The Rate of Reaction
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/19033021.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Miraculous Ladybug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Adrien Agreste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Marinette Dupain-Cheng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Genderbending, Unrequited Crush, Identity Issues, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Heartbreak, deception fic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of The Rate of Reaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Rate of Reaction
by adoribiliusKermode

Summary

“So here we go. You’re confused by a frankly really questionable decision your crush made, I’m bawling like a baby because a literal supermodel won’t date me—we’re really messed up, huh?”

Marinette becomes Marin. Adrien becomes Adrienne. Dynamics are shifted, but it's just as messed up.
Chapter 1

Breakfast with the Tsurugi’s at 8:00. Shoot for her mother’s Fall Catalog at 10:30. Vogue Charity Luncheon at 12:00 Sharp. Chinese at 13:15, Fencing at 15:00, and a surprise akuma attack right after.

Adrienne Agreste had been having a long day, but there were worse things that her mother could have scheduled for today’s agenda. Still, the blonde couldn’t help but sigh a little as she finished up with the late, late, *late* lunch that her Mother had yet again missed. Finally, she had some time to herself. She'd spent most of the time taking a catnap to regain the lost energy as Chat Noire during her late-night Akuma battles, and by the time her second alarm rang at 19:00, she was more than awake.

"Plagg." She called out to summon her Kwami to her. The little black cat groaned but flew over to her as ordered, knowing he couldn't complain because he'd been allowed to binge on cheese while she catnapped. "Claws Out!" Adrienne grinned, a bright green light sweeping over her and leaving her in a black leather costume. The blonde bounded out the window and smiled, loose blonde hair flying in all directions.

Adrienne found a grinning Ladybeetle leaning against the wall at their meeting spot, two cups of coffee in his hand. “Hey, Kitty! How’s your night so far?” Marin handed Adrienne one of the cups of coffee. “Vanilla Macchiato with about five pumps of Chocolate?” A grin nearly split the blonde’s face in two as she accepted the coffee, belt-tail swinging behind her. "Pretty good so far. Better now. Thanks, LB, I owe you one." As much as she hated to admit it, in her sleep-deprived superheroine and supermodel life, the feline ran on mostly caffeine.

"Yeah, no worries! Least I could do for my favorite partner.” Ladybeetle got on his tippy-toes and gave his partner’s cheek a quick peck. Nothing too eyebrow-raising for Adrienne, but still notable. “You ready for patrol?”

Chat almost purred, nodding and shifting her weight. "Ready when you are, Bugaboo.” She took a sip of the cup and hummed in approval. *Yep, LB is on point as always.*

Ladybeetle took the lead on the usual route, being sure to wait up for Chat. “Hey, so I was wondering. Have you ever thought about changing our route? Just by a little bit?”

Chat tilted her head a little bit, matching his pace. "Now and then. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering…if we could take a slight detour to the Agreste Mansion? You know, I know both Adrienne and Gabrielle have been Akuma targets, so I just thought it would be-hey, why’re you making that face?"

It was at this point that Adrienne noticed her look of shock and fear on her face. She blinked and then carefully schooled her expression into something more natural. More catlike. "Well, they’ve been Akuma targets, yes…but there are tons of others who have been Akuma targets as well. Remember Marin and the whole Nathalie getting Akumatized thing?"

Ladybeetle nodded. “You’re right, but I thought that some people are frequent targets-more targeted than others. Who should we make special detours? Clovis Bourgeois, the Agrestes, and...do you really want to go to Marin’s?” He gave a silent nod at Chat. “You’re getting soft on that guy now? Thank god you’ve finally moved on from me.”
"Shut up, you." Adrienne wrinkled her nose and nudged him playfully. "Marin's just a friend. He's a sweet guy, though, and I'd rather not see unnecessary harm come to anyone, especially not people I know." Her partner had always been more strict about the identity thing, but she was pretty sure that hinting she knew Marin in her civilian life wouldn't out her.

It didn’t matter either way, much to Adrienne’s relief—Ladybeetle didn’t seem to catch on. “That’s okay; I can understand that. I wouldn’t want any harm to come to...Adrienne, for instance. So just hit me up with a list, and I’ll try to come up with an edited route.”

That’s...what, the third time he's mentioned my name? I should nip this in the bud.

Adrienne opened her mouth to speak. "I can handle Adrienne's place easily. Besides, her mother has some sort of crazy security system, and I'm pretty sure, as great as you look in red-spotted spandex, that Gabrielle wouldn't be too happy if she noticed the extra attention to her mansion."

"Yeah, especially with wanting to be a designer in my civilian life...yeesh."

Adrienne’s cat ears perked up. "Designing, huh, Bugaboo? I've heard that the fashion industry can be a bit rough." Ladybeetle turned back to Chat with a smirk. “I think I’ve got what it takes. Besides, what would some alley cat know about the fashion world?”

You have no idea, bugboy. "You'd be surprised at the kind of things that this alley cat picks up." She half-smirked at him, tilting her head and shifting her weight to one side as Ladybeetle raised his hands defensively. “Alright! Alright. What...do you do outside the mask? Like, if that doesn’t reveal too much.”

She nibbled one corner of her lip and tilted his head slightly. "Nah, it's a fair question. I do a lot...fencing, piano, tons more."

"Oh. Explains the baton, I guess. Probably a stupid question, but is the fencing and the piano like a job-job thing, or does it really make you happy?"

"It's fun, I guess, but it's mostly a job thing." The blonde shrugged, taking another sip of the coffee.

"Mmm. Ladybeetle took a last sweep of the area as he raised the coffee to his lips again. “Wow, is that it? Time flies when you’re having fun.” He turns to you. “Same time tomorrow, Chat?”

"I guess it does. See you then, bugboy." She nodded and hummed. "Or sooner if there's an Akuma attack, but I don't think any of us are hoping for that."

“Oh, come on, you seriously don’t want to see me sooner unless absolutely necessary?” Ladybeetle stood on his tippytoes once again. Expecting another kiss on the cheek, Adrienne lightly cocked her head, giving Ladybeetle some room for the shorter superhero. He bypassed her cheek entirely, giving her a full, rich kiss on the lips, pulling her head down slightly as he ran his fingers through her hair. She closed her eyes, just letting herself fall into the kiss. Just when she wished that the moment would never end—it did.

“See you soon.” With that, Ladybeetle jumped off of the room, into the Paris night, leaving a very shocked Adrienne.

GOOD JOB THERE, LADYBEETLE. YOU BROKE YOUR PARTNER.

Adrienne managed a muffled squeak, not fully registering what was going on until he was gone and she was standing alone with a burning red face. The blonde raised a clawed hand to her lips, eyes shooting wide. It was a good minute or two before she even tried to get home.
Little did Chat Noire know, Ladybeetle was having no better of a time of it. “Tikki, spots off!” Ladybeetle transformed back into Marin Dupain-Cheng as he slammed into the bed, giving off a loud scream into his pillow. “Tikki!” The kwami flew off of her plate of cookies and rushed to her Chosen’s side. “Why did I do that?” Marin looked up and gave her a mopey look. “M-Marin! It’s okay!”

“It’s not! I messed up our entire relationship, Tikki! Now, what am I supposed to say when we next meet?”

“It’s not like she was completely disgusted by the kiss, Marin.”

“Yeah, but-I just-I just wanted to keep it professional. At least-at least until we defeated Hawkmoth.”

“All right. So is it a fair question to ask why you did it?” Marin narrowed his eyes at the Kwami; it was a fair question, but he didn’t quite want to answer it. “Um-I, uh-I don’t know. It really was a blur. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I knew what I thought I had to do.” Tikki tapped her small hand on her chin, deep in thought.

“Maybe you’re attracted to Chat Noire?”

“What?” Marin scratched his head. “I mean, she’s not…bad looking.”

“‘Not bad looking?’ That’s a little uncharitable if we’re talking about Chat Noire.” Marin finally broke. “Okay, okay! She’s…she’s really hot, okay? She is a beautiful girl in a skintight leather catsuit, and I’m a single sixteen-year-old boy. Skintight leather catsuit, Tikki! That’s like teenage boy kryptonite. What the heck was I supposed to do?”

“So you’re attracted to Chat Noire. Great! So…what’s the issue?” Marin raised a small finger to his desktop wallpaper, and Tikki noticed. “Oh. Right.” She settled onto the pillow next to him. “You know, it’s okay to like two girls at once, right? You’re still single. Adrienne and Chat fulfill different needs for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Adrienne is the girl next door, someone who you could see yourself spending the rest of your life with, a gentle, calming presence for you.” Marin raised an eyebrow. “How can she be a gentle and calming presence if she makes my heart rate go up every time she-“

“Let me finish. Adrienne is all that, but Chat Noire is an exciting presence for you who isn’t afraid to have fun once in a while. She acts with little regret, and you can be yourself around her with a minimal amount of judgment.” Marin sighed. “Thanks, Tikki, But I will have to choose between one of them sooner or later, won’t I?”

Tikki froze, remembering the fight with Dark Owl and what for all purposes almost became a reveal. “Well…let’s cross that bridge when we get to it, shall we? Sooner or later, like you said-hopefully later. What Adrienne and Chat Noire don’t know won’t hurt them, right? Just go to sleep!”

“Wait, Tikki-“

“Go to sleep, Marin!”
Chapter 2

Marin catapulted out of bed when his alarm went off, an explosion of sudden movement. He had all the energy in the world to burn right now, and thus remained a blur of energy as he got ready for school.

Even then, most of his mind was still stuck on a constant loop of 'oh my god I kissed Chat Noire,' and the rest was just enough to get him through getting ready for the day. No sooner had Marin walked out of the door when he was suddenly faced with a mass of blonde hair filling his entire field of view.

“Ah! Adrienne!” Said mass of blonde hair suddenly materialized in Marin’s face, about to run the poor boy over. All thoughts of Chat Noire were wiped away from his mind as he realized who he was in front of. “Why are you walking? Wait, the school’s that way!”

"Oh, sorry!" She squeaked, snapping back to normality and shooting Marin an apologetic smile. "My head's a little bit up in the clouds right now, I'm so sorry, Marin!"

Marin regained his composure and dropped his voice by an entire octave-something he only did around people who he was trying to impress. “Uh...huh. Mind telling me what’s going on? Do you, uh-need to sit down?”

"No, no, I'm fine. A close friend of mine just...did something I wasn't expecting." Her cheeks reddened, and she rubbed the back of her neck. "I still can't believe it really happened."

“Oh! Uh-did he hurt you? Are you alright?”

"No, he didn't...quite the opposite, actually. I'm fine, but thank you Marin."

Marin leaned against the outer wall of the shop and gave off something of a smirk in an attempt to look cool. “Oh. What exactly did this mystery person do?”

Adrienne blushed brightly and ducked her head, rubbing at the back of her neck. "Well...he kind of...kissed me." Wait, what? She shifted her weight. "It's not unwanted, or anything, because I like him. It’s weird, though-about five minutes before that he was teasing me about liking someone else.”

Marin’s first impulse was to groan. However, if one heard closely enough at Marin’s groan, one could hear Verdi’s ‘Dies Irae.’ Marin’s heart sunk to new depths unknown to modern engineering at incalculable speeds currently undiscovered by modern physics. He suddenly became what could only be described as a nervous wreck, but he was a nervous wreck who was somehow still able to maintain a smile. “Oh. That’s...nice. So you, uh-you like this guy, huh? That's-that’s cool.” Not only did Adrienne get kissed by this guy, but she liked it. That was the worst part!

“Y-yeah.” She smiled a little and shifted her weight. "I have no idea what that meant to him, if it even meant anything. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would just kiss me out of nowhere, but he really hasn't shown any interest in me before this." Her smile turned into a frown, and she fidgeted with her hands nervously. "I'm sorry for bothering you with this. It's just feelings drama."

“Oh no, Adrienne. Not bothered at all.” In reality, Marin was extremely bothered. And he was having plenty of feelings drama of his own. “Who-who was the guy that this-this guy-was teasing you about?”
She nibbled her lip and shot him a far more sheepish smile. “He was actually teasing me about you, believe it or not.” She admitted, shifting her weight. "The subject of Akuma attacks came up, and I mentioned how you’d been the target of Nathalie.”

Marin huffed to himself. “Not sure you’d remember that…yeah, and I mean, he must have been joking about that, wasn’t he?” Marin hoped, prayed that he was doing an excellent job of hiding his immense disappointment.

Adrienne squirmed a little in place and nibbled the corner of her lip. "I have no idea. I'm just...kind of confused." Kind of was an understatement. She wasn't sure if she should be swooning or screaming, considering the love of her life had kissed her and left without an explanation. But she couldn’t help but notice a feeling of guilt digging at the back of her head. It could have something to do with the fact that Marin looked very upset at this very moment.

“Well, I’m not confused at all. You like this guy, he kissed you-why don’t you just date him?” She winced in surprise at Marin’s tone of voice but nodded slowly, frowning and pulling at the hem of her shirt. Marin, for his own part, was shocked at his own temper, which was shorter than he expected. *Okay, maybe I raised my voice a quarter of a decibel?*

But what really made him guilty was how scared Adrienne looked. “Adrienne; I’m sorry, it’s been kind of a rough morning for me.” Kind of was an understatement. “I should go to class. I’m glad to see you happy.” With that, Marin spun on his heel and starts to walk away.

What the hell is going on? Ladybeetle was almost making out with her without notice or explanation, Marin was dealing with something and seemed to be kind of taking out on her. Adrienne groaned as she and Marin parted ways. Why did she dump all that on her friend? He was right about her just dating Ladybeetle, or would have been if there wasn't the topic of identities and everything. She walked up the steps of the school right on Marin's heels. What am I going to do?

“Psssh!” Alain hissed at Marin as the other boy anxiously crossed the threshold and into the school, placing an arm around his friend. “Dude, what’s going on? Don’t you see who’s right behind you?”

“Unfortunately.” Marin scowled; Alain raised his eyebrow in suspicion. ”Did...something happen?” Marin turned to Alain with a tired sigh and a glare. “I don’t know Alain, why don’t you ask her?”

“I don’t…” Marin shook his head. “Sorry. I’m just in a bad mood.”

“Okay. Sorry,“

“No, I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry fowhatever.” There was an awkward pause. “So this bad mood...is it you or her?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like-is she reason behind why you’re so upset?” Marin turned to Alain. “How’d you guess?”

“I mean...I kind of saw your conversation. And you two leaving in a huff.” Marin shot a glare at Alain; Alain raised his hands in defensive shock. "I heard nothing, though, so that’s between you and her.”
“Yeah, no, I...” Marin relaxed his glare. “I, uh...I think there’s someone else.”

“Between her and...” Alain pursed his lips. “Listen man, she’s a hot commodity, I mean of course there’s going to be demand-”

“Alain, refer to her as a commodity again, and I’m going to smack you upside the head-”

“-sorry, but my point is, you’ve got high standards, my guy, and so do...you know. Other guys.”

“Alain-”

“-Case in point: Clovis Bourgeois, Leo Rossi, Kagami Tsurugi-”

“I get it. And now this guy.” Alain paused, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Listen, I, uh...I hate to be this guy. I really do. But...”

“Just say it.”

“Do you think there might be a reason on your part on why Adrienne doesn’t...really know you like her? I mean, if you’re a guy, you-you know-you state your intentions.”

“And if you’re too scared to do that?”

“Yeah, uh...” Alain looked askance. “My dad didn’t really cover that. Did your dad not-” Alain cut off his own sentence. Sabine Cheng was a man who was practically swept off his feet by his wife. It was cute, but Marin wasn’t nearly at that stage yet. “Sorry. Listen, I can help.”

“Oh, really?”

“Don’t be bitchy, Marin. Let me hold a party-just the four of us-and I can get some time with you and her alone.”

“How much time?”

“Oh, how about...” Alain smirked. “Is seven minutes going to be enough?”
“Dupain-Cheng!”

“Psst, Marin-”

“Dupain-Cheng, what is the definition of a catalyst?” Marin looked from side to side. Catalyst, Catalyst... Marin heard the name tangentially, but couldn't place where he had. “Uh...um.”

Mendeliev groaned. “Can someone please tell the class, Mister Dupain-Cheng included, what a catalyst is?” Adrienne’s hand shot up as she shot Marin what appeared to be a guilty look. Marin looked back at her and shrugged. “Yes? Miss Agreste?”

Adrienne’s example was almost as if read from the book; “Yes, uh...a catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of reaction of a chemical equation. Usually by lowering the amount of energy required to actually start the reaction.”

“Finally, someone who does the readings!” Mendeliev grinned triumphantly as the final bell rang. “Homework should already be on the site, read the chapters posted there-and Dupain-Cheng? The last reading is strongly recommended for you tonight.”

As soon as the school bell rang, Adrienne got out of her seat to follow Marin, who had bolted for the door. “Marin! Wait-” She failed to catch up with him in a tactful manner, instead opting to cast a guilty glance down at him as he left. “Or...not.” She groaned softly, running her hands through her hair again, and slipped into her car.

Marin turned around as soon as the car drove off, sighing to himself. Finally, he was alone until... “Marin!”

Cue an ungodly shriek that made every pigeon in a fifty-meter radius suddenly take flight. “Marin, Marin!” A mop of blue-tipped brunette hair suddenly filled Marin’s field of view, before revealing a face with equally blue eyes, high cheekbones, and an amused smile. “Marin, Marin, it’s me! It’s Luka!” Sill more heavy, sharp breathing from Marin. “Marin. Marin! Shooooosh, calm breaths, deep breaths.” Luka gave a small giggle that, while a little teasing, was devoid of any actual malice.

Giggle or no, Luka was quite the calming presence. Alain had referred to her as “the hottest girl in terminale year, if not the school,” and while Marin wasn’t quite sure about that other claim, the allure of an older girl with an air of maturity about her was undoubtedly present. Luka was two years ahead of Marin, so there wasn’t much of a chance for the two to hang, but it was rather intense when they did.

“God, Luka, you fu- friggin scared me-” Another giggle from her. “Marin, you can say the word fuck with me, it’s okay.”

“What? No, that’s not the point-”

“Marin. Say it with me. Fuuuuu-”

“Fuck. Okay, I said it!” She giggled again. “Yes, you did! Hear ye, hear ye! Marin Dupain-Cheng says fuck!” Marin looked up at her. “Luka, is there a point you gave me a heart attack today?”

“What, can’t I say good afternoon to my favorite of Julian’s friends?” She crossed her arms. “It’s
okay, though. There was a point.” Luka dropped her arms, checked her cuticles in a weird nervous confidence, and then gazed ahead at Marin. “I was just wondering if you wanted to hang out? Mom’s out with some friends, and Jules and Ross are going out for some weird art show...so I have the whole houseboat to myself.”

Marin weighed his options. He opened his mouth to say yes, before remembering the party. Adrienne, he thought. Wait for her. “Oh, I...”

“Are you sure? I just refilled my pen.” She batted her eyes at him, leaning against the same wall he leaned against that morning in a similar pose—another attempt to look cool. “What, you don’t want to show your senpai how cool and mature you are?”

Marin facepalmed. “First of all, don’t use the word senpai. Just-please. Second of all, I really would love to, but I have homework-”

“Granted, Mendeliev was roasting you in class today-”

“Wait, she does that?”

“Yeah, what else?”

“I can’t believe she’d-”

“Marin, what else?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve...I’ve got a party. To go to. At Alain’s. And I would invite you, but Alain kind of made it clear that he wanted it to be just the four of us.”

Luka raised an eyebrow. “Four?”

“Yeah, uh...Alain, me, Nina, and...Adrienne.” A small pause, and Marin had to butt in before it became awkward. “-So it’s just a squad thing.”

“Oh! Yeah. I see.” Luka grinned, nodding to herself. “Yeah, that’s cool! You have fun.”

“Can we take a raincheck? I’m so sorry-”

“Don’t apologize! I’ll see you...whenever.” Luka winked, turned around, and headed in the opposite direction. Marin looked in the direction of his house. Well. At least I have a backup plan.

While Marin was off socializing with Luka, Adrienne sat in the car alone during the drive home in dead silence (as if Nathaniel or the Gorilla made good conversation) and headed straight for her room as soon as the car rolled into the garage.

“Adrienne, are we really going to-”

“Claws out!” Next thing Adrienne knew she was hopping out of her window into the afternoon Paris sun, making a beeline for Marin’s place.

When she landed on his balcony, she could hear the music coming out of his loft: “The rain falls hard on a humdrum town/This town will drag you down/Oh the rain falls hard on a humdrum down/This town will drag you down...”

She remembered the song. It was an old British song from the eighties, and she recognized it because her father had played it to her once, claiming it always helped him whenever he was heartbroken during his time at Collège and Lyceé. She winced, cat ears drooping a little as the
blonde knocked gently upon his trapdoor to alert the boy of her presence. “Come on in.”

She entered his loft. As in almost every instance she went to his place, she found him sketching a new design on his bed. Marin looked up at her, giving her a sad grin. “Cookies are on me, you know where to get them.”

Chat dropped down onto his bed beside him, curling an arm around his shoulders. “Yeah, I do, but I'm more concerned with you than I am with sweets. What's up?”

He tried to act nonchalant as he reached to pause his Spotify playlist. “Would you like to marry me? And if you like, you can buy the ring/She doesn’t care about anythi- “ Once he had that paused, Marin looked up at her, trying to put on a brave face. “I’m…fiiiiiine. What’s wrong?”

“You look down. I'm not stupid.” She pointed out, raising one brow and shifting to settle in a half-sitting half-leaning position.

Marin gave a slight smirk. “Girl problems. Nothing you’d want to know about.” Another awkward pause. “Marin?” Asked Chat softly. Something sunk like a stone in her chest and she had a feeling she already knew what was going on, especially mentioning the 'girl problems.'

“I mean, it’s kind of my fault. I should have known I wasn’t good enough for her. What was I thinking?”

Marin looked up at Chat with glassy, bleary eyes. “What? I’ve told you what’s wrong.”

Her cat ears flattened down to the top of her head, and the blonde gently put one of her hands over his. "I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

“I don’t know. Does your suit come with mind-control powers? Don’t answer that.” There’s another sad pause. “Just stay if you want, you might want to be on the lookout for evil purple butterflies.” Marin shrugged. “I mean, I guess I should have learned my place when dealing with...you know.”

"Marin." Her cat ears flicked atop her head, raising back into a somewhat normal position. "Stop being so hard on yourself. You're a good person, and whatever girl ended up rejecting you is missing out." The blonde's belt-tail swung and curled behind her as she shifted in place to take one of his hands gently in her own.

“Well, she hasn’t properly rejected me yet, but-“ Marin cuddled into her embrace, assuming the position of the small spoon as he leaned into her frame. “Yeah, maybe you’re right, Chat. So what if Adrienne doesn’t like me?” Oh, craaaaaaap.

"Adrienne, huh?" Yep, that explains the out-of-nowhere guilt. Yep, I’m an idiot. Looking back on it...how didn’t I see the signs? Still, it’s going to be hard letting him down. “The model? She's your classmate, isn't she?” She hadn't known that Marin had feelings for her, and definitely wouldn't have talked to him about the kiss if she'd known.

“Yeah. Her.” Marin scowled. “I mean, she spends a lot of time around guys who are paid to be attractive. No wonder I can’t compare.” Marin looked up at Chat. “Right, sorry. It’s just-I can’t help but feel bad, you know?”

“Don't apologize, Marin. I know better than most people,” Agreed Chat with a little nod. "It's okay to feel bad about stuff like this. I used to do it all the time when LB shot me down. It's natural, don't worry about it."
“Yeah—Wait. You felt bad when he shot you down? I thought you were just joking when you said you flirted with him. I thought that was...you know, fun and games.”

She shrugged a little. "I'm not. I've kind of learned to deal with it by now, though. Pretty much everyone in Paris thinks I'm just a meaningless flirt, LB included. I guess there are worse things to be.” Marin, with this new information, suddenly sprang out of the little spoon position, turning around to look up at the superheroine. “Wait, wait, wait—you actually had feelings for him? You like liked him?”

"Yep. Still do.” She bit back a groan at last night at whatever that meant to her partner. “I mean, it’s not like that’s uncommon. You’d be surprised, I bet a lot of girls like Ladybeetle. He’s cute.” Marin’s ears perked up as he motioned for Chat to go on.

"Go on."

“If you’ll let me geek out for a minute, I’d say that Ladybeetle’s got Damian Wayne’s face, Tim Drake’s brain, Jason Todd’s abs, and Dick Grayson’s butt.” She got lost in a dreamy haze for a second, her teeth fully clamped down as she gave a breathy chuckle, before whipping back to Marin. “Sorry about that.”

Marin blushed a little bit, feeling his cheeks flush a little bit. “It’s all right.” Flattering, even. “And how do you think he feels towards you?”

"I have no idea how he feels, though. I thought I did, but—"

“-but what?”

She felt her face heat up thinking about the kiss, running one hand through her hair. "He kissed me. And then ran off."

Oh, right. That happened. Marin bit back a response that would have blown his cover. “That’s...weird. Maybe he was calling your bluff in terms of flirting, maybe? And, I mean—you’re an attractive teenage girl in a skintight leather catsuit, what guy wouldn’t want to kiss you?”

She frowned and gave off a light, slow sigh. "I guess you're right. I didn't really think he'd go that far just to prove I was flirting meaninglessly, though." If he had...well, there went any hope she had. "That also works to explain stuff...Ugh." Things were getting way too complicated. LB was usually such a gentleman, and then suddenly this whole kiss thing came around.

“So here we go. You’re confused by a frankly really questionable decision your crush made, I’m bawling like a baby because a literal supermodel won’t date me—we’re really messed up, huh?” He looked up at her and smiled.

She chuckled, tilting her head and blinking back at him with feline green eyes. "I guess we are. But that’s love, huh? Sometimes it’s the best thing ever, and then the next moment it’s screwing up everything."

“Yeah...Hey, is Dr. Noire’s therapy session over yet, or do you need some more cuddles? ‘Cause I think I’m feeling better. And...and I think I have a plan.”

"As nice as cuddles are for the both of us, I think it would be good to call the cat therapy to a close and hear that plan of yours.”

“Yeah, you want to hear it?”
“Sure.”

Marin got up and sat on the desk chair, opposite from Chat. “I mean, it’s pretty clear that this guy, whoever he is, is being kind of dodgy, playing some kind of weird game. Maybe I just have to be direct, but not in a way that leaves me out in the open, where she can shut me down for good.” She hummed, propping herself up with one arm. “You sound like Ladybeetle during a firefight. Don’t worry. This is just confessing to your crush.”

“And that’s so much easier?” Chat let out a loud, clear, laugh. “I didn’t say that. Still, how are you planning to do it? Being direct and indirect at the same time?”

Marin’s lip twitched. “Alain’s having a party tonight at his place. She’s supposedly going to be there.” Her breath stopped.

Yikes. Ouch. Fiddlesticks.

Marin was her friend—one of her best. She didn’t feel betrayed by him seeing her as more than that-more shocked, than anything else. It wasn’t like she wasn’t surprised at people having a crush on her at all. Instead, she thought, or merely suspected, that—well, I guess that’s definitely not the case now. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Oh, no, I—I’m just excited to see what happens.” Chat heard a beep on her baton and picked it. Nina? Now? “Whelp. Duty calls. See you later, Marin?”

“Y-yeah. See you later. Marin got up and saw his partner out, watching as she finally left, leaving the coast clear for him to think. “So, a lot of girls like Ladybeetle, huh?” Tikki flew out of Marin’s pocket, looking scandalized. She knew what he was thinking, and she didn’t like it at all. “Marin, no.”

“Marin, yes.”

“Marin, please, it’s risky, and I’m shutting this down right now. Please, Marin.” No sound from Marin. “Tikki, this might be our best chance—my best chance—”

“And who’s to say she won’t give you a chance as Marin? Promise me you’ll only consider it when she rejects you. Okay?”

There was a long pause as Marin studied his shoes—his stupid pink shoes that, while formerly feeling comfortable, made him now feel awkward and plain. “That might not be for much longer.” He looked back up at Tikki. “Okay.”

Adrienne landed with both feet in the back alley behind the Dupain-Cheng Patisserie, feeling the balls of her feet absorb all the shock. “Ow!” Ow. Ow. “Claws-claws in.” She snuck into a side street and sat down, leaning against the wall while she took out her phone. “Hey! Nina? Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey! So, uh-Alain’s holding a party, and...I was wondering if you want to come?”

“Yeah, uh-” Adrienne slid up the wall, dusting herself off. “Who’s gonna be there?”

“Oh, it’s going to be a small thing! Me. And Alain. And Marin.”

“And Marin?” Adrienne could almost hear the shocked look from Nina’s face. “Uh. Yeah. And Marin.” There was a pause. “You think you gonna make it, girl? I know how your mom is—”
“Yeah!” Adrienne blinked, shaking her head as she moved into the imposing double gates into her yard. “Yeah, I...” She gave a nervous chuckle. “If I have to bail, you know why, but...yeah, I should be free.”

“Great! See you then!” There was a long pause on the phone-Nina clearly expected Adrienne to hang up. “Uh...girl? You okay?”

“Yeah! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Oh, no-no reason! Just...yeah. You’re gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

“Oh-okay! Yeah! Sure! No need to BYOB, Alain can provide. See you then!” Nina turned off the phone, leaving Adrienne standing there to stew in her thoughts, nervous about what she was about to go through. She could bail-she could always bail, but that would be unfair-and besides, if there was a way to get out from under her mother, so be it. What am I going to do?
"Adrienne! Hey, what's up?" Alain moved aside from his door to let Adrienne in. "Get in here, get in here!"

On the surface, it was perfect. Alain's flat, as always, was quite well lit, one of Adrienne’s favorite playlists of Nina’s was playing in the background, and the presence of beer and the single bottle of Tequila let Adrienne in on the thought that she was in for a night.

However, the party was less than ideal-less than fun. Marin was sitting on a couch to the side, talking in hushed tones to Nina, who, if Adrienne didn't know any better, was giving him a much-needed pep talk.

"Hi, Alain. Thank you for, er-inviting me to your party. It looks like it'll be fun." Adrienne said, managing to muster a smile toward Alain as she offered her thanks.

In contrast, it was going to be a long night. And while she was almost entirely sure the 'party' was set up with an ulterior motive in mind, there was no point in being rude towards the host. Or anyone, for that matter. "Yeah, I’m ready to party!" She gave a weak fist pump as Alain moved behind the kitchen counter. "Nice, nice!" Adrienne followed Alain into the kitchen as he rolled out the goods. "So: pick your poison. It is limited, but we do have Tequila!"

Adrienne's nose wrinkled at the mention of tequila. It had such a strong taste to it that it wasn't exactly her first choice of liquor, but she wasn’t turning it down. "Sure, why not? Tequila is fine."

"Now you’re speaking my language!" Alain took out a pair of shot glasses. "Marin, y'all gotta get over here." He turned back to Adrienne as he picked up the tequila. "I'm just gonna give you one shot in case you're a lightweight-if you think you can take more, tell me."

Marin sheepishly walked over to the kitchen counter. "Hey, Adrienne!" He gave a small wave, his face looking very nervous. Oh, yikes. Oh, noooo... Adrienne waved a hand with a quiet, almost nervous chuckle at the thought of having to drink any more than a single shot of tequila. "Oh god no, that's plenty for me! I'll just start with one, thank you." Adrienne now turned to Marin, returning a little wave and a slight smile. "Oh, hi Marin. What’s up?"

“I’m doing pretty good! Just thought I should say hi while I’m still sober.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“By the way, I’m sorry about being a bitch this morning, I was having a rough morning.”

“Oh, no, I get it. Don’t worry dude, you’re good.”

“Oh, and, uh-thanks for bailing me out with Mendeliev.”

“Yeah! No worries.”

“Adrienne.” Alain was trying to snap Adrienne’s attention back. “You still want one shot?”

“Yep! Just one.”

"Smart girl." Alain poured out one shot for her and one for..."Marin. Have you had a shot yet?"

"Oh, uh-” Marin blinked. "Not of tequila, I think I just had a beer..."
"So get over here!" Alain handed over a shot for Marin. "Don't be rude to the guest."

"Oh, sure!" Marin gave a faint smile to Adrienne as he raised his shot. "Cheers?"

Adrienne picked up the small shot glass, stared at it for a moment as she reevaluated her life choices, then raised her glass alongside Marin's with a lopsided grin. "Cheers."

Marin took a shot back before giving a small laugh and a groan. Adrienne also threw her shot back in one clean go, giving an involuntary shudder afterward. _Yep, just like how I remember them._

"Sorry, this is my first time with tequila, uh-" He gave a nervous shot to Adrienne. "At least, in a long time." His face was already turning a soft red—and not entirely from embarrassment, either.

"Oh-don't worry about it! Tequila is pretty strong, isn't it?" she commented with a soft laugh.

"Yeah! Yeah, uh...does my face look red yet?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Just a little bit in your cheeks, but it's not too bad yet! I can't see it, don't worry."

"Oh, yeah! Thanks." Marin pursed his lips while nervously scratching the back of his neck. "You wanna do another round?"

"Do...do you?" Adrienne hesitantly asked. _If he insisted..._

"Only if you want to." Marin leaned on his hand, his elbows on the table. "Unless...Alain has nothing else to do." Alain, who already had a beer in his hand, shook his head and shrugged. Adrienne had already shot a glass back on the countertop, and she edged it closer toward the bottle of tequila before suggesting, "Does Nina want to? All three of us could go for a round, maybe."

"Oh, y-yeah! Yeah, sure." Nina walked back to the cupboard, grabbing a third glass and leaning into Alain's ear. "Listen, babe, this might not work, he's psyching out of it."

"Of course he's psyching out of it, I was in a tiger cage when I asked you out, don't you think I was nervous?"

"Still, this is painful to watch."

"The harder the struggle, the more glorious the triumph." Nina looked apoplectic. "So you _did_ do the history reading last night!"

"Alaaaaain." Adrienne tapped her glass on the table, motioning toward the other empty glasses. "Are you sure you don't want to get in on this? Not even once?"

"Uh...nah. I wanna keep a clear head tonight, so when the cops come, I can do a little damage control." He grinned. "But you two have fun!"

"What makes you so sure the cops are going to show up? Are you planning on getting your own party crashed?" Adrienne joked as she picked up the bottle of liquor, pouring out three equal shots.

Alain raised his hands defensively. "I'm not, I'm not. It's called taking precautions, and it's also why I throw the period best period parties period."

Marin took his shot glass. "Are we all ready, or-"

"Oh, right. Of course." Adrienne gave a grin as she picked up her shot glass. The alcohol seemed to
be loosening her up, maybe this night wouldn't be as bad as she thought it would be? "I'm ready. Nina?"

"Hell yeah, girl! Three, two, one-" Adrienne threw back her shot once again, this one going down a bit easier. Her cheeks were already turning a light pink from the effects of the alcohol. "That wasn't so bad. Alain, you're really missing out."

"Says the girl who can get drunk under the table by Marin. Adrienne, you would not believe my tolerance."

"So, wait a minute...." Marin cut in. "Are we just gonna do something besides get drunk and listen to Travis Scott?"

"He's good!"

"Nina, I know he's good, but still." Alain waved his hand. "Peace. Marin's right. Adrienne, you got any ideas?"

"Well, um-..." Adrienne surveyed the looks of each of her friends before also shrugging her shoulders. "What do people usually do at parties? Besides, well-getting drunk. I haven't been to enough parties to know what the fuck we're supposed to be doing."

"Oh, right, you're a nerd," said Alain.

"Alain, come on, that's unfair-"

"Okay, I get it, I'm sorry-"

"No, none taken, it's a dumb joke." There was a long silence that was broken by Alain. "Like, we can get high on my pen and watch Bojack Horseman, but, like...that's boring. We should do some squad bonding. Adrienne, never have I ever or truth or dare?"

"Uh...motion to an unmoderated caucus-" Alain cut off Marin. "Nope, nope, we're not summoning Clovis!" Adrienne blinked a few times, having no idea what a majority of that conversation meant. "Uh...truth or dare? I know how to play that one at least, so..."

"Truth or dare it is! Uhhh...Nina, you start. All of us are fair game." Alain sat down on the couch, leaning into it.

"How about..." Nina trailed off, squinting as she looked over her group of friends for an entertaining candidate. "Babe. Truth or dare?"

"Uh...truth."

"Alright!" Nina decided to go with a simple question. "What's the most embarrassing thing you've ever done? That you can think of, anyways."

"Oh...oh, uhhhh..." Alain hit the back of his head lightly against the window. "I guess when I fell for Leo Rossi and his lies?" Adrienne nodded along to Alain's answer, internally cringing at the mention of Leo. "Like, that was pretty cringe for a guy who wants to go into investigative journalism." He looked at Marin, and pulled him in for the hug. "Hey, I'm sorry, brother."

"Awww, it's okay."

"Alright. Uh...and I'm also sorry about this. Truth or dare?"
“Truth or dare, Adrienne?”

"Oh, returning the question I see?” Adrienne said with a grin. Well, since no one had picked it yet (and because she wasn't a \textit{wimp}), "Dare."

"Fine," bit back Alain, and a curious smirk lit up on his face. "Seven minutes in heaven." He looked back to the other boy with a certain look in his eye. "With Marin."
Chapter 5

As soon as she heard what her dare was, Adrienne flushed a bright, hot pink. She’d never been in a situation quite like that. Hell, she didn’t even know what seven minutes in heaven was six months ago! She remembered Nina explaining it to her, but not getting what was actually supposed to happen until much later.

Laughing off her blush, she sat up. “Alright,” the girl shrugged, trying to act like her heart wasn’t about to beat out of her chest. Adrienne caught what was supposed to be a secret look between Nina and Alain, but was poorly hidden. Do they know something I don’t?

As she made a mental note to ask Nina about it later, she moved her gaze to Marin, who was sitting across from her. “Are you alright with that, Marin?” Adrienne would take the loss if he was uncomfortable, she didn’t want her friend to feel like he had to do it—it’s only a dare, after all.

Adrienne saw Marin as a sorry sight. What had been a great deal of discomfort before had turned into something truly painful for him. He had his arms wrapped around his knees, focusing his head into his lap and muttering to himself. He barely registered the exchange going on in front of him at all. It was more than clear that Adrienne would just have to coax him out of his shell and into the closet.

"Er, Marin? Are you okay?" Having stood up, she bent down in front of him. "If you don't want to, then-

"Nonsense, of course he wants to. Just...help him to the closet over there,” Alain sounded exasperated, his arms wrapped around Nina as he shot Marin a short glare.

"Are you sure-" Adrienne was cut off by vigorous nodding by both Alain and Nina before she held out a hand to her friend. "Come on, I think Nina and Alain want some alone time anyways," she raised an eyebrow at her other friends while both of them put on clueless faces.

“Huh?” Marin looked up, his eyes close to tears. “Er...nevermind. Let's go.”
Marin crossed the room, looking at the door as he placed a delicate hand on the handle. “Are you coming?” Marin looked out the door expectantly at Adrienne.

“Oh! Yeah, sorry,” said Adrienne as she followed Marin, her cheeks flushed pink from embarrassment. She walked past him into the closet, quietly closing the door behind her. “I’m sorry you got stuck in here with me. We don’t have to do anything if you don’t-“

“Save it. Really, I should be saying that to you.” Marin had resumed his earlier stance-cradling his knees while paying a disproportionate amount of attention to his shoes.
“No, really. I’m sorry you got stuck in here with me. We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to.” Adrienne could see the crack in the door frame illuminate a single tear running down Marin’s cheek.

Adrienne knelt beside him, concern written on her face for her friend. “Marin? Are you alright?” She asked, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?” The girl frowned, pushing a stray piece of hair behind her ear. She moved her hand up to his face to wipe away the tears.

Marin’s hand flew to Adrienne’s, only slowing down to gently move it away. “Stop, stop ,” he murmured, not moving. His voice was low, crackly, and wracked with hiccups. “Please. It’s fine. It’s-I’m okay.”
Adrienne let him, stepping back to give him some more space. “Are you sure? Seriously, if you’re not comfortable with this, we can leave. Tell Alain where he can shove his dare.” She tried for a smile, but it was slightly forced.

“No, no, let’s keep going. I’m not going to give up now,” He mumbled, more to himself than to Adrienne.

*It’s almost like he has something to prove.* “Okay...” Adrienne let it go, although she wasn’t entirely convinced. She kept an eye on Marin as she tried to figure out what was bothering him.

Suddenly, he looked up with the light of surprise in his eyes. “Wait, why would you make me uncomfortable?”

“I don’t know...truth be told, I always thought I made you uncomfortable,” she admitted, biting her lip nervously.

“You...” Marin gave an empty laugh. “You thought you made me uncomfortable? And why do you think would that be?”

She can’t be this obtuse, thought Marin. Surely she has to know what’s going on?

Marin turned his head back from the doorframe to Adrienne. The door frame still illuminated what was now a steady stream of tears down his face. “Adrienne, you’re not uncomfortable to me. Quite the opposite. Well, at least not now...” God, I’m basically telling her at this point!

The girl nodded, flushing lightly. “Yeah, I did. Still do, sometimes.” Adrienne paused, getting off her knees so she could actually sit down. “Well, it seemed like every time I came around, you suddenly had to leave, or you stopped talking. I thought you hated me for a while, but Alain always brushed it off as you being shy when I asked,” she confessed, hands in her lap. “But then whenever I got too close or touched you, you’d shy away. I thought maybe you just didn’t like to be touched, but you didn’t do it with anyone else, so...” Adrienne paused. “I thought I made you uncomfortable.”

“Oh. Yeah.” *So she IS that obtuse.* “Well, I guess we’re okay. I don’t feel uncomfortable around you. Okay?” Marin tried to force a wry smile as he said that.

Adrienne nodded, though something was still bothering her. "Then, why do you always push me away? Is it something I did? I mean, I know we didn't exactly get off on the right foot when we met, but-"

“No, no, it’s not you, it’s-“ Marin trailed off before finding his voice yet again. “It’s me.” He gave a small hiccup. “I-you know what? Forget about it, let's just have me apologize for how I acted and try to deal with-“

"No, no! It's nothing you have to apologize for. Really, if it's because of some way that you feel about me, I don't mind. I know sometimes we don't like others for no reason, and I completely understand. Don't be sorry for how you feel,” Adrienne smiled softly, before biting her lip nervously.

“It’s not that I don’t like you! It really isn’t.” *Quite the opposite,* thought Marin. “I really do wish I could change how I feel about you, though.”

Adrienne frowned, cocking her head to the side curiously. "What do you mean by that?" She asked, her confusion only growing. She thought she'd figured it out, she must have annoyed Marin in some way. But then...he was saying that wasn't it. *Then what was it?*
“Nothing! Nothing. Just wish it could go away.” Marin pursed his lips. “Can we stop talking about this?”

"If something's bothering you, can't you tell me?" Adrienne was genuinely worried for Marin, now. For all her emotional unintelligence, she knew it wasn't right to keep one's feelings in. After all, she only wanted to help, but wouldn't push it too far. "Come on, Marin. I'm your friend."

“Friends...” Marin’s voice trailed off, before coming back with a vengeance. “Friends, yeah, that’s the best it’s going to get between us, isn’t it?” And just like that, Marin was right back to his confrontative, snippy, and decidedly un-Marin-like tone of that morning.

It took Adrienne a full minute to comprehend his tone and his message. She had never heard that snippyness—and certainly never had it directed at her.

Marin quickly realized how that sounded—after all, it was out of his mouth before he could even hold it in. His hands flew to his mouth, his face relaxed, and his eyes widened. “Oh my-ugh, god, sorry, so sorry—I didn’t mean to say that.” His eyes began to water—Now I've really gone and done it!

The first thing Adrienne felt was a certain numbness. She shouldn’t have been surprised, but hearing him actually say it..."I-um, I'm not sure what to say about that..." The girl murmured, biting her lip. Did that mean he wanted to be more than just friends? She didn't want to assume, but, how else was she supposed to take it? If so, how long had he felt that way? He'd either been really good at hiding it, or she really just was that stupid. Either way, she'd had no idea.

“Oh, please finally get it—” Marin sat there like a startled deer in the headlights, unsure of what to do. “You do, don’t you?”

"I...think I do..." Adrienne wouldn't meet his eyes, but only nodded with uncertainty. Oh, wow. How was she gonna tell him? She didn't want this to get in the way of their friendship. She liked Marin, she really did. Just not...like that. Should I give him a chance? Why not? Because of Ladybeetle, and Adrienne found herself wondering how she would feel if she didn't know Ladybeetle. Would she accept Marin's feelings? Or would she still feel the same?

"I-erm, Marin, I had no idea..." She mumbled, trying to prolong the inevitable. She would have to tell him how she felt sooner or later.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I get the message. No need to say anything.” Marin’s face was twisted into one of fury, fear, self-loathing, and disappointment. Adrienne’s heart sank. He expected me to reject him. He saw it coming.

“Save the ‘great guy’ speech, I can show my way out.” With a small sob, Marin stood up, took off his heels, and turned to move for the door handle. “I don’t even know why I tried—”

Adrienne stood up, shaking her head. She grabbed Marin's hand on the door handle, trying to stop him from leaving. "Marin, no. That's not-I didn't mean-" She sighed, trying to find the best words. "I love you, I do. Just not...in the way that you want," she said gently, biting her lip. This was harder to do than she thought. "I don't want you to think anything's wrong with you, okay? There's not, I just...I can't return your feelings. And I'm sorry."

After what seemed like an eternity, Marin pulled his hand away and left, his hands on his face as he ran out of the room. The door opened, revealing Alain and Nina. “Adrienne? How’d it go, when’s the...” Alain’s voice dried up as he put the pieces together. Nina’s eyes sharpened. “Oh, no.”
“Adrienne.” Alain’s voice lowered as his eyes narrowed at the blonde. “Please tell me you let him down easy.”

Adrienne refused to look at anywhere but her feet, biting her lip so hard it might start bleeding. “I...I think I did. I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry, I just...should I go after him?” When she did look up, she only looked at the empty doorway that led to the stairs and stewed in the morass that was her feelings.

“Adrienne. There’s someone else, isn’t there?” Adrienne felt Alain’s hand on her shoulder. “Alain, don’t—”

“It’s fine, Nina. Who is he, Adrienne?”

Adrienne flushed lightly, pink dusting her cheeks. "You'll think it's dumb," she mumbled, not looking him in the eye.

Alain snorted. “Yeah, I already think it’s stupid you’d turn Marin Dupain-Cheng down. This new guy should be fun. Surprise me.”

Adrienne sighed, gathering up her courage. “You can’t laugh, alright? I’ve gotten enough crap from Nina.” She could feel Nina’s knowing gaze settle on her. She waited a moment, trying to prolong it. When she figured she couldn’t wait anymore, she confessed in a small voice, looking at the ground. “It’s, um...it’s Ladybeetle.”

Alain stared at her with a blank look on his face before awkwardly shrugging. “Uh, yeah. Duh. Not surprised at all. You want Ladybeetle? So does Nina. So does Clovis. So do I. You think my worship of the guy is purely platonic? But we all know he’s off limits. He’s got a job to do. So we find other people to date. Other people to fall for. People right under our noses. But I guess a spoiled rich girl like you with standards as high as yours—of course Marin’s not good enough for you.” He turned around, facing his back to Adrienne. “I’m going to go upstairs and apologize to Marin. I strongly suggest you come with and do the same.”

“That’s not it!” Her voice trailed off as she tried to act indignant or offer an explanation—something. She couldn’t tell him the real reason why she was so hung up on Ladybeetle. She was with him every day, she knew him. He wasn’t unattainable for her, the only thing in her way with him was his own feelings. Of course, she wasn’t going to give up. She would continue to flirt, to laugh, to pretend like his rejections didn’t hurt. She couldn’t just give up. It just couldn’t happen. But at the same time, was it possible? Why Ladybeetle, and not Marin? Would Marin be settling for less? Was she just a spoiled rich girl, just like Alain had said? She shook her head and moved to Alain, deciding to focus more on the task at hand.

“What do I even say? He won’t want to talk to me, he probably won’t even want to talk to me again.”

“I don’t think there’s any need. We get the message, Adrienne.” Alain headed upstairs. “Marin! Hey, bro, I’m here, it’s gonna be-oh...kay?” Alain looked inside his room. The window was wide open, and Marin’s clothes were gone. Just like Marin.

“If he killed himself, I’m kicking you out of my house.”

“What? ” Adrienne had only been halfway up the stairs, but she ran the rest of the way when Alain said the words ‘killed’ and ‘himself’ in the same sentence. Adrienne began thinking, wondering where he would go. No doubt he wanted to be alone, so someplace not many would think of to look for him, maybe?
Nina looked outside the window. “I don’t see Marin’s pancake outside, so I think he’s okay?”
Alain’s gears began grinding in his head. “Okay, so where did he go?” “Why’re you asking me?”

"Search the whole house. And the street outside.” Alain bit his lip. “Marin!”
It was safe to say that Adrienne, Nina, and Alain had torn the place upside down. Every nook and cranny had been searched—he wasn’t in the house. So they began looking outside; he couldn’t have gotten that far, could he? Adrienne was starting to get worried: what if something had happened to him? Where could he have gone? How did he get out without anyone else noticing? One thing was for sure: that Chat Noire would be a lot of help right about now.

“Still nothing?” She asked from her spot on the sidewalk, hugging her arms to her body. It was cold out, but that was the least of her worries.

“Yeah, I—” Alain’s phone buzzed. “Oh, so now he decides to call.” He picked up the phone. “Yes? Hello? We searched everywhere for you, I hope you have a very good excuse—“

“Alain! Alain, I...sorry I didn’t call earlier, I was in a weird space. Not the best time to call you, I just want you to know I’m home and I’m okay.” Marin’s voice was hoarse. It sounded like he’d been crying. “Maybe I’m still there, though...”

“We were all worried sick, man!” Alain exclaimed, concern evident in his voice. “Where have you been? Did you just go home? Listen, I’m sorry about the dare, I shouldn’t have—“ he sighed. “I shouldn’t have said it. Anyways, I’m gonna come over, alright? Just me. ” The boy said, eyeing Nina and Adrienne, who looked like she’d been about to say something. The blonde shut her mouth, turning her gaze to look down towards the ground.

“I mean, if you want to.” Marin hiccuped. “I guess I could really use someone, even if that’s really not the best thing to—actually, who am I trying to impress?”

“Exactly,” Alain tried to smile, but it was forced. “I’ll be over in ten, maybe less,” he said, and then hung up after a moment. The boy turned to the girls to his left. “Alright, so, sleepover’s off. I’m gonna go cheer up my best friend, and you two are gonna let things die down a bit, alright?” He asked. His tone indicated that it wasn’t a question. When both girls agreed, he shot a quick text to his brother that he was going out and to not wait up and started to head out the door to Marin’s, who didn’t live too far away. He left the girls to themselves, figuring Adrienne could call someone to pick her up.

Marin shut off the phone, biting his lip. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t entitled to Adrienne, but—“Tikki?”

Tikki flew herself from his space next to Marin, her face full of confusion and worry,. “Yes, Marin?”

“Did I do the right thing back there?”

“Well...I’m not sure there was a right thing to do,” Tikki chose her words carefully. “You probably shouldn’t have worried your friend so much but...they know you’re okay now. But I’m sure it’ll get better, Marin!” Tikki smiled in a barebones attempt to stay positive.

“No, how can you say that? It’s not. It’s only gonna get weird between us.” Marin started to sob. “I just...I really should have seen this coming. It wasn’t gonna happen with Adrienne. I mean, look at her, right? And then look at me.”

He sat in silence. “I can speak three languages. I’m the president of my class. I could be accepted into any Fine Arts school on Earth. I’ve designed album covers for Jagged Stone, and I’ve had my
work recognized by Gabrielle Agreste. But every time I see her, I’ll be reminded of how that’s never going to be enough. Never, ever, ever…” He wiped away at his eyes. “I shouldn’t have been so open like that.”

Tikki crossed her arms, making a small ‘humph’ sound. “You’re proving my point, Marin! Don’t sell yourself short, there’s plenty of other great things about you. You’re the most reliable person in your class, everyone trusts you, and you’re a great friend! Do you want me to keep going? I can keep going.”

“I really don’t want to hear the word ‘friend’ right now, Tikki,” Marin snarled. “You make it sound like I’m so perfect. Tikki, I’m 167 centimeters. I’m a full head shorter than her! The fact that I wear earrings that have nothing to do with you also really hurts. We can also talk about the fact that I bake and that I talk too much and cry too much—ugh, I’m doing it right now!”

Marin tried to fight back those tears as he went on, the word sissy running through his mind. “How about the fact that I’m designing at all? I mean, most guys follow FC Paris, and I follow…RuPaul’s Drag Race. Do you want me to keep going? Because I can keep going.” He shrugged, shaking his head before looking up at Tikki apologetically. “Sorry, it’s just…she’s conventional and perfect. I guess it makes sense she’d want someone just as conventional and perfect as her.”

Tikki let her head fall. “There’s nothing wrong with any of those things, though. Football is boring, and everyone loves your baking! And your designs!” Tikki settled down on Marin’s bed, flopping on her stomach. “You’re a great person, Marin, and you’ve already accomplished a lot of other things by yourself. Ladybeetle not included. I don’t want this to make you think otherwise,” she frowned, his face full of concern.

“I get what you’re saying, Tikki. But what am I supposed to think after what happened?”

“I-I don’t know,” the kwami admitted. “But you know Adrienne,” she pressed. “There’s no way she would hold anything like that against you. She still likes you, or she wouldn’t have cared so much about what you thought about her, right?”

“Assuming she cared at all.”

Marin checked his phone. “Where’s Alain? He’s supposed to be here by now.” As if on cue, there was the ringing of the doorbell on the ground floor. “Hey man, you in there?” Marin scrambled downstairs, almost tripping over himself. True to form, Alain was standing in the doorframe. “Hey, were…you on the phone or something? I thought I heard voi-”


They went up the stairs back to Marin’s room, Marin tripping over himself again as he headed back into his room, leaving the door wide open. Alain closed it behind him. “So.”

When Alain turned around, Marin had already sat down at his desk, turning back to him. “Yeah.” There was a painful silence.

“Hey, man. What’s up?”

Alain simply stood there with a sad, expectant look on his face, not uttering a sound. “Marin.”

Marin stood there for a second before standing back up, immediately wrapping his arms around Alain, burying his face into the taller boy’s shoulder. Alain accepted the hug, wrapping his arms tightly around his friend. He didn’t say anything, he didn’t think he needed to. He only hugged him, rubbing what he hoped was soothing circles in his back.
“M’sorry...m’ so sorry...” Marin tried to calm his breath down, keeping it from spilling out. “Don’t be, Marin,” Alain said firmly. “Don’t be. I’m sorry. There’s nothing to be sorry for, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m an idiot, oh god, what was I thinking?” Marin sobbed before sighing and stepping away, sitting down on the couch with his head back into his hands. “Was never going to happen, anyways.” All their plots and attempts to get her to notice him-they had all come to naught, in the course of one night. “And I think I ruined our friendship as well.”

Alain let his arms drop back to his sides. He shook his head. “You couldn’t have known that. If I were her, I’d jump at the chance you gave her.” He paused. “No homo, I-“ he groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“So who is he?” Marin looked up at Alain, his ears perking up. “Assuming there is someone else.”

The boy shook his head. “Not anyone we have to worry about...she’s delusional if she thinks she has a chance.” Alain winced. “Sorry, that was mean. Are you sure you want to know?” He asked, his eyebrow raised.

“It isn’t me. I don’t really care especially who it is, at this point.”

Alain stepped back, reaching up to rub his neck. “It’s, uh, it’s Ladybeetle, actually. We didn’t really talk much about it,” he said, not wanting to meet Marin’s eyes.

“Lady...beetle.” Marin’s mouth dropped open, and he made contact with another pair of black, beady eyes across the room, large eyes filled with concern and dread as it watched the gears turn in Marin’s head. “Ladybeetle.”
Chapter 7

Adrienne-no, Chat Noire-blitzed along the rooftops of Paris. No afternoon lessons, no homework, and no photo shoots meant absolute freedom for the afternoon, and what better way to spend that time than as one of Paris's superheroes? She'd been too lax on patrol lately, anyways. Finally, the girl stopped on the rooftop of some business building, hair wild and unruly, whipping around her face.

"Kitty." She whipped around to see a familiar voice-Ladybeetle? No. It was just Marin, relaxing on his deck chair with his phone in one hand and a Rosé in the other. "Waiting for someone?" Why does his voice sound like Ladybeetles?

As soon as she realized who it was, she relaxed. Okay. Just Marin. "I'm enjoying the scenery," she grinned. "What are you doing up here?" The girl made her way over to him, letting her baton grow until she could lean against it.

"Just relaxing! Done with schoolwork, so, ya know." Marin stood up, walking over to Chat-or at least, as close as he could get to Chat without jumping across a rooftop. "What about you? Patrol shouldn’t be for hours, right?"

"You're observant," the girl noted. "What, you like watching me go on patrol? I mean, I know I'm irresistible, but please, contain yourself," she teased. "I had some free time, I needed to get out. Don't tell Ladybeetle, but I've been just a bit lazy with patrol recently. I'm making up for lost time."

"I'm not going to tell Ladybeetle! Promise. Not in my best interests to get that guy jealous." Marin grinned, cocking a smirk. "And I’m guessing you also wanted to visit little ol’ me?"

"How did you know?" Chat Noire grinned. She turned to glance around the streets, figuring she should at least pretend to be productive. "You know, it's so weird, when you first called out to me, I thought you were Ladybeetle. You sounded almost exactly like him."

"Reeeeeally?" Marin’s hand flew to his mouth. "That's...that’s it, right? I mean, no way am I like Ladybeetle."

"Well, I think you're awesome." She hopped across the railing, landing in Marin’s balcony. "I don't know, Marin. I think you two would get along, you're both very...heroic, in your own ways," Chat smiled fondly. She'd once compared Marin to Ladybeetle as Adrienne, and she still stood by what she said. He was like their everyday Ladybeetle.

"Nah, he’s...he’s Ladybeetle, you know? And I’m...” He knew it was stupid making the comparison, seeing as he was Ladybeetle. But when he wore the mask, something happened-like the biggest confidence booster ever. Tikki said it was for Ladybeetles to overcome their fears in battle, but Marin felt it intrap into other aspects of his life. He picked his next words carefully. "I’m...I’m me. I mean, I’m not...like...other guys, and I don’t mean to say that in the quirky, positive way. I’m not the kind of different most people go for."

"Well, I think you're awesome." She hopped across the railing, landing in Marin’s balcony. "Remember when you helped me defeat Natalie Kurtzberg when she got akumatized?" If she remembered correctly, Natalie had had quite the crush on him. "Don't sell yourself short. From what I know about you, you're pretty cool."

"You did all the work, kitty!" Marin chuckled nervously. “I just sat there and watched.”
“Not true! You saved my butt!” Chat paused. “I mean, I was pretty awesome, too. But that time, it was all you, Blue.” A pause from Marin. “Get it? ‘Cause ‘blue’ rhymes with ‘you’? And you’ve got blue hair? Okay, not my best work.”

“Yeah, well...Natalie later said she thought the reason I rejected her was that I was gay, so, you know. Goes to show what people think of me. Not that-not that that’s a bad thing or anything, I just...” Marin trailed off, his smile setting into a frown. “Listen, I know I’m girly. I just wish people could see beyond the assumptions and stereotypes.” I wish Adrienne could...

She sighed. “Yeah, stereotypes suck,” she said bluntly, for lack of better words. “Listen, fuck anyone who thinks less of you because of some dumb stereotypes.”

“And what would you know about stereotypes?”

“Uh, have I told you about my home life? Look at me. Everyone thinks I’m prim and proper, perfect student, perfect daughter, et cetera, et cetera. Do you know me to be the perfect anything? Nope, and I would rather have it like that. You should be yourself, despite everyone else. I’ve found it can be quite liberating.”

“Yeah, no, uh-I am! I’m not changing myself for anyone’s approval.” Marin shook his head and gritted his teeth when Tikki pinched the back of his neck. “It’s just that...I guess sometimes you have to make some sacrifices for that.” Adrienne suddenly understood where he was coming from-and also that he wasn’t entirely over what had happened at that sleepover. Ugh, when is he gonna get over it?

Chat was quiet for a little bit after that. "I see," she said quietly. She'd thought things were taken care of, wrapped up neatly with a bow. Of course, she shouldn't have been so oblivious, she should have seen it before. Could she keep thinking of Ladybeetle in that way, then? Knowing how Marin felt? She really really didn't want to have to choose between her friend and her crush.

“Sorry!” Marin grinned and looked back up at Chat. “I didn’t mean to be a downer. Something just happened a few days ago where...well, I’m kind of in a mood not to take that advice. But I’m okay! I really am.” Marin didn’t know why he wasn’t letting more on.

Chat pulled out a smile, but it was forced. “What happened?” She asked, despite herself. She wanted to hear what he had to say about it.

“Nothing! I’m fine! It’s just-Chat, do you...if you were able to change one thing about yourself to get Ladybeetle to unconditionally fall in love with you...would you change it?”

“Would I...change myself?” Would she? She wanted to say no, but...“I-I don’t know.” She’d been caught off guard. She wasn’t sure.

“I mean...sorry, that was insensitive of me. I shouldn’t have asked that, and you don’t need to answer it.” He sat back. “It’s just that I think it would work for me, you know? Me and my crush.”

Chat bit her lip, getting concerned. "What makes you say that?" She asked, feeling as though there was a pit in her stomach.

“I...listen, I got rejected. By Adrienne. And I’m not trying to be one of those entitled incel types, and I know I really sound like one, but...but it still hurts. Especially when I can guess why she did it.” Marin felt his heart sink once again as he tried very hard to ignore the knot in his throat.

“Maybe she wouldn’t have rejected me if I wasn’t such a sissy.”

"What?" Was that what he thought? "Have you-have you talked to her about it?" She asked, feeling
very trapped as the bottleneck that was Marin’s emotions began to sputter and burst.

Marin broke, hugging Chat Noire while starting to sob. “No-no! I just, I know, you know? Adrienne-she’s perfect, and she deserves a guy who’s just as perfect as her! Not-not me. I knew it wasn’t going to be me.” He pulled back, tears running down his face.

Chat could practically hear her own heart break. She should have known, should have seen that it wasn't okay like he’d said. She hugged him back, squeezing him tightly. "That's not true!" She blurted, unable to stop herself as he pulled away. "I-I mean-" She couldn't come up with something else to say, an excuse as to why she'd said it. "I mean...I don't know. Maybe-maybe you could ask?" She asked lamely, desperate for an excuse for her outburst.

“I don’t want to mess up our friendship worse than it already has. I’ll get over it, I have to—I have no right to be this emotional.”

"Now, that's even less true. You have every right to your emotions, Marin. You shouldn't keep it to yourself," the girl let her hands fall to her side.

“I just wish I wasn’t so weak.” He looked up. “D’you think she’d be ashamed of me if we dated?”

"No, I don't think that at all," Chat said honestly. "Why would she? I mean, you're one of the best designers I've ever seen, and trust me, that's saying something. Listen, I don't think you're weak at all. Look at the way you handle people like Clovis."

Marin sighed. “I guess...I wish Adrienne would see it that way.”

Chat bit her lip. "Maybe...you should ask her. Either way, you shouldn't keep what you're feeling to yourself."

“What do you think?”

"About you, or about her?"

“All of this? Both? Either?” He hugged his knees, looking out. “I don’t know. I...” Marin’s voice trailed off. “I’m scared. And it’s really not a good look on me.”

It took Chat a little while to respond, she was trying to figure out how to. "Come on. I mean what's the worst that could realistically happen? Adrienne doesn't seem the type to judge you for something like that."

“Really? The millionaire teenage supermodel, not superficial? Like, don’t get me wrong...Adrienne’s wonderful. But...” Marin’s voice trailed off and he looked away. “But even she’s gotta have her limits. And I think I found out what they were the other night.”

“Just...promise me you'll at least try?” Chat asked, trying not to be suspicious by pushing it too hard, but also trying not to act like it wasn't a big deal. "You never know, she could be thinking about something completely different."

“I dunno. Something tells me I’m right.” Marin backed away. Adrienne rejected Marin but got all cozy with someone exactly like Marin. At least, someone who should be exactly like Marin, right? Hell, somebody who was Marin. She rejected and accepted him at the same time—with but one difference between Marin and Marin.

He looked up at Chat apologetically. “Sorry, I-I didn’t mean to sound so cold.” His face twisted into a smile that reminded her of her mother-cold, methodical. “But maybe Adrienne might find
The girl was taken aback. What did he mean by that? She didn't like that smile, either. It made her shudder, thinking of her mother. She used that smile when she was thinking, calculating in her head. Sometimes even planning something that usually ended in her despair. She felt her heartbeat rise, and it felt like she couldn't breathe. "Uh-I, um, need to-I need to get back to patrol, Marin. Can I come back tomorrow?" She asked, still feeling trapped. She didn't know why it'd bothered her so much. It shouldn't have.

"Yeah. Feel free." Marin took another sip of his wine. Tikki flew out the look of concern widening on her face. “I’m going to do it, Tikki. This really is the only way.”
“Marin, you have to consider this carefully.” Chat had left hours ago, leaving Marin to stew in his own juices. Finally, Tikki could come out of her hiding spot. She knew Marin would want to talk about what Alain said about Adrienne, and who she’d turned him down for, and Chat Noire’s advice on top of that. What were the odds?

“Marin, are you sure you want to do that? I mean, you can’t see her as Ladybeetle, can you? She’s going to want to know who you are,” there were plenty more concerns Tikki had. And as much as he hated to be skeptical, he wanted to know that Marin was absolutely sure of what he was doing.

“You really don’t understand, don’t you?” Marin giggled. “It’s fine. Adrienne will finally be satisfied with me. It’ll be okay!” Marin sighed. “I don’t think she has any intention on caring about who I really am, she’s made that abundantly clear. But maybe I should do it tomorrow or later, just to wave off suspicion...what do you think?”

“I...I don’t know...” Tikki’s face was full of concern. Of course, one look at how excited his friend was, and he had to agree, especially with how upset he’d been earlier. “I mean-if you know what you’re doing...”

“I’ve been doing this for how many years now? I think I know, Tikki.” Marin nodded. “If she can’t love me as Marin but as Ladybeetle...I’ll take it.” He gave a terse, sad smile as he gritted his teeth. This is right. I’m sure of it. Tikki still had her doubts. Her concerns. Her anxious thoughts. However, she pushed them down and only nodded in response. “So, tomorrow?”

“Okay, I can do this.” Ladybeetle ran his fingers through his hair, checking his face in the mirror on his comms unit. “I can...” One look at Adrienne was enough to psych himself out. “Nope! I can’t do it.” He frowned and turned back around for one last look. The final look he got was Adrienne, staring up at him. She was playing with her hair, staring up at him with an interested look on her face. Guess I’m going to have to.

The second Adrienne got home, she’d face planted onto her bed for half an hour. Plagg tried to get her up, bellyaching about his hunger. She placated him, partly to placate him, partly to get her mind off of things.

She was sure Marin hated her now. He’d barely spoken a word to her all day. No, he didn’t speak a word to me all day. She hated being back to square one (more like square zero) with him. It ate away at her, and she wondered if she should have given him a chance-would that be so bad?

Finally, she got up and walked around the house, but didn’t feel like doing much. Some half-hearted homework, perhaps, but she couldn’t even finish that. She’d called Marin five minutes ago—of course he didn’t answer.

The girl resigned herself to wandering around her room, before a streak of red and black caught her eye. The streak solidified into Ladybeetle. Back so soon? Not that I mind. She rapped on the glass and motioned for him to come to her.

Marin gulped and leaped the distance across. “Uh...hey! How’s your night?” Did I really say that? Adrienne went over to unlock and open the window. “Uh...hey...? It’s, um, well,” she didn’t want to say how it was really going—no sense turning Ladybeetle off. She crossed her arms, huffed her
shoulders, and looked up at him. “It’s fine.”

“Mind if I, uh-mind if I come in?”

“Oh! Um, not at all,” Adrienne moved out of the way to let him in. “Come on in.”

“Good-great. Thanks!” Marin slid in, instinctively grabbing Adrienne’s hips to steady himself. “Oh! Sorry.” He sighed, looking up at her. “So, uh...how was your day?”

As Adrienne turned to close the window, she let her hair fall in her face, desperately trying to hide the growing blush on her face. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but, what are you doing here?” She asked, half because she was curious and half because she really didn’t want to answer the question about her day.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry, it’s just...” Marin paused. “I, um, I just finished up patrol, and I wanted to see you. Just because.” He gulped. “Listen, if you want me to leave...”

“No!” Realizing that that might have come off as a little forceful, Adrienne repeated it in a gentler tone. “I mean, no. I don’t have a problem with it,” she smiled softly. “So, is there a reason that you suddenly want to be friends? Not that I’m complaining, of course.”

Adrienne nodded, crossing her arms over her body. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, I don’t have a problem with it,” she smiled softly. “So, is there a reason that you suddenly want to be friends? Not that I’m complaining, of course.”

Marin felt the word friend burn into his chest. “I dunno. No offense, but...you seem like you might need one.”

Adrienne’s face fell into a bitter smile. “Yeah, you’re not wrong.” She walked past him to plop down on her couch. “Speaking of which, I’m pretty sure I just screwed up a pretty important friendship last night,” she admitted.

“Really? How come?” Marin sat next to her, nonchalantly draping an arm behind her on the couch as he realized he knew what she was talking about. “What did you do?”

“Well...” What’s the worst that could come from telling him? He probably has no idea who Marin even is. “I have-had-I had a friend. We didn’t hang out all that often, usually with others, but I considered him a close friend because...he’d always been there for me, you know? Whenever I had any kind of problem, he would be there to help. I just...I could really tell he cared.”

Adrienne sighed. “And then...I found out his feelings weren’t completely platonic and...I couldn’t return them. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I couldn’t lie either! I had to tell him the truth, and now he’ll barely look at me, forget talking to me.” Adrienne pulled her knees to her chest, resting her head on them.

“So you friend-zoned him.” Ladybeetle’s face fell as he realized that she genuinely felt bad about it. "I...I’m sorry that happened. What was wrong with him?”

“Nothing! He’s amazing! Trustworthy, kind, reliable. He wants to be a designer, and he’s so good he’s even got my mother’s approval.” I don’t even get my mother’s approval. “I just...like someone else, and I couldn’t push those feelings away. Of course, that makes me wonder, if I didn’t like this other person, would I be able to return his feelings for me? I’m not sure, and I don’t know whether that makes me feel better or worse.”
“I get it.” Marin didn’t need to know exactly who it was. “I guess he’s hurting, you know? Give him time. He’ll come around.” Will I? Marin felt Tikki spinning around in his brain as he nodded to himself. *Yes, I will. I’m doing it right now.*

Ladybeetle leaned into Adrienne, and she felt him waft waves of much-needed heat into her cold frame. Adrienne leaned her head on Ladybeetle’s shoulder, letting her eyes close for a brief moment. “I hope so,” she murmured. “He’s really important to me, Ladybeetle. I don’t know what to do if he doesn’t.”

Adrienne raised her head; would Marin be okay with that? *Would he even believe me if I said that?* She shook her head. “But you don’t want to hear about my sad drama, do you? What about you? Anything interesting that you can tell me?”

“Uh... not really. No akumas yet this week. Gives me a chance to unwind. Spend some time with you.” Marin bit his lip. *That had to work.*

Adrienne flushed, hoping he wouldn’t look up at her. “With me?” She almost couldn’t get the words out. Why did he want to spend time with her? Of course, she wasn’t going to complain. It seemed almost too good to be true.

“Yeah! I mean... you’re important. I find you important. Do you not want that?” Marin looked up at her to see her flushed face. “Seems you don’t, I should really go...”

“No! I mean, I do. It’s nice to be important to someone,” Adrienne had leaned up again, her legs crossed. “Especially if it’s you,” she mumbled, folding her hands neatly in her lap.

“And why’s that?” Ladybeetle was so close; Adrienne could feel his warm, mint-tinged breath on her cheek. If she were to turn her head, she would find their lips centimeters apart.

*Eep! Help!* Adrienne felt her heart speeding up, her face getting redder by the second. Suddenly, she was incapable of forming a sentence. *Stupid Ladybeetle. Stupid sexy Ladybeetle.* “L... um-“ Waving her hands, she finally found the right words. At least, she hoped. “Because you’re important to me, too.” She said, glancing up at his face. He was so close, all it would take was for her to lean forward only slightly. She was very tempted to do so.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Ladybeetle chuckled. “And why is that?”

“All the generic reasons, I guess. You’re Paris’s hero, an inspiration to all. And-“ Adrienne couldn’t bring herself to say it. What would she say? *I’ve been in love with you since the moment I saw you?* Kind of on the nose, Adrienne.

“And?” Ladybeetle held the silence for a few seconds before bursting out laughing, a cute little chortle that could be mistaken for a giggle. “Nevermind. I’ll drop it, it’s okay. Besides, I can already guess.” He pulled away, sitting up at the other side of the couch while glancing up at Adrienne.

“You can?” Adrienne’s heart stopped. Had she really been so obvious? As Chat Noire, she didn’t care how obvious she was. She could be anyone. Chat Noire was whoever she wanted to be. Adrienne was the nice, quiet, perfect daughter of Gabrielle Agreste. “That is to say- what do you guess, then?” She asked, trying to seem genuinely curious, and not like she was trying to figure out if he’d figured her out.

“You’re hopelessly in love with me?” *EEEP!* Adrienne’s eyes widened, and she froze. Probably looking like a deer in headlights, the girl was about to sell herself out. What would she say? *‘I
mean, I’m not hopelessly in love with you.’ Not only was that a lie, but it also wouldn’t help her case anyway. There was a painfully tense moment of silence.

Ladybeetle broke the silence by laughing again. He could practically hear Tikki internally shrieking inside the miraculous. “I kid, I kid. I have no idea.”

Adrienne let the breath she’d been holding out in a nervous giggle. “Very funny,” she tried to sound calm, but she was still getting her heart rate back to normal.

“I was close, wasn’t I?” Ladybeetle stood up and moseyed over to the window.

More like spot on, Adrienne thought quietly to herself, before standing up to follow him. “Feel free to tell me whenever you’re comfortable, but I gotta go for now. I’ll come back with food next time. See you...the night after tomorrow?”

“That long?” She asked teasingly, a gentle smile on her face.

Marin froze. He knew already, but her words sent a shiver up his spine. “Yeah. Got to keep up the suspense, ya know?” There was a small pause. “You gonna give me a kiss before I go?” He turned around to face her, looking up at her frightened, leering eyes.

It was Adrienne’s turn to freeze. Had he heard her? Or was he kidding again? Either way, he had offered. If she didn’t take the chance, she’d never forgive herself.

Putting on a confident smile, even though her heart was doing backflips in her chest, Adrienne walked over to him. She had to bend down a little, but she didn’t mind. Adrienne placed her hand on his shoulder, and gave him a small, sweet kiss on the cheek.

“If you want a real one, then you should wait until next week,” she smiled softly, backing away to let him leave.

Ladybeetle leaped onto the windowsill, the kiss like a shock of electricity right into his brain, reinvigorating him. “If I crash-land on the way home, it’s your fault!” He gave a loud whoop as he swung across the city, not stopping until he landed on his bed, detransforming in the process.

“Tikki! Tikki! Did you hear all that?”

“I did! Marin, it worked!” She still had her doubts about the arrangement, but for now, Marin was happy. So she’d let him have that. Besides, Adrienne seemed happy too. It was a win-win, thought Tikki. Right?

“Pound it?” Marin raised his fist to Tikki. Tikki returned it with the best attempt at a fist. “I don’t know...you are going over again tomorrow, right?”

“Youh, duh! Ugh, this is turning out so well. I don’t know what came over me! Was that some luck-confidence-magic thing?” He chuckled. “I guess the only question is; how do I deal with Adrienne as myself? Like, as in Marin-myself.” There was a pause from Tikki-something even Tikki couldn’t fully answer. “What about you as Marin? Are you gonna keep being friends with her?”

Marin frowned. “I guess either way, it doesn’t matter, but...I don’t know if I can bounce back from that. Socially, I guess. I suppose I’ll have to, cause we’ve got too many mutual friends to avoid each other. Plus, I think she feels bad about it, so it’s not worth beating a dead horse over.”

“What happens if she finds out who you are? She probably won’t like being lied to-what if she gets akumatized? What if you have to fight her and-“ Tikki stopped there, he figured Marin wouldn’t
want him to rain on his parade like that. “And what?”

“Forget I say anything,” she said sheepishly. “It probably won’t happen...”

Marin frowned. “Keeping her from finding out who I really am is our top priority, Tikki. We can’t let that happen for literally any reason at all. But I guess we do have to think of a plan in case that does happen...” Marin trailed off. “It won’t.”

“Okay.” Tikki shook her head. “So, we’re going next week, right?” Marin bit his lip, grinned, and turned to Tikki. “Hell yeah, we’re going next week.” *This isn’t so bad, after all.* “But Marin?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I mean...”

“Go ahead, nothing could burst my bubble!”

“No! Well...this could.” Marin looked to her, his face falling. “Tikki?”

“Sorry, I’ve said enough-”

“No, no, it’s...it’s all good.” He nodded. “Tell me.”

“It’s just...it’s not you.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s Ladybeetle she loves, Marin. I’m sorry, but...you have to know that.”

“I know, Tikki.” Marin’s face fell, before eerily rising again. The new smile was full of sadness but also full of determination. His voice began to crack. “I know.”
Adrienne woke up with a smile on her face, the sun bursting through her window and cascading onto her face. That last night was magical, and she was more than sure that there were a lot more magical nights to come.

She laid in bed for what seemed to be a long time for her, thinking about what she would do with Marin. Truth be told, he really should have moved on by this point. It would be so easy to pretend like the conversation hadn't happened. But it had, and she had to address it. Discreetly, of course.

She stood by the door of the classroom before class started, having already put her backpack in her seat, hoping to catch Marin before he even got into class.

Bingo. Marin was there, a happy blank look on his face. He didn’t even notice Adrienne. "Marin-Marin!" Adrienne called, following him. "Hey-we um, we need to talk. Can we talk?" She stood in front of him now, not even giving him the chance to sit down.

"Yeah.” Marin smirked—a small, coquettish smirk that reminded her of Clovis and Leo and her mother and even Ladybeetle. "Yeah, what did I do this time?"

Adrienne frowned, "No-nothing, I-I can just tell..." she trailed off, unsure of how to put it. "Things aren't okay between us, are they? You said they were but...I don't believe you," she said softly. There it was again. He smiled, it took her breath away.

"Things are fine with me, Adrienne. I can get over heartbreak perfectly okay. Is...everything okay with you?"

"Uh, yeah, I’m great!” Am I? Was everything okay with her? She thought so. She wanted to believe so. "Are you sure?" She asked timidly, treading lightly but trying again. "I just...feel like there's something bothering you about what happened."

"Wow, you finally got that?” Marin posed it as a joke. "No, it’s fine. I’m good. I wish you were a little more honest with me, but...but I get it.” An awkward pause. "Is there something you wanted me to say? That I, I cry myself to sleep every night? That I need you so, so much in my life? That I, what, I weep and wonder what might have been?” Marin snorted. "What do you want me to say?"

"No, of course not," Adrienne wanted to be nice. Understanding. Why couldn't he just come clean about what he was feeling? "Listen, Marin. If you decide to tell me what's been going on, because I know there's something else, then you can call me. Until then, maybe-maybe we should-" her voice broke off, she didn't know if she'd be able to complete the sentence. "Maybe we should steer clear of each other."

All pretense dropped. Marin lost her, and he suddenly realized he was about to lose her a second time. "What-what? Why?"

"I don't think it's healthy for us to be friends if we're distanced from each other, especially after what happened,” the girl started, looking close to tears. "I-If I don't know what's going on with you, or what's bothering you about it, then I can't help or-or ease your mind. I-" she glanced at the clock, looking for a way out. "Listen, I, uh-class is about to start and I...need to use the bathroom-" She barely got the sentence out before turning on her heel and walking quickly, briskly out of the classroom.

Marin stood there, wondering what was about to happen. And then it hit him. "Nope. Nope, nope,
nOPE, nOPE, nOPE.” He bolted for the men’s restroom.

She heard it in the stall. A familiar voice, one that seemed low and cold, but one that dripped with a maternal caring. “Adrienne. Adrienne, my poor, poor girl…” Adrienne had locked herself in the stall, not even noticing a dark butterfly fly itself in. When she realized it, though, it was too late. She felt trapped in her own mind. A part of her fighting against her persuasion, a bigger part embracing it. Oh no. This was bad, this was—oh. Perhaps not as bad as I’d originally thought.

“Adrienne, my dear? Can you hear me?” The voice was love and warmth and comfort and everything she needed—was this how Hawkmoth was so effective? “Tell me if you can.”

“Yes,” Adrienne nodded, feeling Plagg squirming in her jacket. “I can hear you.” She was itching to hear Hawkmoth again. She sounded so familiar, like a voice she’d craved to hear for a long time.

“Adrienne, I saw everything. I’m sorry I can’t knock any sense into that boy, but…but that’s where you come in, isn’t it?” There was a pause. “But I must know, why do you care about him so much that you need my…that you need my help?”

“He’s my friend,” she said immediately, clenching her fists tight. “At least, I thought he was. I—I’m not sure,” the girl frowned. Why did she care so much? It couldn’t be just because he was her friend, could it?

“Well, Simulacra—you’re about to turn his chest into a pincushion.”

“Yes, Hawkmoth.” The bubbles began to build up around Adrienne, and soon everything turned to blackness.
Chapter 10

Adrienne-no, Simulacra-took a deep breath. She kicked the door to the bathroom stall off its hinges, jumping up through the ceiling onto the roof. She would get Ladybeetle first: she knew Hawkmoth would want his miraculous. After that, she would come clean about her role as Chat Noire, and hand over her own miraculous.

Almost playfully, she skipped along the roof. “Maaaaaaaariiiinnnn,” she sang. “Come on out, I know you’re here!”

Marin’s voice called out to Adrienne from the second-floor balcony. ”Adrienne! Adrienne, come down here! Please. Let’s talk.”

"Okay, Marin," called out Adrienne as she swung down to see the rather frightened boy.

Marin sighed. “Adrienne, just stop. I-I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“First off, Marin, I’m not Adrienne,” the girl chided. “My name is Simulacra.” She thought for a moment, a wicked grin on her face.

“And second of all, you should have thought of that before you crossed me,” she said lowly, holding up the blade in her right hand and pointing it at him. “It’s too late to talk, Marin. If you wanted to talk, you should have done so earlier.” Without wasting another second, she threw herself forward, blade pointed directly at him.

Marin’s gaze hardened, before pulling Simulacra forward, holding her. He suddenly went up in a puff of smoke to reveal Renard Rouge. “Bug, NOW!” Adrienne felt herself shatter into a million pieces as Ladybeetle’s yo-yo pierced her skin—a skin made of fine china.

“Adrienne?” Ladybeetle hovered over her, looking for an akumatized object. “Where could it be? Is it her sweater—“

“Bug?”

“Yeah? I don’t-“ Renard could see the shards reconnecting with each other, centering around her sweater, seemingly fusing together-albeit with the cracks still visible. “Bug, figure it out or get out of here...” A leg had re-formed. And then an arm. And then a torso, and then- “Oh, god.” Ladybeetle turned around. “So that’s your special power.” This is all my fault. “Adrienne, Simulacra, please—“

Simulacra feigned a hurt look, standing and turning to face Ladybeetle. Her foot hadn’t completely reformed, but it was almost done. “Would you really hurt me, Ladybeetle?” She was taking slow steps towards him, showing no outward signs of attack. “I thought we were closer than that.”

She was about two feet away from him. After the next step, she sprang at him, face hardening into a hateful glare. She feigned to the left before striking hard to the right. Marin was too slow on the uptake; he went for the feint before he screeched when the blade hit his right side, gasping for breath and clutching his ribs. Ouch. Ouch, ouch, ouch.

“Don’t do this, Adrienne-“ He pulled back, yelling into his comm. “Chat, I need you, Akuma at CFD. Where the hell are you?”

The girl laughed, taking a moment to speak. “Looking for your sidekick? You won’t find her!” She
planted one blade into the ground, leaning on it. “How does it feel to be abandoned? To be all alone?” In a way, she wasn’t talking to Ladybeetle. She was trying to get under Marin’s skin, hurt Marin if he was listening. Perhaps she was digging up buried feelings about her parents. Now was no time for a therapy session, and the part of her in control didn’t care about those feelings. She only wanted Ladybeetle’s miraculous, as well as Marin on the end of her blade.

“I’m calling your bluff. You never left the school! Chat Noire is still on her way.” Ladybeetle backed away, his yo-yo still twirling. “And she’s not the only one here.”

“You don’t know what I know,” she sang, her cracked face contorted in what could only be a crooked grin.

Out of nowhere, Renard stepped forward while grabbing Simulacra’s arms and restraining her. Her swords clattered to the ground. “Ladybeetle, It’s in the sweater! The sweater’s the only thing not painted on!”

Adrienne immediately began struggling. There wasn’t anything she could do without harming the sweater, which held her Akuma.

“I know where she is!” She cried in desperation. “If you get rid of my Akuma, I won’t remember anything that happened! I know where she is! You’ll never see her again!” A complete and total lie with buried truths. She knew where Chat Noire was, but the only way to get her back was to break the Akuma. The girl could only hope Ladybeetle would take the bait.

“Wait, don’t!” Ladybeetle advanced on Simulacra, holding her head in his hands while looking up at her with his eyes. “Where is she? What are you talking about?” Alain was on standby, ready to rip the sweater in two at the first moment of contention. “Adrienne, please. Think of the time we spent together.”

“What? Our one not-date last night?”

Hawkmoth’s voice rang inside of Adrienne’s head. “Wait. Simulacra. What do you mean by that?” “Nothing,” Simulacra immediately responded, ignoring Ladybeetle’s pleas. “He means nothing.” It seemed to be a simple act of defiance. She didn’t want Hawkmoth, or anyone else to know about her time with him. It was theirs, and theirs alone.

“And I told you, Ladybeetle,” she mumbled. “I’m not Adrienne!” The girl broke free from her confines, though a couple pieces of her arms chipped off in the process. They flew up and snapped back into place. Her perfect porcelain body seemed to be getting more fragile the longer the fight went on and the more her emotions ran high. “I’ll tell you, but only if you give me your miraculous. If I don’t get it, you’ll spend the rest of your life looking for her.” Another lie, but hopefully believable.

A pause as Ladybeetle seriously thought that one over. No. Hawkmoth, Adrienne, Alain...everyone would know who I really am. “You know I can’t do that. If you have her, that means Hawkmoth has her, and her miraculous. If I give myself up, Hawkmoth wins.”

Alain rerestrained her, grabbing onto her torso while Marin continued to berate her. “And you akumatized yourself over what? Over Marin? I lose against Hawkmoth because you couldn’t get over the fact you hurt someone?”

“Uh, Ladybeetle? I’m really struggling now-”

“I was trying to fix it! I-“ I don’t care anymore, she thought, going deeper in despair. Why would I
care about fixing any sort of relationship I had with Marin? He’s the one who won’t let it go, he’s the entitled one here.

She struggled against Renard, attempting to scratch, stomp, or stab him in any way she could. "You’ll never see her again!" She was getting desperate. "Don’t you care about her? How will she feel when she finds out you abandoned her?"

“If what you’re saying is even true...I hope she’ll understand.” Marin looked down. He couldn’t compare what Adrienne did to him with what he was doing to Chat. “How do you think Marin felt?”

“Should I care?” She felt Renard’s grip on her tighten considerably when she spat out the words. “That’s beneath me! If you don’t give me your miraculous, I’ll take it.” She said, but there was a faraway look in her eyes that betrayed the real battle within herself. She blinked, and the look was gone, replaced by nothing but anger.

“Ladybeetle, she’s playing with you, snap out of it!” Renard bashed her side in with his recorder, trying to slow her down. Ladybeetle just stood there, lost for words. “He always was to you, wasn’t he? Beneath you.”

Simulacra let out a howl, the broken pieces of her side immediately coming back together. She ignored Renard as best she could, only going for Ladybeetle. “What do you care, Ladybeetle? You seemed more than happy to jump at the chance to comfort me. Reassure me. Why would you care what I think of him?”

“Because you got akumatized over it! At least now I know how you really feel about me.” Marin went for her, not even noticing his Freudian slip. “Alain, release the Akuma.” Alain went to rip the sweater.

“Wait, wha-“ The girl had noticed the slip, and wanted confirmation on it. Before she could get it, though, she heard a sickening riiip, and suddenly all she saw was black.

A moment later, she was on her knees, disoriented and confused. There was a crowd around her, citizens, and students alike gathered around to watch the spectacle.

“It’s fine, everyone!” Ladybeetle knelt to his feet and picked up Adrienne. “Give her some space!” He leaned in with a markedly changed tone to his voice. “I’ll get you out of here.” He swung away with her in tow, landing her on a nearby street. “Take the rest of the day off. I’ll talk things over with Damocles. Do you want me to swing by?”

Adrienne clung tightly to the hero, putting the missing pieces of her memory together. “Did I...?” She didn’t even finish the sentence; she very well knew the answer.

The girl was startled by a ringing in her pocket, her phone. When she answered, Nathaniel began talking in his monotone voice. “Adrienne, your mother saw what happened on the news. She’s demanded you come home right away. Where are you? I’ve been instructed to pick you up.” Still shaken, she gave him the name of the street, before finally getting to Ladybeetle. “I- no. I think I should...be alone.”

“Whatever you want. Either way, get here as soon as possible.” Nathaniel shrugged and leaned back into his chair.

After hanging up the phone, Adrienne turned to Ladybeetle. “I’m gonna...go for a walk,” she lied, putting on a fake smile.
“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, it’s fine,” Adrienne shook her head, hugging her elbows to her abdomen. “I can manage. I’m sure you have to clean up my mess anyways. I’m...really sorry,” her eyes were on her feet.

“Yeah, and I feel like I’d clean your mess best if I were here with you.” Ladybeetle took her had. “Please.”

Adrienne gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I would be lying if I said I didn’t want you to stay with me, but...” she took a deep breath. “I’ll be fine. I have something I need to do, anyways.”

“Yeah.” Marin nodded. “Go ahead.”

“But...could you come tonight? I need you.” Her voice sounded desperate. “Please. I need you.”

Marin reluctantly nodded. “Of course.” He reeled his yo-yo back before letting it fly, leaping over the school building to leave her alone in the alleyway.

She felt Plagg come out and look at her with an unusual expression of shame. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“Plagg, claws out!” She said, transforming before Plagg could even finish his sentence. When she did, she used to baton to help her hop on a rooftop, heading back towards the school.

She found Marin almost immediately. He was loitering inside the school, which was odd. He must have ran out during the Akuma attack. He looked up at her, then looked down just as soon, pretending not to notice her.

“Hey-Marin!” She called, going in the nearly abandoned school. “I heard about what happened. I’m sorry I couldn’t come, I was...dealing with something.” She paused. “Have you seen Ladybeetle? I need to let him know.”

“He...just left. Dealt with it himself, there’s nothing for you to worry about. Anything you want to tell me about?”

Chat shook her head. “No, why?” She bit her lip. “Is it about where I was? It was, uh, superhero business. I can’t really get into it,” she lied guiltily.

“Oh, okay! Yeah, sure. Can’t it wait until patrol, or is it that urgent?”

“I guess not,” Chat shrugged. “Ladybeetle can wait. I’ll tell him then.” She gave him a smile. “You should rest, after all that. I can talk to your teachers, they’ll excuse you.”


“I gotta go. See you soon?”

“Yeah.” Marin nodded, panting as she boosted herself off of the ground. “Marin!”

“Luka!” Marin whipped his head around to see the older girl. “Hey, are-”

“You okay?”

“Are you okay?” They stared at each other. “No, you go first.”
“Yeah, I’m fine, it happened near your class.” Luka nodded. “Are you okay?”

“I...” Marin remembered what Simulacra-no, Adrienne-no, both of them-no had said. He nodded his head. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry, they had us under the desks the entire time.”


She grinned and took his hand, gently pulling him away from the school. “Wait, don’t you want to talk with-”

“Marin, c’mon. You should play hooky once in your life,” Marin grinned. “Are you trying to be a bad influence on me?” She turned back and gave him that same grin. “Sometimes, I think I’m the best influence you need right now, kiddo.”

He stood there to catch his breath and his thoughts, staring at the back of Luka’s head as he followed her to her houseboat. Even though Luka was there with him, he couldn’t shake off his fears. It’s beneath me. God, what was that supposed to mean? And then he realized he knew exactly what it meant.

He was back at square one with Adrienne-as awkward as ever. What am I going to do now?
Adrienne had gone home, faced her mother (who was more than eager to forgive and forget this time, come to think of it), and then spent the rest of the day in her room, alone. She had a lot of time to think, and before she knew it, it had gotten dark. Climbing out of her window as Chat, the girl began patrolling the area, wanting to get a head start.

“Kitty?” Ladybeetle walked over to Chat Noire, hugging her before pulling her away and scanning her up and down for injuries. “Hey, I’m sorry about Simulacra. She said she kidnapped you?”

Chat wrapped her arms around him, before pulling away to hold him at arm’s length. “I sa- I mean, she said what?” The girl thought quickly, trying to come up with an answer before pretending to know what he was talking about. “Oh! Yeah, nothing too bad. I got locked in...a locker...” she said. It’d be a good cover for where she was, anyways.

“Oh, okay.” Ladybeetle nodded before pausing. “Wait a tic. You couldn’t get out using cataclysm?”

"It- um," Chat flushed, trying not to get caught in her lie. "I...didn't want to destroy school property...?"

“Even though you’ve seen me use Miraculous Cure a bazillion times?” Marin shook his head. “Sorry—not important. I managed to take her down all on my own.” There was another pause. “Oh—Marin told me that you had something to tell me?”

Chat Noire inwardly let out a relieved sigh when he dismissed it. “Just that I’m fine,” she shrugged. “I didn’t want you to worry too much about me,” the girl teased, sending a playful wink his way. “Oh, okay. Good.” Ladybeetle gave his own sigh. “That’s it? He said it was something pressing, from your tone today.”

"It's nothing, just...what exactly happened?" She was unable to keep herself from asking. She couldn't remember most of it, maybe a little bit? It all felt like a hazy dream.

“Oh, uh-kind of anticlimactic. She was somewhat easy to beat. No big deal. It was more the stuff she said.”

"What'd she say?" Chat could feel her composure slipping, and it felt like time had stopped. What did I say?

“Well...she got akumatized over rejecting Marin, and feeling bad about that? I don't know about that one, but anyways. She told me to hand over my miraculous in exchange for you, and I said no. Sorry about that.” Ladybeetle continued his story. “So then she asked how you would feel with me abandoning you, and then I asked how Marin felt, and then she said, her words not mine, ‘Should I care? That’s beneath me, now.’” There was an awkward pause. “I’m sorry about saying I wouldn’t rescue you. You know I would, right?”

Chat Noire had stopped listening after should I care? That’s beneath me now. She’d said that? Oh no, was Marin there? Did he hear? Surely he knew that was the akuma talking, not her. Her jaw dropped open, and she had a faraway look in her eyes, exactly like the one she’d had while akumatized. She couldn't talk to him, not now. Not after what she'd said, akumatized or not. She wasn't sure she'd be able to face him. Would he even want to talk to her? She doubted it.

“Chat? You’d know I’d save you, right?” Marin placed his hand on Chat’s shoulder. “Chat, you
still with me?"

The girl blinked, coming back to reality. There was a slight flush on her cheeks, and she was still bothered by his words. "I-I'm sorry...what did you say?"

Ladybeetle laughed. "Nevermind. Did whatever Adrienne say shake you up all that much?"

Chat put on a fake smile, though she wasn't sure she had the energy to keep up the facade. "Course not," she laughed, but it was humorless. "Was...was Marin there? Did he hear it?" Ladybeetle pursed his lips. "I'm afraid...he knows of it. He wasn't there to hear it."

Chat Noire felt her heart stop. He knows. "O-oh..." she looked down, doing everything she could to keep the tears back. The day had just been too much. She was exhausted, and it wasn't over yet.

"Chat?" Ladybeetle hugged her. He could see the tears coming to her eyes. "Chat, what's wrong?"

She couldn't keep it down anymore. As soon as he hugged her, she wrapped her arms tightly around him while letting out a sob. She stayed like that for a while, tears streaming down her face. "I-I'm sorry," she said, when she was finally able to speak, wiping furiously at the tears. "I..." She couldn't give him a viable excuse for why she'd broken down, not without giving away who she was.

"What're you sorry for, I-" Marin shook his head as he kept hugging her. "Sorry, it probably has nothing to do with what you're going through..."

She buried her face in between his neck and shoulder with her eyes clenched shut. "Wh- what do you mean?" She asked softly, trying desperately to stop the tears.

"Well...what you're torn up about and what Marin's going through, probably two different things. Right?" It took her a little while to respond. She wished they were completely different. "Uh...yeah," she said quietly, barely audible from her spot. "Completely different..." she didn't have it in her to make it believable.

"Well, unless you have a vested interest in Marin, clearly she doesn't," Ladybeetle snorted before looking at her. "Hey, do you want to sit this one out? I can patrol on my own."

Chat winced, biting her lip. She took a step back, hair covering her eyes, red from crying. "It's fine, Ladybeetle...I'll help," she said, nodding. It was as if she was convincing herself she could do it as well as him. "I can't stay put after getting stuck for the fight today." She tried for a smile. "I owe you that much."

"Okay. Oh...okay. If you think so." Ladybeetle squeezed Chat's hand. "Do you want to grab a boba or something? I think there's at least one place on our route that should be open."

Adrienne shrugged indifferently. "If you want to, I don't mind." Maybe going to get something would be good, keep her mind off of herself for a while. She knew she shouldn't take her mind off it, she should feel guilty. She didn't deserve her peace of mind right now. Not after what she'd said.

"Hey, what about your problems? I don't mean to pry, but...you don't seem to be all that okay either."

"Oh, nothing. Just relationship drama," Chat waved a hand dismissively, eager to not talk about it. "Nothing important, I'm fine."
“Okay. Alright.” Ladybeetle sighed as they leaped across the Rue St. Honore. “I’m guessing you
don’t want to talk about it?”

"Not really," She admitted, biting her lip as she followed him. "I'm sorry I...might open up at some
point. It's too fresh to tell you right now, and I think I need some time to think and figure
everything out."

“Yeah, I get it. I’m usually more open about it myself, but...I guess if I were to share my bullshit,
I’d have to admit some things to myself that I don’t want to,” said Marin. “Plus, it would be super
insensitive to you.”

Chat nodded, smiling softly. "Ah, it's alright. Might even give me an idea about how to handle my
drama." She paused. "You don't have to be open with me if you don't want."

“As much as it pains me to do,” said Marin as they crossed the river, skipping like stones across
under the Pont Alexandre III. “It’s not like I don’t want to, I do! But...I don’t know if I can just
yet.”

"I understand. I can't be closed up and expect you to be open,” the girl shook her head. She was
quiet for a while after that, lost in thought.

“It’s more like I...augh.” Marin shook his head. “Do you want to get something warm? And
starchy? Cause I think I need it.”

Chat let out a small laugh, nodding at Ladybeetle’s suggestion. "Sure, where do you want to go?"
She sometimes went into shops as Chat Noire, mainly ones that offered free food. Not that that's
what she wanted, of course! Okay. Maybe a little. But I always insist on paying!

“Actually...” Ladybeetle looked lost in thought for a second. “No can do.” He frowned. “I have a
hot date.”

“A hot...wait.” Chat grinned. “Is this the girl?”

“ I mean,” said Marin, pausing for effect, “Yeah! Yeah, it’s the girl!” She gave a loud whoop into
the night, partly for Ladybeetle’s benefit, but partly for her own-she’d had her suspicions that she
was Ladybeetle’s mystery girl ever since their first night together, but now they were confirmed.
All the anxiety of that day had passed, finally. She was the girl-and she’d better get ready.
Before he knew it, Marin Dupain-Cheng—no, Ladybeetle, he reminded himself, was at Adrienne’s house. He knocked on her window and smiled. She excitedly and wordlessly got up, ran over to the window, and opened it.

He gratefully slid inside, landing at her feet a few inches away from her. “Hey! How’re things?”

“I’m doing good, despite everything that’s happened.”

“Are you okay?”

“What do you...mean?” Marin lowered his head, looking up at Adrienne. “You just got akumatized a couple hours ago. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She giggled. “Yeah, I...I can get over it. But not without your help. So, what brings you here?” She could take a pretty good guess. “If you’re checking on me, that’s sweet, and I appreciate it. But I’m fine. I mean, my mother wants to pretend like Simulacra never happened, and I’m sure there will be backlash from the media, but...” She shrugged. “What can you do, you know?”

“And Marin?”

“What about Marin?”

“I just want to...listen, what you said. I know there’s at least a little truth behind the hurtful things akumas say, but I also know it’s not really my business.” Marin sighed and leaned next to her. “That being said...Simulacra said some things that were...less than ideal. She said something about Marin being beneath her—or, well, you, I guess—and I guess I was kind of shaken up by it.”

Adrienne stiffened at the mention of her words, and she refused to meet his eye. “I’m sorry, I—” She sighed deeply, twiddling her thumbs. “You have to understand that that was the akumatized me being a bitch. I don’t remember much, it’s all kind of hazy. But when you told me what I’d said? I’ve been thinking about that all day, and I feel awful. I just hope Marin doesn’t catch wind of it. He’d never speak to me again.”

“I...” Marin covered his face. “I think he heard. I’m so sorry.” He looked up at her, his face reddening. “But I guess it’s fair; I mean, he was the guy that got you akumatized.”

Adrienne snapped her head up, looking distressed. “He did? Oh, no.” Burying her face in her hands, she mumbled a muffled reply. “No matter what I do, I keep hurting him.” She looked back up. “What do I do? He knows I didn’t mean it, right? Marin is in no way beneath me.” Well, he is a little shorter, but now would be the wrong time to pun about it...

“I mean, there’s always the truth behind what the akumas say. So I guess if Marin does, he’s got a good reason to.”

"Not this time," Adrienne insisted. 

“Adrienne. I promise he’ll understand. You just need to talk to him.”

She backed away, shrugging to herself as she made the decision. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow.” She gave a weak smile as he sat down next to her. “I just...I really value our friendship, and I hope he wants to keep being my friend more than he wants to be my boyfriend. Because me rejecting him-
it’s really more of a reflection of me than it is of him. I want to live my life without losing him, and I feel like that’s happening.”

Ladybeetle sat down next to her, remorse threatening to cloud his face at any moment. He nodded. “I understand.”

She turned to him with an exasperated smile. “Hey, where’s the makeout session I was promised?”

Her question left Marin internally shrieking. God, if Leo and Kagami and Clovis could only see him now. Uhhh...what do I do?

Marin opted to lightly press into Adrienne, gently placing one of his hands on her hips while moving another hand up to her on. He broke from her for a second, pressing his forehead against hers while giving a light chuckle. “You’re a good kisser.”

Did I really say that?

It took all Adrienne had not to shriek and dive for her phone to call Nina. Should she tell her? Or keep it to herself? Would Nina actually believe that she was actually seeing Ladybeetle? Forget it, he’s talking to you! Adrienne let out a giggle, beaming. “Thank you, you’re pretty good yourself.”

“Really? It’s...” Marin thought about it. Why would you tell her it’s your first one, nimrod?

He gently ran a few fingers through her hair. “Can we do it again?”

Adrienne nodded, perhaps a little too eagerly. “I mean, of course. If you want. Of course, you don’t have to if you don’t want to!” Why would he ask if he didn’t want to, idiot? “I mean—never mind, forget that. I—um, of course!” Adrienne, cheeks flushed from embarrassment, winced at her own awkward rambling.

Who’s stuttering now, Adrienne? Ever so gently, Ladybeetle gently pushed Adrienne again, kissing her back as he ran his fingers through her hair. “By the way, your perfume smells nice.”

Adrienne kissed him back, leaning her back against the closed window. She felt like if she didn’t, she might pass out. The girl mumbled a lost response, something along the lines of a ‘thank you,’ but she never really got it out clearly.

Marin pulled back, looking at her with an amused but quizzical look on his face. “By the way...how come you did want me back so soon?”

“I like seeing you,” she admitted, running her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. “Truth be told, I’ve liked you for quite some time, now.”

“What a coincidence.” Ladybeetle gave Adrienne a confident smile—a false confidence which his alter ego didn’t have. “I hope you don’t think it’s weird, but, uh—I kind of planned my patrol routes along the billboards with you on them. I’m surprised Chat hasn’t caught on yet.”

“Huh,” Adrienne thought back. She hadn’t noticed, but now she realized that she had seen a lot of herself when covering Ladybeetle’s routes for whatever reasons. “I don’t think it’s weird at all. I practically stalk my friend’s Ladyblog. He’s very good at getting pictures that make you look good.” And then, as she looked down and away, she couldn’t help but mumble in an indecipherable tone. “All of my pictures make me look like a donkey.”

“Well...I like looking at you.” Ladybeetle interlaced his fingers with Adrienne’s. “I think you’re beautiful.” Adrienne’s cheeks flared up again, and she smiled shyly.
There was a pause before Ladybeetle’s eyes widened. “Oh, uh!” Marin held up a paper bag-a warm paper bag with the Dupain-Cheng Patisserie logo. It was quite crumpled and partially soaked in oil. “I almost forgot-I brought food.”

When he brought up food, Adrienne looked down at the bag, eyes wide. “No way! You go there, too? That’s like, one of my favorite places.”

Gently, she took the bag from him, going over to set it on the table in front of her couch before sitting on the couch. She patted the space next to her. “It’s still warm...you know the Dupain-Cheng’s? The bakery is usually closed by now.”

“Yeah, I...” Ladybeetle’s voice trailed off. They were closed for hours now, unless...

“Marin did me a solid. What can I say?” Not exactly a lie, but...would Adrienne think that Marin would be capable of that? Help his rival?

“Really?” Adrienne wondered if he’d told him what it was for, especially if Marin overheard Nina and her talking this morning. “He did that?” She had no reason not to believe him, so...besides, why would he lie about it? Shrugging to herself, Adrienne opened the bag. “I love going over there, his mom makes the best...well, everything.”

“And what about him?” Shut up, Marin. Shut up, shut up, please shut uuuup. “What do you think of him?”

“Marin’s great. He’s nice, reliable, and genuinely a good person.” She paused. “I really hope he finds someone who can make him as happy as he makes everyone else,” Adrienne said sincerely, crossing her legs up on the couch. “I think he’s a great designer, too. Even my mother thinks he has potential.”

Ladybeetle snorted and sat down on the couch, leaving the bag on the coffee table before nodding. “That’s nice.” There was a pause. “You don’t think there’s something...off about him?”

“I mean, sometimes he disappears after saying some excuse, usually about a bathroom. But I do it too.” Adrienne shrugged. “Why? Do you think there’s something off about him?” She asked curiously, tilting her head to the side.

“No, I didn’t mean any offense by that, but...you have to admit he’s rather...unique. Not like the other guys.” Marin sighed as he remembered the first time Clovis called him a sissy, all the way back in École. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

“Sure he is,” Adrienne leaned back, a faint smile on her face. “Doesn’t make him off.” She turned to face Ladybeetle with a relaxed expression on her face. “I get what you’re saying. Marin’s a little different. But he’s one of the best friends I could have asked for.”

Ladybeetle nodded before moving over to Adrienne and laying his head in her lap. “I getcha.” He paused for a second, unsure of what to say.

Adrienne looked down at him, gently running her fingers through his hair. “Speaking of friends, what do you think about Chat Noire?” She asked curiously, cocking her head to the side.

“Chat Noire?” Ladybeetle chuckled, cracking a wide smile. “She’s...she’s great, I love her. She...she really has my back in battle. I think I’d really be swiss cheese without her.” There was a pause. “Why do you ask, are you jealous?”

Adrienne shook her head, and couldn’t help but smile. “No, just wondering.” She couldn’t let any excitement she had for his words get out, he would wonder why she’d gotten excited about him
talking so highly about someone else. “Do you think her flirting makes your relationship awkward sometimes?”

Marin shook his head. “I mean...she’s joking, right? She’s not being serious. So I guess as long as it’s all jokes, I not going to let that be a hamper on our relationship.”

*Oh...so all this time, he thought I was joking? She felt herself getting miffed the more she thought about it; much more clear could she be? Of course, it didn’t matter now, did it? Hiding the disappointed expression she’d let slip for a moment, Adrienne shifted to a more comfortable position. “I bet it’s nice to have someone you can trust that much,” she said quietly, as if she didn’t have a person herself. Of course I do, she thought. I do, and he’s sitting right next to me.*

“And...all this time, he thought I was joking? She felt herself getting miffed the more she thought about it; much more clear could she be? Of course, it didn’t matter now, did it? Hiding the disappointed expression she’d let slip for a moment, Adrienne shifted to a more comfortable position. “I bet it’s nice to have someone you can trust that much,” she said quietly, as if she didn’t have a person herself. Of course I do, she thought. I do, and he’s sitting right next to me.*

“Yeah! It is. I’d trust her with my life, Adrienne. And I haven’t been disappointed yet!”

Adrienne felt her heart swell once again. The fact that he said that about her? And he didn’t even know she was asking about herself? She was certain she’d never find a better person in her life.

Her happy thoughts were interrupted by panicked ones. “Hey, um, you don’t have to do any kind of patrol tonight, do you?” She asked, before adding. “I mean, assuming you guys do that. I know I see you outside my window, on the buildings.”

“Hmmm...” Marin thought about it. “I can skip a night. Chat’s been busy a lot of patrol nights. I don’t think she’ll mind if I take a breath with the other important girl in my life.”

Adrienne smiled, continuing to rake her fingers gently through his hair. “So...what does this make us?” She asked, perhaps a little boldly.

“I...I don’t know.” Ladybeetle sat up. “I’d definitely agree with you if you said that this is going a little fast. If you don’t want to be there yet, I completely understand.” Ladybeetle pursed his lips. “I’d be remiss if I didn’t want to be with you, though.”

Adrienne let her hands fall into her lap, turning towards him. “Maybe...we should go a little slower. I mean, we don’t even really know each other, do we?” Not completely true. Adrienne might not know Ladybeetle, but Chat Noire did. He didn’t know that, though. And if they were going to get closer, she wanted him to get to know her, not her alter ego.

“I mean...” Ladybeetle might not know Adrienne, but she was one of Marin’s best friends. Marin realized that this was really an ideal setup...“I don’t know.” He sat next to her, placing a hand on hers. “I feel like I’ve known you for the longest time.”

“Me too.” Of course, she had known him for a long time. By what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, right? She moved her hand to hold his, clasping their fingers together. “But maybe, just for now, we should work on really getting to know each other better. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” Ladybeetle nodded. “Mhm, I get it. But, uh-but about that. Adrienne, if we’re to really be-well, whatever we are-you can’t know who I am. Not under the mask. That’s my only condition. Are you okay with that?” Ladybeetle suddenly seemed quite vulnerable at that moment, reminding Adrienne of Marin.

“I...I guess so,” Adrienne was taken aback by the statement. She hadn’t even thought about it before, but now...what happened if things ended up getting serious? She had doubts, but as of now, she’d respect his wishes. Who was to say they would last that long, anyways? So...“I’m completely alright with that.”

Marin let out a long sigh of relief, before straightening up. “Thanks. I, uh-really needed that.”
Ladybeetle moved in, grinning up at Adrienne. “So now that that’s out of the way, let’s get to know each other better.”

Adrienne couldn’t help but smile, leaning closer to him. The whole situation felt like a dream, especially because it happened right after Adrienne had been afraid she would lose a good friend. *Strange coincidence, huh?* "Can I ask a question, Ladybeetle?"

Ladybeetle looked up at her, cuddling into her like a hot ball of warmth. “Yeah, sure, what is it?”
Chapter 13

Adrienne sat at her desk, still giddy from the night that happened a week before. She was dying to tell Nina, but she knew she couldn’t tell anyone, not even her best friend. People were filing into the classroom, and after a moment, Nina plopped down next to her with tired eyes. Both girls mumbled ‘hello’ to each other, one girl’s hello much more eager than the other.

“You seem chipper.”

“I am chipper.”

“What’re you chipper about, babe?”

“Hmmm...nothing! I got nine hours of sleep!” Nina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that would be something to be chipper about.” Out of the corner of her eye, Adrienne could see Marin looking into his mirror at his locker, doing a last-minute touch-up. “There’s someone who’s not being chipper.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?” Nina shrugged. “Babe, if he’s still going to be bitter about it...”

“I know, I know, but...he’s still my friend, you know? And I want it to stay that way. At least, I wanna know if it’s still possible. You know?” She had to do something.

Adrienne, without even thinking about it, stood up. Ignoring Nina’s protests, she made a beeline for Marin. “Hey, Marin,” She called out softly, her teeth perched ever so nervously on the back of her lip. “How, um, how are you?” She walked up to him, her fingers anxiously tapping together. He merely turned around and smiled at Adrienne calmly. “Hey, Adrienne. What do you want?” He was at peace—but it was a strange sort of peace, something to be nervous about.

“Er-to talk? I don’t like how we left things at Alain’s, and we haven’t talked since...” Adrienne wasn’t used to be so awkward, especially with her friends. Of course, she didn’t mind it as long as she made sure they were okay.

Marin pursed his lips, feigning exasperation. “Alright, then. Talk.” He checked his watch and wondered if he was going too far.

Adrienne winced before attempting a half-hearted smile. “I...I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I really had no idea how you felt, and I hope that my feelings don’t come in between us being friends. You’re a really important person to me, and I really don’t want to lose you as a friend.” The more she talked, the faster she spoke, out of some misguided worry that he would lose interest and walk away.

Marin thought about it. It certainly might be a blow to his pride. He would fail, and not only fail to net Adrienne Agreste, but fail in ways he couldn’t think of, failed in ways that he had failed so many times before. And he thought about how being friends with her would acknowledge that and take the hit in some sick, weird way.

And then he thought about her. He thought about how upset she was in disappointing him, how scared she was in losing him as a friend. How much both sides of him mattered to her, in different ways.
And then he realized that to drop her as a friend would put his own anxieties and fears over his love for her—her as a crush, her as a person, her as a friend. And that was a call he couldn’t make.

“Sure, Adrienne. No problem.” He extended his arms for a hug. I’m making the right choice. Besides, I’m still dating her, right?

Adrienne’s face settled with relief she felt wash over her as soon as he started speaking. Without a word, without hesitation, she threw her arms around him in a tight hug. The girl had her arms around his shoulders, and she had to bend down slightly to reach him comfortably, but she hugged him tightly nonetheless.

“You don’t know how much that means to me,” she said quietly, before letting him go. “Ah! I’m sorry if I hugged you too tight.”

“It’s fine. Keep hugging me as long as you want.” Marin chuckled, his body continuing to warm her cold frame. “Seems like you need it.”

“Yeah, I really do.” Adrienne kept smiling, she was feeling a lot of things. Happiness, relief, excitement. “Thank you, Marin.” She said sincerely, holding his shoulders at arm’s length. Marin separated from Adrienne, holding on to both her hands. “I’m glad. So, how much more late to class do you want to get?”

Adrienne looked around, realizing that they were alone in the hallway. “Oh! Crap, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize we were late,” she let her arms fall back to her side. “We should probably get to class, then.” She didn’t exactly feel like being scolded by teachers, but there was nothing to do about it now.

“Yeah! Let’s, uh-let’s go.” Marin’s face tinged a bright pink as he felt Tikki wriggle around happily in his pocket.

As soon as the bell rang, Adrienne ran out the door, Nina right on her heels. “Please tell me he didn’t hit you or anything.”

“God, no, it’s nothing like that!” Practically beaming, Adrienne whispered back to her. “I think Marin and I sorted things out. We’re back to being friends!”

“Really? What happened? You got to tell me, sis.” Nina turned inwards, careful not to let Marin in on it.

“I asked him if we could talk. I apologize again for what happened, and a couple minutes later we were hugging. I feel so much better now, Nina. I couldn’t stand him being mad at me,” Adrienne said to her. Nina poked her right in the ribs. “You’re not off the hook yet, young lady. What did you want to tell me about something that happened last night? You’re full of secrets today.”

“Weeeeell...I got a visit from surprise Ladybeetle last week. Totally random, I know.” Nina rolled her eyes. “Oh, as you do. What did he want? You don’t just get random calls from Ladybeetle.”

“We talked for a little bit, and then he left.” Adrienne wasn’t going to tell Nina everything about their date—if she could even call it such. She’d told herself that if she were to get involved, it had to stay secret. But...letting her in on a little bit wouldn’t hurt, right? “And...I kissed his cheek before he left.”

“Oooooohhh, okay, okay! Get some, Adri!” Nina giggled while nudging into Adrienne’s side. Nobody heard that but Marin at the next table over, who tensed up out of habit. No one noticed THAT tense up, except for Adrienne.
Adrienne’s eyes widened as she shushed Nina. “Nina! Be quiet!” Her face was getting redder by the second. But of the corner of her eye, she saw Marin tense up. Oh no. Did he think she was seeing Ladybeetle right after rejecting him? Well, kind of. But nothing had happened! Not really, anyways. That counted, right?

“It’s not like that! It’s just...um-well, uh-“ unable to come up with a believable excuse, Adrienne simply let her words trail off, gesturing with her hand as if that explained it.

“Hey, if you’re banging Ladybeetle, I’m not going to judge you. It’s none of my business.” Nina giggled under her hijab and gave Adrienne’s arm a light squeeze.

“But really, I have to ask...what’s wrong with Marin? I mean, I know he’s-“ Nina’s voice darkened-“He’s not exactly a typical guy, but...he’s okay at least, right? I mean, even I had a crush on him for a hot sec.” There was a pause as they both thought. Adrienne bit her lip, trying not to glance back at Marin. What was wrong with him? She couldn’t find anything.

“Is it a height thing?”

“No! Definitely not. I mean, Ladybeetle is shorter than me, anyway.” The girl whispered in a hurry. “I-I’m not sure though. I’ve always been in love with Ladybeetle, so I guess I never really thought about anyone else...” She said, quieter this time. “But I am not banging Ladybeetle.”

“But you will be?”

“Ugh, maybe in the cards. I’m seeing him tonight.”

“Ohhh, seriously? Ugh, make sure to steal some pantyhose from your mom’s office. Try to spice things up!”

“Nina, no!”
“Spots off!” Marin detransformed in mid-air before landing on his knees. “Ow! Ow, ow.”

He limped to his bed and laid down on the bed, looking up to the ceiling. Big mistake. But it was worth it, that felt great! He turned to Tikki, grinning and chuckling to himself.

“Tikki! Fill up as fast as you can, I have to get out there asap. C’mon, this is our two month anniversary!” He was truly giddy if it was the two month that he was celebrating.

“Marin...”

“Yes, I know, I know! People celebrate the one month and three month, but c’mon! I’ll take whatever excuse I can get to see her. You get me, right?”

For now, there was nothing but silence from Tikki. “Tikki?” Marin got out of the bed, sitting up and looking around to see Tikki doing nothing. “Tikki?”

Tikki had been nervous about having to do this. She didn't usually disagree with Marin, but here she had to take a stand. This had gone on long enough. "No," she squeaked out, head hanging low. "I can't help you do that anymore." She looked up at her chosen to stand her ground. "I'm sorry Marin, it's just...it doesn't feel right!"

“What?” Marin sat up, looking straight at Tikki. "Why?" His nostrils flared as he rounded on Tikki, his eyes desperate. "Adrienne’s feeling really bad right now. And-and she basically put the nail in the coffin between her and I as today, if you weren’t paying attention to the two of us. So if there’s any reason you have for backing out of this so soon, I need to know now-"

"You're lying to her, Marin! If she were to ever find out that you're Ladybeetle, she'd..." Tikki trailed off, not even able to finish the thought. "Besides that, there's still the moral issue! You can't keep lying like this!" She took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I won't support you tricking your friend-girlfriend-whatever- anymore!"

“Oh, she’s not my girlfriend, Tikki, I think she’s made that more than clear,” hissed Marin. “And in what universe am I lying, exactly? I’d only by lying if I wasn’t Ladybeetle.” He crossed his arms. “I thought I’d have to change myself for her approval, and I don’t even have to do that! Jesus, do you want me to be miserable?”

"No, of course not!" Tikki was losing his confidence. "I just don't like that you're pretending! You are lying, whether you mean to or not. She thinks that Marin and Ladybeetle are two completely different people. She feels bad about rejecting Marin because she likes Ladybeetle and you just...let it happen! I just...at some point, the truth is going to have to come out. I don't want things to get more complicated when it does."

“So if you’re going to pull out of this because of an issue you have with me, I guess you obviously have an alternative solution,” sad Marin, his eyes glaring at Tikki. “Right?”

Tikki winced, shrugging lightly. "Well, you could always...tell her the truth," she said, her voice registering barely above a whisper.

“You mean reveal myself to her?” Marin smirked. “Didn’t we agree on day one that revealing myself to anyone was a bad idea?”
"I- yes! But..." Tikki was at a loss for words. She didn't have any other ideas, but she wouldn't just let Marin keep doing what he was doing. She had a bad feeling that it wouldn't end well for anyone.

“Answer me this, Tikki, would you be satisfied with breaking me and Adrienne up for good if it meant I wouldn’t see her anymore as Ladybeetle?” Marin’s face had gone back to desperation, wondering what Tikki was going to say.

"Yes! No! I don't know..." The kwami took a deep breath. "It's wrong to be her friend as Marin, and something more as Ladybeetle, when she thinks you're someone else. It's not fair. To you or her. How do you not get that?"

“Don’t talk to me about fairness. How is it not fair to me? I would be willing to do whatever it took, change every little piece of me just to her liking.” Marin pursed his lips, and pressed his palms against his eyes. “She said I was beneath her, Tikki. And I know it was Simulacra that said it, but you know that there’s truth behind what every akuma says.”

"She also said you'd never see Chat Noire again if you didn't give her your miraculous," said a desperate Tikki.

“How is it not fa-”

"It's not fair because you're literally hiding behind a mask. When you talk to her as Ladybeetle, you're not...you. You're Ladybeetle, and that's different than Marin and you should be trying to win her over as Marin and not Ladybeetle and..." the kwami finally took a breath as Marin sat there numbly.

“I...don’t follow.” Marin walked over and placed a tray of cookies pointedly over to where Tikki was sitting. “Tikki, if the concept of ‘winning her over’ after she rejected me isn’t incredibly sexist already, I think all three of us established that romantically, she wants nothing to do with me and everything to do with Ladybeetle!” Marin pursed his lips and moved the plate towards Tikki. “Either way, you need energy. Eat.”

Tikki shook his head. "No." After a moment, she added to her argument. "Besides, that's not completely true! You're not completely different from Ladybeetle. She's called you an everyday Ladybeetle before, hasn't she? Of course she likes you, I mean-she likes Ladybeetle!” Tikki's logic was getting more jumbled the more she talked, but she kept going nonetheless.

“She likes me because she likes Ladybeetle because I am Ladybeetle.” He sighed. “Tikki, she rejected me. And then she said, although it was in her akumatized form, that I was beneath her. That’s fine. I’m hurt by it, but yeah, that’s how it’s going to go. This is...the best I can do. It’s the best I’m ever going to get with her.” He quickly tried to blink some tears away. “Tikki, please eat.”

Tikki had seen the tears, and she was torn. She wanted Marin to be happy, but would he really be happy like this? Eventually, Adrienne would want something more permanent with him, if they lasted that long. "I..."

“Or maybe you are right, maybe I should just move on. Settle for someone else. I don’t deserve her.” Marin nodded, and his face showed no hint of sarcasm-or maybe just a little. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Why did I even think I was possible in the first place?”

"No! That's not what I'm saying!" The kwami was obviously distressed. Her mind was going a million miles an hour. "I-I-fine!" Begrudgingly, she picked up a cookie from the plate and began eating it.
Marin looked down at his desk while Tikki ate. “Tikki, do you honestly think that Adrienne could love me back as Marin?” He scratched his cheek. “Are you still in denial?”

“Yes, I do!” Tikki nodded vigorously, with a mouth full of cookie. She took another one after swallowing the first one. “The fact that she loves you as Ladybeetle means she could love you as Marin.”

“Could is different than does. I want does, and I just...” Marin’s voice began to crack. “I just don’t want to compromise, for once.”

Tikki frowned, biting into the cookie. ”Come on, Marin! You can't seriously be completely okay with lying to her.”

“But...” Marin let his voice trail off as he shrugged. “Tikki, it’s not lying, right? Cause I am Ladybeetle, if you haven’t noticed.” His eyes narrowed. “Unless you think there are differences between me and...well, me?”

“It's because she thinks you're two different people. The fact that you keep it up is deceitful at best. What happens if she finds out? You know how she feels about liars,” said Tikki as she shook her head.

“And I feel even worse about liars, but...” Marin’s voice trailed off. “I can’t. My hands are tied.”

“So I’ll untie them,” said Tikki. “Listen, Marin, I don’t want to do this, but...I can renounce you as a chosen. You have a duty as Ladybeetle that stretches beyond any one crush. And if you’re going to pick yourself over the city...”

Marin paused. Would she actually go through that? He stood there in silence as he thought of a plan. “Wait. Okay, weird, sick, twisted idea time. But hear me out. This is what we’re gonna do...”

Adrienne sat on her couch expectantly. She’d been waiting all afternoon-no, all day for the sun to go down. She had been talking to Plagg, who was eating Camembert from a plate brought up by the chef. She’d opted for a pair of clean, baggy sweatpants and a green and gold flannel on top of the same shirt that she seemed to wear all the time. “Plagg, how do I-”

“Your dad was Emil Agreste, you look perfect.”

“Oh...kay.” As soon as she saw a streak of black and red outside her window, though, she shooed Plagg to hide, taking one last look in her mirror across the room. She looked presentable, she hoped (she took Clovis’s advice for once: heavy on the makeup but dress down.)

Adrienne opened her window, smiling as the small streak of black and red that shimmied down her window. “So you did come.”

“I can’t say no to you.” Ladybeetle slid down to the floor. “Now. I believe I get a kiss for coming tonight?” He grinned, cocking his head to one side.

“Hmm...” Adrienne pretended to think about it. “Did I say that?” She closed the window behind him, before turning around again.

“I...believe you did.” Ladybeetle gently pushed Adrienne, leaning into her while standing on half-tiptoe.

Adrienne’s heart was racing. She was going to do it. She was going to kiss Ladybeetle. It was
going to—she couldn’t do it. God, what was she thinking? What if she was a bad kisser? What if he
decided he never wanted to see her again? What if—oh, man. If Nina were here, she would slap the
shit out of her. Adrienne could almost hear her: Do it! He’s right there! And waiting on you!

Marin pressed his lips against hers, smelling the strawberry-scented lipstick on her. He pulled
away, leaning against the wall. “So...how’re things?”

Adrienne opened the window, smiling to herself. She was eager to put everything in the past and
forget about it just for tonight, but at the same time she felt a lingering feeling it wasn’t going to be
that easy. Stepping out of the way, she gestured for him to come in. “They’ve been better, but... I
think I’m mostly over Marin, and I think he is too!”

Ladybeetle nodded and then smirked. “Why’re you so worried about what he thinks? I’m getting a
little jealous. Arent’ you, you know, not into him?”

"He's my friend, Ladybeetle. He's nice, and he genuinely cares about what I'm thinking, or feeling." Frowning, she leaned her head against his shoulder, scooping down to get more comfortable. "Ever
since I met him, he was the same Marin. A lot of people were nice to me because I was Adrienne Agreste. Model daughter of Gabrielle Agreste, who plays a dumb piano and can fence and maybe
ask for dumplings in stupid Chinese. Marin thought I was trying to help Clovis stick gum in his
seat, and wouldn't talk to me for a while. He didn't see my last name, you know? Even Nina
admitted she saw the name before the person. I may not be into him like that but I still care about
him."

Marin paused and lowered his head. “Seems like you really like him. You really do care about how
he thinks of you.” He looked up and stared ahead of him. “But you can’t love him.” He shook his
head. “Sorry; god, I don’t mean to probe—"

“No, you’re good!” Adrienne nodded, "I do care about him. But, you're right. I wonder if I wasn't
in love with you, then would I-" she shook her head. "You wouldn't want to hear that, I'm sorry. I
just want everyone to be happy, but should that come at the cost of my own happiness? And, if it
does, am I willing to sacrifice it? I mean, I'd love to think I am, but the decisions I'm making
lately..." The girl laughed bitterly. "Sorry, didn't mean to get all 'sacrificial' on you."

“I know what you’re saying.” Marin paused. “And I’m thinking of something. Adrienne, if you
couldn’t be in love with me—would you give Marin a chance?” His breath hitched. Here we go.

"I..." Her voice faltered. "I don't know, maybe? It's hard to imagine a life not knowing you," she
admitted. "Are you sure that's something you want me to talk about? I mean, he did confess
feelings for me, and you and I are...something, I guess." She flushed lightly. "Why do you want to
know?"

“This is dangerous, Adrienne. For both of us. And...” Marin took a deep breath, and held her hand
tightly. “Which is why I think it’s best—"

“What?” He almost descended into sobs right then and there— why was this so hard? “You don’t
mean—” she cut herself off, holding both his hands in hers. “Oh, god, I’m so sorry.” He had fought
for this so hard, and now he was going to throw it away with both hands.

Adrienne’s heart stopped. “Ladybeetle, no.” She tried to look him in the eye, reaching up to cup his
cheek in her hand. “You’re not- you don’t mean what I think you mean—"

“It’s not you, it’s me, I’m so sorry, I didn’t want to do this-Tikki told me the risks!” He fell into
Adrienne’s shoulder, and realized that his crocodile tears weren’t so fake after all.
"He-hey," she wrapped her arms around him, shaking her head.

"I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to be like this! It’s Hawkmoth, he’s too powerful. When he gets defeated—"

"I don’t care about any risks, okay? I can take care of myself, you don’t get to decide what’s too dangerous for me." There were tears in her eyes, and she pulled away to press their foreheads together.

"I’m sorry, I’m so, so, sorry—"

"If you still love me, like you said you did, then we’ll both take the risks." Adrienne let her eyes fall, worry forming in the pit of her stomach. "Unless...unless it is me."

"What?" Ladybeetle backed away-he’d underestimated how she felt for him. "Why would it be you? It’s not you, you’re doing fine. You’re doing great, I love you!"

"Then why are we standing around talking about this?" Adrienne let her hands fall in her lap after wiping tears from her eyes. "Please just be honest with me. You got too close, didn’t you? Decided you liked me better when I was just a pretty face on a billboard. Frowning, she looked at her feet. "It’s okay. I’ll be okay if you don’t really love me. Nobody really does, in the end—"

"No!" Ladybeetle paused, his heart skipping a beat.

"No. No, she can’t think that."

"But she’s got to, hasn’t she? Thought another voice. A horrible pit opened up in the bottom of his heart as the silence lengthened. “Well?”

"Adrienne, I-please, don’t say it like that.” This is how it should be, said Tikki inside his head. This is how it needs to be. “But this is how it needs to be.” He tried to act as cold and dispassionate as possible—and didn’t know if it was working or not.

Adrienne had said she’d be okay, but he’d just confirmed it. He liked the idea of Adrienne Agreste better. She cleared her throat, nodding as if she were convincing herself. "Alright. I understand. Please don’t...don’t try to make it sound noble," she said softly, her lips pursed together. "Don’t pretend."

“It’s a...” Ladybeetle bit his lip, “Should I go? I should stay—” Adrienne scoffed. "You don’t have a reason to stay, do you?" They could both hear the bite to her voice. She didn't mean to act so bitter, but could Marin blame her?

"I don’t want you to get akumatized again—"

"Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine," she said. The girl still refused to meet his eye. "I'm sorry I wasn't what you were expecting," she mumbled.

"I’m sorry I couldn’t be what you wanted," mumbled Ladybeetle as he headed for the window. "Good night."

"Good night," she said, but it was offhanded, her mind was somewhere else. She stood there silently, choking back as sob before closing the window behind him.

Marin rushed home, panicking as usual. He hit the deck of his balcony, sprawling out across the floor. He stared up at the Paris light. What a night. “Spots off.” He stood up solemnly and glared at Tikki. “I hope you’re happy. Now she’s even more miserable.”
Tikki shook her head. "It's not ideal, Marin, but it was for the best." She paused. "You shouldn't give up on her completely, you know. Maybe now, as Marin..."

“Whatever happened to me being beneath her?” Marin scoffed.

“Do you really think she believes that, though?” Tikki frowned. “Maybe you’re right. But that doesn’t feel right.”

Marin stepped back. “So what, she runs into my arms, and I’m her shoulder to cry on? I’m the guy who she settles for, but will never love as much as the one who got away? That sounds...less than ideal.”

“It was your plan. And I mean, you don’t have to do anything like that, or rush anything but... I think you two would be great together. Adrienne and Marin.”

“Tell her that.” He backed away. “Do you have a plan? You’re the one who got me into this.”

“Well, no.” Tikki blinked, shaking her head as she felt herself become more and more desperate. “I wouldn’t do anything so soon but, I don’t know- be a friend for a bit? You both might need one.”

“You mean to say you broke me and Adrienne up, and you didn’t have a plan to get us back together? I-“ Marin facepalmed. “I’m sorry, I was focused on one thing at a time!” Tikki frowned, thinking.

“And that thing was breaking me up with my crush. Yeah, great going.”

“Marin, I...listen, Either way, you have a responsibility as Ladybeetle. You can't afford to distract yourself with...with nothing, really!”

“Really wrong choice of words right now, Tikki-”

“Right, right, I just...” Tikki’s boundless patience was about to run out. “I mean...I’m just saying that it might not be worth it to reveal yourself to her.” Marin was silent, so Tikki decided to go for the jugular. “Also, you know...Adrienne isn't the only person out there. You’ve been rejecting girls left and right yourself, right?”

“Yeah. I’ll give you one guess on who I was rejecting them for.” Marin stared out of the window, into the Parisian night. “It’s just Adrienne. It’ll always be her.”

That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Tikki paused, and it all snapped for her. She shook her head, pursing her lips in silent fury. “ Shut up.”
Chapter 15

“What?” Marin was taken aback. He’d never heard Tikki like this, and certainly never to him.

“Shut up! Shut up! Right now!” Tikki balled her little hands into her fists, her eyes burning into Marin’s. The room went down about twenty degrees as Marin’s face went wide with terror.

“Tikki, I don’t understand—”

“Oh my god, Marin.”

“What’s going o—”

“Do you hear yourself right now? Do you hear what I’m hearing?” There was a pause. She’s mad, realized Marin. Oh, god, she’s really mad. “Tikki, calm down—”

“You calm down! You really don’t get it, do you?” Marin paused, frozen to the core. “N...n—”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

“Yeah?”

“Fine! Marin Dupain-Cheng, you’re acting like a brat.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re exemplifying everything that you hate. Spoiled, entitled, desperate, toxic, nothing is enough for you!” She shook her head, moving herself up to his face, right in between his eyes. Adrienne is your friend. She cares about you and what you think of her, she always has your back! Marin, she got akumatized because of you! She loves you—yes, you, Marin—you-she loves like she loves the rest of her friends, with all of her heart—”

“Yeah, and that’s the problem—”

“Exactly! That’s the problem! You don’t care that she loves you, because when it comes down to it, you’ve stopped loving her.”

Marin got hit to the core. “N-no, you don’t know what you’re talking about, stop—” He backed away, his eyes narrowing as they filled with fluid.

Tikki now seemed to grow, leaning upright as she backed away from Marin. “Marin, I have been alive for billions of years! Empires rose because of me, diseases wiped out, planets and civilizations blessed into peace and prosperity! I am the god of growth and love!” She bared her teeth, her hands seeming to glow. “I know what I am speaking of, and you would do best to learn.” She turned cold and small again, but no less angry. “And I know enough to learn that you don’t love her anymore.”

Marin was silent. Her accusation blew his train of thought off the tracks. “Why?”

“Because you made a mistake. A mistake within yourself and against her and because of that, you no longer love her. You don’t even like her anymore.”

“I don’t believe you, you’re wrong—”
“Okay.” Tikki nodded. “I’m wrong. You really do love and care for her.” She shrugged. “And let’s also say that she rejects you. She doesn’t feel the same way about you, for whatever reason. Maybe she likes someone else.”

“Y...yeah-I don’t follow, that’s not even a hypothetical!”

“*So say it is!* ” Marin shrank back and sat down on his bed, quickly nodding. “You love her, right? So if you love her, you’re *supposed to* respect her and her wishes, what she wants. You don’t change yourself just for her! Because that’s what love is! It’s about you *and* the other person!”

“Hey, I love her, and she doesn’t love me, so I did what I had to-”

“*There it is again! You’re not making things better!* JUST! SHUT! UP!” Marin paused and curled up on the bed. A single tear ran down his cheek. “I needed to...”

“No. You did what you wanted to do because you were scared of rejection. Of failing”

“F-failing what?”

“Failing to win her, Marin.” Silence from Marin. “Failing to win her. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I mean, that’s...” Marin’s voice trailed off. “That’s the most messed up way of putting it, but...I guess if you want to put it that way.”

“God, it’s worse than I thought...”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t even see her as a *person*. She’s a *prize*. An object for you to win as some marker of your success and validation. A king of the hill competition against Leo and Kagami and Clovis-”

“Okay, you’ve taken it too far-”

“And you didn’t want to get rejected because if you failed to *win*, that meant you failed as a man as well.” Tikki shook her head. “And you know what? You’re right, in a way. Your worst fear is coming true. You’ve proved you’re willing to sacrifice your integrity for validation. And if that isn’t weakness-”

“-Okay, you need to *stop*- ”

“You tied your entire sense of self-worth as a person and a man to your one relationship with Adrienne. Am I wrong?” The tears were coming now, flooding Marin’s vision. He instinctively raised his hand to cover his eyes. “Just...let me sleep!”

“No! You need to hear this, Marin. I am not going to let Paris get destroyed or taken over or whatever Hawkmoth wants to do with it because you couldn't dispel the lie that you tell yourself every time you get out of bed.”

“Everyone knows it, Tikki, they all know I’m a useless sissy, they *all* know I’m not good enough, e-even Alain, Nina, Adrienne- *why do you think she rejected me*?!?” Marin burst into sobs, curling into a ball as he dissolved into a messy series of hiccups and yelps. “Ah-I’m t-t-t-tired! I’m so tired...”

Tikki calmed down, floating down and placing a hand on his shoulder. “I guarantee you it’s not because of that. Because the *only* one who thinks that is *you*.” Her voice regained that same
stillness and strength. “Adrienne will be at school tomorrow. Her heart will be broken. You need to be the friend she deserves. Do you hear me?”

“Nnn...I know...” Marin hiccuped. “I know.”

“Marin, do you hear me?”

“Yeah-”

“Do you?”

“Yeah!” Marin looked up at her. She cocked a sympathetic head to the side. “Good.” She sighed. “Oh, you poor thing.” She backed away as his breathing turned to silted and terrified to calm and relaxed, staying vigil above his bed until he drifted off to sleep. “You poor, poor thing...”
Chapter 16

Much like Marin, Adrienne did not have a good night. She didn’t fall asleep until quite late, and when she did, it was restless. Nevertheless, as morning came Adrienne went through the motions of her usual routine, everything methodical and robotic, putting on makeup (war paint, she thought of it,) to cover any weaknesses underneath. A five-minute car ride later, and she found herself trudging up the steps to school.

Her mood didn’t go unnoticed.

"Dude-" Alain nudged the crook of his arm into Marin. "Look. Do you want to-

"Yeah, I'll..."

Marin looked at his messenger bag ever so slightly, knowing full well who was inside and what she would say. He turned to Adrienne and walked over.

"Adrienne!"

Adrienne looked up, the familiar voice pulling her out of her thoughts. “Oh, hey Marin!”

"Is...everything all right?"

He shook his head when he saw her face. “Sorry, stupid question. What's wrong?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, do I look that obvious? I had a bit of a rough night, I guess. Even models need their beauty sleep, I guess.” She gave him a practiced model smile, trying to brush it off.

Marin grinned. "Just like us mere mortals, right? Yeah, I get it.” His voice got low hand he leaned in, gingerly putting a hand on her elbow. "Is it-is it your mom?” He asked, feigning ignorance to get her to reveal the truth he already knew.

She shook her head. “You know, for the first time, it isn’t her. Nothing like that. It's so stupid, really. Just a boy I was seeing,” she mumbled as she cleared her throat. “It. Uh, well it didn’t really end well. It ended last night.”

Marin’s heart beat in triple-time. He froze, studying his loafers while letting his hand fall from her shoulder. "Was it the boy?” He stayed there before a flash of realization came to him. "Sorry, I-wait, don't answer that. At least-you don't need to."

“He ended it, but it was because of me. I couldn’t be what he wanted, what he deserved.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Some people are like butterflies. Pretty to see but hard to touch.” She shook her head, trying to shake her thoughts off. “Sorry. I’m just pouring this all out on you. I’ll be fine. Really. I should be used to it...” She shook her head again as she moved to leave.

"What?” Marin grabbed her arm. "Adrienne!” His eyes softened. "I. Can we...can we talk? Later, I mean? It’s not a date, I swear-"

“No, of course not! Yeah, let’s hang out.”

“But it’s just that I need to know something, and I need you to know something.” His head tilted down ever so slightly with his large round eyes looking up at Adrienne. No matter how sad she
was, she couldn't say no to that puppy-dog face. "Please?"

She bit her lip but sighed and nodded. “Marin, stop it.” Cue more puppy eyes. “Ugh, you have
dangerously convincing puppy eyes. Fine. What is it?”

"Inside the quad?"

“Alright.” She followed him. “Now what is it, Marin? You’re getting me nervous.”

"When I confessed to you...did you think I was just interested in Adrienne Agreste?" Marin
scratched his forearm. "Did you really think that low of me?"

The question took her by surprise. ‘Marin! Of course I could never think low of you. You’re an
incredible person and a good friend. But I couldn’t blame you if that’s what you saw. That’s all
most people see. The last name, the label, the brand. Sometimes that’s all I can see in myself.”

She shrugged. “People like Adrienne Agreste.”

Marin stood there, still as a stone. He thought about her answer long and hard, paying particular
attention to the ground once again. And then he pulled her in for a hug. “Marin, wha-”

"Trust me," He said, holding her close, his head buried into the crook of her shoulder. "You need
this." He kept hugging her, unsure of what else he could do. "I'm-I'm so sorry..."

She stood stiff in the hug, surprised by his outburst. Eventually, she exhaled the breath she had
been holding and relaxed, hugging him back. “Marin. It’s okay. It’s okay. You have nothing to be
sorry for. It’s fine. I’m fine. You’re fine. Everything is gonna be okay.” She breathed softly,
noticing offhandedly how nice his hair smelled. “None of this is your fault after all. And I’m a
tough girl,” she said with her familiar brave face on. “I’m gonna be fine. We’re gonna be fine!”

Marin nodded, smiling as he backed away from her. "D-do you think it'd be weird if we hung out?"

She smiled. "As long as you’re prepared for Nina’s teasing and Alain’s interrogations, I think I’m
down."

"Yeah." Marin sighed and nodded. "I know you're going through some stuff, so...yeah."

“You’re right. I'm going through some stuff. My life didn’t end!” She gave him a genuine smile.
“I’m gonna be okay Marin. You don’t have to worry so much.”

"Right." He checked his watch. "Are you heading to the houseboat after school? Kitty Section is
practicing today."

“Yeah, Luka sent me some new sheet music to learn. You should hear it, Marin—I’ll text you my
recording. It’s incredible.”

"Yeah. Luka's pretty incredible." Marin found it within himself to smile again before shaking his
head. "Sorry, I should go. Class is about to start for me. See you soon?"

“Definitely,” she grinned. “And Marin?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

Marin arrived to the Liberty rather late—the leadership meeting had gone over, and Marin, in his
rush to get to school (and his preoccupation with smoothing things over with Adrienne) had left his
sketchbook with the Kitty Section costumes at home. This meant that Marin, despite even traveling
over as Ladybeetle, hadn’t been quite as fast enough. He grabbed a soda out of the outside fridge
and walked over to the edge of the stage. "Hey, guys! Hey, Luka. Sorry I’m late."

“It’s no problem, Marin. We’re just glad you’re here,” called Luka from the platform with a kind
smile. Julian had introduced the two of them at Kitty Section’s first practice, and the two had hit it
off. Luka was two years ahead of Marin, so there wasn’t much of a chance for the two to hang, but
it was rather intense when they did.

"Yeah, sure!” Marin stared up at her with a grin on his face. "And I'm sorry I wasn't able to hang
out more often. I was, uh..." Marin flickered his eyes to Adrienne, who had taken a seat at the
keyboard with a smile on her face. She was focused on the sheet music in front of her than any
conversation, so Marin was free to stare. "I was...I was busy. But...now I think I'm going to be
more...freer," finished Marin with a grin. Freer? Who says that?

“Well, you’re in the right place to express freedom. How better than through art?” Luka grinned.
“We were about to try something new. Tell us what you think. Maybe it’ll inspire you. Your
designs always inspire me; maybe my music can do the same for you.”

"Alright. Sounds like a plan." Marin sat down and sat back w, pen, and paper in hand. Luka smiled
and gave a nod to everyone. “A one, a two, a one, two, three, and-”

Luka let loose with an intense B Major chord, and they were off. Adrienne’s fingers danced over
the keyboard nimbly, hitting every key in perfect time. Luka closed her eyes as she played, the
music hardly coming from the sheet as from inside of her.

Marin’s eyes flickered from Luka to Adrienne to Luka. Looking between the two girls gave him an
idea, and he began to sketch. "I think I got something..."

Adrienne played perfectly with the score, it was methodical and precisely perfect. She had clearly
put a lot of effort into rehearsing until she was satisfied with the result. Luka, on the other hand,
played with the wild abandon that only the most talented musician could pull off. The music
washed through the ship with an energy that they created themselves until the song came to its
inevitable end.

“Bravo!” Marin immediately began to clap as soon as the final note was reached. "That was great!
Perfect set, guys." Julian turned to Luka. "Sis. Should we take ten?” He nudged his elbow into his
sister with an unusual and scary grin on his face while pointing his finger at an oblivious Marin.
“Adrienne rejected him about a month ago, and he hasn’t been the same since. Do your worst.”
Luka nodded to her brother before calling to the group. “Awesome job! Let’s take a little break.
Back in ten!”

She jumped off the platform next to Marin. “I could practically feel the creative wheels turning.
What did you feel?”

"I could definitely feel it from you,” mumbled Marin, patting the small space next to him on the
crate he was sitting on. "Oh-sorry." He scooched over ever so slightly, making more room for
That’s always the goal, right? So do I get to see what you dreamed up, or do I have to wait and be
surprised?”

"Well, uh..." It was clear he was having a little trouble, only having drawn some sketches of the
band. Luka noted that she was drawn in nigh-perfect detail. Notes were scribbled on and around
the drawings, but not much else in terms of actual designs. "...I guess you could say that I'm a little
stuck.” He looked down, studying his loafers as he was usually wont to do. "I'm sorry, Luka."

“What are you sorry for? It’s a little creativity block. It happens to everyone,” Luka smiled. “I have an idea if you want to try something.”

"Yeah, sure, what's your idea?” Marin chuckled anxiously, scratching the back of his neck. "Anything would help, honestly."

Luka grinned cryptically and reached for her guitar. “Okay. I’m gonna play something, and you’re gonna put your pencil on the paper. I don’t care what you draw, it doesn’t even need to be an actual design. You’re just going to sketch whatever the music brings out in you. What you’re not gonna do is overthink it. Understand, Marin?”

"Yeah. I'm game!” Marin smiled, grabbing his pencil and sketchbook. "Okay. I'm ready."

Luka nodded, closing her eyes as she began to pick lightly on the strings. The sound was soft and gentle. It wasn’t Kitty Section’s music or anything Marin had heard on the bands Luka. It sounded like a broken heart mending. Fragile and vulnerable but promising to grow into something strong and steadfast.

Marin kept sketching, nodding his head as he found inspiration in Luka's music. He found himself humming to Luka's improvised music, able to follow along perfectly despite having never heard this song before. "This is nice.” He chuckled as he kept sketching. "Who's vibrations are you playing?"

Luka shrugged. “Mostly you. You've got a lot of things going on right now, don't you?”

Marin began to cackle, but it was when Luka didn't laugh in turn did he realize she was serious. "I'm sorry, I, uh...you're serious?” He bit the back of his lip, leaning against the wall of the boat. More silence from Luka, prompting him to keep talking. "Uh...I might. Have some things going on."

Luka kept playing, not replying in hopes of maybe prompting Marin to keep talking. She wouldn’t push if he didn’t, but she wanted him to know she would listen. Despite what Julian had said, he looked relatively unbothered. "I, uh...” He kept sketching, hoping that would take his mind off of things. After he and Adrienne had their talk, even Tikki had remained silent about the matter. "Yeah, I guess this is kind of a me-problem, you know? Just something I have to deal with by myself."

Luka nodded. “I get it. Well, just know you’ve got people cheering you on no matter what you’re dealing with,” she smiled, strumming the chords one last time. “Okay. You got sketching so hopefully that at least helped with your block.”

"Yes! It did! It's just a sketch, and I really want to see what you'll think...after I ink it." Marin grinned. "You'll just have to wait~" The girl stuck out her tongue. “Ugh. Alright. I think I can be patient, for you.” Luka smiled and stood up, offering Marin her hand up. “Let’s call the group back together for now then.”

"Alright.” Marin nodded, gently bumping Luka off the crate. "I think you've got another set to sing for me?"

Luka walked over to the stage, where Julian and Ross were waiting for her with smirks on their faces. "So...how'd it go?” Luka looked at him with a dithering expression on her face. “What do you mean, how’d it go? It went fine. He was just having a bit of an artistic block. Music always
inspires me, so I played for him,” she shrugged. “Why, what did you expect to happen?”

Julian raised his hands up defensively. "Want him to hang back after practice? Ross and I are seeing a drag show right after this, so..." Ross beamed up at Luka. "What do you think?"

“You boys have fun. I think I’m gonna hang back for this one. I’d love to not have a hangover tomorrow,” Luka grinned. “I think I have something new to write too.”

"Okay." Julian looked from Ross to Luka to Adrienne as they all took their spots on stage. "Okay. A one, a two, a one, two, three, four!”
"See you, Luka! See you, Marin!" Adrienne waved her hand as she stepped off of the boat onto the pier before walking up the steps where The Gorilla and the car were waiting.

Marin stared up at the car for what seemed to Luka to be a second too long before it finally drove off.

He looked back up at her with a smile. Ivana had been the first to leave for home, and Ross and Julian had headed out right before Adrienne, leaving the two of them together. "Well! Uh. I hate to leave you alone, but you probably want to kick me out by this point..."

"Not even a little bit!" Luka grinned. "Today was great. Practice went fantastic, and I can’t wait to see what you came up with. All in all, I’d say it was a pretty great day.” She took the shoulder strap of her guitar off and set it down. “What are your plans for tonight?”

"My plans? Oh, I..." Marin gave a short laugh. "I'm free! My parents are expecting me, but I can, uh, text them if I want." A moment of awkward silence. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. “It seemed like everyone else had plans. I was just wondering. But since you are free, you could totally hang around for a bit if you wanted. I wanted to write down the song I came up with earlier. Maybe having you around will help.” She grinned, walking up to him. “Or...we could do something else. It’s up to you if you’d like to stay. If not, no worries.”

"I'd be down to stay. The question is, do you want me to stay?"

Luka gave a small chuckle, like the answer to that question should have been obvious. “Of course I’d like for you to stay. You’re great company, Marin.”


“I’m just being honest,” shrugged Luka with a smile. “Anyway, what kind of trouble does the good Marin Dupain-Cheng want to get up to tonight?”

"Um...some weak beer and Netflix, I guess?"

“A fantastic combination.” Luka grinned, leading him down into the houseboat. “Watch your step. But if you trip, I promise I’ll catch you.” Luka threw a wink at him over her shoulder and descended the stairs.

Marin sighed. "Yes, Luka!" He headed inside, moving over to where Luka was standing in the kitchen. "PBR?" He snickered. "Hipster."

“The proper word is alternative ,” Luka corrected. “Besides, I don’t wear the hipster dress code of a beanie and flannel.” She flopped on the couch, grabbed the remote, and turned on the TV.

"Nice." Marin sat down next to her, leaning on her shoulder and quickly overextending himself. He was so used to visiting Adrienne as Ladybeetle that he forgot what it was like cuddling with a girl his height. "And of course you use Hulu instead. Can't be too preppy."

“It has better options,” she insisted. “But Jules does have a Netflix account if you need it. What are you in the mood for? ” She scrolled through her option a bit, curling back against him and curling her knees up to her chest.
"Hmmm..." Marin scratched the back of his neck. "I would have wanted to see *To All The Boys I've loved before*, but it's on Netflix," mused Marin, lost in thought. "Is it weird that I identify with the lead in that show?"

"I’ve never seen it. What’s the lead like?” She tilted her head, interested in his explanation.

"A hapa girl who goes for multiple white guys who she thinks are out of her league?"

“There’s no such thing as *out of someone’s league*.” She shrugged. “Love isn’t about who *deserves* who. It’s not that superficial. But anyway, why do you identify with her? Like, you’re a hapa, but I don’t think *anyone* is out of your league, per se.”

"So why do I keep crushing on people who are?" Marin shrugged. "I dunno. One girl in particular..." Luka knew damn well who that girl was, but she needn’t say anything now. “Marin. No one is out of your league,” she smirked. “That’s a copout for not wanting to take a chance.”

"But I *did*! Remember that party-the party I told you about, the reason why I couldn't hang out with you that day-" Marin closed his eyes. "I confessed to her. And she shot me down. There was someone else."

“Oh-Marin.” Her voice was soft as she gently wrapped her arms around him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you talk about it. I’m sorry.” She rubbed what she hoped were soothing circles on his back. “Just because there was someone else doesn’t mean you aren’t good enough. You are always good enough, Marin. We don’t choose our feelings.”

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to go emotional on you, you don't need to-" Marin tried to give a half-hearted struggle, but Luka wouldn't budge. He finally relaxed, letting her comfort him as he wrapped his arms around her in turn. "Sorry. I...I just need to man up. I'll be okay."

"You don’t need to man up Marin. You need to feel every single one of the feelings you are feeling right now.” She shook her head. “Sometimes they suck, but they’re still important because you’re feeling them. You don’t need to just shove everything down. You’ll *explode*.”

“I know,” said Marin, his voice low. “I just...I just feel like I can’t win sometimes. And I’m tired, Luka...” Everything that Marin could spill out he did: Tears, hiccups and sighs, Adrienne, the condescension of the class the minute Leo showed back up, the feeling he never measured up to any of the other guys in his class... “I’m so, so, so tired...”

Luka nodded. “Of course you’re tired. Under the weight of all that I can’t imagine how anyone couldn’t be.” She sighed softly, leaning back to wipe a tear from his cheek and brush his hair out of his eyes. “Hold on a second.” She pressed a kiss to the top of his head and gently detangled herself. She took his beer from him and walking back to the kitchen, returning a second later with a glass of water, a box of tissues, and a fluffy blanket. She handed the water to him. “Drink it. You’ll feel better.”

“Thank you-“ Marin took the water, giving it a small sip and looking at Luka. “Ugh, I probably look so pitiful right now.”

“Upset? Yes. Overwhelmed? Yes. Pitiful? No.” She smiled and sat back down and pulled the blanket over both of them, scooting closer so they would fit.

"I...guess I'll have to take your word for it." Marin leaned his head towards Luka, only finding air and her skull. "Ouch! Sorry, I, uh...I guess I'm used to taller girls."

Luka giggled. “Now how many guys can say they’re more used to snuggling with supermodels?”
"She's not that good to snuggle with, come to think of it." Past Marin would have brained Present Marin with a rolling pin, but it needed to be said. "She's super skinny, and kinda...clings to me for warmth, because she has the body heat of a White Walker?" He shrugged, blushing. "But that's okay...I mean, she's my friend, right?"

Luka smiled knowingly. “Yeah, you’re right. We suffer a lot of things, pointy elbows included, for the sake of friendship sometimes.” She grinned, leaning into his shoulder. “And something tells me you didn’t exactly mind her clinging on to you...”

“Oh, I-” *Oh, hell no.* Marin wasn't that much of a virgin that he didn't know that girls got mad when one thought about two of them in one date- *if this even is a date.* "What? What're you...nah. Depends on what you're insinuating..."

“I don’t need to insinuate anything. Your crush on Adrienne was blatantly obvious. Except to the two of you, apparently.”

"You mean, except to her." Marin pursed her lips. "Take a wild guess on who I confessed to?"

Luka shook her head. “Just because she turned you down doesn’t mean you’re not good enough. I know you've overthought this, perhaps even to an unhealthy degree, but I feel like you need to hear it. Your worth has absolutely no correlation with your love life.”

Marin shrugged. "What...what is my worth, though? I know I'm not like most guys..." He wiped a tear from his cheek. That seemed to be the last of them. “You think that’s a bad thing?” Luka passed him a tissue. “Marin, how do you know when you've made a cool design? Or when I write a new song, what do you think makes it interesting?”

"Because it's unique, because I haven't heard it before. But it's not the same, right?"

“Your best designs stand out because they are new and different and not like what’s already been done. I may only be in the music scene, but I'm willing to bet it’s roughly the same for fashion. And it’s the same for people.”

"But Ad-someone like Adrienne. She's..." Marin sighed. "You're going to kill me, but she's perfect. And I'm guessing she wants someone just as perfect as her. Like another model, or...someone like Ladybeetle. Nothing new or unique. And there's nothing wrong with that."

“No, if that’s what she wants. But it might not be.” Luka shrugged. “But I think the main issue here is that you need to recognize that Adrienne isn't perfect. That’s a lot to expect of a human, any human.”

"I know." Marin sighed as he pressed *Play* on a movie that he had finally selected after going through the list over and over again-more attempts on his part to distract himself. "I feel like I expect that of myself a lot." He looked up at her. "Do you have popcorn, or should I get some?"
Adrienne sighed as she closed the door to her room after returning from yet another disappointing family dinner. Minus the family; she shouldn't have expected her father to show up now of all times. She opened her mini-fridge and tossed a wedge of camembert to Plagg. “Fuel up. We’re going out.”

"Yikes," mumbled Plagg as he hovered up to Adrienne. "Adri, are you, uh...are you gonna be ready?"

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” She gave him a pointed look, daring him to suggest that her emotions were getting the better of her. “I’m just peachy.”

Plagg raised his hands apologetically. "I know, I know, I know, I just...kiddo. I know it's gonna be as Chat Noire, but...it will be your first time seeing him since that happened."

“I can’t just not go out on patrol ever again Plagg.” She crossed her arms over her chest before turning to him. “I’ll be fine. What are you so worried about?”

“Nothing, nothing, nothing,” said Plagg, more to himself than to Adrienne. “Kay then! Claws out!"

"I'm worried for him," mumbled Plagg as he found himself getting sucked into his ring.

"Chat!” Ladybeetle yelled out as he watched her approach. An unknowing smile graced his face. "Hey! You ready to get this done and dusted with?"

She flipped her hair off her shoulder as she touched down next to him. “Why? You have something to do after? A hot date maybe?” She presented the words like she was joking but there was an almost undetectable bite in her voice.

"Nope, the hot date ended a few hours ago." Ladybeetle grinned as he remembered scampering off of Luka’s shoulder as soon as she had dozed off. "Why, do...you have a hot date?"

“You know I’ve only ever had eyes for you Bugaboo.” It was a flirtatious line she had used before, but the words felt bitter in her mouth now. “But tell me more about your date.”

"Oh, uh...you know, it was just cuddling on her couch. Weak beer and movies were involved." That hurt. Adrienne remembered that she and Ladybeetle used to watch movies and cuddle, too. She chuckled bitterly under her breath. “And people call me the loose one in the tabloids. At least I don’t have a rebound rate of less than three days.”

Marin’s ears perked up. "Sorry, what?"

“Nothing, sorry. Thinking out loud.” She bit her lip, knowing she would regret her next question. “So, what’s she like?”

"She’s...chill, ya know?” Marin began to get very chill himself, instantly relaxing around Chat Noire. "I mean. With my last girlfriend, I really felt like I had to put up a front around her, and I just don't with this other girl. You know?"

“Wasn’t that doing a disservice to the other one? Putting up a front? Did you even give her a
Ladybeetle gave a small chuckle. "Trust me, Kitty. Full disclosure? She wouldn't want to know the real me." He shrugged. "And that was cool, ya know? But I mean it's a little less exhausting with this other girl-.

“No. No, I don’t know actually!” She shook her head. “Did you maybe think to let her decide that for herself? Let her fall for the real you. Did you stop to think, maybe, just maybe, you’re actually enough!”

"Because..." Marin thought about the chain of events that led him to that point until-oh. Right. I can't tell her that bit. "I can't tell you that bit, but the answer is really clear once you understand it."

“There seems to be a lot of things I don’t understand about you lately,” she sighed. “I’m sorry your past relationship was such a burden on you.”

Marin narrowed his eyes. "I...sorry, did you have an issue with my personal life? Maybe you actually should know what's happened to me before you make personal judgements." He crossed his arms. "And maybe you should recognize that my civilian self is nothing like-" He waved his hands over his mask to drive home the point- "-this!"

“Okay? You say that like it’s supposed to change anything! The fact that you don’t go around wearing skintight spandex and saving busses full of people in your civilian life doesn’t mean that you’re anything less when you’re not in the mask. Maybe you’re different, maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe you could let people decide that for themselves, instead of running yourself into the ground trying to put out an image of what you think people want you to be!”

"Okay, okay, okay, question: why do you care?" He raised his hands, now truly confused. "Are you getting mad at me...for my ex?"

“Maybe I am!” She threw her hands up. “Maybe I have a shred of empathy for how you treated her. Unlike you, apparently."

"Listen. Chat, this girl-okay, you don't know who I'm talking about, but you would know her-she's perfect." There was a moment of stunned silence before Ladybeetle found his footing again. "Yeah, for lack of a better word, but-she would have dropped me like a hot potato if she knew who I really was and what I really was like." He stopped. "She'd start seeing me as...just a friend."

“No one's perfect. And maybe, she might actually be a human too. One with a mind she can use for herself.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you never gave her the chance to do that, did you? Tell me, LB, did you intend to be her boyfriend without actually being her friend? How was she supposed to care about the real you if you never even gave her the opportunity to try?” She threw up her hands, exasperated. She waited for a snappy comeback from Ladybeetle, but it never came. Instead, there was silence. Dead silence. Marin stayed quiet as he looked over the rooftops, into the night.

Chat rolled her eyes and turned her back to him. “It would seem you have a few things to think through. I’ll leave you to your thoughts. Goodnight, Ladybeetle.”

"Wait!" He called back. His eyes looked desperate before he pulled back, pursing his lips. "...Nevermind. Sorry."

She stopped for a moment, speaking over her shoulder with a gentle voice. “You know how to reach me. I’ll see you later. Get some sleep tonight, okay?” With that, she disappeared into the
Ladybeetle bowed his head. "Spots off." He looked up at Tikki. "Can't say you didn't tell me so."

Tikki sighed. "You can't change what you did in the past. But acknowledging it isn't a bad step."

"So. Marin leaned back on the rooftop, feeling the cold sheet metal press into his back. "How about Luka, huh?"

“What about her?” Tikki asked carefully. “She seems like a sweet girl.”

"You're gonna tell me to, uh...what does Kagami say? 'Change targets'?"

“I'm gonna tell you to not think of these girls as targets.” Tikki folded her little arms.

"You know what I mean." Marin paused. "Right?"

Tikki rolled her eyes. “Marin, do you intend on making the same mistake twice? You said Luka was easier to be with. Why do you think that?"

Marin tapped his feet. "So that's a yes?"

“You're avoiding the question,” she prompted, trying to let him come to conclusions on his own.

"I mean, I'm not...opposed to it?" Marin groaned. "But I'm going to spend more time with Adrienne. As a friend. But. Y'know, in the incredibly unlikely event that Adrienne does fall for me...who would my-" Tikki's watchful eye gave him pause. "Who would I be with?"

“So Luka is a fall back since she turned you down as Marin and you broke up with her as Ladybeetle?” Tikki raised an eyebrow. “You see no problem with this?”

Marin scoffed. "I mean, for lack of a better term, but I don't...see her that way? Does the fact that I'm seeing someone immediately after I broke up with someone else make her automatically a rebound?"

“It’s not so much the time gap as your reason that makes it a rebound. You’re only with Luka because Adrienne didn’t work out.”

“I...I can’t win, can I?” He winced. “Tikki. Do you not think I should see anyone?”

Tikki sighed. “I think only you can answer that question. You’re deserving of love, Marin. But they deserve to love the real you.”

"I'm not..." He stood up. "I'm not with Luka. Not yet, anyway. I don't know if I want to be with Luka."

“Oh so you cuddle together alone in the dark with many attractive individuals do you?”

"I don't know if she's-" Marin blushed a deep red. "Attractive...per se." Liar. He shook his head. "Sorry! I should-we should go before I get a cold." He stood up. "Spots on!"

Tikki gave Marin one last skeptical look before she spiraled into the earrings. What was that look for?

Ladybeetle broke into a leap, jumping across the rooftops and alleys before stopping in front of a familiar windowsill he all knew too well. "Oh..."
Adrienne was back inside, her hair pulled into a careless bun and dressed in the coziest sweatpants she owned.

Marin could distinctly hear Jagged Stone blasting loudly in the background as she curled up on her bed.

He couldn’t hear her as she was talking seemingly to herself, but in reality to her kwami; “He hates me now, Plagg. He hates me as Adrienne, and now he hates me as Chat. I mean, I was just being honest. Brutally honest.”

“A little too honest?” She groaned. “Piss off, Plagg.”

Far above her room on the opposite side of the street, Ladybeetle continued to stare down at Adrienne. "I..." He pursed his cold, chapped lips before turning around.

He didn't account for the sound of his footfalls to reverberate from the sheet metal roof. He certainly didn’t expect the ensuing sound calling Adrienne's attention.

She bolted up in her bed as Plagg zipped under a pillow. “What was that?” She ran to the window. “Who’s there? If you’re an akuma, I’m warning you-!” She looked around like a hawk, watching to see if anything was there.

She didn't see anything. Ladybeetle was gone.
"Yo, Alain?" Marin put down his game controller and took a sip of water. "Uh. What do you think about Luka?"

"You mean the adorable music chick with the dreamy voice and edgy style?" Alain smirked knowingly. "I didn’t know you had an extended taste, gal’s got a little meat on her bones—"

"Alain. " Alain froze and put his hands up in the air defensively. "Sorry! Sorry." He still kept up that annoying smirk of his.

Marin turned to the smirk. He knew that smirk all too well. "Alain. Alain. I don't-" There was no other reason to hide it, reasoned Marin. "So what if she is," he mumbled.

"She seems cool." He shrugged. "You’re moving off of Adrienne, then?"

"I wouldn't." Marin sighed. "Do I get to have a crush on more than one person?"

"Sure. crushes are generally pretty harmless. But you can only pursue one...if you're going to be monogamous and all that. Anyway, but otherwise, if you’re gonna do anything, you do have to choose."

"If I even have a choice. Adrienne...yeah."

"She turned you down when you confessed to her after crying in a closet. I’m not telling you to become a creep who can’t take no for an answer, but maybe give her some time and work on building a solid platonic relationship first."

"Or just move on like a healthy not-adult?" Yeah, right.

"Don’t you like her as a friend? You can’t just avoid her forever-"

"No, I mean like moving on while being her friend. I guess I've been caught up in trying to date her I forgot that being friends is...y’know, a good thing? Like, I let down Nina and Nathalie because I was holding on for Adrienne, and that didn't happen. So I guess I've been doing some thinking—" If getting yelled at by Tikki constituted as thinking- "And. Yeah."

“And yeah?” Alain grinned. “I think that’s a good place to start, really. I think it will be good for both of you.”

"Do you think it was me?" Marin leaned his head back, looking at the roof. Alain shrugged. “I don’t know. If anything, I think it was probably the lack of you. I mean, your voice dropped an octave whenever she would walk into the room.”

"I mean, didn't yours?"

“Eh, she’s not my type. Nina, on the other hand,” Alain grinned wolfishly as he let out a playfully whistle. A small shiver began to crawl up Marin's spine. He cringed. "Yikes."

“What?” Alain raised an eyebrow, and Marin shook his head. "Nothing, I-nothing." He paused. "What did you mean by 'lack of me'?"

"You kept putting up your façade every time she was around. It’s like you were never really there, just some airbrushed blurry version of you. But that’s only what I saw.”
Marin stopped. “I mean...” He couldn’t defend it any longer. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I thought she might like me better if...nah, nevermind. I mean, c’mon man, that day before the party, you said as much.”

“I told you to state your intentions. And I mean, you did. You got declined, but she knows how you feel now.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Marin rolled his eyes before fixing them in the center of his line of sight. Oh, wait! “Crap, the cookies! I’m about to burn them!”

He ran downstairs, where he saw Adrienne standing at the ready, looking at the melting chocolate and golden-brown dough. “Are you huffing cookie fumes?”

“Maybe?”

Marin giggled as he grabbed the oven mitts, the blush on his face unmistakable. “C’mon, back up, I don’t wanna burn that perfect face of yours.” He opened the oven, the sweet goodness blasting out of the oven. “And grab the wire rack! It’s in the cupboard right behind you.”

“Rack in the cupboard,” she muttered under her breath as she jumped into action. “Ah! Got it!” She put it down for him, a soft sigh escaping her as she breathed in the warm cookie smell. “Mmm, they smell heavenly.” She grinned. “What’s the secret, Marin? I know you must use witchcraft or something cause these look perfect.”

“It must be that...miraculous Dupain-Cheng touch,” said Marin as he gently slid each cookie onto the wire rack with his spatula before placing the baking sheet in the sink. Adrienne could see his biceps poking out from under his body-hugging t-shirt.

He picked up a cookie-the smallest, most misshapen one-and held it up to where Adrienne could bite at it. “Tell me what you think.”

She smirked and leaned forward to bite it. “Mmm. It’s perfect.” She closed her eyes and moaned with a grin. “Your baking is a danger to every model in a 50-kilometer radius.”

“Great! I’m...glad.” Marin tried a smile. “It, uh...it’s certainly a danger to one model in a fifty-meter radius.”

“If you ship, it’s a danger to everyone everywhere. No one would be safe,” she grinned.

“Maybe that’s my evil plan. I wonder if Hawkmoth is taking applications.” There was an awkward pause. Marin didn’t let his smile fall. “...So.” Another awkward pause. “It’s great to see you in high spirits so soon after—“ Nope! Nope, nope... “After...you know.”

“Got dumped?” Adrienne raised an eyebrow.

Ah. Look at what you’ve done. “We don’t. Have. To talk about. It. Unless you want?”

“I mean, I can’t just sit in my room and cry, can I? And one of the steps on getting over a heartbreak is homemade cookies,” she smiled, trying a joke so as not to get too deep into her feelings.

“That’s good to hear. Certainly healthier than my heartbreak,” joked Marin right back at her. He didn’t know how deep that would dig in, and he honestly hoped it would bounce right off. Tikki’ll kill me, but- “So, any plans for a rebound guy?”
She shrugged. “Not really. This guy, the one who broke it off, he was kind of the only person I’ve had a genuinely deep crush on in a while. I was so focused on him, I guess I never really even looked around.” Marin’s gears were turning in his head. Adrienne didn’t catch on—but Tikki very much did. “Huh. Maybe...”

“Maybe what?” She tilted her head to look at him inquisitively. From behind her back over her shoulder, Tikki glared at Marin. She crossed her arms and shook her head, knowing that she couldn’t say anything definitely could send a message of disapproval. Don’t do this, Marin. It’s dangerous. You know this is a bad idea.

Whatever Tikki was saying, Marin didn’t hear—or didn't care. "Maybe you would be interested in taking a look at some people right under your nose?" He grinned, crossing his arms and leaning against the stovetop. "Listen, the healing process I get, but when you’re ready to head out there—maybe the right place to search is right where you are. Right?"

Adrienne bit her lip, considering. “And you wouldn’t happen to know of anyone nearby who might be interested when I’m ready, would you? Besides Clovis, obviously.”

Marin shrugged. "Depends if you're ready to move on." Adrienne hesitated. “I—I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I think I need a bit more time. Some actual closure would be nice too,” she sighed before looking down at him with a soft smile. “When I’m ready, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

"Great." He spread his arms for a hug. "I know you're gonna need some time. But I got you. You know that?"

“I know,” she smiled as she stepped in to hugged him. “Thank you, Marin.” She stepped back and smoothed his shirt down. “I should ask though, how are you and Luka?”

"Me and...Luka?" Marin scratched the back of his neck. "Oh, we're just, uh-we're just friends." His eyes flicked up to Tikki ever so slightly. "Nothing serious, if there is anything, you know?"

“Ah, I see.” She ran a hand through her hair, her face unreadable. “That’s...fun,” she admitted, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.

“So!” Adrienne’s ears perked up. “You wanna help me get those cookies up to Alain?” broached Marin, breaking the silence. “Yes! Yes, definitely.”

“Can I trust you with them?”

“Hmmmm...” She grinned. “Now that remains to be seen.”

“Wow, I knew I smelled awkward tension,” Alain smirked, coming down the stairs. “That and cookies. What are you two up to?”

"We were deep in the throes of passion while you were up here playing Fortnite," said Marin sarcastically as he gazed down at Adrienne, who was coming up after him. "Isn't that right, Adrienne?"

“Yes. That’s exactly what we were doing. I’m surprised you didn’t hear our screams of ecstasy through your gaming headset as he ravished me against the oven,” Adrienne nodded, completely deadpan.

Alain’s eyes widened before they settled down. He looked at Marin with a thumbs up.
Marin responded with a sly wink and his own nervous thumbs up.

Alain pumped his fist before looking back at Marin with a wary look. He shook his splayed palm slightly with a quizzical look on his face.

Marin shrugged with a *what can you do* look on his face.

Alain returned with his own shrug, before giving Marin a wink and offering his fist. Marin gratefully took the fistbump.

Adrienne rolled her eyes. “Should I ask?”

"Oh, n-nothing! Just, uh, guy talk."

"Or guy not-talk."

"Masculine nonverbal communication between two platonic male counterparts."

"Yep."

"That's the one."

As soon as the door closed behind Alain, Tikki was on Marin. “What in the *hell* was that?”

“Tikki, what the hell, what’s going on-”

“Marin, what were you thinking?”

"What do you mean, what was I thinking?" He shrugged. "Listen. This is good news! We know that..." He grinned despite the chagrin on Tikki’s face. "We know it's not me. It's not my fault she said no..."

“Literally last night, you were cuddling up to Luka. And now you’re thinking of getting back with the same girl you broke up with.” She pinched her brow. “You seriously don’t see anything wrong with this?”

“Uh...no?” Marin shrugged. “What do you have against me playing the field a little? Is the Ladybug miraculous the miraculous of chastity and commitment? I can date around! I’m not committed to either.” He huffed his shoulders. “And it sounds more and more like you just don’t approve of me and Adrienne together, in any form.” His eyes narrowed in a mix of anger and fear. “What, you don’t think I’m good enough for her?”

Tikki shook her head. “There’s no doubt in my mind that you two complement each other more than you could understa-”

“Answer the question, Tikki.” She gave him a sharp glare. “If you’re so insecure about yourself that you need to ask, the answer is yes. But to have a relationship, you need to have trust and honesty. Not just with the other person but with yourself too. Are you truly prepared for that? *Because I don’t think you are*.”

“I don’t see what’s deceptive about it! Just...I’m dating her as Marin, isn’t that what you wanted?”

“This isn’t about what I want. This is about you. Marin, will you show Adrienne the real you if you date her? Will you bare yourself to her even if she rejects you again? Or are you going to continue to put up a front to protect yourself?”
“I just...I don’t want to get hurt again! I don’t want to get hurt by one of my best friends.”

“That’s understandable.” Her voice softened. “But if Adrien wants to date one of her best friends, would you give her anything but the real you to love?” Marin pursed his lips. “Listen. The ‘real me’ is great. I get it. But is the real me dateable? Especially to one of the most eligible girls in France?”

“Let her decide that! Maybe respect yourself and her enough to be true.” Tikki sighed. “You’ve put her so high up on a pedestal. She’s just a girl, Marin. A girl who can fall for whomever she chooses. You should at least allow her to choose you.”

Marin’s face darkened. “I did.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chat looked over the city on the edge of a rooftop, feeling very much like a much cuter cat version of Batman when she heard something behind her. *Wait. That’s Catwoman. Or Black Cat. Nah, I like DC Comics better. Catwoman it is."

“Ah,” She chirped as she heard a pair of feet land on the roof next to her. ”I was wondering when you were going to join me,” she grinned, turning to smile at him.

“I’m not that late.” Marin checked his comms unit. “Am I?” He walked over to her. “How’s your day been, KitKat?”

“No, I’m just impatient,” she smirked, stepping off the edge to face him. “I got cookies, so I can’t complain, I guess. How about you, bugaboo?”

“Busy day.” Marin leaned against a chimney in mock fatigue. “Those Epic Victory Royales are hard, honest work, kitty...”

“I guess for a noob, they might be a bit difficult,” she retorted with a smirk. “Ya know, if you ever want to share our identities, maybe I could have you a helping paw...” Silence from Ladybeetle as he looked over the skyline. “Alternatively, I could just crush you at it.”

Ladybeetle snorted. "Let's move out." As they were walking, Marin kept checking a small sketchbook, occasionally making notes into it.

She raised an eyebrow the first time she noticed him doing it but didn’t say anything for a while as they walked. "...okay, you know the saying about curiosity and cats?"

"Yeeees?"

"What’re you writing?"

"Drawing, actually..." Ladybeetle's eyes didn't stray away from the paper, jotting down notes and ideas. They looked like elaborate costume pieces.

“Okaaay. What are you drawing then?” She tilted her head, peering over to see the sketchbook. “Oh, what are those? They look fantastic, LB! Can I look?”

"Hm? Sure!" Ladybeetle racked his brains for an excuse of what he was drawing. He couldn't let Chat Noire put two and two together if Kitty Section ever got big. "Er..." *If they ever got big*, thought Marin, *which they won’t*. He shrugged and showed her the costumes. "It's a little basic, I know. I'm making costumes for a band."

She poured over the sketches, smiling brightly “Bugaboo, I knew you were multitalented, but this is amazing!” "Oh, you're just saying."

“They look fantastic! I’m sure anyone will be proud to wear something as awesome as this”

"It's a little underdeveloped. There's no theme, no..." Ladybeetle shook his head. "Nothing tying it all together."
“Hmm. They’re concept sketches, so there’s still room for unifying details. But I think most of it comes from what you’re inspired by. What do you want the costumes to portray? As someone who, uh—wears clothes—it’s easier to create a look when you’ve got an inspiration to center on.”

"Hm...yeah. I see what you mean. Hang on, stay right there;" Ladybeetle flipped to his sketch of Adrienne's costume, raising the book to Chat Noire's face before lowering it again, and then raising it, and then lowering it. Hang on. It snapped in his head. Okay, I've got it. I think I have it! He raised it again, tilting his head while squeezing one eye shut, lost in thought. I need to do a few alterations, but- "I think I got it!" He grinned. "I think I've got my theme."

She tilted her head quizzically but stayed still for him while he worked. “Oh, that’s great! Do I get to know what it is, or is it just gonna have to be a surprise?”

"You're...you're gonna have to wait," said Marin, holding his sketchbook away from Chat defensively. "Sorry, kitty." He grinned, pulling it away from her. "You'll just have to wait until the band and I are rich and famous."

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “So many secrets, Bugaboo. But I can take it. At least that shouldn’t take too long.” She grinned. “All I ask is that you don’t forget us normies when you’re rich and famous, okay?”

Ladybeetle grinned. “Well, it’s a good thing that a special girl like you is telling me. I’ll make sure to remember that.”

Something about the word special made his face fall as he remembered the last time they had parted. “I...Chat. I wanted to say I’m sorry about patrol last night. I was scared and anxious—well, I still kind of am—and you didn’t deserve me taking that out on you.”

She shook her head. “Me too. It takes two to argue. I was a bit on edge, and I kinda snapped on you too. I said some things a lot harsher than I probably could have phrased them” She sighed. “But I appreciate the apology.”

Marin nodded. “Why were you on edge? Not to pry, but—“

“Oh, uh...I kinda got dumped, around the same time you dumped Adrienne.” She rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. “So...yeah. I was a little worked up.”

"I'm sorry to hear that. No wonder you had empathy for her..." Marin looked up at her. "Why didn't you tell me, Kitkat?"

“I didn’t want to talk to anyone. And you—” she shook her head. “You’re...you remind me of him. It was just a bit too much.”

"Ah. I see." Marin slowly nodded. "I get it."

“Yeah, I’m okay, though. It’s fine,” Chat Noire shrugged. “How’ve you been?”

"I've been good. I wish I could apologize to Adrienne." He put his head in his hands. "I did love her. Tikki...my kwami, she railroaded me into it. And I don't mean to blame her, cause duh, she had a good reason to railroad me into breaking up with her, but—" Marin sighed, realizing he was this close to saying too much. "She says I should approach her as a civilian."

Chat bit her lip, putting a soft hand on his shoulder. “I think—actually no, I’m sure she can forgive you.” She sighed. “Question now is, do you even want to? Like, you broke up with her, and God knows I don’t know what she did wrong, but whether it’s you as a civilian or superhero, she’s still
“She didn’t do anything wrong! I just...couldn’t be with her as me, as Ladybeetle,” said Marin. “And I know that she’s the same girl, but I know I won’t be the same boy.”

She tried to conceal her surprise. “Wait. The it’s me not you bit was actually the case? For real?” She blinked and refocused.

Ladybeetle looked up at her. “I’m sorry?”

She shrugged off the slip. “LB, I don’t know exactly what you said to Adrienne when you broke up with her, but I can guarantee you she thinks it’s because of her that you broke up.”

“What?” He hissed. “How could she-why would she think that? Who’s stupid enough to dump her?”

You . Chat shook her head. “Think about this from her perspective. She’s probably used to the people in her life using her for her looks, money, or name and then just leaving. You kinda did the same thing. From her perspective, at least. I think it’s a pretty natural response for people to blame themselves.”

“She didn’t-I couldn’t-“ Ladybeetle walked around the corner of the chimney row in a huff before detransforming back into Marin. He looked down at Tikki. “Help me!”

Tikki shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Marin. I had no idea this would happen.”

“Tell Chat! Please! She’s not going to believe me.” Marin put his head in his hands. “Oh, god...what if.” His face contorted into one of fear. “What if I was just using her?”

“Marin you, had good intentions. Yes, you were misguided, and you went about everything in the worst way possible, but you know you never meant to hurt Adrienne. And you know you never thought of her that way.”

Tikki sighed softly before flying around the corner to talk to Chat. Usually that would be a bit of a cop-out, but she figured after everything she could always lecture her chosen later and let him have a moment to his thoughts.

“Uh...” Adrienne’s ears perked up as she saw Tikki approach. “You’re...well, you’re to Ladybeetle what Plagg is to me, I’m guessing.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m-I’m not in the loop with all the miraculous stuff.”

“Don’t worry, Plagg never explains anything.” Tikki smiled and rolled her eyes. “About what Ladybeetle told you, though. It’s true. I pushed him into breaking up with Adrienne.”

“What?” Her blood turned cold. “I...” She began to shake, looking at Tikki with anger in her eyes. “Why? We-they were happy together! Why couldn't you have just left it alone?”

Tikki shook her head. “They both deserved an honest relationship. It’s difficult, but I believe it’s for the best. Ladybeetle wasn't completely honest with Adrienne or himself, and that’s not how a relationship should form. It will be better this way. Eventually.”

“So your meddling wasn't about Hawkmoth or if she found out,” muttered Chat, her face now twisted into fury. At least I'd understand if that was the case.

“There was that too! Of course it was dangerous. It’s always going to be danger-”
"It was about you."

"Adrienne, I-"

"It was about you forcing your chosen into breaking Adrienne's heart because apparently you think
you know better than your chosen on how he conducts his personal life." She looked ready to
cataclysm Tikki. "And for what? To make him even more uncomfortable? To force him out of his
shell even if he's not ready?" She pursed her lips. "How dare you! What gives you that right?"

Tikki shook her head. "Chat Noire, you and Ladybeetle will always be together. One way or
another. But that doesn’t mean you should stay stagnant. Ladybeetle needs to grow. He has so
much potential, and maybe a push out of his comfort zone is what he needs!"

Adrienne shook her head bitterly. "So that’s all he is. A source of potential.” She gazed at the row
of chimneys. "Who is he," she whispered. "Who is Ladybeetle?"

Tikki shook her head softly. “He’s your partner.”

"I know him, don't I? I know him as Adrienne." Her heart sank. She'd told Tikki, but she was sure
Tikki already knew-and besides, she didn't care at that point. "What did I do to him?"

Tikki shook her head. “Things will work out. You two will always find each other eventually. Just
have faith until then, Adrienne.” She gave an apologetic sigh. “Ladybeetle is a lot sometimes, but
he’s a good kid. I know that it’s going to be okay.”

"Tikki, what did I do?"

"I know it may not seem this way, but I really am just trying to do what’s best." Before Adrienne
could bite a retort, the kwami heard a Tikki, spots on! and dutifully flew into Ladybeetle’s pair of
earrings. Ladybeetle walked out onto the roof, looking up at Chat Noir. "Now do you understand?"

She crossed her arms and shook her head. “Now I know what happened, but I don’t think I’ll ever
understand,” she sighed. “And how do you feel about all of this?"

As if you need to ask," said Marin despondently. “Like, imagine getting everything you want, and
then your kwami, someone who you trust, forcing you to...give it all away. All for something that’s
impossible.” He stared out into the night. “It sucks, Chat.”

“I don’t think anything is impossible for you.” She dropped her arms to her side, letting go of some
of her anger; it wasn’t going to help anything. “Have you considered what you’re gonna do now?"

“I...I don’t know. I have options, but they’re just...risky. And then when I did approach Adrienne as
my real self, whatever that means, Tikki went after me again!” Marin pulled Chat Noir in for a
hug. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

She sighed and wrapped her arms around him, holding on to him tightly. “I don’t think there’s any
pleasing that kwami. And I thought Plagg was bad,” she scoffed. “She was right about one thing,
though.” He looked up at her. “What?"

“You’re a good guy. And we will be alright.” She pulled away, looking at him with a soft smile.
“Yeah, I mean you don’t hate me anymore?” Chat rolled her eyes and nodded. “I was upset. But I
could never hate you,” she sighed, the corners of her mouth turning up. “We’re partners, right?”

Marin backed away from her, sticking out his hand for her to shake. “That’s right, Kitty. Partners.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween!
Chapter 21

Adrienne nodded enthusiastically as Marin showed the band another page of sketches. They all oohed and ahhed appropriately. Luka stepped forward. “Marin, these are fantastic! Where did these ideas come from? They’re great!”

“From Chat Noire, actually,” explained Marin. “I thought, ‘hmm, what if we took Chat’s basic concept, and applied it to every single band member?’” Adrienne blushed softly in the back. It was flattering that Marin had found his inspiration from her. Marin, failing to notice, went on. “That’s pretty much the whole concept. I’ll make minor cosmetic changes to each, but for the most part, the concept and the structure are the same.”

Luka nodded thoughtfully. “I like it. You’ve outdone yourself, Marin.”

“Oh, c’mon, I’m really lazy here, actually...” Marin held up his hands defensively, looking away with a deep blush on his face.

Adrienne recognized that blush. It was the same blush he used to give her.

“You’ve created something beautiful from the creative spirit inside you,” Luka grinned, taking a step closer. “Thank you, Marin.”

Adrienne cleared her throat. “Yeah, Marin. I can't wait to wear your designs. They look wonderful. Thank you.”

“Oh, uh-uh-thanks! That’s beautiful. Beautiful that you think so!” Marin, his face as red as the crimson color he picked out for Ivana, looked to Julian for help. He only received a middle finger and a smirk in return. “It should be ready in about a week! I’m excited to use the 3D printer. It’s not really a medium I’ve used before. You should thank Maxine for helping me with CAD software...”

Luka gently laughed at Marin. “I’ll have to thank her too,” she grinned, “I can’t wait to see the final product.” Marin nodded, sliding his hands into Luka’s. “I won’t disappoint you, Luka.”

She smiled back at him and squeezed his hand. “You never could, Marin. Besides, your creativity doesn’t come from a computer. It comes from in there-” Luka tapped a finger into the side of Marin’s head before softly sliding her hand onto his chest. “-So it’s always beautiful when you share something like this with us.”

Adrienne’s nails dug into her palms as she walked up to her keyboard. She was happy for them. She was happy for them. She was ha-

“Kay!” Marin sat back, relaxed, and looked from Luka to Adrienne to Luka back to Adrienne. Oh. Oh. Oh, no!

He could barely concentrate on the music itself as they did their first set. Still, he found himself
clapping along with the rest of the groupies as the band finished their last song. “That was great, Luka!” Marin walked up to the stage. “Were we doing anything else with the rest of the band, or...”

Already Mylene and Ivana were packing up. “So it’s just the two of us. And maybe Ross and Julian.”

Ross shook his head and grabbed Julian’s hand. “We’re going for ice cream. You two behave yourselves!” Julian shrugged with an apologetic smile before letting himself be dragged away by an enthusiastic Ross. Luka laughed. “Right then. What about you? Anywhere for you to be?”

“Oh. No.” He flicked his eyes to Adrienne, who was looking back at him. “Well...maybe.” He flicked his eyes back to Luka, not realizing she knew precisely what he was talking about until it was too late. “Oh...sorry, I-“

“Marin. Please. I’ll be okay.” Adrienne swiftly turned her back with her cheeks flushed as she pretended to engross herself with packing up.

Luka cleared her throat as Adrienne wordlessly went down below decks to get her things, leaving the two of them alone. “Marin.” Marin turned around. “Yes, Luka?”

“Marin.” Marin turned around. “Yes, Luka?”

“Yeah.” Marin walked over to Luka, his heart pounding in his chest. Could this be...

Marin's heart poudned hopefully in its chest before his inner voice of reason talked it down. Marin never even got a chance to wonder why his heart was doing calisthenics so hard in the first place. "Yeah, what’s up? Did you...have an idea about the costumes?"

"Oh, okay! Please, don’t stop on my account.” Marin turned to Adrienne, advancing on her. "Marin! Please. I’ll be okay.” Adrienne swiftly turned her back with her cheeks flushed as she pretended to engross herself with packing up.

"There’s something I want to say to you. Something important.” She smiled gently, taking a step closer to him. Her cheeks were uncharacteristically red.

"Yeah." Marin walked over to Luka, his heart pounding in his chest. Could this be... Marin's heart pounded hopefully in its chest before his inner voice of reason talked it down. Marin never even got a chance to wonder why his heart was doing calisthenics so hard in the first place. "Yeah, what’s up? Did you...have an idea about the costumes?"

"Well, no. You’re great about the costumes! It’s...a little more important than that.” Yes , thought Marin. Yeah, it might be. “Well, c’mon. Don’t leave me in suspense.”

"Oh, okay! Yeah, sure. Well, it’s just-” Luka reached into her pocket and took out an advertisement. "There’s this talent competition that XY is advertising, and I feel like we should do it! I haven’t proposed it to the band just yet, ‘cause I wanna get your hot take on it.”

Marin’s face was a blank. “Right. Yeah. Of course.” Ouch. Why do I even bother again? Marin reached out with his hand, offering to take the advertisement. “Do you mind if I-”

“Yeah, sure” She handed him the ad, her fingers brushing over his as she did. It was a complicated brochure with a lot of legalese on the back side-more than usual, in Marin’s opinion. It doesn't seem too important... “What do you think?”

"Okay..." Marin slowly nodded. "I love it. They want a video recording and a shoot, but I'm sure Adrienne could help with that." He handed it back to her. "I'm totally on board!"

"Yes!” She grinned, pumping a fist in the air before stepping in to hug him. “I’m so glad. I can’t wait to wear your new designs!"

“Oh, come on, you’re just saying that...”

“No, they do look incredible!” Marin chuckled, scratching the back of his head. "I guess now the pressure's on me to print the things, huh?"

“I’m not a computer wiz like Maxine, but if there’s anything I can do to help you, please just let me know, and I'll do everything I can. I mean it.”
"You should probably bring this up in the band group chat. You're the frontwoman, and I'm not technically a member..." He looked over to the dock, wondering where Adrienne had gone before looking back at Luka. "But thank you for that confidence. That means a lot, Luka." He looked at the brochure. "Yeah. But to be honest with you, I can't see any way that this could go wrong."

"Wow," muttered Marin as he viewed the advertisements for XY’s newest show. "That went all wrong. Luka, I’m sorry."

"Don’t be. I’m the one who acted stupid, thinking this was our lucky break. God, I shouldn’t have brought it up!"

He looked at Adrienne sheepishly. "I don't suppose your mom could help us out?"

"How could she-"

"She's got a scary legal team." Marin looked back to Adrienne. "If she's willing. Which I guess not."

Adrienne sighed. “Don’t bother. She doesn’t like the fact that I'm doing this at all, and it’ll probably be 3 to 5 business days before I can schedule a meeting to even bring it up with her.”

“This is outrageous.” Luka clenched her fists. She was the type of person who prided herself on her chill, unbothered vibe. But right now, anyone in a ten-foot radius could feel her rage simmering.

"L...luka?" Julian put his hand on her shoulder. "Sis, you okay?"

Her eyes snapped up as Julian touched her. “How dare they” She whirled around. “Who do they think they are?! To steal our music, Marin’s designs! It’s not right! They-They need to pay!”

"Pay..." Julian and Marin traded a look. "How?" "I mean, I date all of my designs, and the CAD models and the audition video are timestamped. I’m sure we could file suit with the evidence we have, plus Gabrielle's lawyers...heck, even Clovis could argue that case and win us money."

Luka didn’t move. Marin held in a breath. 

"But you're not thinking about a lawsuit, aren't you?" Not a snowball's chance in hell.

Luka tightened her grip on the mask she was holding. The mask Marin has spent so much time and effort designing and making. The mask that XY had carelessly stolen. She turned away from the group who were arguing amongst themselves about how to proceed.

“Luka?” Adrienne looked down at the other girl. “What’re you gonna do?"

“I’m going to fix this,” she said quietly, her nails biting into her palm as she walked away from the group, a small voice intruding in her thoughts.

"Luka?" Marin's small voice perked up. He turned to the group. "Excuse me a moment." He ran out of the houseboat with a worried look on his face, scanning for black butterflies. "Luka?" He began to pick up the pace, leaping onto the dock as Luka huffed off into the street. "Luka!"

Luka turned a corner just as the voice overtook him, offering him a deal that seemed too good to be true. Despite Marin’s watchful gaze, a single black butterfly jumped into the helmet he had clutched in his hand. It was on. Revenge was a dish best served silent.
Maybe I'll talk her out of it, thought Marin half-heartedly as he ran up the steps to the recording studio. That's always worked before. Luka had gotten there ahead of him and was already raging into the studio...with almost an eerie lack of noise. "Luka?"

Marin moved into the recording studio, where XY and a couple of studio technicians were cowering in a corner. One conspicuously absent person was XY’s manager. Figures, realized Marin. XY probably didn’t have either the guts or the brains to think up of this plan by herself.

"Oh, god." He whipped around. "Luka? Where are you?"

Luka—or not quite Luka-stepped out into the light, casting a glare at the people tied up before turning to Marin. “Don’t worry, Marin. I won’t hurt you. Thanks to the power Hawkmoth gave me, I can get justice. I’ll force Barb Roth to come clean about what she did to Kitty Section. What she did to you.”

Marin grimaced. “Luka. This. This isn’t right. We can fix this, you and me! This...this isn’t justice, it’s revenge! And please, teaming up with Hawkmoth involves fighting Chat Noire and Ladybeetle, who’ve won every battle they’ve ever fought!”

“Chat Noire and Ladybeetle weren’t here when we needed them. So I’m taking the law of silence into my own hands.” She took a step forward, placing a hand on his hip. “Let me do this. You deserve better.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You’re an incredible guy, Marin. Clear as a music note, sincere like a melody. You are the song I hear in my head since we first met. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” With that, Luka Couffaine-no, Silencer, Marin reminded himself-turned and ran.

“What’s she talking about. Marin’s thoughts were interrupted by a young girl bound by what appeared to be electricians tape and cable. Oh. Right. Marin ran over to the pop starlet, shaking her awake. “Hey! XY? Are you, uh...are you okay? Talk to me.”

XY jolted awake, but when she went to open her mouth no sound came out. She felt the passage of air and the vibration of her voice, but no sound left her lips. Her eyes widened even more, and she shook her head in a panic. She couldn’t make a sound.

Marin removed his hands from her, his eyes widening. This has got to stop. Gotta find somewhere to change... Marin burst into the bathroom, a whirlwind of emotions through his head. “Tikki! What just happened?”

“I think that was a declaration of l-”

“Has an Akuma ever done that before?”

Tikki shook her head. “Every Akuma is going to be different. And Luka is a special case. She’s dealing with different emotions, and she’s not fighting only for herself. She’s fighting for you too. But you need to stop her and save her from herself!”

Marin nodded. “Right. More like Ladybeetle needs to stop her. Tikki, spots on!” Marin had to admit; he enjoyed that familiar rush of adrenaline that came with being Ladybeetle. “Now, Let’s get Silencer.”
“You’re going to pay for what you did!” Silencer had Barb Roth cornered on the roof, backing her towards the edge.

She was rudely interrupted by an interloping superhero. “I can’t let you do this, Luka!” Ladybeetle spun his yo-yo around Silencer’s back, pulling her back away from the other woman.

Ladybeetle pulled Silencer away from Barb, sending her sprawling on her back. “That was easy…” Ladybeetle stepped over Silencer, looking for her akumatized object... okay, I give up. Where is it? Oh, I think it just might be the helm—“I’m sorry about this.”

“Yeah, me too.” Silencer smirked as she reached up to press two fingers to Ladybeetle’s lips. “But I’ve still got things to do.” She captured his voice and threw him off of her, brushing herself off as she stood.

Got to get her out of here. Ladybeetle pushed Barb backwards into a service elevator. Once she was gone, he turned back to Silencer. Time to end this. Lucky Char-wait. Why can’t I say-oh. Oh, NO!

Silencer smirked. “I guess everyone’s luck eventually runs out,” she said, speaking in Marin’s voice.

—“I can’t talk. Marin felt his chest heave and huff—not that he could hear himself breathe. He lifted his comms unit, sent off a quick message to Chat Noire, and off he went. I’ve got to go. Luka’ll be focused on Barb Roth, anyways.

[on my way bugaboo! ;3]

Chat Noire landed on the roof where he had asked to meet her. “So what’s up, LB? What’re we up against this time?”

Ladybeetle sighed. “—” He signed a ‘zipped lips’ hand sign, before opening his mouth, trying to make sound and obviously failing.

“...cat got your tongue?” She couldn’t help but snicker a bit at her lame joke.

[this isn’t funny]

[There’s a girl that went sicko mode and turned into an Akuma that steals people’s voices.]

[Take a wild guess on what happened.]

“So...akuma got your tongue?” She smirked. “Fine Fine. I’ll focus. So what’s the plan?”

Ladybeetle sighed. [She’s got my voice, which means she can say ‘Lucky Charm.’]

[We’ve got to get her to say the words in my voice]

[knowing luka, she’s going to drag Barb Roth back to the TV Studio. We should wait for her until that happens.]

Hang on. Does Ladybeetle know Luka? Well enough that they were on a first-name basis? Chat Noire raised an eyebrow. “This is Luka? After what happened to Kitty Section, I guess that makes sense.” Chat tilted her head. “Maybe we should wait until after she makes her confession? I mean,
not to agree with an Akuma, but the woman had it coming.”

[We can’t do it.] Marin shook his head as they ran back to the studio, reaching the building and lying in wait for Silencer. [Maybe we’ll be able to tell her that it’s the right thing to do after we beat Silencer, but how you do something is just as important as what you’re doing] Marin pursed his lips. A little hypocritical, no? He wondered if that was the kwami talking.

“Fair enough.” She pressed her ear against the door of the studio. “They’re about to start the broadcast. Show time?” She grinned before bursting through the door, whirling her baton and tackling Silencer, gesturing for Ladybeetle to get Barb and go.

Ladybeetle ran in and grabbed Barb, running over to the supply room and locking the door behind him.

“Why are you siding with her, Chat?” Luka fought with Chat, the two girls tumbling across the floor as Marin was working his plan. “I thought you were a superhero.”

“I am! We both are. And what Barb did was wrong, but this isn’t the way.” She was careful not to let Silencer anywhere near her mouth. Luka looked around, enraged when she realized she had lost sight of Barb.

Luka let out an anguished scream, kicking Chat Noire off of her. “I’m going to set things right. I’m going to make Barb tell the truth about what happened. And then I’ll tell my own truth when I tell Marin how I truly feel!” She turned on her heel and sprinted out the door, leaving Chat Noire alone.

[chat]
[chat noire]
[kitkat, do you read me?]  
[yeah, Bugaboo. She’s headed your way. What do you need?] Adrienne barely had time to process anything that Luka had said before she was back on her feet, running through the studio halls.

[done with my end. Heading to your position. I need you to get Luka and make her come to where you are]

[if there’s one thing I’m good at it’s finding trouble >:3 I’ll get her here don’t worry]

She smirked, wondering how far she could push the cat emojis before LB snapped. She grinned, calling out. “Ladybeetle! Where are you? I think Silencer is in the studio! I need your help!”

She heard Ladybeetle’s voice; “Yeah, I’m here! You’re at the door to the studio, right? On my way!”

[that’s not me, btw. On my way!] Ladybeetle was huffing over to the studio door. This plan had to work.

Chat grinned as Ladybeetle skidded to a stop next to her. “Alright, bugboy, she’s going to be right in front of the studio. You ready?”

Marin gave the nod as Silencer walked over to them, a surprised look on her face. She began to open her hands in Ladybeetle’s voice; “Wait! How were you able to make something without saying ‘Lucky Charm’?”
Marin sprung to action, throwing the fake Lucky Charm at Luka’s face and bracing himself for the actual Lucky Charm. *A vacuum. Huh.* [Kitkat, ever play that game, ‘Luigi’s Mansion’?]

“*Have I.*” Chat blinked. “I still don’t see how a vacuum is any more useful, but at least it’s the real deal.” she grinned. “I’ll buy you time. I know you’ll figure something out!” She leaped at Silencer again for round two, the two of them tumbling through the studio room.

Ladybeetle ran over to the two as they fought. *Wait, she needs to cataclysm the mask. That’s where Silencer’s hiding all the...euaugh. How do I—!* Ladybeetle dropped the vacuum and began to wave his hands wildly, holding his fist over an outstretched hand to indicate Chat’s power. “—!” Chat looked up and saw him. “What?”

Marin played a game of charades, mimicking explosions, death-anything that would suggest cataclysm.

“Um..hi?” Chat raised a confused eyebrow and waved back before she got it. “*oOH, yeah! Cataclysm!*” She let herself be tackled by Silencer, getting in close to press her hand to her helmet, releasing all the voices. “*All yours, LB!*”

Marin revved up the vacuum to full blast, sucking in every single voice save his own, which he took and slurped into his mouth. His voice tasted slightly sweet, with notes of lavender, honey, and cherries.

Marin gave a loud sigh of relief as he looked down at the vacuum, before throwing it up in the air. As soon as the Ladybeetles cleared, Marin knew what he had to do.

“Luka!” He ran over to the girl as she was beginning to regain her bearings, kneeling next to her. “Hey, are you okay? You were akumatized, but it’s all better now.” He placed a hand on her back, a thin smile on his face.

“Ladybeetle? Oh, no...” Luka groaned and shook her head. “Please tell me I didn’t hurt anyone!”

“No, it’s okay! We’re fine. You did leave us a little speechless, is all...”

“So, is this part of the settlement?” Julian asked Adrienne as he grabbed his bass guitar, slinging it across his back.

After a deposition and about an hour of negotiations later, Barb Roth agreed to give Kitty Section a generous portion in royalties, legal assistance in filing Marin and Luka’s ideas as intellectual property, and thirty minutes of Primetime viewing. “*Man, your mom’s lawyers are scary.*” Julian grinned. “It’s awesome.”

Adrienne gave a small nervous laugh in response. “Well, you guys deserve it. The music is incredible, and Marin’s designs are on a level all their own. For all her faults, my mom knows talent when she sees it!” At the word *talent*, she threw a grin and a wink at Marin.

At Marin. Who was scanning the concessions table for something to eat.

On the one hand, there was a plate of cookies. It would be a little gratification, and it’s technically what Marin wanted, and he did deserve it after that fight, but he didn’t know how good it would be for him in the *long* run.

On another hand, there was a bowl of fruit salad. Not what Marin expected at first, and not what he
would go for at first blush, but something more filling and wholesome for him. And it wasn’t like it was a terrible option, either.

“Hey, Luka,” he said as the girl walked up to him and put her hand on his hip. “Which one do you think I should get?”

Luka tilted her head and looked over the options, considering them. “Hmm. I mean, both could be good. Speaking for myself, I’d go with the fruit salad. Better for you and just as sweet in its own way.” She grinned, smiling at him.

“You wouldn’t brutally be heartbroken if I went for the other one, right?”

Luka laughed and shook her head. “You deserve whichever will make you happy, Marin. Cookies or fruit salad. Whatever you choose, I’ll still be here.”

“Nice. Thanks, Luka. I appreciate it.” Marin rolled his eyes before sharpening them again to see her. “Say, Luka. Do you remember when you were an Akuma? Specifically something you said when you were akumatized that kind of caught my interest...”

Luka’s smile fell, and she shook her head. “I’m so sorry, Marin. I can’t remember anything. I hope I didn’t say anything mean to you.”

Marin shook his head. “No, nothing like that! God, no.” He shrugged. “Just something interesting that you said. I didn’t know an Akuma could say that, it’s never said anything like that before. It didn’t hurt me, and I know you wouldn’t. Even if you were akumatized.”

“Oh, thank god. Thank you. I promise I’ll never hurt you. Because you’re a wonderful guy, Marin.” Luka turned back to him, looking straight into his eyes. “Clear as a music note, sincere as a melody. You’re the song I hear in my head since the day we first met.” She gave him a wink and walked the other way.

Woah. No way. No way! Marin was quaking in his dockers as Luka walked away. It was one thing to hear Silencer say it, but another entirely to hear Luka say it. “Tikki, was that her confessing?” In the confidence of solitude, Marin hoped he could talk to Tikki about this. But Marin wasn’t alone. He didn’t see Adrienne. Adrienne, who had heard the whole confession.

“Yes, Marin! And one of the best I’ve ever heard!” Tikki squealed. “What are you going to tell her?”

“I don’t know.” And he didn’t. He genuinely didn’t know. He looked back at the catering table. Cookies or fruit?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!