A witch's familiar

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Summary

In which a married businessman neglects his son and sleeps with his personal assistant.

Notes

On the canon divergence: I started writing this mid-season 1, before Jackady and Origins had aired. The lore, kwami names, heroes names and identities, as well as the character's relatives are very different from the series.

The tone is also MUCH darker than my other fics.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Adrien had been led to believe that, for most teenagers in the school system, summer was seen as the blissful two months of freedom from the crushing confines of the educational system. To most students, summer was paradise. To him, it was hell. He longed for September.

His father was not much of a fan of idleness and free time (nor was he a fan of bliss, or even mild well-being). As far as Adrien could tell, Gabriel considered summer as an eight weeks period during which his son was finally under his absolute control, instead of wasting his time at school, studying material his private teachers had covered years before, in the company of disreputable hoodlums.

Adrien's schedule was even busier than during his school days, which was saying a lot. There was not a second of his week that was not somehow monitored or assigned to Important Activities. It had been near impossible to escape to help Ladybug with the constant Akuma attacks. Thankfully, Adrien - being a model whose complexion was to be preserved - was allowed long nights of sleep (which he employed to patrol Paris until he felt about to pass out). As for his days… He spent them at his company's headquarters, studying or modeling. Adrien's mastery of Chinese being "acceptable", Gabriel felt that his son could now tackle other languages, like Dutch and Spanish. On top of that, Adrien could not be allowed to "forget" what he had learnt during the year, so he had been given homework. And then there was sport, sport, sport, and more sport. And more modeling.

He had only seen Nino once in four weeks, and it had been as Chat Noir, during an Akuma attack on an open pool.

The only classmate he saw every day was Marinette, and Marinette… Marinette got jittery when he tried to talk to her. Very jittery. He couldn't figure out how she could go from "assertive class president" to "let me hide behind that curtain with a squeal of terror because you are talking to me" whenever he as much as said hi.

He still tried to talk to her, because he needed to talk to someone who was not Nathalie. After ten months surrounded with friends, he had lost the habit of being entirely isolated.

Gabriel did sometimes appear at the dinner table, or would grab a cup of coffee on his way out in the morning, but there was never a moment where he was not carrying a pile of files or a sketchbook or a telephonic conversation. He would ask "how was your day?" and listen for a second or so, then his attention would start to race back to his work. Adrien could see it every time, the way his eyes would dart to the documents he had brought in, even if he tried to fight it. Work always won. Adrien's answers turned to terse summaries, barely sentences, as the meals went on. What was there to say, anyway? His father knew full well how his days had gone. He checked his schedule. Nathalie reported to him.

There were days he could tell Gabriel started out interested by the sound of his voice - if not by his highly predictable words about this photo shoot and that fencing lesson - and then there were days where his father flat out did not care. It had been that way since Adrien's mother had disappeared, with ups and downs, and lower downs, and it was becoming difficult to remember that time when Gabriel would actually put his work aside to look at his son. It didn't seem like it was something that could occur to Gabriel without his wife's gentle prodding.

So, Adrien still tried to talk to Marinette. Marinette, who had come out first in three successive fashion contests held by his father, and who had won (and earned) an internship for the summer.
She was at the office every day, fluttering about, learning, discovering, proving herself. Adrien got to watch her act like herself: a bit clumsy, but confident in a way he rarely witnessed, as she would shed all assertivity if she noticed his eyes on her. He also got to resent her.

His father was allocating ten minutes of his busy schedule, every day, to talking to her. He would look at her drawings and comment on them, and give her tips, and do everything to nurture the budding talent he planned to hire someday. It was all fake, of course. Gabriel went into full businessman mode, his every attention a commercial tactic, his every smile calculated. Still, Adrien was jealous. It was ten more minutes than he usually got, and if his father could lie and pretend with others, why couldn't he at least lie and pretend with his son?

Adrien would have settled for lies.

None of it was Marinette's fault, so he didn't take it out on her. He didn't take it out on anyone. He just waited for the night, so he would get to slip out and join Ladybug on their patrols.

That was how he found himself rolling across his bedroom most evenings, his desk chair spiralling on the floor as he counted the minutes.

That was how he found himself at the window on the night he caught Ladybug spying on his house.

###

He turned the lights on (of course, the lights were off: proper moping had to take place in the dark or not at all). He tapped the window. He waved.

Ladybug was perched on the mansion's outer wall, looking not at his window, but at the building as a whole. She froze when the lights turned on, turned to an absolute iceberg when she noticed him, and stumbled and crashed into the courtyard.

He paled, opened the window, and tried to look down to check on her.

The yo-yo wrapped itself around the window frame, and Ladybug climbed to him.

"H-hi", she said.

He stared at her, mouth dry, brain disconnected. All he could think about was that Ladybug was sitting on the border of his window, which tended not to happen when he was awake.

"I wasn't spying or anything!" she exclaimed, scratching the back of her neck with a nervous laugh. "There's just… Ahem. I mean, people think they have spotted an Akuma around here. I was, er, checking everything was normal. That's it. That's absolutely it."

"Oh", he replied, because an answer was in order. "Oh."

He felt like hiding behind some curtains. He felt like beaming. He felt like slapping himself on the back of the head because there was an Akuma to deal with and his priorities were out of whack.

"You haven't n-noticed anything weird, have you?" she asked. "Flying p-people, explosions, pink monsters?"
"No. No, not really. Should I check the security cameras? I'm sure my father's assistant can take a look for you."

"I… Ah, that's very nice of you, but it looks like the reports were wrong, really. I gave the area a thorough check, I'm glad to say you everything look fine."

Had he misheard that? He wasn't sure. He blushed anyway.

"Ah, I'm. Glad. To hear it."

He saw her look inside. Straight at his computer. With the gigantic screens, all showing Alya's Ladybug blog. He nearly fainted. She… She blushed. Was he dreaming that?

He considered inventing a credible excuse not to look like a besotted fan, and discarded the idea.

"I'm a big fan!" he said with a grin. "I think what you are doing for the city is fantastic!"

He had seen her react to fans before, even to love confessions, even to the one marriage proposal, complete with engagement ring and a suitor on his knees. She had never lost her cool. Yet… She spluttered for a second before collecting herself.

"Thanks. I have to admit Chat Noir is doing most of the work", she said with a wink. "He deserves just as much praise."

"O-of course!"

"I should go", she declared. "Patrol won't patrol itself! Good night, Adrien!"

She knew his name.

Just like anyone who had ever opened a magazine or looked at a billboard.

"G-good night", he replied, watching her jump down into the courtyard and run away.

He stared at her silhouette until it vanished, then he stared some more. After a few minutes, Plagg flew up to him.

"How many centuries in a row will I have to endure a reenactment of this scene, exactly? You humans are very tiring."

"Uuhh."

"You know she was lying about that Akuma thing, right?"

Adrien gasped.

"Right. Plagg, claws out!"

###

Chat Noir found Ladybug easily enough. She had not gone far. Actually, she had not left the grounds, just circled the mansion so Adrien couldn't see her. She was peeking into his father's
bedroom, which was mildly concerning.

"Hello, my lady", he greeted her, dropping next to her.

"Hush."

He snapped his mouth shut, waited ten seconds, then inched closer, curious and slightly worried.

"So, did mister Agreste turn into a supervillain?"

Ladybug frowned and climbed to the roof, waiting for him to join her.

"I'm investigating a lead", she announced when he crouched next to her, his concern hidden behind raised eyebrow and a dubious expression.

"A lead? What kind of lead?"

"I know someone who works for mister Agreste, and who noticed strange absences. Apparently, every time an Akuma shows up, Gabriel Agreste just vanishes. He's nowhere to be seen. He comes back after the fight is over, sometimes hours later."

Chat frowned, suddenly finding it difficult to keep his features neutral.

"I'm not sure I follow your meaning."

"I mean there is only one person who has a clear reason to go missing during every Akuma attack, and that's Hawk Moth."

Adrien couldn't stop himself from getting defensive.

"He's not Hawk Moth", he hissed, furious that Ladybug could even entertain that idea.

Her eyes went wide at his vehemence, and he bit his tongue.

"I mean, it's unlikely", he added, nonchalant. "He's too busy for that, what with him running the entire fashion world."

"I've been observing him for two weeks, now. That's seven Akuma attacks. He vanished for all of them. Every time, he was gone before I even learned there was an Akuma running wild. You have to admit that's suspicious."

Adrien bit the inside of his cheeks.

"It could mean anything. Business meetings, phone calls, or even just him locking himself in a quiet room to draw."

"It's still worth investigating, isn't it? We don't have the slightest clue of who Hawk Moth is yet, and we should. We should find him, and go after him, before he can hurt more people."

"That's not wrong, but… Mister Agreste, really? He's too high profile. He's too… He's not… It just can't be him."

"Think about it. Keeps vanishing, is known as a bit of a recluse… Is pleasant enough in public but it doesn't really add up. See, his son has that friend - Chloé Bourgeois - who lives literally next door… And I know from a source that mister Agreste has never met her. Did not even know her name until recently. And then there's the whole thing with the Bubbler and Adrien Agreste's
'birthday party'."

His father, Adrien realized, had made it easy for people to draw ridiculous conclusions.

"He's not Hawk Moth", he said. "Just a very private man who has had a very bad few years. I talked to his son, you know? After the Bubbler incident. He talked about his dad, a little."

"He did?" Ladybug exclaimed.

Chat Noir nodded.

"What do you know about them?" he asked, knowing what he would hear.

If his partner knew something, it would be what the press had written, and the press had not written anything pleasant.

"Not… Not much. His work is renowned. His life, not so much. There was a lot of rumors a few years ago, when his wife left."

"She didn't leave", Chat corrected, keeping his voice casual. "She went missing. She was on a trip in Brazil, and she just vanished into thin air. Mister Agreste is still looking for her. Not as much and not as hard than… right after it happened, for obvious reasons, but he is still in contact with law enforcement in Brazil and in South America in general."

He knew that sounded like wishful thinking. Maybe it was.

Ladybug stared at him, horrified.

"That's… I didn't know, no."

He smiled.

"Anyway, Adrien swore to me that his father was a good person, just… not the best at communication. I'm inclined to believe him."

She considered that, but only grew darker. She sighed.

"A good man with a missing wife might have even more use for the Miraculous than an evil one", she pointed out.

That was one rebuttal too many.

Adrien stood, jaw clenched.

"Fine", he exclaimed. "There's two of us. We'll watch him, and we'll figure out what he's doing during the Akuma attacks quickly enough. I'm sure you're wrong, however."

"I hope I am."

###

Nine Akuma attacks had not been enough for Chat Noir to disprove Ladybug's theory.
She had been right: his father was nowhere to be found when the city was under attack. Adrien could not always pinpoint when he had left the office, or their house, but Gabriel had only ever reappeared after the villain of the day had been defeated. So far.

Now, watching his every step was not very easy when you happened to be needed to fight the Akuma. You couldn't exactly tell Paris: "Sorry, stalking my dad today", especially not when buildings were collapsing around you. Adrien had raced away from several fights right as they finished, while Ladybug was freeing the butterflies and fixing the damage. Still… The battles were long over when Adrien arrived wherever his father was supposed to be, to the point that his presence would not have proved a thing.

He had tried to check Nathalie's tablet to see Gabriel's schedule, and discovered entire hours allocated to R&D, which told him nothing.

The teenager needed proof. He didn't believe his father was Hawk Moth, but the idea was eating away at him. "A good man with a missing wife" was not such an unlikely candidate and, for all his faults, Gabriel had loved Adrien's mother from the bottom of his heart. He still did. At least, Adrien thought so.

He knew his father couldn't be Hawk Moth. He just wanted to convince his partner. That was all.

It took a tenth battle - a tense fight against a flying monster who had been near indistinguishable under the moonlight - for Adrien to get an opportunity to gather actual proof. The Akuma had attacked a mere block away from the company's office, and Gabriel's office window was brightly lit when Chat Noir landed on the opposite roof.

Every other window around the block was dark. It was past midnight. No one but Gabriel would be working so late, not when no shows were planned for three weeks.

Chat's ring had three paws left. He jumped across the street, landing on the fire stairs of the office building. He peeked inside Gabriel's office.

There was someone inside, but it was not his father: Nathalie was sitting at the desk, organizing piles of documents and photographs. She was alone.

*If Hawk Moth is a Miraculous user, then his transformation might not have worn off*, Adrien told himself, looking at his own ring. Now, with the Akuma defeated, there was no obvious point maintaining the transformation, but maybe Hawk Moth had some reason to make use of every second of his.

He saw Nathalie move, and turned back to the window. The woman had been startled by the door, that had opened on Gabriel. Once again, he was appearing too late to prove that he was no supervillain. He walked in and locked the door behind him, talking to Nathalie without bothering to look at her. Questions were asked, answers were given, documents were handed back and forth, until Adrien's father found himself standing behind Nathalie, looking over her shoulder to examine the files on the desk.

Then, something happened that made Adrien whirl away from the window in horrified surprise, peek back to make sure of what he had seen, and leave.

It was as simple as his father undoing Nathalie's bun and smoothing her hair. It was as simple as him putting his hands on her shoulders and leaning a little closer.

As horrifying as the Hawk Moth theory was, Adrien couldn't say he liked this discovery much
better. "Good men with missing wives" were one thing, but what were you supposed to believe when the wives were no longer missed? A hairdo undone, and one's life came apart at the seams. You started to wonder why your father had moved on, if he had given up, or been given a reason to. Every question you had refused to ask yourself came knocking at the door. You kept the door closed.

New questions begged for answers. You didn't want them. You would ask for them anyway.
**Playing cat and mouse**

Every relationship has a backstory. It might not be interesting, it might not be long, it might not be pleasant. It can be as simple as "we’ve been friends since forever, and then", as brief as "wow, that girl is cute, mind introducing me?". Sometimes, it is sweet. Sometimes, it is tragic. Sometimes, it is crazy. Sometimes, it is nothing special.

Nevertheless, there is always a story.

Sometimes, it ends with a hairdo pulled apart pin by pin, hands running through smooth dark hair, lips running down a neck.

###

The first time Nathalie Sancoeur had met Gabriel Agreste, the encounter had been uneventful. Almost uneventful. It had occurred in a school hallway. He had been sixteen. She had been twelve, and late for class. Her being late had led to her racing across the school, bag clutched against her chest, eyes occupied with a last minute rereading of her homework, until her forehead had connected with Gabriel's solar plexus.

There had been some yelling.

Someone had been told to pay attention to where she was going.

Someone had been told not to stand in the middle of the hallway like he owned it (even though he probably did, what with the generous donations their school received from the Agreste family).

There had been no spark of lightning, no starry eyes, no butterflies in the stomach. For a start, Nathalie was twelve. On top of that, she was literally heartless, and so was the boy (figuratively).

###

If the age difference had not been so drastic (four years equated a century, when you were so young), teenage Nathalie and teenage Gabriel would probably have interacted more. They were incredibly like-minded. Both of them were unpleasant, conniving, backstabbing asses who lied, deceived, and would have sold their own parents to get their way. Nathalie, as a matter of fact, had actually sold her own mother to a fellow kindergartener, for the extravagant price of one bag of candy.

Had they been of the same age, they would have been happy to sit together, alone in a corner, frowning upon the rest of the world and observing it with contempt. They would not have exchanged a word. Maybe there would have been a nod, some communication in the form of raised eyebrows and huffs, but it would have been the extent of their interactions. They were not merely introverts: they liked to dislike people. It made their days (they wouldn't have admitted it: they didn't realize it).
As things were, Gabriel had been older, and had spent his time near his classmates instead. That merry band of absolute imbeciles had done its best to somehow curb young Gabriel's antisocial tendencies, teaching him not to be kinder but to pretend better.

That merry band of imbeciles had included Alice Beauregard, latter known as Alice Agreste.

"This can't happen again", a much older Gabriel had told Nathalie when they had found themselves disheveled and panting and spent in his office, on that first afternoon.

He had been adjusting his clothes, back turned to her, standing a feet away. She had been adjusting hers. Her only answer had been a curt nod, which he had not even looked at. He had not needed to.

They were in entire agreement on the subject.

Nathalie had never, not once in her life, entertained the notion of sleeping with Gabriel Agreste, not even that one time her mother had pointed out how dreamy he was, when she had been sixteen. Journalists had hinted at the idea and been severely disappointed by Nathalie's reaction, or lack thereof. She couldn't fathom why everyone insisted that, if people of compatible sexual orientations worked in close quarters for too long, things could only devolve.

Well, obviously, people slipped every now and then.

Nathalie had entire flowcharts in her mind, with various decisions points such as "Is your job compromised? Yes/No" and "Was it pleasant? Yes/No". Every branch led to "don't do it again".

He had watched her twist her hair into a tight bun she hoped looked presentable. His face had remained blank, but she knew he didn't approve of the hairstyle at all. It had all started with that ridiculous bobby pins thing.

It is important to mention that Nathalie had never, up to the point where the "this can't happen again" discussions occurred once a week, been attracted to Gabriel Agreste.

Nathalie was not attracted to anyone unless she was clobbered over the head with direct offers. She didn't think about dating much: she had no time for that. She had plenty of memories to prove her distinct lack of interest in romance, men, and her employer. The one that came to mind first was that one time, when her mother had tried to convince her that her underage self would be wise to drool over an engaged grown man.

It had happened during a fashion show, when Gabriel had just started rising to fame. Nathalie's father had obtained tickets thanks to the friend of a friend of a friend, and her mother had wanted to go. Nathalie had wanted to stay home to reorganize her class notes for the upcoming exams, but it was a "once in a lifetime opportunity", and she had been dragged along.

Nathalie, once there, had spotted the appetizers. Her mother had spotted twenty years old Gabriel, and grabbed her daughter's arm to force her to look at him. The teenager, who knew full well what
the blond looked like, and knew even better that Alice Beauregard occupied his every thought, had attempted to return to the salmon toast.

Her mother had gripped her arm like a vice.

"He is so dreamy", she had claimed, desperately trying to elicit some sort of human reaction from the girl.

She was losing hope. Nathalie had been a quiet, emotionless toddler who had grown into a quiet, emotionless child, who had grown into a teenager. As a kind, warm, exuberant woman, Aurélie had always been worried by her daughter's coldness. Considering her ex-husband had come with a warning label about his general disposition right in his last name, a disposition that had obviously been passed on to his equally heartless progeny, one wondered why she was so surprised.

"No, he is not", the teenager had replied.

"Come on, Nathalie. "Look at those eyes. Look at that hair. Look at him."

The girl had indulged her and stared in Gabriel's direction for a few seconds.

"He has to learn to smile", she had commented.

"He is smiling right now!"

"No, I mean he has to learn to smile. Close jaw, then move lips. The way he does it, it just looks like he lost his dentures."

"Nathalie, that's rude!" Aurélie had yelled, before blanching and lowering her voice. "Oh my god, I think he heard you."

He clearly had. His smile had vanished, and he had turned to the impolite sixteen years old, his expression nonchalant, to stare at her.

Her thoughts had been an unending stream of "oh my god he heard I'm so dead". She had gone for the easiest solution of all: looking straight right through him, pretending she didn't notice him at all, and keeping her features beyond bored. As soon as he had turned away, her knees had gone weak.

"Let's escape", her mother had whispered.

Nathalie had nodded, filled a napkin with salmon toasts, and followed her out of the room.

###

Nathalie liked her hair like she liked her clothes: strict and professional.

As a teenager, she had gone to war with her mother over hair dye, and suitable colorings for a fourteen years old girl ("the one you were born with and it is not changing"). It had taken her a year to win the battle, and she had celebrated her victory with a full head of blood red hair. Then, she had settled for something that actually worked with her complexion.

Her hair color had not changed in fifteen years. Neither had her haircut. Neither had her shampoo
brand. Neither had her conditioner's. Yet, six months before, in a totally baffling turn of events she had not been able to explain, her bobby pins had started to vanish and her bun to dissolve, at random times of the day.

It had driven her nuts until she had figured it out. Actually, even now that she had discovered the how and the why, it still nearly made her lose it.

The first time it had happened, she had been with Adrien, busy explaining his activities of the day, and she had felt her bun collapse in slow-motion. The boy had been privy to her meltdown, complete with swearing and frantic attempts to put her hair back into place. She had only stopped when she had noticed he was staring at her like at a crazy person.

She had frozen into place, let her hair go, and composed herself.

"As I was saying, the photo shoot is scheduled at four, but you have to be at the office by two, your father wants you to give some tips to our newest child model."

Adrien had kept gaping at her.

She had retreated to the bathroom so she wouldn't bash his head in with her tablet, and so she could fix her stupid hair because she could feel it touching her back and it threatened her sanity.

Every day after that, she had secured her bun like one would have secured the restraints of Hannibal Lecter.

Her pins still vanished. Her bun still fell.

Weeks had gone by, and she had looked for the damned pins everywhere, getting on her knees in her office to check the floor, inspecting her keyboard and drawers from every angle, all but bringing a metal detector to work. They just vanished.

Adrien was so amused by her disarray that she had started to suspect the child was pranking her. She had spent days watching his every move around her. But the strange phenomenon happened even when she had not crossed his path for hours.

It had taken months (and a window) for her to finally discover what was going on, and it proved so surreal it nearly didn't register. She had been looking outside, waiting for the limousine to arrive and talking to mister Agreste, when he had passed behind her back.

She had felt nothing, not the slightest brush. If she had not seen it all unfold in their reflections in the window, she would have missed it. But she had seen Gabriel lift his arm, snatch something from the back of her head, and immediately pocket it.

###

The "this can't happen again" line had fallen out of their vocabulary. They didn't bother pretending they would stop: they functioned well as boss and employee despite the change to their dynamic. More precisely, they did not mention the change. Their days followed their usual routine until they didn't. Gabriel would always be the one to make a move, and never at home, never where they could get caught. The door was always locked, it never lasted long, they did not waste time with cuddling and pleasantries.
She didn't question Gabriel's motives. Sometimes, he grew bored of company management, and wanted a few minutes of entertainment. More often, he vanished for hours and came back starving for touch.

She didn't question her own motives. Her work didn't leave much room for dating and relationships, and while she was not lonely, she was just human.

###

The thought process involved in dealing with your extremely tight-laced boss stealing your bobby pins was long and convoluted and required diagrams. Nathalie's mind helpfully provided those at the drop of a hat.

When she had caught Gabriel red-handed, her mental flowchart looked like this:

![Flowchart](http://i.imgur.com/4XFRNEq.png)

She had decided to remain calm. She had turned to Gabriel.
"Sir", she had asked after clearing her throat. "Would you mind giving that back?"

He had frowned, and she had pointed at his hand, still buried in his pocket. Her boss had paled. His mouth had gone dry so quickly she had heard his tongue unglue itself from his palate.

He had extracted the bobby pin from his pocket, looked at it as if surprised to find it in his hand, and handed it to Nathalie. She had taken it by the tip, with the tip of her fingers, and had pulled away.

"My deepest apologies", her employer had said, clearly embarrassed. "I… I used to - well, clearly not *used* to - suffer from a mild case of kleptomania as a teenager, I…"

She hoped it was kleptomania, as the other option fell into the realm of deviant behavior.

"I see", she had replied.

Her thoughts had been a lot more verbose, and could be summed up to "get therapy, get therapy for this, get therapy for your wife, get therapy for your relationship with your son, get therapy for everything, you need bloody therapy".

"It won't happen again", he had said.

He had kept his word for three days.

###

He was so apt at stealing unnoticed that, when his hand brushed her neck for the first time, she knew it was on purpose. She had been able to see he was studying her reaction, though his face had been cold and inscrutable as ever.

She had filed that away, just as the next touch, and the one after that. She had wanted to file it *all* away, to be sorted and analyzed. In the end, it had been for nothing. He had not given her the time to process her thoughts. Maybe she had hurried things along herself, by accident, by whirling into place without realizing he had just pilfered bobby pin 1048. She had crashed into him and he had steadied her, before pushing the pin back into her hair.

"Would a kiss be unwelcome?" he had asked.

*I don't know. I dislike complications, and I have a thousand things to do today. Also, are you fourteen, or maybe Victorian?*

She thought she had rolled her eyes, but she wasn't totally sure of that.

The kiss had not been unwelcome. It hadn't been just a kiss either: they didn't waste time when they had so little to spare.

###
Adrien was insufferable. Not in general, of course. He was a quiet boy, and the living proof that goodness had to be innate, because his father's education was most certainly not teaching him how to keep one's temper in check.

No. He was insufferable since the early morning.

He had ordered Nathalie to arrange a meeting with his father, later during the day, as soon as possible, and "no later than today, please, thank you Nathalie". It was now four in the afternoon, and she had not bothered trying.

When the boy came to knock on her door, she pretended not to hear. She knew it was him: there was a security camera pointed at him. It was his fifth visit of the day. She had better things to do with her time.

He knocked again, then just walked in.

"Nathalie, have you told my father I need to talk to him?" he asked.

You could hear the fury. You could see it. With that frown and that glare, he reminded her a little of sixteen years old Gabriel (he was not nearly frightening and malevolent enough for the resemblance to be perfect).

"Your father is busy with R&D", she told him. It was code for "I have no clue where he vanished to, he could be dead in a ditch for all I know, if you find him, send him to me."

"When will he be back?" the child insisted.

"I don't know. Be sure that I will inform him of your request as soon as he returns", she promised.

Never did she say she would convince his father. She could work miracles with a schedule and bend the laws of logistics, but some things were beyond even her abilities.

Adrien didn't answer and looked at her with a coldness she had rarely seen in him. Much like his mother, he was hard to really anger, and always felt guilty a few seconds in. She kept her face neutral, but his attitude did unsettle her. It was unlike him.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Will he be working late tonight?"

"It's likely. I can check his schedule, if you want me to."

"I can wait for him in his office, if he doesn't plan to get home until late."

She sighed.

"Do you want me to try and call him?"

There was a glint in Adrien's eyes. She didn't like it.

"Please", he said.

She was willing to bet that he had tried and that his father had not picked up. If Gabriel took her call after ignoring his son, there would be hell to pay. She called anyway.
She let the phone ring once, twice, thrice, and hung up.

"As you can see, he is busy", she announced. "I will try again later."

Adrien lowered his eyes, sighing.

"Thank you, Nathalie", he murmured, hesitating in front of the door.

He stared at the phone, obviously waiting for his father to return the call. He was counting the seconds. She idly wondered if she could disconnect the cables with a kick, and if she would be noticed.

It took less than twenty seconds for Gabriel to call back. Nathalie pursed her lips. Adrien gave her a look of betrayal and loathing, and just left.

She picked up.

"Your son wants to talk to you", she announced over her employer's voice. "I don't think it can wait."

###
The morals of an alley cat

Adrien tried to tell himself his father favored *work*, and not just Nathalie. He tried to tell himself that things were no different than the week before, the month before, or whenever it was that Gabriel and his assistant had gotten "involved".

Things were, however, different. It stung to discover that his father *had* free time and affection to spare and spared them on someone else, but it was not the real problem. It hurt that they had chosen to hide the relationship from him, but it was not why being in the same room as Nathalie now filled Adrien with loathing.

Gabriel was not allowed to *move on*. Not before they knew for sure where Alice was. As long as they didn't know, there was hope she would come back. If Gabriel himself gave up on her, Adrien couldn't pretend that there was still a chance to see her again. He had thought his father would wait forever.

It wasn't a fair thing to ask from him, Adrien knew that. It had been four years, nearly five. *He* would have waited forever, or at least he thought so. And the way his father had looked at his mother, with a warmth that bordered on adoration… It was hard to believe Gabriel could just put all of that love in a box and bury it without irrefutable proof that Alice was forever gone.

Adrien had left Nathalie's office in their company's headquarters, left the building, and walked home. Then, he had locked himself in his bedroom, where he had thrown himself on the bed and done his best to think about *nothing at all*.

Plagg was sitting on his desk, pacing and staring at him, clearly trying to find something to say. Twenty minutes of reflection had not been enough for him to come up with comforting words. Adrien never found out how long the cat would have needed: after twenty minutes, Gabriel knocked on his door.

Adrien went to open and found his father tense and bristling with impatience.

"You wanted to talk to me", he all but snapped.

His son tried to be nice and polite, as one of them had to be. He had dragged his father out of… R&D, possibly something important, most likely something important. Everything Gabriel did was important to Gabriel.

The teenager smiled and moved back, gesturing for his father to enter the room.

"Yes. I'm sorry I was so pushy about it, but… I need to talk about mom."

Months of fights as Chat Noir and years of fencing training had taught him to spot the minute signs that someone was about to step away and flee. He saw Gabriel's every muscle prepare for retreat, then he watched as his father forced himself to walk into the room.

He looked around, unfamiliar with surroundings he had not seen in years now. He looked mildly surprised at the presence of arcade games he had paid for, took in the climbing wall, the posters, the everything, and paused as he turned to Adrien's computer screens.

"I see you are a fan of Ladybug", he commented, face blanker than his son had ever seen it.

He pressed his lips into a thin line and turned to Adrien with a look of disapproval.
"I think she's kind of cool", the teenager replied. "I… I take it you don't."

"Children recklessly endangering themselves? I can't say I approve. They are in over their head, and I doubt they realize it. But I'm sure you are aware of that."

Adrien lowered his eyes, trying to hide how hard that blow had hit him. Gabriel had no idea how personal that topic was, and had not meant to hurt him. Not that much, at least.

"They save the city every day", he murmured.

His father closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"What was it you wanted to discuss?"

"I want to know… That is, I am not sure… I mean… Are you still trying to find mom?"

Gabriel opened and closed his mouth in puzzled, then horrified silence. He was frozen, and did not manage much more than stunned blinks for a few moments. When he recovered, it was to retreat behind an icy facade.

"As a matter of fact, I'm flying to Bolivia next week, then to Brazil, to meet with the private investigators we hired there", he said, his words chosen with even more care than the fabric he picked for his most elaborate creations.

It was not the answer Adrien had wanted: it told him nothing about his father thoughts, nor about his hopes and feelings.

"Do you think there is still a chance to find her?"

Gabriel tried his best to hide his reaction at that. Anger still flickered on his face, his jaw still clenched, he still pulled back. He reined it all in before he could lash out - it took him less than a second - but Adrien had not missed his expression. It was quickly replaced by impassiveness. Gabriel's tone turned reassuring, but he still avoided giving a straight answer.

"We have hired the best investigators money can afford, all over South America and Europe. If there is a chance, they will not miss it."

Maybe Adrien read too much into it, but at no point did those words suggest that Gabriel believed the chance existed. "If".

"Do you think there is one?" he insisted. "Do you?"

There was a short silence as Gabriel frowned and tried to figure out how to react. He joined his son and put a hand on his shoulder. He clearly wondered where to go from that point, squeezed a little, and sighed.

"What brought this on, Adrien?"

The boy stared at him.

Evasive tactics, again. He did not want to reply, most likely because his answer would be to no one's liking.

"You gave up", the young model murmured.

The hand Gabriel had placed on his shoulder twitched.
"Why would you think that?" his father asked, hesitant.

"Because I have been trying to get you to tell me that you still have hope for the last ten minutes, Father, and you can't say it."

The hand fell, hovered next to Adrien's arm for a moment, and returned to his shoulder. Gabriel swallowed hard. He sucked his cheeks in, bit down, breathed out.

"I will not stop looking until we know for sure what happened to her", he promised.

He was still not saying he believed she would be found, let alone found alive.

Adrien had never wanted so hard to be held, but he was not sure his father could stomach it. That hand on his shoulder was a lot, coming from someone like Gabriel. It was a surprise when the man ran his other hand through Adrien's hair. He left it there, after an awkward pat.

"You should…" he started.

He stopped there, sighing one more time.

"I will keep you informed of any development", he said. "I wish I could-"

His phone rang. While he did not pick up, he did not silence it either. He hesitated for a moment, listening to the ringtone until it stopped.

"I…” Gabriel murmured, swallowing his next words, racking his brains for more.

This was a man who managed a worldwide corporation and who was interviewed every other day. But, apparently, talking with his own son was beyond his abilities. He wanted to run. You could see it in his posture, in his eyes, in his everything.

"Wasn't that an important call?" Adrien asked.

"Maybe. It can wait. I will call you next week, after talking with the investigators, if you want me to."

"I'd like that."

Gabriel pulled back, removing his hands, leaving him cold and distraught.

"I will, then", he assured.

There was a lull, then he patted his pocket to check for his phone. He took it out, looked at the screen and frowned.

"This can't wait", he muttered. "I'm sorry, Adrien, there's an emergency at the office. I have to go."

"I understand, Father. Go. Just go."

It was the opportunity to run Gabriel had waited for. He seized it.

###
Nathalie was good at covering her ass. It was both the reason why she had been hired, and the one why she had never been fired. She could lie, trick or bribe her way out of most situations. She had lied, tricked or bribed Gabriel's way out of many situations. She knew what one could get away with, and when you had to man up and face the music.

She knew when retreat was neither possible nor recommended. That was why she had sent Gabriel to Adrien. Something was wrong, and waiting for it to pass was not an option.

Her employer had trusted her judgement, and gone to talk to his son.

Her judgement had not recommended escaping the conversation after less than five minutes, to go handle *paperwork* at the office.

She was routinely baffled by how inapt a parent Gabriel could be. She could not parent, but she was certain she could have done a better job, had she tried. She would have mimicked happy families on television, which would still have been better than Gabriel's handling of the boy. She didn't get it. She felt like a parent should have been better at dealing with their own child, if only for having brought them into the world. Then she remembered that procreating did in no way instill parenting into you.

If it had not threatened her continued employment, and if she had not already known the answer to the question, she would have asked Gabriel why he had chosen to have a child.

"You don't like children. As a matter of fact, you don't like people. What the hell possessed you?"

The answer to the question was "Alice wanted children".

Gabriel would have given Alice the moon and stars if he could have purchased them. As things were, he had given her everything money could buy, and what was free, he had given her too. He had been a young man in love with his polar opposite, conscious their differences would tear them apart. As he had not been able to *become* everything she wanted, he had *given her* everything she wanted, which was not nearly the same.

Alice had been naive enough to fall for the persona he had assumed to seduce her, and to believe in that mask long enough for Adrien to seem like a good idea.

Nathalie had been there to hear her joyous "Gabriel! Look at your son!" turn into "Gabriel. Look at your son", and then "Gabriel. Look. At. Your. Son".

When Alice had vanished, people had assumed she had left Gabriel, not without good reason. Their marriage had been rocky at best. Gabriel had lied, tricked and bribed his way into her heart, and it had all come to light. But she had not left, Nathalie was certain of that. Alice would have tried to fix things to the end, and she could never have abandoned her son.

She had vanished, that was it.

The how and the why mattered little. The result was that Gabriel had found himself holding the hand of a child he had thought would be hers only. He, who had been so good at putting on a facade to seduce his wife, did not manage to lie to the boy.

The result of the result was that Nathalie, who was a qualified executive assistant (no one could prove otherwise) with the matching salary, spent several hours a day being cautiously distant with Adrien, so the boy's father wouldn't have to be present. Better results could have been achieved by hiring a seventeen year old crack-addicted nanny, yet Gabriel had insisted that she was the best choice.
She couldn't fathom why.

Alice having hated her guts from the second she had met her, Nathalie would have expected Gabriel to somewhat trust his wife's opinion.

Instead, the assistant found herself in a strange and unpleasant situation where she took care of a child who wasn't hers, after years spent attempting to convince his father to give the task to someone who actually wanted it, and while trying very hard not to feel sorry for the boy. To be honest, she was trying very hard not to feel anything for the boy.

It mostly worked, except when it didn't.

When, after his talk with his father, Adrien failed to appear for dinner, Nathalie grew concerned.

She went and knocked on his bedroom door, found the room empty, and tracked the teenager down through the security cameras. She found him in the courtyard, dejectedly sitting in the darkest corner available.

She joined him.

Much to her surprise, he was talking to someone when she arrived. As it didn't look like he was holding his phone, and as there was no one in sight, Nathalie was confused. Then, she looked up. Ladybug was perched above Adrien's head, crouching on the mansion's wall, and was leaning in to listen to his words.

"So, yes, I'm okay", Adrien was saying. "I just wish he could... Talk to me, you know? He spends his days talking to other people. I don't know why he avoids me."

Because Gabriel can speak with someone for days without telling them anything, Nathalie thought. Because when he talks to you, his words have to mean something. It's that simple.

Silence took many forms.

Nathalie considered not showing herself, but Ladybug, warrior that she was, spotted her. Adrien saw her turn and followed her eyes. He jumped to his feet, nervous.

"N-Nathalie", he stuttered. "I was just... Am I needed inside?"

She looked up at Ladybug, who was a child - even more than the previous hero who had worn the costume - but who was studying her with the cold, assessing eyes of a soldier.

"I just wanted to check on you", Nathalie replied, her eyes returning to Adrien. "Dinner is served if you want it, but I see you are entertaining a friend."

Ladybug shifted on her perch.

Adrien flushed, looking up, and down, and everywhere but at Nathalie's eyes. The woman, knowing a crush when she saw one, turned back towards the doors, ready to walk away.

"Please don't tell my father about this!" the boy called after her.

She had told his father "about this" every time Adrien had ever uttered those words. Her loyalties were determined by the signature on her paychecks.

"I won't", she promised, this time without lying.
A hero was better equipped than she was to save the day.

###
So here I was trying to write perfectly fine "emotionally crippled terrible people" bad romance, and Adrien decided to snatch two entire pages with his teenage nonsense. Sorry about that.

After his discussion with his father, Adrien's first reaction was to put as much distance as he could between himself and his home. He left his room, he walked out of the mansion, he crossed the courtyard, then he realized that his absence would - for once - be noticed. He could not just request his father and Nathalie's full attention and then vanish. Of course, Gabriel had run off to deal with that problem that "couldn't wait", but his assistant was still home.

Adrien had not asked about Nathalie at all. Ultimately, her relationship with his father was not the issue here, just the proof that Gabriel had laid his feelings for his wife to rest. It meant that Adrien was the last person to think there was hope left, and it felt like believing in fairies: if no one did, they vanished. The thing was... He could clap all he wanted, no one else would anymore. And with every day, with every sparkle of faith extinguished, he felt like Alice faded.

He found himself a corner away from the dimming sunlight, and sat there, leaning against the courtyard's wall.

Plagg, looking every shade of concerned, popped out of under his shirt.

Now, Plagg was not who you thought of when you talked about "compassion" and "comfort", but you could tell he wanted to say something. He did not manage to come up with anything, though he was clearly sad, so he landed on Adrien's shoulder and curled up there.

He made a strange, continuous snorting noise that was probably meant to be purring.

It did cheer Adrien up, if only because the mix of surprise and ridiculousness nearly made him laugh. The boy held the burst of hilarity in. He could see that Plagg was trying his hardest, and was grateful for that. He smiled and scratched the Kwami's head.

"Thank you, Plagg", he murmured.

"I wish there was..." the cat started, pausing to think. "I wish there was something I could say to you."

"It's okay. It's alright. I... I'm glad you're here."

The Kwami nodded, and remained silent. After a few moments, he bumped his head against Adrien's chin. The teenager felt a little warmer at that, a little less distraught. Then, Plagg dove inside his collar, hiding under his shirt.

"Everything alright down here?" a familiar voice asked from above.

Adrien looked up and froze. Ladybug was perched on the wall, and waved hesitantly.
"L-Ladybug", he exclaimed, jumping to his feet and turning to her.

"H-Hey there", she replied. "Are you okay? I was just passing by, and-"

That was when he remembered she was convinced that his father was their archnemesis, and that he was not pleased with that assumption.

"You meant you wanted to make sure my father was not busy releasing Akuma upon innocent Parisians?" he asked in his warmest, most friendly voice.

Ladybug went very still, her face twisting in horror. She was so shocked that she forgot to keep her grasp on the fence that lined the walls. She dropped like a stone and crashed head first.

There was a "AOUCH!".

There was a "OH MY GOD ARE YOU OKAY?".

Adrien helped her up, apologizing profusely. Then, there were explanations - lies - on the Hawk Moth thing.

"Why would think I-" Ladybug began.

"Chat Noir asked me a few questions", he pretended, realizing when she gaped and frowned that he would be murdered as soon as she would get her hands on his other self. "I mean, he didn't say as much, I came to that conclusion myself."

He watched as her expression moved from 'I want to kill my partner' to 'I want to kill myself'. It was a face of her he scarcely knew. Chat Noir was the goofy one and, as a consequence, Ladybug always seemed to be the one with her head firmly on her shoulders. The way she interacted with Adrien Agreste was… surprising.

He idly wondered if she knew of his career as a model, and if there was some celebrity crush at play. He doubted it - she was one herself - but it was not like he was unused to that kind of attention.

Eventually, she regained her composure. She sighed, and sat against the wall, patting the ground next to her. He sat too.

She looked up at the orange skies.

"Truth is, I'm grasping at straws about Hawk Moth's identity, and I investigate the tiniest clues", she said in a soft voice, bringing her index and thumb together to underline how small the clues were. "Someone who works at your father's company posted something on a conspiracy blog, and I looked into it for a day or two. Well, what I discovered is that your dad is a very, very busy man."

Her words sounded perfectly genuine. He knew they were not, since her most recent discussion with Chat Noir had been radically different, but he could appreciate her trying to comfort him.

"I don't think he is", he murmured, turning away from her to look at the sky too. "I'm not saying he is… I mean, he has his faults. He does. But I don't think he is Hawk Moth. There are evil people, and then there are people who are just…"

He couldn't find the words.

"People who just don't seem to know how to… to…" he tried.
He felt like his tongue was getting stuck to the roof of his mouth.
"My father is not good with people", he concluded, sighing.
Ladybug put a hand on his.
"Are you alright?" she asked again, returning to the original reason for her presence.
"I… Yes, thank you."
She squeezed his hand, studying his face.
"Are you sure?"
Adrien took a deep breath and forced himself to smile.
"Yes. I had a chat with Father, and it didn't go so well, but it's nothing to be worried about."
He saw her blink at the formal form, but she was not nearly as stunned as Alya that time he had used "Mom" and "Father" in the same sentence.
"That… doesn't sound so good", she replied. "Do you want to talk about it?"
He shook his head.
"It will blow over", he lied. "Thanks for caring."
He saw her hesitate, clear worry on her face, and he had to admit the feeling of her hand on his was one he cherished. He considered telling her, but discarded the idea. She had enough on her plate. And paint too accurate a portrait of Gabriel was not the best thing to do when she suspected him of being her mortal enemy.
"You should go", he insisted. "I'll be okay, and 'patrol won't patrol itself'."
That was a quote of her own words to him, days earlier, and she flushed when she heard them.
Adrien froze and gaped, turning red as he understood that she had been so embarrassed about that mistake that she had to correct it several days later.
He had not thought he could love her more.
He smiled.
She cleared her throat, mumbled a "you're probably right", and jumped back on the wall. He turned and looked up to watch her go, but she stopped there.
"I'll drop by tomorrow", she promised. She hesitated. "Does it happen often? You arguing with your father?"
The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.
"No. Usually, we don't see each other", he heard himself say.
The look on her face was so concerned and anguished that he felt sorry he had opened his mouth. He took a deep breath and leaned back against the wall, looking at the ground so he wouldn't have
to meet her eyes.

"He's a very, very busy man", he told her. "You saw that yourself. And it's fine, I understand that, it has always been that way. So, yes, I'm okay. I just wish he could... Talk to me, you know?" - He had meant to keep the words in. He couldn't. He tilted his head back to look at her. - "He spends his days talking to other people. I don't know why he avoids me."

His partner turned. So did he.

Nathalie was coming towards them, her ever faithful tablet under the arm. And Gabriel did not approve of Ladybug at all.

Adrien jumped to his feet.

"N-Nathalie. I was just... Am I needed inside?"

His father's assistant - his father's something - took a long look at Ladybug. Her expression didn't change at all. It remained inscrutable, even when her eyes returned to Adrien. His heart was thumping in his chest. He knew she would tell what she had seen to Gabriel - she always did - and he didn't want to have another talk with his father so soon. Not when he knew he would only get disapproval. Then again, Gabriel had fled their earlier discussion. Maybe he would drop the Ladybug issue not to have to reopen the discussion about Adrien's mother.

Nathalie didn't mention Gabriel at all. She just announced dinner was served, made a quick reference to Ladybug's presence, and left.

"Please don't tell my father about this!" he called after her.

She said she wouldn't.

He knew she was lying. He watched her go, taking a long, trembling breath.

Ladybug landed next to him.

"So that was your father's assistant, right?"

He turned the tip of his tongue against his palate so his mouth would not feel like dried clay. He forgot to answer.

"Adrien?"

"Yes", he said, because Nathalie was his father's assistant, even if that wasn't all.

"Adrien?"

He blinked and turned to Ladybug.

"Have you ever seen the sunset from the top of the Eiffel tower?"

"Yes. I mean no."
After his discussion with his son, Gabriel’s first reaction had been to put as much distance as he could between himself and his home. It had also been his second, third, and twentieth. In his position as the owner of a corporation, he was rarely idle to begin with, but he spent the next days making sure to be busy from dawn to dusk. Most people actively attempted to cancel their work meetings. He came up with more (his place in the heart of his employees grew smaller).

Nathalie was left to wonder what the hell she was supposed to assist, seeing how his schedule updated itself. On a particularly frustrating occasion, she had to fight for the control of a square in one of the columns of Gabriel's schedule. Her boss was set on moving it to an earlier time, while she attempted to keep that appointment right where it was, namely "not while the other person involved was on a plane over the Atlantic".

The digital battle went on on for four minutes, then Nathalie collected herself, her thoughts, and the remains of her sanity, to go knock on Gabriel's door.

"Sir", she said when he told her she could come in. "I won't be able to reschedule that meeting. However, I believe there's two appointments I can fit in that time period."

He probably noticed the faint notes of mild annoyance in her voice, because he looked up from his screen halfway through her sentence, and turned to her.

"Very well."

*Also, please do not change your schedule, I change your schedule, I have to actually warn the people whose schedule you are impacting, you capricious jackass.*

Gabriel was turning back to his screen.

Nathalie breathed in and moved back towards the door.

"Also", she added. "I would appreciate if could you let me handle your appointments. If you need to be kept busy, I will keep you busy. You just have to keep me updated."

His eyes snapped to hers.

Judging by how stunned he looked (not at all: his face was blank, but the perpetual air of disdain was gone), his mind was happily swimming in the gutter. She knew the signs.

She couldn't help but purse her lips and frown. That was why you didn't sleep with your boss.

He nodded, biting the inside of his cheeks, then focused on his laptop.

She retreated.

###

The bobby pins thing was about control. The lack, the loss, and slow unraveling of it.

Nathalie figured that out quite late. At midnight or so, more precisely, in Gabriel's arms, over her desk, in her office. Not the mansion's office, of course. They were in no hurry to see their relationship discovered, but the idea of Adrien being made aware of it was… It didn't register, could not happen, and *would not.*
It meant they spent more time at the office, though most of Nathalie's duties could be accomplished from the mansion, thanks to the wonders of cell phones and the internet. A minor part of her time involved carrying a tablet around Paris so her employer could have video conferences with people he couldn't meet in person, but it still didn't require her presence at the main office. Once upon a time, she had followed Gabriel everywhere, but she had since been "promoted" to the rank of babysitter. Not only had her presence in the company's office not been required, she had been expected to stay close to Adrien, always. Now that the boy was older, went to school, and had more full-time jobs than most adults, maybe it would change. She left his side more often.

Her presence in the company building past midnight was rare, however. Or it had been, up to the point she had let Gabriel Agreste kiss her for that first time. Now, it was a near-daily occurrence.

Gabriel displayed some restraint, as far as her hairdo was concerned: her bobby pins had stopped vanishing at work, at least during the day. She felt them go missing after sundown and, when they were still in place at night, they were the first thing to go when Gabriel got his hands on her.

It was a compromise as good as any. She didn't mind being disheveled as long as she did not have to go about her day looking like a ragdoll. Not that she didn't feel like sighing and rolling her eyes a little whenever his game started. Yes. I get it. You like long hair.

At least, that was what she had believed up to that point. Gabriel always went for the hair first. Loved to touch it, loved to bury his face in it, loved to brush it out of the way so he could kiss the nape of her neck. It was simple enough.

Or so she had thought.

Gabriel had this way of being an extremely practical man and still thinking it was a good idea to pin you down on your desk while you were sorting three years worth of contracts copies, and had arranged them in neat piles all over said desk. So you found yourself trying to kiss back while trying not to move, wanting to pull him close and to push him away, and protesting. Definitely protesting.

"Can we just-" she whispered. "Those files are…"

Then you heard the deafening sound of fifty photocopies scattering on the floor as one of your perfect, neat, alphabetically sorted piles of documents fell off the desk.

Nathalie managed not to swear, but she twisted in Gabriel's arms, trying to assess the damage.

... annotated and the post-its please let the post-its still be where they should be...

"I'm sorry, can we-" she exclaimed.

Then she saw the look on Gabriel's face. More precisely, the grin. That was when she realized her mistake about the bobby pins, and the hair, and everything else she had believed about him up to that point.

He sloooooowly reached for a second pile of documents, and sloooooowly pushed it off the desk. I will kill you.

It was not the hair. It was the look on her face. He wanted her aggravated, he wanted her mad, he wanted her out of her mind. He loved to drive her crazy.

She grabbed his wrist before he could destroy another hour of work.
"Don't you dare."

He raised an eyebrow. The grin grew more smug. His hand inexorably moved towards a stack of folders. She was still holding his wrist. However, she had to admit that was about it: she was not exerting any semblance of force to stop his motion.

*I will kill you, Gabriel Agreste.*

The stack went down with a thump.

*I will not even hire someone to do it. I will do it myself.*

"That was terribly immature", she said, keeping her voice neutral.

Gabriel *chuckled.* And then he kissed her, and she let him, because even his *kisses* had been cold up to that point, and she found she liked them more when they weren't.

###
Out of the bag

Watching the sunset from the top of the Eiffel tower with Ladybug as Adrien was a vastly different thing from doing so as Chat Noir.

As Chat Noir, his heart was thumping in exhilaration, even in their quietest moments of companionship. It didn't show, and why would it have? How could she have noticed the difference when his heart had always raced in her presence, so much that he barely thought about it anymore? Skip a beat, and another, and then some, and catch up with all of those beats at once. It was his every night.

As Adrien, he felt like his heart was melting and imploding and exploding all at the same time. He felt like he was melting and imploding all at the same time. He felt so warm and soft and in love he didn't know what to feel.

She had carried him there (the logistics of the trip had been creative and exceedingly dangerous). She had spent an entire hour by his side, watching the sun disappear over the horizon, not only one evening, but for four nights in a rows, all of that just to comfort him.

Every night, Chat Noir had joined her on patrol feeling a little less broken and angry.

It helped.

Marinette also helped. She had brought him pastry. She had made "lunch with Alya and Nino" happen. She tried her best to talk to him every day, even if her words did not always make sense or contain all of the syllables they were meant to contain.

Seeing Nino had cheered him up.

Seeing Alya had cheered him up.

What had not cheered him up where his father's efforts to cheer him up.

Gabriel, who was not able to earn his son's affection through basic human interactions (and God knew Adrien was not setting the bar very high), attempted to buy it instead. He was showering the teenager in gifts and bribes. Adrien had received cinema tickets for a movie premiere, and given them to Nino and Alya while he ran off to patrol as Chat Noir. He had gotten one theme park ticket. He had gotten two free afternoons, one of his photoshoots had been moved to the next week, and he had been given the "very serious and important task" of explaining everything he knew about modeling to Marinette. He figured it was some veiled, disguised way to allow him to interact with a friend. That, or matchmaking. He didn't think it was matchmaking.

While his father's existence made itself clear in monetary form, the physical form had vanished. It took six days, after their discussion about Adrien's mother, for Gabriel to make an appearance. When he finally did, the only thing he noticed was Nathalie.

###

If it wasn't about the hair, Nathalie figured, winning the war was easy enough.
Adrien had been prodding and poking his breakfast for twenty solid minutes, attempting not to eat it just in case Marinette planned to bring pastry again, when Nathalie arrived and gave him a shock. Not the shock of his life, but not a tiny shock either.

He had never seen her with her hair free before. He had seen her hairdo fall to pieces by accident, but it was not nearly the same as her arriving to work with her hair flowing behind her, every strand of it brushed into straight, silky submission.

The teenager stared at her.

She didn't even look at him. It was business as usual, and business as usual meant 'handing him a tablet with his schedule and escaping as fast as humanly possible'.

"I have this afternoon free too?" he asked as soon as he touched the tablet, forcing her to stay long enough to answer him.

Which she did. With cold indifference.

"As long as you are finished with your daily homework before you leave, yes."

She brushed her hair away from her temple, once, twice, and showed more emotion doing that than she usually did talking to Adrien.

"Am I expected back home for supper or can I plan something with friends?" he asked.

"It would be better if you came home before seven", she replied.

Her back was turned to the door, so she didn't see Gabriel enter. She didn't see him pause, his face expressionless but his eyes riveted to her, just her. She didn't see the way he followed the movement of her hand as she pushed her hair over her shoulder for a third time. She didn't see him swallow, clasp his hands behind his back, and straighten up to hide any sign of interest.

Adrien did.

He knew his father. His clasping his hands behind his back was a big tell, if only because his son knew Gabriel did it not to have tells. If you stood behind him, every now and then, you could catch him balling his fists or tapping his fingers, while the rest of him remained perfectly composed.

"Good morning, Father", Adrien said.

"Good morning, Adrien", Gabriel replied with a short nod in his direction.

He unclasped his hands so he could look at his watch instead of at the boy.

"Nathalie. I'm heading to Aria Rossignol's house right now, then I will call you to reorganize the afternoon. She just sent me an email with reference for that gala dress she wants, and it has nothing to do with what she asked for. I forwarded it to you. I'll need a few hours to revise the designs I prepared."

"Very well", Nathalie replied, turning to him without showing any feeling whatsoever. Just
boredom.

Adrien wondered if, instead of being angry about that thing they had, he shouldn't have felt worried. His father was so set upon not feeling anything, and Nathalie would be the last person to encourage him out of that.

He watched his father leave. He watch Nathalie escape.

He sighed.

###

Whatever was going on in Gabriel's head needed to stop, because Nathalie was not sure of how many surprise "R&D" afternoons she could take before snapping and taking her boss' calendar editing permissions away.

He had vanished after his appointment with Aria Rossignol, disappearing for three hours, surfacing for the only actual meeting he had that day, then disappearing into thin air before Nathalie could get her hands on him. He had ignored his emails, he had not answered his phone, and - on top of that - she had not been able to keep calling because a new supervillain had taken control of every cell tower in town for most of the afternoon.

She managed to track him down at six in the evening. He had gone to his fencing club, and was busy training.

Her employer was a firm believer in the 'Mens sana in corpore sano' saying. From her perspective, he was halfway there. He practiced sports several hours a week, on schedule, but tended to limit himself to agility training or running. He loved fencing, but had mostly given up on it.

Nathalie had a limited understanding of the sport, especially since Gabriel scarcely ever practiced anymore. From what she gathered, he was good at it. She was used to seeing his defeated opponents walk away in utter frustration, which was not an uncommon reaction to interacting with Gabriel.

He rarely lost. She had watched him train for years (him, and Adrien), and still couldn't quite follow the rhythm of the fights, the flurry of hits, the footwork. She didn't know what Gabriel's tactics were, of if he had any. He seemed to attack a lot. He parried with ease.

Usually, it seemed to calm him down. Now, however, it looked like he could have used a different outlet, one that involved a lot more punching and kicking.

He won his fight, and - being the disdainful ass that he was - immediately turned away from his opponent, handing his saber to the instructor who took it without even pausing to think. The man's expression quickly changed to "why am I holding this?", but it was too late.

Gabriel removed his mask, straightened up, and looked at her.

She was too far to talk, so she tapped the tablet she was holding under her arm. She had important news.
Attraction was a strange thing, she thought as he vanished into the locker room to shower and change. You spent years not paying the slightest attention to someone, and then… Then you had to remind yourself that you had better things to do than to blush like a schoolgirl at the idea of your… partner changing clothes.

You had to figure out how to convince important customers that the Gabriel brand's creations were just as valuable as Gabriel's personal designs, because Gabriel was not going to be available for two weeks, and Jagged Stone needed his new outfits in four.

Instead of trying to figure out who she could drop that problem on, Nathalie was endlessly distracted by fantasies.

Gabriel spent the drive back to the office on the phone, with the back of his free hand ever so slightly pressed against Nathalie's thigh. Every time Nathalie tried to get her stupid, unruly hair away from her face, he gave her a thoughtful look, and did not quite manage to turn away.

She should have kept the bun. Clearly, he liked her hair too.

His telephonic conversation had started in the locker room. It ended in his office. Nathalie had been waiting for a chance to inform him of the 'Jagged Stone is a spoiled brat' problem.

He hung up and locked the door.

Nathalie raised both hands.

"Not now. I've been trying to find you all day", she announced. "There's an emergency to handle."

He rolled his eyes, looking at the ceiling with a long sigh, then shook his head and walked to his desk to sink into his chair.

"Not now."

When?

He allowed himself ten seconds of closed eyes, then poured himself a glass of water, drank it, and tried to delay their talk some more by checking his emails. He didn't read them. He just opened his mailbox and stared.

Then, he turned back to Nathalie.

"An emergency, you were saying?"

"Jagged Stone wants a set of outfits for his tour. For him, for his dancers, and - of course - he asked specifically for the designs to be yours."

Gabriel perked up. World-renowned designers tended to like creating clothes, and she knew his
favorite moments were those where he managed to get his hand on some fabric, or a sketchbook. Now that he was at the head of such a large company, he no longer had the luxury to follow his fancy, and he missed it.

"When does he need them?"

"For the tenth of September. And it's too short a delay, since you're to leave for two weeks for your trip to South America. Which means you will have to meet with Jagged Stone to discuss alternatives."

"Push the trip to mid-September", Gabriel replied without hesitation.

His words stunned her into silence.

He had been meant to travel to Bolivia and Brazil for the sole purpose of meeting with the investigators who were looking for his wife. He had never, ever delayed appointments with the detectives before, and the idea had been inconceivable.

She stared at him, filled with cold dread she had no reason to feel. This didn't concern her.

Still.

She had never questioned why he had started sleeping with her, and she should have. The answer was blatant.

You couldn't compete with Alice. From the day Gabriel had noticed her, from that exact second, he had been hers and hers only. He would never have looked at someone else, never have thought of it, never. He would never have put his hands on another woman.

What do you know that I don't?

"You've never moved one of those meetings before", she said, voice as careful and quiet and neutral as she could make it.

He looked at his empty glass.

"It's pointless", he replied. "She is dead."

His eyes were lost in the distance.

Nathalie had no idea what to answer to that. She racked her brains. Silence filled the room. Gabriel looked like he didn't care. There had been nothing in his voice but cold certainty.

"How long have you known?" his assistant asked, when the silence started feeling worse than the twist in her stomach.

"The third of October last year."

It had been ten months.

"How…” Nathalie tried to ask. "I mean, why…”

"She called me three years ago. To tell me she would be gone for a few more months. She was with a friend. The friend came back. Alice didn't."

'Three years ago' meant Alice had spent nearly two years alive and hidden. It meant that she had
walked out on her son and husband.

"Did you talk to that friend?" Nathalie asked. "What did they say?"

Gabriel breathed in, then looked up and met her eyes, face just as unconcerned as if he had been discussing the weather.

"I haven't called them. But I can say with ninety-nine percent certainty that my wife is gone."

Ten months was a long time. One grieved, one tried to move on. It was enough time to start thinking that, maybe, flirting with someone else was acceptable. It was even enough time to actually do it.

"Adrien doesn't know", she whispered.

"I will tell him when I have irrefutable proof", Gabriel replied.

*Proof that could be obtained by calling that mysterious friend.*

"Are you telling me you have been lying to your son's face for the best part of a year? Your funeral."

The moment that last word was out of her mouth, Nathalie wished she could swallow it back. His eyes widened. She pursed her lips and pretended he could not be hurt by a slip of the tongue. In all likelihood, he couldn't.

"I'm sorry", she said, keeping her composure. "Are we having this discussion as colleagues, or as…" - She fumbled for words, as 'lovers' did not nearly fit. - "Friends?"

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. It was a cold smile, close to a smirk, without the malice.

"Do you have friends, Nathalie?" he asked.

She thought back of college, of roommates, of classmates, of remarks such as 'You are petty and ruthless and pretty heartless', and of the 'Seriously? How long have you been been practicing *that* one in front of your mirror, Sarah?' she had retorted.

"Not really."

"That makes two of us."

*What does that make us, then?*

"As I was saying, I will tell Adrien when I have tangible proof", he repeated. "I don't want to shatter his hopes without absolute certainty."

"Then call Alice's friend", she advised.

She knew he knew it was the thing to do. She also knew he would not. His having ninety-nine percent certainty of his wife's death left him one percent of hope. He would never be able to let go.

He shook his head.

"Give me Jagged Stone's number. I need to get in touch."
You couldn't compete with Alice. Anyone who had ever seen Gabriel interact with her knew that. She had been his everything. Even at sixteen, he had been consumed, absolutely **besotted**, not in that cute and awkward way teenagers fancied each other, but with the breathless, quiet longing of one who felt actual elation when their partner entered the room. It had been surprising enough from a boy that cold, and even more so because it had happened overnight. It had been like if someone had flipped a switch. One day, Gabriel couldn't **stand** Alice - couldn't tolerate being in the same room, couldn't be escape her advances fast enough - and the next, he had been smitten.

Nathalie, who had been twelve at that time, and a student of the same school, had seen it all unfold. She had wondered who had died and left Alice piles of money. There was no other sensible explanation.

They had been sickening. **Sickening.**

Before seeing Gabriel suddenly and inexplicably start to fancy her, Alice had chased after him for years. There was a rumor she had confessed to him seventeen times. Her refusal to give up had turned into a joke around school. She had been so bubbly and naive and optimistic that people felt a bit sorry for her.

Her reaction to the boy's sudden professions of love had been beaming, ecstatic joy.

Gabriel had been heavy-handed on the romance: the dates, the gifts, the flowers, the gifts, the gifts, the gifts, oh, and of course the gifts. He had smiled to her grins, had walked hand in hand with her, had listened to her silly nonsense with vivid interest. He had been dashing, warm, and loving, playing the part of the generic romcom hero. Lie upon lie upon lie. The facade faded as soon as Alice looked the other way.

To everyone else, Gabriel was still cold and sarcastic and - quite frankly - mean. Unpleasantness was in his nature. He was haughty and impatient. He hated people.

There had been rumors about the reasons for his exaggerated, sudden sweetness, but Nathalie had been a bit too young to understand the lingo. She had heard one of Alice's friend tell her that she would "get dumped like a hot potato as soon as she and Richie Rich would do 'it'". Alice's reaction had been to giggle like the dimwit she was.

In retrospect, Nathalie suspected Alice had been slyer than she had given her credit for.

The romance had survived the honeymoon. As the months went by, the rumors had died down. Gabriel was showing no signs of wanting to "dump her like a hot potato". Sure, his Prince Charming facade fell apart at times but, even when he wasn't lying his way into her arms, you could tell he loved her. He had been good at concealing his feelings, but not to the point that you couldn't notice she was the only person whose touch he didn't cringe away from, whose presence ever so slightly made him relax. He would hang around his classmates so he could be around her, when all he had ever tried to do was get away from other people. He was crazy about her.

That had been as a teenager.

Nathalie had lost track of them while busy getting herself an education, and many years had passed.
before she had joined Gabriel's company as a young and promising intern. She had been the most promising intern of the year, actually, having bribed, threatened or tricked the better applicants away.

By that point, Gabriel and Alice had been married, with a child on the way. He had not shed the facade. It cracked and crumbled at the edges. It entirely vanished at times. It wasn't as exaggerated and theatrical as it had been in his teenage years. However… Four years of marriage, and Gabriel still played the part of another person.

Said marriage was shaking on its foundations. Alice was naive but not entirely blind, and Gabriel had slipped more and more as the years had passed. His inability to bond with his son had been an issue even then, and the biggest of all. The boy had been kept away from his parents' screaming matches, but his name had been at the forefront of a great many arguments. Alice didn't mind when Gabriel withdrew into himself and neglected her: she didn't break, she poked him and nudged him until he melted. She found it more difficult to teach him, over and over again, how to interact with his own child. The lessons didn't take.

They had been breaking up, shattering, falling to pieces, and mending the pieces on a daily basis when Alice had gone missing.

Gabriel had dropped the facade. He had dropped emotions altogether, after weeks spent hands clasped behind his back to hide his constant shaking, after being questioned, and suspected of murder, and dragged in the dirt by every tabloid.

He had felt too much at once, shown nothing of it, and kept those new walls up.

He had let no one in.

Nathalie had not thought he'd ever try to recover.

###

Marinette still brought croissants, and macarons, and éclairs, and every delicious kind of pastry she could pilfer from her parents' bakery in the morning.

Adrien still joined her for breakfast, even when he had already eaten and was not hungry at all. He didn't mind. She was always so happy when he liked what she brought. Which was all the time, because not only did Adrien think the pastries were delicious, he really loved to make her that happy.

They had not perfected communication yet, but there was distinct progress. He had figured out that the topic of fashion made her comfortable, so he had stuck to that, until they had realized they both liked Jagged Stone (which they had discovered because Marinette was so, so, so excited about Adrien's father designing a whole set of outfits that would be crafted during her internship, meaning she could maybe, if that wasn't too much too ask, and if she was very lucky, get to watch the process). They had discussed the singer, and his songs, and his tour, and Adrien had wondered how to get his hands on tickets for his next show. He had no doubt his father would get him one, whether he asked for it or not. The question was: "how could he get enough to take at least Marinette with him?". He knew she wouldn't be able to get her own. Every single of Jagged Stone's shows to come was sold out.
In the end, he had asked Jagged Stone for tickets, and received four. It had been simpler than
asking Gabriel. The singer had been more than happy to help, especially since he had been
convinced he was helping Adrien "get the girl". Adrien had no idea why the man believed that was
his plan - he sure had never said that - but... "Tickets".

He handed hers to Marinette over a box of croissants.

She lost the ability to talk.

After a few seconds, he noticed she had actually lost the ability to breathe and needed an
intervention.

"Marinette?"

"GOOD BYE. I MEAN THANK YOU. Adrien that's so nice of you you didn't have to do that I'll
pay you back thank you so much you have no idea how happy that makes me thank you!"

He smiled, a bit overwhelmed by all of the syllables, but glad that she was so pleased.

"It was nothing. I got some for Alya and Nino too, so we can all go together."

Marinette answered that with frantic head nods, until someone called her name from the entrance of
the room.

"Marinette!" the designer was saying. "We're waiting for you upstairs!"

Adrien's friend gaped in horror, with the face of the chronically late who realized they had
managed to miss the beginning of their day when they had arrived thirty minutes early for it.

"I need to go", she squeaked, running off. "Thank you thank you see you later."

The boy blinked as the door closed behind her, then picked up the show ticket she had forgotten.
He smiled. He pictured her blushing and flustered.

A long overdue penny dropped.

He looked at the box of croissants she had left on the table, the last in a long series of boxes of
pastries brought to the office just to be shared with him.

"Wait a second", he murmured to Plagg, his voice strangled by shock. "W-was that flirting? WAS
SHE FLIRTING? OH GOD, WAS SHE?"

His Kwami snorted.

"How would I know? Does she look like cheese?"

"Of course n... Plagg!"

"I don't know."

"She can't have been flirting. I mean we're just friends. And she's shy with everyoooh. No she
isn't. But that's just impossible. I mean if she was interested, someone would have told me. That
was just her being nice. She can't possibly like me, 'like me', could she?"

He heard a faint noise at the door, and turned to find himself face to face with his father, who was
gaping at his meltdown.
Adrien felt himself blush and pale at the same time.

"F-father."

Gabriel looked at him, then at the abandoned box of pastries. His eyes returned to his son. His consternation was clear on his face. He pursed his lips, clicked his tongue, and pretended nothing unusual had happened.

"I was on my way, I just wanted to say hello, since you were here", he said. "Don't forget about that photoshoot with Aria Rossignol at ten."

Adrien nodded.

"I-I won't. Of course not. Have a nice day, Father."

"Have a nice day", Gabriel replied, as he left the room.

The teenager sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands until the burning receded.

###

"My son is an idiot", Gabriel said when he entered Nathalie's office.

"Yes, sir", she replied.

Then her eyes went wide and she took that back. She had been expecting 'bring me some coffee'.

"I mean no. I mean, what do you mean?"

"I mean", her employer said, joining her at her desk and snatching two bobby pins off her hair without bothering to hide, "that he is having a great internal debate on whether Marinette Dupain-Cheng fancies him or not."

Nathalie clasped both hands on her head to try to keep her hair in place.

She had not been expecting this.

After his confession about his wife, Gabriel had kept away. He had worked, and worked, and worked some more, confining himself to his office to draw until he was happy with his sketches, then traveling back and forth between the workshops and said office. He had stayed at work late and sent her home early. He had not talked to her, let alone discussed his revelations. He most certainly had not touched her.

She spun on her chair and held a hand up so he would give the hairpins back. He frowned.

"I prefer my hair up", she said.

Gabriel breathed in, nodded, and dropped both bobby pins onto her palm. She closed her hand.

"Thank you, sir."

The term earned her another frown, a tilt of the eyebrows, but he didn't comment.
They would have to discuss this, Nathalie thought. The hair thing, the name thing, the degree of familiarity she was expected to use, the degree of familiarity she wanted to use.

She fixed her bun.

"How does that make your son an 'idiot'?"

"Have you watched miss Dupain-Cheng interact with him? Adrien is so oblivious I'm embarrassed for him."

"Teenagers are by definition new at this, sir."

*Ridiculously so.*

"Trust me", Gabriel replied, "at his age, not only would I have noticed, I would have made good use of the opportunity. The girl is perfect for him."

Nathalie tried hard not to blanch, her thoughts cycling between "no no no" and "damn damn damn". It was bad enough that the girl had won an internship, and that she was now talking to Adrien on a daily basis. Gabriel actually encouraging those interactions meant that the "birthday gift issue" was more and more likely to be discovered. At some point, the girl was going to ask about that scarf. There would be questions. Nathalie would be out of a job.

She had prepared an alibi in the form of "oh my, the actual gift must have been stolen by some unruly kid while I was stuck in that flying soap bubble and the one that was left was just so similar to Mister Agreste's gift, I'm afraid I got mixed up", but she guessed she could go for blackmail, now that she had some material for a sexual harassment suit.

"Perfect for him?" she repeated. "I'm surprised to hear that. You don't usually approve of your son's friends."

"Which ones? The rapper who refers to me as 'dude', or the diva plagiarist? Miss Dupain-Cheng is talented and hard-working, not to mention she seems to deeply care for my son. The worst I can say about her is that she needs to acquire a watch. I think she would manage to be late for her own funeral."

"If one isn't 'late' for their own funeral, they are in for a bad day", Nathalie commented without thinking.

Gabriel stared at her, the corner of his mouth twitching. He was unaware she could joke (to be honest, so was she), and it looked like he was not sure her remark had been humorous.

"And, about the girl… You have a point", Nathalie conceded.

"I do. She seem to be like a really promising young talent."

*Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, the girl isn't going anywhere.*

The assistant was trying to find an answer when her boss changed topic.

"Have the materials we ordered arrived?" he asked. "I'd like to start on the dancers' suits for the finale. I'll need cloth samples."

"They were delivered an hour ago. I'll have everything brought to your office. Anything else?"

Gabriel clasped his hands behind his back. He thought about his answer, but didn't utter a syllable.
Nathalie knew the look on his face, however.

"Not now", she exclaimed. "Anyone could come in, and if I lock the door, the rumors will run wild. You have no idea how many people I have to deal with in a-

"Indulge me", he said, his voice quiet and wishful, as he sank to his knees at her feet.

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew it was acting, all of it. It was very convincing.

"Didn't you just say you had work to do?"

"I just spent several days staying up until four in the morning to come up for designs for twenty dancers for fifteen different songs, all of that to hear Jagged Stone ask me if I could make them 'cooler'", he pointed out.

"I have no doubt it was very trying for your sanity, but-

"Actually, I enjoyed it. It is my calling, after all. I haven't been this relaxed in months", Gabriel replied, his hand brushing her knee and sliding up her thigh.

She grabbed her chair's armrests so her own hands would not find their way to his hair.

"Then you should not need further distraction", she declared.

He smirked and leaned down to kiss her thigh.

###

Chapter End Notes

PEOPLE. THE SITUATION IS DIRE.

I'm running out of cat idioms.
Like cats and dogs

Gabriel had spent the night drawing, as far as Nathalie knew. He had not left the company's building, anyway: he would have needed to use his keycard, and she would have seen his comings and goings in the security log.

The dozens of new sketches she found when she walked into his office in the morning seemed to confirm that. He had spread pages of detailed, annotated drawings over his desk, pinned them to his whiteboard, prepared everything for Jagged Stone's visit, and all of that had been done by nine AM, if not earlier.

She had escorted Adrien to his photoshoot of the day before arriving, and had found her employer... dangerously bored. He had nothing to keep himself busy with. The designs he had been meant to finish in the afternoon were done, and his entire schedule was planned around the Jagged Stone contract. Now, it was not the best of days for him to be left without distractions. He had been meant to leave for South America at ten, for that trip he had pushed back to late September.

He had not been fidgeting, not exactly, but he had been pacing.

Nathalie, who was not one to waste a good opportunity, had buried him in documents to review and sign. There was never a shortage of those. As a matter of fact, Gabriel had been surprised by the amount of documents she had brought him.

"I don't recall ever getting so many in a day", he had told her. "Have you been forging my signature, up to this point?"

"No, sir."

He had given her a slightly suspicious, slightly quizzical look. She had not even blinked. Sometimes, she felt crippling anxiety at the idea of her misdeeds being discovered. She didn't count "getting things done" as a misdeed, however, no matter how illegal her methods.

She had left him to his paperwork and spent the rest of the morning playing minesweeper.

She returned to his office during lunch, with the sandwich and espresso he had asked for. He was standing at the window, looking down into the street, and did not look pleased.

"Nathalie. My son seems to be sharing his lunch with that deadbeat rapper boy. Could you please join them and get that young man to leave?"

She joined him at the window. Just as he had said, Adrien was having lunch, not just with that 'Nino' classmate, but with Marinette Dupain-Cheng and that teenage girl who seemed grafted to her hip.

"Adrien is too kind for his own good", Gabriel commented. "He tries to see the good in everyone, but he's unable to draw the line. I wish he could realize there are people out there who can only get him in trouble, before he has to learn that lesson the hard way."

"Is that a lesson you had to learn yourself?"

"By proxy. I hardly surrounded myself with disreputable people, but Alice was… Let's just say that I had to dispatch a lawyer on several occasions."
Nathalie nodded.

Alice had been known to ‘like everyone’. Her best friend had been Anne-Laure Lenoir, a spoiled rich girl slash juvenile delinquent who had managed to seduce André Bourgeois, then divorced him and vanished to the Caribbean, abandoning her entire life and her young daughter. Nathalie could imagine the brand of trouble attached to a friendship with that kind of person.

"I'll go right now", she said, walking out of the office.

When she joined the children on the street, she found them spread on public benches with sandwiches, bottles of soda and three bags of candy. Adrien was laughing. It was not a noise Nathalie heard often, let alone those last few weeks, and she felt a pang of something. She ignored it.

The teenagers spotted her and turned to her. 'Nino', who immediately crossed his arms and leaned back on the bench, was glowering. Miss Dupain-Cheng was tense, but hid her disapproval better, though she was still pursing her lips. The second girl just looked concerned. Adrien blanched and lowered his eyes.

"Adrien. A word, if you please", Nathalie said.

The boy did not protest. He handed his bag of candy to his best friend, who briefly squeezed his wrist. Adrien acknowledged the effort with the slightest nod, then followed Nathalie into the building without as much as a sigh.

"You know your father does not approve of that boy", she told him once away from prying ears.

Adrien agreed, resigned. He was biting the inside of his cheeks.

"You are going to tell my father, aren't you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it's a bit late for that. He spotted you with your friends."

The boy looked up, startled.

"What do you mean, spotted me? I thought his flight was this morning."

Nathalie had to try hard not to gape. Gabriel had not told Adrien his flight had been postponed. Neither had he told her to warn his son. Maybe he had expected her to do it. Had she been supposed to guess? It was like the birthday thing. It looked like she was expected to assume Gabriel's parenting duties without ever being given clear instructions.

It inevitably led to situations where the boy was hurt, and where one couldn't be sure where to lay the blame. Nathalie, who disliked feeling guilty, especially when a problem was not her fault, didn't take kindly to those situations.

Being a terrible person born literally heartless, she had little compassion to spare. In cases like those, she felt sorry for herself. All concern for Adrien came as an afterthought. She was surprised to even feel some, having spent her life caring about no one at all. But the child had his ways.

"His trip was pushed back to the end of September", she informed him, knowing how important the investigation about Alice's disappearance was to him, even when it was clear everyone was just playing pretend. "Due to the Jagged Stone contract."

"I… I see", Adrien replied, eyes wet and unblinking. "That… That makes sense."
There was a lull in the conversation.

"They came to visit miss Dupain-Cheng, didn't they?" Nathalie asked. "Your two friends?"

The boy hesitated. He wouldn't have lied, not to her face, not about disobeying his father.

"Yes. She has lunch with them every other day. Alya is her best friend, and Nino is… I mean, she asked me if I wanted to join in. I should have said no, I'm sorry."

"I'll tell your father it was not your idea", she announced. "You're free to go."

He didn't thank her, didn't comment, didn't even nod. He just left, clearly wanting to put as much distance between them as possible.

She went back to Gabriel's office. He was correcting his sketches, standing in front of the whiteboard with a pencil in his hand, and leaning closer to each pinned drawing to add details and annotations where needed.

"How did it go?" he asked, his eyes not leaving the whiteboard. "Was Adrien angry?"

"He had merely joined miss Dupain-Cheng on her lunch with her friends, sir. He apologized for doing so."

Gabriel paused and frowned, but still didn't look at Nathalie. She waited a few seconds, waiting to see if he would engage in conversation of his own free will. When he failed to do so, she braced herself.

"He was not aware your trip had been postponed, sir."

"What? Didn't you tell him?"

"You didn't ask me to. I assumed you had, sir. I'm very sorry."

_Not._

Gabriel breathed in, containing himself, but all but slamming his pencil down on the closest table.

"I'll talk to him."

Nathalie hesitated. She had no idea what their dynamics were supposed to be, and had no doubt he would retreat behind his employer persona if she dared to question his personal choices. The moments where he opened up were few and far between, and he picked when and how they happened.

"Have you called your wife's friend, sir?" she asked him.

Gabriel's spine straightened.

"I don't see how that's your concern", he replied, voice clipped.

She looked away, mouth dry, heart racing. She said her goodbyes to her career (and how unfair was that, to have been allowed to ask that same question without risking backlash just a few days before, only to see him reestablish their boundaries at his convenience?).

Then again, did she even like her job?
She had stopped at nothing, short of murder, to get to where she was. "Where she was", however, had nothing to do with what she had been aiming for. Once upon a time, she had been ambitious. She had chosen a field that made excellent use of her abilities (a knack for accounting, an excellent spelling, a good phone voice and a passion for minesweeper). She had selected a young company where her lack of experience would not be a problem, cheated her way into a job, and clung to it as Gabriel raised to fame and brought in millions. The ride had been relatively smooth, with a great paycheck and yearly raises. As much as she had complained about it, she had loved her job. She liked things orderly and, for years, she had gone home with the satisfaction of having tamed chaos and cut it into tiny pieces that fit into a spreadsheet or a calendar. Mister Agreste had been the perfect boss. You could never have guessed he was an artist. He was more rigid than she was, he loved order just as much as she did, and he was always content to let her do her job as long as the results were to his liking. He didn't question her methods. It had all changed after his wife's death.

Her duties had become… frustrating.

There was a lot more 'Adrien' in the equation.

Now, there was a lot more 'Gabriel', and a lot more uncertainty.

And she had gotten 'involved' so she had to get involved. No one else would talk to the man.

"Call", she insisted. "Call before you talk to Adrien, and call now. You are denying your son closure."

Because you are afraid to get it, she didn't add.

Gabriel didn't answer. He didn't fire her outright, but it looked like he was considering it. He didn't get to think about it for long, however. His pocket watch's alarm started ringing. They both jumped in surprise. The sound - the horrible metallic rattling of an antique - was startling enough in normal circumstances, and they were both taunt as bowstrings.

He got the pocket watch out of his jacket and pressed the latch, stopping the alarm. There was a pink glow when the cover opened, and Gabriel snapped it shut after checking the time.

"I need a few hours", he announced. "If I'm not back in three, have Stéphanie show the sketches to Jagged Stone, and make sure he leaves with copies."

"I will, sir", Nathalie replied as he left the room.

###

Adrien had given himself thirty minutes alone to recover from the news delivered by Nathalie. Well, 'alone'. Plagg had been there, and had made that fake purring sound.

The teenager had tried to ask the Kwami what he thought his father thought, but the answers he had gotten were "I don't know", "I couldn't tell" and "I can't say". Plagg had looked a little subdued. He was concerned. His ears were drooping.

That was comforting.

Adrien had employed his time avoiding to think about his mother, and of how he had yet another
After that hour, he made his way to the workshop to talk to Marinette, knowing she was most likely worried about him, seeing how Nathalie had dragged him away from his friends earlier. He found his classmate talking to one of the design assistants, next to a board covered in his father's latest batch of sketches. They were discussing how Marinette would get to help with the confection of the test garments (especially the hats, since she had experience with that). The hat she had created for his photoshoot was mentioned, and he felt a sneeze coming on just at the memory. The design assistant believed Marinette would get to embroider one of the final pieces - the least important hat of the less noticeable dancer, but still - if her work on the test headgear was satisfactory.

Marinette, overjoyed by the news, was… wiggling… her backside. It was very distracting when you happened to be behind her. Cute. But distracting. Adrien had given entirely too much thought to the possibility that Marinette might have 'liked', 'liked' him. It meant he had given entirely too much thought to his every interaction with Marinette, as well as to her interactions with everyone else (as they were more informative about her personality).

It had not revealed to him whether she liked him or not (he had planned to ask Nino), but he had come to the conclusion that she was cute. Smart, astute, confident (when talking to anyone but him, and twice as confident when facing Chloé), and cute.

Adrien had never in his life seen her do that wiggling thing, but it was definitely adorable.

He caught himself smiling.

He waited for the design assistant to leave, let his friend enjoy her joy for a moment more, then joined her and braced for the impeding squeak.

"Hey, Marinette", he said.

She squeaked.

Well. His time spent studying his every memory of her had given him impeccable insight into her reactions. That was something.

"A-Adrien", she replied, her expression changing from panic to concern. "Did you get in trouble? We were so worried."

He smiled, shaking his head.

"No, I didn't. Don't worry. Nathalie just wanted to talk about my schedule."

Marinette studied his face, frowning.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her tone making it clear that she knew he was not.

He knew she was sharp. He did. He had seen her outsmart Chloé at every turn, solve everyone's problem as a class president, face the Evillustrator without giving Chat Noir's strategy away. He had not expect her to turn her full focus to him, however.

"I… Yes", he lied.

She looked even more concerned at that.

"Are you sure?" she insisted.
He grinned.  
"Yes, yes, I'm fine", he replied, sounding as genuine as he could. He turned to the pinboard. "So, you really are a fan of my father."

Marinette turned to it too, but she was still assessing him out of the corner of her eye. She considered her answer.

"I really love his work", she enthusiastically replied, with a smile in her voice.  

It sounded fake, and Adrien took a look at her face. The smile did not reach her eyes, though it was plastered on her lips. She caught him staring.

"You know", she told him, turning to him. "If you ever need to talk, I'm here. I'm here, and I'll listen, and I will smuggle you to Nino if you'd prefer to talk to him. But... If you have something on your mind, we're here. You have us. We'll help."

He swallowed.

"Thank you", he said, trying to smile but feeling his eyes water.

He looked away so she wouldn't see that. His eyes focused on a computer screen at the other end of the workshop. Much to his surprise, it was not displaying patterns and reference, but a live feed of the news. A journalist was standing on the Pont des Arts, looking worried. Adrien could not hear him, but he could see his lips were blue. The camera turned to reveal what was going on.

A flying yeti was attacking the boats on a frozen Seine.

Marinette started fidgeting.

Adrien frowned, wondering how to run off without being too blatant. Chat Noir would be needed, but he couldn't just drop Marinette mid-conversation. The television had her full attention, however.

There was something else he had to do before leaving. Just in case. Just to check.

With a few words of apology, he took his phone out of his pocket and called his father, just to make sure he was available and not busy attacking Paris. He waited for Gabriel to pick up. And waited. And waited.

The call went to voicemail.

"I have to go", Adrien murmured. "I need to talk to my father."

###

Ladybug and Chat Noir saved the day.

Adrien went home.

He had called his father four times: twice before the attack, once during it (after a stealthy detransformation), and once right after. He had also called Nathalie, who was wondering where he
had vanished to ("Home. I wasn't feeling well."). and she had told him that Gabriel was not at the office.

He stayed in his room all afternoon, staring at the ceiling, and contemplating the idea that the Hawk Moth theory was maybe not as far-fetched as he had initially thought.

At six, there was a knock on his window. He jumped out of bed, more than a little confused (as his room was not on the ground floor, which made 'knocking on his window' a complex endeavour, and because he did not get visitors to begin with). Ladybug was hanging upside down from the roof. She waved.

He ran to the window and opened it.

"Hi there", she said. "I was on my way home, I figured I'd drop by to say hello."

"Hi", he replied, flushing. "H-hello."

"How are you today?" she asked, trying to move up so he wouldn't get a plunging view of the contents of her nostrils.

"Do you want to come in?" Adrien suggested, moving out of the way and gesturing for her to enter his room.

She grabbed the edge of the window and rolled inside. He had seen her not two hours before, but his heart still danced in joy. It quieted quickly enough.

She's not coming to say hi, he told himself. She's still spying on your father.

Maybe it was time to help her with that.

"He's not here", Adrien announced, looking at her feet.

"I'm sorry?"

"My father. He's not here. He left the office a little before that Akuma attack. He's 'busy'. Not that Nathalie would tell me where he is or what he is doing."

"I'm sorry?" she repeated.

Adrien stared at his hands, playing with his fingers. He tried not to feel like a traitor. His father absences were getting very suspicious, however. The impromptu R&D time that always lined up with Akuma attacks. His not having been in the Bubbler's bubbles, when Chat Noir had spotted Nathalie and their driver in them.

"I mean maybe you weren't wrong to think he's... I... I... I tried to call him. While that yeti monster was out there. I called him four times and he did not pick up, he did not try to call me back, and I'm not sure Nathalie knows where he is."

He did not look up.

She didn't answer. Not for a long time, anyway, enough for Adrien to swallow twice - painfully - and to consider calling his father one last time.

Then, she hugged him. It was a crushing hug, with most of her strength behind it, and it hurt a little more that he would have admitted. The was going to lose a few ribs. But it felt absurdly good.
"Okay", she whispered. Her voice grew stronger. "Okay. I'm going to look into it, and I'm going to find out, and I'm going to bring you proof he is not."

And if he is?

She squeezed some more, then moved away, her hands still on his back.

"But you need to talk to me, Adrien. You've been telling me that everything was fine for days, and… This is not being fine. This is not fine. You can talk to me", she assured him. "I'm here to listen. You don't have to keep it all in."

Adrien pursed his lips.

"It's… It's about my mother", he explained. "My father, he… He thinks she's dead, and… I think she's not, and... "

The words poured out.

He kept talking until his father barged into the room.

###

It took five seconds at most, from the instant the door started opening, for Ladybug to jump out of the window and out of sight. But Adrien's father had spotted her, and he did not look pleased. Actually, he was furious.

Adrien, who was not used to seeing Gabriel lose his cool, let alone fly into a rage, stared in horror as he raced across the room to look outside, swore, and slammed the window shut.

"WHAT WAS SHE DOING HERE?"

"Father", the teenager said, fumbling for words. "She was just…"

He had no idea what to say. Gabriel was livid, and there was no way to mistake the look on his face for anything else than absolute loathing. It was so out of character that his son was stunned into silence. It had been years since he had last heard his father raise his voice. Gabriel did not believe in 'unnecessary displays of emotion'. 'Tantrums in public' served no other purpose than to convince people that you had been raised by wolves. It was not acceptable behavior. "Forget it reflecting poorly on the family name", he had once told Adrien. "It reflects poorly on you, both who you are and who you will become."

Now that he thought about it, when was the last time he had seen his father that furious? He remembered him screaming himself hoarse at a cop, but that had been right after his mother's disappearance. Adrien had only managed to catch glimpses of Gabriel, back then. Nathalie had kept them as far away as possible within the confines of the house. It had been a harsh time for everyone involved.

Before that, his parents argued a lot. Not that he was supposed to know about it: they had tried very hard to keep it from him, only ever fighting late at night and behind closed doors, when they thought he couldn't hear.
For the last four years, however, Gabriel had kept his feelings bottled in. Oh, he could get angry, but what he showed the world was mild irritation.

"WHAT DID SHE WANT?" he yelled.

He finally noticed the shock on his son's face and forced himself to calm down. He straightened up, and hid his balled fists behind his back.

"What did she want?" he asked again in a sharp, but lower voice.

"Someone reported a monster flying around", Adrien lied, just as Ladybug had the first time he had caught her spying on his home. "She wanted to know if I had seen it."

Gabriel's eyes traveled back and forth between the sofa and the window. He clearly didn't believe a single word Adrien had said.

"What were you talking about?" he asked. "I don't see how a possible monster attack warrants her staying for an extended chat. On the contrary."

"I... I wanted to thank her for saving my friends when they were attacked, Father. That's all."

That didn't seem to calm Gabriel down. His frown deepened. He clenched his jaw.

"Father, it's just Ladybug", Adrien insisted.

He did not understand why her presence infuriated his father so. She was Ladybug. She saved people, she saved Paris, she fought evil. There was nothing wrong with that. Nothing to disapprove of. Unless a certain theory was true.

"I don't want you talking to her", Gabriel snapped. "I do not want you involved in her antics, do you hear me?"

"Antics? She's saving Paris. She's protecting people, every day!"

"And I'm sure it's all very romantic to a boy your age, but it doesn't make her life any less insane and dangerous!"

Silence fell.

Adrien - Chat Noir - with his insane and dangerous life, had to refrain from yelling every single protest that came to his mind. Ladybug and Chat Noir were needed. Without their 'antics', the country would have remained frozen over after Stormy Weather's appearance. Every citizen of Paris would be trapped in a suit of armor, and serving Dark Blade. There would be no adults, there would be no friendships, birds would... Birds would be at war with Dark Knight's army, actually. Hawk Moth would have conquered the world.

The teenager clenched his fists and glared. Gabriel pointed at the window, with barely contained rage.

"Why do you think we live behind walls three times the size of a man, Adrien?" he asked. "What do you think the security cameras are for? I've done all I could to keep you safe, it's not to watch you befriend a suicidal vigilante!"

"She's a HERO!" Adrien yelled.
Gabriel retreated between every layer of ice he was able to summon. He clasped his hands behind his back. He squared his shoulders. When he spoke, there was not the slightest sign of emotion on his face.

"She is a child fighting monsters, Adrien. She will inevitably die doing so. Life is not a fairy tale. Now, if she's as lucky as her name suggests, she might be the only one falling when she fails to save the day, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"You don't sound too sad about that."

"I am sad. If she had any sense, she would give up on that life and focus on her future. As things are now, she doesn't have one."

"Maybe she thinks her life is worth protecting thousands."

"And maybe that's true, but I want you nowhere near someone who willingly takes on that responsibility, Adrien. If she comes to you again, politely send her on her way", Gabriel ordered, leaving the room.

He closed the door behind him, quietly.

###

Marinette took a long, deep breath. She straightened her spine. She gathered her courage. She gathered her anger. Then she walked into Nathalie Sancoeur's office. It was the only way to Mister Agreste's, and his assistant was guarding the way from her desk.

The woman was… cold was not the world. Cold would have required some semblance of temperature. Miss Sancoeur, who deserved her name, was empty. After days spying on mister Agreste, Ladybug had ample opportunity to observe his assistant. So far, there was no evidence that she felt anything at all, one way or another. She did not seem to care about Adrien. She did not seem to care about Gabriel, even though they were having an affair. Marinette was under the impression Nathalie would have been content to spend her days formatting spreadsheets.

For a time, Marinette had thought that affair was the explanation behind mister Agreste's disappearances. Secret rendez-vous seemed mundane enough. Unfortunately, it had quickly been clear that miss Sancoeur was just as baffled by her employer's absences as the rest of the world. It made her unimportant in the grand scheme of things, so Ladybug would not spy on her anymore. In the smaller scheme of things (the non quantic one), Nathalie's poorly concealed relationship with Gabriel Agreste made Adrien miserable, so Marinette was not fond of the woman.

That being said, she had not come to confront Nathalie.

"Is mister Agreste available? I had an ap-"

"He will see you right now", miss Sancoeur replied. "You can go in."

Marinette had to brace herself all over again, taking a deep breath and straightening her spine. She walked into mister Agreste's office.

The room was as cold and impersonal as his home. The furniture was modern, in shades of black
and white, with the same kind of geometric patterns that decorated the doors and flower pots of his home. The whiteboard and drawing table were covered in sketches. The sheets were the only things in the room that did not look positioned with a compass and a ruler.

Mister Agreste was sitting at his desk. He was drawing, and looked up without raising his pencil.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng. You wanted to see me?"

The teenager's spine turned to stone.

"Yes, sir. Yes. Yes."

_Snap out of it_, she told herself. She had rehearsed for this. She knew exactly what to say. You did not rush into a fight with the owner of a Fortune 500 company without considering your words very carefully.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I wanted to inform you that I will not be continuing my internship, sir."

She opened her mouth to continue the long speech she had prepared. Mister Agreste looked down at his art.

"Very well. That's unfortunate. I'm sorry this could not work out. I wish you all the best with your future in the industry."

Marinette stared at him. He drew a curved line, then looked up, as if intrigued to see her still standing there.

"Y-you are not going to ask me why?" she exclaimed.

"Nathalie will hand you a few forms to fill before you leave. Be sure they will be properly analyzed by our HR department, and that your suggestions and comments will be taken into consideration."

Marinette breathed in.

"It's not about the company", she said.

He raised an eyebrow. His face grew colder. He still didn't ask.

Marinette clenched her fists.

She didn't know if he was Hawk Moth. She still thought it was a possibility, she was not entirely convinced, and she had no proof anyway. She prayed for him not to be, as having confirmation of that would have shattered Adrien. Marinette had tried to discuss the matter with Tikki, who had been doubtful and evasive, repeatedly telling Marinette that she didn't know, and that they "had to wait for Fu to return to Paris to examine the situation with him". "Things", the Kwami insisted, "were not always what they seemed". She had told Marinette not to jump to conclusions, and not to act without thinking.

Well, without jumping to conclusions, there was a lot to be deduced from his behavior, and from the way the people around him saw him. Maybe he was not Hawk Moth, but Adrien was willing to believe he was. His own son did not trust him. His own son thought that his being a supervillain was a distinct possibility. That wasn't right. And then there was everything Adrien had confessed to
Ladybug the previous afternoon. The secret relationship with his assistant. The neglect. The way he kept Adrien from his friends. No parties, no gifts, not a minute spared to drop by Adrien's school for parents' day.

"It's not about the company", she repeated. "I like everyone here. Everything I got to work on was fascinating. I learned so much. It's not about the company. It's about me not wanting to work for you."

She loved his work. There was no denying that. As far as his designs were concerned, she couldn't have found enough praise in the dictionary to fully express her thoughts. Everything he had ever created was wonderful. She had binders full of pictures of his work, collected from magazines or from the internet, sorted by year, season, event. The critics raved about him. So did every fashion blogger Marinette followed. As far as creating was concerned, he could do no wrong. He had just come up with about forty different costumes in less than a week!

But that was his work.

She glared at him.

He stared back, and sighed.

"I see", he replied, clicking his tongue. "I'm sorry you didn't come to that conclusion earlier. Another student could have benefited from the weeks you wasted making up your mind."

"I'm sorry", she replied without thinking.

She bit her tongue.

"Allow me to give you a piece of advice", mister Agreste continued. "Honesty is invaluable, but the line between honesty and disrespect is a blurry one, especially in this line of work. Think twice before talking. Don't antagonize the leaders of the industry, unless you want to nip your very promising career in the bud."

"If making it in the industry means one has to keep their opinions to themselves, sir, I believe the problem is with the industry. I'll have to speak up even more to compensate. And I did think twice."

"Then think thrice ", he amended, his voice dripping with annoyance. "Thank you very much for your input, miss Dupain-Cheng. You're free to go."

He had evaded her attempts to actually explain what the problem was. She had planned to rain thunder upon him, but he had maneuvered his way out of the storm before she could raise her voice. The man was used to dealing with business sharks and celebrities. He was not about to let a teenager force him into a conversation he did not wish to have.

Well, she was not going to leave without saying her piece.

She took a step forward.

"You are destroying your son."
Miss Dupain-Cheng's voice carried, much to Nathalie's regret. She had better things to do with her time than to listen to a teenager's tantrum, and it was difficult to deduce where a mine was hidden when you could barely hear yourself think. The young girl sure had a lot to say and, despite the thick closed door, Nathalie could not have missed a single word of her tirade.

"No, he didn't tell me anything!" the girl was yelling. "He would never complain about you. Not to us, not to anyone, not even to you. But you are not there to see the look on his face every time you ignore one of his calls, and every time you skip a school event, and every time you make excuses not to be present."

Her voice raised and raised, as shouting at Gabriel was akin to shouting at a brick wall. He met her accusations with quiet answers. Nathalie couldn't make his exact words out, but she knew they were dripping with a politeness that might as well have been British.

Nathalie clicked on a mine and watched the twenty remaining bombs appear on the minesweeper board. She sighed. Not that she had been on her way to beat her own record, on the contrary, but she still felt mildly irritated at her mistake. Then again, how was she supposed to concentrate?

"Do you realize he knows you so little that what other people say about you is starting to fill in the blanks?" the teenager was claiming. "How can you even stand it? How could any parent stand it?"

There was no answer from Gabriel, or none that could be heard through the door. Miss Dupain-Cheng argued some more, to no avail. He was not about to give her the satisfaction of raising his voice, nor of confessing his sins, and she had vastly overestimated her ability to convince and to shame. She was facing a man who could endure Aria Rossignol's explosive outbursts (and eardrums-shattering soprano) without blinking. People had attempted to threaten, blackmail, and trick him out of his company. He had faced lawyers, he had faced businessmen, he had faced policemen set on arresting him for the murder of his wife. A fifteen year old girl's speech was not going to phase him.

"... to go", Nathalie heard him say.

There was a silence, followed by another very articulate, very eloquent tirade from Marinette. It contained neither profanity nor respect. Then, the girl opened the door, stopping on her way out to turn to Gabriel.

"I know Nino tried to talk to you and he was nice about it. And now you've seen me, and you can expect more of his friends to come knock on your door, because we all see what you are doing and we won't stand by and let it happen", she snapped.

"Have a nice day, miss", Gabriel replied, his tone courteous.

The teenager did not lose it, but you could see the explosions going off in her mind, through the grimace on her face and the bulging eyes. She stormed out of Nathalie's office, and the assistant heard her stomp away.

A minute went by.

Gabriel burst out laughing.
"That brings you back", he commented after nearly three minutes of uninterrupted laughter, his voice still straying to the side of hilarity. "That... brings you back."

Nathalie, who had walked into the room with a fresh pot of coffee and a cup, poured him a drink and did not comment.

"Alice used to have fits like that", Gabriel said. "Mostly at me. Just. Like. That."

"I know", his assistant murmured, as he was not listening to her anyway.

"My son doesn't have a chance", he continued, nearly giggling. "That poor boy."

"You think he fancies her?"

"As evidenced by his hands being somewhere on her person whenever I spot them together, yes."

He breathed in. His eyes lost focus and he sighed, his mirth evaporating. A moment later, he was so deep in his thoughts that he nearly did not notice Nathalie slipping away. From the look on his face, the thoughts were unpleasant at best.

"She's going to regret this", he remarked. "Sorely."

"Then she should have thought things through a little better, sir", Nathalie replied.

He pursed his lips, staring into the distance. His only answer was a nod.

###

Adrien walked into the workshop at noon, after a morning spent fencing. It had been the best part of the last twenty-four hours. After that disaster of a talk with his father, he had transformed and spent the entire night patrolling. He had done that alone, as Ladybug was nowhere to be found. He had not been so sure he wanted to see her, not so soon, not in that state, so it had probably been for the best.

The night had been uneventful, with no Akuma attacks, no robberies, no fires, nothing to spend his energy on. So he had raced across the city, from roof to roof. He had tried to enjoy every jump and every freefall. He had climbed to the top of the Eiffel Tower and down. He had propelled himself above the city with his staff and taken in the sights. He had kept himself busy.

He had gone home in the morning to find his father gone. Adrien's absence had not been noticed. Training had been a welcome distraction.

The first thing he noticed when he entered the workshop was the silence. The second were the whispers. The conversations were held in hushed tones. Everyone's eyes were turning to the corner of the room, where Marinette was packing the few things she had brought with her into her bag.

Adrien, not quite understanding what was going on at first, watched her say her goodbyes to the
seamstresses and designers. She was leaving?

She exited the workshop through the opposite door, and he ran after her.

"Marinette?" he exclaimed, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She gasped and jumped away, as always when he was a bit too close.

He paid no attention to that. She was always startled. It passed quickly.

"What's happening? Why are you leaving? Has my father done something?" he asked in increasingly horrified tones.

It had to be about that lunch with Nino and Alya. Gabriel was probably furious - not that they had discussed it the previous evening - and had likely decided to rid Adrien's life of another 'bad influence'.

"N-No", she replied. Her voice grew firmer. "No. I quit."

"What? But why? You were so happy about the hats thing just yesterday! What happened?"

She took a deep breath, bracing herself, then deflated. She fidgeted for a while. He waited patiently, more and more concerned the more and more she looked about to flee. Then, she sighed.

"You will probably hear about it, so… I… I had words. With your father."

Adrien blinked, not quite understanding what she meant by that. It made no sense. Just the previous day, she had been telling him she loved his father's work.

"Words?"

Her eyes strayed to the side.

"I don't approve of… I don't like the way…"

She hesitated, paling as she fumbled for words, as if faced with a sudden realization she had not expected. Adrien easily understood what she was trying not to say, or to formulate in a way that would not offend him.

He tensed, his love and loyalty for his father surfacing back with a surge of anger, dark and cutting and defensive.

"Do you mean you argued with him about me?" he asked, his voice polite but strained.

She had meant well.

"I… Yes."

"Why?"

She froze at his tone, and at the look on his face. She had not expected him to be angry, he knew that. She had been concerned. She had meant well, without taking the consequences into consideration. People said the road to hell was paved with good intentions. Wasn't that good enough a warning?

"I… Adrien, the way he treats you, it's not fair", Marinette said.
He forced himself to remain calm. She had meant well. She barely knew him, and she had no idea what she was stepping into, but she had meant well.

"You don't know that", he pointed out. "You don't know my father. You barely know me."

"I know enough", she replied in a soft voice. "It's not hard to notice how rarely you see him, and the way he cuts you from your friends. Y-"

"So you thought you'd swoop in to save the day?" he snapped. "What gives you the right?"

She blanched at that, taking a step back. She let go of her bag and fumbled to grab it before it hit the floor. Adrien did not help.

"You know nothing about my family", he continued, his voice cold as steel. "I appreciate your concern, Marinette, but you had no right to meddle."

His classmate stuttered, clutching her bag and the handful of sewing supplies that had fallen out of it.

"I… Adrien, I'm sorry", she said, horrified and dumbfounded.

He shook his head, swallowing the anger down.

"Forget it", he mumbled. "Just forget it. You meant well."

"Adrien…"

"I should go", he told her, turning away as he talked.

Maybe his father was available. Maybe he could fix the damage his classmate had caused. He took one last look at her.

"I'm not sure I'll see you before September, so… Bye. Have a nice summer", he said, with a forced smile.

He didn't wait for her answer.

###

"Is my father available?" Adrien asked when he entered Nathalie's office, after politely knocking and waiting to be invited in.

He knew the answer was likely to be 'no', unless Gabriel wanted to roast him for associating with Marinette. He had to try to salvage the situation all the same. His classmate couldn't have picked a worse day to talk to his father. There was no way Gabriel could have calmed down since the previous evening and their argument about Ladybug. Considering how he had reacted to Nino's pleading for something as trivial as a birthday party, and that on a normal day, Adrien was terrified of how his father had taken being antagonized and yelled at by another of his friends. There would be hell to pay.

"He is waiting for you", Nathalie announced, raising her eyebrows by a thousandth of an inch, in a way that said nothing about her feelings on the topic, save for the fact that she had some.
Adrien swallowed. The lump in his throat made that hard.

"How angry is he?"

Nathalie's eyes shifted to the side as she thought about her answer. Half a second later, they returned to Adrien.

"I don't think you are in trouble", she said. "But he is waiting for you."

The teenager nodded, bracing himself. Waiting. His father had not even called him. He had not sent Nathalie to fetch him. He had just expected him to race to his office after discovering the news. Was it some kind of test?

Nathalie pressed a button on her interphone, letting Gabriel know about his son's presence and putting an end to the 'bracing'. All that was left to do was to walk into Gabriel's office and face the music, so that's what Adrien did.

His father was sitting at his drawing table, back turned to the entrance. He was adding the finishing touches to a design of a woman in a sunset themed dress, her outfit various shades of orange and violet. 'Finishing touches' was not the exact term. It looked like the drawing had been finished hours before. Gabriel was just adding visual noise.

"Sit", he invited, putting his pencils down and standing up.

Adrien dropped into one of the two chairs that faced his desk. Gabriel crossed the room and sat down into his own seat, leaning forward over his desk. He gave his son a long, assessing look.

"Calm down", he told Adrien. "You are not in trouble."

That was not as much of a relief as one would have thought. The boy's heart was still in shoes and his stomach in his throat.

"I… I don't know what Marinette said to you, Father, but please don't hold it against her. Please don't let it impact her future in fashion. She thought she was helping. I think I gave her the wrong idea, I'm so-"

"Calm. Down", Gabriel interrupted him, rolling his eyes. "I'm not about to ruin a teenage girl's life for having a tantrum. I believe she'll see the errors of her ways soon enough, if she has not already", he added with a pointed look. "I did give a call to her parents to let them know how disappointing her behavior was. They will handle the situation as they see fit."

Adrien cleared his throat, wondering if he had not been too harsh with Marinette, even though he was angry at her. His relation with his father was none of her business. It was one thing to have Nino try to be a good friend by begging for a party and some freedom, but Marinette was not nearly as close to Adrien, and she had no right to intrude in his personal life.

"What… What did she tell you, Father?"

What had she seen? What did she believe about him? What did the rest of his friends believe?

"Let us just say that she is very eloquent", Gabriel replied. "I don't think I have ever been this thoroughly insulted by a sentence that contained at least two 'with all due respect, sir', and the formula is usually code for 'let me politely call you an idiot'."

The humor in his voice was subtle but unmistakable. Adrien's eyes went wide, and he finally
looked up. He caught the hint of a smile on his father's face.

Gabriel's smile faded when he saw he had Adrien's full attention.

"She made a few good points", he said, his own eyes straying to his desk, to focus on a box of paper clips. "We should talk."

"Father, I'm sure whatever she said was…"

"You should not hesitate to tell me when I'm pushing you too hard. You should not hesitate to tell me if you are unhappy, Adrien. I know I'm harsh. I know I have little time to spare. But I don't set out to make you miserable. I just want what is best for you. You know there is a lot more you need to be prepared for than most boys your age, hence the myriad of activities, but… Maybe we could make some adaptations."

"Adaptations?" Adrien repeated, so surprised by those words that he did not manage to form a real answer.

Of course, his father's first thought was to fix his schedule, but it was… something. Not nearly as good as an offer to spend time together, but it was a display of actual concern.

"Your Chinese is very good", Gabriel continued. "Maybe you don't need a lesson a week. Maybe you could drop… piano?"

"Father."

"Or maybe basketball, unless you like it."

"Father", Adrien cut in with a soft smile. "I don't mind the activities."

Gabriel froze. He stared at his son, slowly leaning back against his chair, a strange expression on his face. It was not totally dissimilar to horror. He had paled.

"You look so much like your mother that I keep forgetting you are nothing like her", he mused.

That stung, even if Adrien did not understand what his father meant by that. Gabriel raised a hand and started explaining his words.

"It was virtually impossible to hurt Alice", he said. "For a start, she had a stunningly high tolerance threshold before she even started to feel upset. And she would come down on you like a ton of bricks and call you out on your behavior before you could inflict actual damage. Her brand of honesty was not unlike miss Dupain-Cheng's, if I have to be honest."

There was a fondness in his voice, and amusement had crept in as he talked. By his last words, that hint of a smile had returned.

"People thought - because she was so bubbly and optimistic - that your mother was weak. " - He pursed his lips. - "But being loving and sweet does not mean one is fragile. Her edges were just as sharp as mine. You… are softer", Gabriel continued, his own voice gentle. "You wear your heart on your sleeve. That is not a flaw, but it does make you more vulnerable."

Hearing his father talk about his mother was so rare that Adrien paid little to no attention to the parts of that explanation that pertained to him. He had only ever known Alice as soft and warmth and tender. She had been gentle and teasing in her interactions with Gabriel whenever their son was in the room, though Adrien knew things weren't as peaceful behind closed doors.
"She wore her heart on her sleeve too", he pointed out.

His father took a few seconds to think about his answer.

"Not in the way you do. It was easier for her to do, because her heart would not break. Every time you put others first, every time you show kindness, it costs you a little. Ultimately, it makes you stronger and braver than your mother, and she would be so proud of you."

To Adrien, those words were bittersweet. He would have made her proud, he would have… but Gabriel was using the past tense.

"You cancelled your trip", the boy murmured.

The first answer he got was silence, and the faint noise his father made when he sucked his lower lip in.

"I did", Gabriel said, leaning forward. "I did."

He reached over his desk to press his hand on Adrien's.

"I've arranged for videoconferences with the detectives, and I will meet with them in person next month."

"She is dead, isn't she?" the teenager asked, looking down at their hands.

His father was trembling, and shivered at little at those words. He squeezed Adrien's hand.

"I think we should… slowly accept that idea", he replied. "She would have come back by now. I wish I had another answer to give you. I wish I had an explanation to give you. But… Even without that… I think it's time to let go."

It hurt less to hear those words than to see his father lie about it, in the end, though Adrien's breath still caught in his chest. His eyes still went wet.

Minutes went by.

"Alright", he said. "Alright."

His father's hand had not left his.

Adrien swallowed and took a deep breath.

"M-modeling", he stuttered. "Modeling. I could do with a little less modeling. I mean, it's fun, but… I could use a little less of it."

"Fine. We're not canceling this month's shoots, just so you know."

"Alright. And… And maybe I could go fencing with you every now and then?"

There was another silence. Adrien looked up. His father looked puzzled.

"I'm not allowed", the man ended up saying, with an overly serious expression.

"What?"

"I just remembered… Your mother took offense because I would not let you win. When you were
eight or so. I am not *allowed*.”

Adrien stared, and stared some more, and burst into laughter.

###
Nathalie, though she was not an idiot (and maybe because of that), had obtained her bachelor through relentless lying, cheating and bribing. It made her uniquely qualified to hold a position in a fortune 500 company.

She was not above embellishing her resume. Maybe opening Photoshop once in her life did not give her 'advanced skills', but - if her new place of employment ever required her to use the software - internet came with millions of tutorials to get her out of any predicament. As far as she was concerned, she 'excelled at everything’ until proven otherwise.

She looked at her resume, threw a few key skills in, and attached it to the email she was writing. He proofread her cover letter for spelling mistakes. She made sure she had replaced her "CONTACT_NAME_HERE" and "COMPANY_NAME_HERE" by the proper names.

She pressed "send".

###

Jagged Stone arrived at four PM instead of five, as usual, which meant he arrived exactly when Nathalie had scheduled his meeting with mister Agreste. By this point, she just told the rock star to come an hour before whenever he was actually needed. It made things much easier for everyone involved.

Like every morning, he signed a few autographs before making his way to Gabriel's office, and greeted Nathalie with a "woah, Nat, love the hair!". *Just* like every morning. Sometimes, he said it twice. It meant so little to him and his addled brain that he did not realize he used the same line over and over again. He rarely did it in front of Gabriel, who had no time for such nonsense and did not leave Jagged Stone's attention wander. That being said, the singer's silence was never borne out of respect, nor even self preservation: as soon as the designer left him to his own devices, Stone had to chat with everyone around, fishing for compliments and talking, talking, talking.

Sometimes, it just so happened that the only available audience was Nathalie. That afternoon, she had been unlucky enough to still be in Gabriel's office when the man had started to correct his last batch of sketches, after receiving a few contradictory suggestions from Jagged Stone. Ten seconds in, the musician had decided he couldn't possibly survive his boredom, and turned to Gabriel's assistant.

She had listened to none of his unending flattery (it mostly pertained to him, anyway), and answered what sounded like questions with noncommittal noises.

"Your eyes, Natalee, they are so blue", he said at some point, after what felt like four hours of uninterrupted monologue. "I should write a song about them. Like… 'Oooh, those aquamareene ooorbs, they reduce me to soooobs…'"

"Stone", Gabriel cut in. "If you can't learn to treat my employees with a modicum of professionalism, you will have to find yourself another designer, are we clear?"

He hadn't turned, he hadn't raised his voice, but his words was enough for Jagged Stone's mouth to
snap shut.

The conversation, after that, consisted in short questions from mister Agreste ("This pattern or that one? Does this cut work for you?"), and even shorter answers from Jagged Stone. Gabriel gave the man the illusion of a choice. He offered a myriad of simple alterations so Jagged Stone would feel like his opinion was taken into consideration, but Gabriel's mind was set on a final look for each of the outfits he had prepared, and he deflected any requests that could have impacted it.

It still took two hours for the meeting to end but, when it did, every design had been agreed on. Jagged Stone left satisfied. Everything was "so cool, man, woah".

Gabriel watched him go, waited for the door of his office to close, and clicked his tongue.

"Sometimes, I wonder why he is so popular, then I remember that he caters to the lowest common denominator."

Nathalie unpinned the approved designs from the whiteboard and picked them up from every surface, to slip them into plastic pockets.

"I suppose, sir."

Gabriel turned to her, watching her sort the drawings and put them all in a binder. He waited for her to be done.

"I'm starving", he declared. "What about we grab dinner?"

Nathalie frowned, then raised her eyebrows.

"Your evening is free, sir. Would you not rather go home?"

Gabriel tilted his head to the side, studying her face and keeping his own unreadable.

"Well, I would not", he said.

Oh.

###

If it was a date, Gabriel made sure not to let it look as one, talking numbers and marketing for the best part of an hour, as they sat in an Italian restaurant two streets away from the office. It was the way Nathalie liked it. She favored numbers and marketing. She favored work.

She favored rigidity, professionalism, and boredom.

"By the way", Gabriel told her at the end of the meal, as she was taking a sip of her coffee, "I told Xavier Dubois from Grenat Fashion that I was very satisfied with your work performance, and that he couldn't find a better employee if he decided to hire you."

Nathalie choked, that sip of coffee traveling up her nose and burning everything on its way.

She had sent that application in strict confidence. The had made sure to mention that twice in her email.

Gabriel waited for her to recover.
"Now, I would rather prefer if you stayed with us. You are one of my best employees. So why do you want to leave?"

She hesitated, unwilling to have that conversation with so many prying ears around them. He understood her concern, and called the waiter to ask for the bill. Ten minutes later, they were walking out of the restaurant. Gabriel led her across the street, towards the Seine, leaving car and driver waiting for them. Nathalie, who had never been one to take leisurely strolls along the Seine under a cool evening breeze, wrapped her coat around her and followed him in nervous silence. They stopped a few moments later, once far from the constant flow of passersby.

"Have you made up your mind?" he asked, leaning against the railing, which conveniently put his face in the shadows. "Can I change it?"

She sighed, crossing her arms and moving closer to him.

"I don't know", she replied.

"You've worked for me fifteen years, Nathalie. Why now?"

You know why.

"Things have changed", she explained, staring at the water underneath them. "They have become… complicated. And I don't like complicated. I don't like uncertainty. Do you see what I mean?"

He studied her face, and all she could see of his was the reflection of the city's light on his glasses. That, and hard edges of black shadows underlying features that were not soft to begin with. There was no reading him.

"Do you?" she asked again, when he failed to answer.

"I understand that our situation is… confusing, lately, but that's something that can be discussed."

"It's not confusing", she replied. "It's complicated. And I didn't mean just 'lately'."

He sighed, irritated, but she saw him force himself to let it go. His shoulders relaxed. He lowered his head to stare at the water. He nodded.

Nathalie uncrossed her arms and pressed herself against the railing too, not quite brushing against him.

"I selected your company with great choice, so I could do a specific job, and… It's not the job I'm doing now, Gabriel. It hasn't been in… years."

She didn't say 'in five', wanting to let Alice's ghost rest, but the memory of her disappearance hovered over them all the same.

"I know", he said.

"And I'm not… I'm the last person who should be taking care of your son. I think you know that too. I'm not nurturing, I'm not warm, I'm not even nice. I still can't understand why you picked me."

Gabriel looked down at his hands, balling a fist and nervously clawing at it with his other hand.

His voice dropped to a whisper, rough and raw.
"I knew without the shadow of a doubt you had nothing to do with her disappearance", he explained. "The police cleared you, and so did every other investigator who looked into your life after that." - He took a deep breath and gasped it out. - "It was the only thing I knew for sure. Everyone else..."

He waved a hand and shook his head.

Nathalie thought about that time, of the state he had been in, the weeks of constant shaking. He had been terrified, enough to turn his home into a cage for his son, so the boy could neither escape nor be taken away. And months, years had gone by without answers.

He straightened up, peeking at her.

"I know I pulled you away from what you did best. I didn't intend for it to last quite so long. But Adrien was safe with you. Not just in the sense that you wouldn't hurt him. I like knowing that paparazzis and reporters run for their life when they see you."

Nathalie clicked her tongue, turning her face away.

"A few restraining orders, sir. Some blackmail."

She tried to infuse that truth with an humor she did not possess, and failed.

"I know", he replied (and of course he did. Why had she believed he was blind to her methods?). "That's why I hired you to begin with."

That was new. She blinked and turned to him again. He tilted his face to the side, finally letting light hit him, and smiled.

"If I had wanted someone to organize my schedule and smile at my customers, I could have picked anyone. You, however, landed your internship with… let us say 'creative tactics'. I know if I throw a problem at you, you will make it go away. I know it will always be better not to ask questions on the hows and on the how much it cost, but… I needed those skills and you have never disappointed me."

"Never."

"There were hiccups. Should you get another job, try to not steal candy from your employer's three year old son. That one was hard to explain away."

Nathalie gaped. He chuckled.

"I-I…" she stuttered. "I sincerely have no idea what you are talking about. Actually 'sincerely'."

"I think it was some pinata candy from Adrien's birthday, and he told Alice you had taken it, and it escalated to her ordering me to fire you. Again."

"I'm sorry it seems to have been a common occurrence", she commented. "To be honest, Alice had very valid reasons not to want me around."

Those words earned her an amused snort.

"I'm sure she did, not that they mattered. Alice loathed you for far simpler and sillier reasons. I think the exact words I overheard were 'that girl is not unpretty or anything'."

Nathalie frowned.
"What?" - Understanding dawned. - "She thought you would cheat? Had she even met you?"

He snorted again.

"Well, look at us now ", he retorted. "And you were hired at a… difficult time."

*Difficult time*. Nathalie had the feeling his time with Alice had been difficult for fifteen years in a row.

Gabriel turned back to the Seine.

"If you want your original duties back, we can see about that", he told her. "About uncomplicating things…"

She waited.

A minute went by. The world kept moving. They paid no attention to the noises of the city, nor to the passerby who moved behind them. Gabriel stared at the Seine and said nothing at all.

Nathalie closed her eyes.

"Are we putting an end to this?" she asked.

"I don't want to."

She twirled her tongue in her mouth so it would feel less like lead.

"Then I should quit. You keep retreating back behind your position, and I don't know where I stand. I can't have that."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"It wouldn't be any different if you were not working for me", he said. "I'm known to use any wall I can build, I… What do *you* want, Nathalie? Not just from this, but in general?"

It was not a difficult question to answer.

"Little", she said. "I'm hardly emotional. I'm not looking for anything. I have never been that concerned with the whole romance thing. I dated, sometimes for months or so, but I can't say I've ever been in love."

"Then count yourself lucky", he replied, voice hoarse.

The look on his face made it clear the words had escaped him. He moved back into the shadows. Nathalie, much to her own surprise, felt her heart break a little, out of sympathy.

She swallowed.

"What do *you* want?"

"Companionship?" he said, the emotion gone from his voice.

She waited, to see if he would bluff to the end. He tried. When it became clear Nathalie could outmatch his patience, however, he sighed.

"Companionship", he repeated. "Nothing more. I'm not looking for love. I… What I felt for Alice
is best described as mental illness. I can safely say I never want to feel that way again."

Nathalie’s heart skipped a beat. She put a hand on his shoulder, inching closer as she did so.

He pursed his lips.

"It was very much a moth to a flame situation", he explained. "I'd have done anything for her, which turned out to be quite a problem. People think it's romantic. They don't realize how dark a mindset it can be."

Most people were blissfully naive. Others, like Nathalie, had a more clinical point of view on life. While she could not understand the dynamics of Gabriel’s relationship with Alice, she had no illusions about his notion of 'anything'. He had been willing to erase himself, and had obviously considered that a small price to pay.

Anything.

Alice would never have accepted 'anything'.

"Purely theoretically", he said, his voice lighter, "if I told you I would do anything for you, what would you think?"

"That we should draft some kind of legal documents giving me full control of your assets should you be jailed", she replied.

He sucked in a breath, then laughed, as if he had never heard a joke that hilarious in his life, nor that reassuring. She felt him relax. It took him a moment to calm down, and he kept smiling, leaning forward to look at the river. He started to play with a tiny something, rolling it between his fingers.

"You would send lawyers, of course?"

"I can safely say I would take the money and run."

He chuckled.

She looked at his hands, watching the 'tiny something' move and spin, and belatedly realizing what it was.

"HOW?" she exclaimed, reaching for the hairpin. "WHEN?"

Her hand brushed against his. They both stilled.

Nathalie had thought the evening was chilly. It was not, not at all.

Gabriel dropped the hairpin and wrapped his hand around hers, his thumb caressing her palm from its center to the ticklish, soft skin of her wrist. He looked at her then looked around, frowning in annoyance as he remembered they were not alone. He composed himself, slipping back behind his facade, shoulders squared, chin high, back straight. But, when he let go of her hand, it was so his fingers could travel from her wrist to her shoulder, brushing along her sleeve the whole way there.

He looked around again, moved so he would best protect them from prying eyes, and leaned in for what looked like the chastest of kisses.
Pussyfooting

The fact that Nathalie did, in fact, own an apartment and did not vaporize into thin air whenever she left her workplace came as a surprise to Gabriel. Obviously, he had never paid the slightest interest to her personal life up to this point. He had likely assumed she didn't have one. It was not far off the mark. Still, she had to sleep *somewhere*, but he had been baffled when she had suggested they could go to her place for once.

He would not have brought her home, not when his son could have figured out what was going on. Nathalie had been fine with furtive, hastened meetings in a locked office. The thought of spending the night *somewhere* had never crossed her mind.

Then, it had just popped out of the blue, and made so much sense.

The drive from the restaurant to her street had been short, and she could not recall a second of it. She only remembered the way the back of Gabriel's hand had been pressed against her thigh.

There was no point being that cautious while being driven to her home, but it was just who he was.

A few hours later, she found herself tiptoeing to her bedroom after a quick shower, and slipping into a bed that was not empty.

Spending the night together, she mused, had its perks. It allowed for variations in the state of undress you could afford, and for luxuries such as time. It let them indulge in flights of fancy, such as caresses and kisses and exploration. They had never spared a second for matters as trivial as mutual discovery, so they had not known about each other's birthmarks and freckles and scars. Gabriel had wanted to trace them all, and he had not known Nathalie was ticklish either.

He had loved to discover that, just as he loved everything that unravelled her, he who would not unravel, and who tried to only grin when she could not see him do so. She could hear that smile in his silences and feel it in the way he moved, even when he made sure she could not look at him. She could feel it in every brush of his fingers against her skin, in the possessive arm he wrapped around her waist, and - yes - in the way he moved.

Another perk was obtaining the proof that the man did, in fact, sleep.

Nathalie had wondered.

She tried her best not to wake him up as she slipped under the covers, then contemplated the fact that she would have to sleep with someone else in her bed. She had lost that habit. The prospect worried her for a second, but… Gabriel slept just as he lived: his back turned to the rest of the world, closed up and still as a stone. There would be no hogging of the covers, no wriggling, no unbearable *cuddling*.

She rolled to the side, with her back to his, and turned the light off.

Falling asleep was surprisingly easy. She didn't mind his presence at all.

She woke two hours later, nearly jumping out of her bones when the alarm of his pocket watch went off.
It took Gabriel a whole minute to locate his jacket, extract his watch out of the inner pocket, and turn the damn alarm off. By that point, Nathalie considered herself a paragon of virtue for not having murdered him.

She stared at him, heart pounding in her chest.

"Should I order a new watch for you, sir? Rolex has a fantastic line this year."

He came back to the bed, sitting next to her and pressing the watch's latch. As soon as the cover flipped open, a hologram of a butterfly appeared above the watch, wings flickering. It cast a faint pink glow all over the room.

"What is that thing?" she asked, as the device did not look like a mere high-tech gadget meant to impress the crowds. It was too delicate, too intricately decorated. The hologram was too vivid.

"It's a quantique", Gabriel replied, all of his attention turned to the watch.

"I'm sorry, a what?"

"A quantic anti… Nevermind. It's a family heirloom. Some kind of enchanted device, quite fascinating. Quite priceless."

Magic. Didn't they have enough magic with the constant supervillains attacks?

Nathalie sighed, too exhausted and jittery to be really curious.

"What does it do and why is it ringing at two in the morning?"

"It's a barometer of sorts. It changes colors depending on the weather", Gabriel replied, the tension in his shoulders telling another story entirely. "As for the ringing… It needs to be charged", he explained, clapping the pocket watch shut.

"You are telling me you vanish for hours, every few days, to go charge a watch that predicts rain."

And you call it R&D and come back barely keeping your temper in check.

"I am", Gabriel said, standing up to collect his clothes. "As a matter of fact, I have to go. I've been told if depletes its 'battery', it will never work again. And it does cost more than my home, that's quite the incentive not to break it."

Nathalie sighed, sinking back against the mattress.

There was something very, very wrong going on there. And it was two in the morning, and she hated trouble.

She listened to the shuffling of fabric, the zipping, the lacing, the buttoning. She considered falling back to sleep, but she had to walk Gabriel to the door and lock it after him. He was not about to just walk out and leave, either. Their driver had gone back to the mansion, and was supposed to pick them up at eight.

She ran a hand over her face, sitting up and wrapping herself in a blanket.
"Where are you going?" she muttered, turning the bedside lamp on.

He pulled the shadow trick again, taking a step back so the light would not hit his face at all. All Nathalie could see (and it was not that much: her eyes were gooey and she had no idea where her glasses were) was his silhouette.

"Home", he told her.

Nathalie sighed. She stretched, her neck cracking a little, then got out of bed and walked to him. She clutched the blanket, one fist balled against her chest. Gabriel stepped back as she got close, and hit the wall. He huffed, glaring at her with a deep frown and pursed lips.

She took the watch out of his hand. Maybe it was precious, maybe it held dark and compromising secrets, maybe it was worth more than a mansion in the middle of Paris… but she met no resistance.

The slightest brush on the latch was enough for the watch to spring open. The butterfly reappeared, shining pink and bright. Gabriel could no longer hide his face. He did not bother concealing his rage either, though he did not try to take the device back, and did not comment on Nathalie's actions.

She breathed in, looking away from him to stare at the watch instead. The clock hands were not giving the time, but pointing to the window. Nathalie moved to the right, and the hands turned to the left. She took a step left, and they turned to the right.

She closed the watch.

Gabriel took it back and pushed it into his pocket.

"I gather I'm supposed not to ask questions", she commented.

"We're both good at that", he replied, leaning down to press his lips to hers.

It wasn't any colder than most of his kisses, so there was no deducing his mood from it.

"Very much so", she murmured.

What have you done?

"I'll show myself the way out", he announced. "Just go to sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

###

Chat Noir had not meant to spy on his father.

For a start, he didn't need to be told that you didn't want to spy on your father and his girlfriend. Maybe Gabriel was not forthcoming with informations about his new relationships, but Adrien prefered not to know anything to knowing too much.

He had also calmed down about… everything.

As much as he wanted to strangle Marinette for intervening, there had been some progress. His
father had talked to him. Maybe he had not opened up about everything, but Adrien was willing to wait and see if topics like "Nathalie" would come up on their own. His father had talked about his mother, and that was a big step forward already.

Also, he had taken Adrien to his fencing club in the morning. They had trained together for an hour, and the experience had brought the teenager to two conclusions.

The first one was that his mother had been onto something when she had forbidden her husband to practice with him, because Gabriel did not understand the concept of 'going easy on someone'. And he was absurdly good at fencing.

That conclusion led to the second: there was no possible way Gabriel was Hawk Moth, because Hawk Moth would have triumphed and obtained the Miraculous ten seconds into his first attack on Ladybug and Chat Noir. Adrien's father was ruthless. He did not tolerate defeat, unless he inflicted it. The boy had watched the other club members avoid Gabriel and wince whenever a match with him was suggested. It was clear that he did not lose, ever. On top of that, he was not very pleasant, but that was hardly news.

All in one, it had been a nice morning, even if Adrien had fallen flat on his back more often than during that fight against Supersavon and his dish soap spray guns.

He had not set out to spy on his father. Actually, he was out patrolling, not spying on anyone, when he spotted Ladybug perched on the building facing Nathalie's apartment.

He landed next to her, fuming on the inside, but grinning for her benefit.

"Hi there, Ladybug. How is the stalking going?"

She squeaked at the question, then whirled to him, frowning.

"Hush!"

"I'm hushing", he whispered. "D'you think it's a good idea to spy on mister Agreste's girlfriend?"

"I'm not spying on her", his partner hissed back. "Please be quiet."

Chat Noir blinked. He had thought his father was home. He had heard the car come back. He had not checked, however.

He turned to Nathalie's building, trying to remember which floor her flat was on.

"Mister Agreste is here?"

Ladybug nodded.

Adrien winced.

"It's deeeefinitely not a good idea to spy on them, then", he pointed out. "I mean, you could end up appawwilled."

She groaned.

"I know. And I'm not watching the window, I'm watching the main door. Downstairs. It's just… I promised Adrien Agreste that I would prove his dad is not Hawk Moth, and the fastest way to do that is not to let the man out of my sight until the next Akuma attack."
"It's two in the morning", Chat Noir replied. "It's… Nice that you are so determined, and I'm sure Adrien would appreciate that, but… I don't think it would make much of a difference if you left until sunrise."

She sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose through her mask.

"You never know. I just want an answer, here. I need the answer, and that boy needs the answer, and I'm going to get it."

Chat Noir swallowed, uneasy, and leaned over the roof's edge to look at the street underneath. He had told Ladybug he believed his father was Hawk Moth, and she had seen how furious Gabriel had been to see her in their home. She had reason to worry.

"Have you talked to Adrien today?" he asked.

"No. No, I haven't, I was busy hanging upside down above mister Agreste's office window. And then I just followed. How is it that there's usually an Akuma attack every ten minutes, and suddenly, Hawk Moth seems to forget about us?"

"Maybe you should talk to that kid. Maybe he could shed some light on this. Maybe he has information. Maybe…"

"I wouldn't have involved Adrien Agreste in this at all if you had not let him guess I was suspecting his dad! I'll go back to him with answers."

Being cared about, Chat realized, was more tiring than he had thought.

"I'm sure you-"

"He's leaving", Ladybug exclaimed.

Chat Noir turned to the street again. His eyes went wide: his father was indeed leaving the building, his white suit recognizable enough even in the dim light. He took something out of his pocket and held it in front of him. Whatever he was holding started shining, casting a pastel pink glow on Gabriel's suit.

Ladybug opened her mirror and zoomed in on the scene. Chat Noir did the same with his staff's internal screen.

His stomach sank. His legs nearly gave in.

What his father was holding was a watch, very similar to the one Alix had turning into Timebreaker over. It was made of silver, it looked intricately decorated, and it projected a glowing illusion. Adrien started trembling. He had been more than willing to believe he had been wrong about the Hawk Moth thing. He had been eager to believe he'd been wrong. Then again, he had to admit magical, luminous butterflies were pretty incriminating.

###
Dancing mice

Sleeping was not a realistic suggestion.

Nathalie found herself sitting in front of her TV with her laptop on her knees. Fifteen minutes after Gabriel's departure, a superpowered ballerina started rampaging around the Palais Garnier. It was on the news.

She had watched the footage with increasing resignation. So, Gabriel's absences coincided with Hawk Moth's appearances. They were also triggered by a quantic butterfly in an enchanted watch. And there was nothing Nathalie could do. Blowing the whistle on one's employer was not an option when you were the only one knowing about his use of butterfly-themed magic.

At least, he had not threatened her. He had expected her to roll with it, which was… unsurprising, actually.

As her 'not wanting to roll with it' was irrelevant, Nathalie celebrated her promotion to henchwoman with a bottle of wine. She checked the company files to see if Gabriel had prepared his legal incarceration (he had, but then again that was expected of him considering his position as the CEO). She googled everything Hawk Moth. She read that blindingly pink Ladybug blog.

It had to be about Alice, because Hawk Moth had surfaced in October, right after Gabriel had figured out his wife was dead. The watch had appeared, the absences had started. The hairpin thing, too. Maybe he had not been trying to heal. Maybe he had just needed an outlet - several - for whatever was driving him now.

The man who would have done anything for Alice Beauregard lived in a world where magic could fix everything.

All it took was a pair of earrings.

Nathalie emptied that bottle of wine, helped its effects with a sleeping pill, and returned to bed. She made sure to unplug her alarm clock.

###

Ladybug and Chat Noir had followed Gabriel across town. After walking out of Nathalie's building, he had called a taxi, and gone straight to an office building two streets away from his company's headquarters. It was a tower rented by multiple companies, whose names and logos were pasted on rows upon rows of mailboxes on the ground floor.

The two heroes had slipped into the building right after Adrien's father, to discover that the elevator was going up. The bright red number on the display above its door were steadily increasing: 2, 3, 4…

Chat Noir dashed to the staircase, only to be stopped dead in his tracks by his partner's yoyo. She dragged him to her.

"There's probably a security system in the staircase", she whispered. "Let's see what floor he stops
on and try to go in through the windows."

To anyone in their right mind, it was the best course of action. Adrien, however, just wanted to follow his father and to confront him, safety be damned. He needed to know, and understand. He wanted the obvious explanation to be proved a misunderstanding.

He was falling apart.

Worse, he had to grin and bear it. Secrets identities and all. Chat Noir had no reason to care.

He clasped his hands behind his back to control his trembling, and stared at the tiny screen above the elevator. The numbers were still going up: 27, 28.

"There might still be another explanation", he murmured. "I mean, he's a designer. What would his motive be? 'He really likes to design costumes'?"

"I can't believe you just made that pun."

"I did", he replied with a smile. He sighed. "I really don't like to wait in the wings."

32, 33.

Ladybug glared at him. He swallowed.

"Okay. I'll stop. But it could still be a big misunderstanding. For all we know, he just wants a quiet place to hole himself in when he doesn't feel like returning home."

"Have you ever seen the inside of his house? Or his son's shoes, for that matter?"

Chat Noir blinked. What shoes was she talking about, and what was he supposed to have noticed on them?

"Err, no? Have you?"

36.

"Yes. There are butterfly outlines everywhere. As a matter of fact, I've been told he uses a black butterfly as a signature on his designs."

37.

Chat noir stared at Ladybug, the only answer on his mind a resounding 'shut up'. He wanted the truth to go away. He wanted everything, including her, to go away.

38.

"Just half an hour ago, you told me you wanted to tell that kid that his father was not Hawk Moth", he snapped.

"And I would love to, but failing that, I can't ignore the truth!"

Adrien crushed his own fingers to let his rage out, so he wouldn't let the smile on his face vanish. Secret. Identities. Like father like son. He couldn't let her know. He couldn't. She did not want to know. And, for the first time, he did not want her to know.

He kept his eyes on the floor numbers.
The elevator stopped on floor fifty-two. The last floor. Of course. Why had it even been a question? Supervillains, just like cats, favored high places.

Ladybug ran to the mailboxes.

"Pat Messmer, lawyer", she read next to the '52' label. And, in a lower voice, she murmured: "At least it's not a pun. No logo either. Let's go!"

They ran out of the building, ready to climb to the roof. They realized as they walked out that Hawk moth being out meant 'Akuma attack'.

###

'Wrecking Ballerina' did not take long to defeat. Thankfully for Paris' touristic appeal, Ladybug repaired the Opera Garnier easily enough.

After feeding their Kwami, she and Chat Noir raced back to the mysterious building where they had left Gabriel. Unfortunately, it looked like Adrien's father was long gone. The building's doors were locked, for a start, and the elevator had gone back to the ground floor. There was not a single lit window in the place.

They climbed to the last floor, peeked through the windows, and saw only darkness.

"Breaking and entering, then?" the boy asked.

"Let's try to be discreet."

They pried a window open (claws helped), and slipped inside, only to find a perfectly normal office filled with perfectly normal furniture filled with perfectly normal lawyery things. The shelves were filled with law books, the desks covered in legal documents, the room decorated with greek statuettes replicas and golden scales.

Ladybug sighed. You couldn't tell if it was in relief or disappointment.

"Maybe we're on the wrong side of the building", she said.

"Maybe", Chat replied, looking around.

He took in the armored door, protected with a keypass. He looked at the perfectly arranged office supplies. There was a notepad on the desk, with a sheet missing, but there was not the slightest crease in the one that showed, not an ink stain, not a smudge. The pencils, in their pot, were all perfectly sharpened. The ballpens were new. The documents lying around were at least six months old.

It was all very convincing, but still fake.

The door was armored, and still locked. It meant there was something hidden to be found in the room. Adrien tapped the walls. He tried to pull on every book on the shelves. He tried to push and twist everything that was attached to the walls. His partner helped him.

The secret passage ended up being in the floor. A piece of tile could be lifted, and underneath was a lever that opened a trapdoor over a staircase. The trapdoor itself was perfectly concealed. It took eight blocks of tile, and slid up and down without the slightest noise. The mechanism was perfectly
calibrated and assembled.

They found an entire floor concealed between the fifty-first and fifty-second. It had no windows, a very low ceiling, magically powered lights, and proof. Endless proof.

Ladybug sucked in a breath as she looked around.

A wall was lined with aquariums filled with butterflies. A map of the city covered in annotations and drawings was pinned on another. Upon closer inspection of the map, the point of appearance of every single one of their enemies had been circled.

"Well", Ladybug whispered.

Chat Noir walked to one of the tables. He found it covered with sketches of Stormy Weather and Rogercop. Their flaws and strengths were listed on the side of the drawings, in an elegant hand that Adrien knew only too well.

His partner inspected another table and showed him pictures of Alix and her brother, as well as notes on the Pharaoh.

R&D.

Research, research, research.

They found more of those notes: on Alya, on Nino, on the strangers they had rescued from Evilization. Every single of their failures and mistakes was documented.

Ladybug also found notes about them. Gabriel had analyzed their fighting styles, their speech patterns, the way they interacted - "In any given era, in any given location, in any given circumstances, Chat Noir loves Ladybug", he had written, which made her pause a little, then pretend she had missed the line - and even their costumes.

Adrien wished they had never followed his father.

He had known you didn't want to spy on your own father.

"Alright", he said. "We have proof."

His ring started beeping. So did his partner's Miraculous. They stared at each other, stunned, as they had not used their powers and there was no reason for them to untransform. Then, they ran out of the secret lair, closed the trapdoor, and fled through the open window. Chat closed it behind them, hoping it would stay shut.

"I'll meet you later", he promised as they slid down the building. "Whenever I can change again."

"Be careful", she said. "I don't know what's happening."

Their Miraculous beeped again.

"You too", Adrien said, dropping to the floor. "I'll be patrolling tomorrow afternoon. You know my itinerary. Try to find me!"

On that, they ran in opposite directions.

He hid and turned back into himself.
Plagg popped out of his ring.

"What was that?" Adrien exclaimed. "What just happened?"

"Tikki and I wanted the two of you out of there", the Kwami announced. "Stop investigating this. Stop. You need to talk to Fu. You have to talk to Fu. No. More. Investigating."

###
Adrien, who had slept for two hours at best and dreamed of dark rooms filled with butterflies, woke to hushed whispers and hissing. At first, he thought he was not totally awake, and that he was only imagining things. He was exhausted. His lips were glued together. His muscles felt like lead. But, just as he thought he had dreamed it all and prepared to close his eyes and return to sleep, he heard Plagg's voice again.

"Well then maybe your little candy dispenser should try harder", the Kwami was saying. "We need master Fu."

Adrien looked around, finding his bedroom empty. The voices seemed to come from outside. He slipped out of bed and inched closer to the window he had left open that night, after coming back from Hawk Moth's lair.

No one but the Miraculous holders knew of master Fu's existence.

"We will find him", a female voice replied. "And he will handle this. I don't think he realizes the conundrum the seal would land us in."

*Seal?*

The boy peeked out and spotted Plagg, who was hovering a few inches under his feet, talking to what looked like red sparkles.

"I told him those seals were as stupid an idea as his face. I'd rather be a dark god than an useless one."

"It was for everyone's safety", the red light replied in a pleading voice. "Including yours."

"Wah, wah, wah. Worked out so well."

"How is the boy holding up?"

"He went straight to bed when we came back and forgot to feed me, that's how he is holding up."

Adrien jumped and heaved himself through the window frame so he could talk to the Kwami. The red sparkles vanished, and a ladybug flew away, vanishing into the distance. Plagg looked up, startled.

"You're awake."

"Was that… That was Tikki, wasn't it?" Adrien asked.

He knew the name of Ladybug's Kwami, though he had never seen her. His partner had mentioned her on several occasions, as a benevolent, helpful and wise friend who sounded like Plagg's polar opposite. The boy had not known the two spirits were in contact, or even that Tikki knew who he was and where he lived.

Plagg huffed and flew back inside.

"Yes. I wanted to know if her silly little human had even tried to find Fu. He needs to come back and deal with all of this."
And here it was again: the argument that Ladybug and Chat Noir couldn't handle the situation. Plagg had been arguing about this for an hour that night, and had flat out refused to listen to Adrien's assurance that he was perfectly able to deal with what they had discovered. Sure, it was a lie, but the young hero was sure he could make it true with enough effort. The initial blow had been harsh, that was all.

"And what did Tikki say?"

"That the silly old man was probably out there fighting his own immortal enemy and that she couldn't find him."

So nothing had changed in… three hours.

"What was that about a seal?" Adrien asked, as the conversation between Tikki and the black cat had sounded ominous (mentions of becoming a dark god were a bit worrying).

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Just tell me! Or tell me why I can't be told! Please?"

Plagg yawned.

"I was just telling Tikki things would be simpler if I could tell you who Ladybug was, instead of us having to relay information."

"You know who she is?"

"Of course I know. I peeked. I always peek."

"She didn't want us to!"

Plagg shrugged, yawning again.

"Well I can't tell you anyway. That's the seal, we can't spill your secrets. I'd need the girl's express approval, or two other Kwami's. For everyone's safety, wah wah wah. Here I am playing carrier pigeon when I could be napping."

"And, err, the part about becoming a 'dark god'?"

"Figure of speech. Are we getting breakfast any time soon? I'm starving."

"Plagg."

"Starving."

"Plaaagg."

"Starving."

###

The 'dark god' mystery was never elucidated.
Adrien had been sitting at the breakfast table for three minutes, and had just barely given Plagg a piece of cheese when they heard approaching footsteps. The Kwami vanished. Adrien froze, stomach twisting. He did not hear the clicking of heels, meaning the person about to enter the room was not Nathalie.

He looked down at his plate and pretended to focus on his untouched food.

Gabriel walked in.

"Good morning, Adrien", he said.

"Good morning, Father", the boy replied, praying for the man not to notice his anxiety.

He peeked up, forcing a smile onto his face, but knowing full well that grimace would convince no one. Thankfully, Gabriel was distracted. He was looking around, frowning, and quite a lot more nervous than usual.

"Have you seen Nathalie?" he asked. "I can't find her."

"I haven't", Adrien replied, surprised.

Nathalie was never late.

For a second or so, the boy was worried, then he saw his father wince. It was the distinct, unmistakable wince of someone who had seriously messed up. It was not an expression one associated with Gabriel Agreste.

"Maybe there's traffic", Adrien commented, voice strangled.

"That is a possibility", his father said, his tone unconvinced.

He took his phone out of his pocket and walked to the dinner table, sitting next to his son. He stared down at his phone, and not at the teenage boy drenched in cold-sweat seated inches to his right. He made a call, still holding the phone in front of him. The phone was not showing a picture, but "N. Sancoeur" in big black letters, above a green phone icon. The call went to voicemail. So did the next, not a minute later.

Gabriel pursed his lips.

"Maybe she slept in", Adrien said.

"That is also a possibility", his father replied.

He took his phone out of his pocket and walked to the dinner table, sitting next to his son. He stared down at his phone, and not at the teenage boy drenched in cold-sweat seated inches to his right. He made a call, still holding the phone in front of him. The phone was not showing a picture, but "N. Sancoeur" in big black letters, above a green phone icon. The call went to voicemail. So did the next, not a minute later.

Gabriel pursed his lips.

"Maybe she slept in", Adrien said.

"That is also a possibility", his father replied.

The young hero studied his face. He looked tired, and agitated, but there was nothing on his features that screamed 'supervillain'. On the contrary, he looked more human than usual. He was chewing the inside of his cheeks and drumming his fingers on the table. If his son had shown such a blatant display of nervousness, he would have been chastised.

"Did-" Adrien started, hesitant. "Did the two of you have a fight?"

Here. The cat was out of the bag. Mister Agreste, world-renowned designer, would never have argued with his assistant, so the question was clear. Adrien had planned to wait for his father to reveal his secrets, or maybe to see how long it would take. Maybe it had been a bit of a test but, for the most part, Adrien did believe had the right to chose when and how he wanted the news to be broken. Then again, next to the Hawk Moth thing, his relationship with Nathalie now seemed like a
trivial matter.

Gabriel's eyes widened. He took a second to process the question, then slowly turned to Adrien. He pursed his lips, shoulders moving back, muscles tensing in a flight reflex. He kept his expression neutral.

He swallowed.

"How long have you known?"

"A few weeks", Adrien replied, looking away. "Not that long."

His father clicked his tongue and bit his lower lip. He took a deep breath.

"How?"

Adrien nearly replied that he had seen them kissing, then he remembered that they only ever did that behind locked doors, away from prying eyes. If he hadn't been spying, he would never have known.

"You are closer", he explained. "I mean… Physically closer. There used to be at least an arm's distance between you, at all times. Now, sometimes, you touch her shoulder. The back of your hand brushes the back of hers. You find excuses to look at her tablet so you can bump into her..."

His father listened to him with increasing shock, and ended up chuckling. He cleared his throat, pressing a hand to his lips.

"Hands somewhere on her person whenever… I am an idiot", he muttered.

His son blinked, wondering what he was missing.

"I made the same observations about someone else a few days ago", Gabriel explained, regaining his composure. "And I came to the same conclusion."

He cleared his throat again, then shook his head.

"We would have told you in time. I didn't expect you'd notice. We tried to keep it quiet."

Adrien nodded.

"Of course", he murmured.

There was a lull in the conversation. He felt his father's eyes study him.

"We would have", Gabriel insisted. "I didn't intend for it to be a dark secret. There was just no point telling you about it yet."

Adrien looked up, startled. There was not the slightest hint of guilt on his father's face, not even of doubt. As a matter of fact, he was confident, as if he had been asked an easy question.

"Romantic matters are handled differently depending on one's age", he continued, "Teenagers fall in love first, and then they stumble their way through flirting and dating, handling their problems as they come. Adults… Adults go about it the other way around. They are cautious. They have done the stumbling and falling before, so they start by testing the waters and making sure there will not be unsurmountable barriers along the way. Until it's all figured out, until you are sure you can build something lasting… there is no point sharing the news. There is no point bringing
someone else's feelings and expectations into the equation."

"You are saying you didn't want to tell me because you it's not serious with Nathalie?"

Gabriel winced.

"Not quite as callously. What I meant is... It's such an important change. It's not bringing someone new into my life, but in yours too. It would have been irresponsible to get your hopes up - or to hurt you, more likely - without being certain the relationship was meant to last."

Adrien mulled over that. Strange how, every time his father was willing to open up, there was something worse concealed on the side, like a secret lair filled with magical artefacts and butterflies. The heart to heart conversations did not feel nearly as important as they should have.

"Do you want it to last?"

Gabriel pinched his lips, frowning.

"I don't think it's appropriate to discuss such a perso-"

He caught the expression on his son's face, went silent, and sighed.

"I don't know", he admitted. "And I'd rather not discuss this further until I do. Please do not take that as a sign I don't think you can handle the conversation."

Adrien gestured in frustration.

"WHY? Why do you have to keep everything to yourself like that? Why do you keep keeping secrets?"

Gabriel glared at him.

"Do not raise your v-"

He groaned.

"There is no why", he said, his tone carefully controlled. "I discuss things when they are ready to be discussed."

"Or when you are ready to discuss them."

Adrien's father glared at him. The teenager glared back.

"Or is that the same thing?" he spat.

Gabriel stood, pushing his chair back into place.

"I see this conversation will not get us anywhere, and I really don't appreciate your tone", he said, looking at the table rather than at Adrien. He walked to the door. "I should be at the office by now. Please check your schedule and try to follow it. I don't know if Nathalie will come to work today."

Adrien gaped at him, the pattern he had seen time and time again suddenly too glaring to be ignored.

"You are a coward", he said, his realization escaping his lips just as it occurred to him.
Gabriel tensed.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You are a coward. All of that disapproval, all of that criticism, it's just so you can run away from the conversations you don't like. You make the other person feel like it's their fault, but you are running away. You are a coward", the boy repeated.

His father tried to stare him down, but Adrien was not about to let himself be subdued.

"Why is Nathalie not returning your calls?" he asked, arms crossed. "What have you done?"

Gabriel straightened up.

"It is none of your business, and childish displays of rebellion are unseemly, Adrien. Have a nice day", he finished, leaving the room.

He closed the door behind him.

###

Nathalie's doorbell rang.

It either meant that the building was on fire, or that Gabriel had decided to come to check if she had left the country. No one ever visited her. Whoever it was had managed to make it through the building's doors and to go straight to her floor, too.

Quite frankly, she hoped there was a fire.

Signing, she extracted herself from her bed, walked into her living room, and waited to see if the visitor would ring the doorbell again.

He did.

She opened the door, in her pyjamas and slippers, hair braided, with no layer of powder and concealer on her face make her feel human.

"I'm sick", she told Gabriel as soon as she recognized his suit, before he could greet her. She didn't even look at his face. "I called in sick."

"I know. I was told. I had something to return to you", he said, handing her a black plastic box.

It was labelled 'paperclips'. She took it, still not looking at him, and opened it.

It contained what looked like a hundred bobby pins.

Her brain was foggy, she was paying the price for that bottle of wine, and she had not slept enough. The only thought she managed to formulate was "therapy".

"You kept them."

"I might have lost one or two", Gabriel commented, with slight humor.
"Please take them and go away", she replied, shoving the box back into his hands.

He closed it and slipped between her and the doorframe to get inside, before she could react.

"I wanted to apologize about earlier", he casually said, just as if he had not just forced his way in uninvited. "I left knowing what conclusion the events would lead you to, and I feel like I should… correct it."

Nathalie closed the door. It gave her an excuse to turn her back to him, for a few seconds.

"You mean I should have drawn conclusions from your owning a magical watch that contains some shiny butterfly, and vanishing when the city is under attack? I don't see what you mean, sir."

"I tend to do that, you know? There's a conversation I don't want to have, where the issue could be solved by talking, and I still flee."

She turned to him. He had left the box on a cabinet, and was looking down at his hands, twisting his fingers. Anyone else would have looked sheepish, but he was pensive.

"Are we having the conversation, then?" she asked.

"No."

Nathalie, aggravated, took a deep breath.

"As you wish."

"I came to talk about that obvious conclusion. Namely, to deny being him. I know the evidence points in that direction, but it can be misleading."

"It's not what you think. Really."

Gabriel joined her. He did not touch her, but his hand hovered inches from her hip.

"Really."

She pursed her lips.

"And you won't discuss what the correct conclusion is, of course."

His hand did land on her hip. It burned her through the flannel of her pyjama.

"If I discussed the correct conclusion, then 'plausible deniability' would fly right out the window, for a start. On top of that, you can't discuss everything with everyone, and there are things I can't tell you. You have covered for me for fifteen years, and I trust you, but this is not a question of trust."

Nathalie was still trying not to meet his eyes. She looked down at his arm.

"It is about Alice, isn't it?"

His hand moved away from her hip and balled into a fist. He hid it behind his back.

"Partly", he murmured. "Do you believe me, when I say this is not what it looks like?"

"Does it matter?"
"I wish I could say it doesn't."

She shook her head.

"I'm too much of a liar to trust you on your word only, Gabriel."

He nodded, reaching up to brush a stray hair away from her face.

"I suppose that's fair."

Nathalie sighed. He bit his lower lip, and took a step back.

"I'll be on my way", he said. "Let me know if you plan to return to work, or-"

"I was about to make coffee. Do you want some?"

###

Two hours was a long, long time to sit on the floor in front of a flower pot, but Adrien took his moping seriously. He glowered at the flower pot and seethed until his father returned home, and paid no mind to his backside's protests.

He had turned the house upside down.

He had discovered more than he had set out to find.

At eight in the evening, he finally heard the limo come back and park in the courtyard. A minute later, his father unlocked the doors and walked into the mansion's hallway. He spotted Adrien. He paused, then closed the door, tilting his head to the side.

"Adrien. Please do not sit on the floor", he said, his tone halfway between confusion and disappointment.

The teenager did not look at him, but pointed at the network of silvery lines that decorated the black flower pot.

"That", he announced, "is a butterfly."

Gabriel took three steps forward and turned to the pot.

"I think it is", he commented.

"It's also on the doors, and on the walls, and everywhere else."

"Adrien, our last name is the name of a butterfly species. Why does it seem to come as a surprise that they are plastered on every surface of our ancestral home?"

The teenager blinked, startled. He had totally forgotten about the name. In his defense, it was quite the obscure piece of trivia. He still felt like an idiot. He shook his head, and turned to his father. Gabriel was puzzled, and irritated, but Adrien still noticed some nervousness in the way he held himself.
"You also sign your art with a black butterfly", Adrien pointed out, watching his reaction.

His father clenched his jaw, while trying to look unfazed.

"Yes. Once upon a time, I was a fourteen year old aspiring designer, and I thought it was a great idea. Drop it. And, for the love of god, stop sitting on the floor."

"I'm going to ask you something. Just one question. I'd like an honest answer. I'm not going to get angry, I'm not going to panic, I just…" - Adrien breathed in and lowered his eyes. - "I just want to know."

"Adrien, look at me ", his father commanded, voice hoarse.

The boy did. Gabriel had paled, his expression the closest to horror his son had ever seen it.

"No", he said once their eyes met.

"A-are you Hawk Moth?" Adrien exclaimed at the same time.

Gabriel stilled. He pinched his lips, absorbing the blow, and composed himself.

"It's-", he started, voice shaky. - "It's an interesting theory, and I'm sure it has it's merits. Do you think I am?"

By that last question, he had recovered, and his tone was mildly curious at best. Adrien had seen how hard the accusation had hit him, however. He had his answer. He also knew there would be no repairing the harm he had just done.

"I, no, I…"

"I am not", Gabriel said, adjusting his coat, and walking to the stairs. "Though I see why you would be suspicious."

Adrien, fumbling for words, watched him climb the stairs without looking back. The boy jumped to his feet.

"Father", he called. "Father, please, I didn't-"

Gabriel merely nodded, walking into his office. He closed the door. Adrien heard the lock turn.

###

Gabriel had stayed for coffee.

They had not discussed the 'supervillain' matter - cowards, the two of them, and secretive cheats on top of that - preferring to go for small talk about the weather and work. Nathalie's boss had 'freed his day'. When she had asked how he had accomplished that feat (she had taken his editing privileges away on the calendar app), he had told her how he had tricked Jagged Stone into compliance.

"I told him I was in trouble with a beautiful woman, which was very effective. And then I begged for advice, which had him all but order me to take the day off. He's now in Stéphanie's very
capable hands. She can introduce the test garments and deal with his suggestions."

"Did he give you tips?"

"Twenty minutes worth of them."

"And what was his advice?"

"I have no idea. I don't even listen to him when his opinion is relevant."

Two minutes into that conversation, she had noticed he was playing with the hair tie that had been, up to that point, holding her braid together.

They had discussed his undergoing six months of therapy, at the age of thirteen, so his mother's cigarettes would stop vanishing straight from her hands. Gabriel had uttered the words "I always had terrible impulse control". Nathalie had stared at him in disbelief, wondering what his point of reference was.

He had laid secrets at her feet, as an offering to thank her for not asking about the real secret, the dangerous one, the one that would most likely land them both in trouble.

Someday, she would gather the nerve to question him, and force his hand into explaining what was going on. Another day. For all the mystery and gloom, after their talk, she was mostly sure he was telling the truth. His reaction had not been that of an evil supercriminal. He had not threatened her. He had not killed her. He had merely been concerned about what she thought.

From what she had seen in the morning, murder was the last thing on his mind. Mostly, he focused on keeping his hands away from her. As far as dark plans were concerned, that was fairly insignificant.

Then, after deciding he had to go to work after all, and putting his coat on, and walking out the door, and saying goodbye, he had informed her that Adrien had found out about their relationship. In passing. He had promised to handle the problem, and provided no explanations on how the boy had figured things out or what his opinion was.

Nathalie had spent the afternoon working from home (because what was she supposed to do with her days but work?) before deciding that a talk about Adrien was definitely in order.

She walked into the mansion at nine in the evening, hoping she could slip into Gabriel's office unnoticed. She knew he was in there: the light was on. She had hoped for stealthy race up the stairs, but paused in the hallway when she found Adrien standing in front of his father's door, a fist still raised to knock.

He looked distraught.

What mess have they landed themselves in this time?

The boy ran down the stairs.

"Nathalie, thank god you're here."

She looked at him, then at Gabriel's door, then back to the child.

"What's wrong?" she asked, knowing full well the crestfallen expression on Adrien's face was a sign of disaster.
"I… I said something to Father, and… I said something horrible, Nathalie, and I'm not sure I can fix it. He won't talk to me."

She grimaced. She couldn't help it. She already had one child to babysit. She did not need Gabriel to act like a moping toddler on top of that.

Adrien winced, hurt (of course), and she forced herself to appear caring and warm, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"What did you tell him?"

"It's going to sound insane… I-I accused him of being Hawk Moth."

"I… see", she replied to fill the silence.

Her stomach had twisted a little. It was one thing for Gabriel to hear the question from her, but from his son?

Adrien was frantic.

"I wanted to talk to him, I wanted to fix this, but he won't open the door, he won't even answer when I knock. I don't know what to do."

Extroverts. Gabriel would avoid talking to his last breath. The easiest way to fix it was to leave him alone.

Nathalie inhaled then sighed, hiding her worry.

"I will talk to him", she promised, getting a few bills and a credit card out of her wallet. She pushed them into Adrien's hands. "Call your friends. Have a nice evening out. Be home by midnight."

"What if… What do… What if he won't let you in either?"

She held her keys up. The boy's eyes went wide.

"That would, err, work."

"Now stop worrying because your father is acting like a child, and go have fun. I will take care of this."

"He's not acting like a child! He's hurt!"

Nathalie rolled her eyes.

"He has you panicking and pulling your hair out because he can't handle conversation. That is childish. Parents are not supposed to let their feelings weigh upon their children, no matter the circumstances. He knows that full well."

Adrien frowned, his expression turning cold and defensive.

He looked so much like his mother it was uncanny.

He controlled himself, however, lowering his eyes. The anger faded, replaced by sadness.

"Do you care about him?" he murmured.
"I do. If I did not, I would not have to call him out when he does this ", she replied, pointing at Gabriel's office door.

Adrien nodded.

"Please tell him I didn't mean it", he murmured. "Tell him I'm sorry."

"I will. Now, let's get the car, have you driven to… Nino's? That rapper boy? He's your favorite, isn't he?"

The teenager gaped.

"I will cover for you", she said, pushing him out the door and texting their driver. "Also, I want an update on where you are and with whom every thirty minutes, are we clear?"

"Yes, Nathalie."

"And you are to be home by midnight."

"I will be."

"Good."

Ten minutes later, once sure Adrien had agreed with a meeting place with his friend and was on his way there, she walked back into the mansion. She climbed the stairs, knocked on the office's door, and got no answer.

"Gabriel."

"It's open", he said, which meant he had watched her send his son away and unlocked his door while she was outside.

She walked in, locking the door between her. Gabriel was sitting at his desk, surrounded by dozens of sketches. He was still drawing, and had not looked up. His face was inscrutable, but gaunt.

"Stéphanie emailed me Stone's comments", he announced. "I've been working on the requested changes, I'm nearly done. I'll need you to scan them and email them to him. With some luck, he'll be able to review them tonight."

Nathalie reached up, running her fingers over her bun, pulling her hairpins out. She crossed the room, crushing fragments of porcelain on her way. A vase was missing from Gabriel's desk, and she spotted the remains of it in the trash can.

Once next to Gabriel, she pushed his drawings off the corner of desk, and sat on the spot she had just freed.

He frowned.

"What are-"

She dropped her bobby pins on the sketch he was working on.

###
Adrien had spent the evening with Nino, his best friend having managed to convince his parents that catching a movie that late at night was totally a good idea.

Nino, being Nino, had quickly realized Adrien did not want to talk, so he had chattered, and chattered, and chattered. Music talk, and jokes, and a complete review of the movie Adrien had pretended to watch. Some fawning about Alya carefully concealed behind a summary of his day. It had been distracting, and Adrien was grateful for that. He adored Nino.

He still returned home ten minutes before midnight, to find Nathalie waiting for him. She was sitting in the small sofa next to the stairs, reading something on her tablet. It was like any normal day.

He approached, scared and uneasy, waiting for her to notice him.

"Your father is waiting for you in his office", she told him as he fidgeted his way to her.

She barely looked up, and was bored and distant when she did. Like on any normal day.

"T-thank you, Nathalie", Adrien murmured, turning to the staircase.

"Did you enjoy your evening?"

He froze and blinked, his eyes returning to her.

"It was nice, thank you."

She nodded, and focused on her screen again. Adrien waited for a second or so, for his surprise to subside, then walked to his father's office as fast as he could without running inside the house. The door was ajar.

"Come in", Gabriel said as soon as he noticed his presence.

Adrien did, swallowing hard.

"Father."

"I'd like to apologize for earlier. My reaction was… I overreacted. I am sorry."

"W-what I said was awful, Father. Not to mention stupid. I had no reason to believe-"

"Of course you did. You have no idea of who I am, which is entirely my fault. Do you know what Marinette told me the other day?"

The teenager shook his head.

His father stood and joined him, putting a hand on his shoulder and leading him to the window. He looked up and stared at the night sky.

"She told me that you know me so little that what other people say is starting to fill in the blanks."

Adrien reeled at that. He knew Marinette pulled no punches when she had a battle to fight - she had proved it time and time again in class, even if she was shy with him - but that was harsh. Harsh, and not totally untrue. He had started to believe Ladybug's theory over his own opinion of his father.
Still… It was not a pleasant thing to hear, and Gabriel did not tolerate disrespect. Adrien was surprised Marinette had walked out of that meeting with all her feathers intact.

He studied his father's profile. He didn't look angry, just tired.

"That's not true, you know", Adrien lied.

"Don't try to spare me. I am just as bad as she said. All I've done for the last five years is put distance between us. All I've done for my entire life is put distance between me and people. I haven't tried nearly hard enough to fix that flaw. I mean, I've been accused of being a supervillain by two people in a single day. There's no denying I have failings…" - His hand squeezed Adrien's shoulder. - "I promise I'll try harder."

His son had no words to say to that, so he hugged him. Gabriel tensed, then breathed in, then relaxed, and then wrapped an hesitant arm around Adrien. There was some awkward shoulder patting.

Adrien ended up taking a step back, not to torture his father for too long.

"Thank you", he said with a smile.

"There's nothing to thank me for", Gabriel murmured, tousling his hair. "Now go to bed. It's late."

His son acquiesced, running a hand through his own hair, and walked to the door. He stopped on his way out.

"Good night, Father."

"Good night, Adrien."

The boy closed the door as he left and traipsed away. He was startled by the clicking of heels. Nathalie, down the stairs, was collecting her things.

She stopped and turned to him.

"How did it go?" she asked, adjusting the strap of her purse.

"It went… well", Adrien replied. "Are you leaving?"

"It's getting late and I have to get up early tomorrow. See you in the morning."

He gaped, understanding all of a sudden that she was not going to discuss something with her father before leaving: she had been waiting for him to finish his talk with Gabriel. She had wanted to check on him.

"See you in the morning", he repeated. "Good night, Nathalie. Thank you."

She gave a sharp nod and quietly walked out.

###

Curiosity killed the cat, but they had nine lives.

Chat Noir needed answers. He wanted to know his father better. He wanted to understand him and,
while Gabriel was *trying* to get closer… he would never be forthcoming with his secrets.

Which meant a visit to 'Pat Messmer, lawyer' was in order.

Adrien had gone to bed, waited one hour, and slipped out of the house to transform. He had been barely a block away when Ladybug had called him to know where he had been all day and evening. He had told her he would be patrolling, and had forgotten about that. He had reassured her and apologized, then politely cut the conversation short.

After that, he had made his way to the fifty-second floor of that office building and opened the window he had broken on his first visit.

He found the secret room just like they had left it: notes and drawings everywhere, butterflies in aquariums, and magical artefacts everywhere. He discovered Jalil's pendant on one of the tables, as well as an umbrella that looked very much like Aurore Borell's, wrapped in black cloth. Chat picked up a stack of notes and started reading.

His ring beeped.

"Stop it, Plagg."

There was a second beep, not sixty seconds after the first, but right after his words.

"I'm not leaving."

The beeping ceased. His ring returned to normal.

"Thank you."

As it turned out, the notes he had grabbed were about Kim, and contained a great deal of magical jargon. If Gabriel was not a supervillain, he had to be a wizard. Three entire pages were filled with a nearly untranslatable analysis of Dislocoeur's reversal spell.

Adrien went to check the notes on Ladybug next. The sketches of her were accurate down to the amount and location of her spots (Chat noir had once counted them. Twice.), and her most common moves were illustrated step by step. Everything about her was documented: her height, her approximate weight, how high she could jump, how fast she could run. Her *patrol routes* were listed.

This in an unsecured room that had been located by two teenagers. Adrien folded the sheet and shoved it into his pocket.

Chat Noir moved on to his father's files about *him*. Those notes were very similar to those about Ladybug: the pages were organised in the same fashion, with sketches and a description of his costume, then of his combat moves. The annotations contained more than a few "idiot" and "stupid".

*Thanks, dad.*

Nothing explained why the moves were "stupid" either. It was just written there, next to step by step descriptions of his motions.

His patrols were listed too.

He paled and took that sheet too, understanding only too well that if Hawk Moth had managed to
piece that much information together, he and Ladybug would have been dead ten times over.

He flipped to the next page and found random observations on his behavior. 'Besotted with the
girl'. 'Kind, favors children (exploitable flaw), self-esteem issues, insecure with overcompensation'.
'Self-sacrificing: will shield the girl regardless of available alternatives. Fails to use ranged weapon
to fend the threats off. Poor reflexes.'

*Thanks again, dad.*

'Will get them both killed.'

Chat Noir put the notes back on the table.

None of this was nice. None of this was pleasant. But it was just information, compulsively
collected. His father could have slaughtered them with half of what he knew about them.

There was no-

He heard a noise. He didn't recognize it at once, but it seemed to come from outside of the room,
from another part of the building.

*The elevator.*

He dropped everything and hurried to the stairs, pushing the trapdoor back into place. He was
climbing through the window when the door opened. He looked back and, for a second, his eyes
met his father's. Gabriel gaped at him, bewildered.

Chat Noir slipped out the window.

"WAIT", he heard his father call. "WAIT!"

The young hero just climbed out of sight, figuring that he could get to the roof and then pick a
course of action. He rolled over the roof's railing and sat down, his heart thumping, nearly
hyperventilating. He heard a scraping noise behind him. He turned back and saw Gabriel heave
himself above the railing. His father dropped to the floor and immediately stood up, on wobbly
legs, with no shoes, his white suit torn and stained. He muttered a curse, then raised an arm.

"W-wait", he asked again.

He had climbed out of that window. He had climbed out of a window on the last floor of a fifty-
two floors high building, and climbed to the roof.

"Please wait", he repeated, taking a step closer to a bewildered Adrien. "I need to talk to you."

Chat Noir took a step back. His mind was reeling, and he couldn't have replied if he had tried. He
was breathing too fast. His throat was clenched.

He couldn't process what was happening at all.

"My wife", Gabriel said. "She was one of you. She was a Miraculous holder. I need to know what
happened to her. I need to talk to Tikki."

###
On a hot tin roof

What Gabriel remembered best about Alice were the ribbons. Red, falling to her knees and, more often than not, wrapped around his wrist. He still woke up reaching for them.

It didn't happen everyday, of course, not anymore. Maybe once a week. More often than not, the first thing he did in the morning was reach to the left to wrap an arm around someone who was not there anymore. *More often than not.*

How his morning went was determined by how awake he was when his alarm clock started beeping. Half-awake, slumbering? He patted the mattress once, and sighed. There was no confusion, and thus there was no fear. If he was startled awake, however, his mind did not quite catch up. He had to *remember* all over again. There was that split second of 'what is happening?', and then reality hit.

He slept with the curtains open. He was not fond of his own mind. It had been five years, *five.* He hoped that, at *some* point, the notion would sink in.

###

It's an established fact that, in any given era, in any given location, in any given circumstances, Chat Noir loves Ladybug.
Some say it comes with the ring.

Chat Noir knows better.

###

It was hard, Gabriel mused as he looked at the wide-eyed Chat Noir, to remember having ever been so young. How old was that boy? Fourteen? Fifteen, at most? Still innocent, still hopeful. Still naive enough for the weird old man with the secret lair not to be hanging upside down from the roof with a shattered jaw and broken ribs.

"One of us?" the child said. "What do you mean?"

How did you go about explaining it all? That boy was in love with a lively girl who was * alright,* and he trusted Plagg with his life. He had not lost anything yet. He still thought he would never fail.

"Alice… My wife…" Gabriel started, still trying to find the best way to formulate his thoughts. "Was…" - Well, there was not two ways about it. - "She used to be Ladybug. Years ago, she went missing, while on a trip, and I think Tikki… Do you know her? Ladybug’s Kwami?"

Chat Noir nodded.

Gabriel wet his lips. He clasped his hands behind his back and kept his voice casual.
"Tikki might have information about her disappearance. Hopefully."

The boy remained silent. He was shaking, and his fist was clenched around his staff.

"What… is all of this? " he exclaimed, pointing at the roof under them. "All of that research. Are you looking for your wife? Is that what it is about?"

He was not going to make it easy.

"If you don't mind, I would rather have this conversation with Tikki. I know her. I'm sorry, Chat Noir, but I don't know you."

"Didn't your wife have a partner?" the child tried, as if the costume proved his worth. "Another Chat Noir?"

He _had_ to ask that question.

"No", Gabriel lied.

The boy did not need to know about the man whose ring had been taken away.

"So, if I ask my Kwami about you, he will confirm that?"

Gabriel's stomach twisted a little, not nearly enough for it to disturb him, let alone for it to show on his face.

"He will."

Plagg did not have a choice, anyway.

"And if I ask Tikki?" the child asked.

There was no holding the wince in at those words. Tikki was no liar. Even sealed twice over, she would volunteer all the information she was allowed to reveal. Gabriel bit the inside of his cheeks, forcing his features into impassiveness, but Chat Noir had seen his brief grimace.

"You are lying!" the boy exclaimed. "Why are you even… There was no point!"

Children. You tried to protect them, but they preferred to question, and dig, and pick at the wounds. They couldn't just let it go. As you aged, you realized lies were a mercy.

The incoherences in the conversation hit the boy.

"Why would Tikki tell me, but not Plagg?"

Gabriel would have preferred him a little slower. He sighed.

"Plagg cannot talk about his previous chosen. He cannot talk to his previous chosen. Plagg is sealed, for his own safety. The Miraculous was taken away from that man, for very good reasons, as far as I know."

"What good reasons?"

*Look at him, don't let your eyes stray, don't falter.*

"I'm afraid my wife didn't share more than what I just told you. I'm sorry. Now… Please, let's
just… I only want to talk to Tikki. Give your partner that message. Let her decide."

He watched as Chat Noir's mask - not the black one around his eyes, but the daring persona - slipped back on. The young hero smirked.

"Sir, you're not being straightforward with me, why should I help you? If every word that comes out of your mouth is a lie of the tiniest part of the truth you can tell me… You're not going anywhere near my partner."

Gabriel rolled his eyes.

The boy crossed his arms.

They waited.

"That's it? You don't care if I walk away?" Chat Noir exclaimed.

"We both know you are not going to walk away. I'm sorry you can't trust me, but I will not be blackmailed into giving you information that is none of your business. Now, if you do not like that, I will go straight to your partner."

"Ladybug has been active for ten months and you have not contacted her. Or me, for that matter."

_I didn't want answers. Do you want me to tell you I didn't want answers? It was easier to try to track down Hawk Moth._

"Will you pass the message?" Gabriel asked, ignoring the remark.

The boy clenched his jaw and glared at him, face tilted down to hide his features both behind his hair and in the shadows. Gabriel saw his eyes widen all the same.

_Damn._

"In any given era", Chat Noir quoted. "In any given location, in any given circumstances, Chat Noir loves Ladybug."

Gabriel turned away with a groan.

The young idiot who would not remember that curiosity had killed the cat stared at him.

"You loved her. She was Ladybug and you were Chat Noir and you loved her", he murmured. "It was you."

###

Lie upon lie upon lie, over and over again.

It was really Gabriel's defining trait, those secrets. You thought you had finally discovered something, and then you found out something was hidden deeper still. He would look into your eyes, cold, confident and composed, to feed you whatever story he wanted you to believe.

Adrien could spot some of his tells, by now, thankfully. Chat Noir knew more pieces of the puzzle
than Gabriel realized. He had seen him lose it after finding Ladybug in his home. He had listened to him call her a child fighting monsters, and predict she would die.

He had seen just how madly and desperately the inscrutable, uncaring man in front of him had loved his wife.

"It was you", the teenager repeated.

His father had been Chat Noir.

His mother had been Ladybug.

His heart was thumping so hard he could hear it.

Gabriel, who had turned away, pinched the bridge of his nose. He clicked his tongue.

"Yes. Yes. And how is that information relevant, exactly? I'm asking you to be a messenger, boy, not a confidant. My backstory does not concern you, is that clear?"

Chat Noir crossed his arms.

He had walked out of Gabriel's office feeling better, with the promise that his father would try harder to mend the gap between them, with hope. And now, he discovered that mending the gap would never mean sharing the truth about anything. Adrien's mother had been Ladybug, Ladybug, and it had something to do with her disappearance, but that did not concern him any more than it did the masked stranger that was Chat Noir.

"You are telling me that your ring was taken from you for very good reasons, and yet you are asking me to help you contact Tikki. You are telling me that Plagg is sealed and cannot talk to you, yet you expect me to let you near my untransformed best friend. Yes, your story concerns me."

His father adjusted his suit and shook his head, walking to the service door leading inside the building.

"As I was saying, I will not discuss my past with you", he declared, fetching his access card from his pocket. He swiped it in the digital lock. "Feel free to relay my request to Tikki, or that she can expect hearing from me through her chosen. Goodbye, young man."

Adrien watched him walk through the door and close it behind him, for the third time that day.

At least, he does that to everyone...

He considered removing his ring and questioning Plagg, but the Kwami was sealed, wasn't he? "That's the seal, I can't spill your secrets", he had said about that discussion with Tikki earlier. And even before that… every time Adrien had tried to discuss his father with Plagg, the black cat's answers had been 'I couldn't tell', 'I can't say', and other variations of that same sentence.

That purring, and his looking so sorry about everything that had unfolded with Adrien's father...

He had known all along. He had not been able to say it.

Chat Noir and Ladybug.

Chat Noir, and Ladybug.
It took four minutes and around forty seconds for the new Chat Noir to peek into Gabriel's study. It was enough time for him to have called the girl, and too little for him to have actually talked to her. Discoveries about their predecessors and questionable contact requests were usually involved strenuous discussions and the odd argument.

Gabriel's guess on how long it would take him to follow had not been that far off.

The designer did not look up from his notes - he needed to at least appear busy - and clapped his watch shut, wishing the bloody thing could recharge faster.

He was in no mood for yet another discussion with a teenage boy. Your own son being willing to believe you were a sociopathic monster was quite the indication you had no aptitude to handle children (you had to stop and contemplate your abject failure as a parent).

Not liking children did not help.

Chat Noir waited over the trapdoor for a minute, head hanging down above the stairs, then dropped into the room. He said nothing and wandered around with a smile on his lips, pretending to take in the sights. He tapped one of the aquariums with a claw. He inspected the notes and sketches. He hummed Dragon Ball's opening tune. In short, he did everything in his power to force Gabriel to interact with him without actually trying to interact with him.

He was irritating.

As if you weren't, back then.

"Do you know what they say about cats and curiosity?" Gabriel drawled, without turning to the brat.

"Can't say I do, sorry."

The corner of Gabriel's mouth twitched. A cat idiom, and no immediate comeback? That took some dedication. He still pretended to focus on notes he had reviewed a hundred times, and berated himself for being lured into conversation. Not that he had asked the young hero to leave. He had been 'lured' the instant he had seen the teenager slip out the window, and had not managed to rein his own curiosity in.

He had questions. So many questions. None of them were worth asking.

"So", the boy exclaimed, flipping through his own file and stopping on the combat notes. "What is so 'stupid' about my fighting style?"

Gabriel lifted his head at that, and his eyebrows.

"I've seen you use your staff as a sword, a shield, a club, and an elevator, but you scarcely ever use it as a staff."

"It's a multipurpose weapon. What's your point?"

"My point is that if your opponents get close enough for you to use said weapon as a sword, you
have messed up spectacularly."

Chat Noir huffed.

"Also", his predecessor continued, "every single time you do a pirouette to the right, you leave your left side exposed.

"I do not!"

Gabriel stared him down.

"I do?" the boy sighed.

He took his staff out and tried a pirouette in slow-motion. He winced halfway through and tried it again, and again, and again, until he got it right.

"Thank you", he said.

When he got no answer, he inched closer, leaning on his staff.

"So, you used a staff too?"

"No. I'm a fencer. Sword", Gabriel, lifting his right hand. "Cataclysm", he added, lifting the left.

Chat Noir swayed back and forth, hands on the tip on his staff and chin on his hands.

"Nice", he commented, pensive.

He was less insufferable than Gabriel had expected. For a start, he had dropped the prying. And then… he seemed like a hard boy to hate. Cocky, but bearable, if a bit irritating. Strange how, this time around, the cat was the nice one. Gabriel caught himself not disliking him. Considering the visceral loathing he felt for the girl, it was a surprise.

"Timebreaker had a watch just like that one", Chat Noir noted. "What do they do?"

"It's a quantique, a ma-"

"A quantic antique? Did you just…"

"Yes. It's a magic tracker. Family heirloom, very precious, do not touch ", Gabriel snapped when clawed hands reached for the watch.

The brat pressed the latch. The watch opened. As no Akuma had been released, nothing happened. The butterfly did not pop out of the watch face. The hands gave the time, instead of the pink Kwami's position.

Chat Noir wrinkled his nose.

Gabriel studied his face. So the boy had seen the watch's magic in action.

"It is calibrated to react to Hawk Moth's transformation and to his corrupting a butterfly", he explained. "I've been trying to…"

"... Pinpoint his location?" the young hero finished, staring at the map on the wall. He swallowed. "Are you sure you should go after a supervillain? I mean, you're just…"
"Just?"

"Just… human. Don't you have a kid? What if you get hurt? Does he even know you are doing this?"

Gabriel pursed his lips, breathing in, clenching his hands on the table.

He had considered that question at length.

He had made sure Adrien would have all of the answers he needed if - and only if - a confrontation with Hawk Moth turned sour. He would not have to go through the agony of wondering. A car crash, closed casket, very sudden, very sad, but very normal. Nathalie would make sure to cover it all up.

Of course, he did not plan to be the one to get hurt.

"Do your parents know you are doing this?"

Chat Noir gaped.

"Then don't throw stones", Gabriel told him.

"I'm just saying…"

"No. I'm willing to give you a few fighting tips if it can help save your life - and god knows you will sorely need them - but I will not discuss my family with you. Not in any circumstances."

The boy glared, fuming.

"Fine."

"And on that note, I'd appreciate if your partner stopped visiting my son, especially if her goal is to go and convince him that I am the lunatic I fought for ten years of my life. Are we clear on that?"

The tirade ended as a yell, rage forcing its way out of Gabriel despite his best attempts to keep it in. The outburst made him angry at himself instead. Chat Noir recoiled. Gabriel moved back in a slower motion, straightening up and wiping all emotion off his own face.

A moment passed.

"She didn't tell him that", the teenager declared, fumbling for a lie. "That was me."

Gabriel rolled his eyes.

"I highly doubt that."

Chat Noir rolled his eyes.

"Suit yourself. It was still me."

"Suit yourself."

The child grinned, faking smugness. Gabriel sighed, taking the sky as a witness.

"Don't cover for that girl too much. You are her pendant. You are supposed to call her out when her behavior is unacceptable. That doesn't work if you worship the ground she walks on."
That revelation was received with a confused blink, then a Cheshire grin.

"I take it you did a lot of catcalling out with your Ladybug?"

His mouth remained open as horror replaced his humor. Dead wife. Or maybe it was just the whole 'accusing Gabriel Agreste of lewd behavior'.

The designer took pity on him.

"As a matter of fact, I did a lot of 'catcalling'. Does it look to you like I was the one doing the calling out, however?"

The child went from horrified to appalled, and more than a bit shocked.

Gabriel smirked, considered the situation, and let himself grin.

###
After all, Adrien mused, getting his father to talk to him was not that hard: he just had to be someone else.

Could you be jealous of yourself? The ease with which Chat Noir had managed to start a conversation was… distressing, that was the term. Then again, what would Gabriel and Adrien have talked about? The only thing they had in common was their secret, and Gabriel had kept his well. Even now, even after letting a bit of his mask slip, he kept walls around himself, and slammed metaphorical doors in Adrien's face as soon as the topic strayed too close to discomfort.

So, instead of talking of Alice Agreste, the Ladybug, the boy asked about his fighting skills. Instead of demanding explanations about the 'very good reasons' why his father had seen the ring taken from him, and about the seal placed on Plagg, they discussed magical watches.

"It needs charging, endless charging", Gabriel had explained, pointing at a gem on the ceiling, right above the pocket watch. "It's defective. Whenever the tracking spell activates, the magic starts leaking out."

"Can't you fix it?"

Adrien was only just learning of the existence of magical items that were not Kwami-related, but his father acted like they were a common occurrence, and he seemed to be quite the expert on those things.

The more you knew.

It was still easier to process than his having been Chat Noir.

"Not really", Gabriel replied. "I went to one of the creator's descendants, but the only way to 'repair' the spell would be to remove it and cast it again. It couldn't be linked to the butterfly Kwami."

Maybe it would not have been such a bad thing. Adrien did not want his father to track Hawk Moth down. That 'lunatic Gabriel had fought for ten years of his life'. It was way too dangerous.

Was it what his mother had done? Gone after Hawk Moth, and not come back?

He couldn't ask, even if he desperately wanted to know. The only moment his father had replied to a question about his wife without closing up, it had been when the question had been a joke. On that note, Chat Noir would have to remember to think about his puns before blurting them out, because he had not wanted to hear about catcalling and his father in the same sentence, ever. But, of course, 'calling' out, 'cat', 'catcall'. He wished he could wipe that moment from his memory, as well as the traumatizing answer.

It had been an occasion to understand a little more about his father, though. It had been so shocking to see him grin. Not 'grin', exactly: be amused, consider the possibility of grinning, and then consciously allow himself to. Anger slipped out of him much more easily than smiles.

You could not talk to him, you had to bait him into talking to you. He did not have conversations he could not control, he ran away from them. He had no scruples about lying whatsoever.

You had to wear a mask to see his true face.
Adrien could not recall a single conversation between them, as father and son, where the man had been at ease, let alone this at ease.

His son took the scraps of attention he could get.

"So what will you do, if you find him?" he asked, finally crossing the few steps that separated him from his father, and sitting on the table next to him.

There was not a sign of recognition on his father's face, even from that close up. Then again, when you were plastered on magazines in one identity, and all over the news in the other, without ever being recognized, you had to admit your mask was super-effective.

"Inform one of the Kwami of his identity", Gabriel said. "Most likely Kappa, if I can get my hands on master Fu."

"Why not Ladybug and I? I mean, it's kind of our job."

For a second or so, Gabriel's eyes lost focus. He composed himself quickly enough.

"It is 'kind of his job' too", he drawled.

"But we are here, and we have been fighting Hawk Moth since he resurfaced. That is why we were given the Miraculous to begin with."

"You only just discovered that your dodges left you wide open to being gutted, boy. Forgive me for not giving you my vote of confidence."

"I can get better."

"I'm sure you can", Gabriel replied, taking the watch and opening it.

He sighed and looked up at the gem on the ceiling as if it had personally offended him.

Chat Noir stared at him, then grinned and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

"Your could train me", he suggested, wriggling his eyebrows. "Seems like you're purrfectly suited for the job."

His heart started thumping, terror flooding in - that had been a mistake - but he couldn't swallow the words back. Gabriel went rigid. It lasted a second, then he relaxed, adjusting his glasses and turning to Adrien. The boy tried to pass it all as a joke, forcing his smile to grow larger until his cheeks hurt.

It had been a stupid idea, the stupidest of all, but a tempting one, because he felt like it had a chance to work. More than awkward fencing lessons squeezed in between business meetings and photoshoots.

His father rolled his eyes.

"If I had spare time to waste, boy, I'd spend it with my son."

Adrien swallowed and nodded, turning to the room without commenting on how much spare time had been spent on all of that research and work.

With my son.
"Say…” he muttered.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Gabriel shift in his chair. Chat Noir pursed his lips, growing serious.

"I tried to call Ladybug earlier", he announced, leaning over the table to grab a sheet of paper at random, to give himself something to look at. "I couldn't reach her, so she probably wasn't transformed, but I'm about to go and try to find her, so I can relay your message…”

That earned him a nod.

"And", Adrien continued, gathering his courage. "You know I need answers. At least some answers."

His father sighed, resigned. It was somehow better than his terse rebuttals earlier, but not by much.

"There is no point, Chat Noir. Tikki knows me and knows me well. Why is it with children and that need to unearth every truth better left buried? My story was over before you were even born. Let it go."

"How? How did it stop?" Adrien asked, turning to him. "What did you do?"

Gabriel met his eyes but still shook his head. The teenager did not look away, and waited, and waited. His father gave in.

"Let's just say that powers such as yours should not be given to someone cold enough to use them, and leave it at that."

Adrien felt a chill crawl up his spine at those words. He looked down at his own hands.

*What have you done, Father? Mom stayed with you, it can't be what I think. So what did you do?*"  

"Whatever you did… Do you regret it?"

"No. I regret the consequences, I regret having the ring taken from me, I regret losing Plagg, but I took a decision I deemed necessary and am still convinced it was the best course of action. I'm not sorry."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

Gabriel's face did not betray his feelings, if he had any. He observed Chat Noir, studying his reaction.

"I should go", the teenager said. "I'll try to find Tikki. If she agrees to see you, we'll find you."

"Thank you."

Chat Noir nodded, jumping off the table and waving. Then, he ran away.

###
Gabriel fed a butterfly to the charged watch, put it back into his pocket, and returned to his car. He sat into the driver seat with an exhausted sigh, and considered driving to Nathalie's.

He needed the distraction.

Then again, Nathalie - like most sensible people - slept at night. She was not a retired vigilante saddled with defective magical artefacts and good old-fashioned insomnia. Showing up at three in the morning was not going to win him points. He also suspected his assistant knew how to get away with murder, and would not ponder overly long about committing one, should she be woken at an ungodly hour after such a long day.

He still felt sorely tempted. He wanted to be alone in someone's company, and Nathalie had mastered the art of being present without ever being intrusive. It had taken him fifteen years to notice it, and now it made him want her more and more.

He loved the void and the quiet.

He loved 'uncomplicated' too.

It had been a long, long day, and he was drained, and maybe he was allowed some comfort every now and then.

Being accused of being Hawk Moth had hit him harder than he cared to admit, and he was still reeling. He had been reeling all evening. Congratulations. Your own son believes you are the monster who most likely killed your wife. A round of applause, if you please.

What did you even answer to that accusation?

'Nothing'.

It had taken collapsing in Nathalie's arms for the best part of an hour for Gabriel to even manage to process the idea. She had put him back together piece by piece, organizing his thoughts for him until they were straight and understandable again.

"I think in diagrams", she had informed him when he had commented on those uncanny abilities. "I'm not kidding."

That piece of trivia (and the mental gymnastics required to forget that no office chair, no matter how expensive it was, was made to comfortably accommodate two entwined bodies) had pierced through his mental fog.

"Really?"

"Really. Mostly in yellow tones with sans-serif fonts and grey outlines. Entire flowcharts."

He remembered smiling at that.

There had been no extensive advice, no criticism, no lengthy comments. Just a 'talk to your son'. And then she had put herself back together, hairpin by hairpin.

He had talked to his son.

He hoped it had gone well. He had tried. Apologies and promises, all of them from the bottom of the heart, with the utmost sincerity, because Gabriel loved that boy, even if he could not understand him at all. Fifteen years to figure him out, and every single interaction was still a
disaster. Granted, ten minutes a year of actual interactions did not amount to much, even over a
decade and a half.

Still. They had nothing in common. Adrien was warm where Gabriel was ice cold, kind when his
father was best described as a remorseless bastard. He had no notion of personal space and craved
for physical contact. Gabriel was best known as 'the boy who cringed away from his mother's
hugs'.

He had thought he and Alice were polar opposites, but they had been cut to fit. His son? His son
was a mystery.

Interacting with the new Chat Noir had been easier. Much easier. Talking about combat and magic
was simple. Gabriel had breathed combat and magic for ten years of his life and still did, even
though he no longer had Plagg's powers, even though roaming the roofs grew more and more
difficult with the years.

The new Chat Noir was the same.

It was a shame he would die young. A heart like his had no place on a battlefield. If Dislocoeur's
arrows had been lethal, he would have been killed once already. Shielding the girl had been a
mistake.

Maybe training him wouldn't be such a bad idea.

*Maybe you should focus on finding Hawk Moth and solving everyone's issues instead.*

He sighed.

He drove home. He stopped a few streets away from the mansion, realizing he was being stalked
by a dark silhouette with pointy ears, and made his way to his office instead. The house was off-
limits to Chat Noir and his partner, and Gabriel was not about to lure them there.

His company headquarters were close by, and he had a sofa there. It would be a good meeting
point if the brat came back for another talk, or to deliver news from Tikki. If he didn't, sleeping
would still be an option.

Ten minutes later, Gabriel parked in front of the building, and made his way to his office. He
opened a window, sat down in the sofa, and waited.

It didn't take long for a crouching silhouette to appear in the window frame.

It wasn't Chat Noir.

"You wanted to see me", the girl said, frowning under her red mask.

Gabriel stood, clasping his hands behind his back. He swallowed the bile and the hatred down,
raising his eyebrows in mild surprise. All the while, he felt like roaches were crawling over his
skin. His breathing was a bit hard to control.

"Not exactly. I seem to recall having asked for Tikki."

"Then I hope you have excellent reasons, because you are not getting near her without my say-so."

He clicked his tongue. He could shove her out of the window. It wouldn't hurt her much. It would
get her out of his sight.
"Ask away, then", he replied. "I'm sure we can clear this up quickly enough. Hasn't Chat Noir explained the situation?"

"He has. I'm just not sure what you said is true."

"You should trust your partner more."

"I trust him. I don't trust you. It looks like you have stalked us for a long time"

"The third of October last year, if I'm not mistaken. You were on the news."

He dug his nails into his palms and showed nothing of his feelings about that day.

"As I was saying: a long time", the girl commented. "You are going to have to prove that this is not a trick, mister Agreste, because your butterfly watch and your butterfly brand don't exactly scream 'Chat Noir', regardless of what you say."

Tearing the Miraculous off her ears felt like a compelling idea.

Gabriel decided to ignore the girl entirely.

"Tikki", he called. "I know you can hear me. I release you, as Alice's next of kin. You're free to reveal her identity. You are free to speak about her. *Please* convince your chosen."

He heard a beep coming from the teenager's Miraculous.

She scampered.

###
"I told you he wouldn't talk to you if you pushed!" Chat Noir exclaimed when Ladybug climbed away from his father's office, a mere minute after going in.

He had told her to wait for him. He had told her not to antagonize Gabriel.

He had told her…

His partner heaved herself onto the roof. Her earrings beeped. The boy gaped, wondering just for a second why she would have used her lucky charm, then remembering their transformation was vulnerable to other things.

"Tikki is pushing me out," Ladybug announced just as he came to that realization. "Agreste said something about releasing her, about allowing her to talk."

"Talk about what? " Chat asked, both desperate and hopeful.

It sounded like he was overly curious at best. Who could have guessed how much he needed to hear what Tikki had to say about his mother?

Ladybug didn't notice the trembling in his voice.

"Mrs Agreste, apparently."

Chat Noir's throat clenched.

"I'll have a talk with Tikki," his partner continued over another beep. "See what she thinks of all of this."

"Can I stay? I have questions too. I… Oh. Right. Can't watch you transform back."

There was another beep. Ladybug looked around, frantic.

"Listen. I'll send her to you as soon as I'm done. And then we'll regroup and compare what we know. Alright?"

How did you go about telling her how important knowing was? Adrien did not want to have to wait. Yet, he nodded and watched his partner jump to another roof, hide, and presumably untransform. He spotted a pink glow on a balcony.

He waited.

He closed his eyes. He counted the seconds. He went to forty-five, then Tikki (whom he had never seen, but what other Kwami would have been red with a big black spot on the forehead?) bumped against him.

"I'm here," she said. "I'm here. I'm so sorry. I couldn't talk to you before. Your mother made me promise I wouldn't tell you about her secret until you were old enough, and I swore I wouldn't, and we can't break our vows, and…"

Chat Noir stared at her. She was all softness and goodwill, and everything about her felt totally unlike Plagg.
"My father says you know what happened to my mom," he blurted out.

The Kwami stilled, the desolate expression on her face changing just a little bit. She opened her mouth to talk, but Adrien only had to look at her to know what she was going to say.

Of all of the answers he had expected, it was the one he had thought about the less.

"No," he murmured. "Please don't tell me that."

###

She had called one year, nine months and seventeen days after her disappearance, and Gabriel had nearly missed that call.

Strange how you spent months not sleeping, jumping out of your bones every other breath, thinking you had heard a doorbell, a buzz, a ringtone, and then, and then, when the ringtone was not a figment of your imagination, you tried to sleep through it. It had been four in the morning, one year, nine months and seventeen days after her last call, and… Gabriel had left himself be convinced that maybe, maybe it was time to stop keeping watch, and to merely wait instead.

In retrospect, if he had slept through the call, his life would have been much easier.

Or he would have noticed the missed call in the morning and tortured himself with different questions.

He had woken, however, and rolled out of bed, and grabbed his phone, and braced himself to hear the news he had been fearing for months. "We are terribly sorry, sir, but your wife...".

And then he had picked up.

"Gabriel?" she had said.

He had not said anything, anything at all. His parched tongue had slipped and fumbled against the roof of his mouth.

Alice had kept talking anyway.

"Gabriel, I'm so sorry, I messed up, I don't think I have ever messed up that bad, I'm so sorry. I'm alright. I'm safe!"

"Alice."

They had never been the 'romantic nicknames' kind. Pretend flirting notwithstanding ("Miss Beauregard? What a perfect fit."). they had always used each other's names. No 'love', no 'honey', no 'sweetie', just 'you'. Didn't it mean the same?

"Hawk Moth threw a timetraveler at me. He sent us forward, I just saw the date, I'm sorry, how is Adrien? How are you?"

It had been a bit of a surprise to hear about Hawk Moth, Alice having retired five years earlier, but not that much of one. It had been one of the possibilities, next to the kidnapping and accidental death theories. The problem with being a pariah to the Kwami was that you were not privy to their
plans anymore.

"We're… Alice, where are you?"

"Somewhere south of Pacaás Novos. Not sure where, I had to hike to the closest road… This is a payphone, though, let me ask around and…"

He had taken the briefest look at his phone screen to memorize the caller's number, then pressed it to his ear again.

"No. Don't move, don't move, sit next to that phone and don't move until I come and get you, is that clear?"

She was fourteen hours away from Paris at least, but if he could have pinned her into place, he would have. Irrational fear had gnawed at him.

"I can -"

"Don't. Move."

She had taken three seconds to answer, and that had been enough for him to miss the sound of her voice.

"Alright. I'm here. I'm not leaving."

"Please talk to me," he had muttered, writing the phone number down and calling his personal pilot to get him out of bed.

Cue a mumbled conversation about needing the jet and a trip to Brazil and make it happen, while he listened to his wife with the other ear.

For Alice, six hours had elapsed since they had last talked to each other, six hours she had spent fighting Contretemps, a fellow french tourist who wanted the next book in his favorite series to be 'out already'. It left her with little to say about her day, but she was alive and talking and her husband had her describe her surroundings, down to the color of the grass and trees, just so he could hear her voice.

He had shoved himself into clothes, emailed the number she was calling from to the detectives he had hired in Brazil, and shoved laptop, tablet and credit cards into a bag.

"Can I talk to Adrien?" she had asked.

"He's sleeping," Gabriel had replied, as he had just walked through the house to drive himself to the airport and was not in the mood to waste time. "We'll surprise him when you get home."

It had been pure impatience and egoism, depriving their son of a short conversation with her, but it had turned out to be a blessing.

By the time Gabriel had arrived to that tiny village south of Pacaás Novos and its payphone, Alice had been gone. One of his employees had arrived twelve hours before him and, by that point, she had already vanished into thin air.

###
Chat Noir slipped through the window of his father's office, with what was left of his courage, the remains of his heart, and the news.

He had sent Ladybug away. His father deserved to be told everything - what little there was - by someone who cared, even if Adrien was the only one of them who knew he did.

He found Gabriel sitting at his desk with paperwork and a pen, busy signing sheet after sheet. He had changed, the torn suit replaced by a pristine grey one, his hair brushed back. He turned to Chat Noir with mild curiosity.

"Thanks for finding your partner so fast, young man. I was expecting more of a delay. Did she talk to Tikki?"

"I did," Adrien replied, trying to keep his voice in check.

It was easier to handle things with the mask on. It put a few layers of distance between him and the events. It forced him to think differently, to reorder his priorities. He had to be a little more of a hero.

Gabriel studied his face.

"Tikki can't talk to you," Chat Noir announced. "But I think you know that already."

His father nodded.

"I'm considered a corrupting influence," he murmured. "Waspp and Kappa encouraged drastic measures to make sure I could not get in touch with Tikki, nor Plagg. But that's a story for another day, and you heard enough of it, we already discussed that, and I think we covered how it was not something you should hear about, and..."

He was trying to keep talking to delay the actual conversation, his son realized. The teenager braced himself.

"Tikki doesn't know anything," he cut in. "Your wife... After calling you, after that fight against Contretemps..." - A call Adrien knew nothing about, because his father had never told him about it, never, never. - "She wanted to go home, but Hawk Moth had to be tracked down, so your wife gave the Miraculous back. And Tikki went on to find herself a new chosen. They parted ways. I'm so sorry."

He was. He was. He tried to tell himself that it changed nothing - they hadn't known anything to begin with, they did not know less - but hearing Tikki explain all of that had torn a hole through his heart.

Gabriel paled, baffled. When he spoke, his voice was strangled and weak.

"What?"

His hands started twitching. So did a muscle in his cheek. He took a shaky breath, bit down on his lower lip, then dissolved.

"SHE CAN'T NOT KNOW!" he yelled, standing and shoving all the documents off his desk. "SHE WAS THERE, SHE WAS WITH HER!" - He kicked his desk, which swayed. - "SHE HAS TO HAVE SOME KIND OF ANSWERS!" - The twitching had turned to shaking, and his whole
body was trembling. - WHAT THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO TELL MY SON? HOW THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO KEEP."

Chat Noir took a step away, horrified, and his father just stopped. He straightened up, collected himself, shut everything in. He forced his hands down, hid them behind his back. He wiped all emotion off his face. Not that it worked: even if his features mimicked impassiveness, there was nothing he could do about the muscle twitches and the shaking.

He still pretended to be fine.

"My apologies for that outburst," he said. "It won't happen again."

His teeth chattered. He caught himself and clenched his jaw.

Adrien stared in disbelief and horror - What are you doing to yourself? - then crossed the space between them and tried to put a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. His father sidestepped away and shot daggers at him, then moved back farther still.

"Thank you very much for your help, Chat Noir. I appreciate the effort you just spent helping me. If you don't mind, however, I'd like some time to process the news."

The teenager shook his head. There was no possible way he would leave his dad alone in that state. Gabriel glared at him with pure loathing, however, withdrawing deeper into himself.

Adrien raised a hesitant hand.

"I-I'll call your assistant," he murmured. "She… I…"

"T-that won't be necessary. Good night, Chat Noir."

The young hero looked at the window, then at his father. He had to do something, but could not figure out what. He stood there, frozen, fumbling for words, until Gabriel snapped again.

"WILL YOU JUST GET THE FUCK OUT?" the man screamed.

Adrien ran to the window and climbed out. Gabriel slammed it shut. The lights of the office went out.

###

Adrien sat on the roof of the building facing his father's office, untransformed, as the sun rose.

The lights were still off in his dad's office, but the daylight was now bright enough to show that the room was empty. Gabriel's car was still there, however, so he had not slipped out. The teenager supposed he had gone down to the workshops: he liked it there.

"We should go home," he murmured. "He's gone."

Plagg shifted on his shoulder and nodded. Maybe the Kwami couldn't talk about the previous Chat Noir, and maybe he couldn't talk to him, but he could be worried. When Adrien had perched himself on that roof to watch his father's window, the black cat had dropped down on his shoulder and kept just as anxious a watch. His tail had wriggled nervously for the two hours they had spent there. He had not said a word, just watched and kept his ears perked up, listening to the silence around them with the utmost attention.
He cared.

"Why?" Adrien asked, still looking at the windows in front of them. "Why did you pick me?"

The son of a disgraced Chat Noir and of a missing Ladybug. It seemed cruel.

"Why 'why'?" the Kwami replied.

"Why me?"

"Because you are Chat Noir?" Plagg said, sounding mildly confused. "Should there be another reason?"

Adrien frowned, turning to him.

"What do you mean, 'you are Chat Noir'?"

Plagg huffed.

"You are. You were. That's it. Kappa and Waspp and all the others are so set on convening on their candidates and having every active hero chime in and judge if the humans we want are worthy before giving them the Miraculous." - He shrugged. - "Tikki indulges them."

"You don't?"

"Tikki picks her human and then they try and try and try to convince me that this little human fits the other little human and that they will work well together," Plagg explained, rolling his eyes in boredom. "So I just steal the ring and give it to Chat Noir. They still haven't figured out how I snatch the Miraculous every time, by the way. There's a triiiiiick."

"A trick?"

The Kwami nodded.

"It's Tikki who steals it. Don't tell."

Adrien blinked. Plagg jumped up and hovered in the air, stretching his neck.

"Tikki gets her human, and then I get the human's partner. It's that simple. Tikki tells me about her chosen a little, and I find one that matches. And I had been… stealing some cheese in your house for a few months" - 'Spying on your father', Adrien translated. - "and I knew what you were like, and you were perfect for this Ladybug. That's all."

"You didn't take my parents into consideration at all?"

Plagg flickered, turning to sparkles and then back to himself.

The boy quickly found a better question.

"Did you want to stay in my home so you could keep stealing cheese?"

"Of course I did."

"And how long exactly had you been hiding around in the mansion?"

"Since Volpina - not the tiny human, the old lady before her - 'lost' my Miraculous."
"With Tikki's help."

Plagg giggled.

"Don't you accuse my sister of theft. I don't see what you are talking about," he exclaimed, falsely indignant. "Tikki would never!"

Adrien smiled, scratching the back of his Kwami's head.

"So you were in Italy before that?"

"It's a great place to be. Lots of cheeses. Not as good as camembert, though. France is so much better."

What his chosen had gathered from the conversation was not that cheese was better north of Italy, however, but that Plagg's Miraculous had to be stolen from the other heroes on a regular basis. It was just as if he had been a prisoner. And that seal…

He cupped his hands so Plagg could land.

"Are the other Kwami afraid of you, Plagg?" he asked.

The black cat snorted.

"We are afraid of our own shadows," he replied. "And I'm bad luck."

Adrien frowned. He didn't like to hear that at all.

Plagg yawned.

"Also I broke the Sphinx and Kappa is still ranting about it. Long story."

He turned towards the sun.

"You should go home before Nathalie arrives to wake you up," he pointed out. "We're coming back right after, right?"

"Right," Adrien confirmed.

Absolutely.

He had to check on his father as himself too.

###

Nathalie walked into Gabriel's office at ten past nine in the morning, after dropping Adrien on the second floor for his photoshoot of the day.

She felt the change as soon as she passed the door.

*Oh.*

She had not realized how blatant Gabriel's attraction to her had been until that point. Now that it
had vanished all at once, however, the contrast was striking. His eyes didn't turn to her when she entered the office. His posture did not change. His tone did not ever so slightly warm up. All she got was a 'good morning' and a question about Jagged Stone.

That faint spark in him was gone, overnight, for no apparent reason.

Like a spurned fourteen years old, she panicked, wondering if it was her fault, what she had done, what she could do. Was it the way she had seduced him the previous evening? Had she pushed buttons she shouldn't have? Had she…

She didn't like feeling like a teenage girl. She swallowed the panic down and focused on her work instead.

"As you can see, Carine requested your opinion on the dancer's outfits prototypes, so I pushed things around a little. You still have a free forty-five minutes gap for lunch, since Aria Rossignol just canceled that restaurant meeting."

He nodded. She studied his face with a twinge of something akin to worry. His features were gaunt. It didn't look like he had slept at all.

Things had seemed alright when she had left the previous evening. There had been some kind of reconciliation with Adrien. Gabriel had seemed a little less destroyed. Now, she didn't know. Something had changed. Whether something had happened in the real world or in Gabriel's mind, however, she couldn't tell.

"What is Adrien's schedule for lunch?" he asked.

"He's free."

"Then send him to me. Order whatever food he likes. We can eat in my office."

"Very well."

"Thank you. Could you also bring me new sketching books? I ran out of them. Also, a set of neutral gray Copics, I seem to have misplaced four of my markers, I've been looking everywhere."

She joined him, frowning, knowing full well that Gabriel Agreste did not 'misplace' his belongings. As soon as she circled the desk, she spotted a large dent in the front drawers.

So something had happened.

"I'll fetch that, sir," she murmured.

Then she ran a hand over his shoulder, watched him go still and indifferent, and pulled away. This from the same man who had sank into her for hours the previous day.

"Anything else we should discuss?" she asked.

"Not that I can think of."

Alright, then.

"Very well, sir," she said, returning to the door. "I'll be back with your supplies."
"You're to have lunch with your father," Nathalie had told Adrien after his photoshoot. "At half past noon, in his office. Anything specific you'd like me to order, or would your usual sandwich be alright?"

Adrien had thought of the brie sandwich he ordered every day so he could eat the bread and give the cheese to Plagg. That one was fine when he ate alone, but he believed his father was aware he hated cheese. Gabriel was not the kind of man to remember details like that, but Adrien had once puked a mouthful of Munster on his shoes. That was not something you forgot easily.

Adrien could still hear his father's crestfallen "That was perfectly good cheese!", now that he thought about it. His father loved stinky cheese.

… His father loved stinky cheese.

Well. He and Plagg had likely been like peas in a pod.

Anyway, a brie sandwich would have been suspicious. Adrien had ordered a salad instead.

He walked into his father's office five minutes before their appointment, terrified. He had fallen from flying cars, seen the Eiffel Tower collapse on him, faced a near Egyptian god and his mummies, and more generally saved the world at least once a week for eleven months.

He felt faint. Would they be talking about his mother? Tikki had not provided the information they had wanted, that was true, but the situation was still different now. Something had to come out of it all.

"Hello, Adrien," his father greeted when he spotted him, with a faint smile on his lips. "Come in, take a seat."

Gabriel stood and motioned to a table that had been cleared of everything but their food. His son obeyed, dropping into the chair in front of his salad. His father sat in front of him, pulling a platter with a sandwich and coffee closer to him. Adrien breathed in and studied his face, hoping to read his mind, to figure out what he felt after that breakdown. He looked exhausted, but showed no sign of distress nor pain. On the contrary, he was smiling.

"I hear you had a photoshoot this morning," he asked. "How did it go?"

There would be not talk about Alice being Ladybug or the events of the night, Adrien realized. Gabriel was going to keep it all wrapped up, just like he had kept the news of his wife calling him three years before a secret.

This meeting had nothing to do with his conversation with Chat Noir. It was about what he had told Adrien the evening before. It was about trying harder not to put distance between them.

Which he intended to do by sharing nothing.

Adrien had seen him shatter and was worried sick. He had hoped his father would talk, and let him reach out and comfort him - because he was his son, not a stranger like the new Chat Noir - but it was never going to happen. Never. Gabriel would always keep everything he could not handle or fix to himself. Adrien was not sure he could have opened up, had he wanted to.
"It went fine," Adrien replied. "Dad, are you alright? You look tired."

The 'dad' earned him a startled look, but no comment on excessive familiarity.

"Yes, yes. I had a videoconference with our chinese branch at three in the morning, nothing coffee can't fix."

And, to underline his words, he brought his cup to his lips and took the lightest sip.

Adrien had to hide his hands under the table: they had started to tremble. He pretended to look around, to keep himself busy. New drawings were pinned to the whiteboard, sketches of summer dresses and jewelry layered over each other to the point that you could not see the board at all. The trash can was filled to the brim with discarded artwork. Gabriel's hands were stained with grey and yellow ink. Their palms were also scraped raw from scaling a wall a few hours before.

"I'm sorry I accused you of being Hawk Moth," Adrien blurted out, the guilt that had been hovering at the back of his mind finally hitting home.

His mother had been fighting one of Hawk Moth's minions right before vanishing for the second time, and Gabriel had known that all along. That on top of having spent ten years facing that same enemy.

"It's alright, Adrien. We covered that already. Just forget it. I didn't take it to heart."

"I'm still sorry."

"I know. Forget it. I've definitely been called worse. Say, do you want to go fencing tonight? That, and possibly endure Jagged Stone all evening afterwards. I have a business dinner with the man. He might forget to show up again," Gabriel finished with unconcealed disgust.

"I… would definitely love to go fencing, Father. And, err, I take it you don't like Jagged Stone much?"

"People like him give creatives a bad name. That being said, I have to admit he accomplished something. Not everyone gets to his level of fame. You like him?"

"His music is really good. All of my friends are fans. He did a signing session for the Mayor the other day, everyone was so excited!"

"I can imagine. I don't think I'm of the correct generation to really enjoy his style, however. That being said, if you want tickets for his show and a backstage pass, I will gladly ask. Nathalie can take you," Gabriel suggested before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Adrien cleared his throat, poking his salad with his fork so he would not have to look up.

"I already have four. I wanted to give them to my friends. I mean, M-Marinette is a big fan, and… that was before she…"

He trailed off. His father stopped chewing and stared at him with raised eyebrows. The teenager shifted on his chair, uneasy. He had not talked to Marinette at all since she had quit her internship, and started to wonder how things would go the next time they would cross paths. Considering Nino and Alya could as well have been dating (their relationship only lacked the kissing part, and they would figure out soon enough that neither of them was averse to that idea) and nearly never left their best friends, and that they went to the same school, Adrien didn't see how he could avoid her. He would have to face her, no matter how little he wanted to.
"You wanted to take miss Dupain-Cheng to that show?" his father asked.

"I… I would have asked first, Father. But I don't plan to now."

"Have you heard of her?"

"Not really."

Gabriel clicked his tongue.

"Provided she apologizes to you, I would not object to your going with her," he announced.

Adrien gaped.

Those words did not compute. Not at all. His father did not just agree to his seeing friends and having fun and doing things that did not involve learning something of earning a salary. He had crucified Nino over that birthday party. He called Chloé 'the budding art thief'. He had not met Alya yet, but Adrien had a feeling that meeting could not be delayed enough.

"W-what?"

"You heard me. And stop picking at your food."

Adrien shoveled a spoonful of salad into his mouth.

How had the conversation moved so fast from utter desolation to this?

He chewed that salad leaf for a solid five minutes.

"I thought you would not want me to see her anymore," he ended up saying, when there was no possible way to pretend there was still food in his mouth. "You threw Nino out for just asking about a party…"

Gabriel frowned.

"I do expect your friends to show a modicum of respect in my house, and I will not have some aspiring rapper straight out of the slums come and drag you into hijinks and trouble."

"That's unfair. He came to nicely ask you for one party. He's a great friend, no one has my back like he does."

Except for Ladybug, but that's something else entirely.

His father pursed his lips, his frown deepening. Adrien could spot the minute hints of the start of a storm. Every conversation between them had to turn sour.

"Why are you not angry at Marinette?" he asked in his most cautious tone, to move the topic away from his best friend. "I mean…"

"Because the moment she opened her mouth, I knew she would regret her outburst," Gabriel replied. "And sorely, at that. She compromised your friendship by going behind your back to try and fix a situation you did not wish to share with her. Your reaction was not hard to predict."

Adrien poked his salad some more, shoving tomatoes around with the tip of his fork. His father took another sip of coffee.
"Which is why I'm willing to drop it as long as she apologizes to you," he said.

"You *really* like her," his son blurted out.

"I like her work. As for her personality, I think it could use improvement. Not to the point where I would forbid you to interact with her, however."

The corner of his mouth twisted as if he had been suppressing a smile. That being said, the look on his face was still halfway between polite curiosity and absolute exhaustion.

He liked her, Adrien decided. The gap between 'asking for one party' and 'ripping someone apart for fifteen minutes' was a bit too large not to suspect favoritism.

"At what time did you want to go fencing?" the boy asked. "I have to get my equipment, everything is at home."

"Six?"

"Alright. Thanks, Father."

He caught the hint of a frown on Gabriel's face at that, a split-second of disapproval, then his father nodded and smirked a little.

"And, again, stop picking at your food, boy. It's not going to turn into candy."

###

The first time Gabriel Agreste had met Nathalie Sancoeur, the encounter had been uneventful. Almost uneventful.

She had been twenty-one. He had been twenty-five. Renaud, his assistant, needed an intern who could be trained to replace him, as he wanted to pack his bags and join his long-distance girlfriend in Canada.

They had brought in a batch of bright young applicants, fresh out the HEC, to select the most promising out of them. Nathalie had made sure the choice would be easy for them.

"The woman is a snake," Renaud had commented after interviewing the two applicants who had showed up for their appointment. "The scruples of a snake. No shame. A very large wallet for someone fresh out of school, too."

Gabriel had perked up at that. He had been looking for a snake. His world did not allow for bleeding hearts and niceties.

"I did what you said," Renaud had explained. "Got myself a cheap suit, and sat down with them kids, and waited for my 'interview'. And she was talking to the others and panicking because her Russian was terrible and 'It's a requirement but surely it would be fine to learn the language on the side during their first months of employment, right?'."

"Russian was not a requirement."

"It was on the edited job offer she had printed out, as well as Japanese and Spanish. She targeted
the most nervous applicants and panicked with them over every single requirement until they lost it and walked out. Kids."

If Gabriel had not been married, with a child on the way, he would have felt the first stirrings of attraction.

The morals of an alley cat and the scruples of a snake.

"That's it?"

"Oh no, no. Seven HEC students got a call this morning, from 'me', to warn them their interview was cancelled and that the position was no longer open. I don't know how she pulled it off, but the calls came from our offices."

Gabriel and Renaud had stared at each other.

"She bribed a janitor," they had said in the same voice.

"Or she bribed someone who bribed a janitor," Renaud had added. "I mean, that's what i would have done, back when I was still young and stupid."

"You are twenty-four."

"Then she tried to talk me into leaving and, when that failed, she gave me three-hundred euros."

"Sounds to me like she has all the qualifications we need."

"None of the subtlety."

Gabriel had looked at the mail on his desk, the piles and piles of scams and heartbreaking supplications that had kept flowing in since his father's assistant had stopped filtering his correspondence, when he had turned eighteen.

"Subtlety is not the most important skill for the job to be done, Renaud, we both know that. Send her to me."

Renaud had.

When she had walked into his office, he had said nothing about her trickery and deceit and cheating. He had taken a long look at her, taking in her dark suit, her turtleneck, her eyeshadow and lipstick, her everything. She was the very definition of control and concealment, every hair kept perfectly into place, not a hint of skin showing under the armor of powder and paints.

Fifteen years down the line, she barely looked different.

"Miss Sancoeur," he had said. "Have a seat and tell me why you wish to work for my company."

###

The first time Alice Agreste, née Beauregard, had met Nathalie Sancoeur… Maybe the encounter had not been so uneventful. Gabriel tended to lose focus when his wife walked into a room, and it had only grown worse during her pregnancy. Truth to be told, he looked less at her, and more at
the bump on her belly.

Alice had met Nathalie the first time she had visited the mansion, so Gabriel could explain the workings of the house to the intern. They had been going over the proper handling of his personal correspondence.

"As you can see," he had been telling her, "you will have to be removed from the situation, detached." - He had not thought it would be a problem. - "You will get a hundred letters a day begging for money to save some infant with heart defects, some schoolboy with leukemia, some family who couldn't pay for food, or electricity or even rent. We only ever give to established charities. All you can do here is find the proper way to turn the requests down without causing a PR nightmare. Sometimes, it means redirecting those people to the correct organizations. Sometimes it means not answering at all. Sometimes, it means reporting scammers to the authorities. See how Renaud does it."

Renaud himself was getting worn down of handling it all. If you had money, the world would try to bleed you down. There was no shortage of misery.

He had handed Nathalie one of the worst letters of the week and watched her read it. It had not permeated through her boredom.

Heartless through and through.

"No individual help, ever?" she had asked.

"Renaud still picks the odd family to rescue, but I'd like that to stop. It inevitably ends up in the news and raises the others' hopes. I firmly believe the only way to provide meaningful help is to support and fund the existing structures. If you handle the symptoms and not the root of a problem, you accomplish nothing."

So maybe it cost you your soul.

He still firmly believed it.

"I'll keep that in mind," Nathalie had replied, folding the letter and putting it back on the pile. "Anything else?"

"No. I'll be available should you have any questions when handling the letters, and-"

"Hello there," Alice had greeted from the door.

Gabriel had no recollection of what had happened next, not for a good five minutes.

Alice's presence, at that point in time, had carved holes in his heart on top of making it beat a little faster. They had been tiptoeing around open wounds, not quite daring to talk to each other, not quite knowing who they were to each other anymore.

Chat Noir was gone. So was the man Alice had married. And, while she could understand what he had done to Hawk Moth, she could not accept it, and it stretched even her incredible capacity for forgiveness.

Still. She had not left, and they were to have a child, and there was magic in that. No matter how dark their days, no matter how bleak their future, it took one look at the bump on her belly for Gabriel to forget it all. Reality crashed down on him quickly enough, of course, but for a split second, he had to stare in wonder and refrain himself from reaching out.
He had introduced Nathalie to Alice, then taken a moment to collect himself while they chatted. A moment, a few minutes at most. How stunned he had been by the loathing he had felt in Alice when he'd turned to her.

Alice liked everyone. Her best friend had been Queen Bee. She had married him. Had she met Satan in person, she would have managed to unearth some redeeming quality in him. But Nathalie? Hate at first sight.

Gabriel had not understood why until months later. Then, he had overheard her discuss his assistant with Bee.

"That girl is not unpretty or anything," she had been saying when he had walked by the window she had been sitting under with Anne-Laure.

"Not unpretty?" her best friend had replied. "A: even with all that makeup on, she's nowhere near as lovely as you. And B... you're crazy if you think Sourpuss will ever look the other way. I mean, I've seen him talk to you in a changing room full of topless supermodels and he didn't give them a second glance. And that was when you had the flu. So his repressed accountant, when you are in top shape? Pft."

"It's not just that," Alice had replied. "She's so much like him, Bee. It would be so easy for him to love her."

"He's not going to fall for her, no matter how easy the ride, you dimwit."

"I don't mean falling. I mean, literally, that it would be easier for him to love her."

He had thought that was nonsense.

He had showered Alice with romance and gifts.

###

Alice, although sweet and forgiving, had always been an excellent judge of character.

###

Nathalie did not push. She could get a clue.

Her day was no different from any other day in the fifteen previous years: she handled her duties the best as she could and winged it when her skills were not up to the task. She ordered sandwiches and salads and rescheduled appointments and ushered a sad little boy towards this photoshoot and that Dutch lesson. She brought copies and pencils and legal documents to his father.

Said father went about his day the same way he had gone about his days for fifteen years minus the last ten months. He threw in a little more family time, in a conscious effort to fix his life, but that was it.
No hairpins went missing.

Gabriel was a great liar when he so wished.

Nathalie faced the prospect of his putting an end to things with stoicism. She would have liked to say 'with no feelings whatsoever', but that time was past. A few months before (a few weeks, even), Gabriel would have meant nothing to her. From the moment he had confided in her, however, he had redefined their relationship. He had made himself more. She was not hurt by the idea of being rejected. Annoyed that residual attraction could threaten a perfectly fine working relationship? Obviously. Hurt? When had she ever been?

What she felt was concern.

The closer she got to him, the more she saw a man trapped inside his own head.

She still said nothing. Whether something had happened during the night, or whether he had decided on a new course of action, explaining himself or not was his choice. She was convinced he would not, and ended up surprised when he did, in the late afternoon.

He had scheduled himself one hour of free time before his fencing session with his son (when he had restored his editing permissions on the calendar would remain a mystery). Two minutes into that hour, he called her in, asking for fresh coffee.

He watched her walk into his office, pour a cup, put the coffee pot on the table and leave before snapping out of his silence and stillness.

"Wait. Please stay and lock the door. I'd like to talk."

She paused, hand on the handle, then did as asked. She waited by the door, hesitant.

"I called Alice's friend," Gabriel announced.

Nathalie blanched. She knew him enough to understand what had transpired.

He kept his expression neutral but looked into the distance rather than at her.

"She… did not have the information I believed she possessed. She went her own way right after Alice last contacted me."

It was the worst possible situation. No news could have been worse. Gabriel - Gabriel, who referred to his feelings for his wife as mental illness - needed to move on. It was the healthy thing to do. It would have been the healthy thing to do before they had gotten married. His loving Alice had done him more harm than good - "I never want to feel that way again" - and it would continue tearing him apart until he let go.

Nathalie took two steps forward.

"So," he continued, raising his voice to stop her dead in her tracks. "It would seem I drew hasty conclusions from her friend's return." - He took a deep breath. - "Considering the circumstances, it would be in poor taste to pursue a relationship. I am so very sorry."

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, but was more horrified than irritated.

"You don't have to do do this," she murmured. "You know you don't have to."

He met her eyes, straightening up.
"I'm afraid I do. I'm sorry. I may not have much in the way of ethics, but there are a few values I do hold as sacred."

"No, there is not," Nathalie replied, voice low and quiet.

She knew how well he had choked his already crippled conscience. He held some values dear, not sacred. *This* was compulsion.

He frowned and ignored her words, keeping his tone even.

"I'm sorry for any disappointment or hurt I might have inflicted." - His voice faltered a little. - "I sincerely thought the situation was different."

She shook her head.

"You were the one who pursued me, Gabriel. It's all the same to me, one way or another. If there were feelings to be bruised here, they weren't mine."

He nodded, then nodded again.

"That's good to hear."

She stared at him, pursing her lips. He gave her the politest smile.

"I'm glad that's cleared up," he commented. "You're free to go."

Nathalie walked back to the door, opened it, then locked it again. She kept her back to him for the moment it took her to compose herself, then turned to him. His icy facade slipped back on in the blink of an eye: he went rigid, jaw clenched, chin just a little up. In other circumstances, she would have kept her thoughts to herself and quietly given up.

Not this time.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," she told him.

That earned her a scathing look. He was not nearly as scary as he believed himself to be. She met his eyes and kept talking, her voice firm and patient.

"I'm not saying this as an ex-lover or whatever it is that you see me as. I'm saying this as a friend: get therapy."

He sighed, rolling his eyes, and leaned back into his chair.

"I don't-"

"Get therapy," she insisted. "You can't keep doing this to yourself. You can't keep putting your life on hold. Now, I could not care less if you date me or someone else, but you cannot stay alone for the rest of your life. You are not cut out for it, as much as you believe yourself to be."

Gabriel glared at her, until he gathered that she would not relent.

"I don't need therapy," he snapped. "I need answers."

"You are never going to get them!"

The words hung in the air. Nathalie, always the scaredy-cat, afraid for her job and position and
more generally of consequences, found that she did not care about the repercussions at all. Gabriel had to be dragged out of that pit he had driven himself into.

He took a long, breath, the fury clear on his face. Then, he smirked, and Nathalie felt like he'd been replaced by someone else entirely. She had known him dark, she had known him ruthless, she had known him driven, but never had he been cruel. Never on purpose, anyway.

"Oh, but I will," he retorted. "One way or another."

She shook her head, thinking of the butterfly watch, thinking of magic and lies.

"As you wish," she murmured. "As you wish…"

###
Adrien went to bed as soon as he arrived home. He felt the kind of exhaustion that could only be induced by a long battle against an evilized supervillain, an afternoon of basketball training, or - apparently - one of Jagged Stone's monologues. The singer, like a great many people, loved the sound of his voice. Adrien wasn't so sure he did anymore. That dinner with his father and the rock star had lasted three hours, and Jagged Stone had quickly gathered that Adrien was a better conversationalist than his father.

The man had not stopped bragging for a second.

He had improvised a song.

Adrien had been raised to be compulsively polite and friendly. He had lost the ability to formulate coherent thought.

Training with his father, prior to the meal, had not been as pleasant as he had hoped either. Adrien had walked out of the fencing club with the feeling that he had no talent for the sport whatsoever, Gabriel having pointed out his every flaw and then invented some. He had not done it to hurt his feelings, of course: he had the impatience that came with an abundance of skill and a distinct lack of leniency. Still, Adrien had hoped to get some semblance of approval. He had always trained hard.

Then again… Right hand, "sword". Left hand, "cataclysm". His father had been more than a mere fencer practicing for fun. He had been Chat Noir, with entirely different stakes and opponents.

Adrien wondered what his fighting style had been like. A saber was way more lethal than a staff.

He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. At midnight, a knock on his window startled him awake. It was a very, very light knock, but he had very, very jumpy nerves.

He ran to his window and opened it to find Ladybug hanging upside down from the roof.

"H-hello," she said, with an awkward smile. "I hope I didn't wake you. I didn't mean to knock too hard."

He tilted his head to the side. Reading the facial expressions of people was not that easy when your mind was foggy and their features happened to be in unexpected locations.

"It's fine," he mumbled. "I wasn't asleep."

That didn't sound very convincing. She didn't look very convinced.

"Aaaal… right? I, uh. I just wanted to drop by to say that your dad is not Hawk Moth. Proved with a hundred percent certainty. You have my word."

Adrien stared at her. She put on her best TV face and used her most assured tone to explain things.

"There was an incident with an Akuma this evening - a short one, he really didn't have the time to cause trouble or anything - but you and your father were at the restaurant. So, here, I just wanted to
tell you," she said, already pulling on her string to climb back to the roof.

"Wait!" Adrien exclaimed, knowing there had been no 'incident', but that she had to find a way to break the news without divulging what she knew about his parents. "T-thank you."

She clenched her fist around her yoyo string and started balancing from left to right.

"I told you I would," she declared. "And I caused all of that trouble to begin with, by suspecting him."

He nodded, then shook his head.

"I… understand. Don't worry about it. You have to protect the city, you can't just ignore clues."

"Still. I should have been quiet about it until I had definite proof, not just rumors and suspicions."

He grabbed her string just under - above? - her hands to steady her, pulling her closer to the window.

"I said 'don't worry about it'," he repeated with a tired smile.

Then he noticed her blush. She had all but frozen, and was chewing on her lower lip with what he thought was a dazzled expression. It was hard to say. He wished he had turned the lights on: with just the moonlight and the distant glow of a street lamp, there was little he could see. The lip chewing was clear enough, however.

He heaved himself through the window, wanting to steal a kiss, stopping halfway through because you did not do things like that. Instead, he tried to hold himself into place with one arm, his feet swaying above the floor. He reached for her cheek with his other hand, and gave her a chance to prevent the kiss.

She did.

By flattening a hand on his face.

She didn't slap him or anything, just raised her hand and pressed her palm against his nose with a gasped "no", but he still fell back into his bedroom. She yelped, swinging in every direction and bumping her head against the window.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed after steadying herself.

He rubbed his nose, staring at her. He distinctly heard Plagg groan, but Ladybug did not notice that. She winced and gave Adrien a sad look.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, this time in a whisper. "I… I'm very flattered, but… You don't know who I am, and I don't think it would be fair of me to take this and keep my secrets."

She sounded so sincere and heartbroken that he felt himself crack a little.

A tiny part of him screamed and thrashed in fury. Why couldn't the people he loved like the side of him who loved them? Why did his father have to prefer Chat Noir, and Ladybug Adrien the model, whom she barely knew?

"I shouldn't have tried to begin with," he replied, grinning. "I wouldn't want to stab Chat Noir in the back."
Ladybug blinked, confused.

"What does Chat have to do with this?"

Adrien gave her his warmest smile. He had tried to tell her with the mask on, over and over again. There was no way she was not aware of his feelings, on some level. Maybe she did not want to think about it. Apparently, she liked 'someone else'.

"He loves you, you know."

She gaped, letting go of her string and falling a floor down. She climbed back to the window, head above feet, this time. She was giggling.

"W-why would you say that?"

She did not believe it. How could she not believe it?

"Because he does," Adrien replied, matter-of-factly. It was so much easier to say when pretending it did not concern you. "Have you seen the way he looks at you? Talks to you?"

She chuckled again, but didn't look so certain anymore.

"That's just Chat being Chat. He's a flirt. With everyone. He once 'rescued' me while I was out of costume and laid it so thick I thought I was going to give myself away by bursting into laughter."

When? WHAT? Adrien, what did you DO?

"He's a flirt," she insisted. "My favorite flirt, but still a flirt. I wouldn't pay too much attention to the whole 'romance' thing."

He bit the inside of his cheeks but kept his smile firmly on.

"Ladybug."

She grew serious, leaning forward and waiting for him to continue talking. He looked straight at her, not faltering, not hesitating, and more importantly not showing how much the conversation meant to him.

"He does."

His partner's face fell. She slipped down by a few inches, clutching the window frame, and shook her head with a heavy sigh.

"He…"

She pursed her lips, breathed in, breathed out. It was too dark to be sure, but Adrien thought she was tearing up a little. His impression was confirmed when she blinked - just once - then sniffed. A second later, she had collected herself.

"It doesn't count," she said, her voice quiet.

She moved back a little, holding on to the window frame with a hand. She patted her chest.

"It doesn't count. This is not me. I'm not like this. I'm not that strong. I'm a klutz and I'm impulsive and I'm rash and I keep making stupid mistakes and he doesn't know that. All he knows is Ladybug. It doesn't count."
Her words hit him hard, leaving him breathless and stunned. He had never considered she could feel that way too.

"It doesn't count," she murmured. "Not if all he knows is the perfect persona. That's not me. Do you get what I mean?"

Adrien's words flowed out of him without real thought, his tone casual. He was still reeling.

"I'm a model, Ladybug. I know exactly what you mean."

She stilled, studying his face with growing horror.

He patted his own chest.

"This is not me. I'm not perfect and warm and kind. I get jealous and mean just like everyone else. I can be impulsive and make stupid mistakes too. And no one knows that."

Silence fell. They stared at each other, him with a determined expression, her with a crestfallen one. A minute went by, maybe two.

"Adrien Agreste," she ended up replying. "You might not be perfect, and you might be impulsive, and you might make stupid mistakes, and there's nothing wrong with that, but you are an idiot if you think you are not warm and kind."

He flushed, heart racing.

She kept talking.

"And you should not keep that facade up. Your friends would love to know you better. That Nino boy who is always with you. That Alya girl with the blog. They would be there for you when you are down, they would love you even more for letting them in. You don't have to play pretend."

"You play pretend," he pointed out.

"I'm a superhero," Ladybug retorted, grabbing the side of her mask and pulling on it. "It comes with the job. As myself, I am myself. Which is not always a good thing, and involves a lot of phone stealing, but it mostly goes well."

Adrien's brain latched onto the least important part of her sentence.

"Phone stea-"

"Forget the phone stealing. My point is... don't be afraid of being yourself. If someone pushes you not to be, maybe they don't deserve the effort."

Her eyes strayed to his bedroom door, so it was not hard to understand she was thinking of a specific someone. Adrien pretended not to see.

She was pretending and he was pretending, they were both pretending. What was it that Plagg had said? "Tikki gets her human and I find one that matches"?

He chuckled.

"What a pair we make," he said. "All about the masks, both of us."

"Please promise me you'll allow yourself to be, you know, yourself."
He grinned mischievously.

"Well, I don't know, maybe you'd like me less. That would be a distinct loss."

She shook her head with an amused snort.

"Would I like you more or less as yourself?" he asked.

Her faint smile faltered.

"Excellent question. Maybe, someday, you'll find out. But not now. I better get back to my patrol before Paris sets itself on fire."

"W-"

She did not wait. She dropped down into the courtyard and ran away.

###

Ladybug stumbled through her patrol, for the most part mostly unaware of her surroundings. Paris could have set itself on fire, she would not have noticed.

Her conversation with Adrien had been every degree of unsettling.

She hated the idea that he could be wearing a facade every single day. Hated it. That he could have told her, with conviction, that he was not kind. That he felt like the Adrien people liked did not exist. That the Adrien Marinette liked did not exist. That was not the problem: she would gladly have watched the boy she fancied vanish, as long as he could be himself and happy. She knew the idea of him disappearing was nonsense, anyway. He seemed to think he was radically different, and somehow worse of a person, but really flawed people were not able to keep the pretense so well. Their flaws seeped through their masks. Of course Adrien was kind. His first instinct was always to protect and comfort.

She hoped she had found the right words. She hoped she had been of some help. Fighting supervillains, as it turned out, was much easier than comforting a friend.

Also.

Also.

He had tried to kiss her. He had tried to kiss her. And she had turned him down. Letting him had not even been a question: he was furious at her. He had not idea it was her he was furious at, but she was not about to betray him by taking advantage of his ignorance.

She didn't know how she would handle the situation as Marinette, either. Alya had lectured her about her calling Gabriel out, and Nino (once he had heard about the situation from Alya) had all but murdered her, but she still firmly believed she had been right to confront the man. She couldn't exactly tell her friends what Adrien had told Ladybug in strict confidence, so she had not been able to smooth the edges by explaining her exact reasons. She did not regret going after mister Agreste, only hurting Adrien. As for Gabriel himself, pleasant public facade and tragic backstory aside, he could rot in hell. How did you neglect your son to the point that ended up convinced you were a
supervillain?

It was so wrong that she still wanted to scream.

Apparently, her yelling session had been of some use, because mister Agreste had spent more time with his son in a week than he had in a year. She had heard, through Nino, that there would be less modeling in Adrien's near future. She felt a little vindicated.

She tried not to. She still remembered the look of betrayal and anger Adrien had given her when he had realized what she had done.

Marinette would have to apologize to him for going behind his back.

She landed on the Opera Garnier and paused for breath. Not that she needed it. She needed to think.

The most unsettling part of the conversation had been his insisting that Chat was in love with her. Actually in love with her. She had brushed that thought aside for months, convincing herself he couldn't be serious, that all of his flirting had been just that: flirting.

Adrien's words kept coming back to her. Have you seen the way he looks at you?

She had. She had, and she had discarded it, forgetting how often and for how long she had felt his gaze on her. At first, it had been so overdone that she couldn't have taken it seriously, and then, it had been... the norm. She had discarded the idea because she had not wanted him to love her, but she could not honestly say she had not known. She had consciously looked the other way, because she liked someone else. If she had admitted Chat loved her, then she would have had to face the fact that she was hurting him.

Ladybug hoped he was not patrolling that evening. There was no way she could talk to him without giving her anxiety away.

She took a deep breath and looked around, to make sure that Paris had not set itself on fire after all. The streets were quiet. Nothing was burning, nothing was collapsing, no supervillain was rampaging in the area. Ladybug relaxed a little. Then she felt a presence, an overwhelming sense of menace, right as she heard a shifting motion behind her. She whirled, sending her yoyo flying. She saw the dark silhouette of a man crouch, raising a hand to the level of his eyes. Her yoyo's string wrapped itself around his head and arm instead of around his shoulders. Since he only had to move his arm to loosen the string, he freed himself effortlessly.

"Do you always attack civilians without warning, miss?" he spat, throwing her yoyo down.

She recognized the voice before she recognized the person: the unruly hair, grey pants and dark hoodie did not fit his character at all.

"Mister Agreste ?" she exclaimed, staring at him.

He didn't look like himself at all. There was little left of the proper, serious businessman she had met. He had kept his glasses. His hair was an utter mess, behind which he was trying to hide his eyes (not that it worked: he had groomed it back for so long that pushing it down was no longer an option). The clothes were unfamiliar, of course. But what made the difference so drastic was his posture. Gabriel Agreste was stiff and moved little. The man in front of Marinette... His back was straight. It looked like he was still. But his hands, while hidden behind his back, were not clasped. He was ever so slightly rocking on his heels, ready to run. The rigidity Marinette had come to associate with him had vanished.
She raised her chin.

"Fancy meeting you here," she greeted him with a cheeky smile, even though her confidence was all faked. "How did you find me?"

She had good instincts, and the man felt like a threat. He gave her a pleasant smile. It was not enough to hide his malevolence.

"Your patrol routes are easy enough to figure out," he said, which was not pleasant to hear.

He joined her, unzipping his hoodie and fishing for something in his pockets. She took a step back. Her reaction startled him, and he suppressed an eye roll, but he didn't comment and handed her an envelope instead. He was holding it by a corner, with the tip of his fingers, and released it as soon as she touched it, as if fearing some sort of contagion.

She dropped the envelope, snatched it as it fell, and stared at it. Mister Agreste moved back.

"I cannot express how grateful I am for the information Tikki provided about my wife," he told Ladybug. "That being said, I have more questions I'd like an answer to, so I can brief the detectives working on Alice's case. I wrote them down. I would tremendously appreciate it if you and Tikki could shed light on some of them. Just drop the letter into my secret lair, or maybe send me an email. Whatever works best for you."

Ladybug folded the letter, frowning.

"Tikki can't talk to you," she pointed out.

"I'm well aware of that."

"What if we don't want to help?"

The man shook his head and walked to the closest trapdoor, crouching to open it.

"Should that be the case, please remember I have a teenage son who has been waiting for answers for five years," he declared, lowering himself into the building. "But I doubt that slipped your mind."

It had not.

She gaped for a second or so as he took another step down - she had expected him to jump off the roof or something equally cloak and dagger - then collected herself.

"What did you do? Why was your ring taken away?"

"Ask your Kwami, if it matters to you so much," he retorted. "As far as I'm concerned, it's none of your business."

"It would earn you points if you told me yourself."

"I'll pass. Oh. And one more thing, miss."

She crossed her arms.

"What now?"

"While I am endlessly grateful for your assistance in all matters concerning my wife, I still want
you nowhere near my son. Leave him alone. Is that clear?"

Marinette stared him down.

"You seem to love pushing his friends away, mister Agreste."

Icy eyes stared her down, and she had to fight hard not to look away. The look on his face was
darker and more menacing that the ones she had received from most of the enemies she had fought.
Evilized people were always moved by some kind of boiling anger, by a stroke of madness that
made it clear they were controlled by external forces.

Gabriel Agreste just loathed her.

It was nothing like Chloé's petty hatred. Chloé sometimes looked like she wanted Marinette to
vanish from the face of the Earth. With mister Agreste, however, it felt like if he would make it
happen if pushed too far.

"Just stay away from him," he said, vanishing into the building and closing the trapdoor as he went.

Ladybug stood there for a minute or so, then raced to the corner of the roof, jumped off, and ran
home. She untransformed ten minutes later, as soon as she dropped into her bedroom. She had
spent the entire way looking over her shoulder.

Tikki jumped out of her earrings and hovered in front of her. Marinette rubbed her own shoulders,
skin crawling. The envelope was lying on her bed.

"That man scares me, Tikki," she blurted out. "Actually, genuinely scares me."

"He won't hurt you," the Kwami replied, heavy-hearted.

"The way he looks at me. It's just… What have I ever done to him?"

Tikki dropped onto the bed to open the envelope, then pulled three sheets of paper out. It was a list
of questions about Hawk Moth's appearances over the last five years. They pertained to the villains
he had created, the places he had been to, the dates of the fights against him, and so on. Not exactly
something you could bring to a detective.

Tikki folded the sheets.

"You have done nothing, Marinette. It's not about you," she explained.

"It very much feels like it's about me," the teenager sighed. "Did you see the look on his face? I've
had enemies be warmer to me. I'm just Ladybug. I help people. I don't-"

"Not to him, you are not," Tikki whispered.

Marinette froze and stared through her Kwami as those words sank in. The spirit shook her head.

"You have done nothing and there is nothing you can do. He will never be able to bear the sight of
you. Just give him space."

Oh.

The third of october of the previous year, Ladybug and Chat Noir had been filmed and
photographed for the first time. They had been on live TV, fighting not their first enemy, but the
first whose powers had impacted an area large enough to draw attention.
Ladybug had been on live TV. Except she had not been Ladybug.

*That poor man.*

"Why was his ring taken away, Tikki? What did he do?"

The Kwami shook her head.

"Can you promise me to never tell Chat Noir?" she asked. "Can you promise me to never tell Gabriel's son either? It's something they have to hear from him or not at all. It would have too much of an impact on how Chat Noir sees his powers, and on how Adrien sees his father. So, can you swear to me that you will keep it to yourself?"

"Of course I will!"

Tikki shot daggers at her at the hasty promise, and Marinette looked down at her hands.

"I will," she swore. "I won't tell them. You have my word."

###

Chapter End Notes

If you want to see fantastic, gorgeous, wonderful fanart? [Hchano drew some wonderful Ladrien art.](https://hchano.tumblr.com/post/168344447090/drawer-01)
More than one way to skin a cat

It had all started with a health awareness class, at school, when Gabriel had been eleven. It had not covered much - it had been organized because a network of cigarette smuggling had been discovered among the older students - but it had informed Gabriel and his classmates that smoking was bad for you. It gave you cancer. Throat cancer, lung cancer, tongue cancer, pick your cancer cancer.

It had hardly been a traumatic revelation. They knew that, they all knew that. It had not shocked him, it had not traumatized him, it had not even fazed him.

He couldn't have explained why he had started stealing his mother's cigarettes. He had returned home after class, seen a Camel stuck between Elise's glossy red lips, and felt nothing out of the ordinary. She had grasped the cigarette between two fingers and waved at him from her spot next to the open window, mindful of the ashes, and that had been it.

He thought he recalled politely asking her to stop smoking, but was not entirely certain of that. Thirty years had gone by. His memory was vague at best. What he remembered was hearing his parents argue about his thieving habits, three or three months down the line.

"How is he doing it, Elise? How can you pay so little attention? He is stealing burning, smoking little sticks of poison straight out of your hands."

"I don't know, Olivier. I swear I'm trying to watch him but he just... I mean, he's so fast, it's baffling. Have you seen him do it?"

His parents stopped him at the door whenever he left a room. More often than not, if they asked him to surrender the cigarette he had just stolen, he handed it back. He didn't mind being caught. The truth was, he barely noticed stealing them in the first place. He did it on impulse and, while there was a thrill to it, he didn't go looking for it.

His parents stopped him on principle alone. They never spotted him taking the cigarettes (not after the first month, anyway). His mother, chain-smoker than she was, would light a new one every time one went missing, and not question it. She was never sure there had been something to steal. She had to check the ashtray, her own hands, and her spotty memory. It was easier to ask Gabriel to show his hands.

There had been talks.

"Can't you please stop?" Gabriel's father had asked more than once, more worried than angry. "It's really growing concerning."

"I don't notice I'm doing it, Father," the boy would reply with growing annoyance. "I'm sorry. I'll try."

And, every time, he had handed Olivier boxes full of half-smoked cigarettes. It was not really stealing if you did not use them. You could always give them back.

There had been therapy. A psychologist had insisted too rigid a family life was pushing Gabriel to act out. That assessment had puzzled his parents, who were distinctly less rigid than expected from a couple of their prestige and position. Their son had been born forty, they had argued. He wanted rigidity. He imposed it. He was distant, he liked to be left alone to read and draw. He shied away from physical affection. At the age of six, he had been found hidden in the attic with a book during
his own birthday party.

Olivier, convinced the psychiatrist had even less of a clue of what was going on in his son's head than he did, had settled on his own explanation. He had made sure his wife understood it.

"Will you just STOP? Can't you see it upsets him? For god's sake, Elise!"

Elise, addict that she was, promised and gave up on smoking for a month, then went back to it, over and over again.

And then, the problem had vanished: at the age of fourteen, Gabriel (who was not really a catch in terms of personality, age, or looks, but had tons of money) had found himself a girlfriend.

His parents had focused on more important issues, such as "he better not get her pregnant" and "that little gold-digger is in it for the gifts".

###

One week. One week went by before the first "this can't happen again", or rather "this can't happen a-".

One.

###

To say Gabriel had will was entirely too flattering a description. If someone had asked Nathalie's opinion (and she had been sure not to be recorded while giving it), she would have gone for 'stubborn as hell'. She didn't mind that he had one-sidedly decided to break their relationship off. 'No heart to shatter', 'it's in the name', and so on.

The feelings bruised had been his. She was not blind.

Gabriel did not pursue what he did not want.

By cutting things off, he had cut himself deeper than he would ever admit.

She knew his tells. She knew how he clasped his hands behind his back, and straightened his spine, and stared you down when he wanted to run. She could also tell the difference between his not noticing your presence and his pretending not to. He rolled his tongue against the roof of his mouth. His muscles were tenser. If he had something in his hands, he played with it.

His hands were his most blatant tell. That was why he hid them. They moved faster than his thoughts. If something monopolized his attention, he fidgeted.

Her comings and goings in his office were punctuated by the clicking of his pen.

Still, it was his choice to keep away, and she let him. For her entire life up to that point, she would not have cared. Now? She worried.
She was not the only one.

"He pushed you away, didn't he?" Adrien asked, after four day spent observing his father's behaviour with increasing worry.

Nathalie nearly jumped out of her bones at that question. She knew the boy knew about that thing with his father, but they had not discussed it. Not in so many words. He had trusted her to handle Gabriel's breakdown a few days before, but that had been desperation, not acceptance.

If it had been in her power, she would have kept the affair from him until the end of time. Getting his approval seemed unlikely. He missed his mother too much, and he had not been allowed nor helped to move on. Nathalie, though she had no desire to walk in his mother shoes, could as best be seen as an unwelcome replacement, if not as the evil stepmother. You couldn't compete with Alice, after all. Saints cast too dark a shadow.

Adrien would have been the last person she wanted to discuss the matter with, had she planned to discuss it at all.

"I'm sorry?" she gasped.

"He pushed you away," the boy replied with a sigh. "I mean, it's not hard to see."

What did you answer to that? Nathalie fumbled for words, aware that her panic was showing on her face and in her posture.

"That…" she tried to say, her voice several octaves higher than she wanted it to be.

She cleared her throat, straightening up, faking composure. She made sure her expression was inscrutable.

"I don't think we should-"

Adrien chuckled.

"I'm sorry!" he immediately exclaimed. "I didn't mean to laugh, I…"

Nathalie blinked, and possibly frowned, confused. He shook his head.

"It's just-" he started. "Nevermind."

_Easier said than done. What was that about?_

He must have noticed her puzzlement. He smiled, straightening up, raising his chin, and clasping his hands behind his back. Just like his father. And just like she had just done. The difference was that the child's expression was warm and amused. There was fondness in it.

"Same mannerisms," he commented. "I'm sorry. It just hit me. I shouldn't have laughed."

Of course the mannerisms were the same. Nathalie had adopted Gabriel's gestures from the moment she had started working for him. They were incredibly effective.

She huffed and let her arms fall to her sides. That didn't feel quite right, she was too aware of them, so she ended up crossing them.

Adrien watched it all, then put his hands in his front pockets, and rocked on his heels with easy grace. _Models._
"I'm not going to ask you if you are alright with that," he said, looking at the wall somewhere on her right. "Him pushing you away. That's private. I just… If you're not alright with it… please, don't let him. You get him. Not everyone does."

She was too baffled to answer. The teenager waited for an instant or so, then took a step back.

"Anyway that was just my opinion, what do I know?" he mumbled, eyes downcast, smile hesitant.

He turned to leave. Nathalie watched him hurry to the closest door. Her brain finally provided a helpful diagram. Every possible path in that flowchart pointed to 'reassure the boy'.

"Adrien", she called.

He stopped and looked at her. She bit her lower lip and did that hand clasping thing again, Nathalie, for god's sake. She tried to look just a little warmer.

"I'll be there if he needs me," she promised.

Adrien studied her face, with an unsettling seriousness, then broke into a grin.

"Thank you," he said, slipping out of the room.

He left her stunned, confused, and unable to process what had just happened.

###

Ladybug perched three buildings away from Pat Messmer's office and waited for any sign of activity. A week had gone by since her encounter with Gabriel Agreste on the roof of the opera. His questionnaire was filled in. She had answers. She wished she could forget them. Keeping her promise to Tikki would not be that easy.

She had no intention of talking to Adrien. Chat, however... She wished she could warn him. He seemed so fascinated by his predecessor. A predecessor who, as Tikki herself admitted, should never have been Chat Noir in the first place.

"You have to understand, Marinette," the Kwami had told her. "He was never evil, just... He fit Alice. He fit Alice, and it meant he was all that Chat Noir should never be."

Tikki had been so remorseful.

"It was my fault. I picked a girl who was as bright as the sun, and her Chat Noir had to be everything she was not. It made for a Chat who was ruthless and cold as ice, and who craved for her light and warmth. Being chosen cost them so much."

"I still don't know what he did, but... How could you possibly have guessed it would end poorly?" Marinette had replied, trying to comfort her. "Everyone makes their own choices. If the ring was taken from him, I imagine he decided to do something terrible."

"He did. That's not the point. He should never have ended up in a position to take that decision to begin with. I could have guessed, Marinette. I should have. We cannot allow such a contrast between Ladybug and Chat Noir, ever. They have to balance each other like you and your Chat: different yet alike, and complementary. When I picked Alice, I allowed for Plagg to chose a child who resembled him, and Plagg is a god of misfortune."
Marinette, listening to her words, had grown more and more nervous.

Tikki had summed up the previous Chat Noir in one sentence.

"His weapon was a sword."

Not a staff, that allowed to fight without inflicting serious damage. Not Marinette's yoyo, used mostly to travel and incapacitate. No. Mister Agreste's weapon, the one he had received upon his first transformation, had been meant to kill.

Marinette's next question had not been 'what did he do?'

"Who?" she had asked Tikki.

That had been clear enough.

"Hawk Moth," the Kwami had replied. "He used Cataclysm on Hawk Moth."

###

Adrien had observed his father for a week, with increasing worry. Gabriel was making an effort to be more present, and had fitted a fencing session into his busy schedule nearly every day. While Adrien was overjoyed to get to spend time with him (at the cost of a bruised ego and a bruised everything else, as he had never fallen down so much in his life), he could still see that his father was withdrawing into himself.

He had broken up with Nathalie. He kept a respectful distance. He no longer bumped into her. He no longer perked up when he saw her walk into a room (well, he did, but contained himself).

Adrien had not realized how good it was to see him move on until that point. Watching him retreat back into that endless wait for his mother was horrendous. Gabriel would keep his life on hold forever, unless he got answers. And, Adrien suspected, they would never be found. If Tikki did not know what happened, when she was the last person to have seen Alice… There was no one left to question.

As Adrien Agreste, perfect son, was not supposed to know anything about superhero business, he hoped he would get to talk to his father as Chat Noir instead.

His patrols had been quiet and lonely, as Ladybug made sure to avoid him. He suspected she would need a few more days to process his confession, and then some to decide how to handle his unrequited love. That stung a little, but it was hardly unexpected.

It had given him ample time to stalk his father.

Of course, for that entire week, Gabriel had stayed home. He had not gone to his secret office to charge his watch, probably due to the fact that Hawk Moth had been quiet. The supervillain had unleashed a new enemy that afternoon, however. It had not been an easy fight. Laser Tag, as her name clearly indicated, had a taste for stealth, ranged weapons, and scoring a lot of points. Adrien had taken a shot for Ladybug, and finished the battle with a paralyzed shoulder.

His partner had saved the day. Lucky charm had fixed everything, including his arm. They had
bumped fists and Chat had tried not to cringe at Ladybug's unease. Then, they had parted ways.

Twenty minutes later, he was breaking into Pat Messmer's office. Again. Having googled the lawyer's name, he chuckled as he did so. His father did have a taste for cat references.

The trapdoor was open. He tiptoed down the stairs, looking around for Gabriel. He found him sitting next to his charging watch, wearing a grey sweater and with his hair in an… 'artistic mess'. That was quite a sight. Also, he looked about to slaughter someone.

"Uh," Chat Noir gasped, tiptoeing backwards to escape the storm, but it was too late, Gabriel had spotted him.

The man jumped out of his chair, joined Chat, and grabbed him by a cat ear. Then he dragged him towards one of the tables.


"Stop whining, or I'll use the real ones," Gabriel said in his calmest voice. Then he pulled Chat's face closer to the table, right above a tablet. "Now what. Was. THAT?"

Adrien looked down. The screen was showing a picture of the fight against Laser Tag, zoomed him on Chat Noir and his paralyzed arm. His shoulder was glowing red where he had been shot.

He tried to wriggle free. His father let go of his ear.

"That? Well, Laser Tag was about to shoot Ladybug and I-"

"You shielded her, you imbecile. What the hell possessed you?"

Chat Noir turned to him, gaping.

"You have to stop being that stupid," Gabriel continued. "It's a mistake you keep making, and it will get the two of you killed. Just. Stop."

Adrien gaped some more, and snapped out of it thanks to righteous fury.

"What do you mean, 'stop'? I have to protect her!"

His father groaned and muttered something about lovesick children. He picked the tablet up, swiping in every direction.

"I swear you are lucky I have no proper footage of this fight yet," he snapped. "But I'll just explain my point differently. Here. Do you remember this?"

He turned the screen towards Chat Noir, who blinked and looked at it, confused. A video was playing: a loop of one of Dislocoeur's attack, more precisely the moment where Adrien had been hit by an arrow and turned evil. It looked like it had been filmed by a security camera. It was grainy, in black and white, but the events were clear enough.

Gabriel waited for the loop to start over.

Adrien watched himself try to confess his feelings to Ladybug, standing on his staff on a building's facade with his partner in his arms. Ten seconds in, Kim flew into the picture and fired an arrow. Gabriel paused the video when the Chat on the screen put himself between Ladybug and the arrow.

"Here," he exclaimed, tapping the picture under Chat Noir and Ladybug's feet. "What is that, pray
tell?"

Adrien winced.

"A… wall?"

"It's *empty space*, you dimwit. Empty space, empty space, empty space," his father repeated, pointing at various parts of the screen. "*All* you had to do was to drop to the ground, or to grab her while falling backwards. Why was your first instinct *suicide*?"

Chat opened and closed his mouth. He desperately tried to find an explanation that sounded tactically sound.

"She… was holding her yoyo's string," he said, as if he did not know that it could stretch at will. "That would have kept her pinned right where she was."

Gabriel rolled his eyes.

"Alright, maybe not," his son conceded. "*But* it was a split-second decision. I just…"

"It was an asinine decision and you need to cure yourself of reflexes like that. You *keep* doing it."

Adrien looked away, arms crossed, not quite sulking but… It probably did look just like he was sulking.

"Maybe that time was a mistake," he mumbled. "*But* sometimes I do *not* have a choice. Sometimes it *is* the only option, and I'd gladly give my life if it means she gets to survive."

"Oh please, spare me the self-sacrificing drivel. The whole 'I would die for her' mentality is all very romantic but it has no place on a battlefield."

Chat Noir turned to him, studying his profile. Gabriel was shaking his head, mildly annoyed. He turned the tablet off and set it down on the table.

He believed his words. He absolutely and totally believed them.

Adrien couldn't help but wonder about his parents' fighting dynamics. Gabriel's Chat Noir did not sound as if he had been very focused on defensive techniques. "Sword, cataclysm". What had he been like on the field? How would he have protected Alice?

"Wouldn't you have died for your Ladybug?" the boy asked, hesitant.

"No."

"*What?*"

"It was never an acceptable solution in my eyes. I do not tolerate *failing*. I would have taken any measures necessary to do my duty as Chat Noir, but that was not protecting *her*, it was protecting *us.*"

He returned to the watch to check on it. It was not charged, so he sighed and sat down again. Chat Noir just stared at him, shocked. His father's point of view made sense, but it was so different from his own that he struggled with the idea. *His* first instinct was to save Ladybug. There was no conscious thought behind it, as long as no other lives were involved. Civilians took priority over her, and she took priority over Chat himself. That was just… how things were?
After a few moments of silence, Gabriel pursed his lips.

"You are a team," he explained. "If you die, if you are injured, you leave her crippled. You might feel like sacrificing yourself is the best decision, like you gave her a chance to win, but in truth you are depriving her of a good part of her offensive power. Always, always find a better solution."

"What if I can't?"

Gabriel mouthed those words back, aggravated.

"If that's the way you think, you can as well give that ring back. Or you can stop whining and train to get better at this."

Chat sighed and sat on the table, crossing his hands on his knees. He tapped his claws against the leather of his gloves.

"You were never in a situation where you had no other choice?" he asked.

"Obviously not. I am here, aren't I?"

"Never?"

"Once or twice. We were young. We got lucky. But the thing is, for the next ten years, I could trust Ladybug to handle herself. I could trust her not to put us in a situation where one of us had to make that choice. We trained hard to survive. We found teachers, we reviewed our battles, we did everything in our power to be the best at this."

Adrien stared into the distance, stunned.

"That sounds... so weird. I read a bit about your wife. Curiosity, cats, you know? She sounded... "

_Sweet. Tender. Warm. Loving._

"She didn't sound like what you are describing," he finished, saddened to discover his mother had kept so much of herself from him.

"Because she wore pastel dresses and acted bubbly and naive?"

_Acted?_

Gabriel hesitated for half a second.

"She was all of that, but she was my wife," he said. "That should be a big sign that there was more to her. There is a lot of ourselves we only show the world when we wear a mask," he finished, taping the corner of his eye. "Aren't you less of a brat as a civilian? Isn't the girl softer?"

Chat cleared his throat.

"I have no idea. I don't know who she is."

His father blinked. Adrien stared at him, just as confused.

"Your wife told you who she was from the start?" he asked.

"Of course not. I peeked. Three days in."
Gabriel sounded exactly like Plagg, when he had told Adrien that he 'peeked, he always peeked'.

His son gaped.

"You… What? But that was betraying her trust!"

"Yes. I have the scruples of a snake. Tell me something I don't know."

Chat studied his face. He was smiling - though you had to look hard and long to spot that curve at the corner of his lips - and had relaxed a little.

"What did you do? After finding out who she was? Did you reveal yourself?"

"Absolutely not. She was a girl from my class who had a crush on me. She had confessed to me, actually. Seventeen times. I couldn't stand her. But then… having seen Ladybug … I asked her out. I laid it heavy on the romance, wrapped her around my finger."

Chat opened and closed his mouth. Well. That was horrifying in more ways than one.

Gabriel grinned.

"That went on for a month or so, then she figured me out and kicked my ass from one side of Paris to the other."

"And then?" Adrien said, frowning.

His father chuckled. The teenager turned green.

"FORGET I ASKED."

That got Gabriel to laugh.

Adrien had not seen that man in five years, if not in ten. His father no longer laughed, or only faked it. He did it as a business practice, to get his interlocutors at ease, when he bothered with that. It had taken Adrien's mother, her jokes, her teasing to get sincere laughter out of him. Or, as his son was starting to realize, it had taken his Ladybug. He only showed his true self when he wore a mask, only that mask was not dependent on a costume but on the context. Here, in a room filled with magic, talking to his successor, his inner Chat Noir surfaced.

He would never show that side of himself to Adrien. Gabriel was so set on keeping his son away from Ladybug and Chat noir, on not discussing his family, 'not in any circumstances'. He had build so many walls around his real life and magic, just like he had built walls the size of a mountain around his home. He was afraid of exposing Adrien to danger, and there would be no pushing him to reveal himself.

Adrien wished he could convince him to share a bit more, but asking would just make his father retreat further away. Chat Noir could reach him, however, so the boy lied his way into his confidence, and stole what secrets about his parents he could get.

"So, she loved you already?" he commented, leaning back and sighing. "I wish I was that lucky. My lady won't give me a second glance."

His father raised his eyebrows.

"Won't she, now?"

"I wish she would. I don't think her loving me is in the cards, though. I've been trying to win her
heart, and the results have been cata-strophic."

"Oh, the girl loves you," Gabriel replied, opening the butterfly watch and smiling in satisfaction as it gave a faint pink glow.

Chat Noir jumped and leaned forward.

"What do you mean?"

His father gave him a side-look.

"You don't ever review your fights, do you?"

"Errrrr…"

"She freed you from Dislocoeur's influence with a kiss," Gabriel clarified. "What kind of magic did you think was at work there? The mystical powers of strawberry-flavored gloss?"

Adrien's eyes went wide. He gaped at his father as the man walked to the aquariums, caught a butterfly, and trapped it inside the watch. Which was a kind of magic that would have to be investigated too.

"You…" he stuttered. "You really think she…"

"Yes. And maybe if you stopped being such an obnoxious flirt, she would notice it."

"Being an obnoxious flirt is who I am!"

"Well, then change who you are?" Gabriel retorted, pushing the watch into his pocket. "Now, you'll have to excuse me, but I'm not powered by quantic energy. I'm going home to sleep. It was nice talking to you."

###
Gabriel had started stealing cigarettes again at the age of sixteen.

It had not been about cancer. It had not been about health concerns at all, nor about the rigidity of his family life, nor about emotional distress. It had been entirely meant to piss Anne-Laure off.

Dating Alice came with perks. You got an exceptionally pretty girlfriend who would model for free. You got the companionship of someone who, while she loved to be showered in romance until she swooned, was happy enough to simply be in the same room as you. You got to kiss Ladybug. Unfortunately, with those perks also came her ever present best friend.

It said a lot about Alice that the most important relationships in her life always seemed to involve absolute jerks. Gabriel was one of them. Anne-Laure was the closest contender. Alice liked everyone. *Everyone*. But being liked by Alice was not nearly the same as being loved by her. You could not understand her until she loved you.

Well meaning classmates and 'friends' would flock to her and worry about how close she was to Anne-Laure, how naive she was to trust Gabriel. They would tell her she was too forgiving. And she would chuckle and give them her kindest, brightest smile.

"I'm not forgiving," she would tell them.

They would sigh and give up, and watch her from afar with concern, wondering how she could be convinced that her friendships were toxic, and her boyfriend abusive.

She smiled to that too.

"If I minded the way you act," she had once told Gabriel, "I would tell you."

Of course, he knew that. As Ladybug, she never minced her words. Alice was more patient, however. As Ladybug, she had a persona to maintain, different expectations, and harsher standards. As herself, she rolled with the punches. She didn't mind insults. She was well aware that her optimism and kindness were painted as idiocy, but… that rolled off like water off a duck's back.

If you really, really messed up, she would give you a piece of her mind. And then the world would tremble. As Gabriel did not go out of his way to treat people like dirt (as a matter of fact, he went out of his way not to have to treat people like anything), he mostly avoided those fits of righteous anger. Anne-Laure took the brunt of them.

He had seen Alice unleash hell upon her best friend, and it had been a scary sight.

"And If you think for a second I will tolerate your *bullying* that girl…"

Anne-Laure deserved it.
"... you have another thing coming…"

She really did.

"... in no universe is this acceptable…"

She was a nightmare.

"... haven't considered it at all? Well let me clarify things for you, you…"

The stereotypical mean girl, with a sprinkling of juvenile delinquency.

"... catch you doing it again you will wish that…"

She smoked and drank and partied.

"... ARE WE CLEAR?"

Anne-Laure really liked yellow and stripes. She'd been Waspp's chosen, too. Queen Bee.

Alice's outbursts always corrected Anne-Laure's natural disposition for at least two months. After that one, the girl had been wide-eyed and gaping, as she watched Alice cross her arms and glare.

"Okay, okayyy, chill! I'll apologize. Wow. Holy hell."

That was what fear looked like. Fear and, to a lesser extent, remorse.

The next day, they were best friends again, and Bee's behaviour had distinctly improved.

Gabriel and Anne-Laure had despised each other, being rivals for Alice's affection. So he had stolen her cigarettes and watched her flip out. It never failed to amuse him.

There was nothing quite as satisfying as hearing a "Gabriel, you ass, those things cost money, give it back!", especially when Alice was right next to them and secretly approved of his stealing. Cigarettes did cause cancer.

###

One week.

That awkward conversation with Adrien set aside, Nathalie had spent her days tending to her usual duties, her concern turning to worry and then to frank anxiety. She was unused to feeling disquiet that was not directly related to her being in trouble. It was new and unpleasant.

Over those seven days, Gabriel had gone from tiredness to exhaustion. If the timestamps on the emails he sent were anything to go by, he was not sleeping. One am, two, three, four, five AM, with sometimes a gap between six and seven, and not even every night. He was restless and irritable, and growing paler from day to day.

Nathalie, being Nathalie, had googled the legal consequences of slipping someone sleeping pills. They were dire. She had discarded the idea.
By day six, she was considering dragging him to bed.

Maybe he would not take kindly to the suggestion, let alone to a more direct and bodily approach of it. He needed to rest, however, and if she had to get down on her knees to convince him, it would not trouble her much.

Being a coward, and a lazy one on top of that, she stopped at mulling over the idea, and playing minesweeper instead.

On day seven, Laser Tag attacked Paris, and Gabriel vanished until the next morning.

"Where does he go?" Nathalie asked their driver, discovering that anxiety about loved ones came with an unhealthy amount of curiosity.

"I have no idea. He just takes the car, brings it back hours later. I'm paid not to question it. You told me I was paid not to question it."

That was true.

Thankfully, for situations where one had to remotely stalk one's employer, engineers had invented GPS tracking. While Gabriel was off for "R&D", she spent her afternoon and evening in front of her tablet, following a little red dot on a map of Paris. From the looks of it, the car was not going anywhere specific, just spiraling around an area. It was not hard to guess Gabriel was circling the location his butterfly watch pointed to.

Nathalie had no idea what he was looking for, but at least it was not the possessed villain of the day.

The car ended up changing directions entirely and parking in a business area halfway across town. It stayed there. Nathalie waited, and waited, and wrote the address down, and went home to sleep. Her willingness to investigate Gabriel's fishy behavior did not extend to actually confronting him. Not yet.

She woke up at half past six, checked her emails, and discovered Gabriel had been steadily answering his business correspondence for the best part of two hours. The notifications kept arriving as she showered, dressed herself, applied her makeup, drove herself to the mansion, and made sure Adrien was alive and fed (he was not, as a matter of fact, fed, but picking at his food while fawning over a video of Ladybug on his phone).

At some point, she figured out Gabriel was working from home. More precisely, when he asked for coffee over the intercom.

She sent Adrien on his way (Dutch lessons, that poor boy), and made her way to her boss' office with a platter that included coffee, breakfast, and orange juice.

Unsurprisingly, Gabriel, who was sitting at his desk and drawing, looked like death warmed over. Which she noticed with a pang of worry. Which she definitely would have preferred not to feel.

"Good morning," he greeted her. "Have you had a chance to catch up on the emails I sent to Aria Rossignol and Melodie Chanteclair?"

"Not yet, sir," Nathalie replied, putting the platter down on his desk, between a perfectly arranged notepad, stapler and pencil box. "I'll read them right now."

"Good. Aria is asking for a new dress for the Cannes festival. Plenty of time, but you know the
woman. She wants sketches 'yesterday'. See if you can fit a meeting with her over lunch next week, and make sure she understands actual work won't start until October."

"Very well, sir," she said, staring at him.

She took in his paleness, the dark circles under his eyes, the gauntness of his cheeks, and reached out, running a hand through his hair. She only realized what she had done afterwards, and froze. For all of her worrying and plans to get him to sleep, she had not meant to ever act. She had not intended to show concern.

Gabriel, focused on his work, proved similarly slow on the uptake.

"Also-" he started, before the touch registered.

He looked up in disbelief.

She swallowed.

As mistakes went, this one was fairly horrendous. For a start, she would have to scrub her hand clean with industrial detergent to get rid of all that wax. On top of that, her touch had been unwelcome. He wanted distance. She had known he wanted distance. And he liked his instructions followed to the letter.

She hid her hand behind her back, like a little girl caught stealing candy.

Gabriel frowned - and Nathalie knew fury when she saw it - then turned back to his art, scowling, but willing to pretend nothing had happened. That was fantastic. She could pretend too.

"I'll be getting in touch with Aria," she announced, turning away. "Anything else?"

"That will be all."

She nodded, walking to the door. She heard his chair creak and roll and, an instant later, he was wrapping an arm around her.

###

The ribbons had been an endless source of entertainment. For Gabriel. For Alice… not so much.

Wandering around him with knee-length, flowing ribbons was - as far as he was concerned - inviting trouble. He had managed to refrain from snatching the things for the entire time his Ladybug had been unaware of his identity. He had some boundaries. After they had figured each other's secrets out, however, the ribbons had been fair game. Alice was his girlfriend. He had snatched a lot more from her than hair accessories.

More often than not, their patrols ended with a yelp from her, or a yell, or an aggravated protest.

"Chat! Those are not *leashes!*" she would snap (again).

Gabriel grinned and played with the silly things, whether she liked it or not. As far as impulse control was concerned, he had too much or none at all, and four feet long ribbons twirling within his reach were too much of a temptation. He'd grab one and wrap it around his wrist once then,
depending on Ladybug's reaction, let it go or wrap it around his wrist over and over again as he pulled her closer.

She would sulk or tease him or flick her fingers at his forehead, rolling her eyes at his playfulness.

"I'm buying a laser pointer," she'd swear.

"Still waiting," he'd retort, grinning, his hand so tangled in her ribbons that it was easier for her to surrender them than to free herself. They vanished when she untransformed, anyway.

"Or, better, I'm buying a big cardboard box."

It wasn't an uncommon threat.

"You can try. I like boxes," he would reply, trying to undo her pigtails.

"Aouch!" the invulnerable girl would exclaim as soon as he pulled on a hair. "Aow! Ouch! I swear I will end you."

He had to dance away from playful kicks.

###

Nathalie tried to locate her vest's button. It had fallen off and rolled away earlier, and she would need to find it at some point. She spotted it on the left of a shelf, nearly hidden under a potted plant. She took good note of its location.

Then she focused on Gabriel, who was lying under her and wrapped around her and did not seem to mind how hard the floor was. She was willing to believe he had terrible impulse control, after all. Maybe just a little. Or maybe he just bottled things up so compulsively that he was bound to implode every now and then. She knew nothing forced him to keep his emotions to himself. It was just how he liked to be, who he strove to be. Perfect composure at all times. Feelings undiscussed, unmentionable. If there was more underneath - a restlessness, a playfulness, a heart - he kept it well hidden. He hated losing control. Still, everyone had their limits.

His fingers ran up and down her back as his thoughts traveled through darker and darker territories.

"This can't happen a-" he tried to say.

"Shut up."

His hand stilled.

"With all due respect," Nathalie added.

Gabriel's fingers resumed their motion, up and down, up and down.

"I guess I can stop saying it. I clearly cannot stick to my own decisions," he commented.

"You would have an easier time if your 'decisions' did not involve torturing yourself," his assistant muttered. "You might as well accept that you are just human and that you do need a modicum of warmth."
He had an opinion about that, and she could see it on his face, but there was a time and place to express it. A different time and place. Instead, he turned away, wrapping an arm around her waist.

He was dozing off.

Nathalie studied his face.

"When did you last sleep, Gabriel?"

"Three hours ago?"

"You mean when you were emailing every single one of your business contacts?"

There was a pause.

"Four hours ago?" he tried, sounding as unconvinced as she felt.

She sighed, sitting up and stretching her neck.

"Let's get you to bed."

The look on his face as he heard those words looked distinctly like fear. It vanished in a split-second, replaced by mild annoyance, but there was no unseeing it. She looked down, spotting yellowish bruises on his chest and arms, scratches on his hands. Once again, she wondered what the hell was going on. She cared to the point that plausible deniability was no longer such a concern. It had been, all jokes aside. She had never wanted to get involved.

They rolled away from each other, collecting their clothes.

"The house is empty, isn't it?" he asked moments later, buttoning his shirt, his back turned to her.

"It is," she replied, adjusting her vest, though there was not much she could do to keep it closed without the first button.

He relaxed a little.

"Sleep, then," he said, his voice entirely too cheerful.

It did not sound like him.

Nathalie frowned, joining him, trying to get a look at his face. He had no shadows to hide behind here, so he just turned away, as casually as he could. She put a hand on his shoulder. He straightened up and nodded, letting her look at him. Whatever expression he had been trying to conceal was gone. All she got was a polite smile. That, and a kiss.

And then two. And then three.

"I said sleep," she mumbled as he led her to his bedroom.

She could recognize diversionary tactics when she saw them.

They stopped by the door, for a few inviting kisses and some fooling around, then Gabriel pushed the door open. He wrapped his arms around Nathalie and took a step back, leaning against the doorframe. That was as far as they got.

While Gabriel's intentions were unmistakable, he quickly faltered. It did not take long for Nathalie
to notice his hesitation, then that said hesitation was not just *that*. She felt him shudder, she felt him pause. His kisses felt forced. His hands left her - left, then right - to clutch the door frame. His knees buckled a little, and he slipped down by a few inches. His breathing was too controlled, unnatural.

Nathalie pulled back.

"I can't," he told her, staring through her. "I'm sorry. I can't."

She peeked inside the room. She had seen it often. It was not unusual for her to supervise furniture deliveries or repairs. That being said, being allowed in as staff was different from being invited in as a lover. While, in appearance, Gabriel's bedroom was just as impersonal as the rest of the mansion, it was still the one he had shared with his wife.

"I understand," Nathalie replied.

Then she noticed how his hands, still clenched on the door frame, were shaking. He was fighting to keep his breathing in check.

She bit her tongue not to swear.

This was why, when you went through traumatic events, like the disappearance of your partner of twenty years, you got professional help.

*What am I supposed to do now?*

She took a step to the side to return to the corridor, then pressed a hand to Gabriel's. Softly, carefully, she pried his fingers off the door's frame.

"Let's find a quieter place," she suggested.

A room without ghosts would do.
"What's bugging you?"

"Tomorrow at three would be perfect," Nathalie replied when Stella Spotlight's assistant finally bent to her will, after a solid thirty minutes of 'negotiation'.

Nathalie had negotiated by refusing to bulge at all until her interlocutor understood that upturning her boss' schedule would be easier and less time-consuming than getting Gabriel's assistant to back down. Nathalie had all day. Her most pressing duty was to move the handful of videoconferences her employer was not in condition to hold, and she was doing that from the corner of a bed, in a guest room of the mansion. Her shoes were off. So was her jacket.

She had retrieved her laptop so she could keep sending and replying to emails as she handled Gabriel's panic attack in the only way she could: by doing nothing at all.

Was he medicated? she had asked. "No". No therapy either, but she knew that. So she had brought him to a guest bedroom and put him to bed. The first and only thing he had done was to sit with his back against the headboard, curled up in foetal position.

Her MBA did not come with mental health training. She would probably have cheated her way through those classes, anyway.

"Do you want a sleeping pill?" she had offered. "It's all I have on me, really."

He had shaken his head.

She had left the room to fetch a bottle of water, then sat next to him with a hand on his shoulder for twenty minutes, until his shaking had stopped. It was at that point that Nathalie had gotten her laptop from her office, seeing how Gabriel was in no state to work. At all. Which she knew because he had not once insisted he could.

She had spent the next two hours sitting on the corner of the bed and praying for something to lean against, as her back was killing her. Every now and then, she idly reached for Gabriel, who was sitting two feet away, arms crossed on his knees and chin buried against his elbow.

"Take the sleeping pill," she advised again after hanging up, with mild impatience and next to no concern.

He shook his head.

This time, Nathalie sighed. He chuckled, staring straight ahead, his voice sounding like it came from the grave. She clicked her tongue and turned back to her computer screen, refreshing her email. She could feel his eyes on her.

She answered two emails before he spoke again.

"Thank you," he said, quietly.

"Just doing my job, sir."

She peeked at him after saying that, because angering him would not have been wise. Now, if her words had stung a little, she would not have minded. Gabriel, however, was merely looking at her, his expression as calm and tired as his voice. Nathalie ended up being the one annoyed.
"Just lie down and sleep, will you? I don't intend to cajole you into it. I don't plan to wait until you finally pass out."

The corner of his mouth twitched. He pursed his lips to keep the smile in, but it still reached his eyes. She took a deep breath, so she would not lose it and kill him.

"Sleep," she ordered, pushing him down (and she didn't shove him hard, but he still collapsed, out of energy as he was). "I don't especially care that you are afraid to do so. Sleep."

She stood, deciding that he had been comforted enough and could handle himself like the grown adult he was supposed to be. He watched her walk to the door.

"I'm not afraid to sleep," he told her as she opened it.

Of course, it stopped Nathalie dead in her tracks.

"You could have fooled me," she commented.

He shook his head, sitting up.

"I'm not. I just hate waking up."

She frowned, not quite understanding what the problem would be. She had supposed he was struggling with nightmares. He straightened up, turning ever so slightly away.

"It's…" he started. "Being startled awake doesn't… I'll just have that sleeping pill, if you don't mind."

Nathalie stared at him. She thought back of the year Alice had gone missing. The state he had been in, the hours on end he had spent shaking. She had thought it would be nightmares, but the trauma just seeped out in other ways.

"The pills are in my bag," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'll get it."

Ten minutes later, standing next to the bed with her arms crossed, she watched him voluntarily swallow the pill, hereby saving her from prosecution, jail time, and unemployment. He put his glass of water down on the nightstand, and raised his eyebrows at her in the universal "happy now?" look. She stared him down.

"You know you are doing this to yourself, don't you?"

Alice's disappearance had shattered him and that was not his fault, but he only had himself to blame for refusing to get help for five whole years.

"I do."

"Then just-"

He reached for her wrist, giving a little tug on her arm to ask her to join him in bed, when she could have used a: words, b: an apology, c: some begging (or d: all of the above). Nathalie still sat down, sighing. When Gabriel wrapped an arm around her, her thoughts moved from inner complaining to profanity.

Did he have to admit he needed her to stay?

Did she have to be worried for him?
If she had been wise, she would have freed herself and left. Gabriel Agreste was a man who cringed away from physical contact in most circumstances.

She laid down against him instead, and spent four hours uncomfortably shifting in his arms, with short stretches of slumber to distract her from her aching back and crushed, tingling arm. At least, he did not twist and turn.

He pretended to sleep well after she felt him wake up.

It was only when he spoke that she realized he'd been gathering his courage.

"She was a superhero," he told her. "Alice. I'm aware it sounds… crazy at best. But she was."

###

Sometimes, it was pleasant to transform, climb atop an architectural landmark, and lounge. At a different time of the day, Chat Noir would have found himself a comfy spot on the Eiffel tower. In the middle of the afternoon, however, he preferred to avoid the constant stream of tourists. He was lying on one of the arches of Notre-Dame and enjoying the sun. Better still, Ladybug was with him.

If his father or Nathalie ever figured out that his Dutch teacher had called in sick, and that Adrien had promptly escaped, there would be hell to pay. As long as he returned home at the planned time, however, they were unlikely to ask about his day. Well, that was not strictly true. His father was trying to show a little more curiosity, and had to talk about something when they went fencing together. He did not expect minute by minute summaries of his Dutch lessons, however.

Adrien had two hours.

It was sunny.

For a little while, he could put his worry for his father aside. He had cheerier things to think about. He could indulge in fantasies and hopes for a moment.

"Now that's a goofy smile," Ladybug asked from her perch on the border of the roof, in her first display of friendly curiosity since Adrien Agreste had confessed Chat Noir's feelings. "What are you daydreaming about?"

He opened his eyes and tilted his head back to look at her. She was leaning forward, smiling. He grinned.

"Strawberry-flavored lip gloss!" he announced.

He expected the words to mean nothing to her, as she had not been there to hear Gabriel's comment about the magical powers of true love kisses and lipstick. Much to his surprise, she froze, and she tasted her own lips with a nervous flick of the tongue. He blushed, which made her blush, and they both ended up a vivid shade of scarlet.

"W—wait!" he exclaimed. "Are you wearing strawberry-flavored lipstick?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she retorted with a cheeky smile that did not quite cover her
"Actuuumuably..." he trailed off, flirting, totally flirting, and maybe he was an obnoxious flirt, yes, but how was he supposed to help himself when she smiled like that?

She flushed a little, but leaned forward with a raised eyebrow and an amused smirk.

"What makes you think I even wear lip gloss? I'm a bit too busy saving Paris to worry about makeup, don't you think?"

Chat Noir jumped to his feet, whirling to her with a hand on his hip. He grabbed his tail and made it spin.

"Just because you have to save the city doesn't mean that you can't do it in style," he pointed out.

She giggled.

"You have enough style for the two of us, kitty."

"Thank you very much, my lady," he replied, bowing. "Wait, that was a compliment, wasn't it?"

She laughed again, finally relaxed. It made his heart beat a little faster.

"For what it's worth," he commented, "strawberries would definitely fit you."

Ladybug raised an eyebrow. Chat grinned.

"Red, covered in spots, sweet, ..."

"Stop right here, Don Juan," she interrupted, still chuckling. "I see your point."

He scratched his neck, so relieved to see the atmosphere between them return to normal. While his father's sharp assessment of how and why that kiss had freed him from Dislocoeur influence was promising, the knowledge that Ladybug had feelings for him was not nearly as important to him as her friendship. He wanted her to feel comfortable about him, and happy, and amused.

"I'm not going to get an explanation on the strawberry-flavored makeup daydreaming, am I?" she asked.

"You couldn't make heads or tails of it anyway," he declared, swinging the tip of his belt up and down. "There's a context."

"Oh, if there's a context ..."

He swayed back and forth, grinning. She smiled back. He swayed a little too far and had to do a backflip and land farther down not to lose his balance and fall.

"Say," he exclaimed once secure on his feet. "Wanna spar?"

Ladybug blinked.

"Spar?"

"Yes! Just, you know, as training. It's not often we have free time to do something other than patrolling and 'saving Paris in style'. I figure practice would be a good idea, every now and then."
His partner tilted her head to the side, considering the suggestion, then nodded.

"That's true. We should definitely make some room for that," she commented, before jumping down from her perch and sliding to him. "Great idea!"

"Not mine, really. Mister Agreste made a few comments on my fighting style. Namely, he pointed out two ways I routinely leave myself wide open to getting killed, in as many conversations. I need to get better."

Ladybug frowned, growing tense. However, she tried to keep her tone neutral.

"Is that what you talked about? Fighting technique?"

Chat Noir nodded.

"He had, err, comments, about the way I handled myself against Laser Tag, and he told me about a flaw with my pirouettes. He obviously knows his stuff. He was a superhero for ten years."

His partner's expression turned worried, her frown deepening. She bit her lower lip and took a moment to consider her next words.

"I know you are curious about him, and that's only natural, but… You should be careful," she told him, uneasy. "He might be nice to you and give you tips, but at the end of the day, he is not the kind of person one should look up to. You might end up disappointed. Has he told you why he lost the ring?"

She knew. You could see it on her face, hear it in her voice.

Adrien rocked on his heels. He had wondered about it. He still wondered about it. But, no matter how bad it had been, he trusted his mother's judgement. She had remained by his father's side after his birth, and Gabriel had implied the Miraculous had been taken from him before that.

"He implied he abused Chat Noir's powers," he replied. "He made it sound bad, so I can guess. And I can also guess it did not work or he was stopped." - He took a deep breath. - "Tikki told you, didn't she?"

Ladybug nodded.

"Yes. Mister Agreste contacted me to get information on Hawk Moth, to help finding his wife. So I asked her what he had done. But … I promised not to tell you. She doesn't want me to tell Adrien Agreste, because the truth should come from his father. And she thinks it would change the way you see your powers, so Plagg or mister Agreste would be better suited to explain what happened."

Tikki, who knew full well who Chat Noir was, had clearly invented a flimsy excuse so Ladybug would not run straight to her partner and reveal every dark secret his father kept hidden.

"That… I see," he murmured. "I guess I'll ask again."

"Please be cautious. He might not be evil - Tikki does not believe he is - but he was not the kind of hero you are. He might try to justify what he did, to convince you it was necessary."

Chat Noir looked down at his hand, clenching his fist and opening it.

Nothing could ever convince him to use Cataclysm on someone. The spell was meant for objects only. His father had not tried to justify his choices, however. He had said he only regretted the
consequences, but he had told Adrien his ring had been taken away for 'very good reasons'. He had basically said he had been too cold to be given Chat Noir's powers.

"Don't worry," he replied. "I kind of suspect what he did. I mean, I guess he failed, or he wouldn't be running free, but it's no big mystery he tried to kill an enemy." - That was to be expected from a man who did not tolerate failing, who could steel himself against any feeling. Alice had still forgiven him. - "But he can't wrap his mind around the way I think or me around the way he thinks. There's still a lot to be learned from him, though."

Ladybug mulled over that, chewing the inside of one cheek, then nodded.

"Has he told you what he'll do if he finds Hawk Moth?" she asked. "I have a letter with the answers he asked for, and I've been sitting on it for a week. I'm not sure it should be given to a civilian."

Adrien's eyes widened.

"You've been keeping it to yourself?" he exclaimed, horrified.

"I'm not about to encourage mister Agreste to go after a superpowered evil mastermind! He'll get himself killed. I know he probably wants to check if his wife tried to follow Tikki, but I can't help wondering if there's a catch. The man is a compulsive liar. He might have other plans. I'm just afraid to give him information that could get him closer to Hawk Moth."

Chat forced himself to calm down, keeping his voice mildly curious.

"What kind of information is it?"

"You know Hawk Moth was active in Brazil when Mrs Agreste went missing. After she gave the Miraculous back, Tikki picked a new hero and kept fighting him. Now, mister Agreste never knew about that, because the hero was a boy in a black and golden costume who went by a different name. He was never filmed, barely ever noticed. He mostly tried to track Hawk Moth down, and only had to fight Akuma five times. Hawk Moth was not attacking at random like he is now. Tikki thinks he was looking for a lost Miraculous."

"The blue one, or the yellow one?"

Adrien knew Volpina had Vixx's, the orange one. Master Fu had the green one, and Hawk Moth the pink, which meant only two were missing.

"The blue," Ladybug replied. "Queen Bee was active at the same time as Mrs Agreste, there was no reason to believe her Miraculous was gone. On the other hand, there has not been a Firebird in in a century. Tikki and the other Kwami have not heard of Zharr since then either."

"Obviously, Hawk Moth did not find him. Right now, he's winging it. If he had two Miraculous, we'd be facing him on a wing and a prayer..."

Ladybug glared at him.

He cleared his throat.

"So, what information did you have to give?"

"The locations and dates of the Akuma attacks Tikki remembers. The places where she and her chosen stayed for more than a few hours. There is not much, and I don't see how it could help finding Adrien's mother. Tikki never even heard Alice's name before she returned to Paris."
"It doesn't sound like there's anything in there that could lead mister Agreste to Hawk Moth either. It all happened in South America, didn't it? And at least a year ago."

"I know… It's just… I don't know. Maybe there is something in there I couldn't spot. Maybe getting that information will convince him he's right to try to find Hawk Moth, and what if he manages to? He'd be in so much danger. I wish I could find a way to make him drop it."

Chat Noir stared through Ladybug as he absorbed all of that, and the implications, and the risks and consequences.

He wanted his father to drop it too.

"He won't," he declared. "Never. Now, I don't know the man that well, but I talked to Adrien. I know enough. His wife was his everything. He might fancy his assistant and care about his son, but no one drew him out of himself like his wife did. I mean, the man I talked to in that 'secret lair'? The passion for magic, the fighting knowledge, the smiles, the jokes? Adrien has never met him. He's not just Gabriel Agreste. Maybe the ring was taken from him, but he's still Chat Noir. And she's still his partner. He won't drop it."

Ladybug stared at him, growing paler from word to word.

"He couldn't if he tried," Adrien added as she swallowed and fidgeted. "He would do anything."

His partner looked away, taking a sharp breath. It pained her to hear that. She could tell what was true for one Chat Noir also applied to the other, and she had been struggling with the idea that hers loved her for days now. She did not want to hear it. She had no idea how to handle it.

Adrien's train of thought was not stopping, however.

"And he lost his ring," he exclaimed as the realization hit him. "He made a choice that meant she would be fighting alone and…"

And she went off to fight Hawk Moth on her own and she did not even tell him about it. All of that because of that choice. He was not by his partner's side when she went missing and only has himself to blame.

He had come to that conclusion before, of course. Analyzing the past and trying to figure Gabriel out was not nearly the same as picturing himself in that same situation, with his own Ladybug vanishing because of his absence.

The mere idea gave him cold sweats. He felt faint.

"I'll talk to him," he exclaimed.

"What?"

"I'll talk to him. That intel, do you have it on paper, or did you just memorize it?"

"We printed it out. I'm not sure it's-"

"I'll give it to him. And I'll talk to him. Try to convince him to let us handle Hawk Moth. He… I don't think he'd listen to you. He's not a man who listens to anyone," he amended, trying to convince her that it had nothing to do with her at all, and failing. "But I'm Chat Noir. If someone can reach him, it's me."
Ladybug studied his face.

"It won't be an easy conversation," she warned him, getting a folded envelope from her yoyo.

"I know. But it's worth a try," he replied with a grin, holding his hand out to grab the envelope.

She gave it to him and watched him stuff it into his pocket.

"I wouldn't do anything for you," she blurted out.

It startled him, and he looked up in surprise.

"I wouldn't," she repeated, her voice more confident. "and I know you would not either." - She reached for his hand, took it, and held it with a firm grip. - "And that's a good thing. Because we know each other and we fit each other and we know where to draw the line. We know where the other would draw the line. And we can trust each other not to go further than that."

Adrien scarcely ever used the word 'mesmerized' but, when he did, his lady was always involved. He bit his lower lip, unable to form a word. His heart was thumping straight in his ears.

She put her second hand over his.

"And we would both draw the line at the same point. We would never expect the other to do more than what they can, we would never want them to suffer, we would want them to put their happiness first."

Well. His outlook on their relationship had been a little more self-sacrificing. As far as what he wanted for her was concerned, however, she was spot on.

He felt a little giddy, and totally smitten.

"I'm going to hug you now," he announced, with a smile that was zero percent bravado and a hundred percent nerves. "Just so you know."

She let go of his hand and hugged him. He froze. He gaped. He opened and closed his mouth. Then he wrapped his arms around her.

###

"Ladybug," Gabriel announced, after Nathalie's initial wave of 'what do you mean, superhero?' and exhausted confusion. "From age fifteen to thirty."

His assistant, who had sat up and was gaping at him, squinted and tried to process the idea.

Gabriel was still lying down, having merely rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling and continued talking in a casual tone, his voice as detached as if he had been discussing the weather.

"It was pretty much the life you'd expect of a masked vigilante. A monster attacked, a supervillain attacked, a robber attacked, and it had to be handled immediately. There was no questioning it. Sure, it was risky, but Alice was good at what she did. She knew how to handle herself, much better than the two kids running amok those days. We both accepted the fact that, one day, she might not come home, and that was alright. But having a child redefines your concept of danger. It
changes the balance between acceptable risks and accomplishments. All of a sudden, it's your duty to ensure that child is safe, that he will have a future where he is taken care off, where he will not have to worry about monsters barging into his home. So you take drastic decisions.

Nathalie tried to think back of their family life. She had seen nothing that could have indicated Alice had a secret identity. Nothing. Did she vanish at random times of the day? Why not? She was a rich, popular stay-at-home mom with plenty of friends. Sometimes, she missed an appointment. Sometimes, she went to bed in the middle of the day with a headache. Who would have questioned it?

Gabriel had showed no sign of worrying for her safety, but that was Gabriel being Gabriel. While his wife was out fighting magical criminals, his apparent concern was to know if Nathalie had forwarded the week's kidnapping and murder threats to the police. And he had known all along she had superpowers.

All along…

"So that's what happened!" Nathalie exclaimed. "You figured out who she was."

Gabriel turned to her, startled.

"I'm sorry?"

"We were in the same school," she told him. "You and Alice were the celebrity couple, and there were quite a few rumors going on about how she had gotten you to date her after seventeen rejections. You discovered her secret identity."

He snorted.

"I remember the rumors. And yes, that's exactly what happened. I found her a lot more interesting after figuring out she had a personality."

That personality, Nathalie mused, had been very well hidden.

Gabriel sat up, massaging the nape of his neck.

"There was a lot of outcry back then. One of her friends threatened to 'beat the shit out of me', another actually did - you might remember Anne-Laure Bourgeois - and I got quite a few nasty comments. People thought Alice was fragile. No one understood her, so no one believed the arrogant, unpleasant rich kid was exactly who she had wanted to date."

"So the whole dashing prince act…"

"It was all fun and games. We were both playing pretend. And, to some extent… It was an easy, painted by numbers way of giving her the romance I felt she deserved. My natural instinct is not to overshare, so..."

Now that's the euphemism of the century.

His marriage was starting to make sense, in a disturbing, unhealthy way. They had both been wearing masks, but they had both known exactly who the other was, and had helped each other keep the pretense up. Gabriel's prince charming persona had been another way for him not to express himself, and his wife had encouraged that. As for Alice, she had been a different person entirely. There was no telling how much of her sweetness and bubbliness had been faked.
If Alice had walked into their union with illusions, they had not been about the way Gabriel treated her. She had loved him cold and distant. A superhero would have been able to take it. But then, she would have faced the reality of what "cold and distant" did to a child. She would have seen how the traits she liked were harmful to her son. That was why they had drifted apart.

A superhero.

"Tell me you are not trying to track a supervillain down because he might be involved in your wife's disappearance," Nathalie sighed.

A new Ladybug had appeared at the same time as Hawk Moth had started attacking Paris, the previous year. That was why Gabriel had come to the conclusion that Alice was dead. And the butterfly watch, the mysterious absences…

"Of course I am," he replied.

She groaned.

"No. No. No, you are not. It's insane, it will get you killed, this stops now. Are we clear?"

Gabriel raised his eyebrows and waited for her to back down. Which she did, because fifteen years of being employed as his underling had gotten her used to a vastly unequal balance of power in their relationship, one where she did not question her boss' decisions if she wanted to keep her job. Even if the dynamics had changed, her reflexes needed to be relearned.

She sighed, her shoulders sagging.

"I'll take that under advisement," he replied.

Thinking in flowcharts was a terrible quirk, Nathalie realized. You could start imagining Gabriel's future, branch by branch, decision by decision, up to the point he died, and past that point. Then you started to consider every variation of what would happen to Adrien.

She put those thoughts aside, to be used as arguments later into the discussion.

"You told me she retired. I take it she changed her mind? When did that happen?"

"That's a good question. For all I know, she never quit, only pretended to. I was not supposed to be privy to her plans as a hero. Safety precaution, you know? The point being, when she went missing, I had no idea she had returned to that life. I knew it was a possibility, but she was on a trip in a dangerous area, being an Agreste, and we get so many threats, and more importantly Hawk Moth had been soundly defeated the year before Adrien was born… So Ladybug was the last thing on my mind. I just t-th… I mean I… It… I just didn't know," he explained, gasping those last words out.

Nathalie had never been fond of Alice, but now discovered new (and much more valid) reasons to dislike the woman.

She put a hand on Gabriel's knee. He took a deep breath.

"Some of the detectives I hired in South America are well versed in magic, just in case. I was not about to ignore a possibility. But an accident was more likely, or an abduction, or even a murder. I was just waiting for a body to be found, then she called."

That dislike Nathalie felt for Alice morphed into loathing. She shifted on the bed to sit closer to
Gabriel, wrapping an arm around his shoulders in a way she hoped he would believe 'comforting', and not possessive.

"What did she tell you?"

"Roughly that Hawk Moth was active in Brazil, and that she had fought a time travelling enemy and jumped forward by more than a year. She had traveled there because an ally had heard rumors of magical activity and butterflies, she figured it could be Hawk Moth. As it turned out, she was right. And, two hours after that phone call, she had disappeared again, so it's not much of a stretch to think Hawk Moth managed to find her after that jump through time."

What did you say to that? More importantly, how did you convince someone not to look into suspicions of that kind? She had told him that he would never get answers, but she had believed Alice was rotting in a ditch in some forgotten part of the rainforest. She had thought it had been an accident, or that she had gotten lost while hiking, or maybe that she had been robbed and killed and buried in a shallow grave. She had not thought there was a solid lead.

"You need to give that watch to the heroes," she told him. "You need to let them handle this. If they defeat him, they will ask about Alice for you. They will get the answers from him, if he has them."

"They are fifteen year old children who have no idea what they are doing. Even if they could face Hawk Moth without getting killed, they would not get a word out of him. He has nothing to gain by confessing a murder."

"Then he's not going to talk to you, is he?"

"Don't underestimate how much I'm willing to pay for information. I'm a very rich man."

"I'm not under the impression you are willing to pay at all. As a matter of fact, I'm not under the impression that you would let him walk away if you had a way to take him down."

He tensed.

She rolled her eyes.

"Don't go and tell me how you would have done 'anything' for your wife and then act surprised when I figure out you are willing to kill someone."

"I'm not surprised."

"Well then, I am so very glad you trust me with that knowledge, sir. I suppose I'll be expected to help you get away with it, too?"

"Now let's be realistic, the odds of my being able to kill a superpowered, invulnerable being are near nonexistent."

"The odds of you lying to my face about that are significantly higher."

Gabriel froze, startled, then grinned.

Nathalie straightened up.

"And I do not see the humor in that!"

"You wouldn't," he commented.
"And nowhere in my contract is there a mention of getting rid of inconvenient bodies, including yours, so you might as well reconsider your plans right now."

"I'll take that under advisement too."

She glared at him, anger and worry fighting for control. Her usual lack of concern had abandoned ship.

"What are your plans, anyway?"

###
The first time they had collected a cursed weapon, they had been seventeen.

They had been facing Candy Warper, a teleporting enemy who had forced the three of them to run all over Paris for six hours straight, as she popped from candy store to candy store to create herself an army of murderous sweets.

She had not followed the most basic rule of teleportation, which was 'do not transport yourself to a location you cannot see'. It made for a gory death. She had warped herself to the roof of a store, unaware that construction materials such as beams and sheet metal had recently been stored there.

Queen Bee had been the one to locate her. She had warned them that it was not a pretty sight, but Alice had still heaved and gagged, Ladybug persona or not. Gabriel had more of an aptitude to detach himself from a situation. He had winced and circled Candy Warper's body, looking for the corrupted candy cane the Akuma had nested in.

"Think you can fix this?" Bee had asked to a wheezing Ladybug, who was resolutely looking away from the dead supervillain.

"I'll... Try," Alice had gasped out. "Where's the candy cane?"

Chat Noir had crouched next to Candy Warper and picked the fetish up.

"Here," he had said, attempting to snap it in two.

The candy cane had resisted. Bee, hovering above Chat's head, had snatched it from his hands.

"Lemme, you wimp."

Gabriel had watched her try to smash the fetish, over and over again, while he quietly extended his left hand and prepared a Cataclysm. Anne-Laure had handed him the candy cane without a word. He had closed his fist around it and watched the dark magic glow and slide over the red and white candy bar, only to fade into nothing, leaving the fetish intact.

Alice had patted her earrings to revert her transformation, keeping her back turned to Candy Warper.

"Tikki, what is going on?"

Her Kwami had hovered between Chat Noir and the dead girl, remaining silent for a while.

"Her soul was sucked into her weapon," she had said. "It merged with it. There is nothing we can do now."

"WHAT?" Alice had yelled. "There has to be something we can try!"

Tikki had shaken her head.

"When something like this happens, the Akuma devours the victim's soul," she had explained in her darkest voice. "It's irreversible. This girl's powers are forever sealed into the weapon. You will
have to give it to Fu so he can store it. The next time the seven Miraculous will be gathered, we will purge it, along with the others."

"There are others?" Gabriel had asked, his priorities always ever so slightly wrong.

"Two," Tikki had replied. "They are kept hidden for safety. We have been waiting for an opportunity to cleanse them."

"I thought Firebird's Miraculous had been lost," Queen Bee had commented.

"It was. Zharr will resurface. We always do."

"We can't bring the girl back?" Alice had cut in, her voice growing shrill.

They were all so used to fixable losses. They had seen people die during battles, of course, but Tikki's powers had always repaired all of the damage. They had never found themselves in a situation where capturing the Akuma was not an option.

"I'm afraid not, Alice," her Kwami had replied.

"There has to be a way. There's always a solution. We are not thinking hard enough. That's all!"

Her entire purpose was to come up with solutions. Gabriel was the planner, she was the "spur of the moment", "stroke of genius" problem-solver. For all of the power behind her Lucky Charm, it would have been useless without her resourcefulness and her unwavering belief that they could save everyone.

Chat Noir knew better. When he went home, it was to hear an endless flow of medical terms, from chemotherapy to morphine patches to metastases. Surprisingly, they did not pertain to chain-smoker Elise, but to her husband.

Gabriel was not a dreamer. Some battles could not be won. It was not for lack of trying.

He had wrapped his arm around Alice, careful not to let his claws scratch her. It had calmed her down a little. Still, the bubbly teenage girl with ponytails, who had never lost anything worth caring about, had changed. There had always been steel under her sweetness. It had been a shield, just like the red buckler with red dots her pouch turned into. On that day, that inner steel had become jagged and sharp, a step closer to the blade.

"I can still stop the magical army, right?" she had asked after taking the deepest of breaths.

"Your magic should work on that, yes," her Kwami had replied. "And on the damage to the city."

"Well, then. Tikki, transform me!"

###

Adrien had gone home, found the place empty, and made his way straight to his bedroom.

There, armed with the amazing powers of google, he had investigated Joa, the superhero who had replaced his mother as Ladybug. There was nothing to be found about him on the internet. Even his fights against Akuma had gone unnoticed. Mostly, they had happened in the forest, or in tiny
villages that were not even on the map. Ladybug's (or in this case Joa's) ability to repair any damage after a battle ensured there would be no signs of the Akuma's presence. As for the villains themselves, they had been local children or teenagers, who had gone straight for Joa. They would not have been taken seriously, if they had come home with wild stories of turning into monsters.

As far as Adrien could tell, there was nothing in those answers that could help his father track down Hawk Moth: no physical description, no mentions of him being seen, no names, no nothing. The butterfly watch was much more of a worry to the teenager. Tikki's answers, instead of cementing Gabriel's decision to track down Hawk Moth in Paris, were more likely to send him to Brazil to investigate the battles she had mentioned.

Any delay was good.

"Plagg," he asked his Kwami after a solid hour of reflexion. "Should I give him?"

The black cat stared at him and winced, his tail swinging in nervousness.

"Oh," Adrien murmured. "Sorry. You can't discuss that."

He would have to figure out what those seals were and how to lift them. He would ask his father, as Chat. If that failed, Fu would have a lot of answering to do.

Plagg huffed and dropped down on the desk. He had been watching the screen and listening to Adrien thinking aloud without a single comment, but was clearly curious. The teenager gave him a little scratch on the back of the neck.

He could not imagine being forced - and magically, at that - to remain silent about someone he cared about. The more he thought about it, the angrier he grew. He felt like Plagg was seen as a danger by the other Kwami and Miraculous holders, and that was not fair.

"Let's go to the kitchen and see if the cook has purchased more cheese," he suggested. "I bet we can find something you like."

"Camembert?"

"Roquefort. Herve cheese, maybe."

Plagg lit up like a child in a candy store. Adrien chuckled, letting him hide under his shirt so they could wander the house without risk. They were halfway to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Adrien kept walking, since someone was bound to open the door. Then the doorbell rang again, and again, and he realized Nathalie was not at her desk and no one was filling in for her.

He hurried to her office, pressing the first button on the interphone to see who was waiting at the gates.

It was Marinette.

"Come in," he told her, trying to figure out which button out of the twenty-two unlabelled buttons on the pristinely white interphone opened the gates.

He pressed all of them, peeking through the window to see if something had worked. Then he raced to the main doors. When he walked out, Marinette was making her way to the stairs.

"Hello," he greeted her, slightly wary. He still smiled.
Plagg groaned, but she couldn't hear that.

"H-hi," his classmate replied.

She froze at the bottom of the stairs, then took a deep breath, raised her chin a little, and joined him at the door.

"Hi," she repeated, this time in a confident voice, without the slightest hint of her usual panicky awkwardness. "I came to apologize. For going to your father behind your back."

Adrien blinked, then took a step back and gestured for her to enter the house. He was not quite sure of what to say to her, past a 'please come in' he did not manage to voice anyway. He could not quite bring himself to smile either. Years of modeling should have taught him to fake any emotion at the drop of a hat, but he still felt betrayed, so he was still angry.

Marinette walked into the house and stopped three steps away, fidgeting. He closed the doors, turned to her, and crossed his arms.

She studied his face, saw his frown, and breathed in again. When she spoke, the shy and clumsy girl she turned into whenever she talked to him had vanished.

"It was wrong of me to confront him without taking your feelings into consideration," she said. "I should have talked to you about it. I should have asked your opinion before doing anything."

Adrien listened to all of that and realized that, while she was apologizing for not consulting him, at no point had she said she regretted arguing with Gabriel. She was only concerned about the impact on Adrien himself.

"Yes, you should have!" he snapped. "You don't know anything about my family. You don't know anything about my father, as a matter of fact! I don't know where you got the idea that he was some kind of monster..."

His own words started him. Something nagged at him. He filed that away.

"But he's not the man you think he is!" he continued. "I don't see why you'd think he's so bad! He has only been nice to you! He took time he doesn't have to mentor you during your internship! He liked you!"

She took a third deep breath, this time an exasperated, huffy one.

"I don't care how someone treats me and how much they like me if they can't be nice to others!" she retorted. "Do you think anyone who cares about you missed how he treats you? Do you think we missed that Chloé had to introduce herself during that fashion contest when she is your oldest friend? Do you think we missed how he never showed up for parents day and how you slipped out to call him? Nobody at school but Nino has ever seen the two of you in the same room, and that was when he threw Nino out! That is not how a family works!"

Adrien hardened, taking a step back.

"So you thought you'd stand up for me?"

There was a bit of panic in her eyes. It snapped her out of her anger, if only for a moment.

"N-no. Yes. No! I just wanted..." - She raised her hands in irritation, left them there, and balled her fists and looking to the tiled floor. - "I thought maybe he didn't see what he was doing. I thought he
wouldn't know, because you are so nice you would never tell him." - Her hands fell back to her sides as she looked up. - "I just wanted to tell him, to put things into motion, so he could fix things if he wan-"

He knew that look on her face. It was not just that she was defensive, or angry. The way she gestured, the way she had narrowed her eyes and was so lost in thought that she was staring into the distance… But also the disgusted turn of her lips, her frown, her everything.

There was self-righteous fury and disdain there, and maybe even hatred.

"Wow, you really hate him," Adrien cut in.

She froze and winced.

"I… No. I. It's not that!"

He shook his head, that something that had nagged at his mind earlier hitting him with full clarity.

"It was you. The one who told Ladybug my dad might be Hawk Moth."

Marinette went absolutely still. Adrien sighed.

"I should have guessed. Ladybug rescued you from Mylene, I knew she knew you."

"I'm sorry, " she murmured. "It was never meant to get back to you, you were never supposed to be told he was suspicious or anything."

"And that makes it okay? You go off and cause trouble behind my back and think it's fine as long as I don't find out about it? He's my FATHER, Marinette! And, for the record, he's not Hawk Moth."

Who was so 'nice', now?

His classmate lowered her head, looking genuinely remorseful. His anger abated and, not a second later, he felt more sorry than her.

"I… I didn't come here to argue," she said. "I, uh, I… I'm sorry. I shouldn't have…"

She hesitated for a while, and Adrien tried to finish her sentence. 'Accused your father of being a supervillain'? 'Gotten involved in your family's private issues'? 'Done any of that'?

"Come," she finished. "I-I just made things worse, I didn't meant to, I-"

She went silent as they heard a door open upstairs, and the clicking of heels coming in their direction. They both turned towards the noise. On top of Nathalie's footsteps (the heels were a dead giveaway), they could hear Gabriel's quiet voice, though his words were hard to distinguish.

Adrien wished he could forget the floor plan, because there was nothing but bedrooms in the direction they came from.

By the time Nathalie answered, they were close enough for her words to be clear.

"I do not care about the resources you have at your disposal, nor about the variety of improvements you are able to come up with, sir," she was saying, with mild annoyance. She arrived on the stairs' landing, stopped there, and turned back. "All the creativity and careful planning in the world is beyond pointless when you are. Manufacturing. The. Problem!"
Adrien gaped.

She had never, in his life, raised her voice at his father.

Gabriel walked out of the corridor, eyebrows raised. As usual, he was the picture of propriety, with his back straight and his hands behind his back. His suit was a little crumpled. On the topic of clothes, Nathalie's jacket was folded over her arm.

*Stop paying attention to details like that,* Adrien told himself.

"I was merely suggesting-" his father started.

He trailed off when he noticed the two teenagers staring at him.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," he said, with a polite smile. "Nice of you to visit."

To Adrien, he gave a nod.

Nathalie just walked down the stairs, ignoring everyone in the most dignified fashion. Her heels were clicking a little louder than usual. She passed next to Adrien and an uneasy Marinette with barely a glance, but stopped at the door to turn back to Gabriel, whose eyes had followed her.

"Anything else you'll need today, sir?"

"No. Have a nice evening, Nathalie," Gabriel replied.

She nodded, then looked at his son.

"See you tomorrow, Adrien."

"See you tomorrow. Good evening," the boy said.

Nathalie gave him a fake, thin smile, then walked out. She did not slam the door, but it felt like she had.

"I… I should go," Marinette exclaimed. "Sorry again, Adrien."

He nodded and opened the door for her, sending her on her way with a 'bye' and a 'see you at school'. He was only too aware that his father was observing their every move.

"What did she want?" Gabriel asked when Adrien closed the door, after watching Marinette hurry to the gates.

Adrien looked at his father and felt a pang of worry. His face was gaunt and livid, and you could not miss his exhaustion.

"To apologize," the teenager said.

"Clearly, that did not go so well."

"I… No, father. Not really."

Gabriel sighed, looking up and mulling over Adrien's words.

"She'll learn," he commented. "Are you free for some fencing?"
Chapter End Notes

I ran out of idioms. Book quote today!
If Hawk Moth were to vanish, he would not be missed.

Maybe that was not strictly true. Monsters had children too, and significant others, and dogs, and cats. Most likely cats.

He would not be missed by Nathalie.

Why would she care if her days no longer included being attacked on the street by some crazy mime firing invisible arrows? Or, for that matter, by elephants. Or giant robots. Or if she did not end up trapped in a flying bubble wobbling at plane level.

She would not have minded spending the rest of her life not having to worry about superpowered lunatics throwing apocalyptic tantrums. She was willing to bet the sentiment was shared by the majority of Parisians.

What she minded was that the one person planning to get Hawk Moth out of the picture was just a broken man with breakable bones, an unbreakable will, and only the one life.

###

Adrien landed on his ass, not for the first time since he had started training with his father, and not even for the first time that day.

He considered staying down and playing possum.

"Come on, Adrien. I know you can do better," Gabriel snapped, holding out a hand to help his son up.

The teenager took it, wincing, and got back to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Father. I guess I'm distracted."

His fight with Marinette had ruined what would have otherwise been a pretty good day, considering his talk with Ladybug earlier, their finally getting close again, sharing jokes, teasing each other. But no. Marinette's visit had made him both angry and apologetic, and now he felt guilty and aggravated.

"I can see that," the designer commented, rolling his eyes. "Let's just call it a day. It's getting late, we can as well find ourselves something to eat."

Adrien looked up in surprise.

"Don't you have work to do tonight?" he asked. "I figured you'd work late, like usual."

Gabriel shook his head, already walking away, towards the changing rooms.

"I had a migraine this afternoon, Nathalie made sure I would be forced to rest by rescheduling my every task and appointment. I believe some blackmail was involved, but it's best not to ask."
That was a joke. From Gabriel Agreste. A joke. As Gabriel Agreste.

"Blackmail?" Adrien repeated.

"And possibly some forgery. I'm fairly certain some contracts were meant to be sent by tomorrow morning. Do you like Italian food?"

The teenager took a deep breath, resigned. He had reached the ripe age of fifteen, but his father was still unaware of what foods he liked, disliked, or could not touch with a ten-foot pole. Adrien guessed some of the blame rested on him: if there was food on the table when his father was present, he ate it without protest. How was one supposed to guess he was turning greener and greener at every bite?

"It's fine, Father," he replied.

Which was not going to help communicating his preferences.

That was how he ended up sitting in an Italian restaurant, staring at the four cheese gnocchi his father had ordered, and poking and probing a salad he did not want to eat, what with all that cheese right under his nose.

That, and he was still thinking about Marinette's visit. He couldn't decide if he had to go to her to try to smooth things over, or if she had gone too far for him to forgive, after all. He understood that she had meant well. He did. It still left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Stop picking at your food," Gabriel told him after ten minutes of eating in silence. "I swear I'm growing concerned by your eating habits."

"Sorry," Adrien replied, stabbing a piece of potato and elegantly pushing it into his mouth.

His father studied his face, watched him chew and swallow, then looked down at his own food. He ate a mouthful of gnocchi.

"Do you want to discuss miss Dupain-Cheng and the latest developments?" he asked.

"Not really. It was nothing."

Gabriel wiped the corner of his mouth with his napkin, although there was nothing to clean there. He poured himself a glass of water and took two sips of it. He then picked his fork up and returned to eating, until Adrien couldn't take the silence anymore.

"It's just that she came to apologize," the boy exclaimed, "and she made a point of apologizing about everything except what she said to you! She listed everything she was sorry about and picked her words so carefully..."

His father swallowed his food.

"I'm not surprised. You won't catch her lying about something she feels strongly about, even to defuse a situation like this one."

He did not seem concerned at all.

Adrien stabbed his salad.

"So she tried to push the problem under the carpet by giving me 'a little something'?"
"Of course she did. More water?" Gabriel asked, refilling his son's glass without waiting for an answer. "She'll give you white lies, a few self-serving lies and - from what I have observed - a lot of spluttering, but she won't go against her sense of ethics."

That was not much of a sense of ethics, Adrien thought. Then again, it was the same Marinette who had played the Evillustrator like a fiddle, the one who had tricked Chloé out of the room when they were filming that movie. She could be crafty, and only had scruples when she realized what she was doing was wrong.

"She can't stand you," he declared, without mentioning how Marinette had been the one to give Ladybug those 'Hawk Moth' suspicions. "I don't get it. She doesn't even know you. She barely even knows me."

Gabriel took a sip of his drink.

"I no longer allow myself to underestimate how perceptive teenage girls can be when they set their minds to it," he commented. "I've been proven wrong before."

"How so?"

"Did I ever tell you how many times your mother asked me out before I caved in?"

Adrien shook his head.

"Quite a few," his father continued. "I believe the official tally was 'seventeen', but it was my classmates doing the counting. I wanted her nowhere near me. I thought she was the most vapid idiot to ever have walked the earth."

The teenager gaped. Of course, he had heard one version of that story before, when Gabriel had told Chat Noir about uncovering his Ladybug's identity, but his father was now giving him different parts of the same tale.

"Really?"

"Really. See, I have never been pleasant, let alone likable, and here came this girl who was the definition of 'sweet' and 'sparky'. And dense, my god, so dense. Couldn't take a hint. Couldn't take no for an answer. I had no idea what she saw in me."

He frowned, thought about it, and shook his head.

"Actually," he amended, "I thought she saw someone I was not. She used to read those godawful vampire novels, with the dark, broody vampire love interest and… whatever else those stories are about. And I was dark, and broody, and about as much of a jerk as the male leads of those books. So I thought she had those expectations of redemption and hidden depths and, if you can call it that, 'romance'. I recall making a point of destroying her favorite story by explaining to her how the bipolar heroine was madly in love with her illegitimate brother, who happened to be a psychotic bastard who reveled in torturing animals and indulged in conjugal rape. That did not go over well."

Adrien stared at him in disbelief.

"What book was that?"

"A classic. We read it for school."

"I… don't think we got to that one yet."
"Thank your lucky star. Where was I?"

"Mom liking vampire stories."

Gabriel nodded, looking to the side with a faint smile.

"Yes. I figured she was entertaining fantasies, that she could not see me for who I was. Then, we ended up interacting out of school, I saw a side of her I had never noticed before, we started dating… and it turned out I was the one who did not know her at all."

"So she wasn't dense?" Adrien asked, deadpan, eyebrows raised.

His father gave him a pointed, 'you think you are so funny' look.

"No, she was not dense. As a matter of fact, Alice was always much smarter than I was. It did surprise me. Then again, many, many people were fooled by her naive, happy-go-lucky attitude."

Adrien moved back on his chair, studying his father's face. Gabriel was saying that so casually. It was good to see. For years, he had avoided the topic entirely. His finally discussing his wife meant that he was getting better. As much as his son had wanted them both to keep hoping for Alice to be found alive, as much as he had wanted them to wait for her...

"You told me before… I mean, that she was not really like that. It's so strange. It's like I never really knew her."

Gabriel tilted his head to the side, considering his son's words.

"That's…" he started.

He looked up, left, right, and up again. Then his eyes returned to Adrien.

"It was very, very important to your mother to remain warm and optimistic," he said. "Those were her defining traits. She was generous and loving and cheerful, and that was who she aspired to be. She would explain rather than scold, try to understand people rather than argue with them, smile rather than get offended. She genuinely believed in kindness and hope, so those were the sides of her she most showed. The sharper parts of her, she saw as flaws. She kept them bottled up, unless someone deserved a taste of hell. Most of the time, however, she valued her self-control."

"Like you do?" Adrien asked, his food forgotten.

Maybe, if he put all the pieces together, from what his father told Chat Noir to what he told him, the boy would figure out the person his mother had been.

Gabriel chuckled.

"I suppose so. We were both fond of masks."

The teenager's eyes went wide at that, and he fought to regain his composure. He was not supposed to understand the secret meaning in that.

"Of course," his father added, "it was for vastly different reasons. She loved to keep people happy, and I loved to keep them away."

Adrien mulled over that.

"So, you were the only one who ever really saw everything she was?"
"Me and her best friend. We both deserved a taste of hell on a regular basis."

Two people.

Well, Adrien himself had maybe one and a half, what with Ladybug knowing only Chat Noir and Nino only catching glimpses of his alter-ego.

Ladybug's words about dropping his perfect persona came back to him, along with her assurance that his friends would love to know the true him.

"That sounds awfully lonely," he replied.

"Not to someone who likes it that way. Facades are a good thing. Nobody owes the world their soul. How many people one lets in is a personal choice."

Adrien nodded. He pushed his salad around.

His father's 'personal choice' seemed to be 'as few people as humanly possible', which translated to 'Alice Beauregard, period'. Then again, the teenager was starting to realize his own facade was not helping.

His father did not know him, but he was not showing himself either, was he? He had always been so set on being good and making Gabriel proud that he had kept what defined him under wraps.

He poked his salad some more.

"I give up," Gabriel snapped. "Please order a dessert. Order an ice cream. Order something you will eat. But stop picking at your food."

###

Gabriel and Alice's first date had been meant to be a romantic walk in the park under the beautiful sunny skies of Paris. They had discussed... 'small-talkey' things. Possibly topics even more insignificant.

The blond had assumed his best 'Prince Charming' persona, showering Alice with compliments on her outfit, on her hair, on her everything, all the while trying to catch a glimpse of Ladybug under the girly, fluffy cheer.

It had started raining cats and dogs thirty minutes in.

"Let's go to my place!" Alice had insisted, getting a red folding umbrella out of her purse and failing to open it.

She had managed after ten tries. By that point, they were soaked to the bone and shivering (well, Gabriel was). Her shoes made a splashing noise at every step. His were ruined. If he had been given ten seconds to think, Gabriel would have called it a day. Alice Beauregard, however, having finally gotten her claws into her prey, was not about to let him go.

It had taken a five minute walk for them to get to her house. They had found it empty, and Alice had immediately started fluttering around, preparing warm drinks, getting them towels and ushering Gabriel into her bedroom. She had served him coffee. She had served herself tea. At no point had she asked what he would have prefered. She just knew. Which was unsurprising,
considering the months of stalking he had endured.

Gabriel had looked around, taking in the faint smell of pastry, the pastel walls and pastel furniture, the softness and cheerfulness of it all. It had been very 'Alice Beauregard', with nothing 'Ladybug' in sight, but that didn't mean you couldn't spot the oddities in the bright decor.

He had walked to her bookshelf and read the titles of her books - the ones with the black covers and red lettering, most of them by Anne Rice - only to pick one up at random and scan a page or two.

He had stared at the page.

Then, he had stared some more.

Then, Alice had gathered which specific piece of literature he had gotten his hands on.

"AHAHAALETMEPUTTHATBACK," she had yelled in a moment of panic, tearing the book out of his hands to shove it back in its place.

If she had been able to slam a doorless bookshelf shut, she would have.

"I'm sorry," he had replied. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. I shouldn't have taken it without asking."

She had smiled, swallowing her panic down, and trying to assess what kind of page he had landed on. He was willing to bet he had found the worst, but was not about to say so.

"It's just… I know you don't really like that kind of stories," she had explained. "I mean, I remember what you said about…"

"I'm sorry about what I said about Wuthering Heights."

"It's alright. I read it again. Some of your points were… on point. Do you want cookies? I can get cookies. We also have cheese crackers, and cheetos, and… I don't know, but we can go and check."

"I'd love cookies, thanks," he had replied with his tenderest, sweetest, warmest, fakest smile.

Alice had scampered.

Gabriel had smirked, sniffed the air, and tried to locate the source of the pastry smell. It seemed to come from the desk, so he had opened the first drawer and grinned to Tikki.

"Hi there. Pleased to meet you."

"Gabriel Agreste," Tikki had grumbled, flying up to the level of his eyes, "you are the most dishonest and conniving person I have ever met, and if you don't tell Alice what you are playing at right now, I will."

Plagg's squeals of laughter had interrupted her. The black cat had popped out of Gabriel's inner pocket, and twirled around his sister.

"Let us have our fun," he had said. "This is hilarious."

Tikki had answered that with a glare and crossed arms. Plagg, being Plagg, had giggled some more.

"No need to be so serious!" he had drawled. "I, for one, enjoy this welcome change in our chosens'
interactions. It's definitely more entertaining."

"Entertaining is not the word I would have used," the red Kwami had snapped, shooting daggers at Gabriel.

The teenager had clasped his hands behind his back and smiled.

"Come on. We mean no harm. I will tell her soon," he had promised.

By 'soon', he meant 'never'. Tikki, from the look on her face, knew that. The conversation had been cut short by the sound of footsteps. Gabriel had pushed the drawer shut as the two Kwami vanished.

Alice had entered the room with cookies in three flavors, three bags of candy, and the cheese crackers she had talked about. She could get a bit carried away. Three minutes later, sitting on her bed with a board game between them, Gabriel had opened the box of cheese crackers (that without having touched the cookies his date was inhaling). He had endured the most boring game of Sea Battle (and lost). He had endured the second most boring game of Sea Battle in history (and won). Then Alice, proving that she could be merciful, had put the board away.

"It's still raining," she had commented, leaning back on the bed with a long look at her window. "What do you feel like doing?"

He had looked around, trying to suggest an activity available to them. The vampire books were not going to be of much help, nor were the clothes and posters hanging from the walls. There was a television and a VCR, however.

"We could watch a movie," he had suggested.

Alice had smiled.

"We could."
Nathalie arrived at the mansion in the early morning as usual, if a little late, then collected Adrien, drove him to his photo shoot, and drove herself to the closest coffee shop. She sipped the same cup of coffee for half an hour, then repeated the process with a second one, all the while checking her emails.

Gabriel, lunatic that he was, had started to catch up on his workload of the previous day around two am and had not stopped, judging by the steady flow of BCCs and forwards Nathalie had received all night. She made a point of ignoring the constant notifications as she played minesweeper on her tablet. Every ten games or so, she scrolled through her emails to see if the suicidal idiot required her presence at the office.

He did not.

She showed up there at eleven, went straight to her desk, and started to handle Gabriel's public mailbox, the one where the supplicants and beggars sent their sob stories and desperate cries for help. They were naive enough to believe Gabriel was the one to read the 'gabriel@gabriel.co.fr' email. She went through three dozen messages about cancerous toddlers, dying wives and homeless families without as much as a heartbeat. She directed some to charities, she wrote others encouraging and empty words, she sent a really fishy one to their legal team. She scrolled past the pictures of tiny little babies in hospital beds, of loving couples, of little grandmas whose house had been stolen away by scammers. She felt nothing. She had dealt with that for fifteen years and felt nothing.

Literally heartless.

That was how she liked herself. Her family had walked away from her because of that coldness - even her mother, who had tried hard enough. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen a friend. She couldn't recall having a friend. She had forgotten the name of most of the men she had dated or 'seen'.

And Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel…

She was so angry she had no words for it.

Hawk Moth would not be missed, he would not, not by her, not by most of the world. But Gabriel.

Gabriel.

She was going to kill him before he could get himself killed. He deserved it.

Fifteen years by his side and she had expected none of this. None. She had thought an affair with the married man she happened to work for was complicated enough.

Their hurried, clandestine interludes - ten minutes stolen here and there, cold kisses, meaningless - had been enough for her. Locked doors and silence and a total absence of feelings, save for her constant state of aggravation, with the bobby pins thing. Nathalie would have been fine with just that. She had no heart to break. She had never loved anyone.

Had Gabriel been the same, they would have been fine.

Had she realized how wrong she was about him in time to break it all off, they would have been
fine.

However, contrary to all of her expectations, Gabriel still had a heart. Maybe it was torn to shreds from being pried away from Alice's cold, dead hands, but it was there, and it could beat.

It could feel. He could feel.

And Gabriel was a Venus flytrap. The more he opened up, the more Nathalie was caught. The more he gave, he more he took. It was so unfair a trick that she wondered if he did it on purpose. As she watched him fall for her, she slipped and stumbled into some semblance of feeling. His every display of trust, his every confidence, his every smile had cost her a little. And now, now, now that pulling away painlessly was no longer an option, he confessed to planning murder.

A 'foolproof' plan, explained in the most casual of voices. Locate, weaken, question, destroy. Magical artefacts filled in for the superpowers Gabriel did not possess. It was all timing, stealth, and guile. "Foolproof", he had said. But fools were hardly in a position to judge if an idea was wise or not.

"Famous last words," she had snapped the previous day, after listening to his idiotic plan. "Let me write that down so I can have it engraved on your headstone, will you?"

"F-o-o-l-p-r-o-o-f."

"This is no laughing matter, you im-" - She had not managed to call him names to his face. She needed to work on that. - "He is a superpowered being who turns emotional people into monsters. He'll make short work of you!"

Gabriel had clicked his tongue.

"You vastly overestimate him. He is just a middle aged man armed with a piece of enchanted jewelry, and one that entirely stops working for periods of time, at that."

"And you are just a middle aged man with no piece of enchanted jewelry, Gabriel. Can that notion permeate your thick skull?"

"I assure you that I have equally powerful magical artefacts at my disposal. The perks of being very rich."

"Oh. Right. Of course. Forgive me, I had not realized that the whole plan hinged on who had the best toys. Not skill, not luck, not common sense: toys. How is that for your epitaph: 'Had big tools, was one'. How can you not see how insane the whole idea is?"

"I just have a better understanding of the workings of magic. I have studied them since I was a teenager."

That had been a revelation, in a conversation that had included too many of them already.

"Fine. Fine," Nathalie had retorted. "Let's pretend his powers are removed. Let's pretend you get to him while he is untransformed. What are you going to do if he pulls a gun to your face? Scratch that. You probably prepared for that too. Let's pretend you do catch him, and get him to confess what he did to your wife, and then kill him. What would you even do with his body?"

"I don't know, Nathalie. What would you do with a body?"

"I don't know! It would entirely depend on the murder weapon and my ability to use someone else
as a scapegoat. That is not my point. You have not thought things through."

"I can safely say the moments in my life I did not think things through are few and far between," he had snapped, his quiet confidence cracking as anger flickered on his face.

Nathalie had let out a long suffering sigh.

"And had no point did it cross your mind that your obvious mental illness might be impacting your judgement?"

That had stunned him into silence, or offended him, more like.

She had dropped the mental health topic. He could come to his own conclusions. He could google those self-diagnosis tests you found all over the internet.

"Just let the new Ladybug and Chat Noir handle things," she had insisted. "That's their job."

His face had changed at that, tiredness and resignation washing over both irritation and assurance.

"They are fifteen year old children," he had retorted. "If they are that old. They have no idea what they are up against, and the best thing that could happen to them is to see Hawk Moth vanish before reality sinks in. Being on the battlefield from day to day changes you. It tore chunks of Alice's soul out, and I'm still amazed that - after a decade of that life - she was still herself. You become the mission. By the time she retired, she was terrifying a soldier. Never a misstep, never a hesitation, just motion and skill. It is not a life she would have wished upon the two brats. As a matter of fact, she was deadly set against telling Adrien, and so was I."

That picture still did not reconcile with motherly Alice who would cuddle with her son for hours, cheerful Alice who would snuggle against Gabriel as he worked, resting against his shoulder in the sofa as he typed out emails and reviewed business proposals.

"What about the other heroes? I know there's another one in Italy. The fox one."

"Who is also a child."

"Adult heroes?"

His cheek had twitched.

"There is one. He is the one handing out the 'enchanted pieces of jewelry' to teenagers," he had explained with unconcealed disgust. "He is the perfect illustration of what happens when you become the mission. Fifty years behind a mask will do that to you."

"Then go to that man and call it a day," she had said, picking her buttonless jacket up and walking out of the bedroom.

He had followed her out, arguing that he was the only one who could handle things properly and for good, reminding her that his plan was flawless and foolproof. Nathalie had explained to him, over and over again, that he was an imbecile who was creating his own problems.

It was like talking to a brick wall.

She was so angry.

He could expect her to be exceedingly late for work every day, by at least 'however long she felt like slacking', until she calmed down. She was privy to his murder plans. It gave her leverage.
Obviously, he agreed with that last point: when he joined her at her desk, one hour after her arrival, he made no comments about her lateness.

"Stone will be dropping by at two to check on the completed dancer outfits," he announced. "Which he of course announced through a text message sent to my personal phone. Make sure Stephanie can be present when he arrives, or I'll have to handle it myself. The man needs to be micromanaged."

"I will, sir," she replied, writing that down without as much as a look at him.

His muscles tensed. She could tell, even without watching, just as she could tell when he relaxed, a moment later, and turned into that aggravating, teasing jackass who wanted nothing but to drive her insane. He crossed the room, stopping behind her.

Nathalie knew there was no possible way she could feel the heat of his body from five feet away, but her back still felt like it was on fire.

She scowled.

He moved closer, leaning down to put his hands on her shoulders and kiss her temple.

"No," she said, without raising her voice, without putting any emotion in it either.

Gabriel pulled away, taking a step back. She pushed her chair to the side and turned to him. He looked like someone who had been up all night working, and all week keeping himself busy. His afternoon of rest had not done much to bring colors back to his face.

"I could take your backpedaling and your shutting me out, Gabriel," she stated. "It is all the same to me. I am fine swimming in shallow waters. But there is a point where even I draw a line."

"I know. That's fair."

He said that with a grave tone and a businesslike expression, his hands clasped behind his back, but all the while he was rocking back and forth on his heels, as if pulled towards her. Nathalie had seen him do that before, though not with her. Never with her.

It hit her stronger than she had expected.

"I need to get back to work," she announced, turning her chair away. "Don't forget your appointment with Grace Ouillette at three."

"I won't. Have you already decided what you will do with the new… information I gave you?"

She clicked her tongue.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

_What am I supposed to do, you jackass? Go to the cops to accuse you of planning to execute a supercriminal, using magical watches and the knowledge brought to you by your retired hero wife? That would go over so well._

"Nothing," she repeated, pulling her chair closer to her desk and staring at her screen. "You do what you want. I'll still be here to collect my paycheck and fix the damage you do to this company's reputation with your surprise 'R&D' sessions. Oh, and you are giving me a raise."
"Am I?"

"Yes, you are. I have not checked the average salary of 'accessories to murder' yet, but I have a feeling it is beyond impressive."

She heard Gabriel breathe in. His hands closed on the back of her chair. Not on her, however.

"I-" he gasped.

Whatever he had meant to say - and Nathalie knew, she knew - was cut short. The butterfly watch started ringing. Gabriel jumped away, getting the thing out of his pocket and opening it. He clasped it shut in a matter of seconds. His assistant opened his calendar and started shuffling rectangles around.

She tried to come up with a snarky remark about R&D and hourly wages.

She shuffled rectangles around some more, as Gabriel took a deep breath, straightened up, and walked to the door. He paused, the watch still in his hand.

*I can't do this.*

"Put that thing away," Nathalie heard herself say. "Put that thing away. Go back to your office."

She had not meant to.

Gabriel stared at her, worry flickering on his face.

"Just stay here," she hissed, lowering her head and raking her hands through her hair. This wasn't her. She had never been the kind of person who would care to the point of praying. "Keep yourself busy, think of something else, draw something, break something, but don't go."

He hesitated. Not that it lasted: barely a blink later, he had steeled himself.

"I'll see you later," he told her as he walked out.

The door closed with a click.

Nathalie shoved everything off her desk.

###

Chat felt sticky and smelled like bubblegum, but Grenadine was dealt with.

He knew Ladybug had cleaned every drop of burgundy goo from the streets and from their costumes, but the sensation of walking on (fruit flavored) tar was not easy to forget. Also, the grenades. So many grenades. His ears (all four of them) were ringing.

That being said, Grenadine's syrupy attack had been the first sign of Hawk Moth since Ladybug had given Chat the envelope with Tikki's answer. Adrien had untransformed and called Nathalie to confirm that his father was 'busy'. That meant he was most likely out with the quantic watch, trying to figure out where Hawk Moth was hiding. Now that the attack was over, Gabriel would probably go straight to his secret office, so Chat Noir was making his way there.
He could have handed him the letter anytime, anywhere, but he felt like the hideout had its own atmosphere, one that would help engaging in conversation.

He was three streets away from the park they had defeated Grenadine on when he spotted a man wandering on the roofs. As he was wearing a cap and loose blue pants with a toolbelt, Chat nearly ignored him, mistaking him for some repairman. However, the way the man moved caught his attention. There was a smoothness to his motions that looked more like parkour than what you would have expect from an electrician.

The young hero watched as the stranger scaled a chimney, jumped to the closest roof, and climbed to an antenna with easy grace. Then, the man fetched a pocket watch from inside his vest, and opened it on the pinkish magical glow of a butterfly hologram.

_Father?_

Chat jumped from roof to roof to land close to Gabriel.

"Mister Agreste! Now that's a surprise."

His father grunted and ignored him, reaching for the top of the antenna without losing focus. A white butterfly - the one Ladybug had just freed from its corruption, most likely - was perched on one of the metallic branches. Gabriel snatched it between two fingers, pushed it into his watch, then dropped down on the roof.

"Chat Noir," he greeted.

"Need to go charge your quantique?" the boy asked. "This cat can give you a lift, free of charge."

"Is that an offer to be bodily carried across town by a gangly teenager two heads smaller than me, like some damsel in distress?"

"I'm not two heads smaller than you. And it does sound a little weird when you put things that way."

"You don't say? I'll pass. My car is close by."

"I'll walk you to it, then."

Gabriel rolled his eyes.

"If you insist," he replied, walking away.

Chat Noir watched him slide down the tiles and jump down to a lower roof, then hop from walls to fire stairs to roofs. Adrien followed him with much larger jumps.

Well, no wonder his dad was so good at fencing, what with him having clearly kept up with the superhero training. Of course, Gabriel still winced when he had to scale a wall, or when he dropped from too high.

"Old bones," he commented when Chat Noir stared at his grimacing with a little too much interest.

The boy studied his father's face. His features were gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes that looked even worse under the cap's shadow. Strange how he could be doing better and worse all at once. On one side, he now casually shared memories about Adrien's mother. On the other, he did not sleep and he was stalking a supervillain.
"Are you sure that's the problem?" Chat asked. "It looks like I could knock you over with a feather."

"You probably could," Gabriel replied, crouching on the border of a roof peek at the alley underneath. "I'm allergic."

Adrien chuckled. Like father, like son.

"Seriously?"

"Seriousl," the man replied, before lowering himself down and dropping into the alley.

Chat leaned over the edge of the roof, and took the letter out of his pocket.

"I have something for you," he said, waving the envelope, knowing full well Gabriel had no way to climb back up.

His father looked up and realized what he was holding. He narrowed his eyes, his every muscle tensing in anger at the idea that there could be conditions to his getting the envelope. He kept his face emotionless, but his son knew him well enough to recognize loathing. The boy dropped down and handed the letter over. Gabriel snatched it from his hands, relaxing a little.

Chat Noir let him open the envelope and scan the five pages report Ladybug had given him. Gabriel's expression went from sour to sourer.

"Thank you," he said, folding the sheets and pushing them into the same pocket the watch was in.

"I hope it helps," Adrien replied, hoping that maybe there was more to Tikki's stories than what he could see.

"I will pass the relevant information to the investigators I hired in Brazil. We will see what comes out of this."

Chat nodded.

"Say. I'm sure there's a ton of footage of the fight with Grenadine on the internet by now. Iiiiii could use some constructive criticism. I mean, won't you be bored all alone in that secret hideout of yours?"

His father raised his eyebrows.

"Can't you ask your actual allies? The girl? Fu?"

"My lady saw me waddle in pink goo long enough for one day, thank you. I'd like to keep some of my dignity."

"And the old man?"

"Out of town."

Gabriel sighed, but Chat caught a hint of a smile on his face.

"Very well," the designer said. "Meet me in my 'office' in half an hour. And don't expect me to go easy on you."
Gabriel had spent his last hour as Chat Noir perched on the replica of the Statue of Liberty, near the Grenelle bridge. He liked it there. If you ever needed to stop and think, the Ile aux Cygnes was a nice place to go to. You could sit and watch the barges travel down the Seine, surrounded by trees, with the city noises drowning out the maelstrom in your mind.

Alice knew he loved the area, so he had fully expected her to have no trouble finding him.

She had.

Around three in the morning, while the city was sleeping - as much as Paris ever did, Ladybug had landed next to Chat Noir.

They had stared at each other in silence, he with his hands clasped behind his back and no emotion whatsoever, her with wet eyes and trembling lips. Then she had steeled herself and the anger had poured out of every wound he had ever inflicted.

"Give me the ring, Gabriel."

"How am I even alive?" Chat Noir groaned after listening to the soul-crushing, confidence-shattering, non-exhaustive list of mistakes his father had pointed out in thirty minutes of video.

"Dumb luck, incompetent enemies?"

"If you call that incompetent, I don't want to meet the skilled ones."

"You will get better, boy. Train. Learn. Do not taste the weird red jelly a supervillain throws at you to check what it is."

"Now, come on, it's the fifth time you bring that up in ten minutes."

"Are you sorry you tasted the weird red magical jelly yet?"

"It was jam. Really thick blackcurrant flavored jam."

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. Chat Noir sighed and wandered through the hideout, picking up magical gadget after magical gadget.

His father was relaxed, if exhausted. He was not starting conversations but he was not avoiding them either, so Adrien was sorting through the infinite list of questions he wanted to ask to find one that would not make Gabriel close up and leave. It was a delicate choice to make. If he got it wrong, he would see the door slammed in his face, again. His father would not be having a talk he could not control.

Chat wanted to ask about the way he had lost the Miraculous. He wanted to connect all the dots, from what Gabriel had done to what he was planning to do. He wanted to see the big picture, and to understand it.
That was not in the cards.

"So," he asked, playing with a yellow gem that turned blue wherever he touched it. "What, exactly, is a dark god?"

His father looked up, curious, and studied his face.

"That is just an overly dramatic, ominous way to say 'evil kwami'. Why?"

"I overheard a conversation between… Well, between Tikki and Plagg. I was wondering."

Gabriel snorted.

"You could have asked either one of them and gotten that answer, boy."

"I asked Plagg."

"I… Yes. You could have asked Tikki. Plagg is never straightforward, is he?"

"Cheese helps," Chat replied.

His father chuckled and shook his head. Adrien returned to him and leaned on the table.

"Do how does a Kwami 'become' one, exactly?"

Gabriel's face changed. He had to know that question pertained to what he had done, to the reason he had lost the ring. He withdrew, cautious, and pursed his lips.

"That's…" - He moved his tongue in his mouth, uneasy. - "They are extremely vulnerable to their chosens' influence. Especially when transformed. That is why Fu is so careful about selecting new heroes that will not abuse their Miraculous' powers. The person you are as Chat Noir molds Plagg. If you use his powers for evil, it will change him."

That was why Plagg had been sealed. That was why he could no longer interact with Adrien's father nor talk about him. Whatever had happened had been bad enough for the other Kwami to believe their brother was at risk of being corrupted.

It fit the 'attempted murder' theory.

"He told me his Miraculous is kept under close watch," the boy said. "That it has to be stolen every time he picks a new Chat Noir. I asked him if they were afraid of him and he told me…"

Adrien's eyes went wide as he remembered his Kwami's exact words. *We are afraid of our own shadows* .

"They are," Gabriel said. "And it is not totally unwarranted. Plagg was born an evil deity." - He frowned and shook his head. - "Maybe not evil per se, but destructive and unstable. It is just in his nature. He is misfortune incarnate. For centuries, the ring was only ever given to heroes who could balance that darkness out, so Plagg would be brought back to the light."

"So it works both ways?" Chat Noir asked, thinking of the contrast between him and Plagg, of the way he had to bribe him and encourage him and force him into combat.

His father nodded.

"It does. The more you use his powers for good, the softer his shadows are. It means that Tikki, as
his twin and pendant, bears the burden of keeping her brother anchored. She has to compromise. She picks first, knowing that Plagg will always chose the perfect match for her Ladybug. So she does not usually go for a perfect hero. She makes sure her chosen has flaws, so Chat Noir can have qualities, and enough goodness in him - or her - to never corrupt Plagg."

Adrien mulled over those words.

He thought about his father's main traits: the evading, the lying, the coldness.

"Tikki told Ladybug why the Miraculous was taken from you," he announced.

Gabriel took a deep breath and stared down at his watch.

"I see."

"She made Ladybug promise not to tell me, however. She said I had to hear it from Plagg or from you."

"No," his father snapped. "Boy. You have no darkness in you, don't ask me to volunteer some. It is not a story you should hear at all."

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Chat Noir retorted, raising his left hand. "Right hand, sword. Left hand, cataclysm. I don't know who you were willing to kill - if I had to hazard a guess, I would say Hawk Moth - but what you did is not a big mystery, even if Tikki won't tell me about it."

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing.

"Drop it."

"There had to be a reason you did that. Maybe the situation was really bad, maybe-"

"Boy."

"Maybe he left you with no other choice, maybe-"

"Boy!"

"Your Ladybug forgave you!" Adrien said. "She stayed with you! It couldn't have been that bad!"

His father wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, wincing as if suffering from a splitting headache. He shook his head, staring straight ahead, into the distance.

Chat Noir felt a chill run down his spine.

"Drop it," Gabriel repeated. "Cure yourself of the notion that there is a justification for what I did. When I told you the Miraculous was taken from me for good reason, I meant it. And, for that matter, Alice never forgave me. My wife might have stayed by my side, because there were more strings tying us together than duty, but Ladybug entirely shut me out. Which was the right thing to do."

"I thought… I mean, she…"

"She never forgave me, Chat Noir. Why would she have? I was put in a situation that I had a variety of options to defuse, and I settled for cold-blooded murder. I felt no remorse whatsoever about it, either."
Adrien's legs felt weak.

You should not have asked, he thought.

"So," his predecessor continued, "do not make the mistake of thinking me better than I am. At no point did I expect forgiveness or acceptance for my actions."

His son stared at him.

###

Gabriel, still transformed, had closed two fingers around his ring and paused. He had known the price of his actions - actually, simply surrendering the Miraculous was getting of much more easily than he had expected - but it seemed such a high cost, with so little results.

"Why?" Ladybug had yelled at him, while he braced himself. "WHY did you have to do it?"

He had pulled on the ring, getting it to the middle of his finger without taking it off.

"It was the best solution I could see," he had replied, aware that Alice knew that. She could guess his every thought. He was not a complicated man. She had known him, to the bottom of his soul, before he had even learned her name.

"BULLSHIT. The 'most efficient', maybe, but not in any way the best, and don't try to tell me you sincerely think it was, because that would be the worst lie of your life."

"Very well," he had murmured.

"YOU HAD ENDLESS OTHER OPTIONS! HOW COULD YOU?" she had yelled, finally losing it. "HOW COULD YOU?"

It was rare to see Ladybug shaking, no matter how angry or upset. It was rare to see her upset at all.

"I'm not as forgiving as you are," her husband had pointed out.

"DON'T YOU TELL ME THAT. We have to work to be forgiving, Gabriel. We have to work to be good. It is not meant to be easy! I give it my best every day! You did not even try."

"I suppose I did not," he had whispered, removing the Miraculous.

###
Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

Silence stretched as seconds, then eternities went by. Chat Noir breathed in, and out, and in, staring at his father. Gabriel was studying his face, expressionless. He made no comment, offered no comfort, just waited.

The boy looked up at the ceiling, taking a deeper breath of air.

He had expected something else. He had expected his father to have some kind of reason for his actions. He had hoped for explanations such as 'it was for the greater good', 'I was left without a choice', something. Not just 'I settled for cold-blooded murder'. Not that. Then again, his father was a liar, and there was no telling how many pieces were missing there.

Adrien would never know.

"Okay," he squeaked. "Okay."

Gabriel pursed his lips, sighed, and joined him, patting him on the head just the once. Warmth spread through his son at that unexpected gesture of comfort.

"I told you to drop it," his father murmured, with a trace of sadness in his voice. "I told you there was no point discussing the past."

"I see a point," Chat Noir retorted. "It is important history. It's… I…"

He opened and closed his right hand, the one he used for Cataclysm. He would never be tempted to make the same choice, he knew that. He could not wrap his mind around the idea.

"What happened?" he asked. "What were the circumstances? It was Hawk Moth, wasn't it?"

Gabriel sighed and sat next to him on the table. His fingers drummed on the polished wood. He wet his lips, swallowed so hard Chat Noir could hear it.

"It was Hawk Moth," he confirmed. "As for the circumstances, well… Our team was not performing well that day. Anne-Lau… Queen Bee was something like two months pregnant with severe morning sickness, Ladybug was unavailable. Hawk Moth saw an opening. He joined the fight, let his evilized victim handle us, and took a hostage. Then he prattled for hours. You know how villains are."

There was an attempt at humor there, but it fell flat. Unsurprisingly.

"I have nightmares about Cataclysm," Adrien said. "Sometimes, I just… I dream of accidents."

His father sighed, his breathing a bit shaky, then nodded. Chat stared at the floor.

"How do you get to the point where using it on someone is acceptable? I don't get it!"

"And you never will, boy," Gabriel replied, putting a hand on his shoulder, while Adrien kept looking into the distance. "You are a good person. I am not. It's as simple as that."

Adrien's eyes snapped to his.

"Yes you are!"
"We met three times, Chat Noir," his father retorted. "Also, you eat the magical red goo your enemies throw at you. You have a very optimistic outlook on… everything. You are inclined to see the what little light someone has before you see their darkness. That's good. However, sometimes, the shadows outweigh the brightness. I get that you are curious, that I am your predecessor, that you would prefer to see the good in me… But If you want to know what kind of person Chat Noir should be, I am not the example you should look at. I should never have been given that ring."

"How can you say that?" Adrien exclaimed. "You had it for ten years. You were a hero for ten years. You couldn't have been out here, fighting evil, protecting the world, without goodness in you. And - if the internet is anything to go by - you had a wife who adored you, you have a son who loves you. You can't be that bad."

Gabriel collapsed into laughter. He tried to stifle it and ended up with a coughing fit. When he managed to breathe again, he shook his head.

"There is such a thing as bribing journalists." - He chuckled again. - "I was a terrible husband. I'm a terrible father. And I would not have called myself a hero. I am a good businessman. I built my company not thanks to my talent as a designer, but through to my willingness to do what it takes to climb to the top. You need character traits that are in no way heroic."

Chat Noir frowned. With the costume on, he was in no position to refute the 'terrible father' assessment. While there was some truth to it, the teenager felt like there was a difference between being bad at something and behaving horribly on purpose. Gabriel was a liar and a bit of a coward. If dragged out of his comfort zone, he lashed at you with ice and steel. But those were flaws he was aware of, and he had been trying to overcome those traits, over the last few weeks.

Maybe it was a little late, and maybe the attempts were not perfect, but there was intent. There was hope.

Not that 'Chat Noir' could say that out loud.

"Your flaws don't erase the good you did," he pointed out.

"We were discussing my attempting to murder an enemy in cold blood."

Adrien's mouth slammed shut.

*Right*. 

"You ask how one can get to the point where the notion of using Cataclysm on another person becomes acceptable," his father said, staring at the wall. "I never got to that point. I started there. When you are detached enough to be able to think in terms of return on investment, risk mitigation and acceptable losses about human lives, you cannot be a hero. That is when you should surrender the ring, not obtain it."

"Soldiers think like that," the teenager commented.

"So do mercenaries, which would be a better description of the kind of Chat Noir I was."

"We don't exactly get paychecks. You can't be a mercenary if you have nothing to gain. What would you even… Oh," Adrien finished, realizing exactly what kind of reward his father had received for his efforts as Chat Noir: his partner's heart. "Did you even care about helping people?"

"I did. To some extent. I cared about results more than I cared about the mission, and I cared about the mission more than I cared about the helping. But I did."
Chat Noir nodded, letting their entire discussion sink in. He did not know what to think. Was he being too lenient on account of Gabriel being his father? Ladybug had not taken Tikki's revelations kindly.

"Did you free the hostage?"

"Yes."

Adrien nodded and swallowed.

"Was that when you… When… I mean-"

"Yes."

The boy took a shaky breath and turned his tongue in his mouth until he felt he could move it properly.

"W-what happened?"

His father hesitated. For a minute or so, he didn't speak, looking to the side and considering his options.

"I hit his armor. I thought it would… As it turns out, Bella is more powerful than an exhausted Plagg. There was a lot of damage to Hawk Moth's suit, but he was unharmed, and he had another minion lying in wait to rescue him. They both escaped."

"A-and you feel no remorse. Not even now?"

Gabriel mulled over his answer.

"No," he ended up replying. "I'm perfectly aware that I should, and that I am morally corrupt. I know what I did was wrong, but I do not feel that it was."

His son shivered, then shook his head and composed himself. He smiled.

"Can I ask you something?"

The question got him a quizzical look followed by a frown.

"I'm listening?"

"Can you promise me that you will let master Fu handle things, if you locate Hawk Moth?"

"Did I not already tell you I would inform the Kwami of his identity?"

"You said that. I want a promise."

"I promise. In case you don't remember, I have old bones and a distinct lack of superpowers. What else could I do?"

Chat Noir nodded, though he knew a lie when he heard one.

He jumped to his feet and stretched, keeping his back turned to his father. He put his hands on his hips and tried to keep his voice casual when he spoke again.

"You know, I met your son, once or twice. After the Bubbler fight, and when that monster attacked
The only answer he received was chilly silence. He turned to Gabriel.

"He'd be worried to know you're doing... this," the young hero said, gesturing at the room. "You know that, right?"

"Your point being?"

"My point being keep that promise. You might be a 'terrible dad' but you're the only one he has. I don't think he'd want you in danger. So think about him, okay?"

"Don't worry, Chat Noir. I always think of my son. On that note, once again, people in glass houses should not throw stones. Think of your parents, will you?"

###

Ladybug sat on the edge of the roof, above Pat Messmer's office, and waited.

She had no idea what she was doing there. By all means, she should have been home. The fight with Grenadine was over, the city was safe, Ladybug was no longer needed. Marinette had to devise a way to reapologize to Adrien, this time without angering him more. That would take skills she did not have, and there was no going to Alya for tips. How did one explain having reacted to information only one's secret identity knew?

Instead, she had found herself checking on the previous Chat Noir, worried as she was that he could do something terrible. Each fight against a supervillain was a chance for him to locate Hawk Moth and she knew they could not let that happen. Someone would die.

She had arrived in sight of his 'secret lair' just in time to see the lights of the office turn on. A second later, Chat Noir had dropped from the roof and entered the building through the window. Ladybug had been waiting since then.

She hated the idea of Chat interacting with Gabriel Agreste. It was not that she believed he could corrupt Chat, but he could hurt him. It would do her friend no good to get to know him better; it could only stain the picture of 'Chat Noir, the hero' the teenager had imagined. Agreste was all sharp edges, darkness and ice. The man lived on cold hatred and dreams of revenge, and he made her skin crawl.

Marinette had not forgotten a word of Tikki's story.

"You have to understand that Gabriel was always efficient," the Kwami had explained. "He was a strategist, and a cautious one. If he could not win, he did not play. And - as I just told you - he was not evil... but he was ruthless. He was perfectly willing to do whatever it took to accomplish his duties, which meant shouldering the guilt and consequences of his every decision. Now, he and Alice were a good team. Gabriel was rarely put in situations that left him with no choice, but it did happen."

"Like when he tried to kill Hawk Moth?"
"That… That was different," Tikki had murmured. "He had options, but he went for what he saw as the best possible outcome, and his sense of priorities is not yours nor mine. I think he always believed taking Hawk Moth out was necessary. Gabriel is unforgiving. But he never acted on that belief because he did not feel it was worth it. Then came a point where the benefits outweighed the costs."

Marinette had shivered.

"There's no 'best possible outcome' where you murder someone. You find another way. There's always another way. It's never worth it!"

Tikki had flown up to her, nodding.

"I agree. But he could not see it, and the circumstances were difficult."

"So what happened?"

The kwami had sighed and landed on Marinette's bed.

"Alice was pregnant. Obviously, she had been avoiding the battles. Chat Noir and Queen Bee did the heavy lifting, and Ladybug showed up at the end to purify the Akuma. Hawk Moth realized what was going on. He engineered a situation where all three of them had to intervene, then joined the fight and captured Ladybug."

"He got the Miraculous?" the girl had gasped.

"One of the two earrings. Alice swallowed the other one. That led to… threats, among other things. But Hawk Moth thought he had won and he got carried away rubbing that victory in Alice's face. In the meantime, Chat Noir had tracked them down and managed to sneak into Hawk Moth's headquarters. It was a warehouse. I watched Gabriel climb up to the beams, and make his way to us."

Marinette had frowned at that.

"So he was there, and Hawk Moth was threatening his pregnant wife. Did he go berserk? Is that what happened?"

Tikki had shaken her head, regretful.

"No. No. If he had, Kappa and Waspp would have considered letting him keep the ring. But the truth is it was not taken from him just because he tried to kill Hawk Moth. He was not the first to hero to try and he won't be the last. It is the way he did it."

At that point, Marinette had realized how silly thinking he could have flown into a rage had been. The man was deadly set on controlling his emotions. Every time she had met him as Ladybug, she had felt the hatred and malevolence right under the surface, carefully kept in check. As for the Gabriel Agreste she had interacted with as an intern, she was not sure he actually existed. Much of his warmth and pleasantness had come from his desire to attach a promising young talent to his company. It had been business to him.

"He dropped down," Tikki had explained. "Behind Hawk Moth, without being seen. He walked to him while he was talking to Alice, then stopped to listen for a moment more. He thought about it. And then he slowly, quietly raised a hand and grabbed the side of Hawk Moth's head."

That was all Marinette needed to know.
Tikki could say that mister Agreste was not evil, but her chosen did not agree with that assessment. Her kwami was attached to the man. He had been the previous Ladybug's partner and husband. Tikki had lived in their home, had been close to them, and she still cared.

Marinette was not blinded by affection. As far as she was concerned, there was a line between good and evil, and deliberately attempting to kill someone crossed it.

She did not understand how he had been allowed to just walk away after that. So the Miraculous had been taken away. Tikki had forgiven him. His wife had not left him. She had let him be present in Adrien's life, even though the way he treated his son could only be described as neglect. He had nearly murdered a man, and everyone else had swept that 'detail' under the rug.

And now he was trying to find Hawk Moth.

Ladybug knew Agreste wanted their enemy dead. She was not stupid. What she did not know was what to do about it. He would never talk to her, especially not while she was wearing his wife's costume. Stalking him was pointless. Chat got through to him, but she wanted her friend nowhere near his predecessor. But Chat Noir was kind to everyone, and he was curious, and she had to trust him to make his own decisions.

Someday soon, they would have to discuss how mister Agreste was likely planning an execution. Marinette had promised Tikki not to discuss Gabriel's past actions, but the present was something else entirely.

In the meantime, she could only wait and worry while her friend talked to the man.

More than one hour went by before Chat Noir finally left the building. She chased after him, joining him on a neighboring roof.

The look on his face wrenched her heart.

Of course, as soon as he noticed her, he grinned and stopped.

"Stalking the strange old man, m'lady?" he joked.

"Kind of. I saw the lights were on. And then I spotted you going in. I figured I would wait for you."

He breathed in, his expression flickering as if he would have prefered for her not to have done so, but he kept smiling.

"I gave him your letter," he said, his voice casual. "He'll see it it can help the detectives he hired. Also, he gave me constructive criticism on the fight with Grenadine. Lots of it."

"Useful criticism?"

"Definitely."

Ladybug nodded. Chat rocked on his heels. There was a lull in the conversation.

"Also, we talked about what he did," he announced. "There is that."

"Oh, Chat ," Marinette exclaimed, squeezing his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, don't worry. It was nothing I didn't expect. It's just... heavy, you know?"
She nodded.

"I know. I heard the story from Tikki."

Her partner sighed, looking to the sky, unblinking. She waited and waited, but he did not answer, so she coughed and tried to revive the conversation.

"He will try again," she commented, gesturing at the hideout's building. "That's what all of this is is about."

Chat Noir clicked his tongue and shook his head.

"I know."

"Then we have to stop him!" Ladybug exclaimed. "That's -"

"Don't worry about it," her partner cut in. "Let me deal with that. It will be fine."

"What?"

Chat smiled, the sadness clear on his face.

"It will be fine. He won't actually do it."

"I... I wouldn't be so sure of that," Ladybug murmured. "He is driven."

Her partner shrugged.

"I know. He still won't do it. I'm sure he believes he will, and I'm sure he has the skill and the means. It won't matter in the end. He'll see the flaws in his thinking. Trust me on this. I know people like him. My whole family is like that."

She winced. Chat had never discussed his family (just as she had never talked about hers) but, considering his sunny personality, she had always thought he was surrounded by warm, cheerful (and most likely obnoxious) people. It chilled her a little to realize he was not that lucky.

"I... Alright. I'll still keep an eye on him, though," she replied.

Her friend nodded.

"I'll try to nudge him in the right direction," he declared. "And if he does not come to his senses, well, I can still threaten to tell his son. That would make him hate my guts, but I'm pretty sure it would work." - He looked around and frowned. - "I have to run. I should have been home hours ago, I'm going to be in caaaaatastrophic trouble."

He grinned and bowed, then ran to the edge of the roof and waved.

"See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow, kitten! Careful on your way home. Don't taste weird goo on the way!"

"AAAAAGH. I'm never going to live that down, will I?"

"Nope. I'm going to milk that one for a long, long while."

"I'll let you know it was jam."
"It was magical villain-made jam. And it was on the ground anyway."

"I'm. Super. Late," Chat replied, sticking his tongue out. "Bye, my lady!"

And he jumped.

Ladybug sighed, walking to the edge of the roof and staring into the distance. 'Trust me on this'. It was easier said than done. She could not trust Gabriel. She spent the next ten minutes turning and twisting the problem in her head. She got nowhere.

In the end, she was snapped out of her thoughts by repeated flashes of light coming from the street underneath. She looked down and spotted a woman waving at her, her phone in her hand, the flashlight turned on and pointed up. Marinette wrinkled her nose, curious, then lowered herself down to the street with her yoyo.

The stranger joined her, heels clicking on the pavement. Ladybug scowled when she recognized her: it was Nathalie Sancoeur, Gabriel Agreste's assistant. The woman clasped her hands behind her back, studying Ladybug's face.

"We need to talk."

###
Marinette had never liked Nathalie. The woman was the walking picture of indifference and boredom. It was hard to guess her thoughts or emotions. Just like there was not an inch of her skin not covered in paint, her feelings were concealed and her thoughts wrapped up in lies. If she had ethics, she hid them well.

She was just as cold to Adrien as his father was and, while her job was to keep the boy safe, Ladybug had seen more than once that she paid no attention to him in dangerous situations. None whatsoever.

The woman also copied mister Agreste's mannerisms and behavior. Chin up, hands behind her back, shoulders squared. It was uncanny and it made Marinette tenser than she should have been.

"Talk about what?" the heroine asked, keeping her expression neutral behind her mask.

"Gabriel," Nathalie replied, who looked to the windows of the fake office with a puzzled frown. "I didn't know the two of you stayed in touch with him."

What did she know about her employer's secret life? Was she aware of what he was planning? Did she know who he was? Ladybug could not just start discussing his activities. She would have to tiptoe around the topic to figure out what information miss Sancoeur was privy to.

"We are," the girl replied. "Can I help you?"

Miss Sancoeur stared at her, tilting her head to the side.

"You can't be more than fifteen," she murmured. "I knew you were a child, but I had never realized exactly how young you were."

Ladybug scowled. People only ever saw what they expected. They met her and could not believe a teenager had what it took to be the hero they had heard about. No fifteen year old could have been out there fighting supervillains and monsters, and winning. So they saw what they expected to see: a young woman, lithe and short but definitely past the age of eighteen.

She smiled.

"Can I help you, miss Sancoeur?" she repeated, ignoring the comment.

The woman stared at her some more, considering her next move. Clearly, she had something in mind when she had called Ladybug, but she was having doubts. She saw Marinette as a child, and those who focused on her age tended to disregard her aptitudes.

In the end, Nathalie decided Ladybug could not be trusted. She still spoke, but Marinette could tell there was a great deal she kept to herself.

"I am… worried about mister Agreste," the assistant said. "I'd like you to keep an eye on him. I think he might have put himself in a dangerous situation. Do you know what he is doing in there?"

"I do," Marinette replied. "We have been 'keeping an eye on him' for a while, now. We are handling it. Do you know what he is doing?"

Miss Sancoeur looked down, the blue of her eyes vanishing under mascara-laden eyelashes and
"heavy eyelids. She pursed her lips.

"I can't say he took me into his confidence. What I know is that his behaviour and absences are getting suspicious. As I told you, I think he might be at risk. I just want to make sure nothing will happen to him."

They were going to dance around the topic for hours. Neither of them wanted to divulge secrets the other was not aware of. Nathalie would not have said anything incriminating about her employer and lover, and Ladybug could not discuss quantic business with random strangers.

"We know about the watch," the girl announced, "and we know who he is looking for."

Miss Sancoeur's shoulders relaxed and she breathed out in relief. She immediately collected herself.

"You cannot let him find Hawk Moth," she replied. "He would die."

Who that 'he' pertained to was unclear, and maybe it was no accident.

"A step ahead of you there, miss Sancoeur. We are on it. Saving people is what we do. Anything else you can tell me? We could use some help, and you obviously know mister Agreste better than we do."

Nathalie considered her answer.

"I do. Are there any adults in your team? I assume Chat Noir is as young as you."

"None we can reach at the moment. But that doesn't mean you can't trust us," Marinette replied, with fake confidence. "We know what we are doing."

"I am sure you do, as far as fighting evil is concerned."

As expected from Nathalie Sancoeur, her tone betrayed nothing of her thoughts. It was polite, neutral, even.

"We can handle this," Ladybug insisted.

Gabriel's assistant sighed, resigned, then shook her head.

"You are a straightforward girl, aren't you?"

"I... suppose I am?"

Miss Sancoeur pursed her painted lips in annoyance.

"Don't be," she said. Then, as Marinette frowned, she explained herself. "You asked for tips. 'Don't be straightforward'. Not with him. Do not confront him, do not attempt to change his mind and, for the love of God, do not argue with him."

"I won't," Ladybug replied, realizing too late she had crossed her arms as she replied.

That reaction got Nathalie to sigh again.

"I think it would be best if you limited your interactions to rescuing him if he puts himself in harm's way," she stated. "Don't get me wrong, I am sure you are a fantastic hero, but handling Gabriel requires… a different skillset."
Maybe that skillset required the patience to deal with a would-be murderer. Marinette did not have that. She had no idea what to do about him. Chat Noir believed the man's mind could be changed, however. Maybe he had what it took to sway Agreste and to dissuade him from pursuing his plans. Maybe threatening to warn Adrien would work, if everything else failed.

Maybe miss Sancoeur's advice could help Chat.

"Mister Agreste does not want to talk to me anyway," the teenager said. "He likes Chat Noir, however. And… I might be a bit headstrong, but Chat is patient and subtle when needed, much more than I'll ever be. If someone can get through to your boss, it's him."

Nathalie considered those words. She pursed her lips for an instant, looked to the left, looked to the right, as she sorted through her thoughts.

"The important thing to understand about Gabriel is that he is not entirely himself right now," she ended up saying. "He is not well, and his judgement is severely impaired. I… I am not sure a teenager like you can fully apprehend the damage his wife's disappearance did. Let's just say he has been in a dark place ever since. He is finally emerging, and moving forward… and the goal he has set for himself might not make sense to you but - as far as he can see - it is all he has to hold onto."

"He has a son," Ladybug snapped. "A son who loves him."

"As far as he can see," Miss Sancoeur repeated. "Gabriel is not one to allow himself to find comfort in others. He needs a sense of progress and accomplishment to carry on, and he is prone to trying to handle his problems on his own. And the more he isolates himself, the more he believes he is right to do so. He cannot be talked out of that behavior, he cannot be pushed, he cannot be dragged. Think of it as trying to tame a feral cat. You leave food out, and you wait for it to realize it is starving."

"So no matter how terrible his plans are, we should stand by and hope he will, what, reconsider?"

"Yes. Leave the convincing to the people who know him, or at least understand him. I'm here for that. I'm not about to let him go through with whatever asinine plan he is working on. However, if he feels like you are standing in his way, I can guarantee you will only push him to act faster. So please don't," Nathalie finished, her voice rawer and more worried than Marinette had ever heard it.

She cared.

Marinette had known she was Gabriel's girlfriend, or something like that. Still, it was a secret relationship, and Nathalie had never shown the slightest sign of attachment, even when Ladybug had spied on the two of them.

"Has he told you what he is doing?" the girl asked, concerned.

"Bits and parts. I know he is looking for his wife. I know Hawk Moth is a solid lead."

"Did he tell you why?"

"It's irrelevant," miss Sancoeur commented. "I don't care. I just want to prevent him from doing something he will regret, and that can be accomplished without shedding light on all of his secrets. I know enough. I have been by his side for fifteen years, that's all I need to reach him."

"You don't care? What if he wants to do something really horrible?"
"Of course he wants to do something 'really horrible', miss. He has reasons to believe Hawk Moth murdered his wife. In his place, I would entertain dark fantasies of my own. But I know him. He is more than just that."

Ladybug hesitated, Tikki's words running through her mind over and over again. 'It was the way he did it'. 'He thought about it'. Why was Chat so willing to forgive? Why did Tikki insist on saying Gabriel was not evil? Why did miss Sancoeur care?

There was a line.

"A-are you sure you know him that well?" Marinette asked. "What if you are wrong about him?"

"If you don't trust my judgement, miss, trust Alice's. Fifteen years wearing polka dots should give her opinion of him some credibility. Now, do I have your word you won't do more than save his life if need be?"

"No," Ladybug replied. "But I'll wait and see if your approach works. Is that enough for you?"

###

Bellum, bella, belli, bellorum, bello, bellis, bellum, bella, bello, bellis, bellum, bella.

_Bella._

When they heard the name of Plagg's sister, most people believed it meant 'beauty'. Humans were naive that way. And Bella was pretty - the butterfly - all fluttering wings and smiles, all pinkness and softness and joy. Or so they thought.

The wiser humans, if they knew their Latin and if they knew her, would say "Does your name come from bellum? The word for war?". They rarely realized that quantic gods had walked the earth well before Romulus and Remus had found a she-wolf to feed them, and were much older than Latin itself.

Bella had not taken her name from anything or anyone. The Romans had named wars after her.

And Plagg… Plagg? _Plaga_. Millenia had gone by and new languages had been born of the ashes of the ancient ones, but he still heard fragments of his name when humans discussed illnesses and wounds.

Ancient Rome. They had made _history_. Bella and Plagg had settled there for a few decades, and their visit would forever be remembered. The 'Plague of Galen', the humans called it. Plagg could still picture Lucius and Mellusa dancing on the roofs and laughing as the city died. Thousands of corpses were rotting in the streets, but Bella's chosen was a spiteful little creature born of pain and abuse, and she wanted revenge. She had broken her chains, and her masters, and their world. As for Plagg's chosen… Lucius loved Mellusa, and watching the collapse of a civilization was entertaining.

Lucius had never met his Ladybug. Plagg had not allowed it. It would have meant the end of the fun and the games.

Lucius would have loved her too.
It was always the same story. Chat Noir loved Ladybug and Ladybug loved Chat Noir. It was not necessarily romantic love. It could be friendly, or sisterly, or fatherly, or any other sort of love. The label you put on it did not matter: no one ever mattered more to Tikki and Plagg's chosens than their partners. Out of the thousands, millions of other humans out there, their Kwami gave them one who matched them in every way. It was as good as finding one's soulmate (though Plagg could have told you those did not exist).

To a creature who had no concept of romantic love, the longing and passion felt a little pointless. Plagg could understand familial love, however. He had siblings. He had Tikki. Sure, he liked some better than the others, and no one shone as bright as his twin, but he cared for them. In a way. Even as a corrupted god, he had cared.

There was some favoritism at play between them all, of course. Kappa and Tikki were peas in a pod, being the patient ones. Bella liked Zharr best, the butterfly and the firebird, the moth and the flame. Other than that, Plagg adored Bella and vice-versa. On the other hand, he couldn't stand Vixx, but the little fox could cuddle against Bella for days. No one liked Waspp, but she got things done.

Tikki and Plagg… Tikki and Plagg, well, they were twins. They could still bicker like children. They argued and ranted at each other and teased each other and got on each other's nerves. They missed each other when apart, though they would not have admitted it. Though Plagg would not have admitted it.

The years they had spent together under Gabriel and Alice's roof had been nice, until Alice had ruined it all by confiscating the ring.

Plagg had never been as angry at anyone as he had been at Alice that day, and he had spent three thousand years as an evil deity of misfortune.

And Fu and Kappa. Oh, Fu and Kappa, and Waspp, and their insistence that he had to be kept away from Gabriel. Not only that: sealed, sealed, not to return to his chosen, not to talk to him again, ever. "Too risky", Fu had said. "He is a bad influence on you".

Waspp and Kappa had agreed wholeheartedly. Zharr had been gone. Bella was still evil (and hopefully not too vexed by that Cataclysm against her chosen. All was fair in love and war, she said so herself). Vixx had sided with the others.

"Don't you remember what you were like back then?" she had asked. "If Gabriel had not failed, you would be gone. Do you realize? He would have wiped out every single good thing in you. You would have ended up like Bella again, insane and twisted and evil."

"I WAS BORN EVIL!" Plagg had shouted. "DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY BEING GONE? I AM GONE. You made me shades of grey, and you made Tikki shades of grey, but neither of us is the god we were meant to be."

By the end of that tirade, he had been growling, tail whipping the air, magic oozing out of him in dark tendrils.

"Plagg," Tikki had murmured.

And that had been it.

For all his moaning and ranting, Plagg listened to Tikki. He had let her bring him back to the light, slowly, steadily, by picking heroes too dark for her so he would chose his cats warmer and kinder
than they could have been. He never cheated, not at that game. Tikki found Ladybug and he gave her the best Chat Noir, always. And so, as the centuries had gone by, his sister had gained shadows and he had gained sparks of brightness.

At some point, he had been declared 'redeemed'.

They thought Gabriel had compromised that. They were wrong, and Plagg had told them all. To corrupt, you needed intent. To Gabriel, killing Hawk Moth had been a calculated choice, not an act of evil. He had taken no pleasure in it.

He had just wanted the world to be a safer place for his unborn son.

Bella did not have a Tikki to lure her to the light. Zharr could have done it, if he had bothered with his wayward sister, but he had been missing for decades. She would shed her darkness on a whim, for a handful of years, but she hid her Miraculous from the other Kwami and gave it to whomever caught her fancy. And, as a dark deity, she always made sure her chosen walked free once she left them.

It had been going on since Bella had first been corrupted. There was no end in sight.

Plagg still believed Gabriel had been the only one willing to take the hard decisions. Sometimes, two wrongs did make a right.

His Kwami knew the difference between malevolence and dedication. No one was a better judge than him.

They had still sealed him.

They had made him solemnly swear to never show himself to Gabriel again. They had made him swear to never talk to him again. They had made him swear to keep his secrets. And the Kwami could not break his vows. If his previous chosen as much as looked his way, Plagg vanished. If Adrien questioned him about his father, the spirit's tongue froze in his mouth.

He had given his word, and his stupid, idiotic siblings were nowhere to be found now that he needed to discuss Gabriel. His previous Chat was in pain, and the kitten was miserable, and there was nothing Plagg could do for them.

He would never make a promise again.

He made sure to let Tikki know how he felt.

"I will NEVER give my word again, do you hear me?" he growled, pacing in Marinette's pink bedroom, as his twin tried to calm him down. "This has gone on for long enough and it is only getting worse, and your Ladybug is not HELPING !"

"Plagg, please. Her parents will hear you," Tikki pointed out. "We have sent more messages to Fu, and Volpina can't travel to France right now. She is trying to get in touch with him too."

"Where is he anyway?"

"I assume Kappa is looking for Waspp. It has been a long time, her absence is becoming worrying."

"Well, I sure hope he'll do better than when he tried to find Zharr. I'm still waiting to see the stupid bird again."
"Plagg, please."

"And your chosen is an imbecile. Worse than Christine. Worse than Oscar, even."

"I am still extremely fond of both Christine and Oscar, I'll let you know. They were good heroes."

"They were judgemental idiots and so is your newest pastry dispenser. She is hurting my chosen."

"She does not mean to, Plagg. You know that. She wants to protect Adrien, and even you have to admit that Gabriel is not even trying to parent the poor boy."

Plagg was not about to admit anything and could not have if he had tried. He had given his word.

"She is-"

The trapdoor opened, and Marinette climbed into the room, blinking as she noticed the black cat hovering above her desk.

"Plagg?" she exclaimed, slamming the trapdoor closed.

The Kwami felt a growl rumble in his throat. He swallowed it and flew to the girl, stopping in front of her face.

"You are going to stop acting like an idiot. You are to stay away from...."

He could not say it.

He took a deep breath and turned to Tikki. His sister sighed.

"What Plagg is trying to say is that you should stay away from Gabriel," she explained to her chosen. "As for 'acting like an idiot', he is going to take that back. He did not mean it."

###
Ladybug would be of no use. Nathalie had hoped the superhero was a bit older than she appeared, but she had to be around Adrien's age, if not younger. Worse, she was confrontational and self-righteous, traits that probably served her well when facing supervillains, but that guaranteed disaster when talking to Gabriel.

One could only hope that the girl would not make the situation worse.

After her chat with the hero, Nathalie had gone home. She spent her evening catching up on the work she had abandoned to stalk her employer. Ten new tear-jerking emails had appeared while she was gone, along with requests for appointments, complaints about missed appointments (there was only so much rescheduling and apologizing one could do while on stakeout), and meeting reports. All of that kept her busy until midnight, and would have taken longer if the rest of the world had shared her concept of working hours.

Once that was done, she took a bath, one long enough and hot enough to relax somewhat. She painted her nails, all twenty of them. She waited for them to dry off. She went through her skin creams and lotions and applied the relevant ones.

She was not tired. She no longer felt her nerves but the stress was still there, underneath the surface, keeping her awake.

She watched half a rerun of Criminal Minds. Her phone kept buzzing. A quick glance at her notifications confirmed that Gabriel was still working, going through his own emails and forwarding most of them to her. It was hard to say if he wanted to get things done or if he was avoiding sleep, but Nathalie's bets were on the second option. Well, in both cases, it was his choice.

She turned the TV off and returned to the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror and plucked her hairpins from her bun, so she could braid her hair and call it a day. Once done, she stared at the bobby pins on her counter. In the next room, her phone buzzed again. She stared at the bobby pins for a moment more, before undoing her braid and twisting her hair back into a bun. She applied some makeup. She dressed herself, putting on a shirt and pants but neither jacket nor shoes.

A few minutes later, after a new email arrived into her inbox, she called Gabriel.

"Nathalie?" he said as he picked up. "Is there a problem?"

He was not usually that worried when she called. Granted, it was two in the morning.

"No, no," she replied. "I saw that you were awake. I'm sitting here with a bottle of wine, I wondered if you'd like to drop by."

He went silent. A handful of seconds went by.

"I have a lot of work to catch up on," he replied. "Stephanie sent me extensive notes on Jagged Stone's ou-"

"In twenty minutes?" she exclaimed, her tone saccharine. "That's perfect! I'll be waiting."

"Wait, w-"
She hung up and went to look for the one bottle of wine she thought she owned, before remembering she had downed the stupid thing the night she had suspected Gabriel of being Hawkmoth.

"Please bring a bottle of wine from the mansion as it turns out I do not actually have wine," she texted him.

He did not answer. Fifteen minutes later, Nathalie's doorbell rang.

She let him into the building and waited by her apartment door. She opened it before Gabriel could knock, when she heard his footsteps in the corridor.

"Hello," she greeted him.

He raised a bottle of wine and gave her his best look of aggravated disapproval. But he was there, wasn't he? She pursed her lips to suppress her knowing smile.

"Come in," she said, stepping out of the way.

He took in her outfit, her bare feet, the shirt falling over her pants. He himself wore a pristine suit and impeccable shoes. His hair was perfectly slicked back. Nathalie tended to wear makeup like an armor. She felt more comfortable in her own skin when others could not see much of it. Gabriel's armor was made of fabric and leather.

"What is the occasion?" he asked, wary.

She ran a finger up his tie and took the bottle of wine from his hands. He frowned but followed her to the living room, sitting while she fetched glasses. She joined him, pushing the cushion to free some space next to him. The bottle of wine was opened, drinks poured.

"Should I expect a difficult conversation?" Gabriel said. "About my absence this afternoon, maybe? About yesterday afternoon?"

Nathalie shook her head.

"No. No, don't worry. I have reconsidered."

"Did you? A few hours ago, you told me I had crossed a line."

"And I revised my opinion. I did a great deal of thinking today. I believe I'll worry about lines later on."

Gabriel studied her face, his eyes cold and piercing behind his glasses.

"That's too easy. Where is the catch?"

"There is no catch."

He shifted away, still tense, still suspicious. And, more than that, he looked mildly uncomfortable. There was no slamming the door in her face there, however, no retreating behind his position of authority. The tables had turned, Nathalie realized. As far as their relationship was concerned, she was now just as much in control as he was, if not more. As much as he would have denied it, he craved for companionship. He needed her. She did not need him. That gave her an advantage.

That being said, she cared.
"There is always a catch," he replied.

"I still expect a raise."

He considered that.

"I'll run it through H.R.,” he promised, his voice a little more relaxed.

Nathalie sipped her wine.

"Thank you," she said, putting her glass down on the coffee table.

She leaned closer to him. At first, so did he, but he pulled away, composing himself. Of course. She had left him to his own devices for a few hours, and that after pushing him away. That was ample time for him to rebuild some of his walls. She was not so sure he was the one doing the building, to be honest. From her point of view, it looked more and more like they reappeared on their own and trapped him in.

"I'm sorry," he told her. "Yesterday was a moment of weakness. I… still don't feel it's appropriate."

Said the man who had willingly joined Nathalie in her apartment at two in the morning, knowing full well what was in store for him.

Nathalie was having none of that.

She undid one of his buttons.

"You have the strangest priorities," she commented, very satisfied by the stunned look on his face. "Murder is just fine but adultery is not?"

The man was in love with a ghost, so surrounded by his wife's absence that he could not see the way out. Of course murder was fine with him. He was so deep underwater that he likely did not remember what breathing was like. All he had was what he did not have. All he saw was death. Hawk Moth's, his…

"I'm aware my logic leaves much to be desired," Gabriel stated, staring at her hands, which were still holding the fabric they had parted.

"It does," Nathalie murmured, kissing him.

She was entirely willing to respect his decisions, except when said decisions were asinine.

He was denying himself something he craved and needed out of misplaced, compulsive guilt. Nathalie had finally figured out that he had to be dragged out of himself. His mind was not a nice place to be alone in, not when he was mourning and picking at festering wounds that would never mend. Left to his own devices, he would pull away from everything and everyone, work himself to exhaustion, and either murder a man or get killed trying.

Gabriel needed to be helped out, and wasn't that what Nathalie was for? Assisting him?

He was struggling with the idea of wanting someone other than his wife, of loving someone other than his wife, but that was fine with her. She knew she was a rebound and a crutch, but she did not need more. What she needed was to see him emerge from that hell he was in. If he remembered what being alive felt like, most of his problems would solve themselves. He would not be so set on his suicide mission. He would not bury himself in work quite so much.
Her kiss went unanswered. However, as she moved away, Gabriel's hand reached up and pulled a bobby pin out of her hair.

###

The Miraculous holders had met in Fu's hotel room, three days after the fight against Hawk Moth and Gabriel's attempt to blow his head off. Emergencies were all fine and good, but one did not hike back from rural China to Paris in a few hours.

Volpina had arrived first, limping out of the TGV with a suitcase both larger and heavier than her. Plagg and Gabriel, perched on a building next to the Gare du Nord, had watched the old coot drag her bag to the corner of the street. As tiny and wrinkled as she was, she had parted the crowd easily, tapping people with her cane so they would move out of her way. If the pedestrians protested, she cupped her ear with one hand and started ranting in Italian, walking away as if they had offended her. Volpina, of course, was perfectly fluent in French, and well versed in the basic concepts of politeness. She was, however, 'old enough to do whatever she pleased'. 'Respect for one's elders' had become much more important to her after she had started greying at the temples.

Alice had joined her after a five minutes wait. Even in her civilian clothes, the young human had been Ladybug. Plagg and Gabriel had been too far to see her expression, but they could tell from her posture and attitude. What they had seen was that her face was still black and blue, and that her hair covered her bandaged ears.

Hawk Moth had torn her Miraculous off, but Ladybug had not let that stop her. The first thing she had done, while she was still untransforming, had been to headbutt Bella's chosen. Nose broken, face covered in blood, she had managed to get away with one of the earrings, which she had swallowed as she ran. That had saved Tikki from slavery.

Gabriel, next to Plagg, had shivered upon seeing the healing bruises on his wife's face, but they had been a blessing. The injuries had made her hard to recognize, despite all the magazine covers and tabloid articles she had appeared on.

"She's fine," the Kwami had told him.

"I know."

That had not been strictly true. Their bodies had been spared - for the most part - but their spirits had not been that lucky.

"We can't stay here much longer," Gabriel had muttered. "Bee is still looking for us."

Of course, Plagg's chosen was the one who had found out that Volpina was on her way. He was the one who had decided to spy on the fox and Alice. Even on the run, he had needed to see his wife. He had needed to make sure that nothing was wrong with the baby.

They had stayed some more.

Plagg had grown tenser and tenser. Volpina had stomped to Alice's car, talking animatedly, scanning their surroundings for signs of Chat Noir. The black Kwami had made sure to stay out of her sight.
"Let's go," he had snapped. "I'm not going back to deity jail."

Gabriel had nodded and raced away from the station. Untransformed, he had not been as fast and agile as his alter-ego, but Plagg had to admit 'antenna repairman' was less noticeable a costume than 'superhero'.

They had found shelter in an abandoned building, where Gabriel, sitting on the dirty floor, had flipped through pages and pages of the newspapers of the day. They had been looking for reports of a missing man around Gabriel's age. They had checked every hospital and morgue, to no avail.

Hawk Moth had not been injured. Bella had shielded him.

"We can still track my sister down," Plagg had commented, landing next to his chosen. "Things won't be as bad if we bring Bella back with us. Kappa might give us a pass."

"She is more likely to hide until she recovers, isn't she? How long will she be out?"

"I don't know. The last time I hit one of us that hard, it was Waspp, and it took her twenty years to recover."

Gabriel had groaned, leaning against the wall.

"They will just bide their time until she is strong enough to attack us again. It was all for nothing."

After a moment of hesitation, Plagg had landed next to him.

"A few years of no Bella is something," he had said, trying to comfort the human.

It had been pointless. Gabriel had been willing to throw away everything dear to him for a specific price, but it had escaped him. His mask, the love of his life, his child, his mind, all of it paid for the prospect of a world where Adrien would not be at risk of being slaughtered before he was even born. The chance had slipped between his fingers.

Gabriel had shaken his head at those meaningless words.

"I have to go back," he had declared, removing his Miraculous and throwing it at Plagg. "Here."

The Kwami had caught the ring and frowned.

"What are you doing?"

"You are not going back to 'Kwami prison' because of a decision I took."

"You are giving me the ring."

"I am fairly confident you will not run off to cause a new outbreak of bubonic plague. Just go, find your next chosen, and try not to let Fu and Volpina catch you, will you?"

Plagg had thrown the ring back into his face.

The god did not have much of a sense of responsibilities, nor much of a protective instinct. If you wanted him to do something, you had better come with offerings of cheese. When it mattered, however, Plagg was there for his heroes.

"I am not letting you go back alone. If you go down for this, so do I. I think you did the right thing. If they can't admit it was necessary, they are idiots."
Gabriel, being Gabriel, had not commented on that, just looked at his Kwami with pale eyes that betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

"Don't surrender," Plagg had advised. "They will wipe your memories. You know they will."

It was how Kappa handled every problem: he swept it under the carpet, as if it had never existed. Unsurprising, from a turtle. You could not deliver corrupted heroes to human justice. They tricked their way out. They took advantage of their race's lack of magical knowledge, feigned possession, lied their way out of imprisonment. At the beginning of time, the humans' brand of justice had been swift and lethal. It had not allowed for questioning and doubt. The Kwami had been opposed to those absolutes, of course (those of them on the side of goodness, anyway). Still, back then, escaping punishment had been harder. Living in an enlightened world meant that you could not convict without proof. When your crime was magical and its witnesses masked vigilantes, that proof did not exist.

Heroes did not kill, not even for the greater good. Heroes did not keep criminals in secret prisons. So what did they do? They made the monsters forget ever having been monsters. The villains walked back to their normal lives, a bit dazed but free to rebuild.

It did not cure the darkness in their hearts.

It did not give their victims closure.

"What were you like as a dark god, Plagg?" Gabriel had asked, for the very first time.

_I was the frost destroying the crops after a warm month of spring. I was the sun when the fields needed rain._

Once upon a time, someone had trapped ideas inside a box. Some of their names had been forgotten. Not luck and misfortune, of course. Those were not about to fade from memory. Guile was another easy one. Purpose, Plagg supposed, was as good as a term as any to define Waspp. She got things done. Kappa, and Zharr, and Bella… Who knew?

_I was the calm sea when your sails needed wind. I was the storm the rest of the time._

Once upon a time, someone had opened the box and a furious black cat had escaped. He had not been especially evil. He was too lazy for that. He had slept under the warm sun and gorged himself with cream and milk. But everywhere he went, he took his essence with him. People tripped, items broke, the wind always blew in the wrong direction.

That had been the extent of his sins. He had been content playing with his brothers and sisters when he crossed their paths. Then Bella's little chosen had slaughtered his entire family and things - including the butterfly Kwami herself - had changed.

"Come on," Plagg's sister had told him on more than one occasion, in dozens of languages. "It will be fun."

_Bella would find a broken human with dreams of revenge, and I would tag along and play._


"I was what you would expect from bad luck," the Kwami had told Gabriel. "I toppled Stonehenge. Twice. I broke the Sphinx's nose. I caused the Antonine plague."

_That_ had shocked the boy, though you had to know him to see it. His face gave nothing away. You
had to pay attention to the tension in his shoulders and to his shrinking pupils.

"Why?" he had asked.

"Because my chosen wanted to? It's a long story."

"That's it? Is that all it took?"

"We were born pure," Plagg had explained. "The concepts of guilt and compassion were all Tikki's. They seeped into me later, through my chosens, after my sister started forcing me to pick humans with hearts. But, for the longest time, all I was was mischief and hunger."

"Mischief. The Plague of Galen."

"It is all the same to a creature with no conscience. I do see, now, how Lucius was insane, but back then he merely entertained me."

Gabriel had stared at his left hand. For once, his thoughts were clear on his face. A Kwami could be stripped of parts of its essence whenever its powers were abused, the young man knew that. Just as easily as the goodness of their chosens merged with the Kwami' spirits, it could be torn out. Worse: evil could replace it.

It took so little.

For Bella, it had taken three murders. One would have been enough.

"It takes intent, Gabriel," Plagg had told his Chat Noir. "I was never at risk of corruption here."

"Are we sure of that?"

"You worry too much."

"If you were to turn into a dark god again, would you prefer to remain one? Could you be brought back?"

"Of course, I could be brought back. I have Tikki. And yes, I would prefer to remain one, but then again I would not know any better. Could we go find cheese? I'm starving."

Gabriel had gotten a tupperware filled with cheese cubes from his toolbelt.

"Could Bella be brought back?"

"I don't see why not," Plagg had replied, stuffing himself full of emmental. "We did it with Waspp when she was corrupted."

"Maybe next time, then," his chosen had murmured, closing his eyes and leaning back against the wall.

The Kwami had landed on his shoulder and stayed there.

###
Training was fun.

Fencing training with Gabriel Agreste was many things, but fun was not one of them. Adrien had gotten more bruises over three weeks of duels against his father than in his entire career as a superhero.

That proved to be a problem when he arrived to his photoshoot of the day and discovered the line of short sleeved shirts he was supposed to be modeling. Everyone, from the photographer to Nathalie, winced when they saw the purple marks on his elbows. Adrien stood there, apologizing, while everyone panicked about having to cancel the photoshoot. Thankfully, Sandra, one of the makeup artists, swore the bruises could be concealed. "I can hide those well enough, and photoshoot will do the rest anyway," she promised.

Ten minutes later, she was inspecting Adrien's half-painted elbow under the light. She chattered as she did so, which was nice, since the teenager needed the distraction. He was trying not to think about his discussion with his father, but kept remembering bits and parts of Gabriel's confession. It was hard enough to absorb the notion that his father had been willing to execute his nemesis. Knowing he was planning to try again was worse. The boy sincerely believed Gabriel would not go through with his plans, however, provided someone reminded him he had a life waiting for him. He could not be left alone with his thoughts. His mind was working against him. He needed help.

Adrien would be there to give it.

"If you want to keep modeling, you might have to cut down on heavy sports, kiddo," Sandra told him, startling him out of his thoughts. "We can't have the face of the company look like it danced a slow with a combine harvester."

Much to his own surprise, the teenager grinned.

"Who says I want to keep modeling?" he replied, the words out of his mouth before he could think about them.

Only after saying them did he realize how true they were. It was not just that he did not plan to do it forever, even if it made his father happy. He wanted to stop. He actually wanted to stop. He wanted more time for important things such as saving the city and patrolling it with Ladybug, and for silly, normal things like seeing his friends.

"Well, you better have a replacement in mind 'cause I'm not going to your dad with those news," Sandra teased, adding some skin-colored touches to his purple-colored skin.

"It's fine. I'll tell him. If he reeeeeeally wants a replacement, I, uh, can suggest a friend?" Adrien joked. "Is it alright if we get a dashing blonde instead of a cute blond?"

"Tell me you are not talking about the Bourgeois girl. Please."

"You know Chloé? And I kind of am. She would love modeling. I think." - If it was not too much work and if she got to sign autographs. - "She is really into fashion."

"Of course I met her. How many times has she dropped by for your photoshoots by now?"

He smiled. Chloé did that, or used to. Nathalie had given her a stern talking to the previous summer. Not everyone had been enchanted to see her there. He had liked her visits. She had been his only friend, and had more good in her than people tended to notice, though those aspects of her personality vanished piece by piece as she aged.
"I like her. I do," he insisted when the makeup artist raised her eyebrows. "She's not that bad when you get to know her."

"I didn't say your friend was bad! The worst I have to say about her is that someone should tell her that lipstick is a terrible mistake. But, seriously, maybe don't mention her to your father. If you go and suggest Anne-Laure's daughter as the new face of his teenage line, he is gonna blow a gasket."

Adrien blinked. Something nagged at his mind.

"Wait, you knew Chloé's mother?"

"Of course I knew her. I've worked here since the company was founded and Anne-Laure was your mom's best friend. Before she divorced and flew away to the Caribbean or was it Honolulu, that is. What a shame that was for her kid."

That nagging feeling turned into full blown realization as Gabriel's words came back to Adrien. 'Anne-Lau… Queen Bee was something like two months pregnant with severe morning sickness'. His father had told him the identity of a previous superhero. He had let it slip and had not even cared.

Adrien did not know much about Chloé's mother, save for the fact that she had packed her bags and left mere days after giving birth to her daughter, to never come back. Had she left on Miraculous business? No, that was unlikely. Waspp's comb was supposedly lost. Mrs Bourgeois would have had no reason to stay away. She had just left.

"My father did not like her?"

"It was more… mutual, absolute loathing. They couldn't stand each other, which was pretty unfortunate since they were both grafted to your mother's hip. And Anne-Laure was not afraid of him, either. She'd storm straight into the studio and shout at him if she felt like it."

The boy could not picture that. No one screamed at his father. Well, Aria Rossignol did, but Gabriel stared her down easily enough.

"Here, done!" Sandra said, while Adrien tried to pick a question to ask. "Let's go, we're late enough as it is."

The photoshoot took hours. The young model spent the entirety of it thinking about what Sandra had just revealed, and of the implications. They had been trying to get in touch with Fu, in vain, but maybe the retired Queen Bee knew how to find him. Maybe she had an idea of where Waspp was.

His mind was also rearranging the dates and information he had. Queen Bee had been 'something like two months' pregnant. That meant Ladybug, the 'unavailable' Ladybug, had been closer to five months into her own. Chloé was just a little younger than Adrien.

The boy was trying hard not to think about that, but the pieces were putting themselves back together all the same. 'My wife stayed by my side because there were more strings tying us together than duty', his father had told him. A child was a pretty big string, Adrien supposed. He felt stupid not to have come to that conclusion sooner. From Gabriel's first words to Chat Noir - 'My story was over before you were even born.' - he had supposed the events with Hawk Moth had unfolded much earlier.

He did not like those thoughts, so he focused on the 'Queen Bee' lead.

Sandra was called away before the end of the photoshoot, and Adrien did not manage to find her.
after that, so he gave up on questioning the makeup artist and ran to the staircase rather than to the elevators, figuring he could get a moment of quiet to talk to Plagg.

"Can you talk about Anne-Laure Bourgeois?" he asked his Kwami as soon as he was certain to be out of sight.

"Lenoir," Plagg corrected. "She didn't even want to be called Bourgeois when she was married. And Lenoir has a nicer tone to it."

"Do you think she might help us find Fu? Would she still be in contact with him?"

"I'm not sure. But it's worth a try. Clearly Ladybug and Tikki are getting nowhere on that front, and we need a third Kwami. If it can't be Kappa, Waspp would do."

"Then we're finding Queen Bee," Adrien exclaimed, racing up the stairs to the last floor.

He joined Nathalie in her office. When he got close to her desk, she alt-tabbed away from a game of minesweeper, nearly quickly enough not to be caught. Adrien pretended not to have noticed, and she pretended to be busy.

"How did the photoshoot go?" she asked, barely looking up from her screen.

"It turned up alright. We were only ten minutes late by the time it ended, and the photographer says what we have is good."

"Nice to hear. You should be free until your Spanish lesson, then. Don't forget about it. The car will be waiting for you at one."

"Alright. Say, talking about cars, was Jagged Stone supposed to drop by today? I think I saw his limo outside."

The teenager had not even peeked outside but knew full well the rock star had an appointment a whole hour before, which meant he would be arriving soon. Nathalie jumped out of her chair, frantic for a second, before composing herself. She logged out with two keystrokes on her computer keyboard, then picked her tablet up.

"Thanks, Adrien," she said, walking to the exit. "I'll check. Oh. I ordered a brie sandwich for you. Did you want something else? It's still early enough to change the order."

"Brie is fine, thank you," the blond answered, doing his best not to fidget.

Nathalie nodded and left. As soon as the door closed behind her, Adrien dropped on her chair and grabbed her mouse. Getting past the password prompt was easy enough: he had known for a year that she used 'literally' on most of her devices. Once logged in, he opened her contact list.

His father, being Gabriel Agreste, knew everyone. Nathalie, as his assistant, had everyone's phone number. Grace Ouillette's personal line? Of course. Jagged Stone's home number, his email, his manager's phone number, his mother's mobile phone number? Obviously. If that list had been printed, people would have paid thousands to get their hands on it.

Adrien typed "Lenoir" in the search box and had had to filter through thirty-four results.

He wrote the number down and was shoving the post-it into his pocket when his father walked out of his office. The man frowned when he saw him sitting on Nathalie's chair.
"I-I was bored," Adrien blurted out. "I didn't think Nathalie would mind if I played a game of cards or minesweeper."

His father relaxed, then paled.

"Not the minesweeper," he exclaimed. "Don't. I'm fairly sure the only things Nathalie values in her life are her paycheck and her minesweeper scores. Don't. Touch. Minesweeper."

Adrien gaped.

"Aaaalright?"

His father cleared his throat, forcing his features into a serious expression.

"And this conversation never happened. I am not and have never been aware of Nathalie's interest in computer games, or of her lack of interest. Also, I am furious to discover that you know her password. That's unacceptable. Now kindly log out and get away from that chair before she comes back and realizes you do."

After half a dozen stunned blinks, Adrien did as commanded.

"You are not going to tell her?" he asked.

Gabriel scowled.

"Long story short, if she changes that password, I won't be able to give myself editing permissions on my own calendar the next time she takes them away. This conversation never happened either. Now run off."

His son nearly chuckled, so pleasantly surprised and amused by the whole exchange that he had forgotten all about Hawk Moth and dark memories.

"Your editing privileges? " he repeated.

Gabriel stared him down, but it was a friendly kind of death glare. Adrien's spine did not even turn to ice.

"I'll just take a walk before lunch," the teenager said, walking out. "See you then!"

His father nodded, rolling his eyes with a long suffering sigh.

Ten minutes later, Chat Noir found himself on the roof of the building, a crumpled post-it in one hand, and his staff in the other. He opened the communicator, hoping the thing could call the Caribbean (or was it Honolulu?). He dialed the number he had copied from Nathalie's contact list.

By the second 'beep', someone picked up.

###
Plagg had not taken his insults back. As a matter of fact, on top of 'acting like an idiot', he had accused Marinette of being brash, uninformed and judgemental. Then he had just called her names, in an endless stream of insults that grew louder every time he tried and failed to utter Gabriel Agreste's name.

And then he had left.

"I'm sorry, Marinette," Tikki had told her. "He adored Gabriel."

"I got that part, yes," the teenager had replied, staring at the window the black Kwami had phased through.

His outburst had left her feeling a little guilty, even though her opinion of mister Agreste had not improved.

"Why did he?" she had asked Tikki. "Why? I don't get it! The man tried to murder someone and it's like he got a 'get out of jail free' card. Everyone forgave him!"

The Kwami had sighed, shaking her head.

"It's not that simple. Plagg… Plagg believed - still believes - that Gabriel took a necessary decision. For all his childishness and insouciance, Plagg is millenia old, with a long past. He is… Disenchanted. And… No, not everyone forgave Gabriel. Not by a long shot."

"His Ladybug did."

Tikki had stared into the distance at that, long enough for Marinette to start fidgeting. When her Kwami had snapped out of it, she had looked more tired and darker than the teenager had ever seen her.

"Trying to explain Alice and Gabriel is like trying to explain the deep sea to the wind. They had a strange dynamic and you could only see the wrong in it. You and Chat Noir complete each other, and the edges of you blur together, because you are so different and yet so alike. Alice was carved around Gabriel's shadows. She did not forgive him. She could not have forgiven him. What he did was against her every value. But she could not blame him either, because she understood him so perfectly. And she agonized about that."

"But she stayed with him."

"And she took the Miraculous from him. She believed he deserved punishment. He believed he did, so he gave her the ring without a protest. While it might not seem like enough for you, it was the fairest option Alice could see, and she fought Fu and Mona - the previous Volpina - so the punishment would stop at that."

"What did master Fu want to do?"

"We… don't kill. Never. But sometimes, corrupted heroes cannot be delivered to the human authorities. If their wrongdoings cannot be explained, there is nothing the police can do. So the simplest thing to do is to remove their memories of the Miraculous. They forget they were ever heroes, and we let them go. It is not ideal, but it is the safest solution. It gives them another chance at life, too, even if the partial amnesia does not make things easy.”
"But… He was married to Ladybug. How would that have wor-"

"He would have forgotten most of their lives. Her being Ladybug and his being Chat Noir was the foundation of their relationship. He only got to know her after he found out who she was, he only started caring for her because of who she was. All of those memories would have been wiped away. Alice… Obviously, Alice refused to let it happen."

That, Marinette could understand. Her predecessor had not only been married, but also pregnant. Making Gabriel forget would have punished her more severely than him. He would not have known what he missed. He would have seen her as a stranger. He would have become one. And they had been weeks away from Adrien's birth. They had been married half a decade, and together since their teenage years.

"It might seem like he got off easy," Tikki had continued, "but surrendering the Miraculous was excruciating to him. Living with the consequences of his actions was harder than you can imagine. I was by Alice's side for four more years, though I had been sealed so I would not interact with him. Trust me when I say the punishment was sufficient."

###

"Aaaallo?" a woman mumbled as Chat Noir panicked on his side of the communicator. "Hello? Moshi moshi? Halo?"

He opened and closed his mouth.

"Jesus Christ," the woman muttered, her voice growing distant.

"Hello!" Adrien exclaimed before she could hang up. "Sorry. Bad reception. I am looking for an Anne-Laure Lenoir. I was given this number."

"Thell 'ryou?"

"Hi! Uh. I mean I really need to make sure you are miss Lenoir."

"Kiddo, do you know what time it is?"

"I, ah, no, actually. I mean I don't know where you are. I've been told 'the Caribbean or maybe Honolulu'."

"Not even close. Yeah, I'm her. I mean I'm me. Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Chat Noir. I've been told you used to be Queen Bee. Hi."

There was a long silence. The boy forgot to breathe, frantically trying to come up with some kind of coherent sentence that could get miss Lenoir's interest. He had a feeling if she hung up now, she would never pick up again.

An eternity went by.

"YOU ARE THE KITTEN!" she squealed. "Oh my god, I saw you on that Ladyblog. You are sooooo cute. Do you know that?"
"Thanks?"

"And your girlfriend is adorable with the spots on. She needs more ribbons, though."

"I-I'll tell her? And she's not my-"

"So why are you calling me? Is something wrong?"

Chat Noir straightened up, his face growing serious, even if miss Lenoir could see none of that.

"No, there is nothing wrong. We are trying to find master Fu but have no way to contact him, that's all. We are kind of clawing at straws and-"

"Oh god," she groaned. "Not the puns."

"S-sorry. Grasping at straws and I thought maybe you were in touch with him."

"Aw. Nope, can't say I am, sorry. It's been a while since I gave up on the whole hero thing. I haven't heard of him in what, five years?"

Adrien sighed.

"Well, it was worth a try, thank you. I don't suppose you know where to find Waspp?"

"I'm not the person you should ask about that. I'm not the last Bee. I handed the Miraculous to some Hawaiian kid thirteen years ago or so. Fu was in touch with him, but…"

"But you're not."

"I'm afraid not. If you find her, gimme a call, though. I kind of miss the little pest."

Chat took a deep breath.

"I will, and I'll tell master Fu you'd like to be kept updated. If we ever manage to contact him, that is."

"Oh, he'll show up. Hawk Moth is in Paris, right? Fu will be around. If he's not then he's probably after a lead on Zharr. Unless the Firebird has been found and I wasn't told."

"No, he wasn't. Not that I know of."

"Figures. Say, who told you about my past, exactly? Was it Fu? He's not usually that careless."

Adrien opened and closed his mouth.

"Uh, er, ah… I, uh. No. It was not master Fu. Gabriel Agreste let it slip, actually. I don't think he expected me to connect the dots."

There was another silence. He swallowed. When miss Lenoir spoke again, her tone had turned cold and serious.

"Why are you in touch with him?" she asked. "Just stay away from him, will you?"

Adrien's heart sank. He should have been used to people having a terrible opinion of his father by now (especially when they knew of his history with Hawk Moth), but it still hit him straight in the gut every time.
"He wanted information from Tikki, about his wife," he explained in a muted voice. "Is there a specific reason I should avoid him? Is he secretly a cannibal? A crime lord? A supervillain? All of the above?"

"Nah. He's just an ass." - There was a clatter and a bang, followed by a stream of curses. - "Just lemme plug the stupid phone to something before it dies on me." - More curses. - "Theeeeere. Charging."

"An ass?" Chat repeated after the background racket stopped.

"Yep. So, did you just meet him the once, when he contacted you about Alice, or did he stay in touch?"

"I stayed in touch. I mean, I was kind of curious."

"Right. NOW. Knowing Gabriel, I have to ask: did he tell you who he used to be, or did he stop at Alice being Ladybug?"

"He told me he was the previous Chat Noir. No, wait. Actually, I figured that out and he didn't deny it."

There was a long silence. If Adrien had not heard the faint cackling of birds on the other side of the line, he would have thought the call had been interrupted. Miss Lenoir clicked her tongue.

"Yeeaaaaah. Sounds like Sourpuss alright."

**Sourpuss?**

"He's not very talkative," Chat continued, "but he gave me fighting tips. We reviewed the footage of some Akuma attacks. He's nice to me."

"Oh, kitten. That's… gooood? I… think?" Anne-Laure replied, her disbelief near tangible. "But I'd be very careful if I were you. Gabriel doesn't do anything without an agenda. And I don't know what he told you on his past, but you should know that he did not exactly retire. We had to take his Miraculous away. Long story short, a battle went horribly sour, and he tried to cataclysm Hawk Moth's head off."

Well.

That was brutally honest. Tikki had been so set on having Adrien hear the story from his father, going as far as having Ladybug promise not to repeat what she knew. She had wanted to protect him. She had wanted to make sure he only heard a clean, softened version of the events. Even his father had been careful when talking to ‘Chat Noir’. He had avoided discussing the specifics and picked his words with the utmost care. 'I hit his armor', he had said.

Adrien dragged a sluggish tongue over his palate. He tried to swallow, but his mouth was parched.

"I know," he stated. "He told me."

Once again, miss Lenoir went silent, and Chat found himself waiting for her answer. He heard her inhale.

"Okay, kiddo. I want to know exactly what he told you. I mean, I know the guy. It's not that I don't trust him but…"
The teenager cleared his throat. He looked up and stared at the sky.

"He only gave me a rundown. I mean, he had told me about abusing Chat's powers, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what he meant by that, so I asked for details. What he said was that you were pregnant, and Ladybug unavailable, and that Hawk Moth used that to his advantage. He took a hostage, and mister Agreste tried to kill him during the rescue. After thinking about it," Adrien explained, his voice strangled. "He also told me he does not feel it was wrong, even though he knows it was wrong."

"Oh for f-" - Miss Lenoir groaned. - "That's Gabriel for you. Jesus bloody Christ."

Chat Noir swallowed, his throat so clenched that it felt like a bowling ball was travelling down it.

"Did he lie?"

"No. Yes. No. Damn it. See, the man managed to tell you the truth while omitting every important piece of information. That, that, that is Gabriel. That is why you have to be careful around him. He won't ever be straightforward. That's. Just. Agh. He decides, he has to decide, so glad to hear the jerk didn't change."

The boy heard clatter again, shuffled paper, muttered curses.

"So what did he not tell me? I mean, I can ask Tikki if you don't feel like explaining."

"You could. Say, how old are you exactly? So I can adjust the 'dark as hell' vibe?"

"Fifteen?"

"Ouch. Er. Okay, here we go. Yeah, Ladybug was 'unavailable'. Totally unavailable. She was the damn hostage."

The world stopped.

The pieces of the puzzle rearranged themselves, again.

Adrien blinked and blinked and blinked, until his eyes felt less… felt more normal.

"Hawk Moth had captured Ladybug," he murmured. "He had her, he had Tikki's Miraculous, and he had mister Agreste's wife. Pregnant wife," he added as an afterthought.

"Yeah. I mean, details, right?"

The boy nodded, realizing belatedly that he had curled into a ball. He forced himself to chuckle.

"You know, if you wanted me to like him less, it would have been better not to tell me about the 'extenuating circumstances'. He was set on making me think he was rotten to the core."

"No, no, stop right here. The important thing here is not what happened back then. You weren't even born. Water under the bridge. No. Maybe this once he chose to paint himself in a bad light so you wouldn't excuse the shit he has done. It's still lying. That's what he does. That's not a good trait. That's still him being controlling. It's the reason why you have to be careful around him." - She sighed. - "I told you before. He does nothing without an agenda, even if that agenda is to protect you. If you don't pay attention to that, it will seriously bite you in the ass."

"That's… That's okay, don't worry. I knew that."
"Kitten, you are fifteen. Don't underestimate a forty year old businessman who eats lawyers for breakfast."

"It's okay, really. I've been the one going to him for tips. He's not trying to get anything from me."

"If you say so."

Sourpuss, Adrien thought. You did not give nicknames like that to someone you really loathed.

"Say," he exclaimed. "Did you hate him, 'hate him', or was it more like friendly dislike?"

Miss Lenoir snickered, but it didn't sound mean.

"Heh. Sourpuss did not have friends. His world stopped at Alice."

"But you did not hate him, did you?"

"Define 'hate'. There was not a second of my days I didn't want to strangle him. He was a jerk. But I suppose I didn't totally want him dead."

Chat breathed in.

"If you cared at all, would you mind checking on him? Maybe call him, or something? If you think he won't take it poorly, that is. From what I gathered, it has been a bad few years for him."

There was a pause.

"What is it you are not telling me, kitty?"

"N-nothing. It's just that it doesn't look like he's doing so well. So, you know, since he has no friends…"

Anne-Laure went silent again as she analyzed his words.

"I'll see," she replied.

You could hear the shrug in her voice.

"Thanks!" Adrien replied.

You could hear the grin in his voice.

He heard her yawn.

"Mind if we continue this conversation at another time? The sun is about to rise. Imma pass out."

"Oh! Sorry, sorry. Thank you very much for your help, miss Lenoir."

"No problem. Take care, kitten."

He nodded.

"I will."

"Good. Have a nice day!"

"Oh. Just. Another thing," the young hero added, as hesitent as he had been when talking about
Gabriel. "I don't know if you want to know about it or… I just wanted to say… Chloé is a Ladubug cosplayer. Number one fan. She, ah…"

The silence lasted just a little too long.

"Who?" Anne-Laure replied, her tone perfectly puzzled and entirely faked.

Adrien pursed his lips and breathed in.

"Nothing. Good night, miss."

###

Marinette still had no idea what to make of Gabriel Agreste, nor of what to do about him, nor of what to think about his backstory. Forgiveness was out of the question, and she struggled with the 'understanding' part. 'Wait and see' seemed like the best option. With both Chat Noir and the man's girlfriend involved, maybe Ladybug could just take a step back and let events unfold.

She had other problems to take care off.

Unfortunately, said problems were also named 'Agreste' and shared a house with the previous Chat Noir. She found herself in front of the mansion, in a state of mild panic, as she tried to remember the foolproof apology to Adrien she had so carefully prepared before coming.

It took her ten minutes to ring the doorbell. A second later, a camera shoved itself in her face.

"Yes?" miss Sancoeur's voice greeted her with all the warmth of an icecap.

"H-hello. I'd like to talk to Adrien. If he is home, could you please tell him I'm here?"

The camera vanished into the wall.

Marinette waited. She wondered how long she had to stand there before being sure that Gabriel's assistant had slammed the proverbial door in her face.

Two minutes in, she had started fidgeting, her feet hurt, and her nerve was deserting her.

The camera popped back out of the wall.

"Come in," miss Sancoeur commanded as the gates opened.

Marinette braced herself and crossed the courtyard. She had forgotten every word she had prepared. Every. Single. Word. Her discussion with Adrien was going to be a disaster. She was never going to get it right. Actually, she was likely to make things worse. Again.

Much to her surprise, when Miss Sancoeur opened the door to let her in, it was not Adrien who was waiting for them inside. Mister Agreste was standing on the stair landing, looking down at them.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," he greeted Marinette, his eyes cold behind his thick glasses. "My son is not home yet. His Spanish lesson should be over by now, so he will be home soon. Do you have fifteen minutes to spare?"
"I, uh, ah, I can come back later," she exclaimed.

"I'd like to have a word with you, if you don't mind."

She blinked, uneasy, and peeked at Nathalie as if there was help to be found that way. Then again, Marinette did not need help, did she? She turned back to Adrien's father.

"Alright. I don't mind."

"Please follow me," he told her. "Nathalie, have some tea brought to my study."

"Yes, sir," his assistant replied.

Sir. She took the 'secret relationship' thing seriously.

Marinette, who was not supposed to know about their personal lives, kept her expression neutral. She climbed the stairs to the landing. From there, mister Agreste led her to his study.

In other circumstances, she would have gaped at the artful sketches pinned to the walls and spread over the desk, but her dislike for the man was starting to seep into her admiration for his work. Instead of studying everything with starry-eyed amazement, she barely paid attention to her surroundings.

Mister Agreste collected sewing supplies from a box, put them on the workbench, and pushed a chair next to it.

"Please sit," he ordered, adding a pile of drawings and a square of fabric to the supplies. "And work on this, or pretend to. Just make sure to look busy."

"What?"

"This is an embroidery pattern that has to be shown to one of my customers. Part of it is done - I needed to make sure it looked as I wanted it to - but I was about to send the templates to the workshop so the seamstresses could prepare real prototypes. The templates are simple enough. Satin stitch, some beading, well within your abilities, really. Embroidery is where you shine."

Marinette blinked at the praise, and even more at the situation.

"I thought you wanted to talk," she commented.

"I lied. Please sit. I'm doing you a favor."

"I'm sorry, what?"

Mister Agreste gestured at the chair he had prepared for her, and went to sit at his drawing table. He rummaged through a box of Copic markers as she stared at him.

"You are not sitting," he remarked.

Marinette sat down.

It was stunning how different his body language was from his secret persona's. When they had met on the roof of the Opera Garnier, her every instinct had screamed 'run'. There was no feeling of menace here, no hostility. 'Chat Noir' Gabriel Agreste had given the impression he was about to attack or escape. Designer Gabriel Agreste gave a sense of stillness and rigidity. Yet he was relaxed.
"Doing me a favor?" she asked.

"Yes. See, it would seem that you are in a difficult situation with Adrien. Things are at a bit of a standstill, aren't they? So I figured I would give you an opportunity to cheat at life and to bypass the 'apology' requirement."

She gaped at him. He started to draw, shading a dress drawing in nuances of warm grey.

"We both know you will not apologize," he said, unconcerned. "You couldn't, not when you think you were right. And as, frankly, I couldn't care less about a teenager's opinion of me, I'm willing to let it go. Adrien, however..."

He clicked his tongue.

Marinette pursed her lips, fuming.

"You are suggesting we pretend to get along to trick Adrien into thinking that everything is fine?"

Mister Agreste did not turn.

"Pretty much."

"That's dishonest!" she yelled. "I won't lie to him like that and you shouldn't either!"

"Well then. I'll be expecting the heartfelt apology the boy requires from you."

Marinette cringed.

"You were going to get one anyway. You called my parents about the internship. My father brought me here four times to make me apologize to you, but you were never home."

"Did he, now?"

"He did," the girl confirmed.

Her parents had asked her about her argument with mister Agreste and - to be fair - they had come out of that questioning session with more than a little concern about Adrien's family life. Marinette had not been able to explain what she had against Gabriel, however. Not exactly. Most of what she knew of him was classified Ladybug knowledge. As herself, she could not prove Gabriel was what she had accused him to be. She had never witnessed more than Adrien's calls going to voicemail, or than his father's absence during parents day. It was not to Marinette that Adrien had confessed he thought Gabriel was Hawk Moth.

Of course, her parents had expected her to apologize.

Mister Agreste looked up from his drawing and turned to her.

"Are you sorry you hurt my son?" he asked.

Marinette spluttered but collected herself by crossing her arms and raising her chin.

"Yes."

"Good. Apology accepted."

The teenager scowled. Mister Agreste returned to his drawing. He switched markers, taking his
time to decide between two tones.

"Are you?" Marinette asked.

She saw him tense and relax.

"Let us not get back to the arguing," he replied, adding a wavy pattern to the dress design. "You made your point the last time."

The teenager stared at him, frowning. He pretended not to notice. Minutes went by. Miss Sancoeur brought them tea and orange juice, then left. The rough sketch that Gabriel had started turned into an intricate, annotated art piece.

What the man lacked in common decency, he made up for in talent.

Talent was not going to make his son feel loved, however.

"I've you thought about what I told you at all?" Marinette blurted out.

She knew he had, to some extent. He took Adrien with him to his fencing club. Every now and then, they ate together. But, once again, it was information only Ladybug was privy to.

He sighed, putting his markers down, then turned to her.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Though that result could have been accomplished by telling me your opinion instead of shrieking my ears off."

Marinette set her jaw.

"The last time a friend of Adrien tried to talk to you, you got him Akumatized," she mumbled. Gabriel narrowed his eyes.

"Nino. He is the best friend Adrien could have, by the way."

"Then maybe he should have showed some of the qualities that make him so during his visit, because all I saw was a rude hoodlum begging for my son to neglect his responsibilities."

"By having a birthday party? And 'rude hoodlum'? That 'rude hoodlum' was turned into a mind-controlled supervillain and what did he do with those powers? Try to make his best friend happy by throwing him a party he dreamed of! So maybe you shouldn't judge books by their covers and judge people by their actions instead! Clearly being proper and distinguished does not mean someone is decent."

Mister Agreste chuckled. He cleared his throat, camouflaging his amusement behind a mask of cool indifference, but Marinette had not missed his reaction.

"I am serious!" she exclaimed.

"My apologies," he replied with a hint of mirth in his voice. "I know you are."

"Then why are you laughing?"

The man shook his head, pursing his lips to suppress a smile.
"It doesn't matter. For what it's worth, I'm not mocking you."

Marinette scowled. It sure looked like it.

"It might surprise you," mister Agreste added, "but you are the first of my son's friends I approve of."

That threw her in for a loop.

"Why? I have done nothing but criticize you and yell at you."

The man leaned forward on his chair.

"My son is incredibly forgiving. Too much, really. He has a tendency to overestimate the good in someone. His considering miss Bourgeois a friend is a prime example of that. And yes, I know the girl. I might have successfully avoided her for the last fifteen years, but it does not mean I am not aware of who she is and what she is like. Trust me, her reputation precedes her."

Marinette breathed in and chewed the inside of her cheeks, but let him talk.

"You, on the other hand…" he continued. "The first time I 'met' you, you defended yourself against an art thief with not only eloquence, but admirable professionalism. You are talented, you are hardworking, you are assertive… and you are a teenager. The flaws of character you have displayed so far are not as much an indication of a bad nature as a consequence of your inexperience. You have not yet learned to temper your impetuosity. You don't know how to make your voice heard without being, at times, too forceful. All of that, you will grow out of."

That was a surprisingly deep analysis from a total stranger.

"I…" Marinette started. "It's…"

"As for Adrien, he has the reverse problem. He is shy. You won't catch him accidentally hurting someone's feelings. He puts others first. He does not always stand up for himself when he should, as you have abundantly pointed out. The two of you are a good fit. You'll learn from each other."

She pictured the way Chloé had walked all over Adrien at the beginning of the school year, and how he had gradually started resisting her advances and calling her out on her behavior.

"Nino is a good fit too! And Alya, and Mylene, and Ivan, and Rose and Juleka! Have you ever considered that Adrien might be better at standing up for himself if he had been able to try against someone else than you? You have kept him in a cage for years, with no friends, no social life, nothing. Have you ever considered your overprotectiveness was bad for him?"

Mister Agreste bit the inside of his cheeks and took a deep breath. He moved back in his chair.

"I did not defend myself against your accusations so far, which you should have noticed was a victory, but here I have to correct you. Adrien was in very real, substantial danger from the day he was born. That is why he was homeschooled from an early age. That is why my wife stayed at home to teach him when he was a toddler. We both believed that it was the safest option we had."

Marinette blinked. Adrien's mother had agreed to that?

Gabriel pursed his lips.

"It's easy to think that, because nothing ever happened to him, he was never at risk. Unfortunately,
reality is not so pleasant. If you think we overdid it, please remember that his mother went missing."

"I know! But you can't stop living because of that. You can't let fear dictate everything you do!"

You can't let it convince you that the solution is hiding behind thick walls and security cameras.
She swallowed as she reconsidered the situation as a whole.

You can't let it convince you that the solution is murder.

"Bumper sticker grade philosophy," he commented. "I envy your idealism. That being said, well before Alice's disappearance, we had several close calls. When she was pregnant with Adrien, she was abducted." - Hawk Moth. - "She was rescued by a vigilante, but she did not return unharmed. Broken nose, broken ribs, and more generally the kind of injuries you can expect when left alone with a maniac with a grudge. A maniac who escaped, by the way."

Hawk Moth, Hawk Moth, who had seen Alice untransformed.

And Mister Agreste had been left without powers, not knowing if his wife had been recognized, not knowing if their enemy would retaliate, but aware that he would be helpless if that happened. 'Living with the consequences of his actions was harder than you can imagine', Tikki had said.

Marinette understood that a little better. She still could not forgive, but things were clearer now.

"I... I see," she replied. "That can't have been easy."

Mister Agreste's lips moved, but no sound came out. He bit his lower lip.

"Alice knew how to make Adrien feel like he was free despite those walls," he ended up saying. "I... relented about keeping him homeschooled. Maybe it came too late, but do not try telling me my reservations were baseless. I know our situation much better than you do."

Marinette mulled over that.

"For what it's worth," she said, staring at her knees, "going to school makes him happy."

"I know. Nathalie wrote me a report about that."

She looked up, startled, already frowning. He raised his eyebrows.

"That is not funny," she exclaimed after realizing it had been a joke.

"I'm sorry to hear that," mister Agreste commented. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to finish this. My customer expects to see the rough draft by the end of the day."

Marinette nodded. She watched him turn back to his drawing table, then fidgeted on her chair, wondering what she was supposed to do. In the end, she investigated the fabric and templates he had given her, and tried to reproduce the stylized flowers he had embroidered on the cloth.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door, despite it being open.

She looked up.

Adrien was standing in the doorway, beaming.
"Father? Marinette?"

*Cheating at life indeed.*

###
Adrien was not used to walking home to find one of his friends talking to his father. The last time it had happened, Nino had ended up possessed.

Being sent to his father's study by Nathalie, with the mention that Marinette was there, had been worrying. But Adrien had walked in to find them working on design and embroidery, quietly and peacefully. This despite the fact that Marinette could not stand Gabriel and had made that clear. This despite the fact that Adrien's father did not take kindly to disrespect, criticism, or human interactions in general.

It was miraculous.

"Father? Marinette?" he greeted them, still a bit incredulous.

Mostly, he felt giddy.

His classmate had already turned to him.

"Ah, you are home," his father commented without looking up from his drawing. "How was your Spanish lesson?"

"It went fine, Father. I, uh, so, uh, you…"

"Miss Dupain-Cheng just accepted to join us for dinner," Gabriel continued. "Why don't the two of you go to your room until it is served? I have to finish this."

He was a fantastic liar. The same could not be said of Marinette. She gaped in shocked panic before going through a series of amazing grimaces. The last was her sucking hers lips in and glaring at the back of Gabriel's head with bulging eyes. She took a long, deep breath then grinned and turned to Adrien.

"It's so very nice of y-your father to have invited me," she said, her smile looking like it was stretched into place by medical instruments.

"That's… yes, very nice," Adrien replied, peeking at his father's profile.

He caught the hint of a smirk, though maybe it was a trick of the light.

"Let's go then," the boy said, smiling to Marinette.

She jumped out of her chair and trotted to him. He put a hand on her shoulder to lead her out of the room. Usually, that would have caused her to fidget in embarrassment, but she was so focused on Adrien's father that she barely noticed the touch. She was fuming, and it took the study's door being out of sight for her to snap out of it. Adrien, who had observed her out of the corner of his eye as they walked, watched her expression move from 'frowny artificial grin' to 'oh my god what I am doing' to 'awkward smile'.

What is going on here? he wondered.

"So, uh, Spanish?" she said. "Was it a, er, nice lesson?"

"It went fine," Adrien replied (again). "Nathalie said you wanted to see me?"
She stared at him, wide eyed and paralyzed, then composed herself. She gave him a tired smile.

"I did, actually. I wanted to apologize. Again. Preferably without it ending in a disaster this time."

Adrien stopped.

"Oh," he said.

She took one more step then noticed he was not following. She turned back.

He smiled.

"It's… okay?" he told her. "I mean, you obviously sorted things out with my father. I think."

Marinette burst into nervous laughter.

"Oh, that. Yes. So-when-is-dinner-served-exactly? I have to call my parents to tell them when I'll get home."

That was smooth.

"Seven?" Adrien replied, distractedly, too busy wondering what had unfolded between his dad and his friend.

Marinette fumbled for her phone, conveniently turning away from him.

Plagg popped out of under his shirt and stared at the girl. Adrien shoved him back down with a wave of panic. He mouthed a 'what are you doing?' and closed his shirt, praying for Marinette not to have noticed his Kwami. Plagg struggled against him and passed through the cloth, darting to the ceiling to observe them. All his chosen could do was suck his cheeks in and try to keep his eyes' wideness in the "small to moderate" range of "saucer size".

He grabbed Marinette's wrist, dragging her to his room and away from Plagg. She stumbled after him, dropped her phone and kicked it away as she tried to catch it with her foot.

They watched the phone hit the wall and bounce on the floor, screen shattered.

"Aaaagghhhneeeehhh," Marinette squealed, hiding her face in her hands.

"I. I. I'll buy you another," Adrien exclaimed. "I. Right now. Let's go to Nathalie. What was the model? I'm so so so so so so sorry."

"Itsfine," she mumbled from behind her hands. "Happensallthetime."

"Really?"

She nodded. A dozen times.

"It totally was my fault," he pointed out, putting his hand on hers to pry them away from her face.

Blue eyes stared up at him, from above a vivid blush of mortification. He smiled to her and let her go, crouching to pick the phone up instead.

"Nathalie should still be at her desk," he told his friend. "Come on."

Thirty minutes later, a delivery man handed a box to Nathalie and fidgeted into place as she opened
it, inspected the contents, and handed Marinette her replacement phone. Nathalie had ordered it through the internet, after uttering exactly four syllables: "I see. Alright". The syllables had come with a lot of typing and some inspecting of Marinette's broken smartphone, of course.

By the time they were done transferring SD cards, configuring mail accounts, and downloading applications, dinner was served. Adrien and Marinette ended up sitting next to each other at the dinner table, at the opposite end of Gabriel's empty chair, with the phone between their plates.

"And that's just it," Adrien explained about one of the games he had recommended. "You put food and toys in the garden, and the cats arrive."

"It's so cute! Does the same thing exist with hamsters? I love hamsters."

"Let's check," he replied, swiping back to the app store.

Marinette watched him scroll through pages of results, leaning closer and closer to the screen and to him.

"I will pay you back, of course," she told him when he reached page nine.

"You don't need to! It's my fault your phone fell."

"I want to. I kicked it. I kicked it. And I have several orders waiting, so it's not like I cannot afford to pay."

"Orders?"

"Yes! Two hats, a logo, and a custom doll for Manon's birthday."

That got Adrien to wince in recollection -dolls- but his friend did not notice.

"And I have gotten three other enquiries I still have to reply to. Between the Jagged Stone thing and the hat and accessories you modeled, I have gotten a lot of exposure."

"Not undeserved," Gabriel's voice commented, as Adrien's father walked into the room.

He did not look at them, walking straight to his seat at the end of the table. His empty plate was waiting for him, and he served himself his own food from the bowls and pans left on the table.

Marinette had gone rigid. She had been smiling as she talked to Adrien, but that smile turned sharp and sugary at once.

"Thank you, mister Agreste. That's a lot of praise coming from you."

Adrien's father looked up from his plate after serving himself a slice of roast beef.

"I give praise where praise is due," he replied. "You have skill. On that note, would you consider coming back to my company to finish your internship? I'm sure we can put the… past… behind us."

Adrien moved back on his chair and turned to Marinette, who straightened up. Her smile did not falter. Her eyes were defiant, and her chin tilted up.

"That's so very nice of you to give me that opportunity, mister Agreste!" she said. "I really appreciate it. But, as I was just telling Adrien, I have orders to finish before we get back to school, and plans with my friends on top of that."
Next to her, her friend was gaping. It was like watching snakes fight. Not that Adrien had any idea if snakes fought or what the fights looked like.

His father, who had given Marinette an opportunity she could not refuse, yet had, did not even look offended by her answer. He was amused. He liked seeing her resist him.

"I see. That's a shame," Gabriel declared, focusing on his food.

"OH!" Marinette exclaimed, turning to Adrien. She beamed at him. "Now that I think about it, I'm seeing Alya and Nino tomorrow. We're having a 'board games' afternoon at my place. It would be so nice if you could come!" - She looked at his father out of the corner of her eye, with an assessing squint that clashed with her light, enthusiastic tone. - "If you have some free time, that is."

The boy stared at her with wide eyes, so he would not stare at his dad with terrified eyes.

"I-"

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Gabriel cut in, slicing his meat in neat little cubes. "Actually, why don't the four of you spend the afternoon here?"

Marinette opened and closed her mouth, blatantly horrified.

"T-that…” - She collected herself and grinned. - "Why not? My room can get a little cramped. Thank you, mister Agreste."

"I suppose I might as well give 'Nino' a chance to correct the first impression he gave, since I'm hearing such praise."

"You will love Nino once you get to know him," Marinette replied, in a tone that sounded more like an order than a comment.

Adrien's father took a bite of his meat, remaining both elegant and composed.

"As long as he is on his best behavior," he commented, "I don't see why not."

That was unfair.

Whenever Adrien's behavior had even slightly resembled impertinence, whenever he had tried to push the envelope, his father had immediately put him in his place. Gabriel had always been harsh and uncompromising, and his son had always backed down in the end. He had fought so hard for the things he wanted most, like being allowed to go to school, that he had considered the trivial a lost cause, be it birthday parties or time together.

Meanwhile, Marinette did not just push for what she wanted, she shoved, and Gabriel liked her all the more for it.

Adrien sighed and smiled. Well. He would have to take a leaf out of her book.

"You will like him, Father," he said. Then, not letting Gabriel the time to answer, he turned to his classmate. "So, at what time will you be coming?"

He was all too aware of his father's eyes studying him, but pretended not to notice he was being observed. He spent the rest of the meal discussing Marinette's plans for the next day. Gabriel let them speak, though he seemed to be listening in.
Once dinner was over, Adrien escorted Marinette back to the gates, as she had to go home.

"He never invited you to dinner, did he?" he asked right after they walked out of the house. "He just dropped it on you to force your hand."

His friend froze, face twisting in a grimace of horror.

"What?" she squeaked with a nervous giggle. "I-"

"You can just tell me, you know. I have eyes."

She deflated, sighing.

"He did. He did."

Adrien studied her face. She avoided his eyes, but looked more tired than guilty.

He rocked on his heels.

"It's kind of impressive how you can shove back when he pushes you. Not many people manage that, not even adults."

"I have to shove back. You can't give him an inch, or he'll walk all over you."

Adrien did not answer, looking at her and waiting for her to continue talking.

"It's like Chloé," Marinette ranted. "She bullies her way through everything, and why wouldn't she? It works! It used to work on me until I started calling her out on it." - She huffed. - "Except it's not exactly the same with your dad. With Chloé, if you fight back, you see she's just empty air. Your father… He starts giving you leeway because he thinks you won it."

Once her tirade was over, she realized what she had just said, and slammed her mouth shut, eyes wide. Adrien swallowed a sigh. That sounded like an accurate assessment, though Marinette did not seem to realize how much his father liked her to begin with, and what of an advantage it gave her.

"I-I-I'm sorry," she stuttered. She turned away, lowering her head. "I should not talk like that about your dad."

Adrien sighed, shaking his head. He patted her shoulder.

"I get where you are coming from. He is not always… nice. But there's more to him than that, I swear."

"I know!" she exclaimed. "That's what irks me! He does not have to act like he does! He knows better! He can do better! He is not even trying!"

Adrien remembered his talk with his father, when they had discussed Marinette's refusal to apologize and how she knew nothing of their lives. 'I no longer allow myself to underestimate how perceptive teenage girls can be when they set their minds to it', Gabriel had said. He had been so very right.

"He used to," the boy explained. "Without my mom, he… Anyway, he's doing better, lately."

Marinette did not point out that the 'lately' had started after she had taken it upon herself to scream at Gabriel. She studied his face for a second then sighed.
"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I know you love him, and that you'd like me to like him too, but I just... He is..." - She pursed her lips in frustration, looking at the sky. - "I can try to get along with him for you, but I can't like him unless he does his best."

Silence fell. Adrien hesitated, looking at the empty courtyard. He scratched the back of his neck.

"Maybe just don't yell at him on my behalf? Please? I know you mean well, but it could just make things worse."

She crossed her arms, even though she was trying to look remorseful. It did not quite mix. Actually, the look of remorse was not that good either, and he nearly burst into laughter at her grimace.

"I'll try," she mumbled.

"Try? Try?" he repeated with a mischievous grin. "Who just said the words 'he knows better, he can do better, he is not even trying'?"

She grimaced in horrified realization, eyes going wide as saucers, mouth doing a... thing.

Adrien did chuckle, this time.

Marinette scratched the back of her neck.

"Alright. I won't yell at him on your behalf. No matter how much I'd like to." - She breathed in. Her expression grew serious. - "The thing is, Adrien... I can go to war against him for you, and I gladly would, but you are the only one who can tell him how you feel. And you should," she told him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You keep saying how things are difficult for him with your mother gone, and I know you like to put others first, but there's nothing wrong with putting them on the same level as you either."

She snatched her hand away, blushing, and hid it behind her back.

"A-anyway that's just my opinion," she blurted out, turning to the gates.

Adrien watched her take two steps away, her back turned to him. She did not know what to make of her hands, so she flailed a little, ultimately settling for keeping them straight as sticks to her sides.

"Thank you, Marinette," he murmured.

"Oh. Ah. Thanks. I mean you're w-welcome."

Adrien was hit by an overwhelming urge to press himself against her back and wrap his arms around her. He wanted to hold her, he wanted to bury his face in her neck, and he had no idea where that came from. He swallowed, feeling like a ball of steel was making its way down his throat.

"I really need to get back home," she commented. "I meant to work on Manon's doll tonight, it needs to be done by Wednesday."

"Do you want me to walk you there? Possibly with the help of a very big and very silent man?"

She turned to him, chuckling.

"No, it's okay, the bakery is not far at all. See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow," he confirmed, cheeks burning.
She left, waving. He watched her hurry down the street (or rather down the forty feet to the corner). He stood by the gates for five minutes more, distractedly patting his fire-hot face. Then he returned to the house, walked through the doors, and leaned against them after closing them.

He was supposed to be in love with Ladybug. Actually, he was in love with Ladybug, with every fiber of his being, except the treacherous one that seemed to fancy Marinette Dupain-Cheng instead.

This was an unexpected turn of events.

He slipped to the floor and spent the next ten minutes thinking. After that, he had to get out of the way of a very puzzled Nathalie who wanted to go home.

###

Twenty year old Gabriel had been famous. A rising star. His work had been on the cover of every fashion magazine and then some. His days had been a succession of shows, interviews and - most people tended to forget about that - good old-fashioned business management. He had not just been building his fame, but a company. His family's fortune was all in stock actions, real estate and technology, and had remained firmly there. Not a centime of it had touched Gabriel's own business: his father had not allowed it.

"Fashion is a hobby," Olivier had told his son. "I am not about to let you squander what your grandfather has built because you fancy yourself an artist!"

Olivier had died too soon to see his child rise to fame, much to Gabriel's regret. There had been no anger between them, just the expectation that Gabriel would prove himself in time, but the young designer had long wondered if he could have worked harder and achieved his goals quickly enough for Olivier to witness his success.

He had received his full inheritance at the age of twenty-four, after his mother had died too. By that point, his company had no longer needed monetary help.

At the age of twenty, Gabriel had moved in with Alice, in a luxury apartment he had decorated with impeccable designer furniture that she had promptly covered in pastel cushions and multicolor quilts. And stuffed toys. Dozens of stuffed toys. Mostly cats.

He had packed all of the stuffed toys away, and agreed on a compromise: the cushions and coverlets could stay, as long as she got rid of the plushies. He could not bring business contacts to a house filled with toys.

It had only been after stashing the last box of stuffed cats in their basement that he had realized he had just been tricked into keeping the decoration his fiancée wanted.

That was the story of his relationship with Alice, and he thanked the gods that complete absence of brains of his only surfaced in her company. He had a lot more business sense the rest of the time. That being said, from their first date, he had been completely at her mercy.

Living together had presented them with some challenges. One of them had been "Anne-Laure Lenoir's constant presence". Another had been "entertaining guests with Alice".
Gabriel's interpretation of proper etiquette did not quite match his fiancée's.

It led to evenings where one found oneself sitting at one's seat at the end of the table, attempting to keep the interest of a business angel without signing oneself into indentured slavery, while one's train of thought was an uninterrupted stream of "Alice, for god's sake, you are the hostess, you take the head seat at the end of the table. How is that complicated? How? We discussed this!".

They had discussed that. And Alice had tried. Gabriel had seen her try. She had spent half an hour sitting where she was supposed to sit, leaning closer and closer to her guests, but still presiding over the dinner. Thirty minutes, then she had squeezed herself between the PDG of Paris-Presse and his wife, to gush over baby pictures of the woman's third grandson. You did not do that. There was a seating arrangement for a reason. You did not flutter around like an overgrown toddler, you did not intrude your guests' personal space, you did not beam at everyone like if you were the sun stolen from the sky, you just did not.

Of course, Alice's interest for the pictures had been so overwhelmingly sincere that the old coot that was Mrs Pepin-Dufour had actually looked pleased. Not that it excused the horrendous breach in etiquette. Gabriel had fumed most of the meal - relenting every time Alice turned that blinding smile to him, as there was more magic in it than in Tikki and Plagg combined - but had been forced to hide his irritation. The business angel he had been talking to, Stephane Lenorman (why had he wanted that snake's money?), had been observing both his and Alice's behavior. The man might have disapproved of Alice's liberties with etiquette, but for Gabriel to appear flustered would have been much worse. So, the young designer had endured.

She had thrown in some physical contact and public displays of affection. At that point, he had known he was being punished. She knew he melted under her touch. She knew it. And everyone could see it, every time, always.

At the end of the dinner, he had watched her shake the hand of every guest, exchange a few last words - the personal, nearly intimate words one would have expected from an old friend - then close the door and turn to him.

He had exploded.

"WHAT. WAS. THAT? We had talked about this! We agreed it was a serious event!"

"You agreed with yourself, Gabriel," she had replied, dropping a kiss on his cheek as she made her way past him.

That had kept him silent and perfectly still for twenty seconds.

"I definitely started enjoying the evening more after everyone flocked to Alice," Plagg had chimed in. "All of that money talk. I don't get why you humans care about money that much."

" Plagg. "

The kwami had yawned and landed on the dinner table to sniff for cheese.

"What. Was. That?" Gabriel had asked again, following his fiancée to the bathroom.

"You were being grumpy. There is an acceptable level of grumpy," she had replied, poking his nose with a hand that also held a hairbrush. "You had gone past that level."

"I was being professional! You don't know what those people are like. It's already a wonder we did not get snide comments about living in sin."
"Those people were perfectly nice, Gabriel," Alice had retorted, brushing her hair with a pleasant smile on her lips.

He had pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You think I am perfectly nice."

"No, I don't. I think you can be perfectly nice when you bother trying. It's not nearly the same thing."

That statement had been followed by one of Tikki's giggles.

Gabriel had crossed his arms.

Alice had raised her eyebrows, watching him in the mirror as she braided her hair.

After a few moments of that, he had sighed.

"Please listen to me the next time," he had murmured.

"Please be less grumpy the next time. I am not kidding. Those people could have spent a better friday night elsewhere. They bothered coming. If they had spent a terrible evening, they would not have bothered again. You cannot be all business all the time, Gabriel. And if you have to be, then you have to trust me to take care of the rest."

He had pursed his lips.

"Boy!" Plagg had shouted from the dining room. "You trust that girl with your life. You can trust her with smalltalk."

"He has a point," Tikki had added, landing on the sink.

"Could the two of you not butt in?" Gabriel had snapped.

Not that it ever worked.

"I will stop butting in when you provide me with camembert!" Plagg had shouted back. "Because I can't find any."

"Have you looked in the fridge?"

"I can't open the fridge!"

"Need I remind you that you can phase through solid objects?"

"Are you telling me I should lock myself in chilly, absolute darkness to eat because you won't bother opening a door?" Plagg had retorted.

Gabriel had taken a long look at Alice, who was still braiding her hair with a serene expression, then he had stormed to the kitchen to open the fridge.

"Good," his Kwami had drawled, diving straight to the cheeses.

Gabriel had chewed the inside of his cheeks and quietly walked to the living room, to sit on the sofa, in perfect stillness. A bit later, his fiancée had joined him. She had squeezed herself between the armrest and him, moving one of her pastel cushions out of the way, then trailed kisses over his
"I am having lunch with Mrs Pepin-Dufour and her granddaughter tomorrow," she had announced. "She's getting married - big ceremony, no expense spared - and Mrs Pepin-Dufour thinks she would love your style. I am to bring your bridal dresses sketches and my charming young fiance."

Gabriel had tilted his head to the side. He had known about Jessica Pepin's engagement. It was a big event. She was the heiress of a media empire.

"How did you manage that?"

"I don't know, Gabriel. It's almost like I'm nice."

###
Gabriel’s hatred for waking up, Nathalie had to admit, was fully warranted. If her mornings had begun by barely suppressed panic attacks, she would have avoided sleep too.

When her phone had started beeping, at a late and well needed half past seven, Gabriel had stirred in confusion. Nathalie, her back turned to him, had reached for her glasses, eyes still closed, every muscle painful. It was late but still too early for someone who had slept four hours.

Then she had heard him strangle a gasp. He had started hyperventilating - one breath, two breaths, three breaths - before swallowing that down too. He had forced himself to take deep, controlled breaths, getting to his feet and out of bed and nearly out of the room before Nathalie had managed to catch up with him and grab his wrist.

She had not mentioned therapy because there was no point beating a dead horse.

He knew.

That being said, being seen like that had been enough to snap him out of the anxiety attack. He had retreated into cold fury instead, which was just as healthy.

Nathalie had kept his hand on his shoulder, waiting for the wall of rage to crack, and for him to reach out for her.

He had.

Her day, after they had arrived at the mansion later in the morning, had been busy enough. Monitoring Adrien's nearly botched photo shoot had taken too much of her time, and so had babysitting Jagged Stone and his pet. Then, her work had started.

It had been a bit underhanded, a bit illegal, a bit expensive. Not out of the ordinary.

"What would you rather do?" she had said at one point. "Take the five-thousand euros and pretend your leg is broken, or have my friend here break it for you?"

Boxes had moved and stretched on Gabriel's calendar.

Boxes had moved and stretched on Adrien's.

If the day had been ideal, Nathalie would have cornered Adrien after his Spanish lesson, to brief him on his revised schedule and responsibilities. Unfortunately, Marinette Dupain-Cheng had showed up and not only monopolized the boy for most of the evening, but also managed to reconcile with Gabriel.

It gave Nathalie cold sweats and nightmares about blue scarves.

Eventually, however, Adrien escorted his classmate out, and Nathalie joined Gabriel in his study. She found him scanning his newest piece, which she recognized from having read the requirements email.

"I thought you wouldn't start on Aria Rossignol's dress until October," she commented, joining him next to the scanner. Gabriel did not turn, too busy slipping the sketch into a plastic sheet protector, but he relaxed a little.
"I know, but I was inspired," he replied. "What was that ruckus with the children earlier? I heard some squealing."

"One of them broke miss Dupain-Cheng's phone, but they could not agree on whom. I provided a replacement paid for with Adrien's allowance. I trust they will sort it out between themselves. I see you got her to apologize?"

Gabriel chuckled and shook his head, turning to Nathalie with an amused smile.

"I'm as likely to get apologies out of her as the rest of the world is to get apologies out of me. No, I did not. As a matter of fact, I did not bother trying. Calling for a truce was simpler."

"Should we expect more frequent visits from her?"

"Apparently. She is coming tomorrow to spend the afternoon with Adrien, and bringing the juvenile delinquent and the obnoxious blogger with her. You will be supervising. Make sure they do not destroy the house before I get back from my lunch with Stone."

He was getting better, she mused. Barely a month earlier, the mere suggestion of inviting some of Adrien's friends would have been met with disapproval and scorn.

"Very well, sir," she said.

He mouthed that 'sir' with a little roll of the eyes, but did not comment further. Nathalie let him put his artwork down, then pressed herself against him, placing a hand on his chest and letting it slide up to his shoulder.

He melted. There was no other word. The ever-present tension in his every muscle vanished as he arched a little closer. His shoulders, that she had never seen other than squared, relaxed.

Her heart skipped a beat.

"This sure is an interesting change of dynamics," he murmured, placing a hand on her lower back.

"I was about to go home," Nathalie said, getting a set of keys out of her pocket.

She shook them under Gabriel's nose until he took them, then watched him blink and scowl.

"Those are my spare keys," she told him. "If you feel like dropping by tonight, please do, and let yourself in. You know your way to my bedroom, by now. Just know that I'm going straight to bed and that if you wake me up an an ungodly hour, I will murder you."

She could not flat out offer him not to wake up alone, but the meaning was clear enough, wasn't it?

"Are we at the 'keys' milestone already?" he drawled, raising his eyebrows.

"That is a moot point," Nathalie retorted, pulling away. "I have every single key to your home."

She adjusted her jacket, straightening up, trying to pay no attention to the hand that had slipped from her back to her hip. Gabriel left it there, considering her offer. He ended up pocketing the keys.

"See you later, then," he said, leaning down for a quick kiss, barely more than a brush of the lips.

Nathalie adjusted his tie to stop herself from removing it.
"Good," she replied. "Good."

She took a step away, then another, then another. Then she nodded and walked out of the study, making her way down the stairs to the main door.

Adrien was sitting with his back to the door, lost in thought, his cheeks red enough to serve as a traffic light. He jumped to his feet when he saw her.

"Is everything alright?" Nathalie asked, though she needed no explanation on what was troubling him.

She had a feeling they would be seeing a lot of Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

"I-I am fine. I'm sorry. I. Were you leaving?"

Nathalie nodded. Adrien stuttered some more, stepping to the side to get closer to the dining room door.

"Oh. Good night. Have a nice evening. S-see you tomorrow," he finished, waiting to be dismissed.

"Have a good evening," Nathalie replied, walking out.

As the door closed, she heard him run off.

###

Companies did not manage themselves. Meetings did not attend themselves. Faxes and emails did not answer themselves. Designs did not create themselves, fashion shows did not organize themselves, business relationships did not manage themselves, interviews did not give themselves, quarterly reports did not review themselves, and Gabriel loved to work. The harder the task, the better.

He had gotten much more efficient once no longer distracted by the roofs of Paris and nightly patrols.

The more he had worked, the more work he had to do - which had been good, even if Alice could not see that - and the more focused he had grown. And sometimes - sometimes - he had pretended not to hear the words he had heard the most in three years. How hard was it to understand that he had work to do? But Alice could not give him a break, could she?

She would insist, and insist, and insist.

"Gabriel. Look. At. Your. Son."

###

Adrien had retreated to his bedroom in the hopes that he would get some quiet to sort through his thoughts. No such luck. Plagg had reappeared right after he had closed the door, and started
swirling around him.

"She's learning," the Kwami announced. "I did not believe she could."

"Plagg!"

"It's true, isn't it? That girl can be a bit obtuse. I'm glad she is making some progress."

"Would you mind not insulting my friends? Also, really? Don't you feel a bit like a pot here, Plagg?"

"Pot?"

"Calling the kettle black."

The black cat stared at him for ten solid seconds.

"I was just saying those new developments make me happy," he retorted, huffing. "I don't like it when my heroes are not treated right."

"She was just worried for me, Plagg. She could have gone about it differently, but... It's okay. She's sorry."

"I didn't mean you," the Kwami replied, in what had to be his first - if indirect - reference to Gabriel.

"Oh," Adrien gasped. "Oh."

He extended his hands for Plagg to land on. The Kwami spun one last time, then floated down, sitting cross-legged on Adrien's palms. He raised expectant green eyes to his charge.

"I think Father can handle a teenage girl," the boy told him, in a patient tone.

Plagg yawned.

"I think teenage girls should not meddle in matters they don't understand," he drawled. "But water under the bridge. If mychosens like her, who am I to judge?"

He kept his words generic, using plurals rather than names, and Adrien wondered what the cat would have said if he had been able to discuss Gabriel directly. The boy smiled.

"They definitely get along," he replied, scratching the top of Plagg's head. "In their way. It's a bit scary."

It was a loose definition of 'getting along', applied to two people at war, but the way they were able to play each other boded well. Or so Adrien hoped.

"Well, birds of a feather flock together," Plagg mumbled.

The teenager chuckled.

"Come on, they are not even remotely alike."

The Kwami snorted, but did not answer. He most likely could not.

Adrien put him down on his desk.
"I need to go thank him. He… invited? Marinette and Nino and Alya tomorrow, I didn't think it would ever happen."

Plagg tilted his head to the side.

"You are bringing me cheese on your way back, aren't you?"

The blond sighed.

"Of course I am. You know that you can phase through the fridge door, right?"

Plagg's eyes grew wide. He started laughing.

"It's chilly in there. You weren't too happy to be locked inside a fridge the last time it happened to you, were you?"

"I… guess not," Adrien admitted, chuckling. "Alright, I'll see what I can find."

"Camembert."

"Camembert," the young hero promised, before walking out of his bedroom.

###

When Gabriel tried to recall four year old Adrien, the first thing that came to his mind was hands. Tiny little hands and a tuft of tousled blond hair. That, and yellow plastic giraffes.

He had been working (on Grace Ouillette's costume for Comme un poison dans l'eau, more precisely), and he remembered being vaguely aware of his son wandering around in his office. Every now and then, the designer had heard a hushed "tadadam!" or a mumbled "dududum", in the quiet and distracted voice of a very focused preschooler. Adrien would trot to his father, slow down as he approached, and tiptoe up to the desk. Then, very silently, the tuft of blond hair would inch closer. A tiny hand would appear, and place a plastic animal on Gabriel's desk. Mostly giraffes. He had a whole set.

Gabriel had paid very little attention to the whole process, only peeking from the corner of his eye when it looked like his son's hands got to close to his Ecoline bottles or to the glass of water sitting on a platter at his left. Whenever Adrien had attempted to place one of his plastic animals on Gabriel's sketch, his father had picked the toy up and put it down farther away, with a little 'clack'.

The boy's comings and goings had gradually slowed down. Still, he had tried to get Gabriel's attention, flattening himself against the desk and picking two giraffes up to make them gallop on the border of the desk. Hesitant green eyes had glanced up at the designer. The next "dududum" had been a little louder.

"Adrien, dad is busy," Gabriel had said, dipping his paintbrush into a bottle of blue ink and testing the tone on a spare sheet of paper.

Adrien had not answered.

A minute had gone by, then the boy had started to make his giraffes walk, with caution, so their plastic hooves would make no noise on the surface of the desk. He had shuffled them around in
perfect silence for… a while.

Then Gabriel had felt another presence and turned to the door, to find his wife standing there with her arms crossed. Their eyes had met. Hers held nothing but seething hatred. That coldness and rage had vanished in a split second, of course, as soon as Adrien had noticed his mother's arrival.

The child had looked up and beamed.

"Mom!" he had exclaimed, abandoning his giraffes to run to Alice and hug her leg.

"Hiii there sweetie," his mother had greeted him, picking him up effortlessly and squishing him against her. "What's up?"

Adrien had lifted himself up to her ear and whispered something. Alice had raised her eyebrows.

"I can see he is. Why don't we go to the kitchen and find some candy to eat?" she had suggested. "I hear someone came home with gummies."

The child's grin had grown wider. His mother had kissed his forehead and carried him out.

Gabriel had focused on his drawing and waited.

He had known what was coming, and seeing the door slam open thirty minutes later had not surprised him. Alice had stopped under the doorframe, collected herself, and closed the door in a quieter fashion.

A second later, all hell had broken loose.

"How HARD would it be to look up from your work every once in a while to HUG YOUR SON?" she had screamed.

The question had not been a new one, nor an uncommon one.

"I have to finish this, Alice," Gabriel had retorted. "I am late as it is. Filming starts next month."

"You have never been 'late' in your life, Gabriel. What you mean is that you are not weeks ahead of schedule like you like to be."

" Filming starts next month. "

"Cry me a river. You didn't need that contract."

He had raised his chin and steeled himself, keeping his tone cold.

"I can't just turn down a rising superstar because you want me to babysit."

Silence had fallen. Gabriel had turned back to his sketch, coloring the dress night blue. Alice had glared at him for an eternity.

"You don't get to do this," she had finally yelled. "You don't get to withdraw inside yourself, you don't get to withhold love! You wanted children! You , emphasis, wanted children , plural! I'm sorry reality doesn't measure up to your perfect 'heir and spare' scenario, I am sorry it is not as easy as you expected, but YOU DON'T GET TO DO THIS."

He could have sworn he had heard a whisper from Tikki, the slightest hint of her voice, in a pleading, appeasing tone. He had not seen the Kwami in four years, but she had still been with
Alice at all times.

"What I am doing," he had explained, meeting her glare with cold eyes and a colder expression, "is make sure that our son has a bright future ahead of him, where he will lack for nothing, where you will lack for nothing. And I am not up for having this discussion again, quite frankly. I believe you made your point the first twenty times." He had inspected his paintbrush and dipped it in his glass of water, to have an excuse to look away.

Alice had shot daggers at him, standing there with her jaw clenched and her hands balled into fists, before crossing the room and grabbing the green beach bucket Adrien transported his toys in. Wordlessly, she had started to collect the plastic lions and the plastic rhinoceroses from Gabriel's desk, dropping them into the bucket. The zebras. The elephants. The giraffes.

Her husband had waited for her to resume her rant. He had known her arguments and accusations by heart, by that point. There had been some truth to them. Mostly, though, their respective notions of parenting were as compatible as their respective notions of entertaining guests. Alice was a dreamer. One of them had to attend reality.

He had made efforts all the same - look at your son - but it was never enough, and his work was important. So maybe it had not involved saving lives. That had not made his accomplishments meaningless.

Alice had dropped the last giraffe into the bucket.

"I'm done," she had told him. "I'm… done. I tried. I waited. I gave you every chance I could. And if it was just me, I would not care, but Adrien comes first. I'm done, Gabriel. We're over."

He had stilled, only raising his head after running that sentence over in his mind.

"Are we?"

"We are," his wife had repeated, wrapping herself in steely resolve and looking very much like her soldier self.

He had clicked his tongue and dipped his paintbrush in deep blue ink.

"I see. Where do we go from here?"

"It depends. What do you want?"

###

As Adrien made his way across the house to go see his father, the mental blur caused by Marinette's unexpected visit finally faded. The rest of his day came back to him and, when he finally peeked into his father's study, he was mentally replaying his conversation with Anne-Laure Lenoir. Her revelations - a story that he should have suspected, really - had left him reeling. While he was reasonably sure of what he felt, he did not know what to think. He knew his father. Maybe Adrien still had secrets to discover, but Gabriel's essence was not hard to grasp. Following the thought process that had led him to attacking Hawk Moth was easy when you had all of the variables. *Handle the root of the problem and not its symptoms. Sometimes, you have to take hard*
decisions. Gabriel had trusted his Ladybug to handle herself. If it had been her and only her in danger, Adrien did not think his father's actions would have been so drastic. A baby could not keep himself safe, however. Faced with the prospect of years of danger - here we go again, give me your Miraculous - and confronted to the exact picture of what that danger was, it was no wonder Gabriel had decided to eliminate the threat permanently.

It was so very him.

It was so very wrong. Still, while Adrien could not accept that solution, he could understand the mindset that had let to it, so the boy only felt overwhelming sadness instead of disapproval and anger. Sadness, and foreboding, because he knew that Gabriel was still in a place where such choices felt justifiable. Whatever goodness he had in him would always be swept away by cold practicality, unless Gabriel decided to fight that penchant.

It was a choice.

When Adrien entered the study, he found his father at his desk with his laptop, busy typing at a speed only Nathalie could match. While, during dinner, he had managed to appear full of energy, that facade was cracking. The exhaustion that had been there for days was clear on his face.

Worry flooded his son.

"Father?" he called.

Gabriel raised a hand, eyes riveted to his screen, and kept typing for a few seconds. His eyes glazed over for an instant, then he turned to Adrien.

"Do you need something?" he snapped, eyes widening when he heard his own tone.

He pursed his lips, looking distinctly abashed.

"I'm sorry," he said, pushing the computer away. "Tense conversation with miss Spotlight. Did you and miss Dupain-Cheng ever decide who was responsible for the death of her phone?"

"Not really. Do you plan to work late? You look tired."

His father breathed in and adjusted his glasses, staring at his screen, then stood and pushed his chair under the desk.

"No. No, I think I'll call it a day."

Adrien smiled, relieved. He crossed the room, stopping next to his father and smiling a little wider, before throwing himself against Gabriel to hug him.

His dad tensed like a bowstring, instinctively shrinking away, but he caught himself. He relaxed - though it clearly took some effort - and wrapped an arm around Adrien. He patted his shoulder, clearing his throat and muttering a "what brought this on?". The teenager could hear his smile.

"Thank you," Adrien mumbled, nose buried against Gabriel's shoulder.

His father replied with a noncommittal hum.

"Now," the boy muttered, "I think it was quite blatant, but I have to ask. Were you playing matchmaker? With Marinette?"

"Where would you get such a silly idea?" Gabriel said, his tone overly theatrical.
Adrien looked up.

"Oh my god you were," he exclaimed.

His father raised his eyebrows. The boy pulled back, blinking.


"Oh," Gabriel replied. His expression flickered between the surprise and the frown. It settled on the frown. "It's not that Chloé girl, is it?"

"What? No!"

"That Nino boy, then?"

"What?"

"Because no son of mine will be dating a rapper!"

"What?" - By that point, Adrien was getting irritated. He took a step back and scowled. - "It's not Nino. It's not someone you know. And it doesn't matter, because you don't get to decide who I like."

His father glared back, just for a second. After that, he sighed and looked at the ceiling, only mildly annoyed. Then he met his son's eyes with a reluctantly sorry expression.

"You are right. My apologies."

Adrien crossed his arms. His resolve was starting to falter, but he was not about to drop the topic.

"And you don't even know Chloé."

Gabriel gave him a pointed look.

"You don't," Adrien insisted. "There's more to her than what her reputation says!"

"I was not arguing. Do not turn this into a fight." - He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. - "I swear this is your mother and Anne-Laure all over again," he mumbled.

His son let his arms fall to his sides, and softened a little.

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother and Chloé's were best friends," Gabriel explained. "As close as sisters. Inseparable. While I'd like to say I approved of the friendship... Anne-Laure and I did not get along, to put it mildly. There's a lot of baggage there, and I'm afraid I'd find it difficult to judge your friend without bias. I know it's unfair of me. I was not arguing."

Adrien hesitated.

"Chloé is not her mom," he pointed out.

"I know."

The teenager sighed, lowering his eyes.
"Does the girl ever talk about her mother?" Gabriel asked. "About finding her?"

"Not… Not really?" Adrien replied, trying to remember if her friend had ever mentioned her mom.

She had not. Never. She couldn't spend ten minutes without dropping her father's name, but she acted as if mister Bourgeois was the only relative she had.

"Good," Gabriel mused. "Good."

He wrinkled his nose, lost in thought.

"If she does," he added, softly, "try to dissuade her. It would do her no good to reach out."

All of a sudden, Adrien wondered if contacting the previous Queen Bee had been such a bright idea. He had liked her during that phone call - until that 'who?' at the mention of Chloé, at least - but clearly there was more to her than a no-nonsense approach to life and concern for the resident kitten.

"Is there a specific reason?" he asked. "Is her mother a bad person?"

Gabriel thought about it for an instant, then tousled Adrien's hair, leaving his hand there.

"I trust André discussed those private matters with his daughter already," he declared. "And in the event he has not, you shouldn't be the first to know."

"But is she a terrible person? I mean, if I'm to dissuade Chloé from investigating, I have to know something."

"Seems to me like you are the one interested in investigating," his father commented, taking his hand away and patting Adrien's shoulder. "Boy, you don't have a sly bone in you."

"Alright, alright. I'm curious."

"Six years ago, I had to bail Anne-Laure out of a mexican jail after she got into a brawl with a drug dealer, and it was not the first time it happened. And by that I don't mean 'bailing her out of jail', but precisely 'bailing her out of a mexican jail after she got into a brawl with a drug dealer'."

Adrien gaped.

"Anne-Laure was… still is a free spirit," his father continued. "I could write novels on her and Alice's epic adventures. 'The time someone kicked a light switch and caused an electrical fire that got their school closed for a week'. 'The time two teenage girls came to class in bikinis to protest against the newly introduced dress code'. 'The shoplifting saga'. The 'Gabriel, can you come get us, we were arrested in a foreign country because one of us headbutted a policeman' episodes, plural."

The corner of Adrien's mouth twitched. A surprised grin spread on his face.

"Seriously?"

Gabriel scowled.

"Yes. Your mother was never the initiator, but she was in no way a saint. She enjoyed those hijinks just as much as Anne-Laure. It's a wonder I never strangled the two of them. By all means, I should have, probably after the first four AM call to beg for a lawyer."

His son stared at him with wide eyes, trying very hard not to laugh.
"You never told me any of that!"

"Of course I didn't! Parents are meant to protect their children from bad influences, not to be said bad influence. To discipline a child, you have to have the moral high ground."

Adrien chuckled.

"So how did that bikini protest go?"

"They met a chilly reception from the school board and the month of February. They got suspended for a week and spent that week in bed with the flu."

The teenager bit his lips not to laugh. He took two steps back to sit at the drawing table. His dad caught the hint and sat at his desk, turning his chair to face him.

"What about the shoplifting saga?" Adrien asked.

"Now that's a long and unpleasant story that started with Anne-Laure buying five thousand francs worth of clothes from Berskha and getting caught snatching a twenty-five francs eye-liner on her way out. Alice was with her, I was right outside the door taking notes on the new collection, and then I saw your mother walk out, looking extremely worried. So she tells me what happened, and that Anne-Laure said we should continue shopping, that she would catch up. Alice wanted to wait, but I still dragged her to Zara's. And we walked in, and the anti-theft detector went off the second your mother got through the doors. So the security guard comes over, makes Alice open her bag and, unsurprisingly, it was filled to the brim with bottles of yellow nail polish and cheap jewelry, courtesy of Anne-Laure. Alice ran through the whole spectrum of human emotion in the span of a second, really."

Adrien's eyes grew wider and wider as his father talked.

"So what did you do?"

"I seem to recall your mom put both hands on her face and shrieked with her mouth closed for the best part of a minute."

The boy had seen his mother do that a few times, when really angry. It was her version of shouting expletives.

"And then?" he asked.

###

Alice had packed Adrien's plastic giraffes in a lavender suitcase, along with pajamas, day clothes, his favorite stuffed toy (Maya the bee) and a dozen books.

Gabriel had considered adding a phone, so his son could call him whenever he wanted, but knew that he was unlikely to be available 'whenever Adrien wanted'. It was easier to set appointments with Alice and to try not to miss those.

On a Friday morning, he had watched his child sit on that rolling suitcase as Alice dragged it to the door. It had been the ride of his life. The slightest things made Adrien happy, at that age.
"Will you be coming to Marseilles, Daddy?" the boy had asked when Alice had left the suitcase at the door and joined Nathalie to discuss the details of her 'holiday trip'.

That was what they had called Alice leaving, that time and all of the others.

"Not this time, Adrien," Gabriel had replied. "I have a fashion show to organize. But you will be too busy to miss me, with all the fun you will be having at the beach. Make sure to take plenty of pictures. I can't wait to look at them."

The boy had nodded dutifully.

Gabriel had crouched and picked him up, squeezing him tight against him.

"Be nice with your mother," he had advised, with his chin resting on Adrien's shoulder. "I don't want to hear you gave her trouble."

"I'll be nice!"

"I know you will be," his father had murmured. "You're always a good boy. Dad loves you very much, you know that?"

Adrien's answer had been to hug Gabriel closer. The designer had kept him like that for a while, rocking from left to right, until Alice had come back from her talk with Nathalie. He had lowered the boy to the ground and turned to her.

She had been looking at him with a clenched jaw, her eyes ever so slightly wet.

"Don't forget to call me when your plane lands," Gabriel had told her, refusing to beg or to break.

They had not yet explained to Adrien that he and his mother might not be returning home after their trip. Alice was planning to stay at her friends' in Paris for a while, while she looked for a suitable place to move in. But, before that, she wanted some air. She wanted to think.

"I won't," she had replied, giving him a blinding smile and a quick peck on the lips, the most she could manage.

He had pulled away, nodding, then turned to Adrien to smooth his tousled hair.

"T-the car is waiting for us, sweetie," Alice had announced. "It's time to go, or we will miss our flight. Say goodbye to Daddy."

"Good bye," the boy had said, hugging Gabriel's thigh.

"Good bye, Adrien," his father had repeated, trying to instill some warmth in his voice.

He had watched them go. Seeing the door close had left him with the distinct absence of feelings one only reached when one's emotions were too heavy to process.

He had turned to Nathalie.

"We should go," he had told her. "I don't want to be late for the meeting with Bonneau. You know he likes to arrive early."
Nathalie had gone to bed at half past nine, then slumbered. It was hard to really sleep when you were waiting for someone. She stirred a little when she heard a light knock at her apartment door, much later, but was too exhausted to move, so she did not. She listened, however, and waited.

It took a little while, but she heard key turns in the lock. The door opened and closed. Then she heard nothing at all, not even footsteps, until Gabriel slipped into her room. He paused at the entrance. Nathalie did not exactly fake sleep - her body was definitely out cold, though her mind was passably alert - but did not show signs of being awake either. She could not have moved a finger if she had wanted to. She was too old to sleep so little as she had the previous night.

Gabriel closed the door and walked to the free side of the bed. There was some shuffling, the sound of cloth rubbing against cloth, then he sat on the corner of the bed. The mattress shifted.

He waited.

"I'm wake," Nathalie mumbled after a while, feeling observed.

"I know," he murmured, lifting the covers to slip under them.

The mattress creased under his weight and Nathalie rolled towards the middle of the bed, stirring a little more now that she had a reason to open her eyes.

He wrapped an arm around her and kissed her shoulder.

Cuddling. Ugh.

"Good night," he said.

She sighed and nodded, shifting against him until she found a position where his arm did not bother her. It was not as difficult as she remembered.

"Good night," she muttered.

She woke up much later to find his arm still around her, and her black hair tie wrapped around his pinky and ring finger.

###
When Nathalie joined Adrien in the dining room during breakfast, she told him Gabriel had already left for work.

That was a lie. If Gabriel had left for work, he had done so from an entirely different location. The boy knew that because he had seen his father leave the house at midnight, right as Chat Noir slipped away for patrol. He sure had not gone to Pat Messmer's office, and the list of likely destinations was short.

"I see," Adrien replied, with a smug grin.

Nathalie scowled.

His smile grew wider.

She huffed, squaring her shoulders and straightening her back.

"When you are done eating, please join me in the conference room. We need to discuss some recent revisions to your schedule."

"What about my Dutch lesson?" he asked. "I'll be late."

"It was cancelled. I'll explain everything."

Five minutes later, Adrien walked into the upstairs conference room and found her busy unrolling the projector screen, with poorly concealed enjoyment. The lights had not been turned off, but the projector was already on. Nathalie's shadow cut through the neat grid of a calendar. She took a step away, fidgeting, then pressed a remote to turn the lights off.

She breathed in.

One had to admit she was excellent at keeping a poker face, but Adrien could tell she was giddy. A schedule, a laser pointer and a projector. To Nathalie, it was Christmas.

The teenager sat down and looked at the screen.

Nathalie cleared her throat, then pointed at the first day of the calendar with a glowing red dot.

"Let me start by saying this is not only your schedule, but a combination of yours and your father's," she explained. "It is color coded. You are lime green."

The green boxes were few and far between. Well, not 'few and far between' per se, but definitely more spaced out than Adrien was used to. There were gaps of at least two hours in the middle of his days. Every single second of the day up to 10 pm was taken, however. Orange, yellow and grey boxes were piled on top of each other without a single break.

"Some, ah, unfortunate events 'forced' me to rearrange your days. As you can see, your Chinese lessons have been suspended until further notice, just like your basketball training sessions."

"What?" he exclaimed, worried. "What unfortunate events?"
"Your basketball coach seems to have broken his leg, and will be staying home for a few weeks to... recover."

"How did that happen? Is he alright?"

"From what I heard, he tripped. Over a large sum of money. How very regrettable."

Adrien processed that and slowly turned to Nathalie, eyes wide.

"What about my Chinese teacher?" he asked, with the careful tone he would have used in the presence of a feral animal.

"He is travelling to China for at least a month. Familial emergency."

"Familial emergency."

"Yes. I believe he had to urgently discuss how he stumbled upon an 'all expenses paid' trip to Beijing."

Adrien opened and closed his mouth. He stared at his father's assistant with awe.

"You bribed them."

"Please do not entertain such ridiculous theories. I absolutely deny being involved in whatever highly suspicious circumstances caused the two men to drop their work obligations," Nathalie replied, deadpan.

The teenager gasped, nose tickling and eyes going wet with a beginning of laughter. He pursed his lips and chuckled in perfect silence.

She had bribed them.

Nathalie huffed and picked her tablet up. She swiped to the left. The calendar slid to the left, to be replaced by a nearly identical calendar.

It was a powerpoint presentation. A powerpoint presentation made of screenshots of a schedule. The assistant had added arrows pointing to some of the calendar events. There was a legend. A color-coded legend. With neat little colored rectangles accompanied by neat Arial 10 text.

Blue boxes had appeared between the lime green boxes.

"Now," Nathalie said, "you might think that your activities being suspended means you have more free time. That is not strictly true."

She turned the laser pointer to the legend.

"The yellow boxes represent the appointments your father has outside," she explained (even though it was written on her legend next to the yellow rectangle). "Grey means he is at the office. Orange means he is at home."

Adrien peeked at the blue rectangle's legend, but it merely said 'available'.

"What does blue stand for?" he asked.

"I'll get to that." - She clicked her tongue. - "It might not be self-evident but I have significantly modified your father's schedule. I did not include breaks - that never goes over well - but I took the
liberty of making his every activity fifteen to thirty minutes longer than it should be."

The boy gaped.

"Which means that," Nathalie continued, moving the laser dot in a quick zigzag between every orange box, "for at least ten minutes at the end of every event, your father will be doing nothing. Or that he will keeping himself busy with whatever work he can find. You will be 'on call'. Your job will be to go and disturb him."

"W-what?"

"'Disturb him'. Wait for him to be available and force him to spend time with you."

"I, uh, that doesn't sound like the best idea," Adrien replied, hesitant. "He really wouldn't want me to do that."

Nathalie made her laser pointer roll between her fingers. She was still staring at the screen. After a moment, she turned to Adrien.

"What your father wants from you and what your father needs from you are two vastly different things."

That was true, the boy mused. Every single thing he had discovered over the last month converged and led to that conclusion. Strangely enough, everyone seemed to come to it at the same time. Marinette, Nathalie, Adrien himself...

Nathalie mistook his failure to answer for doubt. She joined him.

"Permission to be frank?" she asked.

"Oooof course?"

She took the seat next to his, but kept looking at the screen. She did not like to have tells. She did not like to show her feelings. He knew that.

She took a moment to find her words.

"For years, I watched your mother push him, and drag him out of his office, and bully him into interacting with people. And I would ask myself… Why? I would think 'you married a loner, Alice. You knew that. You made your bed, now lie in it'. I… did not give your mother much credit. I did not understand why she pushed him, and why she was right to do so. Now, I do."

"Being alone is not good for him," Adrien said.

"Being alone is not good for him," Nathalie confirmed. "He is an introvert and, left to his own devices, he will withdraw further and further away. The more distance he puts between himself and the rest of the world, the more he forgets what he likes about having people in his life. But… he is not as much of a loner as he would like to be. He does not need many people in his life, but he needs them. He needs you," she added, tousling Adrien's hair.

He was on the receiving end of a lot of tousling, lately. He did not mind at all, especially when it came from Gabriel and Nathalie.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not the only person he needs," he mumbled.

His father's assistant pretended not to hear that. She turned the lights on with the remote instead.
Adrien smiled to her.

"You are doing him a lot of good, you know that? Think of how he acted just a month ago, and the way he is doing now. It's amazing."

"You are giving me too much credit. He is doing better. I might be helping a little by being present and by… guiding him along the way," she replied, pointing at the agenda on the wall. "But the real change happened inside him. He is willing to move on."

The teenager lowered his head, nodding.

**Willing to move on.**

"I'm sorry," Nathalie said. "I know that it's… not necessarily easy to hear."

"N-no. It's good that he is moving on. I-I wanted to believe Mom was alive, I did, but holding on to that hope was killing him from the inside. A-and it's not like he will stop looking for her, even if he starts building something else, right?"

Nathalie took a deep breath.

"He will never stop searching for her, Adrien. He will never stop loving her, he will never forget her. She is the love of his life. Wherever he goes from here, whomever he decides to share his life with in the future… they will never replace her. But he might find someone he'll love just as much as her, at some point, and I wish him that. Alice would have wished him that too. She would never have wanted him to be miserable in her absence. She would not have wanted him to wait."

*At some point.* Did Nathalie not include herself in the list of possibilities?

She needed better glasses.

Adrien nodded. There was more to discuss. Regardless of her not including herself in Gabriel's future romance prospects, Nathalie was present now, and she wanted to keep him on the right track. Which meant she could help with the darkest problems.

"I… I'm worried," he said, averting his eyes. "He's doing better but sometimes, I get the feeling he is doing worse too. I don't know if you noticed, but he doesn't sleep. Sometimes, he vanishes for hours. He leaves the house in the middle of the night, he just… I'm afraid there's something going on we don't know about, something-"

Nathalie stared at him while he spoke, and raised a hand to silence him.

"Don't worry about that."

She did not look surprised at all. He blinked. What did she know?

"I'm aware of all of those issues," she declared. "I will take care of it."

Adrien's eyes went wide.

"Do you know where he vanishes to?"

There was no way. Gabriel would never have told her.

"Yes," Nathalie affirmed. "Don't worry. It is nothing you should be concerned about. I will handle it. I am handling it."
"I *really* think it's something I should be concerned about!" Adrien retorted. "Are you sure you know everything? What do you know, anyway?"

She took a deep breath.

"I know enough, and I know him. Sometimes... Sometimes, when you have not been doing well for a *long* time... Things start getting better, and you get that influx of energy... You get back into motion, but you cannot think straight *yet*. So, for a little while, you might do things that make sense to no one else, and you might not see how nonsensical those things are. But as long as you have people watching out for that, people who can help you out of that mindset... It's alright."

Adrien remembered his own words to Ladybug. 'He won't do it. I'm sure he believes he will. It won't matter in the end'. His breath caught in his throat.

"You really *get* him," he murmured, feeling a weight fall off his shoulders.

Someone *else* was trying to help Gabriel out of the darkness he was in. Adrien was not *alone*. He had no idea what Nathalie knew - his father was too set on covering his tracks and past to have casually revealed them to his girlfriend - but she understood the core of the problem. She knew the way Gabriel's mind worked.

Nathalie ever so slightly rolled her eyes.

"Your father is many things. Difficult, infuriating, stubborn... but he is not a complicated man. Don't tell him I said that."

Adrien hugged her.

She nearly fell off her chair.

After a moment and then some, she awkwardly patted his back. That hand stayed there for a second more, as Nathalie hesitated, then the woman wrapped both arms around Adrien and hugged him tight.

###

"Alright," Marinette exclaimed after Nino and Alya sat down in her bedroom. "Before we head over to Adrien's, we need to discuss the Plan."

Alya raised her eyebrows. Nino, who was sitting on the floor with his back to Alya's legs, frowned, looking around with a moody expression. He had been cold since Marinette had confessed to quitting her internship and to giving Gabriel Agreste a piece of her mind. Nino's anger had not abated. He had accused her of making things worse for Adrien, and that discussion had not gone so well.

She had reconciled with Adrien, though. Nino had no reason to sulk anymore.

"What *plan*?" he asked, finally looking in her general direction (somewhere around her shoes).

"The 'Deal with Gabriel Agreste' plan," she retorted, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, right. We saw how your plans go. Also, why do you have Adrien's full schedule on a roll-
up screen in your bedroom? That's just creepy."
Marinette squeaked and rolled the roll-up screen up. She huffed and tried to compose herself.
"And the pictures on the walls," Nino added.
She groaned.
" Ignore the pictures on the walls. I'm over Adrien. Done. Over. I just haven't redecorated yet."
"You are?" Alya exclaimed.
"Are you sure?" Nino commented.
"What happened? How did it happen? Did you confess? Did he turn you down? Did you meet someone else? Marinette, you need to tell me!"
The young designer groaned.
"I've been told he likes someone else. I can't compete." - She neglected to mention that the 'someone else' was her superhero persona, whom Adrien had wanted to kiss. - "Page turned! Can we focus on the Plan, here?"
"What do you mean, someone else?" her two friends asked in the same voice.
"THE. PLAN."
Nino and Alya looked at each other, puzzled. Marinette breathed in.
"The. Plan," she repeated. "It's not a long one. Just listen to me for five minutes and then you can discuss Adrien's love life as much as you want."
Her best friend turned to her with a nervous yet encouraging smile.
"Marinette, I don't think we need a plan to deal with mister Agreste," she said. "I'm sure we can just go there and act civilized and that everything will go just fine."
Her friends stared at her.
She nearly rolled the roll-up screen down, before remembering that she had forgotten to replace it by her ten points plan of action. She would have to talk them through it.
"Mister Agreste is a bully," she explained. "A. Bully. We can't just go in there and be nice and polite, because he would steamroll us. He would judge us, and decide something stupid and possibly medieval about the way Adrien should behave, and then order us around. Or out. Most likely out. We can't let him."
Alya and Nino's eyes were growing wider and wider.
Marinette put her hands on her hips.
"We have to present an united front. He will want it to be his way or the highway. We have to stand firm until he backs down."
"He's not a 'back down' guy," Nino pointed out.

"Who got the three of us invited this afternoon?" Marinette retorted.

"I'm starting to wonder if that's not a trap to get rid of us all in one go, because mister Agreste can't be pleased about the way you go about things."

She sighed. Her eyes strayed to the corner of the room. She scowled, crossing her arms

"For some reason, he is, actually. He likes me, he told me as much."

Not that she was happy about it.

"Could it be because you are a talented and forceful young designer who reminds him of himself?" Alya mused.

Marinette gaped in horror.

"I can see it," Nino commented, tilting his head back to look at Alya.

"I CAN'T!" their friend shrieked.

Her classmates exchanged a knowing look. Marinette turned away with a snort.

"Think what you want. I don't care. The important thing here is to go there and be good friends to Adrien. Which means we have to meet mister Agreste's standards…" - She walked to Nino and snatched his cap. - "So no hats in the house, no talk about superheroes because the man hates them," she added with a pointed look at Alya, before taping her own chest. "And no yelling at him."

Her two friends glared at her, definitely offended.

"What?" Marinette exclaimed. "I'm just saying we can't give him ammunition against us. We make efforts to meet his standards so we can stand firm."

Nino sighed.

"I swear if I turn into an Akuma over this again, it won't be mister Agreste's fault," he mumbled.

"Marinette, you are making a mountain out of a molehill," Alya commented with a smile. "We'll be fine. We don't need to read the Art of War before we go."

Her friend held her breath and counted to ten.


###

"They are here!" Adrien exclaimed even before his friends could ring the doorbell. "Nathalie, please open the doors!"

He had been standing at the window for half an hour, waiting with growing nervousness and
impatience. He grinned when his father's assistant opened the gates with a bored press of a button. Not thirty seconds later, he had raced to the courtyard to greet everyone.

He froze when he saw Nino. His best friend's outfit was... new. Different. The teenager was wearing ironed black pants and a black shirt, clothes Adrien had no idea his friend owned and that had probably been bought for a funeral three years before (judging by the large gap between the hem of his pants and his ankles). Nino's cap was gone, and so were his headphones. He was still wearing sneakers.

"I don't want to hear it, dude," the boy mumbled.

Adrien chuckled.

"Hear what? Welcome! I'm so glad you're all here."

He turned to Alya, who was wearing her usual plaid shirt and blue jeans. She waved and smiled, totally at ease and totally herself. As for Marinette... It was hard to say if she was wearing different clothes, because you could not see her behind all the bags and boxes she was carrying. She was swaying from one side to the other under the weight. She couldn't see in front of her either: there was a Pictionary box in front of her face.

Adrien hurried to catch that box before the whole pile could come crashing down.

"No no no!" Alya snapped. "Don't help her! This is a learning experience."

"A what?" the model exclaimed.

"A learning experience. Marinette insisted to be in charge of everything, so she is in charge of everything."

"I'm fine!" the other girl mumbled from behind the boxes.

He blinked, looking at Alya, then at Nino. The two of them had crossed their arms and snorted with smug expressions. They were insane. Everyone was insane. Adrien took five of the game boxes to carry them himself. Maybe his friends had been overenthusiastic, he thought when he had to hold that pile of games in place with his chin. Even if they stayed the entire afternoon, there was no way they could play Monopoly and Pictionary and Clue and Labyrinth and Trivial Pursuit in one visit. And Uno, and Werewolf, and whatever was in all the tinier boxes Marinette was carrying in her two plastic bags.

He stumbled back.

"Glad to see you didn't go overboard... games," he joked.

That fell flat. Admittedly, it was not the best of puns.

Marinette tried to readjust the weight of everything else she was carrying. Nino and Alya took one bag each and left her with three boxes.

"We didn't know what kind of games you liked," Marinette explained. "So we all brought something."

Adrien stared at her. He did not know how to answer that. The truth was he had no idea of what he liked. He had only ever played board games with his mother, and never games meant for larger groups. He liked checkers. He liked Mouse Trap. He liked video games.
"I, uh. All of them, really. Come on, let's get all of this upstairs!"

Five minutes later, his friends were discovering his bedroom.

"You have a zipline," Alya commented as she put her bag down. "In your room."

He placed the games he was carrying on his desk.

"Ah, I, y-yes?"

"A ZIPLINE. In your room. And a skateboard ramp, and climbing walls."

Adrien cleared his throat.

"It's, like, the most amazing room ever, don't get me wrong," the blogger said. "But I'm kind of questioning the point of having a bodyguard when you have ten ways to accidentally kill yourself right in your bedroom."

"That's… You have a point," the boy replied, looking around.

Walls three time the size of a man, cameras everywhere, the best security system money could provide. A house that was basically a fortress. Gabriel had gone about keeping their home safe in the most obvious and clinical of ways, turning it into a prison. At the same time, he had allowed Adrien to turn his room into a substitute for 'outside'. At no point had Gabriel stopped to consider that allowing a preteen to decorate his room with whatever struck his fancy was not necessarily wise. On top of that, Adrien's internal Chat Noir was still looking at the walls and thinking 'What? It's not such a big fall'. Did his father also look at all of it with the eyes of someone who had climbed Paris' highest towers?

"Who cares?" Nino said. "It's a kickass r-"

At that point, Marinette tripped, shrieked and fell flat on her face, crushing the boxes she was carrying under her full weight. Adrien ran to help her up. He caught Alya holding Nino back when the rapper tried to do the same.

More matchmaking. How had he not seen it before? He added 'have a chat with Alya' to his mental todo list.

"Are you okay?" he murmured, flushing, when Marinette was back on her feet.

"Yes, yes, AAAAAH!" - She kneeled to inspect the crushed boxes. - "I broke everything."

He crouched, that blush spreading from his cheeks to his ears.

"Hey, it's nothing tape can't fix. More tape," he added, realizing that the Uno and Werewolf boxes were already kept in one piece by strips of brown and transparent tape (and what looked like dried snot and strawberry jam).

"I… It's… Agh!" Marinette exclaimed.

Alya joined them, leaning down and putting a hand on her best friend's shoulder.

"Now that I think about it, those are card games. Why do they come in shoe boxes?" she asked, getting the cards out of their packages. "Let's just throw the boxes away. My sisters destroyed them a loooong time ago."
She grabbed the boxes and looked around for a trash can.

Marinette, still on her knees, was staring at the floor. Clearly, the problem was not the damage to the boxes. She looked dejected and angry at herself. It was the same Marinette who had kicked her phone into a wall just the previous day, and commented that it happened 'all the time'. She was ashamed of her clumsiness.

It hit him straight in the gut. Before he knew it, his hand was on her shoulder and squeezing. That gesture was a lot less than what he felt the urge to do. He averted his eyes, wondering once again where those impulses came from.

She cleared her throat and got back to her feet.

"So what are we playing?" she asked, hands on her hips and looking at nobody in particular.

"What about we let Adrien decide?" Alya suggested. "What do you feel like playing?"

The boy gave her a deer in headlights look. How was he supposed to decide? His eyes darted around and stopped on the pile of boxes on his desk.

"Pictionary?" he replied, because that box was on top of the pile.

Nino and Alya blanched. They turned to each other, horrified, and gaped for five seconds or so before whirling to Adrien.

"I'M IN MARINETTE'S TEAM!" they both shouted.

"I SAID IT FIRST!" Alya exclaimed.

"NO, I SAID IT FIRST!"

The young designer cracked her knuckles, giving them a shark's grin.

"Adrien," she said, her voice dripping with dark glee. "Do you want to be in my team?"

He took a step away.

"Uh."

"Great!" she said, running to get the Pictionary box.

Judging by the look on Nino and Alya's faces, Adrien knew he had opened the gates to hell.

In the next hour, he discovered a few things about Marinette.

For a start, she was even more talented an artist than Adrien thought. It took her four strokes at most to draw something recognizable. If Adrien had not faked idiocy and lost on purpose whenever he could get away with it, their team would have destroyed Alya and Nino's. Adrien could not draw, but that did not matter much when the only person in the room who could was Marinette.

Another thing he discovered was that she was extremely competitive. Scary-grade competitive. It was a bit unexpected, a bit baffling, and a bit amusing. All in one, he liked it, even if it drove everyone including himself crazy.

A last thing was that she would make little victory dances, complete with arm wriggling and tongue clicking, whenever she was happy with her team's performance. It was endearingly
annoying.

"You should have seen the day she played against Nathanaël," Alya whispered during one of her best friend's oblivious dances. "This is hell, but we don't talk about that day anymore. It was a dark time."

Adrien, who was watching Marinette's butt wiggle - why was he looking at her butt? - turned to Alya and opened wide eyes.

Nino leaned over the table.

"We finish this," he whispered, "then we get her away from the board games. Trust me, you don't want a Marinette on a winning streak."

Adrien turned to the aspiring designer. He caught himself chuckling.

###

They had drawn circles on the courtyard's walls.

Adrien had a zipline in his room. He had a skateboard ramp, climbing walls, arcade games, a complete apartment's worth of furniture and enough books to last two lifetimes. But they had to draw chalk circles on the courtyard's walls to play basketball, because there was nothing meant for Adrien anywhere in his home, except in that bedroom.

Marinette was so angry she had given a quadruple outline to the chalk circle she had drawn, and nearly crushed the chalk on the brick while doing so. She did not want it to wash away easily.

Let Gabriel Agreste see just how little he had given his son who had 'everything'.

Adrien had drawn another circle on the opposite wall, and it was so faint you barely noticed it.

"I'll clean it up!" he had promised when Nathalie Sancoeur had walked out of the house and stared at the chalk ring. "I promise."

Mister Agreste's assistant had not commented. She had not told Adrien it was fine, that it was just chalk, that he did not have to panic about it. No. She had merely said "your father is working in his study. Try not to make too much noise". Then she had returned to her office. Every now and then, Marinette saw her peeking at them through the window, when one of them shouted or laughed too loudly.

In time, even Adrien forgot they were being watched, however. He relaxed. He stopped wincing and peeking at the upstairs windows, then started having fun.

It took Marinette's breath away.

He was different. She had never seen him at ease before, she realized with a pang to the heart. She had never seen him carefree. She had never seen him happy. It was hard to reconcile that beautiful boy with a grin on his face with shy, reserved Adrien, whose smile was always soft and kind. Stunted. Restrained.

'This is not me. I'm not perfect and warm and kind.'
The Adrien who dribbled and raced between Alya and Nino was breaking out of that facade. His smile shone brighter than the sun. He teased them, taunted them, whirled and danced in a way that reminded Marinette of Chat Noir of all people. Not that Adrien joked. Not that he flirted. Not that he made puns. It was in the grin, really.

He turned to her with that amazing smile, eyes sparkling.

"Catch!" Alya shouted, throwing the ball at her.

Marinette did. With her face.

She tripped, fell, landed on her back, banged her head against the ground and saw stars. She heard the ball thump away. Everyone ran to her.

"Oh my god, Marinette, are you okay?" Alya squeaked, dropping to her knees next to her.

Adrien wrapped his arm around Marinette's shoulders and helped her sit.

"Ow," she moaned. "Ow."

"MarinetteI'msosorry," her best friend said.

"I'mokay."

"Are you sure?" Adrien exclaimed, his smile gone, his expression worried. "That was a nasty blow."

She liked his smiles better, and she was not about to ruin a perfectly fine day because of a tiny bump on the head. Or two.

"I'm fine, I've seen worse," she replied, getting to her feet.

"But…"

"I'm fine!" she insisted, putting her hands on her hips. "Now where did that ball go?"

"Marinette!" Alya snapped. "Don't be ridiculous, you…"

The black haired girl raced to the ball and picked it up. Alya groaned.

"Mari-

She went silent. Everyone did. Marinette turned to her friends, frowning.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," Gabriel Agreste called from a window upstairs. "Kindly drop that ball and rest until we are all reasonably sure you don't have a concussion, will you?"

He was leaning down, eyebrows raised in consternation.

Nino went stiff as a pole, clapping his feet together and straightening his spine in a near military salute. Adrien withered a little. Alya just looked up.

Marinette glared and let go of the ball. It dropped on her foot (she pretended not to feel that), then bounced away.

Mister Agreste nodded and returned to his work, closing the window behind him. Not two minutes
later, Nathalie Sancoeur brought them drinks and ice cream.

No one mentioned Gabriel's intervention, not even his not bothering to say 'hello'.

Only after fifteen minutes of sitting (and the emptying of every ice cream bowl) did Marinette's friends concede that she was in perfect health. By that point, she was so done with the fussing that she decided to prove exactly how fine she was by destroying them all. So Nino was a pretty good player and Adrien was brilliant? She was dedicated.

Thirty minutes later, the game was a tie between Adrien and her, with Nino far behind. Alya had stopped playing entirely and was sitting on the stairs instead, filming them. Adrien was smiling again.

Marinette was so busy trying to get the upper hand that she did not notice mister Agreste's arrival. She bumped into Adrien, who had spotted his father and frozen into place, then she turned to the stairs.

Gabriel was standing at the top of them (from what she gathered, that was his thing), with his hands behind his back and an inscrutable expression.

"F-father," Adrien said. "Are we making too much noise?"

The designer shook his head, walking down the stairs and joining his son.

"I said I'd meet your friends, didn't I?"

"You… did," Adrien replied. "Well, you already met Nino and Marinette…"

Gabriel acquiesced, turning to Nino and giving him a polite nod. The teenager stuttered a 'mister Agreste'. The man then looked at Marinette.

"Feeling better already?"

"Yes, sir, thank you for your concern," she ground out from behind a frozen smile.

Mister Agreste did not quite chuckle, but there was a sparkle in his eyes, and she heard the slightest hint of a snort. Gabriel took a step back to look at Alya, who had gotten to her feet and was smiling at them from the bottom of the stairs.

Adrien opened his mouth to introduce her.

Alya waved.

"Alya Césaire, sir. Pleased to meet you."

Marinette watched Adrien's shoulders tense.

"Likewise," mister Agreste replied with a pleasant smile.

Relief washed over his son, whose every muscle relaxed. He brightened up. A tentative smile curled the corners of his lips.

"Say!" Alya exclaimed. "Want to join the game, mister Agreste? I believe the boys need help against Marinette."

Gabriel snorted, amused.
"I'm afraid a tailored suit is not appropriate attire for outdoor sports, miss Césaire."

"Well then take it off?"

Adrien's father raised his eyebrows well before the penny dropped for everyone else. Then Alya's jaw dropped. Adrien's eyes went wide, just like his best friend's. Nino was the first to laugh. He held it in, of course, choking instead of chuckling, but he still had to press both hands to his face to hide the nervous smile that was spreading on his face. Adrien was making strange snorting noises. Marinette was willing to bet no one had ever accidentally asked his father to undress before.

"OH COME ON!" Alya shouted, shooting daggers at Nino. "I didn't mean it like that!"

The boy started coughing and had to turn away. Alya huffed and mumbled a 'this is not funny'. Adrien… giggled. It was faint and strangled at first, but it quickly devolved into a quiet kind of laughter.

Nino was staring at his feet, and Alya was staring at Nino, and Adrien was staring at Alya's indignant expression. Marinette was looking at Mister Agreste, who had turned to his son. She saw the man's expression shatter as he watched Adrien laugh. He swallowed, sucking his lips in, then collected himself.

"Very well," he said, unbuttoning his vest and smirking at Alya. "I can give it a shot."

He removed the garment and handed it to the blogger, before undoing his tie and the first button of his shirt.

His son stared at him in disbelief. It took a few seconds for the boy to fully understand what was going on, then he grinned. Not just grinned: beamed like he had never beamed before. It startled them all. Marinette saw pain flicker on Gabriel's face, but the man hid it well, collecting the ball from the corner it had rolled to.

He threw it at Adrien.

###

Gabriel played for the best part of an hour, old bones or not, because it made Adrien laugh and grin. How long had it been since the boy had last laughed? Or smiled at all? Gabriel could not remember, not for the life of him.

And who do you have to blame for that?

The best part of an hour was the best he could manage without a break, however. He still trained, he still climbed roofs, he still raced from building to building if he needed to, but he was old. He spent his days at a drawing table or in an office chair. He did not sleep. It took a toll on one's stamina.

He joined miss Césaire on the stairs and sat next to her. She had folded his vest and placed it on the stairs railing, to be free to film the game of basketball.

She tapped the screen of her phone to stop the recording.
"You're pretty good," she commented. "You gave them all a run for their money."

"Thank you, miss," Gabriel replied.

He did not like her. Really, it was more that he could not. She was smart enough, and confident enough, and nice enough, and polite enough. She did not call him dude. There was nothing wrong with her outfit (except maybe the plaid shirt, but who was he to judge?). But she had liveblogged her own abduction by the Pharaoh. She routinely ran into danger to get a scoop on Chat Noir and his partner. It made Gabriel want to grab her by the shoulders and to shake sense into her.

She grinned.

"D'you want me to send you the footage?" she asked.

"I'd love that. Ask Nathalie for her email and send the videos to her, please. I don't really have a public email."

"What about gabriel at gabriel dot co dot fr?"

"That would be 'miserable intern' at gabriel dot co dot fr," he replied.

"I guess that makes sense," the girl commented, tapping her screen to start filming again. He saw her turn the sound recording off.

They sat there for a while. Gabriel watched his son dance around miss Dupain-Cheng, the way they moved together clear as day for anyone equipped with eyes, and the way they smiled at each other even more blatant. Not that they saw it.

"I'm going to have to ask," Gabriel said, "because it is absolutely baffling. How are those two not an item?"

Miss Césaire nearly dropped her phone.

"What? I, uh. I mean I beg your pardon?"

He gave her a pointed look.

"I doubt an aspiring journalist would be devoid of observation skills."

She groaned.

"I, well, sir, I don't think it's any of your business."

"I'm merely curious. She clearly fancies him, he clearly fancies her, and if he does not, he urgently has to learn how not to send girls the wrong signals."

The teenager grimaced.

"Still none of your business, with all due respect."

He looked at her in silence and waited. It did not take long for her to start squirming. For a while, she attempted to ignore him, going as far as to look the other way. She started getting annoyed, then angry.

"Okay!" she snapped after a solid five minutes. She immediately lowered her tone to a whisper.

"Marinette has bad luck, alright? She tried, but things always go awry. Like… She sent him a love
letter to confess and he didn't get it. She knitted him a scarf and dropped it here for his birthday, and when he showed up wearing it, he thought was a gift from…"

She swallowed her tongue and paled.

Gabriel frowned.

"From?" he inquired.

"Uh. From you, actually," miss Césaire murmured, clearing her throat.

He had to run the sentence over through his mind. His frown deepened.

"From me," he repeated.

###

Chapter End Notes

Hchano, I have not forgotten my threats. Just you wait.
Cat-harsis

After that basketball game with the children, Gabriel had returned to his office, using work and a sore back as an excuse. Adrien had looked a bit disappointed, but that had barely made a dent in his obvious happiness. The boy had retreated to his bedroom with his friends, and you could hear the occasional bout of cheering and laughing from upstairs.

Nathalie was not fond of teenagers in general, but she had to admit Adrien's friends had done a good job. It was not easy to get Gabriel to relax, let alone to play.

She had spent a good part of the afternoon with a smile on her face.

That had been too good to last.

Twenty minutes after getting back to work, her employer had her bring him coffee and snacks. She walked into his office to find him cold. He had closed up, pretexting to work to shut Nathalie out, using his feigned concentration as a wall. She could tell: she knew him well enough, by now. He let her place her platter on his desk and return to the door without even acknowledging her presence. Her stomach twisted.

"Nathalie. A word, if you please," he ended up saying, right as she was about to walk out.

She stopped, closing the door with a trembling hand. She had worked with him long enough to know when he was about to unleash hell. There were minute signs. The look on his face, the tension in his shoulders, even the way his hands rested on his keyboard, all contracted sinew and forced angles.

She turned to him.

He leaned back against his chair.

"There seems to have been some kind of mix-up with Adrien's birthday gift last year," he announced. "A friend of his sent him a gift - a handmade scarf - and Adrien is convinced it came from me. Do you know how that could have happened?"

Nathalie's knees buckled. She kept herself upright by pure reflex, straightening her spine and moving her shoulders back.

Arrows and boxes drew themselves in her mind, flowcharts with only one endpoint.

Don't lie.

Twenty minutes were enough for Gabriel to have browsed through his credit cards' history. There was no order to be found, not the slightest purchase that could somehow have been construed as a gift for Adrien. He knew. He was not an idiot.

Don't lie.

He knew, and this was a test, it had to be. What Nathalie had to do was:

1) to come clean.

2) to apologize.
3) to clear things up with Adrien.

*Don't lie.*

*He is testing you, don't lie.*

Decades of self-preservation kicked in. You did not fall out of the habit of lying easily. It was a defense mechanism, a reflex, a compulsion of sorts. If she told the truth, she would lose everything. If she lied too, but lies were safe and honesty was not. She was well aware that the sentiment was a fallacy, but that did not help.

"That's strange," she replied, throat clenched, mentally screaming at herself for uttering those words. "I distinctly remember handing him your gift after collecting it from the mailbox."

Cold blue eyes moved from her face to the wall and back.

"What did you get Adrien?" Gabriel asked.

"A video game. The one with the robots. The fighting one. 'Ultimate machine strike'?"

"And did he like it?"

"I... wouldn't know. I didn't wait for him to unwrap the gift, I had some work to finish, and I was late, with the soap bubbles incident." - She shuddered at the memory. - "You remember it was the day the Bubbler appeared, don't you?"

"I do."

"I... I assume there was some kind of problem with the delivery. There was one package in the mailbox, I didn't check if it was the game, I went straight to Adrien."

*If it had been delivered by a store, it would have been in a delivery box, not gift wrapped. It's not even a plausible lie.*

Gabriel studied her face.

"I see," he murmured. "Thank you, that clarifies matters." - He looked down at his work. - "You're free to go."

Nathalie waited by the door for a handful of seconds, drawing circles on her palate with the tip of her tongue. She couldn't force herself to admit the truth. At no point did he acknowledge her presence.

She walked out.

###

Adrien couldn't remember the last time he had been this happy. Happy, with a capital H, so full of restless energy that Ladybug had remarked on his acrobatics during their patrol, that she had grinned at the joy on his face.

That had made his day even better. He loved to see her smile.
They ended their patrol on Notre-Dame, in a hammock woven in yoyo strings, looking at the stars.

"What got you in such a good mood, kitty?" she asked.

"I had a greeaaaaaat day," he replied, his grin so large his cheeks hurt.

His father was doing better. Nathalie was taking care of him. Adrien's friends had been allowed to visit (and Gabriel had even been civil to Nino). Gabriel had not only let them play in the courtyard, but joined in.

It still felt like a dream.

"That great?" Ladybug commented, rolling to her side on the net of yoyo strings.

Chat turned to her too.

"That great. You know those days where everything just goes perfectly?"

She nodded.

"It was one of those days," he explained.

She smiled and sniffed and looked at him with a warmth that made his heart stop. He blushed and rolled on his back, trying so hard to do so casually and failing. He felt like his entire body was pulled towards her, like it would slide and crash against her if he did not keep his fingers tangled in the hammock's strings. He wanted to slide and crash and wrap his arms around her waist. It was overwhelming. He was sure those thoughts were clear on his face, too.

"I'm happy for you," she said.

He would not have been able to answer if he had tried. He only managed a strangled giggle, then tried to relax and to focus on the stars.

All he wanted to do was sink into her arms and tell her about his day, about his life. He wanted to share everything with her, every bit of relief and happiness, every bit of hope. Not being allowed to clouded his joy with specks of loneliness.

He sat up.

Maybe it was his lucky day.

Maybe everything would go well.

Adrien couldn't know. What he knew was that he couldn't bear waiting anymore. He needed certainty. He needed closure. He needed not to be so confused that the presence of Marinette Dupain-Cheng became troubling.

"My lady," he said, turning to her with a smile that was neither Chat nor Adrien, but that serious, lovesick boy in-between them.

She took one look at him and paled, sitting up in a careful, tense motion.

Or maybe everything would not go well, he thought. But it was worth a try.

"I w-was wondering," he started. "I was wondering if you would do me the great honor of going on a date with me."
She blanched and panicked and fidgetted, recoiling a little.

"I-I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, looking down at the fists she had balled on her knees. "I, uh, I…"

He kept his smile on, but pursed his lips.

She breathed in and raised jittering hands.

"I don't mean I'm sorry, I mean I'm sorry, I mean… Agh. I'm making a mess of things," she moaned.

He rocked back and forth with the motions of the hammock, faking serene patience.

Ladybug composed herself.

"I mean I am sorry I pretended not to see that you liked me," she said, voice laden with guilt. "It's… I didn't always pretend, just the last few days, after… Anyway, I couldn't see it. I think I didn't want to see it. I'm sorry. I, I…"

She was rolling herself into a ball as she talked, and would have buried her face in her knees if Chat had not intervened.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay," he told her, leaning forwards.

"No it's not!"

He chuckled.

"My Lady, it seems to bug you more than it bugs me. I mean, a certain someone warned me he confessed on my behalf…"

She gaped at that, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"… And I could see the idea made you uneasy so I would never have mentioned it," he continued.

She forgot to breathe. He felt about to lose his nerve, so he turned to the sky and looked at the stars instead.

"The truth is I'm fine with being your partner. Your friend. I love you from the bottom of my heart but it doesn't mean I want you to be mine. What I want is for you to be happy. And whoever you end up loving, even if it isn't me…" - He thought of the magic of strawberry-flavored lip gloss, or absence thereof, and held on to faint hopes. - "I will be happy for you. That's what's most important to me."

She shifted closer, hesitantly squeezing his shoulder then taking her hand away.

He closed his eyes and breathed in.

"But I had to try, you know?" he said, looking up at the moon. "As happy as I'd be to see you happy, I would be an idiot to forever hold my peace." - He turned to her, grinning. - "I had to at least try. Even if it's to get a 'in your dreams, kitty'. I had to make sure."

She kissed him.

It was just a peck on the lips. It lasted less than a second, and she immediately moved away, raising her hands in a 'stop right here' gesture. He stilled. More precisely, he felt so tense that he
couldn't tell if he had turned to stone or if he was trembling too fast to notice.

He still brushed his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, wondering about the strawberry thing. He did not taste sugar. It was a little disappointing.

Ladybug swallowed.

"I need to explain something," she announced.

Then she went silent.

A minute went by. It gave Chat some time to relax. He watched her, concerned, and waited.

"There's a boy I like," she said, looking to the side. "I have liked him since… Forever, really. That's why I didn't pay attention to anyone else."

Adrien took a deep breath. He knew full well who she was talking about, but it still stung, for some asinine reason he could not have explained in a century. Well. He had been jealous of Theo Barbeau. Being jealous of himself was only slightly more ridiculous.

"And by 'a boy', you mean Adrien Agreste," he commented when she failed to keep talking.

He tried to keep his voice casual.

The look of shocked aggravation she gave him nearly sent him into a fit of laughher. She was fuming.

"Did the two of you discuss everything?" she exclaimed. "What did he tell you?"

"That he confessed on my behalf, mostly. He wanted to give me fair warning. We didn't really discuss you," Chat finished.

Was that a lie or a truth? How did you describe talking to yourself?

Ladybug sighed.

"Alright," she grumbled. "It doesn't matter. What I was trying to say is that I have decided to move on from liking him."

Chat Noir blinked.

Secret identities made for a rollercoaster of feelings, all of them nonsensical and confusing. So she kissed 'him' but she didn't like 'him' anymore and it put him in a strange state of overjoyed vexation.

"Why?" he blurted out.

"Because it's for the best."

"But… why? You like him, he obviously likes you, so I'm having trouble wrapping my head around the issue."

Ladybug frowned, perplexed.

"Chat. Why would you of all people question that decision?"
"Curiosity?"

"You will not get me to say that idiom again."

Adrien laughed.

"It was worth a try."

His partner shook her head, sighing.

"The thing is… For a start, Adrien likes Ladybug, and Ladybug is a mask I put on when I need to be brave and save the world. She is an illusion... " - She saw the look on Chat's face and booped his nose. - "She is an illusion, and the girl underneath is nothing like that."

He tilted his head away and rubbed his nose.

"That's… I don't mean to discard your opinion, but that's… How are you an illusion? I've been by your side for a year now and you're pretty real to me."

She gave him a sad smile.

"You know me better but you haven't seen everything I am either. Ladybug is this larger-than-life perfect hero who never does anything wrong, but it's just what she needs to be. Underneath, I am just some girl. I'm not like that at…"

"I don't think you're perfect," he cut in, eyes closed, chin up, in an overly serious tone.

"What?"

"I don't think you are perfect. I think you're amazing, but you are nowhere near perfect," he explained with a grin.

"What?"

"You are terribly stubborn," Chat said. "And sometimes, you rush into things. And I'm not going to say anything else because I really liked the whole kissing thing and I'd like to keep my options open."

She huffed, which made him chuckle.

"I don't think you are an illusion," he told her, growing serious. "There's a lot of things you can fake. You can pretend to be kind, to be happy, to be many, many things… but you? There is no faking the essence of you. You are brave, you are a leader, you are smart. You can't pretend to be that. The moment you act brave, you are brave. Leadership is a skill, and I wish I had half your brains. I don't see how you could turn into a pumpkin at midnight."

Silence fell. Ladybug stared at him, so flustered he could see her blush even under the moonlight. She was opening and closing her mouth but could not utter a sound.

He changed topics before she could come up with a rebuttal.

"So, now that that's off the table, what is so wrong with Adrien Agreste? I thought he was quite the catch!"

She snorted and choked and turned away.
"There is nothing wrong with Adrien Agreste."

Well, that was reassuring.

Ladybug sucked her lower lip in then released it with a smacking noise.

"The problem is that I don't think I know anything about Adrien Agreste. Now, I know everything there is to know about Adrien Agreste. I have pictures, I have posters, I have eleven binders filled with interviews photocopied from magazines. In French, in English, even one in German and one in Japanese. With translations. And then I have an index of all of those on my computer, by keyword, by date, by author. I can quote every word he ever told the press."

Adrien stared at her in disbelief, eyes growing wider at every syllable, until he felt laughter bubble up in his throat. He had to slam his mouth closed. His cheeks still puffed up, chuckles coming out of his nose in little snorts.

"So who is brave and smart and a leader now?" Ladybug mumbled, looking at a lamppost far into the distance.

He choked.

That was unexpected and incredibly cute.

"Are you done laughing?" she grumbled, sulking. "I was trying to make a point here."

Chat lost it, collapsing back onto the hammock and laughing until he couldn't breathe. His partner glared at him. Her gloom could only last so long, however. It took a while, but she ended up giggling.

"Now come on," she said. "I know it's silly!"

Adrien tried to calm down, taking long breaths and focusing on Serious Things. He was grinning so much his cheeks hurt.

"You should tell him!" he declared when he managed to regain a modicum of self-control.

"So I can get this exact same reaction and die of mortification? Thanks but I'll pass."

"I'm sure he would think it's cute!" Adrien swore.

"I am not telling him about that."

"I'm pretty sure it's his normal, you know? He won't mind."

"I am. Not. Telling him. About that."

"Alright, alright," Chat replied, trying to remain serious for more than ten seconds and failing. He chuckled.

Ladybug rolled her eyes.

"What I was trying to say is that I might know everything there is to know about him… And I know more than what I read in magazines. I saw him shield his friends from Timebreaker, I saw him comfort them, I saw him call a bully out, I know a lot more than what he thinks I do."

"That's starting to sound dangerously close to stalking."
She glared.

"Not that I have anything against stalkers," Chat Noir added. "My mom used to be one."

That answer got him a bewildered look.

He cleared his throat.

"From what I have been told, my parents had a very romantic - if slightly weird - courtship."

"I-I'm sure they did."

"So, you know-but-don't-know Adrien," he prompted.

Ladybug lowered her eyes, face darkening.

"I think Adrien… I don't think he gets to be himself much," she murmured, looking away. "He wears a mask too. He tries so hard to conform to the expectations of… others. And, for a long time, I couldn't see that. He told me. He had to tell me, even if I knew 'so much' about him. Sometimes, there is a whole different boy shining through, if you pay attention."

Chat nearly tore his ring off his finger. He fumbled with it but kept it on, hands trembling.

Thankfully, his partner was not looking at him.

She swallowed.

"It made me realize… I might like him, but it doesn't count. It's not the right kind of love. He deserves someone who got to know all of who he is, who loves all of who he is, and-"

"You could be that," Adrien murmured, twisting his ring from left to right.

"And someone he will truly know. Someone who can be honest with him, share everything with him, and that can never be me because this mask is not coming off for him, ever," Ladybug continued, patting her cheekbone. "Whether I interact with him as Ladybug or as myself - and that would be a whole new kind of dishonest - there will always be secrets. That's not right. I don't want that."

He smiled, trying not to let her see how clenched his throat was and how close to breaking down he felt.

"You could tell him who you are," he pointed out.

"We both know I can't. You understand, don't you? You are the only person who could understand."

"I do," he murmured.

"So I have to stop pining like a little girl and move on, because it is the way things should be. I have to let go. And that's fine. I'm sure there is better for him down the line. Better for everyone."

Adrien breathed in, looking at the sky. He let a few moments pass, then started rocking the string hammock.

He kept his ring on. It kept the game slightly rigged in his favor, and he needed to think.
"You kissed me," he said minutes later.

She had not said a word, settling for stargazing with him instead. The remark startled her out of her thoughts.

"I did," she murmured back.

"There would still be secrets if you dated me, right? The mask would not come off for me either. It would be just the same."

"It would not be the same at all," she replied, looking at the sky. "Because you know there is a secret. You know why there is one." - She turned to him. - "And you know me better than anyone, Chat Noir. You know me better than I know myself."

"What if I want to know all of you?"

"Well, for a start, you don't need to know my identity to know me as a person. There is that. And then…"

"Theeeeen?"

She gave him a conspiratorial grin.

"I've been told getting to know someone is what dating is for."

###

Adrien woke up at nine in the morning with a smile on his face. Well, he woke up with the terrified confusion of someone whose alarm clock had not gone off. Then he checked his schedule and realized with great relief that his morning was free. Then he confusingly recalled slipping into the mansion at four in the morning, with great precautions because his father was awake, with every light in his bedroom and study lit. Then the boy remembered kissing Ladybug and agreeing on a date.

He had kissed Ladybug.

She had kissed him first.

They were dating.

They were dating because he had conveniently decided to lie to her when he knew she did not want to date Adrien Agreste with secrets between them, but surely that issue could be solved through careful conversation and lots of apologizing.

*Sorry, Adrien, for throwing you under the bus.*

*Don't worry about it, Chat Noir. May the best man win.*

*I intend to.*

It would go well.
He hoped.

*He was dating Ladybug.*

"So are you finally going to get out of bed and find some food for me?" Plagg mumbled.

"I am dating Ladybug."

The Kwami grumbled.

"Yes. Now what about my breakfast?"

Adrien grinned to him.

"I am *dating* Ladybug!" he repeated.

"Yeees. I know. What an overwhelming surprise, I would never have expected it, it has certainly never happened to the Chats Noirs of the last five millennia."

"Do you have to be that grumpy?"

"I am always grumpy when I am starving."

"Fiiiiine, let's get you food," his chosen mumbled.

He had barely finished getting dressed when there was a knock at his door. Plagg exploded into black sparkles, leaving him alone.

"Adrien, are you up?" Gabriel called from outside.

"Yes!" the teenager squeaked, stunned to hear his father's voice and not Nathalie's.

Had he done something wrong?

"Can I come in?" the man asked.

"Of c-"

The door opened before he could finish his sentence. An exhausted Gabriel walked in, a photo album under the arm. The look on his face was beyond tiredness. Adrien was not sure how to read it, but he thought he recognized sadness and guilt.

"Father?"

Gabriel sighed, crossing the room to take a seat on the sofa.

"There seems to have been some kind of mix-up last year," he murmured. "About your birthday gift."

Adrien frowned.

His father gestured at the vacant seat on the sofa, waiting for him to join him. The teenager did, sitting down carefully, with his spine straight.

Gabriel pursed his lips, looking at the red photo album he had placed on his knees.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng sent you a gift. A homemade scarf, which ended up being given to you as a
gift from me, by mistake."

Adrien paled.

"What? But…"

It was impossible. She would have said something. He still remembered going to school with that scarf. He remembered Alya commenting on it, and telling her and Marinette that it was a gift from Gabriel. Neither of the girls had corrected him.

It couldn’t be true.

Except no one was in a better position than Gabriel to know what gift Gabriel had sent Adrien.

"I… How?" the boy asked.

Rather than answering, his father clenched his hands on the album. It took him a moment to relax. He did not turn to Adrien.

"I wish I could say there was some delivery issue, that the package I ordered was switched with miss Dupain-Cheng's gift, or that my order did not arrive because of the Akuma attack. The truth is… I have no idea if I got you a gift. I can't remember. Maybe I just expected Nathalie to get one. Maybe I forgot to ask her to buy something. I don't know."

Adrien did not know what to say.

His father looked sincerely sorry, so the teenager's stomach twisted out of concern and not just hurt.

"Dad," he murmured, reaching for his shoulder without daring to touch him.

Gabriel handed him the photo album.

"I know this won't make up for it but I felt you deserved an actual gift," he told him. "So I put a little something together."

Adrien blinked and opened the album.

The first page was empty. He turned it and found not a photograph, but a sketch of a teenage girl with pigtails, posing with an umbrella.

_Mom._

There was a note in the corner of the page, a simple "Alice, 16 year old", written in Gabriel's neat handwriting.

The designer was watching Adrien's face, observing his reaction with bated breath. His son turned the page and found two more sketches on yellowed paper, under impeccable plastic covering.

On the first, in colored pencil, his mother was sitting in a staircase, a red schoolbag by her side. "Alice, 16 year old, at school". On the right page, Adrien found portraits of Alice - doodles, mostly - with a range of devoted and blushing expressions he had never seen her display. "Alice, 16 year old, attempting to engage future husband in conversation".

Adrien turned the page again.
His father leaned a little closer.

"I figured you'd like to see those," he murmured. "So I went digging through my old art to-"

"Thank you," his son blurted out, voice strangled.

He was looking at a sketch of a dejected Alice being consoled by another girl, who did not have features, but long pale hair and a striped t-shirt. "Future husband would not converse".

The next page was a color portrait of a boy with glasses. Clearly, Gabriel had not drawn that one, because it was terrible. The eyes were not even remotely where eyes went, the nose was twisted, the lines shaky, and the glasses looked like ski equipment. "Future husband, as drawn by Alice, date unknown".

Adrien looked up.

Gabriel winced.

"I did try to teach her how to draw but she threatened me with a break-up," he commented, eyes turned to the ceiling. "I hear I'm not the most pleasant of teachers."

His son chuckled and went on to the next pages.

"Alice, 17 year old, bikini protest". "Alice, 17 year old, whining about the pose hurting her back(side)", said a note on a sketch of her where she was folding herself like a contortionist. "You told me you were drawing ME!", under a detailed drawing of a summer dress covering a barely sketched silhouette. "Alice, 18 year old, birthday party". "Alice, 18 year old, wearing (mocking) future husband's clothes". "Alice, 18 year old, wearing (praising) future husband's designs". A half-finished drawing, where Adrien's mother wore thick glasses, was accompanied by a larger blurb of text: "Alice, 19 year old, wearing future husband's glasses, prior to long argument on how considerably easier it is to draw accurate portraits when one is in possession of one's glasses".

Adrien turned two more pages and found color drawings of an apartment filled with cushions and quilts, the stark furniture so covered in fluff and pastels that it looked cozy. "First apartment", the note said.

The next sketches were Alice again, at age twenty, twenty-one, twenty two, and so on. In her wedding dress, in jeans and t-shirt, in her pajamas, in maternity clothes.

And then, Adrien found himself.

The first drawing of him showed him as a newborn in his mother's arms. "Adrien, 1 day old". His breath caught in his throat.

"Thank you," he repeated.

It meant so much. More than he could express.

Gabriel put a hand on his shoulder and turned the page with the other one.

"Adrien, 2 day old, and Alice". "Adrien, 2 week old, and Maya the Bee". Adrien remembered that Maya toy. He had kept it for years.

They went past a page where Alice, in crumpled pajamas, was sipping coffee and glaring at the viewer. "Motherhood", said the text in the corner.
"Fatherhood was not pretty either," Gabriel mumbled. "Don't expect to find pictures."

There were dozens of sketches of Adrien after that, either alone or with his mother. His dad only stopped turning the pages when they reached a colorful illustration of six month old Adrien sleeping on two hundred seventeen stuffed cats.

You could tell there were two hundred seventeen stuffed cats because it was written in the corner. "Adrien and the 217 stuffed cats".

Cats. Most of them black. The young superhero couldn't help but smile.

"Why did you have two hundred seventeen cat plushies?" he asked. "How does that even happen?"

His father grunted.

"Your mother wanted pastel cushions. It's a long, long, loooong story."

###
I call it purring, not growling

Nathalie had known Gabriel was in love with her for quite some time now. He had made no secret of it. It showed. She did not delude herself into thinking it would last. She was a rebound relationship, his first breath of air after emerging from the grave he had buried himself in. It would fade as he learned to live again, and she would be fine with it.

She would.

She would.

Nathalie had known he was aware of his own feelings when he had made a point of kissing her goodbye, mere hours after discovering the birthday gift debacle, when the damage she could have caused to his relationship with his son still hung between them.

He had caught up with her as she left the mansion in the late evening, just to kiss her full on the lips, just to tell her he would be too busy to drop by her apartment later that night, yet to show her he would have loved to.

She would have liked to pretend she had not been kept awake by overwhelming relief.

###

She spent the next morning playing minesweeper while Gabriel talked to his son.

Then she worked until midnight.

She only went home at half past one.

###

Adrien followed his new schedule to the letter, more than any schedule Nathalie had attempted to have him respect for the past few years. Granted, knowing he made his father happy was an excellent incentive. It was stunning to observe. Nathalie had watched the boy try so hard to please Gabriel, and for so long, only to be crushed time and time again. Now, however...

Now, his father let him in.

In a normal family, it would not have been so satisfying to see a son sit in the same room as his parent to study. In a normal family, seeing basketball hoops appear in the courtyard would not have warmed your heart. In a normal family, hearing laughter in the house would not have been a new and welcome event.

Nathalie knew it was only possible because Gabriel's wounds were at long last starting to heal - finally, finally, finally - and watched it all unfold not with satisfaction but with the utmost relief.
Her hairpins started to go missing again.

Gabriel made sure to get caught and to steal a kiss or two.

He moved his things to a guest room so the master bedroom could be 'freshened up' (and by that he meant repainted, refurbished and entirely redecorated). And, as no ghosts lived in that guest room, Nathalie was invited to spend the night.

Things had taken a turn for the better.

Now, unfortunately, Hawk Moth had not fallen off the face of the earth.

###

Chat Noir was sulking.

There was only one thing he wanted in the world, one, and it was his date with Ladybug. He had more or less managed to bury his guilt. So she wanted to move on from Adrien Agreste. It was because of reasons. Reasons that were not especially valid in their current circumstances, which Ladybug was unaware of, which meant 'Adrien Agreste' had to somehow improvise.

He would come clean. He would. At the end of the first date. If it ever happened.

Three Akuma attacks in three days had delayed it a little.

Chat Noir would not have been opposed to a three AM rooftop picnic, but his partner swore that she needed sleep, especially now that school had started again.

Adrien, however… Well, there was some truth to the 'like father, like son' adage. Insomnia seemed to be hereditary.

At half past three, he found himself knocking on the window of Pat Messmer's office. He could not just slip in: the frame had been repaired and it was surprising he had not faced dire consequences for breaking in the first time. So Chat Noir knocked and waited for his father to let him in. He knew Gabriel was there. The lights were on.

It took a few moments, but his father came out of the secret passage. He raised his eyebrows when he recognized the young hero and walked to the window to open it.

His son grinned. He detached his staff from the wall and slipped inside, bowing.

"I knew you'd be here," the teenager said. "How are you?"

Gabriel's eyebrows traveled a little higher.

"Isn't tomorrow a school day?" he asked. "I figured after the fight Legal Reaction put you through, you'd have headed straight to bed."

Adrien cringed at the mention of the seven hours battle against an Evilized court clerk who, on top of minionizing three dozen people, had not stopped spewing legalese for a second.

"I'll let you know there's no law saying I have to sleep," he retorted. "And anyway, who are you to
"I'm merely defending a healthier lifestyle. There is a lot of evidence in support of good sleeping habits. It would be criminal of you to ignore it."

Chat Noir chuckled.

"Are you appealing to my better judgement?"

Gabriel shook his head, smiling, and headed for the trapdoor.

"What do you want, boy?"

"Nothing in particular," Adrien replied, following him into his 'secret lair'. "I figured you'd be bored while your 'quantique' was charging, I thought I'd drop by."

"How considerate," his father said, camouflaging a chuckle behind a snort.

The teenager looked around. The room was half empty. The magical artefacts that had been littering the tables and floor were gone, as well as the largest part of his father's notes. The aquariums remained, but only a handful of butterflies were left in them.

He blinked.

"What happened to your stuff?"

His father sat under the crystals, at the table his watch was on.

"It's all in storage. I'm to go on a trip soon, I didn't want to leave magical paraphernalia lying around. Especially not in a room so poorly concealed that two inexperienced kids managed to find it. No offense."

"None taken. When are you leaving?" Adrien asked, though he already knew the answer.

"As soon as possible, really. It's a trip I had to delay because of an unexpected contract, but the customer has been easier to deal with than I expected. The designs were sent to the workshops and my creative input is no longer required. So…"

"I see," Chat Noir murmured, slowly turning to inspect the room.

He couldn't push. Gabriel had warned 'Chat Noir' he would never discuss his family. The topic of Brazil was off limits, as was Alice's.

The boy did not quite know how to keep the conversation going. He improvised.

"Say! Do you have footage of tonight's battle? I could use constructive criticism."

His father shook his head.

"Not yet. TVI's crew was hypnotized and the fight did not get close enough to my company's buildings. I'd say 'try to drag the monster to one of my stores next time' but I'd prefer if you did not."

Chat Noir grinned.

"Alright. What about just observing my technique, then? I owe you for that tip on the pirouettes. If
you could point out my other mistakes, I'd be super grateful."

His dad stretched, smiling.

"Well then," he murmured, "let's see."

Adrien followed him to the roof.

Forty minutes and fifty-two 360 spins later, Gabriel punched him in the solar plexus and followed that by a tap to the chin. His son coughed, jumping back.

"And that," his father declared, "is why you don't beg for training when you're not willing to focus."

"Aouch."

"And do not whine, you are invulnerable."

"That was my pride. It is mortally wounded."

The joke earned him a snort and a roll of the eyes, but Adrien caught the hint of a smile on Gabriel's face. The designer walked to the door that led to the maintenance staircase.

"Go home and go to sleep, brat. You are dead on your feet."

"It's not that," Chat Noir muttered. "Just thinking of something else."

Gabriel gave him a pointed look.

"And I'm maybe a little tired," the teenager amended, "but I'm mostly thinking of something else."

"You are not helping your case."

The young hero scoffed and followed him inside. They walked back to the fake office in companionable silence. Chat fidgeted a little. Yes, he had something else on his mind and he wanted to blurt it out to the one person in the world who could possibly understand.

His father noticed his nervousness.

"No, no, no, I don't want to hear it," he stated as they walked out of the maintenance staircase.

"But."

"No."

"But I haven't said anything!" Chat Noir exclaimed, watching Gabriel open his office's door.

"Yet."

"But-

"But nothing. Whatever the problem is, I will not listen to it. Don't try."

Adrien pursed his lips. Gabriel gave him a side-look then walked down the secret passage. The boy scowled and followed.

"Alright then," he said.
His predecessor glowered at him, sitting down next to his watch but turned towards him.

Chat Noir raised his chin, smiling.

"I have a question."

"My rebuttal was no invitation to look for loopholes, boy."

Adrien pretended not to hear and went to sit on the corner of the table.

"How did you tell your Ladybug that you were Chat Noir?"

The only answer he got was a mumbled 'oh for god's sake', as his father turned to his watch and stared at it with the utmost focus.

"Come on!" his son pleaded. "It's an important question. The secret identity thing is supposed to be critical. It's practically a matter of national security."

"Before you can tell me how the fate of the world depends on my answer, let me say once again that I have no interest in teenage shenanigans."

"No teenage shenanigans involved. I swear."

"You are a terrible liar."

If he had dared to, Adrien would have grumbled a few choice words. As he was mostly a polite child, his mouth moved from side to side but he didn't say a word.

Gabriel rolled his eyes.

"What have you done?"

"I asked Ladybug on a date."

"Congratulations."

"After she specifically told me she fancied the civilian me but wanted to move on."

His father breathed in, ran his hands over his face and massaged his temples.

"You sure like to make your life complicated."

"I'll let you know it complicated itself just fine without my intervention."

The designer groaned.

Chat Noir crossed his arms.

"I planned to tell her. After our first date. That keeps getting delayed by Akuma. It's just… I'm not sure I want to tell her."

"Ah."

"I mean, I don't want her to like 'civilian me'. I don't especially like civilian me. I want her to like me, the obnoxious flirt with the silly puns, because it is who I am, and I'm afraid if she knows who I am, she'll want me to be less Chat and more… the other guy."
"Ah," Gabriel repeated, tapping his watch with the tip of a finger. It wasn't glowing yet, which meant it was not done charging.

"And I wish I had someone else who dealt with that identity divide to talk to, but no such luck, sorry. So if you had tips, even tiny, insignificant tips…"

"I can't say I do."

Chat Noir sighed.

"It was worth a try. Thanks anyway," he replied.

"Though, if you want input from a fellow costumed hero, you could always call Bee," his father declared. "Again."

Adrien blanched, choked and sputtered.

Gabriel snorted.

"S-she called you," the boy squeaked.

"Of course she did. By the way, I'm curious, how did you track her down? She's not exactly on LinkedIn."

"I 'borrowed' mister Bourgeois' contact book," Chat Noir mumbled. "I figured he would have her phone number, you know, for emergency purposes."

"That was both smart and incredibly stupid."

The teenager cleared his throat and looked away.

"I'm sorry?"

He suspected his father's reaction at that was 'raised eyebrows' at best and 'shooting daggers' at worst. He didn't check, staring at the butterflies in their aquariums instead.

After a minute, he cleared his throat.

"So did that call go well?"

"She expressed some concern over the concern I caused you. And by that I mean she yelled at me for ten minutes because 'the kitten was worried sick'."

Adrien winced.

His father smirked.

"That didn't go quite according to plan, did it, boy?"

Chat Noir buried his face in his hands, dragging the tips of his fingers down his cheeks.

_Not exactly._

Gabriel seemed to find the situation hilarious.

"Bee is both exceedingly reckless and straightforward. You will never get her to react like you want her to. I hope you learned your lesson."
"She wasn't supposed to tell you I contacted her," Chat Noir mumbled.

"It would of course have been impossible for me to figure that out had she abstained. I don't see how I would ever have suspected the one Miraculous holder I'm on speaking terms with. It would have been such a baffling mystery."

Adrien's grimace went from pained to tortured.

"Okay, okay, I get it. You can stop now."

Gabriel shook his head, turning away to hide his Cheshire cat grin.

His son studied his profile.

"You are not angry," he remarked.

"Luckily for you, Anne-Laure knows me well enough not to anger me unless she intends to. That being said, do not pull something like this again. My son and assistant are already conspiring to coddle me. There is no need to get my old friends involved."

So much for Nathalie's 'secret' plans.

"Alright. I won't do it again," Adrien promised. He paused for a second, then smiled. "You know, you seem to be doing much better."

Gabriel tilted his head to the side.

A moment went by.

"I think I am," he replied.

###

Strange how quickly you grew used to hearing another set of keys opening the door to your apartment. Strange how, after years of sleeping alone, you found you were not averse to feeling your mattress shift under someone else's weight, even if it meant that you had to lay on an ever so slightly inclined surface and you could not stop noticing it. Strange how you didn't mind a presence at all, when your home had been quiet and silence from the moment you had moved in. Nathalie had expected more of an adjustment period.

Gabriel did not drop by every evening. 'Every other night' was more like it. Still, he came, quietly slipping into bed in the early hours of morning when his vendetta kept him out late at night, or knocking at the door at eleven or so the other days. He waited for Adrien to go to bed before slipping out of the mansion to drive to Nathalie's, as if the boy was not smart enough to notice his father's absences. Of course, Gabriel's standards of behavior around his son bordered on the Victorian. He would kiss Nathalie in front of the boy - Adrien knew they were seeing each other, the charade was up - but it would be quick pecks on the lips, good morning kisses, nothing more. If caught demonstrating the slightest bit of inappropriateness, Gabriel would get incredibly flustered (which you could only notice if you knew him well and watched very hard for the signs).

He would say he had an example to set. Clearly, he was insane.
At some point, Nathalie would have to tell Adrien to find himself a sane role model, preferably before his father's notion of acceptable displays of affection could mess him up for life.

At some point.

She walked out of her shower at half past eleven on a Monday night, dried her hair, brushed her teeth, then slipped into a nightdress and made her way to the kitchen. She stopped in front of her bedroom and peeked inside. She half-expected to find Gabriel sitting at her desk with his laptop and a pile of paperwork. Instead, she found him lying in bed with his laptop and a notepad, which did not surprise her at all.

Gabriel had showered before her so he was squeaky-clean, with hair tousled beyond recognition. He kept brushing it back, wincing when an unruly lock dropped back to tickle the corner of his eye. He raised his eyebrows at Nathalie, who smiled and pointed outside. She left him to his work.

She would join him in a moment. She just had to locate her phone, which was somewhere in the kitchen, as far as she remembered. She walked on a bobby pin on her way. She picked it up then looked around for the others. There had to be at least one by the front door, and five others between said door and the bedroom. Nathalie only found four. She dropped them on the kitchen counter, next to her... phone.

I swear I can only find things when I stop looking for them.

She plugged the phone to its charger, checking the sixteen email notifications she had received since Gabriel's arrival, not two hours before. Most were forwards of his emails, though Jagged Stone's assistant had sent two pages of clear feedback on the test garments Stone's dancers had received. It was a direct translation of the musician's quick "all of it is just great, I mean like the blue ones could use some minor changes but don't sweat it". A quick look at the email confirmed that the adjustments needed would not delay the production of the final pieces (the few that weren't done yet). Stone tended to prefer to work with young talents, people he could help obtain the recognition they deserved. However, for this specific tour, working with Gabriel had been the best possible choice: he had the most experience designing dance costumes and had ironed out the kinks before they could make themselves known. Nathalie had stood by Stone's choreographer's side as he studied the original designs and she had seen the man's face go from guarded to surprised to smiling. "I can actually work with this," he had exclaimed, with the tone of someone who was not usually that lucky.

The adjustments could wait for the first four shows to be over. They would not require Gabriel's direct involvement. Every single outfit would be complete for the first show of the tour, on the upcoming Saturday.

Nathalie spotted a fifth bobby pin under the kitchen table. She collected it and put it away with the others. She sighed as she did so but caught herself smiling.

For an instant, she stared at her phone and considered emailing her mother.

"You were right," she could have written. "I'm seeing that 'dreamy' man."

Then she realized she had not talked to her mother in five, maybe six years, or seven. She was not sure. They had argued about Nathalie not caring about something that had happened to some family member, though what exact 'something' was anyone's guess. Nathalie did not remember. The rest of her family had drifted away much earlier than Aurélie. Her father had called her back in 2012, but that had been to ask for her help with tax evasion. She was good with numbers.
There was not a single personal contact in Nathalie's phone. It had never mattered. Her life revolved around work. Everything else was a distraction. She had nothing to share and, until now, nothing she wanted to.

Her apartment was a place where she went to sleep. Her overpriced home theater system was a background noise machine she used when she had to wipe her mind clean. Her designer furniture was there to fill the space in a flat that matched her generous paycheck, yet she could not remember ever interacting with some of the chairs or sofas. Her dining table was a eight seater. She used it as a desk.

She could not be bothered to maintain relationships her work did not benefit from. She had no understanding of the concept of loneliness. She was satisfied alone. She was happy alone.

Against all odds, she no longer wanted to be.

She returned to her bedroom and slipped into bed, next to a Gabriel who shifted a little to the side to make room for her. He didn't look away from his laptop's screen, even when Nathalie scooted closer and wrapped an arm over his belly. She felt him relax, however. He breathed out and smiled.

"Seems everything will be ready in time for Stone's show," he said after a few minutes of reading his emails in companionable silence.

Nathalie gave a little hum of approval. Gabriel moved on to the next mail, typed an answer, and so on.

She inched closer, running her hand through his hair and squinting a little as she parted it from side to side. She was checking for roots. The eyebrows did not lie: he had gone grey long ago. She idly wondered if there was still some ash-blond hair to be found under all that bleach and wax. The man used more chemicals on his hair than she did, which was kind of an accomplishment.

He scowled, shook his head and tried to move away from her fingers.

Nathalie narrowed her eyes.

She flicked his messy hair to the side, which got Gabriel to click his tongue and glare.

"You hate that!" she exclaimed.

He glowered at her. She flicked his hair in the other direction.

"And here I thought the whole bobby pins thing was just childish of you. But you know exactly how aggravating it is!"

"It is not the same."

"It is exactly the same."

"You are an excellent liar, but I doubt even you could look me in the eye and tell me my hair is mesmerizing."

Nathalie grumbled, wrapping her arm around him once again. He smirked and returned to his work, dealing with an email from Stella Spotlight and reports from the Chinese workshops.

"I feel terribly unproductive," Nathalie ended up mumbling.

Not that she planned to get her tablet out and start working.
Gabriel chuckled. That good humor died down quickly. For the best part of a minute, he stared at his screen, lost in thought. He put his hand over Nathalie's. He seemed to hesitate, his nervousness clear in the way his entire body tensed.

"We are going to have to review my trip arrangements," he told her. "Maybe see about moving the departure date to next week."

Nathalie sat up.

What had he kept to himself this time?

Gabriel ran his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"I wouldn't say I have a lead, but… I have the closest thing to a lead I have had in years," he explained, turning his laptop so she could look at the screen. "I got some answers from…" - He sucked his lips in and bit down. - "From the young heroes. Not much to go by, but it's worth investigating."

He opened an ancient-looking picture of a strangely shaped bird drawn on moldy parchment. Even considering the age and style of the piece, the creature was odd, with a large head and stunted wings, but a long train of colorful feathers.

Gabriel kept his eyes on the screen, making a point not to look at Nathalie.

"This is Zharr," he announced. "I think I mentioned that Alice got her power from a minor deity, which will be the 'friend' I got in touch with. Hawk Moth is paired with an insane butterfly spirit named Bella. Zharr is another of them."

He tapped the space bar, moving to the next picture. It was a black and white photograph on yellowed paper that had to be a century old. It showed a masked woman wrapped in a shawl, whose dress parted on the front to uncover what looked like a dark, embroidered unitard. You couldn't see an inch of the woman's skin but her hair was black, curly and fell to her hips.

"Zharr is a peacock spirit," Gabriel continued. "However, he is best known as the 'Firebird', thanks to his flamme-summoning powers. His heroes go by variations of that name. The latest was an American woman who was photographed in New York in 1895, after saving the life of the Attorney General. She vanished two years later and was never found again. Neither was Zharr's Miraculous."

Nathalie frowned.

"Where was she last spotted?"

She suspected she was about to hear 'the Amazonian rainforest'. She was wrong.

"Portland," her lover replied. "However, Hawk Moth seemed to believe he would find the miracle stone in South America, and I figure I can follow the leads he followed. If I discover where he travelled to, I might find more information about Alice. I know there is little hope, but I have to try."

His assistant forced herself to breathe normally. She had been about to take a deep breath, but did not want him to misinterpret her reaction. She did not want to sound impatient. She was not impatient. She could not have put a name on her feelings if she had tried.

"What have you found so far?" she asked.
"Nothing. But going back to Pacaás Novos with a new outlook might help me spot details I missed so far."

###

Adrien had never played so much basketball in his life. His coach was still nursing that 'broken leg' he had contracted with Nathalie's help, which gave Adrien some free time after class. He spent that time enthusiastically playing basketball in the courtyard, because there was now a basketball hoop in the courtyard, installed there at his father's request. Adrien had not asked (he would never had dared). It was all Gabriel's idea. Well, it was maybe Gabriel's idea. Marinette having yelled at him to get one was a distinct possibility.

The boy wanted to show how grateful he was, so he practiced.

It was exactly what he was doing after school on Tuesday the sixth when a grappling hook flew above the courtyard's walls, hit the ground, then was slowly heaved up by whoever had thrown it from the street.

"What the..." the teenager murmured.

"Now that's new," Plagg commented, landing on his shoulder and hiding under his shirt.

The grappling hook anchored itself to the metallic fence at the top of the wall.

Adrien frowned and watched, ready to transform.

Someone heaved themselves up. The first thing the boy saw was a yellow baseball cap that obscured a woman's face, then sunburned shoulders under a dusty white tank top, then a pair of ripped jeans.

The woman threw herself over the metallic fence and crashed into the courtyard, backside first.

"Crap, that was higher than I remembered," she mumbled, getting to her feet and trying to recover her grappling hook by pulling on it. "Damn it."

Adrien gaped.

"This is going to get interesting," Plagg whispered, giggling.

His holder blinked.

"Ah, uh, Mrs.?" he called, raising a hand to catch the intruder's attention.

She turned to him, her blond ponytail bobbing behind her. Her hair was messy and dirty. Her eyes were hidden behind aviator sunglasses, not to mention under her baseball cap. Her skin was various shades of suntanned to burned, with the brighter marks of different shapes of sleeves all over her shoulders and arms. She was covered in scars and even had a few tattoos. Her clothes were cheap and patched up, just like her old army backpack. Still, you could not not recognize her. Be it in frame or features, she looked exactly like an older Chloé.

Anne-Laure Lenoir lifted her sunglasses, pushing her cap up with them. Her very blue eyes went wide.
"Holy shit, don't you look just like your mom!" she exclaimed, abandoning her grappling hook to join him. "Hello!"

He swallowed. It dawned on him that his father was going to kill him. Well, to kill Chat Noir, not that it made any difference.

"H-hi?" he stuttered. "I-I'm sorry, but… who are you?"

She beamed, tilting her head to the left then to the right to look at him from all angles.

"I'm Anne-Laure. Old friend of your mom," she replied, fishing into her bag to find a pack of cigarettes. "Got you a Maya the Bee plushie Alice swore you took everywhere, in case it rings a bell."

"It… does ring a bell," Adrien replied, watching her cup her hands around a cigarette as she lit it.

Plagg had hidden himself well but the young hero could feel him wriggling.

"Anyway," miss Lenoir continued, "I couldn't use the main gates because of reasons. Is your dad home?"

"He is," Gabriel replied from the house's entrance. "Would you mind keeping your second hand smoke away from my son?"

The visitor turned away from Adrien, blew a cloud of smoke out, then turned to Gabriel with a grin.

"Hey there, Sourpuss. Long time no see."

###
Gabriel's first encounter with Queen Bee, as his hero self, had been about as pleasant as his previous encounters with Anne-Laure Lenoir.

"So that's the jackass you told me about?" the yellow-clad superheroine had asked Ladybug as she landed next to her on a rain-soaked roof, after what had been the most inefficient battle of their entire hero career.

The young Chat Noir could have been competent, even if it had only been his second day on the job. Unfortunately, his tools were inadequate. He had figured out on his first fight - just one night before - that the best way to use his magical sword was not to use it at all.

Heroes did not kill. Heroes did not harm. Oh, he was certain the blade would come in handy at some point, should he need to cut a rope or slice an obstacle in two. Against Akumatized civilians, however, the whole stabbing and slicing thing was ill-advised. His years of competitive fencing were of no use. He had to rely on hand-to-hand combat and, quite frankly, he was a wimp.

Chat Noir had joined his first battle because Ladybug was in trouble, with the plan to save her life and steal her heart in one fell swoop. He had ended up battered, bruised and rescued by the girl he had been trying to impress.

That second battle had gone about the same way, except Queen Bee had been there to witness it.

The 'jackass' remark had been delivered with a smirk, as Anne-Laure wrapped an arm around Ladybug's shoulders.

Chat Noir had grinned at that, while Gabriel's blood boiled under his mask.

"I did not say 'jackass',' Ladybug had corrected, arms crossed. "I said overconfident."

"And then you described a jackass," Queen Bee had helpfully clarified.

Alice's concern about accuracy had not extended to denying her best friend's words.

There had been an awkward silence during which the young Ladybug had raised her chin to appear less nervous than she actually was. Bee had given Chat Noir her smuggest smile.

"Hey, no need to get stingy," he had told her, trying his best to sound nice and humorous and vaguely hurt.

That had not worked at all.

Ladybug had breathed in, growing tenser.

"Now," she had cut in as Anne-Laure mumbled a 'never heard that one before', "we both remember how overwhelming the 'secret identity' thing can get, how you can get a little carried away at first. I'm sure Chat Noir only needs a little time to adapt."

"Why, Milady, I'm open to suggestions," Chat Noir had replied with a bow and a wink, taking that opportunity to get a step closer to her.
That had ticked at least five checkboxes on the 'jackass red flags' list.

Truth to be said, Gabriel had been trying his best to seduce her. He had not meant to come off as an insufferable jerk. It just so happened that he was not very good at flirting.

He had started out in life with three defining features: he was exceedingly ugly, exceedingly unpleasant, but also exceedingly rich. It meant that he had never needed to learn the subtleties of seduction, not even the pretty clean-cut basics like 'being nice to girls'. It had not been required of him. Girls were throwing themselves at him whether he wanted them to or not (sometimes seventeen times). His girlfriends had never expected him to be charming, friendly or even remotely engaging. They wanted one thing from him and, as long as he provided it, he got everything he wanted.

He was woefully unprepared to interacting with a girl who was no gold-digger. On top of that, he was a teenage boy. He was woefully unprepared to interacting with girls, period.

Ladybug had taken a step back.

"Well. You might be eager to help but you have to realize we have a dynamic, and if you don't pay attention to it, you will only slow us down," she had explained. "If you interfere again, I will take you out of the fight. Do I make myself clear?"

"Purrfectly."

Both the heroines had winced.

Decades had passed and he still remembered how much he had hated himself for that line and the reaction it had gotten him. Not that he had showed it.

"I want to improve," he had told Ladybug instead, pretending Bee wasn't there. "You could show me the ropes. Maybe let me join you on patrol."

As many introverted jackasses, Gabriel had not been the best with social clues. He did not care about them much and tended to miss obvious ones, such as how poorly received it was to totally ignore the closest friend of the girl you were flirting with. He had greatly improved at paying attention with the years. At sixteen, however, blinking neon arrows would not have been enough to make him understand how many points he was losing every time he opened his mouth.

Bee had scoffed at his words.

Ladybug had frowned, taking a long look at the sword hanging from his belt.

"I don't think patrol is a good idea," she had replied. "I don't think you can be trusted yet. Observe us from afar if you want to, handle the petty thieves and the cats in trees situations, but leave Hawk Moth to us for now. We'll get in touch with you if you're needed."

Her words had been punctuated by the beeping of her earrings.

Gabriel's ring had beeped a split second later.

"Time to go," Queen Bee had commented, giving Chat Noir a triumphant smirk. "Till we meet again, Sourpuss."

Ladybug's only goodbye had been a sharp nod, then her 'predestined partner', her supposed 'pendant' had watched her race away on the roofs, to vanish over the horizon with Bee speeding
after her.

He had dropped into an alley to untransform and stood there shaking, fists clenched. After a moment, he had clasped his hands behind his back, pretending they weren't spasming in fury.

"This cannot happen again," he had told Plagg. "I need a different strategy to make up for the lack of a weapon. I find it very difficult to wrap my mind around the concept of long fights."

His first instinct was to land a single crippling blow to take the enemy out.

Not acceptable.

"You'll figure it out," his Kwami had replied, darting up with a mischievous smirk.

"W-wait! Where are you going?"

"I don't know about you but I really want to see what the girl looks like."

###

Being in Miss Lenoir's presence was as disorienting as talking to her on the phone, if not more. She was special, if only for the fact that Gabriel did not murder her for keeping that cigarette lit. Instead, the designer had to walk down the stairs, join his old acquaintance and rip the cigarette from her hands. He then threw it to the ground.

"Let's just go inside," he said after a deep breath, rolling his eyes.

Adrien breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe he wouldn't die, after all. This was not how his father reacted to people he wanted gone. Gabriel was very good at getting his point across.

The teenager followed the two adults inside, with his dad leading the way.

Miss Lenoir walked in and froze. Adrien nearly collided with her back. He took a step to the side and turned to her, concerned. She was staring at the family portrait at the top of the stairs.

"Gabriel, Jesus Christ," she whispered, raising her hand and dropping it on Adrien's head without looking his way.

She distractedly patted his head twice, then a third time, as he wriggled in unease.

Gabriel had not paid attention to her reaction at all. He had gone straight for Nathalie's desk, to tell her they had a visitor and that coffee would be required. When he turned back to Anne-Laure, it was to give her a puzzled frown. He followed her stare to the painting, his confusion growing. He mouthed a 'what now?'

Clearly, he saw nothing wrong with the painting. Adrien was of the opinion the picture was gloomy and depressing, but was not sure it warranted swearing and pity. Then again, there was probably some history at play.

The retired Queen Bee took a deep breath and shook her head, grinning at Nathalie who was coming out of the office.
"Hi! Long time no see," the blonde said.

Nathalie retreated behind polite blankness, answering with a lukewarm 'Good afternoon, miss Lenoir. Will you be drinking coffee or would you prefer tea?'.

"Coffee, thanks!" Anne-Laure replied, walking into the office without waiting for an invitation.

She threw her army bag in a corner and sat on Nathalie's desk.

Gabriel pursed his lips and rolled his eyes. He stared at the ceiling for ten seconds at least.

"I'll join you in a moment, Anne-Laure. Adrien, a word, if you please," he said, pushing his son into the dining room and closing the door behind them.

The teenager clasped his hands behind his back and waited for him to speak.

His father frowned at the door. He turned to Adrien, looking ever so slightly dejected.

"As I'm sure you figured out who that is… The Bourgeois girl is not to hear about this visit, are we clear?"

There was actual concern in his voice. Considering he was talking about a girl he could not stand and would not meet, it was clear nothing good would happen if Chloé discovered her mother's presence in Paris.

Adrien nodded.

"Alright."

"I'll try to send Anne-Laure on her way before she can steal something or set the house on fire," Gabriel continued, still scowling despite the faint note of humor in his voice. "Try to stay out of her way."

"I'll be in my room," the young model promised.

He did go to his room, for a total of sixteen seconds. Roughly the time it took him to transform. Not a minute later, Chat Noir was hanging upside down next to the window of his father's office, ears wide open. All four of them.

"... San Francisco, mostly," miss Lenoir was saying. "Spent two months in Japan earlier this year, went to China too, you know I don't like to stay in one place for long."

"So I take it you won't be staying?" Gabriel replied, his voice laced with amusement.

"Hell no. I was planning to hitchhike my way to Italy, you know, pay a visit to Babyfox."

There was a silence, but Adrien did not dare peeking through the window to see what was going on. He waited.

"You didn't have to drop by," his father ended up saying, his tone quiet at first. It turned gruff. "I don't know what the boy told you, but I am doing just fine."

"Heh, I figured I might as well show up. Paris was on my way. And I was a bit curious about the kid, really. I've been watching those Ladyblog videos, he's a cutie. Plagg must be walking all over him."
The 'cutie' wrinkled his nose.

Gabriel chuckled.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"You like him!" Anne-Laure exclaimed. "You do. Yes, you do." - That was pleasant to hear. - "So, what's he like?"

"He is a sweet, caring boy going through a severe identity crisis. He somehow convinced himself that his civilian personality does not actually exist, which is beyond asinine." - On his perch, Adrien winced. His father went on. - "But he'll get past that. Overall, I'd say he is a good match for Plagg."

The eavesdropping teenager grinned at that. It was heartwarming, even if he knew his father would not have been caught dead saying that to his face.

"I'm so going to try and catch a glimpse," miss Lenoir commented. She paused. Her tone changed. "He sounded really worried about you, Sourpuss. What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on," the designer sighed. "I am still looking for Alice, I asked for information from Tikki, and the boy grew overly concerned."

You could hear him roll his eyes. The lies were less obvious, but Adrien hoped miss Lenoir knew Gabriel well enough to see through them.

She didn't push.

"How is that going?" she asked instead.

There was another silence, longer. Chat Noir heard footsteps.

"I have nothing," his father announced. "So I've been looking into Zharr's disappearance, since Hawk Moth might have been after that Miraculous. I'm going back to Brazil next week, try to figure out why Hawk Moth thought the area was worth investigating. You never know."

Adrien heard Anne-Laure take a deep breath and exhale.

"You can try … but damn it, Sourpuss. I trekked from one side to Pacaás Novos to the other for eight months after she vanished. It's the mother of all haystacks. You could search for decades and come up with nothing. You know that."

She got no answer. Chat Noir's sensitive ears were not enough to interpret the faint noises he heard.

Then miss Lenoir started swearing under her breath.

The young hero lowered himself by a few inches. He peeked into the office to see his father pacing from one side of the room to the other, gesturing in silence, fists opening and clenching as he shook in rage. It didn't take him long to collect himself, but even though he had stilled and quieted, Gabriel's face had a faraway look.

Miss Lenoir swore again, putting a hand on the previous Chat Noir's shoulder.

"Come on."

Adrien heaved himself up before one of them could notice him. His gut was twisting in worry.
He had not called Queen Bee for her to pick at his father's wounds, even if she was not doing so on purpose.

Gabriel clicked his tongue.

"I don't recall ever letting the arduousness of a task discourage me before."

"Want me to make a list, jackass? Cause we'll be here all day."

The barb seemed to lighten Gabriel's mood.

"Don't start throwing stones, Bee. We both know who has the most ammunition here."

"Fire away."

Adrien's father scoffed

"I am not going to stop looking. I am aware I might never find the slightest hint. It doesn't mean I should stop."

"When did I ever say you should stop?" miss Lenoir replied, aggravated. "We've all been looking. Okay, maybe not me, but it's not like I don't check the area every six months or so. Fu searched for her. Even Mona tried, though you know how her health was. She was family. D'you think I'd expect you to drop it?"

Adrien let all of that sink in, particularly the news that master Fu himself had been investigating his mother's disappearance and had not said a word about it.

Silence fell.

Whatever happened next happened through looks and gestures, because he heard nothing at all but the conversation started again.

"What do you have on Zharr?" Anne-Laure asked.

"Next to nothing. Pictures of the last Firebird. Art of the one before. News clippings from the 19th century. What does Fu have?"

"I have no clue. I figure if there was ever a lead, he checked it. Now, though, he's no longer looking into that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Fu is looking for a new Turtle, or at least that's what I gathered when I emailed Volpina's granddaughter last week. I can't say it comes as a surprise."

"That would be why the young heroes have had such a hard time contacting him," Gabriel mused, his tone detached. He dismissed the topic entirely. "Any news of Waspp?"

Adrien still remembered the light, unconcerned way the woman had answered his own questions about the bee Kwami. 'I handed the Miraculous to some Hawaiian kid thirteen years ago or so'.

The contrast was striking when she replied to Gabriel.

"Well, with some luck, she wasn't pulverized along with David."
Chat Noir's stomach lurched.

Gabriel sighed.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

"Water under the bridge," she muttered. "I talked to that kid twice, I'm not losing sleep over it. Still, the best bet is that Waspp is stuck under a rock somewhere in the Pacific Ocean."

"I'm sure she'll surface," Adrien's father commented, voice barely above a whisper.

"She always does. Hey, think I could borrow one of your fancy showers for a while? I walked here from the airport and I... " - She sniffed. - "... stink like a sewer drain."

"Yes, Bee. Of course, Bee. Don't steal anything on the way."

###

The teleporters got the short end of the stick.

Paper Cute had not known about the net under the Pont de la Concorde, because it had not been there a week before. It had not been there for long after her drowning, either. She had not meant to get trapped between it and drifting debris. She had not meant to drop into the water to begin with, from what Alice had inferred. Only surprise could explain how an Akuma armed with a blade that could cut through steel could be restrained by mere rope.

Alice had returned home at midnight and found her husband attempting to teach their two year old son how to read. She had been too crushed to comment on how two year old children were supposed to have bedtimes (a concept Gabriel no longer understood).

Adrien had not cared much about the letters, even if his father had been trying to get him to spell 'Maya'. He had been telling his father all about Simba. The boy had an affinity for felines that made his father proud (Alice used the word 'smug' to describe his exact state of mind).

Upon seeing his mother, Adrien had jumped out of Gabriel's arms to trot to her, hugging her leg. She had picked him up and hugged him. Her eyes had remained empty.

"Did you have fun tonight?" she had asked.

"I wash Simmha," Adrien had exclaimed, waving at the television.

"You watched Simba?" Alice had repeated with fake glee, at which point Gabriel had collected their son from her arms, knowing she was about to break down.

"Time to go to bed, Adrien," he had announced, whirling to the door and making sure the boy could not see the look on his mother's face. "Let's get you Maya."

With some coaxing and some guile, he had managed to get the toddler into bed. Adrien had even promised to stay in it.

After that, Gabriel had followed the sound of running water to the bathroom, where he had found his wife curled up in a ball under the shower. Greyish dirt was washing out of her hair.
"The victim drowned," she had told him, in a voice devoid of emotion.

It was a hard blow, made even harder by her expectation that she would never have to watch one of Hawk Moth's victims die again. Unfortunately, while he was gone, remnants of Bella's magic were spread all over town, in long hidden Akuma that infected people at random. They had appeared frequently in the first weeks after Hawk Moth's defeat. Now, they only showed up every few months, less and less often.

Gabriel had removed his shirt and shoes to join his wife, sitting on the tiled floor under a stream of lukewarm water. Carefully, he had put his hands on her shoulders, brushing her hair to the side until she had relaxed enough to let him hold her. Which he had done, pressing himself against her back and rocking back and forth with her.

"She just," Alice had gasped. "She trapped herself. I think she teleported l-lower than she meant to. B-breathed water in."

Gabriel had held her closer, pressing his lips to her temple.

"I c-couldn't even find the fetish," she had snapped. "I couldn't even do that."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he had murmured. "I'll help you look. I'm sure it will surface."

He had known it would not.

###

Nathalie walked into Gabriel's bedroom to retrieve the earrings she had left there in the morning.

She froze.

Her thoughts rearranged themselves into boxes and arrows and Arial 10 letters.

Are the security cameras working?

Yes.

Did I keep an eye on the security footage since Anne-Laure Lenoir grappling-hooked her way into the mansion?

Yes.

Did I see her lock herself into a bathroom?

Yes.

Did she ever walk out of that bathroom?

No.

"How did you get in here?" Nathalie exclaimed, staring at her employer's 'old friend', who was browsing through his drawers.
The blonde took a step away from the desk she had been rummaging through, frowning at Nathalie. Her hands slipped back to her hips, the left one closing over the candy cane stuck between her belt and her jeans.

She did not answer.

Nathalie straightened her spine and squared her shoulders.

"Whatever you stole, I suggest you hand it back right now," she said, turning her tablet on. "Though we will still have to see if mister Agreste wishes to call the police."

Anne-Laure sighed in annoyance, with the same air of bored rebellion that had been her go-to expression in her early twenties. Not that Nathalie had known her well. The woman had left town right after her daughter's birth, and that couldn't have been more than a year after Nathalie had started working for Gabriel. Not even a year, really. Chloé and Adrien were very close in age.


Nathalie's mind went blank. Entirely blank. The diagrams faded, so did her thoughts. She recovered quickly enough, but only felt surreal calmness.

Anne-Laure had been Alice's closest friend.

What did she know?

"I'm listening."

"If you know where he keeps it, you need to take it and hand it over to Ladybug and Chat Noir. He should not have that thing in his possession."

Nathalie keep her expression neutral. She clasped her hands behind her back.

"Why?"

"Because, long story short, that's a magical gadget that'll get him killed. The heroes should have it."

Gabriel's assistant pursed her lips. She took a deep breath. She stared at a point into the distance, at the level of Lenoir's knees.

"First things first, he keeps the watch on his person at all times. He is very cautious with it."

That announcement got her an exasperated scoff.

"Furthermore," Nathalie continued, "I am not going to go behind his back and steal it from him."

"Trust me here, you have no idea what kind of a mess he's in. There's a lot of things you don't know about Gabriel, and."

"What I know," Nathalie cut in, taking a gamble, "is that if that watch goes missing, not only will he find another way to track Hawk Moth down, but he will also make sure no one can find out about it. He will turn his back on whatever tenuous connection Chat Noir managed to create between them. It would make things worse."

"You know what the watch does?" Anne-Laure exclaimed, staring at her in disbelief. She opened
and closed her mouth. "He told you what the watch does?"

"Did he tell you?"

She made sure to remain collected, schooling her features into a perfectly blank mask.

The blonde seized her up, studying her face with a deepening frown. There was no reading Nathalie. She had practiced her poker face for decades now, against much more perceptive individuals than Lenoir.

"What do you know?" the visitor asked, her tone cautious yet combative.

"What do you know?"

"Are we gonna play that game? Because you should know I don't fold."

That was pure bravado. She would fold. The woman did not know how to keep her temper in check. On top of that, she was both curious and concerned. It showed.

Gabriel's assistant raised her eyebrows and gave the blonde a dubious look.

Anne-Laure rolled her eyes. She clenched her jaw. She bit the inside of her cheeks, staring at a corner of the ceiling then at the dresser. As most people with a volatile disposition, she couldn't take the silence. Her impatience would get the better of her every time.

"Listen, I just want to keep the jerk from getting himself killed!" she snapped without meeting Nathalie's eyes. "What do you care what the hell I know? I know more than you do."

"Yet you clearly don't know enough if you can't see that Gabriel is not a man you stop."

Lenoir sneered.

"No. Shit. Doesn't mean I can just let him commit suicide. Sometimes, you have to give people a solid shove to stop them from acting like total idiots."

"Not Gabriel," Nathalie snarled. She ran her tongue against the roof of her mouth. When she spoke again, her tone was collected. "You cannot force him into anything because he cannot stand it. And you cannot convince him of anything, because he has never and will never listen to anyone. If he has something to gain…" - Images flashed through Nathalie's mind, of Gabriel and Alice screaming at each other, and falling back into marital bliss for a few weeks or days. - "If he has something to gain, he will pretend to comply and go behind your back every single time." - Look. At. Your. Son. - "If he actually cares, he might try his hardest… until he burns out, that is. But, at the end of the day, the only way to get Gabriel to do anything is to let him decide to on his own."

She bit her tongue. She had not meant for her tirade to be so long or to reveal quite as much.

Anne-Laure gave her a quizzical look but did not comment. The woman pursed her lips, eyes glazing over as she analyzed Nathalie's words.

Nathalie did not give her the time to respond to them.

"Why are you here, miss Lenoir?"

"I'm here because a little kid in spandex called me to tell me my 'old friend' wasn't doing so well." - She shrugged. - "I was long overdue for a visit, anyway."
"Why you? You have been gone for fifteen years. You are not the first person I would have thought of."

"Gabriel dropped my name at random in a conversation, apparently. I didn't question the kid."

"Once again," Nathalie insisted, "but taking into consideration how well informed you are on the magical artefacts my employer owns, and how I am aware of Mrs Agreste's... singular hobby."

Nathalie's awareness of the existence of the watch and of its use had surprised Anne-Laure. This revelation left her shell-shocked.

"He told you," she said.

A handful of seconds went by.

"He told you," she repeated. Then she squinted. "Wait. Singular hobby, you'll have to be clearer."

"A fondness for red and ribbons."

The blonde gaped, blinking over and over again. She ended up bursting into laughter.

"Well I'll be... " - She snorted and coughed. - "... damned."

She didn't manage to stop laughing. Nathalie felt herself cross her arms. It took an eternity for Anne-Laure to calm down. When she did, she waved her hand and shook her head.

"The kitten called me because I'm the only other superhero he managed to get in touch with," she explained. "Queen Bee. Retired, just in case it's not blatant from the grappling hook thing. I wish I could still fly."

Now they were getting somewhere.

Nathalie did not remember much about Queen Bee. She did not remember much about Alice's Ladybug either. Years had gone by. The two heroines had been camera-shy, too. They had not bothered giving interviews and entertaining the press. On top of that, teenage Nathalie had never cared much about superheroes and magic. It had all been background noise to her, bothersome. She loved the void and he quiet. She loved the uncomplicated. She loved normalcy.

In the current circumstances, she needed competent help.

"Are there others like you?" she asked. "Adults? Adults with less..." - She clicked her tongue. - "... with a subtler approach of sensitive issues?"

Anne-Laure sat on the corner of the bed (dropped on it, more exactly). She snorted.

"No. There's just the kids, now. The bug, the kitten, and the baby fox in Rome. Sorry to disappoint, and thanks for the vote of confidence."

Nathalie rolled her eyes.

"I don't want you to intervene for the exact same reason I told that Ladybug girl to stay away. I'm not going to let her meddle in and turn a precarious situation into a disaster, and the same goes for you. I've been trying my hardest to help Gabriel out of this mess. There is visible progress, just ask Adrien. I won't allow anyone to compromise that."

Lenoir breathed in, wincing.
"Jesus Christ, this again." - She pursed her lips, looking pained. - "Listen. I'm sure there's visible progress. But you've no idea what you're dealing with here, and he just... You have no clue how often I heard that exact same thing. Which was every two damn months for the best part of a decade. And I swear I wish you the best. Hell, I want your 'subtler approach' to work. D'you think I like to see him miserable? But I'd rather take that watch away so he can't go after Hawk Moth the next time something sets him off, which will happen because it always, always does!"

Nathalie bit down on her lower lip. She swallowed and clenched her belly, as if it could smother the ball of anxiety that was twisting and turning in her stomach.

*Every two damn months for the best part of a decade.* Because Alice had been there before, of course, hoping for a change, for lasting change.

The idea was sickening.

Then again, Nathalie had faced Fortune 500 CEOs and enraged rock stars and flown above the skies of Paris in a man-sized soap bubble and dealt with stalkers and death threats and paparazzi and she was a competent adult and no one could prove otherwise.

She could handle this.

"Be that as it may," she said.

That was as far as she got.

Anne-Laure looked at her, wrinkling her overly tanned nose (nearly burned, really, with the paler mark of ever present sunglasses. The woman needed makeup.).

"Be that as it may?"

Nathalie clasped her hands behind her back and dug her nails into her wrist.

"Be that as it may, the only assistance you should give now will have to be limited to friendly conversations. If he snaps, then intervene. In the meantime, let me deal with this. I have things under control."

What a lie that was.

Anne-Laure rolled her eyes.

"Fine. Fine ", she snapped. "But don't ever say I didn't warn you."

"I won't," Nathalie replied, showing none of her doubts and distress.

The retired heroine nodded, pulled her candy cane out of her belt and vanished.

###

Chapter End Notes

Things that were not supposed to happen in this fic, ever: Anne-Laure making an
appearance.
Miss Lenoir stayed for dinner, but not much longer.

By half past nine, she took her army bag, two bottle of pilfered fine spirits and her grappling hook, and made her way out of the courtyard the same way she had come in.

Adrien watched her go. So did his father.

"Now don't you think you are being a little overdramatic?" Gabriel asked as Anne-Laure scaled the wall with unexpected ease considering her age and the size of her bag.

"Nope!"

"If you are sure… "

"I am sure," the blonde assured, heaving herself above the wall.

She climbed over the metallic fence and waved to them. Gabriel rolled his eyes while Adrien waved back, nonplussed.

"Have a nice trip," his father said as a good bye. "I hope you'll enjoy Italy."

"Thanks!" his old friend replied. "Take care." - She turned to Adrien. - "Goodbye, kiddo. It was nice to see you again."

"It was," Adrien said, though he did not remember meeting her before. He had been too young. "Have a nice trip, Miss Lenoir."

She grinned, nodded and dropped down into the street.

A minute went by.

"I'm having those fences electrified," Gabriel commented.

Adrien cleared his throat.

"She did go out of her way - literally - not to use the main gates."

"She did."

The boy tried to meet his father's eyes, to no avail. He really wanted to ask questions, but Gabriel did not want to hear them. So Adrien stared. Unblinkingly.

Gabriel gave him a side-look.

"It's in the girl's best interests," he said in resigned annoyance.

"It's her mother."

"Once again, Adrien, it is none of your business. But if you absolutely have to know… Anne-Laure is nothing more to the Bourgeois girl than a surrogate. You should consider her father to be her only parent. I have no doubt André gave the girl suitable explanations on the matter, and you should not get involved."
"I don't get it. You don't just walk away from-"

Adrien shuddered. It hit him, all of a sudden, that the situation grated him more than it should. He didn't handle missing mothers well.

Gabriel frowned.

"The Bourgeois girl has a father who loves her - who adores her - and who wanted her enough for two parents and more. You are making mountains out of molehills. I doubt miss Bourgeois is half as concerned by the issue as you are."

It was hard to say. Chloé had never mentioned her mother. Not once. However, it did not mean that she did not think about her.

"Drop it," Gabriel insisted. "Don't go open wounds where there are none. Trust me, you don't want Anne-Laure to meet that girl. She has no concept of the notion of sugarcoating the truth. No child wants to hear they were not wanted, even when they know it."

Adrien looked into the distance.

"What did mom think about it all? Miss Lenoir was her friend, wasn't she?"

"Your mother did not take kindly to poor parenting. I assure you she believed distance was preferable to constant neglect. Now, let's not stand in the courtyard all night. It's getting chilly," Gabriel pointed out, pushing Adrien towards the house.

###

Old friends with family problems were easily forgotten when Hawk Moth threw a supervillain at you. Again. He was making it a nightly thing. A time-consuming, date-preventing, life-threatening nightly thing.

Chat Noir did not get to meet Anne-Laure Lenoir, who seemed to have vanished into thin air. If she had 'caught a glimpse of him', as she had told Gabriel she would, Adrien had not noticed her. Granted, he had been too busy surviving a fireball-throwing golf player.

He crashed into bed at five in the morning without getting an opportunity to discuss miss Lenoir's visit with Plagg. The most he had managed was a short exchange right after her departure.

"She was not at all what I expected," he had told his Kwami.

The black cat had chuckled.

"She was Waspp's ," he had replied, as if it explained everything.

Adrien had squinted and tilted his head, waiting for more information.

"Waspp gets things done," Plagg had told him. "Not necessarily done by herself, though. She puts things into motion, whether you want her to or not. Which usually translates to the Bee causing a disaster and every other hero being forced to fix it." - He had licked his camembert's wrapping paper. - "She wins the least loved Kwami vote every time."
"Are her heroes always like that?"

"Waspp is... I'm misfortune and Tikki is luck, and Waspp is a deity of purpose, or something like that. Her heroes are not necessarily 'like' Anne-Laure, but they are always 'like' her. They take crazy risks, they don't hold their punches, and they don't care about the consequences. They just 'overwinter' through the fallout."

"This... sounds like you, but a little more proactive."

Adrien had meant those words as a light tease, but Plagg had frowned and turned away in offense. All of the teenager's apologies had not stopped him from zipping out of the room to 'raid the kitchen'.

After that, the topic of 'Queen Bee' had been dropped. Plagg had only surfaced at midnight, after Adrien had spent fifteen minutes looking for him to go handle the Akuma of the day.

When the boy woke, after three meager hours of sleep, his Kwami was back to his cheese-obsessed self and busy slurping down near liquid camembert.

They did not get to talk because three hours of sleep and a five am bedtime meant 'late for school'. Adrien showered and got dressed in a blur. He had to skip breakfast (and instead listen to a short reprimand from Nathalie for oversleeping) so he could be in the car in time to be driven to school.

He slumbered through his morning classes. He napped through lunch. He endured the rest of the afternoon, managing to be awake for his fencing session with his father (though it ended in repeated defeat as always). After dinner, he went to bed until patrol.

Of course, not ten minutes into said patrol, Hawk Moth sent a new Akuma, because why not?

Thankfully, 'Fuzzy Focus' did not throw fire, did not cover the world in exploding pink jelly, did not command elemental forces and did not fly. He made people myopic. That was about it. It only took thirty minutes to defeat him.

"That was an easy one," Ladybug commented after sending the confused optometrist on his way.

"I think it's plain to see Hawk Moth is getting as tired as us," Chat Noir replied, leaning closer to her.

She raised her eyebrows, forcing herself not to smile at the pun.

"So what do we do now, Chat?" she said. "It's still early enough to finish patrol."

The 'early' got Adrien's full attention. His eyes went wide. He grinned.

It was early.

"Say. Why don't we finally have our date?"

###

Gabriel had fancied Ladybug from the moment he had met her, which had happened well before a mischievous flying cat had knocked all of the books of his library off their shelves to introduce
himself.

She had rescued him. It had been a car crash at twenty-five km/h, so he had never been in danger to begin with, but she had still jumped in to help him and the driver out of the car. In other circumstances, Gabriel would have rolled his eyes and snapped at his rescuer for being overdramatic, since there was clearly nothing to be concerned about, but the rescuer had been beautiful, gracious and she had called him handsome.

Handsome.

"I'm sure you hear it all the time but you're pretty handsome," she had told him, blushing pink above her cheeky grin.

It had not been, as a matter of fact, something Gabriel heard 'all the time'. No one but her had ever called him that. No one else ever would.

"Thanks," he had replied, summoning all of his poise and eloquence. "I can say the same about you. A-and by that I mean 'gorgeous'."

He had been a bit stunned.

His feelings for Ladybug had been instantaneous, if not exactly romantic. 'Romantic' implied the presence of heartfelt affection and Gabriel was somewhat lacking in the heart department. No. Those instantaneous feelings had been what one would expect from a teenage jerk encountering the prettiest girl in the world. They had been mixed with a hunger and playfulness he had not quite managed to smother.

Understandably, making a fool of himself as Chat Noir had left a bitter taste in his mouth. He had wanted - no: needed - to fix it.

So he had cheated and peeked and discovered his Ladybug's identity.

Learning that she was none other than Alice Beauregard, stalker extraordinaire, had thrown him in for a loop.

He still remembered Plagg's giggles.

"Didn't you turn that girl down just two days ago?" the Kwami had commented, trying to stifle his laughter and ending up snorting in short bursts instead.

Gabriel had not graced that with an answer, flattening himself against the roof he was hidden on and staring at Alice as she hurried away. She looked entirely different. Her body language had nothing in common with Ladybug's. Her smile was not the same. Gabriel had seen her transform and could barely believe they were the same person.

As puzzled as he had been by his discovery, he had recognized how much of an edge it gave him.

"Alice," he had found himself saying the next afternoon. "About that walk in the park you suggested… I changed my mind."

He had gone on that date as 'the most dishonest and conniving person Tikki had ever met'. He had lied, he had cheated, he had used every trick in the book to get her to like him more. He had walked out of her house after that date to realize he had been had.

She had played him like a fiddle.
At no point had she shed the naive, lovesick attitude, so he had not seen a thing until he had found himself alone in front her door, overcome by a strange sense of possessiveness and longing.

He had thought she had walked into their relationship with an idealized vision of him, that she expected no trickery and no betrayal. In truth, she had known him better than he knew himself. She had not been aware of his being Chat Noir, but knew full well he was a snake. Every warning her friends had given her had been put to the test. She had known which buttons to push to get what she wanted, which values Gabriel held sacred. She had played on his traditionalism, on his sense of duty.

_We could watch a movie._

_We could._

Ladybug’s analytical skills, craftiness and resolve all packed in a girl who could not for the life of her show darkness. She had given him what he had wanted to steal and more, knowing it would make him hers.

That was when he had fallen in love, under her doorstep, when his thoughts had moved from shock to 'well played'.

From that point on, he had tried to spot the guile under the bubbly facade, the sharp edges under the girly smiles. There was a whole different person under that mask, reined in by principles and compulsion. She only showed herself when clad in red and black, with ribbons in her hair. If you paid attention, however, you could see her out of costume too.

Gabriel had barely been able to keep his eyes off her. Every second spent with her had made him fall a little more. They had enjoyed a few blissful weeks of 'honeymoon'.

On Chat Noir’s front, he had not been doing so well. He had become a better fighter, having trained hard to. If he had to handle monsters, he acquitted himself of the task well enough. He no longer ended up being used as a punching bag or squishy toy. Ladybug no longer had to clean his messes up. The remarks she made on his technique had become rare. That being said, she had grown no fonder of his persona.

Maybe some part of him had been afraid that her knowing the truth might make her like Gabriel less, that her dislike for Chat Noir would seep into their relationship, because he had felt compelled to underline the differences between his two identities. If asked why he never used his sword, even against robots and dolls, he pretended to be helpless with it, mocking himself and giving silly demonstrations of his lack of skill. He overdid it with the puns and the grins. Ladybug couldn’t stand that.

He had tried to avoid discussing the heroes with Alice. She would still talk about them, commenting the latest rumors and watching whatever footage of them she could get her hands on. She was comfortable enough with her boyfriend to mumble comments about Chat Noir's mistakes.

That was how he had ended up slipping.

"Nice job calming the victim down," Ladybug had said one night, after watching him rescue a woman from a mugger.

"Didn't you tell me I didn't care enough about the civilians?" Chat Noir had replied, giving her a doubtful look.

Ladybug had stilled, eyes going wide behind her mask. She had raised a hand, running her fingers
against his cheek, tracing the outline of his jaw and nose.

"No, I didn't," she had declared, voice perfectly neutral.

Then she had kneed him in the balls.

###

"We could have a picnic," Chat Noir suggested after his partner agreed on the 'date' thing.

"A picnic?"

"Just buy some snacks, find a romantic spot, eat, talk?"

"Hem."

"I mean, if you don't want to, that's-"

"It's not that," Ladybug explained with a nervous grin. "I am not really hungry."

"Oh."

"Are you?"

"Well, not really..."

"But maybe we could find a romantic spot and talk," she declared with her cheekiest smile. "I'm open to suggestions, mister Smooth."

Adrien felt the corner of his mouth twitch as his nervous smile morphed into a grin and back. He couldn't think of a single place that was not somehow part of their patrols. The Eiffel Tower wouldn't be special. Nor Notre-Dame's roof. Nor the Arc de Triomphe. The park sounded a little bland. Maybe the Île aux Cygnes, with the walkway and the statue next to the Seine?

He had made a list of locations. He had spent hours on Google maps, Wikipedia and Paris' official website. He had a list. But he couldn't remember a single point of it. As a matter of fact, he couldn't remember what building he would find if he turned the corner of the street they were on. He felt like he had never visited the city in his life.

"Earth to mister Smooth?" Ladybug called.

"I-I don't know. I-I m-mean I gave it a lot of thought, but... I'm trying to think of some place that looks pretty at night. Like-"

He caught something flying straight towards his face, sidestepped and deflected the projectile with his baton. It was a piece of brick the size of a ping-pong ball. It fell on the roof while Ladybug and Chat Noir turned towards the person who had thrown it.

The 'person who had thrown it' was a tall man in grey pants and a black sweater, and bleached blond hair falling in messy strands around his face. He was standing on the edge of the roof, twenty feet away from them.
"I thought you had fixed that flaw with your pirouettes, boy," Gabriel said, walking to them with a smug grin on his face. "You are supposed to get better with time, not worse."

He threw another piece of brick at Chat Noir, aiming for the point the teenager left exposed during his pirouettes.

The young hero let the pebble hit.

"Mister Agreste!" he exclaimed. "What a surprise."

Next to him, Ladybug had tensed. Her yoyo was in her hand. She looked ready to fight. There was no sense of menace coming from Adrien's father, however. He was relaxed. He moved with a smoothness that had nothing in common with the rigidity Gabriel 'king of fashion' Agreste usually displayed. He didn't look threatening, just wildly amused.

It was easy to imagine a domino around his eyes.

Adrien would have been overjoyed to see him like that, if the timing had been better. That date had been delayed enough. He didn't want to have to wait for another Akuma-free occasion.

Gabriel gave him a side-look, his grin growing larger, before turning to Ladybug. Another facade slipped on. Adrien knew it well: it was the pleasant, charming one his father gave to his esteemed customers and to his most promising students.

"Miss," the man said, extending a hand for Ladybug to shake. "I'm glad to see you. I feel like I had to apologize for our previous encounters. I was not… on my best behavior, to put it mildly."

Adrien's partner blinked, hesitant. She shook Gabriel's hand with the distinct look of someone who wondered if they were dreaming. She did not manage (nor try) to answer. The designer's smile grew kinder. His eyes darted to Chat Noir.

Oh my god, the young hero thought. Oh. My. God.

His father's timing was not 'unfortunate'. It was not even accidental. Gabriel had known Chat was meant to go on a date with his partner. The man knew the teenager would jump on the first opportunity available.

"I feel like I should make it up to you," Gabriel told Ladybug, his voice warm. "Now, you might know I gave Chat Noir a few fighting tips. Not much so far, just some remarks on his pirouettes and spins. That being said, I've learned that you don't exactly have teachers to help you with this, with Fu being unavailable and his being the only adult hero. I'd like to offer my help. To the two of you."

"What do you mean?" Ladybug asked, frowning.

The proposition was clear enough and Adrien was certain she had perfectly understood it, but his Lady was not about to trust Gabriel blindly. She had good reason not to. So she tried to keep him talking while she analyzed his offer.

Her reaction did not bother Gabriel. He didn't show the slightest sign of annoyance.

"I'm to leave the country for a while soon but, before that, I'll have a few nights free. I'm willing to help the two of you review your past fights and to help you correct your fighting technique. If you feel that could help you, of course."
Chat Noir looked at the sky and groaned.

His father raised an eyebrow.

Ladybug paid no attention to her partner's antics.

"What's the catch?" she asked.

"There is no catch," Gabriel promised. "I remember being your age and inexperienced. I figure you need all the help you can get."

His son made a noise deep in his throat, roughly around the part of his esophagus where he could taste bile.

"A problem, Chat Noir?" Gabriel asked with a smirk.

"You don't have to do this," Adrien mumbled. "I apologize, alright? I'm sorry!"

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you are apologizing for, boy."

"I'm sorry Queen Bee showed up because of me! I didn't think she would! You really don't have to do this!"

Ladybug stared at him with wide eyes.

"Uh, what is going on here?"

"His ex-teammate visited him because of me and he didn't want her to, so now he is making me pay."

"'He' is standing right here," his father cut in, "and 'he' is doing no such thing."

Adrien tried to pull him aside.

"You knew I'd be on a date," he whispered. "You interrupted on purpose. You want to keep us busy every night so we don't get the time to be alone! This is punishment."

"That's a silly accusation if I've ever heard one," Gabriel retorted, eyes sparkling with amusement. "It would be awfully childish of me."

Chat Noir glowered.

His father's smirk was terribly obnoxious and - yes - 'childish'.

"Of course," the man said, raising his voice a little, I would perfectly understand if you had other plans or more important priorities."

"Of course I don't have more important priorities," Adrien snapped in hushed tones.

He was not about to refuse training from an experienced hero who had been in his shoes for ten years. That was obvious. If it meant he wouldn't get a moment alone with Ladybug, he would live with it. But he would not be happy about it.

As far as payback went, Gabriel had picked a punishment that fit the crime: harmless yet
aggravating, and useful in some way.

"Good," the designer commented. "I'm glad that's settled. What about you, Ladybug?"

Chat's partner was staring at them as if they were crazy. She snapped out of it when she heard her name.

She would not refuse. While she could not stand the previous Chat Noir, she knew how important their duty was. She would not throw such an opportunity away. That didn't mean she would be pleasant about it, or even reasonable. Gabriel was likely to get the Chloé treatment.

Ladybug crossed her arms and looked away, scowling.

"We could benefit from some training. It's not a bad idea. It's worth giving it a try, anyway. Though I'm surprised you don't have anything more important to do with your time. Or more important people to spend your time with."

Don't you believe for a second that we are grateful or anything. You won't hear a thank you.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow.

"I am a busy man, but my ability to handle 'important' business is severely crippled by the fact that 'important' people sleep. I should be able to pencil you in between one and three am. Maybe midnight, if you shift your patrols."

"Midnight is fine for me. What about you, Chat?"

"It's perfect," Adrien muttered, sulking.

Gabriel gave them his most benevolent smile, the one he had honed by handling charity events and young contest winners for decades now.

"Well then. I suggest we start today."

###

Nathalie no longer knew what sleep patterns were. She was, however, discovering the true meaning of 'exhaustion'.

"I will take those keys back," she murmured when Gabriel slipped into her bed at four in the morning, just like he had done for four days in a row.

She was awake. Not just drowsily aware that there was motion around her and a presence in her room, no. Awake. As awake as if her alarm clock had started beeping. She easily adapted to new schedules, and being joined in bed at the same hour for more than three days in a row had been enough to change her morning habits.

Meanwhile, her jackass of a boyfriend just wanted to enjoy his three hours of sleep. He kissed her cheek and rolled onto his back, eyes already closed. He slept in short stretches but at least he did, stealing a one hour nap in the afternoon, then two more hours in her arms in the late evening, making sure she was always present when he woke. It seemed to help with the panic attacks, though they had not vanished altogether. His approach of resting was unorthodox but seemed to
work for him. He was no longer dead on his feet.

Nathalie wished she could say the same about herself.

She figured she would get used to it. In the meantime, she took comfort in his progress.

Visible progress, just like she had told Anne-Laure Lenoir.

There had to be a way to make it last.

"How did it go?" she asked, pressing herself against him and sliding her hand up his chest.

Gabriel had not told her what his new 'activity' was. What she knew was that it turned him into Cinderella, making him slip away right before midnight. She could also see that, unlike his hunt for Hawk Moth, those outings did not eat him alive. He left and came back in a cheerful mood.

He nodded and hummed.

A moment later, in a surprising move, he elaborated.

"I've been meeting with the young Chat Noir and his partner," he explained. "I seem to be the local authority on the past heroes. I've been telling the children what little I remember of Alice's battles. You never know when they might need that knowledge."

Nathalie's eyes went wide.

She knew he disapproved of the heroes. He expected them to die young and steeled himself against that. He was worried by what being soldiers would do to them. And there was more at play, of course: he had discussed the two teenagers more than once, be it in passing or because his explanations on Hawk Moth required mentions of them. Yet, he had never called the girl 'Ladybug'.

His assistant hoped the young heroine would remember her advice. No arguing, no confrontations, no attempting to change Gabriel's mind. With some luck, the child let Chat Noir handle things. She had said herself that Gabriel liked her partner. Maybe the boy was as subtle and patient as Ladybug had promised.

"Sounds like you enjoyed yourself," she stated, trying to sound as noncommittal as possible.

Gabriel clicked his tongue.

"That boy has been nagging me for weeks now. He found out about the watch and took it upon himself to 'keep me company'." He said those words with exaggerated annoyance but Nathalie could hear the smile in his voice. - "I decided to annoy him back. I can be downright insufferable when I set my mind to it."

*You don't need to set your mind to it.*

"Are you telling me you are dedicating three hours of your nights to bullying a teenage boy?"

"Yes."

She groaned.

"It's all in good fun," Gabriel swore. "And it's not like I'm not providing that kid with useful information. Alice did not tell me everything about her costumed activities, but I *do* know that she
was basically handed magical trinkets and left to her own devices. No one bothered teaching her about her abilities or even explaining her role. I happen to think figuring everything out on your own is terribly inefficient."

It was Nathalie's turn to hum and nod.

Silence fell. Gabriel closed his eyes. After a moment, he reached for her ponytail and pulled her hair tie out. She grumbled but let him play. There was no stopping him.

"How was your day?" he ended up asking, giving up on sleep.

"You were next to me for most of it," she pointed out.

"Not during your meeting with Stone and his manager," Gabriel replied. "Now, you told me he was happy with the outfits, but not how the meeting went. He behaved, didn't he?"

"He always behaves when Rolling is present. Thank God for that woman. Not that he isn't nice, but he can be…" 

"Artistic?" Gabriel suggested, his disdain clear.

"That's the word. Rolling is good at what she does, however. She manages to keep his behaviour in check without stifling him."

Her companion chuckled.

"What?" Nathalie asked, puzzled.

"Nothing. Just drawing parallels."

She frowned. He smiled.

"I just find it quite telling that you would appreciate a woman whose job is to handle and temper her stubborn nightmare of an employer."

Nathalie scoffed and mumbled that she would, indeed, appreciate skills of that kind.

He kissed her.

"I w-"

An earsplitting noise startled them, causing them both to frantically sit up with their hearts thumping in their chests. The butterfly watch had started ringing.

Nathalie had heard that sound way too often over the last few days. She collected herself, waiting for Gabriel to get dressed and leave.

He turned the lights on and dragged himself out of bed with an aggravated sigh, snatching his jacket from the chair it was resting on.

"Can't he give it a rest?" he snapped, taking the watch out of the garment's pocket.

He pressed the latch to silence the alarm, then returned to bed, all but slamming the watch down on the night stand. Huffing, he pulled the covers up, then looked at Nathalie.

She met his eyes with a perfectly composed expression, hiding the overwhelming relief she felt.
Begging had not worked. She had tried it once, she had asked, she had pleaded, and, when that had failed, she had tried not to do it again. There was no changing his mind. She had hoped (prayed, implored gods she did not believe in) that he would surface enough to let go of that vendetta on his own… or just to give it a rest. Anything.

She had not been sure he could, not even once.

In any case, she had not pushed the issue. Which was why she hid her relief. It would have been another form of begging.

Something had to show on her face, though, because his eyes went wide when he turned to her. He did not just pale, he blanched, pulling her to him for a kiss, then pulling her closer still.

###

Chat Noir and Ladybug got their date.

Prior to that, however, they learned to fight. Gabriel being as good of a teacher as he was a fencing partner, it made for painful training sessions that ended with a lot more bruises than two invulnerable teenagers would have expected. The disgraced Chat Noir's approach of training was to pit them against each other, since he was no longer fast enough nor powerful enough to land blows himself. Weaknesses had been pointed out (but not to the hero who displayed them, no, that would have been too easy), then exploited. Adrien could safely say he would never fail a pirouette again. The mere thought of it made his ribs ache, and he swore he could feel a dent in his bones where Ladybug's yoyo had hit him over and over again.

Gabriel answered complaints and aouchs with 'if you don't like it, don't let it happen to you'.

He had taught them more by telling them about the enemies he had defeated with his wife and Queen Bee. To each foe a weakness, to each power a flaw.

As enlightening as the training sessions had been, Adrien had been glad to see them end. His backside hurt, his pride hurt and being stuck between two people who hated each other for three hours a night was not his idea of a good time. He planned to ask for more training from Gabriel after his trip, but he would beg for individual lessons. He could endure being hit, defeated, tied up and criticized, but it took better nerves than his to survive Gabriel and Ladybug's constant verbal sparring.

"Why did you actually volunteer to teach us?" Chat Noir had asked his father after one of their sessions, as the animosity between his partner and the man had been near tangible that night.

Gabriel was not that patient. Adrien knew it cost him to tolerate Ladybug's presence. Was he afraid for them to the point that he felt that his tutelage was necessary?

Of course, you could never get a straight answer out of him.

"To see you sulk about that date," his father had replied. "Which, I have to say, worked beautifully."

Adrien had frowned and squinted, trying to come up with a sharp comeback that wouldn't make him sound sulkier. He had not managed.
"Did you ever tell the girl who you are?" Gabriel had ended up asking.

"No."

"Still planning that reveal for the end of your date?"

"No," Chat Noir had announced. "I'll wait a little more."

His dad had given no hint of what his thoughts on the topic were, keeping his expression a mask of mild curiosity.

"I see. What is the reasoning behind that change of plans?"

The teenager had glared at him, remembering only too well that his father thought of him as a 'sweet boy going through an identity crisis'.

"I already told you my reasoning. It hasn't changed. This. Is. Me. That other boy is the mask, I don't want to be expected to act like him."

Gabriel had studied his face, looking slightly puzzled.

Chat Noir had huffed, defensive.

"What?"

"Nothing. Nothing. You just reminded me of someone."

He had not said who. Instead, he had announced it was getting late and that he had to get home. By home, he meant 'Nathalie's apartment'.

Alice did roll with the punches and she was incredibly patient. There seemed to be a threshold to reach before she could get angry. If you passed that point, her fuse was incredibly short. She would come down on you like a thunderstorm and make you wish you had never crossed her.

The rest of the time, she was sweet. She was nice. She was kind. She believed she had to be. Gabriel and her were much alike in that regard. They felt, in their bones, that there was a proper way to behave in a public setting. They could not stand shedding their facade. They could not fathom why no one else seemed to get it.

You did not owe the world your soul.

Alice was sweet and nice and she paid no mind to the mockery it got her, to the whispers she heard about her naivety and lack of brains. She did not care. Water off a duck's back.

At least, that was what she had let Gabriel see. He had sometimes wondered if the screaming in her mind ever stopped.

###
That long-awaited date happened after:

- Sixty akuma attacks
- Twelve training sessions
- Three photo shoots
- Ten fencing sessions with one's dad
- One Jagged Stone show
- One trip to the airport to say goodbye to one's father before his three weeks trip.

The date went well. Candy was eaten, video games were discussed, favorite colors were revealed. Identities were kept a secret, though someone mentioned her favorite color was pink, which should have been a dead giveaway.

###

"How is it that, despite being in an entirely different timezone, you still manage to wake me up at four in the morning?" Nathalie grumbled, staring down at her tablet with blurred vision.

She had not bothered turning the lights on, so Gabriel was probably looking at a squinting ghostlike figure surrounded by absolute darkness. She didn't care. She wanted to sleep.

"I'm sorry. I had not realized it was that early for you," he lied. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

She pushed the tablet away and buried her face into her pillow.

Gabriel was in a very bright room. That was all she was able to say of that room: blindingly bright. Mostly yellow. Possibly an hotel room, since he had internet access. He had been driving at random from one Brazilian city to the other for two weeks (with the odd flight to Portland), so she had no idea where he was staying at. She figured she would find out by checking his credit card history.

"So how are you today?" Nathalie muttered. "And where are you, while I am at it?"

"I'm fine, thank you, and I'm in Syracuse."

That got her to turn to her tablet again.

"What?"

"Syracuse, United States," he clarified. "Not Syracuse, Sicily. I met with a collector of 19th century photography this afternoon. It was worth it, actually. He had quite a lot of newspapers from the 1890's, and I found more about the previous Firebird."

"Did you, now?" Nathalie replied, sitting up and turning the lights on.
"Yes. Two more photographs of her in costume, for a start, but I'm also pretty sure I have found pictures of her as a civilian. If I am right, she was a woman from Syracuse, a widowed mother of two who seemed to be quite involved in local charity work. I don't have a name, but her deactivated Miraculous is clearly visible on three separate pictures. I could send the scans to you."

Nathalie had little interest in heroes, current or past. She was starting to gather that Gabriel was as passionate about them as he was about fashion, however. Looking into the Firebirds might have been a way to figure out what had happened to Alice, but he enjoyed the investigation. He loved to collect information, to study it, to file it away in neatly sorted folders indexed by topic, date and keywords. You could ask if if there had been a Ladybug in the such or such century and he would answer "15th? Why, yes, Joan of Arc. 13th? Matilda Fitzwalter, with her husband being that era's Chat Noir.". In the same way, he could look at any ancient fashion plate and tell you its decade (sometimes the exact year) and most likely recognize the designer if they were known.

You had to ask, though. He was not one to ramble about his interests without an invitation.

It was rare of him to want to share.

"Send them," she replied. "What will you do now?"

"I was thinking trying to figure out that woman's identity. She had children. Maybe she has descendants. For all we know, her Miraculous might be locked in a jewelry box somewhere. Most would not keep the Kwami trapped, but they can't phase through some materials. Some alloys of gold and silver, like electrum..."

"Gabriel, it's four in the morning and I have no understanding of magical theory."

He scoffed.

"Where are you going next?" she asked.

"I'll stay in Syracuse for the week, at least. After that, I haven't decided."

"Do you need me to make any arrangements?"

"Not at the moment."

"Do you think you'll prolong the trip? Adrien has asked me three times now, I think he is growing concerned."

"No, no. I'll be back when promised. If needed, I'll make arrangements for a second trip later this year."

That was both a relief and a disappointment. Nathalie liked to know there was an ocean of distance between him and Hawk Moth. As far as she was concerned, he could spend as long as he wanted chasing missing magical brooches. Adrien missed him, though.

"Does he want me to come back earlier?" Gabriel added with a slight frown.

"It's not that. I think he is used to seeing your plans change unexpectedly, so he tries to stay informed. As long as you keep calling him every day - and let me stress the word 'day', not 'ungodly early morning' - he will be fine. It's only ten more days."

An email notification popped up in the corner of the tablet's screen. The subject of the email was '[Firebird] 1896 news articles'. Nathalie swiped it away. She would read it at a sane hour, with the
rest of her messages.

"I will, I will. Do you want me to come back earlier?" Gabriel wondered, his expression innocent but not his tone, no. It was his smiling voice, the one that went with that grin he always tried to keep hidden.

"No. You are to come back in ten days, four hours and... twenty-two minutes," she snapped. "Not a second earlier, because you do not want your son to walk to school, and not a second later, because you would be missing your appointment with Rossignol."

"What about a day earlier?"

"How eager are you to work in a house where the master bedroom is being refurbished, or in an office where the walls are being repainted?"

"I wouldn't mind it?"

"Listen. If you open your calendar, you will see that the next two months are full of colored little boxes carefully arranged according to the schedules of the various superstars and CEOs you are supposed to meet with, and on the recording times of the interviews you are supposed to give."

His eyes shifted to the right. She heard clicking.

"I'm looking at it," he told her.

"You will also notice that you no longer have editing permissions."

Gabriel scowled.

"And," she added, "if you call the tech team to have the privileges restored, I will know."

"Will you."

"And I have changed my own password."

It was now 'figuratively' instead of 'literally'.

"This is petty revenge," Gabriel murmured.

"Yes, it is."

"I'll let you know I own the servers that calendar app runs on, and that I am your boss, not that it seems to mean anything to you," he continued, raising an eyebrow.

"See, I am still waiting for that raise we talked about. Until I get it, I will be taking liberties."

"It's in HR's hands!"

"That is a convenient excuse to cover the truth."

"The truth being?"

"You forgot. I should know, I called HR."

"I did. Very well, I will send them an email," Gabriel sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that."
He smiled and shook his head.

"Now that that's settled, it's getting late. I should definitely turn in."

Considering that he had gotten her out of bed at four in the morning and effectively ensured she would not be able to go back to sleep, those were the most infuriating words he could have uttered.

"Don't you d-"

"Good night, Nathalie," he told her with that Cheshire smile of his.

He reached for his mouse.

Nathalie was not about to let him win. She pulled her hair tie off and ran a hand through her hair.

"Good night, sir," she replied, hanging up.

He tried to call her back not ten seconds later. She did not pick up.

###

Adrien's grins caught Nathalie unaware. She was so unused to seeing the boy smile.

If she had to be honest, it felt like a punch to the gut every time he did, which was more and more often. As elated as she was to see him happy, the contrast with the Adrien she had taken care of for five years was too stark not to feel overwhelmed by guilt.

*This is the boy he was supposed to be*, she would think whenever he ran out of the house beaming because his friends were at the door.

*You could have done something about it*, she told herself whenever he gave that Nino boy a cheeky grin when he beat him at basketball.

*You could have helped earlier.*

*You should have.*

She did not let him see that turmoil.

"You are in a good mood today," she commented one afternoon, watching Adrien chuckle at the text messages he kept receiving, while on their way to his piano lesson.

"What?" the teenager exclaimed, startled. "Oh. Yes. It's… Apparently, Nino has been volunteered-"

"'Has been' volunteered?"

"By Alya. It happens. Often. Anyway, Marinette babysits a little girl. Nadja Chamack's daughter. She's the one who modeled with me last summer, the day that Stormy Weather villain attacked the city."

"I remember her."

"Well, Nino has been roped into helping with the babysitting, because Marinette forgot to deliver a
hat she made for a birthday and had to go. And Nino is keeping me updated. It's… not going so well. He's trying to convince me that Manon is Hawk Moth."

"Is that even possible? That little girl did not strike me as an evil mastermind. Those pictures with her were adorable."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. She was Akumatized a few months ago - she became the Puppeteer - and Ladybug said that she was one of the most efficient enemies she and Chat Noir had ever faced. That interview is on the Ladyblog, somewhere."

"How does a kindergartener cause the slightest trouble to two experienced heroes?"

"Well, she is not Akumatized right now and Nino swears she could get Chat Noir and Ladybug to surrender their Miraculous just to get her to stop shrieking."

"Shrieking."

"Yes. But, if I believe Nino, Alya is a magical unicorn princess from a parallel world and she got Manon to calm down with the help of 'magic, you should see her, dude'."

Nathalie was not gaping per se, but looked stunned enough for Adrien to raise his eyebrows.

"I swear it makes sense," he blurted out.

She shook her head.

"I knew you were a well-behaved child," she explained, "but it occurs to me that I underestimated how well-behaved exactly."

Adrien flushed.

"Err… Thanks?"

Nathalie smiled.

"You were quiet. But," she added, "you climbed on everything. Everything. Let me tell you those two traits should not be found in the same toddler. Not only would you try to get to the most dangerous places, we wouldn't notice you doing it. Your mother once found you eating candy out of the top cupboard in the kitchen. You had climbed on a chair, and on the dishwasher, and on the microwave, and on the fridge to get there. While you were supposed to be in bed. It's a wonder you didn't break your neck."

Adrien's face brightened. He gave her a shy, uncertain smile. He grinned more often, but it was not yet the norm. Most of the time, he remained that reserved boy five years of neglect had turned him into.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really. That caused some panic."

The boy smothered a budding giggle.

"I can imagine. How did Father react?"

"He scolded you for getting out of your room at night. While your mother was making roughly the face I made when he agreed to installing that zip-line in your room."
"What is wrong with the zip-line?"

Like father like son. No notion of heights. Nathalie could not climb on a chair without feeling faint.

"Do I need to make a list of the bones you could break using it?"

"I'm careful with the zip-line, I swear!" her charge exclaimed.

She groaned.

"That's not the point."

"I like the zip-line."

She scowled. He bit on his lower lip not to grin, but did not manage to stifle his chuckle. She narrowed her eyes.

He decided (perceptive child that he was) that changing the topic was a good idea.

"We'll call him when we get home, right? If he is still in Syracuse, it will be four in the afternoon for him."

"Three. And I don't think it would make much of a difference to your father. He seems to be quite jet-lag-"  

The driver swerved and braked, sending the car spinning. They had not been driving fast so the vehicle stopped after a u-turn, the passenger door hitting a lamp post. The tires still screeched and burst, torn to pieces by the sidewalk's edge.

"What the…" Nathalie murmured, looking through the window.

The street was filled with cobwebs. It was filling with cobwebs.

"There's an Akuma!" Adrien yelled.

The bodyguard jumped out of the car and opened the door for them, gesturing towards the end of the street not yet covered in webs. Nathalie stumbled out, pulling Adrien by the wrist.

"Run," she shouted. "We have to get to safety."

The teenager obeyed, grabbing her arm and dragging her after him.

They all raced towards the corner. Nathalie looked back and spotted a four-legged man in a black costume hopping from cobweb to cobweb. Ladybug was chasing him.

The assistant focused on getting away.

At some point, Adrien released her arm. At some point - and she did not notice when - he started lagging behind. When they turned the corner and reached a bookstore's entrance, she reached for the boy. He was gone.

"Adrien?" she whispered, realization dawning.

Then fear hit. She felt ill to the pit of her stomach. Her legs nearly buckled.

No, no, no, no, no…
It kept happening. When had they lost him?

"Where is he?" she yelled, digging her nails into the bodyguard's wrist.

The man shook his head, turning as pale as her. She ran back to the street they had come from but did not see Adrien anywhere. She crouched and flattened her cheek against the pavement, just in case he was hiding under one of the parked cars, but that was a vain hope. There were twenty buildings on each side of the street between its end and the car. Maybe Adrien had snuck into one of them.

She ran to the closest door and tried to open it. It was locked, so she moved on to the next house, shaking the door handle and knocking, as there was light inside. No one would open. She rang the doorbell and was ignored. Clearly, those people would not have let Adrien in, she told herself.

She tried the next building, and the next, and another, while her colleague did the same on the other side of the street. They could see more and more cobwebs in the distance. More importantly, they could see giant spiders crawling on them.

Nathalie felt so faint she thought she would pass out.

She was knocking on the sixteenth door when a dark silhouette landed behind her. She shrieked, whirling to face the monster and flattening herself against the closest wall in the same motion. Much to her surprise, she did not find herself face to face with the newest Akuma, but with Gabriel.

He was wearing strange clothes: a dark grey sweater, darker pants, sneakers, a toolbelt. His glasses were gone. His hair was messy. His posture was all wrong.

There was nowhere he could have dropped down from except a balcony one floor up.

Nathalie stared at him in disbelief.

Syracuse, United States, not Syracuse, Sicily.

He had not used the jet. He had not used his credit card to buy a plane ticket home. She would have spotted the charge. Made sure not to get caught. Behind our back. Of course, of course, of course.

"Gabriel," she choked out.

He was not looking at her, but at their surroundings, eyes darting from giant spider to giant spider. He turned back to Nathalie.

"Where is my son?"

"I-I-I don't know. He was right behind me, I swear he was just… and then he was gone, I don't know what happened, I-"

The worry on Gabriel's face vanished in a blink and left only ice-cold rage.

"'Behind' you, Nathalie?"

His tone cut through her, but it was fully justified.

She should never had let Adrien out of her sight.

"He slipped away," she murmured. "I'll find him, he can't have gone far, I'll check the other buildings, I-"
Gabriel snarled, moving away, not moving like himself at all. The look on his face was both alien and terrifying.

That was the man who hid in the shadows when he did not want her to see him, the man who had stood in her bedroom with a magical watch she had taken from his hands, the one whose rage she had seen only because the pink light of the butterfly hologram had let her do so.

He did not move like himself.

"Don't bother," he snapped, "I know exactly where he is."

She did not get an opportunity to ask for an explanation. He took two steps back, then ran towards the facade of the building, jumping against the wall to propel himself up and grab the edge of the balcony above them. He heaved himself over the railing with an ease she would never have expected, ran along the balcony itself, then grabbed the closest gutter and started climbing.

Her legs did buckle at that point.

She had known Alice was Ladybug. She had known Gabriel was a liar. Despite that, she had never considered the simplest, most blatant fact.

Ladybug was only one half of a team.

###
"So you finally show up, Chat Noir!" the villain of the day taunted when Adrien dropped on the closest roof to the gigantic cobweb the Akumaized entomologist was standing on. "I thought you'd never arrive. You're just in time. Your partner was hanging on by a thread."

That was the worst pun Chat had ever heard, and he had heard Copycat's.

It was technically accurate, though: Ladybug was wrapped in spider silk and hanging ten feet above a dozen super-sized black widows.

It didn't look good. Now, it was not as bad as a t-rex, but black widows were nothing to scoff at and it didn't look like Ladybug would manage to free herself. She was wriggling and twisting but both her arms were stuck. The silk threads were tightly wrapped around her body.

Their enemy lowered her by a few inches.

"You know what to do, Chat Noir! Give me your Miraculous, and I'll let her go."

"Thanks but I'll pass!" Adrien shouted, dropping in the middle of the spiders with his staff spinning.

_Fails to use ranged weapon to fend the threats off_, his father's notes had said. _I've seen you use your staff as a sword, a shield, a club, and an elevator, but you scarcely ever use it as a staff._

Now seemed like the perfect time to focus on the 'ranged' thing. He made the staff grow, holding it above his head, and spun it faster and faster. It kept the black widows at bay, though some tried to spit silk or to get closer by jumping over the staff itself.

They were surprisingly heavy.

"Okay, thread carefully here, Chat," the hero muttered after nearly falling to his knees under a single spider's weight.

He could not waste time. His _real_ enemy was going to att-

The four-legged man dropped from his web and shot a long string of sticky silk at him. Chat Noir planted his staff on the pavement and propelled himself up by extending it. He wrapped an arm around Ladybug's waist when he reached her, held on for dear life, then pointed his staff at the farthest wall he could see.

"Guess who is pulling the strings today, my lady?" he joked, making the staff grow until its tip connected with the wall and glued itself there.

"No 'clawing your way out' joke? You disappoint me, Chat."

He chuckled and shrunk the staff without releasing it. They zipped towards the wall, with Chat Noir trying his hardest not to let go of Ladybug, nor of the staff. The silk thread she was hanging from stretched and resisted, but snapped when they got fast enough.

Adrien held her close, releasing his weapon to salto in the air, landing against the wall feet first and
jumping down into the street. Only then did he let go of his girlfriend.

He could say girlfriend. They were dating.

"So who is our new friend?" he asked, jumping up to detach his staff from the wall while Ladybug freed herself from her prison of silk.

The villain was racing towards them, followed by his army of arachnids.

"Oh, I'll let him do the honors," Ladybug replied, throwing her yoyo at the highest balcony and shooting through the air. She landed on the roof and looked down. "Couldn't say his name with a straight face."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

Chat Noir grinned.

"Let's see, then," he murmured, watching their enemy draw close.

Four legs, four arms. Black costume. His weapon was a bracelet that could shoot gooey strings he used as restraints or zip-lines. That had to be what the Akuma was hiding in.

"I'll take care of the spiders," Adrien announced. "Good luck with Tarantula."

"It's Spider Fan!" their enemy corrected, throwing himself at Chat.

The teenager dodged, hit the man's chest with his staff, jumped away.

"Seriously?"

"Yep!" Ladybug confirmed.

"Now that's just a trademark lawsuit waiting to happen," her partner pointed out.

'Spider Fan' tried to attack him, only to be dragged away by Ladybug's yoyo.

Adrien focused on the spiders and the civilians who were still cowering in the area. He saved two children who were hiding under a bench, helped a woman fend off the human-sized grey recluse that was trying to force its way through her window, and more generally kept the arthropods away from his girlfriend.

He was doing a good job of it, or so he thought. Then Spider Fan managed to hit him with a ball of gluey silk thread that threw him against a building's facade before unfolding into an inescapable cobweb.

The young hero tried to tear his way out but his claws could not cut through the silk, that was as stretchy and disgusting as old chewing gum. Pushing on the wall to loosen the cobweb did not work. Chat Noir barely managed to bend his leg.

Helpless, he watched Ladybug lure Spider Fan away. She vanished behind a roof, followed by both the villain and a dozen black widows.

Adrien groaned. He had no choice but to try to use Cataclysm, even if it meant that he would be on a timer. At least, the spiders seemed to have forgotten about him.
A man dropped next to him. His lanky silhouette was easy enough to recognize. Chat Noir had to bite his tongue not to blurt out a 'Father?'.

"Mister Agreste?" he exclaimed instead while Gabriel quickly assessed their surroundings.

It was impossible. He was supposed to be in Syracuse, on the other side of the Atlantic. Adrien had talked to him just the previous day on Skype. They had talked about the hotel Gabriel was staying at, about his getting in touch with the designers who ran the Syracuse Style fashion show. There was no way he could have flown back to France so quickly.

*Unless he never went to Syracuse.*

*Unless he stayed in Paris to track Hawk Moth down without being monitored.*

His father turned to him with an inscrutable expression. He did not say a word. Instead, he grabbed one of the silk threads of the cobweb and tugged. The thread stretched but did not break.

"Mister Agreste?" Chat Noir insisted.

Gabriel ignored him. He wiped his hand on his pants, then took a rectangular metallic box out of his toolbelt, opening it on a thin, stylus-shaped steel blade. It looked plain but, when Gabriel used it on the cobweb Chat Noir's claws had been worthless against, not only did it cut through the silk, it carved deep into the wall itself.

What was that thing? Was it magical?

The man traced the outline of Chat's body, severing enough of the web to free him. Gabriel grabbed his arm and pulled him out of his prison. He put the blade back in its box, which he pushed back into his toolbelt.

The teenager breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank y-

"We are going home," his father said, dragging him away.

###

The Seine was cold on any given day, but it was worse at night, when you swam in dark waters for hours on end, day after day. A few minutes in and you would be chilled to the bone, no matter how expensive your swimming equipment, especially if you no longer had superpowers.

Gabriel had not complained once, diving time and time again, a flashlight in his hands, to find a cursed letter opener he knew full well would not be found. It was locked up in his office, in a safe, in a thick electrum box that would keep its aura concealed even if Tikki happened to wander near enough to sense it. Not that it was much of a risk. When Candy Warper had died, the Kwami had all said the Akuma trapped in that candy cane could barely be felt, even from up close. There was no reason Paper Cute's weapon would be any different.

"It's no use," Gabriel had told Ladybug after five nights of fruitless diving, while he was resting on
the towpath next to the water. "It must have drifted away. We will not find it."

Alice had known that. She could not accept it.

"That's what Tikki said, but I'll be damned if I don't try my hardest. It can't have been dragged all the way to the English Channel!"

She could not accept it. It broke her. Yet Gabriel had not told her he knew full well where the blade was. He had not told her he had been the first person to find Paper Cute after she had drowned.

Instead, he had tried to soothe her.

"You have to let it go," he had murmured. "Fu will look for it. His Kwami will look for it. They can travel all the way to Le Havre. They gladly will."

"I am not going to give up after just five days, Gabriel! I can't just let that woman's soul… wander. I have to know that… that someday she will be helped. Which can't happen if we don't find that letter opener."

It broke her.

It hadn't mattered in the larger scheme of things. Guilt and pain faded. Danger never did. Gabriel had known Alice would get over that failure, just like she had gotten over Candy Warper and Blood Moon's deaths.

Gabriel had not liked to see her suffer - as a matter of fact, he had hated it - but relinquishing the one weapon he had to protect her had been out of the question.

How many nights had he spent following her from a distance, watching her fight monsters and criminals, all the while knowing he would not be able to intervene if the fights turned sour? There had not been a thing he could have done against a dragon or a malebranche, nor against a sorcerer, nor against a supervillain, not until he had found Paper Cute's cold body tangled in that net right under the Seine's surface, inches away from air.

The blade had changed everything.

Gabriel had never deluded himself into thinking Hawk Moth would never return. Even without that, there was no shortage of monsters in the world.

You did not throw away what little tools you had to fight them.

Sometimes, you had to make the ones you loved suffer a little, for their own good.

###

For the best part of thirty seconds, Chat Noir could only stumble after his father as he dragged him down the street, hand firmly clenched around his wrist.

We are going home.

He knew. There would be no distracting him, no deflecting, no denying. He knew. He knew, and Adrien realized that he should have confessed weeks before, the moment Gabriel and Chat Noir
had met, the moment his father had told him about his mother's fate.

His father, who had hidden him behind walls three times the size of a man, who had kept him home-schooled and sheltered, who had warned him against 'suicidal vigilantes' because his wife had been one, because she had run off to tend to quantic business and vanished without a trace. His father who had lived in terror for years, with no answers, with no hope. His father whose son could have died a dozen times with a mask on, erasing Adrien Agreste from the face of the earth.

The boy had dithered for days over telling his girlfriend who he was, but he had totally overlooked the one reveal that mattered.

'Do your parents know you are doing this?'

"Dad! Dad, I'm sorry," he exclaimed, trying to catch up to face Gabriel.

His father was holding his wrist at such an angle that Adrien had to lag behind not to twist his arm. Gabriel did not answer. He did not even look back.

"Dad!" Adrien tried again, only to be ignored once more. "Father."

The man did not react. He just kept walking, holding Chat Noir's arm without quite pulling it. He did not have to: not following was not an option. Adrien would not have dared to free himself. The teenager's gut felt like ice. Cold sweat was dripping down his back.

He would have preferred to be yelled at. He would have preferred to be punished, sermoned, to have the ring pulled off his finger if that was what it took for Gabriel to feel better. Anything but that cool, collected nothing.

"Dad, " he pleaded.

Nothing.

They were reaching the end of the street. The spiders were mostly gone. They had abandoned the deserted street and the cocoons passerby had been trapped in, most likely to go after Ladybug.

Ladybug.

"W-wait! I-I have t-to go help her. Father, please…"

This time, Gabriel replied, though he did not bother turning.

"She will be fine," he declared. "She does not need you."

His tone was not snappish. There was not the slightest hint of anger in his voice. He was merely stating a fact, with a finality that hit Adrien in the gut.

The young hero tore his hand away from Gabriel's grip.

He could not find words to protest. He wanted to retort that Ladybug did need him, but he did not manage to. Every argument that came to his mind felt like a lie. As much as he would have liked to say that he had saved her time and time again, that they were a team, that she said so herself… it all rang hollow. He did not manage to believe them - not after hearing that - and if he could not convince himself, he would not convince his father.

Five words. It had only taken five words for his confidence to shatter, which was not surprising. It had been built on empty air to begin with.
"I have to go," he murmured instead. *That*, at least, was true.

Gabriel turned to him and studied his face with cold curiosity, just as if he had been staring at some peculiar but insignificant insect.

He did not say a word.

Adrien shrunk under his gaze, uneasy. He did not try to get away. When his father resumed walking, the boy followed. They found his car - a battered grey Ford Escort - parked two streets away. Gabriel pointed at the passenger door and took the driver seat.

Chat Noir hazarded a "dad…” before getting into the car, but his father still refused to talk.

The designer remained silent for their entire ride home. By the time they parked in the mansion's garage, Adrien would have begged to be screamed at. He did.

"Please, please, father, *say something!* " he exclaimed when they got out of the car. "Talk to me!"

Gabriel made his way to the staircase, then the hallway one floor up, all the while ignoring his son. He only bothered to turn when Ladybug called Chat Noir's weapon, and that was only to give the boy a scathing glare.

Adrien's hand hovered above the baton. He hesitated. He took a shaky breath. In the end, he did not answer. He could not tell if it would make things worse and he was too terrified to risk it. It was better to do exactly what his father wanted - anything - in the hope it could somehow calm him down. Even if Gabriel would not tell him *what* he wanted.

Adrien was desperate. He did not know how to fix things. He had no idea if things *could* be fixed.

He followed Gabriel into the dining room. The man's phone rang twice on the way. The first time, he hung up. The second time, he turned the phone off.

Still without a word, he walked to the dining table, grabbed a chair and dragged it to the hallway. He came back, did the same with the next chair, though in a less controlled fashion. He nearly threw it out of the room, which was what he did with the third one. As for the remaining chairs, he shoved them aside, hurling the last ones away to free the center of the room. He flipped the table.

Adrien watched the scene unfold, whispering the odd 'What are you d-' and 'Father, just-' when his clenched throat allowed him to.

When Gabriel grabbed one of the table's leg and used his full weight to twist it off, the boy joined him. The wood of the table creaked. It resisted. The bolts and nails, however, did not. The piece of wood snapped out of its socket.

Gabriel held it in one hand, swinging his arm back and forth, gathering momentum to throw it away. Except he did not do that: he spun on himself and hit Chat Noir in the belly with the table leg, and followed that blow by tripping the young hero. Adrien fell, landing flat on his back with his breath knocked out of him.

"Never assume you are safe," his father said, with the same coldness as before. "Up."

The boy propped himself up on one elbow, too stunned to answer.

"Up," Gabriel repeated.
Hesitantly, Adrien sat up and tried to get back to his feet, only for the designer to trip him again.

"What did I just say?" the man told him. "Up."

Chat Noir swallowed. He carefully crouched, then rolled away and saltoed when Gabriel tried to trip him for a third time. The boy landed on his feet at the other end of the room. He massaged his abs, though the blow his father had landed had surprised him more than it had hurt him.

"And don't whine," his dad snapped, repeating the words his son had heard time and time again during their training sessions, whenever he had failed to block one of Ladybug's or Gabriel's attacks. "You are invulnerable."

"I-"

"Staff."

"W-"

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. Chat Noir detached his weapon from his belt and grew it to its battle size.

"Dad," he pleaded. "Can we not do this? Can we please talk?"

His father threw the table leg away. Once again, he refused to answer. He joined Adrien and reached for the bell at his collar. The teenager blocked by pure reflex, hitting Gabriel's ribs with his staff and jerking his arm to the side. He stopped himself right before he could complete the move and sprain Gabriel's shoulder or worse.

Of course, his father used that hesitation to free himself and trip him.

"Up," he said after Adrien hit the floor.

The boy clenched his jaw.

"No! No, I am not doing this, I am not, I-"

Gabriel leaned down.

"Let me be clear," he murmured, voice dripping with menace. "If you are to go out there with that ring and willfully endanger yourself, there will be no mistakes. There will be no half-assed dodges, no faulty pirouettes, no fooling around. Either you become a perfect fighter, or you won't be a fighter at all."

###

Eight days after surrendering the ring, Gabriel had still caught himself idly talking to Plagg, only to remember the Kwami was gone and that they would never meet again.

Sleep had not come easily, or at all, so he had taken pills for a little while. He was not one to find comfort in drugs, but he needed some kind of distraction and sleep was as good as any. The pills had not worked anyway. He had still found himself pacing in the master bedroom at three in the morning, staring out the windows to check for black butterflies or dark silhouettes clad in violet.
Whenever he had turned away from the windows, it had been to look at the empty bed, where only one side of the covers was crumpled. Alice had moved into one of the guest bedrooms. While she had not considered divorce an acceptable solution, she had needed distance, and he had given it to her.

On the eighth night, he had knocked on her bedroom's door.

"I. C-can I..." he had stuttered when his wife had opened.

_Come in._

Alice had stared at him with the slightest frown, not saying anything.

He had breathed in and tried to collect himself.

"I can't..." - _... take this._ - "... sleep," he had pretended. "I do not mean to force you to talk to me, but I'd appreciate if..."

He had reached for her belly without touching it. She took his hand and pressed it against the flannel of her pyjamas, over the bump of her outstretched navel. He had hoped to feel a little kick, some motion - you never knew - but the baby had clearly been asleep.

"Come in," Alice had murmured. "Here."

They had not talked, but they had slept in each other's arms. That had been a start.

###

Plagg was nothing like Tikki. He was not _cuddly_. He was not soft, he was not comforting, he was not nice. That did not mean he was heartless. He felt plenty, compassion included (though empathy was a trait he had acquired late and not without effort). But he shied away from consoling his chosens. What was the point? It was entirely too tiring and complicated. His heroes knew how he felt, anyway. All of that fumbling and cooing and coddling was beyond useless.

He watched from the sidelines whenever heartbreak hit. If his chosens needed him to, he would land on their shoulder and sit there patiently while they sorted through their feelings on their own. He scarcely intervened, except when he had to.

He hated doing it, and he hated in even more when he had to pick one of his humans over the other. _Especially_ when the two humans involved were shattering and when he felt for both of them. But Gabriel had not given him a choice, had he?

Adrien could not defend himself. He could only break and tremble as his father tore his heart to pieces. He was too young and too kind to purposely hurt the ones he loved.

Plagg had given Gabriel enough time to get over himself.

So he was falling apart. Tough luck.

There were lines you did not cross.

Of course, the Kwami was trapped in the quantic realm, watching the so-called training session
unfold through Chat Noir's eyes. He could not talk to Gabriel. Not that it left Plagg without a voice.

When Gabriel, after tripping Adrien again, ordered the boy to get back to his feet, Plagg made the ring beep.

The teenager's first reaction was to tense, the sound too unexpected and too loud for his frayed nerves. The next second, his every muscle relaxed as he recognized the beeping of his Miraculous and envisioned the imminent transformation back into himself. He would never have dared to take the ring off, nor to protest in any way at his father's treatment of him. But Gabriel could not blame Adrien for turning back if he was not given a choice in the matter. Relief washed over the young hero.

Gabriel glared at the ring.

"It's not me!" Adrien exclaimed. "Plagg is doing it, he-"

"He cannot force you out of your transformation," the former Chat Noir snapped. "Get. Up."

The relief faded at once. Adrien's shoulder went from slightly relaxed to hunched. He rolled and jumped back to his feet, stumbling as he landed.

His father was right. You couldn't force a Miraculous holder to untransform. If the Kwami had any say in the matter, Hawk Moth would not have been such a problem. They could only obey their masters. Not that Adrien had known that for sure before hearing Gabriel's words. There were a lot of things the Kwami 'failed to mention' about the rules that bound them. You never knew how that knowledge could be used.

Adrien was a good boy, so he had never questioned the way Plagg would sometimes - rarely - start taking paw pads off the ring. One, two, three, four, five. The black cat avoided pulling that trick, so Adrien would always panic when it happened. Truth was a Kwami could not break a transformation unless exhausted. What they could do was confuse and stress their holders into willing themselves to transform back, unknowingly. It only worked when the humans were caught unaware, though.

Thankfully, Plagg did not need the transformation to break. On the contrary.

He made the ring beep again. And again. And again.

Gabriel took a deep breath, collecting the staff Adrien had dropped and throwing it to the boy, who nearly dropped it. He was getting clumsier and clumsier, which meant Gabriel was getting harsher and harsher, because Gabriel had reverted back to his only coping mechanism: focusing on a problem and fixing it.

Normal people screamed themselves hoarse, broke furniture and punched walls, but not him. No. He did not know how to let the anger out, would not allow himself to. He suppressed it and smothered it, keeping it under his skin where it could fester. From there, it seeped into his soul and poisoned him from the inside out.

As long as he accomplished something, as long as he could adjust and control the world around him, he pretended he could ignore that darkness he kept bottled.

"Grab block, once again," he told Adrien, raising his voice to cover the beeping of the Miraculous.

His son blocked as ordered, too slowly, and twisted his ankle while stepping back.
His father glared.

Plagg was not about to let himself be ignored. He could annoy anyone into breaking. He was the most insufferable creature in the world when he so wanted. He could drive Tikki to distraction.

He made the Miraculous beep continuously, loudly enough to cover Gabriel's voice.

His former chosen took a long, shaky breath, raising his chin to stare at the ceiling. He tried to calm himself and failed.

"Plagg, if you don't stop immediately, I-"

The Kwami raised the volume some more.

It took nearly a minute for Gabriel to give up. He groaned and stormed to the exit, slamming the door as he left.

Adrien tore the ring off his finger. Plagg spiraled out of it, spun in the air and landed on the boy's shoulder. He squeezed himself against his neck and gave his jaw a little bump of the head. His chosen let out a sob, then another, then curled up on the floor.

###

"Does the screaming inside your head ever stop?" Gabriel had once asked a bewildered Alice, after watching her giggle at being 'politely' called an imbecile.

It happened to her every single day.

"What do you mean?" the teenage girl had replied, puzzled out of her mind.

"You know what I mean. Don't those idiots get to you, at least a little?"

"Not really," Alice had replied, shrugging.

That had been a lie, of course, and Gabriel had been aware of that. He had caught her chewing the inside of her cheeks more than once, after the 'well-meaning' mean girls of their school had given her yet another 'friendly tip', or after she had overheard yet another comment on her lack of brains. Her eyes would narrow, she would frown, Ladybug's temper seeping out of the cracks in her mask.

"Is there screaming inside your head?" she had asked the boy.

Gabriel had shaken his head.

"No. If I'm angry, everyone knows it."

That had been a lie, too, except the young hero had believed he was telling the truth. Plagg knew better. If Gabriel was irritated, everyone knew it. He snapped at people, he scolded them, he sent them away. Irritation was an acceptable feeling, so he displayed it openly. Anger, however… True anger was too much of a giveaway. It exposed too much of his heart. He bottled it like up he bottled everything else up, every droplet of it poured into an ever-growing pool of rage.

"If I'm angry, everyone knows it too," Alice had pointed out. "You know that. You saw me scream
at Anne-Laure. You saw me scream at you."

Gabriel had winced at that, shifting in his seat. Painful memories.

"Yes."

His girlfriend had found his discomfort very amusing. He had given her a side-look. After a few
seconds, he had relaxed a little.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Yes, I am," she had assured him, and it had been the truth.

She was much like Tikki. She took the anger in, slept on it, and it faded into nothing just like the
Akuma's darkness.

Gabriel had never learned how to do that.

"Are you alright?" Alice had wondered.

"Why wouldn't I be?" her companion had replied, raising his eyebrows.

He had thought he was being sincere.

In truth, the list of 'whys' was unending.

###

Nathalie had never entertained the possibility that Gabriel could have been a hero, let alone Chat
Noir. Dismissing that suspicion had been logical considering he had told her - flat out told her - that
Alice had not kept him informed of her activities as Ladybug.

'I was not supposed to be privy to her plans as a hero. Safety precaution, you know?'

That had not been a lie. It could not have been, because Nathalie had been by his side when Alice
had vanished. She had seen him collapse, travel all over the word for answers that had never come,
answers he was still looking for. There would have been no faking the way he had shattered back
then, the way he had harassed the Brazilian detectives, the sheer panic and despair.

He had not known Alice had still been Ladybug when she had left for that trip. The woman had
lied. She had kept secrets. It was so different from the young heroes' dynamic that it made the idea
of Gabriel being Chat Noir inconceivable. 'Chat Noir is my partner', the new Ladybug would tell
the press. 'We are a team'. Meanwhile, Alice had walked away from her husband without sharing
as much as a hint of her plans.

Of course, Nathalie had discarded the notion.

Gabriel had made sure not to give her any reason to revise her conclusions. He had told her exactly
as much as he wanted her to know.

She should have been watching out for that. She had warned Anne-Laure Lenoir about that trait.
He will pretend to comply and go behind your back every single time.

He will never listen to anyone.

Syracuse, United States, not Syracuse, Sicily.

Nathalie was a liar herself. She had the scruples of a snake. She bribed and tricked and concealed the truth and forged her employer's signature. She should have known better, but she had wanted to believe he could change his stripes, that he only needed to get better to leave the past behind.

When he had closed the Butterfly watch instead of running off to chase after Hawk Moth, she had taken that as a good sign. And the look on his face afterwards... She could recognize sincere guilt and concern. He had been worried sick about her. She had wanted to believe it would make a difference.

She had chosen to ignore who Gabriel was. She had willfully closed her eyes and covered her ears and told herself fairy tales.

He had been worried sick for her because she had been worried sick about him. The simplest way to solve that problem was to make her believe there was nothing to be concerned about anymore. So he had tricked her into thinking he was safe an ocean away, and he had gone behind her back.

She would have done the same.

"Can't find them," Adrien's bodyguard announced as he took his place at the wheel of their car, when he returned from a quick search around the now spider-free block. "Not the boy, not the boss."

He had been looking for twenty minutes, ever since Ladybug had defeated her opponent and cleaned the streets of the myriad of cobwebs that had obstructed them. Nathalie had spent that time in the car, that the young heroine's spell had repaired and haphazardly parked next to the sidewalk they had left it on.

She had called Gabriel several times. She had also made good use of her tablet.

"They went home," she stated. "Or at least their phones did. I have been checking their device locator service."

She had seen the dot of Gabriel's phone travel all the way to the Place du Chatelet on the map of Paris the website had shown her. During that time, Adrien's had been nowhere to be found. It had only appeared a minute before.

"Couldn't he have called?" her coworker mumbled.

Nathalie pursed her lips and stared into the distance.

"Let's just go back," she murmured.

She spent the ride to the mansion with her heart in her mouth, knowing Gabriel had not called because he was about to make them pay for letting Adrien escape. 'Behind you, Nathalie?'. Clumsy as Gabriel was around his son, there was no one he loved more than that boy, and there was nothing he valued more than the child's safety.

There would be hell to pay for their failure to watch their charge properly.
As soon as they parked in the house's garage, Nathalie jumped out of the car and hurried to the staircase, racing up to the hallway. Three upturned chairs were lying next to the dining room door. Her first instinct was to pick them up to carry them back to their spot under the table, then to wonder what they were doing there. She stopped with her hand on the dining room door when that question hit her.

She leaned closer to the door. Hearing whispers, she knocked and waited. The voices died. A moment later, Adrien's shaky voice invited her to come in.

Nathalie pushed the door open and blanched.

The teenager was curled up in a corner, face wet, eyes puffy. He gulped down a sob, then tried to take a deep breath through a stuffy nose. He ended up gasping for air instead.

In an instant, Nathalie was kneeling by his side, squeezing his shoulder.

"Adrien?" she squeaked. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I-I'm sorry," the boy murmured without looking up. "I ruined everything. I-I lied to him and now…"

The woman ran her hand through his hair, parting it to the side and smoothing it.

"Shh, shh. It's not your fault," she said in the quietest, most reassuring voice she could manage. "What is going on, Adrien?"

The child sniffed. He bit on his trembling lower lip.

"I-I-

He snapped his mouth shut, turning to the entrance and freezing like a deer in the headlights. She had her back turned to the door but could guess who was standing there. She tensed. *Here we go.*

"Nathalie. A word, if you please," Gabriel said, in a clipped tone.

She pursed her lips, closed her eyes and nodded, all of that without turning to him. She gave Adrien's arm another squeeze before standing. Only after squaring her shoulders and making sure her spine was straight did she look at Gabriel.

Whatever he was feeling was well hidden. His mask was perfect. She couldn't see through his casual coldness. Something was off with his body language - he was tenser than usual - but it was the only anomaly she could spot.

She did not want to leave Adrien in that state, but it was not unusual of her to do so, was it? So she reluctantly followed her lover to his office.

He walked straight to his desk - he did not hurry, he did not stall - and sat with his hands crossed in front of him.

Nathalie balled her fists behind her back.

"You son is curled up in a ball and *weeping* two rooms away," she snapped. "What *happened*?"

He did not grace that outburst with an answer, so she raised her voice some more.

"What the *hell* have you done this time?" she yelled.
It was sadly not the first time the man had reduced his son to tears, though the damage had never been quite that awful.

"My son…" - Gabriel stared at his fingers for a second, with resigned indifference. - "Is Chat Noir."

*Chat Noir.*

The words ran through Nathalie's mind but did not register. That did not make sense. The boy was a bit of an escape artist, but surely… surely… He could not have vanished that often. His schedule was always full. He was supposed to be supervised at all times. She had known he slipped away every now and then, but she knew how crushing his golden cage was. She had not suspected more than the antics of a teenager who needed to spread his wings.

*Chat Noir.*

The young Ladybug had insisted her partner would be the one handling Gabriel. Did she even *know* what she was asking from the boy? Did she even know who he was?

"We need to have a conversation," Gabriel announced. "I'd like it to remain civil, if at all possible."

Nathalie was still too stunned and confused to react. Disjointed flowcharts were drawing themselves in her mind as she tried to sort through her memories of the last year, of every Akuma attack, of where Adrien had been meant to be during them. What signs had she missed?

"Please sit," Gabriel said.

She shook her head. He did not comment but kept talking.

"Today's events have made me realize that you are not quite as good a fit for this job as I previously believed. Now, the blame partly falls on me. I redefined what your job entailed along the way. I *am* aware that I gave you a responsibility you were poorly equipped to handle, one you did not want to begin with. That being said, I still expected a modicum of professionalism. I expected *more*. Anything else, I could have discarded, but not this." - He paused, barely long enough for his silence to be noticeable. - "You are fired. Please collect your things and leave."

Though she had perfectly understood his words and the intent behind them, her mouth ran away from her brain and went straight for the most inane of answers.

"W-what?" she gasped.

He looked away, keeping his voice polite and engaging, as he did in professional circumstances when he had to handle someone he could not afford to insult.

"You will get a good severance package. Three months of pay. And - of course - I will not impede your career prospects. Should Grenat Fashion still be willing to hire you, I will give you a stellar recommendation. However, from this moment on, all communications will have to go through the company's HR department. They will get in touch with you to handle all legal and financial aspects of the situation, which I'm sure you understand."

By that point, Nathalie had recovered from the revelation on Adrien's secret identity. She had processed Gabriel's speech and analyzed his motivations.

He was going to shut everyone out and withdraw ever deeper into himself. He was going to focus on the one thing that gave him purpose, which was finding Hawk Moth. Knowing that the madman
was Adrien's direct enemy would only add fuel to that fire.

"Don't," she murmured. "Don't do this! Please don't," she insisted, joining him and reaching for his shoulder.

He pushed his chair away to avoid her touch. She paused with her hand in the air, trying to convey her feelings through her expression alone.

Gabriel stared straight at her and pretended not to see her pleading look.

"I was willing to let the scarf go," he told her, "even if I knew it was only a symptom of a much larger problem. Now I have irrefutable proof that not only did Adrien escape your watch over and over again for a year, but you have also been hiding it from me. This is the extent of my good will. Go. Just go."

"No!" she snapped. "Let's discuss this. I'm not going to let you push me away. Not this time."

This was the moment Anne-Laure Lenoir had warned her about, the 'something' that had set Gabriel off, which had to happen because it always, always did. And now he would go after Hawk Moth, and he would do it with neither supervision nor moral support.

Nathalie had been an idiot to believe she could prevent it. She could not prepare for every eventuality, only adjust to them when they presented themselves.

She had no idea what to do.

Gabriel breathed in.

"Don't make me rip you apart," he murmured, looking down at his hands. "Because I will. I will, and I won't stop. So don't."

Nathalie snarled.

She bit the inside of her cheeks bloody.

She collected herself.

"That is more courtesy than you showed your son," she stated. "You do realize that, don't you?"

He stilled. It was not a sudden change. He had been immobile and he did not resume moving at all, not for a minute at least. He looked at his hands in perfect silence, did not blink, barely breathed. His first gesture was to clench his fingers together.

Then he looked up.

"Go," he repeated.

She glared at him and stood firm for a moment, but it was useless. There would be no reaching him. Not yet.

She walked out.

###
Chapter End Notes

I hope no one had forgotten Gabriel is an asshole.
Ladybug landed on the roof of the Grand Paris and turned to the Agreste's home, looking for any sign of its residents.

She had spent half an hour trying to locate Chat Noir, who had vanished while she was fighting Spider Fan. Her partner had not answered her calls. Actually, he had ignored the first. The second had not connected at all, a sure sign he was no longer transformed. It was not in his habits, so Marinette had gone from concerned to worried to afraid for him.

It had taken her thirty minutes to find someone who had seen the young hero leave the battle, and Ladybug had not liked what she had heard.

"He left with an older man," a woman from a building close by had told her when she had knocked on her door. "I saw them through my window. Chat Noir was not being forced or anything, it looked more like he was trying to plead his way out of it. I thought it was strange, but I told myself there had to be a reason."

"Older man? Ladybug had asked. "What did he look like?"

"Lanky, moody, with dark clothes…"

"Pale blond hair?" Marinette had snapped, recognizing that description.

"Yes. Platinum, you know, bleached. And messy."

She had thought Gabriel Agreste was an ocean away, but now that she thought about the past few weeks, she realized she should have been more suspicious. The man had moved the contents of his secret lair to a 'secure storage location', which was a sneaky way to say 'to a new hideout nobody could find'. They had not questioned it, since Gabriel was meant to travel for weeks. To quell suspicions, the disgraced hero had let Chat Noir believe he was doing much better. Even Marinette had fallen for that, after Gabriel had made the effort to come and train them both, despite his blatant hatred for a Ladybug who was not his wife.

They had not been vigilant enough.

Now she could only wonder what was going on.

The mansion looked quiet - it always did, empty as it was - but there was light in Gabriel's office, which meant either the man or his secretary were home. The teenager zipped to the roof of the house then lowered herself to the office's window.

Mister Agreste was sitting at his desk, still wearing the loose dark clothes he favored during their nights of training. His hair was an unruly mess. He was trying to comb it back with his fingers, although he would have needed hair gel to succeed.
Ladybug knocked

Adrien's father jumped in his chair and whirled to the window, bewildered. He collected himself in a blink. When he crossed the room to open the window, his face was as inscrutable as ever.

"Miss," he greeted her.

"Mister Agreste. Where is my partner?"

Gabriel stared at her - through her, more precisely - and did not answer.

"People saw him follow you away from the battle," she continued, "and now he is not answering my calls. Where is he?"

Once again, there was a lull. Mister Agreste did not move a single muscle. He was not even thinking about his answer. You could tell when he was lost in thought: he would frown, he would look to the side. Here, Marinette only saw perfect stillness.

"I reckon he went home to his family," Gabriel ended up replying.

"That's it?"

"That would be where I advised him to go," the man stated, pushing the window closed.

Ladybug blocked it.

"I want to know what happened."

The blond did not try to force the window shut. A few seconds went by.

"I found young Chat Noir glued to a wall in a street filled with enlarged versions of the most lethal spiders the world has to offer. I freed him, dragged him away and gave him my opinion on his fighting abilities. And I sent him home."

The young heroine frowned. Something was terribly wrong. That emptiness in Gabriel scared her. She had never seen him act that way. Even during their worst encounters, on the night Chat Noir had figured the designer's past identity and when the man had waited for her on the roof of the Opera Garnier, his mood had been tangible. He was reserved but not altogether hard to read. As much as he loved to wear a facade, you knew there was a vibrant personality just beneath the surface, intense, focused. During their last meetings - both when Marinette had visited Adrien at home or when mister Agreste had trained Chat Noir and her - the man had smiled and teased them and played basketball with his son.

This blankness was so off it was frightening.

"Are you alright?" Ladybug asked, in her softest voice.

"Yes," the blond replied after the slightest delay. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to."

He pushed the window closed, this time firmly enough not to let Marinette stop him. She watched him turn away and walk to his computer without sparing her another glance.

He tapped the screen.

Thick sheets of metal dropped over all of the house's windows, so quickly Ladybug had to jump
away from the wall and nearly let go of her yoyo's string. The teenager swayed back and forth and ended up with both feet pressed to the metal. She stayed there for a few seconds, stunned, then climbed to the closest balcony and shot back to the roof of the Bourgeois Hotel.

She made sure no one could see her and transformed back.

Tikki spiraled out of her earrings and landed in her cupped hands.

"Something is off," Marinette exclaimed. "I… He… He is not supposed to act like that, is he? You know him. Is it normal for him, or…"

"Something is off," the Kwami confirmed, turning to the mansion, even though it was not in their line of sight. Her face crumpled in worry. "Marinette, I think we should stay here and make sure Gabriel does not leave."

"W-what?"

The girl did not really need an explanation. Not an hour before, mister Agreste had been observing the battle against Spider Fan. He was still hunting Hawk Moth down and something had clearly happened.

"I'm afraid if he gets out now, he might go and do something he will regret," Tikki explained.

Marinette nodded.

"I'll keep an eye on him," she promised. "Spots on!"

###

Nathalie walked out of the office much earlier than Adrien had expected her to.

Her talk with Gabriel could not have lasted more than five minutes.

The boy had been worried sick, aware that he had put his father's assistant in a terrible situation. Gabriel was never soft on people who did not do their job well and Nathalie's not noticing Adrien's absences, let alone his secret identity, could not go over well.

The teenager had spent those five minutes listening to the silence as hard as he could. He had heard Nathalie's voice a little after the office door had closed on her and his father, but nothing after that. Gabriel hated to make a spectacle of himself. He did not shout, he did not yell, not unless the circumstances were extreme.

Whatever had unfolded had done so in collected tones, neither hushed nor too loud.

"I wouldn't worry too much," Plagg had muttered.

Adrien had not agreed with the sentiment. As a matter of fact, he had gaped at his Kwami in disbelief.

"She is tough," the black cat had added, as if it was meant to be comforting.

The young hero had shaken his head and waited some more.

Of course, when Nathalie knocked on the dining room door and slipped inside, her expression was
neutral. If you looked closely, you could imagine some sadness there, but maybe it was a trick of the light.

She looked at the room, her gaze drifting from the upturned table to the discarded chairs.

Plagg waited for her to look the other way to dash out, staying close to the ceiling and only diving down behind her, next to the open door. He slipped out.

Adrien ran to Nathalie.

"W-what did Father s-" he started.

Nathalie pulled him to her and hugged him. He stilled. She squeezed him tighter, pressing her chin against his shoulder. Hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around her, keeping them hovering inches from her body for an eternity before he dared to squeeze back.

The hug lasted ten more seconds then Nathalie pulled back, putting her hands on Adrien's shoulders.

She sighed.

She took her hands away and lifted one side of her jacket to take a card holder and a pen out of her inner pocket.

"I'll have to go away," she announced, taking one of her business cards out and placing it on her flattened palm. She started to write in clumsy, wavy lines. "This is my personal email, in case you do not have it yet, and my home address. I don't think you know where I live."

Adrien did, of course. He had spied on his father long enough to discover that. He did not correct her assumption, however. His mind was stuck on her first words.

"G-go away?" he stuttered.

She squeezed his shoulder once more, giving him a sad smile.

"He fired you?" Adrien exclaimed. "He is sending you away?"

"I'm sorry," Nathalie replied, her tone quiet and professional.

"But he can't! - Of course he can, Adrien. How did you think he would react? - "He can't! He l… l-likes you. You make him happy."

She hushed him.

"Now, now, no need to overre-"

"It's my fault," Adrien blurted out. "I knew he didn't want… I lied to everyone, I-"

"Oh hush," Nathalie snapped, putting her other hand on his other shoulder. "None of this is your fault. You-"

She frowned and looked down at his hand. He was still holding his ring, though he was not wearing it.

"Are you really Chat Noir?" she asked.
He looked away, uneasy.

"Yes."

"I see. Well then, running off to fight superpowered monsters without letting anyone know about it? Bad form. Very bad form. If I still had a word to say, you would be grounded into adulthood."

Adrien lowered his eyes.

"However," Nathalie continued, "I did not see it. I knew you slipped away from time to time. I assumed it was to visit friends. I failed to do my job. That's on me. Your father failed to do his. That's on him. And whatever went on here," she continued, gesturing at the upturned furniture, "is not right. I want you to remember that. It is not right. It is not normal. Are we clear on that?"

"It's… I… Nathalie, he has every right to be angry, you wouldn't un-
"I understand just fine. He told me about Alice being Ladybug."

The boy froze.

"He did?"

"He did," she casually confirmed, as if that revelation had not been bewildering. "So I understand just fine why he would be less than thrilled to have another hero in the family. But this …" - She waved at the table. - "I have said it before and I will say it again: parents are not supposed to let their feelings weigh upon their children. You are not responsible for your father's happiness, you are not responsible for the state of his relationships, you are not responsible for his mental health. And this," she spat, staring at the room, "was inacceptable. Good parents do not reduce their children to sobs to discipline them. Good parents do not let their children believe their being less than perfect will destroy the family. Abusive parents do."

Adrien felt numb and cold down to the bones. His anxiety was dying down, leaving him exhausted.

"He is not that bad," he murmured.

Nathalie winced and clicked her tongue, then raised her hand to cup his cheek. She left it there.

"But he is," she said in her softest voice. "Today, he was. And I have watched him be a terrible father for a very long time, too. And I… let it happen, because it was none of my business, because he is your father, and… I should really have taken a stand. I'm sorry."

"He is not that bad!" Adrien repeated. "He's just…"

"Struggling. I know. I'm aware there is an entirely different side to Gabriel, one that does not surface very often. That's why I have tried very hard to make him remember how to be happy. So have you," she amended, running a hand through Adrien's hair. "We both know he is struggling. But that is no excuse."

"Of course it is!"

"That is no excuse," Nathalie repeated, firmly. "He might not be fine, but he has been steadily refusing help for years. That means he is responsible for the way he feels. The blame is on him."

Adrien could not find an answer to that. He still felt like he had broken everything they had.

Nathalie pulled him into another hug. This time, the teenager held on for dear life.
She had been the only person keeping his family together. She was family. Without her, he did not have the slightest hope to salvage the situation. He did not know how to reach his father. He did not think Gabriel would ever forgive him for not confessing to being Chat Noir either.

"I don't want you to go," he murmured.

She ran her hand through his hair but gave no other answer.

He breathed in.

"I don't know what to do," he murmured.

Nathalie stilled, remaining silent for a while. She was thinking.

"I will handle things," she ended up declaring. "Stay strong, give him space, let him sulk. Try to keep yourself busy. You should go to school and spend time with your friends and talk to them. Do not let this eat you from the inside."

"I can't tell them," Adrien protested. "It would be dangerous."

"Tell them something," Nathalie insisted. "Do not go through this alone."

But there was no way to tell them 'something', was there? The one friend Adrien could have talked to about everything was Ladybug, and he did not want to tell her who he was. Not like this. Not because of this.

"What about Father?" he asked. "Is there anything I can do?"

She pursed her lips with a little suction noise. A moment later, she pulled away.

"Avoid him," she said. "I will handle your father."

"But-"

"But nothing."

"But he pushed you away."

"And so what? He is not the boss of me."

Adrien stared at her with wide eyes as the words registered. Then he choked and burst into poorly contained chuckles that came out of his nose in little snorts.

Nathalie waited for him to calm down with a faint smile on her lips.

When he finally did, he felt much lighter.

"About your father," she told him, "there is a scene I have watched unfold over and over and over again. Whenever you are really upset and clearly need to be comforted, what does Gabriel do? He fidgets, he might pat your shoulder, but then he leaves. Every single time."

"Er, y-yes?"

"He does that because whenever Gabriel is upset, the last thing he wants is to be comforted. He leaves because he would want to be left alone. Hugging you, patting your shoulder, staying with you… I think he knows you need it, but he can't wrap his mind around that. His first instinct
around you is always wrong."

"And my first instinct around him is always wrong," Adrien commented, looking away.

"It is sometimes wrong," Nathalie corrected. "Trust me when I say that you can't be as bad as your father at this."

The boy choked again.

She tousled his hair.

"I know it's difficult for you to do nothing," she told him, "but it's the best approach right now. When he is ready to talk to you, he will. And," she continued with a frown, "this time, he better crawl to repair the damage he has done."

"I don't w-"

The security system activated. Metallic shutters rolled down every window, plunging the room into darkness.

Nathalie sighed.

"Sulking," she muttered, rolling her eyes. She breathed in and turned to Adrien. "I should go. Take care of yourself, will you? Don't hesitate to call me. Alright?"

He nodded.

"Alright. Thank you, Nathalie."

She studied his face, hugged him one last time and left.

###

Plagg missed the days before Adrien's birth, that handful of years living together with Tikki and Gabriel and Alice. They had been a family, a blissfully happy family.

Tikki had told Plagg about the heartache that had come later, the fights, the leaving, the coming back, but the black cat had not been there to see it. All of that had unfolded after he had been sent back to Italy with Volpina, after Gabriel had surrendered the ring. In the earlier years, however, the two humans had not argued much. They had bickered, sure, but never clashed hard enough to leave wounds. They had been made for each other, carved around each other's shadows. As abrasive as Gabriel was, he could not hurt Alice. She was much like Tikki. She absorbed anger until it faded into nothing. She did not hold grudges. She rolled with the punches.

Of course, Gabriel did not want to hurt her - he loved her like a cat loved the sun - but Plagg knew only too well that not wanting and not doing were separate concepts. It was so easy to bruise feelings you could not relate to.

But Alice was like Tikki, warm enough for two, bright enough for two, patient, relentless.

(And shattered, and tainted with a darkness she fought nail and tooth to hold in.)
Gabriel could not have hurt her if he had tried, and even less by accident. Whenever he did, it was by hurting others, as never in a million years could she have stood by and watched. Which was why she had reacted to the two pink lines on a little plastic stick not with joy but with horror.

Plagg, ever curious, had heard frantic whispers and peeked into her bathroom to find her pacing, with Tikki murmuring comforting words.

"Gabriel can't know," Alice had told her Kwami, oblivious to Plagg's presence. "Can't. This is not happening. No. No."

"You cannot not tell him," Tikki had pleaded. "You know how much he wanted this."

"Because it is what proper families do! He is not cut out for it!"

"People change," the red Kwami had insisted, her words hollow.

Plagg had landed on the sink and stared at her, only to see her avoid his eyes as her face crumbled. Tikki knew all about people changing.

She knew all about darkness fading and withering away.

Alice had not noticed their interaction, too freaked out to even pay attention to Plagg's arrival.

"This is going to be a disaster," she had predicted, running her hands over her face.

Tikki had carefully picked her words, knowing the parallels her brother would draw between their chosens' situation and the past.

Tell us how you see me, Plagg had thought, bitterness pooling in his chest and spreading inside him like venom.

"I think you are not giving Gabriel enough credit," his sister had chastised her chosen. "He will love that child from the bottom of his heart. You know that."

Plagg had glowered at those words, as they did not promise anything more than that one feeling. They were not meant to allay Alice's fear. They did not imply that Gabriel could turn out to be 'cut out for it'.

They had changed, Tikki and him. They knew all about changing. They had traded darkness and light and tainted their essences until there was too little left of them to recognize the gods they had been. Yet that had not been enough, or Tikki would have been able to believe in Gabriel's ability to grow.

The look on Alice's face had made it clear Gabriel's love for the child was not what she was concerned about, or maybe that it was.

"He can't know about this," she had repeated.

Maybe she had entertained the thought of making the problem go away, though Plagg knew it would have been idle thinking. Alice did not have it in her.

"He already does," the black cat had announced, making her jump out of her skin. "I told him a month ago, when I felt the baby."

The young human had gaped at him and slowly turned to Tikki, as she realized that peeing on a
plastic stick was pointless when one's personal deity was perfectly able to inform you of your pregnancies or lack thereof.

She had stormed out.

The next day, she had shared some of her worries with a very sulky Plagg.

"It is not that I think he won't love our child," she had explained. "Of course he will. Probably already does."

"He does," Plagg had muttered.

That confirmation had been met with a sigh.

"It's just that he is cold. He is cold, and he is cutting, and I can read him, I can see through that… but a child won't. And I'm afraid no matter how hard Gabriel tries to fight that, he will always slip. Again and again and again. I don't want our child to go through death by a thousand cuts, even by accident."

To Gabriel himself, for years, she had said that having children while they were superheroes would be unwise. She had never mentioned those particular fears.

Plagg had scowled at her without answering.

"And I would do the same," she had added, much to his surprise. "I'm just as bad as he is. I'm worse. Do you think I can't see that? Some people are not cut out to be parents. I'm not. He's not. We're not."

The Kwami liked her better when she pointed her own flaws out, and not just his chosen's.

"You'll do fine," he had told her, yawning. "You want to do fine."

It was only years later that he had understood how right she had been.

###

Plagg slipped into Gabriel's office by squeezing himself under the door. He flattened himself against the floor and circled the room, only flying up once safely concealed by one of the mannequins that decorated the office and the black wallpaper behind it.

The Kwami was enraged.

*Death by a thousand cuts and a punch to the gut.*

Alice and Gabriel had been handed the kindest, sweetest boy they could have hoped for and they had steadily broken him.

Plagg had seen the scars easily enough when he had returned to Gabriel's house years before, after escaping Volpina. It was not just that Adrien's father constant neglect had damaged him. Alice had left the boy wide open to the blows. Of all the things she could have taught her child, she had handed him her mask.

Roll with the punches.

Except Adrien did not roll with the punches: he endured them and tried not to show the pain. And yes, Adrien smiled, but the boy had been meant to grin. All of that mischief and joy snuffed out, tightly controlled, kept under wraps.

Yes, Alice had been right to be afraid. The scars she had left had been more insidious than the ones her husband had inflicted. Gabriel's behaviour caused immediate, unmistakable pain. Alice's tricked you into feeling happy as you shattered.

Plagg had prayed the gods for something good to come the child's way.

Tikki had heard him.

The black Kwami had danced in joy when his sister had chosen the cookie girl - as stubborn and bad-tempered as Marinette was - because it meant the ring would belong to Adrien. He was her match, her perfect match, and that had been such good news.

Becoming Chat Noir had given Adrien a well-deserved taste of freedom and it had made him so happy. If Plagg had to be honest, he had been happy too. It was nice to be able to repair some of the damage Gabriel had inflicted, to push the teenager to break the crippling facade his parents had forced on him.

Of course, Gabriel had to ruin everything, because Gabriel was a jerk and an idiot and an ass on top of that.

'You'll do fine. You want to do fine.'

Never had Plagg uttered worse nonsense, and most of what came out of his mouth was silly.

'Wanting to do fine' was a recipe for disaster, because Gabriel's notion of 'fine' was a nightmare. In wanting the best for his son, he had given him the worst, over and over again. And that was when he had tried. Plagg had watched his previous chosen withdraw and avoid Adrien too often to count.

The black cat was enraged.

He had gone into Gabriel's office to steal the cursed weapon. Something had to be done about that. The Kwami had no clue where Gabriel had gotten it. What he knew was that letting him keep it was not a good idea. Not in general and especially not now.

That was it.

Maybe he wanted to glower at the man on top of that. Shoot some daggers at him. He couldn't yell at him, after all, so ominous staring was the best he could do to calm his nerves.

Maybe he was a little worried too.

He knew Gabriel well.

He knew what his previous chosen was doing to himself.

Maybe having been a dark god gave Plagg an unique perspective on the situation, an understanding of that total inability to relate, of thinking in a way that was so logical yet that no one could comprehend.
How many times had he stared into Tikki's disappointed eyes without a clue of what he had done wrong?

Truth was, you did not need to be evil to be cruel. You did not even need to want to be cruel. You did not have to be evil to act evil. It was all the same to a creature with no conscience.

Gabriel had just destroyed his son, yet Plagg knew he had tried his hardest to spare him. It was not difficult to tell, though Adrien would never be able to understand that. His father had let him keep the ring.

*Now where is that letter opener?* the small god asked himself, looking around and pretending this was the only reason he had come.

Gabriel was still wearing his roof-climbing outfit and, unsurprisingly, the toolbelt that went with it. The cursed blade had to be inside it, in that electrum box that prevented Plagg from sensing its darkness. Pilfering it was not an option.

The Kwami grimaced and landed on the head of the mannequin, observing Gabriel as he stared out a shuttered window. After a moment of looking at the sheet of metal behind the glass, the man returned to his computer and took a look at the security footage. That went on for a while. Plagg, hovering higher to peek at the screen, watched Nathalie leave and Adrien go back to his room.

Barely a minute later, Gabriel spoke.

"Plagg," he murmured, "on the off chance that you are in the room… Kindly get out."

The Kwami landed back on the mannequin and went utterly still.

Gabriel waited, his breathing growing louder and louder as the seconds went by. Then he started sobbing.

###

"I warned you," Anne-Laure Lenoir said after listening to Nathalie's heavily shortened summary of the situation, her voice muffled and hard to understand courtesy of the wind that blew straight into her phone.

Nathalie had stopped her explanations at 'Gabriel snapped, can you get me in touch with Ladybug?’, really. The rest could wait.

Calling Anne-Laure had been her last resort. The simplest way to contact Chat Noir's partner would have been to ask Chat Noir himself but, considering how shaken Adrien was, she had preferred not to worry him by reminding him of Gabriel's murder plans. The boy had enough on his plate. Nathalie wanted him in his room, preferably on the phone with a friend who could calm him down.

"I know you warned me. Now can you or can you not contact the girl?"

"I can't but I can give you the number of the granddaughter of another Miraculous holder, who should have Volpina's number, who should be able to call Ladybug. I hope you speak Italian."

"Yes, I speak Italian. What's the number?"
"Let me find it and text it to you, okay?"

"Alright."

"Better yet, I'll do the calling. Where are you now?"

"I am in a coffee shop next to the mansion, staring at the garage door. I don't plan to move unless Gabriel leaves."

"What about the front door?"

"I have someone guarding it," Nathalie announced.

She had slipped three hundred euros to her equally fired coworker, who was happy enough to sip expensive coffee at the Bourgeois' while keeping an eye on Gabriel's home. They would not be able to follow their ex-employer if he left, but at least they would know he was gone.

"Well, don't move," Anne-Laure mumbled. "I'll see what I can do."

She hung up.

Nathalie closed her eyes and tried to rein the panic in. She had promised Adrien she would handle things, but it had only been a way to placate the boy. There was nothing she could do.

She had worked within a set of variables, accounting for Gabriel's grief, his trauma, his drive and his anger. She had thought she could outmaneuver him. Accounting only for the parameters she knew about, stopping him should have been simple. He had to move on, he had to heal, he had to focus on what he had instead of what he missed. That road would have been arduous but straightforward enough.

Gabriel having previously been Chat Noir was a shock (not that it should have been), but ultimately had no impact on her plans.

Adrien being Chat Noir sent everything crashing down. There was no hope of stopping Gabriel now, because nothing mattered more to him than the boy's safety. His need for answers did not compare, nor did his thirst for revenge. He could have put that aside. But Adrien, in direct danger? Gabriel would stop at nothing to take the threat out.

Well. She hoped he would stop at some things. She loved the man. She had faith in him. Unfortunately, he had his demons.

Trying to keep an eye on the garage door, she peeked down at her tablet and opened Gabriel's phone tracking website, using his credentials. She could no longer connect to Gabriel's company's services - her account having been terminated not ten minutes after she had left the man's office - but he was not aware of how many external websites she could still access.

Not everything was locked behind face recognition or fingerprint scanners.

Gabriel had never seen her use the GPS tracking, not even to find Adrien during his escapades. He would not suspect her of spying on his phone.

Unfortunately, said phone was off. There was no dot to be found on the map. The website listed the device as 'offline'. 
Nathalie sighed and turned to the garage doors again. She picked her phone up, opening her contact list, and called yet another person who could possibly help.

"Miss Césaire," she said when Adrien's young blogger friend picked up. "This is Nathalie Sancoeur. I need to get in touch with Ladybug. Is there any way you could make that happen?"

###

Adrien had spent he had no clue how long sitting at his desk, in his bedroom, staring at his phone. Nathalie's advice was not terrible per se. Talking to a friend was a comforting idea, though he did not know who to call. He was turning and twisting the story in his head anyway, hoping to figure out a way to discuss the situation without giving himself away.

The first person he had to call was Ladybug, really, but Plagg had not returned yet and Adrien could not contact her without transforming.

The teenager was having trouble keeping himself distracted. When the Kwami finally arrived, with a stack of Camembert boxes that he dropped on the sofa, Adrien nearly jumped out of his chair.

"The fridge door wouldn't open," Plagg announced, in the most dejected tone he had ever used in his holder's presence.

It was also his less convincing lie.

"We need to transform," Adrien told him. "Ladybug must be worried sick."

The Kwami did not protest. Instead, he flew closer, ears drooping, eyes downcast.

"Are you okay?" the young human murmured, extending a hand so the black cat could land.

Plagg ignored the hand and darted up, nuzzling against Adrien's cheek.

"Claws out?" the deity asked.

"Claws out," his chosen confirmed.

The transformation lasted fifteen seconds and Chat's baton started ringing halfway through it. He picked up as soon as the magic stopped crackling around him.

"My L-"

"CHAT ARE YOU OKAY?" his partner shrieked.

He gasped and nearly dropped his baton.

"Yes. Yes, Ladybug. Sorry for deserting the fight like that. I didn't mean to worry you."

"That's okay, as long as you're fine. Where are you? What did Agreste want?"

Adrien's stomach twisted.

"He… Uh… Where are you right now?"
"I'm on the Grand Paris' roof," she replied. "I was looking for you, so I went to ask mister Agreste what was going on and… Chat, there's something really off. You should have seen him. No, wait, you have seen him."

"I have," Chat Noir replied in a dead voice. "I'll explain. It's… not a good day."

"Yeah, I can see that. The house is on lockdown. And when I talked to him, he was not acting like himself. Tikki thought it would be wiser to make sure he did not leave, so I'm keeping watch."

Adrien felt like the ground had collapsed under him.

He hung up and started running. Not ten seconds later, he was banging on his father's office's door. No one answered, so the boy tried to open it, only to find it locked.

"Cataclysm," he whispered, pressing his palm to the wood.

He watched it fall to dust and reveal an empty office.

_He could be in the study, the boy told himself. He could be in his room._

Deep down, he knew he was deluding himself. He still ran upstairs and checked every bedroom, as well as the study and the attic. All the while, he ignored the ringing of his staff. It was only after checking the house's security footage and confirming that his father had never walked out of his office that he called Ladybug back.

"He's gone," he blurted out, as loud as he could to drown her voice. "I just had Adrien check. Mister Agreste is not home."

###

The watch started ringing at half past eight in the morning, roughly. Gabriel pressed the latch to open it, leaning over the edge of the roof he was perched on and extending his arm.

As he had expected, the clock hands pointed straight at the Louvre.

Summer had come and gone. _That_ had made a world of difference. Despite his best efforts, trying to track Hawk Moth down during the holiday had been a frustrating and hopeless endeavor, as the bastard would not stop _moving_. The Akuma attacks had not been long enough to pinpoint his location, and it changed from battle to battle.

Now that summer break was over, Hawk Moth's hypothetical children had gone back to school, and the man himself had returned to work.

A week of daily attacks had been more than enough to figure out where the Akuma were summoned. Gabriel had known which city block to focus on before leaving for Brazil. Refining the list of possibilities down to the Louvre had been child's play.

Now, all that was left to do was to discover which room Hawk Moth used as a hideout.

Simple enough.

Gabriel clipped his MP3 player to his belt and turned the radio on. Listening to the news would
keep him informed of the villain of the day's location and of their defeat, which translated to knowing when Hawk Moth would be forced out of his transformation.

The designer jumped from roof to roof, watch in hand, to try to locate the room his enemy was in. Once that was done, he got Paper Cute's weapon out and teleported into the Louvre itself. He prayed for luck before doing so, because the one rule of teleporting was not to transport yourself to a place you could not see. Unfortunately, famous museums with boarded windows and a plethora of guards did not allow for recon, so all Gabriel had to work with mere floor plans and vague memories of the place.

Thankfully, he appeared in a deserted storage room, next to a pile of crates instead of through them. He put the letter opener back into its box before Bella could notice the trapped Akuma's aura. After that, Gabriel slipped out of the room. He made his way to the stairs that led to Hawk Moth's lair, hid and kept watch.

He had to close his eyes when the radio informed him that Ladybug and Chat Noir had joined the battle. He waited for his stomach to travel down from his throat to his belly. Then he just waited.

At seven past ten, Miss Colibri was defeated.

Gabriel put his ski mask on.

At fourteen past ten, a trapdoor slid open on the ceiling of the staircase and he heard footsteps coming down.

"I keep telling you," a crystalline voice chimed above his head. "You need to take the girl by surprise. We need to try another illusionist."

"We are not having this argument again," a man answered in a tired tone. "We will make an illusionist when someone suitable presents themselves."

Gabriel flattened himself against the wall. He reached for the electrum box inside his toolbelt and opened it by an inch, touching the letter opener with the tip of his finger. He heard Bella gasp, right as he teleported behind the Kwami and her chosen.

The man whirled to him. Gabriel kicked him in the chest and sent him flying down the stairs. An instant later, he had dropped over him and snatched the brooch hidden under his tie.

"LET ME GO!" Bella shrieked, bumping against his hand.

Not that it had the slightest effect: she was exhausted and needed food, for a start, and there was no way for a Kwami to take a Miraculous away from its holder.

Gabriel took the letter opener out of the electrum box and pushed the brooch into it, forcing Bella back into the quantic plane.

He grinned under his mask.

Hawk Moth stared at him through cracked glasses and tried to crawl away. Hawk Moth the family man, father of two children he had not hesitated to turn into monsters. Not that it was a surprise.

"Hello!" Gabriel greeted him. "Long time no see. Though I suppose you would remember me," he added, waving the cursed blade with his right hand. "Sword." - He passed it to his left. - "Cataclysm."
Those who have followed the WIP on Tumblr might notice I dropped a few new paragraphs at some points, and that a 1400 words scene was deleted (it might come back later).

Anyway, sorry for the delay. :)

Ladybug's first words, upon hearing that Gabriel had seemingly vanished out of a locked office with sealed windows, had been "I'll check that lawyer office. Please make sure Adrien is okay!". She had not given Chat Noir an opportunity to protest. Her feet had been in motion the second she had heard about Gabriel's disappearance (her partner had heard the drumming of her footsteps and the wind around her) and she had hung up right after announcing her plans. She needed her yoyo for fast travel.

When Chat Noir had joined her in Pat Messmer's empty office, twenty minutes later, her first words were "is Adrien okay?". Chat Noir eluded that question, pretending to look at the emptied 'secret lair'.

"I knew it," he murmured. "I knew there would be nothing to find. He moved everything days ago."

Ladybug sighed.

"Alright. I don't know what's going on but we need to find him," she said, walking to the empty aquariums and opening them as if there was something to be found inside. "Do you have any idea of what happened? Did he tell you anything?"

Chat Noir braced himself. He watched her close the aquariums and redirect her attention to the drawers of the closest cabinet.

He closed his eyes.

He breathed in.

"He found out his son was a superhero," he explained.

Ladybug opened a drawer, slammed it shut and opened another one. Then Adrien's words registered and she whirled to him.

"What?"

Her partner stared at his hands, twisting his fingers. Then he removed his ring. His transformation dissolved in a flash of yellow lightning. Plagg spiraled out of his Miraculous and dropped on his shoulder.

Ladybug stood frozen. Her lips moved - barely - but she did not say a word.
Adrien looked away.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," he said. "I-I just didn't want… all of the expectations… I just wanted to be just Chat a little longer. I-"

She threw herself at him and pulled him into a crushing hug.

His heart all but stopped.

"I-" he tried again.

"Oh, Chat, I'm so sorry. And I dragged you on that investigation and you had to listen to me say all of those terrible things about your dad and I kept messing things up for you and…"

This wasn’t what he had expected at all. He had lied to her. He had tricked her into dating him, disregarding her decision to move on from ‘Adrien’, minimizing the severity of his lies. Day after day after day, he had kept up the pretence, in a way that ultimately meant he did not trust her.

She should have been angry. She was entitled to being angry. He didn’t feel like he deserved her apologies.

Still, his apprehension dissolved into incredulity, then relief, then an overwhelming mix of remorse and love.

She straightened up, pulling back but keeping her arms around him.

"We're going to find him," she promised. "We're going to find him, we're going to help him and make sure he is safe. That everyone is safe."

It was his turn to grab her and hug her. He took a deep breath, squeezed hard and let go.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. We're partners," she reminded him, running her hands down his arms until she found his hands, then intertwining her fingers with his. "We're friends. More than friends. We'll always be here for each other."

Adrien moved back so he could look at her. He felt himself smile.

"We will, won't we?"

"We will," she assured him.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," he repeated once again, this time with less guilt.

She tensed and looked at the ceiling, taking a step back.

"ABOUT THAT."

He stared at her as she started fidgeting, arms flailing by her sides. Her fists opened and closed. She gestured. She was so jittery that, when she reached for her earrings to untransform, Adrien already knew who he was about to see. The scene was too familiar.

Pink sparkles washed over Ladybug and left Marinette in their wake.

"So I kind of 'brushed over' a few things," she blurted out, staring at the ceiling. "And I might have
used information Ladybug knew as Marinette and vice-versa until it got very confusing and basically I'm-

Adrien chuckled.

It explained quite a few things, like the timing of her first outburst against his father. Like the overwhelming urge to hold her he had started to feel when she had started acting more like herself around him.

"How did I not guess?" he said.

She had been there for him in and out of costume, with all her bravery and stubbornness, and he had not connected the dots. Not when Marinette had rained hell upon his father to defend him, when Gabriel was probably the scariest (non-akumatized) man she had ever met. Not when a flustered Ladybug had confessed to collecting interviews and posters of him.

He was denser than osmium.

"How did I not guess?" she muttered.

Then she breathed in, growing serious.

"We should g-"

"Cursed letter opener!" Plagg snapped.

The two teenagers turned to him, only to realize he had been talking to Tikki.

"Yes, you two are very cute, you'll still be very cute after we discuss the cursed knife" the black cat commented when he noticed the children had gone silent. Then he turned to his sister, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

"There's a letter opener," Plagg told her. "Steel. Can cut through walls and magical webs. I had never seen it before, so I assume it's new. Does that description ring a bell?"

Adrien did not know Tikki well. He had only met her a handful of times, though Ladybug had talked about her a lot. If the boy had been asked to describe the Kwami, he would have used words such as 'kind', 'patient' and maybe even 'motherly'. 'Cheerful' and 'serene' would have fit in too. He had never pictured the tiny goddess in a state of boiling rage because he had not thought she could get angry.

She could.

Her eyes went wider and wider as red sparkles flickered around her. She had gone very still. Her jaw was clenched. You could feel static electricity in the air.

"He had it all along," she said. "He had it all along? ALICE LOOKED FOR THAT WEAPON FOR WEEKS!"

"Er… I'm sorry," Marinette cut in. "What weapon are you talking about?"

Tikki tried to relax.

"It's… It's a magical blade, a dark artefact. Very dangerous. About ten years ago, one of Ladybug's enemies died and we couldn't find her weapon at all. We thought she had dropped it in the Seine, that it had drifted away… Gabriel helped us look for it. I-"
"What powers does it have, Tikki?" Plagg asked. "Who cares if it was in the river or not? We know who has it now."

"I'll explain," Adrien whispered to his partner.

Meanwhile, the red Kwami had squeezed her eyes shut.

"It can cut through anything and slice buildings in two but that's unimportant. Teleportation. Paper Cute was a teleporter."

"Could have guessed that," Plagg mumbled.

"Father vanished out of a locked room," Adrien announced. "I figure-"

His phone started ringing. He frantically pulled it out of his pocket and sighed when he saw that the caller was not Gabriel.

But it was Nathalie. He raised a hand and pointed at his phone then turned away to answer.

"Nathalie? Is something wrong?"

"Your bodyguard saw you run out of the mansion," she announced. His freshly fired bodyguard, who should not have been around. "What happened? Where did you go?"

"Father is gone!" he blurted out. His next words poured out faster than his tongue could move. "I had to join Ladybug, we're looking for him. There's a place he used to go to but-"


"We have to find him quickly, he's going to-"

"Adrien!"

The boy swallowed his tongue.

"Better," Nathalie said. "Now. There is no point in panicking. Let's regroup at my apartment. Take your partner with you. We'll handle this."

"He can teleport!"

There was a pause. Adrien heard Nathalie take an irritated breath.

"Be that as it may, there was an Akuma attack today. He used the watch. He will be charging it for the next several hours. He has gone to ground, you would be wasting your energy running around with no leads. Come to my place and we will figure things out."

###

Tikki and Alice were much alike. They both strove to be good. They gave the world their best. They were kind, they were forgiving, they were benevolent and they worked hard to be so.

They both struggled with a darkness they could contain but never erase, Tikki because she had
wanted to give her brother his spot in the light, Alice because she was only human and had been born with it. The goddess and her chosen both knew that there was no such thing as unadulterated goodness, that it could not be allowed to exist, not in a world in shades of grey. What goodness you had, you had to share. What darkness you faced, you had to absorb and dilute and endure. And then, no matter how tainted you were and how sullied you felt, you had to rise above it and shine brighter. You could always make more light, as long as you were not swallowed by the blackest of shadows.


The brightest stars had to find the fire in themselves, not to burn out.

Of course, Alice was only human and humans cracked and broke. Darkness came from their core, not just from the outside.

They could collapse.

They could erupt.

"NO! DO YOU FUCKING HEAR ME? NO!" the blonde had roared when Fu had suggested - once again - that Gabriel's memories of being Chat Noir could be erased. It was his second try. His first attempt, right after all of the heroes minus Gabriel had joined him in his hotel room, had been met with snappish refusals.

"Alice, you know the rules," Volpina had pointed out.

The old fox was not easily impressed. She believed herself old and Alice was a child in her eyes.

"YOU STAY OUT OF THIS!" Tikki's chosen had screamed, whirling towards Mona. "You will get the ring back. You will guard it. But I will handle my family. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

Volpina had not batted an eyelash. Queen Bee, however, had taken a step back. As for Fu, he had shied away.

A decade on the field had carved away everything of Alice that was not a soldier. Her civilian self was still bubbly and optimistic, but as soon as Ladybug's mask slipped on, gone were the sweetness and warmth. The cold edges surfaced. Every step and every breath were taken for and only for the mission.

She paid no mind to her broken nose and broken ribs and torn earlobes, nor to the star shaped cut on her belly, that kept splitting open and oozed dark blood through layers of gauze.

"Alice, just-" Anne-Laure had tried, raising an hesitant hand.

But Ladybug had merely turned to Fu.

"Ten years. I have fought, and I have bled, and I have paid time and time again, and now I GET TO DECIDE. Now I GET TO HANDLE THIS. You don't get a word to say! NONE OF YOU GET A WORD TO SAY. THIS IS MY FAMILY. And if you try to touch one hair of Gabriel's head, it will be over my dead body. IS THAT CLEAR?"

Mona had said something. One syllable, Tikki did not remember what. Alice had snarled at her to make her shut up, then she had stormed out, slamming the door behind her.
She had only started sobbing in the hotel's elevator.

###

*They are made for each other,* Adrien thought when he slipped into Nathalie's apartment through the window she had left open.

He had never seen the inside of her home before, not really. He had peeked in once or twice, while spying on his father, but it had only ever been to confirm nobody was present. On top of that, Adrien had tried hard not to look. Plenty of room for trauma if two somebodies had in fact been present.

Her living room was all white space and designer furniture, and white and grey walls, and sharp angles. Pristine red cushions were carefully arranged on a brand new charcoal sofa that was perfectly parallel to the coffee table. The tile was spotless, the shelves dust-free.

Grey and white and grey and black, with the odd spot of crimson.

Nothing at all like the pastel cushions Adrien's mother had favored. His father most likely loved the place. *Loved her,* the boy thought. Before his secrets had ruined everything.

"Make yourself at home," Nathalie told them when Ladybug jumped inside. Her tone was matter-of-fact, her expression neutral. '"Chat Noir', are you at all able to receive personal phone calls while… in costume?"

The young hero shook his head. Marinette did not intervene but put a comforting hand on his shoulder. They had raced across town to get to Nathalie’s and acrobatics at breakneck speed did not allow for deep conversation on one’s feelings. They had more pressing problems to handle, anyway. They would talk later, with the masks off, after finding his father.

They *had* to be heroes first.

"Then I'm going to have to ask you to do away with the outfit," Nathalie told him. "If at all possible."

He nodded and released the transformation. Plagg landed on his shoulder as soon as he reappeared.

"So you are the Kwami," their hostess said.

To which the black cat replied "So you know about us."

"In a manner of speaking. I've heard little about you and Ladybug's Kwami, but Gabriel discussed Zharr in more detail, since I was supposed to believe he was looking for information on the last Firebird in Syracuse."

Plagg opened his mouth, closed it and faked boredom, though Adrien could see he was concealing irritation. He could not talk about Gabriel. He could not fight the seal. It caused a lull in the conversation, as Nathalie was expecting an answer.

Ladybug narrowed her eyes and looked from Plagg to Nathalie. She took a step forward.

"Miss Sancoeur. You wanted us to join you. Is there any way you can help us locate mister
Nathalie ever so slightly shifted. Her arms slid behind her back, where her hand closed around her wrist. She raised her chin by half an inch.

"I spent the last few hours attempting to do so," she declared. "His house is watched. I have given a few phone calls, though unfortunately my means are limited. You might not be aware of it yet but I no longer work for Gabriel. My login credentials on the company's servers have been suspended, which means I have lost access to services that could have been useful, namely the security feed of the company's offices and warehouses. That being said, word of my termination has not traveled far yet. I managed to call his bank and learned that none of his cards have been used in the last week. I've collected favors and greased some palms, so if he shows up at the places he most frequents, we will be contacted. That being said…"

Plagg, who had listened to all of that with flattened ears and a sulky expression, perked up.

"He won't be found," Nathalie said.

"What?" Ladybug exclaimed. "You got us here just to tell us that? We could be out there searching."

Nathalie gave her a pointed look.

"And searching where exactly? Do you know where to start?" - When Marinette failed to answer, the woman raised her eyebrows. - "Are you going to knock on every door, break into every building and peek into every sewer? Paris is a large city."

Ladybug's shoulders sagged. She winced.

Plagg chuckled.

It was the most chilling sound Adrien had ever heard.

The Kwami quickly realized his mistake. His eyes went wide. He turned to his chosen and flew up, slightly panicked, trying to come up with something to say.

"We're not going to find him," the boy murmured, looking at the black cat.

Plagg's only answer was a show of drooping ears and lowered head.

Adrien looked at the floor.

"I see."

Nathalie pressed herself against his back, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. She leaned down to kiss his hair.

"Your father just managed to trick us - and not only us, but the thirty people he interacted with over the last few days - into thinking he was on an entirely different continent. If he does not want to be found, he won't be found." - She planted another kiss in his hair. Her voice was warmer than he had ever heard it. - "That being said. Let me tell you what is going to happen. He will recharge that watch. He will sulk in some dark basement until Hawk Moth surfaces, then attempt to find him. That, by the way, will be when Gabriel will be out in the open. Now, you might want to remember he has been looking for a year with no results whatsoever. The odds of him miraculously stumbling upon Hawk Moth today are infinitesimal. So he will fail, he will go back to charging the watch, he
will sulk some more and he will calm down."

Adrien raised his head to look at her, incredulous. She smiled. The teenager turned to Plagg, who gave a satisfied nod.

"You really think so?"

Nathalie nodded, solemn.

"I do."

The blond relaxed.

"Alright. Alright."

"I'm going to give him a call. Leave a message, tell him you're here and safe," she announced. "Then we will start discussing what each of us knows about your father's plans, in case he somehow let something useful slip."

"You knew about his plans," Ladybug intervened. "About the lawyer office, anyway."

"You know I did," Nathalie said. "I did ask for your help, didn't I?"

Marinette nodded. Adrien narrowed his eyes.

"The truth is," his father's assistant continued, "I know very little. Gabriel only ever discloses whatever pieces of information he believes you need to know. He managed to tell me his wife used to be Ladybug, yet failed to mention who her partner was. I had to figure that out on my own."

That sounded like Gabriel.

Plagg chuckled some more. Nathalie got her phone out of her pocket. She gestured towards the kitchen door.

"I'll give that call now, if you don't mind. Help yourself to the fridge."

###

"Thank God he looks like you," Anne-Laure had said the first time she had seen Adrien, in his tiny hospital crib filled with stuffed toys.

Tikki had slapped her own forehead. Alice had just rolled her eyes and leaned back against the cushions of her bed.

"Please."

"What? It's true! You have to admit that Gabriel is… has… what's the word? Aquiline features."

"It's too early to say who Adrien will look like, anyway. He's all red and squished. Also he looks a little like a monkey with sunburns. But maybe it's the painkillers and the hormones messing with me."
"Alice."

"Yes."

"It's a super cute baby."

"I never said he wasn't cute!"

"You just… Nevermind," Anne-Laure had muttered. She had opened her designer bag - a gigantic monstrosity, suitcase-sized, from Gabriel's most hated competitor - and pulled a yellow plushie out. "I bought him a Maya. The Bee. From the cartoon."

That had gotten a laugh out of her exhausted best friend.

"This is going to get you killed."

Anne-Laure had replied with a grin that had quickly faltered. You didn't discuss Gabriel and murder at the same time anymore. That old joke no longer had appeal. It poured salt on fresh wounds every time it slipped out (and it did often enough, seeing how used they had been to repeating those words).

Bee had crossed the room, slowly. Her pregnancy had been quite advanced by that point, though it did not show as much as it should have. Anne-Laure was made of nerves and couldn't have gained weight if she had tried to. That did not mean the pregnancy had not impeded her movements. The baby kept squirming.

She had sat down on the corner of Alice's bed while Tikki resumed gushing on Adrien.

"How's it going with Sourpuss?" the visitor had asked after a quick look at the door.

Anne-Laure had arrived with her husband and promptly sent him to fetch coffee. André had walked out with Gabriel, after announcing that the new father needed his dose of caffeine. Said new father had not wanted to follow, but mister Bourgeois did not take 'no' for an answer. He was a little dense and did not understand 'no' as an answer.

"It's going… okay," Alice had answered. "He's making efforts. We both are. He's working a lot, though, but that was to be expected."

Those news (if you could call the mention that Gabriel was working a lot 'news') had been met by silence, so Alice had raised both hands.

"But he hired a new assistant to replace Renaud. From what I hear, she is competent enough."

"Good," Bee had replied. "Good, I guess…"

"How is it going with André?"

Anne-Laure had huffed and laughed.

"He's going nuts with the baby shopping. I swear his kid is going to be the worst spoiled brat to have ever lived. So far she has an entire designer wardrobe which I told him she'd never get to wear because infants grow fast, but he doesn't care." - She had chuckled. - "It's getting ridiculous. We just came back from Italy with five suitcases full of onesies and teddies. He's going to top your stuffed toys guerrilla attack."

Alice had smiled at those words, though said smile had been a little tense.
"Why am I not surprised? Oh, and how was the trip? When did you get back?"

"This morning. And the trip was nice. I found a little house by the sea not that far from Mona's city, it's paid for, I'll show you pics. Anyway, it'll do alright for however long it'll take me to get back into shape, then I'll be off to Samoa with Waspp. Fu thinks one of the Marvelous Kwami might be there."

Tikki had emerged from Adrien's crib, mildly curious. She always liked to hear about the other miracle stones. The conversation had not continued in that direction, however.

"Now that the bullshit is out of the way," Anne-Laure had exclaimed. "How is Gabriel doing?"

Alice's eyes had glazed over.

"He has ups and downs," she had murmured. "Mostly downs."

"Got that part when you said he was working a lot. Also, the hotel is kind of right next to your place. I saw the new walls. I saw the cameras."

Tikki had flown up to Alice's nightstand, so the two humans would not forget her presence. It had been a private conversation. Eavesdropping had never been her plan.

Instead of asking her to go, her chosen had looked at her, looking for support.

The Kwami had sighed.

"He is... He feels defenseless without Plagg. The walls and the cameras help, to some extent."

Anne-Laure had nodded and turned to Alice.

"You're not leaving?"

"No. No," Tikki’s chosen had replied. "We can and we will get through this."

"Then you have to let go of the earrings," her best friend had replied.

"No."

"Alice, trust me here, you have to give him a clean break. Either you go, either you turn your back on magic, but you will never rebuild anything with Ladybug between you. He will resent you, he will be terrified for you, you have to let go."

She knew all about clean breaks. She had already planned her escape from marriage and motherhood. And family.

"I CAN'T!" Alice had snapped back.

The outburst had made Adrien wail. Tikki had hurried to him and nuzzled against his cheek.

"I can't," Alice had repeated in a whisper. "Hawk Moth saw my face. I have to keep my powers, at least while I make sure we're safe! One of us has to be able to fight magic!"

It was unfortunately true. If Tikki had not feared that Hawk Moth would target his enemies as a civilian, she would have suggested retirement herself. Bella would be weakened for years. Ladybug was not strictly needed. Even without his powers, Hawk Moth was dangerous, however. Tikki had no doubt he had more magic at his disposal than his Miraculous. Bella would have seen
Anne-Laure had leaned closer.

“If that’s the issue, I can stay!” she had exclaimed. “Polynesia can wait. You just have to ask, I’ll be right next door, I can handle the psychotic bastard. Just ask.”

“No. No, Bee, thanks but no. You’ve been trying to leave Paris for years, I’m not going to chain you down. It will only be for a few months anyway. Just long enough to make sure he doesn’t know who I am. Then I’ll retire.”

Waspp’s chosen had sighed.

“Allright. Your choice. Stupid choice, by the way, but your choice.”

###

Nathalie Sancoeur was a liar.

Of course, Marinette already knew that. What she had not expected was for Adrien to believe her so easily. Which was probably for the best, because he was so distraught. He needed what comfort he could get.

Ladybug was ambivalent about the whole thing.

White lies were not that bad.

Lies that delayed preventing a murder were something else entirely. Mister Agreste was never going to ‘calm down and come home’. Maybe - maybe - if his hunt for Hawk Moth stretched on, he would run out of energy and give it up for a time. He would take a few days to iron out the kinks in his plans, to consider new strategies. But he would not calm down.

It meant that Marinette had to find a way to leave and look for the man without alerting Adrien. This was not a situation Chat Noir should have to handle. Gabriel had hurt him enough. He didn’t deserve to be dragged through more pain.

‘My whole family is like that’. That was what Chat Noir had told Ladybug when they had discussed mister Agreste’s plans, and how Chat was sure the man would not go through with them. ‘My whole family is like that’. ‘I know people like him’.

She could not, for the life of her, understand how she had not recognized him right there and then. She should have seen how worried he was. She should have seen how personal it was to him. She should have seen how angry her ‘investigation’ had made him, how defensive he had gotten whenever she insisted there was something suspicious about Gabriel.

Bar that, she should have realized when Adrien had told her that Chat Noir was in love with her. She still remembered that ‘he loves you, you know’, the absolute certainty in his voice. ‘He does’.

She had been given a million occasions to see. Had she even wanted to? She had thought she knew her partner so well, just like she had once thought she knew ‘everything there was to know about Adrien Agreste’. She had been happy enough to focus on the masks, without ever stopping to
think. Even now, she found it hard to reconcile the two boys, even though she could see where they connected. Chat’s softness, the shyness and uncertainty he hid behind humor and bravado. That kindness in him she had seen in Adrien from the very beginning, the same kindness that had pulled her to him to begin with. And Adrien. Adrien who had wanted to know her thoughts about Chat Noir. Adrien who could grin, who would talk to Nino with a confident, mischievous look he scarcely ever showed to the people who were not close to him. Adrien who had told her he knew all about masks.

Adrien who had not dared to tell her who he actually was, who had been too afraid of her reaction to do so. And she could understand that. She had felt that divide, to a lesser extent, the nagging belief that one side of her mask was more herself than the other. Except it was much worse for Adrien. He did not get to be himself as himself. He only got to do what he wanted when he put Chat Noir’s mask on.

Of course he did not want to reveal himself. He had to be terrified she would expect him to act like the perfect model she had a crush on.

She felt so guilty.

They would discuss that. She would never let him believe she wanted anyone else but who he really was. But that would have to wait.

The mission came first.

“I should have put a tracker on him,” Adrien murmured, dropping onto the sofa.

She joined him, sitting by his side and wrapping an arm around him.

“It wouldn’t have worked and you know that. He would have found it in ten seconds tops. Probably taped it to someone else, too.”

He sighed and nodded. She squeezed closer, tilting her head so it would rest on his shoulder. She had no idea what to say. Ladybug was perfectly able to reassure civilians and to promise to rescue their possessed or kidnapped relatives, but Gabriel was not under the influence of dark magic. He had not been abducted. The entire situation was his doing. What did you say? What did you promise?

Her whole body was trembling with an energy she could barely contain. In her mind, she was in motion, racing over Paris’ roofs, looking for a trail. In her mind she was jumping and running and zipping through the air. But she could not move. She could not go. Miss Sancoeur was right: she did not know where to start searching.

“It will be alright,” she said.

Adrien’s only answer was to take her hand and to intertwine his fingers with her gloved ones.

They could hear miss Sancoeur’s voice from the next room. She had called mister Agreste and was leaving him a message. “Your son is at my place. He is safe. I don’t intend to leave him to spend the night unsupervised in an empty house, so please come collect him”. As soon as the woman hung up, she made another call. She exchanged a few words with a ‘Stéphanie’.

The doorbell rang.

“Can one of you open the door?” miss Sancoeur asked.
Adrien stood with visible effort then hurried to the entrance. Ladybug slipped out of sight and waited, peeking at the door from behind a bookshelf.

The visitor was a woman with messy blond hair and dirty clothes, who grinned at Adrien when he greeted her. She also happened to look exactly like Chloé.

She flattened both hands on Adrien’s head and tousled his hair mercilessly.

“Shit,” she exclaimed, pulling two strands of hair up roughly where Chat Noir’s ears would have been. “Shit.” - She covered the teenager’s eyes with one hand. - “Shit! How did I not see this?”

Adrien tried to comb his hair back into place, with little success.

“I’m glad you’re here!” he said. “How did-”

“Nathalie called me. Told me your dad was being a huge moron, which isn’t what I’d call surprising,” the woman explained, closing the door. “So how are you holding up?”

“I. Uh. I just want to find him. I didn’t think of putting a tracker on him or anything, so we’re just…”

“Nah, you’re not gonna find him,” the blonde answered, patting his head. “Stealth was ninety percent of his fighting tactics. Let him brood, he’ll come back crawling when he gets tired of it. Any food here? I’m starving.” - She turned to Marinette. - “Oh hi there, Ladybug!”

The superhero moved away from the bookshelf.

“Hello,” she said. “I assume you’re Queen Bee, mister Agreste’s old teammate?”

“Yep. Did the kitten tell you that you need more ribbons?”

“I, uh, I’m sorry, what?”

Queen Bee turned to Adrien, resigned.

“Kiddo! You had one job.”

“I-uh-ah sorry,” Adrien stuttered. “I didn’t really get a chance to mention you before. I mean, not in detail.”

The woman mussed the hair he had barely managed to smooth back into place.

“That’s okay. So where’s Nathalie?” she asked.

“Here,” the secretary replied, walking into the room with a tablet in her hands.

She did not bother looking up.

Queen Bee let go of Adrien’s hair and joined the other woman, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Allright!” she said, pushing her towards the kitchen. “I just managed Dijon-Paris in two hours. I’m gonna need coffee and food before we do the whole ‘planning’ thing. You have food, right?”

“I have coffee,” Nathalie replied just before the kitchen door closed over the two of them.
Ladybug stared at the door for a few seconds. She turned to her partner.

“Was that…”

“Anne-Laure Lenoir,” he replied. “She was my mother’s best friend. Queen Bee. I called her so she would check on my father a few weeks ago. I told you, I think.”

“You… did. Adrien, she looks just like Chloé.”

“She… She would. She’s her mother. They’re not really in touch, though, so please don’t tell anyone you saw her.”

Marinette frowned but did not comment. Chloé’s life was none of her business. She just hoped the apple had fallen far from the tree. She needed to be able to trust miss Lenoir.

“Do you know her well?”

“Not really. My father likes her. Well, likes to complain about her, which is pretty much the same thing. She’s very frank. Told me exactly what had happened with Hawk Moth, you know, back then. Now, she thought she was talking to Chat Noir, not to Adrien Agreste, so she told me to be careful around him because he is a controlling liar. What do you think?”

Ladybug considered that.

“She sounds alright,” she ended up replying.

Plagg yawned.

“Of course she is. She was Waspp’s chosen. They’re always direct. If you can call it that.”

Marinette nearly jumped out of her bones. She had forgotten the Kwami’s presence.

“What was she like as a hero?” Adrien asked.

“She dropped enemies from very, very high.”

“And I did recon,” miss Lenoir added from the kitchen’s entrance. She was walking out with a plate filled with sandwiches. “Tons of recon. I mean, I was the only flyer. Sourpuss didn’t have a fancy Goku-style growing staff to use as a magical vantage point either.”

Miss Sancoeur was following her, carrying a platter of drinks. She went to put it down on the coffee table.

“Enough banter,” she said. “I think it’s about time we start exchanging information.”

###

The conversation was, for the most part, useless. Sure, they all knew some of the pieces of the puzzle - the flimsiest tidbits of information mister Agreste had accepted to reveal or what they had figured out on their own - but assembling everything into a neat timeline had not given them a miraculous solution to their current problems.
Ladybug had a clearer idea of what little miss Sancoeur had done to stop her lover’s plans.

Miss Sancoeur seemed to have a better understanding of said lover’s past. She had not looked pleased by the revelation that Gabriel had tried to kill Hawk Moth once before. Apparently, the retired Chat Noir had never mentioned his past as a superhero, just his wife’s. Marinette felt a little sorry for her. The woman cared entirely too much about a man who would never be truly honest with her.

That being said, Marinette worried about Adrien more. He had listened intently to the entire discussion. He had racked his brains to try to recall every detail of his every conversation with his father. Now that it was clear that nothing they knew would help them discover mister Agreste’s whereabouts, he was just sitting with hunched shoulders, idly scratching Plagg’s head. The Kwami, who didn’t strike Ladybug as being the cuddly kind, let himself be petted.

“So,” Nathalie said, putting her tablet down on the table so they could all look at it. She had drawn a timeline of the events they knew about. She gave the screen a swipe to show them a flowchart of her employer’s possible actions. “I think we all agree on the fact that we have no way to find him yet. I suggest we settle down until Hawk Moth’s next attack. Ladybug, you should go home. I’m sure you have parents waiting for you.”

Ladybug straightened up, frowning.

“My private life is irrelevant here,” she stated, reaching for her partner’s hand and squeezing it. “I’d rather stay with Adrien until-”

“It’s fine, Ladybug,” he cut in with a tired smile. “There’s really nothing we can do. You should go home and rest. I mean, we should expect our daily Akuma in a few hours, right?”

She breathed in.

That was true. Hawk Moth had attacked every day for a while. He had no reason to stop. It was not like he could guess they had a crisis.

“Are you sure?” she insisted. “I can call my mom, tell her I’m staying at a friend’s.”

“I’m sure, don’t worry. And I’m not alone, right? Plagg is here. Nathalie and miss Lenoir are here.”

Marinette squinted at Plagg.

The Kwami squinted back.

Adrien chuckled.

“Come on. He’s grumpy but he’s not that bad.”

Ladybug grumbled. She shook her head, took a deep breath, then stood and turned to their hostess.

“I’ll drop by tomorrow morning. Adrien can call me if anything changes during the night.”

“We will call you if the situation warrants it, Ladybug,” miss Sancoeur drawled. “Have no fear. Thank you again for your help today.”

“Don’t mention it,” Marinette replied.

She hugged Adrien one last time, said goodbye to the others and left.
Alice and Adrien had spent three weeks in Marseilles. They had spent their days at the beach, their evening strolling through the city’s streets or watching TV in their hotel room. Whenever the boy had napped or slept, his mother had perused divorce papers.

Gabriel had called every other day. Tikki still believed he had tried to make a point by not calling every evening. He was prideful to the point of idiocy at times, and obtuse, oh so obtuse.

Whenever he had called, he had spent hours on the phone. He had read Adrien bedtime stories. The boy had told him all about his trips and the hermit crabs he had seen, and the sea shells he had collected, and the ships, and the plastic giraffes he had lost on the beach.

The first week, Gabriel’s conversations with Alice - if they could be called that - had been terse and brief. By the second week, he had warmed up a little and allowed himself more time to ask about his son’s days. By the third week, intimacy had creeped back into their talks, and love, and longing. The divorce papers had ended up shredded to bits in the hotel room’s trash can.

Alice had gone home and walked into the mansion with Adrien riding her rolling suitcase. Her husband had been waiting for them.

“You know what?” she had told Tikki fifteen minutes later, as they watched Gabriel throw his son in the air and whirl him around to play ‘plane’. “I think it’s been long enough.”

The Kwami had not understood what her chosen had been talking about. She had turned to the human, who had been smiling and gazing at her family with infinite tenderness.

“Long enough?”

Alice’s smile had grown.

“Yes.”

Tikki had frowned, perplexed. Her chosen had reached for one of her earrings.

“It’s been four years. If he knew who I was, he would have attacked us, by now. We’re safe. It’s been long enough.”

The red Kwami had perked up.

Usually, the partings were sad (and that one had been, of course). But, in Alice’s specific circumstances, letting go was the right choice. She had given enough of herself to the mission. She had a life, she had a child, she had a husband who loved her but was falling to pieces. They needed to turn the page and build their world anew.

“That’s a good decision,” the Kwami had replied, before nuzzling against Alice’s cheek. “I’ll miss you.”

Adrien grinned and crouched next to the sofa.

“I guess you have to pull on the lower part? Here?”

He grabbed the bottom of the sofa. Nathalie winced. If she had been wrong, the boy was about to ruin a perfectly fine piece of furniture. Thankfully, her vague recollections of the day of her purchase were correct. The bottom of the sofa slid out, revealing cushions that had never seen the light of the day.

Adrien looked up.

She figured she had to look astounded, because he giggled as soon as he saw her face.

“What now?” she mumbled, scoffing.

“Nothing, nothing,” the teenager replied, eyes still sparkling with mirth.

Nathalie made a point to look flustered. It was good to see him smile. She was worried sick. If playing the part of the comic relief could help him, she would gladly do so.

The Kwami on the boy’s shoulder was doing the same. He had been making silly comments for the best part of the evening, bantering with Anne-Laure Lenoir until she had left then teasing Adrien and nagging him for food.

“Say, do you have cheese here?” the creature wondered with a pointed look at Nathalie.

She had heard him prompt Adrien for camembert a dozen times, but it was the first time the black cat asked her directly. She suspected it meant he was actually hungry.

“Unfortunately, miss Lenoir managed to smuggle the contents of my fridge away when she left. We’ll have to order in. Adrien, would you mind calling a pizzeria to have something delivered? I’ll fetch some bedsheets and pillows.”

The teenager nodded.

“What should I order for you?”

“The same thing as you, I’m not picky,” she replied, walking to her bedroom door.

She turned back and watched the boy get her tablet and stare intently at the screen. Plagg was clamoring he wanted cheese pizza. ‘Without the bread’.

She slipped into her room and closed the door.

Adrien was convinced that Gabriel’s efforts would be fruitless, and that he would return home after a few hours, maybe days. He wanted to believe it. Adrien was a sweet child. He liked to see the best in everyone. Anne-Laure and Plagg had both gone along with that and promoted that scenario. Nathalie had not even needed to brief them. Still, when Lenoir had left, her parting words had been ‘That was prime quality bullshit. You’re good’.

_It’s my job._
She got bedsheets from a drawer and blankets from another. She put all of that on the corner of her bed, sat down and allowed herself a moment to breathe. Then she dropped back against the mattress and stared at the ceiling.

###

Miss Colibri had been an easy opponent, or would have been if Ladybug and Chat Noir had not spent most of their fight against her scanning their surroundings for signs of Gabriel Agreste.

They had not found him. Neither had Anne-Laure Lenoir, though she had spent the battle searching for him. She had not been kept busy by a flying supervillain. On top of that, she could teleport, thanks to a magical candy cane that gave Marinette the creeps for no discernable reason.

“I’ll keep looking,” the blonde had promised Ladybug when they had regrouped after Miss Colibri’s defeat. “I’ll try my best. Just go back to school and feed Tikki and Plagg, okay?”

They had missed their window. They knew that. Marinette had nodded and gone to school as suggested. Adrien had gone back to Nathalie’s.

Four hours later, when the bell finally rang, she transformed and joined her partner on the roof of miss Sancoeur’s building. They patrolled for five hours straight. They found no signs of mister Agreste.

###

“I would not normally ask you this,” Fu had told Alice, over a cup of coffee in a little bistro near Notre-Dame. “But I can’t travel to Brazil right now. I have to stay with Volpina, at least for a little while. Mona. I mean Mona,” he had corrected, voice ever so slightly strangled by grief. “I can’t send Tikki alone either.”

Alice had frowned but nodded. The request had not been outrageous: cross the Atlantic, spend a few days in South America, listen for rumors of butterflies and monsters while searching for a new holder for Ladybug’s Miraculous. The Guardian had not asked her to return to a hero’s life, just to pick a new one.

“How long?” she had asked.

“Tikki has good judgement. If it were Vixx, I’d ask you to supervise her choices. If it was Waspp, I’d ask you to be twice as careful. But you know Tikki. She will not delay and she will not select an unsuitable candidate. Two, maybe three weeks should be enough for her to find a new hero.”

“Alright,” Alice had replied, understanding how Fu needed to stay at his dying partner’s side. “I’ll do it.”

###
Ladybug was halfway home when she saw the police car.

It was parked in front of a building she knew because she had visited it once or twice. It was Alix’s place. She lived on the second floor, in a large apartment that was just short of luxurious. It was filled to the brim with egyptian artwork and antique statuettes, as was to be expected from the home of an historian.

As it was near midnight, all of the lights were off in the building, save for the glow of a television on the fourth floor. In Alix’s apartment, however, every light was lit.

Frowning, Ladybug jumped down to the street, only to realize the police car was empty. The hallway of the building was lit too, but it didn’t look like there was anything dangerous going on. No strange flying supervillain threatening the city, no screams, no noise at all. She figured there had been some kind of benign disturbance, maybe a theft, and she zipped up to the roofs again. She had to get back home and get *some* sleep. For a start, Adrien would meet her early in the morning for breakfast. On top of that, she had to be functional for the next Akuma attack.

She was about to leave when she spotted Alix.

Her classmate was sitting on the roof of her building, in the dark, with her legs dangling from the edge of the roof. It looked like she was texting someone. The screen of her phone was casting a faint glow over her frowning face.

Marinette joined her.

“Hello! Everything alright?” she asked. “I saw the police car.”

Alix didn’t answer immediately. First, she sighed. She put her phone away. Then she turned to Ladybug.

“Yeah. My dad never came home from work so my mom *freaked out*. She called his job, and they had her call some antiques collector he was supposed to visit, and he never got there either and… Anyway, my mother just went crazy and called the cops and everything. It’ll blow over. He prolly just went to ‘buy smokes’, you know? Wouldn’t surprise me.”

Marinette stared at her, not knowing what to say.

“That’s… Is there anything I can do? I could help the cops look, maybe,” she suggested. “Something like that.”

Alix snorted and shook her head.

“Nah, thanks. Nothing magical here. Though if you had a secret lair where I could *sleep* without everyone around shrieking and panicking, that would be nice.”

“No secret lair, sorry.”

“It was worth a try,” the skater mumbled. “Guess I’ll just wait for Jalil to calm mom down. She’s bound to get tired. It’s late.”

To prove her point, she fished a silver watch out of her pocket. She pressed the latch to open it, revealing a bluish hologram of a woman holding a clock. Ladybug’s heart skipped a beat. She had seen that watch before - it *had* caused Alix to get Akumatized - but she couldn’t say the same of the
hologram.

“Is… Is that a magical w-” she tried to ask.

She did not get to finish her sentence. Downstairs, a woman started wailing.

###
The email arrived a little after midnight. Adrien was trying to go to sleep, on Nathalie's orders, when his phone buzzed.

"Must be Ladybug again," he murmured when Plagg landed next to the phone. "Let me see…"

His Kwami threw him the phone, which Adrien turned on without expecting anything more than a 'good night' from Marinette.

She was so concerned for him.

She had spent the previous evening messaging him, enquiring about everything from his state of mind to the kind of pizza he had ordered. Her messages had been littered with gibberish and apologies about how the strange keyboard on her new phone was really difficult to get a hang of. They had texted late into the night, then she had excused herself to go to sleep, but he knew she had gone out to patrol after that. Someone had posted pictures on the Ladyblog.

Ladybug had showed up with three boxes of pastries and a tupperware full of cheese in the morning, right before Miss Colibri's attack. Nathalie had stared at the boxes, then at Ladybug, then at the boxes again, without commenting on how the logo on them happened to be the same as the one on the Dupain-Cheng's bakery.

Adrien was fairly sure she had figured Ladybug's identity out.

Of course, they had been forced to abandon the pastries to run after Miss Colibri, so Adrien had eaten them for lunch instead. As for the battle itself, it had been longer than warranted, but they had not spotted his father anywhere.

Queen Bee had promised to keep looking, so Marinette had gone back to school. Not that she had focused the slightest bit on her studies: she had texted Adrien all afternoon. It was not a format that allowed for deep conversation, but the constant stream of messages had been comforting.

As for his own afternoon, Adrien had spent it with Nathalie, waiting for phone calls that had never come. He had listened to her conversations with employees from his father's company, with private detectives she had tasked with finding offices and warehouses registered to a 'Pat Messmer', an 'Otto Sullivan', or a 'Felix something'. She had showed him the photographs and news clippings about the previous Firebird that Gabriel had collected in Syracuse.

It had been strange to see another hero in and out of costume. Adrien, who needed to keep himself busy, had spent hours comparing the pictures of her civilian self with those of her in costume. As a mother of two, she had posed for the Syracuse Herald with her sons, to illustrate an article about a charity event she had organised. As Firebird, she had appeared in a handful official photographs. You would never have guessed the two women were one and the same if she had not worn her Miraculous as a brooch.

At the end of the day, he had put all of that aside to patrol with Ladybug. They had found a few cats to rescue, a mugging to stop, a little girl with a lost doll to locate.

They had not talked much but what little they had said had meant a lot.

"I know I nag you a lot about the puns and the flirting, but… it's all banter. I'd never ask you to change," she had told him. "I'm sorry I let you think I would."
"I. You. You didn't," he had murmured back. "It's just... It's me. I'm... I know you wouldn't."

He had not known how to put his fears into words. When he tried to, in his mind, it all sounded so silly.

"I get it," she had replied. "I get it."

And she had leaned against him, which had meant the world to him.

"Say," she had blurted out after five minutes of companionable silence.

"Mmh?"

"Would you have breakfast with a Marinette Dupain-Cheng tomorrow? I hear she's a bit of a klutz and a notorious phone thief, but she's cute."

"Is she now?"

"Yup."

"As cute as you?"

"So I've been told."

"I would be honored."

"Eight on the roof of the school?"

"Eight on Marinette Dupain-Cheng's balcony?"

"I believe we have a deal."

He had left feeling much lighter.

Considering how his day had gone, however, he did not expect messages from anyone but her. The notification he found when he turned his phone on was for a new email from his father.

Of course, the subject did not tell him much. 'About the current situation'. That was it. Gabriel firmly believed you could never be too business-like.

His son opened the mail. He did not read it immediately. He was breathing too fast. His throat was too clenched. He couldn't make sense of the letters on the screen. It took him a few moments to calm down enough to focus.

'I am not angry at you,' the message said. 'I am angry at myself.

I apologize for the way I reacted to discovering you were Plagg's new chosen. It was out of line. It won't happen again.

I will be coming home as soon as I can trust myself to talk to you.

You once told me I was a coward who ran away from the conversations he could not handle. I absolutely am. When I am not in perfect control of myself, what I say scarcely ever conveys what I actually feel. I'd rather not risk causing more damage than I already did. Please bear with me and give me a little time.
He gaped at his screen, not knowing what to think but feeling strangely numb. His heart was still thumping from seeing the notification but the email itself left him blank. If he searched deep within himself, he could find some tiredness, but that was it. No dejection. No relief at knowing his father was alive. No guilt. No joy. No anger. Nothing. Maybe love was a finite resource. Maybe it did run out.

He turned to Plagg, who was hovering next to him and reading the email.

"What do you think?" his chosen asked. Then he remembered there was no point asking. "Oh."

"Wait," the Kwami replied.

He dashed across the room and dove through Nathalie's bedroom door. A minute later, she walked out, with the black cat on her shoulder. She looked mildly perplexed, so Adrien explained what was going on.

"Father sent me an email," he told her, holding his phone out.

Nathalie joined him and took the phone. She sat on the edge of the sofa as she read.

"He's apologizing," the teenager explained, though she could see that for herself. "I… don't know what to think."

She did not answer. She was frowning at the screen. Her scowl only deepened as she scrolled down the message. By the end of it, she looked enraged. She turned the phone off and quietly put it down on the coffee table. She took a deep breath.

"I will have a talk with your father," she announced, making sure to keep her voice even. "About all of this."

"But he apologized," Adrien pointed out. "Isn't that a good thing?"

It did not feel like a good thing, but he could not pinpoint why.

Nathalie clicked her tongue.

"The day your father apologizes to you, not only will he do it to your face, but you will know exactly what to think about it. This is not an apology, this is him making excuses for himself. Again."

The words seeped through the cracks in Adrien's heart and hit home.

They rang true.

He still had doubts.

"What if he is sincere?" he asked.

"Someone can be sincere and still be in the wrong!" Nathalie snapped back. She sucked her lips in and forced herself to calm down. When she spoke again, her tone was soothing. "He hurt you,
Adrien. More than words can repair. He is still hurting you right now. There is a point where you have to start judging him not on what he says but on what he does.

Adrien breathed in.

Maybe he was done taking blows and turning the other cheek. He had put his father first for long enough. He was not innocent himself - not revealing he was Chat Noir had been wrong - but he had tried so hard to be good, and for so long. It wasn't so much to ask to get the same level of effort in return.

"Maybe," he said. Then he corrected himself. "No. You are right."

Nathalie let out the softest satisfied sigh, then wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him against her. She pressed her cheek against his hair and ran her hand through it.

"Thank you," Plagg told her, with a politeness and respect he scarcely ever displayed.

So, even if he could not talk, he could make his voice heard.

It seemed like everyone in the room agreed on at least one point.

"Would you mind if I stayed a few days more?" Adrien murmured after a few minutes of silence. Nathalie's hand had not left his hair. She had not pushed him away. "If that's not a bother, that is. I... I don't really feel like going home."

She brushed a strand of his hair back.

"Of course I wouldn't mind."

###

Ladybug did not find the nerve to knock on miss Sancoeur's living room window. She knew Adrien was sleeping there. She did not know what to tell him, how to tell him, so she circled the building and tried to find Nathalie's bedroom instead. It proved easy. The lights were on.

She lowered herself to the windowsill and peeked inside, ready to avert her eyes if she arrived at an inopportune moment. As it turned out, she had, thought not of the kind she expected.

You wouldn't have believed Nathalie Sancoeur could have feelings, not at first sight. She was good with masks. You saw as little of her heart as you saw of her skin. A dab of foundation, a blur of powder, a brush of eyeshadow, the hint of a blush. Mascara, lipstick. All of it added up until she vanished.

She was careful, oh so careful about her facade. You could catch her angry, you could catch her stunned, but for the most part she was as unreadable as a mask of stone.

Here, she was sitting on the edge of her bed, hunched up, with her face in her hands.

Marinette did avert her eyes. She turned her back to the window then gave a little knock. A moment later, it opened.

"Ladybug?" Nathalie murmured. "Did something happen?"
The teenager wrapped herself in her superhero persona, gathering every shred of her confidence.

"I'm afraid so, miss Sancoeur. Can I come in?"

The woman moved out of the way. She concealed her trembling well, but Marinette still noticed the way she clasped her hands behind her back. The girl jumped into the room.

"Should we wake Adrien?" Nathalie asked after closing the window.

*I don't know how to tell him,* Marinette thought once again. She did not answer.

Miss Sancoeur studied her face.

"Or maybe you would find it easier to give me the news so I can relay them," she said. "That's an option."

Ladybug straightened up, startled. She was not a coward, was she? Not anymore. She had to go to her partner and tell him. She had to find the words. But the more she racked her brains, the more impossible the task seemed.

"I-I will," she assured. "I should."

"I can easily imagine what kind of news bring you to my... doorstep at one in the morning. Once again, I can be the messenger. While I understand that you do not want Adrien to hear the news from a stranger, you are in no way required to shoulder the weight of the world."

"I am his partner. I am his girlfriend. I am his friend. I can't just... I just have to... There has to be a way to tell him that won't... If I f-find the right words..."

The shock and fear she had felt since she had left Alix's building were twisting inside her and turning into rage and loathing. She wished Gabriel Agreste could be there so she could... So she could...

Nathalie put a hand on her shoulder.

"There is no way to deliver those news to Adrien without breaking his heart. And if you tell him, you will break yours in the process. Give me the details. Let me."

Marinette shook her head. It sounded like a good choice. It sounded like the wrong choice. She felt lost.

Miss Sancoeur waited. She sighed.

"I'd say we could delay, but I'm going to assume he is likely to discover something the next time he checks the news."

Ladybug bit her lower lip and nodded.

"I think so. I... Yes, I'm pretty sure he will hear about it from at least facebook."

Silence fell, if only for an instant.

Nathalie reached for Ladybug's bangs but took her hand away before touching her hair. Once again, she clasped her hands behind her back.

"Then there is not much of a choice," she commented, looking at a corner of the room.
"I'll do it," Marinette insisted once again.

"Here's how we will proceed. I will go wake him, and prepare him the best I can, and then we will tell him together. Is that alright with you?"

Ladybug could have sworn on everything she owned that she did not cry easily. She was not about to cry now.

"That sounds good," she replied.

Nathalie did not comment. Once again, she raised her hand, only to hesitate mid-air. She gave Marinette's shoulder a light squeeze. Then she erased all outwards signs of concern and returned to her collected facade.

"Who died?" she asked.

###

"It's still just a suspicion," Ladybug said. "But the watch… You have seen Alix's watch, Adrien. When you open it, a hologram pops out. Tikki says it is a magical tracker too. It can't be a coincidence."

Adrien nodded, his composure perfect.

"How?" he asked. "What did the cops say?"

"They say mister Kubdel was on his way to a business appointment. It looks like he was speeding a little and missed a turn. His car left the road and crashed into a field, out of sight. It caught fire, but… the cops say everything indicates he was killed on impact."

He closed his eyes and let the news wash over him. He felt Marinette's fingers slip between his. Nathalie squeezed his other hand.

"I see," he said.

Amid the numbness and exhaustion, anger started bubbling.

###

Chat Noir sat on the edge of the roof and stared at the street underneath. At such a late hour, it was empty, with the odd car driving by every fifteen minutes or so.

The young hero distracted himself with the glint of reflected light on the tip of his boots, that came and went as he rocked back and forth. Moonlight, darkness, moonlight, darkness, moonlight. He was trying not to think, since the train of thought pertaining to the current situation had very few stops, all of them unavoidable and blatant. As you traveled quickly between 'a friend's father is dead because of mine' to 'I guess I'm calling the cops', it made for a painfully depressing loop of reasoning.
He had asked Ladybug to go home, even if she did not want to, because he needed to breathe a little. He had transformed because even Plagg's presence was too much right now. He wanted a little emptiness. His thoughts took too much room already. He did not need more voices.

Despite that, he caught himself listening to Nathalie and Anne-Laure Lenoir's conversation, which he could hear even from the roof. They had left a window open and did not realize how acute his hearing was with the costume on.

In his defense, he was not really eavesdropping. Their words blurred into background noise about 'cigarettes inside' and the proper way to prepare coffee. Every now and then, a sentence caught his attention.

"So," Nathalie said. "What do the words 'cursed weapon' entail, exactly?"

"Akuma victim dies, Akuma gets trapped in the fetish." - That was pretty much horrifying. Adrien shivered. Anne-Laure didn't sound bothered by the concept, however. She went on. - "Keeps all of the original powers of the enemy it came with."

Silence.

"This one was Candy Warper's," the retired Queen Bee continued. "Teleportation, but you knew that, and remote-controlling candy."

"And how did you get your hands on it?"


"Well, see, normally we hand that shit over to the oldest Miraculous holder. He hides them somewhere, keeps them safe, then whenever all of the Kwami are reunited, they exorcise the weapons. Not that it's going to happen soon with three Miraculous out of seven out of our hands. I borrowed the candy cane when Alice went missing. I needed a fast way to travel through the rainforest."

Adrien already knew she had looked for his mother but hearing those words still gave him a little pang of pleased surprise.

This time, the silence lasted. The boy only heard cups clinking, footsteps - Nathalie's heels only - and chairs shuffling against the floor.

"Are you still looking?" Nathalie ended up asking.

Miss Lenoir's tone got as casual as if she had been discussing slightly inconvenient weather.

"I go back every six months, I guess? Not that there is a point. Pacaás Novos is huge and it's just trees everyfuckingwhere. I landed in Bolivia once, didn't even notice."

"That's dedication," the other woman commented.

Anne-Laure's voice changed, there. It grew darker, colder.

"Alice was like a sister to me. I would have done anything for her."

“I… see,” Nathalie answered.

The conversation died down after that, so Adrien returned to inspecting his shoes. He tilted his feet up, then left, then down, just to stare at the reflections on the silvery tip of the boots. At some
point, he told himself, he would have to go back inside and pretend to sleep. He was surprised Nathalie had not come after him already.

It could wait.

He listened to the sounds of the city: car noises and, farther away, a train’s horn. Faint music. Sirens. If he stayed a little more, birds would probably join in. How long had he been up?

He stretched and shifted back, pulling his feet back on the roof. Miss Lenoir’s next words froze him in motion.

“You’re pretty serene about the whole thing,” she told Nathalie.

*That* got Adrien’s full attention. He wished the silence would tell him more. He wished he could peek through the window and see Nathalie’s reaction for himself. She tended to speak in looks rather than in words, and he wanted to know what she was thinking.

She had not told him what she was thinking. Oh, she had shown hints of anger and worry. She had been the voice of reason, promising that his father would never find Hawk Moth, that he would come back crawling. She had organized. She had planned. She had supervised, she had tempered, she had soothed. But she had never shared her feelings on the situation. Not in so many words.

Her answer to Queen Bee’s comment was just as evasive.

“So are you,” she noted.

There was a slurping noise.

“No use freaking out,” miss Lenoir explained. “I know Gabriel is an efficient bastard. That’s why I wanted to take the watch. I pretty much expected this.”

Nathalie snorted. Anne-Laure went on.

“But you never saw how scary he was as Chat Noir. You couldn’t be prepared for this. So I’m a little surprised.”

A minute went by. Adrien leaned down, waiting for the answer, *wondering*.

“I know Gabriel,” Nathalie stated.

The teenager sighed.

###

“Did you slip him a sleeping pill?” Plagg asked Nathalie.

They were watching Adrien, who had collapsed on the sofa and was drooling over his own shoulder. He had laid down after breakfast to check his friends’ facebook feeds on his phone and *finally* drowsed off.

“I didn’t,” Nathalie replied. “Administering chemicals to children without their consent is frowned upon.”
“I was about to say it would have been a good thing to do.”

“I gave him valerian tea,” she replied.

The Kwami’s ears perked up.

“So that’s what smelled so good!”

She snorted. It only now occurred to her that she had given valerian to a ‘cat’.

“What about you?” the tiny deity continued, landing next to her laptop’s screen. “Are you ever going to go to bed, or do you plan to play minesweeper all day?”

Nathalie breathed in, eyes still on Adrien. She was long overdue for a few hours of sleep. Exhaustion had caught up with her. She didn’t want to leave the boy, however. She had deluded herself into thinking he would sleep better with someone else in the room. His familiar could have filled that role, of course, but still…

Sleep could wait, anyway. She was not just playing minesweeper. She had opened the game on top of the phone-tracking service that would allow her to locate Gabriel’s phone if he ever turned it on. That was the ace in her sleeve, the one card she had withheld from the children and Anne-Laure Lenoir. Most of her credentials had been suspended, that was true. That being said, HR had no clue of how many of her former employer’s accounts Nathalie knew the passwords for.

She had kept the children in the dark so she would get a chance to confront Gabriel alone. Of course, she had slept through the one moment he had used his damn phone, when he had sent Adrien that disaster of an ‘apology’. She was not about to miss her next chance to find him.

She had plans.

She knew him.

Plagg tilted his head to the side, looking at her screen.

“You know, I don’t often say that of humans, but you are kind of smart.”

She gave him a pointed look.

He yawned and stretched, then flew back to Adrien and curled up on the side of the sofa.

“Anyway, I could use some sleep. Wake me up for lunch.”

She rolled her eyes and decided to ignore the creature’s silly posturing. Why was she surrounded by prideful imbeciles?

She clicked a few boxes on her minesweeper game. She hit a mine. She started over.

One hour went by, then an eternity.

Adrien slept through lunch (‘lunch’ being a charitable description of the bread-and-strawberry-jam sandwiches Nathalie had prepared). Ladybug dropped by twice but stopped at the window, leaving with a wave of the hand and mouthing that she would come back.

The hours stretched and multiplied.

Adrien woke and stalked his friend’s grieving family over the internet. Nathalie took his phone
away and handed him a novel instead. That did not go over well. They settled on turning the television on. The boy paced and sat and stood and sulked on every piece of furniture in sight.

At three, after a phone call from Stéphanie, she had to tell the boy his father had showed up at work, spent twenty minutes inspecting the workshop, then vanished again.

It was hardly surprising. Some people drank their issues away. Others used pills. Others clung to normalcy and order and achievements. Of course he had gone to work. He did not know how to function otherwise. What was surprising - and arguably concerning - was that he had only stayed twenty minutes.

“Was he in a good mood?” Nathalie had asked Stéphanie, because it was the subtlest way she had found to say ‘what state was he in?’ ‘Is he falling apart at the seams?’ ‘Did he look broken to you?’

“Same old, same old.”

Anne-Laure Lenoir showed up at seven and did not leave. In other circumstances, Nathalie would have thrown her out, her and her histrionics and her bloody cigarettes, but the blonde cheered Adrien up, so she got to stay.

Nathalie pretended to go to bed and spent six more hours staring at her laptop’s screen, until the long-awaited dot that marked Gabriel’s phone position finally appeared on the map of Paris.

She zoomed in. She memorized the address. A minute later, she walked out of her room with her best grimace of pain, mumbling about screen glares and painkillers.

“I’m going to go and try to find an open pharmacy,” she mumbled when Adrien and Anne-Laure turned to her. “I have the worst migraine.”

“I might have something,” Lenoir exclaimed, reaching for her bag and nearly destroying her hostess’ carefully crafted excuse.

“That’s kind of you,” Nathalie sighed, trying to refrain from killing her, “but unless you have inderal, I’m afraid it won’t do the trick.”

“Eh, uh, paracetamol?” the blonde offered, waving a battered box of pills.

“Not strong enough. It’s fine. I’ll be right back.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Adrien asked, jumping to his feet. “Or I could go! You know. With Plagg.”

Nathalie cringed and raised her hands to her ears as if hearing his voice had caused her actual pain.

“Adrien,” she snapped. “I’m perfectly able to walk to a pharmacy on my own. The fresh air will help. So will silence.” - That got him to shrink away and nod, so she softened. - “Thank’s for offering. I’ll be right back,” she promised.

Forty minutes later, she was standing in front of a derelict building on the edge of town. Once upon a time, it had been a shoe factory. The original signs had been covered with a layer of flaking white paint adorned with a ‘Garfield Packaging’ in dark blue letters.
How had she not thought of Garfield?

How had she not thought of Azrael and Salem and Cheshire, while she was at it? She could have dropped those names to the PIs she had contacted.

‘Garfield’.

*Gabriel, love, you have the subtlety of a jackhammer.*

The obvious giveaway having convinced her she had found the right building, she circled the place and located a beat up Citroën parked out of sight, right behind it. The block was deserted. High fences lined the closest buildings. There was not a light on that Nathalie could see, save for the street lights whose orange glow did not reach the back of the ‘packaging factory’. Nathalie had to satisfy herself with a greyish moonlight that wrapped everything in dark shadows.

She stood a few steps away from the car and waited, only looking away from the building’s back door to peek at her watch. She paced a little as the minutes went by but stilled after the first hour. A little after three - finally - the factory’s door opened.

Gabriel did not notice her when he walked out, nor did he notice her a minute later, when he leaned against the door and ran his hands over his face. She watched him take deep breath after deep breath and stare at the sky. He composed himself, pushed himself away from the door then turned to his car. And then he saw her.

He blinked once, twice. His mouth formed a silent ‘how?’, then Nathalie spotted the hint of a grimace that was immediately swallowed by exhaustion. She let him join her, without a comment, without a frown, without as much as a sigh.

He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck.

She reached up, pressing one hand against his back and running the other through his hair.

“How are you satisfied?” she asked, trying to keep the sharpness out of her voice, along with every other emotion. “Have you gone dark enough?”

Gabriel took a shaky breath. His embrace tightened.

She closed her eyes, scratching the back of his head with the tips of her fingers. His short hair slipped back into place with the slightest rasping noise. It was soothing.

“This is it,” she stated. “This is the point where you fix your life, Gabriel. This is the point where you drag yourself out of the abyss you have created for yourself, or I swear to god I will walk away and I will take your son with me. I will. I will get social services involved, I will get the cops involved, I will get him emancipated, I will do *everything in my power* to make sure he is protected from you. Are we clear?”

Once again, she got no answer. With his cheek pressed against her skin, however, she could feel the chattering of his teeth. She kept her fingers moving, drawing eights and circles through his hair with a fingernail until he calmed down.

She gathered her strength for the next question.

She knew the answer.

She knew Gabriel.
Still, it was hard not to doubt.

“Now,” she snapped, ever so slightly pulling away. “Where are you keeping Kubdel?”

Gabriel jumped back, wide-eyed, stunned into silence. He gaped in the most ridiculous fashion. It took him a few seconds to recover, after what he snapped his mouth shut and looked away.

“In the basement,” he replied, his voice cracking from disuse.

###
"You need a prescription," Adrien exclaimed.

Miss Lenoir, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor watching a rerun of Criminal Minds, jumped out of her bones.

The teenager, from his spot on Nathalie's sofa-bed, gestured at his phone.

"For Inderal. You need a prescription."

Anne-Laure stared at him.

"Also," he elaborated, "it's a preventive treatment. You take those pills every day."

Considering Nathalie had been gone for 'he had no idea how long' (he had drowsed off a little after she had left, without watching the time), he had gotten worried, then suspicious. Of course, he had googled the medication she had told them she needed. He had quickly realized how gullible he had been.

His companion groaned.

"Kiddo. Go to sleep."

"Are you listening to me?" he snapped. "She lied to us so she could sneak out!"

"Course she did. I'm pretty sure she found your dad."

Adrien cringed. He couldn't help it. He was so frustrated he wanted to scream. This was like trying to have an important discussion with Plagg, except even Plagg had the decency to show a modicum of seriousness when the situation (really, really, really) warranted it. Anne-Laure's reaction to everything seemed to be 'whatever'.

"Then why didn't you say anything?" he yelled.

She shrugged.

"Because I trust Nathalie to handle your dad. He's not going to listen to anyone else, either."

Adrien wished, trulY wished people would stop manipulating him and going behind his back. Was a little trust too much to ask for? Couldn't his family show a little faith in him, once in a blue moon? Couldn't they include him and let him help.

He breathed in. That wasn't fair to Nathalie. She had let him help. She had included him in her plans to help Gabriel overcome the darkness that was devouring him. Sure, she had not told Adrien everything she knew, but she had explained her reasoning and methods as best as she could.
"I could have gone," he sighed. "I could have talked to him."

Anne-Laure clicked her tongue.

"Now you know that's bull. You know Gabriel."

Adrien lowered his head.

He was not so sure of that. He had thought he did, back when he had sworn to Ladybug his father would never kill Hawk Moth. And now, mister Kubdel - mister Kubdel who, according to Anne-Laure herself, came from a long line of magical experts and had potentially been in possession of a Kwami tracking watch - was dead. Hawk Moth had not attacked all day.

Miss Lenoir pushed herself to her feet and threw herself on the sofa, crawling to the corner of it and wiggling until she found a comfortable position.

"Your father could never listen to you. Forget it. He's not wired like that."

She lit a cigarette. Inside. Adrien ran to the window to open it, then realized the cigarette had been a diversion to take the sting out of the words. He turned to her and watched her blow a ring of smoke.

"My father is a bit like that," she confessed. "Feels deep in his bones that a father must be a figure of authority and nothing else. Which is shitty parenting in oh so many ways, but it's an unshakable belief." - She grabbed a teacup from the coffee table and used it as an ashtray. - "Now, I'm not saying Gabriel can't see the light and change his ways, but it's not going to happen in the next twenty-four hours. So, as far as dealing with this particular crisis goes, you're out."

Adrien sat on the edge of the sofa, hunched over, feeling drained.

She gave him a side look.

"Not to mention no one will let you get a murder confession out of your dad so you can do your duty and call the cops on him."

The young hero paled, whirling to her.

"What? Are you suggesting he should get away with it?"

"I'm suggesting you stay out of it. There's a reason surgeons don't operate on their family and there's a reason baby vigilantes shouldn't handle their parents' crimes. Not when someone else can do that job."

"Alright. Alright," he conceded. "But then why didn't you follow Nathalie? Why didn't you go?"

Miss Lenoir crushed her cigarette in the cup and put the cup away.

"Your dad, he's a one-person cat. Gets close to someone, lets no one else in. And he's head over heels in love with Nathalie. It doesn't take a genius to see that. You want someone to talk sense into him? It has to be her. He won't listen to anyone but her."

Adrien still questioned the wisdom of letting Nathalie go alone, because he questioned the veracity of the information she would bring back. She was a liar too. She would fudge the truth if it served her interests. As for said interests… Adrien was fairly sure she loved his father back. Would she help him get away with murder?
If she were to come back and announce that it was all a big misunderstanding, that mister Kubdel couldn't possibly be Hawk Moth, Adrien would be more than willing to believe her. *It would fix everything.*

"What if we're wrong?" he blurted out. "What if it was *just* a car crash and Father is just holed up somewhere, trying to find the real Hawk Moth?"

"That's a possibility," Anne-Laure replied, sounding like she didn't care much about the answer. "I suppose we'll know soon."

Adrien lowered his head so his hair would hide the look on his face.

"I suppose," he repeated.

He felt the woman's eyes on him. A minute went by.

"You know," she said, "I used to dislike Nathalie." - That got Adrien to turn, curiosity getting the better of him. - "Your mom hated her guts. So I hated her guts."

"Really?"

"I'm a good friend. Mostly. And Nathalie was untrustworthy. She stole candy from a toddler. She cheated her way into her job, she lied to cover her ass… Your mom was not a fan."

Adrien listened intently.

Anne-Laure kept talking.

"BUT! Let me point at exhibit A." - She gestured towards Plagg, who was snoring on a cushion and suckling on a piece of cheese in his sleep. It was more than a little disgusting. He had gooey cheese all over his face. - "Plagg loves her. Which means she treats you right. And I've watched her with you over the last two days, I've seen her protect you and comfort you and lose sleep over you, and it's clear to me that she cares about you a great deal. So I'm going to trust her to handle things right. Will you?"

He considered that then slowly nodded.

"Of course I will."

###

"I swear, Gabriel, I am trying to think of a way to get you out of this mess, but you have not made it easy," Nathalie ranted as she walked into the factory with the lunatic she happened to be involved with.

The panic she had kept bottled had been wiped away by the confirmation that Alim Kubdel was alive. It had left a gaping hole that was quickly being filled by an overwhelming urge to collapse into tears. As Nathalie had no intention to start sobbing like a little child, she focused on anger instead. She had enough of that to last a century. She did not think she would ever be able to remember the current circumstances and not to feel overwhelming fury.

Gabriel nodded and kept his head down. At least, he had the decency to look guilty, which saved
him from being ripped apart by his companion.

"Where did you even find a body?" she snapped.

"I bought it."

"You… What? How does one even buy a body?"

"Through the 'physician' I used to work with when I was Chat Noir," Gabriel explained. "Not the kind of medical practitioner you would find in the phone book, obviously. He was contacted by a cancer patient who was looking into options for euthanasia. He put me in touch with the family."

"And you just, what, purchased the corpse?"

Gabriel acquiesced.

"That man's children and wife are set for life. And I wasn't about to steal a body, was I?"

"Of course not," Nathalie railed, rolling her eyes. "You are an upstanding citizen! You would only ever commit body snatching on living people! How considerate of you not to want to add grave-robbing to your ever-growing list of crimes. It would have looked dreadful next to the assault, kidnapping and murder charges."

He shot daggers at her.

"Oh!" she gasped. "And the child abuse! I nearly forgot the child abuse!"

That hit home. Gabriel cringed, pressing his balled fist against his forehead. Nathalie snorted and looked around to find somewhere to sit. She had been on her feet for an eternity and her shoes were not made for stakeouts. She spotted a box roughly as high as a chair and brushed the dust off it before sitting down. She did not spare Gabriel another glance.

He sighed and joined her, dropping on the closest box. He did not bother to clean it: he was still wearing dark, formless clothes that had seen better days.

He looked up at the ceiling.

"I didn't mean to freak out on Adrien. I…" - He turned his tongue in his mouth. It made a small suction noise. - "I just… I mean I don't like the fact that he is Chat Noir but I know he skilled, especially for his age. I can't fault him on his competence, he is not just good, he excels at this. It's just…"

He breathed in and shook his head.

Nathalie pursed her lips to collect herself.

"Gabriel. I am in this strange place where I do not know if I want to extend a helping hand or to smash it in your face. I'd be very careful with my choice of words, if I were you."

He closed his eyes. A moment went by, then he stared down at his hands as he twisted his fingers.

"Alice had a scar," he stated. "Hawk Moth captured her, back when she was pregnant with Adrien. I should probably explain t-"

"I know what happened," Nathalie cut in. "Miss Lenoir was kind enough to give me a rundown."
That remark was met with a silence, then a nod.

"She had a scar," Gabriel repeated, closing his hand around an invisible handle and extending his arm in front of him. "Above her navel." - He tilted his hand up, slowly, as if the imaginary blade he was holding was meeting resistance. Then he twisted. - "I can't... Just the idea that Adrien might have to face him... I just..."

He closed his shaking fist and squeezed it with his other hand.

Nathalie closed her eyes and absorbed that.

Of course. There was always a darker piece of the puzzle to discover. Not that it changed anything.

"You know," she murmured, "I would have been a lot more compassionate had you addressed your crippling trauma before you could pass it on to your child."

"I was not trying to garner sympathy. Merely explaining."

She shook her head.

Gabriel was gazing at the palm of his hand. He ran his thumb over the tips of his other fingers, back and forth.

"Even now," he said. "He is a mild-mannered historian. But even now, I just can't... Just the notion that he could breathe the same air as Adrien..."

He clicked his tongue.

Nathalie took a long, deep breath.

"I want to see him," she announced.

###

"I wasn't expecting you at all!" Alice had squealed when Queen Been had landed on her balcony on a sunny spring day, weeks after her last visit. "You could have called me! I'd have prepared something!"

Anne-Laure had left Paris seven months earlier. After that, she had dropped by at random, when it struck her fancy. That meant she did not come often, because the woman had never wanted anything more than to fly away from Paris and the chains it came with.

A travelling life suited her. Her skinned burned and her hair turned to crackling hay, but the ever present edge of malice in her - which Tikki had always frowned upon - dulled as soon as the city lights faded.

"Heh. If I had called, it wouldn't have been a surprise," the superheroine had replied, flying inside and landing in the middle of Alice and Gabriel's bedroom. There, she had untransformed. "How's the baby?"

"He is officially a biped. A very, very fast, very happy biped. And wherever he trots, he drags Maya the Bee. Just so you know your gift was appreciated."
"Oooooh. Oooooh. How's Sourpuss taking that?"

Alice had grinned to the question. That Maya toy had been an endless source of aggravation to her husband, who tried to replace it with more suitable plushies whenever he could. Several ladybugs had been rejected already, as well as a collection of felines of various species and sizes. Adrien loved his Maya.

"I can confirm that," Tikki had chimed in. She had been slightly miffed about the boy's preferences, especially since she knew Waspp would rub it in her face. But she would never have admitted it.

"The boy has taste," her sister had commented, floating up from behind Anne-Laure. "Unlike his parents." - Her antennas had twitched. - "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me. Tikki. Come."

There was a reason Waspp's siblings did not go out of their way to spend time with her. Some of them were even know to avoid the continents she was active on.

Tikki had let out a long suffering sigh.

"Now?"

In the background, she had heard Anne-Laure chuckle and turn back to Alice.

"Yes, now," Waspp had replied. "Wasn't I clear enough?"

"So who's the black haired robot who was collecting your mail when I tried to sneak in?" Bee had asked.

"You were veeerrry clear," Tikki had sighed.

"Nathalie," Alice had told her best friend. "Gabriel's assistant."

Waspp had dashed to the door and stopped there, impatient. She had glared at her fellow Kwami.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Anne-Laure had raised her eyebrows at Alice's words.

"Ooooh, now that was venom," she had commented.

Tikki had hurried after her sister. On her way out, she had managed to catch Alice's answer.

"You know me. I don't easily dislike people. But that woman? She is an absolute snake."

###

Kubdel was a mild-mannered historian.

When Nathalie walked into the basement, face hidden under a ski mask and clothes concealed by Gabriel's greyish sweater, the prisoner turned to her with a quietness that surprised her. She had been prepared for either panic or rage, but it looked like the man had been calmly waiting for Gabriel to come back.
He squinted at her, struggling to see without his glasses.

Nathalie tried not to fidget, the notion that he was Hawk Moth eating away at her resolve. She was in no way comforted by the cursed letter opener tucked under her belt ("You are not facing him without a way to defend yourself," Gabriel had told her). Her hands slipped behind her back and locked themselves together. She bit the inside of her cheeks.

She had come alone and she could handle this. She would. She had to. Gabriel had to be removed from the situation. He had managed to refrain from killing his captive and she knew he did not have it in him to commit cold blooded murder, as much as he wanted to believe he did. However, he was unravelling and would keep unravelling until Kubdel was dealt with.

The man was sitting behind in a cage that had been built into the basement, with bars that vanished into the ceiling and concrete floor.

He was in much better shape than what she had expected. There was a large bruise on the side of his face and a scratch on his nose, presumably left by his glasses when they had been broken. His lip was split. He cringed when he stood but still managed to get to his feet. All in one, he looked like a man who had gone through a brawl. He had not been beaten within an inch of his life. He had not been tortured.

Gabriel's mind worked in twisted ways but you could trust him to follow whatever warped ethics he believed in.

"Now that's a surprise," Kubdel told her. "I hadn't expected Gabriel would have an accomplice."

She blanched at the name. She knew Gabriel had been careful with his disguises. He would not have shown his face.

Hawk Moth's eyes slid over her as she went rigid then straightened her spine. He tilted his head to the side and gave her the indulgent smile of a teacher to a young and naive student.

"Please. Ladybug gets lost in the timestream and it just so happens that Gabriel Agreste's wife vanishes that same month, from the same area? Give me some credit."

Nathalie did not answer. She frowned and walked to the cage to take a better look at his face. She swallowed her fear. He was a monster, possibly a smart one, but she had worked with Gabriel for fifteen years. She had a modicum of experience in dealing with cold-blooded bastards.

She did not say a word. She hoped it would lure him into revealing more. He only smiled. In the end, she had to break the silence.

"Strange how you suddenly come to that conclusion," she pointed out. "One would think you would not have found yourself in this predicament, with that information at your disposal."

"Do you know what happened to her?" Kubdel asked. "Contretemps? A time-travelling enemy?"

Nathalie rolled her eyes with calculated boredom. Yes, yes, yes.

The man turned to the side and looked at the ceiling as he reminded himself of the past.

"Mrs Agreste's disappearance was well advertised. She had a child about my daughter's age. As soon as I connected the dots, I made sure to watch Gabriel." - He shrugged. - "When I realized he did not suspect my involvement, I walked away."
"I somehow find that difficult to believe," Nathalie retorted. "Especially considering your history with him. You are not known for being forgiving."

He finally met her eyes and gave her a polite smile.

"I was willing to let bygones be bygones. Bella and I are after the Miraculous. I had nothing to gain by murdering a man who was no longer in possession of one. He was not standing in my way."

"But Alice was."

Gabriel had not questioned his prisoner. He had admitted as much. From what Nathalie had gathered, her lover had captured the man, dragged him to his hideout, locked him in the basement, then spent the rest of the day brooding or doing whatever it was that certifiable people did when they kidnapped their nemesis and couldn't go through with their murder plans.

Now that she thought about it, Gabriel had not mentioned Hawk Moth's Kwami at all. Where was it?

*You should have thought this through,* she berated herself. *You don't have enough information.*

Boxes and arrows were still rearranging themselves in her mind, leading from condition to condition to a set of solutions that were quickly being discarded. 'Is he aware of the identity of his kidnapper?'. 'Yes'. Option A ('Video-recording his confession and delivering him to the police') was crossed off. 'Is he willing to cooperate?'. 'Does he have the information you need?'.

Being accused of murdering Alice unsettled Kubdel, who frowned for an instant. He recovered quickly. His serene expression returned.

"I'm curious, Miss Sancoeur. How does a woman like you end up an accomplice to kidnapping and sequestration?"

She clicked her tongue when she heard her name. Of course. If he knew who Gabriel was, guessing her identity was child's play. She pulled the ski mask off.

"I'm curious," she drawled. "How does a man like you end up a supercriminal with an obsession on children's jewelry?"

He ignored the mockery.

"I owe Bella a debt I could never repay and that I do not care to discuss," he explained with a smile. "But let us say my gratitude knows no bounds."

"That's it? A mysterious sob story?"

Kubdel grew impatient. He frowned.

"Every single one of Bella's chosens has a sob story," he retorted, rolling his eyes. "She is a deity of revenge. She favors the victimized and the weak."

Nathalie thought of Nino, the one of Adrien's friends who had turned into the Bubbler to punish the adults of Paris. She thought of Dark Blade, who had transformed on live television after André Bourgeois' unsurprising reelection. Revenge, but at a price. 'Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' seemed like a recurring theme for Hawk Moth, maybe more than he understood.
She wrinkled her nose.

"You are closer to my age than Gabriel's, aren't you?" she asked as a suspicion jumped to the forefront of her mind.

"Without knowing your age... I assume so."

*Which means you were twelve at most when you became Hawk Moth. A sob story indeed.*

She put that thought aside.

"As pleasant as this small talk is," she told him, suddenly businesslike, "we have more important matters to discuss."

Kudbel walked away and went to sit on a box at the opposite end of the cage. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and bridged his hands.

"So you will be handling the 'questioning'?' - The corner of his mouth twitched and, for a second, she caught a hint of cruelty in his smile. - "Go ahead."

"We might as well cut straight to the chase. What happened to the previous Ladybug?"

"Joa? I wouldn't know. Our encounters were few and far between."

So he wanted to toy with her? Nathalie could not have cared less. She was used to those childish games. It came with the job.

"What happened to Alice Agreste?" she amended, with the exact same tone and detachment as the first time she had asked the question.

Kubdel took a deep breath. He pulled away.

"It would seem we are at a bit of an impasse here," he replied, trying to suppress the crazy grin that had been trying to slip out since Nathalie had moved to the interrogation. "See, I am acutely aware that my survival hinges on what I know of her fate. I feel it would be in my best interest to keep it to myself while I wait and pray for a 'miracle'."

Nathalie raised her eyebrows.

She felt much calmer. Her fear had vanished. As dangerous as Hawk Moth had been, most of the fear he inspired came from his theatrical shows of force and from the mystery that surrounded him. But he was just a man. A *middle-aged man armed with a piece of magical jewelry. With no piece of magical jewelry.*

Without his Miraculous, he was not that different from the monsters she had faced as the personal assistant of a billionaire. In that world, the demons wore Armani suits or carried Gucci purses. You could fight them with words.

"You seem to be under the impression that you detain information that we cannot obtain from your Kwami," she observed. "You should cure yourself of that notion."

The mild-mannered historian faded away entirely. Madness stared back at Nathalie and smirked.

"Bella won't tell you anything. Not a word. And even if she wanted to, she doesn't know the whole story."
Nathalie had copied a lot from Gabriel over the years: the way he clasped his hands behind his back, the impeccable strictness of his posture when she had to assert her authority. She used the same disdainful silences. Her glares could be as icy as his.

She could borrow his smiles too.

"I'm sorry," she said, the corner of her mouth curling. "I misspoke. I meant to say that there is no information we can't obtain through Bella."

She paused for a second and watched the realization sink in. Bella and the godly powers she could provide to her victims. Contretemps came to mind.

Hawk Moth blanched. Nathalie's smile grew larger, though it never went past 'subtle'.

"What you know, mister Kubdel, is irrelevant. Your survival does not depend on it. It hinges entirely on the shreds of Gabriel's conscience. However, your cooperation might improve your chances of getting out of this alive, a fact you'd do well to keep in mind."

As it turned out, you could scare even the devil.

"Am I to believe you would let him kill me?" Kubdel railed. You could hear the cracks in his voice. "And, really, am I to believe he would risk his only chance at getting answers? It seems to me like the lack of them is eating him alive."

His words slid over her. She let an instant go by, observing him with perfect detachment.

"Do you know what Gabriel's problem is?" she asked.

Kubdel gave her a wary look.

"He feels too much," Nathalie continued. She stepped closer to the cage's bars. "My problem is that I don't feel enough."

The man recoiled. It was subtle, but she spotted it all the same. She reached under her sweater and retrieved the letter opener. She looked down at it and inspected the blade.

"Now, let me clarify the situation." - Her tone was tranquil. - "The man whose family you destroyed is now my partner. The child you wanted to carve out of his mother's womb is now mine. You, on the other hand, are little more to me than a speck of dirt on my shoe. You are an inconvenience. If you were to disappear without a trace, every single problem I have right now would be solved. So, mister Kubdel, if I were in your shoes, I would consider my options very carefully."

###
There was power in being unassuming. There was power in fading into the background, in remaining unnoticed, underrated, unknown. Against a strategist like Hawk Moth, invisibility gave you the strongest of all advantages: unpredictability.

Alim Kubdel was a schemer. His entire modus operandi hinged on knowledge. He was the devil offering deals to the downtrodden and the victimized and, in order to trick them into accepting his terms, he had to understand them. He had to get into their mind, under their skins. Perceptiveness had to be his major trait. But, like most men of his ilk, he thought himself entirely too smart.

He had observed Gabriel. He had been aware of his identity for five years. And yet, he had minimized the danger his enemy posed, had believed him unable of achieving significant results.

Still, that error in judgement did not mean he could not read Gabriel. They had been adversaries since their teenage years. Kubdel had to be acutely aware of how far, exactly, is enemy was willing to go. He knew how desperate Gabriel was for answers. He had said so himself. He had reason to believe withholding information would protect him. More importantly, he knew Gabriel had once been a hero. Maybe that 'Chat Noir' had been the coldest in millennia, maybe he had been willing to go much farther than a Miraculous Holder should have, but he had been a hero. Kubdel would have understood the difference between killing the enemy who threatened your unborn child and killing a helpless, unarmed prisoner. He would not have been terrified of Gabriel because Gabriel could not go through with his plans. He did not have it in him.

That was why Kubdel was willing to wait for a 'miracle'. The odds of getting one were encouraging.

Nathalie was a wildcard.

He knew nothing of her. Nothing. She was willing to bet he was cursing himself for that, because she had been right under his nose for years, yet he had not paid the slightest attention to her. Why would he have? She was the help. She was a wallflower. She was nothing.

She did not need to be willing to kill him for that threat to scare him. It did not matter if she did not know herself if she would go through with it. Kubdel could not read her. He was blind. His powers had been taken away.

He was a strategist and would mitigate the risks as best as he could with the information at his disposal.

As he had none, he would be cautious.

"Should I talk," he asked, standing up and taking two steps towards the cage's bars, "what can I expect? A short trip to the closest police precinct? To the young heroes? Or, maybe, life in captivity under your watch?"

Nathalie rolled the letter opener between her fingers and saw Kubdel shudder. She put the weapon away and took her phone out of her bag. She looked down at her screen.

"You seem under the impression that this is a negotiation, mister Kubdel," she commented.
She opened Adrien's private Facebook page and browsed his list of friends.

"What would you call this, then?" he replied, tone still polite.

Nathalie did not spare him a glance.

"Doing you a favor."

She could feel his eyes on her face, studying her.

"What do you have to gain from that?" he ended up asking.

It was another way to question her resolve. If she had nothing to gain, then she was not as ready to kill him as she pretended, was she?

She paused at that thought. She considered that question herself, then raised her eyebrows in surprise and turned to him.

"Nothing, as a matter of fact."

He frowned and stared at her some more, considering what answer he could give. His frustration was clear and getting worse by the minute. He pursed his lips, sucked them in and bit on them. He didn't quite pace, but he took a step to the side and kept shifting his balance from one foot to the other.

He was not a patient man. He merely played the part well.

"What can I expect?" he asked again. "What are the options you suggest me to 'consider'? You can't possibly believe I am going to comply without a clear idea of the outcome of doing so."

Nathalie turned back to her screen and swiped through Jalil Kubdel's facebook pictures.

"Get used to ignorance," she said. "I am not one of the children you preyed upon. I am not interested in your deals. I do not plan to bargain. I will not give you material to do so. So you will have to live with the fact that I can understand you much better than you understand me. It might be a new feeling for you, but you'll grow accustomed to it."

Kubdel's tone dropped to a threatening whisper.

"I highly doubt you understand me, miss Sancoeur. Isn't it a bit presumptuous to assume you know more about me than I do about you, when we are perfect strangers?"

She looked up with her eyebrows raised, just for a second.

"You'd be surprised of how much one can infer from a timeline," she commented, immediately returning to her screen and to the photographs. "Let's see. I can tell your daughter is the same age as Adrien and that your son is older. Yet, right before the girl's birth, you were ready to slaughter an unborn child, which leads me to believe you felt nothing for your own children at that point. A young father would find the idea of such an act difficult to stomach." - She peeked at him and saw him narrow his eyes. - "No, I don't think you wanted to be a father. Then again, you are my age, so Jalil would have been born when you were, mmm, seventeen?"

"An interesting analysis, if off the mark."

"Dates, again. Your profile on the Louvre's website tells me how you started working there right after getting your history degree, eight years ago. Eight, plus four… So, were you a particularly
slow student or did you start on that degree years after your daughter's birth? One might wonder about that strange gap between your activities as a magical terrorist and your return to school. I wonder. If I were to look into your health during those years, what would I discover? Were you stuck home, sick and crippled, maybe?"

This was so much easier than figuring out if the cries for help she had to filter every day at work were scams or not. No crying parents here, no dying toddlers, no cancerous little girls and no starving baby boys. Just a twisted, toxic man with a life as transparent as glass.

Kubdel smiled but his jaw trembled with rage. His muscles were twitching under the effort he put into appearing calm.

"I believe you have made your point," he commented with the most saccharine voice.

"Did I? I don't think I have. Should we see what your family pictures say about you, mister Kubdel?"

"That won't be ne-"

"An easy observation is that nowhere, in a collection of photographs spanning a decade, are your hands anywhere near your wife of twenty years. I wonder why that may be." - Nathalie clicked her tongue. - "Interesting also how she is the one attending all of your son's school events and special occasions, when you are both present for everything your daughter does. Do you know what that tells me?"

He scoffed.

Nathalie continued, with perfect detachment.

"It tells me that if I were to threaten to hurt your son, you would be livid with rage, because I would have dared to use your family against you." - She prepared herself for the reaction she would get after her next words. She could not allow herself to be startled. - "If I were to threaten your daughter, however, you would be terrified."

He lunged against the cage's bars and tried to grab her. The tip of his fingers brushed the top of her phone, and barely, at that. She didn't bat an eyelash. She was just out of reach. She had made sure of that.

She moved away, slipping her phone into her pocket. She removed her watch.

"You have thirty minutes," she announced as she set the chronometer. "Make good use of them."

He watched her place the watch on the floor and leave, but did not comment.

That being said, Nathalie had seen how pale he had turned.

###

Gabriel was waiting right outside the door, with a tablet in his hands and one headphone in his ear. The tablet showed footage of Kubdel's cell, unsurprisingly. Nathalie had not seen the camera, but that there was one inside the basement went without saying. One, or two, or ten.
She nodded at him and followed him upstairs. They locked the door behind them and pushed the shelves that blocked the secret passage back into place. Because why wouldn't Gabriel have installed a secret passage?

"He's just a man," she told him as he pulled away from the shelves and breathed in.

That little demonstration against Kubdel had not been for the lunatic's benefit. There was no point playing power games. The historian was useless. Even if he were to speak - which she doubted would happen - he was likely to lie. The only reason she had dissected him had been to show how ordinary he was. She wanted that evidence to permeate through Gabriel's fears, to bring him some semblance of peace.

"He jumped into bed with an insane deity at the ripe age of twelve," she continued when Gabriel bit his lips without looking at her. "He's just a man. A middle-aged man who thinks himself much smarter and much more dangerous than he actually is."

"That rings a bell," Gabriel murmured, turning to her.

He looked like death warmed over, but he still gave her a faint smile, an exhausted smile of affection mixed with guilt. He actually looked away for a second. Nathalie sighed through her nose, aggravated. Let him feel guilty. Oh, just let him feel guilty.

She stopped at sighing. Despite everything, she was fond of the man.

He corrected his posture, straightening up and raising his chin, then ran a hand through his hair to force it back into place. Not that it worked. It was rumpled and dirty. In places, it fell in limp strands. In others, it stood up on ends. But, to Gabriel, maintaining a perfect facade was of the utmost importance. In a moment like this, he needed to feel like himself.

"You were brilliant," he commented, his tone polite and collected, his voice raw and raspy.

He cleared his throat.

"Have you summoned the Kwami yet?" Nathalie asked.

"No. I figured I would fare better against a centuries old goddess after some rest and some planning."

She acquiesced.

"Indeed. Let's get you back to the mansion."

Gabriel paused, looking at the shelves that blocked the way to the basement. He did not protest.

"Bella is going to bargain for his release," he announced instead, as if Nathalie had not guessed that herself. 'Waiting for a miracle' indeed. "Kwami are exceedingly protective of their chosens."

"I gathered that. I met Plagg," she added as an afterthought.

Gabriel blinked.

"Really? How did that go?"

"He told me I was smart for a human."

That statement was met with a puzzled look and the hint of a happy grin. Of course, Gabriel
that. He gave a polite nod.

"That would be high praise."

*Peas in a pod, that cat and him.*

"As for Bella," Nathalie said, "let her try. I can see a few options to extract information out of the two of them without having to play their games. But we can discuss that later. I am dead on my feet and so are you."

Her companion narrowed his eyes. He could not figure out what she meant, a sure sign that he needed to rest. He was used to functioning on little to no sleep. His inability to think said a lot about his state of exhaustion.

"Let's go," she insisted. "I'll drive you home."

He acquiesced and followed her to her car, in silence. Seeing the state he was in, she half expected him to collapse on the passenger seat and drowse of, but he sat with his back straight and his eyes wide open, pretending he was not trembling with that small effort.

They were ten minutes away from his hideout when he finally spoke.

"Adrien is still at your place, isn't he?"

"Yes, with miss Lenoir."

Gabriel nodded.

"Do you think he is still asleep?"

"No," Nathalie drawled. "I don't think he is *still* asleep. 'Still' would imply he slept at all since you pulled your disappearing act, Gabriel."

She was not awake enough to take her eyes off the road *and* keep the car on it. She could not watch the man's reaction, but she hoped he had cringed.

"I'll talk to him," he murmured.

"*I* will talk to him," Nathalie snapped. "And then we will talk to him. And maybe, *maybe,* at some point in the future, when I decide you can be trusted to interact with the boy, you will get to spend time alone with him. In the meantime, expect to be supervised by a sensible adult."

"That's hardly-"

"Shut up."

He went utterly still.

She released the gas pedal, let the car come to a stop, then pulled the handbrake. That early in the morning, there was no traffic to hinder.

"There are so many things you have to fix about yourself that I don't even know where to start," she told him, staring straight ahead at the street with her hands clenched on the wheel. "And what you did, over the last few days… Gabriel, for the *rest of your life,* every time your parenting proves anything less than *excellent,* I will rub this in your face so hard that you will feel physical pain."
Silence fell. He shifted in his seat.

"I know," he quietly replied. "And that's fair. It's just… I have to start somewhere."

###

At seven in the morning, after hours waiting for news from Nathalie or his father, Adrien could not summon any other feelings than anger and exhaustion. Gone was the worry, gone was the fear. He just wanted to strangle Gabriel and to talk to Nathalie in a really sharp tone. Even Miss Lenoir's presence (or rather her lack of concern for the situation) exasperated him.

He had retreated to the kitchen with Plagg, who was probably the only person slash creature he felt like spending time with. He was not even sure he wanted to see Marinette, though that was not out of anger, more out of a vague sense of shame. His father had landed them in such an horrific mess that he did not want to show his face. And she had to go to school and hear everything about Alix and her father.

Adrien had gotten texts from both Nino and Alya, asking him if he had heard the news, and he had nearly lost it.

He distracted himself with the history of the Firebird, aka the Peacock, aka Plume, aka - apparently - a million other names. There was not much to be found on the internet, but searching kept him busy.

It was nearly half past seven when Nathalie came back from her 'trip to the pharmacy'. Adrien heard her keys turn in the door and was halfway across the apartment before she could walk in. Plagg, forgetting to be lazy, dashed after him.

She was alone.

"You're back!" the teenager exclaimed, his brain refusing to come up with pertinent questions such as 'has my father murdered Hawk Moth?' and 'what should I do now?'.

Nathalie paused when she saw him, startled, then relaxed and gave him a tired sigh.

"I'm back," she said. "I have news."

Adrien heard miss Lenoir drag herself from the sofa to the entrance, though she stayed behind him.

"What kind of news?" the boy snapped. The knot in his stomach did not make it easy to keep a polite facade. He tried to soften his tone. "Did you find my father?"

Nathalie closed the door and joined him. She ran a hand through his hair.

"What kind of news?" the boy snapped. The knot in his stomach did not make it easy to keep a polite facade. He tried to soften his tone. "Did you find my father?"

Nathalie closed the door and joined him. She ran a hand through his hair.

"I found him, and I found mister Kubdel, who is in good health, though he is suffering from a few bruises and a wounded ego."

Adrien heard the words. He could not make sense of them.

"W-what?"

"Alim Kubdel is Hawk Moth," Nathalie clarified. "Gabriel captured him and has him locked up in a
secure location. The plan is to interrogate him about your mother, then to deliver him to the police."

It still didn't make sense. At all. Adrien was *trying* to focus and understand, but his thoughts were foggy. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep that made it hard to process the news, or maybe they were *insane*.

Plagg landed on his shoulder and leaned closer to Nathalie.

"Your father is home," she continued in a tone laced with exasperation. "I made sure he went to bed and I don't expect him to wake up for the next five hours, preferably more… Then he will be joining us."

It finally clicked. Adrien jumped back, moving away from the hand she had put on his shoulder.


Nathalie's smile faded.

"It's a long story and I'm not sure I can explain it without making your father sound insane…" - She ran her hand over her face and murmured to herself. - "Then again, he absolutely *is.*"

Queen Bee moved closer, pressing herself against Adrien's back and putting both hands on his shoulders.

"So who was in that car?" she asked.

Nathalie groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Gabriel had prepared a... procedure in the event he went missing in the same way Alice did," she announced. "It was meant to, ah, make it easier on everyone involved, by letting no questions go unanswered."

"Holy shit," Anne-Laure gasped.

Plagg's tail twitched.

Nathalie looked like if she was having a tooth pulled. She covered her eyes not to have to look at them.

"The 'procedure' apparently involved making an *especially* peculiar purchase and promptly setting it on fire so it couldn't be identif… I'm sorry," she blurted out, raising a hand. "Can we just *drop* this specific topic? I don't believe it's worth discussing."

Adrien stared at her, trying to digest the idea that Gabriel had not only considered faking his own death if he disappeared, but gone as far as figuring out a way to acquire a corpse, pack it into a car and stage a fatal crash. The teenager was not angry anymore. He would have prefered to be, really. As things were, he felt *ill*.

Gabriel's willingness to kill had been a blow, but there had always been that spark of doubt and hope undern the suspicions, that frail layer of trust that would not break. And revenge was an easy concept to understand. It was commonplace.

This… This was worse than murder plans, somehow. It underlined how far gone Gabriel was.

Adrien let the bleakness of that notion wash over him.
Don't think about it, he told himself. Don't. DON'T.

He heard Anne-Laure mutter a string of profanity, but it barely registered. He grabbed his ring and tried to focus on his duties as Chat Noir.

"This is why you medicate your crippling depression," Bee snapped. "For fuck's sake!"

Don't think about it. It is not your responsibility.

"Where is mister Kubdel?" Adrien cut in, turning to Nathalie. "Did you see him?"

"In a secure location," she replied. She got her phone out of her bag and opened a video. "I have access to the security cameras, so you can see for yourself that he is very much alive."

She turned the screen to him. The boy looked and recognized Alix's father, who was pacing in a large cage. The man was obviously furious, but in good enough health to try to kick and shake the bars, not to mention roam from one side of the cage to the other.

Adrien clenched his jaw.

Plagg flew up.

"What about Bella?" he asked. "Where is her Miraculous?"

Now that was an important question his chosen wished he had come up with.

"Locked in an electrum box, in a safe at the mansion," she replied. "Gabriel will bring it when he joins us."

That snapped Adrien out of his sullen silence.

"WHAT? You left Hawk Moth's Kwami with him? After all of this? He's never going to resist summoning her!"

"Adrien," Nathalie said, her tone soothing but sharp. "I said it was in a safe. I didn't say Gabriel had its combination. I also made sure to take that letter opener with me, just so he would not get ideas."

The young hero let out an irritated sigh and nodded. Then he just shook his head.

"You know what?" he exclaimed. "I'm done. Just... Just handle this. Whatever. I'll be at school."

He looked down at his clothes, decided they were presentable enough, and went to retrieve his shoes from under the coffee table. Plagg followed him, concerned.

Nathalie took a few steps in the same direction.

"I'll drive you there," she said.

"I can walk."

"Your school is on the other side of town."

"I can 'walk'," he retorted, raising his hand to show her the ring.

"I will drive you there," Nathalie repeated, in a tone that did not allow for protest.

The teenager bit the inside of his cheeks but nodded.
Ten minutes later, their car was pulling out of its parking spot. They had not exchanged a word, though Adrien had said goodbye to Anne-Laure before leaving. The woman had collected her things and left at the same time as they had, not to stay alone in Nathalie's apartment. They had watched her walk away.

"Have you tried to sleep at least a little after I left?" Nathalie asked him after driving for a few minutes.

"Not after I figured out you lied about that migraine," Adrien commented.

She sighed.

"I'm very sorry," she told him. "I should not have done that. I was not sure what I would find, I did not want you to follow and that was the only idea I came up with."

He turned away, looking at the sidewalk. It was still early, but people were pouring out of their houses to start their days. He watched a mother carry her young son to her car and strap him to his seat.

"What if he does find that's safe's combination?" he asked. "I mean, clearly Father isn't thinking clearly, so what would happen?"

Nathalie shook her head. She fumbled for her purse, which she had dropped between their seats, and put it down on her knees. She did not manage to drive while rummaging through it, however, so she parked. A minute later, she pulled out the now familiar electrum box.

Adrien's eyes went wide.

"I didn't leave the Miraculous where your father could get it," she declared. "I just did not want to say that in front of miss Lenoir."

Plagg snorted from underneath his chosen's shirt.

The boy blinked.

"What? Why not?"

Nathalie clicked her tongue.

"I had a very enlightening conversation with her, a few hours ago," she explained. "She told me how your mother was like a sister to her, how she would have done anything for her."

Memories of a conversation with Ladybug flashed through his mind, of when they had discussed the limits of what they would do for each other. How they knew where to draw the line.

"Are you saying we shouldn't trust her just because she said that?" Adrien protested despite a pang of uneasiness. "She's nice. And she's pretty laid back. She's not mulling over things like father is."

"Just because someone looks nonchalant doesn't mean they are," Nathalie pointed out. "And when someone tells you they would do anything for you, I'd recommend you investigate how serious they are exactly. From some people, it is a very scary prospect. Now, if you start thinking about miss Lenoir, well… I know for a fact that, when your father started dating your mother, Anne-Laure beat him up. I know Gabriel got her out of jail, in various countries, on various occasions, because she had assaulted someone. I know she is still, to this day, taking trips to Pacaás Novos to look for Alice. So, yes, Alim Kubdel is held in an undisclosed secure location, and the Butterfly
Miraculous 'is anywhere else than on me'."

Adrien blanched as she spoke. He was aware of every single of those points but had never connected them. Anne-Laure was fun. She was easygoing. She didn't look like the type to hold grudges, more like the type that didn't care enough about anything.

Nathalie looked at him.

"Here is some advice you should remember: when someone shows you who they are, believe… them. Oh damn," she blurted out, shoving her bag on the backseat and pulling out of the parking spot.

She did a u-turn and sped away from the school's side of town.

###

Chapter End Notes

And yet another chapter cut in two because it grew too long.
I will get to the end of that fic. I swear.
"Nathalie, what's going on?" Adrien snapped when his father's assistant, after that hurried u-turn, failed to give the right of way to a blue Volvo and swerved to avoid a crash.

She did not stop. On the contrary: she sped away.

"Nathalie!" Adrien yelled.

She was in no state to drive. She had barely slept in the last two days and it was a miracle that she could still walk in a straight line. Speed-racing through the crowded streets of Paris was definitely not an option.

"I'm an idiot, I'm a damn moron, I am an IDIOT," she ranted, not even peeking at him.

"Nathalie!"

She took a deep breath.

"I messed up," she said. This time, it sounded like she was talking to Adrien and not to herself. He had never heard her use that word before. "Plagg!"

The Kwami popped out of Adrien's messenger bag.

"Yes?"

"You're a cat?" Nathalie asked, her tone laced with anxiety. "With the cat senses?"

"Of course I have the cat senses."

"And the sense of smell?"

"Yes?" Plagg replied, confused.

"Alright. Is there food in the car?" - Both Adrien and his Kwami blinked at the strange question. - "Is there candy?" Nathalie amended. "Can you check?"

The teenager's eyes went wide. That conversation he had eavesdropped on echoed through his mind. *This one was Candy Warper's,' Anne-Laure had said about her cursed candy cane. *Teleportation, but you knew that, and remote-controlling candy.'

Plagg zipped from one corner of the car to the other, checking under the seats, slipping into the trunk, diving into Nathalie's purse. He dashed out of it and landed on his chosen's knees, dropping three gummy bears on his lap.

Nathalie looked down at them and started swearing in an uninterrupted flow of expletives Adrien had no idea she even knew.

"Out!" she yelled. "Out, throw them out."

The boy did, opening his window and dropping the candy on the street while Nathalie accelerated. She kept ranting.
"And you *talked* about putting a tracker on your father and it didn't *register*! I didn't even *consider* there could be one on me, I should have *known*!"

"Come on," Adrien pleaded. "Please calm down. We don't know if something has happened yet, for all we know, miss Lenoir won't do a single thing."

Nathalie stared at the road, slaloming between cars in a way that involved not using one's blinkers, overtaking cars by the right side and using the bus lane when at all possible. He patted his seatbelt.

"Maybe I should transform and go check," he suggested in his most polite voice, sincerely worried they were going to get killed.

She pursed her lips.

"Call miss Dupain-Cheng. We'll give her the address." - So she *had* figured out Ladybug's identity. - "Also take my tablet from my purse…" - Adrien opened her handbag and found it impeccably arranged, with every type of item categorized and sorted in the adequate pocket. He took the tablet out. - "And open the browser, the url to the hideout's surveillance camera is 198 dot 154 dot 0 dot 21, slash, camera, slash, 1."

Adrien struggled to keep up with the typing, but the browser helpfully autocompleted the url from its history. It took a few moments for the video to load, then the image of the cage mister Kubdel was kept in appeared. He was pacing, just as he had been when Nathalie had showed Adrien the feed, not an hour before. Thankfully, he was alone and unharmed.

"He's fine," the boy announced, keeping his eyes on the screen and dialing Marinette's number.

His girlfriend answered near instantly.

"Hi!" she said. "You're already up?"

"Yes, I… Er, we have a problem!" he exclaimed, summarizing the situation. "I doesn't look like anything is happening, but we're on our way and it would be great if you could join us…" - Nathalie gave him an address. - "…On the Rue des Forges, in the industrial district. The Garfield packaging factory."

How had Gabriel even managed to escape their notice for so long, with that habit to register his hideouts to fictional cats or to their creators?

"Okay, I'll get there as soon as I can," Marinette answered. "Can you transform so we can use the tra-"

"NO!" Adrien yelled when Anne-Laure appeared behind the unsuspecting mister Kubdel on the security footage.

"What?" his partner gasped.

"She's *there*," the blond explained as miss Lenoir kicked mister Kubdel behind the knees to make him fall. "Just g-"

All he heard was the tonality. Marinette had hung up.

###
Marinette had never showed up to school as early as at seven in the morning. Not since she had started walking there on her own, anyway. Her parents rose early. Marinette, however, could sleep through the noises of the bakery, two alarm clocks and (just the once) the Akuma-induced collapse of half the city block. She was a heavy sleeper. That being said, to stay asleep, one had to fall asleep, and she had spent her night patrolling, then staring at the ceiling.

At some point, she had given up on sleep entirely.

Much to her surprise, several of her classmates were sitting on the school's entrance stairs when she arrived. Nino and Ivan were talking about music, with the DJ yawning and pressing one side of Ivan's headphones to his ear. Kim and Max were lounging higher up. When Marinette walked closer, she spotted darkening bruises on Kim's face. He definitely had a black eye.

"Hey, Marinette!" Nino exclaimed, joining her. "What happened? You're… reverse late?"

"You mean 'early'?"

"Nah. Early would be 'one minute before on time'. You're like early-early."

"I couldn't sleep. And you're early too."

"Yeah, kind of. I took the bus with Ivan today, we had some mp3s to share."

Marinette nodded then lowered her voice.

"Did Kim get into a fight?"

"Er, something like that? He went to see Alix. You know, with her dad and everything, er… Anyway, I think he annoyed her a little too much."

Kim, who was well within earshot, rolled his eyes.

"I didn't 'annoy' her. I told her if she thought I was an ass, she could punch me."

Marinette blinked.

Her classmate rolled his eyes one more time.

"She needed to punch something, okay?"

The young designer stared at him.

"I. See. That was… strangely… considerate," she commented. She couldn't imagine the state Alix was in, though she figured 'angry' would be at the forefront. Alix didn't like to appear weak. "Did it help?"

"I think so? I mean she thanked me."

Nino sighed. Marinette looked down at her shoes, nodding.

"The funeral is in two days," Kim announced. "Are you going?"

_I'll show up if I manage to drag Adrien's father to a police station_, she thought.
"I. Yes. Who is going?"

"Most of the class except, you know, Chloé, who doesn't give a shit. Even Sabrina said she'd show up."

Marinette nodded again, lost in thought.

They could never repair what Gabriel had done. Never. There would be no magical swarm of ladybugs to wash away everything that had gone wrong. Nobody would be brought back to life. Alix's family was destroyed forever. And, unlike Hawk Moth's possessed victims, Gabriel was fully to blame for what he had done. He could not get away with it. She would have to deliver him to the cops, regardless of how much it would hurt Adrien. And it would. Where would he go if his father was arrested? Did he have relatives who would take him in? Would he end up in foster care? He had already lost a parent and now he'd have to see the second be sent away. Would he ever recover from that?

She didn't think he would ever forgive her in any case, but she could live with that. Gabriel had chosen his path and that path had caused grief to everyone around him. He had hurt Adrien time and time again and you couldn't let him continue to do so. You couldn't excuse his actions.

Marinette wished Alice had not excused his actions.

Maybe the previous Ladybug would have been miserable if her husband's memories had been wiped away, but it would have given Adrien a clean start in life. He would not have grown to love a man who abused him more often than he showed him affection. Maybe he would have grown up without a father but with a mother who loved him. Maybe Alice would have met someone else, someone good. In any case, Adrien would not have been forced to handle Gabriel's actions. He would not have had to deal with the fact that his father was a murderer. Instead, his own mother had laid out the foundations for the mess they were in. She had known the kind of man her husband was, yet she had enabled him.

Now, everyone was paying the price.

"Are the doors still locked?" she asked, turning to the school's entrance.

She had never arrived that early.

"No," Max replied. "Just closed. Mister Haprele was cleaning the entrance when we arrived and he needed them shut. You sh-"

Marinette's phone started ringing. It was Adrien. Her heart started racing and she excused herself with one gesture to Nino, walking to the corner of the street to take the call.

"Hi!" she said. "You're already up?"

"Yes, I… Er, we have a problem!" Adrien announced, voice muffled by motor noises.

She lowered her voice to a whisper so her classmates would not hear her.

"What's happening?"

"I was about to come to school, I'd have told you, I… Mister Kubdel is alive," her partner blurted out, his voice frantic. "He is Hawk Moth, my father has him locked up somewhere."

Marinette froze, gobsmacked. That did not make sense. There was a body. Mister Kubdel's car had
been found. Alix's family was preparing his funeral.

The young designer was still digesting Adrien's words when he dropped the next bomb.

"Nathalie thinks miss Lenoir figured out where my father keeps him and that she's going there right now. I don't look like anything is happening, but we're on our way and it would be great if you could join us..."

Marinette heard miss Sancoeur speak in the background, which meant she knew her real identity... but then again, she had probably been too blatant. She would handle that later.

She wrote down the address Adrien gave her and promised to hurry there, then tried to suggest a transformation into Chat Noir. The tracking system built into their weapons would be a blessing in the current circumstances.

Adrien shrieked a 'no' into his phone.

"What?" his girlfriend exclaimed, her heart jumping to the middle of her throat.

"She's there, " Adrien explained. "Just-

"I'm on my way!" Marinette replied, frantic.

She realized in the same instant she had ended the call before talking, but her partner would understand. She turned to Nino.

"My, uh, cousin is... locked on her balcony!" she shouted, already starting to run. "I have to go! No one else has the key! I'll be right back!"

A minute later, she was out of sight. A few seconds after that, she had transformed and was zipping from roof to roof, speeding to the address she had received.

She could not fathom how things had gone so wrong.

Well, actually, she could. They had done nothing. They had not watched mister Agreste closely enough. They had not accounted for the fact that his own son was Chat Noir (a fact that would definitely have changed Marinette's approach). They had underestimated him. They had underestimated Anne-Laure Lenoir, who seemed harmless enough, who just wanted to smoke and eat and wander the world. Marinette had been so busy with everything else that she had barely spared a thought for the woman. She had barely even wondered how and why the retired Queen Bee had left Chloé behind. At no point had she stopped to question what had brought her back. Adrien had told her he had gotten her to visit his father, and that had been enough of an explanation.

Why would Ladybug have considered that Anne-Laure could hold a grudge against Hawk Moth, just like Gabriel? Silly idea! Who would think such a thing?

Anyone with half a brain.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

It took her fifteen minutes to get in sight of the packaging factory. It did not look like a secret lair that doubled as a prison. Then again, mister Agreste's first hideout had been a lawyer office. That was even less indicative of criminal activities (at least the kind of criminal activities the fashion designer indulged in).
Marinette looked around, trying to find signs of Chat Noir or of Nathalie Sancoeur.

Her partner was nowhere in sight - had he already gone in? - but miss Sancoeur's grey car was driving away.

That could only mean trouble. Ladybug gave chase.

She followed the grey Audi down the street, even passing it as it turned the corner and parked next to a pile of discarded tires and garbage. Ladybug landed next to the car right as Nathalie opened the door. The woman was alone.

"Where is Adrien?" the teenager asked. "What's going on?"

Then she saw how hard Nathalie was shaking. Her hands were clutching her bag so hard her knuckles had turned white.

"A-Adrien… I-I m-mean Chat Noir went to the f-factory. I-I-I had to leave," the woman explained, trying to regain her composure. "I-I had to drive away."

She looked wracked with guilt.

"Of course you had to!" Marinette exclaimed. "You're a civilian! If you had stayed, you would only have put yourself in danger."

The young heroine did not add that Nathalie was no usual civilian, seeing how she was privy to her employer's murder plans and to the location of his hideouts. Once the immediate problems would be taken care of, Ladybug would make sure to ask her share of questions.

"You don't get it," Nathalie said, opening her bag. "I have the Butterfly Miraculous on me. I have that enchanted letter opener. I couldn't bring them anywhere near Hawk Moth. If he somehow escapes… It's too risky."

Marinette blanched.

"Go," she said. "Hide, don't go anywhere anyone would expect you to be. I'll handle this, and once we have mister Kubdel and miss Lenoir secured, I will call you. And, when I call, ask me the name of your cat."

"I don't have a… Oh."

"If I give you a name, you'll know something went wrong," Ladybug added, turning away and throwing her yoyo at a lamppost. "And now I have to go."

###

Chat Noir shoved aside the shelves that concealed the basement door, then used the key Nathalie had given him to unlock the armored door itself. As soon as he opened it, he heard screams, even though the factory had been silent as a tomb a second before. Count on his father to invest in the best sound isolation money could buy.

The young hero raced down the stairs.
He found Anne-Laure towering over a curled up mister Kubdel, who was covering his head with both arms. His hands were bloody.

"SPEAK!" his assailant yelled.

They were both inside the cage. Miss Lenoir's Candy Cane was on the floor at the opposite end of the room, out of the cage, totally out of reach.

Adrien did not waste time.

"Cataclysm," he murmured under his breath as he ran to the cage.

He hit two bars - just two bars - and did not even wait for them to be done shattering to skip into the cell. As soon as he was in, he planted his staff in the middle of the gap he had created, between shards of rusted metal. He made it grow until it stuck both to the floor and to the ceiling like a replacement bar.

Miss Lenoir had whirled to him.

"W-" she started, taking a step towards him.

She didn't get to finish that sentence. Chat Noir grabbed her extended arm and threw her away from Hawk Moth. At was to be expected from someone who scaled walls and grappled her way into fortified mansions, she did not fall. She did not trip. She barely stumbled. A second later, she was dashing back to Adrien and shoved him back.

"What are you doing? We need to make him talk!"

People used 'foaming at the mouth' as a figure of speech often enough. Anne-Laure actually was.

Chat Noir pushed her away, in a calm but firm gesture.

"No. Not like this," he retorted, staying between Kudbel and the blonde.

"Not like… Why are you defending him?" she yelled. "He killed Alice!"

That hit Adrien like a punch to the gut. He swayed. He tried not to take a deep breath, because Kubdel had moved back against the bars and was observing them.

"Did he say he did?" the superhero asked, as coolly and professionally as he could manage. The mask and the costume helped. He could wrap 'Chat Noir' around his pain like a cloak.

Anne-Laure frowned.

"Not yet, but-"

"Well then I guess you can leave now, because if you are not out of my sight in the next thirty seconds, I will be delivering you to the cops along with him."

Adrien punctuated that announcement by raising his chin and clenching his jaw.

His Miraculous beeped.

Miss Lenoir took a step to the side and tried to walk past him to get to Kubdel, but he blocked her way. She scoffed.
"Kid, I know you mean well," she said, pushing him away, "but you have no idea the kind of psycho you're dealing with here."

Once again, Chat Noir shoved her back.

"Yep, seems that way. I have to hand it to you, though, you're quite the wasp in bee's clothing."

Mister Kubdel inched away, pressing himself against the bars of the cell, right where Chat Noir had broken in. There was probably enough space between the real bars and the staff for the man to slip through. The young hero whirled to him.

"Don't even try," he snapped.

Looking away from Anne-Laure was a mistake. She kicked the back of his knee. His leg gave way. He stumbled back, collapsing against her, only to be grabbed by the waist and lifted in the air. She bent back and threw him over her head, sending him rolling on the floor while she saltoed and landed on her feet. A second later, one of those feet connected with mister Kubdel's stomach, then the second crushed his wrist.

The next beep of Chat's ring went unheard as Hawk Moth yelled in pain.

"Once again, Alim," Lenoir spat. "What did you do to her?"

Adrien bounced back up and charged. The blonde raised a hand to stop him.

"Take one more step and I will fucking cripple him, kiddo," she threatened. "I'm not going to kill him, I'll hand him over after he talks, so chill. No need to play the white knight here. God knows he doesn't deserve one."

"Everyone deserves one," Chat Noir retorted, circling them and trying to come up with a way to rescue Hawk Moth - of all people, Hawk Moth - from torture.

It was a peculiar situation, all things considered, but Adrien had no doubt he was doing the right thing. If answers about his mother came at that price, he did not want them.

"Yeah? Tell that to the people he slaughtered. Tell that to Benoît Lagrange who died as Blood Moon, when his power of flight deserted him. Tell that to the teen girl who was cut to pieces as Candy Warper, whose soul is still trapped into a fetish. Tell that to the people who lost everything because they didn't get forgiveness for what they did under his Akuma's control."

Chat Noir's ring beeped again. This time, the sound echoed around them.

Anne-Laure looked down, startled. Her expression grew harder still as she looked back up to meet Adrien's eyes.

"Just go before you transform back," she said. "It's bad enough he knows who Gabriel is."

The boy did not move. He glared back.

A minute passed.

There was another beep.

"Oh for f..." Lenoir mumbled, grabbing Chat Noir's staff and trying to pry it from the floor and ceiling to make an opening in the cell.
She did not manage to. It was stuck there and would not move unless Adrien wanted it to. She turned to him, eyes wide. He watched her gesture at the staff, ignored her, and walked to her and Kubdel.

Alix's father was studying his face. The man was battered and bruised, with a bloody nose that looked broken, a split lip, a black eye. If he was in pain, he had forgotten about it: he was too busy assessing the situation.

The young hero crouched.

"Can you stand?"

Kubdel's eyes narrowed.

"I don't know," he replied, shifting uneasily and trying to sit up.

Lenoir immediately kicked him in the chest, a blow that Chat Noir managed to block but not altogether stop. The boy shoved her leg away. He grabbed the front of the sweater Hawk Moth was wearing - a formless thing, very unlike the sharp suits the man wore in and out of costume - and pulled him up.

Yellow lightning washed over Chat Noir, who reverted back into Adrien. Plagg landed on his shoulder an instant later.

Hawk Moth's eyes widened.

"You are their son," he said. "You… Ah. Of course, you are. How did I not see it?"

The teenager ignored that, just like he ignored Anne-Laure's muffled stream of curses.

"Here's how things are going to go," he announced in his coldest tone, staring at Kubdel with a composure that would have made Gabriel proud. "I'm going to get you to an hospital, so we can make sure you are not bleeding internally or something of the kind. And then I will give you two options."

Adrien had not been given much time to consider what the available options were. Not in circumstances like these. He had always pictured Hawk Moth's capture as an epic showdown with Akuma and storms of magic. He had imagined taking the Butterfly Miraculous back, and delivering a defeated stranger to the hands of the law.

Kidnapping had never come to his mind.

As things were, their options were limited and none of them were good.

"Adrien," miss Lenoir sighed. "Don't. Don't give him options. You don't have any. Leave him to me and I'll hand him over to the guardian."

He would not look at her. He had never been that angry in his life, and the last few days had set the bar high.

"You don't get a vote," he told her. "Neither does my father. Not after this. You used to be heroes. You should have been better than this. Actually, if you were like this to begin with, I doubt you deserved a Miraculous. So either you follow my lead, either you walk away now knowing Ladybug and I will find you and drag you to the cops for assault. Do I make myself clear?"
She huffed but she stayed.

Mister Kubdel leaned against the bars, holding his belly.

"So what would the options be?"

Adrien clenched his teeth.

"I assume Bella told you about the normal punishment for rogue Miraculous holders? The memory wipe?"

Hawk Moth narrowed his eyes.

"She did."

"Well, that's your best option. We take away all your memories of being Hawk Moth, of ever meeting your kwami, and we let you go."

"That's twenty years worth of memories, young man. You would effectively erase me."

Adrien let out an exasperated sigh. He could feel Plagg's tail twitching on his shoulder.

"That's the option where I don't have to tell Alix what you did. I sure hope it will erase you and leave only your memories of caring for her and your son. Because, you know, Alix is my friend. She's in my class. I like her. So you might go home with holes in your mind the size of a small planet, but she'll still have you. And I will keep an eye on you for the rest of your life, to see what kind of person you are without your evil Kwami's influence. And if there's anything left of the man who Akumatized her, who Akumatized both of his children, I swear I'll tell her everything. But if you can be a decent person, then you still have a chance."

By the end of that tirade, Adrien was shaking, more from anxiety than from anger.

Mister Kubdel mulled over that then nodded.

"What's the other option?"

"The other option is 'we drag you to the cops'," the teenager snapped.

"I'd take the first one if I were you," Plagg chimed in. "It's much nicer than what you deserve. The boy is my kindest Chat Noir yet."

Hawk Moth breathed in. The corner of his lips twitched and curled into a faint smile.

"I see."

Anne-Laure winced.

"You can't give him to the cops. He's going to lie his ass off and pretend he's your father's innocent victim. Gabriel would get arrested."

Adrien sucked his cheeks in.

"First, I trust the judicial system. I have to. And then, Father is a grown man. He made his own choices while fully aware of their consequences, so let him deal with them." - He turned to Kubdel again. - "You. Think about those options carefully because I'll be asking for your answer as soon as a doctor confirms you aren't dying on us. Now let's go," Adrien said, pushing the man through the
opening left by the two destroyed cell bars.

Kubdel took two steps forward then lunged for the candy cane. Of course, that was hardly unexpected, so Adrien tripped him. Anne-Laure ran to the magical artefact and shoved it into the inside pocket of her vest.

Adrien sighed and pulled their captive to his feet.

*Just go, just go, just go. Call Ladybug, call Nathalie, call an ambulance, just go,* he told himself.

Anne-Laure grabbed Kubdel by the shoulder and pushed him up the stairs, keeping a firm hold on him. The man walked hunched, with an arm wrapped around his abdomen. He was also grinding his teeth. Adrien followed them out of the staircase then put his own hand on Hawk Moth's other shoulder, so they would both be holding him.

"What now?" Lenoir asked.

Adrien took his phone out of his pocket and called Marinette's number. It went straight to voicemail.

"Ladybug should be here soon," he sighed. "I'll call Nathalie."

By that point, the Butterfly Miraculous had to be stashed away in a safe location. Adrien would need to ask her for cheese. Plagg was exhausted.

"Alright," Anne-Laure replied. "Find something to tie this bastard up, alright?"

Kubdel rolled his eyes.

"What, are you expecting me to run with broken ribs and a sprained knee?"

"You seemed fine to me when you tried to get the candy cane a minute ago," the blonde snapped.

Adrien stared down at his phone, mind wiped blank. Plagg peeked down and waited a moment, then nudged him.

"Nathalie," he prompted.

"Right."

He called her, giving her the quickest rundown of the situation. She listened, hung up, and texted him that an ambulance was on the way. So was she.

The boy put his phone away and ran his hands over his face. Then he heard Ladybug's voice.

"Chat?" she was calling. She ran into the building the very next second. Her eyes drifted from Kubdel to Adrien. "Chat?"

He had never felt such overwhelming relief.

"Ladybug!" he exclaimed, turning to her just in time to see her blanch and open her mouth.

Then he heard a moan behind him. He whirled to Anne-Laure and saw her bending over. Hawk Moth fist was buried against her stomach, and a dark red stain spread on her clothes right around it. Kubdel pulled her in front of him as a human shield and moved his hand away.
He was holding a bloody, rusty shard of steel.

Adrien's eyes went wide.

The bars had shattered and fallen to pieces when he had hit them with his Cataclysm. He remembered the sounds the pieces of metal had made when they had hit the floor.

He heard himself scream. He reached for Anne-Laure just as Kubdel grabbed the candy cane from her inner pocket. Hawk Moth shoved her away and grabbed Adrien's extended hand. By pure reflex, the boy pulled his ring off and dropped it.

A split-second later, everything went dark.

###
"Lucky charm!"

You could rely on Lucky Charm. You could. You could rely on Tikki. You could rely on luck, except when you couldn't, because luck was not going to help you and what could Lucky Charm do against a gaping abdominal injury, anyway? You couldn't trick a bleeding wound, you could not outwit it. Ladybug's miracles did not include the healing of injuries inflicted out of an Akuma's range of influence.

Red gauze fell from the sky, straight into Marinette's hands. It was soaked wet and warm, and she stared at it with wide eyes for the second it took Plagg to react.

"Bleeding," he told her. "Control the bleeding."

Bleeding, control the bleeding.

Ladybug ran to miss Lenoir, crouching the exact same spot Adrien had just vanished from.

Adrien.

What would Kubdel do to him? He would kill him, wouldn't he? He would. He had tried for months now.

She fumbled with the gauze, trying to see how to apply it. How did she not know how to do that? She had read everything she could find about first aid! She had rescued mugging and assault victims. She had read about abdominal wounds and how to handle them, so why could she not remember?

"Open her shirt," Plagg said.

Marinette had to gently pry Anne-Laure's hands away from her belly. The woman mumbled that she had seen 'worse', though her skin was pale and clammy. She was also trembling.

The wound itself was small but jagged, and it oozed blood. Ladybug stared at the wet gauze she was holding then pressed it against Anne-Laure's belly to stop the bleeding.

"Lie down," she said, putting an arm around the woman's shoulder to help her lean back.

Plagg's eyes were riveted to the red gauze with black polka dots. It was rapidly turning dark brown.

"I'll be right back," he announced, zipping away at a surprising speed considering his state of exhaustion.

"Plagg, what do I do?" Ladybug shrieked.

But he was gone.

She opened her communicator and called an ambulance, only to be told one was on the way. She
begged miss Lenoir to hold on. With one hand on the gauze, she used the communicator to look up first aid for abdominal injuries. She prayed.

She jumped out of her bones when Plagg appeared and spoke.

"Put the ring on," he told her.

Marinette whirled to him, heart thumping. He was sitting on the floor, next to his Miraculous. He was holding the rotten remains of a ham sandwich, with bread covered in spots of green mold and ham that had long turned brownish.

"Put the ring on," the Kwami repeated. "Adrien dropped it before they teleported. You'll have to use it."

That got miss Lenoir to shift and try to sit. Ladybug had to force her to stay down.

"She's not trained!" the blonde protested in a croaky voice.

"She'll do fine," Plagg replied. "You won't."

Anne-Laure opened her mouth to argue but she was too weak to talk.

"Trained?" Marinette asked.

Plagg shrugged and bit down on a moldy corner of the sandwich.

"You… can eat that?" Marinette said, cringing. She would have turned greener than that mold if she didn't have more pressing matters on her hands. She was still babbling. "I thought you only ate camembert! Won't it make you-"

"I don't get sick from food," he said, gulping down a larger piece of bread. "Get the ring."

She did, slipping it on her gloved finger.

"What now?"

"Now? You say 'claws out'."

###

Something had gone wrong.

Something had gone horribly wrong.

Nathalie had not even needed to park near Garfield Packaging to figure that out. Driving into the street had been enough. There was an ambulance in front of the building, but that was not the dead giveaway.

The ladybugs were. There were thousands of them, covering the lampposts, crawling on the buildings' walls, flying around. When Nathalie stopped next to the factory and got out of her car, she crushed a dozen in one footstep. A dozen more landed on her face and hair. She brushed them away, shuddering. Red ladybugs with black spots, black ladybugs with red spots, yellow ladybugs
with black spots, red ladybugs with no spots at all, jet black ladybugs.

She started running towards the building, just in time to see a gurney be pushed out by two EMTs. At first, she blanched, spotting blond hair, but it was 'only' Anne-Laure Lenoir. Nathalie stopped to let them run to the ambulance.

The next person to walk out of the building was Ladybug. Except she was not entirely Ladybug. She was different. She was more.

Her eyes had turned a luminous shade of green - the same as Plagg's, Natalie noted - and the outline of her was... not blurry, but... multiplied. Trying to look at her was painful. It was like staring at three different images fusing and separating at once. Three silhouettes shimmered around what was, objectively, Ladybug's shape, though there was no way to focus on one of them at once.

Nathalie had to squeeze her eyes shut to stop them from aching.

"Hawk Moth escaped and took Chat Noir with him," Ladybug announced.

A second, deeper female voice spoke in tongues as she did.

A thousand other voices echoed that voice's words in distant whispers.

"What?" Nathalie gasped, her eyes snapping open.

"I didn't get there in time. All I know is that he stabbed miss Lenoir and used her candy cane to teleport." - There was buzzing around them, as if someone was talking. - "Miss Lenoir will live. I repaired most of the damage she sustained." - More buzzing. - "I am going to transform back and I won't remember any of this. It's likely I will be unconscious for several hours. Please help Adrien."

The heroine ran to the ambulance and exchanged a few words with a dazzled EMT who covered his eyes. The man replied, then closed the van's doors. It drove away with its sirens blaring.

It turned the corner. The sound of the sirens faded, leaving an eerie silence only disturbed by the buzzing of thousands of insect wings and recognizable beeps.

Ladybug raised her hand and stared at the black ring on her finger.

Red and yellow lightning washed over her, taking her costume away to reveal Marinette Dupain-Cheng in a girly pink and grey outfit. The teenager collapsed. Plagg and a red Kwami dropped to the ground. Nathalie ran and kneeled by the child's side, pulling her up so her head would rest on her thighs. Marinette was out cold.

The red Kwami moaned and bobbed up and down, crashing to the ground again. Plagg groaned and rolled in the dirt, sending dozens of ladybugs flying.

"We need to find Adrien," he said. "Can you use your phone like you did for..." - He flickered and cringed. - "Like you did to track this place down and where is Bella?"

The red Kwami zipped up and dropped on Marinette. She raised pleading eyes towards Nathalie.

"You need to contact Gabriel and tell him to hide!" she exclaimed. "Hawk Moth is going to think he kept the Butterfly Miraculous."

Nathalie thought of Gabriel, whom she had put to bed with a sleeping pill and two glasses of the strongest liquor she had managed to find in the mansion. She had wanted him out cold, unable to
cause more trouble.

What she had actually managed was to render him unable to defend himself from a teleporting enemy who could pop in and out of the house at will.

She got her phone out and dialed his number, put the phone on speaker, then stood and tried to lift Marinette from the ground. They couldn't stay there like sitting ducks either. She had to get the girl in the car and drive away as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, as lithe and small as the girl was, she weighed as much as a horse.

"Wakup," Nathalie mumbled, wrapping her arms around Marinette's waist and heaving her up. She was dragging her to the car when Gabriel replied. She heard a muffled 'Nathalie?' from her phone, that was buried against miss Dupain-Cheng's stomach. She twisted her hand so the microphone would work.

"YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!" she shouted. "HAWK MOTH ESCAPED!"

"I know, am… two streets away," he replied, his voice slurring. "Wait for me."

"What?"

"Jus… wait."

Nathalie would have asked more questions - she had millions running through her mind - but he hung up on her. She winced and dragged Marinette towards her car, hoping the girl's heels would recover from the scraping they were enduring. She made it halfway to the car when Gabriel's Mercedes arrived.

It was swaying. One of the front headlights was broken. There was a nasty crease in the passenger door. It still looked much better than Gabriel himself. He stumbled out of the car and made his way to Nathalie in cautious, wobbly steps. The sleeping pill and the drinks had not worn off.

Of course, he still attempted to assume control of the situation.

"Here," he said, pulling Marinette out of Nathalie's arms.

As out of it as he was, he still lifted her up effortlessly and, while he had some difficulties getting to Nathalie's car without falling, it was in no way due to the teenager's weight. He laid her down on the backseat, then leaned against the car's door and slipped to the ground.

Nathalie joined him.

"He took Adrien," she announced, crouching down a little and extending a hand that Gabriel ignored.

"I k-know. The place is fu… filled with cameras. The silent alarm went off the moment Anne-Laure broke in. I w-watched everything."

His hand hovered in the air, closing around an invisible blade and twisting , just as he had done when he had talked about the scar on Alice's belly.

Nathalie made no comments on his driving under the influence of drugs.

"Can you track his phone too?" he asked.
"As long as it is turned on and he has it on him," she replied.

She hoped Kudbel would not realize the boy could be located through the device, because they had no other leads.

"Alright," Gabriel murmured. "Alright." - He took a deep breath and grabbed the car door handle to heave himself up, climbing the side of the car to get up. - "Ladybug out. Bee out." - He ran his hands over his face. - "Damn it."

"I'm not sure what happened to miss Dupain-Cheng," Nathalie replied, putting her hands on his shoulders to soothe him. "Maybe the Kwami could…"

She frowned and looked around. The two creatures had vanished.

"Plagg and Tikki can't show themselves to me," Gabriel explained. "They are sealed. It was to protect them from me, in case I tried to corrupt them." - He took a deep breath. - "We are going to need Bella. Where is her Miraculous?"

"I… In a storm drain a block away," she replied. "Get in the car."

###

Adrien's eyes did not adjust to the darkness quickly enough for him to realize where he had been transported to, but he did not need to see to know where Hawk Moth was standing. He kicked. He hit a leg, then Kubdel released him and teleported away.

Adrien stumbled back, spreading his arms to try to locate a wall, a piece of furniture, anything. He hit something that fell and crashed to the floor with a noise of shattered porcelain. Shards landed on his sneakers and he crushed some when he stepped back.

Then a light turned on. It was faint. It was blue. It did not come from a lamp, but from the pocket watch mister Kubdel was holding in his hand. The man was standing at the opposite end of the room, which seemed to be twenty feet on twenty feet large and filled with historical artefacts.

The hologram that had flown out of the watch was a blue bird with beating wings. It didn't look like the one in Alix's watch: Marinette had described it as a woman holding a clock. They had been wrong, Adrien realized. Alix did not have a magic-tracking watch. Her father did. His targeted the peacock Kwami.

The teenager watched him open what looked like a box - it was hard to say, with such a weak light - then put something inside it and close the door. It was only when Adrien heard the latch turning that he realized Hawk Moth had just locked the candy cane into a safe.

There was a door behind Kubdel. It had a keypad.

Adrien blanched and looked around as best as he could. This was a vault. There was only one way out, and he did not have the code.

*Call for help. You have a phone. Call. For. Help.*

Ladybug was with Anne-Laure. If the woman was still alive, she would be taken care of. The only
thing Adrien could do was make his own way out. He would have to fight Hawk Moth, sure, but how hard could it be? Bee had done quite a lot of damage. Even if Kubdel was a grown man, he would not be much of a challenge in the state he was in, would he?

The teenager grabbed a statuette and took a careful step back.

The room was filled to the brim with things. Boxes, furniture, antiques. He recognized a sarcophagus next to the door. A lot of the statues he could distinguish looked Egyptian.

"Don't," mister Kubdel said. "Don't even try to fight. Your father is not the only one who collects magical weaponry."

To underline his words, he moved two steps to the left. His watch's light revealed a weapon rack that Adrien had not noticed before. Kubdek grabbed a khopesh. As soon as he lifted it, its blade started shining, filling the entire vault with a bright golden glow.

"Being the partner of a deity comes with perks," Hawk Moth said as Adrien raised an arm to protect his eyes. "Bella saw the pyramids being built. She was there when Pompei burned. Plagg and her watched a third of Rome's population grow sick and die when the Chat Noir of the times used cataclysm on his girlfriend's masters and let the plague spread. Go with her anywhere - and I mean anywhere - and she will tell you 'oh, I think I remember Mellusa stashed some weaponry in that cave!'. Or, you know, 'Alim, Alim! Those archaeologists are digging a mile too far to the north!'. It proves... convenient, in my line of business."

Adrien moved back until he hit a wall and looked for weapons he could use. The statuette he was holding would be a good projectile, but he needed range. He needed a staff, maybe a sword, especially if his enemy had a khopesh. With some luck, Kubdel was not trained to use it, though. Adrien had a few years of fencing behind him, and his experience as Chat Noir on top of that. Maybe that would be enough.

Of course, it could only be enough if he found a weapon. The more he looked, the more it became evident that the only weapon rack was behind Hawk Moth.

Alix's father followed his eyes.

"Don't," he said. "I would rather not kill you if I can avoid it, but if you attack me, I won't hesitate."

"Killing me is all you've tried to do for the last year," Adrien snapped. "And you just stabbed someone, so excuse me if I have trouble believing you."

Kubdel clicked his tongue.

"You are more valuable to me alive. I need to rescue Bella, and trading you against her seems like the obvious choice."

Adrien took a step to the left, then kept moving, hoping that a new position would allow him to spot weapons or tools hidden behind the assorted antiques.

He frowned at Hawk Moth's words.

"Rescue. Rescue?"

Mister Kubdel inspected the luminous blade of his sword, brushing it with the flat of his hand.

"Of course, rescue. Wouldn't you help Plagg if he was captured by people intent on enslaving
"Yeah. If he was being enslaved. Not that it's the case for Bella. She's an evil deity. So what if we clip her wings? She needs to be controlled!"

"Says who?"

"Says common sense."

Irritation flashed on Hawk Moth's face. His features did not quite return to the quiet expression he had displayed an instant before. He snorted.

"Give me your phone, boy," he said, taking a few steps towards Adrien. "I'll call your father, arrange for an exchange, and we'll both go on our merry way."

The teenager jumped over an engraved stone bench and climbed on a Greek statue. He perched himself on the shoulders of (as far as he could tell) Zeus. Kubdel pushed the bench away and walked to the statue, looking up at Adrien. It was only then that the boy saw the dried blood on the man's hands. Anne-Laure's blood. Adrien's stomach lurched.

"Our merry way," he repeated in a dead voice.

Kubdel stared into the distance. It took him a few seconds to talk again.

"Your father values his family and I value mine," he said. "I am sure we can come to an arrangement where I spare you and get to walk away with my children." - He turned the khopesh in his hands. - "And Bella, of course."

Adrien was starting to slip. He tried to hold on, grabbing Zeus' stone curls.

Hawk Moth wanted it all. He wanted his family, intact. He wanted his Kwami and the powers that came with her. He wanted things to revert to what they had been before Gabriel had come crashing into his life.

Which means he wanted his secrets to remain just that.

"You are going to kill us all," Adrien commented. "You can't let anyone know who you are. You want to be Hawk Moth but your children wouldn't forgive you."

Bella's powers had strict requirements but, when those were met, she could provide powers of any kind. Flight, teleportation, mind-control, time-travel. She was scarier than Tikki and Plagg put together.

If they let Hawk Moth get away with his crimes, he would be powerful enough to take them down. His Akuma would be after them forever.

"Get down," Kubdel said.

Adrien stayed right where he was.

One sweep of the khopesh later, the statue had fallen to pieces. The teenager slipped as it crumbled and hit the floor hard. He tried to roll away but the shining blade was already pressed to his throat.

He stared at Kubdel, panting. The man's expression was inscrutable.

"My daughter likes you," he ended up declaring to a baffled Adrien.
"W-"

"Of course, it's Alix we are talking about. She wouldn't say that in so many words. But her skater friends gave her hell when they heard that Adrien Agreste, 'the supermodel', was in her class. You know how teenagers are. Understandably, they thought you were a spoiled brat. The money, the fame, the looks. She called them jackasses and told them you were 'sickeningly nice'."

Adrien tried to shift to the side so the blade would not be so closely pressed to his throat. He could not even swallow. It would get him a nasty cut.

Hawk Moth followed his motion, groaning in pain when he had to lean closer. The khopesh trembled and left a cut under Adrien's Adam apple. If the blade had not been hooked, the teenager would have kicked his opponent and rolled away. As things were, he would have risked slicing his own throat. He ran through his possible moves through his mind.

He needed to push that hook away from him.

"Now where is your phone, boy?" Hawk Moth asked, patting his pockets.

Adrien waited for him to lean closer, grabbed his arm at the wrist and above the elbow, then rolled with both arms extended. Kubdel dropped on him - he was much heavier than expected - and the young hero had to put all of his strength in staying in motion. He managed to both keep the khopesh away from his throat and to roll over his enemy. Unfortunately, Kubdel had not let go of the weapon.

He gave a wide slice that Adrien dodged by an hairsbreadth.

The boy rolled away and jumped over a sarcophagus to get to the weapon rack.

"DAMNIT, BOY!" Hawk Moth screamed. "Are you trying to get killed?"

"Pretty sure I'm trying not to be," the blond chimed back, grabbing a blade from the rack. "Oh! Look! A faltaca!"

"Falcata," Kubdel corrected in the heavily rehearsed tone of someone used to lecture people on historical facts. He clicked his tongue and winced when he realized how pointless correcting his nemesis was. "What is it that you hope to accomplish with a centuries-old piece of rusty iron, Adrien?"

"Well, I'm on the fence. I need to slice a few options off my list. But I'm a good fencer, so if you fancy a little duel…"

Hawk Moth hit another statue with his glowing khopesh. The marble shattered.

"I wouldn't tempt my luck if I were you," he said. "Magic trumps steel."

"Nah, it's not so cut and dry. You're old. No offense. You're injured." - Adrien grinned. - "You weren't trained by my dad."

Kubdel wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Adrien assumed a defensive stance.

Neither of them attacked.

They moved, of course. The teenager stepped to the left. Hawk Moth did the same. They took in
the space around them, the obstacles, the projectiles they could use. They still wouldn't make the first move.

"I get a feeling you would try not to hurt me even if I attacked," Adrien ended up commenting.

It was ridiculous, because he had seen the man gut Anne-Laure. But all of that talking, that story about Alix, the way he had targeted the statue with his blade when he could have cut Adrien himself to pieces…

"What do you want, anyway?" the boy blurted out.

"Well, I wanted the ring, but since you managed to get rid of it before we teleported, I'll have to settle for trading you against Bella. But you knew that."

Adrien shook his head.

"No. I mean. In general. What do you want? You have been after the Miraculous for more than half your life. You've stopped at nothing. Why? What will you do with them?"

Kubdel rolled his eyes and sighed, with the hint of a resigned smile. There was a tiredness to him.

"I hardly think it matters," he replied.

"Of course it matters. You've terrorized the city for two decades, you have threatened, you have blackmailed, you have murdered for them. Yet the more I look at you, the more I think you're not that eager to do all of that. You don't act like the Hawk Moth Queen Bee described."

The teenager cringed as he said that, remembering the way Anne-Laure had crumpled around her bleeding wound. When Hawk Moth had stabbed her, he had been every bit the monster Gabriel and his ex-teammate had told Chat about. Yet, now that Kubdel was alone with Adrien, his aura was entirely different. The feeling of menace had all but vanished. He didn't feel that threatening, and that cognitive dissonance left Adrien unsettled. The man still had blood on his hands.

"Queen Bee seems to be under the impression that since she never changed, nobody can," Kubdel commented, rubbing the bruised side of his face.

Adrien nearly defended Anne-Laure, but it would have meant losing an opportunity to learn more on his enemy. Instead of retorting, he investigated.

"I didn't get the impression that your mothus operandi was that different," he said. "Send supervillain out, tear the city apart, bully teenagers into handing over their jewelry…"

"There's a reason your father is afraid of me and you are not, boy," Kubdel pointed out. "At your age, I was… angry. I wanted the world to burn." - He shrugged. - "Now I'm old. I don't have the energy."

"You still try. Emphasis on 'try'. You kind of suck at this, no offense."

Something mean flickered on Hawk Moth's face.

"And here I had hoped you would be less obnoxious with the mask off. Alix describes you as quiet and polite, you know?"

"That's with the mask on."

Mister Kubdel snorted in annoyance.
"Give me your phone, brat."

"There's no point. I seem to be getting a poor reception here," Adrien retorted, gesturing at the fiery khopesh.

Hawk Moth cringed.

"I see you take after your father," he commented. "At least Ladybug kept the wordplay to a minimum."

Adrien blanched.

He had not expected the mention of Alice. It felt like a blow to the gut. He clenched his teeth.

"You don't get to talk about her," he growled. "You don't get to kill her and then talk about her. YOU DON'T!"

Kubdel froze.

He looked pained for a second. His mouth opened and closed. He bit his lower lip. His expression settled on pity.

Adrien went paler still. He would have expected gloating. He would have expected taunting and disdain. But Kubdel was not gloating, was he? He looked sorry.

"Boy," he said. "I know it is an easy assumption, but I did not kill her. I have no idea what happened to her. I was on a dig in Bangladesh when Bella felt Contretemps resurface. It took us two weeks to get to Brazil. Your mother was long gone."

The teenager stared at him. His legs felt weak. His stomach lurched. It was like the ground had been swiped from under his feet.

"W-what?" he murmured.

Kubdel closed his eyes.

"I could hardly tell your father that. His belief that I had information was the only thing keeping me alive. But I was not in Brazil back then and that's easily verifiable. Whatever happened, I had no hand in it."

Adrien felt like he was suffocating.

"You're lying."

"I'd have nothing to gain," Hawk Moth said, quietly walking towards him. "You know I am a murderer. That's not going to change because the list of my victims gets shorter by one name."

He was nearly within arm's reach when his proximity registered. Adrien jumped away, sword at the ready. His enemy tried to lunge but doubled over, clutching his stomach.

So he was hurt.

The boy bit the inside of his cheeks.

"You know what? You should sit down in case you're bleeding internally or something nasty like that," he spat.
Even if Kubdel was, he would still be in better shape than Queen Bee. A murderer indeed.

The tired pleasantness on the man's face faded as pain flooded him. Then, the grimace of pain was replaced by rage. Adrien whirled away just as Kubdel slashed at him. The shining blade left a gash on the side of his throat.

_Damn._

He had to dodge again - _pirouette to the left, don't leave your side exposed_ - then jump away, then hop over a sarcophagus, all of that to stay out of reach of a series of slashes. Everything Kubdel hit fell to pieces. A marble statue crumbled. A wooden cabinet fell apart. A porcelain vase shattered. One by one, every obstacle was destroyed, until there was nothing else Adrien could hide behind. He kept dodging, trying not to trip over the debris of what had to be a priceless collection of antiques. His luck failed him, however: his foot landed on a fragment of metal that slipped on the floor. Adrien fell and landed flat on his back.

He did not get a chance to roll away.

"Enough… pleasantries," Hawk Moth panted, pushing the tip of his weapon against Adrien's chest. He was foaming at the mouth. The hand that held the khopesh was twitching. His skin was sweaty and ghastly pale in the golden glow of the magical blade.

"You might be a sweet kid and you might be my daughter's friend, but there's only so much that can do to protect you. I don't _need_ you alive. Your father just cost me my _family_. I can't go home. I have nothing left but Bella. So I'd be _delighted_ to send you back to Gabriel in tiny, bloody chunks, as payback."

Adrien shrunk away. The tip of the khopesh had not pierced through his clothes yet, but it was pushed hard enough against his flesh to cause a sharp pain.

"Now give me your phone," Hawk Moth snapped.

###

Marinette woke up in a room she did not recognize, with a headache and a queasy stomach. She felt ill, she felt confused, and she felt…

She rolled to the side of the sofa she was resting on and vomited on a beaten up tunisian carpet. She was still heaving when Nathalie Sancoeur appeared with a glass of water, tissues and a vase that still had a flower in it. The teenager grabbed the vase and leaned over it until the nausea receded, then looked up.

"Thanks," she mumbled. She winced and ran a hand over her forehead. "T-thanks."

"Don't exert yourself," miss Sancoeur advised. "You'll need more than half an hour of sleep to recover."

Marinette looked around. They were in an hotel room. The cheap kind, but not the _bad_ kind. The furniture was old and tasteless but it was clean. There were two beds in the room, a small CRT television, a table with two chairs and the sofa Marinette was sitting on. The bathroom door was
opened and Marinette heard mister Agreste's voice coming from it.

"Where… what…"

She blanched.

Mister Kubdel had stabbed Chloé's mom. He had taken Adrien.

"Where's miss Lenoir?" she gasped. "Adrien is-

Miss Sancoeur pressed her hand to Marinette's lips to shut her up. The woman gestured at the bathroom door.

"I don't have it on me," Gabriel was drawling. "It is locked up well away from my home. I will need time to retrieve it." - There was a pause. - "Two hours. Yes. I will make her swear to release my son, do you hear me?" - Something slammed. - "Yes. Two hours. Fine."

Then he swore.

A second later, he walked out of the bathroom, staring at his phone.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," he said. "What is your last memory?"

She cringed.

"I-uh, ah…" - She looked down at her hands and saw that Chat Noir's ring was still there. "I… Miss Lenoir was injured. Mister Kubdel had teleported with Adrien."

"Good," Gabriel mused. He saw the confusion on her face - nothing was good about their situation - so he explained himself. "You combined Ladybug and Chat Noir's powers. Human minds are ill-equipped to process the full consciousness of ancient deities, and it took a toll on you. It's good that you remember the events that preceded the transformation, however. Alice lost a month's worth of memories the one time she had to pull that trick."

"Oh. Oh." - Marinette scowled and scanned their surroundings. - "Where are Tikki and Plagg?"

"Around but immaterial, I assume. They are sealed. They cannot show themselves to me."

The teenager nodded, taking the glass of water Nathalie was pushing into her hands.

"Do you have news? About Adrien? About miss Lenoir?"

"You saved Anne-Laure. She's in the hospital, she'll live. As for Adrien, I just bargained for a two hours delay with mister Kubdel, who expects me to release Bella along with her Miraculous."

He stumbled, caught himself, then made his way to one of the beds, swaying all the while. After sitting on the edge of the mattress, he ran his hands over his face. He looked drugged, or maybe just severely exhausted.

Then again, Marinette did not have much empathy to spare for him. He had caused the mess they were in. Adrien was in danger because of him.

She did pity Nathalie, however. The woman was haggard, with unkempt hair and rumpled clothes. There was not a trace of the expertly applied makeup she wore every day. Her face was pale and her eyes puffy.
Marinette tried to wrap Ladybug's persona around herself.

"Alright. We'll need the Butterfly Miraculous," she exclaimed. "And food for Tikki and Plagg. I assume if we release Bella, Plagg can follow her and lead me to Hawk Moth. What were the instructions he gave you? Did he tell you not to contact me, nor the cops? Any other conditions?"

Mister Agreste sighed and massaged his temples.

"We will not be following his instructions," he announced, getting a golden box out of his pocket. "The one good thing we got out of this mess is that Bella is no longer running wild. She has been caught. Fu will give her to a suitable master who will work hard to undo the corruption she is suffering from. We are not unleashing her upon the world again."

"What choice do we have?" Marinette yelled. She wished her head did not feel like it was made of lead. She wished Tikki could appear to give her advice. "What is going to happen if the butterfly Kwami is not free in two hours."

"Nad… Natha… lie…"-Mister Agreste rubbed his eyes and blinked. -"Nathalie can track Adrien's phone. We've a rough idea of the area he's in. You'll need to get there and…" - He breathed in and squeezed his eyelids shut, then forced them open. - "And… And to figure out where Kubdel is holding him. A… After that, you should have no issues rescuing him. Hawk Moth is powerless."

"Gabriel," his assistant cut in. "Rest. I will wake you up."

"I can hardly rest now," he retorted. "We have to-"

Nathalie stood. She was imposing. Her mannerisms were copied straight from Gabriel's, Marinette mused. When miss Sancoeur stood and towered over you, you shut up.

Mister Agreste shut up. He watched her cross the room to join him, then put her hands on his shoulders.

Marinette turned away, embarrassed. For such a cold, heartless bastard, mister Agreste could sure look smitten.

"There is no point fighting the sleeping pills," Nathalie told the man. "Rest, and in the meantime I will make sure both Kwami are fed. Actually, if you slept, they would be able to show themselves, which would be a vast improvement over our current situation."

There was a short silence, then mister Agreste clicked his tongue, wincing.

"I am an idiot."

He opened the metal box he was still holding and shook it above his palm until the Butterfly Miraculous dropped out. A pink shape dashed out of the box and spiraled around Gabriel, who pinned the brooch to his collar. He looked up at the butterfly Kwami, who had stilled at arm's distance.

She was a scary thing. Marinette had seen Tikki angry, but even furious, Tikki remained adorable. It was uncanny to see a creature with such a similar appearance look so cold. Bella was the same size and the same shape. She was pink. She had delicate little wings. Yet she had none of Tikki's soft warmth, nor of Plagg's mischievousness.

The difference was not in her looks, yet she looked her age.
She stared at mister Agreste with cold rage, face blank, body tense and still. Adrien's father glared back.

"If you hurt Alim," the Kwami said in a soft, melodious voice, "I will destroy you."

Mister Agreste stood, fighting to keep his balance, but ignored the threat. Instead, he turned away, joining Marinette. He made sure to avoid the spot of soiled carpet near the teenager.

Bella watched him move, her eyes drilling holes into him.

"There's three of you," Gabriel said, looking down at Chat Noir's ring, that was still on Marinette's finger. "Tikki. Bella. You are to unseal Plagg. Plagg, Bella, you are to unseal Tikki. Fetch me when it's done," he finished, leaving the hotel room.

###

Chapter End Notes

Can I give a huge thank you to everyone who commented? It's greatly appreciated, though I didn't find the time to answer. Thank you so much!
On a wing and a prayer

Tikki emerged first.

She had been hiding under a cushion next to Marinette. As soon as the door closed on mister Agreste, the Kwami peeked out, then she pushed the cushion away and flew up to stare at the exit. Her antennae were falling limply on the sides of her head. She looked exhausted.

Marinette raised a cupped hand so her Kwami could land, but Tikki did not even notice it. Instead, she jumped in the air when Bella called her name.

"Tikki!" the butterfly Kwami exclaimed. "Tikki, Tikki, Tikki!" - She zipped to her sister and started twirling around her, gleeful. - "Tikki! It's been so long! When was it that we last saw each other? How are you? I'm so happy!"

She was nothing but a spinning blur of pink sparkles. She only stilled when Plagg dropped from the ceiling fan. That got another squeal out of the previously murderous Bella.

"Plagg!"

She dashed to him, but he only gave a tired grunt, floating down to the table.

"The seal," he said.

Bella landed next to him, disappointed.

"You're not usually that businesslike."

"Your chosen kidnapped my chosen," the black cat snapped. "So I'm not that happy to see you."

"Alim is alive?"

Tikki joined them, frowning.

"He is in pretty bad shape. Gabriel was holding him captive to deliver him to the cops or to the Guardian, but someone else found him. From what Plagg tells me, he took a bad beating and needs healing magic."

Bella narrowed her eyes.

"Someone else."

Plagg groaned.

"We'll have plenty of time to explain later. Remove the seal!"

"Someone else," Bella repeated, spinning into place to look at miss Sancoeur, then Tikki, then Marinette. She discarded them as candidates. "Who?"

"Queen Bee," Tikki replied with a sigh. "It's not important now. What matters is fin-"

"Bee. I should have known. Why is it that Waspp's holders always end up murdering mine? None of my butterflies ever killed her heroes! She should have-"
Plagg growled.
"If you start whining about Brutus again, I swear…"

"It was one of the greatest betrayals in history!" Bella protested.

Tikki intervened.
"Bella. Now is not the time."

The sulky expression vanished from the pink Kwami's face. She stared at her sister with wide, angry eyes.

"We need to release the seals," Tikki insisted. "They were put on us when the previous Chat Noir nearly corrupted Plagg, but they are crippling us rather than protecting us right now. We have to work with Gabriel."

"I won't do a single thing he asks me to," Bella retorted. "I haven't forgotten that Cataclysm he threw at Alim. I had to watch my chosen be half-paralyzed, stuck in a wheelchair for three years while I was too weak to help him. I have no intention of helping Gabriel. Not now, not ever."

"LIFT. THAT. SEAL. OFF. ME!" Plagg screamed.

Nathalie jumped out of her bones. Marinette caught herself shrinking away.

It was easy to forget what kind of creatures the Kwami were. It was easy to forget how powerful, how old and how scary they were. They never showed you the godly side of them. They used their magic to unlock lockers while shouting 'tadaa!', they chewed on everything that looked like food, they curled up like plushies next to your pillow. You did not get to see tendrils of dark magic oozing out of their bodies. You did not get to see yellow sparkles crackle in the air around them. You never heard their voice echo in a room and break into a thousand more.

Bella sighed.
"Alright. I'll do it for you. For Tikki, though, we'll have to decide on a price."

Plagg glared at her, eyes narrowed to glowing slits.

His sisters rolled her eyes.
"I haven't lifted a seal in three thousand years. Tikki, you start, and I'll repeat."

The red kwami rubbed her face, wincing.
"Miss Sancoeur, Marinette. Would you mind finding food for us while we do this?" she asked.
"Bella doesn't eat solid food, but liquid honey or any soda will do."

"Not the diet ones!" the butterfly protested.


The teenager and the woman exchanged a look, then left the room. They made their way to the elevator in silence, then Marinette sighed.

"I didn't envision Bella like this," she said.
"What did you envision, then?"

"I… I don't know, actually. Not a five-thousand year old child throwing a tantrum."

"I'd be very wary of said 'child'," Nathalie commented. "She might appear fickle and sulky, but I doubt she would have escaped capture for millennia by being featherbrained. She does not care about those 'seals'. Let us see how she behaves when the topic of Alim Kubdel comes up."

Marinette realized they were standing in front of the elevator, waiting, but that neither of them had called it. She pressed the 'down' button.

"What happened?" she asked. "I… I only got there in time to see him stab miss Lenoir. I… Adrien didn't explain much over the phone."

Miss Sancoeur looked around to make sure they were alone.

"Gabriel found out that Adrien was, well, your partner. It… He was unstable to begin with. But you know that part." - She shook her head. - "I found Gabriel. There is a GPS tracking feature on his phone, so I kept an eye on that."

"You didn't tell us about that!"

"Of course not. I told you before that Gabriel doesn't react well to confrontation. I wanted to get to him first and bring him home, which I did."

Marinette had to lean against the wall at that point. Her legs felt weak. She still frowned.

"If you had taken us with you, we'd have kept Hawk Moth under watch," she pointed out.

The elevator arrived with a ding. The doors opened. Nathalie did not move.

"He was under watch," she said. "He was in perfect health, surrounded by cameras, in a cell he could not escape, waiting to be delivered to that 'Fu' person. I thought we could let everyone rest for a bit before dealing with the rest. I had not counted on Anne-Laure putting a tracker on me."

The teenager pushed herself away from the wall and entered the elevator before the doors could close.

"Alright. Alright, I see your point." - Her stomach lurch. - "About Anne-Laure, she was… I mean, he stabbed her in a bad place, is she…"

"I called the hospital but they wouldn't tell me anything. You, yourself, promised she would live, while you were transformed as both Chat Noir and Ladybug." - She frowned. - "There is someone I could call, however."

Marinette did not even get to ask 'who?': Nathalie's phone was out, and she quickly dialed up a number. Whoever she was calling picked up near instantly.

"Mister Bourgeois," the woman said. "This is Nathalie Sancoeur, mister Agreste's assistant. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time?" - They heard muffled apologies and some mumbling. - "Ah. I believe that's precisely what I'm calling about. I was having lunch with an acquaintance of mine, works for 'Paris Mail', and there's word of paparazzi making their way to the Georges-Pompidou hospital because of some rumors about one of your family members. I just wanted to give you a heads up." - More mumbling. - "That's dreadful! Will she be alright? Oh. That's a relief! Yes. Please tell her I wish her a speedy recovery. Thank you. Yes. Goodbye, mister Bourgeois." - She
hung up. - "Miss Lenoir is perfectly fine. They are keeping her for observation."

Marinette gaped at her.

"What?" Nathalie asked. "He's the mayor of Paris. He would have been called the second someone figured out who Anne-Laure was."

She pushed zero on the elevator's floor numbers board. The doors had long closed on them. It started moving.

"There should be vending machines in the hall," the woman added. "I think I saw some. We'll get some sugar into you before we head upstairs."

The girl nodded. It was hard to be confident and to take charge of the situation when you couldn't stand upright without conscious effort.

They found the vending machines by the entrance, next to a plastic bench nailed to the wall. They sat with six cans of soda, two packs of Mikado biscuits for Tikki and two boxes of cheese crackers for Plagg (camembert was not commonly found in snacks dispensers). Nathalie had Marinette wolf down three cereal bars and one energy drink. The woman went for coffee, two cups.

"We have to hurry," Marinette murmured. "We don't know what Hawk Moth will do to Adrien."

Her companion didn't answer. The woman blew on her coffee instead, trying to get it from charring to drinkable.

The teenager stared down at her energy drink.

"I met mister Kubdel," she said. "Once or twice. He was a bit harsh on his son, but… He seemed… normal. What does mister Agreste say about him?"

"Gabriel is barely able to remain coherent when discussing that man. I don't think you realize the extent of the trauma Hawk Moth inflicted during their... their last 'meeting'. But I talked to Kubdel. I think as long as Adrien complies with the orders he receives, he will be safe."

"But what if we don't comply?"

"Have you ever given in to Hawk Moth?"

Marinette shook her head. She had not. It had nearly happened, when enemies had left her with no other choice, but Chat Noir had stopped her. When he had not been there to do so, she had been lucky enough to see a different solution at the last minute. The two of them had never given in. But Adrien had never been a helpless hostage before.

"That doesn't make any difference," she chided herself. "There's always a better way."

"You know, I have an interesting job," miss Sancoeur told her. "It involves a lot of negotiating, a lot of bargaining. Threats, sometimes. Bribes. Lawyers. But, mostly, it's me and my phone, having to talk people into giving me what I want. What Gabriel wants. I know when to push. I know when to give up."

Marinette studied her face. Nathalie was quiet and composed.

"In other circumstances," Gabriel's assistant continued, "I would tell you 'release the Kwami. She
"But you are not."

"I am not. I cannot be reasonably certain that Kubdel will hold his side of the bargain up. He cannot be trusted. I talked to him, and what I saw was a man who strives to be pleasant, yet finds it difficult to rein his anger in. He is unstable. He has nothing left to lose. He only cares about Bella, and we don't know what he will do once he has her back."

"So we can't negotiate."

"We could. In both cases, we risk losing Adrien. If we do negotiate, however, we could be releasing a dark goddess for nothing."

Marinette took a deep breath. She crumpled her empty can.

"I don't get it! He has a family! He has two children he evilized! Why would he do all of this?"

"You became Ladybug a year ago, something like that, didn't you? You were fourteen, maybe fifteen?"

The young hero nodded.

Nathalie pursed her lips, looking at her coffee cup.

"At that age, he was Hawk Moth. But he did not get a soft, cuddly companion like that red Kwami is to you. He was chosen - targeted - by an evil being who made sure to establish herself as his only friend. He was vulnerable, possibly abused, and she helped him. So he values her above everything. She will always come first. She made sure of that."

Marinette crushed her can until the jagged aluminium hurt her fingers. She threw it into the garbage.

"Let's go get ready," she said, collecting the rest of the cans and the food.

Miss Sancoeur nodded, taking one sip of her first cup of coffee and carrying both to the elevator. On the way up, they discussed tracking Adrien's phone and where he supposedly was. When they walked into the hotel room, Tikki and Bella were sitting on the table, conversing in a language Marinette did not recognize.

"Where did Plagg go?" the teenager wondered.

Both of the Kwami pointed at the ceiling. A few seconds later, through the open window, she heard yelling. Not much of the screaming was intelligible, but she recognized Plagg's voice, and what he was calling mister Agreste was not flattering.

###

"You should probably just go and find a doctor," Adrien commented when mister Kubdel leaned against the vault's door, only to slide down and sit on the floor.

His captor looked about to pass out and, while the teenager had rarely seen real corpses, corpses in
movies looked a good deal healthier than Alix's father.

In comparison, Adrien was feeling peachy. The cut on his throat had dried up, though the crust on it cracked when he moved his head. He was tied up against a statue. His arms were tingling behind his back. He was not comfortable by a long shot, but he did not suffer from life-threatening injuries.

Now, when it came to mister Kubdel's medical situation, the boy wasn't so sure. The man became weaker and weaker as the minutes passed.

Of course, he was stubborn.

"Boy. Kindly be silent," he replied to Adrien's advice.

"Has it occurred to you that if I am concerned, I mean me, now, in my situation… You should probably be?"

Hawk Moth grunted.

"I mean I'm pretty tied up right now," the young hero added, "but if I wasn't, I'd drag you to the hospital myself. Which, in case you forgot, was the plan before you decided to stab someone to escape."

"Boy."

Adrien went silent. He had seen Kubdel go ballistic over being argued with. He had learned his lesson.

Hawk Moth sighed and took his watch out of his pocket. When he opened it, a translucent blue bird spread its wings and hovered above the clock's face. Its light mixed with the golden glow cast by the magical khopesh, coloring the room in shades of yellow and turquoise.

"It's a tracker, isn't it?" Adrien asked.

"Yes."

"For the Firebird."

Kubdel scoffed.

"Firebird is the fancy name four English-speaking heroes chose for themselves. Zharr is a peacock. His ability to burst into flame does not change his species."

"So were you actually looking for the peacock Miraculous, in Brazil?"

"Did they ever tell you that-"

"Curiosity killed the cat? Can't say I ever heard that."

The joke got a pained grunt out of mister Kubdel, who shifted against the door.

Adrien frowned, sincerely worried for his archnemesis.

"Did you need that Miraculous too? I thought you were just after Tikki and Plagg's."

"Tikki and Plagg's are the ones we need. But Bella would be pleased to find all of them. She
misses her siblings."

"Then maybe she shouldn't attack them?"

"Do not talk about a situation you know nothing about, boy."

"So. Admitting you get the Miraculous. What do you want with them? I mean 'absolute power' is all fine, but it does open up a ton of possibilities."

Mister Kubdel started laughing. It hurt him, so he coughed and curled up in pain, but he could not quite stop himself. A minute went by before he calmed down and, after that, he kept wheezing for a while. He coughed. He took a deep breath. He looked up at the ceiling.

"Once upon a time, a human magician of no little skill trapped ideas inside a box," he recounted. "It was quite the feat. It took him and his followers a decade of collecting concepts in the form of energy, in an enchanted device he had invented himself. Even then, the ideas spoke to him through the gold and silver walls of the box. He heard them thunder and scream and beg. He figured out he could not control them in that form, however, so he devised a new spell."

Adrien, who had listened with raised eyebrows at first, quickly found himself frowning, then paling.

Kubdel went on, with a polite smile on his face. His tone was the same he would have used to narrate historical facts to the Louvre's visitors.

"He found a way to transfer the howling, shrieking ideas into gems and metals. It was a grisly process, that all quantic gods remember well. It involved fire and smoke and animal souls, and fancy pieces of jewelry. The magician created three sets of seven artefacts: the Marvels, the Malefices, and the Miracles. And then, he handed the jewels to his servants, to do as they pleased with."

Adrien stared at him with wide eyes.

That sounded horrendous. Could it be true? Wouldn't Plagg have mentioned it?

"That's just… That's…"

"One man turned gods into slaves," Hawk Moth finished. "Some of them grew resigned. Some of them are still howling and begging. So, you ask me what I would do if I had absolute power. I would do the humane thing: I would free Bella. I would free the others, if they so wished. The Miraculous are nothing but prisons."

The teenager swallowed. It felt like a ball of steel was moving down his throat.

Absolute power. The power to create anything. The power to destroy anything.

Anything.

"You want to destroy them," he said. "You want… to destroy... the Miraculous."

"Wouldn't you, if Plagg asked you to?"

"It's Bella? It was Bella, asking you for this, all along?"

"Isn't it her prerogative?"
Adrien spluttered. He did not know enough about magic to measure the consequences of destroying a Miraculous. He had no idea what would happen. Even so, the end did not justify the means.

"Wouldn't it kill her?" he exclaimed. "What would happen to her? Do you even know?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it does!"

Kubdel shook his head, smiling.

"Have you ever been trapped? Really trapped? Forced to do things that you want no part in, day after day after day?" - He raised his hands and drew the shape of a box in the air. - "You find yourself in a cage you cannot escape. And not only are you trapped in that cage, coerced into those things … when you ask for help, people tell your 'but there is no cage!'. You go to them begging and they answer 'you must be imagining things'. That person you call a jailor is taking good care of you'. 'You are a liar!', 'Why would you invent those horrible stories?'. And so you stop pleading for help. You resign yourself. You endure. Any way out sounds like a good way out."

Adrien knew enough of Hawk Moth's timeline for those words to mean more to him than what was being said. You could tell mister Kubdel was younger than Gabriel and Alice. How old had he been when people had refused to help him? How broken had he been when Bella had found him?

Kubdel got back to his feet, leaning against the door.

"Finding someone who not only believes you, but is willing to rescue you? It doesn't happen to everyone. But Bella gave me the weapons to help myself and I fully intend to return the favor."

"At what price?" Adrien protested. "You have been terrorizing the city. You have killed people, you have ruined lives, you have akumatized your own children."

"My children remember nothing of their transformations," Kubdel commented. "As for the rest, I couldn't care less."

He walked to the safe he had locked the candy cane in and opened it to take the artefact out.

Adrien pulled on his restraints.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving," Kubdel replied. "I used your phone. Your father has probably narrowed our location down by this point. If he does release Bella in the next…” - He checked his watch. - "Twenty-five minutes, she will know where to find me. I expect he is more likely to raid this place. I'd rather verify that theory from a distance."

He collected the magical khopesh, then Adrien's phone, which he threw on the debris of a destroyed statue. The teenager looked at it, hopes he didn't know he had crushed.

His enemy came back to him.

"Let's go."
Nathalie kept herself in check until young Marinette Dupain-Cheng - in her Ladybug costume - zipped out of the window to land on the closest roof.

Even after that, Nathalie watched the girl hop from building to building until she was out of sight. Then the woman walked to the table, where Plagg was curled up around his ring, next to the electrum box in which Gabriel had shoved Bella's brooch the instant she had attempted to bargain for Alim Kubdel's release.

Gabriel was sleeping on one of the room's beds, fully clothed, over the covers. He had conceded that he would be useless while hallucinating. Nathalie had promised to wake him up before Ladybug's departure, but lies were an integral part of their relationship, weren't they?

She picked her phone up, checking the battery, then put it down again.

Ladybug would call her as soon as she would be near the location they had pinpointed when tracking the location of Adrien's phone. Nathalie's tablet was plugged to the wall and Plagg was keeping an eye on the map, in case Adrien and Hawk Moth changed location.

That was if they had kept the phone, of course, but Nathalie tried not to be pessimistic.

She looked around for her purse, collected it from the chair it was on, then locked herself into the bathroom with it. The room was small and cramped, but it would do. Nathalie sat on the edge of the bathtub and opened her purse. She got her foundation out, along with her eyeshadow, her face powder, her liner, her mascara, her lipstick, and her golden little box of blush.

Then she started the long, arduous process of drawing her facade on.

Two minutes in, after a first sob and some tears, she had to clean her foundation away to start over. She calmed down. She ordered herself to keep it together. She applied the foundation, again, and tears rolled down her face. At that point, she stood and turned the sink's faucet on to wash her face with clear water. It would help with the makeup disaster. It would help her calm down.

By the time she was done cleaning her face, she was weeping. She had to sit down on the bathtub again, because of how hard it was to breathe. She curled up with her face in her hands, waiting for it to pass.

In time, the sobs receded. She managed to dry her eyes, to wipe her nose, to tidy herself up. Her throat unclenched. So she stared at herself in the mirror, wondering how to best conceal her puffy eyes. She rubbed her cheeks with the tip of her fingers to get rid of errant eyelashes. When she was sure, certain, adamant she had calmed down, she tried to apply foundation again.

Plagg found her sobbing a few minutes later.

He watched her for an instant without commenting.

"Ladybug is calling," he announced when, having wiped her face and collected herself, Nathalie turned to him.

"I'm coming," she said, shoving her makeup into her bag.

Plagg carried her phone to her as soon as she walked out of the bathroom.

"I'm here," Nathalie told Ladybug.
The first thing she heard, rather than words, was the panic in the teenage heroine's voice.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "Can you repeat that?"

"It's a vault," Marinette repeated. "It's a vault in a storage building. And I called Adrien's phone with mine. I mean, as a civilian. So I heard the ringtone, and nobody picked up. I don't think there's anyone in there. Just his phone."

The world went blank. Nathalie distantly registered dropping onto a chair. She couldn't quite hear. She couldn't quite breathe. Her arms were shaking so hard she thought she would drop the phone and a tingling feeling spread from her fingers to her elbows.

"Miss Sancoeur?" Marinette asked. "Are you still here?"

Nathalie swallowed.

"Miss Sancoeur?" the girl called again.

"Give me a second," the woman replied, putting the phone down.

She breathed in, turning to the golden box that contained the Butterfly Miraculous. Plagg landed next to it, frowning, and tried to block Nathalie's hand when she reached for it. Gently but firmly, she pushed him away.

"I wouldn't," he said when she picked the box up.

"Hush," she whispered.

She knew very little about Bella's powers. As a Parisian, however, she knew some general facts, so she knew enough. She opened the box and let the brooch fall into her palm.

Bella emerged, a dozen white butterflies bursting out of her body and landing on the closest surfaces. The Kwami looked at Nathalie, her posture and expression screaming 'distrust'.

"Have two hours gone by?" the creature asked.

"Yes," the human replied, pinning the brooch to her collar.

Bella's eyes widened in panic. Nathalie paid it no mind. She closed her eyes.

"Transform me," she murmured.

###
So many people angry. So many people broken. So many people screaming inside their heads.

Nathalie closed her eyes and covered her ears to shut the darkness out. Instead of touching skin and hair, her fingers - her gloved fingers - hit fabric. But she could not focus on the costume. Despite her best efforts, the waves of emotions wouldn't go away. Rage and pain kept exploding around her like fireworks, from everywhere at once, weaker the farther they came from but still present.

"Miss Sancoeur?" she heard from the phone she had discarded. "Miss Sancoeur? Is everything alright?"

She did not answer. She lowered her head to her knees and tried to wall herself shut.

How was she supposed to locate Adrien and Kubdel like this?

Plagg hopped next to the phone.

"She's looking for another way to track Adrien down," he said, lowering his head to the microphone. "We'll call you back if we find something."

Nathalie heard a swat. She felt Plagg fly closer to her. He was a faint, blurry shape hovering at the edge of her mind. She could tell he was on her left, above the table, unmoving. He didn't register as anything else than 'alive'. His aura was nothing like the ones of the people of Paris. Plagg did not feel human. He barely felt 'present'.

Around them, however. Around them. So many people, so many. She had known Hawk Moth could sense people's emotions, that he used that power to send his Akuma out. From Nathalie's perspective, it had sounded like the ideal skill to solve their predicament. Alim Kubdel would have been furious, considering his current position. Adrien would have been distressed.

Nathalie had not imagined how difficult the task would be.

She was right when she said that she did not feel much. Did people have to wear their broken hearts on their sleeves? How did they make it through their days being that fragile?

And the city kept moving. People kept hurting each other and rage kept bursting out in dark waves, pulsating and growing, and Nathalie could not shut them out. It was overwhelming.

When a pool of darkness appeared right next to her and engulfed her, she threw herself off her chair, crawling on the floor to get away from it.

"Nathalie," she heard, and the pitch black darkness moved closer.

She rolled under the table.

"Nathalie," the voice repeated, in a gentler tone.

She finally recognized it. She blinked, panting, and looked up at Gabriel. He was crouching next to the table, extending a hand. His worry was clear on his face. Nathalie felt him more than she saw him, all rage and bitterness and pain coalescing in a mass of darkness as thick as tar. It receded a little when she took his hand.

"Come here," he murmured, helping her to crawl out from under the table.
He was clumsier than she was, wobbling on his feet, skin covered in sweat. They did not manage to get up. Instead, they found themselves sitting on the floor. Gabriel wrapped his arms around Nathalie, pulling her against him.

Nathalie was torn between two opposing reactions. She wanted to run away from that tangible, suffocating darkness that seeped into her skin. She had known he was damaged, she had known that, but knowing and feeling were two different things entirely. That bottled rage made her ill.

But he was still Gabriel. Pressed against him like she was, Nathalie could smell the familiar scent of his cologne (his cologne, the one that had been created at his request, to please his tastes, because he could afford it and because he hated everything else on the market). She felt comfortable in his arms, even if he was too tall and too full of angles. So she stayed there. She anchored herself. The waves of emotions coming from around them stopped crashing into her: with some calm and focus, she could deflect them, push them away with barely a thought.

In a few minutes, her world stopped shaking and she was left sitting in the middle of constellation of minds.

"Better?" Gabriel asked.

"I. Yes. How long have you been awake?"

"Since your transformation," he replied. "What happened?"

"They abandoned Adrien's phone," Nathalie explained. She felt him tense. "I needed a way to... find him. I don't know if I can, though. There are thousands of people around us."

Plagg landed in front of them.

"Kubdel kept Candy Warper's fetish, he is travelling with a fragment of Bella's magic," he said. "That's not much, but you might be able to sense it from a close enough location. And you know who you are looking for. Maybe Adrien will feel familiar."

Nathalie nodded. She squeezed Gabriel's shoulder and used it to pull herself to her feet, then leaned against the table and composed herself.

She closed her eyes.

Dots. Dots, everywhere around them, of feelings burning low or exploding. Some areas were more crowded, others entirely deserted.

"Give me my tablet," she said. "I need a map of Paris."

Gabriel did as asked, staying next to her to look at the screen as she let the GPS determine the hotel's location. She had no idea where they were - they had dragged miss Dupain-Cheng to the first place they had found, sneaking her into the bedroom they had rented while the hotel's staff was distracted - and at no point had Nathalie considered looking at the street names. She didn't know the area. She rarely ventured in the less savory parts of town.

Finding out where they were did not help her much. She turned to face north, focused on the emotions she was feeling from everywhere, but she could not place them. While she had a general idea of the direction to turn to to 'look' at a specific person, she could not figure out the distance between them.

She frowned and dragged the map up and down, trying to match the clusters of minds with the
more populated areas of Paris. Would she be able to jump from person to person to read their thoughts and see where they were? Hawk Moth had been able to.

Gabriel moved away. She let him, trying not to lose focus.

The distance issue could be solved later. She had to find Adrien first.

Paris was wide, and Hawk Moth could teleport. There was no way to know if he had remained in town, except - obviously - checking every single spark of emotion that she could perceive. She covered her eyes, stopping halfway to stare at her new black gloves and the violet sleeves that reminded her of her favorite work outfit. Then, eyes closed, she started scanning a triangular area.

Gabriel came back to her and placed something on the table. It was a cane that had to go with the costume, considering its colors. She took it. Her powers grew stronger. All of a sudden, the sources of the waves of emotions she perceived became easier to pinpoint. Their numbers grew.

"It will take hours," she muttered.

There was magic in words like that. Whenever you lost your car keys, you only had to stop searching for them for the bloody things to reappear. Something pink flickered to the north. Something black spread and shrunk next to it.

She frowned and gave those oddities her full attention. They were far. She thought she could distinguish rage - violet and black, pulsating - and something she had no words for yet. The feelings were muted, subtle, and she would have missed them without that brief spark of pink.

"I think I have something," she said.

Lightning crackled behind her, filling the room with blinding yellow light. She jumped to her feet and turned to Gabriel.

A grey-haired Chat Noir turned to her, pulling on one of his gloves and flexing clawed fingers.

"Where?" he asked.

##

Perched on the Louvre's roof, Ladybug anxiously stared at her communicator, just like she had been doing for the last fifteen minutes, while waiting for miss Sancoeur's call. The longer she waited, the more terrified she grew.

She was powerless. There was nothing she could do to find Adrien, nothing. She had checked Alix's home, to see if mister Kubdel had risked going back there. As the Louvre was not that far from the apartment, Ladybug had gone there too, to ask the security team to keep an eye out for the historian. If they spotted him on the museum's security feed, they would warn her. Not that she thought they would have to.

She was looking up Kubdel's family - Did he have parents? Siblings? Close friends? - when someone landed next to her.

Marinette nearly jumped out of her bones.
She had not heard anything. She had not noticed anything. Yet a Chat Noir she did not know was crouching next to her.

The young heroine gaped at him. He was much older than Adrien. His hair was grey and messy, with an undercut. His eyes had the same green glow, but his irises were blue. The costume was different too: in one glance, she noticed a belt buckle. His belt 'tail' was longer. He kept his collar unzipped. More importantly, it was not an escrima stick he wore attached to his belt, but a black dagger.

Her eyes went wide.

"Mister Agreste?"

"This way," he told her, racing away and jumping from the edge of the roof.

She followed, attaching her yoyo to her hip before diving into the courtyard.

"Where are we going?" she asked when she caught up with him.

"Straight ahead. Nathalie found a way to track them down, but all she has is a direction, not a distance. So she is tracking me, and she will warn us when we get close."

Ladybug nodded, throwing her yoyo at the chimney of the building directly facing them and zipping to the roof. She quickly realized that Gabriel could not match her speed. He did not have a staff to use as an elevator. He would have to climb and run.

Or teleport, she thought when he vanished from the Louvre's courtyard to reappear next to her. He was holding the cursed letter opener.

He only stayed there for the split-second it took him to find a suitable landing place on the next building and teleport there. Marinette dashed after him.

They were halfway across town when her communicator rang. She paused, startled, as it was not the same ringtone as the one she had obtained when Nathalie had attempted to call the strange, magical number her Miraculous had generated. They had spent a solid twenty minutes setting up their only way to communicate. Marinette had jumped in and out of her transformation several times so Tikki could phase through Nathalie's smartphone and figure out how it worked. The superheroine had called miss Sancoeur's phone a dozen times, until the woman had managed to return the call, and the ringtone they had heard then had been the one Nathalie used on her phone. But who else could be calling? Adrien was being held hostage and 'Chat Noir' was right beside her.

She picked up.

"Ladybug, can you hear me?" Nathalie asked.

"Yes. Are we getting close?"

"I think you are."

The teenager looked around. They were still in a populated area where buildings were squeezed together like sardines. All of them had two floors at least. All of them looked inhabited. Figuring out in which Hawk Moth was hidden would be tedious, not to mention it would be easy for the man to escape if he noticed their presence. So many fire escapes and tiny stores and back alleys.

"Please stay right where you are," miss Sancoeur commanded. "Gabriel, can you hear me?"
Mister Agreste, who had detached his dagger's pommel from the blade and was now using it as a phone, clicked his tongue when he heard his real name. Marinette could hardly blame Nathalie for not calling him 'Chat Noir', however. That would require a long, long, long period of adaptation. Hopefully, they would not have to see that period elapse.

"Yes," the man replied.

Ladybug frowned.

_How_ had this become a conference call?

"Keep heading east," miss Sancoeur instructed.

Gabriel did as asked, wordlessly. On his feet, he was as quick as Chat Noir… As _Adrien's_ Chat Noir, but he lacked the tools that would have allowed him to travel faster. He was also _old_. You could see it in the way he moved, in his winces when he had to take a hard landing or to scale a wall. Still, for a man who had not worn the costume in fifteen years, he was good at this. You could tell he had once been great.

He jumped from roof to roof until he reached the end of the street, then teleported to the other side. From there, he kept vanishing and reappearing farther away, marking a pause between each teleportation.

"Now turn left," Nathalie said when all Ladybug could see of the man was a black dot in the distance.

His assistant had him run in a straight line until he got out of Marinette's line of view altogether. The teenager frowned and waited.

"Stop," Miss Sancoeur ordered. She went silent for a moment, then breathed in. "They are right between the two of you. Can you see each other?"

"No," Ladybug and Gabriel replied in one voice.

"But we have trackers," the young heroine amended. She opened her communicator and looked for Chat Noir's symbol on the map. "Found him."

"I'm coming your way," mister Agreste said.

She started running towards him. Not thirty seconds later, Nathalie gasped a 'stop'.

"Gabriel. You just passed over them," she said. "Go back."

Ladybug scowled. She could see the man, now, but far into the distance. 'Right between the two of you' was a relative notion when one of the two could teleport. She ran faster, using her yoyo to propel herself forward when at all possible. As she did so, she saw him land on a building, that Nathalie flagged as their target with a 'yes, right there'.

Marinette was still two streets away when Gabriel opened the attic window and slipped inside.

###
You did not teleport in a place you could not see, Adrien realized. You just didn't. He wished he had been given a choice in the matter, because the gash on his leg would not heal any time soon.

He was lucky, he supposed. He had reappeared next (through) a coffee table, but only a superficial layer of his skin had tried to occupy the same space as the wooden leg of said table. It was not like it had ripped a hole through a muscle or an artery. It still hurt and it still bled, but Adrien would probably manage to run on that leg if he somehow managed to free himself.

Not that 'somehow managing to free himself' sounded like a likely possibility. At the moment, he was lying on his side on the floor and his hands were bound tighter than the corset Chloé pretended not to wear.

It gave him plenty of time to survey his surroundings, really. One side of them. Mostly the floor of it.

As far as he could tell, he was in a house, maybe an apartment. He could see a window but, from his position down at carpet level, there was not much he could see out of said window, save from an electric cable and a bit of sky. As for the room itself, it was a living room, with old fashioned, dusty sofas arranged around a coffee table. They faced a black CRT television that was covered in just as much dust as the stand it was on. That was the extent of the furniture the room contained.

The walls were lined with cardboard boxes labeled 'books', 'records', 'decoration' and 'books', 'books' and 'books'. The cardboard itself had paled from light exposure. It looked like they had been there for years.

There were paler rectangles on the wallpaper, from pictures that had long been removed. There was a pale circle too, from a clock.

"So this doesn't look like a hideout," Adrien commented, tilting his head up to look at mister Kubdel, who had collapsed on one of the sofas and was staring at his open watch.

"Please stop talking," Hawk Moth murmured.

In daylight, he looked distinctly paler. Whatever injuries Anne-Laure had inflicted, they were draining him. He needed help, and he needed it quickly, but Adrien could not get him to admit that.

"I'm just asking," Adrien continued. "My father has hideouts but they are gloomy places full of magical paraphernalia and secret passages. I just saw, what, your storage area and... a house."

"That would be because I had the one 'hideout', and your father found me in it," Kubdel sighed. "Is there a point to this conversation?"

"No. This is just me being me. I have been called 'inquisitive' before."

"Have you ever heard the term 'obnoxious'?"

"Oh, yes. So. What's this place?"

"This is my mother's house," Kubdel replied.

Adrien rolled onto his back, crushing his hands in the process. Pain flared up his thigh.

"Is it?"

"Yes. She passed away when I was around your age. The place has been empty since then."
The casual conversation was beyond strange, but the teenager preferred it to getting sliced into cubes. There was not much he could do except appeal to mister Kubdel's good side and hope for Ladybug to find him quickly.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He tried not to frown. He could not help but wonder about the story the man had told him. A cage with a jailor who was your caretaker. An abuser no one would believe could hurt you. He stared at the boxes and read the labels one by one, as if they could give him a glimpse of mister Kubdel's past.

He wanted to know what kind of boy Bella had preyed upon. He would never get answers.

"You are not going to find a way to escape in twenty years worth of Harlequin novels," his captor commented.

Adrien sighed.

"Say."

He got no answer. Grimacing, he rolled onto his side again.

"You should call your family," he suggested. "You should, I don't know, say…" - He thought about it. He thought about the difference between having one's father die in a car crash on his way to a business meeting, or last hearing of him as a supervillain on the run, possibly dying of internal injuries. He couldn't figure out which option was the right one. Probably neither. - "Nothing," he finished.

Hawk Moth scoffed.

"I have shattered ribs, Chat Noir," he drawled, eyes still riveted to the peacock hologram. "I'll get care for them as soon as this business with your father is resolved. I have seen worse."

"You look a lot worse than you would with just shattered ribs."

Hawk Moth clasped his watch shut. For a few seconds, he remained silent.

"I was on the receiving end of a Cataclysm," he pointed out. "I spent three years in a wheelchair. I can endure a few kicks to the stomach."

Adrien's eyes went wide.

"I thought Father hit your armor."

"Mostly. He pierced it. But then again, you know how your attack works."

"Err."

Kubdel groaned and stood, doubling over then straightening up. He leaned forward to pick his weapon up, keeping an arm wrapped around his belly. The khopesh started glowing as soon as he touched it.

"Looks like your father does not value your life much," he commented. "And you can hardly say I did not give him plenty of time to release Bella."

Despite his injury, Adrien managed a backward roll, ending up on his knees two steps away from
"What are you doing?" he exclaimed.

"I am going to send your body to your father," Hawk Moth replied, shrugging. "He did not leave me much of a choice."

"You don't have to!" Adrien protested, going for delaying tactics. "You can still use me as a hostage! Maybe if I talk to him..."

"No."

"I can convince him, I-"

"No," Kubdel repeated, with indifference. "Men like Gabriel do not change their minds, not without being forced to." - He tapped the side of Adrien's neck with the tip of his blade. - "Which means I have to kill you so, when I get my hands on Nathalie Sancoeur, a few weeks from now, he won't have the will to refuse my demands. It's nothing personal."

Adrien rolled again, wishing he could free his hands. Hawk Moth followed him without difficulty and grabbed him by the shoulder to keep him still.

Just as he raised his khopesh to strike, the window shattered. Ladybug dropped into the room, rolling on the floor and jumping back to her feet. In a split second, her partner went from 'imminent murder victim' to 'human shield'.

"Let him go, Hawk Moth!" Ladybug shouted, yoyo spinning in front of her.

"Or maybe I'll keep him a little longer," the man retorted, pressing the hooked blade of the khopesh against his hostage's throat.

He couldn't both keep Adrien immobilized and reach for the candy cane, the boy realized. Not with one hand holding the sword and the other pressed to Adrien's chest. The teenager tried to headbutt him and leaned back with his full weight, in vain. He slipped. Kubdel only moved back against the wall and stayed upright.

\textit{Congratulations}, the blond chided himself. Now \textit{Ladybug can't even wrap her yoyo around the two of you.}

She didn't seem worried by that prospect. She gave the quickest peek at Adrien's shoes.

It wasn't the kind of hint her boyfriend could have missed. He looked down and saw something flicker on the black butterfly logo of his right sneaker. Wings. Black wings. The black wings of an Akuma. But if Hawk Moth no longer had his Miraculous, who...

His eyes went wide.

\textit{Yes, yes, yesyesyesYES}, he thought as loud as he could.

The Akuma sank into his shoe and black magic spread from there over his own body.

He did not get to see what he had turned into: the floor exploded and collapsed. Hawk Moth tried to slit his throat, but the magical blade was deflected when it hit metal. Adrien heard a bell jingle around his throat. Grinning, he thrust himself forward, clawing at the ropes around his wrists. He tore them apart easily.
"Down!" Ladybug shouted, having jumped back to the window to fall along with the remains of the floor.

Adrien rolled on a collapsing beam, avoiding the yoyo when she threw it at their nemesis. The boy grabbed the staff attached to his belt and stretched it from one side of the room to the other until it stuck to both walls. In a quick flip, he landed on it and watched his Lady lower mister Kubdel down to the ground floor. The yoyo was wrapped around the man's shoulders, too tightly for him to escape.

"Bye bye, little butterfly," Ladybug murmured.

Adrien chuckled, looking down at his clawed hand and patting his pointed ears.

"I think I still have to give the butterfly back, Bugaboo. Though I'm not sure if I should give it to you or send it back to my father."

Then he heard the beep. It did not come from his hand - he had not used Cataclysm, anyway - but from the ravaged room under them. He looked down.

He had thought Gabriel was using Bella's powers. He had been wrong.

Another Chat Noir was standing under the doorframe that had protected him from the collapsing ceiling. He stepped over plaster debris, joining mister Kubdel in slow, measured steps. He stopped a few feet from the supervillain and picked the magical sword up.

The teenager blanched.

"Dad!"

Gabriel did not react to the call. He merely inspected the khopesh, staring at Kubdel with an expressionless face. Their enemy sneered.

"DAD!" Adrien insisted.

Once again, Gabriel ignored him. A moment passed in tense silence. Then Gabriel dropped the khopesh and climbed up one floor, effortlessly hopping from a broken beam to a cracked square of subfloor, to finally land right next to Adrien on his staff.

Then he grabbed the teenager and pulled him into a crushing hug.

###

Ladybug dropped from her perch, landing among the debris of the room mister Agreste had destroyed. She did not want to disturb the man and his son during a rare and much needed hug, so she figured she could check on Hawk Moth instead.

The man was looking down, jaw clenched. He turned away when she crouched near him.

She did not know what to say to him so she said nothing. The fact that he was Hawk Moth - Alix's father, a man she had met, a man who had seemed so normal - did not register yet. She took the candy cane from him. She pulled on the yoyo string to make sure it was wrapped tight, but not too much. As mister Kubdel looked like death warmed over, she checked for injuries. Broken ribs, at
least, but she did not like the swelling she felt when she touched his abdomen.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed motion, so she looked up. Adrien was shoving his father away. Her partner jumped down from his staff and joined her.

He was wearing a nearly perfect replica of his Chat Noir costume. The shape of his mask was different and silver butterflies were sewed to the sides of his shoes, but the rest of the outfit matched the real one in every way. For her first day as a Miraculous holder, miss Sancoeur had done well.

Ladybug shivered when she remembered how Adrien had transformed into 'Chat Noir' just in time to avoid death. She could still hear the jingling of the bell on his collar.

"He needs an ambulance," Adrien said, looking at mister Kubdel. "He needed it two hours ago, really, but he 'declined' the option."

"There's one on the way," Marinette replied. "I also called the police."

She looked at her partner as she said those words. She had no idea what Hawk Moth would tell the police. He could accuse Gabriel of kidnapping and miss Lenoir of assault (and, really, the two of them would have it coming). Not to mention the whole 'fake death' trick, that would certainly be investigated as a murder.

For all she knew, Adrien would be losing his father over this.

"Good," he replied, jaw clenched. He crouched in front of Hawk Moth. "I feel like you should know your family thinks you are dead. Your 'body' was found hours ago. They are planning your funeral."

Mister Kubdel, who had so far refused to look at them, turned to Gabriel with wide eyes. He composed himself quickly.

"I see," he told Adrien.

"I'm going to ask again if you'd prefer to lose your memories and return to them. It would be easy to pretend your car was stolen and that you were left for dead. You would be confused, but you would have a future."

They could hear sirens into the distance and voices just outside. The collapse of half the building had attracted a crowd.

"No, thank you," Hawk Moth replied. "I'd rather remain myself."

"That was a mercy, Kubdel," mister Agreste snapped.

Their prisoner narrowed his eyes and glared at him, but did not grace that comment with an answer. A moment later, he looked down at Adrien's shoes and the butterflies on them.

He mouthed something Marinette didn't catch. The sirens were getting closer.

Chat Noir's ring beeped again.

Adrien jumped back, startled, raising his hands to count paws that weren't there.

"Oh. Right. Not me. I… I should still go, Ladybug. I don't know how long this…" - He gestured at his costume. - "... will last."
There was a burst of yellow light next to them, and they whirled to find mister Agreste standing there in his socks and crumpled clothes, with Plagg spiraling around him. He had taken the Miraculous off and handed it to Adrien, who took it by reflex. The teenager blinked once, then looked down at the silvery ring in his hand.

"I should definitely make myself scarce," his father declared. "I'll be checking on Nathalie."

His son remained silent, turning the ring between his fingers. Plagg landed on his shoulder.

"So, are you putting it on or what? It's yours!"

Adrien did.

By that point, the ambulances and cop cars had reached the building. Ladybug heard them park. Footsteps hurried to the door.

"Go!" she told her partner, realizing as she turned to him that mister Agreste had already vanished. "I'll deal with the police. Go."

The boy stared at her with obvious guilt, but ended up nodding and scampering, escaping through the window she had shattered earlier.

The front door would not open, so she helped the EMT and the cops break it, then led them to mister Kubdel.

"He's dangerous," she murmured, gesturing at the magical sword laying amid wood and plaster debris. "Be careful. Be careful."

She couldn't quite bring herself to tell them who he was. She could still picture Alix, sitting on her building's roof. She could still hear her classmate's words. 'Prolly went to buy smokes'. Alix who was so set on never being hurt.

Ladybug ran her hands over her face. She let the EMT take care of Kubdel and get him into the ambulance. She deflected the police's questions. It was only when she heard what Hawk Moth was saying to the police that she snapped out of her trance.

"I-I don't remember," he was telling them. "I… was at work, and… I think I was… attacked? There was that voice… No, just… flashes, I suppose? Someone was talking to me, I… I'm sorry. It's all so very foggy."

Ladybug clenched her jaw and stormed to the ambulance, stopping next to the cops who were questioning the supervillain. She took a short breath to compose herself then gave the two policemen her most confident look.

I'm sorry, Alix.

"That man is Hawk Moth," she told them. "His memory is flawless. He is merely trying to get away with what he did. Earlier today, after he was defeated, he managed to escape and to abduct Chat Noir. I arrived just in time to rescue my partner."

She opened her communicator and displayed the muted footage of the scene she had recorded right before her intervention, as mister Agreste was preparing to take the floor out with a Cataclysm. The images were shaky - filming through the window while hanging upside down from the roof had not been simple - but you could still see mister Kubdel holding an enchanted blade and threatening the blond boy he held hostage. Adrien's face was hard to distinguish, but the bloody stain on the
"Is that convincing enough?" she asked.

###

It said a lot that, instead of returning to the mansion after the morning's events, Adrien had gone straight to Nathalie's place. Plagg was too weary for a real transformation, so the Kwami had spent the entire trip perched on Adrien's head, between the pointy black ears of 'Chakuma Noir'. Nathalie kept Adrien transformed until he slipped through the window to her living room, then the black butterfly flew out of his shoes and the costume vanished.

Adrien blinked, memories running away from him like the remnants of a dream. Plagg hissed and whacked his chosen's ear with his tail.

"Aouch," the teenager gasped. "Ow!"

"Focus," Plagg snapped, leaning forward from his spot on the top of Adrien's head.

"Alright, alright!" the boy replied, wincing. "Aouch."

That complaining about the faint stinging of his ear reminded him of much more painful injuries, namely the cut on his throat and the gash on his leg. He cringed and limped to the bathroom, followed by the black butterfly. The Akuma circled him while he was opening every drawer to look for gauze, then it landed on the sink and turned white.

The phone rang.

Adrien hopped back to the living room to pick up.

"You need stitches," Nathalie told him before he could say 'allo'. "Please call your bodyguard and get yourself driven to the hospital."

"Nathalie! Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I am safe, I will come back soon. And do not deflect. Go to the hospital. Now."

"I swear it looks worse than it actually is," the teenager lied. He was not sure stitches were warranted, but the cuts were nasty. That being said, he was not bleeding out and he wanted to sink into the sofa to never move again. He tried to distract Nathalie. "Father is on his way to you."

"I know. Adrien, for the last time..."

"I'm fine," he swore. "I'll wait for you and if you still think I need stitches when you see the cut, then we'll go to the hospital. Is that okay?"

"No, it is not okay!"

Plagg scoffed.

"It's not that bad!" the black cat shouted so Nathalie would hear him. "Let the boy rest for a minute."
"You are not qualified to give medical opinions!" she retorted, at which point Adrien put the receiver down on the table and walked away.

They kept bickering.

He returned to the bathroom and cleaned his wounds, covering them with band aids, then dragged himself to the sofa and laid down. He didn't think he would manage to fall asleep - not after that day, not with his father risking arrest, not with miss Lenoir in the hospital, not after everything with Hawk Moth - but he went out like a light.

He halfway woke a few times. A phone buzzed. He heard voices in the background. The wound on his leg stang all of a sudden, but Nathalie told him to go back to sleep in a whisper. Someone covered him with blankets. Someone started playing with his hair, pushing them to one side then to the other, brushing them away from his forehead.

He slept through it.

When he finally woke, his head was resting on Nathalie's knees. Her hand was pressed to his cheek. She had fallen asleep sitting next to him, with her head tilted to the side. As she looked exhausted, he tried not to move.

Of course, she did not get to rest for long. Not five minutes later, her phone rang. Adrien had to move when her eyes snapped open, and sighed when she ran across the room to get her charging phone from the counter. He sighed again when he realized she was getting a call from the company's HR department, about her recent termination.

She snorted after hanging up.

"I have to deal with this," she announced, as if it was entirely normal for her to deal with paperwork in their situation. "How is your leg?"

Adrien looked down to discover he was wearing blue flannel pajamas with floral patterns.

"It stings a little. Are we going to the hospital?"

"Plagg assures me, as 'a god of destruction with claws and fangs who knows better than puny human doctors', that your wounds are healing properly. Your days as a swimsuit model, however, are a thing of the past"

The teenager faked a grin at that, perking up.

"Now that's good news. I'm more of a pants guy anyway."

"Please go take a shower and make sure to keep the bandages dry," she muttered. "I'll go and buy you some fresh clothes."

"I… Alright, thank you." - He took two steps towards the bathroom then stopped. - "Nathalie, did you see my father?"

"He'll drop by later," she replied, collecting her purse and coat. "I ordered him to rest before anything else."

Adrien acquiesced and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the tub and mulled over the situation until Plagg phased through the window to join him.
"There is a pizzeria at the end of the street!" he informed his chosen. "You know what? Gorgonzola is not that bad after all."

"There is a cheese you don't like?"

"Yes. That cheese. Or so I thought."

Adrien chuckled, appreciating the Kwami's efforts to bring some levity to their day.

"I really should shower," he ended up saying, looking at his bloodstained hands.

It was clear that Nathalie had attempted to clean him up. You could see smeared, diluted blood in places and his hands were mostly clean, but there was only so much she could do with whatever she had used. His nails, instead of being perfectly manicured, were crusty with blood.

He turned the faucet on and washed his hands first, then undressed and slipped into the bathtub, where he showered sitting, over and over again. In the end, he just let the water run over his chest, leaned back, and let the bathtub fill.

"What happened to Bella?" he asked, raising his hand to stare at his ring.

"Back in her brooch," Plagg replied. "For a little while."

Adrien chewed the inside of his cheeks. He mulled over that.

"Plagg," he asked after a moment. "Do you remember being in the box?"

"What box?"

"The magician's box."

The Kwami's eyes went wide. He stared at his chosen in silence for a minute or so.

"Not really," he replied. "It was a long time ago."

"And being bound to the ring?"

"If I wasn't given cheese, I do not remember," Plagg commented, yawning. "Are you going to splash around forever? All of that water is making me nervous."

Adrien sighed and dropped the topic. He would ask again later. Maybe he would go to Tikki instead.

"Warm water is nice," he joked, turning the shower pommel towards his horrified Kwami, who dashed from one side of the room to the other to avoid getting wet.

"You brat!"

The boy laughed.

In the end, he had to clean up after himself, having doused everything in water. He found clothes waiting just outside the door when he tried to leave, ten minutes later, and spend five minutes more changing from Nathalie's pyjamas to a pair of jeans and a grey t-shirt.

He returned to the living room to find his father sitting at the table, with Nathalie by his side. They both stood. Adrien tensed.
Gabriel looked hesitant, more hesitant than his son had ever seen him. He was fidgeting, hiding his hands behind his back and turning his tongue in his mouth.

"Adrien," he said, voice trembling with emotion.

He immediately swallowed and wet his lips, his nerves getting the better of him. As for Nathalie, she was perfectly composed. Her shoulders were squared, her spine straight, her chin raised. She was observing Gabriel with a harsh expression, and you could see him squirm under her scrutiny.

The man still tried to keep his facade up, but he had unravelled. He was transparent.

"I feel like we should discuss the recent events," he continued, nearly managing a businesslike tone. "And my actions over the last few days. I am aware that the way I-

Adrien glared at him and had the pleasure to see him lose his nerve. His father went silent. He sucked his lower lip in.

"That is, if you accept to," he said.

The teenager stared at him for a moment more. He let the silence grow heavy. He watched Gabriel shatter.

Then, he spoke.

"I'm not going to shut you out," he told his father. "That's what you do. If you want to talk to me, I will listen. In time. But I'm done bending over backwards to fix this family. I'm done being the only one who tries."

And, on that, he grabbed his phone and jacket and walked out of the apartment.

###
Nathalie kept her eyes on Gabriel as the door closed on Adrien. She was worried about the boy, yes, but she did not want to miss his father's reaction. There was a lot to be learned from it and it would help her decide how to handle Gabriel. She had a long, grueling list of expectations for his future behavior. She had not discussed it so far and would refrain from divulging its points for a time. She wanted to see if Gabriel could figure them out on his own. She hoped he would. He was an intelligent man. There was a process to follow to get his life back on track, and she had no doubt he could plan every step of it through logic and reflexion. What she doubted was not his ability to plan, however. It was his sanity.

If it turned out he was too far gone to figure things out on his own, she would guide him. As things were, she believed his progress would be more meaningful if he moved forward of his own volition.

He stared at the closed door for a moment then sucked his lips in.

"That was very much deserved," he commented, voice barely above a murmur.

"And long overdue," Nathalie added, noncommittal.

He breathed in and sighed. For a handful of seconds, he stared into the distance, then he pulled his facade up. You could see it happen: it washed over him like a wave, his every muscle tensing, his weariness fading away as he straightened his back and squared his shoulders.

When he turned to her, he had regained all of his composure.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. But he needed those walls. He needed them as much as she needed hers. It didn't mean anything.

"What will you tell him when he comes back?" she asked.

*That* was the important question.

"I believe my actions went well past what words could fix," he replied. "Apologies are in order, of course, but *talking* to him is not what I should focus on."

Nathalie nodded. Good.

She fetched her tablet and sat down at the dinner table, checking the myriad of emails Gabriel's HR staff had sent her. None of them were pleasant. She filed the ones that pertained to documents to fill in one folder and deleted the threatening ones, unless they mentioned a lawyer.

Gabriel did not take the liberty to sit. He turned to the window and looked outside, but did not advance farther in the apartment to get a better view.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, staring at the clouds. "Have you recovered from the transformation?"

"I'll be fine," she replied. "Though I'd be happy never to have to repeat the experience. I can't fathom how someone would enjoy having such powers. They are rather unpleasant."

That was the understatement of the century. Whenever Nathalie closed her eyes, she expected to
see bursts of darkness explode around her.

"I don't think you'll ever have to use them again," her companion commented. "I will question Bella about Alice and, once that's dealt with, I will lock her up until Fu can collect her. I'm sure he will pair her with someone better suited to her brand of magic."

Nathalie froze.

She nearly told him how she had planned to extract the information from the Butterfly Kwami, but now was not the time. She needed him relaxed and malleable, not exhausted and withdrawn.

"It can wait, can't it?" she said, scrolling through her emails.

"Of course. I planned to wait for the dust to settle. Kubdel is still in surgery. I fully expect cops to bang on my door the moment he wakes and starts talking."

"In which case you'll throw lawyers at them," Nathalie muttered, squinting at a particularly nasty message from the head of HR.

Gabriel saw the look on her face and frowned.

"Is something wrong?"

She took a deep breath.

"I might have contacted quite a few people while we were looking for you," she explained. "All the while implying I was still your employee. Vanessa from HR is threatening legal action."

He rolled his eyes.

"I'll get her off your back."

"That would be appreciated."

Gabriel nodded and patted his pockets to find his phone, then retreated to the kitchen to give a single call. It did not last more than three minutes. While Nathalie could not make out the exact words he was using through the closed door, she could tell his tone was glacial.

She shook her head.

"They will not bother you again," he told her when he walked out of the kitchen.

He joined her, sitting not next to her but at the closest end of the table. He bridged his hands and stared at his nails. Then he met her eyes.

"I would like to apologize for the way I ended things," he told her, in the practiced tones of a businessman who had appeased divas and journalists for two decades. "It was callous and insulting. You deserved better."

Nathalie breathed in, turning back to her tablet and purposely launching the minesweeper app. She was not up for that conversation.

"It is over and done, Gabriel. Not to mention hardly relevant at this point."

"I know. I merely wanted to let you know it does not reflect my actual… There was a logic to that reaction, but I swear to god I look back at that moment and cannot figure out why my line of
thinking made so much sense."

She slammed her palms on the table.

"I get it. I should have seen Adrien was Chat Noir. I failed to protect him. I get it! Would you drop the topic already?"

He blinked and frowned.

"No," he protested. "No. It wasn't that."

It was Nathalie's turn to look confused. Her companion shook his head.

"Let's be clear. I was a teenage superhero. I managed to hide it from the world for much longer than Adrien. My own parents never realized. I know all the tricks. I can hardly harbor hard feelings towards the people who would fall for them. Now, I did fire you because you had not done your job, but that's not why I pushed you away."

Only Gabriel could consider the two issues as distinct.

She winced.

"Then what?"

"He was behind you. I thought it was yet another symptom that you had no inclination to take care of a child, like the scarf, like every single time you told me you were not suited for it."

So he had been keeping score. Of course. Nathalie lowered her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her tongue moved and tripped against the roof of her mouth. She could not get a single word out. She could have screamed. As a matter of fact, her thoughts had turned to an endless shriek.

She had to remove her glasses when a tear dropped on one of her lenses, then to fight not to twist their frame and break it.

Gabriel swallowed.

"I thought I couldn't now allow myself to… Obviously, that reasoning can only be described as insane. By all means, you have been a much better parent to Adrien than I ever was. You still are. I don't know what crossed my mind."

She threw her tablet at his face. He caught it, and they found themselves awkwardly staring at each other, with the device between them. On its screen, bombs were exploding on the minesweeper grid. A moment went by. Gabriel cleared his throat and put the tablet on the table.

"On that note," he murmured, "we need to discuss Adrien."

###

Adrien walked out of Nathalie's building, stormed to the end of the street, then stopped and sat on a bench to check his buzzing phone.

He pulled it out of his pocket, scrolled through the notifications, then frowned. The last time he
had seen the device, it was when Kubdel had abandoned it in his vault, before teleporting away. How the phone had appeared in Nathalie's apartment was a mystery. Well, a fairly transparent mystery. Gabriel wouldn't have left evidence of Adrien's identity laying around, and breaking into a vault had to be simple enough for him.

Adrien sighed and pushed the thought away, focusing on the phone instead. He had slept for a while. Apparently, the entire population of Paris had tried to get in touch with him during that time.

He had never received so many messages in four hours. Well, he had, that time his personal number had been leaked over the internet, but Nathalie had gotten him a new phone plan in less than twenty minutes. Not to mention an endless stream of 'I LUV YOU' and date invitations had been easier on his nerves than what his inbox contained at the moment.

Ten separate classmates had informed him that mister Kubdel was not, as a matter of fact, dead. 'Hes in surgery,' Nino had sent at some point during chemistry class. 'We don't know what happened with the car crash. Sabrina called her dad but he won't say'.

All of the messages had been in that vein, though. No one was going crazy over Hawk Moth's capture. Adrien was surprised the news weren't out yet. Surely the police was planning to release a statement. Maybe they were waiting for mister Kubdel to be out of surgery, to talk to him first. Maybe they wanted proof before revealing the man's identity.

According to Marinette, the cops had footage of the last minutes before her intervention, where mister Kubdel was shown attacking him ('Don't worry, you can't tell it's you', Marinette had insisted in her email). That being said, it did not prove he was Hawk Moth. For that, they would have needed to film the man's transformation. Right now, all the cops had to work with was the word of anonymous children and circumstantial evidence.

Kubdel would go away for a time - attempted murder caught on film would ensure that - but he would likely get away with his crimes as a supervillain.

And then there was the distinct possibility that he would share a cell with Gabriel.

He winced at that thought.

"So where are we going?" Plagg asked.

There was only one answer to that. He scrolled through his contacts to find Marinette's number and called her. There was a fair chance she would be transformed and dealing with the fallback of the morning's events, in which case Chat Noir would be joining her, but he prefered checking first.

She answered near instantly.

"Adrien? Are you okay?" she exclaimed. She sounded sick with worry.

"I'm f-fine!" he replied with a pang of guilt. "I just… I kind of passed out as soon as I sat down."

"Passed out?"

"Wrong choice of words," Plagg commented.
"I mean I fell asleep!" Adrien explained, frantic. "As soon as I arrived at Nathalie's. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

He heard her take a deep breath.

"Alright. I was just wondering why you weren't answering my emails, that's all."

"I wanted to join you, actually. I thought you'd be… I don't know, with the cops, or watching the hospit… I should go check on Anne-Laure."

"I had Sabrina's father ask how she was, actually, and she is doing fine. The doctors wouldn't believe she had been stabbed."

Adrien sighed, relieved.

"Good. Good. Then I'll visit later." - He was not in the mood for another confrontation. - "Where are you? Did you go back to school?"

"I'm home," she mumbled, sounding more than a little ashamed. "I kind of ran away. Told the cops I was about to untransform and fled. I've been hiding in my room. I told my mom I was not feeling well."

"Can I drop by?"

"Of course you c-"

"I'm on my way!" Adrien said, jumping to his feet to find a good place to transform.

Not fifteen minutes later, he landed on Marinette's balcony. He grimaced, because his leg wound had not vanished during his transformation, and it stung. He also chuckled, remembering all of a sudden how many times he had landed, jumped over or otherwise raced over this very same balcony without ever realizing it was his lady's home. How many times had he seen Marinette leaning over the railing while he was wandering the roofs?

When all of the drama would be over with, he would make sure to surprise her with flowers and chocolates under the moonlight. Or something equally romantic but less cliché.

Something sweet.

He went to knock on her trapdoor. She opened it and gestured for him to come in. He dropped down into her bedroom, on her bed. With his shoes.

That was not a very practical location for a trapdoor.

"I'm glad to see you!" she said, hugging him.

Adrien wrapped his arms around her and squeezed back, though the whole 'crouching on the bed with his shoes on' was definitely playing tricks with both his mind and his injured leg.

He grumbled, not willing to let go, but too uncomfortable to stay like that for long.

"A second," he said, pulling away. "Just a second."

He stretched himself, trying to get his feet out of the bed - to appease his conscience - and to stretch his legs - to appease the stinging of his thigh. He had never quite realized how tall he was before attempting to fit in a normal person's bed (and at a diagonal, at that). He gave up and
untransformed so he could make his life easier by removing his shoes.

"Better," he mumbled, placing them on the stairs that led down into Marinette's room.

He turned at her to find her staring at him with wide eyes.

He blinked.

"Oh god," she exclaimed, leaning closer to look at the gauze taped to his throat. "Did you get stitches? What did the doctor say?"

She frowned and tried to look at his leg, but his bandage was covered by his pants and there was no way to get to the wound.

"We just cleaned the cut," he replied. "Plagg said it was healing well."

"You didn't see a doctor?" she exclaimed.

Tikki appear out of nowhere and dashed to them, stopping next to him.

"Plagg said what?" the Kwami asked, irate.

Her brother, who had dropped on a cushion once the transformation had been lifted, hopped closer to them.

"I said it was healing well."

Obviously, that answer did not please Tikki.

"You know nothing about wounds!" she ranted. "You're the prime reason why Gabriel is covered in scars! The boy needed stitches! How did Nathalie agree to this? I thought she was a sensible woman!"

Plagg rolled his eyes.

"It's a flesh wound."

Tikki pulled the gauze away from Adrien's throat, much to the teenager's displeasure. He murmured a 'ouch', because he did not want to attract too much attention on himself when Tikki was angry.

"It will leave a big scar!" she snapped. "With stitches, it would have been barely noticeable!"

"You know what?" Plagg retorted. "If it had been Waspp, she would just have covered it all in vinegar and honey and you would have been all 'Why, thank you, Waspp! Good job, Waspp!'. You are just grumpy because I didn't ask you."

"It would have been a good job two-thousand years ago! Even Waspp admitted the merits of modern surgery."

"It's a fleeeeeshh wwwouuuuund," Plagg insisted.

"I-I swear I'm fine," Adrien intervened, only to be ignored.

"It is a deep gash inflicted by a magical weapon! You are just-"
The black cat smirked.

"So are you going to yell at me until the cookie-parents hear you and come check what's going on?"

Tikki slammed her mouth shut and glowered. Her brother rolled onto his back on the bed, smug.

"It's nothing, really," Adrien said, pressing the bandage against in skin in the hope that the tape would stick.

He could live with a scar. He was not worried at all. Marinette, however, was giving him a scowling look of horrified concern. Marinette's face could display a lot of expressions at the same time. He winced.

"And it's not like 'Adrien Agreste, face of the Gabriel brand' could show up at the hospital with the same wounds as Chat Noir without the whole world knowing in five minutes tops, right?"

"See?" Plagg told Tikki. "I was 'exercising caution'."

His sister looked about to explode.

Marinette stared at her hands, dejected. Her shoulders fell. She sighed.

"Right."

"Come on," he said. "It's just a tiny cut. I don't even feel it." - That got him a glare. - "Much," he amended. "Less than getting a full body wax for the summer swimwear collection."

His partner opened her mouth and stared at him, aghast. He grinned and changed the subject.

"Is that a cat pillow I spy, princess?" he joked, lying down on his back and reaching up to poke the nose of the the huge cat pillow that decorated the head of her bed. "You know, I should be vexed. I would have thought you'd have chosen a black one."

"I-I only need one black cat in my life, kitty," she retorted, poking his nose.

She was jittery. It surprised him, because her nervousness around him had mostly vanished lately. Had he done something intimidating?

Plagg yawned.

"Don't worry. I'm here to stay."

The two teenagers froze. They had forgotten the Kwami's presence. Marinette turned to him, stunned. As for Adrien, his eyes went wide. He blinked. Then a snort escaped him, then another, and soon he found himself choking with laughter. It got worse when Marinette turned to him with the same shocked look she had given Plagg. At that point, Adrien lost it and guffawed.

His girlfriend snapped out of her trance and pounced on him, flattening both hands on his mouth.

"My parents will hear!" she whispered.

Adrien tried to calm himself, nodded, but immediately started giggling again. She groaned and exhaled through her nose, rolling her eyes. It was adorable and (unfortunately) hilarious.

It took a few minutes for Adrien to recover. By the time he finally stopped chuckling, Marinette
was no longer nervous, just mildly annoyed. She rolled on her back and stared at the ceiling, grumbling.

Adrien studied Marinette's profile, finding himself blushing as he pictured her with the mask on, then off (what an idiot he had been, really). He smiled. He, who had no difficulties wrapping his arms around her as Chat Noir, found himself too nervous to even reach for her.

He watched her expression morph from grumpiness to resignation.

"We are going to have to get out and deal with everything," she declared, looking at the trapdoor. "The police will want to hear from us."

Adrien's own face grew dark. He nodded.

"Did they even announce his arrest?" she muttered, sitting up.

She ran her hand on the shelves above her bed until she found her phone. When she turned it on, it was already playing a live feed of a news channel.

"There wasn't much so far," Adrien told her.

On the screen, a journalist was commenting on an art show somewhere in Reims. It was in no way related to the Miraculous. It wasn't even about Egyptian art.

Marinette sighed and laid down again.

"If they start talking about Hawk Moth, we'll go, alright?"

"Alright," Adrien replied.

He knew procrastinating was wrong, especially in those circumstances, but he was drained. I couldn't summon the energy to drag himself out of the cocoon that was Marinette's bedroom. He wanted peace.

They listened to the reporter praise a modern painter he was interviewing, then learned about a rabbit-themed coffee shop in Dijon, where the customers could meet and pet adoptable bunnies.

"That sounds like the cutest terrible idea ever," Marinette commented.

"It totally does. They're adorable, though," Adrien replied. But he still wrinkled his nose. He was allergic to rabbits too.

Video wouldn't hurt, though, so he squeezed closer to Marinette to get a closer look at her phone screen. She let him, so he blushed and wrapped an arm around her belly. Then they both froze. They had no reason to: Chat Noir had embraced, hugged and carried Ladybug plenty of times. But, as Adrien and Marinette, they could be ditzy around each other. Sometimes. A little.

Their fingers could brush while grabbing a game controller and they would jump away in a panic.

Adrien smiled at that memory and relaxed. He moved closer to Marinette, burying his nose against her shoulder.

As a homeschooled, overly isolated boy of fifteen, he had not gotten much practice at cuddling with one's girlfriend. It looked sweet in the movies. It also looked easy, which had given him highly inaccurate expectations of how the whole thing would go. He had planned on snuggling, on pretending not to sniff Marinette's scent (a mix of lavender, fresh pastry and artificial strawberry
scent), and maybe on kissing her shoulder.

A hair stabbed him in the eye. Her pigtail tickled his nose. As if that wasn't bad already, he was laying on one arm he had no idea what to do with.

He endured. His arm quickly fell asleep but he kept enduring. He *liked* holding her close and, from her drawn, exhausted expression, she needed him to.

Maybe if they stayed there, they could run away from the world forever.

The news were replaced by advertisements, which they stared at. After the advertisements, the TV station started airing a new episode of the Young and the Restless. It was *much* harder to stare at that, or to give it the slightest kind of focus.

Adrien saw Marinette's thoughts drift towards darkness again. He tried to hold her a little tighter, but it was no use.

"I will have to tell the police what your father did," she told him, still looking at the phone she was holding above their heads. "Would you mind if I did?"

"No," he murmured. It was only partly a lie. They had to do the right thing, or the closest thing to the right thing they could manage. You didn't cover for criminals, no matter what their reasons were. "No. My father made his own choices and if there are consequences, he will have to deal with them."

Plagg and Tikki, who had made themselves scarce for the last twenty minutes, resurfaced. The red Kwami perched herself on Marinette's shelves while Plagg dropped on the corner of the bed. They listened intently.

"But what about you?" Marinette asked. "What would you do if the police arrests him?"

"I'm sure it will all work out," he commented. "Knowing my father, he prepared for that. Actually, he prepared for the possibility of being killed by Hawk Moth, so I'm *pretty* sure he had something planned for me."

His partner sighed and sat up. He followed suit.

Plagg jumped from the mattress to Adrien's knees.

"*If* it happens, I'll be there," he promised. "We'll go to Nathalie's. I like Nathalie."

Adrien gave him a faint smile.

"I noticed that. Thank you, Plagg."

Tikki flew down from the shelves and landed on his shoulder.

"We'll all be there," she said, nuzzling against his cheek. "Whatever happens."

"Thank you, Tikki," Adrien said, cupping his hands around her.

She was trying to hide her worry behind determination, but was a poor liar. As Plagg's chosen, the boy had a lot of practice reading Kwami expressions and could see through Tikki clear as day. He put her down next to her brother, smiling to her. Then Marinette nearly choked him with a surprise bear hug.
A second later, they heard Nadja Chamack's voice.

They pulled away from each other. Marinette grabbed her phone, that she had dropped on the bed. The top of the screen was covered in a 'breaking news' banner. Nadja Chamack was standing in the park, in front of that sculpture of them. There was a podium under it and reporters were packed next to it. Flagpoles had been installed on each side of the statue, one with the french flag and the other with the parisian flag.

"- all curious to know why the mayor called this impromptu press conference," Nadja was saying. "It should start any moment n… And here is mister Bourgeois arriving!" she exclaimed, turning away from the camera.

The cameraman moved away and filmed Chloé's father as he walked from the park's entrance to the podium near the statue. He waved at the crowd. He adjusted the microphone. It took a minute for the conference to start.

Marinette and Adrien held their breaths.

Mister Bourgeois started to talk.

"Citizens of Paris!" he said, with a blinding smile. "Today is a wonderful day for our city and our country! I have great news! " - He marked a pause and stepped to the side to gesture at the statue. - "Thanks to the relentless efforts and exceptional courage of our heroes, I have the utmost pleasure of announcing that Hawk Moth's reign of terror is over!"

As soon as he closed his mouth, questions started pouring in. Every reporter present had something to say and said it very fast and very loudly. Mister Bourgeois waited for them to settle down.

"As I was saying, Hawk Moth was arrested this morning, thank to Ladybug and Chat Noir. It was a difficult battle that left both Hawk Moth and Chat Noir injured, so I'm taking the liberty of announcing the news despite our valiant heroes' absence. They deserve time to rest and to recover from their injuries."

"How considerate of him," Adrien joked.

Once again, the journalists started talking. Mister Bourgeois reminded them that he would answer all of their questions after the conference.

"Now," the mayor continued. "Hawk Moth's identity will be revealed soon, but our priority is to ensure the security of his family, who was unaware of his criminal activities. The police is concerned about retaliation against his wife, children and relatives, though I want to make it clear they were uninvolved. They were questioned and investigated already. Like the rest of the city, they are the innocent victims of one man's madness."

Adrien felt ill. So Alix knew, now. And the rest of the world would know soon. His friend's life was ruined and his conscience kept murmuring 'this is your fault'.

If he had stopped Gabriel, maybe they would have had better options. Maybe they could have convinced mister Kubdel of accepting magical amnesia. But would it have fixed anything? The man was insane. Adrien could still picture the look in his eyes when Alim had been about to murder him. The man had no regard for human life. Memory loss wouldn't have taught him to care.

Lost in thought, Adrien missed a reporter's question. Mister Bourgeois answered that one, of course.
"- narrow escape," the mayor was saying. "Hawk Moth was determined and would have stopped at nothing. Actually, when he realized that his identity had been discovered, he went as far as faking his death to avoid being captured. He was undoubtedly planning to continue attacking the city while on the run but, thankfully, he was caught in a matter of days."

"WHAT?" Marinette and Adrien exclaimed.

The young girl spluttered. She had paled.

"That's not… I never said… I…"

"Why would he…" Adrien murmured.

"I told them I would explain everything later! All they knew was that he had been caught and that you were injured. I never said he had faked his death!"

Plagg landed next to the phone.

"He's controlling the narrative," he said. "You didn't get the story out, so he invented one that he could use."

"He has nothing to do with this!" Adrien snapped.

Then he shut up because that screaming was going to attract the attention of Marinette's parents.

"My father probably bribed him," he murmured, clenching his jaw.

He had not been happy to think of Gabriel being arrested, but thinking about him getting away with what he had done was worse. He grabbed his phone and called his father, glaring at the picture of André Bourgeois, who was still talking.

"Adrien?" Gabriel answered, sounding surprised.

"What have you done?" his son asked, ignoring Plagg when he hesitantly called his name. "How much did you pay him?"

"I…" - His father's voice grew distant. - "I'm sorry," he told someone else. "There seems to be some kind of problem. What are you talking about, Adrien?"

Plagg nudged the teenager's knee, but his chosen was fully focused on his conversation.

"I'm talking about the mayor's press conference! So what did you promise him? Money? Something else?"

"Wh… Listen, I'm at… in the middle of a meeting," Gabriel replied. You could hear footsteps and a door closing in the background. "I had no idea there was a press conference."

"How convenient he's saying exactly what he should to get you off the hook for that kidnapping thing, then!"

There was a silence. Plagg swatted Adrien's knee.

"Boy!"

The blond looked down. His Kwami had grown irritated and was scowling at him.
Gabriel resumed talking.

"I have gotten out of my way to avoid André Bourgeois for the last fifteen years," he stated. "I haven't bribed him, I haven't threatened him, as a matter of fact I haven't talked to him in nearly six months. He's much more likely to be covering for himself."

"He has nothing to cover!" the boy retorted.

Tikki patted his knee to get his attention.

"He has someone," she softly pointed out.

###
Chat Noir landed on Chloé’s balcony and winced when the scab on his leg wound split open under his costume. Everyone was fussing over the cut on his throat, but the scrape on his leg was going to be the annoying injury. It was not deep, but it was large and irregular. It was much more likely to get infected and would take ages to heal. Also, it stung whenever he moved.

He shook his head. He had more important things to worry about than little scratches.

Making sure to take loud steps so Chloé could hear him coming, he walked to her room’s door, looked away and tapped the glass with the tip of his claws. Not a second later, he heard a pleased squeal. His friend ran to the door, opened it, and kept bouncing into place.

"Chat Noir! You did it! Ladybug and you won! You are amazing!"

She was looking at him with the same kind of childish adoration she usually reserved for Ladybug. She was so clearly happy to see him that he forced himself not to look dejected, no matter how he was actually feeling. He grinned.

"Seems like we did," he replied. "Though there isn't much of a story."

She got her phone out and wrapped an arm around his shoulders to take a selfie before he got a chance to react.

"Are you kidding me?" she replied, right after the flash, with her phone still in the air. He saw her open the facebook app. "The story is insane. Daddy told me Hawk Moth faked his own death and that you were critically inj-"

She stopped and moved away, inspecting him from head to toe. She spotted the layer of gauze that his collar almost perfectly concealed.

"YOU ARE CRITICALLY INJURED!"

"I'm not I'm not I'm not!" he exclaimed, panicking. "It's a flesh wound! It looked worse than it was!"

She gave him a death glare, her blue eyes digging into his soul. Despite her best efforts to camouflage them under a powder box-worth of violet eyeshadow, Chloé’s eyes had always been striking.

She crossed her arms and stomped her foot.

"Are you sure."

It was not a question.

"I'm sure."

"Daddy said you were really hurt."

"I was just bleeding a lot. That's all! It's, like, this little gash, and it's already closed up."

"Will it leave a scar? You can't have a scar! It would get you down from a seven to a five."
"I'm a sev…" Chat tried to catch himself before they could follow that line of conversation, but it was too late.

"Yes, you are a seven. See, tens would be Adrien Agreste, or Ladybug. XY would be a nine."

"Chloé…"

"And Alec Cataldi would be a eight…"

"Chloé! I was here for something important!"

"This IS important!"

"Something important- er! Clo, I need to talk to your father, but his staff won't tell me where he is."

She raised her eyebrows in confusion.

"A friend of his is in the hospital," she replied. "He told me he'd pay a quick visit. Why wouldn't they tell you?"

Adrien nearly slapped himself. How had he not checked Anne-Laure's hospital room first? Why had he assumed the best place to find the mayor would be his home? Ladybug had even gone to the city hall in case the man was there. They were idiots.

"I suppose every reporter in town is trying to find him and maybe he wanted his sick friend to have some privacy," Chat Noir replied.

"Huh. So, why do you need to talk to him? It's about the press conference, isn't it? You're not angry he started it without you, are you? I told him Ladybug had to be there but he was really concerned about her needing rest. And you. Because you were 'injured'."

"It's fine, it's fine," Adrien lied. "We just need to, ah, talk about what will be happening to Hawk Moth, and his family, and everything."

She waved her hands dismissively.

"Pft. Details. You should be out there celebrating."

"A lot of details make for a big problem," he countered.

She shrugged and grimaced.

"Who even cares about what happens to him? He'll go to prison forever and that's it. I don't see why it should be a 'big' problem."

"It's going to impact a lot of people, Chloé. People who will be hurt, who will be dragged under the spotlight and through the mud."

She huffed and rolled her eyes. But that was Chloé, wasn't it?

Adrien pictured only too well how she would treat Alix after this.

He took a deep breath.

"Chloé. There's something I have to ask of you."
Her first reaction was to cross her arms and raise her chin. You didn't make demands, not from her. He suspected she would have listened more easily to Ladybug, but Marinette wasn't there.

"Hawk Moth has a family," he told her. "If you meet them, I want you to be nice to them. They had no idea what their father was doing. I don't want you to rub it in their faces, is that clear?"

Chloé looked up and snarled as if insulted.

"I'll let you know I'm always nice! Everyone loves me!"

Chat Noir merely looked at her and waited. It took a moment but she snorted.

"If they didn't see their dad was a supervillain, then it's their own fault," she declared.

"Chloé."

"Fine, fine, I'll be nice. I won't say a thing. Whatever."

"Is that a promise? In any circumstances? Not even behind their back?"

She rolled her eyes once again. The promise never came.

He closed his eyes.

"Can you put yourself in their shoes?" he insisted. "Imagine if one of your parents turned out to be a criminal."

Not that André wasn't one to some extent, but bribes and electoral fraud were not the same kind of crimes.

"Duh. It's not going to happen! My dad is a great person."

There was one other scenario Chat Noir could bring up. He did not like the idea of doing it, but said scenario would possibly come to pass. Maybe it was better to get Chloé to ask herself how she would react before Anne-Laure's actions came out in the open.

"What about your mother?" he asked. "What if you discovered she had done bad things?"

Chloé chuckled.

"I don't have a mother."

"But what if she came back? Or what if, wherever she is, she caused trouble?"

His friend shook her head, smiling as if that was ridiculous.

"No, you don't get it. I really do not have a mother."

Adrien frowned, puzzled. She gave him an amused, superior expression.

"Can you keep a secret? Because I never told anyone so the press wouldn't know. It's not that I care, but it would mess with my father's career. So you better not say anything to anyone."

"I'm a costumed superhero with a secret identity," he replied by automatism, too confused by her blatant indifference to give his answer much thought.

"I never had a mother. Just my dad. That woman he married was just a surrogate he hired so he
could have me. Of course that's illegal, so they made it look like more, but that's it. That woman was never my 'mom' or anything," she finished with a satisfied smirk.

Chat Noir gaped at her. That story did not mesh with what he knew, yet it meshed perfectly in many ways. It was horrifying, however, and he could not believe Chloé was happy with that. But then again, he was not Chloé, and her feelings were her own, and he was not inside her head to understand and judge her entire life. He tried to wrap his mind around the way she saw things.

She saw his reaction and snorted, rolling her eyes.

"Oh please, don't look at me like you're sad. I'm fine. My dad adores me, he always gave me the world and more. Actually, he paid quite a lot of money so I could be born, if you even need proof that I was very much wanted." - Of course she would judge affection based on how much mister Bourgeois had spent for her. - "I don't need a second parent when I have him. I mean, I have friends whose fathers won't even speak to them and I would never trade. They're miserable."

Adrien paled and tried not to show it.

"We're straying away from the point," he told her. "I just mean… Try to put yourself in her shoes."

As soon as that 'her' was out of his mouth, he knew he had given Alix's identity away.

Chloé's eyes went wide.

"Is it Alix Kubdel? You're talking about Alix Kubdel? But she was turned into Timebreaker!"

"Yes. And her brother was turned into the Pharaoh. Not everyone's parents are as great as your dad. So, can you be nice to her?"

The blonde chewed the inside of her cheeks and bit her lip.

"Why would I be nice to Alix?" she drawled. Chat Noir nearly strangled her, but Chloé kept talking. "She'd think I pity her. Actually, why would I act any different with her?" she added, pushing her bangs behind her ears. "We never talk anyway. I don't see why things should change."

Thinking about it, it was the most Adrien could expect from her, and the best way to handle Alix. Their classmate would not want attention nor pity. She would probably prefer to take her nerves out on Kim, who would welcome it. Maybe she would accept some support from Mylène and Ivan, who were close to her, but everyone else would be risking a punch to the gut just for opening their mouth.

"That's… Yeah. Do that," he told her. "And maybe be a little careful about what you say around her. Okay?"

Chloé mouthed those last words, with one more eyeroll.

"I don't see how my discussing Grenat's new makeup line with Sabrina could hurt but fine. If Alix takes offense because I have nothing good to say about Vuitton's newest purses, it won't be my fault either."

"Thank you, Chloé," he sighed. "I should get going. See you around!"

###
The last thing Adrien had expected to hear from Anne-Laure's hospital room was laughter. Yet, when he and Ladybug found themselves in front of the door, they were met by André Bourgeois' loud guffaws. They were followed by Anne-Laure's voice.

"And then he got suckerpunched, 'cause, you know, you don't just tell a biker that. So what happens? I have to jump in. Me. Like, I'm half his size and maybe a quarter of his weight and I had to save his ass from a damn biker gang."

"At least you made it out alright," Mister Bourgeois replied.

"Yeah, I did."

Chat Noir pushed the door open and walked into the room with his coldest expression. Ladybug followed him in.

Anne-Laure and her ex-husband turned to him.

"Mayor Bourgeois," Adrien said, shooting daggers at the man. "I didn't expect to find you here."

The man brightened, giving them his warmest smile and opening his arms.

"Ladybug! Chat Noir! I'm so glad to see you."

"Cut it out," Adrien replied in a flat voice. He turned to Anne-Laure, who was in bed in a hospital gown. She looked pale but alive. He gave her an icy glare. "I'm glad you survived."

"Kid, I'm s-"

Adrien whirled to mister Bourgeois, ignoring her apology.

"You. If you think for a second we are going to let you cover the truth so your ex-wife gets away with what she did, you have another think coming."

Ladybug did not say a word but she took one step forward to stand next to him with her arms crossed. Although she was undoubtedly tiny and lithe and at times adorable, she could manage Gabriel-grade glaring. She got the mayor to fidget.

The man raised his hands, giving them a nervous smile.

"Now, now," he said, trying to appease them. "I know the way I presented the events to the press might be slightly inaccurate, but I was acting in everyone's best interests. While I do know that, with a youthful, idealistic perspective, divulging the entire truth might seem like the right choice, the required choice... when you have been in politics for as long as I have, balancing the needs and the rights of thousands of people, you understand the need for the odd white lie."

"Don't even try to make us swallow that. 'Everyone's best interests', of course! YOU ARE JUST COVERING FOR HER," Chat Noir yelled, gesturing at Anne-Laure.

She frowned.

"André, what the hell have you done?"

Her ex-husband looked at her and smiled warmly, if with slight awkwardness.
"I might have shortened the narrative a little when I broke the news of Hawk Moth's arrest. It was needlessly complicated. As far as the world is concerned, two brave young heroes discovered his identity and then captured him, against impossible odds."

Miss Lenoir groaned and leaned back to stare at the ceiling.

"Figures."

Chat Noir crossed his arms. He had been raised to be polite and respectful of authority figures, but he had come to see that authority figures did not necessarily deserve respect and politeness.

"Don't worry, all of those details you forgot to mention will be brought up when we talk to the press. You can't do this. Everyone has to be held accountable! You can't pile every crime on Kubdel's head because he happens to be guilty of most of them! Whatever he did, he still deserves to be treated fairly."

Bourgeois raised his eyebrows and looked at Ladybug to check her reaction. She raised her chin and smiled to him.

"I absolutely agree with Chat here," she said. "You do not get to lie to the public, especially when it is blatantly for the benefit of your political career and your friends."

The mayor breathed in, eyebrows still raised, and turned back to Chat Noir.

"I have to admit I am surprised you would want to reveal the entire story, Adrien," he said.

The young hero's blood ran cold. So Hawk Moth had revealed his identity. He tried not to show his panic, but his heart was thumping in his chest. Who else knew? How many cops? How many nurses and doctors? How quickly would the information get out?

He managed to keep his expression neutral. Ladybug, however, was not the best liar. Her every feeling of horror and anger showed on her face and when she finally managed to put a facade up, it was a twisted grimace.

André smiled, triumphant.

"Don't be so alarmed. I can keep a secret."

If mister Bourgeois wanted to play the 'secrets' card, the only thing to do was to render it worthless.

"I'm sure mister Kubdel will spread the word to whoever wants to hear it. I mean, he was clearly in a hurry to tell you. So don't worry about the secret-keeping. I'll survive an identity reveal."

Mister Bourgeois tilted his head to the side.

"It is true that I had a talk with him, but you are mistaken if you think I was unaware of your identity before that."

Adrien whirled to Anne-Laure. So did Ladybug. Chloé's mother raised her hands and mouthed 'not me'. The mayor let out a weary sigh.

"I was married to a superheroine," he pointed out. "When you know who Queen Bee was, it's not that difficult to infer her one and only friend was Ladybug. Now, I'll admit I only realized the previous Chat Noir's identity, ah, two hours ago? Your father might have been Alice's husband, but his... reputation does not quite fit that of a superhero. But then again, while you were held hostage,
another Chat Noir was filmed by security cameras. And he looked distinctly like an aged-up version of the one I met when I was a teenager. Now, from that point, one wonders why a retired vigilante would suddenly resurface. Or rather: 'for whom?'."

"André," Anne-Laure intervened. "Stop lording your 'superior sense of observation' over the kids. You're not a Bond villain. Also, I called Gabriel 'Sourpuss' for a whole decade and you connected the dots now? "

Mister Bourgeois cleared his throat.

Chat Noir stared him down.

"That 'sense of observation', superior or otherwise, does not matter at all, because I'd rather reveal my identity than let you lie. Our masks were meant to protect us from danger, not to help us or others evade the law. If you want to use it as leverage to keep us silent, I will call a press conference as Adrien Agreste and transform in front of every tabloid journalist in the country. We'll see how useful your blackmail material is after that."

The mayor paled. He pursed his lips and hesitated, half-apologetic, half-annoyed. He settled for a nervous expression and placating words.

"Now, now, let's not resort to such extremities. What I was trying to say was that I am surprised that, considering your father's involvement, you would want his actions scrutinized. He is your dad." - Adrien noted his use of the childish, intimate form of 'father' and tensed. Mister Bourgeois went on. - "But of course, you are an honest young man. You would want the law to apply to everyone, even the people you love."

Chat Noir glared.

"But…" André continued. "Chat Noir. Ladybug. I urge you, I beg you to consider the kind of damage and drama the full truth will cause."

Ladybug stepped forward.

"Maybe the people responsible for that drama should have considered the consequences they would face, then. Maybe mister Agreste should have called the police when he figured out Hawk Moth's identity, instead of abducting the man and faking his death! By the way, how many crimes is that? And maybe when she discovered where mister Kubdel was held," Ladybug continued, pointing at Anne-Laure, "she could have told someone instead of running there to torture him."

The blonde, who had listened with mild interest at best up to this point, finally snapped.

"I just wanted to get information out of him!" she exclaimed. "I just need to know what he did to A-

"HE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW! " Adrien yelled. "Which you two idiots could have figured out if you had checked a calendar! He was in another country when she vanished!"

Miss Lenoir did not give him an answer, just a wide-eyed, horrified look of disbelief. She was shell-shocked. Adrien was well past caring.

"And don't ever utter her name again. She would never have forgiven you for the trick you just pulled. She would never have forgiven Father either."

Ladybug put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He went silent but barely relaxed.
There was a knock at the door. It immediately opened on an irritated nurse.

"I'm going to have to ask you to keep it-

She went silent when she saw who she was admonishing. She gaped for an instant, eyes moving from the Mayor to Ladybug to Chat Noir. When she resumed talking, her voice had dropped to a whisper.

"Would be nice… disturbing the other patients… thanks," she muttered before hurrying out of the room.

Her departure left everyone in the room stunned and uneasy. They all stared at the walls in awkward silence. Mister Bourgeois ended up clearing his throat.

"I'm certain there are personal stakes for everyone involved," he said. "God knows I don't want Chloé to be bullied by the press over Anne-Laure's actions. But that was not what I had in mind when I mentioned dreadful consequences. The world does not stop at our families. There is not a single person in Paris who was not victimized or in some way impacted by Hawk Moth's actions. There is a lot of resentment going around, and not only for the last year. Many people still remember the decade before your birth. If word of what mister Agreste did got out… the police would be forced to arrest the man who finally ended Hawk Moth's reign of terror. He would be seen as a hero. There would be outrage, there would be protests." - André thought about that and frowned even more, as Chat and Ladybug listened with growing horror. - "There would be riots. Yet we cannot condone vigilantism, so a trial would be mandatory, and that would give us months of unrest. And the public opinion would be so divided that there is no possible sentence he could receive without more backlash." - He breathed in. - "Oh, and another thing. Have you ever tried to try a billionaire? The judicial system is already struggling, underfunded and understaffed, and you'd want us to throw millions at one single big case that will end with a slap on the wrist? It just can't be done!"

Anne-Laure ran her fist against her forehead, eyes squeezed shut.

Ladybug crossed her arms.

"You're just making excuses. Let's just see how the people of Paris react when they see we are on the side of the law."

She was the straightforward one, the righteous one, the honest one. Her words rang true because she believed them. Adrien was the appeaser, the liar, the boy with the masks who did his best to keep his father pleased. His life was a minefield and, every single day, he stepped around so carefully not to provoke a chain explosion.

He knew better than to dismiss mister Bourgeois' warnings.

Marinette put her elbow on his shoulder and leaned on him, giving the mayor a defiant smile.

"Isn't that right, Chat?"

The boy's silence spoke louder than words. His partner turned to him, aghast. He couldn't meet her eyes.

"We are going to have to give this more consideration," he told her, even though every word of that sentence sickened him. "We could use an unbiased opinion on this."

Ladybug was blindsided but adapted quickly, pretending to agree with him when he knew full well
she did not.

"We will do our best to find a solution that allows for both justice and safety," she said. "Expect to hear from us soon."

Hand firmly pressed between Chat Noir's shoulders, she led the way out of the hospital room. Adrien glanced back, catching Anne-Laure's apologetic look just before the door closed behind them.

###

Adrien, having given Marinette the vaguest, most evasive apology of his life, had escaped to find a place to untransform. He was so furious his thoughts had turned to howling inside his head, and he wanted to destroy something, which was not the best state of mind for someone with the power to destroy anything. He needed to talk to Plagg (and maybe to scream at the rest of the world).

He released his transformation in a deserted alley and caught his Kwami as he dropped from the air. The black cat grumbled, rolling between the boy's cupped hands until he managed to sit.

"I knew it would come to that," he mumbled.

Anger coursed through Adrien.

"It's-"

His phone started buzzing in his pocket, again and again and again. He let go of Plagg and checked it. Text messages were arriving in quick succession. Two were from Nino and four from Nathalie.

His best friend's were a "can I drop your math homework in your mailbox?" and a "Things are crazy here".

Nathalie's were, in order: "Can you please keep me updated on where you are?", "Please call me", "Adrien, please drop by my apartment later" and "Yes, your father is gone".

The teenager sighed, suddenly feeling guilty. He called her.

"Adrien," she answered in a calm, unconcerned voice. "Thanks for calling. I was starting to wonder where you had vanished to."

"Ladybug and I had to have a small talk with… someone," he replied. "I'm sorry. I should not have left like that."

"Don't worry about the leaving. I just wanted to know where you were. I don't seem to be able to call her communicator from my phone anymore, and… I could use Hawk Moth's Miraculous to get in touch with you, but…" - Her voice cracked a little. - "I'd rather not."

"I'll come back right now," Adrien blurted out, before giving any real thought to the idea. "We're done anyway."

"Good. Do you want me to come pick you up? How far away are you?"

"I'm not that far. I should be there in fifteen minutes or so."
"Alright. Be careful on the way, will you?"

He couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes in mock annoyance.

"Yes, mom!" he railed.

He froze as soon as the words were out of his mouth. Joke or not, it was not something he could have told Nathalie before.

There was a silence at the other end of the line, but it didn't last.

"And don't wisecrack at me, young man," Nathalie replied.

"I wouldn't dare," Adrien said, still nervous.

He quickly hung up and cleared his throat, staring down at a very amused Plagg.

His chosen didn't give him a second to comment.

"Claws out."

###

Fifteen minutes were a long time. Well, maybe not, but it was enough of a timespan for warm feelings of embarrassment to fade, and for the reality to come crashing back.

When Adrien walked into Nathalie's apartment, he had turned and twisted every single one of the mayor's words in his head, and was feeling awful. He was seething. He was not accustomed to seething. Even Plagg's near-cuddling (he was perched on Adrien's shoulder, pressed against his throat) did nothing to calm him down.

The teenager found Nathalie sitting at the dinner table with her laptop. For the first time in what felt like forever, her hair was done, her makeup was perfect, her clothes sharply ironed. Her composure was impeccable.

Adrien looked at her.

"He's going to get away with it," he announced.

She frowned, thinking about his words for an instant.

"Not Hawk Moth, I assume?"

"Did you see the mayor's speech?"

"I did. I'm sorry."

"My father will get away with everything. There is nothing we can do. Nothing. If we drag him to the police, no one out here will want to punish him when he stopped Hawk Moth! We're forced to let it go!"

Nathalie pursed her lips, looking down then closing her eyes. She took a long, deep breath.
"I can't say I'm surprised," she said. "Politics are a complicated thing."

Adrien suddenly remembered Plagg's 'if it happens', and Tikki's 'whatever happens', and realized they had all along, that they had probably known from the moment they had realized what Gabriel's plans were. It made him angrier still.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't! We were going to catch him, and to hand him over to the police, and to give the Butterfly Miraculous back to Fu, and everything would have... would have..."

He had to stop and take a shaky breath. When he swallowed, his throat hurt.

Nathalie stood and joined him, putting both hands on his shoulders. Plagg shifted a little closer to Adrien's neck.

"You were never going to have a perfect ending," she murmured, raising a hand to stroke his cheek. "Through no fault of your own. There is no perfect ending to situations like these. Even without your father's intervention, Hawk Moth's defeat would have come with its share of pain. The moment he would have turned from a monster to a man, you would have seen it." - Her hand traveled to his hair and smoothed it. - "You did everything you could and you should focus on that."

"Everything I could wasn't enough. We are heroes. We were supposed to make things right!"

She thought about it for an instant, then guided him to the sofa.

"We had heroes too, when I was much younger," she told him as she sat next to him. "A Ladybug, a Queen Bee. They were urban legends of sorts. There was a third one and he rarely showed himself. They avoided the press. They most certainly did not get caught on camera kneeling next to an Akumatized little girl to comfort her, they did not have statues made for them, there was no Ladyblog, barely a peep in the magazines. They were ghosts. Everyone forgot about them."

Adrien blinked, peeking at Plagg.

"That's true," the Kwami confirmed. "Alice did a little better because she liked people, but they were never as involved as you and Marinette."

"Oh," his chosen murmured before turning to Nathalie again.

She pushed his chin up so he would raise his head, then peeled his bandage off.

"Stopping Hawk Moth was not what this was about," she continued, matter-of-factly. "The good you did is in the small things, in the victims you comforted, in the people you gave hope to, in the children who look up to you and who will follow your example." - She leaned forward to get a better look at his cut. - "That's the difference between a hero and a warrior. Now let me get some betadine", she finished, standing up and vanishing into the bathroom.

While she was gone, Adrien mulled over her words. His father had once described himself as a mercenary, caring more about the results than about the people he helped. Maybe Nathalie was right.

"I like her," Plagg commented. "I really like her. It's rare to meet a human who talks sense without being dramatic about it. Gabriel ought to marry her."

"I don't think he deserves her."
Plagg went silent.

"You have a point. I was about to say he is a billionaire," he ended up replying, "but it still doesn't make him a catch."

Adrien had to swallow a chortle at that.

"What did I miss?" Nathalie asked as she came back into the room with a pack of gauze and a bottle of disinfectant.

"Nothing, nothing," Adrien mumbled. He winced when she sat and opened the betadine bottle. "Do we need to do this?"

"Yes, we do," she retorted, tilting his head up.

He grimaced when she started disinfecting the wound, which got her to click her tongue and mutter something about boys gladly walking on broken limbs but complaining about papercuts. So he wrinkled his nose, sucked his cheeks in, and pretended he didn't mind the stinging. A few minutes later, Nathalie finished taping gauze to his throat. She put the betadine on the coffee table.

"I'll let you take care of your leg yourself. If it's infected, we'll take you to the doctor."

"Alright. Er. Everyone is making a fuss about the scars."

"We'll magick them away," Nathalie commented, without the slightest concern. She saw him gape, so she gave the slightest eye roll. "We have three deities at hand. I'm sure one of them can do something."

Plagg raised his head.

"Worst case scenario, I'll merge with Tikki again."

Nathalie gave him a pointed look.

"Or Waspp can vomit healing honey," the Kwami amended. "if we ever track her down."

"A discussion for another time," the woman replied. She closed her eyes and braced herself.

"Adrien. We need to discuss your father."

"We just discussed him," the teenager snapped, moving back.

Nathalie sighed.

"I know you probably don't want to hear his name right now, but there are a few things I would like to explain. I talked with him and-"

"Where is he, anyway?"

"I don't know. I assume he went home."

Adrien shook his head.

"When I called him earlier, he told me he was in a meeting."

Nathalie frowned.
"He did?"

The teenager acquiesced.

"That was during the mayor's speech," he explained. "I thought Father had bribed mister Bourgeois or something like that."

That declaration was met with a shake of the head and a sigh.

"No. No, I don't think your father is doing anything about this whole business. I doubt he has the energy for that." - Cry me a river, Adrien thought. - "Then again, work is Gabriel's very own personal opiate. If he told you he had a meeting, he had a meeting."

The boy turned away. He had never been so angry in his life and did not like the feeling.

"He does not have to do anything," he stated. "He will get away with it anyway. Anne-Laure, too."

Nathalie hesitated.

"I… I understand that the way-"

"They shouldn't get to!" Adrien cut in. "They shouldn't! I understand that reporting them will cause a lot of trouble. I understand that there will be outrage, that people will think what they did was for the best! But what they did was wrong! They committed crimes, they hurt people. The law applies to everyone." - He took a shaky breath, looking for more arguments. "You're not supposed to get a pass. T-there's no justice if you walk away as if nothing happened, you don't learn anything, you…"

His voice died down. Every word he spoke sounded made up. He knew his arguments were right, yet he felt like a vindictive, spiteful liar.

*Do you really want your father to be arrested?*

*Do you really want him to go to jail?*

*Really?*

*Is it even about justice, or do you simply want to make him suffer?*

Nathalie leaned closer. She reached for his hand, squeezed it, then kept holding it.

"You have the right to be angry at your father for what he did to *you*," she said. "You are allowed to say it."

Adrien tried to pull his hand away, panicking.

"N-no!" he exclaimed. "I-it's not that, I'm not… I mean…"

She wouldn't let go.

"I get it," she insisted, in a louder voice but still in the same quiet, non-judgmental tone. "I get it." - She waited for him to stop fidgeting, then breathed in. "You trusted Anne-Laure and she betrayed that trust. You had faith in your father and he shattered it. You are allowed to be angry. You are entitled to being angry. You were hurt and the blame is entirely on *them*.

"I… I just…"
She waited, but he could not finish his sentence. He saw her expression shift from expectant to pained. Plagg nudged him a little, but in vain. Nathalie waited a little more then closed her eyes.

"About Gabriel and his getting away with it... " she started, looking up at Adrien. "He might not face consequences from the law, but he will be held accountable. I will hold him accountable. I will be the judge, the jury and the enforcer. I do not plan to let him 'get away with it'."

Adrien stared at her, wide-eyed. She straightened up.

"There is a set of rules I expect him to follow. I want him to demonstrate that he can, wants and will change and that he deserves to be given a chance. And I want him to prove that not for a week, not for a month, not for a year, but for the rest of his life. I was willing to be lenient considering that he is ill - blatantly ill - but it stops now."

The teenager only managed to gape. He felt something but couldn't pinpoint what.

He peeked at Plagg. The Kwami was listening to all of that with a satisfied smirk.

"On that note," Nathalie continued, raising her voice so Adrien would turn his attention to her. "I talked to him, at length, and decisions were taken. For a start, Gabriel will make no attempts at contacting you, he won't try to apologize, not until you expressly allow him to. While you did take the high-ground by telling him you would listen… you are not ready. I can see it, he can see it, and so he will wait."

That something Adrien was feeling bubbled up in his chest.

"Nathalie… It's fine, I swear, I…"

The look in her eyes silenced him. She went on.

"On top of that," she told him, "Gabriel is not allowed to talk to you alone. I won't stop you if you decide you want to have a discussion in private, but as a general rule, if he interacts with you, it will be under close supervision. My supervision at the moment."

Plagg made a noise close to purring.

The bubbles inside Adrien's chest exploded and turned to butterflies. He felt a bit nauseated, but mostly relieved. And, because he felt relieved, he felt guilty too.

That rule was extreme, wasn't it?

But Nathalie thought it was warranted.

"There's a third thing," Nathalie murmured, squeezing his shoulder. "It's about your living arrangements, and it will be up to you."

Adrien had to blink tears away. He forced an answer out.

"Yes?"

"Your father recognizes that his mental health devolved to the point that he cannot be trusted around you. He acknowledges it, he wants to work on it, but he feels the best thing for you would be to remain at a safe distance until he gets better. So, we have come up with three options. One would be for you to go back to your house. I would move into a guest bedroom, and your father would keep living there, but I would act as a buffer between the two of you. Or you could return to
the mansion with me, while Gabriel moves to a hotel. And a third option would be for you to stay here with me."

A treacherous part of Adrien's mind murmured that it was all just an excuse Gabriel used to get rid of him but, upon consideration, the teenager found that it did not matter anymore, because he did not want to go back.

The notion that Gabriel's behavior had been horrible enough for Nathalie to stage a rescue was slowly sinking in.

"I… I… If you don't mind," he murmured, finding it hard to breathe, "I'd like to stay here. Please."

He was relieved, so relieved.

"You are more than welcome to stay, Adrien," she replied in her softest voice.

He couldn't hold it in. He started to cry.

###
Ladybug had seen enough of André Bourgeois for one day. She had seen enough of him for one lifetime. If she had been given any say on the matter, she would have avoided him until the end of his mandate. She was not that lucky. She crossed his path again not one hour after that disastrous conversation in miss Lenoir's room. And - because why would things have gotten better when they could get worse? - that second meeting occurred right after she had been delivered awful news.

After leaving miss Lenoir’s room, Adrien had fled. That was the term. He had not stayed to discuss the mayor’s affirmations. Marinette did not want to believe what the man had said. Surely, the people of Paris would understand that the law applied to everyone? Surely, they would want justice to prevail?

Yet, Chat Noir had doubted, and her partner was by far subtler than she was. He was the one who could find brightness in anyone, even Chloé. At the same time, he could see the darkness and the flaws in Marinette herself, when she failed to admit them or even to notice them. He saw shades of grey where she only saw black and white. He understood better.

If Adrien thought mister Bourgeois had a point, then she had no choice but believe it. She wished her partner could have stayed and tried to figure out a way to hold everyone accountable, in some way, but she supposed she couldn't ask him that. It would mean getting his father arrested and she was not about to force him to make that choice.

She was so worried for him, and not just because of his father's situation. There was one issue Adrien had not mentioned at all, not before yelling at Chloé's mother, one that was undoubtedly just as crushing for him as everything his father had done: mister Kubdel did not know what had happened to his mother.

Hawk Moth had been the only lead.

They would never know.

Marinette hoped he had discussed it with someone, because he had not told her a single thing about the hours he had spent as Hawk Moth's hostage. She was not even sure he had talked to Plagg.

She fully planned to bring the topic up later on, of course, but softly. She would not force him to talk. If he needed to confide in someone, she would be there.

To be there for him, however, he had to be there.

After finding herself alone on the roof of the hospital, she had figured that, since she was already there, she could check on mister Kubdel. He was out of surgery, in a heavily guarded room at the end of a heavily guarded corridor.

Her appearance caused a buzz among the cops. One of them stopped her at the end of the corridor, apologetic, while another hurried to the nurse's office.

"I'm sorry, Ladybug," the policeman said. "It's not that we don't trust you, just…"

He trailed off.

"I understand," she replied. "How is mister Kubdel?"
"Awake, good prognosis. He's here for a few days, then we'll have him moved. In the meantime, well, we'll make sure he doesn't run."

"What about his family?"

"His wife and son are being questioned. The girl is… I don't know, I think social services is taking care of her? You'd better ask the commish."

"Sure, where-"

"Miss Ladybug!" came a voice from the nurse's office. A man had walked out and was trying to get her attention with the loudest whisper he could manage. It was the commissioner. He joined them. "I was hoping you would show up. There's definitely…" - He looked uneasy. His eyes shifted from one side to the other, and he guided her to the nurse's office. - "I have a few questions."

He locked the door, sped to a tiny radio on the closest desk and turned it on, then breathed out.

"I am going to be direct, since we seem to have a big, urgent problem to handle." - That was not very direct. - "Do you have any tangible proof that Alim Kubdel is Hawk Moth?"

Marinette blanched.

"What?"

"Proof. Other than your word. Not that I do not believe your word, but it'll be hard to convict him based on that only, and you'd have to be willing to reveal your true identity to be an acceptable witness."

"What?" Ladybug repeated. "I gave you that video of him threatening Chat Noir!"

"And that's good, that's quite a few crimes we can pin on him, but it doesn't prove he was Hawk Moth. We'd need footage of his transformations, witnesses who saw him use his powers, something indisputable. But his victims never saw him and don't remember anything about him. His family was totally out of the loop. His kids thought he was having an affair. All we have is your word, and that might not be enough."

"I…" Marinette replied. She went silent and started to think. Would it be safe to reveal her identity? Would it endanger her parents? Her friends? Those were moot points. "If it is necessary, I will reveal myself. He is not getting away with it. Not if I can help it. His victims deserve closure. But is there any other-"

There was a knock at the door. They both jumped and looked at it. Whoever was behind it tried to push it open, in vain. The commissioner sighed and unlocked it. A cop was waiting on the other side.

"The mayor is here, commissioner," he announced. "Says he wants to talk to you and 'miss Ladybug'."

His superior let out another sigh, cringing.

"Show him in," he replied.

He waited for the policeman to leave, then massaged the bridge of his nose.
"Sorry about this," he told Ladybug, without looking at her.

She saw him tense when mister Bourgeois entered.

"Ladybug!" the mayor exclaimed. "Julien. I'm glad to see the two of you got a chance to talk."

He was grinning, he looked confident, but there was sweat on his forehead and his smile flickered. He most likely believed Marinette had told the police everything she knew about mister Agreste and Anne-Laure Lenoir.

"Mister Mayor," the commissioner said. "I was just telling Ladybug about that lack of evidence problem."

"I'd be willing to testify," the young heroine cut in. "Under my real name. I'll do whatever it takes."

Mister Bourgeois waved his hand.

"That's kind of you," he drawled, "but it might not be sufficient."

"I'm sure Chat Noir will be more than willing to join me as a witness," she added. "And I am sure we can find other people who knew who he was, if we search far and wide. Who knows? Those people might be closer than you think!"

The mayor gave her a nervous smile and tried to regain his composure.

"Now, now, now, let's not resort to extreme measures if they are not necessary! Your real name! Think about your family! You have caught so many criminals, you can't take the risk of letting them know who you and your family are. I'm sure things can be solved without all that fuss."

"We'd need a miracle, mister Mayor," the commissioner commented. "Short of a confession, Kubdel."

"Well, has he been questioned?" André asked.

"Barely. The anesthesia wore off, but we are not interrogating a man under the effect of strong painkillers, in his hospital bed. The interrogation will be done by the book and filmed from beginning to end. If he says something incriminating, I want it to be usable in court."

"He hasn't been questioned! Well, Julien, you're being horribly pessimistic. For all you know, Hawk Moth is in a hurry to confess."

"I sincerely doubt it. He knows how little we have."

Mister Bourgeois dismissed those concerns with a wave of the hand.

"I'm sure he will show exemplary goodwill. He has every reason to."

"With all due respect, mister Mayor, I don't think you understand what I'm trying to explain, here."

"I suppose I'll check for myself," André drawled.

Ladybug's stomach turned to stone. She tensed. What kind of trick had he prepared?

"I don't think that would be wise," she said. "He is a very dangerous man, even without magic."

The police chief sided with her, back straight as a pole, tense all over.
"Not to mention no one but my detectives and Kubdel's lawyers will be talking to the man for the foreseeable future."

Bourgeois ignored Marinette entirely and scowled at the cop.

"Do we need to discuss your retirement again, Julien?"

The commissioner turned beet red.

"I hardly see what you could tell him," he replied in a much lower voice.

"I merely want to appeal to his better nature. Give me five minutes."

Ladybug stepped forward, arms on her hips.

"I'm fairly certain it would break a million laws, so why don't you ask mister Kubdel's lawyer what they think about it? Or wait for him to get a lawyer?"

"Me! Breaking the law! I believe I know more about the law than you do, young lady."

"Well, you sure know all about evading it."

He gave her a sweet, saccharine smile.

"That is certainly an interesting accusation from a vigilante."

"You liked that vigilantism just fine up until one hour ago," she snapped back. "You are not talking to mister Kubdel. I don't know what you are planning but it's not happening."

Bourgeois rolled his eyes.

"I merely wanted to have a quick chat with the man. What was I going to do? Bribe him?" - He shook his head. - "Very well. I'll leave. I'll be at the Grand Paris if I'm needed."

Marinette scoffed.

"Goodbye, mister Mayor. Have a nice evening."

"Likewise, Ladybug. Julien…"

The two men exchanged a few (tense) pleasantries, then Chloé's father left. Ladybug shot daggers at the commissioner, who was a grown man and should have been able to resist Bourgeois' bullying, then she ran to the roof. She watched the parking lot until she saw the mayor's white limo drive away.

After that, she ran back home, praying for her absence not to have been noticed.

###

There was nothing more terrifying than to be the parent of a child, save maybe being the makeshift parent of a shattered boy who would have needed so much more than what little warmth you had to offer.
Mimicking happy families on television was never going to cut it.

There was little Nathalie could do but try to take the less damaging decisions, following her logic and common sense, all of that without succumbing to panic. She was terrified. Every syllable she uttered sent cold sweats running down her back: every single word she said could hurt Adrien more. She had no idea what to do. She was not cut out for this.

It pained her to see how little he was able to express. Despite her best efforts to encourage him to let his anger out - and he was angry, with good reason - he was still containing himself. He had been shaped into silence and obedience for so long that the damage would be hard to undo. But there was hope. He had learned to resist his father and Nathalie firmly believed he would never give in again.

As for Gabriel… She had a list of requirements, and he had ticked one of the points off.

That was good.

He had recognized Adrien would be safer away from him and had shown the willingness to find a solution. She would have taken steps to separate them quickly enough, but to see Gabriel figure it out by himself was a positive development. His idea had been to leave his home to have Nathalie live there with his son. She had provided the two alternatives.

Adrien's choice had not come as a surprise. He was hurt deeper than she could imagine.

And that was just the family angle. She had not dared to ask him about his abduction yet. She would wait for things to settle down before doing so.

In the meantime, she would be present, reliable and ready to listen. Also, to bring some normalcy back into Adrien's life, she would fill the time with logistics.

"So what are we buying, exactly?" Adrien asked as Nathalie circled IKEA's parking lot to find her car a spot. "I thought we were getting groceries."

"A bed," his guardian replied, speeding through an alley to steal a spot from a slower driver. She ignored the honking. "You need a bed. You can't sleep on the sofa forever."

"I… guess… not?" Adrien replied.

"But the sofa is right next to the TV!" Plagg protested.

"Well then we'll order another television for the bedroom," Nathalie snapped. "Out of the car, hop, hop, hop."

Adrien got out, wincing as he stood, and Nathalie cringed. She would heal his wounds later. She just needed a suitable candidate.

"How come you don't have a guest room?" Adrien wondered. "Your place is huge."

'Huge', said the boy who lived in a mansion.

"Do I strike you as the kind of person who would entertain guests?" she replied, exiting the car and locking its doors. "I have a bedroom and a library."

"You don't strike me as the kind of person who would have a library," Plagg commented from his hiding place under Adrien's shirt.
Nathalie found herself glaring at a front pocket.

"I mean, you do everything on your tablet. Don't they make books in electronic form, now? Why would you need the paper ones for?"

"I do happen to like nice, hardback editions of fashion artbooks. I own quite a few."

"Nothing about food?" Plagg asked.

"No."

"Nothing about cats?"

"No."

"And here I thought I liked you."

Both Nathalie and Adrien rolled their eyes. The boy ran into the store, stopping at the map near the entrance.

"I'm not sure where they would put the air mattresses," he said when she joined him. "I'm not sure they have a camp-"

"We are not getting you an air mattress," she cut in, brandishing Gabriel's credit card. "We are getting you a bed. And, while we're here, let's see what else we can carry home. You will need cushions, you will need blankets, and nightstands, and lamps, and a wardrobe, and maybe even wall decorations."

"It's not really necessary."

"No, you don't get it. I have your father's credit card. We are taking the money and running. Do you want a Playstation to go with that TV we are getting you?"

That got Adrien to chuckle.

"Come on. What will you do with all of that once I go back home?"

She led him towards the furniture aisle.

"Even if you go back home, I suspect you will be a frequent visitor at my place for the foreseeable future. And maybe I should see why everyone seems to love Ultimate Mecha Strike."

Adrien whirled to her with wide eyes that spelled doom. She had not even said that she would play with him (though it was implied), but not doing so would no longer be an option.

"Oh boy," Plagg muttered.

"It's great!" his chosen exclaimed. For a boy who had been on the edge of clinical depression for most of the day, he was incredibly cheerful. "I'll show you. So basically it's a fighting game with robots, where you control a robot that evolves, and you have to defeat either the AI, either another player. I'm pretty good at it. Marinette is better, though. She even won a trophy with a boy from our class."

Nathalie latched onto that unexpected and most welcome way out.

"Maybe we could invite miss Dupain-Cheng, then," she suggested. "I'm sure she'd love to play with
Plagg snorted. Adrien, who was either more innocent or more mature than the millennia-old small god, merely smiled.

"Only if you don't mind that. Thank you, Nathalie!"

She gave a little sigh and led him towards the bedroom section.

"Come on," she said. "It's getting late and the store will close soon. Let's get you that bed."

###

Getting furniture delivered after eight in the evening was exceedingly easy, if you were exceedingly nice and punctuated every word of your requests with a fifty euro bill.

Nathalie walked out of her apartment at half past nine, leaving Adrien alone with Plagg, his newly assembled bed, boxes of unpacked decorations and his brand new TV. Between the 'getting it out of the box', the 'plugging it to a brand new xbox' and the 'picking a game to play out of the thirty-two they had bought', she figured he would be busy for at least one hour. That gave her ample time to drive to Gabriel's house and pack most of Adrien's clothes.

When she arrived there, the mansion was no longer on lockdown. She used Adrien's keys and cards to get through the door, finding the hallway emptied of the chairs that had littered it the last time she had visited.

It didn't look like anyone was home. The house was silent. The lights were off. You could hear the ticking of the dining room clock from the hallway.

Nathalie sighed, wondering where Gabriel had vanished to. She took a quick look at his office door. It was ajar on a darkened room. The study was just as deserted. Rather than checking the bedroom - they were not on those terms anymore - she called him to let him know she was there. She had texted him earlier on, to tell him of Adrien's decision, but he had not acknowledged that message. A real conversation couldn't hurt.

As soon as she pressed the 'call' icon, she heard Gabriel's ringtone. It was coming from the seemingly empty office. She backtracked.

"Gabriel?" she called, pushing the door open.

The room was dark, but she could see a shape crumpled on the desk. She panicked and slapped the light switch.

The shape was, just as she had thought, Gabriel. Thankfully, it was the only one of her thoughts to prove accurate: yes, he was crumpled on the desk, face buried against his crossed arms, with some drawings spread around him, but he was merely asleep. With his glasses on. He shifted and hid his face with one arm to protect himself from the light, then stopped moving altogether.

Well. That's new, Nathalie mused with her heart still thumping. She was mostly used to seeing him awake at inappropriate hours.
She walked to him and gave his shoulder a light tap, then softly shook it.

"Gabriel?" she called. He grumbled. "Gabriel?"

He grunted and sighed, rolling his shoulders and sitting up. Then he looked around, squinting, and blinked.

"Nathalie?" he muttered, confused. He shook his head and peeked out the window. The night sky seemed to surprise him. "What time is it?"

"About ten," she replied.

The folds of his sleeves had left creases on his face. With his befuddled, half-asleep expression, he looked ridiculous. Nathalie had to purse her lips not to smile. It would have been a sign of endearment, and she could not soften so soon.

"I thought I could rest my eyes for five minutes," he said, collecting his sketches and arranging them into a neat pile. "It looks like I slept through the whole afternoon." - He massaged the bridge of his nose, then fumbled to stand. - "I didn't expect you this late." - She saw him brace himself, if only for a second. - "Where is Adrien?"

Nathalie breathed in and tried to deliver the blow as delicately as possible.

"Adrien… decided to stay with me for a while. I'm sorry."

She was not actually sorry - it was probably the best for the boy - but she did not enjoy delivering punches to the gut. Not to the people she loved, anyway.

Gabriel closed his eyes.

"Good," he commented, his tone subdued. "I assume you came to get his schoolbooks?"

Nathalie nodded.

"That, and some clothes," she explained, studying his motions. He was still drowsy. He could stand, but he swayed a little. For an instant, she wondered if he was drunk. But the only glass in the room was filled with water, and she noticed a bottle of Perrier on the desk. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I need coffee."

"If you could please give me ten minutes to grab a cup from the kitchen, I'll help you pack."

She acquiesced and followed him to the kitchen, where he served them both coffees. He took his black, and she diluted hers with as much milk as she could fit in her cup.

"I hear you went to work today," she told him as they waited for their drinks to cool down. She was spinning her spoon in her cup and staring intently at the twirling coffee.

"Yes. No. Briefly. I had to meet with HR so they would leave you alone, and to clear Adrien's schedule and mine. Then I went back home. You told me to rest…"

"I rested."

"Anything else?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"No. I barely even watched the news. If Adrien had not called me, I wouldn't have heard about
"You'll be happy to know he got you off the hook," Nathalie replied, her voice a little more snappish than she wanted it.

"I heard."

She sipped her coffee. So did he.

Then he spoke.

"And Anne-Laure called me to tell me Kubdel was not involved in Alice's disappearance."

Nathalie froze with her cup still against her lips. A handful of seconds went by.

"Is that what he told her?" she asked.

"That is what he told Adrien, apparently."

She slowly put her cup down not to drop it. She had not dared to question Adrien but, obviously, she should have.

The news did not come as much of a surprise, not to her. She had never been convinced that Hawk Moth had the answers Gabriel was looking for. She also knew that, if Kubdel had known the slightest useful detail, he would have taken it to his grave.

What was shocking was that Gabriel had not gone straight to Adrien to get the full story out of him.

"You have not called him," she stated.

There was the slighted lull. Gabriel's eyes lost focus.

"I have not. We agreed on that."

She nodded.

He took another sip of his coffee, looking straight through the cup. After a moment, Nathalie reached for his wrist.

"We will get information one way or another," she promised.

She did not tell him how, not yet.

He acquiesced but did not comment. Nathalie sighed and finished her cup. He downed the rest of his.

"Let's find some suitcases," he suggested.

###

When Ladybug knocked on Adrien's new bedroom window, a little after ten, Plagg would have gladly shouted 'transform back'. He did not want to see Ladybug. He did not want to see Marinette. He needed to talk to Tikki. Unfortunately, requesting to see his sister would have been suspicious,
and he did not want to let the children see how serious his concerns were.

He rolled on Adrien's new bed while Tikki's young chosen slipped through the window and hugged Adrien. He sniffed the bed sheets while she explained that the Mayor had something fishy planned, then he answered the inevitable 'how can you smell things with no nose?' with his usual disdainful snort. He was magical. What he looked like did not matter. At the core, he was a black cat and a ghost, and he had kept all of his senses.

Then the children focused on the room. Marinette was in awe, as she had clearly never seen a lamp before and needed to inspect it for five minutes, then to do the same for every single little thing Adrien had purchased.

"How did you get all of that in here and assembled in the span of one afternoon?" the girl marvelled.

"Bribes," Adrien explained. "And a limitless visa card. They go hand in hand, really."

"It doesn't even look like the same room as yesterday."

Plagg yawned. Inside his head, he was screaming 'Bella told the story of the Magician's Boxes'. But he didn't show it. Instead, he grumbled and moaned about being bored.

"If you're going to talk about chairs and lamps for the whole evening, can you let Tikki out? I'm bored. I'm so bored."

Marinette hesitated, looking around, then realized that not only were they alone, Nathalie knew her true identity anyway. She tapped her earrings and reverted her transformation.

Of course, Tikki could not take a hint. Instead of joining Plagg, as her brother had hoped, she landed on Adrien's shoulder and nuzzled against his chin until the boy chuckled.

"Hiya, Tikki," Plagg's chosen greeted her. "How are you?"

"Fine! How are you?"

"Well, I got Ultimate Mecha Strike V!"

"That's not an answer."

"I'm fine," Adrien swore. "Nathalie is great. I think this is all for the best."

Marinette's enraged grimace at that was hilarious (undoubtedly, she was thinking of Gabriel), but neither Tikki nor Adrien saw it. No. Tikki was too busy looking at the boy with a resolute expression.

"So do I. Things will get better," she promised. "Time heals all wounds."

"TIME ISN'T GONNA HEAL THE HOLE IN MY STOMACH!" Plagg yelled.

That got him a frown, but he did not care: he had his sister's attention.

"Come on," he exclaimed, darting out of the room.

Tikki dashed after him and caught up with him in the kitchen.

"I swear, Plagg, you are insufferable."
"Bella told Kubdel about the Pandora boxes. She told him about the ritual."

"WHAT?" Tikki shrieked. Then she lowered her voice. "Are you sure?"

"He told Adrien about it," the black Kwami explained. "Now, I don't know if she gave Kubdel all of the magical theory that goes with that story, but she shared too much already. Adrien started pesterling me about the Magician. He asked me if I remembered being in the box."

They all remembered being in the box. The least lucky of them - the ones who had been born of creatures made of flesh rather than chitin - remembered much more than that. They remembered the flames.

Tikki covered her mouth and spun into place, horrified.

"She wouldn't. She wouldn't have. We promised to let that knowledge die."

"Adrien sounded concerned," Plagg continued.

"That doesn't mean… No, no, she wouldn't have. Did you ask the boy what he knows?"

"Of course not. The more interest I show for the whole thing, the more easily he'll understand it's dangerous knowledge. We are going to have to ask Bella herself."

"If he does know the whole story, I doubt he has not realized how serious it is, Plagg."

"I don't know. I tell myself he wouldn't have stopped at vague questions if he knew everything."

"We have to ask him," Tikki insisted. "You know how childish Bella has gotten since her corruption."

"She has always been childish."

"You know what I mean. She'd lie just to spite us. And we need to ask him. We can't allow humans to remember how to bind more of us, not even Adrien, and especially not Hawk Moth. If Alim Kubdel is in possession of that knowledge… His memories will have to be wiped."

Plagg grunted. He did not like the idea of discussing the binding with the children. Adrien would worry, Marinette would dramatize everything, and Plagg and Tikki would never hear the end of it.

So we were ideas turned corporeal. So we were not given a choice. So what?

As long as no more Kwami were made, what was the point of bringing the whole debacle up?

"Now?" he muttered.

"Yes, now! This is important, Plagg. The more we wait, the more time Hawk Moth has to share the information!"

"Fine, fine, if you insist," the black cat mumbled.

He flew out of the kitchen, dragging his feet as much as one could drag one's feet while flying. He was halfway to Adrien's new bedroom when the front door opened.

"A little help?" Nathalie called as she walked into the apartment, dragging a rolling suitcase behind her.
Marinette and Adrien ran out of the bedroom, wondering what was going on. The boy took one look at Nathalie's suitcase and hurried to help her. His girlfriend joined them, then peeked out to see if something else needed carrying. As it turned out, there was one suitcase left, which she carried in.

Tikki and Plagg looked at each other.

The talk would have to wait.

"I didn't expect to see you here at this time of the night, miss Dupain-Cheng," Nathalie commented.

"I dropped by before patrol," the girl replied. "Adrien texted me. But it's really late, I should go."

"No. No, actually, that's fine," the woman answered, which surprised both of the Kwami. "Adrien, did you change your bandages while I was gone?" - The teenager shook his head. - "I see. Marinette, would you mind helping him? There's a few things I need to do."

"Of course not!" Tikki's chosen exclaimed, tripping on a corner of the sofa as she hurried to the bathroom. She mumbled a curse, then hopped to the door. "Where do you keep the gauze?"

"First drawer under the sink," Adrien answered, joining her.

Nathalie watched them go, then quietly removed her coat, collected her purse, and walked into the kitchen. Plagg frowned, nudged Tikki, and followed the human. They found her standing by the kitchen table with her open purse. She got an eyeglass case out, and put it down. She placed her tablet next to it, a plastic pen on top of the tablet, then a charger.

The next thing she pulled out of the purse was the electrum box that held Bella and her Miraculous.

Plagg peeked into the living room. Adrien and Marinette had found the bandages. The young girl was checking the cut on the boy's throat.

"Tikki," Nathalie whispered. "If I could have a second of your time…"

The red Kwami dashed to her and hovered next to the electrum box, that the human was spinning between her fingers.

"Are you planning to…" Tikki started.

"If you agree. You and the girl, of course. She is worried about Adrien's injuries, now would be the perfect time to turn her into a healer."

Plagg's sister frowned, pensive.

"You handled Bella's powers well enough with Adrien. No corruption, you barely impacted his mental state… I think this could work. As long as Marinette agrees with the idea, I don't see any reason to object."

"Good," Nathalie replied. "Let's consider this a test run. Marinette?" she called, turning to the door.

"YES?" came the answer. Then the girl trotted into the kitchen. "Yes?"

Nathalie looked down at the golden box she was holding.

"Would you like to try healing Adrien's wounds in a more efficient way?"
Marinette's eyes traveled back and forth between the woman's face and the box. She peeked at Tikki, then stared at Bella's new holder.

"You mean…"

"Yes."

The teenager closed the door behind her.

"We can try," she said.

Meanwhile, Plagg was studying Nathalie's face.

A test run for what?

###
Out of the box

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: prepare for a visit from my old friend the exposition fairy, who came with her pal the infodump goblin.

Adrien blinked when the door of the kitchen closed. He was puzzled, but did not move from the (now folded and and depressingly strict) sofa. He did not move either when he heard hushed whispers, though he tried to eavesdrop (in vain). When he heard a brief and shrill yelp, however, he tiptoed to the door.

He had to nearly squash his ear against the door to hear what was going on.

Nathalie was talking.

"Just… a second," she was saying, voice strained.

"That's not good," Plagg commented.

Adrien could hear him clearly. The Kwami had to be near the door.

Tikki corrected him.

"On the contrary. That is very good. It's when you don't get that reaction that you should be worried."

"There," Nathalie muttered. Her voice stopped quivering. "There. I'm ready if you are."

"I am," Marinette replied.

Her boyfriend, having crossed the line between curiosity and worry, opened the door. He blanched.

Nathalie had transformed.

The kitchen was filled with butterflies. They were crawling on the walls and furniture, and fluttering around. They were white - he had always imagined they would be black - and quite a bit larger than he remembered the Akuma being.

It's the room, he thought. You're used to seeing only one at a time in larger spaces.

It was uncanny how closely Hawk Moth's outfit resembled Nathalie's usual clothes: transformed, she wore a violet suit and black shoes too. The costume was just as strict: her favorite red turtleneck had been replaced by a lavender shirt with a high collar, but that was about it. The more glaring difference was the hood that covered all of her face but the mouth, that was cut behind her head and let her hair flow freely. Her jacket had a black collar shaped like distorted butterfly wings. She wore black gloves. The Miraculous was pinned to her shirt. But, all things considered, she was recognizable.

Or maybe it's just because you know she has the Miraculous. Marinette looks exactly like herself.
Nathalie recoiled when he walked into the room, then turned to him. For an instant, she looked as if she had seen a ghost, then she calmed down.

"Adrien," she said. "Come in. Marinette and I would like to attempt to heal your injuries."

"What?" he gasped. He whirled to his partner. "WHAT?"

She was going to let herself be Akumatized?

Marinette raised her hands.

"It will be fine. It's how the Butterfly's powers are meant to be used, right? To help people?"

Adrien's stomach lurched. He peeked at Plagg.

"Did Bella agree?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

The black kwami shrugged.

"Then no!" the boy exclaimed. He frowned at Nathalie. "Did you even ask her?"

He quieted a little when he noticed she was shaking. She tried to compose herself.

"I did not. However, considering her 'hero' was the one who slit your throat and she has been terrorizing Paris for decades, I don't think it's too much to expect her to repair some of the damage she caused."

Marinette was frowning, studying everyone's expressions. As she had not been given an impromptu lecture on Kwami slavery by Alim Kubdel, however, she stopped at observing.

Adrien looked at Plagg again but realized his Kwami did not want to intervene. He would sulk and judge them in silence, but he would not comment.

"Tikki," the blond asked. "What do you think?"

The red Kwami lowered her head.

"I think... " - She took a deep breath. - "It's a good deed. Bella won't like it, and I don't like it, but she will have to be forced to do good for decades to be healed," she murmured, resigned. "She has to be reshaped until she becomes herself again. We might as well start now."

Plagg's eyes were reduced to slits.

"Are you sure?" Adrien insisted, staring hard at Tikki.

"I am sure. As things are now, Bella is not the goddess she is meant to be."

_Like Plagg, then?_

"Plagg?" the young human insisted, turning to the flying cat.

"What Tikki says."

Adrien frowned but nodded. They knew better, didn't they? That being said, he still had doubts, and he liked the idea even less than Tikki did.

Plagg sighed.
"We have her best interests at heart, kiddo. She's our sister."

The teenager acquiesced. He sighed.

"Alright."

Nathalie closed her eyes. She was swaying.


She cupped both hands. One of the butterflies flew to her and landed on her palms. Marinette took a deep breath, straightened her back, and held a bottle of Betadine up. Her expression traveled back and forth between resolute and anxious.

Nathalie closed her hands over the butterfly. When she released it, it had turned black.

Of course, Marinette was never one to wait passively. She tapped the Akuma with the cork of the Betadine bottle.

Adrien took a step back, hand raised.

"Plagg," he murmured, a 'claws out' on the tip of his tongue.

Magic washed over his partner and left her dressed in a regular, bland nurse uniform. She did not even wear that little hat with a red cross, just a blue vest, white pants and white sneakers. She would have looked perfectly normal if her hands had not been shining white. As for the antiseptic bottle, it had grown two times its initial size, turned golden, and white sparkles were erupting out of it.

"Marinette?" Adrien called, just as a concerned Tikki darted to her chosen. "Are you alright?"

His girlfriend's eyes had glazed over. A glowing butterfly outline had appeared in front of her face. She didn't answer.

"Marinette?" Tikki insisted.

The young designer jerked up.

"Wow. Okay, wow." - She looked down at her hands and outfit. - "Uh. Oh. That's… It works, I guess. No villain name either?"

"I don't do puns," Nathalie retorted. "Let's give your powers a try?"

Marinette the nurse whirled to Adrien. She tried to spin the bottle in her hand like she did her yoyo, with questionable results. Golden liquid sprayed all over the room, shining bright for an instant before vanishing. Plagg and Nathalie winced. Tikki bit her lower lip, resigned. Marinette cleared her throat and blushed.

"Hem. Sorry. So. Adrien, can you raise your head?"

He nodded (grimacing when his cut stung) then lifted his chin (grimacing again when the wound reopened). His girlfriend breathed in, leaned closer, then sprayed some of her magical disinfectant over the cut. Once again, the liquid shone bright (he had to close his eyes, and the light was still intense enough to see it as a pink glow passing through his skin). Warmth spread from his throat to his nose and clavicles.
Then it all faded.

He blinked and patted his throat. He felt no pain. More importantly, he felt no scar.

"It worked?"

Plagg zipped to him, landing on his shoulder.

"It did better than work. It looks like you were never injured."

"Bella's powers are limitless when properly channeled," Tikki chimed in.

Though she was talking to them all, she was observing Nathalie. Adrien peeked at the woman and paled a little. There was something wrong. Though she was holding herself straight, with her hands behind her back and the cane that had to be her weapon in her hands, it looked like she was shivering.

Noticing that she was being watched, she pretended to feel comfortable. She smiled.

"Good job, Marinette. Let's see if your powers are as effective on his leg?"

Adrien's partner nodded. So did he. Then Nathalie decided to take what had been a perfectly normal (if weird as hell) moment and to make it the most embarrassing point of Adrien's life.

"Don't worry," she added. "I won't look."

And she walked to the window, turning her back to them.

Adrien, who had worn swimsuits often enough, who had actually modeled swimsuits and who, as a matter of fact, was a model used to being dressed and undressed by total strangers, turned beet red at the idea of being seen in his underwear by his girlfriend.

Marinette blushed so hard smoke could have come out of her ears.

They stood there, flustered and paralysed, for an eternity, then Plagg whacked Adrien's ear. Four minutes later, the mortified teenager was putting his pants back on over the baby-smooth skin of his thighs. There was not a trace left of the hole teleporting through a table had gouged in his skin. There was not a trace left of his pride either.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "Now…"

Nathalie let out a sigh so loud everyone turned to her. She ignored them and reached for the electrum box that was still laying on the table. She tore the brooch away from her collar.

The butterflies scattered. Bella's pink shape spiraled in the air at breakneck speed. The Kwami barely had a second to yell a 'don't you dare -' before Nathalie shoved the Miraculous into the golden box and slammed it shut.

Bella and her butterflies vanished. Marinette's transformation reverted, leaving her standing there with a perfectly normal bottle of Betadine. Plagg and Tikki tensed.

Nathalie sat down and leaned back on her chair, skin clammy.

The first to talk was Marinette, when she should by all means have been too confused to form a coherent sentence. Most Akuma victims forgot everything when they were freed. Adrien's memories had done their best to run away from him the moment he had turned back from
Chakuma' into himself. But, clearly, the way Nathalie used the Butterfly Miraculous did not cause as strong an impact as Hawk Moth's attacks.

"I know Bella is… corrupted," Marinette said, concerned, "but isn't this a bit extreme?"

Nathalie's hands clenched on the electrum box.

"No."

Plagg and his sister exchanged a look. They didn't voice their objections. Were they even able to? Adrien was starting to doubt that.

"Please let her out," the teenager asked Nathalie. "I know Bella is not the most pleasant company, but it's… You shouldn't keep her trapped like that. There's very little trouble she can cause even if you let her fly around. She can't go far from her Miraculous, she can't steal it from its holder…"

"It's not a good idea," she replied, her tone collected and indifferent, just as if she had been at work and trying to convince him to endure yet another activity his father had come up with. "The whole reason we got into this mess is because that Kwami drove a teenage boy insane. I am not letting her anywhere near you."

"We got into this mess because Bella wants to be free," Adrien corrected. "The Kwami are prisoners." - He heard Tikki gasp and turned to her. - "You are, aren't you? Spirits bound to a piece of jewelry and turned into slaves?"

Plagg hissed. Tikki opened and closed her mouth. Marinette had blanched and raised her hands to her earrings, that she was brushing with trembling fingers.

Nathalie breathed in and leaned forward, looking at Tikki.

"Is that true?"

The red Kwami fidgeted.

"It's complicated," she replied, trying to sound non-committal and failing.

"It's true," Adrien insisted. "And the reason Hawk Moth wanted the Miraculous was so they could break Bella's."

"What?" Plagg and Tikki gasped.

From the looks on their faces, the prospect of a broken Miraculous was terrifying.

"That's what Kubdel told me," the young hero continued. "That some of the Kwami wanted freedom, like Bella, and that he wanted to give it to her."

"Nonononono," Tikki squeaked. "That's not…"

Adrien frowned.

"It wouldn't free her?" he asked, wondering if he had been lied to again.

"It has never been done before," the red Kwami replied. "I don't know! Though, the most probable outcome… It would. In a manner of speaking."

Those words sank in.
He felt the blood leave his face.

"Nathalie," he exclaimed, whirling to her. "You can't keep her trapped. It's just cruel."

The woman's first reaction was a wince. She ran her hands over her face then raked them through her hair. Then she exploded.

"I am not releasing the insane goddess," she snapped, face twisted in fury. "I have enough on my plate with one crazy human. Bella is not. My. PROBLEM. - She stood. - "When that older Miraculous holder everyone keeps talking about finally shows up, I will gladly hand the damn brooch over. He'll be free to do whatever he wants with it and I will return to my normal life! In the meantime, Bella will stay in the box. Am I making myself clear?"

You hardly ever saw her angry, and Adrien hated to fight with about everyone who was not a supervillain. He took a step back. A second later, he took a step forward.

"It's not your choice! Nathalie, she's a living, sentient being! You can't just confine -"

"I don't CARE! Do you hear me? I. Don't. Care! You can pull at my heartstrings all you want, there's nothing there. Drop it!"

That outburst left the room eerily silent. Nathalie composed herself in a split-second, giving them no time to recover.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," she said. "Thank you for your help, it was greatly appreciated. That being said, it's getting late. You should go home."

Marinette blinked, threw Adrien a deer-in-headlights look, then ran to the window. She transformed halfway to it and jumped out as Ladybug. Her partner stared at the window, stunned.

He idly registered a hissing noise near to him, but only realized it was coming from Plagg when the Kwami jumped off his shoulder and flew out of the room.

He looked at Nathalie, pale.

"It is really late," she told him, her facade perfectly in place. "I'll be going to bed. So should you."

Still firmly holding the electrum box, she vanished into her bedroom.

###

Ladybug still remembered the words Chat Noir had used to describe his family, an eternity before. They had been discussing Gabriel Agreste - before she had known Chat was Adrien - and he had said… he had said 'my whole family is like that'.

It was.

She had dared to think Nathalie was making efforts, and that maybe the woman could protect Adrien, but birds of a feather flocked together and Nathalie was mister Agreste's girlfriend. There was a reason Marinette had never liked her, and it was not just that strange scarf incident.

The teenager had still thought things were going better for Adrien. He had been so enthusiastic about his new bedroom, and TV, and games. It looked like he was getting closer to his father's
assistant.

So much for that.

Hanging upside-down from the roof, she lowered herself to Adrien's window, waited for him to walk in, then knocked. He did not smile. He did not even brighten up. He merely walked to the window and opened it.

"Hi there," she said. "Have you ever seen the full moon from the top of the Eiffel Tower?"

*That* got a chuckle out of him. He grabbed her by the back of the head and stole a kiss.

"Yes. I mean no!" he exclaimed, quoting his own reaction at her first invitation to watch celestial bodies from the top of architectural landmarks.

She laughed.

"Guess I'm going to have to carry you there, damsel-in-distress style, then. I don't see Plagg anywhere and I wouldn't want you to miss the sight."

"He's sulking somewhere," Adrien explained.

"I'm right here," Plagg commented from the inside of a discarded cardboard box, before peeking out.

"Well then," Adrien said. "Guess *I'll* carry myself there, damsel-in-distress style. Claws out!"

His costume and trademark grin appeared in a burst of magic and, not a second later, he had jumped out of the window and grabbed Ladybug by the waist on the way out. They raced to the Eiffel Tower, with the odd attempt at carrying the other like a Disney princess, to finally perch themselves at the top of the tower and stare at the night sky.

"Are you alright?" Ladybug asked after twenty minutes of silence.

One more minute went by.

"I'll be fine," Chat Noir replied. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't be! That was not *normal*, Adrien!"

He didn't answer, so she breathed in and went on.

"Normal families don't treat each other like that. They don't hurt each other like that. That kind of anger..."

"I know."

Marinette found herself at a loss for words.

"Normal families don't handle supervillains, kidnappings and deities either," Adrien muttered. "I'm willing to make allowances for that."

"Maybe you shouldn't," she pointed out. "Maybe you've made enough allowances already. They are adults. They know better."

"I'm done making them for my father. Nathalie... You know, Nathalie doesn't get angry. I don't
think I have ever seen her like that. Sure, she's cold, she's not the nicest person, but... she doesn't like to have feelings. It's not like my dad, who doesn't like to be weak. Anger is fine with him, he uses it as a weapon. I think Nathalie just wants... Well. Her password is 'literally'."

His partner blinked.


No heartstrings to tug at.

Marinette shuddered.

"I don't get it. Who would want to be empty?" she murmured. She shook her head. "Do you have someone else you could stay with? Relatives? Family friends?"

"No. My grandparents all died before I was born, my parents did not have siblings... I get the feeling if I have a godmother, she'll turn out to be Anne-Laure..."

Ladybug hesitated.

"I could ask my parents."

Chat merely smiled and shook his head.

"I'm fine where I am. For what it's worth, Nathalie does love me."

Marinette wanted to scream. That's not the point!

"You can't keep excusing the-"

Chat removed his ring and rolled it between his fingers as he untransformed.

"I'm holding one miracle," he told her. "I don't expect more. I can't expect the people around me to magically become someone they are not. My family is never going to turn into yours. And I'm definitely going to stop being too forgiving, I promise. But if they really try, I can appreciate that, can't I? That's the important thing."

Plagg landed on his knees, frowning.

Marinette mulled over that.

"I don't know," she ended up admitting. "I think you should talk to my parents. Seriously," she exclaimed when he raised his eyebrows. "They could help. I think you could use an outside perspective. And they're good people."

"I'll consider it," Adrien lied. She could hear it in his voice.

Why are we heroes if we can't help the people we care about the most? she wondered.

"What about miss Bustier?" she insisted.

He kissed her temple.

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he pressed his fingers to her lips to silence her.
"I am done with my father," he said. "I don't know if I will forgive him and I'm not sure I can. And I love him, and I get that he has issues, and I hope he will get better… But right now, I don't want to be anywhere near him, and I don't have to. That's..." - He breathed in. Plagg jumped from his knees to his shoulder. - "And Nathalie… She's really doing all of this out of the kindness of the heart she says she doesn't have. My father fired her. I'm not even sure they are together anymore. She didn't have to get involved. And anyway this whole week… this whole summer has been crazy and maybe I'll wait for things to settle down before passing judgement. And maybe I really shouldn't have pushed this particular issue at that very moment, because it doesn't look like transforming into Hawkie feels that great."

Plagg scoffed.

"I will ask again tomorrow!" Adrien exclaimed, trying to look at the black cat on his shoulder. He winced and pulled his head back. "I'm not going to keep Bella locked in a box, no matter what she did. It's not her fault she was corrupted, is it?"

Marinette reverted her own transformation. She had so many questions about all of this. Dark gods, corruption, enslaved Kwami… Tikki would likely be more straightforward about it than her brother. Pale red light flickered over the young heroine, washing her costume away while Tikki twirled into the air.

"She's not," Plagg replied, shrugging. "You humans are the sum of what you learn. We are the sum of our holders. We were born little more than concepts and everything else we are now trickled down to us from our heroes' hearts. We have little choice in the matter."

Marinette turned to Tikki, who had landed on a metalling beam and was listening to Plagg with a somber expression.

"How does that work?" the girl asked, her worry seeping into her voice. "What are Kwami? Are you really prisoners?"

She had never seen Tikki so distinctly uncomfortable. Plagg was curled up with his ears flattened on his head. He shook his head. His sister shook her own.

"We were… ideas," she explained. "Just intangible, living representations of a concept. I was Luck, Plagg was Misfortune, and our brothers and sisters need more than one word to be described." - She collected herself, looking up at Marinette with the utmost seriousness. - "A long, long time ago, humanity was going through a dark time. The humans were facing magical enemies. Demons, dragons, gods… They needed to defend themselves, so they found a way to steal magic from the sky. They captured us and they bound us to jewels, so we could be used as allies to fight evil. Now, the process was all very complicated and I don't know all the details of it, but the most important point was that, before binding us to the Miraculous, they needed to make us at least partly corporeal."

Marinette frowned.

Tikki took a quick peek at Adrien then went on.

"Before binding us to something physical, they needed to bind us to something magical. Think of it as some sort of ethereal clay we were fused with."

"And by that she means 'animal souls'," Adrien cut in.

The two Kwami turned to him in horror. Marinette blanched, looking at them for confirmation.
From their aghast expressions, it was clear her partner was right.

"What did Kubdel tell you?" Plagg asked, voice low and menacing.

"He told me that you were all trapped in a magical box," Adrien replied, sullen. "That you were all trying to escape, and that you couldn't be used like that, so that there was a horrible ritual 'involving fire and animal souls', all of that so you could be merged with the Miraculous and exploited."

"I'M GOING TO STRANGLE BELLA!" the black Kwami yelled, while Tikki floated back, shell-shocked.

"Oh, that's not good," she murmured. "That's not good at all. No one is supposed to know that part. What was Bella thinking? We are going to have to figure it how much Kubdel knows of the specifics, and if he told someone else about it! It's-"

"Tikki," Marinette exclaimed.

Her Kwami whirled to her.

"Mister Kubdel will be questioned anyway, about many things. We will pay him a visit. But I have a question. An important question." - She braced herself. - "Do you want to be freed?"

Tikki stared at her, bewildered.

Her chosen went on.

"Bella wants to break out of her Miraculous no matter what it will do to her. Obviously, the Miraculous are prisons. So do you want to be freed? Can we help the two of you?"

"I don't want out!" Tikki protested. "The Miraculous are important! I am happy to help fight evil! We are making the word a better place! And I am not your prisoner. You are not my jailor. You are my friend."

"What about you, Plagg?" Adrien asked.

"I think you are making mountains out of molehills. I assure you humans invented chains well before they figured magic out. They had slaves before they had writing. You have squishy bodies of water and meat that can be transported against your will. You can be coerced and used too. We are all bound to something."

His chosen gestured in frustration.

"It doesn't make the way you were treated any fairer."

"But whatever was done to us was only a symptom of a larger problem," Plagg retorted, rolling his eyes. "We are ancient, Adrien. We lived long enough to have seen Caesar conquer half a continent and sell entire populations into slavery. Fifty-thousand people at a time, just sold. And we are now closer to Caesar's time than Caesar's time was to our birth. Can you imagine how primitive and different the world was back then? You are making yourself sick worrying about concerns that we no longer have."

"What about how Tikki has to steal your ring from the other Miraculous holders so you can pick your own heroes?" Adrien insisted. "What about the seals? How is that fair?"
The more Marinette heard, the more horrified she was. She picked Tikki up between her cupped hands and pulled her close to her, wishing the Kwami was larger so she could be hugged. Tikki nuzzled against her cheek then flew to Adrien.

"It was not the heroes who decided to keep Plagg under watch," she explained. "It was us. His siblings. We took that decision because it was warranted and while I don't think it is still necessary, the others are not convinced yet. We are vulnerable," she explained. "We are vulnerable and we have to be cautious about the way our powers are used. You can't really measure how much we can be changed by external influences unless you have seen the before and the after, but Bella… Bella used to be eager to help. She was overjoyed to be given missions, she loved everything about what we do. She was sweeter than I am."

"But then her powers were used for evil," Marinette finished.

Plagg yawned.

"Pretty much. Turns out there's a problem with using what's basically a magical sponge to bind spirits," he drawled. "The animal souls held us in alright, but they can absorb a great many nastier things on top of that. And, guess what, they do."

"Nastier things that come from us," Adrien commented. "Why didn't you warn us?"

"Because it takes acts of great evil to corrupt us," Tikki replied. She stared Plagg down. "And I do berate Marinette when she uses her powers with less than honorable intentions, but I guess someone takes a more liberal approach."

The black Kwami scoffed.

"Hey! I berated him when he told that one lie to that one man that one time! I think!"

His sister puffed her cheeks and frowned some more.

"Maybe," Plagg muttered.

She kept staring.

"ALRIGHT, I DIDN'T!" he yelled. "Who cares? Weren't we discussing serious things?"

The red Kwami grumbled.

"Day-to-day mischief does not really impact us," she explained, looking at Adrien. "We had no reason to warn the two of you because you are kind-hearted. There is no evil in you. When I said 'acts of great evil', I didn't mean pettiness or jealousy or the odd stolen phone." - Marinette blushed. - "Bella was corrupted by murder. So was Waspp. And I don't mean the simple act of killing people, because we were given to soldiers before, we fought in wars, our heroes did what they had to. I mean taking a life out of hatred or for pleasure. It's the intent that taints us, the desire to inflict pain and cause irreversible destruction. That is what taints us."

"Tainting isn't the right word," Plagg commented. "What it actually does is carve parts of us away to make place for that darkness. So when Bella's chosen went ahead and slaughtered his family, her conscience was cut clean out."

"She might be a monster now but she had no say in it," Tikki concluded. "And she cannot understand that she is one. As far as she is concerned, she isn't doing anything wrong. She cannot be reasoned with, she cannot be shown the errors of her ways, because you cannot appeal to
feelings that do not exist."

Marinette pursed her lips.

"So what we..." - She went silent when she noticed the look on Adrien's face, or absence thereof. He had paled and tensed, and was lost in thought. - "Adrien?"

He blinked, startled.

"So what we can do for her - the only thing we can do to help her - is give her to someone who will balance the corruption with goodness," he said. "Even if she fights against it."

Tikki acquiesced.

"The Bella I knew would not want to be the creature she is now. We have to help her become herself again. And I know the way to do it does not feel right, but there's no other choice. Sometimes, you have to hurt the ones you love, for their own good."

Adrien stared right at her, maybe through her.

"What about the box?" he asked. "That's too much, isn't it?"

Tikki shifted and shrunk away, uneasy. She mulled over the question. Her eyes darted to Plagg, who was observing her reaction. She looked away. The more time passed, the clearer it became that she did not have an answer.

"Nathalie is afraid and I think she might be overreacting," she ended up replying, "but that's only human. Bella will get over it."

Adrien breathed in, smiled, then stood.

"I'll discuss this with Nathalie, if it's alright with you." - He said that, but didn't give Tikki a second to answer. - "Plagg! Claws out!"

###

Nathalie was not surprised to find the apartment empty when she walked out of her bedroom, not fifteen minutes after locking herself into it. She had not expected Ladybug to leave, not really. The girl was a young dragon who would protect Adrien to her last fiery breath. Of course, she would have stayed.

An empty apartment was just fine.

She carried Bella's box to the bathroom, turned the shower on, then curled up under the burning water in the hope it would wash everything she was away.

Not that it worked.

Was there even a point to taking Adrien away from his father if she replaced Gabriel's abuse by more of the same? She would shut the boy out too. What little warmth she had to give burned out in a matter of minutes. She was as suited for this as salt was to soothing wounds. All the presents and toys she could smother Adrien with would not change that.
If there had been anyone else to turn to, she would have thrown Adrien at them and bolted.

There was no one else.

She stayed under the water until the heat of the water became unbearable. She dried her reddish skin, wiped the remnants of makeup from her face, brushed her hair. She dressed herself rather than changing into pyjamas. After that, she returned to her bedroom with the golden box, sat on her bed, and freed Bella.

The pink Kwami burst out of the box as soon as it opened, shoving the lid out of her way. The brooch fell into Nathalie's hand, and she closed her fist around it.

Bella stilled in front of her, hovering just out of arm's reach, just high enough to force Nathalie to look up at her.

A moment went by. The goddess studied her face.

"What do you want?" she asked.

There was no point pretending she had not been summoned out of need. Even if Bella had not been some kind of empath, it was clear enough that Nathalie would never have let her out of her prison if she had not needed to do so. The Kwami was not stupid.

*There is nothing you can gain from talking to the devil,* Nathalie told herself.

But she had a question she needed an answer to. And, for the first time ever, she wanted that answer to be 'yes'.

"Is Alice alive?" she asked.

###
Adrien woke up at seven.

He jumped out of bed, ignoring Plagg's disgruntled moans, then tripped over a cardboard box he had forgotten about, then ran out of his improvised bedroom to get to the kitchen. Once there, he opened the fridge and made a mental list of its contents.

Nathalie, who seemed to live on probiotic yogurt, bread, frozen vegetables and little more, had restocked her kitchen to accommodate the presence of a new tenant. The fridge was packed full, the cupboards were packed full, cereal boxes were lined on top of the cupboards themselves. She had ticked every item off her mental checklist and sighed in contentment after emptying the groceries bag and putting everything away. Cans were stacked on top of each other in the cupboards, neatly ordered. The cereal boxes were perfectly parallel and sorted in alphabetical order. The vegetables were in the vegetables drawer of the fridge, and twelve eggs had been taken out of their packages to be placed in the little egg holes of the door.

Adrien took six eggs and a pack of milk out, got flour out of the second cupboard from the left (and salt), then found a bowl and started working.

He had thought hard and long about the previous evening, from Nathalie's reaction to Bella's situation. He had come to the conclusion that there was not a single decision they could take that would not cost someone something. Even if Hawk Moth had been stopped, nothing could go right. It looked like the days to come would be dark and depressing, with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Well. When there was no light at the end of the tunnel, you checked your pockets for a flashlight.

"What are you making?" Plagg asked, finally emerging from the bedroom.

The Kwami landed next to him and watched him mix the flour, the eggs and mix in the bowl. With a fork. There was no whisk to be found in the drawers.

"Pancats," Adrien replied.

"Panwhat?"

"Pan. Cats. It's pancakes, but with ears. My mom used to make them."

Plagg observed some more.

"When have you last cooked?"

Adrien pursed his lips and puffed his cheeks.

"Not so long ago. Like, five, six years? I remember just fine!"

The Kwami stared at the batter with a dubious expression.

"Maybe we could use Cataclysm on it to get rid of the lumps."

"Or maybe you could just let me whip it until they're gone!" his chosen mumbled.
"If you think it's best…"

Adrien rolled his eyes, sighing. He kept mixing the batter, managing to obtain a more or less smooth substance where you could only find average sized lumps. He would just avoid pouring them in the pan.

Armed with butter and a ladle, he greased the pan and poured the first pancake. He made sure not to make it too large, to leave room for the ears, then added two triangles of batter on top of it. 'Triangle' being the general idea and not the final result. It didn't matter at all in the end, because that pancake ended up on the floor when he tried to flip it.

It had always seemed so effortless when Alice did it.

"Alright," he muttered. "Let's try again."

He cleaned the mess up, made a new pancake, and flipped it with the help of a cooking pan lid. He had managed to prepare six of them when Nathalie walked out of the room and, if you averaged the burned sides and the raw sides, they were even decently cooked!

Nathalie stopped at the room's entrance and blinked.

"What are you… cooking?" she asked.

Adrien grinned.

"Pancats! It's like pancakes, but with a little more flair."

She blinked again, then looked briefly pained as recollection hit her. 'Pancats' were one of Alice's favorite treats. Nathalie wiped the sadness from her face and smiled, seating herself at the table.

"Sounds delicious," she replied.

"'Sounds'," Plagg murmured.

He wouldn't look at Nathalie. As a matter of fact, he kept his back turned to her and his ears flattened. But he had not managed to resist the jab.

Adrien ignored him. He grabbed two plates, served the pancakes he had prepared, and brought them to the table. Then he ran back to the cupboards to get sugar and cassonade.

"Here," he said, putting both packs on the table and sitting in front of Nathalie.

"Thank… you," she exclaimed, with the slightest hesitation. To be fair, the pancats didn't look that appetizing. The last one Adrien had made was slightly less burned on the top, but wasn't what one would call mouthwatering. "It looks delicious."

"I'll do better with the next ones, I swear," he promised. "Sugar?"

Nathalie shook her head and reached for the cassonade, dumping some of it in the middle of her pancake. She went to fetch forks and knives, since Adrien had forgotten them, then spread the cassonade over her pancake and folded it.

She did not grimace when she took her first bite, much to the teenager's relief.

They ate in silence, with Nathalie shifting uneasily on her seat for the best part of five minutes.
"I am sorry for yesterday," she ended up saying. "I shouldn't have yelled like that."

Adrien tensed a little, looking away.

"It's fine," he replied. "I get it."

She studied his face but made no further comment.

"But we will have to discuss Bella," Adrien added. "Whether you want it or not. There is knowledge she gave to mister Kubdel that no human should have, and we need to know what she told him. And that box is too cruel a punishment. And there are... other questions we have to ask her."

_That I have to ask_, he thought.

Maybe mister Kubdel had told the truth about what he knew about Alice's fate, but nothing proved his Kwami was as ignorant as he was.

"That 'Fu' person..." Nathalie replied. "Have you contacted him? Can we expect him to show up soon?"

Adrien shook his head.

"We haven't been able to get in touch with him at all. Volpina - an Italian hero - is trying, but from what I have heard... it might not be Master Fu who'll come back with the Turtle Miraculous. He is looking for a replacement."

She massaged the bridge of her nose.

"Perfect. Just. Perfect."

"Anyway, we can talk about Bella tonight, or tomorrow, when things are a little calmer." - Adrien stuffed a square of pancat into his mouth. - "Today, I'm going to school."

"You are? I can get you a doctor note for the next week, really."

Adrien took two more bites, chewed and swallowed.

"I want to go. _Everyone_ in my class was Akumatized except Marinette. _Everyone_. I want to know how they are taking the news. And then there is Alya and her blog. She hasn't posted anything about Hawk Moth's capture, so I think she figured out he's Alix's father. I want to know what she plans to do." - _And if she would write an article about the actual truth_, he didn't say. - "And then, of course, maybe someone talked to Alix herself."

Nathalie mulled over that.

"I expect her family is under police protection, so that's unlikely."

Adrien closed his eyes, absorbed her words (though he was well aware that she was right), then breathed out.

"I'll see. Anyway, I'll take the Cat Bus there..." - Nathalie obviously didn't catch the Totoro reference. - "And I'll get back here after... What day is it and what am I supposed to do after class, anyway?"

"Nothing. You are free. Your father cancelled all of your after-school activities."
"He did?"

"Yes. He did the same for all of your upcoming photoshoots. I hear the company is scrambling to find a replacement, but it will most likely be Hugo Duranch."

"Oh. Oh. Good for him," Adrien commented, vaguely remembering a blond boy he had met twice after he had appeared in a video clip. "He's nice."

"I couldn't say. Anyway, your evenings are free, your curfew is nine on school days, ten on weekends, and might be stretched as far as midnight for special events. Also, you are to warn me before bringing friends over."

He stared at her. He wasn't used to being allowed out of the house without the supervision of a bodyguard.

"Huh, that's… it?" he asked.

"That was roughly what my mother went with when I was your age. We were also feuding about tattoos, but I'll simply say that, in retrospect, I am thankful she would not let me get one, especially in the location I wanted it on. I'm sure you can see the wisdom in waiting a few years to take decisions that permanent."

Adrien gaped. Even Plagg had turned to Nathalie.

The boy frowned.

"Where did you want it?"

"In a place that would have guaranteed me a very different line of employment," she replied. "All of that to say: the rules are simple, follow them, have fun."

She resumed eating, cutting her pancakes into little pieces which she ate without the slightest grimace. Adrien appreciated that, because the more he ate of his own, the more he felt like spitting the burned parts out.

"What about your day?" he asked when the silence grew heavy.

"Well. I have to go out and file for unemployment, for a start. Then I was planning to see what kind of positions are available at the moment, to send a few resumes in."

"Oh. So Father will not hire you again?"

"He will not, and I would refuse anyway," Nathalie replied. She stood and went to the coffee machine, preparing a cup and pressing a series of buttons. The machine filled her cup. "That being said, I'm sure he will give me a stellar recommendation if asked."

Adrien had another question, pertaining not to Nathalie's work relationship with his father but to their relationship, period. He was hesitant to ask it.

He watched Nathalie put her cup down on the counter, then cover what was left of his pancake batter with cellophane and put it in the fridge. She came back to the table and frowned at his inquisitive look.

"Yes?"

He cleared his throat.
"Nothing."

She scowled but didn't push. Plagg snorted as if he had understood what his chosen had not dared to ask and thought the question was ridiculous. At least, it was how it felt to Adrien, who finished his plate in silence. He put his fork down, looked at the clock and paled.

"How is it eight already?" he gasped. He hadn't spent that much time preparing their breakfast, had he? "I need to go!"

He ran to his new bedroom to get dressed and grab his things, then hurried to the front door. Nathalie was waiting for him.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you there?"

"I'll be faster as Chat Noir," he insisted. "Don't worry."

Nathalie scowled. She clearly did not agree. However, she sighed and nodded.

"Have a nice day!" he exclaimed, nearly running out with Plagg dashing after him. He stopped dead in his tracks. "Please try to think of another solution for Bella. Even if it's a canary cage with golden bars. I need to talk to her, Nathalie. I need to ask her about my mom."

Nathalie paled, sucking in a breath. She bit her lower lip. She swallowed. She clasped her hands behind her back.

"I will give it some thought," she promised. "Have a nice day."

###

Marinette woke up at seven.

She dripped out of bed like a mass of exhausted goo, slipping down the stairs with the speed and wakefulness of a drugged snail. She stretched, scratched her head, yawned, and opened the trapdoor to the lower floor.

This was a brand new day. Maybe it would go well. Maybe it would not include dirty politics, criminals escaping the law, nor godawful parents harming their children. Maybe.

She took five steps down the stairs and found her parents talking with a police officer.

Her mother turned to her, face wrinkled with worry.

"Marinette!" she exclaimed, walking to the stairs. "I was about to come wake you up. I checked on you half an hour ago but you were sleeping soundly. Did you hear anything strange during the night? Footsteps? Anything?"

Tom, who was looking just as anxious, was watching them. So was the cop, though his expression was more concerned than worried.

"Did something happen?" Marinette asked, paling.

"Someone broke in during the night," Sabine explained, gesturing at the entrance. "They broke the
window on the door downstairs, and they picked this lock. They took some money on the kitchen counter, possibly more, but we still need to check."

"You might have startled them before they could, ma'am," the policeman cut in. "You wake up real early, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," Marinette's father replied. "A little before four on most days."

"Then they might have tried to grab what they could from this floor before trying their luck on the cash register and safe downstairs. They would have scampered as soon as they heard noise. So, miss, did you hear anything at all?"

Marinette stared at him.

If thieves had broken the previous night, they had likely done so while she was out for patrol. She wouldn't have heard a thing, because she wouldn't have been there.

"I… No. I'm a really heavy sleeper, and if I had heard anything from downstairs, I'd have ignored it, since mom and dad get up early. I don't think anyone tried to open the trapdoor to my room either."

Not that she had heard Sabine checking in on her half an hour before.

"They most likely didn't try the bedrooms," the cop commented. "Petty thieves like that don't want to be caught." He turned to Tom. "We should make a list of what was stolen. Where do you keep your valuables?"

Marinette's father accompanied the man downstairs. Sabine sighed and closed the door behind them, then reopened it and tapped the broken lock.

"Why did it have to happen?" she murmured. "Frankly…” She looked up at her daughter. "Can you check your room? Your father and I would have heard the stairs creaking, but you never know."

The teenager stared at her.

Her stomach lurched.

"Y-yes, mom, of course!" she replied, climbing the stairs to her room.

Then she slammed the trapdoor shut, ran to the cupboard on her desk, opened the third drawer and got her diary box out. That was where she had hidden Candy Warper's cursed candy cane.

"What's happening?" Tikki asked, landing on Marinette's shoulder.

The young girl got the keys out of their own hiding place and unlocked her diary box.

Her diary was there.

The candy cane was gone.

"Oooh no," Tikki whispered.

Marinette stuffed half her fist in her mouth to stop the stream of curses she was about to shout. It came out of her nostrils as a long, high-pitched noise.

She did not bother checking anything else because there was nothing else worth stealing in the
room. She was going to *kill* someone, be it Anne-Laure Lenoir or Gabriel Agreste.

She threw some clothes on and ran back downstairs.

"Nothing is missing," she told her mother, trying to appear serene. "Do I need to stay for the police, or should I go to school?"

Sabine frowned.

"Are you feeling well enough for school?" she asked.

Marinette blinked in confusion before remembering that she was supposed to be sick.

"Oh. Oh, yes. I think I ate something I shouldn't have yesterday. I'm feeling *peachy.*"

"If you are sure," Sabine replied, looking concerned still. "But if you feel faint, come back *immediately.*"

Marinette dashed to the fridge, pretending to get herself a suitable breakfast.

"Of course, Mom!" she promised before drinking a yogurt. "But I told Mylène I'd see her early so I could get a summary of what I missed yesterday. I should hurry."

Two seconds later, she was out the door.

"Don't overexert yourself!" her mother called after her.

"Noooo! See you lateeer! Have a nice day!" Marinette shouted back, racing down the stairs.

She burst out of the house and raced towards the school. She turned to enter the metro station and transformed as soon as she found a quiet corner.

The first place she went to was the hospital where Anne-Laure Lenoir was supposed to be kept for observation. The woman was gone. Her room was occupied by another patient.

Ten minutes later, Ladybug barged into the Grand Paris. The mayor was not hard to find: he was on his way out when she arrived, which saved her from having to track him down. He looked puzzled when he saw her, then worried. Chloé was also in the hallway and gaped at the look on Ladybug's face.

The young heroine ignored her classmate and went straight for the mayor.

"Where. Is. SHE ?" she yelled.

"Ladybug... I-I am not sure I know who you are talking a-about," André stuttered. That was a patent lie. He was watching Chloé's reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, *really ?*" Ladybug snapped. "Should I *elaborate ?*"

"W-we should go to my office," he suggested. Marinette could have sworn he was about to faint. "It is quieter. We won't be disturbed."

She did not have to say 'lead the way' nor 'start moving'. One look was enough. The politician escorted her to the elevator.

Once the doors had closed on them, he lost what was left of his composure.
"Ladybug, I beg you to never mention her in front of Chloé. Ever. My daughter was told a carefully crafted story meant to preserve her from some dark truths, and I will not see her heart broken."

"Oh, yes, carefully crafted stories and unpleasant truths! How am I not surprised?" Marinette spat. "That's your solution for everything!"

He looked at her with tired eyes and a bleak expression. She crossed her arms but calmed down.

"There is a complicated family history at work," he told her. "One that I do not intend to share, but know that Chloé has no one else but me for good reason. Some topics are not to be brought up around her! I won't have her investigate matters that can only harm her. She is only a child."

"I am not here to get Chloé involved!" Marinette snapped. "I am here to know where your backstabbing thief of an ex-wife vanished to!"

The mayor sighed. The elevator stopped on the next floor, and he pushed every other button to get it moving again.

"I have no idea where she is," he declared. "I said my goodbyes yesterday evening, when she left the hospital. If I know Anne-Laure well, she's half a continent away by now. Her only endeavor for the last fifteen years has been to keep five-hundred miles between her and Paris at all times. Check the airports and the train stations."

Marinette would have stormed out if the elevator had not been moving. She had to wait for it to stop and for the doors to open. The mayor took that as an opportunity to keep talking.

"What did she do?" he asked, with the slightest frown. "Stole a dangerous magical artefact. 'Allegedly'," Ladybug added, since she was talking to a politician. She crossed her arms and stared at the doors, waiting for them to open. "Which she couldn't have done if she had been arrested for assault like she should have been."

The elevator finally stopped and Marinette elbowed her way out before the doors were fully open, leaving the mayor stunned and worried. She ran all the way through the corridor, barging through the first open door she saw, then dashed past a shocked maid to jump out of the window.

She crossed the street.

The Agreste's house was no longer on lockdown. It looked like it always did: imposing, respectable and deserted. She smashed the doorbell a few times, waited about thirty second, then just propelled herself over the wall and into the courtyard.

The window to the dining room was open, so she got in that way, then started looking for mister Agreste. He was not in his office. He was not in his study on the first floor. The door to the master bedroom was open on buckets of paint and rolled up wallpaper, and all the furniture was gone. Ladybug was not about to knock on any bedroom door, however, so she tried her luck downstairs.

After some wandering, she heard some noise, and followed it to the kitchen.

Mister Agreste was standing by the stove with her back to her, wearing impeccable grey pants, grey waistcoat and a white shirt. His white jacket was folded on the back of a chair, a few steps away.

He was cooking.
He was also purposely ignoring her.

She crossed her arms.

"So," she said, trying to sound both composed and disdainful. "Which one of you did it? Was it you, or was it miss Lenoir?"

Gabriel didn't turn. He kept his full focus on his cooking pan, and pushed its content around with a spatula. The smell of grease and fried eggs filled the air. Marinette's stomach lurched.

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you are talking about," he replied.

"The candy cane. The cursed candy cane. It was stolen from my room."

He peeked at her, mildly curious.

"Then I sure hope it was Bee."

"No one else knew I had it," Marinette snapped back. "Except you, Adrien and miss Sancoeur."

Mister Agreste pulled the pan out of the fire and turned the stove off.

"Then it has to be Anne-Laure," he commented, taking a plate and emptying the contents of the pan on it. Ladybug nearly heaved at the sight of the bacon omelette. It was too early in the morning for greasy meals. Yet, Gabriel didn't seem to mind. He sat down at the kitchen table with a smile on his face. "Do you want some?" he offered.

Her stomach nearly escaped through her nostrils.

"No."

"You don't know what you are missing," he replied, taking a first bite. "And I am positive it was Anne-Laure. Did she vanish already?"

Ladybug stared him down. It didn't work, because he looked at his plate and not at her.

"I assume she did," she answered. "It's not like I would know where to look."

Gabriel swallowed another bite, then looked up with an absolute late of concern.

"Have you asked André Bourgeois?"

"I have, as a matter of fact, but it looks like he is only helping her get away with aggravated assault. He didn't know about the candy cane and he doesn't know where she is."

Mister Agreste stabbed a piece of bacon.

"I'll give her a call," he promised before stuffing the piece of meat into his mouth. "But you might as well consider the fetish gone. For what it's worth, Fu gave it to her. She'll give it back."

"For what it's…"

Ladybug stopped at that and groaned. She wanted to strangle him, just as much as she wanted to strangle Anne-Laure.

"There's a reason I didn't involve her in my nefarious plans," Gabriel said. "There is a reason I
made sure she wouldn't know I had found Hawk Moth. Have you ever heard her talk about my wife?" Marinette shook her head. He gave the faintest shrug. "Figures. You would have understood." He took a sip of water. "Anne-Laure is a loose cannon."

*Talk about the cat calling the kettle black.*

All of a sudden, Marinette couldn't take it anymore. His attitude. His mocking politeness. His stupid omelette.

"What are you *doing?*" she yelled.

He looked at her.

"Eating?" he replied. "I'm famished."

"What. Are. You. DOING?" Marinette shouted again. "You nearly killed someone, you ruined lives, you *broke your son,* and now you are here just…" She gestured at his now empty plate. "Eating breakfast as if nothing happened? What are you *doing?*"

"Nothing," Gabriel said. He raised his eyebrows at her and explained himself. "I am doing nothing. There is nothing I can do."

"Nothing-" Marinette stomped to the table. "You could be apologizing to your son. You could be making some use of the second chance… third chance, or is it *tenth* chance you were given and don't deserve! You could be doing *something!*"

Mister Agreste pushed his chair away and stood, picking his plate up. He went and put it in the dishwasher, along with his fork and knife. He straightened up, back turned to Ladybug. He joined his hands behind his back, intertwining his fingers.

"When I was about Adrien's age, my father started rotting," he said. He walked to the window, looking outside. She frowned and studied his profile. His expression was, as usual, inscrutable. "I would say he fell ill, but that would not adequately describe the agony he went through. People will tell you cancer is a monster that devours you from the inside, and everyone *knows* how horrendous of an illness it is, and yet they don't. You can't know until you have seen it for yourself."

Ladybug shifted her weight from one foot to the other, uneasy. She had no idea what to make of that. She wished she could untransform and have Tikki step in, but it was not an option. Instead, she crossed her arms.

"So, what kind of reaction are you expecting, exactly?"

Mister Agreste turned to her.

"Don't worry. I'm not looking for your compassion. This is a parallel, not a sob story."

"Then what point are you trying to make?"

He breathed in.

"My father was a good man. He was an *amazing* man. To this day, I worship the ground he walked on, though he never knew that. He was given a long, excruciating death sentence that dragged on for years, and he endured it with the dignity of a king. He never complained. Not about the pain, not about how short his life would be. He did his best to comfort my mother. He spent time with me. He took care of me and, for as long as he could, he tried to steer me in the right direction."
There is a lot I should have learned from him and didn't."

Marinette reached for her earrings but still didn't transform back. She frowned and waited.

Gabriel turned his back to the window and leaned against the windowsill.

"I wanted to run," he said. "Back then, at Adrien's age. I wanted to run. I ran. I was out there on the roofs, every single night, running and flirting with my future wife, trying to steal her away from her partner. I wouldn't tell her how bad things were because I knew she would have sent me home. I was there when my father was awake, of course, but at night I vanished. He was the most deserving man. He loved me, he sheltered me, he made me his priority, and I..." He trailed off and looked out the window. "Now, imagine being in Adrien's shoes, with a father who is not ill, who is not loving, and who is most certainly not deserving. He is entitled to some distance."

"All you ever gave him was distance," Ladybug pointed out.

Mister Agreste straightened up.

"And now he wants it," he replied, collecting his jacket from the chair he had left it on. "Crawling back to him with flimsy apologies and promises will accomplish nothing. We're well past the point where the wounds could be mended with words. Maybe there is hope that actions could help, over time, but at this very moment, there is nothing I can do. Which is why I am doing nothing."

"I'm sure you can do better than that," Ladybug retorted, arms crossed.

"You don't get it. I don't think there was a single day in the last twenty years where I did nothing. It's part of the problem. I worked and worked until I disappeared. Doing nothing is likely a step in the right direction."

Marinette scoffed, grabbing the dirty pan from the stove and putting it into the dishwasher with Gabriel's plate.

"You sure seem to be enjoying it," she commented.

"Do I?"

She raised her eyebrows and let her eyes roam over him, from the impeccable shoes to the ironed pants to the impeccable jacket he was buttoning up. He didn't look especially distraught.

The tone of his answer bordered on mockery, and irritated her so much that she nearly missed the significance of his words.

"We all wear our suit of armor, Ladybug," he said.

###

The mood at school was wrong. Adrien felt it as soon as he walked into the yard. Everyone was subdued. The students talked in hushed whispers. Some of them kept peeking at Ivan, who almost seemed to be patrolling. If he stopped and looked at a group too closely, they cowered. Adrien, who had just arrived and was making his way to Nino and Alya, saw him glower at two Terminale boys. They had to be seventeen at least, yet they went silent under Ivan's glare. He was scary for
his age.

Adrien kept an eye on him as he joined his friends on the bench they were sitting on.

"Hi," he greeted them, still looking at their classmate. "What's going on here?"

"You're back!" Nino exclaimed. "Damn, dude, you missed a lot."

Alya merely waved, busy scrolling down on her phone. Her expression was beyond dark.

Adrien grimaced.

"A lot?"

His best friend scooted closer, lowering his voice.

"You heard Hawk Moth was arrested, right?"

The blond nodded. Alya stopped looking at her phone and listened in, though she did not raise her head.

"And you know how Alix's dad had that car accident?" Nino continued. "Well. Turns out he didn't. He is Hawk Moth."

Adrien gave his best display of speechless horror.

"Yeah," his friend muttered. "Word got out real quickly. Alix's parents have friends who tried to go to the funerarium to bring flowers, except there was no longer someone to bring flowers to, and they connected that to the news… and their daughter is in another class."

At least it hadn't been Chloé. Adrien looked around and saw her sitting on another bench, perusing Vogue with Sabrina. He breathed in in relief. Slight relief. The rest of what he had learned was catastrophic.

"So what's going on with Ivan and why does it look like he's patrolling?"

"He is," Alya said.

Adrien watched their friend near the schoolyard entrance and turn back.

"Why?"

"Okay so everyone is gossiping," Nino explained. "And yesterday, some Terminale guys were talking a bit too loudly about how Alix had to know who her dad was, and Kim was right next to them and he just turned around and suckerpunched one of them. Broke his nose. He's suspended."

Adrien ran his hands over his face.

"So Ivan is 'gently' reminding everyone that gossip sucks," the DJ said. "I mean he wouldn't hurt anyone but he looks like he could. Miss Bustier is also slamming anyone she hears making comments."

"There's only so much the teachers will be able to do," Alya commented, resuming her scrolling. "I mean, I'm surprised the news aren't in every newspaper yet. If I have them, I'm sure Nadja Chamack has them, among others."
"Thanks for not posting anything," Adrien murmured.

That startled the blogger, who frowned at him.

"Alix is our friend," she snapped. "I would never put her family in danger like that!"

"I know, I know!" the young model blurted out. "I mean, even just about Hawk Moth's arrest…"

"I have more than that," she said. "Footage of another Chat Noir, footage of our Chat Noir untransformed and being threatened by mister Kubdel…"

"You what?" the two boys gasped.

"It was leaked to Youtube and taken out real quickly, but I've been up all night refreshing the search…"

By that point, Adrien was pale as a ghost. He stared straight into Alya's eyes, looking for signs of recognition, but he didn't find any.

"I hadn't heard of that," he said.

"Well, unless someone was up between precisely twelve past four and thirteen past four this morning, it's possible no one else saw it."

"Can we look?" Nino asked.

*No, no, no,* Adrien thought.

Alya looked around, squeezed closer to them, and put her phone in front of Nino, making sure no one else could catch the slightest glimpse of the screen. She opened the video. Adrien started shivering, cold sweat running down his back. The footage was blurry and overexposed, but you could recognize Alim Kubdel. His blade was glowing. Adrien saw himself as a pale silhouette with clothes stained dark brown. Just as Marinette had told him, he was not recognizable. Between the motion blur and the heavy contrast, his face was either a white shape or a pale trail. His hair was just as messy as Chat Noir's, and looked nothing like his trademark haircut. Even Nino didn't recognize him while watching closely.

What Nino did was heave.

"Okay okay turn it off," he blurted out. "Did we hear from Chat Noir at all? That's a lot of blood."

"Yes," Alya replied, to Nino's blatant relief. "He was spotted a few times yesterday."

"Alright. Alright," the boy muttered, still shaken. "Man, that's nasty. Looks like mister Kubdel is going to spend a loooot of time in prison. Shit. I hope Alix will be-"

"He'll go there for assault and attempted murder," Alya cut in, closing the video and putting her phone away. Her expression had grown gloomier still.

"Huh? Yeah, I guess they can add that to the whole supervillain deal."

Alya took a deep breath, looking straight ahead. Adrien chewed the inside of his cheeks, knowing full well what she was about to say.

"They'll try," she told them. "It will be the trial of the century, too."
Nino winced.

"But?" he insisted. "Alya, I don't like it when you make that face."

"But the attempted murder is the only thing that will stick. How do you prove someone was wearing a mask?"

###

Plagg liked valerian tea.

It wasn't that it smelled good, though it did. It worked on Adrien. It put him to sleep.

The boy had spent his school day pretending to be fine. He was worried sick about the Kubdel girl, which meant he had kept his ears wide open to every rumor and judgemental remark a herd of human children could come up with. Plagg, who had seen his heroes executed, murdered, driven out of town and burned at the stake, had a thick hide and had rolled his eyes in boredom at every stupid comment made by Adrien's schoolmates. Unfortunately, the boy was soft. The more he heard, the sadder he felt. The sadder he felt, the harder the nonsense he heard hit him (meanwhile, his partner fumed more and more). By the end of the day, Plagg had tried to console him by telling him he had done everything right, but that had done little to cheer the child up. Even a 'it's not your fault people are idiots' had not been enough.

Plagg was not Tikki. He was not good with words. There was little more he could say.

He had watched Adrien drag himself back to Nathalie's, then drop on his bed to stare listlessly at a turned off television.

Nathalie had been busy browsing websites on her laptop when they had arrived, but had put that aside to prepare pancakes for supper, with what was left of the batter Adrien had prepared in the morning.

Plagg was still angry at her and would remain so until she released Bella, but he had to admit she was making efforts. The valerian tea, after the meal, had been a nice touch. It wasn't like Adrien had passed out after the first sip, but the drink had kept him drowsy all evening. He had tried watching the news, but lost interest when it had became clear that Nadja Chamack was rehashing the mayor's speech. Some big-shot law teachers had been called to give their enlightened predictions on the future trial, but they had merely repeated Alya's analysis in much fancier words.

By half past eight, Adrien changed channels at random and retreated to his bedroom, leaving Nathalie to learn the wonders of ant colonies as explained by some old man with a really deep voice.

Unsurprisingly, they heard the TV turn off not two minutes later.

Adrien curled up on his bed and started texting the cookie girl.

"So I finally know what Marinette tried to tell me all afternoon," he said.

Tikki's chosen had attempted to get some time alone with him for hours, but their respective best friends had not let that happen. Alya, who usually tried her best to push the two dimwits together,
had been oblivious to her best friend's desperation and to Adrien's vivid interest in the girl.

"What was it?" Plagg asked, even though he didn't care.

"Someone stole the candy cane."

"It's Bee," the Kwami replied, since that was obvious.

"What? You knew about that?"

"Well, no," Plagg drawled, "but who else would it be? Don't worry, she'll give it back to Fu once she's done with it."

"What makes you so sure she didn't steal it from him?" Adrien asked, suspicious in a way that made his Kwami proud.

"She couldn't have fished it out of the Mariana Trench on her own," he replied. "You need the Turtle transformation to get there."

The boy squinted, studied his face, then sighed. He typed something on his phone. The device buzzed a few seconds later.

Plagg yawned and curled up on the phone's charger. He watched Adrien type and type and type, then fall asleep with his phone still in his hand.

The Kwami perked up, waiting to see if his chosen would wake up, but it looked like he was sleeping soundly. The black cat flew up to the light switch and bumped into it to turn the lights off, then phased through the bedroom door. He really wanted to investigate why Nathalie had carefully kept her screen turned away from Adrien for the entire evening. Job listings were hardly confidential.

Cats were silent by nature, flying black cats even more so. Plagg darted to the ceiling and followed the wall to circle Nathalie, then slowly dropped to her level, landing on the shelves behind her chair.

Her screen was divided between a satellite map of made of dark green and brown, with forests wrapped around mountain and not a road in sight, and a document filled with dates and coordinates. Nathalie kept dragging the map from one side to another, stopping on cities south of the forest to type their names in her document.

Plagg doubted she would find many job offerings in Pacaás Novos.

He watched her study the map some more, crossreference her dates with news articles about Alice's initial disappearance, then browse through bank account histories, old schedules and flight plans. He let her log in on Gabriel's company network using 'stephanie.albert's' account to access accounting files, then landed next to her cup of coffee.

"What is it that you know and haven't told the boy?" he asked, making her jump.

She stared at him in utter shock for an instant, then slammed her laptop shut. Plagg rolled his eyes.

"You talked to Bella, didn't you?"

###
Chapter End Notes

Save me, save me, save me from this fiic...
I got a big fat wordcount trying to break me...
As stealthy as a cat

Chapter Notes

All of my apologies for not answering to... two weeks worth of comments. They are greatly appreciated and mean a lot to me, so thank you everyone! I'm a bit swamped and tired and I try to prioritize writing.

"Let's go downstairs," Nathalie suggested, closing all of the windows and documents on her screen.

She locked the computer and closed the lid, then collected her purse and walked to the exit. Plagg followed, with one short glance at Adrien's bedroom door.

Nathalie remained silent in the elevator. She remained silent in the hallway. She remained silent as she walked from the building entrance to a tree planted on the edge of the parking lot, then fished a pack of cigarettes out of her purse.

She lit one, breathed the smoke in and coughed.

"I did talk to Bella," she finally said.

Plagg stared at the glowing tip of the cigarette, that shone vivid orange in the darkness.

"When did you start smoking?" he murmured, with an uneasiness she couldn't have understood.

"At fourteen," she replied. "Mostly as part of a feud with my mother. I stopped three months later. This is the first pack I bought in... twelve years?"

Plagg's eyes followed the orange glow that swayed from side to side as she shook her hand.

"Never smoke in front of Gabriel."

The human blinked, perplexed. She hesitated.

"Why?"

"His father died of lung cancer," he explained. And his mother blamed herself to the point she let herself die, he didn't add.

"Oh." Nathalie dropped the cigarette and crushed it under her heel, then picked it up and pushed it into the pack it had come from. She looked around, found a trash can and threw it all away.

"What did Bella say?" Plagg asked when she came back.

"Bella," the woman replied, tone laced with disgust, "tried to make a deal. She wanted me to transform and send a champion to free Alim Kubdel, in exchange of what she would have told me everything she knew about Alice's disappearance. That's as far as the conversation went."

Plagg scoffed.

"He's her chosen. Of course she would ask that."
"She doesn't know anything," Nathalie stated. Hesitation flickered on her face. "At least, I think she doesn't. 'Everything someone knows' can be very little. But if Kubdel doesn't know anything, I doubt she has more information than he does."

"Then what are you doing with the maps and the dates?"

"I have… a lead, of sorts. I am… putting a timeline together, preparing the terrain. Not that it is of any real use, but I want to wait for Gabriel to recover some semblance of sanity."

"And what are you planning, exactly?" the black cat wondered, eyes reduced to thin slits.

*What did you need a test run for?*

She ignored the question.

"Plagg. If you had a way to find her and were hiding it from Gabriel - for his own sanity, that is - how long could you keep it to yourself? How long would be 'too long' for him to forgive you?"

"Roughly the time it took you to decide to keep it a secret," the Kwami commented. She knew that.

"I see. Well, then. Waiting a little more can hardly make it worse."

###

If you wanted prime quality moping, you went to the roof.

Some prefered to do their moping in a dark room, with the curtains closed and a pillow to cry on, but when you were a teenager in the company of another teenager you were dating, it was much harder to lock yourself in your bedroom and in the dark. You faced some scrutiny. Your makeshift guardian insisted on open doors or long talks that 'trust me, Adrien, you would rather have with the internet'.

The roof was good too.

Marinette and Adrien were laying on their backs and staring at the sky, with Tikki sitting on the edge of the roof and Plagg curled up in the sun.

It was a good way to spend a saturday morning.

The clouds were moving faster than the news.

"What do you think will happen when they reveal his identity, Tikki?" Adrien asked. He wanted a new perspective. "Has this ever happened before, or did you always go the memory wipe road? Was there ever a villain who got away with it?"

He realized too late how silly his question was. Bella had roamed the world for centuries.

The Kwami sighed.

"We've seen justice evolve over the centuries, a lot," she responded, looking at the sky. "I remember a time where there was no such thing as a 'burden of proof'. I remember a time when proof came in the form of a needle that prickled your skin, or as the word of a spoiled prince, or as
an omen. If Alim Kubdel gets away with it, then I will still be content, as it will be a sign that humanity has bettered itself." She turned to Adrien and smiled. - "Cautiousness in those matters is a good thing and we should encourage it always. It is better to see a guilty man escape the law than to see an innocent be punished. Far be it from us to slay the righteous with the wicked."

Adrien blinked at the familiar words he couldn't quite place. He let them sink in.

Tikki was something else.

"Fair point," he admitted, smiling.

"You might not see it because, from where you stand, it looks like every single thing is going wrong, but in the greater scheme of things… you have freed the world from a great evil. Bella is finally back with us. Her reign of terror is over. I don't think you realize how important that is. She has been lost for millennia. We lost Waspp to corruption for a century, and Vixx for the odd decade, but Bella was out of our reach for most of our lives. We can finally hope to be reunited. Finding Zharr and Waspp should be easy enough. The cursed weapons Bella caused will be cleansed, the souls they contain finally put to rest."

"Provided miss Lenoir gives the one she stole back," Marinette mumbled.

Adrien bolted upright.

"The watch."

Marinette sat and Plagg raised his head, curious.

"Alix's watch is not a tracker!" Adrien exclaimed, standing up. "Her father had one. The real one, with a bird hologram in it. He had it on him when you rescued me. It has to be somewhere in the house, or with the cops!"

Tikki's words echoed in his mind. Finding Zharr. It was why Hawk Moth had travelled to Brazil to begin with. How had Adrien forgotten about that so easily? He hoped the device had survived the collapse of the floor they had been on. With some luck, it was safe and sound in a box of evidence.

"We need to get it," he said. "I'll warn Nathalie we're leaving."

He ran to the maintenance staircase, not waiting for his partner. Tikki landed on his shoulder as he raced down the stairs.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes! It looks exactly like my father's butterfly watch."

"Are you really sure?" she insisted.

"Yes!"

He nearly ran past the door to Nathalie's floor, backtracked and stopped there. By that point, Marinette had caught up with them.

"What did the bird look like?" Tikki insisted. "What was it doing?"

"Is that important?" Marinette asked, pushing the door open and holding it for them.

"It was flying," Adrien replied. "Just beating its wings."
Tikki jumped from his shoulder to Marinette's.

"What about its tail? Was it displayed? In a fan?" she clarified. "Or was it down?"

Adrien thought about it.

"Down. Definitely down."

"Oh," Tikki murmured, lowering her head.

Marinette led the way towards the apartment door.

"What would be the difference?"

"I've seen that watch before," her Kwami explained. "It was part of a set of six, one for each of us except Bella, since she was on the run. They were made by a magical engineer, back in the seventeenth century. We were all active in France back then, and the king commissioned them for our heroes. Chat Noir destroyed his and mine in... as soon as we left the room after the ceremony, actually. But the others still work."

Adrien frowned.

"How come my father has one?"

"The butterfly watch was assembled but never linked to Bella. I assume someone got it to work by powering it with Akuma. Anyway... the watches have two modes. In their dormant state, they give the time and display the image of an animal. When our holders are transformed, however, the clock hands point at us, and the hologram changes. If the peacock's tail had been on display, it would have meant that Zharr is active in the vicinity."

They stopped in front of Nathalie's door.

Little fragments of information were weaving themselves together. Tikki's story, Alim's words, Gabriel's.

"My father said his was an heirloom," Adrien said, narrowing his eyes. "Tikki... Is it at all possible that Bella could have chosen mister Kubdel because she knew he would inherit the watch? She wants to find the Miraculous, right?"

Marinette paled.

"I think it's a distinct possibility. Especially since that watch is linked to Zharr. He's her favorite brother."

"She could have gotten to the others," Marinette remarked, horrified. "She needs to attack to lure us out, but... as long as she gets the watches, she can find the other Kwami and surprise them. Waspp is missing!"

"The bee watch is in Volpina's... in Fu's hands," Tikki reassured her. "Waspp is many things, but 'naive' is not one of them. She realized how dangerous those trackers were, just like Plagg. However, she was willing to admit the watches could prove useful if one of us was corrupted. She made sure to leave hers in the right hands."

"But the peacock watch remained in Zharr's holder's family," Adrien supposed.
"It… Yes," Tikki sighed. "That magical engineer was Zharr's chosen. He kept his."

Adrien bit down on his lips, mulling over the possibility that Alim Kubdel had been targeted, rather than chosen, by a deity five-thousand years older than the child he had been.

You have freed the world from a great evil.

Her reign of terror is over.

"We should get the peacock watch back," he said. "Master Fu should have it. We never know who might end up finding it."

Tikki nodded. Adrien unlocked the apartment door and let Marinette walk inside before him. As soon as they entered, they heard Nathalie's voice from the kitchen.

"- same approach my mother took and I turned out fine." There was a pause, then her tone grew horrified. "When did you meet my… You remember that?" she exclaimed, going silent once again. "My mother calling you 'dreamy' doesn't mean a thing. She has horrible taste in men."

Marinette and Adrien exchanged a stunned look, then joined Nathalie into the kitchen.

"The children are here," the woman muttered into her phone.

She was making coffee. Plagg, who had not bothered with the stairs, was already in the room, chewing a piece of Camembert on a countertop. The volume of Nathalie's phone was loud enough for Adrien to recognize his father's voice, but not to make out what he was saying.

"Your father says hello, to the both of you," Nathalie announced, greatly shortening whatever it was that Gabriel had said.

Marinette muttered a 'good day to him'. Adrien nodded, then grew serious.

"We'll be out for the rest of the morning. Is that okay or should I be back for lunch?"

"Where are you going?" Nathalie asked, over what sounded distinctly like a 'where is he going?' from Gabriel. She muted her phone.

"To the pool!" Marinette blurted out, despite the fact that neither of them had a gym bag or even the shadow of a swimsuit with them.

"To the movies," Adrien said at the exact same time, being the excellent liar he was. "Jurassic World is on at half past ten and I left the blu ray in my room."

"You have blu rays of movies that are still in theaters?" his girlfriend exclaimed.

"Father gets them for me whenever he wants to avoid spending time with me," he deadpanned. Everyone winced, even Tikki and Plagg.

He scratched the back of his neck.

"Anyway, Nathalie, I don't know if you had something planned for lunch…"

She shook her head.

"No, no. Feel free to eat something at the 'pool'," she told him. "Please avoid facing gunfire,
knife-wielding criminals and journalists, though. If you get interviewed, you will be grounded."

Adrien was unused to such a level of freedom.

"Uh. Okay. Uh. See you this afternoon, then. Thank you!"

He retreated to the door, while Marinette thanked Nathalie too. Tikki promised to keep an eye on them both. As for Plagg, he asked if he could finish his cheese.

###

"They'll be fine," Nathalie told Gabriel when the door closed on Adrien and his girlfriend.

"I never said they wouldn't be," he lied. Well, not lied. He had not said it. She knew he had his worries.

"I'll keep you updated. What are your plans for the afternoon?"

She waited for a satisfactory answer, something that could translate to 'yes, I have recovered' or 'yes, I am in full control of my emotions'. What she got was 'I'll drop by my fencing club, I think'. It did not shed any light on Gabriel's mental state.

"Good," she commented. "Exercise will do you good."

There was a deafening crunch followed by the briefest munching noise. She nearly threw her phone out the window. She squeaked.

"Shorry," her nightmare of an… ex… something mumbled. She heard him swallow. "I thought I had muted the call. My breakfast is ready. Can I call you later?"

"I will keep you updated," she repeated. "Enjoy your fencing session."

"Thank you. Have a nice day, Nathalie."

"You too," she sighed, hanging up.

She wished she could be sure of how he felt. He tried, tried very hard to be nonchalant and pleasing (with that thin layer of obnoxiousness that put her in a murderous mood). That being said, it meant little. There were blanks in their conversations. He would be talking to her then, in the span of an instant, his eyes would glaze over. He would lose focus. He would stop answering. He was also exhausted: she had woken him up twice by calling him in the middle of the day.

He had been fueled by his need to find Hawk Moth. Now that he had, that energy had been drained out of him, leaving him… different.

It was like that afternoon they had spent in that guest room, after the first panic attack he had had in front of her. The difference was that, this time, his weariness was there to stay.

*He's not all there yet,* she told herself.

She thought of the coalescing darkness she had seen oozing out of him and squeezed her eyes shut.
Not yet.

But she remembered Plagg's words too.

"If Alice is alive and you waste a single second Gabriel could have spent rescuing her, he will kill you," the black cat had warned her when they had discussed the secrets she kept.

"If," Nathalie had replied. "I am not delusional. I doubt you are. We are looking for her bones, if there is that much left to find."

But she wasn't sure. She could not be.

"Trust me when I say I wish she could be alive and well," she had continued. "Adrien needs his mother, especially now. But, realistically speaking, everything points to her being dead."

Uncertainty had pooled in Nathalie's stomach as she forced those words out of her mouth. It had made her ill.

The nausea came and went, along with her doubts.

###

Saturday went by uneventfully. For the most part.

Hawk Moth's identity remained undisclosed. The press kept rehashing what little they had to go on. Conflicting information about his hospital stay were revealed, then corrected, then corrected again.

Plagg spent most of the afternoon grumbling about stupid human cops and their refusal to cooperate, but Adrien was not as negative as he was. Chat Noir had met with the police commissioner, along with Ladybug, and they had asked about the watch.

"It is a dangerous magical artefact," Ladybug had pretended, in a seamless, perfect lie she would never have managed out of costume. "We just want to make sure it will be handled properly."

Unfortunately for them, the commissioner had not been much help.

"Evidence is still being processed," he had replied. "Dusted for prints, photographed, transported from one lab to another... I'll give a few phonecalls, get the list, see if it was catalogued."

He had given said phonecalls, discovered the peacock watch was safely stored with the rest of the items collected from mister Kubdel's mother home, and refused to give it to them.

It made sense. Evidence couldn't just vanish from the police headquarters. The entire case had to be handled 'by the book', despite the overwhelming amount of tampering André Bourgeois had done already. The watch would be kept under close watch, however.

"Trust me. This is Hawk Moth," the commissioner had promised. "We're not leaving anything to chance. Those items will be guarded night and day."

Tikki was of the mind that it was good enough. They would wait for the trial to be over and quietly steal the watch and voila.
Plagg wanted to skip the whole 'waiting' part.

He started ranting the instant Adrien and Marinette untransformed, in a back alley two streets away from the police station. He kept mumbling under his breath for the whole bus ride to Nathalie's, forcing the two teenagers to talk loudly and non-stop to cover his voice (everyone shot daggers at them). He grumbled and whined and argued from the moment they walked into the apartment, continued while his chosen and his best friend prepared themselves lunch and went on while they played Ultimate Mecha Strike.

Adrien had never seen him so interested in getting his paws on something that wasn't cheese. Yet, when the Kwami finally shut up, the boy didn't stop to think that it was suspicious, nor did he pay any mind to Tikki and Plagg's sudden disappearance. He was winning his matches, and feeling good for the first time in days (The winner got a kiss. Of course, seeing how they were alone, so did the loser. It was a win-win situation with added mechas).

He did not question Nathalie closing the bedroom door because the game's sound effects got on her nerves, even though she had made snide remarks about teenage pregnancy in the morning.

Even when he raided the kitchen for more snacks, in the late afternoon, he nearly failed to notice that something was amiss. Everything looked normal: the apartment was quiet, with the television softly buzzing in the background. Nathalie was sitting at the dinner table with her laptop, still busy sending jobs applications. Adrien nearly ran back to his room with the bag of doritos and the cans of Dr. Pepper he had pilfered. He stopped on his way back to look for Plagg. A quiet Plagg was an omen of trouble.

That was when he heard the muffled voices coming from Nathalie's room. Tikki's quiet whispers and Plagg's random interjections merged into background noise. What caught Adrien's attention was a third voice, a childish, enthusiastic soprano that answered the other voices in quick bursts.

He froze, then turned to Nathalie. She pretended to be absorbed in her work, but pursed her lips.

"You released Bella?" Adrien gasped, keeping his voice barely above a whisper so the Kwami would not hear him. "And you did not tell us?"

She took a deep breath.

"Tikki needed her to lift some 'seals','" she explained without looking up. Her tone was strictly professional. "As soon as that's done, the brooch is going back into its box."

"No! No, Nathalie, please, at least give me a chance to talk to her," he begged. His stomach twisted. "Please. I need to ask her about mom."

For a split-second, Nathalie looked as if she had taken a blow to the gut. She collected herself, grimaced and pinched the bridge of her nose. Then she sighed.

"Please sit," she instructed.

Adrien paled and walked to the table, clutching the back of a chair.

"You asked," he murmured.

Nathalie nodded.

"I did. She doesn't know anything, Adrien. I'm sorry."
He had to clutch the chair a little harder. His legs felt like jelly.

"I... Are you sure? I mean... What did she say exactly?"

"That she was not in Brazil when your mother went missing and neither was Hawk Moth. Her siblings are talking to her. They will try asking her too - she is much more likely to be honest with them than with us - but I don't think she has the answers."

"Could I just-" 

"No."

"But-"

"No. Adrien, she is poison, and she is angry at you and Ladybug. She will tell you whatever she believes will hurt you the most. Let the Kwami try."

He opened his mouth, not to protest but to answer 'I understand'. Nathalie still cut him off.

"No! " she snapped.

She was angry, but it was anger rooted in fear. She was scared of letting him near Bella. He understood that, though the would have liked a little more trust.

"Alright," he blurted out, quickly so she wouldn't believe he was about to argue. "Could you... Could you call me as soon as they're done? Please? "

"Of course," she promised. "Of course I will. In the meantime, please stay with Marinette and try not to work yourself up. We will get to the bottom of this, I promise."

Well, if even Bella doesn't know, good luck with that.

"Alright," he repeated. He crushed the bag of doritos against his chest and moved the cans of Dr. Pepper to his other side before the condensation on them could permeate through his t-shirt.

"Alright."

He returned to his room and found Marinette sitting cross-legged on the floor, next to the game controller she had discarded. She looked worried.

"Something wrong with Nathalie?" she asked.

Just no news at all. Business as usual.

He did not feel like repeating that his mother would never be found.

"No, no. Just a disagreement about Doritos and carpets," he pretended. He sat next to her and pushed their controllers away with both feet. Then he smiled and leaned against her until she collapsed.

"Hey!" she gasped.

He chuckled and pressed himself against her back, burying his nose against her shoulder. Her clothes smelled like pastries. She grumbled about cold floors and blushed so hard he saw her neck color.

"D'you still want to play?" he asked her. "It's been hours."
"I don't know, I was winning, so…"

"We could watch a movie," he suggested.

"We could."

###

Adrien had tried to stay awake, really tried.

He had wanted to wait for Plagg. Tikki had returned to Marinette less than one hour after Adrien's talk with Nathalie, but she had returned alone. He had not asked about Plagg. He had not talked to Tikki at all, merely kept his eyes on the TV screen and Alicia Silverstone in her white Calvin Klein dress.

He had let Marinette pick the movie and watched her select *The devil wears Prada*, then flail and fidget and frantically look for something that didn't involve a bad-tempered fashion leader, all of that while trying to make sure Adrien had not noticed her first choice. She had settled for *Clueless* but, as it turned out, it took little to remind someone of Gabriel Agreste. Gigantic closets with a computer based matching system did, for a start.

Then again, when your girlfriend smelled like pastries fresh out of the oven, your father wasn't the first thing on your mind. He wasn't even the second. The second thing was pie. The third was chocolate bread, then croissants, then éclairs, then macarons, then those weird balls covered in sugar and filled with cream Adrien didn't know the name of, then your father. And it was a distant thought you tried to smother.

"Where did you vanish to?" Marinette had asked Tikki.

Adrien had shaken his head so she would not worry her chosen with the truth.

"Just getting some food," The Kwami had replied.

Marinette, oblivious to the grimaces her boyfriend was making behind her, had asked about Plagg, only to be told that he would be busy for a while.

They had left at the end of the movie. Ladybug had transformed in a corner of Adrien's room, kissed him and slipped out through the window.

Adrien had paced for an hour, returning to the living room every five minutes to find Nathalie shaking her head. Her bedroom door had remained closed. After a while, he had given up on the pacing and sat down on his bed, then laid down, then… Well.

The sunlight woke him up the next morning.

It took him a few seconds to remember where he was, then what he had been doing right before falling asleep. Then he bolted upright, looking for Plagg.

"Plagg?" he called. "Plagg?"

The Kwami emerged from a cardboard box.
"Mhngf."

Adrien jumped out of bed and crouched on the floor next to the box.

"What did Bella say?" As Plagg merely squeezed his eyes shut, the teenager insisted. "What did she say about mom?"

The look on Plagg's face told him everything.

"She doesn't know," the Kwami replied. "She doesn't, or if she does, she will lie to the end. Tikki all but begged her for answers, because it is Alice, you know. I tried to get Bella to brag and tell me... We used to be birds of a feather, you know? But she insists she knows nothing."

"Do you believe her?"

"I don't know. Your father hurt her chosen. You captured him. She holds grudges."

Adrien ran his hands over his face.

Alright. Alright. It changes nothing. You didn't know. You had no leads. It changes nothing at all.

He remained still for a moment, head tilted back, hands flattened over his eyes. He let the pressure clutching his brain slowly recede.

"Alright. It was worth a try. Did Nathalie put her back in the box?"

Plagg nodded.

"Nathalie is terrified of Bella. She will only summon her if strictly necessary."

Adrien sighed.

"That's still... I don't like it. At all."

Plagg yawned, shrugging.

"She'll get over it."

"W-what? I don't get you! Just yesterday, you were furious!"

"I had forgotten," Plagg said, hovering to the door and landing on the doorknob.

"Forgotten what?"

"I had forgotten what she was like. I mean, corrupted. It's not really her you are talking to, it's ghosts of her previous holders. All of their spite bottled up. I don't want that near you. Nathalie can let her out when you are not around."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Adrien muttered, frowning.

Plagg lifted his chin and looked at him with eyes that, for once, had nothing of a person and everything of a cat. His tail flicked left and right.

"She would lash out at you," he ended up saying. "And you are kind. You would let her." His demeanor changed. All of a sudden, he was an impish furball again. He shrugged. "Truth is, when someone spews vitriol at you, you don't have to listen. Now come on, I'm hungry. Let's get
cheese.

###

For the entire morning, Adrien was kept busy with the cruel realities of life, also known as what teenagers called 'homework'. Nathalie sat at the opposite end of the living room table as he worked, busy sending job applications while he worked. If he tried to procrastinate by asking what companies she was targeting or if she had received answers, she gave monosyllabic answers and questioned him on his schoolwork.

When he was done, she checked it all, from the math homework to the French book report he had prepared. She had him redo the math homework, seeing how it contained a 'careless mistake' that was 'not like him at all' (he agreed on that when he did the exercises again and saw that he had mixed up two formulas).

By half by eleven, he was cooking (potatoes, microwaved apple sauce and steak).

If he had it his way, he would never eat chef-prepared meals served to him on a platter again. Cooking was fun. Nathalie didn't seem to be worried about him setting the apartment on fire, either. As a matter of fact, Nathalie didn't seem to be worried about what he did _as long_ as he didn't set the apartment on fire.

They ate at noon, while watching the news (that had nothing new to report on Hawk Moth and his identity). Adrien waited a good thirty minutes to made sure no one had been poisoned, then asked if he could go out.

Ten minutes later, he found himself standing at the bus stop and sighing at a text from Marinette.

"have to hold donw the fort, lots of customers today, see you tnight"

"I forgot the bakery was open on sundays," he told Plagg. "Where should we go?"

"Are cheese shops open on sundays too?"

"You JUST finished eating."

"Yes, but we came _allllll_ this way," the Kwami retorted, pointing at Nathalie's building down the street.

"Oh! I know. We're going to Nino's," Adrien exclaimed, running off to hide between two vans, where no one could see him. "Claws out!"

He jumped to the closest roof and had to use his staff's GPS to know in which direction to go. He knew Nino's address but had never visited it. They had gone to the park, the zoo, the Champ de Mars, but never to Nino's home. He was curious. Paying a surprise visit couldn't hurt, could it?

It was nice to run from roof to roof just for fun again. The fresh air and the speed were relaxing. Chat Noir felt lighter and happier just thanks to the sun and the wind.

He had nearly arrived to his best friend's place when he spotted a construction worker on a roof.

He had learned to pay attention to lone construction workers on roofs, especially when their outfits
leaned to the side of the sportswear.

The man was standing on top of a four-storey building, on the edge of the roof. He was lanky, with pale blond hair and sharp features. His clothes were black, but he was wearing a yellow safety vest on top of them. Strange how, to become virtually invisible on the roofs, all you had to do was make yourself as visible as possible. 'What are you doing there, sir? Just inspecting the gutters'.

Adrien sighed.

What was his father planning now?

He jumped closer, making sure to stay hidden. He would follow Gabriel and figure out what mess he had gotten himself in this time.

From up close, his father looked unsteady. He swayed back and forth, just a little, but enough for it to be concerning.

Then he jumped.

###

Marinette wiped the sweat of her forehead and covered it with flour.

She had helped her father carry bags of supplies into the bakery while her mother worked the register. Tom had not let her lift a single heavy thing, but they had gone back and forth a dozen time and the bakery itself was warm, with the oven running. It was a sunny day and people had flocked to the park, so customers arrived in a steady stream. The shelves had been emptied by noon, but Tom and Sabine had started preparing more pastries and snacks by mid-morning, trusting the weather forecast.

"So many people today," she heard Sabine say to her father when he joined her at the counter.

"People were scared of crowded places," he commented. "It's a relief for everyone that Hawk Moth has been stopped. No reason to cower at home on a day like this."

In other circumstances, Marinette would have been elated. Considering the network of lies the mayor had woven around everything, she merely felt resigned. She tried not to think about it too much, not to get angry again. She needed to cool down before taking decisions.

"I'll go wash up!" she announced, rubbing the flour on her forehead.

She left her parents to their talk and ran to the bathroom, to run water over her face.

"There's some in your hair," Tikki told her.

Marinette winced. Well. Shampoo it was, then. She was taking her top off when her phone started buzzing.

"It's Nathalie!" she exclaimed.

Her chosen's eyes went wide. She grabbed her phone and picked up.
"Miss Sancoeur?"

"Hello, Marinette. How are you?"

"I, uh, fine," she replied, recovering from her surprise. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong. I was just wondering if you were home."

"Yes, yes, I am?"

"Is Adrien there?"

"No," Marinette replied, nonplussed. "Should he be?"

"No. I mean, not especially. But it is good that he is not here. Now, I have something to ask from Tikki. Could you send her to me? I'm under the archway, right next to your front door."

The teenager and Tikki exchanged a puzzled look, then the Kwami nodded.

"She's on her way," Marinette replied as Tikki darted out through the window.

"Thank you very much. I'll send her back in a few minutes."

"Of-"

Nathalie hung up.

Marinette frowned, narrowed her eyes, then ran out of the room, hurrying out of the apartment and stampeding down the staircase. This was all very weird. She was curious and she had every intention to figure out what was going on. It wasn't that she didn't trust Tikki, of course, but she was not a fan of miss Sancoeur. She liked her better at the moment, but that was it.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, stealthily unlocking the front door and opening it by an inch. The archway and the door were close. With some luck, she would be able to eavesdrop on Nathalie and Tikki's conversation.

She caught a few words.

"- told me Ladybug dropped by the mansion," Nathalie was saying, "so I wanted-"

Her voice grew distant. Marinette could hear the clicking of her heels. She opened the door and slipped out, flattening herself against the house wall and tiptoeing to the archway.

"- not sure of Gabriel's state of mind at all," mister Agreste's assistant said. "I can't ask because he would lie, so I wanted your opinion on-"

Once again, she moved too far away to hear her voice. Marinette was forced to give up. There was no way to follow the woman under the archway without being seen.

###
The butterfly defects

Chat Noir jumped forward the second Gabriel's feet left the edge of the roof. He made his staff grow, pushing its tip against a chimney to propel himself, and flew across the roof at the speed of a cannonball. He realised his mistake mid-air, when he heard not nothing, but the sound of feet landing on metal.

There's a roof.

Shit.

He tried to flip himself as he flew past the edge of the roof, so he wouldn't crash face-first while diving at full speed, but he was going too fast. The galvanized iron roof Gabriel had dropped down to was barely six feet underneath. Chat Noir hit the metal with his heels instead of his soles, bounced and fell flat on his back, only to ricochet down the roof like a puppet.

His father caught his arm just as he rolled past the edge, but between Adrien's momentum and his weight, there was no stopping him. Gabriel was merely pulled over the edge as Chat fell.

Adrien managed to hit the wall with his staff and to glue it here. He held on, his own weight and his father's tugging at his shoulder so hard he felt like it would dislocate. They snapped back up by a few inches, then found themselves hanging above the street, two storeys away from the pavement.

Chat Noir tried to heave himself up with the one arm that was holding his staff, praying for Gabriel not to let go of his arm.

Gabriel let go of his arm.

He grabbed the facade of the building they were hanging from, sticking his fingers in a crack between two bricks in what had to be the weaker hold in the history of climbing. From there, he pulled himself against the wall and scaled it to the roof.

He reached down to help his son up. Adrien grabbed his wrist and let himself be pulled to the safety of the roof.

They stared down at the street for an instant, panting. Then Gabriel started yelling.

"WHAT WAS THAT? WHAT WERE YOU DOING?"

He was shaking and afraid, but Adrien was shaking and afraid too. He shoved him away.


He slammed his balled fist against the man's chest. He wanted to grab him and shake him and shake him and shake him and…

Gabriel's eyes drifted to the street and back. He blanched and pulled Chat Noir to him, cradling him rather than hugging him, like one would hold an injured child.

"You don't have to be worried about that," he said, voice not frantic but hurried. "That's something you really don't have to be worried about, ever."
"What were you doing?" he screamed.

Gabriel's answer was quiet and nonsensical.

"Taking a walk," he said, in a tone meant to be appeasing but that only sent Adrien further into his rage.

"On the roofs?"

His father opened his mouth, paused just long enough to tap his palate with the tip of his tongue.

"Yes." His tone softened. "I've done it my entire life, Chat Noir. I've been doing it since before you were born. It's nothing to worry about."

"You... looked unsteady on your feet!" Adrien snapped.

That was the moment Gabriel's stomach choose to grumble. Gabriel cleared his throat.

"Low blood sugar," he explained, gesturing at a pizzeria on the other side of the street. He pointed at a fire staircase on the side of the building they were perched on. "I was about to get myself something to eat."

They noticed at the same time that passerby had stopped and were looking up at them. Without a word, Chat and his predecessor climbed to higher ground and hid just out of sight.

Adrien crossed his arms and looked away.

"Do you do this often?" he muttered, so Gabriel would not get to choose a conversation.

"Mmh. Mostly at night, when I can't sleep."

"I never saw you."

"You never knew what to look for, Chat Noir."

He was so very good at sticking with the proper name, even though they were talking as themselves, despite Adrien's mask.

They stood there in silence for a while. Pigeons landed a few feet away, noticed them and flew away.

"I was not expecting to cross your path," Gabriel murmured. "This is nowhere near your patrol routes."

So he was avoiding me, Adrien though.

"We changed our patrol routes. You had figured them out. And I'm not on patrol anyway. I was going to Nino's."

"Oh," his father commented, shifting on his feet and clasping his hands behind his back. He was moving. He didn't stop moving. He was ever so slightly rocking back and forth, with the soles of his sneakers squeaking against the roof. "Does he live nearby?"
"Yes."

Gabriel nodded.

"What are you doing?" Adrien asked. "With your time. With your days."

"Not... much," Gabriel replied, trying to pull his facade up and failing. The cold, impeccable designer and the man with messy hair wearing sportswear just didn't mesh. It didn't seem to fit in Gabriel's mind either, because his expression swayed between ice and pleasantness, then settled on a polite smile and a blank stare. "I'm mostly trying to do some thinking."

"That's it?"

"At the moment. I'd say it's... needed."

"What about work?"

"I don't know. I didn't go, I told them I would be gone for a few weeks. I assume the company is on fire."

Adrien frowned.

"You've been gone for weeks and they managed just fine," he pointed out. "When you were in 'Brazil', or was it 'Syracuse'."

Gabriel ignored the jab at his lies.

"Nathalie had prepared everything. Now... well, I don't think they could do too much damage to your inheritance in a month. At least I hope so."

Adrien snorted.

That anger really wouldn't fade. It kept seeping out of him, yet he never felt like there was less of it. It was like an oozing wound. It festered.

"So it's just thinking, and quiet walks?"

His father closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"At the moment," he repeated. His tongue tapped the roof of his mouth again. He considered his next words. His stomach grumbled again, however. "I'm sorry, but I should really get off this roof and find something to eat right now, otherwise you'll have to carry me down."

Chat Noir stared at him. It sounded like a flimsy excuse but he did look about to pass out.

Adrien huffed.

"We better find another pizzeria," he grumbled. "I'm pretty sure twenty people are waiting on the sidewalk, just to see if we'll show up again."

His father's eyes went wide in surprise.

"There is one two streets north," he said, pleased. "This way."

Ten minutes later, they found themselves sitting in a tiny restaurant with four tables, a counter covered in brochures, and faded posters of Italian monuments. Adrien, who had untransformed,
was sipping Fanta straight from the can. One foot of his chair was shorter than the three others, and he
was nervously tilting the chair from left to right. As for his father, he was waiting for his order.
Cheese pizza, of course. What else?

Adrien winced when he came back with his platter, inching away from the cheese. Gabriel sat
down, cut the pizza in four slices, then put one of those slices on a napkin and smoothly hid it on
the chair next to his, this without the slightest hesitation. Plagg dashed out of his hiding spot under
Adrien's jacket and vanished under the table. As for Gabriel, he had started eating, as if nothing
had happened.

It spoke of habit.

"Are you sure you don't want a pizza?" Gabriel asked, cutting into his own and stuffing pieces in
his mouth at superhuman speed.

"I just ate."

"Oh."

"I cooked."

"Oh?"

"Yes. And also , I hate cheese."

Gabriel swallowed, choked and coughed. He covered his mouth with his hand and cleared his
throat.

"I assumed… You kept ordering c… Plagg. I should have known."

There was a chuckle from under the table, quickly followed by munching sounds.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Gabriel said. "I'm sure there's at least a burger joint
somewhere close, and I think there's a candy store."

His son shook his can of soda in front of his face.

"I just ate," he reminded him.

"Right."

There was an awkward silence. Gabriel cut a few squares off his pizza.

"Are you drunk?" Adrien asked.

His father frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you drunk? You are totally out of it."

"I'm not …" Gabriel protested. He breathed in and regained his composure. "I don't drink alone.
You know that. It's unseemly."

Adrien crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows.
"Well then is it weed?"

"What?"

"It would explain the junk food."

"What? No," Gabriel snapped. "And I don't appreciate-"

Adrien stared him down.

His father sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"It's not weed. I'm just operating on very little sleep."

"How is that different from usual?"

"I don't usually have much time to contemplate how tired I am. Work kept me busy and caffeine did the rest. Turns out I don't do so well when I have nothing to do. Rest is exhausting."

Plagg, underneath the table, burped. Even though they were nearly alone, both Gabriel and Adrien faked burping so people wouldn't wonder where the sound had come from. They rolled their eyes.

"Pizza is not good for him," Adrien commented in hushed tones. "Too greasy."

"But at least it's fresh," Gabriel replied. "Has he pulled the 'let's hide Camembert under the bed to let it age' trick?"

The teenager winced at the idea.

"No. No. " Thank god. "He did that?"

"Twice. Under my bed, then under Alice's, at her mother's, since I was there often. He figured he could get away with it."

"Did he?"

"Your mother cleaned her room every two days. She noticed. Then she had him clean the mess with a toothbrush, with Tikki watching."

Under the table, Plagg snorted.

Adrien chuckled. He loved talking about his mother.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. The little bastard also used to phase into the fridge and set it to the lowest setting, so the food would rot. I had to have a fridge disassembled and the inside of it coated with gold. Ow. " Gabriel winced and whispered through closed teeth. "Remove your fangs from my knee this instant. Who do you think you are? Vixx?"

A second later, he sighed in relief.

"What's Vixx like?" Adrien asked, glad to be able to have some kind of normal conversation. "I met Volpina, back when she was tracking that hydra down, but she was transformed."

"Vixx is a tiny carnivore who will charm everything you own out of you and bite you if that
doesn't work. I prayed for Mona to transform so we could get a reprieve. Vixx wasn't nearly as irritating as Waspp, though."

"What about Waspp?"

They distinctly heard Plagg groan.

Gabriel mulled over the question.

"Waspp is driven. Irritatingly so, as she is powerless on her own and has to nag the humans around her so they can accomplish whatever she decides needs to be done. She has neither patience nor diplomacy and…"

"She's a nightmare," Plagg cut in.

Adrien looked around to check if someone had heard him, but the place was empty and the owner too far to hear them, especially over the ambient music.

"She can't be that bad," he said once reassured.

"Fu tends to pair her with people who can't be bothered doing anything," Gabriel explained. "Lazy people. Just to counter her need to act. She's not above forcing surprise confrontations with powerful enemies, with no planning and no way out. Fun times."

Adrien blinked.

"Did she do that with, uh…" He started whispering. "You know. Your friend, Queen Bee."

"She tried. But - and it might surprise you - Bee had excellent impulse control when in costume. As herself, less so, hence the recurrent jail visits. But Queen Bee's main strengths were speed and flight. She relied on agility and I relied on stealth, but neither of us could sustain long battles. We had to be careful about how we engaged the enemy."

"So you went about it the Batman way?"

"Mostly. I was a punching ball for months after I got the bloody ring. Ladybug got a shield. A magical shield. She could take blows for hours. I got a sword that I couldn't use. Every six months or so, I got to cut a rope or magical webs, and that was it. I was forced to go hand-to-hand whenever I joined a fight. It didn't go well."

"You told me you were careful," Adrien remarked. "You told me you nearly never ended up in life-threatening situations."

"I lied."

Adrien choked on his soda.

"Of course I lied," his father explained. "You were being careless. I had to drill it into you that it could get you killed. I was not about to tell you enemies used to mop the floor with me."

"They did?"

"Of course they did. For weeks, if not months, I had to be rescued more often than a Disney princess. Your mother ordered me to stay away from the magical enemies. She told me to stick to 'cats in trees'."
Adrien caught himself smiling.

"So. They mopped the floor with you. Do you have examples?"

"Hm."

"Super Maria," Plagg chimed in.

Gabriel groaned. Adrien raised his eyebrows.

"Super Maria?" he prompted.

His father grumbled, avoiding his eyes.

"She was a little girl who got Akumatized because her mother turned her Nintendo off before she could save. She set me on fire. Twice. And she kept jumping on my head."

Adrien giggled, then laughed. It bubbled out of him until he had to wipe tears of mirth of his face. He slowly collected himself, breathing in and calming down until his grin turned to an amused smile.

He sighed. The whole conversation was so bittersweet.

"Why can't you be like this all the time?" he asked. "It's like you become a whole different person when you change clothes."

Gabriel moved back on his chair and looked at his hands, lost in thought. They were stained and scratched, with dirt under his fingernails and dark smudges on his palms and fingertips. They were not callused enough to be a climber's hands, but they had lost the manicured, clean quality that fit 'Gabriel Agreste's' image.

"Don't we both," he murmured. It was not a question. "I don't usually volunteer this side of myself. It's much like lounging at home in one's underwear." He murmured the rest, flipping his hands and picking his fork up. "Disgraceful."

Anger coursed through Adrien. He had to take a deep breath to rein it in, and still ended up chewing the inside of his cheeks in frustration.

"I'm your son," he snapped. "I wouldn't care if you lounged at home in your underwear! I wouldn't mind if you were human for once."

Gabriel pursed his lips.

"It's… the problem is not what you would think. It's me. I have to behave a certain way. There is something fundamentally wrong with the way I think and feel. And I'm not talking about now, or even the last few years. This is how I have always been."

"Then CHANGE!" Adrien yelled. He paled and looked around. The restaurant owner had frozen at the entrance of the kitchen, and gave him a puzzled look before averting his eyes. The boy turned to his father and tried to regain his composure. "Change," he pleaded. "Change! I would forgive everything you've done if you would only change. Why can't you try?"

His father did not just purse his lips, this time: he bit down on his lower lip so hard Adrien thought he'd draw blood. Gabriel closed his eyes, joined his hands in front of his plate and twisted his fingers. The emotion faded from his face, leaving resigned certainty.
"I could drag you through the same hell of promises I put your mother through," he said. "But I know by now that there is no point in that. All of my promises ended up being lies. I could swear I would do my best, and it would last a month. It's better if you don't even hope."

Adrien said nothing. He quietly, slowly crumpled his soda can until the jagged edges of it started hurting his hands. He let go of the can, stood and left.

###

Plagg dragged Adrien's history book to the living room and shoved it under the sofa.

Lying to the boy was becoming an habit, he thought as he returned to Adrien's bedroom. But then again, necessity was the mother of invention. When you could not go that far from the fancy piece of jewelry you called your home, you had to move that piece of jewelry, one way or another.

"Where is it?" Adrien was moaning. He dropped to his knees to look under his bed. "Miss Bustier is going to kill me if I don't do that homework." He lifted the mattress, dropped it and blanched. "Nathalie is going to kill me."

"Are you sure Nathalie didn't forget to pack your book when she got all your things from the house?" Plagg replied, with the smoothness of a thousands years old liar.

"Nathalie never forgets anything."

"It was a busy day. She was tired."

Adrien lifted several of the discarded furniture boxes he had not thrown away yet, then opened his cupboard and checked the compartments of his empty suitcase.

"It's still… Agh. I'll have to get a new one."

"It's Sunday," Plagg pointed out.

He wanted the kid at the mansion, where Gabriel was. What did he care about bookstores and libraries?

Of course, Adrien did not want to go to the mansion. Adrien wanted space. Adrien wanted to stay as far away from his father as he could. It was only natural, considering Gabriel's words. Then again, Gabriel had a taste for the gloomy and the depressing.

"Maybe I could borrow Nino's book," the boy mused.

Plagg rolled his eyes.

"Nino? On a sunday afternoon? I bet he's only starting to work, if he isn't just procrastinating."

"Hey!"

"It's true! He'll need his book."

The infuriating, stubborn little human sighed.
"Maybe I can find a copy online."

"Adrien. You just need to slip in and out of your room. Your father doesn't even need to see you."

But I need to see your father, so stop being DIFFICULT.

"Alright, alright, alright," the boy conceded at last.

Plagg swallowed a sigh of relief.

You had to be stealthy about some things. For instance, you could not tell the teenage son of a missing woman that a magical being knew full well what had happened to his mother. You couldn't tell him that Bella wanted to exchange that information for Alim Kubdel's freedom. It was a deal Adrien could only refuse, so why give him that choice? If Alice was dead, it would not make any difference. If she was not and ended up being harmed because Bella had not shared her knowledge, Adrien would forever blame himself for not giving in to her demands. It was a white lie, really. A necessary one.

In the same way, you didn't remind him that his father only ever discussed convenient versions of the truth.

Adrien gave the room a last cursory search.

"I guess I don't have a choice. Claws out!"

From there, it was a blur of roofs and streets, seen through the boy's eyes, with more colors than Plagg could see in his own body and a strangely limited field of vision. Thousands of years had come and gone and it still felt strange to him.

Chat Noir entered the mansion through his bathroom window. He untransformed as he landed.

"Let's be quick," he mumbled, opening the door to his bedroom. "The book can't be far."

"I'll stand guard in the hallway," Plagg lied, zipping past the human.

He phased through the door and, instead of stopping there, he sped to Gabriel's office. It was empty, so the Kwami tried the study instead, then the master bedroom, then - after remembering that the master bedroom was being renovated - the guest bedroom Gabriel had elected as his.

That was where he finally found his previous chosen.

Gabriel was standing next to the wardrobe, wearing an unbuttoned shirt and impeccable pants. He smelled of fancy soap and lemon shampoo. He didn't notice Plagg's arrival, so the black cat watched him button his shirt up, smooth it, then put a striped tie on. It was a ritual, really. Plagg had witnessed it a thousand times. Every piece of clothing perfectly tailored and sharply pressed, the collar starched, the cufflinks shiny. The cover did make the book.

Plagg wandered around, looking for the one thing he had come to find.

A place for everything and everything in its place.

He knew Gabriel. Gabriel did not drink alone. Gabriel did not use recreational drugs to take his mind off his problems. Yet, he was drugged. There was only one possible explanation.

Everything in its place.
Plagg dove into the nightstand on Gabriel's preferred side of the bed and opened the first drawer.

Gabriel gasped.

"Ha! I knew it," the Kwami exclaimed when he found two boxes of pills. They looked new. Their cardboard was still crisp. It was neither faded nor crushed. 'Fluoxetine' and 'Alprazolam', the labels said.

"Plagg!" Gabriel snapped. "What are you doing?"

"Why didn't you tell Nathalie you were taking those?" Plagg asked, flying up with one of the boxes in his paws. "She is concerned because you act weird."

Gabriel rolled his eyes and sighed.

"There is no point telling her before I am sure they are effective. They might end up not doing anything."

"Better not to get anyone's hopes up, that's it?"

Gabriel did not answer. He adjusted the buttons of his waistcoat and checked his cufflinks.

Plagg dropped the box on the bed.

"When did you start taking them?"

Gabriel's eyes glazed over. He frowned, trying to focus, but it was clear that he struggled to remember.

"I was at the psychiatrist during Bourgeois' speech. When Adrien called me. I had my GP refer me first thing in the morning."

Plagg snorted. He landed next to the fluoxetine box, opened it and sniffed its contents. Of course, pills wrapped with plastic and aluminum didn't have much of a smell. All he got was a whiff of paper and dust.

"You should tell her. You should tell Adrien. He needs to know that you are willing to change, that you are trying to change. I mean, instead of brooding and sulking like that twat in Alice's favorite book."

Gabriel cringed at the comparison with Heathcliff. He had strong opinions on that book and its characters, which was why Plagg would never stop mentioning it.

"I think you are confusing 'pursuing treatment' and 'changing'. Also, I don't think I'm that sick."

Plagg made a face. Gabriel clicked his tongue.

"While there is clearly something wrong with my mind at the moment - and yes, I am willing to admit that - you all seem to be vastly overestimating the problem. I have done things those last few weeks that seemed to make perfect sense, but were beyond insane, and I can't even fathom how I could for an instant believe t-"

"You are sick," Plagg cut in, matter-of-factly.

"But it does not change the core of who I am, Plagg! I don't feel fundamentally different from the man I was ten years ago, or even twenty years ago. Those pills might stop me from flipping out
and getting lost inside my mind, but they won't change who I am. They won't turn me into the father Adrien needs."

"Well it's not like he has another," Plagg drawled, "so what about you make do?"

"That's the last thing Adrien needs," Gabriel retorted, with his usual, aggravating stubbornness. "When Alice was h-"

"Alice was just as messed up in the head as you are. Alice was just as terrified of hurting that boy as you are. But she didn't chicken out."

There was a brief silence.

"She was?"

"Yes, she was. She told me."

Gabriel absorbed that, then shook his head.

"Alice never hurt Adrien. Alice never lashed out at Adrien, she never broke his spirits and she most certainly never hit him. I will 'chicken out' for as long as it takes me to be sure it will never happen again."

Plagg had lived long enough to know how detached from reason humans could get. The Kwami had been a monster himself. He understood only too well how cracks in a mind could divide and erase emotions and beliefs. Parts of him had been wiped and other shoved in. There was a schism between who he had been and who he was now.

Humans could crack and break under pressure. Emotions could shatter them, fear could unravel them, just like anger, just like distress, just like pain. Some would fall apart for no reason at all. The darkness would take them over from the inside, as if they had been born with it.

Gabriel… Gabriel was merely a stubborn man who did not know how to heal.

Alice had helped, and then she hadn't.

"You can change," Plagg pointed out.

Gabriel turned his back to him, facing a mirror to adjust his clothes again. His answer was terse.

"It never worked before."

"Well, I never saw you admit something was wrong with you before," Plagg retorted.

Gabriel glared at him.

The Kwami yawned.

"That's the crux of the matter, isn't-"

They both froze when they heard a long, annoyed 'Plaaaaaagg' from outside the room. Adrien had given up on looking for his schoolbook. Gabriel didn't say a word. He didn't move. He merely stared at the door, tense and uneasy.

Plagg snorted.
"I'll have to find another trick to get him here," he said. "See you soon."

And, without giving his old chosen a second to answer, he dashed through the door.

###

Adrien looked at his upturned bedroom. He had moved every single piece of furniture, lifted every box, emptied every bag. The book was gone and his homework would never be done, but he was too exhausted to care.

He dropped onto his bed and sighed.

At least, the searching had kept him from thinking about Gabriel. If he could keep himself busy until school the next day, everything would be fine. That wasn't strictly true, of course. Things were entirely too calm on the Hawk Moth front. His identity would be revealed soon enough. Too many people knew who he was.

Adrien sighed and turned to his nightstand to check the time.

His math schoolbook was right next to the alarm clock. Between the pages of said math schoolbook was his history book.

"You've got to be kidding me!" he groaned, sitting up.

He shook his head in frustration and left the room. He would make chocolate milk, offer some to Nathalie, then suggest eating out. Anything to have a quiet evening. It would still be time to work on that history homework at nine.

He found Nathalie in the kitchen, with Plagg, who was talking in a quiet voice.

"... as good as it can get," he was saying. "You can't keep delaying."

"I have looked those up months ago," Nathalie replied. "It will take at least two weeks to see results, and - as a matter of fact - they could make things worse."

"It's not your choice."

"It's-"

Nathalie went silent and turned to Adrien, who looked at the two of them and frowned.

"What is going on?" he asked.

By this point, he was not even expecting an answer. He watched Nathalie hesitate and was surprised to see her breathe in and steel herself.

"There are a few issues that should be discussed," she explained. "About Bella. That being said, it would require involving your father."

Adrien nearly retorted that Gabriel had lost all right to be involved in Miraculous business, then realized that Nathalie would be of the same opinion.
"Is… Is this about mom?" he blurted out, voice uneven and throat clenched.

Nathalie's gaze drifted to Plagg, who rolled his eyes. She composed herself.

"Yes," she replied.

Adrien's legs went weak. He had to stop himself from falling.

"Would it be alright if I had Gabriel come over tonight?" Nathalie asked. "I know I promised you distance, but…” She peeked at Plagg again. "We can't delay handling this particular issue."

That particular issue had been delayed way too long, if you asked Adrien. He did not bother answering, and ran back into his room to call Gabriel himself.

One hour and seven minutes later - the longest sixty-seven minutes of his life - he found himself sitting on the sofa in Nathalie's living room, with Marinette by his side, Tikki and Plagg seated next to him on the armrest, and Gabriel installed in the farthest armchair. Nathalie was walking from one side of the room to the other, collecting her tablet, folders, her laptop and a laser pointer. She dropped all of that on the coffee table, sat next to Gabriel, and cast her tablet's screen on the television. It showed three rows of icons: an email app, office software, world clock widgets and Minesweeper.

Marinette was observing her with a confused expression, regularly turning to Adrien to convey her perplexity. She had been called in but given no explanation save for 'you will be needed to discuss Bella'.

Adrien wanted to explain what little he knew, but he was too nervous to talk. Every time he opened his mouth, his mind was wiped blank.

Nathalie stared at the screen for a moment, lost in thought. She clicked the switch on the laser pointer over and over again, and a bright red dot flickered on Gabriel's knee. She ended up breathing in and standing up.

She straightened her back.

She adjusted her glasses.

"Thank you very much for coming," she started, gaze shifting from Marinette to Adrien's father, then to Tikki. "It has been a few days since the Butterfly Miraculous was recovered and I…" Plagg coughed. She winced. "And things have calmed down enough for us to handle an important problem that was dragged on for too long already."

Marinette reached for Adrien's hand and squeezed it. Gabriel, who was sporting his perfect clothes and his soldered-into-place haircut, shrank and crumbled in that costume. His shoulders sagged. He lowered his head. His skin went from pale to livid.

Nathalie kept her composure.

"We now have everything we need to investigate Alice's - mrs. Agreste - disappearance."

Adrien felt Marinette hesitate. Her hand shifted in his. She was jittery.

"I'm sure you are wondering why I called you, Marinette," Nathalie continued. "I know it sounds like a family matter. Truth to be said, we needed Tikki to be present, and I doubt you would have parted with your Miraculous. And I expect we would have needed to involve you as Ladybug
"quickly enough anyway."

Adrien frowned.

"What are you planning?" his partner asked. "Are we going to question Bella?"

Nathalie gave a quick shake of the head. Her expression betrayed nothing: it was as empty and cold as usual.

"We have done that already. Bella has no intention to talk to us. She demanded that I create a 'champion' to help Alim Kubel escape custody before telling us what she knows. Both Plagg and Tikki tried to convince her to talk. It didn't work. I believe she is bluffing, Plagg thinks she is not, and - if I'm not mistaken - Tikki isn't sure. Not that it matters, as we will not give Bella what she wants."

Adrien exchanged a tired look with Plagg. The cat's ears drooped.

Marinette leaned forward so she could look at Tikki.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered.

"But," Nathalie cut in, "we do not need her to talk. Kubdel tried the exact same trick when I talked to him."

"And he doesn't know," Adrien commented. "He told me. He was trying not to get killed."

He did not look at his father as he said those words, but hoped they would sting. He kept his eyes on Nathalie and saw her falter. She swallowed and sucked her lips in. Her whole posture changed. However, she soldiered through her unease.

"I know." She turned to the television, tapping a slideshow viewer app on her tablet. "But, as I was saying, we do not need them."

They watched a Powerpoint appear on the television screen. It showed a grid of eight photographs, neatly aligned in the middle of their page. The violet and white tones of the second one caught Adrien's eye first: it was a picture of Stormy Weather during her weather forecast. The others were Pharaoh, Dark Blade, Grenadine, Dislocoeur, Nino as the Bubbler, Alya as Lady Wifi, and Alix as Timebreaker.

Marinette's eyes went wide in shock. Tikki seemed surprised too, but Plagg barely reacted. As for Gabriel, he showed no reaction at all.

Nathalie clicked her tongue, staring at the screen.

"As Tikki so helpfully pointed out, Bella's powers are limitless. If we find the right person to channel them, we can do anything."

"NOT ANYTHING!" Plagg and Tikki snapped at the same time. She was frowning. Plagg seemed to have protested out of pure habit.

"Her powers were misused," his sister said. "Every rule ignored. You can't just expect... I... They are limitless but the world itself is kept together by clear lines that should never be crossed."

Her eyes were riveted to the screen and to Timebreaker, just like Adrien's and everyone else's. The
teenager peeked at his father, who had leaned forward with a somber look on his face, hands crossed on his knees.

Timebreaker who could change the past. Pharaoh, who had tried to bring a dead woman back to life. Strange how they seemed tailored to deal with Alice's situation. Strange how Kubdel's own children had come the closest to unraveling reality itself.

Adrien idly wondered if Alim cared at all about what he had done to them.

"I don't plan to create a time traveler," Nathalie announced. "I have made my research and I have seen Back to the Future. As tempting as Timebreaker and Contretemps' powers could be, I assume changing the past would only lead to-"

"Split timelines, duplicate people, dead people," Marinette intervened. She squeezed Adrien's hand again and whispered a 'sorry'. Not that he needed an apology. He agreed with her.

"I know," Nathalie replied.

"So what's the plan?" Adrien asked.

He didn't protest about using Bella's powers without her consent, though he felt guilty. Surely, if Plagg and Tikki had not objected yet, they had to know something he didn't. They had to think Nathalie's plans were justified. Or maybe they were egoists too. Maybe they missed his mother just as much as he did.

When Nathalie heard his question, she did not answer him. Instead, she turned to Gabriel, who was staring at her intently. Their eyes met and they looked at each other for a moment, in a silent conversation that was spoken entirely in micro-expressions and body language. Gabriel's features barely moved. He was listening, not with curiosity but with patience. She was hesitant and waited for a sign of approval that Adrien missed, but that she seemed to spot. Then she turned back to the sofa.

"I have collected as much information as I could on Hawk Moth's previous victims and the how and the why they were transformed," she said, looking down at her tablet and pressing Lady Wifi's picture. It opened a slide that showed the picture, a list of her powers and the goals of her transformation. Nathalie kept talking as she swiped from villain to villain. "Figuring out the way Bella's powers function was critical. I could only try them out twice, and not at length. Marinette's transformation answered a lot of questions, however."

Tikki frowned.

"How so?"

She gave Plagg a suspicious side-look. He merely yawned.

"I wanted to determine how the champions' powers and appearances were determined," Nathalie explained. "And, from what I saw, Hawk Moth has to use existing goals and feelings. Using the strongest one is easier. It comes with a set of powers and an appearance that come straight out of the champion's mind. That's how Adrien transformed into Chat Noir when I sent the butterfly. I had to fight against Marinette's will not to let her turn into a Ladybug copy."

Marinette blinked at that.

"I didn't fight you! I wanted to heal Adrien! I was thinking about it as hard as I could!"
"I don't think you did it consciously," she said. "But I still had to put a lot of effort into focusing on that desire to heal, and then try to build a power set around it. You ended up considerably weaker than if I had let you change into Ladybug. Of course, your healing ability was sufficient, so there was no reason to question your performance."

"Oh. Oh."

"That's pretty much it," Plagg muttered.

Tikki glowered at him.

Adrien took a deep breath to summon some nerve.

"So... you want to find someone who wants to find my mother?" he asked Nathalie. "Someone whose powers would naturally be related to that? Like... a detective Akuma. I mean, I could do i-"

Nathalie silenced him with a soft shake of the head.

"We already know that your 'Chat Noir' persona is stronger than anything else. You wouldn't make a good candidate. I'm sorry."

She didn't sound that sorry, but she still tousled his hair.

"Then who?" he asked.

There was only one candidate he could think of. His gaze drifted to his father, then back to Nathalie when he saw her tense. She had blanched. She was distinctly and unmistakably afraid, despite her best efforts to hide it.

She tried to collect herself and droned on.

"We would need someone who would want the answers, but not to the point that they would be consumed by that desire." Behind her, Gabriel frowned. She put her tablet down on the coffee table. "Someone who could assemble and organize hints. Someone with good organisational skills..."

She turned to Gabriel, who was staring at her with growing disbelief and horror. She reached under her jacket to take something from her inner pocket.

Adrien's father shook his head.

Nathalie didn't move. Her hand stayed under her jacket.

"... Who is used to, who enjoys keeping track of time and people..."

"No," Gabriel said, jerking away.

She took the electrum box out of her pocket and held it out to him.

"No," he repeated, breathing so quick and hard his son could hear him.

Nathalie waited, and waited, and waited.

A minute went by.
Gabriel took the box.

###
"This is a terrible idea," Plagg said, matter-of-factly.

Nathalie's stomach, which was already twisting and clenching, sank. It was not like she did not have her reservations about the whole idea. As a matter of fact, she was terrified. But the Butterfly Miraculous' powers would likely be their only chance at figuring out what had happened to Alice. It was not the ideal solution, not by any stretch of the mind, but what else could they do? The one suspect had denied involvement. The police had failed, an army of private investigators had failed, Gabriel had failed.

"As long as we are careful, I don't see much of a risk," she lied. "We will just have to take all the precautions necessary. I don't think we have to worry about hostile behavior. Clearly, neither Adrien nor Marinette became aggressive when transformed. From what I could tell, they acted normally, with little to no tunnel vision."

"That is because you used the Miraculous' powers with the correct mindset," Tikki intervened. "You picked positive emotions to weave your magic around. You kept the transformations brief. And, more importantly, you have a calm disposition and were detached enough not to corrupt them with your own feelings. It is your will you infused the butterflies with, not Bella's. That's how her power works. You can't have someone with a deep personal involvement and intense negative feelings do the same thing. It's a recipe for disaster."

"Terrible idea," Plagg said, in a 'I told you so' voice.

His sister glared at him.

"Don't act like you didn't know about this."

"What? I didn't! If I had known this was the plan, I'd have told her it was stupid!"

Nathalie did not have the patience for their bickering. She did not have the patience to comfort the two children, who were listening to the conversation with anxious faces. She didn't even have the patience to handle Gabriel's shell-shocked silence.

Did they all think she liked the damn idea?

"I don't care if the plan is stupid!" she yelled. "There is no other plan! So it is happening and it is happening before the 'guardian' shows up, because I will not keep that brooch for a second longer than I have to. So what we're going to be discussing is how to keep our attempts SAFE! IS THAT CLEAR?"

###

"Are you sure you want to do it?" Adrien asked Nathalie at twenty-two past eleven, when they finally found themselves alone in her apartment.
She was collecting empty glasses and coffee cups on a tray. He was fidgeting on the sofa.

The electrum box was resting between them on the coffee table. His father had left it there. If he had not, Adrien would have asked him to give it back before leaving, but he had not needed to. Actually, no one had needed to ask Gabriel anything, because Gabriel had not participated in the evening's conversation at all. Save for his reaction to being handed the Miraculous, he had not said a word. Not one. Not when Tikki had explained how dangerous transforming Nathalie would be. Not when Nathalie had established a schedule for three Akumatization attempts, and guidelines on how they would take place. Not when it had been decided that Plagg and Tikki would be present to observe, but that Marinette and Adrien would stay in a different room, ready to intervene if things turned sour.

Not a word.

Adrien, who had complained enough on how controlling his father was, found this new behaviour just as infuriating. Of all topics, finding Alice was not the one Gabriel should have entirely dropped on the rest of them. It was most certainly not a matter Adrien's father could handle on his own - they had seen where that path led - but totally withdrawing was not the solution either.

Then again, Nathalie could read his mind. He had not talked, but he had spent the evening looking at her, and her expression had changed just as if she had been talked to. She had gone from frustrated to worried, then tired, then irritated again.

Adrien did not understand them at all.

"It is my idea!" Nathalie snapped, with the aggravation of someone who had repeated those words too often for their taste. "Adrien, we went over this."

"I know, I know," he blurted out, apologetic. "But still, you know, you don't have to. I mean, yeah, I want mom to be found, but it doesn't mean that you should-"

She put the platter down. The glasses and cups trembled.

"Stop. Worrying. I volunteered the idea because I want those answers too. There is no point trying to talk me out of this."

Adrien pursed his lips. He still didn't like it - the idea filled him with a diffuse feeling of guilt - but what could he say?

"Okay."

Nathalie huffed and picked up the tray. He watched her vanish into the kitchen and come back.

"You should go to bed," she advised. "Tomorrow is a school day."

Distant memories of some history homework came back to him, but he brushed them aside. He would deal with that in the morning.

He acquiesced but stayed.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Thank you so much. For everything."

Nathalie didn't like to be thanked. She did not know what to do with gratitude. She cleared her throat, mumbled a 'don't mention it', then kept herself busy.
Adrien tried to wait a little, just to see if she would welcome more conversation, but he had to give up after five minutes. Nathalie had a gift for keeping herself busy.

"I'll just go to bed," he mumbled. "Good night."

"Good night, Adrien," she replied, while cleaning the coffee table with a wet sponge.

He went to brush his teeth, changed into pajamas, then made his way to his bedroom. He stopped at the door.

"Nathalie?"

She had just sat down at the dining table with her laptop and her tablet. She turned to him, eyebrows raised.

"Father knew nothing about this, did he? Plagg was the only one who seemed to know you were planning something."

"That's right. I was concerned about your father's state of mind. I doubted he could handle the idea."

Adrien mulled over that.

"He didn't have a lot to say about all of this," he commented. "I swear I have no idea what he's thinking."

She clicked her tongue.

"He's thinking he has to do this, but that he does not want to do this. Not like this, because he fought Akumatized people for a decade and Hawk Moth's powers disgust him, and not to me, because he somehow cares. He is also afraid of what having that kind of magic at his disposal will do to him, because he no longer trusts himself. But he needs to do this, because Alice. Does that help?"

Adrien stared at her.

"No but seriously, how do you do that? He didn't say a word all night!"

"I know him, Adrien. He has the emotional depth of a kiddie pool. It is actually really easy to guess his thoughts."

He blinked.

"Hem."

"Trust me," she added. "You are much harder to understand. Now, come on. Go to bed and try to sleep. I don't want you to sleep through class tomorrow."

Adrien nodded and went to bed. He had just turned the lights off when he remembered the history homework due the next day. He grabbed his phone to set the alarm to six in the morning.

He had six missed calls, seven emails and eighteen text messages.

###
Nathalie massaged the bridge of her nose while the elevator made its way up to her floor. She prayed for Adrien to catch a break. A quiet day at school, maybe. A nice talk with his friends. Some time alone with his girlfriend. But it wasn't in the cards, was it? Not with the news of Hawk Moth's identity out. Not with Alix Kubdel as a friend and classmate.

What could you even tell the boy? Nathalie didn't think he had slept at all. She had driven him to school, because he had wanted to go and letting him go alone had been 'absolutely out of the question, Adrien', but the ride had been tense, if not silent. All of Plagg's attempts at humor and distraction had fallen flat. Adrien had given the Kwami terse, sullen answers, but never looked away from the sidewalk.

Nathalie wondered what she would see if she transformed into Hawk Moth again. The last time she had done it, to try out the powers on Marinette, she had been horrified to see how much darkness had taken hold of Adrien. Nathalie had easily ignored the bubbling feelings of anger and powerlessness she had felt from Marinette - that girl burned so bright negativity could never sink its claws into her - but Adrien… His pain and his rage were taking root, and Nathalie had no idea what to do about it.

And things wouldn't just settle down.

The elevator stopped. She walked out, fumbling for her keys, and stopped when she realized she was not alone. Gabriel was waiting by her door.

"You could have let yourself in," she sighed, taking in the vacant look in his eyes and the paleness of his skin. "You have the keys."

The rest of him was impeccable, of course: four-piece suit, shining shoes, waxed hair. He hadn't worn deep blue in a decade and it suited him a lot better than white, but wearing colors didn't make him look any less like a ghost.

"I didn't think it was appropriate," he replied. "I'll give them back, actually."

Nathalie nodded and unlocked the door, inviting him in. She watched him wobble to the sofa.

"Have you seen the news?" she asked, removing her coat. "Coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee, please. And yes, I have. But that's not why I'm here."

She left her purse on a side table and went to the kitchen to prepare coffee for the two of them. She needed some. When she returned to the living room, she found Gabriel sitting in the armchair. She put his cup on the coffee table in front of him and sat down on the sofa with hers.

"Are the meds helping?" she asked when he reached for his cup with a slow, careful hand.

He winced.

"Plagg."

"Of course, Plagg. Were you really expecting him to shut up about this?"

"I guess not. He likes you, you're a cat person."

"I have never had a cat in my life," she replied. "Do they? Help."
Gabriel breathed in, placing his cup and saucer on his knees.

"It's too early too say. Mostly, I feel like I'm made of cotton wool. Alprazolam takes some getting used to."

Nathalie wanted to reach out and touch him - run her fingers from his temple to his chin, maybe, wrap herself around him - but they were not in that place anymore. It was a strange situation to be in, but the separation was for the best. He needed to put some order in his own mind before adding a relationship to his list of issues.

She needed to forgive him for what he had done, though she was not even sure she was still angry. She was so tired.

It would be so easy to slip into his arms and just…

"Stick to it," she sighed. "If they don't work, there are others."

He acquiesced, then shook his head.

"That's not why I'm here."

"I swear if it's about the plans for tonight-

"No. No. You offered, we'll do it, period. No. I'm here about Adrien. I think he should be talking to someone. A professional, maybe. He went through quite the harrowing experience, this on top of the family problems and… everything, really. Has he opened up at all?"

"About you, a little," Nathalie replied. "He's also concerned about the Kwami and their situation as 'prisoners'."

Gabriel idly nodded.

"What about what happened with Kubdel? Being held hostage?"

She shook her head.

"Not yet."

Gabriel grimaced and pursed his lips. He looked out the window.

"I assume the girl… No. No, Adrien wouldn't worry her with that, would he?" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll see if I can find some therapist with experience with that kind of trauma. I still have contacts in the police, I figure they can give me a l-" - He noticed Nathalie's puzzled expression. - "I was a superhero. Of course I have contacts in the police. Why do you think no cops showed up at the factory when you called that ambulance?"

She groaned and refrained from strangling him.

"I'll talk to him about therapy," she said. "I'm not sure how the logistics would work, what with the masked vigilante issue, but we can try."

"I have to admit I have the same 'logistics' issue at this very moment." - Was he seeing a therapist? - "You know… We all had something that broke us, back then. With the job. For Alice, it was finding Candy Warper, who teleported through a pile of metal sheets. For Bee, it was Blood Moon. He was a flyer, so she had to fight him alone… then he lost his powers and dropped from the sky and she couldn't catch him. We all dealt with it by pretending it never happened."
He didn't say what had broken *him*, but she assumed she knew that. She remembered the look on his face when he had mimicked a blade being twisted against Alice's belly.

"You'd think it would be more of a death by a thousand cuts," she murmured. "It's not a 'job' teenagers should have to do."

"'Teenagehood' is a strange concept, and most certainly a new one in terms of history. Jeanne d'Arc was burned at nineteen. Alexander the Great founded his first colony at sixteen. Cleopatra was a queen by eighteen. All three of them obtained Miraculous in time, be it by virtue, by strength or by guile, but they were powers to be reckoned with well before that. Even as children."

"Different times, Gabriel. Do I need to ask you just how 'strange' a concept age is when your son is the superhero?"

That got a grimace out of him.

"Point." He sighed. "Alice was resilient. She could take the hardships that came with the mission. Anne-Laure and I were well past caring. We were pretty messed up, the three of us."

"Even Alice?" Nathalie asked.

She had met Anne-Laure.

"Especially Alice. I'm not lying when I say she was resilient. In many ways, she was the perfect Ladybug. Hurting her was near impossible." He opened his hands in front of him, cupped them and closed them over an invisible shape. "She'd absorb the insults and the blows. It's like with the Akuma. The darkness went in, never out." He opened his hands as if releasing a butterfly. "But she *couldn't* let it out. In many, many ways, she was exactly like me. There's a reason we ended up with each other."

Nathalie wished the memory of Alice would vaporize and disappear, so she would never have to hear that name again.

"I don't remember her having the slightest problem expressing her displeasure," she sighed. "The two of you kept arguing."

Gabriel blinked, as if surprised, then leaned back against his armchair. He lifted his cup of coffee and took a sip.

"That was after Adrien's birth," he mused. "We were only ever happy in a vacuum. Alice couldn't stand watching others be abused, and I'm an asshole, so... adding a child to the equation was not the brightest idea." He shook his head. "To get back to the point..."

Nathalie had no wish to revisit the 'point'. Why couldn't they discuss the myriad of other issues on their plate? She was going to give him every answer she could about his wife that evening, or die trying. Couldn't she be spared *additional* talk about Alice Beauregard Agreste?

Apparently not.

Gabriel went on.

"I don't think I ever saw Alice get angry on her own behalf. She'd been cured of that by age ten."

"How so?" Nathalie drawled, since he so *obviously* wanted to discuss this.
"Her mother was a walking disaster," he commented. "Self-diagnosed 'manic-depressive', which actually translated to narcissistic drunk with the maturity of a five year old child. She would devolve into sobbing fits every time Alice breathed the wrong way and accuse her of breaking her heart. It makes a child exceedingly wary of hurting people." He finished his now lukewarm coffee. "Alice cut all ties with her when she found out she was pregnant with Adrien."

Nathalie peeked at her own cup of coffee. She had not touched it.

"I see," she replied.

She wished Gabriel would drop the topic.

No such luck.

"Having Anne-Laure as a friend was good for her," he continued. "Anne-Laure doesn't give a damn about anything and you can scream at her until you're blue in the face without hurting her feelings. And Bee gave her every reason to, of course. It helped. They balanced each other out."

_Much like Adrien and Marinette_, Nathalie thought.

Then the parallels connected as no parallels had ever connected before, because parallels were by definition unable to cross. Metaphors were not her strong point.

Gabriel had chosen to discuss this topic because it was relevant to his son. He had done to Adrien what Alice's mother had done to Alice. And he saw it.

Nathalie stared at him.

He toyed with his empty cup with clumsy fingers and nearly dropped it.

"I've been thinking about things," he murmured as he leaned down.

Meanwhile, Nathalie's mind had latched onto the parallels and a great many realisations were coming to her at once. A wave of panic washed over her. Her skin went clammy with cold sweats.

"Ohmygod, he shouldn't be at school," she moaned, covering her face with her hands. "Why did I even let him go? Why did I drive him there? How did I think it was a good idea?"

Gabriel gave her the numbly bemused expression of a man on too high a dose of benzodiazepines. Not that his understanding of his son's feelings was much better when he wasn't drugged out of his mind.

Adrien insisting he was fine meant nothing. The boy would pretend that in all circumstances.

"It's a media circus out there!" she exclaimed, standing up and pacing. "And Kubdel's girl is in Adrien's class. Hawk Moth is the only thing his entire school will be talking about. He shouldn't be out there listening to all of that. He should be sitting in a psychologist's office and getting help for everything that happened!"

She turned to Gabriel for an instant. He was observing her with a resigned expression. It made her feel all the more guilty. She tried to justify her actions.

"I thought giving him freedom would help! Let him make his own choices, see his friends, show him that I trust his decisions, I..."

Why couldn't she have _parented_ him instead?
"This is going to be a disaster," she whispered, running her hands over her face again.

###

Adrien, back turned to his school and to the dozens of students who were hanging around and gossiping, watched Nathalie drive away.

He breathed in.

*Just find Nino*, he told himself. Finding Nino was the best way to start a day, even when said day promised to be a nightmare. Of course, most of the school had figured out who Hawk Moth was before Nadja Chamack had divulged the 'breaking' news, but suspicions and facts were entirely different things.

Adrien looked around and spotted his best friend on the side of the street, with *Marinette*, Alya, Max and Kim.

Adrien had not expected Marinette to be present this early in the morning. He now knew that her chronic lateness could be blamed on her secret life (for the most part, if you said it really quickly and did not question it too much), but it would be a while before he would get used to expecting her to be on time for school. That was why he had not thought of looking for her. Seeing her there brought a smile to his face.

He joined his friends and his hand slipped into Marinette's of its own volition.

"Hi," he greeted everyone. "How are you all?"

Marinette seemed to be paralyzed and turned a vivid shade of red. The boys replied with variations of 'fine, and you?'. Alya gave a warm 'hey, Adrien, hi!' but whirled to Kim the next second.

Adrien blinked when he noticed the other boy's fading black eye, but didn't ask. He had gotten into a fight about Alix, hadn't he?

"And yeah, no, that was just the cops," he told Alya. "Alix's cousin was hiking the whole week-end and the police was waiting for him to come back. As soon as they snatched him, the news went live."

"Snatched?" Adrien asked, blanching.

"They've put Alix's entire family under protective custody," Kim explained. "I'm talking like third cousins twice removed, everyone with Kubdel as a last name or her mother's name. They're afraid people will turn against them and everything."

Adrien nearly crushed Marinette's hand at that. He had to force himself to relax.

"That's awful," he commented, keeping his voice soft but as casual as possible. "How do you know? Did she call you?"

Kim shook his head.

"Hell no. No one has talked to Alix since the police picked her family up. Her mom's lawyer is keeping her relatives updated. I mean, the ones who refused police protection and weren't
arrested." He shrugged. "I'm just in touch with Alix's uncle's, uh, stepdaughter, I think? Met her when I… when I went to Alix's place when mister Kubdel, you know, died and all." He frowned when he saw he was getting a weird look from Nino, who maybe wondered how one met girls at wakes. "She was helping with the funeral, she wanted me to call if I planned to go!"

Alya, who saw that Kim was in the mood to pick fights, stepped in.

"It's good that the police managed to keep the press quiet," she said. "There's news that a store was vandalized in Calais this morning because the owner is called Kubdel. People are changing their names. And people are protesting on the quai des Orfèvres today."

"What are they protesting?" Nino exclaimed. "The guy was arrested. He's in the hospital and he'll go straight to prison the second he's well enough to get out of there. What the hell do they want the cops to do? Hold trial in the ER?"

"Justice and answers and transparency,'" Alya mumbled, staring down at her phone.

Kim was tuning them out. He looked down at Adrien and Marinette's hands.

"Hey! Look who finally got a clue!" he laughed. "Congrats!"

Marinette was still out of commission. She sucked her lips and nodded while Adrien blushed and smiled. Nino peeked at their hands and blinked. Alya followed his gaze. Her eyes bulged out. She looked at Marinette, then at Adrien, then at Marinette again.

"When did-"

Chloé's voice interrupted her.

"I don't care that you are sick!" she was yelling into her phone as she got out of the white limo that had just stopped in front of the school. "What am I going to tell miss Bustier?" She sighed. "Fine. Fine. Type it out, email it to me, I'll see what I can do."

She hung up and immediately turned to Adrien, with a blinding smile that faded as soon as she noticed Marinette. For a second, it turned into an irritated grimace, then Chloé noticed their intertwined hands. All emotion vanished from her face. In the blink of an eye, her expression morphed to bored indifference. She turned away as if nothing had happened and walked into the school, stopping at the door to turn back and wave at her father, who was standing next to the limousine.

Marinette had tensed and Alya was rolling her eyes, but Adrien doubted they had noticed that Chloé was hurt.

He didn't get to think about it, however. Mister Bourgeois was calling him.

"Adrien! I'm so glad to see you!" the man boomed, loudly enough for everyone around to turn to him.

The teenager didn't want more attention. He pulled his hand out of Marinette's, as swiftly and discreetly as he could, and joined Bourgeois by his car. There was a good ten feet of distance between them and the closest students, but that wasn't nearly enough for Adrien's tastes. He felt eyes on him.

"You haven't dropped by the Hotel in ages," Bourgeois exclaimed, squeezing his shoulder. "You absolutely should. We'd be glad to have you."
Adrien wished he could turn to his friends to get some support, but he had made sure to keep his back to them, as if standing between them and mister Bourgeois could be enough to smother the echoes of the man's voice.

"I'm sorry," Adrien replied. "I've been busy."

"Oh, that's no problem, no problem at all!" Bourgeois replied, still loudly enough to be heard from Australia. Then, his voice dropped back to a normal volume. "But, actually, my friend the police commissioner is also eagerly awaiting a visit from a, hem, certain someone. I figured you could, ah, give the message to your pointy-eared 'friend'."

Every single muscle in Adrien's body tensed.

Bourgeois gave him an apologetic smile.

"I am so sorry to have to resort to this method of communication, but it's the only one we have," he said.

Adrien opened his mouth and had to run the tip of his tongue in circles against the roof of his mouth for an instant. Blind fury was making it hard for him to find his word.

"Get back into your car," he replied, voice barely above a whisper and unnaturally calm. "Now. Take your lying and your tricks and your blackmail and go. Don't ever try this again, or I'll take it as a sign that you don't value secrets much."

"Let's not overreact here," the mayor commented. "This was an important message. We needed to let you know."

Adrien got his phone out and scrolled through his contacts, looking for a number he had scarcely ever called but that he thought Bourgeois would recognize: Anne-Laure's. He turned the screen towards André and gave him his most innocent model smile.

"Should I text this to Chloé?" he asked.

The blood left Bourgeois' face, as well as every drop of sweat in his body. Adrien observed that with cold satisfaction.

Nino joined them, leaning against Adrien and putting an elbow on his shoulder. He didn't say a word but looked concerned. He was also ever so softly pushing Adrien back.

Bourgeois smiled to them.

"Well, it was nice talking to you, Adrien, but I'm late as it is. I can't stay. Have a nice day."

"Bye, mister Mayor."

He watched the man climb back into his car. The limousine drove away. As soon as it was out of sight, Marinette and Alya joined them.

"Dude," Nino blurted out. "What was that?"

"What did he want?" Marinette asked at the same time.

Adrien smiled to them both.

"He was just inviting me," he told them. "Nothing important."
"You sure? It looked like you wanted to hurt him," his best friend retorted.

Adrien shook his head, even if there was some truth to those words. Bourgeois had succeeded where a year's worth of supervillains had failed: he had made Adrien hate him.

Kim, Alya and Max flocked to them, so Adrien gave them all a warm smile.

"Don't worry, okay? We argued about, ah, things the other day…" - Let them believe those 'things' were 'Chloé'. - "He's just being pushy about it. It's really nothing. Oh! We don't start the day with history class, right? I had a photoshoot that took all day yesterday, I didn't get the time to do my homework."

"Uh, we kind of do start with history class," Nino replied. "Sorry, dude."

Adrien made a show of looking horrified.

"Okay that's not good. Nathalie will murder me if I get a zero." He hugged his messenger bag to his chest. "I'll see if I can do it now."

"Want help?" Nino and Marinette offered.

"No, no, it'll be fine," Adrien swore, running away.

He heard a 'come on, he has better grades than the two of you put together' from Alya just as he reached the stairs, then nothing else. He raced to the library to find a quiet corner for himself. He had no plans to do that homework. He just needed to breathe.

"I can't believe that idiot's nerve," Plagg said, emerging from Adrien's bag.

"I can," the teenager sighed. "You know him, right? I mean, he was Queen Bee's husband. Any idea of how I could get him to back off?"

"I don't really know him. I mean, Gabriel always went out of his way to avoid the man and Waspp never talked about him, so… And just keep shoving back. He looks like a coward to me, all bark and no bite."

Adrien looked down at his shoes, guilt gnawing at him.

"I can't just threaten people like that," he replied. Even when it feels like they have it coming. "It's just not…"

"I'm sorry. Am I all red with a big spot on my forehead?"

"Uh?"

"Because, see, if you want wise words and absolute morality, you need Tikki," Plagg explained, chuckling. "Me, all I have to say is 'attaboy'!"

Adrien huffed, mildly annoyed by his Kwami's total absence of a sense of responsibilities.

"Plagg!"

The black cat's only response was a giggle as he vanished into Adrien's bag. The boy sighed and sat down at the closest table. He could as well try to do that homework, after all.
Adrien walked into the classroom right before the bell rang, with a sheet of paper that was a lot more scribbly and stained than his usual homework, but that he hoped would get an acceptable grade.

He found everyone already in class. A group had formed around Kim's empty seat: in the absence of his better informed best friend, Max was being questioned on everything Kim had told him about Alix. Rose and Juleka were squeezed close together on their desk, listening intently. Nathanaël seemed to prefer to stay two steps away, but was not losing a word of what Max said. Ivan and Mylène were standing next to Mylène's seat. She looked distraught. Ivan had wrapped an arm around her to comfort her.

Alya, Nino and Marinette were sitting at their desks, but listening to the conversation. Chloé was the only one who didn't seem to care. She was scribbling on a sheet of paper, blatantly copying what was written on her tablet's screen.

"Adrien!" Marinette exclaimed when she saw him come in.

He could tell she had been waiting for him. She looked worried. Nino whirled to the door when he heard her outburst. He was clearly just as concerned, but didn't push.

"Hey! Did you manage to finish that homework?" he asked instead of bringing the topic of mister Bourgeois up.

Adrien took his seat next to him.

"Yep. I don't think I'll get more than a 12/20, but it's better than nothing. What did I miss?"

Alya glowered at the rest of the class.

"Nothing much. Just talk about Hawk Moth," she said.

Alya leaned forward.

"So congratulations," she said with a grin, though her tone was maybe a little on the maniacal side.

He blushed.

"Alyaaaa," Marinette moaned. "I swear we just forgot to tell you. Leave Adrien alone."

"And I'm saying I'm happy for the two of you!" her best friend retorted, moving back on her seat. "We've waited long enough to see it happen."

Adrien had a feeling Alya's reaction would have been a lot more enthusiastic in other circumstances. All of their reactions, actually. But it was not a day to celebrate. Everyone was
worried about Alix. Nino kept peeking at their classmates, whose conversation was still going on. Alya tried to focus on Marinette and Adrien, but her eyes still drifted towards the others.

Max's voice did not really carry over, but Rose's soprano caught Adrien's attention.

"That's awful!" she was telling Max, who had gotten his phone out and was showing the screen to everyone else. She shuddered. "Just turn that off already."

"Man, that's a lot of blood," Ivan murmured.

Marinette's expression changed at once. She frowned and tensed, staring at the others with a focus that was nearly soldier like.

"Are we sure he's okay?" Juleka asked. "Look at his throat…"

"He was patrolling this weekend," Mylène promptly answered.

"You'd expect a magical sword to cauterize wounds," Max commented. "Considering the light that blade emits, you would think its temperature would be around 1100°, assuming it is made of iron, of course. But you can't…"

All of a sudden, all Adrien could hear was a whistling in his ears. They were watching the video Ladybug had filmed, the one of Alim Kubdel's attempt to kill him.

He turned away and stared at his desk. He felt…

'I am going to send your body to your father.'

He felt…

'He didn't leave me much of a choice.'

His stomach lurched. The whole room was swaying around him, and his body was curling up on its own. His fingers were tingling, the sensation slowly spreading to his hands and forearms. The rest of him was numb and weak.

He couldn't breathe. He felt like he was just floating, like his seat had vanished from under him, like the floor was gone, like he couldn't touch anything nor hold on to anything. Though he could see that his hands were resting on his desk, he couldn't feel the wood, just the pins and needles.

"Adrien?" Nino whispered.

The door opened on miss Bustier, instead of the history teacher. Adrien registered her presence but did not manage to look up. On the contrary, he lowered his head and hunched over his desk.

"Good morning," she said. "Could you all please put your phones away and return to your seats? Thank you."

Adrien curled up a little more. His breath was coming out in faint, shaky bursts. Swallowing filled him with nausea. He was seeing stars.

"Now, considering the circumstances, mister Damocles thought it would be best if the news concerning your classmate were addressed before rumors could grow out of proportion," miss Bustier was telling the class. "As you probably heard…"

"You okay?" Nino whispered, putting a hand on Adrien's shoulder.
The blond felt like that little touch could send him spiraling forward. He tensed, shuddering.

"... counselor will be joining…" miss Bustier was explaining.

Adrien forced himself to stand.

"I'm sorry I feel ill could I be excused," he blurted out.

He didn't see the teacher's reaction - he couldn't have looked up to save his life - but he heard whispers. Miss Bustier replied in a casually concerned voice, used as she was to seeing students run out of her class for minor medical issues.

"Of course, Adrien, just…"

Her voice faltered. He didn't hear the rest of her reaction. He was already running.

###

Chapter End Notes

So now the story's plot is "let's let characters react organically to everything and see where that goes". Ending? What's an ending?
"Slow breaths," Plagg murmured into Adrien's ear. "Try to count to three. One, two, three."

Adrien kept rocking back and forth, curled up in a corner of the basement, hidden behind cleaning supplies. The advice would have been excellent if he had managed to control his breathing at all, but he was hyperventilating and just couldn't stop. A dull ache was spreading through his forehead, that on top of the vertigo and nausea and sheer terror.

He couldn't even explain why he was feeling so sick over that video. He had seen it before. Scratch that: he had lived through the whole abduction and near-execution, and walked away exhausted and angry, not terrified. He hadn't even been that afraid when Kubdel had nearly sliced his throat.

And yet there he was, barely able to breathe, feeling about to pass out, with his arms tingling and his stomach in his throat.

"It will be fine," Plagg promised from his perch on Adrien's shoulder.

He had never made more of an effort to comfort his chosen, yet his words rang hollow to Adrien's ears. The teenager couldn't will himself to believe them. He tried to find words to reassure his Kwami, but they heard footsteps coming from the basement entrance. Plagg dove behind the cleaning supplies. Adrien shrunk away.

It was probably a teacher, or Marinette. He had alarmed everyone, hadn't he?

The clicking of heels echoed in the room, pausing for a moment before starting again. Adrien did not remember Marinette's shoes sounding like that at all. It was probably for the best. He didn't feel like facing someone who would worry for him. He braced himself for a talk with miss Bustier, then he heard an aggravated sigh and a phone flashlight turned on.

Chloé?

The light swept the room from one corner to another. Adrien couldn't believe his loud, erratic breathing had not given him away. The circle of light fell on his shoes. Chloé hurried closer and turned the light straight to his face.

"Oh, you are here!" she exclaimed.

He couldn't answer. He couldn't see the look on her face either - the flashlight was blinding him - but she shifted and went silent. Then she fumbled to turn the light off. An instant later, the basement had turned pitch black, save for the faint glow of her phone's screen. Adrien's eyes had to adjust to the darkness again.

"Ugh, this place is a dump!" Chloé exclaimed, looking around to have an excuse not to look at him. "Did they even clean the place after that Horrificator disaster?"

She did not even wait for Adrien's answer: she leaned down with a grimace to carefully place her purse on the ground, not next to him (he had squeezed himself in a small space between supplies and walls) but close enough. She brushed her white pants and huffed, then sat down.

Adrien relaxed a little. She was by his side, but not turned towards him. She didn't try to talk to him. Instead, she focused on her phone, browsing the internet while he tried to calm down. Not that trying worked. He had to wait it out.
"Do you want a paper bag?" she asked at some point. "Well. A plastic bag. I think I have one in my purse."

"A paper… Oh. No. No. I'm f-fine," he murmured.

She shrugged and turned back to her phone.

It took an eternity for Adrien to calm down and, when he did, he felt drained to the core. His brain had to be made of cotton, if it was made of anything but mush. He didn't dare to speak, but he could see Chloë was peeking at him from time to time, though she did her best to appear absorbed in her reading of fashion blogs.

She waited a few minutes, then put her phone away.

"Let's go!" she exclaimed. "Cartier has new arrivals and I want to go see them!"

"What?"

That was not what Adrien had expected to hear. All things considered, he should have expected exactly that. Chloë was so very Chloë in all circumstances.

"New. Arrivals," she repeated, marking her syllables as if he were deaf or stupid.

"Clo, I should really..."

_Get back to class_, he nearly said. By this point, people would be frantically looking for him. His father and Nathalie would have been called. He still trailed off.

"It will be fun!" she countered. "And if I'm going to skip class, I might as well skip the whole day. Also, I'll need you to tell me what you think about the clothes I buy, so I don't accidentally buy something that doesn't fit my complexion or whatever."

Adrien gaped. She got to her feet and brushed the dust off her clothes.

"Come on," she ordered, grabbing his arm and heaving him to his feet. "We don't have all day."

He protested. Some. Not nearly enough to be credible.

Slipping out of the school proved easy, despite the fact that several teachers were searching for him. Chloë had her ways, and her ways involved walking across the schoolyard as if she owned it, while class was in session, then to throw a tantrum when caught by mister Damocles.

"I feel ill!" she yelled at the top of her lungs when the headmaster refused to let her leave the school. "You want to call my father? Great idea. Let's call my father, so I can tell him how you are forcing me to stay here when I am totally horribly sick! I clearly have a fever!" she insisted, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. "And I'm nauseous. And I have a stomach ache. And I'm…" - She coughed. - "My throat is sore!"

She shouted that last part in a perfectly healthy voice.

That was all Adrien saw of that scene, since he had been meant to make good use of that distraction by dashing out of the school. He waited for Chloë at the corner of the street, and she joined him with the smuggest smile.

"Told you it would work," she said. "It always does."
Adrien mused that she had taken a lot from her father, and that he should probably have disapproved (he usually did). In the current circumstances, it made her his favorite person.

Of course, he checked his phone on the way to the rue de la Paix. It had been on silent, so he discovered three dozen text messages: four from Nino, three from Nathalie, zero from his father, one from Kim, one from Mylène, two from Alya, and the rest from Marinette. Nathalie had also left a message on his voicemail, but he didn't get to check it: Chloé was talking about clothes. If she didn't have a sore throat yet, she could expect it by the end of the day.

He texted everyone back to tell them he had gone home and was fine. He texted Marinette five times ("Don't worry I am okay. I just needed fresh hair". "I meant air". "I will call you after class". "I'm sorry I worried you". "I'm okay I swear"). He managed a longer text to Nathalie, explaining that he was out with a friend and that he was not yet up for school after all. He promised to go back to the apartment 'soon', without elaborating on the 'soon'.

Three hours later, he walked out of Vuitton's with his arm fulls and a limited field of vision. They had gone to Cartier, and then to every store in the vicinity. Chloé had the two resources you should never have given her at the same time: her father's credit card and a school-free day. It made for lots of shopping bags. Adrien felt a lot better than before they had left the school, but he was still exhausted, and clothes were surprisingly heavy.

"Now off to Zara's!" Chloé announced. "It's a little low quality for me but Sabrina could use new earrings."

"Clocouldwesitforamoment," Adrien protested, in a murmur.

"Oh! Not Zara. I don't know what kind of drugged monkey they hired to design this year's collection but it is horrible. We should-"

" Chlooooooééééééé, " Adrien moaned, dropping half his bags.

"What are you doing? " she yelled as he fumbled to pick them up.

"Can we please sit for a minute? I can't feel my legs." He knew that wouldn't be convincing enough. "We should try the new tea shop next to Claire's."

She frowned and made a face, but ended up rolling her eyes and sighing in defeat. She took his arm and led him to a public bench. Adrien's heart sank at the way she was clutching said arm. It would have given anyone the impression they were dating.

"Clo," he warned, wriggling away.

Chloé raised her eyebrows as if she did not understand what she had done wrong, but Adrien caught the flash of pain on her face. He knew that would be followed by anger. She would turn dismissive. Maybe she would even mock him. She tended to do that. To others, anyway.

He looked away.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was dating Marinette. It's new."

She wouldn't look at him. Instead, she rolled her eyes and lifted her chin, staring at a faraway cloud.

"Blah blah blah. Why would I care about you dating Marinette?" She sat down on the bench. "I mean, it's not like you couldn't see it coming, anyway, and I really think you could do better, but
it's not my problem, is it?"

Of course *Marinette* would be the target of the mocking.

Adrien put the shopping bags down.

"Clo."

Chloé took a deep breath and waved her hand and still wouldn't look at him.

"It's fine. I don't care. It's not like I'd be interested in a boy who doesn't *adore* me. And plenty of boys adore me, so…"

Adrien looked down at his shoes.

Chloé scoffed.

"And anyway, I like someone else, so there. Don't have such an high opinion of yourself, Adrien Agreste."

He nodded. It was better not to push, wasn't it? He didn't know.

"And anyway, " she went on, crossing her arms and sulking, "you don't deserve me, mister 'I didn't call you once all summer'!"

Her voice had gone from angry to petulant, and that was *much* better. A petulant Chloé was a Chloé who wasn't cut too deep.

But she had a point.

"I'm so SORRY!" he gasped. "I was so busy and then there was… I had… problems at home, and I just… Clo, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ignore you."

She smirked, amused. She loved long, heartfelt apologies of the 'crawling on broken glass' kind. She let him fumble with words for a moment more, then raised a hand.

"Forget it," she said, magnanimous. "And sit. You were the one who wanted to sit."

Adrien did as commanded, awkwardly. He still felt a little guilty.

Chloé spent a few minutes collecting her shopping bags, putting the smaller ones into the larger ones and moving packages from one bag to another.

"Say. I've been meaning to ask," she started. Then she said nothing.

Adrien waited, puzzled, but she did not continue.

"Yes?" he prompted her.

"Where did you move to? And what happened?"

He paled and looked away.

"Ah," he said, which was not an answer but would have to do. "I didn't think you'd have noticed."

"Of course I noticed. Hello? I live on the other side of the street?"
He nodded.

"I'm at Nathalie's for a little while. My father is... busy. He needs some... quiet."

Chloé frowned.

"You could come to my place, you know? We wouldn't even make you pay for the room. And it would be fun. Think of all we could do! Jagged Stone basically lives here, and you could roleplay with Sabrina and I...."

Adrien chuckled.

"I'll keep that in mind. Do I get to be Chat Noir?"

"Ugh. No. We'll find you a supervillain identity."

"What was that 'ugh'?
" he exclaimed.

"That's..."

Nathalie's car stopped on the side of the road, in front of them. Both teenagers went silent.

I should remember that my phone can be tracked, Adrien thought. Then he stood and braced himself. He was going to be grounded until his retirement.

Nino got out of the car first. Nathalie took a moment more, then coolly slipped out of the car. Her composure was impeccable, just like her hair and her business suit. She joined Adrien, keeping her face inscrutable.

"I'm s-" he started.

"Come here," she whispered, pulling him against her.

###

By noon, Nathalie had dropped Nino back at their school, thanking him for his help and wishing him a good, productive afternoon. It had taken five minutes more to drive Chloé back to the Grand Paris and twenty more to unload her shopping bags. After that, Nathalie had driven Adrien back to her place.

"Alright," she told him, after having commanded him to sit on the sofa, where he was intently waiting for her next words. She breathed in and started over, in a firmer voice. "Alright. In light of recent... After... We have come to the realization..." She stopped and sighed, squeezing her eyes shut, then sighed once again. "You are going to see a therapist. It is not up for discussion. I-"

"I... What? " Adrien gasped, baffled. "I don't need a therapist!"

"I said it wasn't up for discussion. " She ran her hands over her face. "I thought we could handle things by ourselves, I thought I could help you, but it is clear that I am not equipped to do so. I'm not. Your father is most certainly not, and neither are your fifteen year old friends."

Adrien wanted to protest about everything at once and did not know where to start.
"You… They..."

"They can help, but there is so much going on in your life, heavy things children cannot shoulder. They don't have the experience to do so, and - quite frankly - I doubt you could really open up to them. You are too used to put the people you love before yourself. It would do you good to talk to someone with an external perspective, someone for whom what you say is not personal."

She was worried. Of course she was worried: Adrien had given her every reason to be. He could hardly pretend collapsing into a trembling mess and fleeing school was a sign of mental health. But he was fine. He was.

"I don't need a doctor," he assured her. "And I couldn't talk to them anyway! I'm a superhero. My parents were superheroes. My girlfriend is a superheroine. You are the last Hawk Moth to date. I'd have to omit my entire life! What would be the point?"

He looked around for Plagg, who was lazing on the armrest.

"We'll deal with that question when it comes up," Nathalie countered. "First, we are going to find someone you find comfortable with. We made a list-"

"Plagg!" Adrien exclaimed. "Tell her it's not a good idea. We can't reveal who we are. Ever. We can't even risk it!"

The Kwami shrugged.

"Why not? Hawk Moth already knows who you are, and he's behind bars anyway."

Nathalie whirled to him, startled. As for Adrien, he gaped at Plagg in disbelief. It was the first time the Kwami suggested a public reveal: he had probed Adrien about discovering Ladybug’s identity, he had not commented after Chat Noir had threatened André Bourgeois with a reveal of his identity, but he had never flat out told him that there was no reason to remain silent anymore.

Of course, Plagg was being irresponsible. Tikki would most certainly never recommend such a thing. As a matter of fact, she would probably scold her brother for the suggestion.

"No! W-we can't just… Strangers a-aren't the same thing as..." Adrien sputtered.

"Adrien," Nathalie interrupted. She composed herself. "Calm down. The question is irrelevant right now. As I was saying, I just want you to meet someone, see if you like them and if they can help you, and we will go from there."

He shrunk back on his seat. That sounded reasonable. He still did not want to go.

"Did Father put you up to this?" he asked, looking at the floor.

"We came to that conclusion separately, but we are in agreement on this."

Adrien tensed, but Nathalie joined him on the sofa and squeezed his shoulder.

"I think it would be good for you. Please don't discard the idea because your father happens to agree with me."

"Well, if my father wants to send someone to a psychiatrist, maybe he should look in the mirror first."

Nathalie hesitated. She opened and closed her mouth, then ever so slightly shook her head. She
"Please give it a try," she insisted, taking his hand. "Do it for…"

Me, Adrien mentally finished.

"Your own well-being," Nathalie went on. "You are angry and you are hurt and I…" She bit her lower lip, staining her teeth with lipstick. "And you should not keep it in. Please consider the idea. I will take to you at least one appointment, but we both know it won't help at all if you don't open up."

She let go of his hand.

He looked down at it, feeling vaguely guilty. He closed his fist.

"I'll think about it," he replied.

Nathalie breathed in relief.

"Good. Good."

Adrien stood, somber.

"Can I go now?" he asked, avoiding Nathalie's eyes.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'll cook something, then I'll call you, alright?"

He nodded and hurried to his room, closing the door behind him. Plagg phased through it to join him. Adrien ignored him. He sat down on his bed, grabbed his phone, and scrolled through the messages he had not answered yet. Marinette had sent a few more, despite being stuck in class. He texted her kisses and smileys, which improved his mood by a fair degree.

"You should listen to Nathalie," Plagg commented, landing on his pillow.

Adrien frowned, turned to him, then gave the Kwami his best scowl.

"I don't need a doctor. I'm fine."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

"Yes. I. Am."

Plagg gave him a pointed look.

"I'm fine!" Adrien insisted. "I can handle this. I don't need to talk things out with anyone, let alone with a total stranger."

"Because keeping things in worked out so well for your father."

Adrien felt the blood leave his face and pool somewhere in his stomach like a ball of lead. Every single one of his muscles turned to stone.

"This is what Gabriel does," Plagg remarked. "This is what Alice did. It didn't help them, why
would it help you?"

The teenager nearly lashed out. The anger was still there, not directed at anything but begging to be let out.

But Plagg was right.

"I'm turning into my dad," Adrien muttered, running his hands over his face. He covered his eyes and pressed, hard. "I'm sorry."

Maybe he was angry and hurt. And it was getting worse and worse, and it was changing him. Two weeks in the past, would he have avoided Marinette? Would he have collapsed at school? Would he have considered blackmailing André Bourgeois?

"She has a point," he murmured.

"Told you so!" Plagg smugly replied.

Adrien glared at him, sulking. The Kwami laughed. In retaliation, his chosen tried to poke him in the stomach, but Plagg zipped faster than if he had seen cheese. Adrien gave chase. Ten minutes of jumping over the furniture and throwing pillows at Plagg later, he heard his phone buzz.

It was a text from Nino. Actually, it was the last of four.

"Nevermind, I sneaked in," it said.

The first was 'are you at miss Sanker's place?'. The second was 'Can I drop by?'. The third was 'Okay so actually I'm here, can you come down?'.

Adrien bolted out of his room just in time to see Nathalie open the door. Nino walked in, looking terribly uneasy. He was crushing his cap between his hands.

"Nino?" Adrien exclaimed.

"Uh. Hi. Miss Sancoeour said I should visit after class, uh, it's just, uh, the teacher was, ah, sick," he lied with a terrified glance at Nathalie. "AnywayIcameearliersosorry."

Nathalie smiled and closed the door.

"Adrien, what about you show your friend your room? I'll bring you your lunch."

"Thank you, Nathalie! Nino, this way," the boy exclaimed, beaming.

His friend hesitantly watched her return to the kitchen, then snapped out of his trance and followed Adrien, in slow steps. He paused several times on the way to look around, awed. It was only after being pushed into Adrien's bedroom and watching the door close behind them that he started talking.

"Dude. I don't think you want me to ask, but what's going on?" he blurted out, gesturing at the bed and tv. "Are you okay?"

Adrien gave him a weary smile.

"Yes. Yes. Don't worry. There's… trouble with my dad, so Nathalie offered to give me a little space, that's all."
Nino tensed, indignant. He didn't say anything, but he was chewing on the inside of his cheeks.

"It's okay," Adrien lied. "It will settle down. Wanna see the-

"I was right next to you in class this morning. Just don't... Just. Gah!" Nino took a deep breath to collect himself. When he resumed talking, he sounded sorrowful. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right? I'm here. I'll listen. Marinette will listen. Alya will listen. Just... If things are bad, you can tell us, okay?"

Adrien felt his eyes tingle. He kept them wide open so they would not water and forced a smile on his face.

"I know, I know. I..." he heard himself sniffle and inwardly cursed. He prayed for Nathalie to knock on the door before he could start weeping. "I mean, I know. Just, err..."

There was a knock at the door. Adrien spun around and opened it wide, all but bowing at Nathalie as she entered with a platter of sandwiches, orange juice and pastries. He thanked her, offered help with the dishes later on (she owned a dishwasher), suggested they could eat at the dining table with her (she was not hungry) and asked if the pastries were from the Dupain-Cheng's bakery (they were not). Ultimately, he had to let Nathalie leave and face Nino. He still managed not to meet his best friend's eyes, and put the platter down on the bed instead.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, grabbing a sandwich and wishing his eyes would dry already. "I'm starving."

He sat down, trying to keep his bangs in front of his eyes.

Instead of sitting on the other side of the bed, Nino joined Adrien and put a hand on his shoulder. Slowly, carefully, he sat down. Adrien had not managed to look up.


Adrien let out a shaky breath. His best friend leaned closer, tilting his head to take a look at his face.

"I..." the blond murmured. Maybe Plagg was right. Maybe secrets no longer mattered. Maybe keeping things in was not the way to go. "I... I'm the boy. On the video. I'm the boy. It's me. I'm Chat Noir."

###
"I'm Chat Noir," Adrien mouthed once again, this time with not the slightest sound coming out of his clenched throat.

Nino's only answer was crushing silence, and Adrien couldn't bring himself to look at him. He swallowed and wet his lips, trying to keep talking instead.

"A-and I don't even know why I freaked out about the video," he joked in a trembling voice. "I mean, I was not even afraid when it was happening. I sassed him the entire time. And he wasn't even scary or anything. I mean, he had internal injuries, he could barely stand up. And I know there was a lot of blood, but I only had flesh wounds, and one of the two was an accident anyway."

He twisted his fingers, feeling like they were still sticky with blood, and scraped long gone dirt from under his fingernails.

"And we magicked the wounds away so-"

"Adrien!" Nino snapped, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him once, before softening. He was trembling. He looked at Adrien, squeezing his shoulders. "He tried to kill you. It's okay not to be fine! It was bad. It was really bad! You don't have to act like, like… like it wasn't, like it didn't matter! Okay? Just… Just stop for a second, just…"

He couldn't find his words, so he pulled Adrien into a crushing hug. It actually hurt in places, like where Nino's fingers were clenched on Adrien's arm, but the blond didn't care. He wrapped his arms around Nino, tentatively placing his hands on the other boy's back. He choked on a sob, strangled another, then couldn't hold them in anymore. He clutched Nino's T-shirt.

He had nearly died dozens of times, so this shouldn't have been any different. People had tried to kill him before, he had been injured before, he had been captured before. It was just the same. Except it wasn't.

"I-it w-was bad," he murmured. "I mean… F-fighting akumatized people is one… one thing. Y-you know it's just magic making them bad. And H-Hawk Moth was just some… cartoon villain. All evil, not…'real'. But f-facing him." He shuddered. "Facing him, it wasn't… He's a person. And I thought it would be all black and white and that he'd be like a w-walking stereotype, but…"

He had to pull away to wipe his face.

He could still hear Kubdel's voice, see the way he had shrugged as he told him he was going to send his corpse to his father.

"It was bad," he repeated, steadier. "I mean, he didn't even hate me. He just didn't care if I lived or died as long as he got what he w-wanted. And it's not like he didn't have it in him to care. You could tell he loves A-Alix, and Bella, b-but…"

He took a deep breath.

Nino shifted to sit next to him, then wrapped an arm around his shoulders and held him close.

"I-I wasn't prepared for that," Adrien explained, staring at the floor. He thought of Kubdel's quiet
explanations, of his tiredness, of his bursts of murderous rage followed by bored indifference. "I wasn't prepared at all."

Admitting that relieved him a little, just like explaining the different ways in which his abduction had gotten to him. It didn't even matter that Nino couldn't find anything to say: Adrien had taken a step back from his thoughts, and they had started organizing themselves. He could finally examine them with a modicum of clarity and pinpoint every wound. Watching Anne-Laure being stabbed, listening to Hawk Moth's motives, ending up nearly dead because of his father, after being lied to and betrayed. And of course the powerlessness, the fear, the very real injuries, and the last minute rescue.

Of course, it was hard to hold oneself together after that.

"But I'm gonna be okay," he said, finally looking up. And it was true, wasn't it? "I'm not okay now but it's just that the situation is such a mess. Every single little thing seems to be going wrong at once and it's... overwhelming, you know?"

Nino took a deep, wet breath.

"Yeah," he replied, squeezing Adrien's shoulder and rocking him left and right. "Yeah. You'll be okay."

His voice dropped to a whisper, and he mumbled a series of 'damnit, damnit, damnit'. He pulled Adrien closer.

"A-are you alright?" the blond asked, concerned.

"Yes. No. It's just... It's not fair that you had to go through all of that! It's just not right! Who does that to a kid? Who does that to anyone?" Nino pressed his balled fist to his lips. "I'm sorry. I'll calm down."

Adrien waited, at a loss for words, but it didn't take long for his friend to resume talking.

"You're strong," Nino said, turning to Adrien to meet his eyes. "Much stronger than I am. I mean, I was Akumatized in what, ten minutes? But you've always had so much more on your plate than any of us who were turned, and you always, always manage to get over it and find the bright side. And you're a superhero on top of that? I mean, that's like... WOW."

He cleared his throat and looked down at his fingers, idly tapping the tips of his fingers against the fat of his thumb.

"Anyway, you'll be okay," he went on. "And things can only get better and better, right?"

Adrien nodded.

Nino smiled, tentatively.

"Also, dude, thanks for getting me out of that bubble suit. It was super ridiculous."

"Well, you did throw me a birthday party, so I'd say we're even."

"The party was nice, but not that nice. For a start, it lacked cheese," Plagg chimed in, emerging from behind the TV. "I'd say you are half-even and he should throw you another one with more Camembert."
Nino squeaked and jumped back on the bed.

"WHAT THE-"

"Plagg!" Adrien exclaimed, before realizing that explanations were needed. "Nino, that's just Plagg-"

"Just?" Plagg huffed.

"That's Plagg," his chosen amended. "He is a Kwami, and he's the one who gave me Chat Noir's powers."


Plagg yawned and landed between the sandwiches, lifting the bread and confiscating all the cheese he could find. Only after doing that did he turn to Nino.

"Hello, boy. Nice to officially meet you."

He didn't even wait for an answer before stuffing a rolled up slice of gouda in his mouth. Adrien watched (and listened to) him chew, with a disgusted grimace.

"Plagg reeeeeeally likes cheese," he muttered as an apology of sorts.

"I, uh, can see that," Nino replied.

He was staring at the Kwami with wide eyes. He kept staring as Plagg burped and rubbed his belly. Then, he snapped out of it.

"Holy shit, you're really Chat Noir," he blurted out.

Adrien was not altogether sure of how to answer.

"I… Uh…"

"I mean I believed you but now it's sinking in."

That got a chuckle out of Adrien.

"I'm absolutely pawsitive I am," he joked.

Nino kept gawking at Plagg.

"So how does it work? Do you, like, say 'Shazam' and then you transform?"

"No. It's 'claws out',' Adrien replied, with no intent, so his Kwami wouldn't be sucked into the ring.

Nino blinked. He blinked again. He turned to Adrien with a pained yet amused expression.

"How did I not guess that? I could have guessed that."

Adrien gave him an exhausted grin.

"And Ladybug's is 'spots on', just so you know."

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah. It's... Ah. So. Chat Noir is in love with Ladybug, and you are dating Marinette, and you are Chat Noir, so, uh, how do I say it..."

Adrien groaned, covering his face with his hands.

"I know, it's unfair to Marinette. And cruel. And I should probably break up with her since I like another girl but-"

Nino rolled his eyes.

"Dude. Did you forget I know you?"

Adrien groaned a second time. Every single reveal of Ladybug's identity had been his fault. And she was so careful about her secret, too. He was going to get the lecture of his life.

"I'm not going to tell!" Nino exclaimed. Then he thought about it. "And I'm especially not going to tell her. If she ever tells me, I'll act surprised and all."

"Thank you," Adrien mumbled, face still buried in his hands.

"Hey. Do I get to watch?"

"Mh?"

"Your transformation!"

Adrien perked up. Plagg, not so much.

"Absolutely not!" the Kwami protested. "I have perfectly fine gouda to finish!"

"Come on," his chosen pleaded. "Just the once."

"No."

"I'll buy you Camembert."

"Nathalie will buy me Camembert anyway."

"I'll buy you Roquefort and Camembert."

Plagg started listening intently.

"And that Herve one."

"Fiiine," the Kwami drawled. "But I'm not a party trick. This is just this once."

"Thanks, Plagg! Claws out!"

###

"It will come and it will recede, and come and recede, and come and recede... You humans are
"weird like that," Plagg said.

Nathalie, sitting at the dining table with her laptop and a glass of wine (the bottle was safely hidden behind the cleaning supplies, under the sink), listened to the boyish voices coming from Adrien’s bedroom. There was laughter at times, then stretches of whispers, then loud banter and video game music, then more subdued conversation. All risks aside, she was glad Adrien had revealed his identity to that Nino boy. He did not behave in the most refined way but he was a solid friend.

"It's not the same for all humans," she told Plagg, low enough for her voice not to be heard through the door of Adrien's room. "For some, it comes and never leaves. Thankfully, he is a resilient child."

Plagg nodded, idly gnawing on a moldy piece of cheese he had unearthed from the trash can. He had been muttering about having to transform 'with no good reason' for ten minutes, but Nathalie could tell his ears were turned towards the bedroom. All of his rambling was just a distraction so he could spy on Adrien.

"How different is it for you Kwami?" she asked.

She knew Bella was corrupted, and that they were vulnerable to being shaped by their holders. Still, even that sounded human in some fashion.

Plagg shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't care. I know how I feel and I know I want cheese and sleep. What's it going to change to know why I feel?"

Nathalie nodded. His interest in serious discussion was inversely proportional to his proximity to Camembert.

"You should ask Tikki," he suggested.

"Tikki comes attached to young Marinette Dupain-Cheng and the girl can be tiring."

He tilted his head to the side.

"We're simpler," he ended up saying. "Not anymore, maybe, but we were simpler. We had no ambitions but our duty, and not even all of us, at that. We had no driving forces but what we were. Waspp was driven and I didn't care about much except pushing things off tables to see what happened. Still do. And we can learn but we can't change, if that makes sense. Our knowledge can grow but our pool of feelings is fixed. It's not that obvious now, because we've been tainted with so much of our holders' souls, but for the longest time, we only had two or three feelings to pick from."

She shuddered at his choice of words. 'Tainted'.

"Has anyone ever knowingly tried to make you darker?" she asked.

He yawned.

"No. Not me. It was done to Waspp, though," he drawled. "To some humans, a dark god is more useful than just a god. Or maybe they just didn't want to hear Waspp lecture them forever. Her voice gets on one's nerves."

"What about Bella?"
Plagg shook his head.

"I don't think her chosen gave it any thought at all. He was young. Younger than Adrien, even."

"What did he do?"

"He killed his grandfather, father and uncle. Bella told me they deserved it, but then again, she was far gone at that point, and she didn't give me details."

Nathalie nodded. She didn't tell Plagg Kwami weren't so far removed from humans in terms of vulnerability. They too could be changed by overwhelming influences. Instead, she focused on an unwelcome yet obvious question.

"I expect your heroes often end up traumatized?"

She did not have to look at the black cat's face to know he did not appreciate that line of questioning. His silence spoke volumes. Nathalie kept her eyes on her computer screen and on the search results for child therapists in Paris.

Plagg didn't answer.

"Do they usually recover?" she asked, with a look towards Adrien's room. "Not that I don't think Adrien will recover, of course."

It would merely take time.

"No two humans are the same," Plagg muttered, shrugging. "And the boy is not alone."

"Of course he is not."

The Kwami rolled his eyes.

"So he will be just fine."

She acquiesced, sighing.

"I know. It's just… Gabriel hasn't fared so well, has he?"

Plagg looked pained.

"That's not a fair comparison. It wouldn't have been the same if he had kept the Miraculous. And he never had Adrien's inner brightness either."

"Even at Adrien's age?"

"Someday, he'll tell you about it," Plagg commented, twisting a piece of rind off his Camembert and swallowing it whole. "But you should know before hairpins, it was ci-"

Nathalie's phone started ringing. The image of Gabriel appeared on its screen.

"Talk about the devil," she murmured, picking up.

He had spent the morning with her (and, later on, Nino Lahiffe) to try and find Adrien. As his son did not want to see him and Gabriel respected that, he had let Nathalie retrieve the boy alone after
she had located him, and made his own way home. Nathalie had texted him after collecting Adrien and had received several texts in return, but, by the point she had been able to reply to those, Gabriel was no longer answering. She had called and left two messages, first to confirm that Adrien was safely home, then to inform Gabriel that Nino was doing a good job of cheering the boy up.

She had been waiting to hear from him.

"Gabriel, thanks for calling me back." She turned away from Plagg. "Did you get my messages?"

"I did," Gabriel replied.

Exhaustion and longing washed over her. She barely even heard his next words: she had to collect herself and close her eyes for an instant. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into his arms and forget all of her problems (nevermind the fact that he had caused all of those).

Was that why Alice had stayed, despite everything? Not just love, but that sheer tiredness, the overwhelming need for comfort? Nathalie felt worn out. She had been worn down.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" she said once the wave of emotions receded.

"I was asking how Adrien was doing. Is Nino still there?"

"He is. I think they are playing video games right now. Nino is certainly a welcome distraction, and it seems like Adrien managed to confide in him, to some extent. It's not the same as an actual professional, of course, it's still doing Adrien a world of good."

There was a silence on the other side of the line, and shuffling noises.

"I found someone," he announced. "Hélène Poitiers. An old friend in the police worked with her. She worked with crime victims, children with trauma, so she could be a good fit. She is retired, for the most part, but she'd be open to seeing Adrien."

"You called her already?"

"Yes. I did not give her a full rundown of the situation - we'll see about that once Adrien gets onboard with the idea - but I did tell her about Alice… going missing, and… myself, actually. In broad strokes."

"Alright. Send me her number, I'll get an appointment as soon as possible."

"I'll do that. Oh. Nathalie, have you watched the news?"

What now? she thought, wincing. What had the universe thrown at them now?

"Not in the last thirty minutes."

"Don't let Adrien check them. There was a protest in front of his school. Some imbeciles heard Kubdel's daughter was a student there and they grabbed their pitchforks and torches."

"Who the hell protests against a fifteen year old girl?" Nathalie hissed, indignant (not that she would have cared if Adrien had not been involved). "Is it over?"

"It lasted less than fifteen minutes. Ladybug showed up and gave them a dressing down of the 'goes down in history' kind. It was spectacular. It's on miss Lane's Ladyblog, if you want to watch."
Nathalie could hear the smile in his voice.

"You do like that girl, don't you?"

"Which one? The journalist or the superheroine?"

"Marinette."

"Well, obviously. One could say she was tailor-made for my son."

She winced at that pun.

"You didn't just…"

She trailed off when Adrien and Nino got out of the bedroom to hurry to the kitchen. Not that Nino really hurried. He was too uncomfortable, and slowed down with a guilty look at Nathalie. She raised her eyebrows and looked away, focusing on her phone call.

"... say that," she finished.

"What? And I'd like to mention she would help to keep the company in the family. In a fashion, we're cut from the same cloth."

Nathalie groaned. She had no idea if his meds had worn off, impaired his self-control or simply started working. In any case, she had a feeling she would have to get used to wordplay.

She frowned, feeling watched. Adrien had stopped at the kitchen door and was observing her with a sullen expression.

"It is your father," she confirmed, knowing full well it was what the boy was thinking. Who else would she have called? She no longer had a job. "He wanted to know how you were feeling."

Adrien pursed his lips, to Nino's obvious concern, then crossed the room and extended his hand for Nathalie to give him her phone. She did, even though Gabriel had just started talking.

Adrien pressed it to his ear and raised his voice to drown out his father's voice.

"Hello," he said. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

Gabriel did not get a second to answer: Adrien gave Nathalie her phone back with a sharp nod, then returned to the kitchen. His father, who had no idea what was happening, kept talking. She heard a nervous 'Adrien' and inintelligible questions. Plagg dashed after his chosen.

"He still doesn't want to talk to you," Nathalie murmured into her phone. "I'm sorry."

Nino winced and nodded at her, then followed Adrien.

"No, I know that," Gabriel replied. He sighed. "I know."

He had managed to spend years not talking to his son, but of course it took the boy refusing to interact for it to get to him.

"You should tell him about your…" she trailed off so the teenagers would not hear 'medical treatment'. Some news needed to come from Gabriel. "Can you hold on for a moment?"

She waited for his 'of course', then put her phone down and joined Adrien and Nino in the kitchen.
They were restocking on junk food and soda.

"He was here," she heard Nino whisper as she passed the door. "With us. All morning. He was super worried about you. But he said you had an… arrangement?"

"We do," Adrien replied, subdued. "Do you want Fanta or Dr Pepper?"

His friend hummed, thinking about it, then noticed Nathalie and froze.

"There's also some orange juice in this cupboard," she announced, pointing at a door. "Boys, would you like it if Alya and Marinette joined you after class? If you invite them, I'll go pick them up."

Adrien shifted in unease, looking around.

"I. Um. Would it be fine if we went out instead? Maybe to the movies, or something? I'd rather not…"

*Explain the situation to Alya,* Nathalie concluded.

"That's alright," she replied. "Ask them and let me know."

Adrien acquiesced and gave her a faint smile.

"Thank you, Nathalie."

*It will come and it will recede, come and recede, come and recede.*

She nodded, poured herself a cup of coffee, then went back to the dining room. It gave some time to the boys to return to Adrien's room. Once they closed the door, she picked up her phone.

"Still here?" she asked.

"Yes, yes."

"They'll be arranging to spend some time with 'miss Lane' and miss Dupain-Cheng later today," she announced. "I'll brief the girls a little, so they don't bring up the protest while Adrien is feeling low."

"Good."

"Another thing."

"Yes?" Gabriel replied, perplexed and sounding as if he was bracing himself.

"I have been considering hiring a caretaker for Adrien. I can tutor him if he does not go to school, but I can't be with him 24/7. For a start, I should be looking for a job." She sighed. "Would you trust me to pick someone?"

She did not tell him who she had in mind. She did not know how it would pan out.

"Of… course," Gabriel said. "Obviously, I'd want to meet them before they meet Adrien, but I do trust your judgement."

"Good. Good. I'll call you tonight, then. I need to get in touch with someone."

"Very well. I'll be waiting."
With the conversation at an obvious end, Nathalie nearly said goodbye. She didn't. She didn't want to.

"How is your afternoon so far?" she asked instead.

###

Nathalie parked under a familiar building with a wholly unfamiliar feeling of dread.

She had not visited in years, yet the place hadn't changed. The beige walls were a little dirtier, maybe, but that was about it. The parking lot was filled with the same old, cheap cars. Children played on the lawn in front of the building. Laundry was drying on some of the balconies. Potted plants were dying on some others. A red tabby was looking down at the street from the second floor. You could hear a loud movie from one apartment, somewhere, and music from another. And, in the background, there was the faint humming of the highway, that never quite stopped. If the wind blew in the right direction, it would keep you up at night.

She got out of the car and braced herself. She was unused to feeling so nervous - to feeling so guilty - and she stood under the building's doorbell for five minutes without ringing. In the end, she slipped in when a young man opened the door, then took another moment to collect herself before calling the elevator.

Fifth floor.


She wouldn't have been crawling back in other circumstances. She wouldn't have thought of crawling back because she wouldn't have thought of anything but her job. It was what she had, it was who she was. The rest faded into the distance. She forgot.

But she was worried for Adrien. She was terrified for Adrien, and she needed help. No one could be more ill prepared for parenting than she was (regardless of what she had learned from fictional parents on TV).

It was embarrassing to only come back because she needed something, but what was she supposed to do?

She walked out of the elevator and stopped at the second door on the left.

The doormat had changed. It was the most meaningless thing to focus on, but it caught her full attention for a good thirty seconds.

It was ridiculous. She was being ridiculous.

She took a deep breath, straightened her spine, lifted her chin and rang the doorbell.

A moment went by.

There was shuffling inside, footsteps, the jingling of keys. The lock turned. The door opened on an old woman with grey hair that Nathalie nearly didn't recognize. An haircut and a few wrinkles shouldn't have been so confusing, but the colors were wrong, the length was wrong, the age was
wrong. When you spent years away from someone, of course they changed a lot.

The woman's blue eyes went wide behind her reading glasses.

"Hello," Nathalie greeted her, forcing the words out of her clenched throat. "I'm sorry. I know it has been a long time. I… need your help."

The silence lasted an eternity, then she got a smile and a sigh for her trouble.

"Come in."

###
Adrien awoke to sunlight on his face, reached for his phone, checked the time, and nearly had a heart attack. It was ten in the morning, and he was so late for school he would never be able to find a plausible excuse. Why hadn't Nathalie woken him?

He jumped out of bed, frantic, promptly tripped over an unicorn plush toy and kissed the floor. He also realized the room was the wrong color. He struggled to get to his knees, looked around, and remembered where he was. Apparently, he hadn't adjusted to living at Nathalie's yet. He had also forgotten he was not supposed to go to school, which was likely why she had let him sleep in. As for the unicorn plushie, he had won it the previous evening. If you could call it 'winning'.

At Nathalie's suggestion, Adrien and Nino had arranged an evening out with Marinette and Alya. Nino had taken care of everything. He had decided on what they would eat (burgers), when they would meet (seven) and where they would go (the arcade). Then he had spent the two hours leading to the meeting panicking. So had Adrien, all because of an innocent question Nino had asked: 'so, is it a double date?'. It technically was and, for some reason, it had appeared to them like some insurmountable obstacle. They had wondered what the girls were expecting, if they had to be on their best behavior, as if the four of them had never spent any time together.

Thankfully, Alya was pretty much no-nonsense and had greeted them with a ten minutes discussion on the best burger places, which had given Nino ample opportunity to disagree on the quality of said places, which had left Marinette and Adrien trying not to side with anyone.

They had bought chinese takeout and eaten in the park.

They had gone to the arcade, since no one had raised objections. Marinette had slaughtered them at Ultimate Mecha Strike II, but Nino had taken his revenge on racing games. Alya had stood back with Adrien to watch them play, and made sure not to discuss Hawk Moth, superheroes, or any of her favorite topics. Instead, she had congratulated Adrien on finally, thank god, finally getting together with Marinette. Apparently, the 'centuries' leading to it had been harrowing for everyone involved (except Adrien, who was kind of oblivious).

Their evening had ended in front of the claw cranes, where Adrien had spent half of the Agreste fortune trying to win one stuffed cat for Marinette. Then Alya had informed them that they were rigged.

"There's a programmable payout percentage," she had said. "And the grip is set to grab at full strength then weaken."

That revelation had been met with an indignant 'what?' from Nino and a 'how do you know?' from Marinette.

"Max told me," the blogger had explained.

Adrien had heard a 'humph' from under his jacket and seen a black blur dash into the claw crane machine. He had won the next toy, and then four others (even if the claws had looked suspiciously loose for all of those attempts). When the arcade owner had given them all suspicious looks, Adrien had ended Plagg's cheating spree and guided his friends outside. He had seen the owner
hurry to the machine they had pillaged and open the back panel.

All in one, it had been a good evening, with not even a whisper on the Hawk Moth disaster, nor on Gabriel. Nino and Alya had walked home. Nathalie had picked Marinette and Adrien up, and driven Marinette home while Tikki and Plagg bickered about cheating and dishonesty. "It doesn't count if you are cheating a cheater," the black cat had argued.

Talking about Plagg…

"Plagg?" Adrien called, looking around his bedroom. "Plagg?"

There was no answer, so the boy figured the kitchen was a safe bet. He walked out and found his Kwami sitting on the sofa's back, with the TV turned on on a cartoon channel. He did not even notice Adrien's arrival: he was too absorbed in the adventures of a white dolphin and a little girl in an orange dress (as well as in nibbling on a generous slice of brie). Adrien sat next to him, said "hi" and got a "hush" for his trouble.

"Where is Nathalie?" he whispered.

Plagg pointed at the bathroom door.

"D'you think she'll be done soon?" Adrien murmured.

"Shhhhh! There's a shark after Oum!"

The teenager swallowed his tongue and retreated into the kitchen, where he prepared himself a bowl of cereal and a cup of hot chocolate. He was halfway through both when Nathalie joined him.

She was impeccably dressed, in a grey pantsuit and red shirt, with her hairdo perfect. More than the clothes, though, it was her attitude that gave her mood away: this was going to be a business day. You could see it in her posture, in the tilt of her chin, in the tension in her shoulders.

"Hi?" Adrien said.

"Good morning," she replied, sitting next to him. She looked down at her tablet, even though it was turned off. "We need to discuss your day."

He dropped his spoon back into his cereal bowl.

"A-Alright?"

"I called your school," Nathalie explained. "You are excused for the next two weeks, due to professional engagements, and your teachers will be forwarding me your homework so I can teach you from home."

He nodded.

She pursed her lips and paused for an instant.

"On the topic of seeing a therapist… We found someone with a good reputation, used to working with the police, whom we believe should be able to handle… sensitive matters properly. She can see you tomorrow or Saturday, as you prefer. I know you are not enthusiastic about the idea, but I still want you to meet her. Now, I know 'tomorrow' would be quite sudden, and leaves you no time to prepare for the visit, so if you need a few days to consider what you could discuss with her…"

Adrien lowered his head.
"Saturday will be fine," he sighed.

He still couldn't imagine talking to a stranger, but even Plagg had told him he should. He'd try. If it turned out to be useless - which he fully expected - then no one could tell him he hadn't made efforts.

"Also," Nathalie said.

He waited for her to continue. It took her a moment.

"I am not going to be available all day, every day," she announced. "For a start, today, I need to go to the bank, I need to meet an old acquaintance from Grenat Fashion, I need to get my hair done because my roots are more than showing …" She pursed her lips. "I know you are old enough to be left alone in the apartment, but you will need someone to drive you around, to take care of the shopping you might need…"

_The return of the bodyguard_, Adrien thought.

"I can go buy groceries," he pointed out more than he protested.

"So I asked someone to come and keep you company for those two weeks," Nathalie continued, ignoring him.

He frowned.

"Nathalie, please. That's not-"

"My mother will be joining us at noon," she finished.

He gaped at her. Well. That wasn't what he had expected.

"I didn't know you had a mother," he blurted out, before realizing how idiotic that sounded. "I mean, I, uh, you mentioned her. And the tattoo thing. I, ah, just didn't know you were close to her."

Nathalie peered at him over her glasses. He cleared his throat.

"You will like her," she told him. "She is very… unlike me, I suppose."

"I… Alright?"

###

Aurélie was, as a matter of fact, very unlike Nathalie. She was… motherly. No. 'Motherly' was not the term. She was closer to 'grand-motherly' but not quite. She was chirpy and younger than Adrien would have expected (though her hair was grey and she wore reading glasses, which she kept pushing up or down). She smiled all the time (and _that_ had to be why, despite having the exact same blue eyes and heart-shaped face, she didn't look like Nathalie at all).

She had introduced herself as 'Aurélie', thwarting his attempt to call her 'Mrs. Lastname' like the polite boy he had been raised to be. So, now, he fumbled with his words and called her 'Mrs Aurélie' or 'Mrs' or nothing at all, because he couldn't quite manage 'Aurélie, period'.
Nathalie had given her a tour of the apartment, keys and a bank card, then left them alone.

"Have you eaten yet?" Aurélie had immediately exclaimed.

"Not yet, no?"

She had opened the cupboards one by one.

"Alright! What do you like?"

They had decided on a meal, then he had retreated into his bedroom to 'play video games'. In truth, what he had done was start Ultimate Mecha Strike and let the demo sequence play on a loop, loudly, so he could talk to Plagg without raising questions. Of course, Plagg just wanted to nibble on cheese and laze around.

Adrien was so frustrated. He could have gone to school. He wasn't ill. He was not feeling great, he could admit that, but it didn't mean he was fragile and had to be kept away from real life. Being forced to skip class made him restless: he could think of nothing but the lessons he was missing and the work he could have done, so he tried to read his schoolbooks on his own, before giving up. After that, he tried to play video games but couldn't focus.

He ended up following the scent of food to the kitchen.

"Can I help?" he asked Aurélie, whom he found standing by the stove, moving food in a pan with a wooden spoon. Then he gaped at the stove. "That's a lot of food."

There was no space left on the stove: she was cooking not only meat, but vegetables (in two separate pans), and a large cooking pot was taking the last available corner.

Aurélie pointed at the pot and smaller pan.

"I'm making soup for tonight and tomorrow," she explained. "It's not easy to convince Nathalie to eat but, if you put warm beverages next to her while she works, you can trick her into drinking them. Do you like leek?"

Adrien joined her and peeked into the pans, finding peas, carrots and potatoes in butter in one, and sliced leek and onions in another.

"I do. It looks delicious."

"Thank you," Aurélie replied. She handed him her spoon. "Now, could you please make sure the peas don't stick while I set the table?"

He did as asked, then ended up eating at the diner table, with the pans of food sitting at the center of the table rather than elegantly disposed bowls and saucers. He served himself straight from the pan instead of receiving a prepared plate, and did that with a normal spoon. He was even encouraged to clean the sauce from the pan with bread. Sure, the dining table etiquette at Nathalie's was a lot more relaxed than at home (and he had, as a matter of fact, served his own plate before), but she would not have suggested such extremes.

And the food was delicious, too. All in once, he felt pretty content, even if he expected Plagg to grumble about the distinct lack of cheese.

"I thought I could make apple pie this afternoon," Aurélie announced as Adrien was filling the dishwasher. "Nathalie tells me you like pastry?"
Adrien perked up, which made her laugh.

"I see you do," she exclaimed.

He nodded.

"Could I help? I've been trying to make pancakes and everything, but I'm not very good at it."

It occurred to him that Marinette was the daughter of the best bakers in Paris and that he could probably get a few lessons from her if he asked. She had to know what she was doing in a kitchen. Maybe. Not everyone learned through osmosis. He sure couldn't handle a sewing needle.

"I don't see why not," Aurélie replied. "Though we should hurry and go to the market, because Nathalie has neither apples nor dough. I know she had a pie pan somewhere, because I bought it for her when she moved in..."

"I didn't see one."

"We'll find it. But first, shopping. Let's go?"

Rather than to go to a grocery store and call it a day, they drove through half the city to get to an open market. For a weekday, it was busy enough, with people bumping into each other and crowding around the grocery and butcher stands. It wasn't the most efficient place to get the ingredients an apple pie required, but it sure made for a pleasant outing on a sunny afternoon.

Within fifteen minutes of their arrival, Adrien (who had his own money) was stuffing himself with fresh figs, wearing a brand new Chat Noir cap and a counterfeit Gabriel coat (he specialized in passive-aggressive rebellion). Aurélie was standing in line at a grocery stand a few feet away.

"Get me cheese," Plagg murmured from under his jacket.

There was cheese everywhere. At least three stands were selling some, and one specialized in it.

"It smells so good," the Kwami insisted before Adrien could answer.

"Alright, alright," the boy replied. "I'll get you a bit of everything."

"A lot of everything."

"Some of everything."

There was a pause.

"Some is acceptable, I suppose. But more than a bit."

Adrien sighed, figuring that he would go home smelling like moldy socks again, but got in line at the cheese stand. As there were quite a few people before him, he got his phone out to pass the time. He knew Marinette was in class, but he still tried texting her a 'Hi! how is your day?'

Surprisingly, she answered in less than a minute.

"Math and yours?"

He sent her a picture of the cheese stand.

"Plagg is driving em mental. Getting him snacks"
Her next answer took more time. The customers before Adrien ordered and left, and he managed to buy Plagg’s weight in cheese before his phone buzzed again. He let his Kwami dive into his plastic bag and looked around for Aurélie, just in case she was searching for him. She was waiting next to the cheese stand and waved at him. He joined her, only peeking at his notifications. He chuckled.

"Brie-ant idea! Is miss Sancoeur with you?” Marinette was asking.

"Do you have everything you want?” Aurélie asked, looking at his baseball cap with an amused smile.

He nodded.

"And you?"

"We just have to find dough,” she replied, patting a grocery bag that seemed to hold a lot more than just a few apples.

They got that from a corner store, then returned to the car. Adrien waited for Aurélie to be driving to check his phone again and answer Marinette's message.

"Nathalie's mom is going to show me how to make apple pie. I'll keep a slice for you"

His girlfriend only replied hours later, after class. By that point, he had peeled, cut and cooked the apples, ran out to buy a pie pan (Nathalie's was nowhere to be found), spread apple slices over apple sauce, and put the pie in the oven. He was checking on it every minute or so to make sure it didn't burn.

Aurélie, who was a lot more confident in her estimation of the cooking time, was playing Candy Crush Saga. She smiled when Adrien's phone buzzed but didn't comment.

"Thats nice! I didn't know you liked to cook"

"It's fun. I think I'll learn to bake. Could you teach me?"

";D I can ask my DAD"

"You can't bake?"

"A little, but not things that need to be TAUGHT. I mean I can COOK with you, that'll be fun!"

A second later, she fired at "I can't find the apostrophe, sorry"

Adrien immediately forgot where the apostrophe was. His mind just blanked out. In the end, it didn't matter, because he had to run to take the pie out of the oven. When he came back to his phone, he had three messages.

"Found it!"

"We'll make croissants this weekend if you want!"

"Mom says you can come"

"I'll ask Nathalie," Adrien answered.

Minutes went by. He realized that no amount of staring at the pie was going to make it cool down faster, so he joined Aurélie in the living room and thanked her again for the lesson, then discussed
phone games. Nathalie came home while they were talking.

"Is this counterfeit?" she asked from the entrance, pulling on the sleeve of Adrien's new coat.

"Hiiiii!" Adrien answered. "How did you know?"

"The stitching is godawful," she commented, releasing the sleeve as if it were a dirty rag. She sniffed the air. "Pastry?"

"Pie!" Adrien exclaimed. "Come see."

He showed her the pie, posted a photo to Instagram and sent the link to Marinette. She answered with a "It looks SO good!!", while Nathalie gave a faint smile and commented it looked delicious. She went straight for the soup.

Adrien returned to his conversation with Marinette, leaving Aurélie and Nathalie to their own discussion.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" he asked his girlfriend.

Not a second later, his phone started ringing. He retreated into his room.

"I... I need to go to the police station," Marinette explained a moment later. "Sabrina's father came to talk to Alya, to ask her to mention that 'Ladybug and the police would meet soon' in her posts about Hawk Moth. They don't know how to contact me, so they wanted me to 'get the hint'."

Adrien's mood darkened. He lowered his voice not to be heard from the living room.

"Oh. Do they need 'Ladybug's partner', too?"

"Hum. Yes, yes, actually. But it'll be simpler to keep our stories straight if they don't get a chance to question us at the same time, so I said you'd go another day."

He sighed.

"Mister Bourgeois told me to go," he explained. "That was why we argued."

Marinette moved away from her phone so she could mutter a few choice words and explain that to Tikki. Adrien heard the Kwami answer in a soft, encouraging tone, but couldn't make out her words.

"I'll have a talk with him," Marinette grumbled.

"It's okay. I think he'll leave me alone. Should I join you near the precinct?"

"No, no, it should be short. I mean, I don't have much to tell them. And anyway I need to drop by miss Sancœur's later tonight. Apple pie, right? God, I'm starving."

"Okay. Just maybe use the door. I don't know how Nathalie's mom would take a superhero sneaking in through the window."

"Oh. Oh right! So did she visit for the day? Is she nice?"

"She's my new caretaker, apparently. And she is really nice. You'll probably meet at some point, so you'll see. I like her a lot."
"That's n-

Marinette yelped.

"I'm so late!" she exclaimed, frantic. "And I still have half the city to cross. I really need to transform. I'll call you when I'm done, okay?"

"Okay," he sighed. "Be careful, alright?"

"Of course! Talk to you later!"

"Listen-if-you-

Adrien stopped there; she had hung up.

Listen, if you want to tell the truth about my father, that's okay, he had tried to say. He knew she would lie, and he knew she wouldn't like it. Not for him, not because the people of Paris couldn't accept the truth, and especially not because Gabriel was too rich and powerful to be prosecuted. He felt so guilty.

He shook his head and returned to the living room, where Aurélie was packing her things.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she told Adrien. "Keep some pie for me?"

He nodded and accompanied her to the door, pretending to still be in a cheerful mood, then kept the facade on and joined Nathalie.

"Your mom is nice," he said.

"I told you you'd like her."

Plagg jumped down from the closest bookshelf.

"Well, she's nice enough. But now that she's gone, can I get my cheese?"

Adrien sighed, resigned, and went to open the fridge. Plagg landed on the highest shelf and dug into the plastic bag that contained all the cheese his chosen had bought at the market, and sniffed every single one of them. He didn't seem in a hurry to choose.

"Can Marinette drop by later today?" Adrien asked Nathalie. "I said she could have pie."

He saw her start to roll her eyes in irritation, but stop herself.

"Actually, that would be convenient. I was planning to meet with your father tonight, and I have a few questions for Tikki first."

"A-about… the transformation thing?" he asked, feeling cold all of a sudden.

Nathalie hesitated, peeking at Plagg then bracing herself.

"Yes. We don't plan to rush into it, but it would be best to have a clear idea of Bella's powers, what to expect and so on. Really, it will be a discussion on magical theory, which is sure to fascinate your father and no one else."

"I could come. Plagg should be there too," Adrien pointed out.
"What?" the Kwami gasped from inside the fridge. He peeked out. "There's no point. I'm not going to endure hours of tedious nitpicking on the arcane uses of magic. Wrong Kwami, send Kappa."

His chosen frowned.

"Plagg, come on!"

"And," Nathalie cut in, "I'd like an opportunity to discuss your father's thoughts about the whole prospect, which he won't be inclined to share if he is preoccupied about you. I would rather have him know that you're safe at home and resting in front of movies, so I can talk to him."

The teenager pursed his lips, anger pooling into his chest, though he couldn't pinpoint the precise cause of it. It was all diffuse spite and rage directed at Gabriel, and he could have found fault in everything that concerned his father.

Nathalie sighed.

"I would gladly delay this," she said. "I didn't want to rush into this, I don't think that Gabriel is stable enough for that kind of emotional pressure, and that you are struggling yourself does little to change my mind. But it is not a matter that can wait, so we will proceed, but it will be on my terms. Please."

Adrien lowered his head, anger turning into guilt and bitterness.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

She put a hand on his shoulder.

"I want the two of you to rest and feel better," she said, softly. "That's it. I don't know what the right way to go about it is or if there's even one, but please try to understand."

He didn't know what to answer, so he just shook his head. Plagg landed on his shoulder. He smelled like moldy cheese.

"Let it goooooo," he moaned. "I'm sure they'll make spreadsheets. I don't want to go and help make spreadsheets. Why don't we call Nino and have him come over?"

"That's a great idea," Nathalie said. "I can drive him home when I come back. I don't plan to stay out late. And I've been led to believe there was apple pie."

Adrien sighed.

"It's just... I..."

... don't know what I feel, he didn't say.

"It's about mom, you know?" he went on. "I don't want to be shoved aside. And... I don't like the idea of Father going behind our backs again, I suppose."

Nathalie scoffed.

"Sincerely, if it had been an option, I'd have gone behind both of your backs and come back with results."

Adrien gaped at her. She gave him a pointed look. She did not elaborate, but the 'I dare you to
protest' was clear enough from her expression. She ended up raising an eyebrow.

"I-" he started.

"People with secret identities don't get to throw stones," she interrupted, turning to the fridge and closing its door. "Now. If Nino comes over, ask him to bring his homework. I fully expect you to work on yours tomorrow morning."

"What?" Adrien gasped, not so much because he was opposed to the idea than because he was surprised by the sudden change of topic.

"And I'll go over your lessons until lunch, too," she continued, serving herself another bowl of soup. "My mother will be coming back for the afternoon."

"Alright, alright," he replied.

"Do you want soup?"

He sighed and nodded.

"Yes, please. Thank you."

She took another bowl out of the cupboard, as well as salt and pepper. He checked his phone.

Marinette had sent him two messages.

'Volpina called. They found master Fu. It's bad news, he's very sick', followed by 'I'll call you after the cop thing'.

"I need to go!" he exclaimed, before Nathalie could fill his bowl. "I have to join Marinette."

###

"Next question," the cop said. "How, exactly, did you discover that Alim Kubdel was Hawk Moth?"

Ladybug heard his voice, of course, but the words did not register. She couldn't focus at all: her conversation with Volpina was running through her mind, and spinning and spinning and spinning.

The two policemen exchanged a look. The first one cleared his throat.

"Ladybug?"

Marinette looked up, startled.

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?"

The man hesitated, peeking at his colleague.

"We could do this tomorrow, if you prefer. Obviously, you just received important news?"

She shook her head and gestured.
"It's nothing!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry. What was the question again?

"How did you figure out that mister Kubdel was Hawk Moth? What were your leads? As you can understand, we could use every piece of evidence pointing to him."

She pursed her lips.

"A retired superhero located him by triangulation, by tracking the magical energy emitted by his Miraculous. We have no proof save for the fact that he did have Hawk Moth's Miraculous."

"Which you confiscated."

"Which we confiscated. It's a dangerous magical artefact. We had to take it back."

There was a pause.

"I don't suppose you could turn it in as evidence?" a cop hazarded.

There was another pause. Ladybug stared at him, torn between dejection and the urge to laugh in despair.

What could she even reply to that?

Master Fu would probably have been best suited to give an answer, but master Fu… Master Fu was unlikely to ever be able to give one. There were no adults in charge, now, no one to turn to, except maybe 'the previous Volpina's granddaughter', who was a civilian anyway. Asking mister Agreste and (admitting she resurfaced) miss Lenoir for advice was out of the question. Tikki was unavailable while Ladybug was transformed. She had to handle things on her own.

She raised her chin, giving them her most polite and professional voice.

"No. The risks outweigh the benefits, for a start. I will give you a description of it so we can browse through every available picture of mister Kubdel and, if we discover that he was wearing it on any of them, then I will consider showing it to the police. But… the Miraculous are meant to make heroes," she explained. "Hawk Moth abused his, but it is going to be given to a more deserving person, so they can use it to fight evil. We can't have images of it going around, it would expose the identity of every future hero wearing it."

Was that what the Guardian would have argued?

They didn't even know who would replace him, if it came to that.

Volpina had called right as Ladybug walked into the police station. Marinette had been in such a hurry that she had nearly ignored the ringtone. It had to be Chat, and she had been texting him a second before, and she was horribly late. Of course, she couldn't ignore his call: if he was transformed, then maybe a situation required their presence.

She had opened her communicator to see not Chat's face, but Volpina's, and had immediately known something had happened. The fox heroine avoided calls if at all possible. She sent texts (in a strange mix of English, Italian and French), and rarely at that. Of course, she had promised to contact Ladybug if she heard from master Fu.

Marinette had nearly dropped her yoyo in her hurry to answer, and once again after Volpina's first words.
"Ladybug, hi… I have bad news," her fellow heroine had announced, as Marinette bolted out of the police station to talk without being overheard.

She had needed an instant to absorb that.

"Hi," she had replied, swallowing hard. "Hi. Did something happen to master Fu? Did you find him?"

"No, non… Not me. Francesca, the granddaughter della previous Volpina, I mean. She found him. He is in Cina, in the hospital."

"Oh my god. How sick is he? Will he be okay?"

Volpina had searched for words for an eternity, starting sentences and stopping after a syllable or two.

"We don't know. Ha…He has pol… pneumonia and it is bad. Francesca say the hospital had problems to identify him because was, uh, not much conscious when they found him."

"So how did she find him?" Ladybug had asked, picturing the stranger that was 'Francesca' showing pictures of Fu to nurses in random hospitals. "Did he call for her?"

"Kappa. It's Kappa he found her. Francesca was making rounds of all hospitals where master Fu has been last seen. Kappa saw her and take her to him. But master Fu was too sick to say. Uh, talk!"

It was clear enough the Guardian would not recover.

"So what are we going to do?" Ladybug had asked. "Is someone going to replace him? I mean, while he's sick?"

"Francesca don't know yet. I call you when I know, okay?"

"Okay," Marinette had numbly repeated.

"I'm sorry it is all bad news," Volpina had sighed. "Bye..."

After the call, Ladybug had spent five minutes composing herself, even though she was already fifteen minutes late. She had tried to push the entire conversation to the back of her mind, to be analyzed later. She had a deposition to go through.

But it wasn't so easy to forget about master Fu when the Guardian's expertise was so sorely needed.

She pursed her lips, looking up at the kindest looking cop.

"You can't expect us to just ignore potential evidence," he told her. "Especially for heroes who haven't been, uh, 'hired' yet."

Think on your feet.

"Even if I gave it to the police, I would only endanger everyone," she countered. "I don't know how you protect evidence but it's not thieves and crooks who'll come for a Miraculous. It's superpowered villains. It's monsters. It's the next Hawk Moth wannabe. The police can't face that. That's why we exist."

That didn't earn her points. The cop frowned.
"I assure you we will take all the precautions necessary and keep it in a secure location."

"There are trackers," she argued. "That's how Hawk Moth was found. I'm sorry, detective. I cannot and I will not hand it over."

She didn't mention the fact that the brooch was inhabited by a malicious deity, but Bella was definitely an argument against surrendering the Miraculous to the police.

"Even if it means Kubdel evading charges?" the cop asked.

Ladybug closed her eyes.

She hated this.

"He's just one man," she replied. "And he has done enough as Alim Kubdel to go to prison for a long time."

"That's not really justice, is it? We can do better than 'Capone's tax evasion'."

"It's a brooch. It's oval and purple, with a rose gold setting. Look for it in pictures of him, as I said, and if it turns out he's wearing the Miraculous on some of them… we'll see what can be done. But it's not up to me."

The cops sighed.

"What about the 'retired superhero' who helped you?" the oldest asked. "Is it possible he has more information than you do? Possible proof? Could we talk to him?"

Marinette considered sending them straight to Gabriel Agreste, but… she had to think of Adrien.

"That's… I… I'm not sure," she lied. "I don't think he has anything specific."

She knew full well there was footage of the cell where Gabriel had held mister Kubdel. She knew the man had been questioned. She could have brought that up. She should have. Wouldn't Hawk Moth accuse Gabriel of abducting him, at least? Wouldn't he reveal Adrien and Gabriel's identities? Was there even a point lying to the police?

She hated lies.

"Can you give us a name?" the cop insisted.

"It's the previous Chat Noir," she replied.

It was a name.

"And a way to contact him?" the detective sighed, clearly growing frustrated.

"I will tell him you want to get in touch," she promised.

She saw the man ball his fist and fight the urge to slam it down on the table. He took a deep breath.

"Alright. Let's run over the events," he said. "We know Alim Kubdel vanished, allegedly faked his own death, and then resurfaced at his secondary residence, where he kept Chat Noir hostage. What we don't know is how those events are connected. Could you enlighten us?"

"I… I wasn't really involved until Chat Noir's abduction. I even talked to Alix Kubdel on the
evening her father's 'body' was found. I had no idea what was going on back then. Chat Noir called me when he found Hawk Moth, and I got there right when Hawk Moth escaped and kidnapped him. And then you already know what happened."

"A battle, Chat Noir managing to transform, and the house being destroyed in the battle," the cop recited.

"Yes. We handed him over immediately. We didn't even get to talk to him."

"Alright. Where were you supposed to join Chat Noir after he found Hawk Moth?"

"At, uh…"

Who did Garfield Packaging belong to? Was Gabriel Agreste the official owner? How was she even supposed to lie about it all? It wasn't like Kubdel wouldn't tell them… except if he didn't know where mister Agreste had locked him up. If all he had seen was his cell and the inside of the factory, then he had nothing useful to tell the police. But, of course, if he started talking, he would tell them about Adrien, and Gabriel, and Anne-Laure.

There was no way out of this.

"A factory in the industrial district," she admitted. "Garfield Packaging. That's where mister Kubdel was held after the previous Chat Noir caught him. Chat Noir - the current Chat Noir, I mean - was going to collect him and bring him to the station, except it went wrong."

The second detective flipped through some documents.

"So that would be when an unidentified woman borrowed a phone from a truck driver and used it to call an ambulance, an ambulance that then collected an injured Anne-Laure Lenoir from Garfield Packaging?"

"That's… Yes. That's when."

"How did the mayor's ex-wife end up involved in the capture of Hawk Moth, exactly?"

Marinette had not envisioned that line of questioning.

"I don't know," she blurted out.

"See, there's a lot of weirdness going on," the first cop commented. "Like… when an ambulance is called because someone was assaulted, the police is kept in the loop. We send a few cars. Yet, here, nobody was dispatched. The instructions somehow got 'lost'. We haven't figured out at what level yet, but it looks like some palms were greased. Now, I'm not accusing anyone..."

Ladybug breathed in. Her stomach felt like a ball of lead.

The other detective let his partner's words hang in the air, then took a sheet of paper and scanned it.

"Now, miss Lenoir has a knack for getting in trouble and being mysteriously bailed out. Mostly assault, more assault, trespassing and some assault."

Marinette had not wanted to lie to begin with. Really, she hadn't. She had thought she could get out of it by saying the strict minimum - for Adrien's sake, mostly, not because she believed Gabriel and Anne-Laure deserved protection, and certainly not because of André Bourgeois' wild theories about unrest in Paris - but it had been naive.
She couldn't expect the cops not to do their job.

"I have to go," she blurted out, pushing her chair back.

It screeched against the floor.

"Ladybug, wait!" a detective exclaimed. "Please stay."

She shook her head, ready to run, but he raised a hand.

"If you're being pressured into hiding the truth," he started, "tell us. We can help."

"I'm not!"

Was she?

She stepped away from the interrogation table, moving closer to the door. She didn't let the cops press her for answers.

"I'm not," she insisted when they tried to talk. "I'm not. I'll explain. I mean. It was a mess and people got dragged into it and... It's a mess. But I don't want to hide anything! It's just... It's just..."

She ran her hands over her face.

She wished Ladybug's cloak would protect her, but she couldn't muster the confidence that usually came with the costume. Ladybug wouldn't have teared up. She was just Marinette in red pajamas, and she didn't know what to do.

She forced herself to calm down.

"The thing is... Akuma weren't the same," she told them. "They were angry and overwhelmed but you could take the darkness away, and they'd be good. People like Hawk Moth... It's just terrible people doing terrible things, and they don't care at all about the consequences so they might be the ones that get arrested, but they are not the ones that get punished." She opened the door. "I have to check on someone."

"Wait!" the oldest detective snapped. "You can't just go and compromise the investigation by..."

He trailed off, not sure of what she had in mind and not ready to accuse her of helping criminals.

Ladybug gathered all of the aplomb she could muster.

"I will be back," she assured.

Then she left, shutting the door. Her facade broke in the hallway. She nearly curled up on the floor right then and there. She stopped. She wrapped her arms around herself. But the detectives were racing to the door - she could hear their frantic footsteps - so she marched down the hallway and into the next one, chin high and posture straight, so no one would stop her. She heard the detectives call after her but didn't look back.

Three turns to the exit.

She could make it.

She had reached the middle of the very last corridor when she glimpsed Alix dashing across the
entrance hall. The girl was out of sight in a blink, having moved past the doorway at the end of the hallway, but Marinette had recognized the look on her face: fury.

She started running.

She wasn't fast enough. She heard a thud and gasps, then she turned the corner and found Chat Noir sitting on the floor with Alix towering over him. Her fists were balled and she went for a kick, turning at the last second to hit a chair rather than Chat.

"Why couldn't you just let him be DEAD?" she yelled. "WE WERE FINE WITH HIM BEING DEAD! WE WERE. FINE. WI-"

Ladybug threw herself between them and shoved Alix away.

She understood her mistake immediately, of course: they were the heroes. If a distraught victim was screaming at them, they were meant to take it and help, not side against them. Alix was stunned for an instant, looking betrayed, but then the rage flooded back and she shoved Marinette back with all her strength.

Ladybug stumbled but didn't fall.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

She couldn't resist glancing at Chat, even though she knew she should have calmed Alix down first. He had turned away.

Alix pushed her again. It was more of a blow than a shove.

"You should have let him ROT! We'd have been just-"

Her brother grabbed her from behind and dragged her back.

"Alix, STOP!"

That didn't calm the pink-haired girl down, but her mother hurried to her with a frown on her face and whispered a terse something in a language Marinette didn't understand. Alix turned away, sullen. Jalil let her go. Ladybug heard Adrien shift behind her. Mrs Kubdel spoke to her, however, so she didn't get to turn to her partner.

"I apologize for my daughter's behavior," the woman was saying, with a sharp look at Alix. "This was inacceptable."

Marinette had only met her once, distraught and crying after her husband had been 'found dead'. She was calmer now, no longer grieving. She kept her chin high. Her composure was perfect.

"We would like to thank you for everything. You did what was right. I'm sorry for everything Alim put you through and…" She turned to Chat, her next word already on her lips, but paled.

Ladybug whirled back. Chat Noir was staring at Mrs Kubdel with a forced smile, trying to pretend he was not shaking like a leaf. The next second, he bolted.

"CHAT!" she shouted, her body moving on its own to follow him.

She stopped dead in her tracks when she remembered her responsibilities as a superhero, who she had been talking to, and how many people were watching them. Adrien was already out the door. She looked around, noting the presence of the detectives who had questioned her and their
bewildered expression. More cops were standing in the doorways. Stunned civilians were gaping at the scene. Jalil and Alix were gaping at the exit, visibly horrified.

Ladybug turned to Mrs Kubdel, who was looking at her with sadness, maybe guilt.

They stared at each other for an instant, then the woman snapped out of it.

"Go," she said.

Marinette ran out.

###

Chapter End Notes

Alright. Confession time.

I shot myself in the foot. I shot myself in the foot so hard I am pretty stuck. That would be why it took me so long to get to the end of this chapter (that and the fact that it is all boring connecting scenes). Basically, I left crap lying around, forgot I had left crap lying around, and then the crap decided to remind me of its existence. Namely when Marinette found herself in that room with detectives, and the detectives decided to actually do their job, mostly against my will and better judgement. Meaning that loose end I was supposed to take care of is a damn lot looser and a damn lot more urgent.

What did this teach me? "Outline your stories, Wohoo". Outline your stories, people. Or you'll end up like me, with 250k fics you just can't end.

Anyway, see you all when I manage to find a way out of my own mess. =)
Catching butterflies with vinegar

Nathalie drove into the mansion's courtyard, extending an arm as she turned to stop her tupperware from sliding off the passenger seat. It was just a reflex, really: she was more focused on her phone call than on the driving and driving-induced tupperware motions.

"So when will you come back?" she asked Adrien.

From what he had told her - and she was not so sure she believed him - he had bolted out to join his girlfriend in the park, where his classmates had organized an impromptu soccer match. He had called to tell Nathalie he wouldn't return early. He didn't sound like an excited boy invited to play with his friends.

"I don't know," the boy answered. "We thought we'd go to the comic book store. And maybe grab snacks afterwards. OH. You didn't forget the pie, right?"

"I didn't forget the pie," Nathalie assured him.

He had wanted her to bring a piece of the so far untasted apple pie to Gabriel, though that suggestion had come with no small amount of grumbling. Hence, a neat slice of pie (one sixth) was sitting on her passenger seat in a plastic box.

She slowed down and parked under the stairs, leaning back against her seat. She didn't have to immediately walk in, did she?

"Alright. Thank you, Nathalie! Um, I'll call you when I get back home if you aren't there. Okay?"

"That sounds fine to me."

"See you later, then. Bye, Nathalie."

"Bye, Adrien."

She sighed as he hung up. She didn't like his subdued, tired tone. There was not much she could do but worry, however. Hopefully, his friends (or at least Marinette) could help.

She got out of the car (nearly forgetting the tupperware Adrien had been so concerned about) and walked to the door, then stopped. She had the keys, of course, but between the whole "being fired" and "breaking up", she was not sure she could use them. Gabriel had made a point of not using his.

Nathalie knocked. She waited for a minute or so, then turned back, figuring she would have to ring the doorbell at the gates. The door clicked open behind her. That being said, nobody greeted her: the door was only slightly ajar and, when she pushed it open, she found the entrance hall empty.

The dining room door was open on a brand new table and set of chairs. There was no one in the room. Gabriel's office was similarly deserted. The baffling unlocking of the front door was the most unexplainable (trivial) mystery Nathalie had ever encountered. It remained so for a whole thirty seconds, then a blur of pink dashed across the hall and up the stairs, dropping marshmallows along the way.

"Bella?"

Nathalie ran after the Kwami. She lost her as early as the landing, but the trail of candy led her her
to the master bedroom. Though the renovation was finished, you could smell paint from the hallway. The door was ajar and Nathalie felt a draft as she walked in. Her eyes were drawn to the window first, then to the brand new carpet and wallpaper, made prominent by the absence of furniture.

Bella was nesting in a corner, among pilfered cushions, candy packs and bottles of fruit juice. She was dipping marshmallows into a pot of honey and nibbling on them while staring at a smartphone screen. She shot a brief look at Nathalie, but appeared unconcerned by her presence. The only form of acknowledgement she gave was increasing the volume of the video she was watching. Nathalie recognized the intro music of TVi's news.

"You're out," she said, instantly berating herself for stating the obvious.

Bella nodded but said nothing: she was giving a reporter her full attention. Nathalie swallowed, uneasy. Gabriel had never discussed releasing the creature. As a matter of fact, both Tikki and Plagg had advised against it, though Nathalie wasn't certain they had shared that opinion with him.

"Where is Gabriel?" she asked.

"In the study. He said I could fly around if I left him alone."

Nathalie counted the bottles of juice and the packs of candy. Considering Bella's size and how many trips across the house she would have needed to collect her stash, it was clear she had been free for a good while.

As long as she does leave him alone...

Nathalie turned back. It was best not to engage Bella at all. It could only end with blackmail and bargaining. She was halfway through the door when the Kwami called after her.

"Are they going to erase his memory?"

Nathalie froze, frowning at Bella.

"I'm sorry?"

"Alim. Will the others erase his memory?"

She waited for an answer then grew impatient.

"That's the way things are done. The Guardians take the memories of the captured renegades. When they are captured, that is."

Nathalie shook her head.

"I don't know. He's in police custody, and we have not heard of the other heroes. Your guess is as good as mine."

The Kwami mulled over that.

"You know, my offer still stands. If you help me free him, I will tell you about Pacaás Novos."

At those words, Nathalie had to struggle to keep her composure. Up to that point, the creature's bargaining attempts had concerned Alice: "everything I know about Ladybug", "about Gabriel's wife", "about Mrs Agreste". But Bella had never mention the last place she'd been seen in.
But that was public knowledge, wasn't it? And it no longer mattered anyway.

"No. I think it's more than time the man faces the consequences of your actions."

"My actions?"

"Both of your actions. He's no longer the child you preyed upon and tricked into helping you. He's responsible for his own choices."

Bella narrowed her eyes.

"I didn't prey on him."

"Of course you did. You all do. Going after vulnerable children who need either the support or the confidence."

"That's not true. He needed help, and no one was willing to give it to him. So I stepped in."

"I somehow doubt he needed you quite as much as you needed him," Nathalie commented, remembering her various conversations with Tikki and Plagg. "Or that you needed the Miraculous-tracking watch he would someday inherit."

Bella gave her a sharp look.

"You don't know anything about his life when I went to him."

"And I don't care. I find it hard to muster empathy for either of you. 'Save one child, victimize the rest of the world'. You'll have to forgive me for not finding the approach palatable," Nathalie concluded, leaving the room.

She closed the door immediately and started walking. She wasn't even aiming for the study: she just wanted as much distance as possible between the Kwami and herself. One child saved, one, when Bella's Akuma always targeted victims she did not give a damn about. Nathalie had spent years discarding letters from destitute, dying, desperate people. Newborns with heart defects, kindergarteners with cancer, families living in the streets, she had seen it all. She had never let compassion guide her answers. It had been, always, always, practicality. It stood to reason that Alim Kubdel's story had not been especially heartbreaking, but that helping him had been to Bella's advantage.

Nathalie went as far as the kitchen, then sighed and prepared herself a coffee. With her back turned to the door, she heard Gabriel walk in. He didn't say anything. She didn't turn.

"You freed her," she commented.

She heard his footsteps as he joined her. He stopped by her side.

"With Adrien out of the house, I figured she couldn't do much harm," he explained. He took a cup out of the cupboard. "How was your day?"

Nathalie ran a hand over her hair, that still smelled of dye. Of course, getting her hair done had been the calmest part of her day.

"It went well," she replied, pushing the tupperware she had brought with her towards him. "My mother taught him how to make pie."

Gabriel raised his eyebrows and opened the box, startled.
"So they are getting along?"

"I daresay the only person who doesn't get along with my mother is me," Nathalie deadpanned. "She even liked you."

His eyebrows rose a little higher. He closed the tupperware.

"I had no idea Adrien liked to cook."

Did you ever ask?

Nathalie kept the snide remark to herself. To be fair, even if Gabriel had asked, Adrien couldn't have answered him.

"I don't think he knew himself," she said. "He has been showing an interest this week, however. He made dinner once or twice, and cat-shaped pancake-"

"Pancats," Gabriel blurted out.

"Pan… cats," Nathalie amended. "He's not so good at the whole thing so far, but trust my mother to turn him into a proper chef by the end of the month. I think it will do him good, really. He needs the distraction."

Gabriel nodded, getting a saucer and napkins.

"He needs some normalcy," he sighed as served himself the slice of apple pie. "I'm glad he accepted to see the therapist but I'm not sure that is what will help the most." He put the empty tupperware into the dishwasher. "Things need to settle down."

"Unfortunately, I doubt that will happen anytime soon. My mother should be capable to keep him busy, however, and his friends are rallying to cheer him up."

Gabriel pursed his lips and scowled, lost in thought. He leaned against the countertop and looked up at the ceiling.

"That's good to hear. And, more importantly, he has you. I don't think I can stress how thankful I am for everything you are doing for him."

Before she could decide if she wanted to snap at him or to appreciate the acknowledgement, he returned to the original topic.

"Still," he continued, "I wonder if it wouldn't be wise to get him away from the media circus, at least for a little while."

Nathalie massaged the bridge of her nose.

"He is not going to accept to be carted away nor separated from his friends, Gabriel."

"No, no. I was thinking more along the line of week-end trips to the beach or to whichever event we can find, with his friends. Considering how… unsupervised the three of them seem to be, I'm sure their parents would easily be persuaded to let them accompany Adrien."

"They are adequately supervised for teenagers their age."

Gabriel snorted.
"I'm sorry, who is it you are referring to? The teenage vigilante or the girl who liveblogged her own adventures as a ritual sacrifice?"

Nathalie peered at him. He had the good grace to clear his throat and look abashed. She fought the impulse to smile and lean against him, press herself against his chest, kiss his throat, his jaw....

Instead, she straightened her posture and reverted to her most professional tone.

"Short trips are a viable idea. For all the damage he caused, Hawk Moth focused on Paris. Distance might not silence the press but it would limit how many of his victims Adrien could run into."

Gabriel nodded. He tapped his spoon to the side of the saucer he was holding, looking into the distance.

"Shielding him from additional stress and giving him space to recover should be a good start," he said. "Though I wish there was more I could do."

She smothered a sigh.

"He might forgive you still, providing you make actual efforts as a parent."

He tapped his spoon to his plate again.

"Obviously, there is hope," he pointed out, carving a piece out of his slice of pie. He paused in wonder to murmur a 'this looks delicious', then went on. "The boy is entirely too forgiving. I'll be keeping my distance until we are all sure he wants me in his life."

This time, Nathalie sighed. He wasn't wrong. Adrien needed the time apart, but she was not certain he could stick to his decision to cut contact. He would crawl back to Gabriel, inch by inch, against his best interests. She would have to nudge him in the opposite direction.

"Are you feeling a little better?" she asked. "A little less out of it, with your treatment?" she clarified, though her initial question had been meant to encompass a lot more than his physical well-being.

He thought about it.

"I'm steadier on my feet. My thoughts are a little clearer, I have more energy," he listed. "And I'm starving, absolutely starving, all the time."

To underline his words, he stuffed a large piece of pie into his mouth.

Her body inched closer. Her hand reached for his hip, but she pulled it back.

"Is that all?"

His expression darkened. He swallowed the pie, sucked his lips in and took a deep breath.

"As I have told Plagg, people tend to mistake those pills for miracle elixirs. They are meant to fix mental health, not personalities. It would be unreasonable to hope for significant changes."

Then try harder, she nearly said, but Gabriel could hardly ever be blamed of not trying enough if he set his mind to something.

"Then let's aim for minor changes and go on from there," she replied, brushing his temple with the tip of her fingers.
His breath caught. Silence fell.

If they had been different people - people with less self-control and less of a sense of propriety - they would have given up on their separation right there and then. They'd have kissed and slipped into each other's arms, at the very least. But they weren't.

Gabriel moved away first, going to set his plate down on the table.

She picked her cup of coffee up, with her back turned to him.

"Have you done any research in preparation for tonight?" she asked.

"Some. Well, I browsed through my old notes, mostly. I had compiled fairly extensive documentation on Bella's Akuma, as Chat Noir, so all I had to do was go through the relevant enemies. We didn't have that many time-travelers, but I made a list of the powers you were likely to obtain and of the ways to counter them."

Nathalie turned to him, waiting for more explanations.

"For miss Dupain-Cheng's eyes only," he concluded.

Oh.

She shuddered at the possibility of turning into a monster once possessed. Surely, if they were careful enough...

"Are you really sure letting the Kwami roam the house is a good idea?" she asked. "Didn't she harass you?"

"It turns out I'm incredibly apt at ignoring people," Gabriel retorted, sitting down to eat. "And I'm not... comfortable with forcing her into her Miraculous for mere convenience."

Nathalie stared at him. She wasn't aware he had suddenly acquired Adrien's scruples.

He shook his head.

"Plagg was treated in a similar fashion for most of his time in captivity, and it never made him any more cooperative," he explained between two spoonfuls of pie. "She's unable to leave the house while the brooch is inside, she cannot steal it and she knows better than to try to blackmail me. There's not much of a risk to letting her wander about."

It didn't sound as reassuring as what Gabriel was aiming for.

"Did she attempt to talk to you?" Nathalie insisted. "She tried to lure me into a deal. Again."

Gabriel sighed.

"I have no doubt. She makes it sound like she knows something, doesn't she? But it's a moot point. As soon as we attempt the transformations, we should be able to figure out what happened to Alice. It will just take creating the correct ability set. Bella made several tracking Akuma before, for a start. I'm sure there is a way to bend that magic around. Truth to be said, I'm more worried about her range than anything else."

Nathalie sat down with him.

"I'm not sure how far her powers can reach. As... As Hawk Moth, I could sense people in Paris,
"Her capacities seem to grow exponentially when channeled through a human. Stormy Weather froze most of the country. Yet it's one of the few Akuma who managed that feat. It seems to be related to the type of powers, though. Weather-based ones always seem to have a disproportionate area of effect, which I assume is because they require little to no precision. Mind-control can have thousands of simultaneous targets, but the more victims are manipulated, the less sentient they prove to be. The most dangerous mind-controlling enemies we faced never had more than five minions at a time."

This was going to turn into a full lecture, Nathalie knew it. For a man so terse with most people, he sure could talk someone numb, once that person had expressed an interest (which she had done, once upon a time, because she thought he didn't open up enough). She opened her mouth to say something to stop him before he could start into a point by point comparison of all magic types and their range. She had to pause for an instant to come up with a diplomatic way to formulate 'please shut up'.

"It is unlikely we'll need those kind of skills," she said. "I think we should focus on everything related to tracking and time."

"You are right. My notes are in the study. We should go review them."

"We should," Nathalie sighed, wishing with all her heart she would never, ever hear about magic again once their attempt at finding Alice was over with.

Gabriel wolfed down the rest of his pie.

"You'll have to tell Adrien the pie was fantastic," he commented.

###

Chat Noir, sitting on the roof of the Palais Garnier, stared at the skyline.

He could breathe again but was feeling numb, and so, so, so exhausted. He hoped Nathalie hadn't heard the tiredness in his voice (nor the lies) when he had called her. She hadn't picked up on the fact that he was calling from Chat Noir's communicator, at least, or she would have questioned him. He hadn't transformed yet. He didn't want to talk to anyone, not even Plagg.

He was such a coward.

Of course, as long as he was transformed, Marinette could track him down him, but it wasn't the same. She wasn't the same. She was…

Ladybug landed next to him.

"Oh my god, Chat, I thought I'd never find you," she blurted out, dropping to her knees and wrapping her arms around him.

Then she hurriedly pulled away, as if she thought the embrace was unwelcome. It sent guilt flaring through him.
"I'm sorry," she stuttered, voice raw. "Are you okay? Is... Is there something I can do?"

He pulled her to him and buried his face against her shoulder until, at long last, she relaxed.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

He pulled back, keeping his hands on her shoulders, and gave her a weak smile.

"I didn't mean to worry you. I was just, uh, whelmed," he said, figuring that blatant quotes from superhero cartoons would reassure her on his state of mind.

Surely she had watched Young Justice.

She blinked.

"Whelmed?"

She hadn't seen Young justice.

"Whelmed," he awkwardly explained. "'You're overwhelmed, Freeze was underwhelmed, why isn't anyone ever just"..." He cleared his throat and looked away. "Nevermind. It's from a TV show."

"Oh. Ooh!" Marinette finally exclaimed, chuckling. "You're going to have to show me that one."

Well. Maybe the quoting attempt had been embarrassing, but it had lightened the mood. Adrien crossed his arms, tilted his chin up and pretended to sulk.

"Well, I don't know if a superheroine who hasn't watched Young Justice deserves to be my partner..." That was as far as he resisted. "Okay how does tonight sound? I've the entire series and all of the comics and you're gonna LOVE Batgirl in it."

"It's a BATMAN show?" she shrieked.

"Uhm, err, more of a Robin and friends show?"

"Oh my god I need to watch it. When did it come out?"

"Something like five years ago?"

"I haven't seen it. I mean, I decided I'd focus on fashion and for months all I watched was fashion shows and fashion documentaries and sewing tutorials and 'the Devil Wears Prada'. I've only gotten back into superhero shows since I've met Alya."

"Wow. Well then I have a few dozen DVDs for you. And your weight in comics. I mean my weight in comics. Possibly Rogercop's weight in comics. I can't believe we never discussed that before."

She giggled.

"Well, in case we ever needed date ideas..."

For a moment, he forgot everything about his day, week and entire month. All he saw was the wonderful girl he was blessed to have as a partner. He felt warm, and happy, and madly in love.

But you couldn't forget reality forever.
He waited for her laughter to die down, then grew serious, though he did his best to keep a smile on his face.

"How did it go? With the cops?"

She paled and looked down at her hands.

"It's. Uh. I'll handle it," she declared, faking confidence.

"What?"

"It's nothing. Just a complication. I'll deal with it," she insisted, refusing to meet his eyes.

It obviously wasn't nothing. He could guess why she was refusing to explain.

"Ladybug. You don't have to protect me," he said, squeezing and shoulder. "I'm fine. It's okay. I can take it. Tell me. Please."

She weighed her options, shaking her head as she did so, but she ended up taking a deep breath. Her expression grew resolute.

"They are investigating Chloé's mother," she said, looking him in the eye with the determination he knew so well and admired so much. "They know about the factory and that an ambulance picked her up there, so they put two and two together. They asked me a lot of questions and I delayed, but…"

Chat Noir turned back to the skyline. Planes had left white trails in a cloudless if greyish sky. There wasn't much to see but endless roofs and towers. You could hear the constant sound of the traffic, distant honks, faint music.

"You can tell them," he said.

"W-what?"

"You can tell them. My father dug his grave. He can lie in it."

"Chat… I-I..."

He turned to her, trying to read her expression. Her features were twisted with worry and guilt.

"You can," he said. "I can take it."

"I would ruin your life!" she yelled, staring down at her balled fists.

He bit down on his lower lip, considering his answer. He could still hear Alix's voice.

'Why couldn't you let him be dead? We were fine with him being dead!'

He understood her reaction, yet he would not shift the blame.

"You wouldn't," he murmured. "He did that on his own."

Ladybug punched the roof then punched it again, then gave it a kick with the flat of her foot. She looked like she wanted to scream in frustration. Adrien, however, felt more and more resigned.

Whether they told the truth or not, someone would have to carry the guilt.
He didn't want it to be her.

"Come here," he murmured, pulling her close. "You don't have to talk to them. I'll do it."

###

"So you're not home yet?" Nathalie asked Adrien, keeping her back turned to Gabriel and crushing her phone against her ear as if it could somehow prevent him from hearing her words. "I thought you'd be in a hurry to get Marinette's opinion on your cooking."

"Yes! Yes, we'll go back later. We're at the Eiffel Tower right now, just, you know, looking at the scenery? It's nice out there tonight."

Nathalie tilted her head and looked through the window.

"I don't know. Doesn't it look like rain?"

Did invulnerable superheroes catch colds?

"It's warm out," he reassured her. "If it starts raining cats and bugs, we'll go."

"Alright. Still. It's a school night. I'm sure Marinette's parents would appreciate if she was in bed in time. Also, keep the crime fighting to a minimum."

"Yes, Nathalie!"

"And call me when you get home."

"Are you still out?"

She heard him shift and imagined that, on his perch on the Eiffel Tower, he was turning to look at the house. His next words confirmed her suspicions.

"Are you at the mansion?" he asked. He paused. "Didn't you need Tikki?"

He sounded anxious. Nathalie considered the pros and cons of having the Kwami come and comment on Gabriel's meticulous research, versus having Marinette doing girlfriend/boyfriend things with Adrien, versus the very real risk Marinette would prefer superhero business.

Maybe it was still time to play matchmaker between Adrien and Nino Lahiffe.

"Not tonight. We are still sorting through several years worth of handwritten notes on obscure magical trivia. Your father is very thorough. Maybe tomorrow, if we're done indexing everything."

She mumbled a disgruntled 'though I am not sure you remember your father's handwriting', for added effect.

"Oh. Alright. You'll tell me about the notes when you get home, right?"

"If I don't go straight to bed with a headache," she sighed. "Have fun with Marinette."

A few goodbyes later, she hung up. She belatedly realized she had forgotten to mention the pie and
Gabriel's high praise of it. But that could wait until she got home.

She peered at Gabriel, who seemed to be exerting a great amount of effort not to question her. He raised his eyebrows. She sighed.

"I wish those two could be normal teenagers so I could expect them to occupy themselves with normal teenage activities such as making out and smoking pot, not patrolling the streets."

Gabriel snorted.

"I assure you creative teenagers will manage to fit all of that in whatever free time they have. I should know."

It was her turn to raise her eyebrows.

"I had no idea you smoked pot," she deadpanned.

His expression shifted between amusement and unease. He tried to conceal the later.

"I was never much into smoking," he replied, which reminded Nathalie of Plagg's reaction to her cigarettes and of Olivier Agreste's lung cancer. "Everything else, however…"

Nathalie was unfamiliar with horrible guilt but didn't like it one bit, so she buried the feeling down.

"Well, now that you say that, I can see you rebelling against authority and thinking you know better than everyone else."

He gaped, then choked, then hunched over to smother his coughing chuckles while she smiled in victory. When he finally recovered, he changed the topic.

"I take it Tikki won't join us tonight?" he said, pushing his notes away.

"Not tonight. Though I am not certain what more is left to be discussed on Hawk Moth's powers."

"You're right. This is as prepared as we can be. I will just have to brief miss Dupain-Cheng on battle strategy. I think we can move on to the next step."

Nathalie froze. She had known it would be coming, but she still watched in horror as pulled the Miraculous out of his pocket and toyed with it. They had to get to the transformations at some point, at least his. With the other hand, he picked up his phone and sent out a text. Nathalie wondered what was going on, but only for the ten seconds it took for Bella to zip into the study. She glowered at Gabriel.

"Master."

Nathalie shuddered. Save for the wings, the Kwami was the same shape and size as Tikki. There was nothing menacing about her physical appearance: she was like some strange hybrid between a pear, a balloon and candy floss. Butterflies had followed her into the room. She looked downright silly. They all did. And yet…

_Hatred by any other name…_

Gabriel remained unfazed. He stood and moved away from his seat.

"Thanks for your promptness," he told Bella as he attached the brooch to his collar. "We are going to try a brief experiment."
The deity didn't bother raising her voice.

"No."

He graced her with half an eyeroll and adjusted the brooch. Bella said nothing else. She merely kept staring at Gabriel in icy silence, eyes wide and unblinking. There was nothing she could say nor do, was there?

Nathalie pushed her thoughts about the Kwami aside. She had other concerns.

She stepped forward.

"Are you sure you want to do this? I am not certain you are entirely prepared."

Gabriel had already wrapped himself in _himself_- the distance, the coldness, the superiority - and was past listening to advice.

"I was a superhero for a decade. I believe I am qualified to handle one transformation in the safety of my own home."

"That's not what I meant," Nathalie said. She took a deep breath and let it out. "It is harrowing."

He softened at that, giving her a faint, sad smile.

"Thanks for the warning," he said.

Then he closed his eyes and ordered Bella to transform him.

Watching the process wasn't quite as disturbing as living it, but Nathalie still felt queasy. Her memories of her time as Hawk Moth were still vivid. She shuddered and frantically rubbed her sleeves when butterflies brushed against her, and moved until she found herself pressed against the wall. By that point, Gabriel's transformation was complete.

In some situations, it was easy to see who, out of the two of them, was heartless.

He adjusted his lapels. He tugged at his sleeves. He said nothing about the maelstrom of emotions she knew was whirling around him. He didn't care.

Whatever she was feeling got his attention, however. He turned to her, looking nearly sorry under his mask, then joined her. The butterflies fluttered out of the way. He stopped at arm's distance.

"It doesn't need to be an ordeal," he murmured, grazing her shoulder with a gloved hand. "Just more mind-numbing research and outcome predictions. I can drone on about magical trivia, if it would help."

She chuckled without mirth.

"Please spare me."

His hand moved up to her cheek in a ghost of a caress. He snatched it away.

"We might as well get comfortable," he told her, returning to his chair. "I need to figure out how this works."

Nathalie nodded and went back to her own seat. He didn't _need_ to figure it out, of course. She had done it. She could explain it all: how to reach for a butterfly, how to infuse it with energy, how to
release it, how to guide it to one person out of millions, how to see through the victim's eyes. She didn't want to. She did it anyway.

In the end, Gabriel did not spare her the over-detailed rambling on magical theory, and it did help. It did help so much that, thirty minutes in, she was praying for paracetamol and caffeine. She had gone from jumping away from the butterflies to swatting them away. She just wanted the evening to be over with already.

He was holding a butterfly between his cupped hands, pulling darkness in and out of it, in and out, in and out. He had been doing it for so long Nathalie's horror had faded. The motion only registered distantly, like the ticking of a clock.

"Alright," she snapped, because hearing all about communicating magical vessels for more than ten minutes at a time would have driven anyone to distraction. She picked her tablet up so she could take notes. "I think you mastered the process. What about telling me what kind of powers you can sense in me?"

Gabriel went silent. He considered it, then shook his head.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "You said alternate personas would volunteer themselves by focusing on a target, but I can't picture anything about you."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"What about other people?"

He frowned, looking away, and remained silent for a handful of seconds.

"It seems to work for about everyone around. Just not you."

She ran her hands over her face, slipping her fingers under her glasses to massage her eyes. *Fantastic.*

"What if you let the Akuma come close?" she asked.

Maybe it was better if she didn't have a clear superpowered self waiting to be unearthed. It left Gabriel with a blank canvas. They would be free to pick the perfect powers for their purposes, which was ideal.

He released the black butterfly. The creature did not even hesitate: it flew straight to her tablet and landed on its corner. She hid her disgust, though she was pretty sure her nose had wrinkled for a second. At first, she felt nothing. She watched the black wings beat, with waves of purple spreading and twirling on their delicate surface. Then she felt the magic sink into her fingertips through the tablet. Her mood ever so slightly changed, her impatience winning over her usual calm.

"What about now?"

Gabriel frowned, keeping his full focus on the Akuma.

"Actually… There is something," he announced. "Exceedingly useful powers, too."

"Dangerous?"

"I don't think so."
Nathalie pursed her lips.

"Good."

She let the Akuma in.

###
Time trekking skills

The perk of being Akumatized was the perfect sense of focus.

Nathalie had never before felt such clarity. Gone were the distractions, the headaches, the minor annoyances that impeded her work and thought process. She was free to concentrate on her one goal: finding Alice.

She looked down at her tablet and the three icons sitting in the top left corner of the screen.

It seemed she had all the tools she needed to accomplish her task, too.

Two applications and one game. The latter was, for all intents and purposes, useless. As for the two others, they seemed perfect for the task at hand. Nathalie analyzed her options. Boxes, lozenges and arrows arranged themselves in her mind, branching out into possible paths leading to an array of potential outcomes.

*You obtained superpowers for the purpose of locating a missing person.*

*Which magical application should you test?*

- **The camera?**
- **The map?**

The camera did not have much of a range, making the map the tool to prioritize. Nathalie had to assess the strength of her new abilities, and plan based on their limitations. She pressed the second icon.

Gabriel - Hawk Moth - joined her, hovering behind her. He tentatively pressed her shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

His concern did nothing but irritate her. They had no time to spare for idle talk and pointless displays of affection.

"Yes."

A map of Paris had appeared on her tablet screen. It was centered on the mansion, with a black butterfly marker over Nathalie's position. There was a search field in the top left corner, placed above a datepicker. The digits in the 'minutes' field changed from '37' to '38' as she watched.

*Step one: check if the software is working as expected.*

She ignored the 'date' field and pressed the search box, then typed 'Adrien Agreste'. The map zipped to the side and zoomed on the city block Nathalie lived on, with her building neatly in the center. A red marker was pinned on a corner of said building.

Gabriel detached his tongue from the roof of his mouth with the slightest suction noise.

"It would seem he d-"

*Step two: confirm the results.*
Nathalie typed 'Jagged Stone'. The map zoomed back to the mansion, or rather to the Grand Paris right on the corner, where Jagged Stone's marker started moving in quick zig-zags.

*Step three: make initial attempt to locate the target.*

It was unlikely to work: Nathalie did not yet know the limitations of her powers, but she had no doubt they existed and were quite restrictive. The analysis of the previous Akuma had demonstrated that.

She started typing.

At the third letter ('i'), she heard Gabriel's sharp intake of breath. She did not let it distract her, and finished entering Alice Agreste's name. She pressed 'submit'.

Gabriel moved away as soon as the results (or lack thereof) appeared, running his hand over his face in frustration. Nathalie gave a quick look to the error message ('Alice Agreste cannot be found') then watched her companion pace.

*If the target was not located, go on to step four.*

"We should determine the maximal distance my powers can cover," she pointed out. "I expect Brazil is vastly out of my reach."

He nodded, took a deep breath, then nodded again.

"Grace Ouillette is promoting her new movie in London," he announced. "She's there for the week."

Nathalie nodded and typed "Grace Ouillette" into the search field. A second later, the message 'Grace Ouillette cannot be found' appeared on the screen.

Gabriel massaged the bridge of his nose through his mask.

"Do you know anyone who lives right out of town?"

"My mother," Nathalie answered.

She was already typing Aurélie's name.

Once again, the application came up blank.

"How far from here is she?" Gabriel asked.

"Between seven and ten kilometers. I never had to calculate the geodesic distance up until now."

He nodded.

"It's consistent with the range of most Akuma. We'll need to have an employee travel from the office to the outskirts of the city and see how far we can track them."

Nathalie acquiesced at that.

*Step five: figure out if you can track the dead.*

She searched for 'Victor Hugo'. Instead of showing the Pantheon, the map application displayed yet another error message.
Well, that was inconvenient, but good to know.

*Step six: figure out the magical limitations.*

Nathalie typed 'Hawk Moth'.

It stood to reason that Miraculous users could not be tracked through their superhero identity. If that had been possible, Kubdel would have made short work of the children. Still, verifying couldn't hurt.

'Hawk Moth cannot be found,' her tablet displayed.

"That was to be expected," Gabriel sighed. "Chat Noir and Ladybug can track each other, but it requires cooperation between the Kwami. Waspp was adamantly against it and, for the longest time, Bee would page us her coordinates."

"Page?"

"It was the early nineties. The heroes' costume and equipment is derived from their own imagination. Medieval heroes would use crystallomancy to communicate, Adrien gets a smartphone, and we had pagers."

Nathalie nodded and typed 'Gabriel Agreste'.

The search turned up nothing.

Gabriel frowned.

"So the civilian identity is also protected during the transformation," he mused. "Not that it will impede us, since Alice no longer had her Miraculous when she vanished."

Nathalie did not bother answering.

*Step 6: determine the range of the 'search by date' tool.*

She tapped the datepicker and entered '1976-11-21 22:00:00'. The map scrolled to the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, where, on that date, Gabriel had been born.

The silence in the room was tangible. Gabriel had stopped to breathe. He was staring at the screen, as if stunned by the realization that she could track people through time. Surely he had known that before giving her the powers, but he had always been overdramatic.

Satisfied that she could cover the last forty years and thus the period during which Alice had gone missing, Nathalie ignored him and moved on to step seven: 'cross-reference the map data with the camera application footage'.

She searched for her own location on the fourteenth of April, in 2010, at two P.M.. It was a date picked at random but a work day, so she was not surprised to see the map return to the mansion. An unmoving marker appeared, roughly in the location of Gabriel's office.

Nathalie closed the map and tapped the camera icon. A picture of the room appeared, filmed through her tablet. At first, as she was holding it pointed down, it showed the tile. She tilted it upright until it was angled towards the door. Then she stopped moving.

This application did not have a search box, but it had retained the datepicker. She entered "2010-04-14 14:00:00". Instantly, the image changed: it was still showing the door, but it was open rather
than closed, and the light was different. Instead of the artificial neon glow, the room was filled by bright sunlight. She spun around, comparing the neatly sorted boxes of materials, the tools lying around and the art pinned to the walls. While the art had changed, it was about the only difference. Gabriel was a creature of order and rigidity. The room had been organized in the same way for at least a decade.

Nathalie turned the tablet to Gabriel and filmed absence. In 2010, the room had been empty. Where had he been on that day, at that time? In his office? With a customer? On a trip? Nathalie doubted he had been home. Even back then, avoidance had been his best-honed skill.

"Can I take a look?" he asked.

She frowned (unnecessary curiosity hindered her work), but tilted the screen towards him so he could watch the feed. He pressed her hand to make her turn, and inspected the room, from the windows to the door. He frowned under his mask.

"That seems accurate enough. Let's find a calendar and check the date."

Nathalie nodded and walked out. Gabriel followed her through the hallway, nervously playing with his magical cane. She heard it click, and peeked just in time to see the hint of a blade vanish back into the shaft. Of course. That a fencer would carry a concealed sword was hardly a surprise. She filed the information away and kept walking, tablet in hand.

The mansion had barely changed. The daylight of 2010-mansion contrasted with the artificial lights of present-mansion. The painting on the staircase landing had changed. That was about it. Nathalie did not bother playing the difference game: there would be at least one computer on in the office, or some kind of screen with a date display.

She went down the stairs and walked past the image of Alice, who was climbing the same stairs back in 2010. Nathalie ignored her, turning to the office door as she walked. It was open (and brand new) in the present but closed in the past.

"Adrien?" Alice's voice called from her tablet. "Adrien, are you upstairs?"

"W-wait!" Gabriel exclaimed, grabbing Nathalie by the shoulder.

He gawked at the empty space behind them, trying to follow the motions of someone who wasn't there.

"Adrien?" Alice's voice insisted.

Nathalie let out an exasperated sigh.

"We don't have time for this."

She freed herself, leaving Gabriel trembling on the stairs, and entered the office. She looked around through her tablet screen. A younger, much healthier looking Gabriel was seated at the table, surrounded by neatly arranged piles of books. A younger, identical looking Nathalie was absorbed in computer work. Through the enchanted tablet's speakers, you could hear the faint sounds of typing and page turning.

Present-Nathalie circled the desk and leaned through the image of her past self so she could get the camera of her tablet closer to the computer screen. The clock in the corner of the screen, unfortunately, did not show the full date, but simply "14:05". Nathalie clicked her tongue, wondering where else she could find the date. Her past self thankfully solved the problem: she
opened her calendar software. The highlighted column was titled 'Wed. 04/14'.

Nathalie pulled away from the screen, satisfied.

Gabriel was standing in the doorway. He had composed himself - barely - and spoke in a careful, polite tone.

"From your expression, I am going to assume the date is correct?"

She nodded.

"It is. Which means that, as soon as we determine the exact range of the map application, we should be able to travel to Brazil and follow your wife from her last known location."

She paused, wondering which employee would be available at that time of the evening to drive out of town with no explanation. She was not certain Gabriel still had a chauffeur.

"Who can we dispatch to test my tracking range?" she asked. "The recent staff changes are making it difficult for me to figure out our options."

"It can wait," Gabriel replied.

Nathalie tensed.

"I need the specifics documented so I can move on to the next step of the plan."

He studied her face for an instant.

"It would be a waste of resources and time," he countered. "Considering the distance between the house and your apartment, we can consider your trackable area as vastly sufficient, seeing how we have a starting point to follow Alice and can rely on the camera alone."

She considered the argument.

"You have a point."

Next step.

She sat down at the desk, turned the computer on (her account, unlike her company network credentials, had not been disabled), and started Skype to make a phone call. She was halfway through typing the number of the company's pilot when Gabriel grabbed her hand.

"Who are you calling?" he asked, puzzled.

She gave him a pointed look.

"Pierre Vivante," she explained. "If the jet can be readied right now, it might be possible for us to be in São Paulo by tomorrow afternoon, and to reach Pacaás Novos by the next day. With proper-

Gabriel turned the computer off.

"We can't leave now," he declared.

"Of course we can," she stated. Then she frowned. "Unless the jet is unavailable?" she asked, annoyed by the prospect of such an easily avoidable delay.
"I mean we can't leave now because we cannot just drop everything and abandon Adrien in Paris. Arrangements have to be made. I'd like him to meet with the therapist before we proceed with the trip, too."

"Those are unnecessary concerns. My mother can handle him while we are gone. We should-"

"It is not negotiable. The trip can wait two, even three weeks. Adrien needs immediate support."

Nathalie scowled under a mask she had not, up to that point, realized she was wearing.

There had to be a way to work around the issue. Surely Aurélie was a qualified caretaker. No one could be more supportive. She was certainly more so than Gabriel and Nathalie combined.

Gabriel sighed and tugged at the Miraculous pinned to his collar.

"I think we should call it a day," he said. "We made excellent progress and-"

He stopped as they heard typing. He shot Nathalie a sharp look, then realized that she was not touching the keyboard. The sound was coming from her tablet, which she put down. He picked it up and pointed it at the computer, then turned to the table where he had been sitting in 2010 and observed himself.

He pursed his lips.

"Can you record with this?"

Nathalie took the tablet back, located the controls and pressed the 'record' button. She filmed her past self for a few seconds, then stopped and replayed the footage. Gabriel watched the scene loop.

A moment went by.

"Can you email me the video?" he asked.

She hit the 'share' icon, entered his email address and pressed 'send'. His phone buzzed. He gave its screen a glance, then stared into space.

"I'm aware it is a lot to ask," he ended up saying, turning to her, "but I could use your powers for something unrelated."

They had already accomplished everything they could accomplish that evening. He had said so himself. Having nothing left to do, Nathalie had no reason to refuse. He was not impeding her work.

"I'm listening," she said.

"We are about to travel to Brazil, find Alice's trail, and follow it - in all likelihood - to a corpse. And it occurs to me that Adrien has nothing to remember his mother by."

That made no sense.

"The house is full of pictures of her," Nathalie stated.

"Of Alice," he corrected. "There is nothing left of her as Ladybug. No photographs, no footage… I wouldn't even sketch her, so the art couldn't be used against us if we were found out. If Adrien had not discovered her secret identity, the lack of mementos would be alright, but… he might want to know more about her."
Nathalie peered at him. He did not look away.

"I have have at least one date in mind," he told her. "And timeframes where we might catch glimpses of her."

She considered his suggestion. While it seemed to her the efforts involved would reap no valuable benefits, they would also be practically costless. The time they would waste was unallocated. They would not be neglecting more productive activities. Overall, the gains (albeit negligible) would outweigh the costs.

She did not answer Gabriel quickly enough for his tastes.

"We would be wasting an unique opportunity if we did not exploit those powers," he insisted.

Nathalie nodded.

"Very well. What is the first date?"

He pursed his lips. His gaze drifted to a corner of the room as he mulled over his answer.

"99, July the… fourth," he said. "In the middle of the afternoon, if I remember well."

He left the office, gesturing for her to follow, and went to the front door. He pulled it open but stayed behind it. His costume would prove highly conspicuous if passerby happened to peek into the courtyard. Nathalie checked her own outfit. It was, as far as she could see, the most normal of work outfits.

"Outside, then?" she asked, walking out of the mansion.

She changed the date of the camera footage to July '99, and filmed the courtyard. It had been a sunny Sunday. Unlike the inside of the house, the courtyard had changed. Instead of high walls, it was surrounded by an intricate iron fence. You could see the surrounding streets (which were empty save for two cops standing next to the fountain). Brand new cars of models that had long been retired were parked along the sideways.

Nathalie peeked at Gabriel.

"What am I looking for?"

"Model Behaviour," he replied. When she squinted in confusion, he went on. "I caused an Akumatization by firing a model during a photoshoot, and she went after me. I spent half that day being compulsively polite, while Ladybug and Bee handled things. Alice dropped me back home afterwards."

Having seen Gabriel fire people (or more simply interact with them), Nathalie wondered how many Akumatizations he had been responsible for. Surely the list had to be two pages long (A4, arial 10, regular line spacing). You would have thought being the superhero tasked with stopping Hawk Moth's victims would have been incentive enough to temper one's… temperament.

*A tiger cannot change its stripes.*

"Any idea of the precise time you came back home?" she asked, stepping halfway into the house to look at him as she spoke. He was leaning against the door, all but flattened against it. Instead of turning to her, he stared at the ceiling.
"None. The photo shoot was in the morning, and the fight lasted for at least two hours, but I was under hypnosis for all of it. The rest of the day is as much of a blur in my mind, to be honest."

Nathalie took a deep breath.

"Very well. Let's start at noon, then."

Looking back at her screen, she tapped the datepicker and changed the time to '12:00'. On the video, the shadows shifted positions, passerby appeared, the policemen vanished.

Next came the tedious part: defining the proper checking interval and covering the whole afternoon. Ten minutes was definitely too large a gap not to miss Ladybug’s appearance. Five minutes seemed like a safer interval, but not by much.

"Did the two of you converse?" she asked. "Or was it just a quick, 'drop in, fistbump, goodbye' encounter?"

"It was a quick one," Gabriel sighed. "Ladybug did not linger."

*Three minutes, then.*

Nathalie started iterating through the minutes - three, six, nine, twelve, and so on, and so on - then through the hours. The process was barely faster than letting the video play, really, and the changes in the footage were minimal. People popped into existence, and out of it. The light changed, ever so slightly, as the clouds teleported before the sun and away. Sirens and music blasted, were cut short.

Then, in that distant past, red and blue dropped from the sky and collided with Nathalie's tablet. All she could see was darkness. She took a step away and the image reappeared, overexposed for an instant as the lens adjusted to the sunlight. Royal blue suit, a tad wrinkled, and short blond hair, then black-gloved fingers brushing a shoulder and patting it. It stayed there.

"There you are, mister Agreste, safe and sound," Alice said. "Try not to get in the way of a supervillain next time."

The voice was unmistakable.

Present time Gabriel ran his hands over his face.

Past Gabriel bowed his head.

"Thank you, Lady-"

Nathalie changed the date to five minutes earlier, then stepped away from the door and angled her tablet towards the roof, trying to figure out where Alice had dropped from. She listened, for the most part, as surely walking on rooftops would make noise.

As it turned out, Ladybug did not arrive from the mansion's roof, but from the other side of the street, at breakneck speed. She was propelled by some black, elastic rope attached to something on the roof, which hurled her at the facade of the house. She hit the wall with both feet then jumped back in a salto, the taut rope going slack at once. And, of course, she did all of that while carrying Gabriel.

They landed in front of the door, in a quite comical tableau: Gabriel was a head taller than she was, and seemed to be hanging from her neck more than he was being carried. Not that Ladybug would
have been able to hold him, as she needed a free hand for her lasso.

Gabriel let go of her as soon as her feet hit the ground, swiftly getting up with his back to the mansion. Meanwhile, Ladybug tugged on the rope, and a red shield dropped into her hand. She leaned closer to Gabriel and put a hand on his shoulder, while she spun the lanyard a few times, making the shield shrink to the size of a compact disc. The last spin wrapped the rope around her waist and pinned the shield (now identical to Marinette's communicator device) to her hip.

"There you are, mister Agreste, safe and sound," she said once again. "Try not to get in the way of a supervillain next time."

Her costume was somewhat different from Marinette's, if not by much: the shape of black gloves and thigh-high black boots was incorporated into her suit, her belt was thicker and black, her ribbons were longer. Yet, it was identical in cut (or lack thereof) and material. She was, without the shadow of a doubt, Ladybug. And there was no denying she was Alice. Maybe magic could have distracted from her most recognizable traits - her eyes, her voice, her hair - but that would have changed nothing. The look on Gabriel's face gave her away.

Nathalie knew that look. She had seen it often, that and the way he was both leaning towards Alice and pulling himself away, the way his hands reached for her, the way the tip of a finger - just a finger - brushed her hip.

"Thank you, Ladybug. And I wouldn’t dream of it."

Alice gave an amused snort, letting go of his shoulder and stepping away. Gabriel clasped his hands behind his back, pulling back.

"I should go," Ladybug said, detaching her communicator from her belt and transforming it back into a shield. She wrapped the lanyard it was attached to around her wrist, then cocked her head to the side. "Have a nice day, mister Agreste."

"Likew-" Gabriel tried to answer, too late: Alice had flung her shield across the courtyard, the rope stretching behind it until it caught the statue atop the fountain. A tug from the rope had sent her flying over the statue and out of sight.

Nathalie turned her tablet to past-Gabriel. She watched him chuckle, walk into the house, and call Renaud, his assistant of the time. As Renaud would in no way interest Adrien, she stopped recording. She emailed the footage she had just captured to Gabriel, then moved farther away from the door. She was changing the date on the app's datepicker when her companion called for her.

"Nathalie?"

He did not peek out. She did not even hear him move behind the door. He was not one to risk being glimpsed.

"One moment," she said. "I'll record this again from another angle."

There was the slightest pause.

"As you wish," Gabriel answered, his voice so quiet she could barely hear him.

She changed the date, tilted her tablet up, and started filming. It made sense to document the one interaction available from as many angles as possible: from afar, from up close, from one side, from the other. She took additional stills, as it allowed for a higher resolution than video. After fifteen minutes, judging that she had everything they needed, she closed the app and returned
Gabriel was still standing with his back to the door. He was pushing his phone into the inner pocket of his jacket as she walked in, or rather attempting to: Hawk Moth's outfit did not seem to be equipped with the same amount of pockets than his usual clothes. Instead of casually putting the phone away as he had wanted to, he dropped it. It slipped under the jacket and clattered on the floor. Gabriel winced under his mask and snatched it, too fast, his feigned indifference gone. He had already crouched when he caught himself. She watched him purse his lips, frown, then give her a guilty look she couldn't have been less concerned about.

"Are there any other events we could observe?" she asked. "Surely Alice would have had to transform at home at least a few times."

Gabriel raised his eyebrows under Hawk Moth's cowl.

"Actually, we tried to avoid it. Or, rather, we made sure not to waltz in or out as our alter-egos. But we did train while transformed, so the gym would be a good place to inspect."

Nathalie frowned, confused for a brief moment. Then she remembered there was small home gym in the basement. It hadn't been used in years: both Adrien and Gabriel had memberships in various sports clubs, and never trained at the mansion.

She turned towards the basement door but, much to her surprise, Gabriel went to the staircase instead.

"Upstairs," he said as he climbed. "Adrien's room. We turned the gym to a nursery a little before you were hired." He paused on the landing. "It used to be my room, actually, before I left home to move in with Alice."

*That's an interesting tidbit of information,* Nathalie thought as she followed him to Adrien's bedroom. It meant the gym had only been a gym for three years at most. Gabriel and Alice had shared an apartment for a few months, and only moved into the mansion after the death of Gabriel's mother. If you accounted for the time it would have taken to transform from a bedroom to a home gym, and knew your own hiring date…


"Did you have a specific training schedule?"

Once again, there was a delay before Gabriel's response. He was looking around, distracted. He eventually blinked and turned to her.

"Between six and seven, most mornings. Renaud arrived at eight. Of course, Alice spent more time in here than I did. It was crucial for her to be in perfect shape."

Nathalie did not need her magical tablet to hear Alice's voice, there. She remembered it just fine. "It's time for my yoga session, I have to run". A kiss dropped on Adrien's forehead, a smile, a sweet word or two, and a 'I'll be back for dinner'. The stay-at-home mother, vanishing for five hours at a time. It had never been yoga, had it been?

She opened the camera app again and picked a new date.

*June 1, 2000, half past six A.M.*

The room she saw through her screen was entirely different. Daylight filtering through frosted
windows. Balance beams and parallel bars, a treadmill, a rowing machine. A climbing wall, still, but with black and red hand holds only.

There was no one in sight.

Nathalie skipped to the next day, found the room equally empty. She was about to jump to the next morning, then she heard laughter. Gabriel's. Past Gabriel's. She spun around, pointing her tablet in every direction to try to find him.

The real Gabriel squeezed her shoulder.

"Up," he said, pointing at the ceiling.

She looked up.

There were trapezes.

There were trapezes, and Alice and her Chat Noir were hanging upside down from them, swinging back and forth. He was holding her, chuckling, smiling, grinning.

Nathalie had only ever caught glimpses of that Gabriel - the one who pushed files off her desk, grinned in the dark, raced on rooftops - and she followed him with the camera, all too aware it would be her one and only opportunity to observe him.

While she acknowledged that she would be akumatized again, she knew the next transformations would be entirely focused on finding Alice. Her current circumstances would not present themselves again, and she had to know.

She watched 'Chat Noir' swing back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, and she had to know. She had to know who Gabriel was, under the facades, the madness, the wounds. She had to see that ghost for herself.

She crossed the room to circle Ladybug and Chat Noir, filming all the while. Alice was annoyed and bickering, whereas Gabriel was laughing to tears. He dropped her and she landed on a balance beam, in a handstand, then rolled. Nathalie focused on her husband. He was hanging by one foot, but effortlessly bent back up to grab the trapeze and climb on it. He was still chuckling.

"It's not funny," Alice mumbled.

Nathalie zoomed in on the look of infinite tenderness on Chat Noir's face.

"I beg to differ. It was too tempting."

Out of frame, Alice huffed. Nathalie heard bouncing (one, two, three, four times) and watched Gabriel follow his wife's motions. His smile was still there, barely, twitching at the corner of his lips, but devotion had mostly washed it away.

"You said this used to be your room?" Nathalie asked.

The real Gabriel squinted under his mask, perplexed.

"Yes?"

She had already changed the date to a random evening of the nineties. The decor on her screen changed again. The gym turned into a bedroom, the furniture shades of grey and brown and the walls covered in fashion plates. Silks were draped on a mannequin by the door. Sewing supplies
were spread on the desk.

Since the lights were on, Nathalie slowly spun into place, looking for the room's occupants. She found Plagg sleeping on the corner of the bed. He was alone. She skipped to the next evening, then the next, then the next, until she found a teenage Gabriel sitting on his bed with a needle and a piece of cloth. He was busy embroidering the pocket of a shirt.

Plagg zipped into the picture with a piece of cheese between his paws, which he deposited in his young chosen's mouth.

"'k you," the boy said, gulping it down while his fingers kept working.

"Another one?"

Nathalie stopped the video.

This was pointless.

Who Gabriel had been in the past was irrelevant. It didn't matter how facetious and tender he had been with Alice, or how close he had been to Plagg. It didn't matter if he had once been a happier, warmer, better man. You couldn't hope to scratch the surface and find that boy underneath. You could dig forever and never find his corpse. You had to judge Gabriel not by who he used to be, or who he could be, but by who he was.

*On that note.*

Nathalie walked out of the bedroom, followed by a puzzled Gabriel. She changed the date again. *That* one she knew, and had wondered about for a long time.

She stood at the top of the staircase and adjusted the time on the datepicker until she found chairs lying in the hallway. Then she walked down to the dining room.

You could hear Adrien's strangled voice through the tablet's speakers.

"What are you d… Father, just-"

Wood creaked.

She stopped in the doorframe and filmed the events as they unfolded.

She lowered her tablet.

"Never assume you are safe," past Gabriel was telling Chat Noir. "Up."

The real one, behind her, ran a hand over his face.

Nathalie closed the video app.

She launched the game.

###
Ladybug landed on the roof of the Bourgeois hotel and steeled herself, once again, before storming into Gabriel Agreste's house to confront him. Once again.

She had left Adrien at miss Sancoeur's not ten minutes before, after an evening spent comforting him the best she could. There was no changing his mind about going to the police about his father's involvement with Hawk Moth's capture, so all Marinette had been able to do was holding him and supporting him as he struggled with the idea.

He wanted so badly to do the right thing.

She breathed in, staring at the mansion. Several lights were on inside. Miss Sancoeur's car was still parked in the courtyard, which meant that mister Agreste and her were probably busy discussing her future Akumatization, which should have happened under Tikki and Plagg's supervision as planned.

But no.

Of course not.

She would have to confront the two of them about that-

The windows of the mansion's dining room exploded.

Ladybug dove into the street, throwing her yoyo at the house's roof and propelling herself over the courtyard's walls, in a curve angled straight at the front window. She saw the numbers painted on the dining room's floor right before landing, corrected trajectory, and bounced from the windowsill to the fireplace.

The tile was destroyed in places, mostly around the door leading to the hallayway. The numbers she had noticed before were painted on most but not all of the intact tiles. Two, three, four, the odd six.

Marinette chewed the inside of her cheeks bloody.

*Minesweeper.*

She spotted a safe spot on the floor, jumped to it and peeked into the hallayway. An akumatized miss Sancoeur was standing on the staircase, tablet in hand, while a man in a violet suit - he had to go and turn into Hawk Moth - crawled on a floor covered in sixes.

Ladybug threw her yoyo at one of the hanging lamps, shooting through the air after it and flipping above miss Sancoeur. The woman looked up in shock, eyes wide behind her red butterfly mask.

Marinette dropped down, hooking a leg through Nathalie's arms and snatching the tablet away. She rolled down the stairs, tugging on her yoyo string to stop herself before touching the tile, and smashed the tablet against the steps. Not thirty seconds later, she had purified the Akuma and repaired the damage. Miss Sancoeur was sitting on the stairs, untransformed. Mister Hawkgreste was getting back to his feet.

"YOU SAID YOU WOULD NOT DO THIS WITHOUT TIKKI AND PLAGG," Ladybug screamed.
Gabriel ignored her. Instead, he collected a smartphone from the floor and frantically swiped the screen. Marinette nearly tore it out of his hands. She clenched her fists and squared her jaw instead.

"Are you listening to me?"

She heard faint voices from the phone, and mister Agreste seemed to relax. He raised a hand to his collar to take his Miraculous off, but paused and ended up putting his hand on his chest.

"Yes. Yes, Ladybug," he replied, putting the phone down on a windowsill. "I am sorry. This whole affair went a little bit off the rails."

She snatched the Miraculous and held it away from him, in her balled fist. His transformation reverted. Bella spun out of the jewel.

"WE AGREED!" Marinette snapped at mister Agreste. "THIS WHOLE PLAN WAS INSANE ENOUGH WITHOUT YOU GOING AND-"

"Well..." Bella chimed in.

"SHUT UP!" Ladybug shrieked, before whirling back to Gabriel. "YOU HAD TO GO BEHIND OUR BACKS! YOU JUST COULDN'T STOP YOURS-"

" Miss Dupain-Cheng, " Miss Sancoeur cut in.

Marinette stilled, then turned to the stairs. Her earrings beeped.

Miss Sancoeur looked dazed, with sweat running down her face. That was enough to calm Marinette down, at least temporarily.

"As much as Gabriel usually deserves the blame, this wasn't his doing," the woman explained, slowly going down the steps with a hand on the railing. She wiped her forehead. "This was all me. We were only analyzing the Akuma to see which faculties it could grant me, and I grabbed it. I thought I could handle it. I'm sorry."

Marinette whirled from her to Gabriel and back. She nearly threw the Miraculous to the floor in frustration, but remembered just in time what, exactly, she was holding.

"Couldn't the two of you just wait? Couldn't you… Couldn't you… Oh, I give up, " she exclaimed. "That's not even why I'm here!"

By that point, miss Sancoeur had joined her. She took Ladybug's hands in what seemed, initially, a concerned gesture, up to the point the girl realized she was likely trying to get the Miraculous.

Marinette snatched her hands away.

" You. Adrien trusted you when you told him you'd just be going through old notes and that you wouldn't be doing anything."

Nathalie made a blank face, though not one Marinette was familiar with: miss Sancoeur always put on a facade of bored indifference but had never, up to that point, looked as if she had vacated reality. That emptiness was gone in a blink.

"We were making good progress and I grew impatient," she stated. "I didn't set out to do this."
Ladybug’s earrings beeped once again. She reverted the transformation, letting Tikki land on her shoulder.

"You do realize that I can’t trust a single word you say?" Marinette told Nathalie. "The two of you keep lying!"

Tikki nodded. She was drowsy but still intervened.

"Whatever your intentions, this was careless, Nathalie. People could have been seriously hurt."

She turned to mister Agreste and gave him a long, heavy look.

He met her eyes for an instant, closed his, and walked away.

"We should get you some food," he commented, stopping by the door that led to the kitchen. "That goes for Bella too."

Tikki flew up to be at his eye level and glowered at him. Her sister, however, perked up and floated after Gabriel, as if she did not despise him. Miss Sancoeur tried to nudge Marinette towards them, but she would not bulge. She had come to make a stand and she would.

"The police has been asking us questions about everything that went on before Hawk Moth’s capture," she announced. "They have connected a lot of dots together. Miss Lenoir, mister Bourgeois, the factory… I talked to the detectives and-"

"You what?" mister Agreste and miss Sancoeur exclaimed in the same voice.

"I talked to the detectives," Marinette repeated, defiant, "and t-"

She shut up when she saw that Nathalie had taken her phone out and was browsing through her contacts.

"What are you doing?" the girl exclaimed.

"I am calling your parents to let them know their sixteen year old child is being interrogated by law enforcement without a lawyer present!"

Marinette yelped and tried to grab the phone. She didn't manage to, but at least stopped miss Sancoeur from dialing. Actually, she had to grab the woman and hold her up, because she swayed as if she was about to faint while trying to wrangle the phone away. Mister Agreste, who was much stronger and had both hands free, caught her by the shoulders, but released her within the same second.

"I’m sorry," Marinette murmured, stepping away.

Maybe wrestling with a freshly rescued Akumatization victim was going overboard.

Miss Sancoeur stepped away from Gabriel, massaging the bridge of her nose.

"You should under no circumstances talk to the police alone," she stated. "I am fairly certain your parents would object to your vigilante career in general, but incriminating yourself in by volunteering as a witness to various illicit activities is significantly worse. And, before you can protest that it is ‘the right thing to do,’ she added, silencing Marinette before she could speak, "depending on your age, it is neither legal nor receivable in court."

The girl stared at her. She had considered the secret identity, of course, but not her age nor the laws
that went with it. Would she have to confess everything to her parents? Were Nathalie's explanations true, or were they simply another distraction?

It didn't matter.

Marinette pursed her lips. She raised her chin.

"Adrien is going to go talk to them," she announced. She glared at Mister Agreste. "Since you are trying to get away with everything, he is going to go tell them everything he knows. Because you won't."

Gabriel's eyes went wide.

Marinette stared him down, waiting to see a *modicum* of guilt surface. Not even *much* guilt. Some. Just a trace of it would have been enough.

He winced in irritation and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It's absolutely out of the question!" he exclaimed, pacing. He frowned, looking at the ceiling. "If it has to come to that, I will go to the police myself. There's no need for Adrien to get involved at all."

Marinette stared through him as the words sank in.

"I… You what?"

This was the result she had come to obtain.

Why did it feel so off?

"I will *talk to the police*," he repeated, turning to her. "There is no way I will allow my child to go and shoulder the responsibility of testifying against me." He turned back to Nathalie. "We will have to review the paperwork making you his legal guardian if I end up incarcerated. Everything should already be in order, but you can never be too careful. Not to mention the current situation ought to be documented."

Marinette ran to him and shoved him with all her strength.

She knew what was off.

"Why. Can't you for *once*," she yelled, thumping his chest. She punctuated her next words with more blows. "do something not because it impacts one of the *two* people you ever cared about, but because it is the *right. Thing. To. DO*?"

He could easily have stopped her, but he stood there in puzzlement as she hit him. When she stopped, with her balled fists crushed against his chest, he raised hesitant hands that hovered above hers without touching them. She jumped back in revulsion.

"Why can't you just…" she muttered, wiping tears off her cheek with her palm.

She didn't know when she had started sobbing but she was. The floor was blurry through her tears. She vaguely registered that mister Agreste's hands were still up in the air and then dropped back to his sides.

Tikki landed on her shoulder, murmuring a worried 'Marinette'. Her chosen hiccuped. A shrill, strangled noise was coming out of her throat.
Miss Sancoeur put a hand on her other shoulder and squeezed.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng," she murmured. When that failed to get a reaction, she softly pulled her back. "Come with me. Come on. I'll drive you home."

###

Nathalie did not quite know what to do with the crying girl curled up on her passenger seat, nor what to tell her. She knew she should have said something to calm her down and console her, but it was hardly her forte at the best of times.

It wasn't the best of times.

While she was focused on Marinette, she was also trying to catch the images and sounds racing away from her, slipping off the edges of her mind, evaporating. *Never assume you are safe. Up.*

*Up.*

*Up.*

She ran her hands over her face.

She could remember that and file it away for later.

"Are you feeling a little better?" she asked miss Dupain-Cheng.

There was no point asking, really. The answer was clear enough. The girl was no longer wailing, but was still shaken by silent sobs. It seemed like there was nothing left to do but let her cry her nerves out. Even Tikki seemed to be resigned. The Kwami was sitting on Marinette's knees, looking despondent.

They had been parked in sight of the Dupain-Cheng's bakery for the last ten minutes. The drive from the mansion was short, so Nathalie had stopped a few houses before the corner to convince her passenger to lock the butterfly Miraculous into the electrum box and give her a moment to collect herself. She was not sure the night would suffice.

Miss Dupain-Cheng did not answer her question, but made an effort to appear calmer. She wiped her eyes and sniffed noisily.

What did you even tell a child in such a situation?

Nathalie said nothing.

Minutes later, the girl straightened up for a second, a short wave of anger washing through her.

"He's just…" she exclaimed.

And then she crumpled in her seat again.

"Yes," Tikki murmured.

She was not looking at her companion, but at the blinking light of the car alarm. Marinette snapped out of her crying spell and gaped at her.
Nathalie had to admit she had not expected agreement from the Kwami. She was the chirpy one.

"He changed so much," Tikki went on. "He was always cold but he didn't use to be like that. Not when I was still with Alice. Or maybe he was, but I didn't want to see. Maybe I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to admit he was chipping away at everything good he was. Maybe I just kept making excuses."

"Tikki! Don't be so hard on yourself!" Marinette gasped. "You just try to see the best in everyone. You shouldn't blame yourself for falling for his act!"

The Kwami's eyes glazed over for an instant. She didn't answer, but put on a tired smile and went to nuzzle against the girl's cheek. Marinette cupped her hands around her, noticing only the tenderness.

Nathalie understood better.

She stared at the street for a moment, letting the spirit work her magic. It was late enough that no more cars were driving by. A street light flickered over orange stillness.

*Up.*

*Up.*

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Will he really go?" Miss Dupain-Cheng asked.

Her voice quivered still, but she was trying.

"Yes. He goes about appeasement in different ways."

The girl shifted in her seat. Nathalie turned back to her.

"Are you ready to go home?" she asked. She clicked her tongue at her own dryness. "A little more ready?"

That attempt at coddling did not sound any softer.

Marinette ignored the question.

"We'll still go," she stated. "To the cops. I will, and hopefully Adrien won't have to, but we have to see this to the end. We can't let Hawk Moth get away with what he did, and there is no proof of his secret identity except our word."

Nathalie took a long, deep breath. She raked her hands through her hair. What was left of her hairdo collapsed.

"Why?" she snapped. "There is no point! There are enough crimes to pin on him for him to never step outside of a jail cell in his entire life."

"Because people have to know he was caught. Because he has to be punished, for everything. Fairly punished. He did so much harm, over so many years! His victims deserve closure!"

"His punishment is entirely irrelevant! What good would it do to them? You don't find closure in other people, you find it in yourself."
She forced herself to shut up. Marinette was staring at her as if she had been betrayed. Nathalie did not peek at Tikki, but she could imagine the accusatory glare.

She closed her eyes and massaged the bridge of her nose.

"I am hardly a reference on this," she said, in a gentler voice, "but my take is you can't put you own well-being in anyone's hands but your own. Especially not someone like Alim Kubdel. People like him won't ever fix the harm they inflicted, and it's naive to hope they could. They won't repent. They won't change. Some might - remorse is not unheard of - but most are just terrible people at heart. Sometimes you have to just cut your losses and find better ways to heal."

The girl studied her face, frowning. She sucked her cheeks in and out, and mulled over her answer, and frowned with more intent.

She seemed to be blessed with such an inexhaustible trove of energy.

"I see," she said. Her left cheek puffed out again, once. "It's not totally wrong, I guess. But. You know. Why is it that when it's Alim Kubdel, that's the advice you have to give, but when it's mister Agreste, then suddenly it's all about pretending he isn't doing anything wrong, and not confronting him, and giving him more and more chances?"

Nathalie said nothing.

She turned back to the dashboard and pulled the keys out. They wouldn't be needing the AC anymore. She turned the headlights off when the car started beeping, then opened the door and got out.

Miss Dupain-Cheng took the clue. She followed her onto the street, closing the car door and crossing her arms.

"You don't have an answer?"

"No, I do, actually," Nathalie replied. "You are very right. I will give it some thought."

The girl trotted after her as she made her way to her home's door. She was so busy trying to read her features that what they were doing did not seem to register. It was only when Nathalie rang the doorbell that she blanched.

###

Adrien had been lying awake for two hours when he heard the shower turn on.

He had not heard Nathalie come home so, obviously, she had been careful with the door. That she would then decide to shower at nearly three in the morning seemed a little counterproductive, but it suited him fine. He had not exactly been waiting for her, but he had been waiting for her.

He slipped out of bed and tiptoed out, in order to camp in the living room until she was done. He went alone: Plagg was sleeping on his pillow and did not stir.

He found the bathroom door open. Nathalie was kneeling on the floor next to the tub, still dressed, and holding the running shower head over her head. Water was streaming through her hair, which
she was twisting and rubbing. Her makeup was washing away, leaving black and orange droplets on the edge of the bathtub.

"Nathalie?" Adrien called, hesitant.

She reached for the faucet and shut it off. He watched her squeeze the water of of her hair and wrap it in a towel.

"I could still smell the dye," she told him, giving him her usual neutral look. "It was making nauseous."

"Oh. Oh. I'll wait in the kitchen, alright?"

Nathalie closed her eyes, rubbing her eyelashes when they glued together and leaving a black smudge over her temple. She nodded. She smiled.

"Give me a few moments."

He acquiesced and ran off, to go sit cross-legged on the sofa. He couldn't stay still.

Maybe there would be a way to talk about the research Nathalie and his father had worked on without Adrien mentioning his decision to go to the police. He felt like if he discussed it, he would lose his resolve. Even if he didn't simply falter, Nathalie would talk him out of it (and that was if his father did not intervene).

He stillled when Nathalie joined him and sat down in the closest armchair.

"Did Miss Dupain-Cheng call you?" she asked.

"Um, after she left, you mean? No? Should she have?"

Nathalie shook her head.

"Nevermind. She will likely call you tomorrow, she must still be busy with her parents."

She paused. Her gaze strayed to the coffee table, then back to Adrien. She was as inexpressive as she could be.

"We made good progress today," she announced. "Though I did take a careless decision that resulted in a bit of trouble. I will explain it all in more detail tomorrow, but it is late and we should both get some sleep."

"Good progress?" Adrien exclaimed. There was no way he could wait until the next day to know more. "How so? Were Father's notes useful? And what trouble?"

"I can safely said that we have defined the perfect set of powers to investigate your mother's disappearance. Now, I do not want to make hasty promises, but I do believe we could follow her tracks from the last time she got in touch with your Father. We haven't scheduled anything yet, and there are some kinks to iron out, but you can expect both of us to make a trip to Brazil in the upcoming weeks."

He froze.

"Right now, however," she went on, "I am exhausted. I am more than willing to recount the entire evening - which I want you to know, in case you get more details through miss Dupain-Cheng - but it will be after some rest."
A hundred questions came to Adrien, and he tried to voice them all at once.

"What po… W-what happened? Was Ladybug-

" *Tomorrow,* " Nathalie repeated.

She closed her eyes for an instant, breathing in, then blinked. She *did* look exhausted. Her skin was still stained by smudges of mascara. Her collar was wet, with traces of foundation and powder.

He relented.

"Alright. Alright! Just rest as much as you need!" he told her, impatience turning to guilt. "This can wait!"

She gave a delayed nod and stood, tousling his hair as she walked past him.

He turned to watch her walk away.

"Thank you, Nathalie," he called after her, with all the gratitude he could put in his voice.

She stopped, turning to him.

"Don't mention it," she replied. A second went by. "Oh, Adrien, there is something else. You are to refrain from talking to the police. It will not be necessary."

And, on that, she slipped into her bedroom and closed the door.

###

Nathalie shed her jacket and her shoes and her pants and dropped into bed. Her mattress was flat, entirely flat. It didn't tilt to the side anymore. She curled up into a ball in the middle of it.

###

Chat Noir bowed with an intricate flourish as he walked out of the tea shop, giving profuse thanks to the owner for opening a whole two hours before schedule, just for him. It was seven in the morning and most stores wouldn't open before nine, which had left him in a bit of a pickle.

He wanted, really wanted, to do something nice for Nathalie. It wasn't that he wanted to bribe her about the police thing. He suspected they would debate that at length. It wasn't that he needed to know what had happened the night before, and what powers she had been talking about. She *deserved* to be shown how much he cared. She was going out of her way to be there for him, in so many ways that he could not count them, her every effort understated, almost hidden. But he could see it took a toll on her, and where he couldn't see, he could deduce.

Anyone would have preferred to run barefoot on broken glass to the prospect of being akumatized, yet here they were.
He wanted to do something special.

Nathalie being Nathalie, croissants for breakfast wouldn't do. She wasn't a sugar person. She wasn't a breakfast person, really. He could have made coffee, but coffee wouldn't cut it. He had programmed the machine before leaving in any case, but he needed to do better than that.

He had found himself wandering her neighborhood and staring through the windows of closed stores, praying for a flash of inspiration. He had all of the money in the world, but thirty minutes to spare at most, and the most common opening hours did not quite match the timeframe. Catching the attention of the tea shop's storekeeper had been a stroke of luck.

He had bought about half of the inventory, exotic coffees in metal boxes and flavored infusions in nice glossy paper bags, cookies in pastry boxes, all of it packed into more bags which were hanging from his staff, over his shoulder.

Nathalie was bound to like something. The violet flavored tea, maybe.

He raced from rooftop to rooftop to get back home, and slipped back into his room through the window. He put the bag down on his bed, trying to figure out which boxes to unpack first.

He froze when he heard voices.

Nathalie was speaking to someone in the living room, which meant there was someone in the living room, which means he had absolutely no idea if he was supposed to come back into the apartment through his bedroom door or through the entrance, because he did not know if the visitor knew he was up.

He crept to the door and pressed two ears against it.

"... which I did," Nathalie was saying. "I had contacts at Grenat, for a start. But, let's be lucid, I don't have the faintest hope to work in the fashion industry again. No one who figures out I am raising Gabriel Agreste's son will believe that I'm not a corporate spy."

Adrien paled.

He had never stopped to think about that.

A spoon was spun inside a cup, with clinking noises.

"So what are your plans?" the visitor asked.

It was Nathalie's mother. She had not been meant to arrive until the afternoon.

"I have savings," her daughter replied. Her heels clicked on the tile. "I can afford a sabbatical. Gabriel insisted I could draw from his accounts in whatever way I saw fit, but obviously that's ridiculous."

Aurélie did not answer.

"Though I could use a few millions," Nathalie mused.

Silence fell. Adrien leaned against the door, knowing he should have long stopped eavesdropping. He did not.

A moment passed.
"So, Adrien is here to stay?" Aurélie inquired, her tone on the wary side of careful.

"Yes."

There was more silence.

"It's just… unexpected," the old woman commented. "That's all."

"Gabriel is not fit to take care of him. His meds might help, in time, but I'm not counting on a miracle."

*Meds?*

Adrien thought back on his father's strange behaviour, his spaciness, his drugged motions.

*Oh.*

What was he taking that might 'help'?

"*And,*" Nathalie continued, "in any case, the boy would be well within his rights to never talk to his father again, which is frankly a decision I would support. If I have to spend the next few years serving as a buffer between the two of them, then so be it."

Chat Noir slid to the floor, keeping his back to the door. He stared at the ceiling.

A drink was sipped.

Heels clicked.

A liquid was poured into something.

Something was put down on the table.

Aurélie was the one to break the silence.

"Now," she said. "And I know you don't want me asking. We have well covered how abusive he is to his son, but I can't help but notice you have not told me a single thing about how he treats you."

Adrien's eyes went wide.

*You really don't stop to think, do you?*

*Of course he is breaking her too.*

*He breaks everyone.*

"I'm not made of glass," Nathalie snapped.

"See, that is not reassuring," her mother retorted. "That does not tell me he treats you right, just that you think you can weather whatever he throws at you."

He heard Nathalie's exasperated sigh.

"Mom, I know you mean well, but I can handle myself. And there is no reason to be concerned. We broke up."

Aurélie's own sigh was subdued.
"Breaking up is when you walk away and start seeing other people, Nathalie. It's not just withholding affection."

A cup was slammed into its saucer.

*You really shouldn't be listening to this,* Adrien berated himself.

He got up and ran across his room, jumping out of the window and into the street to get far, far away from that conversation.

###
Who would have thought a good little boy like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness?

Nathalie was incredibly apt at ignoring her mother's advice. It was a well honed skill, which she had perfected by the age of fourteen, and which she had used and overused for the next two decades.

It came in handy.

She had more important things to focus on than her relationship (or lack thereof) with Gabriel Agreste. As she had told Aurélie, the only relationship of any sort she was in right now was with Adrien. Adrien who had vanished from his room at (according to his phone tracking system, the boy never learned) at seven in the morning.

She knew he had not gone to the police yet, because three security guards in civilian clothes had been camping near the police headquarters for the last eight hours. If Adrien, Chat Noir or Ladybug had been spotted going in, she would have known about it.

As his phone's marker no longer appeared on the city map, she knew he was transformed, which meant he hadn't gone to school. The Dupain-Cheng's bakery was another option, though, if she was to hazard a guess, young Ladybug would be under close watch.

All Nathalie could do was wait by the windows and pace, which she did.

At a quarter to eight, an eternity after she had noticed he was gone, he texted her.

"I saw your mother was there," he had written. "Should I come in through the main door or through my room?"

She relaxed.

"Was that him?" Aurélie asked.

Nathalie nodded, texting back a 'front door'.

Five minutes later, Adrien stumbled into the apartment with a dozen shopping bags in, on and under his arms, and bumped into every obstacle on his way to the kitchen. After a few steps, he ended up hopping on one foot so he could use his knee to keeps the bags from falling, and the two women ran to help him.

"I bought some tea," the boy announced, as if that wasn't blatant from the entire store he was carrying. He saw Nathalie's befuddled look and beamed. "I didn't know what you liked."

Children were weird.

Adrien hurried the kitchen, pouring the bags on the counter and squishing them into place. Then he started unpacking.

"I got some berry flavored tea," he said, brandishing a pink metal box with a bird drawn on it. "And tropical fruit tea, jasmine, ginger and hibiscus, uh, cactus? Um. Where is it?" - He rummaged through the bags. - "Violet flavored tea!"

He seemed so proud of himself. Nathalie didn't have the heart not to play along (or was it 'having'
the heart? Nothing about that idiom made sense).

"Thank you, Adrien," she said, taking the box from his hands and inspecting it. "That's very thoughtful of you."

His smile grew larger. Humming, he filled the kettle with water, then turned to Nathalie's mother.

"Do you want some tea, mrs… Aurélie? There's coffee too."

She chuckled and went to help with the shopping bags.

"Tea will be fine. Thank you very much, Adrien."

He paused next to the sink and added more water to the kettle.

"You are here early," he commented. "I thought you would be arriving in the afternoon."

"I asked her to come a little earlier," Nathalie explained, with a side look at her mother, whose understanding of 'a little' was somewhat off. "I might have to drop by the mansion later today so your father and I can review some guardianship paperwork. It's to simplify matters with your school and travel," she added, before the boy could assume his father was giving him up for adoption.

Adrien nodded, somber.

She opened the box of violet flavored tea and put it down on the counter.

"I fully expect you to try and catch up on schoolwork this morning, even if I'm not here. Alright?"

"Yes, Nathalie," he sighed.

She paused for an instant. *So much for his good mood.*

"Can you look for the tea ball in that drawer?" she prompted. "I think that's where I last saw them."

Well-ingrained obedience kicked in and distracted him from his gloom. He helped her prepare three cups of tea, and she made sure to keep him busy as it infused. They put all of his purchases away, fitting what they could into the cupboards and lining the prettiest boxes over the counters and shelves. They cut what was left of the apple pie into tiny slices.

It was only after sitting down and taking a few sips of the (delicious) tea that Adrien dared to probe more sensitive topics.

"Weren't we, um, supposed to talk, this morning?"

"We were," Nathalie replied, peeking at her mother. "We will."

Aurélie took the hint.

"I just had a few spare cooking instruments I wanted to drop here, in case we need them later today. But I still have a few errands to run," she announced, looking at her watch, "and the post office should be open by now. I'll just be on my way and come back at ten or so."

Nathalie nodded, getting up to escort her to the door.

"Ten would be perfect. Thank you."
Being able to visually organize your plans in neat flowcharts in your mind proved utterly pointless when the entire diagram turned into a circle.

Which of the current problems did you tackle first? Which did you bring up first?
Your own akumatization (and the subsequent murder attempt on Adrien's father)?
Gabriel's decision to cooperate with the police (and the distinct possibility he would be arrested for doing so)?
Adrien's decision to cooperate with the police (which was not going to happen, ever, if Nathalie could help it)?
Trips meant to locate a corpse?
The drastic actions you had taken against Adrien's girlfriend and partner?
Therapy sessions and mental health?
If you thought about it, rolling a dice had to be the most sensible way to decide on a topic.

Nino Lahiffe ended up dictating the conversation.

"Nathalie," Adrien asked when she came back to the kitchen table, after her mother's hasty departure. He was frowning at his phone. "What is it you were saying about Marinette, yesterday? Because Nino says she did not show up for class. He's asking me if there's a superhero thing going on."

Nathalie sat and took her teacup in both hands. She gazed at the speckles of tea leaves spread at its bottom.

"I expect miss Dupain-Cheng's parent kept her home to further discuss what to do about her vigilantism," she replied.

For a boy who had been so routinely lied to, tricked and backstabbed, Adrien sure was incredibly unprepared to betrayal. He looked at her as if he had been kicked.

"You told her parents? " he gasped.

"Yes, Adrien, I told them. A fifteen year old girl was trying to give testimony to the police in a criminal investigation. Of course, I told them."

Plagg popped out from under his shirt, but said nothing. He merely floated to the edge of the table and sat there.

"B-but," the boy stuttered. "You couldn't! It's… They can't know, it's dangerous, and what if… What if-"

"I think we have all learned by now that crime fighting activities are best practiced with the knowledge and approval of one's family rather than behind people's backs," Nathalie cut in.
"But-

"No. I should have warned them the very second I figured out who Marinette was. The goalposts for reasonable behavior had been so deeply shifted before I even got implicated that I did not immediately realize how far off field they were. It is about time they are returned to their proper position."

Adrien leaned back into his chair, arms dropping to his sides. He slowly shook his head.

Nathalie did not let it get to her.

"For what it's worth, having conversed with mrs and mister Dupain-Cheng, they strike me as sufficiently…” - She ran her tongue against the roof of her mouth. - "... law-abiding to encourage her to testify, albeit with proper legal counsel."

Plagg's ears twitched and flattened, then perked up again. He turned to his chosen, who was knitting his brow.

The boy leaned forward, hands on the table.

"What about-"

Nathalie did not let herself bat an eyelash.

"It goes without saying that you will not be allowed to do so, at least not for the time being. As I told you yesterday, it is unnecessary."

Adrien groaned, dropping back into his chair.

"Listen, I understand you don't want me to implicate Father, and that you want to protect me…” - Wasn't that an informative list order. - "But we really need to do everything in our power to prevent mister Kubdel from getting away with what he did. And if the police can't prove he is Hawk Moth, then I can at least ensure he will be prosecuted for k-kidnapping and assault, among other things."

Nathalie noticed the stutter. She looked down at her teacup.

You should have gotten rid of Kubdel while you could.

He didn't need to ever leave that basement.

"I do understand how important it is to you, and others, to see him punished for his exact crimes. I do." - No 'irrelevant punishment' here, no 'finding closure in yourself'. - "However, your involvement is limited enough that it shouldn't be necessary for you to be put on the stand. There is video footage of Kubdel threatening a boy. It should be sufficient evidence to put him away without informing anyone that you are said boy. Furthermore, your father will be cooperating with the police. I assume he will give them a direct account of what happened in Kubdel's house."

"He what ?" Plagg exclaimed.

Adrien clenched his hands on the edge of the table, eyes wide.

"He… what? He will ?"

"Apparently."

That was not a satisfactory answer, so Nathalie straightened up on her chair and tried again.
"We have not decided on the specifics yet. As I mentioned earlier, we need to review legal documents regarding your guardianship before he takes any action, but money usually makes the wheels of bureaucracy run faster. That should be dealt with in a matter of days. After that, I expect he will get in touch with the detectives."

Adrien shock had turned to distrust.

"Why? Why now? He doesn't think that will stop me from talking to them, does he?"

*Of course he does.*

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I expect his arriving at this decision was a *process* ," she commented. "Your father has had to do a lot of thinking over the last few days, and I believe he prioritized some topics over others."

Plagg was rolling her eyes at her. Thankfully, Adrien was not looking at Plagg.

"In any case," Nathalie added, "your father is not the one who won't let you talk to the police. That is *my* decision."

From the look on the boy's face, he was not used to her taking decisions that were not a direct transcription of Gabriel's. Even his Kwami looked puzzled.

"It's my decision," she repeated. "*I* will be taking all parenting decisions until further notice. Gabriel still has to learn the difference between involvement and control. While I will be keeping him updated and will welcome his input, he is no longer in charge. This might change in the future depending on his behavior and mental state, but not right now."

Adrien looked stunned, then sad, then uneasy. He avoided her eyes. He started picking at his nails.

"You know," he mumbled, "you don't have to-"

She did not want to hear the rest of that sentence, so she decided what he meant to say and cut him off.

"Yes, I do."

She couldn't do 'soft' and 'rational' at the same time.

"Now," she went on, trying to instill some kind of emotion in her voice and failing, "while we are on the topic of decisions, I would like to outline how the next weeks are going to go."

Her mental flowchart was still circular. If you looked at it closely, it looked eerily like a downward spiral.

*What do I start with?*

*What do I start with?*

*What do I start with?*

*What. Do. I. Do?*

"In no precise order, because I cannot guess how events will unfold: you are going to go to that therapist appointment, which hopefully will go well. We will wait to see how your father's
interactions with the police go and react accordingly. You are not to discuss the topic with him without me being present." - She reconsidered that. - "Scratch that. You are not to talk to him without me being present, period. I know it sounds harsh, but Gabriel will have a lot of work to do to prove himself before I can trust him around you."

Adrien cleared his throat.

"You really are angry at him, aren't you?" he murmured.

Faint memories flashed through her mind. Bombs going off. A body hitting a wall.

"Only as much as warranted by his previous behavior," she stated, dismissive.

The teenager looked pained. For an instant, she thought he would insist, but he merely nodded and averted his eyes.

She clicked her tongue. She had gone off on a tangent. She started over.

"As I was saying: you will see the therapist, you will not talk to law enforcement unless circumstances drastically change, you will not have unsupervised meetings with your father, we will wait and see what the consequences of his interactions with the cops are." - She took a deep breath. - "In addition, your father and I will make a brief trip to Brazil to investigate Alice's whereabouts, using the set of powers I told you about yesterday. My mother will be staying with you during that time, not to mention you will have Plagg to keep you company."

She couldn't have been dryer if she had tried.

"I think that covers everything," she finished, in the phony satisfied tone she used to conclude work meetings.

She stared at a point on the table, between them. She couldn't bear to watch his reaction.

That plan was all she had.

That plan was all she had, and it felt like it would only make things worse. The more she twisted and turned their options in her head, the less she could see a way out. The more she contemplated the mess they were in, the scarier it grew. Cheats and bribes could only go so far. She was out of time. She was out of ideas.

She would have done anything for the boy, if only she had known what to do.

###

Adrien tapped the tip of his pencil against his notepad, over and over and over again.

His phone was lying on the table, but he hasn't received a single message in hours, despite his frantic texts to Marinette. His history textbook was open next to him, but no amount of reading and rereading the four pages he was meant to summarize had taught him anything about citizenship in ancient Rome. His thoughts were much louder than his inner reading voice, which felt as remote and unimportant as speaker announcements in a supermarket. He knew there were sentences somewhere in there, but he couldn't process them.
Aurélie was sitting on the opposite side of the living room table, perusing his geography textbook. She kept lifting her lowering her reading glasses. She would squint, widen her eyes, mull over whatever she had read, and start over again.

She ended up closing the book.

"Well, I think I will let Nathalie help you with that one. I'm pretty sure several of those countries did not exist when was in school."

Adrien had been expecting prodding about his mental state. The comment caught him unaware.

"What? Which ones?"

"The Czech Republic and Slovakia, apparently. Possibly others."

"Oh. No. Czechoslovakia split in ninety-three," he explained, finding that discussing world events was surprisingly calming.

Aurélie furrowed her brow.

"That… rings a bell. I think. God, it was such a long time ago. I really ought to brush up on my history. You know, when I was in your age, Pluto was still a planet."

She shook her head and removed her glasses. She looked at his notebook, suppressed a saddened smile, and stood.

"What about I made some more tea?" she asked with fake cheer. "I spotted a cranberry-strawberry mix earlier and I'd love to give it a try."

He nodded, forcing a smile on.

"I'd love some, please."

She vanished into the kitchen, and Plagg took the opportunity to sneak out from under the table to peek at Adrien's homework.

"Hey, I was there!" he whispered, looking at the artwork in the history book. "We fought toilet demons."

"Toilet what?"

"Toilet demons. Roman latrines were interesting places, you see. Mostly, they were infested by sewer rats, or they spontaneously caught fire, but monsters would sometimes hide in there, too."

His chosen stared at him. He couldn't tell if Plagg was making it all up to distract him, but it seemed like a distinct possibility.

"I think it was around the time Cleopatra stole Vixx's Miraculous, too," the Kwami went on. "Or was it when Waspp was with that Brutus guy? Meh."

"Wait, Cleopa-"

Adrien heard Aurélie come back and slammed his mouth shut. Plagg dashed behind the sofa.

She put a grey and red teapot (which still had the remnants of a price sticker on it) down on the table, along with two empty grey cups. Then she squeezed his shoulder.
"How did your discussion with Nathalie go?"

Adrien lowered his head.

"It. Um. It..." - He sighed. - "Nathalie is very... structured, I guess. There were things she said we'd talk about but then she..." - He gestured. - "Forgot? I mean I don't mean she avoided the topics on purpose, it's just..."

"Iiii... see exactly what you mean."

He twisted his fingers.

"I mean, I can wait until she comes back. It's not urgent. I just... There's things I wanted to ask, about my father, and things that have happened, and, um, you know, things that are going to happen, and it's really just a lot of questions and of course they can wait and I know it's a lot to handle and I don't want to push but... Um..."

Aurélie sighed, her resigned smile coming back. She squeezed his shoulder again.

"I'm sure Nathalie will discuss everything very soon. She does get stuck in a line of thinking, sometimes."

He nodded.

She poured tea into their cups. He dropped four sugar cubes into his.

"Say, what did she tell you about my father?"

Aurélie sat back in her spot, pulling her cup to her.

"She... told me he was not a very nice person, which is why she took you in. She did not go into detail but she did say he will need a little time to, ah, reflect on his behavior."

Well, that was sure more tactful than 'how abusive he is to his son'.

He gave her his most innocent look.

"Well, Nathalie told me the meds he takes might make things better. Do you think she is right?"

Please fall for it and say what the meds are.

Aurélie put her reading glasses back just so she could lower them and peer at him over their frame.

"Young man, I raised a much slyer child than you. I know for a fact Nathalie did not tell you about that."

He cleared his throat and avoided her eyes.

"And," she went on, "it is not my place to discuss that."

He grimaced.

"Sorry. I just don't know why she won't tell me about it. It's not like it's bad news."

Aurélie blew on her tea and took a careful sip.

"Maybe it's not her place to, either."
Adrien dropped back into his chair, frustrated. If they had to wait for Gabriel to tell him himself, they would be there until hell froze over.

His irritation quickly gave way to guilt.

He could hardly criticize the way Nathalie handled things when she had no obligation to do so to begin with. It would have been much better for her to just walk away. He was the only reason she couldn't.

He was not sure what the future would be like, and if Gabriel would even remain out of a prison cell, but maybe he did not need to chain Nathalie to him. To either of them.

"She shouldn't be the one to deal with everything," he said. "My father is not that bad and I could probably just go home. Staying a few days was fine, but I'm okay now. I can deal with him. She shouldn't be forced to, you know, drop everything for us."

Aurélie breathed in. She paused for an instant, but did not waste time mulling over an answer.

"Trust me on this: if Nathalie thought you were a burden, you would not be here."

He stilled.

Aurélie refilled her cup.

"She obviously loves you very much, Adrien."

He shifted in his seat, uneasy. She went on.

"I know it's easy to get tricked into thinking that the people who care for you, the friends who care for you, only do so because they feel they don't have a choice. But that's just not true. People have their own agency. They can decide for themselves, and they can just walk away. Especially people like Nathalie, who isn't the most caring person to begin with." - She paused. - "For the most part, the people who go out of their way to support you do it out of love."

"I. I, uh," he muttered.

He didn't know where to look. He fidgeted, he scratched his cheek. He felt a blush coming on.

"I. I love her very much too."

###

Nathalie stuck her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she rummaged through her purse to find her keys. She didn't like what she was hearing - which, granted, wasn't much - but she still let Sabine Cheng babble a whole novella's worth of idiocy.

"If you will just give me a second," she replied as she inserted her key into her building's door. "Let me just get to a quieter room."

The hallway was quiet enough, but prefered not to have random neighbours overhear her obvious attempts at witness intimidation. She slipped into the staircase, which was seldom used, and still lowered her voice.
"With all due respect, mrs Cheng, it would be a careless decision. Of course, whether you encourage your daughter to reveal herself or not is entirely your family's business, but I will not let anyone implicate Adrien. I will not have him exposed to endless retaliation from the criminals he put behind bars, or attempts on his life by those who have not been caught yet. I don't trust the police to keep the children's identities a secret, and would rather not draw a permanent target on Adrien's back."

She climbed a floor as she talked, and paused to listen for noises in the corridors. She heard nothing.

"-nette told us a lot more than you did about mister Agreste's actions," Sabine was saying. If her tone had been any more accusatory, it could have been issued as an indictment. "It sounds to me like-"

"Gabriel is taken care of," Nathalie stated. "We have submitted some guardianship documents concerning Adrien, but they should be processed by monday, at which point he will get in touch with the authorities. Adrien is out of his reach, and Gabriel doesn't have the slightest incentive to cause trouble at the moment, so you needn't concern yourself with him."

Mrs Goody-Two-Shoes was not satisfied with that, of course, so Nathalie tuned her off as she made her way to her own floor.

She caught a remark about 'child endangerment' and 'proper channels', and clicked her tongue.

"No. For all intents and purposes, consider that I am Adrien's acting parent. I have taken all necessary measures to protect him both from his father and less immediate dangers, and there is no need to 'rescue' him anymore."

Once again, she fished through her bag for her keys, which she had carelessly discarded not a minute before.

"With all due respect, miss Sancoeur," Cheng insisted, "are you sure you are totally unbiased? Our daughter might… struggle with nuance at times, but I have never known her to be this persistent in her hostility for someone. And that was already the case before everything else unfolded. Your hasty measures and your covering things up are not going resolve this."

"With all due respect, this is not your call," Nathalie drawled as she unlocked her apartment door. There was a pause.

"You might be used to having things your way," Sabine ground out, "but do not expect people to just close their eyes and ignore your employer's criminal behavior. My call , as you say, might very well be to social services. I should, by all means, get in touch with them right now. "

Nathalie's upper lip curled up.

" I suggest you don't. "

She entered the living room and found Adrien sitting on the sofa with his smartphone in his hands. He shot daggers at her.

"I see Marinette got her phone back," she commented.

"Roughly half an hour ago," Cheng replied, sounding puzzled by the change of topic.
Adrien was more succinct.
"Yes."

Nathalie let out a sigh.

"I will call you back," she said, hanging up.

Adrien glowered at her.

"Is my mother still here?" she asked, though she knew Aurélie wouldn't have left before her return. There was noise in the kitchen, in any case, and Plagg did not wear shoes with hard, noisy heels.

He nodded.

She raised a finger so he would wait, and joined her mother in the kitchen. It did not take Aurélie long to collect her things and leave (though there was whispering about Adrien's mood, and about the boy being aware of his father's medical treatment).

He put on a cheerful facade to say goodbye to Aurélie, but was back to seething when Nathalie joined him on the sofa.

"What did miss Dupain-Cheng say?" she prompted.

"He akumatized you!" the boy snapped. "You turned against him."

Nathalie squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose, giving herself a second to fight a wave of tiredness.

Adrien only seemed to grow more distressed.

"Why wouldn't you tell me?" he exclaimed.

"It slipped my mind."

"It… What?"

"It slipped my mind," she repeated. "I told you yesterday that we would speak about this, it just did not come up."

He moved back, raking his hands through his hair.

"And 'he' did not akumatize me," she explained. "I touched the Akuma. For once, it was my doing. I lost patience and tried to skip steps. Now, I am not entirely clear on why that happened - you know that memories from possession fade quickly, don't you? - but as long as I'm not granted offensive powers during our next attempts, it should not be a problem."

Logic hardly ever seemed to comfort him.

He shook his head. She put a hand on his shoulder. Maybe that would help.

"Let's not make mountains out of molehills," she said. "Ladybug happened to be around the corner when I turned against Gabriel, but it all lasted less than a minute and he could easily have taken my powers away. It really wasn't as bad as she likely made it sound. Now, what matters is that we finally have the tools to look into your mother's disappearance."
He threw his hands up.

"No!"

Well, that was unexpected.

"I'm sorry?"

"Nathalie, you don't have to do this. You shouldn't do this. It can wait. We can find some other way, you just shouldn't!" - He crushed his palms against his eyes and ran his hands down his face. - "It's like you won't even acknowledge what this is doing to you and the toll it takes. Everything you are doing… You can't just keep sacrificing yourself like this."

She had never, in her entire life, been accused of sacrificing something that did not belong to someone else.

She softened. She cupped his cheek, then moved her hand up to smooth his hair.

"Adrien, really, I am just fine. This is not such a big deal."

"Yes, it is!"

Nathalie kept stroking his hair, idly trying to fix the hairdo he had tousled beyond recognition.

"You let yourself be akumatized," he repeated, as if it were the end of the world. His voice had dropped to a whisper. "It really is not worth it. I don't want you to."

"I want me to," she murmured. She kept pushing strands of hair back into place. "This is the deepest cut, to both you and your father, and it costs me nothing to at least try and close it. I want me to."

He threw himself into her arms and hugged her as close as he could.
Licking your wounds

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your fantastic comments.

Since I'm doing the nanowrimo with the fic, on top of my full time job, I'm really, really short on time to answer them but they mean a LOT to me.

Hélène Poitier's office was not Adrien's idea of a therapist's office. Not that he had any idea what a therapist's office was supposed to look like, nor any other doctor's office, except dentist cabinets. The doctors had always come to the mansion. His family could afford it.

Movies had told him there would be a sofa, and he supposed there was a sofa, since he was sitting on it, but it wasn't the kind of sofa he had expected. Truth was, mrs Poitier's office looked a bit like mister Damocles', except the pictures of birds on the walls were of robins and blue jays, and the floor covering was green carpet instead of wood, and there was only one bookshelf, with more flower pots and art supplies, and there was a desk but it was buried in stacks of papers, and there were no chairs but two armchairs, a coffee table and the sofa.

Well. The walls were beige.

Adrien supposed it reminded him of mister Damocles' office because it was a place where you were sent when something went wrong, not a place you went to.

Mrs Poitiers was retired, or nearly, and worked from her home just out of town. It was a tiny little house with a garden and a dog, surrounded by neat hedges, an elegant low metallic fence, and a few trees. Adrien had not seen the dog, but he had heard it bark, and he knew from a little sign on the gate that it was a german shepherd.

It was all very cosy.

As for mrs Poitiers herself, she was Minerva McGonagall, but cheerier.

She had not done much save for inviting him to sit, introducing herself, and smiling at him from a comfy brown armchair.

"Um, so, I don't really know what I'm supposed to say," he muttered, squirming under her gaze. "I mean, I, ah… I don't know what we're supposed to do today..."

That did not seem to faze her.

"Oh, I don't know either," she replied. "It isn't very important, is it? We can figure it out."

Adrien blinked.

"You don't? I mean, didn't Nathalie explain?"

"Well, I had a long conversation with your father," the therapist said, picking a stack of sheets from the coffee table and flipping through it with ever so slightly raised eyebrows. "And miss Sancoeur
provided me with a basic summary of the issues she thought relevant…"

He couldn't read the pages from his seat, but he could tell they contained quite a lot of tables, lists, and yellow highlighter.

He felt a bit embarrassed and looked away, scratching the back of his neck.

"She… is very thorough."

Mrs Poitiers smiled at that.

"It looks like it," she said, putting the stack of sheets away. "But, truth to be said, I'm more interested in what you want to discuss."

He moved back in his seat, a bit puzzled.

"Um…"

"You accepted to come, which is a big step, and I am here to help you," she explained. "So you get to pick what you want help with. It doesn't need to be big things. You don't have to confess your every dark secret, or even the smaller ones, or to share things you don't want to share." - Her tone turned a little lighter. - "I mean, we barely met. Who does that? You could, say, pick a tiny problem - a school thing, maybe? - and I could give you excellent professional advice, if I do say so myself."

He couldn't help but chuckle.

She smiled in return.

"Or you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, and what you are looking for."

What little good cheer he had felt faded in a matter of seconds. He hunched over.

He had no idea what he could tell her about himself. He couldn't think of anything that wouldn't land his father in trouble (or, more realistically, in prison, not that it mattered, since Gabriel would land himself there just fine by surrendering to the police). What did Mrs Poitiers know, anyway?

"Can I see?" he asked, reaching for Nathalie's notes.

"You could, but it's a lot of reading. And… I want to make it clear that both your father and miss Sancoeur told me that no topic was taboo. They both insisted on that. There is no exhaustive list of issues you are allowed to discuss."

Then why did you print it?

He stared at the floor.

"It looks like you know about everything I could tell you about," he commented.

Mrs Poitiers looked at the printed notes and closed her eyes. She pushed them a little farther away.

"Frankly, Adrien, this tells me a lot more about miss Sancoeur than about you. And… this was all very last minute. I needed a bit of a crash course before meeting you."

He stared at another part of the floor.
"Do you have an obligation to report things?" he asked. "I mean, to the police. If you hear about some things. Things that are not legal. Things like that."

"It depends on how severe and urgent the 'things' are. I can, if it is necessary, in some extreme cases, like immediate danger to a vulnerable person." - That seemed to match what he had gathered from Google. - "Which does not mean you should be scared of confiding in me. First and foremost, I will be acting with your best interests at heart. Both your father and your guardian have demonstrated that they are willing to talk to me and work on the issues that arise, too, which is a good sign."

He stilled when she mentioned his father, as he found the statement hard to believe, but refrained from asking questions. He couldn't just guess at what she had been told, or what she would report or not, or whether she would think that teenage superheroes were vulnerable people in imminent danger. Just asking her what she knew would give too much away.

He stood.

"I'm sorry. It's just not going to work," he mumbled.

Nathalie was waiting for him a room away and she would not like this. She had been adamant about the therapy, and he was not going to get out of it that easily.

Much to his surprise, mrs Poitiers did not seem concerned.

"I see," she replied, getting to her feet too. "Alright. Let's call it a day."

He gaped.

There had to be a trap.

"But," she added, "I'd like you to agree to a second session. One week from now, maybe two."

There it was.

"I… Mrs Poitiers, I really don't think it's a good idea," he murmured.

She joined him, guiding him to the exit without quite touching him.

"I know there are things you'd rather not bring up with me," she said, pausing by the door. "And it's really not my intention to put you on the spot. That being said, there's a lot more to 'this' than just discussing specific events. Sometimes, it's about learning coping mechanisms, or ways to manage and reframe negative thoughts. It can be exercises, or just talking about issues and behaviors in general…"

Adrien looked away.

"I… Maybe," he replied, because lying was easier than to flat out refuse.

Not that she couldn't see through it.

She squeezed his shoulder as she opened the door.

"Please think about it."
Nathalie wasn't as angry about the therapy session as Adrien had expected her to be. She wasn't, as a matter of fact, angry at all. She had accepted his hasty escape as if she had expected it, and then she had booked another appointment.

Then again, it was Nathalie.

Who knew what Nathalie thought?

"We'll be back in ten days, then," she announced after a brief conversation with Mrs. Poitiers. She led him to the car. "How did it go?"

Adrien was not a boy who routinely used expletives but he was roughly tempted. He was surrounded by the most infuriating people in the world.

He glowered at her. She stopped in the driveway, turning to him with a somewhat inquisitive look. If you squinted, you could tell her eyebrows were raised. Somewhat.

He yelled very loudly at her in his head, and then he let out a deep breath.

"I don't think there is a lot I can tell her. About anything. Does she know, about the…" - He gestured. - "The 'family business'. You know."

"Oh. Oh. No, I didn't mention that yet. I did not think a first session would dig that deep, I'm sorry. I expected it would be more about figuring out if you felt comfortable with her, and how therapy worked in general."

"So what did you put in that twenty-six pages document?" Plagg chimed in from Adrien's pocket.

"Yes, Nathalie, what did you put in that twenty-six pages document? 'Redacted' stamps every other word? the boy nearly bit back. But there was no point getting testy, was there? She was doing her best.

"General notes on your Gabriel's parenting, as well as a brief summary of the recent changes in Adrien's life," Nathalie answered. She realized she was talking at to a pocket and corrected herself. "In your life. But the whole purpose of this is to let you discuss anything you need to freely. Anything."

"But I can't, can I?" he snapped, getting in the car. He leaned back against the seat, knowing Nathalie couldn't hear him. "There no one I can talk to."

Plagg clawed his ribs through his shirt.

"Ow. Nearly no one," Adrien corrected.

Nathalie had gotten in the car too.

"I know it's a delicate situation and that there are secrets you might want to hide, but there has to be some ways this can help, even if it's just by having the two of us go to some sessions together, to figure out what I should change to take better care of you."

That left Adrien gobsmacked.

She snorted.
"I am acutely aware I am not the best at this."

He cleared his throat and looked out the window, feeling guilty to have made her think so, though it wasn't false per se.

"In any case," she went on, starting the car, "the situation is bound to evolve a lot in the next two weeks. You will have time to reconsider."

Adrien sighed, then nodded.

Things would evolve indeed.

###

Adrien felt like the biggest liar in the world. Lies, however, were sometimes necessary, like when you were about to do something really, really stupid. But, sometimes, you needed to do really stupid things, like land on the roof on your own house in the middle of the afternoon.

He had told Nathalie he was going to Nino's.

He was a terrible, terrible person.

There was no way to be sure Gabriel was at the mansion except by checking but, despite the size of the house, the man tended to confine himself to the same few rooms. If he was not in the office, he would be in the study.

Chat Noir climbed down to the office's window first, and peeked inside.

His father was sitting at his desk with a sketchbook.

*Well, that was easy.*

He glued his staff to the wall and let himself hang upside down in front of the window. He knocked. The wide-eyed, astonished look Gabriel gave him was priceless.

"Chat Noir?" he blurted out after opening the window.

His facade had already returned, and his expression was one of polite surprise.

"You are very good with the secret identities thing," Adrien commented.

Gabriel tilted his head to the right, obviously bothered by his son's position.

"Does Nathalie know you're here?" he asked.

"Of course she does," Chat Noir lied.

His father tilted his head to the left.

"She doesn't," he stated, getting his phone out of his pocket. "You shouldn't have come. You shouldn't be talking to me unsupervised. We agreed on that."

"I said I didn't want to talk to you," Adrien pointed out. "I get to change my mind."
"It was a sound decision," Gabriel replied, walking away from the window as he tapped the screen of his phone. Adrien saw the image turn to a 'dialing' icon.

"Come on, don't leave me hanging," the boy protested.

His father raised his eyebrows and pressed the phone to his ear. He made a point of looking at Chat Noir straight in the eyes as he said: 'Nathalie, Adrien is here. Could you please come pick him up?'

Adrien did not hear her answer - which he had two separate pairs of ears to catch - so he guessed Gabriel had merely left a message.

He started humming 'Hanging on the telephone'.

Gabriel sighed and put his phone away. He twisted his neck in every direction as he returned to the window.

"I'm sorry. Are we going to have this entire discussion with you-"

"Hanging on your every word?"

Gabriel sniffed and rolled his eyes, though it was in good humor.

"... operating from opposed viewpoints."

Story of our lives.

"I don't know. I just wanted to start our conversation from the right angle."

And to make it harder to read my face or die trying.

His father snorted.

"I guess that approach has its upsides and its downsides, the 'downside' being at this moment in full display for passerby." - He moved back. - "Come inside before everyone in the street starts wondering why you are hanging around."

Chat Noir stayed right where he was.

"Why wouldn't you tell me that you were taking meds?"

That stripped Gabriel of his good cheer. He clicked his tongue, irritated, and walked back to his desk.

"Who told you?"

"No one told me. I overheard Nathalie on the phone. I think she thinks it would be some kind of milestone if you told me yourself."

Gabriel sighed, a deep, heavy sigh that spoke of exasperation.

"There was no point," he explained, glaring at a portion of the wall as if it had insulted him. "I don't know yet what effect they will have, or if they will even have one. I didn't want to get your hopes up. I'd rather come back with results."

Chat Noir ran his hands over his face and felt his claws dig into his mask. He jumped down into the room.
How could he get his point of view through Gabriel's thick skull?

"I don't want results." - Maybe spelling out each letter would work? - "I want effort."

His father shook his head, massaging the bridge of his nose with his eyes squeezed shut.

"EFFORT," Adrien repeated. "I know if you could buy results or fake them to deliver them to me, you would, and it still wouldn't fix anything."

Gabriel took a deep breath.

"Effort without results is meaningless, Chat Noir. What you should be requiring is both."

"I can accept that people sometimes fail, father," the boy murmured. "I'm not asking for miracles, but… I feel like it's the first time you try something meaningful, and you could just have told me."

"Adrien, please stop."

He tensed.

Gabriel went on.

"You should not be tutoring me on to behave. And by that, I mean you should not be tutoring me on how to behave. It is not your job to fix me. It is my job to fix myself and there's a line between making me understand how you feel and assuming the burden of pushing me on the right path."

"I'm not assuming any burden, I'm just trying to explain that you keep-"

"Adrien."

The teenager shrank back.

Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose again.

"I know. I know what I should be doing. I am the adult and the parent. I know. And even if I did not, there are people I can turn to and who can give me advice. Adults. Professionals. Your coming here to check on me and try to make me see the light is not going to help. It can only hurt you. Nathalie and I enforced a safe distance so you would have space to heal without me around to reopen the wounds I inflicted, so please... I am not trying to be harsh, but please don't come on your own."

Adrien crossed his arms, with his shoulders tense and his claws digging into his sleeves.

"Or you're just running away like usual."

Gabriel collected himself. He joined him and reached up, as if to grab his shoulders, but ended up just clasping his hands behind his back.

"It's not that," he snapped. He winced at his own tone, pursing his lips and wetting them. "It is not that. There is a nuance between distance and avoidance, though it might not be self-evident. This is not about me protecting myself, or me not wanting to talk to you. You're more than welcome to visit as long as Nathalie comes with you. But the supervision by another adult is a hard rule which I refuse to break." - He raised a hand to silence Adrien when he tried to protest. - "Because I have shown, over and over again, that I cannot be trusted around you. It is a reasonable rule."

Adrien shrugged, looking at the floor.
"It's not necessary," he muttered. "You're bad but not that bad."

"I attacked you!"

Gabriel stepped back, hands raised and gesturing. His fingers went up and down as he hesitated between motions, then he closed his fists and hid them behind his back again.

"I attacked you," he repeated. "And that was the just the culmination of years and years of increasingly abusive behavior. There's just no… You've grown accustomed to this and I don't think you measure the full extent of the problem, but it's a reasonable rule. It's a necessary rule. And even now, even right now, we shouldn't be talking like this, because I will just give you more of the same treatment."

He removed his glasses and ran a hand over his face.

Adrien stared at him.

"Things have to change," his father stated. "They have to be radically different. Up to this point, we've gone about this the wrong way, and enrolled you in to support me and help me up - when you did not outright volunteer for it - but that is in no way your place. It should be the other way around. My issues should not impact you, they shouldn't burden you, no matter the circumstances. Your only concerns should be school and your friends and maybe proper dates with Marinette Dupain-Cheng, but not this. Never this."

Silence fell.

It was so rare for Gabriel to acknowledge any kind of wrongdoing, let alone important ones. Adrien found himself at a loss for words. He didn't even know what to think. There were truths in those words that he had never dared to voice, or simply consider. He had never expected to hear them from his father, of all people.

His feelings had to show on his face, because Gabriel took one look at him and shook his head, then turned away with an air of tired indifference. He walked to the desk to align his sketches.

"I know." - He turned a sheet of paper until it was perfectly parallel to the edge of desk. - "The problem was never that I am unable to recognize the issues, it's that I refuse to. That, or I simply won't fix them." - He frowned at the sketchbook and shifted it to the right by a hairsbreadth. - "That is why I am so adamant that you require actual, tangible results. Efforts are only as valuable as the intentions behind them. Improvement can be prompted by motivation, but lasting change requires will, and you should know… People who only exert effort for the sake of appeasement or palackation are not worth your while."

"I GET IT, change is hard!" Adrien snapped. "Why do you have to go out of your way to make it sound like you're not going to manage? You've never failed at anything in your life."

Gabriel gaped at him.

"Seriously!" the boy rambled. "You're just setting up the stage so you can just quit if it gets too hard. You could, you know, stop whining and get better at this."

He poked his father in the ribs with his staff, which made his expression go from stunned to gobsmacked. Adrien did it again, because it was actually quite cathartic, and saw amusement flash on Gabriel's face.

He would have done it a third time but he remembered that, for once, Gabriel was working towards
lasting change.

He lowered his arm.

"When are you going to the cops?"

"I… There are some legal documents that need reviewing and signing, to make sure Nathalie is considered your legal guardian should I not be… available. That’s going to take a little time, though, so I would say 'on Thursday'? Friday, at the latest."

Adrien stared at a blurry corner of tile.

"What will you tell them?"

"Well. I'll… redact a few names out, obviously. Your identity and Ladybug's are to remain unknown. But I will give them all of the details on his capture, from the point I captured him in the Louvre to his arrest. Between the information I expect that, between the direct testimony I can give and the information I gathered during my investigation, the police will have all they need to lock him up for the next decade. No other witnesses should be forced to testify."

Adrien tensed.

"You mean Ladybug and I."

"Indeed. If you do end up being put on the stand, be assured that it will be as 'Child A' and 'Child B', with no one knowing your real names. There is just too much at stake to let the two of you reveal yourself."

Chat Noir put his staff away so he could cross his arms.

"So you are doing this to get us out of trouble."

"I'm-"

Gabriel took a deep breath.

"Save for the significant portion of the events that are imputable to Alim Kubdel being a deranged madman, this is my mess. It’s time I own up to it. And yes, I do sure hope it will distract law enforcement from the two of you, but not only is that beside the point, that alone is reason enough for me to turn myself in. It. Is. My. Mess. My actions, my mistakes, my punishment."

"We were still involved, you know... I mean, I was pretty involved and I have a lot to tell the cops about-"

"Did my package arrive yet?" a girly voice cut in.

Adrien whirled to the entrance.

Bella was floating in front of it, straight in front of the silver circle that served as a handle. Silver lines that looked just like butterfly wings spread from there. The effect was uncanny enough when you remembered what kind of creature Bella was meant to be.

"Amazon said same day delivery," she told Gabriel, as if that made any kind of sense.

"There was no package," the man sighed. "Just get something from the fridge."
The corrupted Kwami (responsible for two decades of terror in Paris and several thousand years of the same everywhere else) pouted and zipped out of the room.

Adrien turned to his father, cheek twitching.

"I thought Nathalie had the Miraculous. Marinette told me she had taken it back."

"Nathalie is not fond of Bella," Gabriel replied. "And this place is better suited to letting her-"

He went silent. A car was parking in the courtyard. It wasn't a delivery company's.

###

Adrien's ears still hurt. He knew they couldn't possibly do that because:

1. a) the ears Nathalie had grabbed to drag him out of the mansion were not, as a matter of fact, actual ears.
2. b) they were no longer on his head, what with him being untransformed.
3. c) it had been five hours and pain would have faded by now.

It was all in his head. Rather than on top of it.

*Now* that was a joke he had to file away for later use.

The imaginary pain was maybe a message from his subconscious to remind him that Nathalie was still very, very irritated by his short visit to his father, which she had bodily removed him from as she shot accusatory looks at Gabriel.

Of course, that perceived irritation was nothing compared to the feeling of menace she was giving off since she had seated herself at the Dupain-Cheng's diner table. Her face betrayed nothing of her thoughts - it was still Nathalie - but her hostility was tangible. It was strange, since having diner with Marinette's family was her idea.

Mrs Cheng and mister Dupain were both tense, as they had picked up on it.

Others were more oblivious.

"This is soooooo good," Plagg was cooing, marveling at the piece of bread he had dipped in the baked Camembert Sabine had prepared for him and him alone.

It had garlic and olive oil and herbs, and looked very fancy (possibly delicious to people who actually liked cheese, which Adrien did not). Plagg had teared up with happiness when Sabine had taken it out of the oven and placed it on his plate. Ten minutes later, his eyes were still wet.

It was hard to tell if Tikki had noticed anything: she was polite and cheerful and, if she had deeper thoughts about the whole situation, she hid them well. She had been served cookies which she nibbled on as she listened to the humans' conversation, but she did not say much of anything.

Marinette… Marinette had picked up on the tension but totally misread it. As she had not been provided much of an explanation for the surprise evening meal save for a quick 'we thought it would be nice to get together and discuss that Miraculous thing a little', she had assumed the 'Miraculous thing' was to blame for the terrible mood. She was babbling about the superhero life
and how it was so much safer than it looked.

"A-and so, the gorillaaaaaaaaaaaape. I meant the ape. I don't remember the exact species but it wasn't that large, actually it was tiny and kind of fluffy, you know, maybe a capuchin? Well, it had climbed all the way to the roof of the mansion."

Maybe, Adrien mused, *maybe* she could have picked another story than the 'pack of exotic pets escape peculiar private zoo' debacle. Maybe. Then again, it *was* pretty tame next to battle with supervillains.

"And, uuuum", she went on, "so we got that tiny, tiny monkey down, using Chat Noir's staff as a fishing pole and my yoyo as a line. And that's when we figured out that it had climbed all the way to the roof because it was being chased by aaaaaah… CAT! Ha ha ha. Yes. A cat. A cuuuute orange tabby."

She was adorable.

Her parents seemed to have made up their minds about the whole superhero thing, and were clearly not convinced by her revised story, but Adrien did not feel like telling her that. He could have spent the rest of his life gazing at a flustered Marinette. On top of that, his day had been long and dark and depressing, and he loved that her most pressing problems were so light and silly.

"S-so anyway I try to catch the cat," she stuttered, with wild gestures, "and, and, and, um, Chat Noir tries to catch the monkey, and, and…"

Adrien beamed at Tom.

"We kept running in circles for ten minutes, but Ladybug was weaving a net with her yoyo while we did that, so she ended up catching both. And then we just had to get the capuchin back into its cage, and the cat into the garden."

Mister Dupain blinked and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, that sounds like quite the animated afternoon."

"It was fun. And we were glad to help."

Marinette's father nodded, though he was lost in thought behind his smile.

Nathalie, seeing the conversation was dying down, offered more wine to Sabine and Tom, then refilled her own glass. She had brought a bottle as a gift (which she had purchased which Gabriel's credit card). Her mood did not seem to be improving.

Marinette was still set on fixing things through positive chatter, but she took the opportunity to change topics.

"Dad, Mom, did I tell you Adrien has started to learn cooking? I said you could maybe teach him a few things about baking. I mean I *would* but it would be more fun to do it as a group. And maybe I could get Alya and even Nino to come. Alya cooks better than I do, of course, but… It would still be fun."

Adrien perked up. Soon, he was being quizzed about his interests, namely if he would prefer to try croissants, macarons or some other things that strange names he had never heard before. The conversation lasted until the end of the meal.
When Sabine and Nathalie started collecting the plates, Tom turned to Marinette.

"Why don't you go upstairs with Adrien and play video games?" he said, with a wink that had his daughter run through every facial expression known to man to settle on mortification.

She nodded, grabbed Adrien's hand, and dragged him to her room.

"I'm so sorry, he's not subtle at all, oh my god," she mumbled, hiding her face in her hands.

He closed the trapdoor, then poked her hand so she would move them. When she did, he stole a kiss.

"I for one couldn't wait for a moment alone," he said, smiling.

She hid her face behind her hands again, so frantically that it made a slapping noise. She peeked at him between her fingers. He couldn't help but chuckle. She crossed her arms at that, forgetting her embarrassment.

"So I was surprised ", she huffed.

He grinned and wrapped his arms around her.

"It was cute."

She sulked a little more. It only lasted an instant, though: afterwards, she relaxed and leaned against him. He kissed her forehead.

"How is going with your parents?"

"I don't know. They say it's a lot to digest and that we should not rush into decisions, that we should take some time to consider what should be done. They talked with Tikki but they wouldn't let me be there."

He acquiesced.

She wiggled her jaw and chewed on the inside of her cheek.

"Also, they won't let me go back to the police until we find a good lawyer, and I think they are just drawing it out on purpose."

"I don't know. This would be a high profile case and I don't think anyone ever represented a superhero before," he mused, though Marinette was probably right. "It would be hard to get references."

She grimaced and nodded. Then, the topic of lawyers reminded her of other issues. She looked back at him, worried.

"Is your father really going to go to the cops?"

"I think so," he said, giving the faintest one-shouldered shrug. "He made up his mind and it looks like he wants to take some responsibility for what he did, so..."

She put her hands on his arms.

"Will you be okay?"
Adrien nodded.

"Yes, don't worry. I don't know what will come out of it..." - *Kidnapping, twenty years. Assault, three years. Faking a death, even google can't tell me.* - "But Nathalie will be there for me, whatever happens."

Marinette clearly had a lot of thoughts about Nathalie, and all of them appeared on her face at once. She was nice enough not to voice them.

Adrien chuckled and hugged her.

"It will be fine. It's... important that he's facing the consequences of his actions, for once, and Nathalie is doing her best."

His girlfriend didn't say 'she still sucks' aloud but you could nearly hear her thinking it.

"I am kind of at the point where I want to fire everyone and parent myself," he admitted. "But still, you know, in the long run... things can only get better. I don't know if my father will be in that 'long run' at all, I mean, it all depends on where he goes from here and then I'll decide. But as bad as things look right now, they are moving forward."

###

Nathalie collected the last glasses from the dining table, and brought them to Sabine, who was filling the dishwasher. She would gladly have washed the dishes without the appliance. It would have given her something to busy her hands with, and something to look at that was not Marinette's parents.

She could not stand those two soft-hearted imbeciles.

Still.

She had organized the entire evening for a reason.

"Would you like some coffee, miss Sancoeur?" Tom Dupain offered, with a kind smile that only made her tenser.

She was not oblivious to the wariness behind it, and to how he and his wife were analysing her every word and microexpression to judge what kind of person she was.

"Yes, thank you," she replied.

Caffeine at nine did not strike her as the wisest choice, but the cup would make for a welcome point to look at. She returned to the dinner table and let Dupain serve her the drink. She gave herself the time to add half a cube of sugar to it.

"I am well aware that I am in no way winning points as far as your opinion of my parenting abilities are concerned," she said, staring at the ripples in her coffee. "But I would still like if you could give me a chance, before calling social services."

The Dupain-Cheng exchanged a look.
Nathalie pursed her lips.

"I understand your concerns. I know it looks like I am trying to cover up for Gabriel and… myself, I suppose. Which, to be fair, was my job up to this point, so it's a fair accusation. But I'd like to assure you that everything I am doing right now, I do to mitigate the damage to Adrien."

Tom looked at his wife.

Sabine's posture was as closed as it could get coming from such a serene and soft woman. She had not crossed her arms, but she was tapping her own wrist with the other hand.

"I am not denying that, but have you considered the damage your approach might cause?"

"Yes."

Nathalie bridged her hands. She breathed in.

"For all intents and purposes, I am the last person who should be taking care of Adrien. I also am the last person he has. While Gabriel might eventually clean up his act, I don't envision that happening before the boy is out of college at the earliest. Adrien has no living relatives, no godparents, no family friends. He also has a significant fortune. If I'm removed from the equation, he will either enter the foster family lottery, or group homes, or he'll be caught in a tug-of-war between five times removed relatives who want to get their hands on his funds or those he stands to inherit from his father. I don't see how that wouldn't make things significantly worse. The best options if for me to stay and to get better at this."

Sabine nodded at her husband, who leaned forward. The table creaked under his weight.

"I'm sure you are trying your best," he told Nathalie, "but just know we can help. Our door is open, we would gladly have Adrien have sleepovers, or even stay with-"

"I'm getting to that," she cut in. Realizing how harsh her tone sounded, she raised her hands and collected her thoughts. "I have been trying to implement some measures meant to protect Adrien and support him. His father is no longer allowed to interact with him alone. We hired a therapist. I brought in my mother, who is everything I am not, because Adrien needed someone around who isn't emotionally stunted. Those are all sound steps in theory, yet they are not reaping the intended results. I can't prevent Adrien from running off on his own to see Gabriel, which can only go wrong, because Gabriel has no notion of the proper way to communicate with a child and only reinforces the issues whenever he opens his mouth."

She winced at that and ran her hands over her face, remembering how she had all but shoved Adrien out of the mansion, so certain had she been that Gabriel was making a mess of the conversation. If he ever got out of prison, she would force him through parenting classes.

"Have you explained to Adrien why he should not go alone?" Sabine asked. "I don't know him well yet, but he doesn't seem like a boy who would disobey you for sake of it. I assume he thought the rule was too stringent, or that he did not think you would allow the conversation he wanted to have."

"I thought I had been clear enough," Nathalie stated. She reflected on her earlier reaction, and figured that 'Adrien, it is for your own good' was maybe too vague an argument. "I will make sure to discuss the matter again."

Sabine and Tom both nodded, with smiles she was sure they thought encouraging.
Nathalie looked back at her cooking coffee.

"Seeing a therapist might help Adrien learn some coping skills or some assertiveness, but it will be mostly useless considering he can't discuss most of what he went through. As much as I want him to be able to talk freely about all he endured - especially his father's actions - it is just not safe. Revealing his identity as a Miraculous Holder would compromise his safety for his entire life. Even if he surrendered the ring, he would still be a target because enemies would assume he is connected to the other heroes. I think he is acutely aware of the risks, or at least the immediate risks, so he will not open up in the close future, if ever."

Sabine shifted in her seat. She gave a nervous glance to her husband, then turned back to Nathalie.

"We… did give some thought to those dangers." - She scanned the room, looking for Tikki and Plagg, but they were nowhere to be seen. - "Quite a lot of thought, actually, but I'm afraid we don't have any solution right now. We have been trying to keep Marinette away from the police until we can talk to… adults, I suppose. The people responsible for those jewels. We know there was a 'Guardian', but he seems to be ill… As for Tikki…"

Nathalie nodded.

"The Kwami are well-meaning, but can't even see the issue with turning teenagers into child soldiers. They are extremely protective of their holders, and supportive, yet they don't seem to comprehend that they are the root cause of most of the issues they have to support their chosens through. Even Bella - the butterfly one, who is more predatory in her picks - seem to have blind spots in that regard. I think all Tikki can give you advice on is how to have your daughter be safer and better as a hero, but not as a child."

Tom crumpled down, hunching over the table and massaging the bridge of his nose.

"Yes. That sounds accurate."

"Overall, I don't think those two can do much more harm," Nathalie commented, looking at the two Kwami behind the window. Plagg was trying to stuff camembert pieces into Tikki's mouth. "Except encourage the children to run into danger, which both of them are eager to do. If the children can be cont… convinced to be more careful, then the Kwami will comply. Overall, I feel like Adrien benefits from having Plagg around, if only for the fact that Plagg brings constant comedic relief to his days."

"We have been trying to get to know Tikki," Sabine announced, sounding uneasy. "She is very sweet."

Nathalie acquiesced.

"That's what I was told."

She blinked, realizing she was straying from the point.

"I'm sorry. You said earlier that your door was open," she said, turning to Tom, "and that's actually something I would like to discuss."

"Of course?" Sabine prompted.

"I… know I might given you the impression that I disagreed with your… methods of parenting, I suppose. But the truth is… For all - and despite - her antics as a superhero, Marinette is a well-adjusted child. More importantly, she is just that, a child. Adrien… Adrien barely acts like one
anymore. He went through situations no child should have to handle and I fear there is more of that coming. And I… don't know how to parent him. I can restructure his life to shelter him from the most obvious problems. I can apply every point of parenting advice manuals, I can push therapy on him, I can make sure he is fed, and dressed, and healthy. But I'm not nurturing. I'm not warm. I'm not even nice. I am going to need you help and your advice if you have any to spare, because I have to learn and I am not going to manage that on my own."

Her tirade seemed to leave them frantic for a moment - and why wouldn't it have? They had a lot on their plate as things were. - but Sabine reached out over the table and put her hand over Nathalie's.

"Of course we will help. You can come to us at any time. I expect we'll see a lot of Adrien in the future, in any case. I don't see Marinette not inviting him at every opportunity."

That would possibly have been funny, if Nathalie had not been so crushed by relief.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

She paused for an instant.

"There was something else."

###
Declawed

Any moment now, Chat Noir told himself, following the blinking dot moving on the map on his staff's screen.

The dot was two streets over and slowly making its way to the police station, this on a sunny if somewhat cold Monday afternoon. The dot stopped at a corner (red light?) then resumed moving, until Gabriel's grey Mercedes appeared at the end of the street.

Adrien, leaning over the edge of the building he was perched on, watched the car park in front of the station. Gabriel got out of it, then Nathalie, through the opposite door. They both checked the time (he on his watch, her on her phone), and looked around. Two men in pristine suits joined them from the other side of the street, and they both had briefcases, so Adrien figured they were lawyers. There were handshakes, there was smalltalk, there was nodding and discrete gesturing at the police station.

Adrien checked the time. It was half past two, and still Monday.

His father and his companions crossed the street. Chat Noir saltoed over it and landed next to him.

"Hi!" he said, grinning to the shell-shocked lawyers and a wide-eyed Gabriel and Nathalie.

They were not happy, which was understandable, because he was supposed to be home with Nathalie's mother, except Nathalie's mother did not know could escape through the window. He had set Ultimate Mecha Strike III on practice mode, and she would be hearing loud fighting noises for as long as the AI managed to beat up an immortal character that did not move.

"I said Thursday!" Gabriel exclaimed.

Chat's grin grew larger.

"Yes, but you're also a liar, so I put a tracker on you."

Gabriel's eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of his face. Nathalie kept her cool, however, and sent the lawyers away. Then she turned to him.

"You were supposed to be home with my mother," she whispered through clenched teeth and a polite facade.

"I know. I know, I'm sorry. I'll go back. It's just…"

He looked at Gabriel, who had pursed his lips and was trying not to appear emotional to the passerby and journalists who were gawking at them. Adrien had not thought about the journalists, but of course they would be there, with Hawk Moth's recent arrest.

He sobered.

"If you're going to do this and get arrested," he told his father, "I wanted to at least say goodbye properly, you know?"

Gabriel's facade broke. It lasted a second at most, just enough time to blink, but Adrien had never seen him so close to tearing up. Gabriel had also reached for him, but caught himself. Instead of grabbing him, he merely put one hand on his shoulder and patted it, with the same artificial smile.
he used on commercial prospects.

"It was nice of you to drop by, Chat Noir." - His hand squeezed Adrien's shoulder. - "And I was glad to see you again. But I really should go in now."

Instead of just pulling his hand away, he let it slide from Chat's shoulder to the side of his arm, then gave one last pat. Even then, he only moved back slowly. Adrien had to fight not to lean closer.

You said you'd go home, he reminded himself.

He had to get back before Aurélie could notice his absence and panic. She hadn't yet. Nathalie would have known.

"Well, then, I shan't keep you," he answered, bowing with a flourish.

He had to keep his head down, and open his eyes wide so they would dry. He held the pose for a second, then hopped back up.

"Chat Noir, it will be fine, " his father murmured, voice strangled.

"Of course all will be fine, sir."

"And I'm not get-"

"Mister Agreste!" a woman called. "Mister Agreste!"

They both turned to see mrs Kubdel hurrying towards them. Adrien did not recognize her at first. She didn't look like Alix at all, especially not in her pastel blue coat and cream colored clothes. She trotted to them, heels clicking on the pavement. She was smiling, but Adrien knew panic when he saw it.

"Mister Agreste," she said again as she stopped by their side. She gasped for air. "Thank you for coming!"

Gabriel looked bewildered, but composed himself quickly enough: every single reporter in sight had turned to them when Chat Noir had arrived, but miss Kubdel warranted actual filming.

"Thanks for agreeing to help with my family's legal defense," she babbled, a nervous smile plastered to her lips. "Maybe we should go somewhere else to discuss things."

"Absolutely," Gabriel replied. He glared at the closest cop, and gestured to indicate his lack of intervention was a disgrace.

Three policemen hurried to them and guided them into the building. Nathalie stayed back to whisper something to the two lawyers. Chat Noir pretended to totally belong there and followed his father inside. He was so very smooth that he managed to stick around, somewhat hidden by a potted plant, while Gabriel ordered a policeman around to get him to free an office where he and mrs Kubdel could talk in private. Adrien trailed after them, reopening the door right after it closed and slipping in.

"While help with your legal expenses could certainly be arranged, mrs Kubdel," Gabriel was saying, "I expect there is something else you would like to dis..." - He noticed Chat Noir. - "What are you doing in here?"

Adrien shifted back to the door and bumped into Nathalie, who had followed him in.
She was also glaring at him with disapproving eyes.

"It's alright," Mrs Kubdel intervened. "This concerns him too."

All eyes turned to her. Nathalie closed the door.

"Alim confessed," Mrs Kubdel announced, her voice a whisper. She cleared her throat. "They let me talk to him before they transferred him to jail, and twice before that, and he accepted to confess. As of this morning, he admitted to everything."

Everyone was too stunned to give her an answer, so she just went on.

"The news did not make it to the press yet," she said, "as he is still being interrogated, but his lawyer kept me updated. I figured you needed to be told as soon as possible, I would have contacted you, I… didn't expect you to appear out of the blue, really."

"What, exactly, did he confess to?" Gabriel asked.

"He kept the names out. But… Everything. Being Hawk Moth in the nineties, going underground and coming back last year…" She giggled nervously, staring at a safety notice on the wall. "And tax evasion, counterfeiting and trafficking of historical artefacts, apparently. Though I'd be lying if I said the latter was a surprise. We shouldn't have been able to afford our apartment with just his salary."

She ran a hand over her face. Her nervous cheer was gone. She looked haunted.

"He told me who you were. Both of you. In private, obviously." - She glanced at Nathalie. - "Does she know?"

Gabriel nodded.

"Yes. How did you convince him? There is nothing in it for him, is there?"

Mrs Kubdel looked at the floor. She crossed her arms as if cold, and turned away.

"People like Alim are always too willing to believe other people think like they do," she murmured. She paused. "He was concerned for our children. The more this drags on, the more they'll suffer."

Gabriel nodded, somber.

"I know."

"Anyway, I wanted to give you a heads up. There is no need for anyone else to get involved," she said, looking insistently at Chat Noir. "T-this can be wrapped up quickly, cleanly." - She shook her head and went on in a lower voice, talking to herself. - "I should have wrapped this up twenty years ago."

"I'm sorry?" Nathalie blurted out.

Adrien's father had stilled.

"Oh," Mrs Kubdel exclaimed. "Not like you think. I… I would never have suspected him of being Hawk Moth. Jalil is fascinated by magic but Alim always loathed it. It's the main reason why they don't get along. He kept saying magic belonged in fairy tales."
"He comes from a line of magical experts," Gabriel stated.

"I know. That's precisely why he hates it. He cut all ties with his family and he banned about everything concerning magic from our home. He kept that watch of his, the one he gave Alix, but that's it."

Adrien frowned, puzzled.

"So you knew nothing. You couldn't have 'wrapped this up twenty years ago'."

Mrs Kubdel turned to him with the guiltiest, most tired look on her face.

"I am surprised Alim turned out to be a magical criminal," she explained. "But I can't say I am particularly surprised that he turned out to be a criminal. He… wasn't in a very good place when we met. Not that he had ever been arrested or caught doing something illegal, but… he was very, very angry back then. But were both young and we were both running away from something, so I pretended not to see. I could have dug deeper. I could probably have found out he was Hawk Moth back then. But I didn't want to. And then Alim got very ill for a very long time, and it changed him - or he pretended it did - so I thought all was fine."

"I don't know," he mused. "It's easy not to see what's right under your nose when the people you trust are lying to you. They're not supposed to do that."

His father turned to him but his features remained inscrutable.

Adrien looked away. He had not meant for the remark to be a shot at him, though he supposed it applied to their situation.

"I was willing to overlook too many issues," Mrs Kubdel said. "I knew something was wrong. I just chose to believe it was the benign kind of wrong." - She shook her head. - "In any case, I did the best I could to fix things. It won't just hinge on Chat Noir and Ladybug's testimonies. I'll have my lawyer argue that Jalil and Alix shouldn't be called to the stand either, but he already said he might not manage to avoid it."

She wanted to move the pieces of the issues into a convenient package they could wrap up and put away, and cover up what did not fit. It wasn't very different from André Bourgeois' approach, really: white lies and shades of grey, letting some of the monsters get away with what they had done to shelter their loved ones. Alix, Jalil, Chloé, and even Marinette and Adrien himself. With Alim Kubdel's confession, nobody else would have to come forward, guilt be damned.

Nobody.

Gabriel took a deep breath.

"Nathalie. Make sure mrs Kubdel and her children are properly represented. We will foot the bill."

- He adjusted his tie and his jacket. - "Thank you for the heads up, mrs Kubdel. It was very helpful. That being said, I have an appointment that cannot wait."

Chat Noir's eyes went wide, but not as wide as Nathalie's. She grabbed Gabriel as he turned to the door, and it took her a second to let go.

Adrien just stared.

His father squeezed his shoulder on the way out.
"Will you children stop pacing?" Nathalie snapped.

Out of the four of them, only Adrien was actually pacing. The three others were seated in the sofa and on the floor, and demonstrated various degrees of restlessness. Marinette, who was sitting cross-legged next to the TV, was by far the most jittery. Nino was only moderately nervous. Miss Lane, whose actual name Nathalie had managed to forget, was the calmest of the lot.

Adrien, of course, was roaming from one side of the living room to the other with Plagg trailing after him.

He stilled.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "It's just…"

Nathalie sighed.

Gabriel had not called yet. Only five hours had gone by since he had turned himself in at the police station and, for all they knew, he was still talking to the detectives.

"Please try to relax a little. There is no point getting worked up. Nothing dramatic is going to happen today. Justice moves slowly when millionaires are concerned."

Three children glared at her. Adrien lowered his head.

A change of strategy was going to be necessary.

"It's nearly six," she pointed out. "Who has to go home for dinner and who is staying? So I know for how many people I should cook."

"I'm staying," Alya - right, that was her name - announced.

"Me too," Nino chimed in, though he followed that with a quick "I mean, if you don't mind."

Marinette shook her head.

"My dad says he'd come to get me after closing the store," she said.

Nathalie translated that to 'Tom Dupain wants news on what Gabriel did'.

"Fine. Anyone here with food allergies or intolerances?"

Nino and Alya gaped at her as if they had never been asked that question in their lives, which was frankly concerning. Did the parents of their friends not ensure that they wouldn't accidentally poison their teenage guests?

"Um, no?" Nino said.

"Very well. Let's figure out what I could make, then."

She made them follow her into the kitchen - even Marinette - and had them brainstorm on which
food they would rather eat, down to each condiment. At least that got them away from the television. She also offered them tea, which added even more inane and time-consuming choices to her diversion, seeing how there was a tea shop's worth of tastes to pick from. Her mother would have been better at handling them, but Nathalie had let her go in the middle of the afternoon, before knowing Adrien's friends would be visiting.

She idly wondered how she had ended up with not one, but four children camping in her apartment after work hours.

From what she had gathered, Marinette had seen Gabriel and Chat Noir on the news. She had then called Adrien to ask him if his father had really gone to the cops. Upon receiving confirmation of that fact, she had enrolled Nino as a emotional support for Adrien and dragged him to Nathalie's. How their blogger friend - who was not even supposed to know about the Miraculous - had ended up there too was anyone's guess.

It made for a crowded, noisy home.

Nathalie wished she could hear herself think.

There was no way to keep the children distracted forever (and it didn't work on Adrien, in any case). She still had them peel the vegetables while she tried to figure out how to cook steak in the presence of the daughter of a chef.

Her phone rang as she was scrolling down the search results.

"Is that Father?" Adrien gasped.

It was.

"You all stay here and make sure the meat doesn't burn," she replied, raising a hand to silence them.

Then she went to lock herself in her bedroom, ignoring Adrien's protests. Plagg flew straight through the door and landed on the bed, but at least he didn't say anything. She took the call.

###

Adrien nearly jumped out of his chair when Nathalie finally came out of her room.

"So what happened?" he blurted out.

The news weren't talking about Gabriel at all, save for a rumor that he would be paying for the Kubdel family's legal expenses. There was quite a lot of drama about it, because nobody could decide if 'the Kubdel' included Hawk Moth or not. The company's spokespeople had declined to comment, likely because they had no clue of what was going on and the company owner was being interrogated by the police.

It was a mess, but not as much of a mess as their other problems.

Nathalie didn't look worried.

That didn't mean anything, because Nathalie was Nathalie and she wouldn't have looked worried if
the building had been on fire.

"Come with me," she told him, returning to her room and gesturing at him to follow.

Plagg was floating near the door and gave Adrien a few nods before zipping after her. He didn't look worried either, which was possibly more reassuring than Nathalie's calm, but not by much.

Adrien followed them into her bedroom.

"Your father just went home," she announced. "The police let him go temporarily, provided he remains available for further questioning."

"WHAT?"

Nathalie closed her eyes and collected her thoughts for an instant.

"He is under close watch, obviously, and he expects to be put under house arrest as soon as a judge can take a look at his deposition. He will probably have to wear an ankle monitor until the case moves forwards, one way or another."

That didn't mesh with what Adrien had expected. At all.

He had thought Gabriel would be locked up and never step out of a prison cell in his life. He hadn't wanted for his father to end up there, of course, but he had been ready for it.

"That's… W-what did he tell them?" he stuttered. "They can't just have let him go. That's… There's kidnapping, and there's assault, and there's the faking a death thing…"

She sighed.

"As I said earlier, your father is a powerful man with connections, and even if he doesn't use them, law enforcement is still going to be more careful with him than with some random citizen. As for what he told them… He altered the story, to some extent - and by that I mean he edited most mentions of the Miraculous out - but he gave them the gist of it."

Adrien furrowed his brow.

"How would he even manage to cut the Miraculous out of the story? It's the entire story."

Plagg sniffed.

"Gabriel is better at playing his cards than you think."

"As far as the police is concerned," Nathalie explained, "your father was a private citizen with too much money on his hands. He told them that, when your mother called him nearly two years after her disappearance, she mentioned having encountered an akumatized person. He told them that, from that point, he assumed Hawk Moth had something to do with her going missing, and that he no longer thought law enforcement would help him. It is exactly what happened, even if a few details are missing. He told them everything about Hawk Moth's capture, since they were already investigating miss Lenoir. He did not tell them who you were either, though he said he briefly used your Miraculous when you lost it."

Adrien felt numb.

He acquiesced.
For once, it seemed like Gabriel had not told the tiniest part of the truth he could get away with, but the largest. It was a good compromise. It kept both of their identities undisclosed while ensuring Gabriel would face consequences for his actions.

*That wasn't what I wanted.*

Nathalie caught him as he swayed and helped him sit on the bed.

"It will be alright," she said, sitting next to him with a hand on his shoulder.

He frantically shook his head.

*This isn't what I wanted.*

"I should have *stopped him*!" he cried. "I-I-I... I didn't want him to turn himself in, I just wanted him to want to. And now he's going to go to prison and it's all because I-

Nathalie hushed him.

"Adrien, this is not on you," she murmured, dropping a kiss in his hair. "You did not ask your father to do this, you didn't convince your father to do this. You didn't make him do everything he did and you most certainly did not make him do this. This is Gabriel, deciding for himself, and he decided he wanted to do the right thing."

###

"I'm sorry," Gabriel murmured into Adrien's hair, cradling him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Adrien held onto him, hugging him so hard he knew it had to be uncomfortable, but he just couldn't let go. His father didn't seem to want to pull away either.

Nathalie tried not to disturb them but, in the end, it was the clacking of her heels that snapped them out of it, when she walked to the window. Gabriel and Adrien reluctantly let go of each other. The boy took a step back.

"So, um. So that's what an ankle monitor looks like," he blurted out.

It was possibly the stupidest sounding thing he could have said.

His father did not seem to pick up on that. He twisted his foot to inspect the black device locked around his sock.

"Yes. Not quite my preferred fashion style, but it could be much worse."

Adrien scratched his neck, uneasy. His father clicked his tongue.

"I figure I could improve it somewhat by painting some stripes on it."

Adrien snorted at that, trying to keep his chuckling in, and then realized his father was joking. He collapsed in laughter. The corner of Gabriel's lips twitched, once, twice, before his smile broke through.
"It's only a temporary impediment," he said. "I expect the judge can be convinced I am a well respected member of the community with strong ties in France, and thus can be trusted not to leave the country. It would make it distinctly easier for me to leave the country for that trip to Brazil. There is a scheduling issue here, but it couldn't be helped."

Right.

"Don't you think it will make things worse with the police?" Adrien asked.

Surely bolting after a confession couldn't improve one's sentencing odds.

"That can be sorted out later. The important thing is that we-"

A tearing noise interrupted him. They all turned to its source.

In a corner of the office, Bella was tugging on a cardboard box's tape.

"Don't mind me," she told them, pulling some more until the tape was totally torn from the package.

"She is still out," Nathalie commented, as inexpressive as a rock before it hit you in the face.

"I am," Bella chirped.

She dove into the box and popped out of it with a pack of capri-sun. Adrien gaped at the drink, which she opened and started to sip.

Nathalie massaged the bridge of her nose.

"Are you letting the insane Kwami order soda from the internet?"

Plagg bolted out of his holder's pocket and shot daggers at Gabriel.

"That's no fair! I didn't get to order cheese from the internet!"

His previous chosen rolled his eyes.

"Plagg. We ordered your cheese straight from the gourmet cheese shop, not from some cheap-grade online grocer that did not even exist fifteen years ago."

That did not mollify the Kwami, who glowered at him but could not argue with the point.

"Do you want some fake orange juice?" Bella offered. "I have pomegranate juice too. And that Pepper thing that doesn't have pepper in it."

Her brother gave her a look from beyond the grave.

"No."

"Okay, more for me," she replied, fluttering out of the room.

A moment went by.

"I can't believe you are letting her roam free," Nathalie sighed.

"Seeing how the reasoning that led to Hawk Moth's attacks was that she was not free enough," Gabriel commented, "I don't see how it could harm."
He shook his head.

"To get back to the topic at hand… It is now Tuesday. Accounting for the time it would take our lawyers to get me out of this unpractical appliance," he said, looking down at his foot, "I expect a trip could be planned for as early as Saturday. Nathalie, could you arrange for that?"

###
Stray cats

There was no phone signal in the countryside.

None.

Well, that was probably an exaggeration. Sometimes, sometimes, when the car neared a village, Adrien got one bar or two. It was enough to load a few emails and two websites. Marinette and him each did their best to load the most important news articles, but she was running out of battery.

He suspected it was part of Nathalie's strategy to keep him away from the Hawk Moth disaster. The rest of the strategy had been to send him on a vacation with Aurélie and the Dupain-Cheng family. Of course, he had to stay with someone while she and Gabriel were off to Brazil, but the trip to Italy had not been strictly necessary for that purpose. It kept them away from the police, however, and Marinette's parents were too worried still to risk having her run off and meet with the detectives.

Chat Noir couldn't have, because Chat Noir was in Brazil looking for his wife.

There was no way Adrien would have let his father run off to face dangers unknown without a way to defend himself. He didn't know what had happened to Alice, but it a monster was lurking in the depths of the rainforest, at least Gabriel would be able to fight it off. Of course, it felt strange not to have Plagg around, but it would be temporary. Adrien still caught himself talking to him and sniffing for cheese. Tikki had perched herself on his shoulder for most of the trip, which he appreciated.

"Daaaad, when is the next stop?" Marinette moaned, holding her phone up, then left, then right.

"Thirty minutes away," mrs Dupain replied, peeking over her shoulder from the passenger seat. "We're stopping by Mâcon for the evening. There's no point trying to cross Lyon during rush hour, so we might as well go see the sights."

"Ungh. Can I please charge my phone? It's dying."

As if to agree with her, her phone beeped.

"I'll plug it in," Sabine replied. "Give it to me."

Marinette's eyes narrowed with the immediate suspicion that she would not be getting the phone back. She still handed it over. She watched her mother plug it in, then sighed and leaned against Adrien.

"What's new?" she murmured, hoping the adults wouldn't overhear her.

Tom was busy driving, but Sabine was looking at the road. Aurélie was reading a book on the second backseat (because why travel in a cramped car when you could just borrow a seven seater Audi from the company's fleet?). Both teenagers knew they were actually watching them like hawks.

"The news will still be there when we return next week!" Tom pointed out.

"Yes but they won't be news anymore!" Marinette retorted.
"I wouldn't call them news right now," Aurélie chimed in. "It seems to me like all of the newspapers are going out of their way to make stories out of thin air."

That wasn't strictly false.

"Well, at least they dropped the articles about my father 'paying for Hawk Moth's defense'," he commented. "They are still wondering why he was arrested, but all they have is some absolute stranger who worked for our accounting department for a week back in 2008, and he is saying it's tax evasion."

"Just as I thought," Aurélie replied, turning a page of her book.

Marinette slouched against Adrien's shoulder, reading the news on his phone's screen. There wasn't much on the page, just more about Alim Kubdel's calm and boring life ("he was a quiet, well-respected man"), and more nonsense about his father.

The Ladyblog had posted a long article about Volpina and her adventures in Rome, and absolutely nothing about Hawk Moth, which had probably cost Alya a fortune in advertising revenue, but had made Adrien as fond of her as humanly possible.

Tikki's antennae were twitching.

"Say, could we go see the castle?" she asked.

"Which castle?" Sabine asked. "There's quite a few of them around Maçon."

"Pierreclos! It's so pretty when the sun sets. I used to go there with one of my holders."

"What?" Marinette exclaimed. "When? Who?"

"Roland. He was a knight errant, a long, long time ago. We met the lord of the castle when we captured a dragon that terrorized the fields."

"A dragon?" Adrien exclaimed.

"It's kind of a long story."

###

At ten in the morning, Rio time, Nathalie knocked on the door of Gabriel's hotel room. She was still exhausted from their flight and knew another one awaited them, and then helicopter rides, which she tried not to think about because heights were somehow scarier in a helicopter than in a private jet. Logic dictated that she would die all the same if a plane crashed, but it wouldn't register.

Plagg opened the door.

"You don't have cheese," he mumbled. "I'm going back to bed."

And, on those welcoming words, he zipped away and left her standing in the doorway.

Nathalie shook her head, closing the door behind her as she entered the room. It was a nice one -
the kind the Agreste could afford - with a view on the sea and an entire apartment's worth of space and furniture. She walked past a dining table and a whole set of sofas to get to the actual bedroom, which was was behind another door.

She had thought that, after a twelve hours flight, Gabriel would have dropped like a stone, but she should have known better.

He was sitting on the bed, hunched over, in crumpled clothes, the picture of exhaustion. He barely reacted to her entrance: she saw him close his eyes and breathe out, but that was it.

"You didn't rest," she commented.

"I tried. We have another flight, I can catch up on sleep then."

He was idly playing with the electrum box that contained the butterfly Miraculous.

She stopped by the door and took a moment to feel nothing at all.

She was tired. She knew she should have been concerned by another transformation, and the risks it would entail, but she couldn't be bothered to care. Without offensive powers, she would not attack anyone. With Gabriel having seen for himself that she would turn against him given the right reasons, she knew he would be careful. A means to an end. No sacrifice at all, whatever Adrien had to say about it.

It was all the same to her.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

They could have flown farther into the land, but he had wanted to make one stop on the way to the national park. This was Alice's room.

She had stayed there on her last trip, for a night, before moving on to her quest for a new Ladybug, and Hawk Moth.

Plagg emerged from under a pillow, flying to Gabriel's side.

His holder squeezed his eyes shut.

A second passed.

He reopened them and freed Bella.

###

"What I don't get is what he is looking for," Alice had told Tikki.

She had been pacing around the dining table of her hotel room, in a tailored pastel dress and pearl colored slippers, which made for a strange sight, with the dozen maps spread on the table and floor. They all had markers connected by colored lines. She had drawn question marks on every point of interest, and black crosses for every site they suspected had been targeted by an Akuma. And, even before her trip, she had read every book she could find about the local legends and myths. Tikki wasn't so familiar with the Americas, so the books had taught her as much as to her
They had obviously missed something in their research, because they were both stumped as to what Hawk Moth wanted.

"It has to be a Miraculous," Alice went on. "Or at least a similarly potent artefact. This doesn't seem like an attempt to force you and Plagg out. It's almost like he is trying to only attract some attention, but not too much."

"It could be one of the other jewels, from the Marvelous set, maybe," Tikki had suggested.

"What about the Malefices?"

The kwami had shaken her head.

"Those are under lock and key."

"Zharr, then? Or Waspp. Hawaii is far, but not that far, and you could cross that ocean in any direction. It all depends on where David drowned, and whether his body was found."

"I don't know. If Hawk Moth is trying to lure someone out with villains, then it is likely an active hero, but I don't see how Waspp wouldn't have reached out to Fu. And I would say the same of Zharr. He has his flaws, but he knows how important our mission is."

Tikki had hoped it wasn't wishful thinking. She missed her siblings dearly.

It was the way of things. They were all sent on their own quests, working with small groups of heroes, or wandering alone. Every now and then, one of them went missing, until they were found on their chosen's body, wherever they had fallen. It was so rare for all of them to be reunited that she couldn't even recall how how many centuries it had been since it had last happened.

She missed hearing Plagg and Vixx bicker over cheese, bacon and every single thing in the world. She missed watching a sweet, happy Bella chase after Zharr's tail. She missed discussing lore and magic with Kappa, over warm drinks and sweet bread. She even missed the endless catastrophes Waspp kept provoking.

"We can't discard the possibility that Waspp was corrupted," Alice had murmured, collecting Tikki in her cupped hands and nuzzling against her head. "It happened to her before. And even without that, she couldn't force a new holder to come to you if they decided they did not want to. Or did not have the means to. But that's me catastrophizing. We are a long, long way from the Pacific ocean. I'm sure she's just slowly swimming her way to us."

###

"I think we have everything we need," Hawk Moth said.

Nathalie tapped her tablet to stop recording, but kept the camera angled at the table, and the annotated maps Alice had arranged on it, five years in the past. She had taken photographs of each of them (three close-ups of each set of notes, three shots of each separate map, and twelve of the table). She had also recorded all of Alice and Tikki's conversation, twice, to ensure their words would be intelligible on at least one of the mp4 files. On top of that, she had taken a few stills of
Alice in her pastel dress, which could serve as a memento if she was found dead.

"Very well," she replied. "There was no other important date to check, was there?"

He brushed the back of her tablet with his gloved hand and pulled the Akuma out.

"No, this will be enough."

Nathalie's transformation faded away, and confusion washed over her. She blinked. She was forgetting everything already and couldn't let that happen.

"We filmed maps," she said. "Took photographs. Alice was talking about… the peacock Kwami, and…"

It was slipping away.

"Waspp," Gabriel said. "The bee one. How are you feeling?"

"And the Pacific ocean."

What was it about the Pacific ocean?

"Are you alright?" he insisted, leaning closer.

His concern only irritated her. She didn't need it. She didn't want it.

"I am fine, merely frustrated."

His fingers brushed against her back as he moved to her side.

"You should still sit until the transformation's effects fade," he commented, guiding her towards the sofa.

It wasn't really that he was pushing her, but that his hand was close enough to her back for her to move before they could really touch. She strode to the sofa and sat down, figuring it would save them both a few seconds of awkwardness. He watched her straighten her spine rather than collapse against the cushions, then adjust her glasses.

He looked away and removed his Miraculous.

"Did you have to take that long?" Bella whined as she spiralled out of the jewel, as he untransformed. "It's worse than being in the box."

"Plagg, escort your sister to the minibar, will you?" Gabriel said, ignoring the butterfly Kwami.

Nathalie blinked.

She had not seen Plagg at all while she was transformed, but she had not been looking for him either. As it turned out, he was perched on a shelf, observing them from the highest vantage point in the room. He drifted down and collected his sister with a quiet 'come on'.

When the cat Kwami thought he was out of earshot - he wasn't a good judge of human hearing range, really, not with his enhanced senses - he hissed a question.

"Can't you just tell me what you were looking for?"
"Your chosen hasn't helped Alim, has he?" Bella retorted, zipping away.

Gabriel frowned at the space where she had been floating.

_We don't need her._

It was the whole point of the Akumatization.

"We should-" he started.

His phone, which had apparently been in his pocket during his transformation, started buzzing. It didn't stop, notification following notification. He sighed and took it out, then checked the screen and sighed again. His shoulders tensed more and more as he scrolled through the notifications.

"What is it?" Nathalie asked.

"TVi got a hold of my number, among other things. But, mostly, my lawyers are letting me know that they did not get me out of that ankle monitor so I could flee the country, and that Adrien's sudden and unexplained field trip is not helping my case."

"Nothing unexpected, then."

"No. And Adrien is apparently in Grenoble rather than Turin, because Tikki told them about a dragon nesting site in the local forest and they are now on a quest to find it. That's a fine distraction. She always knew how to cater to her audience."

"A dragon nesting site."

"Dragons went extinct in the 18th century and drakes are skittish, so they won't find much more than a scale or two at best. He wants to know how we are." - He paused for a second. - "C… Should I call him?"

"Let's try to arrange a video call, if he isn't wandering through the woods."

Gabriel nodded and called Adrien, but his son didn't answer. A prerecorded voice invited him to leave a message, which he did. They had an hour and a half to spare before their next flight, which gave Adrien a chance to get in touch with them. His father dropped a few words on trivia on dragons, because _of course_ Gabriel would know everything there was to know about extinct magical monsters.

He hung up, stared at his phone, then turned back to Nathalie rather than to deal with his emails.

"Can I see the photographs?"

She frowned, remembering that she was still holding her tablet. She had uploaded all of the pictures to the cloud, and she downloaded them back. When she opened them, they looked familiar, but only barely: her memories just wouldn't stick.

_Focus._

Alice's pastel dress. Crosses and question marks on maps where roads circled an empty space the size of a small country. Tikki zipping in and out of sight in a red blur.

Gabriel took the tablet from her hands and swiped from picture to picture.

"They seem perfect," he said, turning the device off. "We should try to rest a little before the taxi
Nathalie cringed. She hated having her thoughts escape her control.

"Who is David?" she blurted out.

Gabriel froze. He wet his lips, suddenly nervous, and put the tablet down on the coffee table as he sat on the opposite sofa.

"He was the last bee Miraculous holder," he explained. "A teenager from Hawaii. He went missing three months into the job, after answering a distress call at sea. Vanished without a trace. I never met him, but Anne-Laure was quite distraught about it, seeing how she had picked him."

"That's it? The boy was never found?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"No. It wasn't for lack of searching, but the Pacific ocean is wide, and the creatures that lurk in it tend not to be welcoming to trespassers."

Creatures lurking in the Pacific. Drakes in Grenoble.

Nathalie pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Fu led the search," he went on. "No one else could have, really. He is the only one with aquatic powers, and… it's usually the Bees who are sent for recon, since they have the ability to fly. It makes them well suited for missions in areas where land travel is complicated, like archipelos. In any case, Fu found what was left of the ship: drifting wood and ash. No survivors. No Miraculous. No David."

"He couldn't tell what happened?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"Anne-Laure framed it as 'blown up to shit'. Significant signs of a magical fire, which is surprising that far at sea. Ships in that area are more likely to fall prey to sea serpents or krakens. The boat had stopped by Hawaii, though, which could have been close enough to Kilauea to accidentally attract a fire spirit. They slip into ships to feed on the coal, if there's any, and react poorly when they end up trapped in the middle of the ocean. It was most frequent in the era of-"

"Steamships. I can imagine. Are they still looking for him?"

"Anne-Laure would deny it, but I assume she gives it the occasional try. She always feels guilty when she is tied to a death. Fu… Fu would be looking for Waspp, I expect, but he was already feeling his age back in the nineties. His Miraculous slowed the process, but it can't do anything for arthritis. Mona's granddaughter is likely to resume the search once he passes away."

Nathalie was somewhat able to place the names. Mona was the previous 'Volpina'. Her granddaughter was 'Francesca', the woman who had finally located the elusive 'master Fu'. 'Fu' was the mentor figure whose mentorship skills included 'letting children figure out how to fight superpowered maniacs on their own' and 'condemning bad behavior in anyone but himself'.

She nearly asked if Gabriel thought that David boy would ever be found, but he was probably the
last person in the world who needed to hear that question.

Bella could be used to track the boy down later on, by whoever she was given to.

Gabriel dropped the topic before she could.

"I'll call room service," he announced. "What do you want to eat?"

###

Watching the Isère at night was as peaceful as watching the Seine, Adrien felt. Of course, he couldn't perch himself on a roof to gaze down on the cars driving past. He had to be content with the windowsill of a cramped hotel room (he had not known, as a matter of fact, that hotel rooms came in a size that matched his personal bathroom's). Tom's loud snoring swallowed the hum of the traffic, but Adrien didn't mind that.

He was still tired and sore from the afternoon. Trekking through a forest had been a lot more tiring than he had expected (then again, being out of shape was the price to pay for ditching his fencing lessons and basketball practice). It had been fun. Exhausting, but fun. Marinette's parents had aimed for 'distracting', and it was clear that Tikki was not totally innocent in her sudden willingness to share stories on her past holders. Recounting knight Roland's adventures had been an easy way for her to redirect their attention. Showing them the way to the old dragon cave had been plain cheating.

They had not found dragons. Dragons, she had explained, would never be found so close to human settlements. Wyrms and drakes, maybe. It was still worth visiting, she had told them, because dragons did not actually hoard gold, but they liked places that shone under their fire.

The entrance to the cave had been blocked by boulders, which Ladybug had easily moved out of the way. Tom and Sabine had followed them in, with torchlights they had bought in Grenoble, where Aurélie was waiting for them.

They had found no dragons, nor drakes, nor wyrms. They hadn't found gold either. Still, it had been worth the long walk through the forest. The walls of the cave glimmered, slabs of obsidian and veins of copper catching the light. The copper was rusty and bled verdigris, but the obsidian was still polished. If you ran your hands against it, you could feel the ridges left by something scraping against it over and over again, mostly at eye level. The hard scales of a dragon's side, maybe.

They had taken chips of obsidian with them as they left.

Adrien wondered what Plagg would think of his piece of rock. He would likely chew on it to see if it could be eaten, and then shrug and extol the virtues of mature cheese. Nathalie would likely give him a neutral 'very interesting, Adrien', and would maybe examine the obsidian a little. Gabriel… Considering everything his son had learned about him in the last year, he was sure Gabriel would have loved to visit the dragon cave. Maybe they could go together, in twenty years or so.

Mister Dupain's snoring stopped. The twin bed he was sleeping on creaked as he shifted, then wobbled when he sat up, confused.
"Adrien?"

He fumbled for his phone and squinted at the faint glow of its screen. He blinked in confusion, brought the phone closer to his face, then shut his eyes with a grimace. Well, that was only natural. It was four in the morning.

"I'm sorry," Adrien said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, you didn't, this is when I get up for w… Why are you up?"

"I couldn't sleep. I figured I'd look at the street until I felt drowsy again. It's a pretty city."

"It's the snoring, isn't it?"

"What? No, no, it's not the snoring!"

"I told Sabine!" he mumbled. "We should have taken a fourth room."

It had not been easy to find five beds at the last minute. Marinette and Sabine shared a room. Aurélie was alone in the second one. Adrien and Tom had taken the third.

"It's. Not. The. Snoring, I swear!"

Tom sighed and got up (the bed made sounds like a tree about to break). He joined him by the window and looked down at the river.

"It is pretty, that's true."

Adrien nodded. Marinette's father put his hand on his shoulder.

"You should try to catch some sleep," he advised. "It will be much harder in the car tomorrow."

The teenager stared at the street underneath, shuddering. He blinked and pictured the outline of a glowing khopesh. It really hadn't been the snoring that had kept him awake.

'It's nothing personal'. 'Nothing personal'. 'Nothing personal'. 'I'm going to send your body to your father'.

Tom squeezed his shoulder.

"Since I'm up, I'll go out for a walk," he announced. "Maybe you should come with me. A little exercise might help you fall asleep."

"I'd be glad to, thanks. Just let me get dressed."

Fifteen minutes later, they were leaning over a bridge, looking at the Isère. A barge was passing through. The air was warm, if not hot, which made Adrien feel like it was still summer. In Paris, the nights were getting colder, and rainy.

"How are you feeling?" Mister Dupain asked, his tone as soft and protective as bubble wrap.

Adrien pulled away from the bridge railing, blinking. It wasn't that he did not want to reply, but it was half past four in the morning. His tongue was sluggish and his brain even more so.

"I, uh, I'm alright" he said. He gave some more thought to his answer. "And… I really wanted to thank you, for everything. I mean, the whole trip, and being so nice, and…"
Tom breathed out, then smiled. He patted his shoulder.

"Don't mention it." - He paused, the pat turning into a firm, amicable squeeze. - "And… I know we've mostly been running around trying to keep you kids distracted, but you can talk to us, alright? About anything and everything."

"It's okay," Adrien told him. "I'm… okay, considering."

Except for the nightmares, but hey.

Tom pulled him a little closer – tugged, really, though not on purpose – and sighed.

"Still. We know it can't be easy, everything that's going on now, with your father… Your parents."

No one had really dared to talk about the reason for Gabriel and Nathalie's absence. Everyone was walking on eggshells, even Marinette. What could they say, anyway? This would be the last trip to Brazil, the one where his mother would be found. Nobody expected her to be found alive, so people were as awkward as during a funeral. It had been the same five years earlier, after Alice had vanished.

"No," he corrected. "About my mom… It's fine. It's been a long, long time and we know. We've always known, I think, it's just that we couldn't handle it. But now it’s not so much looking for answers, rather for confirmation. We did the moving on already. At least I did, I think. It doesn’t feel as bad as it used to. I miss her but I no longer miss her. Does that make sense?"

Mister Dupain nodded.

"Yes, it does." – He waited a little. – "There’s still a lot on your plate."

Adrien shrugged and felt a brief wave of horrified embarrassment at his own rudeness. He swallowed, uneasy, then tried to focus on the conversation.

"There's that episode of the Simpsons. I don't know if you watch."

"I've seen a few. And some."

"Well. There's the one where you find out that mister Burns has all of the illnesses. So many of them that they can't all fit through the door at once, and none of them actually makes him sick. They just get all squished and stuck. Anyway. It's a bit like that. Sometimes, somethings comes through, and I feel horrible for a little while, but mostly… it kind of stays in the background."

That did not seem to reassure Tom.

"It won't always be that bad," he promised after a long pause. "All of those problems, one by one… they'll be fixed, or they'll go away, or they won't matter anymore. One at a time. And you don't have to deal with them all alone, either. We're there, Nathalie will be there, Nathalie's mom, … Marinette is most certainly not going away."

Adrien chuckled.

"No she isn't, and neither am I."

Mister Dupain gasped.

"Really? I can't believe it!"
That got the teenager to laugh.

"But you're more than welcome around," Tom went on. "I for one look forward to teaching you how to bake." – His voice dropped to a whisper. – "I don't know if you noticed, but it's not Marinette's cup of tea. Who am I supposed to pass my secret recipes on to?"

"I can't wait to learn them," Adrien replied, smiling.

His good cheer was fading away.

There was one name missing from mister Dupain's list.

He took a deep breath.

One illness at a time, squeezing through the door, spreading its tendrils.

"My father is going away," he murmured.

Tom had no comforting words to answer that. His brow furrowed, then he looked pained. He stared into the distance, at the river and the barge sailing away. He sighed.

"I'm afraid so."

"It's not that want him to get away with what he did so he could stay with me. It's not how it works. I get it. I just don't want him to go to prison forever."

Doubt and guilt nagged at Adrien. Despite Nathalie and Gabriel's reassurances, he still wondered if his father had not turned himself in to prove something to him, or just to get him out of trouble. 'Doing the right thing' wasn't his father's type. He wasn't wired that way.

Stop.

"I…" – Mister Dupain went his lips, considering his next words. – "I don't think you have to worry about him going to prison 'forever'. He helped capture Hawk Moth. Even if he did terrible things to accomplish that, people won't want to lock him up."

Mister Bourgeois' words, framed differently. A convenient version of justice, bent and eroded, that wouldn't rub people the wrong way.

Had Gabriel accounted for that before going to the cops? Had he been playing with piped dices from the start?

Stop. Thinking. About. It.

"But… He might still go," Tom added. "Now, I'm not a lawyer, and I don't know everything your dad did, but Marinette gave us a rundown, and it sounds to me like you should prepare yourself for… a few… months or years? I tried to look it up on the internet but it's not very helpful."

Adrien snorted.

"Well, it told me 'several life sentences'. And that I had cancer."

"Yeeees. I think maybe we should stay away from the internet and just be patient. There is not much we can do but to wait and see."

The boy sighed.
"I guess so."

He rolled his shoulders and stretched. He was sore from exhaustion.

"So, where are we going tomorrow?" he asked. "I mean today. Do we continue to Turin, or is Tikki planning more Miraculous adventures for us?"

"Oh, Tikki did not plan this one, or at least she did not warn us about it. So the plan is to go to Turin, but I can't promise things will go according to plan. We might end up making a few stops."

"I've been meaning to ask, but why Turin? Are we going somewhere specific?"

"Well, Turin is... at the end of the highway."

"That's all?"

"It's also a beautiful city."

"That's all?"

"It has palaces!" Tom exclaimed.

Adrien stared at him.

"And it has a fashion school Marinette might be interested in," the man added. "Studying abroad would be a nice experience."

"Then we should go to Milan and check out the Istituto Marangoni. I mean, it's the best after, uh... Parsons and that London school that has a name, I swear. Anyway, I can totally get Marinette a tour. I know some of the teachers, I went to Milan's fashion week a few years in a row."

Mister Dupain gaped at him. His eyes went wider and wider.

"Iiiii guess we're going to Milan then, because if you say that in front of Marinette, we'll never hear the end of it."

"And, if we get there and you still insist on keeping us busy far from Paris, we could go as far as Rome to say hello to Volpina. I think that's where, um, Francesca comes from, too. If she returns from China with Master Fu, that's where she'll go."

The look on Tom's face said it all. He cleared his throat. He looked away.

"That's a great idea, Adrien!" he exclaimed.

He wasn't a very good liar.

It had always been their destination.

###
A ladybug can't change her spots

Nathalie disliked the countryside. The bumpy roads. The dirt. The insects. The distinct lack of a wifi signal. Brazil was worse in many ways, because instead of beige cliffs and vineyards, it had sienna dirt and patches of grass and palm trees and other trees that looked alien, and the insects were the size of rodents. And the humidity. The humidity was unbearable. It had been unbearable even before she had spent hours in a helicopter, and it was driving her crazy now that she felt like her legs were made of cotton wool and that her head was *that* close to exploding.

At least, she was at ground level now.

Heights were not her thing.

The pickup truck was not her thing either, but she could convince herself she would not die in it. She could tolerate the rumbling and the trembling. Gabriel's approach to driving was sensibly different when he didn't wear a three piece suit, however, and she wished he would slow down a little. Not that they had time to spare. The longer he would stay away from Paris, the more trouble he would be in.

"Is that the place?" Plagg asked from his perch on the GPS.

There was *maybe* a little something that looked like a building in the distance, if you squinted. Yet, Gabriel answered without hesitation.

"Yes."

The 'little something' turned into a wooden building as they got closer. It was white, with washed out paint and a sienna tile roof. The words 'Colégio Municipal' were painted on a sign above the door, in faded blue letters. Palm trees were lined on its sides, and there was a playground behind it, surrounded by a low wall. Nathalie spotted a goalpost with no net, and a jungle gym. Farther away still, you could see the small town the school belonged to.

It was the place, but not The Place. 'The Place' was one hour away from there, if Nathalie's calculations were right. This was merely a point of interest, a 'X' on Alice's map.

During his trip to Brazil, five years earlier, Hawk Moth had left no credible witnesses. It wasn't that he had killed people (though Nathalie did not rule that out): he had only Akumatized victims who would not be taken seriously. Children had been his targets of choice.

They knew from Tikki that Alice had fought an Akuma near a school 'in Rondônia'. In *Rondônia*, a ninety thousand square miles state that, despite having a tenth of the population density of France, still had quite a few small towns with schools. Spying on the past had allowed them to figure out where, exactly, the Akuma had been based.

They had the date of the fight, if not the exact time. They knew it had been a young boy with a few friends.

Gabriel parked the pickup truck and got out, followed by Plagg, who zipped from one building window to the other, then back to his holder. Nathalie joined them.

"Have you been here before?" she asked.

"Yes, actually," Gabriel replied. "I stayed at a small hotel in town, four years ago. I had no idea
there had been an Akuma back then, however. I was merely surveying the area, looking for traces of magical activity."

He fished the electrum box out of his hiking pants pocket and freed Bella. She bolted out of her prison and spun into place, then stopped and shook her head like a wet dog.

"Ugh. Uuugh. Can you stop putting me in there?"

"That could be negotiated. Do you remember this place?"

She looked around.

"Mh. I don't know. Yes. No. Maybe. Will you help Alim get out of prison?"

"That option is still not on the table."

She made a face.

"Then 'no'," she replied.

Then she bolted, phasing through the school's door and popping out of the building not twenty seconds later, through a window. She was carrying a tiny star-shaped fruit.

So much for her 'not remembering'.

Gabriel pursed his lips. He did not comment, however. Instead, he turned to Plagg.

"How close are the nearest people?"

The Kwami's ears wiggled. They turned to the side.

"That brown building, over there," he said, pointing at a squarish shape farther down the road. His ears tilted in the other direction. "And children in the fields, but they're going in the other direction."

"Good," Gabriel murmured.

He rummaged through his pocket, got a black wooden box out of it, then opened it. It was filled with foam, that was itself wrapped around a plastic-wrapped silver watch, which he took. He opened the latch without removing the plastic covering.

Nathalie expected to see the usual butterfly hologram appear. It did not. Instead, a blue bird flew up and hovered above the watch, beating its wings.

"Where did you get that?" she and Bella exclaimed in unison.

"In the police's evidence room," Gabriel replied, unfazed.

Of course he would tamper with evidence in a criminal investigation if it suited his needs. Of course. And how he had managed to was an easily answered question. She should never have given him the letter opener back.

"I switched it for the butterfly one," he commented, spinning on himself with the watch in his hand. "The casing and engraving are identical, so the cops won't notice a difference unless they check for the hologram, which won't activate. They'll just assume the watch is malfunctioning, not that it has been replaced."
"What about prints?" Nathalie sighed. "DNA tests?"

"Samples had already been collected when I broke into the evidence locker," he explained. He crumpled the plastic wrapping around the artefact. "As long as we don't touch the watch itself, everything will be fine. In any case, Kubdel was looking for Zharr. I figured the tracker might come in handy."

Bella shrugged.

"Well, he's not here," she stated, suckling on her stolen fruit. "That's the dormant state. I think the tail is supposed to make a fan when Zharr is active."

"I'm well aware," Gabriel replied.

He closed the watch and put it back into its box, which he returned to his pocket. He breathed in and looked around again, then wandered to the playground. He hopped on the low wall, walked on it until he reached the jungle gym, then jumped down and ran his hand along its metal pipes.

Nathalie followed him, but used the gate like a normal person. She was not nearly fit enough for acrobatics, and no amount of hiking clothes would change that.

"Should we transform?" she asked.

Her tablet was still in the truck. She would have to fetch it.

He hesitated. It took him a moment to answer, and he did so with reluctance.

"I suppose so."

###

Adrien now understood why Tom, Sabine and Aurélie had kept their destination quiet.

When Marinette had a goal, she did not tolerate delays.

From the moment she had heard the words "Rome" and "Volpina", the idea of visiting Milan fashion school had been dead in the water. 'I don't need to go,' she had argued. 'I looked it up on the internet. I know everything about it. I checked all of the teachers' websites, I subscribed to the school's youtube channel, I talk with several students on fashion forums, and I follow a thousand blogs and I literally watched a thousand hours of videos. I don't need to go! We should go straight to Volpina's.'

She had only relented a little when her father had asked to visit one of the palaces in Turin, and only because he looked genuinely sad about it.

They had been in the car for three hours and seventeen minutes, and she had spent about three hours and sixteen minutes of that frowning at Google Maps on her phone. At least, she contributed to the conversations, which was more than what could be said about Adrien.

He kept dozing off.

He had not recovered from his insomnia in Grenoble, and had not slept much in Turin either. He
had spent a good part of the night watching news videos on his phone (they all said the same thing as the previous day: 'nothing'), then rabbit and cats videos, just so he could avoid the nightmares he knew would come. A healthy breakfast of sandwiches, black coffee and coke had not helped. At least, Marinette did not seem to mind being squished against the car door, with his head on her shoulder.

Despite his exhaustion, he tried to follow the others' conversations.

"Do you know Francesca well?" Marinette was asking Tikki. "What is she like?"

"She's nice!" Tikki chirped. Of course, Tikki thought everyone was nice. "Very down to earth. I've known her since she was little. Mona kept watch over the Miraculous whenever master Fu was travelling, and Francesca would visit often. Mona kind of wanted her to become the new Volpina, but Francesca is more of a scholar and she said no. She knows a lot about the Miraculous, though, because she grew up around them."

"The previous Volpina did not keep her identity a secret?" Marinette gasped.

"Well, that's difficult when you start getting married and having children," Tikki muttered. "But Francesca found out because Vixx showed herself to get a piece of hot-dog."

That startled Adrien out of his half-slumber. It sounded like something Plagg would have done.

"She did?"

Tikki winced.

"On several occasions over the course of the centuries, mostly with random strangers. Oh, and once with Emperor Taizu of Song. That was eventful."

"What happened?"

Tikki made a face. She opened her mouth wide, looking up at the sky (or, rather, at the car's ceiling). Her tongue spun in her mouth, not seven but a dozen times.

"WELL. It wasn't that he was a bad emperor. He was a good emperor, actually. He unified the country and brought peace to the land. Very smart, very tactical. Very much Vixx's type, as far as chosens are concerned. But we had a job to do and mountains to cross and yetis to find and of course, once he saw her, he tried to get her Miraculous. And so there we were, with two teenage farmhands as chosens, trying to cross the whole of China with every single retired warlord after us. It took us four months! FOUR. MONTHS."

Obviously, that had been a touchy topic.

"Um," Marinette said. "So, did you find the yetis?"

Tikki scowled, gloomy.

"They found us."

Adrien jumped in.

"Is it true Cleopatra was Volpina?" he asked. "Plagg mentioned something about it."

"Oh! Yes, yes, she was. It was a busy era, too. We were all active in the same century, in roughly the same circles. Cleopatra learnt of the Miraculous and then managed not only to track down the
Guardian of the time, but to steal Vixx's pendant. Waspp was briefly with Brutus, but before Caesar's assassination. Bella was with Caesar, except nobody knew that until she tried to avenge him by attacking Waspp's new chosen. She often ends up with great military leaders, really, because her powers suit them more. Alexander the Great was also a Butterfly."

"What about you? Where were you at that time?"

"Oh, I was not with the famous ones. My chosen was a young greek girl named Elpida, near Larissa. Someone had to handle the Olympians' messes."

Everyone turned and gaped at her at those words, even mister Dupain, who was driving.

"TOM!" Sabine shouted when the car strayed into the shoulder.

"Oops!"

They all quieted, waiting to be sure the car would be staying within its lane.

"The greek gods actually existed?" Aurélie asked.

"Yes? Humans didn't make them up. They did embroider some stories, though. Elpida mostly had to handle silly problems, like drunk gods trying to steal Hades' dogs to breed them and ending up letting them loose in the area, or tracking down Hermes so he could bring her to Zeus when too many humans were turned into animals."

"Silly problems," Adrien repeated, in disbelief.

"Well, sometimes we had hydrams. Now that's serious business."

The two teenagers grimaced. They remembered that only too well. They had met Volpina when one of the creatures had made its way from the Po to the Seine. It had taken all three of them to capture it.

"Did you ever have famous historical figures as Ladybug?" Adrien asked, hoping to never hear the word 'hydra' again.

"Joan!" Tikki replied. "Joan of Arc. And Hippolyta, too. And Matilda, who was Robin of Locksley's partner."

He frowned.

"Wait, Robin Hood?"

She nodded.

"He was Chat Noir, of course. His skill with a quarterstaff made it into the legends, even though people focus on the bow. Ladybird was better with a bow than he was, actually," she added, with no small amount of smugness. "In any case, Matilda's name somehow became Marian, but she was Ladybug."

Marinette turned her phone off and put it down on the seat.

"Were they really outlaws?"
Ladybug was a soldier.

_You become the mission._

The trail of dead children didn't faze her. Not outwardly, at least. She crouched by a little corpse - seven year old, at most - and ran her gloved fingers along the two holes in his throat. The skin was turning black around them. She checked his pulse, pausing to count, then letting go of the little wrist.

She put her hand on the ground. She lowered her head, eyes vanishing behind a curtain of blonde hair. From a distance, you would have assumed she was mourning.

From a distance.

The sinew of her hand showed even through her glove. Her muscles were tense. She was waiting.

The ground trembled. It was absorbed by the grass, for the most part, and you would not have noticed if you weren't paying attention. Still. Something was burrowing underneath, and getting close.

Closer.

_Never a misstep._

Ladybug rolled right as the creature emerged behind her. Her shield flew, hitting it in the throat, and it stumbled back, but not for long. It jumped back, arms spread, fangs bared. It hissed. It was a boy. It _had been_ a boy. Now his body was covered in scales, black on his face and belly, grey everywhere else save for the occeli on his back. A hood of scaly flesh was connecting temples to his arms. His clothes were torn and blackened, merging with his skin in places. A snake-shaped bracelet was wrapped around his wrist.

_Never a hesitation._

Ladybug threw her shield again, in an arc. If not for the snake hood, the rope of the shield would have wrapped itself around the boy's throat and strangled him. It nearly did. The hood bent. The boy clawed at it. Alice pulled as hard as she could.

He freed himself by diving into the ground again, slipping out of his bounds. The shield flew straight back at Ladybug, who caught it and jumped back to her feet. She spun it around her, passing the lanyard from one hand to the other as the shield zipped over the grass, in a larger and larger circle. If anything emerged from the ground, the rope would hit it and trap it. She did that with the utmost calm, taking a step back, then another, then another, moving away from the school and into empty terrain, so her shield could cover more and more space.

_Motion and skill._

The ground trembled again. Her eyes moved from one side to the other as the origin of the sound shifted. She turned as she walked. Then, she heard a child's voice and slowed.

"Rafael? Rafaaaaaeel?"
It came from behind the school.

Alice kept spinning her shield just long enough to watch a boy in a yellow t-shirt move into sight. He was pushing a bike along the road, and looking around in puzzlement. He had not noticed her yet. The Akuma had noticed him.

She sent her shield flying past the child, at a tree, and used the rope to propel herself through the air like a cannonball. She snatched him from the ground, holding him close to her chest as they spun around the tree, at which point she tugged the shield back and threw it over the school's roof, at another palm tree. The rope wrapped itself around it, stretched, then contract, pulling Ladybug and the rescued child down. She let go of the lanyard, flipped in the air, and landed on the roof with the boy in her arms.

"Stay here and lay low," she whispered, putting him down. Then she winced. "Um. 'Fique aqui'."

She made him crouch, with repeated 'hush' gestures. He nodded and crouched. Children knew better than to disobey superheroes.

Ladybug ran to the edge of the roof and looked down.

The corpses on the playground and in the grassy field behind it had risen.

"Just what I needed," she sighed.

Five of them, no adults. The children had come back after school was over to use the playground. A girl had been hanging upside down in the jungle gym, and the four boys had been killed wherever the Akuma had caught them while they fled. They were regrouping, now. Black scales were growing on their faces. The Akuma was nowhere in sight.

"Lucky Charm!" Alice called, jumping from the roof.

She snatched the red tube that fell from the sky on her way down, rolling her eyes when she realized it contained a set of tennis balls.

"Really, Tikki?"

She tucked it under her arm and spun her shield around, just like she had done earlier. The dead children charged at her. She caught the closest boy with her rope and ran past the others, tripping one, flipping another, and shoving the last one against his tied up friend. The little girl was more cautious, so Alice kept her for last. Catching the fallen boys as they got back to their feet and wrapping them up in a bundle proved easy enough. She did not let go of the lanyard.

The ground was trembling again.

The little girl, who was now covered in black scales, hissed. Ladybug threw the tube of tennis balls at her so she would dodge, then took advantage of her confusion to wrap her rope around her ankle. She let go, grabbed the tube and rolled away just as the Akuma came out of the ground.

The lanyard shrank and dragged the dead girl away.

The Akuma spat venom not at Ladybug, but at the space she was rolling to. It hit her in the shoulder and back, sizzling on her suit and dissolving her hair. She muttered a curse, flipped and kicked the boy as he lunged at her. He stumbled back and vanished into the ground.

She got back to her feet, panting and trembling, then bolted. The ground vibrated behind her, with
speckles of dirt flying bouncing on the drier areas. Clutching the tennis balls to her chest with the arm that wasn't hanging by her side, he made it to the jungle gym, jumped on it and threw herself at the closest tree. She managed to wrap her legs around the trunk and hold on.

She took a deep breath. She looked back.

The Akuma had not surfaced, though you could guess his location by watching the grass. Ladybug stuck her tube between her chin and clavicles and climbed up to the closest branches. The snake child couldn't tell where she was. She took a tennis ball out of the tube and dropped it on the ground. The Akuma stilled. She got a second ball and dropped it too, a few inches away from the first one, and felt the tree shake under her feet. She threw the last ball down.

The Akuma emerged right where it hit the ground. She toppled him with a dropkick and tore the bracelet off his arm, releasing the Akuma. She caught him ten seconds later - the ten seconds necessary to get her shield back. She purified it. She let it go. She closed her eyes. She cast her miracle.

She kept her eyes closed.

She held her breath.

The children started talking all at once. Some were confused, some were yelling. The one on the roof was calling her and asking to be helped down.

She opened her eyes and ran to the building, scaling the wall to join him and help in down. The other children swarmed them as they climbed down.

"Are you okay?" she asked them, patting one on the head, pushing the chin of another up to look at his throat. Their wounds had healed. "Aaah, uuuuh, está okay?"

She gave them thumbs up and a nervous smile. They answered with frantic nods, a flood of over-enthusiastic shouting and hundreds of questions she did not understand. She waved her hands to silence them, or at least try to. None of them seemed particularly traumatized, not even the boy who had not been dead or akumatized during the whole ordeal.

A warm smile made its way to her lips.

"Go home. Su casa. Go, go, go," she told them, with shooing motions. "Ir casa."

Her mix of languages made them laugh. They didn't leave, however: the boy from the roof narrated what he had seen to the others, then they all tried to formulate their questions by miming them. Ladybug escaped when her earrings started beeping, shouting a last 'go tu casa' to them.

She came back as Alice after making sure they had left.

"I'm still not sure," she told Tikki, as she climbed over the low wall that surrounded the playground. She was holding a barometer. "Every single sensor detected weather magic. Look, the needle is still going nuts."

The Kwami landed on her forearm and leaned close to the barometer.

"Sho there 'ould be a second one," she mumbled through a mouthful of chocolate brownie.

Alice shook her head.
"The readings are much fainter than they were last week. I think it's residual." - She frowned. - "In any case, just how powerful was that disturbance, exactly? Fu was warned about it a whole month ago and there's still magic lingering. You'd think there would have been a visible enough impact to make the news."

A child had left a backpack next to the jungle gym. Alice picked it up and brought it to the school door, pushing it as close to the wall as she could, so the roof would protect it if it rained.

"It might have been unrelated to the Akuma," Tikki pointed out. "The closer you get to the rainforest, the more likely you are to see spirits or such wander around."

"True," Alice conceded. "And a spirit would have done its best not to be noticed, unlike an Akuma. We'll have to travel north and check for a trail." - She turned back to the playground and squinted, looking around. - "But first, we need to check the local hotels. I doubt Hawk Moth is out camping in the wilderness. There it is!"

She ran to a greyish spot on the grass, and picked up a rubber snake. It wasn't a bracelet, in the end, but the toy was curled so tightly that it could be used as such. She pocketed it.

"There's still…" she trailed off, lost in thought.

She idly scratched the sunburned skin of her shoulder, then wiped her fingers on her pink tank top. She clicked her tongue.

"The main road north, the first town with a gas station in miles, the first building on the road, and he attacked the kid now." - She jumped back to her feet. - "He knew we were coming."

She stormed away from the playground, with a wide-eyed Tikki trailing after her.

"And here I was rambling about checking the hotels for foreigners," Alice ranted. "All he had to do was to bribe someone near each hotel of the area, and go 'can you please call me when my blonde french tourist of a wife checks in?' and time our travels. As far as he knows, I never gave you away."

She climbed into her car, a jeep she had parked by the school's entrance, leaned over the passenger seat and opened a backpack on three water bottles and three dozens of individually wrapped brownies.

"We're going to stay away from the gas stations and hotels," she decided. "We circle the town, find either a landline or 2G, and call Fu. He needs to send Plagg or Vixx as support. We can handle a few Akuma in the meantime, but there's no way I can just hand you over to some untrained stranger with Hawk Moth breathing down your neck. That's just calling for another 'David' to happen."

She got her keys out of her pocket and started the car. Tikki swallowed the last bit of her snack and climbed onto the dashboard.

"What about—"

"Yes. Of course, I'll call Gabriel. I can lie to him about a trip, not about a mission."

She peeked at the rearview mirror to confirm no cars were coming their way, then drove off.

Under a palm tree, a wooden man with a clock face was checking his watch.

She didn't see him.
Mona's home was a tiny house with stone walls and brown wood shutters, hidden away in the Roman countryside, at the end of a cramped, forgotten country road that did not even have street view on google maps. The weeds around the house were overgrown. The bushes and trees had grown so tall that you couldn't even see the the house from a distance.

Technically, it wasn't 'Mona's home'. The previous Volpina had been death from five years, and her house now belonged to the mysterious Francesca (who was still in China with Fu, with no set return date). It was, however, what the new Volpina had called it when she and Ladybug had decided on a meeting place.

"There won't be no one, so it's good, no journalists," the fox heroine had sworn. She had mumbled something in Italian, sulkily, and not loudly enough to be understandable through the communicator. "Wait for me outside. There is nobody home but I have the.. chi… uh, key. "

They had arranged to meet at nine in the morning, which gave them just enough time to get from the hotel they were staying in to the house.

Tom parked the car in the driveway. Once upon a time, it had been covered in gravel. Now, it was dirt with a sprinkling of pebbles, and tire-shaped holes. Seen from up close, the house was on the derelict side. Green mold was growing on the walls. Some of the shutters clearly could not be shut. The paint on the door was flaking.

Volpina was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe she's inside already," Sabine commented, getting out of the car.

She walked to the door and knocked. No one answered. Aurélie and Tom joined her.

"We are a bit early. I'm sure she'll be here soon."

Marinette turned to Adrien.

"Um, do you want my Miraculous?" she asked. "I was going to transform, but I think Volpina is a lot more likely to recognize your face than mine."

*Who isn't?*

He cleared his throat. She had a point. That being said…

"Um. My ears aren't pierced."

"Oh."

They stared at each other for an instant, then Marinette tousled his hair with both hands (with the same softness and care she would have used to shampoo a carpet), then shoved sunglasses on his nose.

He checked his reflexion in the rearview mirror.

"That will do!"
Tikki started giggling. She coughed when they turned to her.

"I'm sorry," she said, pursing her lips to hide her smile. It didn't work.

Adrien checked his reflexion again. He didn't think he looked that silly. So his hair was a bit messy, and not in Chat Noir's fashionable way. So the sunglasses had been designed to fit the tastes of a teenage girl. He was still Adrien Agreste, supermodel. He could make it work.

He nearly jumped out of his bones when he heard motor noises. Marinette transformed. A few seconds later, a dirt bike stopped next to the car and Volpina climbed off it.

Why don't we have dirt bikes? Adrien wondered. They could have used dirt bikes! They had been running everywhere for months.

Ladybug got out of the car and greeted Volpina, while the adult stayed at a careful distance. Tom and Sabine had paled. They were not looking at the newcomer, however. They were looking at Marinette.

Adrien tousled his hair some more, hoping to crank the 'silly' level up. He slipped out of the car and waited a step away from his partner, while she greeted Volpina. The Italian girl was struggling with French and half of what she said made no sense grammatically, but you could understand her all the same. She was excited to see them again.

She turned to Tom, Sabine and Aurélie, then went to shake their hands with heroic professionalism. She blinked, realizing she was forgetting something (namely 'Chat Noir'), then whirled to Adrien. Her eyes went wide.

"M-ma… Ma tu, tu, tu s…" - She looked at Ladybug. - "Is… Is t-that…" - She turned back to him. - "Y-you are…"

He scratched the back of his neck. So much for not being recognized.

"Hi?"

"CHAT NOIR?"

He smiled at her.

"Yep! Glad to see you again. It's been a while."

She looked down at his sneakers (and the black butterfly on them), and his jeans (their butterfly was sawn on his back pockets), and his coat (which, being counterfeit, did have a butterfly, but a six-winged one). She frowned at the coat.

"Is that a false one?"

"See!" Marinette exclaimed, with a triumphant pose. "I told you it was blatant."

"It was the poiiiiint," he whispered.

"The point was maaaaade," she whispered back. "Needlepointlessly."

The joke fell flat for everyone but Adrien, who loved it. Someday, someday, he would marry her, and their children would make terrible, terrible puns.
Volpina cleared her throat.

"Let's go inside," she suggested. "I have the keys."

She took them out of the tail bag of her bike, then opened the door and led everyone in.

"I will make coffee, and we can speak. Talk," she said. "This way."

They followed her through a small living room, filled with old-fashioned, sturdy furniture. The buffet was made of dark varnished wood engraved with pastoral scenes. The (scratched) leather armchairs had (gnawed on) wooden armrests. There was a grandfather clock, which was still ticking, though it didn't give the correct time. There was dust everywhere, of course, but that was to be expected from an empty house.

Something creaked in the next room.

Adrien tensed, and so did Ladybug and Volpina. The three adults were busy taking in the room, and had not noticed the noise.

Maybe it was just an old house, where the floor and walls creaked on their own. Or maybe someone was carefully walking out of the other room, step by step. Volpina tiptoed to the door, hand on her weapon. Adrien and Ladybug followed.

He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and immediately realized who the intruder was.

He peeked through the doorway at the same time as Volpina and, sure enough, Anne-Laure Lenoir was trying to sneak out of the kitchen through the other exit, with a bowl of cereal in her hands and a spoon in her mouth.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed, at the same time as Ladybug.

Anne-Laure looked offended.

"What ah I hooing here? I'm eaffin' fereal! What ah you doing here?"

###

The Akuma crawled out of Nathalie's tablet, wings twitching but not beating, and climbed into Hawk Moth's hand.

The night had long fallen. Maybe that was why it didn't try to flutter away. They had spent hours moving around the school, filming the same scenes from several angles, to make sure they had caught every motion and every word. The sun had set, the moon had risen, the temperature had dropped. A single car had come and gone, but it hadn't stopped.

"Contretemps," she stated, so she would remember. Her memories were fading already.

Gabriel's voice was a tired whisper.

"Yes."

"Here."
"Yes."

She kept silent as he untransformed, trying to knit her fading memories together into a single picture. Contretemps, under the tree, as Alice drove away. Contretemps, leaning against the school door, as Ladybug was spinning her shield around her to hit the snake child. Contretemps, hidden between the branches of a tree as the dead children got back to their feet.

He shouldn't have been there. Contretemps had been Akumatized later, elsewhere.

"Oops," Bella said, after spiralling out of her brooch.

She landed on the car hood and stretched her wings, then folded them. Plagg dashed to her and shoved her down.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" he yelled. "What did you do to her? JUST TELL US ALREADY."

She hummed and flew up, as if she had not been attacked. Plagg growled and flew in circles around her.

"He wasn't supposed to be here," he hissed. "He wasn't even supposed to be Contretemps yet. Why. Was he. Here?"

"Beats me."

She turned towards the school and flew that way, but Plagg blocked her path.

"Just tell me!" He shouted. "She was my family too!"

Gabriel ignored them both. He ran his hands up his face and dragged them back down.

"Are you alright, Nathalie?" he asked, as if the two Kwami had not been arguing about his wife's disappearance.

She stared at him. She couldn't help but focus on the deities' conversation, and answering Gabriel's question did not occur to her.

"Weneell," Bella was saying, "you didn't help Alim, did you? If you had, then I'd have told you, and we wouldn't have needed to come all this way."

Tendrils of black magic were oozing out of Plagg's body. His eyes were reduced to thin slits. His growling grew louder.

Contretemps, sitting in a tree, as the snake boy crawled under the ground.

"Can she make two Akuma at once?" Nathalie murmured.

Gabriel nodded.

"Yes. She has to recharge between the two, and they are usually on the weak side, since she spreads her magic. But she can."

There was nothing weak about a time-traveller.

The pink Kwami giggled.

"You didn't really give it a lot of thought until now, did you? I mean, I know you did, but you
really didn't think."

"BELLA!" his brother thundered.

She rolled her eyes.

"Fine, fine, since we came aaaaall this way and I reaaaaaally want to get home and have the internet again, I guess I can tell you."

Plagg kept circling her, so slowly it looked like he was drifting.

Gabriel closed his eyes. Nathalie swallowed. The pieces were starting to click.

"You don't get it, do you?" she told Plagg. "'Why was Contretemps here?', 'he wasn't supposed to be here'... Why wouldn't he have been here? He could go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted!"

_Idiot. You are an idiot_, Nathalie told herself.

"You keep trying to make a timeline of what happened. Ladybug comes here. Ladybug leaves. Ladybug fights Contretemps a town away from here and jumps through time. Ladybug reappears months later. Ladybug goes missing. But that's all from her perspective."

"What did you do?" Plagg repeated once again, in a lifeless murmur.

Bella raised an arm as a human would have raised a finger.

"It starts in 2010, a little after the the cobra Akuma. I create Contretemps," she explained. She tilted her arm to the side. "Contretemps travels back through time to Ladybug's last known location, namely here, and follows her to the next town. I pick a date for him to get defeated, in 2011, or was it 2012? He travels to that future date, and watches another version of himself fight Ladybug and lose. He waits for her to send his alternate deakumatized self on his merry way, then he kills her while she is powerless. Then he goes back to 2010, attacks Ladybug a town away from here, sends them both to 2012 and goes through the 'defeat and deakumatization' part of the timeline. He goes on his merry way, and she stays there and dies," she explained, punctuating each sentence with a tilt of the arm. "And then, I wait until 2012 and make sure to keep Alim away from Brazil on the date of her disappearance, so he has an alibi."

Silence fell.

"I can draw a flowchart," she offered.

###
Sometimes, the answers you got were not the answers you wanted.

Nathalie watched Plagg attack Bella. He didn't pounce on her, like earlier, but straight through her, which seemed to have more of an impact than an actual collision. Tendrils of violet magic oozed out of her back. She looked nauseous. Plagg flipped in the air and lunged at her again, crushing her against the ground. She squealed. He was still growling, but the sound was now barely audible.

Could a Kwami be hurt? Nathalie wondered. Could they be killed? They weakened if they lacked food, she knew that much. But could they be hurt?

Bella vanished.

Plagg, who had been pushing her down, smashed into the dirt, then looked up in confusion. Nathalie heard a clicking noise coming from Gabriel. He had just closed the electrum box. He was calm, unperturbed.

"She's lying," he stated, pushing the box into his pocket.

Plagg floated up, stunned. Nathalie stared at Gabriel. She did not know what to say. Was that denial, or did he know something she didn't, something even Plagg did not suspect? The Kwami was willing to believe his sister, and he knew her much better than Gabriel ever would.

He clicked his tongue.

"She's lying," he repeated, walking to the car as if nothing had happened. He opened the door. "There are gaps in that story the size of the Grand Canyon."

He waited there. Plagg zipped through the windscreen and sat on the dashboard, ears perked up. Nathalie joined them, climbing into the passenger seat. She put her tablet down on her knees, screen down, and held it there with clenched fingers.

"Gaps," she said.

Gabriel got into the car and closed the door.

"Yes. Her constant use of 'I', for a start," he explained, putting on his seat belt. "Which would imply she showed herself to Contretemps, and risked exposing Kubdel's identity to a minion who could follow her back to him." - He started the car and signaled to the left, even though it was four in the morning in the middle of nowhere and there was no other car to signal to. - "Kubdel being seemingly genuine when he told Adrien he did not know what had happened to Alice, yet having an alibi prepared for the event. Relying on a time-traveler when Hawk Moth is unlikely to be able to control a minion operating in the future or past."

Nathalie envied his self-possession.

Anyone else would have felt first, and thought second. Who could hear 'I killed your wife' and focus on the technicalities rather than the grief?

Plagg slid closer to the wheel so he could listen better. His ears were turned in his direction.

Gabriel started driving.
"More importantly," he went on, "she has nothing to gain from telling us the truth. It doesn't benefit her in the slightest. On the contrary: she just sacrificed what little freedom I was willing to allow her. With that in mind, the question is 'what is in it for her?'."

Plagg turned his back to them and looked at the road.

"Maybe she just wants to pour salt into the wound."

"She could have dragged this out to the end, and taunted us the entire way there. Which would have been more rewarding?"

Plagg paused, then looked at him over his shoulder. Nathalie couldn't read his face. All she saw was a black silhouette with pointed ears. The Kwami didn't add anything.

Gabriel leaned back in his seat, strangely relaxed.

"So. Why does she want us to turn back? How does it align with her goals?" he asked. "What is she hiding?"

Nathalie mulled over that.

She had watched and rewatched the videos of Alice and Tikki brainstorming in her hotel room. Something had not been adding up back then - enough for Alice to analyze and obsess over every little detail - and something wasn't adding up now.

"It's too convoluted a story," she said. "She dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's, yet she didn't go into details. She never gave us information we did not know already. She just built upon what we had."

Gabriel did darken a little at that point. He kept looking at the road.

"Exactly. She doesn't have anything tangible."

The headlights were bright enough for his features to be distinguishable. She watched his expression turn vacant.

While the natural course of the conversation would have been how tangible remains would have been, Nathalie did not feel inclined to mention it.

"You are taking things very calmly," she commented.

It took him a second to answer.

"I'm sorry?" he asked, puzzled.

"I expected a… different reaction," she told him. "And I'm sure so did she."

He shrugged.

"There was no point taking that bait. It would be like getting angry at Tinkerbell for attempting to get Wendy shot. The only emotion Bella has left to feel is spite. The good parts of her no longer have room to fit."

Plagg hunched over on the dashboard, but said nothing.

Gabriel took a deep breath.
"I'll find a hotel," he announced. "It might be a long drive. You should try to rest."

###

"Now come on, kids, don't you think the duct tape is a little excessive?" Anne-Laure whined.

She flopped on her chair, wiggling her ankles to try and pry the tape that bound them to the legs of the seat loose. She didn't manage to: her thighs were also tightly wrapped up, as well as her torso and arms.

"NO," Ladybug and Volpina snapped.

The fox heroine was pacing, staring at a mobile phone she had gotten from the bag on her dirt bike. She had been trying to call Francesca, with little success.

"Can someone at least feed me?" Anne-Laure complained. "I was having a perfectly fine breakfast before you kids butted in."

"You can have breakfast later in jail," Ladybug grumbled. "They'll give one to you, you won't even have to steal it."

Adrien turned to Marinette's parents and Aurélie, who were gaping at the scene, what with the whole 'assault and sequestration of a stranger' thing. It occurred to him that maybe clarifying the identity of the squatter slash prisoner would be wise.

"This is Anne-Laure Lenoir," he explained. "An… acquaintance of my father. Marinette might have mentioned her and her involvement in..." - He gestured. - "Everything."

Sabine and Tom tensed. They both gave Anne-Laure hostile glares. Aurélie only grew more confused. Adrien grimaced. She was supposed to know everything, now, but it was the kind of 'everything' that could be condensed into a single discussion with Nathalie. Concealing the fact that Gabriel might be going to prison had not been an option, and once you admitted that Gabriel was facing prison time, you had to explain what he had done, and then why he had done it, and so on, and so on. Yet, Nathalie had glossed over some parts of the story, or just forgotten them. Since Aurélie was more of a listener than a conversationalist, she had not discussed the specifics of what she had been told.

"She's the one who tried to torture Hawk Moth for information," he said, uneasy. It felt strange to discuss those topics with civilians.

"Oh," Aurélie murmured.

"Come oooon," Anne-Laure protested. "That wasn't anywhere close to torture. I was just roughing him up a little."

"HE HAD A RUPTURED PANCREAS AND SEVERE INTERNAL BLEEDING," Ladybug shouted.

Adrien was out of anger for the day. His only available emotion at the moment was resignation. He gave a faint smile to Aurélie and Marinette's parents.
"She also makes my dad look like the poster child for accountability."

Tom sighed and turned away, getting his phone out of his pocket.

"Well, we're calling the police," he muttered to himself.

Volpina's ears turned his way.

"NO! No no no no no! No police!" she exclaimed, whirling to him. Then she realized how keeping a criminal from the cops might be perceived. "Not here. Magic in the house. I bring her to the police."

Miss Lenoir grew even more indignant, and launched into a tirade Adrien understood nothing of, because it was in fast-paced Italian. Volpina argued back in faster paced Italian and even quicker gestures, which made even Ladybug stop and stare.

Adrien's phone started ringing.

Volpina stopped shouting at once.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll just, um, take that in the other room."

He peeked at his phone and saw the caller was an unknown number with a brazilian prefix. He all but ran to the living room to pick up.

It was Nathalie.

"Good morning, Adrien," she said, in her usual tone (or absence of one). "I just wanted to check on you, since we might not have phone signal once we travel farther north. How are you? And where are you, while I am at it?"

"TELL THE BOY HELLO," Plagg shouted from somewhere near her (possibly her shoulder, considering the volume).

"Hi Plagg! And we are in Rome. We just arrived at Miss Francesca's house, actually, and..." - He nearly told her about Anne-Laure, but that would have started a whole conversation and he had more pressing concerns. - "Where are you? Is the trip going... How is the trip going?"

Have you found anything?

His legs felt weak. He sat down on the edge of an armchair and tried to keep his breathing even.

"We are in... Let me ask. We arrived late at night, I didn't see any signs. Gabriel, where are we?"

Adrien heard his father's voice, muffled, but clear enough to understand his 'the Palácio hotel'. Nathalie let out an exasperated sigh.

"The town."

"Can I talk to him?" Adrien blurted out.

He peeked at the kitchen door, but no one had followed him. Nobody was talking, however, so he assumed they were listening in. He lowered his voice.

"Please?"
"Just a second," Nathalie answered.

There were clicking and brushing noises, a deafening scratching sound, then Gabriel picked up.

"Hello, Adrien. How are you?"

It was good to hear him.

"I'm alright! We're in Rome, well, near Rome, at the previous Volpina's house. We arrived last night."

"Already?" his father said, sounding surprised. "Is Mona's granddaughter back?"

"No, not yet. We met with Volpina. Oh. And Anne-Laure Lenoir is here."

"Is she?"

"Yes. She was squatting the house, apparently."

"That sounds like her. Tell her I'm not bailing her out of jail this time."

His son chuckled.

"Wait," he instructed, moving the phone away from his face.

He trotted to the kitchen door and peeked into the room. There was no way he would miss Anne-Laure's reaction to that. He raised a hand to get her attention.

"My father says he's not bailing you out this time," he announced, trying to swallow his smug grin.

"Tell your father I didn't need his help anyway," she retorted, sullen. "I can bail myself out just fine."

"Are you sure?" - He threw in a dramatic pause. - "If not, I can call your ex-husband for you. It would streamline the process, though I don't know if he can't bully the Italian police like he does Paris."

"Apple didn't fall far from the tree," she mumbled, rolling her eyes and pointedly ignoring him.

He smirked and returned to the sofa.

"Sorry," he told his father. "I'm back. I was just-"

"I heard," Gabriel replied. "I assume one of you kids plans to drag her to the cops?"

"Two of us. It would be three, but I'm superpowers-impaired this week."

"Well, you'll tell me all about that in a week or two, when we get back. Plagg is quite eager to return to you and give you your powers back, just so you know. I am sure he will pretend he only missed the Camembert, but you know him."

"HEY!" Plagg shouted.

"I know," Adrien murmured, smiling. Then, he remembered the reason for the call. "Dad, where are you now? How is the trip going? Did... Did you find anything?"

There was a brief silence.
"The trip is uneventful so far," his father replied.

Adrien's stomach dropped, for no reason. It wasn't bad news. It wasn't good news. It wasn't even 'news'. He couldn't tell if the ball in the pit of his stomach was disappointment or anxiety over what was to come.

"We were on the road for most of the day," Gabriel went on, "and in a helicopter before that. We're only just getting near Pacaás Novos. Now I..." - There was a shuffling noise. - "Don't know which town we are in. We drove as far as we could and stopped at the first hotel we found."

"Wait, did you just get there?" Adrien gasped, forgetting his unease. "Isn't it something like four in the morning for you?"

He hadn't done the math before.

"Five, I think."

And ten, Paris time.

"Father, get some sleep."

"We were about to. We just wanted to make sure to catch you once before we left. We're close to our… destination, and there will be phone coverage there, but not if we have to head into the national park itself."

The teenager took a deep breath.

Now, he felt anxious.

"Father…"

"Yes?"

"Just…"

Gabriel waited for him to continue. Adrien choked out the next words.

"Be careful, alright?"

"We will be," Gabriel promised. "I doubt there's anything to be concerned about. The main danger is in a box in my pocket right now. In any case, if I head out, it will be as Chat Noir. I'll have powers." - He paused. - "I'll have my sword."

That last part sounded way too much like a pleased realization.

His son made a face.

Nathalie stole the words right out of his mouth.

"Tell me you are not hoping to get a reason to use that sword," Adrien heard her say.

"No," Gabriel denied. "It's just that it has proven remarkably useless in the past, and I was merely thinking…"

She sighed. The phone moved away from Gabriel, muffling his next words. Nathalie spoke next.
"We really should be catching some sleep," she told Adrien. "Your father is clearly showing signs of fatigue. We will try to call you back when we get up, unless it's past ten, Paris time. We will not be calling past that point, so don't wait and do go to bed at a decent time."

"You can call me later!" he protested. "I never go to bed that early."

"I am well aware, but the main reason for that is eating cheese slices next to me. Be a reasonable boy and develop healthy sleeping habits while you still can."

You couldn't hear pointed looks, but there was no doubt she was shooting one at Gabriel.

"Alright," Adrien sighed. "Nathalie?"

"Yes?"

"Tell dad I…" - He corrected himself. - "I love you all. Okay?"

He knew none of them were equipped to answer that kind of emotional display with the same words, so he added a quick 'goodnight!' to avoid an uncomfortable silence.

There was a silence all the same.

"We love you too, Adrien," Nathalie replied, sounding frustrated. "We do." - She paused. - "No, Plagg, you don't 'suppose'!"

She huffed.

"It is really getting late," she said. "Goodnight, Adrien."

He smiled.

"Goodnight, Nathalie. Talk to you soon."

He heard Gabriel say goodnight, and Plagg gasp a 'hey!' followed by a hasty 'goodbye'. Then, she hung up.

He stared at his phone for a moment, then returned to the kitchen, where a tense conversation was being held in whispers.

###

"Alright, I think that will work," Ladybug said, moving away from the car.

They had removed everything that could be grabbed, thrown or otherwise used as a distraction, from their suitcases to the charging cables of their electronics. The Audi needed to be an acceptable substitute for a police car, after all. Capturing a fugitive was one thing. Transporting a fugitive all the way to Rome was another, when all you had at your disposal was one dirt bike and one magical yoyo. It was hard to propel yourself over the roofs when there were no roofs around. Motorcycles and unwilling passengers didn't mix. So, they had convened that Tom would drive Anne-Laure, Volpina and Ladybug to the city.

Marinette's parents were understandably uneasy about the whole thing, but seemed to have
accepted that a superhero's job came with some craziness. Aurélie was nervous, but attempted not to show it, even though she was pacing in front of the house. Adrien, who had been helping empty the car, joined her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, don't worry about me. This just takes some getting used to."

"Just so you know, this is a 'citizen's arrest', not sequestration. Because we're bringing her to the police."

He had read up on the difference, in excruciating detail, over the previous days. Hiding someone in a basement and faking their death was very much not a citizen's arrest.

"Well, that's good to hear," Aurélie replied. "I don't know how I would have handled being an accomplice. I was only ever accessory to insurance fraud before, and unwittingly at that."

He gaped at her.

She smiled.

"Nathalie's father once convinced me my car had been stolen, and I reported it as such. Our insurance company sent us a check, we bought a new car…"

"It wasn't stolen?"

"I found it collecting dust a city block away, six months later. He had forgotten where he had parked it."

"He… sounds like… an interesting person," Adrien commented, gobsmacked.

"Oh, yes, very much. But-"

Volpina interrupted them.

"Chat Noir! Here, you have this," she said, shoving her keys into her hands. She pointed at the door. "You wait for us with mrs Sabine and mrs Sancoeur, okay?" - Their real identities were still kept somewhat secret, so she had assigned Aurélie her daughter's surname. - "No touching the old clock, because sometimes it punches people. And don't go inside… into… to the basement. Traps. There is lots of traps."

"Um, are you sure it's okay?" he wondered, uncomfortable with staying at someone's place in their absence. "Won't Francesca mind?"

"No, no. Nobody lives here. Master Fu just keeps his books here and stays here when he travels. It's a hiding place."

"Oh. Oh, fine, then."

He pocketed the keys then frowned.

Ladybug was tending to the car. Tom was talking to her. Sabine was carrying suitcases inside. Aurélie was next to him. Volpina was in front of him.

Nobody was watching Anne-Laure.
He ran to the kitchen.  
"Goddamnit," he groaned.  

The chair was lying on the ground. The duct tape around it was cut, with a few gummy bears glued to it. The box of cereal that had been on the table, within reach of Anne-Laure, was spilled on the floor. You could see wet bite marks in its cardboard.  

"I checked she didn't have the candy cane on her," he told Marinette when she bumped into his side. "I swear I did."  

"I believe you. I checked too."  

###  

Nathalie woke to the sound of the shower running.  

She shifted in her bed, her whole body aching. She had slept like a stone, even though the mattress' springs were pushing into her back, but she still felt exhausted. It was sunny outside, and the room was brightly lit, with its beige curtains barely filtering the light. The room was much warmer than it had been when they had arrived, so she assumed it was at least noon. Not that it mattered: they were in no hurry. There was no point running to the village Alice had vanished from, if they had to wait for the night to fall so Nathalie could transform without witnesses.  

The room was empty. Plagg was nowhere in sight, but his plate of cheese was empty, so she assumed had run off to find more. There was more than enough of it in their pickup truck. Gabriel's backpack was resting against the wall. The bed she had seen him sleep in looked untouched.  

She shifted in her twin bed until she found a comfortable position, then looked absently at the bathroom door. She could hear the stream of the water and faint scrubbing noises. She could picture it all. She bit her lower lip, feeling her blood rush to her cheeks. Her breathing quickened. She tried to keep it even, rolling onto her back, then to her side, then back. It didn't help. Whatever she did, memories invited themselves. Images, too.  

*Now is not the time for this,* she told herself, sitting up and running her hands over her face.  

There were other things to focus on. Were her tablet and phone charged? Was her power bank charged? Were the three other ones - the ones she hadn't used during the trip - still in her backpack? She checked her emails (the hotel had slow wifi but wifi nonetheless). She checked the time. Three in the afternoon.  

The shower stopped.  

She pressed the tip of her tongue against the roof of her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. She tried not to pay attention to the noises she could hear - footsteps, shuffling cloth, zippers. It didn't take long for Gabriel to get out of the bathroom.  

He had changed clothes, for a fresh set of hiking pants and a simple green t-shirt that suited him much better than his usual jackets. He was still himself, however, despite the Miraculous on his finger. His back was still straight, his shoulders still stiff, his chin high. He had no cufflinks to tug on, so he he adjusted the strap of his watch instead. His hair was wet, not waxed, but still combed.
She blinked mental pictures away.


He greeted her with a nod.

"I didn't expect you to be up this early," he commented, pausing by the bathroom door with a mildly puzzled expression.

Nathalie looked down at her phone and turned the screen off.

"Ten hours of sleep is much more than I usually get," she replied. "And we should be preparing to leave. We should call Adrien, too, while he is still awake."

"I will do that. We." - He hesitated. "How are you feeling?"

For the briefest instant, for no reason she could pinpoint, she felt herself tense. It passed when she thought about his question, instead of reacting to it. Considering their plans for the day and Bella's confession, Nathalie should have been the one asking that question.

"I am fine. How are you?"

"I'm alright."

It sounded sincere.

He checked his watch and pursed his lips, then collected his backpack and sat down on his bed. Nathalie watched him take his meds out of the bag and pop one pill out of its blister pack. She poured him a glass of water.

"Thank you," he said, before drinking half of it to wash the pill down.

He had been religious about taking the meds, even though their jumping of timezones had not allowed him to follow a strict schedule. At least, he did not seem to let the circumstances distract him from his treatment. They could have been a convenient excuse to drop it.

He put the glass down on the nightstand, then stretched his neck and rested his elbows on his knees, hunching over. He no longer looked 'alright', merely tired. She sat down next to him.

"We should leave in about two hours," he murmured, idly twisting his wedding band on his finger. "It will leave us ample time to get there and do some recon before we proceed. Hopefully, we will get the answers we need and it will be the end of it." - He let go of his wedding ring and toyed with the Cat Miraculous instead. "I will be giving you your offensive powers back, this time. We don't know what we might find out there."

She nodded.

Bella was hiding something. There had to be something to find at the end of the road, and it was not just Alice's body. There had to be real danger out there - Adrien was sure terrified of it - but, to Nathalie, it didn't register. She just wanted everything to be over.

Gabriel, however, had been expecting danger from the start. He had even prepared for specific eventualities. Wasn't that why he had stolen the magical tracking watch?
Nathalie realized why Bella's impromptu confession had not fazed him.

She frowned.

"Do you think Bella found Zharr?"

"I think it's a distinct possibility. That would certainly explain why she attempted to distract us. Her goal was to break out of her Miraculous, which she considers a prison. It stands to reason that she would attempt to free her siblings too, if given an opportunity to do so. In any case, she would most certainly make sure not to let Zharr's Miraculous end up in the Guardian's hands."

"That leaves quite a few options. If the Miraculous is in the area, then she expects her brother to be caught unaware by our arrival, or she wouldn't be trying to make us turn back. So, she couldn't warn him."

"She didn't try," Gabriel corrected.

Nathalie frowned. He bridged his hands.

"I gave her a smartphone with internet access and a screen recorder," he explained. "I installed monitoring software on every other computer and tablet in the house, and recorded every outgoing phone call. She didn't try."

Of course.

"Then she didn't risk it or - and that is more likely - she does not know how to contact him. Maybe she didn't find him, then. Maybe she merely knows the Miraculous is in the area. But then, why wouldn't Kubdel have tracked it down, in five years?"

She paused.

Oh.

"If I had to hazard a guess," Gabriel started, "Bella-"

"Didn't tell Kubdel, either because she didn't want to, or because she couldn't. Kwami can't disclose the identities of Miraculous holders."

He leaned down and took the box that contained the tracking watch out of his pocket. He opened it on the silver watch in its transparent plastic wrapping. He pressed the latch. The peacock hologram flew up, tail folded.

"There is no sign of one so far, but we won't be going in blind."

He snapped the device shut.

Nathalie watched him put it away.

She wasn't surprised, not really. She had known he had been focusing on the 'Firebird' for weeks. He had even sent her his detective work. He would not have expended that much effort for no reason.

The prospect of facing another Miraculous Holder didn't frighten her as much as it should have. It didn't frighten her, period. It was just like the mysterious dangers she should have been preparing for: abstract, intangible.
"I highly doubt we will be attacked," Gabriel added. "I visited the place over twenty times in the last three years. I stayed for days, and it was no secret I was looking for my wife. If someone had been monitoring the place, they would have attacked me back then, when I was alone and vulnerable, not now that we are coming with a Miraculous. If Zharr was ever here, he clearly moved on. In any case, it is not the Peacock we are looking for. If we find signs of his presence, it will be up to Fu, or whoever replaces him, to investigate."

Nathalie closed her eyes for a second. She breathed in.

"And if the Peacock is responsible for Alice's disappearance?"

He shook his head.

"We stop wherever she did," he murmured. "I'm done chasing shadows."

Silence fell. Nathalie's hands longed to touch him, to press his shoulder, to run through his hair, to pull him to her and hold him. She clasped them on her knees. He watched her hands as she did. He did not comment, but he pursed his lips for a second. His gaze strayed back to the floor. He looked resigned.

A minute went by.

"I'd rather not have you endure recurrent Akumatizations either," he told her, turning back to her. "So there would be no point wasting time on unrelated investigations. The shorter and the more to the point I can keep this ch-"

She snarled at the concern in his voice.

She did not know where that rage came from nor why it burst out like that. She pushed it back, locked it up, threw away the key.

"I don't have to 'endure' anything," she ranted, with mild irritation. "The only thing I mind is the memory loss. Seriously, Gabriel, you have more of a problem with this than I do."

He opened his mouth but said nothing. He breathed in, wet his lower lip, then grimaced.

"It… changes you," he explained, uneasy. He swallowed. "It's uncanny."

Nathalie tried to remember how she acted while transformed. She had heard her own voice on the footage they had recorded. It sounded dry, but not unusually so. Yet, something had to be terribly wrong, or Gabriel wouldn't have been so visibly unsettled.

It took her a second to figure out that 'dry' was no longer usual to him. That was what distressed him so.

She softened. Immediately, she saw some tension leave him. He leaned towards her, so focused on finding the words to express what he meant that she knew he had not noticed what he was doing. He never did. She was tempted to make him realize he had moved - whether by shifting away or leaning closer, she didn't know - but decided not to. Instead, she watched him raise a hand and gesture in the air, lost in thought.

He stopped. He discarded whatever long explanation he had been composing.

"It strips you of everything you are." he said.
That was enough. There was no need for him to elaborate. She understood.

She gave him a faint smile.

"Most people wouldn't see the difference," she joked, or maybe commented. She was not sure there was humor in that.

The hand he had been waving between them moved to her temple and pushed a strand of hair away. He leaned closer still.

"I do," he murmured.

She closed the distance between them.

They both pulled away at the first brush of skin.

"I can't," she blurted out.

Gabriel was calmer. He was sitting straight, at arm's distance. His hand was back on his knee. His resigned expression had returned.

Nathalie ran a hand over her face, breathing fast, her skin feeling clammy.

It was all finally clicking.

It had been such a flimsy lie, that he needed to be alone to fix himself, that being on his own would be better for him. In what universe did that make sense? When had solitude ever helped him? How was separating better than having his significant other by his side, supporting him through his recovery? What could walking away accomplish, compared to staying? The choice wasn't as clean cut and obvious than Nathalie had made it out to be. Maybe there was no right one. But, if you only considered what was good for Gabriel, the scales were not tilted towards separation. It had never been about him.

It had only partly been about keeping Adrien away.

She had not been willing to admit to herself that she was the one who needed to leave.

"I can't," she repeated, trying to control her voice.

She wanted nothing but to crawl into his arms, but she couldn't bear his touch. She finally understood why his concern elicited nothing but rage: it came too late, after too much. Maybe the pills he took could mend him, but they wouldn't mend her.

"You lied to me," she cried.

He didn't answer. His hand moved by an inch, then fell back on his leg. He clutched his knee.

"You used me," she added.

He looked pained. His lips moved, but his voice was too quiet to be heard.

She was growing quieter too.

"You tricked me."

"I know," he murmured.
He reached out to touch her cheek, hesitated, and ended up putting his hand over hers, on the mattress. That was acceptable. He had not leaned closer, merely extended his arm.

"I know," he repeated. "I'm sorry."

Of course, he knew. That was why he had never tried to change her mind.

She took a deep breath.

She clutched his hand.

She burst into tears.

###

Someone knocked on Adrien's window at one in the morning.

He wasn't altogether opposed to knocks on his window at one in the morning. That being said, the knocks on his window were usually Ladybug's, and he knew for a fact she was in bed. Sabine had enforced their bedtime and would be watching her daughter to prevent any escape. On top of the whole 'sleeping girlfriend' thing, Adrien was staying on the fourth floor of an Italian hotel, not at Nathalie's nor at the mansion. It made the list of people susceptible to knock on his window pretty short. Actually, it made it a white page.

Maybe it was Volpina.

All he could see looking out was the reflection of his hotel room.

He put his laptop down on the bed, walked to the door, turned the light off and looked outside. He realized that years at the mansion had made him forget that curtains were a thing, and a thing that could be closed, at that. Also, it wasn't Volpina who was sitting on on the windowsill, but Anne-Laure.

He went to the window and opened it.

"I should just shove you," he told her.

"No need to be snarky," she mumbled. "Can I come in?"

He closed the window.

She teleported inside.

"What do you want?" he sighed.

It had been a long day. He was still, for lack of a better term, pissed. It was bad enough that she had escaped, but she had escaped because they had failed to watch her and to check the room they were holding her in for magical candy. He was done with her egotistical, immature, criminal crap.

He couldn't catch her, however. She'd be gone in a blink if he moved her way.

Maybe he could appeal to her good side, if she had one.
"Well," she said, looking around, "I kind of wondered where your dad is and why you're travelling the world with your girlfriend and a bunch of strangers."

"None of your business."

"He's not in jail, is he? That would be all over the internet."

"Not yet," Adrien retorted. "It won't be long, that being said. Oh, by the way, did you know that kidnapping has a five year sentence if the victim is released in less than seven days, but thirty if they suffered a permanent injury caused by being detained?"

Anne-Laure raised her eyebrows, puzzled.

"Like, you know, a ruptured pancreas! " he snapped.

"I'm pretty sure 'permanent' means the pancreas has to be lost. The fucker still has his, right?"

Murder was starting to sound like an appealing option.

Adrien ran through some quick mental calculations. How many steps would it take to get to her and how long would it take him to do so? There wasn't much space to cover. The room wasn't cramped, but it was small. How could he distract her so she would not be ready to teleport if he lunged at her?

"Yeah, somehow I don't think it will make much of a difference to a judge. I mean, kidnapping where you don't release the victim in seven days is still twenty years, and now we'll never know if Father would have let Kubdel go."

She rolled her eyes.

"Gosh, your father isn't going to prison. He's filthy rich and he captured Hawk Moth. Chill!"

How had he ever thought that he liked her?

"How did you ever get a Miraculous?" he asked, disgusted.

He took a step towards her. She jumped backwards, landing upright on the bed, with no apparent effort.

"Young girl with shit parents and lots of potential," she replied, shrugging. "And Ladybug needed a partner. I never really knew. Fu has a convoluted thinking process."

She vanished and reappeared behind Adrien, next to the door. She flicked the lights on.

"How did the cops even find Gabe? Kubdel sold him out?"

"No. Father went to the police and confessed."

"WHAT? Why the fuck would he?"

"Because he's a better person than you are," the boy commented, sullen. "Because, sometimes, he takes responsibility for his actions. Unlike some."

The candy cane was in her sleeve, with a wristband holding it into place. It was a good place to put it if you had to hang out of fourth floor windows in the middle of the night, he supposed. Getting the artefact back would require grabbing her arm, however. The curly side was under her sleeve. If
you tugged on the candy cane, it would get stuck.

"Yeah. No. He can go and tell them eeeevetything I did. That should help. I mean, it's not like Paris' cops wouldn't believe him. I got assault charges often enough for it to be plausible."

"That's not the POINT!"

She vanished again and reappeared on the bed. She dropped into a sitting position.

"Where is Plagg, by the way?" she inquired, looking at Adrien's bare hand. "I thought he'd stick with you for a few decades."

"He's with Father," the teenager replied, getting closer to the bed. "On a trip."

Anne-Laure grinned. She wasn't relaxed, though: her every muscle was preparing to flee.

"Really? Geez, he needs to take pics." - She leaned back onto the bed. - "So, trip where?"

"Still none of your business. So. Why are you in Italy?"

He took another step forward.

"What do you think? Waiting for news of the old man. He was my mentor for ten years, you know?"

Adrien nearly bit back with a 'he must be really proud', but figured that snide remarks about one's dying teacher and colleague were a little low. He bit the inside of his cheeks and crossed his arms.

"So, you're going to stick around and wait for them to return?"

Anne-Laure's face went blank for a second, then she shrugged.

"That was the plan. Might stay at my house rather than Mona's so I don't have to run into Babyfox." - She peeked at the screen of Adrien's laptop. - "That kid is a sweetheart but she can g-"

She turned pale as a ghost. She grabbed the computer and dragged it onto her knees as carefully as if it had been about to explode. She stared at the screen. Her facade of indifference had vanished, replaced by a deadly serious expression.

"What is this?" she asked. "Where did you get this?"

Adrien narrowed his eyes. He had to think about it, because her unexpected visit had wiped his memory clean. It had been a long day but, despite the exhaustion, he had not managed to fall asleep.

At first, he had waited for Gabriel and Nathalie to call. They hadn't. Instead, they had sent him an email, a little after eleven, saying they had overslept, and had to leave the hotel. They had promised they would be safe.

After that, he had gone to bed, but tossed and turned for fifteen minutes. He was not especially eager to dream, and his worry about Gabriel and Nathalie did not help. Instead of doing the intelligent thing, namely shutting his eyes and trying to pass out anyway, he had turned his computer on and tried to find some old emails. Since he was travelling with Tikki and Marinette, and since Volpina was around, he had figured that unearthing the photographs of the previous Peacock and sharing them would be a good idea. For all he knew, Fu would be glad to get them (or Francesca, if things took a turn for the worst).
He had been checking one of Gabriel's emails: '[Firebird] 1895 photographs'.

"Um. Father found old information about the previous Peacock Miraculous holder. The Firebird. News clippings and stuff. I thought he had told you," Adrien replied.

He distinctly remembered overhearing Gabriel discussing it with her.

Anne-Laure didn't even look up.

"Shit," she said. "Holy mother fucking shit."

###

"So this is the place," Plagg murmured, looking at the village into the distance through the windshield.

It wasn't a village per se. Villages were larger. Five buildings lining a road did not qualify, at least not in Nathalie's mind. One of them was a convenience store, with vivid red walls and large white lettering painted from the roof to the ground. The others were farms, or houses. It was hard to say. There were pastures, but no animals in sight, and the fields had been harvested. The forest was spreading right behind them.

Gabriel parked by the first building (a pastel green one with a black metal roof).

"Yes," he said, sinking back into his seat with his hands still on the wheel. "This is it."

Someone leaned out of the shop's window, squinted at their car, then went back in. Farther along the road, a child ran from one house to another, with a dog trailing behind him. A light turned on in the house the child had gotten in. The orange glow of the sunset had faded, and the sky was turning a dark shade of blue.

Nathalie massaged her eyes, trying to adjust to the fading light. They ended up covered in beige grease. She had cried, it showed, and she had thrown concealer at the problem. She had done a sloppy job of it. She rubbed her fingertips together and closed her hand.

"I don't see a payphone," she commented.

The place was on the main road, and connected to both power and phone lines. She supposed she would find the phone if she followed the cable, but she did not have Plagg's eyes.

"They removed it," Gabriel explained. "It was outside the store, next to the parking spots."

He pointed in that direction, then slowly moved his finger to the right.

"From what we could find back then, she came out from the forest roughly around there," he said, extending his arm. The traced a line from the trees to the road. "There were footprints in the fields, consistent with the brand of shoes she would have been wearing, and then a second pair, which would have been a deakumatized Contretemps."

He leaned back into his seat, getting the peacock watch out of his pocket and opening it. The hologram burst out of it, casting a faint blue light over them. The peacock's train was folded.
Gabriel stared at it, frowning.

Plagg landed on his shoulder.

"You know that won't work if Zharr's hero is not transformed, right?"

"I'm well aware," his old chosen replied.

He looked at the time on the car's dashboard, compared it with his watch, and looked at the store. He drummed his fingers on the wheel. A moment later, the man who had peeked out of the show window earlier got out of the building and locked the door behind him. He crossed the road and entered one of the houses.

That was their cue.

Nathalie retrieved her tablet.

Gabriel freed Bella.

###

It had been dark out when Alice, dragging a confused and exhausted Stéphane Gérard, had finally reached a road. Her pants and shoes were muddy, her t-shirt was torn in three places, and she limped.

She had helped Hawk Moth's victim to sit down against the wall of the convenience store, then mumbled a 'wait here'. Then she had tried to knock on the store's door, to no avail, and had gone from house to house to beg for water. She had explained (in a broken mix of Portuguese, Spanish and English, and with Tikki whispering the odd translation) that a tourist had passed out in the forest and needed help.

That was true enough.

She had returned to her companion with a bottle of water, as well as bread and fruits, then collapsed next to him. He was exhausted, but that was to be expected from a sixty-something man who had been forced to hike through the rainforest right after an Evilization.

"That lady can't drive but she'll wake her husband up so he can take you to the closest town," she had told him, handing him the bottle of water. "You were in São Miguel, weren't you? What's the last thing you remember?"

Water seemed to help the man focus. He exhaled, running a hand over his face.

"Bookstore," he muttered. "I… was arguing with the owner, because I had preordered book seven of the Black Spire series, and he hadn't gotten it yet. It's been out for a… Nevermind. It's a long drive to town and a got frustrated and… I got to my car… I sat down… I don't know, actually. Maybe I fainted. I just woke up in the forest where you found me. This is crazy… I don't remember travelling there at all."

"You know, weird things have been going happening around the forest," she had replied, trying to distract him from the questions his predicament raised. "I mean, just two days ago, I met kids who said they had been turned to snakes. There's just strange rumors all over, like when Hawk Moth
started attacking Paris, fifteen years ago. People would wake up in strange places, said something
had happened to them, and nobody believed them." - She had shrugged. "It wouldn't surprise me if
there was magic at play here."

He had groaned.

"I sure hope not. When I left Paris, I thought I'd never have to worry about magic again."

"So you left to come live here?" she had asked. "I assumed you were a tourist."

"Oh, I am. I have a little mobile home, I travel around. What else is retirement for, right? Are you
a tourist? And what were you doing in the forest, by the way? I have to say it's a stroke of luck that
you were there to rescue me, but a French rescuer on top of that? What are the odds?"

The man had been fishing for information.

"Oh, I'm an entomologist," Alice had replied, with her most naive smile. "I am utterly fascinated
by the variety of species native to the rainforest, and I take frequent trips to the area to study them.
Do you know the forest is teeming with undiscovered species? There is still a chance of finding
creatures nobody ever caught before."

"I... see," he had murmured.

She had patted her pockets.

"Is there family you'd wanna call?" she had asked, pointing at the payphone. "I-"

A car had parked next to them. The woman who had given her the water and the food came out of
it, and started talking to the two of them. Alice, clearly, could not understand a word she was
saying.

"She's asking if you need to be driven to São Miguel too," her companion translated.

"Oh! No, no," Alice had replied, drawing a tent with her hands. She had pointed at the forest in the
distance. "I have a campsite with all my things. I'll rest a bit and get back there."

The answer had puzzled everyone, but some frantic gesturing and random Spanish had convinced
them to leave her behind, in the end.

She had waved at the car as it left, until it had been out of sight, then her expression had turned
dark.

"Alright," she had told Tikki, collecting some fruit and bread and sharing them with the Kwami.
"We recharge and hitchhike our way out. We can't go back to São Miguel."

That was where Contretemps had ambushed them.

Tikki had stuffed a piece of bread into her mouth and nodded, trying to chew as fast as she could.
She looked a bit nauseated.

"We ended up a lot farther than I thought," she had commented, peeking at the forest. "Hopefully,
it's far enough for Hawk Moth not to catch up with us too quickly."

Alice had nodded. She had taken a knife out of her pocket and cut a passion fruit in two, placing it
on a windowsill and helping Tikki climb there. The Kwami had dipped a piece of bread into the
juice and nibbled on it.
"We're definitely leaving the main roads," her chosen had mused.

She had checked her phone. It had no signal. She had patted her pockets and gotten a wallet out, then counted her coins.

"I'll have to get some change so I can call Gabriel before we go," she had sighed. "I don't think this will cover an international c-"

Tikki had raised her head at her sudden silence. Alice was shaking.

"Is something wrong?" the Kwami had exclaimed.

With absolute horror, Alice had pointed at the store window, or rather at the flyer taped to it. It was an advertisement for a concert, with a picture of the band, the address, and the date. It was set in 2012.

###

Tablet in hand, Nathalie watched Alice push coins into the payphone as she talked, and talked, and talked to Gabriel. Each coin she pushed into the device fell right into a drawer Tikki had unlocked before Alice had surrendered her Miraculous and sent her on her way. She pushed them right back into the coin slot. The conversation could have lasted for hours. It certainly felt like it had.

"No signs of Contretemps yet," Nathalie commented, after Alice repeated - for the fourth time - how a year and a half had been six hours to her. "I think we can safely assume Bella lied."

She had been filming Alice, for the most part, with none of the back and forth and multiple angles recording they had done during Nathalie's other Akumatizations. The goal was to watch the events unfold, nothing more. She had still checked for Contretemps' presence, since Bella had sworn that he had been watching her every move. Of course, he was elusive, but he had demonstrated a fondness for hiding in trees, which was where Nathalie had looked for him. He hadn't shown up.

Gabriel - Chat Noir - nodded. Seeing his suspicions confirmed didn't faze him. He had been too certain he was right. In any case, he was fully focused on the video and his wife, and hadn't displayed a single emotion other than mild interest since they had transformed. If you paid attention, you could see his pupils expand and contract. That was it.

Eventually, he started mouthing every word Alice said.

The facade cracked.

So did his voice.

"Yes," he murmured, at the same time as Alice. "I'll be waiting. I love you too."

They watched her hang up. He took a deep, shaky breath.

Nothing happened.

His breath came out in a mirthless chuckle. His tension vanished at once. His shoulders drooped.

"Well, I did tell her to wait," he joked, with a frozen, dead smile. "I don't know what I was
expecting. Please skip a few minutes.

Nathalie obeyed, and caught Alice walking away. The woman was looking around, making sure nobody was around. Once sure that she was alone, she tiptoed to the largest tree in sight, making sure to only walk on rocky ground or wood. She climbed the tree, hiding between its branches until you couldn't see her from the ground.

"Come on," Gabriel whispered, wrapping his arm around Nathalie's waist without quite touching her.

She stiffened.

"No, I am not climbing anything," she ground out, feeling like her whole body had turned to lead. Akumatization only muted her feelings up to a point.

He looked bewildered. Had he not been aware of her fear of heights?

"I'm not going up there!" she snapped.

Gabriel got it. He let her go.

"Let's just see when she comes down, alright?"

Nathalie nodded, and jumped from hour to hour, circling the tree with her tablet pointed up to make sure Alice had not moved. At the fourth hour, she did not manage to find her. She rewinded by thirty minutes, and spotted blonde hair between the branches. She moved forward by fifteen minutes, then back by five, and another five, until she caught Alice slowly climbing down the tree.

They watched her drop to the ground and survey her surroundings, then carefully walk away, eyes darting from place to place to make sure she was not being observed.

A yellow blur snatched her from the ground.

It took less than a second. A blink, and she was gone. It took Nathalie several tries to pause on the right frame. Even then, she couldn't tell what she was looking at.

"Bee?" Gabriel blurted out.

###
Nathalie stepped back, tablet pointed at a paused image of Alice, to get a clearer picture of her surroundings. Gabriel stumbled after her, eyes riveted to the sky. It was silly, really. There was nothing to see up there. There hadn't been anything to see up there in three years. She cleared her throat. He blinked, then looked back at the tablet.

She replayed the scene they had just watched, all three seconds of it. A dash of yellow sped through the screen, coming from behind Alice's back, colliding with her and snatching her away. Nathalie paused the footage and turn, trying to follow their trail. Gabriel leaned against her back, put his hand over hers and tilted the tablet up.

Alice and her assailant were high up in the air already. It was a man in a yellow and black striped costume, with a yellow and black domino mask, who had hooked his arms under Alice's shoulders to lift her up. Nathalie circled them. She heard Gabriel follow her. As Chat Noir, his footsteps were inaudible. That being said, he was breathing too fast.

In the frozen picture, Alice's pose was almost comical: mouth wide open, chin buried into her chest, hair flattened against her face, legs flailing. Almost. It didn't take long to realize she had been gasping for air. Her arms were pulled up and her ribcage compressed. She had not been given an opportunity to react, let alone defend herself. Her abductor, however, was perfectly focused. He was looking straight ahead, at the sky, body stretched from head to toe as he shot up into the air.

"Well, now we know where Waspp and David vanished to," Gabriel murmured. He pressed the 'play' icon with a clawed finger, in a nonchalant gesture that would have been more convincing had his breathing not been so loud. The video started again. Alice and her attacker shot out of sight. Gabriel pushed the tablet up, then to the side, not bothering to try to follow them.

Instead, he paused the video again and scanned the sky, making Nathalie turn with her tablet. She narrowed her eyes.

"There is no way to preserve that momentum in an upwards trajectory," he explained. "He would have slowed down and gathered strength before speeding off again."

His breathing was returning to normal.

"You seem familiar with the technique."

"Queen Bee's favorite trick," he told her. "Swoop in like a bird of prey, ensure you smack into the target's back to knock the air out of their lungs. It relies on the Miraculous heroes' enhanced resistance to blows, and on extensive training. Hit someone at the wrong angle, and their body won't bend. Hit them too hard, and you will shatter their bones. Meet resistance, and you will crash."

He kept moving the tablet until he found two human shapes in the distance. They were not so high up in the sky that you could not distinguish them, but still way too far from the ground for Nathalie's comfort.

They had changed trajectory, Nathalie and Gabriel discovered as they moved closer. They had been moving along the houses and road. Now, they were turned towards the forest. Alice was no longer
stunned: her body was tense, her legs were bent, her hands were clutched around the bee supervillain's wrists. From the ground, on a frozen image, you couldn't tell if she had been trying to free herself or to hold on.

Nathalie pushed 'play'.

They flew away, but now slowly enough for her to follow them with the camera. Alice was thrashing and kicking, and the Bee was struggling to move in a straight line. He flew up, wobbling, until she seemed to calm down, then sped towards the forest. He made it to the trees.

There was a flash of yellow light.

Their silhouettes separated and careened to the ground.

###

Adrien paced in Marinette's hotel room, watching Ladybug try to call Chat Noir - Gabriel as 'Chat Noir' - and failing. It was her seventh attempt, on top of six tries to connect to Hawk Moth's Miraculous. Meanwhile, his own phone kept repeating 'this person cannot be reached at the moment, please leave a message'. Both Nathalie and Gabriel's numbers were going straight to voicemail. They had been calling them, over and over again (even Marinette's parents, who probably didn't understand what was going on). Adrien had sent emails.

They had a three words warning for Gabriel and Nathalie, and they couldn't get in touch with them. If Anne-Laure had arrived just one hour earlier, they would have managed.

Miss Lenoir was pacing too, twisting the cursed candy cane between her fingers. She looked like she was contemplating teleporting all the way to Brazil. Adrien idly wondered if it was doable. He would probably get a few more holes in his body along the way, if he went and 'sphinched' himself by teleporting through things again, but maybe it would be worth it.

In the back of his mind, he kept running through his conversation with her, after she had grabbed his laptop.

She had kept staring at the laptop's screen and swearing under her breath. She she had not even noticed him joining her and snapping a 'what is going on? '. He had watched her crush her fists against her mouth and mutter a steady flow of 'fucks'.

He had grabbed her shoulder.

"What. Is. Going. ON?" he had repeated, trying to get her to turn to him.

She had gestured at the screen, mouthing words without making a sound, then taken a deep breath. She had raked her hands through her hair.

"Okay. Are those photographs genuine? " she had asked. "They're not more recent than they look, right?"

Adrien had frowned.

"I don't think so? Father thinks they are real, in any case."
She had cringed and buried her face in her hands.

"Jesus fucking Christ. I've been had. I've been so entirely fucking had."

It had been clear that she was stuck on a loop.

"Anne-Laure!" Adrien had shouted, which had snapped her out of it. He had lowered his voice not to attract the attention of the entire hotel. "What is the deal with the pictures?"

She had waved at the screen. Not at the images of the transformed Firebird, as he had expected, but at the superheroine's civilian form, from an article in the Syracuse Herald about charity projects she had organized. Her Miraculous was visible on the picture (or at least, a peacock-themed brooch was). There were more photos of her wearing the same piece of jewelry, but Anne-Laure had not been looking at those. She had not even been looking at the Miraculous holder.

"That's David," she had said, pointing at the teenage boy standing next to the woman.

Cold dread had washed over Adrien. He knew that name.

"That's David," Anne-Laure had insisted. "That's the kid I gave the bee Miraculous to."

"W… N-no. That's not possible," he had stammered. "Those pics are a century old. Nobody lives that long."

"It's possible with magic," she had retorted. "It's possible with time travel. It's possible with a bloody Miraculous. They prolong life!"

Adrien faintly remembered pulling back on the bed, and staring in horror as she talked.

"The more you transform, the less you age. That's why Fu is something like a million years old. That's why your mother looked younger than your dad, because she kept hers longer."

That was information on the Miraculous he had not been privy too, and it sounded insane. He had kept shaking his head.

"He was a nice kid," Anne-Laure had ranted. "Perfect for the job. A little too eager to do good for Waspp, but she liked him all the same."

Adrien had turned the laptop towards him and zoomed on the teenager.

"Are you sure? Maybe they just look alike. That's more likely than an immortal Miraculous holder."

"I trained that kid for three months and I thought I'd gotten him killed! I remember his bloody face!"

He had let that sink in. His thought process had roughly followed Anne-Laure's next words.

"Godamnit. Of course he was perfect. He had Zharr to tell him exactly how to act so I would hand Waspp over."

Two minutes later, Adrien had been banging on the Dupain-Cheng's door.

As much as wanted to deny that 'David' could have had the peacock Miraculous, he was the previous holder's son. If his mother had been an active superheroine, he would have known. Secrets like that always came out in the end. Even Gabriel's compulsive secretiveness had not been
enough to keep his past hidden. And if David knew about the Miraculous and had convinced Queen Bee to pick him as a successor without mentioning Zharr once, it couldn't have been with good intentions. Which meant there was a very old young man with two Miraculous at large, and that he went around targeting Miraculous holders.

"It still won't connect," Ladybug announced, transforming back.

Tikki spiralled out of her earrings and dropped on her shoulders.

"They are too far," she sighed. "I can't even tell if Chat Noir is out or not."

Adrien looked at his phone and called Gabriel. Again.

Tikki opened and closed her mouth, then shook her head. She turned to Anne-Laure, who was still fidgeting.

"Are you really sure it was him?"

"Yeeees," she replied. "I'm sure. He looks the same. And there were things that didn't add up back then, and that I should have paid attention to."

Tikki hunched over on Marinette's shoulder.

"How did you meet him?" she asked. "What was he like?"

"A young sea serpent was attacking people on a beach. Not a big one, you know how adults end up beached if they get too close to the shore." - She cringed. - "Which should have given me a clue. David was trying to make it leave. Got a net to try and catch it. He was a bit older than on the pic. Eighteen instead of fifteen, maybe. Same beauty marks, same curly hair, though." - She shook her head. - "We caught the snake, I went and dropped it somewhere in the ocean, and then I went back to thank the kid. And then I stayed. I made sure he was the right kind of person, I got to know him. And then I gave him Waspp."

"And then he vanished with the Miraculous," Adrien finished.

"A fucking distress call from a ship, he never came back, nobody from that ship came back, it was blown up to pieces."

She ran a hand through her hair, then leaned against a wall, sighing.

"I should have been more suspicious. It's just… He waited for me to trust him. I didn't think for a second that it could have been a trick."

Tikki sighed.

"You couldn't have known. Even master Fu didn't suspect that."

Anne-Laure shook her head and teleported out.

###

Alice had never been afraid of heights. That much was clear.
Most people, if they had been lifted into the air and found themselves suspended so far above the trees that a fall would have pulverized them, would have held on. Not Alice. Alice had trashed, and headbutted, and kicked, and then, as a last resort, had reached above her head to grab the Bee Miraculous and tear it off her attacker.

Yellow light had washed over him, his transformation reverting in the blink of an eye.

Alice had flipped in the air, trying to wrap her legs around him and to pin the Miraculous to her hair. She had misjudged her own skill. The 'Miraculous' part had gone well. The 'wrapping her legs around the teenager', not so much. He had been behind her, and she had to flip in the air to catch him. The flip had sent them spinning.

Frantic, she had hooked a knee around his leg, only to grimace in pain as they had spiraled in different directions. She had not let go per se. He had slipped out of her grasp, desperately trying to grab something as he fell. Within seconds, he had been totally out of her reach.

The trees had been seconds away too.

"WASPP! Transform me!"

Yellow light had washed over her, replacing her hiking clothes by Queen Bee's costume. She had dived after the young man, overshot, and belatedly realized she did not know how to fly.

She'd hit the trees at terminal velocity, shattering the weakest branches on the way down, smashing into the stronger ones, all the way to the ground. She had slowed down enough to drop on it rather than to crash, but she had been too dazed and battered to easily get back to her feet. She had rolled to her side, moaning, and propped herself up on one elbow.

"What the…" she had muttered.

It had taken her a whole minute to sit upright. She had taken deep, slow breaths, and clutched her head between her hands. Then her yes had gone wide and she had jumped to her feet.

She had spun into place, eyes darting from place to place as if she had been searching for something, or someone. Then she had jumped up, landed, winced, and tried again. Flying was more complicated than it looked. Instead of persisting, Alice had climbed up a tree, heaving herself from branch to branch to reach the top of the tree.

From that perch, and in the faint early morning light, the forest looked like an endless ocean of green. You would have needed to be much higher above the trees to spot broken branches and holes in the canopy.

She had raised her hand to her mouth in silent horror, then checked for the village's location and tried to calculate where her assailant could have crashed. She had jumped up, hovering in the air for a handful of seconds, then had dropped back on her branch, her hand reaching for the shield she no longer had.

Ultimately, she had decided on a direction to go in, and hopped from branch to branch to get there.

"Where are you?" she had murmured, after spending a few minutes searching for the young man.

And then, she had looked up.

Maybe she had felt observed. Maybe she had noticed a moving shadow. Maybe she merely had good instincts. In any case, she had looked up and spotted the flying man clad in aquamarine and
blue who had been observing her.

He had dashed away.

###

Nathalie curled up into a ball as soon as her feet touched the ground. She felt faint. It was incredible that she could feel anything at all with an Akuma crawling through her mind, but she did.

The trees were so high and of course, of course, 'high' had to be where Alice's trail led. And of course, of course, Nathalie's only means of transportation was Chat Noir's back, as he climbed the trees and held her with just one hand, when he held her at all. And of course, of course, she had to climb up with him, because the tablet stopped working when it was too far from her. You'd have thought Gabriel would have shaped her powers to avoid that particular issue.

He made sure she was safe and sound but he had no concern to spare this time.

He took the electum box out of his pocket and freed Bella. She spiralled out of the box and looked around, narrowing her eyes.

"Waspp and Zharr," Gabriel said. "You knew about this."

The Kwami stifled a giggle. She didn't answer.

Gabriel clicked his tongue.

"And you think he is still here," he drawled. "Or you wouldn't have tried to get us to turn back. 'Missing the internet', really."

Bella shrugged.

"I didn't tell Alim. I wasn't about to tell you."*

He clenched his jaw. His ears - the fake ones - flattened against his head like an angry cat's.

"Did she give chase? Is that what happened?"

"I don't know," the Kwami replied, sounding sincerely puzzled. "I wasn't there."

It was clear from the look on Gabriel's face that he did not believe her. She scowled.

"I lost Contretemps the moment he jumped into the future with Ladybug," she explained. "I didn't know when he was nor where he was. And I couldn't stay forever to wait for them to reappear, so I asked Zharr to take care of it. That way he'd have Tikki, and all that would have been left to do was free Plagg."

Gabriel balled his fists. He hid them behind his back.

"But he didn't catch Tikki."

Bella looked away, uneasy.
"Well we all saw that, didn't we? I mean, I knew something had gone wrong. Alim and I fought Tikki's next chosen when we came back to Brazil. But I had no way to contact Zharr. He was supposed to contact me. So your guess is as good as mine."

Nathalie struggled to get back to her feet. Her fear was fading, but her legs felt like they were made of cotton wool. Being akumatized should at least have come with an enhanced resistance to hormonal responses. In any case, physical weaknesses aside, she had to focus on her goals. Following Alice was the only task they had to accomplish. Everything else, especially talking to Bella, was a waste of time.

She pointed her tablet at the trees' canopy, trying to find traces of yellow. Queen Bee's costume was vividly colored. Maybe it could be tracked from the ground.

Bella and Gabriel were still arguing.

"Why would he have told me?" the Kwami was saying. "He didn't manage to escape the Guardians for a century by being careless. Hideouts locations are on a 'need-to-know' basis. That's just safer."

"So he-"

Alarmed, Gabriel rushed to Nathalie and wrapped an arm around her back, as if she had been about to fall. There was no need. She ignored him and kept searching for signs of Alice. She zoomed in on the foliage. It was so dense she could barely see the sky.

"We should proceed," she told him. "We could follow Alice by relying on clues such as falling leaves and fleeing animals."

She rewinded the video to confirm the branches had shaken when their target had landed on them. They had. A single frightened bird had also flown away.

*It isn't efficient,* she told herself.

*It's too high,* her mind retorted.

"I'd rather not run into an ambush," Gabriel murmured. "Questioning Bella might prove useful."

She could feel his claws pressing against her side, though they didn't dig into her clothes just yet.

"No," she retorted. "Liars don't lie because they have to but because they can. We should go."

He released her and looked up at the branches.

Bella floated to them and peeked at the tablet's screen.

"Then you should make an Akuma that can fly," she commented. "You'll need one."

Gabriel reached for the dagger sheath attached to his belt. There was a thin box bound to it, which he opened to take out the magical letter opener.

###

Queen Bee had dropped through the tree's canopy, moving between the branches with the ease of a...
gymnast using parallel bars. She had landed on the ground with an audible 'thump', sending leaves flying, but instantly gotten back to her feet.

She had chased the Peacock for a minute or two, but he was airborne, and faster. So, she had transformed back into Alice Agreste and whirled to the yellow Kwami who had spiraled out of the comb.

"Was that your holder?"

Waspp had tilted her head to the side, as if the question made no sense.

" You are my holder?"

Alice had sighed and ran her hands over her face.

"Of course." - She had amended her question. - "Was that the same boy I just fought, or his teammate? Was he the one I watched crash, so I can know if I have to look around and see if he's still alive?"

Wasp had hesitated for half a second.

"They're a team. We need to check."

Her lack of urgency, however, showed that she was lying.

"Was that David? " Alice had exclaimed, gesturing at the sky. She had sighed and lowered her voice. "No. David would have been much younger."

She had stared at Waspp, who was watching her with an eerie calm. The confusion on Alice's face had morphed into unease, then horror.

"What did he do to you?" - She had raised a hand to touch the Kwami's cheek. - "Are you corrupted?"

"I'm not corrupted," Waspp had replied. "I always remain pretty much the same. I'm not like Plagg. I don't act on whims. I don't let emotions get the better of me."

Alice had given her a pained look.

"Oh, Waspp."

"And don't tell me I couldn't tell the difference."

Alice had not answered that. Her expression had been clear enough. She had turned away and limped to a tree so she could sit against it.

"Can you at least tell me how you ended up in his hands? And what he wants?" she had asked instead. "I have to say I didn't expect one of your Bees to attack me."

That had seemed to permeate Waspp's indifference.

"I'm sorry, Alice… It's nothing personal. We just wanted to free Tikki."

" Free? "

Waspp had twisted her mouth, then flown down to be at eye level with her new holder.
"You know, I gave it a lot of thought, and Zharr and Bella make a good point."

Alice's eyes had gone wide at the mention of the butterfly Kwami, but she had not commented.

"We are not needed," Waspp had explained. "The gods are dead, the industrial expansion forced the monsters into territories inaccessible to humans, human technology in itself caught up with magic to the point that modern weapons could take down even krakens and hydras. But on the other hand, you have Bella, who tears cities apart with her butterflies. You have Plagg, whose cats can turn anything to rot and caused pandemics. We are the danger now. We have become what we exist to stop. And it could go on, and on, and on, forever. Our chosen being hunted and killed. Being stolen, being used. Being throw into a box to get 'fixed' when we go 'wrong'. And for what? We could just be spirits again!"

"What?"

"If we are not needed and the risks of having the Miraculous around outweigh the benefits, then the Miraculous should be destroyed. We'd be free, and our powers would never again be a threat to humans. Everybody would win."

Alice had stared at her in horror.

"I... don't think it works that way," she had murmured, voice laced with incertitude.

You could tell she was thinking about it, as hard and fast as possible. She did not have the knowledge necessary to argue back, however.

"Even if it didn't, it's still the rational choice," Waspp insisted. "You just have to consider if the highest possible cost of unbinding us would be worth it, and the more centuries pass, the more it is."

"The highest cost."

"We have lived a long, long time, Alice. Most of it under someone's heel. We're not that attached to the material plane."

Alice had pressed her fist to her lips, lost in thought, and slowly shaken her head.

"And you say that's what Zharr wants? What Bella wants? Since when does what Bella wants seem like a sound plan to you?"

"They both came to that conclusion on their own," Waspp had replied. "Zharr made up his mind decades ago and started working towards his goals well before he got in touch with Bella. He found me seven years before she even showed up in Brazil."

Alice had frowned.

"You keep saying 'Zharr'. His chosen is just going along with it? No protests, no doubts?"

"He understands the pain and suffering the Miraculous will bring. He witnessed all of that first hand."

"A zealot, then," Alice had sighed, voice barely above a whisper.

"I didn't catch that?"

"I'm sorry, Waspp. Transform me. "
Teleportation made the trip faster and jumps free, but it did not get them any closer to the ground. It didn't stop Gabriel - Chat Noir - from landing on one foot on a swaying branch, from hopping from the ones that broke to the first available perch, all of that without the use of his arms, because he had wrapped one around Nathalie and had to hold a cursed weapon in the other. Nathalie couldn't have moved a muscle if she had tried. She was clutching his shoulder. He moved her tablet so it would point at his wife, high up in the sky. He pressed the play button and moved the progress bar. The bell around his neck didn't ring as often as Nathalie would have expected from such an unpractical accessory, but it did whenever he lost his balance and stumbled to recover it. Sometimes, it rang when they were safe, but it still made her stomach lurch.

Alice had learned to fly. It had taken her a few tries. Some jumping, some falling, like a young bird flapping its wings on the ground, on its first day out of its nest. When she had finally managed to float up to the treetops, it had been in a wobbly line. Her first ten minutes of flying had been equally clumsy. Then, she had gotten the hang of it.

She had flown high above the trees to survey the area.

Gabriel had watched all of that unfold on camera and managed to mutter only one 'Alice, you idiot'. Nathalie agreed with the qualifier but did not feel strongly enough about it to voice her opinion. Still, it took a special brand of stupidity to go on the hunt for a Miraculous holder alone (the two of them were only moderately less stupid, since they were two). If Gabriel had further thoughts about his wife's recklessness, he kept them well hidden. He focused on getting to the end of the trail, as fast as possible.

He slowed down when Alice, on the tablet's screen, started circling the same area. He found a larger tree for them to land on and teleported them to its sturdiest branch, then crouched on it, letting Nathalie slip out of his hold so she could sit on the branch itself. He realized his mistake when she threw herself against him.

"Shhhh," he murmured, pulling her close and resting her back against his chest. His lips brushed against her hair, which could have been an accident. "I think we might get to climb down soon. She found something."

Nathalie just clutched his arm. He kept that arm wrapped around her and took the tablet with his other hand, tilting it up. He used his thumb to navigate back by a minute or so, then just watched the scene unfold. Alice was moving in slower and slower circles, getting closer and closer to the treetops. Eventually, she landed. Gabriel paused the video and estimated the distance between them and her landing spot.

"Hold onto me," he instructed, making her turn to him, with the tablet pressed between them.

His own arms were crushing her against him. As soon as she obeyed, he jumped down. Nathalie heard herself shriek. The sound felt alien. It just wasn't her style. They landed one branch down, and he jumped to another, and another still, as if they had been stairs. His bell was ringing at every step. Then, after thirty-six branches, in a soft and silent drop, they reached the ground. Nathalie fell to her knees and heaved.

There was a flash of green, a high-pitched squeak, a flash of pink. Hawk Moth picked her tablet up
and sucked the Akuma out. He crouched next to Nathalie as her transformation reverted.

"Better?" he murmured.

Her memories were shattering. She felt as if she had been waking up from a nightmare, skin drenched in cold sweats, muscles weak. She could still see the trees flashing in her mind. The trees, the trees, and the fall. Gabriel sighed and collected her into his arms.

"Let's rest for a while, alright?"

She took a few shaky breaths. She nodded. He waited for her to recover.

"I think we're done with the aerial travel," he said. "We'll walk from here and see what she found."

Right. Alice had talked to Waspp. Alice had gone after the peacock Miraculous' holder.

She acquiesced.

A moment went by.

"This is the last thing I'll ever ask of you," he murmured.

"You didn't ask," she pointed out. "I offered. This was my plan."

She would have to remember that. She had not expected the extremes it would go to. But she had known from the start Gabriel would let her suffer if it served their purpose. Hadn't she volunteered?

He made a humming noise.

"You know what I mean."

She nodded.

"You can let go, now," she told him, shaking herself free. She got back to her feet and picked her tablet up. "We should continue."

###

A two minutes flight turned into a twenty minutes walk, when you were slaloming between trees in a forest. Nathalie wasn't walking any faster than in the mansion's hallways, either. A new Akumatization had improved her nervous state, but not the overall physical weakness induced by their tree-climbing adventures.

Gabriel did not seem to mind the slow pace, even if, as Chat Noir, he could have moved much faster. She knew the delay had to be killing him. Yet, he slowed down more as they got near to the area Alice had landed in. He started surveying their surroundings with the utmost care. He paused at every sound (even those Nathalie couldn't hear). He kept a hand on his dagger's hilt. In the end, he even pulled it out of its sheath. It turned into a sword in his hand.

He stopped by a tree, frowning, and looked up. He pointed at a branch.
"Magic detector," he whispered.

Nathalie joined him and followed his gaze. There was a golden crystal painted with black runes embedded into the branch.

"They come in pairs," Gabriel explained. "The receptor glows when the sensor activates. Not much of a range, quite primitive but still rare. The crystals aren't easy to enchant."

"Can they be disabled?"

"In a manner of speaking."

He climbed the tree and crawled along the branch until he reached the detector, then stabbed it with the letter opener. The crystal fell to dust.

*That works.*

Gabriel dropped back to the ground.

"Let's move," he murmured, hand overing behind her back.

From that point on, she gave her full attention to the branches above them, trying to spot other surveillance devices. She missed two. He didn't. And then, proving yet again he was more observant than she was, he hurried to another tree and ran his hand along an electrical cable. It vanished in the ground, buried by moss and leaves. It looked like it was nailed all the way to the top of the tree. Gabriel climbed up to see what it was connected to, then dropped back down.

"Solar panels. We're close."

He took his magical watch out of his pocket and opened it. The peacock hologram flew up. His train was still down.

Gabriel breathed out and handed the device to Nathalie. He crouched and ran his hand on the forest floor, trying to follow the wire. It was covered by a thick layer of dirt and leaves, thick enough that you could walk on it without feeling it, and not risk tripping.

Nathalie stuck her tablet between her chest and the hand that was holding the watch, then set changed the time on the datepicker of her video app, to the moment when Alice had landed in the trees above them. She pressed play, held the tablet up, and searched for signs of the woman. Her vivid yellow suit was easy to spot even in the faint morning light on the video.

She found Queen Bee perched in a tree. She was looking at the trunk and running a hand against it. She slipped to a lower branch, eyes still riveted to the trunk, then just flew down to the ground without landing. She leaned down, ending up upside down in the air with her face inches away from the ground. Nathalie wondered if there was another solar panel up above. She zoomed in, looking for another wire, but the angle was wrong.

Gabriel had stopped moving. He was wincing at the video.

"Don't follow that," he murmured through clenched teeth.

Yet, after watching Alice speed out of sight, he focused back on the wire he had been digging out of the ground. He only paused after pulling his hand out of the dirt, pushing leaves back onto the hole, and moving to a new stop. He pursed his lips.
"Replay that?" he murmured.

Nathalie gave him the watch back and did as asked. This time, she tried to follow Alice as she dashed away from the tree, but Queen Bee's powers were easier to master than they had seemed to at first. She was fast. They managed to somewhat follow her all the same. She had been darting from tree to tree to find more solar panels, and try to figure out what they were powering.

Gabriel took a deep breath. He was smiling, but it was a pained, broken sort of smile. His eyes were wet. He pointed at one of the magic detectors he had broken. You could see them on the video, just faint golden gleams, when the camera was tilted up. Alice had not noticed them.

Nathalie checked the current time.

More than fifteen minutes had elapsed since they had found the first sensor. In all likelihood, they had walked past others. If there had been someone to alert, that someone would have attacked them by now. An ambush scenario remained possible.

"Let's go on," Gabriel said, unsheathing his sword once again.

She nodded, skipped one minute of video, and searched for Alice. What she found was a divergence in the position of the trees. In the present, they were tilted. The ground under them, which had been even three years earlier, had caved in.

Gabriel took the tablet from Nathalie's hands. He circled the collapsed area, comparing past and present. It wasn't, per se, a huge difference: the ground had shifted by a few inches at most. The trees were inclined by a two to five degree angle at most. Some tree roots had been exposed, but moss and leaves had all but covered them already.

A wire had been ripped out of the dirt, however. It was hanging over the sunken ground, drawing a straight line to a rocky ledge. Gabriel walked around it rather than jump down, which allowed Nathalie to follow him.

There was a cave under that ledge. Bushes had been planted around it to hide both the wires, which were going into the cavern, and yet another magic sensor. That one was already broken. Save for the vegetation's growth, the entrance looked the same as three years earlier.

Gabriel let out a faint suction noise. Nathalie heard him swallow. His muscles were stiff. The hand he held the tablet with was trembling. She frowned at the screen. She couldn't see what had shocked him so. The cave was pitch black both on the video and in the present.

Gabriel put his sword away and got the watch out. He opened it, then held it in front of them, so the bird hologram would light the way.

The cave had been pitch black in the past because it was deep. It was pitch black for Nathalie because the sun hadn't risen yet, and because she didn't have cat eyes. There was something there that hadn't been there before: rubble. Nathalie took the watch and the tablet and stepped into the cave, to get a better view. Entire slabs of stone had fallen from the cave's roof and shattered, blocking the way to the wooden door that had stood there three years earlier.

There was a flash of green light behind her. She turned back just as the Akuma flew out of her tablet and transformed her back. She squeezed her eyes shut to focus and root her memories in place before they could escape her. Then Gabriel's second transformation reverted too, in a flash of pink. Bella dashed into the cave and straight through the rubble. Plagg paused in front of Gabriel, looking back and forth, until his chosen gave him a nod. The Kwami followed his sister.
Nathalie joined Gabriel, in slow, careful steps. He took a deep breath, looked up at the tree's canopy, then turned his back to the cavern's entrance and started pacing.

It took six minutes for Plagg to return. They heard him before they saw him or, rather, they heard the rubble move. He flew to them, head down, shoulders hunched. He was carrying a wedding ring.

Gabriel made a huffing noise. He slowly sat down on the ground and hunched over, shoulders shaken by repeated jerks, gasping for air. Then, he started laughing.

###

Chapter End Notes

I have been sitting on this chapter title since chapter 33.

End Notes

Absolutely check out the fantastic art people drew for this story!

Works inspired by this is The Marionette and the Black Cat by MiraculousDerpy101

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!