In Defiance of all Geometry

by idiopathicsmile

Summary

Amis House might not be the biggest student co-op, or the fanciest, but it's got something all its own. Specifically, smoke damage on the kitchen ceiling from that time Courfeyrac lit a political pamphlet on fire.

In which there are secrets, pining, pancakes, and revelations, and sometimes the shortest distance between three points is not a triangle but a circle.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

June

There's a word for meeting your best friend within the first twenty minutes of freshman orientation.

Call it luck or fate, depending on your perspective. Combeferre might lean towards luck; on a spiritual level he's not sure he trusts in anything beyond the inherent stochasticity of the universe.

Still, he'll always be grateful for the series of coincidences that brought him to that humid day in July three years ago. His orientation group had been about to tour the library when one of the guys had made a rape joke. Combeferre remembers thinking, 'Someone really needs to call him on that' and
opening his mouth, already resigned to being the insufferable politically correct one of the bunch yet again, because apparently nothing at all had changed since high school.

But then Enjolras had reared around, eyes flashing, blond curly ponytail whipping behind him, and bitten out a comment about patriarchy and privilege and insensitive sexist assholes, and it had felt like the sun coming out. And when Enjolras paused for breath, and the joke-teller had rolled his eyes and muttered, "Oh my god, who cares, I was kidding," Combeferre had cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses and said, "And in fact, that's the problem with rape culture—"

Enjolras had picked up the thread of the argument effortlessly and for the next five minutes they'd executed a maneuver Courfeyrac would later dub the "dreamteam tagteam ultimate verbal smackdown." (Courfeyrac being Courfeyrac, it has a theme song and a sort of dance.) They would come to perfect it later, in classrooms and cafeterias and countless nights at the slightly questionable diner by the chem building. Still, nothing would ever quite eclipse that first day, finding that spark of recognition and seeing it reflected back on him.

There's a word for sticking by your best friend for the next three years of college, seeing him through illness and exam stress and some unusually bad family drama—for functioning almost like a couple, as their friends like to joke.

When Enjolras said, "So I want to look into student co-ops for next year, what do you think?" Combeferre knew without asking that this meant "for both of us" and Combeferre also knew that if Enjolras wound up liking student co-ops then Combeferre would follow him there, too. He'd known this even before they'd taken the tour, back when the word 'co-op' had mostly conjured images of aging hippies growing their own hemp and shelling organic soybeans around a drum circle.

That is not what it wound up being at all. Amis House is more what would happen if you took a frat house, emptied it, filled it with a certain bend of socially progressive geek, and had them run it like a small socialist country. Combeferre's happy here, it's his place as much as Enjolras's, but somewhere in the back of his mind he knows he would've gone no matter what if Enjolras needed him to.

Call it loyalty, if you're optimistic about human nature. Co-dependency, if you're feeling a little more clinical. Combeferre goes back and forth on this one.

There's a word, too, for being devastatingly, achingly in love with your best friend and knowing you will never have the courage to do anything about it. There are several words, probably. Combeferre tries not to think about just what they are.

Generally speaking, he likes his life. He likes his classes, he likes his city, and he lives in a weird old house with most of his favorite people. It's odd to think about, but in a way it's probably the most familiar he'll ever be with his friends. He runs into them when he brushes his teeth in the morning. He runs into them when he does his laundry. They share sections of the New York Times over breakfast and they argue politics and pop culture over dinner and in the evening they sprawl out over couches and beanbag chairs to continue the debate and procrastinate their homework just a little longer.

If Combeferre finishes the final draft of a paper at 2 AM and staggers down to the kitchen for a snack, there's a decent chance he will also find Jehan, sitting on the counter and swigging coffee from an oversized novelty beer stein gifted by Bahorel last year, on an occasion that was nobody's birthday but still required cake and party hats, for reasons Combeferre can no longer remember.

The trouble with defining yourself by your friends is that it's a funhouse mirror, and the stronger the personalities involved, the greater the effects. It's entirely possible that Combeferre is not the preternaturally restrained, eminently rational philosopher-king he is often portrayed as. It's just that
Combeferre has the ability to walk away from an 18-year-old collecting signatures for the local libertarian candidate without reducing the kid to tears. Necessarily.

Combeferre doesn't have Enjolras's fire or Courfeyrac's passion or Bahorel’s swagger or Jehan's quiet steely resolve but on some level he knows it's possible that he isn't a complete coward.

It is possible. The possibility exists.

"Room pick meeting next week," says Enjolras behind him, and Combeferre tries not to startle. He must be back from his shower.

Combeferre keeps his focus on his computer screen, a less obvious not-looking than turning around and averting his eyes. Enjolras genuinely has no idea how beautiful he is, which is endearing most of the time but also means that if he gets distracted between now and putting on clothes, he will easily spend half an hour hanging out in the room wearing only a towel, drops of water still trailing down his skin.

"Do you have any feelings on it?" Enjolras is saying. "Wanna go have a look at Musichetta and Eponine's room? I remember it being pretty good."

Their current room isn't bad, exactly. It's bigger than some of the doubles and it's not in the basement. They're on the first floor, so it can get a little loud, and the previous tenants tried to sponge paint it dark green but got bored after the first coat, so the walls look a little like they're covered in mold. ("Not in a bad way," said Jehan once, meaning it, in the way that only Jehan can.) Combeferre is already nostalgic about this room.

"So about that," says Combeferre.

He takes a deep breath, lets it out, gives Enjolras enough time to dry off and put on clothes, does the necessary mental exercises not to dwell on the image of Enjolras naked and damp and smelling of coconut shampoo (usually he picks a big number and divides it back into primes). Combeferre swivels in his desk chair so he can read Enjolras's expression. He doesn't look or sound angry, just confused. His hair is beginning to dry, little tendrils of it springing back to curl around his face.

"I've been thinking about it, and I think it might make more sense if I get a single next year." The summer they moved into Amis House, he'd wound up coming a few days earlier; technically, he has seniority, and thus more say in where he rooms.

"What?" says Enjolras, and Combeferre tenses. They don't fight very often, and he doesn't want to fight about this.

"I mean, I think we'd both get more done if—"

"You're doing fine now, aren't you?"

"I know," says Combeferre, "but this way I could stay up and read without worrying about keeping you awake." And really it's the flimsiest of reasons, because they tend to more or less have the same schedule. "Wouldn't you like a little privacy sometimes?" he adds. He tries not to sound too plaintive, but it's difficult. The emotional strain of living in the pocket of someone he's secretly in love with is bad enough, but the sexual frustration is reaching insane proportions. He hasn't been able to touch himself in weeks; Enjolras is a light sleeper and they have the same schedule.
Enjolras picks at the cuff of his sweatshirt. "If it was bothering you, you should've said something," he says.

"It wasn't," Combeferre lies. "I mean, it's not like this has been eating away at me or something, it's just, I have the seniority and I think it would be nice."

There's a long beat and then Enjolras says, "No, it's fine. Fine. I mean, of course it's fine." It's enough *fines* to signify that in fact things are probably not fine. His voice is light and his face uncreased, and yet it still feels like there's something heavy in the air. Or possibly it's just the feeling in Combeferre's chest.

"Are you looking forward to meeting the newbies?" Combeferre asks after a moment. "Jehan met a few when they came by to tour the house, says they're adorable."

"Jehan thinks naked mole rats are adorable," says Enjolras, and Combeferre would jump to defend his friend’s honor except that it is a factually true statement.

"You can try to bring me down, but you can't put a *rodent* in my good spirits," he says instead, because while Enjolras claims not to like horrible puns, they never fail to make him smile.

This time is no different. "That was awful even by your standards," Enjolras tells him, but that terrible heaviness has dispersed at least a little, and Combeferre thinks that maybe they will be fine after all.

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September

Marius Pontmercy is probably a very nice person. Unfortunately, he has a giant strike against him, in the form of not being Combeferre.

"The meeting's in five minutes," says Marius somewhere behind him. Enjolras nods distantly. Since moving into their new room two days ago, Marius has already covered his half of the walls in posters, all bands and movies that Enjolras doesn't hate but also has no interest in seeing every day for the next nine months. "Oh right, of course you'd know that." On the creaky floorboards, Marius's shift from one foot to the other is audible. "Since you're president and stuff."

"Work manager," Enjolras corrects. People are sometimes surprised that Enjolras never had any interest in being house president. It's true that his report cards have labeled him "a natural leader" since preschool, but presidency in a co-op is a delicate diplomatic position, mostly centered around conducting meetings and arbitrating disputes.

A good house president is organized, firm but approachable, and above all, capable of remaining neutral in times of conflict. Combeferre is house president this year. He's going to be amazing at it.

The work manager wields easily as much power. Each semester, they draw up the schedule assigning everyone their weekly four hours of chores. They're also in charge of making sure everyone sticks to this schedule, and applying punishment when someone doesn't.

A good work manager is competent, driven, and slightly to moderately feared. "You've got this in the bag, dude," Courfeyrac had said, the night Enjolras and Combeferre were elected to their respective posts. "Shit, Amis House's very own power couple over here. We're about to enter a golden age of co-opdom."

Enjolras had tried not to bristle; it was meant good-naturedly, he knows that.
Privately Enjolras isn't sure how he's going to get anything done if just looking at his bookshelf is enough to send his thoughts in a thousand directions. It had been beyond strange helping Combeferre move out of their old room. He can still remember how much fun they'd had moving in together, the way they kept laughing as they unpacked their books and realized how much of their collections overlapped. They could've packed away one person's copies but, a little punchy from staying up all night unpacking, they'd decided it would be better to shelve it all together, endless twin volumes marching along the shelf.

Enjolras's books are alone again. It's a weird thought to have, but that doesn't stop him from having it.

They separated their things out quickly, and somehow he wound up with Combeferre's copy of *The Rights of Man*. Combeferre's notes scrawled in the margins. It's sitting on his desk. Enjolras should really give that back. It would take less than a minute to sort out, a one-sentence email. They both check their university accounts constantly, and they still live in the same house for crying out loud.

He's had an empty email open in a tab for days. Whenever he tries to string the words together, all he can see is what's between the lines, stark and needy.

*What did I do? How can I fix it? Why won't you just tell me?*

The urge to stop staring at his computer screen wins out over everything else, and Enjolras heads to the common room a little early. He doesn't try to pick Combeferre out of the group but it happens anyway. Enjolras gravitates toward him before he can overthink it. Combeferre is in a corner, stuck explaining house rules to one of the newcomers, a guy with messy dark hair and an ironic twist to his mouth. Combeferre spots him and nods a greeting, and Enjolras nods back as if everything's normal between them. There are 15 discarded email drafts on Enjolras's laptop that say otherwise.

"So wait, seriously?" the new guy is saying, leaning against the door frame and playing with the strings on his hoodie. "When you want to show you agree with something during a meeting, you don't say 'I agree', you just—"

"It's called twinkles, yeah," says Combeferre with a smile.

The new guy snorts. "Seriously. Part of your official house procedures is jazz hands."

"It's a lot more efficient than everyone individually raising their hand just to—"

"No," says the new guy. "That makes sense. I like it. Or should I say—" he spreads his palms, splaying his fingers and waggling them crisply.

Enjolras didn't even know it was possible to do sarcastic twinkles. He grits his teeth.

"We went over this for all the newbies in June, at the room pick meeting," Enjolras points out.

"Couldn't make it," says the new guy with a shameless grin. "Prior engagement." And that sounds about right, because surely Enjolras would have remembered someone this irritating, with his disheveled hipster haircut and his unconcerned slouch, wearing his apathy on his sleeve like a badge of honor. The new guy waves his hand. "I'm Grantaire," he says.

"I know," says Enjolras. Only one person didn't manage to show up to last June. It doesn't take a genius to match the extra name with the unfamiliar face.

"This is Enjolras," says Combeferre, maybe a little warningly. "We lived here last year, too, so if you have any questions, we're happy to help."
Enjolras nods again, tries to look approachable and not-frightening for Combeferre's sake. He’s aware that the degree to which he cares about everything can make others uncomfortable. Enjolras doesn’t know how to switch off that side of him, and wouldn't even if he could, but he understands there are costs. His only two romantic relationships have both ended with the other guy saying some variation of "I'm sorry, I just wasn't prepared for you to get so serious so quickly" and making a run for the door.

There's a reason Enjolras has never told Combeferre how he feels about him. By the time Enjolras had worked out what was going on in his own head, it was way too late.

If it was only an issue of lust, Enjolras could take a cold shower, or a series of cold showers, and power through. But it’s so much worse than that. Enjolras has fantasies about crowding Combeferre against a wall and kissing down his neck, sliding his hands under Combeferre's sensible sweater and debauching the hell out of him but Enjolras spends an equal amount of time fantasizing about moving into a house together, getting married, and adopting some children. Maybe a pet. Combeferre is a dog person, he thinks.

There is no socially acceptable way to tell your best friend, "I want to blow you against our book case, and also I think you'd make a great dad."

Especially now that it's no longer their book case.

Maybe that's why Enjolras finds all that irony and distance shit so irritating. People like Grantaire skate through life with shrugs and easy smiles, will never have to spend months wondering if they've alienated the most important person in their whole world by caring a little too much, or caring the wrong way. Enjolras takes a deep breath and exhales through his nose, remembers that it's wrong to take his frustrations out on people caught in the savage crossfire of his emotions.

"Yeah, actually," says Grantaire, "the, uh, no-drugs policy, how does that work?"

"We're registered as substance-free housing," Combeferre explains. "So no illegal drugs, obviously. And we don't allow alcohol or tobacco on the premises—the house, the yard, the parking lot. Medication you've been prescribed isn't an issue, of course. Oh, and you can bring in cooking wine for a recipe if you put it to a vote and a majority of the house approves."

Grantaire sucks in a breath and raises his eyebrows, which is stupid because if he'd paid even a little attention during the house tour or the signing of his contract, this should not be new to him.

"Yeah, but we're allowed to drink outside the premises, right?" Grantaire smirks. "Like I don't need to get house approval every time I go to a bar. Can I bring liquor back into the house as long as it's safely in my body?"

People in Amis House have different reasons for picking the drug-free co-op. Enjolras hadn't cared either way, except that it seemed to create a culture less focused on parties and more focused on getting stuff done. He's always assumed Combeferre chose it for similar reasons. But he has the impression that Eponine, and now her little sister Azelma, made a deliberate choice; something about their parents owning a bar, and a very unhappy childhood. Enjolras has maybe 5% of the details but it's enough to make him grind his teeth if he thinks about it too hard. Grind his teeth and want to light Mr. and Mrs. Thenardier on fire.

Among the other co-ops, Amis House has a reputation for being weird and out of touch and more than a little uncool. Enjolras does not give a shit.

"The body is a container," he snaps.
Grantaire opens his mouth like he's going to say something else, and Combeferre steps in with,

"There isn't really consensus. A lot of people drink socially out of the house. As long as you don't go
overboard with it, nobody is going to make a big deal."

Then Courfeyrac comes over to say hi—well, actually, he runs over and hugs Enjolras so
enthusiastically that his feet leave the ground—and Enjolras is pulled into a conversation about a
possible upcoming TA strike that lasts until the start-of-meeting signal. It's the same as the dinner
bell: someone goes out onto the front step and gives the doorbell several deliberate blasts.

This time, it's Bahorel. He leans on the buzzer for five long pulses, as if playing the opening of
"Row Row Row Your Boat" on Hell's kazoo.

All the newbies jump. It's a jarring sound. Like a lot of things in Amis House, you get used to it after
a while, and then it stops bothering you, and then it folds into the fabric of your life so thoroughly
that you wind up fond of it despite yourself.

From across the room, Enjolras locks eyes with Combeferre and they both grin. Enjolras loves his
co-op so much.

"I think everyone's here then?" says Combeferre as Marius bolts into the room sheepishly mouthing
'sorry, sorry, sorry you guys' and wearing only one sock. "Hi everyone! Welcome to another year at
Amis House."

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Grantaire did not sign up for this. Well, technically he did. Technically that's what he did, went down
to the university's co-op headquarters and put his signature on a series of papers, but Grantaire only
kind of skimmed them. Who knows, maybe it's all there in the fine print: "Be advised you are going
to wind up getting in a knock-down screaming fight with the most beautiful man in the world about
organic bananas."

The point is, Grantaire didn't join a co-op intending to be part of the crazy utopia vanguard. He came
on the understanding that rent would be cheap, dinner would be provided five nights a week, and
that none of his old friends would want to live with him once he announced his intentions to cut back
on the old spend-your-weekends-getting-blackout-drunk routine. This last assumption, at least, has
proven right; turns out they'd been less buddies and more drinking buddies, which, well, the more
you know.

"I just don't think it's fair," says Grantaire, "Everything I could find said rent would be one amount,
and now you want to raise it by 20 dollars a month just so we can buy fancier produce?"

This is a civilized debate, which means that the nice one with the glasses — Combeferre, wonderful,
kind Combeferre, who looks Cree or maybe Ojibwe and has sort of a hot librarian thing going on
that is really working for him — must call on people before they're free to yell at each other.
However, the rest of the room has fallen silent, so it's just a moderated pinball back and forth
between Grantaire and the rude gorgeous one with the hair, Enjolras.

Grantaire hasn't been able to use the jazz hands of consensus even once. It's a crying shame.

"Enjolras," says Combeferre.

Enjolras puts his hand down. "Look, I know people might be reluctant to pay more," he says. "But
we're not talking about a silly extravagance. Conventional farming is doing real, measurable harm to
the environment. The water supply, the soil quality, anything living nearby — it's all affected, and it
all connects back to us. What are our priorities here? I just think we need to all take a good long look at what kind of a house, at what kind of people, we want to be."

It's a good speech. The words could use some work, but the delivery has Grantaire wanting to hold up a lighter and sway. (Are lighters allowed in Amis House? Maybe for candles.) From up in his neutral president's chair, Combeferre is trying hard not to look moved. He actually looks a little enamored. To his left, the black guy with the start of an afro and a downright improbable name — Courfeyrac? — murmurs something about "the co-op power couple." Grantaire's stomach sinks. It makes sense that the two most dazzling people in the house would be together, but well. He'd been hoping Combeferre was single.

Back before the meeting but after Grantaire’s awkward comment about alcohol, and after Courfeyrac had dragged Enjolras away, Combeferre had touched his arm and said,

"Is everything okay?" in a quiet gentle way that didn't quite communicate 'I can see through your bluster and clearly things are not okay' but that at least edged toward it. Grantaire had felt so surprised—in his experience, people tiptoe around this kind of shit unless they absolutely can't—that he'd only been able to stammer,

"Well, yeah, I mean, I'm working on it."

Combeferre dropped his voice to an undertone. "Because the university has a ton of resources and support if you—"

And Grantaire snorted, because why yes, that had basically been his summer. "I've got the memo on that, don't worry."

"Well if you need anything," Combeferre said, "or just to talk — give me your phone, I'll add my number."

All delivered innuendo-free, and with, as far as Grantaire could tell, perfect earnestness. When Grantaire had moved out of his old house, the nicest thing any of his housemates said — and these were guys he'd lived with for two years — was "You are such a fucking downer lately, grow up."

Grantaire's stomach roiled, but he passed his phone over. And thankfully, Combeferre didn't seem to notice how few contacts there were, just punched in his own number like it was the most natural thing in the world. Grantaire fixed his eyes on the ceiling for a few seconds, willing himself not to tear up.

Then Combeferre handed the phone back with a self-effacing smile. "Sorry, it kept trying to auto-correct my name," and Grantaire knew he wasn't going to be able to think of anything clever to say, so instead he just reached out his hand. In doing so, the cuff of his hoodie rode up, exposing the edges of the ink on his wrist. Combeferre tilted his head, so Grantaire obligingly pushed up his sleeve to better display the black lines winding up his forearm.

Combeferre laughed then, delight transforming his face. "Are those wild yam vines? That's amazing!"

"What? I — wait, how did you identify yam vines on sight?"

"Dioscorea alata," said Combeferre with a shrug, like oh yes of course. "The veins on the leaves are pretty distinctive, so."

"I just saw the picture somewhere and liked it," Grantaire muttered. "I didn't actually know that it
was — Discor — ?"

"Dioscorea alata," and then maybe noticing Grantaire's wide eyes, Combeferre went a little pink. Adorably pink. "It's not a—I only remember that because it's named after Pedanius Dioscorides," he said defensively, and then, "Uh, this ancient Greek physician-slash-botanist, it's not a big —"

Grantaire couldn't help smiling at that. "Are you trying to be self-deprecating? Because I'm more impressed now than I was before —"

"I'm not the one with wild yam vines tattooed on my arm!"

"It's not a tattoo," Grantaire explained, "I was just bored in class. And I had a marker, so." And for some reason, Combeferre looked at him then. Actually looked, not as a president trying to be responsible around a troubled house member, but with interest, the way you'd look at someone you really wanted to — not sleep with, Grantaire's not delusional — but like maybe Grantaire was somebody he wanted to get to know.

Grantaire can't remember what his face was doing, probably something embarrassing, but then this godawful buzzer sounded five times in a row, making Grantaire nearly leap out of his skin.

But yeah, he'd bet money that Combeferre and Enjolras are an item. Certainly Enjolras has spent the whole meeting up to the fruits and vegetables debacle trying to subtly steal glances at Combeferre with a frequency not explained by a work manager looking to his house president for guidance. “Co-op power couple”, Courfeyrac had said. More like “co-op prom king and queen.” It's probably adorable. Grantaire hates his life sometimes.

"Okay, can we" says Grantaire, and nobody's actually called on him yet, shit, but nobody says anything either, so he continues, "can we maybe take a moment to remember that 180 dollars over the course of the year is not nothing? And look, maybe everyone in this room can afford it, but you don't know who's gonna want to live here next year. If we're trying to make a, a community that's open to people who need that kind of shit, like, okay, what are our priorities? I'm just saying. if it turns out we're putting heirloom tomatoes above poor people—um, that's, uh, not awesome, y'know?" He winces, face burning.

There's a pause. Grantaire has never seen this particular group of people stop speaking at the same time. It's a weird feeling.

Courfeyrac raises his hand. When Combeferre calls on him, he says, "Is anyone else starting to feel like we're framing this issue wrong? There's got to be a way we can stand by our principles without turning into a country club."

"Feuilly?" says Combeferre.

"Yeah," says a guy who Grantaire cleverly deduces must be Feuilly, lowering his hand. "If we want to start thinking about how else can we free up some funds—"

"We could sell our organs," Grantaire suggests. "I mean, I doubt my kidneys are organic, but I'm free-range, that's got to count for—"

Grantaire's new roommate, the hot bald dude—Bossuet—laughs, but multiple people glare daggers, and Combeferre says sternly,

"Reminder to raise your hand before speaking, and not to interrupt. Feuilly?"
"So Eponine and I were talking about this at some point over the summer. Right now, we're paying every month for our knives to be professionally sharpened, but you can buy a knife sharpener for not that much—"

"About 30 bucks," says Eponine, much too promptly. Grantaire can't tell if she's been checking it on her phone, or if she just knows that much about knives. Her nails look very sharp. He vows to be careful around her.

"It would pay for itself pretty quickly," says Feuilly, "and even after that, the savings would work out to—"

And then a lot of math happens, and then some dry procedural things, and Grantaire rapidly loses the ability to even pretend he's paying attention. At this point, he'd pay the twenty dollars a month just to get out of this meeting. He comes to just as Combeferre says,

"Okay, all in favor of the original proposal." Nobody raises their hand, not even Enjolras, which is kind of interesting.

"All in favor of the reconciled proposal," says Combeferre. A bunch of hands go into the air, and so Grantaire raises his, too. Combeferre does a quick headcount.

"Opposed?" Pause. "Abstained?" He counts the remaining hands. "Okay, reconciled proposal passes. Everyone who voted to reconcile, come see me after the meeting and we'll work out when you’re free."

"For what?" Grantaire blurs. Eponine rolls her eyes. Grantaire raises his hand, pretends to call on himself. "For what?" He has a sinking feeling the answer will not be ‘a pizza party.'

"The reconciliation meeting," says Courfeyrac, and it is a marvel how two words so boring can strike such terror into Grantaire's heart.

"Were you listening at all?" Bossuet asks in an undertone as things finally wrap up. Grantaire wobbles his hand in a 'so-so' gesture, and Bossuet explains, "We didn't free up enough to cover the whole amount, so there's gonna be a committee to decide what we buy organic and what we buy conventional."

"So, Sophie's Choice, but with pineapple?" says Grantaire, before he remembers that Holocaust jokes are almost never the key to good first impressions. He tenses. The "it's okay, I'm Jewish" gambit only works until you run into someone who is actually a good Jew. Bossuet may be Indian, but these things can be tricky. For instance, Cosette’s definitely Asian and yet she’s wearing a star of David necklace.

It’s a diverse group. Part of him is psyched at the thought of no longer living with a bunch of straight white dudes. He’s gonna enjoy having a little less casual racism in his life. Still: this kind of shit can get fraught. It’s not a question of if he fucks this up, but when. The pineapple comment, he could kick himself.

But Bossuet only shrugs and nods and says "Basically."

Bossuet is good people. Grantaire needs to figure out how to trick him into being friends. His usual method involves buying shots until everyone forgets to notice what Grantaire is saying, so a new plan is required. Baked goods, maybe. People like baked goods, and Grantaire knows his way around a peanut butter cookie.

“Do you have any food allergies?” he asks as they go to join the people milling around Combeferre.
Bossuet takes the non sequitur in a stride. “Soy,” he says, which doesn’t seem like such a setback, overall.

“And he’s vegan,” says Bossuet’s friend, whose name Grantaire still hasn’t caught.

A vegan who can’t drink soy milk or eat tofu. Grantaire can work with this. Maybe. Somewhere on the internet, recipes exist. Still: “Wow, when God was handing out lives, he took a big steaming shit on yours, huh?”

“Yup!” says Bossuet with a casualness bordering on alarming.

Grantaire sucks in a sympathetic breath. “Is this just generally how things go for you?”

“Always,” says Friend of Bossuet.

“It’s not unusual,” Bossuet allows.

“Last year, his bike got stolen three times.” His friend sounds amused about this, like it’s a running joke.

To be fair, Bossuet is also smiling. “Someone nabbed my front wheel the day of my last final. So really, three and a half.”

“Oh god,” says Grantaire, “is our room gonna get hit by a meteor?”

“Our room in the basement?” says Bossuet. He shrugs. “Dunno. Can’t promise it won’t. Oh man, how funny would it be if that really happened, where our room, and just our room, got crushed by an asteroid? Like it flies basically in an L shape and then there’s a smoking hole on the lower left side of the house—”

Grantaire makes a mental note. Vegan peanut butter cookies. So many.

After much hemming and hawing and checking of schedules, it turns out the only time everyone’s available for the reconciliation is 9 AM on Saturday.

“See, this is why I abstained,” says Friend of Bossuet. “That, and I don’t care as long as there’s enough fruit that nobody gets scurvy.”

“Joly,” says Bossuet, “how many times do I need to tell you that scurvy is not a thing anymore. I’m sorry, are you an 18th century pirate? Am I? Is Grantaire?”

Grantaire chews on his thumbnail. There was a period last year where he was hungover all the time, to the point where all he could reliably keep down was toast. He remembers noting how tired and achey he was, googling "scurvy symptoms" and then judiciously making the switch from vodka Redbulls to screwdrivers. It had felt almost responsible at the time. In retrospect, that kind of reasoning was probably the beginning of the end.

“—seriously the coolest disease,” Joly is saying. “You know in the advanced stages, your scars can start opening up again? Because scar tissue is held together by collagen, and without vitamin C, you can’t make more and the collagen you do have starts falling apart, so even old wounds that have been healed for years can break down and start bleeding. It’s like your body keeps a record of every injury you’ve had, right there under the surface—”

Behind them, a dark-haired kid of indeterminate gender (eye makeup, ripped plaid pajama pants, a Pink Floyd T-shirt and combat boots with daisy-patterned laces) pulls out a notebook.
“Can you say all of that again,” he or she says, “but slower.”

As Joly dutifully repeats himself, Bossuet checks the time on his phone and sighs.

“Man, not looking forward to waking up early on Saturday. Kind of wishing I'd thought to abstain.”

"Kind of wishing I'd known that I was voting for another goddamn meeting,” says Grantaire in an undertone. But not, apparently enough of an undertone, because Enjolras turns around and says,

"Yes, well we went over how all of that worked pretty clearly at the room pick meeting, and also ten minutes ago, right before we voted—” and maybe Grantaire is imagining the slight trace of vindication in his voice. But he doesn't think he imagines the look of pure horror that creeps onto Enjolras's face as Enjolras remembers how he himself had voted, minutes before, and what that means in regards to spending his weekend trapped in a room with Grantaire, arguing fruits and vegetables yet again.

"See you Saturday, Enjolras,” Grantaire tells him, and there's no need to imagine the vindication in Grantaire's voice because it's all on the surface for anyone to see. This is going to be fun.

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Combeferre and Enjolras have a system. Actually, they have a number of systems—they have a system for studying together and a system for when they wind up on opposite sides of a debate and last year they had a system for making dinner for the house on Wednesdays (Enjolras cooks, Combeferre bakes. Anything else, and madness descends.)

But one of those systems relates to texting, and it goes like this: every day, Enjolras is allowed to send Combeferre five messages of a ranting or venting nature. Enjolras is free to exceed this, but from the sixth complaint onward, Combeferre can reply however he wants. He has a whole cache of trivia about insects stored up for this purpose. Enjolras is reluctant to admit it, but invertebrates make his skin crawl. It's kind of cute, or maybe Combeferre is just that far-gone.

The day of the follow-up meeting, Combeferre is studying in the library and Enjolras hits his limit in record-breaking time (If I hear the phrase 'just to play devil's advocate' one more time THERE WILL BE BLOOD). So when his phone buzzes again, Combeferre unlocks the screen without looking up from his book, already racking his brain for a new factoid. Sure enough, the message reads,

Sorry, I understand why you like him, but trying to appreciate his gifts right now is like trying to appreciate the craftsmanship of a mallet that is repeatedly bonking me over the head.

Combeferre considers this, then types back, There is a parasitic wasp in Costa Rica so tiny that the males are smaller than a single-celled paramecium.

After five minutes of radio silence, he adds, Sorry, had to bug you a little. :D

His phone buzzes, and Combeferre reads ok I swear I'm not making this up: a group of flamingos is called a flamboyance. This is a pretty out of character response for Enjolras. Combeferre's forehead wrinkles, and he takes a moment to look at the screen properly and get what's going on. The text is from Grantaire. He scrolls up; the last one was, too.

Combeferre reads two more pages of his book, and then he types out, In that case, a single flamboyance can be as many as a million flamingos—they form some of the largest bird flocks in the world.

He's only progressed about a paragraph more when the next text comes: Sir! Are you challenging me
to a trivia duel??? Consider this my dropped glove: the Anglo-Zanzibar War lasted literally less than 40 minutes.

Combeferre smiles. The nation of Iceland has no standing army. (Which is to say: bring it.)

The trivia battle ends sooner than the Anglo-Zanzibar War, but not by much. It concludes around the time that Combeferre gets an actual sixth text from Enjolras: I don't think he's looked up from his phone or stopped smiling for the last hour. Pretty sure he's playing Angry Birds. This is the worst.

The image of sardonic, deadpan Grantaire delighted over obscure factoids has Combeferre laughing out loud in the library until he remembers, with a sharp, guilty tug back down to earth, that he is being a really terrible house president.

(Combeferre learns later, from Courfeyrac, that while the reconciliation meeting was long, at times fraught, and really much more profane than it had any right to be, it was productive. The house winds up supplementing their groceries with CSA shares from a local organic farm, and Eponine negotiates a considerable discount due to the sheer amount of produce involved. The cooks despair over what to do with so much zucchini, but then Joly invents a chocolate vegan zucchini bread that is astoundingly, addictingly, logic-defyingly good and the complaints drop off sharply.)

His presidential duties keep Combeferre busy over the next few weeks, which is good, because he has less time to be distracted by how weird it is to suddenly have a room to himself. He does appreciate the privacy, but he loses track of the number of times he turns away from his computer, halfway through a comment about something he's read or wanting a second opinion about a thought he's just had, only to remember that Enjolras isn't sitting at a desk a few feet away.

He stops by Enjolras's new room sometimes, but having Marius there throws off their old rhythm. Combeferre feels honor-bound to include him in conversation, but early on, Marius made some comments about Reaganomics that needed to be refuted, and from then on, Marius has been noticeably twitchy in his presence.

Enjolras finds this hilarious. Combeferre is happy for him, he really is.

Combeferre invites him to his new single a few times, and Enjolras shows up when asked but doesn't otherwise make a habit of it, which is also weird. Maybe Enjolras is feeling it too, the need to prepare for the inevitability of the day their lives no longer run in close parallel tracks.

There's a stiltedness between them that was never there before, but Combeferre just keeps trying to ignore it away, because it's that or talk about it and admit the whole tangled mess of feelings and hormones that are frankly better left in their own particular Pandora's box.

So that's Combeferre's frame of mind three weeks into the school year, when a tentative, questioning knock sounds on his door. His heart beats a little faster, even though he knows immediately it's not Enjolras, whose every gesture is declaratory.

"Come in" he says. He's expecting Azelma or Marius until the moment Grantaire walks into the room, pale and shaken-looking and aggressively chewing on his nails. "What's up?"

"Hey," says Grantaire. "Sorry." Even including their trivia battle, four out of five of their most recent interactions have started with Grantaire apologizing for nothing. Combeferre has no idea what he's done to seem so standoffish. He tries to keep his door propped open for part of every day—it seems like good presidential policy — but people keep stealing his cinderblock to use as a stepstool in the
pantry. ("People." It's Musichetta. Everyone knows it's Musichetta. She's the only person both strong enough to lift it and short enough to need it.)

"No, no, it's fine." Combeferre closes his laptop and swivels around in his computer chair. "Sit down." He gestures to the bed — it's the only other place to sit in the tiny room, but Grantaire doesn't see, too busy making himself comfortable on the floor. Combeferre doesn't know whether it would more awkward or less awkward at this point to offer the bed, or to take the bed himself and offer the chair. In the absence of a clear path, he plunges forward. "What's going on?"

Grantaire picks at his cuticles. "Sorry," he says again, and Combeferre vows to train him out of the reflexive apologies someday, somehow. "It's just—is it okay if I hang in here for a bit? I needed to get out of the room."

"Everything okay with Bossuet?" Combeferre asks, although it's hard to imagine anyone having problems with the most laid-back person in all of Amis House.

"Yeah, no, Bossuet's great. Best roommate I could hope for, he's definitely getting the raw end of that deal," says Grantaire. He laughs a little, light and nervous and self-loathing. "No, but, um. Musichetta and Joly came in, and Joly was really, really distraught. He kept saying he was having a heart attack? And Musichetta kept telling me not to call 911, and finally Bossuet told me it's a panic attack, which—" He winces. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, it seems kind of personal—"

"I knew about those," says Combeferre evenly. "Joly told me before he moved in, he doesn't mind people knowing. He has a mild-to-moderate anxiety disorder. Stress triggers it, a couple of other things. If he hasn't calmed down in a few minutes, he's got medication he can take, he's just trying not to rely on it too much."

"Yeah," says Grantaire. He scrubs a hand over his eyes. "That's basically what Bossuet said. I just—this is stupid, I know it's stupid, but Joly was so, so scared, and it was really—"

"No, no, of course that would be upsetting," says Combeferre.

"It was just...it was weird." Grantaire stares up at the ceiling for a moment. "The rest of the time, he's so happy," he says finally.

"Yeah, well it's a mental illness, it's not his personality."

This makes Grantaire blink slowly, as though the thought has never occurred to him. "If you've got stuff to work on—" he starts and Combeferre says,

"I've been on Reddit for the last half hour, which is pretty much my limit. So if there's anything else you want to talk about, by all means feel free."

"Okay," says Grantaire. He taps his fingers on the floor, thoughtfully. Grantaire is constantly moving. It should set Combeferre's teeth on edge, but it doesn't. "Okay, horrible-person-question. What pronouns do I use when I talk about Jehan? And I know," he adds, immediately, before Combeferre can answer, "I should really go ask him-or-her-or-none-of-the-above myself, but it's way too late now. It's like not learning someone's name in time, you can't just sidle up like, 'Hey, I've been misgendering you for a month, sup amigo? Or amiga. Shit.'"

Combeferre shakes his head encouragingly. "It's not a stupid question at all," he insists. "And it's actually a little complicated, because Jehan says—well. Jehan has implied it might change in the future, but that until there's a definite decision, the default might as well be male. But," he sighs. "Courfeyrac pulled us aside a while back and pointed out that if you watch Jehan's face, it kind of
wilts when you use 'he' and 'his', so there's an unofficial house-wide effort to just—"

"Not use pronouns with Jehan at all," says Grantaire. "Yeah, I noticed that. Or I started to, around
the time I was frantically watching you guys, hoping for clues."

It's Combeferre's turn to wince. "Sorry about that," he says, but Grantaire shrugs a shoulder.

"Nah, it's cool." Grantaire has a paperback book in one hand; he bends it and unbends it absently.
Combeferre frowns. Enjolras is usually the one to move a conversation forward; he has no fear about
asking blunt questions, which gives him the power to leap right into the most interesting part of a
conversation.

Enjolras would probably come right out and say, ‘Why did Joly’s panic attack bother you so much?’
or ‘Has nobody ever destigmatized mental illness for you?’ or even ‘What’s that drawing on your
hand?’ Because there’s a new design trailing down the backs of Grantaire’s fingers, over the delicate
wrist bone and disappearing under his sleeve. It looks weblke, or possibly a root system. It’s intricate
and beautiful, and Combeferre very much wants to see the whole thing, if the ink wraps around
Grantaire’s forearm or up his shoulder, but he can’t find the words to make it not sound like a come-
on.

Probably because it would, in fact, be a come-on.

On some level, it’s a relief to know Combeferre is still capable of being attracted to people who
aren’t Enjolras. It would be a bigger relief if Grantaire wasn’t the first exception in three years, or if
the situation wasn’t so volatile. Talking to Grantaire is a delicate operation, and Combeferre’s
fluttery, pulse-pounding nerves are an X factor he does not need.

He gets the sense that if he waits too long to speak, Grantaire will see it as a dismissal, and sure
enough, Grantaire unbends the book again and clears his throat. "Seriously, dude, if you've got
homework or—"

"That thing you said the other day about octopuses," says Combeferre. Grantaire stops, raises an
eyebrow. Just one, like a silent film star. “During our — during the trivia duel.”

"Yeah?"

Combeferre hefts his laptop off the desk, passes it to Grantaire. "Prove it."

"Are you asking me to cite my random trivia facts?" says Grantaire. "Do you want it, like footnoted
and MLA formatted and shit?"

"I'm asking you to find me a Youtube video of an octopus fighting a shark," Combeferre tells him
gravely.

Grantaire snorts. "Okay, point taken. Be prepared to never be able to eat anything with tentacles
again.” He flips open the laptop, fingers clacking on the keys.

“I will take those chances.” Combeferre climbs out of his chair and settles on the worn floorboards
next to Grantaire, shoulders brushing. It’s surprisingly comfortable, although that could be the added
body heat.

Grantaire smells like spearmint. He chews gum the way some people smoke cigarettes: a pack a day.
If Combeferre had to guess, Grantaire picked it up in the process of weaning himself off one
addiction or another. It’s a smart move; studies have shown it’s much easier to replace a habit than to
eradicate it. Combeferre wants to ask but can’t think of a way to do it that won’t summon up another
round of bitter self-deprecation on Grantaire’s part. They can be hard to avoid.

Combeferre really, really likes Grantaire’s genuine laugh. He’s heard it maybe three times.

"No joke,” Grantaire is saying. “This is the end of enjoying calamari. Make your peace now.”

Somehow, Combeferre thinks it will be worth it.

***

October

"Morning, Enjolras," says Cosette. Enjolras nods a greeting. From the corner of his eye, he sees her double-take just a little. "Are you drinking coffee out of a bowl?"

Enjolras looks down at the soup dish in his hands and shrugs. "We're out of clean mugs," he says, and Joly snorts. "What?"

"Nothing, it's just Jehan's in the kitchen, eating cereal from a measuring cup because we're out of clean bowls."

"Let me guess," says Feuilly from behind the newspaper. "Somebody forgot they had rotational." No one person is assigned to watch dishes on Saturdays; everyone signs up for a couple of shifts each semester. This means weekends can get chaotic, depending on who’s covering dishes that week. Or not covering, as the case may be.


Grantaire has missed a rotational, skipped his first living room clean, and last Thursday he had Eponine cover him cooking dinner. Altogether, he owes five hours, and he’s barely been here two months. Every co-op has a weak link or two; this year is no exception.

Grantaire is even worse than expected. He's smart, Combeferre would say in his defense, and it's not like Enjolras doesn't know this. Grantaire will enter a discussion in the middle and make a series of excellent points, quoting philosophers and writers with a wave of his hand. Then if anyone starts agreeing with him, he'll turn on a dime and argue the opposite side. If you point this out, or ask him what the hell he actually believes, he will invariably shrug and say something like, 'Dude, I dunno, there's a reason I decided to major in drawing shapes' and slink off, unconcerned.

Or he'll spend the whole night lying facedown on the couch, whining about a five-page paper due the next day that he'll then start at dawn and be finishing with red-rimmed eyes just as Enjolras is on his way out the door at eight.

Grantaire's intelligence is not a point in his favor. If anything, it just ups the irritating factor. Watching him operate is like watching someone drive a high-end sports car off a cliff, over and over again.

“I’ll clear it up when I’m done with breakfast,” says Enjolras. He picks up the bowl and sips. The slurping echoes through the dining room. Cosette pulls a face. Enjolras hates his life, but he doesn’t hate it as much as he loves coffee, so he takes another careful swallow.

A few minutes later, Grantaire stumbles in, unshaven and disheveled, deep circles under his eyes. Enjolras would be concerned, except that Grantaire is an adult and whatever he’s doing to himself is entirely his own fault. He looks like he hasn’t slept in two weeks, and that’s—that’s not Enjolras’s problem.
“Have you guys seen my takeout from last night?” Grantaire asks, voice a little gravelly.

“Did you check the whole fridge?” says Cosette.

Grantaire nods. “So many times.”

“Did you label it?” says Enjolras, as mildly as he possibly can.

“What the—” both of Grantaire’s hands are in his hair, kneading his scalp. “No, I didn’t label it. It’s my takeout, who the hell is gonna be confused by that?”

“Anything in the kitchen needs to be labeled,” says Combeferre. “What it is, the date, and your initials. If you don’t mark it as yours, people assume you’re making it available for the house.”

Enjolras breathes out through his nose. “We’ve been over this.”

“I’ve forgotten before, and it hasn’t been a problem,” Grantaire mumbles.

“It has been a problem,” says Enjolras, because this is a pet peeve of his. “It’s just that you’ve managed not to face any consequences before now.”

Grantaire’s eyes narrow. “Did you fucking eat my takeout just to prove a point?”

“No.” In fact, Bahorel ate it half an hour ago. Enjolras just didn’t stop him. “But looks like the point’s been made nonetheless.”

Grantaire throws up his hands and rolls his eyes skyward. It seems like an overblown reaction to the loss of some chicken curry.

“Label your food,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire squints at him for a long time. Finally he says, “Is that a bowl of coffee?”, a tinge of amusement creeping into his voice, one corner of his mouth hitching upward.

Even softened by sleep, that arch, mocking smile never fails to raise Enjolras’s hackles. “Whose fault is that?” he snaps. The smile drops off Grantaire’s face, replaced by a wide-eyed, wounded look Enjolras likes even less. It also makes no sense, because Grantaire has demonstrated over and over that he’s shameless about breaking rules, or being called out about it. Enjolras stares up at him, completely at a loss.

“Grantaire, there’s leftover zucchini stir-fry if you want it,” says Cosette.

“Thanks, dude,” Grantaire mumbles, disappearing back into the kitchen.

“Enjolras,” says Combeferre, “can I talk to you for a second?”

“Before you say I’m not being fair to him,” Enjolras says as he gingerly takes a seat on Combeferre’s bed, “I am literally only asking him to follow the same rules as anyone else.”

Combeferre settles into his computer chair. The room is so small that their knees are almost brushing anyway. Enjolras draws his feet up. He wishes Combeferre was wearing a different sweater—something about that particular shade of blue turns his light brown skin almost golden. It’s distracting.
“Of course,” says Combeferre. “Expecting less of him would be condescending. I’m only saying—
can you work on making your dislike a little less obvious?”

Enjolras blinks. “I don’t hate him.” His hatred is reserved for certain politicians, most TV executives,
and for people who hurt his friends. Grantaire is tremendously annoying, but he doesn’t actively
mean harm, and he makes Combeferre happy.

“He bothers you,” says Combeferre evenly, and there’s no denying that. "Is this about what
happened at last month’s meeting?"

"The produce thing? No." Enjolras shakes his head; he knows this much for sure. "He had a point."
Dissent can be useful; the reconciled proposal was a much better one. Honestly, if Grantaire acted
like that all the time, he'd have Enjolras's respect in a heartbeat. But Grantaire doesn't seem interested
in earning anyone's respect.

Yesterday, Enjolras managed to corner him long enough to issue a stern reminder about missed work
hours. Grantaire had responded by laughing and saying, "I'll deal with it, don't worry, boss," waving
a hand as if swatting flies.

“The whole system depends on everyone taking care of the house,” Enjolras says now. “If people
stop, it all falls apart.”

“I don’t think he’s as apathetic as he seems,” says Combeferre. “If you really talk to him, a lot of it is
just posturing.” He swivels back and forth in his desk chair for a moment, thoughtful. "If it helps," he
adds carefully, "I don't think this is another Montparnasse."

Montparnasse moved in a year ago, charmed half the co-op, and then made it his personal mission to
not lift a finger during his entire stay at Amis House. His excuses were impeccable until they weren't,
and when it got to the point where he owed 30 hours of house labor and hundreds in fines, he
vanished in the middle of the night, like something from a bad soap opera.

Worse, he managed to time his disappearing act the day before rent was due. It took months to find a
replacement, and in the meantime, the work schedule and the house budget were both fucked.
Musichetta was work manager at the time. Enjolras had never seen her cry before then, and he's
never seen it happen since.

Combeferre is a good judge of character, and Enjolras knows he should trust that judgement here,
but it's hard. Everything about Grantaire is wrapped up in riddles with clues Enjolras can’t hope to
decipher. It's like trying to solve a Rubik's cube with all the colors on the inside.

"Just—why would he go out of the way to act worse than he is?" Enjolras presses. "What does that
even accomplish?"

Combeferre just sighs.

"Are you gonna tell me I should go ask him?" says Enjolras.

"Well, I was, but if you already know, maybe I'll take the night off." Combeferre smiles, but it's an
exhausted smile. Enjolras has to imagine that it's hard work being his friend sometimes. 'Is that why
—?' he wants to ask. The question burns at him so strongly that it's a physical presence in his throat.
He swallows it back, keeps it at bay for a long moment, and then abruptly, can't.

"Do I—" he blurs out and Combeferre looks up from cleaning his glasses, eyes unguarded and
unfocused at such a close distance. Enjolras can feel himself losing his nerve.
"Do you…" says Combeferre.

"Do I rely on you too much? About stuff like this, I mean."

"Hmm." Combeferre considers this seriously, steepling his hands and resting his lips against the index fingers. The pose should be ridiculous, but he makes it look—well, he makes it look good. "To the extent you rely on me, I think I rely on you an equal amount. Honestly, I think your bigger problem, if you don't mind me saying this—" Enjolras waves him to continue, and Combeferre says, slowly, "For someone who values diversity as much as you do, you can have a very hard time understanding that not everyone sees the world the same way."

Enjolras closes his eyes for a moment and lets the knowledge settle over him like a heavy blanket. Combeferre is good at diplomacy; it's easy to forget how brutally honest he can be when the situation calls for it.

"You really should talk to him," says Combeferre.

"'Hey Grantaire, let's have an open and frank discussion of feelings, how does that sound?" Enjolras shakes his head. "It would only end in tears. His tears, my tears, tears of our ancestors."

"Maybe," Combeferre allows. "But gee, if only there was some way to know for sure—"

It's light, playful, but Enjolras can't shake the bad mood edging on top of him. "Am I a giant hypocrite?" he asks, trying not to sound as plaintive as he feels.

"You don't always live up to your own ideals," says Combeferre, "but that's in part because your ideals are insane, and no human being could ever live up to them. You do better than most."

"But I'm—you're saying I'm narrow-minded—"

"You're human," Combeferre says, which is not an answer. He sighs. "You're going to let this torture you, aren't you? I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," Enjolras swallows. "I'd always rather know. If I could be better, if I'm doing something wrong." He forces himself to look Combeferre in the eye. "If there's anything wrong, anything at all, I would always rather know."

"Of course," says Combeferre. He smiles reassuringly. "Of course, man."

"Glad we had this talk," Enjolras mumbles, fumbling for the door.

Combeferre makes a good voice of reason, he always has. Combeferre is unswayed by emotional arguments. He thinks things through. He is so rational, so outwardly calm, that people sometimes assume that he's unfeeling, a vaguely benevolent android. It drives Enjolras crazy. Combeferre's face is very expressive. His hands, too. You just have to know what you're looking for.

This is how he knows Combeferre was lying.

"Court fey rac," says Bahorel from the back of the car, "I can't believe I trusted you."

"You've gotta admit, it was a brilliant long con," Courfeyrac agrees. "Wait." Enjolras takes the turn a little too sharply. From his peripheral vision he sees Courfeyrac flop against the passenger seat, twisting to face his accuser. "What are we talking about?"
"Hey, you guys." Bahorel puts on a breezy surfer-dude voice. It sounds nothing like Courfeyrac but still somehow works as an impersonation. "Vote for me. It's gonna be so fun, parties and adventures all the time, you guys."

One of the most coveted jobs in Amis House is planning the group social activities—the "House Socialist" as Combeferre dubbed it last year. (The name has stuck with a vengeance, along with a lot of regrettable jokes about the Communist Party.) Given his fun-loving reputation, Courfeyrac was elected in a landslide victory—only to turn around and make their first outing a trip to the local homeless shelter, reading bedtime stories to young children. It's a devious move. Enjolras approves.

"We can have a party next month," says Courfeyrac. "Hell, we can have a party tomorrow. But right now we're gonna go do good and you can effing deal. Besides, think how impressed the ladies will be." He pitches his voice low. 'Hello ladies, sorry I'm late, I just got back from…community service.'"

"It's Bahorel," Eponine pipes up from where she's wedged in the middle of the backseat. "They hear community service, their first thought's gonna be, 'So what crimes did you commit?'"

"Yeah, write this down. You'll probably want to have some crime stories ready," Courfeyrac advises. "Sexy crimes."

"What the hell is a sexy crime?" says Enjolras. "And if anyone says 'stealing hearts' or 'smuggling these guns' and points at their biceps, so help me—"

"Dancing in that Footloose town," says Eponine. There is a lull as everyone takes a moment to imagine Bahorel as Kevin Bacon. Enjolras checks his rearview mirror to make sure that Bossuet's car is still following them. Cosette is somewhere ahead, but it's important to keep an eye on Bossuet. Somehow, all the people born without a sense of direction wound up in the same beat-up Pontiac; if Enjolras lets them get lost, he'll never hear the end of it.

"I'm just saying," says Bahorel. "Two words, Courfeyrac: bait-and-switch." He catches his mistake instantly; it's plain in his voice, but it's too late.

Eponine snickers. "That's three words."

"Whatever, I never pretended to be a fancy math major."

"Although you do have that minor in counting to five," says Combeferre. He's curled up to the left of Eponine, cheek pressed against the window of the car. He's been subdued for most of the ride. Disappointed, maybe, that Grantaire opted out.

The only other person who couldn't make it was Feuilly, who tried and tried but couldn't find anyone to cover his shift at the cafeteria. Grantaire, on the other hand, had only shrugged at Courfeyrac's appeal of "Think of the children!" Shrugged and said, "Dude, I am thinking of them. I'm not cruel enough to subject them to all of this," gesturing at himself. Given that his clothes looked relatively clean, he'd just shaved, and his hair was still damp from the shower, it wasn't that illustrative.

Enjolras isn't upset that Grantaire brushed them off so casually. It would be like yelling at a lake for being wet. But he saw what Combeferre's face did in that split second before the placid mask came back up, and for that, Enjolras wants to shake that lazy jerk by the shoulders.

Combeferre looks blankly out the window. Enjolras wants to say something comforting, but even acknowledging Grantaire's absence feels like a stealth I-told-you-so, and he doesn't want to poke at a wound.
"–important to have a backup plan," Bahorel is saying. In fact, nobody knows what Bahorel's primary plan is. He's lived at Amis House for as long as anyone can remember, and his major is a mystery. If asked, he'll say he's pursuing a Master's in undeclared.

"Who knows," says Courfeyrac, "maybe you'll discover a secret talent for working with children. This could change the course of your life!"

"Yeah," Bahorel agrees. “Or maybe I'll try not to cuss around them and give myself a fucking aneurysm."

When they step inside the shelter, Enjolras takes one look at the cluster of tiny, wide-eyed, impressionable children and feels a sudden profound kinship with Grantaire.

"Is there anything you need cleaned?" he asks the organizer, a justifiably harried-looking woman in her forties. And that's how Enjolras winds up on his hands and knees, scrubbing the shelter's kitchen floor and trying not to think about what's going on between him and Combeferre. It feels good, translating his frustration and confusion into elbow grease, which means soon even the sticky part around the stove is sparkling clean.

Enjolras is trying to track down the organizer again—he wants to take a whack at that oven, but he can't find anything nontoxic enough—when he feels a tug at his pant leg. A small tug, from a tiny hand. With extreme trepidation, he looks down, and into the round, questioning face of a girl who can't be older than four. She has brown pigtails and enormous brown eyes.

"Um," he says.

The girl removes her other hand from her mouth and says, solemnly, "Mister Orange-us, I didn't like the story so I wrote my own and do you want to hear it?"

"Oh…gosh," says Enjolras, eyes frantically scanning the room. He didn't introduce himself to anyone here; that this little girl knows his name smacks of a setup. All of his friends are innocently grouped with other kids. The organizer—shit, he should've gotten her name—is nowhere to be found. The girl twists around, confused, trying to follow his gaze. "I, okay," he says. She isn't much taller than his knee. It doesn't seem fair to make her peer up at him, so he takes a seat on the floor.

She clears her throat, suddenly businesslike. "Okay so this is my story and it's about a mouse family that lives in the mouse forest until once upon a time they had to leave because they don't want the cat to get 'em."

"That…seems reasonable," says Enjolras weakly. The girl raises her eyebrows at him as if to say, "Who's telling this story, you or me?" It's a flat, unimpressed look, at odds with her chubby face and short stature. He gets the sense she will have the exact same expression as an adult, and he hopes she will put it to good use. "I'm sorry for interrupting," he tells her, and she nods, magnanimous. "What happened next?"

She takes a deep breath. "So they were afraid of the cat and then they know that they got to find a new place, and then the Dad, he said they're gonna go to the moon, but first they need new coats."

"Because it's so cold on the moon?" Enjolras guesses, but she huffs an annoyed breath and shakes her head.

"Cause the cat ate the coats all up," she says, with the air of explaining an obvious truth to an idiot. "So they went to the church for new coats but then the littlest mouse get lost—"
The story lasts a good twenty minutes of twists, turns and near-misses. He's impressed at her memory until she pauses with her characters halfway to the moon, looks around wildly, and starts incorporating objects in the room. Then he's impressed with her attention span and her bullshitting skills. She might have a bright career in politics if some massive structural reforms happen between now and when she starts school.

In the end, the mice build a castle on the surface of the moon and knock the interfering cat back to earth using a catapult made of wood, tires, and Musichetta's stretchy purple belt. The girl pauses for one beat, then another, and he realizes she isn't pausing for breath, that's she's actually finished.

There's a talking-to-children voice that Enjolras never mastered: manic and warm and a little high-pitched. When Courfeyrac does it, he sounds like a cartoon character. Maybe that's why kids universally love him. Something tells Enjolras she'd be able to tell if he was faking it, so instead he says,

"That was good," in roughly the same tone he'd use with Jehan or Bahorel. "I liked the part where they built the rocket ship."

The girl nods. She doesn't seem moved but she also isn't crying, so Enjolras counts it a success. She rocks back on her heels, humming.

"What were their names?" he asks. "The mouse family."

She takes a deep breath. "The dad's name was King Mousifer and the mom was Queen Mousifina and the littlest mouse was named—was named…" She seems to have run out of mouse names, but inspiration flashes across her tiny face. "...named Princess Mouserella."

Enjolras casts around for something else to ask, but she solves that problem by continuing, "And she was the most beautiful mouse in the world and she had a beautiful princess dress and beautiful princess shoes and long, long beautiful princess hair, like yours." Enjolras doesn't even know where to begin with that. "Blond," she adds morosely, tugging at her own dark pigtail, and in that moment he could flay the entire Western beauty industry alive.

He remembers an argument from last year, late one night in the dining room. He’d been railing against superficiality—it might have had something to do with those Dove beauty commercials—when Musichetta stopped him cold with a look. “It’s all well and good,” she’d said, “someone like you going ‘oh, looks don’t matter, looks aren’t important, let’s never talk about beauty again.’ You’ve got all the shit we’ve been programmed our whole lives to see as beautiful.”

She’d gestured down at herself, her brown skin and decidedly non-European features. Her family emigrated from the Dominican Republic when she was a baby. "Me, I thought I was ugly, thought I was a freak, until I was eighteen. No matter what you think about society, that is some fucked-up shit to lay on a kid."

It’s not the first time he reversed an opinion after debating with a housemate, but it sticks in his memory.

He is profoundly not qualified to have this conversation. He peers over the little girl's head, searching for Musichetta or Cosette or even Courfeyrac or Combeferre. But everyone is still surrounded by small children — Combeferre is bouncing a toddler on each knee, which does something funny to his heart that he doesn't feel like examining too closely.

So Enjolras says carefully, "You know, princesses can have any kind of hair."
She shakes her head, like he’s making a joke.

"No, it's true," he tells her. "There have been princesses from all over the world. China, India, Ethiopia, Kenya." He doesn't know how much those places mean to a four-year-old, so he adds, "Africa. Most people aren't blond, and that means most princesses haven't been blond. There have been many, many princesses with brown hair, and black hair."

"Really?" The girl's mouth is hanging open.

"Really," he says. "At some point in history, there were princesses that looked just like you, and they were as, as good as any other princess." However a princess's worth is defined, he thinks sourly. What an idiotic figure to raise up as a role model for children.

"Really?" she breathes, eyes as round as quarters.

"I promise," he says solemnly.

From several feet above them, Courfeyrac's voice pipes in, amused.

"Hey, Enjolras, time to go, dude."

Enjolras pulls himself up.

"Thank you for the story," he says.

"You're welcome, Mr. Orange-us," she chirps.

He takes a step away, and then turns around. The little girl is still watching him. "And there are bald princesses," he says, "and princesses who dye their hair green. And princesses with mohawks. Also, boys can be princesses."

She nods, clearly trying to take this all in.

Courfeyrac is pulling at his arm, whispering, "Everyone's waiting outside for you." Enjolras shrugs him off.

"That was a good story," he says again. "You could be a writer." It's certainly a better life goal than 'marry into a monarchy'. Even fashion models and pop stars make for more deserving idols. At least they have careers and talents beyond actively furthering a defunct, oppressive government.

"Say goodbye to the adorable child, Enjolras," says Courfeyrac. Enjolras glances down at his watch and yeah, it is probably after bedtime for a preschooler.

"Have a good night," he says dutifully. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Tiffany," she says. She grins slyly. "Wait! I mean, Princess Tiffany."

Enjolras knows what he has to do. He doesn't want to do it, the thought physically pains him, but his path is clear.

"It was nice to meet you," he says, "your majesty." A better person would bow or take her hand. Enjolras has to turn around so Tiffany doesn't see him wince.

Courfeyrac is speechless on their way out to the parking lot. Literally speechless; he keeps opening his mouth and making weird sounds.
They’re halfway to the car when it looks like maybe Courfeyrac has pulled it together, but then he makes a helpless sort of raptor noise instead. “Indeed,” says Enjolras, just to be irritating. “My thoughts exactly.”

Courfeyrac swallows. “Fuck you,” he manages with relative ease. Then, “What was that? Seriously, dude, what was that?” He sighs. “God, what even is this year?”

‘Indeed,’ thinks Enjolras, ‘my thoughts exactly.’

***

Grantaire has never really understood the process of moving, packing, or organization, which is how, two months into his time at Amis House, he’s searching his room for something important when he instead uncovers a dinosaur-themed coloring book from 1994. He vaguely remembers buying it last year at a thrift store as a gag gift and then not having the heart to part with it.

Bossuet immediately understands what a treasure this is. Five minutes later, they’ve assembled in the common room: Bossuet and Grantaire coloring, Joly systematically fact-checking the text with an orange crayon.

"Can you pass me the aquamarine?" says Bossuet as Joly mutters,

"Pterodactyl, see note: not technically a dinosaur." He turns the page and sighs. "Shit, the tyrannosaurus has the wrong posture, how am I even supposed to—"

"Flip the paper ninety degrees and draw him different feet," Grantaire suggests, rolling a black crayon in his direction. "Boom, now he's just a T-Rex hanging out next to a weird grassy cliff. Not sure what you want to do about the backwards cap and the sunglasses, though."

Bossuet shakes his head solemnly. "Guys, I'm gonna level with you: I'm not sure this coloring book is ever gonna be ready for peer review."

"Bossuet, are you coloring that stegosaurus plaid?" says Joly.

"He's Scottish."

"The dinosaur highlander," Grantaire murmurs. "There can be only one."

Joly laughs. "The dinosaurs didn't go extinct, they were just defeated by the dinosaur highlander." He turns another page and throws his hands in the air, sending the orange crayon flying. It smacks Bahorel in the foot. Bahorel kicks it back to them. "Oh come on! 'Brontosaurus', really?" says Joly, scooping it up again without missing a beat. "See note: straight-up was never a thing."

From the corner of his eye, Grantaire sees Combeferre and Enjolras walk in, heads bowed together, talking quietly. He tries not to watch, but it's tough; they're compelling and he has no self-control.

When he shifts his focus back, Joly is thwapping him lightly with a piece of paper. "The short version is that you need to draw feathers on this guy," Joly says, "for science reasons. Also, Bossuet’s new rapper name is ‘Funky Apatosaur’.

Grantaire nods, automatic. In his peripheral vision, he can see Enjolras start very slightly, as if only now realizing there are other people in the room.
"Hey Bossuet, hey Joly." says Enjolras. Then a slight pause and a subtle compression to the lips, a poorly hidden frown. "Hey Gr—" And that's when Grantaire remembers what kicked off the dinosaur coloring and annotations hour: he'd been looking for his schedule.

"I have lunch clean today," he blurs.

"No," says Enjolras, each syllable loaded with elaborate patience, "you had lunch clean three hours ago. Now Courfeyrac and Feuilly are trying to cook dinner, and every pan is dirty."

Grantaire is struck with a sudden sharp sense of deja vu. Well, "deja vu" for a value of "remembering the last time this happened, on Saturday." He has no idea why he is so shitty at keeping up with this kind of thing.

Well, other than that it's completely in character.

Life in the co-op is a learning process. As the weeks go on, Grantaire learns how to estimate enough dinner for fifteen people, how cook a stir fry in a wok the size of a wading pool, how to accurately judge the spiciness of a dish (if Marius can tolerate it, then it is suitable for babies and small children), how to wash dishes in the giant, lumbering sanitizer, and how to make vegan fudge.

He learns that if the coffee pot is gurgling between one and five AM, it means Jehan is in the kitchen, and willing to talk shit about Greek gods or 19th century literature or the Jabberwocky.

He learns that there are people in the house who enjoy sarcasm and people who cannot stand it, and that he is terrible at telling the difference.

He learns that Enjolras has spent the past two Christmases and Thanksgivings with Combeferre, even though context suggests that Enjolras's parents only live twenty minutes away.

He learns not to ask Joly for science facts while they're eating.

He learns not to ask Feuilly about his family.

He learns not to ask Eponine about her family.

He learns not to ask Marius—well. He learns to wait for people to bring up their families first.

He learns that Bossuet and Joly are the best bar companions a person could hope for, and that Jehan is the worst possible Pictionary partner. (Jehan is actually decent at drawing but way too esoteric in execution, for instance illustrating "time flies when you're having fun" with a sketch of two children playing in a field of decomposing flowers. Grantaire guessed it anyway, but that is not the point.)

He learns that nutritional yeast is not nearly as disgusting as it sounds.

He learns to never insult Lord of the Rings around a linguistics major, that co-ops contain a surprising number of linguistics majors, and that Musichetta has a terrifying death glare.

He learns to never bring up the religious right around Courfeyrac, who inadvertently inspires the first fire drill of the year when he tries to burn an anti-abortion flier on the stove's pilot light and instead starts a small kitchen fire.

("In Courfeyrac's defense, I'm sure it seemed like a bright idea at the time," Combeferre says as they gather outside. Grantaire learns that, even huddled in the lawn, shivering in pajamas and covering his
ears against the shriek of the fire alarm and an onslaught of terrible puns, his ill-advised crush on Combeferre has in no way diminished.)

More than anything else, he learns that if someone comes to his room, nine times out of ten, they're looking for Bossuet. By this point, it's a Pavlovian response: there's a knock at the door and without looking up Grantaire calls, "I think he's in the common room."

"Grantaire?" It's Combeferre's voice. Grantaire glances around frantically, but there's really nothing he can do in five seconds to make the room look like a place where a responsible, non-crazy person lives.

"Come in," says Grantaire. "Watch your step. I hope you've had your shots."

Combeferre cracks the door open and steps inside. To his credit, he doesn't look horrified by the topography of clothes, art supplies, and books that has arisen around Grantaire's desk. Bossuet isn't exactly tidy, but at least the mess on his side has less altitude.

"Hey," says Combeferre, picking his way through the meager patches of exposed floor with ease.

"Have a—um." There's really nowhere to sit; Grantaire's bed is unmade and his desk chair is covered in laundry. Clean, for the most part, but. It paints a picture. "Sorry about the mess," he mumbles.

"Not a problem," says Combeferre. "Clearly you've never been in Enjolras's room during exam season."

Grantaire banishes thoughts of just what Combeferre and Enjolras might be getting up to alone in Enjolras's room with a shake of his head. He flings an armful of papers off Bossuet's beanbag chair and makes a 'help yourself' gesture.

Combeferre can make sitting in a beanbag chair look dignified. It's absurd. Was he bred by scientists in a lab somewhere? Nobody can prove he wasn't.

"I think I'll avoid that particular hell, thanks," says Grantaire. He perches on the only bare edge of his desk. "So what's this about?" Despite Combeferre's poise, something in his hands telegraphs a shadow of nervousness. "Shit, is this about the hours thing?" Grantaire sighs. "Look, I know I owe a ton of house labor right now, but I'm doing all the makeup work I can without —"

"It's not about the hours," Combeferre interrupts. "If you're having issues, that's really something to discuss with the work manager."

"Like that won't end in tears and bloodshed," Grantaire mutters darkly. Combeferre gives him a weird look. "What?"

"Nothing," says Combeferre. "I just—I was walking past your door, and I thought I'd stop by." He frowns down at one thumbnail. "Haven't seen you around much lately."

Grantaire nods. He loves sitting in the common room or the dining room in the midst of a million very odd conversations, but he doesn't always have the energy to deal with the noise. He does stop by Combeferre's room sometimes—Combeferre had offered, and if given an inch, Grantaire will take a mile. Talking to Combeferre is easy, almost dizzyingly so. But Combeferre is also very, very kind. When he pays return visits, Grantaire can never quite tell if it's from a desire to be buddies or an obligation to check that Grantaire isn't dead yet. He tries not to care either way; being Combeferre's pity friend is not a bad deal in the scheme of things.
"What are you up to?" Combeferre asks.


"What movie?" Combeferre peers towards Grantaire's laptop screen, which is frozen on grainy stock footage of a circus.

"Uh, so it's about these four guys. There's a zoologist, a guy who makes robots, a wild animal trainer, and a topiary gardener."

"...and they fight crime?" Combeferre guesses.

Grantaire grins; he would watch the shit out of that show. "I mean, I'm only about three minutes in, but it's a documentary, so. I'm thinking not."

"How do they know each other, then?" says Combeferre, who is really going way beyond the call of duty in the old Grantaire-are-you-still-alive check.

"I don't think they do? I think it's gonna be one of those things where, like, there's all these parallels about work and nature and science, and in the process it kind of helps illuminate things about the human condition." Grantaire makes a face; talking about documentaries really brings out his inner pretentious asshole. All he needs is a smoking jacket and a snifter — although it would have to be full of apple juice or something, since this is Amis House. "And yeah, et cetera," he finishes.

Combeferre's forehead wrinkles. "That sounds really, really, really interesting," he says at last. Again, it's like he's never met irony. Or maybe he met it at one point, but just didn't have time for it. "Can I borrow it when you're done?"

"You can watch it with me right now," says Grantaire, and then immediately regrets it, because surely Combeferre has all kinds of more important things to do. Houses to run, papers to write, mindblowing hot boyfriends to canoodle with.

Although as far as Grantaire is concerned, one of the enduring mysteries of co-op life is how nonphysical Combeferre and Enjolras are as a couple. Everyone jokes about how married they are, and they're constantly giving each other little secret admiring looks, but Grantaire isn't sure he's ever seen them so much as brush shoulders. It makes no sense. Maybe they hate public displays of affection, but they don't seem to have a problem with hugging anyone else in the co-op. It's a huggy group of people.

Maybe it's a boundaries thing, and their only two settings are "keep a foot of space chastely between us" and "rip each other's clothes off like a cheesy romance novel."

Maybe Grantaire contemplates this more than he should. Maybe he contemplates it a lot more than he should. His heart knows it's stupid to get hung up on both halves of a really unattainable couple. His dick has yet to get the memo.

"Sure," says Combeferre, "that would be great."

'Why are you doing this? You know you're not obligated, right? Are you fighting with your boyfriend? Are you just being nice? Is it this obvious how fucked up I am, how much I needed—'

"Cool," says Grantaire. He steps back towards his computer, drags the cursor back to the start of the movie. Something must show on his face, because Combeferre frowns.

"I'm not keeping you from your work, right?" The mouse hovers over play. Combeferre gives him a
stern look. Unfortunately, it’s really hot.

Grantaire swallows. “You mean the work I’m desperately trying to avoid even thinking about and won’t start until a few hours before it’s due? Nah, you’re fine.”

“When is it due?”

“Tomorrow morning,” says Grantaire. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’ve got a process. Denial, then bargaining, anger, grief, acceptance — “

“What’s the assignment? Would it help to talk it through?”

Grantaire has to laugh. Trust Combeferre to offer his assistance without even knowing the subject. Coming from anyone else, it would be cocky as hell, but this is just one of the benefits of being a renaissance style genius.

“Thanks, but it’s art shit. Although actually, if you want to — “ He cuts himself off before the idea can even fully form.

“What?” says Combeferre.

“I need to draw faces,” says Grantaire. “I keep trawling stock photos, looking for references, and everything I can find is so bad it’s distracting. It’s all Woman Laughing Alone With Salad and her cousin, White Guy in a Robber Mask at a Computer — “

“That’s a genre of stock photo?” Combeferre leans forward, eyes alight. His ability to find anything engaging is a goddamn menace. “That’s...charmingly specific.”

“Identity theft. You can pay people to be creative, but apparently you can’t stop them from having the same ten shitty ideas.”

“You want me to help you find better photos?” says Combeferre. “I know a bit about photography but—”

Of course he does. Grantaire squirms. “Actually, I was wondering if I could draw you?” he says in a rush. Combeferre blinks at him. “You wouldn’t have to hold a pose or anything. You could just watch the movie like normal. I need to make a bunch of quick sketches, so it would almost be better if you were reacting to something — “

Combeferre’s brows draw together. “Me?” he says after a moment. “Really?”

“Um, yes?” says Grantaire. He traces his fingers down the side of his desk. His thumbnails are bitten low. When did he start biting his nails? He doesn’t remember; he keeps meaning to stop. There’s a raggedy bit on one pinky. He chews it absently. “It’s fine if you’d rather not. Some people don’t even like having their picture taken, so.”

Now that he thinks about it, Combeferre probably falls into that category. Grantaire knows from some light, casual facebook stalking that most of Combeferre’s photos are of other people. Whenever housemates break out the cameras, Combeferre is quick to put himself on the other side of the lens.

“I mean, I don’t have objections, per se,” says Combeferre, and is he blushing? His skin is dark enough that it can be hard to tell in some lights. “I just — I don’t really have an, an art face — “

Grantaire stares at him. “What the fuck is an art face.”

Combeferre’s hands are twisting together again. “There are a lot of attractive people in the house—“ he says haltingly.
“Preach,” says Grantaire, because it really is absurd. Is there something in the water? In the tofu?

“I mean,” Combeferre continues, “if you want to, to draw me, you’re more than welcome—” And thank god, because Grantaire has been itching to commit that expression to paper ever since Combeferre started biting his lip. Not even for dirty reasons, it’s just striking. Grantaire scrabbles around in his desk, fumbling for his decent sketch notebook and a good eraser. Probably half of learning how to draw is knowing when to erase. His pens are shit and his pencils are uselessly dull, dammit, dammit—

“—but wouldn’t you rather draw one of them?”

Grantaire’s hands freeze over his pencil sharpener. “You’re messing with me now, right?” he says. Combeferre looks confused. It’s a rare look on him. “How so?”

Grantaire goes back to sharpening. “Uh, you’re really, really good-looking? And also, like, your expressions are kind of arresting. They’re subtle, so it’s all in the way your face moves. Like, you have a fast smile and a slow smile, and they’re both genuine but they’re different at every stage, and I don’t know, it’s cool.”

The surface of his desk is covered in wood shavings. He rakes them into his palm, brushes them into the garbage. He glances up. Combeferre is silent. His face right now is a good example of what Grantaire was talking about, but it’s also basically unreadable. Grantaire hasn’t really been listening to himself, and he quickly runs his last comment over in his head.

Well, shit.

It hadn’t occurred to him to self-censor. These things are objective fact as far as Grantaire is concerned. But in retrospect, he probably couldn’t make his stupid feelings more obvious if he wrote them in glitter glue on a construction paper heart.

“Um, thanks?” says Combeferre.

Grantaire shrugs. “You’re welcome, but I wasn’t really trying to flatter you, it’s just, you know, art major. Kinda my job to notice that shit.” Grantaire wills this moment not to be weird. He wills it hard.

And then the babbling starts. "I figure it's gotta be useful for the future. Once I'm kicked out into the real world, it's waiter or barista—either way, you need to read body language if you want to really rake in those tips, you know? Or stripper, I guess, but the same idea applies."

"Hm." Combeferre purses his lips.

"Joking, dude," says Grantaire. He wants to apologize for making them both picture him pole dancing or whatever, but he can't think of a method that won't draw even more attention to it, so instead he just says, "Sorry."

Combeferre nods. "It's fine. I just think you're funnier when you aren't in self-deprecating mode."

Grantaire flips the sentence over in his head, trying to parse it out. "So like, when I'm asleep?"

"I don't know," Combeferre says, glancing down at his hands again. "I liked when you were talking about drawing."

"Sure," says Grantaire, "you mean when I was saying how hot you are. Must be nice." Combeferre
huffs an annoyed breath and Grantaire cringes. It takes a long beat to realize Combeferre is reacting to the self-sabotage, not the praise. He wants to make Combeferre smile again — for the sake of the drawing, not because that disappointed little frown is absolutely killing Grantaire's soul or anything, so as he starts to rough out the lines of Combeferre's face, he adds, "Seriously, I could never strip. Y'know that thing where you take your first pet's name and the street you grew up on and that's your stripper name? Mine's Melvin Stuebel, so. Non-starter."

Combeferre's eyes crinkle when he laughs. Grantaire's hands skitter across the paper. Seriously, how could he possibly be surprised at being called beautiful? Enjolras is probably above noticing something as earthly as bodies and faces, but still, he is not earning himself any boyfriend points right now.

"Pepper Hickory," says Combeferre after a moment. "That's mine."

Grantaire groans. "Seriously, everyone's is better than mine. Pepper Hickory, that's amazing."

"Thanks. In case neuroscience doesn't work out, it's good to have something in my back pocket," says Combeferre, and great, more mental images. Why does Grantaire keep bringing the conversation back to strippers? It's like some form of terrible Tourette's. He swallows and cues up the movie, the room filling with blessedly non-sexy circus music.

It's a good documentary, weird and absorbing. Well, Grantaire is about half-absorbed in what's happening onscreen, and half-absorbed in trying to capture Combeferre's fascinated face. The eyes are the hardest. Grantaire really, really wants to do them justice.

The zoologist turns out to be studying naked mole rats, which Combeferre finds delightful.

"They're Jehan's favorite animals," he explains. "Besides bats, I mean."

Grantaire has to grin. That kid really is the best. "It's like—Jehan is a lover of beauty, but for a definition of beauty so specific and personal, it's maybe only useful to Jehan." They watch the pink wrinkly rats scurry over each other. "Don't get me wrong, in this case, I get it. These little guys are baller."

"Is that why you keep insisting I'm attractive?" says Combeferre, and his voice is light, but his eyes have left the screen for the first time in half an hour.

"Nope, you're hot in the normal, traditional sense, sorry." The conversation keeps pingponging back to forbidden topics, no matter what Grantaire does. "Have you heard Jehan's rant about how moths are better than butterflies?" he tries.

"Well, they are," says Combeferre simply, like case closed. Okay then.

Combeferre doesn't seem to like the parts with the circus animals. Grantaire can't really blame him.

"Is it just me," says Grantaire, "or do those lions look kind of ill?"

"They've got cataracts." Combeferre sounds like he's been waiting to say it. "Most of them are missing their canines, there's sores on their bodies, and I think they've been declawed?"


““It must be difficult,” Combeferre muses, “to train a lion to jump through a flaming hoop. Obviously"
“Fucking circuses,” Grantaire says again. He’s stopped drawing. He doesn’t trust his grip on the pencil. “Take a bunch of wild animals, rip them away from their homes, and make them do a thing they hate all day, then when they snap and act like, y’know, wild animals, we get all surprised. The real miracle is why they would ever play along in the first place. And for what? This weird fucked up imperialist bullshit where we need to feel good about ourselves so we set up this elaborate charade pretending we’ve mastered nature. Like, shit, I’m sorry animal trainer is a high risk job or whatever, but the more I think about it, the more I think I’m rooting for the goddamn lion.”

When he looks up, Combeferre has ducked his head a little, smiling. It’s Grantaire’s favorite smile, the slow, soft look that is less about communicating something to the outside world and more about an inward glow. Grantaire grabs his pencil and flips to a new page, hand racing across the paper, because this, this is what he wants to capture, right here, the unfocused curve of Combeferre’s lips and the warmth in his eyes, this is why Grantaire draws in the first place. There are some things you can’t leave to memory.

He’s torn between wanting desperately to know what Combeferre is thinking, and wanting desperately not to ruin the moment.

He’s just started in on the hair when Combeferre saves him the trouble. “For a second there,” he says, the slightest gentle laugh in his voice, “you sounded just like Enjolras.”

Oh. Grantaire wants to bash his head against a wall, and then he wants to bash his head against a wall for being surprised in the first place. Of course this is Combeferre’s thinking-about-Enjolras smile, of course it is. He breathes in through his nose and redoubles his efforts, trying to get every line perfect.

“What are — oh, you’re working,” says Combeferre. Grantaire nods. He keeps his eyes firmly on the paper. Maybe it can be their wedding present.

Grantaire tends to kind of zone out if he gets absorbed on a drawing. When he looks up again, the movie is on the closing credits and Combeferre is leafing through an errant art history textbook. It’s about symbolism in Medieval European painting, and it’s so dense that even thinking about it gives him a headache, so Combeferre is probably eating that shit up with a spoon.

“What learning anything interesting?” he asks.

Combeferre jumps. “Are you finished? With your drawing, I mean.”

Grantaire is probably going to keep fiddling with the details until he physically hands it to the teacher, but he’s got the important parts more or less how he wants them, and Combeferre has been so accommodating, it would be a dick move not to show him.

He takes a deep breath and surrenders the sketchbook to Combeferre. “H—here. I’m still not convinced I got the eyes right, but the rest of it is — “ He breaks off, he can’t help studying Combeferre studying the picture. Combeferre tilts his head slightly to one side, intent, thoughtful. Grantaire’s palms are sweating; he wipes them on his jeans.

“Can I take a photo of this?” says Combeferre after a long moment. “For my mom. She’s always upset I don’t have more pictures of myself.”
Grantaire looks down at his sketch again. "D’you think she’ll like it?" he asks, trying to keep his voice light, trying to pretend that he isn’t absurdly invested in her opinion. "Will it earn the official Mama Combeferre seal of approval? Oh man, is there any chance she’ll print it out and stick it on her fridge? I swear, that’s all I’ve ever wanted in the world: for a mom, any mom, to hang my art on her refrigerator. That right there is the big leagues."

Combeferre clears his throat. “Surely your mom—” he says.

“Nah,” says Grantaire. “Our kitchen was all tasteful wooden paneling. Nothing to stick a magnet to. I guess I could’ve nailed something to the wood, but I don’t think that would’ve gone over well.” He laughs.

Combeferre doesn’t. “Well, my mom is going to love it,” he says. His voice is quiet and a shade too sincere. His eyes really are something.

Grantaire looks away. “Sure,” he says, busily gathering up his drawing supplies, “paparazzi away or whatever, you can borrow my camera if you don’t— “ Combeferre has stood up from the beanbag chair, already snapping a photo on his phone. “Yeah, that works, too,” he finishes lamely. “Thanks for helping out, by the way. I’m glad you think she’s gonna—”

“I like it, too,” says Combeferre. Grantaire has to turn back and look at him. “Sorry, I didn’t want to give the impression I don’t, or anything. It just—it’s not how I see myself.”

“Shit,” says Grantaire. “I’m sorry, dude, I didn’t mean to—”

“No.” Combeferre shakes his head. “Don’t take it the wrong way. It’s a good drawing and you’re clearly talented. The way you use light in particular is kind of extraordinary.” Even as Grantaire inwardly preens at the compliment, he’s bracing himself for the “but”. He doesn’t need to wait long. “My only problem, and again, I’m not complaining, is that I think you drew me a little too good-looking.”

“Well, yes, of course you’d think so,” says Grantaire. “You see yourself in the mirror every day. That’s the definition of getting used to something. It’s impossible to be objective about your own face.”

“All the same,” says Combeferre. He crosses the room, takes one last look at the drawing, and passes it back to Grantaire, handling it very carefully, as if the paper was something delicate, fragile. “All the same.”

“Yeah?” Grantaire dumps his pencil and eraser on the desk, goes to tuck his sketchpad into his backpack before he can forget.

Combeferre’s hands twist nervously again. He clears his throat. “I’m, uh, starting to think you’re a little biased.”

“A little, yeah,” says Grantaire. “I live with you. Also, that’s the human condition.” Combeferre takes a step closer, and yes, the prattling portion of the evening has returned. “We all try to make sense of the world, and in doing so, faulty machines that we are, we wind up giving ourselves feelings that keep us from making any sense at all—”

“I don’t know if I agree,” says Combeferre. “What if you’re trying to make sense of feelings?” He’s standing closer now, close enough that Grantaire could reach out and — but this is Combeferre, who is very much taken.

“God, why would you want to?” Grantaire fixes his gaze safely over Combeferre’s shoulder. “It’s
like looking at a kitchen sponge under a microscope. Better to let all that bacteria wiggle around unseen. Not like it makes your life better knowing it’s there.”

“You’re saying emotions are germs?” Combeferre sounds amused, soft. “Don’t you think that’s a smidge pessimistic?”

“Maybe,” Grantaire allows, “maybe a smidge.” Then he says nothing at all because Combeferre has lifted one hand, very, very gently brushing the hair away from the side of Grantaire’s face. His thumb strokes Grantaire’s cheek, so careful. Grantaire forgets how to make sounds. Combeferre leans in.

Their noses brush. Grantaire can feel Combeferre’s breath against his face. Somehow, this is actually happening. He closes his eyes—and remembers with a guilty, nauseous rush that this is Combeferre, who is in love with Enjolras, who is so, so in love with Combeferre.

Grantaire jerks back, head smacking hard against the wall.

“Are you okay?” says Combeferre. His hand is still hanging in the air, like he’s going to check for bruises, like he’s going to cradle the back of Grantaire’s head, and Grantaire steps quickly sideways, out of his grasp.

Enjolras may be hard to deal with, but he is upright and honorable and so fucking principled, in a way that actual people never are. He’s like a Medieval knight in a story, and Enjolras loves Combeferre so much.

“I’m fine,” Grantaire grits out. “Fine, I just. I actually still have a lot of work to do, so.”

Combeferre’s eyes widen, stricken. “Oh,” he says, like he’s just remembered that he was about to break his boyfriend’s heart for no reason, for Grantaire. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—I thought—”

“What,” says Grantaire. ‘What in the world were you thinking that made it seem like this would be okay?’

Combeferre shakes his head. “I—well, it doesn’t matter, it’s okay. I’m sorry, I—didn’t realize you had work.”

“Believe it or not, art majors occasionally have to do shit, they don’t just hand us a degree,” says Grantaire.

No response. Combeferre is carefully navigating his way back to the door when his phone chimes with a text. He starts to reach for his phone, then stops.

“You should answer that,” Grantaire tells him. “Could be important.” ‘Could be your boyfriend.’

Combeferre pulls his phone from his pocket and reads the message. He doesn’t say a word. When he reaches the door, he turns back to Grantaire. He holds his phone up.

“My mom loves your picture,” says Combeferre. He smiles weakly. “She’s gonna post it to her facebook wall if that’s okay with you.”

Minutes ago, this would’ve seemed very important. “Yeah,” says Grantaire. “Sure, okay, whatever.”

Combeferre nods, still clutching the phone. He takes a deep breath. “Look,” he says, “Grantaire. I’m sorry if I—but I don’t want this to change things between us, I still—if you’re okay with it, I still—”
Grantaire judges he can keep it together for another forty-five seconds, tops. “Hey Combeferre? I appreciate the urge to talk fucking everything out, but I actually am really busy so maybe it can wait for another time?”

“Oh, of course,” says Combeferre. “Of course.”

Grantaire closes the door behind him, leans against it, and takes a long, ragged breath.

He’s pretty sure naked mole rats never fall in love. He closes his eyes.

Lucky bastards.

***

November

Combeferre is reading in the common room. Prospect theory. The book is well-researched but not absorbing. Or at the very least, he’s having a hard time concentrating. He takes off his glasses and rubs at the bridge of his nose. When he puts the glasses on again, the situation has not improved. There’s too much going on inside his head. Maybe it’s time to try meditation again.

It’s 6 AM on a Saturday, which is why, when he hears footsteps, he’s not surprised to look up and see Enjolras. The only other person walking around this early on weekends is Feuilly, and that’s because he has work.

“Morning,” says Combeferre. Enjolras nods, still not entirely awake. One lock of his hair is out of place, falling across his forehead. “Tea?” Combeferre picks up the steaming mug and holds it out.

“Thank you,” says Enjolras. “Really.” His fingers wrap around the mug, reverent. Enjolras never thinks of doing things like this for himself, and when others do them for him, he treats it like a minor miracle every time.

“Not a problem,” Combeferre tells him, making room on the couch. “I figured you might be down.”

The last few Saturday mornings have found them in the common room together, reading or doing homework or getting caught up on e-mail. There’s little chance of anyone else disturbing them until at least 8. It’s one of his favorite parts of the week lately, an oasis of peace and calm and something he’d call domesticity if it wasn’t a pale imitation of their routine last year, when they roomed together.

The couches are old and sag in the middle, which means that when Enjolras takes a seat, balancing his laptop on his knees and cradling the tea like a precious relic, they will inevitably find themselves sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. It doesn’t help Combeferre’s concentration, but he can’t deny it’s comfortable.

Enjolras types for a while, refreshes all his go-to news sites, links Combeferre to an interesting article about representation, refreshes all his sites again, and clears his throat.

“Did you say something to Grantaire?” he says at last.

The mention of Grantaire’s name is enough to make Combeferre’s stomach sink. He glances around, forgetting how it’s both late enough and early enough that there’s no way Grantaire is still awake, let alone in the common room to overhear.
“When?” says Combeferre. Enjolras would have to be referencing something from weeks ago. These days, whenever Combeferre walks into a room, Grantaire seems to be on his way out.

“I don’t know,” says Enjolras, “end of October? It’s just—he’s been doing way better with his work lately. Yesterday he did three extra hours of dish clean. If he keeps going at this rate, he could be caught up by winter break.”

Combeferre shrugs. “All I’ve said was he should talk to you if he had issues.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do something?” says Enjolras. “He’s been—almost respectful lately, it’s weird.”

“Maybe someone else did,” Combeferre suggests. He glances over Enjolras’s shoulder, hoping for a distracting news story, but the screen has gone into sleep mode.

“It was you if it was anyone,” says Enjolras. “You’re the only one he likes.”

That is patently not true. Grantaire has reams of inside jokes with Bossuet and Joly. He and Bahorel have an ongoing arm wrestling tournament that defies description. Grantaire regularly builds blanket forts with Jehan in the middle of the night from which to watch trippy, psychedelic cartoons. He helps Cosette do her nails and asks Musichetta to teach him Spanish curse words and sometimes he watches Enjolras from under his lashes, although always at a cautious, awed distance.

Enjolras almost certainly hasn’t noticed. Enjolras is terrible at noticing these things. Sometimes it’s endearing and sometimes it’s maddening; how oblivious do you need to be not to realize that multiple people are pining for you not five feet away?

Combeferre shakes his head, and Enjolras amends, “The only one he listens to, at any rate.”

“I guarantee you it was nothing I said,” says Combeferre. “The last real conversation we had, uh, didn’t go all that well.” He’s been trying not to replay it in his mind, but the memory of Grantaire’s expression is hard to shake—face pale, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. So is the sound of Grantaire’s head colliding with the wall, jerking away with sudden violence, like Combeferre was on fire.

"Are you fighting? Should I go have a chat with him?” Enjolras doesn’t say it with any particular menace. He doesn’t need to. Despite himself, Combeferre smiles, wan.

“It—wasn’t really a fight. No yelling or insults or anything, he was just—” Shocked. Hurt. Betrayed. “Caught off-guard, I think, by the whole, uh, situation. Which is fair, because I was, too.” Normally, Combeferre can’t make a big decision without listing all the pros and cons, projecting possible futures and attempting to account for them. Trying to kiss Grantaire had been pure instinct. It turns out instinct may be over-rated.

Enjolras clears his throat. "That's too bad."

"Yeah, I'm hoping we can still be friends." He sighs. "Not sure if he wants to, though."

Enjolras makes a sympathetic face. It seems like he's been making an effort lately, to be more understanding. "That really sucks."

"Yeah," says Combeferre. "It really does."

"I hope it works out, for your sake. But try not to take it personally if he doesn't come around," says Enjolras. "People can be weird about pride sometimes."
Combeferre has a long moment of trying to connect the two statements together in any way. He fails.

"What do you mean?"

"Rejection," says Enjolras. "It's hard to deal with."

"Yeah," says Combeferre heavily. The thunk of a human head hitting something solid is a distinctive sound, like a melon but with a wrongness to it. Maybe the aversion is hardwired in, some sort of evolutionary trick to discourage violence. "But what does that have to do with his pride?"

"I'm just saying, it's natural, if he asked you out and you said no, that—"

Combeferre nearly kicks over his mug. "What?"

"He didn't?" says Enjolras, blinking.

"No. No, why would you think—"

"Nothing," says Enjolras, "a hunch, I guess."


Enjolras shakes his head. “I can’t, I don’t know.” Then quietly, “That was a good picture.”

“What?”

“That he drew of you.”

Combeferre’s hands jump, ruffling the pages and losing his place. “How did you know about that?”

“It was on your mom’s facebook wall.” Enjolras can never entirely fight a smile when he says those words. He’d clearly been delighted, three years ago, to receive her friend request. (“Are you sure she didn’t send it by accident?” he’d asked, several times. As though she’d meant to friend some other college freshman named Enjolras.) Neither of them use their accounts that much, but Combeferre’s mom “likes” every single one of Enjolras’s statuses. Enjolras, in turn, pretends to find this funny instead of almost embarrassingly moving.

“He did a good job,” Enjolras is saying. “He must’ve worked hard, it looks just like you.”

Combeferre’s knuckles have gone white, how interesting. "Can you not," he snaps.

Enjolras blinks, taken aback. “Sorry, I just.”

Sighing, Combeferre rubs his hands over his eyes and reaches down for his tea. “No. I’m sorry,” he says. He takes a sip and tries not to make a face; it’s cooled down, a nebulous clammy-cold that is no longer soothing but still not refreshing enough to pass for iced tea. “That was tremendously uncalled for.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up about it,” says Enjolras. “Someone’s always reminding me to give myself a break.” He bumps Combeferre’s shoulder, companionable. "Wouldn’t it be crazy if he followed his own advice?"

“Moderately crazy,” Combeferre allows. He can feel the corners of his mouth pulling up. He doesn’t fight it. “Mid-to-moderately crazy.”

Relief floods through Combeferre, welcome and warm as caffeine. Stable ground again. He could hug Enjolras. “Promising ideas, dry execution.”

“What’s it about?”

“Seriously,” Combeferre warns, “it is dry.”

“Well then.” Enjolras leans forward, smiling again. “Up for a round of Make it Interesting?”

Make it Interesting is an old standby, inspired by a disappointing history class they’d taken freshman year. The professor had shown a rare talent for sucking the lifeblood out of any topic and so Combeferre developed a game of challenging each other to dig up reasons to care about each section: drawing analogies, examining larger ramifications, and finding parallels to something relevant or exciting whenever possible.

“You guys are literally studying for fun,” Courfeyrac had said that night in the cafeteria. “This is pitiful and tragic, and if anyone asks, I don’t know you.” Forty seconds later, he’d been riveted. It was Courfeyrac who first expanded the realm of the game into non-traditional texts. (“Do the intro in my math textbook! Do the back of this packet of organic gummy bears! Oh hey, do the label on my shirt!” That last challenge issued while whisking his T-shirt over his head, heedless of the staring of nearby tables.)

Courfeyrac was also the one to compile the still-germinating rules and organize them into a single color-coded spreadsheet. This is very fortunate. The points system alone is labyrinthine.

Unofficially, Combeferre is still the champion of Make it Interesting, and he never minds the chance to stretch himself. “Okay,” he says, “so the basic theory—”

By eight or nine, the common room has filled up, the space no longer theirs. It’s a slow, gradual filtering — Cosette enters first, cup of tea in one hand. Musichetta and Azelma are next. They’re absorbed in an intense-looking conversation about linguistics.

Jehan staggers in soon after, eyes sporting deep circles, skin distressingly ashy. Bossuet is holding Jehan’s elbow. The gesture looks both friendly, and judging from Jehan’s posture, structurally necessary.

“Seriously, friend,” Bossuet is saying, “when did you last sleep?”

“I sleep all the time.” Jehan’s gaze is glassy and unfocused. “In fact, pretty sure I fell asleep a second ago. I do not remember how we got here.”

“Nonono,” says Joly behind him. “Microbursts don’t count. We are talking when was the last time you had full-on, horizontal, pillows-and-blankets, REM cycling, wake-up-in-the-morning-feeling-refreshed slumber?”

“Late September 2009,” says Jehan promptly.

Cosette pipes up from across the room. “Isn’t there a thing where if you stay awake for more than 72 hours, you can commit crimes and plead insanity?”

Combeferre glances at Enjolras, who quietly shakes his head. Joly, on the other hand, is looking far too thoughtful.

“Ooh, I’ve always wanted to pull a heist! What should we steal? Bossuet, quick, what do we steal?”
Bossuet contemplates this for a moment. “You know that jewel the British took from India?”

“That jewel?” says Musichetta, arching an eyebrow. “Like, oh yes, that one time European powers took a thing from a nation they occupied, how silly of me to forget.”

“No, this one is memorable,” Bossuet insists, “because they stuck it right on their crown and it’s still there.”

“What, the Koh-i-Nor diamond?” Every turns around to stare at Bahorel, leaning against the doorframe. “Oh come on,” he says, defensive. “I read. It’s been known to happen.” You can never predict the things Bahorel will know or not know. Combeferre has long suspected him to be much, much smarter than he lets on.

“This was in the news last year, right?” says Combeferre. “The Prime Minister was explaining how it ‘wouldn’t be appropriate’ to give it back?”

“The Koh-i-Nor, yeah,” says Bossuet. “We snatch it up in the middle of the night and then leave it on India’s doorstep and dingdong ditch them, return it anonymously. Then when England’s like, ‘Eh, chap, who took our bloody diamond?’, India’s got total plausible deniability. ‘We don’t know, man, we just found it.’”

Musichetta grins. “We thought about giving it back, then we decided, nah, wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Yes,” says Joly, “yes yes yes, I like this.” He claps his hands together. “Okay, who can do a good British accent?”

“I was in My Fair Lady in high school,” Azelma volunteers. “So Cockney by way of, like, Monty Python and Mary Poppins and uh yeah, on further reflection, I’m just gonna count myself out.” This earns a snicker from Musichetta, making Azelma fairly glow with pride.

“We will table that for later,” Joly announces. “Quick, does anyone in the room have Indian citizenship?”

“Wrong kind of Indian, sorry,” says Combeferre. Being half Cree is almost certainly not going to help them here.

“I do, unless someone took it away when I wasn’t looking,” says Bossuet. “Cool, so now all we need is a getaway driver and Jehan to mastermind the whole thing.” He claps Jehan on the shoulder, who staggers a little.

“What, what’s happening?” Jehan slurs, in that advanced state of sleep deprivation where the entire body appears to be fighting gravity. A stronger gravity than the rest of the room, as if Jehan is somehow talking to them from Jupiter.

“Shh, baby, it’s okay,” says Musichetta from the floor. “You’re in charge of planning the diamond heist.”

Jehan glances around the room, brow furrowed, blinking at the window as if sunlight is a surprise. “Not sure you want me in charge of making a sandwich right now. Everything’s sort of...fffuzzed.”

“For the love of god, sleep,” says Cosette. She’s met with only a vague head shake from Jehan.

“I’ve got a paper—”
“Write it on Sunday, like a normal human,” says Bahorel.

Another vague shake of the head. “‘M trying to be responsible. Besides, my vision’s starting to do really cool things at the edges.”

Musichetta watches Jehan wave a hand in a slow arcing motion. “We may need to table the heist.” Then, louder, “Jehan, if you want to hallucinate, have you considered maybe just going to a friend’s house and experimenting with actual drugs?”

“Can’t, that’s so flipping haram,” Jehan mutters.

“Muslims can’t smoke pot?”

“Intoxicants.” Jehan is still transfixed by the movement of one hand.

“Sleep,” says Cosette.

“Coffee,” says Jehan. “It’s fine, I’m fine, I just—coffee.”

Joly and Bossuet exchange a significant look, although the precise significance is lost on Combeferre.

“Yeah,” says Bossuet. “Yes, we will get you that coffee, you just hang there, okay, buddy? Shine bright, starlight.” As Joly and Bossuet retreat into the kitchen, Combeferre is 85% sure he hears one of them mutter, “Protocol Z4 in effect?”

Probably it doesn’t bear thinking about.


“It wasn’t just to remind us that you can read?” asks Eponine sweetly. Combeferre’s not sure when she slipped into the room. She’s notorious for being light on her feet.

Bahorel pushes onward. “I fed Matilda last night, and—”

For some reason, that’s what shakes Marius out of his reverie, where he’s been quietly talking with Courfeyrac in the corner.

“Matilda? Do you have a pet?”

“Sort of,” says Courfeyrac.

“What Bahorel has is thousands upon thousands of micro-organisms living in a carbohydrate slurry,” Combeferre volunteers. Marius’s eyes go slightly wider.

“Matilda is the name of my sourdough starter,” says Bahorel. “I feed her flour and water, and in return, she is very good to me. Anyway, I fed Matilda last night and—”

“Oh man,” says Musichetta. “Oh man, is it pancakes day?”

“Bahorel’s making us pancakes?” asks Azelma, looking rapidly back and forth between them.

“Better than that. Enjolras, Combeferre, get your asses up, we’ve got work to do.” Bahorel grins, triumphant. “It is time for the return of Motherfucking Brunch.”

“What?” says Marius, making the confused face Combeferre has come to think of as his trademark.
Enjolras and Combeferre depart to the strains of Courfeyrac instilling the newbies with the origins of an Amis House tradition.

Last year, Bahorel made sourdough pancakes nearly every Saturday. In the interest of creating something like a balanced meal, Enjolras would whip up a pan of scrambled eggs and a pan of scrambled tofu. Hanging out in the kitchen while Enjolras cooked made Combeferre feel like a slacker, and washing dishes wasn’t an option since the dish room is too far from the stove for conversation. So really, the homemade muffins were a necessity. Things spiraled from there.

At first it was simply called “brunch”, but one of their former housemates refused to say the word on the grounds that it wasn’t manly enough. This led Bahorel to re-christen the meal “magic glitter fairy sparkle pony pancakes hour,” which Jehan, with the linguistic precision of a true poet, shortened to “Motherfucking Brunch.”

Back in the kitchen, Joly and Bossuet are leaning on the counter, waiting for the last of the coffee to finish brewing.

“Sorry,” says Bossuet, “we didn’t think to make enough for you guys.”

“No problem,” Enjolras tells him as Bahorel triumphantly raises up a pitcher full of a thick, frothy liquid. “We’ll need to brew more anyway. Enough for the whole house.”

“Why?” says Joly. “And what’s up with the pitcher?”

Joly and Bossuet have integrated so smoothly into the co-op, it’s easy to forget this is their first year. Unlike Grantaire, who still seems to reel from culture shock sometimes. (Upon walking into the common room while Cosette was playing guitar, “Is this where we all hold hands and sing Kumbaya?” Upon the fifth time he forgot to put his initials on his food, “Can we just assume from now on that if something’s unlabeled in the fridge, it’s me being a dumbass?” Once, very quietly in Combeferre’s room, with something skating close to sincerity, “Everyone is so fucking nice here, I don’t even know if I like it. I can never tell where I stand with people.” It’s been weeks since Grantaire knocked on his door. Combeferre tamps the thought back down.)

“It’s a long story,” he says.

“If you get back to the common room in the next fifteen minutes, Courfeyrac will probably still be telling it,” Bahorel offers while hunting for the whisk. “Also, if Jehan still wants to stay upright, the poor kid needs that coffee, stat.”

Combeferre cranks the oven to 350. “What kind of muffins should I make?” he asks over his shoulder.

Enjolras looks up from where he’s already started cracking eggs. “Banana?”

“Sure.” Combeferre thinks back to the remaining produce in the house. He can work with this. “That would be downright appealing.”

“Don’t say that before I have a spatula to hit you with,” says Enjolras. Then, hopefully, “Banana pecan muffins?”

“I dunno,” says Combeferre. “Sounds kind of—”

Judging from the sound of his voice, Enjolras is struggling not to smile. “Oh god, why did I give you that window—” He breaks off, realizing his fatal mistake.
It’s like lighting a wildfire. Really, Enjolras should know better by now. “Why, do my puns cause you *pane*? Are they too *sill-y*? Should I pull the *curtain* on them? Before everyone’s *shuttering* with horror?” Combeferre racks his brain for the intersection of words and meanings; there must be a glass-based pun—

“Spatula, Bahorel,” says Enjolras, “get me a spatula, I can see the look in his eyes, it’s too late to reason—”

“Dude, keep your weird foreplay away from my pancakes,” Bahorel snickers, as Combeferre and Enjolras each bristle slightly, although for what must be very different reasons. “And get on those banana pecan muffins, man.”

“N*utty*,” says Combeferre. “It would be nutty. Was what I was going to say. Get it? Because I can continue to explain if—”

Bahorel clears his throat. “How do you guys feel about listening to music?”

There is one acceptable soundtrack for Motherfucking Brunch preparations, and that is classic motown. It is the only genre all three of them can agree on. There’s a fair amount of overlap between Combeferre and Enjolras’s musical tastes—in part because Enjolras found most of his favorite bands through Combeferre, to the point where scrolling through Enjolras’s mp3 player produces a weird, almost territorial sense of pride.

But Bahorel does not mince words about such things. (“As much as I love raps about the economic conditions in Somalia, Enjolras, or hearing that skinny white guy with the violin sing about cell division, Combeferre, these pancakes need to be nurtured. And that means something with a little staying power.”)

Mashing bananas to the strains of “Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch”, Combeferre can’t begrudge Bahorel’s rules. Enjolras is bent over the stove, overseeing two pans with a spatula in each hand, nearly dancing. Combeferre watches his blond head and his shoulders bobbing slightly off-beat and has a sudden, dizzying moment of clarity.

Sooner or later, Combeferre is going to confess his feelings. He can put it off for a while, can get his own room or avoid conversations or try not to make eye contact at certain moments, but these are all stopgap measures. The way he feels, watching Enjolras make breakfast for the house, his sleeves rolled up and a flowered apron tied around his waist because fuck gender norms, the sound of Enjolras’s quiet, happy humming — it’s too big, too much to contain within his body indefinitely.

Combeferre will tell him, or if the words aren’t possible in that moment, Combeferre will kiss him. And Enjolras will be very kind and surprisingly gentle, and maybe a little sad on his behalf. Combeferre mashes the bananas into a smooth paste and hums along with the song. He takes a deep breath. His shoulders feel loose, light. It will be awful for a while, he thinks. It will be awful and awkward and raw, and then slowly the wound will heal up.

When Grantaire turned him down, the rejection had felt as bad as all the breakup songs make it sound, but Combeferre is still alive, and on some level he can’t bring himself to regret trying. Better to have it out than to spend years wrapped up in thoughts that never go anywhere. Better to come at the truth head-on.

And Combeferre’s feelings might have ended one friendship, but they won’t end this one. There is too much history here to wreck it all with something as simple as love.
Joly and Bossuet return just as Bahorel is flipping the last batch of pancakes.

Bossuet stares at the golden-brown stack of flapjacks on the kitchen island. He swallows. “Are those...vegan?” he asks in a small hopeful voice.

“Vegan as a newborn carrot in spring,” says Bahorel. “So are the muffins, the fruit salad, and the tofu scram, but shit, you don’t eat tofu—”

“He can have some of my seitan,” says Joly, although God knows why he owns seitan in the first place since he isn’t even vegetarian.

“Good man, good man,” says Bossuet. “Anything we can do to help?”

Combeferre shakes his head with the inner peace of a man who put all three muffin pans in the oven fifteen minutes ago. “You can dance, if the rhythm so moves you,” he offers.

“Oh get down the silverware and plates,” says Bahorel from the griddle.

“Or both,” says Joly, doing a sort of grapevine into the dish room. “What’s baking?”

“Banana muffins,” Combeferre calls.

“That’s my favorite kind!” says Azelma from the doorway.

“Hope you like them a bunch,” he tells her. “The fruit of my labors.”

“I can find another spatula,” Enjolras threatens, pouring the last of the chopped apples into a bowl.

Joly spins back into the kitchen, holding a stack of plates over his head. He sets them on the counter and twirls Bossuet with one hand, pulls Musichetta from behind Azelma with the other hand and twirls her as well.

Bahorel slides the last pancake onto the plate with a flourish. “I’ll get the dinner bell,” he announces, shimmying out of the room. The buzzer sounds four loud, long, obnoxious times, and the crush of housemates descends like a friendly plague. (“I guess we’re all dancing or something,” says Courfeyrac with a shrug as he pulls Marius into a surprisingly credible foxtrot.)

“Where’s Jehan?” says Enjolras.


Bossuet and Joly are exchanging another look. It paints dire possibilities in Combeferre’s mind. “Did you guys just drug a friend?” he asks.

Joly jumps. “No! Of course not, come on!”

“If anything,” says Bossuet, “kind of the opposite.”

“Does this have anything to do with Protocol Z4?” says Combeferre. A thought dawns on him. “Did you guys literally develop a code word that means ‘switch the coffee to decaf when nobody’s watching?’”

“Gosh,” says Bossuet, distributing forks. “Why would we even come up with something like that?” His innocent face is a touch too convincing to be believable. Just what are Protocols A through Z3? It is too terrifying to contemplate.
From the stereo come the opening bars of “You Can’t Hurry Love.” Bahorel darts past the line forming at the counter to crank up the volume.

“She Supremes!” he says. “Everyone shut up and listen to how it’s done!”

Eponine and Cosette are doing some sort of jitterbug. Courfeyrac foxtrots Marius out of the room, returns with a bottle of genuine maple syrup, deposits it on the table, and dances them back to the end of the line, Marius laughing the whole time. Bossuet and Joly are both lip-syncing into their forks. Enjolras’s shoulders move up and down, whether or not he’s aware of it.

Combeferre smiles.

There are times when living in Amis House feels like sitting under a concentrated firehose of stress. There are times when Joly is having panic attacks and Feuilly comes back from working his third job too exhausted to take off his shoes and Marius is in the hallway crying on the phone with his grandfather and neither Azelma nor Eponine is willing to talk about what is happening with their parents and Grantaire is —

Well. When it’s bad, it’s very bad.

When it’s good, everything is worth it.

The weekend before Thanksgiving break, Grantaire goes out to the bar with Joly and Bossuet but doesn’t return with them. He stumbles into the common room a few hours later, reeking of whiskey, makes a series of comments denouncing humanity as a whole and college kids in particular, gets in a pointless and needlessly heated argument with Bossuet of all people, refers to Amis House as "the island of misfit toys", narrowly avoids throwing up on the carpet, and retreats, green-faced, to the bathroom.

"I'm going to check to see if he's alright," says Combeferre into the silence. Nobody stops him.

There may be no worse sound in the world than someone vomiting. Even so, it feels even worse from the other side. Combeferre remembers this much from a childhood of flus and colds. He knows it in a distant, intellectual level but he can't recall the sensations clearly in the present, which means Grantaire is for the most part alone in his pain. This is what separates people from each other, thinks Combeferre. The distance between the remembering self and the experiencing self.

Grantaire makes a gagging noise from the other side of the door. Combeferre knocks, lightly.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"M dying," comes Grantaire's muffled voice.

That Combeferre takes this as an invitation probably means something damning, but if Grantaire had wanted him to leave, he had to know this was the wrong approach. He tries the knob; the door is unlocked.

"I'm coming in," says Combeferre.

"Ugh," says Grantaire. He's crouched on the chipped tile floor, face resting on the toilet seat.

"How are you feeling?"
Grantaire gives a few dry heaves that make Combeferre's stomach muscles ache in sympathy. "How can anyone who's ever thrown up believe in God?" he says at last.

"It's a matter of faith?" Combeferre offers.

Grantaire dry heaves again, then turns to look, bleary-eyed, back at Combeferre. "Do you believe in God?"

Combeferre very hesitantly pats him on the shoulder. "I'm Unitarian," he explains. "The only things I believe in for sure are fair trade coffee and a sort of, of undefinable grace we can only ever glimpse through the random machinations of —"

The upper half of Grantaire's body spasms. He retches into the toilet.

"Let's maybe have this conversation later," says Combeferre.

"Ugh," says Grantaire again. Combeferre's hand moves from shoulder to back, resting between Grantaire's shoulder blades. He means it to be comforting, remembering childhood illness and his mother's hands, but it makes Grantaire freeze for a second. Ever since the aborted kiss, Combeferre has no idea how tactile he can be with Grantaire now. He lets his hand hover lightly, not wanting to pull away if he's reading this wrong, not wanting to make Grantaire feel unsafe if it's too much. But Grantaire breathes in and out and then pushes into the touch.

"Are you okay?" says Combeferre quietly.

"Hate throwing up," Grantaire mumbles. "Hate it, hate it, why do I keep doing this, it's so stupid—"

"It's an addictive pattern, it has nothing to do with the logical part of your brain," says Combeferre.

"You might want to move away for a sec," Grantaire manages in a choked voice, "about to throw up more—"

He does.

When he's done, Grantaire rests his face on the toilet seat again. His hair is just long enough that it's in danger of getting vomited on. Combeferre reaches over and brushes the sweaty curls away from his forehead, trying to think of something comforting to say.

"This is stupid," says Grantaire. "You should go."

"Do you want me to?"

Grantaire shakes his head. "There's no way you don't have better things to do right now—"

"It's fine," says Combeferre.

"Combeferre," says Grantaire. He makes a pained sound. "Combeferre. You're three months younger than me, what the hell."

"What?"

Grantaire pulls himself up, tries to retch again, can't, and groans. "At the beginning of the year. Courfeyrac put up a list. Everyone's birthdays. And you're, you're, you were born three months after me."

Combeferre blinks. "Okay."
"No, no, it's like—you shouldn't have to, to take care of—I should be on top of my shit. You're younger than me, by three months, and it's not fair."

In fact, Combeferre started kindergarten early; more likely he is fifteen months younger. It seems unwise to mention this.

"I don't think anyone's gonna argue that those however many months are supposed to have some secret key to maturity," he says instead. "You're my friend, and I care about you, and I'm staying if you feel like it's helping at all."

"I'm sorry," says Grantaire in a small voice. He retches. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Combeferre, you're so nice and I'm so sorry—so fucking stupid—"

"It's okay," Combeferre tells him. "Really."

Grantaire shakes his head. "It's not, I've been such an ass."

"If you apologize, I'm sure Bossuet will—"

"No," says Grantaire. "Not that." He frowns. "He already knows how shitty I am, at this point if he expects better, it's on him."

This is probably not the time to shake him and give a stern lecture about the toxic, corrosive nature of self-pity. Combeferre sighs and files that away for later.

"But you," Grantaire is saying, "you're so—you're such a good guy, and I don't even know how I thought—because it's crazy to think that, and no matter what I felt like I perceived, the very nature of perception—shit—" He breaks off to gag. "But. Occam's Razor, right? The simplest solution is the best and all that."

This is a gross oversimplification of William of Occam's actual theory, but it occurs to Combeferre that Grantaire may still be drunk. Certainly Combeferre has no idea what Grantaire is trying to say.

"The simplest explanation," Grantaire continues. "And it's so—I mean, it's easy." He laughs, dry and with zero joy. "Got it wrong. Again. Combeferre. You're such a good guy, and I'm so stupid."

"You're not," says Combeferre in a low voice. "Grantaire, you're not stupid, you're not—"

Grantaire cracks an eye open to look at him. "I want to be friends again," he says.

"We were always friends," says Combeferre.

Grantaire’s answering laugh isn’t amused or bitter; relieved maybe. Relieved and still nauseous. "God," he mutters, "you’re just so—" There’s a loud, declarative knock on the door. "Shit," says Grantaire.

"Temporarily out of order," Combeferre calls.

"Combeferre?" Even through the door, he can hear Enjolras’s surprise. "I’m looking for Gr—"

Combeferre pulls himself up, opens the door a crack. "This is not a great time," he says in an undertone. Behind him, Grantaire is dry heaving again.

Enjolras’s gaze moves to the agonized twitch of Grantaire’s shoulders. "Is he—"

"He’s going to be fine, he just needs some time to—get it out of his system." Not the best choice of
words, Combeferre thinks. The dry heaves have become retching again.

“I, uh,” Enjolras clears his throat, “came down to remind him he has dish clean tonight.”

Combeferre stares at him. He steps out of the bathroom, closes the door behind himself. “Not the time,” he says quietly.

“Look, this may surprise you, but I actually don’t want him to get in trouble,” says Enjolras. “And he’s missed so much work at this point—regardless of how much make-up he does, if he misses anything else this semester, we’re going to have to start talking about referral.” Putting someone on referral isn’t the same thing as kicking them out of the co-op, not by a long shot, but it can be the first step down that path.

“He’s vomiting and only kind of coherent,” says Combeferre flatly. “What do you want me to do?” He sighs. “It’s a problem. I get that. If you can just give him a few hours to recover a little—”

“We’re out of clean everything, the dish room is a mess, it’s nearly one A.M. and someone needs to—wait, only kind of coherent, what do you mean?”

Combeferre rubs his eyes. “Just—disjointed, talking in circles. He keeps saying I’m a good guy, and calling himself stupid—”

Enjolras frowns. “Is he okay?”

“He will be.”

“Is he sick,” says Enjolras slowly, “or drunk?”

“At this point, does it matter? We can have the philosophical discussion about blame later, but right now he is indisposed, so you can help, or stand there judging, but Jesus—”

They really almost never fight. Enjolras doesn’t seem to know how to even compute it. His mouth opens and closes.

“Okay,” says Combeferre. He opens the bathroom door, slips back in, closes it.

“What was that?” Grantaire mumbles, still balled up on the floor.


The dry heaving is slowing down. “Are you feeling better?” asks Combeferre.

“A little, yeah,” says Grantaire, “no, wait—” The dry heaving has not stopped entirely yet, either.

Someone is knocking on the door again. “Try a different bathroom,” Combeferre says, just as Enjolras starts,

“Hey, can I just—”

Combeferre whisks the door open. “What,” he says flatly. He’s opened the door too far; Grantaire looks up with a manic, bitter smile.

“Enjolras, nice of you to join us!” says Grantaire. “I know, I know—” he gestures at himself, wiping his mouth with his other hand, “—the body is a container, right? But if it’s any consolation, the container’s nearly empty—”
“I brought water,” says Enjolras, and yes, he is in fact holding a plastic cup, a souvenir from the natural history museum. It’s covered in cartoon mastodons. “It seemed like a good idea. To stay hydrated. So.”

Grantaire’s tight, defensive posture crumbles. He braces his hands on the floor and breathes deeply.

“Yeah, that’s smart,” says Combeferre. He really should have thought of it. “Grantaire, do you think you can hold down water?”

“Here’s hoping,” he says. He gargles the first mouthful, spits it in the toilet, and downs the rest of the glass in about four swallows. He sits back on his heels, and breathes in and out a few times. “I think I’m done.” With a shaky hand, he reaches up and flushes the toilet.

Combeferre takes the cup from him and refills it. “How are you feeling?”

“Let’s go have a pizza party,” says Grantaire. He closes his eyes. “Kidding, obviously. Uh, well the room’s stopped moving, so that’s great. I think if I go lie somewhere and sleep for about a million years—” He tries to twist toward Combeferre at the sink and winces. “—and also never move my torso again, I’ll be aces.”

“More water,” says Combeferre, handing it down.

“Jehan took your dish clean,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire jumps about a foot in the air.

“Oh—fucking shit, I’d signed up for—shit. God. Jehan is a magnificent human being.”

“It’s a trade,” says Enjolras. “Technically, it won’t count as missed hours because you absolutely can’t afford to miss anything else, okay? You’ll have to do Jehan’s bathroom clean tomorrow.”

“No man, that’s fair,” says Grantaire. “I should be the next person to clean this room.” He rolls his neck. “Also Jehan is a beautiful angel creature with a beautiful angel soul.”

“Well, I’m sure Jehan will be delighted to hear that,” says Combeferre wryly. “Once you’ve apologized to Bossuet.”

At that, Grantaire goes a little pale. “Oh shit,” he says. “I really do have to apologize to him, don’t I?”

“You really do,” Combeferre agrees.

Grantaire slumps onto the floor. “Shit.”

“If it helps, there is no doubt in my mind he’ll accept your apology,” says Combeferre.

“That makes it worse because he shouldn’t,” says Grantaire. “Bossuet is a fucking prince.”

“He understands you weren’t fully in control of your faculties,” says Enjolras stiffly.

Grantaire swivels his head and fixes Enjolras with a long, slightly hazy gaze. Combeferre is anticipating some sort of smart remark—so is Enjolras, judging from his posture—but Grantaire just says,

“Do you believe in God?”

Enjolras squints thoughtfully at the ceiling. That he’d engage the issue seriously, even in this context, makes Combeferre smile.
“I think,” he says at last, “that of all the big questions we ask ourselves and each other, the is-there-a-God question is just about the least interesting, and the least useful.”

“So,” says Grantaire from the floor, “basically just a gigantic cop-out.” But he’s smiling a little, the words almost friendly. “That’s okay. Combeferre believes in coffee and stochasticity, so that’s a start, I guess.”

Enjolras returns the smile. “Do you?” he says. “Believe in God, I mean.” Combeferre glances between them, nearly holding his breath. It’s like coming across a baby deer in the middle of the woods. Two of his favorite people in the world are treating each other with respect, talking to each other with interest. With his back against the chilly tile wall, empty mastodon cup in hand, watching them feels like the answer to a riddle he hadn’t thought to ask.

Grantaire laughs weakly. “Of course not, I’ve just spent the last hour throwing up.”

“That makes sense in context,” Combeferre volunteers.

“What context?” says Enjolras, but it’s directed at Grantaire.

“It’s a long—” Grantaire frowns, seems to suddenly register their surroundings. “You know,” he says, and it’s still light, but a different tone than before, “sooner or later, someone is going to need to use the bathroom for, like, non-conversational purposes.” He pulls himself to his feet very carefully, and the pained look on his face makes Combeferre itch to help him up—a steadying arm, at least—but the set of his shoulders warns against it.

Silhouetted against the doorframe, Grantaire turns back to face them as he leaves. “Thanks.” His eyes flick down to the tile floor. “Uh, for everything. And—thanks for the water.”

“No problem,” says Combeferre. Grantaire nods once, shuts the door behind him.

“I have no idea what just happened, why it happened, or what to do,” says Enjolras. Combeferre nods, fervent. If his brain had an autocomplete function, he thinks, that would by far be the highest result.

They stare blankly at the shower wall for a long moment.

“But, to start with,” says Enjolras, “we should probably make tea.”

Combeferre smiles. “You read my mind.”

***

December

The furnace stops working on the coldest night of the winter. Enjolras, absorbed in wrapping up his final essay before break, doesn’t immediately notice. He’s tugged the sleeves of his sweatshirt down to his knuckles and is starting to get curious about why he can’t feel the tip of his nose when Marius says, hesitantly,

"Uh, does it seem really, really cold in here?"

He swivels around. Marius is wearing three sweaters and standing in the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest.

It’s not normal, to be able to see your breath indoors. Enjolras takes a moment to remember this.
"Let's go downstairs," he says.

One of the quirks of living in a house that was built before the Great Depression is that pretty much any part of it is liable to break at one point or another. The heating at Amis House has failed before; there is a process in place. The co-op's maintenance manager will try to reset it, and if this doesn’t work, they will call a repair person. In the meantime, the rest of the house huddles for warmth.

When Enjolras and Marius step into the common room, it's clear that most of their housemates have gotten the memo. A few feet from the door, Cosette, Eponine, and Azelma are curled up in a pile of quilts.

("Marius, c'mere," says Cosette, pulling up one corner in invitation.

"You're letting the cold air in, I hate you," Eponine mumbles, her words belied by the arm tucked firmly around Cosette's waist.)

Meanwhile Courfeyrac, Bahorel and Feuilly have commandeered the house's largest beanbag chair. This is not so uncommon except they've burrowed underneath it, like turtles sharing a huge, puffy shell.

Next to them, Jehan, Joly, Grantaire, and Bossuet are camped out in an emergency blanket fort. They're all in winter coats except for Grantaire, who has rolled himself into a blanket like a burrito and traded his usual beanie for a knit cap with earflaps. (Enjolras would be willing to admit, under extreme duress, that it's kind of adorable.) The four of them are unabashedly cuddling, and Joly is singing "Lean on Me" under his breath, except he's changed the lyrics to be about spooning.

"Musichetta's checking the furnace," says Feuilly. "Given past furnace history, I am not optimistic."

"Should we ring the bell?" says Enjolras.

Marius peers out from under the quilt. "Why, who else is missing?"

"Combeferre," Enjolras and Grantaire say in unison.

"What?" says a sleepy voice from the doorway. Combeferre’s glasses have disappeared and his hair is sticking up in every direction. More worryingly, all he’s got on is a baggy T-shirt and yoga pants. His arms and feet are bare. There is no way he is not freezing.

"Combeferre, what is wrong with you, get under here before you get frostbite," says Courfeyrac.

Combeferre rubs his forearms, hanging back. "That's really more of a...three-person beanbag chair," he says.

"Heat's out," Jehan announces, as though it's not apparent from the knifelike chill. "Join our cuddlepile, we've still got room." Jehan twists to glance over one shoulder. "Grantaire, scoot over, we can definitely fit one more if we get cozy."

Enjolras wonders if he's the only one who notices how Grantaire's eyes go wide, body rigid. When Enjolras glances back up, Combeferre is frowning a little.

"I shouldn't," says Combeferre. "Don't want anyone to get my cold."

Combeferre has been fully recovered for at least three days. When he's actually sick, he can only stomach the blandest foods: oatmeal, buttered toast, unflavored mashed potatoes. But on Thursday he had second helpings of Bahorel's infamous triple spicy veggie chili, the dish Bossuet once described
as "delicious but also maybe I just maced myself in the mouth and I can't stop crying?"

So he's fine, just moping. Enjolras never has much patience for this kind of behavior, but it's harder than usual in the middle of the night, the tip of his nose still numb, watching Combeferre bounce on the balls of his feet—his bare feet—in an obvious bid to stop shivering. Combeferre's toes are—not blue exactly, but also not a color toes are supposed to be. Enjolras takes a seat on the softest couch, grabs the fleece blanket off the back, and pats the spot next to him.

"Combeferre, get over here."

"But germs—" says Combeferre.

"Don't be a martyr," says Enjolras, and because Combeferre reacts poorly to being told his colds are psychosomatic, he adds, "I guarantee you my immune system is stronger than whatever you've got."

From beneath the beanbag chair, Bahorel says, "What are we wagering on this?"

"Pie," Courfeyrac suggests. "If Enjolras doesn't get sick, Combeferre makes him a pie. If he does get sick, he recovers and then makes a pie for Combeferre."

Musichetta snorts as she climbs over the living quilt pile to where Grantaire and Bossuet are already moving to accommodate her in the blanket fort. "Please, you're just saying that because you know either way they're going to let you have a piece."

"That's just practicality," says Courfeyrac. "Nobody can eat a whole pie by themselves, it's absurd. Health reasons, Musichetta. Joly will back me up on this."

Joly makes an affirming noise. "It's my medical opinion that Enjolras or Combeferre should share his pie. Especially if it's cherry. Medically speaking."

"How's the furnace?" says Eponine.

Musichetta shakes her head. "Really and truly busted."

"Well, shit."

Combeferre is rubbing his forearms again. "I just came down to get a drink of water—" That it hasn't occurred to him to leave the room suggests he is either way more tired or way more cold than he's trying to seem. Enjolras is having none of this.

"We don't have a replacement president if you die of exposure," he says. "Get over here."

"Pie," says Marius emphatically.

Cosette laughs. "You can't argue with pie, Combeferre."

"Because it's a noun, not a line of reasoning," Combeferre grumps.

"Sure it is," says Grantaire from the floor. "Like Aristotle said: ethos, pathos, logos, pie. Admittedly, I was wasted for most of On Rhetoric."

"I didn't get the house plague last week," Enjolras says, trying to keep the whine out of his voice. Even if he and Combeferre are not as close as they used to be, surely cuddling should be preferable to hypothermia. "And hey, if I do get sick—pie."

Combeferre gives him a long, quiet look.
“Okay,” he says at last. “Alright.”

As soon as Combeferre is an arm’s length away, Enjolras starts to remember why this is such a terrible idea. The softest couch in Amis House is long but not particularly deep, so that after some awkward flailing, the only way they can both stay on the cushions is by holding each other very, very close. It’s not the friendly spooning happening all around them: Combeferre’s face is resting at the side of Enjolras’s neck and they’re pressed together from chest to knee, legs tangled under the blanket. It would be marvelous except he knows Combeferre is uncomfortable, because he can feel the tension in Combeferre’s muscles at all of the many, many places they’re touching.

Enjolras is fairly certain this is his fault. When he offered, he had been focused on wiping the miserable, lost look off Combeferre’s face. On no conscious level had he even thought to anticipate what this is, feeling Combeferre’s every breath against his hair and trying to will his heartbeat back to something not alarming. He cannot vouch for his subconscious, though, and with a sinking feeling he wonders if some base animal part of his brain meant for this to happen.

With a deeper, faster sinking feeling, he realizes that maybe this was why Combeferre was so hesitant about the whole thing in the first place.

"Hey," says Enjolras in an undertone.

Combeferre’s breathing shifts as he turns his head slightly. "What?" he says, exhale brushing against the fine hairs at the nape of Enjolras’s neck. Enjolras shivers and hopes he can blame it on the cold.

"If this isn't okay—"

"It's okay," says Combeferre, half a beat too soon. Enjolras isn't sure what to do with that.

They don’t do this. Ever since Enjolras worked out what was going on in his head with Combeferre, it has been easier to not touch at all then to touch a little and constantly second guess himself about where the line is. Enjolras would sooner swallow thumbtacks than overstep Combeferre’s boundaries.

Enjolras would sooner talk feelings than overstep Combeferre’s boundaries.

"I don't think it is," Enjolras whispers. They’re too close to see each other’s faces, which somehow makes it a little easier. "Look," he says, "you clearly hate this—" Enjolras moves to sit up. Combeferre’s arms tighten around him in protest. He settles back into the couch.

"I don't," says Combeferre. He lets out a stuttering breath. It almost feels like suppressed laughter. "I promise you, I don’t."

A whispered argument in a relatively quiet room is going to draw more attention than a shouted one. In place of a rebuttal, Enjolras very lightly presses the fingertips of his left hand at the base of Combeferre’s neck, where he is still almost impossibly tense.

"Really, really not your fault," whispers Combeferre with conviction.

Maybe he is making something out of nothing. Maybe Combeferre is stiff from exam stress, or sitting at a desk too long, or just the cold. Enjolras readjusts the blanket around them, tucking the ends in as far as he can reach. Combeferre is very still.

"Breathe," says Enjolras. It's supposed to be calming, he remembers that much from Combeferre’s
yoga phase. In and out, in and out. They breathe together, and he thinks that if the common room wasn't so quiet, Combeferre would say something here about how the up and down feels like being on a ship. The motion of the waves, tides, some terrible pun about the sea. He smiles. He can feel Combeferre relax a fraction. They breathe.

He sweeps his palm from Combeferre's neck, down the knobs of his spine to the small of his back and then up again. Combeferre has done this for other people, but as far as Enjolras knows, nobody has done it for Combeferre. It feels like a tremendous oversight. He repeats the motion, pressing a little more firmly, and Combeferre melts into it with a small contented sound Enjolras wishes he could memorize.

They say nothing for a long time, long enough that Enjolras half-assumes Combeferre has fallen asleep. Just when he is thinking he should reposition himself a little—the arm trapped between Combeferre's ribs and the sofa is losing circulation—Combeferre gives him a squeeze and mutters into his shoulder,

"Missed this."

As a statement, it makes no sense. They don't do this. They've never done this.


He can feel Combeferre nod, and they stretch out their legs and twist, realigning. There are still very few ways two people can comfortably fit together on the narrow cushions, and Combeferre winds up more or less on top of him.

Combeferre is warm and not that heavy and smells like tea. Earl gray. "Sorry," Combeferre mumbles, as though Enjolras doesn't want to stay just like this for the rest of his life.

Enjolras huffs out a laugh and starts to shake his head, because it is an insane thing to apologize for. Combeferre stops him with one hand to the side of his face.

"Uh, not for that," says Combeferre. "For this." He brings their lips together.

It's light and careful and over in a fraction of a second, almost more the idea of a kiss. It happens so quickly that at first Enjolras isn't convinced it's happened at all. Maybe he's fallen asleep on the couch. It wouldn't be the first time he's had dreams about this. Combeferre pulls back, eyes wide and dark and Enjolras can feel his heartbeat through their T-shirts, the nervous stutter of his breath.

They watch each other for a second. When he's dreaming, they're never this tentative, this unsure. Which strongly suggests—well. That this is actually happening.

Before he's made the conscious decision to move, his hands are in Combeferre's hair and Enjolras has pulled him down to kiss him again, and again. Combeferre gasps very quietly, pressing closer, and Enjolras slides one hand to the small of his back, but his fingers get tangled up in the hem of Combeferre's shirt so that his hand brushes bare skin, smooth and warm—

and suddenly Combeferre is off the couch like a shot. "Uh, hey, who wants cocoa?" he blurts out to the room at large.

"That... would be nice?" says Feuilly from under the beanbag chair. Nobody in the co-op is going to turn down a sugary hot beverage at a time like this.

Enjolras curls back against the armrest and touches his lips, trying to convince himself he didn't just
"Need any help?" Courfeyrac is saying.

"Nope, we’ve got it covered," says Combeferre. He reaches down, grabs Enjolras by the elbow, and yanks him out of the room with frankly surprising speed. They stumble down the hallway and into the kitchen. Combeferre closes the door behind them. Enjolras braces himself against the kitchen counter, really wishing he had some idea what was going on. Not even a whole idea. Half an idea. Forty percent of an idea. He’s still not certain they just made out in the common room. Nothing adds up.

Combeferre stares back at him, breathing hard.

"We should probably make two batches," says Enjolras. "Of cocoa. There's no way we have enough almond milk to make it vegan and soy-free for everyone, but since both Bossuet and Musichetta are here—"

"I think," says Combeferre, "we should talk about what just happened. Communication. Is important."

All the air leaves his lungs. It’s like dropping down a roller coaster. "Why did you—" Enjolras gestures back towards the common room, trying and failing to think of a way to word it that isn't 'Why aren't we still kissing?' Nothing is coming to mind.

"Sorry." Combeferre nods as if Enjolras had actually managed to formulate the question. "I know I ruined the moment." His mouth quirks up slightly at one corner. "But I thought, whatever's going on, Courfeyrac deserves a break."

The meaning takes a second to penetrate Enjolras's sleep-deprived, confused, libido-addled brain. One of the drawbacks to communal living is the lack of real privacy. Especially before house members have the seniority to get a single, this means that a lot of personal affairs transpire in semi-public spaces. It's almost a co-op tradition: the first time any two people are hooking up, there will be at least one extra person on the scene, just hanging around. Somehow, in Amis House, this tends to be Courfeyrac.

On the night of the Halloween party, he chose the wrong time to go to the dish room for a mug and wound up getting an eyeful of Bahorel and a woman dressed as a mermaid making out against the sanitizer. When Cosette and Marius finally confessed their feelings for each other, in the laundry room, of all places, Eponine was also there, waiting with gritted teeth for her spin cycle to end. But so was Courfeyrac, who had stopped by to drop off a new bottle of fabric softener and, by his own account, narrowly restrained the urge to high-five them both.

He also has hazy reports of a story involving Musichetta, the basement couch, and either Joly or Bossuet, details are unclear. ("I don't want to talk about it," said Courfeyrac later. "First it was funny, but now I am starting to think I may be under a curse. You guys, I want to respect everyone's intimate moments so badly, but they just keep getting thrust upon me and Combeferre if you make a pun about thrusting I swear to god—") But Combeferre would never make a pun at someone who was truly distressed, and he considers innuendo to be the low-hanging fruit of the wordplay ecosystem. Not forbidden, exactly, but not deserving of recognition, either. Enjolras isn't sure what it means that Combeferre has thought out a pun ethos, or that Enjolras took the time to learn it.

Actually, Enjolras knows precisely what it means. He's known what it meant since walking back from orientation the summer before their freshman year. Combeferre shielding his glasses from the sun's glare, saying, "So I think I'm going to major in bio, and then minor in philosophy or astronomy.
Or psychology. Or women's studies. Or entomology, if they let you have a degree in that—" He'd been almost skipping as he spoke, nearly delirious with joy. He'd been that happy to be free from high school, maybe. Ready to take every single class the university had to offer, from ceramics to conversational Russian.

Enjolras scrubs a hand over his eyes. "'Whatever's going on'," he repeats.

"I just." Combeferre is chewing on his lower lip. "After the last time this—it doesn't seem like a good idea to make assumptions."

It is suddenly very difficult to breathe or form words. "Look," says Enjolras. "If you kissed me—I don't know, to experiment, or because you were tired and weren't thinking, or uh. We don't have to talk about it. If this is, if you didn't mean it—" Combeferre's eyes are wide. He swallows. "If you didn't mean it a lot. Because I am completely incapable of not taking this very, very seriously, and it's probably better to say that now."

"Enjolras," says Combeferre in an odd, choked voice. "Do you really think I would risk the most important friendship in my life to experiment?"

Distantly, Enjolras is forced to admit that no, that sounds nothing like Combeferre. He shakes his head.

"Right," Combeferre says. "Yes." He runs a hand over the back of his hair, lets out a puff of air. "I kissed you because I am in love with you. I have been for years. So."

"I—" Enjolras shakes his head because this is insane. "Same here. Same here, years. I—you're so—"

"Enjolras," Combeferre interrupts in a low voice. "Why are we not kissing right now."

This is an excellent point, Enjolras thinks vaguely, as he stumbles forward and Combeferre grabs at him. Then they're making out against the fridge, and Combeferre's hair is as soft as he remembers, and he tastes like earl gray with honey—he must have been drinking it to stay awake—and the handle of the fridge is really digging into Enjolras's back but he can't bring himself to care even a little because Combeferre is making these sounds, and—

The kitchen door swings open. "Hey guys, sure you don't need any help with the—" Courfeyrac breaks off mid-sentence, presumably because he sees them, although Enjolras doesn't look up to check. "Oh, for the love of—" The kitchen door swings shut, but Courfeyrac's voice is audible through the cheap plywood. "WHY DOES THIS KEEP HAPPENING, YOU'RE IN A HOUSE THAT IS LITERALLY FULL OF BEDROOMS. I AM VERY HAPPY FOR YOU, BUT PLEASE DO THAT ANYWHERE ELSE."

They pull apart a few inches at that, and Enjolras would protest the loss, but this is nice, too, seeing Combeferre’s face close-up and happy. His lips are red and he can't stop smiling.

"So, uh, it's come to my attention that we're in a house," says Combeferre. "A house full of bedrooms." The suggestive raise of his eyebrows is half a joke, but that doesn't make it any less effective. Enjolras presses a kiss just below his ear, because he can. Bedrooms. It's tempting. Still.

"There's no heat," he says reluctantly. "The basement's going to be freezing."

"I have a space heater," says Combeferre. "It doesn't fix the problem, but it is, uh," he pauses to thread their fingers together. "Slightly bearable."

Slightly bearable sounds fantastic right now. "Lead the way," Enjolras tells him.
The furnace doesn't get fixed until nearly seven the next morning. Enjolras and Combeferre have no complaints.

***

The days before winter break pass in a blur. Every time Enjolras thinks about Combeferre, it feels like his feet are floating.

"This is disturbing," says Eponine over breakfast. "How are we supposed to respect and fear you when you keep flashing that dopey smile every five minutes?"

Enjolras doesn't know, or particularly care. "I could make you scrub the stove hood," he offers, which isn't true; Eponine only ever misses work when she and Azelma leave to deal with some sort of recurring family emergency she refuses to talk about. They both make up any missed hours with an almost fanatical promptness, and Eponine has a tendency to stress-clean anyway. Others could learn from her example.

"Do I need to remind you I owe negative hours right now?" She punctuates her question with an unimpressed bite of cereal.

Of course Enjolras knows this; it's all on a spreadsheet on his computer and also backed up on Google Documents and Dropbox just in case. Eponine is at -2.75 hours. Thinking of spreadsheets makes him think of the rules to Make it Interesting, which makes him think of the last time he and Combeferre played, which—

When he looks up, Jehan is sitting across from him, halfway through a bowl of spaghetti and lentil "meatballs". Despite his current levels of distraction, Enjolras' can't help staring. Jehan's fashion choices are always idiosyncratic, but this takes the cake. "Are you wearing swim goggles on purpose?" he asks.

Jehan just blinks, owlishly. "How would I have put them on by accident?"

They're lying in Combeferre's bed, just spooning and going over their respective readings, when Combeferre says, "I still can't believe you didn't figure it out."

Enjolras knows what he means immediately. "You didn't want to room together," he says. "I thought you were sick of me."

Combeferre gives him a reassuring squeeze. "God, how would that even work?" and Enjolras has to admit his smile probably is a little dopey at present. "You do realize now that it was because I liked you, right?"

Months of trying not to dwell on the reasons mean that Enjolras has never stopped to reassess what was going on there. He shakes his head and Combeferre huffs a laugh.

"Enjolras. Please keep up with me here. After an entire year of living in the same room as someone I was A) in love with and B) desperately lusting after, is it so hard to think I maybe found it a little frustrating to never have any, um, alone time?"

Enjolras considers this. "That's what the first floor shower is for," he says. The bathrooms in the basement and the second floor both have shower stalls, like in a dorm, but the one on the first floor is
set up like a bathroom in any residential house: one toilet, one sink, one shower. Privacy.

"Seriously?" says Combeferre. "I thought maybe you just didn't have a sex drive." He grins; in the past week, he's been thoroughly disabused of the notion. Enjolras isn't attracted to many people, but when he is, he is.

Enjolras says, "Remember that semester you did yoga in the room and I started taking two showers a day?"

It takes Combeferre a second to catch his meaning. "Wait, really? Do you have some kind of yoga fetish I should know about?" he asks, voice warm and amused.

"No, it's just, you know. Yoga pants. Are very flattering. On you."

Combeferre dissolves into a fit of helpless giggles. "Oh my god," he manages. "Oh my god. Enjolras. For the record. Part of the reason I started doing yoga in the first place was because I'd read it helps with concentration. Which I was hoping to improve, because I found it so incredibly distracting when you'd walk around the room in a towel all the time, and then you just kept—taking showers—"

"Oh my god," says Enjolras, beaming. They're idiots.

"Pretty sure there's an O. Henry story about this somewhere," Combeferre wheezes.

A few hours later, Combeferre clears his throat. "Hey, so in the interest of full disclosure—"

"Mm?"

Combeferre seems to be steeling himself for something. "Last month, when Grantaire and I weren't getting along. What happened was, we were in his room, I tried to kiss him, and he turned me down."

Enjolras nearly falls off the bed. "Really?"

"Really," says Combeferre, pulling him back towards the center of the mattress with one hand. The other hand fidgets with the sheets. "Look, I'm so glad we're together, and I would never do anything to hurt you or to risk this—and I mean, clearly nothing would ever happen anyway, but. I figured it's information you should probably have."

"Not that," says Enjolras, "I mean, he turned you down?" To be honest, Enjolras has still been fairly certain that the tension had something to do with Grantaire’s feelings for Combeferre. Even after Combeferre insisted Grantaire never asked him out, Enjolras assumed it had been a case of a romantic overture going straight over Combeferre’s head. This is Grantaire, after all; it had probably been indirect and cryptic or shrouded in layers of irony. "Are you sure?" Grantaire rejecting Combeferre—it's incomprehensible.

"There are people out there immune to my charms," says Combeferre drily.

"Not him," says Enjolras.

"Uh, I have it on pretty good authority he is." Combeferre reaches down and runs a hand through Enjolras's hair. "Why are you so hung up on this?"
Enjolras angles his head for more petting. "I can drop it if you want."

"It's fine," says Combeferre, scratching Enjolras's scalp in exactly the right spot. "I just think maybe you're projecting a little."

Is he? Enjolras considers this. His gut instinct is that he's right, but gut instinct has been known to fail, and Enjolras is aware that when he invests a lot of emotion into something he can have a hard time being objective. Wrapping his mind around Combeferre wanting to kiss him had called for a minor reshaping of his universe. Wrapping his mind around Grantaire not wanting to kiss Combeferre calls for the same, somehow. Although it is true that Grantaire does not seem the least bit upset now that Combeferre and Enjolras are together, which maybe says it all.

"I know you hate talking about that drawing, but—"

Combeferre sighs. "I'm still sorry for snapping about that. At the time, it was a little raw. I really am okay now." From Enjolras's current vantage point, Combeferre is upside down. The corners of his mouth twitch down into a smile. "It was a good drawing, even if it was probably too flattering."

Enjolras rolls over and pulls himself up to his elbows. "No, it was—it was exactly how I see you."

"You and my mom," says Combeferre with a laugh. "She's been bugging me for a copy. I keep meaning to ask him, but even if things have gone back to normal, God, that is just not a conversation I want to have."

"Hmm," says Enjolras.

Finding Grantaire is not difficult. He has so many hours to make up that at this point, there's always a good chance he'll be doing one chore or another, and well, Enjolras knows the work schedule.

On Friday, Grantaire is sweeping out the dining room.

"Can I talk to you about something?" says Enjolras.

Grantaire looks up, sees him, and immediately his grip on the broom goes white-knuckled. "Shit, what did I do?"

Enjolras pinches the bridge of his nose. Seconds into this conversation, he is already exhausted. "Nothing, it's—why would you even be in trouble, you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing, when you're supposed to be doing it, in the way you're supposed to do it. What in the world would—never mind."

"Okay," says Grantaire. "Uh, glad we had this chat." He starts sweeping again.

"Do you take commissions?" says Enjolras.

Grantaire stops sweeping. "What?"

"Art. Drawing. Do you take commissions?"

"I haven't before, but I would, I guess," says Grantaire, squinting up at the ceiling. "Why, do you know someone who needs something?"

"Can I commission you to do another drawing of Combeferre?" says Enjolras.
"You…can," says Grantaire slowly. "Or I could just give you the one I already did."


"Um." Grantaire twirls the broom in one hand, making a series of thoughtful faces. "…fif…teen dollars?"

"Are you serious?" Enjolras’s admittedly spotty understanding is that art is generally not that affordable.

"Ten," says Grantaire, "but I won't go any lower." Enjolras goggles at him. "O-kay, I'll go probably a little lower."

Enjolras pulls out one of the dining room chairs and sits down; this is clearly not going to be a short conversation. "First of all, piece of advice: get an agent or something, because that is not how bargaining works."

Grantaire sighs and leans the broom against the table. "Feels weird making you pay anything at all. He's your boyfriend."

"It's not for me, it's for his mom."

"See," says Grantaire, "all the more reason not to charge. Who am I to come between Mama Combeferre and a picture of her own beloved son?"

"No, I mean I'm giving it to her as a Christmas present."

"Okay, then I'll give it to you as a present and you can regift it to her," says Grantaire, triumphant. He furrows his brow with mock puppy eyes. "You wouldn't refuse a Christmas present from your own housemate, would you?"

"That's a good point," says Enjolras, fighting not to smile. "That would be the height of rudeness, wouldn't it?"

"Miss Manners would shit herself," says Grantaire with an earnest nod. "Which she would somehow manage to handle with a lot of grace, but like, the larger point stands."

The urge to smile persists. Enjolras bites the inside of his cheek to keep it at bay. For once, he's come prepared. "Fantastic," he says. "In that case, I got a gift for you, too." He pulls a small white plastic shopping bag from his backpack.

"The hell," says Grantaire, and it's clear from the look on his face that he knows he's been outmaneuvered.

"I looked up commission prices online. Then I tried to imagine you asking for that much with a straight face." Enjolras shakes his head. "So an even trade instead. Seems fair." He holds the bag out.

Grantaire takes it with a degree of caution that is frankly unflattering. "You didn't have to—" he stammers.

This is a very unproductive line of reasoning. "Please, we both know how I am about fairness, yes I did."

"Can I open it?" says Grantaire.

"I didn't wrap it or anything, but sure," says Enjolras. If he's honest with himself, he did kind of want
to see Grantaire's reaction. He'd been hoping to find something a little more impressive, but the clerk at the art supply store assured him that anyone who knew about this kind of thing would be more than pleased.

Grantaire peers into the bag and his eyes go wide. "The hell," he says again. "The hell." When he looks up again, his face is half-rapturous, half-confused. It's so dramatic that at first Enjolras assumes it's sarcasm. But Grantaire sounds sincere and try as he might, Enjolras can't detect even a hint of irony in his expression. "Enjolras," he breathes. "These are such good pens."

For reasons he can't articulate, Enjolras suddenly feels a little uncomfortable. He rubs the back of his neck. "You kept complaining about how your pens were bleeding or spiderwebbing or whatever. The person at the counter said these wouldn't do that, so."

"Wouldn't—" Grantaire echoes, still staring into the depths of the bag like it contains some untold treasure. "I can't accept these. I can't—oh my god, Enjolras, do you know how much these pens cost?"

"Well, yes, actually," says Enjolras, but Grantaire doesn't seem to hear him.

"I can't accept them," Grantaire says again. "Seriously, I can't. I was going to save up and maybe buy some next year—" He pauses, apparently remembering this is a less-than-impressive statement to make in December. "—three hundred sixty five days from now. You can't—"

"I can," says Enjolras, starting to get a little annoyed. It doesn't seem like this part should be quite so difficult. Clearly Grantaire likes the pens. "And point of fact, I did. You just agreed with me that it's rude to turn down a gift, so."

"Yeah, no," Grantaire waves a hand dismissively, "it is, but I'm an asshole, I get to be rude. One of the perks of—" If he gets going, he will never stop. Enjolras has a sudden inspiration.

"If you don't accept them," he says in the gravest voice he can muster, "I will use them like regular pens."

It's a gamble, but it works. Grantaire stares at him. "You wouldn't."

"I have no idea what's supposed to make these so special," says Enjolras, shrugging, "but if you don't want them, hey, I could always use more pens. I have a tendency to get distracted and lose them. Or accidentally put them through the wash. Or leave them uncapped until they dry out. I've dropped a pen climbing out of my car and then driven over it multiple times—"

Grantaire actually looks a little pale. He clutches the bag protectively to his chest. "Oh god, please stop, you're scaring them."

"So do you accept them, then?" Gloating is bad form but Enjolras really can't help the pleased curl of his mouth.

"Yeah, fine." Grantaire heaves an elaborate sigh. He carefully wraps the rest of the bag around the pens, sticks the bundle in his back pocket, and holds up his hands in surrender. "You win."

Enjolras tilts his head to one side. "It's hard to feel much sympathy for you, playing against your own best interests."

"Story of my life," Grantaire mutters. "Hey, there are a couple places the picture might be, so I'm thinking I'll finish up in here before I go looking for it, but I could drop it off in your room tonight?"
The last time Enjolras went into his own room was three days ago, and it was just to get some clean clothes. Marius had looked legitimately surprised to see him. On the other hand, there are a limited number of ways to say, 'If you stop by Combeferre's room tonight you will probably find me but he and I will probably be in the middle of having sex, and maybe you don't want to be there for that.'

"Leave it in my mailbox?" he suggests. "Roll it up, don't crease it, obviously."

Of course Grantaire knows how to raise one eyebrow. Of course he does. "Any further instructions, boss?"

One thing Enjolras has learned in his time at Amis House: sometimes the best way to deal with sarcasm is to willfully take it at face value. "Yeah," he says, "can you sign it and date it? But at least an inch from the edge of the paper."

"O...kay," says Grantaire, "Sure, who am I to say no to your crazy arbitrary whims?"

"I don't want the matting to cover it up," Enjolras explains. It comes out huffier than intended; he is so fantastically out of his depth talking about art.

Grantaire gives him a weird look. Enjolras assumes he's used the wrong word. He readies himself for derision and mockery, but instead Grantaire says,

"You're...framing it?"

"Why, is that weird?" says Enjolras. Shit, maybe it's weird. "Should I let her pick the frame? I mean, it's her house, she might have a better idea of what goes together, and I don't even know what to look for—"

When he looks back up, Grantaire’s smiling, eyes alight. "Oh god," says Grantaire, "I get what's going on here."

"Do you?" Enjolras is impressed; he himself has completely lost the thread.

"You're nervous," says Grantaire. His smile is expanding into grin territory. "You're totally nervous, this is amazing."

"No I'm not," says Enjolras automatically. What would he have to be nervous about? He and Grantaire have lived in the same house for months; this is hardly the first time they've talked. True, this conversation is their longest and definitely their most civil to date, it's actually sort of—fun. And true, it would make Combeferre really, really happy if they could get along. Additionally true: Enjolras can't shake the feeling he is one wrong comment away from shutting the whole thing down. But the negotiation is out of the way, nothing is at stake. There's no reason to get all worked up about—

"I mean, god knows why," Grantaire is saying. "Is Mama Combeferre that terrifying? If you get her a shitty gift, you will feel her wrath?"

Oh. Right. "Combeferre's mom is great," says Enjolras.

"So it's not an issue of like, homophobia or anything—"

Enjolras laughs. "Combeferre and his brothers were raised Unitarian; he's got fond childhood memories of being read Heather Has Two Mommies. She was a hippie, she does advocacy work for First Nations groups, and beyond that—if you were to look at Combeferre, and imagine what type of mother could produce him, she's that woman exactly. She's great."
"Gotcha." Grantaire nods sagely. "So like, you really want her to like you."

"Well, yeah." Enjolras hasn't thought about it in those terms, but of course he wants Jeanne's approval. Who wouldn't?

"How many major holidays have you spent with Combeferre's family?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras does some quick counting. "Five."

"And the second time you were invited back, you didn't think 'hey, guess I have an in here'?"

The second time Enjolras was invited back, he'd been so filled with relief that he hadn't examined it much further. There's no easy way to explain the full situation without going into a lot of background about his own family, baggage and old scars Grantaire couldn't possibly be interested in. Jeanne seems to like him well enough; they are Facebook friends. But he doesn't want to presume.

Besides, however many times he's visited in the past, this is his first Christmas where the underlying subtext will be, "I am in love with your son and have spent the last several weeks doing any number of filthy things with him in bed, and also once against my bookcase, although we don't talk about that because my roommate nearly walked in on us so now I am mostly living in your son's room because it is easier than looking poor Marius in the eye." He doesn't know how much of this will be plain to the average bystander, but Jeanne is perceptive.

"This is a crazy thing to worry about," says Grantaire. "For the record. Except for the whole "dude dating a dude" thing, which is apparently not an issue here, you are the perfect son-in-law. Seriously. You could've been grown in a vat."

Enjolras narrows his eyes. "Thank…you?"

"Ugh, you think I'm kidding." Grantaire scrubs one hand over his face. "This is a nightmare. Okay, fine, I will spell it out for you." He takes a deep breath, ticking off each point on his fingers. "You are brilliant, responsible, passionate about the shit you care about, both idealistic and practical, driven, community-minded, progressive—which I bet she loves, if she's a hippie and all that—oh, and also? You make her son ridiculously happy. Like, actually ridiculous. He is just tap-dancing around—" Grantaire smiles at the floor for a moment, then looks back at Enjolras. "It's disgusting."

Enjolras needs more time to process the warm, fluttering feeling in his chest. "Uh. So, what are your holiday plans?"

"Hanukah already happened," says Grantaire with a shrug. In retrospect, Enjolras already knew this: both that Grantaire is Jewish, and the approximate dates of Hanukah. He glances up, thinking. As far as he can remember, Grantaire spent all eight days at the co-op. As if reading Enjolras's mind, Grantaire shrugs again. "My family, we aren't really holiday people."

Enjolras has never liked how the house feels when it's mostly empty. He doesn't envy anyone staying there through all of winter break.

"Well, Jehan will be around," says Enjolras.

Grantaire gives him a perplexed look. "Eid already happened, too," he says.

"I know, but maybe you can go sledding or something." This does nothing to diminish Grantaire's confusion, but that's fine. It's his turn to be confused. "Also, Eponine and Azelma are getting back on the 26th."
"And I assume Marius is sticking around," says Grantaire, "given the whole—" He doesn't need to finish the sentence; at this point everyone knows that Marius's grandfather seems to be in the process of disowning him.

"Actually, he’s spending Christmas with Courfeyrac's family," says Enjolras. "Feuilly will be here, though."

"Great," says Grantaire flatly, and of course it was too much to hope for, that they'd manage an entire exchange without an argument.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whoa, man." Grantaire looks as surprised as he is that their peaceful conversation is coming to an end. Surprised and possibly disappointed? He holds his hands out in appeal. "Nothing, just—in all the time I've lived here, Feuilly and I have spoken once. I barely see the guy. If it wasn't for the house meeting every month, I wouldn't be convinced he exists. And I dunno, from what I know about him, I don't see us getting along?"

"Feuilly is fantastic," says Enjolras. "He's a really cool person. Well-read, funny, interested in a ton of stuff. You'll like him."

"Uh," says Grantaire, rocking back on his heels, "that's not what I'm worried about?"

"What—oh, no you'll be fine." The more Enjolras thinks about it, the more he likes the idea of Feuilly and Grantaire hanging out. Certainly, Feuilly would love having someone to talk art with.

"Will I?" Grantaire does the eyebrow thing again. "Have you met me?"

"As far as I can tell, you're only an asshole when you're trying to be, so just—don't try."

Grantaire snorts and picks up the broom again, a dismissal of sorts. It's fair: they both have work to do.

"Merry Christmas, Enjolras," he says. One corner of his mouth is quirked up, but there's something genuine in there too, Enjolras thinks.

"Happy Holidays," he says on his way out the door. And because he can't help it, "Enjoy your pens."

"Is it weird to give someone art that's already framed?" says Enjolras. He and Combeferre are lying in bed again. It’s an unspoken rule: if they can be cuddling, they are. They have a lot of time to make up for.

Combeferre makes an inquiring sound.

"I bought Grantaire's drawing for your mom," he explains.

"Really? You convinced him to let you pay him a fair wage?" says Combeferre.

Enjolras bites his lip. "I kind of…emotionally blackmailed him into accepting some expensive art supplies."

Combeferre frowns thoughtfully for a moment, then nods. "And you framed it?"
"Yeah," says Enjolras, "the woman at the craft store said it was a good choice, but it's a giant corporation so who knows how much training she's had. Anyway she's probably paid on commission, so it's built right into the job that her livelihood depends on—"

"I'm sure it's fine," says Combeferre. He props himself up on one elbow. "Are you honestly worried she won't like your present?"

"She has definite tastes sometimes, and I keep wondering if maybe I should've let her choose."

"Enjolras, this is my mom. She will love it if you make the frame out of popsicle sticks." There is a pause. "Please tell me you aren't now regretting not using popsicle sticks."

Enjolras sighs and flops back onto the pillow. "She's hard to shop for. She doesn't want anything."

"She will love it," says Combeferre again. "I swear. I will put it in writing. We can bet another pie," he adds, probably just to make Enjolras smile. It works.

"Deal," says Enjolras. Recent experience has borne it out: his boyfriend makes an incredible cherry pie. It's even better overlaid with the taste of victory.

Combeferre's hands twitch. He smooths the blanket needlessly. "Hey," he says, "quick question. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Enjolras feels his eyebrows draw together. "Shoot?"

"Um." Combeferre looks up. "Does it really not bother you that I tried to kiss Grantaire?"

"In October?"

"Yeah."

"I swear you don't have to worry about that," says Enjolras. There is a pause. He has to admit it isn't a real answer. "Full honesty?"

"Please," says Combeferre.

"It makes me sad, mostly. It had to hurt you. Also, I still think he's in love with you."

"I promise," says Combeferre with a sigh, "it was not ambiguous. He had the opportunity to make any feelings known, and he—did not. With a vengeance. He recoiled so hard, he almost gave himself a concussion on the wall."

Enjolras reflexively reaches out and hugs him. If he still has the sense that neither of them have the full story—now is probably not the time for that.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Combeferre half-laughs. "You are consoling me because it didn't work out with another man. A man you find extremely irritating. You may be the most understanding boyfriend on the planet."

Is he? Of course, Enjolras isn't sure how he would've felt had it worked out. Easy to be gracious when you're on the winning team. He runs his fingers idly down Combeferre's side.

"You know, he's been a lot better lately," he says, both because it's true and it will make Combeferre happy. "We had a whole conversation without a fight today, it was nice."
"Proud of you," says Combeferre. He leans down to press a kiss to Enjolras's temple. It's half a joke, but it's also still a kiss, so Enjolras is not complaining.

Mentally, he circles back to Combeferre's question. For some reason, it's hard to get his thoughts together. He does a thought experiment: that day in October, Combeferre kisses Grantaire and Grantaire kisses back. It probably starts tentative, but Combeferre, who can get kind of bossy in bed, pushes Grantaire carefully against the wall. Grantaire looks up at him with wide, adoring, sincere eyes and lets himself be pushed, and then it's like a dam breaking and Combeferre's elegant fingers are fisted in Grantaire's sweatshirt, and Grantaire's red lower lip is caught between Combeferre's teeth—

Back in reality, Enjolras breathes out a long, shaky breath. How does he feel about his boyfriend kissing Grantaire? Apparently, it doesn't bother him that much.

He should examine this at some point. After the holidays, when he has the time to do some serious thinking. He clears his throat. "When are we leaving tomorrow?"

"Flight's at two, an hour to get to the airport, two hours for checking in and security in case it's crazy, so ten?"

"Do you think there's time for me to make a quick stop and look at frames one more time?" says Enjolras. Combeferre gives him a disbelieving look. "Sorry, sorry."

"For the love of god." Combeferre cups the side of his face with one hand. "Every time my mom calls, she asks how you're doing. She keeps her friends informed about your accomplishments. She used the Thanksgiving photo for her Christmas cards this year, which is to say you are on our Christmas cards. Enjolras," he says, very seriously, "she made you a stocking."

"I—what?" Enjolras has been surprised so many times today, it's starting to feel like his new default. "Really?"

"She knit you a Christmas stocking. It's red. It's got your name on it, and snowflakes all around the edges, and a polar bear." Combeferre twists around, peering over the edge of the bed. "She texted me pictures at one point, not sure where my phone is right now."

"Charging by your desk," says Enjolras. They look balefully over at the power outlet under the desk, well out of arm's reach. "I'll take your word for it," he says. "I just—didn't you say she's the world's slowest knitter?"

"She is," says Combeferre. "She started it the day after Christmas last year. Do I need to tell you that my mom doesn't knit for just anyone? Do I need to remind you," he adds, "that she friended you on Facebook? As far as she's concerned, you are already her son-in-law."

Enjolras's smile is so big, he isn't sure how it's fitting on his face. He grins into Combeferre's shoulder instead, wraps his arms around him.

It's only the 22nd, and this is already the best Christmas he's ever had.

***

December isn't Grantaire's least favorite time of year, but it's up there. Without the banked sentimentiality of a major holiday, it is a fairly bleak span of days. Crummy weather, overplayed songs, strangers demanding that he be jolly. As break starts in earnest, people gradually filter out of the house, and then it's down to Feuilly, Grantaire, Jehan, and a lot of silent rooms. Amis House is a ghost of itself, an effect not lessened by the powdery white lunar landscape outside.
Drinking and moping in his room is not an option, and bars are kind of depressing without Joly and Bossuet. It's a recipe for stir-craziness; what's Grantaire supposed to do, play boardgames against himself?

When he corners Feuilly in the dining room with an extra mug of herbal tea, it's with a vague plan to prove Enjolras wrong about something. Pretty much the only thing he knows about Feuilly—other than the whole orphan thing, which was their first conversation—is that he's putting himself through college through a mix of loans, scholarships, and perpetually working. Grantaire is basically the laziest person on the face of the earth. He's not so sure about common ground.

Enjolras is right, of course. Grantaire can't even be mad at him for managing to win an argument from thousands of miles away, because shit, Feuilly is awesome. They wind up talking for three hours, with a break in the middle where they attempt to doctor some ramen noodles and wind up with a pesto-cumin curry so foul they throw the whole mess in the compost bucket and agree to never mention it again.

Feuilly, despite majoring in engineering, has actually audited a couple of 400 level art history classes, which means he both knows a lot of things Grantaire doesn't know, and is missing chunks of pretty elementary stuff. It turns out he both loves explaining things and has zero shame about asking questions, so the spottiness of his knowledge base actually pushes conversation forward.

At 11:30, Grantaire gets up to grab tea refills and catches a glimpse of the microwave clock on his way out of the kitchen.

"Don't you need to pack in soon?" he says to Feuilly. "Early shifts next morning and all of that?"

Feuilly shakes his head. "I'm off tomorrow and the day after, actually."

Grantaire checks the calendar on his phone: Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, right.

"They gave you a vacation, that's cool," he says.

"Eh," says Feuilly with a shrug. "I suspect they just don't want to shell out triple overtime for holiday pay. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with myself. I'd rather work on Christmas Eve than sit around doing nothing and thinking about the magical times I'm not having."

Sometimes Grantaire has to fight the urge to punch himself in the face. It's so easy to get wrapped up in his own drama bullshit and forget that other people have actual legitimate baggage around the holidays.

Instead he raises his mug in salute. "Hey Feuilly," he says, "how do you feel about sledding?"

Jehan comes along, which is a little surprising. Grantaire had always assumed Jehan's love of nature was more symbolic than a sign of any real outdoorsiness, and also he's not sure Jehan has left the house since exams ended, but the kid expresses an interest and actually owns a sled, so what the hell.

"Where do you normally keep this thing?" Feuilly asks as they make the trek to the nearest significant hill.

From under the circle of black plastic (it's an awkward shape to carry and Jehan has decided that the best method is balancing it atop the head), Jehan shrugs. "I use it like a second desk most of the time. For writing in bed or on the floor."
The thing is concave and also surprisingly heavy. "That can't be comfortable," Grantaire argues.

"Art's not supposed to be comfortable," says Jehan solemnly, and it takes a good seven paces before Grantaire realizes it's a joke.

"In my defense," says Grantaire as Jehan and Feuilly crack up, "I know a lot of pretentious jackasses."

Sledding is very fun for about fifteen minutes, and then they all remember the reason why it is generally reserved for young children.

"Snowpants," says Jehan, teeth chattering, as they make the long and snow-drenched walk back to Amis House. "What we need. Is snowpants."

"Do they make them in adult sizes?" asks Feuilly.

Grantaire considers this. "If nothing else, surely there's a weird pocket of a fetish community somewhere on the internet." If Joly and Bossuet were around, they would spend the next hour coming up with titles for snowpants porn, but admittedly that kind of creativity is a specialty skill.

Jehan hums vaguely in agreement, or possibly as a nostril-defrosting measure. It's must be below zero. Grantaire can't remember what it feels like to have sensation in his feet. As cold as they are, Feuilly has to be colder; he's not wearing boots or even a real winter coat, just a hoodie under a jacket.

A block before they reach Amis House, Feuilly pretends to collapse under a street lamp.

"Leave me here," he says. "I've seen my fate, and this is how it ends for me. Not with a bang, not even with a whimper, just wet socks and snow in my underpants."

Jehan and Grantaire exchange a glance and wordlessly each grab an armpit, yanking him back up.

"Don't worry, friend," says Jehan. "If we have anything to say about it, you will live to have a much, much cooler death."

"Cigar clamped between your teeth, explosions in every direction, a chainsaw in each hand," Grantaire agrees. "No, two chainsaws in each hand!"

Jehan nods. "You die juggling chainsaws, Feuilly. It is a weird choice you make."

Feuilly giggles and lets them support most of his weight, sneakers skidding along the icy sidewalk, until they reach the front porch. It doesn't jibe at all with the hardworking young communist Grantaire knows, but if the past 24 hours have shown anything, it's that he doesn't know Feuilly at all.

They peel off their scarves and hats at the door, stamping what snow they can off their feet.

Grantaire could really use a mug of cocoa right now. Especially since the last time he was promised cocoa, Enjolras and Combeferre just used it as an excuse to slip off to the kitchen to make out. They've been really affectionate with each other since; maybe it's a return to normal and the past few months were just a rough patch for them. Not that Grantaire is over-invested in their love life or anything. That's not the point.
"Is it just me," says Grantaire, "or is the situation loudly crying out for hot chocolate?"

"GRANTAIRE, MAKE US HOT CHOCOLATE," Feuilly yells. He cups a hand to one ear. "Oh hey, I think you were right. About the situation."

Working three part-time jobs while being a full-time student probably doesn't leave a lot of time for silliness, Grantaire thinks. Maybe Feuilly is working it all out of his system at once. That, or it's an early symptom of freezing to death.

Either way, the man deserves some hot chocolate.

January

"Uh, I have one last point of interest," says Marius as everyone is getting up to leave the monthly meeting. Grantaire glances warily around the common room. Marius keeps shifting his weight from one foot to the other and Grantaire thinks there's about a fifty-fifty chance he's about to propose to Cosette. He seems like the public proposal type.

Grantaire can't handle that degree of cuteness. His heart is powered by equal parts caffeine, panic, and sheer spiteful refusal to die.

"I just," Marius says, "being away from the co-op made me realize how important you guys are to me, and how glad I am that you're in my life, so I was thinking maybe we could take a moment for a group hug." He bites his lip. "If, uh, people are okay with that—" His voice trails off as he is swarmed by people hugging him.

The urge to ruin the moment is strong. Grantaire actually has to bite down on his own hand to keep all possible sarcastic responses at bay, but crushed between Bossuet, Jehan, and Joly, he has to admit it's probably worth it.

Every so often, Grantaire gets a glimpse of why so many people in the house are inexplicably in love with Marius Pontmercy.

February

"Why Am I Still Awake: A Memoir, By Jean Prouvaire," says Grantaire, sliding onto the couch.

"With special foreword by Grantaire: I Am Also Still Awake, And I Don't Even Have the Excuse Of Sometimes Sleeping 18 Hours Straight Due to Coffee Inexplicably Failing Me Every Other Weekend For Unknown Reasons," says Jehan.

The reasons are not unknown to Grantaire; he suspects it has something to do with Joly, Bossuet, and Protocol Z4. In a rare display of prudence, he keeps his mouth shut. It's a thing he's experimenting with right now: common sense. For the sake of sheer novelty, if nothing else.

"There's pumpkin fudge in the kitchen," says Grantaire instead.

Jehan’s head snaps up. "What do you want from me."

"Nothing. You're a good egg, Jehan Prouvaire."

"The best egg," Jehan agrees.
"My brother from another mother." He frowns. Shit, that is all wrong. "Sister from another mister," he amends. "Sibling from another liebling—"

"That doesn't make sense on a couple of levels," says Jehan.

"Want to come to my anti-Valentine's Day party?" says Grantaire. "Right now, it's just me, eating a box of discount candy by myself and crying."

Jehan steals the pillow between them and knocks shoulders with him. "How could I possibly resist? You know I like my chocolate flavored by the tears of others." Jehan's fingertips drum on one tie-dyed-corduroy-clad knee. "Really, dude. No need to resort to petty bribes."

"You're not gonna have any fudge?"

"No, I'm still going to eat a bunch of it," says Jehan, getting up. "Save my spot?"

Like there's a line or something. Still, Grantaire obediently stretches his legs out on Jehan's vacated couch cushion.

Jehan re-enters a few minutes later, slurring something through a mouthful of fudge.

"Chew and swallow," says Grantaire helpfully. "Vowels and consonants, that's what we like in English." Jehan gives him the finger, which has to be haram, c'mon, and scoots Grantaire's feet out of the way.

"I said, 'have you invited Feuilly yet?'"

"Nobody's coming but you, dude." Grantaire freezes the second the word has left his mouth; should he amend it to 'dudette'? Is there a secret gender-neutral suffix to 'dude' known only to hippies and vegans and linguistics majors?

Jehan just snorts. "Stop, you'll sprain something. You call Musichetta 'dude' all the time, it's cool."

"You'd tell me if I was oppressing you, right?"

"Unless I was real busy or something was on fire," Jehan agrees.

"Ooh, will you tell me off in the form of slam poetry?" says Grantaire.

"Do not test me," says Jehan. "Hey, so unless you've got actual objections, can I invite Feuilly?"

"Fine." Grantaire shrugs. "But there is no way on this earth he doesn't have work on the fourteenth."

"He can trade shifts. He's got no problem rearranging his schedule if there's a thing he wants to go to."

Grantaire blinks. Jehan looks at him like he's an idiot. Grantaire recognizes the look immediately; he sees it in the mirror often enough.

"Grantaire," says Jehan slowly. "Do I need to grab the masking tape from the kitchen and go around labeling everyone 'THIS IS YOUR FRIEND' before you stop being weird about it?"

Has nobody ever explained the difference between friends and housemates to Jehan? Maybe nobody has ever had to; despite the giant orbiting cloud of weirdness that surrounds the kid like a swarm of bees on a hive, Jehan is effortlessly likable. Anyone in Amis House would gladly live with Jehan, whether or not they had signed a piece of paper requiring them to.
"You're welcome to try," says Grantaire, "but I think like half the house would fight you on it."

Jehan executes a really impressive eyeroll at that. "For the record, this whole self-sabotage-and-self-pity ring cycle is by far your worst quality."

The funny thing is, Grantaire can think of like six worse qualities off the top of his head, but naming any of them would probably count as indulging the loop. It's a nifty little word trap Jehan has made. Touche, he thinks.

Instead, he leans forward. "What's my best quality? Is it my sick dance moves?"

"Pictionary skills," says Jehan. "Then pumpkin fudge, then peanut butter cookies, then DDR, and then actual dance. Hey, let's invite Enjolras and Combeferre! They hate all that corporate consumerism culture—"

"No," says Grantaire. It earns a weird look. He might have been a little too forceful, he thinks. He just wants one evening to hang out with friends and hate his life in peace, away from the masochism tango that is watching Combeferre and Enjolras be adorable together. "Black frozen bitter hearts only." He frowns. That probably rules out Joly and Bossuet. "Bahorel can come, I guess."

"His girlfriend might take exception to that," says Jehan, eyebrows raised. Even Bahorel has someone, of course, such is life. Grantaire groans, and when Jehan is unimpressed, slides bonelessly to the floor and groans again.

Eponine looks up from her book at the other side of the room. "Is Grantaire dying?"

"No, he's planning an anti-Valentine's Day party," says Jehan.

"Cool," says Eponine, "I'll bring the music."

Grantaire opens his mouth to protest, but Eponine fits all qualifications. He never specified that guests had to like him. In meetings, she makes it a point to glare at him every time he takes the floor. It's like clockwork. Sometimes she starts in before he even realizes he's about to raise his hand.

"Would your sister want to come?" Grantaire asks from the floor. He doesn't know Azelma too well, but she doesn't seem to actively hate him and he's not averse to stacking the deck in his favor.

Eponine shakes her head. "She's got a date," she says ominously. Grantaire has to admit that the only thing worse than getting no action is probably getting less action that your little sister.

Grantaire and Bossuet's double is so messy that it can no longer comfortably hold four people; there's a reason Bossuet has more or less moved in with Joly and Feuilly upstairs. Jehan's single is also not an ideal party venue—most of the floor is taken up by the bed and pretty much every decorative item manages to look like it's under an ancient curse, from the two separate skull-shaped lamps to the bedraggled one-eyed paper mache raven staring down from one corner of the bookcase—but it wins in terms of simple spacial reasoning.

"Do you think it's possible to love more than one person at once?" says Grantaire from the rug. He's been spending a lot of time on the floor lately, he thinks. Years of drinking his balance away have left him suspicious of chairs. The ground is his natural state.

"If soap operas are to be believed, then a resounding yes," says Feuilly.
Eponine snorts. "You watch soaps?"

"No," says Feuilly. "But my favorite foster mom did. She'd tape them and then when she got home from work, I'd sit on the couch and do homework while she got caught up. Smoking copiously the whole time. Probably took a year off my life." He smiles fondly.

"My mom was all about that shit," says Eponine. "Other life lessons: you should always double-check if someone’s dead, and absolutely any medical condition can be cured through love, from comas to mental illness to like, lactose intolerance."

"Fucking love," Grantaire mutters. "The worst part about living in Amis House is that you don't even have the option of going, 'Well who cares, romance is all just bullshit anyway' since you're constantly stuck under the same roof of the world's most perfect couple."

"Hear, hear," says Eponine.

"How did those two get together, anyway?" says Grantaire. "Does anybody know? Did they ever officially ask each other out, or did they just run at each other from opposite ends of a field of flowers?"

"You've already heard this story," says Jehan. Grantaire would remember if he had. He shakes his head.

"The laundry room," says Eponine promptly. "I was waiting for my spin cycle to end, and my hand to god they had like, a moment about detergent brands—"

"Not the Marius and Cosette story," Grantaire interrupts. Everyone knows the Marius and Cosette story. Everyone who has spoken to Marius this year knows the Marius and Cosette story, including his professors and probably the pizza delivery guy. "I meant the co-op power couple."

"Who, Enjolras and Combeferre?" says Jehan. "You've already heard that story, too. You were there."

"I moved in at the start of September," he reminds them.

"Yeah," says Eponine, "and they got together two months ago."

"That would mean December. This December."

"That is how months work, yes," Eponine drawls. At his still-boggled face, she sighs. "Come on. You have to remember this. The night the heating broke? And they slipped into the kitchen to—" she hooks her fingers into sarcastic quote marks, "make hot cocoa? And Courfeyrac apparently found them kissing or making out or dry humping against the fridge but refused to tell us what happened?"

"Courfeyrac's a gentleman," says Feuilly. "Kind of."

“And then Joly decided to check if the hot cocoa was maybe just a euphemism, but they’d already left to go hook up in Combeferre’s room and none of us had the willpower to brave the kitchen long enough to boil almond milk so we—"

“—wound up all just passing around a bag of chocolate chips and eating them by the fistful like animals,” Grantaire finishes. "Yes, I mean, I was there. But. They weren’t already dating?"

“They got together then,” says Jehan. “I mean, did you stop to consider how surprised we all were?”
In retrospect, Grantaire can admit that it was a little weird. “I thought maybe they just didn’t do a lot of PDA or anything.”

Jehan coughs. “Well, you were right. In that there was none. Nobody saw it coming. We used to joke about how they were like a married couple—”

Oh. Jokes. Normally, Grantaire is better than this at subtext. He’s sure of it.

Wait. “Wait,” says Grantaire, “but if they didn’t start dating until December, that means they definitely weren’t dating in October—”

“You are just knocking this months thing out of the park,” says Eponine. He absent-mindedly flicks her off, but his mind is racing.

It doesn’t matter. Combeferre never tried to kiss him, it was just his imagination. Grantaire knows this. Grantaire has decided this. Occam’s Razor. This new little nugget of information changes nothing, because there was nothing to change in the first place. There is nothing to process. He tells himself this, firmly, several times. The sinking feeling in his stomach doesn’t give a shit.

Grantaire puts his head in his hands. "I need to sit down," he mumbles to himself.

"You're on the floor," Feuilly points out. This is sensible. Still.

"I need to be lower than the floor right now."

Eponine climbs off the bed and plops down next to him. He squints at her warily, expecting another jibe about his basic calendar knowledge. Instead, she rests her chin on his shoulder.

“Hey,” she says quietly.

“Hey.”

In her hand, she’s holding the plate of peanut butter cookies. Or cookie, at this point. “Want the last one?”

Grantaire thinks this would be a good moment to say something cutting about the relative selflessness of offering the last cookie to the person who made the cookies in the first place, especially given that she ate about half the batch. He thinks this for a long moment, then he thinks that tonight was the first time he’s ever heard her freely volunteer anything at all about her childhood.

She gives the plate an enticing little shake.

“You know what,” he says, “I really would.”

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March

Combeferre likes the annual National Co-op Conference. He does. Really.

Once a year, student co-ops around the country descend on the city and gather together to share ideas and critically examine the sorts of issues that arise in group living situations. It's an important cause. He even likes that Co-Con means that Amis House is temporarily serving as a hostel for ten additional students. It's fun to talk with co-opers from other cities and states. Co-Con tends to attract
the people who are the most engaged, the most passionate about co-op life, and it's always interesting to hear about how other co-ops handle the usual challenges.

So, yes, Combeferre likes Co-Con. He values it as an institution and as a rule he enjoys entertaining their Co-Con guests. But this year the rule has one exception, and unfortunately, that exception has cornered him in the kitchen and will not stop talking, and at the moment all Combeferre wants is to curl up in bed (preferably with Enjolras) and have the whole weekend be over.

Combeferre tries, very hard, not to judge on appearance. He certainly doesn't want to. Still, he's never quite been able to trust white guys with dreadlocks. And when this particular white guy first responded to "Hi, I'm Combeferre" with "Oh hey, where are you from?", spoken in a certain familiar cadence, the one with the unmistakable subtext of "Nice to meet you, care to explain why you're brown?", Combeferre had been annoyed at him partly just for feeding into stereotype.


"No, man," says Dreadlocks, "where are you from? Like, your family?"

"My family is also from Alberta." Combeferre tries to look confused. Some perverse part of him always enjoys making this conversation as difficult as possible.

Dreadlocks shakes his head, undeterred. "No, like, your ancestors. What country did they come over from?"

Elsewhere in the kitchen, Feuilly and Grantaire are having an animated discussion with a tattooed, pink-haired girl with about the merits of Michelangelo versus Donatello. Combeferre has eavesdropped six separate times and it's still unclear whether they mean the Renaissance artists or Teenage Mutant Turtles. He stretches his arms over his head.

"Some of them were French settlers, if that's what you mean?" he offers.

"Yeah, and the others?" says Dreadlocks slowly and loudly.

"They're from Alberta," says Combeferre, and because his growing headache can't take any yelling, he mercifully adds, "they're from Alberta all the way back."

He can see the light dawn very slowly across Dreadlocks's face. "So, you're Native American?"

"Métis, actually."

"Hmm." Dreadlocks wrinkles his brow in scholarly reflection. "I don't think I've heard of that tribe before."

Combeferre bites back a half-formed sarcastic remark, and three fully-formed ones. "It's a distinct group of Aboriginal peoples with mixed European and First Nations heritage," he recites. And because he knows the "what tribe?" question is still coming, he adds, "Cree. Both of my parents were half-Cree, half French. As were their parents."

"Cool, that's really cool," says Dreadlocks. "Yeah, the Native Americans had such a beautiful culture."

"Mm," says Combeferre. If he focuses on clenching his jaw, can he keep himself from grinding his teeth? Perhaps.

Dreadlocks leans against the counter. "Actually, I've got a little Indian blood, so I guess that kind of
makes me a Métis, too.” Combeferre breathes out through his nose, because actually, no, it does not. Dreadlocks nods to himself, the tilt of his head making it clear he expects Combeferre to ask. When it becomes clear that the question isn’t coming, Dreadlocks adds, “Yeah, one of my relatives went West and married an Indian girl, so. I'm one-twentieth Sioux.”


"Yeah.” Dreadlocks nods solemnly. “I’m thinking of getting a tattoo, to honor—”

“Sorry,” says Combeferre, “Sorry, I just—doing the math on this, and either your great-great grandmother was four-fifths Sioux—”

“She was my great-great-great grandma,” says Dreadlocks, bristling.

“Okay, in that case, she was eight-fifths Sioux, so, sorry, just medical curiosity here: this, uh, Indian girl, did she have 60% more blood than an average person, or was it just 60% more concentrated?”

The kitchen is suddenly very quiet. The pink-haired girl is staring openly. Dreadlocks’s expression turns thunderous. It occurs to Combeferre, belatedly, that from a diplomatic perspective, this was not necessarily the wisest course of action to take.

Someone taps him on the shoulder, and Combeferre whips around. It's Enjolras. Combeferre doesn't even try to hide his sigh of relief.

"Sorry to interrupt," says Enjolras, "but I need to talk to him for a second about the work schedule."

Dreadlocks gives a single jerky nod, and they slip out the door and into the hallway.

"What's happening with the work schedule?" says Combeferre.

Enjolras shakes his head. “Nothing, it just seemed like a bad idea to leave you two in the same room.”

The adrenaline is dissipating enough that Combeferre can laugh at that. "Good call. Nobody wants a verbal brawl in the kitchen—"

"Actually," says Enjolras, "I wanted to see you annihilate him. It would've been funny. Just seemed like a bad idea in terms of inter-house relations. I only caught your response, what did he say to you?"

So many things. Combeferre doesn't want to work himself up about it, and he certainly doesn't want to work up Enjolras. "It's fine. He's harmless, just ignorant and privileged and aggressively clueless."

"Need anything?" says Enjolras quietly.

Combeferre shakes his head. "I should probably go in there again, say something, smooth things over." Politely deliver a crash course on race sensitivity, compressed into five minutes. Usually, he considers his restraint an asset, but every now and then, Combeferre wishes he was a slightly angrier person. Maybe then he wouldn't get so tired sometimes.

"Can we have a signal?" says Combeferre. "In case I need to get the hell out again?"

"Of course. Do you want a codeword, or—"
hallway, devising a cipher system.

“I’ll squeeze your shoulder,” he says.

Enjolras nods, only looking a little disappointed. With a deep breath, Combeferre pushes open the kitchen door.

It catches Dreadlocks in mid-sentence. “—don’t mean to be rude, it just like, deeply upsets me.” His hands are fisted at his sides. “Thinking that a co-op might be contributing to the landfill problem. You know that coffee grounds are compostable, right?” he says to Feuilly, enunciating every syllable.

Feuilly nods. “And tea grounds and paper towels and drier lint and cooked noodles and human hair. We have multiple housemates majoring in bio,” he adds with a wry smile, but his eyes are flitting between Dreadlocks and Grantaire with the desperate agreeableness of someone trying to preserve a collapsing peace.

Grantaire’s back is to them, but his dark head tilts to one side. “Dude, we, uh, appreciate your concern—Feuilly’s auditing a course in environmental policy, by the way, he could school everyone in here—”

Dreadlocks’s voice is rising. “I’m sorry, I just don’t see how a compost bucket that size could accommodate a house this big unless you are grievously misusing it—”

Enjolras and Combeferre exchange a look. They’ve been lucky, really, in the lack of house drama this year, but Combeferre remembers this, the way close proximity could spin the most ridiculous minutia into grist for full-scale meltdowns.

“Young,” says Grantaire, “I guess what you didn’t hear, while you were giving my friend Composting 101, was that we have someone emptying it three times a week because our work manager has this adorable little quirk where he doesn’t want the kitchen to smell like rotting food scraps.”

Dreadlocks opens and closes his mouth. This is Combeferre’s window.

“For one thing, we want the kitchen to smell nice for guests,” says Combeferre. Dreadlocks, Feuilly, Grantaire, and the pink-haired girl turn to look at him. “Hospitality is important to us. If what I said earlier made you feel less than welcome—well, there were other, more tactful ways of making my point, and I should’ve used them.”

“It’s fine.” Dreadlocks draws himself up. “I appreciate your apology. I appreciate you can admit you were wrong, man, because that was so uncool.”

Combeferre’s brow furrows—did he say he was wrong? He searches for a distraction. “Speaking of hospitality, have you tried the peanut butter cookies? Grantaire made them for the Co-Con people, it’s kind of his specialty.”

At that, Grantaire ducks his head. “They’re really easy, that’s the secret.”

It only takes a few steps to cross to the counter and hold the plate out to Dreadlocks. “They’re vegan,” says Combeferre, “and gluten-free.”

Dreadlocks takes a cookie, pops it in his mouth, and chews. There is a fair amount of chewing involved with a peanut butter cookie of that size. A moment of gratitude, thinks Combeferre, to Grantaire and his culinary instincts.
“You can make them on the stove, which is nice,” says Grantaire, picking at the sleeve of his hoodie. “I found the recipe because one time me and Marius came down to make Wednesday dinner and the oven was broken.”

“I didn’t know that,” says Combeferre. He’d known about the oven, but Musichetta had gotten it working again almost immediately; he hadn’t realized they’d cooked a whole meal without it.

Grantaire looks up. “Yeah, remember when we had, like, Tex-Mex stew and latkes? It started out as Mexican lasagna and roasted root vegetables.”

“Clever,” says Combeferre, and Grantaire gives a bashful little shrug.

“When you cook the day before the weekly produce delivery, you’ve got to stay flexible.”

“Hey,” says Dreadlocks suddenly, “what’s in these cookies?”

“Oh, uh, do you want the recipe?” Both of Grantaire’s hands have disappeared into the cuffs of his hoodie. “I can e-mail it to you, seriously it is so easy. Cornflakes, sugar, peanut butter—”

“What kind of peanut butter?” says Dreadlocks.

“Smooth?” says Grantaire. “You could probably use chunky, but—”

Dreadlocks heaves a sigh. “God, can you just show me the jar?” Grantaire silently retrieves the peanut butter and hands it to Dreadlocks for his perusal. “Yeah,” he says, “just as I suspected. ‘Hydrogenated oils’. This kind of peanut butter is so bad for you.”

The pink-haired girl clears her throat. “Well, uh, cookies are not generally a health food.”

“No, but this shit is like, toxic,” says Dreadlocks. “Did you know a hydrogenated oil is only a molecule different from plastic? It scars the walls of your arteries. It’s been proven to cause, like, cancer and tumors. This isn’t junk food, it’s poison.”

For the record, Combeferre doesn’t miss living with dramatic people.

“I think the general thought here is that nobody is going to eat a half cup of peanut butter,” says Feuilly. “We understand it’s a food you eat sparingly, and since it’s enough of a staple that the house would riot if we stopped carrying it—”

“I mean, it’s not like you couldn’t switch to natural peanut butter.” Dreadlocks is speaking rapidly now, his voice oddly clipped. “Like the kind that’s just made of, you know, peanuts. It’s good for you and it tastes better than something that’s one molecule away from eating plastic. If you need help, I could give you some brand names—”

“I actually prefer that kind of peanut butter,” says Combeferre. “We looked into ordering it my first year here, but even buying in bulk, getting enough for the whole house was prohibitively expensive.”

“Isn’t it interesting to see how different co-ops operate and make decisions?” says Feuilly. He spreads his palms, almost manically conciliatory.

“Interesting, yeah,” says Dreadlocks. “Interesting. At my house we just decided, you know, that something as basic as health came first. But I guess other co-ops do things differently.”

Enjolras nods. “Yeah, you know at Amis House, sometimes we make compromises in order to keep
costs down so we can stay accessible to people of all economic backgrounds. And then people are free to buy their own peanut butter if they want. But I guess you guys decided to put condiments first, which—interesting, yeah, you said it.” He glances around the room, eyes flashing.

Combeferre tries to follow his gaze, but sees nothing that seems to merit Enjolras’s response, which is to reach over and clutch at Combeferre’s shoulder like a drowning man grabbing a raft.

“If you’ll excuse us,” says Combeferre, taking Enjolras by the elbow. He’s shaking just a little, from indignation, maybe. Time to get him out of there. Still, Combeferre can’t help pausing in the doorway. “Incidentally, water is ‘a molecule away’ from hydrogen peroxide, so.”

“I’m sorry,” Enjolras says a few minutes later. They’re in Combeferre’s room, curled up together, which was what Combeferre wanted in the first place. Combeferre loops an arm around his waist, tugs him an inch closer.

“I promise you, it is okay.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “No, you were counting on me to keep you calm, and I couldn’t do it. I just—God, I can’t stand that kind of pseudo-liberal garbage. That whole thing where instead of questioning the system on any real level, you just use your supposed progressivism to judge everyone below you on the social ladder, and it just becomes this new toxic elitism.”

Lying in this position, Combeferre can actually feel Enjolras’s heart rate increase. “Are you alright?”

"People like that, I bet he’s happy to condemn anyone who eats fast food or shops at Wal-Mart. I bet he’s happy to ignore the—fucking—socio-economic factors that strong-arms people into having no good options—"

"Enjolras—"

"—and then he just smugly goes around condemning people, as if it’s his duty to make them feel like shit, as if he’s doing them a favor, when he has no idea what they’re even like—"

"Hey," Combeferre says quietly. "What’s going on right now, this feels a little out of proportion."

"That guy is an asshole—" Even without being able to see his face, it's clear from the tone of Enjolras's voice that he's gritting his teeth.

The hand resting on Enjolras's stomach rubs small comforting circles. "Be that as it may, you don't generally get this upset," says Combeferre.

"I just—it's stupid."

His boyfriend is also not generally plagued with self-doubt. Combeferre frowns.

"What?"

"I don't even know if I can verbalize it," says Enjolras.

"Try."

Enjolras sucks in a deep breath. On the off chance the circles are helping, Combeferre keeps rubbing.

"I said that thing, about the peanut butter—" It's easy to picture the slight twist of a wry smile on
"Enjolras's lips. With a little distance, it does sound absurdly banal. "— and it sounded familiar as I was saying it, and then I realized: what Grantaire said at the first meeting. And I thought, 'In the entire time we've lived together, Grantaire and I have had one and a half civil conversations, maybe we could go for an even two.'" He sighs.

"Thus far, I fail to see anything stupid," says Combeferre.

"But," Enjolras, "when I tried to catch his eye, I realized he slipped out of the room at some point. Without saying anything. And given that this has never happened before, in the entire time we've lived together, and given that the only variable was Mister Your-Food-is-Poison, I feel like it's connected, like it's his fault. And in addition to being a privileged, sanctimonious, fake-liberal jackass, it just feels like. I don't know, like he ruined something that could've been. Kind of a nice moment?"

The urge to giggle delightedly is strong. Enjolras has a rare knack for being adorable despite his absolute best efforts.

"Are you blushing?" Combeferre trails his hand up to Enjolras's face, which, yes, feels a little warm.

"I said it was stupid," says Enjolras quietly.

"Stupid isn't the word I'd use."

"Well." Enjolras hesitates. "I'm not done." He captures Combeferre's hand and pulls back to his belly. Combeferre obediently resumes the circles. "It's just—I get it, okay?" He says it like it's a tremendous weight off his chest.

Combeferre spends a long moment waiting for a second half to that sentence. None is forthcoming.

"You get what?" he asks at last.

"The appeal," Enjolras says, and then realizing he's only succeeded in being more cryptic, he adds in a rush, "Grantaire. I get why you like him."

It's Combeferre's turn to sigh. "Honesty, this thing you have where you act like he and I should be together, it's starting to feel almost masochistic. He doesn't want to be with me, I want to be with you, it is not all that complicated—"

"Um." Enjolras clears his throat. "Not actually where I was going. With that. Um. This is probably a better conversation to have face-to-face—" It's too dark in the room for that to make much difference, but Combeferre appreciates the sentiment, and he pulls back enough for Enjolras to twist around on the narrow bed.

When they've re-oriented into sort of loosely holding each other, Enjolras says, "Look, at this point, you have to know how I feel about you."

"I may have some idea," says Combeferre with a smile. His boyfriend is not a subtle man.

"But I think, the more that I look at it, I think I also—"

"You're attracted to Grantaire," Combeferre supplies, and the way Enjolras goes very still is answer enough. "Oh come on," he says, nudging Enjolras's foot with his own, "You can't possibly think I'm going to be upset about it. I mean, for one thing it would be enormously hypocritical."

Enjolras nods. Combeferre hears his hair move against the pillow more than he sees it.
"This is—just an odd conversation to have with your boyfriend," says Enjolras.

Is it? Combeferre hums thoughtfully. "To be fair, we’ve never had the monogamy conversation. Do you want to be monogamous? Do you want to have some aspects of an open relationship?"

"It's a moot point in this case," says Enjolras, "given that he doesn't like me."

Maybe it’s a good thing they’re in the dark, because Combeferre is pretty sure he makes a ridiculous face at that. Enjolras seems to sense it anyway.

"One a half civil conversations in six months," he says defensively, "what does that sound like to you?"

Combeferre rubs at his eyes. "It sounds like you wouldn't be in this mess right now if either of you had listened to my advice ages ago and had an honest heart-to-heart with each other. About anything. Honestly, you had fun talking about markers."

"Pens."

"My point stands." He swallows. "My main concern here—and Grantaire would be so upset with me for sharing this, but it really does need to be said—is I think he is genuinely in love with you. So if you two had some sort of a side relationship, it might be hard on him in that respect—"

Enjolras shifts awkwardly. "I, um. As a general matter of course. I only ever want to sleep with someone if I also have feelings for them. Significant feelings. But the thing is—"

Combeferre swallows. He likes to think he's fairly open-minded, but the thought of Enjolras and Grantaire in love with each other, slipping off to be together is testing that.

"I don't want to have sex without you," says Enjolras. Combeferre blinks. "Not—I mean, I understand, if you're open to some kind of a polyamory situation, and I respect that, but personally, even if—I would still want you to be, uh, involved—" This time, Combeferre doesn't have to feel Enjolras's face to know he's blushing.

"Well, then this is once again a moot point, because Grantaire is not interested in me."

"If he was, though," says Enjolras. "Hypothetically."

When Enjolras is locked into a line of reasoning, it can be difficult to divert him. It is probably faster to just answer the question, however far-fetched and useless it may be to ponder.

"Then in this particular case, the only way I'd be comfortable would be if it was a romantic relationship with three equal partners. If we were all seriously dating each other."

"Huh." Enjolras has the gall to sound intrigued at that.

Combeferre shakes his head. "Need I remind you how very, very moot the point is? Grantaire. Is not. Interested. In. Me."

“I bet you a pie that he is,” says Enjolras. “I bet you a pie that he feels the same way about you I do.”

“Graham cracker crust?” Combeferre asks, resting his head on Enjolras’s shoulder.

Enjolras snorts. “You know what happens why I try to make pastry,” he says, which means yes.

“Then you’re on,” says Combeferre. When everything goes wrong, at least they’ll have something to
eat.

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The next morning finds them on their usual couch in the common room, checking their e-mail. It's nice, it's peaceful, but Enjolras still has a confession left. A minor one, but it's been eating at him. He clears his throat.

"There's something else I should probably tell you, in the interest of full disclosure." Combeferre looks up expectantly from his laptop. Enjolras twists the power chord between his fingers. "It's, uh."

It's embarrassing, he means.

Combeferre seems to understand, judging from the way he folds down his screen and turns to face him with a mixture of confusion, curiosity, and reassurance. It's a look that says, 'After last night, what other revelations could you possibly have?'

It's far enough into the day that the common room is not empty. Cosette is recovering from a jog, and Musichetta is using the printer. Enjolras glances back and forth, biting his lip. Then he purposefully picks up his open laptop and opens a new chat window. Combeferre raises his eyebrows but does the same.

Enjolras takes a deep breath and starts typing.

E: I actually really enjoy the puns.

Combeferre laughs for about a minute and a half.

Enjolras's hands race over the keys, defensive.

E: I've always liked puns. It's just that the first time we met, we had sort of a banter going about me hating them, and I just let it keep going because sometimes it felt almost flirtatious and I figured that was the closest I'd ever get to—

He sighs and starts to tap at the delete key, but Combeferre stops him with a hand to the wrist, reading off his screen.

Combeferre places his hands over Enjolras's and types, I knew you liked puns, goofball. Why did you think I kept making them?

"Okay, this is ridiculous," says Enjolras, pulling the laptop out of his reach. "You make puns because you can't stop. You'd make them to anyone and anything: telemarketers, cats, trees."

Combeferre doesn't deny it. "Trees? Maybe I should. Might be nice to branch out a little."

"Until the tree tells you to leaf it alone," says Enjolras, and Combeferre's face lights up.

"Don't worry, I'm sure its bark is worse than its bite."

"Well," says Enjolras, choked with laughter, "I'm rooting for you."

"Ugh," says Cosette. She takes a sip from her water bottle and shakes her head. "No wonder people thought you guys'd been together for years."
"What?" says Enjolras. He assumes she means some of their Co-Con guests, but at the sound of his voice, Cosette jumps and pulls the headphones out of her ears, eyes wide.

"I meant to say that under my breath," she says in a startled rush.

It's perplexing. Why would she feel the need to keep such an innocuous piece of information a secret?

"Well, you failed," says Enjolras. "What?"

She shifts from one foot to the other. "Look, I have no idea why, it's nothing bad as far as I can tell, but I was told in no uncertain terms not to share it with others."

"A secret about us," Combeferre prompts, eyes wide and earnest and ever so slightly manipulative. Enjolras forces down a smile; his boyfriend is an evil genius. He’s not surprised when Cosette crumbles.

"I don't know why, because it never seemed that illicit or anything." She glances uncertainly at Musichetta, who is still trying to coax the ancient printer into handling a double-sided document.

"I can put my hands over my ears and hum," Musichetta offers. It's her last year at Amis House, and she is adamant about not getting pulled into other people's personal problems.

"That would be great," says Cosette.

As Musichetta covers her ears and starts in on Bohemian Rhapsody, Cosette lowers her voice. "It's—nothing, really. But Eponine mentioned something to me about how at least one person in the house wasn't surprised when you got together in December because he'd assumed from the first time he met you that you guys were a couple."

"Interesting," says Enjolras. The wheels in his head are spinning furiously. He opens the chat window again.

E: Well, it does feel nice to be right.
C: ???
E: Follow along with me here. It must have been one of the newbies; anyone who lived here last year was around for that month where I dated what's-his-name. Can’t be Azelma because Cosette said “he.”
E: It wasn’t Cosette, and if she heard it second-hand, it wasn't Marius. Therefore, it's down to Joly, Bossuet, and Grantaire.
E: If Joly or Bossuet said it, they would've told Musichetta before they would've told Eponine, and she would'v'e set them straight instantly.
E: Who does that leave?

He cuts a sidelong glance to get Combeferre's reaction, but Combeferre is unimpressed.

C: Okay, Grantaire thought we were dating before we were dating. What does that prove?

Normally, Combeferre is much sharper than this. Enjolras blames early morning grogginess. Maybe he needs more tea.

E: What if he thought we were dating IN OCTOBER.
Combeferre stares at the screen. "Shit," he says eloquently.

"Exactly," says Enjolras.

Distantly, he's aware of Musichetta calling out, "Hey, can I stop humming yet?" and Cosette laughing.

"But you were just getting to my favorite part—"

E: Thoughts?
C: I'm not sure I can type fast enough.
E: Your room?

"Well," says Combeferre once they've shut the door behind them. "Your theory is a little far-fetched, but it would explain some things."

"Such as?"

"In October. When Grantaire turned me down. Part of what made it so painful—I'd been worried, if he rejected me, that it would make things weird between us, but he wasn't sympathetic or pitying, or however people normally are in these sorts of unrequited situations. Honestly, he seemed angry at me. Maybe a little disappointed? I chalked it up to some combination of hurt or betrayal but if he thought I was cheating on you, it might have been outrage on your behalf."

"Even you have to admit, it's not out of the question. I mean, think about the way he is around you, think about the way he drew you. It would make sense."

Combeferre sighs. "Just because it would make sense doesn't mean it's going to happen."

"It doesn't mean it won't, though," says Enjolras. "Are you willing to try?"

"I already tried," Combeferre reminds him.

"Are you willing to try now that he knows you're not asking him to commit an infidelity?"

"If we do this really carefully, if we talk over everything very very thoroughly first, if we can agree on a plan of action—"

"We're good at plans," says Enjolras. "You know we are."

"We also pined for each other for three and a half years before doing anything about it. Our track record in this area is not excellent." Enjolras opens his mouth to protest and Combeferre adds, "I'm not saying it can't be done, just. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"Wait," says Courfeyrac. "What?"

Enjolras guesses from the stunned expression that Courfeyrac did in fact hear them correctly the first time. Combeferre must feel the same, because he says mildly,

"Just what it sounds like."

"Okay," says Courfeyrac. "Sure, I will go with this. For reasons that haven't been explained to me, our fridge is currently housing seven cooked lobsters and a block of cheese carved into the shape of the school mascot. Anything is possible in this brave new world." He grins. "Oh man, I'm so proud
of you guys, look at you, all grown up and defying traditional relationship models. Group hug!"

With some people, this would be a joke, but hugs are no laughing matter to Courfeyrac. He sweeps them into a big, cheery embrace. Enjolras hadn't realized he'd been apprehensive—Courfeyrac is one of the least judgmental people they know—until he finds himself letting out a huge pent-up breath, and only half because the force of the squeeze has knocked it out of his lungs.

"Thanks, Courfeyrac," says Combeferre's muffled voice from somewhere to the right. Enjolras smiles. Given their relative heights, he is likely talking into Courfeyrac's hair.

"Anytime!" Courfeyrac releases them, still beaming. "And I'm not sure why you went to me for help here, but—"

"You're our best friend," says Enjolras simply.

Combeferre nods. "Also, of the three of us, you have by far the best social skills."

At that, Courfeyrac dips a quick bow. "Charmed, I'm sure. Also, any particular reason why this conversation has to happen in the dish room?" He slides a tray of mugs into the sanitizer for emphasis.

"Enjolras didn't feel like waiting the however many minutes until you finish your dish clean," says Combeferre with a shrug.

"Yeah," says Courfeyrac. "Yeah, that was more or less my theory." He picks up a plate, scrubbing meditatively. "Hey, so since you both went out of your way not to mention hypothetical third boyfriend by name, I'm gonna assume we're doing the whole thing where we all pretend like I don't know who you're talking about?"

Enjolras wants to protest this; Courfeyrac is astute but he's not psychic. On the other hand, does Enjolras feel like calling his bluff?

He doesn't.

Courfeyrac snickers as he washes another plate. "It's cute the way you think anyone in this house can keep a secret, or do anything with the slightest degree of subtlety ever. You kids especially. It's like the sex version of the Three Stooges." Enjolras doesn't know what his face does at that, but Courfeyrac amends, "Okay, fine, you're a smidge classier. The sex Marx Brothers, how's that?"

Combeferre makes a choking noise. "They were brothers—"

"Yes," says Courfeyrac, "and you guys have always felt like my brothers, so however distressing the mental images are here, they're worse for me, okay? Don't get me wrong, I will power through this. I want you to be happy." He pauses, carefully. "I want all three of you to be happy. Hypothetically. If I knew who the other guy was. Which, let's say I don't."

If Courfeyrac does in fact know what's going on here—and Enjolras is increasingly glad about the decision not to call his bluff—there's no harm in getting his opinion.

"Hypothetically," says Enjolras, "do you think we have a chance of success?"

"Hypothetically." Courfeyrac rinses a fistful of silverware. "It's hard for me to say, I mean I'm on team All My Friends Hold Hands And Fall in Love And Get Laid. Who knows how objective I am. All of that said?" He throws the silverware on the tray, grabs more. "I think there is a shot. As long as you don't eff it all up."
"Any suggestions?" says Combeferre, leaning against the counter.

"I mean, I've slept with a fair number of people, but, you know, consecutively," says Courfeyrac, gesturing with the hand holding the sponge. "Communication? Honesty? Being really, really careful —" 

Enjolras is starting to resent this particular warning. It's not like he is incapable of any subtlety.

"What, so he doesn't run away screaming?"

Courfeyrac shakes his head. "I think in this particular totally hypothetical case, your bigger worry is that he faints from shock." He sets down the spatula, starts in on the cheese grater. "That's my advice: have this conversation near, like, a fainting couch. No sharp corners. Break it to him gradually—"

"How?" says Combeferre. "There isn't really a script for this kind of thing—"

"I don't know, take his temperature on it?" Courfeyrac tosses the cheese grater on the pile. "Invite him to watch a movie with a threesome in it, then at the right moment, turn to him and waggle your eyebrows in perfect unison—"

He's clearly kidding. Still. "Name one movie where a three-person romantic relationship works out well for all parties," says Enjolras. Combeferre is right; it's not a concept present in most of the Western canon. Or anything he can think of, off the top of his head.

"Singin' in the Rain?" Courfeyrac suggests.

"Not the version I remember," says Combeferre.

Courfeyrac grins. "Clearly, we weren't watching the same movie. Go back and see it as an adult, tell me you don't start to notice certain nuances. Tell me they're not all sleeping together after 'Good Morning'. You cannot."

"Hey," says Bahorel from the door. Enjolras, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac all spin around. "Whoa." He’s holding a wooden spoon in one hand. "Sorry to add to the workload, bro, but I just got done feeding Matilda."

Courfeyrac shrugs. "Not a problem, man, do what you've got to do."

Bahorel boosts himself onto the counter, tossing the spoon into the silverware tub in a clean arc. "What's going on, is Courfeyrac teaching you guys the ways of the world?"

"Love advice," says Courfeyrac, "you know how it goes."

"And you didn't ask me?" From his perch on the counter, Bahorel shoots them a reproachful look. "You're missing out, I'm awesome at that shit." He attempts to snare Combeferre in a brotherly noogie, but Combeferre, who grew up with actual brothers, ducks with practiced ease and gives him an unimpressed look.

"You told Joly it would help his love life to invest in a pair of skinny jeans."

Bahorel smiles. "Why don't you go ask Joly how that worked out for him?"

"Is tight pants your advice in general," says Courfeyrac, "or is there something specific about Joly?"

"It's about emphasizing your assets. This is basic stuff, people." He huffs. "Come on, haven't we as a
society reached a point where a straight man can notice another man's shapely calves without it being weird?"

"I'm writing that down," Courfeyrac warns.

"Do it, I'll fucking sign it, man," says Bahorel. "Life's too short for giving a goddamn shit about that shit." He swings his feet cheerfully. "That is just a taste of my wisdom, kiddies. What's wrong? Tell Uncle Bahorel what's up."

Combeferre and Enjolras exchange a look. It was easy to decide to share with Courfeyrac, but they never discussed just who else they'd be letting in on the plan. It seems better to err on the side of caution.

"How are you qualified to tell us what to do?" says Enjolras, partly to stall. "As far as I can tell, your most serious relationship is with a jar of sourdough starter."

Bahorel lets out a bark of delighted laughter. For some reason, he gets a kick out of it whenever Enjolras says something rude. "Dude, I have been with the same girl for like three years, how does nobody in the house know this?"

Combeferre seems as surprised as Enjolras, which is somewhat comforting.

"Come on," says Bahorel. "You've all met her."

"….E—Eponine?" says Combeferre tentatively.

It only earns him a massive eyeroll. "Okay, you guys do realize there are other people outside of Amis House, right? Literally a whole planet of humans that you don't live with."

"When did we meet your alleged girlfriend?" says Enjolras. "I don't remember this."

“Come on,” Bahorel repeats. “Seriously? Dude, she was at the Halloween party. Brown eyes, spiky haircut, amazing laugh?"

Courfeyrac drops his plate. "The mermaid!"

"Who did you think she was, my parole officer?" says Bahorel.

Enjolras gives a guilty start; in fact, he had briefly entertained the notion. "You never mention her."

"Yeah," says Bahorel, "because we never have problems, so it seems like bragging to bring her up!"

"Aw man, that's great, though!" Courfeyrac bounds over to the counter, too consumed with congratulations to peel off his yellow rubber gloves before clapping Bahorel on the shoulder. "Happy for you."

It leaves a big, sudsy handprint on Bahorel’s shirt. He kicks his feet again, unconcerned. “You should be, man. We have the perfect relationship. All we ever do is make jokes, eat pizza, and mack on each other."

"Congrats," says Enjolras, "you're living out the romantic dreams of any twelve-year-old."

"So how's your life going, Enjolras?" says Bahorel innocently. "Any particular reason that Courfeyrac's romantic advice dovetails right into his rant about Singin' in the Rain's secret queer polyamorous underpinnings? Come into any super belated realizations lately?"
It's Enjolras's turn to roll his eyes. "Has everyone known about this except us?"

"You, Combeferre, and the totally unnamed mystery third party—" says Courfeyrac.

"If it's any comfort, I also doubt Marius has noticed," Bahorel adds.

"Imagine," says Combeferre, "Marius not noticing something, it boggles the mind."

Courfeyrac flashes him a pleasant smile. "Oh please, you're just jealous because he straightened out all his romantic intrigue in one day while you and your boyfriend bumble around like a bad Victorian farce." Bahorel laughs, which is all the encouragement he needs. "God, lucky for you two geniuses, you manage to go for the one person who is worse at realizing when people are obviously into him —"

"Hey, party in the dishroom!" says Grantaire from the doorway, bowl of cereal in one hand. All conversation freezes. Grantaire's eyes dart from person to person. Enjolras thinks there was a time he would've read the defensive flick of Grantaire's head, the hunched shoulders and the bitter, sideways twist of his mouth as belligerence, not hurt. It's hard to put himself back in that place, though.

"I'm just here for a clean spoon," says Grantaire, "don't let me get in the way of whatever skullduggery you guys are working on, I know how it is."

"It's not—" Enjolras blurs, and Grantaire's smile goes sickly sweet.

"So hey guys," he says, brittle with false cheer, "whatcha talking about?"

Enjolras shakes his head. "We weren't—"

"No?" says Grantaire. "Then what—"

"They wanted relationship advice." Courfeyrac raises his hands consolingly. Both fists are full of sharp knives. The gesture remains harmless only by sheer force of personality. "It's personal, sorry."

"Right," Grantaire snaps, "and all the third-person pronouns were just for shits and giggles—"

"Well, we were trying not to TMI you," Bahorel pipes up from the counter, "but yeah, they want to figure out the best way to add another dude into the mix, so."

And people accuse Enjolras of lacking delicacy. (Except Bahorel doesn't add anything else, and Enjolras suddenly remembers a late-night conversation last year, Bahorel announcing, "Man, I don't get why people lie so much, like half the time you've got a better chance of fooling people if you just give them part of the truth—")

Grantaire barks a laugh. "Wow, man. Full points for creativity and style, I'll grant you that—"

"He's, uh, not lying," says Combeferre, and Grantaire fixes him with a long look. It's clear the moment the sincerity registers, because Grantaire's eyes go wide and he nearly swallows his tongue. In terms of taking his temperature, it's either a very good sign, or a very bad one.

"Okay. Wow." Grantaire's voice is a little higher than usual. Enjolras puts a cautious checkmark in the "good" column. "Damn," says Grantaire. "Jesus, you guys, that is the definition of a first-world problem. Like, I thought I was bad, because sometimes I worry my therapist is only pretending to laugh at my jokes, but this takes the cake. It takes several cakes. Somewhere there is a bakery lying in ruins because all its cakes have been taken—"
Enjolras summons his most earnest face. "We aren't telling many people yet, because we don't know how they'll react."

Grantaire throws his hands in the air defensively, still holding the bowl. Cereal rains onto the floor. He doesn't seem to notice. His cheeks are a little pink. Enjolras is past the point of pretending it is not cute.

"Hey, hey, judgement free zone here," says Grantaire. "You're among friends—or housemates, whatever."

"Friends," says Enjolras firmly. Grantaire tilts his head to the side, brow furrowed. This is, Enjolras realizes, going to be a long, steep, uphill battle.

"The point," Grantaire presses on, "is that you guys should do whatever makes you happy, screw anyone else's opinion. I mean, it's not my business in the first place."

"Well, we value your opinion anyway," says Combeferre solemnly. "Thank you."

Grantaire shrugs, fidgets. "Anytime. So hey, I just needed a spoon, where is the closest—"

The closest spoon is where the spoons always are, next to the knives and forks. Bahorel tugs open the drawer and passes over the spoon with both hands, like it's a fine bottle of wine or a scepter. Grantaire takes it, nodding a thank you. He glances at his feet, wiggling his toes on the worn linoleum. He seems to be summoning the willpower for something. Finally, he looks back up, gaze skating between Enjolras and Combeferre.

"Good luck," he says. He swallows. "With the other guy, or whatever. Not that you need it, since I can't imagine that's gonna be a particularly hard sell, but, uh, I hope it—goes well." There is a long suspended moment where they lock eyes and Enjolras can tell Grantaire is both trying not to picture them having sweaty, athletic group sex, and also failing. "Um." Grantaire blushes to his hairline, makes a choking sound, and flees. His bowl of cereal is still sitting on the counter.

Enjolras takes a moment to mentally fill the "good" column with checks. He wants to high-five Combeferre, or hug him, or possibly kiss him on the mouth. He wants to do the same to Grantaire, but that can't be wise at this point.

"Huh," says Combeferre. He wipes his glasses on the hem of his shirt, then puts them back on. "Huh."

Courfeyrac makes a sound like a tea kettle. "With God as my witness, you guys, if you still aren't sure whether or not he likes you back—"

"I will acknowledge it as a strong possibility," says Combeferre, one corner of his mouth twitching.

"So what now?" says Enjolras.

It's Bahorel who answers first. "Get him comfortable hanging out with you guys."

"How?"

Bahorel has the look of a man regarding sheer idiocy in motion. "Uh, by having him hang out with you guys? A lot?"

"How?" Easier said than done, given how antsy Grantaire tends to get in his presence.
It's clear by the sudden hesitation that Bahorel grasps this difficulty. He squints at the ceiling. "Trick him?" he offers.

Combeferre coughs. "That is terrible advice."

"I know," says Bahorel, "and that's why I can't wait to hear the genius solution you come up with instead."

***

It starts out as a fairly typical Saturday. Grantaire should be thinking about what he's going to do for food, since it's the one night a week there's no house dinner. Instead, he, Joly, and Bossuet are lying on the common room floor, inventing a gritty crime drama about a detective that is also an infant. Inspector Baby. It practically pitches itself. They're just starting to compose the theme song—Joly has disappeared to find his oboe—when Grantaire's stomach starts to grumble in earnest.

As if on cue, Combeferre looks up from his textbook. "Hey Grantaire, do you have dinner plans yet?"

"Beyond 'get real hungry'?"

"Want to go to that Thai place you were talking about?" says Combeferre.

Grantaire bites his lip, dithering.

On one hand—Combeferre. Ever since he and Enjolras slipped into full-on couple mode, it has been harder and harder to secure one-on-one time.

On the other hand—Combeferre. Pining over two people incandescently in love with each other is bad enough, but spending a bunch of time with one of them while trying to ignore his recent accidental window into their less-than-vanilla sex life is an exercise in so many different kinds of frustration. He has no idea how it isn't written all over his face whenever he looks at them, and it's probably just a matter of time before that particular skeleton comes to light.

On the other hand—curry.

Grantaire's heart dukes it out against his stomach and loses. He glances over helplessly at Bossuet.

"Don't worry," Bossuet assures him, "Inspector Baby will still be here when you get back. It's an idea with legs."

"Tiny chubby baby legs," Grantaire agrees. He pulls himself upright, stretching his back until it pops. "Alright," he says to Combeferre, "I'm game."

Combeferre smiles back at him. Grantaire really does miss the days they could just shoot the shit. He's grateful for the tentative peace between himself and Enjolras, but he also has the self-knowledge to understand that the best hope of maintaining it is to avoid further interaction at all costs.

"Great!" says Combeferre. "I've really missed hanging out with you." It feels like getting punched in the gut, but in a nice way. "Grab your coat and let's get going," he says. "Enjolras is meeting us there."

"Cool," says Grantaire. "Wait, what?"

"Your coat," Combeferre repeats. "We may be coming to the end of March but it is not warm out."
"Yeah, one sec." Grantaire jogs down the basement stairs, and once his bedroom door is shut, he gives himself ten good seconds to freak out. Since he knows Bossuet isn't there, he doesn't bother trying to be low-key with it: he clutches at his hair and flails his arms and jumps up and down a few times. Then it turns out Joly is in the room, looking for his oboe under Bossuet's desk. Joly is the ideal person to witness such a scene, though. He doesn't make comments or ask questions, just offers Grantaire an understanding look and half a Xanax. Grantaire turns the meds down only because he's got the nagging sense he's going to need his wits about him.

His jacket is conveniently where he left it, balled up on the floor on top of Joly's oboe.

When he steps back into the common room, Combeferre is checking something on his phone and smiling a small, private smile. Grantaire has the direst of forebodings.

Now that he doesn't have substances to lean on, Grantaire's strategy in tough social situations is to indulge all his nervous tics and make sure he's got a trapdoor out of there if he needs it.

"You know," he starts as they head down the sidewalk, "I actually might need to bow out, I have a lot of stuff to do tonight."

"On a Saturday?" says Combeferre pleasantly.

Grantaire pops a stick of gum into his mouth and chews. "Yeah, there's just—some things I was working on."

"More important or less important than a talking baby gumshoe?" says Combeferre.

"Whoa now, Inspector Baby can't talk," Grantaire says, because he, Joly, and Bossuet are all in agreement on this point. "She's three months old, she can't even sit up on her own yet."

Combeferre snorts. "A detective with no object permanence—"

"It's a new twist, you have to give us that," says Grantaire.

Combeferre keeps him talking about Inspector Baby all the way there. No, she doesn't have an above-average intellect for her age. Her success rate closing cases is not great. No, she can't reliably hold a magnifying glass. Yes, she does wear a fedora and overcoat; she is a detective.

"There are standards!" says Grantaire, mock-affronted, and Combeferre laughs.

It's fun, but it may also be strategic because by the time they roll up to the restaurant, he's forgotten to be nervous. At least, until they step inside and Enjolras is already there, waiting at a table by the window and sipping an iced tea. Grantaire holds his breath, steeling himself for whatever face Enjolras is going to make upon discovering that his boyfriend has inexplicably dragged Grantaire along to what was very likely supposed to be a date.

But when Enjolras looks up and sees them, his only reaction is to wave them over. Both of them. If this was an ambush, it had only one victim.

Grantaire's mind is racing. His first thought is that he's getting kicked out of the house, and this is their way of breaking it to him. The problem is that he's been good about doing his work lately; he's more or less caught up. Besides, the house doesn't have the funds to cover dinner for someone getting the boot.
Grantaire gingerly takes a seat. Enjolras and Combeferre give each other a kiss hello. Grantaire chews on his thumbnail. Nail biting is a terrible habit. He really is going to think about quitting soon. Once life stops being stressful and/or fucking incomprehensible.

"So, what's good here?" asks Enjolras, leaning forward.

"Uh." Enjolras tolerating his presence is one thing; Enjolras seeking his opinion is a whole new stratosphere of weird. Grantaire pretends to scrutinize his menu for the excuse of looking away. "You can't go wrong with the green curry. If you want to do tofu—"

Enjolras shakes his head. "If I'm eating at a restaurant, I'm ordering chicken at least." Grantaire nods in sympathy. Generally speaking, dinner at the house is meat-free by default; it's just easier than preparing a separate option for the vegetarians and vegans. Grantaire doesn't mind lentils and soy, but he finds himself craving the dumbest shit sometimes. Lunch meat, beef jerky, even bologna.

"Not sure how you can so easily leave your omnivore roots behind," Grantaire says to Combeferre, who shrugs.

"I've been vegetarian since I was twelve. At some point, you stop even categorizing meat as an option. The only thing I ever crave is bacon."

Makes sense, thinks Grantaire. "Yeah, the summer I tried to keep Kosher, bacon was my downfall."

"Really?" says Enjolras. "What about not believing in God?" Grantaire assumes for a long moment this is an attack—he can feel the adrenaline start—but there's no venom in it, no flashing eyes or gritted teeth. Combeferre is sitting calmly beside him, stealing sips of iced tea.

"Didn't help," Grantaire allows. He twirls his fork in one hand. "Hey, what are the better questions?"

Enjolras blinks. "What?"

"One time I asked you if you thought there was a god, and you said—"

"You remember that?" says Enjolras. Fair enough; it was months ago. Grantaire tries not to feel caught out. That night is carved into some corner of his brain; there are things you don't forget. Puking and being maudlin in front of people you're pining for falls firmly into this category. Enjolras seems to take his lack of sarcastic response as answer enough. "It's not that they're better questions," he says, "so much as it is the answers are more useful."

"Such as?" says Combeferre.

Enjolras taps his fingers on the table, gaze somewhere near the ceiling. "'What is the absolute most I can do to make the world the best possible version of itself?'" he says.

Grantaire ponders this. "Let me guess, and for you somehow the first step is communal living?"

"The first step," says Enjolras, with real earnestness, "is surrounding yourself with people who make it easy to believe in humanity."

Every now and then, Grantaire is struck by just how much Enjolras loves Amis House. Even his sternness as a work manager is essentially a love letter to the co-op, a fierce, protective hug that encompasses the decrepit old house and all the people inside. Most of them, at any rate.

"In that case, I'll just—" Grantaire rises as if to leave. It's a joke, albeit an awkward one. But before he can process what's happening, Combeferre's hand is wrapped around Grantaire's wrist.
"Don't—" says Combeferre. Grantaire swallows and tries not to enjoy the feel of Combeferre's thumb against his pulse point. "Dude," he says, "I was kidding?"

"Um," says Combeferre, eyes wide. He looks down at Grantaire's wrist as if just now noticing that he's seized it. "Sorry?" he offers. Grantaire shakes his head, possibly a little too hard. "It's fine," he says. He sits back down, but he doesn't try to pull his hand back, and Combeferre makes no effort to free it. He's sure it's all in his head, and still, the moment feels so charged, he's surprised Enjolras hasn't noticed and intervened.

Except when Grantaire darts a glance in his direction, Enjolras is watching them with a look that doesn't even resemble anger. His eyes are glassy and his lips are a little parted. Grantaire would guess that he's drunk, except that makes no sense. Nothing makes sense. Combeferre still hasn't let go. Grantaire still doesn't want him to.

"Are you guys ready to order?" says the waitress.

"No," the three of them say in near-perfect unison.

It happens two more times. Not the grabbing thing; Combeferre lets Grantaire have his wrist back immediately after that, and Grantaire pretends not to be disappointed.

But the next time the waitress comes by, they're deep into a conversation about music. (Grantaire was first surprised that Enjolras has musical opinions at all, and then even more surprised to learn that he likes rap. "What about ice and Benjamins and shaking it in the club resonates with you?" says Grantaire, and Enjolras just shakes his head and says, "That's only a narrow slice of what's out there. I'll make you a playlist," as though the thought of Enjolras burning him a hip hop mixtape is not completely insane.)

"Have you had a chance to look at the menu yet?" the waitress asks.

"No, sorry," says Combeferre with an apologetic smile.

"We meant to," Grantaire adds, like that means something.

Then it happens again, because it turns out Combeferre has never seen *It's A Wonderful Life*, which Grantaire just can't wrap his head around.

"We should rent it sometime," says Enjolras. "Apart from the standard nineteen-fifties sentimentality, it's actually worth a watch."

"Come on!" says Grantaire, "I've seen it, and I'm filthy unbeliever!"

That time, the waitress backs away on her own.

The next time she comes around, still somehow hopefully clutching her pen and pad of paper, Grantaire doesn't have the heart to send her away again. He interrupts Enjolras and Combeferre's debate (they're trying to explain a game they invented, and apparently the scoring system is controversial) long enough to say,

"Oh for the love of—unless someone at the table objects, we'll have one green curry with tofu and
two green curries with beef. Mild all around."

Enjolras frowns skeptically. "Mild," he says, "really?"

"Yes, I promise you," says Grantaire, and Enjolras nods. Even being trusted with something this small has Grantaire swallowing past a lump in his throat. Once the waitress has left, he adds, "Their medium is anyone else's extra spicy. The first time I ate here, I actually ordered hot, and it caused me real physical pain, but also it was delicious, so I kept eating it, just tears streaming down my face and long story short, culinary masochism is the least fun kind of masochism."

"Good to know," says Combeferre evenly.

"So, this Make-it-Interesting game," says Grantaire, flailing for a subject change that won't send his thoughts rocketing toward the gutter, "you could play it with anything?"

"Any text," says Enjolras.

Grantaire casts his eyes around the room for a second, and then he snatches up a packet of salt from their table, holding it up so they can see that all it says is "SALT"

"Sure," says Combeferre. "This one is easy, actually. Have you ever heard of the Salt March of 1930?"

"Guys, I'm majoring in shapes and colors," says Grantaire, "assume I have not."

Combeferre's story is fascinating, and the food, when it comes, is delicious. These at least are constants Grantaire can hold onto, solid ground in a world of shifting sand and surreally companionable conversation. After dinner, Enjolras and Combeferre want to get gelato, and Grantaire begs off on the pretense of a just-remembered homework assignment. At the very least Combeferre has to know it's a ruse, but he's mercifully polite enough not to call him on it, and Grantaire heads back to the house, hands in his pockets, trying to understand what's just happened.

Trying to savor it a little, too, if he's honest. A pleasant evening spent with Enjolras and Combeferre. It was like Haley's Comet, he thinks: bright and unexpected and liable to only come around once every eighty years.

On Tuesday, Enjolras catches him on the way out of the dining room.

"You don't have dish clean tomorrow, right?"

"Uh, not yet?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras nods. "Good, then you'll be free to watch It's A Wonderful Life with us?"

"…Yes?"

"Great!" says Enjolras, with apparent sincerity. Grantaire boggles at him as he leaves, as if the back of Enjolras's retreating blond head is one of those old Magic Eye posters, and some high quality staring is all it will take to produce the secret image that will solve the mystery. Grantaire tries pretty hard.

No dice.
Things progress from there. The next weekend, Combeferre and Enjolras remember that they've "always wanted" to check out the university art museum, and can Grantaire maybe play tour guide? The weekend after that, they just so happen to have an extra ticket to some weird indie film playing at the weird indie theater on the other side of campus.

And yeah, Grantaire is calling shenanigans.

Combeferre needs to wait in line to pick up their tickets, and Enjolras decides to get popcorn. Without Combeferre to cover for him, Enjolras is not that good at deception. This, Grantaire thinks, is his window.

He follows Enjolras into the concession line. "Want anything?" says Enjolras. He pulls out his wallet as though he's actually going to spring for Grantaire's food, and the weirdness of the moment is undeniable.

"Is he making you do this?" Grantaire blurts out.

"I wanted popcorn." Enjolras's tone is innocent enough, but his mouth is twitching all over the place. Clearly he knows what's up.

"Okay, dude, this is just insulting," says Grantaire. "Something is going on. The natural order of things has been flipped-turned upside down. All I can think of is that Combeferre wants us to get along to the point where he is applying boyfriend guilt on you to hang out." He checks Enjolras for reactions out of the corner of his eye. Silence. Grantaire runs the toe of his sneaker along the movie theater's paisley carpet, which is so dirty that the stains and blots of old gum form their own secondary paisley.

"If you want," Grantaire adds, "I can try to get you off the hook. Talk to him, tell him we promise not to fight in exchange for an end to the quality time." The thought of being able to do a favor for Enjolras, even a favor that is his absence, is sort of heartening.

A line is forming between Enjolras's eyebrows. "Does this seem like a punishment to you?" he says.

"No?" Grantaire ventures.

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

That isn't really the point, but. "...yes?"

"Okay then," says Enjolras, shrugging. "Your theory's wrong. And for the record, it was my idea to ask you to this."

"Aww, you remembered my love of experimental existentialist foreign films," says Grantaire, deadpan, mostly for want of anything better to say.

"Thought you might want to check it out," says Enjolras. Or possibly what he says is "Czech it out"; Grantaire thinks the director may be from Prague, and by now he knows Enjolras is enough of a loser to make that joke.

The line inches forward. Grantaire traces another swirl on the carpet. "Is this a Big Brother situation?" he asks.

"Huh," says Enjolras, surveying the various popcorn sizes, "the mentorship program, or the Orwellian police state?"
Grantaire actually meant the reality show, but. "Either?"

Enjolras shakes his head. "There's no cameras, and Combeferre is younger than you."

"If I guess what's going on, will you tell me?"

"That's irrelevant; you won't guess," says Enjolras. He says it immediately, and with great confidence.

Grantaire tries not to be hurt. "Is that a personal failing on my part, or is it something nobody would guess?"

"No, and no," says Enjolras. This is starting to feel like a riddle, and Grantaire knows he should stop poking. If Enjolras wanted to come clean, he would.

They move up a few places in line, and then Grantaire can't hold back. "You're honestly okay that I keep crashing your dates with Combeferre?"

"You aren't crashing anything," Enjolras frowns. "You're invited. Look, I can't tell you right now what's going on, but I promise it's nothing bad."

"Can you blame me if I keep feeling like I'm cockblocking you guys?" says Grantaire, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Enjolras rolls his eyes, but without any real malice. "That implies that if you hadn't come along, we'd be having sex right now." He waves a hand at the movie theater, which is admittedly crowded and fairly grimy. "You do the math on that. I'm getting a medium popcorn, are you sure you don't—"

"Dude, I don't want anything," says Grantaire. A ridiculous statement. He replays it as Enjolras smiles at the poor bowtied teenager working the concession stand. It's a polite expression, a mask. Grantaire watches him carefully, trying to decide if it looks familiar. It doesn't. He's been seeing a lot of Enjolras's real smile lately, although that might just be proximity to Combeferre.

God, they're such a great couple.

_I don't want anything._ He could've said "No, thank you" like a normal human being, but no, Grantaire had to go for the irony bomb. It's a disease. Or he could've tried the truth, looked Enjolras right in the eye and said, "I want so many things it would make your head spin. Ridiculous things, impossible things. Just not, like, Jujubees."

The movie is terrible. They actually all hate it, although for different reasons. Grantaire doesn't mind when films are crushingly, brutally depressing, but crushingly, brutally depressing _and_ trite is an unforgivable sin.

Combeferre insists the only way to remedy the situation is hashbrowns. Grantaire doesn't even stop to question his logic until they're halfway to Enjolras and Combeferre's favorite greasy spoon, that's how persuasive it is.

The diner is across from the chem building, and it is sketchy even by Grantaire's standards. The walls are covered in graffiti, the waiter is surly to the point of parody, and there are dead flies painted over on the window sill. He's pretty sure the only reason it's still operating is that the health inspector is too afraid to set foot inside.
He looks at Enjolras and Combeferre, who are beaming as if meeting up with an old friend, and thinks this must be the kind of place that survives due to the nostalgia of its patrons.

The bathroom, when he excuses himself to use it, is worse than he'd imagined. It would put even Enjolras’s work managing skills to shame. The sink is so dirty, washing his hands becomes a paradox: contact with the faucet is bound to counteract any good done by the soap. He does the best he can, and when he rejoins the table, Combeferre says,

"So Grantaire, what do you want to do next?"

Grantaire rests his chin on his hands. "Order hashbrowns?" That was the point of the exercise, after all. He tries to gesture with his fork and realizes that his elbows have stuck to the surface of the table. He peels them off and makes a face. "Compose my will?"

"I promise the food here is worth it," says Combeferre. "No, I mean, what do you want to do the next time we hang out? I feel like Enjolras and I have been choosing the stuff we do lately, so if you have something you want to—"

Lately. Lately. Grantaire interjects. He doesn't care if it makes him sound like he's been counting. He doesn't care if it makes him sound like he's been keeping a goddamn scrapbook. If Combeferre and Enjolras don't want to explain themselves, that's their business, but somebody needs to acknowledge that it's out of the ordinary before Grantaire feels like he's slipped into the Twilight Zone.

"In that case," says Enjolras, "by all rights, you should pick the next two things."

Grantaire taps the handle of his fork thoughtfully against the table. The table puts up some slight resistance—or at least, whatever's been spilled on the table. "The only activity I can think of, you'd probably hate."

Of course Enjolras is contrary enough to be interested in that. Of course Combeferre looks curious. They are ridiculous, just ridiculous. Grantaire can feel the beginnings of a smile. "Uh, so there's this fancy new boutique-y supermarket like a five minute drive from here," he starts.

"You want to go grocery shopping?" says Enjolras.

"No," says Grantaire. "Hear me out. So at the end of every day, they throw out a lot of food. And really, most of it's still good. Bags of fruit where one piece is rotten and the rest is fine. Day-old pastries wrapped in like six layers of plastic. Day-old bread that you could still totally use for like, French toast—"

"—or bread pudding," Combeferre adds.

"Sure. And they can't give it away because technically, it's not, you know, fresh. But instead it's just sitting there every night—"

"Oh," says Enjolras, "dumpster diving? Sure, I'm in."

Grantaire hadn't realized how much he'd meant it as a test, how much he'd been counting on Enjolras to say no, until the moment doesn't come and he finds himself sputtering,

"But it's illegal!" as if it wasn't his idea in the first place.

"Uh, yeah," says Enjolras. "I mean, I assumed."
Grantaire drops his fork. Combeferre is choking back laughter. "Grantaire, your face—!"

"But you love rules," says Grantaire, raising an accusing finger at him, and then at Combeferre, who is still breathless. "He loves rules!"

"He loves the house rules," Combeferre explains. "The laws of the land, he's a little mixed on. He's been arrested four times."

"At least one of those doesn't count," says Enjolras.

"Just because you talked your way out of it before the cop actually put you in the squad car—" says Combeferre, and Grantaire really wants to hear this story sometime, but the waiter chooses that moment to deposit their plates on the table, and well, hashbrowns.

"Okay," says Grantaire after the first forkful. "I understand why you guys come here." This place might not have cottoned to how soap works, but they've definitely figured out potatoes.

They devour their food in short order, and Grantaire insists on paying for himself.

"It's fine," says Enjolras, holding the bill above his head and out of Grantaire's reach. "You can cover next time."

"Technically," says Grantaire, "We're all covering next time. With crime."

It's fun. It's really fun. They uncover a sack of danishes, a bag of kumquats, two bunches of bananas that are only just starting to speckle brown (Combeferre makes tantalizing comments about banana bread), a tray of pre-cut fruit in which only the cantaloupe looks iffy, and then several paper bags of slightly stale bread. He also finds some shrink-wrapped cheeses, but Combeferre makes him put them back.

Every single time they hear a car pass, Enjolras instinctively tries to shield them both with his body, which makes no sense, and Combeferre laughs into his sleeve.

It's a full moon, their breath hangs in the air, they're crawling around in garbage, and it's the most fun he's had in weeks. Grantaire vows to stop questioning whatever the hell is going on. When the Virgin Mary appears on your toast, you don't take your toaster to the repair shop, you build yourself a toast grotto and enjoy it.

April

They see another movie, a better one. They take an aimless walk around campus that devolves almost immediately into getting hot chocolate instead; it's freezing and Combeferre had dressed with an optimism that leaves him shivering.

They check out a new Indian restaurant. They visit the Natural History Museum. They go to a concert because the organist is in Grantaire's program, and when the show takes a turn towards the atonal, they spend the whole night trying to come up something nice they can say to Frank afterwards. (Combeferre snags "novel", Enjolras awkwardly praises their enthusiasm, and Grantaire winds up mumbling "It's very..." and then doing some vague gestures. One of the nice things about being in a visual field is that nobody really expects Grantaire to be able to use his words.)
They eat at Grantaire's favorite cafe. They go to Enjolras's favorite used bookstore. Combeferre's mom comes to town, and Grantaire fakes a stomach ailment to get out of meeting her. (Other people's parents make him uneasy, although actually, so do his own.) They make cookies. They watch another movie. They take a more successful walk around campus; it's getting warmer.

May

"So hey," says Combeferre. "I think it's time to have the conversation."

The three of them are in Combeferre's room, sitting on his bed. They've just finished watching a documentary, and the first thing that goes through Grantaire's mind is that it's about the movie. Second is a pang of disappointment; he'd been hoping they would sit through the whole credits. The tiny room is cozier than usual with the lights off, and Combeferre's head is resting on Grantaire's shoulder.

(Three months ago, he would be spasming with guilt at the thought, but tonight Grantaire had just said, "Dude, that can't possibly be comfortable."

Enjolras had looked over, totally unconcerned. "After midnight, the whole world becomes Combeferre's headrest. If you value your shoulder, you might want to move."

"Nah, it's fine." Grantaire had shrugged very carefully, so as not to dislodge the warm, pleasant weight on his shoulder. "Turns out I've got another one on the other side."

Combeferre had responded by wordlessly reaching over and patting Grantaire's head. He can get a little loopy when he's tired.)

"Yeah," says Enjolras now. "I think you're right." It's not about the movie, Grantaire realizes. He has the sudden distinct impression that this exchange is operating at a level over his head.

Grantaire gently disentangles himself and gets to his feet. "I can leave the room if there's something you guys need to talk about."

"Not at all," says Combeferre. "Actually, this, uh, concerns you. Grantaire, can you get the light?"

He obligingly crosses the room and flicks the switch, flooding them with 17 very energy-efficient watts. When he turns around, Combeferre and Enjolras are having a silent conversation with each other. It looks serious. Even then, Grantaire does not immediately assume that he is being kicked out of the co-op. The thought does occur to him, but it is not his go-to. His therapist would call this progress.

Still, clearly something is about to go down. He looks back and forth between them, trying to read their expressions. Neither of them seem upset, just determined and maybe a little nervous.

"Ooh, are you guys getting married?"

"What?" Combeferre blinks. "No. We've only been dating for five months, we haven't even had the 'moving in together' talk—"

"Yes, because you already live together," says Grantaire patiently.

"We aren't getting married," says Enjolras.
Grantaire chews his lip, thinking. A wedding was by far his likeliest bet. "Are either of you—"
Mentally, he runs through his remaining guesses, from most likely to least, "—running for office,
joining the peace corps, getting arrested…again," he adds with a pointed glance at Enjolras,
"winning some sort of co-op award, secretly an FBI agent—"

"Remember when I said you wouldn't be able to guess it?" Enjolras interrupts.

Oh. It's about that; the truth is finally about to come to light. He's not sure he's ready. Grantaire's
stomach churns. To cover for it, he keeps talking. "Which one was the closest, though?"

Enjolras and Combeferre give each other a thoughtful look. "The co-op award," says Combeferre at
last.

"Really?" says Enjolras, and Combeferre says,

"More than being a mole for the U.S. government?"

"Point," Enjolras concedes. "But we're getting off-track."

Combeferre cuts an uneasy glance at where Grantaire is still standing, next to the dresser and his
rickety-looking IKEA bookcase.

"You should probably sit down," he says, and when Grantaire takes a step towards rejoining them
on the bed, he adds, "Maybe—in the chair."

The stomach churning intensifies. Grantaire plunks down into Combeferre's desk chair and stares
back at them. "What," he says.

Enjolras and Combeferre are in the middle of another conference, although this one is considerably
less silent.

"Should I tell him, or should you?" says Enjolras.

"We agreed we were going to tell him together."

"I know," says Enjolras, "but who is actually going to—"

"I can," Combeferre offers, and Enjolras nods. "Caveats first, though."

"Fine." Enjolras sighs heavily, like a child contemplating the plate of overcooked vegetables
separating him from ice cream. "But we're starting with my caveat to your caveat."

"Um," says Grantaire.

They both turn back to face him. "Okay," says Enjolras, folding his hands together. "Look. This
seems really obvious, to the point where I feel stupid saying it out loud and I don't want you to think
I'm being patronizing when I say this, because it should be obvious to you, too, but on the off chance
it isn't." He takes a deep breath. "Combeferre and I, we both respect you. We respect you a lot and
you don't need to do anything you don't want to do. Whatever you decide, we will respect it."

What in the world? Grantaire takes a long moment trying to suss this out. His prevailing theory,
although he's not ready to voice it yet, is that they want to get matching tattoos. He's not closed to the
idea, but he doesn't think it calls for this level of solemnity.

They both seem to waiting for a reply, so he says, "Golden. Um, I respect you guys too, so that's—
good. I mean, it's kind of a crucial ingredient to a non-shitty friendship—"
At the word 'friendship', both Combeferre and Enjolras flinch slightly. Grantaire frowns. He really thought he was done feeling insecure about this; even Enjolras corrected him, weeks ago: friends, not housemates.

"About that." Combeferre clears his throat. "Grantaire," he says, "Will you go out with us?"

"Sure," says Grantaire, raising an eyebrow. "I mean, maybe not right at this moment, since it's gotta be like two in the morning, but tomorrow? Sure. Why, would you rather talk about it then, whatever it is?"

Combeferre pulls off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. "That's not—" He sighs. "Wow, this is more difficult than I thought it would be, and I didn't think it would be easy." Enjolras scoots closer to him on the bed, gives him a supportive pat on the shoulder. "Grantaire, the thing is, we really, really like you—"

"Yes, yes," says Grantaire, in lieu of bracing himself for the 'but' that is sure to follow, "you respect me, I respect you, it's all very beautiful, but we've already been over—"

"No," says Combeferre. "Well, I mean, yes, we do, but that's not the point I'm trying to make right now." He scrubs a hand over his face and puts his glasses back on. "The point. Okay. Well, to start with, do you think it's possible to be in love with two people at the same t—"

"Yes," says Grantaire. Combeferre and Enjolras look over at each other, and Grantaire wishes desperately that he could've at least let Combeferre finish the word. Failing that, finding a pit to burrow into would be nice. He checks under his feet: solid floor.

"That's, uh, encouraging," says Combeferre. He says it to Enjolras, who is biting down on his lip as if trying not to laugh.

Grantaire reviews all the available information, and comes to the only logical conclusion. "Is this about—uh, remember that time in the dish room, when I came in and you guys were all talking—"

He hesitates; Combeferre nods encouragingly. He's finally making headway on whatever mystery is going on. "And Bahorel said you were trying to figure out how to add another guy to your relationship, like some kind of polyamorous—are you okay, dude?" Combeferre's nodding has become so rapid that it's almost more like his head is vibrating.

"I'm fine," Combeferre says, although honestly he sounds a little choked. "You were saying?"

"Yeah, I."

Grantaire scratches the back of his neck. "You haven't brought it up since, so I assumed maybe we weren't, like, at that place in our friendship, which is fair. But if you guys want to talk it out, like if you think it would help to have an outside party's perspective—"

Privately, he hopes it doesn't come to that. He's happy for them both that they've found each other, he really is, but he doesn't know if he has the personal strength to help them hook up with another person. Besides, he doubts he would be much use in the seduction advice department, since his only feedback would be "Keep doing exactly what you're doing, it is super effective."

"You're about half right," says Enjolras in a strangled voice, and wow, Grantaire has really lost the thread here.

"Half right? How is that even possible? Is this or isn't it about Dish Room Guy?"

"Yes," says Enjolras, at the same time Combeferre is saying,

"There is no Dish Room Guy."
"Well," says Grantaire, "that clears up—absolutely nothing."

Combeferre tilts his head. "I guess, technically he is a real person. It's just that he's you."

"What?"

"You," says Enjolras, "for crying out loud, we were talking about you."

Grantaire swallows. He can feel his eyes narrowing. "So you were talking about me behind my back?"

"In that you are Dish Room Guy," says Combeferre.

"Wait," says Grantaire. "Sorry, I'm confused."

"How?" Enjolras's voice is rising, but he doesn't sound angry so much as plaintive. "How are you confused? You are so, so smart and we literally began this conversation by asking you out, so I'm sorry, but this is just mystifying. How can we make this clearer, Grantaire? Short of writing up a Powerpoint presentation where we bulletpoint why we want to make out with you—"

Combeferre's face is in his hands. "Grantaire, I'm sorry," he says, a little muffled by his palms. "This conversation was so much less painful when we outlined it out earlier." He looks up, massaging his temples. "And I was the one who nixed the Powerpoint," he admits. "Which I'm regretting now."

"Uh," Grantaire manages, "that's—wow, I mean, not to be presumptuous, but it almost, kind of sounds like you're asking me out on a date? Like both of you together are asking me out on a date."

"Oh, thank God," says Combeferre in one heartfelt breath. "Yes. Yes, that's what we meant."

All Grantaire can do is gape at them. Literally: all he can do. He's not sure he's still breathing, and he can't vouch absolutely for his heartbeat. He is really, really glad he's sitting down. They're both carefully watching his reaction. He closes his mouth.

"Wow," says Grantaire. He shakes his head, dizzy. "Okay, Enjolras, you were right, I was not going to guess that."

"I appreciate that you're willing to admit it," says Enjolras.

"Yeah." Having this conversation is much, much easier than processing it. "Yeah, that is pretty big of me."

Combeferre clears his throat. "You, uh, haven't answered the question yet."

"That's because I'm still about eighty-five percent sure this is a hallucination," says Grantaire. Surreptitiously, he drives his thumbnail and fingernail into the flesh of his palm. It hurts. "Sixty percent," he amends.

"Are you pinching yourself to see if you're asleep?" says Combeferre. He smiles, tentative. "Depending on your thought process, that is really flattering."

"Oh, be flattered," says Grantaire. "Be very flattered. Sorry," he adds, taking a deep breath. His heart is definitely beating again. Possibly, it's beating double-time. "This is just a lot to process. It's like, imagine your plane crashes in the desert, and you're staggering around, dying of thirst—"

"And then someone gives you two glasses of water?" Combeferre gives him a sympathetic look. "I can see where that would be—"
"No." Grantaire shakes his head. "Someone gives you a fucking lake, and then another lake, and your own island in the Bahamas and then all your student loans are paid off and it turns out your childhood pet is still alive, like it had faked its death for tax reasons but now it's hiding out, ready for another adventure, and then you find out that Calvin and Hobbes is running again, and you have a brand-new laptop with all the memory you could ever want and pens—"

"You already have pens," says Combeferre, reasonably.

"I have the best pens," Grantaire agrees, grinning. "I have the best fucking pens."

"You still haven't actually said yes," says Enjolras, and Grantaire can't help laughing a little.

"Oh my god, dude, if you haven't figured out from context, you officially forfeit all right to give me a hard time for not immediately decoding 'You are Dish Room Guy' into some declaration—"

Enjolras laughs too, then looks down at his hands. "No, I get it, but can you blame me for wanting to hear the words?"

Fair enough. "I like you both a lot," he says. "A lot. If you guys feel like roping me into a threesome, I am very okay with that."

"I don't like the word threesome," says Combeferre seriously. "It implies that it's only about sex, which—I mean, I think we're both hoping that's going to be an element, but we also want to do all the other things. Relationship things. Except with three people."

Grantaire spins back and forth in the chair a little. "This is insane," he says. "You guys do realize that, right? I am onboard, I am a thousand percent onboard, but this is my first relationship with anyone and, like, this could go really badly—"

"We are going to be so good at this," says Combeferre fiercely. "We are going to share and communicate and have weekly check-ins to make sure everyone's needs are being met—"

"More meetings, just what my life needed," says Grantaire. His grin is about to start hurting his face, and he doesn't even care. "So do I just—you're both my boyfriends?"

Enjolras grins back at him. "Yes. Boyfriends. Also, I hope you're okay with people knowing, because we should probably tell you that most of the house has already figured out what's going on."

"How?"

"Apparently, we are not subtle," says Combeferre drily. "That is the rumor."

"Who—" Grantaire starts, and Combeferre says,

"Everyone but Marius."

Realistically, given that Marius is dating Cosette, he might know by now anyway, but Grantaire is going to hold onto the notion that Grantaire was not literally the last person to realize what was going on in his own love life. He ponders this, gaze going to the only window in Combeferre's room. It could be his imagination, but he thinks it's starting to get light out again.

"Oh my god," he says, "what time do you think it even is?"

Combeferre pulls out his phone. "Two forty-five." They're lucky it's the weekend, thinks Grantaire. He pulls himself to his feet. He's still jittering all over. When he gets back to his room, he may need
to dance for a while, just to let it out. Bossuet will understand.

"So," says Enjolras, "the next socially acceptable meal—"

"Breakfast," says Combeferre. "It's called breakfast."

"—the three of us are going out on a date," Enjolras finishes. "As boyfriends," he adds, apparently just because he can. Grantaire understands the impulse.

Grantaire nods and nods. "Yes, awesome, a breakfast date. I am down with this. Nine?" Generally, he has a standing policy about not waking up before ten on a weekend, but he's never had a better reason to tweak his schedule.

"Nine works," says Combeferre.

"Great," says Grantaire. "I should probably head back if—wait." He pauses halfway to the door, turns around.

Combeferre looks concerned. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is—okay is not the word I would use, but yes, very much. I just." Grantaire sucks in a breath of air for courage. "I totally get that you guys want to respect my boundaries and not pressure me, and that makes sense because you're farther along in your relationship, and maybe you're comfortable doing things with each other that you don't want to assume I'd be okay with, and I appreciate it, I do. But." Another breath. "I have been attracted to both of you pretty much since meeting you, and I have wanted, for so, so long to—and maybe the boundaries thing is as much for you as it is for me, which is fair, and you're within your rights to say no, but. You're right here and on a bed and it seems like a shame to let this go by. Assuming you both also want to." He swallows, the sound audible in the quiet of the room.

Because neither Enjolras nor Combeferre are saying anything. They're both just watching him, although he can see that Combeferre's hand on Enjolras's elbow, fingers tightening on his sleeve.

"This is awkward," says Grantaire. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ruin the moment. We can talk this over more when it's not three in the morning, and in the meantime I'll let you get some sleep—" He backtracks into Combeferre's bookshelf and then to the exit.

"Grantaire, in the name of all things holy, take your hand off the door," says Combeferre. Grantaire lets both hands hover in the air. "Good," says Combeferre. "Now turn around and come over here."

Grantaire does as he's told. It's not a difficult decision. Combeferre's room is tiny but he has still never crossed a space faster. Combeferre smiles up at him. "Good," he says again.

"I really hoped you were going to be my ally against his bossiness in bed," says Enjolras genially.

"Sorry, but I think I may in fact be really, really into it," Grantaire breathes, and Enjolras says, "Um, that's good, too."

Combeferre scoots back on the bed. "If you're still taking suggestions—" and Grantaire nods, fervently. "Wonderful," says Combeferre, "then I think you should kiss me." He pats the space he's just vacated, so Grantaire climbs onto the bed and sets his hands carefully on Combeferre's shoulders. Combeferre smiles again, encouraging, and Grantaire moves closer, runs his hands down Combeferre's shoulder blades to rest at his waist, like they're dancing. Grantaire giggles helplessly. This is already the most action he's gotten since eighth grade. He buries his face in Combeferre's
collarbone. Combeferre brings up a hand and strokes his hair.

"Sorry," Grantaire mutters, still giggling. "I swear, I will kiss you like a normal human, I can do this."

Combeferre nods—Grantaire can feel it even if he can't see it—and ducks back enough to bring them face to face. "I like your laugh," he says, and then he brings their mouths crashing together. It's not brutal but it is forceful. Grantaire has no idea what he's doing but Combeferre clearly does, and Grantaire is more than happy to let him take the lead. Especially when Combeferre coaxes his mouth open a little more and tangles his other hand in Grantaire's hair, tugging lightly and making a pleased sound at the way Grantaire's grip tightens on his waist.

When Grantaire pulls away, Combeferre is grinning again. "Thank you," says Combeferre quietly, "that was nice." And then, in a more normal tone of voice, "So, did that live up to your expectations?" It's directed over Grantaire's shoulder, at Enjolras, who is watching them with wide, dark eyes.

"Yes," says Enjolras, and he sounds as out of breath as Grantaire. "Feel free to do that again."

"Enjolras has this thing where he really wanted to see us kiss," says Combeferre, like this is a charming eccentricity, and not something that is making Grantaire's brain melt.

"It's not a kink," Enjolras insists, and he is definitely blushing. "It's just a reasonable response to the situation."

"You are so cute," says Combeferre. "Come here." He uses the hand that isn't still resting in Grantaire's hair to tug Enjolras closer, which means Grantaire has a very good view of them making out. Grantaire may have to agree with Enjolras: watching them makes him feel warm all over, and it seems pretty reasonable.


"At least now I have a witness to how bossy you are," he says, with exactly zero resentment.

"Sorry," says Grantaire, "I can't hear you over the sound of your first world problems."

"You're going to enable the hell out of him," Enjolras accuses, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He brushes a renegade curl out out of Grantaire's hair, tucks it behind his ear. Their faces are only a few inches apart.

Grantaire bites his lip. "Can I—"

"Yes," says Enjolras immediately, and then they're kissing, and Grantaire is still so ridiculously, absurdly happy that he wants to dance around his room, but that will have to wait for later, because for now there are more pressing uses of his energy.

***

Combeferre's bed was never big enough for two people in the first place. That he and Enjolras have managed to share it for several months is mostly a testament to Enjolras's jellyfish-like feats of cuddling. Objectively, there is no way the three of them are comfortable right now. Grantaire is pressed against the wall, Combeferre is several inches from tumbling onto the floor, and they're both kind of lying on Enjolras.
It's probably about four in the morning, judging from the fledgling light coming in at the window. Once the endorphins and the afterglow wear off, they're bound to discover all kinds of sore muscles and awkwardly arranged limbs. At the moment, though, Combeferre will admit he just feels really, really good. He stretches his legs, very careful not to kick Enjolras in the process, and wiggles his toes.

"Hey," says Combeferre, "anyone else want water?"

"Water is a good call," says Enjolras.

From the other side of the bed, Grantaire makes a sleepy, agreeable sound. He is, at best, half awake. It is by far the most relaxed Combeferre has ever seen him, which is just one more side benefit of this whole arrangement.

"I'll help you," Enjolras offers, trying to pull himself upright. Combeferre thinks it's very likely that Grantaire will be embarrassed later at the way he clings instinctively to Enjolras, nuzzling the side of his neck and mumbling displeased almost-words. If Grantaire remembers it at all, he will be embarrassed, and it will be up to Combeferre to counteract this by explaining how Enjolras's resolve immediately crumbled, how he flopped back down in bed and gave Combeferre a hopeless look, then wrapped an arm around Grantaire and pressed a kiss to the side of his face.

If this revelation embarrasses Enjolras, then Combeferre will happily volunteer the soppy, enamored smile he gave them both, the smile that persists as he roots through the clothes they'd left strewn on the floor in search of the nearest pair of pants. It's been a good morning, Combeferre thinks as he bounds up the stairs. It's been a very good morning, and maybe after some water and some rest, they can have another round. There's plenty of time between now and nine, and Combeferre has always been an optimist.

The dish room is dark and quiet. He grabs three cups, with handles for easier juggling. He's humming as he steps into the kitchen, some half-remembered melody that may have been a show tune. He tiptoes across the chilly tile floor and cranks one of the sink faucets, doing a little soft-shoe as he waits for the first cup to fill.

"Good morning," says Jehan from the kitchen counter, oversized mug in one hand.

Combeferre freezes. "Hey, Jehan," he says. He is suddenly acutely aware that the pajama pants he's wearing belong to Enjolras, and that the shirt, which is—he looks down to check—indeed inside-out, is—he checks again—definitely Grantaire's. The hickey trailing down either side of his neck are not clearly identifiable as belonging to Enjolras or Grantaire, although someone with a decent forensics background might be able to tell they were made by two different—

"Your cup's overflowing," says Jehan helpfully. "One of them, anyway."

"Thanks," says Combeferre. He fills the other two cups as Jehan waits for a new pot of coffee to brew, the distinctive plink of the machine still audible under the rush of the faucet. He shuts off the sink.

Jehan's amused look encompasses Combeferre's no doubt very mussed hair, the marks on his neck, and the three cups of water in his hands.

Combeferre coughs. "I was very thirsty," he says.

"I can see that." Jehan raises the mug of coffee in solemn salute. "Enjoy your water, my friend."

"I will," says Combeferre, and with that, he pads out of the kitchen, through the dish room, and
down the stairs, back to his tiny room in Amis House and his boyfriends.

End Notes

A tremendous thank you to Bedlam for her endless patience, hand-holding, and encouragement—and for not laughing in my face when I confessed I'd decided to start yet another Les Mis fic. (Not laughing very much, at any rate.)

Fun fact: this is the first piece of fan fiction I've ever finished. It's also the longest thing I've ever written, because when you've never swam before, why not start by plunging directly into the deep end? Hahahaha oh god.

Hope you like it, lionsjaw!

PS. If you have any questions (including any questions about student co-ops!), comments, or just feelings about dead French kids, feel free to hit me up on tumblr, where I am also idiopathicsmile.

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic] In Defiance of all Geometry by delabaissé (missyay), Cover - In Defiance of all Geometry by Mazsoland, Fanart for In Defiance of All Gravity by saltkettle

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