You Don't Know Me
by Ferisae

Summary

When Ladybug suffers a near-fatal accident and is presumed dead, it is up to Adrien - who has discovered Ladybug's secret - to help her through her painstaking recovery and reacquaint her with herself. All this while trying to save Paris on his own without losing himself in the process.

Notes

This is my first Miraculous fic and I'm a bit nervous. I haven't written in a good while so my hand is very off, and for that I apologize. Thank you Breana for proofreading this chapter for me, since English isn't my first language and I still do dumb mistakes lol :)

Story was inspired by the song "You don't know me" by Erutan, on Youtube.
“I am Demoman!”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it! You like to demolish things!” Chat griped as he leapt away from yet another swing of the Akuma’s wrecking ball. The big iron sphere crashed mere inches from where Chat had been and the aftershock sent him flying back. “Whoa!”

He tumbled away, tiny bits of rock raining on his head.

“Chat! Are you okay!??” he heard Ladybug call as she took refuge behind a chimney. The blast had left a huge, gaping hole on the roof between them.

“Ballin’” Chat replied as he righted himself, grinning at Ladybug’s groan as it reached his ears.
“Really? At a time like this?”

She waved at him urgently from across the gap and Chat quickly followed her cue, hiding behind a turret as Demoman tried to take aim at him again. Suddenly losing sight of Chat, the villain roared in anger, echoing the thunder clap from the cloudy skies above. “I’ll demolish you!”

The Akuma they were fighting today was probably one of the toughest, most physically-taxing, villains they’ve ever had to face. Sure, he wasn’t precisely quick-witted, but he was insanely aggressive and destructive, and rather than being intent on obtaining their Miraculouses, he seemed more interested in causing as much damage as possible.

As to what had led this Akuma to appear, apparently, a construction worker had demolished the wrong structure by accident in a nearby site. His boss had ridiculed him in front of his crew and then fired him, which caused the distraught man to become the perfect fodder for Hawkmoth. The worker had become a behemoth of a man, sporting a suit of grays, blacks, and yellows underneath an orange and green vest while wearing a yellow safety helmet on his head. His shoulders had grown in size, and his arms had morphed into large chains with iron balls hanging from them.

So, he essentially had wrecking balls for arms.

Amazing.

“I am DEMOMAN!”

“WE GET IT!” Ladybug and Chat yelled in unison for the tenth time that day as a wrecking ball zoomed some inches over Ladybug’s head.

Ladybug and Chat didn’t know why Demoman felt the need to yell his name every time he was about to attack, but while it was increasingly grating, it at least served as a warning to get out of the way before he hauled the big iron balls he had as arms at their heads. Again, Demoman was not the fastest or the brightest, but they had learned the hard way the need to tread carefully when engaging
him; their aching bodies were quick to remind them of all close calls they'd had today.

They had also long deduced that the Akuma was in his safety helmet, but Demoman was nearly impossible to approach. Any moment they came relatively close, he would spin in circles, turning into a deadly top and destroying everything in his immediate radius.

So they had spent the last two hours playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with a living wrecking machine, and Chat could see that Ladybug was beginning to get restless as thunder rolled through the sky above them. He knew perfectly well why.

Fighting in the rain was probably one of the most difficult things to do, and Chat knew it was one of the things Ladybug especially hated. Between slippery roofs, a slippery yo-yo, and water in the eyes, it all spelled disaster to Ladybug; he could tell that she was itching to get this battle done before the sky broke.

Suddenly, Ladybug gasped as Demoman spun and swung a wrecking ball her way. She jumped out of the blast zone in time, zipping towards Chat's side of the roof with her yo-yo, as the chimney got blasted to pieces behind her. Demoman roared furiously, shooting his wrecking balls in every direction in an attempt to flush them out.

“We need to distract him long enough to use Lucky Charm. If we don’t stop him right now, half of Paris will look like a war zone!”

She was right. As Demoman chased them across the rooftops, he left a path of destruction, fire, and debris in his wake. Ambulances blared in the streets as falling pieces of stone had struck people below. No deaths, thank heavens, but they could tell there was a large number of injured civilians, not to mention the insane amount of damaged property.

“Got it, cat’s on the job!” Chat said with a two finger salute, grabbing his baton from its spot on his back.

“Chat, wait,” Ladybug said, grabbing his arm. He looked back at her, and Chat was temporarily taken aback by her expression. Her eyebrows were knitted in a frown and her face was flushed in exertion, but what got him was the deep concern flooding her eyes.
“Be careful. He might be slow and dumb, but if he hits you...”

Chat smiled, touched.

It was not that Ladybug didn’t worry about him - she did! - but unlike him, she always tried to bury her feelings in favor of quick thinking and strategy. This time, it seemed that this Akuma had really set her on edge with the amount of damage he could cause and the time it was taking them to beat him.

Chat would’ve lied if he said he didn’t also wonder about what would happen if they got a direct hit from the Akuma. Their suits could resist most damage and were near invincible (being impossible to cut or remove the suits), but that didn’t mean they were free from feeling great amounts of pain underneath. Half the time, the only reason they never came away with bruises or internal bleeding was because of Ladybug’s healing power. The suits gave them inhuman strength and stamina, but they were not completely infallible.

“I know, m’lady...” he said, and then he grinned, “I’m not too keen on testing the limits of our suits either so I’ll try not to get wrecked.”

A deep sigh from her. “Right, okay...” Ladybug said before she removed her arm awkwardly. She then spun her yo-yo upwards, shouting to the sky. “LUCKY CHAR-”

“I AM DEMOMAN!!!”

“Watch out!” Chat yelled as he pushed Ladybug out of the way and leapt back just as a wrecking ball crashed through the turret, raining plaster and brick everywhere and covering them in a thick cloud of dirt.
Chat coughed as he rolled across the roof and faced Demoman again, his baton extended and at the ready.

“Don’t you ever get tired!” Chat hissed at him in exasperation, as his throat burned from the dust. He glanced back to see another dark, gaping hole on the spot where Ladybug and he had been standing mere seconds ago.

Demoman grinned, but then his smile faltered. Chat saw the outline of a purple butterfly shine around Demoman’s face, and saw him nod shortly after. He spun, and slung a ball at Chat with such blinding speed that he barely had time to react. Chat jumped away again with a grunt, narrowly missing the hit and coughing as another cloud of dust got lodged in his throat, his eyes watering.

He heard Demoman laughing, but his laugh sounded oddly distant. Chat rubbed at his eyes and then spun his baton rapidly to disperse the dirty cloud. As it dissipated, he found Demoman leaping from roof to roof and away from them. He was teasing them into a chase, wreaking havoc as he went, and Chat felt a growl rumble in his throat.

“He is getting away! I’m going after him!” Chat said as he prepared his baton to vault away into the next roof, but the lack of a reply made him hesitate. “Ladybug?”

He turned around. He couldn’t see her. Only smoke and dust met his gaze.
“Ladybug?”

He pressed an arm to his face to avoid inhaling more dirt, and ran back towards the destroyed turret, an unpleasant feeling rolling in the pit of his stomach. Surely, he had pushed her away in time to avoid the hit, hadn’t he?

“Ladybug! Where are you?”

Silence.

The dust began to settle, and he began to feel the first pinpricks of rain fall on his hair as he looked for her, twisting his cat ears around for any sound. He edged closer to the enormous hole where the turret had been, and where most of the roof had caved in from the impact. Leaning over the edge, he suddenly caught a faint red glow in the darkness below and gasped.
He jumped down through the hole without hesitation, sliding down a broken concrete beam to land softly on the ground below. It was pitch dark save for the dim light filtering through the cracks in the rubble. Grateful for his night vision, he navigated through the dark and destroyed building, wincing when he realized the extent of the damage their battle had wrought on the place. What appeared to have been an apartment complex lay in complete ruin. Furniture was overturned or laying in pieces around him, walls brought down into piles of rock and rubble, broken glass peppering what had been a carpeted floor...

The ominous sound of the remaining support beams creaking above him sent shivers down his spine.

“Ladybug?”

The source of the red glow was now only a few feet from him and he sprinted towards it. His fingers closed around a small object. It looked like a magnet in the shape of a “U”, colored red with black spots. Her Lucky Charm?
“Ladybug?” He tried again, his voice echoing in the dilapidated room as he looked around. Suddenly, an idea came to him. He took out his baton, pressed the green paw print on it to activate the phone feature, and dialed Ladybug’s yo-yo.

He waited a few seconds with bated breath. Then he heard it, echoing in the dark. The ringing of her yo-yo was coming from a few feet further on from what looked like a mound of rocks and splintered wooden beams.
He ran towards the spot, jumping over broken glass and furniture, nearly tripping when he saw it: a blur of red and black among the wreckage.

Ladybug!

As he came closer, his night vision sharpened. Her body lay sprawled face down on the floor, buried from the waist down in masonry and wood, hunks of iron beams and rubble pinning her upper body and head to the ground. A pool of some dark liquid was underneath her; he tried to ignore it as he raced toward her.
“Ladybug!” She didn’t respond. Her body remained unmoving under the debris, and her face was obscured by her bangs.

He knelt at her side, desperately trying to shift the rocks crushing her shoulders with his baton as leverage. He managed to free her arms and head, his chest constricting as her blood-stained face came into view, her eyes closed. Chat then recoiled at the dark liquid coating his gloves: her blood. His eyes lingered on it as it dripped through his fingers down to join the growing pool of red around her.

His own blood ran cold.
“No...” he choked out, cold washing all over him, “No no no no no!”

He pushed off the rest of the debris trapping her body with a grunt and desperately tried to pull her out of the mound of rocks by her arms, to no avail. Her legs were completely stuck between some large pieces of cement. He growled in frustration, his eyes welling with moisture. He tried to shift the bigger rocks, all the while calling out her name in an attempt to rouse her. He cursed under his breath as the shifting only caused more rocks to rain on her. No matter what he tried, the superior strength the suit gave him was not enough to free her.

“CATACLYSM!”
His fist burst into black flame and he scratched it against the mountain of concrete trapping her. The black wave of his destructive power rippled, and with a loud rumble, the wreckage on top of her dissolved into dust.

He grabbed her by the arms again and pulled, almost losing his footing as she now slid out easily from the gravel. He cradled her beat-up body in his arms, resting her on his folded legs. She was limp against him, her body stained with blood and grime.

“My Lady?” Chat said, his voice breaking. Her head lolled against his shoulder as he shook her gently. Rivulets of blood slid down the side of her face from a deep gash on her head. She looked like she was sleeping, but her skin was ghostly pale and for a moment, Chat feared the worst. His breath hitching, he placed a hand on her stomach, heaving a relieved sigh when he felt it slowly rise and fall. She was still breathing.

“LB, can you hear me?”

His only response was a soft beep coming from her earrings. He idly noticed the Lucky Charm had long since disappeared.

Two spots remained on her earring. Two minutes.

He gulped, and shook her gently again.
“Please, wake up!”

No response.

Beep.

“L-Ladybug…”

( beep beep beep )
Beep, beep, beep!

Before he had a chance to turn away, a flash of red and white shone around her as her disguise disintegrated, temporarily blinding him.

He waited in the dark long after the glow had vanished, breathing heavily. He kept his eyes shut, wanting to respect her wishes: to have their identities remain secret. But after a couple of minutes, the silence became agonizing. He could feel her fading.

“I’m so sorry, Ladybug…”

Chat cracked his eyes open, his breath immediately catching in his throat. His eyes widened and, for a moment, he forgot how to breathe.

If you were to have asked him at this moment what he thought, he’d be very honest. He’d admit to having very often lost himself in daydreams of what his beloved Lady looked like under the mask. Pining away longingly for a faceless girl with dark locks and eyes as blue as the sky. He’d also no doubt admit to having entertained numerous fantasies of all the possible ways they could reveal themselves to each other, replaying scenario after scenario in his head…

...None of which had included Marinette Dupain-Cheng lying unconscious in his arms as she bled to death.
Sorry...? (HOPE YOU GUYS LIKE THE PICTURES <33333 Sorry for the blood)

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: WONDERFUL Fanart of this Chapter!!!

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/142990141486/milagrosa-ladybug-he-knelt-at-her-side

*AUDIO DRAMA OF THIS CHAPTER (aka, voice acted dialogue):
http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143458324296/princess-sakura-serenity-when-ladybug-suffers-a
Marinette.

*Marinette was Ladybug.*

Marinette Dupain-Cheng. The sweet, caring girl from school, the girl with a heart of gold and determination like no other. The girl who stumbled on her words when he was near... was his beloved Ladybug.

He let himself have a moment’s respite and allowed his heart to swell at the revelation.

He let out the breath he was holding and reached out with a trembling hand, running his gloved fingers down the side of her face, gently caressing her cheek with a thumb. He was suddenly very aware of the quickening heartbeat in his ears.

*Marinette was Ladybug.*

His fingers traveled further up, carefully brushing her bangs away from her eyes. Her hair was sticky with blood, and his eyes passed over every contour on her face as if it was the first time he saw her. His breath faltered.

*Marinette was Ladybug.*

She had been so close to him all this time. Sat behind him in class, worked on projects with him, hung out with him...

And now here she was, lying flush against him and bleeding. A lot.

Blood. Staining her face. And shirt. And arms. And...
A sudden jolt traveled through his spine at the sight of the blood coating his chest, breaking his stupor, yanking him back to reality. He was suddenly very aware that he was trembling and that there was a sting in his eyes. He shuddered and pulled Marinette against his chest, as if that alone kept her tethered to life.

“Oh god, M-Marinette…” he choked out, holding her as he rocked slightly. “Open your eyes, please… Wake up…”

He caused this. His negligence caused this. He hurt his classmate. His friend. His partner.

His *partner.*

His chest constricted painfully.

*This is my fault... This is my fault...*

“Chat Noir…”

The small voice broke through his mental tirade and he paused. Was that…? Did Marinette just…?

He looked down at her. Her eyes were still closed. Her lips were slightly parted but they were pale and unmoving, barely drawing breath...

“Chat Noir... here...”

There it was again. A small, high pitched voice coming from *underneath* Marinette. He looked around her head and he saw her. A small, red creature slumped on the ground, looking so weak and beat-up that she was barely able to turn her head up to look at Chat.

He reached down with a hand, gently taking the little Kwami in his hands and lifting her up. She was in really bad shape.

“Y-You’re…”

“Tikki…” the Kwami said, leaning against his fingers with trembling paws, “I’m Ladybug’s Kwami…”

“Ladybug’s Kwami…” he repeated, as if in a trance.

“Chat, she needs help…” Tikki said between exhausted breaths, her tone urgent, desperate. “She is hurt really bad. Please…” Chat could see the little Kwami was fading, using sheer willpower alone to keep herself awake.

“Don’t let them take her Miraculous…” Tikki said, “Please, *save her*…”
“What can I do?” Chat asked desperately.

Tikki’s eyelids were slowly drooping. “Outside…go…” But as soon as the last word left her lips, she collapsed on his palm.

He gave a sharp intake of breath. Of course. There were ambulances outside. He could pass her as an injured civilian. He could save her yet.

With renewed vigor, Chat put Tikki down and reached up again, gently removing Marinette’s earrings and tucking them away within the safety of his pockets. Then, with as much gentleness, he grabbed Tikki again and eased the unconscious Kwami into the space between the crook of his neck and the collar of his suit, where she fit snug and safe.

He slid a hand underneath Marinette’s knees, the other one around her back, and hauled her up with him.

“Hang in there, Marinette. …” He squeezed her to him briefly, and then broke into a run.

*You’re going to be okay.* he chanted in his head, *You’re going to be okay*…

His mind went numb, absent. Adrenaline fueled his motions. His body seemed to be moving of its own accord, leading his legs to his goal with a sense of urgency unlike anything he had ever felt before. Before he knew it, he had escaped the building and bounded into the streets below, running towards the nearest ambulance.

He barely heard his own voice pleading for help as he pushed Marinette toward one of the paramedics, their eyes wide in surprise. He could feel himself fighting back the tears, his voice hoarse from raw emotion.

*“Please, save her …”* he heard himself repeat over and over, telling the men in black and orange her name, where she lived, what was happening to her. They seemed taken aback by Chat Noir’s desperation, but they acknowledged his urgency and took Marinette from him, easing her broken body on a stretcher, as another paramedic tried to stem the flow of blood from her head.

There was so much of it.

He looked on the proceedings in silence, his mind miles away. His stomach recoiled at the big crimson splotches all over her clothes and skin. He idly registered questions being directed at him from the media reporters on the scene who had caught up with him, but he didn’t answer any of them. His mind tuned them out, focused solely on Marinette - *his Ladybug* - being hauled up on the back of the ambulance on the stretcher. The ambulance fleeing the scene, taking Marinette with it.

In the haze of his thoughts, he suddenly wondered if Alya was there, too. He wondered if she had
He was afraid to look, but he did so anyways. He looked around for her. She was always there, risking her neck for the best scoop whenever Ladybug and Chat Noir were around. She was reckless and hard-headed like that.

It didn’t take long to find her. There she was indeed. A blur of brown and red through his tear-filled eyes, looking at him from the sidewalk. Her hands were on her mouth, her eyes blown wide in shock, glistening with welled up tears. Her phone lay discarded at her feet. She must have dropped it when she saw just who Chat was carrying.

She lowered her hands only barely, enough to mouth Marinette’s name in disbelief.

And then Chat couldn’t stand being there any longer.

He drew his baton, extending it and vaulting to the nearest roof. As soon as he found purchase on the tiles, he broke into a run. The tears finally came, mingling with the gentle drops that continued to fall from the sky, sliding down his face.

He could still hear the blaring of the ambulances from far away, even with the sound of the wind in his ears. He didn’t know if they were actually there or just haunting his mind, reminding him of the precious cargo one of them carried.

Eventually, he made it home, slinking through the window and immediately falling to his hands and knees, panting. His arms trembled, threatening to give out, and he choked back a sob. Low, garbled voices reached his ears from the computer set in his room. He probably left it on. He didn’t recall, and he didn’t really care. Cold was quickly encompassing him, numbing his senses.

He barely heard the last warning beep from his ring before his disguise disintegrated in a green flash. Plagg tumbled out of the ring with a whine, lying dazed on the floor. Adrien then felt something warm slipping from his neck and instinctively brought a hand up in time to catch a falling Tikki.

“Tikki!” Adrien cradled the unconscious Kwami in his hands, pulling himself up and stumbling to his bed. He laid her carefully on his pillow, stroking her tiny head with a trembling finger. “Tikki?”

“Move over!” came Plagg’s sudden screech as he zoomed past Adrien to land on Tikki’s side, moving Adrien’s hand away. “Tikki! Tikki, talk to me!”

Plagg fussed over her, stroking her head gingerly in an attempt to wake her but Tikki didn’t stir; she was knocked out cold.

Adrien watched, almost in a daze.

Just as his mind began to shut down from the adrenaline draining from his body, the garbled voices started filtering into his head again in the shape of half-formed sentences.
“...Chat Noir was.... Akuma... buildings... in its radius....Ladybug....”

He turned his head at his larger computer screen. He had two windows open: Alya’s Ladyblog and the local news broadcast. Alya’s live feed had gone dark, but he knew perfectly well why that was. The news broadcast was still going, however, and he set his attention there.

The reporter was giving a summary of the events of that day, pointing out the destructive power of the Akuma and urging people to remain vigilant and vacate the premises if he was spotted. She then switched to talk about Ladybug and Chat Noir and Adrien tensed, feeling cold wash over him again. Footage from their battle appeared on screen; the camera was shaky, shot from the streets, but he saw it clearly, the exact moment it all went downhill.

They were behind the turret, talking. Ladybug had raised her arm to conjure Lucky Charm, and then Demoman hit. Even though the video was at normal speed, Adrien’s mind played it in painful slow motion: The moment he pushed her out of the way and leapt back. The moment she stumbled in an attempt to catch the Lucky Charm. The moment she realized she wasn’t fast enough, her eyes wide. The moment the wrecking ball slammed into her and smashed her through the roof. The moment her body disappeared under the rubble in a cloud of dust. The moment the ball retracted and she didn’t come back up...

Adrien’s stomach churned painfully, hot tears escaping his eyes, unbidden.

The reporter continued. The headline Where is Ladybug? rolled on the bottom of the broadcast, as they played the footage of Demoman escaping and Chat Noir fighting alone. The feed cut to the chaotic streets, where smoke and dust flooded the air among mounds of rubble. There was yelling and people running around, helping others who had gotten hurt in the attack. Some people were bleeding from wounds on their arms or heads, limping away. A new headline rolled. No casualties so far, but a lot of injured civilians. The worst ones off were being eased into stretchers and taken to the hospital.

Paramedics were flitting around, helping the critically wounded when he saw himself emerge as Chat Noir from a cloud of dust, carrying Marinette’s bleeding body in his arms, pleading with the paramedics. He looked terrible. Covered in soot, shaken, his eyes manic and his body caked in blood. Marinette’s blood. Adrien froze.

He saw her. He saw her clear as day. Limp like a rag doll in his arms, her face a ghostly white. He saw the strips of blood seeping from the corner of her mouth and nose. He saw the large gash on her head clearer than ever, deep and open and bleeding profusely, staining her clothing all the way from her shirt to her pants, covering his chest and his arms. Adrien hated it. Hated how lifeless she looked. Hated how his mind kept conjuring the same words over and over in his head...

She is dead.

Marinette is dead...

And just like that, his head spun, his vision blurred, and Adrien doubled over, heaving on the floor before all went black.
The next time he woke, his head was pounding as though he’d been hit by a freight train. He grimaced at the taste of bile in his mouth, swallowing thickly, his throat dry. His eyes hurt. Looking up at the light from his computer screen he was forced to turn away, but it was bright and painful even behind closed lids.

He groaned as he slowly rolled onto his back. After a moment, he lifted a trembling arm to latch on to the edge of the bed to pull himself up to a sitting position, careful to avoid the spot on the floor where he was sure the contents of his stomach lay.

With much difficulty, he managed to crack open his swollen eyes. He let his gaze land on the view outside his window. It was completely dark, and the rain was falling harder now, pit-pattering against the windowpanes. His room was also sunk in darkness, save for the glow of his computer screen, and he wondered just how long he had been out. He didn’t even remember passing out.

He felt exhausted; his limbs like lead.

“Plagg…” Adrien rasped, grabbing his aching head as he rested his back on the edge of his bed. “What time is it?”

“Ask your phone,” came Plagg’s reply from the pillow, almost bitter, “It’s been chiming non-stop.”

Adrien sighed as he pulled himself to his feet with shaking arms. His hands fumbled as he attempted to grab the phone on the computer desk, his eyes slow to adjust to the light of his room. Plagg was on his pillow, curled up beside Tikki, who still seemed to be out of it. Adrien could see the worry lining the black Kwami’s tiny green eyes, but decided not to press.

He clicked the home button on his phone, and was greeted by several messages piled up in his inbox, as well as some missed calls from… Alya? His heart skipped a beat. Most of the messages were from Alya too…He tapped her name, bringing up the message log.

5:31 PM <Alya: Adrien are u there?

5:35 PM <Alya : did you see the news?

5:43 PM <Alya: i need to talk to you asap. Please text me back

6:00 PM <MISSED CALL FROM ALYA CÉSAIRE>

6:03 PM <MISSED CALL FROM ALYA CÉSAIRE>

6:04 PM <Alya : please pick up

6:10 PM <Alya: Mari’s in the hospital. akuma attack.

6:11 PM <Alya : it's bad
6:12 PM <Alya: I’m with her parents rn. waiting for news.

6:14 PM <Alya: Call me when u see this

6:40 PM <MISSED CALL FROM ALYA CÉSAIRE>

6:43 PM <MISSED CALL FROM ALYA CÉSAIRE>

7:20 PM <Alya: Still no news. where are you?

7:30 PM <Alya: Adrien?

He blinked, his lethargic mind still processing the texts. Mari. Hospital. Bad. Alya was in the hospital with Marinette’s parents, waiting for news on Marinette’s state. She wanted to talk to him, of all people.

It all came rushing back to him at once; he had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep himself from retching again. He sat on the bed, took a few steadying breaths, and opened his eyes again. His phone read 7:35 PM, so her last message had been sent only five minutes ago. Marinette was alive. She wasn’t dead… at least, not yet. He allowed himself to let out a shaky breath of relief.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Adrien asked Plagg with annoyance.

“You were out cold. Besides, you were freaking out.” Plagg said. “It was driving me crazy.”

Adrien scoffed, “You are one to talk.” his eyes then softened when he saw Tikki beside him. “How is she doing?”

“Not too good…”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She-”

“…Plagg?” Tikki croaked suddenly, opening her eyes a crack to look at the black Kwami beside her.

“Tikki!” Plagg cried, “Are you okay? Why did you go and do that for!?” Plagg accused, holding her head in his paws.

“I had to…”

“What are you talking about?” Adrien asked her. "Do what?"

“She did something we shouldn’t do.” Plagg said with an angry squeak.

“And what’s that?”
Once she had gotten some of her bearings together, Tikki sighed, trying to sit up. “As you know, your suits are magic…” she started, her voice weak and hoarse. She was not really looking at Adrien, barely able to speak, let alone turn her head. “We lend you our power to improve your abilities and make you stronger, faster, more resilient. That way you are able to resist pain that would normally cripple you were you in civilian form…”

“But the suits don’t stop you from feeling things altogether, so you may still feel some pain or get hurt under the suit,” Plagg continued for her, “The only reason you usually come out unscathed is because of the Miraculous Ladybug’s power, which heals everything. I guess what I’m trying to say is, we take that damage for you and absorb it.”

“But… you guys look fine when we transform back,” Adrien argued, trying to understand, “Unless we use our powers, it doesn’t look like you go through anything. You don’t even look tired!”

“You could say we are gods of a sort, so we have much more resistance than you. The normal damage you guys go through daily is really not that big a deal for us, so really, it’s not an issue.” Plagg said, shrugging his shoulders.

“But we absorb all of the damage you take anyway,” Tikki continued, “So you don’t have to feel all of it, because we are made to withstand that.”

“But there’s… instances, were it can be too much, even for us.” Plagg hesitated.

“Such as…?” Adrien pressed.

“As far as the laws of the universe are concerned, Ladybug should’ve died today.” Plagg said.

The straightforward, almost emotionless way Plagg said it sent a shiver down Adrien’s spine.

“The hit was too much. Her body was completely shattered, even with the power of the suit taking the brunt of it.” Tikki breathed, “But… I tried to heal her. I used up my energy to try and mend everything I could in her body and keep her alive. But it’s hard. Your special powers are like a spell, so unless Ladybug says Miraculous Ladybug, I can’t do much on my own. I had to force myself through the seal that binds us, which took all of my power. When the roof caved on her, I tried to hold on and keep the transformation up so it wouldn’t crush her… But because my energy was already spent from using Lucky Charm and keeping her alive… she still ended up pretty badly hurt, I couldn’t heal all of her…”

“When you arrived, and took her out, I finally let her transformation go.” Tikki finished with an exhausted sigh.

“Essentially, Tikki nearly traded her life for Ladybug’s, by saving her and keeping up the transformation beyond the threshold…” Plagg said, “It’s one thing to unleash our power when our wielder casts it, and another to break through the seal that binds us to your whim and bring someone
back to life. What Tikki did was no little thing, and it could’ve costed her existence. We are not supposed to do this. Ever. We protect you from most things but we can’t - should not - stop you from dying if the damage is too bad."

Adrien was shocked into silence. So Ladybug was nearly dead, but Tikki brought her back, and kept her alive until Chat Noir found her, at the risk of using herself up and disappearing. Which explained why Plagg was so worried for her. The amount of appreciation Adrien felt for the red Kwami for keeping his partner alive was so overwhelming he could already feel tears welling up in his eyes again.

“Tikki... I-” Adrien murmured, gently taking her in his hands and kissing her head “Thank you so, so much. I don’t know how I can ever repay you…”

Tikki smiled tiredly and shook her head a bit, eyes dropping. “I love her just as much as you do, Chat…Just take care of her for me...”

“Tikki wait-!”

“Chill, it’s not what you think.” Plagg said, calmly floating up to them, “She’s not dying or anything. Not anymore anyway. What she means is, if Ladybug survives her wounds, she won’t be able to transform in a while, so you have to take care of Ladybug while Tikki recovers. It will take more than food to bring Tikki back to full power. It could take days or weeks.” He turned to her for confirmation, but Tikki was already fading again, her eyes closing.

“Tikki, no!” Plagg rounded on Adrien, his tone urgent, “What are you standing around for? Get her something to eat!”

“Wh-what?” Adrien stuttered, “Cheese?”

“No, not cheese!” Plagg chided, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “She is even more refined than I am! Sweet! Something sweet or with sugar!”

“Sweet, sweet…” Adrien repeated to himself. He stumbled to the shelf beside his desk, looking through the stash of gift boxes he kept there. Thanks to his modelling career, he had a generous number of fans that often sent gifts to him. Cards, chocolates, pastries… He could never eat all of them, not only because he had to watch his weight for work, but because he just couldn’t. So, he had made a habit of giving some to Nino whenever he came over, so it wouldn’t go to waste.

He browsed through his options but his hand stopped on a box with familiar branding. It was a small white box with elegant dark brown swirls. A logo with a big T and S surrounded by laurels sat in the middle, the words Boulangerie - Patisserie right beneath it.

He took it without a second thought, walking back to the bed and sitting down. He opened the small box on his lap, finding an assortment of tiny chocolate chip cookies in the shape of hearts. The familiar smell wafted to his nose, delicious and fresh despite not opening the box in a while. Now he knew why Tom and Sabine’s bakery was so well known.
It reminded him of Marinette too, but he pushed that thought away before his stomach did somersaults again.

He grabbed several cookies and brought them close to Tikki, who was still safely nestled in Adrien’s other hand. “Here you go. Eat up, Tikki.”

Tikki sniffed the cookies and made a humming sound, opening her eyes blearily. Not wasting any time, she grabbed a cookie and stuffed it in her mouth, munching away with a sound of delight. She swallowed almost immediately, a spark of recognition in her eyes.

“These are-” she began.

“From Marinette’s bakery. Yes.”

Tikki looked up at him for what seemed like the first time since she woke up, and she paused, staring really long and hard at him.

“Adrien…” Tikki gasped, suddenly smiling in awe, “It was you after all!”

Adrien raised an eyebrow. “Uh, sorry?”

“You are Chat Noir!”

Adrien winced. “Yes, it’s me.” he then balked, “Wait, what do you mean by ‘it was you after all’? Did Marinette find out?”

Tikki shook her head. “No, she didn’t, but I could feel it every time she went to school. I could feel Plagg around and I knew someone in Marinette’s class was Chat Noir. I was starting to suspect you since I always felt Plagg strongest when she was in school near you or hanging out with you.”

“So you guys don’t know who each other’s chosens are?” Adrien asked, eyebrow raised.

“For safety reasons, we usually don’t.” Tikki said, “But we can feel each other, and I felt Plagg a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess I did too…” Plagg seemed to be avoiding looking at Adrien’s eyes.

Adrien turned to him, narrowing his eyes. “Did you know?” he said, frowning. “Did you know Marinette was Ladybug?”

“I… had suspicions.” Plagg replied, dismissing him. “I didn’t think it was relevant.”
“Not relevant?” Adrien said in disbelief, “Plagg! You knew how I felt about Ladybug!”

“Yeah well, that’s hardly my problem.”

“Plagg…” Tikki chided.

“We are not supposed to tell them if we find out, and you know that!” Plagg countered, turning to Tikki. “If they figure it out, they have to do it on their own!”

“Oh, now you care to follow rules? Who was the one who told me, and I quote,” Adrien made a face, trying his best to imitate Plagg’s voice, “‘What are you doing, you almost found out who the love of your life was, what were you thinking’ when I chose to close the door on Ladybug transforming instead of peeking?’”

“You did that?” Tikki asked with a kind smile, “That’s was really nice and responsible of you.”

Adrien smiled a little, rubbing the back of his neck with a hand, “Yeah, well… I wanted to respect her decision.”

Tikki giggled and Adrien turned on Plagg again.

“Anything else you’ve been keeping from me?”

“None of your business,” the black kwami replied stubbornly, crossing his arms a he floated with his back to Adrien.

“If it involves me, it is my business!” Adrien retorted.

Tikki laughed, finding amusement in Plagg and his protégé arguing. “Did you tell him about the kiss, Plagg?”

Plagg cringed.

“Kiss?” Adrien’s eyes widened. “What kiss?”

“Uh… I may have forgotten to mention that little detail.” Plagg rubbed the back of his head.

“Forgotten!?” Adrien said, aghast, “Maybe I will forget to feed you! What kiss? Start talking!”

Plagg groaned, but Tikki’s pointed stare made him hesitate. “Okay, fine… remember back when Dark Cupid attacked, you got hit by an arrow and started hating on Ladybug?”

“Yeah, you were quick to relay that part of the ordeal to me in excruciating detail, if I recall…”
Adrien said, fuming.

“Yeah okay, so... the only way to snap you out of it was... uh...”

“Ladybug kissed you.” Tikki interrupted with a smile. “She kissed you to break Dark Cupid’s spell!”

Adrien gaped, eyes wide, and then he threw himself back on the bed dramatically, covering his face with one hand while holding Tikki on the other. He groaned loudly in despair.

“Oh god... What I would give to remember that...”

“Even as a villain, you seemed really into it.” Tikki added.

“Not helping...”

The red Kwami giggled again.

“Ladybug kissed me...” Adrien dropped his hand to his side and sighed in wonder. No, Marinette kissed you, his mind corrected. A little bit of his stress seemed to ebb away from his face.

“Here we go again.” Plagg lamented.

Feeling a little bit better, Tikki floated to sit beside Adrien’s face and laid a paw on his cheek. “You really love Ladybug, don’t you Adrien?” she asked gently.

“More than my own life,” Adrien said softly, a small smile on his lips, “I thought I made it fairly obvious. As Chat Noir, I mean.”

“Well, she suspected you felt something for her but mostly thought it was just part of your personality. If only she knew...” She chuckled, “What about Marinette...?”

Adrien turned to her, and Adrien could see it in her eyes. 'If you love Ladybug, you must love all of her'. Adrien dug deeply, bringing up memories of Marinette. Her determination, her kindness, her generosity, her playful smile which was so Ladybug-like. The fierceness with which she fought for her ideals, just like Ladybug. Suddenly, all the memories where he’d fought alongside Ladybug came back to him, his mind replacing his Lady with Marinette.

Marinette giggling at him when he turned into Reflekta. Marinette ringing his bell playfully and taking his advice. Marinette fearlessly taming a dragon. Marinette groaning at his puns. Marinette pounding fists at the end of a battle. Marinette saying they were a team...

How could he not feel the same way for Marinette now that he knew that she and Ladybug were one and the same? His heart swelled, and it must have shown in his face because Tikki smiled and stroked his cheek again.
“The blush says everything.” Tikki said with a satisfied nod.

“Disgusting.”

“Be quiet Plagg, you sourpuss.”

Adrien laughed, then paused. He hesitated for a minute, but dared to ask the question that had been probing him since he found out Marinette was Ladybug.

“Tikki… Does Lady- I mean, Marinette… like me back?” He looked away, “She always seemed so nervous around me as Adrien that… I don’t know. I felt I made her uncomfortable sometimes…”

She giggled, shaking her head. “Why don’t you ask her that yourself?” Her face then fell, worry suddenly lacing her little blue eyes. “Adrien, what happened to Marinette?”

“You may want to ask her,” Plagg interrupted, floating in front of them and holding Adrien’s phone in his paws. It was vibrating, and the screen read “INCOMING CALL: ALYA CÉSAIRE”.

“Dammit! I forgot!” Adrien shot up from the bed, catching the phone and fumbling with it till he managed to click the green phone icon.

“Alya?” he said, pressing the phone to his ear.

“Finally! Where have you been?” Came Alya’s cry from the other end. Her voice sounded shaky and hoarse, as if she had been crying. “I’ve been trying to reach you for hours!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have my phone with me,” he lied, “Alya, I saw the news I-… how… how is she?”

Alya went silent for a moment. “Not good.”

Adrien’s heart plummeted.

“We could really use the company here…” Alya said softly, after he went silent. "It's depressing...”

“We?” he questioned.

“Mari’s parents. Me. Especially me. I could really use a hug right now, for example.”

“Of course, I’m on my way.” Adrien said, jumping on his feet, “Is Nino there?”

“He left town for the weekend. Visiting family. Besides,” Alya hesitated, “I think Marinette would rather have you here…”

Adrien paused, his heart skipping a beat. Did Alya figure out who he was? Who Marinette was? Why was she being so specific? “Why is that?”

“Just get your butt in here, Adrien Agreste.” Alya said sternly. “ASAP.”

“Yes, m’am.” Adrien chuckled despite himself. “Hospital?”
“I’m sending you the location.”

His phone chimed.

“Got it. Be there in 10.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

He hung up the phone and ran to his walk-in closet, taking off his current clothes except for his jeans and pulling on a dark gray turtleneck and a black jacket. It was getting chilly and rainy, plus it would be easier to conceal both Plagg and Tikki in the sleeves of his jacket.

“Guys, we are leaving,” He told the kwami as he came out.

“Where to?” Plagg griped as he picked up the cookies Adrien had knocked over when he jumped from the bed.

“To see Marinette.”

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: omg GREAT ART FOR THIS CHAPTER <3

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/142893781766/sampsonthebamfson-oh-god-m-marinette-he

This chapter ended up being twice the length of the other one, sorry. :x

Had to make up some Kwami lore for this to work out. I may consider changing it if things are elaborated/explained in future episodes, but I'm sticking with this for now.

Thank you to everyone who commented <3 your words help me keep going!
Radio Silence

Chapter Summary

In which it's a wonder Adrien hasn't died of dehydration cuz of all the crying.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adrien tapped his fingers impatiently on the armrest, gazing out the window and looking at the drops of rain slide down the glass.

Nathalie had initially refused Adrien's request to be taken to the hospital, what with the threat of Demoman and the rain pouring outside looming, but one quick call to his father imploring for his understanding had quickly solved that problem. Gabriel's eyes had even softened at his son's plea, a rare sight, and even urged Nathalie to not delay Adrien's visit any longer.

Adrien had hopped eagerly into the limo, urging the Gorilla to step on it.

Seeing that they were alone in the backseat, Tikki poked her head out of the neck of Adrien's jacket.

"Are we there yet?" she whispered, looking around apprehensively.

"Almost, just a minute or two to go." he whispered back.

Tikki nodded and hid back in the folds of the coat.

Adrien swallowed nervously. The news playing on the screen on the dashboard in front of him kept asking for Chat Noir and Ladybug's whereabouts, noting their blatant absence and even questioning if they had both been defeated by Demoman. What made his insides squirm even more was the reporter posing the question of whether or not Ladybug had made it out of the encounter at all, all the while replaying the horrible clip of the battle where she was last seen.

He tried to focus his mind elsewhere before he got sick again, setting his eyes on the road. They kept driving past streets that had been closed off by police, as the roads ahead had been destroyed by the Akuma. He lost count of all the shortcuts Gorilla had had to take, and he tried not to think about what awaited him in the near future. With Ladybug indisposed, he'd had to fight the Akuma alone. He couldn't suppress a shudder, and he felt a comforting pat on his chest. No doubt from Tikki; Plagg wasn't that empathetic.

At last, the tall and gray facade of the hospital's emergency unit came into view. The limo had barely pulled up to the sidewalk when Adrien jumped out the door and rushed into the lobby, quickly dialing Alya's number. A set of quick directions from Alya and an elevator later, he found himself in the hallway to the waiting room.

He stalled at the door, his hand lingering on the doorknob. Suddenly, he felt inadequate, like he didn't belong. Behind the door was Alya, sure, but so were Marinette's parents, Tom Dupain and Sabine Cheng. Something about that realization made him get cold feet.

How could he face them?
"What are you waiting for?" Plagg complained suddenly from the folds of his jacket, "Go inside, Tikki is getting anxious."

"Is something wrong, Adrien?" Tikki asked gently, popping up beside Plagg.

"I-I don't know." He said, "I feel... like I shouldn't be here."

"It's in your head, kid," Plagg scoffed, "Get in!"

"Her parents are in there..." Adrien argued.

Tikki looked at him blinking in confusion, her eyes turned sad as she seemed to realize something. Whatever that realization was though, she didn't express it and instead shook her head.

"Plagg is right, there's nothing to worry about..." Tikki said reassuringly, "But Adrien, I'd like to talk to you later, if that's okay?"

"Uh, okay..." Adrien said, raising an eyebrow questioningly. He then braced himself with an intake of breath. "Alright guys, hide."

Both Kwami slipped under the neck of his coat and, after mustering enough courage, Adrien grabbed the doorknob and pushed the door open.

What he saw was nothing short of what he expected; The small room felt depressing and heavy with tension. Light subdued by rain filtered through the only window in the room, giving it a gloomy feel. Sabine sat on a chair, her face flushed and tear-stained as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Tom sat beside her, an arm around her petite shoulders, the other rubbing soothing circles on the top of her hand. Their eyes were glassy and red with dark rings around them, their frames hunched and tired. He found a similar expression on Alya as she turned away from the window and saw him standing in the doorway.

"Adrien..." Alya said, her voice tired.

Everyone turned to look at him and for a moment Adrien wished the earth would swallow him whole. He suddenly wanted to run away, break down somewhere, and just pass out to make this end.

"H-hey..." he choked.

"Adrien," Tom said softly, rising from his seat to greet him and smiling a little despite himself. "It's nice to see you, son."

"Likewise, Monsieur Dupain." Adrien said politely, offering his hand as Marinette's father approached him.

"Tom will do." Tom replied with a chuckle, shaking Adrien's hand and patting him on the back.

Adrien then turned to Marinette's mother, his heart squeezing painfully.

"Madame Cheng," he said inclining his head in respect. Sabine also attempted a tearful smile, reaching out to him with her arms.

"Come," she said gently, her voice low and weak.

Adrien obeyed without hesitation, moving closer to her and kneeling before her so she wouldn't have to stand up to greet him. He gasped in surprise when she suddenly pulled him into a warm hug,
softly stroking the back of his head. "Thank you for coming, Adrien. We really appreciate it. I'm sure Marinette would be happy to see you, too."

Adrien fought the incoming sting behind his eyes, swallowing the lump in his throat as he returned the embrace. "Of course," he said, his breath catching. He squeezed Sabine gently and pulled back, bowing his head again. "I'm so sorry… about all of this."

There was no way they could know he was Chat, but he felt like apologizing anyway. Apologizing for not being good enough; for not protecting their daughter like he should've.

Tom shook his head "It will be okay. She is a fighter," he said, his smile quivering, "We'll get through this."

Adrien didn't know how to ask. He wanted to know, but was afraid to know, afraid to acknowledge the severity of the situation. He swallowed thickly, his mouth suddenly dry.

"H-how is Marinette doing…?" he managed.

Tom opened his mouth, but hesitated, closing it again. Sabine's chin trembled, and she looked down at her hands.

"I'll update him," Alya interrupted, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Let's talk on the way down. Would you like something from the café, Mme. and M. Dupain-Cheng?" she asked Marinette's parents.

"We are fine Alya, thank you." Tom said, eyes softening. "Go get some fresh air. Thanks for being there for Marinette."

"Anytime." She said with a small smile, "We'll be right back. You have my number if you need anything." She hooked Adrien's arm in hers and dragged him with her as she closed the door behind them.

She released his arm and they walked down the hallway, taking the elevator. She was silent the whole way down to the lobby, her eyes trained on her sneakers, but Adrien was okay with it. He didn't know what to say and he preferred to wait till Alya was ready to talk before asking anything. For someone who had seen the horrid, bloodied state of her best friend, Alya was holding herself pretty straight and composed. Adrien was really impressed by her fortitude. He wished he was that strong.

They reached the first floor and entered the hospital's café, where Alya promptly ordered some warm drinks for them. Adrien moved to pay, handing some euros to the cashier before Alya had a chance to protest, though she seemed too exhausted to fight and gave him a soft thanks instead. She was handed the drinks and she nodded her head toward a lone table in the back of the café.

He nodded and followed her in silence. She set the drinks down on the table, but before she had a chance to sit, Adrien grabbed her by the arm and gently pulled her towards him, wrapping his arms around her.

She was unmoving for a moment, taken aback, then her shoulders sagged. She clutched at the fabric on his back almost instantly, sinking her face in his chest, her body trembling with the silent sobs she had been holding in all evening while trying to be strong for Marinette's parents.

"You said you could use a hug," Adrien mumbled, smiling against her head.

She chuckled against his chest. "I sure did. Thank you."
She pulled away after a moment, wiping at her eyes, then motioned for him to sit down. He nodded but moved to pull the chair out for Alya first. She sat down and he pushed her chair forward. Alya made a quip about him being a gentleman even in desperate times and he smiled, seating himself across from her.

Alya drank quietly from her cup then put it down, her face downcast as she gathered her thoughts. Adrien reached out and placed a comforting hand on hers, rubbing the top of her hand with his thumb. He remained silent, waiting patiently for Alya to speak when she was ready. He could only imagine how hard it was for her, watching her best friend, practically a sister to her, in the bloody mess she was in.

He could relate, in a way, because even though he had not known Marinette as deeply as Alya, he knew Ladybug. She was his trusted partner, his yang, the one he could not live without, and as Plagg had aptly put it: the love of his life. It pierced his heart every time he remembered that she was somewhere in that hospital behind a cold, unfeeling door, battling for her life.

How had the day turned around so badly?

Alya smiled a tired smile, her eyes glistening as she looked at him. "Thanks for taking my call, Adrien."

"No problem. I know Nino is sorry he couldn't be here," Adrien replied softly, "But I'm here for you and Marinette. If there's anything I can do to help…"

"If you can make her okay, then that would be super." Alya commented almost as an afterthought, but instantly regretted it as she saw the flash of pain that passed through Adrien's eyes.

"What I wouldn't give," Adrien mumbled, his eyes downcast. If all the money he owned were enough to save save her, he'd give it away without a second thought.

He turned back to her, eyes filled with dread. "Alya, what is going on? She is not going to… you know…"

"We don't know…" Alya whispered, catching his meaning "She was… in really bad shape, Adrien."

Adrien cringed, unable to hide the shudder that overtook his body. Alya sighed, bracing herself to tell him everything. After taking a few steadying breaths, she began.

After Alya had seen Marinette being taken away in an ambulance, she immediately called Marinette's parents. The Dupain-Chengs closed the shop and rushed to see their daughter straightaway, their faces white with dread.

When they got there, they found Marinette had been rushed to the Emergency Room to be stabilized, her injuries too life-threatening to wait around. Alya recounted the extent of the damage to Adrien as the doctor had laid it out to them: Broken ribs, collapsed lung, head split open, hip shattered, immense blood loss… a dreadfully long list of injuries so severe they couldn't fathom how she was still alive. Most incredible of all was the fact that, save for her lung, none of her organs were damaged or malfunctioning, and yet, considering the state of her body, they couldn't explain how she was still breathing.

She was truly a fighter.

"They let us see her for a minute and then they moved her to surgery like two hours ago," Alya croaked, clutching her cup, "To close her head and fix her hip and... God, it was so awful..." She covered her mouth with a hand as fresh tears sprung from her eyes, her body trembling at the
Color had long since drained from Adrien's face, his knuckles white from squeezing his fists too hard on the table. His eyes glazed, and he could feel his frantic heartbeat in his ears. He was cold inside, his stomach tossing and turning.

"Marinette's parents are devastated. And I'm just... It's hard," Alya continued, her voice breaking, "Because she is my bff you know? And they said that even if they manage to fix her, they don't know if she will recover, because the injury on her head is so bad and even with a transfusion, she had lost so much blood. So I really don't know what will happen. None of us do."

He nodded dejectedly. They stayed silent for a moment, and she sipped on her cup. Adrien grabbed his, but did not drink, too busy battling his own inner turmoil. Deciding to give Adrien some time to take it all in, Alya idly looked up at the TV screen hanging above them to distract herself. It was muted, but it was displaying the local news, showing scenes of the destruction, of Demoman, of Chat Noir, and Ladybug...

"It's a good thing Chat Noir was there."

Adrien tensed, and if it wasn't because he was still sitting upright he could've sworn his heart stopped and he toppled over. He looked at Alya, glistening eyes wide.

"If he had not saved Marinette... I don't think she would still be here, you know? I wish I could thank him and just... talk to him. About Marinette... about Ladybug. She hasn't shown up since Demoman attacked her. Do you think she is okay? I haven't exactly been able to jump back into the fray-"

But Adrien was not listening. His brain was short-circuiting.

It's a good thing Chat Noir was there? What good he did, indeed! If he had actually been any good, Ladybug - no, Marinette - wouldn't be here right now, cut open and bleeding, lingering in death's threshold because he was not competent enough to keep her safe!

Adrien trembled in anger, gritting his teeth.

"Adrien?" came Alya's worried voice but it didn't register with him.

He squeezed his eyes shut and ran a shaking hand through his hair, breathing heavily. He wished so badly to see her. To feel her breath on his face and her heartbeat under his hand; to feel her warm skin under his touch, her soft hair through his fingers. If anything, to cling onto any indication that she was still alive and not lying dead in a surgery room somewhere, doctors hovering over her and deliberating how to tell her family that she could not be saved...

If they needed blood for her they could pump him dry for all he cared, as long as Marinette was safe. He wished he could just trade places, to be the one under the light right now-

"Adrien, breathe..." Alya said, standing up suddenly and hovering over him, eyes filled with concern. "Breathe with me..."

His heart rate had increased, his pulse throbbing underneath his skin. It was getting increasingly hard to breathe. His eyes burned with hot tears and he could feel himself choking.

"Hey, I'm here," Alya soothed, dragging her chair up beside him, sitting down, and pulling him into an embrace as she saw him unravel. "Let it all out."
And he did.

He reached out and clung to her like she was a life line. Heart-wrenching sobs ripped from his throat as he cried against Alya's shoulder, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. He completely let go of any inhibition, of any semblance he had tried to show that he was strong and composed, crushing the image of the upstanding model that he so carefully upheld. He let out the fear, the dejection, the guilt, and the sadness he had been harboring all day. His fingers clutched at the fabric of her shirt, his face completely hidden in the crook of her neck like a child.

And he wished so hard… he wished so hard that she was there. His mother. Who had disappeared some time ago without a trace, who had brought warmth to his home and his heart. He wished so badly to be consoled by her, to be told that that it wasn't his fault, and that everything would be okay.

But she wasn't there. And things would not be okay because it had been his fault, for not fulfilling his role of protecting Ladybug at the cost of his own life. He had failed, Marinette paid the ultimate price, and it would all be on his head. And here he was, crying like a child and lamenting the loss of yet another light in his already dull, miserable life. He was consoled by a friend who had much more of a right to cry over Marinette, and who had every reason to hate him if she only knew who he was.

But she held on to him, gently stroking his head, patiently rubbing his back.

The café was mercifully empty, and the baristas had turned away, giving them the privacy they needed.

"If only Marinette could see us now," Alya chuckled half-heartedly after Adrien had cried his fill and they had let go of each other. "Being so emotional over her...Especially you..."

"Me?" Adrien croaked, "Why me?"

There it was again. Singling him out. He recalled Alya emphasizing that he, Adrien, should be there and he had wondered why. Marinette was warm and friendly and had plenty of friends, why was Alya so adamant on having him there? She hadn't even mentioned her boyfriend, Nino.

Alya hesitated. "She would kill me if I told you but.. I guess it can't be helped. I just..." she wrung her hands nervously, "In case anything happens and...if Marinette..."

"Please, don't finish it." Adrien warned. He didn't want to hear it. Implied or otherwise. He had enough with his own dark thoughts.

Alya nodded and Adrien waited, wiping his tired eyes with the sleeve of his jacket, looking curiously at Alya.

"Marinette kinda... Well, not kinda... Marinette positively l-loves-"

She jumped suddenly with a squeak, a buzzing sound reaching their ears. She hurriedly reached into her pants pocket and took out her ringing phone, touching the green button and placing it against her ear.

"Hello?" Alya said.

Adrien saw her give a small gasp of surprise and nod at whatever she was being told on the other end. After a minute or two of being quiet, she spoke again. "Yes, we'll be right up!" She put her phone back into her pocket, turning back to Adrien. Whatever she was going to tell him earlier, she completely disregarded it as she grabbed his hand.
"She's out. There can only be two people at a time so we're in after her parents see her. Since she's in ICU we get 10 minutes." She explained hurriedly, pulling him to his feet and dragging him out the café. Adrien stumbled, following her blindly and just letting her drag him to the elevator and back to the waiting room, all the while repeating the same thing over and over in his head:

She was out. She survived the surgery. She was alive.

Marinette was alive.

Relief flooded him, and a weight he didn't know he was holding alleviated from his shoulders. She still had to recover, so it was a small but important step nonetheless.

They reached the room again, finding it empty. Marinette's parents were gone, probably in for their 10 minute visit. He knew that friends were not usually allowed to visit a patient immediately after a surgery, but he assumed Tom had pitched in for them and convinced the doctor to let them in.

Alya took a seat, pulling out her phone to occupy herself with, probably to talk to Nino, and after a moment Adrien started to pace.

The next 10 minutes passed by excruciatingly slow. He was convinced that if the floor had not been solid tiling, he would've made a hole in it by now. Alya tapped her foot impatiently on the floor, scrolling rapidly down the contents on her phone. Adrien was convinced she was not really looking at whatever was in front of her, her mind miles away.

He could feel Tikki's nervous fluttering against his chest, mirroring his own growing nervousness. What would he say? What would she say? Would she be confused? Would she remember what brought her to that situation in the first place? So many questions flitted in his head.

A sudden creaking sound snapped him out of his thoughts and he jumped, arms shooting up defensively as the Chat in him surfaced momentarily. Realizing it was only the door on the back opening, he blinked and quickly put his fists down. He was glad Alya had not seen his reaction as she stood up to greet Marinette's parents coming through the door, a doctor in tow.

Adrien studied their faces carefully to determine what awaited him. Tom and Sabine looked haggard but their faces were not quite as lined with worry as they had been earlier. The tears on Sabine's cheeks had dried, even if her eyes still looked dead and tired. Adrien couldn't quite place the emotion he was reading. What he saw there was different; It was no longer the fear of uncertainty and hopelessness. No… It was a sort of relief but with a lingering sense of dejection. There was still sadness but it wasn't for the loss of a daughter. It was for a sort of loss but low key in comparison to what could've been. It was...

Resignation?

Adrien didn't quite know what to make of that.

Alya hugged them both, asking them if they were okay. They nodded and murmured something to Alya but Adrien was not paying attention. He was looking at the black haired doctor behind them expectantly as he jotted something on his clipboard. Once he was done, he rearranged his spectacles, shook his mustache a bit, and looked up at both Alya and Adrien.

"These must be Mlle. Dupain-Cheng's friends, correct?" The doctor asked Tom.

"Yes, Dr. Longuevie."

Dr. Longuevie nodded, placing the clipboard under his right arm and gesturing with his left to the
After Dr. Longuevie got them to clean their hands and arms, he guided them through another hallway, explaining the visitation rules as Adrien and Alya listened on silently. No latex balloons and no flowers are permitted in ICU; hands must be thoroughly cleaned before entering the room; they will only be allowed 10 minutes at a time since Marinette's condition is delicate and they need to monitor her constantly; use encouraging words; even if it seems she isn't listening, she is; keep your voices level; do not disturb her; do not touch her head or hip; do not be alarmed by the strange machines and sounds, and so on.

Adrien was only half listening, nodding his head from time to time. He was growing anxious. How long was this hallway anyway?

After what seemed like forever, they finally reached the room. The doctor opened it for them and let them through first. Adrien was immediately assaulted by a myriad of strange smells and sounds. Beeping and booping came and went at different intervals, soft whirring sounds were heard in the background. The smell of disinfectant and analgesic attacked his nostrils. A nurse moved around a bed in the middle of the room, looking at machines and jotting things on a clipboard methodically.

It was a small room, fit for only one patient. A window was at the far back, curtains drawn closed so the light was subdued and easy on the eyes. Doctor Longuevie was saying something but Adrien was too distracted to tell what it was. He just heard the sound of the door closing and his eyes fell on the bed before him, on the inert body dressed in a pale blue robe and sunken chest deep into pristine white sheets. He walked towards her automatically, not really thinking.

Alya reached her first, rounding the bed so Adrien was free to linger on the side closest to him. There were tears in the corners of Alya's eyes as she reached out with a hand to caress Marinette's pale cheek, and Adrien felt pain. Pure, unbridled pain.

Marinette's skin was white, her cheeks flushed with sickness, and her closed eyes sunken. A tube of sorts came out of her mouth and connected to a ventilator at her side. The great majority of her head including her left eye was wrapped in thick, white bandages. What little hair they could see under the bandage lay sprawled over the pillow. All over her were cables and tubes connecting to her body in some way; on her arms, on her chest underneath the robe, on her temples, tethering her to all the strange monitors around her. She breathed slow and short breaths, trembling with every try, as if she was struggling to suck in even the simplest of breaths.

Adrien came closer almost hesitantly, ignoring the feeling of his heart in his throat and idly tapped his chest twice with a finger. He felt the hurried flitting of a Kwami moving up underneath his jacket and slinking down his right sleeve, and he subtly raised his forearm. He felt Tikki's little head underneath his palm, hiding behind his fingers as he pointed his hand to the bed so she would see. He felt her tremble.

His left hand moved on its own, brushing his fingers softly against the back of her hand. She was cold to the touch. She looked like she had been to hell and back, purple and black blemishes peppering the distinct parts of skin they could see. He felt moisture building at the corners of his eyes again, but kept them at bay.

"Hey, Marinette." Alya whispered, her voice cracking as she laid a hand on Marinette's arm. "You did great! I'm so proud of you. You're such a fighter, girl."

Marinette didn't stir, nor respond in any way, but Alya kept talking encouragingly, rubbing Mari's forearm gently. Adrien looked on, his voice gone. He just watched, taking in the image of her
beaten, broken body, wishing he could so much more for her than just caress her hand.

"When do you think she will wake?" Alya asked the nurse that had so far lingered in the back to give them privacy.

"We currently cannot determine when she will be waking." The nurse said. She looked at them in such a way that made them feel like what she said was the most obvious thing in the world to know. "Depending on her recovery, it may take some time."

"Why is that? Sedatives?" Alya asked, raising an eyebrow.

The nurse looked at her curiously, then her eyes softened in realization. "Did Dr. Longuevie not brief you on Mlle. Dupain-Cheng’s condition?"

"Uh, not really, just visitation rules."

The nurse hesitated, looked over at Marinette briefly, then turned back to them, her eyes sympathetic. Adrien found himself regretting Alya’s question before the nurse even spoke next.

"Mlle. Dupain-Cheng is in a coma."

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: ARTTSSSS


I apologize if there are any formatting errors. I hope I got them all!
Demoman could've burst through the window right at that moment, punched him straight in the gut, and it still wouldn't feel as terrible as the pain he felt right now.

He was back in his room, sitting on the floor against the door. A hand clutched at his chest, an agony unlike anything he'd felt before constricting his lungs. The pain was so bad, that he couldn't even utter a sob as he cried, mouth agape in a mute cry. He felt like he was encased in a tight, iron clamp, choking, but the tears wouldn't stop coming.

The memory kept replaying in his head.

As soon as the nurse spoke those damning words, the world around Adrien came crashing down so badly he was shocked into numbness. His mind went completely blank; his emotions shut down, which was probably a good thing as he was able to bid goodbye to Marinette's parents and Alya with composed decorum. He parted ways with Alya, then made his way home, silent as a tomb.

When he got there, he thanked Nathalie and Gorilla, asked to not disturbed for the rest of the night, and as soon as he closed the door behind him, he slid down to the floor and the dam finally broke.

Anguish assaulted him full force, forcing him to clamp a hand over his mouth to stifle the strangled cries that ripped from his throat before he could stop them. Tears came in rivers, flowing unchecked down his cheeks and drenching his shirt. His chest tightened and he doubled over, taking a hand to his heart in an attempt to alleviate the ache.

It didn't work.

Tikki and Plagg had long since floated out of his jacket, giving him the space to grieve in peace. Tikki had been crying her own set of small, silent tears as she rested on the pillow, and Plagg laid a comforting paw on her back. Eventually, sometime during the night, Adrien's sobs descended to tired sniffles and Tikki asked Plagg to excuse them. The black Kwami immediately floated away to the second floor of the room with a knowing nod.

Tikki floated down in front of Adrien, laying her paws on his bangs, stroking his hair gently. Without a word, Adrien straightened slightly and reached out with both arms, taking Tikki in his hands and pulling her close to his chest in his version of a hug.

"I'm so s-sorry, Tikki," he gasped, his voice broken and nearly imperceptible.

Tikki laid her head against him.

"Why do you keep blaming yourself?" Tikki asked him softly, "You were blaming yourself before going into the waiting room too, weren't you? That's why you were afraid of seeing her parents?"
You think you did this?"

Adrien didn't reply, his glassy and tired eyes not daring to look at the Kwami of his former partner. His guilt overwhelmed him and tears continued to flow nonstop down his cheeks.

"Adrien, it was not your fault," Tikki said, floating up and pulling on his chin in an attempt to get him to look at her. "None of it was. It just happened. There was nothing you could've done."

"She's supposed to be the lucky one." Adrien rasped, finally looking at her, "I'm supposed to absorb her bad luck. Why wasn't it me, Tikki?"

"It just wasn't Adrien, and we should be grateful it was not both of you who got hurt." Tikki explained.

"Got hurt?" Adrien's voice cracked, "She died. It's only because of you that she's still alive. She didn't just get hurt." His face contorted in a grimace of pain as the weight of what he said descended on him.

He rose to his feet and began pacing, running a hand through his hair in despair. "I almost… I almost got Ladybug killed!"

"Adrien, that's not-" Tikki began, floating after him.

"I should've made sure she was out of the way!" He cried, not listening, "I should've taken that hit, not her! Some hero I am! I don't deserve to be Chat Noir!"

"Stop!" Tikki raised her voice, small droplets falling from her eyes anew, "That wasn't your fault! Don't forget who the true villain here is! Hawk Moth sent that Akuma, and that Akuma hurt Ladybug, not you!"

Adrien looked back at Tikki, shocked into silence at the outburst of the otherwise calm Kwami.

"Wishing it was you in her place isn't going to help her!" Tikki cried, "Don't you think that if it had been you instead, Marinette would be feeling the same way? How do you think she would've felt if she had realized she almost lost Adrien? It would've destroyed her!"

Adrien shook his head, looking away. "I'm just a classmate. Why would she care?"

"Because she loves you!" Tikki burst out, then gasped, putting her paws on her mouth. "Oh…"

Adrien did a double take, eyes widening as he turned back to her. "She what?"

Seeing as the damage was done, Tikki sighed, lowering her paws in defeat. "Marinette is in love with you; with Adrien Agreste."

His shoulders sagged, and his knees almost gave out from under him. He gaped like a fish out of water.

Marinette loved him?

This was too unreal. Too unbelievable.

The reason she was so awkward around him was because she loved him, and not because she was uncomfortable around him? All this time he was worried that she was being cautious around him because he was friends with Chloé, but that was not the case at all. Marinette stumbled on her words because she had feelings for him!
His heart was about to burst.

Was that why Ladybug was not interested in Chat Noir? Because the girl under Ladybug's mask was in love with the boy behind Chat Noir?

"Please, Adrien," Tikki continued, her voice soft, pleading, "Please don't give up. Please. I know Marinette. If it had been you in her place, Paris would have lost not one, but two heroes in one night. Ladybug needs Chat Noir, just as much as Chat Noir needs her. And Marinette… Marinette needs you…"

Tikki covered her eyes, weeping into her little paws.

Adrien was instantly knocked out of his high, and suddenly felt like the worst person on the planet. Selfish and ungrateful. Overridden with guilt for causing Tikki grief, he walked towards her, taking her in his hands and cuddling her against his face.

"Please forgive me, Tikki. You are right," Adrien said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed, "I'm not going to give up. I lost my head. I'm just…" he sighed. "I'm a mess…"

"I know," Tikki sniffled, hugging his cheek. "I'm worried about her too, but I'm positive she will be fine. Have faith that she will pull through. Okay?"

"I will try," Adrien gave her a small smile.

Tikki smiled in return and nuzzled his cheek. "Thank you."

"So she likes me?" Adrien couldn't hide the delighted lilt in his voice. His voice still cracked but the tears had finally stopped, his heart singing.

"Quite a bit," Tikki said with a nod.

"I think I can attest to that," came Plagg's voice. He floated down from the second floor, apparently more than capable of listening on their whole conversation.

"What are you talking about?" Adrien asked him.

Plagg sighed in exasperation, muttering something like 'You're so dense!' and flying to the side of the shelf that directly faced Adrien's bed, ripping a piece of paper that had been carefully taped to the wood sometime ago.

"Hey!" Adrien protested but was immediately silenced as he realized that what Plagg was holding in his paws was a familiar, heart-shaped letter containing a poem written in red ink. His mystery Valentine. The one he had long thought was written by Ladybug.

"This is hers, isn't it?" Plagg asked Tikki as he handed the Valentine to Adrien. "It smells like her, anyway."

"Yes, it is! Oh!" Tikki then winced as she looked at the handwriting, "She didn't sign it again, did she?"

"This is Marinette's?" Adrien said breathlessly, realizing Plagg was right. It did have a faint smell of cinnamon he had somehow missed the first time. His chest swelling, he re-read the poem that had been the perfect response to his own and the trigger for many a daydream during dull school days:

*Your hair shines like the sun, your eyes are lucky green*
I look at you and wonder, your thoughts and dreams,

Yes, I would be your valentine, our love is so true,

Together for eternity, my heart belongs to you.

He sighed in contentment.

"Yes, she saw your poem um… discarded on the floor," Tikki said, avoiding Adrien's eyes, "And the way you described it, we thought it was for her so she decided to respond to your Valentine."

"It was actually for Ladybug but…now that you mention it," Adrien's eyes widened and he slapped a hand to his forehead, "Of course! How could I not see it before? Black hair, blue eyes...They were the same! I'm an idiot!"

Adrien made a sound of frustration and Tikki laughed.

"Wait you said 'she didn't sign it again'" Adrien began, "Did she mean to send another letter or…?"

Adrien couldn't help getting excited.

He loved Ladybug. Marinette loved Adrien. Ladybug was Marinette so Ladybug loved Adrien. Adrien loved Ladybug, so he loved Marinette. They loved each other without knowing! It was simply a case of criss-crossed love and it was all just so perfect. He couldn't believe how things had turned out. Even with the dire situation at hand, he couldn't help getting elated.

"Not quite, but she did make a gift for your birthday, once" Tikki said, putting a paw to her chin in thought.

"Gift? I don't really remember getting any gift." Adrien racked his brain but other than some croissant or macarons - which she had shared with Alya and Nino, too - he didn't recall a gift from Marinette around the date of his birthday.

"That's because she didn't sign the card! Oh, Marinette..." Tikki lamented. "It was a blue scarf! She made it herself, just for you."

"But that can't be," Adrien frowned, "I only have one blue scarf, but Nathalie told me it was from my father."

"Hmm… was it?" Tikki said, then excused herself and flew into Adrien's closet, permission be damned. After scouring through his clothes for a bit, she finally flew back, a bundle of blue in her paws.

"Check it for yourself," Tikki told Adrien almost defiantly, handing him the soft garment. "Marinette always-"

"Signs her work…” Adrien finished for her, his voice trailing off as he saw it, right in the corner of the beautiful scarf. Her name was embroidered in a shiny, baby blue thread on the very edge of the scarf, the very same swirly signature she had embroidered on the bowler hat she had made for his father's contest.

He didn't know why Nathalie had told him it was from his father. She probably got confused, but it didn't matter now. He couldn't even bring himself to be bothered by the fact his father had not gotten him anything after all. He knew who the scarf was from now, and he found he preferred this turnout much more.
Something in him stirred, and he pressed both the poem and the scarf to his chest. An all-enveloping warmth suffused through him, soft and calming. A deep affection for the girl that sat behind him bloomed unrelenting in his chest. For a moment, he pretended that it was not the scarf he held against him, but her. Sweet, beautiful, brave Marinette… Warm, soft, smelling of cinnamon and sugar from the bakery; a familiar, soothing smell. It made him think of home more than his own mansion did.

Marinette felt like home.

She was home.

"I need to see her." Adrien said suddenly, standing up from the bed.

"Oh brother, look what you've done Tikki." Plagg lamented.

"But visiting hours are over." Tikki argued.

"Whoever said I was going as Adrien?"

Adrien couldn't climb walls, but Chat Noir sure could.

Tikki had initially opposed the idea, but it didn't take long for her to go along when Adrien played on her own wish to see Marinette. It was the dead of night, and he currently hung from the window's ledge, waiting for Tikki to give him the signal.

After checking that they had the right window, Tikki made sure no one was in the room before signaling Chat Noir to go ahead. Chat nodded and carefully got the window open, slinking inside quietly.

The same smells and same sounds from earlier today greeted him. The light had been further subdued, only bright enough to enable anyone to walk around the room without crashing into any of the machines inside.

There was a green flash and suddenly Adrien stood in Chat's place.

"Plagg, keep a lookout." Adrien whispered.

"Yeah, whatever, knock yourself out." Plagg said, floating towards the door.

Tikki sat on Adrien's shoulder as he walked to the bed in the middle of the room. Although nothing much had changed, somehow he looked on her with a different light. Despite the paleness of her skin, she glowed to him, radiating warmth. It was probably due to the newfound feelings he had for the girl, but either way, Adrien didn't care. Tears didn't threaten to come this time. Longing took their place.

He stood at the edge of her bed and reached out with a hand, gently caressing her cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Hello, My Lady," he whispered at her with a smile. Of course, there was no response, but for the time being, he didn't care. Tikki flew down to sit beside Marinette's head, snuggling close to her with a croon.

Knowing now that Marinette had feelings for him, he felt bold. He leaned down, softly pressing his lips against her forehead. He remained there for a moment, reveling in how good and natural it felt. How right it felt. Then he heard it.
A sigh.

She sighed.

Adrien pulled back, gasping. "Tikki did you hear that?"

"She's just in a coma, not dead. People in coma also breathe, you know?" Came the scathing remark from the door.

"Plagg." Tikki said icily before Adrien had a chance to respond.

Adrien never knew such a small creature could hold so much hate until he saw Tikki glaring daggers at Plagg, tiny blue eyes narrowed.

"Okay okay, back to lookout."

Adrien chuckled despite himself, then turned back to Marinette, his excitement over her reaction unaffected. He grabbed her hand, gently stroking the back of it with his thumb.

"They said that you could hear us despite… what happened to you," Adrien started, softly, "So if you can hear me Marinette, I just… I want you to hold in there, okay? I'll be waiting for you for as long as it takes. I know you can pull through. You're strong and amazing and… I believe in you."

No response as expected, but it didn't bother Adrien. He carefully raised her hand, and kissed the back of it.

"I won't give up. I'll look after Paris while you are gone, but please," He sighed, "Wake up soon, okay? Chat Noir needs Ladybug..." He hesitated, then added, almost in a whisper. "I need you."

He kissed her hand again and gently put it back down on the bed. Looking at the clock on top her bed, he turned to the little Kwami beside Marinette. "Tikki, do you want a few minutes before we leave?"

Tikki looked at him, pensive, then nodded. Adrien smiled and moved away to stand with Plagg at the door as Tikki began talking to Marinette in too low a voice for him to hear. He felt warmth at how much the Kwami loved her charge, going so far as to risk herself for Marinette. That was devotion if he'd ever seen any, and Adrien was glad Marinette had someone like Tikki looking out for her.

Suddenly a thought struck him. He tossed the idea about in his head, wondering if he should bring it up, and after much deliberation, he turned to his own Kwami.

"Plagg," Adrien said quietly, "If it had been me in her place… would you have done for me what Tikki did for Marinette?"

Plagg was silent for a moment, then chuckled, almost miserably. "Tikki has it easy. Ladybugs are lucky. Triumphant. My choosen are paragons of bad luck. They wreak and attract destruction. They take the hit. They protect… If I had done what Tikki did every time it was needed… I wouldn't be here anymore..."

The implication in Plagg's explanation was not lost on Adrien.

"How many Chats have… have you lost?"

Pain flashed in Plagg's eyes, and Adrien had never seen the sarcastic sprite look so despondent. "It
doesn't matter."

But Adrien was not convinced. The moment Plagg turned away, Adrien looked back at Tikki, who apparently had overheard their conversation, and her sad eyes told him everything:

Too many to count.

Adrien's shoulders drooped. Suddenly, Plagg's lazy, uninterested attitude towards things in general started to make sense for him. Of course he was being sarcastic about Marinette's condition. Of course he downplayed the situation. He was bitter. Bitter that Tikki very rarely, or at least until today, had ever had to worry about losing a charge and Plagg, lord of bad luck, had to resign himself to the inevitable fate that awaited most of his charges, choosing instead to not get attached to them.

He wanted to reach out and hug him, but he wasn't sure if the grouchy Kwami would've appreciated the motion.

Adrien was snapped out of his thoughts and jumped as he felt a buzz against his leg. He reached down and pulled out his phone from his pants pocket, reading the notification on the screen with a pensive face.

"Alya?" Tikki asked him.

"Sort of," Adrien said, walking back to Tikki, "The Ladyblog, Demoman has been sighted again."

Tikki's antennae drooped and she looked back at Marinette's sleeping face.

"I need to stop him," Adrien said thickly, "Once and for all. I think I know how."

"But Adrien, he was really dangerous with both of you fighting him. Now it's only you." Tikki said, her eyes lining with worry. "Are you sure about this?"

"I have no choice, Tikki. She wouldn't want me to let this drag on."

"I have no choice, Tikki. She wouldn't want me to let this drag on." He murmured, his index finger stroking the back of her hand. "Besides..." His eyes suddenly narrowed, and something dark passed over Adrien's eyes, making Tikki shiver. "I have a score to settle with that guy."

"But... you can't purify Akumas." she tried.

"I'll think of something."

Tikki was concerned but seeing as she could not dissuade him, she did not question him further. Having temporarily stopped Tikki's protests, Adrien leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to Marinette's cheek.

"I'll come back to visit. I promise." He whispered as he pulled back. This time, he could've sworn he saw her eyebrow twitch, but he couldn't be sure.

"A kiss for luck, huh?"

"Shut up, Plagg." Adrien smirked, "Transform me!"

A loud rumble like rolling thunder echoed through the sky, and soon the sound of sirens blared in the city. He had left Marinette's room half an hour ago, sitting the roof of the hospital while he tracked Demoman's path through the Ladyblog's sighting reports, ticking off locations on his baton's map feature.
If Chat Noir's prediction on where the villain would stop next were accurate, he knew just where he’d find him, and he had the perfect plan to beat him. It was risky, but it was the only chance he had. Demoman was a formidable opponent, so Chat would have to use cunning and use his enemy's strength against him if he wanted to succeed.

After confirming that Demoman was staying on the path he had mapped out, Chat Noir jumped confidently from roof to roof towards the source of the commotion, pinpointed by a large column of smoke rising in the sky before him. He knew just the location it was coming from, and he grinned at the accuracy of his guess.

*Le Pont Des Arts.*

What an ironic place to wreak havoc in given Chat's circumstances. The famous bridge full of padlocks hanging from the railings; the *love locks*, as they were called; symbols of countless couples' love and devotion to each other, meant to hang for all eternity; their iron incorruptible, timeless.

The perfect place to blow into pieces. For Ladybug. For Marinette. This would be the "padlock" he'd dedicate to her.

A few jumps further and he got there, looking down from a ledge at the hubbub below. Demoman was slinging his wrecking balls around, laughing in sick delight as people scurried away from him in between rubble and smoke.

A growl rumbled in his throat and Tikki peeked her head out of the neckline of his suit, just behind his bell, and looked up at him.

"Adrien, don't forget why you are doing this," Tikki warned.

"For Marinette-"

"For *Paris,*" Tikki corrected. "You are a *hero.* Do this not out of revenge, but because it's the right thing to do. Please Chat, don't let it fill your head. Are you sure you know what you are doing?"

Chat Noir's expression was unreadable, but he nodded at Tikki all the same. "Positive. You remember when to bail, right?"

Tikki sighed. "I do."

Demoman started down the bridge, laughing into the air.

"Ok. Hide." Chat said, and Tikki went back into the recesses of his suit.

Chat Noir took a deep breath and jumped down, landing just in front of Demoman. He rose to his full height, chest out to exude more confidence than what he really felt, and brandished his baton defiantly.

"Sorry to *crash* your party." Chat sneered. "But I think we have some pending business to attend to."

People taking refuge behind cars and heaps of rock nearby gasped, pointing at him in between remarks of *We are saved!* and *Chat noir will help us!* They cheered for him, and he felt a boost of confidence. A boost he so desperately needed.

He was terrified. He truly was. Loathe as he was to admit it, Demoman had defeated Ladybug, the symbol of Paris; Lady Luck, the girl who could see the exit out of every problem. Sure, they were evenly matched in strength, but he always felt Ladybug was the strategist, and Chat had often
followed her plans blindly, only pitching in his own thoughts when he truly felt he found a kink in her plan. He placed his utmost trust in her, and it had never been misplaced.

But she was gone now. He was on his own. And although Tikki was clever on her own and a positive influence, she was not Ladybug. She was not Marinette. Tikki could not cast Lucky Charm, or Miraculous Ladybug. If something went wrong, there was no getting out of it with magic. He was truly all he could depend on. Him and a stupid, suicide plan he had concocted as a last resort.

And that plan had just been set into motion. There was no turning back now. He drew strength from his thoughts of Marinette, and braced himself. He sucked in a breath, and locked eyes with his enemy.

Demoman chuckled, grinning a sickening smile.

"Scaredy cat!" Demoman said, walking to him and crashing his wrecking balls at this sides with every step for added effect. "Where you been kitty? Scared in a hole? Scared I squish you like your cute buggy friend!!"

Demoman swung a wrecking ball some feet in front of him, but not with the intent to hit him. The ball landed between them with a loud thump, breaking the wooden planks underneath. He pulled back on the chain until Chat Noir was able to see the underside of the wrecking ball. He shivered involuntarily. There was a dark stain on it, a stain he was sure had been red at some point, when it was still fresh.

Blood.

"I squish her good!" He laughed. "I squish her dead, like the insect she was!"

Chat Noir snapped.

With a feral scream, Chat Noir lunged at the Akuma. Rage flared in his stomach and fueled his every limb, allowing him to deftly evade every swing of the wrecking ball sent his way. A chain flew over his head and he planted himself firmly on his feet, launching himself forward in a spinning kick that connected with Demoman's stomach. The villain groaned, taking shaky steps back, further into bridge. Chat kept pushing, taking every chance he got to push the Akuma further and further into the heart of the bridge.

Boom, Crash, Hit. Wrecking ball after wrecking ball rained abuse on their battleground. The bridge was far from being the landmark it used to be, full of holes and splintered planks and punched-out metal jutting from the edges. Many a padlock had met their fate on the bottom of the Seine, their promises broken.

Chat was breathing heavily, his energy depleting from trying to get Demoman just where he wanted him. He was so close. His limbs burnt, but his fury kept him going, jumping, dodging, kicking. Every time he caught a glimpse of the blood-stained ball, his anger mounted, sending him into another fit of violent kicks and punches as he growled in pent-up frustration.

He was pissed, and he was going to make sure Demoman felt it all.

Demoman roared angrily, slamming the wrecking balls against the floor around him in a rage, pieces of splintered wood flying everywhere. The ground quaked, but Chat held fast. He was nearly there, he knew he was. His ears twitched, picking up on a singular sound, a sound that brought him a sickening joy.

The sound of metal beams groaning.
"Urgh, I take all your nine lives!" Demoman shouted, retracting his chains to prepare a new onslaught.

"Come get them then, blockhead." Chat hissed with a smirk, posing himself on all fours just in front of the his target.

With a roar, Demoman hauled both wrecking balls at Chat with all the strength he possessed. Chat deftly jumped away at the last second, landing over the railing. As soon as the iron balls crashed against the spot where he had just been, he felt the bridge tremble, and heard the cement under the wood crack.

There was a heart-stopping moment of silence, where neither of them moved, and then it began. The crack spread like a web across the bridge, rocks flying, ground heaving.

And Chat grinned.

A sudden snap. The sound of metal groaning. The rumble of stone breaking, and down they went, Chat Noir, Demoman, and the bridge as it caved underneath them. It collapsed in a rain of rocks and padlocks, crashing into the freezing Seine below under the terrified stare of onlookers.

And even as he fell with the debris and disappeared under the water, the smirk on Chat Noir's face never left.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: Wonderful Fanart for this chapter!


Woah, thank you so much for the messages on the last chapter! They got me so giddy I started writing the next 2 chapters right away! <3 You guy gimme life with your words <3 soon I will be creating art for this fic (I do that with all my one shots) since my Tablet has been repaired! I will update the chapters with images when I get them done! Cheers!

www.ferisae.tumblr.com
Pitch Black

Chapter Summary

In which Adrien does something reckless (again).

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your encouraging comments! (including those who threatened bodily harm on my person :P ) Without further ado, here is the next chapter! Your reviews fuel the fire of my writing fingers, so thank you kindly for sharing your thoughts!

Freezing. Freezing. Freezing. Freezing!

Chat Noir's body was yelling, the cold slicing at his body like knives even through the suit. He resisted the urge to scream, holding his breath as he swam around the raining debris still crashing through the surface. Padlocks pelted his back and shoulders as they sank to the bottom of the river and he waved his arms frantically to get out of the way.

He brought a hand to his bell, checking around the zipper, and relieved to find Tikki had left the suit on time. No more borrowed luck, it was now or never. He looked through the murk surrounding him, grateful that his night vision worked even under water.

He spotted his target a few meters down, bubbles coming out in streams from his mouth as he struggled to surface. But metal did not float and Demoman continued to sink into the dark, weighed down by his massive arms.

Chat quickly kicked his feet towards Demoman. As much as he had come to resent the villain, he knew there was a blameless, confused person underneath Hawk Moth's spell, and he had to be swift if he wanted them to survive. A life was at stake. He had to get the akumatized item and fast.

Demoman's face contorted in an expression of fury as Chat approached him, but there was nothing he could do to repel him. His arms were pure iron and he could not move them as they sank deeper into the sand on the bottom. Chat propelled himself forward with his arms, increasing speed. His lungs were burning and his time was running out. Finally, when he was but a few inches away from Demoman, he snatched the safety helmet right off his head.

A murmur of approval rumbled in his throat, and he kicked his feet again, swimming back up. His lungs were on fire by the time he breached the water's surface, sucking in lungfuls of cool, night air. Panting, he swam to the river bank, pulling himself over the edge. He fell on all fours, dripping wet.

"Chat Noir!" Came Tikki's voice as she flew down to meet him, "Are you okay?"

"Perfect," he sputtered, and he smiled as he raised his hand and showed Tikki the safety helmet, which glowed in an ominous purple light. However, he was surprised to find she did not share in his
happiness. In fact, her face was contorted in worry. His smile fell. "Tikki?"

"What are you going to do with the Akuma?" She asked, her voice low. "You cannot purify it."

Chat Noir remained silent. He had refrained from telling her about that particular part of his plan in fear that she would somehow object it and talk him out of it. But there was no choice. It was the only alternative he had. A civilian's life was at stake, and he couldn't waste time discussing the repercussions of his actions with the Kwami. He was jumping in blindly.

He dropped the helmet on the ground and promptly punched a fist through it. The helmet cracked under the force of the hit, and a purple butterfly fluttered out of the remains, quickly flying away. It was now or never.

If Ladybug was meant to purify, Chat Noir was meant to destroy.

"CATACLYSM!"

"Chat Noir, no-!"

He slammed the butterfly down hard against the ground, crunching it under his hand with the full weight of his resentment. Cataclysm flared around his fingers as it made contact with the Akuma, and no amount of mental fortitude could have prepared him for the consequences.

Purple and black light mingled, flaring up his arm and around his chest in a flurry of black and purple energy. A shock like lightning shot through his limbs and his body seized up, a horrible scream ripping from his throat. He was on fire, white hot pain incensing every nerve end on his body. Pain like he had never felt before attacked every inch of him, constricted every muscle, and fried every nerve. He felt like liquid fire was flowing through his veins, scorching his insides.

His vision exploded with white flashes, and he couldn't think. He lost sense of where he was. Tikki was screaming at him, her face panic-stricken, but he couldn't hear her. All he heard was the sound of his screaming, piercing his ears along the sound of another creature screeching in the back of his head.

He was burning, white fire searing every inch of his body.

He wanted it to end. Mercy above, he wanted to die.

And then, abruptly, it all stopped, and Chat Noir toppled sideways, collapsing on the ground. His body spasmed uncontrollably, eyes blown wide. His mouth gaped as if unable to breathe, sound dead in his raw throat. The world spun around him. He saw a red blur he thought was Tikki, floating in front of him, her mouth was moving though the sound was distorted. She sounded like she was underwater.

Then suddenly, she zipped away and she was gone.

The corners of his vision started fading to black, his eyelids becoming heavier. Sound was completely drowned out, as if his ears had been plugged, still submerged in the river. He could feel his frantic pulse throughout his body, throbbing in his veins, his heart beat erratically against his ribcage. He couldn't move.

And then he was being shaken.

Someone grabbed him by the arm, trying to raise him. He heard his name. A familiar voice was calling his name.
"Chat Noir! Are you okay?" He heard. He was flopped on his back and a brown and red blur appeared in his line of vision. He didn't respond. He couldn't speak, his voice was gone, and his mind fried. He registered his right arm prickling uncomfortably as if he had a thousand needles pressed to his skin.

Lights. There were suddenly lights all around him, illuminating him, blinding him.

"Chat!" He heard again. The brown and red blur had not left yet. More shadows appeared behind the blur, looking down at him. He was shaken again. Someone was touching his cheek, then his forehead. There was a drowned out cacophony of voices, all speaking at the same time. He could barely make them out.

"He's not responding."

"Is he okay?"

"Call an ambulance!"

He wanted to sleep. He needed to sleep. His eyes felt so heavy...

"Hey! Snap out of it!"

That part came surprisingly clear, and all at once, sound came back full force, assaulting his ears with loud chatter and gasping. His eyes snapped fully open but his vision swam. He could see it, though. Hazel eyes looking at him through a familiar set of black glasses, framed by auburn hair. Other people stood behind her, reporters and civilians alike, looking at him with faces of curiosity and fear alike.

"Chat! Can you hear me? Hey!" Alya snapped her fingers in front of his eyes, but he was slow to blink.

"Come on! Your ring is blinking!" Alya urged him, and that did the trick.

It was like a switch had been turned back on.

Normal function seemed to return to his brain, and Chat groaned, trying to move his arms. They felt like lead weights as he sluggishly tried to turn on his side. Alya grabbed his arm, helping him pull himself on all fours. He panted as if he had run a marathon, his right arm burning. His arms threatened to give out again, but a foreboding beep of his ring kept him rooted.

He caught a glimpse of a white butterfly on the ground in front of him. Its wings were ripped to shreds, the ground around it charred.

"Hey get out, give him some space!" Alya yelled at someone Chat could not see. His eyes were on the ground, and he was trying to make sense of his surroundings. Bridge. Collapse. Akuma…What else? He could hear chatter, questions, being shot at him.

"Chat Noir! What happened?"

"What was that attack you just used?"

"Will the damage in the city be repaired?"

"Where is Ladybug?"

"Is she hurt?"
"Is she dead?"

Tears. Tears came. Falling from his eyes in droplets, leaving little circular stains on the floor. No. He didn't want to hurt again. Please stop. Please stop.

His throat tightened.

"Back off!" Alya yelled again as she pulled his arm around her shoulders and hauled him up to his feet with a strength Chat didn't know the girl possessed. She turned to him, whispering. "You really need to get out of here. I will cover you."

Chat raised his head with much difficulty, looking at Alya with heavy-lidded eyes. Although he could not speak, he wished the girl could see his gratitude. She smiled at him, her gaze empathetic, and he could see her eyes were glistening. She passed him his baton.

"Go."

Chat grabbed it with shaky fingers, and gathering all the energy he could from his broken body, he grabbed on to it with both hands and elongated his baton, shooting to the sky and out of sight. Alya watched him soar away, her heart heavy.

And that night, Paris got one confirmation.

Ladybug was no more.

_Dying_. He felt like he was dying.

His breath came in ragged gasps.

"Just a little bit more, Chat." Tikki's voice coaxed.

He dragged his feet on the roof, hunched over his baton. Breathing was becoming hard to do. His lungs just refused to cooperate. His heart kept thumping erratically in his ears, and his knees trembled, threatening to buckle. His vision kept fading to black and back, so he followed the red glow he assumed to be Tikki across the roofs to find his way home. Everything else was a murky sea of dark blue and brown.

He wheezed. His body was shutting down. He couldn't continue. His ring was on its final beep.

"One more roof, Chat."

He extended his trembling arms, planted his baton, and shot into the sky on instinct, but he could no longer calculate his trajectory right. He couldn't breathe anymore. His world spun and his eyes slid shut.

Down and down he went...

"Look out!"

He felt something small hit him on the side as he plummeted and his body shifted direction. He felt the wind pass him as he flew through a window and crashed against something cushioned but firm. The couch tumbled back and he rolled over, his body sprawling on the floor.

"Adrien!" Tikki squeaked, worried.
He felt the rush of wind of his transformation releasing, and heard Plagg fall beside his head with a
dull thump.

"Owww..." He heard him whine.

"Adrien? Adrien, hang in there! Oh no...." He heard Tikki say. Her voice sounded far away.

"Stupid kid!" Plagg yelled distantly, but his voice was weak, tired.

He didn't know why he was stupid, but he didn't really care. He was sort of breathing again, he thought. He didn't know. He was falling. Falling into darkness, soothing and all enveloping. A voice told him to let go, and he was so tempted...

"Adrien, please say something!"

"Open your eyes, kid! Now!"

No. That was too much work. He preferred it this way. Nothing could touch him here. He drifted, farther and farther away...

"No, no no no! Adrien!"

"I think I know what to do!"

"Hurry, Tikki!"

Tikki and Plagg voices faded. He felt like he should have been more concerned about that but he wasn't. He was so comfortable in this darkness. He had stopped feeling his body. He only heard his heartbeat, low and weak... getting slower and slower...

Something soft pressed against his face. The smell of cinnamon drifted to his nose. He felt warmer, and his drifting stopped for a moment. He nuzzled against the soft thing against his cheek. It felt so nice...

He suddenly heard girly giggling. He heard Nino, Alya, and another voice, laughing. A familiar voice. It made his heart flutter. The audio seemed to be coming from someplace next to his head. It sounded distorted. A video perhaps?

More voices. He knew this video; he recognized its audio. He had watched it many times before. It was one of his favorites. They were in a park if he recalled right. He was the one recording. It was the first day of summer of Adrien's first year at school and Nino had invited him over to the water park. They were using water guns. Nino and Alya were in one team, and he was in another with-

"M-Mari...nette..." He mumbled.

"Plagg, it's working!"

"Shhhh..."

He wanted to tell the Kwami to be quiet, too. He wanted to hear her voice. He couldn't see. He couldn't open his eyes, but he could hear. Marinette's sweet laughter reached his ears. It tugged at his memories, and images materialized behind his lids. A sunny scene at a park full of colorful waterworks and slides bloomed into view. There was so much laughter and joy. He was having fun!

They were having a war. Marinette was on his side, brandishing a bright green water gun. She was an amazing shooter, he noted, scoring several points for both of them. All that videogame playing
made her really skilled. She gave a whoop, celebrating that she had hit both Alya and Nino with a water bomb, and Adrien heard his own laugh in his head.

Adrien smiled. The video had seemingly stopped, but the memory kept playing in his head, continuing from where the video left off.

'We won, Adrien!'

He saw her do a little victory dance, then she high fived him. She wore a cute, pink bikini with white polka dots, a white beach wrap tied around her hip. Her hair was down and dripping wet. She was grinning brightly, a cute blush on her face as she looked at him. She looked beautiful.

He had never noticed how similar her adorable little freckles were to the ones that peeked just below Ladybug's mask. Had those always been there? Her eyes gazed at him; they were a beautiful shade of blue like the summer sky, her smile sunny and bright and wide.

She was his sky.

She was just in front of him, smiling and sweet. So close, so very tantalizing. He wanted to embrace her, hold her close. Share her warmth. He reached out with his arms.

"Oops, careful," Tikki giggled.

"Good, he is moving..."

The memory faded suddenly, and Adrien's eyes cracked open slowly. Nothing but blurred colors met his gaze. He blinked repeatedly, his vision sharpening. Tikki and Plagg were mere inches from his face, looking intently at him. Plagg was holding Adrien's cellphone in his paws in front of him, a video had just stopped, rendering the screen black. Feeling started returning to his limbs, and he was suddenly aware of his heartbeat and breathing again.

"Adrien!" Tikki said with glee, relief flooding her features. Plagg just sighed, dropping the phone on the floor and sitting down beside Tikki. He looked exhausted.

"Plagg?" Adrien croaked, struggling to find his voice, "What happened?"

He found he couldn't recall how he had ended up on the floor of his room, lying on his side with a blue scarf laying across his neck and cheek, and his Valentine tucked under his face.

"You used Cataclysm on an Akuma..." Tikki said, her smile vanishing.

Worry tugged at his insides. "Did.. did it multiply?"

Tikki shook her head, "No, it disappeared, but."

"You absorbed it, you big, stupid boy!" Plagg burst out, furious, "Don't you realize what that could've done to you!?"

"Wha-?" Adrien had trouble keeping up with what he was saying. With much difficulty, he pulled himself to a sitting position with shaking arms, bringing the scarf up with him. He felt like throwing up. "Ugh..."

"Cataclysm is meant to destroy, so it can - and it will - absorb anything that can make it more powerful!" Plagg said, "And guess what, genius? Akumas fit that description! They bend the will of their target, so when Cataclysm absorbed it, part of it bounced back at you! You could have died,
"Adrien, you must never, ever, touch Akumas with Cataclysm." Tikki explained, "You can destroy the object they are in but you must never use it on the butterflies themselves! That's why Ladybug is the only one capable of purifying them. They don't affect her when she uses her power."

"You and Ladybug exist in a balance." She continued "Where she is light, you are darkness. Darkness grows with more darkness, and there's no telling what could happen if you absorb too much of it. You must not do it again. Do you understand?"

"Yeah but...what happened to me?" Adrien asked.

"We are not quite sure," Tikki said, scratching her head, "The nature of Akumas is a mystery, even more so when combined with a power such as Cataclysm, which is unpredictable in itself. From what I could tell, your body was fighting it, but we can't tell if it was fighting off Cataclysm - which could have damaged your body - or the Akuma - which was trying to take over your mind. It very well could have been both."

"A-And...?" Adrien pressed. He wanted to know what the extent of the damage was.

"You were becoming unresponsive. We tried to appeal to your mind, since the mind is stronger than the body. And since the Akumas need negative mental consent to work, we... we tried to make you happy, so we could get you back." Tikki explained, then she smiled. "And it worked! How are you feeling?"

"Like my arms are gonna fall off." Adrien said, grimacing. "And nauseous."

She let out a breath of relief. "Good. It seems Plagg was able to syphon most of the energy out, since the damage looks to be superficial." Tikki said with an approving nod.

"Yeah, and you better not force me to do that again. I'm going to feel it for days." Plagg said, ears and whiskers drooping. "If you were trying to test your theory on whether or not I could do for you what Tikki did for Marinette, then congratulations, you almost did!"

He could swear Plagg's eyes were glassy.

"Plagg, that's not..." Adrien stuttered, "I'm... I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"I will be when you stop making stupid decisions." Plagg spat. He struggled to his feet and floated away to the second floor and out of sight.

Adrien felt terrible. He raked a hand through his hair miserably.

"I messed up..." He moaned, "I just... I didn't think- I thought it would work."

"He thought you were going to die. He was scared." Tikki said, touching his hand, "Plagg may not show it, but he really cares about you, Adrien. Please, be careful. Tell us what you are planning next time."

Adrien hissed suddenly as one of Tikki's comforting pats actually sent a stab of pain up his right arm.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She squeaked, covering her mouth.

Adrien was about to tell her it was alright until he looked at his hand and the words got stuck in his throat.
Extending from his ring finger and a little beyond his wrist, he had an angry red scar shaped like a lightning strike, spreading tendrils around his palm and wrist. It looked as if electricity had flown up his hand, burning the skin in its path.

"What is this?" Adrien croaked, touching it with a finger but regretting it as the contact made him wince.

"I guess a scorch mark from when Cataclysm merged with the Akuma." Tikki tried.

"And…is it permanent?"

"I don't know. Adrien…" Tikki said, and she looked at him sadly, "You are the first Chat Noir to have ever survived something like this."

"Hey Ladybloggers, Alya here with good news and bad news.

As you all know, for the past few days Paris has been under the attack of an akuma calling himself Demoman. The attack affected the 17th, 8th, and 7th arrondissement of Paris, as well as half of the 6th, leaving an enormous amount of property damage and injured civilians in its wake.

The local Police force are doing what they can to support anyone who might need a hand. If you need any help, remember to call their distress number by dialing 17 on your mobile or 112 for general assistance.

Now for the good news.

Demoman has finally been stopped. At around 3:15 a.m last night, Chat Noir appeared and neutralized Demoman at Le Pont des Arts. The bridge collapsed under them from the damage sustained during battle, and Chat Noir was able to free the akuma victim, who is now being properly cared for in the hospital. No other casualties have been reported. Thank you to the medical force for their quick response, and thank you Chat Noir for saving us!

As for the bad news," in here, Alya's face fell, and she tried to blink away the moisture in her eyes, straightening again in an attempt to look professional, "It seems Paris' fears have been confirmed. Chat Noir appeared last night on his own. At no point during the battle was he joined by his partner. When asked about Ladybug, he was unable to answer and his physical response confirmed our suspicions." Alya swallowed hard, struggling to keep her voice even, "Though a body was never retrieved, it is to our understanding that Ladybug passed away during the attack on the 8th arrondissement while on the line of duty. Paris is in mourning; It has lost one of its guardian angels.

Paris will forever be in your debt. Thank you for everything you did for us, Ladybug. May you get the rest you deserve.

As for Chat Noir. The Ladyblog would like to extend their condolences and ask readers to respect Chat Noir's privacy and do not bother him about this. Chat Noir, if you are watching this, Paris stands with you, and we will continue to support you in any way we can.

The Ladyblog will remain online to continue giving people a platform to report on attacks, and to aid Chat Noir in whatever he may need.

This was Alya with the latest. Good night, Ladybloggers, and stay connected."

The video went dark, and his cursor lingered over the player for a few moments. He was silent as the weight of what Alya said sunk in.
And although he knew the truth behind Ladybug’s whereabouts, Adrien mourned with Paris that night.

And this time, he didn't try to hide the tears.

Chapter End Notes

INCREDIBLE FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER AAAH <3

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143530518241/it-is-a-mystery-he-slammed-the-butterfly-down
Erosion

Chapter Summary

In which someone needs to let poor Adrien sleep, please.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dude, you okay? You look like a truck ran you over."

"Trouble sleeping." was Adrien's scant reply to Nino as he walked around the desk to find his seat.

He knew he looked terrible. Pale skin, hunched back, dark rings under his eyes… and his excuse wasn't a complete lie, either.

Every time he had tried to close his eyes last night, his dreams devolved into nightmares.

At times it was Marinette suffering horrible accidents any time she was near him. At other times, it was him drowning in the Seine River, iron shackles around his limbs tying him down. Sometimes, he was in the dark, his body doubled over in pain; Hawk Moth's laugh rang in his ears as he realize his Miraculous was gone and Marinette lay before him in a pool of blood, her Miraculous also gone.

He would wake up from those screaming.

"Yo, sorry to hear that."

Adrien shrugged as an answer and dropped his bag on the desk, biting back a hiss as he used his right hand to do so. He had wrapped a bandage over the wound, but it still burned as if it was new.

"What happened to your hand?" Nino asked him, raising an eyebrow.

"Fell down the stairs." Adrien lied, pulling the sleeve of the green hoodie he was wearing as down over his hand as he could to cover the bandaging.

"Not your lucky night, huh?" Nino chuckled, patting him on the back comfortingly.

"You have no idea." Was Adrien's grouchy reply as he slumped on his chair. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing another wave of nausea down.

His stomach ached. He hadn't even been able to keep his breakfast down that morning and now he felt both the hunger pangs and the urge to vomit in tandem. He wished he could have just called in sick and skipped school, but Nathalie would've suspected and called a doctor and that wouldn't do. He could probably blame his ill health on the stress from worrying over Marinette, but how would he explain the angry, lightning-shaped scar on his arm?

No, he had to truck on and pretend everything was normal.

Or as normal as he could act after destroying a famous Parisian landmark and escaping certain death last night.
He huffed to himself. He idly registered soft sniffling coming from behind him, but he didn’t need to turn around to know who it was.

The Ladyblog had been receiving messages of support all night, to the point he had to mute his phone if he wanted to have any sort of rest. Sometimes however, in the moments when he woke from a bad dream and was too scared to close his eyes again, he grabbed his phone and pulled up the messages.

There were messages of condolences for Ladybug’s family, or users sharing their personal stories on how Ladybug had helped them, selfies they had taken with her, and even drawings and poems that had been done as tributes to Ladybug.

Many others, were messages of support for him, for Chat Noir.

Those had made him shed tears. He had been convinced there was no longer a drop left in his body to cry, but he had been proven wrong once again as he read many of the messages over and over again, tears sliding down his cheeks. There were messages of support and admiration for him, of his strength and dedication, of his loyalty to Paris and to Ladybug.

People shared pictures and videos of his fight with Demoman, and he watched those several times. At certain points, when his body betrayed him and he started to drift off again while watching, his semi-conscious mind tricked him into thinking Ladybug was there, fighting with him. Every glimpse of red, being from Tikki in his suit or something else, took the shape of her in his sleep-deprived mind.

Adrien sighed to himself and buried his face in his arms.

This was going to be a long day.

The day dragged on. It was cloudy, and a veil of sadness hung in the air; spirits seemed to be at an all time low, and barely anyone talked, probably in response to the news of Ladybug’s passing last night. Even Chloé, who was usually so uninterested in anyone’s misfortune but her own, looked despondent, the self-assured shine in her eyes gone as she took notes on her tablet without a word.

Alya was especially silent, but Adrien didn’t blame her. Not only was her best friend stuck in a coma for an indefinite amount of time, but her heroine, Ladybug, was gone as well. He occasionally caught her looking at her phone from under the desk, which was usually followed by another round of quiet sniffling as she rubbed at her eyes.

Adrien himself wasn't doing too well.

As the day went on, he started feeling progressively worse, to the point he had so far asked to go to the bathroom a total of 5 times so he could go vomit. There had been nothing in his stomach to vacate, so all he managed to cough up was bile, time after time. He was left a shaking, sweating mess every time he was done.

Back in the classroom, he shrunk into himself often. He got cold shivers, and couldn’t focus on his work. He took notes as well as he could, but his hand was unsteady, and his vision would occasionally blur when he looked at the blackboard for too long.

Between classes and on breaks, he politely rejected Nino’s invitations to go hang out with him and Alya and instead stayed in the classroom, laying his head on his arms and passing out until the next bell rang. It was on one of such moments that he felt a tap on his shoulder and he was roused from his troubled sleep.
"Adrien?"

He raised his head and blinked blearily, swallowing with difficulty. It was Alya, looking at him apologetically as she held a medium piece of white cardboard on her hand. Nino was behind her, looking at him with concern.

"I'm sorry to wake you up, but do you have a minute?" She said softly.

"Yeah, sure." He said hoarsely, righting himself on his seat as he blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

Alya placed the piece of rectangular cardboard in front of him and he stared long and hard at it, blinking until his vision cleared.

Details popped into view. "Get Well Soon!" was written at the top of the card in big letters and bright colors. In the middle, there was a hand-drawn picture of Marinette from the chest up, smiling. Only her bright blue eyes had been colored in, the rest black and white. She was surrounded by a circular frame of flowers and stars, with the occasional heart here and there.

Around the frame, there were several signatures and encouraging messages written down in different pen colors. Some messages were really long and encouraging, like Rose's or Alya's, others were shorter and straighter to the point, like Ivan's (though Adrien inwardly chuckled since his message seemed to be written like a song). He noticed that Chloé and Sabrina's signatures were absent, but he wasn't at all surprised.

It was a get-well card for Marinette. Adrien smiled.

"It's only yours left." Alya said, passing him a pen. It had green ink. How fitting. "What do you think? Nath did the drawing. Cool, huh?"

"It's beautiful," Adrien said softly, looking over all the small details and colors, "It was a great idea, Alya."

Alya shrugged. "Least I can do since we can't bring flowers or anything of the sort."

"Oh, right," he said absently as he took the pen and pressed the tip to the cardboard. His hand lingered on the card, hesitant, the tip floating just an inch from the surface. He found himself wondering what he could write. So many things he wanted to say, but had to refrain if he wanted to keep both his and Marinette's alter egos a secret.

After a moment of thought, he went for something vague. Something only him, and probably Marinette, would understand.

You wanted to know my thoughts and dreams

But all in them is you

Wishing that you can wake up soon,

To say mine belongs to you.

-Adrien

Adrien finished the short message and handed the pen and the card back to Alya. Alya stared at the message, and raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"Didn't take you for the poetic type," Alya commented.
Adrien shrugged. "Comes and goes."

"Right, well thanks!" Alya said, putting the pen away and taking the card.

"Are you visiting her today?" Adrien asked.

"Yeah, I'm taking Nino to see her since he was not here when it all happened," She said, nodding her head back at Nino. "Wanna come along? We're taking the card."

"Yes please, I would like that." Adrien said, the corners of his mouth pulling into a smile.

"You sure you're feeling up to it, though?" She cocked her head at him, her eyes soft, "You don't look so good. Are you sure you don't wanna go home? We can go another day."

"I'm fine, it was just a rough night. How are you, though?" Adrien asked, "I saw your video on the Ladyblog."

Alya looked down, and Nino instantly put a comforting hand around her shoulders.

"I'll be okay…" she murmured. "Not much to do about it, but help out our remaining hero however we can, huh?" She smiled a half-hearted smile.

"Ladybug would've loved the idea, babe." Nino said, rubbing her shoulder. "And I'm sure Chat Noir is totes thankful for it, too."

"Thanks, Nino," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. "I hope it helps him."

Adrien smiled at her sadly, "I'm sure it will."

"Are you sure you don't wanna head home? You look super tired, bro."

"Nino, for the last time, I'm fine." Adrien said after he came back from yet another visit to the bathroom. They were at the hospital now and the new smells had sent his stomach reeling again. What was wrong with his body today? "I'm well enough for this."

"If you say so, dude." Nino shrugged as they took the elevator to Marinette's room Adrien swiftly punched the floor number, and tapped his foot impatiently as the elevator trembled into motion. He was antsy and couldn't wait to get there.

They had received good news! He could hardly believe it.

They had even used the word miraculous to describe it. Adrien had to suppress an incredulous laugh at the irony of the word choice.

Alya had called Sabine while on their way there to let her know they were coming over to visit. After a moment of talking, Alya's face had lighted up and she smiled at Adrien, eyes wide.

Apparently, sometime during the night, Marinette had moved.

It wasn't much, really, just a twist of her arm, but she had reacted to something when the original prognosis declared she wouldn't be able to move in a while. It sent Adrien's heart thumping hard against his chest at the prospect. And to make things even better, they had decided to make an exception and increase the visiting time as well as up the number of people allowed inside the room at a time.
The doctor had apparently noticed that Marinette reacted exceptionally well every time she heard a familiar voice, and the doctor had decided to allow more visitors at a time to be able to compare Marinette's healing speed in periods where she was isolated to periods where she had company.

It took everything out of Adrien not to sprint to her room once the elevator doors had opened up.

When they got there, Sabine greeted them, a tired but bright smile on her face. Tom had gone back to look after the Bakery, having switched with Sabine some hours prior as they took turns to look after Marinette.

Sabine looked so much better than yesterday, and Adrien could see renewed hope in her eyes. It made his heart swell in turn. She thanked them for visiting and commended Alya for the card, even adding a message of her own. Noticing Adrien's constant looks in Marinette's direction though, she invited them to get closer.

Alya and Nino moved to put the card on Marinette's bedside table, greeting her with enthusiastic chatter as they settled beside her. Adrien approached the bed as well, but immediately noticed something off. Marinette's lips were slightly parted, but the tube in her mouth was gone. She only had a thin plastic tube in her nose in its place. His heart jumped in worry.

"Hey, her ventilator-!

"Don't worry, she doesn't need it."

Adrien turned to Sabine, and was surprised to find her smiling. "What?"

"They cannot explain but… her lung is almost fully healed. She doesn't need the ventilator anymore."

Almost fully healed? What? How?

"Yo, why is she tied to the bed?" Nino said, pointing at some white straps of fabric wrapped loosely around Marinette's wrists. "That's weird."

"Because she was the one that pulled out the ventilator." Sabine said, and Adrien couldn't comprehend how she was so calm about it. "At some point during the night, she moved her arm and pulled it out."

"She moved?" Nino asked incredulously, "Isn't that… like, not supposed to happen when you are in a coma?"

"Contrary to popular belief, not all coma patients are immobile." The doctor had entered the room just in time to hear Nino's question, and he regarded them calmly. "Some may open their eyes, mumble, or even walk, though they are not conscious about it and have no recollection of it when they wake. Madame Cheng, it's nice to see you."

The doctor turned and shook Sabine's hand before addressing the teens again.

"As Madame Cheng has said, we cannot explain the rapid recovery of her lung. It's truly unprecedented. Usually a collapsed lung requires several weeks of bedrest depending on the extent of the damage, but Mlle. Marinette's healed overnight and her body reacted by pulling on the ventilator, so we removed it after determining that she didn't need it anymore. She hasn't moved since but we've decided to restrain her arms for her own safety. We cannot afford her removing anything else on her person. I know it may be upsetting to see but I hope you understand."
"That means she is getting better though, right?" Adrien asked, hope lacing his words. He needed this. By god, he needed to hear this.

The doctor's mustache twitched in thought as he chose his words carefully. "Mlle. Marinette's chances of recovery have improved slightly. Like I said, the speedy healing of her lung is unprecedented, but everything else is as it was yesterday. Her injuries are still extremely delicate. The chances of her waking are also the same. It's anyone's guess when she will wake, and it depends on how well she recovers. We are hoping she will continue to show good progress."

"I see," Adrien muttered, looking away, "Thank you."

"She is extremely lucky to have family and friends like you," the doctor said, in an attempt to sound more supportive, "I have no doubt in my mind that Mlle. Marinette will pull through. I'll be around if you have anymore questions. Have a good day." He nodded his head and left the room.

Suddenly, something clicked in Adrien's head.

Wait…

'Extremely lucky...?'

He could feel it coming on.

Yes. He could feel the gears moving in his sleep-deprived mind.

An epiphany.

The epiphany.

A grin pulled on his lips. Not even the nausea that was threatening to overtake him again could knock it off his face.

"Um, dude, you okay? You are creeping me out."

Adrien blinked out of his revelation. Nino, Alya, and Sabine were staring at him curiously.

"What are you so happy about?" Alya asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, nothing," he lied as he leaned on Marinette's bed and gently tapped his chest twice. "Just happy about her getting better."

His lips pulled into a more subdued smile as he reached out with his right hand and laid it gently on Marinette's, feeling as Tikki travelled down his right sleeve and hugged Marinette's hand under his fingers.

Yep. Nothing at all.

"It's you!" He laughed. He actually laughed. He didn't know he could still do that.

"Sorry?" Tikki asked. She was floating idly as Adrien paced the room in front of her, a smile still plastered on his face.

"It's you, Tikki!" Adrien repeated, grinning. "It's because of you!"

"I don't follow."
"Yeah, welcome to my world 24/7." Plagg griped as he munched on a piece of camembert on the desk.

"Tikki, your power is luck!" Adrien said.

"I'm well aware." Tikki said patiently, "But I still don't understand."

"Just embrace it," Plagg said derisively, "Just nod your head and smile. It makes it easier."

"Oh, hush, what do you know," Adrien smirked, flicking the Kwami on the head.

"Ow, hey!"

"Okay, so your power is luck, right?" Adrien turned to Tikki again, "Before she met you, Marinette was really unlucky, correct?"

"That's what she told me, yes." Tikki cocked her head.

"But after she met you, she wasn't so clumsy anymore. It got better!"

"Adrien, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Her lung healing overnight was not a coincidence, Tikki!" Adrien said with a smile, "It was you! We were there last night. She healed right after you were with her. Your power allows Ladybug to heal things, so even if you aren't able to do much unless you are fused with Marinette, you still exude luck! You heal."

Tikki's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh!"

"Exactly!" Adrien said happily before he snatched Tikki out of the air and spun her around, "You may not be able to heal her completely, but you speed the process when you are around her! You are a blessing, Tikki!"

She giggled. "Well, it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't wanted to visit her." She said, "You are a blessing too, Adrien. Marinette is lucky to have you."

Adrien's eyes softened. "Thank you, Tikki." He nuzzled her head, then he grinned "Hey, can we switch Kwamis? I kind of want to adopt you."

Tikki laughed. "I don't think it's possible, but if you marry Marinette it could be arranged."

"Why are you enabling him, Tikki?" Plagg whined, "Seriously, I can't deal with you two together. I'm gonna throw up."

"You're just jealous 'cause I like Tikki more than you." Adrien stuck his tongue out.

"Like I care about those things."

"You so very care about those things."

"Do not."

"You keep whining. You could be busy eating that camembert, but here you are telling me how disgusting I am because I prefer Tikki over you. You are jealous."

"Why would I be jealous over you being an overly-saccharine dork with her?"
"Oh, big words. Someone is really, really jealous."

"I'm going to bite your face in your sleep."

Adrien burst out laughing but after a moment his breath suddenly hitched and he fell into a coughing fit.

"Adrien?" Tikki asked in concern.

His coughing rose in intensity, turning into aggressive hacking and Adrien's knees gave out from under him. He crumpled to the floor, covering his mouth with both hands. His body shook with the force of his coughing, his face quickly flushing red in exertion. His throat was burning, his chest tightening as he struggled to get air in his lungs.

"Woah kid, what gives?" Plagg floated up, approaching Adrien.

Adrien wheezed, holding a shaky hand up to hold the Kwami back as his coughing began to subside.

"A'igth…" Adrien choked out between pants. "I'm… I'm a-alright..."

"No, you are not." Plagg accused, "You've been sick all day. You haven't even eaten anything!"

"I did not sleep very well," Adrien reminded him as he rose shakily to his feet, "My body is just resenting it."

"Please," Tikki said pleadingly. "You have to get that looked at."

Adrien scoffed.

"And risk getting cooped up here because my father thinks I'm fragile? Not a chance." Adrien shook his head, "It took me too long to get this freedom. I'll be fine. It's just stress. I'm all Paris has left and I made a promise to Marinette. I won't compromise it for a little cough."

Adrien could feel something rising in his chest, raising the hairs on the nape of his neck. He couldn't quite place what it was, bubbling in his veins, warming his blood, making him… angry…

"Working yourself till you pass out ain't gonna do her or Paris any favors!" Plagg retorted.

...so very, very angry…

"Plagg is right, Adrien. It's better if you-"

"I'M FINE!"

Both Kwami shrunk back from the outburst, looking at him with eyes wide. Adrien glared at them, breathing heavily.

He had been harsh, but for some reason, he didn't feel like apologizing. He felt justified. What did they know about how his life had been before they appeared? Being controlled? Caged? They had absolutely no idea. They couldn't understand.

He felt irritation bubble in his chest but he tried to rein it in.

"I'm fine…" Adrien repeated in a low voice, his eyes hooded. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring it up again."
"Adrien…" Tikki started but trailed off.

"What's gotten into you?" Plagg hissed, "This is not like you"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"You're being a stubborn idiot. More so than usual, anyway."

Adrien laughed dryly. "Pot calling the kettle black?" He huffed and looked out the window. The sun was setting. He would be able to visit Marinette again soon.

"We're going out." Adrien said flatly. "Visiting hours are nearly over."

"We're not going anywhere until you calm down and tell us what's wrong with you." Plagg said crossing his arms.

"You don't have a say in this." Adrien said coldly, then turned to him, brandishing his ring. "Plagg, transform me!"

And as Chat Noir materialized before her, Tikki was suddenly not entirely sure she recognized the eyes of the person that stood in Adrien's place.

Chapter End Notes

Oopsie, kitty is getting cranky.

Thank you for all your reviews on the last chapter, they are so motivating!! <333

Visit me at http://ferisae.tumblr.com for ML artwork <3
Remembrance

Chapter Summary

In which Adrien tries to function like a normal human being and kiiiiiiiiinda makes it. Also, he gives a speech.

Chapter Notes

This is my longest chapter to date at like 25 pages wowee. Thanks everyone for the lovely reviews! Every time I got one, it brought a smile to my face and made me open the file and write a little bit more! (maybe that's why this one is so long, or I like torturing Adrien or maybe both idk) So here you go! Please enjoy! (for added effect, try looking up "Dumbledore's Farewell" from the Half Blood Prince OST on Youtube and play it during the second half of this chapter lol.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chat Noir bounded over the rooftops, the last rays of sunlight reflecting off the shiny leather of his suit. Tikki flew after him, keeping a safe distance behind him, but with her eyes firmly trained on Chat Noir's face. She was waiting, searching…

Something about Adrien had been off. The frivolity with how he had forced Plagg to transform him had caught her off guard, and even though she didn't know Adrien as well as Plagg, she knew that was not a normal reaction from him.

Adrien was calm, polite, and good-natured, with a heart of gold far larger than his mansion. As Chat Noir, he was the same, only more easy going, a joker, and a free spirit. It was not even common for him to get angry in battle, as demonstrated by his usual goading and teasing of his enemies and his penchant to blurt out bad jokes at the most inconvenient of times.

She could feel something stirring within his person, and Tikki didn't know what to make of it.

Chat Noir stopped for a rest at a parapet, sucking in a breath.

"Whoo, what a good run," he commented with a yawn and a stretch of his arms over his head. "You okay back there, Tikki?"

He turned his face to her, a small smile on his face.

"Y-Yes," Tikki said dubiously, taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor.

The dangerous, angry spark she had seen mere minutes ago was gone from his eyes.

His brows knitted together in a curious frown, "You sure?"

She hesitated a little bit. "I was wondering...are you okay?"
He chuckled, "I told you it's only a cough-"

"That's not what I mean." Tikki cut in.

Chat blinked. "What do you mean, then?"

"Back there, when you transformed you… " Tikki chose her words carefully, "You seemed… angry."

"Huh?" Chat cocked his head and blinked in confusion. His brows seemed to furrow as he thought, as if trying to remember something but failing to come up with anything.

"I must've spaced out, but I wasn't angry." Chat said finally, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "I think I just need more sleep, it's no big deal. I'm sorry."

Tikki was not convinced, but chose to back down for the time being. "Okay."

"Tikki?" Chat asked, his eyes soft in concern.

"It's okay, you are tired," Tikki said with a small smile, flying up to rest a paw on his cheek, "But Adrien, if there's ever something troubling you, you know you can tell us, right?"

"Of course," Chat said amiably, "You'll be the first to know."

Chat made some good time by waiting on the Eiffel Tower for the sun to set completely. Tikki had been quiet the whole time, which still worried him. She had almost seemed… afraid of him, her eyes quickly looking the other way whenever he caught her staring at him. He wanted to ask her what the problem was but something stopped him. Had he made a face while transforming? Did he really look that sick? He couldn't tell what was wrong.

The fact he had not eaten a bite all day probably didn't help how he acted, as it made his stomach churn painfully and his head feel woozy. He was convinced his determination to get to his goal was the only thing that kept him steady on his feet. He had gotten an idea, but had not told Tikki just yet, mulling it over in his head over and over. He had already neglected telling them the full extent of his plans before, and he didn't feel like doing it again.

He pulled up his baton, activating the phone feature and looking at the time. It was 9 o'clock. Visiting time was officially over and nurses would be taking shifts, giving him a few minutes to sneak in again. Motioning to Tikki with a hand, he leapt off the Tower and vaulted off.

He made it to the hospital's roof in a matter of minutes. Tikki had immediately floated down to Marinette's window, phasing through the glass to check for nurses. Chat waited, clicking his claw against the edge of the building anxiously. Minutes passed and Chat fidgeted, fearing Tikki had been seen and wondering if he should drop down and check himself, but after a few seconds, Tikki finally flew out, floating up to him.

"Sorry for the wait," Tikki apologized, "I took the liberty of hanging around and checking the nurses' shifts posted outside the door. I memorized the whole thing! We have around 15 minutes before the next one comes by to check on her."

"Tikki, you are a genius!" Chat commended with a grin, "Absolute genius!"
Tikki giggled before flying back down, Chat Noir leaping after her. Tikki flew back in through the glass and unlocked the window, allowing him to sneak in, silent on his feline limbs. Making sure they were truly alone, Chat Noir approached Marinette's bedside, gently stroking her cheek with the back of his clawed fingers.

"Hey, Princess." He smiled as Tikki floated to nuzzle against Marinette's other cheek. "You are looking better."

It wasn't a complete exaggeration. Even though it had only been a couple of days, her cheeks seemed to have a healthier flush, and her skin wasn't as pale. Her lips had even gotten their pink color back, looking soft and alive. He had to resist the sudden urge to lean down and kiss them.

No. Even if Tikki had confirmed that Marinette loved him back, he wanted her to tell him herself. He wanted to ask her for the kiss. He wanted to feel her reciprocate, to feel her warmth against his chest, and feel her smile against his lips. He wanted to see her eyes sparkle, her cheeks flush, and her arms wrap around him.

He'd wait whatever time was necessary for that.

For now, he was content with pressing a kiss to her cheek, and taking her hand, rubbing soothing circles on her knuckles. He pouted then. He could barely feel her warmth through the material of his suit, so he detransformed, closing his eyes as the wind whipped his hair around.

Plagg screeched as he zipped out of the ring, turning to Adrien angrily. "What is up with you?!"

Adrien shushed him urgently, taken aback "Plagg, be quiet!"

"Oh, you think I'll wake your girlfriend? Is that it?" Plagg said curtly, crossing his arms. "I'm sure it'll take more than noise to wake her up, don't you think?"

Adrien growled in annoyance, snatching Plagg in his hand. "There's nurses outside!"

"Oh good, maybe they can give you a kick in the butt for me!"

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"I could ask you the same thing!"

"What are you even talking about?" Adrien asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"It's one thing to transform before I finish eating my delicious camembert, but brushing me aside and transforming when I tell you it's not convenient is pushing it!" Plagg freed himself from Adrien's grasp and floated away, his back to Adrien. "Ungrateful kid!"

"When did I even do that?" Adrien asked, offended, "Seriously, when?"

"You have no say in this," Plagg recited, turning back to Adrien, his eyes narrowed, "Sound familiar?"

Adrien cocked his head. "When did I ever say that?"

"You really don't remember?" Tikki piped in suddenly, floating up next to Plagg, her tiny eyes filled with concern.

Adrien hesitated.
"Remember... what?"

"Before you transformed, you yelled at us." Tikki said. "You got really angry."

"We only wanted to help you!" Plagg cried. Tikki shushed him with a calming paw on his shoulder, trying to soothe the still seething Kwami.

"W-Wait, hold it." Adrien held his hands up in defense. A knot of uneasiness was tightening in his stomach, "Rewind a bit, I'm lost. When did this happen?"

"Like an hour ago, I think?" Tikki said.

"What? It can't be- I don't remember doing anything like that..." Adrien trailed off. They had no reason to lie to him, but why couldn't he remember? "Why would I be angry at you?"

"What is the last thing you remember before transforming?" Tikki asked him calmly, sensing Adrien's mounting anxiety.

Adrien racked his brain. He tried to remember the transformation itself but he realized it was only a blur, replaced instead by images of past transformations. He shook his head, trying to will his mind to focus on his most recent transformation, but he couldn't recall a thing. There was a large mental blackout in that span of time. The last thing he remembered was-

"I was coughing." Adrien said, "I remember coughing really bad."

"Yes, but what about after that, before you jumped out the window?" Tikki coaxed.

"Nothing." Adrien said, his voice low with worry. "I was coughing and the next thing I remember is running through the city..."

Tikki turned to look at Plagg, who looked back at her with something akin to dread.

"This has never happened before." Plagg said distantly.

"Did you notice anything while he was transformed?" Tikki asked him.

"He feels...a bit different but I can't place it," Plagg said, his paw on his chin "Like his flow of energy spikes every once in awhile but not enough to change anything."

"What about his aura?" Tikki asked.

"It shifted back to normal when the transformation settled but it was definitely different before I got absorbed into the ring."

"Then there are side effects, as we thought?"

"Seems like it..."

"Guys..." Adrien pleaded, his worry growing with every passing second they spent talking about him like he was not even there, "What's going on?"

Tikki turned to him, her eyes sympathetic.

"It's all conjecture but Plagg and I think you got damaged when you destroyed the Akuma."

"D-Damaged?" He stuttered, "What do you mean damaged?"
"When you touched the Akuma, it tried to take control of you. I know because I felt everything you did, too." Plagg explained and he looked at Tikki, who nodded at him, allowing him to continue on his own. "The pain, the burning energy... I felt it all, but it hit you way worse because you are a mortal. And since there was no object it could grab hold of, the Akuma tried to latch to the closest thing, which was Cataclysm, but it is pure energy, so that caused part of it to rebound on you while the other part killed the butterfly."

"The part of Cataclysm that bounced back damaged your body." He continued. "The other part zeroed on the butterfly, so while it was not enough to kill you, it did hurt you, even though I tried to channel most of the blast to myself."

"So the coughing and the nausea?" Adrien said.

"Lasting damage from technically using Cataclysm on yourself. Seems to have only affected your chest area, though," Tikki added. "But it is treatable, we think. You can heal."

"What about my head? Why can't I remember things?" Adrien asked anxiously, "Was it Cataclysm, too? Did it mess up my brain?"

Tikki looked at Plagg for the answer. He avoided both their gazes, his eyes looking to and fro, like deliberating an answer.

"It was definitely not Cataclysm." He said in a low voice, "I think it was the Akuma."

Adrien's eyes widened, his heart pounding against his chest "You.. you are not saying that…. Hawk Moth was controlling me?"

Oh god, please no...

"No. I could not feel his presence when you transformed." Plagg said.

Adrien breathed a sigh of relief.

"He cannot control you anyway, since you destroyed the akumatized butterfly, but some of its residual evil magic may have seeped into you with Cataclysm when both converged." Plagg continued, "It was not enough to give Hawk Moth access to your head to manipulate you, but it may have tempered with your head a bit, as it seems you only blank out when you experience a strong negative emotion."

"I... see," Adrien whispered. He didn't know what to make of that. It was not like he got upset that often, but if he was going to blank out every time he got pissed, that was going to become a problem, especially if he said or did things while experiencing that emotion; things he couldn't recall he did.

"This is all in theory, Adrien." Tikki reminded him, seeing his face of consternation, "But it seems to hold true. Cataclysm's damage seems to be manageable though, since it's physical. If you get it looked at-

"I'm not going to a doctor," Adrien interrupted, shaking his head "I cannot explain any of this without exposing who I am. I'll ride through it."

Plagg and Tikki sighed in exasperation.

"I hope you know what you are doing." Plagg said.

"I'm...I'm more concerned about the Akuma, honestly..." Adrien turned fearful eyes to the Kwamis.
His voice hitched before he spoke. "Can we do anything about it?"

"I…” Plagg trailed off.

"I don't want it to change me, Plagg..." Adrien said, almost begging. Plagg went quiet, his little green eyes unsure.

"Shh, it's okay. You won't change! We'll keep watch over you." Tikki tried to encourage him, floating down to his head and stroking his hair. "We will figure something out! You're going to be okay!"

And although Tikki was trying to console him with positivism, he didn't miss the melancholic, unsure way Plagg looked at him.

Adrien sighed dejectedly for the 5th time in the last ten minutes. His head rested on one arm on the bed, while the other lay outstretched, caressing Marinette's forearm gently. Tikki and Plagg rested on the pillow near Marinette's head, chatting amiably in hushed voices so as to not disturb him. But in the end, it didn't do anything but set him further on edge. He felt uncomfortable jitters in his stomach, a cold sensation running up and down his back nonstop.

He was scared.

He could deal with the physical consequences of his actions, but the mental side of the ordeal frightened him. How deep did the Akuma's dark influence run in him? How much had it changed? The one reassuring thing about the whole thing was that apparently his moment of depersonalization had barely lasted a minute.

But he didn't know what he was going to do. He hoped nothing like that would happen at home, or school...

Suddenly, he was yanked out of his thoughts when his phone buzzed against his leg, making him jump. He pulled it out, noticing it was an update from the Ladyblog. Remembering that Alya now used it as a platform to report attacks for him, Adrien couldn't bring himself to ignore it. He pulled up the blog to read the newest post.

"**Burglary at gunpoint on the 7th Arrondissement. Suspects fleeing on blue car on Rue de l'Universite. Police force having trouble keeping up. Massive amounts of gunfire. Several injured! Please help, CN!**

*Posted by User: Andre_Jarjayes*

2 minutes ago."

"Damn…” Adrien cursed. He looked apologetically at Plagg, "I'm sorry, but it's an emergency…"

Plagg nodded quietly. He looked back at Tikki before he floated to Adrien, "Yeah, let's get this done…"

"Thank you," Adrien said, "Plagg, if something happens-"

He held up a paw to silence him. "Stop overthinking it. Just do it."

"Y-yes, okay." Adrien turned to Tikki. Time to test out his plan.
"Tikki, could you please stay with Marinette?" He asked, "I really want to see if what I believe is true. Could you please look after her for the next couple of days?"

"But Adrien, what if you need help…" Tikki protested.

"It's just a burglary, not an Akuma," Adrien said with a half hearted smile, "Regular bullets can't penetrate the suit. I will be okay. Please?"

Tikki looked at him hesitantly. He could tell she loved Marinette enough to welcome the proposal, but was also discouraged from doing so for whatever odd thing the Akuma had done to him earlier. He was concerned as well and knew he'd have to touch on the topic again later, but right now, he couldn't delay.

"Look, I'll leave my phone so you can watch the news stream," Adrien said, pulling up the link on his browser and handing her his cellphone. "If you see that I need help, you can fly in. I'll come back right after I'm done. I'll tap on the window, and wait for your signal or send you a text. The phone is set on silent. Sounds good?"

Tikki mulled it over, then sighed, taking his phone from him. "Alright."

"Thank you, Tikki!" Adrien said, "I'm really grateful!"

Tikki nodded with a half-hearted smile, "Please, take care!" She said, zipping away and hiding under Marinette's pillows.

"Will do." Adrien turned to Marinette and took her hand, kissing the back of it. "Hang in there, M'lady…"

"Plagg! Transform me!"

It didn't take him long to find the burglars. The sound of gunfire breaking through the night was clear enough for him to follow, and he caught up to them in no time, pulling ahead of the police fleet giving chase. He was shot at from the windows of the blue car, but the bullets ricocheted off his suit or didn't hit the mark, his reflexes way too quick for them to aim at him properly.

He jumped ahead and threw his baton just in front of the thieves' car, using its momentum to send the vehicle flying and flipping on its side. The car careened out of control, crashing strepitously against the trees lining the sidewalk. The three burglars promptly escaped the smoking car through the broken glass pane on the dashboard and shot at him as they tried to make their escape, but he deftly evaded the shots and incapacitated them before they got too far.

The Police force soon caught up, thanked him, and arrested the thieves.

Seeing as he was not needed anymore, Chat Noir gave them a grin and turned, ready to vault off until he was stopped by Officer Roger calling after him. He ran up to Chat, thanked him again, and handed him a letter bearing the mark of Paris' Mayor, André Bourgeois, urging him to read it as soon as he could to provide an answer.

Intrigued, Chat took the letter with the tiniest hint of hesitation and opened it. His eyes scanned the paper, reading over the neat cursive penmanship and the formal writing. The more he read though, the more his heart clenched, and the quicker his smile disappeared. By the time he was done, he pretended to reread the letter in order to subtly blink the moisture in his eyes away and swallow the
lump that had formed in his throat.

Licking his lips, he folded the letter neatly, tucking it in his pocket. He then turned to the officer, nodding solemnly.

"I'll be there."

"You did great!" Tikki congratulated him as he slinked into the room right after the nurse had left. "That was a really clever thing you did with the baton and- Adrien? Are you okay?"

He didn't respond, he dragged his feet to Marinette's bedside, sliding down to his knees and resting his chin on the mattress, just beside her hand. He almost craved that hand to reach out and comfort him. He sighed, his eyes downcast.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?" Tikki asked, brushing his bangs away from his eyes and feeling his forehead.

"I'm okay." He muttered. He reached down to his pocket, retrieving the letter and handing it to Tikki to read. The Kwami laid it on the bed, mumbling under her breath as she read. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Tikki's antennae droop the closer she got to the end of the letter.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"A Memorial…"

"Mhm…"

Yes. A memorial. They were going to do a memorial for Ladybug in a week's time. A mass ceremony would be held to honor Ladybug's memory and to celebrate her achievements, and they wanted Chat Noir to participate in the event, as her most trusted partner, and the person who was closest to her in life. It would take place right underneath the Eiffel Tower; Ladybug's favorite place. A week of city-wide mourning would be made official right after.

"Are you going?" She asked.

"How couldn't I? I owe her that much and… we have to protect her identity." Chat whispered, "I think it's in our best interest for everyone to believe that she is gone for the time being, especially Hawk Moth. If he believes her Miraculous to have been lost with her, perhaps he will give Paris a rest…"

"I don't know," Tikki said apprehensively, "Hawk Moth is no fool. There is no way he is letting this opportunity pass. I think he will try to target you instead, since you're at your most vulnerable: alone and in mourning. He may also assume that as her partner, you have her Miraculous which is… true. Where did you put them?"

Chat pointed a finger at his other pocket. "I carry them with me, in case she wakes."

"You shouldn't do that! It's better if you store them someplace secret and safe." Tikki said, "It's dangerous for you to carry them. If Hawk Moth were to capture you…"

Chat frowned, considering it.
"We could probably take them to the Guardian-" She started.

"Who?" Chat Noir cut in, raising an eyebrow.

"T-The Guardian," She said, realizing she had never talked about that person with any of them, "The man who looked after the Miraculous before you and Marinette. The one who chose you…"

His cat ears perked in curiosity, his tail swishing behind him. He had never heard of this Guardian. Plagg had never mentioned any such person before; The person who chose him and Marinette to be heroes.

He wondered about him, running questions through his head.

Was he aware of what was happening? Did he mourn Ladybug's 'death' as well? Did he know about Marinette? Did he care about them? Why didn't he come find him? Was he the one who gave Hawk Moth's his Miraculous too?

Chat's thoughts froze.

Why give a Miraculous to such a heinous person? *What were they thinking?*

A hot sensation churned within Chat, rolling in the pit of his stomach. It was warm and sudden, and sent adrenaline coursing through his veins, anger bubbling within him.

"*No,*" Chat said finally in a low voice. "If he really cared, he would've come forward."

He had *no right* to him or Marinette anymore. Adrien felt *betrayed*. Given this task and then abandoned to his own devices… The man wouldn't even show his face when one of his heroes had been shot down. He just wanted them to do his dirty work. He didn't care a smidge about them!

"But-" Tikki started.

"No!" Adrien repeated angrily, "I want the earrings available for Marinette when she wakes! I'll put them in a safe if I must, but *no one* is touching them but Marinette. And if Hawk Moth-" He broke off abruptly, going still. His gaze stared ahead, distant. After a moment, his eyes slowly narrowed, vertical irises becoming thin slits. Tikki stared at him, bewildered.

"A-Adrien..?"

He was quiet for a moment, then, the corners of his lips pulled into a smirk that sent a shiver down Tikki's spine.

"...if Hawk Moth wants to wage war with me, then *let him.*"

The rest of the week dragged slowly, his insides twisting in dread for the upcoming memorial. At Tikki's insistence, he had made the extra effort to keep food in his stomach and take better care of himself to counter the effects of Cataclysm, but much to his misfortune, the added stress did nothing but worsen his condition in the passing days.

As it turned out, after his stunt with the burglary, people started filing more reports, asking for his help with regular crimes, even though the Police force were perfectly capable of handling them. The absence of Akumas was encouraging, but balancing his school work and daily activities with his solo crime fighting was taking everything out of him, and he was left with little chance to take care of...
himself.

Keeping himself on the move and not curled up in his bed in a ball of pain and exhaustion was proving to be a real challenge. Without Ladybug's ability, he was left feeling the bruises from all his encounters after he detransformed. It had gotten to the point he had to begin using makeup to hide the purple blemishes on his body and the dark circles under his eyes, lest he raise too many suspicions.

Trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy in front of Nathalie was quickly becoming a hard task in and of itself. Though she was quick to let it go when he told her it was just a bug from the chilly weather, the woman had definitely noticed Adrien's occasional wobbling step and unfocused eyes. Adrien was convinced that the only reason Nathalie didn't tell on him with his father was because he completed his photoshoots without fail, but he wasn't sure how long he'd be able to keep it up.

At school, Nino and Alya, who had begun to suspect something was off with him, were harder to shake off. They would question him and try to drag him out, insisting that the fresh air would do him good, but he would resist. They would only relent when Adrien insisted he was just tired from work, feigning happiness as he did so to not worry them.

But even he couldn't deny he wasn't okay. He was sluggish and slow on most days from lack of sleep. The bouts of coughing persisted, and at times it was so bad that it would take several minutes for him to recover from a spell. He ate what little he could, but nausea would drive him to his knees several times during the day, making him lose what little nourishment he had managed to get. As the days trickled by, he could feel himself losing strength, getting thinner, sicker…

He knew he needed medical attention but he couldn't bring himself to seek it, in fear of exposing his and Marinette's secret. They would ask him what he was up to, why he had so many bruises, why he had a large scar on his hand, why he was so sick… and he was not confident he could come up with a convincing lie.

His mood wasn't faring any better. He found himself getting irritated at the smallest of things, a fuse within him lighting up as quickly as a match to a flamethrower. Criminals were usually the ones on the receiving end of his lashing, so no one thought anything of it, but it would take several seconds for him to realize what he was doing and rein himself in.

He had to stop watching broadcasts of his crime-fighting after he noticed that despite his wavering strength, he seemed to be a lot more brutal toward villains. It scared him. Especially because half the time he didn't remember doing the feats the videos showed.

He knew it was not like him. But even Plagg had begun to be unable to recall those actions, and thus could not confirm if it was a byproduct of the Akuma's influence or not. He blamed Adrien's exhaustion for it, and Adrien had to make do with that explanation, even though he was almost sure it was not the real reason.

Plagg himself seemed to slow down as well, ending up as worn out as Adrien. He barely talked, focusing instead on getting Camembert through his mouth while trying to keep his eyes open, and napping for hours on end.

All that because Adrien was forced to work overtime, responding to reports on the Ladyblog and transforming almost every couple of hours. With Ladybug gone, criminals were having a field trip, thinking him incapable of being on two places at the same time.

Adrien had never realized how badly he needed Marinette until then.
Her absence took its toll both physically and emotionally. The puns stopped coming. Words in general stopped coming. With no one to listen and sass back, there was no point. The fun-loving Chat Noir everyone knew and loved was fading. He still tried to pretend. He tried to smile, to joke, to goad... but none of his words had any heart in it.

He just didn't have it in him anymore. He went through the motions on auto-pilot. Transform, fight, detransform, check Ladyblog, rinse and repeat...

He barely went out, using his other activities, nonexistent photoshoots, imaginary events, or schoolwork as excuses to not hang out and catch up on sleep instead. Nino would visit sometimes, worried about his sudden isolation, and Adrien would let him in if only for Nino to leave with reassurance that Adrien was fine, even if it was all just a front he put up for everyone around him to leave him alone.

It all pained him. It weakened his spirit. He couldn't protect Paris alone. It needed the duo, and he needed his other half... desperately.

So desperately in fact, that some nights, tears would come unbidden, borne from pure frustration and helplessness, making sleep elude him. Some days, he found himself looking over his shoulder at the empty seat beside Alya, and it would take everything out of him not to break.

He needed her.

There were evenings even, when his body gave up on him and he collapsed on a roof, tired out of his mind, when he'd pull out his baton out and play old interviews on the Ladyblog's video player. Listening to Ladybug's voice was enough to energize him long enough to pull himself to his feet and make it home before he crumbled again. Sometimes though, he wouldn't even be able to make it home, and would instead faint midway, usually on Marinette's balcony, his feline senses instinctively seeking it out as a place of comfort.

It had happened thrice that he had visited Marinette at night, that he had passed out on her bedside, drained. Tikki would rouse him only when the next nurse was soon to come, giving him time to bail. She worried for him, but Chat Noir brushed her off, telling her it was his job and he'd have to deal with it.

She honored the deal she had with Adrien, remaining on Marinette's side at all times, hiding whenever necessary, and Adrien would leave his phone with her every night so she was aware of how he was doing and what was going on in the city.

And despite everything, visiting Marinette always made him feel better. It was the one highlight of the many sleepless nights where he had to keep himself awake to deal with reports being posted on the Ladyblog at every hour. Even as he deteriorated, Marinette improved and that made his heart swell. It was enough for him.

Good news came to him two days shy of the day of the Memorial.

On the evening of the 7th day since the accident, while Adrien, Alya, and Nino were visiting, they were told Marinette was showing amazing recovery, and that the wound on her head had nearly fully closed. That same night, he found she had less bandages, and noticed her hair had grown longer, flowing down her shoulders. She looked even more beautiful to him.

But what made him happiest was his theory being proven true: Tikki was speeding up her healing, serving as Marinette's own Lucky Charm. It had her doctor and nurses baffled, and Adrien had to always suppress a knowing smile whenever they reported back to her parents about her
unprecedented improvements.

The Dupain-Chengs were regaining hope, getting back their spark. Soon, he knew, she'd be back at their side, and it would all go back to how it was. It was his favorite daydream; the one that helped him through every tough day.

Before he knew it, the night of the Memorial was upon him. Throughout the day, he had gotten as much rest as he could, and eaten a light lunch of chicken broth and tea to avoid upsetting his stomach too badly.

He wrote a speech on a piece of paper, and carefully pocketed it, vaulting off into the city. He dropped by the hospital to visit Marinette for a few minutes and left his phone with Tikki so she could watch the streaming of the event. After he helped her get setup with a pair of headphones (in case nurses came in) he headed towards the Eiffel Tower as the sun began to set.

He was early, hanging from a low beam as he surveyed the last of the preparations. A cordon had been set around the monument, protecting its center as people began to arrive. He noticed with no little amount of sadness that the statue Théo had made of them, formerly erected in the park besides Marinette's house, had been moved to rest directly underneath the Tower, its base decorated with black bows and ribbons.

He dropped down and faced the statue, and melancholy took a grip on his heart as he took the familiar image in.

Ladybug's form had been wrapped in a thick strip of flowy, black satin tied around her chest like a sash, a black bow on top of her shoulder. The grim decoration greatly clashed with the vibrant smile on her face, and Chat found he couldn't even recognize his copper doppleganger anymore. He was posed in an energetic crouch, a large grin on his face… A grin that had not been on the real Chat Noir for a few days now.

Against his better judgment, he climbed on top of his inert twin, so that he was level with her image. He reached up with a hand, stroking her cold cheek longingly. He never really thought about it, but he found he really admired Théo's work. He had done a marvelous job at getting her likeness on point. It looked like she could spring alive at any moment, swinging away on her yo-yo with a smirk on her lips...

God, how he missed that smile.

"Um, excuse me, what do you think you are doing?"

Chat jumped, nearly slipping off the statue. He turned around to find Chloé Bourgeois staring at him disapprovingly, a large wax candle with a red and black polka dotted bow clasped in her hands.

"Do you have any idea how long it took to get it polished? You're going to get it all dirty, get off," she said, and although she had her trademark scowl on her face, the usual scorn was gone from her voice. She sounded tired. She wasn't even wearing her usual attire, having switched for something more respectable in tones of black and red, but no less fashionable.

"Sorry," Chat apologized, jumping down from the statue.

Chloé scoffed, "You may have been her partner, but that doesn't mean you can suddenly do as you please." She said, walking to the statue and brushing some stray dust aside. After she was done
cleaning (dramatically exaggerating the motion), she placed the candle at the base, just below Stone Chat's face, and lit it with a lighter.

Chat Noir watched as Chloé fell silent, looking up forlornly at Ladybug's face. He was not sure he had ever seen his childhood friend look so genuinely sad and distant. She truly had admired Ladybug.

"Do you miss her?"

The question had been whispered in such a low voice he wasn't completely sure Chloé had spoken the words at all.

"Every minute of every day…" he said softly.

Chloé turned to him, and he could see tears in her bright blue eyes. "You know, I hated you for the longest time…"

Chat Noir frowned. He knew Chloé was a huge fan of Ladybug and didn't particularly care much about him, but he didn't know she actually hated him. "Why?"

"I blamed you for her dying." Chloé said straightforwardly. "I almost asked daddy to have you banned from the event."

Chat's cat ears flattened against his head in indignation. Ban him? Ladybug's partner? Was she insane? Before he could retort however, Chloé held up a hand.

"But I didn't…" She said, crossing her arms against the cold night breeze and looking down, "I figured that if anyone was… hurting about her, it was you. You couldn't have possibly wanted this, could you?" She looked back up at him. "If you had been able, you would've saved her, right?"

Chat Noir couldn't speak. A lump had formed in his throat. From anger, or sadness, or both, he didn't know. How could he have possibly wanted this? How could anyone, except Hawk Moth, have wanted this? How could he have wanted to go back to being alone, miserable, and unloved? Saved her? If only! His inability to do it still haunted him. If the Grim Reaper had had a physical manifestation, he would've bargained for her life without a moment's doubt, trading his soul for hers gladly.

He felt a stray tear slide down his cheek.

"She was my life." He said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Not a day has passed when I don't wish it had been me."

Chloé looked sternly at him. They stared each other down in silence. Her, deliberating the honesty of his answer, and him, fighting to regain control of his emotions. He couldn't unravel right now, not when the event hadn't even started, and he had vowed to keep himself strong.

Chloé walked to him, and from her scrunched up face he had half expected her to slap him, but much to his surprise, she untangled her arms and wrapped them around him.

He gaped, unsure of how to react to the foreign action, his arms lingering at her sides. He was used to her overbearingness as Adrien, but not as Chat. It was unexpected; Chloé was really not known for her compassion...

But it didn't matter. As soon as it had happened it was over. Before he could reciprocate the embrace, Chloé had pulled away, subtly brushing at her eye so he wouldn't notice she had teared up.
"Your speech better be good. She deserves it." She said as she started walking past him, avoiding his gaze. "I chose you for this so you better not make me regret it."

"Chloé!" Chat called after her. She stopped, but didn't turn, her back to him.

"Thank you." He said softly. "For… For all of this. I know she would've appreciated it."

Chloé's frame shook slightly with what he suspected had been a well concealed sob. She seemed to compose herself, and looked at him over her shoulder.

"Did you expect any less from her number one fan?" She managed a smile and walked away from him, her head held high.

Police vehicles lined up on every entrance, controlling the flow of people starting to trickle in to find their place around the cordon from all four directions. A podium had been set up a few steps in front and to the right of the statue and Chloé was going around fixing up some last minute snags.

Chat had climbed back up to wait in a shadowy corner of the Tower, away from prying eyes. People filing in down below would stare at him with pity and sympathy, and although he appreciated the sentiment, it only worsened his anxiety, so he chose to hide away until the time came.

He felt butterflies in his stomach, and he tapped his foot nervously on the metal beam as he read and reread the speech he had written in an attempt to memorize it, but he was too distracted, realizing he had read the same line over and over in the span of 5 minutes.

It felt odd to him to be reading an eulogy for a person that wasn't really dead. It was like attending a funeral with an empty casket. He knew he had to go through with it to further protect Marinette's identity from Hawk Moth, but he couldn't help but feel like he was doing a disservice to Marinette. She was stronger than that, she deserved so much more than that.

Ten minutes later, Chloé started calling him down. He leapt off and landed at her side, and she started explaining the whole program to him. Times, positions, fanfares, the lot. Most of the ceremony would be conducted by the Mayor, and Chat was only meant to stand at his side until it was time for him to speak. That actually relaxed him a bit, letting someone else handle the bulk of the show, and to just be told when to step in.

At Chloé's signal, Chat Noir walked to the Mayor's side as the man climbed the podium and arranged a stack of papers in preparation for his speech. Chat stood diligently and quietly beside the podium, though he was pretty sure he was sweating underneath the suit. Curious eyes followed his every move, and he had to gulp several times to keep his throat from tightening.

Suddenly, he jumped when he felt something pull on his tail.

"Manon, no! Come back here!"

Chat looked down at the little girl that suddenly stood beside him, having pulled his tail to get his attention. A woman, whom he quickly recognized as Nadja Chamack, the news reporter that often interviewed him and Ladybug, swiftly approached him to apologize.

"I really sorry, Chat Noir! My daughter is just really excited. Let's go, Manon!" Nadja said as she grabbed Manon's hand to pull her away.
"Wait! I need to tell him something, mama!" Manon struggled against her mother's grasp, and Chat noticed she held something tight against her chest with her other hand.

"Now it's not the time! Chat Noir isn't to be bothered!"

"Madame, it's alright." Chat said softly with a smile as he kneeled to be on Manon's level. Even though she wore all black now, he remembered the little girl and her twin ponytails clearly. She had posed with him at a photoshoot while Marinette babysat her once, and had even been akumatized, turning into the fearsome Puppeteer. "What did you need to tell me, Manon?"

Manon looked at her feet shyly, then pulled her arms out, showing him what she had been holding.

"I wanted to give you this, because I think you need it more." the little girl said.

On her hands was a handmade Ladybug doll. The same one Marinette had made.

His heart plummeted to his stomach as Manon laid the doll in Chat Noir's open hands. He grabbed it hesitantly, a clawed thumb passing over the sewn smile on the soft felted face. His eyes glazed over as he was suddenly overcome with emotion.

"Don't be sad, Chat Noir!" Manon said. She rose on her tiptoes then, and kissed his cheek.

"I'll try," he chuckled with a quivering smile, pulling Manon into a hug, "I'll treasure this. Thank you, Manon. Thank you..."

The girl then quickly bid him goodbye as the lights dimmed, and a spotlight was shone on the Mayor.

He gathered strength from the soft plushie in his hand and straightened up.

Time to get this done.

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It was torture. The whole thing was torture for him.

Every garden, bridge, and road around the Eiffel Tower was packed with people. It looked like the whole city was there, to the point it seemed like the Tower was surrounded by a sea of black, pin pricked by tiny balls of light from the candles held by many of the members of the audience.

Adults, teenagers, babies, kids... they were all there, and those who weren't were surely watching the footage streamed from the many cameras set up both on the ground and on the air on choppers.

This is how much people loved you, Marinette, Chat Noir thought wistfully.

The ceremony opened with Mayor Bourgois thanking people's assistance and explaining the motive of the event. As he spoke, large projectors on the ground displayed a slideshow of images of Ladybug on the surface of the Eiffel Tower. Chat Noir tried to aver his gaze, knowing that if he looked at the images, the wavering hold he had on his emotions would crumble.

"Chat Noir here, Ladybug's partner and confidante, will share a few words."

Chat Noir snapped out of his thoughts at the sound of his name on the microphone and he turned to see the Mayor looking at him expectantly, stepping back to give him space on the podium.
Sucking in a breath, Chat stepped onto the wooden platform and into the light, the piece of paper with his speech clutched tightly in one nervous fist, and the Ladybug doll clutched in the other.

He breathed heavily, looking around at the crowd. Every eye was on him, and as he scanned the audience, he noticed that Alya had managed to drag Nino and Marinette's parents to the very first row, her hands, unsurprisingly, holding up her cellphone as she recorded the whole thing.

He felt his throat constrict as he unfurled the wrinkled paper in his fist.

"I...I..." He started, his voice, amplified by the microphone, echoing across the silent courtyard. His voice hitched, and he felt his own heart rate spike, heart thumping loudly in his ears. Fear enveloped him suddenly and nausea threatened to make him throw up.

He was suddenly not sure he could do this. He was used to the spotlight as Adrien, but this... this was a whole 'nother monster. This was not a photoshoot, this was a funeral for his closest, dearest friend, with the eyes of hundreds of Parisians on him, waiting expectantly for his words.

His eyes fell on the Dupain-Chengs again. They looked at him sympathetically, and he could've sworn he saw Tom nod his head at him in encouragement, and Sabine cross her arms in front of her in a sign of support. He looked down at the speech clutched in his trembling hands but the words blurred together. His eyes were misting over.

Swallowing hard, he crumpled the piece of paper and dropped it on the ground. He briefly looked over his shoulder at the statue, at Ladybug's smiling face. Breathing deeply, he turned back to the expectant audience, bringing the doll close to his chest.

"Thank you everyone for coming out here," Chat Noir started, his voice quivering, "Being here for me is... it's a great honor, because Ladybug was more than just a hero. She was a passionate, empathetic, and beautiful girl who gave so much to others without even once thinking about herself. Her heart knew no bounds in its all-enveloping love, and her compassion was as endless as an open sea. But this... this is something everyone knows. Many of you experienced it yourselves. Either as a former akuma victim, or simply as a bystander, Ladybug was there in some way."

He saw Alya and a few other citizens, people he recognized as former akuma victims, look at each other nod in acknowledgement, smiling.

"Paris lost a protector, a guardian angel... but I lost more than that..."

Chat paused, taking a few steadying breaths.

"I lost my world. Ladybug was more than just my partner, my friend..." He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears at bay, "...although she kept our relationship strictly professional, she was much more than that to me... We were a team, but she was my better half... and to this day I still regret not telling her that. I regret not telling her how much she meant to me, how much light she brought to my world, how much I loved her..."

Some gasps of surprise and whispering rippled through the crowd, but he didn't care.

"I miss her..." his voice broke, and he choked back a sob, "I miss her more than I can express. Every day, everything reminds me of her, and it's hard. It's hard fighting alone. It's hard not having that red blur at my side. It's hard not having someone to listen, to joke with, to... to groan at my bad jokes," he pulled a shaky grin, tears building up in his eyes, "It's hard realizing that I will never hear her voice again. That I will never hear "good job" at the end of a mission again..."

His sensitive ears picked up sniffling, but his eyes were so laden by moisture that everything was a
blur in front of him.

"Paris lost something special. I lost everything. But she wouldn't have wanted me, or anyone, to live mourning her. She was that selfless. I remember that day with Stoneheart. The day we were chosen. The day both of us accepted becoming Paris' protectors. She thought she was not made for it, she doubted herself, but still fought, and she proved everyone wrong. She proved that she had the strength and the courage to give her life for others, and even though people had doubted her that day, she made a promise to you all… to protect you from anyone that may seek to harm you."

More nodding from the crowd. He even caught Chloé smiling from the corner of his eye, no doubt recalling how Ladybug had saved her on that fateful day.

"I will uphold that promise!" Chat said loudly, "I will keep fighting for her, to the end of my days. To defend the ideals she believed in, to defend the city she loved so much, and protect the people she cherished to her very last breath.

"What happened was nothing short of a tragedy. Not only did Paris lose an outstanding citizen, but a family lost their beautiful girl. A girl who had no fault, a girl who had been chosen because of her big heart and sense of justice, a girl who had just begun to live and was so ready to give everything to the world. But her life was ripped away by a despicable monster…”

He shuddered suddenly, his fists clenching over the doll in his hands. His teeth gritted as he held back a growl and sadness quickly bubbled into rage in his chest. He struggled to hold himself back, his whole body trembling.

"That's why… H-Hawk Moth, if you are listening," his voice broke, something taking a hold of him; something fierce, wild… "I'm going to hunt you down and make you pay!"

Silence reigned as Chat's voice rose with his impassioned threat.

"You hear me?! I'm STILL HERE HAWK MOTH!" He yelled, eyes narrowing as his voice rose to a dark growl "Paris may not have the whole team, but I am still standing, and I will find you! This city will not be threatened by you, not while I am still here!"

The crowd cheered and whooped, fueling the flame of his emotion.

"Ladybug may have left us physically, but her spirit lives on! We are still here, and we are not afraid of you! She lives in all of us, and will continue to live in the memories of everyone she touched! You haven't, and will never, win this!" Chat declared, punching a fist into the air, "Long live Ladybug!"

The audience exploded into raucous applause and chants of "long live Ladybug!", cheering on with him, flooding the courtyard in acclaim and noise.

As the cheering mounted, he looked down at the doll in his hands, and he leaned down, placing a kiss on its head.

You'll live on, m'lady...

The ceremony carried on, charged with emotion. Chloé had even gotten Jagged Stone to play a tribute song he made for Ladybug, while videos of her played on the Eiffel Tower and on large plasma screens along the courtyard. Everyone looked at the videos from the eyes of a camera, but Chat? He was looking at them from his own eyes, recalling the banter, the shameless flirting, the
sass, and the laughter in every mission shown. He pulled up a smile at the memories, even when Jagged's heartfelt number had reduced half the audience to a blubbering mess.

As the show winded down, the cordon was opened up. People came forward, laying their tribute at the foot of the statue. Flowers, candles, pictures, action figures, posters, and other treats flooded the base; people leaving little pieces of themselves there for Ladybug, to express their gratitude and respect. Chat stood diligently to a side of the statue, nodding his head gratefully at people paying their condolences to him, and shaking their hands as they came forth with words of encouragement for him.

He surprised himself by staying composed. His face was flushed, and his voice was soft due to the tightening of his throat, but so far, he had successfully kept the tears at bay, mostly by reminding himself that Ladybug was not gone, and she was only a few buildings away, sleeping soundly on a bed awaiting the day to wake, not unlike Sleeping Beauty. If only a kiss was enough to wake her...

He noticed idly that Alya, Nino, Tom, and Sabine had not approached him yet, standing to the side waiting for the flood of people to diminish. They had all left their respective gifts (Tom had even left a tray of cookies shaped like ladybugs decorated with red fondant) but instead of leaving, they had moved to the edge of the hubbub to wait.

Chat looked curiously at them and thought of approaching them, but was forced to wait until he had greeted most of the attendants, receiving awkward hugs and handshakes every now and then.

At long last, the flow of people slowed to a trickle as everyone headed home. As he shook a last couple of hands, he finally saw Alya and company approach him.

"Hey." She said awkwardly.

"Hey," he said, "Thank you for hanging around."

"What a speech, man!" Nino piped in, pulling an arm around Alya's shoulders, "Gave me shivers, dude! That Hawkman doesn't know what he's getting into! Must be trembling in his pants!"

Chat chuckled halfheartedly, "Thank you. Let us hope. Can't say I'm a big fan of butterflies lately."

Nino laughed but Alya frowned in worry, laying a hand on his shoulder, "You okay, Chat Noir?"

Chat smiled tiredly, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm managing. Your blog has been useful, thank you for looking out for me."

"Anytime. If you need anything else, you know you can let me know, right?" She laid a hand on his cheek, "We've got your back on this. Nino and I, and everyone at school... Yeah, even Chloé." She added with a playful roll of the eyes and a smirk. "I think Ivan said he'd gladly punch things for you, if you ask him to."

He couldn't help a quivering smile after imagining his classmates rooting for him. Don't cry. Don't cry. "Of course. Thank you, Alya. Thank everyone for me. The support means the world to me."

"You got it!"

"Chat Noir." came a low voice.

He straightened, looking at Tom and Sabine, who had lingered in the back to let the teens speak. They gazed at him sympathetically, soft smiles on their faces.
"We wanted to thank you." Tom said.

"For what?" Chat asked, cocking his head.

"You brought our little girl back home," Tom said, "And she is doing better, all thanks to you."

Oh. "It's my pleasure to help, monsieur." Chat said softly, bowing his head. "It makes me really happy to hear your daughter is doing better."

Sabine looked at him meaningfully, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She walked up to him and cupped his face with her hands.

"She is alive because of you," she said softly, brushing his hair out of his eyes. "No words in the world can express how grateful we are to you. Nothing in the world will be enough to repay you."

Tears trickled down Sabine's eyes as she regarded him with earnest. "We are so sorry for your loss…"

Chat swallowed hard, leaning appreciatively against Sabine's hand.

"Madame-"

He was cut off as Sabine suddenly pulled him into an embrace, stroking the back of his hair gently.

"Please know that you are always welcome at our home." She said, "Whatever you may need, we will provide. There will always be a place for you at our table."

Chat gulped, unsure of how to respond. His body was trembling from the effort of keeping himself in check, but it was too much. It was entirely too much. He needed this. After days of loneliness and crippling exhaustion, his body craved this; the warmth, the comfort, the support, the feeling that he wasn't alone in this world, the feeling that he was loved…

The dam broke. His hold shattered.

"Thank you…Thank you…" Chat choked as tears started streaming down his cheeks. He clung to her for dear life, arms going around her lithe frame. He hid his face in the crook of her neck, all decorum be damned, and sobbed into her shirt, soaking it.

Sabine didn't seem to mind, and held him tighter, lowering herself to the ground as Chat's knees gave out from under him and he fell to the floor in a trembling mess of whimpers. Everything he had been holding back during the ceremony came straight out, unhindered.

"You are so brave," Sabine whispered soothingly, rubbing circles on his back. "You are strong and kind. Things will look up, I promise…"

Chat only cried harder, holding her tight against him as his body was wracked by his heart-shattering sobs. A minute after, he felt warmer, as if a large quilt was being laid on him. He then realized it was Tom embracing both him and Sabine in his huge arms. Soon, Alya and Nino joined in, hugging Chat from all directions, shielding him from the cold and the loneliness. They hurt with him, cried with him…

And for the first time after days of sadness and despair, a genuine smile full of warmth and gratitude made its way to his lips.
EDIT: PEOPLE MADE FANART OF THIS CHAPTER AAAAGh THANK YOU YOU LOVELY PEOPLE <3
*http://papayapart.tumblr.com/post/142671398594/thank-youthank-you-chat-choked-as-tears
*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/142747895596/wipengineer-i-blamed-you-for-her-dying-chlo%C3%A9
*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143274644541/qookyquiche-angst-have-allll-the-angst-the

Leave a thought?

If I left you too sad please refer to these fluffy Adrinette comics drawn by me to soothe your heart (anddisuadeyoufromkillingme) http://ferisae.tumblr.com/tagged/bracelet-au
Symbiosis

Chapter Summary

In which Adrien is a pouty baby.

Chapter Notes

Thank you thank you thank you for all the lovely reviews last chapter! And all the art I received omg ;_; They made me so stupidly happy and got me so motivated I actually finished this chapter and half of the next in one day! This one is more tame feelings-wise (I'm giving you all a chance to recover before the next chapter :P) and focuses more on exposition, so I hope it's of your liking. Thank you so much everyone, and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He sat on the usual roof, legs drawn up, arms around his knees. He stared at the moon and stars, which glowed unusually bright tonight. The sky was clear, the wind pleasant on the uncovered skin on his face, the city quiet as crickets chirped in the night.

He was waiting.

Time passed. He waited, and waited, until he got tired of waiting.

Tired of hoping.

He stood up with a sigh, about to turn and head home when he heard it, a tinkling laugh, sweet as a song.

"Leaving so soon, mon minou?"

Chat Noir's head snapped back at the voice, staring up. There, perched on a chimney, was Ladybug, hunched over the edge and flashing him a playful grin.

"We haven't even started patrol yet!" she said with a disapproving click of her tongue.

"Ladybug…?" Chat Noir whispered in disbelief, his eyes wide.

"I can't leave you for a second because you slack off!" Ladybug said with a grin, rising up to her full height with hands on her hips. "Are you ready? Bet you can't catch me!"

She laughed and launched her yo-yo to a nearby building, zipping away after it. Mind reeling and breath catching, Chat threw all logic out the window and followed her, running on all fours to catch up with her as she leapt from roof to roof.

"Too slow, kitty!" she teased, two roofs ahead of him. Her laugh was contagious, and he felt his own mirth bubbling in his throat, chuckling along with her. He couldn't explain what was happening. How was she here? There was something different about her but he couldn't place it. He really
didn’t care. She was there with him, and it made him so happy!

He laughed brightly, running after her.

She zipped toward the Eiffel Tower, yo-yo coiling around a support beam and swinging around it. Getting an idea, Chat Noir ran in the opposite direction around the Tower and increased speed. Egged on by her taunting laugh, and with a smile of his own, he pounced as she came flying around from the corner.

She gasped as Chat caught her in mid air and they tumbled down the Tower, rolling across the viewing deck until she lay on her back, him on top of her.

"Gotcha!" he said with a grin, his arms on either side of her head, "Who is the slow one now?"

"Cheap tactics!" Ladybug countered, pushing on his face with a hand as she laughed, "Nothing but dirty tricks!"

"You're just mad because I caught you!" Chat laughed, feeling the happiest he had felt in days as he stared down at his Lady, smiling and writhing in protest under him.

"You wish! You cheating cat!"

"My Lady, you are paw-sitively awful." he said with mock sadness. "You wound me."

"Ugh, again with the puns! Get off me!" Ladybug said, trying to sound annoyed but her cover blown by the amused smile on her face. She pushed playfully against his chest, and although Chat would've normally moved away without hesitation, he didn't budge.

His smile disappeared.

He had noticed something; something that had instantly caused his breath to catch and frozen his body in place.

Her hair was down.

Ladybug never wore her hair down.

Chat's mirth disappeared, snuffed out like flame to a candle. Realization dawned on his features, his face constricting in a pained frown.

"You are not real..." Chat said, his voice descending to a whisper as his ears drooped. "You are not really here...are you?"

Ladybug's smile faded as she stopped moving and stared at him with her gorgeous bluebell eyes. She didn't say a word, just staring at him until Chat reached his own conclusions.

His eyes instantly misted over, tears building in the corners of his eyes.

"I miss you," he said, voice hitching, "I miss you so much, Ladybug."

"Chaton," she said softly, reaching up with a hand to cup his face, "I miss you, too."

"It's not the same without you," he whimpered, laying his hand on hers and leaning his face into it, "I can't do this alone. Please come back."

"I can't kitty," she said sadly, reaching out with her remaining hand until she cupped his face with
both hands, brushing soothing thumbs over his cheeks. "Not yet."

"When, then?" Chat questioned, leaning down and hiding his face in the crook of her neck, "When?"

"I don't know." she said as his trembling body descended on hers and she hugged him to her. "But I need you to hang on."

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he nuzzled her warm, soft face, a sad purr rumbling in his throat. "I can't. I need you."

"I know, but I need you to be strong. I need you to wait for me. Can you do that, kitty?" Ladybug said softly, stroking his head, "Can you wait a little longer for me?"

"I don't know… I… I…" he sobbed, holding her tighter, unwilling to part with her warmth.

"You're strong. You are brave. I know you can do this, because I know you. You are my partner, Chat. Don't give up," Ladybug pleaded, "Please hold on a little longer for me, Chat. Promise me?"

He released a shaky breath.

"... I promise."

"That's my kitty." Ladybug said with a smile as she pushed him away just enough to make him face her. "It's time to wake up, now."

"No," Chat said, shaking his head vehemently, "Don't go away! Not yet, please…"

"Chat…"

"I don't want you to disappear, please!" Chat pleaded desperately, "I want to stay here with you!"

"You cannot thrive on dreams, minou," Ladybug said sadly, "I want you to live. Who will protect Paris, then?"

"To hell with Paris!" Chat cried, "You are not there! I want you! They took you away from me!"

"But I'm still around, Chat." Ladybug said soothingly, stroking his cheek. "In your heart, you know I am… And when I wake, I want you to be the first face I see, so I need you to live. Got it?"

Chat choked on a sob, "Yes…"

"That's it…" She whispered as she cupped his face and pulled it towards her, lightly brushing his lips with hers, "That's my kitty…."

Adrien snapped out of the dream with a gasp, his lips still tingling. He was nuzzled to his pillow, the surface of which was drenched in tears that had seeped from his eyes in his sleep. He was curled up in a tight ball, clutching the Ladybug doll close to his chest, and still in his day clothes.

He sighed, rolling on his back and wiping his tired, wet eyes.

He remembered passing out last night the moment he got back from the ceremony, so physically and emotionally drained that he hadn't even bothered to change after he detransformed. By the dim light from the overcast sky outside he gathered it was something like 7 in the morning. He was thankful that it was a Saturday, so he could technically sleep in, but his buzzing mind wouldn't allow it now that he was awake.
The dream still swam in his head, taunting him. It had seemed so real. It was also the first time since the accident that he had dreamt about Ladybug in a setting that wasn't her getting hurt or dying all over again. It was actually her having a good time with him, like old times. She also seemed so oddly aware of her situation, consciously talking to him…

A thought filtered into his conscious.

"Plagg?" he called hoarsely.

"Mrr?" came Plagg's reply from his computer desk. He rested inside an empty Camembert container, his eyes looking blearily at Adrien.

"I dreamt with Ladybug."

"Mhmm…" Plagg muttered noncommittally, still not quite awake.

"But she was talking to me; she told me to hang on and wait for her," Adrien explained, raising the Ladybug doll over his head and staring at her beady eyes. "Like she was aware that she was in a coma; aware of how I was feeling."

"Uh-huh," Plagg said with a yawn.

"Can Miraculous holders communicate telepathically?" Adrien asked, a spark of hope igniting.

"No. You can sense each other but you cannot communicate telepathically." Plagg explained with another yawn, "She's just been in your mind all week, that's all."

And just like that the spark fizzled.

"I see…" Adrien said with a sad sigh, letting his arms drop at his sides.

Of course, it would've been too good to be true.

"Stop doing this to yourself." Plagg said, his eyes serious, "You need to control your emotions. You know that."

"You know it's not up to me." Adrien said with a frown, "I can't just stop feeling things. You know how I feel about Ladybug-"

"That's beside the point!" Plagg snapped, "You have to learn to control yourself! There's residual Akuma magic flowing through you, and every time you let your feelings blow up, it takes over. I'm trying to figure this thing out so we can help you but you keep letting your anger flare up and it throws me off!"

Adrien sat up on the bed with a frustrated sigh. "Why are you telling me this?" he said, "Did something happen last night?"

"Not sure. I meant to ask yesterday but you passed out." Plagg said, "Do you remember threatening Hawk Moth?"

"What?" Adrien's eyes widened. "I threatened Hawk Moth?"

"Hm," Plagg narrowed his eyes at Adrien, then flew to the computer, opening up the browser and setting up the Ladyblog's videoplayer to the most recent upload. It was a recording of last night's stream. Adrien stood up from the bed and walked over to the computer. Plagg played the video, fast forwarding to the moment where Chat Noir had passionately addressed Hawk Moth in his speech,
his face constricted in anger.

"I… don't remember that," Adrien said in a low voice, "It must have been a second. I don't even remember blacking out at all."

"Interesting…” Plagg said, tapping his chin in thought.

"What's interesting?" Adrien asked.

"I felt it wasn't completely you since I remember your energy going haywire at that moment. I think it was the Akuma filtering through since you were very upset,,” Plagg said, "Because even though you definitely dislike Hawk Moth, it would seem that the Akuma inside you backs that sentiment, and it took over during that moment."

"So this Akuma is screwing up with my head but at the same time, it doesn't like Hawk Moth?" Adrien said, raising an eyebrow. "How does that work?"

"Not sure. We need to see Tikki, I need to bounce this idea with her." Plagg said floating around Adrien's head as he thought, "When do visiting hours start?"

"Three hours, tops." Adrien asked, "Though, you know her parents are likely to be there, right? You won't be able to talk to Tikki."

"I'll take whatever chance we get, they can't be there forever. Now go get some breakfast and let's get moving! And get me some Camembert!"

Adrien chuckled. "Yes, sir."

"Hey, I tried calling you yesterday but you didn't pick up. Did you go to the Ladybug memorial?" came Nino's voice from the phone as Adrien took the elevator to Marinette's floor.

"Sorry, I came down with something," Adrien lied softly, his voice barely above a whisper, "I watched the stream, though."

"Poor Chat Noir, man," Nino commented offhandedly, "I'm super impressed he managed to hold himself straight throughout the whole thing… He kinda broke down in the end though."

"Huh?" Adrien said dumbly.

"Marinette's folks came with Alya and I. We waited till like the end, and they like thanked him for saving Marinette and stuff. Dude broke down."

"Oh." Adrien said absently. It was odd hearing Nino speak about something that happened like he was not there when he had been there, he had broken down, and he was actually on the receiving end of that group hug. But Nino didn't need to know that. No one did.

"Well, his partner died, what did you expect?" Adrien said the last bit almost hesitantly.

"Yeah. Must really suck. What a bummer." Nino said, "Alya was super depressed too, but Chat Noir told her that her blog had been useful last night, so she's been like working nonstop to reformat the whole thing to make it more streamlined. It's good to see her all excited about something again, ya know?"

"Oh yeah? That's great," Adrien said with a large yawn, which then turned into coughing. He brought a hand up, covering his mouth with his sleeve until it subsided a few seconds later.
Nino paused on the other end of the line, "Dude, you okay?"

"Yeah, just a cold."

"All right if you say so, but it's been a week, man. You need to get that checked out. Tell your pops to stop overworking you. Get some initiative!"

"Yeah, I'll try."

"Hey, so Alya and I were thinking about going to the movies today, you know, to ease up all the depression. Wanna join? There's this sick thriller showing this week."

"Sorry, I have a photoshoot today. Maybe next week?"

"Dude, initiative!"

"I can't bail on this Nino, you know that."

"Do I need to get akumatized a second time to get you to hang out with us again?" Nino chuckled.

Adrien cringed, his voice dropping into a hiss, "Nino, don't play with that…"

Nino's chuckling stopped. "...It was only a joke, relax."

"Not really the best time to make those jokes," Adrien chastised, frowning, "Chat Noir has enough on his plate with regular crimes to add Akumas into the mix… Don't jinx it."

"Okay man, I'm sorry…" he heard Nino sigh, "Do you know him or something? What's gotten into you lately? You're really jumpy."

Adrien sighed, "No, I don't know him. Look, I'm sorry, I really need to go, I'll talk to you later, okay? Say hi to Alya for me."

"Yeah, whatever suits you. Take care of yourself, and take a chill pill, will ya? Let's do movies next week."

"Yeah, next week, for sure."

Nino hung up just as the elevator doors popped open and he stepped out, walking down the corridor.

What has gotten into you lately?

Nino's question echoed in his head, over and over. What had gotten into him lately? Was his short fuse brought upon by his own exhaustion, or was it a byproduct of the Akuma? These days he wasn't sure anymore. He knew that when the Akuma took over there were lagoons in his memory, but he hadn't spaced out with Nino, so was that all him? Was he reaching his wit's end? Was the Akuma changing him, as he feared?

He sighed. He needed some respite. He wished so hard that his dream would become real. That Marinette would wake, transform into Ladybug, and everything would go back to the way it was. Maybe she could even help him with his problem. Maybe having her around would make the Akuma's presence fade. She was the power of creation after all, maybe her healing presence alone would help him.

His stomach grumbled, and he grimaced against the pain that shot up his stomach. It was definitely not hunger pain. So far, he had been successfully able to keep his breakfast in his stomach, but he
could feel it protesting, demanding to be vacated again. He pushed the urge down, really eager to actually get some nourishment.

He had noticed with no little amount of concern while he changed that his ribs had begun to show. It was slightly, and it was only terribly noticeable when he stretched his arms over his head, but he could feel it be the beginning. Even his skin had a paler tinge to it and was becoming dry. He had to get better, and quick. He couldn't let Nathalie notice and go blabber to his father about it. He'd have Adrien checked out, they would deem him too sick, and he'd be forced to be cooped up in the mansion for God knows how long.

And if they saw the scar...

No. He had to pretend, he had to hide. He was thankful that it was the beginning of the autumn-winter season, which made Adrien's sudden interest in long sleeved shirts and jackets normal and inconspicuous. Thankfully, all his photoshoots had involved him modelling his father's Winter Line as well, which covered all his body, including his preoccupying right arm.

He could pretend without issue until summer.

He just hoped Marinette would wake before then.

He reached the door to her room and knocked. After a few seconds, it cracked open and he was met with the face of Sabine, whose lips stretched into a smile at the sight of him.

"Adrien!" she greeted, opening the door and letting him in, "Didn't think any of Marinette's friends would visit at this time. Come in, please!"

"I had some business in the afternoon so I thought I'd come early." Adrien said, bowing his head at her. "It's nice to see you, Madame Cheng. You look radiant today."

"Thank you dear. It's nice to see you, too," Sabine said with a smile, though her eyes then turned sad, "Though I can't help but notice you look tired. Are you alright?"

"Just had a tough time sleeping, nothing to worry about Madame." Adrien said, pulling his lips into the most convincing smile he could muster, though it wasn't particularly hard. He couldn't help having a newfound appreciation for Marinette's family and getting attached to them, becoming especially fond of Sabine and how motherly and welcoming she had been with him. Smiling for her came naturally. "Thank you for your concern."

She laid a hand on his cheek and Adrien had a hard time not jumping at the motion, being reminded of last night. "You are such a nice boy. Thank you for being there for Marinette. She is very lucky to have a friend like you."

Adrien could feel his cheeks turn warm. "I feel very fortunate of knowing her, Madame. Thank you."

"Well now that you're here, and If I may abuse your kindness a bit, there's a favor I need to ask." she said apologetically.

"Anything."

"I actually needed to go fetch some things for the bakery earlier but I couldn't bear leaving Marinette's side. Tom must be having a tough time on his own and I absolutely need to run those errands. Would you mind keeping a watch on Marinette while I'm gone?" Sabine said, "I feel better having someone familiar looking after her. I promise I will be back as soon as I can. I'll leave you my
number if anything happens."

Well it seems the unlucky Kwami suddenly got very, very lucky.

Adrien smiled pleasantly. "Of course, Madame!"

"Again, I'm sorry for troubling you with this." Sabine said as Adrien handed her his cellphone and she wrote her number, while he wrote his on hers.

"It's not a problem at all," Adrien said with a warm smile, handing her back her phone, "Please don't worry about it."

"Thank you, Adrien. I will be back soon." Sabine said as he handed her his cellphone and she wrote her number, while he wrote his on hers.

"How are you the spirit of bad luck, again?" Adrien muttered after a moment with a grin. Plagg came flying out of the recesses of his jacket with a smug look of his own.

"Bad luck has been busy having a tryst with you to bother with me," Plagg scoffed, then turned toward the back of the room. "Hey, Tikki!"

In an instant, the red sprite came flying from underneath Marinette's bed to greet them. "Plagg, Adrien, it's great to see you!"

"Hello Tikki, how have you been?" Adrien asked as he dragged a chair to Marinette's bedside and sat down.

"I've been fine. Marinette is doing good progress. I think it's safe to say your assumption was correct, Adrien!" she said, nuzzling Adrien's cheek affectionately.

"And I'm ever so glad to hear that. Thanks for indulging me, Tikki." Adrien said, stroking the red Kwami's head gently. "Any big changes?"

"Oh yes! She is mumbling!"

"Mumbling?" Adrien raised an eyebrow.

"It started last night. I was playing the stream next to her on your phone. She doesn't make a sound, but she's been moving her mouth a lot, as if she was talking to someone."

"Is she now?" Adrien looked at Plagg pointedly.

"Don't give me that. I told you Miraculous holders can't speak telepathically! It's a muscular reflex, lover boy!" Plagg said, crossing his arms stubbornly. "Don't get excited."

"What a party pooper." Adrien pouted, grabbing Marinette's hand and kissing the back of it in his usual greeting. "Hello, Princess." He idly noticed her hand was warmer than he had ever felt it, which brought a smile to his face.

"What's this about telepathy?" Tikki asked, cocking her head in confusion.

"Adrien had a dumb dream last night of Ladybug talking with him and now he thinks Marinette can speak to him in dreams."

"It sounds really dumb when you say it that way, but it didn't seem so at the time." Adrien said, sticking his tongue out at his Kwami.
"Oh, well, I'd have to side with Plagg here. I'm sorry, Adrien," Tikki said apologetically. "Chosens can't communicate in dreams."

Adrien sighed, "That's alright."

"Anyway, that's not important. I needed to talk to you, Tikki." Plagg said, "So did you watch the full stream last night?"

"I did, yes." Tikki turned to Adrien with gentle eyes, "That was a beautiful speech, by the way. I'm sure Marinette would've loved it. It made me cry!" Adrien chuckled halfheartedly. "Thank you, Tikki."

"Yeah, yeah...The part with Hawk Moth, do you remember it?" Plagg insisted.

"Yes, I remember it. What about it?" Tikki asked.

"Adrien doesn't remember part of it. I think the Akuma took over."

Tikki's face grew concerned, "The Akuma?"

"If that wasn't Adrien then that means that whatever consciousness the Akuma has doesn't like Hawk Moth very much either. What do you make of this?"

"Interesting," Tikki said with a paw on her chin.

"Is this a thing you two do?" Adrien said suddenly, "Like, just go interesting and stroke your imaginary beard like those old, mysterious asian guys in movies that do not elaborate and leave people in the dark?"

"Adrien, shut up."

"Okay."

Tikki giggled. "An Akuma that holds disdain for Hawk Moth can only mean one thing." she said with a knowing nod, "It's adapting."

"Which means...?" Adrien pressed.

"You know how true Akuma victims never remember anything they do while under the influence of the Akuma?" Tikki asked Adrien.

"Yeah?"

"The Akuma completely takes over, using the victim's source of grief as its motivator and acting out on it, but the victim is completely unaware of anything. The villains we see are the Akumas speaking with the victim's voice, using the victim's negative thoughts and memories as a guide for their personality. A doppleganger, if you will. Like when Evillustrator only targeted Chloé and asked Marinette out, even though he was a villain. He was still capable of love because Nathanael loved Marinette and the Akuma reflected that."

"Yeah or Vanisher, who only really cared about bothering Chloé, but not anyone else..." Adrien said, a finger on his chin.

"Exactly!" Tikki said, "The difference here is that when the Akuma completely takes over, it also gives Hawk Moth full control on the victim, so if part of their true consciousness manages to push..."
through the Akuma's grip, he can torture them until they relinquish their hold again."

"Yes, I figured out that much." Adrien said, nodding. "So?"

"I think I've figured it out. Those mental lagoons you get when you get really upset are probably meant to emulate that feeling of unawareness the Akuma victims get, but the Akuma's influence is not strong enough to completely take over you or even allow a channel between Hawk Moth and you to be created." Tikki explained, "But it's still substantial enough, and persistent enough that you act up when you get too emotional. The Akuma residue is adopting your feelings and acting on them like a regular Akuma, but since there's no Hawk Moth to control you, and the Akuma isn't even that strong, you are free to push through anytime and be in full control most of the time."

"So, with no Hawk Moth to rein your true self in, the Akuma is making your feelings its own and only surfaces when you let it, echoing your feelings tenfold. If you hate Hawk Moth, it hates him too. If you care about Alya and Nino, it cares about them, too. If you love Marinette, it loves her, too."

Adrien's eyes widened. "So this means that…"

"Even if you lose control of your feelings because of the Akuma's influence, it's unlikely you will hurt people close to you because the Akuma considers them close, too." Tikki said, "But it will affect how candidly you react to certain situations, since Akuma's do thrive on negative feelings and encourage them, acting as a catalyst."

"That's actually pretty reassuring," Adrien said, "Not hurting people I care about, I mean. At least until we figure out what to do about it."

"Yes. That would also explain why you only seem to lose your temper with criminals and nowhere else. You hate injustice, so the Akuma lends you more emotional strength to deal with it, and expresses it by making you more aggressive."

Adrien frowned. "That doesn't sound very calming. I almost lost my temper with Nino today, so I got a little worried."

"Remember, the Akuma exacerbates your negative feelings. Whereas normal you would only scoff at something, the current you may get more irritated. I would venture a guess that the Akuma wouldn't do anything that would cause harm to come to you in any way though, since it needs you to survive." Tikki explained. "You may have gotten angrier than usual at Nino, but you wouldn't hurt him, and the Akuma wouldn't try to have you hurt him, either."

"So essentially, it's like a parasite?" Adrien said, making a disgusted face.

"I'd choose symbiosis as a more apt description. It needs you to survive, but in return also protects you, in it's own way. I've been watching your streams. I've noticed it improves your reflexes when you deal with criminals, and makes you more calculating and cold where your gentle heart would usually have in it to be more merciful and lenient with people who seek to harm you." Tikki explained.

"I guess that's better than a parasite if it's supposed to be mutually beneficial," Adrien said dubiously, scratching the back of his head, "Have you given it any thought about how we can get rid of it, though? It gives me the creeps just thinking that there's this thing inside me that can spring up at any moment..." Adrien shuddered at the thought.

"I have but one guess, but I would need to check with someone else."
"Nuh-uh, out of the question." Plagg interrupted suddenly, having stayed out of the conversation so Tikki could explain. "I know who you mean. You know he stays strictly out of our business and we have to respect that. Chosens are not supposed to know about him unless it's really necessary."

"Chosens being influenced by Akumas isn't a normal circumstance, Plagg." Tikki countered, "If anyone knows if something can be done about this, it's him. You've said yourself that Adrien feels different when you transform. We need to nip this problem in the bud before it flourishes and take Adrien to him."

"Who's *him*?" Adrien asked.

Tikki hesitated. "The man I told you about… the Guardian."

Adrien scowled. "I don't need to see him."

"Don't be that way, please…" Tikki pleaded, "You don't have to give him the earrings, just let him take a look at you?"

"Wait, you already had this conversation?" Plagg asked, "When?"

"He was transformed at the time so you were probably asleep in the suit," Tikki said.

"Or I don't know, maybe I was trying to siphon out a being made of dark magic, hmm?"

"Yes, maybe…" Tikki conceded, "Anyway, I told Adrien about him. He didn't really like the idea because I suggested we return Marinette's Miraculous to keep them safe until she woke up, but he didn't want to."

"I told you, I want them readily available for Marinette! I put them in a safe, so don't worry about it!" Adrien pouted, crossing his arms stubbornly.

Tikki sighed. "Please?"

"No."

Plagg hummed, looking carefully at Adrien.

"Is it really that you want them available or is it because you don't want Marinette replaced?" Plagg asked with a grin. "The Guardian can easily choose another person to be Ladybug, that's not an issue. Plenty of girls in Paris to choose from."

Tikki gasped when Adrien suddenly shot up from his chair, knocking it over.

"What did you say?" Adrien hissed, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Plagg stared him down with a smirk.

"Adrien, calm down!" Tikki coaxed. She turned on Plagg disapprovingly. "What are you doing!?"

"You are not replacing Marinette!" Adrien said, "*Ever!*"

"Ah-hah. There it is!" Plagg said, pointing accusingly. "You absolutely stink at this controlling yourself thing! It didn't take much at all to get a rise out of you and for you to let the Akuma surface!"

Adrien's eyes widened as realization dawned on him and he took a step back. "What? I… I didn't..."
he stuttered, eyes flitting from Plagg to Tikki in worry.

"Okay, now we are definitely going!" Tikki said, shaking her head, "We absolutely need to stop this before it gets out of hand! Please!"

Adrien's features softened in shame and his shoulders sagged. Plagg's suggestion had really triggered something in him. He had felt irritation at the mere implication that Marinette would not be Ladybug anymore, but before he knew it, irritation became rage in the blink of an eye. He had been completely aware of his anger, but had done nothing to stop it from escalating. It had felt… natural.

But now he realized that was not him. He did not snap. Not that way.

If he could not tell when the Akuma was influencing him and when it was not, then Adrien feared the worst.

It was changing him.

Adrien sighed. "Alright. Look me over, then I leave…" Adrien said in defeat.

"Why do you hate him anyway? You don't even know him!" Plagg said cocking his head.

"I have my reasons," Adrien huffed. "Not that it matters. We'll go see him tonight, then. Let's get this over with."

"Hello?"

It was the dead of night, and Chat Noir walked into the seemingly empty massage room; a quaint little room with a massage mat and an assortment of Chinese paraphernalia and decoration. It was cozy, permeated with the smell of incense and bathed in warm candlelight.

He had found the establishment to be open despite the CLOSED sign outside. The lobby was deserted but Tikki had assured him that it was completely fine to enter without explicit consent from the owner. She then led him down a dimly lit hallway to the little room he stood in now, where he was met with silence.

"Coming as Chat Noir was really not necessary." Tikki commented, floating beside his head. "He knows who you are. He chose you."

"Safety precaution."

"He's an old man…"

Chat stared pointedly at Tikki, his brows knitted into a frown.

Tikki sighed, "Alright, if it makes you feel better."

"Hello?" Chat called again, knocking on the open door.

Silence met him. There were but a few candles lighting the otherwise dark room, but the flame on the wicks barely stirred with the breeze filtering through an open window on his left.

"Tikki, are you sure this is the pla-"

"Hello, Adrien."
Chat jumped with a yelp, turning on his heel to find a short, Asian old man standing in the doorway behind him, holding a tray with a pot of tea and some cups in it. His red hawaiian shirt really stood out in stark contrast with the otherwise meditative, sober design of the place.

The old man smiled. "My name is Master Fu. To what do I owe the pleasure, M. Agreste?"

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: BEAUTIFUL FANARTTTTT

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143680025976/toriitorii-had-do-draw-this-for-ferisae-s
*

Oh snap!

Thank you for reading!
"You!" Chat Noir said, mouth agape as he pointed with a finger, "I remember you! I helped you at the school! Before-

"Before you became Chat Noir?" Master Fu finished for him. "What a chivalrous lad you were, yes. Not a moment of hesitation either. Lots of energy and boldness, despite your sheltered upbringing."

"You were testing me?" Chat raised an eyebrow.

The corners of Master Fu's lips rose. "Fancy some tea?" he offered, his slanted eyes turning smaller as he smiled.

"No, thank you," Chat said flatly, moving to the side to let the old man in.

"Hello, Master Fu!" Tikki greeted, waving enthusiastically at the old man.

"Hello Tikki, you are looking fine today."

Chat eyed the old man dubiously as he moved to the other side of the mat and calmly put the tray down.

This was the guy supposed to be the Guardian? An eccentric old man who owned a massage shop? The Great Protector of the Miraculous who needed only a single act of kindness to bestow an item of great power on a person? This man was the cause of all his grief?

How underwhelming.

"I didn't expect you here so soon, especially after the marvelous job you've been doing in the city." Master Fu said as he settled on his folded legs on the other side of the mat, "Such a beautiful speech you gave last night, too. Please, take a seat."

But Chat Noir did not move, staring at the old man with narrowed eyes, tail swishing angrily behind him.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced, yet it seems you don't like me very much." Master Fu said placidly.
A growl rumbled in Chat's throat.

"Chat!" Tikki chided.

"It's quite alright. He is in all his right to dislike me at this moment." Master Fu said as he poured a steaming cup of green tea for himself. "I've kept much from you, haven't I?"

Anger flared in Chat's chest, his eyes turning to slits. Was it him, or the Akuma bristling? Where did Chat end and the Akuma start?

He felt the warm coil of contempt stirring in his gut for this man. Yes, he was thankful he had freed him from the prison of his mansion, but in the end, he had put a heavy burden on the shoulders of two innocent teens, without so much as an explanation. He expected them to do all the work to fix the misdeeds of a villain he had created; a villain whose cronic had effectively murdered his partner, who only came back to life thanks to Tikki's last minute save.

Wasn't he supposed to be a Guardian? He sucked really bad at his job, then.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees.

"Why didn't you do anything?" Chat hissed.

"Beg your pardon?" Fu said, blowing lightly on the cup.

"One of your Chosens nearly died and you are acting as if nothing had happened!" Chat raised his voice, but Master Fu didn't seem phased, looking at him calmly while Tikki looked on the exchange nervously. "You don't give a damn about us, do you?"

"Is that what you really think?" Master Fu raised an eyebrow.

"Have you given an indication otherwise?"

"I gave you your Miraculous."

"Because you can't be bothered to fix your own mistake!" Chat sneered, "Do you even know anything about us? Do you even care?"

Fu hummed, closing his eyes. "Poor Adrien Agreste. Son of famous designer Gabriel Agreste. Cooped up in his home, forced into a life of luxury and duty without a chance to be truly himself. No friends, no freedom. A pretty puppet in the hand of wealthy society. A gentle heart in the suffocating grip of the upper class. A kind boy whose heart's only desire is to be free and to be genuinely loved. What Miraculous to give him but the mischievous free spirit, Chat Noir?"

Chat's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Master Fu smiled and continued. "And what about sweet Marinette Dupain-Cheng, the diligent daughter of the baker? Talented, resourceful, compassionate. A girl raised by two very loving set of hands. A girl whose gentle personality makes it easy for her to make friends and touch the hearts of others. Thinks herself clumsy, but is very much the cleverest girl Paris has ever seen. The perfect Ladybug."

Chat blinked, his mouth agape.

"How far was I from the mark?" Master Fu asked with a smirk. "Do not mistake my lack of intervention for disinterest. I've been watching over you both ever since you became heroes."
Chat Noir shook his head and gathered his stance again. "If you knew, why didn't you do anything? Have you even visited Marinette? Or check how she was doing?"

"I do not need to visit her to know the dire situation she is in," Master Fu said knowingly, sipping on his tea, "Plus I doubt her parents would be at ease with a strange, old man visiting their daughter at the hospital, wouldn't you say?"

"Fair point," Chat agreed hesitantly, "What about me? I could've needed you. It would've helped to know I wasn't alone after I lost Ladybug…"

"Were you truly alone, Adrien Agreste?" Master Fu asked, "It seems to me that this situation has only brought you closer to what you desired."

Chat grit his teeth, his anger only escalating with his mounting frustration.

"Brought me closer to what desire? The girl I love is in a coma!" Chat snapped. "I've been working myself sick to protect this city alone! I fight criminals day and night because they think it's fun to stretch me thin, just because Ladybug isn't around!"

"Being a hero entails sacrifice, but trial often exhibits truly wonderful results…"

"Spare me your useless proverbs!" Chat shouted, "What are you even talking about anymore?"

Chat jumped when Master Fu extended his hand and images started flitting in Chat's mind. They careened to a stop at a certain image, a certain memory playing in his head.

It was him sunk to the floor, surrounded by four people, wrapped in a warm, reassuring embrace as he cried into the shoulder of a woman; a woman who treated him as if he were her own son and welcomed him to her home with open arms.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" he heard Fu's voice echo in his head. "A loving family? Friends? And your Ladybug lives yet…" another memory filtered into his mind. Ladybug, her hair down, laughing at him as she lay underneath him after Chat had pounced on her. A vision trapped in a dream. "Marinette is still here…"

"Stop…" Chat hissed, squeezing his eyes shut. "Stop this."

Master Fu lowered his hand and the images snuffed out from Chat's mind. Chat fought the tears that had gathered at the corner of his eyes, blinking them back.

"Why?" he asked softly.

"Why?" Master Fu questioned.

"Why did you give a Miraculous to Hawk Moth?" Chat asked.

"I did no such thing. He found the Butterfly Miraculous, which I had assumed to be lost forever. The reason I chose you and Miss Marinette was to fight his advances and get it back."

"Why didn't you fight him yourself?" Chat asked.

"I will let you take a look at me and figure that out for yourself." Master Fu drank from his cup again.

Chat groaned in frustration. "Fine! You are old! You needed help! But you seem knowledgeable enough, at least. I could've used some advice!"
"What do you think Tikki and Plagg are there for?" Master Fu raised his eyebrows. "They are centennial beings. I may be the Guardian of the Miraculous, but those two Kwami are wise beyond what their appearance shows. And who to know better about their own power than the Kwami themselves?"

Chat huffed angrily, looking out the window. The sound logic behind Master Fu's words irritated him, making his reasons to dislike the man look like weak excuses to pin the blame of his pain on someone other than himself.

"I know none of my explanations are enough to quell your anger. You feel betrayed, abandoned..." Master Fu fixed him with a pointed stare, a brow raised.

Chat remained petulantly looking out the window.

"But you have to understand that I am not to interfere. Not anymore. I am only an observer. I take care of the Miraculous in my possession and bestow them upon people I deem worthy of their power when the world needs it most. People with a sound mind and goodness in their hearts, trusting that they'll make good use of them. I cannot, however, interfere in the ways of destiny.

"If Ladybug was meant to get into that accident, for whatever design destiny had in store for her, then there was nothing I could've done to prevent it. I cannot tell the future," Fu said, and when Chat Noir was about to retort, he held up a hand to silence him, "Fate works in mysterious ways. I know many things because I'm old and I've seen my share of the world, but I cannot predict what will, or will not happen.

"My Chosen are like my children, being taken to school for the first time. Their Kwami like diligent teachers. I look upon them as I free them into the world, but do not interfere with how they react and interact with the world. I see them grow and I let them tumble and fall, for what better way is there to learn but to learn from one's own mistakes?"

"Parents help their children," Chat turned to Master Fu again, eyes narrowed, "They nurture them. They guide them. They give them advice..."

"You would know about that, wouldn't you?" Master Fu said flatly.

Chat winced at the jab.

"You have to understand that no advice I could've given you would've spared you the daunting reality of your situation... but that's neither here nor there." Master Fu said, waving a hand dismissively. "Your Kwami is your sworn companion and the most trustworthy guide you will ever need. Now, with that out of the way..."

Master Fu leaned on his folded legs, staring deep into Chat's eyes.

"Why are you really here, Chat Noir?" Master Fu asked cryptically, "Questioning my motives is not the real reason you are here, is it? Any question about your powers can be easily answered by Plagg or Tikki, so it must be something else if Tikki felt the need to bring you to me. You are here because there is something wrong with you, isn't there?"

The air around Chat Noir suddenly became charged, his ears lowering threateningly, his whole demeanor shifting.

"What would you know about what is wrong with me?" Chat growled, baring his teeth, "You are nothing but a selfish old man."
"Chat?" Tikki started, floating towards Chat, but Master Fu raised a hand to stop her.

"I see now. There is a second being," Master Fu said softly, "Feeding your anger, speaking through you…"

Chat's cat ears completely flattened against his head as he glared with slitted eyes. His tail swished aggressively behind him, twitching dangerously.

"You are crazy." Chat chuckled darkly, his voice dangerously low. Tikki gasped, floating away from Chat as something sinister descended on his face and the hairs on the nape of Chat's neck rose.

Master Fu just chuckled, staring at Chat head on, "Aren't we all."

Chat flexed his claws, body coiling back as if he was about to jump. A guttural growl rumbled in his throat.

"But alas, I've no interest in speaking with you, so if you'd allow me to talk to Adrien now, I'd appreciate it." Master Fu said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "Wayzz."

In an instant, a green blur shot out from a record player in the back and flew at Chat. It zoomed around him, fast as a bullet, pelting strategic points on his body before Chat could do anything about it. Magic rippled from the spots, making his body seize up with a low gasp.

And just like that, the dangerous aura in the room lifted.

Then, as if a switch had been turned off, Chat crumpled to the ground with a whine, suddenly feeling weak. He clutched at his chest with a hiss, his body abruptly enveloped in pain.

"W-What's ha-happening to m-me?" Chat gasped, the dangerous edge in his voice was completely gone, replaced by fear. He realized the green blur, which now floated serenely beside Master Fu, had been a green Kwami with a turtle shell on its back.

"The Akuma overpowered you, so I had it sent to sleep, releasing you from its hold. Though It's only temporary, I'm afraid," Master Fu said with a hum, stroking his beard.

Chat's eyes widened in terror, "D-Did I…? Ngh…" Chat winced and pain flashed in his face.

"Don't fret, you didn't do anything you'd regret," Master Fu said reassuringly, then nodded his head at the Kwami. "Thanks to Wayzz here, my Kwami."

"Nice to make your acquaintance," the Kwami said respectfully with a bow.

But Chat didn't hear him, heaving a long moan as he doubled over and pressed his head to the floor, clutching at his stomach desperately.

"Chat! What's wrong?" Tikki said in a panic, floating down to Chat, who had begun to shake and whimper. She turned to Master Fu with eyes wide, "Master, what's happening to him?"

Master Fu stroked his beard pensively, regarding the boy with furrowed brows.

"It's merely a guess, but it would appear that the reach of the Akuma's influence has spread. It's not just confined to his mind anymore. It must have been masking Adrien's physical condition all this time, hiding the true extent of the damage for its own convenience. This is not good." Master Fu said in a low voice.

Chat Noir looked up at him with tears in his eyes. "Help me... P-Please..." His voice cracked, filled
Tikki stared in disbelief as Chat begged. It was like he was a completely different person from the boy that had been standing in that spot mere seconds ago, ready to pounce on Master Fu and rip him to shreds. Was that the true nature of the Akuma?

Master Fu looked at him sympathetically. "Lay on the mat."

Chat Noir dragged himself forward on all fours, flopping weakly on his back with a whimper. Master Fu held his hands above Chat's chest, humming under his breath and closing his eyes. He moved his hands up and down his body while Chat lay on the mat, breathing heavily through his nose.

"There's a lot of damage," Master Fu muttered, "Your lungs, your stomach, your heart… they are in really bad shape. What happened?"

"Cataclysm, ngh… I used it on an Akuma… It backfired on me…” Chat said through gritted teeth as the pain intensified in waves, his claws digging into the mat, "Please… m-make it stop…"

"You're not supposed to use Cataclysm on the Akuma-"

"I know!" Chat cried out, tears escaping his eyes. "Ah..!"

His body burned terribly. It felt like he had a torch lodged in between his organs, scorching everything in close proximity while knives sliced at the rest of him, killing him from the inside out. Chat cried out, his back arching, claws grasping desperately at the mat.

"Master Fu…” Tikki whimpered, paws on her mouth. Wayzz floated to her and laid a paw on her shoulder, but she was not appeased. Chat was agonizing, his cries almost like yowls, his face white and drenched in sweat.

He was losing his mind, white pain flashing in his head. Was this what he would feel if the Akuma was not there? Might as well have mercy and kill him now. The damn thing didn't sound like such a bad idea after all if it was able to block all this pain away. He almost missed the insistent, but considerably tame stomach pains he got daily.

"I… I kind of want the Akuma back…” Chat groaned, shaking.

"Do not wish for that." Fu said with a grimace, "The Akuma is trying to manipulate you in its own way. In exchange for a false sense of comfort, you are giving it leverage on your mind. That, however, doesn't change that you are very hurt inside. It's only an illusion the Akuma created. You are now feeling the true extent of the damage Cataclysm left behind. You've left this unattended for too long. You need to get help right away."

"No." Chat Noir hissed, "No… no one can know. I can't explain this…"

"They need not know you are Chat Noir, just that you are hurt. You're in great risk-"

"You don't understand…ngh…” Chat moaned loudly as he writhed on the mat, feeling like his stomach was being ripped open. "My father he… he's going to take m-my freedom away… I c-can't be Chat Noir…”

"I admire your sense of duty but a dead Chat Noir is of no use to Paris or Ladybug. This will only get worse if you do not take care of it." Master Fu explained reasonably. "Cataclysm is not a force to be trifled with. It is a miracle you are even still alive."
Chat squeezed his eyes shut, teeth gritted against the searing pain consuming him. "J-just... Let me take care of it... at my own time..." he sobbed. "But please just... just... do s-something..."

"I can only provide you temporary relief. It will fade with time." Master Fu explained, conjuring a cloth and bringing it across Chat's forehead to wipe the sweat off his brow.

"Anything... I b-beg you..." Chat pleaded, his mind on the verge of blacking out from pain, "Please..." Chat looked at him, eyes tearing in desperation, "Please..."

Master Fu nodded. "As you wish. Detransform."

Adrien released his transformation but immediately regretted it. He cried out in anguish as Plagg's protection fell from his skin and his pain multiplied tenfold, sending a new wave of agony through his body as he writhed in distress.

"Adrien!" Plagg called, turning on the agonizing mess that was his Chosen.

"Shhh, stay calm or you will only stress him out further." Master Fu told the concerned Plagg as he leaned over the suffering boy and began pressing his fingers to distinct parts of his body. Adrien shuddered under his touch, mouth agape in a strangled cry.

Master Fu frowned.

"Pressure points don't work, the damage is too deep."

"What are we gonna do?" Plagg whined.

"Wayzz, my satchel. Quickly." Master Fu commanded. The Kwami nodded and flew out of the room.

"M-Master Fu," Adrien moaned, his voice breaking as he struggled to turn on his side. He cracked his eyes open, tear-laden green orbs finding the old master's face. "I'm so sorry... Earlier... I didn't mean... ngh!" Adrien winced, his hands clutching at the mat as he rode out another wave of pain.

"Shh... There's nothing to apologize for. If anything, I'm sorry there's not much I can do to bring you solace." Master Fu said, laying a comforting hand on Adrien's hair. "You do not deserve any of this."

Adrien just looked at him, his breathing labored.

"It probably means nothing coming from an old coot like me, but I'm really proud of you." Master Fu said warmly, "You've stood strong even in the face of adversity, and tonight is only proof of your unyielding strength. I am proud to call you my Chosen. There hasn't been a finest Chat Noir in centuries." he said with smile.

Despite his agony, Adrien managed to pull a small, grateful smile.

But it quickly disappeared as his eyes squeezed shut again and his body lurched, overtaken by an aggressive bout of coughing. Before long, something dark started dribbling from Adrien's mouth and down his chin.

"Adrien!" Plagg cried, his green eyes wide in horror.

"Wayzz!" Master Fu called urgently.

"I'm here, Master!" Wayzz said as he flew into the room, carrying a small, brown satchel in his paws.
Master Fu snatched it out of the air and started rummaging in it, the sound of clinking glass filling the room. Before long, Master Fu pulled out a medium sized vial as he cupped a hand under the nearly-unconscious Adrien's head and lifted him up, craning his neck so that his mouth lay partly open.

"Adrien, I'm giving you something to drink. Open wide." Master Fu instructed, tipping the edge of the vial over Adrien's lips. Adrien parted his trembling lips and a clear, greenish liquid leaked into his mouth. He sputtered, choking at first, but then, he leaned forward, pressing his lips tightly against the neck of the bottle. He drank in earnest, going so far as to lift a trembling hand to grip Master Fu's wrist to tip the vial further.

"Wait, not all of it!"

But Adrien was too dazed to listen, and after the vial was emptied and the last drop had slid down his throat, he collapsed back on the mat with a drawn out sigh, his mouth half open as a wave of relief flooded him.

Master Fu looked at the empty vial with furrowed brows. He then shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Can't be helped I suppose..."

"What is that, Master?" Tikki asked, wringing her paws nervously as she watched Adrien's body cease its shaking as whatever he had drank took effect and he was left breathing slowly.

"It's a concoction I created to deal with my arthritis when it gets really bad, but I found it can dull the most terrible of pains. It's only temporary, but it should be enough to allow him to function normally until he gets proper help." Master Fu explained. "Provided he only drinks a few drops next time."

"Thank me when you are better. You need to get home before the side effects kick in. You will feel very sluggish and drowsy, but it should last you long enough to get a good night's sleep. I'm giving you several of these, but only use them in extreme cases where the pain is unbearable, do you understand?" Master Fu said, placing several vials in a plastic bag Wayzz had brought him. Adrien nodded slowly.

"It's easy to become dependent, but resist temptation. Drink only what's necessary or you will pass out for the rest of the day. This is not an antidote. It will not cure you, only dull the pain. You need to get proper help as soon as possible."

"Y-yes Master..." Adrien said as he slowly pulled himself to a sitting position to grab the bag with a shaky hand.

"What about the Akuma?" Plagg asked, "Can you do anything about it?"

"I'm afraid not. The only one that can purify Akumas is Ladybug, so she's his only chance to get rid of it for good," Master Fu said gravely, "It's never happened in my lifetime, so I don't even know if it works without a tangible butterfly to capture, but she is our best bet. All I can do for now is restrain it. It won't be permanent, but Adrien should be fine for the time being. His body however..." Master Fu's brows knitted into a serious grimace. "It needs to be taken care of immediately."

"Understood, Master," Tikki and Plagg nodded.

"Y-You are... not going to take the earrings back?" Adrien asked, his words slurring as the potion continued to take effect, "You are not going to replace Marinette... right?"
"Wouldn't dream of it," Master Fu said, lifting his nose in the air, "I'm very proud of my choice. That girl is special, and I have utmost faith that she will recover. *The flower that blooms in adversity, is the most rare and beautiful of all,* after all." He then winked, "Plus, I happen to think you two make an excellent team."

Adrien smiled weakly, closing his eyes in relief, "Thank you…"

Master Fu then turned to Tikki. "If you feel like the Akuma is surfacing, bring him to me again. Drag him if you must. It is likely that the Akuma will put up a fight next time if Adrien is not able to control it."

"Yes, Master."

Tikki then descended into a long conversation with Master Fu about Marinette, which Adrien was too tired to try and comprehend. His mouth hung partly open, sleepiness dripping into his conscious. His body felt so pleasantly numb and relaxed, he barely registered Plagg having floated to his face silently, his green eyes wide with worry. The black Kwami then reached out with a paw, brushing it across Adrien's mouth and wiping something warm off the edge of his lips.

Plagg looked at the wet stain on his paw, and Adrien thought he saw a flash of red, but the light was too dim to make sure and his mind was too jumbled to care.

"What is it, Plagg?" Adrien said softly, stifling a yawn with a hand.

Plagg looked at him briefly before wiping his paw behind his back.

"Drool. Yuck." he said, and although he gave him a smirk, his tone was emotionless.

"Pfft, now you know how I feel," Adrien said with a hint of mirth, poking a shaky finger in the Kwami's chest. "Stop sleeping on my face."

Plagg chuckled halfheartedly. "Yeah whatever, only if you get me my own stash of Camembert. Else get used to my butt on your face."

Adrien grinned, then heaved a big yawn, which he didn't bother to cover.

"Well, time to head home." Tikki said, floating over and stroking Adrien gently on the forehead with a paw.

"You're so pretty…" Adrien drawled, smiling up at Tikki as she brushed his bangs out of his eyes. "Almost as much as Ladybuuuug…"

"Um, thank you?" Tikki giggled, noticing the dopey way Adrien stared up at her with half-lidded, unfocused eyes. "Someone needs to sleep!"

"Thank you for helping him, Master," Plagg said, bowing to Master Fu.

Master Fu smiled, reaching out with a hand and scratching Plagg behind the ears.

"I know how difficult this must be for you," Master Fu said sympathetically. "Take good care of him, Plagg."

"Hah. He can't even take care of himself," Adrien laughed drunkenly, stumbling as he rose to his feet, his arms flailing until he found purchase on the wall. He then started giggling for absolutely no reason, finding the wallpaper very interesting as he poked at it with a finger, his nose scrunchied up in
"Uh… should I be concerned about this?" Plagg said, side eyeing Master Fu dubiously.

"Oh, boy…” Master Fu sighed.

"This is why he's not supposed to drink a whole vial in one go, isn't it?" Tikki said.

"P-Precisely…” Wayzz said, scratching the side of his face nervously. "It's a very potent potion, which is why only a few drops are sufficient to deal with pain for a few hours and still be completely functional. But he downed the whole thing so he might be a little… uh...

"This is some sweet wallpaper, it's actually moving…” Adrien said in awe as he pressed his nose to the door, staring at the perfectly still floral pattern on it. "Look at it go~"

"What even is in that thing you gave him?" Plagg asked, arching an eyebrow.

Master Fu groaned. "Just take him home."

"Well, he's finally tucked in," Tikki said with a sigh, watching as Adrien snuggled under the covers, his face the most relaxed and peaceful they'd seen it in days.

They had the hardest time getting the drugged Adrien to change into his night clothes. He could barely keep himself steady on his feet and he would stumble around the room telling terrible puns borne from his delusional mind, laughing heartily at his own wit.

They had even struggled a good 15 minutes trying to convince him to stop having a conversation with his Ladybug doll, telling him it was not really Ladybug. He had apparently convinced himself into thinking that if he talked to the doll, Marinette would be able to hear him in her dreams, so he spent several minutes cracking dumb jokes at it and flirting with it.

Plagg and Tikki couldn't decide if to be amused, or deeply saddened.

At last, they managed to get him to slip into his pajamas and led him to bed, where he nuzzled his pillow affectionately.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy, when skies are graaaaay-" Adrien sang softly, smiling against the pillow as he pulled the Ladybug doll to him, "You'll never know dear, how much I love you, so please don't take my sunshine awaaaay…” he finished, kissing the doll on the head until his eyes finally slid shut and he relaxed against the mattress, a sigh ghosting past his lips.

"Good night, Adrien," Tikki smiled sadly as she eased the covers on him, kissing his forehead as he drifted off.

"I'll be going back to Marinette," Tikki told Plagg,"You know where to find me if you need help, okay?"

"Yeah..." Plagg said despondently. The Kwami was not looking at her, his tired, sad eyes on his Chosen's sleeping form. His whiskers were droopy, his shoulders sagging.

Tikki's eyes softened.

"He will be okay, Plagg." She said as she wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled his cheek. He responded the hug halfheartedly.
"Yeah, I guess…" he whispered, pulling back.

"Good night," she bid, flying out the window and back to the hospital.

Once Tikki was out of sight, Plagg turned off the lights and floated to the bed. He regarded Adrien contemplatively for a minute, noting the calm rise and fall of his chest. He floated to Adrien's pillow and curled up into a ball just beside his face, brushing a stray lock of blonde hair out of his eyes.

"Stupid kitten," Plagg grumbled, nuzzling his face close to Adrien's and drifting off to sleep with him.

Don't ever scare me like that again…

Plagg woke up to insistent buzzing the next morning. He grumbled in annoyance, cracking open an eye to find Adrien's cell phone vibrating nonstop on his bedside table.

"Adrien, your phooooone," Plagg whined, covering his ears with his paws. Adrien didn't respond, his soft snoring filtering through Plagg's blockade. "Ugh, for real?"

Plagg floated up with a groan, grabbing the cell phone and reading the notifications blowing up on the screen.

It was the Ladyblog, popping up with notifications about a fire, some car chases, something about a Dragon? What a weird name for a business. A robbery here and there, a cat stuck in a tree (Really, people!?) Plagg frowned, then looked back at Adrien's sleeping form, peaceful and relaxed, perfectly content in his dreams.

Screw it.

Plagg unlocked the phone angrily, popped open the Ladyblog and scrolled to the very bottom. His paw lingered at the option displayed just beside the credits. He hesitated, gauging how much this would come back and bite him in the butt, until he decided that his Chosen had had enough.

He tapped unsubscribe and disabled notifications.

No Akuma, no Chat Noir. He deserved a break. Let Paris fend for her own for once.

Adrien would berate him when he realized what Plagg had done, but Plagg had had enough of Adrien's self-serving altruism. Let the Police do their jobs and give the boy a rest.

He threw the cellphone on the bed and curled up to Adrien again.

He was not going to let them take his charge.

"Adrien, what are you thinking about?"

He had been so caught up in her beauty that he didn't even realize Ladybug had called him by his civilian name.

"Sorry?" said Chat, blinking distractedly.

Ladybug turned to him, her blue eyes shining, her hair - once again loose - flowing gently in the breeze. They were sitting on a roof, side by side, watching the sun set behind the Parisian skyline.
"What are you thinking about?" she repeated softly, her head tilting just the slightest bit. "You've been looking at me like that for a while." She finished with a chuckle.

"I was thinking that the sun has nothing on you," Chat said just as softly, his eyes half-lidded and glowing with affection, "So I decided to turn to the actual, most beautiful sight around here."

Her eyes seemed to widen as the color on her cheeks deepened into a blush. She quickly caught herself and smirked, turning away from him with a pretend huff. "You are just saying that, you flirt..."

"Hey," He said, taking her chin in between his fingers and gently turning her face towards him again. His eyes shone earnestly. "I would never say things to you without meaning them. You are the best thing that's happened to me, Ladybug. To be at your side, even as just partners, is a privilege for me." His eyes were so sincere and his voice so genuine that Ladybug was left breathless, taken aback by the deep love in his eyes.

"Chat..."

"No..." Chat said, shaking his head, "Call me by my name again. Please..."

Ladybug hesitated, then said very softly. "Adrien."

Chat smiled, his eyes glistening. God, his name sounded so beautiful on her lips, rolling off her tongue like a prayer. He wanted to hear her call him by his real name over and over from now on, secret identity be damned. His heart thumped in his chest, his body tingling in anticipation. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers and closing his eyes.

"I love you..." he whispered, nuzzling his nose against hers, his lips tantalizingly close to hers. "So, so much..."

"Adrien," she sighed softly again, leaning into him as clawed hands curled around her waist. She closed her eyes, the corner of her lips brushing his cheek, his breath fanning the side of her face. Her hands found his chest, sliding up until her lithe fingers curled around his shoulders. He trembled under her gentle touch, his arms fully winding around her body in response, bringing her flush against him.

"My Lady..." he sighed, his lips finding her cheek and softly brushing against it in a chaste kiss.

Suddenly, she made a sound like a sob, and Chat hurriedly pulled away as if shocked by electricity. His hands shot off her body, his eyes blown wide.

"Ladybug?" he stammered, his face flushed and constricted in worry, "Did I go too far? I did not mean- I'm so sorry-"

She shook her head, cupping his face reassuringly. "No, no, it's not that."

"W-What is it...?" he asked.

"I'm not real."

Chat paused, his heart plummeting to his stomach and feeling as though a vat of cold water had been dropped on him. His eyes scanned her, looking for things that could prove that she was playing with him. That she was going to laugh and tell him she was joking... Her eyes looked so real, glistening with tears she was holding back, her rose lips lowered in a regretful grimace, her fingers very much touching his cheeks.
But she was right. He more he took in, the more he noticed was off about her. The loose hair. The ethereal white glow around her. The lack of warmth in her touch... It was but another illusion. Another cruel mirage.

He felt pressure behind his eyes, his throat constricting in frustration. He couldn't stand it. He knew now that it was all but a dream, he knew it was not real...

But his heart ached so much.

"I don't care." he said finally, reaching out with a hand to gently thread his fingers through her midnight hair, his palm brushing ever so slightly against her cheek. "Please, don't make me wake. Let me stay a little longer... Please..." he begged, his eyes shining.

She looked at him, her beautiful blue eyes regarding him compassionately. The corners of her lips raised in a small, warm smile. She slowly grabbed his hands and lowered them, placing them around her waist again. "If that's what you wish..."

"Only if you wish it, too." he said, his fingers hovering over her body respectfully.

"I do," she said, cupping his face and bringing it in close. His breath caught as her lips suddenly pressed against his own, his body freezing in place. She angled her face, deepening the kiss without hesitation, her body pressing closer to him.

Heavens above, the feelings it awoke in him.

Despite the lack of temperature from her body, her kiss sent a wave of warmth suffusing through his body. It almost felt familiar.

He sighed into the kiss with a purr, his eyes sliding shut as he angled his face to match her rhythm, kissing back eagerly. His arms wrapped around her back, pressing her lithe form against him, her curves molding perfectly against his body. She made a pleasant sound, her thumbs brushing against the lobes of his real ears, eliciting a delighted hum from him, which only made her kiss him deeper. Her lips were so soft and perfect against his own, her hands gently caressing his face and neck, intensifying his purring.

He was in heaven. He was pretty sure he had died and reached heaven.

That was, until a moan escaped him.

But it was not a moan of pleasure, it was of pain. Deep, torturous pain.

He broke the kiss abruptly, gasping. He instantly doubled over, groaning loudly.

"Adrien?" Ladybug asked as she pulled away, her eyes filling with worry.

He was choking, his hands flying to his chest as pain blossomed in his rib cage.

"L-Ladybug..." Chat moaned. Pain was spreading, taking over his senses. He felt tingling in his throat and started coughing aggressively until something wet slid from his lips and hit the tiles beneath him. Something slick and black.

He heard her gasp.

"You have to wake up!" Ladybug said urgently, grabbing his shoulders. "Wake up, Adrien! Wake up!"
Adrien lurched on the bed, his brain snapping violently into awareness as fire seared through him and made him cry out. All memories of the dream were lost, overtaken by the agony travelling through his body. He clutched at his stomach, feeling like knives were slicing at it.

"Adrien!?" Plagg said in alarm, having been snapped awake at Adrien's scream.

Adrien struggled to his feet desperately, stumbling toward the bathroom just in time to fall to his knees and throw up in the toilet. He heaved violently, his stomach sending horrible sparks of pain through his limbs. He moaned loudly, knuckles white around the toilet seat. His body shook, feeling the cold sweat against his skin. He coughed, feeling wetness in his throat, slipping down his lips and into the water below…

And he saw several drops of red.

"Hey! What is it?!" Said Plagg, zipping into the bathroom after him.

Adrien turned to him, face ashen, tears seeping from his eyes.

"...Plagg…” Adrien whimpered, voice breaking. "It's getting worse…"

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: BEAUTIFUL FANART AGAINNNNN <3 thank you u guys are the bessttt

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143629361831/chatttnoir-his-body-shook-feeling-the-cold

Thank you so much for reviewing my last chapter! I'm so happy to see so many new faces in the review sections! I have a surprise! I will be drawing for my chapters and they will also be getting a sound drama (voice acted video)! Chapter 1 is ready and if you return to Chapter 1, you should see pictures accompanying the text! As for the Audio Drama for Chapter 1, you can find it here!:
http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/143458324296/princess-sakura-serenity-when-ladybug-suffers-a
"Okay, breathe in and calm down." Master Fu said a few drops should do it. "

Adrien raised a trembling hand to his mouth, tipping the edge of the vial Plagg had brought for him over his lips. After he felt the fifth drop of sickenly sweet potion fall from the bottle and slide down his throat, he swallowed thickly, lowered the bottle, and corked it again. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the potion take effect and feeling the last remnants of pain slowly ebb away from his chest, relief spreading down his limbs. With a sigh, he opened his eyes again.

He sat on the bathroom floor, back against the closet. He released a shaky breath, his eyes unfocused as he stared at the tiling on the floor, pointedly avoiding looking at the toilet in front of him. His skin was still ghost-white, save for the dark circles under his eyes, rivulets of sweat sliding down his temples. He sat with his legs drawn up, flexing and straightening his fingers on his knees, his shoulders tense.

"Breathe, kid..." Plagg coaxed, "Getting stressed about it will only make it worse."

"It's already worse!" Adrien cried, hiding his face in his knees and taking his hands to his disheveled hair. He sniffled, his frame trembling. Emotion dispelled any attempt at composing himself, so he let his feelings run their course, every part of him shuddering with his silent sobbing.

He was terrified.

He was bleeding. On the inside. And the pain. Oh god, the pain. The moment the potion from last night had finished flushing through his system was the moment that his pain mounted so badly that it had even bled into his dreams. It was bad enough that it woke him up, but it was even worse when he had barely managed to stand up to stumble to the bathroom.
The pain had been almost bad enough that he couldn't move.

How had it come to this? Was that really the power of the Akuma? Was it powerful enough that it could mask Adrien's terrible pain and make him oblivious to it? Had his neglect been so bad that it allowed the damage to escalate, or had he always been that hurt inside?

Was he...dying?

He choked on a sob, bringing his hands down to grip at his knees, fisting the material of his pants in his hands.

"Look, I..." Plagg started hesitantly, "I know you are scared, but it will be okay, y'know? I'm sure they'll fix ya..."

He knew Plagg was struggling with being encouraging. Tikki was the positive one; Plagg only knew how to be sarcastic and cynical. So Adrien knew he was trying really hard to be there for him, and although it did nothing to assuage his fear, he appreciated it. Adrien raised his head, offering him a weak smile, but it wavered and fell almost immediately. Warm tears escaped silently down his cheeks, his body shivering with sickness-induced cold. He brought his arms around his legs, trying in vain to warm himself.

"What am I going to do?" Adrien asked him, and his voice was so low and broken that it took everything out of Plagg not to break with him.

"They'll fix you, you'll see," Plagg repeated, awkwardly patting Adrien's head.

"Only Ladybug can get rid of the Akuma..." Adrien said softly, "What if it takes over me again?"

"Master Fu restrained the Akuma so you should be okay for now, but we do need to get you help so your body can heal." Plagg replied, resting on Adrien's shoulder comfortingly. "That way you'll be able to punch the Akuma in the face if it rears its ugly head again!"

"What if I don't get better, though? What if I can't fight anymore?" Adrien asked, his eyes glassy and his voice quivering, "What if... What if I d-di... " he couldn't finish. Another wave of fear gripped him and his eyes widened, body shuddering with the realization of what he was about to say.

"Hey, listen to me," Plagg said sternly, sensing Adrien's anxiety and flying off his shoulder to pull on his hair till he raised his head. "Stop talking like that. You're not gonna die, okay? I'm not letting you die, ever. You are stuck with me, and that's that. Understand?"

Adrien gave a watery chuckle, "Is that a promise?"

"Yeah, yeah, cross my heart," Plagg said, crossing a paw over his chest, "But only if you promise to do your best to get better and not do anything dumb and reckless that will probably make Tikki yell at us, got it?"

Adrien found it in himself to laugh. "Got it..."

"Nuh-uh, cross your heart, too." Plagg insisted, floating in front of him and crossing his arms over his chest stubbornly.

Adrien smiled, bringing up a hand to shakily brush his index finger against his chest in an x shape. "Cross my heart."

"So are we going, or what? Are you feeling well enough to walk?" Plagg asked.
"Going where?"

"Hospital, stupid!" Plagg said, knocking on Adrien's hand with a paw, "You told Master Fu you'd do it, and you just entered an extremely cheesy and extremely emotional binding contract with me so you are screwed, boy. I don't go sappy for anyone. We're doing this!"

Adrien smiled slightly, "Yes, I get it. Just… Give me some time?"

"Time is something we don't have a lot of, kid…" Plagg frowned.

Adrien looked dubiously at his arm. He grabbed the edge of his pajama sleeve and pulled it back past his elbow, revealing the ugly white scar on his right forearm.

How would he explain this? Or the burnt organs?

He traced a finger over a white tendril on his wrist.

"Look, just let me figure out what I'm going to say." Adrien pleaded, "If I go alone, they will just call my father or Nathalie and I just… Give me a day to figure it out?"

"A day. No more. And even if your dad, aka, Mr. Control Freak, finds out, you're not backing out, okay?" Plagg said, pointing accusingly, "You have me. You won't lose anything while I'm around, got that?"

"Right," said Adrien, and although he was still afraid of the possibility of losing his coveted freedom, his fear over losing his life won out. The dead could not love the living, after all, and if Adrien ever hoped to love Marinette as she deserved, and be loved back in return, he needed to be alive for that. And he had promised the Ladybug in his dreams that he'd live and wait for her.

Even though he knew she was just part of a dream, she felt real to him. Regardless if it was a just a promise to a figment of his imagination, it held unbelievable weight for him, and he would uphold that promise.

His lips began tingling as he finally gave himself the chance to recall his dream, fingers brushing tenderly against his mouth. Ladybug's sweet kiss had been utter paradise, and he longed for the day he could experience it for real, if he was allowed. For now, his dreams would do, and he'd look forward to every night to dream with her again, even if he had to down another vial to knock himself out. These dreams had become the only respite from his torment.

Adrien struggled to his feet, using the wall for balance.

"What're you gonna do now? It's Sunday, so you don't have any dumb appointments or photoshoots. It's fair game." Plagg pointed out as Adrien trudged back to his bed, back hunched.

Adrien sat down on the mattress with a sigh, grabbing his cell phone from the bedside table with one hand, and pulling the drawer open with the other. He stashed the vial inside the potion bag he kept inside, idly noticing something sparkly and green in the dark recesses of the drawer just behind the bag. Curious, he reached in blindly.

"I don't know. I think I need some air, maybe patrol a bit…" Adrien trailed off, flicking through his phone for any messages or reports from the Ladyblog, though he wasn't really paying attention. When the fingers on his other hand closed on the object he sought, he retracted his hand, pulling out something light and stringy. He turned his hand over, finding an odd but familiar charm on his palm. It was a bracelet made with red string. A big, green stone sat in the middle, decorated with pink and yellow beads on either side.
"Well, why don't you try playing with it?" The memory filtered into his mind, unbidden.

Marinette's Lucky Charm.

Adrien's heart squeezed painfully.

"I don't know if patrol is a good idea right now," Plagg said after Adrien had gone silent. "You can barely stand…"

Adrien's features softened, his fingers closing on the charm as he pressed it to his chest.

Something stirred in him, something warm but aching. He felt a craving for something, something that could soothe the longing in his chest. Something that could soften the vice around his heart. Something that could ease the sadness in his spirit.

"No… You're right…" Adrien said in a tight voice, quickly flicking up the contact list on his phone, and dialing a familiar number. "I need something else…"

She was up there again.

She sat on a metal beam, high, high above the ground, on the last deck on the Eiffel Tower, overlooking the scenery around her. She wore nothing but a light pink dress decorated with white flowers. She was completely barefoot, and her hair lay loose over her shoulders.

The cool breeze blew gently, tousling her midnight hair, her blue eyes set on the horizon. The city of Paris was gone. It was only the Eiffel Tower, standing proud in the middle of a flower field that extended eternal in every direction, the grass a bright and vibrant green.

She heard whispers in the breeze, unintelligible, but soft and familiar. She had no idea where she was, but the voices kept her at peace. At times, when she felt cold, someone would grab her hand. She would turn and look at the person, but a shadow covered their face, their features lost to her. They had a male voice. It was young, soothing, and gentle. It set her heart a flutter.

She would stand to greet him then. Although this boy was a stranger, she trusted him with her life. He'd whisper something kind, then bow to kiss her hand. She would blush as a warm feeling flooded her. He would then pull her over the edge of the Tower, gently floating down with her.

They would touch down on the grass, soft and lush.

"Princess..." was the only word she could discern in his garbled speech, the rest of the words flowing in the air with a strange echo, sounding foreign as he faded with the wind.

More voices would flow in then, and although she could not understand the words, she got their meaning. The strange thing was that smells and feelings usually accompanied these voices, and it was for this alone that she could recognize them.

When she smelled cookies and dough and felt the softness of flour under her toes, she knew it was her papa. Big and strong, but soft, like a big teddy bear. Her precious papa. She loved him so. She'd feel the warmth of his embrace, even if his arms were not really around her, but she'd feel it, and she'd smile, happy, content, and protected.

Then, when she smelled lavender and cinnamon, and felt the softness of petals from the most beautiful peach trees against her legs, she knew the voice to be her maman. She felt the sweet caress of her gentle hand against her face, and felt her warm fingers thread through her hair, although she
could not see them. She would snuggle to the wind, feeling as the breeze pulled in around her as if she was but a babe again, carried in the arms of her beautiful mother, her voice like a lullaby in her ears, lulling her into dreams of being loved, cherished, and safe.

But there were other voices, some of which she couldn't place, but their scents and feelings where there, buried deep within her.

There would be a female voice. Happy, headstrong. She'd feel the tickle of dandelions on her feet, and catch the scent of hibiscus in the air. She'd feel a surge of energy, feel the brush of an arm around her shoulders, and catch the sweetness of her laugh in her ears. She would laugh alongside the voice, feeling adventurous, like she could do anything in the world. She couldn't place a face with this voice, but it felt familiar, and she trusted her.

Her voice would often be accompanied by one other, one that felt like electricity, mixed with the smell of orange and body cream. She would feel like laughing when she heard this voice, wanting to dance to a soundless tune while she felt the smoothness of a dance floor under her bare feet. A strange voice for sure, but welcome, and also familiar. Hibiscus and orange mixed in tandem in a splash of floral smells and she was happy, feeling alive and energized.

But then, there was this other voice. The voice of the boy that would float her down and root her to the grassy plain; the voice who would call her princess and kiss her hand with as much reverence as one would a Queen. When this voice permeated the wind, she felt the sweet caress of sunlight, bathing her skin in its all enveloping warmth. Sometimes, rare times, he smelled creamy, like cheese, but most times, he carried with him a scent of cleanliness, like a body fresh out of a shower, with a subtle mix of sweet vanilla and honey that flowed into her like steam wafting up from a warm cup of milk in a rainy day.

She would breath in this scent, slow and deep, feeling as though she was lying against a warm chest, the feel of fresh, soft clothing under her fingers, and the weight of warm arms flowing around her frame. She'd feel a subtle press against her cheek, and feel the waves of warmth that it would send spreading through her.

She wished she could see his face, but feeling him, smelling him, was enough. She would feel like lying on the soft grass under the spring sun that reminded her of him, surrounded in a cocoon of gentleness, feeling loved, wanted, missed...

Alya flicked through her phone with a pensive frown, scrolling down all the attack reports filtering through the Ladyblog as the bus drove down Gotlib street.

The new system she was using to file reports was proving to be extremely effective. Not only were the reports now categorized by type (Akuma attack, Burglary, Robbery, Fire, etc), but they could also be sorted by urgency (one yellow flame was less urgent, 5 red flames, extremely urgent). If the user had Location services turned on, they could even put a pin on the blog's map to locate their emergency, making it easy to track them down and allowing anyone to filter the pins on the map by type. She was pretty proud of it actually, having finished the framework in one night.

But now, she frowned not at her work, or at the quantity of situations being reported (which were more than usual now that people had gotten a hang of her site), but at the nature of some of them.

Apparently, a bunch of mysterious fires had sprouted across the city around the 17th and 18th arrondissement since early morning, their source unknown. All users could report was that a roaring sound like thunder would usually break the silence before someplace nearby burst into flames for seemingly no reason.
Such reports had continued throughout the day, making the firefighters frantically drive to and fro across the city to control the fires. But despite the dire situation, that wasn’t what worried her, no. What was most preoccupying for her was the blatant absence of Chat Noir. He hadn’t shown up to stop any regular crime, or at least investigate the fires. Not a peep had been heard from the black-clad hero all day and Alya was perplexed.

She could imagine the past few days had been long and trying for him after Ladybug's passing, but last week he had shown up, tired and beaten as he was, but never missing a beat. But today, it was already five in the afternoon and there hadn’t been a single sighting all day.

She wondered if he was okay.

She felt it on the night of the memorial, after she had seen him break down in the arms of Marinette's mother. Something like a deeply buried instinct.

She wanted to help him; Protect him, even.

Ever since the accident, she had noticed the drastic change in his demeanor. Chat Noir used to gloat and show off in front of the cameras; social, friendly, and approachable, but now, he had become as elusive as a shadow, fleeing the scene as soon as he was done and before he could be approached by any type of media. He had isolated himself from the world, and despite his bold and encouraging words two nights ago, Alya had begun to fear they were losing him as well.

He was the one hero they had left, and she felt a fierce determination to be of utmost help to him, not only to honor Ladybug’s memory, but to help out someone she thought was a lonely boy dealing with his grief alone. She wished she could talk to him, to ask him how he was doing, ask if he needed anything. Did he have any family? Any friends? Was there anyone he could talk to about what scared him? About how difficult fighting was? What Ladybug's absence felt like? It pained her to think he was completely alone.

"Give me a sign…” she muttered under her breath, scrolling past another fire report.

Her phone suddenly vibrated as a notification popped on the top of her screen.

5:12 PM Adrien: I'm here.

She quickly typed a response.

5:12 PM Alya: Ok going around the corner, be right there.

Talking about strange demeanors, Chat Noir had not been the only one acting up lately. Alya noticed Adrien had also begun to behave strangely, but she kind of had an idea why. Alya knew Adrien cared about Marinette, but she never could’ve guessed his feelings ran so deep to the point he had been affected both emotionally and physically by her condition. What else could it be? He had only began to exhibit signs of being unwell after they were told Marinette was in a coma. The timing was too much of a coincidence to be anything else.

Did Adrien feel something for her best friend? Her journalist heart had been prodding at her to find out, but like Chat Noir, Adrien had proven to be as elusive, rejecting any invitations to hang out, ignoring texts, and spending minimal time with them during school. He wouldn't even have lunch with them, preferring to sleep in the classroom or go home. He was not being himself at all.

So imagine her surprise when earlier in the day she got a short, vague text from one Adrien Agreste, asking if they could meet up to talk at the park beside Marinette's house. Of course Alya had agreed
immediately, telling him she'd let Nino know, only to be promptly messaged back and told to come alone.

She had been taken aback, suspicious even, but when she asked if he was okay, Adrien had stopped responding. She felt a cold wave of worry ripple through her, but not matter how many times she prodded him for an answer, he would not reply, her messages stuck in seen limbo.

Well, if that was the best she was going to get, she'd bite, but he was crazy if he didn't think she'd question him all the way to next week.

That's not how Alya Césaire worked.

The bus slowed to a stop and Alya stood up, getting off at the corner around the bakery. As the bus drove away, she adjusted the purple scarf around her neck, tightening her brown jacket around her as she walked around the bend to the park. The chilly, rainy days of the last weeks of October were creeping just around the corner, prompting the switch to warmer clothes.

She looked around the park for a familiar face. She spotted him a few meters away, hiding under the shadow of the tree he was leaning against, checking his phone. Seeing Adrien be so… sneaky set off all kind of alarms in her head but she decided to ignore it for now. Approaching him amicably was better to gain his trust than outright barraging him with questions, she supposed.

"Hey!" she called, waving at him.

She saw him jump and snap his head around to look at her, eyes fearful. He only seemed to relax after recognizing her, his shoulders sagging as he let out the breath he was holding.

Damn… Alya thought.

Nino was not kidding when he said Adrien was jumpy lately. And she had to note that for a model, he looked terrible.

Despite the sheepish smile he gave her for getting startled, Alya could see that Adrien was far from okay. He was pale, and she noticed that he had tried to hide the bags under his eyes with concealer. She had to hand it to him, he was good with makeup, but Alya was even better with observation. His eyes looked droopy and tired, and his slouching stance was noticeable even with the thick black trench coat he wore.

He waved weakly at her.

"Hey, thanks for coming." His voice was so low and breathy she had barely heard it as she approached. He looked beyond exhausted.

"Yeah, no problem, um… Do you want to sit?" She said, pointing at the bench behind him.

"I'd rather walk for a bit," he said nodding towards the road around the fountain, "If you don't mind that is. I've just been sitting all day so I thought I'd walk around a little; get some air, you know?"

Get some air? You need an oxygen tank, Alya thought with a raised brow, noticing how Adrien breathed very deeply every time he spoke, as if it was a great effort.

"Are you sure? You look… tired."

"Positive."
"Alright then, lead the way." she said, shrugging and joining him at his side as he began walking down the road.

They walked in complete silence for a bit. He was looking straight ahead, lost in his thoughts, but Alya's attention was entirely on him as she observed him from the corner of her eye. She could see the occasional falter in his step, and the way he kept his lips slightly parted to breathe through his mouth.

"Nino is really worried about you, you know?" Alya said, breaking the silence, "He thinks you're still upset at him for the Akuma comment. You won't answer his calls or texts since then."

Adrien sighed, "It's nothing like that I just… I haven't been myself lately and I just thought it'd be better if—"

"You isolated yourself from everyone? I can see that's working out for you." Alya cut in, a bit harsher than she intended. She saw Adrien wince and she almost regretted it. Almost. Her desire for answers was stronger than her desire to apologize.

"I'm sorry, Alya… to both of you," Adrien said, avoiding her gaze and fumbling nervously with his trench coat pocket, which didn't go unnoticed by Alya "I've just…I …"

"Hey, it's okay," Alya said, laying a hand on his shoulder as she saw his lower lip quiver, "We're just worried about you. We wanna know what's going on."

"I've...been sick…" Adrien hesitated, and Alya didn't miss the flash of pain that crossed his features for a split second. He fumbled in his pocket a bit more desperately. "Cold, I-I guess…"

"Yeah, except it doesn't look like a cold. I'm not Nathalie, I can see right through you, you know? What's really going on, Adrien?" Alya pressed. Adrien didn't immediately respond, his breathing getting laborious and beads of sweat forming at his brow the further they walked.

Alya stopped dead in her tracks. "Hey, you okay?" she asked.

"F-Fine," Adrien said as he finally removed his gloved hand from his pocket and brought something to his mouth. He quickly took a swig from what appeared to be a glass vial and promptly hid it back in his pocket. His features relaxed considerably, his mouth parting in a sigh.

Now Alya was really concerned.

"Okay, sit." She said finally.

"No, it's fine, rea-ooof!" Adrien was not allowed to finish as Alya grabbed him from an arm and dragged him off stumbling to a bench, seating him down forcefully. She sat herself down beside him, crossing her arms.

"Nino is upset you won't talk to him, and I'm upset that he is upset. Now, you texted me saying you wanted to talk, so I won't accept you getting cold feet on me," Alya said, pressing an accusing finger to his chest. "And you look like a car ran you over, by the way, so I don't think a cold is all that's been going on. Start talking, I'm listening."

Adrien blinked at her, his mouth opening and closing. "I, uh…"

"How eloquent." Alya said with an unimpressed frown. "You didn't think this through, did you?"

"No," Adrien admitted, looking down at his feet. Alya's eyes softened and she lay a hand on his
"Look… you know you can trust us, right? Nino and I?" Alya said gently, "You can talk to us. We're here for you, that's what friends are for. We're your friends, Adrien."

"I kn-know," Adrien whispered, fingering his blue scarf nervously. "It's just… I don't even know where to begin…"

Adrien grimaced, trying to stifle a sudden cough with his arm. He lowered a trembling hand to his pocket, taking out the vial again and giving it another, longer drink. When he was done, he let a breath out, shaking his head and blinking rapidly, trying to regain focus.

"What is that?" Alya asked him as he shakily put the bottle away.

"M-Medicine…" He said, but something in his quivering voice told Alya that wasn't completely true.

"You want to know where to start? Well, you can start by admitting you are not fine. You aren't fine, are you?"

Adrien trained his eyes on the ground, blinking hard, then, he slowly shook his head. "N-No…"

"That's why you called me?"

He nodded his head.

"Why not Nino?" Alya said gently, "He's your best friend. He has begun to think he is not good enough since you keep pushing him away. He's been really down about it."

Adrien snapped his head back to look at her with eyes wide, "No, no no… it's not him it's.. I'm just… ah…" Adrien suddenly swayed in his place.

"Hey," she grabbed both his shoulders to steady him. "What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing, I'm just really, really tired…" Adrien said, patting her arm appreciatively and straightening himself on the bench. "N-Nasty bug…"

"If you say so…" Alya said dubiously, but despite her concern, she let Adrien's odd behavior slide in favor of hearing what he had to say.

Adrien cleared his throat. "The r-reason I didn't call Nino…well, uh…"

"Yeah?" Alya coaxed.

"It's stupid and… A-and…" Adrien tugged at his scarf nervousl. "This was a mistake…"

"Well, I'm here already and I'm not leaving," Alya said stubbornly, "So out with it."

"I miss her."

Alya paused, taken aback by how suddenly he said it and by how much his voice cracked. He squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly curling into himself, his hand fisting in his scarf. "I really miss her…"

He sounded so lost and forlorn, his posture hunched and defeated. Her eyes softened, her lips pulling into a small smile.
"Is this what all this has been about? You shut yourself away because you miss Marinette?"

He nodded, opening his eyes again.

"Among other… things," Adrien said quietly, avoiding her gaze, "But for the most part, yes…"

Alya nodded in understanding, coaxing him to continue by placing a hand on his back. "Alright, I'm all ears."

"It's… It's been really hard to deal with. And… I needed to talk to someone that would understand…" Adrien continued softly, his voice surprisingly steady even though he still looked beyond ill, "Nino is fantastic. He's the best friend I've ever had and he is super supportive but… I think you're the only one who would know how it feels. How do you do it?"

He turned to look at her expectantly, his eyes glassy. Alya's smile turned sad and she raised a hand, gently patting his hair. Adrien shivered, not because he was uncomfortable, but because of how warm and comforting it felt.

"I just feel she wouldn't want me to let go," Alya said, "And you have no idea how badly I miss her, too. She was my first friend. There's not a day when I don't wish she was around. In fact," Alya chuckled suddenly, "It's really dumb, but there's this thing I've been doing…"

"What?" Adrien asked, his head cocked in curiosity.

"I text her."

"You… text her?"

"I never expect a reply of course, but every day, I text her what I did throughout the day. Everything that has happened, what we've been learning at school, the movies I've watched, all the scoops I've gotten, you know, how we used to do…"

"But… why?" Adrien asked, perplexed.

"It helps to cope. Plus, when she wakes - and she will wake," Alya said confidently, "I want her to read them and see that she was thought about every day. I want her to realize how much she is appreciated and how it doesn't matter what happens, she will always be my best friend. I want her to wake up knowing she was surrounded by people who loved her while she was away."

Adrien's lips formed a little "o" and he nodded in understanding, a smile playing on his lips at Alya's heartfelt gesture. "That's actually pretty nice."

"Thanks," Alya said with a smirk, "She needs to be told often. Marinette can be quite oblivious, like someone else I know..." she looked pointedly at him.

Adrien shrunk under her gaze, "Uh, what do you mean?"

"You know, I've been wondering," Alya said quietly, putting an arm around his shoulder to prevent him from moving further away, "Do you like Marinette?"

The question surprised him and his eyes widened slightly. "L-Like her?"

"I mean, you've been acting all weird ever since the accident so I got suspicious and I was meaning to ask you that." she leaned closer to him, looking him straight in the eye with a grin, "Well, do you?"
"Alya, you are doing the journalist thing," Adrien tried to edge away, feeling like a deer in headlights under Alya's inquisitive stare.

"And if you don't want me to go full journalist, you will answer the question," Alya said, nudging his side insistently, "Well?"

Adrien took a deep breath, fingers curling anxiously around the edge of the bench. Well, this was as good time as any to get it out.

"I… I do love her," Adrien whispered shyly, tearing his eyes away from Alya's and rubbing his arm sheepishly. While it flustered him greatly, for some reason he found that getting the confession out hadn't been as hard as he expected, probably because his desperation to have someone to talk to had made him crack.

He heard Alya take a sharp intake of breath in surprise. They sat in silence for a moment; her processing the information, him waiting for her reaction.

"Those are some big words," Alya chuckled finally, giving a little impressed whistle.

"Hey, I mean it," Adrien said, his voice slightly hurt. He had finally managed to get out his confession to someone else other than Plagg and she made fun of him?

"Hey, calm down," Alya said, holding her hands up defensively, "It's not that I don't believe you, it's just that I pictured Marinette hearing that, and it was the funniest thing."

Adrien raised an eyebrow "How so?"

Alya hesitated for a bit, scratching her cheek contemplatively. She then sighed decisively.

"Well, screw it. She can kill me when she wakes up. I'll write my obituary tonight," Alya said, shrugging, "So, she's kinda head over heels for you."

Adrien felt his cheeks warm up and his ears tingle. Sure, he had heard it from Tikki first, but hearing confirmation from Alya sent a new wave of heat travelling to his face and ears and caused his heart to start thumping hard against his chest.

"S-She is?"

"She wouldn't shut up about you," Alya commented with a grin, enjoying Adrien's quickly reddening face, "Seriously, she had this list of adjectives to describe you with… it would make the French teacher proud."

Adrien shifted in his seat awkwardly. He felt something inside him stirring, like the feeling of a child being told he was going to the amusement park for the first time. It caused his heart to swell and butterflies to flutter in his stomach. A bashful smile pulled on his lips. Was this elation? He wanted to know so much more! What did Marinette think of him? What had she told Alya? His curiosity was piqued and he wanted to prod her, but he was afraid of sounding desperate.

"What uh…" Adrien started awkwardly, rubbing his neck, "W-What did she say she liked about me?"

"You want the short list or the long?" Alya grinned. Adrien only blushed more and she laughed, "Okay, so she likes that you are talented, smart, sensible, intelligent, handsome… I think she used the term like a Greek god at some point..."
Adrien's eyes widened and he sputtered, choking on his own saliva. "Greek god!"

Alya laughed heartily as Adrien coughed, his face beet red, "Oh my gosh, your face is gold!"

"Alya!"

"This is absolutely hilarious! I wish I had recorded this, dang…"

"Alya, stop!" Adrien shrunk into himself in embarrassment, groaning into his hands.

"Are you still regretting calling me, though?"

"I wasn't before, but now I very much regret calling you."

Alya snorted, "Sure you do, Romeo."

Adrien could practically feel the steam blowing out of his ears.

"Point is, when she finds out you feel the same, she's gonna go crazy," Alya said with a nod and a conspiratorial wink. "In fact, I volunteer to organize your wedding."

"I think it's a bit too soon for that," Adrien chuckled, but then he trailed off, his face turning contemplative as his eyes looked at the ground.

"Do you think she would be happy with me?" Adrien asked quietly. His eyes, which had previously shone with mirth despite his embarrassment now seemed to fill with doubt. He turned to Alya for reassurance, looking in her eyes for further confirmation that yes, Marinette loved him, and when she woke, perhaps they would get a chance at being happy together.

Alya's mirth ebbed away, but her smile was still there. She surrounded Adrien with an arm again, pulling him into a warm hug. He stiffened momentarily, having not expected the gesture, but it didn't take long for him to relax into the embrace with a sigh, laying his head on her shoulder and wrapping his arms around her as well, squeezing back. He had needed this. This was what he craved.

Acceptance, reassurance, support...

"I've no doubt in my mind that you would make her really happy, Adrien," Alya said, patting the back of his head. "Marinette would be amazing to you, too. And trust me, I'm not just saying that because I'm her best friend."

Alya pulled back, laying her hands on his shoulders, "She thinks the world of you, and that girl has more love in her to give than everyone in Paris combined."

Adrien smiled, nodding his head. "I know."

"So then, you must also know that if you wrong her, I will end you." Alya said, her face impassive. Adrien cowered back

"Uh…"

Alya's face then lit up with a grin and she laughed, slapping him on the back. "Lighten up!"

"Why do you keep doing this to me?" Adrien mock-lamented, shooting her sad puppy-eyes but suppressing a smile. He was happy, elated even, that he had Alya's blessing.

"You're a good guy, Adrien," Alya said after her laughter had died down. "You should do that too,
by the way."

"Do what?"

"Text her what you feel, or what you are doing... Whatever comes to your mind."

Adrien felt a shiver in his neck when he thought about texting Marinette; a shiver of anticipation almost, of nervousness.

"You think she won't mind?" he asked.

"Mind? Boy, she'd go nuts!"

Adrien smiled gratefully, "Alright, I'll give it a shot."

"Good going! Now, talking about making people happy, she probably wouldn't approve of me saying this but I think you should know who really gave you that scarf." She said, grabbing the edge of Adrien's blue scarf and running a thumb over it.

"I know it's Marinette's…" Adrien said with a smile.

"How did you find out?"

"She signs her work," Adrien said, turning the end of his scarf over and showing Alya the neat signature stitched into the fabric. "I figured it out after... you know..."

"Yeah, I get it." She said, arranging the scarf neatly around his neck. Her face then turned pensive. "Adrien, I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"You mentioned among other things earlier," Alya looked pointedly at him, her face serious, "What did you mean with that? What else is going on?"

Adrien hesitated, his eyes widening as he pulled back a little. "Uh..."

Part of him, the part of him that was tired of being exhausted, alone, and in constant pain was screaming at him to blurt it all out. Itching to tell her the truth of what was going on so she could come with him to get help, or to advise him on what to do because heavens knew he was desperate and he needed the support badly. However, the other part of him was so afraid of what could happen, of all the suspicions it would raise, of his father finding out, and now... of Alya knowing his secret, and blaming him for Marinette's condition.

He cursed at himself. It seemed that every time he explored the possible consequences of getting help, a new fear sprung up. Fear of exposing Marinette's identity by needing to reveal his own, fear of losing his freedom to his father after finding out his precarious condition, Alya hating him for not being good enough to protect Marinette...

He knew Alya had previously expressed wanting to thank Chat Noir for saving Marinette, but guilt still ate at him to this day, filling his mind with doubt and feelings of inadequacy every time he was around Alya or Marinette's parents. His heart wanted to scream "I'm sorry!" every time they were around, but his mouth stayed shut, fearful of revealing his real identity, of them finding out that he was to blame for Marinette nearly dying because he didn't push her out of the way in time...

Because just how could he explain what he was going through without mentioning how he came to
be in that condition to begin with? Without mentioning he was Chat Noir?

Adrien's frame trembled, hands fisting on his knees as he avoided Alya's gaze.

"You can trust me, Adrien," Alya said gently, laying a hand on his shoulder, "I promise I'll do what I can to help, if you let me. I won't judge."

Wouldn't she? If she knew who he was, would she accept both Chat Noir and Adrien as one? Would she forgive him for what happened to Marinette? Would she look beyond the scoop she could possibly get, care for him as a person and give him the necessary support to heal his broken mind?

Plagg had told him no one could know…

But he needed someone to trust and support him so badly…

"I… there's… something…" Adrien started, wringing his hands.

His mind was screaming *Shut up, idiot! No one can find out!* But his heart was reaching out in desperation, clinging to the prospect of having someone to rely on, someone that could understand the responsibility of being a superhero and the burdens it entailed.

There was only so much the Kwamis and Master Fu could do. Ladybug was gone. He couldn't rely on his family, and he couldn't rely on himself…

*Please, please help me.*

"Y-You were right. It's not a cold..." Adrien confessed, his eyes anywhere but on Alya. "I a-am hurt… badly.." He was getting nervous, feeling the cold touch of sweat behind his neck. His hands felt warm inside his gloves and the trench coat suddenly felt suffocating.

"What?" Alya's eyes widened in concern, her demeanor shifting from comfort to worry as she seemingly scanned him for injuries. "What do you mean you are hurt? What happened?"

"I got hurt d-during a fight, because I...I am…" Adrien stuttered, and he could feel Plagg's disapproving probing inside his trench coat, urging him to stay quiet. But screw it, he needed someone to listen. "I'm... C-Ch…"

"Alya? Adrien? Is that you?"

Adrien's heart leapt in his chest, and he almost jumped from the bench in surprise. The voice came from behind him, and he looked over his shoulder in alarm.

Marinette's mother, Sabine, was hanging outside the Bakery just in front of the park, changing the sign on the store to *Closed* and looking at them through the bars of the park's fence.

"Hello, Madame Cheng!" Alya called back, turning around on the bench to greet her while Adrien tried to get his heart rate to go back to normal.

"Hello, sweetheart," Sabine said, "What are you doing around here? Didn't expect to see you today!"

"Just hanging out," Alya said amicably, though she shot Adrien a look that clearly said *we are not done here* before turning back to Sabine "Are you closing already? I thought the bakery didn't close till 8!"

"We close at 6 on Sundays," she replied, "Are you two busy? Would you like to stay for dinner?"
Alya didn't hesitate. "We'd love to! Right, Adrien?" Alya turned on him, nudging him on the shoulder.

"I... I wouldn't want to impose..." Adrien stuttered, barely able to keep eye contact with Sabine as he rubbed his arm.

"Oh, please! You two could never impose! Come on, now!" Madame Cheng said happily, waving them in.

"I really don't-"

Alya nudged him hard on the ribs, earning a painful hiss from him, "Ah...!

Alya pulled back and stared at him, perplexed at the sound of pain and the sudden grimace on his face, "I'm... I'm sorry, are you okay?" she hurried to apologize.

"I'm... It's fine, let's just go..." he croaked, avoiding her eyes as he slowly stood from the bench, a hand immediately digging in his pocket for his medicine. He walked away from her, rubbing at his side gingerly as he drank from the vial, his expression pained. Alya followed shyly behind him, her eyes trained on the back of his head, brows knitted together in a worried frown.

If a simple nudge was enough to hurt him, Alya could not longer shake the unsettling feeling that there was something way more serious going on with him than what he let on.

"Oh dear, are you alright?" Sabine asked Adrien in concern as she let them into the living room and she got a good look at his pale face.

"I'm fine, Madame, please don't worry..." Adrien said softly, a weak smile on his lips. "I just have a bit of a cold."

"Alright, but if you need us to call your driver or anything else, please do not hesitate to ask, okay?" Sabine told him, patting the back of his head gently.

"I appreciate it, Madame Cheng." he bowed his head respectfully.

"Hello, Adrien!" Tom greeted as he walked from the kitchen to the table, laying a steaming plate of quiche in the middle of a generous serving of croissants, veggies, and sauces. "You look a bit under the weather, son, but this should perk you right up!"

Adrien smiled a little bit wider, "I'm sure it will."

After they were all settled at the table, Sabine began pouring them drinks and serving their plates while Tom chatted with Alya amicably. Alya however, would keep stealing glances at Adrien when he was not looking. He mostly lay hunched over the table, his head hanging slightly and his eyes droopy, blinking slowly. He yawned occasionally, hand going up to try and hide it. He looked worse by the minute and she was almost tempted to excuse herself to take him home.

"Adrien, would you like some quiche?" Sabine offered, standing at his side with the plate of the pastry on her hand.

"Yes, please," Adrien said, lifting his plate up to take Sabine's offered slice.

"Marinette told us it was your favorite some time back," Tom commented. "You got lucky today, son!"
"Seems I have," Adrien said with a soft chuckle, "And it is my favorite. Best I've ever tried. Your bakery is truly the best in Paris, monsieur."

"Well, I'm honored," Tom said bashfully. "That means a lot, Adrien."

Adrien jumped when he felt a hand slide on his forehead.

"You are really warm," Sabine said, her eyes gentle as she looked into his unfocused eyes. "Are you sure you don't want us to call your driver to take you home? You look really tired, dear."

"Or I can walk you home if you prefer," Alya offered.

"I'll be alright, please don't worry," Adrien said, waving a hand dismissively, "Plus, I wouldn't want to miss out on your fantastic cooking."

"You are much too kind," Sabine said appreciatively, brushing his bangs away from his sweaty forehead and resting a hand on his cheek before moving away to serve Alya. Adrien found himself missing Sabine's motherly touch almost immediately, giving a soft disappointed sigh before moving to remove his gloves to eat.

"You okay there?" Tom asked, pointing at Adrien's bandaged right hand as it came into view.

"Yeah, just sprained my wrist." Adrien said, smiling sheepishly.

"I thought that was days ago." Alya said, raising an eyebrow. "Shouldn't it be better by now?"

"Hurts from time to time, so I keep it bandaged," Adrien said quickly.

"Is that Marinette's?" Sabine asked suddenly, pointing at Adrien's wrist as she finished up and sat herself beside Tom.

Adrien looked down at his hand, then pulled slightly on his sleeve, revealing a green, pink, and yellow charm tied around his wrist.

"Ah yes, she lent it to me during the Ultimate Mecha Strike III tournament and she let me keep it," Adrien said, smiling fondly at the memory, "I've had a tough week lately so I thought I'd borrow a bit of her luck again."

"Oh, Marinette," Sabine said, gently holding Adrien's offered hand to look at the charm, "She used to believe she had bad luck ever since she was a small child. I helped her make this good luck charm when she was around 5, so she would get more confidence in herself. My sweet Marinette." Sabine blinked, trying to keep tears at bay.

"I-I'm sorry," Adrien said, eyes downcast. "If you want it back-

"Oh, no no, please keep it," Tom said as he surrounded Sabine with a comforting arm, "We are glad that it's been of use to you. I'm sure Marinette would be really happy to see you wear it."

"It keeps her close," Adrien said with a sad smile, brushing a finger over the green stone in the middle.

"Uh, I'm sorry to interrupt, but could I borrow your TV for a minute, Madame Cheng?" Alya said suddenly, her eyes pasted to her phone as she scrolled rapidly down her blog, "I just need to check something real quick."

"Of course, go ahead! Everything alright?"
"There's been another fire," Alya said as she moved to turn on the TV on the news.

"Another fire?" Adrien asked curiously. "What fire?"

"There's been some mysterious fires sprouting across Paris all day." Tom said gravely. "It's been happening in other arrondissements but we were worried it would spread to ours."

"What?" Adrien asked incredulously, "What's causing them?"

"No one knows, it just happens, they don't have a source," Alya said, scrolling down the channels to find a live broadcast. "There's a roar somewhere and boom some place bursts into flames for no reason. The blog has been exploding with reports all day."

The blog? But he hadn't received any notifications at all…

He quickly took out his cellphone, pulling up his notification dashboard.

Not a message.

Blood pumping in his ears, Adrien opened the Ladyblog manually, his heart immediately constricting at the sight of the hundreds of messages he had missed flooding the main page.

*What the hell…?*

"There we go!" Alya said as she finally landed a good channel. Nadja Chamack appeared on screen. She was standing in front of a building that was up in flames, firefighters already at the scene trying to control the raging inferno consuming the restaurant behind her. "Damn…"

"What is it?" Sabine asked.

"This one happened pretty close to here. Chat Noir hasn't shown up in this one either…"

Adrien froze. "C-Chat Noir?"

"He's been missing all day." Alya explained, turning to him, "He hasn't shown up to help with any crime or investigate the fires. He's been pretty AWOL."

"Do you think he is okay?" Tom asked, his voice low.

"I dunno. I've been hoping to get a sighting report on the blog but none so far. No one has seen him." Alya said anxiously, checking her phone. "He's gone."

"Oh, poor boy…" Sabine lamented.

"H-has anyone died?" Adrien asked cautiously.

"No one so far. Several injured, though…" Alya replied, her eyes trained on the news stream again. "Mostly lots of property damage."

*Sick.* He was going to be sick.

He could already feel a sensation like ice-cold water being dumped on him, his heart pounding violently against his ribcage. There had been mysterious fires and crimes all day. People had reported them, expecting him to show up. He had been gone. He had been missing in action.

People had gotten hurt.
There was no mystery behind the fire, either. He knew *exactly* what was causing it.

He could feel his chest tightening with his rising panic, throat tickling with the upcoming threat of a coughing bout and causing his breathing to hitch.

"I-I need to go…" Adrien said suddenly, jumping off the chair clumsily and making his way to the door.


"N-Nathalie w-will get… wo-worrie-" The violent coughing began. He doubled over and covered his mouth with a hand, the other flying to the doorknob as he stumbled to the door. He had drank so much potion that his reflexes were slow and his head swam as he leaned on the door to regain his balance.

"Adrien?" Tom asked.

The coughing subsided and Adrien wheezed, freezing as he looked at his hand and saw something dark on his palm. If it had been at all possible, his face went whiter, eyes blown wide.

"Adrien, are you alright?" Sabine said, standing up and walking to him, her brows furrowed in concern.

Adrien looked at her, and the fear Sabine saw in his eyes made her pause, taken aback.

"I'm so *sorry*…" Adrien whispered, his eyes glistening as he opened the door and he dashed down the stairs, all but crashing against the front door before he disappeared into the streets.

He ran and ran, never looking back, ignoring Alya's calls. He ran until he found a dark alleyway to hide in, slinking in and leaning his back against the brick wall before his knees gave out and he slid down to sit on the floor, panting. His heart was beating hard in his chest, lower lip quivering. He wiped at his lips with a sleeve desperately, trying to brush away the splatter of red on them.

Plagg came flying out of his trench coat, green eyes worried. "Wow, what was all that about? Why are you freaking out?"

"The fires... It... it's..."

"It's what?"

Adrien turned to look at Plagg, eyes wide and glassy, pupils shrunk in horror.

"It's an Akuma…"

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Chapter End Notes

There's no rest for the wick- I mean, the cinnamon rolls.

On that note, guys, no matter how much you tell me "update now" I can't. I update the moment I'm finished with a chapter. I CANNOT tell you when I will update now. I
don't have a schedule. I post whenever I'm done. Please don't rush me? It only stresses me out and blocks me, which only slows down my writing. I appreciate your enthusiasm but leaving comments /just/ to rush me or asking when the next chap is coming are a bit discouraging. ;u; Thanks.
"It doesn't have to be an Akuma," Plagg rationalized, trying to calm Adrien's nerves, "It could just be some crazy arsonist."

"How can someone set fire to so many buildings and not get caught?" Adrien retorted, rubbing his arms in an attempt to stave off the cold; whether the chill was from the weather or his own apprehension, he wasn't sure. "And even if that were the case, that doesn't change anything… I still wasn't there to stop it…"

"You're just one guy, Adrien. You can't be expected to solve this city's every problem," Plagg said. "There's only you, and let's be honest, you aren't really fit to be fighting random crimes right now. You need to take care of yourself before you take care of others…"

"They were waiting for me, Plagg…” Adrien whispered woefully, pulling out his cellphone and scrolling down the screen, his eyes watering as he re-read the messages he had missed. The messages of the many people who had plead for him. "They were expecting Chat Noir to help them…”

"Adrien, please," Plagg groaned. "Snap out of it, there's nothing you can do about it now! You can't change what's already happened! No one died anyway!"

"It's just… I just don't understand why I wasn't receiving any messages," Adrien said, ignoring Plagg as he scrolled down his phone, his eyebrows furrowed , "I had notifications on and everything..."

"W-What does it matter anymore?" Plagg said waving a hand dismissively, "Can't undo what has been done. You can go get help now!"
"Wait a sec…" Adrien said, frowning. He had reached the end of the Ladyblog, his eyes scanning the credits. "Why am I unsubscribed?"

Plagg gulped, "M-Maybe you accidentally clicked on it? How am I supposed to know? It doesn't matter, let's go get help–"

Adrien looked up at Plagg with a curious look, brows furrowed in suspicion. "Plagg–"

**BOOM!**

Both Adrien and Plagg jumped as a strident bellow broke the silence, followed by the sound of an explosion. The ground shook, causing Adrien to jump to his feet, his face losing all color.

"Woah, what was that!?" Plagg cried, covering his head from the pinpricks of dust falling from the walls. "I didn't hear about a storm coming!"

"That wasn't thunder…" Adrien said, his voice low.

"What do you mean it wasn't thunder? Look at the clouds, it's totally gonna ra–"

"That was a roar…"

Adrien knew thunder. It had been raining the past two weeks, and he had fought in the rain several times. He was familiar with the sound of thunder. And that sound? That definitely did *not* sound like thunder. It sounded like the roar of an animal…

A *very large, very angry animal*…

And it had come from right around the corner.

Where the bakery was.

Where *Marinette's parents* were.

Adrien jumped out of the alley without hesitation, running back the way he came.

"Adrien, wait! You can't face that Akuma!"

"Oh, *now* you are saying it's an Akuma!??" Adrien shouted back.

He skidded to a halt with a gasp as he rounded the corner, eyes wide at the horrible sight before him.

It looked like the scene out of a post-apocalyptic movie. People were screaming, running away in panic, bumping into him as they tried to take cover. The park where he and Alya had been talking at merely an hour ago was completely engulfed in flames, dark pillars of smoke rising into the sky. Trees had either been uprooted or scorched, their now bare branches a black skeleton against the orange light that flooded the area. The fountain lay cracked, water splashing everywhere from the broken pipes, the benches upended and smouldering in the sea of fire.

The road was covered in scorch marks, craters and pieces of concrete littering the streets were explosions had gone off. Cars were overturned or otherwise burning, their passengers long gone.

Adrien couldn't understand how so much devastation had occurred in such little time. Was that what the other arrondissements had had to withstand?

This was most definitely not an arsonist.
Before Adrien could get his bearings together however, another rumble echoed across the air, so loud that Adrien had to press his hands against his ears to block out the terrible sound. The wind around him picked up violently, as if a large helicopter was taking off right in front of him, whipping his hair and scarf around his face. The force of the wind was such that Adrien was forced to take cover beneath the archway of a nearby building, kneeling on the ground so he wouldn't be blown away.

"What is *that*?!" Adrien shouted over the roar of the wind.

He looked up to see where the disturbance came from, expecting to see a villain floating in the sky, stirring the twister, but saw nothing. He could discern a sound like the flap of wings, and with every flap, a new gust of wind came, forcing him back to the ground.

"Adrien, listen to me!" Plagg shouted desperately over the cacophony of noise, holding on to Adrien's trench coat for dear life, "You can't—you *mustn't*—fight this Akuma!"

"I have to!"

"It's not a question of have or not! You *can't*!" Plagg insisted. "You know what happened last time! You can't purify the Akuma!"

"Marinette's parents are in there, Plagg!" Adrien shouted back desperately, hurriedly untying Marinette's bracelet from his wrist. "I don't have a choice!"

"You're hurt! You won't *make it*!"

"I'm not leaving them!" Adrien yelled, looking back at Plagg. His eyes glistened, fearful but pleading as he looked at his Kwami. "I already failed *her*, I'm not failing *them*, too!"

Plagg hesitated, taken aback by the desperation in his eyes. He saw the desperation of a boy who had lost everything; of a boy who had been hurt beyond measure, and yet continued to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders.

A boy who was afraid of dying but couldn't bear the thought of losing someone dear to him again.

Plagg's eyes softened, whiskers drooping.

At Plagg's wordless response, Adrien moved.

"Plagg, transform me!"

Plagg flew into the ring without protest, and black leather materialized over Adrien's frame, senses enhancing and limbs strengthening as his body became one with Plagg's. He grabbed the lucky charm bracelet from where he had laid it on the floor and brought it to his lips in a quick kiss.

"I'll need all the good luck you can give me, Princess…" Chat whispered, tucking the bracelet inside one of his pockets. He poked his head out from under the archway, looking up for any sign of the Akuma. His cat ears twitched frantically, following the sound of flapping wings in the sky, but no matter how hard he looked, he didn't see anything.

Another loud roar echoed in the vicinity, and Chat Noir braced himself.

He jumped out from his hiding place and broke into a run on all fours, destination set on the Dupain-Cheng Bakery. An angry growl followed as whatever was causing the destruction saw him run across the street.
"CHAT NOIR!" it bellowed in a strident voice, loud and terrible, causing the hairs on the nape of his neck to stand on end. Chat had only half a second to react before he felt movement behind him and jumped to the side. He felt the rush of wind as whatever chased him flew past him, yet, as he tried to look, he found he still couldn't see what was chasing him.

Was it invisible?

Guided by the sound of the creature's flapping, he discerned that it was turning around. It roared again, and Chat saw a pinprick of light forming a few feet above him. The ball of light - now engulfed in orange flame - started growing in size. Chat's eyes widened at the horrible realization. He barely managed to jump out of the way before a fireball came zooming past him, blowing up strepitously on the spot he had just been standing.

Oh, it could shoot fireballs, too?

Great.

The creature roared again, and Chat heard it swoop down. It seemed to touch down on the street, the ground beneath Chat's feet trembling as it landed. Chat breathed heavily, eyes frantic as he tried to catch any hint of where the Akuma was standing: a shadow, the shifting of rocks, anything!

"CAN CATS FETCH, I WONDER?" the Akuma asked mockingly in its booming voice. A car a few feet away and to Chat's left suddenly floated off the ground before it came hurling at him. Chat ducked with a yelp, hearing the car smash against the fence behind him. He heard the sound of groaning metal, rolling out of the way as the car came tumbling down, falling wheels-up on the ground.

Chat took cover behind the car, using it as a barricade.

"HERE, KITTY KITTY!" the creature bellowed. He could feel the tremors on the ground as it walked towards him. Chat Noir quivered against the surface of the car, his limbs suddenly turning to jelly as his fear grew.

Whatever he was fighting was large and powerful. Its voice was menacing enough that even the slightest chuckle was enough to shatter Chat's bravado and send terrible chills down his body, threatening to paralyze him on the spot. Plagg was right. How was he supposed to defeat it? How was he supposed to find the akumatized object? What chance did he have if he couldn't even see his enemy? When a single utterance by it was enough to reduce him to a pile of cowering gooseflesh?

He had battled an invisible enemy before, but Ladybug had been the one to remedy that.

This time there was no Ladybug, and there wouldn't be any miraculous glitter to help him.

Chat jumped when the car behind him groaned again, the metal creaking and crunching as if something was crushing it. Chat looked up, terrified, green meeting the floating, slitted, fuchsia eyes of the Akuma, which were surrounded by a glowing purple outline shaped like a butterfly.

A sinister chuckle filled the air, "I ACCEPT YOUR CHALLENGE, CHAT NOIR..."

...Hawk Moth?

The invisible monster seemed to open its jaws, a sliver of light appearing in thin air as the interior of a mouth materialized before his eyes, its fangs and tongue glowing yellow as a fireball started forming at the back of its throat. Chat's fight-or-flight response kicked in, and he leapt away in time to avoid the stream of fire that the monster had intended for him. The car blew up behind him, causing an explosion that sent Chat tumbling towards a nearby building in a sea of smoke and metal.
The Akuma laughed, wind and smoke blowing as it took to the sky again.

Using the thick cloud of smoke as cover, Chat Noir scrambled to his feet, using trembling hands to feel against the wall for a door or a window he could escape through. He couldn't see, his eyes watering as he felt his way through the smoke, lungs burning as he coughed.

As he heard the Akuma swoop in closer, his claws finally touched a knob and he turned it, hurrying inside and slamming the door shut behind him. He ducked behind the door as he heard the Akuma fly past, the door clattering with the rush of the tailwind.

"WHERE ARE YOU, KITTY?" the Akuma asked mockingly, "COME OUT, COME OUT! DRAGONFIRE IS NOT DONE PLAYING WITH YOU!"

A whine escaped Chat Noir, his body trembling against the door, ears flat against his head.

What was he going to do? Even with Plagg's power, his body was barely strong enough to hold him steady, let alone fight. His chest had already begun to burn with familiar, terrible pains as the potion in his system started to deplete.

He moaned in despair.

"Who's there?"

Chat Noir's ears perked. In his haste to hide, he hadn't even realized whose house he had broken into. Now that he took in his dark surroundings, he realized he was sitting in the Dupain-Cheng's foyer. Relief suffused through him and he jumped to his feet.

"Madame Cheng!" Chat called, "Monsieur Dupain!" He rushed up the stairs, three steps at a time until he reached the second floor.

"Chat Noir?" Tom asked, his head poking through the door of the living room. Upon seeing Chat, he opened the door wide, a shaken Sabine and Alya looking at him from behind Tom, who held a frying pan defensively on one hand.

"You're all okay!" Chat said in relief, his lips breaking into a big smile. Without pausing to think, he ran to them and hugged Sabine and Alya—the ones he could surround with his arms—to him. "I'm so happy you're safe!"

Chat pulled back, surprised to find both Sabine and Alya staring at him, seemingly taken aback by the embrace. Chat Noir realized a second too late that he was not Adrien, and that the gesture must have looked really strange coming from Chat Noir.

Chat cleared his throat. "Um, sorry. I-Is everyone alright?" he asked awkwardly, taking a few steps back.

"We are. The moment we heard the roar we took shelter in the living room," Tom explained.

"What's going on outside, Chat Noir?" Sabine asked. "We saw the park blow up in flames!"

"It was so sudden. No one even saw who did it!" Alya said, "It's an Akuma, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Chat said, "His name is Dragonfire, and he's the one who has been setting fire to buildings in other parts of the city. We have to evacuate. Smoke's starting to leak into the house. It's no longer safe for you here. I came to get you out."
"Thank you, Chat Noir!" Sabine said appreciatively.

"Are you alright, though?" Alya asked, her eyes concerned, "Where have you been?"

Chat hesitated, looking at the floor. "I'm s-sorry I haven't been around I..."

How could he explain that he had neglected his duty for something as stupid as not having notifications enabled? He was supposed to be better than that. He shouldn't need a phone app to tell him when to show up. He was a hero! He was supposed to be able to recognize danger when he saw it. To be there the moment trouble was abrew. But he had been distracted, wallowing in his own self-pity...

He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"It's alright. You're here now, so let's all focus on getting out of here, okay?" Tom said, smiling amicably and looking at Chat meaningfully. Chat returned the gesture, nodding his head, grateful for Tom's timely intervention. He didn't need more self deprecation to finish shattering what was left of his morale.

However, his little respite was short lived. Another roar pierced the air, making the flat vibrate.

"I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU'D MAKE ME PAY, CHAT NOIR!" the Akuma laughed as it flew overhead, looking for him. "WHERE´S YOUR COURAGE NOW? OH, THAT'S RIGHT. SHE'S DEAD!"

Sabine and Alya gasped, and all of them turned to look at Chat. Chat Noir's breath caught in his throat as he stared at the ceiling vacantly. He swallowed with difficulty, trying to appear unperturbed by the jab, trying to keep his emotional barriers up.

"We have to go," Chat said, avoiding their gazes as he moved towards the staircase. The others followed close behind, waiting for his cues to move.

"YOU´RE NOTHING WITHOUT LADYBUG!" came another rumble.

Chat Noir stayed silent, lips tightly closed as he walked decidedly down the stairs, his ears flattened against his head. Tom and Sabine looked at each other in worry as Alya tried to catch up with Chat.

"Hey, Chat Noir..." Alya tried, but Chat jumped off the rest of the steps, getting to the foyer first.

"IT'S USELESS! FACE YOUR FATE! THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO FOR THIS CITY!"

Chat reached the doorway that lead to the Bakery, his breathing labored.

"P-Please go through this door..." Chat said, voice soft and quivering. He kept his back to them, trying to hide his face, but the tension was evident in his shoulders. "Run to the S-Seine. Go down river t-till you reach somewhere safe. I'll distract him a-and-"

"YOU KNOW HOW TO END THIS, CHAT NOIR! IT'S OVER. THIS WAR IS OVER. LADYBUG HAS LOST. YOU HAVE LOST!"

Alya frowned. Chat may have been trying to hide any indication that the Akuma's threats were getting to him, but observation was Alya's specialty, and she definitely didn't miss the shaky breath that had escaped his lips just a second ago after the Akuma's voice was done echoing in the room.

"Hey, don't listen to him," Alya said, grabbing Chat's arm and gently turning him around to face
them. Chat kept his gaze downcast, his expression hidden by his bangs. "None of it's true... He's just a big bully. The moment you give in to his demands is the moment Paris falls for good. You're our only hope, Chat!"

"He's trying to scare you," Tom agreed, laying a hand on his shoulder, "He's trying to intimidate you so that you'll make mistakes. It's all talk. Never give in."

"He doesn't know you and he doesn't know what you're capable of," Sabine added, her hand finding his in the dark to squeeze it reassuringly, "We know you can do this, Chat Noir. We know you can beat him."

Chat finally looked up at them. Try as he might to stay composed, moisture had already gathered at his eyes, making them glassy.

He hated that he couldn't block it out. He hated that he couldn't stop the Akuma's words from hitting home and piercing his heart where it hurt, destroying what little confidence he had left. He hated that he could not control his fear, letting it overtake him with every threatening word, making his heart beat hard in his throat, choking him, breaking his thoughts.

But he couldn't break down here. He couldn't let them see him scared. Not when Marinette's family needed him. He had to stay composed and firm, and guide them through this, like Ladybug would have done...

But he was not her...

Ladybug was gone...

And the truth was, he was so terrified of what awaited him...

Terrified of not being able to see his fate beyond today...

The thanks he had intended for them for their encouragement died in his throat, a lump forming there instead as anxiety took hold of him, ghosting past his lips in the form of a quivering breath, eyes burning with unshed tears.

He felt Sabine wrap her arms around him, bringing him close to her chest. He didn't fight it, melting into her arms, hiding his face against her shoulder. Her touch assuaged his gooseflesh, spreading waves of pleasant warmth down his cold body, the vaguest hint of an appreciative purr rumbling in his chest.

"You're going to be okay..." she said softly. A roar cracked through the sky and Chat couldn't stop the flinch that coursed through his body, making his claws dig unconsciously into Sabine's tunic, his face sinking further into the crook of her neck. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, and braver than what that monster thinks. Okay?"

Chat took a deep breath against her neck.

"Okay," Chat repeated, pulling back and looking at Sabine with warm eyes. She surprised him by pulling his head down and kissing his forehead, which he accepted unflinchingly.

"Show that Akuma what you're made of," Alya said with a confident nod of her head. Chat nodded in return, allowing a small smile to form on his lips.

"Please wait till I have his attention before leaving the bakery," Chat told them, "The moment you see him chase me, run to the river and take cover under the bridge. On the next chance you get, run
downstream, as far away as possible from here."

"Understood, Chat Noir. Good luck," Tom said as he dragged both women to the bakery to get ready to flee. Chat moved to the door on the foyer and took a deep breath.

"YOU ARE A SPINELESS COWARD, CHAT NOIR!"

"If I'm the coward, then how come you don't show your face, smokebreath?!” Chat yelled as he walked through the door, tail swishing angrily behind him. He felt the wind pick up as the Akuma seemed to shift in the air toward him.

"OH, BUT THEN, THE WAY YOU SQUIRM IN FEAR WOULDN'T BE AS SATISFYING!" the Akuma bellowed above him, seemingly circling him. He landed shortly after, the ground trembling with the impact, Chat turned around, facing where he thought the Akuma was. He breathed heavily, feet trained firmly on the ground. His stomach squirmed uncomfortably but he stood his ground.

He looked around, eyes shifting to catch any hint of his location. He could feel a rumble on the ground but he couldn't tell if it was walking around him, or towards him.

Suddenly, he felt a warm breeze on the side of his face, a breeze so hot and suffocating it felt more like a furnace. Chat looked to the side, startled to find a pair of large, pink eyes and a row of razor sharp fangs floating in the air beside him.

"OH, THE TERROR IN YOUR EYES IS SIMPLY DELIGHTFUL!"

Chat backed away with a gasp, limbs frantically flying to grab his baton before he felt something hard and strong connect with his side and send him flying over the air. He crashed a few meters away, hissing in pain as his injured chest absorbed the impact.

Even with Plagg's enhancements, his body was just too broken to fight.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tom open the bakery door a crack, waiting for Chat's signal. Chat struggled to his feet, limbs tingling with the aftershock.

"Is that all you've got!?” Chat yelled as he held his injured side. Dragonfire chuckled, and opened his huge maw, hurling a fireball at Chat. Chat jumped to the side with a grunt, feeling the heat of the explosion behind him as he rolled on the balls of his feet. "Missed me, lizard face!"

"GOAD ALL YOU WANT. YOU WILL BE PLEADING FOR MERCY SOON ENOUGH!"

Dragonfire roared, the wind picking up as it took to the skies again. Chat scanned the darkening clouds, cat ears turning to and fro restlessly to pinpoint the location of the Akuma. He may not be able to see him but he could very well hear him. Although the sky rumbled with the sound of the upcoming downpour, Chat could still hear the flapping of wings. The air above him shifted, and Chat leapt away as the concrete behind him exploded with the Akuma's landing, the sound of powerful claws scraping against the stone not lost to him.

Chat spent 5 terrible minutes in this deadly game of guess-where-the-Akuma-is-gonna-hit-next, his eyes darting to the Bakery every few seconds as he watched the Dupain-Chengs and Alya finally sneak out the door and make a beeline for the Seine.

However, on his last glance, he stared one second too long.

His body slammed against the concrete as something tough and heavy landed on his back, pinning him down against the ground. He could hear the crack of his spine as the Akuma pressed down on
him, mouth gasping desperately for air as his lungs were crushed under the weight.

He felt the warm breeze against his cheek again, hot like the wind on a scorching desert.

"PLEAD FOR MERCY..." The Akuma growled in Chat's ear, fangs - the only part of the akuma he could see- glinting menacingly beside his face.

"S-s-cre...w y-you..." Chat wheezed, claws raking the concrete in an attempt to pull himself out from under him.

"WRONG ANSWER," Dragonfire rumbled, and Chat let out a scream when he felt the pressure on him increase, causing his pelvis to crack. "GIVE ME YOUR AND LADYBUG'S MIRACULOUS AND I MAY SPARE YOU!"

The moment you give into his demands, is the moment Paris falls for good...

Chat gaped, choking on the lack of air, arms flailing uselessly. "N-no..."

"I WILL SAY THIS ONE LAST TIME! GIVE ME YOUR-

Dragonfire cut off abruptly and Chat was not sure what was happening until he heard the Akuma snicker.

"PERHAPS THERE ARE OTHER METHODS OF PERSUASION..."

Chat felt Dragonfire shift above him, but before he realized what was happening he saw the flash of a fireball being spit and heard a booming explosion, followed by the the scream of a woman.

"SABINE!"

Chat gasped, head whipping forward.

Alya and Tom had made it to the stairwell leading to the Seine River, but Sabine had not managed to get that far. She lay on the ground, staring in terror at the scorched crater between her and the stairwell, her dress singed and her face dirtied.

"NO!" Chat choked out desperately, eyes blown wide in panic, hands clawing aggressively, "L-leave her alone!"

"THE MIRACULOUS!"
"D-don't t-touch them!"
"WRONG ANSWER AGAIN!"

Chat felt Dragonfire move on top of him, the air around him shifting, getting hotter by the second.

No, no no no no no no!

Not again!

Chat growled as he took advantage of Dragonfire's distraction to pull himself out of his grasp. Stumbling on his feet, he sprinted toward Sabine's frozen form just a few meters away. Body aching, joints locking up, Chat took one running leap and pounced, pushing Sabine down on the ground and covering her with his body as the inevitable stream of fire came hurtling at them with a deafening roar.
He had no time to brace. Chat screamed in agony as hell made contact with his body. Flames licked against every inch of him, painful and terrible even with Plagg’s protection. Heat blazed around him, burning the skin under the suit. Fire seared around his exposed neck and face, the smell of burnt flesh and singed hair reaching his nostrils, threatening to make him gag.

After several agonizing seconds that felt like hours, the fire let up and Chat collapsed on Sabine, limbs giving out from under him. His skin tingled in pain, his suit and hair smoking, surrounding them in a pungent smell.

"No!" Sabine cried, turning her head to see him. She trembled beneath him, her eyes, filled with tears, wide in terror, "Chat Noir!"

"M-madame…” Chat croaked, trying weakly to prop himself up on trembling limbs so as to not crush her. But his strength was quickly leaving him. His voice failed him, his eyes threatening to close, "R-run…"

But she didn't move, looking up at him with regret.

"Chat Noir…” she sobbed, cupping his face as tears streamed down her face, "Oh god your neck…”

Chat hissed as one of her fingers touched the burnt skin behind his human ear, shakily traveling up to his singed hair.

"YOU BRAZEN FOOL!"

Chat had no time to react before he was whacked away from Sabine with an invisible appendage, body arching in the air as he crashed back down against the floor with a gasp of pain. Everything hurt, his skin alight with his freshly inflicted burns and sending spark after spark of pain travelling down his limbs. He heard Sabine scream again, and Chat cracked his eyes open.

She was floating in midair, seemingly held by the Akuma. Tom had ran forward with a furious yell, trying to reach Sabine desperately, but the Akuma had tossed him away like a rag doll, and Tom rolled across the pavement with a grunt.

"ONE LAST CHANCE, CHAT NOIR!" the Akuma bellowed, shaking the panicked Sabine in his grasp. "THE MIRACULOUS! FIVE!"

"Let... her go…” Chat choked, reaching out uselessly with a hand. "P-please…”

"FOUR…"

No.. please don’t. Please... Not Madame Cheng... please!

Chat dragged himself forward, pathetically crawling on the ground towards Sabine, his sight blurring. If only he had more strength. If only he could do more...He couldn't even summon Cataclysm, his power fading even as he held the transformation.

"THREE…"

If only he wasn't such a weak, pathetic excuse for a hero… If only he was strong enough to save Sabine...

But his only chance at saving Marinette's mother was to have more power...

Chat dug within him, trying to reach his center, trying to bring forth what was left of his waning
TWO...

His desperation increased. He dug deeper and deeper, feeling for the latent presence in the back of his head...

Help me...

He whispered inwardly, trying to reach out to the dormant power within him...

Please, help me...

He felt a soft stirring within his person, a rousing presence building in the pit of his being, like a curious creature reaching up to meet Chat's soul....

I need you...

The presence within him stirred further, tendrils of energy stretching to meet Chat's mental grasp. Chat reached back, fighting against the barriers in his mind, dissolving the chains of his self restraint...

They made contact, and he felt sizzling energy caress his consciousness...

Please, Chat called to the presence, his heart and soul put into his words, Please, help me save her!

His plea echoed in the recesses of his mind...

...And from the very center of his being, a voice replied.

As you wish...

ONE...

Chat's body spasmed, a cold shiver setting every hair on his body on end, energy crackling around him. His head snapped up, a guttural growl rumbling in his chest.

"You are going to regret this." Chat snarled, a dark shadow falling on his features as his pupils turned to slits and his face contorted into a savage grimace, fangs bared. He rose on all fours with a strength he didn't know he possessed, and sprinted forward, taking a running leap to where he assumed the Akuma's snout was, pinpointed by a sliver of light that had begun to form when it opened its jaws.

Chat slammed into a hard, invisible surface, clinging to it with his claws. His hands felt thick scales and soft folds of skin, and with an angry snarl, he swooped down and sank his fangs where he thought the Akuma's eye to be. Sharp incisors pierced soft flesh in a flash of fuchsia light, and the Akuma screeched in anger and pain, dropping Sabine as it trashed around.

Tom quickly lunged forward, catching his falling wife on his arms before he turned tail and ran back to the stairwell, finding refuge from the clashing duo.

Chat Noir held on viciously as the Akuma trashed, claws digging into scaly skin and teeth sinking deeper and deeper, fueled by the searing rage that consumed him, his senses finding sick delight in the taste of copper on his tongue.

Dragonfire tossed his head with terrible screams of pain, crimson drops raining on the pavement from
where Chat Noir had mangled the Akuma's eye. With a resounding roar, Dragonfire swooped down head first, slamming his forehead - and Chat - against the pavement with zealous rage, cracking the ground underneath.

Chat's jaws slackened, his bloodied mouth opening up in a gasp as his back was crushed against the stone. Before Chat could get his bearings, Dragonfire slammed his head against a nearby building, over and over again, until Chat's arms had started trembling from the shock, claws retracting.

With a savage toss of his head, Dragonfire flung Chat off his face. He flew through the air, body crashing against the pavement and rolling across the ground until he skidded to a halt over the bridge, body twitching, mouth gaping like a fish out of water.

"YOU LITTLE, SON OF A--"

Boom!

Dragonfire paused, looking up at the sky. Had his body not been going into shock, his vision darkening as his consciousness faded, Chat Noir would've distinguished the familiar roar of thunder and felt the first pinpricks of rain against his face as the sky finally broke.

Dragonfire roared in anger, "I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU YET, CHAT NOIR! I WILL FIND YOU!"

There was the sound of the flap of powerful wings as Dragonfire took flight, and after a few moments, silence reigned, broken only by the pitter patter of rain as it began to pour from the sky.

"Sabine? Are you okay?" Tom asked her, quivering hand cupping her face to look at her eyes as they took refuge under the bridge, "I thought I was going to lose you..."

"I'm fine, love. I'm so glad you are okay, too," Sabine said, her voice still shaking from the rush of adrenaline. She leaned forward to press a calming kiss on Tom's lips. "What happened to Chat Noir?"

"I... don't know." Tom confessed, his arms going around Sabine protectively.

"You think he's gone?" Alya asked cautiously, peering around the archway and staring up at the crying sky. She took a tentative step forward. "I don't hear anything…"

"Alya, no, stay here!" Sabine said, but it was too late. Alya was already halfway up the stairwell, back hunched as she sneaked up the steps, head dipped against the rain.

She peered over the wall, scanning the area for any sign of the Akuma. It was eerily deserted, the streets devoid of any sign of life. The crackling fire in the park had begun to subdue with the aid of the rain, pillars of smoke rising up to the sky. Her hair and shirt fully soaked, Alya took a step forward toward the street, but jumped when she heard a choking sound. She turned her head, finding Chat Noir in the middle of the bridge on all fours, body shaking with an incessant cough, the rain making his hair stick to his face.

The sound of his heaving was terrible on her ears, sounding painful and dry. Before long, the sound went from dry to watery, and she saw him lurch forward violently, mouth gaping wide as he retched and something liquid and dark came pouring from his mouth, falling to the ground with a splat. She couldn't see what it was, the view getting obscured by the rain, but Chat made a sound between a cough and a sob and his limbs trembled, his head dropping pitifully.
"Chat Noir?" Alya said cautiously, walking slowly to him.

His ears seemed to perk at her voice and he shakily struggled to his feet, his back to her. He had barely gotten up before he swayed again, drunkenly stumbling to the edge of the bridge and grabbing on to the railing, breathing heavily.

"Hey, are you okay?"

He didn't respond, walking away from her with faltering, shaky hand reaching back for his baton.

"No, wait!"

She ran towards him, but he was faster than her. He extended his baton and vaulted to the sky, landing on the roof of a nearby building and slinking out of sight. Alya skidded to a halt on the spot where he had stood, heaving an exasperated sigh. She shook her head, looking down, but she paused when her eyes caught a flash of color on the ground.

Kneeling slowly, Alya's eyes narrowed curiously, her eyes peering at a puddle at her feet. A moment later, she gasped, her heart clenching.

What should have been a puddle of transparent water was stained a deep crimson, splatters of red blood spreading across the concrete as the rain continued to fall.

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Adrien moaned as Plagg helped him out of his shirt, the fabric sticking to the angry, red burn on his neck. With one last pull, Plagg managed to rip it away from his skin and Adrien hissed in pain.

He laid on his knees before the large bathtub in the middle of his shower, having dragged himself to the bathroom the moment he touched down in his room to wash away the stink of blood and smoke from his skin. He had turned the tap to fill the tub, throwing in a bath bomb as he weakly began to undress, body protesting every move as his burnt back ached with the stretching skin.

"I'm not helping you with your pants," Plagg said dryly, turning away as Adrien shakily removed the rest of his garments, tossed them aside, and slowly dipped into the tub. He stifled a groan as he sunk into the warm soapy water, feeling every scratch, burn, and bruise throb against his skin. He let out a sigh, breathing in the cinnamon and apple scent from the bath bomb.

"Lean forward," Plagg said as soon as Adrien was chest deep in the cleansing water. Adrien obeyed, dipping his head as Plagg looked at the damage across his neck and back.

"How bad is it?" Adrien asked hoarsely.

"Bad." Plagg said, as he flew to the first aid kit in the bathroom and came back with wads of cotton and ointment. "You won't be able to hide this for long. Your back is all red. Your neck and the lower part of your jaw is all icky and full of blisters, and fire also got the ends of your hair. You'll need to cut it."

Adrien sighed despondently, then grunted when Plagg began cleaning the burn by dropping soapy water on it.

He remained silent for the next several minutes, letting Plagg clean and dress the wound as he stifled groans of pain with a fist. Despite the water washing away the grime, smoke, and blood - both his and the Akuma's - Adrien found he didn't really feel any better. His body felt broken, abused. He could feel the bruises all over his body without looking at them. The rush of adrenaline he had felt
when he had attacked the Akuma had already left him. He was left to feel the extent of the damage, although his memory of the event was still a blurry mess.

His chest hurt, not only from his internal ailments, but because of the new wounds inflicted by the Akuma. He would be surprised if he didn't have a cracked rib. It hurt to walk, his spine and pelvis still resenting the abuse, which he was sure would have been significantly worse if not for Plagg’s armor. His back stung with even the slightest of touches, although it wasn't a bad as the back of his neck, where fire had actually burnt the flesh. Adrien was convinced the only reason he was not presently howling in pain was because he had downed half a vial of potion the moment he reached his room.

He felt so hurt and exhausted.

"I can't do this anymore…"

"Wha-?"

"I can't do this!" Adrien said more urgently, pressing both hands desperately to his face. "What am I going to do? He almost killed Marinette's mother! I can't do this alone anymore…"

Plagg was quiet, looking at Adrien contemplatively. After a moment, he spoke. "You don't have to do it alone…"

"What are you talking about? Marinette is still out-"

"I'm not talking about Marinette," Plagg said as he downed another cup of soapy water on the burn. Adrien flinched at the sensation. "I don't follow?"

"Look, I've been thinking…." Plagg started, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, "I.. know that we can't let the Akuma roam free, so if you were to give the earrings to someone e-"

"No." Adrien interrupted with a hiss, "No one is using her earrings…"

Plagg scoffed, "They're not hers to begin with, they are Master Fu's!"

"No one is going to be Ladybug while Marinette is still around!"

"Ugh, you are so stubborn!" Plagg groaned, "You're wearing yourself thin when the solution is right in front of you! We could end this so easily if you would just get over your stupid crush!"

There. He said it.

It's not that Plagg disliked Marinette. Sure, she was clumsy and awkward around Adrien when he was a civilian, but the girl was kind and selfless and he was sure that she was more than capable of giving his Chosen the love and affection he craved.

But to see Adrien put himself at so much risk for a stupid notion like his loyalty to her? It was beginning to grate on his nerves. He was doing his best to not be resentful towards Marinette because of Adrien's pig-headed stubbornness. But at the end of the day, his Chosen's life was Plagg's priority. However, Adrien was far from receptive to the idea.

"It's not a stupid crush!" Adrien's voice rose as he turned his head to face Plagg. He felt a stir in the back of his mind, and the words came tumbling out of his lips before he could stop them. "What would you know about loving someone, anyway? You don't care about anyone but yourself!"
Plagg's fur bristled, eyes narrowing. "Is that it? It that seriously what you think? These days I've done nothing but look out for you and this is what I get?"

"Looked out for me?" Adrien scoffed. The pressure at the back of his head intensified. "It's all been Tikki! What have you done?"

"I've been trying to get you to catch a break but you're an insistent idiot!"

Something seemed to click in Adrien's head and his eyes widened. "It was you."

"What?"

"You unsubscribed me from the Ladyblog!" Adrien yelled, pointing a finger accusingly, "It was you, wasn't it? You messed with my phone!"

Plagg hesitated, but his anger returned and he didn't back down, "So what if I did? You almost got killed today! You can't continue fighting like this!"

"They were counting on me!" Adrien shouted, motioning towards himself desperately, "People could've died, Plagg!"

"You could barely stand up!" Plagg shouted back, "How can you save others when you can't even save yourself!?"

"It's my job! I was chosen to do this!" Adrien retorted, "It's my duty, Plagg!"

"That doesn't mean you have to go out and get yourself killed!" Plagg screeched, "You need to go to the hospital! NOW!"

"There's a stupid...dragon, flying around the skies of Paris right now!" Adrien said, "I can't just turn my back on it! Why won't you understand this?"

"And why won't you understand that I don't want you to die!?" Plagg screamed, his eyes watering.

Adrien backpedaled, mind reeling. The presence in the back of his head backed off, the anger fizzling up as guilt took its place.

"Plagg..."

"Forget it! Fine, go get yourself killed!" Plagg turned around, his back to Adrien as he mumbled angrily under his breath. "See if I care! You stupid, ungrateful-"

Adrien reached out, taking Plagg in his hands.

"no, don't touch me! I don't want to talk to you!" Plagg struggled against his hold, but Adrien didn't relent, bringing Plagg closer, "Stupid kid with your stupid crush and your stupid puns and, and, and--"

Adrien brought Plagg close to his face, nuzzling the Kwami's head with his nose.

"--and... and your... stupid... face..." Plagg wibbled, nuzzling back with his forehead, eyes tightly closed as he tried to keep his tiny tears at bay.

"You...you do care about me..." Adrien murmured, his own eyes stinging.

"I don't! I hate you..." Plagg cried, floating to Adrien's cheek and laying his head against it. "You're
dumb! So dumb!"

Adrien chuckled, "I deserved that. I'm sorry, Plagg. You're the only friend I can count on and what I said wasn't fair... I'm... I'm really sorry. Thank you for taking care of me."

Plagg sniffled uncharacteristically, wiping at his face with a paw, "Yeah, whatever... Turn around I'm not done cleaning. You're seriously a mess, kid."

Adrien could tell Plagg felt awkward about his rare display of emotion, eager to change the subject, so he didn't say anything more and obeyed.

"I promise I will go get help after school tomorrow," Adrien said as he turned and leaned forward again.

"You better go through with it this time."

"Maybe we can pass through the bakery on the way? I'm worried about Marinette's parents..."
Adrien murmured.

He felt more than saw Plagg roll his eyes. "They're fine. You were out but I saw them escape. The Akuma ran away, too."

"Why would he run away?" Adrien asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Beats me. In any case, it's a good thing he did."

"Yeah..."

Adrien grimaced. It still bothered him. The Akuma had definitely had the upperhand. Adrien remembered being thrown in the air and crashing against the ground, his body locking up as the air was knocked out of him. The amount of pain that exploded at once had sent his mind reeling, sending him into shock. The next time he came to, he had begun to cough, blood dripping from his mouth, but the Akuma had already left by then.

What was the deal with him?

Adrien sighed, preferring to swerve his thoughts to another direction as he felt the beginnings of anxiety pricking at his skin. There was not much he could do at this point anyway.

"We haven't visited Marinette and Tikki in a while. How do you think they're doing?"

"Probably better than you." Plagg grunted.

Adrien chuckled. "No doubt..."

He missed Marinette. He hadn't visited her since the day he visited Master Fu. He made a mental note to go after he was done getting himself checked. For now, he'd have to content himself with the Ladybug in his dreams to keep him company.

Floating. She was floating.

She glided through a dreamland town. Only the roofs were visible, the rest of the buildings sunk in fluffy white mist. The sky was blue and bright, and she floated with ease through the city, the tips of her feet barely touching the tiles before she leapt to the next building.
Her dress was gone. She was wearing a full body, skin-tight suit and a mask, but she didn't know what color they were or what they looked like. When she looked down at herself, it glowed in a bright white light. She wore her hair in pigtails, long, streaming, glowing ribbons trailing behind her as she moved.

She laughed in delight. She loved the liberating sensation of flying through the sky. No physical or mental restraints to hold her back. She was free to move as she wished, tied down by nothing but the limits of her imagination.

"My Lady…"

She turned at the voice, echoing ethereally in the air around her. She couldn't see anyone with her, but a familiar scent reached her nose.

Honey and vanilla. With a hint of floral cleanliness. She recognized him now.

"My Lady!" the voice laughed. It was everywhere and nowhere, the sound changing its origin, as if he was moving around her. He was speaking, garbled words echoing around her. She couldn't understand the words, but oddly enough, her heart knew exactly what he was saying:

Can you catch me?

With a smile at the dare, she followed his scent. He was moving quickly in front of her, clouds shifting as he seemed to move through the white mist like a ghost. On occasions, she would see the faint outline of a tail. A black, sleek, long… belt?

He was wearing a black belt?

Her confusion cost her a few seconds and she heard his tinkling laugh again, mocking her. Pouting, she increased her speed to catch up with him. A flash of black, a flash of green, a flash of gold, but she could never see all of him.

In the distance, the Eiffel Tower materialized, standing proud and tall in the sea of buildings, all of which looked the same, sunk in a sea of clouds. She heard the pit patter of his feet as he climbed the tower and she followed. Her arm shot up on instinct, intent to throw something, but there was nothing in her hand.

She looked at her white fingers confused. Why was she throwing her arm forward?

"My Lady…" his voice chuckled, coming from high up the Tower. Taking a deep breath, she followed the pull building up in her gut and jumped. She jumped high and nimble, her one jump covering several meters of metal. She reached out with a hand to grab on to the ledge, floating over the railing to land on one of the Towers' viewing decks.

Hello?

"My Lady…"

She turned around, meeting air, but she felt her hand move, as if someone was lifting it. She felt something warm press to the back of her palm, sending wave after wave of warmth through her body. She felt her face warm up. Tentatively, she lifted her hand, reaching forward to where she thought a face would be…

And her hands touched skin.
The tips of her fingers lit up, and although the rest of him was invisible, the area around her fingers came into view. Soft, beautiful skin materialized like watercolor over a canvas, and she ran her fingers across his jaw, and then to his chin. Any new area she touched came into view, the others fading back to invisibility as she moved. A smile appeared as her fingers found his lips and she lingered, taking in the subtle curve of his grin. He softly kissed her fingers, but otherwise did not interrupt her wandering touch.

She reached up with a second hand, feeling his other cheek, then his hair - it was a golden yellow! - when she reached his eyes, they closed, so she couldn't see their color, instead she was met with black shadow and soft leather - a mask?

When she was done running her fingers through his hair to feel the texture - even finding some black cat ears! - she moved down. Her hands caressed his neck, memorizing every inch of him, fingers meeting with the edge of a black leather suit and a golden bell. Her hands followed his zipper line and stopped at his chest. She felt the strong muscle under the suit, felt his chest rise and fall with his breathing. He was warm and firm.

Feeling bold, she leaned forward, resting her ear against his chest. There she heard it, the gentle beating of his heart, a soft, constant thrum. She sighed against him, finding that she felt at utmost peace in his presence. She suddenly felt warmth on her back, travelling in circles around her shoulder blades. He was hugging her to him, and she let him, comforted by his embrace.

She couldn't put a name or face to the boy before her, but she felt safe and loved, and so she remained there until he had pulled her down to sit against him, allowing her to get comfortable.

The sounds of their heartbeats joined, forming one steady rhythm. Before long, the sound of his heartbeat was joined by another and it was the most curious sound, rumbling softly in his chest. It made her smile.

*He was purring.*

"Adrien, are you sure you don't want us to call your chauffeur to pick you up?"

"It's okay, Ms. Bustier, it's only a cold," Adrien tried to shoot his teacher his most convincing smile, but even that took everything out of him. His teacher sighed, clearly unconvinced, but she nodded her head and turned around to do the roll call.

Adrien was worried that he looked so bad that the first thing Ms. Bustier did when coming inside was address him before doing anything else.

He trembled within his green hoodie, face snuggling further into his scarf to hide the bandages around his neck and the burns in his lower jaw. He knew he looked terrible and he felt just as terrible.

Despite Plagg's best efforts to bandage him up, sometime during the night the burn on his neck had gotten infected. He woke up in the wee hours of the morning sweating and with his heart hammering uncomfortably against his chest, his skin quickly burning up with a fever. He had taken a cold bath to assuage it, but it had helped little. He hadn't even been able to keep his breakfast down in the morning, throwing it up almost immediately after.

Nathalie had insisted he stayed home, but Adrien had brushed her away, telling her he had an important test he couldn't miss. Of course, it was all just a lie.

He felt Nino nudge him as Ms. Bustier continued with the list.
"Dude, you sure you're okay?"

No. "Yeah, just a cold."

"Doesn't look like just a cold to me." Nino noted, taking his first good look at him. Adrien could only imagine what he looked like in Nino's eyes; exceedingly pale and clammy, a sick flush adorning his cheeks. His eyes droopy and tired, framed by dark rings which he hadn't even bothered to conceal. His whole body felt broken, as if it would shatter with the slightest touch.

Yes, definitely not a cold.

"I'm fine, don't fuss," Adrien said, waving a hand nonchalantly.

"If you say so man, but you're starting to worry me," Nino said, laying a hand on his back, oblivious to Adrien's wince, "I thought you would get that checked out."

"Yeah, I did," Adrien lied, shrugging, "My defenses were low so a bug hit me bad. No big deal. Just need more sleep. Sorry I've been a jerk to you, by the way."

Nino's eyebrows shot up. "What do you mean?"

"Ignoring your messages and your calls and everything... I'm sorry I just haven't been-"

"Yourself, I know..." Nino said with an understanding nod, "Don't worry, Alya told me..."

Adrien winced, "What did she tell you?" How much did she tell him?

But just then, Alya entered the room, rushing to her seat as silently as she could as Ms. Bustier finished with her list.

"Yo babe, what's up?" Nino whispered over his shoulder.

"Mom wouldn't let me come," Alya panted, setting her bag down and quickly taking out her school tablet. "We kind of had a tiff and I missed the bus."

"What? Why wouldn't she let you come?" Adrien asked softly.

"She was freaking out because of the Akuma attack that happened down the block yesterday." she whispered. "You left before it happened, but didn't you see the park on the way here this morning? It was horrible."

"Yeah, the news couldn't even get to the scene. It was up in flames and smoke and everything," Nino added. "I almost had a heart attack when I heard Alya was there. Didn't you hear?"

"Woah, what happened to you?" Alya cut in as she finally took her first good look at Adrien, eyebrow raising.

Adrien hesitated, "Uh..."

"Nino, Alya, and Adrien, if you want to chat, I'll have to ask you to do it outside." Ms. Bustier interrupted with a disapproving cock of her head.

"Sorry Ms. Bustier," all three of them said at the same time.

"We really need to talk," Alya whispered to Adrien, reclining back on her seat and setting her eyes to the front.
Adrien sighed. Yeah, there was no way he was getting out of that one. He pondered on, wondering just how much Alya had told Nino about why he was being odd. It's not like he didn't want Nino to know that he liked Marinette. Just...not yet. And if he could find out through Adrien, that would be better, since he didn't know how Alya would fill the gaps in information. But for now, he'd be left wondering as he set his eyes to the front and began jotting down information in his tablet.

He covered his face with an arm as another coughing bout came on, his body spasming slightly and a sliver of pain shooting up his chest. He had coughed so much that morning that his throat was already turning raw. He was surprised that he even had a voice to speak with.

15 minutes in, he gave up trying to take notes. His vision kept blurring, turning dark every few seconds. He thought nothing of it, blaming his fever on the tiredness of his eyes. The one thing he could not ignore though, was the the feeling of cold sweat drenching his body, the shivers running up and down his back, and how quickly his heart was now beating inside his chest.

By the time the class ended and Adrien stood up to grab his bag, he was shaking.

"Adrien?" Alya asked in concern, seeing him struggle with picking up his bag. "You okay? Do you want to go to the infirmary?"

"F-Fine…" Adrien said, breathing hard, "I- I really need to sleep. T-That's all..."

His heart was beating uncomfortably fast against his chest now, making it hard to talk, and he took deep breaths to steady himself.

Adrien finally managed to sling his bag on his shoulder, covering another bout of coughing with his forearm. "I'm s-sorry, you'll have to tell m-me the story another time. I'll go crash at the l-lab. See you g-guys later…” he said between wheezes.

Alya and Nino looked at each other with a frown, but thankfully, they decided to take Adrien's word for it and left, but not before Alya shot him a knowing look over her shoulder as they crossed the door. Adrien waited until most of the class had filed out before stumbling out of the room, placing a hand on the wall for purchase. He felt faint, and he walked with shaky steps towards the chemistry lab.

With every movement, his body hurt, making him wince. His back stung, his joints ached, his heart thrummed, and his lungs burned. He couldn't stand it anymore. He dug in his pocket and took out a half-full vial of potion. Without hesitation, he uncorked it and downed the whole thing.

*God, just let it end...*

"Well, he crashed all right…” Nino said as he and Alya entered the Chemistry lab after their break. They had gone in to find Adrien seated at his usual seat, hunched over, face hidden in his crossed arms and obscured by his hair as he slept.

"Shouldn't we wake him?" Alya asked.

"Nah, I feel bad for him, let him sleep." Nino commented, sitting with Alya instead.

Before long, the rest of the class came in, chattering and laughing loudly, but Adrien didn’t stir, seemingly unperturbed. Mrs. Mendeleev filed in after the last student entered, closing the door behind her and addressing the class. After she got everyone to take out their tablets and jot down
some formulas from the blackboard, she noticed Adrien had not moved an inch since she came in, and her face scrunched up in an angry frown.

"Mr. Agreste, if you really find my class that boring you can just go sleep in the Principal's office!" Mrs. Mendeleev griped, hovering over Adrien like an angry bird of prey. However, Adrien didn't move, and the teacher grit her teeth, slamming her hand against the desk beside Adrien's ear, to no effect.

He did not stir nor react to the sound.

"Mr. Agreste, look at me when I'm talking to you!"

"H-He is just sick, Mrs. Mendeleev!" Nino piped in shyly, standing up from his seat. "I'll get him."

Nino moved to Adrien's side, grabbing his shoulder. "Hey man, wake up!"

Adrien did not respond.

"Hey!" Nino shook him harder, "Dude, stop playing around!"

Letting his urgency get the best of him, Nino accidentally shook Adrien too hard. Adrien toppled over his seat, dropping like a dead weight to the floor, and both Nino and Mrs. Mendeleev jumped back with a gasp at the sight that met them.

Adrien lay on the floor unconscious. His face an unhealthy shade of white, covered in a fine sheen of sweat. He breathed with extreme difficulty, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his unnaturally quick heartbeat.

But perhaps most disturbing of all was the small puddle of blood on his desk where he had rested, and the thin strips of red that dribbled from his mouth and down his chin, staining the ground red.
*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/145414025586/ajbeeblebrox-i-havent-been-able-to-stop
...tachycardia... extreme dehydration... infection...

Adrien's mind stirred, voices filtering softly into his subconscious. He felt the rapid beating of his heart in his ears but little else. He was floating, his body numb, immobile. He tried to focus on the voices around him, trying to make them out …

"How long has this been going on for?"

"I dunno. I-I started noticing like one or two weeks back b-but he didn't look so bad. He said he was having trouble sleeping. I just thought that he was tired..."

Was that Nino? It sounded like him. He sounded shaken, nervous. The other voice sounded like Mr. Damocles. Why was the Principal there?

"He's extremely thin. Has he been eating?" A voice he didn't recognize asked. It came from somewhere above him.

"Not sure. He's been skipping some lunch breaks. And...I did see him throw up a few times..."

"Eating disorders?"

"I-I don't think so, I just think he legit can't keep it down... he mentioned having a bug and his defenses being low so I thought he had eaten something off..."
"Had he coughed up blood before today?"

"It's the first time I've seen him do that..."

"What about the burns?"

"I...I don't know, Alya?"

"...No clue..."

"Hm..."

Feeling started returning to him little by little. Waves of hot and cold rippled through his body alternatively. His skin was burning but his forehead felt cool, like there was something wet draped over it. He felt the tingling throb of the burn on his back and a stir in his stomach. He tried opening his eyes. It took great effort, but he managed to open them a crack. His eyelids were swollen and his vision was hazy, but he was eventually able to discern his surroundings.

He was in the chemistry lab. He was lying on the floor on something soft; someone dressed in white was hovering over him. Further back, closer to the door, Adrien could make out blotches of color that he presumed were Nino, Alya, and Mr. Damocles. The rest of the room was empty.

Wait... why was he on the floor?

What happened?

Awareness was beginning to trickle back into his mind, feeling returning steadily inch by inch.

He realized that his hoodie and scarf had been removed; the feeling of cool air against his arms and neck gave it away. A wave of anxiety crashed through him, unease rolling in the pit of his stomach. All of his wounds were visible. His scar, his burns, his bruises... They'd seen it all. His friends and the teachers had seen it all! Adrien inhaled sharply through his nose, fingers twitching into motion.

"Look, he's awake!" Nino said, noting Adrien's now fully open eyes.

"Adrien?" the man standing over him spoke. Adrien blinked repeatedly, trying to clear his vision. He flicked his eyes to look at the man, his head too heavy to move. He didn't recognize him. He was a brown-haired man dressed in white, his hands covered in blue plastic gloves. "Adrien, can you hear me?"

"Nn..." Adrien couldn't speak. His mouth was unresponsive, breathing was difficult.

"It's okay. Move your fingers if you understand."

Adrien did, though they felt numb and slow to respond.

"Good. I'm Dr. Barnes. I'm a medic, and I'm here to help you," the man said. Adrien could hear the concerned professionalism in his voice; somehow, he found it soothing.

"I need you to blink twice if you can hear and understand me." Adrien slowly blinked twice, maintaining eye contact with Dr. Barnes. "Good." Adrien felt him lift his right arm, turn it over and hold a syringe to his forearm, "I'm going to give you a shot. Your heart is going a bit crazy in there, so we are going to slow it down, okay?"

Adrien tried to nod but failed. He elected to blink twice in understanding. The medic nodded, getting the message, and Adrien winced as he felt the pinch, followed by the cold feeling of the contents
being pumped into his veins.

The medic bandaged up his arm, speaking as he did so. "Now, I need you to answer a few questions for me. Just simple 'yes' and 'no' questions. Blink once for yes, and blink twice for no. Do you understand?"

Adrien blinked once, though he could feel sensation returning to parts of his face.

"Do you know where you are?"

Adrien blinked once, swallowing painfully before attempting to speak.

"...Sch...ool..."

"Do you know what happened to you?"

Adrien drew a blank. He remembered being in class, and then he was walking to the chemistry lab, but everything after that was a blur. It seemed his confused face showed because the medic continued speaking.

"You fainted in class. Do you remember that?"

He fainted? Was his body in that bad of a shape?

He blinked twice, obvious concern in his expression.

"Alright. There's an ambulance waiting outside. We're just going to do a quick check-up at the hospital to make sure everything's okay. We couldn't locate your father, but his assistant is on her way."

Adrien closed his eyes, grimacing. He was screwed. He was so, so screwed. Nathalie was on her way, and his father would surely find out shortly after if he didn't know already. He wasn't ready to face the pressure and the barrage of questions. He wasn't ready to lie his way out of it. He didn't know what he was going to do. He was at the mercy of his body's unresponsiveness, his mind flitting with all the horrible scenarios that could come from this.

He had messed up. He should've skipped school. He shouldn't have pushed himself this far. He wasn't ready. He wasn't ready for any of this!

Adrien's breath quickened, pulse throbbing in his veins. He could feel his heart's rhythm fluctuate, as if his own heart was fighting the medication. He still couldn't move, his limbs as heavy as lead. He was getting frustrated, panic rising in his chest.

"Adrien, please calm down, breathe..."

He tried to will his limbs to move, to twitch, anything. He felt claustrophobic in his own body, cursing it for shutting down on him. His body was quickly burning up, and he felt the beads of sweat forming at his brow...

"Adrien-"

Adrien suddenly felt a hand on his cheek and his frightened eyes opened and darted to the owner to his left. He met hazel eyes framed by black glasses.

"Hey, relax..." Alya whispered, crouched at his side, "It's gonna be okay. You're gonna be okay."
There was something oddly calming about her voice and the feel of her hand against his cheek and his body seemed to relax in response, though it was only slightly. Alya however seemed satisfied with his response and smiled slightly, removing her hand. There was something peculiar in her eyes, like curiosity mingled with understanding. It was like she was silently asking a question that she expected Adrien to answer, but he had no idea what her question was. For a moment, he saw a flash of regret in her eyes, but it was fleeting and gone in the blink of an eye.

"You'd have to be nuts to come to school with a 37 and a half degree temperature." she said with a half smile.

She was trying to be comforting but he didn't feel any better. It just reaffirmed how much his body was rebelling against him. How badly it was finally shutting down on him from days of abuse and illness. However, he made an attempt to calm down, focusing on his heartbeat and trying to regulate it. His body seemed to relax a little bit more, though he was beginning to feel woozy, the room coming in and out of focus.

"You may feel a little bit dizzy," the Dr. Barnes said as he took the pressure in Adrien's right arm, noticing Adrien's wavering gaze. "So try not to move too much. They'll be bringing up the gurney soon." He put a comforting hand on Adrien's arm as he slipped the pressure cuff off. "You're going to be alright."

Adrien breathed deeply. The medic jotted something down on his clipboard while Alya hovered over him as a calming presence. However, her eyes were not on him. They were on his right arm. Her face was contorted in a frown, her eyebrows twitching as she thought. Adrien couldn't tell if she was looking at his scar, or at his ring…

Both worried him.

"Man, you are one crazy dude," Nino commented as he was allowed to settle beside Alya. He looked as shaken as he sounded, and there seemed to be a quiver in his smile. "You didn't actually get this checked, did you?"

Adrien found he had no strength to lie. "N-no…"

Nino sighed deeply, shaking his head. Adrien figured that he was probably disappointed that he had lied to him, but when Nino looked at him again, he saw nothing but concern in his eyes. As his soft, brown eyes bore into his, something in Adrien told him that Nino understood perfectly well why he had to lie. He knew better than anyone else how Adrien felt about this restrictive father, so he deduced Nino had come to the right conclusion on his own.

Adrien had hid the gravity of his condition, not because he didn't trust Nino, but because Adrien was trying to downplay everything to keep his father off his back.

Which unfortunately, would not be possible anymore. His ruse was up, Nathalie was on her way, and Adrien could already feel himself kissing his freedom goodbye.

He exhaled in defeat. Although he was scared, he slowly resigned himself to the inevitable.

*Well, I kept my word, Plagg,* Adrien thought ruefully as the medic finished taking his temperature again.

"Your fever is rising," the medic commented as he looked at the thermometer, his brow furrowed, "Your burn is infected… It's unlike any kind of burn I've seen before, and son, I've been a medic for a long time. How did you get it?"
Adrien didn't immediately respond. Alya was looking at him expectantly. He swallowed nervously.

"Um..."

**BOOM!**

Adrien froze.

"Woah, I think we're gonna get a downpour today..." Nino commented, looking out the window with an impressed whistle.

Adrien's heartbeat quickened. Eyes blew wide in terror.

"N-no...no..." he muttered.

"What?" Alya asked him, with a quirked eyebrow. "Hey, wait!"

Adrien's sudden fear had kickstarted his nerves, shocking his limbs into motion as he shakily tried to raise his head, a wet cloth slipping off his forehead.

"Be still, you aren't supposed to move-" Dr. Barnes said, pushing gently on Adrien's shoulder to get him to lay back down.

"No! No...th-er!" Adrien mumbled more urgently, weakly fighting off both the medic's and Nino's grasp as they tried to get him to lie down again.

"You're not making any sense dude! Chill!" Nino said.

"NO THUNDER!" Adrien yelled with a force he didn't know he had, startling everyone off him. He was manic by this point, limbs flailing and kicking everyone away. "Not thunder! Not thunder!"

His body felt like a dead weight, the world around him spinning from the medication, but adrenaline kicked in and Adrien managed to get on all fours and stumble to his feet, nearly falling again as he grabbed on a table for support. His legs trembled with the effort to hold him up, and he shook his head in an attempt to get the room to stop moving.

"Mr. Agreste, calm yourself!" Mr. Damocles pleaded, "Ms. Nathalie is on her way, please go lie down again!"

"Not s-safe!" Adrien wheezed as he moved to grab his bag off the ground with a trembling hand, arm shooting up to keep the medic off him, "Get out!"

"Adrien, you are scaring us, what is it?" Alya asked him, keeping her distance from the panicking Adrien.

"Evacuate!" Adrien yelled at them, his pale face drenched in sweat as he slung his bag over his shoulder and backed away from them with staggering step. "Y-you're a-all in danger!"

"What? Why?" Nino asked, eyebrow raised.

A terrible roar suddenly broke through the air and Adrien's eyes shot to the ceiling as the light fixtures clattered, "No...no..."

Everyone looked at him quizzically... Except for Alya. Her eyes widened as she seemed to realize something, a soft gasp ghosting past her lips.
Another rumble filled the air and the ground shook violently. Everyone gasped in surprise and grabbed on to the tables to hold steady and Adrien took advantage of their momentary distraction to slip out of the classroom before he could be stopped. He stumbled down the hallway, mind reeling.

"Hey, kid, are you okay?" Plagg whispered urgently, poking his head from underneath the lapel of Adrien's bag, "You passed out! Where are you going? You were getting help!"

"I… have… to …warn … everyone!" Adrien said between gasps, desperately fighting his body's exhaustion as he ran while holding the railing for support. "He's back!"

"Who's back—" Plagg's voice cut off abruptly and his tiny green eyes widened, "No... Adrien, no!"

But Adrien ignored him, limping past classrooms as students poked their heads out at the commotion, asking what was going on.

"Adrien, stop, please!" Plagg pleaded.

Adrien stayed silent, staggering down the steps to the first floor as quickly as his beat-up body could take him. There was no way he could warn the whole school in time. He'd have to take drastic measures.

"Where's the fire alarm?" Adrien asked, more to himself that to anyone. "The fire alarm… I need the fire alarm!"

"Adrien, there's no way you are winning this! Back down!"

BOOM!

Adrien was blown off his feet as an explosion went off in the middle of the courtyard, and he rolled across the ground with a pained moan. Screams filled the air; when Adrien opened his eyes again he saw a large smoking crater a few feet from where he had been standing, debris and pieces of concrete scattered all around it.

An strident laugh filled the air and Adrien's heart leapt to his throat.

"Take cover!" Plagg hissed as Adrien struggled to his feet. Students had come out of their classrooms, gasping and chattering in fear. They were confused, pointing at the crater in the first floor in panic. Adrien looked around him, trying to find the fire alarm. He located it a few feet away, a bright red box perched on the wall. He stumbled to it and grabbed onto the white lever. It was tough, even more so with his unsteady grasp, but he managed to pull it down and the howl of the alarm soon filled the entirety of the school.

As bells and honks went off and students and teachers started filing out of the rooms in a frenzy, Adrien dragged himself to the boy's bathroom and locked himself in a stall.

"Don't dare transform!" Plagg told him immediately after Adrien sat on the toilet and opened the lapel of his bag, "That was a warning shot! He is trying to flush you out!"

"How did he know I was here, though?" Adrien asked him, his pulse quickening in his veins.

"It was the last place he saw you, so he probably figured you were still around! Do not confirm it!"

"What if he hurts someone?" Adrien countered.

"He hasn't purposefully hurt someone before, he just wants to wreak havoc to get you to come out!"
"He nearly killed Marinette's mother yesterday!"

"Because you showed emotion!" Plagg screeched, "You showed that you cared! She was just in front of him!" Plagg rubbed his eyes, exasperation turning into desperation before Adrien's eyes. "He could've gotten her if he wanted to, but he didn't, did he? He scorched the air in front of her to see your reaction, and you confirmed his suspicions! He took advantage of it and used her as leverage!" His green eyes drilled into Adrien's. "This is why no one is supposed to know who you are! It puts the people that you care about in danger if word gets out!"

Adrien sighed despondently, eyes closing in contemplation. There was truth in Plagg's words, but at the same time, his gut told him he had to move and do his job. Dragonfire may not have been purposefully trying to hurt anyone, but the wreckage he was leaving behind could very well do just that. Adrien felt torn between his two choices. To intervene, or not to? Would his absence make matters better or worse? Would he leave if Adrien stayed where he was?

"You are not fit to fight, Adrien," Plagg interrupted his thoughts, his voice a bit lower, more pleading. "Look at you. You can barely stand up straight, you're warmer than molten Camembert, and your eyes keep skewing. Even if you transform, you don't stand a chance!"

Adrien hunched on the toilet, his drive waning. Plagg was right, once again. He felt like a wreck. His joints ached, his whole body felt like fragile glass, his skin burned terribly, and the heart medication kept screwing with his heart rate, making him dizzy. What chance did he stand?

"Please, Adrien..." Plagg whispered, laying a paw on Adrien's hand, "Evacuate the school like a normal student, get help, and then you can come back."

"Plagg..."

**BOOM!**

The ground shook again and Adrien nearly toppled off the toilet seat.

"He's still at it!"

"He's trying to scare you to bring you out! Don't give in to his taunting!"

"What's that?" He could hear commotion outside, crying and screaming and thumping. He stood from the seat and walked out of the stall to the door, poking his head out.

He was met with mayhem. The courtyard was full of students huddled together, cowering and crying with their teachers or friends. Some of them had begun to cough, their faces marred with dirt.

"We're trapped!"

"Someone help us!"

"There's no other exit!"

"Help!"

Trapped?

Adrien realized with growing horror that the courtyard was quickly filling with smoke. Classrooms on the second floor were burning up, flames licking the railings through broken windows, and as Adrien's eyes scanned the damage frantically, he realized why no one was moving.
The exit had caved in. Dragonfire had sealed them off.

They were all going to die.

Damn it!

"Plagg!"

"Adrien, no! There has to be another way!"

"TRANSFORM ME!"

Green flashed in the room, and he felt his suit materialize around him. He still felt sicker than a dog, his mask hot against his face, but at least his muscles felt strong enough to help people out of there, even if he wasn't fit to fight a full grown dragon. He'd handle that later.

Taking a deep calming breath to assuage his nerves, he left the bathroom and people gasped upon seeing him, clamoring for him.

"What happened?" Chat Noir asked Ms. Bustier, who was close to him comforting one of her younger students.

"We were moving in lines to leave the building and then something exploded in the roof and the entrance collapsed!" she explained, her face white and hair disheveled. "There were also bursts of fire in the classrooms. Everyone had already left, thank goodness, but now we can't go up! The second floor is up in flames!"

Son of a…

He had blocked the entrance off and made sure they couldn't escape through the roof, either. There was no way firefighters would get to them in time.

He really hated this Akuma.

"Thank you. Stay calm, Miss, I'll take it from here. Make everyone lay down on the floor and cover their mouths!"

"Yes, Chat Noir. Thank you!"

He sprinted toward the entrance as quick as his limbs could take him, jumping over blocks of cement and running around scared, coughing students with an arm against his face. He had to get them out quick before they all passed out from asphyxiation. His heart worried for Nino and Alya, but he had no time to seek them out. It was a race against the clock.

He reached the exit, finding Mr. Damocles and some of the other teachers trying to unblock the wreckage, with little success. Chat Noir assessed the situation. He considered using Cataclysm but that could just make more masonry fall on them, not to mention he didn't know if he could save them all before his timer ran out and he transformed back. If Ladybug was here, it'd be possible… but he was on his own. He had to think fast.

"Mr. Damocles, please stand aside!" Chat Noir told him. The portly principal looked at him, eyes wide in surprise, but he nodded silently and stepped aside, as did all the teachers.

"What are you going to do?" The principal asked him.

"Just stand back!" Chat said. After giving the blockage one last look, he thought he saw an
opportunity for escape. A small sliver of light filtered through the cracks. He knelt and sunk his hands deep into the rock. Taking one deep breath, Chat pulled back with all his might, his strength enhanced by Plagg's power. His body protested at the effort, but Chat kept pulling, groaning through his teeth.

Rocks shifted around him, stones pitter pattering on his head as larger blocks fell to the floor from the heap. Chat kept tugging and with a resounding yell, he managed to pull out one of the larger rocks from the bottom off the heap, prompting smaller ones to clatter to the floor and widen the hole he had made. Light from outside filtered through the hole, which was big enough to let people out if they bowed their heads. People behind him cheered, but Chat did not join in.

The remaining rocks groaned ominously, dust raining from the rest of the blockage. Realizing what was about to happen, Chat ran forward and put his arms up just as a stone beam gave out, stopping it before it collapsed and blocked them all in again. He screamed in pain as the whole weight of the blockage fell on him, his arms bending until the rock pressed hard on his back, body tensing as the weight fell on his knees. His nerves and muscles screamed in agony, his legs trembling terribly, but he held his ground, keeping the window of escape open, breathing heavily through his nose.

Firefighters were outside already, along with ambulances and concerned family members trying to get to their children. They had begun to fire jet streams of water at the windows of the second floor in an attempt to tame the flames.

"Get… out!" Chat grunted, his eyes squeezed shut at the effort, teeth gritting. "Out!"

He heard people begin to move behind him, instructed by their teachers, and out came kid after kid, crouching low under Chat's arms and running to their families at the foot of the stairs. Firefighters reached Chat and helped the victims out, taking them to safety if they were too dizzy or scared to do it themselves.

Chat held the rocks up with every ounce of strength he had but it was quickly waning, his arms going numb. He tried to tap into the latent source of energy at the back of his head, itching for a burst in power, but he couldn't focus. He had begun to breath in the stream of smoke filtering from the hole and he choked. His whole body was burning, his lungs on fire as he struggled to breathe. A horrible spark of pain shot from his stomach and he could feel the familiar watery sensation in his throat...

Not now, please, not now...

But he could not stop it. He heaved, and liquid rose from his throat in a burst of copper flavor, seeping through his lips and dripping to the floor in splashes of red. His eyes watered, his muscles screaming for release as he choked on his own blood.

"Come on Ms. Cesáire, you are next!"

Chat cracked his eyes open at the familiar name and glanced to the side. Alya was crouched under his arm, staring at him in horror, her face full of soot and dirt. He could see the deep worry in her eyes, like she wanted to reach out, but he could hear Nino urging her on from behind.

She moved, and out came Nino, looking in as bad shape as Alya did. He looked at Chat, his eyes widened, frightened.

"Our friend Adrien," he said hastily, pleading, "We can't find him! He's really sick, I-I can't leave him behind!"
Shit.

Chat hesitated. He racked his brain for an excuse.

"He...made it out... I saw him," Chat grunted, "Run away from the school... b-before ...I-I came in..."

"Really?" Alya asked him, she looked relieved, but there was a curious quirk to her brow.

Like she did not believe him.

"Alya, you heard him!" Nino said, "Let's get out of here! Adrien must be waiting out back! Let's go find him! Thank you, Chat Noir!"

"Go..." Chat whispered to her, blood dripping from his mouth.

Alya moved hesitantly, looking over her shoulder at him as she and Nino were dragged away by a firefighter. He saw the rest of his class steadily trickle through the hole and to the safety of the streets in between coughs and cries. Chat's knees began to buckle, his strength leaking away with every drop of blood that hit the floor and every cough that racked his body. He was sweating, his costume and hair sticking uncomfortably against his skin from the heat coming from behind him. His back was alight with pain, as if his burns were new. His vision had begun to darken and he had to shake his head to keep himself conscious.

After a few agonizing minutes and countless victims later, Mr. Damocles slithered out of the hole in a crouch, coughing.

"That's the last one Chat Noir!" he told him between coughs. Chat nodded in understanding and waited for the older man to finish moving to safety with the firefighter before doing anything. He was nearly out, just a little bit more...

And then, a dark, resounding chuckle filled the air.

If Chat had had fur, he was pretty sure it would've stood on end.

He heard the terrible flap of large wings above him and then a resounding crash coming from the roof. The stone around him groaned and he realized with no little amount of dread that it was too late for him.

His body slammed hard against the ground as the whole façade collapsed around him with a strident crash. He cried out in agony as a rock fell heavy and hard on his left shoulder, causing it to crack sickeningly and pinning his arm in an unnatural angle. Tears of immense pain sprung from his eyes, blood coming in spurts from his mouth and nose as his chest and legs were crushed under the full weight of the wreckage.

His free arm shot out in despair, clawing at the ground in front of him as he struggled to bring air into his lungs, his mouth opening and closing uselessly. Smoke bellowed all around him, making him choke, and he felt the heat of the fire through the rocks and against his skin.

"POOR, POOR KITTY," a dark voice whispered somewhere above him, "SO NAIVE. SO PREDICTABLE! I COULD FREE YOU, IF YOU WOULD ONLY MAKE THE TRADE..."

Chat's eyes flitted desperately around him. People had backed away as they saw the building collapse, watching in terror as their last hero was trapped under the crackling inferno of flames and rock. He could see the firefighters desperately trying to assuage the flames with their hoses but they
seemed too afraid to get closer to help Chat out. Could they hear the Akuma as well?

"ONE WORD, CHAT NOIR, AND YOU WILL BE FREE," Dragonfire sneered. Chat glanced above him. He saw a pair of large fuchsia eyes glaring at him, floating in the air. Dragonfire was most likely hanging on to the side of the building, his face dangerously close to Chat, breathing hot and heavy against his cheek.

He had no voice to speak with, lost to the smoke and flames, but Chat mouthed a clear "No."

Dragonfire growled, "THEN YOU SHALL MEET THE SAME FATE LADYBUG DID! OH HOW SHE MUST HAVE SUFFERED WHEN YOU LEFT HER TO DIE IN THAT WRECKAGE!"

Something inside Chat broke and he sobbed, his right arm slowly ceasing its flailing. His vision was darkening around the corners, the world around him swimming as his oxygen started to deplete. He was suffocating. He could no longer think. Dragonfire's terrible words were all that enveloped his mind.

"NOW YOU WILL FEEL HER PAIN. AND LIKE HER, THERE WILL BE NO ONE TO SAVE YOU!" Dragonfire snarled, "I WILL TAKE YOUR MIRACULOUS FROM YOUR SCORCHED, DEAD HANDS!"

Chat felt Dragonfire open his jaws, felt the familiar sensation of stifling heat building around him. He could even hear the toxic gases come together to form the deadly flame in the back of the Akuma's throat…

Chat Noir sucked in a breath, laid down his head, and closed his eyes.

_I'm sorry, Plagg... Marinette..._

He ceased moving and braced.

But the terrible stream of fire he expected never came.

Instead, he felt water splash on his face and soon after, heard Dragonfire's screech of pain. Chat opened his eyes a crack, but his vision was blurry, turning dark by the second. He saw a flash of magenta hurtling to the sky, screeching in anger. It flew away from Chat with a displeased roar, and disappeared into the clouds.

What was..._that_?

But he had no chance to ponder it. He got lightheaded and his vision tunneled. The smoke completely surrounded him, and he coughed pathetically against the floor, blood dripping down his lips. He couldn't breathe anymore, every pant, every wheeze, pointless. The world around him swam, turning darker and darker…

_Is this how it felt for you, Marinette?_ The thought came unbidden to his head. _Is this what you had to go through because I wasn't there for you?_

Tears slipped from his eyes, but they evaporated before hitting the ground. The fire was encompassing him, stifling him.

_I'm so sorry…_

_I'm so sorry you had to suffer…_
Forgive me…

Please…

He could hear yelling and someone calling his name, but his consciousness slipped away. He had ceased to breathe.

The pain suddenly lessened, his eyes fluttering closed.

And amidst the sound of his name being called, someone yelling at someone else to stop, and the crackling of flames, he was lost to the world.

---

He was laying on something soft. It was plump and comfortable. His eyes were closed, and he could feel slender fingers raking through his hair. He purred against the sensation and a beautiful laugh reached his ears.

Chat opened his eyes, green meeting gorgeous bluebell.

"Hello, Adrien," she said with a kind smile.

"Ladybug…" Chat replied with a lazy smile. She had his head laying on her folded legs, her gloved hand gently stroking his hair. He reached up with an arm, caressing her cheek with the back of his fingers. Her loose hair fell around his hand in soft waves, "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, kitty," she smiled. Although her body radiated no heat, he felt warm. She was a beacon of light, glowing ethereally above him, her eyes gentle, her smile sweet.

"Ladybug?"

"Yes?"

"You are so beautiful."

She chuckled, "So you've told me. Am I, really?"

Chat righted himself, only half registering they were on a flowery hill overlooking the city of Paris.

"Breathtakingly so," Chat murmured with a grin, getting his face so close to hers that their noses touched, his fingers dancing gently on the skin of her cheek. "Without a shadow of a doubt…"

"Well, that's very kind of you to say," she giggled, allowing his hand to slowly lower to caress her neck, and then her chin, fingers curling to grab it gently.

"My Lady?"

"Yes?"

"May I kiss you?"

She gave a sigh, and he was surprised to see her lids fall to half mast, "I thought you'd never ask."

Their lips met, soft and gentle, her pink lips moving on his confidently as her hands traveled up his chest to surround his neck with her arms. His hands moved to caress her upper back, pressing her closer to him.
"Adrien," she sighed against his mouth before retaking his lips again, suddenly moving on him with an eager desperation.

Her hands returned to his chest and he felt her push on him until he lay on his back, placing her legs on either side of him, straddling him. He was startled by her brazen approach, but he was immediately distracted by her lips returning to move on his eagerly, her hair tickling his cheeks.

He hummed at her excitement, parting his lips at her insistent plea for entrance. He felt warmth travel through him as she pressed her body to his, her tongue exploring the recesses of his mouth without hesitation. Chat angled his head, responding to her zeal with just as much yearning, deepening the kiss and exploring her back. His hands roved over her body, gently sliding up her sides and down her spine.

Heavens above, she was a goddess. He couldn't believe what was happening. His Lady, pressed against him, ravaging his mouth as if she owned him. She had utmost control over him and he was completely content. He would be hers until he ceased to draw breath.

In the haze of pleasant feelings consuming him, he idly felt one of her hands leave his chest to touch his forehead.

Heat exploded in his head upon contact, and his thoughts scrambled, images flitting through his head in rapid succession. He felt an insistent pressure, messing up his mind.

He groaned against her in protest, grimacing at the odd sensation.

"Shhh," she soothed against his mouth, her hand boring against his forehead, pressing his head against the grass. Her mouth slid down to his jawline, peppering it with kisses before they moved further down and reached his neck, warm lips surrounding the sensitive skin around his Adam's apple. He gasped at the sensation, forgetting for a moment about the pressure in his head. His body tingled with the most pleasant feeling he'd ever felt, skin alight with fluttering and goosebumps.

This was so unlike her. He never would've thought Ladybug could be this forward but his mind was so disconnected, his head too full of sensation, to question what was going on or fight it. His mind misted over. He couldn't stop. His restraint melted away. He let go of every inhibition and it felt great. He felt loved and wanted and oh he ached for so much more...

He grabbed her waist and he surprised both of them by pushing on her and rolling over until he lay on top of her. Her eyes were wide in surprise, but it didn't last long. Her lids lowered again, the corner of her lips raising seductively. One of her hands reached up to curl her fingers around the back of his neck and she pulled him down.

Their lips met again, but now he sought her hungrily, lips moving passionately against hers, a deep purr rumbling in his chest. She hummed in delight, angling her head to give him better access, her hands travelling up to caress the back of his head. He felt hot pressure again, and his mind exploded in white flashes, causing him to gasp against her lips, but she pulled him down again, forcing him against her.

"Shhh," she soothed again. Chat's mind went blank and he let go. His mouth left her lips to return her previous favor, kissing against her jawline and trailing down to her neck the same way she had done. He purred against her skin, loving the way it tingled under his lips. She sighed at his attentions, her lips stretching into a contented smile.

He was getting so into it, consumed by her scent and the feel of her body against his, until he felt something odd in his throat. He coughed against her skin, and he pulled back, choking.
"Adrien?" she asked. "What is it?"

Chat didn't respond, he was coughing insistently, face pulled tight in a grimace. He could distinguish the taste of coal and copper against his tongue and a sharp pain shot up from his chest. Her face contorted in worry and she straightened, cupping his face.

"Adrien, what's wrong?"

He moaned in response and he shrunk into himself. She frowned and brushed a thumb against his lips. She slowly withdrew her hand, finding her fingers stained red in his blood. She inhaled sharply.

"You need to wake up!" she said urgently, "Now!"

"I don't want to wake up..." he choked. "I don't want to go back!"

"You have to face the Akuma!" she insisted.

"I can't!" he cried, "I can't! I'm too weak, I can't beat him!"

"Paris needs you, Adrien!"

"I can't."

"It's fine, you can do this," she said encouragingly, cupping his cheeks gently and smiling, "I believe in you!"

Adrien gave a deep sigh, his cat ears drooping. "...Will I see you again?"

"Of course. I will be right here," she said, laying her forehead against his. His vision began to go black, as if his eyes were closing. He felt an invisible pull on his body, his skin alight with a tingling sensation. He could see a light glow brightly behind Ladybug.

"Adrien?"

"Yes, My Lady?"

"I love you..."

His world went dark.

"He's breathing again!"

"Oh, thank goodness..."

Chat's cat ears twitched. He could hear chatter farway, as if he was underwater, but mostly, he could hear his own labored breathing loud and clear in his head. He breathed erratically, and he felt a stifling sensation, as if there was something on his face. He frowned. Where was he?

"He's coming to..."

"Chat Noir?"

Chat wanted to nod but he couldn't move his body. When he tried, his breathing faltered. He focused on his breathing instead, trying to steady it. But no matter how much or how fast he breathed, it seemed like only a smidgen of it was getting to his lungs. He was suffocating. He could feel himself
fading again...

"Breathe deeply, son."

The voice was familiar. He couldn't place it but he didn't hesitate to obey it. He breathed in long and deep, concentrating on getting air into his body. Over and over, he breathed in steadily, and little by little, he could feel oxygen flowing through his body again. His mind began to clear.

"That's it, good job..."

Chat's eyes opened slowly. The world in front of him was blurry. The sky had darkened with the incoming rain, thunder rolling across the sky. He could see the red and yellow lights of sirens around him, splashes of dark colors meeting his gaze. There were people above him but he couldn't make them out. His body still felt dormant, lying prone on a soft surface. He was being held, his upper body and head being supported with what felt like an arm. There was something thick and transparent like a mask on his face, covering his nose and mouth.

"Chat Noir, can you hear us?" the familiar voice said again. It was a man on his left, big and burly. He could make out a bright blue shirt and brown hair. At the lack of a reply, the man leaned in closer, and Chat blinked slowly to focus on him.

Tom Dupain's face materialized in front of him. His hair and mustache were dirtied and disheveled, his face and shirt stained dark with soot, sweat, and grime.

"You okay, son?"

Chat tried to speak but only a squeak came out. His throat was sore, his mouth dry. He trembled slightly as feeling started returning to him.

"He'll be alright," the firefighter holding Chat said as he continued to hold the oxygen mask to Chat's face. He then nodded at someone beyond Chat's field of vision. "He's awake, bring the stretcher."

Stretcher?

No...

No no no!

Panic rose in Chat's chest like a firework. He couldn't be taken to the hospital. If he was taken like this, his identity would surely be discovered! He squirmed, limbs flailing weakly, hissing loudly as pain shot up from his left arm. He couldn't move it, and it lay useless at his side.

"Woah, calm down, Chat Noir!"

But Chat didn't stop, using his right arm to push against the mask on his face, legs kicking to get as far away a possible as he could from them. The firefighter held on to him, but his grasp slipped and Chat crawled away, wheezing as the oxygen mask was pulled from him. His back connected with a hard surface and he flinched, shrinking into himself like a frightened cat.

"Take it easy, we are just trying to help you!" the firefighter said, raising his hands as a peace offering.

Chat panted heavily, eyes flitting from place to place frantically. He coughed as he struggled to find his feet, gagging at the taste of ash and blood in his mouth. He rose shakily, his right hand finding support on the ambulance behind him as his left hung limp at his side. His head was swimming, and
through the haze he saw people around him, paramedics, firefighters, policemen, all looking at him, some trying to reach him…

He had to disappear.

Holding his left arm to his side with his right, he broke into a run, ignoring his body’s protests. He heard them call his name, begging him to stop, but Chat didn't slow down until he had managed to leap down the stairwell to the Seine and disappeared under the bridge.

He waited, pressed against the wall, but after a few moments he realized he hadn't been followed and he relaxed. He let out a breath and slumped to the floor, eyes sliding shut. It was still hard to breathe, but he was no longer suffocating. However, feeling was returning, and with it, all the pain from his wounds and illness. His left arm stung terribly, and it lay motionless on his lap.

It was probably broken.

He heaved a combination of a hiss and a sob, tears welling up at the edge of his eyes as he tried to ride out the pain. He couldn't detransform and get help. He knew losing Plagg’s protection would only make it worse and he was not ready for that. He was also not ready to face his father and Nathalie as Adrien.

His body however, was heating up again, his fever probably worsening from inhaling so much smoke, and he began to sweat. Everything hurt. Everything stung. Everything ached, and at one point it became so unbearable he blacked out against the wall, his body sliding sideways on the brick till he lay on his side, curled into a fetal position.

By the time he regained consciousness again he didn’t know how much time had passed. All he knew was that it was dark, it was raining, and he felt very very sick.

He needed help. Badly.

He regretted letting so much time pass. He should've listened to Plagg and Nino and everyone else. He had been so stupid. He could barely move, and if he transformed now it would be even worse. What could he do?

And it was then that a desperate thought slipped into his head.

*Please know that you are always welcome at our home. Whatever you may need, we will provide.*

The Dupain-Chengs.

They were close by, too. If he could only get a bit patched up...

But would he truly be welcome, especially after putting Madame Cheng at so much risk? He recalled Tom had been there when he was revived, looking as if he had been in the fire. Why was he there? He was asking if he was okay. Surely, he didn't hold hard feelings for him?

At any rate, it was his only option. It was worth a shot.

He pulled himself up with his one functional arm, shaking terribly with effort. It took him a full five minutes to stand, and by the time he managed it, he was panting. He found himself leaning on the wall for support, fighting back the nausea building in his throat. Trying to ignore the creaking of his joints, he walked forward with faltering steps. He gritted his teeth as every move sent sparks of pain up his body. He followed the wall with his hand, his vision going out of focus as he moved.
Rain poured on him like a torrent as he left the cover of the bridge and slowly dragged himself up the stairs. Each step easily took an entire minute to climb, and he was left exhausted, fighting to regain his breath. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he was chilled to the bone and breathing with great difficulty. His eyes threatened to close and his body was nearing the point of collapse, but he trudged on.

Soon his eyes ceased working properly. His vision had completely blurred, and he followed the general direction of the Bakery, pinpointed by the glow of the store. His knees gave out midway and he fell with a splash and a grunt, but he continued following the light, dragging himself to the Dupain-Cheng's doorstep. He could only pray that they'd be willing to help him...

He could see the dark door leading to the foyer, just a few feet away.

He was so close. So, so close…

THUMP!

Sabine jumped in her skin behind the register, her frightened eyes looking at the door behind her.

"Tom," she started.

"Stay here," Tom said, resting a comforting hand on her shoulder and grabbing a large roller from the table at the backend of the bakery. Tom walked to the foyer silently, holding his roller at the ready.

"Who's there?" he called.

No response.

"I'm warning you, I'm armed!"

Still no answer.

Tom arched an eyebrow then reached forward slowly with a hand, fingers curling around the knob. Taking a deep breath, he yanked back the door and raised his roller, but hesitated when he met empty air.

"Huh?"

"Who is it, Tom?"

Tom scratched his head, "No one, I think someone was—"

He stopped when he heard soft coughing from below. When he looked down, he instantly jumped back in surprise.

"Sabine!"

Sabine came running at the call, stopping in her tracks with a gasp when she saw Chat Noir collapsed on the doorstep in a puddle of rain, soaked to the skin, his face white and grimacing in pain.

"Oh my goodness, is he...?" she asked, quivering fingers over her mouth.

"No, he's still breathing," Tom said as he crouched on the ground, hand floating in front of Chat's
"But I think he's unconscious."

"Should we call an ambulance?" she asked.

"He didn't seem too keen on that earlier. We should probably ask him first," Tom said.

"But... we can't just wait and leave him there," she whispered, her eyes pleading.

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded, "We won't. Could you get the living room set up?"

Sabine nodded and went upstairs.

Tom moved cautiously, looking down both ends of the street to make sure there was no sign of the Akuma before he reached out with his arms and delicately turned Chat Noir on his back. He slipped both hands under his back and knees and hauled him up with ease. His body hung limp in Tom's strong arms and Chat Noir gave a small whimper of pain.

"Shh, I got you," Tom soothed, closing the door with his foot and ignoring the spreading cold on his chest. Chat Noir was drenched, his hair plastered to his face and droplets sliding down his leather suit and dripping to the floor. Although his eyes remained closed - leading Tom to believe he was unconscious- Chat Noir grunted softly with every step Tom took. He tried to climb slowly up the stairs, intent on causing Chat the least amount of pain possible, but it was clear to Tom that Chat Noir was in too bad of a shape to really make any difference.

He reached the living room, finding Sabine had already draped several blankets and towels across the couch in the middle of the room and subdued the lights. Tom moved towards the couch and gently lay down Chat Noir while Sabine helped ease his head on a pillow.

Chat's body settled into the soft surface, and he let out a shaky breath. He looked so pale and sick, a unhealthy flush peeking from underneath his mask and fading into the reddened skin of his burnt jaw.

"Mm...A...rm..." Chat slurred suddenly and Tom and Sabine jumped at the hoarseness of his voice.

"Chat Noir?" Tom asked.

"My... arm..." he repeated his eyes opening slightly as he tried to turn on his side, "Please..."

"Your arm?" Sabine asked. "Does your arm hurt?

Chat Noir groaned in pain as he tried to sit up with little success.

"Here, let me help you," Tom offered, grabbing him from the side and helping him right himself on the couch. Chat Noir swayed, but Tom held him steady.

"I... think it's... b-broken," Chat moaned, holding onto Tom with his right arm as he fought the dizziness, his left dangling at his side.

"Let me see," Tom said. He grabbed Chat's left arm - Chat had to stifle a hiss - and softly began kneading it with his fingers. The more he traveled up his arm, the more pained Chat's noises were.

"I feel something in your shoulder but I'd need to see it..." Tom scratched his head, taking a look at all of Chat's getup, "But I understand if you do not want to take off your suit...Uh, identity and all?"

"I-I can... a little," Chat rasped. He reached up with his right hand and grabbed his bell. With a few pulls he managed to lower it, opening the suit across his chest. He pulled on the bell until he reached
his navel, where the zipper ended. "That's... as far as it goes..."

"That works fine," Tom moved forward again, carefully grabbing the neck of his suit and gently pulling the fabric back and down his left arm. Chat gasped loudly as the fabric caused his arm to move.

"Oh dear," Sabine commented as Chat's shoulder came into view, and Tom hummed under his breath.

"That doesn't look good," he said.

Chat's shoulder was completely bruised, marred with splotches of purple and red. It was heavily swollen and it had a strange bump on its front, right beside Chat's collarbone. Tom gently pressed a finger to the bump and Chat cried loudly in pain. Tom then hummed in thought, removing his finger.

"Your arm isn't broken, but your shoulder is dislocated," Tom said finally. "That bump is the bone jutting out of the joint."

"C-Can you fix it?" Chat asked, his voice hitching.

"I could try. But technically only a doctor should do this," Tom began, "We could get you help—"

"No, please," Chat begged, his eyes glistening, "Try..."

Tom tried to refuse him, but in the end, seeing Chat in so much pain and begging so hard softened his heart. He sighed in defeat, looking hesitantly at Sabine before repositioning himself, "Alright, if that's what you want, but it will be unpleasant."

"Do what you must."

Tom nodded before taking a clean hand towel from the pile Sabine had brought and offering it to Chat. "Take this. Put it in your mouth."

"What for?" Chat asked, grabbing the towel with his right hand.

"This might hurt," Tom said, looking at him meaningfully.

Chat gulped but nodded quietly. He opened his mouth, settled the towel there, and bit down.

Tom nodded, "Sabine, please hold him. I need you to pull from the other side."

Sabine moved to surround Chat around his torso with her arms, one of them going under his left armpit to leave his arm free. Chat swallowed nervously and closed his eyes, the fingers on his right hand curling on the edge of the couch to avoid hurting Sabine in the process.

"Are you ready?" Tom asked.

Chat nodded.

"All right, here goes."

Tom grabbed his arm and pulled on it, but he could've popped it right off and it probably would've hurt less. Pain like a electric current shot from Chat's shoulder and his back arched, a terrible scream ripping from his throat and muffled by the towel in his mouth.

"It's going to be ok, hang in there, Chat!" Tom encouraged. He pulled a bit harder on his arm,
twisting and tugging to get the shoulder dislodged from its current position. Sabine held on to Chat's torso, pulling in the opposite direction as steady as she could while Chat wriggled under her grasp. Managing to dislodge it, Tom grunted as he now tried to get the joint back into its place, but Chat was thrashing too much. For him, it burnt like a searing sun, sending jolts of painful electricity up and down his muscles, to the point he just wanted to rip it off and be done with it. They could hear him sobbing behind his gag.

"It's already halfway in, please hold on a little bit longer!" Tom begged, pressing him down against the couch with one hand as the other tried to force the shoulder joint back in. Chat yowled terribly, claws sinking into the soft fabric of the couch, tears streaming from his eyes. Then, a soft clack sounded from his arm and Chat quieted abruptly. His body shivered briefly and he collapsed against Sabine, his head hanging over her shoulder, and his whole body going slack.

"Oh god, I think I killed him…" Tom said, his face contorted in worry.

"No, he just passed out," Sabine told him with a reassuring smile as she stroked Chat's head gently and laid him back down on the couch, removing the towel from his mouth and wiping his tear streaked face. "We should put that in a sling before he wakes up again."

"Yes, good plan." Tom said nervously, "I'll go get the kit."

"That should do it," Tom said with a satisfied nod.

Chat's arm had been set and bandaged around his torso to prevent it from moving and Sabine had placed an ice pack wrapped in a towel on his shoulder to lower the swelling. They both sat back down on the remaining couch and lay in silence for a few moments, simply regarding the unconscious hero contemplatively.

There was something rather unnerving about having one of Paris' superheroes lying broken in your living room at almost 8 o'clock in the night. Previously the paragons of justice, both Ladybug and Chat Noir had seemed unstoppable, a beacon of strength and resilience. They needed no one's help but their own. They always came out of tough situations unscathed, radiant, and with big smiles on their faces. They conquered battle after battle with barely a tired breath…

But now, a villain had finally managed to vanquish one of their beloved heroes - Ladybug, the Light of Paris - and it seemed like their last remaining hope was fast approaching her side, barely able to keep up without his invaluable companion…

It was clear to them now, that they were a balance. One could not survive without the other for long, and that fact was becoming clearer and more preoccupying as the days went by. They knew Chat Noir was trying his hardest to make up for it, but something in their hearts told them that it would not be enough. Chat Noir was wasting away right in front of them. With every appearance, he looked worse and worse for the wear, his back hunched a little bit more with every battle, his eyes more vacant after every struggle, and his smile long absent from his face.

They feared for him.

"Can you imagine what it must be like?" Sabine asked Tom suddenly.

"What, dear?"

"Going through this?" Sabine said, her eyes sad as she leaned on him, "He is just a child, Tom. He mustn't be any older than Marinette, and yet… He's doing things not even adults should be doing, or going through. Things he shouldn't have any responsibility for."
"I guess it's part of the whole hero package," Tom said, surrounding Sabine with an arm as they cuddled together, "Being young. Doing risky, dangerous things to protect the city..."

"His family must be so worried for him," Sabine said.

"Or perhaps... he doesn't have one," Tom suggested softly, "Maybe that's why we didn't hear anything from Ladybug's family, either. It could be a hero requirement, to have no ties...

"I guess it makes sense but… That would be terrible," Sabine said, rubbing her arms, "Do you really think he is all by himself? In this state?"

"I don't know. Ladybug and Chat Noir probably looked after each other all the time, but with her gone...It makes me think he came to us for a reason," Tom scratched his head, "He trusts us. Otherwise going to family would've been my first course of action if I had been hurt."

"That's true," Sabine sighed, "It just pains me to think he has nothing to return to. No one should have to go through this alone...."

"Which is why we are going to help him. He will pull through," Tom said reassuringly, holding Sabine to him, "He's a strong guy."

Sabine nodded, and looked silently at the suffering boy in front them, breathing heavy in his troubled sleep, and wishing there was more she could do for him.

Sabine wasn't sure at what point she and Tom drifted off, but by the time she woke again, it was nearly 11 pm, according to the clock hanging on the kitchen wall. She raised her head from Tom's chest, blinking blearily and noticing he was still fast asleep and snoring through his mustache. Smiling, she was about to lay down again when she heard soft sobbing, followed by unintelligible mumbling.

Chat was stirring on the couch, limbs rustling the covers as he moved with some kind of subdued desperation, head turning back and forth against the pillow. He was sobbing inconsolably, words softly slurring past his lips.

Concerned, Sabine quietly stood up to kneel at Chat's side. He seemed to still be asleep, but he was sweating something fierce, cheeks glistening with tears, and eyes squeezed shut against some unknown terror behind his lids. His lips parted, panting or otherwise gasping out words Sabine could not make out. At some points though, she thought she could hear the name Ladybug falling from his lips over and over, and her heart ached for him.

"Shhh, it's alright," she whispered soothingly, delicately smoothing his tussled hair away from his face. Chat seemed to slow down in his movements, head turning unconsciously towards Sabine. He continued to cry for Ladybug, and Sabine continued shushing him, whispering soft, comforting words close to his ear while gently stroking his head until he seemed to calm down. He started to ease up, arm and legs relaxing against the couch, fingers uncurling from the blanket underneath him.

"You're safe, you're okay," Sabine continued to whisper until Chat's sobbing had faded into quiet sniffling, though not once did he wake.

She reached for a hand towel from the pile on the coffee table and gently dabbed at his face, cleaning off all the grime and sweat on his skin. He grimaced in his sleep when she rubbed over the sore, burnt parts, but didn't move otherwise. After several minutes, she was done cleaning his face and drying his hair, and she laid down the towel, hand moving up to gently stroke his head. Her fingers threaded softly through his golden hair, caressing both his leather ears and real ones in a relaxing
Chat Noir shifted moments later, his chest rising and falling with his slow, heavy breathing and his eyes lazily opened to half mast, looking at the room and Sabine vacantly. He didn't seem to be quite there however, looking at her as if he was in a daze, his eyes unfocused, his gaze disoriented. She noticed that his usually slitted pupils were blown wide, dilated a far as they could go, nearly making his green eyes appear black. She wasn't an expert on animal biology, but she did know that when a cat's eyes were completely dilated, it could only mean one of two things: excitement, or pain.

She was more than inclined to believe the latter, and her heart broke in two for him. He was surely hurting, but he was too exhausted to show it anymore.

Her fingers gently caressed his cheek, reaching up to brush the hair out of his eyes. He watched her silently for a long while, his lethargic eyes following her like a lost child, his mind seemingly absent. Moisture suddenly gathered at the corners of his eyes and he mouthed something, but no sound came out from his lips. Perplexed, Sabine leaned forward, trying to make it out…

"M-maman…"

Sabine's eyes widened and she pulled back.

"Maman…" Chat breathed again, clearly delirious, a quivering smile forming on his lips, his hand weakly reaching out for her. "Maman…"

"I'm not…" Sabine started but she hesitated as his glassy, dazed eyes looked at her adoringly like a small child. He looked so happy, calling for her with such yearning. Something in her chest stirred. A mix of tenderness and terrible sadness.

Sucking in a shuddering breath, Sabine smiled at him, "Yes, I'm here. I'm right here."

Chat smiled in contentment and leaned his face into her tender touch, closing his eyes again and letting out a soft sigh. Shortly after, Sabine heard a soft rumbling sound, and felt a tingling sensation against the palm of her hand.

She blinked several times.

Was he…?

"He can purr?" Sabine jumped a bit, startled to find Tom had apparently woken up at some point. His sleepy eyes were wide, staring at Chat's prone form purring to his heart's content as he nuzzled Sabine's hand.

"Apparently so," Sabine chuckled and continued to tenderly caress Chat's face as she would her own child, smiling at his relaxed expression and pleased purring as it mingled with the soft patter of the rain against the windowpanes. The sight of his sickish but content visage made her heart melt. It sparked every motherly instinct in her body and all of a sudden she wanted nothing but to protect him and free him from all his pain, hold him to her and tell him everything would be alright. He had been through so much suffering and loneliness...

Eyes glistening, Sabine leaned forward to press a kiss against his forehead, but she frowned suddenly and pulled back instantly, her hand flying to Chat's forehead.

"What is it?" Tom asked at her strange expression.
"He's burning up," she said, reaching forward with another hand to touch his neck but the more she touched him the more worried she became. His breathing was searing hot and heavy, and he wouldn't stop sweating. He wasn't just burning up.

He was boiling.

"No wonder he's delirious, he's really sick," Sabine said, concerned, "Come. Feel him."

Tom's brows furrowed, and he leaned over placing one of his large hands on Chat Noir's temple. He withdrew his hand with a hum.

"That's one heck of a fever," Tom said, "I don't think just medicine will be enough."

"What can we do?" Sabine asked, "We can't just drop him in a bath all dressed like this, can we?"

"Hang on, I have an idea," Tom said as he stood up, walking to the kitchen. A few moments later he came back with some small plastic bags filled to the brim with ice cubes. He placed them down carefully between Chat's arms and at either side of his neck. Chat frowned in his sleep, his purring slowing to a stop.

"That should help a bit," Tom said. "I will go out and see if I can get some medicine. Can you handle it on your own?"

"I'll be fine. I'll cook some dinner in the meantime," Sabine said, "Be careful out there."

"Of course, dear. I won't be long."

The next time Chat Noir's consciousness stirred was an hour later and he woke to the sound of television static and garbled voices. His body felt strange, heavy, alternating waves of hot and cold rippling through him. He felt a cool and humid sensation on his head and naked chest, as well as on his neck and arms, but the rest of him felt terribly warm and he shifted in discomfort.

He paused, however, when his nose was tickled by the sudden delicious smell of broth and chicken. His stomach grumbled noisily in response and he grimaced as the sensation made his stomach and its surrounding muscles ache unpleasantly.

"Someone sounds hungry."

Chat opened his eyes slowly, finding Madame Cheng kneeling in front of him, framed by the bluish-white glow of the television behind her. The room was nearly plunged in darkness, a single fixture on the entrance of the room being the only source of light and the only thing allowing him to see the woman in front of him, gently stroking the feverish skin on his face and chest with a wet cloth.

Wait… where was he, again?

Oh right, he was at the Dupain-Chengs. Had he passed out? He had trouble recalling details prior to waking up, so he groggily did a personal assessment. He could not move his left arm, he realized. It seemed to be bandaged up against his body, set in a sling. There was a dull pain in his shoulder but it hurt way less now than how it did earlier. He still felt debilitated and disoriented, his body not quite catching up with his mind waking up. Wherever he was laying on though, it was soft and comfortable, soothing on his aching wounds, and it took everything out of him not to drift to sleep again. He tried to speak but a yawn came out instead.

Sabine smiled, reaching out with a hand and dragging the wet cloth across his forehead.
"How are you feeling?" She asked softly.

Chat swallowed, coaxing his stiff jaw to move and his vocal cords to function again.

"A bit… warm but… better," Chat breathed slowly, his eyelids heavy as he blinked slowly.

"You have a fever," Sabine said, then reached behind her to get a steaming bowl from the coffee table, "It's come down a bit, but I made some soup for you to help. Would you like to try it? Are you hungry?"

"Famished," Chat confessed, voice hoarse with dehydration, flashing her a small, grateful smile. He tried to sit up with a grunt, but his good arm trembled underneath him and he fell back into the pillow with a frustrated sigh. He still felt so weak and frail. He tried once more, and Tom appeared from the kitchen to help him straighten up on the couch, removing the bags of ice and wet cloths from around him. Chat forced back a groan as his left shoulder shifted and sighed when he finally managed to sit up straight, resting his good arm on his knee and hunching over. "Thank you."

"Well, you are looking a right sight better already," Tom said encouragingly as he took everything back to the kitchen. Chat smiled amicably but he knew he looked like a human disaster. Although less swollen, the bruise on his shoulder still looked terrible, pretty much a mishmash of every hue of purple and red in existence. His body felt like a truck towing a horse cart had run him over repeatedly He couldn't even get his cat ears to straighten; they were left lying listlessly against his head. He was pretty sure that if he hadn't been wearing a mask, he'd have dark circles around his eyes and they'd be red instead of green from exhaustion.

Sabine sat down beside Chat on the couch, blew on a spoonful of soup, and offered it to him. He felt himself blush at the prospect of having to be spoon-fed but it couldn't be helped. His left arm was useless and his right still felt impossibly heavy. He meekly leaned forward and took the spoon into his mouth, immediately unable to conceal the moan of delight at the explosion of flavor on his tongue. He swallowed the savory broth with a hum and his stomach immediately growled for more.

"This is so good," Chat sighed, taking a second spoonful as eagerly as a starved stray. Whatever embarrassment he might have felt for being fed this way melted away in his desperation to quell his painful hunger. He realized with concern that he hadn't eaten well in days; this felt like a godsend to his Cataclysm-scorched stomach. For once, he didn't feel like throwing up.

_God_, this family was unbelievably amazing with food. He might have the best chef in Paris as his personal cook back at home, but nothing could beat the warm, homey meals the Dupain-Chengs offered him. He was pretty sure that quiche had become his favorite dish thanks to Tom's delectable pies, not to mention their macarons and croissants. Simply to die for.

His stomach groaned once more at the memories.

"I'm so glad you like it," Sabine said, smiling as Chat ate heartily, relieved to see him perking up. "We got you some medicine too, but you need to eat first."

Chat swallowed the soup and went quiet, his eyes looking at the floor.

Had they really gone out of their way to shelter him and look after him to make sure he felt better? They had absolutely no obligation, and yet still went the extra mile _for him_. Why had he been so afraid? If there had ever been a spark of uncertainty about how they felt about him, it completely snuffed out with this.

"Are you alright?" Sabine asked at his sudden silence.
Chat looked at her warmly, and bowed his head.

"Thank you so much for taking care of me." His voice was soft, almost reverential, seeping gratitude and appreciation. "I'm in your debt."

"You don't owe us anything," Sabine said gently, cupping Chat's face to make him look back at her, "If anything, we owe you. You've done so much for us. You've protected our daughter, you've protected us, you've protected this city with every ounce of your strength… We all owe you our lives."

She put the bowl aside and pulled him into a warm embrace, mindful of his injured arm. Chat melted into her arms instantly, surrounding her with his right arm and nuzzling up to the side of her face.

"I mean it, Chat Noir," Sabine said gently, "You will always be welcome at our home."

"Thank you, Madame," he said in a whisper.

Sabine pulled back and looked earnestly at him, one of her hands cupping his cheek. She bit her lower lip, hesitating.

"Madame?" Chat asked.

"I meant to ask you something, Chat."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any family?"

Chat's blinked and he stuttered, pulling back from Sabine. "F-family…?"

"I mean, is there someone waiting for you back at home?" Sabine continued, "Someone that looks after you?"

"Uh…" he avoided her gaze and swallowed awkwardly. How could he explain that what little family he had didn't really act like one? And that the only thing waiting for him back at home was a big, empty room with nothing but his shadow to keep him company?

Chat suddenly jumped as a ringing sound like a phone went off somewhere, breaking the uncomfortable silence between him and Sabine with its intermittent ringing.

"Oh, excuse me. I'll get it," she said as she stood up. She reached for the phone on the kitchen counter and clicked the call button. As she busied herself, Tom came forward with a glass of water and a pill on his hand and sat down beside Chat.

"Here, drink this. It's Ibuprofen, so it should help with the fever," Tom told him, handing him the pill, which Chat took gingerly in one hand. "How are you doing?" he asked, setting the glass down within arms reach.

"I've been better," Chat confessed with a meek smile, shrugging his good shoulder.

"Yeah I'd imagine," Tom said sadly, "I had never seen you guys get this hurt before."

Chat's ears drooped.

"That was because of Ladybug," he explained, his voice low as his eyes fell to the floor. "She had this ability that fixed everything at the end of every battle. It could heal us as well. So with her
"Oh, I see," Tom said. "I'm really sorry."

"It's okay, I'll manage," Chat said as he popped the pill in his mouth and took a long swig of water to swallow it. He sighed as the water cooled his parched throat. "Thank you for this, really."

"It's our pleasure to help. You just let us know if you need anything else, okay?" Tom said, giving him a soft pat on the back, although Chat still had to conceal the hiss of pain that came with the contact of the leather on his burnt back.

"I will," Chat promised, putting the glass down and retrieving the bowl to finish his meal. Even though his hand was far from steady, he still managed to lap up soup with the spoon to continue eating, savoring every bit of chicken and vegetable in the broth as if he had never eaten such delectable things before, "Mmm. This is delicious."

"Nothing like Sabine's cooking to deal with a bad bug," Tom said with a hearty chuckle.

"Yeah, I'd never want to miss out on her fantastic cooking," Chat agreed, downing another spoonful eagerly and completely missing the way Tom's eyebrow quirked curiously. It wasn't until he was met with ongoing silence that Chat turned to Tom. He was squinting at him, like he was trying to figure something out in his head.

Chat gulped uncomfortably.

"Mr. Dupain?" Chat asked.

"So, you've tried our food, huh?" Tom asked nonchalantly, resting his head on his hand with his elbow on the headrest.

"Ah, yes, I have." Chat said, and then added hurriedly, "Your bread is known as the best in Paris, after all."

Tom's eyebrows raised. "Ah, good. Which pastry is your favorite, if you don't mind me asking?"

A cold feeling ran down Chat's spine and he was suddenly not sure he wanted to answer that question. Something about the way Tom was looking at him with such familiarity was throwing him off. Had he said something wrong?

"Uh, um, the croissants are really good," Chat said quickly, saying the first thing that came to his mind, "And the éclairs... The filling is really great."

Tom hummed under his breath, then nodded, "Well, I'm glad you enjoy them. I can't believe the great Chat Noir has eaten from our Bakery! What an honor!" Tom laughed heartily.

Chat chuckled awkwardly with him, blowing at a soup-laden spoon, "Yeah, it's really fantast—"

"Adrien?"

Chat choked on his broth and his heart jumped to his throat, his blood instantly going cold. He snapped his head around to look at Sabine behind him, eyes wide, but she wasn't looking at him. She was still on the phone, her brows furrowed in worry.

"What do you mean he's missing?" Sabine asked the person on the line. There was some rushed talking on the other side of the phone, and Sabine nodded, "Yes, Ms. Sancoeur, I understand. We
Chat felt the cold sweat forming on the back of his neck. They were looking for him? Dammit! He had been gone for far too long. Not only were Gorilla and Nathalie likely facing his father's wrath right this moment, but if he found out where Adrien had been... There was no way Nathalie or Gorilla would ever let him out of their sight again.

He was in so much trouble.

She hung up and turned to Tom, her face furrowed in concern.

"What happened to Adrien?" Tom asked Sabine.

"They can't find him. He disappeared right before the Akuma attacked the school and hasn't been seen since then. They thought he might have gone to a friend's house but Nino and Alya haven't seen him either. They've been looking for him all over the place."

"Oh, that's terrible. Have they gotten the police on the case?"

"They are about to if he doesn't show up in the next couple of hours, but they were hoping he had taken shelter somewhere nearby."

"You don't think he was caught up in the fire do you?" Tom asked.

"No, the firefighters didn't find anything. Everyone made it out, thank heavens." Sabine said with a sigh, "But I worry for him. Did he look a tad under the weather to you yesterday?"

"Yeah, he didn't look too good."

Chat didn't miss the swift glance Tom gave him before turning to his wife again.

"His father must be worried sick. I hope he turns up soon," Sabine said with a sigh, seating herself between Tom and Chat, "Are you alright, Chat?"

Chat, who had stayed quiet and stone-still during the exchange, looked at her from the corner of his eye, sweat dribbling down the side of his face, "Y-Yeah, I'm okay…"

"Are you sure? You look a bit shaken…"

"I'm fine," he smiled awkwardly, "And about your question, I...," he stuttered, avoiding her gaze, "There isn't anyone. I mean, I-like family..."

He felt terrible lying to Sabine, but he couldn't risk them or himself any more than what he had already done by coming to them. They had already done too much for him to get them involved any further. He had to keep his ties as vague as possible, no matter how much he ached to have the support and understanding.

"Oh, that's unfortunate, I'm really sorry," Sabine said, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder, "Then please know that you are welcome to stay for as long as you want."

"Thank you Madame, but you've done enough for me," he said apologetically, "I wouldn't like to burden you any further."
"You can never be a burden, Chat," she smiled, "How is your arm?"

"It still hurts some but it's better. Thank you so much for fixing it for me," Chat said gratefully, stealing a nervous glance at Tom.

"Anytime," Tom said, beaming at him.

They fell into companionable silence while Chat finished eating his food, and Tom and Sabine started some idle chatter as they watched the television. They switched channels until they stopped on a pre-recorded news broadcast that recounted the day's attacks. Chat's spoon paused in front of his mouth as he looked at the scenes being displayed, enraptured.

The marquee "AKUMA REVEALED" scrolled on the bottom of the screen as they played amateur scenes from the fire. It was footage recorded with several cellphones, taken by people who had been recording from behind the cordon set around the perimeter.

He could see himself, trapped underneath the wreckage of the school engulfed in flames, struggling to get out. He could see the moment he turned his head to look at Dragonfire, who was invisible to the eyes of the witnesses recording except for his giant, glowing eyes. He saw the moment an orb of fire began to form above his trapped form, which signaled Dragonfire preparing to roast him, and the firefighters shooting jets of water at the flames leaking through the windows.

"Aim up!" a voice screamed suddenly in one of the recordings. A voice he soon recognized as Alya's. "Aim further up!"

Why had she wanted the firefighters to do that?

His past self had already laid his head on the floor and closed his eyes in defeat. Alya continued screaming at the firefighters to aim their hoses up, but only one actually did.

It did the trick.

Chat's eyes widened at what happened next, his spoon clattering against the bowl and splashing soup around him.

The jet of water from the hose hit the mark and the moment the liquid made contact with the Akuma, a deafening screech of pain flooded the area. The video shifted and trembled as the recorder tried to take cover, but Chat could still see it clearly...

It looked like a wave was coursing through the Akuma. Invisible flakes rippled to reveal bright magenta scales and orange stripes on a long, muscular reptilian body. An enormous wyvern, easily as large as a double-decker bus, materialized out of thin air as his camouflage fell away with the water.

He screeched as he hung from the side of the building like a lizard, teal claws like gemstones scratching at the walls in his desperation, spiked tail swishing in anger. He beat its wings in rage, shaking off the water and roaring at the onlookers as smoke trailed from his scaly skin, as if burnt. He landed on the ground with a big tremor, building a ball of fire in his throat and turning on the firefighters, but it sizzled and sparked in its jaws and nothing came out. He tried again, but the same thing happened and Dragonfire's snout smoked with his failed attempts.

With a frustrated roar, he flapped his big, velvety wings and took to the skies, shooting up to hide among the dark clouds with an echoing screech. As the footage was repeated in slow motion for the benefit of the audience watching the broadcast, Chat finally saw it as the Akuma flew off. The akumatized object. A golden chain tied around Dragonfire's ankle! His Akuma was in the anklet!
"He's… weak to water," Chat whispered in wonder, more to himself than to the other two occupants of the room.

His mind reeled with the revelation. That's why he had fled on the battle at the park. It had begun to rain and Dragonfire was weak to water! He couldn't breathe fire when his skin got wet and it caused him pain! That was it! That's how he could beat him! Alya must have lost sleep trying to figure out what had happened during the battle at the park and gosh, he could kiss her right now!

Bless that infuriating journalist nosiness of her! How else would she know to look into Dragonfire's weak point? Who else but her would be observant enough to figure out how Ladybug and he operated and how the Akumas worked?

Chat's attention got brought back to the television as a lot of yelling broke out on the scene.

"Get him out!" a lot of people yelled, "Save him!"

Save who?

"He's suffocating!"

"Chat Noir, fight!"

Chat's heart clenched as he heard people trying to get the fire brigade to save him, going so far as to try to jump over the cordon to personally rush to his aid. Policemen and firefighters staved off the civilians as they tried to get to his prone body, passed out from asphyxiation.

And then, a flash of blue caught his eye. It took him a bit to recognize him, but he distinctly made out Tom Dupain rushing from the bakery and barreling through the firefighters trying to hold him off. He made it to Chat Noir's side amongst screams of protest from the officers present, deaf to their yelling.

Tom immediately moved to grab the block of cement crushing Chat, trying to pull it off him. Seeing as they could not stop him, some firefighters chose to rush to Tom's side to assist him. After several grueling seconds they managed to lift the rock high enough to free Chat's legs, and Tom immediately moved to take Chat in his arms and pull him to safety, both of them covered in soot and dirt, and him lying motionless in Tom's arms.

The footage cut off and Nadja Chamack reappeared on the screen to summarize the events. But Chat was too distracted to listen to whatever she had to say. His heart was thumping fast in his chest, nearly ready to burst, and he looked at Tom, who was not looking at him but watching the tv impassively.

"You… you saved my life," Chat croaked. "You could've gotten hurt but...you…"

"You saved my daughter and my wife," Tom said, finally looking at Chat as he held Sabine to him to emphasize his point, a placid smile on his face "I had to return the favor somehow, don't you think?"

Chat could've cried right there. He could feel his eyes stinging, tears gathering at his eyes and a lump forming in his throat but he held himself back, choosing instead to flash Tom a quivering, grateful smile, "Thank you so much. Really, thank you..."

He decided right there and then that he would forever fight to protect this family.

"There is nothing to thank," Tom said, smiling widely at him.
"I can stop him now," Chat whispered with a grin.

"Beg your pardon?" Tom asked.

"Dragonfire. I know how to stop him now," Chat said, his face lighting up. He slowly pulled himself to his feet with a grunt, his body shaking with the effort of keeping him standing as he stumbled away from the couch, teeth gritted against his pain.

He felt like he could break at any moment, breath coming short in his throat, but he'd be damned if he'd waste this opportunity.

"Chat Noir, wait!" Sabine said, reaching for him. "What are you doing? You can't go out like this!"

"I may not get another chance!" Chat panted, inching towards the window in faltering, weak steps, "He...he... is vulnerable right now, ah..."

The room spun and Chat stumbled sideways, crashing noisily against the kitchen table.

"Chat Noir!" Sabine rushed to his side.

Chat Noir wheezed as he tried to pull himself up with his good arm, holding Sabine off by turning his body the other way. He clambered up with what little strength he had, beads of sweat forming at his brow as he reached down to zip up his suit again. His body hurt and burned, exhausted beyond measure and feeling as if his limbs would fall off at any moment, but his will kept him moving.

"Please, stay put!" Sabine begged. "You're going to hurt yourself!"

"You cannot fight like this, Chat Noir! You need to save your strength!" Tom said, rushing to his side as well.

"I... I have to do this," Chat panted, shaking his head to stop the room spinning, "I have to finish this once and for all..." He inched closer to the window, grabbing the baton on his back. He was going to have a tough time vaulting with one arm injured, but there was no other way.

Chat grunted as he lost his balance again and slammed against the side of the window hard. Something clattered to the floor underneath him but he paid it no mind. He was too busy coordinating his limbs to check what he had broken. He dragged himself up again.

"Chat-!"

"Thank you, Madame, Monsieur...for all your hospitality," Chat bowed his head at them and pulled the window open, climbing over the railing and jumping off into the storm before he could be stopped. By the time Sabine rushed to the window to call him back, he had disappeared into the darkness of the night.

"Chat Noir," she lamented, her head dropping with a sigh, Tom came up beside her, rubbing her shoulder soothingly.

"Let's just pray he will be alright," Tom told her, "In the end, he knows he is welcome back here."

"I know that but..." she trailed off.

Resigned, she turned to close the window but paused when something on the floor caught her attention. She recalled something clattering to the floor when Chat crashed against the window and she leaned down to pick up whatever it was that Chat Noir had dropped before he left. Her fingers
closed around something stringy and light and she turned her hand around, putting the object to the light.

A bracelet, made with red string with a large green bead in the center and smaller yellow and pink beads on either side met her gaze.

Her eyes widened and her fearful eyes snapped up to look at the unknown darkness beyond the window, her voice barely above a whisper:

"Adrien?"

Chapter End Notes

You dun goof’d boi
Alya tapped the end of her pen against her chin pensively. She sighed to herself, rubbing her tired eyes. She had been lying in the dark for a while, with nothing but the bright blue light of her laptop to keep her company. She laid on her bed, scrolling idly down her Ladyblog, only half reading the posts on it.

Her siblings had long since gone to bed, but she couldn't for the life of her get to sleep despite the soothing pitter patter of the rain. The day's events still swirled incessantly in her head. As hard as she tried, she still found herself unable to wrap her head around some of the details yet.

To name a few: Adrien, sick and hurt, somehow managing to escape the school before it was destroyed by the dragon Akuma; Alya still flabbergasted that she had nailed its weakness from watching amateur videos of the attack at the park over and over; Chat Noir narrowly escaping certain death thanks to a last-minute save from Tom Dupain; Adrien going missing; Nino and Alya helping Nathalie look for him with no results; Nino freaking out, to the point of having a breakdown...

The image of his tired, tear-filled eyes had been stuck in her head since he had dropped her off earlier; she couldn't make it go away.

Sure, she was worried sick for Adrien too, but Nino was a whole different story. Nino blamed himself endlessly for never noticing Adrien's dire state and not helping him out, no matter how much Alya tried to reassure him that no one could've known. He kept beating himself up, describing himself with harsh expletives and moping over his negligence. In the end, she let him grieve in his own way, even though it tore at her heart to see him so heartbroken.
She understood where he was coming from. Nino had told her that before she arrived at Françoise-Dupont, he wasn't the easiest person to approach and thus had no real friends. Adrien had been his first. Finally, someone he could call a best bud… Losing Adrien like this, the first person he had ever considered close to a brother, was world-shattering. It had been the same way with Alya and Marinette.

But there was something that Alya simply couldn't shake off about Adrien. Something suspicious. She hadn't mentioned it to Nino - he was distraught as it was - but she had noticed that something had been going on with him the past few weeks. His mounting illness, his sudden exhaustion and - dare she say it? - his growing depression…?

She realized that it all coincided not just with Marinette's accident, but with Ladybug's death as well.

Had Adrien been friends with Ladybug?

She wouldn't have been surprised, considering his social status; he was in a position to get to know some of the most influential people in Paris. She had entertained the thought with mild interest the past few days, but didn't give it much weight until that morning. That morning something else had caught her eye, something that made an idea click and a tingle to rise on the back of her neck.

Sure, the burn on his back was peculiar, but the scar on his arm was what really got her. The pattern was not normal. It almost seemed like something like electricity mixed with fire had singed the skin, and curiously, the scar seemed to branch out exactly from the ring around his finger, as if it had originated from it. What had happened to give him such a curious mark?

And didn't the ring look a tad familiar?

It nagged at her with insistence and she grit her teeth in frustration.

And if that hadn't been enough, the sadness in Adrien's eyes threw up another red flag. There was so much desolation, so much loss. They held the kind of loneliness you'd find in someone who had just lost a part of himself. And recently, she had only seen such a look on one other person...

Could it be that Adrien was—

Tap, tap.

Alya jumped at the sound and turned to the window. It was late into the night and it was hard to see out through the thick sheets of dark rain. She wondered if perhaps a bird or critter had bumped into her window?

Tap, tap.

No, that seemed too deliberate. Setting her laptop aside, Alya stood from the bed and walked to the window, curiously peering through the glass. Finally she saw it, something dark coming up the lower edge of the window and rapping on the glass.

It looked like a hand.

A hand? On the second floor?

Alarmed, Alya jerked the window open, turning her head against the rain and wind. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness outside and she gasped.

In front of her window, hanging precariously from his extended staff, one arm bandaged against his
chest and the other holding onto his baton for dear life while his legs wrapped tightly around the metal, was a soaking wet Chat Noir.

"Chat Noir?!"

"M-May I c-c-come in?" He croaked, his teeth chattering against the cold and glowing green eyes squinted against the rain.

"What? Oh! O-Of course," Alya said, tripping over her words as she reached forward to grab him and help him in through the window. He struggled terribly, grunting under his breath; every little move seemed to pain him. Wrapping her fingers around the back part of his belt, Alya pulled until Chat Noir slithered through the window and slid onto the floor of her room on all fours, breathing hard.

He shivered, unable to stop himself from shrinking into a ball to keep what little body heat he had left, wet hair plastered to his face and water dripping all over the floor. Alya quickly tugged the bedspread from her bed, easing it around Chat's trembling frame.

"T-Thank you…” he whispered through quivering lips, hand going out to tug the bedspread tighter around himself.

"Are you okay?" Alya said, kneeling at his side and rubbing his back.

"I've b-been b-better…” he wheezed, trying but failing to show her a small smile.

"What happened? What's wrong with your arm?" Alya asked him as she watched him reposition himself so his bandaged arm would not be upset, wrapping the comforter closer to his body with his good arm. With every tiny move he made, he grit his teeth and his eyes squeezed shut.

"D-dislocated it, but it'll be fine, never m-mind it…” his nose scrunched suddenly and he sneezed, covering his face with the back of his arm. He sniffled miserably and sighed.

"À tes souhaits. You don't sound so good. Do you need anything?" she offered.

Chat shook his head vehemently, "No t-time, I n-need your help…"

"Help? With what?" Alya's eyebrow perked up in curiosity.

"You f-figured it out," he coughed, tired eyes barely focused on her, "Y-you figured out his weakpoint. I need to f-find him… Can you h-help me find the Ak-kuma?"

"I could try but..." Alya looked him over with her eyebrow still raised. He was shivering fiercely, his face was pasty white, and he looked so sick it seemed he could pass out at any moment, "Are you sure you should take him on? You seem kind of..." Unable to find the right words, she simply gestured to where he lay in a shivering heap.

"A-Alya, it doesn't matter, please," He begged, grabbing her hand with trembling fingers, "I n-need your help, I c-can't do this without you. You're the b-best reporter I know…"

Alya blushed, feeling the thrums of pride rising in her chest, "Well, thank you."

"So, c-can you help me? Can you track down the Akuma?" Chat asked her, withdrawing his hand so he could once again wrap the comforter around him.

"Well, I could try making a map out of the reports. There have been some sightings…” She said,
tapping her chin with a finger in thought and standing up to get her laptop.

"That would b-be g-great," Chat said hoarsely. He coughed and huddled into a ball, eyes blinking slowly. Alya watched him in concern, biting her lower lip. He looked so exhausted.

"Would you like to lay down on the bed a bit?" Alya offered, picking her laptop off the mattress.

"I-I don't want to g-get it wet. I'm f-fine h-here, honest," Chat whispered with a weak smile. "Don't worry about m-me."

"How do you not want me to worry about you? You nearly choked to death back in that fire and now you are practically coughing up a lung."

"Alya..."

She sighed in defeat, rolling her eyes. "Alright, if you insist... This will take a bit so sit tight."

She settled on her desk and pulled open her laptop. She scrolled through the reports on the Ladyblog, silently reading all of the latest posts, scouring every description meticulously and then jotting down the location of the sightings on a notebook.

Chat remained quiet, letting her work, and they fell into companionable silence, with the occasional bout of coughing here and there. She continued scrolling and clicking without pause, searching for coordinates and pulling up maps on her browser.

A few minutes passed and she heard shuffling. Turning her head, she found Chat had gone completely horizontal, head lying on the floor, his legs pulled to his chest, and completely wrapped in the comforter. His eyes had closed and he breathed with so much difficulty her concern for him grew again.

"Chat Noir?" Alya called softly. He didn't respond. He seemed to be completely out of it, face sunken into the comforter and shivering.

Her heart clenching, Alya stood up from the desk, notebook and laptop under her arm, and took a pillow from her bed. She walked towards him, silently seating herself beside him on the floor. Laying her laptop and notebook to the side, she gently propped his head up and laid the pillow underneath him, carefully laying him back on the plush surface.

He didn't react or stir, but she noticed his skin felt warm against her fingers. Hot, even. Clearly, he was in the middle of a fever that had not broken, and Alya clicked her tongue in disapproval. Despite her worry, however, he looked so tired that she didn't have the heart to wake him. She could tell that he definitely needed the rest.

She propped herself against the wall instead, laying her laptop on her crossed legs and continuing her work, occasionally stealing glances at him.

After a long while, she yawned and looked at the time on her phone. It was nearly 2 in the morning, and the rain hadn't let up, pattering hard against the window. She had spent close to an hour on her research, and just as she jotted down the last location, Chat shifted again, huffing as he tried to find a comfortable position for his head on the pillow. He rubbed his face unconsciously against the surface with a moan, messing up his hair in the process.

Alya looked long and hard at him and his now disheveled hair. An eerie sense of familiarity overtook her again and she paused her work, staring. Curiosity soon got the best of her, and she reached out with a hand, her fingers softly brushing on his bangs, tussling them and parting them until they
resembled the familiar hairdo of one particular classmate of hers…

Could he be…?

He mumbled suddenly, eyes opening up a crack, and she quickly withdrew her hand, propping her laptop on her legs and pretending to have been working. He didn't seem to have noticed however, and looked around him in confusion.

"...Alya?" He asked groggily, "Did I fall asleep?" She hummed a vague affirmation. "How long was I out?"

"An hour, more or less." Alya said.

"An hour?!" he screeched, and he brusquely made to stand up, though he didn't quite make it. He immediately cried out, doubling over to hold his middle, eyes squeezed shut against the pain.

"Woah! Are you okay?" Alya set the laptop aside, moving to his side. He didn't answer immediately, slightly rocking himself back and forth and holding his stomach. It looked like whatever pain he was dealing with was excruciating.

"I-I need to get this over with…" he wheezed, but Alya could hear the faintest hint of a whimper in his voice. "Please tell me you found something…" he turned to her with glassy eyes, pupils completely dilated and nearly filling the green iris with black.

"I-I, yes… I think, but are you sure you want to do this?" She said. He was in such a bad shape. She was half tempted to take it back and pretend her investigation had lead to nothing but dead ends.

"If I don't finish it right now, I won't be able to do it later," Chat insisted. He then hesitated, turning away from her as if ashamed. "I...I don't think I'll be able to fight again for a while. This is my last chance…"

The way he said it, in such a finalizing, deadpan tone sent Alya's heart plummeting to her stomach. He sounded so distraught, so…defeated. She could tell that he had struggled to admit that maybe he was not fit for fighting anymore. He was beyond hurt, and not just physically.

Alya assumed that he must be feeling ashamed that he couldn't keep up like he usually could when Ladybug was around. But how could he blame himself? He had no purifying powers, he was doing what he could with what he had... No one could hold it against him. He was trying so hard.

"Chat, I…"

"Please tell me where he is, Alya…" He practically begged, looking back at her with glassy eyes, "Please…"

Alya bit her lower lip, but after a brief moment of consideration, she conceded. "La Petite Ceinture…"

Chat raised his eyebrow. "The old railway?" he asked, surprise evident in his tone.

"I traced a route using all the points where he was sighted. He must heal really slowly because he was easy to spot flying around for several hours, apparently. His camouflage must have not reformed yet. The sightings end somewhere along the old railway, so I'm assuming he's hiding in the tunnels there. It's the perfect cover from the rain."

Chat Noir nodded and hummed in thought. After a few moments of contemplation, he shrugged off
the comforter and attempted to stand up. However, his condition was such that he had barely made it halfway up before his legs trembled and gave out from under him. Alya barely managed to shoot up in time to catch him before he hit the ground again.

He grunted in discomfort as she surrounded his torso with her arms, holding him aloft. He breathed tiredly against her shoulder, using his good arm to hold on to her.

"I'm sorry, I just…" He started softly.

"Hey, don't apologize, it's okay," Alya said amicably, putting his good arm around her shoulders and walking him to the bed, "You've been through a lot today…"

She sat him down gently, seating herself down beside him and softly rubbing his back with a hand. He sighed deeply, caressing his injured shoulder.

"You still sure you wanna do this?" She asked him again.

"P-Positive."

She sighed and stood up to retrieve her notebook from the floor.

"Here's the map I made," Alya said, showing him the notes on her notebook and pointing at different red marks on a hand drawn map, "The sightings stop close to La Fleche d'Or Café, which used to be the old Gare de Charonne station. I guess he's hiding somewhere around there."

"Thank you, Alya," Chat said, managing to flash her a small smile as he memorized the details in the map, "I knew you'd figure it out. You're amazing at this."

"Oh stop, it's nothing," Alya said, sitting beside him again, but he could see a faint blush on her cheeks. She chuckled suddenly, "Gosh, this is embarrassing…"

"What is?" Chat asked, slightly tilting his head in confusion.

Alya breathed in deeply.

"You know, I always wanted to be able to help you guys," Alya said, looking forlornly at the wall beside her bed. Chat followed her gaze and realized she was looking at a poster of both Ladybug and himself that she had taped to the wall. The way she looked at it longingly caused his heart to clench and a wave of nostalgia to course through him.

Seeing Ladybug's smiling face on the paper, looking at him with her trademark confident smirk and her eyebrow playfully quirked, only made his heart ache for her more than it already did. He could almost hear her voice echoing in his head, calling him by her pet name for him - Chaton - and chastising him for getting so sentimental.

"Ever since that day with Stoneheart, when you guys saved me and then asked me to help out… It felt great," Alya continued softly, "I couldn't be a hero like you guys, but I could help in my own way. That's why I created the Ladyblog. It's my pride and joy…"

Chat smiled warmly as Alya bared her feelings, resting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing it reassuringly.

"Ladybug was deeply grateful for your work, Alya." Chat said softly, "She was always thankful that she had you. You ar-" Chat hesitated at his slip up, and quickly mended it, ",-were like a close friend to her. She was always fond of you. As am I. I'm really grateful for all your help. I wouldn't be able
to do this without you."

She smiled and lowered her eyes to the ground, flustered. A moment later, her brows knitted into a frown as gears seemed to move in her head.

"Chat Noir?"

"Yeah?"

"Did I know Ladybug outside the costume?" She turned to him, her inquisitive eyes digging into his, "Do I know you?" She made special emphasis in the last word, leaning closer to him.

Chat's eyes widened and he pulled away. He could not betray Marinette's secret, but his…? He knew now in his heart that he couldn't tell her. He had certainly considered it, and had even been close to saying it before but now that he knew Dragonfire had it in for him and was purposefully chasing him, he couldn't risk putting Alya in danger.

If tonight didn't end well for him, he didn't want Alya to suffer the consequences. He knew she was hard-headed enough to want to help him with or without the costume and he couldn't do this to her. No matter how much he needed her, he just couldn't. He would never forgive himself.

"Alya, I can't…” he began. "I'm sorry, but… I can't tell you, neither hers, nor mine."

Alya sighed deeply, turning away from him. "I understand… but, could you at least tell me this? Did you know who she was? There was a rumor running around that not even you two knew…” She looked back at him meaningfully.

"It's true." Chat confessed, looking away, "She wanted it that way, to keep each other safe, and I respected her decision. I only found out who she was when she…” Chat cut off, head lowering and eyes lingering on the floor.

"I'm sorry…” Alya said softly, "Did she get a proper funeral? I just want to know if she…” she hesitated, trying to keep her voice level, "...She was given the respect she deserved."

Chat felt terrible lying about what actually happened, but he had to protect Marinette's identity, even from her best friend, "She did. She was shown that she was very loved by everyone around her."

"I'm glad to hear that," Alya said, and Chat could've sworn her voice quivered a bit. He took that as his cue to cut the conversation short. Time was of the essence and his was running out. He could almost feel a clock ticking away in his body, and he knew he wouldn't be able to walk for much longer. He had to end this. He took a long breath and let it out.

"She always cared about you, Alya," Chat said as he slowly stood up from the bed, "That's why she hid it from you and everyone. That's all we both ever wanted. To protect you and everyone around us."

"Hey, where are you going?" Alya asked as Chat made his way shakily to the window, taking out his baton.

"Hopefully, by morning, this will all be over," Chat said, turning around briefly to flash her a confident smile.

But Alya knew right away that he felt anything but confidence.

She could see it in his eyes, flooding the green. Fear. Helplessness. He was scared. And so was she.
The way Chat kept speaking with such finality sent a cold shiver through her body and she could feel the beginnings of panic rising in her chest.

"Chat, hang on, we need a plan!" Alya said, standing up to follow him, but he was already halfway out the window.

"We? No. It's just me. You've done enough for me and I'm really grateful," Chat said elongating his baton and preparing to vault as he crouched on the windowsill. He turned to smile placidly at her. "But I can't risk putting you in any more danger than I already have." He gave her a weak salute. "Thank you for everything, Alya."

"Chat Noir, wait!"

Before her hand could wrap around his wrist to stop him, he leapt and vaulted away into the darkness of night. She groaned in frustration as she watched his outline disappear in the rain.

How he was even managing to move like that in such a bad state and with only one functional arm was anyone's guess but she figured the boy was running on the power of stupidity alone, which in and on itself was a force to be reckoned with.

Because if he thought he could shake Alya off his tail now that she had seen how helpless he was, he was going to be proven severely wrong.

Two could play the Reckless Stubbornness game.

Alya swiftly grabbed her phone off the floor and dialed a familiar public number.

"Are you sure?" Tom asked her.

"Why else would Chat Noir have this, Tom?" Sabine said stubbornly, showing him Marinette's bracelet, "The last person we saw it on was Adrien and... god, he looked so sick when he was here..."

Tom gave a pensive hum. After Chat Noir had jumped off, Sabine was left a fretful mess, turning to Tom to reveal her discovery with wide eyes.

"And during the attack on the park... Adrien disappeared but Chat Noir appeared right after and he was looking for us specifically and he knew our names, and it makes so much sense, oh my goodness...!" Sabine continued, getting more fretful as she continued to make connections between the two boys.

Although initially Tom chalked it up to a coincidence, he had to admit he had suspected it too. With the way Chat talked it sounded so Adrien-like it was almost uncanny. There were too many similarities between the two to be mere coincidence, now that he considered it. Sabine had a point as well.

Both Adrien and Chat Noir had been terribly sick when they last saw them, both afflicted by a fever. Marinette’s Lucky Charm had just been the icing on the cake. Because why would Chat Noir have it when it had been given to Adrien?

And Adrien mysteriously going missing at the same time as Chat Noir passed out at their home?

It all added up.
"We have to find him," Sabine said urgently, walking to the closet beside the living room door and getting out her bright red raincoat.

"But how will we find him? It's raining cats and dogs outside-" Tom said, then cringed when he saw the look of disapproval Sabine shot him at his wording.

"Sorry…"

"He stands no chance out there, Tom," Sabine said, grabbing his raincoat and handing it to him, "There's no way he can fight in his condition, he's going to get himself killed! We have to find him before he finds the Akuma!"

"Sabine-"

"Tom, if something happens to him…” Sabine's voice cracked, and her eyes filled with unshed tears as she looked pleadingly at him, "I won't forgive myself. I can't… He saved our Marinette. It was him, Tom. My baby is alive because of him..." she said, covering her mouth with a hand as the weight of her words sunk in.

Tom's willpower fell. Seeing his wife so afflicted for Adrien's well being, her petite frame trembling with her contained sadness, completely destroyed his conviction. Besides, she was right. Adrien had saved Marinette. If not for him, Marinette would've….

"Shhh, we'll find him," Tom said soothingly, taking her into his large arms and rubbing her back. "We'll use the delivery truck to look for him."

"Where will we start?" Sabine asked him, sniffling against his chest.

Tom put a hand on his chin pensively, then clicked his fingers, "Alya's blog."

"The Ladyblog?"

"If Chat Noir is looking for the Akuma, he's bound to check her website for reports, right? I mean unless he has some kind of… Akuma-finding sixth sense, the blog is our best bet. Let's just follow the breadcrumbs. Someone is bound to have seen a huge dragon."

Sabine gave him a hopeful smile, "That's a brilliant idea!"

"Well, let's get going, then. We have a stray kitty to find."

He had only managed to vault away a couple of times before exhaustion made him take to the streets. He knew he wasn't too far away. He was nearing the 20th arrondissement, where the café was located, and he could already see the railway extending across the streets.

He limped down the waterlogged streets, using his baton as a walking staff as he lowered his head against the rain.

He was so cold and exhausted, his injured arm was aching and sore from his shoulder joint. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and curl into a ball, but he knew that if he didn't end this now, he wouldn't be able to do it later.

The medication and food the Dupain-Chengs had provided had given him a boost, but his energy was quickly depleting again and his fever was on the rise. His body was so ready to shut down. He was running on willpower alone.
He continued trudging through sheets upon sheets of cold October rain, staying out of the range of the streetlamps' light to avoid being seen. Thunder rolled across the sky and he jumped with the sudden thunderclap. Chat didn't think he'd ever be able to feel comfortable with thunder from now on. Every crack sounded like a roar, and his body would involuntarily tense up in anticipation of more pain.

He knew then that thunderstorms and rain would never be soothing for him again.

He walked down several blocks, his breath condensing into a white smoke-like plume in front of him. His legs and arms felt numb, paralyzed by the cold. He weakly raised his head and was relieved to make out the dark outline of the café close by.

Railways extended far underneath the venue, disappearing into a dark tunnel on the other side. The tunnel Dragonfire was surely hiding in.

However, the railway was mostly closed off. He'd either have to find a way in or make his own way in.

Where the old station used to be, he found a dilapidated staircase leading down to the tracks. The stairway had long since been boarded up with thick wiring to prevent the average passersby from getting onto the tracks, but he was hardly the average passerby.

Elongating his baton, Chat stuck it between the wiring and the edge of the entrance and pushed. It took a few tries but the wiring finally gave in and the rusty gate clattered to the ground strepitously, the sound echoing in the abandoned tunnels.

He walked cautiously into the railways, looking down both sides across graffiti-filled stone walls, his baton at the ready on his working hand. Taking a deep breath, Chat planted his feet on the gravel in front of the cavernous tunnel and steeled himself to whatever consequence his actions were going to bring.

"Dragonfire!" Chat called, his voice echoing through the dilapidated railway. "Come out, coward!"

Silence. Only the sound of the raindrops hitting the gravel and metal met his command.

"I know you're there!" he continued taunting. He was shivering, from both cold and fear, but he couldn't move. He had come this far and he would finish this. His stomach however, churned uncomfortably. What if he had been wrong? What if Alya's analysis had been inaccurate?

He was about to walk back the way he came, to at least have some cover from the rain, before he heard some rumbling behind him.

"FULL OF BRAVERY, OR JUST STUPIDITY? YOU MUST POSSESS ONE OR THE OTHER IN ORDER TO COME HERE..."

Chat swiveled on his feet, holding up his baton defensively with a gasp. Beyond the sheet of rain, within the darkness of the tunnel before him, a pair of gigantic, fuchsia eyes stared back at him.

Alya, two. Dragon, zero.

"I came to end this!" Chat said, his voice sounding more confident that what he really felt. His legs had begun to shake, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Damn Dragonfire and that voice which always seemed to reduce him to a whimpering pile of gooseflesh.

"END THIS? SEEMS TO ME YOU ARE ENDING NO ONE BUT YOURSELF." Dragonfire
chuckled, his eyes narrowing as it seemed to catch Chat's useless arm in the sling. "COME HERE AND I'LL GLADLY HELP YOU SPEED UP THE PROCESS!"

"Why go there when you could come here? Or what? Is the little dragon afraid of some water?" Chat taunted. He had the distinct feeling he was just digging his grave deeper.

Dragonfire chuckled dryly. "YOU THINK THAT BECAUSE YOU AND YOUR STUPID LITTLE FRIEND FIGURED OUT IT CHANGES ANYTHING?!"

Chat gulped, bracing against the effect Dragonfire's booming voice had on him.

"IT CHANGES NOTHING. NOTHING AT ALL!"

It came without warning. Out of the tunnel a big mass of magenta and orange came hurtling at him with a deafening roar, fangs bared and tongue on fire. Chat barely managed to jump away in time before the humongous creature flew past him and into the cover of the tunnel underneath the café behind him. He heard the distinct sound of sizzling skin and scraping gravel, and he stood up to turn around and face Dragonfire again.

Bright, slitted eyes stared at him with hate, a low growl emanating from the darkness of the tunnel. A snout lined with razor sharp fangs opened a sliver, giving out a meager glow in the dark. Chat could see the glow bouncing off bright teal claws that scraped the ground as Dragonfire paced, considering his next move.

Chat knew Dragonfire couldn't use fire against him. He had seen it on the video. If his skin got wet, he couldn't produce fire. So all he had at his disposal was physical attacks, but to attack him, he'd have to come into the rain, which would hurt him. Chat was also smaller and his suit blended with the night, so that made him hard to spot in the dark… or so he hoped.

For all intents and purposes, Chat held the advantage, and under normal circumstances, he'd stand a fighting chance. But these were not normal circumstances. He was deeply injured and sick, and even the simple act of remaining standing took a toll on him. He had to finish this fast. But how? He knew Dragonfire's akuma was in an anklet tied around one of his back legs so if only he could get behind him…

Dragonfire lunged again, and Chat avoided him with a yelp. However, he hadn't counted with Dragonfire swishing his tail to the side at the last minute. It caught Chat around the middle and he was slammed against the wall, falling back to the ground with a pained grunt.

And just like that, the battle quickly took a turn for the worse.

Ignoring the burning of his skin from the rain, Dragonfire made a full turn and lunged back at him, but Chat didn't manage to get up in time. Dragonfire slammed his head against him, knocking the air out of him, and with a loud roar, swung his head and sent Chat flying through the air. He fell back on the ground with a painful crack, skidding through the gravel until he stopped in a heap.

Chat hissed loudly in pain, tears building in his eyes. He held his arm as he gingerly tried to get up before he was attacked again, but as his eyes took in his surroundings, his stomach bottomed out when he realized where he was.

Dragonfire had pushed him into the tunnel beneath the venue. Away from the rain. Away from his only advantage.

He couldn't run away in time.
Dragonfire slinked into the tunnel, quickly slamming a giant paw on Chat and pinning him back on the ground before he could move again. Chat cried out as his sling was ripped away and his injured arm sprawled out, sending jolts of pain coursing through his body. Two giant claws rested at either side of his face, cold and sharp to the touch. Dragonfire's skin sizzled and smoked, patches of bright red marring the shiny magenta scales where the water had burnt him.

"AW, DOES YOUR ARM HURT, KITTY CAT?" Dragonfire taunted, smiling a sadistic grin lined with sharp fangs, "MAYBE I CAN HELP?"

"No, no… please, no…” Chat begged as he saw Dragonfire lean down, his snout getting terribly close to his injured arm.

"WHERE IS YOUR BRAVADO NOW, CHAT NOIR?" Dragonfire sneered, opening his maw mere inches away from Chat's arm.

"Please, stop!" Chat cried.

"YOU KNOW JUST WHAT WILL MAKE THIS STOP…"

"No-!"

"HAVE IT YOUR WAY."

Dragonfire bit down hard on Chat's arm, causing him to scream out in pain, his arm exploding in fiery agony. White spots flashed in Chat's eyes as the tears came, his other hand coming up to claw at the dragon's paw to get him off, but his attempts were futile. Chat began to beg for him to stop, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Dragonfire merely bit harder and chuckled against his skin in sick delight.

As if the bite hadn't been enough, Dragonfire suddenly lifted him from his arm and slung Chat over his head, body arching in the air. Chat crashed against opposite wall of the tunnel, slumping into a heap on the ground while holding his abused arm to himself, tears running down his eyes in rivers as shock after shock of pain seared his nerves from his shoulder joint.

Although his suit was powerful enough that Dragonfire's fangs had not pierced it, he felt the pressure of the punctures and the fire from his throat on every inch of his arm.

And god, it hurt so terribly. He was at his wits end. Dragonfire turned on him and Chat shook, huddling further into a ball, terror flooding his senses. He stood absolutely no chance against this Akuma. He had been so stupid to think so.

Or were you?

Chat startled, taken aback. That whisper. It sounded like it had come from him. A very angry him, very deep inside in his head...

You can beat him.

I can? He asked himself.

Something stirred within. Something electrifying, something powerful, and although he was confused he did not fight it. He was so terrified, he felt weak. He wouldn't be able to fight if he kept feeling that way…He wanted to feel powerful, strong...

Dragonfire kept approaching, walking tantalizingly slow towards him...
Help me… Chat whispered within his head, *Help me, please…!*

Chat felt further stirring within him, like a connection was trying to be made within him, like his soul was trying to touch this source of power within himself…

*Please, please help…* Chat begged.

Dragonfire smirked a cruel grin as he came upon him.

*Please! I need you!* Chat pleaded, squeezing his eyes shut.

…*So be it.*

A familiar feeling, one he had felt just once before, overtook him. A feeling of incredible power flowing through his veins. At first he was scared of it, of its aggressive energy, but then, he let it come, letting the crackling energy flow down every limb.

The pain in his broken arm went completely numb, adrenaline clinging to every cell in his bloodstream. His pupils turned to slits and his eyes narrowed as a fanged grin found its way to his mouth.

Chat Noir chuckled darkly and Dragonfire hesitated, taken aback by the sudden change in demeanor.

"*An eye for an eye!*" Chat cackled loudly before he leapt forward and clambered over Dragonfire's back. Before Dragonfire could do anything to stop him, Chat bit down on the red, sore, and unprotected skin over the shoulder blade of Dragonfire's wing, claws going in deep to pierce muscle and nerve in a burst of blood.

Dragonfire roared in anguish and flailed around to knock Chat off him, but he held on stubbornly, laughing against the mangled skin.

"*Where's your bravado, Dragonfire?!*" Chat taunted, jumping off Dragonfire's back as he attempted to flatten Chat against the wall. Dragonfire crashed against the brick, wood and rock raining down on him from the impact and further upsetting the new wound on his shoulder.

Dragonfire growled in rage, his right wing now lying useless on the ground as he stared down Chat, who crouched on his three working limbs with a derisive smile on his face in front of him.

"*Now, we are even…*" Chat chuckled dryly, his tail swishing aggressively behind him, and his ears pulled back.

Dragonfire roared at him and began to pace, and Chat followed in turn. They circled each other within the cover of the tunnel, their eyes never leaving each other, angry snarl meeting mocking smirk. As Dragonfire growled at him, calculating his next move, Chat's ears twitched, catching on strange sounds coming from within the noise of the rain. He glanced into the darkness in curiosity, though Dragonfire didn't seem to notice what Chat was looking at, his eyes focused on his prey.

"*IF YOU THINK YOUR LITTLE STUNT WILL STOP ME-*"

"Oh, no, it won't…" Chat chuckled suddenly, standing on two legs again, his expression taunting and triumphant. "*But this will!*"

Before the Akuma could decipher what he meant, Chat pressed himself flat to the wall of the tunnel just as an intense white light like a headlight suddenly shone on them both, blinding them. Blinking against the lights, Dragonfire failed to see the three well aimed torrents of water that suddenly came...
shooting from the light, crashing against him in a thunderous downpour and pushing him out of the tunnel from sheer force alone.

Dragonfire screeched in agony as water cascaded on his skin, firefighters suddenly materializing from the bright glow of the headlights and advancing on the huge dragon, their hoses up and shooting water at him relentlessly.

The dragon flapped his one working wing uselessly, but the water continued to scald him, his skin crackling and sizzling with the onslaught.

As the firefighters moved forward, trying to corner Dragonfire, Chat raised an arm, covering his eyes from the light and looking beyond. A large fire truck was parked on the streets above, several hoses trailing down from it to the railways. Several police cars and an ambulance were also there, cordoning off the area, their sirens and lights blaring now that their ambush was in progress.

Chat squinted through the rain and lights, catching all of the sudden activity. Several officers were manning the headlights they had brought down to the railways to blind the dragon, and there, standing beside Officer Rogers wearing a purple raincoat was Alya, recording the whole thing. Chat grinned to himself, shaking his head with a sigh.

Of course, it had to be her. Who else was that clever and stubborn? Only she would've been able to think this up.

In his heart, Chat made a mental note to thank her later.

But that'd have to wait. This was his chance. He moved forward with the firefighters watching as Dragonfire uselessly tried to fend them off, but between being blinded and attacked, there was little he could do. However, he was flailing too much, so if Chat tried to grab the akumatized object now, it was very likely he'd end up being stepped on.

He had to immobilize him first, and he smirked as he got just the idea to achieve it. Crouching, Chat broke into a sprint, then took a running leap at one of the graffiti-covered walls of the railways. Using his gathered momentum and speed, Chat bent his legs against the wall and bounced off, twisting in midair to deliver a flying kick to the side of Dragonfire's head.

It connected and the force of the kick slammed Dragonfire's head against the opposite wall, winding him and causing him to fall into the ground in a daze. As he lay recovering with a pained growl, Chat quickly moved to his legs and snatched the akumatized object from around his ankle.

"Show's over..." Chat growled, throwing the anklet on the ground. His voice then lowered to a whisper that only he could hear. "Now it's your turn..."

Chat shivered suddenly, shaking his head as the power within him receded and he got his bearings back together again. Weakness and pain settled back in and Chat groaned in discomfort. Momentarily disoriented, Chat quickly looked around and assessed the situation, though it didn't take him long to figure out what had happened. Although his memory during his strange moment of adrenaline rush was hazy, he knew that Alya had brought the cavalry to assist him, and it had worked!

It was not going to be in vain. His eyes fell on the ground, where a golden anklet with a dragon-shaped charm lay bathed in a purple glow.

Eyes narrowing in hate, he didn't waste any time. Grabbing a large rock from the ground, Chat kneeled and slammed it hard against the anklet, cracking it in several pieces. A purple butterfly came
fluttering out of the remains, and Chat quickly snatched it out of the air in one swipe, crushing it in his fingers.

Breathing hard, Chat looked back as a purple glow started to surround Dragonfire and the firefighters stopped their onslaught. He took this as his cue and stood up, running towards the opposite tunnel and disappearing into the darkness, Akuma in hand.

Chat panted, feeling the butterfly fluttering frantically within his fisted hand.

Behind him he could hear the sound of rippling scales as the Akuma devolved into their old human self. He didn't even bother to turn around, unwilling to look at the civilian who had unwittingly caused so much pain to both the city and him, but he could hear their surprised gasp as they took in the sights around them and the familiar, confused *"Where am I?"* that usually accompanied each purification.

He could tell it was a boy, probably around his age, but Chat didn't care. That wasn't important.

The true problem lay encased between his fingers, trying desperately to get free as the magic in his ring prevented it from phasing through as it normally would. Chat knew by now how the Butterflies worked when they were infused with Hawk Moth's power.

It didn't matter where their victims were, or if they tried to hide, they would get to them anyway. Earthly objects were no obstacle for them, and they melted through whatever material stood in their way with ease, much like ghosts searching for an object to haunt.

Which is how Chat knew he couldn't simply put them inside a bottle and wait till Marinette woke up to purify them. He had thought about it, shortly after he destroyed the first Akuma and he had asked Plagg and Tikki about it. But no, that would've been too easy, and nothing was ever easy when Hawk Moth, or in this case, ancient magic was involved. The laws of physics did not apply to sinister powers permeating corrupted insects.

Only Ladybug's magic, which was pure and benevolent, could drive away the awful magic and purify them.

Chat's magic on the other hand, destructive and rotten, could only absorb that which could make it stronger but to great personal cost on his mortal body...

So now he stood at a loss. If he let it go, it would multiply, and he would definitely not be able to stop this Akuma and its army if that happened. He had already learned that he stood no chance against them, not without his partner. On the other hand, he could destroy it again the way he had done the other. It had proven effective, but he had been warned not to do it ever again.

The first one had already done enough damage.

But what else could he do? Without Ladybug, whom he vehemently refused to replace, either option was grim and terrible. There was but one big, poignant difference between the two...

To sacrifice a whole city, or sacrifice a single person?

He swallowed painfully, feeling the cold sweat against his skin as the weight of the thought sunk in. The knot in his stomach tightened, sending cold chills down his body, the fingers that trapped the horrible creature shaking. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes, borne from the sudden feeling of pure helplessness building in his chest.
There was no other choice, and deep in his heart, he knew this to be a undeniable truth. With a shaky breath, he swallowed the lump in his throat, and for a moment, allowed himself to think of something more pleasant.

Marinette, beautiful and kind, was the first thing that materialized in his mind. He recalled the moment they unwittingly met in their suits, crashing against him as she fell from the sky. He thought of that cloudy first day of school where he lent her his umbrella to shield her from the rain. He thought of every adventure, every Akuma they fought, every laugh they shared... He thought of every happy memory he had of Nino, of Alya, the Dupain-Chengs, his father, his mother...

...And with a resigned sigh, he smiled to himself as the answer to his question became clear.

"C-Cataclysm!"

He had no chance to brace.

His broken scream filled the air as his spine snapped straight and pulled his head back, mouth wide open in a hoarse cry. His legs locked up in shock, fisted hand firmly pressed against his chest as Cataclysm and the Akuma flared around his body like a terrible tongue of fire. He could feel every bit of him, from the tip of his fingers, to his innermost organs flaring up in white hot pain. Knives stabbed and slashed at his lungs and heart, sending his head reeling. Tears leaked from his eyes, his throat turning raw from the endless screaming.

He could feel his insides shutting down one by one, feeling as though they were becoming undone, ripping open and bleeding, filling his body with a terrible, fiery sensation. Blood burst from his throat, choking him, dripping past his lips and down his chin in thick red rivulets.

The pain intensified a hundredfold, and he could not be freed. The thought of death, of leaving so much behind terrified him…

But maybe, just maybe, if Hawk Moth believed he had killed both of them, he would leave Paris alone. Maybe, if he believed their Miraculous to be lost, they would finally be allowed peace. He thought of Marinette, his Ladybug, and burned the image into his mind, hoping that when she woke, she would open her eyes to a peaceful, Akuma-free Paris.

With that last thought in his head, his mind shut down and it all ended.

His knees gave out first, and the rest of him followed, body collapsing to the ground. He hit the gravel, his body twitching and smoking, his eyes watering. He wheezed pitifully, unable to suck in air and every attempt painful in his chest. His body felt so heavy. He could hear a sizzling sound coming from his hand, which tingled with the pain of a freshly inflicted burn. No doubt a white butterfly lay ruined in his fingers, but his job was done. He had defeated the villain. He got the Akuma. He had saved the day.

The corners of his vision began to dim, the world around him blurring. He felt his heart beating erratically against his ribcage, weak and unstable. He realized that he couldn't feel his body. Starting from his legs and climbing up his spine, a numbing sensation that felt like a rising wave crept over him. He could no longer move, but he found that it didn't really bother him.

He felt no pain anymore.

A beep reached his ears. His Miraculous was running out and he would detransform soon, but he was alright with it. He would probably be long gone by the time he was discovered, anyway.

He idly wondered if he would get a memorial, too…
Wondered if Alya and Madame Cheng would ever forgive him when they found out the truth...

Sound drowned out, the bodies of the firefighters and officers moving beyond the cavernous tunnel becoming nothing but mere shadows in the black haze building around his vision. They hadn't even realized he was there. The sound of the rain provided good cover, possibly. Seconds passed, maybe minutes, he didn't know. The passage of time became irrelevant.

His breathing steadily slowed down until he ceased to feel it altogether. His body relaxed soundly against the ground, his eyelids slowly slid closed...

And with one last shuddering breath, his heart finally stopped.

Alya snuck around the officers as they tended to the confused Akuma victim, a boy no older than her with brown hair and blue eyes. He was being questioned as a second ambulance pulled up to the scene, and Alya took the chance to slip by unnoticed to the last place she had seen Chat Noir slink to.

"Chat Noir?" she called, silently trudging into the abandoned tunnel. It was dark and grim, so she pulled out her phone from under her raincoat and turned on her flashlight. She breathed heavy, flicking the light from corner to corner over dilapidated rock and wood, across abandoned railways and gravel. She heard the faint echo of a beeping sound and she followed the source.

She nearly jumped when she saw him, lying a couple of meters away from her. He was lying on his stomach, still as a statue, thin ribbons of smoke trailing from his suit. Alya's heart leapt in her chest.

"Chat!"

She ran to him, falling to her knees by his side. It felt like his suit had been burnt, warm to the touch and dirtied. She called his name again, gently shaking him by the shoulder, but he didn't move. She shook him again, harder this time, but there was no reaction.

"Wake up!" she hissed, grabbing him from his arm and flipping him on his back. His eyes were closed, his bloodstained lips parted…

And she realized no breath was coming out.

"No… Chat, don't do this," Alya whispered under her breath, cold creeping up her spine as she took in his body for any sign of movement, but his chest was impossibly still. She pressed two fingers against his neck, waiting, hoping… But he was getting colder, and there was no pulse to be found.

"No, no, no, no!" Alya cried as tears began well up in her eyes, "Wake up! Wake up! You can't do this, Chat!"

Alya shook him insistently by the shoulders, occasionally slapping his cheek in an attempt to rouse him but she got no reaction, his head bobbing uselessly with her shaking. She trembled as realization dawned on her, carefully laying him down on the ground again and gently easing his head on the gravel to not hurt him…

But he was… Chat Noir was…

Her cellphone began chiming and she jumped in alarm. With a mixture of grief and anger, she aggressively grabbed her phone from the ground with trembling fingers.

Who could be calling at a time like this? When Paris had just lost so much?
Through her tears, she saw the words *M. Dupain-Cheng* flashing on her touch screen and she gasped. Alya fumbled with her phone until she managed to tap the glowing, green phone icon.

"M-Madame!" she cried.

"Alya?" came Sabine's voice on the other side of the phone.

"M-Madame Cheng…" she wept.

"Alya, what is it? Are you okay?"

She couldn't speak. Sobs were starting to rise from her chest, impeding her speech.

"I-I'm fine but Ch-Chat… Chat is…"

God, she couldn't say it.

Sabine went suddenly quiet, "What about Chat Noir?"

"He...He's…" she sobbed. Her fingers found his stiff hand, and she squeezed it.

"He's what? Alya, where are you?" Sabine started talking more urgently, sounding agitated. Alya heard her telling Tom *I think she found Chat Noir* in the background before she came back to her, "Honey, we need to know where you are. We found your bike. There are a lot of patrol cars. Are you at the railway?"

"T-Tunnels," Alya sniffled, "We are i-in the t-tunnels…Please hurry!"

"We?" Sabine asked.

"C-Chat… Chat Noir, but he's-" she sobbed again, bringing his inert hand to her chest, "Please… bring help!"

She heard Sabine give a sharp intake of breath. "Okay, stay on the phone with me, Alya. We are pulling over, don't move from where you are. Guide us to you, okay?"

"O-Okay."

"It's going to be fine, we are on our way," Sabine said, and from the fluctuations in her voice, Alya could tell they were getting out of the car, "Where are you? We see some officers with a kid down at the tracks, are you there? We are at the station."

"I-In the t-tunnel" Alya said, trying to keep her voice steady, "A-Across the station."

"Got it, hang on, we are moving down the stairs."

"The o-officers won't let you through."

"We'll handle it, don't worry dear. Stay with me and remain calm."

"Yes, Ma'am,"

Alya then heard some discussion going on through the phone. Tom sounded like he was arguing with someone, their voices getting more and more heated, but it began to sound farther and farther away, as if Sabine was moving despite the altercation.
"Alya, I'm near the tunnel, where are you?" she whispered.

"I'm further in...I...um, I'm going to shine my phone, just follow the light?"

"Alright, show me the way."

Alya raised her phone over her head and waved it frantically. Beyond the entrance, through the curtain of rain, she made out the dark petite outline of Sabine against the headlights, angling her head in an attempt to see her. She seemed to shift and then she went through the curtain of water, a small beacon of light in her hand. Alya idly heard another beep echo behind her.

"O-Over here!" Alya called.

The light of the flashlight in Sabine's hand came closer and soon, her face became visible in the dark, white puffs of mist coming from her mouth as she huddled into her red raincoat.

"Alya!"

"Madame Cheng!"

Alya rose up to meet Sabine in a running hug, holding her tight against her and hiding her face in her chest.

"You had me worried! Are you alright, Alya?" Sabine asked her, running a hand down Alya's wet hair.

Alya nodded against her chest, sniffling dejectedly.

"Where's Chat Noir?"

Alya froze and slowly pulled back, avoiding Sabine's eyes as she looked over her shoulder with tear laden eyes. Sabine followed her gaze and gasped when her eyes fell on Chat Noir's unmoving shape on the ground.

"Chat!" Sabine called, running to him. She knelt at his side, flashlight discarded as she gently lay a quivering hand on his head. "Chat?"

"He's n-not breathing," Alya said, kneeling on the opposite side of Sabine beside Chat, bringing a hand to her mouth to stifle a whimper.

Sabine lowered her head, pressing her ear against his chest. She lingered there a few seconds before pulling back, her face blank. Sucking in a breath, Sabine quickly pulled Chat's head back and placed her hands on the middle of Chat's chest, one on top of the other, beginning to press intermittently. Although tears had begun to gather at her eyes, Sabine kept herself perfectly composed, counting her thrusts under her breath.

She pumped for a minute, her rhythm constant and steady. They both heard another beep from his ring, but ignored it. His life was more important than the possibility of his identity being revealed. Knowing that there was nothing she could do while Sabine worked, Alya ran a soothing hand down Chat's hair, hoping, praying, for him to give them a sign that there's was still life in him.

Then, as if in response to her pleading, Chat's face twitched. It was minuscule, almost imperceptible, but Alya saw it clearly: a subtle tilt of the chin and a small twitch in his Adam's apple.

"Madame Cheng—!" Alya gasped.
"Come on, Chat, come back to us," Sabine coaxed, her voice quivering, her energy renewed and her compressions unrelenting. "You can do this, come on…!"

A few sounds like low choking emanated from his throat and the corners of his lips twitched.

"Come on, Chat!" Alya pleaded, grabbing his hand and squeezing softly.

One more minute of constant pressing followed and then — finally — a reaction!

His head snapped back and his mouth spread wide in a ragged gasp, back arching with broken, gurgling breaths. He started to choke and Sabine quickly turned his head to a side as he heaved and blood came pouring out of his mouth, his body falling into a fit of coughing. Alya jumped back at the motion, avoiding the drops of red narrowly as they splattered on the ground.

Chat's body fell back on the ground, trembling fiercely, chest heaving, and breathing gruff. Alya sobbed incredulously, a big grin spreading on her face.

He was alive. Chat Noir was alive!

"Thank goodness!" Sabine cried, shrugging off her raincoat and removing the jacket she wore underneath, wrapping it over Chat to shield him from the cold. Bundling him up, she took him into her arms and lifted him to hold him to her chest, "Oh Chat, I'm so glad…"

He was unresponsive, shaking uncontrollably, but his chest rose and fell with his labored breathing, his mouth agape as he wheezed against her.

Sabine gave out what sounded like a sob mixed with a laugh as Chat curled into her, coughing lightly under his breath. She ran her fingers soothingly down his hair, stroking the side of his face. A last warning beep from his ring echoed in the dark tunnel.

"Chat? Can you hear me?" Sabine started softly, brushing his bangs away from his face.

Chat didn't react, chest still rising and falling haphazardly as his body seemed to get used to breathing again.

"If you can hear me, please open your eyes." Sabine hesitated a little, her voice going low. "Adrien…?"

Alya gasped, looking at Sabine with eyes wide.

"How do you...?" she stuttered.

But Alya had no chance to finish. With a shuddering sigh, Chat's eyes opened a crack, a hint of green peaking from under heavy lids. His gaze was unfocused, pupils entirely dilated. He didn't seem to be able to lock onto Sabine's face above him.

"Hello," Sabine said warmly with a quivering chuckle, smiling down at his tired face, "It's alright… You can turn back, Adrien…"

He just looked at her for a few moments, and then as if obeying her command, he closed his eyes and a bright green light enveloped him, blinding Sabine and Alya momentarily. A second later, Adrien Agreste lay before them. Beaten, sick, and barely alive in Sabine's arms.

The moment he materialized, white skin and blonde hair replacing black leather, Sabine found she couldn't hold back anymore. With a loud sob, the tears came, trailing down her cheeks in thick
rivulets.

"It was you…" she whispered as she bent down to kiss his forehead as she held him tight. "It was you…"

"Adrien…" Alya said, grabbing his motionless hand and squeezing it. For once, Alya was at a loss for words. Although she had suspected it, the revelation that Chat Noir was indeed Adrien still came as a shock to her. Part of her still couldn't believe that it was her classmate during all those Akuma battles, cracking dumb jokes and pulling risky stunts, saving them countless times, stopping countless disasters…

And that same classmate had saved them again. He had been willing to give up his life to keep them safe. Adrien had been willing to give everything up for them.

Everything made so much sense now. His absences, his physique… The amount of affection Alya felt for him could've made her heart burst.

But said heart suddenly plummeted again. Sabine was looking at Adrien with something like panic in her eyes, one of her hands going to his cheek.

"Adrien, please open your eyes, please…" Sabine said desperately, shaking him lightly. He looked like he was sleeping, but his breathing was slowing down. "Please! Keep breathing Adrien! Keep breathing!"

"A-Adrien…"

Alya and Sabine both jumped at the sudden voice. It was low and squeaky and it had come from somewhere below Alya.

"… help…"

Alya grabbed her phone and shone a light on the floor, nearly jumping again with a tiny screech when her light fell on something small and black crawling on the ground beside her.

"Help me…up…" the dark thing croaked, dragging itself on all fours towards her. It looked like a mouse. A talking mouse. Or was it a tiny cat?

"What… are you?" Alya asked, inching away from it.

"I'm Plagg… Adrien… I have.. to help him…" Plagg gasped, weakly reaching out for Alya. "Help me…!"

Driven by curiosity, Alya reached forward hesitantly, grabbing Plagg by the scruff of his neck and carefully laying him on her hand to raise him up to Adrien's level.

Sabine stared dumbfounded at him, but she was too preoccupied by Adrien's condition to comment on it. Alya herself was weirded out by the fact she had a talking animal on her hand, but something about it was strangely exhilarating. She didn't know Chat Noir had an actual animal partner. She had only seen it in fiction. But here he was, on her hand, and he had only appeared right after Adrien transformed back. Was this the creature who gave Chat Noir his power?

But she had no chance to ponder it. After looking at Adrien, Plagg gasped and turned his face to Alya, green eyes widened.

"You are Marinette's friend… the blogger," Plagg said, "You.. you have videos of her, right? Play
one... Play one to his ear! Hurry!"

"What? Why?"

"Just... do it! There's no time!" Plagg screeched.

Alya obeyed hesitantly, pulling up the video player on her phone and choosing a random recording of her and Marinette fooling around at her room at the Dupain-Cheng's. She placed the phone close to Adrien's ear, letting the sound of hers and Marinette's laughter flood the tunnel.

The video played for several minutes, but Adrien didn't seem to react to it, lying prone against Sabine's chest.

Plagg floated off Alya's hand - eliciting a little yelp of surprise from her and Sabine- and landed on Adrien's head, looking down at him.

"Come on kid, wake up! It's me, Plagg..." Plagg said, pulling on Adrien's hair. "Listen, it's Marinette. Hear her voice? You better wake up, I won't be explaining to her what happened to you!... Adrien?"

Adrien didn't acknowledge him, merely breathing a long, exhausted sigh in response.

"It's not working..." Plagg croaked, grabbing his tiny head in despair "It's not working...!"

"What's not working?" Alya asked. But Plagg didn't respond, losing his balance on Adrien's head with a yelp as it began to slide to a side.

"Kid, no, please, don't do this to me," Plagg begged, his tiny green eyes turning glassy, "You promised kid! Stay awake! Open your eyes!"

"Adrien? Sweetheart?" Sabine said as well, her hand gently catching his face and turning it towards her again, "Open your eyes, please..."

His eyelids twitched, but they only lifted a smidgen, the vaguest hint of green peeking under the lids. He stared blankly beyond Sabine.

"He needs help... Please, help him!" Plagg turned to Alya and Sabine, his voice desperate and his eyes wide and glossy. "Please help Adrien!"

"Alya, go to Tom, tell him!" Sabine commanded, holding Adrien to her, "Have them bring help!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Alya said, jumping to her feet and running back to the entrance of the tunnel to find Tom.

"Hang in there, Adrien. You're going to be okay..." Sabine soothed, rocking him gently. "You're going to be okay..."

"You stupid kid!" Plagg cried, pulling on a tuft of Adrien's hair dejectedly. "Dumb, stupid kid!"

"Y-You..." Sabine started hesitantly, addressing Plagg. "You worked with him?"

"Kinda," Plagg sniffled, no longer caring if he had revealed his existence to another human, "I give him his powers. Without me he can't transform."

"And w-what happened? What happened to Adrien?" Sabine asked.
"He… he destroyed an Akuma… And only Ladybug can deal with Akumas. He can't do that! I told him he couldn't do that! Stupid kid!" Plagg broke into wails again, slamming his small paws against Adrien's head. "Stupid, stupid kid!"

Suddenly, the sound of heavy footsteps and chatter echoed in the tunnel and both Plagg and Sabine looked up. The distinct shape of several people outlined by light materialized in the mouth of the tunnel and Plagg yelped and flew behind Sabine, hiding in her hair.

"Don't tell anyone about me or Adrien!" Plagg hissed in her ear. Sabine nodded in understanding and remained impassive, as if Plagg had never been there.

"Sabine!" Tom called, coming in to view in his bright yellow raincoat. Alya was following at his side and behind them was a group of officers and paramedics.

The light of the flashlights in their hands illuminated Sabine and Adrien, blinding her momentarily as the group came closer. Tom and Alya came to stand to Sabine's side, and she heard the officer gasp and instruct the paramedics to move forward. He then pulled out his radio and began calling urgently into it.

"Tell Officer Rogers we found the Agreste kid! I repeat: we found the Agreste kid!"

The paramedics huddled around her, taking Adrien's limp body off Sabine's arms. She parted with him reluctantly, letting them carry him off.

"Don't give up, Adrien!" Sabine called to him as he was eased on a stretcher and was surrounded by paramedics. "Don't give up!"

He was trying.

By god, he was trying.

But it was just so hard to breathe.

It took everything out of him to keep his lungs functioning, pushing his chest to rise and fall. The oxygen mask on his face did little to help, because it was not the lack of oxygen what got him, it was the action of consciously keeping his lungs pumping.

It had ceased to be an automatic function for his body and he had to force it. He was quickly becoming exhausted, his eyes threatening to close again, but he had the distinct feeling that if he fell asleep, the chances of him not opening his eyes again were incredibly high.

Besides, Madame Cheng had told him to not give up.

So he kept trying.

He sucked in air however he could then exhaled. Over and over. He timed it and repeated it.

The world around him became a blur, like disjointed scenes from a movie. First, he was in the tunnel, in Madame Cheng's arms, his identity bared. She had been crying. He felt bad about it but he couldn't speak to tell her he was okay with it. There were many voices, many of them alarmed. He was being hauled up somewhere. Someone pricked his arms, moved him around. He heard the distinct sound of a siren. He was in a moving vehicle.

He was cold. So very cold.
The faces of young, pale faced paramedics came in and out of focus above him. His eyelids twitched, but he kept them raised, although there was still a dark halo around his vision and his sight was hazy. They shone a light on his eyes, and he saw the worry immediately etch on their faces. His pupils remained dilated, it seemed. He blinked slowly. His heart was beating strangely. He didn't understand what they were doing but their ministrations became more urgent.

He wasn't sure what had happened. One moment his world had gone dark, and the next, he was trying to force air into his lungs, feeling as if he was being asphyxiated, a dull pain blossoming in his chest, and the taste of copper on his tongue.

Then, he had heard Madame Cheng's voice, calling to him. She had asked him to open his eyes, and how could he refuse? He loved Madame Cheng. He didn't want to make her sad. Besides, she had called him by his name. How did she know? He didn't care much, he found. If there was someone he would trust with his secret, it would be her. Madame Cheng was nice.

She had asked him to destransform, too. She wanted him to rest. She always looked after him, so he obeyed. But then, he felt so tired, so hurt... He just wanted to sleep. But she wasn't letting him, she didn't want him sleeping. Then he heard Plagg. He hoped he wasn't annoying Madame Cheng. Plagg could be that way.

Then, he had heard Marinette. Was she there? Had she woken up? Was she seeing him? Why was she laughing, though? It confused him. He couldn't do anything about it, his body just refused to cooperate. The darkness in his head kept tempting him with sleep. But he had to remain awake. He was told to not give up.

Adrien wasn't sure how much time passed before he was being moved again, and then he was being pulled into a building. It was still raining. He wondered where Plagg was. Wasn't this Marinette's hospital? He recognized some of the walls. People were talking hurriedly around him, moving him speedily down hallways. He was not sure what was going on. He was so dizzy and everything in his body hurt.

He was just so, so tired. He wanted to sleep. Sleep sounded so enticing. He was so drained and his chest just kept hurting so much...

He heard one of the medics yell something about his heart.

His eyelids began to lower. In his head, he still found it in himself to ask Madame Cheng to forgive him.

He failed to notice at what point he stopped breathing.

Shock.

That's what they had said was happening to him before he disappeared toward the ER. He was going into cardiogenic shock, he believed was the term.

Plagg had left Sabine's side and had followed the ambulance carrying Adrien all the way to the hospital, phasing through walls and remaining out of sight. He was exhausted and it was a tough journey, but his worry for Adrien was bigger than his hunger or fatigue.

He didn't care that his eyes stung with tears. None of that mattered.

What mattered is that his Chosen was dying.
He saw it in his eyes. He was on the verge of crossing a threshold, but he kept clinging to life by the skin of his teeth. Bless that stupid stubbornness of his, finally useful for something. Plagg had felt it all when Adrien used Cataclysm on the Akuma. He felt the dark power bounce back, felt it attack Adrien's body without mercy. It worsened all of Adrien's already existing conditions, and caused lasting damage to his heart. Adrien had stood no chance.

Plagg had even thought that his heart stopping cold the first time had been an act of mercy.

But he had been revived, and now he was agonizing, slowly descending back to death. He didn't want to lose him. Plagg really did not want to lose him, but to see him struggling for breath, his whole body paralyzed and useless, his heart barely beating…

Now he was at a crossroads, where his fate would hinge on the competence of the humans taking care of him as they attempted to save his life. He didn't know what had happened to the blogger girl that hung out with Marinette or the bakers. He had been seen, but at this point, he didn't care. All he cared about was that Adrien was suffering, and it tore at his heart that there was nothing he could do for him.

He was not Tikki. He couldn't heal, just destroy.

Tikki. If only she was there with him. But he couldn't tell her. Not yet. He wouldn't stand an earful, plus she couldn't help. Adrien was surrounded by people, there was no way she could even get close to him to try and help.

Plagg followed the doctors through the walls, his eyes never leaving Adrien. His Assistant - Nathalie? - had been called, as had been his father. Would he even show up, he wondered? That man was as cold as a slab of ice. It wasn't his business anyway. Only Adrien mattered. And right now, he was unconscious and they had to rip his shirt open because there was something wrong with his heart.

The doctors put him on a bed and began to work on him. They hooked him to weird machines and artifacts and Plagg hid on the light fixture on top of the operating table, watching closely.

They were trying to stabilize him, trying to find what was wrong, but they were perplexed. Everything in Adrien was malfunctioning and they couldn't figure out why. Adrien himself would slip in and out of consciousness. Sometimes he'd randomly bleed from his mouth, sometimes he'd stop breathing. Sometimes his heartbeat would hitch. It came and went.

Plagg could tell he was fighting, hanging on by a thread, but his body just couldn't keep up. He would try to move his hand sometimes, but he would stop soon after, exhausted, drained. It was futile.

An hour passed. An hour and a half. Nearly two hours, and he still hung on a precipice. It didn't matter how much they worked on him, Adrien looked worse and worse by the minute. Paler, sicker, weaker… Plagg was struggling not to cry. He heard that Adrien's father was demanding to see him but he wouldn't be let in. Adrien was in too delicate a state. He couldn't imagine what his assistant was going through, having to deal with him.

A sudden beeping sound caught Plagg's attention and he looked around. One of the machines was beeping intermittently. The doctors moved frantically around Adrien, giving hurried orders. Something was wrong, really really wrong. Something about his heart going into arrest. He tried to listen to any piece of conversation he could but they talked hurriedly between them.

Plagg paused, however, when he realized Adrien was looking at him. His green eyes, half lidded and
lifeless, had spotted him and were looking at him beyond the light fixture. Plagg's heart clenched when he realized he was crying. Adrien was crying, warm tears leaking silently from his eyes and down his face. He was also mouthing something behind his oxygen mask but what? What was it?

Adrien slowly moved his right arm to a side, letting it hang over the edge of the operating table, his hand balled in a fist. Why was he doing that?

Plagg squinted at Adrien's lips trying to make it out…

'I'm sorry…'

As the terrible realization dawned on Plagg, Adrien's fist relaxed and his fingers loosened. A silver ring slipped through them, clattering to the ground and rolling across the floor into a dark corner of the room, unseen.

But the worst of it, what caused Plagg's stomach to bottom out and for a cold chill to overtake him, was the shrill alarm that began to blare from one of the machines and Adrien's eyes slowly slipping closed...

They didn't open again.

Chapter End Notes

AGAIN: THIS STORY IS NOT OVER. WE ARE ON THE HALFWAY MARK, THERE'S MORE TO COME :) I won't abandon this story either! If I take a month again, it was probably cuz I'm too busy or the chapter is tricky but I intend to finish this story, please don't worry!!! (I received a lot of comments of people worried about this so please don't <3!)

EDIT: Incredible fanart for this chapter!

*http://ferisae.tumblr.com/post/150335907356/celineeinum-i-finished-it-its-a-fancomic-of
Requiem for a Dream

Chapter Summary

In which Gabriel actually behaves like a human being for once.

Also, lucid dreaming is a thing.

BIG PROPS/THANKS TO MLLEKYLIE ON TUMBLR FOR BEING MY TRUSTY, PUNTASTIC BETA <3

Chapter Notes

"WHAT? A NEW CHAPTER!?" you cry, "THIS IS MADNESS!"

Indeed it is. I surprised even myself lol. ENJOY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silence.

Everything was suddenly so cold, and so silent.

For an hour, they tried everything. For an hour, Plagg watched them press the pads to his chest and shock him, his body jerking with every jolt of electricity. For an hour, Plagg saw the monitor connected to him display the same straight green line, the same constant shrill tone echoing through the room. For an hour, Plagg held his breath, expecting to see Adrien's eyes open.

But an hour passed, and Adrien did not wake. The doctors and nurses eventually slowed to a stop, putting down their tools, and inclining their heads.

Adrien's skin had lost all color. His pulse was gone.

He was gone.

The head doctor slowly reached out and gently removed the oxygen mask from Adrien's face, one hand going up to pat his head as some sort of apology. After a few moments, they grabbed a soft, white linen sheet and covered him, all the way from his feet to his head.

One of the doctors took out a clipboard.

"Time of death…" Plagg heard him say. He didn't listen to the rest. Plagg blocked this voice out.

They gave up on him and Plagg felt rage bubble within him, tears burning in his eyes. They continued to write on the clipboard. They moved around the bed for a while, checking on the machines, disconnecting some of them…

They had completely given up.
After a few moments, they left, probably to plan how they were going to tell Gabriel Agreste that his only son could not be saved. Plagg was left alone with him, but the silence was so agonizing that Plagg was tempted to escape the room. He stayed however, floating down slowly from the light and lingering on top of Adrien.

He reached out slowly, cautiously, grabbing the edge of the sheet and pulling it down to Adrien's chest. His pale face came into view, tussled and dirtied golden locks covering his forehead. He looked so peaceful, so relaxed, his eyes closed. The agony of pain was no longer etched into every line of his face. Plagg could almost believe that he was just sleeping and would wake up at any moment…

But he wouldn't. Not anymore.

Because he was gone.

Never again would Plagg be able to hear him say, "Transform me!" Never again would he hear the lame jokes he said in an attempt to woo Ladybug. Never again would he hear Adrien's complaints about how stinky Camembert was, or hear himself be called fat and lazy despite Adrien's best efforts to make sure that he was comfortable. Never again would he listen in as Adrien watched stupid movies, laughing with Nino. Never again would he sit with him, waiting for Marinette to wake up, like he promised he would…

Marinette would never know how he felt for her. He would never get a chance to love her, like he had wanted.

He chose to give all of that up to make sure the city she lived in was safe.

And probably the worst part of all this was the realization that Plagg was still around. If a Chosen didn't want to fulfill their duty anymore and removed the Miraculous, the Kwami would go back to sleep within the stone. Plagg, however, was still active, even when Adrien had removed his Miraculous, which only meant one thing.

Adrien hadn't wanted to stop being Chat Noir. He hadn't wanted to die.

He had fought so hard. Up to his last breath, Adrien had tried so hard to survive, to keep his heart beating. To live. But what good was having will to live if your body had long since given up? He had suffered so much, he had struggled so much, and it had all been in vain. Even in his last moments he had enough clarity of mind to make sure the Miraculous was hidden away so Plagg would be safe. Even in his last moments, he thought of others before himself.

Plagg's heart broke. Tears slowly leaked from his eyes as he floated down to sit on Adrien's chest.

"I'm sorry," Plagg whispered to him, voice cracking, "I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise. I'm so sorry I couldn't save you. I'm so sorry, Adrien…"

Plagg crawled towards his face, curling into a ball in the crook between Adrien's chin and his neck. He nuzzled him and whimpered, body trembling with his sobs, with nothing but the sound of Adrien's silence to keep him company.

Gabriel's mind was reeling. He paced around the waiting room, running an anxious hand through his hair while Nathalie stood in a corner watching him nervously. He could feel his heart racing in his chest, the back of his neck covered in a cold sweat. It had been hours and still no news.
It was not supposed to be this way. It was *never* supposed to be this way.

He had first been notified that Adrien had passed out at school from an unknown ailment. Having been preoccupied at the time, he had sent Nathalie ahead to go get him, but by the time she got there the school had long since been destroyed by the Akuma and cordoned off.

When they told him Adrien had vanished without a trace, he immediately dropped everything and ordered a search, helmed by Nathalie and Adrien's bodyguard. They had even gotten help from his classmates and teachers, but it had been to no avail. Adrien had been nowhere to be found. Calls to his phone would not go through and inexplicably, his device could not be traced.

Gabriel had remained home, checking every outlet he could to find his son. As hours passed, a familiar feeling of loss and desperation began to take over him. A feeling he had not felt since she…

He had shaken his head then, trying to keep calm. It wasn't like him to lose his head. He was trying to remain collected but a strange feeling—fear—had begun to creep up his spine. Adrien was all he had left of her. He wouldn't bear to lose him. Not after losing *her*.

"Sir, they found Adrien!" Nathalie had told him later that night, barging into his office in early hours of the morning, "He's on his way to the ER."

The word ER had sent a jolt of panic through him.

"What do you mean ER, what happened to him?" he had demanded, causing Nathalie to hesitate at the stern volume of his voice.

"H-He was attacked by an Akuma. They found him in a tunnel in the 20th arrondissement. Chat Noir stopped the Akuma."

An Akuma. Adrien had been attacked by an Akuma.

If he hadn't been plunged in darkness, Nathalie would've surely seen the color leave Gabriel's face and his eyes widen in disbelief.

He had promptly sent her off to get to the hospital ahead of him to arrange whatever needed to be arranged to ensure that Adrien received the best care possible. He was infinitely relieved at her swiftness at following orders, leaving him alone to get his bearings back together. He cursed at himself. He was logical, calculating, and determined. And he would not lose his cool, not even when his son had been taken by the monster he—

"Master?" A little moth-like creature had emerged from the shadows as it sensed Gabriel's distress. "Master, are you alright?"

"Be quiet, Nooroo!" he had snapped.

The little creature had backed away at the harsh order, wings tucking behind him in fear, "Yes, Master…"

Gabriel had turned away from him and headed off towards the hospital, his insides turning cold. The creature did not follow him, obediently remaining in a dark corner of the room, unseen.

When he arrived at the hospital and demanded to see Adrien, he was vehemently denied.

"Adrien is in an extremely delicate condition," they had said, "We cannot afford to put him under more stress. We are doing everything that we can."
The doctor had promptly returned to his duties, and Gabriel had been left to simmer in his rage. Rage he felt at his own impotence. At his orders being ignored. At himself for landing his son in that place. Because that had been the exact reason he had turned away from Nooroo.

He didn't want to see him—his Kwami—because that would mean acknowledging that he was Hawk Moth, and that the dragon Hawk Moth had sent to terrorize the city was the same one he had commanded and had gotten Adrien hurt. But no, he was trying so hard to block that thought away, to deny it…

To deny the fact that in his zeal to break Chat Noir and finally get ultimate power, he had gotten his son involved in the crossfire.

Although his Akuma had been extremely aggressive and destructive and often acted on his own, Gabriel had not minded because Dragonfire had been diligent in trying to make his wish a reality. He had cared naught for the consequences as long as he got what he desired. In the end, he had been careless, leaving the Akuma to his own devices, ignorant of the true damage it was causing.

And now, his son...

"M. Agreste?" Nathalie addressed him warily. Gabriel bristled, side-eyeing her impatiently as he was brought back to reality.

Although part of him wanted to shirk responsibility and pin the blame on her negligence for Adrien's current predicament, he knew deep within him that there was no way she could've gotten to the school on time to save Adrien. According to student accounts, Adrien had run away way before the dragon had even attacked.

"What?" he spat.

"S-Sir this is Madame and Monsieur Dupain-Cheng," Nathalie said, introducing a short, Asian woman behind her and her husband, a burly, brown haired man. They both looked worse for the wear, soaked to the skin, and their eyes laden with fatigue. Gabriel had not even heard them come in.

"And they are…?" Gabriel insisted coldly. He really could not be bothered by strangers at this moment, so he put up his front again.

"They're the parents of Marinette, one of Adrien's classmates…" Nathalie explained.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. He recognized the name. In addition to Adrien mentioning her often, he also recalled that the girl had won several of his fashion contests in the past. She was a bright, creative girl with a world of potential in her being. He had even once idly considered taking her in as an intern when she was of age to work in the industry—

He suddenly froze when he abruptly remembered that another Akuma of his, Demoman, had landed her in the hospital. In a coma, from what Adrien had mentioned. He swallowed thickly and his stance softened slightly.

"I recall…" Gabriel said levelly, though not so cold as before.

"They and another one of Adrien's friends were the ones who found him on the railways," Nathalie continued.

Gabriel looked them over momentarily, and then extended his hand.

"Madame Dupain-Cheng," he said, his voice level and professional.
Sabine approached him silently, but instead of just falling into the handshake, she cupped his hand with both of hers and looked warmly at him.

"He will be alright," she said soothingly, smiling at him, "He's a strong kid. Have faith."

Guilt unlike any he had felt before nipped at Gabriel's consciousness. While he had gotten their child fatally wounded with little regard for it, they had gone out of their way to look for his and even comfort him in his time of need.

Gabriel could've laughed dryly at the irony if not for the grim situation they were both in.

So he could do nothing but nod his head. "You have my thanks, Monsieur and Madame Dupain-Cheng…"

"Here, take this. It will keep you warm," Tom offered, handing him a brown paper bag. "If there's anything we can do for you, our number is in the bag."

Nathalie hurriedly came forward to grab the bag in Gabriel's stead. It opened slightly and the smell of chocolate and warm bread wafted into the room.

"Ah, you are the bakers that own that prestigious pâtisserie," Gabriel noted, smiling with polite professionalism as he took in the logo on the bag, "I remember your daughter. Brilliant mind. I should hope she is doing well?"

Sabine smiled amicably, though her eyes remained sad, "She's hanging in there."

"Then I'll have something arranged for you," Gabriel said suddenly.

"Oh, there's no need!" Sabine said.

"Please, I insist." Gabriel said with finality, nodding his head at Nathalie. "See to it that Mlle. Marinette is given the best service the hospital has to offer."

Nathalie nodded silently and left the room to fulfill Gabriel's request.

"M. Agreste, we are deeply touched, but it really isn't necessary," Tom said nervously, "We wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"It's not an inconvenience, and it's my thanks for looking out for my son. I'm deeply grateful."

Gabriel said with yet another pleasant smile.

"Well, thank you very much, Monsieur Agreste," Sabine said bowing her head gratefully.

Suddenly, they heard the creak of a door and someone clearing their throat and they turned towards the source.

"Monsieur Agreste?" the doctor asked softly as he walked into the room. He looked serious and grim and Gabriel got a chill down his spine. Suddenly the temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees and the tension among all occupants increased.

"May I speak to him privately, please?" he gently nodded at Tom and Sabine. They looked at each other in silence, worry etched on their features, and then inclined their heads respectfully at the doctor. Sabine spared Gabriel one last glance and a small smile and they left the room silently.

"How is he?" Gabriel asked the moment the door closed behind the Dupain-Chengs.
The doctor hesitated, breathing deeply.

"We did what we could but I'm afraid Adrien's condition was too precarious," he said in a low voice, his eyes apologetic, "He came to us in a terrible state. His heart went into arrest and he…" he swallowed, "I'm sorry, M. Agreste, but he didn't make it."

As the words sunk in, echoing in his head, Gabriel's heart skipped a beat and his breath hitched. He felt as if a vat of cold water had been dumped on him, and his knees had suddenly gone weak.

It had to be a joke. This could be nothing but a joke. This wasn't happening. *This wasn't happening.*

"This can't be…" Gabriel said, frowning and shaking his head, "There must be some sort of mistake!"

"I'm afraid there's no mistake. He has no vitals. We tried everything we could to revive him—"

"Clearly, you didn't try hard enough!" Gabriel snapped, his voice shaking in both fear and anger.

"Sir, I assure you, we did all we could. He was very hurt, we're still trying to determine a cause—"

"Take me to him!" Gabriel demanded, his nostrils flaring dangerously. He wasn't going to believe a word they said until he saw it with his own eyes. His son couldn't be dead. Adrien couldn't be dead. His last living memory of her couldn't be dead.

He couldn't possibly have *killed his own son.*

"Take me to him right now!"

The doctor sighed in defeat, "This way…"

Plagg lost track of how long he cried against Adrien before he felt a stir in the air. Plagg raised his head in curiosity, tear-filled and swollen eyes looking around in confusion. His surroundings suddenly felt heavy, crackling with energy, and the hairs on the nape of Plagg's neck stood on end.

Suddenly, he yelped when he felt something move beneath him, and he jumped away, realizing Adrien's Adam's apple had nudge him—

*Wait, what?*

Plagg's eyes widened when he realized Adrien was grimacing.

He was *grimacing!*

"Adrien!/?" Plagg stuttered in disbelief.

Adrien groaned as he stirred, eyes still squeezed shut. His head moved to side to side and he struggled as he tried to sit up, huffing heavily. Plagg waited with bated breath, watching as Adrien suddenly rose on the bed, broken arm hanging limply at his side as he sat, his head hanging, and messy hair covering his face. He breathed heavily, choking on his own breath and trembling.

"Adrien!" Plagg cried again in relief. He was about to fly to him when a strange sound like a choked chuckle stopped him.

"Cold…" Adrien croaked suddenly. His face was hanging low, so his features were hidden away from Plagg.
"What?" Plagg asked, tilting his head, "Adrien?"

Adrien chuckled again. "Still cold…"

A shiver travelled down Plagg's spine. Adrien didn't sound like himself, his voice was dark and low. The air stirred around Plagg again and his fur rose in response. Flabbergasted, he tapped into the strange aura, and his eyes widened when he recognized it.

"You're not Adrien…" Plagg hissed.

"Warmer…" and although Plagg could not see his face, he could feel the smile on Adrien's lips.

Plagg's eyes narrowed and he bared his teeth. "Akuma!"

"Hot, hot, hot..." Adrien slowly raised his head and Plagg backed away as Adrien's face came into view.

Although most looked the same, his eyes were entirely different. Dark rings lined his narrowed eyes. Bright magenta had replaced Adrien's vivid green, and his round pupils had become slitted like a cat's. They were cold, calculating, and dark. So very different from Adrien's warm and innocent gaze. Plagg also didn't miss how Adrien's canines had sharpened like fangs as he smiled mockingly at him, breathing heavily, as if it was still difficult to do so.

"You… How dare you!" Plagg cried in anger, "Where's Adrien?!"

"Oh, he's still here," the Akuma said through Adrien's lips, pointing a trembling finger at his forehead as he panted. "Mind you, the poor thing...is wondering if he's in purgatory since... he can't seem to pass on…"

"You son of a—"

Adrien interrupted him with a disapproving tut and a waggle of his finger.

"Ah, ah, ah… Is that any way to speak…to the one keeping him alive?" Adrien tilted his head, raising his eyebrows in mock innocence.

"Keeping his soul trapped isn't keeping him alive!" Plagg cried in indignation, fur completely standing on end.

"Oh, but he's not trapped," Adrien breathed, coughing slightly, "We are just switching up…so he can rest. And I think...we can both agree that the break is sorely needed, yes?" Adrien smiled amicably, gesturing to himself with his hand.

"Taking over his body is not rest! Get out!" Plagg spat.

"Relax, kitty, it's not permanent," the Akuma scoffed, "If you can stop glaring daggers at me... I can explain…"

"What?" Plagg hesitated, confused by the Akuma's sudden agreeable demeanor.

"Look, I know your tiny mind will have a hard time…understanding this, but do try…" the Akuma started, taking deep breaths, "I don't seek to hurt Adrien…I don't care about the Miraculous either...if that's what you are worried about."

"Oh, go home! Who would believe that!?" Plagg crossed his arms.
"Come on, use your brain for a bit, yeah?" Adrien said snidely, quirking an eyebrow, "Don't you think that if I cared about that...I would've already grabbed that ring on the floor...and the earrings in the safe, and taken them away? Adrien wasn't akumatized...so Hawk Moth doesn't control him, or me...I'm my own being. Adrien...is only vaguely aware of me."

"You're...your own being? How?" Plagg raised an eyebrow.

"Beats me..." Adrien shrugged his shoulders, "I just began existing in him and would only come out when he allowed me to. But...I've become stronger and now..." Adrien wiggled his fingers experimentally.

"If you think I will just let you take over him-!

"Oh, but you will. Assuming you want him to live, that is..." Adrien said in a low voice.

"Are you threatening me?!" Plagg growled.

"Look," Adrien huffed in exasperation, "You know how this is still working?" he shakily gestured to his chest, where Adrien's heart was. "That's all me."

"You're...keeping his heart beating?" Plagg asked.

"That's right. And I've been trying...to keep him alive for days," Adrien said, wincing as he clutched at his chest in pain, "Adrien should've died ages ago...but I kept him going, until that stupid old man sealed me away. Didn't you notice he was suddenly worse after that?"

"You just did that 'cause you were trying to use him!" Plagg said, "And hiding the pain from him wasn't helping him, he was still getting sick!"

"Okay, there's something...you need to understand," Adrien sighed, "I don't seek to terrorize Adrien or ruin his life. I actually...like the guy, even if he is kind of stupid and stubborn—" Plagg hissed, "—but my target is Hawk Moth. That's all I've wanted all along."

Plagg balked, "Wait, what? But you're an Akuma!"

"A free one... He has no power over me, and I will make him pay for what he's done." Adrien growled.

"What did he do to you?" Plagg narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"He nearly killed Marinette...and tried to hurt her family. I won't forgive him for that."

Plagg tilted his head in confusion. His eyes then widened when a memory came to him and Tikki's voice filtered in his head.

_The Akuma is making your feelings its own and only surfaces when you let it, echoing your feelings tenfold. If you hate Hawk Moth, it hates him too. If you love Marinette, it loves her, too._

Suddenly everything made sense. The Akuma had a consciousness of its own, but it had based its personality on Adrien's and adopted his likes and dislikes. So it was like a colder, evil copy of Adrien, but Adrien all the same!

"So the only reason you need Adrien's body is to defeat Hawk Moth?" Plagg asked.

"Yeah, so as you can see...our goals are aligned," Adrien breathed, nodding, "I have no intentions of hurting Adrien or the people he cares about. I just have a score to settle with Hawk Moth." he ended.
with a narrowed glare.

"And how come you're only showing yourself now if you've been in there all along?"

"Adrien had full control," the Akuma explained, breathing hard, "Part of him was subconsciously
holding me back all this time after the old man intervened...I had to...trick him into trusting me."

"Trick him? How?" Plagg's ears flattened against his head in wariness.

The Akuma hesitated before it spoke, "I kept myself in check and...I showed him...what he wanted
to see..."

"What he wanted...?" Plagg thought for a bit, and then gasped "The dreams!?!"

Adrien nodded. "Ladybug...was an illusion...I created," The Akuma panted. "She... made him drop
his defense..."

Plagg scrunched his face in an expression of distaste, "That's low, even for you!"

"It was either that or letting him suffer endless nightmares... Your call..." The Akuma said matter-of
-factly. Plagg crossed his arms and grumbled. He didn't approve on the Akuma's methods, but he
wasn't keen on the alternative either.

"Either way...I only came out when he allowed me to. But with his consciousness fading... when his
heart stopped, I was able to take over and hold him together so he wouldn't pass away." Adrien
coughed and a thin strip of blood dripped from his lips. He reached up to clean it with a sigh.
"Dammit..."

"You tricked their machines?" Plagg said pointing at the heart monitor, which even though it was
still plugged to Adrien, lay completely silent.

"Yeah, it wasn't easy... But I needed some time to get used to his body. I didn't try to restart his heart
till he was left alone... and froze the machines when I did," The Akuma explained with a tired breath,
"When Adrien granted me control before, it was only as backup. Now, with his consciousness gone,
I had to take over and... well it's a new experience... " Adrien sighed.

He looked like the sole act of talking was beginning to drain him, his eyes getting droopy and sweat
beading on his forehead. He breathed harder and harder every time he spoke.

"I see," Plagg said, putting a paw on his chin pensively. In retrospect, although he despised the idea
of an Akuma living inside Adrien he had to admit that he sounded genuine. After all, he had helped
Adrien twice during his battles with Dragonfire, and he had relinquished control right after. Besides,
if it was as he said, and the Akuma had been the one keeping him alive all along...

Adrien looked warily at the door, his shoulders tense. He could hear the sound of chatter close by.

"Look, there's people coming, so here's the deal..." Adrien panted, talking low under his breath,
"You keep quiet about me, and I help Adrien stay alive. His body... is still a massive wreck, and
keeping his heart going is enough work for me... so he still needs to stay here and recover on his
own. Do not tell him about me... or he will get scared and try to get rid of me.... and he will die for
sure. I will let Adrien stay in control, I just want to look for Hawk Moth, I swear. If you help me, we
can work this out. Deal?"

Plagg hesitated, looking dubiously at Adrien. He could see part of the real Adrien seeping through
the Akuma, but the fact it was so aggressive and unpredictable whenever it got upset was
preoccupying. How much was Adrien and how much was the Akuma? How far was it willing to go to achieve its goal?

Plagg was at a crossroads. To risk having a sentient Akuma lose control, but having Adrien alive and well, or lose Adrien forever?

It didn't take him long to make up his mind.

"Deal."

The doctor had barely gotten the door open before Gabriel shoved past him, ignoring the protests from the nurses. He strode wordlessly toward the bed in the middle of the operating room, where a body covered with a white linen sheet lay.

"M. Agreste, please wait!" The doctor called after him. Gabriel ignored him and grabbed the edge of the sheet, swiftly yanking it away.

He couldn't stifle the gasp that left him.

Adrien's lifeless form came into view, pale and unmoving.

Gabriel's eyes widened as they took in the extent of damage he had gone through. Adrien had terrible burns everywhere, cuts and bruises peppering his skin on different parts of his body. His left shoulder was covered in red and purple blemishes, and his right arm, marred by a large, white scar branching out from his hand and up to his shoulder, lay hanging listlessly at the edge of the bed.

What had he done?

"Adrien…?" Gabriel choked.

A trembling hand reached out to cup Adrien's cheek. It was cold to the touch, and he got no reaction from him.

"Son…" Gabriel tried again, his voice going soft, low. His hand went to caress his hair, thumb brushing Adrien's brow. He stroked his hair gently in a way he hadn't done in years, not since Adrien had been but a toddler and she was…

He shook his head to get rid of the thoughts and his hand went down again, the back of his fingers stroking Adrien's cheek. "Son…wake up…"

But Adrien was silent and still.

And reality came crashing down. Terrible, cold, and heavy.

Adrien was dead. He had killed his son.

Gabriel had killed his own son.

In his stupid venture to fulfill his own wish, he had lost the one remaining thing he had that tethered him to any semblance of sanity. All of this back and forth, this ridiculous cat and mouse chase had all been for him, for them!

To be a family again…

And now he didn't even have that. Ladybug and her earrings were gone, Chat Noir had gone into
hiding and now he had nothing, absolutely nothing, left... No Miraculous, no wife, and now... no son. No amount of money or power in the world was going to be able to bring him back. He had lost him. Adrien was gone, forever...

And for the first time in ages, Gabriel Agreste cried.

He wept silently, tears dripping from his eyes as he leaned down to take his only child, his son, into his arms, cradling him against his chest and sinking his face into the crook of his neck. He rocked him, muffling his sobs against his cold skin, hands trembling as they felt the terrible burn covering his back.

A hand went up to caress Adrien's head, fingers brushing through his matted, golden hair, pressing him to his body as if that alone were enough erase the reality of his situation. They remained in the embrace for several minutes. Just him, holding Adrien, as the doctors and nurses looked on solemnly.

So enveloped was he in his grief that he didn't even hear one of the nurses gasp; so engrossed in his own pain, that he didn't even notice one of the monitors tethered to Adrien begin to emit a low, beeping sound. So lost in his own guilt, that he initially failed to notice Adrien cough and give a shuddering breath against his neck.

"Mon dieu..." the doctor breathed behind him.

Gabriel then felt movement and pulled back with a gasp, his tear-stricken blue eyes suddenly meeting a pair of very tired, but very alive green ones.

Gabriel had to blink several times to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

And Adrien blinked slowly back at him, breathing low and ragged.

"...D...ad..."

And that morning, among incredulous tears and sighs of relief, the staff at the hospital knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had experienced a miracle.

Adrien began to exist in limbo.

He didn't know how much time had passed. He had completely lost notion of time.

All he knew is that every day was the same.

He felt like he was in a constant state of floating. He couldn't feel himself. None of his senses seemed to work. Sometimes, he felt his eyes would open on their own, but his mind would be elsewhere.

He'd see people above him, doing things with him, but it was a blur. Their voices would sound far away and muted like he was underwater. He didn't recognize any of them.

Sometimes though, he thought he heard his father. Other times, it was Nathalie, or Nino, or Alya or Plagg... Sometimes he could hear Madame Cheng, too. He couldn't be sure. Sometimes though, his mind wished the voice he would hear would be another. One he missed dearly. One he hadn't heard in a long time.

And sometimes when his eyes closed again, he'd get his wish.

*When his eyes closed, a brand new world opened. A world where everything felt right. He would wake in a grassy plain, peppered with daffodils and lilies. He'd lie on the soft grass for several*
minutes on end, soaking in the warm sun. He had shed his usual clothing, wearing nothing but a shirt and pants that were white as snow, completely barefoot, and his body devoid of any blemish, burn or scar.

Nothing hurt anymore. Nothing ached. He was healthy and alive and happy. He felt completely at ease and comfortable and he would only stand when the ache in his heart began. When his heart ached, he would rise and wander, looking for the only thing, or rather, the only one who could ease his yearning heart.

He would walk for miles, through fields of green, watching the birds scatter into a pure blue sky. Eventually, he'd reach a familiar landmark. The Eiffel Tower stood proud and tall in the middle of a valley, and he would look longingly at it. For some reason, when he tried to go that way, he'd be unable to, as if a invisible barrier had been erected.

He would get as close as he could and just watch. Because some days ago, he had discovered something interesting.

Sometimes, if he stayed there long enough, he'd catch a glimpse of a mysterious figure, gliding through the grass, humming under her breath and carrying a beautiful bouquet as she moved underneath the Parisian tower.

She wore a beautiful pink summer dress. Her midnight hair would hang loose, cascading down her shoulders, and her bright blue eyes shone like jewels. She was both strange and familiar, and his heart would long for her. He'd call her, then. By what name? He didn't know. He just knew his lips were moving, trying to get her attention.

However, she would never listen. She would never turn.

This would repeat every time, in an unending cycle. Adrien would wander, he'd find the tower, and find the girl at the border of the barrier, calling to her. But she could never hear him. He'd eventually go back, and lie back down where he'd begun, his eyes closing and the dreamscape fading.

When he wasn't dreaming, he just floated endlessly in a dark void, nothing but whispers and unintelligible words flooding his conscious as he seemed to sway in a black ocean.

Then one day, while he dreamt, something finally changed.

He had wandered to the barrier again, and once again, he had called to the dark haired girl, even though he knew what would happen.

Today, however, someone responded.

"She can't hear you."

Adrien turned to find Ladybug standing behind him, a placid smile on her face. Even though he hadn't seen her in a long time, she was as he remembered her. Loose midnight hair flowing around her, ethereal white glow enveloping her, and her eyes kind and blue.

"Adrien, walk with me."

Ladybug walked ahead, and Adrien followed her. As he came astride her, Ladybug laced her fingers with his and they walked hand in hand. They walked along the edge of the invisible barrier for a while. They were quiet for a time and then Adrien finally asked the question burning in his chest.
"Who is she? Why can't she hear me?"

"She's the one your heart is longing for," Ladybug said softly.

"Marinette?" Adrien breathed, looking back at the mystery girl under the tower. He had never dreamt with Marinette before. It had always been him and Ladybug, but for the first time, Marinette figured in his dreams and it was pleasant, not a nightmare!

But of course, that dark blue hair was unmistakable. How had he not recognized her? Had he started to forget her? No, impossible. He could never forget about her. She was the reason he had kept fighting.

Adrien turned back to Ladybug with a hopeful smile but it quickly fell when he noticed Ladybug looked tired, her eyes devoid of the glow he remembered.

"Seems so," she said, "She cannot hear you because she exists in her own dreamscape."

"Her own dreamscape?" Adrien asked.

"When we dream, we access a world that is our own, where we have no limits or grievances. But we are contained in our own minds." Ladybug explained.

"You mean, I'm looking at Marinette dream? Like, right now?" Adrien's voice hitched in sudden incredulity.

"Yes."

Adrien gasped, his heart racing in excitement.

"Wait... if she exists in her own dreamscape," Adrien started, "How come I can see her?"

"Because you two seem to be connected, so your dreamscapes exist close to one another. Think of two snowglobes perched on the same shelf next to each other," she said, "And your heart remembers her, so you can see and hear her, but for her, it's been a long time. It seems she has forgotten what you look or sound like. There's snow and dust blocking the view in her snowglobe, so to speak."

"Why?" Adrien asked with a frown. "And how come this is happening now?"

"I don't know. She might be close to you right now," Ladybug said.

"I thought that we couldn't communicate in dreams..." Adrien argued. He recalled Plagg and Tikki had definitely told him that Chosens couldn't communicate telepathically. Now it turned out that Marinette was dreaming close to him? Where was he exactly?

"I cannot explain it. I just know that for you it's a possibility now," Ladybug shrugged, "Although it's rare, you two are sharing a dream but the connection is weak and that's why she can't seem to hear you. But if it's your wish, I could help you meet."

"You could?" Adrien said, a smile breaking on his face, "I'd love that, please."

"There is one catch though," Ladybug said, and then she stopped in her tracks. When she turned to him, Adrien saw melancholy in her eyes. "You won't be able to see me again."

Adrien's heart dropped, "What? Why?"
"I'm part of your conscious, Adrien. I'm pure energy. It will take all of me to bridge the gap between you and combine the dreamscapes, and once I do it, I won't be able to come back," Ladybug said.

"Wouldn't I be able to dream you back?" Adrien said hopefully.

Ladybug chuckled bitterly "It doesn't work that way. That Ladybug wouldn't be me. One day you will know the truth about me, but for now, this is all I can do for you."

"I don't want you to leave!" Adrien said desperately, taking her hands in his.

"Adrien…" Ladybug said, trying to pull her hands from his grasp, "I'm not real."

"You are for me!"

"Don't make this harder, you have to understand!" she chastised.

And as if to prove her point, Ladybug grabbed his face and kissed him, hard. Although Adrien had initially given in to the kiss, it didn't take him long to feel how off it was. It was cold, unfeeling, and desperate and he knew her heart wasn't in it. Adrien broke off from the kiss, pushing against her shoulders.

"Why are you doing this?" Adrien gasped, trying to regain his breath.

"So you can be happy…" Ladybug said sadly.

"You want to make me happy by leaving?" Adrien said, hurt.

"You won't be alone…"

Ladybug pulled back from him and placed a hand where the invisible barrier would be. The air around her palm began to ripple like waves in water, spreading all around them with a tinkling sound.

"Come!" Ladybug called toward the other side, "Come here!"

To Adrien's surprise, Marinette turned on the other side of the barrier, looking curiously in Adrien's direction. Tilting her head, she started to walk towards them, dropping her bouquet of flowers as she went.

"Stop!" Adrien told Ladybug, "If she comes here, you will disappear!"

"Precisely," Ladybug said before she grabbed him and turned him around, holding his left arm against his back and forcing his right hand to touch the barrier. It felt cold and it tinkled and rippled aggressively.

"What are you doing!?" Adrien said, gasping in surprise and writhing against Ladybug's hold. Marinette on the other side kept coming closer and closer and she extended a hand towards him. "Stop! I don't want you to go!"

"It made me really glad I could spend time with you," Ladybug whispered in his ear, "Now it's time I return the favor. Be happy, Adrien!"

And the moment Marinette's hand came but a few inches from his, Ladybug vanished in a burst of light as the sound of cracking glass exploded in his ears.
Marinette hummed placidly under her breath. She bent down to pick a particularly nice-looking daffodil as she strolled underneath the Eiffel Tower. When she twirled the stem in her hand, she realized it felt warm like the sun, and that its petals had the distinct smell of sweet vanilla.

She breathed in the pleasant smell, letting that feeling of safety and coziness that accompanied the smell suffuse through her body, and she smiled. She stood up again to continue her wandering when a curious sound stopped her.

"Come…"

Marinette paused and tilted her head in confusion. The sudden voice had a distinct ethereal echo to it, and it sounded… like her?

"Come here…"

Marinette looked around perplexed, until her eyes landed on the horizon beyond, on the edge of the valley. Standing there, her hand raised as if touching a wall, was a girl dressed in a red suit and mask with black spots, her dark hair floating around her with an invisible wind. Her familiar blue eyes glinted mysteriously. Was she the one who had called her?

Curious, Marinette walked towards her, dropping the flowers she had collected, drawn to the unknown girl like a bee to honey. The girl seemed to be moving back and Marinette extended her hand, walking faster.

"Wait, don’t go!" she called. Marinette increased her speed, right hand shooting out just as she came close. But before she could reach the mysterious girl in red, her hand touched an invisible cold surface and there was a blinding flash of white light accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. She blinked against the sparkling debris, trying to regain her sight and she gasped when she suddenly felt her hand touch something soft and warm.

Something that smelled like cleanliness and vanilla and felt warm like sunlight.

"...Marinette?" a young male voice asked.

"Tom! Tom, wake up!"

Tom nearly fell off the couch as Sabine shook him awake and he grunted as he grabbed on to the back so as to not fall off. Having been transferred to a more spacious, high-end room a couple of weeks ago thanks to Gabriel Agreste’s generosity, Tom and Sabine now had the luxury of staying over at the hospital and sleeping on the couch as they watched over Marinette.

It had been Sabine’s turn to keep watch that night, and watch she did, for the moment Tom laid eyes on her, he noticed that she seemed really enraptured by something.

"Huh-what?" Tom drawled, trying to blink the sleep out of his eyes.

"Look!"

Sabine grabbed his chin and directed his eyes to the vastly larger and more comfortable-looking bed in the center of the room where Marinette now lay, strapped down and plugged.

"Huh?" Tom mumbled, tilting his head in confusion.

But then, as his sight cleared and the light from the moonlight pouring from the window hit Marinette, he saw what Sabine meant and his eyes widened.
As the pale light glinted off her placidly sleeping face and the white restraints around her wrists, Tom saw Marinette's right hand twitch, fingers spread and forearm raising as if she was trying to reach out for something.

Or someone.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who guessed Dream!Ladybug was the akuma/created by it... Good job ;)  
You didn't really think I'd completely kill off Adrien, right? Come on :P How is the fluff happening with one of the cinnamon rolls missing!?  
Now they can be together.. in coma...  
I kid i kid  
please dont kill me  
EDIT: Beautiful fanart of this chapter!! *___*  
"Marinette…?"

Adrien couldn't believe what was happening. After a long and terrible, lonely month, Marinette was finally in front of him, her eyes wide open, one hand reaching out to him with fingers lightly brushing his chest.

He knew he was dreaming. Ladybug had told him that but… how was it that he could feel her? If it was but a dream, how was it possible that she felt so warm against him and smelled so sweet, like cinnamon and fresh spring flowers?

How was it that she looked so radiant and… alive?

He lifted a hand to cup hers against his chest, a tingle running up his spine as he felt her soft, warm hand under his own. She felt so different from Ladybug. Although Ladybug had been kind and loving, she had always felt cold, like she wasn't really there… but Marinette. Marinette was in front of him, warm, and real, and glowing...

"Marinette…" Adrien repeated, his voice hitching as emotion built in his throat.

She stared at him, tilting her head slightly in bewilderment. She wriggled her fingers under his hand, moving her palm up across his chest as her other hand came to join it, feeling him like a curious child discovering something new.

However, she suddenly frowned and Adrien was taken aback.

"Who?" Marinette asked suddenly, her voice soft and tinkling but laced with concern, "Who… who are you?"

Adrien hesitated, perplexed by her peculiar response, "It's me… it's Adrien, Marinette."

"Adrien?"
If it was even possible, she looked even more confused, her eyes narrowing as she thought.

"I... I don't..." she started, her face contorting in worry. "Why can't I...?"

She looked frustrated, her hands moving across his shoulders and arms desperately, fingers feeling every inch of his skin. Although he was taken aback by her physical response, he didn't attempt to stop her wandering.

"Why can't you what?" Adrien pressed, bewildered by the concern starting to line her features. He was getting worried himself. He had begun to feel the familiar pull in the pit of his stomach and his eyelids, the pull that signaled that he was waking up and his dream was soon coming to an end.

Please, please wait, Adrien begged his body, Please let me stay a little longer!

"Why..." Marinette whispered to herself again, her eyes glistening with disappointment as her hands came to rest against his cheeks.

"Marinette, what... what is it...?" he slurred. The dreamscape was starting to sway around him, his eyes becoming heavier and harder to keep open. He was becoming dizzy, unsteady on his feet.

She looked up at him, but her eyes were not on him, looking past him, like she was trying to find something in the empty air, like she couldn't—

"Why can't I see you?"

—see.

Before his cold fear could even fully begin to form, he felt the ground give out from under him and his world went dark, Marinette fading into shadow.

"Adr...n...."

"Adri...en..."

"...Adrien?"

Adrien's consciousness stirred in the darkness, though it felt slow and muffling, like there was a thick veil enveloping his mind. The voice calling him was not Marinette's, but it beckoned insistently to him. He couldn't feel, or see, or smell, just hear. He just wanted to go back to sleep. He wanted to see her. He didn't want to wake yet and he tried to sink back into the nothingness again...

"Adrien..."

He heard the female voice calling him again. It was joined by an intermittent, slow beeping sound, echoing in the recesses of his mind. He was pulled back from the embrace of darkness and he started to feel something creeping up his arms and his chest, sensation starting to register.

"How long has he been off the morphine?" A male voice asked. It sounded familiar.

"Three hours," the woman answered.

"Give him time to wake, prepare everything for extubation, please."

"Yes, Dr. Longuevie."
Longuevie… where did he know that name from?

He began feeling a dull pressure in his head. His eyes felt heavy and his jaw was stiff. He felt something uncomfortable in his throat, and he swallowed, grimacing at the odd sensation and the bitter taste of copper in his mouth.

The discomfort seemed to grow, branching out to the rest of him. It kept growing and growing, quickly becoming painful. A dull throb spread throughout his body and he winced, a gruff moan escaping him, but it sounded muffled, like there was something in his mouth.

"Adrien? Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?" he heard the man ask him.

Adrien tried to force his heavy lids to move, and his swollen eyes opened a crack. He blinked against the sudden bright light, squeezing his eyes shut again and groaning in protest at the pain it caused.

"Subdue the lights, please," he heard the doctor instruct someone. "Adrien, try again, the lights are off."

He did, and he found that the lighting was much more bearable. His surroundings were hazy, a muddled combination of muted colors. His sight was blurry, as if there was a thick, partially opaque film over his eyes.

He started to become aware of things around him, like the whirring sound of a ventilator on his right, and the beeping sound from several monitors on his left. He also became aware that he was lying on a bed, in a spacious room where the lights had been turned down.

Where was he?

A body moved into his line of vision on his left, a blurry mess of white and black.

"Adrien? If you can hear me, don't speak, just move your fingers, please." he spoke.

He obeyed, but found he couldn't move an inch of his left arm and when he tried, pain sparked in his nerves and he groaned in response.

"Use your right hand. Your left is immobilized."

He moved his right fingers, though he found his movements to be heavy and slow. His eyesight began to clear however, and his eyes focused on the doctor hovering at his side. He had frameless glasses covering his kind, brown eyes, and he sported a small dark mustache matching his perfectly combed black hair. Adrien definitely knew he had seen him somewhere.

"Thank you," the doctor said, seemingly writing something on his clipboard. "Now, can you understand everything I'm saying? Tap your index finger three times."

Adrien did as he was told.

"Good," the doctor said, his voice calm and relaxing. "You must be feeling extremely confused right now, but I promise that everything will be alright."

Confused was an understatement. And alright? Also debatable. Adrien had no idea where he was, why he couldn't move, why everything hurt, or who that man was. He knew he recognized him from somewhere, but his somnolent mind couldn't place him and all he wanted was to go back to sleep again.
"I'm Dr. Longuevie," the man continued, "I've been taking care of you. We've met before. I also look after your friend, Miss Marinette. Do you remember me? Blink once for yes, blink twice for no."

Oh. Oh. So that's who he was. He remembered him now. He had allowed Alya and him to see Marinette when she got out of surgery. He had saved her life. Adrien blinked once.

"Great. You're in the hospital. You suffered an accident with an Akuma. You've been sleeping for a long while," he explained slowly, at a pace Adrien could register, "We're just going to wait for the analgesics to finish leaving your system so we can get to work. Don't try to speak yet. You were intubated because you were having trouble breathing but you're alright now, so we're going to take it out, okay?"

Adrien hesitated for a few seconds but he blinked once. He didn't recall any accident, nor how he had gotten there, but he trusted the doctor and he still felt too tired to care. All in his mind was Marinette and all he wanted was to get whatever they were going to do to him done with so he could go dream and see her again.

The next few minutes passed by as hours to him. Everything moved in a blur around him and the pain across his body intensified with every passing minute. He found himself grimacing and squeezing his eyes closed against the waves of warm electricity traveling down the length of his body, wishing he were unconscious.

After involuntarily letting out a particularly loud whimper at one point, he was told that he would be put back on painkillers when they were done, but Adrien wished they would do it already. He could feel an incandescent sensation rolling in his stomach and spreading to his —broken?—left arm, setting his nerves on fire.

With every passing second, the tube traveling all the way from his mouth and down his throat became more and more painful and he had to resist the urge to choke and gag, his eyes watering each time he shifted his head even an inch.

When they finished preparing, they carefully repositioned him on the bed, his body limp like a ragdoll. He felt too weak to move and he let the nurses move him themselves. He cooperated completely, eager to get the invasive tube out of his mouth and to be put on anything that would make the pain go away again.

Finally, they moved to remove the offending machine. It started slowly, mild, with them suctioning out saliva and other things from his mouth. He coughed and choked as they slowly pulled the thin tube out, his throat burning painfully as the plastic slid up his trachea.

After long grueling seconds, the tube was finally out and he coughed roughly, his throat on fire and saliva dripping down his chin. Sucking in air suddenly seemed more difficult, and he breathed heavily trying to get used to the feeling again.

They cleaned him up and repositioned his pillows, promptly putting an oxygen mask on his face. He accepted it willingly, and relaxed back on the bed, trying to get his breathing under control. Without the tube, he felt a heavy pressure on his chest and an unpleasant, sore emptiness in his throat.

"We'll give you a few minutes to settle. Your father is wanting to see how you're doing today. He's on his way right now," Dr. Longuevie told him, gently smoothing Adrien's hair back away from his forehead in a way that not even his own father had ever done. "I'm sure you'll be wanting to see your friends too. They're really worried about you, but we're going to take it easy today, okay?"
Adrien tried to nod but regretted it as the motion caused his throat to throb.

Dr. Longuevie chuckled sympathetically, "Easy. Just blink."

Adrien blinked once.

"Good," he said warmly, "You're very much like your friend, you know? An incredible fighter."

There was a curious glint in the doctor's eye, like he knew something interesting. A glint of familiarity, of a secret shared between them, but Adrien didn't know what it meant. It made him trust him, however, and made him willing to talk to him.

He wanted to ask him about Marinette, to ask how she was doing, but he didn't know how. He weakly moved his right arm, his fingers tapping the doctor's hand on his bedside. He looked pleadingly at him, hoping that he'd understand the meaning behind his gaze.

Thankfully, he seemed to get the message just fine.

"She's doing better. She's healing steadily and she'll be okay. Don't worry about her," he said with a pleasant smile. Adrien sighed in relief.

He still worried that Marinette couldn't see him in her dream, and that somehow it had to do with her physical body, but knowing she was okay brought him peace. Having the same doctor would definitely make things easier. Finally, a stroke of luck for him!

"I'm sure you'll be wanting to know just what happened to you," Dr. Longuevie said. "I'll tell you everything we know when you get your bearings back. But I'll say this: the fact you're still here Adrien, is nothing short of a miracle. You're one lucky boy."

If he could've done it, Adrien would've laughed heartily at his choice of words.

A miracle indeed.

Adrien moaned against his mask, riding out another wave of intense pain. They didn't want to put him under until his father had seen him and they merely gave him a mild sedative, but it did little to alleviate his pain. All it did was make him dizzy, and now he waited, fingers weakly clawing at the covers.

He wished he'd get there faster.

He was really not surprised at the amount of pain he felt after the doctor had explained just what was wrong with him. Never would he have imagined the amount of damage he had sustained for so long and the fact he had survived it by some grace of the heavens.

His left arm hadn't just been dislocated again. The pressure of Dragonfire's bite had actually cracked his forearm and they had to put it in a cast bound in a shoulder brace against his chest, and if he even tried to move an inch, he'd feel the sharp pinpricks of pain running through his arm and shoulder. He was told that he would probably need therapy for that but he didn't care. He just wanted it to stop stinging.

After several tests and endoscopies, they had found the lining of his stomach to be severely inflamed and bleeding which explained his excruciating stomach pains, why he couldn't keep food down, and why he kept vomiting blood.
His lungs had also suffered an acute infection, which, when coupled with the one on his burnt back, landed him with a terrible cough and fever that he was apparently just overcoming thanks to treatment. The rest of his organs seemed to still be functional but not working at full capacity, causing him to feel pain consistently without pause.

He was surprised his heart was even working, considering Dr. Longuevie told him he had suffered a massive heart attack that sent him into cardiac arrest the night he was admitted in the hospital. But apparently, much to the bafflement of his team, his heart and head were intact, despite having been pronounced dead for nearly half an hour.

All in all, Adrien was a walking wreck. (Or rather, would be if he could walk.)

He could only guess that all this damage had been one of the destructive aftermaths of Cataclysm. He couldn't explain how his heart and head were still alright, but he was not going to question his good fortune on those two very important aspects. He also wasn't going to question the fact he had somehow come back to life, despite the medical impossibility.

What he could question, though, is what was taking his father so long?

It's not that he didn't want to see him; it was just that tears had begun to form at the corners of his eyes from having to tolerate the torture. The pain was unrelenting, and he was itching to go back to sleep. He was tired of feeling pain, and he just wanted to see Marinette again! He had been so close…

He suddenly heard a knock on the door and it opened to reveal Dr. Longuevie. He came up to Adrien's bedside, smiling down at him as he checked one of the monitors connected to Adrien.

"Hey champ, how are you faring?" he asked.

Being unable to talk, Adrien huffed loudly instead, eyes looking pleadingly at the doctor as he fist his hand on the covers to signal his intense discomfort. Dr. Longuevie sighed in response, looking sympathetically at him.

"I know, son, I know," he said gently, patting his uninjured arm reassuringly. "But you've been asleep for four long days. Your father is very worried about you."

Four days? He had been out for four days straight? Somehow it felt longer.

"Speaking of which, your father just arrived and he will be here shortly," the doctor continued. "We will put you under as soon as he sees how you're doing."

And just on cue, a nurse knocked lightly on the open door, addressing Dr. Longuevie.

"Doctor, Monsieur Agreste is here," she said softly.

"Ah, good, let him in. I just need to finish up with Adrien real quick," he said. The nurse nodded and signaled to someone beyond the threshold. Longuevie turned back to Adrien and talked low, "I will be changing your medication now, since it will take a bit to kick in. It will cut your time with your father but I think you've been awake long enough. So if you feel dizzy, don't worry about it. Don't fight it."

Adrien nodded, wishing he could thank him for his mercy. Longuevie seemed to get it regardless, smiling warmly as he changed the IV in Adrien's arm and gently rubbed the skin where the needle had pricked him.
Adrien gave a sigh of relief as he felt a slight burning sensation travelling up his veins, signaling the precious painkiller had begun to course his system. It had a nasty aftertaste of copper on his tongue but he didn't mind it as long as he was out of it.

A shifting sound caught Adrien's attention and he turned to the door. Gabriel slinked into Adrien's line of sight, his poise stiff and professional as he walked into the room. His eyes regarded Adrien impassively, his mouth pulled into a thin line.

Something like bitterness stirred within Adrien. Although initially Adrien had been glad his father had been so distant he couldn't suspect of Adrien's nightly activities, now he was just bothered by his bearing. Not even the near-death of his son could get rid of that cold detachment he always wore like a glove.

Adrien couldn't really say he was surprised, either. If he were to guess, Adrien predicted he would probably be his typical brand of fatherly and confine him to the mansion once he was out of the hospital. It was not something Adrien was looking forward to and it caused him to feel a cold emptiness in his stomach. It was back to square one for him.

Couldn't he just skip this and get knocked out to save him the grief? What could his father possibly have to tell him? And worried about him, was he? He was probably just worried his perfect model was now out of commission and unusable.

God, he missed his mother so much…

Gabriel came to rest at Adrien's bedside, but his inner turmoil had caused Adrien to look away, eyes glassy as he tried to hold both tears of pain and dejection back.

"Good evening, Monsieur Agreste," Dr. Longuevie greeted amicably. "Adrien is doing better today. The treatment is working and the lining in his stomach is healing. He can now breathe on his own but he still needs to be put on morphine to counter the pain. You may notice him getting sleepy but it's nothing to worry about."

"I'll keep it brief," Gabriel said levelly though Adrien knew Gabriel didn't appreciate being cut off. He turned to Adrien, but Adrien stubbornly kept his gaze diverted from him.

"Adrien…" Gabriel said softly.

Adrien cursed at himself. All those years of conditioning by his father made his body react automatically, and his face slowly turned to him.

As his eyes met Gabriel's, Adrien blinked in bafflement. He had expected anger, disappointment, even annoyance... He had not expected to see actual regret in Gabriel's face. His steely, blue eyes even shone with something Adrien had trouble believing were tears. And those rings under his eyes...

Had he been crying?

Gabriel's mouth kept opening and closing, like he couldn't decide what to tell him. He would steal glances at the doctor as if his presence was unwanted but couldn't bring himself to tell Adrien's caretaker anything. Longuevie, perceptive as he was however, was perfectly capable of reading Gabriel's body language.

"I'll leave you to it," Longuevie said softly, bowing his head and leaving the room, silently closing the door behind him.
A cold silence fell between the two. Adrien wished he would speak already, as he was already feeling his muscles begin to relax with the medication and his pain ebb away. Gabriel seemed to read his thoughts and cleared his throat.

"How are you feeling?" Gabriel asked somewhat awkwardly. He was trying to be kind, Adrien could tell, but his constant cold demeanor made that very difficult. Adrien didn't know how to reply either. He opened his mouth but no sound came out, and even attempting it caused him to cough roughly as it upset his sore throat.

"Ah, of course, I'm sorry…" Gabriel apologized, "I'm… I'm glad you're awake."

Adrien was not.

Gabriel hesitated and Adrien was taken aback. He had never seen his father lose his front even slightly. Angry? Yes. Furious? Of course. But awkward? You'd never catch Gabriel Agreste acting insecure around anyone. Not in a thousand years.

When his mother disappeared, he had vanished for days, and when he showed his face again, days later, he had come out changed. Colder. Unfeeling. He was never the same again.

Now, he was seeing signs of the old father he had known. Granted, even before, Gabriel hadn't exactly been the emotional type. That was mostly his mother, and his mother had been the only person able to bring out the best in Gabriel. His caring, human side.

The side that actually loved Adrien as a son and not as a company asset.

But when his mother left, so did Gabriel's heart.

"I… I'm sorry," Gabriel said again after a couple seconds of silence. "I'm sorry for… this."

Sorry for what? For not being there? Yeah probably, but Adrien had actually been grateful for it. Plus, Adrien was used to his absence. Nothing new.

"I wish… I could've stopped it," Gabriel continued in a low voice, "This wasn't meant to happen..."

Why was he talking like it was his fault? It's not like he sent the Akuma. That was Hawk Moth and to be fair, Adrien had purposefully sought the dragon out, too. He got himself into it. He knew it was a suicide mission and he was ready to accept the consequences.

"I'm so sorry for not protecting you," Gabriel continued, and even as his mind began to waver, Adrien could distinguish a slight tremor in his voice. "I should've been there for you."

Please, stop, Adrien begged in his mind. Something in Adrien's chest was constricting, and a lump had begun to form in his throat. It's not your fault, please stop.

"But I will make it right," Gabriel continued, and Adrien was surprised to find Gabriel's hand had reached out to hold his own. "It will be fine, Adrien. You will get better. You will be alright."

Adrien was shocked to see something thin and liquid trail down from Gabriel's eye.

Was he… No, he couldn't possibly be…

A shaky breath left Gabriel. "Please, forgive me…"

And then it happened. Gabriel began to weep in front of him, silent tears trailing down both his cheeks as he bowed his head down in a poor attempt to hide it. Adrien was frozen in place. He had
never seen his father cry. Ever. It was unnerving. It was depressing. And it was causing Adrien's heart to squeeze in guilt.

Why did he keep blaming himself? It wasn't his fault. He wished so hard he could tell him it wasn't his fault, that it was Adrien's. He'd been the stupid one to go picking a fight with a damn dragon! It was Adrien who had tricked his caretakers and nearly got himself murdered!

His father had nothing to do with it. He was always busy and Adrien got that, really, he did. He wished he'd be more present, more caring but Adrien understood...

*Please, please stop blaming yourself…*

Adrien's eyes burned as his own tears came, slipping down his cheeks and around the plastic of the mask pressed to his face. Gathering all the strength his broken body could muster, Adrien lifted his right arm and reached towards his father, fingers weakly trying to latch on to the lapel of Gabriel's suit.

Gabriel flinched, looking at Adrien's hand with confusion. He turned back to Adrien, eyes full of concern.

"Is it... hurting?" Gabriel asked, unsure on what Adrien's gesture meant, "Should I call the doctor?"

Adrien shook his head, mouthing something unintelligible.

"Son, I don't understand…" Gabriel insisted, perplexed by Adrien's fidgeting.

Adrien mouthed more slowly. His consciousness kept wavering, but he didn't want to pass out until Gabriel understood what he wanted to say. The burning was turning intense in his veins, and he was having trouble coordinating his movements.

Gabriel leaned closer, trying to get his meaning.

"Dad..." Adrien rasped in too low a voice that it was almost imperceptible and Gabriel nearly missed it. "Don't..."

"Don't?" Gabriel repeated, "What do you mean? What is it, Adrien?"

Adrien's trembling fingers finally managed to hook to Gabriel's vest and he tugged weakly. Gabriel gasped as he was pulled down and Adrien's arm wrapped around him, pressing Gabriel to him and sinking face into the front of his tailored suit.

Adrien's soft sobbing reached Gabriel's ears, and he finally understood.

*Don't blame yourself, dad…*

With a lack of hesitation that surprised even himself, Gabriel returned the embrace, carefully lifting Adrien's torso from the bed and holding him close. One of his hands went to Adrien's head, gently holding his face against his shoulder.

A warmth Adrien hadn't felt in more than a decade suffused through him and he shuddered with emotion against Gabriel's shoulder, fingers digging into his father's back. Gabriel hesitated in response, his voice concerned when he asked Adrien if he wanted him to let go, but Adrien shook his head vehemently.

He didn't want Gabriel to let go. He didn't want to stop feeling the love he had been longing for for
so long. For the first time, he felt warm and safe and loved in Gabriel's embrace, and Adrien didn't want to lose that. Adrien's own emotion seemed to seep into Gabriel as he felt him tremble slightly in the hug.

"I thought I'd lost you, too..." Gabriel whispered in Adrien's ear, his voice heavy. "Don't ever leave me like that again…"

It was a mixture of an order and a plea, and Adrien nodded, sniffling against the mask. He knew who he was talking about. Adrien had also been devastated by her departure, and now he understood. Adrien was all Gabriel had left of a family, his one tie to humanity, his last tie to his mother…

He felt like a child, and he was probably acting like one, putting his father's well-collected formality in jeopardy, but at this point he didn't care. And it seemed that Gabriel didn't either as he held him closer, stroking his hair like he once did when Adrien had been but a little boy, rocking him ever so slightly.

Adrien's hold began to weaken. Morphine was finally kicking in and his muscles were starting to go slack. Adrien kept himself conscious for as long as he could, reveling in the warmth of the elusive love his father had for him.

The love he had for a son, and not for a trophy.

Adrien's eyes began to close against his will and a sigh left his lips, his body relaxing as his consciousness began to fade. Gabriel held on to him the whole time, stroking Adrien's head until he completely passed out and his body went limp against him.

Stroking his hair one last time, Gabriel carefully laid Adrien back down, rearranging his head on the pillow and, in a rare demonstration of affection that Gabriel had only reserved for one other person, leaning down and brushing Adrien's forehead with his lips.

"I will make things right again," he said under his breath, "I promise..."

Though Gabriel's words were lost on the unconscious boy.

Adrien's eyes opened to a bright blue sky and a lush, green field. With a gasp of realization, Adrien jumped to his feet. He looked around him until he pinpointed the Eiffel Tower on the horizon. Blood thrumming in his veins, Adrien broke into a run.

It didn't take him long to reach the landmark, and as expected, the barrier was no longer there. He sprinted towards the center of the Tower, looking around for signs of Marinette. The wind blew gently, scattering petals and grass but it didn't matter how long he looked, Marinette was nowhere to be found.

"Marinette?" Adrien called, frowning in confusion. "Marinette!"

There was no response and he started to get worried. Surely, if he could dream up the Eiffel Tower from her dream, that meant she was still asleep and well, right? Surely, this wasn't a sign that there was something wrong?

He gasped when he felt something warm slink around his body. He looked down to see tendrils of light branching out from the ground and crawling around his limbs, covering him in bright, white light. With a yelp, he shook his arms, trying to shake off the weird, warm material sticking all over his skin, but it was to no avail.
As he tried to slap the strange material off him, he noticed the fingers on his now glowing right hand were clawed, and a silver ring had materialized in his ring finger. Frowning in curiosity he took a moment to look at himself. The material was not hurting him. In fact, he noticed with awe that the whiteness had covered his whole body like a suit and a silver bell had materialized where a gold one would be right in the middle of his collarbone.

A long, belted tail suddenly sprouted from his lower back, and he felt the warmth spread to his face and the top of his head as a white mask and matching feline ears materialized in their place.

He had transformed into his superhero alter ego, though his whole costume was white and silver instead of black and gold. But how? He hadn't say a thing, why had he transformed?

As if to answer his unspoken question, something caught his attention on the ground. The soil was sputtering and shifting, as if something was trying to come out. Adrien jumped back when something did pop out. It was thick and silver, and it started to protrude from the ground, rising up in front of him.

As it continued to move, Adrien noticed with a little gasp that it was his baton, extending up in front of him, glowing green paw glinting on the surface. It seemed to pause at the level of Adrien's eyes and he felt like it called to him, like it was trying to tell Adrien to do something.

Curious, Adrien reached out and grabbed the baton from the top. It lurched, and Adrien gasped as he was pulled upwards and he had to press his legs around the silver pole to avoid falling off. The pole continued to extend, up and up, and Adrien clung for dear life, legs wrapped tightly around the metal shaft.

He rose in the middle of the Eiffel Tower, past the many levels and viewing decks. Adrien had no idea what was going on. He just hung on, because although he knew it was a dream, he wasn't keen on finding out what would happen if he fell from that height in a dream.

Eventually though, the baton stopped moving on one of the highest decks of the tower. Frowning, Adrien looked around and he finally realized why the baton had taken him that high. In front of him, sitting and leaning back on one of the iron beams with her legs pulled up and hugging them to her chest with her arms, was Marinette.

She still had that beautiful pink dress on, her dark hair flowing smoothly with the wind and her sapphire eyes trained on the horizon, she looked calm and pensive, lost in her own thoughts and unaware that Adrien was even there.

His heart thumping in his chest, Adrien leapt off the pole and and rolled over the surface of the iron beam. His white costume faded into thin air as he rose to his feet and walked towards her, a hopeful smile pulling on his lips.

"Marinette?"

Marinette sighed for the tenth time that day since she had awakened on the grassy field. She had recalled the mysterious male voice she had heard earlier, when something like glass had shattered right in front of her. She didn't know why that had happened, or what it meant, but she had heard a familiar voice right after.

She was utterly perplexed. She could hear him perfectly and feel him, but he was invisible to her. He felt warm and soft, and he smelled so sweet. Those sensations had become so familiar to her as the
days passed and she had been so excited to finally be able to meet him for real...

But why? Why couldn't she see him? She longed so badly to know who he was.

Adrien, he said was his name. It rang a bell but at the same time, it was foreign to her, like a word stuck on the tip of her tongue. He had asked her what was wrong, but when she was about to reply, he vanished. His voice, smell, and feel was gone. She called for him, over and over, but he had disappeared without a trace.

So now, she waited. She had floated up to her favorite spot on the Tower and waited, hoping that he would appear again, sighing wistfully into the breeze…

"Marinette…"

Marinette gasped as the echo of his voice broke her out of her stupor. She whipped her head around, looking for the source, but her eyes met empty air. She could tell he was very close to her, probably standing on the same iron beam as her.

"Adrien?" she ventured, slowly rising to her feet, eyes scanning every detail around her for a sign of him.

"I'm here, Marinette."

"Where?" she asked, raising her arms as if she were blind, walking slowly towards where she thought his voice was coming from.

"Right here."

She gasped again when she felt his invisible fingers meet her wandering hands. She could feel his fingertips pressed against her own, his touch warm and solid. She noticed that as it had happened many times in the past, whatever she touched would materialize around her fingers, like color spreading on a white canvas.

But it didn't seem to work on Adrien. When she touched him, she'd see a flash of white, but it would dissipate, as if the color refused to stick to the canvas that was Adrien. She longed so bad to see him, to meet the subject that kept appearing in her many dreams, in many shapes and forms. He had always been elusive, mysterious, but now it seemed he was the most real he had ever been. This time, he seemed self aware and responded to everything she said.

Was he really just a dream?

"I can't see you…" Marinette lamented, and she could feel her eyes begin to burn with tears.

She heard him make a sound like a dejected sigh, like he too had expected this time to be different. "It's...it's alright, Marinette. Don't worry about it."

"May I?" she asked cautiously, reaching out with her hand where she thought his chest was.

"Go ahead." he said.

She shyly pressed her hands to his chest, feeling the soft fabric of whatever he was wearing and the warmth radiating from his body. She could feel his rhythmic heartbeat, steady and strong, beating hard against his chest. It seemed so familiar but also unknown, and she had to resist the urge to press her ear against him to feel the constant thrum throughout her body.
She saw the slight sparks of white light up under her fingers. She wondered what color his clothes where. Maybe she could imagine them? She pictured his body in her mind. Judging by the muscles and shapes underneath her fingers, she knew he was tall and fit, and very lean. She tried to picture a navy blue shirt on him to start...

She gasped suddenly.

"What is it?" Adrien asked, concerned.

The whiteness around her fingers had turned navy blue just like she had imagined. Wait… Was it…? Could she…? She got an idea.

"Adrien, what color is your shirt?" she asked him suddenly.

"What…?"

"What color is your shirt? The one you wear? Describe it to me." she repeated.

"Well, I usually wear a black shirt with three colored stripes - yellow, green, and purple - and a white over shirt with the sleeves rolled up… why?"

Marinette grinned. The color under her fingers had changed to black! She could see his shirt and the stripes! Her wandering hands reached for his arms and she gasped again when she felt and saw a glimpse of the white overshirt he wore.

"What about your skin?" she asked, an excited lilt to her voice, "What color is it?"

"Um… fair I guess?" he answered dubiously, "Why? What's going on?"

She didn't answer as a tinkling laugh escaped her. The skin she touched under her fingers had morphed from pure white to a light cream. Suddenly her disappointment seemed to ebb away with her new discovery. She could make this work! She could see him in this new way!

"What about the rest of your clothes?" she asked, making a mental map of his appearance.

"Blue jeans, black belt, orange converse." he said, "I still don't understand, though..."

"I can see you!" she explained with a smile "Well, not see you see you but I can imagine you! And I can see colors and feel things!"

She heard him give a sharp intake of breath.

"So you can see all of me now?" he asked, hopeful.

"Well, not all of you, just glimpses of it, depending on what I… touch." her voice faded suddenly, her expression pensive.

Her hands had stopped on his collar bone, hesitating about reaching further up. Her fingers touched his chin lightly, shyly, afraid to overstep her boundaries. After all, she still didn't quite remember who he was, even though he felt so familiar...

"Do you mind if I...?" she asked respectfully, index finger lightly brushing his jaw.

"Please…" he said very softly, almost pleadingly.

She gasped when she felt something warm cover her fingers, realizing it was his hands reaching for
"Let me help..." he said gently.

She felt him move her hands up to his face. She felt his chin, not very pointy but not very round either. She felt his soft cheeks, felt his tough cheekbones and his jaw, felt his ears... She could tell he was young. The creamy color of his skin would follow her every touch, blossoming like paint under her fingertips. She was memorizing every detail, painting a picture of his face in her mind.

"What color... is your hair?" she asked, almost breathlessly.

"Blonde."

He moved her hands up, allowing her fingers to thread through soft locks of golden hair, neatly combed on his head and parted in the middle in sweeping bangs.

"My eyebrows are slightly darker," he said, making her fingers trace the contour of his eyebrows. She saw the color pop up perfectly well, her fingers brushing the thin line. She then felt the bridge of his nose and then the tip. It was small and adorable, like a button nose, and she giggled.

"Why are you giggling?" he asked, curious.

"Your nose feels cute," she said, her cheeks going slightly pink. "Sorry this... must be awkward for you."

He laughed a beautiful laugh, "Not at all, I'm enjoying it! It's like meeting each other again. It's fun!"

"I knew you?" Marinette asked, "Did I know you in real life?"

"More than you know..."

Marinette didn't know how to feel about that. She couldn't seem to recall him properly, but the way he said it made such a pleasant warmth course her body. A deep rooted instinct threatened to take hold of her, and afraid of it, she turned her mind towards her hands again, eager to get distracted.

"What... what color..." she hesitated, her fingers lingering lightly on his eyelids. "What color are your eyes...?"

"Green..."

And they appeared, lighting up beside her fingertips. Beautiful, glowing green eyes like emeralds hit by a ray of sunlight, regarding her warmly, as if she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. There was such love and kindness in them and she felt her knees go weak. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end, her heart began beating hard in her chest, and her cheeks felt unbearably warm. A familiar feeling began taking hold of her. Something sudden and powerful...

Like a strike of thunder.

"Marinette? Are you okay?" he asked, worried at her sudden silence. "We can stop if you want, I don't... I don't want to make you uncomfortable..."

"No, no, it's not you!" she said, tripping over her words, "It's just... it's the first time this has... Sorry I don't know how to explain..." she trailed off.

"That's alright, we can leave it here." he said, and she felt him grab her hand and lower it from his eyes. She jumped when she felt something warm press against the back of her hand.
A kiss.

"As long as I can be with you, I'm happy, Marinette..."

Marinette wondered if it was possible to actually melt in a dream.

"So, this is good right?" Alya asked, her voice a mix of concern and hopefulness.

"She's very active and her brain activity has spiked," Dr. Longuevie said, a curious smile on his face as he reviewed the notes on Marinette's latest medical report, "So this is certainly good progress, yes."

"Oh, thank goodness," Sabine said, letting out a sigh of relief. A week had gone by and Marinette had not stopped moving on her bed. She wouldn't wake nor respond to her mother calling her, but she wouldn't stop fidgeting, her hands shifting in their bonds almost desperately.

She was most active in the nights, and her brain had registered increased activity during the early hours. It was the most curious thing.

"Does this mean she's waking up soon?" Alya asked.

"That's still not certain but she's definitely getting there." the doctor said.

"Hear that? You're almost there, girl. Don't give up," Alya whispered, squeezing Marinette's hand reassuringly. "We miss you so much..."

"We love you, sweetheart," Sabine added, tucking a loose strand of her now long, dark hair behind Marinette's ear. "We'll be waiting for you right here."

"Well, I'll be leaving you. I need to check on Adrien next door." Dr. Longuevie said, "He should be waking any minute now."

"Shouldn't you call Nino?" Sabine asked Alya, "It's the first time you'll be seeing him awake since the… accident?" Sabine hesitated at the last part.

"Oh, he's already there," Dr. Longuevie said with a sigh, rearranging his glasses, "He's been there for almost an hour. He's been very anxious to check up on Adrien."

"You're telling me. He's been going nuts all week. I should go too," Alya said, standing up from Marinette's bedside, "Just to be with him, you know?"

"Of course, go ahead," Sabine said with a smile.

"I'm sure that'll make Adrien happy. He'll surely want to catch up on several things." Dr. Longuevie said, looking pointedly at Alya. Alya cocked an eyebrow in curiosity but the doctor didn't elaborate and merely excused himself again with a smile before leaving the room.

"Well, that was weird." Alya said.

"Yes, he's waking up, just give him a few more minutes. He's been asleep for a long time and he'll probably be groggy and confused when he sees you, so just bear with him." he heard Longuevie say.

"Of course, thank you."
A door closed and Adrien heard shifting beside him.

Was that Nino? Adrien didn't know at what point he had stopped dreaming. He recalled he had spent some time with Marinette, just talking about everything and nothing. Things he could barely remember. And then his dreamscape had devolved into the dark void he would sometimes find himself in.

He had floated there for a while, annoyed that his time with Marinette had been cut short. Or so he thought. How long had he been dreaming? How many days had he been asleep since that day with his father? It seemed like forever but at the same time too short.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine, thanks babe."

There they were again. Alya and Nino. Were they visiting him? It seemed it had been so long since he heard them last and his heart thrummed in affection. He had been so caught up in this Dragonfire mess and dealing with his illness that he hadn't realized how much he missed hanging out with them and being normal. Eager to see them, Adrien's eyes opened slowly, his surroundings blurry.

"You need to eat something, Nino." came Alya's voice.

"I'm fine, Alya, really…" Nino insisted. By the source of the voice, Adrien could tell he was sitting right beside him. He could also tell, by the roughness of his tone, that he was tired.

"You're trembling like a leaf."

"I'm just nervous. It's fine."

"You're so stubborn…"

"Pot… calling the kettle… black…? " Adrien rasped suddenly with a small smile, his voice low and rough from disuse.

"Adrien!" Alya and Nino gasped at the same time. Adrien turned to them, tired green eyes falling on their hazy outlines. He flashed them a weak grin now that his mask was gone, replaced by a thin tube lodged in his nose.

"Hey…" His throat throbbed but it didn't hurt as much as the day he got his breathing tube removed. He could use a drink, though. He was parched.

"Dude!" Nino said. He looked like he wanted to tell him so many things but his emotion was keeping him from saying anything. He had tears building up in his eyes, surrounded by dark rings of exhaustion. "You're okay…"

"Mostly," Adrien drawled with a soft chuckle, raising his right arm to weakly fistbump his best friend, who shakily responded with a grin of his own, "Thanks for coming, Nino."

"Anything for my bro," Nino chuckled back, sniffing and trying to hold back tears as he held Adrien's pale hand in his. "You've been gone forever, man! We've missed you!"

"It's only been a few days," Adrien teased. "But I've missed you, too…"

"Week and a half!" Nino countered, waving his finger disapprovingly.

Week and a half? Wow, it certainly had not felt that long. His time with Marinette must have made
time go by quicker than he thought. He definitely didn't feel as much pain as he did a couple of days prior, that was for sure.

"Still not forever." Adrien quipped.

"Don't fight me, bro!" Nino warned, "You've been sleeping like a log but it's been hard for us!"

"Yeah, about time you woke up, Sleeping Beauty," Alya chuckled, but he could see tears building in her eyes too.

"I'm still missing my true love's kiss," Adrien joked, weakly rearranging himself on the bed so he could better look at them.

"She's sleeping next door, your royal highness," Alya said, sitting beside Nino and rubbing at her eyes with a snicker. "But hey, at least you haven't lost your sense of humor."

He chuckled. "At least. And... next door?" Adrien asked, perplexed. He had the impression Marinette was a couple of floors down judging by how different his room was to hers.

"Yeah, she got moved to the room beside yours. Doctor's orders." Alya explained, "Your dad paid to have her transferred to a fancy room and it was easier for the doctor to just have you room next to each other, since he decided to take you on as his charge too."

"My dad? But why?" Adrien cocked an eyebrow.

"Beats me, but it's good right?" Alya shrugged, "Easier for us to visit both of you, too."

Adrien was still confused. Why would his dad pay to have Marinette's accommodations improved? Unless it was a donation for a charity to improve his public image, he didn't tend to be that generous. And what was it with Dr. Longuevie that he seemed so attached to them both all of a sudden? He trusted him, for sure, but why was he acting so familiar?

"She's doing much better too. She's been moving a lot." Alya continued.

Adrien smiled, relaxing into his pillows. He could worry about his father's weird decisions later. For now, he was glad she was closer to him than he thought. He missed her already but was calm with the prospect of seeing her in his dreams that night. "I'm glad to hear that. How about you guys? How have you been?"

"Dude, how?" Nino said, finding his broken voice again, "Worried sick! What happened? What was all that? You actually...died for like an hour and then you just... came back to life and you've been asleep for like a week and holy cow why did you do that?"

"Nino..." Adrien whispered, his own eyes stinging at seeing his best friend's pain. "I'm so sorry...I didn't mean to worry you like this. But... I'm here...I'm okay. I'll be okay..."
"I know, I know…" Nino said, dabbing at his eyes with his palm," I just wish you would've told me, or like, asked me for help or something… But I know it was your job and everything—"

"Wait, what?" Adrien asked, eyes narrowing. "What do you mean my job?"

Nino hesitated and then closed his mouth, eyes widening.

Adrien was sick. That's all Nino knew. That he was sick and injured and that he had ran away from school and got attacked by a dragon. That's what Nino was supposed to know. What was he talking about? He turned to Alya, but she was staring awkwardly at both of them.

Adrien suddenly had a very bad feeling about this exchange.

"Uh, well... What I meant is... Uh..." Nino started, scratching his head awkwardly. "Dang..."

Why was he so nervous? He couldn't possibly... No... No, no, no....

"Well, good job, Nino..." said a squeaky voice from the recesses of Alya's bag. A second later a small, black creature came flying out of it, resting on the railing of Adrien's bed. Adrien barely had time to register what he was seeing before the cold chill of fear travelled down his spine and his eyes widened in panic.

"Seriously, bravo!" Plagg chastised, crossing his arms. "You definitely got don't tell Adrien yet down to a science!"

Adrien's pulse quickened in his veins, heart pounding hard against his chest.

Plagg was talking to Alya and Nino.

Plagg was talking to Alya and Nino.

"So..." Nino said apologetically, avoiding Adrien's eyes, "I... guess I kinda found out you're Chat Noir."

Nino looked back at him and smiled awkwardly.

Adrien took a sharp intake of breath and he was not sure if it was his sickness or the morphine that suddenly made his head go light and the room start spinning.

Nino and Alya meanwhile waited nervously for Adrien to say something. They had expected many reactions. They had expected him to be surprised (check), maybe angry or scared (check?). They had even entertained the idea that maybe it would actually make him happy to not be shouldering such a big burden anymore...

They had certainly not expected to see his eyes roll to the back of his head and pass out cold on the spot.

"Fan-freaking-tastic..." Plagg whined.

Chapter End Notes

Friendly reminder to please PLEASE PLEASE DO NOT ASK ME WHEN THE
NEXT CHAPTER IS COMING YET I DONT KNOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!! I POST THEM WHEN I FINISH I HAVE NO SCHEDULE PLEASE I do this in my spare time but I have a job and other stuff to do during the day, I can't write all the time! Be mindful!!! I'm doing this as a hobby, FOR FREE. I only ask for your patience and understanding. I've been DEMANDED and even THREATENED over posting chapters soon and its getting on my nerves, to the point I'm losing heart to continue writing this anymore...

So please, PLEASE reconsider and don't pressure fic authors! We appreciate your enthusiasm but demanding the next chapter so soon after the last isn't humane....
Embers

Chapter Summary

FINALLY! After two months of cracking my head over this monster of a chapter, it's complete! I call it monster cuz I broke my own record again, and this baby is 40 pages long! I hope you guys enjoy it!

Infinite thanks to Maggs for Test Reading it and MlleKylie on Tumblr for proofreading it!

REMINDER: AS YOU COULD SEE FROM HOW LONG IT TOOK TO MAKE THIS CHAPTER I HAVE NO IDEA WHEN THE NEXT ONE WILL COME. THEY JUST HAPPEN. IT MAY TAKE DAYS LIKE IT MAY TAKE WEEKS. SO PLEASE DON'T PRESSURE ME AND ASK ME WHEN THE NEXT ONE IS COMING BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW AND ITS MADDENING AND STRESSFUL. Thank you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The point of visitation is to see how your loved one is doing and make them feel better, not stress them to the point of fainting," Longuevie said, crossing his arms sternly and chastising Nino and Alya after pulling them out of Adrien's room.

"Sorry, Dr. Longuevie…" Alya and Nino apologized in unison, eyes lowered to the ground.

"Adrien is still in a very delicate state," he explained, "He went through a difficult experience and it will take a while for him to recover fully. Please be mindful of him."

"Yes sir," Nino said, lowering his head in shame.

"Whatever did you tell him to get that reaction?" the doctor asked with a raised brow.

"Uh…" Nino looked at Alya, who looked back at him with the same wide eyes.

"Exams!" Alya said suddenly, "W-We told him that h-he'd have to catch up when he returned..."

"Yup, exams!" Nino agreed, nodding energetically and smiling widely, "Really tough exams!"

The doctor furrowed his brows suspiciously, lowering his glasses to look pointedly at them. Alya could've sworn his eyes focused on her bag for a split second before shifting back to the teens in front of him.

"Alright, then…" Dr. Longuevie said, "You can stay a little longer. Though you might want to apologize for startling him when he wakes. Please do not do it again."

"Yes, Dr. Longuevie. Thank you!" Alya said, moving aside to let the doctor in to tend to Adrien, who had begun to stir.
"Good morning," Dr. Longuevie greeted the groggy Adrien as his eyes fluttered open, "It seems you had a bit of a rude awakening." He gave Alya and Nino a glance as they followed him in and they smiled nervously.

Adrien blinked at him in confusion, sleep clinging to his mind as Longuevie came around his bed to check on his monitor. His head then turned to Alya and Nino, and all three of them watched in slow motion how Adrien's face went from groggy sleepiness, to wide-eyed panic.

"Hey, chill dude, it's okay," Nino said hurriedly, then hesitated "I'm sorry about startling you about … uh….the exams." Nino winked an eye at Adrien, who just narrowed his eyes at his best friend in confusion, tilting his head to a side.

"E...xams…?" Adrien repeated dumbly.

"Yeah! We're sorry for worrying you about the exams we were talking about earlier, we didn't mean to upset you," Alya pitched in, emphasizing each word by tilting her head in the direction of her bag with a pointed stare.

Adrien looked down, barely making out a pair of tiny green eyes peeking at him from the darkness in Alya's bag and something clicked in his head.

"Oh… T-Those exams…" Adrien said dubiously, brows knitted in confusion as he fell into the lie. "Yeah…"

"Yep, it was totally exams, but don't worry dude, Mrs. Bustier understands!" Nino said again with a forced smile.

Dr. Longuevie just stared at them with furrowed brows but decided not to press for an explanation. He then turned to Adrien, his approach once again gentle. "You doing okay?"

Adrien sighed and pinched his nose with his index and thumb. "I think I need a breather…"

Despite being in a spacious room, Adrien suddenly felt suffocated and trapped. He wanted to move. He needed a change of scenery to clear his head. He wished he could just transform into Chat Noir and escape everything and disappear for a time.

How he missed just feeling healthy and energetic. No pain, no sickness, no heartache. Nothing but exploring the Parisian skyline with his Lady, secrets concealed, smiles on their faces as they flew from roof to roof, wind rustling their hair… He had taken it all for granted.

Adrien's heart churned and he had to close his eyes to stop the sting building under his eyelids.

"Yeah, fresh air sounds good! Can't he, like, walk around?" Nino asked the doctor, "Maybe take him some place to relax? He's probs tired of being on that bed for so long!"

"Sadly, he can't leave yet. There's still much to work on before he can move," Dr. Longuevie explained, though he then tapped a finger against his chin, "But… perhaps if Adrien is feeling better we could arrange something next week?" he turned to Adrien with a smile

Adrien perked up, "Are you serious? I can leave?"

"You'd have to keep to the premises, and we still have to see how you're doing, but maybe by this time next week you can make do without all of these," The doctor said, motioning to the several tubes and cables connected to him, "It may not make your father too happy, but a few minutes out should be fine."
"Next week sounds great!" Adrien said.

"Well then, for now you need to rest, so we'll take it easy for the rest of today, alright?" Longuevie said, then turned to Alya and Nino with a stern stare, "Maybe you can talk about these exams next week?"

"Uh yes, we can talk about this next week then," Alya said, looking at Adrien meaningfully. "I'll take care of things meanwhile…" she motioned at her bag with her head again. Adrien quickly gathered she was talking about Plagg, whose eyes he could see peeking from beneath the lapel.

"Oh… uh, okay…" Adrien said dubiously, his eyes meeting Plagg's, who seemed to be nodding reassuringly at him, but Adrien still couldn't shake the unsettling feeling in his chest that came with knowing someone else knew about Plagg now. The potential danger that the three of them were now in because of that knowledge.

"Oh, by the way! Alya saved your phone!" Nino said, fishing the device out of his pocket, "So like, if you get too bored or something… just hit us up!"

"Hey, thanks!" Adrien said, taking the phone and charger from Nino. He then hesitated, "Um, you didn't happen to get my ring, too? I think I may have… dropped it in the accident?" Adrien looked pointedly at Alya, his gaze anxious and hoping she knew what he meant.

"Oh, right. I held onto it," Alya said, sinking her hand in her bag to retrieve the ring, which Adrien guessed had been safeguarded by Plagg, "Here you go."

Alya handed him the silver ring and, after checking that it was the right one, he breathed a sigh of relief, "Thank you, Alya, really…"

"Hey, no problem," Alya said, her eyes empathetic.

"That ring seems precious to you," Longuevie, who had remained silent until then, commented idly, watching the piece of jewelry with mild interest, "It must be really important."

Adrien was taken aback by the doctor's expression, a tingly feeling running up his spine.

"Uh, yes, my mother gave it to me," Adrien lied, putting the ring back on his scarred finger and fistng his hand protectively, "I would've hated to lose it."

Longuevie smiled, "I can imagine. Well, I'm glad that you got it back. Now, I think it's time for Adrien to rest up." he turned to Alya and Nino and nodded his head.

"Oh, right! Well, we'll catch up next week, dude!" Nino said, waving at Adrien as Alya and he made their way to the door.

"Yeah, see you next week!" Adrien called back, watching Alya and Nino's retreating backs, and trying to ignore the anxiety building up in the pit of his stomach.

There was going to be a lot to talk about.

To: Marinette +33653257

Adrien 9:32 pm Hey Marinette. Its me Adrien. I got my phone back today so I though Id text you. I know youre still… sleeping but I really wanted to tlk to you
Adrien 9:33 pm Alya said it would be a good idea to send you texts even if you can’t read these messages right now

Adrien 9:33 pm (Sorry if I typo it’s hard to type with one hand.)

Adrien 9:36 pm Um so I don’t know where to begin. It’s a long story. I’m in the hospital right now. I’m in the room next to yours actually which is pretty awesome even if I can’t go visit you right now. I’m okay. Or I’ll be okay at least. I hope. There’s so much I want to tell you.

Adrien 9:38 pm I guess I can begin by saying that… I miss you. A lot. It’s not the same without you Marinette. I hope you’re okay.

Adrien 9:40 pm I need to go to sleep now. I’ll text you tomorrow… Bye.

The week passed by at a snail’s pace to Adrien.

Instead of getting better, like he had thought he would, nothing seemed to really change.

Whenever he was awake, the pain would come and go at irregular intervals, and when it hit, it hit with a vengeance. It was so bad at times it felt like he was back on square one, his body alight with piercing pain, his lips parted in agonized cries.

When he could no longer tolerate it, they would pump painkillers into his bloodstream, completely knocking him out, or at the very least, sinking him into a state between sleep and wakefulness where he felt nothing, not even himself.

He only seemed to get visitors during these instances, and it was in such moments that Adrien would register the oddest things when the line between reality and hallucination blurred.

He would see his father or Nathalie lingering over him, voices subdued as they talked among themselves. He even thought he felt his father caress his head a few times, but he was never entirely sure if it had really happened or it was his mind playing tricks on him.

He also thought he saw Marinette’s mother checking up on him from time to time, kindly tucking him in when his blankets shifted, or gently stroking his cheek when involuntary noises escaped his lips, whispering comforting words in his ear.

Sometimes, he was so far gone he’d see a glowing red light hovering around him, fleeting and mesmerizing. But whenever someone opened the door, it’d disappear and Adrien would forget all about it.

His most frequent visitor, however, was Dr. Longuevie. He would look after him, jotting notes on his clipboard, checking the monitors, or cleaning his burns.

Thinking Adrien asleep, he would often drop his kindly façade and sport a serious grimace on his face, concern lining his features every time he reviewed his notes on Adrien’s status.

One night, based on Longuevie’s dejected sigh and saddened eyes, Adrien could tell with growing dread what was passing through the doctor’s mind….

No progress.

With heart pounding, Adrien would hear Longuevie talk to himself, saying things Adrien could barely make out in a hushed, worried voice. Things about him. Things about his health and stagnant
state, how it seemed that although he wasn't worsening, he had yet to improve.

Sometimes Adrien even thought he heard someone responding to Longuevie, catching a little whisper within the room, but he could never see who he was talking to or decipher what they were saying. Other times, he would express the same concerns over the phone with someone, though Adrien could never figure out who was at the other end of the line.

All he knew was that, so far, things weren't going as smoothly as he was originally led to believe, and he began to feel the seed of uncertainty take root in his heart. Unwilling to deal with the thought, he'd often take solace in his drug-induced sleep, dreaming beautiful dreams with Marinette, his one respite from his deplorable existence.

They'd spend their time creating ridiculous shapes in the sky, changing the colors of nature around them, or racing each other across the vast plain. He often found himself wanting to sleep forever, laughing with Marinette somewhere where there was no pain and he could forget all his worries.

But his wish was not to be. When the morphine would run out in time for his scheduled daily checkup, he'd once again wake up to his daunting reality in the same dull room, with numb limbs, and a lingering hint of pain the depleting morphine couldn't hide.

As days passed with his prognosis unchanged, his feelings of desperation began to grow. He began to feel the claws of hopelessness clutch at him, trying to pull him under to wrap him in a veil of sorrow he couldn't break out from.

He felt trapped in his own body, his mind swirling with negativity and what-ifs. He felt that if it wasn't for the sedatives numbing him, he would've already ripped every tube and wire out of his body and fled the room, if only to be able to move, to feel, to live again…

Some nights it was just too much.

When he was completely alone and his mind wasn't so drugged that he could control his movements, he'd shakily reach for his phone, tears in his eyes, and type random messages to Marinette to keep himself sane.

He'd say all and nothing, like telling her he missed her, telling her he couldn't wait for her to wake up. Telling her about the pain and the dark, self-deprecating thoughts in his mind. Thanking her for all the things she'd done for him, and apologizing for everything he could think of. Telling her how he couldn't wait to go back to sleep to see her, telling her how he wished she was really there.

And although it pained him to never receive an answer, he'd do all this until exhaustion took him or the nurses were forced to put him under again, his body in too much pain to allow him a natural sleep.

However, on the sixth day since Alya and Nino's visit, Adrien finally exhibited a hint of improvement. He could tolerate pain long enough that they could remove his feeding tube from his abdomen and give him normal food again.

The food was usually liquid and flavorless, but swallowing was still a feat in and of itself. He had to be spoon-fed, his grasp too weak and unsteady to hold the spoon on his own.

His mouth would move slowly as he got used to the feeling of food in his mouth again after nearly three weeks of not tasting a bite, constantly fighting the rising waves of nausea in his stomach with oftentimes unsuccessful, messy results.

Despite the unpleasantries, Adrien forced himself to eat, even when he felt anything but hunger and
his spirits were at an all time low.

He felt like death, and probably looked like it too, judging by the concerned faces of Longuevie and Nathalie, whenever she was around to check up on him. Faking a smile had become too much of a hassle, so he didn't bother with it anymore. He had also lost all interest in talking, filling the room with an uncomfortable silence.

Even Gabriel had soon questioned Adrien's caretakers on his lack of interaction, but despite Adrien's nearly nonexistent progress, they assured him he was doing fine.

Adrien did not bother contradicting them and Gabriel would look at him with pity, at times holding his hand in a comforting gesture before he had to leave, which Adrien appreciated even if he couldn't show it.

Nino and Alya would send him texts often, but he never had the spirit to text back, letting the phone buzz on without a response, part of him salty that the buzzing wasn't ever from Marinette, even though he knew full well why that was.

Overall, only one thing rounded his head, a question swimming in Adrien's head, terrible and unrelenting.

Why wasn't he getting better?

Could it be that Cataclysm's damage was permanent? Untreatable?

He couldn't tell, and it was eating at him, killing what little hope he still clung to. He thought being in the hospital would make everything better but in reality, the change had been minimal. It was all still there, but now he had more pain-blocking resources at his disposal.

It was but an illusion.

On the seventh day, Adrien woke up in a decidedly morose mood, barely uttering a word as he was greeted for the day and fed. He slowly licked his lips after swallowing up the last spoonful of porridge the nurse offered him, giving off a despondent sigh as he closed his tired eyes.

"You finished the whole bowl this time, well done," Longuevie praised gently as he watched the nurse remove the table and empty food tray from Adrien's bed. "That's good news."

Adrien supposed that it was. This time around, he hadn't thrown up his food two spoonfuls in like he had done several times yesterday. He still felt terribly sick to his stomach, and didn't respond to Longuevie's comment, huffing low under his breath and turning his head away.

Longuevie furrowed his brows, but waited until the nurse left the room before he spoke again.

"Adrien? Are you alright?" Longuevie asked him softly, sitting on his bedside. Adrien decidedly kept his eyes shut, completely quiet.

"I would like it if you would tell me what's on your mind..." Longuevie insisted gently.

Adrien didn't respond for a full minute, until finally, with a sigh, he opened his eyes, which were now wet and glassy, staring blankly at the wall beyond Longuevie.

"Why do you lie to me?" came Adrien's soft whisper.

Longuevie cocked his head in confusion, arching an eyebrow "Pardon?"
"I'm not going to be fine," Adrien said softly in a croaky voice, "Am I?"

"What makes you think that? Of course you are going to be fi-

"I've heard you," Adrien confessed, "When you think I'm not listening. You tell someone I'm not making progress… That you don't know why nothing is working…"

Longuevie stared, his mouth gaping. It seemed to Adrien that the doctor hadn't realized Adrien could still hear him even when he was sedated, able to pick up whispers here and there and putting two and two together.

Longuevie closed his mouth, and cleared his throat lightly, shaking his head. "It's not like that…"

"Yes, it is," Adrien insisted, voice choking. "You lie to my father and to me, but I'm not getting better…"

It was a deep-rooted fear in his heart, that he would never be alright again, that he was permanently crippled and broken and nothing would ever be the same.

He would never be able to be Chat Noir again, or hang out with Ladybug, or even his friends. He would always be dependent, unable to help others, forever stuck at home.

And although he was trying so hard to control it, he couldn't avoid developing a deep hatred for Hawk Moth and what he had done to them both. How he had permanently changed their lives.

He gave a shuddering breath, trying to keep his emotions under control.

"Adrien, it's alright," Longuevie said soothingly, "I'm sorry you had to hear that. I just… Your damage is unlike anything I've seen before and your healing is… well, It's unnaturally slow. I really want to help you. I wish you would tell me what happened. What really happened, so I could understand better…"

Longuevie looked pointedly at him, but Adrien averted his gaze. Unfortunately for him, Longuevie was not the type to back off when faced with resistance.

"Acute infection and internal bleeding due to aspiration of toxic gases from the dragon's breath." Longuevie recited, "That's the version they gave us. But it's not entirely true, is it? That's not what really happened..."

Adrien swallowed thickly, feeling a cold chill on his neck. He couldn't tell him the truth. He couldn't tell anyone else who he was. Too many people were in danger already by knowing his secret...

"I don't know," Adrien lied, "I don't remember."

"I know you do remember, Adrien. I can see the change in your eyes when I bring it up," Longuevie said, lowering his voice to barely above a whisper. "I also see how you start with loud noises, and how you tremble when it rains and lightning flashes. Even how you stiffen when someone so much as grazes your skin..."

Longuevie trailed off, watching Adrien's reaction closely, trying to find an answer in his teary eyes. Adrien remained decidedly silent, his lower lip trembling slightly as he tried to keep the moisture in his eyes at bay.

Longuevie regarded him a few seconds longer before he sighed, scratching the back of his head.
"I won't force you to tell me if you don't want to, but Adrien..." Longuevie reached out then, laying a comforting hand on Adrien's head. "Please know that you can trust me. Trust that I want nothing but for you to be okay. I'm your doctor. I really want you to get better and I will find a way and do everything in my power to help you. Do you believe me?"

Adrien was silent, trying hard to swallow the lump in his throat.

"Do you believe me, Adrien?" Longuevie asked again.

"...Yes," Adrien croaked, tears finally escaping the corners of his eyes.

"There, there," Longuevie said gently, reaching with a thumb to wipe a tear from Adrien's cheek. "I know you're scared, but you will get better, I promise. We'll make you okay again, no matter what it takes."

"Do you mean it this time?" Adrien asked him, turning to him with glassy eyes.

"I do, with every part of me," Longuevie said, smiling warmly at Adrien. "How are you feeling right now?"

"A little nauseous..." Adrien said, wiping his nose and eyes with his sleeve.

"What about the pain?"

"It's bearable, I guess..."

"Do you want to try getting off the bed? Your friends promised to visit today, remember?"

"I... I don't know if I can," Adrien said. He might've have been excited about the prospect last week, but now, his mind was not entirely in a good place. He didn't know if he could humor his friends in his current state or if he was ready to move his broken body.

"Won't know if you don't try. It will do you good to see other faces other than my old, ugly mug," Longuevie said with a chuckle, "But it's your choice. Are you up for it?"

"I guess..." Adrien said, shrugging his shoulder.

"Alright, rest for a while, and we will give it a try in an hour."

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To: Marinette +33653257

Adrien 12:32 pm Hey Marinette... I wish you were here right now.

Adrien 12:34 pm I'm not feeling too good. Things aren't looking too bright for me.... I'm really scared...

Adrien 12:36 pm Sometimes I just don't want to wake up anymore. I'd rather stay with you.

Adrien 12:37 pm I know it's not real but... I don't know. It's hard to stay positive. I'm trying, but... it's been 3 weeks. I don't know if I'll ever truly be okay again.

Adrien 12:39 pm Sorry I'm being selfish and a downer lately. I'm sorry. Nino and Alya are visiting today so I'll try to perk up. I don't want them worrying and company should be nice for a change. I'll be going out for the first time in 3 weeks so I'm a little bit excited about that at least. I miss the
outside.

**Adrien 12:41 pm** I miss when we patrolled the city together too… I hope we can get that back. Please wake up soon.

**Adrien 12:41 pm** Sorry there I go again…

**Adrien 12:43 pm** On the bright side, I heard it's been going great for you though! I'm really happy for you and I can't wait till you're back on your feet... I need to go now, bt I'll text you soon. Have a big talk with Nino and Alya today... I'll let you know how it goes.

**Adrien 12:45 pm** Miss you.

"And that's the last one," Longuevie said, gently redressing the last of Adrien's burns and applying a bandage on his right shoulder blade. "Now that's healing nicely. Does it sting less?"

"A little bit..." Adrien said, eyes downcast and back hunched over on the edge of bed as Longuevie laced the hospital robe across his back again..

"Ready to give moving a try?"

Adrien shrugged noncommittally, straightening on the bed and stroking the fresh bandaging around his burnt neck, idly noticing his hair had grown longer and unruly.

Not like maintaining his appearance was of any importance now. With all the scarring and damage on his skin, modelling was no longer a viable career path. Not that he really cared anymore.

"Alright then," Longuevie said, walking around to stand at Adrien's side, "Now wrap your arm around my shoulders."

Adrien did, mindful of not pulling on his broken arm in the process. Adrien paused briefly, breathing deeply. It was the first time he was going to move in weeks and he felt nervous and wary of how his body was going to react with the motion.

Giving him a hesitant nod, Longuevie began inching Adrien closer to the edge of the bed.

"Easy now, one step at a time," Longuevie instructed as he held on to Adrien's right arm, slowly easing Adrien off the bed.

Adrien grunted as he slid down and his feet touched the ground, his legs, weakened from disuse, shaking beneath him. Adrien hissed as he tried to take a step and his knees buckled, causing Longuevie to grip him from the waist to hold him up.

"It hurts," Adrien choked as he tried to regain his balance, legs trembling and unstable. He felt extremely thin and frail, and he wobbled in his stance as Longuevie held him firmly in place.

"I know. Your muscles have grown weak, you will need to exercise to get that strength back," the doctor explained, "But don't worry about it for now. As soon as your arm is ready for decasting, you'll go to therapy. You'll be back on your feet in no time."

"Yeah, I hope," Adrien said with a hint of bitterness in his voice as the doctor began edging him to the wheelchair he had prepared beside him, gently seating him down and easing his legs over the supports.
"How does it feel?" Longuevie asked, taking a syringe and a bottle from the pocket of his white coat and preparing it for an injection.

"Weird. My legs are all tingly," Adrien commented, rubbing his thigh in concern.

"It's the blood flow adjusting," Longuevie said, rubbing the spot on the underside of Adrien's arm where his vein was. "It's okay. It will feel strange for a few days but your body will begin falling into its old self soon enough. You've been through a lot, Adrien, remember."

"I know, I know," Adrien lamented.

"I know that given our earlier conversation this may not mean much right now, but you're doing great for someone who went through what you did," Longuevie said very softly, gently injecting the painkiller into Adrien's arm, "Both you and Miss Marinette are very brave…"

Adrien furrowed his brows at the mention of Marinette. "I don't see how getting hurt is being brave. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time…"

"I honestly believe that the reason you were at those places, at those times, is what makes you two brave…" Longuevie said, looking up meaningfully at Adrien.

The hairs on the nape of Adrien's neck stood on end, and he wasn't sure if it was from the medication's cold contents or the implication in Longuevie's words.

"What do you mean?"

Longuevie fixed him with a serious stare, brown eyes boring into Adrien's green ones. His gaze then travelled to Adrien's scarred arm, the one whose vein he was now soothing. He gently removed the syringe and turned his arm around, running a thumb up the white lines branching out of Adrien's ring finger.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you with this one..." Longuevie said.

"You saved my life," Adrien replied, "It's more than I could've asked for."

"No, that was all you," Longuevie looked at him again, "And that is what I find most amazing and… peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

Longuevie was quiet for a moment, before he spoke again in a low voice, "There's something I need to talk to you about, Adrien..."

Adrien gulped, feeling a cold chill down his back, "What about?"

"I-"

But just then, the sound of knocking came from the door, and Longuevie paused, words dying in his throat. He sighed, stealing a glance at the door beside him.

"We'll talk later, your friends are here."

"No, wait!" Adrien said grabbing his arm, "What is it?"

"Later, Adrien," Longuevie said, and before Adrien could protest further, he stood up and walked away, discarding the used syringe container into the biomedical waste and dropping the bottle in a
nearby trash bin.

"This should keep the pain under control for an hour. Enjoy your day with your friends." Longuevie said before he turned to the door, "Come in!"

And just like that, Longuevie's kindly façade, the one Adrien knew was just a front, was back.

Adrien breathed in the scent of wet soil and greenery as Nino wheeled him to the hospital courtyard, exhaling a satisfied sigh.

He forced himself to push his thoughts on Longuevie's odd talk out of his head and to remain calm. Although curiosity ate at him, he was not going to waste his first time out in around three weeks pondering about the doctor's strange behavior.

The courtyard was a square area situated in the middle of the hospital, surrounded by the rest of the building. A great fountain sat in the middle, surrounded by plants and lush hedges pin pricked with small white flowers.

Benches littered the sides of the numerous pathways criss crossing the place, not unlike the larger and more popular Jardin des Plantes.

It was a sight for sore eyes for Adrien to be out in the open once again. As much as he loved the beautiful paradise he and Marinette would often find themselves in dreams, nothing could beat the feel and smell of the real thing.

"Good to be out again, huh?" Nino asked him.

Although Alya had also visited (Plagg included), she had stayed behind, insisting that Adrien should spend some time alone with this best friend to talk things through first. Some kind of bro code they apparently had, not that Adrien was against it.

"Yeah! It's great to have some fresh air again," Adrien replied, "It was getting stuffy in there."

"And you've been asleep through the majority of your stay, imagine if you'd been awake the whole time, dude," Nino chuckled and Adrien cringed, though Nino didn't seem to notice. "Probably would've needed to transfer you to the psychiatric ward."

"Har har, hilarious," Adrien quipped, though silently agreed, kind of glad Nino didn't know the full extent of what Adrien had been going through both physically and mentally.

"Want to rest up by that bench?" Adrien asked, pointing to the quaint iron benches surrounding a grand fountain in the middle of the courtyard.

"Yeah, sure," Nino said, leading them both towards the fountain. Once there, Nino stationed Adrien's wheelchair and sat down on the iron bench beside him, spreading his arms on the back of it with a sigh.

They were silent for a few moments, simply admiring the scenery and taking in the relaxing sound of the flowing water and the birds chirping in the sky. It was an overcast November morning, and although it was cold, Adrien reveled in the chilliness of the air against his skin, making him feel the most alive he'd felt in weeks.

He knew he'd have to go back to his room soon to get hooked up when the pain got intense again, but for now, he'd enjoy the rare opportunity of respite. But as companionable as their silence was,
however, Adrien still felt a kind of tension in the air, and he knew he needed to break it sooner rather than later.

"So…" Adrien started awkwardly, fidgeting with the blanket covering his legs, eyes trained on a little bird who had perched on the topmost ledge of the fountain to take a bath, "You know."

"I do," Nino replied simply, his eyes focused on the same bird.

"How long?"

"Since the night on the railway…” Nino replied calmly, though Adrien could see how forlorn his eyes looked when he said it.

"I see. Um…” Adrien had been the one to start the conversation, but now he didn't know how to continue it, "And…?"

"And what?" Nino shot him a side glance, an eyebrow quirked.

Adrien took a pacifying breath and rubbed at the back of his neck, "I guess… I wanna know what you think, I mean, it's… well…"

Nino chuckled and Adrien paused, "Don't hurt yourself, dude. It's no big deal."

"No big deal?" Adrien looked at him, eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

"I mean, it was a big deal, but that was weeks ago," Nino shrugged, "When we were told you were probably dead and Alya blurted your secret out to me in a fit of hysterics. It's been a long three weeks, man… I can still hear everything in my head."

"What do you mean everything?" Adrien asked, taken aback.

"Your dad shouting, Alya's crying, your screaming-"

"My screaming?" Adrien narrowed his eyes in confusion. He didn't recall screaming when Nino visited him a week ago, "What screaming?"

"During the first few days, remember?"

"Uh…no?" Adrien tilted his head. "Elaborate?"

Nino's eyebrows raised and he breathed in deeply, clicking with his tongue.

"Well, I guess it was bad enough that your brain blocked the memory or something…” Nino commented, laying his elbows on his knees and rubbing his hands for warmth, like what he was about to tell Adrien had a great weight on his heart.

"After they revived you, you were…agonizing, for days," Nino said, lowering his head and staring at his hands, his eyes turning glassy as if he was revisiting an unpleasant memory.

"You were unresponsive, just tossing and screaming. They had to tie you down and put you to sleep because you wouldn't stop crying in pain and ripping all the tubes off. It got so bad once you couldn't even breathe. They had to intubate you." Nino turned to him, quirking an eyebrow, "You really don't remember?"

"I…what? No, I don't remember any of it," Adrien said, eyes widened in surprise. He didn't even recall the night he supposedly came back to life. His memories went from lying in the tunnel in
Madame Cheng's arms to waking up to the doctor removing the tube from his throat. Nothing in between.

"I guess it's for the best you don't, dude." Nino said, rubbing his arms, more out of the chill of the memory than the weather, "Your dad was a wreck. He wouldn't let anyone see you for days, especially 'cuz the media was swarming over you. Son of Agreste attacked by Akuma, etc. It was pretty crazy, man. They only started backing off when your dad threatened with a lawsuit."

"My dad was… with me?" Adrien asked.

"Every day." Nino confirmed, "For as long as he could until he had to go to work, I guess. He would only let Nathalie in, or Madame Cheng…"

"Madame Cheng? Why?" Adrien questioned. Why Marinette's mother of all people? It wasn't like his father to let strangers near him.

"Maybe cuz she was there the night they saved you? Alya thinks it's 'cuz you seemed to calm down a little bit when you heard her. Dunno, you tell me." Nino shrugged.

"How do you know all this?" Adrien asked. "I thought he wasn't letting anyone see me."

"Madame Cheng told us," Nino said, "Dunno if you forgot this too but… you kinda detransformed in her arms. She knows who you are. We're all in this now, and she would tell us how you were doing when we weren't allowed to see you, Plagg especially. He was really worried about you."

It was still unnerving to Adrien to hear Nino speak about Plagg in such a nonchalant manner. Adrien breathed in and braced to make the question that was bugging him since the conversation started. "How… how many people know? Does my father…?"

"Absolutely not. He has no idea. Though I thought your father or Nathalie would know, I mean, with how overbearing they are with you…"

"Are you nuts?" Adrien scoffed, "Do you really think my dad would be happy with the idea of me going around jumping over the roofs of Paris in a cat suit?"

Nino suddenly broke out laughing and Adrien didn't realize how much he missed the sound until then.

"Touché, dude, touché..."Nino chuckled, "When you put it that way…I guess it's too crazy."

"So… who else?" Adrien pressed.

"Alya, me, and Marinette's parents, that's it."

Adrien sighed. He was relieved the media hadn't gotten wind of this, and from the sounds of it, Nino and Alya had kept his secret fiercely guarded.

"Nino, I... I really hope you know how important it is that no one else finds out. Ever." Adrien turned to his friend, looking at him seriously, "I've put you in danger by letting you find out my identity. If Hawk Moth gets wind of who I am, I don't know what he would do to you, or anyone close to me-"

"Relax man, we understand," Nino said, putting a hand on Adrien's good shoulder and squeezing reassuringly, "My girlfriend is an avid superhero nerd, remember? If there's anyone who understands how important secret identities are, it's her."
"Really?" Adrien said, raising an eyebrow "Are we talking about the same girl who would literally put herself in harm's way to find out Ladybug's identity?"

"Okay, I'll give you that one, but she's changed! Now that she realized Chat was you…" Nino rubbed the back of his head, "I guess it puts things into perspective, huh?"

"Totally…" Adrien said bitterly, recalling his own mixed feelings at finding out Ladybug was Marinette all along.

"Talking about the Hawkman, he's been super silent." Nino added.

"Really?" Adrien asked.

"Yup, not one peep since you defeated his last villain," Nino said.

"Weird," Adrien said, though inwardly he was infinitely grateful to get a break in battling, "What's the news saying about Chat Noir?"

"All the lies Alya has been telling them. Since she was there during the last attack, they have no choice but to take her testimony," Nino explained, "She did it mostly to protect you."

"What did she say?"

"Said Chat Noir was going to lay low for a while and let the city deal with the damage of the last Akuma. Asked the city to not call for him for everyday issues and to let him rest, stuff like that."

"Right, well, thank her for me." Adrien said with a genuine smile, feeling warm and fuzzy at how his friends took care of him even when he was out of commission.

"What happened to the boy?" Adrien asked, "The dragon akuma?"

"Hmm," Nino thought, placing a finger on his chin, "Went to the hospital, got checked out. I heard he almost got an aneurysm when he found out he almost killed a person. A famous one at that,"—Adrien scoffed—"Dunno who he is, but he's fine last I heard. I don't think he'll ever be able to look you in the eye again, though."

"I'm honestly fine with that," Adrien sighed.

"That bad, huh?" Nino asked, patting his back empathetically.

"You have no clue," Adrien said, "I… I don't think I'll ever be fine again, Nino."

"Dude, don't say that," Nino said reassuringly, "It'll be difficult but we're here to support you, okay? You're not alone anymore, and while we are on the topic, Madame Cheng said you are welcome at their house any time, any day, as Chat Noir or Adrien."

There it was, his silver lining, cutting through the darkness in his head. He wasn't alone. Not anymore. Even if Ladybug wasn't there to fight with him, at the very least, he now had people he could depend on.

Adrien smiled warmly, eyes stinging. "Thank you, all of you."

"It's no problem, dude," Nino said, smiling sheepishly, "And I uh… I guess it's as good a time as any to apologize."

"Apologize? For what?" Adrien asked.
"For never doing anything… even though you weren't okay," Nino said, lowering his eyes to the ground again, "I should've been a better friend and looked after you, ya know? Help you out even if I couldn't know who you really were or what you were doing." he sniffed.

"Nino…” Adrien started, emotion building in his chest, "There was no way you could've… I was hiding it Nino, I didn't want anyone to know, it's not your fault."

Adrien tried to assuage him, but he could see tears building up in Nino's eyes. He could tell he had been harboring this guilt for a while and Adrien's heart ached for him.

"Even then, I noticed you were hella off, and I didn't do anything," Nino lamented, moisture building up in his eyes, "I should've asked you if you were okay or if you needed anything or something…"

"Nino, I would've lied anyway," Adrien insisted, "I… I was pushing everyone away. Everything wrong with me was because of the Akumas I was fighting without Ladybug. How was I going to explain? I was scared too, Nino. It's not your fault, really."

"When you collapsed that day at school," Nino continued, brushing off Adrien's attempts at comforting him, "I… I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what was wrong with you. And then you d-disappeared, and then… W-We were looking for you all o-over the city. No one had seen you and it was raining, and there was that blasted dragon…” he hissed, and Adrien could see the anger line his friend's features.

Nino paused and took a steadying breath, his eyes once again lowering, his voice going soft, "Then that night Alya called me at like 5 in the morning or something and… gosh my blood went all cold, man…” Nino rubbed his arms, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Nino, don't do this," Adrien tried, grabbing his shoulder to calm him friend down, but he wouldn't be soothed.

"Alya was crying rivers. I couldn't calm her down. At the time… they were told you were dead. Marinette's dad had overheard the doctor telling your dad you were dead." Nino looked at him, and the desolation he saw in Nino's eyes rattled Adrien to his very core.

He was shot back to the past, a cold, rainy night, imagining just how unsettling and world-shattering it must have been to be woken up in early hours of the morning to receive the news that your best friend in the whole world was now dead.

Nino sighed and lowered his eyes to the ground again.

"I could hear Madame Cheng crying, and Alya was in hysterics. She… She told me everything…” Nino explained, his tears now flowing freely as the memories came flooding back. All the emotion he had kept inside for Adrien's sake was bursting forth as he continued his story, his voice barely above a whisper now.

"How you were Chat Noir. How you had gotten attacked. How Madame Cheng revived you but you were just not there, how they took you to the hospital… how the doctors couldn't save you…” Nino's lower lip trembled and his voice cracked, "And all I could think of is how I had messed up, and how now I wouldn't have a chance to say sorry and make it up to you…"

"Nino, please stop," Adrien said, his own tears building in his eyes, "I'm here now, okay? I'm not dead. It's okay, Nino… I'm here. I'm not leaving."

Nino looked at him then, eyes glassy and swollen, and surrounded Adrien with his arms, hugging him tight.
"You b-better mean that, dude," Nino hiccuped, "If you do that a-again I'm gonna drag you back from wherever you are and punch your ghost myself."

Adrien laughed a watery laugh, hugging his friend back. They remained like that for a few minutes, just cementing the fact that they were both alive and reunited again, no secrets between them.

"It's good to have you back, dude," Nino said softly, pulling away and ruffling Adrien's hair gently.

"It's good to be back," Adrien smiled, wiping his eyes and clapping a hand on Nino's shoulder.

"Nino, what happened to the school? How's everyone? I think I... caused a mess there," Adrien said, lowering his eyes in shame.

"Hey dude, stop that," Nino chastised, "It's thanks to you that everyone survived. Everyone is okay. You were the only one hurt in the attack, to be honest."

"Really?" Adrien pressed, his tone relieved.

"Yeah, a few scratches here and there but everyone made it out and no one was badly hurt, thanks to you," Nino smiled, "The school had to be closed, though. Too much damage so they have to rebuild it. Mr. Damocles and Ms. Bustier set up an online platform so we could continue having class through video lessons and digital homework, though. That way we won't fall behind."

"Ah, that's a great idea," Adrien commended.

"For sure...So... How long have you been Chat Noir?" Nino said, wiping his nose with a sleeve, "Was it always you, or...?"

"Yeah, it's always been me..." Adrien said.

"So all those times you were late...?" Nino pressed.

"Yep... Busy leaping around the rooftops of Paris in a catsuit." Adrien said with an amused smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

"Haha, yeah," Nino whistled, "That explains so many things..."

"Were you angry at me?" Adrien asked him suddenly, "When you found out... Were you angry at me for keeping this from you?"

"Well, once you were revived for good...I was... scared, really surprised, and maybe somewhat—okay maybe not somewhat, very—hurt that you hadn't trusted me with that," Nino said and then raised a hand when Adrien was about to interject, "But your tiny cat friend explained everything and how you had to keep it secret. I understand Adrien, I really do and you know I'll take your secret with me to the grave."

"Thank you, Nino, really." Adrien said softly.

"It's no problem," Nino said, then clapped his hands together, "So! Wanna give the place a few more rounds? Alya is dying to see you, so we better get some mileage in before she sits you down and barrages you with questions forevermore."

Adrien chuckled, "Alright, let's make it count."

"Have you told him yet?"
Longuevie sighed against the phone, "Not yet. Didn't get the chance."

He bit on the cigarette in his mouth, inhaling and releasing a thick puff of smoke into the air. He leaned on the railing, phone pressed to his ear as he watched Adrien stroll around with his friend in the gardens down below, chatting amicably.

"Smoking again, are we? Shouldn't you preach with the example, Doctor?"

Longuevie chuckled, "Knowledgeable as ever, though you're hardly in a place to lecture me about preaching with the example, friend." The man on the other end of the line chuckled back.

"Your boy is quite the conundrum to me," Longuevie continued more seriously, sighing and scratching his forehead with his cigarette tucked between his index and middle finger. "I moved them like you suggested. His burns and broken arm are healing steadily, but inside it's a whole different story. What have you gotten me into? What am I dealing with here?"

"I'd need to see him to tell for sure, though I have a few suspicions."

"Which are? His father is becoming increasingly harder to convince. I need to give him results or we risk him transferring Adrien someplace else for care. His assistant has made that abundantly clear to me on repeated occasions lately."

"I'll tell you soon enough, please keep entertaining him, I just need a little bit more time. Let me know when he's to undergo therapy…"

Longuevie sighed, "Make it quick, then. Miss Dupain-Cheng is doing fine and saw a jump in her improvement, but Adrien is flaking. He's losing his drive and his defenses are low. You need to help him. I don't need to remind you that the mind can also have adverse effects on the body…"

"I know…"

"He needs to hear good news but I can't provide that if I don't know what I'm dealing with. I tried to get him to tell me what truly happened, but he doesn't trust me."

"Naturally. Please understand, they were instructed not to tell. Don't hold it against him."

"I know. I'm doing what I can, but it's hard to keep his spirits up. His father barely allows me to let visitors in with him since he doesn't want to stress him out, despite my telling him that seeing his friends would help Adrien, not hurt him."

"The father is just as stubborn as the child, if not more so."

"Clearly."

The man on the other end of the phone sighed, "I know this has been difficult, but you're the only one I trust them with. I really appreciate all you've been doing for me. Please take care of them, Jerôme."

"Of course I will. I care about them, too." Longuevie said softly, "I just wish there was more I could do for them. This is beyond my expertise."

"You're a great doctor. Trust me, it'll work out."

Longuevie sighed. "Hope you're right."
"Sorry I couldn't do lunch, my stomach is kinda…" Adrien made a gesture to signal "so-so" and Nino laughed.

"Don't worry dude, you didn't miss anything. Hospital food is kinda eh. Especially when you've been eating Marlena Cesáire's homemade cooking. Perks of dating a Chef's daughter, I guess." Nino said, wheeling Adrien down the hallway.

"I feel you there," Adrien said absently with a chuckle.

"Why? You also dating someone with chefs for parents?" Nino teased, poking Adrien's head. Adrien blushed visibly, realizing the implication in his offhanded comment. Although he had never told Nino he was in love with Ladybug, it is likely Alya had told Nino about Adrien's seemingly budding affection for Marinette, who had bakers for parents.

"N-No I mean the hospital food bit," Adrien tried to fix, "It is kinda flavorless, huh?"

"Riiiight, I'm sure that's definitely what you meant," Nino teased, a huge smile plastered on his face.

"Oh, are we heading back now?" Adrien said, trying again to divert attention from himself as he noticed his room nearing.

"Nah, not yet. I think we still need to do some updating," Nino said, wheeling him past his room and stopping in front of Marinette's. Adrien swallowed thickly, looking nervously at the door. Noticing his sudden stiffness, Nino paused.

"Only if you want to, dude. Are you feeling up for this?" Nino asked him softly. "We don't have to do this if you aren't feelin' it…"

Adrien took a deep breath. From earlier implications, Adrien knew that Madame Cheng, Monsieur Dupain, Alya, and Plagg, were all in the room together. It would be the first time he would acknowledge they all knew his secret and he suddenly felt nervous, exposed.

He had never pondered what he'd do once a moment like this came along, and now he felt he was being thrust into it with little preparation. He had to admit that part of his anxiety came from knowing that Marinette was Ladybug, who they thought dead but had in reality been fatally wounded because he had failed to protect her as Chat Noir.

What would Madame Cheng say if she knew?

Would she hate him? Resent him?

He didn't think he could bear it if he was hated by Marinette's parents. He loved them too much now. It hurt to just think about it. And what about Alya? Gosh, she'd probably rip him a new one if she knew. Call him useless and a disgrace for nearly letting her best friend get killed...

He took a deep breath again to calm his anxious mind.

No, they didn't know about her. If they did, Nino would've told him right? No, they only knew about him. Marinette's secret was still safe and he very much doubted Plagg would've blurted it out, given he had been the one to insist on secrecy way back then.

He had to face this elephant in the room. Better deal with it now rather than later. Nino's reaction gave him confidence that their reactions wouldn't be as dramatic as he had originally thought now that they knew, but part of him was still wary and afraid. The doctor's strange behavior had made
him paranoid.

"Adrien?" Nino snapped him out of his reverie and Adrien cleared his throat.

"Let's do it."

Nodding, Nino opened the door and wheeled him in, closing the door behind him.

He had expected to see everyone turn to him, maybe greet him… He did not expect being attacked by a mass of black that was now plastered to his face, rubbing its face against him.

"H…Hello, Plagg…" Adrien chuckled.

"Hello Plagg? 'HELLO PLAGG?'" the Kwami gripped as he pulled back to look at Adrien better, "I haven't seen you for weeks and all you can say is 'Hello, Plagg'?"

"Sorry, I have no Camembert to beg for forgiveness…" Adrien said, lifting his hand to stroke Plagg behind the ears, something the little god rarely allowed, but he supposed the circumstances had made him soft.

"I'll let you off for today, then." Plagg chuckled. "But I won't be as lenient next time."

"Naturally. I missed you, buddy..." Adrien said, looking warmly at his companion.

Plagg's lips trembled, but he kept himself composed.

"Missed you too, you dumb kid…” Plagg floated down to sit on Adrien's shoulder as Nino wheeled him further in.

"Hey, if it's not the golden boy!" Alya greeted, sitting on the couch beside Marinette's parents. "Freed from your cage, were you?"

"Hey, Alya!" Adrien said. Nino knowingly wheeled him to rest besides Marinette's bed, close to the couch where Nino had just moved to sit beside Alya. "Madame, monsieur, it's good to see you."

"We're so happy to see you, too, Adrien!" Tom said, surrounding Sabine with his arm. "It's great to see you up and about."

"Yeah, it's been a long time," Adrien agreed, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. Adrien noticed with no little amount of nervousness that they all seemed to be waiting expectantly for him to speak first. So drawing in a deep breath, Adrien spoke.

"I guess I… owe an explanation to everyone, now that you know, huh?" He started. He glanced sideways at Plagg who merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Only if you want to, dear. Don't feel like you owe us anything. We're only glad that you're okay." Sabine said reaching forward to lay a comforting hand on Adrien's knee.

"Thank you, Madame," Adrien said gratefully, "But I owe you that much for helping me out. If not for you all…I wouldn't be alive right now."

"Adrien, don't say that," Sabine said, taking a hand to her chest.

"Forgive me, but it's the truth," Adrien said, shaking his head. "And not just once, but many times. Monsieur Dupain," Adrien turned to Tom, addressing him directly. "If not for you, I wouldn't have gotten out of that fire."
"Adrien, we did it gladly. Anyone in their right mind would've helped you out." Tom countered.

"Except they didn't." Adrien said, "The firefighters wouldn't help me. You and Alya did." Adrien nodded toward Alya, who blushed at the praise, "You told them about the dragon's weakness. I was as good as dead if you hadn't spoken up. And you..." he turned back to Marinette's father, "You risked yourself trying to get me out of the rubble."

At Tom's hesitance, Adrien continued.

"You and Madame Cheng even took me in and took care of me when I was at my lowest," Adrien said, fondly remembering how they had taken him out of the rain and treated his fever. "You were in all your right to refuse me because of the danger I carried with me. Instead, you sheltered me and took care of me until I felt better."

Adrien noticed Sabine's eyes were beginning to water at the memory and he turned to her, grabbing her hand.

"I'm sorry for running out on you, Madame. I feel terrible for worrying you." Adrien said, bowing his head at Sabine, "Thank you for going after me. You gave me a second chance. If not for you and Alya that night, I'd be gone for good. I'm indebted to you."

"Adrien, sweetheart," Madame Cheng sobbed, rising from her seat and hugging Adrien tightly to herself. "I'm so infinitely grateful for you. There's nothing to thank. I'm so, so happy that you're with us."

"I'm happy to be here, too," Adrien said, trying to keep his own emotion at bay as Sabine pulled back and he looked at all of them, whose eyes were all brimming with emotion, "All of you. I wouldn't have made it this far without you. Ladybug may not be with me anymore, but I was lucky to have you."

"Exactly how many of your nine lives did you spend on this fight, dude?" Nino joked wiping his eye with a hand.

"I think all nine, to be honest," Adrien joked back.

"And all nine of mine, too." Plagg cut in.

"You don't have lives, you are an immortal god!"

"Demi-god, but close enough," Plagg said, waving a paw nonchalantly.

"Speaking of which, thank you for taking care of him, Alya," Adrien said, turning to his friend. "I know he can be a bit of a handful."

"Hey!" Plagg snapped.

"It's no problem. He's good fun," Alya said then she winked, "His taste for Camembert not so much... Took a bit to explain my newfound addiction to my mom."

"Everyone in this room has horrible taste," Plagg scoffed, floating off Adrien's shoulder and resting on Madame Cheng's lap. "Except her. Her Camembert cheesecake is mmm... Créme de la crème!"

"Camembert Cheesecake is a thing?" Adrien asked, raising an eyebrow at Tom and Sabine.

"It is now! She made it just for me!" Plagg said proudly, floating over and rubbing on Sabine's cheek
affectionately. "Best baker in all of Paris!"

"Spoiled cat. How many people have you inconvenienced with your stinky habit while I've been
gone?" Adrien said, putting his hand on his waist.

"Took turns between Alya and Mama Cheng."

"Mama Cheng?" Adrien questioned. Sabine shrugged with a smile.

"He's an affectionate little thing." she said in her defense.

"Yeah with everyone but me it seems!" Adrien pouted.

"Hey, don't start!" Plagg said. "I've been worried sick about you."

"Can confirm," Alya pitched in, "He would visit you from time to time but couldn't stay long cuz
there were people in your room constantly. He was very anxious about the visit last week. We
thought we'd be able to talk then."

"Yeah, sorry about that, my body...er.." Adrien said sheepishly looking down.

"Don't apologize dude, we understand. It was a slip up on my part and I'm sorry." Nino said, "The
fact that we know your secret is no small thing."

"Talking about which, how much do they know?" Adrien asked, turning to Plagg.

"Basics. I thought it'd be best if you explained the rest." Plagg shrugged. Floating to rest on the
wheel of Adrien's chair. "Stage's yours, kid."

Adrien looked at the others and they again looked at him expectantly and in silence.

"Well uh..." Adrien rubbed the back of his neck, "Plagg is what we call a Kwami. He's a powerful
magical creature and it's thanks to him that I can transform. He goes into my ring and I get a special
suit and super powers."

"So you guys just... fuse? Is that how it works?" Alya said, her eyes wide open in interest. Adrien
was sure that if it wasn't because of how private the matter was, that she'd be jotting down every
word.

"I guess... it'd help if I demonstrated it. Plagg?" Adrien asked him, looking at his Kwami dubiously.
"Is it safe?"

Plagg looked at him impassively then floated to the door to lock it. "Knock yourself out, kid. I'm sure
you've missed it."

Adrien smile gratefully at him. "Alright. Plagg, transform me!"

Adrien watched as everyone gasped in awe as Plagg flew to the ring and a bright green light
enveloped him, his shiny black suit materializing across his body. His body shivered at the familiar
feeling of leather wrapping over his skin, and at the surge of energy flowing through his veins, like a
shot of adrenaline.

Before long, Chat Noir stood in Adrien's place, tail swishing in excitement at being used again.

"Holy sh..." Nino trailed off, eyes and mouth opened wide. "You look so different! No wonder we
couldn't recognize you!"
"Remarkable…" Sabine gasped beside an equally speechless Tom.

"This is amazing!" Alya said with a wide smile, "Where's Plagg?"

"He's my suit. Or well, part of it," Chat said, wiggling his ears, "He can hear and see everything I do. It's thanks to him that I have super reflexes and super strength, and that I can use Cataclysm."

"Can you use it right now?" Nino asked.

"Are you nuts? He'd destroy everything!" Alya said, slapping him upside the head.

"Alya is right. Besides, Cataclysm is a last resort. It uses a humongous amount of power in one go, and every time I use it I have 5 minutes before I turn back. Plagg ends up exhausted and has to recharge by eating his food." Chat explained.

"Woah, that explains why you guys had to disappear after you used your abilities," Alya said, nodding.

"Exactly. I can transform back by removing my ring or just willing Plagg to do so." Chat demonstrated, wordlessly reverting back to Adrien in a flash of green, "And if I don't use Cataclysm, Plagg is fine and peachy."

"I still won't refuse a good offer of Camembert, though," Plagg said, rubbing his paws together in Alya's direction. Alya sighed and she conjured a piece of the offending cheese from her bag, which Plagg excitedly took and gobbled up. "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

"I feel your pain," Adrien chuckled at Alya's despondent expression.

"Truly." Alya said, rolling her eyes, "So where did you and Ladybug find your… Kwamis?"

"Uh… I can't tell you that, mostly because I don't really know. They just appeared one day. We just knew we were chosen."

"And why were you and… whomever Ladybug was, chosen?" Alya pressed. Adrien gulped, risking a glance in Marinette's direction.

"I don't know… I guess we just had what it took?" Adrien said shrugging his shoulders. "We were just told repeatedly that we were chosen. Right, Plagg?"

"Yeah, it could be anything. Strength of character, goodness in the heart, empathy... It depends on the opinion of the Guardian taking care of us. By the way, don't ask about the Guardian, I won't elaborate." Plagg added quickly, narrowing his eyes, "Just cuz you know Adrien's secret now doesn't mean I'll reveal everything."

"Can we ask what happened to Ladybug's Kwami? Did it go back to whomever this Guardian is?" Alya asked.

" Classified, sorry girl." Plagg said shrugging his shoulders again. Adrien was silently grateful for Plagg's no nonsense coldness. An area Adrien lacked.

"It was worth a shot." Alya chuckled.

"Wow, well… this is all pretty mind blowing," Tom said, "Does your father know?"

"No, and it's super important that you do not tell him!" Adrien said hurriedly. "No one else can know. I really need you guys to keep this an absolute secret for your own safety… and mine."
"Of course Adrien, your secret is safe with us," Alya said, putting a hand on her chest. "Promise."

"We all do." Tom confirmed. "And once you're out of here, if you ever need a place to rest or recharge, our home is open at every hour for you. I took the liberty of adding our numbers to your phone before Nino gave it back to you."

"Make no mistake… I truly wish you didn't have to do this," Sabine said, holding Adrien's hand. "Risking your life… putting yourself in danger… but I know it's what you have to do. I will never stop worrying, but I will always support you."

"Madame…" Adrien said, voice trailing off as his eyes began to sting.

"We'll always support you, Adrien." Tom confirmed with a nod, holding both Sabine's hand and Adrien's in his large one.

"Thank you" Adrien said, bowing his head again. "You're all amazing."

"Anytime, dude." Nino said, "You can come crash at my place if you need to, too…"

"And mine!" Alya said, "I'll make sure you have a stash of stinky cheese for your pal, too."

"Nice! Sidekicks!" Plagg said, "I like them already."

"Only 'cuz they mentioned the cheese." Adrien pouted.

"Talking about which, Alya is gonna leave some for you." Plagg said.

"I'm not eating your stinking cheese!" Adrien said, scrunching his nose in disgust

"Who said it was for you?" Plagg said.

"What?"

"I'm staying here and watching over you, whether you like it or not." Plagg said with a decided nod.

"What? No! They'll discover you!" Adrien countered. "Why don't you stay with Alya?"

"Sorry, I'm staying here, end of discussion. Plus, there's something I need to check."

"Which is?" Adrien asked, eyebrow raised.

"That's for me to know and you to ponder. Now, stop complaining." Plagg said crossing his arms.

"I'm starting to rethink whether I missed you or not, now."

"Well, boo-hoo for you."

"Was the food alright, Mr. Agreste?" the nurse asked Adrien as she gently wiped his mouth and removed the empty food tray from the bed.

"It was. Thank you, miss." Adrien said amicably, sinking into his blankets with a yawn.

"Did you enjoy yourself with your friends today?" she asked, making small talk as she made the ritualistic check of up his IVs and monitors.

Alya and Nino had long since left, the sun having set and hour ago. He had wanted to speak more
with everyone but shortly after Plagg had declared that he'd be staying, his painkiller had run its course and he had to be taken and hooked up again before the pain became too much to bear and he broke in front of everyone, something he definitely didn't want them to see.

He had promised them all they'd talk about everything at a later date and allowed himself to be wheeled away, Plagg and a packet of sealed off Camembert safely hidden within his blanket.

"Very, please tell Dr. Longuevie I send my thanks for the help." Adrien said, voice low and soft.

"Will do. Glad to hear you enjoyed yourself; you've been doing great lately," she said with a smile, fluffing his pillows and adjusting his bed, "But it's been a long day for you, so I'll leave you to rest. Your medication should be kicking in soon. Good night, Mr. Agreste."

"Good...night, miss," Adrien mumbled, eyes slipping closed as he relaxed into the bed. The nurse subdued the lights and left, silently closing the door behind her. After a few minutes, lulled by the steady beep of his monitors and the relaxing effects of the morphine he'd been administered, it didn't take long for Adrien to completely pass out.

"...Gee, I thought she'd never leave," Plagg griped as he slipped from his hiding place under Adrien's pillow, rubbing his eyes.

Plagg turned to Adrien's sleeping form. He breathed calmly against his pillow, completely unaware of Plagg, lost to the world. Floating down to sit on the bed's railing, Plagg perked his ears for any incoming wards, but hearing nothing, he focused on Adrien again.

"Hey," Plagg whispered to the sleeping Adrien, "Are you there?"

Adrien didn't stir, breathing soundly against the bed.

"I need to talk to you. Come out…" Plagg tried again, the vaguest hint of a hiss in his voice, "...Akuma."

Adrien didn't react or acknowledge him, chest rising and falling slowly. After a few minutes of no response, Plagg huffed angrily, his patience spent. He was about to float down to hide under Adrien's bed when a soft chuckle stopped him.

"Aw, you missed me…?"

Plagg turned to see Adrien grinning at him, eyes opened to half mast with the green in his eyes replaced by glowing magenta, and his pupils thin and slitted like a cat's.

"I'm touched," the Akuma said, tilting his head and putting his hand on his heart mockingly.

"Shut up," Plagg hissed, the fur on the nape of his neck rising, "I'll cut to the chase. I've heard what the doctor's been saying about Adrien. What are you doing to him?"

"Sorry?" The Akuma smirked sardonically. "I'm just keeping his heart going, if that's what you-"

"That's not what I mean!" Plagg yelled, then lowered his voice again. "Is...Can Adrien listen to this conversation?"

"Not a clue. He's currently frolicking with our dreamy girlfriend in dreamland," the Akuma sighed in an exaggerated manner, pointing at his temple.

"She's not your girl- Ugh, whatever!" Plagg said, throwing his paws in the air, "That's not important,
"It's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Then what, pray tell, did you wake me for?"

"Why are you not letting him heal?" Plagg asked him, eyes narrowed.

The Akuma scoffed, "Why are you so intent on blaming me for everything?"

"Because you're an Akuma!"

"Well, isn't that prejudiced." The Akuma snickered, feigning hurt with a hand on his heart. "In this day and age too? Tsk tsk, Plagg."

"It isn't funny!" Plagg insisted, "It's been three weeks and he hasn't gotten any better! Why are you doing this?"

"Okay, let's get some things straight here, cat," the Akuma hissed, eyes narrowed, "How many times do I have to tell you I have nothing against Adrien? I'm the reason he's alive. His heart is charred, I'm the one keeping it beating for crying out loud, and mind you, that's no small feat. It takes everything out of me."

In a way Plagg could tell it was so. He could see Adrien's expression become strained, and his breathing get heavier the more he spoke.

"Secondly," the Akuma continued, eyes venomous, "For a god of destruction, you certainly don't understand the extent of your own power."

"What did you say?" Plagg's ears flattened against his head.

"Oh, but how could you really?" The Akuma went on, smiling derisively, "None of them ever survived, did they? Unable to control it, self destructing-"

"Shut up!" Plagg screeched, his eyes widening in fury.

"-the life leaving their eyes when just a smidgen of it touched their frail, tender bodies-"

"Stop it!"

"-dropping, before they could even realize what had happened. Dead, like moths to flame…"

"Enough! I get it!" Plagg said, turning his back on Adrien, "I don't care to hear it!"

"The truth hurts, huh?" The Akuma whispered, tilting his head again with a soft smile on his lips, "But the truth is the answer to your question right now…"

Plagg turned to him, "Cataclysm?"

The Akuma nodded at him again, "It's not that he can't heal at all, but it's slow. Damage by Cataclysm doesn't heal like regular damage. Magic can only be cured by other magic. He will improve, but it will take a while because the heaviest damage was done by magic."

"So he can't be healed completely?" Plagg said, his whiskers drooping at the prospect. "Adrien will be… sick forever?"

The Akuma chuckled.
"Ah, how I love to see you like this," the Akuma said, earning a hiss from Plagg, "But I guess it's for my own good that I tell you…"

"Tell me what?" Plagg spat.

"I'll give you a clue," the Akuma said with a smile, "When a forest burns to the ground, only the rain can cleanse the land enough for life to grow back again, right?" The Akuma paused, letting his words sink in.

Plagg's eyes widened and the Akuma's smirk grew wider.

"Ladybug…"

"Bingo. Good job. If I had one, I'd give you a golden star," the Akuma cackled.

"Only Ladybug can…heal him?" Plagg repeated, more to himself than to the Akuma.

"It's a mighty convenient thing the doctor placed Marinette just beside Adrien's room," The Akuma commented, raising a brow, "What an amazing coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

But Plagg paused, catching the Akuma's implication.

"You're not saying…" But Plagg stopped when the Akuma winced suddenly, clutching at his chest. "What? What is it?"

"...I think it's my cue to bid you adieu," the Akuma said, breathing heavy as he watched the line on Adrien's heart monitor move erratically. "Gonna ride this wave of medication with Adrien, if you don't mind."

"Wait, hey no, don't go to sleep! I'm not done talking!" Plagg said, floating towards him.

"Look cat," the Akuma huffed impatiently, "Adrien depends on these dreams to remain sane, and I depend on him remaining relaxed to do my part. If you really care about him, you will leave me alone. This heart won't pump on its own anymore and I tire just by talking to you."

"I…" Plagg hesitated, but seeing the Akuma's gruff breathing, he chose to concede, "Alright, just… keep him safe, okay? We had a deal."

"And I've honored it, have I not?" the Akuma said, "Trust me, I want Adrien to survive as much as you do. I'm connected to him now. He goes, I go, too… ngh!" The Akuma clutched at his heart again. "Dammit… He's getting restless, I need to go."

"Restless?" Plagg asked, vaguely noticing the green line in Adrien's heart monitor spike again. "What do you mean he's restless? Does he… know about you?"

"No… but..." The Akuma wheezed, "There's something happening… in his dream… and his heart… his heart is racing… I n-need to go…"

"Akuma, wait!"

But the Akuma ignored him, laying back down and closing his eyes with a deep sigh. Adrien's breathing evened out as the Akuma relinquished his hold and disappeared into Adrien's subconscious once more. Plagg waited silently, watching the line in Adrien's heart monitor return back to normal.

"Please, please be okay…" Plagg begged under his breath, whiskers drooping at the grim prospect of his charge's now unpredictable existence.
"Adrien…"

"Yes, Marinette?"

"I feel weird…" she whispered, resting her head against his shoulder. Adrien furrowed his brows in concern, noting her tired face and droopy shoulders. She looked under the weather and miserable, very different to her usual glowing, relaxed demeanor.

He couldn't deny that he felt something was off with her the moment the dream materialized around him. She had been waiting for him, reclined against a foot of the tower, her head hanging low.

However, the moment she heard him approaching she raised her head and smiled at him as if nothing had happened. He had thus ignored it, thinking she had probably just gotten bored.

But now, as they sat on a hill together to watch the world twist and form beautiful shapes and colors around them to their whim, he noticed her acting strange again, her gaze lost and unfocused.

She had finally ended up leaning against him, knowing exactly where to place her head even though she couldn't see him, just from the sheer time they had spent together.

"Weird? What are you feeling?" Adrien asked her, finding her hand and squeezing it. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Marinette breathed, "I feel so tired and dizzy…"

Adrien straightened, his stomach tightening. "Dizzy? How long have you been feeling like this?"

"A while," Marinette confessed, "But it wasn't as bad before…I didn't think..." She trailed off, her eyelids drooping, suddenly feeling heavy against him.

"Marinette?" Adrien asked in worry, preoccupied by how her voice had died in her throat and how she was now resting completely against him. "Marinette, please say something…"

"Tower…" Marinette slurred suddenly, "I want to… go to the Tower…" She attempted to stand up, her arms trembling as she tried to find her feet.

"Mari?" Adrien asked, "Are you okay?"

She didn't reply but shakily got to her feet, her legs trembling with her weight and her frame swaying.

"Adrien... " she repeated, holding her head. "...I feel... strange..."

Adrien jumped to hold her aloft as she teetered on collapse, his own hands trembling as he held her.

"Mariette, please stay with me," he begged, walking her slowly down the hill, "Stay with me..."

Her lips opened but no sound came out. Suddenly her legs gave in and she fell to the ground, Adrien falling with her. He kneeled at her side and held her to him. He noticed with no little amount of panic that her body was starting to become lightweight and white, the edges of her dress whispering away like mist.

"Marinette!" Adrien cried, holding her, "What's wrong? Please, talk to me!"

"... Adrien..." Marinette said barely above a whisper, her eyelids drooping.
"Mari..." Adrien begged, "Please, don't leave..."

She heaved a long sigh and her eyes slid closed, her whole body going slack against him.

Before he could even call her name again, Marinette melted from his hands, disappearing in a cloud of white mist, leaving him alone and lost in the wide, open field.

The shock of losing Marinette was such that Adrien snapped right awake with a gasp, breathing hard and heart hammering hard against his chest.

He had no idea what had just happened or why Marinette was acting so erratically. She had seemed fine the night before, what had changed? She had felt dizzy. Marinette had felt dizzy and strange. He had only felt those things when...

With a gasp of realization, Adrien yanked the covers and straightened, pulling his legs over the edge of the bed. He grabbed on the cables that tethered him to the bed, pulling them out without hesitation. The monitors around him started beeping in alarm but he ignored it.

"Hey, what's happening, where's the fire!?" A groggy Plagg asked, zipping from underneath Adrien's bed in alarm.

"Marinette!" Adrien said "There's something wrong with her!"

With a deep breath, Adrien slowly lowered himself from the bed with his one functional arm, his toes touching the cold floor. He pushed himself off the mattress, his weakened legs trembling fiercely under his weight. He took a few experimental steps and lost his balance, falling down to his knees with a grunt.

"Woah, kid stay in bed! I can go check for you!" Plagg said, pulling on Adrien's robe. "You're gonna get hurt!"

Pain exploded from every inch of Adrien's body, but he ignored it, clinging to the remnants of morphine still flowing through his veins. If he had to drag himself in all fours to Marinette's room to get to her, he was going to do just that.

"No," Adrien huffed, "I'll check her myself."

Determined and ignoring his dizziness, Adrien crawled to the wall, using it as support and pushing the door open. He pushed against the wall of the hallway, rising to his shaking feet and wobbling as fast as he could to Marinette's room beside his.

Suddenly, a gasp stopped him, and Adrien turned his head, finding Madame Cheng standing behind him with a bag of what he assumed was a late night lunch clutched in her hands.

"Adrien, what are you doing out of bed?" She asked in alarm, immediately running to his side and dropping her bag to help him. She turned on Plagg, her eyes disapproving. "Plagg!"

"Hey, don't look at me, I tried to stop him, too!" Plagg said, pulling his paws up in defense.

"I n-need to see her," Adrien grunted, allowing Madame Cheng to surround his waist with her arm to support him, "I need to see Marinette, please!"

"Adrien, you will get hurt-"

"I need to see Marinette!" Adrien repeated more desperately, eyes begging the Asian woman to
understand the urgency behind his words. "Please! I need to see her!"

"Why?" she questioned, worry suddenly filling her eyes.

"I need to know she's okay!" Adrien insisted, "I just… I had a bad dream and I need to see her!"

A hint of realization dawned on Madame Cheng's face and she nodded, grabbing Adrien's arm so he could put it around her shoulder.

"Alright dear, just hang on to me, okay?"

"Thank you," Adrien said, breathing heavy, limping forward as Madame Cheng slowly started making her way to the room, "Thank you so much."

They made it to the door, and Madame Cheng grabbed the knob, pulling the door open in a hurry. She then walked Adrien to Marinette's bedside, seating him down on a nearby chair.

He inched forward and rested his arm on the bed, reaching out for Marinette's inert hand. She was breathing calmly, completely still, except for her brows which were furrowing.

"Marinette?" Adrien whispered, his heart now thumping in his ears, "Can you hear me?"

But she did not respond. She went on sleeping soundly, her machines beeping intermittently, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing out of place. Everything the same.

He waited for several minutes, squeezing her hand.

"Marinette?"

But she did not stir.

With every minute that elapsed, he could feel his body grow cold again, hope snuffing out as he deflated, his body aching with pain now that his adrenaline rush was decreasing. He had thought that perhaps, her disappearance meant that she had...

But no. She was still gone to the world and he couldn't keep the moisture from gathering in his eyes in disappointment, choking back a sudden sob. He lowered his head, resting it on the mattress beside her as a lonely tear escaped his eye and soaked the pristine white sheets.

"I-I'm sorry, I… I thought she had…" Adrien couldn't finish, overtaken by grief.

"Oh, sweetheart…" Madame Cheng said sadly, wrapping her arms around Adrien and stroking his head. "It's alright…Do you want to stay here a while?"

Adrien nodded slowly against the mattress, sniffling silently. He didn't think he could move anymore anyway. His drive had completely left him.

Adrien felt her move behind him, and then felt the warm weight of a blanket being laid around his shoulders. Madame Cheng then sat beside him, rubbing his back gently. Before long, the remnants of morphine in his blood coupled with Madame Cheng's relaxing attentions soon sunk him in a deep sleep once more, his fingers wrapped around Marinette's hand.

But he wouldn't be soothed, now that his dreams were a vast, empty plain where he was completely alone and Marinette was nowhere to be found.

Where are you?
"Doctor Longuevie! The patient - Mr. Agreste has-"

"Leave him…" Longuevie said calmly, not lifting his eyes from his notes as he worked diligently on his report, completely unperturbed by the nurses’ distress as she came to alert him of Adrien's escapade.

"Leave him? But, he pulled everything out! And the medication… A-And Miss Dupain-Cheng, she-"

"Leave him." the doctor repeated looking up briefly from his writing to gaze pointedly at the nurse. "I'll go fetch him soon. For now, let him be. Madame Cheng is in the room. He'll be fine."

The nurse looked at him curiously for a few moments before excusing herself and leaving. By her expression, Longuevie wouldn't have been surprised if she had begun to doubt his sanity or medical training, but he cared little.

He had been completely aware of Adrien's precarious venturing the moment he disconnected the monitors from his skin, and had even gone to get him himself.

But upon reaching the room, seeing him laying with Marinette with hands clasped and deeply asleep as if he had been hit with a potent tranquilizer, made Longuevie reconsider taking him away.

The dose of morphine they had given him that night was not strong enough to keep him knocked out, just enough to numb the worst of the pain. So to see Adrien sleeping placidly off his own accord, with little aid from sedatives, gave Longuevie an idea.

The mind was a strong, but fickle, little thing. Despite the brittle physical condition that had earlier confined him to a wheelchair, Adrien's emotion had been strong enough to get him out of bed and move him to a different room that night, something that had so far been unprecedented since he was admitted.

So, if modern medicine was doing little to aid him in this area, Longuevie would turn to psychology.

It was a risk he was taking, to cater to Adrien's aching need for affection and company. He'd probably never hear the end of it from Monsieur Agreste and his assistant, but he'll be damned if he didn't take the plunge.

So, making up his mind, Doctor Longuevie let Madame Cheng know of his intentions and left the room, eager to see the results of his hypothesis come morning.

He only hoped that he'd see what he had suspected for several days be proven true.

After what felt like hours, Adrien stirred awake again, the room sunk in darkness.

Madame Cheng had long since dozed off on the couch close to him, wrapped in a thick comforter with Plagg tucked warmly within the folds of fabric close to her chin.

Looking at the time on a nearby wall clock, he was mildly surprised that nurses hadn't come to seek him out. They should've found out by now that he had disconnected everything and escaped.

That aside, discomfort had prodded his senses into awakening and he huffed impatiently, bothered by the now-familiar feeling of pain throughout his body but particularly, a weird feeling of pressure on his fingers.
He wriggled them, trying to ease the numbness, but the pressure wouldn't soften and he suddenly felt movement beside him.

Meekly looking up, his sleepy eyes blinked repeatedly, trying to make out the fuzzy shapes in the dark. A subtle kind of shine and the sound of stilted breathing stood out in the dark and Adrien tilted his head in confusion.

As his eyes adjusted and things around him became clearer, Adrien's heart suddenly leapt in his chest and his breathing got stuck in his throat.

For what he found staring back at him as intently as his green eyes were, were a pair of bright, blue eyes belonging to a very drowsy, very confused Marinette.

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Chapter End Notes

*FINAL FANTASY FANFAREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YCN-a0NsNk

lol

REMEMBER: AS YOU COULD SEE FROM HOW LONG IT TOOK TO MAKE THIS CHAPTER I HAVE NO IDEA WHEN THE NEXT ONE WILL COME. THEY JUST HAPPEN. IT MAY TAKE DAYS LIKE IT MAY TAKE WEEKS. SO PLEASE DON'T PRESSURE ME AND ASK ME WHEN THE NEXT ONE IS COMING BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW AND IT'S MADDENING AND STRESSFUL. Thank you.
Adrien’s breath stilled, his unblinking gaze locked on her drowsy, half-lidded eyes. Her pink lips were slightly parted with her slow breathing, her now longer hair disheveled and falling around her flushed cheeks.

A thought came unbidden to his mind, a memory locked in a dream:

When I wake, I want you to be the first face I see...

“M-Marinette?” Adrien said, choking on his breath, absently realizing the pressure around his fingers had been Marinette’s hand firmly clasping his own.

She was looking at him, right? She seemed out of it, blinking lazily at him, chest rising and falling slowly. She shifted her head, squinting at his shape in the dark.

“Hey, Marinette…” Adrien tried again, the corners of his lips twitching into a shaky smile as his eyes quickly became glassy with relief. He rubbed her fingers with his thumb, noting the sudden warmness in them. “Welcome back…”

She sighed softly in response, eyes blinking as she tried to shake the sleep off them. She looked like she was struggling to see, and Adrien quickly released her hand to move to turn on the lamp on her bedside table.

As the meager light shone on her face, she squinted at the sudden intrusion. As the world around her seemed to clear, Adrien watched her reaction with bated breath, silently giving her time to assimilate her situation.

At first she simply looked around her, trying to take in the details of the room.

Her face scrunched up in an expression of deep thought, brows furrowing as her breathing became shallower, faster. She shifted on the bed, fingers fisting over the covers, eyes fleeting as she looked at all the strange monitors connected to her.
Then, when her glassy eyes met his again, Adrien saw an emotion he couldn’t quite describe in them. With growing unease, he realized they were not full of love or happiness like he had expected. No, there was something else in them, something different and unsettling...

And it was when she tried to move her bound hands - eyes growing wide as she looked down to realize what was stopping her - that Adrien finally placed what it was…

**Fear**.

It happened so fast.

Her eyes widened in terror, and she tugged at her bonds aggressively, her shoulders tightening as she desperately tried to pull away between desperate whimpers.

“Shhh, Marinette it’s okay!” Adrien hushed, trying to grab her thrashing arm. “You’re okay! It’s fine!”

She ignored him, her eyes squeezing shut as she struggled in between noises of protest. She jerked, arching her back against the bed and her eyes suddenly popped open, her mouth opening in a silent scream as she tensed with what looked like pain.

She plopped back down and moaned pitifully, tears beginning to build up in the corner of her eyes.

“No, no, it’s okay Marinette, it’s okay!” Adrien tried to soothe, his heart tightening at the sight of her tears.

Seeking to placate her, Adrien quickly moved to free the arm closest to him, undoing the strap that held her down. But as soon as her hand was free, Adrien watched in horror as Marinette jerked aggressively again, moisture leaking from her eyes as she grabbed every tube and wire she could get her fingers around and ripped them right off her skin.

Alarms started ringing and Adrien panicked, trying to hold on to her wrist before she hurt herself further. “Marinette, stop! Don’t do that!”

Madame Cheng awoke with a start at the commotion, knocking a squeaking Plagg off her. She looked around her in confusion, freezing when she caught sight of Adrien struggling with a very awake, very upset Marinette.

“Shhh! Marinette, sweetheart, I’m here!” Madame Cheng said, holding Marinette’s flailing arm against her side in an embrace as her other hand came up to caress her head gingerly. “I’m here. It’s okay Marinette. Shhh...It’s okay...”

At the sound of her mother’s voice and her warm touch on her head, Marinette seemed to pause, her thrashing easing to a trembling stop, moans lowering into sobs.

“Shhh! Marinette, sweet heart, I’m here!” Madame Cheng said, holding Marinette’s flailing arm against her side in an embrace as her other hand came up to caress her head gingerly. “I’m here. It’s okay Marinette. Shhh...It’s okay...”

At the sound of her mother’s voice and her warm touch on her head, Marinette seemed to pause, her thrashing easing to a trembling stop, moans lowering into sobs.

“‘Shhh! Marinette, sweet heart, I’m here!’” Madame Cheng whispered soothingly, kissing the top of Marinette’s head repeatedly as her eyes became glassy with relief. She held her to her chest, rocking her slightly as one of her hands lowered to press the button on the bed’s railing to call a nurse,
“You’re safe, you’re okay…”

Marinette remained with her eyes shut tightly, her face constricted in an expression of deep pain as she sobbed inconsolably against Sabine’s chest, a trembling hand going up to clutch at her mother’s tunic.

Madame Cheng looked at Adrien sympathetically, her eyes filled with as much doubt as his. Adrien found he had nothing to say. All he could think about was the image now burned into his mind; Marinette’s expression of utter fear at seeing him.

It had been hours since Marinette had woken up and Adrien was wheeled back to his room to wait in numb silence. Hours since she had looked at him with nothing but terror in her eyes, struggling wildly to get away. Hours since she had been sedated, strapped back to the bed, and taken away to be subjected to a number of tests and scans to assess her condition...

Hours since he had been fighting the growing feeling of terrible dread in his chest.

And all through that time, all that was in his head was… what went wrong?

What had happened to her? It had been so unsettling to see Marinette - Ladybug - in such crazed distress, and him, hopeless to help her. Hopeless to soothe her. Instead, the sight of him had caused her more woe, sending her on a frenzy...

Plagg had sat silently beside him, eating Camembert without a word. He would occasionally look up at Adrien to see how he was doing, but Adrien was numb, expressionless, vacantly staring at the ceiling.

After a few moments, Plagg felt leaving Adrien to his own mind would do him more harm than good, so, after gobbling his last piece of Camembert, he floated up to sit on his shoulder.

“Hey, what’s up.”

“What happened, Plagg?” Adrien croaked after a moment, eyes still scanning the plaster in the ceiling as if it held the answer to his query.

“She freaked out.” Plagg said with a shrug, “So?”

“What do you mean so?” Adrien raised an eyebrow at him “She was terrified, Plagg! I’ve never seen her that scared…”

“Kid, she’s been sleeping for months. She most likely thought she was having a nightmare or somethin’. You know how you sometimes see shapes in the dark and your mind makes you think they’re monsters? Something like that,” Plagg said matter-of-factly. “You’re overthinking it. It doesn’t have to be about you.”

Despite the logic in the Plagg’s explanation, Adrien was not assuaged and he sighed.

There was suddenly a knock on the door and Adrien quickly ushered Plagg into a hiding place under his blanket. The door opened slightly, revealing Doctor Longuevie peeking through the gap.

“May I come in?” he asked. Adrien nodded wordlessly.
Dr. Longuevie walked in, silently closing the door behind him and walking to Adrien’s bedside. He took a seat on the edge of his bed and looked at him sympathetically.

“How are you doing?”

How was he doing?

The girl he loved above all else - the girl he had endured torturous battles for; for whom he had nearly died for, whose absence had plagued his nightmares and had sunk him into solitude - had finally woken up after months of silence… and her reaction towards him had been one of utter terror.

There was no warmth or yearning in her eyes.

But why… why did she fear him so much? Why had she reacted that way? Hadn’t both Tikki and Alya confirmed that Marinette loved Adrien? Hadn’t they both confirmed that she was head over heels for him?

Then what went wrong?

Unable to externalize these questions though, Adrien just looked at the doctor then lowered his eyes dejectedly.

“I see…” Dr. Longuevie said knowingly, immediately picking up on Adrien’s mood. “I understand that what happened this morning may have been unsettling for you, but I can assure you there’s nothing to worry about.”

“How is she?” Adrien asked softly, looking at his doctor. He recalled that she looked like she was in pain, and he wasn’t sure what to make of that. He feared she had hurt herself seriously in her thrashing.

“She upset her hip in her struggling, but it’s under control. She’ll be okay,” Dr. Longuevie reassured him with a calming smile. “She’s stable and we gave her a tranquilizer. She’s resting right now…”

“I’m glad…” Adrien said. He was genuinely happy that she was okay after all, but his heart still ached.

“I’m frankly surprised you aren’t asking me if you can see her...” Dr. Longuevie commented.

Adrien looked down, rubbing his arm sheepishly.

“I don’t think she wants to see me.”

“Is this because of how she reacted when she woke?”

Adrien nodded silently.

“Adrien, that wasn’t about you…” Longuevie said. Adrien suddenly felt a poke on his leg that felt distinctly like a I told you so.

“But she was fine with her mom…” Adrien said, failing to hide a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“How would you react if you woke up in a strange, dark room, with no recollection of how you got there, tubes all over the place, and tied to a bed?” Longuevie posed. “I’d personally be very disturbed.”
―I thought I could calm her,‖ Adrien said. ―But she wouldn’t listen to me. It was like she didn’t even recognize me.‖

Longuevie paused momentarily, like a thought had just struck him. He hummed pensively, taking off his glasses and cleaning them idly on his robe. He looked uncomfortable, Adrien noticed, avoiding Adrien’s gaze and paying too much attention to his glasses, which Adrien noticed were spotless.

―Adrien… I need to ask you something. When did you meet Marinette?‖

―Like a year and a half ago, I think,‖ Adrien said.

Longuevie sighed, squeezing the bridge of his nose. ―I see…‖

Adrien blinked. ―Why?‖

―...There’s something you should know about Marinette…‖

DAY 1

Adrien inhaled.

Then exhaled.

He did it once more, two times, three… Trying to calm the jitters, but they remained deeply rooted to the pit of his stomach.

―Are you sure you’re up for this, Adrien?‖ Longuevie asked him, standing behind Adrien’s wheelchair as they waited at the door to Marinette’s room.

Adrien’s hand tensed over the armrest, fingers curled and digging into the soft material, trying to assuage the mounting feeling of pressure within his chest.

―Positive,‖ Adrien said flatly, his face guarded.

Longuevie nodded and Adrien took a deep breath again. His conversation with Longuevie yesterday morning filtered into his head, echoing over and over again, his mind not quite wanting to wrap around it, wanting to find a loophole in it.

...We ran Marinette through some tests, to make sure there was no deep neurological damage... the memory echoed in his head as Longuevie slowly opened the door to Marinette’s room.

...At the moment, she has something called dysarthria, so she cannot speak, but she can understand you just fine, albeit a bit slowly. With therapy and good care, she should be able to speak again soon...

Adrien was wheeled quietly into the room. Marinette was resting on her side, her back to him, pillow stuck between her legs under the covers to soothe her hip. Madame Cheng sat at her bedside, her face tired as if she hadn’t slept a wink, hand idly stroking Marinette’s hair. As he was guided around the bed, Adrien closed his eyes momentarily, willing his dread and anxiety to subside.
...we asked Marinette several questions to see how her cognition and memory may have been
affected by the blow to her head...

He was guided to rest beside her bed. She didn’t look at him, the side of her head sunk in the pillow,
er her eyes downcast, staring at nothing, sad, exhausted...

A small whiteboard lay in front of her on the bed, a black marker hanging loosely from her hand on
top of it. Adrien could distinguish two words written on the board in all caps: **OUI. NON.** *Yes. No.*

Adrien swallowed, and after a few moments of silence, Longuevie left his side and cleared his throat,
kneeling beside Marinette’s bed.

“Miss Marinette?” Longuevie said slowly in a soft, gentle voice, “I’m sorry. I know you’re tired, but
there’s someone here that I want you to see. I need you to look up for a bit, please.”

Marinette heaved a heavy sigh, and raised her gaze towards Adrien. As their eyes connected, what
he saw in her eyes was… nothing. They were dull, vacant, melancholic. Adrien saw the distinct
glistening of tears at the edge of her swollen eyes, like she had been crying, dark circles around them.

But despite how seeing Marinette cry made his heart clench, it wasn’t the tears that sent a cold
feeling coursing through Adrien…

It was the emptiness in her eyes, the blatant disinterest in seeing him, like he was nothing more than a
stranger in her midst. Nothing but someone that could go on his merry way and she would be none
the wiser, ignorant to his feelings and thoughts...

...*I’m afraid that Marinette may not be quite herself for a while, Adrien*...

“Marinette, this boy right here, his name is Adrien Agreste…” The doctor began slowly and a shiver
ran down Adrien’s back at the introduction.

It was so surreal, so… bizarre to be introduced, as if they were strangers. He could feel his heart
thumping hard against his chest, reverberating in his ears, a cool sensation running up and down his
back.

He thought of everything. Absolutely everything... every adventure, every class, every…
interaction...

Could they truly be…?

“Remember the picture we showed you earlier? You and Adrien went to school at Francois Dupont.
He was your classmate and sat in front of you in class…” Longuevie continued and the more he
talked, the bigger the lump in Adrien’s throat grew and the tighter the knot in his stomach became.

“Do you remember him, Marinette?” Longuevie asked. “Do you remember Adrien?”

Time stood still, and Adrien held his breath.

...*The reason she was scared of you*....

Marinette looked at him for several moments, blinking slowly, taking in every detail of his person.
Adrien remained stone still, voice stuck in his throat. He couldn’t even bring himself to smile at her.
He was frozen.

...*The reason she didn’t seem to recognize you*...
They locked eyes for a time, and in his head, he begged her to see how much she meant to him, how much they had shared together, to look inside herself and find him...

...was because in her mind...

Marinette’s hand twitched, her hand hovering over the whiteboard, fingers trembling with the effort as she processed the question. The more she looked at him however, the more forlorn she seemed to become. Soon, the tears she had kept at bay spilled, trickling slowly down her cheeks, and she looked so remorseful it broke his heart in two...

Her hand moved toward one of the words, and Adrien felt his heart stop in his chest.

No.

...she never met you.

The moment her marker touched the damning word on the whiteboard, Marinette watched the face of the boy in front of her pale and fall instantly. It was so quick and poignant that it was as if his bright green eyes were wide open windows to his soul, and through them, she saw everything break into pieces within him.

She saw confusion, hopelessness, pain, and heartache flash through his eyes in quick succession… like his whole world had come crumbling down. His mouth opened and closed several times, like he wanted to say something, but no words came out.

His eyes turned glassy, but he chose to look down at his lap in an attempt to hide it, his mouth forming a straight line, although she could more than see the tension in his jaw.

She wanted to say sorry, but she couldn’t. The muscles in her jaw felt strange, foreign. She couldn’t articulate, she couldn’t form words. So she wept instead, unable to stop the tears from flowing.

From the moment she had woken, she found she could only cry. She couldn’t plead to her mother to help ease the pain she felt in her body, as if she was broken. She couldn’t plead to her father to hold her close and tell her things would be okay. She couldn’t plead to the boy in front of her to forgive her for causing him pain.

She just wanted to go back to sleep and pretend none of this was happening.

She thought that if she was lucky, this would all be a bad dream and she would wake up in her bed, late to school as she usually was, cramming breakfast in her mouth as she ran to class, and this would be but a nightmare she would forget by the end of the school day.

But no. She wasn’t that lucky, and everything was very painfully real.

A heavy silence fell between them. Her parents kept their gazes elsewhere, unable to look at either of them, while her doctor kept his on the boy - Adrien, was it? - looking sympathetically at him. From the heavy atmosphere in the room, it seemed to Marinette that she had forgotten someone that had been of great importance to her, so much that even her parents and doctor seemed to feel his sorrow.

And it was making her heart clench.

Who exactly had she forgotten?
Why had she forgotten?

What happened to her?

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, of neither of them doing anything to acknowledge each other, the doctor moved, kneeling beside the boy in front of her.

“Do you want to go back?” he asked him softly.

The boy didn’t move for a moment, then nodded hesitantly, still not looking up, his hand clenching on his lap and his shoulders stiff with concealed tension.

“Alright,” the doctor said.

He rose to his feet, thanked Marinette, and silently wheeled the boy out of her room.

And the only thing in her mind in that moment was her wishing she could remember why he was so important to her, so that she could stop feeling that terrible ache in her heart as if a part of her had been ripped out of her chest.

He felt like there was a hole inside him. A big, gaping hole that was aching to be filled, but throbbed with the desperation of knowing that it would not be. He suddenly felt so weak, so defeated, he didn’t see the point in pursuing a conversation with his doctor, or anyone for that matter.

He just wanted to be left alone.

But Longuevie lingered, not taking him immediately to his room, but wheeling him down the hospital corridors, through the gardens, and around the courtyard.

He was mostly silent, letting Adrien sort his thoughts, limiting himself to only telling him it was okay to let it out to ease his troubled heart after the revelation that Marinette, the girl he was in love with, didn’t even know who he was anymore.

It had felt worse than a punch in the gut.

So Adrien took his offer and let the silent tears flow. Tears of impotence, of sorrow, of helplessness. He curled in on himself and wept quietly, his hand fisting over the blanket on his useless legs or dabbing at his eyes in a poor attempt to appear composed as the cool air dried the moisture on his cheeks.

What had been the point of it all? What had he endured so much for? What was the point if she didn’t remember him anymore? If he was left in the same position as before: in pain and alone?

After letting him cry his fill, Longuevie wheeled Adrien back to his room.

“It’s called Retrograde Amnesia,” Longuevie explained once he had settled Adrien back onto his bed, while Adrien listened on numbly, head downcast. “That means that her memories before her accident have been compromised, and it’s very common in accidents like Marinette’s for this to happen. And judging by the content of her answers, it seems Marinette thinks she is back to being 12 years old and just beginning her first year of collège.”
“So... the last two years...” Adrien said, his voice raspy, not looking up.

“They’re essentially nonexistent. For her, none of that ever happened,” Longuevie confirmed and Adrien felt the rest of his heart break.

So to Marinette, she never became Ladybug, Chat Noir didn’t exist, and Alya, Nino and Adrien... were strangers. No memory at all of their shared victories, their shared laughter, their friendship... Everything was gone. Everything was as if they’d never known each other... and it tore what was left of his heart to pieces.

He couldn’t even begin to imagine how Alya would take it.

“I know this is difficult Adrien, but I ask for your understanding,” Longuevie pleaded, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It’s a very trying time for Marinette. She has lost part of her identity and she has to come to terms with that on her own. It won’t be easy, especially with all the physical limitations she now has to face. She will be very sensitive for a while, and it’s in her best interest that we’re all patient with her and support her during this time.”

Adrien’s spirit plummeted further, momentarily feeling ashamed of his own selfishness, only worrying about what he had lost. He couldn’t imagine what it must be like for Marinette, to be completely fine one day and suddenly wake up to be crippled and with your mind a mess... He understood now why she looked so despondent when they saw each other.

“Will she ever get those memories back, though?” Adrien asked, looking at his doctor.

Longuevie sighed, scratching the back of his head with a hand. “It depends on the patient. She may, or may not. It may be quick or it may be slow. It could take days or it could take years. We’ll have to see and do our best to jog her memory little by little, and slowly reacquaint her with all she lost. I will have to talk to your friends first before they see her.”

“Right...” Adrien said non-committally.

They both fell quiet, and Adrien saw Longuevie look at his hands, as if he was considering something. After a moment, he stood up from his bedside, and went to the door, and to Adrien’s surprise, instead of leaving like Adrien thought he would, he locked the door.

Adrien’s heart jumped in his chest at the motion, and he cocked his head in confusion.

“Dr. Longuevie?” Adrien questioned.

The doctor turned to look back at him, and his eyes were soft but unsure, as if he was considering telling Adrien something but was gauging if he should. After a moment, Longuevie walked back and took a seat on the chair beside Adrien’s bed. He looked him in the eye, his mustache twitching.

“I know it’s been a tough day,” he began quietly, rubbing the back of his neck. “But there’s something else I need you to know, and that I’ve been meaning to tell you for days.”

“Why did you lock the door?” Adrien questioned him, suddenly wary.

“Because of what I’m about to tell you. I consider you’ll agree that we should keep it between us once I explain.”

“I really don’t think I can handle any more news today, Dr. Longuevie...” Adrien said softly, looking at him ruefully. Whatever it was he wanted to tell him, if it was so important he needed to lock the door to avoid eavesdroppers, Adrien wasn’t sure he could take it. “I really just... want to take
a break from things for a bit.”

“I actually think you may find this to be positive news,” he said. “Or not, I honestly… can’t tell, it’s not a situation I commonly come across…”

“Positive?” Adrien asked, not really buying it.

“Yes, but I think I want to begin by first saying that I’m sorry, Adrien…”

“Sorry? For what?” Adrien asked arching an eyebrow.

“If you hadn’t been in the room yesterday, you wouldn’t have had to face that reaction or any of this heartache,” Longuevie explained. “I should’ve had you taken to your room the moment I discovered you were gone, but I decided not to…”

Adrien’s interest peaked. “And why was that?”

“I wanted to see what would happen if you were closer to Marinette.” Longuevie said warily, locking eyes with Adrien.

Adrien’s back tingled. “What for?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while but I was waiting till you were a little bit better to broach it with you.”

Adrien gulped. “Okay…?”

“As you know, your recovery has been… slow.”

More like nonexistent, thought Adrien ruefully, though being able to eat and get out of bed without wanting to die had been a big step forward.

“Though lately you’ve been taking some small steps into significant recovery.”

Adrien shrugged noncommittally. “I guess so.”

“I wish I could say it’s because of our care, but that isn’t entirely true. I’ve had some help to deal with your…condition.”

Adrien turned to him, cocking an eyebrow. “Help?”

“Yes. I was running out of options, and we were risking your father transferring you to another hospital, so I had no choice but to accept this help.”

Adrien was getting more and more nervous by the second. Who had been helping Longuevie deal with Adrien?

“It’s not to worry of course, as I’m pretty sure you’re very familiar with them…”

“Sorry, I don’t think I follow,” Adrien said, nervous.

Longuevie looked at him for a moment, then grabbed the edge of his white coat, lifting it slightly.

“You may come out, now,” Longuevie said toward the interior of his coat.

And suddenly, out of his coat shot a glowing red blur, a creature so familiar it caused Adrien’s blood
to run cold as it flew up to his face.

“Adrien! Oh, goodness, it’s been so long! I’ve been so worried!” Tikki said

“T-Tikki!?” Adrien choked. He tensed and it suddenly felt like a whole bucket of ice cold water had been dumped on him, his heart plummeting to the pit of his stomach. His heart had began beating so fast that the heart monitor gave a warning beep.

“Adrien, you need to calm down,” Longuevie warned, “Relax...”

“It’s okay, Adrien!” Tikki piped in, “I promise it’s okay, don’t worry!”

He tried to calm down, willing the ball of anxiety in the pit of his stomach back down and his breathing to even.

“Y-You know e-each other...” Adrien said, eyes wide.

“Yes, somewhat.” Longuevie said, shrugging. Tikki nodded in turn.

“So you... you know t-that...” Adrien said, pointing at Tikki. “I mean, you know ab-bout...”

“That Marinette is Ladybug? Yes...” Longuevie confirmed, looking at Adrien sheepishly. “And I also know... about you.” Longuevie said meaningfully, glancing at Adrien’s ring.

“How!?” Adrien squeaked, covering his ring on instinct.

“I will tell you once you calm down.” Longuevie said sternly, “Breathe. Go on.”

Adrien obeyed without a word, giving a few well practiced breaths. However, the moment he began to calm down, Plagg poked his head out, floating beside Adrien.

“Ugh, guess the cat is outta the bag...” Plagg grumbled.

“Plagg!” Adrien screeched.

“Whatsoever! He knows already!” Plagg snapped, crossing his arms.“I wonder who else knows. Maybe the neighbor next door. Or maybe the lady down at the flower shop or I don’t know MAYBE THE GORILLA? Swell, awesome, perfect, just what we needed!”

“He’s very... different,” Longuevie commented softly, looking at Tikki, eyes slightly wide in wonder.

“A bit...” she said, “It’s okay, Plagg! Only he knows!”

“Yeah right, lets see how long that lasts.” Plagg said with a huff. “At this rate the whole lot of Paris will find out.”

“If it helps assuage your fears, I’ve known for nearly a month and I’ve taken special care that the nurses or other visitors don’t find out about you.” Longuevie reassured him.

“A month?” Adrien asked, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

“Yes,” Longuevie said, taking off his glasses to clean them idly with the hem of his coat, “I had only found out about Marinette, but it didn’t take long for me to put two and two together after I saw your ring and was told just where you were found during your accident.”
“He told me his suspicions about you, and I had to tell him, Adrien,” Tikki confessed, “I’m very sorry, but it’s for the best. He can help you!”

So the person Adrien had caught Longuevie whispering to in his room… the red light bobbing around him… was Tikki?

Adrien gave a deep breath.

“You need to backtrack a bit, this is a bit much for me…” Adrien said, rubbing his temples, “Okay, so how did you find out about Marinette? I thought I had been careful to protect her identity…”

“Yes, quite. The funeral was the perfect smokescreen,” Longuevie agreed. “And I’m sure Marinette would’ve appreciated it, if only she could remember who she was.”

“Then how did you find out she was Ladybug?” Adrien asked.

“After your… accident, I received a tip off,” Longuevie started slowly, “from someone who told me about Marinette and who wanted me to look after you, as well as her, to the best of my ability…”

Adrien’s brows knitted in a frown. “Who?”

Who else could know about his secret and tell Longuevie about him specifically?

“You’ll meet them soon enough. But after you were wounded, I was asked to take you on as my patient, as well. At the beginning, I didn’t know why, but I trusted their judgement,” Longuevie explained. “You never once wondered how much of a coincidence it was that I was taking care of both of you?”

“I guess I did, once,” Adrien admitted. “But I thought it was just luck finally being on my side.”

“In a way, it was,” Longuevie chuckled. “It came as quite a shock to me as you can imagine. Taking care of the one and only Ladybug, whose survival hinged purely on my abilities? No pressure.” He showed Adrien a gentle smile that looked slightly nervous.

Adrien winced, imagining how much stress that had put on Longuevie, to be responsible for Paris’ guardian and protector, and later to find out he was responsible for not one, but both of them. It was no little thing.

“So I accepted, and after being explained Marinette’s situation, I wondered how you fit into the picture, and why exactly they asked me to take care of you as well. I started having suspicions,” Longuevie continued explaining, “The mysterious nature of your wounds, the place you were found being the last place Chat Noir was seen at, your ring, your devotion to Marinette, who was Ladybug… After convincing her to show herself, I asked Tikki if my guess was sound, and she confirmed your identity to me. I had been trying to get you to tell me yourself, but you did keep your secret well hidden.” Longuevie gave him a good natured smile.

“I see,” Adrien said, reeling from the barrage of information. “Why did you want me to be close to Marinette, though?”

“It was the effects it was having on you,” Longuevie said.

“What effects?” Adrien said, quirking an eyebrow.

“Forgive me, I’m not exceedingly enlightened in the nature of your powers, although I do grasp some of it, but I think Tikki should be the one to explain that part to you.” Longuevie nodded at
Tikki and she nodded back, floating closer to Adrien.

“It turns out we were healing you!” Tikki said.

“Really?” Adrien asked.

“When you first got here, you were placed in this room, and Marinette was two floors down,” she explained. “During that time, you barely showed any sign of improvement, in fact, they were close to losing you again, right?” Tikki asked Longuevie.

“Yes. After you were revived, your health kept deteriorating, no matter what we did,” Longuevie said, a hint of sadness in his tone. “You were in so much pain all the time... You were barely hanging to life by a thread.”

“I found out you were here because I overheard Madame Cheng mentioning it,” Tikki continued, “So one night, I snuck into your room to see how you were doing, but I was so worried about you that I had not noticed that Dr. Longuevie had been sleeping in a corner of your room because of how frail your condition was.”

“Oh, so like a babysitter, only for stupid teenagers,” Plagg added. Adrien frowned at Plagg, pouting.

“He did it so he could look after you, to rush to your aid if something went wrong since you were in such a delicate state.” Tikki continued.

Adrien turned to look at his doctor. The fact that he had kept tabs on him, going above and beyond duty, almost as much as a real father would, was heart warming.

Adrien smiled sincerely. “Thank you…”

“Oh well, sleep is overrated,” Longuevie said with an amused smile. “But indeed, this is also how I eventually found out about your friend here.. Um…”

“Plagg,” Adrien said. “His name is Plagg.”

Plagg fidgeted, uncomfortable, “So uh, you… you saw me?” Plagg seemed nervous all of a sudden. Very nervous. How had he been so careless to not notice Adrien wasn’t alone? “You heard everything?”

“Oh, I didn’t actually see you, but Tikki told me about you. You kept yourself well hidden.”

Plagg visibly relaxed. “Oh great, wouldn’t want you thinking there was anything… uh, odd…” Plagg chuckled.

“What are you talking about?” Tikki asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Plagg hesitated, “Well, the Miraculous and stuff! It’s supposed to be secret remember?”

“Oh… right.” Tikki agreed. “So anyway, I didn’t know he was doing this, so I would hang around you, and Dr. Longuevie saw everything. By this time, Dr. Longuevie already knew Marinette was Ladybug, but he had no idea about me because he was not told details about her powers, just why it was so important that she survived.”

“I treated her as an hallucination caused by sleep deprivation,” Longuevie chuckled. “But she kept appearing. So one night, I waited till she snuck into your room and followed after her. When I came in, she hid, but I called to her and told her it was alright to come out, and told her what I knew about...”
Tikki nodded. “We started talking and I explained a little to Dr. Longuevie about how your powers worked so he could understand why you were so hurt. But Dr. Longuevie made an observation, something I hadn’t noticed.”

“Which was?” Adrien pressed.

“You seemed to do better whenever Tikki visited,” Longuevie said. "On days she didn’t, you either stayed the same or declined. So I asked Tikki to visit more often so I could prove my theory.”

“And he was right!” Tikki said, “Every time I visited, your readings were slightly better at the end of every day.”

“Well, it’s what happened with Marinette, too,” Adrien explained, “right at the beginning, remember? We noticed Marinette started to heal whenever you stayed with her the night. That’s how her lung healed so quickly.”

“Precisely,” Longuevie said, nodding, “But…”

“But?” Adrien repeated.

“I didn’t think that was all. Marinette healed exponentially fast, whereas you healed only a little.” Longuevie said. “So I asked Miss Marinette to be moved beside your room, now that M. Agreste had so generously paid for Miss Marinette’s recovery and upgraded her care.”

“Why would he do that?” Adrien asked. Adrien had never figured out why his father would go out of his way to pay for one of his friend’s recovery. It was so unlike him to be that generous to anyone at all, least of all a girl he didn’t even really know beyond partaking in his contests.

“I’m afraid I have no clue. I did find it rather odd with how… your father is,” Longuevie said cautiously, “But anyway, there were no objections from the Dupain-Chengs, and Miss Marinette was moved to the room besides yours.”

“And?” Adrien asked, “Any change?”

“Absolutely,” Longuevie said with a smile, “Your condition stabilized, and although it’s been slow, you’ve been healing steadily. The very fact you’re awake right now, having a conversation and talking to me as if nothing had happened, is nothing short of a miracle, considering a few weeks ago we couldn’t even keep you conscious long enough to even get a word in. You were in so much pain every second you spent awake was torture for you.”

“Wow…” Adrien said, eyes widening. Now that it was being put in perspective, it all really sounded incredible, how Tikki had this effect on him. How the Miraculous alone had this sort of influence.

“Indeed. I cannot explain it, as I don’t completely understand it,” Longuevie continued, “but it’s like having Tikki and Marinette close to you amplifies their healing influence, so Marinette has been like a lifeline for you.”

Adrien managed to smile a bit. Even though Marinette no longer remembered him, she was still a blessing in his life, protecting him in her own way. Was this how he and Marinette were able to share their dreams? Was this connection between them, this influence, the whole reason behind it?

“So that’s why I allowed you to stay in Marinette’s room last night. I wanted to see if the proximity would speed things in any way.”
“Did it?” Adrien asked.

Longuevie shrugged, “Too soon to tell… but how do you feel about getting that cast off by the end of this week?” Longuevie asked, pointing at Adrien’s bound arm.

Adrien looked down at his arm and wiggled his fingers experimentally. They tingled somewhat, but didn’t hurt as much as before, so he turned to look back at Longuevie and nodded, “More than ready.”

Perhaps, despite everything, despite Marinette’s memory loss, things could still look up. Perhaps, with this uncanny ability of Marinette’s to heal even outside her suit, as if she had absorbed Tikki’s power over the last two years, she would improve as well and maybe with time… remember him.

He felt the slightest pang of elation throb in his heart.

And now that Longuevie knew about him, he felt safer. Someone was watching over him. Maybe Adrien could finally tell him what happened to him so they could figure out what to do together. He still didn’t know who Longuevie’s mysterious confidante was, but they were clearly on his side.

Adrien’s heart swelled with hope for the first time in days, and not even Plagg, who had remained quiet the rest of the exchange with a concerned expression on his face, could knock him out of his high.

DAY 3

My name is Marinette Dupain-Cheng. I’m 14... I’m 14 years old... I attend Collège Françoise Dupont. I’m in third... year. I like fashion, drawing, and baking-

Marinette winced at the flash of pain that suddenly shot up her back.

“I’m sorry, miss,” the nurse apologized, catching Marinette’s expression as she massaged her leg, as had become their routine ever since Marinette woke up a couple of days ago. Marinette shook her head, signaling it was okay. The nurse resumed her exercises.

My name is... Marinette Dupain-Cheng... Ugh...

She winced again.

Marinette had to go through this at least two times a day, but she dreaded it every time. It hurt to have her legs manipulated, but she found she couldn’t move them herself, feeling weakened and unresponsive when she tried.

Other people had to do it, to keep the blood flowing and prevent muscular atrophy, or something of the sort. But every time they did it, her half-healed hip retaliated with a vengeance and Marinette was sunk in a world of pain.

Marinette took a long, steadying breath.

My name... my name is Marinette Dupain-Cheng...
Marinette recited in her head again; a familiar mantra her doctor had told her to recite to herself so she could help the connections in her brain heal…

I’m 12… no, 14 years old…

Fourteen still felt like such a foreign number to her. Something she couldn’t quite associate with herself… but her physical attributes, as well as the dates in every piece of technology around her told her otherwise. It was such a bizarre feeling to have to force her mind to jump in time two years to catch up with her current reality…

She breathed in again.

...I attend Collège Francoise Dupont. I’m in third year. I like fashion, drawing, and baking. My mom is Sabine Cheng. My dad is Tom Dupain-

Marinette gasped in pain, fingers digging into the mattress.

“Only a little bit more to go,” the nurse coaxed, lifting Marinette’s leg and folding it at the knee slowly and methodically, over and over.

Marinette huffed, squeezing her eyes shut.

My name… my name is Marinette…

My name is Marinette…

She sniffled, eyes blinking with unshed tears as her arms tensed, riding out the pain.

Not again...

Marinette thought she was fresh out of tears. She had wept so much the past three days that she thought she’d be dehydrated by now, but she kept tearing up. Sometimes she would even start crying for no reason...

“There, there… we’re done,” the nurse soothed gently, laying down her leg and setting her bed up straight again so that Marinette was in a sitting position, covering her legs with a blanket. “Now that that part is out of the way, let’s try something else, okay?”

Marinette nodded numbly, dabbing at her eyes as the nurse moved out of her line of sight to fetch something. Her legs throbbed painfully, her hip feeling hot and in pain, and she was so tired. Always tired, all the time. She sighed despondently, lying back against the pillows and closing her eyes.

She then felt a warm weight on her hand and turned to look her father, laying his big, warm hand on hers, a sympathetic smile on his face. He had been quiet the whole session, letting the nurse do what she had to do, no matter how much it pained him to see his little girl hurt.

“You’re doing great, sweetheart,” Tom told her softly, rubbing her knuckles soothingly with a thumb. Marinette smiled weakly, though not feeling nearly as hopeful as he did. She wished her mother was there too. They were both such a soothing presence, but her mother was currently gone to tend to the bakery for the day.

Marinette sighed and squeezed her dad’s hand back as she waited. She stared at the round clock on the wall, its almost imperceptible ticking breaking the silence as its hands seemed to take forever to travel around it.
Forever. That’s what everything seemed to feel like ever since she woke.

Things just seemed to be running at a snail’s pace. Days were eternal. Minutes felt like hours. The world around her moved slowly. Most of the time it seemed she went through the day only half awake, drifting in and out without realizing, lulled by the monotony and silence that not even her parents could break as they tried to make small talk with her.

Sometimes she would suddenly fall asleep in the middle of a conversation before she could even feel it. She didn’t mean to be rude, but it seemed that at times her brain just… disconnected, causing her to black out.

When awake, she found herself processing things with difficulty. People needed to talk slowly to her or she’d get lost in the conversation. She would miss words, as if sound drowned out suddenly. They needed to repeat things often, as if she couldn’t understand them, and Marinette just felt so slow, like in a constant state of lethargy.

Then there were the hallucinations. Sometimes she would get them, sometimes she wouldn’t. Everytime she woke up, it was a gamble between being fully aware of reality, or waking up to a strange alternate universe where nothing was right and she lost sense of who she was or where, sometimes even thinking she was in a different country altogether.

Sometimes the visions were inconsequential, but most of the time… they were terrifying.

She’d be sunk in a constant state of fear, trapped in a living nightmare, strapped to her bed, feeling abandoned, her voice silent, no matter how much she tried to scream. She’d see shadows move across her room, watching her, like creatures waiting to pounce, glowing eyes glinting maliciously in the dark.

At times, she felt like she was in a laboratory, being tested on, lied to, being told she had had an accident… But what was real and what was fake? She’d feel restraints around her wrists and ankles, even when there was nothing even touching her skin, feeling needles in her arms, blinding lights upon her head.

In particularly terrible hallucinations, she would sometimes hurt herself struggling against a force that wasn’t really there. A force she felt was trying to clutch at her, shadows snaking around her arms and black butterflies fluttering around her vision.

The black butterflies.

They had become a constant. She felt them crawling on her skin in droves, fluttering near her ears, nipping at her earlobes. But no matter how much she shook her head, they never disappeared and she would clap her hands over her ears, curling into herself in an attempt to shield herself from their assault.

But they would never go away, not until she felt a prick in her arm, and then suddenly everything faded to black, waking up what felt hours later with the butterflies gone and everything back to normal.

She had come to welcome the sting in her arm as a sign of deliverance from the visions that assailed her, many times pleading to feel it again. Many times pleading she could remain asleep.

But despite being told that this - the memory loss, the visions, the pain - were normal, Marinette felt nothing but concern. Concern that she would never, truly, be okay again.

The door closed suddenly, making her jump and snapping Marinette out of her thoughts. The nurse
had come back, holding a basket full of different materials.

“We’re going to work with these today, okay Miss?” the nurse said softly. “Take your time with them.” Marinette nodded numbly and the nurse started laying out several items on Marinette’s lap; a pencil, a basic sewing kit, a notebook...

“Let’s start with the sewing kit, okay?” the nurse instructed.

Marinette knew the drill by now (having started this routine almost immediately after coming out of her coma) but she reached out for the objects hesitantly. Ever since she woke, she realized there was a slight tremor to her hands, and no matter what she did, Marinette had no control over it, causing her difficulties on seemingly simple tasks, like the one she was trying to do now.

She had found it so odd at the beginning to be asked to do such simple tasks… but even odder to find she was unable to do them… It was a bizarre and unsettling feeling, like her body wasn’t her own, like all she wore were prosthetics which she was trying to get acquainted with.

After a few tries, Marinette managed to grab a needle between her index and thumb, and wrap her fingers around a spare piece of thread.

“Now - the thread - eye,” the nurse said.

Marinette paused, blinking at the nurse.

What?

It was as if the nurse’s voice was a skipping record, missing pieces in it. Marinette’s brows furrowed in worry and she swallowed uncomfortably, waiting.

Understanding right away why Marinette was pausing, the nurse motioned with her hands.

“Put the thread through the eye, Marinette,” the nurse repeated slower this time, imitating the described motion with her fingers.

Marinette made an “o” shape with her mouth, and tried to do as told. She gulped, and moved her fingers. Shouldn’t be too hard, she thought, just put the thread through the eye. It’s a big eye, should be simple...

Marinette’s hands trembled and she brought the purple thread to the eye of the needle a little too fast, causing it to fly right over it. Marinette huffed, and tried again. She could do this, she had become an expert at this since she spent so much time sewing. She could do this, she could do this…

Darn!

Missed again.

Gritting her teeth, Marinette tried again and after several minutes, she finally managed to put the thread through the eye, heaving a sigh of relief as the nurse tied the knot for her. She then gave her a piece of fabric.

“Good. Now, try to do a simple stitch on this,” she said.

Marinette grabbed the scrap fabric with trembling fingers, feeling the soft satin texture.

Swallowing, she tried to put the needle through it, but she ended up missing, the tip of the needle sliding over the smooth surface. She tried again and again, skewing her eyes to focus better.
On the last try, Marinette managed the feat, poking the needle through the fabric, but she gasped as she ended up pricking herself, dropping the items as she nursed her finger in her mouth, tasting copper.

Marinette looked up at the nurse in shame.

“It’s alright miss, you’re just starting. This is completely normal,” she encouraged, taking Marinette’s hand and covering the miniature wound with a small bandaid before proceeding. “Let’s try something else.”

She passed Marinette the notebook and a pencil, which Marinette grabbed shakily.

“You like fashion right? How about sketching a simple dress?” the nurse asked.

Marinette bit her lower lip, propping the notebook on her knees. She put the pencil to the sheet and tried to sketch something. Her hand moved slow and unsteady, leaving a shaky line in her wake.

But no matter how much Marinette tried to keep her arm still, all that came out from her drawing attempt after several minutes was a mess of shaky lines only she knew had been meant to be a two-piece dress.

Marinette felt her eyes water as she regarded the result. Shapeless, deformed… no head or tails could be made of it. It was unrecognizable. Like the drawing of a 2 year old child scribbled on a wall.

She took a sharp intake of breath as an unsettling feeling began to build in the pit of her stomach, and she looked down in disappointment.

“It’s okay, you’ll get it soon. Let’s try writing your name shall we? Can you try that for me?” the nurse asked, turning the notebook so Marinette could write on a fresh page. Marinette knew this was probably the most important test of the three, and she swallowed nervously.

Since she couldn’t speak, her only means of communication were vague hand gestures and writing, so she put the pencil to the paper and, holding her wrist down with her other hand to keep it as steady as possible, Marinette slowly attempted to write her name...

But it was no use. It was as if her hand rebelled against her, shaking fiercely in her grasp. As if her brain kept sending the wrong signal, and the pencil went off in another direction. Frustration mounted within her, mingling with her sadness.

She couldn’t do this anymore...

A lonely tear freed itself from her eyes and fell to the sheet, staining what she had intended to be an r. A broken whimper escaped her and she dropped the pencil, ripping the sheet off the notebook and crushing it in her fist.

Dropping the paper ball, she curled in on herself and brought her hands to her face, sobbing into them.

She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t sew. She couldn’t draw. She couldn’t write.

She couldn’t do anything.

“Oh, honey,” Tom said, standing from his seat to wrap his arms around Marinette, “It’s alright, you’ll get better soon, I promise. It’s okay, sweetheart.”
Marinette clung to her father, burying her face in his chest. He rocked her gently, patting her head comforting as the nurse picked up the objects and left to give Marinette some privacy, her expression sympathetic.

Her dreams of being a great artist, a recognized fashion designer working for the biggest names in the industry, had been dashed in one fell swoop. She didn’t even know how, not completely. She didn’t understand how she had ended up here; so messed up that everything she had dreamed about achieving was but a distant memory now.

All she was told was that she had been in an accident; a grievous accident where some sort of supervillain - Marinette could hardly believe they were actually using that word unironically - had blown up several buildings, and she had been caught strolling down the wrong street at the wrong time.

A building had collapsed on her, leaving her fatally wounded, but then, someone named Chat Noir - odd choice for a name, she thought - had rescued her from the rubble and brought her to an ambulance. She had been saved from the brink of death at the hospital, but fell into a coma for at least two months, having finally woken up mere days ago.

So here she was now. Numb. Lost. Confused. Scared. Being unable to do basic things like talking, walking, writing, and not knowing if she would ever go back to being normal again…

She was completely, and utterly crippled when for her, it had just been yesterday that she was attending her first day of school on the first year of collège, completely healthy, completely functional, happy, full of dreams, full of hope…

All gone.

And that wasn’t all she had lost. She had lost memories. Two years worth of them. Two years worth of ideas, of designing, of experiences… Two years worth of new people that had probably meant a lot to her but were now strangers.

Like Adrien.

Besides her parents, he had been the first person she saw after waking up. Before he was brought to her room, she had been shown a picture of her supposed class of third year, to see if she could remember them.

She was told the names of each of them. Some she remembered meeting the day before (or two years ago? Time had become irrelevant to Marinette), some were entirely new faces. They had then pointed out specific people who had been of special importance to her. Her supposed best friend, her best friend’s boyfriend - whom she recalled seeing before but never really talked to him. Nino she believed? - and another boy.

Adrien.

He had looked different. Polished, clean, handsome. One could say he was modelling for a fashion magazine with how flawless his posing was and how photogenic he looked. His smile was perfect and white, his eyes a pure, vibrant green.

She recognized him from somewhere but couldn’t place it. It was somewhere impersonal, like a picture of him on the internet, but nothing like interacting with him, or being friends. He was good looking though, that much she could tell.

But now, he was a mess. He was pale, tired, damaged. Had he been in the same accident as her? She
was curious but couldn’t bring herself to care enough to ask. She was still dealing with her own problems, but...

He had looked so hurt when she told them she couldn’t remember him. Could it be that… they were more than friends? She couldn’t tell, since she didn’t feel anything when seeing him, but by his destroyed expression, she assumed she had been really important to him, which made her rejection all the more difficult for her to admit.

But she just couldn’t do anything about it. There was so much in her head. So much frustration and dejection in heart, so much loss in her present, and hopelessness in her future…

She couldn’t stop the new round of sobs that started wracking her body and she wrapped her arms around her dad, wondering if waking up had been a good thing at all…

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DAY 6

“Alright, how’s that feeling?” Longuevie asked Adrien.

Adrien wiggled his fingers slowly. His arm had been freed from the cast at last, and it felt stiff. He couldn’t move it as freely as he used to be able to, but his hand and fingers were responsive.

“It feels a bit sore but everything works,” Adrien said, bending his arm experimentally and carefully lifting it to test his shoulder, wincing when he realized he couldn’t lift it all the way. “Shoulder not so much.”

“Yes, that’s normal, it was dislocated from the shoulder joint, and the rest of your arm had several fissures in it,” Longuevie said, grabbing his arm and squeezing specific parts to feel the bone. “The fissures have closed but the dislocation may have made the joint clam up. You’ll have to do some exercises to get your full range of movement back, but if you’re dedicated, it should be back to normal before you know it.”

“Hope so,” Adrien sighed.

“It’s very likely that you’ll be sharing a few therapy sessions with Marinette, actually,” Longuevie said, idly massaging his shoulder gently. “She also needs physical rehabilitation, and interacting with someone she knew from the last two years should help jog her memory and get her reacquainted with her former life.”

Adrien felt a tingly feeling in the lining of his stomach. “You really think seeing me often will make her remember me?”

Longuevie shrugged, “It is recommended to constantly try to remind people with amnesia about what they used to know and do while the connections in their brain are still healing. It may improve her chances of recovering the memories she lost if she’s around people she used to know. Showing them pictures and other objects helps, too.”

“I see,” Adrien said, “Alya and Nino have been desperate to see how she’s doing. Will they be able to visit her soon?”
“Hmm…” Longuevie said, twisting Adrien’s arm in experimental ways to see the extent of his range of movement, “I’ve asked them to wait till next week since everything is still rather… overwhelming for Marinette and her mood to entertain visitors hasn’t been the best lately, so for the wellbeing of both parties, I suggested we hold out until next week.”

“How did they take the news?” Adrien asked.

Longuevie hummed to himself, pensive.

Longuevie had asked Adrien to avoid telling Nino and Alya about Marinette’s condition, preferring to explain it himself to let them know the emotional and physical repercussions these kind of conditions put friends and family through and how to deal with them.

“Well, it was hard to tell on the phone,” Longuevie said, scratching the back of his neck, “but Miss Alya did go quiet. Nino had to continue the conversation and hang up for her. He took it a bit better but he did sound low-spirited. But it’s to expect for Miss Alya to take it harder. They were best friends weren’t they?”

Adrien’s face fell, “Yeah, they were practically inseparable.”

“I will be asking Miss Alya, once she feels better, to visit Marinette frequently during the week. It’s important to have someone beside her parents tell Marinette about what she used to do during her times of leisure, show her pictures, videos, tell her stories, and I think Miss Alya may be perfect for the role. This may just help Marinette improve faster.”

“I sure hope so,” Adrien said. “How is Marinette doing? Tikki hasn’t been telling me much, but she looks really sad everytime she visits me. Is everything okay?”

“It’s been… complicated,” Longuevie said vaguely. “Marinette is having a really hard time dealing with her condition. She’s been closing off, turning a bit... uncooperative. But it’s common in the beginning for her to be like this. It’s a lot to take in, so frustration is normal. That’s why I’m hoping having therapy with you and recall sessions with Miss Alya will help keep her mind off things and speed up her recovery.”

“Will I be able to see her soon?” Adrien asked. Truth was, he was starting to get antsy. He hadn’t been able to see Marinette in his dreams. Either because she didn’t sleep, or because the connection may have gotten severed when she woke. He wasn’t quite sure and it was starting to make him nervous. The fact Longuevie had just confirmed that Marinette wasn’t doing too well, at least on the emotional side, worried Adrien deeply, too.

“Let’s give her some space for now. Once she’s calmer and more willing to see people, I will take you to her. I will have Miss Alya see her first, and then visit you so that you can sort out things together. In moments like these, it’s important to have support from all parties. I’m sure Miss Alya will be seeking some comfort as well. You should all look after each other.”

“Got it.” Adrien said, nodding. He sighed inwardly. The way it sounded, it was going to be a heavy couple of weeks ahead of him.

“Well then, back to you. Since we’re now on the same boat, care to tell me how this happened?” Longuevie asked, tapping Adrien’s shoulder lightly. “Aren’t your suits supposed to be like armor of some kind?”

“Yes, but they have limitations, at least when it comes to other magical beings. Normal stuff doesn’t affect us, but anything supernatural has a better chance of damaging us,” Adrien said. “As for how I
dislocated my arm, a stupid dragon dropped a boulder on it, and when I had it put back, he bit it out of the joint again.”

Longuevie winced, “That explains the fissure. I suppose the burn on the back was caused by the aforementioned dragon too, right?”

“Pretty much.” Adrien nodded.

“What about…” Longuevie motioned towards his stomach, “Was it really the dragon's breath that caused all that?”

“No, that’s what they thought happened. That one is a little bit more complicated to explain.” Adrien put a finger on his chin. “How much do you know about our powers?”

Longuevie hummed in thought. “Ladybug fixes things, you destroy things. That’s the extent of my knowledge.”

“Right. So I’ll put it this way. Ladybug ‘fixes’ or purifies Akumas, and only she can do it. If she doesn’t purify them, Akumas multiply and a whole army of monsters attack at the same time. I can’t purify Akumas, but since she was out of commission, I tried to use my power on an Akuma, thinking I could just destroy it, but it backfired on me.”

Longuevie winced again. “So it… destroyed you on the inside?”

“Kind of. Cataclysm can have different effects. In my case, it was kinda degenerative. At first, I only got sick. I had a cough but nothing too serious, but it started getting worse till I started coughing up blood.”

Longuevie made a face. “And you didn’t seek out help when that started happening?”

Plagg, who had been sitting on a pillow beside Adrien eating Camembert silently, cleared his throat rather noisily.

Adrien threw him a dirty look. “I… put it off.”

“How could you put off something like that?” Longuevie asked, appalled.

“I was scared of what would happen if someone found out who I was!” Adrien said, putting his hands up defensively. “I didn’t know how to explain what was happening to me, and I didn’t want my father to know, especially.”

“You should’ve seen him. He was a walking wreck,” Plagg pitched in. “Went to school with a fever and passed out in front of everyone. But did he listen to me? Noooo.”

“How come no one in your family noticed?” Longuevie said, his expression getting more and more concerned.

“Well it’s… uh, I guess I was good at hiding it,” Adrien said.

“Not really,” Plagg said, huffing. “But his assistant would only talk to him when there was an appointment and his dad is never home so no one really looks after him. How do you think he manages to be Chat Noir all the time?”

Longuevie made a disapproving face. “So they neglect you?”

Adrien felt his insides go cold at the tone with which Longuevie said it. It seemed angry,
disappointed.

“I-I wouldn’t say that, I mean it’s not… it’s not like my father doesn’t care about me,” Adrien tried, but even his heart refused to jump to his defense, “He… he just shows it differently. He’s been different since mom left, and he’s busy all the time, but Nathalie takes care of me, I get food, and transport and everything...”

“Neglect involves more than just physical necessities, Adrien. They involve emotions too.” Longuevie said in a low voice, and Adrien could distinguish a hint of spite in his tone. He had the distinct feeling Longuevie didn’t like his father very much.

Adrien himself didn’t know what to say and he went quiet, rubbing his arm awkwardly. Even he couldn’t deny he had begun to feel pushed aside most days.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your mother?” Longuevie asked, his tone softening.

“We don’t know. Mom and father went on a trip one day and she was just…. she was gone…” Adrien said, lowering his head. His heart started throbbing, a lump forming in his throat. “We don’t know what happened to her. I’ve always been wondering if maybe she just left? My father was absent most days but we were okay, she would homeschool me and things just… seemed to be o-okay… she didn’t look… unhappy...”

Much to his despair, Adrien began to notice his voice break, his head bringing up memory after memory with his mother.

“I’m sorry, I-I-...” Adrien started, trying to apologize, but he was surprised at the feeling of warmth suddenly enveloping him, Longuevie having surrounded him with his arms in a warm embrace.

“It’s okay Adrien,” Longuevie said. “Whatever her reasoning was, I’m sure you had nothing to do with it. You’re a great kid, and I’m sure your mother loved you very much. She must've had her reasons, but you mustn't ever blame yourself for this or apologize for your feelings. Alright?”

Adrien breathed softly against his white coat, gingerly bringing up his arms to return the hug. “Yes, sir.”

They parted and Longuevie patted his head gently, “Now let’s see about setting you up for some therapy sessions, alright?”

She was crying in her asleep again. Tossing, turning… Her fingers grabbed at her bedsheets, knuckles white with the effort, her forehead glowing with sweat, face contorted in a grimace.

Tikki hid in a corner of the mattress, watching helplessly as Marinette struggled on her bed, breathing quick and heavy. She looked around, making sure Marinette’s mother was fast asleep before floating off to her charge. She carefully approached her, laying a paw on her tearstained cheek.

“It’s okay Marinette,” Tikki whispered, caressing Marinette’s cheek in a futile attempt to calm her. “It’s okay, it’s okay…”

But far from being assuaged, Marinette started struggling with renewed vigor, until suddenly, her eyes snapped open, causing Tikki to freeze in place.
Tikki paused, holding her breath, fearing having been seen, but even though she was right in front of Marinette’s face, she seemed to be unable to see her, looking past her. Tikki looked behind her, curious, but saw nothing on the ceiling beyond.

When she turned around again however, she realized Marinette’s face had now contorted in an expression of horror, pupils shrinking in terror as she pulled herself all the way back against the back of the bed, her eyes flitting around the room in panic. She then started slapping at her arms and chest between whimpers, as if she was trying to get something off her.

The butterflies.

Tikki knew about them since Marinette had once drawn what looked like a black butterfly on the whiteboard when her parents asked her what kept scaring her so much during her hallucinations.

Marinette couldn’t remember who she was, who she used to be…

But she could remember the feeling of apprehension that black butterflies brought her as Ladybug. The fear that consumed her whenever Hawk Moth came too close to stealing her Miraculous...

Marinette sobbed, shaking her head, clutching at her ears, trying to shake off creatures that weren’t there. Tikki watched in horror as Marinette bumped her head against the wall in her thrashing, trying to scare off the dark insects, scratching at her arms and leaving angry red marks on her skin.

Before Tikki could do anything however, she heard shuffling, signaling Marinette’s mother had been woken up by the noises. She quickly hid under the bed to avoid being discovered, throwing Marinette one last sad look.

Now used to Marinette’s vision-induced panic attacks, a drowsy Sabine automatically jumped off the couch and ran to her daughter, quickly holding her thrashing arms against her sides and pressing her to her chest, as had become the routine after the hallucinations had become more and more recurrent and violent.

“Shhhh, Marinette. There’s nothing there, sweetheart,” Sabine whispered soothingly, pressing the button on the side of the bed, and rapidly surrounding Marinette with her arms. “There’s nothing there. It’s okay, I’m with you. Nothing will hurt you, I promise. Shhh…”

Marinette sobbed, pressing her face against Sabine’s chest, trembling fiercely, kicking her legs against the invisible insects still trying to crawl up her skin.

“There’s nothing there,” Sabine repeated, “There’s nothing there…”

Before long, the door opened and Longuevie came in, panting as if he had run, his face apologetic.

“Another one?” Longuevie asked.

“Yes, a bad one,” Sabine said sadly, gently nursing a bump on the back of Marinette’s head that had formed after hitting herself against the wall.

“I understand. Please hold her still,” Longuevie said, lifting Marinette’s sleeve and cleaning the skin to prepare it for injection as Sabine tightened her hold around Marinette. Marinette whimpered, struggling in Sabine’s hold.

“Shhhh, it’s alright, Marinette,” Longuevie whispered, taking out a syringe from his pocket and slowly sinking the needle into her skin, pumping the antipsychotic sedative into Marinette’s arm. “You’ll be fine…”
Marinette’s movements gradually began to slow, the medication quickly taking effect. Tension seemed to melt away from her body, and her breathing slowed down as the ghastly images in her mind seemed to fade from existence.

“Good girl,” Longuevie soothed gently, covering the area of the injection and rubbing Marinette’s back reassuringly. “You’ll be okay, now…”

Marinette sagged against Sabine with a sigh, her limbs now going slack, her eyelids lowering to half mast as her breathing evened. Sabine softened her hold, moving to lay Marinette down on the bed until Marinette stopped her by reaching up with a trembling hand and tapping a finger three times against Sabine’s arm, looking up at her pleadingly.

Being unable to talk, Marinette and her parents had decided to begin creating a set of simple hand gestures Marinette could use to transmit basic ideas. Hungry, thirsty, pain, cold, hot, I love you...

Marinette tapped Sabine’s arm three times again.

‘Stay with me, please.’

Sabine nodded gently, kissing Marinette’s forehead before she climbed carefully on the bed and laid down beside her, as they did sometimes during particularly bad nights. Marinette curled into her mother, taking refuge in the warmth of her arms, hiding her face in her neck and closing her eyes against the welcoming darkness that was now taking hold of her senses.

“How long will the hallucinations continue for?” Sabine asked softly, caressing the hair of a now sleeping Marinette.

Longuevie sighed. “It’s uncertain. We’ll continue treating her and see if that helps alleviate them until they stop.”

“I just hate seeing her so scared,” Sabine lamented, “I feel so useless.”

“I understand madam, but there’s really not much we can do but be there for her, keep her calm, and give her medication for them until it stops.” Longuevie explained. “It’s just part of her healing process.”

Sabine nodded with a sigh.

“We will be holding back on visitors for a couple of days until we can bring the visions under control, or it may just stress her further. Is this alright with you?”

“Of course.”

“Alright, then. Call me if you need anything else.” The doctor bowed courteously, and left the room.

Sabine continued caressing Marinette’s hair as she breathed softly into her neck, wondering, sadly, when she would have her daughter truly back again.

DAY 11
“Why do you think I can’t see her in my dreams anymore?” Adrien asked the Kwamis, pensive.

He was alone in his room and they had taken the chance to hang out with him for a little bit before the next nurse came around. A plate sat between them and Adrien on the bed with an assortment and cookies and pieces of camembert on it (having earned him an odd look from the nurse when he said he had a craving for a “snack”).

“She hasn’t shown up in them at all?” Tikki asked.

“Not once,” Adrien continued, scrolling idly through his phone, not really paying attention to his messages or social media, which he had given up on after he realized it was filled to the brim with get well messages from admirers and other celebrities, so many he couldn’t possibly reply to all of them.

He had finally told Tikki about the dreams they had shared in detail, and how he was able to talk to Marinette through them before she woke up, realizing as he told the story, that the reason she couldn’t see him in her dreams was probably because she couldn’t remember him, so she couldn’t connect a face to the voice and her imagination couldn't conjure it up for her.

“Well, she hasn’t really been sleeping well,” Tikki offered, “so maybe it’s because of that.”

“But you told me they’re always putting her to sleep,” Adrien argued. “Because of the hallucinations?”

“Yes, but those are in short spurts, not enough time for her mind to enter the deepest state of sleep when dreams happen. And it’s mostly to calm her, so most of the time she’s not even fully asleep, just out of it,” Tikki explained, munching on a cookie. “Plus, the medication is supposed to prevent her brain from conjuring up images of any sort, so if she’s put to sleep, she’s not supposed to dream.”

“You mean to tell me she hasn’t had a full night of natural sleep at all since she woke?” Adrien said, putting down the phone to look at Tikki, concerned. Tikki looked down, her feelers drooping.

“No…” Tikki said. “The few times she’s fallen asleep on her own, she’s had nightmares. Every single time. Her sleeping cycles don’t last. That’s why she’s been so exhausted and disoriented ever since she woke up from her coma. She just can’t sleep properly. Her parents have to tell her what day it is and how long she’s been knocked out every time she’s put under for her to keep track of the days. She’s become a bit irritable because of it, but nothing too bad.”

“Dang, that must feel terrible,” Adrien said, feeling a horrible pang of sadness for Marinette.

“Yeah well, you must know what that’s like, huh?” Plagg said, gobbling a piece of the offending cheese. “It hasn’t precisely been smooth sailing for you either, Sleeping Beauty. But look at you, suffering together, definitely made for one another. I think Romeo and Juliet is a more apt description.”

“No funny, Plagg,” Adrien pouted.

“But you’ve been getting better, right?” Tikki asked. “You have been awake more and more these past few weeks.”

“Yeah it definitely has been better, but I have you and Marinette and Longuevie to thank for that,” Adrien said, smiling and stroking Tikki’s head with a finger. “I just wish it was the same for her.”

“Give it time, hopefully she’ll start getting better soon, and you’ll be able to dream with her again!” Tikki said positively.
“Let us hope,” Adrien said with a half hearted smile. “I really miss her.”

My name is Marinette…

Mari… nette...

She sighed.

No point.

There was no point to anything. Not anymore.

Marinette stared at the objects in front of her. The notebook. The sewing kit. Everything.

But what was the point?


The hands on her lap trembled. A constant reminder that it would never be the same again. Exhaustion assailed her. Every day, every night. Sedatives, tranquilizers, antipsychotics. They did nothing. Nothing but encase her in a temporary darkness where she could see nothing, feel nothing, do nothing. But it never fixed anything.

She no longer had dreams. Just nightmares that followed her even when she woke. She was trapped within her own mind, the silence being more deafening than any sound, unable to tell what was real and what was an illusion, confined to a bed every hour of every day, because she was still too frail to be moved around, even with a wheelchair.

She was going insane, grabbing at the bedsheets, overcome with anxiety.

She was tired. Tired of feeling pain, tired of feeling numb, tired of feeling exhausted, tired of feeling fear. Tired of being reminded of all she lost, and all she wouldn’t ever get back.

She could no longer cry. Day by day, she began to feel less and less. She had long since ran out of tears.

Speech therapy didn’t work. Physical therapy didn’t work. She was still mute, and her legs still hurt.

Nothing worked.

She was broken.

“Miss? Could you point to the the object you want to start with?”

Marinette heard the nurse, speaking slowly so she could understand her, but she didn’t look at her, keeping her eyes staring vacantly at her hands. Her useless, trembling hands.

She didn’t move.

“Come on, sweetie. You need to practice. It’s the only way to get better,” she heard her dad say
beside her, but she didn’t look at him either. Even their comfort had become pointless. A ruse. A fleeting, false sense of security.

“Miss? How about we start with this?”

The nurse tried to press a pencil to Marinette’s hand, but she quickly pulled her hands away, hugging herself and hiding them under her arms. She didn’t want to be touched. She didn’t want anyone to touch her. God, she just wanted to be left alone.

“Marinette?” her dad pressed.

“You have to do this, honey, for your own good.” she heard her mother say on her other side.

Marinette shook her head. She didn't want to have to do anything with those objects. It had been more than a week and nothing had changed after the countless times they had done this same, stupid routine.

There was no point to this. There was no point to anything and it was grating at her that they didn’t realize it.

After a while of being ignored, the nurse finally seemed to move away.

“It’s alright. We’ll try later.” the nurse said, taking the objects and leaving the room quietly. She then heard both her parents sigh and Marinette squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to look at any of them. She loved them dearly, but they couldn’t make things better.

No one could make this better. It would never be better.

It was over.

DAY 14

Several days passed, and things started getting more active for Adrien.

Although he had had absolutely no contact with Marinette, he slowly but surely continued to improve. He couldn’t yet walk on his own, but he could already keep himself seating for extended periods of time without suffering for it, allowing him more frequent strolls in his wheelchair.

His arm was also less stiff. He could already hold things steadily with it, and even text properly on his phone. He still couldn’t lift his arm as he used to, but it was functional for everything else.

His doses of morphine had been steadily lowered, though he realized he found himself needing them less and less each day (much to his relief), which allowed him more awake time. The pain that persisted throughout his body was becoming manageable, and the burns on his back had already started healing, lowering the sting considerably.

Adrien was fully aware there was going to be a large scar left on his back, but he had come to terms with that fact. He had always known modelling wouldn’t last forever, and even then, it was not something he visualized himself doing for the rest of his life anyway. He’d be okay.
He was actually quite looking forward to the upcoming days.

In fact, he was anxious but excited about today. It was the first time he’d be seeing Nino and Alya in several days after his father had imposed a temporary ban on visits so Adrien’s arm could heal in peace, and the first time since Marinette woke up.

Longuevie had already explained to Adrien that Alya and Nino would be re-introduced to Marinette, and then brought to his room to talk about their collective feelings on the situation. After that, he was having his first solo therapy session for his arm and legs.

It was going to be a long day, but to Adrien it felt like progress, and any progress was good progress to him, given the circumstances. He couldn’t wait to finally have some company again.

“You look chipper today, Mr. Agreste,” the nurse wheeling him down the hallway commented with a smile.

“I do feel pretty well today, thank you for taking me out, Miss Lisa,” Adrien said, smiling back at her, having now forged an amicable relationship with his nurses.

“Will your friends come to visit today?” she asked.

“Yeah, they will, but they’re going to see my friend Marinette first.” Adrien said, checking the messages on his phone, though there hadn’t been updates for the past hour.

“It’s good that you get to see them again. It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Adrien said half heartedly, “My father can be a bit… particular…”

“Well, maybe he’s softening a bit,” she joked in a low voice.

Adrien laughed, “Wouldn’t that be something.”

“Would you like some breakfast, Mr. Agreste?” Lisa asked him as they rounded a corner and approached the hallway to his room.

“Oh, I’d love to - huh?”

Adrien was interrupted from his thoughts and requested to be stopped when he saw Tom hanging at Marinette’s door, his face crestfallen. Adrien could notice black circles had formed around his eyes.

“Monsieur Dupain?” Adrien asked, “What’s wrong?”

He hesitated, as if he was debating if telling Adrien was a good idea, but he gave in to the pressure of Adrien’s inquisitive gaze and gentle demeanor.

“Marinette is not eating,” he said softly. “Not one bite, not even her mom can make her. It’s been like this since two days ago. She refuses everything she’s given.”


“She’s just…. really sad. The doctor says it's common for people in Marinette’s situation to feel like this after they wake up,” Tom explained, “But it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with.”

It had been two weeks already, but the more Adrien heard, the more it seemed like Marinette wasn’t improving, at all… And it was eating at him to not know to what extent that was.
“May I see her?” Adrien asked.

Tom hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck apprehensively.

“I guess... you can, but I can’t guarantee you will be well received. She really hasn’t been... herself,” Tom said apologetically. “At all…”

“It’s fine, I understand,” Adrien said. “I just haven’t seen her in a while and.. Well, I’m a bit worried.”

“Alright, if you insist…” Tom sighed softly, opening the door to let Adrien through. “Just whatever happens... don’t take it to heart.”

Adrien gulped at the foreboding warning and nodded his head, allowing his nurse to wheel him forward.

“*Please Marinette, you need to eat...*”

Adrien heard Madame Cheng’s voice say as he came in. He saw Madame Cheng pleading to Marinette, holding a bowl of what looked like porridge and a spoon in her hands in front of Marinette, who was lying on her side again, her back to him. She didn’t move.

Madame Cheng looked up, noticing Adrien enter the room, and her face scrunched in worry. Tom seemed to gesture something behind Adrien and Madame Cheng sighed, standing up to greet him.

“Good morning, Madam Cheng,” Adrien greeted her with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“Good morning, Adrien,” Sabine said with a half hearted smile, which quickly fell as she approached him, laying a hand on his, “Look, about Marinette...”

“I know Madame, don’t worry,” Adrien reassured her, laying his other hand on hers. “I just want to see her, that’s all.”

Sabine nodded, placing a hand on the side of his head to caress his hair before moving away to give him access. As Adrien was wheeled around the bed, he finally had a chance to look at her face for the first time after that morning almost two weeks ago.

He hardly recognized her.

She was looking wistfully out the window, her expression vacant, her eyes looking dull and lifeless. She looked thinner than he remembered, her long, midnight hair laying unkempt around her face, her bangs obscuring part of her eyes. She blinked slowly, tiredly, though she didn’t seem to be paying attention to whatever was beyond the window.

She looked *utterly* defeated, and Adrien realized with a pang of sorrow that he could recognize the emptiness in her eyes...

It was the face of someone who had already given up.

Adrien swallowed, quiet. Even though he had been placed just in front of her, Marinette didn’t seem to notice he was there.

“There’s someone here to see you, sweetheart,” Sabine told her softly, but Marinette didn’t stir nor react, her eyes staring unflinchingly out the window.

“Hello, Marinette.” Adrien tried instead, smiling at her.
She glanced at him for the briefest moment, then turned back to look at the window beyond his head, giving a morose sigh.

That hurt Adrien more than he was willing to admit, but in a way, he understood her apathy. She couldn’t remember him. He was but another blank face, a face that teased memories she had no recollection of... why bother acknowledging them? It was pointless to even pursue it, and would only bring her pain to be reminded again that she had lost everything.

“I know....it feels like you don’t know me right now, but we... we used to go to school together.” Adrien continued slowly, trying not to choke on his own voice, knowing she needed time to process whatever she was told. “My name is Adrien Agreste, and I sat in front of you in Madame Bustier’s class....” he repeated Longuevie’s words in an attempt to jog her memory.

There was the slightest reaction, a subtle furrowing of her brows as she glanced at him again. She stared at him for a moment before she looked up at her mother, as if asking for confirmation.

“Yes dear, you were friends,” Sabine confirmed, “He’s the son of Gabriel Agreste. You met him last year at school. You’re in the same class...”

Her mouth parted slightly, mouthing the word “Gabriel?” before she looked at him again in slight interest as if saying ‘I was friends with Gabriel Agreste’s son?’

Adrien knew Gabriel was Marinette’s favorite designer, thus he knew her surprise came from the brand attached to his name and not from recognition of him, but he couldn’t help but get elated at the smallest hint of acknowledgement he had received. She remembered something!

“I know that you can’t remember anything we did together,” Adrien continued, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. “But I was wondering if you’d like to start over and... make new memories? Can we be friends again, Marinette?” Adrien kept his voice composed as much as he could as he reached out to cup her hand with his.

He was thrown back to the past, to a rainy day after school, where he had faced a just-as-bewildered Marinette, giving her his umbrella to shield her from the rain on her walk home. Their hands had brushed the slightest bit as she had taken it from him and it was right at that moment that something had changed between them.

It had been on that same day that Adrien realized he had gotten a new friend.

But now...even the word hurt. He had expected to gain one step forward with her when she woke up but now... he had gone two steps back. But there was no other choice. He had to remind himself that this was a better outcome than the alternative, which as Tikki had mentioned the night of the accident, could have been Marinette's untimely death.

At least, he still had the opportunity to earn her love again.

She looked quietly at him, like processing what he had said, furrowing her brows. She hesitated before slowly removing her hand from under his, tucking it against her chest. She looked away, closing her eyes and hiding her face against the pillow.

A chill overtook him, his stomach bottoming out at her response, and he blinked in bewilderment.

Her face...

He remembered the very first time he saw her, coming into the room, angry at finding him at her seat. He had tried to explain the accident with the bubblegum, but Marinette had brushed him aside, using
his connection to Chloé to assume he was just out to hurt her as well. Even if she no longer knew he was friends with Chloé, she had made that same face, the same face of distrust and uncertainty she had done back then...

When she had rejected him…

His heart got stuck in his throat, thumping haphazardly as he numbly removed his hand. He swallowed thickly, feeling cold, his head swirling with the same thought over and over.

Marinette didn’t want him anymore.

She couldn’t even stand to see him...

Trying to keep the hurt out of his face, to keep himself as composed as he could so as to not worry the Dupain-Chengs, Adrien swallowed again and turned away from her. Although his heart now ached terribly, his insides going cold at her rejection, he kept his voice steady as he spoke.

“I understand. I’m sorry,” Adrien said softly.

His eyes connected with Sabine, who seemed to want to apologize to him on Marinette’s behalf, but Adrien threw her a gentle smile and shook his head. She understood and backed away, her face lowering in sadness as Adrien was wheeled away.

“Have a good day, Marinette,” Adrien said gently before leaving. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“Adrien…” Tom began, his face regretful.

“Thank you for letting me see her,” Adrien said politely, smiling at him. “Have a good day, too, monsieur.”

“You too, Adrien…”

As he came upon the door, Adrien glanced back at her, only to see her hide her face further in her pillow, but not before he could spot the look of regret on her face.

He heard the door close behind him and he paused to collect himself, letting out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding, blinking rapidly to get rid of the moisture in his eyes. He felt so cold and numb, his hands unmoving on his lap.

He had had no idea how bad Marinette’s situation really was. What had he been thinking?

This was what Longuevie had meant… Why he didn’t want anyone to see her...

“Mr. Agreste? Are you okay?” the nurse asked him, concerned about his silence.

“I… I will be,” Adrien croaked, emotionless. “Thanks for worrying.”

“Come on. Let’s fix you for a spot of breakfast before you start your first therapy session,” the nurse said gently, starting to wheel him to his room. “Oh look, it’s your friends! They’re here early, aren’t they?”
Adrien looked up, seeing Nino and Alya walking towards him, waving at him, holding a gift basket with a few decorative flowers and a ‘get better soon’ balloon for Marinette. His stomach did a somersault at seeing their happy faces, a stark comparison to his current mood. He forced himself to smile at them.

“Hey guys,” Adrien said.

“Gee, you sure sound excited to see us.” Alya said sarcastically as they came upon him.

“Sorry Alya, it’s been a long day,” Adrien said apologetically.

“How you been, bro?” Nino asked, clapping a hand on Adrien’s shoulder. Adrien barely managed to stifle a grimace of pain that thankfully went unnoticed by his friend. “Long time no see!”

“I know huh? I’m doing a little better, thanks,” Adrien said, laughing awkwardly. “How about you?”

“Bit nervous, but good.” Nino asked, “Alya has been super restless, right?”

“Yeah, it’s been a bit nerve wracking… it’s been so long,” Alya said, sheepish. “How is she doing?”

“I… uh…” Adrien hesitated, avoiding Alya’s gaze.

“Ah, Nino, Miss Alya, you’re here.” They all jumped as Longuevie’s voice came suddenly from down the hallway. They turned to find him walking towards them. “Right on time, too.”

Adrien let out a breath, grateful for the interruption of a very uncomfortable moment, quickly pretending to smile to not raise suspicions. Longuevie had told him to give Marinette space and in his excitement, he had sort of breached that arrangement.

“Hi, doctor!” Alya and Nino greeted. “It’s good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you both, too. Are those plastic?” He pointed at the small floral arrangement in Alya’s arms.

“Of course.” Alya said proudly. “Memorized the rules to a tee!”


Alya patted Nino’s backpack.

“Sure did.”

“Good. Well then, let's not dawdle.” He then turned to Adrien and his nurse. “Better take Adrien to his room for the time being, his therapist is meeting him soon.”

“Yes, Dr. Longuevie,” Nurse Lisa said before addressing Adrien. “You will see your friends right after they finish with Miss Marinette, don’t worry.”

“Yes, thank you,” Adrien said, then turned to his friends. “I’ll see you guys later. Good luck.” he finished with a smile as he was wheeled away.

“See ya soon, bro!” Nino called as Longuevie lead them in the opposite direction. Adrien waved halfheartedly at them as his nurse opened the door to his own room.

“Oh my, looks like your therapist is already here,” Nurse Lisa commented suddenly.
Adrien turned around but froze in his seat the moment his eyes connected with the person now sitting calmly on the sofa of his room, looking intently at him.

“Pardon me for being so early, but I just couldn’t wait to meet my new patient,” Master Fu said with a bow of his head, smiling at Adrien. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Agreste.”

Chapter End Notes

Time to buy a second umbrella, Adrien.

Phew. What a ride.

Please don’t ask me when the next chapter is coming. As you could see from this chapter's late update, the more I'm pressured, the more I put off writing cuz it just stresses me out. I lost count on the number of times I almost gave up on this story hahaha :D Thanks for reading!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!