Summary

Fifteen years ago, Marinette and Adrien’s lives were changed forever when all the world learned that Adrien’s father is the Collector, an infamous serial rapist and killer. They both had to claw their way out of the hardest, darkest point in their lives. Every new day serves as a reminder of how broken they are. Now twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively, their lives are much more stable, and they’re keeping the annual tradition of hanging out on the anniversary alive.

All of that changes when a prison riot allows Gabriel to escape.
Anticipation

Chapter Notes

raise your hand if you're ready to feel bad. rewrite of gasoline and the innocent

17 April

The rain was coming down hard, freezing cold and heavy. Adrien hid under his umbrella, nervous hands struggling to keep his grip on it and the present he held in his hands. Somewhere behind the dark storm clouds, dawn had broken. The street lamps were just starting to go out, and cafés were opening.

At the end of the street, there was a tall apartment building. It didn’t look like anything more than just a typical Chateauesque building common in Paris. Adrien ducked into the shade provided by the metal canopy, and after closing his umbrella, he went inside the vestibule.

Adrien shook the water off his umbrella. There was a mailbox on the far wall. Adrien pulled out his keys and opened one of the boxes. There was a key inside, which he used to unlock the bottom compartment. There were a couple of large boxes inside, and it took a bit of elbow grease to get them out.

He put the largest box between the mailbox and his hip to support it while he put his keys back in his pocket. Then he shifted to hold the present in one hand, the boxes against his chest, and then worked his way over to the intercom. Adrien was careful to balance everything in his hands as he raised his elbow up to push the button next to the label ‘713.’

He waited next to the door, his hand on the handle as the boxes shook. He jumped slightly at the sound of the buzzer meaning the door was unlocked, and he pulled it open. Adrien propped it open with his foot as he spun inside.

The security guard glanced down from his mounted television set. “Hello, Monsieur Chevalier,” he said, a smug grin on his face. “If that is you behind all those boxes.”

Adrien chuckled. “Yes, it’s me. Hello, monsieur,” he said as he moved to the elevator. He was about to press the button when he saw the paper taped over it. There was a sign that read «EN PANNE,» to which he sighed. “How long has this thing been busted?”

“A while,” he said after a moment.

Adrien paused. “Are you going to call a mechanic?” He asked sharply.

“Soon.” He held up a small box wrapped in yellow paper. “Mademoiselle Bourgeois dropped this off. She told me to have you take it up."

Adrien closed his eyes. He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. He collected the gift and walked over to the stairs. Trying to open it with his hand risked the boxes he carried, so he had to open it with his foot. After pushing it open, he growled at the guard. “No, no! I don’t need any help, but thanks for asking.”
“You’re welcome,” he said as the door closed.

Adrien frowned. “Knothead,” he muttered as he started his long trip up the stairs. He didn’t consider himself out of shape—quite the opposite actually—but climbing eight flights of stairs was hardly anyone’s idea of a good time. The building was ten stories high, so it could have been worse, but then again, it could have been better, too.

The door opened more easily from inside the staircase. Adrien pushed it open with his back, and then head down the long hallway. He could hear televisions inside the houses, playing the morning news as children got ready for school and adults got ready for work. At the very end of the hall was apartment 713. Adrien knocked against it with his head. It took about a minute and a half for the door to open. Marinette Dupain-Cheng was on the other side.

He smiled at her. “Hey, Marinette!” He bent at his knees to kiss her on both cheeks. “Nino lent me the uncut edition of his new movie for us to watch.” He said.

She moved so he could enter her apartment. “What’s with all of the boxes?” She asked as he kicked off his sneakers. Adrien ignored her to walk down the hall. He emptied his hands when he reached the kitchen, placing the boxes and his present for her on the counter. He took a moment to shake out the cramp in his arms.

He could hear her following him, but it would take a minute for her to reach him, so he spoke loudly. “I checked the mail for you. Did you order something online?”

“Sort of,” she admitted. Adrien took this moment to size up her apartment. Her parents had helped her decorate. The walls were painted straw gold, and there were wooden blinds on the doors leading out to the terrace. Her couch was tan, facing the television, and there were dark end tables at either side. The coffee table had a few books and loose flowers on it. The counters were black marble, and the cabinets had glass doors. There was a window cut out of the wall that formed the hallway, and sitting in this window was a fabric-lined wicker basket and a black Chinese lucky cat with both paws raised.

She had reached the end of the hall. Adrien looked her over, both out of habit and because he liked looking at her. She was wearing a short pink sheath dress with darker polka dots over a dress shirt, as well a heavy black sweater. One of her legs was amputated above the knee, while the other was covered in many pale scars.

Marinette used a pair of forearm crutches to walk—she owned a prosthetic, but rarely used it. She limped over to the counter to look at the boxes. “I ordered some custom boxes for my website.” She said, ripping the tape off one of the boxes. She pulled out a white box with pink apple blossoms on it. She smiled at him. “I thought it would be good to have a brand identity.”

“How is your website going?” He asked. Marinette’s website, ‘Ladybug Creations,’ sold all kinds of things from hats to jewelry to accessories like scarves and purses. Marinette also made and tailored clothes, which was her real source of income. This wasn’t advertised on her website, since she didn’t want people to know where she was.

“Good! Really good. I’m busy, which is… good.” Marinette said, her voice getting weaker. She paused. “I don’t have time to think about things.” She shook her head. “You’ll never guess what!”

“What?” he asked, walking back towards the door. He removed his jacket, hanging it up on the coat tree. Underneath he wore a bordeaux-colored button up shirt, black jeans and a teal blue scarf. They were dark, understated colors that didn’t attract attention.
“Do you remember Rose and Juleka from collège?” He nodded. “They’re getting married. They asked me to make their wedding dresses!”

Adrien looked up to see how her face had lit up. “That’s awesome, Marinette!” He said.

“No, it’s a disaster!” She groaned. “Rose wants something regal, but Juleka won’t ever tell me anything!” At some point, she’d walked over to him. “None of it even matters until they come get measured, though.”

Adrien smiled warmly as he put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll think of something. You always do.”

Marinette blushed. She looked back. “Oh, but you brought a movie, didn’t you?” She offered him a nervous, toothy grin. “I’m sorry, you’re barely in the door and I’m already talking too much.”

“No at all,” he reassured her. “I’m here to see you.”

It was meant to be comforting, but judging by the look on her face, it wasn’t. She limped past him towards the living room. “Yes,” she whispered just barely loud enough for him to hear, “I know.”

Marinette sat down on the couch. She pulled her arms out of the crutches and leaned them against the side table. She turned on the TV, changing the input until the default menu popped up. Adrien opened up the entertainment center and put the disk into the reader.

“Did Nino tell you what it was about?” Marinette asked as he sat down.

“No, but you know he loves his monster movies,” he said with a grin. It wasn’t like either of them would sleep tonight, anyway.

“He wouldn’t send a horror movie, would be?” Marinette asked. “I hate horror movies!”

“Not to worry, Princess,” Adrien said. “It has Kenya York in it, and she doesn’t act in horror movies.” This seemed to put her at ease. “Before you hit ‘play,’ though, I have a present for you.” He grabbed the gifts from the kitchen counter and presented them to her.

She smiled and looked at the tag on the bag. “This says that this one is from you, but what’s with the yellow one?” She asked.

Her face would sour at the mention of Chloé, so it was better not to mention her at all. “A secret admirer, perhaps?” He teased.

Marinette scoffed. “I don’t see what there is to admire, secret or otherwise.”

“Come on, you’re amazing. You know that, right?” Adrien said. He shook his head, dismissing further argument. “Don’t worry about it. It was probably from your parents; you know that they don’t like to intrude on the seventeenth of April.”

She opened the box first. There was a pair of simple black pearl earrings inside. “Adrien, it wasn’t you who bought me these, was it?”

“Princess, you know I love to spoil you. I don’t have anything to gain by pretending I didn’t buy you something.” Besides, he thought as his heart sank into his stomach, earrings were a potentially romantic present, and she… was just a friend.

Marinette opened the bag now. Inside was a French lop rabbit, with little deer antlers and a white
ribbon tied around its neck. “Oh, it’s so precious!” She said, smoothing the fake fur back to reveal the green marble eyes. “Thank you so much!”

“I’m glad you like it!” Adrien said. He leaned back on the couch as Marinette started the movie. He folded one of his legs across the other, intertwining his fingers on his stomach. Marinette pulled her leg up, leaning against the arm of the couch. The space between them felt like an ocean.

In Nino’s movie, Kenya York portrayed Helene Argent, a university student coming home for the vacation. When she walked into her home, she found her parents dead. Or that was what was implied, at least—she opened the door to a hand dripping with blood, which cut to a black, white, and red opening credit sequence.

Adrien glanced at Marinette. “Okay, maybe he has forgotten you hate horror movies.” He said with a grimace. She didn’t move, so he studied her face. She looked far away, her eyes facing the screen but not looking at what was on it. “Marinette, are you okay?” She blinked, as if she’d crashed down to Earth again. “Do you want to turn the movie off?”

“No, no! I mean, maybe Nino wanted me to hype up how scary it is?” Marinette suggested. She frowned, looking out the sliding glass door to the terrace. “I’m sorry, Adrien… it’s just the…”

There was a long pause. Something dark crossed her face, coinciding with a werewolf’s howl on the screen. It occurred to Adrien that it was an apt analogy in this context. A young girl suddenly face to face with a monster, a stalker, a nighttime hunter…

The loud music cut suddenly to heavy rain, echoing the storm outside. Marinette looked back at the screen. “It’s just the anticipation that’s killing me.”

Adrien nodded. He looked at her hand as it clawed up, digging her nails into the cushion. He slid his hand across the fabric, weaving his fingers carefully between hers as they quivered. “I know. And I’m here for you,” he said.

Nino had improved his cinematography since collège. He worked closely with Juleka, and sometimes he called in favors from Max Kanté to help him with animatronics. Nino didn’t use any computer graphics in his movies, which in Adrien’s opinion, made it seem more realistic. Probably not the best choice for Marinette, though to be fair, she wasn’t really watching it.

This became abundantly clear in the second act. Marinette was so out of it that her body just gave up trying to support her. She leaned up against him, blank faced. He shifted so she was propped against his shoulder, and he draped his arm around her. He put his chin on her head. “I’ve got you, princess.” He whispered. She held onto his shirt. “I’ve got you.”

She didn’t say anything. He sighed, then looked outside. The rain had stopped, and the sun was coming out. Adrien grabbed one of the throw pillows, shifting so she could put her head on it. He stood with a spin, carefully lowering her so she was laying down. “Where are you going?” She asked weakly.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” he said. He walked down the hall. The bathroom was on the right when coming from inside the apartment. He opened the door and turned on the light before stealing a glance at Marinette. She was still dissociating while staring at the television screen. Adrien pulled the bathroom door closed before ducking into her bedroom.

Adrien didn’t actually need anything from her bedroom, it was just the only way to access the master bathroom. He was snooping without a doubt, but it was sort of an open secret between them. Adrien started by checking the shower, looking for razor blades. He found nothing. He dug around in the
trash for bloodied bandages, with similar results. He opened her medicine cabinet and looked at her medications. He first checked the date and instructions on her anti-anxiety pills, then opened it. The number remaining seemed right. Then he checked the painkillers. Thankfully, the number remaining was about the same. He’d have to check back in later—her phantom limb pain acted up around this time of year, so she might have to take more. Within reason.

Adrien left the bathroom, then ducked into the half bath he’d pretended to be in. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands. When he left, he opened up the closet and pulled out a box labeled «veilleuses.» Adrien plugged the nightlights into every electrical outlet he could find. He punched in a random number to cook on the microwave, but didn’t start it. Adrien closed the blinds, blocking all outside light. He turned on the lamp on the end table before walking in front of the television.

Marinette pushed herself until she was sitting up. She watched Adrien pull a stool from the counter to the wall. “What are you doing?” She asked as he climbed up and removed the clock from the wall.

“Nothing!” He lied, turning the clock over. He saw that the batteries had been screwed in and frowned. He held his hand over the compartment. “Don’t worry about it.”

He snapped his fingers. Dark energy echoed from his hands. The hands of the clock spun rapidly until they broke in half. He stepped off the stool and put the broken clock on the table. “Adrien!” Marinette scolded.

“I’ll buy you a new one!” He defended himself. And he would, eventually. Marinette might not have even realized it herself, but she would grow more anxious as the night went on. Time was a stressor that would hurt her eventually, but a way for her to postpone it until later was to create the illusion that they were in a place where time, especially nighttime, did not exist. To do that, he had to destroy any evidence that it existed. That meant nightlights and changing clocks. That Adrien actually could destroy things… was merely a convenient, unhappy coincidence.

She shook her head. “Have you eaten today?” She asked. Adrien paused as he considered this question. Had he eaten that day? He didn’t actually— “If you have to think about it, you ate too long ago.” Marinette decided. She slid her arms into her crutches and stood. “I’m going to cook something.”

“Wait, let me help you,” Adrien said.

Marinette rolled her eyes. “I know how to cook, Adrien.” She dug around her drawers and started washing a few potatoes. “Pause the movie, please?”

He obliged. He sat down and watched her, leaning on the couch. He knew that he was staring, but with both their phones shut off and the movie paused, there wasn’t much else to do, so he figured he could get away with it. He watched how proficient she’d become by living on her own. She was as perfect and amazing as she’d ever been, even if she didn’t believe it. He imagined that it was hard to believe that when no one would let her forget what happened, not even her own body.

“Adrien,” Marinette said, “you’re staring.”

He jumped. “I know. Sorry,” he said. “What’s going on in your life?”

“Oh, I got in trouble with the government people again,” she said nonchalantly.


“Well, not, like, jail time government people.” She said. “The insurance government people. Get this,” she leaned forward on the counter. “I got a call from my new insurance agent saying that they
were going to send someone out to give me a physical because the weight I sent them was too low!”
Adrien thought for a moment. “Too… too low?” He asked. She nodded. “They know that you…?”

“Wait, wait, this is funny.” She interrupted. “According to her, I weigh fifteen kilograms less than I should.” Adrien didn’t find it funny, but Marinette was giggling. He knew why she thought it was funny, and maybe to her it was, but her lower leg should have only weighed four kilograms. She waved her hand, not yet finished. “She said—and I think she thought she was being cute—she said, ‘if only we all had your problems!’”

“Oh!” He chuckled now. “What did you tell her?”

“What could I? I told her that I’d rather have my leg back,” she said. “We went back and forth for a while after that until she realized that I’m an amputee.” She moved over a couple steps. “Do you mind grating the parmesan?”

Adrien joined her in the kitchen. He rubbed the cheese against the grater, watching Marinette carefully as she sliced the potatoes and onions. He looked at the cheese in front of him and mustered his courage. “So… are you seeing anyone?”

Marinette didn’t reply for a minute. When she did speak, her answer was simple. “No.” She glanced at him, and he saw her hand grow tight around the handle of her knife. “Have you heard from Kagami?”

Now it was his turn to be quiet. Kagami was his ex-girlfriend. He’d broken up with her very recently. “I threw out the last of the stuff she left behind a couple of days ago, so I guess,” he said as he put down the cheese grater and leaned his weight against the counter, “we are officially… over.”

Marinette looked at him with big, sad bluebell eyes. “Adrien, I’m so sorry. You must be devastated.”

Adrien rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, it’s been… hard. And weird.” He smiled at her. “You’re my one saving grace in all of this.”

“Breakups are never easy.” She said. “You were together for, what, two years?”

He shrugged. “A little more than, but, yeah.” She opened her mouth, but he didn’t give her a chance to speak. “Listen, Kagami is a wonderful person, but we don’t work well as a couple. When we’re together, everything becomes a competition.” He was speaking with his hands as he rambled, a quirk he’d picked up from her. “Literally, everything! We had a breakfast competition once, and I’m still not sure if it was, ‘who can make the best breakfast,’ ‘who can make breakfast the fastest,’ or ‘who can eat breakfast the fastest!’”

“Still, I’m sorry…” Marinette said.

Adrien frowned. The truth was more complicated than he was letting on, but she didn’t need to know it. “Don’t be,” he said. He smirked. “I only need one girl in my life anyway, and that’s you.”

Marinette blushed. She looked up at him, but when she saw his face, she let out a sigh. She laughed and pushed him. “Oh, my god, I’m making boulangère potatoes, not corn!” She scolded. “If you’re finished making jokes, you can butter the baking pan.”

Adrien did as she asked. Marinette layered the potatoes and onions, seasoning with garlic, thyme, salt and pepper. She poured in the stock, seasoned the top layer and sprinkled on the grated cheese. Finally, she put it in the oven. She leaned against the counter.
“And now,” she said quietly, “we wait.”

They both knew they wouldn’t have to wait long.

Marinette’s episode started at about six o’clock in the afternoon. They were playing Scrabble when Marinette exchanged a letter from the bag. It didn’t matter what letter she put in, but she pulled out the letter ‘G.’ It was such a tiny thing to set her off, just a letter and a number on a wooden tile, but it was enough. Marinette threw the tile on the floor. “No!”

She stood, her body giving out under her. “Marinette!” Adrien shouted, standing and trying to help her up.

“No! Don’t touch me!” She shouted at him, crawling away and towards the counter. She tried to pull herself up with one of the stools. Adrien didn’t touch her, but he closed the distance between them.

She could feel him standing there, and when she looked at him, the color had drained from her face. Both of her eyes turned completely red, like an albino rabbit, and her freckles started to glow a similar color. She swiped at the air, her fingers brushing against his shirt, and he was sent flying back by pure psychic force. Adrien grunted when he hit the wall, but he wasn’t badly hurt, and he was awake enough to catch the picture he had knocked from the wall. He leaned it against the wall and shot up.

Marinette pushed herself off and grabbed the couch, her knee buckling under the physical and mental strain. She tried to walk around the couch, but she fell, and she crawled forward with one hand still holding onto the cushion. “Adrien!” She shouted, sobbing hot, frightened tears. “Adrien, please! Please, help me!”

“Marinette, I’m right here!” Adrien said, walking around the coffee table and trying to get her to look at him. “Marinette, I am right here, and you are safe, and I won’t let anyone hurt you! I promise!” He motioned with his hands, desperate for her to look up from the floor. “My lady, please, I need you to come back to me!”

She shook her head. “No! No, I can’t move!” She cried, curling in on herself and pressing her legs close to her chest. “Adrien, I can’t move! I can’t, I hurt too bad, I just can’t!”

“You’re safe! You’re safe, I promise you’re safe!” Adrien said. He took a chance to grab her shoulders. She looked up, her eyes back to their normal color. He pulled her into a tight hug, holding her even as she scratched up his back and kicked her leg. “Marinette, please! Please, I need you! Come back to me,” Adrien cried.

After a few minutes, Marinette calmed down. She relaxed in his arms, but she kept crying. She curled up into his arms, her shaky breath struggling to calm itself.

He could feel her struggling, and he buried his face in her dark hair. “I’ve got you, Marinette.” He reassured her. “Come back to me.”

18 April

Adrien had stayed up with Marinette through the night until sunrise. When the sun rose, she had calmed down. He knew from pattern that she’d be okay in the daytime, so he left with the promise to
call before sunset. He kissed her on both cheeks, and he left her apartment with a heavy heart.

He started his short journey back to his townhouse. He only lived about ten minutes away, which he’d done on purpose. Adrien had moved into his home a month after he turned eighteen, paying for it in full after being declared the manager of his father’s estate. The mansion still stood, though it was empty; Adrien didn’t even want to think about it. He also paid for Marinette’s rent, which he did ‘so no one could trace her checks,’ or that’s what he told her.

Adrien unlocked his door and went up the stairs right past the entrance. He crashed immediately on his couch, sleeping for about forty minutes before his alarm went off. He took a quick shower, fed his cat, changed his clothes and then left for work.

As he got on the subway, his phone buzzed. It was a text from Marinette.

Princess: I’m trying to piece together what happened last night
Princess: did I throw you against a wall and scratch up your back?
me: yes
Princess: oh my god!! I’m so sorry!!
me: don’t be, I know you weren’t really there
me: it wasn’t me you thought you were fighting
Princess: That doesn’t excuse it! You deserve better than that!

Adrien smiled. He quickly typed, ‘I love you,’ but erased it even faster. ‘You should get some sleep. You must be exhausted.’ She sent him the neutral face emoji with eyes closed.

His original text was not a lie. Adrien loved her, truly and deeply. It was guilt that had persuaded him to take care of her, and shame that kept him from confessing it. But it was love that kept him awake at night, that made his heart ache when he wasn’t with her.

He reached his station and got out of the train, putting his headphones in and walking at a brisk pace. At twenty-nine, Adrien was not the naïve child he’d once been. He knew that loving Marinette was not going to solve all his problems, and it certainly wouldn’t solve hers. And he knew that loving her was not easy—as the ache in his back reminded him. It was hard work, but he’d been doing it for years. It didn’t matter what he felt—Adrien was Marinette’s knight, and he was her princess, his lady. He rubbed his arms, feeling the scars on his skin. Her safety would always come before his sanity.

Adrien worked as a nurse at the Hôpital Alexandrine Rayne. He clocked in and changed into his scrubs, locking up his things in his locker. He grabbed his rounds and checked in with the others at the nurses’ station.

The first person on his rounds was a patient named Jean-Baptiste Bonfils, who was in his seventies and admitted for a broken leg following a fall in his home. Adrien knocked on the door before entering. “Hello, Monsieur Bonfils!” He said, grabbing an expo marker and using his sleeve to erase the name written under «infirmière autorisée.» He wrote his own in its place. “My name is Adrien, and I’m your RN today.” He leaned against the bed and smiled. “How are you feeling?”

Monsieur Bonfils didn’t seem fine. He stared at Adrien for a moment. “Aren’t nurses supposed to be girls?” He asked.

“If girls can be doctors, boys can be nurses,” Adrien reasoned as he looked at the charts, reading the doctor’s note and the medication list.

“Why be a nurse if you can be a doctor?”
“I’m told that I’m good at taking care of people.” He said with a shrug. “Speaking of, are you in pain at all?” He shook his head. “Okay. What about breakfast? Have you got a menu?” He shook his head again. Adrien promised to get him one and left the room.

He was about halfway through his rounds when he was approached by fellow nurse Mylène Hapèle. Mylène was short with curly blonde hair braided with colorful strings. She seemed anxious. “Adrien,” she said, out of breath. “You have to go to the ER.”

“What’s happened? Did one of the nursing assistants faint?” He asked, passing her his list of patients.

“No, one of the patients is asking for you.” Mylène said as they walked.


“No,” Mylène said, her voice shaking. “She’s asking for Adrien Agreste!”

Adrien’s jaw dropped. He sprinted down the hall, his mind racing a thousand words a second. He reached the elevator and started pressing the button rapidly. Why does she know my name? He wondered, his fingers tapping the wall as he stared at the buttons. What does she want from me? Dark energy started pulsating in his hand, and he closed his fist to keep control of it.

The doors slid open, but he didn’t even wait to check if it was empty. He jumped inside and hit the button for the ground floor. He repeatedly pressed the close doors button until they obeyed him, and then he paced in the elevator. What does this mean? What does this mean?

When he reached the ground floor, he exploded from the elevator like a bat out of Hell. Adrien sprinted down the hallway towards the ER, where the receptionist gave him a room name and opened the door for him. He barely waited for it to open, hitting his shoulder on the door. Adrien found the room he’d been given, and he entered it without knocking.

“What’s going on?” He asked, getting the other nurses’ and the surgeon’s attention. The room smelled of blood, and the heart rate monitor was going crazy. One of the nurses stepped away to make room for him. Adrien raced to her side, making eye contact with her. “I’m here. I’m Adrien.” He said.

The patient was a woman. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-three. Her hair was dyed black, but it was washing out, and her bright eyes were wide with panic. She was bloody and bruised and it was obvious to everyone but her that she wasn’t long for this world. She offered him her fist, which was missing fingers, and he could see signs of her having been restrained. “For… Adrien…” she sputtered. She turned her fist over and opened it in his hands.

Adrien couldn’t look down for a moment. He tried to keep calm as he looked at his hands. She’d given him a crumpled up piece of paper. Adrien was shaking as he unfurled it, and he jumped when he saw what he thought was another piece of paper fall to the ground.

The note had been written in blood, and after being crumpled and torn and saturated with more blood, it didn’t mean anything. Adrien looked down to grab the other one when he realized that it wasn’t a piece of paper, but a dead cabbage butterfly.

He felt the walls close in on him. Adrien backed up and grabbed a cabinet to support himself. “Oh, no,” he muttered. He held his head and shook it wildly, tears running down his face. “No, no, no! Not again!”
the Things that Stay With You

Chapter Notes

this rewrite comes with longer chapters and a 45% increase in agony

18 April

Adrien had rushed out of work, asking Mylène to cover for him. He had too much energy to stop for even a moment, so he skipped taking the subway and just sprinted down the streets of Paris. He didn’t think about how much his legs and his lungs hurt, because those things didn’t matter right now. What mattered was getting back to Marinette’s apartment.

But his legs gave out before he could get there. Adrien ducked into an alley to take a break. The world distorted around him. He looked at his hands as he watched his scars open up, hot blood running down his hands, staining his fingers. The sounds of the city were drowned out by her screaming, over and over, in pain and frustration and desperation. Those screams he never heard.

Adrien held his head and rocked. After a while, he stood and started running again. He burst into the vestibule and rang the bell over and over until finally Marinette answered and let him in. Adrien didn’t waste time speaking to the security guard, nor did he take notice of the broken elevator. He just dashed for the stairs and ran up them. The negative energy inside him was bubbling up, and whenever he touched the railing, rust formed.

Adrien pushed open the door, the handle rusting and the glass window breaking. He sprinted down the hall, not even bothering to knock on her door.

He found Marinette in her office, drawing concept for Juleka’s wedding dress. She screamed when she heard the door open, taking a moment to calm herself before speaking. “Adrien, Jesus. You scared me half to death.” She said. “What are you doing here…? In your scrubs?” She tried to wave him off. “I’ll be fine until—”

“Marinette,” Adrien interrupted, “my father escaped from prison.”

If Adrien had been upset when he found out, it was nothing compared to what Marinette felt. He saw every bit of color drain from her face, every drop of moisture dry up in her mouth. She dropped her pencil, and for a moment, she was paralyzed. They both knew what this meant. It meant that he was coming, that he was going to find her and try to kill her. To finish what he had started fifteen years ago.

Adrien walked forward and held her arms. “Marinette…”

She shook her head. “No,” was all she could say. Tears started rolling down her face, unadulterated fear being the only thing that she could feel. “No, no, no, no! This can’t be happening!” She closed her eyes and broke free of him, leaning against her desk. Marinette screamed, her psychic power picking up every inanimate object in the room and throwing it around. “No!”
The hot summer sun beat down on thirteen year old Marinette as she sprinted through the streets of Paris. She was cursing herself over and over in her head for running late. She was headed to a fashion competition, which was being judged by none other than her favorite designer and idol, Gabriel Agreste. She had stayed up all night to finish her entry, so she had fallen asleep at her desk and woken up late.

She closed her eyes and spiraled as she considered the negative consequences of her tardiness. She pictured ridicule and embarrassment and shame, as well as Gabriel hating her designs and dismissing her as untalented. Oh, how could she even think that she was good enough to be in this competition? Marinette opened her eyes slightly as she considered turning around and going—

She rounded a corner and slammed into someone she couldn’t see. She was knocked back by force of impact, and she nearly toppled over.

Marinette shook her head and centered herself. “I’m so sorry! I—” she stopped in the middle of her sentence. She hadn’t just crashed into anyone—she’d crashed into Adrien Agreste, Gabriel’s only son and the face of his brand. The sun had caught his golden hair and sad green eyes, and Marinette surely thought that she was looking at a prince.

She thought for sure that he would snap at her, but he smiled. “That’s alright. No harm done.” He shrugged. “Are you in a hurry?”

“No!” She said, but then realized that she’d misspoken. “I mean, no, I’m bot in a flurry! I mean, I am in a jury! I—” Marinette facepalmed and took a breath. “I’m going to the fashion competition.” She said, taking her time.

Adrien’s smile grew wide. “That’s great!” He folded his arms behind his back. “I was just there. I wanted to get some fresh air before it started.” Marinette still couldn’t actually believe she was talking to him! “Are you excited?”

“Yes! But also nervous. I hear the competition is pretty steep,” she said.

Adrien shrugged. “Yeah, a lot of people entered. But for what it’s worth, I hope you win!”

“I like to think I have a good sense of talent!” A black car with tinted windows drove up next to them. The window rolled down, and Marinette could see a large, cross man sitting inside. Adrien waved and looked back at her. “I’m headed there now. Do you want a ride?”

Marinette considered this for a moment. “Um…” Did she want a ride? The gentle look on Adrien’s face was very inviting. “Sure!”

Adrien opened the door for her, and she slid inside. He sat down next to her. They spoke while the chauffeur drove, mostly about the competition. They both got excited when Marinette brought up ‘Ultimate Mecha Strike 3,’ and they were still on that conversation when the car stopped.

“Thank you for the ride,” Marinette said when she got out. “See you inside?”

Adrien nodded. “You know it!” Marinette waved as she ran inside, but Adrien was stuck in place, his hand still up as she watched her. He could feel the heat in his cheeks, but it could have just been
the sun. His bodyguard grunted as he pointed to the building. Adrien sighted and walked inside, any trace of his smile gone.

Marinette was given her space, and she got set up. She texted her booth number to her parents, who had to finish up a cake they were working on before they could join her. The theme was ‘vintage Parisian summer,’ which was fitting, as Marinette had worked the entire summer on her entry.

She’d designed a pearly pink sun hat. A white ribbon wrapped around it, sewn in with small sea shells and a big cream-colored button. The shirt dress was long and white, with the Parisian skyline on the skirt. The black belt was closed with a buckle shaped like a fleur-de-lis. The outfit was completed with a necklace of delicate blue beads. Marinette set this outfit up on the mannequin, and then set out her other designs on the table. A bowler hat inspired by pigeons, more beaded jewelry, and a pair of sunglasses shaped like the Eiffel Tower.

Adrien came round with the judges and his father. The first time Marinette saw him in person, she was surprised by how dissimilar he was to the mental picture she had of him. Of course he seemed stern—many fashion designers were stern—but Gabriel seemed downright cold, his narrow face never changing from his one expression of disdain. She noted that Adrien didn’t look much like him at all. Their hair wasn’t even the same color, even though they were both blond. But, she thought as she looked at Adrien, at the happy smile that lit up his face when he saw her, maybe that was for the best.

The judges ignored Marinette to examine her design. Adrien stood next to Gabriel until he was certain that he wasn’t paying attention to him, and he took a few steps closer to her. “I think it’s going pretty well. They seem to like your originality.” Adrien said.

Marinette placed her hands on her heart. “You think so?” She asked, her heart fluttering inside her chest.

“I’m sure that you’re going to place high!” He reassured her. The judges moved on, and Adrien reluctantly followed them.

A couple of hours passed before the results came back. Marinette has placed second, behind a boy with a few more years of experience than she had. Second place was good, but it was a blow to her pride. Her parents were consoling her as they walked home when Adrien ran up behind them.

“You did really well today,” he said, smiling but a bit out of breath.

Marinette didn’t agree. “I only got second. That’s not good.” She argued.

Adrien shook his head. “You got second place out of almost two hundred contestants!” He said. “You’re on Paris’s list of up and coming designers! You’ve got to be proud!”

She thought about this. A smile broke her face. “Actually… you’re right! I am proud!” She said, her smile brightening the atmosphere and infecting her parents and Adrien.

He was quiet for half a second longer than he might have been. “Do…” he paused. “Do you want to hang out sometime?”

“That would be amazing!” Marinette wrote her phone number on his hand. She waved goodbye to him and dared her parents to race her home. They all took off running, though Tom and Sabine protested loudly. Adrien watched them go, and he looked at his hand with a shy smile on his face.
8 August, Sixteen Years Ago

Marinette: I’m here
Marinette: Adrien?
Marinette: let me in!

Adrien put down his Chinese textbook and raced for his bedroom door. He grinned madly as he took the stairs two at a time, leaping when he reached the bottom. He slid against the wall, sneaking a peek into Gabriel’s atelier. He was dictating something to Nathalie, who spotted him. His face flushed when she seemed cross. Nathalie walked over and closed the door without addressing him.

At first, he was sad that his father had shut him out. A man who was not particularly warm to him before was suddenly very cold since his mother went missing. But, then he shrugged. A closed door made it easier to accomplish his goal.

Adrien tiptoed to the front door. He opened it carefully, and he removed one of his sneakers to keep the door from closing and locking them out. Adrien ran down the driveway and to the gate. He snapped his fingers, unlocking the gate, and then pulled it open. He stuck his head out and looked around.

Marinette was standing next to the mail slot. She grinned when she saw him. “There you are! I’ve been waiting for fifteen minutes!” She said.

Adrien chuckled nervously. “Sorry, I was studying Chinese. Did you bring it?” Marinette smiled wide, her face beaming as she nodded. “You’re the best!” Adrien waved for her to follow him.

Adrien tiptoed inside and led Marinette up to his bedroom. He dragged her a bit when she stopped to stare at a giant portrait of him and his father. He closed the door and put a bell next to it, so they’d know if someone opened it. Adrien grabbed a second bell to set up next to the other door while Marinette approached his bed…

…and dumped the entire contents of her backpack onto it. Marinette sat down on his bed and started flipping through the many papers as Adrien walked back and offered her a pen.

“I had my classmate Max get these for you,” Marinette said as he sat down. Marinette pulled her legs up and crossed them.

“I need to fill out all of these to enroll in collège?” Adrien asked, picking up a few and looking them over.

“I know! I thought you just needed an address in the arrondissement, but look!” She picked one up. “This one says you need to be up to date on your vaccinations!” Marinette frowned and looked at him. “I didn’t realize you could fall out of date with vaccinations.”

“You’re lucky. My mother had to vaccinate me in secret,” Adrien said. She chuckled. He smiled. He loved the way her eyes sparkled when she was amused, and he’d made it his mission to make her giggle any chance he got.

Adrien clicked his pen as he filled out the forms for him to attend Marinette’s school, the Collège Françoise Dupont, when the year started in September. Marinette had agreed to help him get the forms, since his father refused to allow him to go. He was determined to have a normal life, even if it meant disobeying the mighty Gabriel Agreste.
Plus, he noted with a blush on his cheeks, it meant that he got to spend more time with Marinette. Since school didn’t start until September, Marinette had been able to hang out with him almost every time he had a chance to get outside the mansion. They met up at photo shoots and after charity events. But once school started, he knew that would change. She would go back to her real friends, and he’d be nothing more than a memory. Adrien was determined not to let that happen. He knew that he liked Marinette, and he decided to make a move.

And with this decision came the somewhat welcome realization that they were already on his bed. With every filled out form, Adrien moved closer to Marinette. She noticed this, and a shy smile spread across her face. After a few moments, Adrien wondered if he should stop, but then she moved closer to him, too. Adrien put his fingertips on top of hers. In his head, he was already past this. He was six layers deep in an escapist fantasy where it didn’t matter that his father and Nathalie were just downstairs. Adrien pictured them up near his pillows, jackets tossed aside because their kissing was making them hot.

But that scene would never be anything more than what it was—a scene, like in a movie or a play. It wasn’t real. A bell rang as it hit the ground, and they barely had enough time to hide the papers and grab their decoy Nintendo games before Gabriel entered his room.

“Hey, Father!” Adrien said nervously as he shot up. “We were just—” He realized that he had never turned his game on and snapped it shut. “We were just trading Pokémon!”

Gabriel was definitely in shock. He was staring at them, unmoving and unblinking, for a while. They were frozen, too. They hadn’t done anything, but they might have if they hadn’t been interrupted. Gabriel’s eyes moved from Adrien to Marinette. She stood up and started to collect her things, knowing that she was about to be kicked out. Adrien kept his eyes locked on Gabriel, so he noticed that small, almost invisible change. He saw how Gabriel’s eyes followed Marinette, that primal look in his eye that only existed for half a moment.

It didn’t sit right with him, and Adrien was glad Marinette hadn’t seen it. “I met Marinette at the fashion competition. She came in second; do you remember?” Adrien asked. His posture grew more defensive.

“I don’t remember.” Gabriel said.

“I was j… I was just leaving!” Marinette stuttered, pulling her backpack over her shoulders. “I’ll see you later, Adrien!” She said, rushing out of the room. She poked her head back in. “It was good to see you again, Monsieur Agreste!”

The room was silent after she left. Adrien avoided Gabriel’s eyes when he looked back at him, preparing himself for the inevitable punishment that was to follow. “Adrien?” Gabriel said, his voice low and angry.

Adrien flinched. “Yes, Father?”

“Don’t ever bring anyone to this house ever again.” He said firmly. Gabriel left the room without another word.

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17 April, Fifteen Years Ago
The sun was starting to set when Marinette left the bakery and walked towards the Agreste mansion. She had told her parents where she was going, and promised to be home before long. She claimed that she was just going to return a book that Adrien had lent her, but that didn’t explain why she had gotten dressed up—she wore a yellow sweater and a short skirt with a rose pattern—or why she had spent all night fixing her face. She’d braided her hair and put on lip gloss—apple, her favorite.

Marinette rehearsed in her head what she was going to say. She just needed to get inside the mansion, and then she could confess her feeling to Adrien. She’d messed up on his fourteenth birthday, on New Year’s Eve, on Valentine’s Day—but today was her day! She knew it!

She reached the mansion and rang the bell. A mechanical eye blinked at her, getting close to her face. “What do you want?” Nathalie’s gruff voice asked.

Marinette held up the book. “Hi, Nathalie! I f-forgot to return the book Adrien lent me.” She offered a wide grin, hoping it was enough to get her inside. There was no reply. The mail slot opened, and Marinette frowned. She put the book in the slot.

She was about to walk away when she heard whispering through the intercom. She heard her name, and then nothing. “Marinette, Monsieur Agreste would like to speak to you.” Nathalie said. This took a moment to process. “He wants to talk—to me?!” Marinette asked. In response, the gate opened, and without even questioning it, Marinette went inside. Her whole body was shaking, nervous about what Gabriel Agreste could want from her. Nathalie had the door open before she finished climbing the stairs. “Is Adrien home?” Marinette asked.

“No, he’s not.” Nathalie said curtly. She moved to the side and led her into the atelier. Gabriel was standing at his desk, moving things on his touchscreen computer. “Monsieur,” Nathalie said, catching his attention.

“Hello, Marinette.” Gabriel said. He walked closer to her, and then smiled. “I didn’t remember when last we met, but you entered the fashion competition last summer, didn’t you?”

“Yes, monsieur,” Marinette said. “I came in second.”

“Yes, I remembered that, too.” Gabriel thought. “I was impressed by your design, but the other judges were more impressed by the boy who won.” He waved this idea off. “I felt he was pandering too much to ‘Style Queen’ by Audrey Bourgeois. Pitiful, considering she wasn’t even there.”

Marinette felt her heart skip a beat. Being complimented by her idol? That had to be in the top ten feelings ever! “Thank you very much, Monsieur Agreste.”

“Adrien has spoken of you to my assistant, Nathalie.” Gabriel said. Nathalie’s body language grew tense. “He says that you want to work in fashion. Is this true?”

“Yes, monsieur, it’s truly my passion!”

“Then I’d like to extend to you an invitation to the summer internship program with my company.” Gabriel said, and for a moment, Marinette was convinced that she was hearing things. “I’m not certain if you have plans for the summer, but it would give you an idea of what working in the industry is like.”

Marinette’s entire face lit up. “Yes! That sounds like a dream come true!” Marinette was bouncing with happiness when Gabriel handed her a piece of paper with the Gabriel brand logo on it. “Thank you so much, Monsieur Agreste!” She looked at the logo, a simple G in a circle, and her cheeks turned pink. “I have to go tell my parents right now!”
Nathalie moved to stop her, but Gabriel held up his hand. The door opened and slammed. There was a moment where neither spoke. “Did you get it?” Gabriel asked. Nathalie revealed Marinette’s phone, which she had lifted from her while Gabriel distracted her. “Switch the plates, and then go after her.”

Marinette was giddy as she walked home. It hadn’t gone the way she’d hoped, but now Marinette could spend the whole summer, not just with Adrien, but working for her idol! An internship might pave the way for a job, a job could be her jumping off point… Marinette dug in her purse to look for her phone.

She stopped walking when she didn’t immediately find it. She only looked up when a black car with tinted windows pulled up next to her. The window rolled down, and Nathalie’s arm hung out from it, holding her phone. “Forget something, did we?” She asked.

“My phone! Thank you, Nathalie.” Marinette said, taking it quickly. She sent her parents a quick text message. As soon as she sent the message, her phone died. She was surprised, since she’d charged it before leaving the bakery. “What the…?” Marinette muttered.

“It’s getting pretty dark,” Nathalie said. Marinette noticed this, too. “Would you like a ride home?”

Adrien’s bodyguard had given her rides before, though never with Adrien not present. Still, Marinette has no reason to distrust Nathalie, since she knew her, so she smiled. “Sure! Thank you!” Nathalie pushed open the door and slid across. Marinette sat down next to her, and the Gorilla began to drive. “I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

Nathalie was quiet. “You know, I envy you sometimes.” She said. Marinette tilted her head. “Most children, really. You’re able to see the beauty in everything, to trust the evidence of your eyes and ears without thinking of the grander design behind it all.”

Marinette chuckled. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Nathalie said as she yanked Marinette’s leg out from under her, “that you made a terrible mistake tonight.”

Nathalie tried to cover up Marinette’s mouth with a chloroform rag. Marinette, momentarily in shock, flew into her fight-or-flight instinct. Her eyes and freckles turned red, and she tried to fight off Nathalie with every ounce of psychic power she had. Marinette kicked and pounded with her hands, ripping the loose objects in the backseat to shreds and knocking out one of the windows. The rag flew out, but it didn’t deter Nathalie. She grabbed Marinette’s neck and choked her, her hands growing tighter and tighter until she passed out.

Marinette woke up slowly after a while. It took her a long time to process what was going on. Looking around, she found she was in a large, dark room. She didn’t remember how she got there, but when she tried to walk around, she realized her leg was chained to the floor. She saw that her shoes were missing, which led her to process that her clothes were missing, too. If the chain hadn’t alerted her to the danger she was in, this did. Marinette focused her mind as best she could.

She was human—mostly. If the stories her mother had told her were true, she was also descended from an alien race that had crash landed generations ago. The only thing indicating her extraterrestrial heritage was her eyes and her freckles, which glowed red when she manipulated psychic forces. The long line of spots going down her spine never stopped glowing.

However, even when the light of her glow became blinding, Marinette could not move anything telekinetically. She searched what little of the room she could reach. There was nothing she could
reach, nothing she could do, except pull at the chain.

Suddenly, white light lit up the room. Marinette turned to look at a security camera on the wall. It depicted the street outside the mansion. Then another came on, showing the gate. Two more joined them. Four became six, six became ten, until the entire wall was lit up with security camera feeds. She could see the Gorilla in the garage, trying to fix the damage she’d done to the car. She could see Adrien’s bedroom, though he was not in it.

She could now see what was in the room. There were hundreds of white butterflies fluttering about, many flocking to the screens. There was a table with many knives on it, as well as rope, a hatchet, a thick metal rod, a whip, and a box. A door opened on the far side of the room. Marinette turned to look. She was shocked and confused and horrified to see Gabriel Agreste approaching her.

She remembered every moment that followed in vivid detail.

“It’s pointless to struggle against the chains,” Gabriel said as he walked closer. He approached a table and removed his pale blue jacket. It looked almost white in this eerie light. He started to remove the white floral ascot around his neck. “When Nathalie told me of the mess you made in the car, I knew immediately what you were.” He started to unbutton his black shirt. “Those chains are made from the metal of your ancestor’s ships. It is designed to suppress your abilities so they don’t wreak havoc during long voyages through dark space.”

“What’s going on?” Marinette demanded. She had backed away from him, her spine hitting a wooden wall. She pulled her arms up and tried her best to cover her body with them.

“I’m surprised a smart girl like you hasn’t already figured it out.” Gabriel said. He shrugged. “But then again, I suppose you’re not a smart girl, after all. You did get into a vehicle with a perfect stranger.”

Marinette was still confused. “What are you talking about?” She asked. She shivered when Gabriel turned his phone off and pulled his shoes and socks off. “What’s going on?!” He walked around the table, reaching for the button on his black slacks. “What are you going to do to me?!”

Gabriel shrugged. “Eventually, I’m going to kill you.” He confessed as he looked at her. Marinette was starting to shake. “But right now…?” He dropped trou and closed the distance between them. “Let’s see what I can get away with.”

Marinette screamed and tried to push him away. Her telekinetic powers were too weak; they were like light punches as Gabriel slid a condom on and pushed her onto the ground. He forced her legs to part. Marinette screamed and tried to crawl away from him. Part of her kept trying to convince her that it wasn’t real. This was a nightmare, a hallucination—it couldn’t have actually been happening! “No! No! Don’t touch me!” She ordered. And then, it was too real. Gabriel forced one, then two, then three of his fingers into her.

It wouldn’t have been wrong to say that there were things Marinette didn’t know about sex. It was just more accurate to say there were things no had told Marinette about being raped.

She didn’t know that it would feel like she was being ripped in half. She didn’t know that she would freeze, her body reacting to not only the shock but the betrayal. Marinette was terrified; she didn’t know what to do, yet each moment her terror left her unable to act filled her with shame. Shame not only in not fighting, but in letting it happen, for not knowing it was coming.

Even when he pulled out it hurt. Every part of her lower body ached. Watching Gabriel remove the condom was like watching him stick a loaded gun in her face. Which is what he did next.
18 April, Present Day

Marinette shot up like a rocket, her breathing heavy and her face panicked. She ran her hands through her long black hair, trying to understand what had just happened. The last thing she remembered, she was in her office, but that’s not where she was now. She looked around.

Her bedroom was cutely decorated. Her bed was pushed up against the center of the far wall. Directly across from her was her television, complete with a gaming system. Her chaise lounge had laundry piled on it, though it was folded now when it hadn’t been before. There were personal photos and paintings all around the room, mostly white, gray and pink. Yes… this was her home. She was home, and safe.

The door opened, and Adrien came in carrying food on a platter. “Hey, you’re awake.” He said, walking closer to her. He put the serving tray in front of her and put his hand on her forehead. “Are you feeling okay? You hit the ground pretty hard.”

“Adrien? What are you doing here?” She asked. His face fell, and she shook her head. “No… I meant, what are you doing in my bedroom?”

“You fainted. I carried you in here so you could rest.” He said. He sat down and looked at his hands. “I… couldn’t bring myself to leave.” Marinette reached for his hand, but he yanked it away. “No, don’t comfort me. I’m not the one who fainted.”

“I just can’t believe this is real.” Marinette said. She ran her hands through her hair before falling back onto her pillows. “Oh, this is a disaster!” She looked at him when he took her hand, and then sat up. “When do you have to go back to work?”

“I’ve got Mylène covering for me right now; she knows what’s going on.” He said, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know what I’m going to do tomorrow, though.”

Marinette moved the tray from her lap and rolled over so she was in his. Adrien started playing with her hair subconsciously. “I don’t want you to go.” He looked down at her as she squeezed her eyes shut and clawed up her fingers. When she stretched them and opened her eyes, her voice was firm. “I need you to be where you can hear me.”

17 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Marinette was beaten until she was bloody and unable to move. Gabriel has stepped away from her and to his table, looking at his tools. She shifted slowly in hopes such small movements wouldn’t attract his rage. She rubbed the hot and sticky places between her legs, and then nervously moved her hand into the light where she could see it. Part of this was semen, of that she had no doubt, but there was also quite a bit of blood on her hand. She shivered.

“Please,” Marinette begged, the first thing she’d said in hours, “please let me go. I won’t tell anyone, I swear…”
“That’s what they all say,” Gabriel said, “and I don’t believe you more than the others.”

“O-others? How many others?”

He thought about this. “Twenty-two are dead,” he muttered. “In two weeks, it’ll be twenty-three.”

She looked at him for a long time before she burst into tears. She sobbed and sobbed, unable to think of anything else to do. “Why? I thought you were impressed by me!” She demanded. “Why are you doing this to me?!”

Gabriel revealed a long carving knife. “Because I want to.” He said.

He took a few steps closer to her. Marinette couldn’t hardly move, she she tried to look away. She glanced up at the monitors, and she saw the front door open. Adrien had come home! She lunged forward. “Adrien! Adrien, help me!”

Gabriel was surprised. He turned around to watch the monitors while Marinette begged for Adrien. He chuckled. “Yes, Adrien! Help her! She’s here, behind the portrait!” He shouted. He looked down at Marinette with a shrug. “You see? He can’t hear us.” Gabriel laughed. “He’s not even listening for you! He doesn’t know that you’re here!”

Marinette shook her head. “Adrien! Adrien!” She shouted as he started up the stairs and went into his bedroom. “Adrien!” She begged as he flopped down on his bed, as Gabriel turned her over and pinned her with his knee. “ADRIEN!” Gabriel put the carving knife to her back and started cutting.

28 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Over the next few days, Marinette passed the time between torture sessions by staring at the monitors. By the second day, Adrien knew that she’d gone missing, and he was involved in the efforts to find her. He’d organized a search party with Alya and all the rest of her classmates—even Chloé. Gabriel shooed them from the room, though Adrien left with them to begin searching. When he returned, Gabriel presented him with something—to Marinette, it looked like video game. Adrien lashed out against him at this, and then left the mansion to search again. Some of the monitors showed the streets around the mansion, and sometimes she’d see him there, trying to pick up her trail. But it became abundantly clear that he didn’t know she was there, or that she was watching him.

On day eleven, Marinette was officially done waiting to be rescued. Her chain didn’t quite reach the desk, but she could get close enough that she could create little bursts with her powers. It hit something, and Marinette kept trying until it fell off. She’d been expecting a blunt force object or a knife, something she could use to incapacitate Gabriel and take the key from him. Instead, what she’d knocked off was the saw.

Marinette looked at it. She couldn’t threaten anyone with a saw; it just wasn’t possible. Marinette considered trying for something else, but Gabriel wasn’t at the mansion. This was her chance! And she’d likely only get one.

Marinette grabbed the saw and moved into her corner. She mustered every bit of her strength and began to saw at her own ankle to free it from the chain.

It was agony! She could barely see from shock and tears. But she was free, and she had to escape.
Marinette stood before falling to the ground. She crawled on her hands and knees to the wall, feeling for a way to open the door. She found the threshold and forced her psychic power between it and the wall. The door popped open. Marinette continued to crawl, making her way to the banister to hoist herself up from the ground.

She hadn’t been standing for longer than a minute when someone pushed Marinette to the ground. She tumbled forward down the stairs, hitting her head twice on the steps. Nevertheless she continued to crawl for the front door. It was right there—her freedom, within her grasp at last!

Then Nathalie reached over her and locked the door. Marinette’s arm fell, and she started crying. “Monsieur Agreste won’t like this.” Nathalie said as she lost consciousness.

She woke up back in the room. Nathalie had put the chain on her other ankle, and she hadn’t even bothered to bandage her wound. Marinette didn’t know what to do, but being dehydrated, she didn’t have any tears left to cry, so she screamed.

When Gabriel returned, he was indeed furious. He raped her with the knife, ripping at her insides while Nathalie kept her quiet with starved, forced kisses. When he was done, he grabbed the carving knife and tore into her legs.

Then he started to mark her back. Marinette wasn’t entirely sure, but she believed that he was counting the number of times he’d raped her. Gabriel dismissed Nathalie when she finished cleaning the blood from Marinette.

Nathalie changed into clean clothes and got to work cleaning the bloodstain near the front door. Marinette watched her jump when the door opened, revealing that Adrien had come home from ‘school.’ He had a brief interaction with Nathalie, where she snapped at him when he got on his knees and tried to help her.

Adrien went up to his room and dropped off his things. He sat down and was still for a long time. She realized that he was charging his phone. When he had finished, he tried to sneak out, but Nathalie caught him. They argued, but she apparently had the last word.

Gabriel approached her with a knife, pulling her attention from the monitors. He held it close to her face… before cutting off a small clump of Marinette’s knotted hair. He pushed her over, and she guessed he was going to rape her again. She was too tired to fight him off, so she turned her eyes up to the monitors.

She looked up in time to see Adrien drag his computer chair over to the basketball hoop on his wall. He wobbled as he tied something to it. When he moved, she could see it was a noose.

Marinette squirmed away from Gabriel, which bought her enough time to watch Adrien slide the noose around his neck. “Adrien,” she exclaimed, pushing Gabriel away so she could get a better view of the monitors.

“How’ve you already learned that he can’t hear you?” Gabriel asked as Adrien maneuvered onto the arm of the chair. “He’s never going to be able to find you.”

“No!” Marinette squirmed. “He’s—” Just then, he kicked the chair out from under him. “He’s hanging himself! Look!”

Gabriel’s head shot up. For the first time, something akin to fear crossed his face, and Gabriel grabbed his clothes. He was trying to redress, so Adrien wouldn’t be suspicious, but if he did that, he’d never make it in time!
“Go!” Marinette ordered. “What are you doing?! Just go!” Gabriel threw a knife at her, which whizzed past her ear. Marinette looked up at the screen. It had only been a second; Adrien was trying to fight his survival instinct. Marinette knew her powers were weakened, but she couldn’t just do nothing!

Her eyes turned red, and she started to glow. She clenched her fists, fighting the pain in her muscles to focus her energy. She squinted as she stared at the knot, hoping it would unravel. It felt like wasted effort… until the cords came loose, and Adrien fell to the floor.

He held his neck and coughed. Gabriel was fully dressed now, and he sprinted out of the room. There was a solid five seconds between Adrien’s fall and when Gabriel burst into his bedroom.

Marinette couldn’t hear what was said between them. She could only watch as Gabriel endured Adrien’s fury. He trashed his bedroom, threw things, continued shouting… and then he fell, overcome with emotion. Gabriel fell, too, and he embraced him. Adrien pounded his fists against him, probably thinking that his father had saved his life when he wanted nothing more than to die.

Marinette looked at her hands. It hadn’t been Gabriel who had untangled the cords… it had been her. Was her body adapting to the chain? Was she getting more powerful? She’d only have two days to hone her newfound power… because if she wasted time, he’d kill her on the third.

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30 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Over the next two days, Marinette spent every moment that she had alone perfecting her telekinesis. She started small and close. Nathalie had been ordered to keep her hydrated, so she’d been provided a dog bowl to drink from. Marinette started by lifting the bowl, and then by separating water from it. She practiced length by levitating things on the table, and then twirled them around to practice control.

Her training was difficult as the infection worsened. Marinette found that she was having trouble staying conscious, and when she was conscious, she was often confused. She was restless and agitated, even scratching at Nathalie when she tried to feed her. When she wasn’t confused, she decided that she wasn’t in a very good place to escape on her own.

On the other side of the wall, Adrien was kept home from school those two days. Judging by Gabriel’s reaction to recent events, he desperately wanted to avoid the public scandal of checking Adrien into a mental hospital, even though that was probably where he needed to go. Every cord was taken from his bedroom. His computer and television were unplugged and removed, his lamps were taken out, and entire sections of his room were blocked off. Adrien was only allowed his phone, and if it needed charging, Nathalie came into his room and watched him.

On the night of the thirtieth, Gabriel raped and marked her, in what Marinette had begun to think of as routine. He had Nathalie bring in and hook up a hose, which he turned on enough for it to drip. “We don’t want you to be unsightly when you go back out into the world tomorrow,” he said, “do we?”

Then they left. Marinette knew that time was up and it was now or never. She tried to rip the chains apart, to no success. She focused on the wall surrounding the chains, which broke much more easily. Marinette crawled to the table, searching for something that could break the chain. There was a
hammer, luckily, and with a bit of extra force from her powers, the chain broke from the shackle easily. She could move much more quietly now.

Marinette used her powers to force the door open. She stumbled out, falling to her knees and leaving a bloodstain on the floor. The door was right there at the bottom of the stairs, but she remembered her first failed escape attempt. She needed help if she wanted to survive.

She crawled up the stairs, her body scraping against the marble. It took a while to reach the top, but not long at all to get to Adrien’s bedroom. She pulled herself up with the handle, and then used her weight to swing it open. It slammed against the wall.

“I’m taking a bath!” Adrien shouted. He probably thought it was his father or Nathalie, judging by how annoyed he sounded. Marinette crawled around his room, clawing her way closer to the bathroom. She could hear the water running. She pounded on the door as she tried to open it. “Can I get some privacy in here, please?!” He shouted.

Marinette pushed the door open, falling in. She tried to force herself up, but she was only able to raise her head up to look at him.

Adrien started at her with big, frightened eyes. “Marinette?” He asked quietly, frozen.

Tears started to run down her face. “Help me,” she begged as her neck stopped supporting her head. She put it on the cold floor, which felt nice against her fever.

“Oh my god!” Adrien jumped out of the tub, the water sloshing around him. He ran to her side and pulled her gently into his lap. “Stay with me! Come on, stay with me!” He begged, holding her close. She was shaking, and her discolored skin was cold, but she was sweating bullets. When Adrien tried to hold her bridal style, he could feel the heat radiating from her legs. He felt panic rush through his core when he saw her bloody legs, and he had to cover his mouth to keep from screaming when he realized that her foot was missing. “Oh holy God, Marinette, what happened to you?!”

She remembered shuddering. “Adrien, your father…” she whispered before bursting into sobs. “He kidnapped me! I finally escaped!” She lunged for his neck and cried into his shoulder. “Please! You have to help me! Don’t let him hurt me ever again!”

All of the moisture in his mouth dried up, and it took him a moment to respond to that. Adrien hugged her as tight as he could without thinking she’d break. “I promise, Marinette, I’m going to help you get through this. I’m going to make this right! I swear!”

“I want to go home,” Marinette sobbed. “Please, just take me home!” Adrien gently put her on the ground. He redressed in his boxers and his jeans, and he pulled his tee shirt over Marinette’s head.

Her memory of what happened next was fuzzy. She knew enough to know that she wasn’t really in control of what she was saying or doing.

“Adrien… how does that song go?” She asked. He grabbed his towel and wrapped it around Marinette’s leg, trying to stop the bleeding. “The one… the one from that… thing…?” Adrien grabbed his phone and shoved it into his pocket, slid his shoes on, and carried Marinette out of his room.

Oh, so was so light and frightened. She was short of breath and her heart was beating fast. She shivered in his grasp, her head buried into him like she couldn’t believe it was happening. Like she couldn’t believe that she was finally free.

But she wasn’t coherent. “Blackbird…?” She shook her head. “Yes, blackbird and… sparrow. No,
“You’re okay, Marinette,” he whispered into her hair. He carried her down the stairs, noting the trails of blood left behind. “I’ve got you, and you’re going to be okay.”

“Wait, it goes… green finch and linnet bird, nightingale, blackbird, how is it you sing?” Marinette sang quietly. She probably didn’t even know she was doing it, but Adrien tried to quiet her. “How can you… something… sitting in cages? Never taking wing…”

“Marinette, quiet. We have to be quiet!” He whispered. Adrien moved to open the front door, only to jump back when the lights turned red and metal reinforced the door. He shook his head. “Oh, no,” he said.

“No, no, no!” She dug her nails into his skin. “Don’t! Don’t say that!”

But there wasn’t time to think about that, or the fortifications. Adrien ran through the dining hall and towards the garage door. It was locked, but as an internal door, it wasn’t reinforced.

Adrien snapped his fingers, unlocking the door, and then grabbed the keys on the hook. He ducked inside. Adrien locked the door behind him, and then used his dark energy to collapse a shelf to barricade it.

He unlocked the car in the garage. He opened the passenger side first, gently placing Marinette inside. He fastened her seatbelt. “Don’t worry, okay?” He said, brushing his hand against her cheek. “I’m going to get you out.”

“How can you… something… sitting in cages? Never taking wing…” He frowned and brushed a tear from her face. “Adrien, it hurts… like a hot poker inside me. It hurts, Adrien, how do I make it stop?”

He closed the door and ran to the other side to start it. The door was reinforced with metal, but there was a keypad next to the door. Adrien ran to it and put in his password, which lifted the lockdown on this set of doors. Thank goodness for the escape procedures, he thought, and then got inside the car. There was a button to open the garage door already inside it.

Adrien got into the driver’s seat. He steeled his nerves as the door opened, his foot on the brakes and his hand on the gear shift. He sped out of the garage and turned the car around in the courtyard. He closed the garage door and opened the gate. He cringed when it would only open halfway.

“Dammit…” he cursed under his breath.

Marinette looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

He looked at her. Was she coming back? “My father had the gate barricaded…”

Marinette held out her hand weakly. She started to glow, and the chain shattered. “There are people behind us,” she said, turning to face him. Adrien could see them in the rear view mirror. “Go, go, go!”

Adrien punched the gas. They sped out of the courtyard, breaking off one of the side view mirrors. Adrien took a harsh turn on the road, and another as he rounded the corner. “Where’s the closest hospital?” He asked.

“Why are you asking me?” She demanded. Not more than a second later, she clawed up her fist. “Where are you taking me?!”
“To the hospital, Marinette! I just said that!” He shouted back.

“Why? Who are you? Are you a doctor?” She demanded. “I want my lawyer!” He grew tense, worrying that she would die from whatever was causing her delirium before they even reached the hospital. She held her head. “Hospital… hospital… get on this road and then keep going until you get to Rue de Sèvres.”

“Won’t that take me to the Eiffel Tower?” He asked.

“You asked me how to get there, and I told you!” She snapped.

Adrien nodded. He sped horribly, going at least a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour, which infuriated local traffic cops. They chased him as he followed Marinette’s somewhat confused directions. He swerved to avoid hitting the few civilians out and about so late at night.

When they reached the hospital, Adrien pulled up to the entrance of the ER, parking where there clearly wasn’t a spot. He carried Marinette inside.

“Please, you have to help her!” Adrien begged as he approached the counter. The receptionist stood and walked around the desk. “She was kidnapped! She needs help!”

He provided the receptionist with her information after doctors took Marinette into the emergency room. At the same time, he politely asked the police officer who had followed him inside to wait while they sorted that out, and to his surprise, he obliged. Afterwards, Adrien dealt with the police officer, which was more embarrassing than it could have been since he was half naked and parked on the curb, but he accepted the ticket graciously, believing the fine a small price to pay for Marinette’s life.

Adrien moved the car and got a change of clothes from the trunk, leftover from his last photo shoot. He changed in the bathroom. Now, he realized as he looked at his phone, it was time to call the police.

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18 April, Present Day

Adrien sat with Marinette until her breathing calmed down. She sat up when she was ready, smoothing her hair and pulling it back into the bun she wore it in. He watched her. “Are… you ready to talk?” He asked. She nodded. He was quiet for a few minutes before he collapsed on her bed. “People kept saying that I saved you, but that isn’t right. You saved yourself. I just took you to the hospital.”

Marinette frowned. “I wouldn’t have made it on my own, Adrien…” she said.

“Yes you would have.” He said. “You would have… I don’t know, levitated there, or something.” He shook his head. “But now he’s back. It doesn’t feel real…”

“Are you sure? How did you find out?” Marinette asked.

“Mylène told me someone was asking for me. By my old name, not the one I changed it to.” He said. “And when I went to see who it was, it was a woman who had been beaten and changed to look like you… and she had a cabbage butterfly with her.” He sat up and sighed. “That was part of his
signature. He’d put a cabbage butterfly in his victim’s hands.”

“Could it have been a copycat?” She asked. She shook her head. “But, no, a copycat wouldn’t have known where you work. Not that your father should have, either, but still…”

“I know it was him!” He said firmly. “He knows where I work, and if he doesn’t try to kill me, he’ll use me to find you!” He rubbed his face. “How do I tell people that I can’t go back to the hospital…?”

“What do you tell them when you leave to help me?” Marinette asked.

“I tell them that I have a family emergency. There’s a rumor going around that my sister is, and I quote, ‘fucked up.’” Adrien said.

Marinette mulled this over. “They’re kind of right…” she admitted.

“Except you aren’t my sister.” He said, firmly. She seemed confused at this, and he had to think of a way out of it. “You’re my best friend.”

That didn’t seem to help. But after a moment, her expression softened and she took his hand. “Adrien, I don’t want you to leave me. What if he finds me, and you aren’t here?”

Adrien folded his legs and put her hand to his forehead. “I know, Princess.” He said. “But I have work, and what about my cat?”

“Well…” Marinette considered this. “I’ve always wanted to meet your cat!” She joked. He chuckled, and then offered her a warm smile. Marinette’s face became serious. “Adrien, you have to know that if he knows where you work, it’s only a matter of time before he confronts you there.”

“Yes, I know.” He admitted. He thought for a moment. “I actually have a vacation scheduled for the next few weeks. I was supposed to take it with Kagami, but we broke up, so it’s not like I have plans…” Adrien looked up. “I can talk to Mylène, ask her to have it moved up. I can deal with the fallout later.”

Marinette smiled. Then, her face fell. “I can’t ask you to do that. You already do too much for me.” She said. “I’m sorry I even asked!”

“Marinette, you know I’d move the world if you asked.” He said.

“That doesn’t make it right!” She argued.

Adrien took her hands. She shifted so she faced him. “Marinette, there are plenty of nurses at the hospital. They have each other, and the doctors. I only have you,” he said. He smiled. “I want to stay here with you. I want to be here so we can keep each other safe. So we can go back to what works.” He looked at her hands. “Just you and me.”

Marinette fell into his arms. He hugged her, and then sighed. He loved her, truly and deeply. But nothing would happen—nothing could happen—when his father was the reason that she couldn’t walk outside her apartment longer than it took to check the mail on a good day. Why she had flashbacks and panic attacks and phantom limb pain. Still, he said as he took in the warmth of her body and the smell of her hair, it was nice to hold her every once in a while.
this is the events during and following the last chapter’s flashbacks. this is included because I did more research. i have concluded that leverage was right. about everything really. but specifically French prisons

18 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Nathalie had called Adrien out of school that day. In hindsight, this might have been an attempt to delay Adrien finding out that his friend was missing, but at the time, he was just going to another boring photoshoot. At least this time he was nearby—the photoshoot was taking place in the park right next to the collège and the Tom & Sabine Boulangerie et Patisserie. He shot a glance of it every chance he could, hoping to catch a glimpse of Marinette, who he had fallen head over heels for.

But he never saw her. He assumed that she had decided to eat lunch in the cafeteria instead of going home, and he continued with the shoot normally.

That is, until her mother, Sabine, approached him. She looked very concerned, but she waited patiently after Adrien gave her a signal that meant, ‘in a minute.’ When Vincent decided that he was ready for the crew to take a break, Adrien approached Sabine. “Hello, Madame Dupain-Cheng,” Adrien said with a smile. She didn’t return it. “Is everything okay?”

“Well, I hope that’s the case…” She confessed. “You see, Tom is making a bit of a fuss…” She paused, and he could see that she was only trying to stay calm because she knew that she would panic if she let herself slip even a little. “Did… did you see Marinette last night? Was she with you?”

“No, I didn’t.” Adrien said. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I was with Nino and Alya, working on a project, but then I went to le Grand Paris, because Chloé was in a state.” He frowned. “Why?”

“Because Marinette went to return something to you, but she didn’t come home after.” Sabine explained. Adrien jumped. “She sent us a text message, sounding excited, so I just assumed…”

Adrien took a step closer. “No, I didn’t see her at all. Are you sure she didn’t come home?”

“Tom waited up for her, and she wasn’t in her bedroom this morning.” She said. She covered her mouth. “Oh, no. I was so certain that she was with you…!” She slipped into a panic. “It’s been half a day! We have to tell the police!”

Sabine ran back to her home. Adrien was in shock for a moment. He started running for the school, ignoring anyone who tried to stop him. He almost got hit by a car, but he ran into the school building.

Adrien burst into the cafeteria. He found his friends sitting near each other. Nino, Alya, Rose, Juleka, Nathaniel and Alix sat at one, while Kim, Max, Mylène and Ivan sat at another. Sabrina, a police officer’s daughter, sat nearby.

He slammed his hands down on the table where Alya and Nino sat. “Marinette went missing last
night!” He announced.

Nino grabbed his drink as it shook. “Dude!” He scolded. Then, he was confused. “Aren’t you supposed to be at a photoshoot?”

Alya held out her hand. “Wait, did you just say that Marinette is missing?!”

Adrien furrowed his brows. “Yes! Her mother just told me she never came home!” He explained. “Have any of you seen her?”

“Not since yesterday!” Alix said.

Alya stood up. “What else did Madame Cheng tell you?”

“She said that she got a text from her last night saying she had good news, but that was it! Nothing else!”

“I’ll try calling her!” Rose said, digging in her purse for her phone.

Adrien addressed the whole class now. “If Marinette is missing, we have to help find her! Madame Dupain-Cheng said that she was going to call the police!” He said. “We should go now, so we can volunteer with the search party!”

“Adrien, we’re in school right now!” Alix pointed out. “We can’t just le—”

Rose interrupted her. “It went straight to voicemail!” She declared frantically. “Marinette, sweetie, it’s Rose! If you get this message, please stay strong! We’re all here for you!” She said as murmurs spread through the cafeteria.

“I’ve suddenly lost my appetite…” Nathaniel muttered.

“You’re right. We should go, now.” Alix changed her mind.

Most of the class stood up. Kim, Juleka and Ivan even seemed pleased, all wearing a face of, ‘stick it to the man.’ Max and Sabrina were the only ones left behind. “Wait! It isn’t proper to skip class, even under extenuating circumstances!” He protested. Nevertheless, he stood and followed the group, and Sabrina followed him, ever a lackey.

The class met at the bakery. Officer Roger Raincomprix, Sabrina’s father, met with Tom and Sabine. He organized the teenagers into search parties, and split them up to search different parts of the arrondissement. Adrien switched parties with Nino so his father wouldn’t see him skipping his photoshoot.

The search parties turned up very little. There was no blood and little sign of foul play. Nino’s search party turned up broken glass, and this gave police probable cause to start investigating security footage.

Adrien invited the class to the mansion after the search was called off. This is where Chloé joined them. “How else can we help the police?” He asked.

“I have plenty of photographs of Marinette in my scrapbooks!” Rose suggested. “I can make copies and put up posters!”

“And I’ll put her photo up on my blog!” Alya said. “That way, everyone will know to be on the lookout!”
“I’ll keep an eye out for her on my morning and evening jogs!” Kim volunteered. “I’m totally strong and fast! If I see that kidnapper, I’m going to be like—” Here, Kim made loud sound effects to describe him beating up Marinette’s kidnapper.

Alya frowned at him. “Didn’t my dad get you kicked out of the zoo for challenging the animals to a race?” She asked.

Kim waved her off. “That is in the past!”

She scoffed. “That was last week!” She snapped.

Adrien calmed them down. “We’re getting off topic.” He said. “We’re brainstorming ways to find Marinette.”

“I want to believe that Marinette can handle herself,” Alix said, “but it’s been almost a day. If she doesn’t turn up by tonight, she’s in big trouble!”

Max fixed his glasses with a frown. “Statistically, most abducted children are killed within the first forty-eight hours. And the presence of glass at the supposed crime scene suggests that she was taken to a secondary location—”

“Where the odds of coming back are slim to none,” the entire class said in unison, excluding Adrien, who wasn’t sure if it was a reference to something he hadn’t watched or a lecture he’d missed.

Either way, he was furious with it. “Don’t talk like that!” He shouted.

Juleka leaned back. “You know, it’s kinda cool that Marinette is missing…” she muttered. “Like, sometimes I think getting kidnapped will solve all my problems…”

The entire class recoiled from this statement. There came a wave of dissenting voices.

“Ohmigod, Juleka, no!” Alya scolded.

“What is wrong with you?” Chloé asked.

“That’s so awful!” Mylène said with teary eyes.

Adrien tore at his hair. “Enough!” He shouted. “None of this is helping!” He covered his eyes.

“Maybe we could—”

Before he could continue, his door swung open. Adrien expected Nathalie, but he flinched when he realized that it was Gabriel. Gabriel was furious to see so many people in his son’s room. He immediately told them to leave without so much as waiting for Adrien to explain.

“Father, my—”

Gabriel interrupted him. “You abandoned the photoshoot today.” He snapped.

He flinched. “Yes, I did, but—”

“I expect you to finish it tomorrow.” He said.

“Father, you don’t understand! My best friend, Marinette—she went missing!” He explained. Gabriel didn’t react. “She was kidnapped! I just know it!”

“Then the police will handle it. You have other obligations.” He said.
Adrien balled up his fists. “I’m not going to sit by while my best friend suffers!” He declared. He stormed out of his room, taking only his phone with him. He searched for hours, until the sun went down and all the other volunteers turned in for the night, excluding her father. Sabine was at the bakery in case she returned.

Eventually, Adrien was encouraged by Tom to go home. He returned to the mansion with a heavy heart. He couldn’t help but think of what his friends had said. Was it true? Did Marinette only have a few hours left to live? It couldn’t be true! Someone was wonderful as Marinette couldn’t be killed! If it were true, he’d have to…

Adrien jumped when he walked into his bedroom to find his father still there. “Father? It’s late; shouldn’t you have gone to bed?”

Gabriel rubbed his eyes. “I… yes, but I have something for you.” He said. He stood when Adrien didn’t move. “I… thought it might give you some comfort.”

Gabriel handed Adrien a video game with a yellow ribbon on it. Adrien started at it. It was a physical copy of a game he’d already gotten permission to download two weeks ago. He felt his body start to shake. “Is this some kind of joke?” He muttered as he stared at the floor.

“Adrien, you know how I hate it when you mumble.” Gabriel sighed.

“Is this loud enough for you?!” He shouted when he threw the game across the room with enough force to break the case.

Gabriel was in shock. “Adrien Agreste! What has gotten into you?!”

“Are you kidding me?! I tell you my best friend is missing, and you have Nathalie go out and buy me a game that I already own?!” He shouted. Gabriel was taken aback. “Is this your idea of good parenting?!” He asked. “Is this your idea of helping?!”

“How dare you take this tone with me?!”

“No!” He snapped. “How dare you try to distract me from a real, life-threatening problem with some…” he rolled his hands here, trying to think of something cutting. “…some piece of material garbage?! If you paid any attention to me at all, you’d have gotten me a-a-a flashlight in case my phone dies or… or an emergency blanket in case I find her!”

Gabriel furrowed his eyebrows. “I didn’t get you those things because you are not going to find her.” He snapped. “No one is.” Adrien’s entire body language changed from aggressive to disbelief. “I don’t have time to entertain fantasies and delusions. Neither should you!”

Adrien grew tense. “Get out,” he hissed. Gabriel seemed confused. “Get out! GET OUT!” He said, pushing his father away. “Get out of my room!” He pushed Gabriel out into the hall and slammed the door behind them both. Gabriel was about to mock him when Adrien pushed past him and sprinted out the door.

28 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien loved school. He loved going and being with his friends and having a normal life. But he had
skipped the last week and dedicated that time to looking for Marinette. Something in his bones told him that she was nearby, if he just looked a little harder.

But since he was skipping, he had to go home at night so no one realized anything was amiss. One night, when he returned from ‘school,’ he found Nathalie on her knees next to the front door. He almost hit her with it, startling them both.

“Uh, Nathalie? What are you doing?” Adrien asked, stepping inside and closing the door.

She sat on her heels and wiped her forehead off with her sleeve. “Oh, Adrien!” She said, still startled. She was washing the floor with a soapy sponge, and the suds were everywhere. “I, uh… dropped a thing of dye your father asked for. I’m sorry, I must have lost track of time.”

There was a bucket next to her, and he could see another sponge in it. He sat down next to her and reached for the sponge. “Here, let me—”

“No!” Nathalie shouted, lunging forward and pushing the bucket away from him. He recoiled, and neither one of them moved. He was in shock, staring at her panicked expression with fearful eyes. She sat up, coughed into her hand, and collected herself. “You have your homework to do. I’ll check in on you once I’m done.” She said, back to her professional demeanor once again.

“I…” Adrien paused. “Yes, Nathalie.” He stood and walked up to his room. Nathalie looked at the spilled water. It had diluted the blood she’d already cleaned from the stairs, which meant that it wasn’t cleaning the rest of it so easily. She emptied the water and started again with fresh water, soap, and bleach.

Adrien, on the other hand, didn’t do his homework because he didn’t know what it was. He climbed onto his bed and charged his phone. He took this time to check his social media feeds, which he found annoying since no one seemed to care that Marinette was missing. He posted a couple of things about her, hoping they would gain traction, and then attempted to sneak out.

He only had one foot out the door when Nathalie caught him. She seemed just as surprised that he was sneaking out as he was to get caught. She dragged him back to his room and sat him down.

“I know what you’ve done.” She said. “I just received a call from the collège that you haven’t been in class all week.” Her eyes got big and sad. “Adrien, why? After everything I did to convince your father to let you go—you’d just throw it all away?!”

“I’m not throwing anything away!” Adrien protested. “Marinette is—”

“Is missing. Yes, I know,” Nathalie rubbed her forehead. “You’ve only mentioned it a thousand times.”

Adrien stood at this. “It’s been eleven days!” He shouted. “There hasn’t been any sign of her! The DCPJ are involved now!” Nathalie ignored him. “Nathalie! I don’t know how you can expect me to pretend like everything is okay when I know that she’s out there, suffering?!”

“Because, Adrien, everyone everywhere is suffering!” She snapped. “Marinette is not special! And sometimes, bad things happen!” She snapped. Adrien recoiled, in such genuine shock that he couldn’t even shout back at her. She smoothed her hair down. “Stay here. When your father has finished his work, he’ll come deliver your punishment.”

He balled up his fists. “He can’t even be bothered to deal with me now, can he?!” He shouted as she left his room. He ran to follow her. “Why did he even bother having a child when he would have had a much easier time without one?!”
Nathalie swiveled to counter, but thought better of it a moment after. She slammed his door.

Adrien started at the shut door for a little while longer. He sat down on his bed and couldn’t move for a long time. Marinette had been missing for eleven days. Why hadn’t anything turned up? He hated this. He hated everything. He hated the Collector, he hated the police, and he especially hated himself.

His thoughts began to spiral. He had deluded himself into thinking he was going to be her savior, when in fact he wasn’t anything. If he was right—and the Central Directorate of the Judicial Police seemed to think he was—then Marinette had two more days, and then she’d die. The Collector had condensed his abductions to fourteen nights. The thought was agonizing. Why did he get to live when someone so amazing as Marinette had to die?

That wasn’t the only reason he collected the cords. It wasn’t the only reason he tied them together with a knot like he’d seen online. It was the catalyst, the last straw, that which broke the camel’s back. His father didn’t notice that he was upset, or when he did, he tried to distract him with meaningless things. Nathalie noticed, barely, but was too wrapped up in whatever his father had her doing that she couldn’t spare the time to care. His friends had their own lives, their own troubles… they didn’t need his, too. And the only person who did notice was gone, or soon would be. Now he was back at the beginning, and he’d tied the noose around the basketball hoop.

Adrien slid it around his neck. He climbed up onto the arm of his rolling chair, took a moment to steel himself, and then pushed the chair out from under him.

He fell. The next thing he felt was an intense pain on his neck, and his breath became panicked as he struggled to breathe. He tried to fight his own survival instinct. There was a sudden wave of fear—fear of dying, fear of what happened next, fear of who was going to find him—which all became incoherent when the lightheadedness set it.

And then he fell again. He hit the floor and started painfully coughing. The room was spinning around him, and he was disoriented. He held his throat and his head and tried to walk himself through what had happened. He looked up, and he saw that the cords were still intact. They hadn’t snapped under his weight, they had unraveled. He curled up on himself and succumbed to a coughing fit.

Someone grabbed his shoulders and forced him to look up. “Adrien, are you alright?!” Gabriel asked as Adrien looked away to cough.

He pushed Gabriel away and stood up. He stumbled and hit the wall. He slammed his hand into it, damaging the wallpaper. “I’m sick of this!” He shouted, ripping a banner off the wall in a fit of anger. “I hate everything about my life! I hate that I was even born!” He ripped the blankets off his bed and pushed over the foosball table. “I don’t want to live anymore!”

Gabriel tried to comfort him. “Son…”

“Don’t call me that!” Adrien shouted. He grabbed anything in reach to throw at him. This ranged from paper from his trash can to pens from the desk to trophies from the wall—though these were thrown next to him, not at him. “I want to die! I’m ready to die!” He shouted. “Why won’t you let me die?!”

Adrien threw more things while Gabriel held up his arms to protect his face. Adrien eventually broke down into tears, holding onto his desk until his legs gave out. Gabriel approached him and pulled him into a hug that he didn’t want. He pounded his fists against him and tried to push him away.
“Why won’t you let me die?” He sobbed. “I’m so tired. I can’t do this anymore…”

Gabriel held onto Adrien for a very long time. “I love you, Adrien,” he said, pulling him so close that he could hardly move his arms. “We’re going to get through this.”

30 April, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien took a seat in the waiting room while he dialed the commissariat. His hands were shaking when he held the phone up to his ear. It didn’t ring; it just sent him to the directory. He followed it, still shaking. He knew he had to do it, it was just… a disconnect. Between what he knew to be true and his emotions, still coming down from adrenaline.

Eventually, someone picked up. “Commissariat of the twenty-first arrondissement.” A man said on the other end of the line. “Can you state your name for the record?”

“I-I would like to report a crime,” Adrien said, his voice quivering and breaking. When the man tried to argue, he spoke again. “It’s urgent.”

“What is the nature of the crime?”

He paused. “K-kidnapping and sexual assault,” he said.

There was typing on the other side. “Are you in a safe place?”

“No. No, I mean, no, I’m not the victim!” Adrien clarified. He stammered. “My friend… I found… she found me! I—”

“Slow down. Give me your name, first.”

“My name is Adrien Agreste,” he said quietly. “My best friend, Marinette Dupain-Cheng, was kidnapped a couple of weeks ago. She… she found me tonight and…” he covered his mouth. “And my father is the one who abducted her.”

“Hold on. If what you’re saying is true, then—”

“Gabriel Agreste is the Collector.” Adrien confessed. “He should still be at 75001 Place du Châtelet. Please, you have to hurry!”

There was commotion on the other side. The officer’s voice was faint as he shouted orders. “Code 491-B at 75001 Place du Châtelet! Tell the DCPJ agents! I need dispatch on this, now!” He must have put down the phone, because his voice was louder now. “Adrien, can you stay on the line with me? I have police on the way to the address. Are you still there?”

He shook his head before realizing the officer couldn’t see him. “No. No, I took Marinette to the hospital! She was hurt, I think he might have done something to her!” He cried. “She was singing and talking all weird, and I was afraid that she was going to die, so—”

“That’s okay. You did well, Adrien. The police will handle it from here.” He said. “Where are you?” Adrien asked the receptionist, and she gave him the name of the hospital. “601-F at the hospital on Rue de Sèvres. 260-J and possible 901.”
“Wait! Wait.” Adrien said. “There’s one more thing. The mansion—it’s built like a fortress. He knows that I left with her.”

“Does he know that you called the police?”

“I don’t know! I’m sure he doesn’t expect me to pretend that this isn’t happening!” Adrien shouted. He shook his head, stood, and began to pace. “Listen, what I’m trying to tell you is that he fortified the mansion! You aren’t going to be able to get in, but I know how to disable them!” He gave the officer the code, which was handed off.

The officer got back on the phone. “You’re doing great. Officers are on their way. Just relax, and stay on the phone with me.”

Adrien sat down on the floor. He shook his head. “I can’t…” He pulled it away from his face. “I have to call her parents now.”

He hung up despite the officer’s protests. It took a lot of mental fortitude to dial Tom’s number, which he had gotten when the first search parties were sent out. It didn’t even ring once before he answered it, frantic. “Hello? Please tell me you have news of Marinette!”

“I do. She’s alive, and she’s at the hospital on Rue de Sèvres.” Adrien said. “Monsieur Dupain—” But it was too late. Tom has hung up, but he knew that he and Sabine were on their way.

Even though he had called the police first, Tom and Sabine were the first to arrive. He stood when he saw them, and they both embraced him immediately. “Oh, Adrien!” Sabine said, breaking her hold on him to cup his face. “You were the one who brought her here?” He nodded apprehensively. “You saved her!”

“No… no, that’s not right.” He argued. “Monsieur Dupain, Madame Dupain-Cheng… the reason that I was able to bring her here…” he sighed. “My father is the one who kidnapped her. I’m so sorry!”

This took them by surprise. Sabine recovered quicker, and she put her hands on Adrien’s shoulders. “Adrien,” she said very seriously, “did you know that your father had kidnapped Marinette?”

His jaw dropped. “No! I had no idea!” He said. He started to shake. “You have to understand, if I had known—”

“Then why are you apologizing?” She asked, tears welling up in her eyes. “You saved her life!”

She hugged him, and then Tom did. Soon enough, the police arrived, and they separated Adrien from the Dupain-Chengs to get his statement. He was told that the car, being the one that the kidnapping occurred in, was being collected for evidence, and then put in impound. He was first told that he needed to set up new living arrangements between the time the mansion was searched for evidence and his aunt arrived to take temporary custody. Then, he was left alone while a new officer spoke to the one who had been speaking with him.

Tom took this time to sit with him. He didn’t get a chance to say anything before Adrien spoke. “Have the doctors said anything about Marinette?”

He paused. “They’re keeping her sedated now. Sab’s gone to give blood. The wounds on her legs are several days old, and based on what you told them and what they can see, they’re pretty sure she’s got a serious infection.” He said. Adrien looked away. “But, they said that they have ways of stopping the infection from spreading further. They’re very confident that Marinette will live.”
He let out a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad,” he said. “I don’t know what I would have done if I had gotten her here too late!”

Tom rubbed his back. “How are you holding up?”

Adrien shot up. “Me? This isn’t about me!”

“My daughter is alive, and the man who did this to her has been apprehended. I couldn’t be more relieved.” Tom said. “But you just witnessed a girl covered in blood accuse your father of rape and kidnapping—how are you holding up?”

He didn’t move, and then he started shaking. “Oh, this is awful. I don’t want to believe that this is real.” He said. He held his head in his hands. “I try to keep my thoughts on you and Marinette, because I know that this is so much worse for you, but… I can’t believe it’s real.” He looked at his hands. “On one side, I know that Marinette is telling the truth. There’s no other explanation for any of this, but… the naïve part of me… still wants to believe that my father couldn’t have done this.”

“Adrien…”

“My heart will catch up to my head, don’t worry.” He sat up and looked at the ceiling. “It might just take a while.”

But Adrien didn’t get the time to process this at the hospital. The police officers had finished their discussion. “Adrien Agreste?” They said when they approached.

“Yes?” He stood.

One of them took his arm and pulled it around. “You’re under arrest for conspiracy to kidnap Marinette Dupain-Cheng,” the officer said, tightening the handcuffs around his wrists.

“Wait!” Adrien struggled for a moment, but thought better of it. “Wait, I didn’t do anything!” He decided against pleading with the police officers and instead looked at Tom. “Please! Please, you have to believe me! I didn’t do anything, I’m innocent!”

2 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien was still in custody, but he was waiting for his lawyer to speak to him before going to the preliminary hearing. He was sitting alone in a dimly lit room, drumming his fingers against a wooden table. He was starting to get antsy, but he didn’t want to upset the police and get himself in more trouble.

Suddenly the door opened. Adrien’s lawyer didn’t smile when he sat down. He shut the door behind him, and then sat down. “So, here’s the situation.” He said as Adrien sat up. “Your father and his assistant are very adamant that it was your idea to kidnap Marinette. The—”

“But it wasn’t! I didn’t have anything to do with this! I didn’t know she was even there!” Adrien interrupted.

His lawyer interrupted him in turn. “I know what we’re saying. I’m here for you; shouting won’t make me lie to you.” He said. “The problem is that it’s your word against theirs. And right now… it
looks pretty bad.” Adrien’s heart sank. “Adrien, the statements we got right after she went missing say that she went to the mansion to see you. You’re the one with the connection to her, and you were barely in school the whole time she was missing.”

“Because I was looking for her!” Adrien argued. “You can check with the police! I signed in on every search party they sent out!”

His lawyer shook his head. “Which stopped at night, and doesn’t lift suspicion from you.” He explained. “We’re still waiting for the results of the rape test kit. If your DNA and fingerprints don’t turn up, that’s a good sign, but your DNA is bound to be close to your father’s, and fingerprint analysis isn’t foolproof, so we can’t rely on those to wholly exonerate you.”

“Then how do I prove my innocence?”

The lawyer sighed. “I honestly think our best chance at getting the charges dropped is getting Marinette’s statement, but that’s a tentative hope, at best.”

“Why is that? What did Marinette say in her statement?” Adrien asked. The lawyer didn’t respond. At first, he worried that his father had lied to her as another means of torture, but then he realized what it really meant. “No way! She’s still not awake?! It’s been two whole days!”

“I am only telling you this because Madame Cheng told me I could.” He said. “The infection in Marinette’s ankle was identified as sepsis.” He explained. He paused. “It… has spread all the way up through her leg, and they believe that they’re going to have to amputate. On top of which, she’s gone into shock.”

“What does that mean for my Marinette?” He asked quietly.

“It means that, when she was awake, she was delirious, and now she is not awake. They’ve induced a coma.” He said. “And Mademoiselle Sancoeur said that one of the things… they did to her was to make her fear police officers getting too close to the mansion, so once she is awake, we don’t know how long it will be before she can give a statement.” There was a long pause. “And this is all dependent on whether or not she actually does… wake up.”

Adrien took a shallow breath.

“Adrien, if she dies, there is a very likely chance they’ll charge you as an accessory to her murder.” His lawyer said. “You’re still a minor, but since these charges are violent crime, I don’t have much hope for educational sentencing. You could be looking at up to fifteen years in prison.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “This is a nightmare.” He muttered. “Please tell me you have good news!”

His lawyer thought. “Your bodyguard confessed immediately! He’s agreed to go straight to trial.” He said. “We can only connect him to this kidnapping, but I’m confident he’ll get seventeen to twenty years with at least fifteen served.”

“What about Nathalie and my… my father?”

“I’m not sure about Nathalie. I think she’ll go straight to trial with just the accessory charges, but some of the things she’s said suggests that they might tack on the rape charges if they find her DNA with the rape test kit.” That certainly wasn’t what he’d been expecting. “Your father… is not expected to go straight to trail. But, as of right now, he’s been connected to thirteen murders. We think that there’s more.”
Adrien put his head down on the table. He covered it with his hands. “This is it.” He said into the table. “My best friend is dying, my father is a murderer, and I’m going to prison for it. This is my worst nightmare.”

7 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Pending his trial, Adrien was sent to the juvenile barracks of Fleury-Mérogis, the largest prison in Europe, and also the closest one. To say he was terrified was an understatement. He knew from articles that he’d read that French prisons were not good, but he had never had cause to actually be inside one, let alone as an inmate.

He was given a pair of black sweatpants with two white stripes up the side and a black sweatshirt with a zipper. He was told that there were no uniforms, so he wasn’t forced to wear them, but all of his clothes were either at the mansion or in the car that was locked in impound, so he didn’t have a whole lot of choices.

Fleury-Mérogis was past capacity. This was a fact of all French prisons, not just this one. So Adrien considered himself lucky that he got a bed—until he realized that it was infested with fleas and lice, and Adrien spent the entirety of his first full day in the prison desperately trying to comb them out of his hair. After the second night, he gave up and resigned himself to be itchy.

More than once he was propositioned for sex. It was prohibited in public spaces, but they were supposed to consider their cells ‘home,’ whatever that meant, he thought bitterly. Condoms were freely available, but Adrien decided not to partake in any sexual activity.

In hindsight, he guess it made sense, but he hadn’t gone into it expecting prison to be so noisy. He expected it during mealtimes and when they were in the yard, but it was never quiet, not even at night. Adrien wasn’t sleeping much himself, but there was always the sound of crying drowning out the white noise. Sometimes he caught himself crying—he was upset about Marinette, about being in such a small space with nowhere to go, and about having been put in jail when he’d done nothing wrong. But he also worried for his father, though he hated that he was—he was worried for his antisocial father being stuck in an overcrowded prison, sleeping in a bed filled with lice, and Adrien hated that he worried for him. But he did.

Until day six.

Adrien was sitting on the floor, trying his best to decipher a law book. It was difficult to focus, because of the noise from the other inmates. He would sometimes look up at them, as they interacted with one another under the close eye of the correctional officers. A lot of them were eating, and it occurred to him that it was probably lunchtime, but he was stuck on a passage and he didn’t intend to stand up until he finished it.

A dark shadow stood over him. Adrien sighed and tried to ignore it, but it didn’t move. “Excuse me, you’re in my—” Adrien looked up to see Gabriel standing over him, dressed as a guard. This was the first time he’d seen his father since before Marinette’s escape, and it would be the last conversation they would have in person for a very long time. “What are you doing?! You can’t be here! This—” Adrien looked around. “You’re supposed to be in the men’s barracks!”

Gabriel tried to touch Adrien, but he shot back. “I just came here to talk.” He said. “I figured that you
owed it to me.”

“You think I owe you an explanation?!” Adrien snapped. “Father, you kidnapped my best friend, and then you framed me for conspiracy!” He took another step back. “You have to go. They’re going to think that I’m trying to plan an escape with you.”

He started to walk away. “Come back here!” Gabriel ordered. He pointed at an inmate. “You—bring him back over here.”

The inmate’s posture changed, like something had possessed him. He marched over to Adrien and dragged him back, undeterred by his struggling. Adrien broke free when he was face to face with Gabriel once again. He glared at him. “What did you do to him?”

“Your powers might protect you from me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have them.” Gabriel said. “Has the prosecution addressed you yet?”

“Yes, and they told me that it was you who implicated me!” Adrien snapped. “You know that I didn’t do anything!”

“You stole my car.”

Adrien recoiled. “To take Marinette to the hospital! It’s not like I hijacked it and sold it for parts!” He snapped. “Is… you can’t seriously be angry about the car?!”

“No, I’m not.” He said. He grabbed Adrien by the collar and lifted him up. A few people realized what was happening and raced to stop Gabriel, but he glared at them. “Not one of you will take a single step until I’ve finished!” He shouted. They all froze in place. He turned his attention back to Adrien. “Listen to me. I don’t care what they offer you. If you speak out against me, Adrien, I’m going to make your life miserable. I didn’t raise you to be a traitor!”

“Funny, I don’t recall you raising me at all!” Adrien hissed. He grabbed Gabriel’s hands. “They don’t have to offer me anything! If I’m going to prison for something you did, I’m going to prison knowing that I’ll get out in fifteen years!” He dug his nails into Gabriel’s hands. “I am going to make sure that you die here!”

Adrien sank his powers into Gabriel’s skin. He dropped him, and Adrien hit the floor hard. He grabbed his law book and took off running. A new group of guards arrived, these ones wearing headphones. Gabriel pointed at Adrien. “Beat him until he cannot stand!” He ordered. He immediately turned around and surrendered to the guards, who dragged him away in handcuffs.

Adrien was not so lucky. He tried to outrun Gabriel’s possessed lackeys, but one of them grabbed his jacket and pulled him to the ground. A girl that had been among those who had asked Adrien for sex grabbed the law book he’d been reading and used it to beat him. Others used anything else they could get their hands on. A possessed guard parted the crowd and dragged him out of the mob, only to handcuff him to the gate.

He tried to use his legs to ward off his attackers while he tried to use his powers to undo the handcuffs. Adrien managed to catch a break thanks to his mastery of bad luck. The handcuffs broke and the gate unlocked. Adrien yanked it open and spun onto the other side, where the cells were. He used his powers to lock it again, and then he crawled away from the gate.

The possessed inmates and the guards tried to reach through the gate, but whatever order Gabriel had given them had only increased their rage, not their coordination. They didn’t realize that the guards had keys. Adrien stood and limped to his cell.
Adrien looked at his reflection in the mirror. There were already bruises on his face, and his hair was messy, and he looked like he was losing weight. He washed a bit of blood and dirt from his face, and then he collapsed onto his itchy, uncomfortable bunk. He didn’t stay there long until he searched the room, where he found a shiv.

Adrien used it to slice open his wrists, his second suicide attempt in two weeks. A guard checking the cells found him and applied limited first aid before taking him to the infirmary, which is where he passed out from blood loss.

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8 May, Fifteen Years Ago

When he regained consciousness, he found that he was handcuffed to the gurney, and his feet were tied together. Trying to move irritated his arms.

“Yes, Agreste Junior survived. He cut himself. No, I don’t know if he was in the riot. He has some defensive wounds, so it’s possible.” A voice said. Adrien turned to see a doctor on the phone. “… really? Agreste started the riot? Seems odd to me that he would let his own son get hurt.” He was quiet again. “…Yes, I can see why solitary would be a good place for him. We can’t risk what could happen if a power like that incited another riot.”

Adrien was relieved that his father would be moved to a place where he couldn’t influence anyone.

“Though, if I might be so bold, I would wait until his wounds close before we move him.” The doctor said. Adrien tried to sit up. “If he opens them up again, he could die…”


The doctor held the phone away from his face. “You should have thought about that before cutting your wrists,” he snapped. Adrien flinched.

The conversation continued while Adrien tried not to cry. He couldn’t even cover his face. Not too long after, however, the door swung open, and Adrien’s lawyer appeared. “Adrien! I have wonderful news!” He said, rushing to his side. “Marinette is awake. She’s given her statement.” He noticed the restraints. “Hello! Can we get my client out of these restraints, please? A little human dignity is all I’m asking for!”

The doctor complied. Adrien sat up. “You said Marinette is awake? How is she?” He asked.

“Listen for yourself,” the lawyer said. He played a recording after skipping a bit of the intro.

<But I know that Adrien didn’t do this to me. How do you know? When Adrien came home the day I went missing, I… saw him on the monitors, and I called out to him. Gabriel looked up and called out to him, too. Then he told me that, no matter how I tried, Adrien wouldn’t come to help me because he didn’t know I was there. Are you sure that’s what he said? Were you in a stable state of mind? I know what he said. I know what I saw! Adrien spent every waking moment trying to find me. Gabriel lied to hurt him and control him! Adrien risked his life to save mine. Who knows what would have happened to him if he’d gotten caught? Excuse me, but Mademoiselle needs to
rest. You’re getting her too excited. Monsieur, we know Adrien, too. I tried to tell the police, but he was genuinely surprised to hear that she was missing. Thank you, Madame Cheng. I just need one more thing. Mademoiselle, did, at any point, Monsieur Adrien Agreste physically or sexually assault you in any way while you were held captive by Monsieur Gabriel Agreste? No, he did not. Thank you. That’s everything I need for right now.»

The lawyer beamed at him. “The rape test kit came back, too.” He said. “It came back negative for your DNA.”

“So that means…?” Adrien said hesitatingly.

“It means that all the charges against you have been dropped.” His lawyer smiled. “You’re a free man.”

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18 April, Present Day

Adrien paced outside Marinette’s apartment as he held his phone to his face. He listened to the clacking of keys on the other end of the line. Mylène asked. She was rearranging schedules to accommodate a ‘family emergency.’ According to the report she was going to file, Adrien was officially in England, as his ‘sister’ needed specialized care there. Hopefully no one would question that, and it might even throw a few choice people off his trail.

“Are you safe there, at Marinette’s apartment?” Mylène asked. She lowered her voice. “I mean, isn’t it dangerous for the two of you to be together while you-know-who is on the loose?”

“He’s not Bloody Mary, Mylène.” Adrien sighed. “Yes, it’s risky for Marinette and I to be together, but I took a lot of precautions when I picked this place.” He smiled. “It’s not even in either of our names. Technically, this is Alya’s apartment.”

“Doesn’t she live with Nino?” Mylène asked.

“Well, they’ve been married for years, so I’d hope so.” Adrien said. He was quiet. “I really appreciate you doing this for me, Mylène.”

He couldn’t see Mylène, but he could tell her face had broken into a small smile. “Adrien, you do so much for everyone else. This is the least that I can do.”

She hung up and Adrien went back inside. He told Marinette that he was going to go get some things from his home, and then he’d be back. Adrien had wanted to wait for dark, but he knew that it would create anxiety for Marinette if he did. He promised he would return before long, leaving all of his things behind save his metrocard.

His head swarmed with anxious thoughts as he headed to his townhouse. He wondered who knew—it was getting late, and Gabriel needed time to do what he did, so it must have been all over the news by now. He kept his head down, worried people would recognize him.

He got off the metro as the sun began to sink over the horizon, but it was still bright. Nevertheless, he felt the time crunch. He unlocked his house and went inside quickly. Plagg jogged up to him right away. He meowed hungrily. “I know, buddy! I’m on it, just give me a minute!” He said.
He went into the kitchen and fed Plagg so he’d be distracted as he filled up a suitcase with clothes. He put his laptop into his computer bag, and then shoved an accordion folder into it as well.

For the next twelve minutes Adrien chased his cat around his home. Because, as Adrien aptly put it when he finally got Plagg in the carrier, “You're such an asshole cat.” He picked up the carrier and started his walk back to the metro. It was almost completely dark outside, and he felt a chill in the air. He walked faster.

Adrien returned to the apartment right as the last bit of day faded. He dumped his bags by the door, but he carried Plagg a bit further in before opening the carrier. The house was quiet, and all of the lights were off, spare the nightlights in the outlets.

“Marinette?” Adrien shouted as Plagg investigated his new surroundings. “Nette, I’m back. Are you okay?”

Adrien knew Marinette better than just about anyone. He knew that being alone when night had fallen had likely frightened her, so she might have been hiding. He turned on the lights and shut the blinds before looking for her.

He was headed back to Marinette’s bedroom when he heard movement in her office. Adrien approached it carefully, but he found Marinette inside, cleaning and moving things. “Marinette, you’re supposed to be resting.” He scolded gently.

She looked up and smiled. “I thought that, if you’re going to end up staying, I should clear some space for you.” She said. He could tell that Marinette was frightened, and that she needed something to occupy her hands with. “I haven’t used it in years, but I still have the air mattress from when I moved in.”

“Marinette, believe me, I’m the last person you need to fuss over.” He said, but he started helping her clean. They moved the mannequins out into the living room, and the moved bolts of fabric into the closet.

Marinette had him grab the mattress from the top of the closet. He tried to help her set it up, but she refused his help. “It’s got its own motor, so it’ll be fine.” She explained. “Go get some of the sheets from my closet.”

He obliged. His head was swirling with thoughts as he collected the sheets. How was he going to protect her? How many spies had he already turned? Had he gotten more powerful in prison? Adrien took a sharp breath. He tried to put the thoughts out of his mind so he could wear an honest smile when he brought the sheets to Marinette.
8 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien was sent to outprocessing immediately. Two guards escorted him and his lawyer. Adrien realized that many inmates were staring at him, but he had no reason to stare back, so he tried to ignore it.

They returned his belongings to him, and the first thing he did was turn on his phone. When it woke, it came alive with notifications. One was even from Marinette. She wanted to see him! Adrien looked at his lawyer as he finished filing the very last of the paperwork. “Um,” Adrien began, catching his attention, “if it isn’t too much trouble, can you take me to the hospital when we’ve finished here?”

“Well, I’m not taking you anywhere.” His lawyer said.

Adrien tilted his head. “Wait, I would have thought you’d have to take me to get me on a waiting list for foster care, or something. I’m only fourteen!”

“Normally I would, but you’re not going into foster care—”

“Did you find my mother?! Adrien said too quickly, setting himself up for disappointment.

His lawyer frowned. “No, but the government contacted Emilie's family upon his arrest. They noticed your father's unusual powers, and they hoped someone could testify to their danger.” He explained. “Your aunt is in Paris, and she is coming to get you.”


“The police should have told you that before they arrested you. Is something the matter?”

“I… no, I suppose not. I guess I forgot,” Adrien looked away. He folded his hands together and pressed them hard against his legs. Aunt Amelie hadn’t said a word to Gabriel since Emilie went missing. “I should be glad that I’m not going into foster care.”

“I’m glad you think so.” The lawyer said, finishing the paperwork. "She’s waiting for you outside.”

Adrien clenched his belongings close to his chest. He stood and walked out the gate, his body fighting off every feeling of disbelief. Stepping out into the sunshine was the best feeling Adrien had experienced in a long time, warm and free, but it was fleeting. The air was filled with paparazzi shouting for him to make a comment as they snapped pictures of him. They begged for him to look, but he kept his face forward. There was a black car sitting just a little to close, swarmed by people with cameras. The lawyer smiled at Adrien and walked him over.

Adrien hesitated for half a moment before opening the car door. He slid inside without a word,
buckling in next to his cousin Félix. His aunt, Amelie Graham de Vanily, was in the passenger seat, and her husband Michael was driving. The lawyer approached the passenger side door, and the window rolled down. “The court date is set for a few weeks out. Are you certain about testifying?” He asked.

Amelie smiled warmly. “It will be difficult, but you don't need to worry about us. This is what Emilie would have wanted!” She motioned for Michael to roll up the window. He started driving without saying a word, startling the lawyer and the paparazzi.

There was a long, awkward silence in the car. No one said anything, Adrien least of all. He didn’t remember these people very well. He glanced at Félix, who stared back but said nothing, before looking at his aunt and uncle. Aunt Amelie was Emilie's identical twin. They looked exactly alike, except that Amelie's hair was much lighter. It was almost eerie, though. She wore a pretty smile, but there was no joy in her eyes. Michael, on the other hand, had a wide face and tired eyes.

But, they were his family! Surely they would love him. “Aunt Amelie—”

"Oh, Adrien, it is just so good to see you!” Amelie interrupted. She spun around to smile at him, her entire face lit up. He smiled cautiously, optimistic. "It has really been too long since I last saw you! Though now that I see the two of you together again, it looks like I wouldn't have had to look far!” She put her hand on her cheek. "You and Félix, you're just like little twins! Oh, aren't you both so cute! When you were little, you two used to pretend to be one another to try to trick us! Too funny!"

Adrien smiled nervously at Félix. "Any chance that you're actually Adrien, and I'm Félix, and Gabriel isn't really my father?"

Félix didn't smile. "If that were true," he asked, "wouldn't you know how to speak English?"


Amelie laughed at them. "So silly!" She said cheerfully. She touched Michael's shoulder. "Les garçons sont vraiment drôles, mon amour!"

Michael opened his mouth, and then he hesitated. In a heavy London accent, he said, "Je ne… parle… pas… français?"

Amelie processed that before laughing. "Oops! I forgot!" She looked back at Adrien. "I just want you to know that we've decided to move to Paris. I mean, you look like a smart kid! England, Brexit! Hahaha!" She grinned. "Besides, Paris is just so beautiful! I love it. And you don't want to leave it, do you?"

"No, Aunt Amelie. I don't." Though it was a weight of his shoulders to hear her say it, too!

"And why would you! You've never lived anywhere else!" She looked up and frowned. "Oh, but we can't stay in the mansion! I know that you must be sad to leave your childhood home…!"

Adrien shook his head. "No, it doesn't really matter to me." He said. He never wanted to look at that place again.

Yet, this seemed to catch her by surprise. "It doesn't matter to you!" She repeated. Michael said something in English. Amelie said something back. She spoke English just as quickly as she spoke French, and she spoke French very quickly. She looked back at him. "I wasn't expecting that! You don't have any qualms about leaving at all?"

"Not really…"
"Wow! Okay." She chuckled awkwardly. "So, I know you haven't been to the mansion, but they gave back your things!" The cheerfulness of her voice remained level, but the light was fading from her eyes. "What did you take with you?"

"I was sort of in a rush. I only have my phone and some dirty clothes." He said, looking at the things in his hands.

"You know, I ask because—and this is going to sound weird, I know—do you remember the rings that your father has? The silver ones?" Amelie asked, motioning to her fingers. Adrien nodded. "Do you know what he did with them?"

He chuckled awkwardly. "I have… no idea, Aunt Amelie. And to be honest, I don't really care." He admitted as Michael parked the car.

It was quiet as Michael spoke to Amelie. He got out of the car and walked towards the gas station. Amelie's face fell as soon as Michael was out of the car. "If you don't care, I'll give you a reason to care." She hissed. "Those jewels are mine by rights. They belong to the Graham de Vanily family, and your father never should have kept them after my sister disappeared."

"I'm… sorry, Aunt Amelie, but I still have no idea where or why my father would have hidden them. It seems sort of petty to me." He said. "It wasn't something I was thinking about, considering I just got out of prison." He looked at his phone. "I was hoping that—"

"I don't want to hear anything else out of you." Amelie snapped, and Adrien flinched. "It's bad enough that we're stuck in a hotel because we can't stay in the mansion. The one good thing about this scandal was the money and the Parisian mansion. And you know what?" Amelie rubbed her temple. "Your father named you the executor of his estate, but that isn't a title you can have as a minor, which means that everything is frozen until you turn eighteen. I had hoped that you could at least get me those jewels, because they are mine, but it turns out that even that is a lost cause! So you might as well shut your mouth!"

Her sudden change in behavior was shocking. He practically had whiplash. "I… I just wanted to ask if you'd bring me to the hospit—"

"I am not bringing you anywhere, except to the hotel!" He snapped. He looked up at Adrien. "I hope you understand how much trouble you've caused everyone!"

"I'm sorry…"

She sighed. "I can't believe this. I am trying to stay upbeat, but I can't stand the idea of us living like peasants until you turn eighteen." She covered her eyes. "This is unbearable. How could Emilie have done this to me?!"

Félix spoke now, finally, though it was hardly supportive. "Mom, if you're so upset, why not have Dad drop him off at the hospital? Then you don't have to look at him."

Amelie frowned, but then held his face with a warm smile. "Of course you're right, my angel!" She said warmly. When Michael got back in the car, Amelie informed him of the change in plans.

The car went silent again immediately after. Adrien smiled at Félix. "Thank you." He whispered.

"Don't get used to it." He said quietly.
19 April, Present Day

Marinette didn’t get a lot of sleep that night. During the two-week period between the seventeenth and the thirtieth, she didn’t sleep much anyway, but knowing that Gabriel was out there once again was horrible. She got up around three in the morning. She sat next to a nightlight and worked on Juleka’s wedding dress, and this was relaxing enough for her to go back to bed and fall asleep.

She was woken up around eight by the smell of bacon, but she didn’t move yet. She checked her phone, only to see that it had died overnight. She pulled on the cord. She had plugged in the phone, but not the charger. “Goddammit.” She muttered before collapsing onto her pillow.

Marinette jumped when there was a loud sound outside. She reached for her crutches as Adrien started shouting. “God fucking damn it, Plagg! You are such an asshole!” Marinette sighed with a slight smile on her face. She moved towards the door. “I swear, if you don’t stop standing underneath my feet, I’m going to accidentally step on your foot and break it! Is that what you want?”

“Adrien, calm down. He’s just a cat.” Marinette said.

He looked up. “Marinette! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up. I broke one of your plates!”

She limped over to him. “Did you hurt yourself?” Marinette asked.

Adrien paused. “No, I didn’t.”

“Then you have no reason to be sorry.” Marinette used her telekinesis to dispose of the plate. Adrien waited for her to get angry, but she was oddly calm, and while he worried about her, he tried to relax. She stood and smiled at him. “You didn’t have to make breakfast.”

“Don’t get used to it. I hardly ever cook when I’m at home. I’ve been a little antsy since I got up, so I went looking for something to do.” He explained.

“I’d say your more than a little antsy. You just screamed at a cat for doing what cats do.”

“This cat exists to cause me misery,” Adrien said flatly.

“You named him Plague. What did you expect?” Marinette asked. Adrien chuckled. It was a nice sound that she liked to hear. However, she noted that he had already gotten dressed. He wore a deep magenta Henley shirt under a white sweater he’d left unbuttoned, and a pair of jeans. That he was dressed seemed odd to her—she worried that he didn’t intend to stay.

8 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Amelie had Michael drop Adrien off at the hospital. As he got out, he spoke to Adrien quickly in English, though he understood the word ‘hotel’ and what might have been the name of a road. Adrien turned to thank him, but he drove away before he even got a chance to close the door. He sighed and walked into the building.

It was easy enough to get directions to her floor. Marinette had been moved from emergency into the regular hospital. Adrien found the elevator and went to the floor he needed. Hospitals were like
prisons, in that they were never quiet, but where a hospital healed, a prison destroyed. Part of him, the part that hated itself, thought he deserved to be there, rotting away.

Adrien followed the signs, but he didn’t need them to find her room. Tom and Sabine stood outside, talking quietly. He froze, and he wondered if he shouldn’t wait for them to leave. He was about to turn around when Sabine looked up. “Adrien! I’m so glad to see you!” She and Tom ran towards him.

It was too late to leave now. “Hello, Monsieur Dupain, Madame Dupain-Cheng.” He said awkwardly, scratching at his head.

Tom hugged him close. “We heard they let you out of that awful prison!” He said. He pushed him away to look at his face. “Oh, God! Did someone attack you? You’re covered in bruises!”

“Am I? I haven’t paid much attention to my face lately.” Adrien said, though when he moved his hand from his hair to his face, he could tell it was swollen. “I’m fine, don’t worry about me. How is Marinette?”

Tom covered his face with his hands. “Oh, my poor baby! She was in that coma for days!” He cried. “We didn’t know if she was ever going to come back to us!”

Sabine took Adrien’s hand. “I’m so sorry, Adrien. You just missed her.” At first, Adrien panicked, thinking that she had passed away. “She just went back to sleep a few minutes ago,” Sabine clarified, and he relaxed. “A coma isn’t the same thing as being asleep, I don’t think.”

Adrien sighed in relief. “Thank God; I was so worried that she would die!” He said. He frowned. “She deserves to rest. But… I don’t think I can come back later.”

Tom tilted his head. “Why not?” Adrien grew tense and couldn’t meet his eyes. His scratching became worse.

Sabine shook her head as her motherly instincts kicked in. “Adrien, let me see your head.” She ordered. She forced him to bend at his knees so she could look at his scalp. She moved his hair around a bit before pinching a strand of hair and pulling against it. She crushed what was between her fingers before she looked at it. “A louse? Adrien, did you get lice in prison?”

“I… yes, I did. My first day, actually.” He confessed. “I’m sorry, you must think me such a slob…”

“No, lice prefer clean hair. It’s easier for them to move around and lay their eggs.” Sabine said. “But it can’t be comfortable.” She smiled at him. “Come home with us while Marinette sleeps. I’ll get the lice out of your hair, and Tom will fix you something to eat.”

At first, Adrien refused. He didn’t want to burden them after his father had caused such misery. But they wouldn’t take no for an answer, so he accompanied Tom and Sabine back to their bakery, following a quick stop by the pharmacy.

Adrien was asked to take a shower and wash his hair. He forgot what it was like to shower alone, with water he could control the temperature of. He stayed in it longer than he should have. When he got out, Sabine gave him one of Tom’s old shirts to wear while she washed his clothes, and so his only set of clothes wasn’t ruined as she put the lice shampoo in his hair.

She had him put a shower cap on while she turned on a kitchen timer. “I heard what you told my lawyer.” Adrien said while they waited. “Is it true that you never believed I was guilty?”

Sabine sat down. “I saw in your eyes how heartbroken you were when you learned she was missing.
You can’t fake such shock and agony.” She said. “Besides, you aren’t the only person they accused of playing a part in disappearance.” She looked out the window. “They accused us of having killed her, you know.”

“I remember hearing about that, but when it came down to it, it was my word against my father’s.” He said. “How could you believe me over him?”

“I had no reason to trust Gabriel, Adrien. Not after everything he’d done.” She said. “You, on the other hand, I had every reason to.”

The timer went off. Sabine had him rinse the medical shampoo out. Afterward, she had him sit on the floor while she grabbed the comb. There was a towel wrapped around his neck and on her lap. “Thank you for doing this.” Adrien said.

“Oh, this is what mothers do,” Sabine said. The statement was innocent enough, but it made his heart hurt. She carefully went over every clump of hair, not leaving any trace of the parasites behind. “Kids get lice, and then you take care of them. That’s life.”

Sabine combed the lice from Adrien’s hair, then had him blow dry it while she cleaned the comb. She went over it again to make sure that she’d gotten them all. Tom brought up some fresh croissants, Adrien’s favorite thing from the bakery, and they enjoyed a brief conversation while Adrien waited for his clothes to dry. It was such a warm, happy feeling that he almost forgot he was going to visit Marinette because something unspeakably evil happened to her.

When Adrien redressed, he walked alone back to the hospital. He felt cleaner, at least, which had improved his mood slightly, but that didn’t change what was about to happen.

It took a lot of courage to open the door to Marinette’s hospital room. The room was dark, since Marinette had been sleeping, and the television was turned off. It was quiet, all of the white noise from the nearby nurse’s station blocked out by the heavy door. There was a tiny hallway created by the bathroom, and Adrien had to walk through it to find Marinette’s bed.

She looked to be unconscious. Adrien held himself up by placing one of his hands on the wall. She was bandaged under her hospital gown. Her hair was loose and her bruises were healing. At least she finally looked calm, he thought in relief. Adrien found a chair and pulled it closer so he could sit by her. He waited for a moment before he took her hand and held it gently in both of his.

Marinette woke at this and moved her head to look at him. She smiled tiredly, and her eyes filled with happy tears. “Adrien, you’re here,” she said.

He smiled back. “I’m here, Marinette. And I’m never leaving you ever again.”

19 April, Present Day

Adrien and Marinette sat down at the table and started picking at the breakfast he’d made. It was awkwardly silent, but they kept eating. Marinette finally spoke. “So,” she said quietly, “what are we going to do about your father?”

He sighed. “I don’t know.”
“Shouldn’t our first step be the police?” She suggested.

Adrien frowned. “Because they did such a great job with your last stalker!” He hissed.

Marinette frowned. “Adrien, don’t be like that.”

He looked up. “I’m sorry!” He snapped. She seemed hurt, so he took a breath and tried again. “I’m sorry. The subject is a little sensitive, but I didn’t mean to take it out on you.” He said. “I don’t think the police is a bad start, but I also don’t think we should count on them. Most supernaturals don’t go into law enforcement, and they’re the only people who can resist Gabriel’s suggestions.”

Marinette shuddered at his name. “Then what should we do?”

“I’d like to suggest leaving Paris for a while, but I can’t even confirm that this is where he is.” Adrien considered this for a while. “Honestly… I think our best shot is just… lying low, and trying to get more information. Otherwise, we’ll just charge off blind.”

“It’s risky, but I think you might be right.” Marinette agreed. “We know he’s going to come after the both of us, but we don’t know how much he knows. So far, we only know that he knows where you work.”

“And we aren’t even certain of that. He might have just sent her off shouting for me, and someone else knew where to find me. Or it could have even been a coincidence.”

Marinette frowned. She remembered how upset he was when he told her about it, how confident he was that Gabriel knew. “Do you honestly believe that?” She asked.

“No… but I can always hope.”

Marinette leaned against one of her hands. “What about Nathalie and the Gorilla? Have you heard anything from them?” He shook his head. “Ugh, I was so glad that they pled guilty… I don’t think I could have sat through three trials.” She frowned. “Though, now I realize I don’t know what became of them.”

Adrien excused himself from the table. He returned a few minutes later with three files. He opened the first one in a way that Marinette couldn’t see inside until he removed a photo clipped to it. “Gabriel Agreste was one of thirteen criminals sentenced to life in prison fifteen years ago. Because he was found guilty of almost twenty murders, they agreed to never offer him parole, and they sent him to la Santé.”

“Right. That decision was all over the news. People were certain he’d be eligible after thirty years because of how famous he was.”

He leaned back in the chair and slid the file across the counter. He opened the second file. Inside there was a picture of Nathalie from the night she was arrested. “Nathalie was found guilty of kidnapping, twelve counts of accessory murder, and…” Adrien paused. “And sexual assault.”

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“Yeah, it’s just… weird to think of Nathalie participating in the rapes…” Adrien said. “I’m certain he ordered her to do it… but…” He shook his head. “Anyway.”

“Adrien, do you need to slow down?” Marinette asked, reaching across the table.

“No, I’m fine.” He said. “Nathalie received life with twenty-two served in the Centre Pénitentiaire de
Rennes. They wanted her as far away from Gabriel as possible.”

Marinette frowned. “I know that she was technically one of his victims too, but she’s up for parole in seven years?” She asked.

Adrien shrugged. “I think that the courts didn’t believe she’d be even half as dangerous without my father around. This having been said,” he frowned, “I doubt that they expected my father to escape when they offered that to her.”

Marinette nodded. “I guess she actually has to make parole, too.”

He opened the last folder. “The Gorilla gave in immediately. He didn’t fight any of the charges, and he was only convicted of accessory to kidnapping. He got fifteen with ten served in Fleury-Mérogis, but he didn’t apply for parole. He’s not scheduled to get out until the end of May.”

“Why wouldn’t he want to get out of prison?” Marinette asked as she took the file.

“He was definitely under Gabriel’s suggestion. He regretted everything,” Adrien explained. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “My father’s accomplices are both still in prison. I’m not sure he’s going to risk them again, or at least not the same ones. It would be easier to turn random people into minions than bust out his old ones.”

“Maybe we should call Nathalie.” Marinette suggested hesitantly. “She was much closer to G… G-Gabriel than anyone else.”

Adrien scowled. “No! Not after what she did to you.”

“He trusted her to be in the room while he tortured me! He let her join in!” Marinette argued. “She knows things about him. She might have stayed in contact with him, or at least the other way around.” She touched his hand. “Gabriel’s first move when he escaped was to go right back to killing. Nathalie might know what he plans to do next.”

He stewed for a moment. Marinette kept looking at him with her big, bluebell eyes, the ones he could never stay mad at. He finally sighed. “Yes, you’re right. But let me do some digging first, with Alya. If we contact Nathalie, I want to know that it’s safe first.”

She smiled warmly. She reached across the table and held his hand. “Okay. Whatever makes you comfortable.”

“This isn’t about my comfort!” Adrien argued. “This is about keeping you safe!”

“I always feel safe around you,” Marinette said as he tried to hide his flustered expression. She held his hand with both of hers, a slight blush on her own cheeks. “Adrien… how are you holding up?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not here for me.”

She frowned sadly. “I know you’re not.” She looked up at him with sad, bluebell eyes. “But this affects you just as much as it does me. Your life was so hard after Gabriel was arrested.” She said. She paused. “But you never talk about it. You only ever cared about and for me… sometimes I wonder how you got through it…”
Marinette’s eyes welled up with tears as she pulled Adrien closer. “Oh, Adrien, it’s been horrible!” She cried, burying her face into his shoulder. Adrien used his foot to pull the chair closer, so he could sit while she held him. “I thought that I would be home by now, but everything is worse!” She sobbed openly, clawing at his sweatshirt. He hugged her back. “Adrien, I’m so sorry! I’ve ruined your life, and I’m sorry!” Her cries became desperate.

“Marinette, no, don’t even think like that!” Adrien said. “You did nothing wrong! You’re the victim here!”

“I watched you! I saw you looking for me! I saw you try to hang yourself!” She shifted when she felt him grow tense. “Adrien, I’m sorry! This pain is all my fault!”

Adrien pushed her away, and at first she cried harder, but Adrien wiped away her tears. “Now, you listen to me, Marinette. You did nothing wrong.” He said firmly. “I never gave up hope that I would find you, and then you found me. Now, I’m here, okay?” He smiled, holding her face to keep tears from running down her neck. “And I’m going to help you get through this. No matter how dark it gets, no matter how long it takes, I am here for you, no matter what.”

She took a few ragged breaths as she tried to get a hold of herself. “It’s gone, Adrien. It’s all gone.” She leaned back in her hospital bed. “This is it. This is who I’m going to be, forever. I’m just going to be that girl, the one Gabriel Agreste raped, the one who ended his empire. My future… it’s gone.”

“No, it isn’t, Marinette.” Adrien said. “You’re going to make it through, and then you’ll see.” He smiled. “You are so talented. You’re going to have your own fashion empire, and my… Gabriel won’t even be a footnote!”

She frowned. “I almost died, and he didn’t even give me the courtesy of killing me quickly.” She moved her hair to one side of her neck, and then looked at him. “Do you know what my final diagnosis said?”

“No, tell me.”

“The doctors said that I was malnourished and dehydrated, with over seventy lacerations to my back and over a hundred on my legs.” She said. Adrien frowned and took her hand, which was shaking. “Gabriel was so much bigger and taller than me that he actually bruised my cervix, and he cut me inside so bad that I might not be able to have kids! Ever!” She was crying, and she was waving her hands. “And when they first told me that they needed to do a gynecological exam, I thought they were going to tell me I was pregnant!”

Adrien looked down at the hospital bed. “Marinette, I’m so sorry!”

“Th-the infection I got made me so delirious, I barely remember how I escaped… I just know that it spread through almost my entire leg.” She moved the blankets so he could see. Both of her legs were bandaged up, though it was likely they’d need to be changed soon. Her right leg was missing just above her knee. “Adrien… I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to walk again. That’s how bad the sepsis was.”

Adrien took her hand and raised it to his face. He bent her fingers against his forehead, where she unfolded them to run her hands through his hair.

“I used to think I was so great,” Marinette said mournfully, “But I went from vigorous to eviscerated in less than two weeks.”
“You’re still wonderful, Marinette. Nothing could ever change that!” Adrien said, keeping his hands on hers. But Marinette fell silent, and he hated it because the silence screamed the truth. Marinette had been tortured, by his very own father, and this was something that could never be undone. “You’re still you.” He said, like it was a prayer. Adrien moved her hand so he could lay his cheek against it. Her weak, trembling fingers weren’t even remotely calmed. Adrien brought his lips to them as he started to cry. It was his cries that caught her attention. “Don’t pay me any mind, princess—I came to reassure you.”

Marinette frowned. “What’s wrong?” She asked. He shook his head. “Hey, it’s okay. You can tell me if something is bothering you.” She said. She pushed her hand further into his face so she was supporting more of it. “I mean, we’ve gotten to know each other very well at this point.”

He smiled, but he didn’t speak for a while. He didn’t want to say anything that might affect her recovery, especially with how fragile her mental state seemed to be. How could he tell her that his father had ordered strangers to beat him into submission? How could he explain that his aunt had practically abandoned him at the hospital, with not even a phone number to reach her by? These things would have just made her feel bad, and what’s worse, she might have thought they were her fault.

“Adrien?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. I was just waiting for word that you woke up!”

“Adrien, I know they took you to prison…”

“And I’m out now! Trust me, I’ll be absolutely fine!” He reassured her.

There was a knock at the door. A moment passed before a nurse entered. “Excuse me, but the ladies’ doctor is here to see Mademoiselle Marinette.” She said. She smiled at Adrien. “Perhaps you might come back later?”

Marinette caught his hand. “Say that you will! Alya has been busy with her sisters, Juleka is out of town, and no one else can convince their parents to let them come.” She said. “I have nothing but acres of time, and I’ve missed you.”

Adrien took her hand. “I will come, and I will stay for as long as you need. I promise.”

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19 April, Present Day

“I don’t know what you mean.” Adrien collected his folders and stacked them neatly.

“Well, what I mean is, sometimes I think you only take such good care of me is because you feel… guilty? About what happened?” Marinette suggested cautiously.

“I mean, I do…” Adrien confessed, “But I take care of you because you’re my… my friend.” He’d almost said something else. She looked away. “Marinette, I promised that you’d never be alone.”

“Adrien, if you can’t admit that you have needs and feelings, you’re going to be the one who is alone.” Marinette said.
“I can take care of myself!” He snapped.

She grew tense. “But I can’t!?”

“That is not—” Adrien stopped himself. He took a deep breath and started over. “This is not why I’m here.” Marinette still couldn’t meet his eyes, so he tried to change the subject. “Have you spoken to anyone yet? Alya, or your parents, maybe?”

“Have you spoken to your cousin?” She snapped.

Adrien felt his back stiffen. “I—” He shook his head. “That was unworthy of you!”

Marinette sighed. “You’re right, I’m sorry.” She said. She looked at her hands. “To answer your question, no, I haven’t spoken to anyone but you. I don’t know how much of this is in the news, since I don’t watch television this time of year. I don’t even know if my parents know.” She said. She looked out the window. “And then, Alya and I haven’t spoken much since… for a while now.”

“Is everything okay?” Adrien asked as he sat down.

“Well, we’ve been fighting more and more since I moved in here,” Marinette said. “I get mad because she doesn’t like you, and she…” She paused. “I think she finds me tiresome.”

Adrien frowned. “Oh, Nette, you aren’t tiresome.”

“Actually, some days I think you’re my only friend left.” She confessed. Adrien opened his mouth to argue. “Which, I know, is not true. Alya is my friend, even if we fight.” She looked to the window again. “But being my friend often feels like a one-way street.”

Adrien took her hand and kissed it. Before he could reply, his phone buzzed. He looked at it. An alert he’d set up on his phone had gone off. “Well, it looks like we’ll find out what your parents know, at least.” He opened it.

Alya Lahiffe was filling in as an anchorwoman on TVi’s news show «le Matin à Paris.» Normally, she had her own show at prime time, «Restez Connecté,» but Nadja Chamack couldn’t make it. Though Alya loved her job, she wondered if she wouldn’t love it better if she was allowed to do her own makeup.

Alya looked at her reflection as the makeup artist dusted blush onto her cheeks. Her curly auburn hair had been cut short, which meant it now tickled up around her chin, and she’d long ago switched her glasses for contacts. Contacts didn’t reflect the lights on set.

With her makeup done, she was sent to wardrobe. She was told that she was to wear black or an otherwise somber color, as the news that day was very serious. She changed into a white blouse, a black jacket and a black skirt. Thick gray stockings hid her legs, and her black shoes clacked against the tile. She stretched her arms as she speed walked down the halls of the television station. Because Nadja called out so last minute, Alya had missed the briefing, which meant that she was going to be learning the news from the TelePrompTer.

She burst onto set with almost no time to spare. Alya rushed to her seat on set and began to skim her copy of the notes before the live feed started. Mireille Caquet was on weather, Adam LeBlanc was
reporting about the football game, and the top story was about some kind of break.

“We’re on in five! Four!” The director shouted. “Three!” Alya shook out her shoulders and looked up. “Two!” The director pointed at her, and she began to read from the TelePrompTer.

Alya’s face was stony, since she knew it was serious business. “Good morning. Today is the nineteenth of April. I’m Alya Lahiffe, filling in for Nadja Chamack.” She recited. “Our top story: more than a dozen prisoners have escaped from the maximum security-supernatural ward in la Santé following a fatal riot.” Why did that sound familiar, she wondered. “Among those who escaped is infamous serial killer G—”

Her entire world froze in place. Alya has learned in this moment that the person who had tortured and brutalized her best friend was on the loose. Her throat closed up, and part of her hoped that she was having a nightmare. But, no, this was happening. And she couldn’t freeze on camera.

She calmed her breathing but not her face. “…Gabriel Agreste, known to many as the Collector, who evaded police for thirty years preceding his arrest fifteen years ago.” She felt anger building in her chest. “Investigation into how these convicts were able to escape is ongoing, but Agreste is believed to have been a ringleader.

“We are going to show the faces of the escaped convicts now. The public is asked to avoid these individuals, as they are believed to be armed, and their powers make them extremely dangerous.”

Adrien turned the phone over so they didn’t have to look at Gabriel’s face. “I guess that I was the first to know.” He said.

“But how? Didn’t he need time to kill that woman?” Marinette asked.

“I didn’t stick around long enough to get an identification on her. She might have been in la Santé.” He theorized. “He might have attacked her before or after the riot… though that wouldn’t explain how she came to the hospital I worked in.”

“He was just trying to send a message, to shock you. Before the information became public.” Marinette reasoned. She paused to listen as Alya reported other facts. “I wonder why—”

Adrien’s phone rang, pausing the video. The caller ID didn’t give a name, but Adrien had given his number to one of his coworkers the other day in case she needed it, so he assumed that it was hers. “Do you mind if I take this? It could be the hospital.” Adrien said. Marinette leaned back. He answered it. “Allô? Noëlle, is this you?”

“No such luck, I’m afraid.” Gabriel Agreste said on the other side.

Adrien’s phone was loud, and Gabriel had always spoken clearly. His voice was clear as day for Marinette, who gasped at the sound of it, and Adrien stood and took a few steps back. “How did you get this number?!” Adrien asked. He tried his best to sound strong, but he could feel his voice and his knees shake.

“Was that Marinette that I heard just now?” Gabriel asked. Marinette covered her face, and Adrien backed away, not wanting her to hear him.
“Adrien, hang up the phone!” She begged. “What if he’s tracing the call?!”

“Ah, so it is her. You can tell her that I have no ability to do so, because, as I’m sure you remember, I’ve only just gotten out of prison.” Gabriel said as Adrien shook.


“You know what I want. I want to kill you.” Gabriel said. Adrien grew tense. He felt his back hit the wall. “I’m going to kill you, both of you, and I’m going to make you watch when I destroy her.”

Adrien clenched his fist. “Fuck you, you twisted piece of shit!” Marinette reached him, and she tried to take the phone from him, but Adrien was too mad to let go of it.

“You’re too much like your mother, Adrien. You’re too emotional; you always have to be the hero.” Gabriel criticized. “And where has it gotten you? Are you really anyone’s hero?” He sounded almost nonchalant as he spoke. “Marinette is going to die, and there is nothing you can say or do to stop it.”

Marinette was close enough to hear that, and she started crying. Adrien felt rage bubbling inside him, and it came bursting out like a volcano. “I’m going to kill you! I’m going to fucking kill you if you get anywhere close to her! Do you hear me?!”

“Bloodlust! It’s good to see some part of me will—”

Adrien couldn’t listen anymore. He hung up, his powers going haywire and cracking the screen of his phone. Furious, he threw the phone across the room, probably breaking it again. Marinette slid down the wall and sobbed. “Why is this happening to us?” She asked.

But Adrien, still in a rage, couldn’t reply. He grabbed his file on Gabriel and stormed into the guest room. Adrien pulled the papers out and ripped them to shreds. He opened his suitcase and found his razor blade, tucked under his clothes. He placed it against his arm and cut himself.
Marinette was curled up on the couch. She could hear Adrien pace and curse under his breath, and she wondered how she could cheer him up. Adrien liked to pretend that things didn’t bother him, but when he was angry, he had a hard time hiding it. Often, when he got so angry that he couldn’t control his powers, he hid from her, and she didn’t know if it was because he didn’t want her to see him angry, or if it was because he knew that he would snap and confess that he hated her.

She grabbed her crutches and walked to the door. She stopped in front of it, and she leaned her head against it. Adrien kept cursing up a storm, apparently unaware of her presence. She gathered her courage. “…Adrien?” She said weakly, and she heard him stop. However, before she could continue, she heard frantic pounding on her door. She sighed. “I’m going to get the door.”

Marinette limped over to the door. She opened it carefully, though the moment she did, Alya forced it open the rest of the way. “Oh, Nette! How are you feeling?!” She said, hugging her tightly. She kicked the door closed before running into the main apartment. “I teleported right over as soon as my broadcast ended! I had to make sure you were safe.”

“Excuse me, but where in my apartment do you think you’re going with your dirty shoes on?” Marinette asked sharply. “Come take those off right now!” She demanded.

Alya sighed. “So, your spirits are high enough to harass me about my shoes. Good to know.” She walked back to the door and removed her high heeled shoes. She walked again back into the apartment. “You must not know then! Gabriel escaped! Oh, Marinette, this is just crazy!”

“No, I know, I watched some of the—”

“I learned from one of the other reporters that he’s killed someone already! She was a prison guard, I think.” She said. “I don’t know anything else, though! They haven’t released anything from the autopsy, so I don’t know if he…” Alya rolled her hands over. “…you know.”

Marinette frowned. “Yes, I do.”

Alya sighed. “I was so worried! You’re pretty well hidden here, and it isn’t like anyone knows where to find you! But this is so messed up!” She was speaking too quickly for Marinette to say much. “Like, I know that he was in Clairvaux when they were renovating La Santé, but I didn’t think that he was spending that time brainstorming escape plans! I don’t even know how he figured it out so fast! They literally just reopened not so long ago!”

Marinette smiled weakly. “Alya…”

“I don’t know if ‘Chevalier’ knows.” She spat, using air quotes around Chevalier to indicate that she didn’t respect Adrien’s legal name change. “Nino has only tried calling him ten times. He’s probably too busy shagging his girlfriend!” She sassed. She looked down as Plagg rubbed his face against her
legs. “When did you get a cat?”

“He doesn’t belong to her.” Adrien said as he opened the door. Marinette smiled at him, while Alya couldn’t react for a moment. “Nino can’t reach me because I destroyed my phone. Gabriel figured out my phone number, so I broke it.”

Marinette furrowed her brows. “That’s not why you broke it.” She said flatly.

Adrien sighed as he fiddled with the gauze pad taped to his arm. “Let me have this, please.” He said.

Alya stood straight up and frowned. “So! It looks like I shouldn’t have come, since you’re so obviously ahead of the curve.” She said.

Marinette reached for her hand. “Alya, don’t. Please stay.” She reluctantly stopped, though she couldn’t make eye contact with Adrien. She stared out the window instead. Marinette sighed. “Gabriel knows where Adrien works. I asked him to stay with me in case he finds out where I am, too.”

Alya’s head snapped around. “He shouldn’t find out, unless someone tells him!” She said. It was obviously directed at Adrien—she was glaring at him.

Adrien had given up hope of convincing Alya that he was innocent a long time ago. Of the people he’d been friends with before Gabriel was exposed, Alya and Rose were the only ones who did not believe Marinette when she confirmed his innocence. They only knew what they had seen—Marinette had gone missing, and Adrien had stopped going to class. Alya thought that the delirium had corrupted her memory. She’d spent fifteen years convinced of his guilt. This sudden crisis would not change it.

Alya folded her arms across her chest. “Have the two of you decided what you’re going to do?”

“We don’t know where he is.” Adrien said. “Before we do anything, we need to know that we aren’t playing into his hand.”

“So you’re going to do nothing.” She said sharply. “That’s your great plan, sir knight?” She asked.

“There is no sense in charging off blind, Alya.” Marinette said. “Gabriel sent a warning to Adrien, and then taunted him with the telephone call. He wants him to do something rash!” She said. “If we wait, try to draw him out, he might screw up, and we can get the drop on him!”

“What’s to stop him from hurting more people?!” She asked.

“The fact that the only people he wants to hurt are me and Adrien!” She snapped.

“You have to do something, Marinette!”

“What do you recommend?”

Alya opened her mouth to respond, but she was silent for a moment. “What about… Volpina?” She asked.

They were all quiet for a moment. “What about Volpina?” Adrien asked.

Marinette frowned. “Who is Volpina?” She asked.

“She’s a masked supernatural based out of Milan.” Adrien said.
Alya shrugged. “Well, I know she isn’t exactly a superhero, but I’ve heard that she does mercenary work.” She said. “Between your inheritance and my salary, I’m sure we have enough to hire her….”

“Except that, like all of us, she isn’t registered, so any superheroing she does in France is illegal,” Adrien snapped, “and what’s more, nobody knows what her powers actually are, so there is a very real possibility that they don’t exist at all, and if that’s true, we’re sending a total stranger to her death for no reason!”

“You know what else is illegal? Murder.” Alya said. “And that’s exactly what Gabriel is going to do if we don’t try to stop him!”

“No one is saying ‘do nothing,’ Alya, but ideally this is resolved without breaking the law!” Marinette said. She sighed and shook her head. “Listen, I’m still in my pajamas. I’d like to take a shower before sunset, otherwise I’m never going to do it.” She said. Marinette left the room, probably upset.

Adrien and Alya watched her leave. As soon as she was out of sight, Alya pushed him. “What do you think you’re doing?! If Gabriel knows things about you, he’s going to follow you here!” She hissed.

“She asked me to stay. She’s afraid of what might happen if she’s alone.” Adrien said. “And I’m not comfortable leaving her alone. That security guard is a joke!” He grabbed a pen from her jacket and started to write on his palm. “Note to self—hire personal bodyguard…”

Alya slapped the pen from his hand. “If she isn’t safe here, then she should go to a safe house!” She argued. She dug her nails into her arms, unable to maintain eye contact. “You’re like a ticking time bomb, and when it all blows the fuck up, she’s going to be the one who regrets it most.”

10 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Uncle Michael had taken Félix out for breakfast, as they wanted to discuss which school he was to enroll in once they officially moved to Paris. Adrien had woken up groggy, as he’d stayed up texting Marinette until she had fallen asleep. Aunt Amelie was sitting in the kitchenette, her eyes focused on apartment listings.

Adrien checked the time on his phone. There was still a couple of hours before school started, so he smiled at Amelie and asked, “Can you take me to the mansion so I can get my backpack and some of my clothes?”

Amelie put down her coffee and her listings. She stared at Adrien. “The police won’t let anyone inside.”

“Still? It’s been a week!” Adrien asked.

“Yes, still, so don’t ask me again!” Amelie snapped. Adrien flinched and looked down. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal and ate it quietly, not wanting to upset her even more. After a few minutes, she spoke again. “Come on, then. You probably have schoolwork to catch up on. I’ll give you a ride to school.”

“Are you headed to the hospital after school?”

“Yes. I’m going to bring Marinette the work that she missed.”

“Well, I can’t take you there.” Amelie said. Adrien felt a twinge if disappointment, though the feeling was so familiar that now he barely acknowledged it. “I have a job interview, as does Michael, so you and Félix are on your own tonight.” They headed to the door.

Adrien wasn’t paying much attention, so he wasn’t sure how it happened, but at some point, Amelie rammed him into the wall, hard enough to rattle the sliding mirror door on the closet. But she didn’t acknowledge it, so Adrien figured it was an accident, and he didn’t mention it, either.

Amelie dropped Adrien off at school that morning. He hesitated opening the door, but as soon as he was out, Amelie drove away, fully exposing Adrien to the world. The students who were sitting on the stairs turned to stare at him, their eyes wide and their voices low as they started to whisper about him. He probably looked terrible, with ugly bruises on his face, a scar from the noose on his neck, and his hair unkempt from two sleepless nights. Besides, he was still in the sweatsuit from the prison.

Honestly, the only thing he wanted to do was turn and run. The bakery was right there across the street, but he worried what Amelie and Michael would say to him if he ditched, so Adrien mustered his courage and climbed up the steps to the school.

He heard people whisper as he passed them. Once these people had been excited to see him, when he was the face of Gabriel’s company, but not anymore. They kept their voices low, because they didn’t want him to hear. He could pick up bits and pieces of their conversations anyway. ‘I heard that it was his idea to kidnap her!’ ‘I heard that he was in the car when they took her!’ ‘I heard that he raped her!’

Adrien shuddered before sprinting for the stairs. He hesitated before he entered Mademoiselle Bustier’s classroom. Mademoiselle smiled at him when he entered, not showing even the slightest hint of hesitation. “Hello Adrien! Welcome back,” she said warmly. She went into her desk and removed a stack of papers. “Here! The work you missed while you were away.”

“Thank you, Mademoiselle.” Adrien said as he took them. He paused as he held them to his chest. “May I have Marinette’s work, too? I’m going to visit her this afternoon.”

“Of course! That’s very sweet of you. How about I give it to you after class?” She said. He nodded. “The others have made Marinette some get well cards. Do you want to make one, too?”

Adrien paused. “May I?” He asked quietly.

Mademoiselle smiled. “Of course!” She offered him some supplies, and Adrien sat down. He started to work on the card as other students started to pour in.

His return was met with mixed reactions. Nino was ecstatic, rushing to his side and hugging him. Chloé reacted much the same, but with more tears. Mylène and Sabrina seemed hesitant to look at him, and Alix stared at him blankly. Kim and Max watched him from their seats, and Ivan glowered at him. Nathaniel was too flustered to look at him, and it seemed that Rose was actively cowering from him.

But the worst was Alya. Once, they had schemed together, planning parties and surprises. When she saw him now, her entire posture changed, becoming angry and guarded. She didn’t say anything to him when she took the seat behind Nino, but she did her best to draw attention to the fact that Marinette was not sitting next to her.
Mademoiselle began her lesson. Adrien was thankful that, despite how long he’d been absent, he hadn’t fallen desperately behind, though he probably needed help filling in some gaps. He tried to ignore how everyone’s eyes migrated to him when her back was turned. At the end of class, as the students broke for lunch, Adrien stayed behind to get Mademoiselle to help him with his work. Alya glared at him when she passed.

“Try not to judge them too harshly, Adrien.” Mademoiselle said with a kind smile. “They mourned for Marinette, and this situation has left us all changed.”

Adrien covered his mouth with his hand. “Marinette told the police that I didn’t do anything! That this is all my father’s fault!” He said through a sob. “Why do they still hate me?”

She rubbed his back gently. “Sometimes, when we are in difficult times, we act in ways that we wouldn’t normally.” She said. “In time, they will remember who you are, and that you are their friend, and everything will be back to normal. You’ll see!”

“No, it won’t.” Adrien said. He shook his head and looked at her. “Things will never go back to normal for Marinette and I.” He looked down. “It was hard for people to see me as my own person before. I was always Gabriel’s son. And now, no one will ever even try to know me.”

“You’re still you, Adrien. You aren’t bound by your family line or your genetics.” Mademoiselle said. “We all make choices. Your father made his, and you made yours. You saved her life, Adrien.”

That wasn’t the first time someone had said that to him. Even Marinette seemed to hold that opinion. But he didn’t exactly feel like he’d saved her life. It didn’t feel like a fairy tale.

Class started back up. The students came back in, and lessons started again. Adrien found it even harder to concentrate. He found himself acutely aware of all the eyes on him, and shook when he lifted up his tablet pen. He tried to remind himself that he was used to people staring, and that helped a little, but this wasn’t the same as people staring because of his profession. This was much worse.

When class let out for the day, Adrien stood before the rest of his classmates. He didn’t have his backpack, since it was still locked up in the mansion. He went to the desk and collected Marinette’s work and her cards.

Alya looked up in time to witness the exchange. “Hey!” She shouted, loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “Why are you giving Marinette’s things to Adrien?!”

Mademoiselle looked up and placed a careful hand on Adrien’s shoulder. “Adrien is going to visit Marinette in the hospital. He asked to take her the things she was missing, and I asked him to take the cards as well.”

“But, Mademoiselle, he shouldn’t be allowed within a hundred meters of poor Marinette!” Alya argued. “Don’t you remember what was in all of the newspapers?! Every single person in that mansion is facing charges for what happened to her!”

Chloé stood up. “That is ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous!” She shouted. She covered her heart with her hands. “My Adrihoney would never do anything to hurt anyone! And Dupain-Cheng—” Here, her voice faltered, and she had to start again. “And Marinette told the police the same thing!”

Alya scoffed. “When Marinette first woke up, she was so out of it she didn’t remember her own name!” Adrien flinched. Was that true? No one had said that to him. “She can’t remember everything that happened to her! And she said it herself, the video feeds she saw didn’t have sound!” Alya glared at him. “Nobody knows what Gabriel told Adrien! He could know everything, and be
“I’m not lying! I didn’t know that my father had kidnapped her!” Adrien said. “Alya, please, you have to believe me! I’ve already lost my father and my home; I don’t want to lose my friends, too!”

“Oh, sucks to see a rich boy suffer!” Alya said sarcastically. “But, she’s had it tougher.”

“I know that!” Adrien shouted. “You don’t think I know that?! I saw with my own eyes what he did to her when she found me!”

“And then you were arrested because your own father called you out on what you did!” Alya stormed up to him and stuck her finger in his face. “Do you honestly expect us to believe that you didn’t know she was there the entire time?! When she went to the mansion to see you?!”

“I was with you when she was kidnapped!” Adrien pointed out.

“No you weren’t! You left half an hour before Marinette sent that last text message to her parents!”

“Because Chloé needed me!”

Mademoiselle tried to step between them. “Adrien, Alya! This isn’t—”

“You can spout your lies and your excuses somewhere else!” Alya snapped. “Your, ‘oh, I didn’t know where she was’ and your, ‘I didn’t plan the kidnapping!’ She was there, in your house, and so were you!”

“I didn’t do anything! I’m innocent!” Adrien shouted.

Alya was furious, but tears were visible in her eyes. “I know that you hurt her! One day, I’m going to prove it!”

Adrien was shaking. “Don’t pretend like your some amazing friend! I’m the one who scraped my knees every day looking for her! I’m the one who helped her escape! I’m the one who told the police how to get into the mansion! You haven’t even visited her yet!” This obviously hit too close to home, because Alya’s back straightened out, and her face shifted. Adrien turned his attention to the rest of the class. “None of you have!” He turned back to Alya. “Marinette is hurt, and she needs people to stand by her, but the only people she has are her parents and me!”

Adrien stormed out of the classroom. He pushed through the crowds of students, who parted like the Red Sea when they realized who he was. He heard Alya shouting for him, and he made a detour into the locker room.

She followed him, so he walked towards the boys’ bathroom and pointed at the sign. “This is the boys’ room. You can’t follow me in here.” He said, to which she surrendered with a huff.

Adrien went into a stall and locked it. He took his jacket off so he could put Marinette’s things on the ground without ruining them. He sat down on the toilet and covered his eyes, trying not to cry, as he was certain he didn’t any tears left in him. He tried to calm down, his anger burning inside him like an open flame.

The door opened. He quieted his breathing, worried it was Alya. He heard two sets of footsteps, so he relaxed a bit until they spoke. “Kim said that Alya Césaire—you know, the one with the blog—got into a fight with Agreste Junior.” One boy said to the other.

“I would’ve paid to see that!” The other said, and they laughed. Adrien pulled his legs up so they
wouldn’t see him sitting there. “Do you think what they’re saying about him is true? That he helped his dad?”

“No,” Adrien felt his heart swell with hope for half a moment, “but I don’t think Marinette was kidnapped at all.” If Adrien hadn’t been eavesdropping before, he certainly was now.

“So what do you think happened?”

“Well, you saw how… close Adrien and Marinette were. And she went missing the same day he stopped coming to school.” The first boy said. “I heard that Agreste has property in Mulhouse, so I think that they ran off together, but when her parents started to freak out, they made up the story of the kidnapping to get out of trouble.”

“Hahaha, what? You sound like a conspiracy theorist.” The second boy said. Adrien agreed, but he found himself mourning this vacation in Mulhouse that never happened. The second boy lowered his voice. “Do you know what I think? I think Gabriel was protecting Adrien when he said that he only participated in the planning.” He lowered his voice again. “I think Adrien raped her.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d heard this rumor, nor would it be the last, but it hurt like a punch to the gut every time. The reason this conversation stuck with him was the part that came next.

“I mean, it’s too coincidental otherwise, isn’t it?” The second boy said.

“And Marinette said that he didn’t do anything because…”

“Because she wanted him to, obviously!” He said. Adrien felt sick at the mere accusation. “You know, I heard there are these things called rape kits.” He might have been thinking of rape test kits, but even if he was, what he was thinking of was twisted anyway. “I heard you can buy them online. I think I’m going to get one.”

Adrien collected Marinette’s things and kicked the door open. It hit the stall next to it with such force that the hinges broke and rusted. Adrien glared at the boys, who were shocked and embarrassed to see that they’d had this conversation in front of one of the people involved. Adrien felt the anger burn hot, hot, hot in his chest, as though he could breathe fire if he tried hard enough.

“Don’t you ever—ever—speak that way again!” Adrien hissed.

He stormed out of the room. He realized that Alya had been waiting for him, but he ignored her. He walked all the way to the hospital, only stopping for traffic lights. He ducked into the bathroom when he finally reached the hospital, washing his face with cold water to calm himself down.

He looked at his reflection for a long time. He was still angry, and then only thing he could think about was how similar he looked to Gabriel when he was angry. The thought only pissed him off worse—Adrien summoned his power and shattered the mirror.

Adrien looked at the mess he’d made and regretted it. His face was now reflected in slivers, looking less like a person than a monstrosity through compound eyes. He collected her things and walked out of the bathroom, reporting the broken mirror to the receptionist.

He took the elevator and went to Marinette’s room. She was alone, but happy to see him. “Hey, Marinette! I brought you some gifts from the class.” He said. He placed the things on the table and offered her the cards. “See? Everyone wants you to get better so you can come back to school.”

Marinette smiled, but it was brief. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to.” She confessed. Adrien frowned. “The doctors are worried about me after my sepsis relapse yesterday morning. It was minor, and they
caught it quickly, but they’re not convinced I’m ready to be released yet. I might have to stay here until summer, and if I do, I’ll have to repeat the year.” She sighed before offering him a smile. “But, I don’t want to talk about bad things. I want to go back to being happy, and the first step is thinking happy thoughts! Give me some good news.”

Adrien chuckled nervously. He wasn’t sure he had any, but he deflected that thought before it escaped his mouth. “What do you want to hear about?”

“Well, I heard the mansion has been locked up. Where are you living?” She asked.

Adrien remembered the hotel room. He remembered sharing a bed with Félix, and Amelie slamming him into the wall. “My mother’s sister decided to move back to Paris, so they’re looking after me.” He said. “She has a son of her own, and we were close before my mother disappeared, so it’s like I’m getting a brother!” He said with a shrug.

Marinette grinned ear to ear, ecstatic at this. “That’s wonderful! Alya has her sisters, and Nino has his little brother, and neither of them ever seem lonely!” Her grin softened to a smile. “I’m so glad that you’re staying in Paris, too.”

“Yes, so am I.” Adrien smiled.

“You went back to school today, right? Was it weird?” Marinette asked.

Adrien remembered the hordes of people judging him. The sideways glances, the blatant spreading of rumors, the gasps and giggles as he just tried to exist in the same space as them. “It was, a little, but mostly everyone is just glad that you’re alive.” He said.

She seemed relieved. “And what about the others in our class? Are they getting on okay?”

He remembered everyone staring at him. He thought of how Alya shouted at him, and how he had shouted at her. How he had embarrassed her in front of everyone! He was so ashamed of himself. “They’re passionate about your recovery. Alya, in particular.” He grabbed the work he’d set aside. “That’s why Mademoiselle gave me the cards, but she gave me the work you missed, too.” He smiled. “I missed a lot of the same things as you, so I thought we could work together on it.”

“That would be great, but I worry that we’re just going to get each other lost.”

“Mademoiselle already help me get started! I’m sure the rest will come quickly after that.” Adrien said. Marinette smiled. She sat up and folded her leg, motioning for Adrien to sit on the gurney with her.

19 April, Present Day

Adrien sighed. “I know that I’m not your favorite person in the world, Alya, but I don’t want to hurt Marinette.” He said. “I’m also not going to force her to do anything she doesn’t want to.”

Alya sighed. “I don’t want to either, but we might not have a choice.” She lamented. They both turned when they heard the water. “So, Gabriel knows where you work?”

“Yes. His victim was alive when she got to the hospital. I was on my rounds, and Mylène told me
that she was asking for Adrien Agreste.”

Alya thought about that. “Well, if your father knew where you worked, wouldn’t he have told her to ask for Adrien Chevalier?” She asked, trying to be optimistic, but her face fell right after. “Unless he wanted you to be psyched out before you even interacted with her.”

“I haven’t spoken to my father since Lila tricked me into going to Ville-sous-la-Ferté while la Santé was under construction. I never told him that I was going to change my name. He might not know that I changed it.” Adrien said. “I’m certain that he knows that I work at Alexandrine Rayne, but I don’t know how he knows.” He shook his head. “Someone must have given him my information, but I don’t know who.”

“Maybe some of his old contacts from before his arrest are still active.” Alya theorized. She shifted her weight. “I’ll go after my own contacts, see what I can turn up.”

“Great. While you do that, I’m going to buy a new phone!” Adrien said with forced cheer. He sighed. “Don’t worry. I’ll get your number from Marinette, and once I text you, you can block me.”

“Why not just move your SIM card over?” She asked sharply.

“Because, the whole reason I smashed my old phone is because my father knew that number.” Adrien responded in turn. He sighed. “Besides… there are numbers on there I don’t need anymore.”

“Such as…?” Alya said.

Adrien frowned at her. He felt like she was invading his privacy, but he had learned a long time ago that telling her that only made things worse. “Such as Kagami’s number.”

Alya’s posture shifted. “Kagami… as in, your fiancée, Kagami?”

“As in, my ex-girlfriend, Kagami; we were never engaged.” Adrien said. He looked at Marinette’s bedroom door and lowered his voice. “Listen, don’t tell Marinette, because I don’t want her to think that it was her fault, but… things ended badly between Kagami and I.” He looked away. “Like, really badly.”

Alya’s face fell. “Oh, no. You’re talking about what happened in December, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Adrien said. He folded his arms across his chest and looked up. “The point is, I don’t need or want to talk to her again.”

“She came across as kind of… bitter, I guess, is the nice word for it?” Alya said. “Do you think that Kagami is the one who doxxed you?”

“What? No way. I explained my situation to her before I broke up with her. She can be sort of ruthless sometimes, but she wouldn’t do something like that!” Adrien said.

Alya raised her hands up. “Fine! If you say so.” She leaned against the couch. She sighed. There was a long, tense silence. “What will you do if Gabriel finds you?” She asked quietly. “I don’t want to hear about what you’re doing to prevent it. I want to know what your plan is in the worst case scenario.”

Adrien sighed. “Marinette and I are supernaturals. His powers don’t affect us, but ours affect him.” He said. “If he finds us, I’m going to do everything I can to keep him from hurting Marinette.” He looked away from Alya. “But I don’t think I could kill him. I threatened to, but… I don’t think I actually could.”
Alya folded her hands across her chest. “You know… if you did, you could possibly get away with it.” She pointed out. “The Convention of Human Rights allows justifiable homicide as a legal defense.” She sort of shrugged. “It would be really easy to prove, too. Gabriel killed so many people, and he’s threatened the both of you specifically.”

He waved her off. “It’s not that!” He walked over to the fridge and grabbed an orange soda. He offered her one, but she declined. “I really don’t think I have that killer instinct.” He sighed. “Which is fortunate, if you ask me.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Alya said. Their tense conversation was interrupted by the harsh sound of the buzzer. Adrien moved towards it, but Alya beat him to it. “Allô? Who is this?” She demanded.

“This is the police.” The voice on the other end said.

“Come back with a warrant.” Alya denied flatly. She looked at Adrien and shook her head. “Flics.”

“Madame Lahiffe, you aren’t in trouble.” The voice said. “We’re here to investigate the recent prison break, and we’re hoping you can help us.”

Alya sighed. She looked at Adrien, who hesitated before nodding. “Fine!” She pressed the buzzer for three seconds before leaning against the wall. “I’m going to get Marinette out of the shower. She might want to talk to the police, if only to reassure herself.”

“Don’t be too sure of that.” Adrien said as she walked away. “Do you want me to help her instead? They want to talk to you.”

Alya paused, and she turned to look at him with a fake, disbelieving smile. “Adrien Chevalier!” She scolded. “No, I do not want you to help my best friend out of the shower!”

She walked towards her room. Adrien frowned. “She’s my best friend, too!” He shouted at her. Alya flipped him off without turning back. She shut and locked the bedroom door. Adrien huffed and waited for the knock to come to the door.

A few minutes passed. Adrien was tired of waiting, but consoled himself by thinking about how funny it was that the police had to climb up all those stairs because the security guard was too lazy to call a mechanic. Eventually, the knock came to the door, and he went to open it.

He peeked through the door, so he could check that he was actually opening the door for the police. He recognized Sabrina Raincomprix, who had recently made agent. She was a supernatural; therefore she could not be under his father’s command, so he opened the door the rest of the way. He regretted this immediately, because Sabrina was not alone. She’d brought another agent.

“Hello, Madame Lahiffe, I’m Agent Tsuru—” Kagami looked up from opening her police badge, freezing the moment her eyes made contact with his. “Adrien.”

He huffed and rubbed his eyes. “Of course,” he muttered at the floor. “I expected no different.”
Embers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10 June, Three Years Ago

Agent Kagami Tsurugi stood outside the hospital room of Giselle Charron, a ten year old girl who had been admitted for stomach pains before it was discovered she was two months pregnant. Her original attempt to gather information had been a failure, and while the commissariat awaited the aborted fetus to run DNA tests on, they were stuck with no leads until she felt safe enough to speak to police.

One of the nurses, Mylène, approached her. “No luck, huh?” She said sympathetically. Kagami shook her head. “Oh, dear. That’s not good at all.” Her brown eyes became big with tears. “That poor little girl! She’s been through things that no one should have to endure!”

Kagami became tense. “I don’t understand! I can help her! This person hurt her; why won’t she give him up?”

Mylène frowned. “It’s not that easy, madame l’agent.” She said. She looked away. “This isn’t like what happened with…” she shook her head. “Poor Giselle probably doesn’t even understand what happened to her.”

“She knows something! All I need is a name!” Kagami said.

Mylène held up her hands. She was about to speak when she saw someone, and a light clicked on in her head. “Adrien!” She shouted, waving her hand in the air. She caught the attention of a male nurse on the other side of the nurses’ station. He walked over. “Adrien, can you help me? I have a CSA survivor in there, but she won’t talk to the police.”

The nurse, Adrien, frowned. “What happened to her?”

Mylène looked down for a moment. “The worst possible thing,” she said when she looked up. “Her parents consented to giving her an abortion. She’s just woken up from it.” She looked at him hopefully. “Do you think you can help Agent Tsurugi get some information?”

Adrien looked away. “Jesus, Mylène.” He said. He rubbed his face and looked at Kagami. “Are you morally opposed to impersonating a nurse?”

“It’s illegal,” Kagami pointed out.

Mylène frowned as she thought. “Isn’t that only for doctors?”

“You’re not assisting in surgery,” Adrien said as he rolled his eyes. “You’re standing in the room so you hear what she has to say.”

With limited options, Kagami switched her police uniform for a set of scrubs. Adrien gave her a mask so Giselle wouldn’t recognize her, and he lowered the lights for extra measure. Adrien and Kagami entered the hospital room, with Kagami standing closer to the door while Adrien pulled up a chair next to Giselle.

“Hello, Giselle. My name is Adrien, and this is nurse…” Adrien looked at her and paused.
Kagami was quiet. “Kagami.”

“Kagami.” He smiled first at her and then Giselle. He tilted his head when he spoke next. “I understand you just woke up. How are you feeling?”

Giselle was quiet. She twisted her hands. “Fine,” she said.

“You know, it’s okay if you don’t feel fine.” Adrien said. He smiled. “The procedure you had makes some people feel very sick and achy. It’s okay if you feel that way.”

“I guess I do, a little.”

Adrien nodded. “What do maman and papa give you when you feel bad? Maybe I can get the cafeteria to make it for you, special.”

“Chocolat chaud?” She asked. Adrien picked up the phone and placed the order in the cafeteria, adding a bit of ice cream to the order. After a moment, Giselle looked at her feet. “So there’s no more baby?” She asked.

Kagami started, but Adrien just frowned. “No, sweetie.” He said quietly. “No more baby.”

Kagami stood up straight. “Giselle, you knew about baby?”

Adrien held up his hand. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to!” He said quickly. He smiled. “We can just sit here for a while, if you want. Until you’re ready to talk.”

She was quiet for a few minutes. “He told me that we were going to be a family.” She confessed. “Does this mean… that he’s going to be mad?”

Adrien and Kagami gently interviewed Giselle for a little bit. She seemed to be uncomfortable after a while, so Adrien decided they should take a break. Kagami changed out of her disguise while Adrien grabbed a cup of coffee. He was staring at it blankly when she came back out in her uniform.

She watched him for a moment. He looked sad and far away, but he was paying attention. “If you were thinking that it was her father who did this, I think you might want to reconsider.” He said. He looked up at her. “Her father is the one who insisted that she be admitted to the hospital. The rapist sounds like he wanted her to get pregnant, or that he was at least happy about it.” He looked back at his coffee. “A preferential pedophile wouldn’t risk exposing himself this way. Not if this is the outcome he wants.”

Kagami leaned up against the wall next to him. “Who do you suspect, then?”

He shrugged. “A different family member, a neighbor, or a family friend.” He said. He shook his head as he looked back at his coffee. “Poor girl.”

“We can’t afford to ignore any angle.” Kagami said. Adrien shrugged without speaking. He seemed down, so Kagami, unsuccessfully, tried her hand at humor. “Should I be worried that you know so much about this?”

Adrien recoiled and stepped away from her. “No!” He declared firmly, clearly disgusted.

Kagami held up her hands. “I didn’t mean it the way that it sounded!” She said. “What I meant was, you seem to know a lot about the subject. Any particular reason why?”

He stared at her. His face broke into a polite, if not gentle, smile. “Sorry, madame l’agent, I don’t
think I know you well enough to trust you with my tragic backstory.”

She smiled back. “Maybe I could take you out for dinner to change that?”

Adrien looked away. “That’s very kind of you, but I’m actually just getting started on a fourteen hour shift.” He said. He downed his coffee and moved towards the door. “Still, it was my pleasure, Agent Tsurugi.”

“You can just call me Kagami.” She said.

“Okay, Kagami.”

Adrien left the room and got back to work. His mind swirled all day about his encounter with Giselle. He checked up on her before going to break, and then found he felt too sick to eat. He found a dark corner to sit in and text Marinette.

```
me: hey princess
me: it’s been a few days, i was just checking in
Princess: are you at work?
me: yes
me: im on break right now though
Princess: is everything okay?
me: it’s just been trying. I became a nurse to help people but sometimes it feels like I get there too late
Princess: you’re doing good work, Adrien
Princess: the reason it hurts is because you care so much, and that speaks well of you
Princess: plus, you’re still so new. You’ve only been there for a little while. Give it time and you’ll feel right at home
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Adrien smiled at his phone. He had only graduated from nursing school a few months earlier. He still felt like an imposter, like at any given moment someone would figure out who he was and run him out like the diseased rat he often felt like. Marinette sent him a picture of a kitten dressed like a doctor. Adrien sent her a row of heart emojis and felt well enough to return to work.

It was dark when he finally got out of work. Adrien was digging through his pockets when he heard someone call out to him. “Nurse Adrien!” He looked around until he spotted Kagami walking up to him.

“Hello, Kagami.” He said as he waited for her to catch up. “…you haven’t been waiting here the entire time, have you?”

She shook her head. “No. I was following up on the leads that you managed to get from Giselle. I only came back for the DNA tests.” She paused as Adrien pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He put one of them in his mouth. “I… you’re a nurse. You must know that those are terrible for you.”

Adrien laughed. “Would you prefer that I vape, madame l’agent?” He asked. He took the cigarette out, but he didn’t put it away. “I’m still going to smoke it, you know.”

Kagami shook her head. “I figured. I appreciate the lack of smoke in my face, however.” She looked back at the hospital. “You know… the lab is shut down for the night. I won’t be able to test the DNA against the fetus until tomorrow… if you’re still interested in dinner.” Adrien considered it, and after a moment, he agreed, though somewhat reluctantly.
Their dinner was pleasant. They learned that they had similar interests growing up—Kagami hadn’t watched much television or played video games, but she had entered and won many fencing competitions, as he had. She’d also studied martial arts and archery, and before joining the police, she had served in the military.

It was almost midnight by the time they decided to part ways. Kagami caught his arm before he walked to the metro station. “Adrien… in the spirit of full disclosure… my family is very wealthy.” She looked away from him. “To me, it’s not important, but it wouldn’t feel right to start out on a lie.”

Adrien laughed. “Wow, ex-military, police, and rich? My friends are really going to hate you!” He joked. She chuckled in spite of herself. His face fell. “But, also in the spirit of full disclosure… Kagami, there’s someone else.” Her eyes grew wide, but he couldn’t meet them. “We aren’t together, but… I love her, and I have for a long time.”

“You love her, but you aren’t a couple?” She asked.

He nodded. “To say that it’s complicated is the understatement of the century.” He confessed. He sighed and shrugged, looking up at the starless sky. “I love her, and I don’t think I’m ever going to stop, even if I can’t be with her.” He looked to the side, unable to meet her eyes.

Kagami was quiet as she thought. “Adrien, do you know what you should do when facing an opponent that you can’t defeat?” He didn’t say anything, so she placed her hand gently on his cheek and moved his head so he was looking at her. “Change targets.” She suggested. She kissed his cheek. “Have a good night, Adrien. I’ll text you in the morning.”

Adrien couldn’t move for a moment. He put his hand on his face where she’d kissed it and smiled.

19 April, Present Day

Sabrina cleared her throat as she tried to break the tension. “Hello, Monsieur Chevalier. I’m Agent Raincomprix, and this is Agent Tsurugi. We’ve been assigned to handle the apprehension of the escaped convicts from La Santé.” She said professionally. Kagami, on the other hand, turned away from Adrien and folded her arms across her chest. “May we come in?”

Adrien leaned against the door. “I am completely within my rights to tell you no, and that you can come back with a warrant!”

Kagami spun around. “Except that you’re not going to do that, because you know that this is your best shot of getting your father recaptured and sent back to prison on brand new murder charges!” She snapped.

Adrien scowled. “Sure, go ahead and threaten me! This is why nobody fucking likes flics!” He said.

Sabrina hung her head and sighed. “Listen, Adrien, we aren’t here to open up old wounds. We’re just here to talk to Alya.” She said. “We tried to go to her penthouse, but nobody answered.” She looked down. “Her name is listed next to this apartment, and I heard her when I asked to be buzzed in.”

He shook his head in frustration. “Sabrina, did you ever stop to think about why she would have an apartment when she lives with her husband in a penthouse?”
Sabrina was quiet. She looked past him and then folded her hands in front of her. “Well, it’s a very nice apartment! Maybe she needs to get away sometimes?” She suggested.

Kagami put her hands on her hips, pushing aside the white leather jacket she wore over her police uniform. “If she doesn’t live here, why is her name on the door?”


“Adrien, please.” Sabrina begged. She looked at Kagami with pleading eyes. “Kagami, we aren’t here to arrest anyone.” She looked at him. “We just want some information. Any that you can provide.”

Alya stepped out of Marinette’s bedroom. “Adrien, have you seen—” When he turned to look at her, Alya saw Sabrina and Kagami. “Oh.”

Sabrina smiled. “Hello, Madame Lahiffe, we’re here to ask you about the recent prison break.” She said warmly.

“You talk to the flics.” Adrien said. He walked further into the apartment. “I’ll look for it.”

Alya looked at him as he opened her bedroom door. “But I haven’t even told you what—” She started. Adrien slammed the door behind him. “Okay, have it your way, knothead.” Alya sighed and looked at Kagami and Sabrina. “Come on in, madames les agents.”

Adrien rolled his eyes when he heard them walk down the hall. He turned to see Marinette on the bed, her hair wet and her eyes sort of wide. He banished his bad mood to smile at her. “What are we looking for?”

“My cane,” Marinette said, looking at her body. She had changed into a dress shirt with a pink blossom pattern, a black sweater, and a grey skirt. She’d fastened her prosthetic to her leg, nervously going over the dark grey sock that kept the gel liner from rubbing against her skin. “I want to make a good impression on the agents, but I can’t walk very well on my prosthetic without my cane.” She sighed. “I feel so stupid for having lost it.”

Adrien nodded. “You don’t usually use it, so no one is judging you for not knowing where it is.” He said gently. He first looked under her bed, and then in her closet. He dragged a chair over to it so he could examine the upper shelf. He pushed around a couple of hat boxes. “Why do you keep these?” She didn’t respond, so he turned to show it to her. “These hat boxes, I mean.”

Marinette giggled. “I like them!” She giggled, folding her hands in her lap. She looked away. “Lila used to tease me about keeping hat boxes but only having two pairs of shoes.”

“You only have one foot. How many shoes could you possibly need?” He asked.

She giggled again. “That’s what I used to tell her!”

Any talk of Lila made his skin crawl, so Adrien immediately changed the subject. “Hold on, I think I found it.” He reached back into the darkness and yanked on a piece of metal. It was a bit stuck, but he eventually revealed her cane, decorated with stickers and string. He smiled as he climbed down from the chair, presenting it to her with a flourish. “Your cane, milady.”

Marinette took it. “Thank you!” She said. She stood on shaking knees, and then steadied herself with the cane. “I-it’s been a long time.” She said before offering a nervous smile to Adrien.
He tried to return it. “Marinette, before you go out there… you should know that one of the agents assigned to the escape…” he sighed. “Kagami is here.”

Marinette blinked. “The Ice Queen?” She muttered under her breath. “I didn’t know that Kagami was a police agent.”

“I told you that.”

“Like, two years ago—in passing!” Marinette defended herself. “You can hardly expect me to remember.”

Adrien took her arm. “Anyway, I know that you still get unnerved by police.” He said quietly as he moved his hands to her shoulders. “I’m going to sit with you through the interview, and if you don’t feel comfortable, I’ll tell them to leave, okay?”

“Adrien, won’t that just make things worse for you and Kagami?” She asked.

“We already hate each other, Marinette!” He said cheerfully. He wrapped an arm around her, and he led her out into the living room.

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1 June, Two Years Ago

Adrien and Kagami were sitting outside their favorite restaurant, enjoying their first shared day off together in about a month. It was starting to get warm, and Kagami leaned back in her chair so she could catch a bit of the bright, shining sun. She leaned forward and smiled. “Our anniversary is next week.” She said.

Adrien nodded. “What did you want to do?” He asked, sliding his fingers across the table and weaving them into hers.

Kagami thought for a moment. “There’s a new movie coming out. My mother and I have been invited to the premiere, and I can bring a guest.”

He laughed. “You’ve got a movie premiere on our anniversary and you’re just telling me now?”

“No!” She said with a grin. “No, it’s a few days after. I meant, we don’t have to make such a big deal of our anniversary if you want to do the movie premiere instead.”

Adrien shook his head. “We could always do both!” He said. His phone started to ring, and he started digging for it. “I’ll think of something, don’t worry.” He found his phone, though when he saw who was calling him, he was confused. He apologized and picked it up. “Luka? What’s going on?”

Kagami could hear a frantic voice on the other side of the phone, but she couldn’t make out any of the words. She saw how Adrien became tense, and she was worried… and annoyed, in equal measure. She loved Adrien, and she enjoyed the time that she spent with him, but it seemed like he was constantly being called away. She assumed that it was to work.

Adrien stood and started collecting his things. “I’m on my way! I’ll be there—no! Don’t try to get her out, Luka; you don't want to risk making things worse!” He hung up and shoved his phone into
his pocket. “Kagami, I’m so sorry. I have to go, now!”

“Adrien, we haven’t had time to sit down and talk in a while! Can’t someone else go in?”

He seemed confused. “There’s no one else but me,” he said, which sounded unrealistic. He kissed her quickly and climbed over the fence as opposed to going back through the restaurant. “I’m so sorry! I’ll make this up to you, I promise!”

She watched him run down the street. She looked up as the waiter brought her the food they’d ordered. “Actually, it looks like I’ll be taking these to go.” She said, resigned to her fate.

She went back to the townhouse. Adrien might have jumped the gun a little when he had asked her to move in, but she had been looking to move out of her mother’s home for a while, so it worked out. With nothing better to do, she started unpacking her things.

Adrien had helpfully sorted the boxes into the rooms they needed to be unpacked in. Kagami decided to start in Adrien’s office—though, why Adrien had an office was beyond her understanding. Maybe, she reasoned, he was finally taking her advice and going back to school to be a nurse practitioner.

As she was sorting through her financial papers, Kagami came across Adrien’s checkbook. This wouldn’t have been interesting if, when she opened it to get an idea of how much she should be paying towards his mortgage as rent, she hadn’t noticed something interesting.

Adrien paid property taxes and bills on the townhouse. It only came out to be a few hundred euros a month. But, also every month, Adrien wrote a check for three thousand euros, which were all signed and dated by him on the shadow copy, but it did not have anything written next to «payer à l’ordre de.» Every other check was filled out completely, but it was like he tore this one out before he finished writing it.

Adrien didn’t come home until late in the night. He went straight for the shower after feeding Plagg, and then got ready for bed. He collapsed and covered his eyes with his arm. “Adrien, I was putting things away in the office when I found your checkbook.” Kagami said. He didn’t respond. “Why do you write out a check for three thousand euros every month? Who are you giving it to?”

Adrien sighed. “Kagami, I’m really tired. Can we talk in the morning?” He was asleep within moments. Kagami huffed when she realized that she would get nothing out of him. She spotted his phone and thought for a moment.

Kagami reached over him and unplugged his phone. She stood and tiptoed out of the room, setting up in the kitchen as she looked it over. It took a few tries to figure out his password—it locked her out twice—but soon enough she had it open.

She snooped on his social media feeds, looking at his friends and who he followed and what he was posting about. She looked at medical apps he’d downloaded to learn what his prescriptions were for and when he was supposed to take them. She looked at his last few phone calls—the most recent one was to the hospital he worked at, and the one before that was from ‘Luka Couffaine,’ one of the guitarists of a rock band that Adrien liked.

There were twenty calls from someone named ‘Princess,’ all scattered among calls from her and the hospital. Princess also featured as his most recent text chain and FaceTime call. But there wasn’t a picture of her for her contact information, just a symbol. A stylized flower in white, pink, and gray.

“Kagami,” Adrien said, startling her. She closed out of the app and put his phone face down. Adrien
tilted his head. “What are you doing? Is that… my phone?”

She thought for a moment. “Yes, it is.” She offered it to him.

“Why is it unlocked? Were…” Adrien looked up in shock. “Were you going through my phone?!”

“I just….” she sighed. “I thought you were cheating on me.” She frowned, remembering that she wasn’t the bad guy here. “Who is Princess?!” She demanded.

Adrien rolled his eyes. “She’s a friend. I’ve called her princess since collège.” He explained. He smiled and took her shoulders. “Kagami, I love you. I’m not cheating on you, I promise.”

Kagami folded her arms across her chest. “Then price it! Quit running off on our dates!” She ordered.

He flinched. “I can’t promise that.” He said.

Kagami huffed. She stormed off, sliding her shoes on and leaving the house. She returned the next night, and they spoke some more, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she hated Adrien’s ‘Princess.’

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19 April, Present Day

Alya, Sabrina and Kagami all looked up when they entered the room. Kagami frowned and avoided his eyes as Adrien led Marinette to the couch. Marinette sat down next to Alya, who gave her a gentle pat on the head. Adrien looked from Marinette to Kagami. She was still avoiding him, but she must have caught sight of Marinette’s prosthetic leg, because her annoyed expression had shifted into a guilty one.

Alya cleared her throat. “How did Gabriel Agreste escape from la Santé?” She asked. She and Adrien both took Marinette’s hands.

“Everyone who witnessed the riot either escaped or died.” Kagami said bluntly. “Right now, we think that Monsieur Agreste isolated the guard that he killed to get her keys, and then used the non-powered inmates in the adjacent high security wing as a distraction.” She put her hands on her hips. “He removed the dampening shackles from a few choice supernaturals, and when the lockdown went into effect, there wasn’t a whole lot left in his way.”

“The guard was so new to the barracks that she must not have known what he got locked up for.” Sabrina looked sympathetically at Adrien and Marinette. “This must be so hard for the both of you.” She said.

Marinette nodded. “It’s brought back a whole lot of unpleasant memories. And this is the worst time of year for it.” She said as she looked at Adrien.

Sabrina folded her arms in front of her. “I remember.” She said quietly.

Marinette started at Adrien. She motioned for him to speak, but he didn’t. “This morning, Adrien and I were watching Alya’s news program about the escape, and G-Gabriel called him.” She said. Adrien squeezed her hand while Kagami and Sabrina jumped.
Kagami opened her mouth, but Adrien held up His hand. “No, I already broke my phone, so I don’t have anything to tell you except that he called me.” He huffed. “The number was unlisted and I don’t know how he got my information, but… he knows where I work, too.”

Sabrina sighed. “Adrien, you understand that I have to ask this.” She said cautiously. “Have you had any communication with—”

“No!” He snapped, spinning his head around to glare at her. “I haven’t seen or spoken to my father in-in-in… twelve years!” He lifted his hands up. “And even then, it wasn’t by choice!”

“Is there any way he could have traced the call?” Sabrina asked.

“Sabrina, he escaped from prison barely a day ago.” Marinette reasoned as she took Adrien's hands. She rubbed them as she tried to calm him down. “If he spent that time trying to find Adrien, he wouldn’t have time to set up a trace, and even if he did, the conversation was only about a forty-five seconds long.”

Kagami shifted. “If he called you from a smartphone, then he could have traced your location immediately, with very little effort.” She said. She saw how Marinette frightened from this concept, so she sighed. “But he was probably too busy avoiding police patrols to risk something that could have traced him, too.”

“What did he say?” Sabrina asked.

“He said that he was going to kill us.” Adrien said, simplifying for Marinette’s sake.

She sighed. “That’s less than ideal.” She said quietly as she turned to Kagami. “There’s really no good options for us when it comes to protecting witnesses.”

Adrien narrowed his eyes. “Oh, believe me, we know!” He snapped. He motioned to the apartment. “Why do you think Marinette lives here, in an apartment under someone else’s name?!”

“Adrien, you know our hands are tied unless Lila actually does something.” Sabrina said.

He shook his head. “I know,” he muttered, “but that doesn’t give me a whole lot of faith in the police.” Kagami moved to argue, but he cut off any chance of her speaking first. “It took you thirty years to figure out my father is a serial killer, and then it was only because I told you!”

Sabrina sighed. “In complete fairness, that was not us.” She said.

Alya leaned against the side of the couch. “But it was your father,” she pointed out.

“Unhelpful,” Sabrina said.

“I wasn’t trying to help.” Alya said.

Marinette threw up her hands. “Anyway!” She declared. She looked at Sabrina with wide eyes. “Gabriel knows Adrien’s old phone number, and he knows where he works, but I don’t think he knows that he changed his name.” She said.

“Marinette, do you have somewhere to go?” Sabrina asked. “This is a very dangerous situation, and it might not be safe for a long time.”

“I feel safer with Adrien here.” Marinette said, her voice and eyes gentle. Adrien smiled, but Kagami looked away with an intense frown. “Besides, Alya has her contacts. And I’m sure you’ll let me
know if you learn anything?”

Sabrina opened her mouth. Marinette made a pitiful face at her, making her eyes big and her posture vulnerable. She sighed and looked down. “Yes, Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng. I’ll make sure to keep you up to date.”

Kagami rolled her eyes. “Before we go, do you know of any of your father’s old contacts?”

Adrien considered this. “Audrey Bourgeois, but she’s in New York City. She won’t do him much good. And then there’s your mother, but with you being an agent, he probably won’t risk her.” He said. “My father didn’t get out much, and he liked his secrets.”

“He’s not the only one who likes secrets.” Kagami said sharply. Adrien snarled at her while Marinette looked at him with concern. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Sabrina, we have other people to interview.”

Adrien stood and smiled. “Great! Let me show you to the door.” He stormed down the hallway and opened the door. Sabrina sighed as she looked at Kagami.

Kagami paused in the threshold. She looked at him without turning to face him. “I am sorry, Adrien. I’m sure that this is an awful time for you.” She said. Now she turned, and he could see the honesty in her eyes. Kagami tried to be a good person, that he knew, but that didn’t change what had happened. “If you want, I could… call you, to let you know how the investigation is going.”

Adrien looked away. “Sabrina is going to call Marinette. I don’t intend to go anywhere, so you don’t have to bother. I’ll hear it, too.” He said.

Kagami frowned. “Yes,” she snapped, turning away. “Of that I have no doubt.”

She grabbed the door and pulled it shut before he got a chance to. Adrien rolled his eyes and walked back into the living room. Marinette was trying to decompress, as police officers still made her very anxious—or worse yet, they pissed her off. Though, he noted as he sat back down, they pissed almost everyone off.

“I wonder who else escaped.” Marinette said, shifting. She looked at the table and frowned. “Everyone is talking about Gabriel, but other supernaturals escaped with him.”

Alya shrugged. “They probably aren’t all that sophisticated of criminals,” she said. “Most supernaturals who get arrested are sent to the maximum security-supernatural barracks, regardless of the crime they commit.”

“In which case, it probably wouldn’t have been difficult for my father to manipulate them into helping him escape.” He said. “He thinks they’re just pawns, but if they’ve been unjustly punished, they might have leapt at the chance of freedom.”

Alya stood. “Nevertheless, we need to know their powers.” She said. She walked to the door and grabbed her shoes. “They would have to register upon conviction, so there should be records at the city hall.”

“Will you be alright on your own?” Marinette asked.

“I’m not going on my own. I’m going to bring my husband.” Alya said with a grin. She shrugged after putting on her shoes. “Besides, don’t you worry about me.” She put her hands on her hips. “If I get into trouble, I’ll be gone in the blink of an eye.”
Alya vanished in a flash of purple light. Adrien sighed. “Why did she waste time banging on your door if she could just do that?” He asked.

“It’s extremely rude to teleport into someone else’s home, Adrien!” Marinette scolded jokingly, and they both laughed. After a moment, Marinette spoke. “So… I didn’t realize that your breakup with Kagami was so brutal.”

He felt his blood run cold. “What do you mean, princess?” He asked.

“Come on, Adrien. I was there. I saw all the dirty looks, and I felt the tension.” Marinette said. She frowned. “The way you said it, it made it sound like you both just didn’t want to be together anymore, but it’s clear that something else happened.”

Adrien paused. He grinned with a shrug. “Would you believe me if I told you that we had conflicting fetishes?” He asked hopefully.

Marinette scowled at him. “Adrien!”

He sighed. “No, I guess not.” He frowned and then leaned forward. “I need you to understand, I didn’t lie. Kagami is a wonderful person, and I don’t think we would have worked as a couple.” He sighed. “The whole story is just… complicated.”

Marinette smiled gently. “Tell me. We have time.” She said.

Adrien hesitated.

20 December, Four Months Ago

Adrien came home from work exhausted. He hung up his coat and removed his shoes. The whole house was warm and inviting. Adrien walked up the stairs to find Kagami curled up on the couch in a blanket, watching a Christmas movie that was playing on TVi. “Hey, Kagami.” He said, and she looked up at him with a smile. They kissed, and he could see the cup in her hand. “Did you make chocolat chaud?” He asked.

“Yes, I did. I left some for you.” She said. He smiled and plugged in his phone next to her. He went into their bedroom to change out of his clothes, as they smelled of the hospital. Adrien grabbed a mug and sat down next to her. “It’s cold. Share the blanket with me.” She insisted.

Adrien obliged. They were wrapped up cozy, and from the window they could see the snow beginning to fall. They drank their chocolat chaud as they watched the movie, though Adrien—who hated holidays—wasn’t really watching it. Kagami put down her mug and took his out of his hands. “Hey, I was drinking that!” He protested weakly.

Kagami kissed him. It was hot and passionate, enough that they might have fogged up their windows had they been sitting closer to them. Kagami pushed Adrien back against the arm of the couch and straddled him, her hands keeping his face where her lips could reach as his migrated from her waist to her hips, and then lower as she felt him grow hard.

“Tempting though it is to stay here forever,” Adrien said as their most recent kiss broke, “perhaps we should move this to the bedroom?”
Kagami stood and pulled him up with her. Adrien grabbed his phone as she grabbed his wrist and led him into their bedroom. She spun them around and pushed him onto the bed. She climbed on top of him while he fumbled to plug his phone in here. “Adrien, forget about your phone. It’s not even dying,” she said, annoyed.

“I never let it die. You know that.” Adrien said. He plugged it in. “There! Peace of mind.” He said. He returned his focus to her, pulling them both up so his legs didn’t hang uncomfortably.

Kagami pinned Adrien’s arms to the bed. Her kisses turned from hot to starved, migrating down from his lips to his neck and to his chest when she pulled his shirt off and threw it out of the way. Adrien couldn’t do much with his arms pinned, but the moment she released them, he flipped them over and returned the favor, unbuttoning her shirt to kiss her neck as he fondled her breasts. He reached behind her and unhooked her bra, and he slid his hand under it.

“Wait,” he said suddenly, moving his hand down to rest on her stomach. He leaned over and opened the drawer of his nightstand. He dug around blindly. “I think we used the last of the condoms.” He said.

“I bought more. I left them in the kitchen.” Kagami said. He nodded and stood. Kagami sat up to remove her shirt and her bra. She unbuttoned her pants and pulled them down with her panties. As she straightened her back, she noticed that Adrien’s phone had lit up, having received a text message. Kagami didn’t read the text. She quickly debated the pros and cons of telling him he got it, before concluding that, no matter who had sent it to him, there was a very likely chance that he would run off to take care of whatever was going on, leaving her in the dust. It was easy to pretend that it didn’t bother her, but it did. Kagami leaned forward and turned his phone off. She pulled her hand in and tried to look relaxed when Adrien came back inside. “Did I hear my—”

She pulled him down to the bed and climbed on top of him. Kagami dragged her nails over his chest, bringing them down until she reached his pants. She pulled them off roughly, dragging his boxer briefs down with them. After a bit more foreplay, after makeouts and hair pulling and scratches from her nails, Adrien was hard, and Kagami opened the box of condoms to roll one onto his penis.

Adrien gently rolled her over, his eyes fixated on the sly smile that had broken through her normally stern expression. Kagami wrapped her legs around him, as if trying to persuade his body to act before his mind could. “Kagami, I—” he started before she grabbed his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

It knocked him off balance, and when she moved back, he fell forward a bit. Kagami persuaded him to act by pulling on him with her legs and lifting her pelvis up off the bed. Adrien hesitated for half a moment before sliding into her.

Kagami let out a sharp breath, and judging by the way she wrapped her arms around him and moved into it, this was a good thing. Adrien didn’t fight as she rolled them over so he was on his back. The light was in his eyes, but he kept his eyes on her, desperate to hold her closer but knowing that she would pull away after the first kiss broke. Adrien felt a moan growing in his throat, and he bit his knuckle.

She caught him. “Oh! What’s this I see, Adri-chan?” She teased, wrapping her hand around the one he was using to keep himself quiet. She tilted her head in a way that might have been cute if she hadn’t been mocking him for being closer to cumming than she was. “Am I the victor, then?” She asked. He shook his head defiantly, swallowing the moan.

This having been said, Adrien still came first, and Kagami teased him for being so easy to please as
she pulled the condom off. In retaliation, Adrien flipped her over him in a way that caused her to shriek in surprise, pinning her on the other side of the bed. He kissed her gently before teasing her with his fingers.

They both flinched when purple light flashed next to them. Kagami scrambled to hide from Alya, whose face shifted from panicked to annoyed almost instantaneously. She folded her arms across her chest and furrowed her brows. “So this is what you were doing?!”

Adrien sighed heavily. “Alya, what are you doing here?”

“You know this woman?” Kagami asked. She tried to regain her composure as she addressed Alya. “Are you registered on the Supernatural—”

“I was born before the law was passed, I am not a superhero, and I have not been convicted of a crime where it was proven that I used my powers. It is perfectly legal for me not to be registered! Back off, flic!” Alya snapped. She turned back to Adrien. “I can’t believe you!”

Adrien crawled across the bed and picked his clothes up off the floor. “Alya, please. Tell me what’s going on.” He said, trying to redress without exposing himself to her.

“Let me yell at you first!” She snapped. Her eyes were burning with intense fire, one he knew too well. “You talk such a big game about always being ready to help, but you’re all too willing to ignore her when your balls turn blue!” She waved her hands up next to her head. “You shoved her to the side the second an easier target came into view!”

“Oh, bullshit, Alya! I—” Adrien stopped. “Wait, hold on, why are you bringing up—”

“Marinette’s been trying to call you for almost an hour!” Alya snapped. “She sent you, like, a million text messages, and all her calls went straight to your voicemail!” She scoffed. “She thought you were dead! You even had me worried! You almost had me fooled!”

Adrien held up his hands. “Alya, I’ve been next to my phone for the entire night. It hasn’t rung once.” He turned and grabbed it from the nightstand. “Let me show you.” Kagami felt her muscles grow tight as he unplugged it. “See? Look, there’s—”

He stopped in the middle of his sentence. Adrien pressed the home button a couple of times before trying to plug it back in. His confusion only became worse when it didn’t show that it was charging.

“What won’t it turn on? Is it broken?” Adrien asked.

Kagami spoke hesitantly. “I turned it off after you stood up.” She confessed.

Adrien blinked. “You… you turned off my phone?!” He exclaimed, as though she were Brutus and he Julius Caesar.

“I thought that it was someone from work trying to get you to go back!” She defended herself.

“Even if it was, you still shouldn’t have done it!” Adrien snapped. “You know how important my job is to me—and I’m capable of making my own decisions!”

“Adrien, I—”

He held up his hands. “No! No, I don’t want to hear it right now!” He said. He redressed quickly as he looked at Alya. “What happened? She’s not hurt, is she?”
“The snowstorm knocked the power out, and it’s really dark in the apartment.” Alya reported as he finished redressing. “She was holding it together while you were at work—she didn’t want to bother you and get you in trouble again—but she started to—” Adrien grabbed Alya’s hand, and they disappeared in a flash of light, leaving Kagami alone in the bedroom.

She grabbed her housecoat and stood. She went to the bathroom and took a shower, and then she fed Plagg as he stared at her from the counter. She felt bad about what had happened, but she didn’t believe she’d done anything wrong. All she had wanted was to have him to herself for a few hours, and it wasn’t wrong to want that from her boyfriend.

Kagami went back to the bedroom and changed into a pair of pajamas. She got a few fleeting moments of sleep, but she was determined to be awake for when Adrien returned. He came back to the townhouse around three-thirty in the morning, waking her up from half-sleep by slamming the door hard enough the shake the house.

He came up the stairs, clearly in a bad mood. He couldn’t even look at her. “Adrien, what happened when you—” Kagami began. Adrien stormed right past her. She assumed that he was going to bed, and she resigned herself to waiting on the couch for a few hours until he went to sleep.

Instead, Adrien came back into the room and threw three files onto the coffee table. Kagami looked up at him before grabbing the one on top. Inside was an image of infamous serial killer Gabriel ‘the Collector’ Agreste, and the other two were his known accomplices.

“I remember hearing of Gabriel Agreste’s arrest. My mother did business with him, and there was quite a lot of scrambling to maintain our public image once the news broke.” Kagami said. She looked up at him. “Why do you have this file, Adrien?”

“Because Gabriel Agreste,” Adrien hissed, “is my father.”

Kagami’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe him for a moment, not even able to see it when she held up the file to compare their faces.

“The reason that I often drop everything and run away is because the person I go to see is Marinette Dupain-Cheng, his last victim. She’s the only person to ever survive what he did.” Adrien explained. “My father targeted her because he knew that she would trust him. She was my friend.” He shook his head. “She’s my best friend.”

She couldn’t find the words.

“She suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder because of the torture he inflicted upon her. Torture she had to endure because I was there, but I didn’t know that he had her in his clutches.” Tears had started to collect in his eyes. “Kagami, I’m the only person who can bring her out of her flashbacks. If she stays in them, she’ll hurt herself or other people because she thinks that she’s going to die.” He wiped his face and steeled his nerves. “That’s why I never turn my phone off or let it die. Because I don’t know when they’re going to come, and I need to catch her if she falls.”

Kagami closed the file and folded her hands into her lap. “Adrien, if this girl is as sick as you claim, she doesn’t need you, she needs to be in a psychiatric hospital.” She said calmly.

“Do you even understand why I’m telling you this?” Adrien asked. “Why it took more than two years for me to tell you in the first place? This is not about Marinette!” He snapped. “This is about how I spent a week in jail because my father framed me of conspiracy, how he destroyed our family, how I had to change my name to escape his legacy!”
Kagami stood. “No, this is about how you keep abandoning me because you think that the past is more important than the present!” She accused. “Everything that happened with Marinette and your father happened a long, long time ago! This—you and me—is what’s happening now, Adrien!”

“What happened to her in the past is still in her present!”

“But it doesn’t have to be in yours!” Kagami argued. She frowned. “Adrien, do you understand how it makes me feel when you run off at the drop of a hat?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “It makes me feel like I’m not important to you, or that I’m always going to come in second.”

“Kagami, it’s not like that!” Adrien argued. “Marinette—she needs me!”

“I need you, too!” She shouted. She hesitated for a moment when she thought about how he’d said it, like he was desperate. How betrayed he’d sounded when he learned she’d turned off his phone. “When we met… you said you were in love with someone else.”

“She’s just a friend, Kagami!”

“A very good friend, your best friend!” She shook her head. “No, No, I’m not comfortable with this. I felt bad enough when I thought that you were just going to work, but to know that you’re actually running to the side of this woman you think you’re in love with—” Kagami ran her fingers through her hair. “Adrien, you do realize you’re in love with the girl that your father raped?!”

Adrien felt his body grow tense. “Marinette and I have been friends for almost sixteen years!” He shouted. “What was I supposed to do when he-he… did those things to her?!” He was upset enough that his hands had started to shake. “Was I supposed to just abandon her because of what he did?!”

“I don’t want to lose you, Adrien,” Kagami said very carefully, “but I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep feeling like you’re leaving me behind because of something that happened fourteen years ago.” She said. “I’m not going to do that.”

“I don’t know what you’re suggesting I do!” Adrien snapped. “I can’t make her well! She’s got PTS, not the flu!”

Kagami was very quiet. “You should stop going to see Marinette.”

The entire house, just moments ago filled with anger and confusion, fell deathly quiet. Adrien was stunned, and it took him a while to put himself together. “What did you say?” He asked.

Kagami folded her arms in front of her. “You’re never going to move on from what happened to you if you keep holding onto things from your past, so you should start by letting go of her.” She said firmly. Adrien couldn’t speak. “Marinette should learn how to deal with her own problems, and you shouldn’t put your life on hold every time something minorly inconvenient happens to her.” She shrugged. “What did that woman say? That her power had gone out? That was worth dragging you out of your own home?”

“That’s right,” Adrien said, leaning back on his heels and closing his eyes. “This is my home.”

Kagami shook her head. “You should be able to relax and not worry about whether or not you’re going to have to get up and solve a nonexistent problem.” She folded her arms across her chest. “You should be able to have a life, with someone who really loves you.”

Adrien took a sharp breath and looked away, unable to meet her eyes. “I’m not going to tell you to get out, Kagami, because I know that it’s snowing and that isn’t fair, much like this choice you think I should make,” he said with a veneer of calm, and when he looked back, she could see the storm
beneath it. “So I’m going to go, and I’m going to give you a couple of days to get your stuff together and to find a place to go, but I want you out of my house before the new year starts.”

19 April, Present Day

“Long story short,” Adrien said after summing up the fight they’d had, “Kagami asked me to do something that I couldn’t do.” He sighed.

Marinette frowned. “It sounds like she wanted you to choose between your past and your future.” She said.

“She wanted me to choose between her and you!” Adrien argued.

Marinette’s frown deepened. “Adrien, it’s not fair that I put you into that position. I never wanted to become so obtrusive in your life…”

He took her hand and kissed her fingers. “Marinette, I learned a long time ago that, if someone asks you to choose between them and someone else, you always choose the person who isn’t asking you to make that choice.” He said firmly. “Someone who respects you won’t force you to make a choice like that.” He seemed sad as he added, “And unfortunately, sometimes that means losing someone you care about.”

She looked away. “You shouldn’t have been in that position because I shouldn’t be asking so much of you!” She said. “Adrien, I’m so sorry.”

“Marinette—” Adrien tried to reassure her, but Marinette stood on a shaking knee. She walked towards her bedroom, her body faltering with every step. “Nette, please wait.” Adrien begged as he stood. Marinette closed the door to her bedroom, effectively cutting off any hope of continuing the conversation.

Chapter End Notes

so. that was my first attempt at writing sex........ i want to follow it with the reassurance that it wasn't supposed to be hot or romantic or anything--the only reason i included it at all was no matter what i did without it, it didn't feel like enough time had passed between kagami turning off adrien's phone and alya showing up. also this chapter isn't meant for you to hate anyone, just to show a different perspective on adrien's dedication to marinette--one that is considerably less romantic to other people involved
20 December, Four Months Ago

Adrien wasn’t used to teleportation, so he was disoriented when he manifested in Marinette’s apartment. He shivered and pulled his arms in. The first thing he did was check the thermostat. His teeth were chattering. “Negative six degrees? It’s colder in here than it is outside!” Adrien said. “Ugh, I wish I’d brought a housecoat!”

Alya frowned. “You’d better wish for more than that!” They walked further into the apartment. Starting in the kitchen, they discovered a trail of blood. Alya had only ever seen pictures of bloody scenes—she’d never visited one. Adrien led her to the couch and made sure she wasn’t woozy before he followed it.

“Marinette?” Adrien asked, using his phone to light his way. The blood trail led from the kitchen into her bedroom, and then to the bathroom. He knocked twice. “Nette, are you in there?” He could hear sobbing and tiny gasps on the other side, but found the door locked. Adrien used his powers to unlock the door. “Marinette, I’m coming in!” He declared.

He opened the door. Marinette was curled up inside of the tub in her underwear, her pajamas tossed to the side despite the freezing cold. She had taken a kitchen knife and stabbed her leg. Her shaking hands were trying to hold the knife steady as she brought it down her ankle, adding another wound after bloody wound.

“Alya, call an ambulance!” Adrien shouted.

20 April, Present Day

When Marinette was upset, she would often curl up around a pillow, facing a wall until she felt better. When she was young—very young—it would only take about half an hour, maybe an hour at most. As an adult, however, Marinette would fall into such a dissociative state that she’d stay in bed for hours. It wasn’t until she sat up and looked at her phone that she realized she’d wasted the entire day and night—it was past midnight.

Marinette grabbed her crutches and went into the living room. She thought that Adrien must have gone to bed, but then she heard the shower running. Marinette looked at the door for a long time.

How guilty she felt! Adrien had started dating to finally feel normal—she could claim the same tactic twice over—and her reliance upon him had ruined it! She felt as though he was putting on a brave face, because he knew how weak she could be. Marinette was convinced that he would snap and
abandon her, and she would deserve it.

Upset, Marinette decided to focus on something that didn’t make her heart hurt. Unable to think of anything, she went for the next best thing: she began to design Rose’s wedding dress.

She frowned as she drew in her notebook. The idea of Rose and Juleka’s wedding was so bittersweet. On the one hand, Marinette loved weddings! She had designed wedding dresses before, namely for Alya and Mylène, for when she had married her long time beau Ivan Bruel. Marinette also had a few ideas for her own wedding dress, though as her thirties grew ever closer, the hope for such a day faded. She’d been so close to a wedding day, and she wondered where she’d be if things had worked out with either Lila or Luka. Unrelated, she thought as she tried not to dwell on what-ifs, Rose was so afraid of Adrien. She worried what she would say when she came for her measurements.

“That looks really good,” Adrien said.

Marinette yelped and fell forward off the couch. She spun around when she hit the ground, looking up at Adrien. He must have walked right past her to stand behind the couch and look over her shoulder, but she hadn’t heard the water stop or the door open.

“Oh, my god, are you okay?” He asked.

She realized in this moment that this was the first time in her adult life that she had seen so much of him. She supposed that she had technically seen him naked—but neither one of them had considered it a sensuous encounter so much as a traumatic one. She noticed that he had a number of tattoos on his arms—Adrien always wore jackets or long sleeves, especially under his scrubs. On his right arm, he’d gotten a sleeve. It depicted a castle on his bicep, with tall spires and bright windows. A forest blocked the view of some of it in the foreground, and she couldn’t decide if the skull in the background was made of clouds or born of a curse. On his forearm, there was a cat with gold eyes, surrounded by occult symbols—probably born out of spite for his superstitious uncle than any actual practice. On his left arm, there were only a couple, one which had pink string lacing up a self-harm scar that might have been fatal had he not gotten treatment, and then a poem written in between the lines created by old and new scars:

«j’ai pleuré dans
mon sommeil
mais je reverrai
le soleil.»

“Marinette,” Adrien said, sending her crashing back into reality, “you didn’t hurt yourself, did you?”

She used the couch to pull herself up. “No! Nope nope nope!” She said cheerfully. “Jenne suisse pas béní et-et-et tu-nas papa a-a t-t-tinquie—”

Adrien shook his head. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. You’re not having a septic flashback, are you?”

Marinette shook her head and tried to calm her nervous heartbeat. “N-n-no f-f-fla…!” Why was she stuttering so bad? Did she have a thing for tattooed guys?! She grinned nervously. “Does a septic flashback get me out of this situation?” She asked quietly.

Adrien frowned. “No, because if I take you to the hospital and you’re not actually having a septic
flashback, I’m going to be royally pissed off.” He said. His face softened. “Seriously, though. Are you okay?” He looked down the hall quickly. “You’re not upset that I used your shower, are you?”

“No! Of course not!” Marinette closed her design book and used her crutches to stand up. “You’re supposed to be living here, so I hope you use it.”

Adrien chuckled. “I meant, without asking.” He clarified. His face fell again. “Nette, about what happened earlier…”

Marinette processed that for a moment before remembering. She felt her heart break in two once again. “Right…”

“No, please, listen.” Adrien said. “My lady, that fight was always coming. If it hadn’t been about you, it would have been about something else!” He said. He seemed genuine. “Marinette, if Kagami hadn’t asked me to choose between you and her, she would have asked me to choose between her and my job, or her and Plagg—it would have been something!”

“But she did ask you to choose between her and me, and the reason is because I call you when I need help with even the smallest things!” She said. Adrien moved to speak, but she shook her head. “Even that time before your fight—I had Alya there, but I wouldn’t let her help me!”

Adrien leaned against the couch. “Marinette, when I got here, you had used a kitchen knife to cut your leg to shreds. It’s a good thing she came to get me, because she doesn’t know the first thing about administering first aid.” He said.

Marinette threw up her hands, losing her balance for a moment. “That’s not what I mean!” She looked away. “Maybe she was right. Maybe I should go to a psychiatric hospital.”

“Nette, no! Those places are terrible!”

“Every time I ask you to help me, I’m taking time away from you that you could be using to have your own life!”

Adrien walked quickly around the couch and sat her down. “I come to help because I care about you!” He said, taking her hand and squeezing it. “You are so important to me, Marinette!”

Marinette felt her face become hot. Adrien was a friend on whom she could rely, one she could tell anything to… but as many times as he claimed her importance to him, it never felt true. “I should get some sleep.” Marinette said quietly. “I have clients coming tomorrow.” She grabbed her crutches and stood.

“Are you sure that’s safe?” He asked.

Marinette smiled. “It’s just Rose and Juleka.”

He followed her with his eyes. It wasn’t until Marinette had closed the door and Plagg had jumped into his lap that he realized he’d had that entire conversation with her in a towel.

Adrien woke up the next morning feeling like he’d been hit by a truck. It took quite a bit of mental fortitude to pull himself out of bed, and that was only because he smelled something in the kitchen.
After dressing, he went into the kitchen to find Marinette sitting in front of the oven.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

Marinette jumped and leaned against the oven door. She placed a hand on her pounding heart. “God Almighty, Adrien. Why are you so hell bent on scaring the living daylights out of me?” She asked. She sighed. “I’m making macarons.”

Adrien smiled. “You’re in high spirits, then?”

She smiled back, but it was weak. “No, not really.” She admitted, and his face fell. “I agreed to this appointment because I thought it would be good to have something to keep my hands busy, but of course, I agreed to this several weeks ago.” She shook her head. “I always make these for my clients.”

“Can you reschedule?” He asked.

“No, it’s too late.” Marinette said. She pointed to the table. “I made those for you, though.”

Adrien looked. There was a plate of caramel macarons on the table. “Oh! My favorite!” He helped Marinette take the fresh macarons out of the oven before they sat down. He started eating the macarons off the serving tray she’d set them up on.

She used her powers to bring the coffee pot over. She mixed in cream and sugar as Adrien poured his own cup. “Yesterday was so hectic, I completely forgot to take my medicine.” She confessed. She spoke again before he could reply. “I’m so sorry! I know that you get upset when I forget…”

Adrien smiled. “It’s okay, Marinette. I forgot, too!” He said. Adrien went into his bedroom and brought back a pill bottle with him. He poured two out as Marinette opened her daily pill case. She took antidepressants, anti anxiety, and an additional SSRI, and she had added her painkillers.

They took their pills at the same time, toasting with their coffee before tossing it back. There was a moment where neither one spoke. Then, they both looked up and said, “So about last night!”

Adrien spoke first. “I’m sorry if anything I said last night made you feel bad. That was never my intention, and I never want you to feel like you’re a burden.” He said. “I come here because I want to be here.”

Marinette’s face had turned bright pink. “I’m sorry, I must have been acting like such a brat!” She said.

“No, don’t apologize.” Adrien said. “Kagami might have been jealous of you, but that’s hardly your fault.” He smiled. “As for being a brat, I don’t think worrying about whether I made the right choice qualifies you as being a brat. Even if it did, you know how I love to spoil you.” He winked at her.

She smiled and looked down at her hands. It took a moment for her to reply. “I’m sorry. I’m sort of nervous!” Adrien tilted his head, and she looked up. “I’ve never lived with a man, other than papa!”

“What about Luka?” Adrien asked.

“Oh, he never actually lived here!” She said. Her face lost some of its color for a moment. “He was going to move in… but then we broke up, and he never did.” Marinette hung her head for a moment. She looked up at him through her bangs. “But even when he did stay overnight, I still have never slept in the same apartment as a man with tattoos!”
He blinked, and then a grin spread across his face. “What?” He asked with a chuckle. “You expect me to believe that famous rockstar Luka Couffaine doesn’t have any tattoos?”

Marinette giggled. “Nope! Not a one!” She said. She picked up her coffee mug. “I know, he tries to give off such a ‘tattoos-in-rude-places’ bad boy vibe, but there isn’t a drop of ink on his skin!”

Adrien laughed. “Oh my god, he does! I can’t believe it!” He smiled warmly. “Like, one of those anime bad boys who rescues kittens.”

“You’re so right!” Marinette laughed, too. For a moment, it was just the two of them, having breakfast together. There was no threat on their lives, no escaped convicts, no Kagami or Lila—just Marinette and Adrien, joking around about a mutual friend. Even if that mutual friend was also Marinette’s ex-boyfriend. Adrien sighed contentedly, enamoured by her lovely, happy face. Marinette looked down into her mug.

Adrien looked down too. He remembered in this moment how bad things were. But he didn’t want to think about it, so he ran his fingers through his hair. “So, am I to assume that you think my tattoos are sexy?” He asked seductively.

Marinette squeaked and covered her mouth. He chuckled at her flustered expression, at the blush peeking out behind her fingers. She looked away without moving her hand. “I-I had never seen them before today!” She confessed. “I only brought them up because I thought that they were well made, and I want to touch them—” her face turned bright red and she shook her head. “But I won’t! Because I know you can be sensitive about your arms!”

Adrien chuckled. He put his arms on the table and rolled up his sleeves. Now that she was closer, she could see the colors, textures and hard work that had gone into them. “It was like my own sort of rebellion when I got them. Nobody knew that I had struggled with mental illness for a long time because Father had the photographers edit the photos—but covering up a tattoo that took up my whole arm wouldn’t look natural.” He shrugged. “Which, I know, is stupid, because he wasn’t around to have doctored photos of me, but still.”

“It’s not stupid, Adrien.” Marinette said gently.

He smiled. He looked from the sleeve to the poem and the thread. “These two are new, though.” He said. “I was looking up ways to cover self-harm scars, and the poem came up.” The poem was written in-between the lines of his self-harm scars. Three of them were red and scabbed over—fresh cuts, she realized sadly. He shrugged and laughed. “I wrote the poem, which is why it’s so bad!”

“Oh, don’t say that! I like your poems!” She said.

“You’d be the only one!” He said. He traced the thread longfully. “This one was inspired by you.” He said. Marinette blushed, but he didn’t notice as he fell quiet. “This scar is more pronounced than the others because, for a while, I would open it up every time I felt even the slightest bit hopeless.”

Marinette frowned. “What changed?”

“I got this tattoo.” He said. He looked up with a smile. “Now, when I see it, instead of feeling hopeless, I think of you, and I don’t feel the need to open it again.”

Her face turned bright pink. “Oh! Adrien!” She said.

He pushed his arms closer. “Go on. Whenever you’re ready, my lady.”

Marinette glanced down at his tattoo before looking back up at him. Adrien smiled, and Marinette
nervously reached out. She ran her fingers over the ink, feeling the grooves in his skin where the needle had been. His skin was soft, too. Soft and warm… when Marinette pulled her hand back, there was a smile on her face.

There was knock at the door. “If that’s Alya, tell her it’s probably better if she just teleports here.” Adrien said. Marinette stood and got the door.

Rose Lavillant jumped onto Marinette the moment the door opened. “Marinette! I heard the news! Are you okay?!” She asked, wrapping her hands around her head.

Marinette smiled. “I’m fine, Rose. It’s good to see you.” She looked over Rose’s shoulder to smile at Juleka Couffaine. “And you, too, Juleka. Come on in, both of you.”

They entered the apartment and removed their shoes. Rose had to sit to remove the tall, high heeled boots that she wore. She was at least a head shorter without them. She wore a light pink shirt, and on her chest there was a graphic of angel wings. Her skirt was cut short and frayed, and her dark denim jacket was too wide for her shoulders. It kept slipping down. When she took Marinette’s hand, she could see the numerous rings on her fingers, including the engagement ring. “Oh, you poor thing! You must be so frightened!” Rose said, her blue eyes big with concern.

“I was, but I’m not now.” Marinette said. “I’m not alone anymore.”

Rose smiled, but it was she’d forced it. “You don’t have to put on a brave face for us!” Marinette smiled as they went into the living room. Rose stopped short when she spotted Adrien sitting at the table. He waved at her with a smile. She covered her face and sighed.

Juleka followed the two of them, but she seemed happier to see Adrien than her fiancée was. Marinette took the macarons out of the oven and put them out for Rose and Juleka. “So we’re just doing a few minor things today. I’m going to take your measurements, and I’m going to go over some designs and fabrics with you.”

Rose looked from Adrien to Marinette. “So, we’ll, um… go straight to the office, then?” She said.

“Rose, it’s bad luck for the brides to see the other’s wedding dress before the wedding!” Marinette said as she grabbed her design book. “I’ll take you one at a time, and we’ll go into my bedroom. Adrien’s sleeping in the spare.”

Juleka smiled at Rose. “You go first.” Rose grabbed a couple of macarons and followed Marinette into the bedroom. She sat down at the table with Adrien. “Long time, no see,” she said warmly.

“It’s good to see you,” Adrien said. “Congratulations on your impending wedding.”

“Thank you,” Juleka smiled. She wore leather pants, a striped black shirt, and a green bolero jacket. “How are you, Adrien?”

He sighed and leaned back. “I’ve been better.” He said, looking out the window. “My father knows where I work, and he knew my phone number until I smashed it.” He shook his head while Juleka snacked on macarons. “He probably knows where I live, which makes me wonder if I locked my door.”

Juleka covered her mouth before speaking. “Has he contacted you at all?”

Adrien nodded. “Twice, if you count the murder victim at the hospital as contact.”

She shook her head. “Why would I do anything less?” She said. Adrien chuckled. Despite her clear
and undying love for Rose, Juleka, and by extension her family, had always been there for Adrien. When it was obvious that they would not let him return to the mansion for his clothing, Luka and Juleka gathered their old clothes for him to wear. He supposed Rose chalked it up their friendship to one of her many eccentricities. “Is that why you came here?”

“Why I came, yes, but not why I stayed. My poor Marinette was so frightened when I told her. She wanted me to stay.”

Juleka looked at him, something sad and tired hiding behind her eyes. “Adrien,” she said quietly, “you called her ‘yours’ again.”

“I—” Adrien paused. He looked sadly at his coffee. “I guess I did.” It was a bad habit he’d picked up when he was about fourteen and he realized that he loved Marinette. In conversations she couldn’t hear, he often called her his—his Marinette, his lady, his princess—and he had tried to stop once he learned that any romantic future with her would be inappropriate. But he couldn’t, not entirely, and when someone called him out on it, it hurt.

Juleka leaned forward. “You know… you’re living with her. This is probably a dream come true for you.” She said. That was true enough, he thought, though circumstances were less than ideal. She looked at the door to Marinette’s bedroom. “Have you considered… making a move?”

Adrien blushed. “Juleka, no!” He shook his head. “You know that I can’t do that! He looked away. “Even if I could… she’s still vulnerable to flashbacks right now.”

Juleka sighed. “Yeah, and I guess Alya would kill you anyway. Or Lila would.” She shrugged. “Still, you’re no fun.”

The door opened, and Rose left, looking pleased. Juleka stood and walked into the bedroom. Rose nervously put a few macarons on a saucer and sat down at the table. They sat in silence, which was even more awkward, Adrien realized, because he had smashed his phone and Marinette’s television was off. There wasn’t even a clock to watch—he’d broken that, too. He was bored, but Adrien had long ago learned to endure silence.

But it bothered Rose. “So…” She said loudly. “Do you have any cool stories from the hospital?”

He smiled at her gently. “Rose, we don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

Rose smiled back, but it was quick. “I know, but Juleka likes you so much!” Rose looked at her fingers. “And now that you’re here with Marinette, I’ll be seeing more of you…”

“I can make myself scarce, if you’re more comfortable that way.” Adrien suggested.

She sighed. “It’s hard to hate you. You’re so understanding!”

He wanted to suggest that she stop hating him, if it was hard, but decided not to. “The unfortunate truth is that people have plenty of reasons to be afraid of me.”

Rose frowned. “Is it hard? Living with the fears of other people?” She asked. She looked up quickly. “Juleka has her powers, so I think she understands the supernatural element, but I don’t think anyone can truly understand… you.”

Adrien lifted his coffee. “Try as my therapist might!” He toasted. Rose shook her head but giggled. There was a moment of silence, and Adrien couldn’t take it anymore. “Rose… you don’t… you don’t actually think that I r-r…” Even trying to say the word in reference to himself was like agony. “…that I hurt Marinette, do you?”
Rose frowned as she thought. “I don’t know, Adrien.” She confessed. “Marinette says you didn’t, but towards the end, she was so out of it that she barely remembers a thing. They said they didn’t recover any of your DNA, but some of the samples were corrupted.” She folded her arms across her chest. “And, Adrien, I hate to say this, but… your powers could have done that to her leg.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve heard all the theories.” Adrien said with a sigh. “I’ve been called a conspirator and a sidekick, that I’ve heard that I hurt her in all kinds of ways.” He finished his coffee and looked at the empty cup. “And I wonder if I would have been spared these rumors if I had gone to school, and I wonder if that wouldn’t have made them worse.”

Rose opened her mouth. Juleka opened the door, and she stood. Rose made an appointment with Marinette for the first fitting in a few weeks, and then they left. Adrien was still mournfully looking at the coffee cup. Marinette approached him, rubbing his back. He startled and put his hand on hers as he looked up. “Are you okay, Adrien?”

He nodded. “Yes, I’m fine.” He said, though his voice was quiet, and his eyes looked for away. She sat down and then leaned her head on her hands. She looked out the open window, equally lost in thought. “Adrien, I’ve been thinking.”

He tried to pull himself back. “What about?”

She sat up. “You’ve known me for a long time. And you know me better than anyone else.” He tried to calm his pounding heart. Marinette frowned, and he figured that he made the right decision. “You know better than anyone that… I still go back there. To that room, no matter how hard I try not to.” She looked at her hands. “I spend too much time thinking about what he did to me, what I had to do…”

Adrien reached forward and took her hand.

Marinette shook her head, pulling her hands back. “Adrien… I might not have left that room whole, but I left it, and when I left it, I promised myself that I would never step foot in it again.” She said. Her eyes grew narrow. “And I always keep my promises.” She took a deep breath and looked up. “Adrien, if Gabriel succeeds, and he captures us… I want you to kill me.”

Adrien shot back so fast that he fell out of the chair. Marinette stood, but he rose quickly to meet her eyes. “Marinette, I’m not going to kill you!” He declared firmly.

“Adrien, you don’t understand. Anything—literally, anything—you could do to me is better than going back there!” She said. She looked down. “I can’t go back!”

Adrien took her shoulders. “I’m not going to let that happen! But I’m not going to kill you to avoid it!”

She sighed. “Obviously, this is worse case scenario we’re talking about here.” She said. Adrien was reminded of what Gabriel has said. That he would destroy her and make him watch. Maybe killing her would be better but—no! He couldn’t even bear the thought! “But, worst case… I don’t want to give him the satisfaction. I won’t survive a second round, and he knows it.” She looked away. “Suicide pact?” She offered with a shrug.

Adrien shook her to get her to look at him. “Marinette, we are going to get through this! We’ve made it through so much together, and we will make it through this!” He smiled. “You are amazing, and a survivor, and I will not let anything bad happen to you!”

She frowned. She closed her eye and steeled her nerves. “I am never, ever going to let Gabriel
Agreste touch me again. I don’t care if I have to go to Alya’s safe house or move to Shanghai—I’m not going back there!”

Adrien hoped that he had talked her down—both those options involved her living. He took her hand and raised her fingers to his lips to kiss them gently. “And I will follow you wherever you go.”

Marinette started to pick up after breakfast. Adrien stood to help. “I’m sorry to have got you cooped up in here with me.” She apologized. “I’m sure there are a million other things you’d rather be doing.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere in the world other than beside your side,” Adrien said.

Marinette blushed, but her frown remained. “Adrien, I know that it must have been awkward with me, and then Rose just now…” she said. “The two of you don’t exactly see things the same way, same as with Alya.”

“Well, that’s hardly your fault.”

“Everyone was so awful to you in collège.” She said, putting her hands on the counter.

Adrien frowned. “They weren’t any kinder to you,” he pointed out.

“But I still had my family supporting me! You didn’t even have that!” Marinette argued. She sighed. “I wonder how you managed to get through it…”

“I had you.”

18 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Nostalgia rarely held up, but Adrien found himself longing for a time when his fame brought joy, not when his infamy brought evil rumors. Everywhere he went, he heard people whispering about him, or about his family. He wondered if they would ever start to die, or if he’d hear them forever.

Going into school was like listening to the peanut gallery. People stared and gossiped, and they were far past the point of caring whether he heard them or not. Adrien heard the newest rumor going around—word that he had raped her and offered to help her escape in exchange for never telling anyone what he’d done had finally been replaced with a rumor that Adrien had been able to help Marinette escape because Gabriel had dragged him into the room to rape him, and they escaped together after. He tried to decide if that was better or worse.

In science class, Madame Mendeleiev split them up into groups for a project, though it felt like they’d just done one. Adrien was sorted randomly into a group with Nathaniel and Rose, until Rose raised her hand.

“Um, Madame?” Rose squeaked. “C-can I switch groups?”

Madame Mendeleiev put her hands on her hips. “There will be no—”

“I don’t feel comfortable working with Adrien.” She confessed. Everyone in class turned to look at her. Adrien spun around with wide eyes. “I would rather work with someone else.”
There was a very long silence. They might have expected it from Alya, but Rose was terminally sweet, and no one had expected that she would say anything. Alix raised her hand. “I’ll switch with her, Madame. She can work with Max and Mylène.”

Madame Mendeleiev pushed up her glasses. “Well, if that’s out of the way…”

After school, Adrien left without speaking to anyone. He knew in his head that Rose shouldn’t have to do anything that made her uncomfortable, but it stung terribly that he made her uncomfortable. He remembered being close to Rose! It hurt badly that she could abandon him when he needed friends most.

Halfway back to the hotel, Adrien stopped. He realized that his friends were abandoning him. Even if they didn’t want to. Nino wasn’t allowed to have him over at his house. Chloé was very much the same with Audrey back in town—she was apparently following the investigation, meaning that word had spread even to the United States.

Adrien tried to shake off the feeling. He went to the hotel. He found it empty, not even a note explaining why. He did his homework and ate dinner, though it was just some cereal. When Uncle Michael, Aunt Amelie and Félix returned, they explained that they had found an apartment, and they’d move in at the beginning of the next month. This was great news, so they’d gone out to celebrate… but they had left Adrien behind. None of them had even thought to tell him.

That night, he couldn’t fall asleep. The day’s event swirled in his mind like miasma. Adrien stood quietly, and he snuck around to where Aunt Amelie kept her medicine, using his phone as a flashlight. She needed pills to help her sleep, and when Adrien found them, he opened them and poured a large number into his palm. He ran himself a glass of water and steeled his nerves as he stared at them—at the plentiful white pills in his hand, and at the tap water that shook and splashed in the cup. He raised his hand to his mouth.

His phone rang. Adrien sighed. He considered letting it just ring, but he poured the pills back into the bottle and answered the call from an unknown number. “Allô?” He whispered.

“Hi, Adrien,” Marinette said weakly from the other end. “I’m sorry to call you so late…”

Adrien looked at Michael and Amelie as they slept. He grabbed his hotel key and snuck out into the hallway. “Don’t be sorry! Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Well, mostly fine.” She sighed. “No, I’m not really fine. I—” She paused for half a moment. “I didn’t wake you up, did I? I’m so sorry, we can talk in the morning…”

“No! No no no! I’m fine to talk now.” Adrien sat down next to the door. “What’s the matter?”

Marinette sighed again. “It’s my parents!” She said. Adrien worried that the strain of her abduction was going to result in a divorce. “Apparently they’re working harder because they want to put in…” Marinette struggled with the word. “One of those things that you sit in and it carries you up the stairs!”

“Oh, yeah. I know what you’re talking about.” He said. “Does that bother you?”

“What bothers me is that they already work so hard.” Marinette said. “I hate to think that I’m burdening them…”

Adrien shook his head. “You aren’t burdening them, Marinette. You’re their daughter.”

“They want to move the furniture around and get a stool for the bathroom and switch bedrooms so I
don’t have to go as far!” She listed.

“They love you. They want to make your life easier.” Adrien reasoned. “Though, maybe the bedroom thing is a stretch…”

Marinette went quiet. “I don’t want them to make my life easier. I want it to go back to the way it was!” She said. “Before… this all happened.”

“She too, Marinette. But that’s just not realistic.” Adrien said.

“…you sound sad. Adrien, is everything okay?”

He thought back to his day at school, and how his own family had forgotten he existed. “It’s just been a trying day.” He tried to play it off. “You know, life just isn’t the same once you find out that the family secret is your father is a serial killer!”

“Have people been treating you badly?”

“No.” Not to his face, usually. “It’s just not the same. I’ll feel better once you’re back.”

“Soon, Adrien. I promise.” Marinette said hopefully. “Will you bring me more work, so I can get caught up?”

“Yes, I will. I spoke to Aunt Amelie, and she says I can go visit you tomorrow.” Adrien said. “I’ve been taking detailed notes, so you can read them and fill in some blanks.”

He could almost hear Marinette smile contentedly. “Oh, Adrien, what would I do without you?”

Adrien smiled. It was such a tiny thing, but it helped. He couldn’t kill himself because he had to bring Marinette her missing work. Later, he couldn’t kill himself because he had to help her around school, and then to make sure she had her prescriptions filled. He found any little thing that she needed as a reason to stay alive—if he couldn’t live for himself, he’d live for her.
Chapter Notes

oh right, there's a plot here

26 May, Fifteen Years Ago

With the exception of begging Félix for a clean dress shirt to wear, Adrien had barely spoken to his family at all. He simply dressed and ran out the door, not even bothering to eat breakfast. He fixed his clothes by looking at his reflection in the doors of the elevator, desperate to make an outfit he’d clearly thrown together last minute look halfway decent. Félix’s dress shirt didn’t fit, and it looked out of place next to Luka’s hand-me-down black sweatshirt. His jeans barely fit, and Adrien realized that, in less than twenty days, he’d lost so much weight that his clothes—his clothes, clothes that Gabriel had tailored specifically to fit him, to make him look taller and stronger than he actually was—no longer fit. Adrien tucked the shirt into his pants to keep them up, but he didn’t like how that looked, so he untucked the back in true French tuck style.

Adrien ran to the bakery as fast as he could. His heart pounded in his head, hoping that he hadn’t imagined the text that he’d gotten from Tom that morning. His brain convinced him that, if he didn’t run, it wouldn’t be true, and he needed it to be true.

Adrien burst into the bakery at top speed. He didn’t see that his shoelaces had become untied, and the first thing he did was face plant onto the tile. He scrambled to his feet and circled around to the staircase. Adrien raced up them. He pounded on the door and tried his best to wait patiently. “Come in, Adrien,” Sabine said.

He opened the door. Sabine was in the kitchen making tea, and Tom, who was kneeling, looked up at him with a smile. Sitting on the edge of the couch was Marinette, who grinned when she saw him. He felt a smile spread across his face, his first truly genuine expression in weeks. He ran forward and hugged her.

“You’re finally home!” Adrien said, pressing their faces together, taking in everything about her. She’d likely slept and showered here—she still smelled of antiseptic, but also of their laundry detergent and shampoo. “I missed you every day you weren’t here!”

“I missed you too!” Marinette wrapped her hands around him. She pushed him away, and he could see the discomfort on her face. “I’ve missed so much school… I’m worried that I’ll be held behind if I can’t get caught up. And with summer fast approaching…”

Tom took her hand. “Marinette, being held back a year is not the end of the world if you need that time to heal.” He said gently as Adrien agreed silently.

“I’ve lost so much! I don’t want to lose my friends too!” She said. She looked at Adrien apologetically. “I’m sorry, I actually came home last night! I thought that you should get some sleep.”

Adrien frowned. “Nette, you know that I wouldn’t have minded you waking me up.”
“I’ve bothered you for every little thing these past few days!” Marinette said, and Adrien opened his mouth to say again that he didn’t mind when she spoke again. “And I need your help today. C…” Her face turned bright pink. “Are you strong enough to pick me up?”

Adrien smiled. “Marinette, you know that I am.” He had carried her out of the mansion, after all.

“There’s no elevator or wheelchair ramps at the collège,” Marinette said, her face still bright pink. “I haven’t had the chance to start any in-depth physical therapy sessions. Even if I had, I still wouldn’t be able to…” She looked down. “I’ll need you to help me around school. To get to class… a-and up and d-down the stairs…”

Tom put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll help her into school today, if you can get the wheelchair.” He said.

Adrien nodded. “Of course.”

Marinette couldn’t meet his eyes. “Um… be-before we go… maman, can you go get a blanket from my room?” Sabine tilted her head. “To cover my legs when I’m sitting in the wheelchair.”

Sabine nodded. She went up into Marinette’s room and returned a few minutes later with a big pink knit blanket. Marinette pulled her backpack on and held the blanket as Tom lifted her up. She carefully tried to hide her legs with the blanket. Tom carried her out of the room, and Adrien followed a few steps behind with the wheelchair.

Tom had Adrien climb the stairs into the school first, so he could hold the door open. Adrien did the same thing for the door to Mademoiselle’s classroom. He noticed that everyone stopped talking to stare at him, their breath bated as they realized what he held in his hands. He pressed his back to the wall so Tom could carry Marinette in.

Excited voices filled the classroom as their eyes fell to Marinette. She waved at them, her face burning bright pink. Mademoiselle Bustier grinned widely. “Welcome back, Marinette!” She said excitedly.

Tom lowered his voice to speak to her. “Mademoiselle, I think it would be better to move Marinette to the front row, so her wheelchair isn’t in the way.” Marinette opened her mouth to protest, but couldn’t think of a solid reason. “I’ve asked Adrien to help her around. Is it okay if he sits next to her?”

Mademoiselle nodded. She looked anxiously at the class, who were waiting patiently for the chance to pounce upon Marinette with well wishes and questions in equal measure. She didn’t want to draw attention, but it seemed to be too late. She approached Nino. “Nino, can you move back to sit with Alya, so Marinette can have the seat next to the door with her wheelchair?”

Nino obliged. He picked up his things and moved back a seat, much to Alya’s chagrin—it was funny to think that in six years, they’d be married. Not that Adrien really cared if she was upset; it wasn’t like either one had spoken to the other since their argument. Adrien held the door until Tom was safely away from it, and then he followed as he kneeled to put her down. He smoothed her hair and smiled. “Call us if you have any trouble, Marinette. We’re just across the street.”

She smiled. “I’ll be fine, papa,” she reassured him. They embraced, the students sitting behind her able to see the worry on Tom’s face as he held her close to him. Adrien leaned the wheelchair against the wall. He sat down next to her, offering an encouraging smile.

Tom pulled Mademoiselle outside the classroom so they could speak privately. The second the door
clicked, everyone in class jumped to their feet and swarmed Marinette. Their voices all came at once.

“Ohmigod, Marinette! Thank goodness you’re okay!” Mylène said, her hands folded over her heart. “You must have been so scared!”

Juleka had raced around so she was standing next to her. “Can I see your scars?” She asked, looking at the blanket covering Marinette’s leg.

Max stood next to her, fascinated. “Have you begun to experience phantom limb syndrome?”

“Do you want me to switch seats with Adrien?” Alya asked, to which Adrien rolled his eyes.

Alix climbed up into a desk so she could see her over the crowd. “We have to celebrate your discharge!”

“How did you escape?” Ivan asked.

Kim flexed his muscles. “Did you hit Gabriel Agreste?”

“Do you need anything from us?” Nathaniel asked.

Chloé leaned forward. “If you need a ride anywhere, just let me know and I’ll take you!”

“There’s this totally sweet music festival starting out soon, maybe getting out of Paris will help your mood a bit?” Nino suggested.

Sabrina cupped her hands. “My father is keeping me updated on the investigation!”

Rose was shaking. “How did you cut off your own foot?”

Adrien stood up. He motioned for everyone to quiet down. “Okay, you guys, this is Marinette’s first day back. Do you mind—”

Alya threw a tablet pen at him. “Shut up, Adrien!”

Juleka pointed at Rose. “That’s a great question. Answer that!”

Nathaniel moved so she could see him better. “Marinette, is it okay if I make a comic of you?”

Rose gasped. “Did he bury your foot in the yard?!”

Adrien flinched. “Everyone—”

“How did you escape?” Ivan asked again, louder.

“Did you escape by fighting?!” Kim added on to Ivan’s question.

Alix scoffed from her vantage point. “Why are you so obsessed with whether or not she hit him?”

Kim grinned. “I want to know if he got what he deserved!”

Sabrina stared at him. “He’s in prison, Kim!”

“But is he missing any teeth?!”

The door opened. Mademoiselle saw the chaos and put her hands on her hips. “Everyone back to your seats right now!” She ordered as the crowd dispersed and reluctantly returned to their assigned
seats. “Now, I know that we all missed and mourned for Marinette, but now she’s back, and we
don’t have to swarm her like bugs when we see her.”

After taking a moment, Mademoiselle began the lessons for the day. Adrien looked at Marinette, and
when he saw her shaking, his slid his hand across the bench and rubbed her palm. She looked at him,
shocked. “You’re okay, Marinette. They were just worried about you. They didn’t mean to crowd
you.”

She smiled. “I know… I’ll be okay, I promise.”

At the end of class, the other students got up to migrate to science. After letting Alya go first, Adrien
stood and prepared Marinette’s wheelchair. He made sure it was locked before helping her stand up
and hopping over to it. “There you go. Easy does it.” He encouraged as she turned bright red, sure
that everyone in class was staring at her. Adrien helped her sit. Once she was settled, he grabbed the
blanket and folded it in a way that covered her leg but didn’t get caught in the wheels. “You survived
your first class back! It wasn’t so bad, now was it?” Adrien grinned. She smiled back. “Let’s go,
then. I’ll get you to Madame Mendeleiev’s classroom.”

She blushed when he moved behind her. “I can push my own wheelchair…” she said.

Adrien feigned insult. “My lady, a princess does not draw her own carriage!” He stated firmly. She
giggled as he pushed her out of the classroom. Mylène watched them go, thinking.

At lunchtime, Adrien helped Marinette to the cafeteria. He had only recently started eating the food
here, but he had never eaten with the other students. Too many nasty rumors had been spread. They
spoke idly as they grabbed food. Their conversation was interrupted when they left the line. “Adrien,
Marinette!” Mylène called out to them, standing and flagging them down. “Come sit with me!”

Adrien looked at her face. Part of him worried that Mylène had only asked that he join them because
he was the one pushing Marinette to and fro, but she looked from her to him, and the smile on her
face never faded. Mylène hadn’t spoken a word to him since he returned to school… but now she
had overcome her fear. She believed him when he did he was innocent! Adrien grinned and escorted
Marinette to the table.

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20 April, Present Day

Sabrina compared the photographs from the registry to the four people Kagami had arrested. She
nodded when she put them down. “Yes, these are four of our convicts.” She said, folding her arms
behind her back. “And in only two days!”

Kagami smiled at her. “Agreste must have abandoned these escapees soon after the breakout.” Her
smile fell. “Most went to see their families, and were turned in by them.”

“It’s sort of sad, isn’t it?” Sabrina said. She pulled out her phone and texted Marinette. They loaded
their prisoners into an armored truck. “I’ll take these scumbags back to the commissariat.” She said to
Kagami as soon as she finished.

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll go ahead to the west roadblocks. I’ll meet you there.”

They went their separate ways, Sabrina in the armored truck and Kagami in their cruiser. Kagami
sped through the streets of Paris, her hands tight on the wheel. She couldn’t focus, though; her mind was swimming with all kinds of thoughts. Who would have thought that she would be chasing Gabriel Agreste, the depraved father of her ex-boyfriend? She was desperate to get Adrien out of her mind, but seeing him again had opened up the wound.

Kagami didn’t cry. That wasn’t who she was. When Adrien had broken up with her, she’d gone to the gym and worked out her anger on a punching bag instead. She imagined a lot of things with every blow, but nothing quite like what she’d seen. Not the gentle protectiveness Adrien had shown to Marinette, who didn’t look anything like she’d thought. To Kagami, she looked sort of plain—there wasn’t anything about her that stood out excluding her missing leg.

When Kagami reached the roadblock, she parked the cruiser and ran her hands through her hair. After taking a moment to collect herself, she got out of the cruiser.

Upon approaching the roadblock, Kagami discovered a chauffeur arguing with an officer next to a fancy car. She stepped in. “Agent Tsurugi.” She identified herself. “What seems to be the problem?”

The chauffeur recognized her, though she did not recognize him. He opened the back door. Kagami looked down into it, and she realized that the car belonged to her mother, Tomoe Tsurugi. “Okāsan!” She exclaimed. She motioned for the officer to back down. She slid into the car and shut the door. “I told you about the roadblock, okāsan. Where are you going?”

“The wind and the river both flow, but the river is bound by its shores whereas the wind cannot be tamed.” Tomoe said cryptically. Kagami sighed, and she chuckled. “That’s old person for, mind your own damn business, little girl.”

Kagami frowned deeply. “I’m hardly a little girl, and it absolutely is my business to know why you’re trying to cross roadblocks set up to keep a thieves and murderers from escaping city limits!”

“Watch your tone.” Tomoe scolded, poking her in the foot with the bokken she used as a cane. “If you must know, I am attending a business meeting, and then I shall be on my way to the airport. I intend to visit your grandfather’s grave.”

“Where is the business meeting?” Kagami asked.

“It is in Rennes, and my flight leaves from Deauville.” She smiled. “I shall be in Kyoto within days.”

“Which is why you’ve been stopped by the officer, okāsan. You’re going to Rennes, where one of Agreste’s accomplices is locked up, and after that you’re flying halfway across the world!” Kagami said. “We have to search the limousine to make sure that you aren’t smuggling anything!”

“Kagami!” Tomoe snapped. “You dare to look your own mother in the eye and call her a smuggler and a liar?!”

“Well, I can’t look you in the eye, okāsan, because you’re blind and wearing blackout glasses,” Kagami said snippily, “and I’m not calling you anything. I’m saying we have to search your car.”

Tomoe pounded the tip of the bokken against the floor of the limousine. “A mother carries her child knowing that pain will come. The pain of childbirth, the pain of growing… and the pain of betrayal.” She hissed.

Kagami sighed. “I’m not betraying you, I’m doing my job.” Tomoe said nothing. She looked away. “I’m sorry, okāsan. I’ll tell the officer to let you pass, but I need you to let me know each time you stop and get moving again.” She reaches to open the door.

She hesitated. “I went to interview Madame Lahiffe, because Agent Raincomprix said that she knew things about Monsieur Agreste.” She explained. “But when we didn’t find her at her penthouse, we went to the other apartment under her name. When we knocked on the door… Adrien was there.”

“What was he doing there?”

Kagami frowned. “It turns out that he and Madame Lahiffe lied on the lease. She doesn’t live there, and neither does he.” She looked at her mother. “You remember what I told you? That Adrien was in love with his father’s final victim?” Tomoe nodded. “She lives there. He moved in with her when the news broke.”

“Men's hearts are as fickle as they are dark.” Tomoe advised.

“Okāsan, he is still so furious with me!” She said. “I just want him back, but he doesn’t even want to speak to me—and now he’s living with some-some…!” She clawed up her hands and groaned in frustration before folding her arms across her chest and sinking into the seat.

“Where is he living?”

“In an apartment building on Rue Fantôme, why?” She asked.

“Because his home now sits empty, and perhaps revenge is a dish best served cold.” Tomoe said.

“Sure, I’ll just break into his home and machine wash all his video games!” She joked bitterly. “That’ll get him to take me back!” She opened the door and got out of the car. “I’ve wasted enough of your time. Safe journey, okāsan.”

“Before I go, Kagami…” Tomoe said. “You do not truly believe that Gabriel-san will attempt to flee the city, do you?”

“We can’t take any chances, and he’s certainly not on foot.”

“What makes you say that?”

Kagami laughed. “Okāsan, he’s a sixty-eight year old man with a limp. He’s not walking anywhere.”

Kagami shut the door and signaled for the officer to let the car pass. Tomoe sat quietly for a long time, until the city lights became but a faint reminder over the horizon. Soon enough, the chauffeur pulled to the side of the road. There was a bit of shuffling, and then the door opened.

“I appreciate the lift, Tsurugi-san.” Gabriel Agreste said as he settled into the car next to her.

“It was my pleasure, Gabriel.” She passed him her phone, and she could hear him typing away on it. “Rue Fantôme.” She reminded him. She smiled. “How wonderful it is to have an inside man, no?”

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21 April

Alya’s phone buzzed when the metro pulled into the station she and her husband Nino Lahiffe
needed to get off at. She pulled her phone out and looked at the news article that had been published. Her face lit up as she showed Nino the pictures. “Look! The police have apprehended some of the escaped convicts.” She said, flipping through the images posted with the article.

Nino gasped. “Any chance it’s our guy?” He wondered aloud. He was only a little taller than her, and his dark brown hair had grown long. He wore it tied back, and his beard was thick but neatly trimmed. He was dressed casually, a graphic tee shirt under a bomber jacket and a pair of slim fit jeans. He adjusted the cap on his head.

Alya sighed. “No such luck.” She looked back at her phone and kept reading. “It looks like a lot of the convicts split off from Agreste right after the escape. I imagined an army of supernaturals blocking the way to him, but there’s probably only like, eight of them.”

“Less now. How are Marinette and Adrien?” Nino asked.

She shrugged. “Fine! Annoyingly fine.” She said. She pouted. “I think she should go to a safe house but she thinks that Chevalier can protect her.”

Nino sighed. He loved Alya, and he loved nearly everything about her, but her vendetta against Adrien was a major point of contention in their relationship. He didn’t like fighting with her, so usually he responded by changing the subject. “Is it true that they’re setting up checkpoints outside the city?”

Alya nodded. “They shut down the Startrain, too. Nobody knows if Agreste is going to try to leave Paris, since his only major targets still live here, but they don’t want any other convicts slipping outside the city, or worse, France.”

Nino frowned as they walked up the steps. He took her hand and wove their fingers together. “That must be causing problems.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe!” Alya said.

It was a short walk from the metro to city hall. They walked in together to find a long line of people in various levels of distress. Alya huffed as she folded her arms across her chest, and after reminding her that the line was shorter than it had been for days, Nino suggested that she get them some coffees while he held their place in line.

When they reached the front of the queue, they had to wait again while the receptionist refilled the printer with paper and ink. Apparently, dossiers on the escaped convicts were a hot ticket item, and people were trying to protect themselves.

Alya graciously accepted the dossiers, and they went to a nearby café to review them. Gabriel’s information they knew, so they put it to the side. “Who else do we got besides a front runner in the ‘worst person alive’ contest?” Nino asked.

She flipped through the dossiers. “Who else…? Vincent Aza was convicted of—ew, sexual assault and harassment!” She recoiled. “He used his powers to paralyze people and then sell pictures of them naked on the Internet!”

Nino shuddered. “Yuck! He and Gabriel must be best buds.”

She looked up. “Yeah, no kidding. One dose of his powers and not even Marinette’s alien blood will be able to keep Gabriel from doing what he does.” She looked back down. “Depending on exposure, the paralysis can last up to two hours.”
Nino made a note of this in his phone. “Looks like Aza is a high priority target. I’ll text Adrien—”

Alya shook her head. “Adrien destroyed his phone,” she reminded him.

His frown deepened. “I’ll text Chloé and she can tell Sabrina to focus on Aza.” He said.

She shifted uncomfortably. “You don’t think it’s a trap, do you? You don’t think Agreste is trying to get us to focus on Aza when he’s using someone else, do you?”

“If his powers were anything else, I’d be like, yeah maybe, but he wants Marinette. Any advantage he can get over her is a total bonus for him.” Nino said. “Plus, Aza is the same kind of perv as him. He might get something out of this other than a get-outta-jail-free card.”

Alya turned her attention back to the dossiers. “Okay, these four names I read in that article, so they’re in custody…” She frowned. “Honestly, doudou, I doubt any of these people are criminal masterminds.” She said. “He probably sprung them because they could help him get out. A few people with super strength to break down the cell doors, a couple of psychics to act as a countermeasure to the noise-cancelling headphones the guards wear, and some offensive-powered people to kill the witnesses. Not a whole lot of accomplice material here. Even Aza comes across as a more of a sidekick.”

Nino reached across the table and took her hands. “Hey, look at me, ma belle Allie.” Alya smiled and looked up. He rubbed her face with the back of his hand before turning it over and tangling it in her hair. “He was caught once. No way he gets away a second time.”

She sighed. “I hope you’re right…”

Adrien had finally gotten his new cell phone, and he was borrowing Marinette’s to copy contacts over. He added Sabrina so he could call her with updates or leads, and then looked up at Marinette. She was working on Rose’s dress. Adrien stood and walked over to her, peeking at the design as he passed. The dress would be white in traditional fashion, with a ballroom gown skirt. Marinette was just beginning to work on the top, however.

Adrien leaned over. “Anything I can do to—” Marinette yelped and fell forward. She recovered quickly, placing a hand in her pounding heart. Adrien held her shoulder. “Anything I can do to help?”

Marinette smiled at him. “No, I’m fine.” She got back to work on the dress. “I shut down my website this morning. Temporarily, of course.”

“Why would you do that?” He asked.

“I’m not sure that sending clothes and accessories out of my apartment while a serial killer is on the hunt for us is really the best idea…” Marinette said with a giggle. Adrien climbed over the couch to sit next to her. “I’ve been trying to follow the news. They’ve set up roadblocks on all the roads leading out of Paris.”

Adrien stretched before folding his arms over his stomach. “Ah, so much for that romantic vacation I had planned for us to take!” He said jokingly.
“Adrien, when was the last time you left the city?” Marinette asked.

“When was the last time you left the city?” He retorted.

She smiled. “Last summer; maman and I went to Perpignan for a long weekend.” She said.

Adrien stared at her smug expression. He’d completely forgotten about it. He closed his eyes and thought for a long time. “I…” Adrien sat up and spoke quickly. “When Lila tricked me into going to Ville-sous-la-Ferté, but—”

“Jesus, Adrien, you haven’t left Paris in twelve years?!” Marinette interrupted him. He flushed. “You never took the Startrain to London, never took a trip down to Nice?” She put down her scissors and leaned back. “Kagami never took you to Kyoto?”

“She wanted to, but I insisted that I stay here.” The truth was he couldn’t bear to be apart from her, but it seemed that any insistence to this only upset her, so he quickly thought of a lie. “I used to travel so much when I was modeling for my father. I don’t really mind staying in one place nowadays.”

“Still, a change of scenery never hurt anyone!” She said. She looked out the window briefly before looking back at him. “Maybe we could go somewhere together after everything is through!” She suggested happily. “Maybe somewhere in Greece—you know, one of those beeches with the black sand!”

“That’s a great idea!” He said. He winked at her. “You know, I look great in a swimsuit!”

Marinette blushed. He smiled at her flustered expression. However, before the conversation could continue, her phone buzzed. Marinette used her telekinesis to bring it closer. “It’s from Nino. Apparently, Gabriel helped someone who can paralyze people escape, and his powers work on supernaturals.”

“Yikes. No wonder my father sprung him.” Adrien said. “Did he send a picture?” Marinette nodded. She pulled up a picture of a man with blond hair whose pink tips had faded since imprisonment. They both stared at it for a moment, unblinking. Adrien pointed to him and took a moment. “…this guy?”

There was a loud sound downstairs, followed by another just the same. They both jumped, and Adrien stood. For a moment, there was nothing.

He looked up at her. “What was that sound?”

Marinette shivered as she tried to speak. “Gunfire,” she identified.
Chapter Notes

hey what if… the boy who can destroy everything he touches… is not the one you should be scared of

See the end of the chapter for more notes

12 August, Fourteen Years Ago

It was just after midnight when Adrien returned home. He fumbled for his keys, ones he had asked Félix to copy so he could get into the apartment when no one else was home, instead of sitting outside the door. The apartment was dark, and Adrien took his shoes off so he could tiptoe through the halls without making too much noise.

He had barely passed through the kitchen when he heard the toilet flush. He closed his eyes and hoped that it was Félix, who would simply look at him before going back to bed. But, when the door opened, it was Amelie.

Adrien wondered why he had expected different.

“Where have you been?” Amelie asked. Her voice was calm and almost cheerful, but it couldn’t hide how she reached forward to grab the door to Adrien and Félix’s shared bedroom.

Adrien felt his body become stiff. “I’m sorry I’m home so late, Aunt Amelie, but Marinette was having a flashback… it took a while to calm her down.”

Amelie held up her hand. “Enough.” She said. “You shouldn’t have stayed out so late.” She sighed. “Go to bed. I’ll talk to Michael and we will decide your punishment tomorrow morning.”

Adrien watched his aunt as he processed that. “But, Aunt Amelie, I didn’t stay out so late on purpose!” He argued. “She was calling out for me! She needed me!” Amelie paused in the threshold. “I’m sorry that I didn’t call you, but this was important!”

“Don’t talk back to me!” Amelie hissed.

“I’m not talking back! I’m just trying to explain!” Adrien said.

There wasn’t time to explain further, because Amelie spun around and struck Adrien hard enough that he bit his cheek and hit the ground. Adrien yelped when he fell, and he was too disoriented to struggle when Amelie grabbed his arm and pulled him down the hall. He only struggled slightly when they reached the closet in the living room, and even then it wasn’t enough to prevent him from being thrown inside. Amelie held the door shut as she moved an armchair to keep it shut.

Adrien sighed as he realized what had happened. “Aunt Amelie, I think you’re overreacting.” He tried to stay calm. He grabbed the doorknob and tried to push the door open, but it wouldn’t move. Adrien tried it again, jiggling the knob and pushing against it. “Aunt Amelie, the door is stuck!”

“You can come out when I say you can.” Amelie said, and Adrien could hear her walk away.
He felt his world start to shrink. Pressure closed around his windpipe, like a rope was choking him out. “Aunt Amelie!” Adrien shouted as he pounded on the door. There was no sound from the other side. “Please don’t leave me in here! Aunt Amelie, I’m very claustrophobic!”

But there was still nothing. Adrien hyperventilated as he felt the oxygen start to run out. He pounded against the door like his heart pounded against his chest. The winter coats hanging up were too close, the walls were too close, the door was too heavy—when he tried to use his powers, he ended up just snapping his fingers and slapping the door with no effect. His mind was too panicked to actually focus them.

“Aunt Amelie! Please let me out! I haven’t done anything wrong!” Adrien pleaded. “Aunt Amelie! Uncle Michael?! Félix!” He begged. Adrien was crying, his nails clawing at the door. “Anyone! Please, let me out!”

But nobody came. Not until early the next morning, until after he had run out of tears to cry, until after he had thrown up his dinner and his voice was hoarse from shouting. When the door opened slightly, Adrien pushed it open and stumbled out, breathing heavy and unable to stand. “Now, did you learn your lesson about staying out past your curfew?” Amelie asked as Félix watched.

Adrien glared at him. Why hadn’t he done anything?! It would take many years for him to learn that it was likely fear—fear that Amelie would turn the rage she showed Adrien against him if he didn’t stay quiet. Eventually he would learn to participate. But right now, Adrien was furious, because he and Uncle Michael had heard him calling for them, and they had done nothing! He turned his attention to Amelie, readying himself to retort before his anxiety got the better of him, and he puked bile all over the floor.

“Jesus Christ, Adrien.” Félix muttered as he looked away.

“Get up off the ground and clean this up!” Amelie shouted.

Adrien covered his face and looked up. “You are a terrible person.” He hissed. He leaned forward on his hands and knees to scream at him. “I hope you lose someone important to you, so you can know exactly how I feel right now!”

Three days later, Michael died in a car accident.

21 April, Present Day

Adrien spun around and looked at her with wide eyes. “A gunshot?! Are you sure?!” He asked.

Marinette nodded. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Adrien sighed. “Jesus, Marinette. I swear to God, I’m moving you out of this apartment building!” And this time he’d put his name on the lease so Kagami didn’t accidentally come sniffing around.

Marinette grabbed her crutches and stood. “I think the more pressing issue is getting out of this apartment building.” She said. “What do you think the odds are that those gunshots aren’t for us?” They both flinched as another one sounded, closer.

“Not good,” Adrien confessed. He frowned and looked out the door. “What are we going to do?”
“Have you unpacked?” Marinette asked. He shook his head. He hadn’t, technically, unpacked because she didn’t have any dressers or clothes hangers in the spare bedroom she’d used as an office. “Normally I would be upset, but this time it’s good. Get your stuff together, because we’re leaving.”

Adrien obliged. He gathered all of his things and put his suitcase next to the door. He chased Plagg around, trying to corner the frightened black cat, still panicked from gunshots. “Here, kitty kitty kitty!” Adrien cooed. “Come here! I’ll protect you!” He said. Plagg hissed half a moment before another gunshot, and then he ran into Adrien’s arms.

Adrien hid Plagg inside his shirt. Marinette needed a bit of extra time to collect her things, since she had her leg and her cane to think of, but she joined them soon after. She tossed her things next to his. “Go check the elevator! I know it’s busted but I heard someone working on it this morning! I’ll try to think of an escape route.” Marinette ordered. She limped out to the terrace while Adrien ran out into the hall.

He flinched when a gunshot fired, but he endured it to check the elevator. The button lit up, but he couldn’t hear anything inside. He ran back into the apartment. “It’s still broken,” he reported, leaning outside by hanging off the threshold.

Marinette frowned. “So much for sneaking right past them,” she muttered. She frowned and looked at him, her eyes red and her freckles glowing. She held out her hand, levitating Adrien unexpectedly for half a moment. His knees buckled when she let him go. “I have a plan. We need to get to the roof.”

Adrien nodded. “Got it.” He said. They sped to the door, Adrien helping Marinette to put her backpack on. He looked at her things and took a mental inventory. “Do you have your prescriptions?” He asked, and she nodded. “Okay. Where’s your wheelchair?”

Marinette frowned. She tightened her grip on her crutches and shifted uncomfortably. “Don’t make me take my wheelchair, Adrien—”

He sighed. “Marinette!” He scolded.

“It’s heavy and I have no use for it!” She argued.

There was a gunshot. “There’s no time!” Adrien said. “Your leg and back pain are going to get so bad these next few days that you’re hardly going to be able to stand!” He pointed to her room. “I’ll carry it, but you need it!”

She sighed and did as he requested. Adrien stood next to the door, cautiously undoing the locks as he looked through the peephole. He could see no one—likely many of the people in these apartments were not home, as it was the middle of the day. He opened the door and looked out, flinching when the door to the stairs was kicked open.

He heard Marinette’s door open. He held his hand out. “Marinette, stay behind me!” He ordered as he pulled Plagg from his shirt, and he made himself as large as he could. Adrien felt sweat gather on his brow, waiting for the threat to emerge.

At the end of the hall, the man Nino has warned them about, Vincent Aza, walked into view. Adrien shuddered, and he looked for something heavy to use as a weapon. He froze when Aza pulled out the gun, and Adrien briefly wondered what the chances were that he could reach him without getting shot. He realized pretty quickly that it was unlikely that Aza would kill him—he had a powerful, ranged weapon and Adrien was presently an open target. He would have already killed him if he wanted to. Adrien moved to run forward when a second man appeared. Adrien didn’t have a lot of
time to react before he was struck by a powerful blast of air.

He was launched back, sliding across the floor. “Adrien!” Marinette exclaimed, falling to her knee next to him. He put a hand on his head and tried to organize his thoughts. She looked up when she heard someone rushing towards them. Aza had made it through the threshold, his hand extended. Marinette squeaked as her eyes turned red and her freckles glowed. She held out her own hand, knocking Aza several meters back and constructing a shield with her psychic powers to prevent either of their attackers from breaking through again.

Adrien sat up and shook his head. Marinette looked at him with big eyes still red, fear written on her face. She placed a hand on his face, and he unconsciously covered it with his own. He was lost in the moment until he heard muffled shouting from the hallway. They both looked at Aza and his companion as they pounded on the psychic wall. “Sometimes I think that your powers are just run of the mill psychic powers, but other times you do stuff like that,” Adrien said.

Marinette grabbed her crutches and stood. “Grab your stuff. Let’s get out of here.” Adrien put Plagg in Marinette’s backpack, then grabbed his suitcase and her wheelchair. When they gathered at the threshold, Marinette focused her powers. “Okay. I’m going to push them up against the wall. You use your powers to open up the elevator doors.”

Adrien nodded. Marinette swung the psychic shield out and pinned Aza and his companion to the wall. Adrien squeezed past and ran to the elevator door, using his powers to force the doors to open. Marinette focused her powers and threw the two men down the hall and into the now open elevator shaft.

“Let’s go! To the roof!” Marinette ordered. Adrien grabbed his things and they raced to the staircase. It took a bit of extra effort but they were closer to the roof than the ground floor. When they reached the roof, Marinette tied back her long hair and shook out her shoulders. “Okay. Okay, I’ve got this.” She said, psyching herself up. “I’m going to use my powers to carry us across to the building on the other side of the street!”

“Marinette, that’s going to exhaust you,” Adrien reasoned.

“I would rather be exhausted than abducted!” She said, to which he conceded the point. “I’m not going to have enough strength to carry us individually, so we have to go together. Hang on to—”

Marinette grabbed his arm. She spun around, and Adrien turned with her. Her psychic field had picked up when Aza had gotten too close. He seemed surprised when they spotted him, but he adapted quickly. “End of the line, children!” He taunted.

Adrien scoffed. “We’re almost thirty!” He argued, indignant.

He shrugged. “I’m sure you’re wondering how I found you,” he said.

“Right now, or in general?” Marinette asked. “Because, right now, it’s pretty obvious you got the airbender to shoot you up the elevator shaft and then you followed us up the stairs. I’m not very fast,” she said.

Adrien smirked. “And you guys aren’t that smart.” He said. He stepped in front of her, lowering himself into a combat-ready position.

Adrien struck first, keeping his punches tight. Their exchange was quick, just a few hits until one or the other could hit hard enough to take the other down. Aza tried to fake him out before pulling the gun out, but Marinette used her powers to knock it from his hand. Adrien faked a punch to Aza’s
face, and when he went to block it, Adrien punched him in the gut. He buckled over, and Adrien tried to knock his legs out from under him.

Aza’s eyes glowed in purple and teal light. This glow focused quickly into a beam of light, which struck Adrien on his spine as he lowered himself for the kick. Adrien yelped, and when he hit the ground, he couldn’t move. “Adrien!” Marinette exclaimed. She lunged and grabbed him, using her powers to jump almost to the other side of the roof. She panicked as she examined him, at the slight electrical shock that seemed to pulse through him every time he tried to move. “Adrien, please! Come on, you have to move!”

Aza laughed cruelly. “Looks like Gabriel was right! His son is no real threat!” He walked ever closer, grabbing the gun on his way. “Too afraid of your own genes to fight dirty in a struggle for your life?”

Marinette moved between Adrien and Aza. “Stay away from us!” She ordered.

“I’m obviously not going to do that,” Aza said, sort of shrugging. “I’m the one with the upper hand here! And I’m the one with the gun!” He taunted her with it. Aza laughed as he walked closer. Adrien fought the paralysis as desperately as he could, but he wasn’t able to move. “Now, be a good girl. Give me your hand and this will all be over soon…”

Aza was too close for comfort. Marinette unsuccessfully tried to revive Adrien, but he was still paralyzed. “We are not going with you.” Marinette hissed. “This is your last warning! Back away, now!”

Aza waved his hands. “Oh, but how can I disobey when you say that in such a commanding tone?” He laughed. “I’m going to take your picture, baby girl, and when you die, I hope you know that a million strangers are going to see your pussy on—”

Aza was right in front of her with his hand extended. Marinette started to glow, and she focused her powers onto her fist. She punched up with enough Newtonian force to not only break his arm, but to shatter it—the bone tore clean through the skin and the muscle. His blood shot from his arm like a fountain, splattering on Marinette’s furious face. She pushed him back as he screamed. “Shit!” Aza screamed, the only understandable word in his panicked screeches. Marinette grabbed one of the crutches to limp forward. “What the fuck!”

“It goes to show how much Gabriel really values you, Monsieur Aza.” Marinette hissed. “He didn’t even tell you that you’re up against an alien!” She started to shout. “It’s not real telekinesis! It’s gravitational manipulation!”

Aza crawled away from her as she dropped the crutch so they were on eye level. When he tried to use his power again, she created a barrier that bounced it back and hit his leg. Now he couldn’t move, and he started to panic. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I don’t even know why he wants you!”

“You’re lying!” Marinette hissed. She grabbed his ankle and pulled him closer to her. She summoned the force again, focusing it on her open palm. She scowled as she pressed down on his face, pure force alone bring enough to rip through his skin. Marinette kept pushing down on his face until her powers shattered his jaw, knocking out about ten of his teeth.

When Marinette saw the blood, she felt the world around her shift. She felt cold, not just around her but in her blood. It was running down her back and some aura was suffocating her like a plastic bag that was a thousand kilograms on her back. Her vision grew dark, dark, dark… until she snapped out of it and banished her powers, probably just half a moment before the force became so
overwhelming that Vincent Aza would have died.

She was breathing heavy. She looked into Vincent’s frightened blue eyes, at his jaw that now sat the wrong way, and she couldn’t move. She balled up her fist. “You’re so goddamn lucky that I went somewhere bad just now,” Marinette hissed. “If I hadn’t, you’d be dead.” She dragged him over to a pipe and used her hair ribbon to tie his hands to it. She looked him dead in the eyes. “If you’re smart, you’ll tell the police everything you know about Gabriel Agreste, because if you don’t, they’ll send you back to prison with him, and he’ll make you wish I had splattered your brains on the cement.”

Vincent nodded, but he couldn’t talk. Feeling a bit guilty, she ripped the sleeves off her sweater and used one to bind his arm and the other to tie up his jaw.

She crawled back to Adrien, cradling him. “Are you okay? I—” Marinette shook her head. “You can’t answer that…” She struggled to open up the wheelchair, but once she had it, it was easy to lock it into place. She used her powers to lift Adrien up into the wheelchair. She paused after this, as if she needed to catch her thoughts as well as her breath. “You were right. It was smart to bring the wheelchair.”

She apologized profusely as she piled things on top of him. Marinette dug through these things until she found her leg, attaching it quickly. She agonized between Aza and Adrien before walking to the edge of the roof and mustering her courage.

She offered him a grin. “Going down?” She said, before using her powers to lift them over the edge and bring them down gracefully.

She leaned her body against the wheelchair as she pushed him forward, hoping that the other attacker had either remained inside or wasn’t paying attention. She walked forward until she found an alleyway, and she ducked inside it and hid behind the other side of a dumpster.

Marinette took some of the things off of Adrien and then backed away. She curled up into a ball and shook anxiously. She ran her fingers through her dark hair, her mind racing through what had happened. “Oh my god!” She said, her breath uneven. “I almost killed him!” She tore at her neck with her nails. “Adrien, I know he was a pervert, but still, I almost killed him!”

And he had done almost nothing to prevent him from putting her in that position. He felt horrible!

She looked at her hands. “My mother explained to me after I made it home how it was that my powers became so powerful, and then so weak.” She said. “I’ve always had them, unlike most supernaturals, whose powers manifest at puberty… but when I cut off my foot, and Gabriel cut me up, and then I was fighting off so many infections… my body kicked into overdrive to keep me alive. And that included my powers.” She pulled her hands into her chest so she didn’t have to look at them. “Every year they get stronger, Adrien. But I never… I never thought that I could do something like that!”

It had been sort of impressive, even if Marinette was shaken for it. Adrien felt the paralysis start to wear off.

“I’m sorry! He hurt you because you were protecting me, and I put us in even more danger by trying to kill him!” She started to cry, tears mixing with blood. “Adrien, I’m such a terrible person! How could I hurt another living being?!”

Adrien pushed himself forward. He fell out of the wheelchair, scuffing his knees on the pavement. His body was still stiff, but he could move, and that was the important thing. He fought against the atrophy to hold Marinette’s face, pressing her hair to her neck and wiping her tears away.
Marinette sobbed harder. “Adrien, I don’t deserve to have you in my life!” She lamented.

Adrien looked deep into her beautiful blue eyes. “Marinette,” he said, “you are *so, so brave*, and you *saved us!*”

She shook her head. “I have hurt you, over and over, for years!” She cried. “You have never, not *once*, complained! You’re too good for me!” She looked down. “I don’t deserve your friendship!”

He pushed her head up gently. He carefully considered his next words. “Marinette,” Adrien whispered her name like one might have invoked a goddess’s, “I need you to kiss me, because I will never be brave enough to do it myself.”

Marinette stopped crying. There was a moment where neither she nor Adrien moved. It was just her, her hair and makeup a mess, her prosthetic leg disconnected from her stump, and her face splattered with blood, and him, staring at her like she was something more precious than she was. Marinette hesitated, placed her hands on his cheeks, and then pulled him into a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was so short i had to copy-paste a flashback from a future chapter just to make it worth my time lol
After taking the long way around, Adrien and Marinette stopped in front of his townhouse. It was tall and thin, cream-colored with black iron fencing around the gate and the windows. He dug through his things to look for his keys, and upon locating them, he unlocked the car sitting on the road next to the house. “Stay here. I want to check to make sure it’s safe.” He said.

Marinette held his arm. “I want to go with you!” She said desperately.

“I’ll only be a couple of minutes!” He said, offering her a gentle smile. He closed the car door and walked up to the gate, pushing it open. He unlocked his front door, poking his head inside before opening it further. Right at the entryway, there were two sets of stairs, one leading into the basement and the other upstairs to the main level. Adrien pushed the door closed with his foot, checking the basement first. He’d set up a game room here, having salvaged some things when he was finally allowed back into the mansion at eighteen. There was also a bar at the far end, as he’d once had the idea to entertain parties. It was rarely used, though—there was dust on all of the bottles.

Upstairs was the main floor. The very beginning of it was like a loft, as he was able to look into the living room from the landing. A couch was pressed up against the iron gate that acted as a half-wall. Adrien walked up the stairs hesitantly, grabbing an umbrella as a makeshift weapon. He checked the kitchen, finding all of the knives still in place, and then the office, where his files were still neat and orderly. His bedroom seemed untouched, as was the bathroom, the hall closet, and all of the rooms on the seldom-used third floor.

With everything in order, Adrien walked out of his house and to the car. “We’re okay.” He said as he opened the door for her. He grabbed as much as he could hold and they went into the house. “I’m not sure if anyone was actually here, but if they were, they didn’t take anything.”

Marinette opened her backpack so Plagg could jump out. She looked around, noting that Adrien didn’t have any photographs and only a few paintings on the walls. The curtains hung close to the floor, thick to keep light out. Adrien had a television in this room, and it looked like he’d moved the gaming console back from the basement. His minimalist design style might have come from how he was raised… but to her, it came across as very lonely.

“Still,” Adrien said, pulling her back down to earth, “I don’t think we should stay here for more than a few days.” She looked at him in confusion. “My father definitely knows where I live. He might not expect us to come here, but he won’t take him long to figure it out.”

“Where should we go from here?” Marinette asked. When Adrien said nothing, she looked away. “We can’t go far with the roadblocks up. Maybe Alya will let us go to the safe house she was talking about?”

Adrien smiled weakly. “Marinette, Alya probably won’t let me go there.” He said.
She shrugged. “She will if I say that I won’t go without you!” She grinned, and he smiled again, more confidently. “Another option is asking Chloé to set up a space for us at le Grand Paris. I’m sure she knows how to keep things anonymous.”

Adrien nodded. “Subtly may not be Chloé’s strong point, but she’ll help us.” He said.

“Especially if the request comes from you.” Marinette had been standing for too long. She collapsed onto Adrien’s couch, and then smiled. “It’s been so long since I was last here.” She said. “Gosh, it’s weird! I remember helping you decorate this place! Though, granted, I wasn’t much help!”

“Well, that wasn’t really your fault,” Adrien said as he sat down next to her. Plagg jumped into his lap, happy to be home. Adrien placed his hand on his neck and listened to him purr. He leaned his head back with a wistful smile. “You know, I remember thinking, ‘this place is too big, I don’t need all this space,’ but I bought it anyway…”

“Does it suit you better now?” Marinette asked.

He laughed. “No!” He confessed. “Today was the first time in months that I went up to the third floor.” He sort of shrugged. “I almost forgot that I had one!”

Marinette forced a smile, and then looked away. She pushed her hair behind her ear and looked up. “It hasn’t changed much since the last time I was here…” Marinette looked at her fingers. “Though it’s hardly a pleasant memory.”

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16 June, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien was still responsible for escorting Marinette to her various classes, but in an effort to let him catch up on sleep they were sure he was missing, on Wednesdays and Thursdays, Sabine would help Tom get her to school instead. As such, Adrien had overslept, and he was running late.

He still made it to class before it started, but he found something strange when he arrived. Instead of his seat being empty, a young woman sat in it. She had long, thick brown hair, and she was staring at Marinette with starstruck eyes. Marinette had never been big on personal space, but it was clear enough that this girl was violating hers—their hips almost pressed together.

“Your clothes are so cute,” the girl said. It rubbed him the wrong way, like she meant that they’d look cuter off her than on. Adrien told himself that his hypersensitivity was born out of concern, not jealousy. After all, Marinette had been the victim of prolonged torture—she didn’t need some stranger telling her that she’d bend her over a barrel! “Where do you get them? Maybe I should shop there, and we’d be matching!”

Marinette chuckled nervously. “Actually, Lila, I make most of my own clothes.” She said.

The girl, Lila—her face lit up. “That’s so amazing!” She cooed. She leaned closer, placing her fingers over Marinette’s hands in a way that, to Adrien, looked like a cage. “You know, I have connections in the fashion industry—I was discovered by a mogul in Washington, D.C. when I was at a party hosted by President Camilla Hombee—and I could probably get you a summer internship!”

Marinette chuckled nervously. “Actually, Lila, I make most of my own clothes.” She said.

Something about the suggestion made Marinette’s skin crawl. Adrien could see it, even at a distance. Nevertheless, Marinette offered a kind smile. “Thank you, but physical therapy is going to take up
most of my summer.”

“But not all!” Lila pointed out. She placed her hand on her chest. “We should hang out over the summer!”

Marinette hesitated. “My birthday is this weekend, if you want to come to the party…?”

Lila clasped her hands together. “That sounds wonderful!”

Mademoiselle Bustier looked up at him. “Adrien, quit lingering in the doorway and take your seat!” She said. “It’s time to start class!”

“I would, Mademoiselle, but Lila is in my seat.” He protested quietly.

He’d been quiet, but Lila has heard him anyway. “I didn’t realize that the seats were assigned!” She said innocently.

He smiled at her awkwardly. “Oh, they aren’t.” He looked at Mademoiselle. “I would just sit somewhere else, but Monsieur Dupain asked that I sit next to Marinette in case something happens.”

Mademoiselle frowned. “Yes, he asked that I keep the two of you together…”

Lila spoke again. “I would hate to cause problems, but I have to sit in the front row!” She said. She cupped her right ear with a pitiful expression. “I have tinnitus, a loud ringing in my ear!” She moved her hands to her heart. “If I sit too far back, I won’t be able to hear a thing!”

Adrien’s face flushed. He tried to wave it off. “I don’t think you should sit in the back!” He said quickly. “I just have to sit next to Marinette!”

Mademoiselle motioned to the other side. “Lila, perhaps you could take Chloé’s—”

“Nooooope!” Chloé announced loudly.

She sighed. “Perhaps you might take Sabrina’s place.”

Marinette sank into her seat. “I really don’t want to cause problems. Maybe Adrien and I could move to the back of class, and Lila can sit here?”

“You’re in a wheelchair, Marinette,” Adrien reminded her. “Your father will be upset if he comes in tomorrow and finds you sitting in the back row with your wheelchair.”

Chloé groaned. She stood reluctantly. “Adrihoney, why don’t you and Marinette sit here? Sabrina and I will move.”

Marinette was stunned. “Why would you move for me?”

Chloé flipped her hair back elegantly. “Please, Marinette. Even I can recognize the easiest solution.” She motioned to her seat as Sabrina packed their things up. “Here, the two of you are together, and Lila can still be in the front row.” She paused as Sabrina moved their things back. As though she had a reputation to maintain, she added, “Just don’t get used to this!”

Adrien moved Marinette’s wheelchair to the other side of class. He caught Lila staring at him, something vicious in her eyes. But he ignored it in favor of helping Marinette up. “I’ll help you across today, and tomorrow you can have Monsieur Dupain put you on whichever side you prefer, okay?” Adrien said.
She sighed. “I would prefer my old seat, since I’ve sat in that exact spot every year since I started school,” she muttered bitterly as she settled into Chloé’s former seat, “but that’s not going to happen until this school gets some goddamn ramps!”

Alix leaned forward and offered her hand. Marinette offered her what appeared to be a secret handshake, albeit weakly. “Hear hear!” Alix said.

Marinette frowned. “I was clearly talking about wheelchair ramps,” she said.

“Ramps are ramps, Marinette.” Alix said.

She smiled, and Adrien smiled back, glad to see her happy. It felt like things might have been approaching a new normal. He might not have been friends with Alya or Rose anymore, but he was closer to Juleka and Luka, and Marinette seemed to be adjusting to life without her leg. He turned to get some of her things from her wheelchair bag. When he turned around, he spotted Lila, glaring at him once again. He tried to ignore it.

5 July, Thirteen Years Ago

The school year ended in two days, but that didn’t stop Chloé from inviting the entire class to le Grand Paris for a summer party. It wasn’t supposed to be a romantic thing, but he had heard some of the other students pair up. He opened his locker at the end of the school day, trying to psych himself up. It had been a year. He and Marinette, for better or for worse, were closer than ever. If he ever wanted to confess his love for her, it seemed only right that he do it by asking her to be his date for the party.

Adrien caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror that Sabine had bought for his locker. He’d gotten taller, and he looked older. He’d tried to put some weight back on, but the best he was able to do most days was to maintain how much he weighed now. He bent at his knees a bit, checking on the bruise that was forming under his bangs. It wasn’t coming in nearly as fast as the one of his collarbone, but it hurt more. Adrien frowned.

He wasn’t even able to stand up to his family; what made him think he was ever going to be able to confess to Marinette? It wasn’t like they could date anyway—he could already imagine a thousand cold hearted rumors swirling around them, calling him a rapist and abuser, and her things even worse. Besides, Marinette would never want to date the son of her rapist! It would have been weird. He started to collect his things for the wall home when he heard voices on the other side.

“Hi, Marinette!” Lila said, and he could hear it when she leaned against the lockers. From their very first encounter, Lila had attached herself to Marinette, very obviously flirting with her. More than once, when they’d been hanging out with their friends—which was already awkward—Lila would arrive unannounced and make herself at home by sitting on Marinette’s lap—in her wheelchair. She used to complain that it hurt. Thankfully, Marinette had recently begun to use crutches almost exclusively.

“Hi, Lila. What’s up?” Marinette had warmed to her. Adrien had not. It wasn’t like he hated Lila —

“I’ve wanted to ask you ever since I heard. Would you like to go to Chloé’s party with me? As my date?” Lila asked.
But he hated Lila.

Marinette laughed awkwardly. “I think there will be dancing at this party, and I don’t think I’ve danced since before I lost my leg…” She said. There was a pause. “Are you sure you want to take me as your date?” She asked cautiously.

Lila laughed. “Of course I do?” He could almost hear her smile from the other side of the lockers. “I’ve wanted to ask you out on a date just about since the day I met you. Now just seemed like a good time!”

Say no. Say no. Adrien begged her in his mind to say no. “Um… okay! It does sound like fun!”

Fuck! Adrien slammed his locker door shut, his powers going haywire and rusting the edge of the door. He scowled at it, now angry with himself. How was he supposed to explain that? He started to leave. Marinette and Lila looked at him, having heard the door slam. “Are you okay, Agreste?” Lila asked.

She never used his first name. Not after she learned what his father had done to Marinette. It was a tactic she’d use to remind both of them of a fact they could never forget—Adrien was the son of the worst person Marinette had ever encountered. He took a deep breath, looked her in the eyes, and told a lie. “I’m fine.”

Later, Adrien found himself at the party. He was sitting alone, too uncomfortable to step out onto the dance floor. He had a glass of punch, staring into it as he wished that he had something alcoholic to put into it. He tried to shake off his melancholy, but each time he said he’d get out there, he felt himself sink further into his chair.

He remembered being bolder. He remembered being liked! Now people took a wide berth when walking his direction. He glanced out to the crowd on the dance floor. He could see Marinette and Lila dancing. Marinette had to press her body to Lila’s so she didn’t fall over, but she was having so much fun. She was smiling the most she had in months.

It was wonderful to see her so happy, but Adrien couldn’t be anything other than miserable. It felt like Lila had swooped down upon them. Things were good—they felt good!—but then she arrived, and things got worse. He was in the unfortunate position of being miserably enamoured with Marinette, but she was in someone else’s arms instead of his. He watched Marinette dance with Lila, and he wished more than anything that, just once, she would lean against him and smile like that at him as they danced.

Adrien watched the waiter running the bar walk away, leaving it unattended. He snuck over to it and found a bottle of whiskey.

15 February, Twelve Years Ago

Adrien rushed out of his class and down the steps. He couldn’t believe that he’d forgotten his tablet! He had to do homework pretty late the night before, so he’d taken it to the apartment—he hoped he hadn’t left it there! If Aunt Amelie found it, she’d break it! He used his powers to open his locker quickly, and he dug through his things.

He heard giggling on the other side, followed by frantic attempts to quiet themselves. A couple of
lockers opened. There was some shuffling… and then someone leaned against the lockers. “I wish you could see your neck,” Lila said quietly. He couldn’t see her, but he could imagine that she’d run her fingers down Marinette’s neck, likely where a trail of hickeys led down to the collar of her shirt. “And I wish I was in your class… I could look at these all day…”

Marinette chuckled. “Lila, don’t. I’m still sore!” There was a sound, and he supposed that she’d pushed her further into the lockers, as it was followed by a quick gasp. Adrien grabbed his locker door and tried to keep hold of his temper.

“Will I see you tonight?” Lila asked.

“I don’t think so. Our sleepover was a little impromptu…” Adrien felt his breath catch in his throat, and he covered his mouth. He had thought that they’d made out at a movie or something—had Lila and Marinette hooked up last night?!

“What about this weekend? Can I steal you away?” She asked, though her question was answered by another gasp.

“M-maybe…” Marinette must have pushed her away, because there was an audible pop and a moment where neither spoke. “I-I’ll see you after class…” Marinette grabbed her crutches and limped away. He could see her leave the locker room and make her way to the stairs.

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2 June, Eleven Years Ago

There was an arcade that the group had decided to go to during their summer vacation. It was a dark, loud sort of place that served terrible pizza and played music that hadn’t been popular since they were twelve, but that was part of the fun. As Nino and Alya went to call next round on an air hockey table, Adrien stayed behind as Chloé and Marinette stood, Chloé to get a refill and Marinette to the restroom. They noticed that she was limping in a different way than normal, and she even seemed to whimper every so often. Still, Adrien hesitated in following her. Alya had made it very clear that he was to guard their table.

Chloé sighed. She sat back down and motioned to the handicap restroom Marinette was headed to. “You should go make sure that she’s okay. I’ll watch the table.”

Adrien smiled as he stood. “Thank you, Chlo. I’ll try to be quick.” He chased after Marinette, catching up in time to open the door for her. “After you, my lady.” He said. Marinette smiled. She went inside, and Adrien followed her, locking the door behind them. She sat down on the toilet without pulling her pants down. Adrien frowned at her. “Marinette, are you okay? You look pale, and you seem to be in pain.”

“Don’t worry, Adrien. I’m fine…” Marinette said.

“Is it phantom limb? Cramps?” He asked. Though he was fairly certain it wasn’t cramps—Marinette often experienced more flashbacks when she was on her period, because of the blood.

“I…” Marinette paused, as though she was thinking. She smiled at him. “I can tell you anything, right?” She said. “There are no secrets between us.”

“Of course.” Unless the secrets were his feelings for her, naturally. He hoped that she wasn’t going
to confess to him—locked inside a handicap restroom was not where Adrien had planned on professing true love.

Marinette paused again. “Lila and I… are having sex.” She said.

Maybe a bathroom love confession wasn’t the worst thing after all. He grinned awkwardly. “I didn’t realize that was a secret,” he said slowly.

She sighed and leaned forward before flinching. “It’s not, I guess—it’s more of backstory!” She said. She leaned back, but that didn’t seem to help either. “So… Lila bought this dildo to use… on me,” she said, as though she had to choose these words carefully, like it wasn’t already uncomfortable enough that he was talking to the love of his life about what another girl used to fuck her. “But I don’t think she realized how big the one she bought… actually… is.”

Yup. This was quickly shaping up to be one of the most awkward conversations he’d ever had. “Oh… kay…?”

Marinette sighed. “We were having sex last night, and… I guess she went too deep?” She said. She looked at the wall and frowned. “I didn’t know what to do, so I didn’t say anything… but this morning, I woke up with this pain…” She looked at Adrien and tried to sit up. “I think… she might have bruised my cervix.”

Which would have explained the pain! “Are you sure?” He asked.

“I remember how it felt, even now—” Marinette’s voice broke suddenly, and she erupted into pained sobs and panicked breathing. “God, Adrien, it hurts so bad!” She cried as he ran to her side to hold her tight to him. She clawed at his hand-me-down tee shirt and fell apart in his arms. “It’s like—it’s like—”

“A red hot poker inside you,” Adrien said, remembering.

Marinette sobbed. “Yes!”

Adrien pulled Marinette as close as he could, wrapping his arms and his legs around her. When her crying slowed—not stopped, as she was in such pain—he dug through her things until he found her prescription painkillers. They sat together on the bathroom floor for a while—Adrien tried to pretend like he wasn’t aware of how filthy it was—until they kicked in.

Marinette wiped her face off. “What should I do?” She asked.

“Step one is probably to set up an appointment with the gynecologist,” Adrien suggested. She was still in his arms, and he stroked her hair. “Step two is talking to Lila and setting up a safeword.”

“I don’t know if we need to! She’s never hurt me before…” Marinette said. She shifted, and he could feel her pout through his shirt. “This is the first time I’ve had penetrative sex consensually… maybe it wasn’t too big but I’m too small?”

God, he really, really didn’t want to be giving out sex advice. Right now, but also in general. He didn’t know anything about sex. Adrien shared a room with his judgmental cousin—he didn’t even watch porn! But if he didn’t talk to her about it, Alya would, and since Lila hated Adrien as much as Alya did, he was certain that would spiral quickly. He rubbed his face. “Even if that’s true, there are things you can do. It’s a conversation that you should have with Lila, and she should want to know what you like and what you don’t.”

Soon, Marinette was feeling well enough to stand. Adrien got her crutches, they both washed their
hands, and then left the bathroom. Part of him wished, as they walked back to their table, that he had
given her bad advice, but she deserved happiness, even if he wasn’t the one giving it to her.

7 September, Eleven Years Ago

“Did you see Marinette when she was changing after sport today?” Alix whispered to Sabrina. They
were in the library. Adrien was standing behind a bookshelf, trying not to eavesdrop on a
conversation that now interested him greatly.

“No, I was too busy looking at Mireille’s tattoo. I think it’s real!” Sabrina said. “…why? What’s up
with Marinette?”

Alix lowered her voice slightly. “She has these bruises all the way up her ribcage!” She said. “She
looks like she lost a fight!”

“Are you serious?” Sabrina asked. There was a pause. “Maybe they’re track marks? After everything
she’s been through…”

“No way Marinette is on drugs! They’re bruises!” Alix said. “Someone hurt her.”

Adrien shoved the book he held back onto the shelf. He stormed past them, and they realized that
he’d overheard. He left the library, spotting Marinette in the courtyard. She was moving slowly, as
Lila had insisted she get used to walking with her prosthetic and her cane. He moved to approach
her, but he saw Lila walk up behind her. She presented her with a gift in a long box.

Adrien didn’t need to talk to Marinette. He knew where the bruises came from.

17 April, Ten Years Ago

Lila knocked on Adrien’s door. It was getting sort of late, and neither he nor Marinette had been in
school. She waited impatiently as Adrien came to the door, and when he opened it, he flashed him
the fakest smile. “Hi, Agreste. Can I talk to Marinette? Alya said she was here.”

“It’s Chevalier now, Lila.” Adrien snapped.

“Just tell her I’m here.” Lila said. He helped Marinette walk down to the landing, and then he went
into the basement to give them a bit of privacy. “Hi, ma chatte,” Lila said as they kissed. “If you’re
feeling up to it, I was thinking we could do some planning.”

Marinette rubbed her eyes. “Um, actually, I’m spending today with Adrien. It’s the seventeenth of
April…”

Lila was quiet for a moment. “I know. That’s why I thought that we could plan things. To take your
mind off of the anniversary.”

“This is mine and Adrien’s day. It’s tradition. You know that,” Marinette said.
Lila offered a sickeningly sweet smile. “I just think that it’s really weird that you spend the anniversary of the time you were raped with the son of the man who raped you.” She said sharply.

Marinette flinched. “W-we don’t say that word today,” she muttered. She avoided Lila’s eyes. “And it only has to be weird if you make it weird.”

She sighed. “Fine. Can we begin planning tomorrow?” She asked.

“M-maybe. Let’s play it by ear.” She said noncommittally. Marinette kissed her goodbye and shut the door.

Upon hearing it, Adrien rejoined her. He helped her up the stairs, and they unpaused their video game. “What was that about?” He asked.

She didn’t speak for a moment. “She, um, just wanted to discuss plans with me…”

Adrien chuckled. “I had gathered as much. She only said it about a hundred times.” There was a moment of silence. “Plans for what?”

Marinette was still quiet. She paused the game again. She shifted to face him, sitting in such a way that the prosthetic that he knew she hated wearing wasn’t underneath her. “I have something important to tell you.” Marinette said, looking deep into his eyes. He put his controller down and shifted so he faced her. “Lila… Lila asked me to marry her.” She reached into her shirt and pulled out a diamond ring on a golden chain. “I said yes.”

Adrien felt his world shatter around him. “What?”

She smiled gently. “We’re engaged.” She looked down at the ring. “I’m not wearing the ring because it’s too big. We’re getting it resized this weekend.”

He couldn’t breathe. At first he thought that it was caught, but whenever he tried to take a breath, it was like he was trapped in deep space with no oxygen, no life support. “I… what?” He was too stunned to think, let alone prepared to pick up the pieces of his shattered heart.

Marinette sensed his unease, but it wasn’t like she could change topics now. “It’s very new. I haven’t even told my parents.” She smiled at him. “I wanted you to be the first person I told.” When he said nothing, when he simply stared at her with wide eyes, and she sort of cringed. “Because I thought that, if anyone would be happy to see me getting my life back on track, it would be you.”

Adrien sighed. He was shaking, but he couldn’t let her see that. “I am. I am so happy for you.” His smile was fake. His words were fake. He’d never felt more fake, and he’d been faking for four years.

Marinette sighed, too. “Adrien, I don’t want you to lie to me.” She said.

“I’m not lying, I—” Adrien saw the look on her face. “I’m happy that she makes you happy.”

Marinette became tense. “Then why aren’t you excited?” She asked. “You seemed more excited when Mireille and Félix said they were going to get married, and you barely know Mireille compared to what you and I have been through.”

Adrien hesitated. “Félix is my cousin, and Mireille is pregnant, Marinette…”

“Oh, well that makes it different, then!” Marinette snapped. She leaned away from him. “So the only reason to get married is if someone is pregnant?! Are you one of those people, Adrien?!”
Adrien grew tense. “Jesus, Marinette! That’s not what I fucking said!”

Marinette stood, her legs buckling, and she walked around to the other side of the end table. “Then why can’t you just be happy for me?! I’m getting married—you should be happy! It’s a good thing!”

“I am happy for you!”

She slammed her hand down. “Don’t lie to me!” She ordered. “I am not some fragile doll! I’m a person, and I deserve to know the truth!”

Adrien shot up. “You want honesty, Marinette?!” He snapped. He chuckled bitterly. “I honestly don’t know what to say! You know that Lila and I don’t get along, and you have to have noticed that she keeps isolating you from me!”

“She just worries!” Marinette reasoned.

“But hey, she’s all buddy-buddy with Alya, so who the hell gives a shit if they convince you to abandon me—even if you’re the only real friend that I have left!” He started waving his hands. He was spiraling—he didn’t care about this. “But you are my friend! And as your friend, I have to tell you that you shouldn’t marry Lila! She’s wrong for you!”

“What did she ever do to you that makes you hate her so much?!” Marinette asked.

“This isn’t about me!” Though, he hadn’t forgotten that time she tricked him into going to Ville-sous-la-Ferté. “This is about how she’s hurting you!” She startled, and Adrien took the moment to grab her hand and pull it up. Her sleeve fell, and they could see the bruise on her wrist. “Deny it if you want, Marinette. I see what she does.”

She snatched her arm away. “You can’t think that it’s a good idea to marry someone who hurts you!”

“You don’t know the whole story!”

“Then tell me, Marinette! Why do you want to marry Lila when she treats you so horribly?”

“I love her!”

“How can you love someone who hurts you? Please, Nette, help me to understand!”

She was visibly angry. Her cheeks were red and her posture was guarded. “You can’t explain love, Adrien!” She argued. “Lila loves me and I love her! And we’re going to get married, whether you like it or not!”

He took a few steps closer to her. “I can’t let you do this!” He shouted. “I can’t watch you marry her just because you think you understand what love is!” Adrien struggled to keep tears from his eyes. “You, of all people, should know that what the two of you have isn’t love!”

“You don’t get to decide for me, Adrien!” Marinette screamed. She grabbed her purse and her cane. She moved to the door quickly. “I’m going home!”

“Marinette, you’re not leaving until—”

“I said I’m leaving!” She screeched. She threw him against the wall with her powers. She slammed the door behind her as she left. Adrien didn’t bother picking himself up off the floor. He just sat up
and rubbed his face.

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6 August, Ten Years Ago

Marinette and Lila were spending the weekend at a lake, enjoying one another’s company and celebrating their acceptance into their respective universities—though they were doing their own thing at the moment. Lila was in the kitchen, cutting tomatoes for her homemade spaghetti sauce, and Marinette was knitting a pair of mittens for Alya’s birthday.

She put her knitting down. Marinette yelped when her prosthetic buckled under her weight, but she quickly regained her composure and walked outside. Lila looked up at the sound of the sliding glass door, and Marinette smiled as she closed it. She leaned against the railing and looked out over the lake.

It was a beautiful sight. The sun had just started to set, turning the lake orange as it shimmered with dying light. Crickets chirped in the grass, and in the not too distant background, she could see a squirrel climbing into its nest. Marinette sighed contentedly, holding out her engagement ring as the light caught the diamond.

Lila slid the door open. She stood next to Marinette, and they enjoyed a quiet moment. “I’ve wanted you alone for months.” She said, a content smile on her face. Marinette smiled, pushing a bit of hair behind her ear. Lila’s smile fell, and she moved to go back inside. “Ma chatte, can I ask you something sort of personal?” She asked.

“I would hope so.”

“It’s about… Gabriel.” She said. That was ominous. Marinette turned, but Lila caught her shoulder. “Don’t turn around.”

“Lila?” She tried to move, but Lila squeezed her shoulder with all her considerable strength. “You-you're kind of freaking me out…”

“Don’t worry. It’ll only take a second.” She reassured her. Marinette shuddered again. She froze and felt the breath leave her body when Lila pressed a knife to her back. “I mean it. Stop.”

“Go back inside.” Lila ordered.

Marinette obeyed. “Please. Lila, this isn't right.”

“Go upstairs and stop talking.” Lila followed her closely. They went up the stairs, the wood creaking under their feet. The second floor was just the single master bedroom, large with warm wood and
furniture with cream-colored sheets. It had been romantic, but now it was like a dungeon. She pushed Marinette onto the bed, pinning her by straddling her legs. Lila told her to take off her shirt, and when she did, she compared the blade of the knife to the scars on her back. They were thicker and longer than the blade of Lila’s knife.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Marinette was shaking. The knife was different but close enough. It was like she was back there… She started crying as she remembered the blade against her skin, remembering the chains, remembering him. Remembering him touching her, cutting her, hitting her… the blood running down her back and her legs… she pulled her arms close to her chest and finally turned to face Lila.

There was even more silence.

“Are you… mad at me?” Marinette asked.

“I'm not angry.” Lila’s grip tightened on the blade. But she seemed to realize it wasn't helping the situation and groaned. She stabbed the bedside table, leaving the knife sticking straight up. “Earlier this year. You slept with Adrien, didn't you?” She poked Marinette’s chest. “Didn't you!”

“What—you mean in April?! No! Lila, please! It was just the anniversary!” She explained for what felt like the hundredth time. “A tradition!”

“When we were at lunch the next day, he asked me about the bruises on your ribs! How would he know about them unless he saw them?!”

“I--I don't know!” She said. Marinette crawled away from Lila, keeping one eye on the knife. Lila followed her. Marinette escaped by crawling to the edge of the bed. She fell off and scrambled towards the wall as Lila stood up.

“He couldn’t! He couldn't know unless he'd seen them!” Her voice was strained, and tears had smudged her eyeliner. She tore at her hair as her voice went from yelling to screaming. “You're cheating on me! For how long? Tell me!”

“No! No, I'm not!” She stood, using the wall as support. “I love you! I don't want to hurt you! I would never do anything like that!” Lila kept coming. “Lila, please calm down! You're scaring me!”

“Why are you making this harder than it has to be?!” She begged.

Lila grabbed a lamp and wielded it like a sword. The cord ripped the outlet out of the wall, wires ripping in two. She approached Marinette, whose eyes and freckles now glowed red. Lila screamed and lifted the lamp high into the air, bringing it down suddenly like a club. Marinette raised her hands, creating a barrier between them that the lamp broke against. Lila stopped suddenly when she felt something sharp prick her back. She looked behind her to see the knife floating in midair. It drifted around her torso, through the barrier and into Marinette's shaking hands.

Lila threw the broken lamp across the room. It clattered loudly. “I guess we aren’t getting the security deposit back.” She said, abandoning Marinette to the bedroom as she walked down the stairs.

Marinette waited for a few moments before letting the barrier fall. She turned the knife over in her hands. There was blood on the tip, just a little bit, but it was enough to remind her of him again. Enough to remind her of the agony she endured trying to escape. She removed her prosthetic and pushed it away, curling up on herself. Marinette threw the knife across the room, just narrowly missing the window and sticking it in the wall. She curled up in the corner and sobbed, pulling on her bangs. She was relapsing and it was terrible. The pain in her legs was intense, like it had never
ended. Her entire lower body hurt, like the knife wounds were fresh. Everything was terrible. She couldn’t do this. She had to--

“Hey.” Lila said. She looked up. She was holding a cup of chocolate chaud. She offered it to Marinette, who took it cautiously. “Are you okay?”

Marinette didn't say anything.

“You know that I never would have cut you with the knife.” She said. There was another pause. “I thought you might tell me the truth if you were frightened.”

“I am telling you the truth.” She said, tears running down her face.

“You…” Lila bit her tongue and shifted her weight. “I want to trust you, but I can't trust him!”

“Well, I don’t know what you want to do about that. He's one of my best friends.” Marinette stood and moved to the bed. She put the cup down, unable to calm her shaking hands. “I don't know what I can do to make you believe me.”

“Stop talking to Adrien.” Lila said.

Marinette blinked. She sat up and remained stunned for a long time. “You want me to… stop seeing Adrien?” She said.

Lila leaned forward, rubbing Marinette’s lips with the tips of her fingers. “This is the only way we will ever be happy.” She said. Marinette was so stunned that she said nothing. Lila kissed her, first slowly, then passionately.

She couldn’t move. A life… without Adrien? It was like trying to picture a life without sunshine! Without Adrien, Marinette would have died a long time ago! The thought paralyzed her, to the point where she hadn’t realized that Lila had unbuttoned her shirt until it came time for her push it out of the way. She jumped as Lila left a trail of kisses down her chest, starting at the bruise on her neck and working down.

“I love you,” Lila said as she pulled her shorts down with her panties.

Marinette shook her head. “I’m not in the mood.” She said. But Lila didn’t stop. She grabbed her leg and pulled her down, and she yelped. “Lila—” She was silenced by a kiss. Marinette weakly pushed her away, but gave up after a moment as the life drained out of her eyes and her arms lost any incentive to stay up.

“When I went downstairs,” Lila said, sitting up and digging in a box under her bedside table, “I spoke to some caterers and my mother.” She removed her clothes, and after adjusting the harness for the dildo, she squeezed lube onto her hand. She rubbed down the dildo, and when it was slippery, she used the rest on Marinette, who was so passive that she didn’t even flinch at the cold, nor at the feeling of Lila’s fingers making a brief appearance inside her. She got closer as she tried to massage her pussy into relaxation. “I can have everything ready for our wedding in just a few months.”

Marinette said nothing. If you’re quiet, she remembered Nathalie saying, it will be boring, and it will be over faster.

Lila rubbed her lubricated hand on Marinette’s chest to dry it. “I just had to give them a date, so I told them to have it ready for the seventeenth of April.”
22 December, Ten Years Ago

Marinette was sitting on the nearly frozen curb with her luggage—a suitcase with a peeling leather exterior and her collège backpack stuffed with things she wanted for the plane. The bus was coming to take her to the airport any minute, and as she waited anxiously, she twisted the engagement ring around her finger. Lila was sitting next to her, quietly playing games on her phone. She looked at her from the corner of her eye. “You alright, ma chatte?” Lila asked.

Marinette stopped twisting the ring. She moved her hand to the bruise forming on her wrist, and she pulled down her sleeve to cover it. “I’m fine! Just a little nervous. I’ve never been on a plane before!”

“Oh, no! Really?” Lila said, as though it surprised her. Marinette had definitely mentioned it before. “Did you want me to come with—”

“No!” She said too quickly. Lila blinked. “I, uh… I want to be able to do things on my own.”

“Sorry, emergency. Text me when you’re on the bus.” They kissed and Lila walked away.

Marinette relaxed when she was out of sight. She removed the ring and held it in front of her face. There wasn’t a whole lot of time for contemplating before a voice said, “Long time, no see.” She jumped and slid the ring back on her finger before she looked. It was Mylène. The colored strands of her hair had been all but washed out, and judging by her clothes, she was on her way to work. “How are you?”

They hadn’t spoken since what Lila called ‘the friend divorce.’ Marinette frowned and looked away. “If Adrien sent you—” She started.

“He didn’t. I haven’t spoken to him in days, actually.” Mylène said as she sat down. She smoothed her slacks and looked at Marinette quietly. “Are you excited?” She asked with a smiled so forced that there may as well have been a gun to her head.

“Of course! I haven’t seen my mother’s family in years!” She said, nervously pushing hair behind her ears.

Mylène laughed awkwardly. “I know that. I meant, are you excited for the wedding? It's in April, right?”

Marinette flushed. “Oh, yes. April… the seventeenth of April.”

“Oh.”

There was a long pause. “B-but, yes! I’m very excited!” Marinette smiled. “W-what little girl hasn't looked forward to her-her-her wedding d-day?”

“Plenty of them.” Mylène said. She frowned, and she didn’t stop. “You know, it's not too late to back out.”

“I—” Her blood ran cold. “I wouldn’t want to…”

“To upset her?”

“I didn’t say—”
“Marinette.” Mylène said, firmer than what she was normally capable of. “All of the girls saw those bruises. We know what’s going on.”

So that was how Adrien knew! One of the girls had told him. But it didn’t matter! She held up her hands. “Enough, Mylène.” She paused. “Lila doesn’t hit me. I’ve always been so clumsy.” She shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes. “Adrien used to say the same thing about his uncle.” She took her hand. “Please, you know that she’s not going to—”

She dug into her arm with her nails. “Listen, Mylène. I’ve gotten more than enough grief from Adrien about this. I don’t want to listen to you, too.” She snapped. “So, go, if you aren’t going to be supportive. Just leave.”

“Marinette—” She protested.

She rubbed her eyes. “Leave!”

Mylène hesitated, but she stood and left. Eventually, the bus came and Marinette got on. She texted Lila, and then waited as she received about twelve texts containing rules and restrictions about her visit. Marinette left the page with Lila’s texts and opened the last ones Adrien had sent her.

Adrien: Nette please say something
Adrien: you’re my best friend
Adrien: I know that you’re upset about what I said and I’m sorry that I grabbed your hand like that. I’m sorry I said those things
Adrien: you mean everything to me, marinette. Everything that I used to be, I gave it up
Adrien: everything but you
Adrien: my lady please talk to me
Adrien: at least let me know that this is you and not Lila
Adrien: marinette please
Adrien: I miss you
Adrien is typing...

She panicked and backed out of the messages. She didn’t want him to catch her lurking.

Adrien: have a great vacation

Marinette looked at the message for a while before replying to Lila.

31 December, Ten Years Ago

It was the Christmas vacation of their first year at university. Alya had taken Nino with her when she went to Martinique, Chloé was with her mother in New York City, Marinette was with her mother’s family in China, Lila had been visiting hers in Italy but had returned to make wedding plans, and Adrien was… alone.

He scrolled through his feed, liking a few photos of Marinette exploring Shanghai. She wasn’t scheduled to return for days. He sighed, wanting to talk to her. It had been months since he’d heard
Adrien took a drink of his beer the exact moment a knock came to his door, startling him. He choked as he stood, trying to catch his breath as he walked down to the landing. When he pulled the door open, he found Marinette standing on his doorstep.

"Hi, Adrien." She said. She was soaking wet, her makeup having run down her face. He could see her luggage at the gate, probably left behind because she couldn’t get it closer. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

“You aren’t—you’re not bothering me!” He said. He moved. “Come inside before you get sick!” Adrien helped her inside before running out and grabbing her luggage. When he returned, she still hadn’t really stepped inside. She was sitting on the steps, shivering. “What are you doing here? You posted a picture from Shanghai an hour ago!”

Marinette smiled at him. Her beautiful, perfect smile. He had missed her so much… “I came back early.” She explained. Her smile fell, and her shaking was getting worse. “C-can I stay here with you for a few days?”

Adrien blinked. “Um… yes, yes. Of course!” He frowned. “But… don’t you and Lila have an apartment together?”

“I don’t really want her knowing that I’m home…” Marinette said.

His frown deepened. He walked over to her and helped her up to the couch. “First things first. You need to get out of these wet clothes.” He said. He moved to get her luggage from the landing.

“Wait.” Marinette caught him. When he turned, she hesitated. “All of my clothes are wet.” She explained. “I walked here from the airport.”

Adrien put his hand on the railing. “Why did you walk here from the airport? I don’t have any money for a cab, and if I had called one from a rideshare app, it would have been charged to Lila’s credit card.” She explained.

“You could have called me. This is exactly why I bought a car.” He said, walking back into the living room.

“I… I was too afraid to call you.” She said. “I mean, if she’s tracking my location and it pings in Paris when I’m supposed to be in Shanghai…!” She said.

Adrien felt his heart break. It was so much worse now than it had been. He motioned down the hall. “I’m sure I have some clothes that will fit you.” He said. He started down the stairs. “I’ll throw your stuff into the washer, and once you’ve showered and everything, we can talk.” He grabbed the luggage, pausing as he looked at his door. He locked it with the chain bolt before heading downstairs. As he started sorting the clothes, he heard the shower start.

Not too long later, as he was waiting for the water to stop so he start the washer, there was a crash in the bathroom. Adrien sprinted up the stairs, using his powers to unlock the door.

Marinette had lost her balance and fallen in the shower. “Are you okay?” He asked, taking his
bathrobe from the back of the door. He shut off the water and offered her the robe. “I’m so, so sorry! It never even occurred to me to ask you if you needed a stool or something!”

Marinette didn’t care. She embraced him and burst into tears. “You were so right! I can’t believe that I was going to marry her!” She dug her nails into his back, as though she was afraid that someone would come and try to rip her out of his arms.

Adrien picked her up and carried her into his bedroom, shutting the door behind them. He sat down on the bed with her. “You’re okay, Marinette. I’ve got you…” he whispered, holding her until her grip loosened and she pulled away slightly. “What’s the matter? What happened?”

“Adrien…” she hesitated, and she couldn’t look in his eyes. He put her hand on her face. “I think that Lila might have… raped me.”

Adrien’s eyes went wide, and he felt his hands shake. “You think she might have—are you sure?! Tell me what happened!” He blinked and sat up straight. “I mean, don’t, if the memory is too painful, but—”

She held onto his shoulder. “I don’t know. I’m confused, because there have been times where we had sex, and it wasn’t rape because I wanted to, but when we went on vacation this summer…” Marinette looked at the floor and couldn’t move her eyes. “She grabbed a knife… a-and she forced me to go upstairs, and she pinned me to the bed… but then we argued, and she left me alone.”

“What happened when she came back?”

“She apologized.” Marinette said. “She told me that I had to stop being friends with you, and then while I was trying to process that, she took my clothes off…” She frowned. “And I told her not to, because we had just fought and she was telling me to abandon you, but she didn’t… and… I didn’t do anything.” She started crying. “She raped me and I didn’t do anything to try to stop her!”

Adrien took her hands before she could claw at her skin. “Marinette, that’s a very, very common reaction to that situation.” He reassured her.

“I fought so hard when it was Gabriel… I thought that I knew Lila!” Marinette said. She sighed. “I guess I did… and I was just too afraid to do anything about it.” She shook her head. “I was scared of her before, and I’m scared of her now, but in that moment… I knew what was coming, and I felt nothing, and I let it happen.”

“Marinette…”

“Why didn’t I fight? Why did I give up right away?” She asked. “Lila is strong, but I could have created a barrier and sent her flying—I didn’t have to endure it again!” She pulled her hands away. “But for years, I let her hit me, and lie to me, and isolate me from anyone who thought to question it—and then she does this, and I still don’t say anything.”

That was true, though understandable considering how desperate she was for her life to go back to normal. “Why didn’t you tell me then?” Adrien asked as she slid off the bed and pressed her forehead against the mattress.

“Who is going to believe that this happened to me again?” She asked weakly. Adrien’s heart broke again. She sounded so defeated, so sad. Marinette must have been living a nightmare, and he hadn’t done anything to stop it.

He helped her back up, and then he tucked her under the covers. Adrien kissed her cheek and brushed her hair from her face. “Listen, you’ve had a hard time of it, okay?” He said. She nodded.
You should get some sleep. I’m going to do some laundry, but I’m not going far.” He felt his chest puff out with determination. “I am never going to let her hurt you again.”

Marinette smiled at him. She pulled her hands out from under the covers. She removed her engagement ring. She hesitated for half a moment before giving it to Adrien. “I’m too scared to give it back to her…”

He clenched it in his hand, half considering destroying it. But he brushed her hair from her face and smiled. “I’ll take care of it.”

21 April, Present Day

Adrien was digging around inside his closet. He could hear Marinette in the living room, making a report to Sabrina about the location of Vincent Aza. He was in the middle of stripping the bed when her voice got louder. She was walking towards him. “Okay. Let us know if you figure out how he knew where we were.” She hung up and walked to the other side of the bed and helped Adrien with the bed. “Sabrina said that many of my neighbors called the police after the first round of gunshots went off.” They spread new sheets on the bed. “They found Aza, and even though he lost a lot of blood, they think he’ll make it.”

Adrien sighed. “Such a shame!” He said.

Marinette shook her head. “It means that I’m not going to be arrested for murder,” she said. “Getting locked up in Fleury-Mérogis to await trial wouldn’t help us at all.”

He rolled up his sheets and put them in the hamper. He left the room to let a Marinette attend to the pillowcases. He put the hamper in the laundry room and grabbed her luggage on the way back up. He carried it into his bedroom. “I’m glad that he’ll be okay, though. I hope that, if Gabriel hears about it, he’ll take it as a sign that we’ll go as far as he will.”

“I don’t think I want to go as far as—why do you have my suitcase?” She asked, switching gears immediately.

Adrien paused. He looked at the suitcase and then Marinette. “…carrying it in here?” He said. He walked over to the closet and grabbed a spare pillow and blanket. “I assumed you would want your clothing.”

Marinette shook her head. “No. I’m not stealing your bed!” She said firmly as Adrien rolled his eyes. He walked away from her. “Adrien! You should sleep in your bedroom!”

“I don’t feel comfortable making you sleep on the couch.” He said. He flinched when she shot in front of him with her powers, but he kept walking. He found Marinette sitting on the couch in a very ladylike fashion.

She smiled at him. “I won, so you have to do what I say!” She declared. “And I say that you sleep in your bedroom!”

Adrien didn’t reply. He put the blanket on one side and the pillow on the other. Then, he relaxed on the couch, putting his legs behind her. When she looked at him, he pushed her off the couch with his legs.
“Hey!” She protested when she hit the floor.

“Sorry! The couch says you get the bed. No take backs,” he said.

She giggled as she stood. She looked at him, her eyes soft. She opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it. “I… should probably get some rest.” She said. “Good night, for what it’s worth.” She walked away.

Adrien smiled at her. “It’s worth everything to me,” he whispered.

Adrien anxiously paced the house before he finally went to bed. He made sure the doors and windows were locked, with the curtains closed. When he finally tried to sleep, it was dreamless, yet he woke every so often in cold sweat. He finally gave up and scrolled through his phone, doing anything to keep his hands occupied.

He jumped when he saw a figure in the hallway, but it was only Marinette. She had waited until he saw her to come closer. She stood over him for a moment before laying down, snuggling into his chest. Adrien was stunned, and he couldn’t even move his head. “What… is this?” He asked quietly.

Marinette took a moment. “I couldn’t sleep.” That was all she said. She wiggled up to watch what he was doing, but he could sense her unease. Before he could ask, she looked up at him. “I-I don’t want to be presumptuous, Adrien, but…” she paused. “But may I steal another kiss from you?”

Adrien smiled. “You don’t presume, and you don’t need to steal,” he said, putting his phone down and taking her face, “because from here on out, all of my kisses are yours.”

She smiled, and she moved her face closer to his. They kissed, sweet and fitting for this small moment of long awaited intimacy. Adrien felt his heart flutter, with Marinette safe in his arms and her soft lips against his own. When it broke, their eyes met, and Marinette blushed furiously. She buried her head in his chest as he smiled and gently rubbed her back.

2 January, Nine Years Ago

With the police absolutely no help in arresting Lila, Alya and Adrien were on the hunt for apartments where Marinette could live in secret from her fiancé—well, soon to be her former fiancé. Alya had volunteered to stay with Marinette and teleport her away if necessary as Adrien went to their shared apartment to retrieve some of Marinette’s things.

Adrien found the apartment. Lila had not given Marinette a key—a bizarre form of control, but the logic tracked, he supposed—but Adrien didn’t need one. He looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching, and then he snapped his fingers to unlock the door.

The apartment was large. Adrien didn’t know what Lila did for a living, but it must have been lucrative, considering she was too young to have any sort of degree from university. After finding and taking everything that he could attribute to Marinette, Adrien moved towards the bedroom with the box in his hands. He dug through the drawers and pulled out her clothing.

He had just grabbed the last of her dresses when he heard the door open. “What the hell…?” He huffed as he realized Lila had come home. Adrien had everything he needed, so he taped up the box and walked out of the bedroom. Lila saw him, and they stared at one another. “What are you doing
here?” She asked accusingly.

Adrien smiled. “Marinette sent me.” He said simply. “Since she’s leaving, she asked me to come get some of her things.” He lifted the box slightly as a demonstration.

“M—” Lila sputtered. “Leaving?” She asked as Adrien walked closer. “I didn’t even know that she’d come home!”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” He shrugged. “Marinette is more clever than people give her credit for.”

Lila slammed the door behind her. She stormed towards him. “You’re lying! She’s not even supposed to talk to you!” She shouted.

“Marinette is a grown woman who can decide her friends for herself!” Adrien protested.

He held the box tighter in case Lila tried to knock it from his hands. Instead, she... started crying, leaning up against a wall until her legs gave out and she slid down it. For half a moment, Adrien considered that Lila really did love Marinette, and maybe that was true, but even if it was, there was no excuse for what she had done. Adrien stepped over her legs without addressing her. She grabbed one of them suddenly. “Please say she’s coming back,” Lila begged.

Adrien paused. He huffed, pulled his leg away, and turned around. “Why should she come back, Lila?” He asked, turning around. “After what you did—” Adrien swallowed his words so he didn’t threaten her, as it wouldn’t help their situation. “She’s not coming back. Ever.”

Lila looked up before looking at her feet.

He remembered the ring in his pocket. “By the way—” he reached inside and flicked it at her coldly. It struck the side of her face and landed on the hardwood. “She asked me to give that back to you.”

She picked up the ring as Adrien made his way to the door. He had barely opened it when a shoe struck him in the back of the head hard enough to knock him down. He sat up and rubbed his skull, hoping that he wasn’t bleeding. “Where is she?! Tell me where that whore is!” Lila shouted.

Adrien grabbed the box and stood. “Like I would really tell you!”

Lila sprinted to the door and hung out the threshold. “How long have you been wetting your dick inside my fiancée?!” She demanded.

“Ew!” Adrien recoiled. “I’m not, but that’s got to be the worst way you possibly could have said that!”

Lila held up her hands. “Oh, round one wasn’t enough for her?! She had to sneak behind my back and get dicked down by Agreste Junior, too?!”

Adrien snarled. “First of all, I am not sleeping with your ex-fiancée!” He shouted. “Second of all, even if I was, how could you blame her after everything you did to her?”

Lila threw another shoe at him. “I hope you rot in Hell, Adrien Agreste!” She shouted. “But before that, I’m going to find out where she is!” Her eyes were wide, and she was screaming so loud that he could barely understand what she was saying. “I’ll find her if I have to kill everyone in Paris!”
Blood and Milk

Chapter Notes

don’t be fooled this chapter is a serious downer

22 April

Nothing in his life had ever felt as right as waking up with Marinette laying on his chest, fast asleep and calm. Adrien watched her as she slept, still half asleep himself. He brushed her hair out of her face gently. There was comfort even in this—in knowing that she was perfectly safe in his arms. Adrien buried his face in her hair and fell back asleep, almost intoxicated by the smell of her shampoo.

He didn’t stir for several more hours, until he felt Marinette shift on his chest. He forced his eyes to open so he could watch her wake. She squished her body down before stretching it out. She caught his eyes, and she smiled. “Good morning,” she whispered.

“Good morning,” he said, reaching up and pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. She pressed her face against his hand. “You slept well.”

“I haven’t felt so good in a long time.” She said. She reached down and grabbed her crutches so she could stand. It was too soon; he wasn’t ready to let her go. Marinette moved into the kitchen, and she started digging through his refrigerator. “What are you feeling for breakfast?” She asked.

“I don’t think I have much, except for eggs and milk.” Adrien said as he sat up to watch her. He forced a chuckle. “And the quality of those is not guaranteed.”

Marinette opened the milk and smelled it. “It seems okay. I could probably make you an omelette, if you want!” She said cheerfully. Adrien couldn’t see a reason why not, so she started to cook.

While Marinette made breakfast, Adrien changed into fresh clothes. When he rejoined her, she presented him with the omelette.

They hadn’t been eating for very long before it was time to address the elephant in the room. “Adrien,” she asked, “what does our kiss mean for us?”

He paused, and then stabbed his omelette with his fork. There was a moment of silence. “What… do you want it to mean?”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Adrien looked up. “I just…” He tried his best to smile. “I don’t want to put any pressure on you!” He shrugged. “I mean, you just recently broke up with Luka, and Lila is still around, so…”

“Lila will always be around, but Luka and I broke up two years ago…” Marinette said. She looked at her own plate. “Why would you ask to kiss me if…” she shook her head. “Are you still in love with Kagami?”

“I don’t think I ever truly loved Kagami…” he confessed.
“But you only broke up four months ago. Is she…?” Marinette paused again. “I’m not your rebound, am I?”

Adrien startled, his back going stiff. “No!” He exclaimed, horrified even by the thought. “Marinette, no, I’m not on the rebound. I don’t think I’m a rebound sort of person, either.”

“Then, you were serious when you said that all of your kisses were mine?” She asked.

He smiled at her. “Every last one,” he said.

Marinette took a moment. “So… you want me to keep kissing you.”

Adrien flushed. “I mean—only if you want to!”

“But, what is it that you want?”

“What is this, Twenty Questions?” He asked with a sigh. He frowned at her. “Marinette, I don’t want… to force you into something if you’re not ready for it.”

Marinette took a breath. “Adrien, I can’t tell you if I’m ready for something or not unless you tell me what it is that I should get ready for.” She smiled at him. She reached across the table, hesitating for a moment before taking his hand. She wove their fingers together. “Adrien, I just want to know if this was something we did in the heat of the moment, or… if this is something that you had wanted to do for a while.”

He stared into her big, beautiful blue eyes. “I have wanted to kiss you since I was thirteen years old.” He confessed.

Her face turned pink and she pulled her hand away. He looked down, realizing that he had said something wrong. “You’ve… you waited sixteen years to kiss me?” She asked. “Just to kiss me?”

Adrien frowned. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

She shook her head. “No, don’t apologize, Adrien, I—” She looked down. “We just—you had so many opportunities to confess to me. Adrien, whenever I fell apart, it was always just you and me! Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

He looked up, but not at her. “Marinette, you deserve someone who makes you happy and who can give you a normal life.” He said. He tried to smile. “And as much as I love you… that’s just not something I can give you.”

Marinette blushed again. But she looked down at her hands. “Why do you think that you can’t give that to me?”

He stumbled over his thoughts. “Well, it’s obvious that I can’t! Imagine, what if someone asked how we met—”

“But, this has to be as weird as we make it.”

She reached across the table to stroke his face. Adrien held her hand before moving it to kiss her palm. He glanced up at her face, and then kissed her palm once more. Marinette moved her chair so they were closer, and she kissed him. At first, he thought that it would be quick, but then she moved closer. The kiss only broke so she could take a breath and begin again. Adrien hesitated for half a moment before grabbing and pulling her onto his lap.
Marinette relaxed immediately into it. Her hands moved from his face to hang off his shoulders. She abandoned his lips to track kisses down his neck, listening to the starved whimpers he offered in exchange. Marinette closed her eyes and kept placing kisses.

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30 January, Four Years Ago

Marinette pulled the last of the macarons out of the oven and placed them in a box. She had to make twice as many as she normally did, as she wasn’t serving clients at her home, but at the theater they were set to perform in. She placed the macaron boxes on top of the ones she’d put the costumes in, and then waited patiently for Adrien.

He arrived soon after, a smile on his face. “I’ve got the car ready. Are you all set?” He asked.

She smiled back. “Yes! Can you help me with the boxes?” She said cheerfully. Adrien took the boxes and followed Marinette as she left her apartment. She was nervous as she locked the door, as though she already regretted agreeing to leave. Adrien hid a frown as she made her way to the elevator. “Thank you for taking me.”

Adrien smiled. “It’s no big deal.” He said. “It wouldn’t be right to make you trek this stuff halfway across the city in the dead of winter.”

“I appreciate it anyway.” She said. She pressed the elevator button, and they slid open quickly, as Adrien had just taken it up. “You graduate next year! You must be so excited!”

He hesitated, but then grinned. “It’s really only just starting to dawn on me!” He said. “I’m going to be a nurse.” He smiled. “I am excited, if not… apprehensive.”

“Have you started looking at jobs?” She asked.

“I think it’s still too soon…” Adrien said.

His car was parked right outside. He helped her inside after putting the boxes in the backseat, and then he drove. Traffic wasn’t too bad, as Paris had been trying to reduce the number of cars it had on the roads, and they arrived earlier than they’d planned.

They made their way into the theater. Down on the stage, Rose, Juleka and Ivan were setting up their equipment. Rose looked up first, and her face lit up when she saw Marinette. “You made it!” She exclaimed, running up the steps and tackling her with a hug. “Oh, I’m so happy!” She said. She glanced at Adrien but ignored him. “Thank you so much for making our costumes!”

Marinette smiled. “And thank you for letting me!” She grabbed one of the boxes and offered it to her. “I made some macarons for you!”

“You’re wonderful!” Rose said. She led them down to the stage. “I’m very nervous. This is our first paying gig where we aren’t opening for someone else!” She placed her hand on her cheek daintily. “Imagine, ‘Kitty Section’ in the spotlight!”

Adrien smiled. “This could be your big break!” He said. Ivan and Juleka smiled, but Rose couldn’t. He hid another frown when she turned away.
Since they were short handed at the moment, Adrien and Marinette volunteered to help set things up as they waited. Adrien and Juleka spoke idly about their upcoming plans, as at this point in time, they still went out for drinks every other week.

Soon, the theater doors opened to Mylène and Luka Couffaine, Juleka’s older brother and the lead guitarist. Luka paused, surprised to see Marinette—they hadn’t seen one another since Anarka Couffaine threw the post-BAC celebration aboard the Liberty. She and Adrien waved at them as Mylène ran forward happily. “We gave out all of the flyers!” She said. “I can’t guarantee a sold out house, but your name is out there!”

“Thank goodness! Maybe that will convince people to buy some tickets!” Rose said.

“We could always take out an ad in the newspaper,” Luka said with a shrug. He made his way onto the stage. He smiled when he passed Marinette. “It’s good to see you again.”

She smiled back at him. “It’s good to see you, too.” She said.

He started working on the stage next to her. “So… how is married life treating you?” He asked cautiously.

Marinette looked at her hands. “I didn’t marry Lila. I broke off the engagement five years ago.” She said. “Things were… really bad between us.”

He frowned sadly. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know…”

“I totally fell off the grid! Alya said that it was better that I contact as few people as possible, and give even fewer my address.” She said. “Rose is the only one here besides Adrien that I speak to frequently, and that’s only because she’s strangely good at tracking people down!”

He chuckled. “You’re telling me. You don’t even want to know what she did to Ivan when he was late to our last opening.” He looked back at Adrien. “I guess you’re with Adrien now, then.”

Marinette startled. “No! Are we—no!” She said. She looked at Adrien, muffling an almost mournful sigh. “No… we aren’t dating.” Marinette turned away, looking at Luka with a small, forced smile and a shrug.

Luka didn’t react. He watched the others for a moment, but then looked at Marinette. “Does… that mean you’re single?”

“Yes, I’m single.”

“Does that make you happy?”

Marinette looked at him and then grinned. “I don’t know!” She looked up at the ceiling. “I guess I don’t really think about it much. I really thought that I would be married by now!” She chuckled half-heartedly. “Even after I left Lila… I guess I just assumed I’d find someone else quickly.”

“Can’t say I blame you.” He said. “I would have thought that someone would have asked you out the moment you broke off your engagement.”

“It’s so weird! I’ve been away from her for almost as long as we were together,” she looked away, “but I still sometimes feel like she’s there, waiting.” She looked at Luka. “Adrien deals with the brunt of it. She knows where he lives, and she sends him things like dead animals and death threats.”

Luka frowned. “Jesus,”
“He pretends like it doesn’t bother him. But I wish he would move…” Marinette put her crutches down and pulled herself onto a crate. Luka moved to stand next to her. “I owe him a great deal. I don’t think I would have made it to adulthood without him…” Marinette shook her head. “What about you? Are you single?”

“Uh… yeah.” He said, pausing. It was a strange pause, as though he had to think about his choice, not because he was lying but because he was uncertain if he should tell her. “I don’t really date that much!”

“But you’re so cool!” Marinette argued. “I would have thought you’d have people lining down the street waiting for a chance to date you!”

“In all honesty, Marinette… when we were in collège, I had a really big crush on you.” Luka confessed.

She blushed. “Are you serious?!” She exclaimed. He motioned for her to quiet down. “I had no idea!”

“Really? I didn’t think I was being subtle about it.” He laughed. “But… you were with Lila.”

She frowned and looked away. “Did you… know?” She asked.

“No, I didn’t.” Luka said with a frown. “I only found out after Adrien told Juleka and I what happened when he confronted you.”

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “He told you about that?” She chuckled awkwardly. “I didn’t know!” She frowned. “Obviously, that was not my shining moment.”

“Marinette, it’s okay!” Luka said. He frowned and looked at Adrien. “If we’re being honest… I wish he had told me sooner. I would have tried to help you.”

“I would have just hurt you, too.” Marinette said.

They wanted to speak more, but Rose caught them slacking and called them out. They grinned and returned to work. Marinette, Adrien and Mylène stuck around to listen to them rehearse, but then they left. Adrien bought a ticket for himself, as Marinette refused politely when he offered to buy one for her.

He took her home, and after making sure that she was all set, he left to study for a test. Marinette turned on the television for background noise as she worked on some jewelry for her website. About halfway through, her buzzer rang.

She walked over to the intercom and pressed the button. “Who is it?” She asked.

“It’s Luka,” the voice said. “I got your address from Rose. You left something at the theater.”

“Oh! Thanks! I’ll buzz you in,” Marinette said. She held down the button and waited for him to knock on her door. When he did, he presented her with her sweater, she smiled. “You didn’t have to bring this all the way over.”

“I just wanted to thank you in person for your help today. I’m sure that it wasn’t easy for you.” Luka said. Marinette avoided his eyes. He felt the color run from his face. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” He apologized. He paused. “Why does it say Lahiffe next to your apartment number?”
Marinette shrugged. “Oh! The apartment is under Alya’s name. To keep Lila from looking for me here.” She stepped to the side. “Do you want to come in? I can make you a cup of tea, or I have coffee.”

“Sure, if you don’t mind.” Luka stepped inside, flinching when Marinette chastised him for keeping his shoes on. She put some water on to boil while he sat down and watched her. “Are you okay, living here on your own?” He asked.

She smiled at him. “I don’t mind it, usually!” She looked back at the pot. “I mean… before Alya and Adrien came to the collège, I spent a lot of time on my own…” Marinette reached up and grabbed a mug. “I think it was weirder having all eyes on me all the time.”

Luka chuckled. “I would’ve thought you’d be used to that,” he said, “since you’re so beautiful.”

She laughed as she shut off the burner. “I don’t think anyone outside my family has ever called me beautiful!” She poured the hot water into the mug and turned to face him while it steeped. He was looking at her almost like he was in a dream, and her face burned red hot. “Oh… you were… serious just now.”

“As a heart attack,” he said. That was pretty serious, she reasoned. “Marinette, you are good and honest, and as clear as a melody in my head.” He avoided her eyes when her jaw dropped. “I’m… sorry that I waited so long to tell you. I would have told you sooner, but…”

“But what?” She asked.

“But when you dropped off the grid, I assumed that Lila had… taken you somewhere. Or killed you.” He frowned. “I never thought that I would see you again…”

“And now that you know that I’m alive, and that Lila isn’t in the picture anymore?”

He smiled. “I see you, and I am reminded of the good that still exists. And I remember that I am in love with you.” He said.

Marinette ignored the tea that was probably finished steeping to look at the ground. She felt her arms shake as she looked up. “Well, then,” she asked, “would you like to kiss me?”

Luka blinked, but he considered this. He smiled warmly. “Yes,” he said, “I would.”

He stood up and walked over to her. Luka took her face in his hands, his calloused fingers rough on her neck. He hesitated, like he wasn’t certain that it was real, and then he kissed her. Her first kiss in five years, and it was warm and loving and wonderful. Marinette gently pulled him forward so their bodies were touching, and she lamented it when the kiss broke. Her lips followed his as he pulled away to catch his breath. As if to say, don’t leave me, stay here.

Luka kissed her again, this time lifting her up and putting her on the counter. Her crutches clattered to the ground. He kept his hands on her waist, though she could feel them start to slip. His lips certainly were, too—he left a trail of kisses down her throat before picking a side and sucking until he left a hickey. He broke this, and his eyes darting down from her face. He slid his hands forward to rest on her stomach. “Can I…?”

Marinette thought about it. “Y-yeah.” She reached for the button on her skirt and undid it. Luka took over from there, pulling it down and throwing it behind him. He started placing kisses on her thighs, leaving a trail of hickeys as he made his way up to her panties. He reveled in the sounds she made. Luka looked at her face as he slid his hand into her underwear to feel how wet she was.
“Careful, Marinette,” he whispered, “you’ll soak right through.”

He hooked his finger around her panties and shimmied them off. Luka got on his knees and started licking the lips of her pussy. Marinette took a sharp breath, but she tried to relax. She quickly learned that it was near impossible, as Luka suddenly slid his tongue inside her, wiggling it as she gasped and moaned. A gentle feeling joined the desperate tongue, like a lover’s kiss. Luka used one hand to hold onto her leg and the other to massage her clit.

It didn’t take long for her to cum. Luka almost wished that she hadn’t, because it meant that she wasn’t making those beautiful sounds anymore. He lifted his head up, and Marinette yanked his face forward to kiss him. He was shocked for a moment, but then he relaxed into it. “That didn’t take much,” he said when the kiss broke.

“Be nice to me!” She requested in a fake whiny voice. “I haven’t had sex in five years!” Marinette looked at him, her eyes soft. She kissed him again, dragging her nails up his back. “Do you want to take this to the bedroom?”

Luka looked at his phone. “I would, but I was supposed to be back at practice by now.” He said.

“You’ve got to have memorized everything by now!” Marinette complained.

He chuckled. “Yes, but now I have to make sure that Rose doesn’t murder my sister.”

“Aren’t Juleka and Rose dating now that she’s broken up with Prince Ali?”

Luka shrugged. “Yeah, but this is before Jules tells her that she’s probably going to leave the band once she graduates and gets her degree in, of all things, mortuary science.” He chuckled again. “After all, my sister is kind of strange.”

“Rose is really going to flip, huh?” She said. There was a moment where they didn’t speak. Marinette frowned and looked up at him through her bangs. “You’ll be back, right?”

“Of course I will.” Luka said. He offered her his phone. She put her number in it and texted herself. “Maybe you could come to the after party?”

“Maybe! I’m not a whole lot of fun at parties…”

“You are wonderful wherever you go.” Luka said. He took this moment to brush her hair from her eyes. Marinette smiled, cupping his hand with both of hers. Luka left, and Marinette sat on the counter for a while after, her body warm with an emotion it hadn’t felt in years—longer than five years. Something she hadn’t felt since she was thirteen.

17 April, Two Years Ago

Adrien leaned against the wall of the elevator and tried to relax. This was the first time he was going to be with Marinette for the anniversary since he started dating Kagami, and he worried what that would mean for them. He was certain that he wasn’t going to handle it well. He had told her that he was going out and probably wouldn’t return home that night, but he wasn’t certain how well his ‘boys’ night with Nino’ lie would pan out. He hadn’t even woken her when he’d left this morning.
His phone buzzed. He grabbed it, already knowing who it was from. He replied to the text chain.

**me:** hey kagami you were sleeping when i woke up and i didn’t want to wake you. I’m headed out but i love you and i’ll see you tomorrow night

**Kagami:** you left without saying goodbye?

**me:** you worked the night shift yesterday

**Kagami:** That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have woken up to say goodbye

**Kagami:** we might have gotten breakfast

**Kagami:** Nino would have understood

**me:** I’m sorry, Kag

**me:** you looked so peaceful I didn’t want to wake you

**me:** let’s get breakfast tomorrow

**Kagami** is typing…

The elevator doors slid open. Adrien wasn’t paying attention and nearly walked right into Luka. “Oh! Hey, Luka.”

“Hey, Adrien.” He said with a smile. “I was just headed out. I know how important today is to you and Marinette…”

“I didn’t realize that you were here at all…” Adrien said.

“Oh, Marinette has been a little sickly these past few days. I thought that I would stick around in case she needed anything before you got here.”

“She’s ill?” Adrien said. He looked away. “She didn’t say anything to me…”

“Still, you probably shouldn’t keep her waiting.”

They switched places, and Adrien walked forward to Marinette’s apartment. He tried to put the thought of Marinette and Luka out of his mind. He had very conflicting feelings about their relationship. On the one hand, she was happy, and they loved each other, and it was good that she was finally in a relationship that wasn’t systematically isolating her from every single person who cared about her in an attempt to completely control her and everything she did.

On the other hand, even though he had gotten older, he was still a bitterly jealous person. Adrien felt horrible about it, because he liked Luka, but he was jealous enough to rip his vocal chords out so he never had to listen to him say her name ever again. This man, who he liked, who loved him like a brother—and Adrien hated him for loving the same person as him. His phone buzzed.

**Kagami:** I’m just a little cranky from the night shift. Have fun with your friend okay?

**Kagami:** I love you too

He didn’t need to be jealous of Luka. He had a girlfriend now. But the feeling didn’t fade. Adrien knocked on the door, and when it opened, he greeted her warmly. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were feeling sick?”

“You saw Luka on your way here, didn’t you?” She said. “Adrien, I’m fine. It’s just a stomach bug.”

“Still, you should have told me. I could have brought you something to calm your stomach.” He
reasoned. “Even if it was just some ginger tea.”

They sat down and spoke for a while, beginning their yearly ritual of waiting for nightfall. However, about two hours before sunset, Marinette stood, got sick, and collapsed on the floor.

“Marinette!” Adrien exclaimed, rushing to her side. She couldn’t meet his eyes, probably embarrassed about the vomit on her shirt. “This is definitely something more severe than a stomach bug. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.” He sat her up and pulled her shirt off. Marinette sighed as she reached for her crutches. As she tried to stand, Adrien noticed blue varicose veins on her stomach. He felt his blood run cold, and he could tell he was staring.

Marinette shuddered. “Adrien, I need help getting to the shower.”

He smiled. “Of course, my lady.” He helped her up. “Can I ask you some questions?” She nodded. “So, obviously, you’ve been nauseous and fatigued. Have you had any abdominal pain?” He asked.

“No more than usual this time of year,” she said, “but they started earlier.”

“Have you experienced any mood swings?”

“Again, no more than usual.”

He smiled to put her at ease. “What about—there are no secrets between us, right?” He asked. She nodded. “Have you noticed… tenderness in your breasts or any vaginal discharge?”

Marinette considered this. “I… haven’t really been paying attention?” She said. “Is there a point to this line of questioning?”

Adrien helped her into the shower. “Don’t worry, okay?” He said. He smiled at her. “You take your shower. I have to run and get something from the store, but I’ll be back before you know it.” He said. “I’ll be faster than fast! Five minutes, tops.”

Adrien closed the door and raced out of the apartment. There was a convenience store at the corner of the street. He quickly found and purchased the items he needed, and he sprinted back before she even got out of the shower. He waited outside the bathroom for her.

She jumped when she got out of the shower and saw him. She leaned against the threshold as he stood up straight. “I’m sorry I left you alone.” He shifted uncomfortably. He reached into his reusable bag and pulled out one of three boxes. “I… I want you to try this.”

Marinette took the box and turned it over. She read the label, and her face fell. “Adrien…” she said quietly, “…this is a pregnancy test.”

“Yes, it is.” He sighed. “Marinette, I don’t think you have a stomach bug. I don’t think that the nausea and abdominal pain are related to the anniversary.” He looked at her stomach. Now that he was looking at it, she was starting to show, even though she was wearing a towel. “I think you’re several weeks pregnant.”

She squeezed the box. “You know better than anyone that I can’t get pregnant. What Gabriel did to me with the knife—I can’t get pregnant!”

Adrien sighed again. “Marinette, you were thirteen when the doctors told you that—and they didn’t know that you’re part alien!” He reasoned. “We have no idea what your body is truly capable of!” She frowned and looked away from him. “Listen… maybe I’m seeing things. Maybe I’m crazy, but… please, just humor me.”
Marinette huffed. She looked at him and then slammed the bathroom door. Adrien hesitated, waiting for any sign that she needed him, but he could hear her urinating through the door. He tried to relax, though found he couldn’t. He sat down at the counter and waited for her to emerge. When she did, she was clearly angry. “This one is defective. I need you to get another one.” She ordered. She was still holding it, but she was covering the result so he couldn’t see it.

Still, he didn’t have to be a mind reader to know that the result had been positive, which she’d interpret as being defective. He reached into his bag. “I bought three, just in case.” He offered them to her. “Be grateful, because the woman behind the counter gave me a very disapproving glare.” He teased, though she was in no mood for it.

Marinette ducked inside the bathroom and was gone for a long time. Adrien took this time to prepare her home for nightfall. When she came out, she looked winded. He wrapped his arms around her and led her to the couch. She looked at her hands, staring at the positive result on the final test.

Adrien took a deep breath and looked at Marinette, rubbing her shoulder. “So… you’re pregnant.”

“How did this happen?” Marinette asked.

He smiled. “Well, surely you know.” He let his frown fall. “You were being careful with Luka, weren’t you?”

She hesitated. “I… I didn’t think I needed to be.” She looked at him. “We got tested together, and neither of us had an «maladie sexuellement transmissible,» and—” Marinette shook her head. “And I thought that I couldn’t get pregnant! So there wasn’t any reason to use condoms or birth control!”

Adrien sighed. “I know it’s too little, too late, but I really have to insist that you reconsider your choice not to use birth control—” Marinette frowned at him. “When your period is irregular, it can sometimes trigger your relapses! Birth control can help or even stop your periods.”

“Adrien, I thought that Gabriel had screwed me over for life!” She looked out the windows. “I thought that he had stolen any hope I had of a family from me, but—” She looked back at him, her eyes filled with tears but a smile on her face. “Adrien, I’m pregnant!” She laughed and hugged him, crying happy tears.

Adrien hugged her back. “Yes,” he said, “you are.”

She pulled away and rubbed her eyes. “Listen.” She said, trying to be serious. “There is a good chance that it will take me awhile to remember this tomorrow.” She took his hand. “Can you… stay the night and talk to Luka tomorrow morning? Your head will be on better than mine…”

He rubbed her hand. “Of course.”

And he kept his promise. He stayed with her through the relapse, and he stayed with her through the night. When she fell asleep, he carried her into her room and tucked her into bed. He noticed that, while he saw a few things which belonged to Luka, largely her room had remained the same. He disregarded that and left the room. He sat down on the couch and tried to pass the time as he waited for Luka to return. He tried everything to keep himself awake, but eventually, he fell asleep on the couch.

He woke with a start when someone touched his shoulder. “Aaaaah!” He exclaimed, feeling his heart pound in his chest.

Luka recoiled, and Adrien tried to calm himself. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t expect that you’d still be here.” Luka said. He seemed confused, not irritated. “I sort of thought this was a… one day
commitment.”

Adrien rubbed his eyes. “It’s more like a two-week commitment, it’s just that the first day is always the worst.” He clarified. He looked around groggily. “What time is it…?”

Luka frowned. “Is Marinette okay?” He asked. “She’s never relapsed around me. Juleka has told me about them but I’ve been fortunate enough not to witness one.”

He waved him off. “She’s fine, Luka. She’s just resting.” He explained. He stood up. “But, she did ask me to tell you something.”

“Is it… bad news?” He asked. “Should I be worried?”

Adrien considered this. “Uh… depends on your point of view.” When he returned eye contact with Luka, he realized that he hadn’t eased much of the tension. “Marinette hasn’t been sick these past few days. She hasn’t got a bug.” He took a deep breath. “She’s pregnant.”

Luka froze. Adrien actually saw every part of his body stop moving; he witnessed his blood turn to ice. He gently pushed Adrien out of the way so he could sit on the couch. He processed for a long time. “Marinette… she’s pregnant?” He asked. Adrien nodded. “But, I thought that she couldn’t get pregnant.”

“That’s what the doctor told her,” Adrien said, “but I guess they were wrong. Maybe her body has healed.”

Luka pushed his bangs from his face. He took a moment. “This is… wow, this is a lot.” He looked at Adrien firmly. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. She’s got all the classic signs, plus she peed on three pregnancy tests, so I’m pretty damn sure.” He said.

“Well—how far along is she?”

Adrien sighed. “Luka, I’m a nurse, not a gynécologie.” When he frowned, Adrien rolled his eyes. “Without an ultrasound, I can only guess. Maybe nine or ten weeks.” He paused. “I can tell you that she’s starting to show. It’s not very noticeable, but if you’re looking, you can see it.”

Luka took a few calming breaths. “Wow.” He said. “Just… wow.”

Adrien folded his arms across his chest. “What are you feeling right now?”

“Just shock! Genuine shock.” He said. “I never expected to—I’ve never thought about children.”

Adrien frowned. It was surprising that Luka had never considered children, as he knew that Marinette had always wanted them. “You have to do the decent thing, Luka.”

“I need to talk t—” Luka paused and looked up. “The decent thing?” He asked incredulously. He shook his head. “Adrien, what year do you think this is?”

He sighed. “Look, Marinette is sort of traditional in this way.” He reasoned. “My father screwed up her love map, so it doesn’t seem like it, but she’s going to want you to marry her. I doubt she’d be truly happy with any other commitment.”

Adrien didn’t know why he was bringing up marriage. He believed what he was saying was true, and for the most part, it was. But that wasn’t why he was saying it. Maybe he was trying to scare
Luka off? To impress upon him the reality of his situation—even though the reality was much bigger
than he was implying. Whatever selfish reason he had, it backfired.

“You’re right. I should talk to her.” Luka said. “But, if I’m going to marry her… you should walk
me through how to ease her out of a relapse.”

There was no malicious intent in Luka’s eyes. This was not, ‘if I’m her husband, you can’t see her.’
This was not, ‘I’m a better person than you.’ This was a man who cared very deeply about his
girlfriend, and who wanted to do right by her. Adrien felt a twinge of guilt and nodded. “I’ll do my
best.”

They worked together for a few hours. Luka took notes and had the idea to work the system into a
song, with the end product being a new way to calm her down. Adrien left a few hours later, feeling
a strange mix of guilt and… cautious optimism. His phone buzzed.

Princess: Luka proposed!! We want to get married after the baby is born!!
me: that’s great, Marinette! I’d say, pop the champagne, but you can’t drink it lol
Princess: >:p
Princess: I still can’t believe it! you’re going to be an uncle!
me: who am i related to in this scenario that makes me an uncle?
Princess: would you rather be the godfather?
me: uh, yeah, duh, was that even a real question?
me: you come into my house on the day my daughter is to be married
Princess: so you come to me, on this, the day of my daughter’s wedding
Princess: Wait is yours the actual line??

22 April, Present Day

Adrien found it difficult to focus with Marinette so close. He was distracted by every little thing
about her, from the smell of her hair to how she had straddled him to how her breasts were pressed
against his chest. Marinette had attached herself to his neck, surely with the purpose of leaving a
hickey. Adrien wove his fingers into her hair. He pulled it gently, as if to remind her that he was
present. Her lips left his neck with an audible ‘pop,’ and Adrien immediately returned the favor.

At first, it seemed like she enjoyed it, running her fingers through his blond hair and moving closer.
After a moment, though, she pulled away. She put her forehead on his shoulder and started shaking.
She was taking slow, deep breaths.

“Are you okay? Should we stop?” Adrien asked, pushing her back a bit so he could look her in the
eyes.

She waved him off. “I’m fine, Adrien. It’s just phantom pains,” she said. She took another deep
breath as she endured another pain. “I haven’t had them since the day after you told me that your
father had escaped, since I’ve been too preoccupied. It’s about time that they acted up.” Adrien
frowned. She shook her head. “But really! I’m fine! I just need a minute to catch my breath.”

“No, come on.” Adrien lifted her up and took her to the couch, propping her up with the pillows and
covering her with the blankets. “Is it your leg or your back?”

“My leg,” she said, pulling it up to hold the stump. She looked at it sadly, her hands instinctively going to nurse a wound that no longer existed, instead tracing air. She wrapped her arms around the stump and frowned. “It’s just… lingering…” She rubbed her eyes as tears started to collect on her lashes. “Why? Why does it feel like the universe is trying to keep us apart?!”

Adrien smiled at her. “Don’t be silly, my lady.” He said, rubbing her back. “This will pass.” He looked down the hall to his bedroom. “You haven’t taken your medication yet. It will help.”

Marinette said nothing.

He was quiet, too. “It will help, Marinette. That’s why we both take it.” He reassured her. “Do you want the anticonvulsant that Doctor Colonomos prescribed?”

“It makes me sleepy.” She said.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” Adrien said. “Some rest will probably make you feel much better.” He stood and went to fetch their medicine. Adrien kept the anticonvulsants in his refrigerator, and he added them to her medicine. He offered them to her with a glass of water. Marinette took her medicine and then passed the glass back to Adrien so he could take his as well. He then put the glass on the table. He pried her fingers from her leg, then pushed it down gently. Adrien hesitated for half a moment before he started to massage the residual limb.

Marinette pulled it up again. “What are you doing?”

“The last time I had the anticonvulsant prescription refilled, the pharmacist said that massaging the limb can help the pain a bit.” Adrien said. “I’m sorry, I should have asked first…”

“I mean, yes, but it’s okay.” Marinette said. “I was just a little startled! People don’t usually go out of their way to touch my leg.” She tried to relax, and he started to massage it again. “I think it might bother people…”

“Well, most people should learn to mind their own business.” Adrien said. He glanced at her. “Do you think it bothered Lila or Luka?”

“I think so. Lila insisted that I wear the prosthetic, and… I don’t know, Luka didn’t do that, but—” She shook her head. “I don’t think we should be talking about my ex-partners.” She shifted against the pillows. “Does it bother you?”

Adrien considered this. “Um… it used to?” He confessed. “I mean, it bothered me the way it bothered everyone who knew you. At first, we thought you’d lost it so you couldn’t run away, but then we learned from you that the opposite was true…” He sighed. “It made me sad for a long time, but… I don’t know, I guess as you started to adapt to it, you really started to showcase how clever you can be, and I’ve always loved and admired how smart you are.

“I know, perfect world and all that, but, it did happen, and you really made the best of it.” He shrugged. “Now, I’ve known you longer without it than I did with it, so… I don’t really think about it much at all, except this time of year because it bothers you more.”

Adrien looked down at Marinette. She’d fallen asleep during duration of his answer. He stopped rubbing her leg and covered her with blankets, and then began to brush her hair to one side of her face. He relaxed next to her, playing with her hair as she slept.

“I love you, Marinette Dupain-Cheng,” he confessed.
1 June, Two Years Ago

Adrien burst into Marinette’s apartment, sweaty and out of breath. Luka was pacing in the living room, hands tearing at his dyed hair. “Is she still in the bedroom?” Adrien asked, putting his hands on Luka’s arms to comfort him.

Luka nodded. “She’s locked herself in!”

As if on cue, Marinette screamed in agony. “Adrien, help me!” It was followed by sobs and painful groans.

He looked at Adrien with fear in his eyes. “I came here after we finished the week-long tour, and she was already like this!” He shook his head. “Adrien, I did everything you told me, but I can’t even open the door and I don’t know what’s going on!” He grabbed his arms. “She won’t calm down! She won’t tell me what happened!”

Adrien sat him down. “Luka, just stay calm!” He motioned to the door. “Marinette isn’t here right now, consciously.” They both flinched as she screamed again. “You did the right thing by calling me.”

Luka was still shaking. “She’s never relapsed in front of me before!” Adrien could see where the remnants of his stage makeup had smeared from his crying. “Adrien, this is so much worse than I ever could have imagined!”

“Luka, I need you to stay strong for me, okay?” Adrien said. He smiled and rubbed his arms. “Just wait here. I’ll let you know if I need anything, okay? This will be over soon.” Luka nodded. He leaned forward and covered his eyes with his hands. Adrien quickly gave him a glass of water before walking to the bedroom door. “Marinette, it’s me! I’m coming in, okay?”

Adrien used his powers to unlock the door, only to find that it wasn’t just the lock that was keeping him out, but also broken furniture. He pushed the door open until he could slide inside, then he shut it behind him. He moved some of the debris away from the door, flinching as Marinette screamed bloody murder. He turned and examined her room.

It looked like she’d fought for her life. She’d knocked over most everything, and much of it broke upon falling. Her bathroom light was still on, and he could hear the fan. There were clothes set out on the bed, like she had just gotten out of the shower but hadn’t redressed. There was blood on the floor, leading around the bed.

Adrien followed the blood. Marinette was curled up against the bed, her fingers clawing at the air as she sobbed. “Please! Someone, anyone, please help me!” She cried, and then she pulled her hands in to cup her pregnant belly. She was showing a lot now—the bump was very noticeable, a little larger than normal for sixteen weeks. Still, his shower theory held up, as her hair was soaking wet. She’d need another one, though, because she looked as sweaty as he felt.

Adrien fell to her side. “Marinette! Stay with me, Marinette!” He tried to get her to look at him. “He’s gone, Marinette! It’s me, Adrien, and I’m here, but you need to come back to me!”

“It hurts!” She curled up on herself and screamed. Adrien knew her screams—they were loud and desperate and an attempt to be heard. Obviously she was in pain, but the screams didn’t sound right.
He looked her over for any sign of physical injury, noting the blood that was running down her legs. He tried to get her to calm down by rubbing her head, but she wouldn’t have it. She used her powers to throw him against the wall hard enough to knock him unconscious.

He woke with a start. He looked at his phone, noting that he’d lost about about three minutes. He pulled himself off the ground and looked at where Marinette had been. She’d moved to the other side of the room, which wasn’t uncommon. She was probably following the steps she’d taken in the room. She was leaning against the bedside table on the other side.

Adrien moved to go to her side when he noticed something strange about the spot she’d been in. He moved to examine the pool of blood she’d left behind. It was blood, surely, but not just blood. Adrien wasn’t squeamish around it, so he poked around in it and found strange clots that looked like… liver, and something else he cautiously identified as membrane.

His heart fell into his stomach. “Oh, no,” he muttered.

He took a deep breath. Adrien stood and ran out of the room. He startled Luka, but otherwise ignored him to pull a ceramic bowl from the cupboard, a pair of scissors from the drawer, and a rag from the counter. He ran back into the room and locked the door behind him.

Adrien fell to Marinette’s side. “I know it hurts, Princess. I know it does.” He cooed. It was obvious now. This wasn’t the same kind of pain. This wasn’t a normal relapse. The stringy look to her hair wasn’t from the shower, but sweat. Adrien fought the tears in his eyes. “But it’s almost over, I promise.” He choked over his words. “I need you to push as hard as you can with the next contraction.”
Adrien threw open the door and placed the covered bowl on the counter as he started to run hot water. He washed the blood from his hands, scrubbing fiercely as he tried to calm himself down.

Luka approached him. “What’s going on?! What did you need the water for?!” He asked. Try as he may, Adrien couldn’t speak. Luka, understandably frustrated, slammed his hand down on the table. “Hey!” Adrien flinched before he turned off the water and put the covered bowl into the sink. He kept his hands on the bowl as he built up his nerve. Luka grabbed his shoulders and spun him around to get Adrien to look at him. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“Luka…” Adrien covered his mouth and started crying. “Marinette miscarried.”

Adrien could see that Luka was just as shocked as he was. As Adrien sobbed openly, he was frozen. He shook his head. “That’s… that can’t be true!” He argued. “She’s sixteen weeks! She’s in the second trimester! She can’t have miscarried!”

“I’m sorry, Luka.” He said. He couldn’t maintain eye contact. “God, I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t be sorry, because you’re wrong!” He shouted. “Marinette is just relapsing! We were just at the doctor’s office a few days ago! She—she’s going to be fine!” He had started to shake.

Adrien tried to calm his breathing. “There were pools of blood in her bedroom that have membrane in them.” He said calmly. “And there’s evidence that suggests that this episode might have started several days ago.”

“That—that doesn’t mean—”

“The baby has already come away,” Adrien interrupted. “I’m sorry, Luka. Your baby is dead.”

Luka was quiet for a long time. “Is… is that my baby in the bowl?”

Another pause. “Yes.”

Luka struggled with this. Adrien’s heart broke as he wrestled with this new development. They were to be new parents, and they had celebrated this. They’d been told that the second trimester was when things were supposed to get better—increased energy and sex drive, and of course the baby bump—but instead the baby had died inside the womb, and what was worse, Adrien realized, was he would have to have this conversation again with Marinette when she recovered.

“Can you call the hospital?” Adrien asked. “She was in labor for days. We should have her admitted.”

“Can I see the baby?” Luka asked.

Adrien glanced at the bowl. “Luka…” he turned to face him fully, blocking the bowl from his line of sight. “Luka, that’s not going to bring you any peace.”

“Adrien, I want to see it.”

“Luka, please.” He begged. “Please, wait until we get to the hospital.”
“No!” He was crying now, which made Adrien feel a little better, since he was now not the only one crying. “No, I want to see it now!”

Adrien sighed. He wanted to speak, but found any words he could have offered to be insufficient. “I should go wait for the placenta.” He walked away, knowing that the moment he closed that door, Luka would fish the child out of the bowl.

Luka’s hands were shaking when he did this. The baby was small, so very small—now that he could see it, he understood why people compared baby sizes to fruit. The baby was roughly ten centimeters long, about the size of a pear, or maybe an avocado. Despite being fully formed, it barely looked human. Its skin was purple, and translucent, and less covered in blood than he thought. He could see the veins, and the dark freckles that would have glowed when it got older. But most of all, he could see that it was a boy—Luka was holding his son. He started crying all over again.

The ambulance came not too much later. Marinette was taken to the hospital, where she was examined and given another ultrasound to make sure there was nothing left behind in her uterus, but when all was said and done, they found no reason to keep her for very long, and they made the decision to discharge her as long as she wasn’t still relapsing when she regained consciousness.

Marinette was groggy when she woke up. She was frightened when she realized she wasn’t in her home, but relaxed at the sight of Adrien. Her relaxation was short lived, because Adrien then had to explain that she had miscarried.

Marinette cried for hours. Whenever he thought she might be done, she started again. He eventually kicked off his shoes and climbed into the hospital bed with her so she didn’t have to keep reaching for him when her sobs got worse. Adrien cried with her.

Eventually, she had to stop crying. She rubbed her eyes, and she asked for a tissue to blow her nose. “Does Luka know? Did you tell him?” She asked.

“He does. He’s the one that called me.” He said.

Marinette looked around the room. She frowned when she didn’t see him. “Why isn’t he here?”

Had it been anyone else, Adrien might have lied, but it was Luka, and she’d already suffered enough. “I’m not sure. He might be working on funeral arrangements. Maybe he’s calling your families.” He said. “He might even just be sitting somewhere quiet with his guitar. He’s pretty grief stricken.”

“He should be here.” Marinette said.

“You lost a child, Marinette.” Adrien reasoned. “You both need time to grieve, in your own ways.” He looked down at his hands. “What day do you think it is?”

“The twenty-ninth of May,” she said.

“I had a feeling,” Adrien said. “It’s the first of June.”

“I—I lost three days?” She asked. She shook her head. “No! No, I spoke to you this morning, and my phone said that it was the twenty-ninth!”

“You started relapsing when the blood came. You might have meant to call me, but you never did.”

“No, I called you because of the blood!” Marinette said. “I was bleeding, and I was worried, so I called you, and—” Marinette was shaking. “Wait… no. No, I didn’t…”
“You didn’t… what?”

“I didn’t… call you. I was going to,” she said, pausing every so often. “But I didn’t. I remembered the doctor saying that spotting was normal… I just thought that I was overreacting.”

Adrien frowned. “But then the pains started…”

“I don’t remember. I remember taking a shower to calm my nerves, trying to get dressed and… then nothing.” She looked at him. “I was relapsing for three days?” He nodded. “I can’t believe none of my neighbors came to check up on me. I must have been screaming bloody murder.”

He didn’t want to say that her neighbors were so accustomed to screaming that they often didn’t react to her at all, so he was quiet. He took her hand and rubbed it gently, trying to comfort her.

“Adrien…” Marinette said quietly. She looked at him with sad eyes. “Do you think Luka is going to leave me?”

Adrien startled at the question, and he couldn’t think of an answer. “I-I… if he—”

She looked down. “I know that he only proposed because I was pregnant. But kids weren’t part of his plan, not originally.” She rolled her hands. “But now, I know he wants them… and I can’t give them to him.”

“Don’t talk like that. You don’t know that for sure,” He said. “We have no evidence to suggest that you can’t have a successful pregnancy if you try again!”

Marinette sat up straight. “No! No, I think we do!” She snapped. “The doctors—they didn’t mean that I couldn’t have children! They meant that I can’t carry them to term!” She was waving her hands. “What if—what if when my baby was growing, it came across a scar and it got disconnected from me? And then it died because it wasn’t getting what I was supposed to give it?”

Adrien reached up and took her hand. “Marinette, we don’t know why miscarriages happen. Late miscarriages happen in one percent of all pregnancies.” He explained gently. “We don’t know if your past is connected. Honestly, it’s probably not.”

“Maybe my baby saw my scars and didn’t want me to be its mother anymore.” She mumbled.

Adrien scoffed. “Now you’re just being silly. Any child would be blessed to have you as a mother.”

She glanced at him. “Adrien, I want your honest opinion. Do you think Luka will leave me after this?”

He chose his words very carefully. “I don’t think he’s going to leave right away. He loves you, and he knows you’re going to need support,”

“But you do think he’s going to leave.” Marinette clarified.

There was a long pause. “Yes,” he confessed, “I do.”

She looked at the wall. “So do I.” She sighed. “Can you go find him? I think we should talk before I go home.”

“Are you sure you don’t just want me to take you home?”

“No, it’s fine. He can do it, and I’m sure that I’ve already ruined your day.”
“No day spent with you is ruined, my lady.” Adrien kissed her hand, but he did as she requested. He leaned against the back of the elevator, lost in thought.

What an awful day! He’d almost completely forgotten that he’d run out on his date with Kagami. Instead, he was overtake with grief for poor Marinette. She had wanted this so badly… only for joy to come crashing down. He wanted to get started on a support group for her, but figured that telling people about the miscarriage wasn’t his place. Adrien dug in his pockets for a cigarette as he walked outside the building. He was struggling to light it when he heard a guitar.

Adrien followed the sound. Luka was sitting on a bench, strumming the strings on his guitar. His chords were sloppy, like his nerves were shot. Adrien watched for a few moments after lighting his cigarette, and once he’d taken a drag, he spoke. “How are you holding up?”

Luka moved his head, but didn’t look up nor did he look at him. “How is Marinette?”

“She’s waiting for you,” he reported.

He didn’t move. He strummed a few chords, and then returned to his song right after. “I don’t know if you had time to check while you were trying to coax her out of her relapse, but it was a boy.” Luka said. Adrien had made a quick note of it, but it hadn’t mattered to him. He realized now that it might have mattered to Marinette and Luka, and he regretted not paying more attention. Luka offered a half-hearted chuckle. “You know, Marinette and I did that parent thing where we both said that it didn’t matter so long as it was healthy, but… I really wanted a girl.” He paused again. “I mean, to the point where I was researching ways to guarantee a girl. Stupid reason for it, too.”

“Why did you want a daughter?” Adrien asked, as if it were relevant.

“Because I could give her a music name.” He said. “That was the only reason, really. I wanted to name her Mélodie.” He sighed. “Marinette must have been thinking of names, but I think I could have swung Mélodie.”

“It’s a beautiful name,” Adrien said.

“Yeah,” Luka said sharply, “but we had a son. We… we had a son, and we don’t anymore.” He put down the guitar and pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. “We had a son, but I don’t have a name to write on the birth—on the death certificate.”

Adrien took a deep breath. “Marinette must have—”

“She didn’t see him!” Luka shouted. Adrien motioned for him to quiet down—it was almost midnight now. “I saw him, before his color changed and before they took him away… and all I could think about was that I didn’t even have a name for him. I wanted a girl so much…” He looked up at the sky. “The one thing I could have given him… and I couldn’t even do that.”

“Luka, this is not your fault.” Adrien sat next to him. “You wanting a daughter didn’t kill your son.”

“I never said that!” He shouted. “It wasn’t my fault!” Luka snapped. He stood. “This—this is your fault! You and your tainted blood!”

Adrien could smell the alcohol now. He knew that Luka was grieving, so he tried to quash his annoyance that, while he had been explaining to Marinette what had happened, Luka had gone to a bar. “You don’t mean that. You’re just drunk.”

“No! No, I mean it!” Luka shouted. “Alya always said that bad things happen around you, and Gabriel—he’s the reason behind every terrible thing that has ever happened to Marinette!” He
pointed at him, accusing. “Bad things happen around you!”

“Yes, my father hurt her, and I know better than anyone that my powers are based in bad luck, but we don’t know if that’s why she miscarried, Luka.” Adrien reasoned, but Luka started shouting nonsense at him. He really hoped this was just a reaction to grief. He’d been jealous of Luka for a long time, but they were still very close. But even the idea that this man he considered his brother in reality hated him and only tolerated his presence… that was the cherry on top of a truly awful, irredeemable day. He looked away. “Marinette is waiting for you. She wants you to take her home, but I wouldn’t let her into her bedroom until we get the blood cleaned up.” Luka huffed, grabbed his guitar, and walked back towards the hospital. “Maybe you could swing Stone, since you both like Jagged Stone.”

Luka stopped in his tracks. “What are you talking about?”

“For the baby’s name.” Adrien said. He turned to face him. “Stone.”

Luka didn’t say anything. “Maybe.” He went inside.

Adrien started his long walk home. His mind festered in negative thoughts, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was responsible. Was Luka right? Did his powers kill their child? His powers might have killed Michael, after all… but Adrien had never wanted this! But… he had wanted Luka to leave Marinette… had Adrien subconsciously done this? Had he subconsciously killed Michael too? Did being around him make bad things happen? Adrien cut himself in an alley before reaching the townhouse. His phone buzzed as he opened the gate.

Princess: Adrien can you come back to get me?
Princess: I want to go see my parents
Princess: I already called them
me: on y va my lady

Adrien dug in his pockets until he found his keys. He got into his car and barely waited for the engine to turn over before turning around and heading for the hospital. He arrived a few minutes later, just as Luka and Marinette were leaving.

Luka opened the passenger side door and moved to help Marinette inside, but she climbed inside roughly, as if calling attention to how she didn’t need his help. He sighed and opened the backseat to throw her crutches in. “Luka—” Adrien started, though that was all he could say before he slammed the door.

Marinette wiped her face and sat as straight as she could. “I’m ready to go.” She said firmly.

“You don’t want to go with Luka?” He asked.

She shook her head. “He’s going to spend some time with his mother.” She said.

Adrie started to drive. He was quiet, not really sure what to say. He didn’t want to bring up Luka, and she’d endured enough pain for a long time. More than her share.

“I promise I won’t stay there for more than a couple of days.” Marinette said. Adrien looked at her from the corner of his eyes, not wanting to take them from the road. “I know that it isn’t safe to stay with them, because of Lila.” She looked down. “I’m just not ready to go back to where it happened.”

“I understand.” He paused. “If you need more time, you can stay with me!”
“Kagami will never allow that,” Marinette said.

“I’m sure she’d like you if she got to know you!” Adrien said hopefully.

“The Ice Queen? No way.” She said.

“It’s my damn house, Nette. If I say you can stay, you can stay. If she’s got a problem—”

“I don’t know how long Luka and I can survive this.” Marinette interrupted. She shook her head. “We’ve already fought more about this baby than we have about anything…”

“I didn’t know that you two were fighting.” Adrien confessed.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I thought that… I don’t know.”

“What are you thinking about?”

She rubbed her eyes. “I just don’t understand why everyone wants to keep you from me!” She let out a sob before covering her mouth. “You are my best friend!”

Adrien paused. He frowned. “Luka told you that he thinks the miscarriage is my fault.” She nodded. “Luka is grieving, Marinette. He’s also drinking. He’s probably not putting a whole lot of thought into what he’s saying.” He reasoned. “He’ll apologize when he sobered up.”

“Being drunk is not an excuse!” Marinette argued. “And he wasn’t drunk when he told them to cremate the baby!” She started crying again. “I didn’t even get to see him!”

“Nette, I am so sorry…”

“He said that… he said—” Marinette shook her head and looked away. “Adrien… I think I’m done talking now.”

He nodded. “I’m here for you, whenever you need me.” It wasn’t too much longer before they reached the bakery. He parked so the passenger side was facing the door. Marinette opened it and hung her leg out as Adrien took her crutches from the back seat. He could see her parents in the doorway, waiting for her.

Adrien walked with her, worried that that her leg would give out. When she got closer, Tom opened the door. Marinette walked a bit closer before dropping her crutches and falling into his arms, grief bringing sobs anew. Tom picked her up and carried her inside.

Sabine took a step outside. She offered a sympathetic smile to Adrien before handing him a box of croissants. “You’ve had a long night. You need to rest as much as she does.” She advised. He took the box and smiled back when Sabine rubbed the back of her hand across his cheek. “Maybe you could come by tomorrow. I’m sure she’d be glad to see you.”

“I will. Thank you, Madame Dupain-Cheng.”

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22 April, Present Day

Adrien had taken a cold shower. Once she’d woken up, Marinette had taken a warm bath and
changed her clothes. Now, they were on the couch, the television playing music videos in the background. Neither one of them was listening, however, as they’d elected to make out instead.

He would have been lying if he had said that he had never dreamed about this moment. It wasn’t often in his life that the expectations set by him in his fantasies met reality, but it was even rarer that they were exceeded. He couldn’t get over how soft and warm Marinette’s skin and lips were, or how well she kissed. He felt her arms wrap around him, messing up his hair and his clothes. Adrien was using one of his arms to keep himself supported, as he was laying on top of her, but the other he had wrapped around her thigh and dug his nails into, like he was holding it hostage. Regardless, Marinette had relaxed into him. He could feel the soft tingle of her powers as they idly reached for things around them. She was soon subconsciously levitating the both of them, which caught Adrien by surprise, since he was no longer supporting himself.

He yelped and fell forward, breaking the kiss and Marinette’s dazed state. They fell back to the couch, and she yelped, too, as she was sort of crushed under his weight. “Sorry!” He apologized as he sat up. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” Marinette giggled as she shifted. She looked at him with her beautiful eyes. Adrien reached for her face. “I’m sorry, too. My powers are affected by my emotions, and I haven’t been so happy in a long time.”

“Is it common for you to levitate?” He asked.

“No,” she said, “but maybe I just wanted to try zero-G kisses for a change.” She shrugged. “It was great until you crushed me.”

Adrien laughed. “I’m sorry! I won’t do it again. I promise.” He shifted until Marinette was underneath him comfortably, and then he kissed her. His lips wandered from hers, tracing her jaw and her throat, as if he were trying to draw a picture of her in his head. He could hear small sounds of pleasure as she pressed her body closer to him. Adrien scraped his teeth across her neck, gently making his way down…

…where he latched on like a leech and blew air on her neck, making a loud, silly sound. Marinette yelled and then squirmed as she laughed loudly. “Oh my god!” She kicked her leg and pushed him away. “Tease! Tease!” She accused as she laughed uproariously.

Adrien laughed, too. He smiled when he had finished, though Marinette was still laughing. He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. Marinette looked at him, her smile gentle and shy. “I’ve wanted this moment for so long…” he whispered, “and this is better than anything I ever could have dreamed.”

They moved to kiss again when a flash of light distracted them. Marinette rubbed her face as Adrien rolled his eyes and sat up. They both looked at Alya and Nino, who had materialized in the living room, right behind the coffee table.

Nino looked relieved to find them unharmed, but Alya saw the position they were in and became visibly tense. Adrien tried to ignore it as Nino came in for a hug. “I’m so stoked that you’re safe, dude!” He said, breaking the hug to look into his eyes. “We heard they busted Aza, but…”

“Gabriel didn’t tell Aza about Marinette’s powers.” Adrien said. He grinned. “You should have seen her! She totally kicked his ass.”

Alya smiled at Marinette. “Guess that explains why they took him to the hospital instead of to the prison.”
“I didn’t mean to hurt him so badly! I hope he recovers,” Marinette said, pulling her hands in.

“Aza is total scum! Don’t sweat him.” Nino advised. “I guess you bailed on the apartment then.”

Adrien nodded. “It isn’t safe anymore. We came here for the night, but we’re brainstorming safer locations.”

“I don’t know how he found us there!” Marinette said.

Alya folded her arms across her chest. “Isn’t it obvious? Someone—” here, she glared at Adrien. “—told him where to go!”

Marinette frowned at her. “I’ve been with Adrien every moment of every day!” She said. “If he had told Gabriel where to find us, I would have known!”

Nino took Alya’s shoulder. “Babe, Gabe probably traced the call.” Nino said gently. “If he searched around to figure out where Adrien worked, he would have found records of his cellphone number, and he could have used that to trace his location.”

“I thought we’d dismissed that claim!” Alya rubbed her eyes. “Whatever.”

“There are plenty of ways that Aza could have found us,” Marinette said, taking a brief moment to think. “Maybe one of his lackeys was following Sabrina! She’s a police agent who’s working on apprehending him, and we went to school with her.”

“The point is, you can’t stay here. This is going to be the first place that his people look for you!” Alya said. She glared at Adrien. “It was a mistake to bring her here!”

Adrien opened his mouth to argue, but Marinette spoke first. “There weren’t a whole lot of options!” She said. “My parents live too far away—and it wasn’t like you were around to teleport us somewhere!” She folded her hands into her lap. “We did the best we could with what we had.”

“I can take you to the safe house.” Alya said. She looked at Nino. “It’s completely sealed from the outside. The only way in and out is by teleportation. I can take you there, and you’ll be hidden.”

Tu, not vous. She was talking about Marinette, not Marinette and Adrien. “I’m not going by myself!” She declared firmly.

“Marinette, be reasonable! If you go alone, the only person who will know where you are is me!” Alya said.

“But I’m not his only target! I need Adrien; I’m not going anywhere without him!”

Before they could debate the point further, the door swung open. Adrien immediately covered Marinette with his body, while Alya grabbed Nino’s arm to teleport him should the need arise. But their precautions were pointless—rather than a stooge of Gabriel’s, Chloé Bourgeois ran up the stairs.

She had cut her hair short, so her wavy blonde hair now lapped at her shoulders. She wore a black blouse and a shimmery gold jacket. Her white pants clung to her legs, and her gold-colored shoes shimmered in the low light of Adrien’s townhouse. “Oh, Adrihoney, it’s a catastrophe!” She cried, running into his arms. Her diamond jewelry scraped against his skin. “Things just keep getting worse!”

Adrien pried her hands off of him. “Chloé, what are you talking about? The police have
apprehended almost half of the convicts now!” He smiled at her. “Things will be over soon—”

“You’re! Being! Ridiculous!” Chloé shouted, planting her feet and balling up her hands. “And you clearly haven’t been watching the news!” She looked around until she found the remote control, and she flipped through the channels. “It’s breaking news! A top story!”

She flipped past a news channel and had to go back. Reporter Clara Contard was standing outside a building with tall walls and a chain link fence. Chloé’s channel flipping had cut off the start of her sentence.

«…of prison breaks, this one at the Centre Pénitentiaire de Rennes-Vezin. While police are still investigating how weapons were snuck into the facility, exits are now secured, and an accounting of casualties and fatalities has begun.»

Chloé put her hands on her hips. “It must be Gabriel!”

Nino looked at Alya. “How did he squirm past the roadblocks?” He asked.

Marinette pulled her hands in and looked at Adrien. “Didn’t you say that Nathalie was imprisoned in Rennes?”

Adrien couldn’t speak for a moment. “Yes,” he said weakly, “I did.”

Alya spun to face Chloé. “You didn’t hear this right now! Do you know who escaped?”

“I don’t think anyone did!” She said. She started twirling her jewelry. “I heard through the grapevine that Nathalie was transferred after the first prison break, since Gabriel knew where she was.” Chloé shrugged. “Since, you know, she was convicted before he was.”

Marinette shuddered. “He must have gone on a rampage when he learned that she wasn’t there!” She looked at the floor. “Those poor people! They don’t have anything to do with this!” She paused. “And Nathalie… when she hears about this, she’ll feel so guilty…”

Adrien shot up. “Who cares about Nathalie?! After what she did to you—” he shook his head. “We have bigger problems! My father—he’s almost seventy, his powers are non-offensive, and he doesn’t know how to win in a straight-up fight!”

Alya’s eyes grew wide. “And since he didn’t break your bodyguard out…”

Nino finished her thought. “Yo, he’s got help on the outside!”

Marinette frowned. “It goes beyond this attack on the women’s prison.” She said. “This person wouldn’t just have helped him past the roadblocks. They probably also helped him organize the escape from la Santé!”

“Who would do that? What would they gain?” Nino asked. “I mean, I guess I could see why someone might have helped him a gazillion years ago, when he had money and power, but now he’s a wrinkly, gross geezer without two euros to rub together.”

“And, let’s not forget, he’s a pedophile-slash-murderer!” Alya pointed out. “The only people who hang out with pedophile-slash-murderers are other pedophiles and murderers!”

“And perhaps the odd sex trafficker,” Chloé added, as if it were relevant.

Marinette used her powers to grab her crutches. “It doesn’t matter,” she said as she stood. “We could
argue all day about who his accomplices are, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s not in Paris
anymore.” She looked at them sternly. “But he knows that Adrien and I are here. We have to use this
time to plan our next move, or we’re just going to be sitting ducks!”

Adrien frowned. “As expected, the police are useless.” Chloé frowned at him sadly. “I don’t think
we should turn away their help, I just don’t think we should count on their help being any great use
to us.”

“For once… I agree with Adrien.” Alya confessed. This startled everyone in the room, but Alya
wasn’t looking at them. “The best we can hope from them is that they track down the rest of the
escaped convicts.”

“We have to stop this quickly. The French Police don’t exactly have a sterling reputation.” Adrien
said. “As soon as Gabriel has who he needs, the moment he comes back here, he’ll turn citizens
against them as a distraction. Lots of innocent people will be hurt.”

“We can’t let that happen!” Nino said. He frowned. “But… yo, how do we stop it?”

They all fell silent. They had learned a long time ago that they hated silences like this, for it was here
that the emptiness within them screamed the truth. Thankfully, this silence came with a promise from
the television. “President Bourgeois has issued this statement in reference to the latest prison breaks:”

«The People of France are living in fear. Their normally peaceful days are now filled
with terror as they are faced with the harshest realities of the darkness of our world.
Our police officers are dedicated to stopping this threat, but as it spreads, they are
thinning… to protect our people, we are currently drawing contracts with many
supernaturals both inside and out of France, until this threat is captured and
neutralized.»

Alya grinned and clapped her hands together. “That’s it! Chloé’s father is bringing in the
superheroes, and we all have powers!” She said excitedly. “We approach him as new heroes from
outside Paris, and we can use our powers publicly without fear of being reported!”

Chloé seemed excited, too. “We can take the fight to him instead of hiding in the shadow!”

“I mean, it’s a good idea, and it isn’t like Gabriel could control you,” Marinette said cautiously, “but,
I don’t want to face Gabriel again, and while I can’t speak for Adrien, I know that I wouldn’t be very
comfortable knowing that he was out facing him, either.”

Adrien looked at her. “I’m not leaving your side until my father is back in prison.”

Nino shrugged. “We aren’t totally powerless!” He said. “I’m not saying we’ll take any bogus risks,
but at the very least we can get some insider scoops to help protect you.”

Chloé winked at them. “Trust your friends to help!”

Marinette sighed and looked down. “Fine!” She looked up at them with tired eyes. “If you three are
going to be masquerading as superheroes, you’ll need costumes. I need you to go to my apartment
and get my supplies.”

Adrien moved to his end table. “You can borrow my keys.” He looked down to grab it when he
received a text message.

**Unknown:** When you see this, claim you missed a call from Hôpital Alexandrine
Rayne and you need to return it. I have information for you that will help you defeat
Gabriel Agreste.

Adrien looked at his friends before returning his attention to the messages. He gave the keys to Nino and then smiled. “I got a call from the hospital. I should make sure that everything is okay.” He excused himself and ducked into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. He looked at his phone and took a deep breath before calling the unknown number.

It rang four times before someone answered, an exceedingly difficult time to wait when his knees were shaking. “Good morning, Adrien,” Nathalie Sancoeur said as Adrien startled. “I’m glad that you called.”

“Nathalie?!” He moves closer to the wall and lowered his voice. “How did you get my new phone number?!?”

“I’m barely fifty years old, Adrien. I do know how to use a computer.”

“What the fuck are you having me call you for?! Did it occur to you that I might not want to talk to you?!”

“I know that we all hurt you, and Marinette, but you have to understand that your father forced us to do those terrible things.” Nathalie said. “I’m so sorry. That wasn’t me—you have to believe me!”

Adrien was shivering. “Nathalie… you raped her, too. How am I supposed to forgive you for that?!”

“I’m not seeking forgiveness, Adrien. There is none to find in this world.” She said quietly. “What I am here to offer you is information that you might find useful.”

“What is it?”

“The location of your mother.”

Adrien froze. He put down the toilet lid and sat down. “My mother—she’s alive?!” He asked. “I… for so long, I thought that my father had killed her, but… you say she’s alive?!”

“Your mother was once very dear to your father, as you were.” Nathalie said. “His devotion to you is what drew me to him, and secured my downfall.” She paused. “Your mother had a way to control his murderous rage. They were together for fourteen years, and during that time, he never killed a soul.”

Adrien looked out the window. “So… if we find my mother, we might be able to convince her to tell us her secret? To control him long enough for the police to arrest him?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re certain she’s alive?”

“I watched her leave.”

Adrien paused. His eyes fell to the ground as he asked, “If my mother is alive, why didn’t she take me with her? Or at least come to get me when everything came to light?”

Nathalie didn’t speak. “I couldn’t tell you, Adrien. I don’t even know why she left.” She paused, too. “It’s just something to consider. Please, be safe.” She hung up.

Adrien looked at his phone. He sighed and stood up, moving to unlock the door. He jumped when purple light filled the room, and Alya materialized. “Alya, a locked bathroom door usually means
occupied.” He quipped.

But she was angry. “You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve, you know that?!” She hissed. She poked his chest. “Marinette is so vulnerable right now, and you’re taking advantage of that!”

“Alya—”

“Don’t try to deny it! I know what I saw! And even if I hadn’t—” Alya reached for his neck and poked it right where a hickey had started to form. “—the proof is right in plain sight.”

Adrien felt something in his head snap. He put his phone down and laughed sarcastically. “Oh ho! So now you want proof to support the claims you make! And here I thought that you were a fucking mudslinger, just throwing wild accusations around and seeing what sticks!” He waved his hands around. “Why don’t you blame me for the Notre Dame Fire, while you’re at it?!”

“Alya—”

“No, no—I’ve had enough!” Adrien shouted. “I’ve put up with this for fifteen years, Alya! I’ve put up with your wild accusations based on nothing but rumor and lies for fifteen years! I’ve hidden away my feelings for Marinette for fifteen years—and I just today learned that she might feel the same way about me!

“And look, I get it, okay? I get that it’s easier to blame me, to think that I was keeping secrets, than it is to accept that there wasn’t anything we could do to prevent what happened to our poor Marinette.” He said. “But this? You accusing me of taking advantage of her?! After fifteen years of loving and caring and helping her—you have the audacity to even think that, let alone to say it to my face?!”

Alya was shaking as she stuck her finger in his face. “You are a bad person, Adrien Chevalier.” She hissed. The accusation shook him to his core. “You’re a liar and an addict and a drunk! And I don’t know what you’re getting out of this—if you’re stealing her drugs, or if you think you’re going to be able to just do whatever you want to her—but if you hurt her, I swear to God I’ll beat your ass and drop it at eleven thousand meters!”

Adrien curled his fingers in, dragging his nails on the sink. It wasn’t fair that she had his insecurities pegged. It wasn’t fair that she was wrong, and yet she won every argument they had! His body started to shake as he fought the tears in his eyes. “I’ve been clean since I was nineteen, and sober for three months,” he confessed.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, three months this time, is it?” She asked. “Well, I’m sure that will be very comforting the next time you overdose.” She looked at his expression and sighed. “Don’t even try that! I’m completely immune to that look.”

“I’m not trying anything, I’m upset,” Adrien said as he wiped his eyes.

“She’s my best friend! I have to protect her from people who want to hurt her!”

“Because you did such a great job with Lila!” He covered his mouth in sarcastic shock. “Oh, wait! You didn’t protect her from Lila, because you were too busy kissing her ass and hanging on every lie she fed you!”

“It’s not like you did any better!”

“At least I said something!” He poked her. “Where are you when she hurts so bad she can’t walk? Where are you when her neighbor pounds on her door shouting expletives at her? Where were you when she miscarried?!” Years of arguing, and it seemed like Adrien had finally struck his first
deciding blow since the original. Alya startled and looked away, ashamed. He felt bad for having brought it up. “Alya, I don’t expect you to like me. I just… want you to understand. Marinette and I have a lot of shared trauma, and…”

Alya looked back at him. “And what?”

He sighed. “And, she has seen the worst parts of me. I just think that it’s rare to find someone who sees the parts of you that have haunted and broken you… and still wants to be around you.” He said.

There was a long moment of silence. Eventually, Adrien pushed past Alya and left the bathroom. She grabbed the threshold and waited a moment before following him.

Adrien waited for the others to leave before addressing Marinette. “That was Nathalie on the phone. I’m sorry that I lied, but I don’t think she wants many people knowing that she’s helping us.”

Marinette seemed surprised. “I know that we had talked about reaching out to her, but I didn’t realize that you actually had.”

“I didn’t. She reached out to me. I guess she Googled me or something?” Adrien shrugged. “I don’t know how. But she did give me some information.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She said that we should try to find my mother. She said that she has some way to control him.”

Marinette’s jaw dropped. “Adrien—your mother is alive?!” He nodded. “I can’t believe it! I was certain that she was dead!”

“Honestly, I think I had convinced myself that she was, too, because then I didn’t have to wonder why she didn’t come to get me.” He lamented. “I mean, I haven’t seen her in sixteen years… I wonder how she’s changed.”

“Are you sure that you want to find her?” She asked.

Adrien smiled. “She’s my mother, Nette. I’ve always wanted her in my life.”

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay. Let’s find your mom.”

André Bourgeois looked out his window. He closed the curtains and sighed. “The situation is out of control. Many days have passed and there is still a dangerous murderer on our streets.” He said sadly. “A man I knew turned out to be a killer, and now I fear that he will kill anyone who stands in his way. I fear for my life, the life of my daughter, and many others.” He sat down. “While I worry about the consequences of this choice… I find myself in the uncomfortable position of needing outside help.”

With the curtains drawn, it was hard to see in his office. He saw the supernatural in front of him strike a match and light a cigarette. “I completely understand your hesitation. Where superheroes go, trouble often follows.” Volpina offered a wolfish grin. “But it would be more than my honor to take down Gabriel Agreste for you.”
23 April

Adrien stretched his spine when he woke. After a bit of thoughtful debate, Marinette had convinced him to sleep in his bed with her, like they had on the couch but more comfortable. However, when he opened his eyes, he found that she wasn’t next to him.

The wave of panic hit him like a brick. “Marinette?!” He called out, eyes searching frantically for her. “Marinette!”

Adrien yanked the covers off and raced out of the room. He threw open the doors to the rooms, every moment bringing new fear. Adrien could feel his heart pounding out of his chest, and he tripped over the coffee table trying to run around.

“Marinette!” Adrien shouted as he scrambled to his feet.

“Adrien, what’s the matter?”

In his amped up state, Marinette’s voice frightened him. When he realized that it was her, he looked for where it had come from. She was sitting on the landing next to the front door, on the steps leading to the basement. She must have been down there, and had made her way up when she heard him frantically searching for her. Now she stared up at him, her eyes wide and innocent.

She frowned slightly, but she still looked so innocent. “Adrien?”

He glanced back at the bedroom. “When I woke up, you were gone…” He shook his head. “I was just worried something bad had happened, or that someone had taken you.”

She smiled gently. “You sleep lightly, and I sleep even worse than you.” She said. “You would have heard it if something bad had happened.”

“You’re right, but you know me!” He joked as he folded his arms across his chest. “I never listen to reason.”

Marinette laughed. It was such a sweet, happy sound that it broke his melancholy, and he’d think of it all day. “Sad, but true!” She giggled into her hand. She waved for him to follow her. “Come see!”

She scooted down a step on her bottom. Adrien looked at his state of undress—he was only in a light gray undershirt and his dark teal boxer briefs—before looking back at her. “Can I get dressed first?” He asked.

Marinette paused. She looked him over, maybe pausing a bit too long on his exposed tattoos and his boxer briefs, and then she grinned. “I think I would prefer it if you didn’t. Is that wrong?” She asked as he chuckled and shook his head.
Adrien followed Marinette down the stairs. She’d turned his basement into a design studio. Rose and Juleka’s dresses were set up next to the bar, but that clearly wasn’t what she wanted to show him. Further in were three super suits on mannequins. The first was striped yellow and black, like a bee, the second was green with hexagonal patterns and a hood, and the third was orange, white, and black.

“I’ve been working all night long. Once I got it in my head, I couldn’t stop.” Marinette said.

“Look at you, my little Edna Mode.” Adrien said, nudging her with a grin. “What brought this on?”

Her smile was replaced by a serious expression. “Unregistered superheroes are still illegal in France. If our friends claim to be from here, the government might insist they register once this is over.” Marinette said. “So, they’re going to come from outside France. But people who are paying their own way to come here and fight a serial murderer with no qualms about killing people with powers aren’t going to be newbies.” She motioned to the costumes. “So, they need to look professional.”

“You did all three of these in one night?” Adrien asked incredulously.

“My powers make it pretty easy to multitask,” Marinette shrugged.

He pointed to the orange one. “That one looks similar to that mercenary you and Alya were talking about. Volpina.”

“Yes. You had pointed out that we didn’t know much about her, so I did some digging.” She opened his laptop and showed him some articles she had found. “So, the thing about Volpina is that she belongs to this network called Foxglove. They’re a bunch of supernaturals with low-level psychic powers of all sorts, with their major base of operations in Cairo.” She looked at him. “They’re basically all fox-themed spies. New agents pop up all the time. Volpina is the most famous, but there’s the Gray Fox in London, and la Zorra in Sante Fe.”

“It can’t be easy to keep track of so many agents.” Adrien criticized.

“Well, vigilantism isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be.” She reasoned. “Plenty of people take up the mantle, but few are skilled enough to survive to First Contact.” She smiled at Adrien. “Thankfully, that won’t matter to us. To avoid crossing wires, Foxglove rarely sends two agents the same data cache. If Alya takes up the mantle of Rena Rouge, her journalistic connections will pass as insider information.”

Adrien smiled. “Or, better yet, Foxglove hears about her and actually starts sending her data caches.”

Marinette agreed with a sigh. “Perfect world, and all that, right?” She pointed to the green suit. “Nino will be Carapace. He and Alya have the same cover story—they’re from Fort-de-France, Martinique. Alya grew up there, and they went on vacation there seven months ago, so they’ll know enough to pass as heroes.”

He looked at the last costume, the yellow one. “So Chloé is the Queen Bee here?”

“I was going to call her Yellow Jacket because of what a pain she is,” she muttered, “but Queen Bee suits her better.”

Adrien laughed. “What’s her cover story?”

Marinette cringed. “I need you to convince her to say that she’s from Montreal!” She said, taking his hands. “If she claims to be from New York, like I know she’ll want to, her identity will be figured out within hours!” She looked up at the ceiling. “We’ve all seen Spider-Man movies. New York has
photos of every hero in city limits, and it won’t take long for someone to realize that she isn’t from there.”

“But Montreal is safer.” Adrien said. She nodded. He smiled at her. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Our friends are risking their lives to help us! We owe it to them to keep them safe.” She said. She closed her laptop. “But these costumes aren’t ready yet. I need small cameras to put in the fabric, so we can see what they see.” He seemed confused. “It’s the last piece of security I can offer. Chloé can fly, Alya can teleport, and Nino can breathe underwater, so they can get away if your father targets them, but they’re pretty much useless in a straight-up fight. But if I can see what’s around them,” she looked at her hands, “I can even the odds. I can be their lucky charm.”

“Have you thought of a way to protect them if they get swarmed by people my father is controlling?”

“Getting away is easy,” Marinette said. “Protecting the people is harder. But I do have an idea.” She cringed. “It’s not dangerous, technically, but it is, like, a super uncool move.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“You aren’t going to love it. I hate it, and it’s my idea.” She sighed. “We should arm them with flashbang grenades.”

His jaw dropped. “Oh.” He paused. “That actually sounds really dangerous…”

Marinette shook her head. “If they warn me first, I can create a field that traps objects within a certain mass, which can prevent any potential physical damage.” She reasoned. “If our friends use them right, it will keep crowds from hearing any orders that Gabriel gives them.” She didn’t seem to have even convinced herself. “But, they will probably be disoriented. They might not run from him, even if they recognize him, and there is still the risk of our friends panicking and throwing one before I get the chance to put up the field. People could get hurt.”

“People are already hurt.” Adrien reasoned.

“I trust your judgement. Do you think I should tell them where to find and how to use the grenades?”

He considered this. “Not all of them.” He said. “Only give them to Alya. She’s the least prone to panic, and the most likely to remember your instructions.”

Marinette nodded. “That’s probably smart.” She looked at Adrien, who looked back with a smile. She sat up straight and took a deep breath. “Um, not that this is out of the way… I was thinking we could talk about something more serious.”

Adrien chuckled. “More serious than sending our friends to fight my father?” He shrugged. “Though, I guess we are sending them in skin tight pajamas and domino masks!”

She chuckled. “I guess I meant serious as in personal.” She hesitated. “I really… don’t know what this is yet, but I do know that I don’t want to mess it up!”

Adrien took her hand. “You aren’t going to screw this up,” he reassured her.

“I just… I wanted to talk about…” Marinette paused. Adrien felt the tension in his back rising. “I wanted to talk about us… having sex.”

He jumped a little and was startled enough that he couldn’t speak for a moment. “Oh!” He relaxed a
little bit after that. “I didn’t expect this conversation so soon.” But he smiled at her. “I do think that it’s important that we have it, though. I want you to feel safe with me.”

“I do feel safe with you, which is why I want to talk about boundaries.” She said. She looked at the wedding dresses briefly before looking down. “I, um… I think that we should wait a little bit longer before we have sex. At least until the anniversary has passed.” She covered her face. “Please don’t be mad at me!”

“That sounds—why would I be mad at you?” Adrien asked.

“I—I don’t know!” She frowned. “Adrien, sex… changes relationships. As much as we try to pretend it doesn’t…it does.” She put her hands in her lap. “And it will.”

He smiled gently. “Sex might change our relationship, but it won’t change us, Nette.” He poked her in the side. She batted his finger away with a quick grin on her face. “I’m still going to be a goob.”

She stood, grabbing her crutches. “I want to be smart about this. I don’t…I don’t know how to take this.” She dropped her crutches to lean on the bar. “My past relationships have all gone pretty badly.” She was quiet when she heard him walk closer. “I took things slow with Lila because I knew that I had a lot to work through, and she still abused me. I jumped into bed with Luka because I thought that I was wasting time, and that failed too.”

“Lila wanted to take things slow so she could isolate you, and Luka always jumps into things head first.” Adrien shrugged. “Literally, in your case.”

Marinette chuckled. But, then she hummed, a low sound that didn’t commit to anything but a thought. “How do you want to take this?” She asked, pushing against the granite to look at him. She held up a finger when he first opened his mouth. “Think before you speak! I don’t want you to say that you want what I want.”

He thought about this. He straightened his back and took a breath. “I just want…to be allowed to love you.” He looked down. “I want to be able to say and show that I love you. I want to be able to say that I’m in love with you, and not feel like it’s…wrong.”

Marinette smiled, but it was sad. “Alya shouted at you again, didn’t she?”

“Yes, and I know that she’s just angry about everything still.” He said. “I try not to take it to heart, but she touched a nerve this time.” He looked away. “Besides, it isn’t like she’s the only person who takes an issue with my love for you.”

“True. There’s Lila…”

“And my uncle, my cousin, plus Kagami,” he listed. “Though granted, I think they all thought I fell in love with you after. Which would have been weird if it was how we had met.”

Marinette grabbed a bar stool and sat down. She debated her words for a second. “Maybe this would be easier if we…figured out what we are to each other.”

“Good idea. Want to change our relationship status to soulmates?” He joked.

She giggled. “You really can’t take anything serious today!” She said. “I mean it, though.” She searched his eyes. “Who am I to you?”

Adrien considered this. He had waited so long to even just kiss her, part of him just wanted to say ‘wife’ and carry her to the courthouse in his underwear.
However, this sentiment didn’t seem to carry into the silence. Marinette, nervous, said the first thing that came to her mind. “And they were roommates!”

“Oh my god, they were roommates,” Adrien said in turn. They laughed, Adrien shaking his head. “No, I don’t mean to hesitate.” He said.

“So… not roommates.” She said.

“I want you to be my girlfriend, Marinette.” He said. She smiled at him. “I know that it’s dangerous right now, but I want to be with you. I really do.”

Her face was bright pink. She looked away. “I want that, too.” Her eyes darted back, and her smile grew. “So… you’re my boyfriend?” He took her hand and nodded. She giggled madly and looked down. “This feels so awkward!”

Adrien moved closer so he could hug her. “It’s important we discuss this stuff!” He said as she laughed.

“I feel so silly calling you that!”

“Would it feel better if I took you on a date?” He asked. He moved to look at her face, committing the image of her cheeks burning hot to his memory. “Come on. Let me take you to dinner!”

“Adrien!” She scolded as he pulled gently on her wrist.

“Dinner and a movie. Everybody’s first date. Come on,” he said.

“Adrien, it’s seven o’clock in the morning!” She argued with a laugh.

“Ohay,” he said, raising his hands in false defeat before taking her wrist again. “Breakfast and a movie. Nobody’s first date. Come on; we’d be pioneers!”

“Adrien!”

They were laughing when a familiar purple light flashed. Marinette panicked and used her powers to block Adrien’s undressed state from Alya’s unsuspecting eyes by hiding him behind Rose’s wedding dress. Despite the fact that Alya looked serious, they couldn’t banish their giggles. Nevertheless, she smiled. “You two are in a good mood!” She said. She leaned back on her heels. “White is definitely not your color, though.”

“It’s true! I’m much more dashing in black!” Adrien quipped. He leaned forward and draped his arms over the mannequin.

Marinette chuckled awkwardly. “Adrien and I aren’t dressed, Alya.” She said, though at least she was wearing real pajamas.

“Hey, it’s nothing she hasn’t seen before!” Adrien winked at her as Alya rolled her eyes.

She offered him a fake grin. “Watch your mouth, Chevalier.”

“Don’t mind him!” Marinette waved them both off. “Adrien’s just feisty because I agreed to be his girlfriend!”

Adrien’s breath caught in his throat, worried about what Alya would say. Her eyes went wide, and anger flashed across them, but she bit her tongue and said nothing. “Um, that’s great.” She said, a bit forced. She looked at Adrien. “I’m actually here on business, though. I need you to get something for
Adrien nodded. “Sure. What is it?”

She cringed. “I want access to your financial records.”

Marinette furrowed her brows. “Alya! Enough of your tired conspiracy theories!” She scolded as Alya tensed.

Adrien touched her shoulder. “No, princess, this is a reasonable request.” He said. “I really only changed enough of the security measures on my father’s bank accounts to prevent him from wiring money to his commissary account if he got access to a computer.” She didn’t seem convinced. “If he had any way to access it in person, I wouldn’t have anything set up to prevent him from doing something. I never expected he’d escape from prison.”

“Yes, well, will that cause problems? If he has?” She asked quietly.

He moved closer to her to hold her face. “Nette, listen. Don’t worry about me, okay? I have plenty of my own money, I promise.” He smiled at her. “He could completely empty his bank accounts and I would still have more than enough money to take care of you.” He looked at Alya while Marinette held his hands to her lips. “I can call Sabrina and ask if they have copies of my father’s financial records in the weeks leading up to and following Marinette’s kidnapping, if it helps.”

“It might. I want to make sure that there are no recent unauthorized transactions first.” Alya said. She smiled. “Get ready to have your every secret expense exposed!”

He smiled bitterly. “More like prepare to be annoyed by how much money I’m spending on an apartment with an elevator and a security guard when neither one of them work.”

“You know, it’s possible that he died when Aza charged in with the gun,” Marinette said hopefully.

He frowned. “I feel like we would have heard about his death by now if he’d died.”

She frowned, too. “Yeah, that’s a fair point.” She shrugged. “Well, nothing we can do about that until the lease runs out! We should get dressed if we’re going to the bank!”

He smiled at her. “I’ll get dressed. You might want to explain to her what the costumes are for!” He went upstairs.

Adrien could hear Marinette talking up a storm. He went into his closet and started pulling clothes out, half expecting Alya’s voice to come from behind him. He dressed in a gray sweater with the sleeves pulled up—he knew that Marinette liked looking at his tattoos—and jeans. As he ran a black belt through the loops, he could have sworn he heard someone behind him—but when he startled and spun around, there was no one there. He shook his head and pulled on a pair of socks.

Marinette went to change after he did. He and Alya waited in the living room. Adrien was on his laptop, searching the Internet for any recent news about film star Emilie Agreste. However, the most of the recent news was either magazine articles about her mysterious disappearance that he’d read when he was thirteen, or conspiracy theories that his father had murdered her. He’d read those when he was fourteen.

“You look serious.” Alya said.

He looked up at her from over the top of the laptop. “I’m trying to figure out what happened to my mother.” He said. He shrugged. “I have it on good authority that she isn’t actually dead.”
“Who told you that?”

He considered not telling her, but figured that it wasn’t worth the yelling. “Nathalie told me that she might have a way to control my father, and if she does, we can use it to incapacitate him and send him back to prison.”

“Can you trust Nathalie?” She asked.

“My father was controlling her, and it looks like he’s out to kill her, too. Capturing him is in her best interests.” He said.

Alya continued to pace anxiously. “Adrien…” she muttered, her face fallen. “I want your help.”

Adrien froze. He felt a smug grin crawl onto his face from somewhere sinister, and he closed his laptop as it grew. He looked up at her with the biggest shit-eating grin she’d seen in a long time. “This ought to be good.”

Alya scowled at him. She grabbed a coaster from the coffee table and threw it at him like a Frisbee, which missed him by a meter. Her face softened. “I want you to go with me to the mansion.” She looked down. “I know that the police spent weeks picking the place clean, and I know that it belongs to the bank now… but I’m hoping that he decided to camp out there before he left for Rennes.”

“…and you’ve never been inside the mansion, so you need me to go with you to unlock doors and disable any traps he set up inside.” Adrien said.

Alya sighed. “Yes.”

Adrien sighed. “Alya, I want to help, but I can’t leave Marinette’s side, and I refuse to make her face that… dungeon again.”

“I know that, so I want to go tonight, after she falls asleep.” She said. She took a cautious step forward when the door opened. “Don’t tell her!”

“Nighttime is even worse for this plan!” Adrien hissed.

Marinette entered the room on her crutches. She wore a dress shirt, a short pink skirt with a floral pattern, and a dark gray unstructured jacket. She’d tied her hair back into a bun, and held it in place with cute apple barrettes. “What are you two whispering about?”

Adrien spoke before Alya got a chance to. “Alya wants me to go with her when she investigates the mansion. She thinks Gabriel camped there before he was smuggled out of Paris.” Alya hissed at him again. He frowned. “I’m not going to lie to her for you!”

“Alya rubbed her eyes. “I didn’t want to tell you because I don’t think we’re going to find anything Earth-shattering there! I just want to take a look around to see if there is any trace forensic evidence.”

Marinette was stunned. “I… oh! Okay.” She shook her head. “I… guess that’s reasonable.”

“Princess, I’m not going to go if you’re not comfortable with it.” Adrien said.

She waved him off. “No, it’s good that we check his former haunts while he isn’t around to frequent them.” She said. But she was quiet. “I’ll go spend the night with my parents. We’ve been texting, and they’re worried about me, so I might as well. Plus, it’ll give Chloé some time to finish the reservations at le Grand Paris.”
Alya put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll have Nino stay with you, just in case.”

They walked together out to the car. Adrien opened the passenger door so Marinette could sit down, and then he noticed that the flag on his mailbox was up. He shut the door behind Marinette and opened the mailbox as Alya dug around in her purse. Inside was a dead rat with a bloody shard of glass sticking out of its stomach. She jumped when he exclaimed and shot back.

“What’s the matter?” She asked, taking a few steps closer to him.

“Ugh, it looks like Lila is back in town.” He said, almost nonchalantly considering the corpse in his mailbox. He reached inside a bucket hidden in the bushes to pull out a rag. “She was gone for a while, and it had been peaceful, but current events must have convinced her to come back to Paris.” Adrien grimaced as he pulled the rat out wrapped in the rag. He threw both the rat and the rag into the trash before Alya could see it.

They got into the car. “Lila has been terrorizing you both for years. Why haven’t you told the police?” Alya asked.

“I did, the first hundred times or so.” Adrien said. “It’s always the same story.” He put on a mocking tone. “‘You don’t know it was her!’”

Marinette joined in. “‘You don’t have any evidence!’”

“‘You can’t prove that she did it!’” Adrien rolled his eyes. “I’ve had about enough, though. Once I find a new place for Marinette to stay, I’m going to buy a new place near her.”

“You might have trouble selling this place, though, if Lila keeps leaving animal corpses in mailboxes.” Alya joked bitterly.

“They aren’t always in the mailbox!” Marinette said. “Sometimes she leaves them on the doorstep.”

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1 January, Nine Years Ago

Adrien held Marinette’s hand while she cried in the commissariat. She had just finished speaking to the agent, having decided the best course of action was to report the rape to the police. But that meant reliving it, and that had proved to be a painful experience. She looked so small and hurt, like a little bird with a broken wing. Adrien wanted to cry, too.

“So,” the agent said carefully. “This happened… a year ago?”

“No, it was only five months ago.” Adrien clarified. The police agent didn’t seem impressed, so he shifted nervously. “Monsieur l’agent.”

“Why didn’t you report it then?” He asked.

“I-I told you, I was frightened, and she was always nearby. I couldn’t get away from her.” Marinette said.

“She held you hostage.”

Marinette frowned. Adrien didn’t like where this was going. “I mean… it wasn’t like she had me
under lock and key…”

“Were you reported missing?”

“N-no, I wasn’t physically missing. Not really…”

He was quiet for a moment. “Did you tell anyone about this?” He asked.

“No.” Marinette said.

“Do you still own the property it happened in?”

“We never did; we rented it.”

“And she raped you with a dildo?”

“Yes.”

“So you never had a rape test kit done? There’s no DNA?”

“No, monsieur l’agent.”

The agent sighed. He looked at the report on his desk. Adrien was taller than Marinette, so he could see that it was barely filled in. “Well, what do you expect me to do about it?”

Marinette started to shake. Her words were quiet. “I want you to arrest her.” She said. “She attacked me, and she threatened me with the knife, and then she raped me!”

“You don’t have any evidence!” The agent argued.

“It’s your job to collect evidence!”

Adrien dug his nails into the armrest of his chair. “Go to the rental agency and request the bill! They must have charged Lila for the damage she did!”

“That only proves that she broke something, not that she attacked her fiancée.”

“What about the bruises?! Ask any one of our friends, and they’ll all tell you the same thing!” He shouted.

“Monsieur, I need you to stop yelling.” He scolded. “I need physical evidence supporting Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng’s report.”

“Then collect some evidence!”

He tried to look sympathetic, but his voice and face were stony. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“There’s plenty you could do! You just don’t want to do it!” Adrien shouted. “There’s a violent person on the streets, but you’re willing to ignore it because you want to be lazy!”

The agent stood. “Why don’t I arrest you for threatening a police agent, and you’ll see how lazy I am?”

“But I would hate to waste your precious time!” Adrien screamed.

Marinette took his arm and forced him to look at her. “Adrien, that’s enough.” She wiped her face and sighed. “We should… go. We should just go.”
Adrien pointed at the agent. “This isn’t over! I will be filling a complaint with your superior!”

Marinette took his hand and walked out with him as he glared at the police agent. She was walking pretty slowly, since she was wearing her prosthetic. When they’d gotten far enough away that they weren’t in sight of the agent, he turned his attention to her defeated expression. Marinette didn’t say anything as they made their way back to Adrien’s car.

“How insulting! I can’t believe he said that to you!” Adrien snapped when they were alone. “He might as well have told you that Lila should get away with this!” He was shaking. “I swear. The police say and do whatever they want, and then they wonder why people turn to vigilantism!”

She sighed. “He was right, though. I shouldn’t have waited so long to report it.”

“So what if you waited? There’s still evidence to be found!” He said. “He’s just being lazy!” He clawed up his hands, and his powers started to break down the steering wheel cover he’d bought for this specific reason. “I’m going to call the captain. This is ridiculous!”

“You should. I’m sure others have the same complaint.” She looked at him sadly before glancing out the window. “Do you think he’s going to investigate?”

“Well, he didn’t say that he wouldn’t.”

“He heavily implied that he wouldn’t.”

“It won’t matter after the complaint! They’ll assign a new agent to the case.” Adrien said firmly.

She sighed. “They aren’t going to arrest her, are they?” She asked. She looked out the window. “There’s no forensic evidence. Just my word against hers, and no one has ever believed me over her.”

“I did. So did Alya. Others will, too.” He said.

“You believe me because Lila’s lies frequently targeted you. Alya only believes me now because I told her about the rape,” she pulled her arms in and started shaking. “And I wonder if she thinks I’m not just being dramatic again!”

Marinette started to cry again. Adrien pulled into an alley so he could hold her. When she calmed down, she said that she wanted to keep the case open in the event that something else happened, but it was clear by the tone of her voice that she didn’t expect the police to do anything about it. Adrien called the commissariat and complained about the agent, loudly, and he fumed the whole ride back.

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23 April, Present Day

After collecting the paperwork, they went back to Adrien’s house so Marinette could grab her things and prepare to spend the night elsewhere. Alya and Adrien moved the coffee table to go over about three hundred pages worth of data with magnifying glasses, highlighters, and tired eyes.

“Oh, here’s one.” Alya said, exhausted. “Four months ago, €480.” She looked at him.

“Ugh, no. Case of whiskey; I bought it for the week long bender I was on after I broke up with Kagami.” He said.
“Five months ago, €300.”

“Marinette’s powers went haywire and knocked out a small portion of the wall. It had to be fixed.”

Alya’s eyes lit up. “Oooh! Here’s a promising one!” She pointed at it as she showed it to him. “Six months ago, €2,592.68!”

He frowned sympathetically at her. “I had to replace my car’s electric motor,” he explained quietly.

She groaned loudly and threw the paper across the room. “Ugh, this is pointless!” She stood as Adrien collected the papers scattered around them. “You’re so boring! When was the last time you did something for yourself? Your father probably isn’t stealing his money back because he feels bad for you!”

Adrien frowned at her. “I don’t do much for myself because I don’t want to be doing something for myself when I’m needed.” He explained. “The first big thing I was going to do for myself was a Japanese vacation with Kagami once the anniversary ended, because Marinette is considerably less likely to relapse after it passes, and even that was filling me with dread. I was almost thankful that we broke up!”

“Marinette can take care of herself! And she’d be upset to know that you were neglecting yourself because of her.”

“I know she can, and it’s not ‘because of her!’” Adrien said. He shook his head. “Look, most of the time, she doesn’t need me. I spend most of my free time over there with her, but she doesn’t usually need me. But when she does… I have to be able to go. I need to be there!” He sighed. “If something bad happened to her because I was… I don’t know, lounging on the beach in Nice or whatever. I would never forgive myself!”

Marinette’s luggage flew over the iron bars sectioning off the loft, landing harsh on the couch and scaring Alya and Adrien. Marinette levitated over the bars as well a few moments later, landing much more gracefully. “I’m done packing.” She said, laying down so her head was near Adrien’s. He relaxed and wove their fingers together.

“You’re only going to your parents’ place for a day, girlie. You didn’t have to bring your entire wardrobe!” Alya laughed.

Marinette shrugged. “With Lila in town, I can’t take any chances. I’m taking everything of mine.” She said. “Besides, we won’t be sleeping here again. We’re going to le Grand Paris tomorrow.”

Adrien laughed. “And we’re raising the minibar because Chloé isn’t charging us! Haha!” He and Marinette cackled maniacally after fist bumping.

“You have so much money you could clear the minibar in every room on the floor and it wouldn’t make a difference!” She said.

“Everything is more fun when you don’t pay!” He said. Marinette began to glow, and she waved her hand. The papers thrown about the room flew around, stacking one on top of the other and flying into the box they’d been carried inside with. Adrien looked at her with a serious expression. “I hope you put those in chronological order.” She looked back and held out her hand before a light clicked in her head, and she smacked his arm gently as a grin crept across his face.

Alya chuckled. “Careful, Chevalier. If you keep making that face, it’ll stick like that.”

His smile fell. He stuck his tongue out at her. He grabbed Marinette’s luggage and took it out to his
Alya stayed behind, holding her costume in her hands. She walked to the threshold and called out. “I’ll meet you at the mansion in costume. It’ll make it look like you’re cooperating with the investigation.”

“I am cooperating with the investigation. It’s the investigators who suck.” Adrien said as he pulled a leather jacket over his shoulders. “Just lock the door before you leave.” He got into his car and started driving.

Marinette shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat. “Are you nervous? This is the first time you’ve gone back to the mansion in a long time.”

“Eleven years. Yeah.” He said. He was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know how I feel. On one hand, I hope we find something that puts us on the path to recapturing my father, or finding my mother, but…”

Marinette finished his thought. “…but on the other, you hope that you don’t find anything because it’ll be very painful.”

“It’s a bad place, that house.” Adrien said. “A cursed place.” He went quiet again. “Can I confess something to you?”

“Of course.”

“You know that I sold the mansion to my aunt the day I turned eighteen.” He said.

She nodded and giggled. “For thirty euros, I think.”

“Thirty euros… and the condition that she never contact me again.” Adrien sighed. “Aunt Amelie never wanted me in her life. She wanted the family jewels and the mansion. That’s why she convinced her husband to take me in, and why she kicked me out.” Marinette frowned and put her hand on his shoulder. “I had already pawned the jewels and I couldn’t legally give her any money, but I could sell her the mansion. So we made a deal. I kept the money, she got the mansion.”

Marinette knew about this. Adrien had told her about it a long time ago, but her mind had been so clouded then that she couldn’t read the writing on the wall. “But, now, the mansion is abandoned. No one lives there.”

Adrien nodded. “I sold Aunt Amelie the mansion.” He frowned. “She was bankrupt and a hundred thousand euros in debt within nine months.” He shook his head. “I sold it to her… knowing that she would never be able to afford it.”

“Your aunt treated you terribly, Adrien. She basically tortured you for four years!” She said. “Before my father gave you that job at the bakery, there were times where you only ate once a week!”

“Yes, she treated me badly, but I still tricked her!” He argued. “I tricked her into buying the mansion, and then I made it so she couldn’t contact me to bail her out of debt.” He sighed. “She tried to work around it. She tried to get Félix to convince me to send money… but it didn’t work.”

“When was this?”

“A little bit after the BAC. Lila wouldn’t let you speak to me in public.” He sighed. “I was totally wasted, so the memory is fuzzy, but I remember him confronting me for the money, thinking that I wouldn’t refuse him in front of so many people. But I did, he got mad, I got even more drunk… and
I think I gave Wayhem a blow job in the bathroom.”

Marinette’s jaw dropped. “I remember how drunk you were. Wayhem should not have let you do that!” She said.

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters!” He said. “I… screwed over my own family, on purpose! They still won’t speak to me, Marinette.” He frowned. “I don’t even know what Félix named his kid.”

They had reached the bakery. Marinette took his hand when he parked the car. She spoke quickly and quietly as Tom approached the car. “Adrien, you might have tricked her, but you did it to protect yourself. I thought Amelie was going to kill you to get that money, and if she lost the mansion because she was too stupid to understand taxes, that was her problem.” She put her hand on his face and smiled. “You made a smart choice. It worked out for you. And he deserved it.” The car door opened. She smiled at Tom before looking back at Adrien. “Besides, what kind of a person wants to live in a place where such atrocities were committed?”


She nodded. Adrien watched her go inside, and she shot him a worried glance as the door shut behind her. Adrien drove back towards the mansion, stopping on the side of the road to collect his nerves. He didn’t want to go inside. The sound of Marinette’s frightened singing still echoed in his mind, her tongue stumbling over the words to Stephen Sondheim’s ‘Green Finch and Linnet Bird.’ He took a deep breath, moved to put the car back in drive, and then dug through the middle compartment for his cigarettes.

Adrien found his razor blades instead.
When Adrien pulled up to the mansion, a figure in orange stood next to the gate. He knew it was Alya, but made a point to call her Rena Rouge so they could both get used to the idea. Rena Rouge was leaning against the wall, which was overgrown with moss and vines from years of disuse. She used her hand to keep the wind from blowing out the fire of her cigarette lighter.

“Don’t you know those things will kill you?” Adrien teased as he walked closer.

Rena Rouge looked up and rolled her eyes, but a small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “Save it, Chevalier. We both know you smoke twice as much as I do.” She said as the smoke fell from her mouth.

“Hey, that’s not a fair comparison. I’m trying to die.” Adrien joked bitterly. His smile fell as he looked through the gate. It was locked and boarded up, as was the mansion on the other side. Overgrowth made it look like nature was reclaiming it. Some of the windows were broken. Adrien sighed and looked at Rena Rouge. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Adrien nodded. He grabbed the lock keeping the gate closed and rusted it until it broke in his hand. The chains fell, and he pushed open the creaking iron gate enough that they could squirm through. They walked silently up to the front door, and Adrien remembered every time he had climbed the steps to go inside after his mother disappeared. Using his powers, he was able to break down the boards and unlock the door.

Rena went inside first, as Adrien felt his stomach tense at the sound of the door opening. The world mimicked his hesitation; their feet stuck to the grime on the mansion floor. “For what it’s worth… I’m sorry I had to drag you out here just to get me inside.” She said as she walked. Adrien followed her hesitantly. “The limits of my powers are incredibly frustrating. I’m not all that powerful of a supernatural.”

Adrien held his chin as he thought. “You can only teleport to places you’ve been, right?”

“And I have to have been there after my powers surfaced, which meant that I couldn’t just teleport to your bedroom, since that was the only time I’ve ever been inside this godforsaken place.” Rena clarified.

Adrien remembered when Alya’s powers surfaced. She was distraught by the idea that she could have saved Marinette had they developed sooner, and even though they quickly learned that it wasn’t true, he sometimes wondered if she wasn’t harder on him because of that initial distress. “We all have limits to what we can do, human or supernatural.” He reasoned. “My powers don’t work when I’m frightened, Marinette’s powers are prone to going haywire, Nino can’t breathe underwater when he’s
stressed, Chloé can’t fly if she’s carrying something over a certain weight…”

“You powers aren’t a glorified GPS,” Rena quipped. She folded her arms across her chest. “And it feels like my powers have more restrictions than others.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s get started.”

They split up to cover more ground, Rena Rouge taking the rooms on the right hand side for the bottom floor, and Adrien taking the ones on the left. They resolved to switch for the upper floors.

Adrien froze as he reached the doors to the atelier. Every fiber of his being told him that he could not go inside. He’s not even in there, he reasoned. He hasn’t been for fifteen years. Yet even turning the doorknob felt wrong, like he was doing something and going somewhere that he wasn’t allowed.

The atelier floor creaked under his weight, and dragging his feet kicked up dust. He left footprints behind him as dirt cling to his boots. There was no furniture—if it hadn’t been taken by his aunt during his eviction, it would have been auctioned off—so Adrien could clearly see the older footprints left behind when he shined his phone light on them. Evidence that someone had been here recently, but maybe not his father—these looked too fresh. He took a picture with the flash on.

The flash blinded him and sent him back to the park where he learned Marinette was missing. The flash of the cameras as Sabine watched him, anxiously waiting for answers he couldn’t give. Because of what—youthful naïveté? What deception… what distraction his father had planned! He resolved to take no more pictures.

He turned to leave before looking at the wall. The wallpaper, though peeling, was still marked by the frames for the photographs once displayed there. He wondered what had become of them.

Regardless, he was thankful that they were gone.

He went back into the hall, looking up where the chandelier had once been. He cautiously tested the stairs, worried they would collapse beneath him. The wood ached under marble, his legs shaking as he climbed the steps and went towards his old bedroom.

The door to his bedroom was stuck, but it wasn’t anything superior force couldn’t fix. Adrien hit it with his shoulder to knock it free. It slammed against the wall and created a crack in the door. He was greeted by dirty, boarded windows with cracks. Like the rest of the mansion, the furniture was gone. Adrien had either moved it to his house, into storage, or had left it for his aunt to keep or sell. But some things remained, like the rock climbing wall and the built in shelves where his desk and library had been. Adrien walked to the corner and spun once around the fireman’s pole as he reminisced spending hours with his mother. Why did those memories feel incomplete? It was like the were hollow, his memories the dark reflections of her reality.

Adrien looked at the door to his bathroom. He approached timidly, though found it emotionally trying to open the door. He slid down the wall next to it, looking at the dirty floor. Some parts of it seemed discolored even under the grime. Adrien pulled the sleeve of his jacket over his hand and wiped away the collected dust. A bloodstain was revealed.

That must have been where Marinette’s legs had been when she crawled into his bedroom. Looking up at the door, he could see where her hands had been, too. He saw where they had pried the door open. He wondered if she had been nervous to reveal herself to him—had the situation been reversed, he wasn’t confident that he could have gone to her for help naked spare the blood.

He pulled himself off the ground and opened the door. He caught a glimpse of himself in the shattered mirror, but when he looked at his reflection, he couldn’t recognize himself. It wasn’t the fault of the fractures, though he admitted it didn’t help. Looking at his reflection made him feel
younger, like a child in skin that didn’t fit right.

19 September, Eleven Years Ago

Adrien shifted nervously in the leather chair. The office of his lawyer was quiet, and Adrien grew anxious the longer he waited. He tapped his fingers as he held his breath. He looked down at his backpack, which held just about all of his worldly possessions, and then the time on his phone, which was about to die. His aunt had kicked him out of the apartment early, probably just after one, and Adrien had been too embarrassed by it to seek shelter with either the Dupain-Chengs or the Couffinaines, the only two families who would have agreed to take him in. He’d slept in a nearby alley.

Adrien flinched when the door opened. His lawyer placed two cups of coffee on his desk, and then sat across from him. Adrien took the mug closer to him cautiously, like he was afraid that his lawyer would slap his hand, and it would fall.

“Well, I guess I should start by saying, happy birthday.” His lawyer said, a tired smile on his face. Adrien returned it. “Thank you, monsieur.”

His lawyer opened a folder and handed Adrien a few thick packets of paper, which he started to skim. “So, now that you’re an adult, you need to sign this. It will officially give you power of attorney over your father.” The lawyer said. “Monsieur Agreste’s assets will be unfrozen, and control of them will be passed to you as his estate manager.”

Adrien glanced up. “What does that mean?”

“It means that you can legally act on your father’s behalf.”

“I know that,” Adrien snapped. “I meant, what am I allowed to do?”

He quickly flipped through the papers. “You can make decisions for his company, which is also being unfrozen, though that will take several days as the American stock markets catch up.” He explained. “You can also buy and sell property under your father’s name. But until your father passes away, you are limited to using this money in only legal matters such as these.”

“So, I couldn’t buy, like, a condo? I would have to buy one for my father?” Adrien asked.

“You could buy one and gift it to yourself, and you could use his money to pay for the property taxes.”

“That sounds… legally dubious.” Adrien said. His lawyer shrugged. “But, even if I did that, I couldn’t use it to buy food?” Or other things, he thought as his skin crawled.

The lawyer seemed to remember something. He opened his briefcase and slid a small paper envelope across the desk. “Here. I stopped by the bank this morning to reactivate the accounts.”

Adrien glanced up at him. He opened the envelope and pulled out a debit card. His name was printed on it in raised letters—Adrien Agreste. His blood curdled at the sight of his family name.

“As you know, your personal bank account was tied to your father’s. It was to be kept sealed until
you turned eighteen.” He explained. “The money in this account is yours to do with as you see fit.” He tapped the envelope. “There is routing and online banking information on this envelope. You won’t want to lose it.”

“How do I change my name?” Adrien asked quietly.

The lawyer understood. “You’ll need to gather evidence that you are who you say you are, and then file a petition with the French government.” He explained. “A judge will preside over the petition, and at the end, you’ll have a new identity.”

“What sort of evidence do I need?”

“Well, your birth certificate, for example.”

“That’s still locked up in the mansion.” Adrien protested.

The lawyer used a key on his lanyard to unlock a drawer on his desk. He presented Adrien with a set of keys, one for the gate and another for the door. “Go collect your things. Call me if you have questions.”

Adrien nodded. What an odd feeling it was to walk into a place homeless and walk out a multimillionaire. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Before I go… can you help me with one more thing?”

“Of course. What is it?”

He hesitated. “I need to write a will.”

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23 April, Present Day

Adrien tore himself away from his shattered reflection and sat down next to the bathtub. There was a red ring near the top, and Adrien ran his fingers across it. It was smooth; it was likely that Gabriel, Nathalie, and the Gorilla had been too busy trying to hide evidence of their crimes to bother looking in a room where nothing illegal had taken place. If so, this ring left behind was his blood. He’d cut himself before Marinette had found him. It might have gotten stuck to the walls of the tub when the water had evaporated.

His mind was elsewhere, remembering the terror and confusion of that fateful moment. He remembered that awful, gut-wrenching realization that something awful had happened, followed by every stage of grief hammering away at denial. A thought crossed his mind:

He had seen that her foot was missing, but when had it sunk in that she’d never walk on her own again?

He leaned against the tub and sighed. He wiggled his fingers, imagining the warmth of the water before he had leapt from its comfort to a nightmare that had never ended. He looked at the doorway, and though it was wide open, he kept waiting for the slam. He could still see her, sprawled out on the floor and bleeding as she cried.

“Adrien, I searched my side of the house, but I—” Rena said as she entered his field of vision.
He shot up and held out his hand. “Don’t! You’re going to step on her!” He shouted.

Rena took a step back, startled. Adrien blinked, his body relaxing as he realized that they were alone, that Marinette was safe, and that he’d been imagining things again. “Adrien… are you okay?”

“I…” Adrien paused. He pushed himself up and dusted off his hands. “Just my monthly reminder that I should probably be tested for schizophrenia.” He said. He actually did want to get tested for it, though after this encounter, he figured that he might actually stop putting it off. “Do you have any questions not involving my potentially needing antipsychotics?”

Rena sighed. “I was trying to ask you if you’d finished your search of this side of the mansion.” She said.

“Pretty much.” He said. “From what I can tell, no one has been in this room since I came to clear out my stuff.” Adrien shoved his hands into his pockets. “Besides, my father didn’t come into my room much before. No reason to now, when I don’t even live here.”

“Why did you give this place to your aunt, anyway?”

Adrien’s eyes grew wide. “Because it’s fucking haunted, Alya!” He said. He shook his head. “People fucking died here! A lot of people!”

Her face fell. She became visibly tense. “Speaking of, Adrien… there’s one place we haven’t looked in yet.”

His blood ran cold. He looked away and frowned. “I don’t think I can face it.”

“Why did you give this place to your aunt, anyway?”

Adrien shook his head and pulled his arms in. “People died in there.” He whispered.

She nodded. “If he spent time here, he would have spent it where he felt safest, and he felt safest where no one could see his corruption.” She reasoned. “We need to look in the dungeon.”

The mere idea shook him to his core, but he nodded.

Adrien led Rena out of the bedroom, down the marble staircase, to the landing that had once displayed the family portrait. Like everything else, it had been taken a long time ago, the wallpaper discolored and the mechanism to unlock the secret passageway exposed. Shaking, Adrien held his hand out and snapped his fingers in front of the mechanism.

Unfortunately, nothing happened. Adrien tried again, and then shook out his shoulders. “I’m sorry. I’m not very comfortable with this.”

“It’s okay. Take your time.” Rena said gently.

Adrien noted her tone, and he frowned. “Okay, what’s your game here? Because I am not used to this whole… nice-to-me thing you’re up to!” He shook his head. “Aren’t you supposed to put your hand on your forehead like this and accuse me of hiding something in there that proves my guilt?!”

She frowned, too. “Well, I sort of have to be nice to you,” she said dryly, “since I need your help breaking the law.” His frown deepened, and she sighed. “I guess I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday… about me not having been there when Marinette miscarried.”

Adrien’s eyes grew wide, and he looked away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”
“Does she resent me?” Rena asked, bringing her arms in. “Does she resent me for not doing everything I could?”

“Alya… there wasn’t anything anyone could do.”

“I mean, after.” She said. “It wasn’t like I was never there, I just… wasn’t there as much as I could have been.”

“She understands. Your career was just getting off the ground, and you had a lot of work to do.” Rena didn’t seem soothed. “She doesn’t resent you. She does think that you find her tiresome.”

Rena focused on the floor for a moment. “Do you… ever feel like things you have no control over are somehow your fault?”

The question was sad enough on its own, but her expression made it all the worse. Adrien looked at the mechanism. “Yes,” he admitted as his powers focused and unlocked the secret passageway, “I do.”

The door popped open, and it took both Adrien and Rena Rouge to force it all the way. Adrien felt his heart pounding out of his chest as Rena took the first step inside, his nervous footsteps a few moments behind. She watched his face from over her shoulder as he pulled his arms in and looked around.

Adrien had never been in this room. He had never seen the tall, vaulted ceilings or the wall where hundreds of hours worth security footage had been displayed. He had never seen the table, which had been bolted to the ground. Rena walked over to it, but Adrien just stared, frozen by the idea of the torture tools that had once been displayed there.

“There isn’t any blood on this table. If he spent time here, he was probably alone.” Rena reported.

But Adrien barely listened. He tried to remember Marinette’s testimony, and he walked heel-to-toe towards the wall. There was a hole there now, likely larger than it used to be if the scent of mice was any clue. He could hear Rena start to speak again, but he stared at the hole as his mind reconstructed the image of Marinette chained to the wall, desperately clawing at the wooden floors. He could hear her fragile, frightened voice cry out his name, but her bloody, matted hair blocked his view of her face. He could see her turn to look at the hidden door, but now her eyes turned up at him, her face dirty and bruised.

“Adrien, please help me,” he heard her say, her thin, quivering arms reaching up for him as the rest of her body turned to ash, blown away by the draft.

But Adrien barely listened. He tried to remember Marinette’s testimony, and he walked heel-to-toe towards the wall. There was a hole there now, likely larger than it used to be if the scent of mice was any clue. He could hear Rena start to speak again, but he stared at the hole as his mind reconstructed the image of Marinette chained to the wall, desperately clawing at the wooden floors. He could hear her fragile, frightened voice cry out his name, but her bloody, matted hair blocked his view of her face. He could see her turn to look at the hidden door, but now her eyes turned up at him, her face dirty and bruised.

“Adrien, I asked you to help me,” Rena Rouge said, and he looked at her with frightened eyes. “Jesus! You’re bleeding!”

“Alya, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” He shouted, backing away for the door. “I can’t stay here!”

“Alya, I need you to calm down. These boards here are loose, and I can see something under them.” Rena explained.

He shook his head. “I can’t stay here! I have to get out!” He shouted. He turned and ran. “This place
Adrien raced down the stairs and out the front door. He didn’t stop running until he had cleared the gate and only stopped in the middle of the road. He collapsed there, his heart still pounding and his nerves shot. He stood on shaking knees and walked back to the sidewalk, but found he couldn’t even reach the walls surrounding the mansion. He collapsed again and sat on the edge of the pavement. He dug around in his pockets until he found and was able to light a cigarette.

He was still for a long time. Adrien wondered what he was waiting for. Was he waiting for Alya to follow him, to ask why he had bolted? So he could explain that he had seen an image of Marinette turning to ash, begging for his help as if she had died? Another ghost his mind had created to haunt him, a vision that stalked his every moment, be it dreaming or waking? Adrien turned his attention to his wound and did his best to bandage it again.

As he fiddled with the bandage, he looked over his shoulder. He considered going back inside, but just the thought of seeing another ghost stopped the consideration cold. He looked back at the ground.

“Hello,” a voice spoke from behind him. Adrien shot up and spun around. Behind him stood a woman with dark hair and heavy bangs, hazel eyes, and orange fabric tied behind her head like a burglar’s mask. Her orange costume reminded him of Rena’s, but she had a scarf-like belt wrapped around her waist that practically dragged against the ground. “You know, it’s a bit late at night to be sulking out in the open, Monsieur Chevalier.”

Adrien looked around. “I—I’m sorry, have we met? How do you know my name?”

The woman blinked, but then smiled. “No, we haven’t. I am Volpina.” She curtsied before playing with the amulet around her neck. “I’m looking for escaped convict Gabriel Agreste. Some of my information suggested I should come find you.” She shrugged. “That you might have some kind of lead for me.”

Adrien shrugged too. “It looks like your information is out of date, unfortunately.” He said. “Best I can offer you is what I’ve already offered your colleague, Rena Rouge.” What a bluff! Adrien resisted the urge to cringe after he said this. He hoped that she would just assume that she didn’t know every agent. When she was quiet, he clarified. “Um, I was able to let her into the mansion. The gate and doors are opened, but there’s not a whole lot inside.”

Volpina looked at the mansion. “What might I find inside?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, except ghosts and a whole lot of dust.” He said.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” She asked.

“Can I stop you?” He quipped.

“How did you learn about the prison break?”

Adrien dropped his cigarette and put it out with his foot. “I work at a nearby hospital. Many of the casualties and corpses were brought there.” He explained.

“So do you know how Yvette Lemaire?”

He paused. “Uh…” he frowned. “… don’t. I don’t know anyone named Yvette Lemaire.”

“Truly?” Volpina daintily covered her mouth. “But, she was taken to a nearby hospital where she
died of her injuries!”

“Oh! The woman Gabriel killed—her name was Yvette?” He shook his head. “I didn’t stick around long enough to be there for the identification.”

“Where did you go?” He was quiet. “So, you obviously have some connection to the fugitive. Otherwise my colleague and I wouldn’t have sought you out.” Volpina said, walking around him in a circle. “What is that connection?”

Adrien tensed. He didn’t want to confess his identity to a stranger. He didn’t answer.

Volpina pressed her fingers together. “Okay, I understand. Some things are private.” She giggled, but he could tell that she was getting angry. “But, if you aren’t going to tell me how you know Gabriel, I need to know where you went!” She smirked. “I mean, how else am I supposed to know that you’re innocent?”

There was something in the way that she had said that… Adrien couldn’t trust it. He frowned, feeling like he was trapped between a rock and a hard place. He opened his mouth to speak when his phone rang. “Excuse me, this could be important.” Adrien turned away from Volpina and answered his phone, noting that it was Marinette. “Allô? Is everything alright, love?”

“Uh… yes! Everything is fine. I’m fine. I just…” Marinette paused. “I was wondering how it was going, and when you were coming home…”

“I’m fine, Nette. Rena Rouge is taking the lead right now.” He felt a shiver run up his back. “Are you sure you’re okay? You sound like you’re in pain.”

“No, like I said, I’m fine.” She started to stutter. “I-I just wait—je justends—j’attenenends…”

Adrien tried to infer her dilemma from her stutters. He turned slightly, noting that Volpina had gotten too close to him. He gently turned her so her back faced him, and then pushed her away from him. He stared at her as he took a few steps away. “Are you waiting for the painkiller to kick in?” He asked, lowering his voice.

“J’ai bes… I need another…” Marinette’s voice was low, like she was trying to fight through pains.

“Nette, don’t take another painkiller. They’re strong and you could overdose if you take them too close together.” Adrien advised. “Take the anticonvulsant. I promise that it will work better.”

“But, it’ll put me to sleep.”

“And when you wake up, the pain will be gone.”

“It’s never truly gone, but… I want to be awake for when you get home.”

Adrien smiled. “I would rather you not be in pain when I get home.” He smiled. “Take the anticonvulsant. Get some rest. Rena won’t be too much longer and I’ll be home soon.”

Marinette was quiet. “Okay. I love you, Adrien.”

“I love you, too.” He hung up and looked at his phone, a small smile on his face. He turned to face Volpina, who had once again moved closer to him. “You’re not too big on personal space, are you?”

“Who was that? Your girlfriend?” She asked.

His first instinct was to say no, as for many years, people had thought that of Marinette. But he
realized that she was actually his girlfriend now. The thought made his heart skip a beat. “Actually… yeah. That was my girlfriend.” He waved her off. “Sorry, it’s sort of new.”

“Awfully strange to say that you say you love someone in a new relationship.” She said as she leaned against a stop sign. The metal ached under the pressure, which Adrien found odd. “I find it curious that you offer medical advice to her, as well…”

Adrien sighed. “You find that curious, do you?”

She shrugged. “If you are involved with one of your patients, it would be… improper. You could lose your medical license, Docteur Chevalier.”

Adrien blinked, and then unsuccessfully tried to muffle a laugh. “I am not a doctor! And, she’s not my patient.” He laughed as she smiled painfully.

There was no time to continue this conversation, as Rena Rouge joined them. “Adrien, I want you to—” She paused when she saw Volpina. “Oh! You’re—”

Volpina curtsied again. “Yes. I am Volpina.” She smiled. “You must be Rena Rouge. I’ve heard so much about you!”

Rena flushed. “Really? I have to admit, you’re the one who inspired me to pursue superhero work.” She said with a grin. “But, uh, what are you doing here? Foxglove doesn’t usually send more than one agent out.”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“I… guess they must have got their wires crossed!” Rena shrugged, trying not to drop her smile. It now seemed nervous.

But, Volpina didn’t seem disturbed at all by the strangeness. “Must have.” She lifted her chin and looked at the mansion. “What have you learned?”

“Next to nothing. I had considered that Gabriel might have returned here since it was familiar, but it looks like he knew it wouldn’t be safe.” Rena said. She looked at Adrien. “But, I did find some bones. I was hoping you could tell me if they’re fresh.”

Adrien smiled, but his eyebrows furrowed. “Fresh? There’s no such thing as fresh bones.”

“I meant, can you tell me if they were recently brought here, or if the police missed them during the investigation, knothead.”

“Those dumbass flics better not have missed them. They were searching the mansion for a month just for evidence!” Adrien snapped. He offered his hand, and Rena gave him the bones. He didn’t have to look at them for very long before he recognized them and dropped them, taking a few steps back.

Rena dove for the bones as Volpina stood up straight. “What? What startled you about the bones?” Volpina asked.

Adrien couldn’t breathe. Alya had put three bones in his hand, two being phalanges and the third being a calcaneus, the heel bone. His father hadn’t kept bones from his victims. He hadn’t dismembered them with the exception of cutting off a few of Yvette’s fingers, and that might have just been because he was desperate for a kill and she was fighting back. He had kept their hair, and the police had found that, but there was something they couldn’t find and assumed that he’d gotten
rid of days before his arrest. Adrien felt like he was going to be sick.

“Adrien, what is it!” Rena demanded.

He looked up at her and took a shaking breath, covering his mouth with his hands. He couldn’t hold it in—Adrien vomited on his fingers before doubling over. Volpina cringed. “Aaagh!” She stomped her foot as she turned around.

“Adrien, what’s wrong?” Rena asked, sinking to her knees. Adrien coughed, spitting and choking up the vomit stuck in his throat. Rena disappeared in a flash of light, reappearing moments later with a bowl filled with soap and water. She pulled up his sleeves, used a bottle to rinse off his hands before Adrien shakingly washed them in the bowl. She put his hands on his shoulders. “Adrien, tell me what’s wrong.”

He looked up at her. His voice broke as he explained. “You found Marinette’s foot.”

Rena recoiled. She shook her head. “Ohmigod! I thought that he would have destroyed it—ohmigod, eeeew!” She shot up. “Oh, I can’t believe I touched it!”

Volpina drew closer. “I—” She shook her head and closed her eyes. “Ew. I…” She forced her eyes to open. “How do you know that this is the foot of—what did you call her? Marinette?”

“Gabriel kept souvenirs but not body parts,” Adrien said. He looked at Rena. “Why would he keep this?!”

“Maybe he realized that Marinette would be more trouble than usual?” She suggested. “Or, maybe he wanted to keep it so he could show it to you when you were older?”

Adrien stood, rubbing his hands on his jeans. “I’ve got to get out of here. I can’t stay here anymore.”

He said. He shook his head. “Rena, this place is haunted. You can go back inside if you want but I have to go home. I can’t stand it anymore.”

Adrien shoved his hands into his pockets. He walked quickly back to his car, disappearing around the corner. Rena Rouge and Volpina watched him go. Rena sighed. “Oh, Adrien…”

Volpina smiled. “Go ahead and talk to him. I’ll finish up the investigation of the mansion. She offered her hand to Rena, and laughed when she tried to shake it. “Give me your phone! We should stay in close contact with one another, in case Foxglove’s crosses wires are more tangled than we thought!” Rena gave Volpina her phone, and she created a contact in it. After a moment, Rena got antsy, but Volpina played it off. “Sorry! I wanted to put the fox emoji next to my name, but I can’t ever find it!”

Rena ran when Volpina gave her the phone back. When she disappeared around the corner, Volpina looked down at the bones on the sidewalk. She picked them up, looking at them carefully. She pocketed them, and then looked at the mansion. There had to be more inside.

Rena found Adrien struggling to unlock his car. “Adrien!” She called out, but he ignored her to sit inside and slam the door shut. “Adrien, please!” She heard the motor turn over, and she saved time by teleporting into the passenger seat. “Adrien, I think that the mansion might have a leak. The board was weakened by water damage.”

“What do I care? It’s not my house.” He asked as he started to drive. He was tense. “You’ll fit right in with Foxglove, though. They think I’m guilty, too.”

“Hey, calm down.” Rena said. She held her head down and removed her mask. Alya frowned at
him. “At least we know that he wasn’t hiding out in the mansion. That means his outside help hid him, and they must live nearby.”

“And it isn’t like two million people live in Paris or anything!”

“Well, they probably live in the fourteenth arrondissement, which cuts two million to one hundred and forty thousand.”

Adrien glared at her. He rolled his eyes. “I’m so relieved.” He said sarcastically.

“Adrien, this means we shouldn’t be focusing on your father. He’ll keep moving and avoid us.” She said. “Talk to Sabrina in the morning. Maybe she had leads that Nino, Chloé and I can follow.”

“Fine. Whatever. I don’t care.” He shook his head. “I can’t… I can’t believe that he kept it. I can’t believe the police couldn’t find it! That room would have reeked of decomposing flesh!”

“I doubt that they were going to rip up floorboards, Adrien.”

“I’ve seen blood and bones before. It comes with my job.” Adrien said. “Heck, I’m not even squeamish around them at all anymore. But…”

“But this was Marinette’s foot, the thing she amputated from her own body to escape the worst thing that ever happened to her.” Alya said.

Adrien nodded. “And my father kept it.” He said. He sighed and shook his head. “Sometimes when you think you can’t hate a person more than you already do… they do something that makes you so angry and upset—”

“You vomit on your own hands?” Alya suggested with a grin.

Adrien chuckled. “I wish it had been his face.” He said. He sighed again. “I’ve got to take a shower when I get back to the bakery. I feel like I need one—and not just because I threw up on my hands.”

Alya nodded. She smiled at him. “Thank you for coming, Adrien. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yeah, you could have. You just wouldn’t look like a superhero if you walked around with bolt cutters and a battering ram.” He joked. She laughed.

Adrien parked in front of the bakery. He locked the car and stretched. The bakery entrance was locked, so they had to walk around and enter from the house side across from the park. It was unlocked, like Tom and Sabine’s way of saying, ‘you’re welcome here.’

Adrien had never felt at home anywhere before meeting the Dupain-Chengs. The mansion was haunted, but the apartment was brutal. Just being in this doorway brought Adrien peace. He kicked his shoes off while Alya climbed the stairs. Nino offered him a hug and a short report of the night as he held Alya’s hand. They teleported away, warm smiles on their faces.

He grabbed a towel and took a quick shower. He felt the feeling of the mansion run off and down the drain—but it was probably just bile and dust. He dried his body and hair off before climbing up the rest of the stairs and into Marinette’s childhood bedroom. He had packed a change of clothes with Marinette’s things, so he dressed in a tee shirt and his boxer briefs before climbing up into Marinette’s lofted bed.

Marinette startled when the mattress shifted, and she looked over her shoulder, as she was facing the
wall. Adrien must have been too tired to notice, because he didn’t look at her face. He just slid under the covers and tried to get comfortable by pressing his body as close to hers as he could. Adrien pushed one of his arms under her, and used the other to pull her close. He tucked his head into the nape of her neck. He was asleep within seconds, Marinette close behind him.
**Get the Message**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**15 July, Fourteen Years Ago**

Adrien’s knock on the door was weak. He was winded just walking up the stairs, but he had made it. He rested his head on the door for the brief moment between the knock and Sabine’s direction to enter. He feigned a smile as he opened the door. “Joyeux Bastille,” he said as he stepped inside.

“La fête nationale was yesterday, Adrien,” Sabine said gently, offering him some slightly stale macarons in red, blue, and white. Adrien took one, expecting her to pull the tray away, but when she didn’t, he grabbed more by the handful.

“Was it?” He asked. He took a paper towel from the counter. Adrien took a seat next to Marinette, spreading the paper towel between them before dropping the macarons onto it. She took a red one while he shoved three into his mouth. He swallowed them roughly. “I must have been so tired I didn’t hear anything.”

Tom smiled at him. “You and Marinette had a rough night before. You deserved the rest.”

Marinette nodded sadly. They weren’t sure what had triggered her last relapse, but Adrien had struggled to pull her out of it. Tom and Sabine has tried to get him to stay the night once he had, but he had refused. She looked down before catching his eye. “You look sort of pale. Are you feeling alright?”

He wasn’t. His weight was lower than it had been when he was twelve, as Amelie would deny his meals should Michael be absent—which was frequently, as his job often required him to work night shifts. He was also sleeping poorly. Adrien was becoming acutely aware that it was difficult to sleep while starving. He pulled his arm in and felt the scars under his long sleeved shirt. When he did finally fall asleep, often he hoped that he would be dead by morning.

“I’m just a bit antsy with school being out!” He offered a half-truth. “Most of our friends’ parents won’t let them see me outside of school.” He looked around. “Speaking of… there were supposed to be others coming, right?”

Marinette jumped. “Yes! They’ll be here soon!” She grinned. “I like having you here, so I always tell you that we start things a half hour before they actually do!”

Sabine sat down at the table and unsuccessfully hid a frown. “Adrien, we’re worried about you.” She confessed, much to the dismay of Tom and Marinette. “The only time you seem to get out of the apartment is when we call you to help Marinette.” She tilted her head. “That’s not healthy, Adrien.”

He looked at his feet. “I know.” He looked at her through his bangs. “I have been trying to get out more. I’ve applied for some jobs.” He frowned. “But nothing has bore fruit.”

“Why not? You’re a friendly, charming fellow.” Tom reasoned.

“Because of my—” Adrien stopped his answer short. He didn’t like using certain words around them, so he reconsidered. “Some of the modeling jobs I’ve gone after won’t hire me because I look like I’m from… ‘from another brand.’”
Marinette took his hand. “It’s been a year, Adrien.” She said. “I can hear his name.”

Adrien glanced at her. “I’ve applied for entry level positions, too, but they see my family name and never call me back. I even tried Carrefour!” He had tried other things, too. Many of the charities he’d once raised money for could no longer afford his association, lest negative press garner bad attention. He had dropped out of many of his sporting activities because, with his loss of mass, he’d lost muscle.

An idea popped into Tom’s head. He spoke without thinking past the perks. “Well, why don’t you work here part time?” He suggested. It caught everyone else by surprise, but no one questioned it. Sabine and Marinette even perked up. “Things have been picking up here. I could use an extra pair of hands, and it will give you an idea of what a real job is like! What do you say?” Tom asked.

Adrien was frozen. His face broke into a soft, touched smile. “You would do that?” He asked quietly, as if such an idea was foreign to him. It didn’t matter that Adrien didn’t know anything about how to make bread—he could count, at least, so he could work the register—when Tom smiled, Adrien grinned. “That would be wonderful!”

They celebrated. Tom asked if he could start tomorrow, and since Adrien had no plans, he could. The Dupain-Chengs believed they had found a way to repay the boy who had saved their daughter—they were going to make sure he had food to eat.

Five minutes later, Nino arrived with Lila. Nino hugged Adrien as he passed. Lila grabbed his nose and pulled gently before greeting Marinette with a kiss on both cheeks and flirtatiously draping her legs over Marinette’s lap. She winked at Adrien when Tom and Sabine weren’t looking.

24 April, Present Day

Adrien stirred when the smell of fresh baked bread wafted into Marinette’s childhood bedroom. She was still sleeping, like the warmth below was just in the background. Adrien tried to ignore it, so he could hold her closer, to smell her hair instead of the bread, but it almost seemed to get closer, and he couldn’t help but investigate.

Adrien sat up, nearly hitting his head on the ceiling. Had the balcony gotten closer? No—he was just taller. He remembered waking up here with murderous withdrawal symptoms, as Marinette sewed or read on the chaise lounge that no longer lived here. He hunched his shoulders and swung his legs over the side as Marinette stirred.

“Oùallez-vous…?” She murmured, turning to look at him sleepily.

“Bathroom. Go back to sleep,” he said. He kissed her, and she rolled back over. Adrien pulled the covers up over her shoulders.

He climbed down as quietly as he could, grabbing a pair of sweatpants from his overnight bag as he moved for the trap door. Adrien was careful to close it quietly as he looked down at the room. It looked almost exactly the same, though they’d replaced some of the furniture. It still felt like coming home, calm and safe. There were fresh baked croissants on the table, and there was a hissing noise coming from the kitchen.

Adrien walked down the stairs. He saw Sabine standing in front of the stove, though by the time he
reached the bottom, she turned to take the teapot from the stove to the table. Sabine smiled at him when she went to take a teacup from the cupboard.

“Good morning, Madame Dupain-Cheng,” Adrien said. “Are you making tea?”

“I am. Would you like some?” She asked. He nodded, and she grabbed another cup. Sabine has aged, like they all had. Her hair had grown long, and silver had made its way into it. It was pulled back into a bun, the gray hairs swirled into it for a distinguished look. She’d already dressed, wearing a pale yellow cheongsam and green pants underneath. “I’m sorry, Tom and I tried to stay up for you, but it’s harder for us now that we’re older.”

“It’s okay. I just went straight to bed after a shower.” He said. He looked down. “I hope that’s okay.”

Sabine smiled warmly. “Of course it is!” She said. “You’re always welcome here, Adrien.” Adrien sat down and watched the cup as Sabine poured hot water in. She climbed up onto the chair as Adrien filled his cup with sugar, and for a moment, she said nothing. She watched her tea steep. “I’m glad that you’re here.”

Adrien looked up as he stirred his sugar in. “I’m sure that this is just as frightening for you as it is for us.” He said.

“Oh, we panicked when news broke. Tom wanted me to call my mother in Shanghai so we could all leave the country until it was taken care of.” Sabine said.

Adrien chortled. “Monsieur Dupain has always been like that.”

“But then we talked to her, and…I’m glad that you stayed.” She said. She took a sip from her cup and Adrien supposed it was ready. He dunked a croissant into his cup before practically swallowing it whole. “Having you around…well, I’m not sure that it means the same for you, considering what you’ve been through, but…” Sabine looked away for a moment, but a smile crossed her face. “You’re family.”

Adrien smiled warmly. Tom and Sabine had been lifesavers during his teenage years. They didn’t seem to mind the awful things that he’d done to escape his mind, and they cared deeply when he was hurt. It wasn’t until he spent more time with them that he understood that people could actually care about the person he was, not who he was expected or pretended to be. Not as Gabriel’s son, but Adrien.

She coughed and looked up. “Have the police been any help?” She asked. “Sabrina and another one… Kagami? They came a few days ago, but I haven’t heard from them since.”

He scoffed. “The police are useless.” He muttered. He didn’t want to tell her that Marinette was involved in something as dangerous as helping vigilantes, so he struggled for a moment to keep the conversation alive. “We’re just trying to lay low for a bit until we know where to go next.”

“It’s smart to keep moving, but surely that will be exhausting.” She said.

“Huh?” He thought for a moment. “Oh! Oh, no, I meant, I need to figure out…” He took a deep breath and started over. “I meant, I’m looking for people who might know my father’s weaknesses.”

“I assume that your aunt is off the table.” She said. “And last I had heard, your grandmother in Mulhouse had Alzheimer’s?”

Adrien was quiet for a moment. “Actually, she passed away a few years ago.” Adrien hadn’t gone to
the funeral because it was shortly after Marinette had miscarried. Besides, Adrien had never met this Christine Graham de Vanily, and since she was Emilie and Amelie’s mother, Amelie and Félix was sure to be there. “Um, I was actually talking about… someone else.”

“How?”

He offered a small smile. “I’m trying to find my mother.”

Sabine started, and something sad flashed in her eyes. “Oh! Your… mother.”

He frowned. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not, mon chou.” She said. “I’m just…”

“I know, but I learned that she’s still alive!” Adrien said hopefully. “I just need to find her.”

She sighed quietly. She had always thought that his mother was alive. Sabine lived in Paris when the Collector had started killing, and she knew that he didn’t stand on ceremony when dumping the bodies of his victims. If Gabriel had killed his wife, it would have been all over the news. But how to explain that to a young boy who was being abused because, when his father was arrested, his mother hadn’t stepped forward to claim custody? Besides… her thoughts trailed off.

But Adrien didn’t seem to read this from her face. He had told himself that she was dead because it was the only reason he could think of why he wasn’t with her. “She vanished without a trace. It’s been hard tracking her.”

“I wish you luck,” she said, though her voice was filled with sadness he couldn’t pinpoint.

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29 July, Twelve Years Ago

It was finally starting to slow down after the lunchtime rush. Adrien had finished sweeping, and he was sitting behind the counter reading a paperback book while munching on a—what was he eating? Sabine stood on her toes to look from her position next to the oven. Adrien was eating an entire loaf of sourdough bread, just biting into it mindlessly, tearing it apart with his teeth like a starved animal.

She walked closer to him. “Adrien, did you eat before you came to work today?”

He startled at her voice, dropping the book instead of risking the bread. He swallowed roughly and covered his mouth so he wouldn’t spit up crumbs. “No, Madame Dupain-Cheng,” he said, and he pointed to the loaf. “I did pay for this, though.”

She sighed heavily. “When Tom wakes up from his nap, I’ll make your lunch as I make Marinette’s.”

Adrien picked up his book. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Well, I’m not going to watch you eat bread like that. That’s not how you taste bread.”

“I’m not tasting it, I’m eating it.”

“Don’t let my Tom catch you saying that!” Sabine joked. They chuckled as the door to the bakery
opened. Sabine tried to hide her frown as she saw Lila come inside.

“Hello, Madame Dupain-Cheng!” Lila said cheerfully, side-eyeing Adrien as she snuffed his greeting. “Is Marinette upstairs? I’m taking her on a date to the roller rink!”

Sabine hesitated. “I’m not sure that’s the best place to go on a date, Lila, dear.”

Lila put her purse down on the counter roughly before taking out a pair of roller blades. “Oh, not to worry! We were out the other day and her leg started to bother her, so I called the doctor, and he said it was fine to do such activities so long as she was supervised!”

Adrien frowned deeply. “Doctor Colonomos is a woman,” he pointed out.

“Ouais, she—isn’t that what I said?” Lila asked. She waved him off. “Disabled people do everything abled people do, Adrien. Quit being so ableist!”

“I just think it’s weird she’d say that if she knew that Marinette can’t walk on the prosthetic without her cane.” Adrien said as politely as he could, not wanting the venom on his tongue to infect the conversation.

“It must just be you that she has trouble around, because when it’s just the two of us, she’s fine!” Lila dashed past them and sprinted up the stairs.

Adrien glared at the doorway. He looked back at his book. “She doesn’t need her legs if you keep her pinned on her back,” he muttered bitterly. Sabine sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, preparing to scold him when she heard paper rip. “Shit!” She looked up to find Adrien sweeping black ash from the floor. He saw her watching and blushed. “Sorry! I meant… zut.”

She was about to ask what had happened, but she was able to guess. His frustration had led to his powers destroying a page of his book when he went to turn the page. She looked at the stairs. “I know what the therapist said. We have to respect Marinette’s choices, even if we don’t always agree with them. She needs to know that she has control over her body.” Sabine said as Adrien tried to piece together larger scraps of charred paper. “But… you have… powers.”

He glanced at her. “So do you.” He pointed out.

“Mine are not so subtle as yours.”

“My powers are about as subtle as a brick to the head.”

“A brick is less subtle than the entire weight of the universe crushing your spine, I’ll have you know.” Sabine quipped as Adrien chuckled. She frowned. Her next words were chosen carefully and slowly. “I just… sometimes I think that…” She looked out the window at a couple passing by. “I sometimes think that it would be better if…”

Adrien didn’t say anything.

Sabine paused. She looked at him. “Can you make something… bad… happen to Lila?”

Now it was Adrien’s turn to frown. He stood slowly, looking at the ash in his hands. “I’m sorry, Madame Dupain-Cheng. My powers are dangerous, and I don’t use them on people.” He said. “I could hurt them, very badly and very easily.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, Adrien. It wasn’t right of me to ask you that.” Ashamed, she walked out of the room, sweeping out the hallway. She kissed Marinette good-bye as she passed, and she offered a
polite smile to Lila.

Lila stepped out first, though something must have caught her attention, as she looked down and took a wide step before helping Marinette. She smiled at Sabine. “You might want to be careful, Madame. Monsieur must have left gravel here after his walk. Marinette might have fallen!” She tapped Marinette’s lips before bringing her hand in. “Of course, I would have caught you!” They walked away.

Sabine walked back into the bakery. She groaned. “Lila seems perfectly sweet, but—I don’t know. Sometimes she’ll say things, and I feel like she’s intentionally trying to tear people down.” She looked at Adrien. “Maybe I’m being too sensitive?” He shook his head no. “I almost wish that she’d tripped on the gravel.”


24 April, Present Day

Plagg had seen the carrier and hid. Marinette had been unsuccessful in her endeavor to capture him, so Adrien was searching the house for his new hidey-hole as Marinette folded his clothes. She giggled when they both ran past at breakneck speeds, and even more when Adrien jumped and pinned Plagg to the ground.

“I’ve got you now, you little pest!” Adrien said through gritted teeth as Plagg dug his claws into the rug. He wiggled up and unhooked his claws from the fabric so he could lift Plagg up without hurting him. “I don’t think he likes traveling.”

“Hey, if he did, that would be weird. You’d have to take him on walks, and people get weirded out when they see a cat on a leash.” Marinette reasoned as Adrien put Plagg into the carrier. He locked it as Plagg hollered. “Oh, my god! Adrien, he’s so sad! Let him out, you monster!”

“Oh, he’s fine!” Adrien said. He looked at the cage and started mocking the meows. Adrien sat down on the couch and helped Marinette fold his clothes. “Chloé texted me. The reservation is under Alexandrine Dulait.”

She face shifted. “So, the hospital you work at and… milk.” She said flatly. She offered him a coy grin. “Really?”

“She’s trying,” he said through a pained expression. When they’d finished, Adrien put his backpack on and lifted the carrier. “Are you sure you have everything?”

“Yup! Alya is going to drop by later today to pick up the dresses for Rose and Juleka, but then she’ll put the mannequins back at the apartment.” She said as they made their way to the car. Adrien had already loaded her wheelchair into the backseat. He threw his backpack on top of her suitcase, and carefully put the carrier in a way that Plagg could see the road.

“Speaking of your apartment…” Adrien said, glancing at her as she looked at him innocently. “The lease runs out soon… maybe, instead of renewing it or getting a new place, you could… move in with me?”
Her face fell. “I can’t, Adrien. And I don’t want you to think that’s because I don’t want to, but…” her frown deepened. “You know that I can’t. Not if Lila is still around…”

He sighed. “I know, but—”

“But Lila knows where you live, and now she’s back in the city.” She reasoned.

He looked at her again. “Well… maybe we should… leave the city, Nette…”

She laughed. “And go where?”

“I don’t know. Milan, Nice, Mulhouse, Shanghai. Wherever you want.” He suggested. He smiled at her. “Besides, you should move anyway. Why not with me?”

Marinette smiled but remained silent. She shifted, putting her leg and stump under her. “Adrien, you know that I love you.” He did, But it still felt good to hear it. “But this sounds exactly like the time you tried to convince me to buy a dog.”

Adrien huffed as she laughed wickedly. He struggled to contain his own laughter. “Rapists are afraid of dogs! Everyone knows that!” He argued as her laughter grew. “The sky is blue, water is wet, rapists are afraid of dogs!”

She shifted again so her knees were in front of her. “My apartment is on the eighth floor, the sky isn’t always blue, and water isn’t wet.”

Adrien took a turn as they approached the hotel. “Okay, but rapists can climb, and—” He looked at her smug expression. “What do you mean water isn’t wet?!”

She was giggling madly. “Water isn’t wet! Water possesses the ability to make things wet, but it isn’t, in of itself, wet.” He couldn’t tell if she was serious. “You dip your hand in water, now it’s wet. You wipe your hand off on a towel, now your hand is dry. But you can’t wipe off water and make it dry. And since dry is opposite of wet, water… is not wet.”

Adrien was silent with his jaw dropped. Marinette laughed as he pulled to the curb. The chauffeur opened her door, and she started to get out. “You would make a convincing argument if I didn’t already know that you were wrong!” He said, scandalized.

“Of course water is wet, Adrien. I just wanted to watch you squirm a bit,” Marinette said. The chauffeur offered his hand as she found her balance. Adrien opened his door and smiled at the chauffeur as he got into the car. The porter opened the doors to collect their luggage, and Marinette startled a bit. “Don’t forget Plagg! Poor thing.”

Adrien took his crate from the dolly. The porter pushed it inside le Grand Paris as they walked together after him. The doorman smiled as they passed. Adrien smiled at Marinette. “We must be expected.”

Marinette leaned against the reception desk as Adrien opened Plagg’s carrier. The receptionist typed away at his computer after Marinette gave him the false name Chloé had put their reservation under. Upon hearing it, a nearby door swung open, and Chloé rushed out.

“Adrihoney!” She exclaimed, and Adrien stifled a sigh as she ran and hugged him. “I’m so happy I could help you out in this way!” She smiled briefly at Marinette. “I’m sure that this is better than being cooped up in that stuffy old townhouse!”

Adrien frowned slightly. “Hey, I like my stuffy old townhouse.” He said, though a smile tugged at
Chloé waved him off. “Anyway, I took the liberty of giving you a room that overlooks the Eiffel Tower!” She put her hands on her hips. “I can also talk to room service and have something sent up to you.” The receptionist slid two key cards across the counter, which Chloé took. “It’s been a stressful time! Do you want a bottle of wine, or something?”

Adrien tensed at the suggestion. Chloé had known about his history of drug abuse—but so did many people. She likely didn’t know that he’d stopped drinking. He wasn’t ready to get into that, so he struggled to find an excuse. Luckily, Marinette spoke first. “I can’t drink anything for a long time after the anniversary. Adrien’s got me on the anticonvulsant to prevent pains, and if I drink alcohol, I might have a seizure.” She frowned. “Another seizure.”

Adrien shook his head. “You make it sound like you have them all the time, but you’ve only ever had one…”

“The one was enough!” She said firmly.

Adrien shrugged. “Anyway, it wouldn’t be fair if I drank and she couldn’t.” He said.

Chloé looked away for a moment, as though she struggled with her words. “Your life is sad.” She said curtly. She shook her head. “No… that’s not what I meant to say.” She sighed. “I meant… sometimes I forget that there are things that you can’t do.”

Marinette glanced at the ground. She looked back up almost immediately. “I have one leg, Chloé.”

“Okay, but, like, it isn’t like alcohol is stored in the leg, Dupain-Cheng!” Chloé snapped. “Ridiculous.”

Adrien put his hand on Chloé’s shoulder and smiled. “Look, just take it easy. We’ll join you for dinner in the restaurant, okay?”

Marinette frowned. “I never fucking agreed to that…” Adrien shushed her.

They parted ways and walked to the elevator. Once inside, Marinette leaned against the wall and looked down intently. He took his position next to her. “You don’t seem as excited to be here as you did yesterday.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think I get myself worked up, and it never ends up being what I thought it would be.” She said. She looked at him. “I like the idea of being alone in a hotel with you, but I forgot that it meant that I’m here with Chloé.”

“Chloé is… a bit rough around the edges, but she’s tried to change.” Adrien said.

Marinette moved her hair from one side of her face to the other. He could see she was wearing the earrings that she didn’t know were a gift from Chloé. “I don’t doubt it, but… she’s so bad at being nice!” She said. “It’s not like I expect her to know that mixing alcohol with painkillers can cause fatal breathing problems off the top of her head, but… you would think that in fifteen years of shared time together, she’d have noticed that I don’t drink much.”

Adrien reached across the space between them and started playing with Marinette’s hair. “Chloé is one of my oldest friends, but she has this bad habit of only thinking about herself.”

“You can say that again.” The doors slid open. Marinette led the way as Adrien followed, his eyes focused on her. “I’ve noticed something about her though.” Marinette said. “Alya knows that Gabriel
did those awful things to me, but she blames you for it. You would think that, because of the awful things that happened to you after… Chloé would blame *me.*”

There was a reason for that, though it was a truth that would bring her no peace, so he kept his mouth shut.

“If Alya is the queen of misplaced blame, Chloé ranks at least a duchess. But at least she would have had evidence.” Marinette sighed. “I remember you covered in bruises and falling unconscious…I’m nearly twenty-nine, and I still can’t understand how a person can hurt a *child* so badly.”

“What happened to me is Gabriel’s fault, not yours. If he hadn’t done what he did, I wouldn’t have been in that position.” They’d reached the door, and Adrien held the keycard to the scanner. The door popped open. “Amelie treated me the way she did because she was angry that she wasn’t going to be able to get back the Graham de Vanily family jewels. That’s the only reason she agreed to take custody of me.”

“So, what you’re saying is, Lemony Snicket was right.” Marinette said as they entered the hotel room, greeted by cold air and the smell of fresh linens.

Adrien grinned. “Of course he was right!” He said. Plagg jumped off his shoulders and ran about crazily, getting used to the room. Adrien collapsed on the couch, stretching out lazily. Marinette made sure all the locks on the door were secure before joining him, throwing her crutches down to curl up next to him.

He put his fingers under her chin to raise her head until their eyes met. It was a small, intimate moment as her cheeks turned pink and his shoulders relaxed for the first time in hours—though until recently, she had never seen them fall. She squirmed free of his grasp, though he took advantage of this to weave his fingers into her hair. As she inched closer, he moved his free hand to her shoulder, though her rough movements meant that her shirt collar slipped below her shoulder. Their faces were soon only breaths apart, close enough that they could feel their hearts beating practically as one, fast but not nervous. Marinette closed her eyes and leaned closer…

…when Adrien’s phone buzzed from his backpack.

Marinette’s eyes snapped open, and she sighed. Her annoyance was temporary, and she sat up. “Go ahead. I know you never ignore your phone.”

Adrien removed it from his bag, but then stopped before looking at the notification. “Actually… I only did that because I was worried about you.” He confessed. “I don’t need to worry about you when you’re sitting right here.” He shrugged, and then chucked it towards the bed.

It went almost hilariously off course, nearly hitting a window, much to their horror. Marinette started to glow, and she caught it in a gravitational field. She slowly moved her hand, guiding it from its free fall to the bed.

Adrien chuckled nervously. “Thanks for the save,” he said.

“Anytime!” She said. She moved closer. “Now, where were we…?” They kissed, Adrien taking full advantage of the exposed shoulder to nip and lick as she gasped. He could hear his phone buzzing in the background, but it didn’t matter. The taste, the smell, the warmth of her skin was more important.

Meanwhile, his phone had buzzed so much that it had fallen off the bed. It hit the floor with a soft ‘clack’ but continued its insane buzzing.

**Unknown:** Hi Adrien~
Unknown: guess who~
Unknown: hey, you won’t answer?
Unknown: what’s the matter?
Unknown: worried I might find you?
Unknown: it’s too late for that~
Unknown: I know everything
Unknown: it’s only a matter of time now
Unknown: Adrien~
Unknown: Adrien!
Unknown: I know she’s there with you
Unknown: I know what you’re doing
Unknown: you’ll never find me though
Unknown: and you’ll never know
Unknown: when
Unknown: I’m
Unknown: watching
+35550901 sent a photo
+35550901 sent a photo
+35550901 sent a photo

Chapter End Notes

sort of a filler chapter
24 April

The clock read 22:32 by the time Kagami and Sabrina arrived. Chloé had begrudgingly given them the room number, and they now waited for the door to open. When no one answered after a minute and a half, Kagami pushed Sabrina to the side and knocked furiously, only pounding on the door twice before nearly hitting the person who answered on the head when it opened. Both agents were surprised to find that this person was Marinette, not Adrien.

“Thank you for coming.” She said, limping out of the way to let them inside. Sabrina entered first, Kagami still too frustrated to lead the way. Marinette shut and locked the door, leaning against it before following them. “I’m sure that you must be busy.”

Sabrina smiled warmly. “We’re always ready to help, Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng.”

Surprisingly, Marinette didn’t seem comforted by this. In fact, quite the opposite—her entire mood shifted suddenly. Her brows furrowed and her cheeks turned red. “Cut the shit, Sabrina. We both know stalkers are bottom-tier baddies to the police!”

Sabrina moved to explain, but Kagami shook her head. “She’s right. We’re only here to make sure this doesn’t have any connection to the fugitives we’re hunting.” She shoved her hands into her pockets. “Anything less and all we can do is submit a complaint.”

Marinette moved forward, her crutches clacking against the freshly polished floors of the hotel room. “Adrien was against calling you altogether. But… this is worse than it's been in a while.”

Kagami frowned. She stifled a sorrowful sigh. “What makes it worse this time?”

Marinette pulled out a phone. She sighed at the screen before passing it to Kagami. “It started around noon.” At first glance, it looked like Adrien might have been in a group text, but then she saw it.

+35550901 (300+ unread messages)

It prompted only one reaction.

“What… the fuck?” Kagami exclaimed.

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20 June, Fifteen Years Ago
There had to be no greater emotional agony than hunger pangs.

Adrien had never had a healthy relationship with food. Rigorous diet and exercise had come with being a model. But Gabriel had been very controlling of him, down even to his weight. Because of his depression, Adrien had always found that his weight would fluctuate, though Gabriel had always monitored his height and weight closely. As his depression worsened, Adrien had noticed a change in his diet, but he’d always eaten something, even if it was just a bit of bread or leftover meat from the dinners he took alone.

It was different now that he had no choice in the matter. Michael had to work the night shift Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, so Amelie refused to let Adrien eat with her and Félix, and then on Saturday he’d gotten in trouble. He’d chosen ‘to bed without dinner,’ as his punishment so he could still attend Marinette’s birthday party on Sunday. The food the Dupain-Cheng family had set out for the guests was the first thing he’d eaten since Wednesday morning.

Adrien had piled his plate high, and while he worried this was embarrassing, he noticed Kim and Nino do the same. He probably looked like an average teenage boy gearing up for a growth spurt. He found a spot on the grass and started eating, shoveling home cooked food into his mouth like the starved child he was. His stomach hurt from eating so fast.

“Careful, tiger. There’s plenty more where that came from.” Marinette advised. She’d wheeled herself over to him, two pieces of cake in her lap. She handed them to Adrien, and he held them patiently as she pushed herself out of the chair to sit next to him. “I was worried that your aunt and uncle weren’t going to let you come.”

“Why wouldn’t they? They know how important you are to me!” Adrien said. Not a lie, he told himself. Just not relevant to her underlying concern. Marinette didn’t need to know that Adrien hadn’t eaten since Wednesday. If she knew, she’d be upset. And she shouldn’t be upset when her life was finally getting back to normal. “Thank you for the cake!”

“Are you having fun? I haven’t seen you talk to anyone!” Marinette said.

“I talked to Nino.” He said. She frowned, and he sighed. “There are a lot of parents here. I think they might be worried, after what happened to you.”

“I hope not! It would make maman and papa so sad if they thought that the other parents didn’t trust them to protect their children!” Marinette said. Still, she took note of the parents around the park. “It does sort of look like a five-year-old’s party at a Chuck-E-Cheese, though.”

Adrien giggled before bursting into laughter. He couldn’t even look at her.

She protested. She was more amused by him than her own joke.

He tried to calm his breathing. Before he could speak, Lila sat down in Marinette’s wheelchair and grabbed her shoulders. “I heard you laughing! Anything you want to share?” She asked.

Adrien covered his mouth. “Marinette told a joke about the parents at the party.” He said. “She said it looked like Chuck-E-Cheese.”

Lila didn’t laugh. “I guess it must just be funnier when Marimoo tells it!” Lila said, grinning at her. Her eyes went wide as she touched her chest. “Though it does remind me of this hilarious thing that happened to me in Kowar!”

“I thought Kowar was in the Middle East. It seems weird that they would have a Chuck-E-Cheese,”
Marinette said. She frowned. “Though, maybe that’s what the imperialists want me to think.”

Lila blinked. “Well, yes, Kowar is in the Middle East, but—”

Adrien shrugged, interrupting her unintentionally. “It seems weird to me that there’s a Chuck-E-Cheese in Paris, but, there it is.”

“Well, sometimes you want to eat terrible pizza and not get kidnapped.” Marinette shrugged. She smiled mischievously. “Is it too soon for me to tell kidnapping jokes?”

“I don’t think so, since you’re the one telling them.” Adrien theorized. “It would be different if, say, Kim told the joke.”

Lila cleared her throat. “So, Kowar is the capital of Achu, and since my mother is a diplomat, I was there with her as she was writing up a peace treaty—”

Marinette held up her finger. “Lila, hold that thought.” She pointed to an older woman in a leather jacket. “She’s here.” She shot up, waving her hands. “Nonna! Nonna!”

“Nonna?” Adrien asked with a smile.

“Gina Dupain, my paternal grandmother!” She said, though she lost her balance. Adrien and Lila both reached for her, but it was Adrien who caught her in his arms. “She promised that she would come, and she’s here! I haven’t seen her since I was a little girl!”

Lila smiled. “If you’re calling her Nonna, that makes her Italian. You know, I was actually born in Verona, where ‘Roméo et Juliette’ took place—”

Marinette smiled up at Adrien. “You have to meet her! Nonna is so looking forward to meeting you!” She said. She put their plates to the side. “Oh, Lila, I’m sorry!” Lila smiled at the acknowledgment. “Could you move? I still need my wheelchair to get around.”

Lila reluctantly stood. Adrien helped Marinette back into the wheelchair, and then pushed it out of the grass. Lila watched the two of them walk away.

If she was going to win Marinette’s heart, it wasn’t going to happen while Adrien was nearby.

21 June, Fifteen Years Ago

Now it was Monday. Adrien had stuffed himself to bursting, but it had already been digested. He was hungry again, and Michael had to work late. The cycle was starting over. It was depressing, this cycle of starvation. Adrien had never imagined he’d long for table scraps, but even the idea of the crust of a sandwich made his mouth water.

“Hey there!” A voice said. It pulled Adrien out of his lament. He shook his head and looked around. He was in the school library, holding a book on—of all things, anorexia. There was a sad looking young woman on the cover, though the main thing that was meant to catch attention was the detailed depiction of her stomach and esophagus. He lowered it to look at Lila, who was standing next to him.

“Um… hey, Lila. Can I help you with something?” Adrien asked, hiding the cover from her.
“I was just coming to confirm that the rumors are true,” she said, folding her hands behind her back innocently. “That you’re really Gabriel Agreste’s son.”

Adrien sighed. “Yes. I am.” He looked away. “It’s been a rough few months,” he smiled weakly. “But, I think things are starting to get back to normal around here. As much as they can, at least.” He felt his stomach growl. “Here, at least.”

Lila smiled. “That’s good! I’m so happy that you’re adjusting.” She said.

He furrowed his brows even as a smile tugged at his lips. “Really?” He asked. “I was under the impression that you didn’t like me.”

“Oh, no! Of course I like you!” Lila said innocently. She looked up with her arms folded behind her. “I mean, as much as anyone could like you!”

He blinked. “I’m… sorry?”

Lila covered her mouth daintily. “You have to understand! I’m not judging you in any way!” She said. “It’s other people who are saying that you’re exactly like your father, and that you’re going to be just like them!”

“Ah.” He sighed and looked back at the shelf. “Well, I’ve tried to not listen to such rumors…”

“That’s good. All gossip reaches the Devil’s ears anyway.” Lila said. “Besides, I don’t think you have to worry about turning out like your father.”

A vote of confidence? What an unexpected treat.

“If you turn out to be a serial killer,” this caught his ear, and he spun around. “You wouldn’t be an anger excitation rapist.”

“What did you say?” He asked.

“Anger excitation rapist.” Lila repeated loudly. “That’s what the DCPJ said.”

“No, no, I know that. You don’t have to say it so loud, though,” he looked around at the people in the library. “What did you mean, I wouldn’t be one?”

“You disagree?” She asked, faking alarm.

“No! That’s not what I—”

“What I meant to say is, if you were a serial killer, you’d be a family annihilator.” She whispered. Her smile was surprisingly warm for such a dark topic. “You would target families just like yours. A mother, a father, a son between the ages of twelve and fifteen.” She shifted. “You'd probably target the mother first. Partly so she doesn't have to watch her family suffer, and partly because you resent her for not taking you with her.”

He started to walk away, the book on anorexia still in his hands. “I don't have to listen to this.”

“Then you'd kill the father. You are so mad at him. For what he did to you, and those girls.” Lila followed him. She was nothing if not persistent. She watched as his hands started shaking. “When the police find him, they won't even recognize him, will they?”

“Lila, please. Leave me alone.” Adrien said firmly.
“And then you’d kill the son.” She said. He stopped walking. “It isn’t like you want to do it that way. But he’s you now. And you can do to him the one thing that you can’t do to yourself.”

Adrien spun around, his arm out to take a swing. He moved to slap her, but he stopped himself before he made contact by grabbing the bookshelf. Still angry, it splintered in his grasp. He brushed his hair out of his face and took a few deep breaths. “Lila, please. This is a serious subject.” He said. “You don’t have to like me. Hell, I don’t even like me. But I ask that you believe me when I say that I didn’t hurt Marinette, and I don’t want to hurt anyone else, either.”

She blinked. “You’re always in complete control of yourself, aren’t you?” Lila asked. Her sly smile returned. “I had hoped to make you mad, so I could figure out how to pick you apart, but it doesn’t look like that will work for long.” Adrien didn’t respond. “I’ll figure you out, Agreste.”

He looked at the splinters he’d created and started to sweep them up. “Please. Leave me alone,” he begged as he put his book down.

Lila picked up the book by the cover. There were footsteps nearby. “Oh, Adrien. Anorexia?” She scolded, gently yet loud. “There are better ways to control your body than starving it!” She covered her heart with her hands. “If you need someone to talk to, I’m always here! Even if it’s just a shoulder to cry on!”

The footsteps quickened. Whisperers gossiped on the other side of the bookshelf. “She’s so kind, even to scum that doesn’t deserve it!” One voice said.

“The world would be better off if people like Adrien Agreste and his family starved,” a second added. The words hurt. They always did, but they couldn’t possibly know that he was genuinely being starved. Lila threw the book at his head, leaving a sore spot.

21 December, Fifteen Years Ago

Adrien sat on his bed, trying to get a head start on the homework Mendeleiev had assigned for the Christmas holiday. He had some cookies in front of him, a gift from the Dupain-Chengs, who had been giving him food more frequently as of late. He finished the second page and started on the third before he heard his phone ring. Fearing it was Marinette or her parents, he dove to answer it.

“Allô?” He said desperately. “Marinette, are you—”

«Un détenu de la Maison d'Arrêt de la Santé tente de vous contacter. Des frais peuvent vous être des facturés. Si vous acceptez les facturés, ditez ‘oui’ maintenant.»

Adrien hesitated. He sighed and closed his eyes. “Oui.” He muttered. He waited as the automated line connected, and then his heart skipped a beat when he suddenly heard breathing.

But there was nothing. No greeting, no anger, nothing.

He furrowed his brows. “What? What do you want?”

“Is that any way to talk to your father?” Gabriel snapped.

He huffed angrily. “The last time we spoke, you used your powers to get a mob to beat me into
submission, so I doubt you’re surprised by the chilly greeting.” Adrien snapped right back. “What. Do. You. Want.”

“I’ve just been thinking of you. I wanted to wish you a merry Christmas.”

“You must not get a lot of phone time, then.” Adrien said. Gabriel made a sound that indicated his confusion. “I mean, it must be hard, trying to figure out how to call me when you never bothered to learn my phone number. I imagine it took so long because you had to piece it together from memory?”

“I don’t imagine that you know my phone number.”

“Well, you can’t hold that against me. I don’t even know your cell block number.” He quipped.

“It’s not wrong for me to be thinking of you, or to want to speak to you. It’s Christmas, Adrien.”

“Well, it’s not Christmas, actually.” He was quiet as a bitter smile reluctantly made its way to his face. “Do you remember last Christmas? I remember that I had a photo shoot early in the morning, then a charity luncheon, and then a toy drive. Between one of those, I had called you to ask you if you had time to have dinner with me, and you said no, because we both had to work. That’s what you said.”

He didn’t pause longer than to take a breath. “Shortly after that, I got a text from my friend inviting me to Christmas dinner with her family. So I called you again, and I asked if I could go since I had finished early… but you still said no. So I ate Christmas dinner alone. Do you remember that?”

“Well…”

“You calling me is not going to change the fact that you tortured my best friend.” Adrien said.

“I know, but it also won’t change the fact that I’m your father. I love you, and I worry about you.”

He wanted to confess everything. That Amelie was abusing him, that he was being bullied, that he wasn’t eating… after all, it was Gabriel’s fault that these things were happening to him, and Adrien wanted to hurt him. He wanted to rip out his eyes and stomp them into the ground.

But, there is more than one way to hurt someone.

“You weren’t in my life when I wanted you to be.” He hissed. “You don’t get to be a part of my life when I’m finally free of you.”

“Adrien, listen—”

“Don’t call me again.” He said firmly. Adrien hung up his phone, his heart pounding in his head. He looked at his phone for a moment, wondering if his father would call him back. Could he call him back? Should he block the number—was that even possible? To block a federal number like that? He shook his head and opened a new app.

me: hey do you have some time? I need someone to talk to
Marinette is typing…
Marinette wants to FaceTime

Adrien accepted the request. It took a moment to connect, but then they smiled at one another. “Hey, Marinette!” He said weakly. He was certain that his knees would shake if he were standing.

“Hi! What’s going on?” She asked, her bluebell eyes filled with concern.
He didn’t want to confess to her that he’d spoken to his father. It would only upset her. He opened his mouth to speak when Lila entered the frame. She smiled smugly. “O-oh… I didn’t realize that you had company…”

“Oh, it’s alright!” Lila said cheerfully. She kept that smug grin on her face, though, smart and sharp, like knives. “Anything you can say to my good friend Marinette, you can say to me!” Adrien hesitated. “Unless… you’re hiding something?”

“I’m not hiding anything!” He said defensively. “I’m just…” Adrien looked at Marinette, who looked worried, and then Lila again, who looked like a fox about to eat a field mouse. “I was feeling a little down. I was thinking about my mother. She loved Christmas.”

“I know her disappearance hit you hard. Have they still not found any trace of her?” Marinette asked.

“No, and they aren’t likely to. No one knows where she went.” He frowned. “It’s just… this is a rough time of year to be alone…”

“You aren’t alone, Adrien. I will always be here for you.” Marinette said, covering her heart with her hands.

“Thank you, Nette.” He glanced at Lila. “I’ll let you get back to… whatever it was that you two were doing…”

Lila grinned. “My mother has to work late at the embassy! Monsieur Dupain was kind enough to allow me to stay for dinner!”

“Text me if you need anything, Adrien…” Marinette said as he hung up the call. He leaned back into his bed and sighed. He closed his eyes for a moment, though when he opened them again, it was nearly midnight and he’d missed a few texts.

Lila: wow, desperate much?
Lila: and forgetful too, since our own marinette said that I was coming over
Lila: you must not be so great a listener!
Lila: adrien~
Lila: nothing to say?
me: I’m tired
Lila: I must be keeping you awake then >/
Lila: well never mind me!
Lila: you must be looking forward to a long long rest!
Lila: maybe it would be better for everyone if you did

Adrien rubbed his eyes before putting his phone down. He sighed. Maybe she was right… he found a razor blade and took it into the shower with him. He put another in a series of painful scars on his arm. His body relaxed as the hot water ran down his body, mixing with blood and running down the drain…

29 August, Thirteen Years Ago

Marinette was sitting on her balcony. It was hot and dark, but she had prevented her relapse by
turning on the abundant lights surrounding her. She was struggling with her science homework, her stylus tapping the side of the tablet furiously as she tried to comprehend what the question was asking her. She locked it as she decided to try again in the morning. She was about to go back inside when she heard a sharp voice shout at someone on the street. She leaned over the side to see what was going on.

Adrien was walking down the street—or maybe stumbling was the better word. He could only take a few steps at a time. Marinette checked to see that no one else was around. She climbed over the side and used her powers to gently lower herself to the street.

Adrien bumped into her. He startled, but didn’t open his eyes. “Hey… d-do you have any m…? I’m willing to do stuff for…?” He mumbled incoherently.

Marinette put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself. “Adrien, are you okay? You’re not drunk again, are you?”

He opened his eyes slightly. He smiled when he realized who it was. “Nette! Nette, I’m so happy to see you!”

Marinette looked him over and noted two things. Firstly, the binding on his arm was still there, meaning Adrien wasn’t *drunk*, he’d spent all his money on *heroin* instead of food—again. Secondly, there was a ring of dark red bruises that looked like handprints around his neck, badly hidden with a scarf. He’d gotten high on heroin to calm down after Amelie had beaten him. *Also* again.

He pushed against her lightly. “Hey. Nette, Netta… Nette-Netta-Netta.” He chuckled softly as he lifted his arm to scratch his neck. “Do you… have any money?”

“Nope, and you’re not getting any more heroin tonight, Adrien. Let’s go, tough guy.” She slid her arms under his and used her powers again, lifting him up to the balcony. “Come on, Adrien. This is the third time you’ve used heroin in two months. You’re going to get addicted, and I couldn’t live with that…”

“Not…” he muttered, but didn’t say anything else.

“If you would just talk to me, I could get you out of Amelie’s house. You don’t have to *live* like this!”

“*I!*” He sort of shouted. “*Am not living!*”

She sighed. “Let’s go inside.” She said, sitting next to the entrance and holding it open for him. He collapsed, but he didn’t seem hurt, so she waited. “Come on, get inside.” He forced himself up and crawled inside.

Marinette covered him with blankets. He pulled her closer, hugging her close to his chest. He was warm, and his heartbeat gentle. “Good to me. Know that?” He put his hand on her cheek. “I want to… no… I want…” he frowned. “I just need some money…”

“I’m not giving you money just so you can go buy heroin.”

“Princess… gets it. It gets it. It doesn’t understand but it gets it, and then in me again…” Marinette frowned. It might have been too late. He might have already been addicted to heroin. “I’ve got to stop this.”

“Yes, you have to stop using.”
“No!” He shouted sharply. “No! Stop this!” He waved his hands around while Marinette tried to push them back under the covers. He motioned to himself. “Stop this. I need money.”

“No. No money.” She said firmly. “Not until you stop using heroin.”


She smiled. “I love you, too.”

“I want to kiss you. All the time.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I’m not good enough… nobody is.”

“I’m in love with Lila.”

“Lila!” Adrien spat. “Hate Lila! Not good enough. Not me. No one is.” She wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. “Marinette, I want…”

She sighed. “I’m not giving you any money, Adrien…”

“I love you.” He shifted. Adrien leaned forward and let out a small sigh on her neck, sending a shiver up her spine. He raised his hands. They now sat on the sides of her chest, just slightly lower than her breasts. They locked eyes, and she could have sworn a moment of clarity passed through them. Adrien bit Marinette’s neck, causing her back to arch as a gasp escaped her throat. She covered her mouth to stop the satisfied moan from escaping, too. Adrien bit down harder as she gasped, then let up to kiss one of the bite marks. “I love you,” he said, dragging his lips across her skin to lick the other mark. “You taste so good.”

Marinette pushed him down. He let out a sound of protest but didn’t fight her. “Adrien, no. You’re high. This doesn’t count.” She said. Heroin lowered sex drive, she’d learned that in Health. Adrien wasn’t trying to seduce her because he liked her, he was trying to seduce her so she’d give him money. “This isn’t fair, Adrien. Why now?”

“I’m not going to remember.” He argued. “I just want you to kiss me.” He closed his eyes and started to beg. “God, Marinette. Just one kiss.”

“You’re not in a sober state of mind. You aren’t in control, and you’re trying to escape. It would be wrong to kiss you.” She argued. She climbed down to the floor as he rolled over to look at her.

There was a moment where neither spoke. “Nette, I’m so sorry…”

“Just get some sleep. We can talk more in the morning.” She lost her balance and shot over to the chaise lounge. She grabbed her crutches before moving to the stairs. Marinette scooted down, lost in thought.

Adrien loved her, but just as a friend. He did the things he did because he felt guilty. But because of her, now he was addicted to alcohol and heroin, and he had to live with a person who was beating him because she couldn’t use his father’s fortune. She’d reached the bathroom and locked the door behind her. Sometimes, Marinette wished that she had died in that room. Or at least that Adrien didn’t feel so guilty so he’d agree to go live with his grandmother in Mulhouse. She’d be lonelier, but he’d be safe, but…

But, God, that kiss had been so hot! For half a moment, he’d known where he was. Normally he’d snap out of it, but tonight… she ran her fingers over the bite marks. They would show, she was certain. Thankfully she knew how to cover them, but… God, she could still feel his tongue and his
teeth, scraping against her skin. *You taste so good*. His voice, rough and scratchy and full of lust. It wasn’t fair that, after so long, Adrien still had this effect on her.

Marinette washed her face. She climbed back up to her bedroom, some part of her hoping that he was awake.

But he wasn’t. Adrien had fallen asleep. In her bed.

She’d wanted that, but now she wished she was next to him, to combine her timeless fantasy with something more real, like the smell of his hair or the sound of his gentle breathing. Marinette curled up on the chaise lounge and tried to fall asleep.

A few hours later, she was woken by the sound of frantic movement. She sat up as Adrien jumped down from her bed and grabbed her shoulders. He shook her gently, probably not on purpose. “Marinette! How did I get here?!”

She rubbed her eyes. “I carried you. You were wandering down the street, high as a kite, and I brought you here so you wouldn’t get hurt.” The bruises on his neck were dark now, black as the void.

“What happened to your neck?!” He asked. She nodded. “I… thank you.” He relaxed, but it was brief. “Did I say or do anything strange?”

She hesitated, but was clever enough to cover it up quickly. “Uh—no, no! You were asleep as soon as your head hit the pillow.” She lied. He let out a sigh of relief. He might have remembered her sitting on his lap, his hands right beneath her breasts.

He looked up to say goodbye when he noticed something. “What happened to your neck?”

Her hand moved to her neck. She ran her fingers over it. “I was spending time with Lila before I saw you.” He seemed disappointed, which annoyed her. “What happened to *your* neck?”

His hand flew to his neck, panicked. His mind spun wildly as he tried to think of an excuse. “I was roughhousing with Felix and he took it too far.” He lied. He shrugged with a smile. “Serves me right for wanting a brother!”

“You don’t have to lie to protect my feelings, Adrien…” Marinette said. He frowned. She sighed. “Take a shower before you leave. You smell like bread and it’ll be easier for you if Amelie thinks you were out all night.”

Adrien nodded and left her room. Marinette moved back to her bed and curled up in the warm space where his body had been. She pulled her knees up to her chest, her thoughts spiraling. She loved Lila, didn’t she? Maybe she hadn’t at first—maybe she’d said yes to her because Lila had *asked* her—but she *did* love her. But she loved Adrien, too. She still did, or she wouldn’t have buried her face into the pillow and lost himself in the smell of his hair. She wouldn’t have fallen back asleep, thinking of what they might have been if things had been different.

About half an hour later, Lila woke her up. “Good morning, beautiful.” She said warmly. Lila said that they were going to take a train trip to Bordeaux. She was always planning things like this, ways to get her out of the house and active.

Marinette requested a few minutes to change. She dressed slowly, wondering if she should tell Lila about what had happened. On the one hand, lying made her sick. And a fantasy wasn’t cheating… or did that rule change if it had been brought on by something real? She reached for her crutches, but hesitated. Lila would scold her if she relied on them too much. She used her powers to grab her
prosthetic and cane, and then limped down the stairs. She had hidden the mark under her foundation.

Lila seemed concerned. “Did… did I just see Agreste leave your bathroom?”

“Yeah.” Marinette said. “He was too high to function last night. I made him sleep it off here.”

“Doesn’t he have his own place that he can sleep at?”

“If he’d gone home, Amelie might have beaten him again.” Marinette grabbed her shoe and pulled it on.

“Sometimes I worry, though. He’s so… volatile!” She said. “And… he is Gabriel’s son. When the two of you are alone…”

Marinette felt a shiver roll up her spine. She pointed at her. “Lila, enough. I don't want you to ever say anything like that again! Adrien is a good person and he'd never hurt me. Never!” She searched her eyes before she relaxed. “Come on. We’ll miss the train!”

“So nothing happened?” Lila asked. “Marinette?”

“Yes, something happened.” Marinette confessed quietly. She folded her legs carefully and took a breath. “You have to understand, Adrien was so high… he doesn’t remember what he did.” She paused. “He wanted money to buy more heroin, but I wouldn’t give it to him. So… he kissed me.”

Lila’s jaw dropped. “He forced a kiss on you?!”

“Jesus, Lila, no. Of course not.” Marinette said flatly. “No. He thought that, if I wouldn’t give him money, he could earn it. But the only way he thought he could earn it was by… I guess he thought he could seduce me.”

Lila stood there, motionless.

Marinette frowned. “I didn’t do anything with him. I told him that I loved you, and he apologized.” She watched Lila’s face. “I promise, I didn’t do anything.”

“You had a drugged up, horny Adrien in your bedroom, ready to have sex with you—and you expect me to believe that you did nothing?!” Lila shouted.

“Keep your voice down; I don’t want him to get in trouble!” Marinette requested. “But I love you, Lila, and I would never do anything to hurt you, I promise.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Lila stared at her, as if sizing up this conversation. Her fingers, and the super strength which coursed through them, gripped the doorframe, peeling it from the wall.

“I wouldn’t cheat on you. I promise.” She said. Still silence. “Does this mean… you don’t trust me?” Marinette stood shakingly. “Lila, I’ve been nothing but honest with—”

She grinned, and she ran forward to embrace her. “Of course!” She shook her head. “I’m sorry! I do trust you!” She held her chin sweetly. “So long as you promise that nothing happened!”

“I swear on my life!” Marinette took her hand and kissed it.

“Then consider it forgotten!” Lila pulled her face forward and kissed her cheek. Marinette smiled, and they walked together to the top of the stairs.

Marinette had to take the steps one by one when she wore her prosthetic. Lila kept holding her
Lila hesitated for a moment. She obliged, sliding her fingers down her shoulder blades. There they lingered, and after a moment, she finally pushed Marinette. She wobbled for a moment, trying to catch her balance. Lila kicked the cane, the last bit of stability she had. Marinette screamed as she tumbled down the stairs, rolling head over heels.

Lila flew down the stairs behind her. “Marinette! Are you alright?!”

“Yeah. Ow! Oh my god.” Marinette hissed through pains that echoed through her entire body, worried that she had sprained her ankle. Marinette looked at Lila suspiciously, but the genuine concern on her face made her reconsider. No… she was just paranoid from the night before. The discomfort had convinced her that Lila had done something she’d never do, to ease the burden on her own mind. If Lila has done something bad, then it wasn’t so terrible that Marinette still had feelings for Adrien. “I must have… lost my balance, or something.”

Lila helped her up off the floor. “Can you walk?”

“Y…yeah, I'm fine.” They left the house through the bakery and walked to the train station.

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4 September, Thirteen Years Ago

First day of school. New year. He wanted to say ‘new me,’ but he could tell it was going to be another year of just barely fucking making it through the day. Nothing had changed, not even his locker assignment.

What a miserable summer! He had spent the entire vacation watching Lila make goo-goo eyes at Marinette and invade her personal space, waiting for the moment she snapped and broke up with her. He wanted that. He wanted to be the person who was most special to her… even if it was selfish and impossible. New year, Adrien thought as he opened his locker with the same old combination he’d always had, same old bullshit—

When the locker opened, papers fell and scattered everywhere, attracting attention to him and causing a few people to giggle. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Same shit as always,” he muttered as he bent over to pick up the papers.

His blood ran cold. What had scattered around his feet were not regular papers. They were crime scene photographs, blown up and printed in full color. Probably forty photographs were on the floor, depicting eighteen murders, and there was one more. Hanging from his locker was a photo the forensic analyst had taken of Marinette’s back while she was in a coma. There was a message written in bright orange paint over this singular black and white photograph. «Tué Toi.»

Kill yourself.

Adrien ignored the photos on the ground. He sprinted out of the school and didn’t stop until he reached the apartment. He locked himself inside the bathroom, holding it shut even after locking the door. He ran his hands through his hair.
He spent so much time focused on Marinette. It was easy to forget that Gabriel had been convicted of eighteen murders. Eighteen young women with their lives cut short. Marinette had once told him in confidence that he’d committed at least four more, one likely being his mother. Twenty-two people dead, and why was he alive?!

He found his razor blade. He tried to hold it steady but he couldn’t do it standing up. He sat down in the tub, not bothering to strip or run the water. He put the blade against his skin, and then flinched when it broke flesh. Adrien was sobbing as he dug a rough cut into the vein of his left arm. He could hear footsteps, but they didn’t matter. He switched hands and shakily broke skin on his right arm.

A phone started to ring. Not his own, though, so who cared? He dug slowly up his arm. He wanted this pain. He deserved it. The doorknob turned, and then shook violently. But who cared? It was his turn to die. An indirect kill, courtesy of Gabriel fucking Agreste!

“Adrien!” Amelie screamed. “If this is you cutting class, I swear I’m going to kill you and hang your body from the rafters!”

Cutting, kill, hang. Too late, he thought.

The door slammed against the wall, Amelie having broken the frame in her anger. Her face shifted from fury to shock immediately as she watched Adrien cut up his flesh, moving faster now that intervention was imminent. Amelie dove into action as Adrien cut at least another four centimeters, reaching almost his elbow.

“No!” Adrien screeched desperately. He tried to use his legs to push Amelie aside as the blood stained both of their outfits. “It’s my turn! It’s my turn to die!”

But his strength was fading, sapped by the blood loss. Amelie successfully wrestled the blade away from him, and she used towels to tie up his wounds. She dove for her phone, smearing blood on the screen a moment before dropping it and shattering the glass. This didn’t stop her. “112? I need help! My nephew cut open his arms—he tried to commit suicide!”

Adrien lost consciousness.

16 August, Twelve Years Ago

Something hit Adrien in the face. He startled, frightened for a moment. He looked to what had struck him—a pair of jeans that barely fit—and then at the direction they’d come from. Lila stood next to his bed, her hair tied up in a ponytail and her face stern. “Get up. We’re spending the day together.”

Adrien scowled. “No. Get out.”

She sort of half-smiled, but her eyes were annoyed. “Who said you had a choice?” She said. She put her hands on her hips. “I’ll give you a couple of minutes to get dressed, but if you aren’t ready, I’m dragging you out in your pajamas.”

She turned and left, closing the door behind her. Adrien stretched and dressed, his mind telling him to go fast but exhaustion and annoyance convincing him to slow down. He checked the weather on his phone, muttered something about climate change making even temperate regions boil, and then got frustrated when he couldn’t find any long sleeved shirts. He found a gray Jagged Stone shirt, and
then put on the jeans that Lila had thrown at him. He ran his fingers through his hair but didn’t brush it.

Lila was sitting in a very ladylike way on the couch, scrolling through her phone. She stood when she saw him, but he shoved his hands in his pockets. “Why do you even want to spend time with me? We don’t really get along.” He said.

“And that makes Marinette sad!” Lila said innocently. Adrien didn’t believe her; that didn’t sound like Marinette. She smiled. “So today, you and I are going to bond!”

“Contrary to popular belief, Marinette does not have to get _everything_ that she wants!” Adrien snapped. “I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“That’s too bad, because you are.” Lila grabbed his arm and dragged him to the door. Adrien barely had time to grab a pair of shoes before Lila dragged him into the elevator of the apartment building. “So I have to get to my yoga class, then we can get something to eat, but I ordered a dress from both of us to Marinette. It’s waiting at the shop in Ville-sous-la-Ferté.”

Adrien groaned. “Ville-sous-la-Ferté is _three hours_ away!” He complained.

“Not the way I drive!” Lila said as the doors opened. Outside the building, Lila had parked her car. Adrien was still sixteen, but Lila was older than him. She had a learner’s permit—though when they got inside he wasn’t surprised that she’d ignored the rule that a fully agreed driver had to be with her—but the car belonged to her in a very _American_ way. It was a black convertible with slightly tinted windows.

Adrien sat out of Lila’s yoga class. His bones ached, his skin was clammy, and even though the room was kept hot, he felt like he was sitting on a block of ice. He was agitated and bored… and he quickly realized that he was in withdrawal. He started tapping his foot, waiting for the class to end. Lila took him to lunch, and while it smelled delicious, Adrien couldn’t eat anything. His stomach was badly cramped.

To her credit, Lila did drive fast. She put the top down and the wind blew their hair back. It was better to be in the front than in the back, since in the passenger’s seat, he wasn’t choking on air. For a while it was exciting, but soon enough he was bored again.

Lila had to stop to charge the electric motor half an hour before they reached Ville-sous-la-Ferté. She climbed into the car and watched him fuss with his clothing for a moment. She reached across him and dug around in the glove box. “What’s wrong with you, anyway?”

Adrien looked at her. What could he say? “I’m just a fucking addict, okay? Leave me alone. I don’t even want to be here.” He said.

“Marinette said heroin; is that right?” She asked.

Adrien didn’t reply. Lila rolled her eyes before pulling out a bag and tossing it to him. Adrien’s eyes went wide and he instinctively hid it in his hands when he realized that she’d tossed him a chunk of black tar heroin and a needle. “Lila!” He said, though his shaking hands forced him to look at the rock again. “Why do you have this?!”

She shrugged. “I expected that you’d be tweaking and I was right! I figured that this might make you more tolerable.”

Adrien scratched at his ear. “I am not tweaking—fuck, Lila, this was incredibly stupid of you! What if you had gotten caught?!”
“What if you got caught?” Lila retorted.

“I know who I can trust with things like this! Lots of models I knew were on drugs, I—”

Lila threw up her hands. “Look, it wasn’t meant to start an argument!” She said. “I wasn’t even going to give it to you unless I had to—and four hours of you barely making small talk is boring me to death. At least now I can watch how you put a rock into your bloodstream.”

He sighed. “It’s not—I have to purify it, first…”

She motioned to the station. “Go right ahead. I’m not going to stop you.”

Adrien hesitantly pocketed the bag. He didn’t trust Lila—he didn’t, he couldn’t—but his body screamed for the drug, to feed an addiction. He got out of the car and went into the store. He came back a few minutes later, and at Lila’s insistence, he set up in the backseat. More private than a bathroom, she’d said, because it was less likely that someone would come knocking.

Adrien shuddered as she watched him. It was an odd feeling, to be doing something widely acknowledged as wrong, but the need was so overwhelming, he couldn’t stop himself. He waited with trembling fingers as the cotton filtered the heroin, and then as the syringe sucked it up. He glanced at her before putting the needle to his skin, laying it practically flat against his arm, and carefully injecting it into his bloodstream.

There was a stigma attached to injecting it, but it was the fastest way to get high. To get the rush, that surge of warmth and peace and calm that had eluded him for years. Adrien relaxed as best he could, knowing that this high would only last for a couple of hours, that within seconds he’d be itcher than a baby with a bug bite—but he could enjoy it now. He closed his eyes, and his mind wandered off. But, something felt wrong. “Lila… I think that I might…” He wanted to say ‘have overdosed,’ but he blacked out instead. But, he hadn’t blacked out. His mind went to sleep, and his body kept going.

Because, the thing about blacking out is, your brain takes a personal day, and your body is left completely unsupervised. So now you’re on your own, free from inhibitions for the first time. And it’s great, it’s fucking great, because with that freedom you don’t have to think anymore. You’re totally fucking free. But you’re free because you aren’t you, because the you that’s You is basically asleep at the wheel and your Face hasn’t got a clue what to do with your legs! But that darkness? Seeing it clearly, as it takes your vision and embraces you with Nothing? You crave it after a while.

That darkness never leaves you! You want it to, because of that Thing that happened to you. Because of the voices around you that tell you that it wasn’t so bad or you had it coming or you deserved it or it never happened. But you know, and you know you’ll never remember it the way it happened. At best it’s a hazy dream, but the darkness is suffocating you with it. And you want nothing more than you want to see a sunrise, but every morning you’re met with the same inky black sky, void of stars and the moon. Just eternal darkness, the natural state of the universe. And you tell yourself stories, and you project onto people you’ve never met, and either you never mention it or you can’t shut up about it, but it’s there. A miasma, a sickness, a tumor that grows until it threatens to swallow you whole.

You don’t learn from it, you fear it. You don’t move on, because it changed you. And what you want is the one thing you can never have. People in Hell want ice water. People in Hell want ice water. People in Hell want ice water!

But that doesn’t mean that they get it.

When Adrien came down, he didn’t know where he was. He held his head and looked around. He
was sitting in a plain room with a gate. He was sitting next to Lila, who was scrolling through her
social media feed. He tried to piece together where he was, but it was completely foreign to him.

He looked at her, and she returned eye contact. “L… Lila? Where are we?”

She looked back at her phone, closing out of the app she’d been using. “Clairvaux,” she said plainly.

“Th… the prison?” He asked.

She shrugged. “Well, the abbey is in ruins, so, yeah—the prison!” She said. “Excellent sleuthing on
that one, genius.”

Adrien looked around. “Why are we here?”

She showed him a photograph on her phone. It was a picture of a official-looking paper that read «le
permis de visite,» and his name was filled out on it! “I’m so sorry that I didn’t have it for Father’s
Day, but that’s when the idea popped into my head, you see!”

“Father’s Day?! But—” Adrien felt his blood run cold. He grabbed the wall and tried to catch his
breath, because it felt like Lila had just punched him in the gut. He couldn’t stand up on his own. He
grabbed the chair to keep himself standing up. “No! God, Lila, please tell me this is some kind of
cruel joke!”

She laughed. “Oh, it definitely is!” She said. “It’s cruel, and oh boy, is it funny!” She looked down
before looking back up at him through her bangs. “I mean, I’m laughing, at least.”

Adrien wanted to break something. He wanted to showcase his powers, to make her regret what
she’d done—but his fear made them inaccessible. He moved towards the door, close but out of
reach. “I’ve got to get out of here!”

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.” Lila said. Adrien paused. She taunted him with her phone. “I
wouldn’t have gone through so much effort if I didn’t have a way to force you to go through with
this. And you were passed out in my car…”

Adrien lunged for her phone. “Give me that!” He ordered, but she pulled it away at the last moment.
“If you don’t show me what you have, I’m going to leave!”

“I have pictures of you naked.” Lila said. She glanced at him. “Which reminds me… you might want
to fix your shirt. It’s inside-out, and I’m certain your father is very particular about your fashion
choices.” Adrien opened his mouth to argue that she didn’t have them, she opened up her photo
album and tapped on a thumbnail. Even at a distance, he recognized himself. “If you don’t go
through with this, I’m going to email it to Alya, and claim that you sent it to me. She’ll have you
thrown in jail for sexual harassment.”

“This is sexual harassment—and extortion!” He argued. Lila went back to her phone. When Adrien
tried to take it again, she slammed him against the wall. When she moved her arm, Adrien slid to the
ground. He cried for a long time. “Why? Why are you doing this to me?!” He begged for a reason.
“What did I ever do to make you hate me so much?!”

Lila stood. “You’re in love with Marinette!”

“Yes! Yes, I am!” He confessed. “Please, if that’s what you wanted to hear—”

“You’re in love with my girlfriend! And you want to steal her away from me!”
“Listen, I’m not happy that she picked you, but—”

Lila took a step forward. “Actions have consequences, Agreste, and this one is yours!” She snapped.

Adrien grabbed her hand, but she yanked it away to keep the phone from him. He grabbed her other one and started crying. “Please! Please don’t make me do this!” She took a step back, and he fell to his knees. “Lila, please, I don’t want to see him!”

They both looked up when the gate unlocked. “Monsieur Agreste?” The warden called out.

Lila tanked his shirt and pulled him up. “Spend the full hour in there or the picture goes live.” She whispered. He wiped his eyes and reluctantly went forward. “Don’t be scared, sweetie! He isn’t going to hurt you!” She called after him.

Adrien glared at her from over his shoulder. The warden closed the gate behind them. “Your girlfriend is sweet. She provided all of the paperwork; she said that you’ve been so worried about the visitation since you decided you wanted to do it. I’m glad you were able to get some sleep.” The warden said. Adrien huffed. “You slept on her shoulder for a while.”

“It’s just a fling. We’re better off as friends.” He said.

“Not for me to judge! Though it’s rare to find someone who cares about you so much, trust me.” The warden advised. It was rare to have a rival who hates you so much, Adrien thought. They reached a new door, and the warden gave Adrien a quick pat-down search. “Okay, so, I have to go over the rules with you. Your father is of supernatural origin. He is wearing akuma-class medical dampeners. This is severely limiting the effects of his powers. Though his powers of suggestion are weaker than they normally are, you’ll still feel a small compulsion.”

Adrien opened his mouth to bring up his own powers, which made him immune to suggestion, but immediately shut his mouth. No sense in bringing it up.

“I’m giving you a button.” He handed Adrien a long button that, to him, looked like a bomb detonator. He flipped up the lid on it to look at the actual red button underneath. “Don’t let him know you have it. If your father pressures you into harming yourself or other people, press this button. It will sound an alarm, which will signal the guards to remove him.” Adrien looked up at the warden. “He’ll be sent to solitary confinement, and you’ll be sent to the detox chamber.”

“What is that?”

“It’s just a place to treat those hurt by the powered inmates.” He said. The warden nodded at a guard next to the door. Adrien winched when it opened. “We’ll be nearby. You’re perfectly safe.”

Adrien flipped the cover down over the button and shoved it into his pocket. “For now.” He said as he turned around and went into the room.

Adrien closed his eyes as the door shut behind him. He kept them shut for a long moment, every fiber of his being yelling at him to leave. All he could think was to keep his eyes closed, because then it wasn’t happening. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t—

“You’re allowed to sit down, you know.”

Adrien opened his eyes and sighed. And like the obedient son, he walked over to the table and sat down. It took a lot of mental fortitude to look up, but once he did, his eyes were locked, like one might do to a hallucination during a moment of sleep paralysis. A horrible, imaginary thing—and he couldn’t tear his eyes away.
Gabriel had aged. That was the kindest way to put it. He had been fifty-three upon his arrest, though many claimed he’d looked to be in his forties. Now he was fifty-five going on fifty-six, and every year of it was visible on his face. Under his eyes, around his mouth, on his forehead where his eyebrows crinkled when he was frustrated or thinking—he looked like a man who was approaching sixty. His platinum blond hair was still slicked back and his face still clean shaven, but the styling was messy. His hair had fallen into his face, and five o’clock shadow darkened his chin. His clothing was wrinkled, though he was still trying to present a veneer of formality. Despite reality, Adrien almost felt like he was the inmate, and his father was court-assigned lawyer come to explain the details of the charges against him.

Or, he supposed, he was the wayward son of a convicted criminal, waiting for the other person to speak so he knew what tone to go for.

Gabriel rubbed his chain. Adrien could see the dampeners on his wrists, flickering with purple and blue lights. “You’ll have to excuse my unkempt appearance. If I had known you were coming, I would have stopped by the prison salon.” He joked. “My hairdresser is the most charming—”

Adrien pulled his arms in close to his sides. “Don’t sit there and pretend like everything is great!” He interrupted. He shook his head. “God, I can hardly believe that I’m here…”

Gabriel sighed, though the look on his face seemed resigned. “I guess I should have expected anger.” He said, annoyed. “I suppose I was just hopeful, since you went through so much effort to get here.” He chuckled.

“I didn’t go through any effort to get here! Fucking Lila forged the papers!” He shouted.

“Watch your mouth!” He scolded.

“Don’t fucking tell me to watch my goddamn mouth!” Adrien cursed right back.

Gabriel huffed, rubbing his eyes. “Regardless, I am surprised that it was allowed. The wardens must have taken pity on me.” He paused. “This place is a hellhole. You have no idea what it’s like.”

“Actually, I do—thanks to you!” He said. “Or did you forget that you framed me for conspiracy?!”

“No, I didn’t.” He said. “But you were only there for a week. I’ve been here for years.”

“That’s your own fault!” He shouted. “You should have thought about this before you raped and tortured my best friend!” Adrien felt tears collect in his eyes. “And—and now you want to pretend like you actually care about me?!”

“Of course I care about you, Adrien. You’re my son.” Adrien couldn’t meet his eyes. “You’re… living with Emilie’s sister, correct?” He was met by angry silence. “I… understand that her husband passed away a couple of years ago. Has she recovered?”

Adrien took a deep breath. He stood, motioned to the guards waiting behind the two-way mirror, and then reached for the hem of his shirt. He pulled it off, thankful he’d kept the undershirt he’d slept in on. He pointed to a bruise on his upper arm. “So, this one is from the other day. I was doing the dishes, and I guess she thought I wasn’t doing them right, or fast enough, because she pulled me down to the ground.” He moved his hand slowly to a cut near his elbow. “And this one, I dropped something, and she threw the pieces at me.” He pulled down the neck of the undershirt to show him a burn. “And this… I guess she was frustrated that she couldn’t find an ashtray.”

Gabriel sighed, but he didn’t look away. Adrien didn’t know if that was good or bad.
“And, yes, these wounds hurt, but do you know what probably hurt worse?” He asked. He slammed his hands down on the table. “Getting a twelve-centimeter serrated knife shoved up your vagina until there are so many lacerations that the doctors consider doing a hysterectomy to keep the damage from spreading!” Gabriel tried to keep his face serious, but Adrien saw the faintest hint of a smile on his face. “Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?!” His voice was closer to a screech.

He took a breath to calm himself. “What are the track marks from?” He asked. Adrien looked for his shirt. “I’m in prison. I’ve seen my share of drug addicts.” He waited for an answer. “I knew about the self harm. I didn’t think self-medicating was the next step for you. Though, you were always emotional…”

“You’re—you’re calling me emotional?!” Adrien snapped. “Do—Do you even understand what you’ve done?!”

Gabriel closed his eyes. “Adrien, you can be mad at me any day of the week. You’re here—we’re together, for the first time in years.” He sighed. “Can’t we have a nice visit?”

“What are you even care that I’m being abused? You asked me about the drugs—if it gets out that I’m being abused, I get sympathy points, but if I’m a fucking drug addict, I deserve everything I get. Is that right?” He asked. “It doesn’t matter to you that, when I get home, Amelie is going to beat my ass for missing dinner—even though she wouldn’t have let me eat if I had?! It only matters that I might get high to deal with it?!”

Gabriel sighed. “Do you want me to talk to your aunt?” He asked, annoyed. He said in such a way that, even though Gabriel wasn’t his legal guardian anymore, made him feel like a burden.

“I—no! I don’t want you to talk to anyone!”

“Dammit, Adrien. Why even bring it up, then?”

“Because you’re my father, and you’re supposed to care about me!” Adrien said desperately. “And it you’re not remorseful about what you did to her, you can at least be—”

Gabriel interrupted him. “By her, you mean Marinette.”

His blood ran cold. He narrowed his eyes and scowled. “Don’t you even say her name!”

“I mean, you’re not entirely wrong, but you aren’t right, either.” Gabriel said. “I think about her often. Not as much as you, apparently, since you’re punishing yourself for what happened.” He shook his head. “I mean, make whatever excuse you want—you haven’t stood up to Amelie because you want to hurt like she does.”

“That’s not—” Adrien stammered.

He leaned forward. “Do you want to know something about Marinette, Adrien?”

His heart was pounding. His mind wouldn’t focus. He couldn’t breathe, so he protested too late, right as he started talking.

“She tasted like apples.” He said. Adrien’s blood, already cold, now froze inside his veins. “She smelled like fresh bread and she tasted like apples. The second day I had her, I poured a very expensive wine down her throat, and she smelled like a picnic in the country.” He wasn’t breathing. His heart wasn’t beating. His head was heavy—was he going to faint?! “My favorite part was feeling their skin get hot and then cold, like a pillow. But she didn’t stop smelling or tasting like she did until she smelled and tasted like the iron in her blood.”
Adrien tried to stand, but he couldn’t walk away.

“I decided I would dump her in Nouvelle-Aquitaine. It was a bit further out of my way than I would normally go, but it would have been worth it to smell it again.” He sort of smiled. “How long do you think it would have taken for someone to connect her to her body if I had?”

“I… I don’t…”

“What would you have done if I had killed her?” He shook his hand. “No, better question. Let’s say that I had you in the dungeon, and I had a knife to her throat. And I said to you, ‘if you don’t drop trou and rape her right now, I’ll slice her from throat to navel and shove your hands in her guts…”’ Gabriel tilted his head. “If I had said that, would you have done it? Would you have forced yourself upon her if it meant saving her life?”

Adrien couldn’t take it anymore. He stood and dug around in his pocket. He found the button and he struggled with it.

Gabriel stood. “Adrien, don’t you dare push that button!” He ordered.

Adrien ignored him. He pressed it once, which was enough to set off the alarm, but he wouldn’t stop. He pushed it and pushed it and pushed it and pushed it over and over and over and over until the door swung open and he dropped the button. Five wardens entered the room. The one with a taser stepped between Adrien and Gabriel. “Inmate, put your hands where I can see them!”

One of the wardens with Adrien was a woman. She put her hands on his shoulders and led him out of the room. “Come on, we’ve got to get to detox.” She said.

“He—he said…” Adrien started.

“Shh! It’s okay!” They escorted him down a hallway, and then into a room. Adrien was told to sit in a leather chair while they waited for a prison doctor to attend to him from the infirmary. He dissociated as he waited, his mind everywhere and nowhere, furious at a question he couldn’t get out of his head.

He cried for a long time. Adrien didn’t want to see his father, but he had, and now he was going to contemplate this question for too long. He didn’t want this! He’d never wanted this image in his head! Yet, another one pushed forward.

*She tasted like apples.*

Adrien realized that it had been a long time since he’d seen Marinette wear makeup.

Adrien grabbed a warden and demanded a bucket. He puked onto the floor before he got one. He apologized profusely. A little while later, he was cleared. Adrien was escorted back to the lobby, where Lila waited. She stood when she saw him, but he couldn’t even look at her. He stormed towards the door, and she ran on her tiptoes to catch up.

“Hey! I only said you had to go in for an hour!” She said. Adrien took a breath, trying to calm himself down. “I thought that it had turned into a conjugal visit.”

Adrien spun around on his heels and yanked her phone from his hands. His powers alone were enough to short-circuit it, but he slammed it on the ground too. “How could you do this to me?!” He shouted, stomping on the shards of broken electronics. “You know how terrified I am of him, and you—you!”
Lila simply bent over and grabbed the SIM card from the debris.

“This was vile. It was vile and wicked, and I hope you rot in Hell for it!” Adrien snapped. She opened her mouth. “Take me home!”

“You are in no position to be making demands.”

“You’re going to be making this up to me for the rest of your life!” He shouted. “Just wait until I tell Marinette what you've done!”

Lila froze. “Wait! You can’t tell Marinette!” She protested. He glared at her. There was something akin to panic on her face before she recovered. “I’ll tell her that I only gave you a ride, that I didn’t know you were going to the prison. She’s going to think that you went willingly, and she’s going to think that you’re going to hurt her!”

“You just don’t want her to break up with you for your cruelty!” He accused.

“She’s going to reconsider every claim that she ever made on your behalf.” Lila asked. “You were never brought to trial for those charges that were dropped… a new investigation, you might not do so well.”

“They can’t… I won’t…!”

“Can you take that risk?”

Adrien spun around and got into the car. Lila got in right after. She started on the drive back to Paris. Neither spoke the entire time.

24 April, Present Day

“Where is Adrien now?” Sabrina asked, sitting down on the bed next to Marinette.

She motioned to a shut door. “I took everything sharp from him and had him take a bath to calm him down.” She said. There was a whistling sound, and she stood. “Lila was such a torment to both of us. She would turn people against Adrien, and then isolate me from them.” She followed the whistling sound and poured hot water into a cup. “Adrien didn’t tell me any of the things that she did to him until after he’d hidden me away.”

“What does that have to do with it? Lila was clearly tormenting Adrien.” Kagami asked. “What does that have to do with you?”

Marinette paused. She poured some sugar into the cup. “Lila knew that Adrien liked me, and she wanted him out of the picture. She wanted anyone that liked me, as a friend, family, or something more, out of the picture.” She explained. “And she needed me dependant on her, subservient… so when we were alone, she would hit me.” She stirred the sugar in slowly. “And when I was isolated from friends and family, reliant entirely upon her… she raped me.”

“I… oh.” Kagami pulled her hands in. “I see.”

Marinette looked at her. “Adrien helped me escape her. But, it meant that she’s been stalking and
tormenting him, trying to find me, or get revenge, or both…” She sighed. “I’m so worried about him. I’m terrified that she’s going to find out where he is and kill him; she’s strong enough to do it.”

Kagami sighed. She walked over to the closed door and rapped on it with her knuckles. “Adrien, do you mind if I take this down to the commissariat? I want to copy the texts into evidence.”

There was a pause. “Now you want permission to go through my phone?” He shouted through the door.

Her face soured, and she slammed her hand on the door. “Kono yarou! Watashi wa anata o tasukeyou to shite imasu!”

“Kutabare!”

Sabrina interrupted. “French, please, for the idiots in the room!”

“You said it, not me!” Adrien shouted.

Marinette held up a hand. “Enough!” She looked at Kagami. “It’s fine for you to take his phone. Just… make sure you block Lila before you give it back.”

“I don’t recommend that, Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng.” Kagami said. “Lila might say something in these texts that will help us with the arrest.”

Marinette opened her mouth to argue, but Kagami’s word choice stopped her. There was a moment where she couldn’t find her voice. “A… arrest?!? Marinette said quietly. “You’re… going to arrest her? I mean—you’re actually going to investigate?!”

Kagami tilted her head. “But of course!” She said. “Adrien’s harassment complaint is just an infraction, but rape and assault are felonies.” She rolled her eyes back, thinking. “That’s… fifteen years in prison with at least three served, maybe more since it was violent.”

The door swung open. Adrien stepped out, soaking wet and covered in bubbles, the only thing sparing his modesty being a hotel towel. “You mean that she’s actually going to face consequences for what she’s done?!”

Kagami paused. She narrowed her eyes, as if she couldn’t understand the confusion. “Well, probably not for the infraction; that’s usually a fine…” she clarified.

“Fuck the texts, Kagami!” Adrien shouted. “You mean—I won’t have to deal with this for at least three years?!”

Sabrina sighed. “That’s not what she’s saying. Adrien, you know how persuasive Lila is…” She took Marinette’s hand. “This is a promise to investigate. Not to convict.”

Marinette smiled. “Still… she’ll be in prison during the investigation.” She collapsed on the bed and smiled. “I can’t… even imagine what a life without Lila would be like…”

“Even if she’s only there for a few weeks, that’ll still be enough time to move you to a place where you won’t have to hide!” Adrien said optimistically. He smiled at Kagami, that genuine grin that she had fallen for so long ago. “Thank you. The last agent assigned to this… he didn’t even file the report.”

Kagami took a breath to calm her beating heart. “Well…” she moved towards the door, wrapping Adrien’s phone in a plastic liner for the ice bucket as a makeshift evidence bag. “Let me know if she
makes any more threats.”

Sabrina stood to follow her. She looked at them and smiled cautiously. “Um… I’ll try to get her to understand the danger that Lila poses.” She said, chasing after her.

Adrien sat down next to Marinette. She put her weight on her elbows so she could look at him. “A world without Lila…” she breathed, and he turned to look at her. She put her head down again. “I can’t even imagine it!” He looked at his hands. “I can’t imagine waking up, knowing that… I’m going to be okay. I’ll be safe, and so will you.”

“We won’t be until Gabriel is arrested again.” Adrien reasoned, but a small smile broke his face. “Not having to worry about either of them, though? It won’t change what happened to us, but it will… it’ll feel like the weight of the world is off of my shoulders.” Marinette sat up, and she poked him until he got the message. He sat up, and she put her hands on his shoulders. “Nette, you don’t have to—”

“Hey, I know I don’t have to.” She said.

She started by rubbing his shoulders. Marinette had long, delicate fingers, well suited to threading needles and detail work. But she was also fairly strong—she had to be, since her upper body had to compensate for her missing leg, on top of the gravitational pressure that her powers caused. He recognized the feeling on her skin—he couldn’t see her glowing, but he could tell that she was using a bit of her power to massage his muscles.

“Don’t let anything she said to you get you down, mon chaton.” She cooed into his ear, but the only thing that registered was the gentleness of her tone. Her voice, whether calm or kind or powerful, had such power over him. He was practically melting in her hands. “You are loved, and valued, and I wouldn’t change this for anything.” Marinette kissed his cheek. “You’re irreplaceable.”
In Flagrante Delicto

Chapter Notes

i wrote this before watching ikari gozen

27 June, Ten Years Ago

“Okay, graduates, let’s party!” Anarka Couffaine screamed over the speakers as rock music started blaring and lights spun around. The eighteen-year-old baccalaureates screamed in excitement as they started dancing and drinking, unwinding after the most difficult test of their educational careers.

Adrien grabbed a paper cup full of some foul-tasting cocktail, mixed for potency and not for flavor. He drank from it as he pierced the crowd. He was already hammered and off balanced. He’d nearly overdosed the day before, and he’d started drinking early in the morning to forget the pain that vibrated through his body, to forget the ache that he felt in his chest. The dancers that occasionally bumped into him was the first bit of physical human touch he’d felt in days.

He clumsily walked down into the ship. More partners gathered there, talking loudly. Adrien scanned their faces, looking for someone. Anyone. Marinette. He drank from his cup as a hand jerked him around. It caught him by surprise, and his posture became stiff as alcohol splashed from his cup onto the shirt of his cousin Félix.

“Félix?” Adrien said, his tongue fat in his mouth from hours of day drinking.

“But what?” Adrien asked, moving his foot back to keep his balance. “But what, F… Fé…?” He shook his head. “Come on… f-finish your goddamn thought!”

“B-but what?” Adrien asked, moving his foot back to keep his balance. “But what, F… Fé…?” He shook his head. “Come on… f-finish your goddamn thought!”

“If you don’t help her, we’re going to be homeless, Adrien.” Félix said. Adrien took a long drink from his cup. “Look, I know that my mother isn’t what anyone would call a good person, but she’s your family.” Silence. “She’s bankrupt, Adrien. She’s in debt and she’s going to lose the mansion. Obviously this wasn’t her first choice, but you can use Gabriel’s fortune to pay off the money!”

Silence.

“Adrien, the bank gave her ninety days to collect a hundred thousand euros, and with three days left, she doesn’t even have a fraction of it.” Félix begged. “We don’t have that kind of money! She needs help!”

Adrien tossed back the rest of the drink. It crawled down his throat like an insect, and when he lowered his head, he shook as a shiver crawled up his spine. “If Aunt Amelie knew she’d need my help,” Adrien hissed, “maybe she shouldn’t have treated me like a slave for four years.”

Adrien walked away, grabbing two cups full of the cocktail. Félix shouted after him, trying to get his attention. Adrien drank the first cup in one sitting, then slid it onto the second cup as the world shook even more. The words people said were scrambled and overlapping. Adrien stumbled through the crowd as Félix’s voice became quiet… and then he saw her. Marinette.

He approached her, leaning on the wall to support himself. “Marinette!” He exclaimed, grabbing her shoulder for half a moment before he let his hand fall. She looked up at him, holding a juice box in her hands. No one else had one; she’d brought it from home. She waited for him to speak, sucking on the straw. “Princess… Nette… I—”

He lost his train of thought as he looked at her. She was wearing her hair down, so it hung around her shoulders. Her blue eyes sparkled in the dancing lights, though she didn’t seem greatly overjoyed to see him. They’d fought only a few months ago, now. Still, she offered him that warm smile, and he melted.

“Marinette… I s-sold the… the, um—”

“Are you feeling okay, Adrien?” She asked. She leaned against the wall so she could feel his forehead.

“I s-sold the mansion…” he muttered.

“I know that, Adrien. But that was months ago…”

Adrien put his hands on hers, pulling it down so it rested warm against his cheek. She tensed slightly only to relax moments later. He was looking at her intensely. Adrien moved his fingers, and they scraped over the diamond of her engagement ring. She frowned, and his vision steadied enough that he could see the smallest hints of makeup on her face. “Marinette…” Adrien reached for a bit of smeared lipstick. He rubbed it off, saying nothing. Marinette looked up at him with something akin to hunger in her eyes.

Lila walked past them. She gruffly pulled on Marinette, making her yelp. The music drowned out the cry, and Marinette followed Lila immediately, nearly tripping with every step she took. Adrien, too, had lost his balance, and he looked up as the world spun around him. Marinette looked over her shoulder as her prosthetic began to slip. He was too intoxicated to think straight, but he could have sworn she looked frightened.

People blocked most of his view, but he took a step closer and watched. Lila slid open the door to Anarka’s bedroom, and then shoved Marinette inside. She smirked over her shoulder at him, pressing two fingers to either side of her mouth and sticking out her tongue—a crude gesture meaning they were going to have sex, reinforced by the wink that followed. Lila slid and locked the door.

Adrien pulled himself up and walked closer. He didn’t believe that they were going to have sex. But as he was walking, he bumped into Wayhem.

Wayhem startled and helped Adrien to his feet when he stumbled. “Oh my gosh, Adrien! Are you alright?!” He didn’t move his hands from his shoulders when he stood. “I didn’t know that you were going to be here!” He was grinning like a fool. “Though I’m glad you are! I’m going to university in Canada, and I was worried that I wouldn’t see you before I go…”
Adrien looked at the door to Anarka’s bedroom, trying to listen. He couldn’t hear over the music and Wayhem’s chattering, but he couldn’t see any glowing lights through the cracks, either. Maybe it was because of the party lights? He needed to get closer—

Wayhem moved his hand as Adrien tried to walk away. Now his hand, soft and warm, rested on Adrien’s jaw. Adrien looked back, mouth agape as he met Wayhem’s deep brown eyes. His hand, resting on his neck, jaw, and messing up his blond hair. Adrien couldn’t break eye contact, his hands now resting on Wayhem’s shoulders for support. His wavy brown hair was now long, possibly to emulate the tattered style Adrien had worn it in recently, and he was probably the only person who still wore styles similar to Gabriel designs—though they were knockoffs.

“Your face is all flushed. Are you feeling okay?” Wayhem asked.

Adrien moved his hands to hold Wayhem’s face. He leaned forward before he could react. Adrien kissed him, the feeling light as the world spun around him. He was losing his balance, his eyes snapping open as he readjusted. When Wayhem didn’t pull away, when he moved his hands to both hold and support him, Adrien allowed himself to relax.

His unsteady feet got the better of him. They crashed into what he thought was the wall, until it gave out and they fell into the bathroom. Adrien fell to the floor, accidentally biting Wayhem’s lip and drawing a bit of blood.

“S-Sorry! I’m—I’m so sorry…” Adrien said as Wayhem used one hand to cover his mouth and the other to help Adrien up. Adrien shifted into his knees, only to fall into the doorway. He pushed himself off the ground and shut the door. “I didn’t mean to bite you… I didn’t…”

“Hey, it’s totally okay!” Wayhem was blushing.

Adrien tried to push himself up, but only fell into Wayhem. His chest hit his legs, causing Wayhem to startle. Adrien was still for a moment, then looked up at him. “You’re hard,” he whispered, which made the red in his cheeks all the more noticeable. Adrien blinked, and then his eyes darted from his face to the bulge to the closed door. His voice, already quiet, was lowered for Wayhem’s ears alone. “Do you want me to give you a blowjob?”

Wayhem squeaked. It was cute, actually, and a smile broke Adrien’s face for a moment. “W-why would you ask me that?” He asked.

In all honesty… he was touch-starved, and Wayhem was nice. Or at least physically present. And Adrien’s depression was deep enough that he didn’t need to be anything else. But he didn’t say that. “Because it would be wrong to do it without asking.” He frowned. “Does that mean no? H-have I made this weird?”

Wayhem jumped. “No! No, I mean—yes, I want—I want that!”

He fumbled with the belt as Adrien reached up and dug his fingers into his pants, pulling down but waiting patiently. When Wayhem had successfully undone the belt, Adrien helped pull his pants down. “I’ve never… never done anything like this b-before…”

“Really? Because Lila said this was how you paid off your drug dealer—”

Adrien sat up on his knees to silence him. “Don’t say her name again.”

“I won’t,” Wayhem said. “S-sorry…”

Adrien settled back on his knees. He pulled Wayhem’s boxers down, and while his vision still spun,
he was focused enough to take a deep breath. He leaned forward and licked the tip of Wayhem’s penis, tasting the precum that had collected there. He teased him a bit with his tongue before taking it further.

He licked it, rubbed it with his hand, eyes closed as he tried to focus on the moment. If nothing else, at least the taste of salt and the smell of skin were distracting. If he focused on this moment—a small whimper interrupted his internal dialogue. He looked up at Wayhem, the angle strange. “Ah Adrien… y-your teeth—careful of your teeth…!” He said through heavy breaths.

Sorry, the thought, but he didn’t stop. He tried to be mindful of his teeth as he kept going. Steady movements as he shifted, then leaning forward as he attempted to deepthroat. It wasn’t quite successful, so when he pulled back, he stuck his hand between Wayhem’s legs to play with his balls. Wayhem moaned in satisfaction, grabbing Adrien’s hair and pulling it. He probably didn’t mean to do it, but he also pulled his head forward.

The motion sent Wayhem’s dick too far in, and Adrien couldn’t breathe. He remembered the noose around his neck, his legs flailing under him as the world grew cold and dark. But as he struggled against it, his father’s voice passed through his mind. The second day I had her, I poured a very expensive wine down her throat, and she smelled like a picnic in the country. Adrien let go of Wayhem’s balls and pressed his hands against the wall to push away.

Wayhem let go immediately, recognizing that Adrien had revoked the shaky consent he’d offered, but it was a bit too late. He came, half in Adrien’s mouth, the rest around his lips and on his shirt. Adrien covered his mouth, hot cum collecting and running through his fingers. Semen swished around inside his mouth, and he couldn’t figure out what to do with it. He didn’t know if he could physically swallow it, or if Wayhem would take offense to him spitting it out into a bit of toilet paper.

“I am so sorry! I got a bit carried away! I wasn’t trying to—”

Adrien closed his eyes and forced himself to swallow. He moved his hand to smile at Wayhem. “I’m okay. I l-learned about… about my b-boundaries, too.” He shook his head when Wayhem said nothing. “My boundaries! I just need to breathe!”

Wayhem helped Adrien to his feet. He looked down to fix his pants as Adrien walked towards the door. Wayhem nearly tripped as he tried to stop him. “Don’t! Don’t go out there!” He said, catching Adrien’s attention. “You’ve—you’ve got cum all over your face!” He grabbed a washcloth from the shower and wet it, ignoring his pants to clean Adrien’s face.

Adrien caught his hands. “When do you leave for Canada?” He asked.

“In five days.”

He pushed the cloth away and kissed Wayhem again. “Then let’s go back to my townhouse and make the most of those days.” He said. He opened the door as Wayhem struggled with his pants, startling the girl who was about to knock on the door. Adrien saw Félix across the room as he started to leave. He was speaking to Nino. Adrien grabbed two cups from the table and drank them in quick succession.

That was when he blacked out.
The elevator doors opened, and Adrien walked out. He’d been expecting Sabrina, but wasn’t surprised to find Kagami waiting for him instead. He sighed heavily as he walked closer, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Kagami watched him. He looked stressed, but not tired. Marinette must have convinced him to sleep somehow—not something she had been able to do when his stalker had come up during their all too brief time together. It sort of annoyed her that she was only learning his stalker’s name now.

He grabbed the sleeves of his gray sweater and pulled them down to cover his tattoos as he approached her. “Kagami. I should have known that you’d come yourself.”

She shrugged. “Sabrina doesn’t like coming here. She saw Chloé last night and things were awkward.” She said. “Can’t say that I blame her, though. Bourgeois was always unpleasant.”

“I’m sure you aren’t here to insult my choice of friends.” Adrien snapped. He held out his hand. “You’ve cloned my phone, right? I need it back, in case my alerts go off.”

Kagami surrendered the phone gruffly. Her face softened. “Adrien… I had no idea that you were dealing with a woman this deranged.” She looked at him with sad eyes. “Some of the things she said to you… I don’t know how you stand it.”

He shoved it into his pocket. “I wasn’t concerned with what she’d do to me.” He said. “I had to protect Marinette—since the police were unwilling to do anything about it!”

She sighed. “Were you this anti-police when when we were dating?”

“I want to say yes, because I definitely have some complaints.” Adrien said with a grin. He pulled his phone out and unlocked it, first changing his password and then blocking Lila’s contact information. “I just kept them to myself.”

Kagami rolled her eyes. She frowned, and then leaned against the front desk. “Adrien… do you have time to talk?”

He sort of froze, still looking at his phone. He started to type quickly without looking at her. “Depends on what you want to talk about.”

“Listen, I’m… I just want to know how long you plan to be mad at me.” She said. She couldn’t meet his eyes. “I… understand what you’ve been dealing with now. More of it, at least.”

Adrien sighed. “Kagami…” He said disapprovingly.

“If it helps, I am… sorry about it all.” She admitted. “More sorry that I upset you than that I did it, but still sorry.”

“It wasn’t the first time I caught you going through my phone.”

“I know. It’s police instinct, I suppose.” She said.

He furrowed his brows. “That’s bullshit, Kagami! I don’t need to be hiding anything to want privacy!”

“But, you were hiding something!” Kagami argued. “And I could get mad about it, too, because you were hiding your identity from me—but I’m not, Adrien! I’m not!”
“Well, congratulations, Kagami!” Adrien said with a disingenuous bow. “It looks like you’re a better person than me!”

“I’m still in love with you,” Kagami admitted. Her voice broke, and she looked weaker than she normally presented herself. “It’s hard for me to imagine… not loving you.”

Adrien sighed. His arms fell, and he rubbed his neck. For a moment, she thought he might admit the same, but he didn’t. “I’m sorry, Kagami.”

“I just want to start over.” She said. “I want the chance to make this right.”

“Kagami, Nette—Marinette and I… are… dating.” He said. Her eyes flashed up at his, heartbroken, and he had to look away.

She couldn’t speak for a moment. “But—but it’s barely been four months…”

“I know, but…” How could he explain to his ex-girlfriend that he’d been in love with his current girlfriend since they were teenagers without making her feel like a placeholder? Because he certainly couldn’t tell her that he wasn’t truly sure that he’d ever loved her like he loved Marinette. Even if he could, he shouldn’t—it would have been cruel. “There is so much history here that you don’t know.”

“Yes,” Kagami spat as she started to walk away. “I don’t know, nor do I want to know about your history with your father’s victim.” She stormed through the doors, and he could tell that she would have slammed them if they hadn’t been automatic. Kagami walked out to the cruiser, still stomping.

She balled up her fists as she got closer. Kagami didn’t cry. That wasn’t who she was. She didn’t cry. She didn’t cry. She didn’t cry as she got into the cruiser. A single tear roll down her cheek, leaving a cold, itchy spot. Kagami tightened her grip on the wheel and started sobbing, heavy tears rolling down her face and collecting on the horn.

Kagami let go of the wheel and covered her eyes with her hands. She cried into them as her hair hung like a short curtain around her face. She balled up her hands, scratching her forehead, before slamming them down repeatedly. She screeched a few times, coinciding with the horn. “Dammit!” She cried, her spine failing to support her head. “Dammit!”

She calmed down after a while. She reached into the middle console and grabbed a tissue. She rubbed her face in the mirror of the sun visor. She sighed heavily afterwards, taking another moment to let her heartbeat calm itself.

She didn’t get that moment. Her phone rang, and she grabbed it. “Agent Tsurugi,” she said as she picked it up.

“Kagami, it’s me.” Sabrina said. “We just got a new text from Lila on the clone of Adrien’s phone.” She reported. Kagami sat up straight. “It’s a picture of Adrien’s front door. She’s at the townhouse.”

“You’re still at the commissariat, right? I’ll meet you there.” She hung up before Sabrina could protest. Kagami flipped on the siren, quickly pulling away and making a U-turn.

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2 July, Ten Years Ago
The vibration from his phone was enough to jumpstart the now painfully sober Adrien from sleep. He scrambled around, looking for it desperately, worried about what had become of it. It didn’t matter that he was in a room he didn’t recognize, or that he was completely naked excluding… Mardi Gras beads?! Whatever. All that mattered was his phone, which was helpfully plugged in on the bedside table. He grabbed it and unlocked it right away.

**Princess:** so im going on vacation with Lila in a month, not that you’d care about that or anything

Adrien frowned.

**me:** of course I care
**me:** my disapproval comes from how much I care, not a lack of it
**Princess:** I’m still going to marry her
**me:** did she hit you at the party
**Princess:** which party?
**Princess:** the one on the liberty? That was almost a week ago
**Princess:** why bring it up now?

A week? That couldn’t have been right. But, no, there was the date—the second of July.

Adrien felt his blood run cold. “Oh, my god! Ohmigod!” He shot up and scrolled through the contacts on his phone while he grabbed his underwear and struggled to pull it on.

It rang and rang until it stopped. “What do you want?” Félix asked on the other end, clearly annoyed. Typical.

Adrien banished negative thoughts. “Félix! I’m so sorry for what I said—really, I am!” He said as he looked around for his shirt and pants. His tee shirt was crumbled near the door, so he dove for it. “I’m getting dressed right now! I’ll go to the bank, and I’ll have them write a check for Aunt Amelie just as soon as I—”

“Don’t fucking bother, Adrien.” Félix said. “The bank seized the mansion yesterday.”

“I’m… I’m so sorry, Félix.” He said, collapsing on the floor at the end of the bed. “W… where are you now? Let me make it up to you; I can find a new place that’s not so expens—”

“We’re at a homeless shelter.”

“I’m glad that you’re somewhere safe. I have space at the townhouse, though. Let me—”

“Aren’t you worried my mother will hit you if we go there?” Félix asked. Adrien didn’t speak. “Or do you take your kicks in making shady deals? What—you’re waiting for one foul word against you to kick us out on the street again?”

Adrien shook his head. “No, no! I feel terrible about this, Félix! But I didn’t do this on purpose, I was—”

“I don’t care anymore, Adrien. We’re homeless, thanks to you.” He said.

“I know, but please, *let me fix this!*” Adrien begged. “*Please, Félix, I’m so sorry!*”

“I never thought I would say this, but after this week, I’m glad my mother hit you.” Félix said, and the words hurt like he’d been run through. “Honestly, Adrien, if this is how you treat your family, I
feel badly for Uncle Gabriel.” He said flatly. “You might want to consider writing him a letter, because as of this moment, he’s the only family you’ve got left.”

“Wait, I—”

“Do the world a favor and die, Adrien Agreste.” Félix hung up.

Adrien held the phone next to his ear for a moment until it slipped. His hand fell after, resting now on the practically antique shag carpet. The room around him was messy, and while some of it seemed old, there were parts that were decidedly not. Syringes and condoms were laying on the floor, clearly used. Empty bottles and crushed cans were around the desk, and there was a trashy movie paused on the open laptop. But what caught Adrien’s eye was a poster of him as a model, airbrushed to hell and smiling at him with that fake ass camera grin his cameraman had drilled into him. It stared at him, almost knowingly, as Adrien struggled and failed to remember what was going on.

He heard Wayhem stir. He sat up and offered a grin, though flinched in the light and looked around for something to help with that. “What are you doing on the floor?” He asked.

Adrien couldn’t tear his eyes away from the poster. That stupid poster, more than four or five years old, with fading color as the sun bleached it. It was fake and stupid and naïve and it was too much like him. He shook his head and sighed. “How did I get here?” He asked quietly.

Wayhem paused. A strange expression crossed his face, somewhere between confusion and fear and regret. “You don’t remember?” He asked.

He shook his head. “No, I don’t, but that isn’t what I was asking…” he muttered. “I meant, how did I get…” The poster stared at him. It stared at an eighteen-year-old boy on the brink of death nearly every day, with scars and track marks on his arms and clothes that didn’t fit right and enough regret to fill a tub. He sighed. “…here.”

25 April, Present Day

Kagami had silenced her siren when she’d gotten close to Adrien’s townhouse. She extended her baton as she drew closer to the door, noting that it was ajar. She pushed it open slightly, looking around before stepping inside. She closed the door with her foot. It was eerily quiet, and twice as strange because of how she’d last seen this place. Kagami narrowed her eyes and walked inside, honing her warrior’s resolve and waiting for any sort of sound.

In this quiet, she heard scuttling downstairs. She walked down the steps, careful to step in the middle so they wouldn’t creak. She peered into the basement, scanning it before setting her sights on a woman in black shorts and a white shirt with a chameleon pattern. She was digging around a box, but it was clear that she’d been here for a while. The basement was trashed.

“Lila Rossi, you’re under arrest for breaking and entering. Put your hands where I can see them.” Kagami ordered, drawing closer. Lila stopped, and she put her hands up almost passively. “You are also being investigated for sexual assault on 6 August, 20xx. You may be in custody for up to forty-eight hours without being charged.”

Lila chuckled, almost wickedly. “So, Agreste Junior sends his ex to do his lover’s dirty work.”
Kagami tightened her grip on her baton. “Don’t say that!”

“Don’t say what?” Lila asked, feigning innocence. “Agreste Junior, ex… or lover?”

She huffed. Don’t let her under your skin, she thought. You’ve dealt with this kind of perp before. “You have the right to an attorney, an interpreter and a doctor, if you are in need of one. You have the right to see any documentation of the procedure against you in a timely manner.” She recited. “You have the right to make a statement to the procureur de la République and the magistrate, as well as the right to answer questions and remain silent.”

“What stupid fucking right is the right to answer questions?” She criticized. Lila didn’t otherwise speak, nor did she move as Kagami approached. Kagami took a moment to assess whether or not she would strike, but when Lila didn’t move, she collapsed her baton. She grabbed the handcuffs and reached for one of Lila’s hands.

Lila spun around and tried to strike her. Kagami had expected resistance. She blocked the strike and tried to counter it. Lila broke free and kicked Kagami so hard she flew across the room and struck the bar. The pain was excruciating, even with all of her training. Sabrina had mentioned that Lila was super strong, but Kagami had thought it an expression. She hadn’t expected to fight a supernatural.

“Oh, you’re Tomoe’s little girl! Ah!” Lila cooed as she stood. “I really should thank you. You’ve really made all of this possible, you know.” She reaches inside her jacket. “Such an obedient little girl.”

Kagami thought about grabbing her baton, but thought better of it. She noticed a display of swords near the door, and she grabbed one. She unsheathed it dramatically and pointed the tip at Lila. “Drop your weapon! Now!”

Lila covered her mouth daintily. “My weapon! But, madame l’agent, I’m unarmed!” She revealed what was hidden in her jacket. It was a pair of panties, plain gray with white lace around the elastic and a pink ribbon. “What’s more, everyone’s favorite extraterrestrial is hiding somewhere, tragically underdressed!”

Kagami tightened her grip on the sword. “You’re in possession of federal evidence! Drop it, now!”

She shook her head. “Don’t you understand?” She said, motioning to the panties. “Adrien cheated on you. He promised that he loved you, and then he spread her legs.” She laughed, but it was joyless. “You don’t owe him any loyalty!”

“I forgot to mention the child pornography.” Kagami said, taking a step forward. She hoped her defensive stance wouldn’t betray her injury. “Judges and juries hate child porn. You’d better come with me.” She grinned. “You’re going to need a really good lawyer.”

“I have a better plan. I go with you, and you take me to Adrien and Marinette.” Lila said. She took a step closer. “You do that, and I’ll let you give either one of them the cheater’s punishment that you think they deserve.” She smiled at Kagami’s face twisted into fury. “Adrien ruined my engagement. We would have been happy! You understand—two years of your life flushed down the toilet because of some one-legged alien whore!”

Kagami had heard enough. She threw the sword at Lila, aiming at her wicked heart. Lila dodged the incoming strike effortlessly. “Adrien didn’t ruin your relationship! You did that!” She shouted. “And now it’s time to pay the price for it!”

“Oh, you’re Marinette—” Lila started as Kagami hissed. “If Marinette weren’t in the picture, you would
have Adrien all to yourself! I mean, if he wasn’t around, I wouldn’t need to follow him, would I?”

She approached carefully, picking a piece of dust from Kagami’s jacket. “If you bring me to where
they are, I’ll take Marinette… and you’ll never see us again. He’ll need a shoulder to cry on, and
that’s where you’d come in.”

She was shaking, her hands sweating and her pain growing stronger.

“Yes… and all you have to do is tell me where my love is.” She said.

She draped one arm over Kagami’s shoulder while the other booped her nose. “It’s an offer you
can’t refuse.”

Her heart ached for Adrien. She loved him. There was a time where she thought that he was her
soulmate, and sometimes she still couldn’t shake the feeling. Furthermore, Kagami was raised by a
businesswoman. She knew a good deal when she heard one. But she also knew never to come to a
negotiation table empty handed. She had a counteroffer prepared:

Her left hook.

Lila was shocked enough for impact that Kagami was able to catch her by surprise. She tackled her,
grabbing a set of handcuffs. She reached for her wrists, and she handcuffed Lila to an exposed pipe.
Moments after it clicked, Lila kicked her off, and she slid towards the original, abandoned handcuffs.
Kagami grabbed them as Lila sat up.

Kagami struggled to prepare the handcuffs. She opened them and stood, started when she realized
that she was face to face with Adrien. She took a step back, not having heard or seen him come in.
He said nothing, just stared at her with angry, hollow eyes.

“What are you doing here?” She asked. He didn’t speak. He took a step closer, eyes focused
unwavering on her as the world around her became dark. She felt her back hit the wall. Kagami
recognized the face but not the emotion, and it frightened her. There was a loud crack in the
background, but she barely noticed because he raised his arm—and his powers—to her.

Instinctively, Kagami grabbed the sword that was stuck in the wall. She slashed up and forward,
thinking to cut off his hand before he killed her. But instead of Adrien reacting to that, he vanished—
he disintegrated into embers which floated away and died. The room, which had been dark, was now
filled with light. She blinked and tried to comprehend what had happened. It wasn’t until she saw
that Lila had broken the pipe and the handcuffs that she realized that she might have more than just
one power—uncommon, but not unheard of.

“Hey!” Kagami protested as Lila made her way to the stairs.

“Don’t blame me! You’re the one who brought a fist to a magic duel!” She teased.

Lila raced up the stairs, Kagami hot on her heels. As soon as they were outside, Lila used her
considerable strength to flip Kagami’s cruiser into oncoming traffic, causing a head-on collision.
Kagami cringed, but when the driver appeared unscathed, she ignored the crash to chase after the
dangerous criminal who had caused it. Lila pushed people out of the way as she sprinted down the
sidewalk. She kicked over a fire hydrant to slow her down.

Kagami burst through it, soaked but undeterred. “Stop in the name of the twenty-first commissariat!”
She ordered as Lila ducked into an alley. Kagami followed her, only to watch her parkour up to the
roof by jumping between buildings like a frog.

Lila looked down on her with a smug expression. She waved goodbye daintily before flipping her
hair. She disappeared, and with horns honking and people gathering, Kagami had no choice but to surrender this battle to her newfound nemesis.

She spun on her heel as she walked back to the scene of the accident. She took reports and statements as she stewed. She calmed civilians as she festered. She called the commissariat while she felt hatred bubble in her gut. It didn’t fade as more appropriate agents arrived. It became intense as Sabrina arrived to take her back to the hotel. It was enough to make her scream as she took the elevator up to the hotel room.

Adrien didn’t seem surprised to see her, but he was startled when Kagami blew past him. She ignored everything he said to her to the point of not even hearing it, because she was only interested in Marinette right now.

She slammed her hands down on the end of the bed, startling Marinette. “What are Lila’s powers?” She demanded.

“Lila?” Marinette said. “She’s… she’s got super strength. She’s strong enough to contend with my gravitational fields, though I was much weaker back then.” She frowned. “Her strength allows her to perform feats which look similar to flying, too.”

“That can’t be everything. She sent a message to the cloned phone that she was inside Adrien’s home, and when I went there, she—she…” Kagami struggled to describe it in a way that didn’t make her sound insane. “Suddenly, I saw Adrien, but as soon as I interacted with the vision, it turned into embers… and Lila was trying to escape.” She paused to look at Adrien. “By the way, she flooded your basement.”

Adrien huffed. “Of course she did! Knothead.”

Marinette frowned. “While it’s true that some supernaturals develop more than one power, it’s rare for it to occur so late in life. Supernatural powers in humans manifest at puberty, so I would have seen a new power form.”

He agreed. “Furthermore, if a secondary power had manifested, it would be similar to her primary power. Dual-powered supernaturals with super strength as their primary power usually have unbreakable skin or bones as hard as metal.” He said, citing a study he’d participated in during nursing school. “While it’s not impossible, such dramatically different powers would more likely be a result of a traumatic brain injury that she would show signs of.”

“I don’t want you to tell me how unlikely it is!” Kagami snapped at him. “I know what I saw! I don’t know if it was an illusion or hallucination, but that criminal put a picture in my head to distract me!”

Adrien narrowed his eyes. “We didn’t say that we didn’t believe you! We’re just trying to—”

Marinette’s phone buzzed. She grabbed it to look. “Alya sent me a message.” She reported. As she read the message, her face fell. She became small, and she held the phone close to her. “Kagami, Alya thinks you might have a mole at the commissariat.”

“Don’t change the—” Kagami sighed. “What makes you say that?”

“Gabriel made it past the roadblocks.” She said quietly. She looked up with big sad eyes. “There are three confirmed sightings of him in Rennes and other parts of Brittany.” She offered her the phone. “There’s even a picture. Look.”

Kagami took the phone. She skimmed the article, taking note of a few things before looking at the picture. Gabriel was either getting into or out of a red car with tinted windows. Only half of the
license was visible, but that was all she needed. Kagami dropped the phone.

“What’s the matter?” Adrien asked.

She couldn’t breathe. She grabbed her throat. “Th-that is my mother’s car,” she said breathlessly.

Now he’s living with some-some…! Where is he living? In an apartment building on Rue Fantômette, why? Oh, you’re Tomoe’s little girl! Ah! I really should thank you. You’ve really made all of this possible, you know. Such an obedient little girl.

Kagami felt her world crack. “I… I’m the mole!”
Survivor’s Guilt

Chapter Notes

the ambience of the hospital scenes is based on my own experiences in a psychiatric ward (with creative liberties taken for dramatic/romantic reasons)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

25 April

Kagami was sitting on the couch, her head buried in her hands. Marinette was at her side, trying to calm her. Adrien stood in front of her, clearly furious. It brought back memories of their breakup. “It was your fault Aza found us at the apartment!” He shouted. “Do you have any idea how hard Alya and I worked to find that place?! And you ruined it in casual conversation!”

Kagami shook her head. “I know,” she confessed, her voice quiet.

Marinette smiled at her. “It’s okay. You didn’t know.” She said.

“Didn’t know?!” Adrien snapped. “She had to know that it was illegal to leak details from an ongoing investigation!”

“She confided her troubles to her mother, Adrien.” Marinette reasoned. “Everyone makes mistakes.”

“You could be a little more sympathetic!” Marinette argued. She motioned to Kagami, who looked at her in surprise. “She’s going through exactly the same thing you did fifteen years ago, and you sound exactly like the kids at our collège!”

“It’s not the same thing! I never told my father where to find you!” He snapped. “We were in hiding, and she exposed us!” Adrien was pacing, waving his arms around wildly. “She couldn’t have been more obvious if she had painted a sign!”

Kagami nodded. “Adrien is right. I was a fool to have said anything.” She confessed.

Marinette furrowed her brows. “Kagami, does your mother have any powers? Is she a supernatural?”

She considered this. “I… no, not that I know of…”

“Then we have to assume that Madame Tsurugi is under G-Gabriel’s control until we can prove it otherwise.” Marinette said. “Gabriel was in prison for so long. He must be relying on his powers to get by. He can’t charm anyone anymore.”

Kagami put her hand on her heart. “You don’t have to defend me.” She looked down. “If I hadn’t
been so weak, I could have stood my ground. I could have arrested him there, and this would have been over days ago.”

Marinette shook her head. “No, it wouldn’t have.” She argued. “He would have controlled you, and he would have tortured information out of you, and then, he would have killed you.”

“But, my mother—”

“—might be the only reason you’re alive right now, Kagami!” Marinette said. She looked at her desperately. “The only reason you made it out of that car alive is probably so you could feel the way you feel right now—either because you found out, or because we had turned up dead.”

Kagami didn’t say anything for a moment. She looked down.

“Deep down, I know this to be true. And for all the hot air he’s blowing, Adrien knows it too!” She said. “Gabriel can control people. He can control what they say and what they do!” She took Kagami’s hand. “I don’t blame you for telling your mother what you did, Kagami. You mustn’t blame yourself, either. If nothing had come of it, no one would be the wiser, and you would have lifted a burden from your shoulders.”

“A therapist is a better choice for that.” Adrien huffed. Marinette shushed him.

Kagami stood. “I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng, but it doesn’t matter!” She said firmly. “It’s my job to serve and protect, and my actions have caused you pain!”

“Since when have the police served anyone but themselves?” Adrien muttered bitterly. Marinette shushed him again.

She shook her head. “I’ve failed in my duty to protect you. I have to do what I can to put this right.” She walked to the door. She looked at Adrien as she passed. “Good-bye to both of you…” she paused in the threshold. She looked at Marinette sadly. “And Marinette… treat him well.”

There was a moment of tense silence after she left. Adrien was a bit embarrassed by Kagami’s final words, but decided to put it aside for a train of thought he found more important. “What’s the matter with you? You’re usually all for righteous anger, and because of Kagami, you can never go back home again!”

“She wouldn’t have said anything if she had known, Adrien. You can’t blame people for the decisions they make when they don’t have all of the facts.” Marinette said, grabbing her phone and typing away.

“If Madame Tsurugi is the person who told my father where I work, then Kagami is also the reason that warden was sent to l’Hôpital Alexandrine Rayne!”

“We have bigger problems than the possibility that Kagami doxxed you on accident.” Marinette said firmly.

“What could possibly be more important than my father knowing everything about where I go and what I do?!”

“Kagami said that, during the confrontation, Lila called her ‘Tomoe’s little girl.’” She said. Adrien frowned with his eyebrows furrowed. “If she was just stalking you, she’d have called her agent, or the ex.” Adrien still didn’t understand. “She knows Kagami’s mother by first name. Madame Tsurugi may or may not be a hostage, but Lila is definitely working for your father.”
5 September, Thirteen Years Ago

The cafeteria in the psych ward was about the size of Mademoiselle Bustier’s classroom, if slightly smaller, with twelve long tables that had benches connected to them. After the doctors had stabilized him, they had sent him to the psych ward, referred to by the patients as la Promenade, where he’d been confined to his bed until morning. He was in the cafeteria for two reasons—firstly, lunch was about to be served, and since Amelie had not changed, he was still starving, and secondly, it got him away from his roommate, who was desperately trying to remember where he knew him from.

He had asked for a notebook to write in, which a nurse had helpfully provided. But, instead of a pencil or a pen—they could be broken apart—he had been given crayons. Actual wax crayons, like he was a five year old who was still learning colors.

Some adults passed by. He could hear them talking about how badly they wanted out. They missed fresh air, they said, but their conversation quickly turned to how much they missed cigarettes. He could relate. His skin was crawling for want of heroin. He ripped the paper off the red crayon he was using and tried his best to read the chicken scratches on the paper.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{je les vois} \\
\text{ceux qui sont morts} \\
\text{et je me demande} \\
\text{pourquoi} \\
\text{je ne suis pas mort}
\end{align*}
\]

He ripped the paper out and threw it against the wall. It bounced off and landed near the trash can. Adrien sighed as he stood. He walked over to it and threw it away properly. The moment he did so, he heard one of the nurses speak.

“Okay, papa, time for you to go. Visiting hours are 17:00-18:00.”

“Are you sure I can’t stay? I—” A man protested. To Adrien, he sounded like Monsieur Dupain, but lately, he’d heard many familiar voices. “Alright. Your mother and I will be back to visit you then, okay?”

Adrien saw his roommate walk down the hallway, which gave him the chance to go through his things without someone over his shoulder. Which was good, because he desperately needed the bathroom. Adrien grabbed his notebook and tried to sneak down the hall to his room.

He didn’t even make it to the nurses’ station before he locked eyes with Marinette. She looked almost sickly, with her skin having the slightest bit of a green hue. It was very noticeable under her eyes, and Adrien could have sworn there was a bruise on her breastbone. She was in a paper gown, too, so the scars on her shoulders were visible over the top of her wheelchair.

She shifted uncomfortably in it. “Well,” she said, looking up to avoid his eyes, “this is terribly awkward.”

The nurse shooed Adrien away. “Go on! I still have to get Mademoiselle set up.” Adrien obliged, but he stuck nearby, eavesdropping on what the nurse was saying. He hid in his room when the tour was done. Marinette’s room was right across the hall from him—and he considered himself lucky. The nurse spoke a bit more before leaving her to her own devices.
Adrien watched her. Marinette was going through her things, looking for something to change into. She spotted him looking and smiled weakly at him.

Adrien sprinted across the hall and embraced her, causing the wheelchair to roll back and bump against the cot. The position was awkward, so he pulled his legs up and sat in her lap as he’d seen Lila do, holding her close. She smelled of the bakery, so she smelled like home.

But he wasn’t home, and neither was she. Adrien held her close as he started crying.

Adrien rubbed his eyes as he climbed off. “I’m not actually supposed to be in here.” He said, taking a few steps back so his feet were at the very edge of the threshold. He leaned in the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Marinette asked.

“I asked you first.” He said.

“I asked you second!”

Adrien sighed. He didn’t want to tell her about the pictures, but she was at least somewhat aware that he was being bullied. “… spiraled, so I ran away from school and…” He looked at his arms but omitted the rest. “The doctors are keeping me for observation.” He motioned to her. “Your turn.”

She was quiet. “I swallowed a bunch of painkillers because I can’t stand the agony anymore.”

This was her first suicide attempt. Marinette had tried to kill herself three times. The second was because Lila had raped her, so it was after they returned to Paris, moved in together, and her isolation. Adrien hadn’t been allowed near her during that time, but he’d been there for the third, which was about six months after her miscarriage—about the time she should have given birth.

“I’m lucky papa found me when he did.” Marinette said.

“You never told me that you were having thoughts of suicide.” Adrien said.

She smiled at him weakly. “You have your own problems.”

“They aren’t as important as you.”

Marinette sighed. “I think the fact that we’re both here implies that we have problems neither of us can deal with on our own.” She said with a shrug.

A nurse walked by. “Adrien, you can’t be in her room.”

Adrien frowned. “I’m not in her room,” he argued. “I’m—”

“Just step back into the hall, please.” The nurse said firmly.

Marinette smiled at the nurse. “It’s okay. I’m coming out.” She rolled herself into the hall, and the nurse left them be. She smiled at Adrien. “So, give me the patient tour! Since I’ve already had the official one.”

“Well, it’s really boring, mostly.” Adrien said as he took the handles of her wheelchair. “Those stares you’re getting will probably pass. Right now it’s just because you’re new. If they don’t, it’s because they don’t know why they recognize you. That’s my problem.

“Time in here does not even feel real. I swear to God, water has never evaporated faster in my life.”
Adrien said, deadpan. Marinette giggled at this. He chuckled, glad that he'd made her laugh, even if the joke hadn't been very funny. “If you have a problem, talk to the other patients before the nurses. I mean, obviously if it's related to your treatment you should talk to the nurses but if it isn’t, you’ll get more support from other patients.”

“How do I call my parents? We can’t use our phones.” Marinette said.

“They’ve got phones here in the halls. They’ve got cords, actually; it’s really weird.” He said. “Use the one closer to the nurses’ station, though. It’s better.”

She nodded and looked up at him. “So what is there to do around here?”

“Group, mostly. You’ll get out faster if you go to group and participate.” Adrien said. “But there’s a TV in the cafeteria and a piano room in the back.”

Her eyes lit up. “You play piano, right?”

“Um, yes?”

“Oh, I’ve never heard you play. When does group start? Do we have time for you to play something quickly?” She asked with a smile.

Adrien looked up at the clock and then at the schedule written on the whiteboard. “Yeah, we’ve got time.” She giggled again and they went into the piano room. There wasn’t a lot of room inside, but Adrien pushed some things aside to make room for her wheelchair. He found a few songbooks and flipped through them, but not seeing one he liked, he started to play a Jagged Stone song from memory. Marinette shifted so her wheelchair was next to the bench, and she moved from the chair to the bench. She pressed a few keys in an attempt to mess him up, but eventually settled to resting her head on his shoulder.

Later that night, after evening group and dinner, it was lights out. Adrien was trying to sleep, but this annoying sound kept going off every few minutes. His roommate was closer to the bathroom than the door, so he slept right through it, but it kept waking Adrien. He got out of bed to open his door. Marinette opened hers at the same time. They smiled at each other briefly before looking down the hall at a nurse trying to convince a patient that he needed to stay in bed. To Adrien, it seemed as though he wasn’t all there, but then again, none of the people around him would have been there if they were. The nurse spotted them and told them to go back to bed.

They closed their doors and waited for the alarm to stop. After checking in on why he had opened the door, the nurse closed it until it clicked. Adrien sighed, now wide awake. He sat up in bed and tried to clear his thoughts when a folded up piece of paper slid under the crack of the door. He blinked before getting out of bed to grab it. It was a note written in pink crayon, and he had to hold it to the light coming in from under the door to read it.

Marinette: did they tell you off too?

A smile crept across Adrien’s face. No matter what, she could always find a way to make him smile. He grabbed a green crayon and wrote on the same sheet.

Adrien: the nurse said it wasn’t any of our business.

He folded the sheet up along the lines and folds Marinette had made. He pressed his face to the cold tile and slid the paper underneath the door with as much force as he could muster. It made it less than halfway. He muttered under his breath, but soon after, pink light surrounded the note. Marinette used
her powers to pull it closer. A few moments later, she sent it back.

Marinette: why was the alarm going off?
Adrien: it does that when the door is opened after lights out.
Marinette: he was trying to leave?
Adrien: with such wonderful things as a mandatory curfew and condescending nurses? who would leave?
Marinette: at least we can wear our own clothes.
Adrien: at least you have your own clothes.

Adrien scribbled his reply. He looked under the door and slid it back, but before she could drag it closer, it landed at the feet of a nurse. “What is this?” She asked, picking it up.

“Shit!” Adrien scrambled to get back in bed. He flipped over and faced his roommate so the nurse wouldn’t see he was awake when she opened the door to check on him.

The light was blinding as it filled a small corner of the room. She said nothing, and soon enough, she walked away. A few moments passed where all was still. Then, he heard something slide into his room. He smiled and went to get the note.

Marinette: are you still awake?
Adrien: I would never abandon you, my lady.

7 September, Thirteen Years Ago

“Ha! That’s one point for me!” Marinette said gleefully. They were playing paper football in the cafeteria, and she’d successfully shot the paper through his fingers.

He laughed as it hit the floor. “I moved my hands!” He said as he grabbed it.

She shook her head, her eyes as wide as her smile. “You did not!” She said, laughing through her words.

“I did!” He said as he set up to flick the paper. Marinette giggled so hard she could hardly keep her hands steady. He looked at the paper and shook his head. “I moved my hands so you’d get a point!”

“Oh? Is that so?” She asked as he prepared his shot. “It’s legal for us to move our hands? So I can go like…” she waited for him to flick the paper before smacking the paper out of the air. “…this?”

His eyes went wide as he laughed. “Cheater! What a cheater!” He accused, and their laughter filled the cafeteria. He leaned forward to grab the ball, but Marinette moved at the same time to keep it away from him. They both stopped when their faces were but a breath apart. The realization hit them at the same time, but it seemed to hit her harder. Her face, just a moment ago still green and sickly, turned bright pink, and it didn’t look like she was breathing. Adrien was frozen, but aware enough to lower his face enough so their lips were level.

Kiss me, his mind begged her. He didn’t care that it was against the rules. He just wanted to kiss her, but he couldn’t be the one to do it. So kiss me, Marinette, he prayed. Just one kiss.
Instead, her eyes flashed down. Adrien blinked when he felt something on his arm. He looked down, too, and watched as Marinette drew patterns onto the gauze pad that covered his left arm.

“You haven’t told me what happened.” She said, looking up at him with bluebell eyes soft enough to fall into forever.

He sat back down. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn’t come. Adrien looked at his arm and peeled back the gauze. Underneath were several centimeters worth of laceration repairs. There were ugly black stitches, rough to the touch and painful to look at. “There’s a lot going on right now.” He said quietly.

Marinette hesitated. She slid his fingers up his skin, never breaking contact. It felt like electricity chasing his blood, this gentle movement. Her fingers passed the track marks, those red spots on his skin, before her fingers broke contact to caress a bruise on his collarbone. It was reddish brown with green edges, as Adrien hadn’t the time or tools to speed its healing process. She looked up at him. “It was Amelie, wasn’t it? Or was it Félix this time?”

He took a moment to think. “Neither of them cut me up, no.” He said quietly.

She shook her head. “No, that wouldn’t be their style, but this…” Marinette tapped the bruise. “I see these marks on you all of the time.” She pressed her hand to the bruise.

Adrien put his hands on hers, and after a moment, he lifted it up. He brought her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers gently. Adrien pushed them down, forming them into the goalpost of their game. He smiled weakly as he flicked the paper over it, as if to say, don’t worry about me.

“My parents are worried about you. They call the National Service of Telephonic Reception for Mistreated Children nearly every day, but they can’t get through…”

He was quiet for a moment. “Will you ask them to stop?” He said. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“We can’t be friends if you’re dead, Adrien!” She said, but he didn’t respond. He just kept trying to get her to play their game.

A few minutes later, one of the nurses came by and put her hand on the table. “Adrien?” She said with a smile. He looked up. “Your observation period has ended. You’ve been cleared to go home.”

But he didn’t want to go home. He might not have had some of his luxuries, but here he was being fed, and he wasn’t being hit, and he had Marinette all to himself but for an hour or so every afternoon. He didn’t want to leave, but he moved to stand anyway. The moment he moved, Marinette protested.

“No! No, he can’t leave!” She argued. The nurse tried to get her to calm down. “You don’t understand! He won’t be safe out there!” A nurse escorted Adrien away. “No! Don’t leave!”

Adrien put his hand on the nurse’s arm and removed it from his back. “Maybe I should stay, for her peace of mind.”

“They’ve already prepared an outpatient program for you, and there’s a waiting list for your bed.” The nurse argued.

“Adrien! Don’t leave!” Marinette begged. She spun her head around when someone grabbed her wheelchair. “No! Get away from me!”

Adrien looked at her, trying to get her to relax. “Deep breaths, Princess. Calm down!” He advised.
“If you don’t calm down, they’ll keep you longer!”

The nurse sort of pushed him, trying to get him to walk. When he did, Marinette leaned forward and fell out of her wheelchair. “Adrien!” She called out as he was escorted from the room, and she tried to crawl closer. “Adrien!”

The nurse escorted him to the waiting room. Amelie was waiting there, signing him out. The nurse gave him his things, and Adrien waited obediently at his aunt's side. He could hear Marinette screaming, though, begging for someone to get him away from Amelie. Then, her screams… shifted. They were no longer cries to help him, but desperate pleas for him to help her.

He moved to go back through the heavy door. Amelie grabbed his shoulder and held him in place. “She needs me! Listen, she’s calling for me!”

Amelie didn’t reply. She dragged Adrien away, even as he struggled. Marinette was still screaming, though as he moved further and further away, the screaming started to fade out…

26 April, Present Day

A voice pierced the darkness. “You have one new voice message.”

    Kagami: Call me as soon as you hear this. We need to talk, now.

Tomoe was silent for a moment. She picked up a throwing blade, holding it carefully in her hands. She closed her fingers, feeling the blade as it made shallow cuts in her skin. She let out a disappointed sigh. “It would seem my weak willed daughter has learned a secret.” Tomoe said.

She shifted to the movement behind her. “So it would seem.” Gabriel said. She could hear his uneven steps, counting three clacks as he walked. Two feet, one cane. How the mighty have fallen, she thought. “So much for an inside perspective on the investigation. I suppose I’ve no choice but to go back to police scanners.”

She heard him sharpen his blades. Then there came a whimpering sound. Tomoe tried to ignore it by examining two more blades, but the sound annoyed her quickly. She slammed her bokken on the ground. “Do something to quiet him!” She demanded.

“Of course, Tsurugi-san.” Gabriel turned to face a young man tied up in the center of a dimly lit room. Their hostage had seen and identified them, so he couldn’t be allowed to report their location to the police. “Stop whimpering, now!” Gabriel ordered. The man cried, but he was quiet. The only sound in the room came from water rushing through old pipes and their own breathing.

“Thank you. I could hardly think with all that racket.” Tomoe said. She brandished the throwing blades, prepared a strike, and threw them all at the same time. Each one found its target. One stuck the soft spot between two ribs, one struck his neck, and the third was buried in his ear with such force that only the very end was visible.

Gabriel watched as the man slumped over. The blood ran down his clothes, pooling beneath him eerily in the dim light. “Impressive, to be sure.” He said simply. “But I’ve always thought it more satisfying to delay the kill.” He held his chin as he smirked. “The lengths a person will go to when they know they know they’re to die is nothing short of remarkable.”
“I suppose you’d know,” Tomoe said sharply, “but that kind of thinking is what got you caught in the first place.” She shook her head. “If you’d taken the kill when you had it, you wouldn’t have been outmaneuvered by a thirteen year old alien that was dying of an infection.”

“That was rather embarrassing,” Gabriel admitted.

Tomoe was pleased that he agreed. She took a pair of gloves and tucked her sleeves into them when she put them on. She grabbed a heavy sword and lined it up carefully. Tomoe yelled loudly before hacking at the legs of the corpse. Dismembering was the easiest way to prepare a body for transit.

Chapter End Notes

in 2011, the National Service of Telephonic Reception for Mistreated Children, a French program established in 1989, only handled 32,414 of a total 583,139 calls (approx. 0.05%)
26 April

Carapace scratched his head under the hood. He went through the list that Adrien had given him, checking off everything that he’d listed as important. The only thing that hadn’t been checked thoroughly was the financial records that he and Alya had gone through. Rena Rouge was going through those, as Queen Bee didn’t have the patience for it.

She walked into the basement with two files in her hands. “The file on Gabriel is missing.”

Carapace spat. “The Devil!” He muttered. He rubbed his nose. “Adrien said he ripped up the file on Gabriel. He was pissed off.”

“Ugh. Why did Adrihoney even keep these?” Queen Bee asked, glancing at the files. She looked at the mugshots. The Gorilla looked mournful beyond anything, but Nathalie just looked… tired. “It’s creepy.”

“He said that sometimes he’d miss them, and he kept the files to remind himself why it was good that they were gone.” He said. He lifted his boot before they both walked upstairs. “Lila must have had some kind of motive for coming here. She only flooded the place to escape.”

“Nathalie told Adrien to look for Madame Agreste.” Queen Bee said. She shrugged as she shut the files. “Maybe Gabriel told Lila the same thing.”

“What do you suppose Madame Agreste could do that kept the Collector under lock and key?” Carapace asked as they walked towards Rena Rouge.

Rena stood as she closed the box. “It’s hard to imagine anything powerful enough to stop him.”

Queen Bee frowned. “I remember Madame Agreste. She always looked so sad and faraway.” She said. “I’ve seen the same look on poor Marinette…” Rena and Carapace both seemed surprised at her tone. She flipped her hair and looked away from them. “Of course, why wouldn’t Marinette be sad with such plain features as she has?”

“Chloé!” Rena scolded.

“Dude!” Carapace joined in.

“What? Marinette is nice, but you can’t tell me she isn’t plain-looking!” Queen Bee snapped.

“If you’re done being a cow,” Rena said with her hands on her hips, “we should try to figure out how we’re going to track Lila! If we aren’t quick, she’ll feed information to Gabriel—or worse!”

Queen Bee rolled her eyes. “Worse how?” She asked. “She kills Adrien before you get to blame him for not protecting Marinette?”

She felt her back grow tense, and she prepared to argue. However, as she was about to shout at her, she felt her phone buzz. Rena held up a finger to check it.

Trixx: Hi Rena Rouge! Sounds like you’re tracking fugitive Lila Rossi.
Trixx: Maybe I can help with that!

The next message was a link. Rena tapped it hesitantly. It was a hotel reservation under ‘Oriana Abbandonato.’

me: who is this??!
Trixx: I’m Trixx! I should already be a contact in your phone.
me: how did you do that? What are you planning?
Trixx: Foxglove always finds its agents.
Trixx: You may want to hurry. This photograph was taken from a security camera on le Boulevard du Montparnasse.
Trixx: Our forensic accountants can’t find any proof of purchase!

Rena tapped on the image and zoomed in. It took a moment for the pixels to adjust, but when they did, her jaw dropped. It was a picture of Lila, without question.

But she was polishing a shotgun longer than her arm.

me: fuck!
Trixx: Please don’t swear at me.
me: sorry
me: can you send this to Volpina, too?
Trixx: I can use a private number to send information to anyone you’d like, but I need a name.
Trixx: I don’t know who Volpina is.
me: Volpina? Based in Milan?
me: she’s super famous!
Trixx: Oh, that Volpina!
Trixx: I’m afraid I still don’t know who she is.
me: but she works for you? And you found me.
Trixx: Volpina doesn’t work for us.

Kagami walked into the commissariat with a pensive frown and tired eyes. Sabrina looked up when she entered, and she stood. She raced over to Kagami. “There you are! I’ve been trying to reach you!”

She shrugged. “I had some things to take care of.”

“Why are you so quiet? Has something happened?” Sabrina asked, scurrying a few steps behind her. When Kagami didn’t reply, Sabrina kept talking. “I need you to find your fire. I need passionate Kagami! Supernatural vigilantes have taken over the crime scene at Monsieur Chevalier’s home!”

“The president invited them. Take it up with the politicians.” Kagami said as she shoved her hands into her pockets. “Besides, I have no problem with supernaturals.”

Sabrina huffed. “Well, neither do I, seeing as how I am one, but I do have a problem with them trampling over sensitive evidence.” She muttered.
“Wake up, Sabrina. How sensitive can it be when everyone and their mother has heard about it?” She asked.

Sabrina was shocked, and she stopped walking. “Kagami!” She exclaimed as she ran to catch up.

Kagami pushed the door to the captain’s office open. Captain Raincomprix looked up from his paperwork. He didn’t get a chance to speak before Kagami did. “My mother is involved with Gabriel Agreste. I have to be taken off the investigation.” She said. “It’s a conflict of interest.”

Both Roger and Sabrina were floored. Sabrina covered her mouth and Roger stood. “Are you sure?” Sabrina asked, pulling her arms into a position that communicated more vulnerability than a police agent should have. “Are you sure that she isn’t… being controlled?”

“The convictions of Gabriel’s assistant and bodyguard set precedent. His powers don’t excuse any criminal actions taken by an individual.” Kagami said.

Captain Raincomprix frowned. “Tsurugi, I can't take you off this investigation. You have more arrests than any other agent—I need you on this case.” He said.

Kagami processed this, but then frowned. She looked around incredulously. “Are you kidding me?! Have I stepped onto a movie set?!” She asked. “I never should have been on this case to begin with —I used to live with the son of the man we’re chasing!” She dug around in her pockets. “I didn’t protest earlier because I thought that I could prove myself, but now if they get away, or if evidence is mishandled, it could come back on the commissariat!”

“No one else has the skills you do!” Captain Raincomprix said. “With your warrior spirit, and Sabrina’s powers, you’re the best suited to this case!”

“I know I am! But it won’t mean anything if something happens!” Kagami said. She sighed. She took her badge and her shield out of her wallet. “Besides… I need to take a sabbatical.”

Without speaking further, Kagami walked away. She picked up the pace as she tried to avoid Sabrina, who ran after her. “Kagami! Kagami!” She shouted, eventually catching her and turning her around. “What’s going on with you?! I know your mother is a sensitive subject for you, but it isn’t like you to spiral!”

“I am not spiraling. I’ve made a calculated decision.” Kagami said.

“What? Why are you leaving me?!” Sabrina demanded.

Kagami grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “This isn’t about you.”

27 April

Dozens of hands beat him to the ground, pulling him down until his skin ripped. He tried desperately to fend off his attackers as they swarmed him. He kicked wildly, and some stopped to protect their faces, but even more grabbed them and pushed them into submission. Someone climbed on top of him and grabbed his hair, slamming it repeatedly into the ground.

He tried to crawl away. When he turned over onto his stomach, he saw a person down a long
hallway. He called out for help, pulling himself forward. He escaped the beating and tried to get back on his feet. His body ached, but he tried to chase the person as they walked away. He reached out for them… only for a cell door to slam in his face.

Another crashed behind him, and then two more to either side. He was boxed in, trapped by his own mind. He slashed at the bars, trying to break them. He tore his nails up in desperation, but every slash made the walls stronger until they were hard cement.

He screamed and cried, begging to be let out. There was a hum, low and gentle, through the air, but it brought him no comfort. \textit{Don't you worry, minou…}

He looked around for the voice. There was nothing, no person, no machine, nothing that could make that voice. He tried to find it as he scrambled to his feet. The walls were getting closer. God, why couldn’t he breathe?! 

\textit{You’re not going to remember this.}

Adrien shot up in bed, drenched in sweat. He gasped for air, scratching his throat. He held it as he tried to even his breathing. He startled when someone touched him, but relaxed when Marinette brushed a bit of soaked hair from his face.

“What’s wrong, baby?” She asked as Adrien melt in her hands. It was as if his spine no longer existed, or at least could no longer support him. He rested his head against her hand when it moved to his cheek, and then sort of slid into her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s stupid. I just—” Adrien rubbed his eyes. “I had a nightmare.” He shook his head. “You’re probably having worse ones, so I shouldn’t complain.”

Marinette shook her head. “I don’t dream much at all anymore. When I do, they’re nightmares, but overall… no dreams.” She confessed. She shrugged and offered a smile. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t want to dump all my problems on you. You’re not my therapist; I shouldn’t treat you like one.” He said.

“Girls talk about what bothers them, and that’s why we live longer.” She said.

Adrien offered a coy smile. “That would be a compelling point to someone who was interested in living for a long time.”

Marinette smacked his arm. He chuckled. There was a moment of silence. “Do you not want to tell me because I was in it?”

“You only feature in my dirty dreams,” Adrien flirted with a wink. Marinette guffawed and looked down. “Sorry. Too much?”

“No, it’s fine. You’re just silly.” She said. She nudged him. “Seriously, though.”

“No, I mean, it really is stupid.” He said. He looked out the window and sighed. “I had a dream about the prison.”

“Oh. You had a dream about the beating, didn’t you?” She asked. He nodded. “That was very traumatic for you. On top of witnessing the scale of your father’s powers, he turned them against you.”
“It was so dumb!” He snapped. “You were dying and I was worried about lice!”

“Adrien, this is just what I think, but…” she paused. “I think you preoccupied yourself with things that didn’t matter was so… so you didn’t have to think about what you would do if I died, and you weren’t there.”

“I’ve been seeing and hearing things lately…” he muttered. Marinette frowned. She rubbed his shoulder. “I’ve… I just feel very haunted.”

“Things have been weird lately…”

“I just… I can’t tell if it’s just stress, and me not having slept as well lately, or if… I’ve always been like this, and I just learned now because I’m sober.”

Marinette shook her head. “You would know. You know yourself well.”

“I know myself well enough to predict the trouble I’ll cause, but do I know myself?” He asked. He looked at his hands. “I mean, I started drinking when I was… fourteen, fifteen years old. I’ve only been sober for four months. Do I really know who I am?”

She kissed him. “You’re my knight,” she said. She smiled. “You’re the person who offers his hand and brings me up…” She put her head on his shoulder. “I haven’t relapsed lately because whenever I feel like I might, I reach out, and there you are. I hold your hand, and I’m better.”

He chuckled bitterly. “You know, that’s not going to have a one hundred percent success rate.”

Marinette shrugged. “I’m shooting for a solid forty percent.” She offered him a goofy smile. “It’s a marked improvement over zero.”

He chuckled again. He blinked. “Hey, what time is it?” Adrien asked suddenly.

“Um… two?”

“This is way too heavy a conversation for two in the morning.” He said. He dug around in the pockets of his jeans. Adrien grabbed a packet of cigarettes and opened it. Immediately after, it was ripped telekinetically from his hand. “Hey!”

Marinette crushed it in her hand. “You might not be concerned with living a long time, but I would rather you stick around for a while.” She said. “You should still go out onto the balcony, but only to take some calming breaths before trying to go back to sleep. I’m going to check in with Alya.” She grabbed her phone and unlocked it.

Adrien stepped outside. He leaned against the balcony and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. His senses were overwhelmed by the smells and sounds of Paris, as well as the hints that suggested it would rain soon. He tried to relax. He was safe. Marinette was safe. They just had to stay hidden…

Adrien jumped when a flash of orange landed beside him. Volpina flipped her hair back into place as he tried to still his beating heart. She leaned against the railing. “Sorry to bother you. I was doing some late night investigating! Evil never sleeps, you know?”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” Adrien said.

“I heard the news! Your ex-girlfriend’s mother is working for Gabriel.” She said. She held her cheek. “You must have been devastated to hear that!”
Adrien paused. “Uh... yes, it was a bit of a shock, though it wasn’t like I knew Madame Tsurugi very well.” He said. He frowned. “I’m surprised you had heard about that. I doubt that it’s public knowledge...”

“Foxglove is one of the most well connected spy agencies in the world!” Volpina said as the sliding glass door opened. “I made an inquiry into how Gabriel escaped Paris, and they sent encrypted files that proved they planned the escape together.”

Marinette leaned against the threshold. “Does Foxglove know where they’ve gone?”

Volpina stared at her. There was a moment where neither said anything. Volpina remained sturdy as an oak as a mischievous grin infected her face, which she made a bad attempt to hide. Marinette shuddered and took a step back inside, half hiding her body behind a wall. Adrien moved, positioning himself between the door and Volpina.

“She asked you if you know where Gabriel and Madame Tsurugi are now.” Adrien asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Is this your girlfriend?” Volpina asked, dodging the question. “She’s very cute. You’re a lucky man, Monsieur Chevalier.”

Adrien looked at Marinette. “Yes, I am.” She smiled at him.

“Wonderful to meet you! I am Volpina.” She curtsied.

“My name is Marinette.” She didn’t offer her hand.

Volpina furrowed her brows but didn’t frown. “You don’t seem too impressed that I’m here.” She said.

Marinette looked at Adrien. He shrugged. Marinette offered a nervous grin. “I’m not really impressed by superheroes.”

Volpina didn’t react. She shifted. “To answer your question, I do not know where they’ve gone. I’m still trying to decrypt all of the messages.” She smiled. “That’s actually why I’m here. I decoded a message that gave coordinates to a factory. It used to be where the Gabriel line made fast-fashion clothes before he exported them to China.” She batted her eyelashes. “I was hoping you could come with me?”

“Why do you need me? I don’t have the keys to any factory.” Adrien said. “They were probably seized by Audrey Bourgeois when ‘Style Queen’ bought ‘Gabriel.’”

“I know that. But Foxglove sent me your file, too.” She said. She smiled. “There was a witness account of the riot in Fleury-Mérogis fifteen years ago. I know about your powers.”

His blood ran cold. Marinette instinctively took his hand. “You do?” He said.

Volpina nodded. “I really just need you to get the door open. Any evidence inside I can sort through on my own.” She said. “I would prefer to do this before the police catch this lead.”

Adrien huffed. He glanced at Marinette before nodding. “Fine.”

He went back inside inside. He moved to close the door, but Volpina stopped him. Both he and Marinette blinked, but Volpina entered the room without so much as a word. Adrien grabbed his clothes from the floor, and when he went into the bathroom to change, Marinette followed him.
“Are you okay?” Adrien asked.

Marinette nodded. She looked at the door and summoned her powers. Judging by the way his ears popped painfully, she’d created a vacuum. Adrien grabbed her arms and sat her down on the toilet. “I got a text from Alya. Volpina doesn’t work for Foxglove.”

Adrien blinked. He frowned. “But she’s so famous for being their agent!”

“The heroes pop up first, Foxglove contacts them after. Rena Rouge was contacted by Foxglove, and her handler confirmed it.” Marinette pointed at the door. “I don’t know who that is, but she knows who you are. You can’t go with her.”

“What am I—” he started.

There was a gruff knock on the door. “Hi! Are the two of you okay?” Volpina asked.

Adrien cringed. “What am I going to do? I can’t tell her that I won’t go with her. She’ll use my powers to blackmail me!”

Marinette shuddered. “There’s something about her that makes my skin crawl.” She said she looked at Adrien. “I texted Alya. She’ll be here soon. We just have to stall.”

“Monsieur Chevalier? Marinette? Are you still in there?” Volpina asked. Marinette pulled her hand in, slowly collapsing the barrier she’d made. She’d done it this way as to not hurt Adrien, since she couldn’t hurt herself with her powers. Volpina knocked again on the door. When they didn’t respond, the knocks became harsh. “Hello? We’re wasting moonlight!” Marinette held Adrien back, both staring at the door. Without the barrier and the mask, Volpina’s voice was too familiar. Her hand traced his arm, and she intertwined her fingers with his. Marinette visibly flinched as Volpina kept slamming the door. Each slam slowly broke away the threshold, and soon enough, she’d broken the door. Volpina noticed the crack and started pounding it, making it larger. "Marinette! Marinette!”

Chapter End Notes

*tan france voice* im ending it on a cliffhanger, shut up everyone, yes its a cliffhanger
Femme Fatale

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! My phone broke and I do all of my work on my phone.

10 August, Ten Years Ago

Lila opened the door to the apartment, and Marinette walked in slowly. Lila took the bags and brought them into the bedroom while Marinette limped into the living room. She sat down and didn't speak. Four days had passed, but she was still unable to process what had transpired. It was unadulterated shock, this feeling that had grown like a tumor in the depths of her stomach. Her head was heavy and she felt dizzy. She hadn't been able to eat since the--since the--she couldn't bear to even think the word!

Lila sighed heavily. Marinette looked up from her position on the couch, cowering slightly. But Lila wasn't looking at her. "No rest for the wicked, it seems." She said. She smiled. "I swear, this part time job is becoming a full time problem. I'm being called in." She walked over to Marinette. She kissed her, though her eyes were closed. She either didn't notice how Marinette flinched and pulled away, or more likely, she didn't care. She grabbed her neck, her hands firmly holding her jaw. "Can you handle the unpacking?"

Lila left with little else to say. Marinette didn't even attempt to stand until about fifteen minutes after she left. She limped into the bedroom and tried to put their clothes away, but after only a little bit, her body started to fail her. Marinette began to sob, but it was short-lived, because she eventually just leaned into the bed and closed her eyes.

When she came home, Lila was furious. "What have you done all day?!" She demanded. Marinette wanted to defend herself, but she couldn't even work up the energy to open her mouth, let alone speak. "I asked you to do one thing! What good are you?!" Lila lifted her up and pinned her to the bed. Marinette tensed, pulling her legs in. Lila saw her flinch, and she smiled. Lila ran her fingers across her jaw. "What am I to do with you, ma chatte?"

Marinette waited for a blow that didn't come, for penetration that didn't come. Lila took her phone away, and she offhandedly mentioned that she would lock up other electronics. It wasn't lost on Marinette that these were things which she could have used to contact someone in regards to her most recent assault. Adrien was constantly texting her, and her parents were labeled as her best friends on all of the multiplayer games they played together. But it didn't matter, because Marinette could not move.

Marinette laid in bed for two days. In those two days, she barely moved, not even to eat. She didn't sleep, only stared up at the ceiling. Life happened around her, not to her. Lila would get up, go to work, and come home, and in all that time, Marinette would not move. She barely registered anything. In the future, this fog would become distressing, and she often worried that Lila assaulted her again, though she had no proof or memory of it if she did.

When Marinette finally broke through the fog, she found that Lila had taken her leg. After a moment, she forced herself from the bed. She crawled along the floor, pulling herself forward by digging her nails into the carpet. She used her powers to flip on the bathroom light, which turned on the fan. She
used her powers again to rip open the medicine cabinet, which knocked multiple items out of place. She sifted through the toppled bottles until she discovered her SSRI. Marinette leaned against the sink as she poured the entire contents of the bottle into her hand, some spilling onto the damp bathroom rug. She hesitated for half a moment before tossing the pills back, and swallowed them dry. When that didn't work, she crawled into the kitchen and used her powers to pull a knife from the counter. Marinette held it parallel to her veins, like the scars she had seen on Adrien's arms. She steeled her nerves and started to cut.

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27 April, Present Day

Marinette closed her eyes and mentally cowered from the voice pounding on the bathroom door. She remembered every touch as though it were yesterday. She looked up at Adrien's pensive expression and made a decision. "She's almost through," Marinette said. Adrien looked at her with a grim look in his eye. "If we time this right, she'll plow right in. Can you use your powers to destroy her mask?"

Adrien nodded. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"If you're thinking that Lila posed as a Foxglove agent in an attempt to make it to First Contact so she could spy on us, yes, I am." She said. "But we won't know for sure until we get her mask off!"

Adrien winked at her. "Just leave that to me!"

Marinette smiled at him, but it was replaced by stern determination. She barricaded the door with her powers and lowered her voice to a whisper. "When I lower this barrier, she's going to crash through the door. I can stun her by pushing against her with gravity, and when she passes us by, grab her mask and destroy it."

He nodded. Marinette took a breath to steady herself, and then she pulled her hand in. She and Adrien dove out of the way as Volpina crashed through the bathroom door. Everything else seemed to happen in slow motion.

Marinette took the barrier and redirected the energy. She slammed it against Volpina's spine in a way that must have been agonizing. Adrien summoned his powers and reached forward. He grabbed the back of the mask, which disintegrated at his touch.

Time went back to normal as Adrien grabbed Marinette before she fell to the floor. They both shot back, hitting the mattress as Volpina shook her head and stood. As expected, Lila stared back at them, furious. But her anger, red hot and dangerous, broke into a malicious grin. "Guess there's no point in pretending, is there?" She asked.

Adrien stepped in front of Marinette just as a flash of light filled the room. Alya and Carapace appeared, blocking Adrien and Marinette. However, their defensive stance broke almost immediately when they saw Lila stand up. "Lila?! No way!" Carapace exclaimed.

Alya shook her head. "I don't believe it!"

Lila looked at Alya and covered her heart, trying to look innocent. "Alya, you have to listen to me! Adrien is lying; he has his father's powers!" She lied. Before he could protest, she added, "When they got stronger, he forced Marinette to lie to you!"
"That's not true!" Marinette shouted. "She's just trying to turn you against us! Don't let her!"

But Lila didn't back down. "You know me! Why would I ever hurt Marinette?" She said. She held her arms out. "But you know Adrien, too! He's always been jealous of what I had with her! He always wanted her to himself!" She took a step forward. "I mean, why else would he have used his powers to cause her miscarriage?"

Marinette startled at the mention of it, as did Adrien. She squeezed him, wrapping one of her arms around his waist and the other tightly gripping his hand. "Get ready to run," she whispered.

Alya felt her body grow tense. She tightened her jaw and let out an angry sigh. She stretched her fingers and then gripped the heavy metal rod in her hands. She never broke eye contact with Lila, who maintained her innocence. She took a step forward, and that's when Alya broke eye contact. "Alya, he made you an accomplice! If you're looking for a villain, he's right behind you!" She said.

"You're wrong." Alya said. She was shaking as she looked up. "I have seen with my own two eyes how much he cares about her! And all you ever did was feed my anger!" Alya pointed at her with the pipe. "You're working with Gabriel! You copied his signature to get what you wanted! You lied to me to keep me from looking up to where the real questions are!"

Lila frowned, but otherwise didn't react.

"Why did you assume the role of Volpina?" Alya demanded as Lila grabbed the necklace she wore. "Why did you try to isolate Marinette? Why are you working with Gabriel?!

"No!" Marinette gasped, letting go of a startled Adrien and began wildly waving her arms. She struck Lila, who burst into ash. Marinette hit the ground hard, which scared Carapace into backing up and nearly knocking over Alya. Marinette used her powers and dashed across the room, giving herself a carpet burn on her back and possibly a concussion when she hit the wall, as well as knocking furniture out of the way. Plagg whimpered as he ran timidly into her arms, but she barely noticed. Marinette was paralyzed, trapped somewhere between terror and a relapse.

"Marinette!" Adrien exclaimed, running towards her.

Lila retaliated by grabbing Alya's metal pipe weapon. Alya panicked, desperately trying to shake her off by blinking around the room, each teleportation sparkling almost cutely before manifesting. Carapace waved his hands. "Alya!" He shouted.

"Alya teleported next to him. Lila was expecting him to grab the pipe, but instead, he punched her in the face. She fell back, breaking off a piece of the pipe when she did so, leaving the edge jagged. Carapace grabbed her leg and pulled her forward, trying to get her into a position where he could hold her down. Lila shot up and kicked his cheek. She broke the skin and maybe a few teeth--
Carapace covered his mouth and spat up the blood inside.

Lila grabbed his arm and pulled. Adrien looked at Alya before rushing forward. He kicked her stomach, which gave Carapace the opportunity to free his arm. Lila lunged for Adrien, who artfully dodged her, while Carapace regained his balance. While Adrien and Carapace tried to pin her down, Lila shimmered again.

"It's all your fault," Sabine said. "If it hadn't been for you, our little girl would never have been on that man's radar." She hissed. "You ruined her life and I will never forgive you for it."

"Some friend you are!" Alix said. "For fifteen years, you played both sides, not wanting to speak up and defend your so-called best friend from Alya's insults and suspicions!" She tisked. "Why did it take Lila to prove her wrong?"

Adrien and Carapace loosened their grip. Lila kicked Adrien away before grabbing Carapace and slamming into the wall. She slammed his head repeatedly until he passed out.

"Nino!" Alya ran forward to help him, and Lila glared at her. As she ran, Alya realized that the shimmer started at the necklace, and the mirage didn't appear until after. Alya's was an image of Marinette, but she didn't wait to see more than that. She waved it away with her hand and kept running. Alya teleported around Lila to disorient her, then grabbed the necklace.

Alya smirked and yanked it as hard as she could. Lila panicked. "No!" She tried to grab Alya, but she teleported away as soon as the chain broke. Furious, Lila started shouting. "Give that back! It's mine! I stole it from that derelict ship, fair and square!" She protested. Lila tried to grab it, but Alya kept teleporting, teasing her and trying to draw her away from Adrien and Carapace. She didn't even realize that Alya's actions had broken Adrien's auditory hallucination.

As Lila tried to recover her necklace, she noticed a quirk in Alya's powers. Half a breath before her body physically manifested, the light formed the shape of her body. Lila grabbed the broken pipe Alya had dropped and waited. When she had a shot lined up, she took it. Lila threw the pipe with every ounce of strength she had. It pierced the light, which manifested as Alya's shoulder. Alya screamed; Lila had taken advantage of her powers and trapped her against the wall. The pipe had pierced her shoulder, a wound which agonized and bled.

Adrien rushed to his feet. "Alya! Hold on, don't worry!" He ran around Lila and grabbed his nursing bag. He tried to get to Alya, but Lila grabbed him first. She pinned him to the wall, causing him to drop his bag.

She lifted him up and smirked. "So this is the best that you can do." She said. She shook her head. "Your lives are on the line… and the best you can do is a mudslinging reporter and her wimpy husband? Neither of them are fighters!" Lila tilted her head. "Both of them… so gullible. Hanging on my every word like gospel…"

Adrien hissed. "That is your fault, not theirs!"

Lila laughed, but it was joyless. "What really kills me is that you know that I was lying!" She said. She shook her head again. "You know I was lying, and you said nothing. I… guess you were so eager for things to go back to normal that you refused to rock the boat."

Adrien tried to kick her. "Your lies are self-destructive!" He shouted. "Eventually, everyone knew you for who you were, and that's why you fled!"

Lila moved one hand to his neck. "Hmm, but it really is too bad that you waited so long! If you had
spoken up sooner, maybe Marinette wouldn't have become just another statistic, say?" She raised the other one. He fell slightly, but the unpleasant memories of Amelie flooded back. "You know better than anyone that rape victims are thirty-five times more likely to be raped again later in life."

She squeezed, choking him. Adrien tried to think of a witty remark, or something cool to say as she held back some of her strength to savor this moment. But he couldn't, and while that was disappointing, he couldn't be bothered to care. Adrien stopped struggling against her hands to summon his powers. "Never again," he hissed, his expression going dark. "Not while I breathe!"

Adrien slammed his hand into her face, digging every bit of his powers into her skin. Lila screamed, and she let go of him. But he did not return the favor. When his feet touched the ground, Adrien walked forward a few steps. It wasn't until she roundhouse kicked him that he let go.

He slammed against the wall. Lila turned away from him, and he shifted. His body was physically incapable of moving for a second. He tried to catch his breath, not truly believing that he had used his powers like that. He'd only ever done it once before, when Gabriel had grabbed him in the prison, but even that hadn't been for so long…

Lila straightened her back slightly. Adrien was breathing heavily, and he moved slightly towards Marinette, worried that he might have to protect her. It was in this moment that he realized that she was calling out for him, and he moved a bit faster. Lila, on the other hand, simply turned slightly. She lowered her hand, and when she moved to face him, he could see the destruction that he had done.

Lila's face was already darkly bruised, but that wasn't the major problem. The major problem was black varicose veins spreading slowly across her face, popping with each step she took. Blood vessels inside her eye were breaking, and the white part had turned pink and red. As Adrien grimaced, she walked closer, and the varicose veins burst, spilling hot, dark blood down her neck. He tried to summon his powers, but every snap and summons was greeted by nothing.

Lila jumped up and grabbed the chandelier. Adrien grabbed Marinette and shook her slightly. "Marinette! Princess, I need you to snap out of it!" Adrien said. He looked at Lila as she pulled the chandelier down, breaking off one of the arms. "Please! I need you to make a barrier so I can get to Alya! She can teleport us out of here, but you have to wake up!" Adrien flinched when she broke it again so the edge was sharp. "Marinette! Marinette!"

Lila launched the broken chandelier arm. Adrien dodged it, barely, by curling up into Marinette. The sudden vibration woke up Marinette, but she wasn't aware enough to understand Adrien's request. She yelped timidly, and she threw up her hands to make a barrier just in time to block Lila's follow-up attack, which was to throw the rest of the chandelier at them. It shattered against the barrier.

Lila walked closer, her bloody, corrupted face akin to a demon's. She lost her balance and she had to catch herself on the wall. Lila grabbed a piece of the broken chandelier. Alya tried to teleport to them, but her injury was grievous. Every attempt only changed where the pipe was. Lila raised the broken chandelier above her head. Each blow to the barrier seemed to hurt Marinette, and so the space inside began to shrink.

Lila didn't seem bothered by the blood. "I'm going to drag you out of this hotel room if it's the last thing I do!" She didn't even seem tired! "You're never going to see him again! You'll never see your family again!"

Lila ignored the chandelier now. She simply brought her fists down on the barrier, which almost seemed to work better. Marinette couldn't scream but for her crying, and Adrien had done his best to form a human shield. Marinette's hands poked out from underneath his arms, the only thing that
fueled the barrier.

She brought her fists down. The force knocked the barrier walls back, breaking part of the physical wall they were trapped against. Plagg crawled out of Marinette's lap and hissed protectively. Even Adrien could feel the barrier was starting to crack, and he closed his eyes to brace for impact. "You're as good as dead! You're dead! DEAD!"

Lila raised her fists up. Marinette screamed, Adrien flinched, and Alya shouted, "Chloé, don't!"

A huge, ear shattering noise cracked through the air. Instead of Lila's fists making contact with the barrier, a shotgun shell ripped through her stomach. It left a gaping hole as it devastated her insides. Blood and guts splattered against the wall of the barrier, and light broke through. Marinette and Adrien were in shock, enough that Marinette let the barrier fall too soon. Lila fell into Marinette's lap, dead. Standing about two and a half meters away was Chloé, dressed as Queen Bee, holding Lila's illegal shotgun.
did you know: point blank is a term which means that the barrel of the gun is close enough that the holder doesn't need to take any great care when aiming. Its usually used in reference to the barrel touching the target but it's not exclusively to that distance

27 April

Lila was dead.

That was the only thing that raced through Marinette's mind. It didn't matter that Lila's corpse was right on top of her, blood still hot as lingering gravitational fields massaged it from lifeless veins. It didn't matter that Adrien had stood to run, his mind shifting from the defeat of an immediate threat to helping the injured. It didn't matter that the one person who might have led them to Gabriel was gone. All that mattered was Lila. She was dead—dead without offering any clues, dead without ever having to face her crimes, dead without Marinette ever having confronted her… dead without her even getting the chance to say goodbye.

She pushed Lila off and onto the ground. She grabbed her shoulders. "B… Babe? Th… the fight is over." She said as she tried to wake her. But Lila's eyes weren't shut; she had died looking straight at her. Adrien's powers had ripped apart her face. If Chloé had not shot her… this infection would have spread to her brain and killed her anyway. Marinette touched the infected skin and raised Lila's face. "A… are you still mad at me?" She asked meekly. The hotel room had faded away, but nothing replaced it. She simply sat in darkness, floating like dust in the wind. Her voice cracked. "Lila?"

17 April, Ten Years Ago

Lila threw open the curtains, dressed only in a silky yellow robe. It was unusually bright, and the hot sun hit her skin like fire. She took a deep breath, her grin glowing. She flipped her messy hair back and turned around. "Good morning, beautiful!" She said, walking back towards the bed. She touched the lump and shook. "Rise and shine!"

There was grumbling. Eventually, Chloé sat up, turning to face Lila. There was a halfhearted attempt to hide her breasts from her, but she surrendered rather quickly. "I'm not a morning person!" She protested firmly.

Lila giggled. She climbed on top of her, tangling her fingers in her hair. They kissed, Lila applying a bit of pressure and pushing her over. When it broke, Lila still grinned. "No time to waste. School is waiting…"

Lila rolled over and opened up a bag on the ground. She pulled out a set of clothes, different than the ones she'd worn the day before. Chloé grabbed her robe when Lila removed it. She pulled it close
and tied it around her waist until the growing pit in her stomach was replaced by physical pain.

Lila shook her head and began to brush her hair. "I have no motivation to work, though. Americans call it 'senioritis!'" She said.

"Lila." Chloé said. Lila turned. She hesitated. "I broke up with Sabrina six months ago."

Lila covered her mouth. "Oh, it's the six month anniversary! Oh, I totally forgot!" She blushed. "Sorry, baby!"

Chloé shook her head. "No… it's ridiculous to celebrate anniversaries like that…" she mumbled. She looked up through loose curls. "I thought you said you were going to leave Marinette."

Lila frowned. She sighed and walked over to Chloé. She pushed hair out of her face. "Listen, my love, you know as well as I that Marinette is just so unstable. She needs help just getting up to go to the bathroom at night!" She said. She traced her jaw. "It's so exhausting, mentally, and I want to leave her, but–"

"But it isn't like ripping off a bandage." Chloé interrupted.

"I have to do it slowly, or she'll completely fall apart!" There was a moment of silence. Lila kissed Chloé, small and sweet and gentle. "Just wait a little longer. I promise."

And Chloé waited. She took a shower, got dressed, ate breakfast, and went to school. She endured her classes, wondering how she would pass the baccalaureate if she couldn't rely on Sabrina, while simultaneously thankful that Sabrina was still keeping her secrets. She went home, and then she struggled with her homework. She wondered why she'd need to know about the reign of Charlemagne, and then wondered how she could even think of something like that when Marinette was probably crying right about now. She frowned deeply. Being selfish and hurting Dupain-Cheng seemed to be the only things she was any good at these days.

As if on cue, her phone buzzed.

**Adrihoney:** listen I wouldn't ask you if I didnt have a choice but I need you to make sure Marinette made it home okay

**me:** uuuuuuuuh why??????

**me:** isn't she at ur place it isn't even dark yet

**Adrihoney:** we just had a massive fight and she stormed out!

**me:** dont u always fight this time of year

**Adrihoney:** we didn't fight about the anniversary! We fought about Lila!

**me:** not this again!

**Adrihoney:** hey fuck you!

**Adrihoney:** I dont care if you dont believe me about Lila but you know they're wrong for each other!

**me:** so

**Adrihoney:** lila FUCKING proposed!

Chloé smashed her phone and screamed.
27 April, Present Day

Carapace pushed his hood down. "Nino, sit on the bed! I'll get to you in a minute!" Adrien shouted. He rushed to Alya's side and tried to calm her down. "I need you to relax, okay? You're going to be fine, I promise, but you've got to be calm."

"I can't... I can't teleport!" Alya managed to say as Adrien examined the wound. He used his powers to break the pipe, and Alya hit the floor. "Marinette! Is--is Marinette alright?!"

Adrien looked over his shoulder. "She's probably the least hurt of anyone here, thank goodness..." He looked back to her. "If you can't teleport, we have to call an ambulance. Chloé, go check on Nino!" Chloé huffed in annoyance, but did as she was told.

Alya shook her head. "We can't call anyone! I don't know--aaaagh!" She grimaced and nursed her wounds while Adrien did his best to treat them. She waved off his concern out of habit. "I don't know if you noticed, but there's a dead body in here! We can't call anyone else in!"

Chloé rolled her eyes. "You could thank me, you know!"

Adrien shot up. "Yes, Chloé, thank you for killing the one person who we know for a fact helped my father escape from prison! Thank you for giving us a dead body that we now have to deal with!"

"Hey, I saved your life!" She argued.

"You didn't save our lives, you murdered someone!" Adrien shouted.

"You didn't like her either! Nobody here liked Lila! No one is going to lose any sleep over her death!"

"Speak for yourself! I watched her guts explode! Look--they splattered all over me when the barrier fell!"

Alya hissed as she tried to stand. "We have a bigger problem that the moral debate, you two." She said, leaning against the wall. "She was shot from behind. No one is going to believe that it was self defense; whoever was behind her wasn't in danger." She took a moment to wince. "If the flics find out, someone is going to prison."

14 April, Thirteen Years Ago

Adrien put the box back in the bag. He offered a gentle smile to Chloé. "You didn't have to get her a present, Chlo."

She shrugged as Sabrina held her purse. "It wasn't all that expensive, Adrihoney. I just saw it, and I figured that you might head over to the bakery in a few days. You might give it to her then, say that it's from you."

Adrien chuckled. "I can't afford anything like this anymore. Besides, I made her something." He reasoned. Chloé frowned. "I'll tell her it was a present from the class. You're the president again, so it's practically true."
Chloé folded her arms, avoiding his face. "Tell her whatever you like, just don't tell her it's from me. She'll never accept it."

"Chloé, if you just tell her what happened, she'll understand. She won't blame you; that's not who she is." He offered a small smile. "You might even bond a bit, and make a new friend in her."

She considered this, but only for half a breath. "I don't need anyone else, I have you, Adrihoney!" She collapsed into his arms, lifting one foot. She frowned. "And Sabrina, I suppose." She added offhandedly, much to Sabrina's delight. She dusted herself off. "Well, I'm off to the mall!"

"Thank you, Chloé!" Adrien said as he tucked the bag into his backpack.

27 April, Present Day

"She was going to kill you!" Chloé argued as Adrien helped Alya to the bed. Nino was holding ice to his head, and Adrien was trying to test him for a concussion while also keeping an eye on the blood flow. "It was self defense!"

Adrien stared at her, wide-eyed. "Yeah, that's not what that means!" He shouted. "You shot her, point blank, from behind—it was murder!"

"He's right, Chloé. Lila didn't touch you; you don't have a case for self-defense." Alya said. "But neither do any of us! If we call the police, they could arrest all of us!"

"Especially you and me, Chloé. You have gunshot residue on your hands, and my powers caused that mark on her face."

"Plus, Lila probably has a statement written in her will. It could get us thrown in prison for thirty years, or be a message to Gabriel which will trigger an endgame scenario." Alya said.

"What are you saying?" Nino asked, speaking up for the first time.

Alya looked at him, then to Chloé and Adrien, and then to Marinette, who was desperately trying to piece Lila back together. "I'm saying, we've got to get rid of the body."

1 May, Fifteen Years Ago

Chloé was curled up in her chair, wrapped in blankets and her face a mess. The news played, top volume, so she could not deny what was being said. Nadia Chamack had excused herself from reporting this story, so it was the less charismatic Clara Contard reporting.

"Our top story: Gabriel Agreste, CEO of top clothing brand 'Gabriel' was arrested last night for allegations of murder and sexual assault. The designer is accused of kidnapping Marinette Dupain-Cheng, who was found and was hospitalized for severe injuries late last night. Model and face of the brand Adrien Agreste reportedly turned Monsieur Agreste into the police before also being arrested on charges of conspiracy."
Two employees of the household are also being investigated. Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng remains in critical condition.

Chloé muted the television and rewound the feed. It played again, silently, showing footage from outside the hospital. It showed Adrien as he was dragged towards the police cruiser, pleading despite the coldness. Chloé watched it over and over, and she hated that part of her believed that he was guilty. The thought filled her heart with shame, and images which would haunt her.

She recognized the hospital. Chloé looked up a florist on her phone, and she started to order a bouquet of pink roses. However, before completing it, she closed it out. She went back to bed and buried her body in the covers.

27 April, Present Day

"Desecrating a corpse is a crime!" Adrien argued. He rubbed his temples, walking away. "It's against everything I believe in!"

Alya nursed her wound. She moved to stand, but Nino stopped her. "We don't have any choice."

He spun around. "That's what everyone says, and they always get caught!"

Chloé touched his arm. "We can't risk what attention her death will bring!"

"It's your fault we're in this situation to begin with!"

They started to argue, but he refused to hear it. He looked at Marinette, then at the others. "We can't stay here. We have to get you to a hospital." He walked to Marinette and hesitated before taking her shoulder. "Marinette, we have to get out of here."

Marinette shook her head. She couldn't look at him, but she did look at her hands, which were stained red with blood. Flesh had gotten stuck beneath her nails, and she quivered like a leaf. "She—she'll be angry if I leave…” Marinette reasoned, staring at her fingers. "She—I can put her back together…" 

Adrien took her hands and tried to make her face him, but her body gave out. She collapsed and leaned against the wall. "Nette, listen to me. Lila is dead. You can't fix her, and the rest of us are injured. We need medical attention." He brushed her hair out of her face. "This, we can deal with later."

He coached her through her breathing while Marinette processed Lila's death. She leaned in for a hug, draping her arms over his shoulders and smearing blood on his shirt. She saw Chloé, who was watching as Nino helped Alya to her feet, and she remembered the crack of the shotgun shell. She clenched her fist and leaned forward. "You!"

Chloé, Nino, and Alya all looked at her. After a moment, Chloé flipped her hair. "You were in a tight spot there, but it wasn't anything your marvelous Queen Bee couldn't handle!" She said smugly.

"How dare you?" Marinette shouted. Adrien stood, trying to calm her down. "She—she was my fiancée! She was trying to hurt us!"
Adrien stroked her head. "Calm down, my love." He whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

"This was my story! I wanted her to pay for her crimes! I wanted her to go to prison!" She was screaming, eyes filled with hot, angry tears and Adrien just barely keeping her stable. She was practically crawling over his arms. "This didn't have anything to do with you! It was supposed to be up to me to decide how it ends!" She dug her nails into Adrien's arm as she screamed. "What right did you have to do this?!"

17 April, Fifteen Years Ago

"I'm honestly so upset that we got partnered with Dupain-Cheng for this assignment!" Chloé whined into her phone as she walked down the sidewalks. "She's such an annoying brat; I honestly don't know what Adrien honey sees in her!"

Sabrina made a sound of agreement over the phone. "What a let-down!"

"I mean, all I said was that I had a busy schedule and I couldn't help with the project! Like it's my fault that Madame Mendeleiev wants a project due the same week I have a dress fitting!" She held her hand out. "Besides, I chipped my shellac! Does she expect me to work while looking so disheveled?! Ridiculous, utterly ridiculous!"

"You're so right, Chloé!" Sabrina said. Chloé admired the new color on her nails. It glittered elegantly in the light, and they had been polished so much that they reflected everything behind her, including a black car. Chloé noted in this moment that it was driving slowly next to her. She looked over her shoulder, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

She flipped her hair back. "Besides, she already stole the class presidency out from under me! Now she expects me to work? At night?!" The car stopped moving. Chloé walked a little faster. "I–it's not like she's much help, either! I saw on her Instagram that she's working on some new outfit!" She stopped walking and covered her mouth. "The skirt was so short!"

Sabrina hesitated. "She's trying to steal Adrien away by dressing like a slut!"

Chloé guffawed and put her hand on her hip. "She is a slut!" She accused. "At least I dress appropriately when I'm flirting with people!"

Chloé yelped when the streetlights flickered and died. She pulled her arms in and froze. "Chloé?! What's the matter?!" Sabrina asked from the other end of the line.

"All the lights just went out!" She shouted. "Sabrina, I'm frightened, I–" She yelped again when her phone sparking and died. She looked around, taking a few hesitant steps forward in the pitch blackness. She heard someone run from behind her, and Chloé screamed bloody murder.

She took off like a rocket, her fight or flight instinct manifesting as actual flight. She darted around buildings and sped to the hotel, not even bothering to go through the door. She crashed on her balcony, crawling away from the ledge as though she was afraid that she was followed. Her breathing was heavy, and instead of taking the risk that she was followed, she forced the door open and fell inside.

Chloé locked the door behind her and shut the blinds. She plugged her phone in and scrambled for
her laptop. She tapped the keys madly until she was able to video call someone–anyone! The someone who appeared first in her contact list was Adrien Agreste.

It rang, but Adrien was slow to respond. Chloé was freaking out, tapping random messages with the idea to spam his phone. It took thirty seconds for him to pick up. "Chloé, I'm working on a project with Nino right now–"

"I was almost kidnapped!" She shouted, dropping the laptop and pacing. She tore at her hair. "I was walking, because the limo is in the shop because the electronics are shot, but–but–"

"Okay, Chloé? Calm down, I'll be right there." Adrien said. "I just have to text my father."

And he came. Adrien arrived precisely seven minutes and forty-four seconds later, and he stayed until late in the night as he comforted his friend. She explained that her phone had died just after the lights, and that the car had followed her for a long time. She had been too preoccupied to notice at first.

He eventually convinced her to sleep. Chloé slept for a long time, and convinced her personal butler that she wasn't fit to attend school the next morning. When he left, she fell right back asleep. She didn't wake until her phone alerted her to a text message.

**Adrihoney:** come to the mansion right away. Marinette has gone missing

Chloé felt her blood turn to ice. She couldn't move for a long time, as she made a realization.

Marinette had been kidnapped because Chloé had run away.
27 April

Alya had been sedated.

There was no way around it, really. The pipe Lila had thrown was a traumatic wound, even if it had pierced her shoulder only. Alya had been fortunate that she'd retained consciousness for as long as she had, and it was time for Adrien to step aside and let the surgeons do their work.

Since he wasn't too terribly hurt, Adrien had changed into a set of scrubs and had been running around for the past half hour. He'd made it very clear he was only there in an unofficial capacity, so he could help his friends who had been in a "car accident" as far the lie for their injuries went.

Nino was lying on a gurney in a darkened room. Adrien smiled at him as he entered, holding a glass of water and a paper cup. He placed both on the bedside table. "Ondansetron. For your nausea."

Nino shook his head. "Com… comme… A–A–Alya…? Comment… comment va ma femme?"

"She needs surgery. Stab wounds are dangerous, and she needs surgery to correct the damage." Adrien explained. "But, the surgeon is hopeful that she'll recover. Alya is exceptionally brave."

Nino looked at the medication. He reached for the paper cup, but his hands were shaking and uncoordinated. Adrien took the cup and offered it to him, guiding his hands. Nino squeezed the cup once he'd swallowed the medicine. "Enfoiré! Useless." He mumbled angrily.

"Don't worry about anything, Nino. It's all under control." Adrien excused himself. He was smiling as he left the room, but the moment he was out of sight, it fell. Adrien walked through the halls, politely waving at the people who recognized him.

Marinette waited for him behind the nurse's station. She was knitting something idly, her eyes focused on the needles to keep herself distracted. She glanced at him, and she offered a smile, but it was weak. She lowered her eyes and sighed.

"Are you doing okay back here?" He asked, sitting across from her as she returned to her knitting.

Marinette didn't say anything for a moment. "No. No, I'm not okay." She shook her head. "I… I have maybe had more than my fair share of dark thoughts regarding Lila, but to watch her die like that…?" She put her knitting in her lap and held her face with her hand. "And Chloé… is what she said true?"

Adrien shrugged. "I didn't know they'd slept together…" he said. "If I had, I wouldn't have kept that from you."

"Would you really have told me?"
"Oh, yes. You might have actually broken up with her if you'd known she'd slept with Chloé, and that was what I wanted."

She laughed, but then her face fell. "What I meant was... was she really Gabriel's first choice? Everything I remember says that he targeted me specifically, and everything I know about Chloé says that she should have tried to make this about her."

Adrien moved so he was sitting next to her. He sighed. "There was a time when she wanted to. She felt terribly about what had happened to you—"

She glared at him. "Chloé didn't feel badly about what happened to me! She felt—I don't know, but if she felt bad about anything that happened, it was because she felt guilty about being glad that it hadn't happened to her!"

He hesitated, but nodded reluctantly. "I think that might have been part of it." He admitted. "She felt badly about what happened to you, but I can't deny that she wasn't glad to have escaped."

Marinette looked at her hands. She huffed. "It's hard to be mad at the things that she has done when I know that her only motivation this entire time was to make up for some invisible debt to me." She said.

Adrien was quiet. He pulled up one of his legs. "Are you angry with her?"

Marinette scrunched her nose in confusion. "Of course I am. She very nearly shot Lila execution style while she was thirty centimeters away from us!" She said. Her face softened slightly. "But am I angry about her history with Gabriel? No, of course not."

Adrien didn't respond.

She shrugged. "I understand why she might have thought that I would be angry with her. We have never been close." She said. She furrowed her brows. "But she isn't responsible for what happened to me! Even if she hadn't gotten away, I still would have gone to the mansion." Before he could respond, she shook her head. "No, I'm sure of it when I say that I still would have been kidnapped. Gabriel had a ruse planned for me. He must have tried to grab Chloé because he was getting impatient waiting for an opportunity."

"That's... awfully fatalistic, Nette."

She looked away. "I do know one thing. If Chloé had been kidnapped in my place, she would have died." She said. "My powers kicked into overdrive to keep me alive, and because of that, I was able to use them to escape. Chloé wouldn't have had that option." Marinette picked up her knitting. "Call it whatever you want, but my unique genetic code is the reason my powers worked long enough to get to you. The weight of the chains alone would have kept Chloé grounded. I don't blame her for running while she had the chance."

Adrien looked at his feet. He looked up at the ceiling a moment after. "I did." He admitted. She looked at him sadly as he paused. "I know in my head that it has always been Gabriel's fault, but... when I was at my lowest points, I would blame her, too." He twiddled his thumbs. "I used to think that, if she had called the police instead of me..."

"Hey." They both looked up. Chloé had changed out of her costume, now wearing a clean white pantsuit and a black satin blouse. "I just got back from Juleka's morgue. There's no one there."

Adrien stood. "Great. Why are you here, then?" He asked.
Chloé blinked. "Um… what are you talking about?" She asked. "I'm here to get you." Adrien's expression remained stony. "I know what Alya said, that I was supposed to sneak Lila into the morgue, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Oh, my God, are you kidding me?!" Adrien glanced at Marinette before grabbing Chloé and taking her to the side. He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "Chloé, you're supposed to get rid of the body!" His voice tapered off, like he didn't want to say it. He covered his face.

"I know that, but I don't know… how to do that!" Chloé whined. She raised her shoulders while Adrien hung his head. "Like, should I be getting acid? Is that suspicious? Acid?" She pouted.

Adrien frowned. "I don't want to deal with–hi, Lizbeth!" He grinned nervously and waved to the woman who passed him. His voice fell as soon as she was out of earshot. "I didn't murder someone at muzzle velocity!"

"I don't know anything about the human body! Killing is easy!" She argued.

"You should have thought about that before you shot to kill!"

"Hey." A new voice said, startling them. Chloé covered her heart while Adrien took a step back. Juleka stood behind them, her face unaffected. "So… who wants to explain the corpse in my basement?"

Adrien spun around to face Chloé. "You said nobody was home!" He hissed.

"Nobody was!" Chloé argued.

"I just got home." Juleka clarified. She pointed at the floor. While Chloé and Adrien had shadows, and were reflected on the polished tile, Juleka was not. "I'm projecting a replica." She seemed almost bored. "But, anyway. Dead body. Clarification, please."

Adrien held his head. "Lila was pretending to be a superhero to spy on Marinette and I. She was trying to get me to follow her to a secondary location–"

"Where the odds of coming back are slim to none," Juleka and Chloé said in unison.

"Shut up!" Adrien snapped. He sighed. "She attacked right after Nino and Alya arrived. We fought, and it looked like she was going to capture us, when Chloé killed her." He explained. "Now, we have to hide her body, because there are at least two suspects who can't afford to get locked up, and who knows what my father will do when he learns that his eyes and ears wound up dead?"

"So the obvious hiding spot is the morgue." Juleka said. She looked away with a sigh. "Great plan, nobody will ever think to look for a dead body at the morgue."

"At least she sticks out less!" Chloé said.

Adrien shook his head. "Listen, Chloé. You have to go back and get rid of the body."

"I don't know how to do that!" She said desperately.

Juleka spoke up. "I can get rid of the organs and things with the biowaste, but I would need help getting rid of any identifiable body parts, like teeth, fingers, and the head."

Chloé scoffed. "Can't you just cremate her?"

Juleka frowned. "No. Cremations are regulated, to prevent exactly the kind of thing that you're
talking about." She said. "I would have to have paperwork showing that her next of kin signed off on the cremation, or I would have to put her with another body for cremation, and if the family of the deceased wants to witness the cremation, that's not feasible."

Chloé looked at Adrien. "If only there was someone here who both studied human anatomy and had powers which destroyed anything he touched!" She frowned.

Adrien startled. "No. No way!" He said. "This is your mess to clean up! I'm not desecrating a corpse just because you didn't pay attention in Health!"

Juleka held out her hand. "Adrien, Chloé is right. I'm going to have to cut up the body, and it would help if I had some qualified help." He didn't respond. "I'll send Rose to keep Marinette company while you help me. Once we're done, have Chloé dump the body."

Adrien sighed heavily. His body wretched for the thought, and then he shook his head. "Don't bother sending Rose. I'll ask her to wait for Alya to come out of surgery."

"I've got the 'Kitty Section' van and I'm on my way. I'll meet you out front."

Adrien walked away from Chloé as Juleka's replica vanished. Chloë tried to get his attention, but he ignored her. He smiled at Marinette and offered his hand. "I've got some work to do, why don't you wait with Nino until Alya comes out of surgery?"

She took his hand, but frowned at him. "I'm crippled, not deaf, Adrien. I heard everything you just said." She said. He frowned. "You don't have to do this. We can always…" She hesitated. "We could always call the police, but… that might hurt us, wouldn't it?"

"Probably." He said. He held her hand while she grabbed her crutches, and then walked alongside her as he escorted her to Nino's room. Her eyebrows were furrowed, deep in thought. "What's on your mind?"

"A lot of things. The murder, mostly, but also some of the things Lila said… like, how did she know about my miscarriage? But if she knew enough about my situation to know I was pregnant, why did she say that you were the father?" When she reached Nino's hospital room, she dug the necklace out of her purse. "And this! When Alya grabbed it, our hallucinations stopped, plus it agitated her. She said she grabbed it from the derelict ship…"

"Maybe your alien ancestors created it to interact with human minds, or to drive people away from their ships." Adrien suggested.

"That's what I was thinking, but I doubt that Lila grabbed this herself. Gabriel probably gave it to her." She held her chin, deep in thought. "He probably knew the location of a derelict. After all, he melted down metal from one to form a chain to keep me from using my powers." She smirked at Adrien. "If that's true, he might not know that my powers get stronger as I age, and I built up a resistance to the effects of the metal."

Adrien frowned. "How does that help us?"

"If I figure out where this derelict is, I'll bet that's where he's hiding!" She said. She offered a determined grin. "If he thinks that hiding out in the bones of a fancy escape pod is going to protect him, he's got another thing coming!"

He kissed her cheek, ruffling her hair as he did so. "He should be running scared!" He held her hand, not wanting to let go. "I'll be back soon."
Marinette squeezed his hand. "Adrien… please be careful." She said. Her eyes were big and frightened. "Listen, I just get the feeling that… someone here is lying… and I don't know who." He opened his mouth but she interrupted him. "Not necessarily Chloé, but… it's all too convenient, you know?"

"Define convenience." He said, annoyed.

She shrugged. "Well… maybe convenient isn't the right word." She frowned. "Just… be careful." He nodded and kissed her. She grabbed hold of his scrubs and refused to let go for a moment, taking in his scent and his warmth. "I love you, Adrien."

"I love you too, Marinette." He waited for her to sit down in the chair before leaving to wait for Juleka.

She pulled up a few minutes later, and Adrien got into the passenger seat. She watched him buckle his seatbelt and then looked out onto the road. "So. You've been busy." She said as she started to drive away. "Running. Pining. Murder."

"Just like collège!" Adrien joked bitterly. Juleka laughed. "Doesn't this violate some sort of ethics code?"

"Yes, but it's Lila, so fuck her." Juleka said. Adrien choked back a chuckle. "I mean, let's be real, can any of us say that Lila made their lives better…?"

"Still, it's your job to give people a chance to mourn." He said. "Why did you become a mortician?"

"Well, I actually wanted to be a model. I was on Marinette's website a few times when I was in collège, but then she had to go underground, and it just wasn't feasible… the problem being that I'm terribly shy." She shrugged. "What can you do? I can always do both later. What about you?" She looked at him. "Why did you become a nurse?"

He thought about it. "Well, I like helping people… I was fortunate enough to get to play nursemaid to Marinette so much in collège that thinking of other careers never even passed my mind." He smiled. "I remember having to help her with her medication after a relapse once, and I guess…"

Juleka shrugged. "Well, you seem to be good at it. Plus, doctors are creeps. Nurses are so much better." She took one hand off the wheel to lean her head against it by propping it against the window. "Mylène wants to go back to school to become a nurse practitioner. Can you see yourself doing that?"

"No!" He said with an exasperated smile. "Les infirmières praticiennes have much stricter schedule than les infirmières autorisées." He said. "If I went back to school, I wouldn't be able to go to Marinette everytime she needed me, which would defeat the whole purpose of my nursing degree. Besides, I'm plenty happy in the sidekick role!"

Juleka and Adrien spoke idly as they drove out to the mortuary. They were silent as they entered, as Juleka changed into her own scrubs and led him down into the morgue. He was surprised there was no blood, but when they entered the freezing cold embalming room, he could see the hotel sheets Chloé had wrapped the body in. Juleka tossed him a pair of long rubber gloves and a hair cap. She unlocked a door and pulled out a metal tray.

Lila had been stripped in preparation of the desecration. Juleka had removed her earrings and her makeup. Her skin had lost a lot of the color as her blood had started to collect. But no effort had been made into closing the gaping wound. Adrien stared at her, shaking from both anticipation and the
"You alright?" Juleka asked as she tried back her hair and tucked it into the cap. She handed him a hair tie.

He took it. "I'm fine." He said, following suit. "Just tell me what you need done, doctor."

They picked her up and moved her to the embalming table. Juleka used surgical scissors and forceps to open up Lila's chest cavity. "We'll want to remove the internal organs. If this mark on her face is from you, then your powers aren't enough to destroy her entire body." She said. "That, in turn, means that your best bet is to do a water burial, and you'll want to remove anything that will inflate with gas and rise to the surface." Adrien said nothing. Juleka paused. "That's why dead bodies float. The decomposing organs fill with gas."

"I know," Adrien muttered, "though I wonder how much better my life would be if I didn't."

"We're also going to want to shave her head, remove her teeth and eyes, and cut off her hands and feet, so that the police can't use them in identifying her if they come across the body." She looked up at Adrien. "But the first step is the chest cavity. Ready to get your hands dirty?"

He hesitated, then took a deep breath to steal his nerves. "Yes, doctor."

Alya woke slowly. Her vision was blurry, and she couldn't process her surroundings. Only that the lights were moving… and so was she.

Someone grabbed the gurney. She could see a mess of black hair standing over her, but it took a few moments for her vision to even out before she could recognize Marinette, and even longer before she could even understand that she was speaking.

"Everything has been so awful! Adrien had to go with Juleka, the poor thing…" Marinette said. She smiled optimistically. "But he'll be back soon, and you'll be better soon! The surgeon is very confident that you'll make a full recovery!"

Alya shifted uncomfortably. "My… where is my phone?" She asked.

Marinette chuckled. "Only you would care about your phone ten minutes after coming out of surgery!" She said. She looked around. Her phone was in Marinette's purse for safekeeping. She handed it over. "Don't worry, Nino already called and said you had an appendectomy, so your boss understands that you'll be out of work for a while."

Who cares, Alya thought. She opened a text chain. She smiled as she skimmed it. "Here." She said, passing it back. "Show this to Adrien."

Marinette took it. She read it carefully, and then again, because she couldn't believe her eyes.

me: can you do a search for a person?
me: I think that she's related to the case I'm working on.
Trixx: Sure! I just need a name and a photograph.
You sent a photo
me: Emilie Agreste
Trix: Give me some time! I'll do some digging.
Read at 02:44

Trix (06:16): Good news! I've located Emilie Agreste.
Trix: She goes by the name Juliette Desrosiers now, and owns a home in Giornico, Switzerland.
Mind Over Matter

Chapter Notes

I lied! This is the last chapter of story changes. I was going to write the trip into this chapter, but wanted to tie up a few loose ends in Paris before they head out.

So enjoy this chapter that's split right down the middle with physical pain and our otp being #hornyonmain

28 April, Fifteen Years Ago

God, it was the most awful feeling! She considered herself a pretty practical person, and her attachment to her life was greater than the attachment to her ankle. But there was something horrific about the feeling, beyond the obvious. If anyone could hear her screams, they were almost indistinguishable from the ones that accompanied the marking of her back. But this feeling? The idea that there should be silence from the wound? It was a nightmare! Forward, back, forward, back, blood gushing and staining her hand, her other bleeding for her teeth clamped down on it…

Up at the ceiling. Look at the butterflies and the cameras, watch the world go by.

"Look up, look up, up at the ceiling," She sang as close to sing-song as she could. "Gaaah!!" Her agony interrupted. She sobbed again, then tried to steal her nerves. "Look at the butterflies, look at the clouds, and you can watch the world go by..."

The saw fell. Her foot sat next to her, bone and muscle exposed. She pushed the chain away and crawled forward. Her nails dug into the hardwood, dust and dirt getting stuck under her nails along with blood and flesh and semen. She forced the door open, she dragged her body the stairs, but then she was stopped. Her head was spinning as she tumbled, the fresh air getting tangled in her black hair. Then she was lifted, carried back, and she let her arms hang, fingers desperately gripping to air as she tried to fight.

Then she was forced to the cold floor. "Don't!" She protested. "Don't! Don't! You're going to kill me!"

She was silenced by foreign tongue. When the tongue moved, she wanted to get away, and she saw the knife. The knife–long and serrated like a demon's teeth. It stuck, straight up in the air, despite protests, despite fear… she screamed, she screamed, she–

"AAAAAAAAAAH!" Marinette screeched as she jolted awake, drenched in sweat and mortified. She gripped her blankets for dear life, pulling them close to her chin. Where is she?! What is this place?!

"Marinette!" Adrien held her shoulders and tried to get her to look at him. Adrien?! What is he doing here?! This isn't right, he wasn't there–what's going on? "Marinette! Princess, are you alright?!"

"Adrien, the knife, the knife, the knife–get it away from me!" Marinette begged, grabbing his arms. She was shaking, and she was digging her nails into his skin hard enough to discolor it. "Adrien, please, don't let them put it inside me! Get it away, get it away!" A door slammed loudly. She screamed again. "They're back! Help! Help me!"
"She screamed! Why is my baby screaming?!" Tom asked desperately as Sabine clung to his arm.

Adrien cupped her cheeks in her hands. "Marinette, listen! You had a nightmare, okay?" He said calmly. "You are not in the dungeon anymore. The knife is gone, locked away where no one can use it. You are safe, I promise, I promise!" He said. He pushed her sweat-soaked hair from her face. "It was a memory. Just a memory. Take a deep breath for me."

Marinette clenched her jaw, but she took a ragged breath. The world came into focus as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She was in her old bedroom at the bakery, now a safe place to hide. The door she'd heard was the door to her bedroom opening…

She had escaped. She had survived. Look up at the ceiling, look at the butterflies, look at the cameras, look at the clouds, and watch the world go by… this is not the past.

28 April, Present Day

Marinette's breathing calmed considerably. Her back and her leg agonized her… but she was alive. Alive and well, in the arms of her knight, and cared for by her doting parents. She was alive, and safe, and she fell into his arms, thankful for him every moment of every day. "I hate this dream! I hate it, I hate it!"

Adrien kissed the top of her head. "I know you do." He looked over his shoulder at Tom. "It's okay, Monsieur Dupain. Marinette just had a nightmare."

"A nightmare! My poor baby…" Tom said. He walked a bit closer. Adrien shifted as Marinette climbed over him, and with Sabine's help, she floated down into her father's expectant arms. He hugged her tightly to his chest, tears rolling down his cheeks as he stroked her hair. "Don't you worry about your nightmares. Papa will chase them all away."

"Papa, I'm not a little girl anymore!" Marinette protested as he kissed her forehead. Nevertheless she settled into his arms.

Sabine looked at her phone. "It's almost morning." She said. Adrien crawled down from the bed. "Why don't we make a big breakfast?" She said with a smile. "Maybe that will take your mind off of the nightmare."

Marinette nodded, and they all walked downstairs. Tom placed her in one of the tall chairs to wait in, though she protested mildly, and Sabine presented her with washed vegetables to cut instead. Adrien helped her. Marinette wasn't really listening to their conversation, instead focusing on the intense, twisting pain that she felt in a limb that she didn't have anymore. She tried to even out her breathing, and then tuned into the conversation as the oil in the frying pan started to sizzle.

"How on earth did you ever find her?" Sabine asked.

Adrien shook his head. "We didn't, though not for a lack of trying." He said. "Alya found her, through--"

"Through some old contacts of hers. She met them during her investigative journalism courses at university." Marinette interrupted. She mimed for Adrien to be quiet.

"Well… when are you leaving?" Sabine asked, her face somewhat sad. "I can't imagine you're going to leave this information alone…"

"The day after tomorrow." Marinette said.
"It's an eight hour drive." Adrien added. "We talked about it, and decided that it would be better for both of us to wait until the risk of flashbacks drops."

Sabine tilted her head. "You are not taking the train?" She asked.

He shook his head. "No, that would actually longer, if you can believe it. There's lots of construction on the tracks."

Sabine chuckled half-heartedly. "Wow, you'd think we were Americans." Adrien laughed, and she did, too.

Tom turned around. "Well, this is exciting! Your mother, alive… hopefully you can find the answers you're looking for."

Adrien held his chin in his hand and smirked at Marinette. "Besides, it's about time you auditioned for a change." Adrien and Marinette laughed.

Tom blinked. "'Auditions?' What are you talking about?"

Marinette blushed. "Oh. It was just a joke, papa…” He frowned, so she explained. "Well, that's what we called the dinners you had me bring Luka and Lila to. Auditions." She held her head in her hand. "God, what a nightmare."

"Oh, they weren't that bad!" Tom said.

"No, they were pretty freaking bad, Tom…” Sabine muttered.

Marinette sat up straight with wide eyes. "Great Uncle Wang was in Paris for Lila's audition. Lila was running late, so the first ten minutes consisted of maman trying to explain in Chinese that Adrien was not my date."

Adrien frowned. "Unfortunately." He said sadly.

"And then when Lila finally showed up, the dinner started by him saying, 'just because you were raped doesn't mean that you're a lesbian.'" Marinette added, holding her hands out. "In French, for God and everyone to hear! No amount of, 'I was also raped by a woman and I'm not a lesbian, I'm bisexual,' was able to talk him down." She put her head on the table. "I spent the rest of the night in my bedroom, crying my eyes out!"

Tom held his nose in his hand. "Oh, now I remember. Somehow, dinner with Luka went even worse!" He looked at Sabine. "I remember saying that it would go better, because there was no language barrier between Luka and my parents, and we liked Luka–"

Sabine straightened her back. "'We?!'" She said incredulously. "Speak for yourself! I did not want my daughter to marry a musician! Especially not that musician!" She looked at Marinette. "No offense, ma souris."

Marinette frowned in confusion. "We broke up two years ago," she said.

"No, but, my mother didn't realize that my father was going to be there, so there was a fight before Marinette, Adrien and Luka even showed up--" Tom started.

Sabine slammed her hand down on the table. "And Rolland saw that she was pregnant and called her a horrible, horrible word, but before any of us could react, Gina tackled him and they both fell down the stairs!"
"Oh, my God." Marinette covered her face. "Adrien, can I please stay here while you go to meet your mother?" She begged. "I can't take another audition!"

Adrien laughed. "You'll be fine." He promised. He smiled as he took her hand, squeezing it as he looked at her lovingly.

She huffed. "Well, that means you have to audition too!" She said.

"Why? Your family knows me."

"Yes, but as my friend, not my boyfriend." She shook her head. "No, not even my friend—my weird friend who shows up to family dinners!"

Adrien winked. "I'll be sure to change their minds!"

Adrien began to slice vegetables again as her parents continued in the kitchen. Marinette grabbed her knife and attempted to help, but just looking at the knife made her woozy. She held down the potato with her off hand, and she began to slice absentmindedly. Her body pulsated with agony, every moment bringing new pain. She took a breath. It wasn't real pain. It wasn't real. It wasn't—

"Marinette!" Adrien shouted suddenly.

Marinette jolted, and she blinked. She'd cut herself on accident without realizing it. It wasn't a big cut—it didn't even hurt—but it was still bleeding. "Great. Now I have to deal with this." She used her powers to grab her prosthetic, her cane, and a rag, and she limped away.

"Marinette, you've cut yourself. Let me—" Adrien began.

She waved him off. "I'm fine! I just need a bandage, relax!" She walked away and down the stairs, taking them one at a time. When she reached the bathroom, she ran her hand under the water, but though she could see the water, though she watched how it changed colors with the blood, she felt nothing. It was as if the nerves in her hand were dead, unable to feel.

The pain in her legs, on the other hand, was excruciating. After wrapping the bandage around the cut, Marinette sat down and rolled up her pajama pants. She could vividly see both of her legs, dripping in blood from the punishment and her foot bleeding over the rug. Her back felt wet and hot, and Marinette covered her face. She cried into her hands, trying to muffle the sound.

The pain is not real, she told herself. The pain is not real. It was the memory of pain, flaring up because of the anniversary. She grabbed her leg and held it close to her chest. The pain is gone. The infection had been eliminated. She had survived… but there the image was, as fresh in her mind after fifteen years as it was fifteen seconds afterwards. The memory of the saw cutting through her flesh and bone. The memory of her punishment being carved into her skin. The memory of the knife—Marinette pulled on her hair and muffled a scream.

Marinette grabbed the sink. She pulled herself up and ripped open the medicine cabinet. Sabine had organized Marinette's medication there out of habit, as well as Adrien's. She yanked her painkillers and struggled with the lid. Her hands were shaking, and the lid wouldn't come off. "Ugh! Come off!" She complained as the door behind her unlocked and opened. She managed to open it without noticing, and she shook out quite a few pills.

Adrien took her hands from behind her. She startled slightly at his touch, but relaxed immediately after. Adrien guided her hands, filtering more than half of the pills back into the bottle. She closed her fist around the two that remained in her hand as Adrien took the bottle to examine the instructions.
There was a moment of silence. "I wasn't trying to--" She started.

"I know." He said, not looking up. "Tramadol." He thought for a moment. "Why did your psychiatrist switch you to tramadol from nortriptyline?"

Marinette thought for a moment. "Nortriptyline makes me dizzy." She said. "It destabilizes my powers."

He chuckled. "Right, you were on something else for a long time, and then you switched over to nortriptyline while I was in rehab." Adrien waited as she put the pills in her mouth. She turned on the faucet to wash them down with water. "You were on it for a solid two years, I think. I was at the apartment constantly because you were too dizzy to get anything down from the cabinets."

"Can I confess something to you?" Marinette asked. Adrien nodded with a warm smile. "I stopped taking nortriptyline two months after you left rehab." She offered him a nervous smile as he blinked. "I was really worried about you relapsing, what with Lila never leaving you alone, so I pretended to still be on it so you would spend more time with me."

"That… makes sense."

"It was manipulative. I'm sorry." She looked down.

Adrien shook his head. "No, don't be. The first few months of being off heroin were the hardest thing I had done. My house was a mess, my grades were slipping—I almost had to repeat my sophomore year of university." He said. "If it wasn't for you, I might have lost my mind."

"You still would have spent time with me. I didn't have to feign helplessness." Marinette said.

He sighed. "Alya suggested--" He paused and held up his hand. "This was long before yesterday, you understand. Alya suggested that I spend less time with you because of how closely Lila was following me. The first few weeks of you living in your apartment, whenever you called me, I had to text Alya to teleport me so she couldn't follow." Adrien shrugged. "When I left rehab, if I had followed Alya's suggestion… I would probably have relapsed. I knew a lot of people who did."

"Still…"

"What I'm saying is, don't be sorry. You are the reason I'm clean, Marinette." He grabbed her cane and offered it to her. "Come on. Breakfast is ready."

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29 April

Adrien sat alone in the doctor's office. He kept looking over his shoulder at the door, waiting impatiently for the doctor to return. He bided time by playing with his phone and looking at the awards hung up on the wall and in the bookshelf. He opened up his messages and sighed.

  me: hey nette how are you holding up?
  Princess: fine for now. I shouldn't have any more problems until nighttime
  Princess: how is your appointment going?
  me: doc says that my results are inconclusive
  me: shes doing a brief examination of the brain scan
Princess: do you need anything else for the trip?
me: a better personal history as to not embarrass myself in front of my mother
Princess: be serious >:(
me: orange soda for the cooler
Princess: on it ;)
Princess: I want to grab some new clothes from my apartment, I didn't take anything nice enough to meet your mother in. Just to be safe, Alya is going with me
Princess: want me to grab some clothes from your house too?
me: yes please
Princess: ok
Princess: I love you
me: I love you too

The door opened just as he finished the text conversation. He looked up as Doctor Ondine Chiën Lê entered the room. She sat down across from him without looking up. "So, I've finished the examination of your brain scans, but the problem is that without doing further testing, I can't give you an accurate diagnosis."

Adrien frowned. "I'm leaving the country on… vacation tomorrow. I don't have time for further testing." He protested. "It was hard enough to find time for this appointment."

Doctor Chiën Lê nodded. "I understand. In our modern world, it's difficult to find time for our health, and our physical health often takes priority over our mental health. We all struggle with finding a balance between what we owe to others and what we owe ourselves."

Adrien hesitated. "I was officially diagnosed when I was sixteen, but my symptoms manifested much earlier than that."

She nodded. "And you mentioned a history of substance abuse?" He hesitated again. "I started drinking alcohol when I was fourteen, and used heroin for the first time at fifteen." He admitted. "I haven't used heroin since I was nineteen, but I only stopped drinking..."
heavily four months ago."

Ondine frowned. "Only heroin? No other drugs?" He weighed this in his mind noncommittally. He had used other drugs, but none quite so heavily as heroin. "Heroin isn't the thing most people take right out of the gate."

"I was… heroin is cheap." He said. "It was a cheap way to feel better."

"Did it work?"

Adrien's skin was itchy. He scratched at it. "Yes."

She looked down. "So, if the substance abuse was making the symptoms of schizophrenia, I feel as though they would be more… severe than they seem to be." She said. "Also, you are far beyond the age that it typically surfaces in men. It's not impossible for it to manifest now, but I highly doubt that you're suffering from schizoaffective disorder."

"What about my mood swings, my sleep problems, my hallucinations?" Adrien asked.

Ondine sighed, but it wasn't in annoyance. "You mentioned that your abusive father was recently released from prison?" He nodded reluctantly, as a half-truth was easier than correcting her. "Well, Monsieur Chevalier, it seems likely that they might have been caused by stress. Even the hallucinations." He didn't seem pleased. "Stress can be good, but too much of it can tear us apart from the inside. There are documented cases of people losing their ability to see because the stress in their lives had become unmanageable.

"If you'll pardon the joke, this vacation you have planned is just what the doctor ordered." Doctor Chiên Lê said as she filed the papers into a manila folder and locked it in a drawer. "My advice is relax. Unplug. Do something that makes you happy. For example, I go to the pool with my husband to unwind." His mind wandered to Marinette, and how the anniversary was slowly coming to a close. "If your symptoms persist, take note of them, and when you come back, we'll do some more tests and see about getting you on some neuroleptics or an antipsychotic. Besides that, I don't really think there's cause for concern right now."

Adrien stood. "Thank you, doctor." He offered his hand.

"Anytime."

Alya was nursing her shoulder. It was bandaged under her shirt, and the pain was dull. She leaned back slightly on Marinette's bed, not putting pressure on it. "You're really worked up about meeting Emilie, aren't you?" Alya said.

Marinette nodded as she dug through her closet. "Emilie is the only family that Adrien has! He wants more than anything to have her in his life!" She held up a black dress in front of her body before chucking it over her shoulder. "But he doesn't know what to expect, and neither do I! I have to make a perfect impression!

"Marinette, you are honest, clever, and terminally sweet. You're every mother's dream daughter-in-law!" Alya said. "What are you worried about? What's the worst thing that happens if she doesn't like you?"
Marinette spun around. "Okay, well, what if I get there, and she doesn't like me, and she makes Adrien choose between me and her? What if he chooses her and I have to face what comes next with G-Gabriel alone? Or what if he does choose me but he secretly resents me for it for the rest of his life?! What if we get there and she has a whole new family, and I lose control of my temper, and Adrien leaves me because of it? Or what if he gets upset and we get into an accident as we're leaving? What if--"

Alya held up her hand. "Girl, literally everything you just said is outside of your control." She said. "Adrien is a grown man, capable of rational thinking. If you get there, and she forces him to choose between her and you, or if she's started a new family, he will understand that those are choices that she has made and they have nothing to do with you."

Marinette looked down. "But what if she… doesn't like me because of something outside my control?" She asked. "What if she hates me because I'm an alien, or because I'm half Chinese, or because I'm bisexual, or because I'm disabled, or…"

"Or because you're Gabriel's only living victim."

She frowned. "Yes."

Alya sighed with a smile. "Marinette, Adrien is seeking out his mother because he wants her to be a part of his life. You are already a part of it." She said calmly. "If she is prejudiced against you in any way, then she is not the person he thought she was. He will see that."

Marinette smiled at her. "I like this new, positive things to say about Adrien version of you." She said. "He won't believe half the things I tell him you said."

"Fuck the bastard."

She giggled. "He'll believe you said that!"

"But, going back… you said that you were worried you'd lose control of your temper?"

"Well, I can be sort of… passionate."

"Why would you get angry?" Alya asked. "What has Emilie done to upset you?"

Marinette narrowed her eyes. Her mind flashed with images of Adrien in his teenage years, battered and depressed, to the memories of him shying away from contact, yet every time it was made, it lasted longer than it should've. She remembered a boy so desperate to be loved that he spent time with multiple people who disliked him--Lila, Alya, Félix--because there was some vain hope that they might love him. Her throat swelled with anger as she remembered how it felt to learn that his mother was alive and could have prevented this. "Nothing," Marinette muttered. She looked over her shoulder to Alya. "I've never met her."

Alya shook her head. "Come on. Pick one outfit, and you'll feel better. You always do. Hop to it."

Marinette groaned. "But I don't know what to pick!" She said. She dug through her clothes desperately. "There is no way to hide all of my scars! I don't want her to see the ones on my shoulders, but that means exposing my leg." She sighed. "I would wear a stylish pantsuit, but the fabric always seems to get tangled and trip me up…"

Alya sighed, too. "That can't be a problem many amputees have."

Marinette threw her hands up. "And yet! I keep tripping!"
"You're tripping, alright." She said flatly. Marinette stuck her tongue out at her. When she turned to go through the rest of her closet, Alya's face fell. "Marinette… I'm sorry if anything I've said about Adrien in the past hurt your relationship with him." She looked down. "I was so hungry for someone I could blame, but everyone else was out of my reach… if I had been more understanding, maybe Adrien wouldn't have been afraid to act on his feelings for you. Maybe you wouldn't have fallen into Lila's arms, or Luka's bed…"

Marinette smiled warmly. "You only wanted what was best for me. I don't blame you for wanting to keep me safe." Her smile fell. "As for what you said… I can't offer you forgiveness for it because I'm not the wounded party, but don't blame yourself for falling for Lila's lies." She frowned bitterly. "That woman could convince a person that the sky was green!"

Alya nodded. "But, um… I wouldn't worry about Adrien, girl." She grinned wickedly. "If he still wants to suck your face after the hundred-something times you threw him up against the wall, he's not going to leave you because his mom said no."

Marinette giggled into her hand. She looked at her drawers. "I have a white qipao with pink flowers on it around here somewhere… it has a circle skirt instead of a straight one, so it looks a bit different."

"Let me guess–apple blossoms?" Alya asked.

Marinette smiled. "Apple blossoms symbolize beauty in Chinese culture, and good fortune in traditional flower language." She said. She considered accessories. "If I wear the gray sweater and pull up the sleeves, and then the ballet flats…" She tilted her head. "I'll leave my hair down. I know that Adrien thinks that it's pretty when I leave it loose…"

Alya slapped her legs with both hands. "Well, looks like you've got your outfit ready." She walked over to Marinette and kissed her on both cheeks. "I'll go raid Chevalier's closet. Text you what I find, okay?"

Marinette nodded. "Oh! Um, try to find the black dress shirt and the checkered tie. Those are his favorites for formal stuff like this, and I have a sweater I can dress it down with."


Marinette grabbed the dress from her closet. She held it up to her chest, making a mental note to iron it before wearing it out. She moved to look for the sweater, but her eyes migrated from the closet to the chest of drawers. Marinette let the dress fall slightly. She ran her fingers over her skin. There were a couple of hickeys on her neck, yellow from the healing process. She touched it, her fingers lingering as she remembered the touch of Adrien's lips, the warmth of his breath. Her face turned pink.

Marinette put the dress on the bed and dug around in some of the lower drawers. She grabbed a bit of lacy red fabric which was sewn to black underwear. White bows connected the two cups of the bra, Oh, it had been a long time since she'd made it, and since she had only ever gotten the chance to wear it while constructing it, the straps and strings for stockings and garters were tangled. She blushed madly, and then hid her negligee between her knees.

This was a bold move. Marinette didn't know how long they intended to stay, or where… but she did know that by the first of May, the anniversary would have passed completely… and she wanted to be prepared for any possibility.
the Road Less Traveled

Chapter Notes

heavy drinking in the flashback and also Artistic liberties taken with the swedish town for plot-related bullshit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

30 April

"Continue to follow N19."

Marinette let a bit of tension fall from her shoulders. She was trying to relax in the passenger's seat, but she wasn't very comfortable. She bounced her leg and shifted, every so often looking at Adrien. His eyes were focused on the road—as well they should be—but she couldn't help but miss his attention. She leaned forward to check on the navigation app that Tom and Sabine had advised. The instructions had quieted the music, but it was back now, though it brought her no peace.

Her ambient psychic energy picked up on Adrien's unease. She pulled up her legs, disconnecting the prosthetic and removing her shoes. She watched him for a while. Every so often, he would smile at her. Marinette's mind was running wild, a hundred thousand questions floating through it. What was he thinking about? What was he going to say to his mother? Was he happy, sad, angry? Did travelling so far away from the only home he knew frighten him as it did her? She looked away.

Adrien reached forward and lowered the volume of the radio. "What's on your mind, buginette?" He asked, keeping his eyes on the road as he placed his hand on Marinette's knee.

She considered asking him the questions which burned in her mind. Marinette shook her head. "I think I forgot my medication this morning. But I know I packed it, so I'll be okay." She showed him her phone. "I was thinking that a road trip game might be fun!"

13 June, Two Years Ago

Princess: last night off my meds, doctors orders
Princess: take me out
Princess: assassination or to a bar, dealers choice

Adrien held open the door for Marinette as she limped inside on her crutches. The bar was loud, but it wasn't crowded, and he was able to find them a table very easily. Once she was settled, he went to the counter and ordered more than a few shots. The bartender poured them quickly, and Adrien carried them back as carefully as he could.

"The tab is open, and the drinks are on me." Adrien said as he sat down, offering a shot to Marinette.
"Here's to getting so drunk I forget that I drove us here."

"But sober enough to remember that you aren't driving us back!" Marinette laughed as they clinked their glasses together. Adrien tossed it back and grabbed another. She hesitated before mimicking him. "I've never been to a bar like this. I mean, I've had wine with dinner, and slightly alcoholic drinks, but I've never been to a bar to drink."

In the short time she'd used to say that, Adrien had already drank three more shots. He paused as he processed that. "You're twenty-seven!"

She shook her head. "Not for another week!" She argued. She thought about taking the last shot, but pushed it towards him. "I'm going to get a White Russian. I've heard about those and they sound good."

Adrien hummed as he put down his glass. "No! You stay here!" He said loudly. "I'll get it! Don't move!"

"You've had five shots and we haven't been here for five minutes!" She argued as he stood.

"And I'm just getting started!" He shouted. He ordered a Long Island Iced Tea for himself, along with her White Russian. His cheeks were flushed when he sat back down. Marinette reached into her purse, revealing an ornate wooden box. Adrien laughed and covered his heart. "Yes, of course I'll marry you!"

She shook her head with a giggle. "Shut it! It's not even the right size!" Marinette opened the box to reveal metal straws inside. She stuck one in her drink and started stirring it before offering the box to Adrien. He shrugged and took one for his own drink. "This… actually tastes really good."

Adrien lifted his chin and leaned forward. "Let me try it. Here, switch." He slid his glass towards her, moving it too quickly and spilling it. "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ." He pulled his sleeve down and tried to mop up the spill.

"Adrien!" She scolded. Marinette grabbed a napkin and pushed his hand away. "Oh my god! I'm surprised that Kagami takes you anywhere."

Adrien frowned. "Because the Ice Queen drinks just as hard as I do!" He shouted. She tried to quiet him. "Just as hard, but she never gets drunk! I swear to fucking god, she must be a supernatural, because nobody should be able to match me shot for shot and not have a goddamn fucking hangover."

Marinette twirled her straw and frowned. "Ice Queen, huh?" She asked. He didn't say anything, but he made a very loud sound of agreement. "You guys aren't doing so hot, then."

He waved her off. "She's… fucking mad at me for something stupid. I don't fucking know." He rubbed his head. "She was mad that I… that I didn't take the time off to go with her to some… convention? Or whatever? Fuck, I don't know." He sighed. "It wasn't like I didn't try, but we're really short handed right now. Mylène is still hurt, and two other nurses were on vacation…"

"Is she still mad at you for what… happened?" She asked.

"Yes." He shook his head. "Fuck, I thought living together was supposed to make things easier. Never gets to be, huh?"

Marinette frowned. "Didn't you tell her that it was a medical emergency? That I had miscarried?" She asked.
Adrien grinned bitterly. "Yup! I sure as fuck did!" He removed the straw and downed his entire glass. The ice fell out of the glass, which startled him. "Dammit." He stepped away to get another. He held up his hands when he came back. "I know, I know. Slow down. We have all night."

"Thank you." She said with a smile. "If you behave, I might let you take me dancing."

Adrien laughed bitterly. "You shouldn't say things like that to me…"

Her smile fell, as did her shoulders. "I know." She whispered.

He stuck his straw back into his drink, stirring it but not drinking. Marinette smiled. He really was trying to be good! "So, um, what's up? You never want to come drinking with me."

She sighed, leaning back against the booth. "Nothing! Nothing I want to talk about, anyway." He pulled his straw out and poked her with it. "Ugh, Luka and I had a fight."

Adrien scowled, his brows furrowed. "What about?"

"I don't know." Marinette said. She threw her hands up in exasperation. "I woke up breathing this morning!"

He shook his head. The memory of Luka shouting at him was fresh in his mind. It had made him sad earlier, but being at the bottom of six drinks had superheated that sadness into anger. "Hey, do you want me to kill that guy for you?" He asked. Marinette laughed despite trying to quiet him. "I have never tried to kill someone on purpose, but I bet I can make it look like an accident."

"Manslaughter isn't exactly my go-to in terms of finishing a fight." Marinette said. She folded her arms across her chest, looking at her glass sadly. "I… I can feel it coming to an end, you know?"

"Oh, Nette…"

She held up her hand, but only for a moment. "He's grieving, I know that. Honestly, I do." Marinette said. "But so am I. You'd think he was the only one who feels badly. Stone was inside of me." She rubbed her arms. "Sometimes it feels like we're postponing the inevitable."

Adrien reached across the table to take her hand. Marinette took a long sip from her drink. "Have you spoken about… your relationship?"

Marinette was quiet. She looked at her drink before speaking. "No. Not really." She paused. "I… I know that Luka only asked me to marry him because I was pregnant. I'm not anymore, and I wonder if he doesn't think that he's being stupid now."

"I'm sure he doesn't, but… do you still want to marry him?" Adrien asked. Some part of him hoped she would say no.

But the answer wasn't so simple. She glanced at him before looking into her glass. "I… I want to be pregnant again." She said, the easier part of this confession. She looked up at Adrien. "I just… I don't think that I want… Luka to be the father."

"Oh." There wasn't much else to say.

Adrien suddenly pushed his drink away and ducked under the table. Marinette blinked, but then rolled her eyes when he popped up next to her. "There were easier ways to do that!" She said, but it didn't matter. Adrien didn't say anything. Marinette watched him for a moment before leaning her head against him. "I… sometimes I really just want this to be over."
"I understand." Adrien shifted slightly, and for half a moment, her head rested against his chest. He ran his hand across her cheek, and she looked up to meet his eyes. Marinette searched them for a moment, and the world around them slowly faded away. It was just the two of them.

But then her face fell, and she pushed his hand away. "I told Luka that I would be home by midnight. What time is it?" She asked.

"Oh, nowhere close to that late." Adrien said, trying to hide the burning blush of his cheeks. "Besides, this is only the first stop." He tossed back half of his drink.

Marinette raised her eyebrows. "First stop?! How many are there?" She asked.

"I don't know. Until I stop being able to fool the bartenders." He said. He pointed at the counter. "See? He's staring at me."

Marinette looked. She frowned. "He is not staring at you!"

"He is! He knows I'm drunk! He's going to cut me off soon, but the joke's on him. I'm not even that drunk." He slapped her arm gently. "Hurry up. You're not even tipsy."

She laughed. "Okay, okay!" She removed her straw and took a long drink. When she put her glass down, she had cream on her nose. "Okay, I'm ready. Where to next?"

"Ha! I've got to settle the tab first." He laughed, rubbing the cream from her nose and sucking it off his finger. He wiggled away from her to slide under the table. "You said you wanted to go dancing, right?"

"Only if you're good!"

30 April, Present Day

"What was your most embarrassing breakup?" Marinette asked.

Adrien's face turned pink. "Why would you want to know something like that?!" He asked.

Marinette laughed and looked at her phone. "That's just what it says! It's totally random."

He chuckled, but the blush remained. "Oh, my god. Okay, so Kagami is the only person other than you that I've ever really dated seriously, but she's not the only person I've had sex with." He started. "The way my other relationships have ended have been awkward, but I really don't know if I would call them embarrassing."

"I know about Kagami and Wayhem. Is there anybody else?" Marinette asked.

He hesitated. "…I dated this lacrosse player named Adam for a few months in university." Adrien confessed. "You have to understand, this was during our blackout, when Lila wouldn't let me see you at all! Alya had taken that as a sign that she shouldn't speak to me either, which meant that it was difficult for Nino and I to hang out–I was very lonely, okay?"

"Okay. So how did you and Adam meet?"
"I had this vain hope that, if I joined the lacrosse team, I might end up on the same field as Félix and get a chance to apologize to him in person, right? But I met Adam there, instead." He paused. "Okay, so, you know how in, like, *Dragon Age 2*, you can be rivals with your LI and still romance them? The rivalmance feature?"

She hummed noncommittally. "Some people would call it an abusive relationship, but yes, I remember."

"So that was sort of what my relationship with Adam was like!" He said loudly. "Um, so, about a week before you came to my house, I was at Adam's apartment—well, not *his* apartment, his *parents'* apartment—and we were in the shower together." He sighed and he rubbed his eyes. "God, I hate this game. I wish I was dead."

"Go on. You were in the shower together," Marinette urged him.

He sighed. "And so I had just gone down on him, and I was coming up for air, and he told me that this was the last time we could spend time together," here, he furrowed his brows, "because I was 'too clingy' and he was afraid his girlfriend might find out."

Marinette's jaw dropped. "He did not say that to you!"

"The fact that I'm still attracted to men despite all of the terrible shit they've done to me is proof that sexuality is not a choice!" Adrien said firmly. He held out his hand with a frown. "How am I the only one getting asked all these dirty questions?" He muttered. "It's my turn. Give me the phone."

Marinette passed it over to him. Adrien's face remained level, his eyes flickering between the road and the magnet attached to the air vent. Once it was sturdily attached, he pressed the button on the screen.

His face immediately twisted into a wicked grin. "Vindication!" He didn't give her an opportunity to prepare beyond that declaration. "Have you ever faked an orgasm?"

Marinette covered her face with her hands. "Oh my god!" She looked up at him as he laughed. "You volunteered the sex stuff in your stories! I don't think I've asked you anything explicitly sexual!"

"Hey, if you don't want to answer, that's fine." Adrien said smugly. "I'll take the point if you're just giving them away!"

She bit the inside of her cheek. "Yes," she admitted, "I have faked a number of orgasms."

"Wait, seriously?" He asked incredulously. "What, were Luka and Lila just really bad at sex?"

"I—oh my god, no, they were fine, okay?" She said, raising a hand. She frowned. "No… sometimes I just get this weird feeling when I have sex, and even if I was having a good time, I really just want it to be over, and faking an orgasm was a really painless way to do that." She propped up her face with her hand, elbow on the center console. "I found that saying, 'enough, get off of me,' will sometimes hurt your partner's feelings."

Adrien frowned. "If they respect you, they'll understand that your body and boundaries are different than others." He said.

"Oh, I know that! It's all theory-versus-practice." Marinette said. "Like, in theory, my sexual partner would understand that I am revoking consent because of a personal reason, but I've found in practice that they're… upset. They think that I'm upset with them, or that they've done something wrong." She waved her hands around. "I think they understood that it was me and not them, but *knowing* and
thinking are different."

Adrien was quiet. He hesitated before speaking. "…hopefully that isn't a problem you'll encounter in the future."

Marinette smiled. "I get the feeling that I won't." She took her phone back. "This one is easy. What Star Trek alien race would you like to be?"

He smirked curiously. "I'm surprised it specified Star Trek. Isn't Star Wars more popular?"

"I don't know any of the names of the alien races in Star Wars. Besides, I like Star Trek better." She smiled. "It's more optimistic."

Adrien considered the question. "Bajoran. I like their nose crests." He mimicked rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, me too!" She mimicked the action. "Though, I think I would rather be Betazoid. I really admire Deanna Troi's empathic abilities, and–"

"In 1.5 kilometers, make a slight left turn. The destination is on your left." The app announced, startling them both.

For a few moments, neither of them said anything. It was just a tense moment, and Marinette watched Adrien during this time. His hands were shaking—not enough to affect the car, but enough that she could see it. She could see how his jaw tightened, how his eyes had widened in anticipation. She had succeeded in taking his mind off of the situation at hand, but now it was undeniable. Adrien's mother was less than five kilometers away. "Adrien…"

He shook his head. "No turning back now…"

Marinette nodded. "How are you feeling now?" She asked, moving her hand to his knee. She rubbed it gently, until Adrien removed one hand from the steering wheel to hold it. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. She smiled and rubbed his cheek. "You're nervous."

"I just… I don't know if I'm ready." He said, his lip quivering as he looked to Marinette.

"I am right here with you. And I am not going anywhere that you cannot reach." She said, determined. He searched her eyes for a moment, then nodded with a smile.

Adrien drove slowly through the town, old and overgrown. They both watched the streets carefully, reading the signs and navigating as best they could. Eventually, they went over an old bridge, the only way over a thin but crystal clear river. The pavement soon ended, and they drove into a beautiful green forest.

The dirt driving paths in the forest were uneven, though Marinette liked the way the tires sounded on gravel. For a while, they bickered, with Adrien insisting they'd gone the wrong way while Marinette maintained they go just a little further before turning around. Her instincts proved correct, as about half an hour up the mountain, there was a wall with an ornate iron gate.

Adrien drove around and parked next to the wall. He took a deep breath before opening his door. "Okay, I admit that you were right." He said, trying to play off his nerves. "We didn't go the wrong way."

Marinette opened her door, carefully attaching her prosthetic. She stood, pushing her weight into her cane as she took a deep breath. "That's not the only thing I was right about!" She shut the door and
threw her hands up for a moment. "Smell that air! Look at that view!" She looked over the horizon. The next closest mountain was kilometers away, so far that the same light which made the sky blue disguise the mountain—but it was close enough that she could see the outlines of the trees. Looking down the hill, she could see the town through the canopy. "I'm a city girl, tried and true, but this place is gorgeous!"

Adrien stretched his arms over his head and grunted as they popped. "It is really pretty." An idea popped into his head. "I don't have any recent pictures of you. Hold on, let me get my phone!"

She laughed. Marinette looked down the road out of habit, and then posed in the middle, so the nearby blue mountains and the town were in the shot. After minimal convincing, Adrien agreed to get in the shot via timer. He posed with one arm around her for a brief moment, then caught her attention and kissed her moments before the timer went off.

She startled, but melted into him. She cupped his face, closing her eyes and dropping her cane. It broke far too soon—damn the need to breathe!—and their eyes met. Adrien smiled at her with those soft eyes, and he moved one of his hands from her hips, tracing the curve of her waist. He placed that hand on her face, tracing her cheekbone with his thumb.

Adrien grabbed her cane and offered it to her. She led the way to the gate, as he trailed a few steps behind her. As expected, the gate was locked. However, even locked, it offered a view of the house and garden. The house, painted white with a wooden door painted hay gold, was two stories tall. The downstairs windows had white flowers in the boxes, and red roses lined either side of the door. A person wearing a straw hat kneeled next to the bushes, listening to a soft orchestral melody that played over the old fashioned boombox.

Marinette nudged Adrien. He looked at her, and then at the person tending to the roses. "E… excuse…” He said, his voice faltering.

Marinette placed her hand on his shoulder. "Excuse me!" She said, much louder. The person stopped, though they did not turn around. "I'm so sorry to bother you. My boyfriend and I—we think that we're lost?" The person removed their gardening gloves and placed them on the table next to the boombox. "We would really appreciate it if you could give us directions!"

The person removed their hat, revealing long blonde hair that white had made its way into. A woman stood, wearing a white sweater and blue jeans. She dusted off her hands and turned around, looking to Marinette with pretty green eyes. "You're pretty much stuck from here." She said. She walked a bit closer. "You'll have to turn around and head back—" She froze when Adrien entered her field of vision. She stared at him, wide eyed and shocked.

Adrien offered her a small smile. "Hi, maman."

Chapter End Notes

ok so I could have skipped this chapter but....... sis, the drama
30 April

Emilie was frozen, her eyes wide and her jaw dropped. She could not tear her gaze away from Adrien, who felt similarly disoriented. He reached for Marinette, who took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I am so sorry to drop by unannounced like this, maman, but I only had your address, not your phone number."

She looked to the side briefly, and then back at him, as if to say something, but she remained silent.

Adrien's tongue felt fat in his mouth. "And I'm sorry that it took so long for me to find you! Sixteen years is… a very, very long time!" He said, a slight chuckle in his voice. "And I really am sorry that I didn't try to find you sooner, but I really did think that you were dead!" He stuttered. "I… I don't really know what you know about… everything that happened after you left."

There was still silence. Marinette smiled and released Adrien's hand to grab the iron gate. "It might be easier to speak if you let us inside." She suggested.

Emilie looked at her, still shocked. However, she blinked now, and she shook her head. "Of course!" She walked forward and unlocked the gate. She took a few steps back, as if frightened. "I—I'm sorry, I… I'm just surprised!" She looked at Adrien. "It… you're right, it has been a…!"

Adrien pushed the gate open. Marinette motioned for him to go first. He looked at his mother as he walked forward. She was… shorter than he remembered, but Adrien had grown much since he was thirteen, so it was expected. She looked much older too, also expected–she had wrinkles around her eyes and the sides of her mouth, and there was a frailty to her that he didn't remember.

Still, it was undeniable. This was Emilie Agreste, his mother. Emotion was boiling up in his stomach and throat, and a smile broke his face. "Oh…!" He walked forward with his arms wide. Emilie's posture, already guarded, closed off completely. Adrien stopped dead in his tracks, and he hesitated. "Oh." He pulled his arms in for a moment before offering her his hand. Emilie looked at it, but didn't take it. He folded his arms behind his back and offered a pained smile. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"Me, too." Emilie said. She glanced from him to Marinette, who was trying to hide her frown. Her eyes flashed from Marinette's face to her legs and cane. "I suppose it was your car that I heard just now."

Adrien nodded. "It was!" He said happily. "We actually drove here from Paris. It was a good thing, too, because hiking up this mountain would have been a bit difficult!"

Emilie glanced at Marinette. "I'm getting that impression."

Marinette frowned at her. Adrien startled, realizing he'd been rude. "I'm so sorry. Maman, this is my girlfriend, Marinette Dupain-Cheng. Marinette, this is my mother, Emilie Agre—"
"I don't use that name anymore." She interrupted. There was a slight hesitation. "Emilie is fine, but I would prefer you refer to me as Emilie Desrosiers, if anything at all."

Adrien nodded. "Oh, of course!" He said. "I'm so sorry. I don't use it anymore, either–I changed my name to Adrien Chevalier."

There was a moment of silence. Then, she motioned over her shoulder to the door. "Why don't you… come inside?"

"We'd love to." Adrien said as a bright smile spread across his face. Emilie turned and opened her door. He grabbed Marinette's shoulders and giggled. "I can't believe it! I'm actually with my mother!"

"That's really great, mon chaton." Marinette said through a forced smile. "I just wish… she was as happy to see you as you are to see her." Adrien frowned, and she covered quickly. "I mean, she's probably just in shock! Let's go inside, and maybe we can get some information."

They followed Emilie inside. Beyond the threshold was a set of stairs, which Marinette noted was terrible feng shui, though she doubted that Emilie had chosen this location for its aesthetics. To the left was a living room with a sunken seating area. A couch and two armchairs circled a glass top table in the sunken area. Elevated slightly next to the living room was a kitchen, and a cut through which led to the right side of the house. There was a set of sliding glass doors which looked out over a grassy lawn, and Marinette noted that the fence was lined with rose bushes that seemed to be less rose and more thorn.

Emilie offered them seats, and then climbed up into the kitchen via the steps. "I'm so sorry. I don't entertain many visitors, so I can't exactly offer you canapes." She shrugged. "You must be exhausted, driving all the way here from France."

"Oh, the drive was lovely!" Marinette said. She smiled at Adrien and put a hand on his arm. "Your son is a wonderful chauffeur, and we talked for hours!"

Emilie grabbed something from the cabinet. "How long have you two been dating?"

"Oh! Um…" Marinette thought with an awkward smile. "Well, we had been… it was sort of… complicated, for a long time!" She looked up at the ceiling. "What I mean to say is--"

Adrien held her hand. "It's only been official for about a week, but we had been in love and flirting for a very long time before that." He cupped her face in his free hand. "Ever since the day we met."

"How long ago was it that you met?" Emilie asked.

"We met sixteen years ago and have been inseparable ever since."

Emilie walked back towards them carrying a silver tray. She placed it on the glass top table, revealing three glasses and a bottle of expensive whiskey. She poured it into the three glasses. Adrien's veneer of calm was gone, replaced by panic and despair. His grip on Marinette's hand was tight enough to cut off circulation.

Marinette spoke quickly as Emilie moved to offer two of the glasses to them. "I'm sorry to be difficult, Madame Desrosiers, but Adrien is my conducteur désigné." Emilie blinked and straightened her back. "Normally, it would be fine for him to drink something small, but wouldn't you know it, he gets nervous on roads with lots of steep curves." She grinned. "We rented a motel back in town, since we didn't want to overstay our welcome with you, so it would be best if he didn't have anything alcoholic to drink."
Emilie nodded. "Oh, of course!" Adrien looked at Marinette and mouthed 'merci' with a soft smile. Emilie looked at the glasses in her hands. "I should have asked first, especially since I knew you drove here." She paused, shrugged, and then poured the contents of one glass into the other. She handed it to Marinette, who took it passively. "But you should never waste good whiskey."

Adrien offered her a sympathetic look. Marinette raised her eyebrows and then sighed. "Good thing I forgot to take my medicine." She said as she took a sip from her glass.

Emilie sat down across from them. She looked into her glass and took a long drink. "So." She said, crossing one of her legs over the other. "How did you find me?"

"My friend Alya has connections." Marinette said, simplifying. "She used them to find you."

"If it was so easy," Emilie muttered, "maybe I should consider moving."

"Oh, you shouldn't do that!" Marinette said. "You have such a lovely view!"

Emilie smiled at her. She looked her over, and then tilted her head. "How did you lose your leg?"

Adrien started. People weren't usually so upfront with her. "Uh..." She looked at Adrien to take her cue. He shook his head. Marinette grinned and folded her hands in her lap. "Well, I was born with one leg!" She lied cheerfully.

Emilie took a sip of her drink and looked away. "Nah."

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a worried look. He cleared his throat. "Um... so, I don't see a television or a phone."

"That's right. I don't have either of those things." She said. She shrugged. "I'm surprised you've forgotten that I don't really care for electronics."

Adrien tilted his head. "You... were an actor, though." He said, confused. "Wouldn't you want a television, so you could at least watch yourself in your movies?"

"No, that's what theaters are for." She sort of relaxed. "When I moved here, money was tight and they were luxuries I couldn't afford, but then I found that I liked the quiet." She motioned to the sliding glass door. "I have a few old things. A record player, and a projector for black-and-white movies, for instance. I was able to smuggle them out of your bedroom before I left."

Adrien rubbed the side of his head, as though it hurt. "I... I'm sorry. Sometimes when I think about you..." He winced, and Marinette rubbed his back. "...I feel like there are parts of my memory that are hollow."

She hesitated slightly. "It was a long time ago. It's only natural that you would forget." She didn't seem happy about it, though. "We... that was something you and I liked to do together. Indulge in old music and movies." She rolled her eyes. "It was the perfect distraction when Gabriel was in one of his moods."

He shifted uncomfortably. "...did you know?" He asked cautiously. "...about Father?"

Emilie sighed. She looked deep into her glass of whiskey, and then finished it. She stood to pour herself another glass, and she topped off Marinette as well, much to her dismay. She pushed up on the glass, encouraging her to drink. "Well," she said quietly. "That depends on what you mean by, did I know." She sat down again. "Did I know that he was a heartless, murdering, monster? Not
when I married him." She said. She smiled at Adrien. "When we met… your father was passionate and creative, and very kind to me… I doubt he was anything at all like how you remember him. It's been a long time, and you never got to see the real him."

Adrien huffed, his brows furrowed and his jaw clenched. "I think I saw the real Gabriel very well." He hissed.

Emilie looked at him sadly. "Yes… I suppose that was a poor choice of words." She was quiet for a moment. "What happened after he went to prison?"

"Your sister Amelie took me in. We had… a strained relationship." Adrien said. Emilie tilted her head. "It was… it was always hard to be considered an individual when almost my entire life revolved around Father. I had some… growing pains."

Marinette frowned and squeezed his shoulder. "Adrien…"

He smiled brightly. "But things have been much better! I have a wonderful girlfriend, a fulfilling career as a nurse, and now, I can be with my mother!" Marinette took a long drink, her heart breaking for him. This time, she refilled her glass without being prompted to be Emilie.

6 May, Nine Years Ago

Marinette had only briefly skimmed the medical pages, so she wasn't exactly sure she was doing the right thing, but the more important task at hand was bringing Adrien's fever down. The thermometer had registered his fever at thirty-nine, so he was sweating bullets and shivering at the same time. She'd been able to drag him into the bathroom and strip him to his underwear to put him in the tub. Marinette used a face cloth to wipe him down with tepid water.

"M… M… Marin… Nette…" he muttered through clenched teeth.

Marinette caught a drop of sweat and wiped it away, bringing the cloth from his forehead down his cheek. "I'm right here." She said, cupping his face in both hands.

He held her hands, clenching them hard. "I can't…! I can't do this!" He said, his eyes closed. He braced himself as another round of tremors raced through his body. "Oh God."

She startled. "Are you going to be sick again?" She looked around and found the bucket as Adrien choked. He tried to hold in the vomit as it filled his mouth and spilled onto his undershirt. Marinette put the bucket under his chin, and he puked immediately into it. "Don't rush it. Don't hold any of it in." She advised as she stroked his hair.

"I can't do this, Nette." He said, choking on another round of withdrawal-induced nausea. He vomited into the bucket and then spat into it in a futile attempt to get the taste out of his mouth. "Ugh! Whoever thought it was a good idea to make people vomit is fucking stupid." He sat back, flinching slightly when Marinette rubbed the cloth across his face, cleaning it of sweat and vomit. "God, probably."

She chuckled softly. "If you're feeling well enough to make jokes, maybe the worst of this is over."

She said, taking the bucket and forcing herself to stand. She didn't have her prosthetic, her cane, or her crutches—she used her powers to keep her body stable enough as she grabbed the sink and leaned
against the wall. She wrung out the face cloth and washed it in warm water. "This one wasn't so bad."

"Says you." He muttered. He scooped up some of the water and splashed his face with it. "Marinette, I can't do this."

"Yes you can." She said confidently.

"No, I can't." He said as she sat down next to him. She reached into the tub and swished the cloth around before rubbing his arms with the water. He caught her hand and squeezed it, looking at her long, dexterous fingers. He looked up at her with tired eyes. "This is going to kill me, Nette."

She furrowed her brows. "No! Don't say that!" She said, dropping the face cloth and squeezing his hand. "You're going to make it through this! I promise you, you're going to make it!"

"Marinette, I'm dying…!"

"No, you're not!" She grabbed his shoulders. "I refuse to let you!"

Soon enough, the fever had passed, though Adrien's shivering didn't get any better. Marinette texted Alya to bring her some of his clothes. She sat with him, stroking his head so he knew he wasn't alone as he slipped in and out of consciousness. When he was awake, his teeth chattered, and his body was wracked with tremors. "M… Marinette?" He whispered.

"Yes, my knight?"

Adrien looked up at her. His green eyes were sort of red, but they also looked big, sad, and frightened. He waited a moment before he said anything. "I wish my mom was here."

"Thank you." She said. She looked around. "It took a long time to get it to look this way."

Adrien hummed unspecifically as he approached a built-in bookshelf. He skimmed the titles of the books, made note of the bookends and ornaments. She had statues of birds and butterflies, as well as short flowers inside empty bottles rather than vases. Behind a set of glass doors was a mason jar with something… glowing inside of it. Adrien opened the doors to see tiny white lights flickering inside the jar like fireflies. He blinked and reached for it.

Emilie shot up. "Adrien, don't touch that!" She exclaimed. He startled and pulled his hand back. She hesitated, digging her nails into the fabric of her armchair. "It isn't polite to snoop!"

"S-sorry, m-" His voice broke as he closed the door. "Um… I didn't mean…"
"Is something wrong?" Emilie asked.

Adrien walked a bit closer. "It's just…” There was no easy way to ask. "What do I call you? It's been so long… I don't…”

Emilie considered this while Marinette poured herself another glass and drank it in one sip. "I… suppose maman is fine, if you–"

"Why did you leave Adrien behind?" Marinette asked, her voice loud and impatient.

Adrien's eyes went wide. "Marinette!" He scolded, rushing forward to grab the back of the couch.

But she wouldn't be deterred. "You said that you didn't know what he was when you married him, but by the time you left, you did. And you left your thirteen-year-old son in that prison!" Marinette said. "You knew what Gabriel was, and you left a child with him! Why would you do that?"

Emilie looked down. She leaned forward and put her glass down. "That's a fair question." She admitted.

For a while, that was all she said. She looked at the floor for a long time, virtually unmoving. It was though the world stood still, the only indication that life continued being the grandfather clock in the next room and the sun falling behind the mountain.

Eventually, she spoke. "When it came time for me to leave, I had to do so quickly. Adrien had finally developed powers, which meant that he would be safe from anything Gabriel tried to do to him, or have him do…”

"Why is Gabriel able to control humans but not supernaturals?" Adrien asked.

"Gabriel's powers interact very specifically with the human brain. His commands travel through neural pathways that make it seem like an involuntary function. A person obeys his command like their heart obeys a command to beat." Emilie motioned with her hands. "But a supernatural's brain is different. Pathways follow different processes. Even a command to breathe is rooted differently. Gabriel gives an order, it travels through the brain, but eventually gets confused and does nothing."

"So… because Adrien had developed powers, you thought he would be safe from his serial killer father?!" Marinette demanded.

Emilie still couldn't meet their eyes. "If I had taken Adrien, Gabriel never would have let me be." She said. She looked sort of… twisted and flat, her arms and legs tangled and her back pressed into the chair. "I could have been arrested for kidnapping, and dragged back…”

"And when you learned that Gabriel was in prison and Adrien needed his mother?" Silence. Emilie took a ragged breath, but no words came. "You believed the rumors, too." Marinette narrowed her eyes as Adrien's face fell. "You thought your own son was conspiring with a serial killer."

"No, of course not!" She said. She shifted, her arms still protecting her chest but her toes touching the floor. "I… didn't know what happened to Adrien after Gabriel was arrested. The last I heard, he had helped Gabriel's victim escape. When no letter came, I assumed that Adrien had passed away…”

"You seem to be acting awfully cold for someone who just learned the son she thought was dead is still alive." Marinette snapped.

"Marinette, it's fine." Adrien said, pulling her into him. She pouted angrily. Adrien rubbed her arms as he looked up. "I'm sorry, maman. It's been a rough few days."
Emilie raised her hand. "Don't worry about it." She said. She lowered her hand and looked out over the backyard. She offered a small smile to Adrien. "I know that you said you had a room in town, but it's late, and the road is dangerous in the dark." She motioned over her shoulder. "Would you like to stay in the guest room?"

Adrien nodded. They all got up, though as Marinette stood, her leg buckled. Adrien chuckled as she fell into him. "You drank too much." Adrien said as he lifted her up. Emilie led them to a bedroom next to the stairs. Adrien gently placed Marinette on the bed. He took off her shoes as he looked up at Emilie. "Thank you."

Emilie nodded. "You're welcome." She looked down for a moment. "Have a good night. I'll see you in the morning."

She closed the door. Adrien detached Marinette's prosthetic and put it next to the bed with her cane. He sat down at the edge of the bed to remove his shoes. "I'm sorry I ruined your reunion with your mother." Marinette apologized. She reached out to him.

Adrien grabbed her hand and yanked her up. When she was close enough, he kissed her. "You didn't ruin anything." He said, holding her steady as she lay back down. "You're a bit tipsy, though. You should sleep it off."

Marinette closed her eyes. She sighed. "We didn't… ask her how she controlled him." She pulled her dress over her head. "That's why Nathalie told us to look for her…"

Adrien stroked her cheek. "There'll be time for that in the morning." He loosened his tie and undressed, putting his clothes on a chair in the corner. Adrien climbed under the covers, holding them up so Marinette could join him. She snuggled into him, her skin warm against his, and she was asleep in seconds.

Adrien looked up at the ceiling. His mind raced with thoughts of his mother, and his father, and what had happened between them. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but he couldn't calm his thoughts.

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4 November, Eighteen Years Ago

Adrien was staring at the empty space on his bookshelf, and then looked down at the books scattered on the floor. Some pages had been ripped out and drawn on in his hand, others burned by a candle. He sighed and started cleaning, but there was a disconnection between his body and the action. He grabbed a page to look at the drawing on it. It didn't look like it was made with crayon… maybe a marker? But it was messy. He couldn't figure out the drawing.

Emilie placed a hand on his shoulder. "What are you doing?" She asked.

"Cleaning." He said. He rubbed his head. "Maman, my head hurts…"

Emilie led him away, sitting him down in his bathroom and offering him a painkiller and a glass of water. "Come on. I have a game set up in the theater." She said. She winked. "Let's play a prank on your father while he's still in a good mood."

He took the painkiller and stood. Emilie held his hand and walked forward. Adrien walked with her, but only for a few steps before he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He gasped and broke
free, leaning against the granite. The entire right side of his face was covered in dark bruises. "W-what happened?!!" He asked, running his fingers over his face. He looked at Emilie with fear in his eyes. "What happened to my face?! Why am I all beat up?!"

Emilie grimaced. She eventually smiled, but it was shaky. "You fell down the stairs and hit your head. The doctor said you have a concussion, and that you lost some of your memories." She held his face in her hands. "But this will pass. Everything is fine now." Emilie led Adrien forward by walking behind him and pushing slightly. They walked towards the theater, Emilie wearing a fake smile. They passed Gabriel on their way, and offered pleasant greetings. Emilie let her smile fall. "How's your hand?" She asked.

Gabriel opened and closed his left hand, making a fist before stretching his fingers. "Better."

Chapter End Notes

I think I've edited the flashback sequence to reflect canon, but if I've missed any, let me know

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