Omnia mutantur, nihil interit

by Apathy, saltedpin

Summary

Valjean's panting breath does not belong to him.

He scrambles out of the bed and stumbles on too-light feet to the mirror in the corner, although he already knows what he will see.

Peering back at him from behind a curtain of dark hair, wide-eyed, is Éponine Thénardier.

Jean Valjean awakens one morning from uneasy dreams to find that something quite unexpected has happened during the night.

Notes

Thank you to rabbit_habits for the beta!
Title is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Everything changes, nothing perishes.

This is also a little AU in that we have blown out the post-barricades timeline, so Marius and Cosette are still not married almost two years later. Valjean has taken up the lease of the house in the Rue Plumet again :)

Updates will be once a week.
Valjean

The sun is already streaming in through the window when Jean Valjean awakens. He stretches a little, basking in its gentle warmth, and gives thanks to God for allowing him this simplest of pleasures. To wake up safe and warm, tucked up in a comfortable bed –

He pauses mid-stretch. This bed is a little too comfortable to be his own. The pillows are soft and luxurious, the coverlet smells faintly of roses, and the mattress does not creak as he sits up to stare about the room.

Now that his mind is starting to more fully awaken, he is quickly coming to the realisation that something is wrong. The light is coming in at the wrong angle, too bright for his small bedroom in the cottage, and the room itself appears to belong to a young woman – there is perfume on the dressing table, and a hairbrush, and a variety of little knick-knacks in front of a rather ornate mirror. Valjean attempts to breathe through the sudden shock of disorientation: this is not a situation he has ever been in before. He has never woken up before in any bed other than his own – first in the little cottage he had shared with his sister and her children, then the hard bunk at Toulon, the mairie of Montreuil-sur-Mer, the gardener’s cottage at Petit-Picpus, and, at last, his own little room at the back of the garden in the Rue Plumet. The idea that he is here – in a room that is unknown to him, a woman's room, filled with a woman’s things –

He takes a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. Surely this is just some strange dream, the kind that enters through that peculiar window between sleep and wakefulness and blurs the edges of reality.

He scrubs his hands over his face, hoping that the sheer physical act will be enough to break the illusion –

And pauses. Feels himself go statue-still for long seconds, his fingers splayed over his face, his breath trapped within his lungs. 

Somebody shaved off my beard while I slept, a near-hysterical voice in his mind supplies, but the part of him that is still somewhat capable of rationality is cataloguing a far more disturbing range of differences. His face is the wrong shape, its weathered skin now smooth and seemingly in the full blush of youth. Long tendrils of hair brush lightly over his neck. His back does not pain him. But the thing that brings his skin out in a cold sweat – that sends his guts into a spasm of knowing – is the burning in his right hand, the way the fingers do not quite obey his commands. While the fingers of his left hand are deftly mapping the unfamiliar contours of his face, those of the right one rest against his cheek, crabbed, only registering the slightest of sensation. Looking down at the hand, he sees a silvery web of scar tissue over his palm, obviously not long healed, still surrounded by dark red skin.

His panting breath does not belong to him.

He scrambles out of the bed and stumbles on too-light feet to the mirror in the corner, although he already knows what he will see.

Peering back at him from behind a curtain of dark hair, wide-eyed, is Éponine Thénardier.

The only thing Valjean can do is stare.
For long moments he gazes into the mirror, entranced, as each movement he makes is echoed by the frightened young woman looking back at him. He raises his eyebrows, she raises hers; her hand follows his as he slowly moves his fingers.

He finds himself murmuring nonsense, just to hear what his voice sounds like – or, perhaps, he is simply going mad. He supposes that he shouldn’t be surprised, really, given everything that has happened in his life; but still, it’s a pity, given that he has of late been more serene than he has been in years. That this madness should come upon him now, when at last his life has fixed itself into some kind of happiness, doesn’t seem quite fair.

The meaningless words coming from his lips, he realises, have resolved themselves into prayer, long years of habit guiding his mind into the comforting, well-worn path that he can tread without conscious thought. What he’s praying for, he doesn’t even know, but it’s enough to calm his mind and bring him back around to a place of rational thought.

He allows himself a wry smile. He has been in worse situations. As perplexing as this particular situation is, this is not, in fact, the worst start he’s had to a day. Not by a long shot.

Squaring his shoulders and watching as the girl in the mirror does the same, he takes a deep breath and considers his options. Now that he’s calmer, he can recognise that he’s in Éponine’s room in the Rue Plumet house. He hasn’t been inside the room since Éponine recovered from the injuries she had sustained at the barricade, when a bullet had passed through her hand and scraped her shoulder. Once her condition had improved, the room had become hers at his insistence, and he had permanently removed himself from it in order to allow her privacy. Cosette had helped her to furnish it to her liking, and he can see now that Éponine’s tastes run mostly towards the simple, with a few hesitant concessions to the frivolous.

So, he knows where he is. He knows who he is, somewhat. The why and the how remain opaque. All that remains, for now, is the what.

At that thought, his heart shudders wildly.

*Cosette –!*

He searches hurriedly for a dressing-gown, wrapping it around himself in an attempt to preserve Éponine’s modesty, and steps hesitantly into the hallway, unsure of what he will find.

Not ten paces away is a small figure, and he almost collapses in relief.

“Cosette!”

So overjoyed is he that it takes him several seconds to fully take in the sight before him.

Cosette stands there in her nightgown, fists clenched at her sides, practically radiating tension in its purest form. Her face is twisted into a grim rictus, her pretty features contorted into the kind of scowl that would put fear into the hearts of criminals and righteous men alike.

It is an expression he has never seen on his daughter’s face before – but nonetheless, it is an expression with which he is intimately familiar.

His stomach drops. He licks his lips, forces his mouth to form the only word that his addled brain can dredge up.

“Javert?”
The furrow between Cosette’s delicate eyebrows deepens. “So it would seem.”

For the second time this morning, Valjean feels madness licking at the corners of brain.

*What is happening here?* And how – *how* – for the love of everything that is holy, is Javert here, in this house, wearing Cosette’s nightgown and looking at him with Cosette’s eyes and appearing to be about two seconds away from arresting someone just for the sense of normalcy that it would bring?

Even as he watches, he can see Javert’s policeman’s brain ticking over, taking in this latest development and adding it to his collection of evidence. If Javert had his notebook with him, he would be scribbling madly. It’s oddly soothing, in its way – Javert is still himself, despite everything. As much as Valjean dislikes the thought of more people being caught up in this madness, a selfish part of him is glad to not be alone.

Evidently coming to some kind of conclusion, Javert turns and strides purposefully down the hallway. Calmer now, Valjean finds a moment of amusement in seeing his dear darling Cosette stomp down the hallway as if she’s about to bring the full weight of the law upon some unsuspecting criminal’s head; however, curiosity quickly gets the better of him, and he hurries after Javert.

Javert is looking out the window at the end of the hallway, satisfaction written across his face. Valjean peers past him, down into the garden, and sees...

His face scrunches up a little in surprise.

“... Do I really look like that?”

He sees *himself*, standing just outside the cottage in his nightgown, looking dazed and a little flustered. His white hair shines in the early morning sunlight, and, absurdly, Valjean feels a flood of relief that his beard remains in place. On his face, however, is a pensive frown he is quite certain he has not, in many years, had any occasion to make, but one which he has regularly seen on Éponine’s face, most often when he encourages her to read her scripture.

Valjean feels a kind of mild frenzy welling up inside him. He is here, Éponine is there, this is real and God in Heaven has seen fit to test his faith in some new and mysterious way.

He doesn’t realise he has started laughing until he feels the grip of Cosette’s – *Javert’s*, he hastily corrects himself – slender fingers upon his shoulder.

“Valjean.” Javert’s tone is steady, though Valjean finds he must suppress a shudder at the sound of that name spoken with his daughter’s voice. “I know this must be difficult, but you must try to keep your wits about you. Whatever has happened, we must go talk to the young lady – hmm –” He cuts himself off, his eyes skittering back to the figure in the garden. “To... to this person, before they take fright and run out into the street in hysterics.”

Valjean isn’t sure what impression Javert has formed of Éponine that he assumes this would be her response to any situation she finds herself in, but he follows after him as Javert marches on down the hallway, his long, lightly curled hair flowing after him, lace nightgown swirling about his delicate ankles.

Once out in the garden, Valjean finds that, far from the hysterical distress that Javert had predicted, Éponine seems quite calm – to the extent that she has rolled up the sleeve of his nightgown and is slowly raising and lowering an arm, up and down, curling a hand into a fist, feeling along the bunched biceps with the fingers of the other hand.

She turns to face them as they enter the garden. The grass is damp with dew between his toes, and
Valjean takes a moment to honestly enjoy the feeling of being young again, of movement unencumbered by the weight of more than sixty winters.

Valjean sees his own blue eyes widen slightly, and he wonders what must be going through the girl’s mind as she watches herself trip lightly through the garden towards her.

“Well,” she says, as he and Javert come to a stop in front of her. “This is novel. Has this often happened before in your house, Monsieur?”

The quip startles a laugh out of him, and he feels himself relax, despite everything. “Not that I can recall, Mademoiselle.”

“Mademoiselle no longer, it seems.” Éponine spreads her arms once more, flexing her newfound muscles appreciatively. “Why, Cosette, I feel like I could pick you up with one hand,” she says in mild wonder, and for a moment, she advances, looking as if she might be about to do just that.

Javert makes a shocked hissing sound in the back of his throat, taking a skittish step backwards – surely the first time in his life he has ever done that – before Valjean hastily intervenes. Though not, he notices, before a blush spreads across Cosette’s delicate cheeks.

“Wait! Éponine, there is – this is not –” He pauses, collecting himself, and considers how to phrase this. Is there really any good way of explaining this? He ponders briefly, before deciding that no, there is not. “This is not Cosette. It is Javert.”

“Javert? Inspector Javert?” Éponine looks shocked, and for a moment Valjean is treated to the sight of the wary, hunted expression that he must have worn in the past every time someone said that name to him. She has nothing to fear from Javert now – no more, indeed, than Valjean himself does – but her years on the street must surely have left their mark. Valjean watches as Éponine’s eyes sweep sceptically over the girl standing beside him. Perhaps it’s the scowl, or perhaps it’s the way Javert attempts to draw himself up to his full, currently diminutive height, but whatever the case, she apparently accepts what he has said, with an alacrity he finds admirable.

“So.” She paces a little, before stopping to scrutinise them both. “If I’m in your body, Monsieur Fauchelevent, and you’re in mine, and Inspector Javert is in Cosette’s, then...?”

Valjean has never heard himself make the sound that he utters now. He claps his hand briefly over his mouth to stifle the shriek, but then lets it fall away in despair.

“Cosette!” His breath comes in gasps. “My delicate flower, trapped in – in – that!”

Javert harrumphs beside him. “It is not quite so bad as all that, surely.”

Valjean barely hears him as he whirls around and begins to run back towards the house. “We must get dressed!” he calls over his shoulder as he flies up the steps.
Éponine

It seems strange to Éponine, as she sits in the back of the fiacre, that she should be going to call on a man who had once thrown her in the Madelonettes without a second thought – but then, stranger still would be the fact the man in question is actually sitting next to her now, back ramrod straight, fists clenched on his knees, and wearing the body of the girl she’d once been so wildly jealous of she didn’t know what to do with herself, but whom she now calls her sweetest friend.

She tries not to think too hard about what has happened, or how it can be corrected; there is nothing that can be done for the moment, and so she settles for hoping that Cosette is well. She can only pray that Cosette is in fact inhabiting both the Inspector’s body and the Inspector’s residence; the thought that Cosette has run off in confusion, or that somebody else again may answer the door using Javert’s voice, doesn’t bear thinking about.

Then again, Éponine had not found waking up unexpectedly in a man’s body entirely unpleasant. Certainly, it was different, and if she hadn’t been so aware of the fact that Monsieur Fauchelevent would surely come looking for her – and that she had to be able to look him in the eye when he did – she would have been well tempted to remain abed for some time longer.

The image comes to her mind, unbidden: the three of them bursting through the Inspector’s door, Cosette in the Inspector’s body, one hand below the sheets –

Éponine coughs and shifts in her seat, hoping that Cosette’s thoughts upon waking do not stray to the places that Éponine’s had.

Well. They will have to make sure to knock.

She twitches agitatedly, drumming her fingers against her knee – and oh, what a small joy it is to be able to use her right hand again. Her body – Monsieur Fauchelevent’s body – is already falling back into the rhythm of using it without thought. She taps out a little ditty she heard at a café last week, and scowls.

It feels like they’ve been stewing in the awkward silence of this fiacre for hours. It doesn’t help that she has no idea where Javert lives, no way of telling if they are close to their destination. She would ask one or the other of them, but the feeling in her gut tells her that one misspoken word will snap the tension in here like a twig. Monsieur Fauchelevent is chewing pensively at his lower lip, eyes almost comically wide as he ponders their situation, while Inspector Javert resembles nothing so much as a kettle that has been left upon the stove too long.

No, better to leave off for now. She’s had a lot of practice at keeping her mouth shut when it’s needed, after all. Sometimes an ill-timed word or shriek had been met with nothing more than a fond glance and a Hush, daddy’s thinking now, pet, but just as often, she’d gotten a smack in the lip or a swift kick in the belly. She knows that Monsieur Fauchelevent would never do that, that he is kind and gentle beyond what could be considered good sense... but at one time, she would have said the same for her mother.

She had been amazed by how easy Cosette had seemed with him, when Éponine had first come to the house: how she had never seemed frightened to call for him, or to help herself to seconds at the dinner table, or fill the dining room with chatter about her day, about the plans for her wedding, and about whatever apparently enchanting thing Marius had said.

Marius Pontmercy! How she had ever considered herself in love with him, she doesn’t know – while
she considers him a friend, now, and will always appreciate the kindness he showed her when no one else would, it does not seem quite possible to her that she was once willing to throw her life away so easily. Back then, death had seemed like the only possibility – death now or death later, it hadn’t seemed to matter. That was what it had been like to be forever clawing at the edge of a pit of starvation, and it was easy to imagine yourself in love with the first person who came along and handed you a sou without expecting a kiss in return.

It had been clear, anyway, the first time he visited, how little he had even thought of her – with her hair combed out and her face clean of dirt and dressed in something other than rags, he had stared at her for long minutes, before stuttering, Mademoiselle, do I – it seems that I recall –

It had been a bitter draught to swallow – bitterer even than all the others she has had to gulp down over the years. But a voice had asked her why she should be surprised: who would want a woman like her, when they could have a sweet girl like Cosette?

It makes her shudder now, to think of how she might have ended up. Those student boys had at least had families, or mistresses, or someone else who cared, who might’ve come to pick them up and bury them. The only reason her father might have come to claim her corpse would’ve been to check whether she had anything in her pockets worth selling.

That was why she’d curled up where she had, bundling up the wounds to her hand and shoulder with whatever rags she could find. She’d hoped someone else would find her, once she was dead; maybe even Marius. But the hand that had eventually touched her shoulder had belonged to neither Marius nor her father. She’d been too weak to run when a voice had said, You’re the girl who was on the barricades, and she had had no choice but to let herself be carried off to prison – or so she had thought at the time. To have woken instead in a clean bed, her wounds dressed, and the face of the girl from the Rue Plumet hovering over her, pretty forehead pinched in concern....

It still feels like a trap, some days – like she’ll wake in the morning to find the table bare, her belongings sold, her cheek blooming red from the back of an unkind hand.

Inspector Javert’s ongoing presence in her life has not helped in this regard, either. At first she’d been too caught up in her own pain and turmoil to even consider asking after the source of the racking cough that echoed from down the corridor, the snarls that were clearly insults, even if she couldn’t pick out the words. When she’d stumbled across him in the corridor, it had taken her mind several long moments to recognise the unkempt, wraithlike apparition before her as a cop; she had frozen to the spot, the word shit running through her mind over and over even as she calculated which escape route would give her the highest chances of getting away.

Cosette had appeared then, breezily reassuring her that the good inspector would not bring her to any harm, would you now, Inspector, and Javert had simply stared at her until Cosette had guided him back towards his room.

Just knowing that she was in the same house as a police officer would have normally been enough to send her running without a backwards glance; however, something had kept her there. The promise of food and shelter was all that kept her within the house, surely. Certainly, it had nothing to do with Cosette’s warm smiles, with Monsieur Fauchelevent’s reassurances that she could stay for as long as she wanted, and that he requested nothing in return.

Just a little longer, she had told herself. Just while Javert’s still too unwell to arrest me.

Days had turned to weeks, and then months; somehow, it had become normal to be in the policeman’s presence. Not that ‘normal’ had ever meant ‘good’ in her life, but at least it had felt like a known quantity. Indeed, Javert had seemed just as discomfited by her as she had by him, and they
had reached a sort of wordless truce, two strays united by their bewilderment at being taken into the strange hospitality of Monsieur Fauchelevent.

Still, a truce does not mean that she has to like him or trust him, and even now, here in the carriage, she feels herself on edge in a way that is not entirely due to waking up in Monsieur Fauchelevent’s body. The fact that Javert wears Cosette’s face makes it worse, as if by appearing as her beloved friend he can lull her into a false sense of security, make her confess to every crime she has ever committed.

Éponine stifles a sigh. Her sole comfort in this – thing, whatever it is – is the idea that surely God wouldn’t hurt someone as kind as Monsieur Fauchelevent or as sweet as Cosette. Éponine has never thought about God, and has never considered whether He might truly exist – but Fauchelevent clearly thinks He does, and she does not believe that the kindly God of Monsieur Fauchelevent would punish him for too long.

She isn’t sure if she should be comforted or alarmed by the fact that this malady appears to be limited to the four of them. The driver of the fiacre seems idle, indifferent; certainly his behaviour does not resemble that of some poor bewildered soul making a desperate attempt at pretending to be someone else.

The carriage comes to a juddering halt, and Éponine supposes they must have arrived – the way Monsieur Fauchelevent leaps from his seat like a scalded cat would certainly seem to suggest so. She follows quickly after him, feeling a pain in her knee she never noticed before, and manages to intercept her own body before it flies up the steps of the house and into whatever horrors might lie beyond.

“You should allow me, Monsieur,” she says, hoping as soon as she says it that no one has overheard – but there’s no one on the street, and she raises her fist and knocks on the door. A moment later the portress appears, her face showing undisguised delight as her eyes alight upon Éponine’s borrowed face. “Why, Monsieur Fauchelevent!” she says, patting down a few errant strands of steely grey hair. “You’re visiting us again? So soon?”

“Again? So soon?” Éponine wonders. She’d had no idea her benefactor had been visiting the inspector at his home. She’s tempted to turn and look at Monsieur Fauchelevent, but she resists, and keeps her expression grave. This is serious. She reminds herself that Cosette might be upstairs, alone and frightened.

“Yes, Madame.” Éponine has no idea as to how a nice man like Fauchelevent might behave towards an obviously smitten portress, so she simply bows her head and comes straight to the point. “Is Inspector Javert at home?”

“Oh – why, yes he is,” the woman says, hands still smoothing her hair, fluttering like little birds after crumbs. “It is unusual that he’s still in his room at this hour, but I suppose even the law must rest.” She giggles a little at her own joke, and Éponine, deciding that Fauchelevent would laugh, does so – only realising she might have overdone it a little when the woman looks mildly startled.

The portress escorts them up the stairwell without further comment, scurrying back down the stairs after Javert directs a particularly withering look in her direction. She’ll have to have a talk with him later – it would do no good to have Cosette’s reputation besmirched – but for now, she takes a deep breath and knocks forcefully on the door. She calls out loudly, for the benefit of any unwanted listeners, “Inspector Javert?”
At a much lower volume, she murmurs, “Cosette? Are you there?”

The door creaks the tiniest sliver open, and then is flung wide – and Éponine is fairly certain she has never seen such an expression of radiant relief on anyone’s face before, let alone on Inspector Javert’s.

“Papa!”

Before she knows it she has been enfolded in a fierce embrace, Javert’s long arms winding around her and yanking her into his chest.

“I was so frightened! Thank goodness you’ve come!”

Éponine manages to extricate herself, feeling uneasy about accepting Cosette’s embraces under false pretences. But whatever the case, they can’t stand out here on the landing babbling, when the inspector’s neighbours or the portress might wander by at any moment, and stumble upon a scene it would be very difficult to explain later.

“She, I think we need to speak ins – oh.”

She belatedly realises that Cosette is dressed only in a sheet, wrapped around her twice and bunched in her fists. A bit of bare shoulder peeps out of the top. Cosette must notice her looking, because she blushes bright red from the bottom of the Inspector’s whiskers to the roots of his hair, and turns and hurries back into the room, gesturing for the three of them to follow.

“Cosette!”

Éponine hears her own voice piping up several octaves the moment the door is closed behind them.

“You – what are you – is that all – you are wearing a sheet –”

“It is more than I was wearing before,” Cosette mutters in a low voice, her eyes on the floor, face still bright red.

Éponine cannot hold back a very unladylike guffaw. She glances over at the other two: Fauchelevent’s eyes dart about like those of a trapped animal, while Javert stares back at her defiantly, almost daring her to question his authority regarding what he chooses to wear – or not wear – in his own bed.

Cosette follows her gaze, seeming to fully register the presence of the other two for the first time. Her mouth drops open a little when she lays eyes upon Javert – upon herself – and a breathy “oh” escapes her mouth. She raises a hand slightly to reach out towards him, then pulls it back when she remembers her state of undress.

“Are you – ?”

“Indeed.”

“Oh,” she says again.

Javert scrutinises her for a long moment, before stalking over to the set of drawers in the corner and pulling out several items of clothing, laying them out, neatly-folded, on the small table. Éponine notes with some relief that the inspector does, in fact, appear to own a nightshirt, even if he chooses not to make use of it himself.
Cosette turns to Éponine, and her relief is almost palpable. “Oh, Papa, you cannot understand how relieved I am to see you. I awoke this morning to find myself like — well, like — this — and then the next thing I knew, I heard banging on the door! If it had been anyone but you, I — well, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Hearing these words come from the inspector’s mouth — flustered, girlish — causes Éponine no small amount of amusement; however, Cosette’s lack of knowledge about Éponine’s true identity needs to be remedied, and fast, before someone says or does something even more mortifying than everything else that has already occurred this morning.

“Ah, Cosette. I’m not your father.” Cosette’s eyebrows draw together in confusion, and Éponine gestures over towards Monsieur Fauchelevent, who takes a hesitant step forwards, a slightly shy smile on his face. Why, I look almost pretty, Éponine thinks, and swallows.

Cosette’s eyes dart back and forth between them, comprehension dawning slowly. “Papa?”

Fauchelevent spreads his arms wide, and Cosette stumbles into them. Cosette towers above him, but Fauchelevent holds her like a small child, murmuring reassuring sounds into her ear. Éponine turns away slightly, feeling like an intruder on what is clearly a private moment.

After several long seconds, Cosette pulls back and turns towards Éponine, her eyes suspiciously bright. “Then you are Éponine?”

Éponine nods, her throat dry, and finds herself taking a step backwards to brace herself as Cosette flies into her arms. It’s a surprise, but an enjoyable one, and she embraces her back. The gesture, as strange as all this is, especially with the Inspector’s whiskers brushing against her bearded cheek, gives her the confidence to know that, somehow, they will all find a way through this muddle.

A not-so-delicate cough brings her attention back to Inspector Javert. She raises her head to find him standing resolutely next to the table on which he has laid out the clothes, eyes averted, while Monsieur Fauchelevent looks as though he has perhaps swallowed a bad oyster.

Then again, she supposes, it must be strange to watch yourself embrace another, barely-clad man.

“We need to leave here with haste,” Javert says, Cosette’s usually sweet voice emerging a little roughly. “We have already given Madame Durand enough fodder to keep her gossiping for the next two months.” He places his hand on Cosette’s back and steers her towards the table.

“Agreed.” Fauchelevent swallows, and then quickly turns his back to Cosette. Éponine and Javert follow suit. Éponine wants desperately for them to leave the room, to give her privacy, but the thought of causing a spectacle in front of Madame Durand or the other tenants leaves her slightly queasy. She is reaching the point of struggling to keep up the façade of being kindly Monsieur Fauchelevent, and it strikes her that she doesn’t actually know much about him or his life. How is she supposed to keep up this pretence when she doesn't even know half of what she should about him?

Her stomach makes an unholy gurgling noise, and it also occurs to her that she has yet to break her fast for the day, which is surely not helping matters.

Behind her, she can hear Cosette fumbling with the unfamiliar garments; beside her, Javert twitches, as if wanting to assist, but he stays where he is.

Clearly seeking a distraction, Cosette asks, “Do you know what happened? I mean, why this happened?”
Fauchelevent answers. “No, my darling. We were simply like this when we awoke, and then we came to find you.”

“I am glad that you did!” Cosette makes an uncertain noise. “I, ah, think I’m mostly done, here. You can turn around.”

Éponine turns, to see Cosette struggling to get her cravat to sit straight. She smiles. “Here, let me help you with that.”

“Thank you,” Cosette says gratefully. “I have helped Marius with his countless times, but it is quite another thing when it’s on yourself!”

“Hmm.” Javert inspects Cosette’s outfit closely, smoothing out the sleeves and doing up a missed button. “Passable.”

Now only Cosette’s hair is in disarray; Javert looks as if he wants to pull it back into its customary queue himself, but he exercises obvious restraint, merely handing her the ribbon and stepping back. Woe betide Cosette if so much as a hair is out of place, Éponine is certain.

At last, Javert deems Cosette fit to leave his apartment. He passes her his pocketbook and key from where they were hidden; she reaches for his hat and cane.

The four of them saunter down the stairs, aiming for a casual air, but Éponine is certain that anyone who sees them will know that there is something terribly amiss. Cosette in particular is struggling, having already hit her head on the low doorframe as she exited the Inspector’s apartment; on the upside, it means that she does not have to fake her scowl.

“Oh! Leaving again already, are we?”

Cosette tips her hat slightly to Madame Durand, letting out little more than a grunt. Éponine quickly follows suit, tipping her own hat.

Javert’s smile is pained. “A pleasure, Madame.”

“A pleasure,” Fauchelevent echoes faintly.

They bustle past the surprised portress, and hurry off in search of a fiacre before she can reply. Javert hisses at Cosette that he is not some kind of uncouth, monosyllabic boor; Fauchelevent merely laughs lowly in response, before his eye is drawn to something that the inspector has, until now, been keeping hidden in his skirts. He sighs.

“Javert, give Cosette your cudgel.”

Javert glares at him mutinously. The two of them undergo a silent battle of wills for several seconds, before Javert frowns and hands the cudgel over to a surprised Cosette. Éponine can’t fully blame him for wanting to hold onto it – Cosette looks at it as if she has no idea what it’s even used for – but Fauchelevent’s reasoning is sound. Éponine can just imagine Javert forgetting himself and slapping the cudgel into his hand as he stalks along the street, skirts billowing, striking terror into the hearts of passersby and giving Cosette the queerest of reputations.

“Oh, dear,” Cosette suddenly murmurs as the fiacre pulls over by the side of the road. “I do believe Marius is supposed to be coming to visit around midday.”

Javert comes to an abrupt halt, uncaring of the impediment he has created for other pedestrians. He grabs Cosette by the front of her greatcoat and pulls her face down close to his, enunciating every
word carefully.

“Tell him that Cosette is unwell.”

Fauchelevent frowns in confusion. “Surely that is not necessary –”

The inspector looks as close to flustered as Éponine has ever seen him. “I am not going to sit there and pretend to be that dolt’s fiancée!” His voice lowers to a hiss. “I’ve seen him with Cosette. He has… wandering hands.”

“Ah.” Fauchelevent, too, looks flustered. “Yes. I see.”

Éponine opens the carriage door. “We can work this all out on the way. Right now, we need to get there before Marius does.”

“We need to do no such thing.” Javert is still not moving. “I shall walk there. In fact, I think I shall go to a café and eat something instead, and wait for this whole sordid affair to resolve itself.” He points at Cosette. “You will come with me. Once we have eaten, I will write a note to my superiors saying I cannot report to the stationhouse, as I am engaged in other business. There are some men I have been watching, and –”

“Absolutely not.” Fauchelevent interrupts him, his voice soft but implacable. “Cosette will be going nowhere where there is a possibility of danger. She – and you – will return to the house.”

Javert looks loftily at him – which, Éponine grudgingly appreciates, is no small feat since he has been shrunk to his current height. “There will be no danger. I will be there, and –”

“Oi, are you lot getting in or not?” the driver of the fiacre calls down to them impatiently. “Only some of us have to make a living.”

“Yes,” Fauchelevent replies, at the exact same moment that Inspector Javert says, “No.”

A moment’s silence passes, and Éponine sees that Monsieur Fauchelevent is looking at her, a plea in his eyes. She recalls her observation in the garden that, in this body, she could likely pick up Cosette with one hand.

“We are going,” she says firmly, before stepping forward and sweeping up an armful of struggling, incandescently indignant police inspector and lifting him into the carriage.

“This is an outrage! I do not consent to being handled like a sack of potatoes –”

If anyone is listening to him, they give no sign of it.

“Thank you,” Fauchelevent whispers in her ear as they climb inside the carriage, and Éponine smiles.
Javert regrets having ever laid eyes on Jean Valjean.

Granted, it is not the first time he’s had occasion to reflect on this fact; however, it is the most sincere. His life had been simple before he had first encountered the convict known as 24601. Right and wrong were clearly delineated concepts, the law was absolute, and he understood his place in the world.

Now, he struggles with the application of mercy on a daily basis. Now, Jean Valjean looks at him through a Thénardier’s eyes, averting his gaze whenever Javert looks at him. Now, Javert is in possession of a heaving bosom that is barely restrained by the dress that the Thénardier girl had hurriedly pressed upon him before they left the Rue Plumet this morning.

He scowls, pulling at the front of the dress in an attempt at modesty. While he knows that there is no law against this neckline, he feels that there really should be. Maybe later, when he escapes to the station, he can bring this up with his superiors. In the meantime, he feels horribly exposed to the whole world. How does Cosette stand it?

He pulls at his whiskers irritably, only to remember that they are now in Cosette’s possession, and so he settles for winding a few strands of hair around his finger instead, pulling on it harder than is strictly necessary. Another crime to lay at the feet of Jean Valjean. He does not yet know how this whole unfortunate situation is Valjean’s fault, but it most assuredly is. As is the fact that in recent months, he has been feeling faint flickers of something that – if it were not so preposterous – he would call contentment.

It is preposterous, though, and therefore he refuses to dwell on it. He certainly refuses to dwell on the fact that earlier this week, Valjean had patted his hand absent-mindedly while visiting him at his apartment; Javert’s breath had caught in his throat, his heart pounding in a way that he had only ever associated with the thrill of the hunt. He had frozen in place, Valjean apparently unaware of his torment, and wondered how his life had come to this.

Once he had sufficiently recovered from his injuries, the only thing Javert had wanted had been for Valjean to leave him alone to sort through the strange wreckage of his life; however, it had quickly become clear that the only constant in Javert’s existence was that Valjean was going to do the exact opposite of whatever was expected of him. And so Valjean had kept coming, day after day, gently and inexorably drawing Javert into this new, entirely unfamiliar world the same way he had drawn him out of the waters of the Seine.

Javert likes to think that he was not so self-deluded, even then, as to believe that Valjean’s visits were at all motivated by pleasure in his company. Javert has known ever since Valjean had once had a whole town so fooled as to actually elect him mayor of it that he is no stranger to dissembling – but in this, he seems strangely ill at ease, and his rather poor attempts at representing his visits as social calls had irritated Javert more than anything else. He had known that Valjean was only there in an attempt to ensure he did not end up at the bottom of a large body of water.

He is past that, now. But Valjean’s visits haven’t stopped; for whatever reason, neither one of them has severed this tenuous connection, and now they more often than not find themselves sharing a glass of wine in the quiet of Javert’s sparse rooms, talking about things that Javert can never quite remember afterwards.

Javert finds himself anticipating and dreading the visits in equal measure. The tentative hope that
blooms within him in Valjean’s presence so often seems to wither when he is once more left to his own devices. Solitude, which had once come so naturally to him, now leaves him aware of just what it is he lacks, like a blind man given a brief, shining moment of sight before having it snatched away again.

Even in the warmth of Valjean’s presence, he often finds himself torn asunder. There is a certain depth to which their conversations penetrate, but no further. Valjean invariably waves away Javert’s fumbling attempts at apologies – as if there is a way for him to even begin to apologise for all that he has done! – seemingly content to turn the discussions back to the abstract, to hypothetical questions of morality and justice that deftly evade any mention of cruel iron and starving children, any hint of a whipcrack singing through the air.

While Javert cannot blame the man for wishing to avoid speaking of such things, such conversations leave him with a distinctly troubled feeling. Perhaps it is charity on Valjean’s part after all, and he is merely doing enough to keep Javert alive and functioning within society. Perhaps Javert will never be able to bring himself to tell Valjean that he sometimes wakes during the night so cold that he thinks he will never be warm again. Perhaps they will go on like this forever, Javert’s yearning and Valjean’s barely concealed heartache thrumming just beneath the veneer of companionable conversation.

Or perhaps Javert will just do something rash and regrettable, like falling to his knees before Valjean and begging his forgiveness.

Although, knowing Valjean, he would probably merely divert the conversation to the giving of alms, and never again mention what had happened.

The man is absolutely maddening. Still, despite everything, Javert cannot bring himself to regret this strange new turn his life has taken. To have found companionship at this stage in his life – no matter how tentative, no matter how fragile – is something that he never would have expected, or thought he wanted.

Clearly he is not the only one to be astonished by this development. He’d seen the surprised expression the Thénardier girl had pulled with Valjean’s face when his portress had revealed that he visited him – but what business is that of anyone else’s? There’s more than enough happening here already to make him uneasy; namely, that Valjean’s daughter is walking around with his face and in his body, and who knows what else besides. He supposes, however, that Cosette should be no more aware of his thoughts than he is of hers – at least, he can only hope so.

Javert’s face burns – curse his newfound feminine constitution, he most certainly would not react like this were he in his own body – and he pushes the thoughts firmly aside.

There are much more important matters at stake here, and it is time for him to take charge.

The ladies have retired to an adjoining room with their bread and cheese, talking in voices too low for him to overhear. While he appreciates not having to deal with the confusion of having to look at himself, it makes it difficult to plan their next steps.

He raises his voice to the volume that falls under his internal classification system as Putting the fear of God into idiot subordinates. “Cosette! Thénardier! In here!”

Valjean shakes his head, although a smile plays at the corners of his mouth.

Javert fixes him with a glare. “What is it? You already had me dismiss the housekeeper for the week. There is no one else left to hear.”
“Even so. It is best to try to keep in character, surely.”

He draws himself up haughtily. “I am always ready to drop into character at a moment’s notice, Valjean. You know that I am an excellent police spy.”

“I know that you are a police spy, yes,” Valjean murmurs, and Javert narrows his eyes at what seems to be a joke at his expense, though Valjean’s expression is innocent. Before he can object, Valjean continues. “In any case, her name is Éponine, not Thénardier. Although we should get in the habit of calling her ‘Monsieur Fauchelevent’ for the time being.”

“I will call her whatever I please.” His glare deepens as Cosette and the Thénardier girl finally stroll into the room, still deep in conversation. He clears his throat as he stands. “I am pleased that you could join us.”

The Thénardier girl smiles, baring too many teeth, and it’s so out of place on Jean Valjean’s usually mild countenance that he has to repress a shiver. She slouches inelegantly into a chair. “And I am pleased to see that you’ve recovered from your bout of hysteria. Are you well?”

He will not dignify such inanities with a response. Any person in their right mind would have seen fit to raise protest at being manhandled into a carriage in such a fashion. And by the hand of a common criminal who has stolen the face, the incomparable strength, of the man to whom he owes his life! No, his well-reasoned and logically delivered responses to such treatment were well within the bounds of reasonable conduct. The girl is lucky he didn’t arrest her on grounds of attempted abduction.

He begins to pace before them. “We must formulate a plan. That nincompoop of a lawyer –” At Cosette’s frown, he sighs. “Cosette’s darling fiancé –”

“Your darling fiancé,” the harpy wearing Valjean’s face interjects.

“Cosette’s darling fiancé will be arriving here directly, and we still have yet to come up with a strategy.”

Thénardier lifts her eyebrows. “We do have a plan: pretend that everything is normal, and then try to find a solution once Marius has returned home.”

Up until this moment, Javert has never thought kindly upon Valjean’s preachings on the power of redemption, or Cosette’s attempts to engage him in discussion of whichever frivolous novel she is currently reading. But now, he would give everything he owns for one of them to start talking, no matter the subject. The two of them seem to be happy to defer to Thénardier today, however, allowing her to disrespect his authority with impunity. He is still an officer of the law!

She is practically daring him with her eyes to do something rash. Cosette’s hand – his hand – rests upon her arm, either seeking or giving reassurance. He drags his eyes back up to the girl’s face, but not before the image of himself sitting far too close to Valjean has branded itself upon his brain.

“Your solution is no solution at all. He will be able to tell that something is amiss from the moment he walks in.”

“But, Inspector.” Thénardier’s eyes gleam. “From what I hear, you are the greatest of all police spies who ever lived. Surely pretending to be friendly with Marius for ten minutes is not beyond the capabilities of a man of your considerable talents?”

He is an excellent spy, it is true. But that is not the point. The point is –
She leans forward. “Or are you afraid?”

Javert grits his teeth, his lips drawing back in a snarl. “Hardly.”

He fears nothing and no one.

Except the possibility of that dolt’s hand on his thigh, his ridiculous lips whispering inane nothings into Javert’s ear as they move towards his mouth –

He calms his breathing. Draws his shoulders back, and tries a different tack.

“Only, it would be unfair on the boy to lead him along like that. He would be mortified if he knew to whom his advances were being directed. And it would certainly be unfair on Mademoiselle Cosette, to use her person and her relationship with him in this way.”

“Please, Inspector.” Cosette is finally speaking up, giving him a beseeching look that is entirely ludicrous upon his face. “Marius is still delicate from his convalescence. I fear that the shock of finding out the truth could be devastating for his health.”

She seems sincere enough – but then she bats her eyelashes at him, and it is all he can do to not laugh until he throws up. Better he had died in his sleep than have to endure this farce!

“You have already done so much to ensure our happiness,” Cosette continues. “ Surely you would not now wish to endanger it?”

Javert grinds his teeth. An unfortunate side effect of having revealed Valjean’s rescue of Marius in the aftermath of the barricades was that his own role in that sordid affair had also been brought to light. Their ongoing gratitude has been cloying, and, much as they seem to believe otherwise, he does not enjoy having the many, many things to which he is currently turning a blind eye brought to his attention on such a regular basis. He had not arrested that fool Pontmercy that night after the barricades only because he had assumed he was a dead man, and by the time Javert had been well enough to discover that the boy was alive after all, the government was no longer pursuing the remaining insurgents.

But nonetheless, it pokes at him, like a stone in his shoe, just how much he is putting his personal debts above what he once would have considered his inviolable duty, and all of the things he should be doing but is not, purely for the sake of not breaking Cosette’s heart – which would, most assuredly, break Valjean’s.

Nonetheless, there are still things he absolutely will not do, not even for Valjean, and this is one of them.

He swallows, clenching his jaw. “And what of my health? Surely this pointless charade will provoke such undue stress that your face will age ten years overnight.”

Cosette fixes him with a stubborn glare. “That is a risk that I am willing to take for Marius. He will love me, even if I look like an old crone.”

He will, too, the lovesick fool.

Cosette continues determinedly. “Just tell him that you are feeling a little unwell, and that you wish to lie down.”

“No!” The command comes out with the full weight of his authority; he certainly does not yelp it out in terror. “He will wish to sit there and hold my hand and spoon-feed me soup and stroke my face.
No. Absolutely not.”

Cosette looks like she might be about to reply to this, when the matter is taken out of their hands by an ominous knock at the door. As one, they turn slowly to look towards it.

Javert reminds himself to breathe.

“Well.”
Chapter Notes

A note for this chapter! Since Javert was around to spill the beans about Valjean's rescue efforts at the barricade, Marius is still in the dark about Monsieur Fauchelevent's true identity :)

Marius is surprised when the door opens, and it is not Toussaint’s familiar face that greets him on the other side. Instead, it is Monsieur Fauchelevent himself, his smile sitting oddly upon his face.

“Ah, Monsieur Fauchelevent! What a pleasure it is to see you.” Marius proffers his hand in greeting; Monsieur Fauchelevent takes it, but only after the briefest of hesitations. There is something peculiar about the handshake, but not in any way that Marius can define. Perhaps it is simply that his beloved’s Papa is not a very demonstrative man, but still, Marius has never had cause to be taken aback by his handshakes before.

They stand there, Monsieur Fauchelevent blocking the doorway, the strange smile still upon his face. Marius fidgets with the hem of his sleeve. Is this some kind of test? Was he supposed to visit for dinner last night?

His stomach drops into a pit of bottomless horror. Did he forget Monsieur Fauchelevent’s birthday? Did he forget Cosette’s birthday? His dear darling sweetheart – how could he – he must start making preparations at once –

He opens his mouth to apologise to Monsieur Fauchelevent, to offer to make amends in any way the man sees fit – but then Monsieur Fauchelevent startles slightly and moves aside, waving him into the house. “My apologies, Monsieur Marius. Come in.”

Marius steadies himself against the doorframe for a moment, relief making his knees weak, before he follows the man into the house. It strikes him after a moment, however, that Monsieur Fauchelevent, usually so correct in his address, had called him by his first name. “Are you well, Monsieur?”

“Oh, yes,” Monsieur Fauchelevent says distractedly, not looking back at Marius. “You will be wanting to see Cosette, of course.” He barks out a laugh. “She is... quite eager to see you.”

At this, Marius’ heart swells fit to burst; a heavenly choir fills his ears. To think that he will see his sweet Cosette in but a moment’s time! To think that she is in such proximity to him even now, that she is even a tenth, a hundredth as eager to see him as he is to see her – ah! How will he even begin to endure the seconds until he can lay his eyes once again upon her beauteous countenance, until he can rest his gaze upon the unparalleled splendour of her body, the hills and valleys that he wishes so dearly to traverse –!

Monsieur Fauchelevent leads him into the sitting room, where Cosette – radiant Cosette! – is sitting on the sofa, flanked by Éponine and –

“Oh, Monsieur Inspector! I did not expect to see you here today.”

The Inspector coughs. “I... had a change of plans.”
The man looks almost... embarrassed? If Marius did not know better, he would say that the way he ducks his head is almost demure, and there is something both so alien and so familiar about the mannerism that he finds himself floundering on a raft without a paddle.

He studies the others – Éponine is far from her usual defiant self, sitting close by Cosette’s side, looking mildly perturbed. Cosette herself does not seem quite so eager as Monsieur Fauchelevent had earlier described her; she looks – intense, is the only way that Marius can think to describe it, her smile showing entirely too many teeth and not quite reaching her eyes, which glimmer with something altogether new and dangerous.

It is – disquieting.

It provokes... feelings within him that are not entirely appropriate. To think of his Cosette, sweet petal that she is, looking at him with burning eyes and the bared teeth of a predator!

– No, he cannot and will not think such things. He boxes them up, packs them away with all of the other aberrant thoughts that he has acquired over the years and then stored away in the darkest recesses of his mind.

He realises he is staring, but he is so out of sorts that he is unsure of how to proceed. They are all four of them acting strangely, although not in a way that he could explain to anyone were they to ask. Have they quarrelled? Did they eat something that disagreed with their stomachs? Has he forgotten to fasten his trousers? It is only through a supreme act of will that he keeps both his hands and his eyes from checking.

Perhaps the thing to do is simply to act as if everything is normal and pretend that he has not noticed anything amiss. In any case, as his eyes alight once more on the face of his beloved, all thoughts of the strange mood in the room quit his head at once.

“My love,” he says, bowing before her, like the lovestruck Eros before his ravishing but modest Psyche. They have overcome all, conquered all, to be here together today – and are only two months away from the marriage that will seal their happy destiny. There have been times when Marius has felt he might be overwhelmed by joy.

Cosette does not offer her hand for him to kiss as she usually does – but Marius dismisses this as modesty while they have so much unexpected company. Certainly, he does not think that the inspector would approve of such displays, and Marius has, for reasons he is not quite sure of, always sought after Inspector Javert’s good opinion.

Cosette is silent. If Marius did not know better, he would swear to it that Éponine elbows her lightly in the ribs.

“Oh,” his lovely fiancée says, swallowing. “Yes.” An expression crosses her face, which Marius can only compare to someone who is suffering an acute case of indigestion. “Darling.”

Marius blinks at her, feeling now more than ever that something has happened that he has not been privy to and cannot begin to understand. He opens his mouth, closes it again, and is about to say something more when Inspector Javert cuts in.

“What Cosette means to say is that she is delighted beyond words to see you again,” he says, his tone light, his eyes shining in a way Marius has never seen before. “Perhaps she is simply feeling a little lost for words right now. Is that not correct, Mademoiselle?”

Cosette, her lips pursed, eyes glittering, gives a short, curt nod, before looking away.
Marius is mystified. He wants to ask Cosette if it’s true, or if there is something wrong – but he cannot with her father standing beside him, with Éponine’s strangely pensive presence so close by, and Javert’s shining eyes trained on his face. He clears his throat. “Thank you, Monsieur Inspector,” Marius says uncertainly. If what he says is true, then perhaps it would be best to leave Cosette to collect herself, and speak of other things. He turns to Javert. “Do you recall our conversation of last week, Inspector? I believe we were speaking of the code d'instruction criminelle, and I was saying –”

He continues on, detailing the finer points of the most intriguing discussion they had been engaged in. He notes with confusion that as he goes on, Inspector Javert’s face becomes more and more politely blank, while Cosette seems to become increasingly agitated. This is the exact opposite of what he intended, and yet, having started, he is not sure how he can stop.

And so, he continues.

Until, mid-sentence, his darling Cosette abruptly stands up, her lips pressed into a thin line. Marius ceases talking, hoping she might be about to enlighten him as to the source of her distress – oh, if only she would tell him, he would walk to the ends of the earth to –

“Monsieur,” she says, her voice low and firm, and Marius swallows heavily. “I cannot allow you to labour any further under this illusion.”

Marius starts, cold fear coiling up from his belly and into his chest.

Illusion?

What illusion could Cosette be referring to? Horror grows within him. Could it be that she has ceased to love him? As soon as the thought rises in his head, he dismisses it. It is impossible. It is unthinkable. After all they have been through, he simply cannot allow himself to consider the possibility.

But still, now that the seed has been planted, the vine grows wild within him, squeezing his heart and choking his breath in his lungs. Vaguely he is aware of the panic-stricken faces of Éponine and the inspector where they sit on the sofa, but they fade into darkness as he stares at his beloved.

Her expression is implacable.

“It is my duty to tell you that I am not your fiancée,” she says, her voice low and cold. “That is, I may appear to be so – but it is an artifice. Though I have her form, I am not, in fact, Mademoiselle Fauchelevent. I am Inspector Javert of the Paris police.”

For a long moment, Marius is unsure of what he has heard. The words of his beloved have entered his ears – but upon reaching his brain they have come to a screeching halt. They are as incomprehensible to him as if Cosette had announced an expedition to the moon in a carriage drawn by ducks.

“I – my darling, I –” he ventures, before trailing off uncertainly.

Suddenly, things begin to make sense. Monsieur Fauchelevent’s strange manner upon opening the door. The unexpected presence of Inspector Javert. Éponine’s sad, pensive eyes. The odd mood that has prevailed ever since he entered the room.

His darling, the light of his life, has lost her reason and gone mad.

What other explanation could there be?

Marius gazes wildly about him, hearing his heart beating loudly in his ears. Éponine looks horrified, while the Inspector has both his hands clapped over his lips. Monsieur Fauchelevent is frowning,
eyes dark and angry. Cosette alone looks resolute.

“I –” Marius begins again, before his breath feels too short in his lungs to sustain him.

*She is mad. My angel has gone mad.*

The darkness that has welled at the corners of his vision at last overwhelms him, and he feels himself beginning to fall, senseless, to the floor.

When he awakens, it is with the utmost surprise that he finds his head nestled in the lap of Inspector Javert.
Cosette

Chapter Notes

This chapter has an additional bit of AU, in that it assumes that Gillenormand didn't get rid of absolutely every letter that Marius' father wrote.

Cosette runs her fingers through Marius’ hair, watching intently as his eyelids begin to flutter.

He had trembled underneath the weight of the revelation that Inspector Javert had dropped upon his shoulders, and she had reacted on instinct; even as his eyes had taken on a vague cast, she had leapt up and over the table, catching him as he swooned, and then carried him to the sofa. She had never before considered she would be capable of such a feat, but now she thinks that it was not even Javert’s masculine strength that had made such a thing possible, but rather the sheer power of her love for her darling fiancé.

If she can still call him that! Is he the inspector’s fiancé now, instead? Half-horrified, half-amused, she pictures her wedding day: Marius drawing back her veil, fingers quivering in anticipation and love, only to receive a vicious slap and a lengthy lecture on the dubious legalities of trying to wed a police inspector who is currently trapped within the body of the groom’s betrothed.

Cosette smiles ruefully to herself. She owes them both an apology – it was a terrible plan, really, doomed to failure from the beginning. If they had told Marius more carefully, they could have at least given him less of a fright. While she is sure that he will recover from his fainting spell with no ill effects, to see him once again so pale and still twists her stomach into terrible knots.

At least the others have moved to the next room. The door is still open, but she has a semblance of privacy. For the first time today, she has a moment with her own thoughts; if she closes her eyes, she can almost believe that she is herself, and Marius is merely asleep on her lap. If her body is shot through with aches and pains, if she finds herself coughing more often than she normally would, well then, she can almost convince herself that she has just come down with a mild case of the flu.

A small noise brings her back to reality. Her beloved’s brow creases slightly, and she runs her thumb over his cheekbone, marveling at how Marius, so tall and strong, is now dwarfed beneath her hand—beneath all of her. She tries not to think about it too hard, barring her mind from sudden thoughts that are entirely inappropriate.

“Shh.” She cannot get used to her new voice – she has been using it as little as possible – and is not sure whether it is better or worse to ease Marius back into consciousness with the less-than-dulcet tones of Inspector Javert. She murmurs quiet, reassuring words, hoping that her love and devotion make it through to him, despite the messenger that is carrying them.

“Cosette?” His eyelids move slowly at first, blinking hesitantly, but then they open almost comically wide. He scrambles to sit up, and she reaches for him, torn, wanting to provide comfort but knowing that her touch will just provoke further distress.

“Inspector! I – ah –” He scuttles backwards on the sofa, then groans and closes his eyes, clutching at his head. Her heart aches for him – what confused torment he must feel!
“Marius.” She tries to keep her voice calm, soothing, but not so much so as to be ridiculous when coming from the inspector. “Do you remember what happened?”

“I – that is – I –”

It is painful, watching him trying to think it through, to try to work out whether it is he or the world that has gone mad. Perhaps they should have sent Papa to talk to him first; he always knows what to say to make people feel better, and Éponine’s presence is surely not as frightful as the inspector’s.

She decides to gently nudge him in the right direction. “Do you remember being told that –” She falters for a moment, catching herself. “That Cosette was not Cosette? That she was, in fact, Inspector Javert?”

Marius shudders a little, and oh, how she wishes to reach for his hand! She watches as he wages some kind of internal battle with himself, before, at last, he gives the barest of nods.

Her head tilts as she tries to catch his eyes, but they remain fixed upon his folded hands; his shoulders slump. She tries her best to soften her voice. “Marius... she – he – was telling the truth. That was Inspector Javert.”

His head jerks up, eyes widening, mouth opening and closing soundlessly for several moments. “But – what –” He stops, closes his eyes, takes several slow breaths. She gives him time.

He opens his eyes again, and this time they are anguished. “What kind of trick are you all playing upon me? Or am I truly going mad? Have I succumbed to my injuries after all?” His breath quickens. “Where is Cosette? I must see her. I must have these words from her, not from – you.”

He jumps up, and only her hand upon his wrist keeps him from fleeing; through the open door she can see Papa moving to rise, his youthful forehead already pulling itself into familiar worry lines, and silently she begs him, not yet. He nods slightly and lowers himself back into his chair. How grateful she is for him!

“Marius. Please look at me.”

The look he gives her – disbelieving, hurt – is one that she had hoped never to see upon his face. It cuts her to the quick, but the pain steels her determination. She loosens her fingers slightly – still enough to hold him, but not enough to cause pain. He remains standing, watching her with suspicion.

“Please, just – just humour me for a minute.” She smiles softly. “Say that it is true – that Inspector Javert is now inhabiting Cosette’s body. Would it not then follow that Cosette would have to be inhabiting the inspector’s body?”

Marius merely stares at her, and oh, she can see him thinking so hard, trying to put together the events of the day, looking into the inspector’s eyes and trying to see his beloved within them. She lets all of her love for him flow into her expression, her bearing, letting her fingers slip from his wrist, taking his hand tenderly within both of hers. Her heart beats faster when he does not pull away; suspicion and longing wage a war in his countenance. He licks his lips.

“Prove it,” he says, and his voice is rough. “Tell me something that only Cosette would know.”

A wave of excitement washes over her, and she tries to keep herself calm. There are still so many things that could go wrong.

“When you were ill, I would sit and read to you for hours on end. I read everything that I could lay
hands on – novels, newspapers, your terribly boring legal books. At one point, I read you all of *Pride and Prejudice*, just because I know you despise Darcy so, and I was hoping that reading it to you would enrage you enough that you would get out of bed in order to escape it.”

Marius’ lip twitches in what could be the beginnings of amusement, but he is still clearly suspicious. And very, very confused. “Plenty of people came in and out of that room – any of them could have told the inspector this.”

“That is true.” She takes a deep breath. “I also read to you the notes – the ones your grandfather at last allowed you to have during your recovery. The ones that were written by your father.”

Marius gasps; slowly, he sinks back down to the couch. She takes both of his hands now, gently stroking them, as she did for so many long days and nights. The words continue to come from her mouth, although she is not thinking about them so much anymore, thinking only that she has her beloved Marius back. “I read to you about tulips, about dahlias. About all the plants he so lovingly tended. I only ever read this to you in those times when there was no one else to hear.”

His eyes fill with tears. “Oh, Cosette! My darling! My love!”

Suddenly, his lips are upon hers – somehow both chaste and full of emotion at the same time. She startles – this is improper in so many ways, she cannot even begin to count them – but then she kisses back, just for a few moments, only because Marius clearly needs this comfort.

She breaks the kiss before it can become too heated, instead taking him in her arms and merely holding him. She notes distantly that the door to the room has been closed, and silently she thanks Papa for being so understanding.

Or possibly Inspector Javert, for being so mortified. She smiles into Marius’ neck, stifling a laugh.

“Oh, Cosette.” Marius has pulled back, and is staring intently into her eyes. “Is it truly you?”

“Hmm. Well, I do seem to recall you telling me once that you have a birthmark on your –”

“Enough! I believe you!” Marius looks almost giddy. He cocks his head, looking her over; she blushes under his regard. “Well, look at you. I must say, this is quite... unexpected. What on earth happened?”

“I don’t know.” She’s so thrilled to have Marius back, she hardly even cares. “We just woke this morning like this. Papa and Éponine, too.”

“Your father and Éponine as well?” Marius almost looks a little faint again. “Well, that would explain a lot.”

“I’m sure we made quite the queer impression,” she laughs, and she coaxes his head back down upon her lap again. It is terribly forward, but, well, Marius does still look pale, like he could pass out again at any moment. “I must apologise for our behaviour. Now that I am no longer in a state of panic, I can see that we chose what was quite possibly the worst possible course of action.”

“I will agree that it was less than ideal,” Marius says. His face twists into an unreadable expression. “Just think, I could have ended up kissing the inspector!”

Cosette coughs, feeling her face heat once more. “Well, Marius, one could make the argument that you did.”

Marius startles for a moment, before relaxing again. “I kissed you, Cosette.”
Her heart clenches with joy. She had said that Marius would still love her even if she were a crone; this is another step beyond that again. While she had known the depths of his devotion in the abstract, she is overwhelmed now at having it proven in truth.

And yet....

She smiles playfully. “You did not seem to mind kissing me as the inspector.”

His face reddens at that – which is not unexpected. But she is surprised to see that it does not stop – it spreads down his throat, and his face turns a deeper shade of crimson. His mouth works wordlessly.

An answering heat suffuses her. She clears her throat. “Why, Marius Pontmercy. I would not have expected this of you.”

Marius groans, covering his face with his hands. He rolls towards her, his face almost coming into contact with –

Oh.

If Cosette had previously thought herself incapable of blushing any more than she already was, she is now being proven terribly, horribly wrong.

She freezes. Marius freezes. She can hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner, obscenely loud.

Then she pushes Marius to the floor. She feels bad about it, but not as bad as she would feel about keeping him in her lap. This is not her body! They are unmarried! They are both, for all intents and purposes, men! This is unseemly in the extreme!

*Oh sweet Jesus, save me –!*

The sudden thought comes to her of glasses held against walls, of curious eyes at keyholes, and she covers her lap, even as Marius stares at her from the floor, biting his lip. She does *not* let her gaze travel lower, keeps it fixed firmly upon his face.

“Cosette – my darling – I can’t imagine how, ah, confusing this must be for you. If there’s anything I can do to help you – *understand* –”

She stares at him, aghast.

Is he offering to –?

“No!” Her voice cracks, and for a moment she almost sounds like her usual self. “No, that won’t be necessary – thank you for the offer, Marius – but I should – I have to go –”

Cosette stands abruptly. The door – there are two doors to this room. She can make it to the other one – she can – and she just hopes and prays that the others have stayed put where they were before.

Marius is still sprawled on the floor, still looking delightfully dishevelled – *no, don’t think that* – but, she thinks, he looks like he understands.

She can only hope.

“I’m sorry!” she gasps, and stumbles past him, to the far door, and, hopefully, to the safety of her bedroom beyond.
'For what it is worth, Javert, I am truly sorry,’ Valjean says.

They are standing in the porter’s lodge, a single candle flickering on the table as Javert drags a brush viciously through Cosette’s fine chestnut hair. Valjean winces – he hates to see it being so roughly treated, but he doesn’t think Javert will be receptive to suggestions just at this moment.

“Well, I am not,” Javert says, frowning. ‘The boy needed to be told, now rather than later. Did you honestly think he would thank you for keeping it from him, once he knew the truth?’

Valjean sighs. In principle, he agrees with Javert – but he still wishes there had been some other way.

“You are correct,” he murmurs. Normally he might take up the opportunity to debate the issue, but he is exhausted in a way that is new to him – not the physical fatigue that comes from hard labour and poor living conditions, nor the enervating, ever-present knot of fear deep within the stomach that he knew so well during his years on the run, but something new again. He does not know whether he wants to collapse into his bed, or go out into the street and run until his legs give out.

He settles for watching Javert’s reaction, taking a moment to enjoy the way his eyebrows go up in surprise at the unexpected agreement. He can allow Javert this small victory; after all, Cosette and Marius had spent the afternoon alternately gazing into each other’s eyes with unbridled longing, or studiously avoiding one another in the throes of some kind of deep-seated mortification. If it had been somewhat uncomfortable for Valjean to watch, it had to have invoked suffering of the greatest magnitude within Javert.

Beyond that was the two hours that Cosette had spent in her bedroom, while Marius had wandered around the kitchen in a fugue state, buttering pieces of bread and then staring at them as if he did not know what to do with them. Cosette had assured Valjean later – while staring intently at a spot just past his shoulder – that the time had been spent simply praying to God for assistance with their dilemma, and he had decided to believe her, for both their sakes.

“Well! Yes. Of course I am correct.” Javert somehow manages to look down his nose at Valjean, despite his height. Valjean smothers a smile; it would not do to have to explain to Javert how endearing the expression looks on his current face. “You are aware that your daughter coddles that ninny,” he says gruffly, his lips tight.

“Well, perhaps. But they are young,” Valjean says, unable to hide his smile entirely. “We must be patient with the follies of youth.”

Javert frowns. “I was young once, and I was never so foolish.” Valjean sees him swallow, and then his eyes slide away to the corner of the room. “At least, not in that way.”

Dismayed, Valjean opens his mouth to reply, grasping for the right words. It has been some time since Javert has questioned his own worth in such a way, and Valjean had hoped that maybe he had managed to move beyond this – beyond the doubt and loathing that had consumed him after Valjean had pulled him, half-dead, from the cold waters of the Seine.

What can he say that he hasn’t said a hundred times before, that won’t come across as trite, an empty platitude? Maybe Javert has felt this way the entire time, has stopped baring his heart to Valjean because he knows that Valjean is incapable of helping him. Jean Valjean may have the strength to lift a cart off a dying man, but what does he know about lifting the burdens off another’s soul?
Valjean flounders helplessly, and whatever moment existed between them evaporates into the air as Javert’s expression hardens, becomes that of the inspector once more. The message is clear: there will be no more talk of such things, the moment of apparent weakness a mere aberration.

Javert tugs viciously again at another knot of hair, and Valjean’s fingers itch to assist him, to make amends in his own inadequate way. He knows that Javert is capable of taking better care – he would surely resemble a plucked chicken by now, were he to treat his own hair in such a fashion – but clearly the man is at the end of his tether, and their hurried departure from the Rue Plumet this morning had left them with no time to unpick the tangles of the previous night.

Valjean’s chest tightens almost imperceptibly as old memories rise, unbidden, before his mind’s eye: Cosette seated before him, waiting patiently as he runs the comb gently through her hair. Day after day, year after year, morning and evening; he could have set his watch by it, if not for those times when they had to run. A simple braid at night, to keep her hair tidy while she slept, followed by more complicated styles in the morning. He became quite good at it, if he does say so himself, although some of his more fanciful attempts had earned him an exasperated Papa!, complete with an eyeroll or the stamp of a tiny foot.

Thousands of times, he must have brushed her hair. From when she was a small, malnourished child, through the peace and turbulence of the following years and then the blossoming of womanhood, they had shared this daily ritual. Until Marius had come along, and suddenly Cosette was too old to want this anymore, too mature and worldly to have her old, unfashionable father pin back her hair.

He knows that he is being unfair. She is a woman now, about to embark upon her own life. Still, it was a small joy that he could always rely on, no matter how terrible everything else may have been, and now its absence leaves an ache in his heart.

And Javert... well. Valjean had brushed the man’s hair during his convalescence, but that had been out of mere necessity, the bare minimum required to keep his reluctant boarder relatively clean and tidy. As soon as Javert had regained the capacity to hold a comb, no matter how poorly, Valjean had been forbidden from having anything further to do with Javert’s hair. While Valjean had been satisfied with this arrangement at the time, now – now that the idea has burrowed its way into his mind – he finds that the thought of running a brush through the man’s hair has a certain curious appeal. He does not wish to think on why this may be, or why he has found of late that his mind tends to wander places he thinks it probably ought not go.

He rubs at his eyes tiredly. What a web of feelings this unfortunate situation has woven in his heart!

“Here.” The word is out of Valjean’s mouth before his good sense can override his powers of speech. “Pass me the brush.”

“Excuse me?” Javert stares at him incredulously, and Valjean does not think he can blame him.

“The brush. Pass it to me, please.” At Javert’s continued perplexity, he sighs. “The brush, man! I will not have my daughter rendered bald for her own wedding.”

He thinks that maybe he should have found a more diplomatic way of phrasing his request; he has already discovered today that Javert, understandably, does not enjoy being reminded of the fact that Cosette will be married to Marius in a mere two months’ time. Valjean is certain that their predicament will be resolved before Marius can make an honest man of Javert, God willing, but he must also admit to a sense of unease if he thinks about the upcoming nuptials in too much detail.

He prepares himself for an argument, but the fight seems to have gone out of Javert; sullenly, he hands the brush over and sits on the chair.
“I apologise,” Valjean says, carefully adjusting his grip around the brush. “I am still getting used to using my left hand. Please let me know if I pull too hard.”

Javert merely grunts daintily in acquiescence, and Valjean allows himself a small smile. One day, he is certain, they will be able to look back on all of this and laugh.

Well, he will, anyway.

He hesitantly takes a small amount of hair with his crippled right hand. There is still some strength in the fourth and fifth fingers, and it is this that he uses to secure the hair in place. His left hand brings the brush to the very ends of the hair, starting from the bottom, teasing out the tangles at the easiest point.

Javert’s shoulders are rigid beneath his hands; his ramrod posture betraying his supreme discomfiture, and Valjean casts about for a topic that might serve as a distraction.

“You spent quite some time in the study this afternoon.” *Hiding from Cosette and Marius*, he does not say. “Might I enquire as to what you were working on? A case, perhaps?”

It is a risky strategy – reminding Javert of his current inability to perform his inspector’s duties may well frustrate him – but he also knows that once Javert starts talking about his work, he often gets so caught up in it that he forgets all else in the seemingly endless list of things that cause him ill temper.

At the very least, it may be enough to bring something of an air of normality to what has otherwise been a most perplexing day, even if Javert becomes snappish. *Especially* if Javert becomes snappish.

Often they will discuss whichever case is vexing Javert most, taking to the garden when the weather allows: Javert cradling a cup of coffee in hands that make it look like something from a child’s tea-set, while Valjean prunes the roses and mildly offers whatever advice he knows will most exasperate Javert, just to see the man’s brows draw together in irritation.

Or, more often, he will meet Javert after his shift has finished and accompany him back to his humble apartment for a single glass of wine and a discussion on the finer points of mercy. In a way, Valjean almost envies him his home, uncluttered and utilitarian as it is; it is the kind of residence that Valjean would choose for himself, were Cosette not so insistent on his having some luxuries, however small. His insistence on staying in the porter’s lodge is his own small act of rebellion, a reminder of where he came from, of his good fortune in being able to have a roof over his head at all.

And now they are both here in the cottage, his fingers in Javert’s hair. Or – his daughter’s hair, but in the low flicker of candlelight, he can almost believe that it is shot through with grey, thicker and straighter, and strangely soft against the skin of his palms.

He closes his eyes, trying not to let the shudder reach his hands where they brush Javert’s back. He cannot even begin to imagine what prayers he will say to God tonight; he knows that he will be asking for forgiveness, although for what, precisely, he cannot even begin to articulate. Surely God, in His infinite mercy, will show Valjean compassion after such a trying day.

He moves onto a new tangle, pulling apart the worst of it with his fingers before running the brush through it once more.

Javert sighs. “If you must know, I was writing some notes for Cosette.”

Valjean’s hand stills for a moment, before he forces himself to continue. He knows where this is going. “About what?”
“About my current cases, my fellow officers. No, listen –” Javert lifts a hand, stilling Valjean’s protests. “She needs to make an appearance tomorrow. Just for long enough to report back about a couple of urgent matters, and then request a few days of leave.”

Valjean frowns. He starts to pull Javert’s hair back into a simple braid in order to keep himself from saying anything rash. He is out of practice, and his scarred hand makes neatness difficult, but the braid is serviceable for its purpose.

“Please,” Javert says, and his voice is so quiet that Valjean barely recognises it. “You know that my work is – important to me.”

Valjean hears everything that Javert is not saying: that he has had to work hard to regain a tentative trust from his superiors after the letter he had sent that June evening. That he will be at a loose end if he is relieved of his duties. That his presence may, in some small way, help to shift the tide towards mercy.

Valjean carefully ties off the end of the braid with a ribbon, thinking. He cannot respond to Javert just yet. He knows that Cosette would likely do anything that was asked of her to try to relieve some of the pressure of this situation, and might even be excited by the chance to try. She has, after all, never been a timid girl.

He has spent the last decade protecting her, keeping her from harm whenever possible. The thought of exposing her to such a risk makes bile rise in his throat. But she is a woman now – the woman he raised her to be, strong-willed and clever. He will have to let her make her own decisions.

“Here.” He passes the brush over Javert’s shoulder; Javert turns to look back up at him, confused. Valjean gestures at him to stand up. “My hair also requires brushing.” He finds that he can no longer meet Javert’s eyes. “If – if you don’t mind.”

Javert takes the brush cautiously, standing and moving behind the chair so that Valjean can sit. Valjean is aware that he is making himself vulnerable in a way that would have seemed unthinkable two years ago, but now it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

He closes his eyes at the hesitant pull of the brush – so much gentler than Javert had been with his own hair. The feeling is strange; he has never had hair this long, never had the privilege of someone else running a brush through it. The sensation is more comforting than he could have imagined, soothing away some of the headache he was not even aware of until now.

Javert continues to brush in uncertain silence, and Valjean can almost believe that it is Javert, Javert alone, inhabiting nothing but his own form.

He exhales quietly. He must do what is right, even though it pains him. Is this not what he has been saying to Javert for all this time?

“Cosette may go to the stationhouse tomorrow.”

The brush freezes in his hair, and he quickly qualifies, “If – if! – you both take all necessary precautions. And if Cosette agrees, of course.”

“Of course.” Then: “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

The brush moves again – but no, he realises after a moment, those are Javert’s fingers drawing through his hair, and he bites his lip against an embarrassing noise. After a moment, he realises that
Javert is preparing to pull his hair back for him, and his lips twitch into a smile.

“Do you even know how to braid hair?”

Javert’s voice is edged with disdain. “I am familiar with the theory behind the concept. It cannot be so difficult.”

Valjean does not respond, enjoying too much the sensation of fingers in his hair, the gentle tug as sections of it are separated out and then wound back together.

Too soon, however, Javert completes the task. Valjean flips the end of the braid over his shoulder to inspect it, and is unsurprised to find it neatly and efficiently done. He does not need to look at Javert’s face to see the grim satisfaction etched upon it.

He smiles, rising to his feet. “Thank you, Javert.”

Valjean glances out of the cottage window, to where the house is just visible through the dense leaves of the garden. There is a candle still flickering in the window of Éponine’s room, but Cosette’s is in darkness. Valjean tries not to reflect overly long on why this relieves him. Compared with the situations of Cosette and Javert, his own predicament only concerns him insofar as it also affects Éponine.

To see his own body moving about on its own does not unsettle him, the way it seems to unsettle Javert. What has his own body ever meant to him, anyway – and when has it ever truly been his? He does not remember ever considering it so when he was young; the only thing that had made him appreciate what he had lost had been the bagne. His body had not been his for all those nineteen years; and afterwards, it had meant nothing to him beyond the fact that it was a vessel for his soul, nothing more than an instrument to ensure Cosette’s safety. It hadn’t mattered at all, and he would have been willing to sacrifice it at a moment’s notice if it had kept her from harm.

A bare whisper of air against his arm announces Javert’s presence at his side. Valjean shivers; the day may have been warm, but the night holds the promise of frost.

“Hmm.” Javert stares out the window. “One hopes that they are sleeping well.”

The deep frown he is wearing sits poorly on Cosette’s sweet features. The expression is so completely Javert’s that for a moment, it becomes impossible for Valjean to see anything but Javert.

It has been a long day, Valjean thinks – long and troubling enough that it seems natural to let his hand rest on Javert’s arm, to let it linger for longer than could be considered strictly proper. Who would judge him for providing comfort in these strange times to a man whom he has come to think of as a friend? He does not know if Javert would assent to being called so, but the topic has never come up, and so Valjean has continued to do so in the privacy of his own head.

The tension beneath his fingers lessens fractionally, and Javert leans his forehead against the windowpane for a moment, eyes closed, before he straightens again.

“We should sleep.” His mouth twists into a smile, and the strange tension in the air dissipates. “You should hope that your daughter is well-rested tomorrow, Valjean – she will need all of her wits in order to perform her duties as inspector. Who knows – perhaps she will perform them so admirably that she will decide to stay on for the rest of the day. Maybe she’ll break up that smuggling ring we’ve been trying to crack.”

Valjean smiles, allowing his hand to linger a moment longer on Javert’s arm before letting go. Javert is just trying to rile him now – and he is succeeding, somewhat, but Javert does not need to know
that. It is worth it to see his melancholy lift.

He walks over to the bed, to the nightgown that sits upon it. By unspoken agreement, they face away from each other. Valjean’s injured hand struggles to loosen the lacing on his stay, but he cannot ask Javert for assistance with this; it is too much, too strange. Besides, Éponine manages to do this every day.

It takes him longer than he would like to admit; Javert waits quietly until he is done. He hesitates as he climbs into his bed, feeling strangely ill at ease for some indefinable reason. Perhaps it is merely the knowledge that he can no longer trust that he will be himself when he wakes in the morning, that he will awaken in the same bed.

“Who knows?” he says out loud, as much to himself as to Javert. “Perhaps tomorrow we will rise to find that this affliction has passed. It came on in our sleep, so might it not also vanish? The only thing we can do is put our faith in God, and trust that He is watching over us.”

Javert does him the courtesy of not looking overly sceptical as he settles onto the spare mattress they have placed on the floor, pulling the coverlet up to his chin. “Well. Perhaps so.”

Valjean leans over and blows out the candle, before he too settles down, hopefully to wake back within his own body. He closes his eyes in silent prayer, repeating the same prayer he has said every night since Digne, but he finds that tonight, the words provide scant comfort – and that in itself is enough to make him uneasy. Outside the window, he hears the same mysterious rustlings of the garden, the same nighttime songbirds that have lulled him to sleep every night since they came here.

Now, however, he can also hear Javert’s breath in the room beside him – but it is soft and low, and not at all what it should be. The thought puts a chill into his heart.

On the mattress on the floor, Javert shuffles about, apparently trying to get comfortable, before finally he sighs. “Goodnight, Valjean.”

“Goodnight, Javert.”
Cosette’s morning had begun before dawn, with a sharp rapping at her door that had jolted her awake so abruptly that she had almost fallen out of bed. Inspector Javert had stalked into the room moments later, fully dressed, giving her no time to ready herself. That being said, at least she had had the decency to wear a nightgown to bed, so the moment was not half as horrifying as it could have been, merely exceedingly indecorous. But, as the inspector had pointed out, there was nothing there he had not seen before, and it could hardly be considered inappropriate for him to be alone in the same room as himself.

He had asked her whether she would be willing to spend a short time at the police station, and her heart had skipped a beat. Of course she would! To think that she, Cosette Fauchelevent, would have the chance to witness the workings of justice, to walk amongst men and have them listen to what she had to say!

Things had moved quickly from there: the inspector had dropped an enormous stack of papers before her, with orders to memorise everything. Javert had recorded a description of every single person she could possibly encounter during her short trip to the police stationhouse, the layout of the building, everyone’s rank relative to his own and how much respect she should therefore accord them, and a thousand other particulars that she could scarcely hope to understand, let alone recall.

But she had put her mind to it as best as she possibly could, something inside her igniting at the mission she had been set. Not just for the sake of protecting the inspector’s position within the police force – although obviously that was the most important thing – but out of the thrill of the challenge. To show herself equal to the task, to perhaps use her borrowed position to help some of the downtrodden of society – she had been able to think of nothing more exciting.

Of course, Javert had told her that all she needed to do was to go to the station, request a few days of leave, and hand over a letter containing all the information that he wished to pass on to his superiors about his current cases. She was not, under any circumstances, to engage in any actual police work whatsoever or to read the letter; the dozens upon dozens of pages of paperwork she was expected to memorise were merely precautionary.

*Preparation*, Javert had gritted out, *is essential for any man of the law*. As if to demonstrate his point, he had run the razor blade along her jaw with exacting precision – *I will not have you present yourself as some bumbling adolescent with razor cuts all over his face* – and examined his own handiwork critically, before nodding in approval.

At least he had allowed her to dress herself! After he had left the room, she had sat before the mirror – too tall to stand before it, now – and studied her expression, trying to school her features into something that would pass muster with the inspector’s colleagues.

Looking at her reflection – a reflection which, disturbingly, she was starting to get used to – she had drawn her brows together in her most disdainful frown, stiffening her posture until her shoulders hurt. *Like someone shoved his cudgel up his arse*, an inner voice that sounded suspiciously like Éponine had supplied, and she had bitten her lip against a traitorous giggle.

She had pulled upon the lapels of her greatcoat, clearing her throat. Tried to send her voice a little deeper, bringing it down from the slightly higher pitch she has been favouring since they all found themselves in this mess. “Well!”

So caught up in her playacting had she been, that she had not noticed the other figure in the reflection
until it had shifted very deliberately.

*Oh. So that is the legendary Javert scowl that strikes fear into the hearts of all those who encounter it.*

She had tried to copy it, with some success – aided undoubtedly by the fact that the expression seemed to be somewhat engrained into the face that she now wore – and the expression on Javert’s face had slid into a pained grimace.

“Well –” He had cut himself off with a cough. “Indeed. Anyway, you must eat.”

It had only been at that point that Cosette had realised how famished she was, and she had hurried to the kitchen, Javert trailing silently after her.

*

Now, she finds herself in the dingy stationhouse on the Rue de Pontoise, clutching Javert’s letter in her trembling hands as if it is her only lifeline in this heaving sea of masculinity. The raised voices, the stink of sweat, the sheer physicality and swagger on display from police officers and detainees both – how different to the life she knows!

And yet.

Memories twitch at the corners of her mind – a rowdy inn, smells far worse than sweat, feet so numb that she cannot be certain that they even still exist, all the tiny shreds of memory that have come to her over the years – and she steels herself. She has survived far worse places than this, for far longer, as only a small child. Surely she can deliver one letter to another man, protected as she is by the trappings of authority.

“Inspector Javert?”

The voice sounds like it has been trying to get her attention for some time; belatedly, she realises that she is Inspector Javert.

*Remain calm,* she tells herself determinedly. *You cannot show weakness. You must embody the quintessence of Javert.*

Still, she finds herself slightly at a loss, trying to find a way to play the role without descending into parody. Should she be completely aloof, or allow for a kind of gruff camaraderie? The inspector himself had been no help when she had sought his assistance this morning, lacking the kind of self-awareness that a more feminine soul would possess.

Surely he would strike terror into the hearts of his subordinates, given his fearsome reputation! Not that it is a reputation she fully understands, for it seems obvious to her that his bark is worse than his bite... but then again, his subordinates do not have Papa there to keep him in line.

She does not think she can handle instilling terror in these poor young policemen, though. Maybe a small amount of mild alarm will suffice.

Having settled on a course of action, she turns slowly towards the source of the voice. A man stands before her – *cowers* is too strong a word, but only by a small margin. His hair is dark and plays host
to a scattering of dry skin flakes; from Javert’s notes, she knows that he is Sergeant Giraud.

She looks down her nose at him, a small part of her reveling in how she succeeds in making the man shrink back, even as she feels bad for the poor sergeant. A peculiar thought strikes her: how little she has seen of the tops of people’s heads over the course of her life, and, conversely, how many sets of nostrils she has gazed up into!

*Focus, Cosette – Inspector Javert.*

“Yes, Sergeant Giraud?”

The man seems startled; he stammers and wrings his hands.

“I – ah, that is – I just wanted to inform you that we had a breakthrough in the Philippe case last night, Inspector.”

She narrows her eyes a little. “Yes?”

“Well, we arrested him, Inspector – caught him in the act down at the docks. He’s in a holding cell right now.”

“Well! Good, then.” She nods sharply, filing away the information so that she can pass it on to Javert later. How she dearly wants to find out more – but she cannot allow herself to get tangled up in police affairs.

Giraud stares at her, wide-eyed, fear and pride chasing each other across his features. She decides to put him out of his misery. “Good work, Giraud.” Daringly, she claps him on the shoulder for good measure.

His eyes bug even wider, if possible. “I – I – thank you, Inspector.”

Cosette nods again. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must go see the commissaire.”

She turns away and heads towards the other side of the room without looking back, allowing herself to start breathing again. She prays to God that she is remembering the directions correctly, that she will not walk up to the wrong door and start talking to the wrong person. Or, God forbid, into the broom cupboard.

Belatedly, she realises that she is muttering instructions to herself – but if any of the room’s occupants take note, well then, too bad for them. She is Inspector Javert, she does not give a damn what they think!

Her stride is confident, her bearing erect, as she makes her way across the room.

“Hey! Javert! Yeah, you!”

This time, she registers the name as her own, but the voice that spits it out is unexpected – female and harsh. Startled, she stops and turns to see a woman leering at her from one of the holding cells. Her teeth, those that remain, are stained and broken; her eyes glint with amused malice from within her filthy face. She yanks down at her tattered bodice and exposes her breasts, smiling triumphantly.

“See anything you like, Inspector?”

Even as she wishes to help the woman – she must be desperate, to behave so! – she knows that she cannot. To give the woman alms, to offer to put her into contact with a colleague of Marius’ who
specialises in such cases – surely she would get Inspector Javert into a world of trouble!

How to react to such an overture, then? Thinking quickly, she chooses a course of action; she can only pray that her response is believable.

“I do see something I like, in fact.” Cosette walks slowly towards the cell, the woman’s eyes widening in surprise. She allows her face to slip into an expression of disdain, disturbed at how easily it comes. “It is always pleasing to see a criminal behind bars.”

_God forgive me. The poor wretch!_

But the woman, after her initial shock, hoots with laughter and slaps her knee, her bosom jiggling about unrestrained. Cosette keeps her eyes trained on the woman’s face easily enough – she is displaying nothing that Cosette does not herself possess, after all, present circumstances excepted – and she is certain that the inspector would not be distracted by such things.

“I should’ve known! The high-and-mighty Inspector Javert, who can’t even be swayed by such a fine set of tits as these!”

Before Cosette can react, the woman’s bony fingers are wrapped around her wrist, pulling Cosette’s hand down into the woman’s... décolletage, such as it is.

_Well. Javert certainly did not mention this in his briefing._

Cosette recognises that this is a test, a battle of wills, and so she keeps her eyes locked with the woman’s, neither trying to pull her arm back nor attempting any sort of inappropriate contact. The whole room has gone silent, and she can feel all eyes upon her. She stares into the woman’s bloodshot eyes, seeing anger, resignation, and a hint of dark amusement.

The woman breaks first, releasing Cosette’s wrist with an irritated huff, and Cosette calmly draws her hand back to her side, dusting her fingers against her coat. The woman spits.

“Starting to think they’re right, what they say about you – nothing in your pants at all! What kind of man are you?”

What kind, indeed? She had thought that she knew a reasonable amount about Inspector Javert, about the kind of man he might be, but she appreciates now that she really does not know him very well at all. She suddenly realises that if someone were to ask her a question about Javert that did not revolve around his police work, she would not have the first idea as to how to respond.

As for herself – well, she is no kind of man at all, although she could fall into it so very easily, should they not find a way to regain their correct bodies. It takes far less effort than she would have expected to become the fearsome Inspector Javert, and she has to wonder at herself. Is this something that has been within her all along, held back only by her upbringing, by the expectations placed upon her? Or is being in the inspector’s body affecting her disposition, her feminine soul slowly becoming overwhelmed by whatever goes on within the minds of men?

She must hold onto herself: Cosette Fauchelevent, fiancée of Marius Pontmercy, daughter of Ultime Fauchelevent. No, more than that: Cosette Fauchelevent, daughter of God, giver of charity, organiser of households, lover of flowers and nonsensical romance novels and the company of dear friends.

Still. To walk in here and have people listen to her, to have her opinion taken seriously, even though she knows nothing about police work – she can see how it would be intoxicating. Is it so unreasonable that she might want a little of this for herself, as herself – to be able to walk into a room and talk about a subject that she is knowledgeable in, and have people listen?
“What kind of man am I?” One who would free you right now, if it were possible. One who will have to be content with asking Marius to send a lawyer your way later this evening. “One who is a servant to the law, Madame.”

The woman huffs contemptuously, before the two young officers who are guarding the cells seem to spring out of whatever horrified state they had drifted into.

“Beg your pardon, Inspector,” one mutters, rapping the bars of the cell with his cudgel, forcing the woman to take a step back, hissing. “But she’ll be fine once she dries out – back on the streets in an hour or so.” He raises a beady eye. “Unless you’d rather we keep her longer, teach her a lesson about respect...?”

Cosette swallows. “No. No, release her, once... once she has sobered. For the moment, some time in the cells would be for her own protection.”

She sees the startled look in the young policeman’s eye, but she ignores it, turning instead to the commissaire’s door, knocking and going in before anything else can happen.

“Ah, Javert,” the commissaire says. “What can I do for you?”

Cosette coughs, drawing in a deep breath. God, give me strength!

“With respect, I must request a period of leave,” Cosette says, standing as stiffly to attention as she can manage. She thrusts the bulky envelope in her hands forward. “I have written the formal request here, as well as the details of the cases I am currently working on.”

She holds her breath. Surely this will be enough? Surely she can leave soon and return to the safety of her home, where she will not feel as if she is stepping on eggshells and waiting every moment for one to shatter beneath her tread?

The commissaire looks up in surprise. “Leave, Javert? This is very unusual, I must say.” He takes the envelope from her hand, tearing it open and glancing at its contents. “You say here nothing more than ‘personal reasons’. Do you care to elaborate at all?”

Cosette opens her mouth, then closes it again for a moment while she thinks. In the end, the simplest option seems safest. “I’d prefer not to, Monsieur.”

“Hmph.” Something approaching concern colours his features. “I take it nothing is amiss?”

How to possibly respond honestly to such a question? “Nothing that I cannot deal with, Monsieur.”

The commissaire sorts through the multitude of papers Javert had spent hours assembling last night. “Well, this does seem to be in order. Most thorough – as per usual.” He sighs, looking up. “I suppose I shall have to approve it. You have not had so much as a day of leave since... well, since your fall, now that I think about it, after that ghastly June debacle.”

Until now, she has been successfully ignoring the various aches and pains that have come with the inspector’s body – she has had plenty to distract herself with, after all. But the commissaire’s words strike her like a blow to the gut, and it is all she can do to stand upright, to keep breathing normally. She may have no memory of plunging into the Seine, of bones breaking, of tumbling through the cold and endless dark like a leaf borne on the wind, but this body does.

She breathes through the sensation of water in her lungs, freezing cold and then burning hot, through the roar and gurgle of the torrent in her ears, through the full-body thud as she hits the riverbed and ricochets back towards the surface.
Lucky for her that the inspector has a reputation for reticence, for she finds that she emphatically does not want to talk about it.

“Ghastly. Yes.” She clears her throat and bows. “Thank you, Monsieur. Your consideration is much appreciated.”

The commissaire waves his hand indifferently, and she waits to be dismissed, trying not to fidget. This whole adventure has gone from exciting to exhausting, and she dearly wishes to get outside into the fresh air. Her duties have been fulfilled, and all she wants to do is go home and see Marius, see Papa.

The commissaire taps the back end of his pen against the desk. “Oh, Javert – one last thing. You remember that woman, Magnon – the beauty of the Rue Clocheperce? She was caught up in the net following your great triumph at the Gorbeau tenements.”

Cosette affects polite interest – though in fact, the name of the Gorbeau tenements does ring a small bell in her memories. Thinking back, she realises it is the awful house she and Papa had visited to give alms in once – to a family that she had later realised was Éponine’s. What a wretched family, and what a wretched situation! She has since come to understand that Éponine’s father is no one who deserves her pity – or at least, if he once did, he is far beyond it now, may God have mercy on her for thinking so. But to be honest, if she cares where he is now, it is only because Éponine has sometimes expressed a wish to know what has become of her little sister.

“I remember,” Cosette says, nodding.

“She is out of prison this week – and will be back to spinning her schemes again in no time, I’m sure. Even a long spell in prison does nothing to cure such a creature of her habits. I expect we’ll see her back here before too long – but I thought it may be of interest to you.” He shakes his head. “Though of course, since you’re going on leave....”

Cosette clears her throat lightly. “I shouldn’t like to condemn a woman before she has proved herself worthy of it,” she says.

The commissaire narrows his eyes, a half-smile curling his lips. “Well, Inspector. At one time, I would never have thought to hear you say such a thing,” he says. “Not you! Can it be that you are softening, Javert? Why, just last week, Mercier tells me he saw you give a sou to some ragged urchin who was wandering about near the Salpêtrière. I told him to stop spreading such scurrilous lies, and said that you’d box his ears if you ever came to hear of it.”

Cosette cannot react quickly enough to entirely keep the surprise from her face; but then again, she suspects that Inspector Javert would react poorly to such an accusation, whether or not it was true. Could it be true? She finds that she can no longer anticipate the inspector’s actions. What little she thought she knew of the man has been thrown into doubt. What she does know is that he spent several months in forced confinement with Papa while he healed; that, she thinks with some amusement, would probably be enough to make even the most hardened of policemen soften, even if only slightly.

“Damned lies,” she finds herself muttering, and the commissaire cackles in response.

“Good man. I knew Mercier was full of it.” He waves his hand again. “You’re dismissed. Go on, enjoy your mysterious leave. I’ll reassign your cases. Who knows – maybe they’ll all be solved by the time you get back.” His smile indicates that this is exceedingly unlikely, and Cosette has the feeling that she is missing out on some private joke.
Cosette bows. “Thank you, Monsieur.” Turning smartly on her heel, she exits the office into the bustle of the main room, willing her shoulders to relax. The front door is so close – just a few more steps and she is free –

“Inspector Javert! Inspector Javert!”

Her jaw tightens, and she stops without turning towards the source of the voice. Are her nerves really so bad, or is Javert’s body having such influence over her that she now reacts to any overture from another person with distaste?

But the voice sounds so earnest, and these men are under her command. It would not do to leave them without so much as a farewell.

She turns, scrutinising the eager young man before her.

Swiftly, she sorts through her memorised descriptions of the inspector’s colleagues, before hitting on the right one: Red hair. Wide nose. Looks like a calf that has been knocked upside the head.

Ah. So this is the Mercier that the commissaire had been so rude about. He seems like a nice boy, with an honest face.

“Inspector Javert! Is it true that you’re going on leave?”

Her surprise must show on her face, because Sergeant Mercier goes wide-eyed. “Not that I was eavesdropping, Inspector! It’s just that the door was open, and I couldn’t help but overhear –”

“It’s alright, Sergeant Mercier,” she says with a smile, and if the sergeant had appeared worried before, he looks downright alarmed now. Too late she remembers that Javert’s smiles are a resource to be used sparingly, if at all.

She tries to school her face into something more appropriately forbidding, although she cannot help but let a little amusement slip through. The police officers gathered before her are like a gaggle of ducklings, almost falling over themselves in their curiosity about her sudden leave of absence, while simultaneously being somewhat awestruck in the face of their formidable inspector.

They are all so young, some of them barely older then Cosette herself, and her heart swells with something close to pain. She thinks of Marius after the barricade, pale and broken, his friends dead in the streets. These boys have signed on for dangerous work; and, while she cannot always agree with everything that the police do, she understands that some of them, at least, do this work in an attempt to make the streets of Paris safer. The eyes of the men before her shine with idealism, and part of her suddenly regrets that she will be unable to spend more time with them, to foster this spirit and turn them towards a more merciful interpretation of the law.

They wait expectantly before her, and she realises that she needs to take the initiative. Probably they are all too intimidated by her – and what a strange feeling that is!

“Yes, I am taking some leave, but I will return next week. I trust that you will all do yourselves proud in my absence.”

Surprised murmurs of assent rise in response. One of the men – Giraud, she realises – elbows Sergeant Mercier, and Mercier clears his throat.

“Inspector, we were just wondering – that is, if you don’t have somewhere to be right this instant –”

He takes a breath. “It’s just that it’s Royer’s last day before he transfers out, and those of us who are finishing our shifts now are taking him out for a drink.”
Mercier trails off; Giraud, mercifully, takes up the slack. “What Mercier is trying to say, Inspector, is – would you like to join us?”

Cosette is taken aback. If she were a betting woman, which she certainly is not, she would wager that the inspector is not the kind of man to socialise with his colleagues any more than is absolutely necessary. Certainly, he does not seem like the type to go out drinking at the end of a shift. A part of her wonders whether this is something that has been building for some time, or whether her performance as Inspector Javert has been flawed enough to give them an inaccurate impression of the man.

But the officers in front of her look hopeful – well, hopeful and slightly terrified – and surely there is no harm in sharing one drink with them? Her mind has distanced itself enough from the horrors of the Seine that she no longer feels that she has to run straight home, and maybe one drink would help to settle her remaining nerves.

Besides, Javert needs to have a good relationship with his subordinates, if he is to help them become better police officers. Maybe this is how she can contribute – she is very good at lifting others’ morale, after all. Papa often tells her so.

The words come out of her mouth before she can think twice. “Most certainly.”

For a moment, the silence is absolute; then, disbelieving smiles and laughter.

Cosette hopes that she has not made a terrible mistake.
Unfortunately this fic is about to go on a brief hiatus, as we're going away on holidays and internet access will be limited. Updates will be back in a few weeks!

This is another Valjean chapter, just because the plot demanded it, but the POV rotation will return to being (relatively) regular after this -- we haven't forgotten the others. :)

Only now does Valjean realise the unforeseen consequence of having dismissed Toussaint for the week: they must now fend for themselves, as far as acquiring food is concerned.

The truth of the matter is that Valjean has not missed the hustle and bustle of the markets. Cosette had often asked him to accompany them when she went there with Toussaint, but there had always been too many people, too many raised voices, and – most critically – too many policemen, though things have been different, of course, ever since he and Javert reached their détente. This change has meant that he has ventured out more and more often, both alone and with Cosette – but that doesn’t change the fact that after the quiet of the Jardin du Luxembourg and the city streets in the calm of the evening, the market seems oppressively crowded, noisy, and full of unfamiliar sounds and people. Valjean’s instincts are still to shy away, to smile and nod and sidle off as soon as practically possible. Especially so now: it seems impossible that anyone who looks at him would not know that this is not his body, that he is wearing it uncomfortably while his own self walks beside him, most likely feeling very much the same.

“Perhaps this was a bad idea,” he murmurs, as they move into the swell of the crowd. Valjean swallows, moving a little closer to where Javert, as upright and straight-backed as ever, walks by his side.

“Nonsense. We will buy the food, and then we will leave. It will be simple.”

Valjean glances over at him and wonders if Javert is trying to convince himself as much as he is trying to convince Valjean.

Despite all his hopes – and his prayers – they had not woken this morning to find themselves returned to their right and proper bodies. Valjean had in fact lain awake for most of the night, until finally his exhaustion had overcome him, and he had fallen into sleep just as the dawn touched the sky.

When he had woken – feeling as if he would have been better off if he hadn’t slept at all – he had screwed his eyes shut again almost immediately. He had known in an instant that he was still, somehow, in the wrong body, and the brief hours of sleep had not resolved whatever mysterious curse had befallen them.

Raising his hands, he had looked at Éponine’s scarred palm and had had to resist the urge to press it to his face and moan.

They had all been more or less silent over their breakfasts; it had not been the meal he was accustomed to, with Cosette chattering brightly, and Éponine slowly adding more and more sugar to
her coffee and tearing her bread into small pieces, as if trying to make it last longer.

He wonders what Cosette is doing – his darling, alone, perhaps frightened. He yearns to go to her, but the risk is too great. He recalls Javert’s words to him this morning as his daughter alighted from the fiacre at the Rue de Pontoise: She is a capable young woman, Valjean. Do you think I would entrust her with this, otherwise? But even they do nothing to ease the knot of tension that has settled in his belly. He glances over his shoulder, seeing nothing but the heaving mass of the marketplace, hearing nothing but the rise and fall of too many voices.

It is too much. If he might just have a moment to himself to breathe –

Valjean looks about, but Éponine seems to have slipped off somewhere, and Javert is aggressively haggling with a stall keeper over a bunch of radishes. Taking a deep breath, he sidles between the close-pressed bodies – which is much simpler to do in his smaller, slighter form than it ever has been before – trying to find a space in which to breathe.

It only takes him a moment before he sees a narrow alleyway, dark and out of the way, where perhaps he may rest unobserved for a minute or two. He slinks his way over to it, light on his feet, before slipping into the cool shade it provides. Valjean heaves in a deep breath, relief flooding through him.

It lasts precisely half a second, before a large, rough hand closes around his wrist and jerks his arm painfully up.

In ordinary circumstances, Valjean would simply shake himself free or grapple the man to the ground – but now, he finds that even resisting his attacker is impossible, as he pulls him deeper into the shadow of the alley. Éponine is a tall girl, and Valjean does not doubt that she knows something of fighting. But whatever tricks she knows are utterly foreign to him, as he has never had to do anything but rely on his strength. He tries to twist the man’s arm, but his right hand won’t grip properly, his fingers half-curling, and then only painfully.

“Come on, girl, there’s no use in struggling. I’ve got you now.”

If Valjean were in his own body, he would throw caution to the wind – but, as he is painfully aware, this is not his body, and he is only its temporary custodian. He does not want to give this man any reason to resort to violence – not yet, at any rate. With a sudden, cold clutch in his heart, Valjean realises that if this were to go badly, he has no idea what would happen: whether it would be he who dies, or Éponine.

And if it were him, then... what would become of Éponine? Would she be trapped in his aged body – she, a girl of not yet twenty? Would she have over forty years cruelly stolen from her life, and be consigned to live out whatever years remained in a body that creaks in the summer and aches in the winter?

He cannot think of this now, he realises, as the man jerks painfully upon his arm again. He must stay on the alert. He must find a way to escape unscathed.

The attacker flings Valjean ahead of him into the alley. He stays on his feet and prepares himself to run, but immediately sees that it will be of no use. The man’s huge shoulders crowd against the close walls on either side of them, and slim and swift as Éponine is, Valjean knows his chances of getting past him are very low indeed.

“What do you want? Who are you?” he asks, edging away – only to have the man’s fist wrap about his wrist once more.
“Oh, that’s fine, very fine indeed – pretend not to know me. Jondrette, Thénardier, whatever your name is. That dog of a man you call your father – or do you, still? – has swindled me. Took me for a fool, he did. He’s disappeared now, but I mean to make up for the loss.”

“You are mistaken in me, sir,” Valjean tries. The man seems very sure of himself, but he may yet be persuaded he has the wrong girl. “I am not who you think I am. My father is –”

The man cuts him off with a short, sharp bark of laughter. “Oh no, no I am not. You are Éponine Thénardier – or Jondrette, or Fabantou, or whatever you are calling yourself today – or do I have to scrape and bow and call you mademoiselle now? Oh yes, you might play the lady, but I know who you are, and I know what your game is.”

Valjean swallows. His game? “I do not know what you mean.”

“Stop with your denials, or you’ll find I have a very short temper, girl.” The man yanks Valjean forwards and looms over him, hunching his shoulders to growl directly into his face. In the gloom of the alley, Valjean can make out a flat, broad nose, a cruel mouth, and pock-marked cheeks. It is not a face he is familiar with, and certainly not one of the men who had detained him in the Gorbeau tenement. He is obviously yet another of Thénardier’s dupes – perhaps innocent, or perhaps less so. Either way, no man deserves to be swindled.

“I can give you what I have,” Valjean says, reaching for his purse. He is carrying very little money with him, but he can arrange to meet with the man another time and provide him with more – whatever he might need to replace what Thénardier has made off with.

“Oh no, it’s too late for that,” the man snarls. “If I wanted to cut purses there’s a thousand I could have out there in the market. I’m after a share of what you get from the old man – my God, you must be taking him for everything he’s got!”

Valjean starts, blinking in surprise. He has not considered this before – how his taking in of Éponine might look to anyone who might have known her father and his tricks. Éponine has never been easy to draw out on the topic of her family, but one thing she has made perfectly clear is that she is done with the man who raised her. She’d had her private grief for her mother on learning of her death in the Saint-Lazare, and visited the grave marker Valjean had arranged. She had once obliquely expressed a desire to know what had become of her sister, but all of Valjean’s inquiries have, so far, come to naught – as have Javert’s, though he has not admitted in so many words that he is looking.

Thinking about it now, he realises just how easy it would be for someone to come to the same conclusion as this man: Thénardier is a crafty fox, after all, and what better way to fleece an old man than this?

“You are mistaken in me, Monsieur,” he says quietly. “I am not my father. I am not a swindler. If I once helped him in his schemes, it was because I had no choice.”

“Oh, a thief, always a thief,” the man growls in his face. “Do you expect me to believe the old man has taken you in out of the kindness of his heart? What would he say, I wonder, if he knew the truth of you? Of where you have come from, and what you have been?”

Valjean wants to protest – of course he knows; that is the whole of the reason why he had insisted Éponine stay with them after her recovery, that she might not fall back into her desperate condition. He had seen them all – that miserable family, and the two young girls whom, he later realised, he might also have saved when he had plucked Cosette from the inn that night in Montfermeil. They had seemed so happy and well-fed then, but he thinks he should have known that a character such as Thénardier could only come to ruin. If Éponine and her sister had fallen into destitution, then he too
was at least partially to blame. It would have been so easy to save them, and yet he had not. There is not a thing on earth Thénardier wouldn’t sell, if the price is right.

“Or perhaps,” the man continues, breathing directly into Valjean’s face, “he does know, and this is why he keeps you.”

Valjean blanches. “I have not – I would never –”

Misunderstanding him, the man shakes his head, a sneer curling his lip. “No, that wouldn’t be the right way to play it – every man knows to protect his purse from a whore. Much better to pretend to be but a damsel in need of a protector.” He laughs, before affecting a girlish simper. “Oh please, kind Monsieur, my father, he is so ill, and us with no way of paying for a doctor – oh, and my mother, did I not also mention? She was dismissed from her position on scurrilous grounds, you never heard of a greater injustice. They have no money, Monsieur; they starve, Monsieur, all for want of a little kindness. Could you not just put your hand into your pocket and – ?” He shakes his head, snorting. “Your father is right to send his girls out to do this – he knows good men cannot abide the sight of a pathetic woman.” He looks at Valjean again, his eyes ranging over him, taking in the skirts, the bonnet, the gloves he wears. “I must say, the other girl has drawn the short straw in these games. Here you are, got up like a lady, while she still goes about in rags. At least, she was when I saw her. Perhaps Thénardier has bought her a silk gown now, with the money he took from me.”

Valjean raises his head, suddenly alert. “Another girl? You mean it is Azelma? Éponine’s – my sister?”

If the man has noticed his slip, he gives no sign of it. In fact, he does not appear to have heard him at all. “But I’ve kept you too long. The old fool and his pretty little daughter will be missing you soon. I’ll tell you what I want, and we will meet again. Am I clear?”

Valjean swallows, collecting his thoughts.

“If you are in need, then something can be arranged,” Valjean says softly. “But I will not be a part of any deception. And if you have news of my sister –”

“Not be a part of any deception, she says!” The man cuts him off and laughs again, flat and cruel. “Of course, you are as pure as the driven snow! No part of a deception!” He twists Valjean’s arm, sending pain up into his shoulder. “No, girl. You will listen to me, and you will do as I say – or I will reveal all to the silly old goat you have so firmly in your pocket, and then we will see where your father’s carefully laid plans will lead him.”

“You will not be believed,” Valjean says. It is the truth: even if he, the silly old goat himself, were not standing here listening to the scheme right now, Éponine has not taken a sou from him that was not pressed upon her at his or Cosette’s insistence. If taking his money is her game, she is making a very poor play for it.

“Maybe so,” the man admits, shaking his head. In the darkness, Valjean hears a soft click and looks down to see the man has opened a little knife. He raises it, holding it to Valjean’s face. “Perhaps if you are sure of that, then I will have to satisfy myself by depriving your father of the means to run his little scheme.” He leers, eyes full of hatred. Valjean feels the prick of the knife in the soft skin below his jawbone, and swallows. “And – perhaps if you are tempted not to take what I say seriously – I will give you a little something to remember me by – ungh!”

Valjean twists his arm and struggles away – but he does not think it is this that causes the man to let out his sudden grunt of pain, or his eyes to go wide in surprise. The man’s fingers go slack, but his falling body still manages to drag Valjean part of the way down with him.
Valjean can make out nothing in the sudden blaze of sunlight from the mouth of the alley; there is only the silhouette of a diminutive figure, arms raised, wielding a… a parasol?… as if it were a fearsome club, hair unpinned and wild about her shoulders, like an image of the awakened Furies in the midst of wreaking their vengeance.

*My God,* Valjean has time to think, before the man begins scrabbling at his skirts, trying to haul himself up. *It is Javert.*

“You stay where you are. This is your only warning,” Javert barks – and when the man ignores him and attempts to stagger to his feet, the parasol is brought down upon the base of his skull with a resounding *smack,* and he stumbles, releasing Valjean’s skirts, falling to his hands and knees on the cobbles with a groan.

“Valjean.” He feels small hands on his face, a thumb stroking over his cheekbone. When he looks up, he sees his daughter’s blue eyes, blazing with an odd intensity. “*My God,* Valjean, are you hurt?”

“No, Javert, I am fine –” he begins to say, shaking his head – though as he does so, he feels a warm trickle of blood slide over his throat. Cosette’s features distort into a furious snarl.

“He had a knife to your throat.”

“He only meant to frighten me. It was not –”

Valjean does not have any further opportunity to explain. There is a clattering from behind them as his attacker hauls himself to his feet and staggers against some wooden boxes discarded from the markets, upending them in his haste to flee, his plans having been thrown into such unexpected disarray.

Javert’s head snaps back towards him as if it is on a wire, and his hands leave Valjean’s face. “You there! Stop at once!”

Unsurprisingly, the man does no such thing, his feet loud on the cobbles as he makes good his escape.

“Stay here. I will return for you.”

Valjean feels Javert’s currently very small hand run once more over his face – and then watches in horror as he hikes Cosette’s skirts *well* above any acceptable height in order to pursue the fleeing attacker down the alleyway.

“*Javert!* Stop, come back –” he calls out, scrambling to his feet to follow.

Javert, even in stays and slippers, is surprisingly fleet, and Valjean arrives at the mouth of the alley only just in time to see him, chestnut hair blazing in the sun, pointing a furious finger at two surprised-looking policemen standing at the edges of the market crowd. Over the generalised din of the women haggling for their vegetables and the stall keepers calling their prices, he can hear Cosette’s usually sweet voice rising to a strident bark: “… standing uselessly idle while a – a young girl is brutalised in an alley. Look there! He’s running past the melon stall. Good God! Are you waiting for permission? Go after him!”

Valjean is unsure whether the policemen are merely too bemused to disagree with the lovely young girl who is haranguing them, or whether it is the sheer expectation of obedience still carried in Javert’s voice, but both of them make off in pursuit, just as Valjean arrives at Javert’s side.
“Tell them not to harm him,” he says, touching Javert’s sleeve. “He has been robbed by Thénardier—he was simply trying to get back what he was owed.”

Javert gives him an incredulous look. “By slitting your throat? By God, Valjean, you are bleeding—” Javert begins to raise his hand, but cuts the motion off abruptly, snatching his hand back as if it has been burned and curling it into a small fist. He looks away and mutters, “Valjean, please—if you will not have a care for your own sake, consider that it was not you he thought he was threatening.”

Valjean takes his point. Had he not had exactly the same thought? But nonetheless, he continues. “It was done out of desperation. You know what Thénardier is like, Javert. He would swindle his own mother of her last sou.”

It is not the whole truth, but Valjean doesn’t think that mentioning the man’s plot to extort him is likely to bring out the best in Javert. It is irrelevant, anyway: the plan would not have succeeded, even if he had had the chance to put it into action.

For a long moment, he watches as Javert’s eyes flit to the blood Valjean can feel drying on the skin of his throat. Then his lips—Cosette’s lips—form the thin, hard line he knows well.

“You are a terrible influence,” Javert mutters. “They will only apprehend him. But I want to question him about Thénardier.”

Valjean does not remind him that, in his current form, he is unlikely to be invited to do any such thing, and contents himself with thanking God that compassion has won this day.

“Besides that,” he says as Javert begins to turn away, “he may be able to give us some information on Azelma. He has seen her, apparently—and perhaps this means she can yet be found.”

Javert glances at him, frowning. “The younger Thénardier girl?” His frown deepens. “Speaking of which, where is the other one?”

“Perhaps she is—” Valjean begins to answer, before he is interrupted by a shout, followed by a cacophony of wooden boxes overturning, hooting stall keepers, and screamed insults.

“Come,” Javert says. “I assume this means they have caught him.”
Before she had joined the Fauchelevent household, Éponine’s experience of markets was usually squatting at their outskirts, waiting for a moment’s inattention from the stall keeper. Gavroche had taught her how, her and Azelma both – the quick snatch, the even quicker disappearance into the crowd to eat your prize in peace.

She hasn’t done it in some time, of course – not just since Monsieur Fauchelevent took her in, but even before that. No one notices a gamine sliding away into a flock of others just like her, but she had stopped being able to vanish amongst them quite so easily at about the same time as her skirts had begun to fail to cover her knees, and her father had started to find other uses for her in his schemes.

Now, when she visits the markets with Cosette and Toussaint, the stall keepers call out to her – *A sweet apple for the sweet mademoiselle? Come, take a bite* – or slip an extra sausage into her basket with a wink. It makes her laugh, though the joke is not very funny: they have all the free sausages and apples in the world for a girl who can afford to pay for them.

Visiting as Fauchelevent is different again – and she has to resist the temptation to return the market women’s winks and smiles, and not turn her kindly benefactor into some kind of bounding gallant. But still, if she offers an appreciatively raised eyebrow at a particularly low bodice in exchange for an extra handful of plums, where’s the harm in that?

“Thank you, Madame,” she says with a smile as she turns away, and hears the woman laugh lightly in response.

She scans the crowd for the others – the last thing they need is to get separated here – and then she sees it.

It is only a flash in the corner of her eyes – a bright red rose clasped between a set of teeth, a pair of blue spectacles beneath the rim of a tall hat. When she turns again he is gone, but she can still see the closing of the crowd in his wake. Taking the plums and tucking them into her coat pocket, she follows.

It is much too early in the day for Montparnasse to be on the hunt, she realises, and it would be rare to catch him here, where the cops tend to keep their eyes skinned for cutpurses and the snatching hands of thieves – so perhaps it is not him at all. For all his swagger, he’d always stuck to easy targets: women for their pretty jewels or ribbons; old men for their purses or perhaps a fine hat or waistcoat. Easy marks were what he went after – although sometimes the marks turned out not to be so easy after all.

She had had the story from Gavroche, and it hadn’t taken her long to put the pieces together. A white-haired old man who can wrestle down a youth in his prime, but then uses the opportunity to deliver a sermon rather than a beating?
Éponine rolls her eyes. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out.

In any case, the figure is moving through the crowd, and she risks losing him altogether if she doesn’t follow now. Curiosity pulls at her. It has been almost two years since she last saw Montparnasse, and it hadn’t exactly been a lovers’ parting, that night when they’d been trying to pull their job on the Rue Plumet. She can still recall the flash of the knife in his sleeve and the way he’d hissed, *Take care, you’ll cut yourself.*

Making her decision, she trails after him, keeping her distance, highly aware that this body she inhabits doesn’t blend into a crowd so easily as she is used to.

She squints at the man as she closes some of the space between them. *It has* to be him. Surely there cannot be two men in Paris with such ridiculous attire?

He stops, and she pulls up short at the closest stall, ducking her head and feigning interest in a bunch of carrots. She counts to ten before she dares to look up again, and is just in time to catch a glimpse of his gaudy coattails disappearing around a corner.

She ought to leave it. She has nothing to say to him, after all – nothing that she should say while inhabiting the body of Monsieur Fauchelevent, anyway. But something draws her on, makes her leave the stall and follow him around the corner.

To her surprise, he’s waiting for her there, leaning insouciantly against the wall as if he has been there for some time. He reaches up and plucks the rose from between his teeth, a small smile upon his lips.

“So, we meet again, Monsieur.” Montparnasse’s voice is rougher than she remembers; his face is more lined than it once was, his cheeks more hollow. But he is still beautiful, she can see that – and there is still the same deadly glint in his eye, like a cat as it eyes a mouse.

Éponine realises that she’s been had; it was all a trap to lure her here to this alley. Completely obvious, now that she thinks about it, and she curses her own stupidity. Monsieur Fauchelevent and the inspector have no idea where she is, and she’s unarmed. While this body is obviously obscenely strong, she has no experience of using it in a fight – and her heart sinks as she realises that her foolishness has endangered not only herself, but Monsieur Fauchelevent as well.

But something in her blanches at the idea of running – she has never run from him before, and she is not about to start now.

“Forgive me,” she says, offering a small, hard smile. “But I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

Montparnasse raises an eyebrow, before pushing himself up off the wall. “Indeed? So, you had some other reason for following me down this alley?” He twirls the flower in his fingers. “And what was that?”

“To get to the other side,” Éponine says. “There’s a bakery.”

Montparnasse laughs – and it seems genuine. For a moment, Éponine can almost remember why she had not minded so much when her father had told her to go and make a friend of him.

“I must admit, Monsieur, I am a little hurt.” Montparnasse smiles, and Éponine’s eyes drop to his sleeve. She knows his habit of having a knife on him at all times; it would not do to become complacent. “Here I am, having changed my whole life to better suit your instructions, and you do not even remember me!”
It takes her a moment to decipher this clearly preposterous statement, but then she puts the pieces together, remembering what Gavroche had told her about the sermon that Monsieur Fauchelevent had delivered to Montparnasse about the sticky end he would come to if he persisted on his present path.

“To better suit my instructions?” she asks cautiously, narrowing her eyes.

“Indeed, Monsieur. You know, I haven’t lifted a finger except in honest work since that day.”

Éponine stares at him. She wants to ask him what he thought he was doing that evening outside Fauchelevent’s house, when he had urged the others to go on in and turn the house inside out, while he stayed outside and promised to slit her throat if she made so much as a peep. If that’s honest work, then she is Louis XVIII.

“Indeed,” she murnrs, her eyes on his coat sleeves. “Perhaps I do remember you.”

“Ah! Monsieur, I knew you would.” Montparnasse’s smile could curdle cream – she wonders if he thinks it looks charming. “You have made me an honest man. I realised that I was indeed on the road to ruin, the young man that I was. But alas –”

And here it is, Éponine thinks. She knows this well. She has done it enough times herself.

“Alas, it is hard to scramble one’s way out of a life of crime. And expensive, too.”

Éponine runs her eyes over his form. The coat is new – that much she can see. The trousers are threadbare, though, and his hat is frayed. She sees where this is going.

“Expensive, you say.”

Montparnasse nods. “I know you to be a good and generous gentleman – you may recall, you gave me your purse when we last met.” An expression of annoyance crosses his face. “But do you know, some little grasper took it from me before I could put it to any use.”

“Ah, is that so?” she says, keeping her face carefully neutral. “How terrible that must have been for you.”

“You have no idea, Monsieur! I searched high and low for it for days on end, spoke to every cutpurse I encountered in the hopes that I would find some clue as to its whereabouts!” Montparnasse seems almost to believe his own lies, his voice becoming more impassioned, his gestures more grandiose. “But alas, it was not to be – and thus my sad fate was sealed.”

Éponine strokes her beard thoughtfully, letting a serene smile spread across her face. “But Monsieur, you said that you have been undertaking honest work since then. So perhaps God has seen fit to smile upon you and show you that hard work is its own reward. You certainly seem to have earned enough money to buy yourself a fine new coat!”

For a moment, a look of incandescent anger crosses Montparnasse’s face – but then, that’s always been the way with him. His temper is as quick as his knife, and Éponine can see that he has reached the ragged end of his patience.

“Indeed, Monsieur,” he says coldly as his fingers twitch in his sleeve. “And I will soon acquire another. An honest reward for honest work.”

She sees the glint of the knife in his hand, and her body reacts by some strange instinct – she has always avoided knives in the past by dodging them, but this time Monsieur Fauchelevent’s body
seems to take her over. Éponine’s hand wraps about Montparnasse’s wrist without her conscious thought, crushing it in a vice-like grip that sees the knife drop instantly from his grasp. She marvels at the ease with which she performs this feat – she’s not even straining, this isn’t a fraction of what this body is capable of – and takes a moment to relish the sound of Montparnasse’s bitten-back shrieks and curses.

She drives his hand back against the wall and looks down into his wide black eyes. She knows she shouldn’t, but she can’t help it. In the past, she could yell and beat with her fists and kick up a fuss in the streets, but never before has she seen Montparnasse frightened.

“I ain’t who you think I am, my little Montparnasse,” she hisses directly into his face, and watches his eyes widen even further. She hasn’t so much as breathed a word of argot for over two years now, but to her surprise it comes back to her easily, like sliding on a pair of well-worn gloves. “I reckon I know who you are, though. I reckon you’re the type of low-life scum who’d threaten to cut a young girl’s throat.” He twitches, and she brings her other arm up against his throat, pressing just hard enough to put some fear into him. “Yeah, I know you. I reckon you’re the type who’d ransack a house knowing there were only two unprotected women in it.”

Montparnasse makes a shocked choking sound – the first time she’s ever heard him, usually so sure of himself, so cold-blooded, make any such sound – and stares up at her face, eyes hard and searching.

“You – how did you –” But then, the terrible dawn of realisation rises upon his face. He barks out a short, sharp laugh. “Good God, she did it. I never believed she would, but she has....”

Now it’s Éponine’s turn to be confused, and she curses herself for her loss of control even as she tries to make sense of Montparnasse’s ramblings. She increases the pressure on his throat ever so slightly – not enough to cause damage, but certainly enough to get his attention. “Who?”

He wheezes – whether from hilarity or lack of air, she cannot tell. Probably both. “Magnon. She –”

She knows that name. Frowning, she sorts back through her memories – but so many of them from that time are jumbled, fragmented things, and consist mostly of the gnawing pain of hunger, broken up by the occasional feast when her father came into some money. But this Magnon – she remembers her. She remembers passing her the biscuit to put those thieves off the scent of the house on the Rue Plumet; and more than that, she remembers how her father had sometimes come home and tossed a handful of francs on the table, announcing to the family that Madame Magnon’s little gift would feed them this week.

She forces her mind back to the present, back to the smirking face before her. “Magnon? That jumped-up hussy? What does she have to do with this? Where is she?”

Montparnasse just laughs lightly. “Do you really think I would tell you?” His eyes run up and down her body – at least as much as is possible, with her pinning him to the wall – and his voice takes on a tone that comes perilously close to lechery. “My, Éponine, how you have changed. You used to be such a delicate little thing, but now look at you! Mind you, though....” He trails off suggestively, eyebrow quirking.

Her grip loosens as astonishment overwhelms her, and Montparnasse takes advantage of her momentary distraction to slip from her grasp and dive for the abandoned knife. She berates herself for her foolishness even as she grabs his shoulder and heaves him around to face her, keeping herself as far from the knife as possible.

He stares at her, twirling the knife in his fingers, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a smug
He doesn’t think she’ll do it. He thinks she’s gone soft, these past two years.

But really, when will she ever get the chance again?

She pulls back her right arm, and for the briefest of moments she sees his face drop as he realises that he’s underestimated her.

And then there’s just the sweet, satisfying crack of her fist meeting his face, and oh, she has not felt this good in a very long time. Perhaps ever.

He staggers back, falling briefly to one knee before righting himself. His face is playing host to a battle between shock and pain, although she knows that soon enough his main concern will be the state of his appearance, vain fool that he is. Pity the person who is unlucky enough to be in his company when he realises that his spectacles are broken!

She shakes out her hand a little and advances a step – but then stops. Montparnasse still has the knife, and it would not do to risk Monsieur Fauchelevent’s wellbeing any further than she already has done. And it certainly would not do to risk having him arrested if some police should happen along.

Montparnasse seems to have come to a similar conclusion, for he nods his understanding to her – and for a moment, she finds that she does not hate him quite so much. Despite everything that has happened over the past two years, they are still more alike than she would like to admit.

But still – she will keep the memory of punching him safe within her. Surely it will keep her warm and contented through any number of cold winters.

“Mademoiselle.” He bows slightly, even as he backs off.

“Monsieur.”

They watch each other as Montparnasse backs away down the alley, closing his knife and tucking it back, hidden, into his sleeve.

She doesn’t dare turn away until he’s out of sight, doesn’t dare let her mind stray from any thought except to make sure that he truly is gone. She waits, holding her breath, but he doesn’t reappear from whatever dark corner he has slid off into, no doubt to sleep until the sun sets once more.

Magnon. All at once, she remembers what Montparnasse had said. *Good God, she did it. I never believed she would, but she has...*

It isn’t much to go on, she admits. But it’s more than they had before. And it’s the first clue that whatever has happened to them isn’t some mysterious malady, but something else altogether.

*I must tell the others.*

Turning, she hurries back to the market, ignoring the curious looks of passersby as she pushes through the crowd. She can only hope that the others have not gone far; they will be difficult to spot, especially in their current bodies.

She finds herself wishing that Cosette were here. If nothing else can be said for the inspector – and, in her more petty moments, she would suspect that this is indeed the case – he stands out in a crowd.

The thought of Cosette is sobering. Poor thing, having to go and pretend to be a copper! Éponine can
only hope that Cosette has already completed her mission and found her way back home.

Several minutes pass before she locates the inspector and Monsieur Fauchelevent. Unsurprisingly, she merely has to follow the sounds of a ruckus.

She finds something of a scene occurring: a pair of cops are standing over the prone body of some filthy-looking cove, his hands cuffed behind his back. Inspector Javert is standing close by, arms crossed over his chest, russet locks bobbling freely about his flushed cheeks, and his delicate features set in a triumphant scowl.

Javert’s eyes, roving about, fall on her, and he strides over, fists by his side. “Where have you been? What have you been doing?”

Éponine smiles, flexing the fingers on her right hand. “Things,” she says.
The sun has traced its morning arc across the sky, pulling shadows into themselves during its inexorable climb towards its apex. The birds of spring have long abandoned their incessant dawn chatterings, content now with the occasional burst of song.

Marius Pontmercy is still abed at this late hour, but that does not mean that he has been unproductive. Far from it: he has already ruined three handkerchiefs today, and is making short work of a fourth.

He bites his fist in horror, muffling a guilty groan. The images flit through his mind, running into each other: Cosette and the inspector, as themselves and as each other, both at the same time – both of them inhabited by the inspector now, both of them snarling down at him, handcuffs on his wrists and cudgel at his throat – the two of them shoving him through the doors of the police station, Javert slamming him down onto a desk, grabbing him by the lapels, We will extract the confession from you by any means necessary – Cosette, stony-faced, running the cudgel down along his chest, down, down –

Marius rolls over desperately, biting into the pillow in the hopes that it will take the edge off his frantic shrieks. Now Cosette is her usual sweet self again, murmuring comforting words, pulling his head to the soft swell of her bosom, taking him ever so gently in hand – and it’s enough to send him over the edge, shuddering and gasping.

Limp, spent, he lies there, trying to regain his breath. Surely he has performed some miraculous medical feat of endurance – surely four times in one day has to be more than any man could bear! Surely now his rampaging lust will let him be!

Tiredly, he dangles his arm over the side of the bed, intending to drop the handkerchief on the floor with the others... and freezes, staring at it, as a wave of nausea rolls up from the depths of his stomach.

U.F.

He’d forgotten he still had it – it must have been tucked away at the bottom of his drawer, hidden beneath the others, never to be used unless it was a four-handkerchief kind of day.

As if it wasn’t enough to sully the good man’s daughter with his thoughts – now, now to despoil that absolute saint’s very handkerchief with his own sinful emissions – !

Marius releases a moan that comes perilously close to a sob. He has ascended – no, descended – taken on a new form, transformed into a being of pure mortification. No longer human, he will be forever barred entrance from Heaven when he dies, which is right and just.

Hell, on the other hand, will still gladly take him. Of this, he is certain.

He stares at the handkerchief, at those taunting initials. Ultime Fauchelevent. The man who saved my life. His saviour now resides in Éponine’s form, and vice versa – and oh, he knows that Éponine is hardly bashful, and would surely be curious as to how her new body would function.

But Marius, Cosette will not touch me – this is her father’s body, after all. She wants to help me, but she simply cannot.

Cosette is there, too, very close, gazing at him beseechingly from behind the inspector’s eyes. I need help too, my darling Marius. Won’t you assist us both? There’s no one else we can turn to.
Hands run over him – four hands, Lord have mercy – and he is suddenly pressed between two very large, very warm, very hard bodies –

He does shriek this time, staring down in horror as his disobedient organ struggles valiantly in an attempt to come once more to life. He slaps frantically at it – is tempted to punch it – and leaps to his feet. Clearly, indulging its whims has done nothing to placate it, insatiable beast that it is, and so he has no choice but to attempt to distract it.

He limps over to the window, taking in a deep lungful of fresh air. Part of him is uncomfortably aware that any humiliating sounds that have emanated from this room over the past few hours will have carried easily through the open window, but the small part of his brain that is still operating with some semblance of logic points out to him that the room is in desperate need of an airing. Sounds can be explained away as coming from anywhere, but the stench of sin that permeates his bedchamber cannot.

*I should be trying to help them.* He sighs, rubbing at his eyes. Certainly he has not made any contributions towards solving this predicament, unless one counts wasting all of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s butter. He should be there, rendering whatever assistance he can to help them through this strange and confusing time, not... not... whatever it is that he has been doing all morning.

But even as he thinks this, Marius is not sure what exactly he could possibly do to help. He has no experience of this – though he doubts somewhat that anyone else does, either. What if he were to make a fool of himself, or somehow make things worse? It would be dreadful for the inspector and Cosette’s father to think him some kind of ninny! No, better to stay here, where he can do minimal damage.

But here is not an option, either. He has clearly demonstrated that he cannot be left to his own devices, lest he lose all of his secretions upon the world and die of dehydration in his own bed. And the thought of being in his grandfather’s company is even worse – knowing his luck, his unruly member will choose today to take an interest in the old man’s lewd tales. The very idea fills him with horror. No, it will not do.

Outside, then. Maybe a walk will help. A walk in his thickest, loosest coat. Somewhere he is unlikely to encounter anybody he knows. Not that *that* is particularly difficult, these days. Most of the people he might once have counted as his friends – or at least, his acquaintances – had perished over those two awful days in June, when he himself had been under such a cloud of despair that death had seemed like a welcome prospect.

Well. At least he has hit upon a topic that calms his raging loins.

He allows himself a small smile, although there is little humour in it. What a strange life he has led! How much simpler things could have been, had his grandfather been a more reasonable man! Not that he can regret a life that has brought him his darling Cosette. But it would be nice to be able to go for a few years without finding himself in the middle of some bizarre predicament –

He yelps as a sharp series of knocks rattles the door. Who –?

“Marius!” The knocks come more as thuds this time, as if the person doing the knocking is now using the side of their fist. “Marius, you great half-wit! I know you’re in there – I can hear you shrieking.”

Marius’ stomach plummets, his lungs forgetting how to breathe for several long seconds.

*Théodule!*
He – oh, what a fool he is! He was supposed to meet Théodule at midday, at some café his aunt had been nattering on about. Suffice it to say that the appointment had been utterly forgotten amongst the general chaos of his life over these past few days.

Not that Marius had particularly wanted to partake in his cousin’s company, but his aunt had been insistent that they spend more time together, given how isolated Marius had become. He supposes that he cannot entirely blame her – after all, was he not just bemoaning his lack of friends?

Still, Théodule is not his first choice for companionship. They have little in common, and Marius finds Théodule’s cigar-smoking, his constant fiddling with his moustache, and his incessant chatter about his apparently many, many mistresses tiresome at best and disgusting at worst. And yet, almost to his surprise, he doesn’t find his cousin completely repellent. Marius cannot quite put his finger on it, but he supposes that perhaps all the talk of mistresses reminds him a little of poor, dead Courfeyrac, even if he suspects that neither Théodule nor Courfeyrac would be pleased by the comparison.

“Just a moment!” Marius cries, running his hands through his hair in a vain attempt to neaten it. Swallowing down his horrified mortification, he kicks the evidence of his crimes, the four soiled handkerchiefs, beneath his bed.

For one brief, shining moment, he considers escaping through the window and shimmying down the wall to freedom, but dismisses the idea as ludicrous. He would just end up breaking his arm, or worse, and then Cosette would have to come and look after him again – except that it would not be Cosette, would it, it would have to be Inspector Javert –

He unbolts the door and flings it open before this particular fancy can fully take flight. He stands there with his hand on the handle, aware that he is panting slightly, that his general state of terror and bewilderment must be shining through clearly in his face.

Théodule stands before him, his uniform freshly starched, his moustache as ridiculous as ever. Marius tries to stifle the pang of – not envy, no, definitely not envy – that he always feels whenever he encounters said moustache.

Théodule’s eyes widen as they run up and down Marius speculatively, and Marius feels horribly like a slab of meat on display in a butcher’s window.

“Good God, man! Still in your nightgown at this hour? We were supposed to meet at twelve!”

“I’m sorry,” Marius says, doing his utmost to calm his frenzied breathing. “I – I –”

He… what? What could he possibly say that could even begin to hint at the turmoil he has been going through? And more than that, how to explain the situation in general? Théodule would most surely think him mad – and Marius would not blame him if he did.

“Well, get dressed at once,” Théodule says, shaking his head. “Do you know I was sitting there like a great lump for more than an hour, waiting for you to show up? The only thing that made it worth my while was an exquisite creature who was selling flowers on the corner outside. It was only catching sight of her that put me in a good enough temper to forgive you and come to find out what had kept you.”


“I’ll say!” Théodule shakes his head… and then sniffs, his moustache twitching. “Perhaps you should bathe first, though. And be quick about it!”
Marius does not remember the act of sitting on the edge of his bed, but clearly he must have done it, for here he is. He buries his face in his hands and sighs – a long, drawn-out, pathetic sound. Peering through his fingers, he sees his cousin watching him curiously, taking a tentative step forwards.

“Marius? Are you alright, man?”

Théodule almost looks concerned. Maybe... maybe Marius could tell him what’s happened? He does not particularly like the man, but he doesn’t dislike him, either. And really, who else is there that he can talk to? Surely not his grandfather or his aunt. The mere thought makes him go all hot and cold.

Well, to the devil with it. Either I’ve already gone mad, or everyone will think me mad soon enough.

He laughs, his slumped shoulders shaking. “The last few days have been... interesting, cousin.”

Curiosity burns in Théodule’s blue eyes. “Well! After you’ve bathed and dressed yourself, we can go and get something to eat, and you can tell me all about it.”

Marius laughs tiredly as Théodule leaves the room, scrubbing his hands over his face. If he has to witness his life descending into this pit of absurdity, then he might as well do it on a full stomach.
Théodule has always regarded Marius as something of a strange fish. He remembers him from when they were children – how quiet and serious Marius had been, how eager to please, and how he had seemed to actually prefer the company of Monsieur Gillenormand and his elderly friends in their stuffy salons to coming out into the garden with Théodule and the other lads to hit each other with sticks.

These days, Théodule regards his cousin as hardly having changed at all: he still has the same quiet, intense air, and doesn’t seem to be interested in doing anything that Théodule regards as fun. No women, hardly any wine, and he spends all day sitting behind a desk working at whatever it is lawyers do – which is something that Théodule honestly has no desire to discover. And whenever Théodule tries to tell him about his own adventures with the fairer sex, the best that Marius can muster is a little sigh, or a screwing up of his lips like some old prude on the verge of having an apoplexy because a girl lifted her skirts to walk across a mud puddle.

No, Marius has always seemed a little dull to Théodule. Not in a bad way; it’s just that their interests and temperaments have always been wildly divergent. But his aunt had paid him ten louis to take Marius out for the afternoon, and so Théodule had decided that for that reason, if no other, he would see his mission through.

As such, Théodule has spent the past hour in a state of ever-increasing astonishment while Marius has been relaying his sad, sordid tale. His fiancée, trapped inside the body of a police inspector? His future father-in-law suffering from some similar ailment? If he did not know better, he would suspect his cousin of partaking in some of the less legal substances that can be found in seedier parts of the city.

But Marius seems only like a man exhausted, his bedraggled cravat dangling perilously close to his cup of coffee. If he has been affected by illicit concoctions or fallen into some kind of madness, then he is doing a remarkable impression of lucidity. Théodule finds that, despite everything, he almost believes Marius. Or, at the very least, he believes that something has happened to make Marius believe that this peculiar story is true.

He twirls his moustache thoughtfully. The whole scenario is entirely outlandish... although also somewhat appealing. As much as Théodule would not wish to become a woman permanently, it could be delightful for a night or two – and to think of the things he could learn! The discoveries he could make! The time he could spend gazing upon himself in a mirror!

Théodule finds himself becoming quite flustered at the thought. So much so that it takes Marius dropping his coffee spoon to the floor to draw his attention back to his cousin.

“Well, I say, Marius. What a tale you have told!”

Marius looks up at him, worrying at his lower lip with his teeth. “Then... you believe me?”
Théodule opens his mouth, then shuts it again. He’s not sure that he would go quite that far, but he certainly doesn’t disbelieve him, either. He decides that evasion is the better part of valour. “In any case, this is quite the puzzler – for example, which one of them do you propose to marry, then?”

Théodule watches with interest as Marius’ face turns from white to pink to scarlet.

“I... I do not think —” Marius cuts himself off with an unholy gurgle, his complexion now becoming a most unattractive shade of grey. He grabs at the sleeve of Théodule’s uniform, his fingers vice-like, as he stares in terror at something beyond Théodule’s left shoulder.

Discreetly, Théodule tries to tug himself free. “Have a care, Marius, you will cause it to wrinkle.”

But if anything, Marius only tightens his grasp. He is clearly in the grip of some fit or other. Théodule wonders if he should slap him. “Get a hold of yourself, man!”

“Théodule,” Marius hisses, his eyes never leaving their fixed stare over his shoulder. “She... she is here!”

“Here? Where?” Théodule begins to turn, only to have Marius’ fingers practically embed themselves in his flesh.

“Don’t turn around!”

With effort, Théodule remains where he is, but surely Marius cannot expect him not to look? He is certain she would not notice a discreet little glance – but then again, Marius has worked himself into such a state that he will unquestionably cause a scene should Théodule turn again. A stealthier approach is required.

Luckily for Théodule, he didn’t get promoted to the rank of major solely on the basis of his dashing good looks. He is also a master tactician, his wits second to none!

He leans forwards conspiratorially. Marius leans in as well, his eyes darting about, resembling nothing so much as a small woodland creature surrounded by a pack of slavering wolves.

“Marius, my good man. Think about it. If you can see them, then surely that means that they can see you.” He smiles winningly, even as Marius’ eyes widen further. “Why don’t we swap seats – covertly! – so that your lovely fiancée does not see your face and recognise you? Then I can observe them while you tell me more.”

Théodule does not add that Cosette may well recognise him – he did come to visit Marius during his convalescence on more than one occasion, after all, and he feels certain that his appearances must have elicited at least one or two sighs of regret from her bosom. But he is less likely to be noticed than Marius, whose nerves are so thoroughly roused that he will surely draw all attention to him like some sort of pale, sweaty magnet.

And besides, he is jolly curious about this whole mess! Who is this police inspector about whom Marius has waxed so rhapsodic? All Théodule knows about the body that Cosette currently inhabits is that it belongs to a man who is tall and stern, and who wields a cudgel in a most intimidating way.

Marius jerks his head in what Théodule assumes is a nod. With an air of supreme nonchalance, Théodule stands up and then slides into Marius’ now-vacated chair. Marius, for his part, practically falls into the other chair, before shuffling it as much as possible behind a large potted plant.

“Did they see us?” Marius whispers, and Théodule bites back a snappish, Well, they did not see me, cousin. But the party of police officers – about twelve of them, from what he can see – seem to be single-mindedly dedicated to the task of divesting the café of its entire wine supply, paying no heed
“What do you see? What’s happening?” Marius is positively trembling in his chair, and Théodule fights the urge to massage away the headache that is forming at his temples. Perhaps his plan was not quite so brilliant as he first thought.

He peers over the top of his coffee cup at the police officers, who are getting rowdier by the moment. He still does not know which one is Cosette, but at this point it matters not – they’ve only been here a few minutes, and yet he has already witnessed three toasts, with every officer draining their glass on each occasion. Being familiar with such scenes himself, he knows that things will only get worse from here.

Théodule’s mouth twitches in a suppressed smile. He almost feels sorry for Cosette – she will inevitably wake tomorrow with the devil’s own hangover, unless she has been living some kind of secret double life as a lush for the past few years – but presumably she has gone into this of her own free will. Maybe she will even be able to look back upon today’s misadventure fondly, should she actually manage to recall any of it.

It looks like they’re all having a grand old time, and Théodule almost wishes he were part of it. As an army man, he would normally never entertain the thought of making merry with the police – but if any situation ever called for the presence of a stiff drink or five, surely today would qualify!

Marius presses his fingers to the edge of the table, clearly physically restraining himself from turning; Théodule needs to put the poor chap out of his misery. He looks back to the police officers once more.

So, Marius has told him that the inspector is tall. This is not overly helpful; it’s difficult to tell heights with all of them sitting, and none of them appear to be particularly short to begin with.

Stern? Well, they all seem rather jolly at the moment. Half of them are facing away from him, so there is little he can discern about them at all. Perhaps he will need to manufacture an excuse to walk nearer to them.

The only other thing Marius has told him is that the inspector is particularly good at menacing Marius with his cudgel, and really, Théodule has no desire to test this. Besides, presumably Marius’ lovely fiancée will not be so skilled in this regard.

No, he will need more information to work with.

He pushes a pastry towards Marius, in the hopes that it will give him something to do with his hands other than dig nail marks into the edge of the table.

“What else can you tell me about the inspector?”

Marius’ eyes take on a hazy cast. “I don’t know! He is....” He runs his hand through his hair helplessly. “Well built. Rather intense. He has this way of staring at you that makes you feel as if he is penetrating your innermost thoughts.”

Théodule frowns. This is... not helpful, although it does set other thoughts niggling at the back of his mind. Still, for the moment, there is a more pressing issue – and in any case, he is looking for Cosette in the inspector’s body, not the man himself. “What colour is his hair, man? What does his face look like?”

“Oh!” Marius is shredding his pastry now, nervous fingers rolling the dough into small balls. “Dark hair. Dark eyes. Large hands.”
Théodule glances at Marius’ face. His cousin is biting his lip again, eyes focused entirely on the pastry. A faint hint of a flush colours his cheeks – and normally Théodule would pay no heed to that, as even their short acquaintance has been enough for Théodule to ascertain that Marius blushes frequently enough to make the most delicate of women proud. But the niggling voice in Théodule’s mind has gone from a whisper to a yell, and he is now certain that Marius has certain... inclinations... that Théodule had never expected of him.

But how? He has seen the way that Marius swoons when he speaks of Cosette – it is a level of adoration that simply cannot be feigned. Is it just that his feelings for Cosette have been muddled by this peculiar situation that he has found himself in? Théodule would not fault the man for being somewhat confused.

Well! It is his duty to help his cousin, and so help him he shall.

“Dark hair, you say?” He examines the policemen before him and picks out a likely candidate. The man is reasonably good-looking, mid-thirties, with a pleasant smile that he can imagine is Cosette’s. “Aha! There! If you turn slowly, you will see a tall, dark-haired man standing to make a toast.”

Marius, to his credit, does not whip his head around to look, although the way he tries to peer through the fronds of the potted fern is not exactly the epitome of stealth. He shakes his head. “No, not him.”

“Hmm. What about that gentleman at the end of the table there?”

Marius shakes his head. “That’s not him, either. He is more....” He waves his hand ineffectually, as if trying to conjure the essence of the inspector from the very air itself. “More Javert.” Théodule raises an eyebrow, and Marius shrugs weakly. “I do not know what else to say! He is indescribable.” His voice drops to an embarrassed mutter. “You will understand once you have seen him.”

Théodule very much doubts that, but keeps his opinion to himself. Instead, he tries a different tack. “You seem to have quite strong feelings about this Inspector Javert.”

Marius becomes very still. He remains that way for several moments, before mechanically raising the mangled remnants of his pastry to his mouth and taking a bite. “It is just that – he is –”

And now Théodule knows that Marius is flustered beyond all good reason, because he never speaks with his mouth full. Théodule cannot help but be utterly fascinated. To think that within the solemn, serious child of fifteen years ago now burns this feverish flame! It is obvious that his soul is sorely suffering, and, feeling a great wave of pity, Théodule reaches forwards and takes his hand. “Marius. There is no need to be concerned. This kind of sentiment is not new to me – you must remember that I live in a barracks, after all.”

His cousin blinks, swallowing the pastry with an audible gulp. “I don’t understand.”

Théodule holds back a sigh with great effort. “I live in a barracks,” he repeats slowly. Marius gives no sign of having comprehended his words; clearly he will have to elaborate. “With a lot of very bored men, who often have no women to help them... alleviate that boredom.”

Several seconds tick by as a range of emotions flits across Marius’ face, his eyebrows bobbing up and down like corks upon the ocean. Then realisation dawns, and his mouth works frantically, words struggling to find their way out. “I – no! That’s not – I love Cosette!”
Marius is whispering, but the whisper is taking on a hysterical edge, and Théodule knows that he must calm the man before things get out of hand. He holds up his hands placatingly. “I know that you love her – it’s the most obvious thing in the world! But that does not mean that your body does not have other... urges.”

Groaning, Marius buries his face in his hands. He mumbles something through his fingers that Théodule cannot quite make out.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Two years.” Marius looks up and, clearly seeing that Théodule is struggling to decode this cryptic message, decides to state it again with greater emphasis. “Two. Years.”

Théodule pulls at his moustache. “My apologies, my dear lad, but you will have to elaborate.”

The laughter that comes from Marius is that of a man who is clearly at the end of his tether. “Two years I have waited to marry Cosette! My injur – my illness incapacitated me for far longer than was originally anticipated. Two years of waiting, and imagining, and –” He stares beseechingly into Théodule’s eyes. “Two years! I do believe I am going mad.”

Théodule thinks back to the scene in Marius’ bedroom earlier today – to the handkerchiefs not quite hidden under the bed, to Marius’ dishevelled appearance, to the smell that he had recognised all too well. At the time he had thought the man to have merely been cleaning his musket, so to speak, but perhaps things have become more serious than that. Two years is a dreadfully long time to deny oneself the finer things in life, even if unwell – Théodule knows that he would not last a week under such circumstances!

Unwell – or injured. He had not missed Marius’ earlier slip. Why everyone has insisted on referring to Marius’ condition as an illness, he does not know – Théodule is a military man, after all, and had automatically recognised Marius’ injuries for what they were. Still, he is not one to pry – too much – and has decided to let things lie until he is given a reason to do otherwise. If there is one thing he has learnt, it is that he should not question orders from authority figures unless he wants to deal with the consequences, and Monsieur Gillenormand’s wrath is something he does not have the patience or inclination to deal with.

Across the table, Marius slumps in his chair, a defeated man. Théodule refrains from stating the obvious truth – that Marius could end his purgatory at any moment, simply by taking a mistress or asking Cosette if she would like to get some practice before her wedding day.

Well, I suppose that particular ship has sailed. He looks across at the group of policemen, who are midway through a rousing rendition of some song that sounds far too scandalous for sweet Cosette to be a part of. Presumably Cosette would refuse to do anything at all with Marius while inhabiting somebody else’s body, which, he thinks, must be only compounding Marius’ torment.

Théodule opens his mouth to offer some kind of reassurance, but whatever words were about to come forth drop away as he sees one of the officers stand up. And up. By Jove, the man is tall!

Interest piqued, Théodule looks at him more closely... before automatically dismissing the idea that he could possibly be the man in question. He is in his fifties, at least! His long, dark hair is streaked with grey, his whiskers marching along his cheekbones with the seeming intent of waging war upon the rest of his face, the furrows in his forehead so deep and plentiful that they would do any farmer proud.

Honestly, Théodule is beginning to despair that he will ever spot Marius’ mysterious inspector. How
is it that there are only a dozen policemen, and yet he has not managed to spy the correct one?

A hacking cough drags his attention back to the table, and he turns to see Marius choking on his coffee.

“Her!” he wheezes, eyes bulging in what could be terror or something altogether different. He waves his finger towards the table of policemen. “There – it is her!”

“Where?” He looks back across the room, but nothing has changed. There is only the older policeman, staggering around the room, clearly looking for somewhere to empty the contents of his stomach while the others cheer him on. It is all rather embarrassing for the man, really – surely at his age he should be able to drink these whippersnappers under the table!

“There! The tall one, like I said.” Marius’ voice is starting to get louder, his movements more animated as he points towards the older officer.

Théodule’s mouth falls open. Surely he must be mistaken. This cannot be the man who has set Marius’ loins ablaze!

The officer is now holding the front door of the café open for a young lady, sweeping into a too-deep bow. “Mademoiselle,” Théodule can hear him say; once the woman has entered the café, the officer stumbles outside and vomits into the gutter.

Marius, for his part, is pressed up against the window, watching with rapt attention while the man purges his stomach, and sweet Christ above, it must be the inspector.

Théodule blanches. **Him?**

Thoughts vie desperately for attention in his head. Part of him wants to yell at Marius that the man is the most distinctive-looking person in all of the café – possibly all of France – and how had Marius been so utterly inept at providing a useful description? Another part of him wants to take his cousin aside and give him a good talking-to, to tell him that if he truly wishes to pursue this kind of thing, then there are plenty of other fish in the sea – fish that will not tear him into pieces before devouring him and spitting out his bones onto the shore, where they will be bleached by the sun and pointed at by curious travellers.

But for the most part, he is thinking that he must stop this before it gets out of hand. Marius has abandoned all efforts at subtlety, shaking his head and murmuring sympathetic noises as he watches the man – Cosette?! – heave his liquid lunch onto the side of the road. If Marius causes a scene here, in front of all of these police officers, then the consequences could be dire. If nothing else, there will certainly be no further ten louis in Théodule’s future if he cannot manage to take Marius out for coffee without the man getting arrested!

It occurs to Théodule that this is the moment of truth – the moment where he finds out whether there truly has been some sort of cosmic mix-up, or if two years of self-deprivation have merely caused Marius to take complete and utter leave of his senses.

In any case, his few seconds of indecision have taken any choices out of his hands, because the inspector has spotted Marius and wobbled his way over to the window. He knocks upon the glass, smiling delightedly.

“Marius!”

Marius’ entire face lights up; he looks positively radiant. “My darling!”
That spurs Théodule to action. The situation is deteriorating rapidly – and, as much as he would normally find such things exceedingly entertaining, the reputations of at least three people are at stake. Four people, if he counts himself – and he most certainly does – for he does not wish to be caught within even the slightest proximity of such nonsense.

Théodule taps on the window, trying to get the inspector’s attention. The man’s head turns, his bleary eyes trying to focus on Théodule, features scrunching up as if he is trying to identify Théodule’s face. Then his eyes widen, and his mouth stretches into an incredulous smile.

“This Théodule? Is that you?”

... Well.

Up until this point, Théodule had not really considered the implications of Marius’ story. He had listened to it – possibly even believed it to some extent – but he had never really truly comprehended it. To see it with his own eyes – to see what is clearly an inebriated Cosette Fauchelevent staring back at him from the face of an old man who, if he is being quite honest with himself, is rather frightening – well, it defies description.

Perhaps they are all mad, himself included.

Still, he must salvage the situation, on the off-chance that they are all perfectly sane and will need to pick up the pieces of their lives again after this has all been sorted out.

He smiles back at Cosette and nods a greeting. To Marius, he murmurs, “Get your things – we’re leaving.”

“Hmm?” Marius continues to stare up at Cosette, and Théodule is suddenly struck by the thought of particular men and women he has known, those who find a certain... appeal in uniforms and authority. He almost chokes.

Théodule shakes his head. These are thoughts that he does not need to entertain now – or ever.

“We are leaving. Now. This situation is out of hand, and we can only make things worse for both Cosette and the inspector by remaining.”

Marius looks as if he wishes to protest, but Théodule dumps his cousin’s belongings into his arms and takes him firmly by the elbow, pulling him towards the door.

They encounter Cosette just outside, making her swaying way back to the door with the aid of one of the younger policemen, who has come to solicitously guide her back to the table. Marius is still staring like some moonstruck half-wit, and Théodule practically has to drag him through the door of the café.

“But – wait,” Marius says as they are halfway out, suddenly seeming to come to his senses. “Are we just to leave Cosette here with – with those – those –”

“Those perfectly upright men of the law,” Théodule says firmly, his hand gripping Marius’ elbow ever more tightly. At the sight of his cousin’s unconvinced expression, he sighs. “For the love of God, Marius, see sense.” He leans in. “Can you be sure that your emotions will not overcome you? That you will not, in the heat of some mad moment, see only your darling Cosette before you, and do something... rash?”

Marius blinks at him, uncomprehending, for a long moment – but then his mouth pops open and a deep red flush creeps over his face. “I – I –”

"I – I –"
“No, I thought not,” Théodule mutters, half to himself. From the furtive dart of Marius’ eyes, he can tell that something similar may have already come to pass.

Théodule resolutely decides that he would not like to know.

He is about to turn away and take his cousin back to the Marais, his mission to have removed him from the house for a few hours complete, when he hears another round of raucous cheers from the table of policemen – the calling of a new toast.

Grinding his teeth, Théodule releases his cousin. “Wait here,” he says firmly, pushing the door of the café open once more. What a thing it is, to be a man of duty!

Making his way across the room and resolutely keeping his eyes away from the tall, frightening man who is now Cosette, he leans over the back of the chair of the young man he’d seen assisting her after her misadventure in the gutter. He taps him on the shoulder, and the man turns, raising a curious eyebrow at the sight of Théodule’s uniform.

“Yes, Monsieur? Is there something I can help you with?”

He’s not slurring his words, at least, so perhaps not all policemen are so terrible at holding their drink. Théodule wonders if he had once been in the army.

“See that the good inspector gets home safely, won’t you?” he mutters, reaching into his pocket before pressing one of the louis his aunt had given him into the man’s hand. He feels a pang of regret to see it go, but some things cannot be helped.

The young policeman looks down, blinking, at the coin in his hand, before passing it back to Théodule with a shake of his head. “Monsieur, consider it done. But you don’t have to pay me for that.”

Théodule had thought nothing else could surprise him today – but, as he walks back to where Marius is waiting for him, his face practically pressed up against the window of the café, he reflects that he was wrong. A policeman who will not take a bribe, even for something relatively benign? Well, now he feels he truly has seen everything. He sighs as he rejoins his cousin outside.

Marius’ eyes are shining. “Did she ask about me? What did she say?”

Théodule wants to reply sourly, but he finds his humour is surprisingly good, given the circumstances. “She sends you her love and bids you go home,” he says, as he waves down a fiacre. “Now please, for the love of all that is holy – let us go.”
“Tell me again – what exactly did that little back-alley dandy say to you?”

Javert narrows his eyes as the Thénardier girl shakes her head in frustration.

“I’ve already told you a dozen times over – it was nothing more than that. Just the name, Magnon, and the words ‘she did it’. That’s all. Do you think I would leave anything out at a time like this?”

Javert sucks a frustrated breath between his teeth, pacing across the living room. But he is forced to admit that the girl has a point. He does not, in all honesty, believe she would keep anything from him. Not about this, in any case.

But still, there is something here he does not like, worrying at the corners of his mind like a rat with a bone. He turns to stare into the empty hearth and clenches his fists with such force that he can feel his nails pressing into the skin of his palms. If he had still been in his own body, his course of action would be clear, of course, a simple matter to pursue. The fact that he is instead here in Valjean’s sitting room, helpless to do anything at all, grates along each and every one of his nerves like a wire.

He had known, when he awoke yesterday to find himself thus displaced, that this unfortunate situation could shatter the still-fragile life he has managed to rebuild. But he had not truly understood how fundamentally the nature of his very existence had been called into question, until he had found himself near-powerless to aid Valjean – only the element of surprise and a finely honed ability to weaponise everyday objects had allowed him to get the upper hand, and even then, it had barely been enough.

And to be unable to arrest the scoundrel – to yell impotently at the police officers on duty and have them barely respond! He will see to it that they are given the most unpleasant assignments, of course, once he is in possession of his body again. But the thought that in the meantime, he can do nothing – that he could be kept indefinitely from his position, that he may have to live out his days as something other than an instrument of the law – fills the pit of his stomach with something that feels suspiciously like dread. What else is there for him, to keep him from falling back into that gutter into which he was born?

He suspects that the answer is very little. There is only Jean Valjean, who will lecture him with all the patience of a saint about how the law does not define who he is – Jean Valjean, who very nearly died because he was too trusting of a criminal, and because Javert was unable to protect him as he should. To safeguard Valjean – the one thing that Javert can do, that he knows is good and right – and he came so close to failing! The small, scabbed-over cut on Valjean’s throat stares at him like an accusation, and something shrivels up inside him.

His thoughts have circled themselves ever since the incident at the market, returning always to Valjean pinned beneath that brute, a hairsbreadth away from bleeding out his life onto the dirty cobblestones of the alley. One second later and he would have been too late, and then –

It had almost come as a relief, then, as afternoon had faded into evening, and a new worry had begun to gnaw at him, at all of them – Cosette’s failure to return from what should have been a quick trip to the stationhouse. Almost, but not quite.

Discussions of what to do about Magnon and Montparnasse are a rather poor distraction from the question of Cosette’s whereabouts, and he knows that soon they will have to stop waiting for her and decide on a course of action. Send one of them to the station to enquire of Javert’s whereabouts, and
hope that suspicions are not raised by this unusual occurrence? Go back to his apartment to see if Madame Durand has any news?

The indecision over what to do – about Cosette, about Magnon, about his life in general – is almost debilitating. Indecision has become a more familiar feeling to him over the last two years, but he has not yet learned to like it – and if this is the price for his soul, he is not sure he can afford it.

He realises too late that he has become lost in his thoughts – that the Thénardier girl has been waiting for some kind of validation from him, and, finding none forthcoming, has crossed her arms with a huff.

Javert is no good at this. He has very little experience in having his orders questioned, particularly when that questioning is coming from some upstart brat that he has no actual authority over. Valjean’s quiet presence confines him, quells his usual responses. His hands clench helplessly at his sides.

Valjean breaks the stifling silence, and Javert feels a sweeping wave of gratitude. “The name Magnon – it is only a little to go on, but it is something,” he says. “Surely you have begun investigations with less.”

It is true. They have a name – but they also have a coincidence.

Long experience has told Javert that true coincidence is a rare thing indeed.

“I do not like it,” he mutters, pressing his chin to his chest. “That little imp is out in the day, and at the very same moment Monsieur Fauchelevent is attacked – even if his assailant thought he was you? That is rather... convenient, wouldn’t you say?“

He turns back to look at Éponine and finds her pale and defiant, her expression harder than any he has ever seen Valjean make with that face.

“You told me that... that man, whoever he was, said he had been swindled by my father,” she says quietly. She stands, fists clenched by her sides. “Do you think I am a party to it, then? After all this time? That I am here to take Monsieur Fauchelevent’s money?”

“I am sure that is not what the inspector meant to imply.” Valjean breaks in once again. His voice is as calm as ever, but Javert catches the look he shoots him with Éponine’s dark eyes. It is a gentle warning, but a warning nonetheless: Enough. “You were there. You saw what happened.”

Javert swallows. It is true enough – he had not meant to imply that Éponine was part of any plot against Valjean. Nonetheless, he’s aware that his snappishness is getting them nowhere.

“I am sorry,” he mutters, and sees the startled expression that flits across the girl’s borrowed face. “That is not what I meant. I meant only that it points to something deeper. That perhaps our friend Montparnasse was using the man himself. You know he does not like to expose himself where he can help it. Attacking a girl in broad daylight and in a crowded market square is not his usual method.”

“You mean perhaps they were working together?” Valjean says slowly.

Javert shrugs. “Perhaps. Though why, I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Desperation?” Éponine suggests.

Javert turns her suggestion over in his head, and finds it makes some sense. Patron-Minette is no
longer the force it once was. Babet and Gueulemer had been recaptured not long after their escape from La Force, and no one has heard anything of Claquesous since the night of the barricades two years earlier. The rest of the gang had turned on each other, as criminals tend to do, and they had carved up the territory they had once controlled between them – as well as each other. Javert frowns as he remembers the day a stained sack full of bits and pieces of what once might have been Brujon had been found half-shoved inside a sewer grate. Mercier had been sick onto his shoes.

Montparnasse might well be feeling the loss of his territory, the hooks of his claws now loosened where once they had been stuck fast. It may be that he does not rule the night-time hours as he once did, and now has little choice but to take his victims when and where he can.

It is ironic, Javert thinks, that the only one who has consistently eluded them after all this time has been Thénardier, a man who had been considered nothing more than an amateur, a dilettante in Parisian crime circles. Javert might be tempted to believe him dead, but his instincts warn him that to assume anything about that kind of scum can only lead to complacency, and therefore mistakes. And the stakes are much too high for any misstep, in this – Thénardier is, after all, the only other man besides himself who could identify Jean Valjean for who he truly is.

It will have to be followed up with the utmost rigour, once he is in a position to do so – it sets his teeth on edge to think that his colleagues may find Thénardier before he does, and what Thénardier might say to them if he thinks it may help his cause. Oh yes, Fauchelevent, on the Rue Plumet – you’d know him better as Jean Valjean, the old jailbird and parole breaker. Strange that your Inspector Javert never mentioned it, isn’t it?

He forces himself to put the thought from his mind. He can do nothing about it while he is in this form. They would do better to focus their attention on Magnon for now, in the slim hope that something may come of that.

He rubs at his forehead, trying to massage away the headache that has been building steadily all day, and which is only being fuelled by the sound of some drunken idiots singing out in the street. He needs to respond to the girl’s question, but the answers aren’t coming. When did he lose his single-mindedness, his ability to focus on nothing but the task at hand?

The singing has not gone away; instead, it has become louder, incongruous in the quiet surrounds of the Rue Plumet. His nose wrinkles in disgust as he recognises the tune, some bawdy piece of filth that he has heard coming too many times from alehouses and other places of ill repute. Not that the words are even distinguishable as words in this instance, slurred and garbled as they are.

The song trails off, and for a moment, it seems as if the interlopers have passed on by –

But that is definitely the squeak of the front gate, the rustle of bushes in the garden. Javert reaches automatically for his cudgel, cursing under his breath as his hand finds only his skirts. At Valjean’s questioning look, he holds up one hand for silence, grabbing a candlestick with the other. He sidles towards the window, hiding himself behind the curtain and peering out into the darkness beyond.

There is nothing to see but the swaying of ghostly branches in the moonlight, no sound but the thumping of blood in his ears. Perhaps this talk of Thénardier and Patron-Minette has made him paranoid, but he knows what he heard –

The knock on the front door very nearly makes him jump; only long years of hard-won experience allow him to keep his nerve. It is a regular trick of thieves to knock on the door to determine if anyone is home, and then give some kind of barely plausible excuse if somebody actually answers. He makes his way carefully towards the door, trying to find a window that will give him a view.
Really, he should send Valjean and the girl to the back door, in case one of the intruders is trying to
sneak in – a glance in their direction reveals that they are both on edge, ready to react, and he takes a
moment to appreciate that if he has to take on these would-be thieves, then there are probably no two
people he would rather have at his side.

A second knock, louder this time – and then a voice: “Hello! Police!”

Relief floods through Javert’s veins, although he keeps his fingers wrapped tightly around the
candlestick. Out of the corner of his eye, he notes with some disbelief that only now is Valjean
arming himself, grabbing a poker from the fireplace, tension cording through the lines of his body. The Thénardier girl’s hands clench into fists at her sides.

The voice calls out again, and suddenly Javert recognises it as belonging to Sergeant Mercier, of all
the people! He moves forwards, more confident now, and peers out the window next to the door.
Sure enough, he can make out a huddle of officers on the front step, holding each other up and
looking somewhat the worse for wear. Normally he would frown upon such behaviour from officers
in general, and while wearing the uniform in particular, but at this moment his relief is such that he
cannot find it within himself to be particularly upset.

Valjean’s grip on the poker is still white-knuckled. Javert silently gestures at him to put it back where
it came from, placing his own candlestick on a shelf in demonstration. The Thénardier girl, still
looking a little grim herself, murmurs coaxing words to Valjean until he relinquishes it.

It will not do to make either of them answer the door, and so he opens it. He barely bites back the
words *Mercier, you great idiot* in time, instead taking in the scene before him. There is Mercier and
Sergeant Giraud and –

*Oh.*

The two of them are struggling to hold up – *himself* – his barely conscious form hanging limply
between their shoulders like a wet rag. The stink of alcohol and vomit rolls towards Javert and breaks
over him like a wave.

He knows that he should say something in greeting, that he is staring like a slack-jawed fool, but the
horror that has risen up within him is so complete that it has displaced his capacity for speech. To
think that just minutes ago, he was hoping for Cosette’s return!

“Ah! Mademoiselle.” Giraud weakly attempts to tip his hat with his free hand; Cosette has apparently
misplaced Javert’s hat, along with his ribbon, his belt, and his dignity. His greatcoat dangles
precariously from her arm. “My apologies for disturbing you at this late hour, but the inspector’s
friend asked that we bring him here.”

The sheer confusion brought about by *that* statement is enough to snap him back to attention. “His...
friend?”

“The pompous army man with the moustache,” Mercier adds helpfully. “He was sitting with some
other young fellow. Nervous-looking boy, that one was.”

“Théodule and Marius,” Valjean supplies from somewhere behind him.

Javert recognises the name Théodule, but he does not know the man at all. He will have to take
Valjean’s word for it.

He focuses on the more important piece of information – namely, that that dunce of a lawyer and his
accomplice have allowed his body to become downright paralytic in front of the entire Paris police
force. Well! He will be having words with Marius later. The thought almost makes him feel like his old self again, the base animal joy of the predator stalking its prey sparking to life within his gut. Not that the buffoon is anything approaching a worthy target – the very definition of the opposite, in fact – but these days, he will take what he can get. He does not think that Valjean would mind overmuch if he menaced the boy a little.

His lips pull back to bare his teeth in a terrible grin, before he realises that this is not the wisest course of action. He tries to tame his face, to bring his expression in line with what would be more appropriate for Cosette. It would be something along the lines of – dear Lord, he simply cannot do demure, it is physically impossible! – but he manages an approximation of mild-mannered amusement that is, he hopes, convincing enough.

“Well!” he says, forcing himself to laugh brightly. “I will have to make sure to thank them later. I would hate for the inspector to have met with any misfortune.”

Mercier is peering past him and into the house, his natural policeman’s inquisitiveness and inebriated state coming together in such a way that leads him to stare with unconcealed curiosity.

Javert curses inwardly. Several decades he has spent cultivating an air of aloofness, of irreproachability; and now, within the space of a few hours, he has gotten himself falling-down drunk and revealed to his colleagues that he apparently spends his evenings in the company of seemingly well-to-do women who are easily young enough to be his daughters.

Giraud, on the other hand, is merely gawking at Javert’s newly acquired... contours, although his head snaps back up at a remarkable speed. Javert bites back a sigh; he is still not used to having such an abundance of himself on display, but there is nothing in Cosette’s wardrobe that is to his satisfaction. For a woman supposedly raised by nuns, Cosette seems to have a tenuous grasp on the concept of modesty.

He allows himself a moment of amusement at Giraud’s expense. If only the man knew that he was satiating his perverse lusts by gazing upon the cleavage of his superior officer, or that his arm was carelessly wrapped around the waist of a young lady of means!

Giraud laughs nervously. “No misfortune, Mademoiselle. We would not allow that. Not since the inspector’s unhappy accident... was it two years ago? But perhaps you did not know him then. He had a fall. Into the Seine.”

Javert feels himself go very, very still; even his heart pauses within his chest.

Luckily for him, it appears that Giraud is a chatty drunk, and the man takes up the slack of the conversation. “Oh, but don’t worry, Mademoiselle – we would not allow any harm to come to him. Why, old Chabouillet would have our heads! No, that’s more than my life’s worth.”

Javert does not dare to turn to look at Valjean or Éponine. He thinks – he fervently believes – it is only Valjean who knows the truth of what happened that night on the Pont-au-Change. As long as he does not turn around, as long as he does not force himself to see understanding – or, infinitely worse, pity – on the girl’s face, then he can continue to know with absolute certainty that his secret is safe.

Mercier and Giraud seat Cosette on the sofa with a solicitousness that makes Javert feel sick. One corner of her mouth tugs into a grimace and her eyelids flutter before opening. “A fall?” she asks, her voice slow and groggy. “Is that what happened? I fell into the Seine?” She blinks carefully, her mouth forming words with great deliberation. “Well. That makes sense, I suppose. I always thought someone must have pushed me.”
The thin thread that has been keeping Javert’s temper in check finally snaps. “That is enough,” he says, loud and sharp, despite the sweetness of Cosette’s voice. “I thank you, good monsieurs, for the service you have rendered, but now it is time to leave.”

If they are taken aback by his brusque tone, they do not show it, merely murmuring quiet farewells to the miserable figure on the sofa before they straighten up.

“Mademoiselles, Monsieur,” Mercier says. The two officers tip their hats, and Javert’s hand twitches with a lifetime’s reflex; he forces his arm to his side and nods his head curtly, hoping that his slip was not noticed. The men are drunk enough that surely they will not recall too many details... although he knows that there is no amount of wine in the world that could lead them to forget the sight of Inspector Javert brought low by drink.

The officers walk carefully to the door, exuding an air of great dignity that is only somewhat undermined by the way that each of them is the only thing keeping the other upright. Javert cannot bring himself to see them out, letting them close the door behind themselves; the click brings with it a silence that weighs heavy with a certain sense of finality.

He can no longer avoid the conversations that are surely to come, the sympathy in Valjean’s eyes. He could leave the house, wander the streets to be alone with his thoughts; but he knows that Valjean would follow him, would abandon his own daughter for fear of what Javert might do to himself, and he cannot do that to the man. Even if he could leave, where would he go? He can hardly return to his own apartment, and he cannot adequately defend himself on the streets at night.

What is he to do – about how to fix their whole unfortunate situation, about how his position within the police has now been irretrievably compromised, about the way that the question of what happened to him on that June night now hangs heavy in the air?

Steeling himself, he forces himself to turn through sheer willpower, drawing strength from the part of him that has never backed down from a challenge. Valjean looks torn, his eyes darting to Cosette’s limp form sagged upon the sofa and then back to Javert. His eyebrows are drawn together in worry, and Javert feels a surge of rage at how helpless he himself feels. He has not felt this way since those days after the Seine, when his every weakness had been raw and exposed for all the world to see.

“She will need looking after,” he hears himself saying; he jerks his head towards Cosette in emphasis.

Valjean hesitates, before seating himself next to Cosette’s slumped form. “Cosette – my dear –”

Cosette lurches awake, seeming to become suddenly alert. “Éponine?” She sounds bewildered, and Javert cannot honestly say he blames her. “No... no, you are Papa, now. I don’t know how, but you are.”

She is slurring her words, but her eyes are bright as she looks about the room.

“But then, I suppose all the things I don’t know could fill an ocean,” she says, and Javert hears himself suck in a disbelieving breath. “So many things! I feel like you’ve kept them from me, Papa. Who was my mother? What happened to her? And why is it that I can never know anything about your past – about what you did and who you were before you came to Paris? Though you know I was never angry when you wouldn’t tell me. You were so kind, how could I be? But it didn’t stop me from wondering.”

Valjean’s mouth is hanging open, pain and confusion written across his features. Clearly he is trying to form some sort of response, but does not know the first place to begin. How could he? He had sat
with his daughter in order to provide her with comfort, and instead she has chosen to unwittingly tear
his meticulously constructed world asunder.

Cosette ploughs on, unheeding or uncaring of her father’s anguish. Her voice trembles. “Is it so
wrong that I should know a little of the man who is my father?”

Valjean looks stricken, the desperate expression that Javert knows so well clear even on the young
woman’s face he currently wears. His eyes dart to Javert, as if begging him not to say a word. Javert
has never been able to understand it – this insistence of Valjean’s that Cosette know nothing of his
past. Does he honestly think the girl would turn away from him if she knew where he has come
from?

“Cosette –” Valjean says softly, but then she is talking again, becoming more animated as she goes.

“And it is not only that! How is it that you know Inspector Javert? I never knew you to have any
dealings with the police. I never knew you to have dealings with anyone at all! We lived here so
quietly. How did you meet? Were the two of you friends when you were young? I think it must be
so, sometimes... but then, other times.... No one ever tells me anything.”

The righteous anger dissipates as quickly as it grew, and she slumps back, defeated. Her voice, when
she speaks again, is quiet, plaintive. “I just want to know. Why is it that I cannot know?”

The silence in the room is absolute. What could any of them possibly say to that?

Valjean’s face is porcelain pale, his entire body strung through with guilt. Looking at him, Javert
feels equal parts sympathy and frustration – has he not been saying the exact same thing to Valjean
for the past two years? Can the man not see how unquestionably Cosette loves him?

And Cosette – it pains him in ways he cannot articulate, to see himself in such a state. But more than
that, it pains him to see her so torn over such a thing that could be remedied so easily, were Valjean
to just speak with her. He does not know when he started to concern himself with her wellbeing or
when he began to care for her as her own person, rather than just as an extension of Valjean’s
happiness. He does not even know when he became capable of feeling something that, were he to try
to name it, he might be tempted to call compassion. But he knows that he cannot stand to have her sit
here like this in her filthy clothes, enveloped in a silence that cannot be easily filled. Not tonight, in
any case.

He turns to look upon the Thénardier girl; she has been hanging back, clearly as uncertain of her
place as he is of his own. He clears his throat. “Help her up to her bed.” A pause, then, “Please.”

She blinks at him, but then nods. Kneeling beside the sofa, she coaxes Cosette up to her feet, not so
much supporting her as carrying her while allowing her the comfort of being able to pretend that she
is walking under her own power.

The two of them make their slow way up the stairs, and Javert swallows against his dry throat as he
turns to the forlorn figure on the sofa. Valjean has never looked so small or defeated, so frail, no
matter what body he has inhabited. Despite everything, he truly looks like an old man.

“Come.” Javert offers his hand; Valjean stares at it, until Javert offers it a little more forcefully, until it
is practically in his lap. Valjean takes it with a ghost of a smile, but it is a surface-dwelling thing only,
not reaching down into the depths.

Valjean shakes his head. “No, I will stay here, I think. You and Éponine should go and help her.”

Javert opens his mouth to protest, but Valjean shakes his head again, looking down at the floor. “She
needs... time to herself. As do I.”

Javert tries to catch his gaze, to see what is in his eyes. What he glimpses there is pensive and sad, but not self-destructive. He hopes.

He tries to convince himself that this, too, will pass – to have faith that Valjean will not do anything stupid. He presses Valjean’s hand in what he hopes is a reassuring manner. It is not something he is particularly practiced at. “You will remain here until we come back down?”

The smile is back – faint, but genuine. “I do not feel like I could stand up right now, even if I wanted to. Rest assured that I will not go anywhere.”

That will have to be enough. He looks Valjean in the eye, tries to convey – what, exactly? Something meaningful, although he cannot put a finger on what the meaning actually is.

Reluctantly he lets Valjean’s fingers slide from his hand; he forces himself to tear his eyes from that lonely figure, and drags himself up the stairs.
When Javert reaches Cosette’s room, he peers in through the doorway to see that Éponine has laid Cosette out on the bed, fully clothed, a candle flickering on the bedside table. He approaches and nods his appreciation to her.

“I will assist her. By myself.” He silently prays that the girl will leave them be, to understand that he does not want witnesses. It isn’t even so much the clothing issue – although that is part of it – as it is the way that his body sprawls on the bed, semi-conscious and helpless, a mere human form subject to the same laws of nature as all others.

They have already seen you far worse, a voice in his mind whispers. What is a little drunkenness, compared to so cowardly an act as throwing yourself off a bridge? And all because the infallible Inspector Javert could not cope with facing the consequences of his errors.

His fingers tense in the sheets, and the girl, mercifully, nods in understanding and leaves the room. The door clicks closed.

Cosette is pale and dishevelled from her misadventure, as still as a corpse. He knows that it is merely a loss of consciousness that has rendered her so unnaturally motionless, but it still sets a chill coursing deep within himself.

He cannot –

He must find himself again. The old Inspector Javert, who would do his duty without thinking about the consequences of his actions. Who would not be fazed by the task ahead of him, merely irritated. To do otherwise – to allow himself to actually think about paths not taken, to think about where he could have ended up, had an idiotic do-gooder not plunged after him into the Seine – is unthinkable.

Javert cracks his knuckles – or he attempts to, this body not giving him the satisfaction he seeks from the action. He turns towards the figure on the bed, pointedly not looking too closely at himself, breaking his final goal down into a series of tasks that will not involve taking in the wretched entirety of his existence all at once.

He starts with the boots, trying to loosen them a little before tugging them off ruthlessly. Cosette makes a pained noise, and Javert frowns, keeping his eyes firmly averted from her face. “You have brought this upon yourself,” he mutters. “Perhaps in future you will think twice before embarking upon such foolish actions.”

The trousers come next, and he huffs with the exertion, Cosette’s dead weight making the task more onerous than it ought to be. At least the greatcoat fell off after she came through the front door; now he merely has to wrestle with the waistcoat. He undoes the buttons and hauls her over onto her side, pushing his knee into her back with more force than is strictly necessary.

The arm will not come easily through the hole, and suddenly he is weary, unable to care too much as to the state his uniform will be in come morning. He leaves the waistcoat on, settling for undoing the top few buttons of her shirt and removing her cravat; on a whim, he uses the cravat to loosely tie her hair back, the ribbon at some point having fallen victim to her night of debauchery.

He drapes a light blanket over her, then fetches a chamber pot and places it on the floor, inches from where her arm dangles over the side of the bed. Kneeling, he prises one of her eyes open; her protests are barely coherent. He ignores her.
“If you need to vomit, do it in here.” He taps her fingers against the pot’s handle. “And for mercy’s sake, try not to get any of it in my hair.”

Taking her groan as assent, he releases her eyelid and stands, blowing out the candle. He remains there for long moments, at a loss, before sitting on the floor with a long sigh and leaning against the wall. He is so very tired.

Light from a waning moon filters through the curtains, casting silvered shapes across the room. If not for the faint ticks of a distant clock and the slow wheeze of Cosette’s breathing, he could believe that time itself had stopped; even the motes of dust caught in the moonbeam seem suspended in place.

Who would hear him, were he to start talking right now? Nobody and no one. Once again, he is taking the coward’s way out.

“I did not fall. Nor was I pushed.”

The words come almost without thought or inflection, his eyes focused on the wrought iron of the bedframe before him without taking in any details. It is not even his voice; it could so easily be someone else, talking about a stranger he barely recognises anymore.

More words spill out, and he lets them fall as they will, barely noticing their composition. He speaks of Paris, of Montreuil-sur-Mer, of Toulon; he speaks of hounding the girl’s mother to her grave, of nearly doing the same to her beloved father – for surely Jean Valjean’s life would have been far happier and certainly more peaceful had Javert never been a part of it. He is unaware of the details of much that he says, but he knows that he does not spare himself.

Cosette does not move as he recounts his entire existence, his every failing, and part of him hopes that she is merely pretending to sleep, that her eyes will open and she will either console or condemn him. Either would be preferable to the purgatory he finds himself in; and yet he cannot bring himself to take that step, to say the words to her face when she is awake and sober and in her own body, to invite her judgement upon him.

The Javert of two years ago would have confessed to her directly, accepted any punishment she chose to mete out. But now he has something to lose, should she condemn him – a life slowly, painstakingly rebuilt into something new, still fragile yet – and he finds that he cannot bear to part with it so readily as he once might have.

He pulls his eyes to her face – his face – as he has never seen it, relaxed in sleep, or at least drunken stupor. It is a face lined by time, yes, but moreso by deprivation – both that imposed upon him by others, and that imposed upon him by himself. He had taken pride in its sternness, in the way that it struck fear in the hearts of others, cultivating its most fearsome qualities and letting the rest wither and die. To see Cosette using it for smiles, for laughter, pulling it into expressions of which he had not even thought himself capable – how is he supposed to react to this?

It is not him, merely another wearing his skin. And yet, to see a facsimile of himself happy, to see himself so besotted with another, even if in a completely ridiculous and embarrassing fashion – well. As horrifying as it is to witness himself making eyes at that lovesick fool of a lawyer, he would be lying if he said that it didn’t cause him to feel a strange pang within his chest.

Warm light flickers at the corner of his vision, and he turns his head minutely to see Valjean at the door, candle in hand – no, the Thénardier girl, he reminds himself, and the quick, bright burst of relief gives way to something that is not quite despair. Of course it is just the girl, come to check on her friend’s wellbeing.
He clears his throat. “How long have you been there?”

She moves over towards Cosette, peering at her in the candlelight, running gentle fingers over her forehead in a soothing motion. “Long enough.”

The girl sits herself down on the floor next to him, leaving a clear space between the two of them. He gets the distinct feeling that she is staring at the bedframe before them, although he cannot say for sure, because he is doing the same thing.

They sit there for long minutes, waiting to see who will give in first. He can wait all night. He has outwaited many a hardened criminal, although he must grudgingly admit that she is formidable in her own way.

Eventually, it is not words that break him, but actions. The slight movements catch the corner of his eye, and he cannot help but look: she is unbuttoning the cuffs of her sleeves, rolling them to her elbows. The manacle scars shine pale in the candlelight, as well as some other ghastly mark on the inside of her arm that looks like an old burn, and he is undone.

“After I awoke in this body, I had so many questions.” Her voice is low as she examines her wrists. “But it seemed inappropriate to ask Monsieur Fauchelevent. He has been nothing but kind to me, and I would hardly be in a position to judge him.”

Javert finds he has no words to say. There is no defence that he can give for his actions, not when the evidence of his crimes is written so clearly across Valjean’s skin.

“But it is as I expected. He is a good man who fell victim to misfortune, as I heard you tell Cosette. I know criminals, Inspector, and this man is no criminal.”

An instinctive protest rises in his throat — He stole a loaf of bread. He broke his parole. He fled the law — but he swallows it down ruthlessly. It is the vestiges of the man he used to be: the one who had refused to comprehend that the saintliness of Monsieur Madeleine could have been anything other than a lie to conceal the bestial nature of the convict Jean Valjean. The man he had been before he had been forced to admit that both were true, and the one did not cancel out the other.

As for the man he is now... well. Every day still feels like a step along an uncertain path. Where it will lead, he is unsure.

Éponine pauses, and her voice changes slightly. “I also know that you may have saved his life today, and so, most likely, mine.”

He rubs his eyes. It is too late at night for this conversation. It will never be the right time for this conversation. “I was merely doing my duty. I am still a policeman, no matter how I may appear.”

“Ha! I hardly think so, Inspector.” Her quiet voice is rich with amusement. He does not like it. “From how Monsieur Fauchelevent tells it, you descended from the heavens like some sort of avenging angel, terrible in your wrath. Almost as if you are, in fact, capable of obeying your heart as well as the law.”

He scowls. “Monsieur Fauchelevent is prone to exaggeration. I can assure you that I pursue all lowlifes with exactly the same amount of wrath.”

“I doubt that very much,” she says, but she mercifully lets the topic drop.

There is another long silence, which he has no inclination to break. Then the girl speaks up again, quiet, thoughtful. “Do you realise that he has saved every one of us? You, me, Cosette, Marius: all
four of us would likely be dead, were it not for him. Cosette at the inn, the three of us at the barricades, yourself again at the river –” he tries not to flinch “– and who knows how many other people over the years.”

“He has a bad habit of doing that. It will likely get him killed one day.” He cannot meet her eyes – the eyes of the very man they are discussing – and continues staring at that damned bed.

“But that raises the question.” She shifts so that he has no choice but to look at her, at least not without turning his body and being rather rude, even by his standards. “Who will save him?”

He starts. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me. The man is a near-saint, always putting others first, always forgoing his own happiness, always denying his own goodness and playing up his meagre faults. He will not admit it out loud, but he is devastated that Cosette is to be married.” Her voice has dropped to a whisper, no doubt in case Cosette is awake and listening. “While I’d like to think that he thinks of me fondly, I am no replacement for her, and we both know it.”

Javert can hear blood rushing in his ears. “What do you wish for me to do about this? Nobody can replace Cosette. She is his... his daughter. Perhaps not of his blood, but it does not seem to matter. And the sooner he comes to realise that she needs to have her own life, the better.”

“We are in absolute agreement, then.”

He is not sure how to respond to this. Has he won, or lost?

The girl continues: “We must all four of us look out for him, give him our friendship and our love. Show him that he does not need to fear anymore, that Cosette is still his loving daughter, that there is a life for him beyond caring for her. It is the very least we owe him.” She fixes him with a steely glare. “Can you do that, Inspector?”

He wants to protest, for so many reasons: that he is already providing something that others might describe as friendship; that he is unworthy to be in the presence of such a worthy man; that he does not know how to give more than he already gives. But he knows that she is correct: that he must help Jean Valjean, even when it pains him. Especially when it pains him. Has Valjean himself not given him this sermon a dozen times over – never in relation to Valjean himself, of course, self-sacrificing old fool that he is, but always in relation to the slow and painful redemption of Javert’s newfound soul?

The girl is still watching him carefully, waiting for a response. He lets out a slow breath, nodding slightly. “I can do that, Mademoiselle.”

Startled surprise flickers across her face for a moment, before she smiles. “Good.” She relaxes, stretching out her legs in front of her and leaning back on her hands. “The first thing you can do as soon as we’re in our correct bodies again is make him buy some spectacles. Your face is terribly blurry from where I’m sitting, and trying to read gives me a dreadful headache. I don’t know how he stands it.”

He blinks, taken aback by the change in tone and the odd request. “I... shall look into it, Mademoiselle.”

She looks about ready to reply, when a noise captures both their attention: Cosette, mumbling something that is incoherent but clearly full of a deep-seated regret.

Éponine smiles and hops to her feet, murmuring quiet words to Cosette. Javert follows suit, standing
more slowly. He is exhausted after the long day they’ve had, but there is still a small, petty
resentment: even now, Valjean’s body seems to have an endless supply of energy, while Javert,
currently technically several decades his junior, is nearly asleep on his feet.

He supposes that refraining from punching that dolt Pontmercy every time he comes into view takes
a lot out of him. If the others had to witness their bodies canoodling with such a buffoon – well!

The girl is pulling off her own shoes now. “I’ll spend the night here and look after her – the bed is
more than large enough for the two of us.” She laughs quietly. “It won’t be the first time one of us
has sneaked into the other’s room, although usually it was to talk about sillier things.”

It is strange to see himself and Valjean there in front of him on the bed. Valjean’s body leans over his
own, whispering reassuringly, and Javert has a sudden thought of those months after the Seine, that
hazy, ill-remembered time which he has tried so damned hard to forget completely. He remembers
that there was always a warm presence nearby, one that offered comfort that Javert had taken
greedily, even as he had denied to himself that he was doing any such thing.

Cosette coughs and shivers a little, and Éponine gives him a wan smile. “You probably don’t want to
be here for this. Go on – I’ll take care of her.” The smile softens a little. “Monsieur Fauchelevent has
already gone to bed, so take care not to disturb him too much.”

Part of him feels a strange disappointment at this, at the sudden remembrance of brushing Valjean’s
hair the previous night. He wonders whether Valjean will still be awake, whether initiating such
things would fall under the girl’s instruction to offer friendship.

Lighting his candle, he wanders out of the room and down the corridor, heading towards the cottage.
Éponine

The morning sun is warm upon Éponine’s face.

Too warm.

Even with her eyes closed, the brightness sears through her eyelids.

She tries to turn away from it, but the chains hold her tight, gouging deep furrows into the flesh of her wrists.

Her back is aflame, blazing with an intensity that takes her breath away. Her whole world narrows down until all she is aware of is her torso, until she can start to tell one agony from another:

The incandescent lash-marks – she prises them apart in her mind until they are each one distinct from the others. Somewhere in her mind, she counts them – nine, so far. Eleven to go.

The smouldering ache of older scars, as comfortable and familiar by now as an old coat.

The searing fire in her shoulders, pulled as they are into an unnatural position.

And yet none of these burn so badly as the thrice-damned anticipation, the pause between strokes that could be seconds or hours. She can hardly tell whether her tormentor is deliberately trying to prolong her agony or if she has just lost track of time. She can handle anything, except this interminable wait.

*Just get on with it,* she wants to yell – and perhaps she does, she cannot say.

*Just get on with it –!*

The morning sun is warm upon Éponine’s face.

She rubs at her eyes, only belatedly realising that her arms are free to do so. Her fingers come into slow focus, then her hands, then the shiny white bands of scar tissue around her wrists.

She aches in a way she did not ache when she first awoke in this body, the pain fresh, although she can feel that it’s already beginning to fade away into the background. In a way, it’s nothing she hasn’t already experienced for herself – she would have gone mad, had she not become used to the agony in her hand and shoulder while they were healing. Her hand still pains her, but she has found ways to cope when it is at its most severe, distracting herself until the worst of it recedes like the tide.

But this – this is something new again.

Despite his physical prowess, Monsieur Fauchelevent is no longer a young man – she can feel the aches and stiffness that come with age, aches that perhaps she too will eventually come to experience for herself, now that she actually stands a decent chance of surviving more than a few years. It seems an acceptable price to pay for living a long life.

But it is not these physical pains – the years upon years of hurt laid atop each other – that trouble her so. Rather, it is the overwhelming despair that imprisons her, just as surely as the shackles did – as if someone large is sitting upon her chest, slowly crushing all hope from her, bearing down so that each outward breath expels more air than she can hope to take in with the next inhalation.

_Nineteen years._
Nineteen years – longer than she has even been alive – swallowed up by the bagne. She’d never spent longer than two weeks at a stretch in the Madelonettes, and that had been bad enough. Everyone she knows seems to have flitted in and out of prison almost at their leisure, either because they knew the cops had nothing on them, or because escaping was no difficulty with enough help from outside.

Even more incomprehensible is the fact that Monsieur Fauchelevent emerged out the other side of those horrors as a good man. Far too good for her, or any of her family, or practically anyone else in his life except, of course, Cosette. How can such a man blame himself for anything?

Her back twinges, and she represses a sigh. More than anything – more than the physical pain, more than the second-hand despair – she feels guilt. The dream showed her things that Monsieur Fauchelevent had never spoken of. She cannot help but feel that she has trespassed upon something intensely private, something which her benefactor would not wish shared with anyone.

It is bad enough that he suffered, bad enough that said suffering was witnessed by guards and prisoners alike – she remembers that much, even though her memory of the dream’s specifics is hazy at best. She knows that they were there, watching, in the way that one simply knows these things in dreams.

What he has suffered is terrible enough on its own. But for an outsider to remember for him, to feel not just the flaying of his skin but the desolation that settled over him like a shroud – it feels like a violation of the highest order. The queasy feeling in her stomach, she knows, is entirely her own.

Would she want Cosette to know some of the things she did during those lean years when nothing mattered except where her next mouthful of food was coming from? Of course she wouldn’t, even if she knows Cosette would most likely smile and tell her that what’s done is done, the same way Éponine knows Cosette will forgive Fauchelevent when she inevitably comes to learn of where her Papa came from.

Éponine had worked out for herself long ago that the man had a past, and she wasn’t concerned by it, but now she knows that the life he has led and the hardships he has suffered defy all belief. How does one come down the stairs of a morning, sit down for breakfast with their benefactor, and somehow manage to put out of their mind the newfound knowledge that he spent nineteen years under the lash? That he broke parole, that he single-handedly saved a struggling town, that he lifted an entire cart off a man who had been crushed beneath it?

Not that any of the other breakfast conversation options will be any better. The thought of speaking with Javert makes her uneasy, for entirely different reasons than usual. They had come to a mutual understanding last night, and she had felt for the first time that they had found common ground, that she finally understood something of the man and how his life was interwoven with those of the inhabitants of the house on the Rue Plumet. And that understanding is still there.

But the hushed confessions of late evening are a different thing than the starkness of morning, and the dream still lingers at the edge of her consciousness. Hearing Javert describe what he had done, and then experiencing it second-hand via the memories that had been beaten into the body of Monsieur Fauchelevent....

It is not a question of forgiveness on her part. That is the sole decision of Monsieur Fauchelevent, or any other person who had the misfortune to be at Javert’s mercy over the years. Éponine supposes that she could count herself amongst them, although her suffering at his hands had been relatively minor and not entirely undeserved.

She has always known Javert to be capable of great cruelty. It is the knowledge that he is also
capable of kindness, of mercy – of self-doubt, when he had always seemed unyielding as stone – that is so disconcerting.

Perhaps Javert is not the only one who is re-evaluating their understanding of the world and their place in it.

The two of them are more alike than she would like to admit. They both know what it’s like to start from nothing, from worse than nothing, to make something out of the shitty hand that God has dealt them – and oh, will he be unhappy when he realises that she overheard that particular part of his confession.

The Javert who has been drifting at the edges of her life for the past two years is not the same Inspector Javert who once hounded her, although it is difficult to put her finger on exactly where the former ends and the latter begins.

It comes to her in a moment of surprised revelation – that she has, perhaps, forgiven him for his trespasses against her. Or, at the very least, she has set off on the path towards forgiveness, her eventual destination a certainty. So very many people have failed her in her life, and so few have attempted to make any reparation; it is new to her to see someone who has wronged others so grievously admit to any wrongdoing, to show contrition.

And she has failed people, too: Gavroche and Azelma especially, but also Cosette, and others along the way. Certainly she is not blameless in the grand scheme of things. Cosette and Monsieur Fauchelevent try so constantly to convince her that none of it was a failing on her part, that she was too young to know otherwise, but Éponine knows that this is not true. But she also thinks now that maybe it’s possible to have done wrong and still be a good person, to recognise one’s own faults and repair them. To pull oneself from the gutter not by making riches, but by improving one’s soul.

She yawns and scratches at her belly. It is too early in the morning for such thoughts, surely. And she has already lain too long in bed.

As if on cue, an agonised moan rises up from the other side of the bed, sounding like it has been dragged from the very bowels of Hell itself.

That such a sound could come from sweet Cosette –!

But she knows that it is indeed her beloved Cosette – it is a sound that Éponine has become well-acquainted with over the course of the past few hours, just as she has become acquainted with the emptying of chamber pots, with gently pulling loose strands of hair away from Cosette’s clammy face.

Certainly, she is grateful for the fact that Cosette, even in her highly inebriated state, had been courteous enough when purging her stomach to make sure that her aim was true. It is more than Éponine can say for herself – during the misery of her own younger years, the best she could manage in her more lucid moments was to aim for the gutter. In her less lucid moments, it was the footpath, or the stairwell, or – on one memorable, if regrettable, occasion – her father’s shoe.

She can taste it in her mouth, the sudden sharp edge of the brandy cutting through everything else.

While she had been plied with alcohol immediately after the barricades in order to dull the pain of her injuries, Cosette and Monsieur Fauchelevent had reduced the amount as she healed, giving her only laudanum instead – and even that had been taken away from her eventually.

Éponine’s fury had been terrible when she had discovered that there was, in fact, no alcohol to be
had within the house – and oh, how she had torn the place apart in order to make sure that there
wasn’t some kind of substance that could take her back to that dull, comfortable place within her
mind, that could remove the creeping blood from Gavroche’s face so that he was merely peacefully
sleeping, not – not –

Her memories of the rest of that day are in pieces, although she remembers counting the steps
through the house, the nicest gaol she has ever had the pleasure to be imprisoned within. And she
remembers Cosette’s arms around her as she sobbed, the two of them having ended up on the floor
somehow.

Cosette and Monsieur Fauchelevent hadn’t forced the issue. Once she was well enough to leave the
house on her own, they had let her go out, had given her money to buy herself whatever she wanted,
placing their absolute trust in her. It was that trust that had got her in the end – nobody had ever
trusted her to do anything before, had ever expected her to take the right path, without even so much
as a reminder or a threat. The thought of letting them down, when they had put such faith in her,
seemed intolerable.

The fog that had shrouded her mind for so long had slowly lifted, aided, no doubt, by the small
miracle of regular meals and a comfortable bed; in turn, her grief for her dead brother and lost sister,
and even her mother, had become that much more difficult to bear.

And yet, to be allowed this grief, to be able to scream and sob to her heart’s content, and not receive
a clip over the ear or a harsh word in response – it had been more soothing than the soft, comforting
embrace of the brandy had ever been.

In the bed beside her, Cosette’s hand spasms, grabbing the sheet tightly even as she curls in on
herself with a groan. Éponine rubs her arm gently, murmuring meaningless reassurances.

It occurs to her that perhaps Cosette overestimated her own abilities to an even greater degree than
Éponine had realised – while Cosette has certainly never been given to outright drunkenness,
Éponine has observed her partaking in a good number of drinks on several occasions, trying in vain
to disguise her tipsy state with an air of great solemnity. On the other hand, she has never seen Javert
have more than two drinks over the course of an entire evening. She had always just assumed that it
was entirely a matter of self-control, of the need to be seen as being irreproachable in all things – but
perhaps, she thinks with mild amusement, it is that the man simply cannot hold his liquor, and
Cosette has unwittingly fallen victim to his body’s limitations.

That being said, from all appearances it seems like Cosette drank enough wine to kill a whole stable
full of horses, so perhaps Éponine should not rush to judgement quite so quickly.

“Éponine?”

Cosette’s voice is rough, her face screwed up in the very embodiment of wretchedness; nevertheless,
she is now clearly awake and aware of her surroundings, scrubbing one large hand over her eyes.

“I’m right here, Cosette,” Éponine says, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Dear God.” Cosette squints up at her from bloodshot eyes, shielding them from the morning sun;
after a moment, she groans and drops the hand back over her face again. “I have done a very foolish
thing.”

Éponine cannot find it within herself to disagree with that particular statement. Still, wisdom is not
always what it’s cracked up to be. “But was it worth it?”
“I... that remains to be seen.” Cosette struggles to lever herself upright; Éponine helps her to lean back against the bedhead, rearranging the pillows, taking her weight easily. Cosette sinks back with a sigh. “That being said, I would be looking back upon it more fondly if I did not have the terrible suspicion that I have just destroyed Inspector Javert’s life.”

Cosette looks miserable in a way that Éponine knows has nothing to do with the after-effects of drink. And while Éponine can understand her friend’s concern – she knows what Javert is like, after all – it cannot be quite so bad.

She tries for a lighter tone. “Surely not. If coppers were thrown out every time they got drunk, then the inspector would be the only policeman in all of France.”

“It’s not that! It’s – I know how he thinks.” Cosette gently taps at the side of her head with her finger, wincing slightly. “Somewhat, anyway. To be seen like that by his subordinates....”

“We met his subordinates last night,” Éponine says, and Cosette’s eyes widen slightly. “They seemed only concerned for his wellbeing.”

“I had forgotten,” Cosette murmurs, then shakes her head. “It is not their reaction that is the problem – I think they were delighted to have him there. But Javert....”

Is prone to taking drastic actions, Éponine does not say. She can only assume that he went back to the porter’s lodge for the night, that he has not done anything rash. And she cannot believe that he would do anything that would bring Cosette’s body to harm.

“Surely your father would have come to our door by now if anything were wrong,” she says, with more certainty than she feels. She wonders if Cosette knows how the inspector ended up in the Seine – if she overheard Javert’s confessions, or intuited it in the strange way that Éponine has come to know a little of Monsieur Fauchelevent.

To be honest, she is more concerned for Monsieur Fauchelevent at this point. She wonders if Cosette remembers the way her father had seemed to fold in upon himself under the weight of her unthinking questions.

As if reading her mind, Cosette frowns. “I have... a lot of memories from last night, but I cannot be sure which are real and which are dreams. I....”

She lifts her head with an effort, turning to look at Éponine, and their eyes meet. For a moment, Éponine fancies she can see the frightened, bare-footed girl that she barely remembers.

“I fear that I said dreadful things to Papa,” Cosette whispers, wide-eyed, and she grips Éponine’s hand tightly, to the point of pain. “I don’t want him to think that I ... what does it matter, what happened in the past? We have each other now – that is enough.”

Éponine squeezes her hand back. There are many things she could say, but it is not her place, especially when she is in the borrowed form of Cosette’s beloved Papa himself. The truths she has learned sit uneasily within her, like a stone in her stomach, and she has no desire to be their keeper. Especially not from Cosette – but these are not her secrets to tell. They belong to Monsieur Fauchelevent... and, she supposes, to the inspector.

What can she possibly say? Both telling her and not telling her what she has learned feels like a betrayal of someone’s trust.

“Sometimes...” Éponine begins, unsure of what she wants to say. “Sometimes there’re things that it’s better not to know.”
She knows it to be true. Wouldn’t her own life have been happier if she had only been allowed to live on in ignorance of the cruelties of the world? What would Cosette gain from knowing how painful Monsieur Fauchelevent’s life was, before they found each other?

Cosette smiles weakly and nods, but Éponine can see she is, at best, only half-convinced. She drops her eyes, letting the subject go, and Éponine feels guilty for the relief that surges through her.

Cosette sighs, and perhaps the action causes her to catch a whiff of her own breath, because she wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Dear Lord, I need to bathe,” she mutters, and Éponine cannot disagree with her on that point. “Amongst... other things,” Cosette suddenly adds, and she grimaces.

Mildly alarmed, Éponine straightens. “Are you going to be ill again? Do you need the chamber pot?”

“No. I mean – yes, I –” Cosette closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose; her voice, when it comes, is low and steady, but in an unnatural way, like the words are being forced past her teeth. It is not a way in which Éponine has heard her speak before. “No, I am not going to be ill again. Yes, I do need the chamber pot.”

Realisation comes to Éponine all at once, and she cannot suppress a smirk. Given how much Cosette apparently drank last night, this development hardly comes as a surprise.

She schools her expression into innocence. If she had to spend the night tending to the consequences of Cosette’s over-indulgence, then she at least deserves a little fun as a reward. “Do you require assistance with that?”

Cosette is rubbing her hands over her face; if Éponine did not know better, she would swear that she is pulling at her whiskers.

“No, Éponine, I will manage on my own.”

“Are you sure? Because you couldn’t even stand up on your own a few hours ago, and I’m not going to clean up after you if you can’t aim straight –”

“Éponine.” The word sounds like a curse. “You know I love you like a sister –”

“More like a brother at the moment, really,” Éponine supplies helpfully.

“– But right now, you are my father,” Cosette grits out. “So please leave me in peace before I forget myself and arrest you.”

Éponine considers that – considers their situations reversed, considers her own father offering assistance – and stifles a shudder. Cosette has already suffered enough for one day, and she hasn’t even got out of bed yet; it would be cruel to torment her further.

Éponine hops off the bed with some speed. “Take all the time you need to get yourself cleaned up, Cosette. There’ll be breakfast waiting downstairs when you want it.”

Cosette merely grunts, and Éponine beats a hasty retreat.

When she arrives downstairs, she finds both Monsieur Fauchelevent and the inspector sitting at the kitchen table, shoulders stiff, mouths pursed, the dark rings that tell of a sleepless night clear beneath their eyes.

She does not especially want to think about what kinds of conversations might have passed between the two of them – indeed, she finds she has trouble even meeting their eyes over the coffee pot – and
instead settles into the uncomfortable silence, pulling her white roll apart in her fingers in a habit she can’t quite seem to break.

The silence is only broken when Javert at last clears his throat, his eyes fixed upon his plate. “Is Mademoiselle Fauchelevent... well this morning?”

Éponine has to resist the urge to twist her lips into a smile, both at the inspector’s formality as he attempts to square things away into their proper boxes, and at the inane nature of the question.

_of course she is not well_, she does not say. Instead, she says, “You would really have to ask her, Inspector.”

“Hm.” Javert stands without further comment, meeting neither Éponine’s nor Monsieur Fauchelevent’s eyes; he heads out of the room, a slight hesitance in his usual purposeful stride.

That leaves only Éponine and Monsieur Fauchelevent, and the silence spreads over the table once more. She had spoken with him briefly the previous night, had led him unresistingly back to the cottage when he had said that he wished only to sleep. There is so much she wants to ask him about, and yet she does not want to ask him at all, wishes that she did not know to ask him about these things in the first place.

Her wrists itch with the memory of pain, and she reaches across to Javert’s untouched plate to liberate another bread roll – anything to keep her hands from fidgeting with the cuffs of her sleeves.

“We need to find this Madame Magnon.”

The words startle her a little; she looks up into Monsieur Fauchelevent’s face and is relieved to see that the hopelessness of last night, if still there, is now somewhat less stark. Cosette is home safe and sound – more or less – and they have an idea of where to start looking for a solution to their problem. Éponine suspects that the Magnon lead is the only thing keeping Monsieur Fauchelevent from despair, and so she nods encouragingly.

“I think I may be able to find her. At the very least, I know some places we can start.”

There is the faintest gleam of calculation in Monsieur Fauchelevent’s eye, and Éponine knows now what this man is capable of – the feats he has accomplished throughout his life defy belief! Surely together they can track down Magnon.

She pushes his plate a little closer to him. “Here, you must eat. We need to keep up our strength.”

He picks at the food on the plate – eats some of it, even – and she considers it a success. They eat together in silence, and just as she is starting to wonder what to say next, Monsieur Fauchelevent speaks up again.

“Javert must not know of our plans.”

Éponine glances at him, a little surprised. Not that she doesn’t agree, of course, but still. “Monsieur?”

His face is set, lips pressed together. “If we are to uncover what we need to know, we may need to convince Madame Magnon that we are no threat to her freedom. I do not think – that is to say, while I do not believe Javert to be an unreasonable man –”

His words come to an uncertain halt, eyes on the table in front of him. Éponine raises her eyebrows, shaking her head. Only Monsieur Fauchelevent could be so charitable.
“I understand,” she says. “Only... we will have to come up with some excuse.”

Monsieur Fauchelevent’s thoughtful frown deepens. “That is true.”

“Could we say we have gone back to the market?” Éponine suggests.

Monsieur Fauchelevent shakes his head. “Given what happened last time....”

Éponine finds she is forced to agree. As soon as Javert finds out that they have returned to that hive of danger, he will likely fly straight out after them. “It would have to be somewhere he would not be tempted to follow us,” she says. She frowns, lifting another small piece of bread to her lips and chewing thoughtfully. Then an idea strikes her – one that makes her lips twitch with amusement. “Could we perhaps say we have gone to visit Monsieur Marius?”

“That would work, yes,” says Monsieur Fauchelevent, and for the first time in days, she sees the corners of his mouth pull up into a genuine smile.

Éponine shoves the remnants of the roll into her mouth, while Monsieur Fauchelevent dashes off a quick note to the inspector and Cosette, leaving it on the table.

“Javert will not be pleased,” murmurs Éponine as they move towards the door.

“Then let us hurry,” Monsieur Fauchelevent replies.
Even sitting as he is beneath the shade of a marble gladiator, Marius can feel the sweat prickling along his hairline.

Blinking, he wipes his brow for what feels like the tenth time this morning and once again attempts to focus on the book that rests upon his lap.

He is sitting here in the Jardin du Luxembourg with the aforementioned book in an attempt to remind himself that he is, supposedly, a practising lawyer. The tome, purchased this morning, is thick and heavy and smells as new as it looks; Marius has always had trouble trusting a book that does not smell as if it has been mouldering away on a shelf for at least two decades, but for this one he is prepared to make an exception.

It is the latest, most up-to-date book in its field. It comes with glowing recommendations from those lucky souls who have been fortunate enough to read portions of it prior to publication, or – luckier yet – to contribute towards it. It is practically brimming over with helpful case studies that he one hundred per cent cannot read.

He rubs the sweat from his eyes, but it is of no use; it is not his eyes that are the problem, but rather whatever mysterious God-given pathways connect them to his brain. His eyes are registering the fact that there are words on the page, true, but the words are then getting lost somewhere along the way, digressing from their path, swallowed up somehow by a river of ominous sound: the more he tries to read, the more he hears a desolate whoosh in his ears that, he thinks, must be akin to what one would hear in the depths of the Arctic tundra.

He is still unsure as to what possessed him to reveal the entire truth of the current situation to Théodule as he had – it is not usually in his nature to speak so freely of such things. But, he has to admit, it is something of a relief to have unburdened himself so, if only because it is clear to him that even a man of action such as Théodule had been thrown into even greater perplexity than himself.

A man of action.

Marius frowns, the letters on the page before him dancing in front of his eyes. What is he to do? What can any of them do in the face of such calamity?

And yet... he cannot merely sit here like a fool, pretending to read a book under the shadow of some great hulking statue, his thoughts chasing themselves like a dog hunting its own tail.

He leaps to his feet, slamming his book shut with a decisive thunk. His jaw sets itself firmly; he would swear that he stands at least an inch taller. A breeze stirs around him, setting his coattails rippling like some grand flag, and he tucks his book under his arm with great solemnity. It is a sign, surely! Any passerby could clearly see that he is a man to be reckoned with, and esteem him accordingly!

An insolent gust of wind plucks his hat from his head and sets it tumbling down the path, and he scampers after it, capturing it with a somewhat ill-advised foot upon the brim. Grimacing, he dusts it off as best he can.

His fingers tighten as he places the hat back in its proper place, and he swallows as he realises that for all his thoughts of action, he has been remiss where he is needed most.

Cosette.
His hand trembles only slightly as he tucks his book back by his side, shamefully recalling the way he lay in bed only yesterday morning, drained, exhausted, utterly depleted. But he cannot let his own moral failings lead him to even greater failings in chivalry where his beloved is concerned. He will simply have to control himself – and if he cannot –

No, he cannot afford to think like that. He will be setting himself up for failure before he has even begun. Not for him these days are the grand gestures, the gunpowder upon the barricade, the spying on criminals at the Gorbeau tenements. No – he strives for something loftier: the pursuit of love.

His legs are walking him briskly in the direction of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s house before his mind can catch up with him. Yes, this is what a man of action would do in this situation – the right thing, the gallant thing. He will walk into the lion’s den – he will stick his head into the lion’s very mouth itself – if it means that he can check on the welfare of his beloved!

There is a new sense of purpose in his step as he strides down the Rue Mouffetard, and he finds himself almost breathless from the exertion – or possibly it is just the depth of affection that he feels for his dearest Cosette that steals the very air from his lungs! In any case, he slows his pace ever so slightly and ponders upon what he shall say to her when he is once more allowed the honour of basking in her presence.

It strikes him that she is probably feeling somewhat poorly after her misadventure with the police officers. He feels a sudden stab of guilt as he realises that he should have called in at the Rue Plumet to check on her last night, rather than wallowing in his own ruminations and then falling asleep at an embarrassingly early hour. Well, no more! He will call on her, and he will apologise for his appalling lack of care for her wellbeing the previous evening, and his thoughts will be filled with nothing but ensuring that she is the happiest woman in all the world!

A flash of colour catches his eye, and he turns his head to see a flower-seller on the street corner. Ah! The perfect thing to brighten Cosette’s mood.

He hurries over. The flower-seller is an older woman, jovial, the kind of woman who looks like she would be at her happiest when spoiling her grandchildren rotten while their parents are not looking.

Marius nods awkwardly to her. “Good morning, Madame.”

“What can I get for you on this fine day, Monsieur? Flowers for your lady love?”

Marius nods again – or perhaps he never stopped in the first place. “I fear she is somewhat under the weather right now, although I pray she will feel more like herself again soon.”

The woman tuts sympathetically. “That’s no good. But you’ve come to the right place – a fine bouquet of flowers will have her feeling better in no time.”

“I am certain that you are correct – she has always loved flowers so. And she has but a passing illness.” Marius peers at the bouquets on display, feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the range on offer.

“Tell me more about your lady love, Monsieur,” the woman says eagerly, and Marius gets the distinct impression that she is an incorrigible gossip... or, perhaps, that she is merely very good at flattering people into parting with their money. “What does she look like? I am sure she must be fair, to have caught the eye of such a handsome young man as yourself!”

Marius feels his mouth twist into a wry smile. Usually she is the fairest in all of France, but at present she terrifies and arouses me in equal measure is probably not the most appropriate response.
He shrugs a little, unsure. “What can I say, Madame? She is like no other woman on Earth.”

The woman sighs happily, before gesturing to her selection of wares. “Which flowers does your lady like best?”

“All of them,” he says earnestly. It is true – he has never known Cosette to meet a flower she did not like.

The woman looks amused. “I am but a poor woman, Monsieur – I am afraid I cannot provide you with that. But perhaps – ah, yes.” She thrusts an enormous bouquet towards Marius, and it bursts forth with blooms of what, he thinks, must be at least a dozen different varieties of flowers.

It is impressive, he cannot deny it... and yet, it feels strangely impersonal.

“Perhaps,” he muses. He casts his eyes over the other flowers on display – all lovely, but not quite right. What would his darling Cosette like most? What would best say, These are from the man who loves you most in all the world?

A thought occurs to him. “Do you have any tulips? Or dahlias?”

“Why, yes.” The woman looks a little puzzled, but pulls out a bouquet of dahlias. It is a small thing, the flowers peeking out shyly.

He feels a smile break out across his face at the sight. It is perfect.

“I’ll take them,” he says, and the woman, bless her, does not try to dissuade him from buying the cheaper bouquet. It does not hurt, he supposes, that he presses a franc into her hand and tells her to keep the change.

His book beneath his arm, his bouquet in hand, he sets off once more down the Rue Mouffetard. He has not gone far when the flash of snowy white locks catches his eye from across the street – and he recalls immediately the time he had seen his beloved’s father on the Boulevard des Invalides, when Marius had still called him Monsieur Leblanc.

Halting in his tracks, Marius turns, sure that he must be mistaken – but no, he is not. There is Monsieur Fauchelevent, walking hurriedly in the opposite direction, his stride purposeful, shoulders slightly hunched – and there, by his side, is the tall, slender figure of Éponine.

But no, of course, it is the other way around....

Marius swallows as he observes them, thinking that of course, knowing them as he does, it is quite obvious that something is amiss: what appears to be Monsieur Fauchelevent walks with his fists bunched by his side, his jaw jutting defiantly in a way that seems utterly contrary to what Marius knows of his character. Éponine, by contrast, walks by his side with her face cast down, her mien subdued. How Marius was ever fooled by their initial ruse, he cannot tell.

As he watches, they stop at the corner of the Rue Gracieuse and lean in to each other as if conspiring. He watches as Éponine, in the guise of Monsieur Fauchelevent, jabs her finger down the street, as if indicating one of the hovels that line it. They confer briefly and then set off again, disappearing around the corner.

Marius pauses, surprised: what could they be doing in such a ghastly place? And, more importantly, can he be of some assistance? Beginning to cross the street, Marius raises his hand, about to call out to them, when a sudden movement stops his voice in his throat.
A figure peels itself from the dark shadow of a doorway, pausing slightly before setting off in the same direction as Monsieur Fauchelevent and Éponine. Marius cannot say what it is that makes him hesitate – except that he sees something of the hunting cat in the way the man moves, something predatory in the set of his shoulders and the dart of his eyes.

A memory stirs, and Marius realises he has seen the man before. He is well-dressed, even if his clothes are showing some signs of wear, and his hair is black as night and his skin pale as death. Marius’ heart shudders as he finally recalls that it had been Courfeyrac who had pointed him out to Marius one evening as they had walked by the Odéon and told him that this man was to be avoided at all costs – a dangerous man to meet in a darkened alley, who would slit your throat as soon as look at you.

Marius very nearly claps his hand over his mouth to stop himself from calling out a warning – if the man is truly dangerous, who knows what he might do if cornered? Instead, he takes a step back, concealing himself by a gate, and watches, heartbeat tapping in his throat.

The man – he can be no older than Marius himself – adjusts his sleeves, before slinking further along the street, always keeping close to doorways and alcoves, slipping into the shadows like a wisp. Marius bites his lip – it is clear that neither his future father-in-law nor Éponine has noticed that they are being followed.

But what can he do? How can he warn them without alerting the prowler that he has been spotted?

The man is moving quickly and will soon be too far away for Marius to keep in view. What nefariousness might he have planned? Could he have some designs upon Monsieur Fauchelevent’s purse, or – worse yet – his person?

Agonised, Marius weighs his options... before coming to a decision, his spine straightening in his resolve. He will follow the prowler and protect the others. A man of action can do no less!

Ducking his head slightly, he falls in behind a group of men who are wandering in the same direction and tries to appear natural. The men seem to be labourers, and his presence amongst them would not pass even the lightest scrutiny, but some of them are tall and broad enough to mostly shield him from view.

In any case, the man in question seems to have stopped in his pursuit of Éponine and Monsieur Fauchelevent, and has now tucked himself away just inside an alcove. He leans against the wall, all bored nonchalance as he apparently examines his gloves, but Marius can see him peering out from underneath the brim of his hat. Marius follows his line of sight, just in time to see Éponine and Monsieur Fauchelevent disappear through a dingy door across the street.

Marius peels off from the group of labourers with some alacrity, lest he end up walking directly in front of the man and give the game away. He pulls in close to a shop window and feigns an intense interest in a fantastically ugly chaise longue displayed within. Turning his head ever so slightly, he spies the man crossing the street with what on the surface appears to be a leisurely air – but Marius can practically see the coiled tension within him, ready to spring forth.

Marius bounces on his toes, torn by indecision – and then, daringly, he ducks across the street as well, making a beeline for a knot of young men who are cluttering up the footpath as they chatter amongst themselves. He blends with them as best he can, hoping that, in the midst of their jocular farewells, they will not notice a stranger in their midst.

The crowd around Marius suddenly disperses, and he abruptly finds himself exposed for all the world to see. Panic seizes him, rendering him as stiff as a corpse; he finds himself completely unable
to think of a single thing that a person might plausibly do whilst out and about of a morning.

It is only catching a glimpse of the man out of the corner of his eye – he is moving, his head is turning, oh, Lord have mercy on my wretched soul! – that allows him to move again, his body responding automatically in the absence of his brain. He only just manages to slip into the shadow of a porte-cochère as the man turns his head to check he has not been followed.

Marius’ jaw tightens, his breath shallow in his chest as he waits to hear the sound of the door closing in the now-quiet street – but the prowler is too careful for that, and Marius hears nothing. When he chances to peer around the corner again, he sees the front door has been left slightly open, so as not to make a sound.

He closes his eyes momentarily, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. He must do this – for Monsieur Fauchelevent and Éponine! For Cosette! For love!

He slides around the corner and makes for the door, trying to appear as if he is merely out and about for a morning stroll, even as a voice in his head screams frantically that everything is certain to go terribly wrong and that Cosette will be widowed before she is even married.

Marius frowns. Would the inspector, as Cosette, even bother to attend his funeral? He would like to think so – would like to think that the man would even be a little moved by Marius’ untimely demise, that he would get misty-eyed while remembering old times, their adventures at the Gorbeau tenements, the barricades! – but he thinks it more likely that Javert would not even bother to send his apologies. He shivers.

Well, he has committed himself to this course of action now. If he instead surrenders to cowardice – if he has to return to the Rue Plumet, only to inform Cosette that he stood by and allowed her father and her dearest friend to be brutally murdered in a hovel somewhere – well, he would fully deserve to die unmourned and unloved, with no one there to weep piteously over his grave. Let no bosom heave with grief if he should do so heinous a thing!

He creeps up to the door before he can change his mind, his eyes darting this way and that. Cautiously, he prods at the door with a finger; it creaks ponderously, and he quickly shoves it the rest of the way open, nearly dropping both of his burdens in the process.

The reminder of Cosette’s flowers is like a block of ice down the back of his shirt. If anything were to happen to them – he could not stand it!

Looking about frantically, he spies a space under the stairs that is mostly filled with broken old furniture. He gently nestles the bouquet into one of the gaps, hiding it from casual view. On a whim, he kisses his fingertips and places them reverently against the petals.

“My darling,” he murmurs under his breath. “Should I perish here, remember me well.”

Steeling himself, he makes his slow way up the stairs, trying to stick close to the edge of each step in order to reduce the chance of the stairs groaning beneath his weight. He is not entirely successful in this endeavour, but nobody comes running down the stairs to put a bullet in his head, so he considers it a victory.

As he approaches the top step, he scrutinises the hallway in front of him. It appears empty, and so he continues forwards with feline stealth, until he reaches another hallway that branches off from the first.

Marius peers around the corner to see the prowler standing by the rickety doorway of one of the
rooms with his head cocked, as if listening intently to the goings-on within. Faintly, Marius hears the rise and fall of feminine voices – and then the man’s hand goes to his back pocket.

Even in the scant sunlight that filters through the papered window, Marius can see the glimmer of the cruel, twisted wire the man draws from his pocket, its ends wrapped around two corks. For a moment, Marius is perplexed – before the faintest gasp of realisation leaves his lips.

*A garrotte!*

The man’s intentions are now laid plain before Marius’ eyes. He had been correct in his conjecture: the man means to murder Monsieur Fauchelevent – though Marius’ mind rebels against the idea that anyone, no matter how monstrous, could harm a woman – and Éponine, too.

Marius does not know what chain of events has led them all to this place, but he does know that he cannot allow this to happen.

*But what to do?*

Standing in the hallway, watching as the man tightens the wire between his fists, Marius hesitates. By the time he finds a policeman it will be too late – of this, he is certain. He could cry out and alert the others, but he has no idea if the garrotte is the only weapon the man has. What if he also has a gun, or a cudgel, or a knife? Marius knows that his future father-in-law’s strength is incomparable, but every man has his limits. And the prowler has the element of surprise, as well – not to mention the fact, Marius belatedly realises with a shudder, that it is Éponine who now possesses all that leonine strength, while Monsieur Fauchelevent inhabits her own comparatively frail body.

No – no, it is up to him. He is the only one who can save them from certain doom, here in this hovel.

Marius steels himself as he again hears the sound of a woman arguing from within the room, followed by the deep sound of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s voice. As if it is the signal he has been waiting for, the prowler by the doorway stiffens, his fingers curling about his garrotte as he pulls it taut.

*Now! It must be now!* Marius knows if he hesitates even a moment longer, all will be lost – and then – !

It is the thought of Cosette’s beautiful face shrouded by a mourning veil, her eyes filled with tears for her beloved Papa, that spurs him onwards, though to what end he remains unsure. The sight of the prowler – his fashionable, threadbare coat, his slanted hat, his long, cruel fingers tightening around the wire – fills his vision.

Seemingly intuiting Marius’ approach, the man pauses, and Marius sees the flash of his eyes as he turns, first in surprise, and then in fury. The garrotte disappears from his hand, and, faster than Marius can make out, he flicks his wrist and a knife appears from his sleeve, open and glinting in the meagre sunlight.

As if in a moment of divine inspiration, Marius suddenly feels the heavy law tome where it remains tucked under his arm. It is a thick volume, weighty and case-bound. Some kind of inexplicable magic transports it into his hands, and he feels not quite in control of his own body as his arms raise themselves above his head.

The man recoils in surprise, his knife forgotten, his eyes wide as twin moons as he beholds his vanquisher.

Marius trembles mightily as he holds the tome aloft, his chest heaving. Surely this is what it is to be
Heracles, to wield such power and have men quake before him!

Time seems to slow as he brings his arms down with all his strength, the book going on a brief but satisfying journey that terminates atop the man’s head.

The man blinks at him uncomprehendingly for a long moment, before folding in on himself and collapsing onto the creaking wooden boards of the hovel floor. His hat falls beside him, dented beyond repair.

Marius gasps in a lungful of air – he has not been breathing, he belatedly realises – and tries to calm his quivering limbs, his galloping heart. To be a man of action – well! It certainly does his constitution no good.

Trembling, he looks down at the crumpled body at his feet. It does not move. A fleeting panic rises in him as Marius fears he may actually have killed the man – but it subsides as he hears the man groan, his hands clutching at his head.

Surely he is not coming around already? Dithering, Marius is on the verge of raising his tome-turned-weapon once again, when the door of the room is suddenly almost yanked from its hinges, and a woman appears from within, her face distorted with fury.

“Here, what’s the hold up? I told you –”

Marius takes a step backwards in alarm. Who is this newcomer? And how does she fit into this terrible state of affairs?

The woman is no longer young, but there are still traces of beauty about her face. Her clothes, too, were clearly once quite sumptuous, though they are now faded from wear. For a long moment she simply stares at him, her lips working soundlessly in surprise, until another groan from the man on the floor catches her attention.

The woman blinks, before her mouth drops open and her eyebrows draw together. “You useless –”

She looks as if she is about to aim a kick at the man’s prone form, but before she can move, Monsieur Fauchelevent has appeared in the doorway, with Éponine by his side.

Éponine’s eyes widen as they take in the scene before her, darting across to where Marius still clutches his book, his chest heaving. Her mouth drops open; the faintest Ma – spills out from between her lips before she clamps them shut again, setting her mouth in a grim line.

Cosette’s father, on the other hand, spares Marius only a brief, mildly curious glance – the look of a man who has been witness to far too many strange occurrences in his life to be surprised by anything, anymore – before directing his attention back to the woman. Nonetheless, his expression is enough for Marius to know to remain silent.

“Magnon,” Monsieur Fauchelevent says in a voice that is somehow both placating and firm, and the woman backs down. Even in Éponine’s borrowed body, he can, when he chooses, command the kind of respect and obedience that Marius can only dream of.

“Monsieur Fauchelevent,” the woman – Magnon, apparently – murmurs, looking somewhat... embarrassed? “I... well, you see –”

The man at her feet struggles to sit up, still rubbing his head. He feels around himself for his hat; when he finds it and discovers its sorry condition, his expression collapses into dismay of such magnitude that Marius is not sure his face will be able to contain it all.
“Montparnasse happened to run into Éponine yesterday, as you mentioned earlier,” Magnon continues. “He was merely looking out for me. With both of you possibly out for revenge, and me just on my own, no big strong man to back me up? Well, you can understand why I asked him to keep an eye out.” She eyes Marius. “I think I made a wise decision. Three against one – I would’ve stood no chance if you’d decided to take it out on me, with your man here guarding the door.”

Cosette’s father is giving the woman a look that is moving through dubiety towards sympathy – it seems the sainted man just cannot help himself when it comes to hard-luck stories – while Éponine appears to have bypassed both in order to arrive more quickly at unbridled scorn.

Marius, however, is more concerned with the name that just came from Magnon’s lips.

Montparnasse.

Éponine has mentioned this fiend on more than one occasion. The things he has done! He is tempted to take up where Magnon left off, and deliver the imp a swift kick of his own.

“There was no intention to attack you, Madame,” Monsieur Fauchelevent murmurs, as if trying to subdue the rising tension in the air. His eyes move to Marius, who gulps as he sees them harden slightly. “In fact, we did not even know that Monsieur... that this gentleman was here.”

Marius blinks in surprise at Monsieur Fauchelevent’s deflection, before realising that perhaps it is better that neither this woman nor Montparnasse know his name. Most especially since it will one day become Cosette’s name as well.

Magnon snorts. “I find that very hard to believe. Your brute here had murder in his eyes. I wouldn’t have stood a chance! Look at him!”

Marius feels four sets of eyes swivelling towards him. He swallows hard, not knowing whether he should attempt to draw himself up imposingly or shrink down into the least threatening posture possible. He settles for biting his lip and clutching his law book to his chest – a happy medium, he decides.

“He is armed with a book,” Éponine spits, and Marius takes a moment to be thankful that she has reserved her contempt solely for the mode in which the blow was delivered, rather than the vehicle which delivered it.

“And what was Montparnasse armed with, hmm?” Magnon shoots back, although she does not sound like she particularly wants an answer, her question coming more from a place of desperate hope than anything else.

Éponine bends down to where the man in question is still grimacing and picks up a knife off the floor, holding it up for the others to see with a raise of one eyebrow.

“That?” Magnon’s laugh is a little breathless; her eyes blink rapidly. “As I said – I required some sort of defence in case you were to ambush me. Which, I must say, demonstrated considerable foresight on my part.”

As Magnon speaks, Éponine feels about in Montparnasse’s pockets. The man gives her a look that would take ten years off Marius’ life, were he the one to be on the receiving end of it, but Éponine merely continues her unhurried explorations until she finds another item. She holds it up for examination: the garrotte.

“Well,” Magnon says, but she does not seem to be able to come up with more than that, so she repeats it. “Well.”
There is a moment where time seems to pause: anything could happen, any of them could make the first move. But then Monsieur Fauchelevent speaks up, quiet but authoritative, and the worst of the tension dissipates – although not, Marius notes, before Éponine has pocketed both of Montparnasse’s weapons with a smirk.

“As I said earlier,” Fauchelevent says, “it is only answers we seek.”

Magnon, perhaps realising that she may yet get off lightly, allows a flood of words to spill over the dam. “I don’t know how to fix it, I swear! I’m new to this occult thing – I mean, the actual practical side of it – and I fouled it up! This wasn’t supposed to even happen, I didn’t realise it would do this, I thought he would just – I mean – I don’t know! I promise!”

Marius cannot entirely follow the meandering path her words have paved, but it is enough to get the gist.

Witchcraft?!

He feels a little faint – such things cannot be real! If magic is real, then that means that unicorns are real – sirens with bountiful bosoms – huge, hulking centaurs, their powerful muscles rippling in the sun – no!

But then again, what other logical explanation could there be? He supposes it is slightly better than the only other alternative that he can see, which is that he has completely lost his mind.

The conversation is still continuing around him; dazed, he tries to pick up the thread.

“You said ‘he’,” Monsieur Fauchelevent is saying, voice quiet. “Who?”

Magnon looks wretched. “Inspector Javert,” she says, wringing her hands a little. “It’s his fault I was locked up – his fault I – it’s all his fault. Can you blame me for wanting my revenge?”

Monsieur Fauchelevent’s eyes turn to flint for a moment, and Marius gulps. Even in Éponine’s face the expression is a fearsome one, and he cannot help but remember what a formidable man his future father-in-law would be, should he so choose.

“What did you intend?”

Magnon casts her eyes down at the floor, evasive. “Does it matter? It did not come off. It was harmless.”

“Harmless?” Éponine cuts in incredulously, her eyes narrowed. “Do you know –”

Monsieur Fauchelevent shakes his head in a barely perceptible movement, and she stills, pursing her lips and looking away.

“How long will it last?” Monsieur Fauchelevent asks.

“I don’t know!”

Éponine leans forwards ever so slightly, and Magnon shrinks back.

“I can’t say for sure,” she babbles, “but these things usually wear off pretty quick.”

Éponine’s hands twitch at her sides; it is subtle, but Magnon’s eyes flicker about nervously. Éponine looks about ready to unleash a titanic rage upon the woman, seemingly growing in size as she looms over her, and Marius finds himself exceedingly grateful that Cosette’s father is so mild-mannered.
“Define ‘pretty quick’.”

“A week? Maybe?”

Monsieur Fauchelevent frowns. “A week from when it first happened, or a week from now?” His voice is almost gentle; Marius thinks that the roles the two of them have chosen are much more suited to their current bodies than those they would usually possess.

“A week from when it happened! If you don’t specifically cast the spell to be permanent, then they usually just... fade away.”

“Hmm.” Monsieur Fauchelevent looks pensive. “I suppose it could be worse.”

“Could be a whole lot better, though,” Éponine mutters, and Marius is inclined to agree, but does not want to risk the consequences of opening his mouth and saying something foolish. He clutches his book tightly to his chest.

“Still...” Monsieur Fauchelevent sighs. “Now we know, at least. I believe we can make it through a few more days, God willing.”

“Not sure I can say the same for him, though,” Éponine sneers, crouching down by Montparnasse and clapping her hand on his shoulder.

Montparnasse’s face twists into an expression that is probably supposed to look charming. “My little Éponine –”

His voice gives way to a yelp as she tightens her grip on his shoulder.

“You do not get to call me that, ever again. Do you understand me?”

“Mademoiselle –” says Monsieur Fauchelevent placatingly.

Éponine’s grip tightens further. “He tried to kill us! Again! This is the least he deserves. I am done with giving him second chances.”

“Éponine,” says Monsieur Fauchelevent, and something in his voice must reach her this time, because she hangs her head for a long moment, before relinquishing her hold and standing – although not, Marius notices, before she gives Montparnasse’s shoulder one last squeeze. Montparnasse wheezes in pain on the floor; the others ignore him.

“Here.” Monsieur Fauchelevent presses some notes into Magnon’s hand. “Five hundred francs. I trust it will suffice.”

Magnon stares at the money, bewildered. She looks up at Monsieur Fauchelevent; apparently not finding her answers there, she turns her gaze to Éponine, confused.

Éponine shrugs; Marius can see the barely restrained tension in her shoulders. “This is the best deal you’re ever going to get. You should take it.” Her eyes harden. “Just remember that we know where you live – that I know all the hideouts of your little associates, and we have a copper on our side as well. Think about that, before you think about trying something like this again.”

“I – yes, Mademoiselle.” Magnon bobs her head in a quick, jerky nod and practically bolts down the corridor, clattering down the stairs. The front door creaks and slams.

Monsieur Fauchelevent seems to sag a little. “Let us go.” His face relaxes slightly into a small but
genuine smile. “Thank you, Monsieur Pontmercy, for your timely intervention.”

“I – it was nothing, Monsieur,” Marius stammers, his heart soaring like a majestic bird of prey. To have the gratitude of his future father-in-law – to have perhaps saved the man’s life! He is not worthy of such an honour!

He is practically overflowing with all the questions that crowd his mind, but Monsieur Fauchelevent and Éponine both have an oddly similar set to their jaws, a determination that he recognises as the need to get away from a situation that is still potentially dangerous.

And yet, his mind roils: who are these people? How does this Magnon know Monsieur Fauchelevent’s name? How is it that Montparnasse has come to know of their dire predicament? There are so many things he does not understand that he feels his brain bursting beneath the weight of them all.

They trudge down the hall – Éponine, he notices, treads on Montparnasse’s foot as they pass – and make their way down the stairs. Marius rescues Cosette’s flowers – still safely tucked away! – and clutches them close to his heart.

It is only as they are leaving that it starts to sink in that they now have an answer to the riddle that has perplexed them these past few days. And it is only as they are approaching the house in the Rue Plumet that he realises that this means he will be able to marry Cosette as planned.

He sighs happily, his knees almost giving out in his joy. Oh, blessed day!
Cosette

The staircase seems to stretch down into infinity, a treacherous path that surely cannot be navigated by mere mortals.

Cosette closes her eyes, biting back a pained groan. Perhaps the only upside to having emptied her stomach so violently and frequently during the night is that she now has nothing left to purge.

The temptation to turn around and fall back into her soft, warm bed is almost overwhelming; she tightens her fingers around the handrail, anchoring herself in place.

She cannot run from what she has done. Better to face the others and get it out of the way. As much as she would rather crawl back into bed and remain there indefinitely, Cosette cannot deny that her own actions must have caused the inspector considerable grief. It would be wrong to hide when she should be making her amends to him.

And as for Papa –

Her fingers tighten around the rail until she starts to fear that it may crack under the pressure. Her memories of last night are fragmented at best, but she knows that she hurled questions at him, that he had seemed to become smaller before her very eyes. She cannot remember the exact questions she asked, but she does not need to – what else would she have asked him but those things she has always wondered?

The question of where they come from – herself and Papa both – has always sat in the back of her mind, one thoughtless word away from making itself known at any given moment. There were times in her younger years when it slipped out unknowingly, when she had yet been too unversed in the subtleties of the world to understand that there were some things that were simply not spoken of. It had taken her months to realise how smoothly her father would divert the conversation, shunting it onto a different track without her even noticing.

As her questions had become more persistent and complex, his diversions had shifted subtly, although it had taken time for her to make the connection. Where once he had distracted her with a simple change of topic, he began instead plying her with whatever she wanted, with cake and new dolls and strolls around the gardens to look at the birds.

While she had used this newfound knowledge to her advantage for a short time, the shine had quickly worn off, replaced by a vaguely ill feeling. She had found that she preferred to forgo the gifts and the treats, if it meant that the smile stayed in his eyes. What hardship could it be, to refrain from asking questions that she knew would not be answered, if it meant that she was not causing Papa distress?

And so, she had simply stopped asking. The questions – so many of them! – had remained, but she had ignored them, refrained from picking at them so that they could heal into something that, over time, became little more than a barely noticeable itch. Until last night, when she could not help but scratch until it bled.

Poor dear Papa – why had she tormented him with such questions? What had she possibly hoped to gain?

She swallows against a lump in her throat, but her eyes stay dry. For once in her life she wishes the tears would come, wishes that this body would reflect the anguish of her soul, but it seems
determined to deny her the relief that she seeks.

She finds herself descending the stairs almost without realising what she is doing. Her hand grips the rail as if it is the only thing between her and certain death; her steps are slow and unsteady, but resolute nonetheless. The journey is agonising in its endlessness, the throbbing of her head shifting to match the thud of each footfall. But she will endure it – endure anything – to set things right with Papa.

It is only as she finally, blessedly, reaches the bottom of the staircase that she notices the movement nearby – somebody walking through the corridor without a care for how heavily they are treading. Curious, she eases herself around the corner, wincing at the sunlight that pours through the window, but before she can get far, Inspector Javert re-enters the corridor – *Javert, of course it is Javert* – with an empty bucket in each hand.

The inspector – she had forgotten all about him, caught up as she was in thoughts of Papa! She must look and smell an absolute fright; one hand goes up to her hair automatically in an attempt to smooth it down, but she quickly gives up the gesture as utterly futile. She thanks God that she at least managed to put her trousers on before coming downstairs.

“Inspector Javert –” she begins to say – or at least she *tries* to, but her tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth, her throat scraped raw. The only sound that emerges is a vague, sibilant hiss, like an angry goose.

He stops and stares at her, shoulders sagging against the weight of the heavy wooden buckets, mouth set in grim determination –

The air seems to jerk itself out of her lungs.

Despite the pleasant warmth of the morning, she can only feel the burning cold of her feet – see the fog of her breath – hear the crunch of the snow –

It does not feel right – there should be someone else here, she is sure, someone to take her away from all this and make her feel warm again –

*Papa?*

After what may be one second or one minute – she cannot tell – she manages to drag a shuddering breath back into her lungs. Her heart begins to beat again.

Suddenly Cosette knows why her father always forbade her from carrying buckets. He would let her perform other light chores in moderation once they left the convent, but never buckets, never that.

She had not understood, but now she does – even though she does not know the specifics behind his reasoning, does not know exactly what happened, she knows without a doubt that it must have pained him beyond measure to think of her performing such a task.

By the set of the inspector’s jaw, the way he stares down at the buckets, Cosette has the sudden, uncanny sense that he *knows* – that somehow, this long-dormant memory has stirred within him, dragged to the surface by the weight of the buckets in his hands.

She could not explain it were someone to ask *how* she knows that this is what troubles him, but she simply *does*. His fingers twitch around the handles; his eyes slide away.

It is an odd feeling, to know that he knows – that he too can see all the little scraps of memory that
she has collected through the years, turning over and over again in her mind, until she is not sure which ones are real and which are dreams. But she recalls with a shudder the way she had suddenly felt when the commissaire had spoken of her – of his – fall.

The thought makes her uneasy. What if, over time, she slowly forgets who she is? What if this is the first step of becoming not Cosette, but... someone else?

No, that will not happen, she decides. She will hold onto herself, no matter what. These memories are hers – they do not belong to anyone else, no matter who is inhabiting her physical form.

And part of holding onto herself means apologising when she knows she has caused harm.

Drawing in a breath, Cosette swallows heavily, wincing as the walls of her throat scrape painfully against one another, and tries again. “Inspector, I am truly –”

“Please.” Javert’s expression is pained, his eyes still on the buckets. “Do not speak of it.”

Cosette blinks, licking her lips with her parched tongue. What could she possibly say to him to put things to rights? What little she remembers of yesterday’s adventure is a disjointed mess, although she does recall that she enjoyed herself immensely at the times when she was not getting re-acquainted with her breakfast.

But that is not the point. The point is that she broke the man’s trust, that she put her own needs – her own wants – above those of the person whose life she is currently inhabiting. To think that she had one task to perform, and that she instead threw everything into such unwarranted disarray!

She thinks of the disappointment that Papa and Marius must feel in her. Oh, they will not say it in so many words – will be kind to her, even – but they will surely wish that she had not been entrusted with the task. One of them could have dropped the letter in themselves, with an explanation that they were friends of the inspector and that he was unwell. It would have been such a simple solution, and neither of them would have gotten wrapped up in their newfound sense of power – a power which, she sees clearly now, she should never have been entrusted with.

The inspector clears his throat, and Cosette realises that she has been standing in the corridor, staring at nothing in particular.

“But Inspector,” she begins again, “will you at least let me say that I’m –”

“A bath is prepared,” Inspector Javert mutters, still not meeting her eyes. “It would be a shame if it were to go cold.”

Oh – well, of course, that explains the buckets, Cosette thinks, touched by the thoughtfulness of the gesture.

But then Javert’s nose wrinkles, and Cosette realises that perhaps it is not so much thoughtfulness on the inspector’s part, but a polite attempt to inform her that she is in no fit state for company. She cannot say that she blames him, however, and she is certainly not going to turn down the opportunity to scrub off some of the filth that clings to her.

“Thank you, Inspector,” she murmurs. She nods, and then immediately regrets it, feeling her brain rattle in her skull.

The two of them attempt to pass one another in an awkward shuffle of averted gazes and muttered apologies; eventually she presses herself to the wall and lets him pass, trying to keep her own movements to a bare minimum.
Once he is gone, she makes her way slowly towards the end of the corridor, squinting into the sunlight and letting her hand trail along the wall to keep herself from listing against it. After what seems like far too long a time, she staggers into the room – has it always been so far along the corridor? – and takes a moment to appreciate the fact that clean clothes have been laid out for her. Closer inspection reveals that they are most likely Papa’s; the thought of wearing his clothes makes her feel somewhat uneasy, and not just because they will surely be a terrible fit.

Faint curlicues of steam rise up from the tub, and suddenly she can think of nothing she would like more than to be clean. Thinking about the dilemmas that have sprouted like weeds over the past few days can wait until she has washed the stink from her body and the cobwebs from her mind.

Cosette perches herself carefully on the edge of the bath, fumblingly removing her clothes with the bare minimum of touching required, eyes carefully averted. She has managed thus far in her inhabitation of this body to avoid directly looking at... that – the most she has seen is a blur through eyelids screwed almost entirely shut, and, God willing, things will remain that way.

The humiliations of the first day in this body have not been repeated as yet, for which she is thankful. It is with a shudder that she remembers the two hours spent kneeling next to her bed after her unfortunate encounter with Marius, knuckles white around the bedframe as she tried to concentrate entirely on the pain in her knees as they pressed against the hard floor.

It is something that she has tried to put from her mind since then, lest she expire from embarrassment. She can only be thankful that she is not in the body of a younger man, slave to its every whim... or, for that matter, the body of her father. A vague shiver of nausea runs through her, and it has nothing to do with the previous evening’s exploits.

She has – mostly – managed to avoid thinking too much on the fact that the inspector must be struggling with the same problems as she is. Whenever the thought does slip into her mind, she feels uneasy, knowing that her body is no longer hers, that Marius will not be the first man to see it. She supposes that if she has to have a man be in possession of her body, she could do much worse than Inspector Javert; she thinks he must find the situation at least as awkward as she does, and it is difficult to believe that he would take advantage of her in any way.

Still, she will be grateful when this whole sorry affair is over and done with! If God is kind – and she knows that He is – He will return her to her body before it becomes necessary for her to explain to the inspector the full range of inconveniences that can trouble a woman of childbearing age. The alternative simply does not bear thinking about.

Seeking distraction from that particularly unpleasant thought, she slides into the water with a hiss, her whole body protesting the movement. Once she is safely lowered and the pounding in her head has dropped to something manageable, she eases herself back, sighing contentedly – and then frowns as her feet hit the end of the tub. Her knees are sticking much too far out of the water, her legs bent at sharp angles, and oh, this is not relaxing at all.

She twists and turns, trying to rearrange herself into a comfortable position, and eventually ends up half-lying on her side, one leg hooked over the edge of the bath. It will become annoying very quickly, she is certain, but it will do for now.

From here she tries to relax once more, letting the warm water soothe her aching muscles. Cosette notes with some interest how differently this body sits in the water, the manifestly inadequate length of the tub notwithstanding; she is somewhat less buoyant now, feeling rather like a stone in comparison to what she is used to. There are certain parts of her that are exceptions to this, but she studiously ignores them, concentrating on scrubbing herself with soap instead.
As her body starts to feel cleaner, her mouth feels more and more foul by comparison. Oh, if only she had cleaned her teeth before she got in the bath – if only she had scoured her entire mouth with the strongest cleaning agent she could find!

Still, at least she is starting to feel more like herself again – in every sense. The more she had had to drink during the previous evening, the more she had, she thinks, begun to lose track of who she was. Not that this would be a surprise under normal circumstances, given how much wine she’d had, but she had felt more distinctly **Javert**. It had been easier to answer questions as him, to know – more or less – what he would say, were he somehow unrestrained from his usual inhibitions.

On the other hand, perhaps she had merely thought she was speaking as him, and had instead spouted drunken drivel all evening. It is, she thinks with a wince, entirely possible.

But no, she had definitely still felt an echo of it when she woke up. It is gone now, washed away with the last of yesterday’s dirt, but it had been there. Thinking once again that the line between herself and Javert may not be clear-cut – that she may not be entirely herself anymore – sends a mild horror shivering through her gut, and she distracts herself by sliding down to immerse her head so that she can rinse the worst of the filth out of her hair –

She jerks up with a gasp, heart pounding, water sloshing over the edge of the bath. She had not even submerged her nose and mouth, but apparently it was enough to bring back the inspector’s stolen memories, the dark roil of the Seine –

There is a bucket full of clean water on the floor next to the bath; she reaches for it and hauls it up, the ragged edge of her breathing slowly smoothing itself out. She tips some of the water carefully over her head before putting the bucket back down with a sigh, squeezing her eyes closed and resting her head in her hands.

The memory of the river itself is slowly dissipating, but it seems to have unleashed other memories – or dreams, perhaps, or alcohol-laden imaginings from the night before.

There is a woman’s voice, listless, describing places and things she does not know or understand – *Montreuil-sur-Mer, Champmathieu, Valjean*.

There is Éponine sitting on the sofa looking stricken, and Papa – or not Papa, she thinks, but who else could it be? – holding her hair back as she empties her stomach.

There is Papa smoothing her hair back again, but this time she is wracked with fever and pain, and is attempting to cough her lungs out of her body; Papa’s expression is different somehow, his fingers cool and firm within her grip, his hand smaller against hers than she thinks it should be.

There is the cold again, the snow-laced trees, the bucket that seems to conspire with gravity to drag her down into the frozen bowels of the earth itself.

There is Cosette toasting Sergeant Royer with the other officers, friendly claps on the back, laughter and singing and *We would’ve asked you to come out drinking long ago if we’d known and It’s been an honour working with you, Sergeant and You taught me everything I know, Monsieur*.

There is a woman – at least, she thinks it is a woman – toothless, frail, her head shorn, her age impossible to determine; the woman chokes and wheezes, Papa a gentle presence at her side, and Cosette feels a surge of triumph more savage and terrible than anything she has ever felt in her life –

Her eyes fly open. The water has gone cold; her hair clings to her neck.

Trembling, she pulls herself to her knees, leaning heavily against the side of the bath. Slowly she
hauls one leaden leg out and onto the floor, sitting astride the side of the tub for long moments before she manages to swing the other leg over as well.

She sits limply on the edge of the bath, unheeding of how she drips onto the floor or the shivers that course through her. She feels more unclean now than when she first got into the bath, and she is not even sure that she can say why.

She must talk to Papa.

And she must talk to Inspector Javert.
Valjean

Valjean supposes that Éponine has not often had the opportunity to be the bearer of good news, if the small skip in her step as they make their way down the winding corridor from the Rue de Babylone is any indication.

He allows himself to relax ever so fractionally. Her enthusiasm is... not contagious, perhaps, but not entirely unaffecting either.

Things are better than they were when he and Éponine left the house this morning. They have an answer to their mystery, and the solution is not quite so terrible as it could be. They made it out of a dangerous situation without injury. Marius has been quiet – though, to be honest, Marius is usually quiet in Valjean’s presence. Every now and then he has opened his mouth as if to ask something, but then closed it again without speaking. Whatever questions he might have, he has been containing them for another time – which Valjean appreciates.

No – this morning has been rather successful, all things considered.

If only the previous night had gone half as well – if only Cosette had not asked such questions, if only Valjean himself had not sat trembling beside her with panic in his heart and silence on his lips! His lack of response had been damning. But what else could he have done? He had willingly spoken to her of anything and everything when she was growing up – of all the things that he had read, of all the things that he had learned – anything at all, except that. Perhaps, once upon a time, he had had the words to explain these things to her, to give her answers to these questions – but if that is so, then he has them no longer. They have been swallowed up by the silence of the grave – by a silence that comes from somewhere beyond himself, and which he is at a loss to explain.

Shamefully, the thought that he will soon be facing his beloved Cosette again causes his step to falter as the three of them enter the garden. He feels a short, sharp pang of guilt at his hope that their news may cause her to once again forget her curiosity, to again put aside her questions about her mother.

Valjean slips in the door behind Éponine, who in her excitement has left him in her wake. She disappears around the corner, heading towards the kitchen, and he quickens his pace, opening his mouth to call out to her, to say – what? There is no reason why she should not rush in and tell Cosette the good news straight away; and yet, the sense of unease in the base of Valjean’s gut grows even more urgent and unpleasant.

“Cosette!” Éponine sounds excited, her voice brimming with a joyousness that Valjean has so rarely heard from her. He is running now, barely aware of Marius’ footsteps following behind him. “Cosette, you’ll never guess –”

The words cut off suddenly, to be replaced with silence. Dread seizes Valjean; he bursts through the kitchen door behind her, pulling up just in time to keep himself from skidding into the table.

The scene that greets him is worse than he imagined.

Cosette is clean but rumpled, wearing ill-fitting clothes that he distantly identifies as his own; her hair is damp and uncombed, her face unshaven, her skin still carrying a faint pallor.

But it is her expression that steals his breath away – her face contorts in a ferocity of emotion that is completely beyond anything he has ever seen from his beloved daughter. There is disbelief there, and confusion, and a burning anger; beneath it all runs an anguish that clinches at his heart.
There can be only one thing that has caused Cosette to feel this way, to make such a frightful expression: somehow – somehow, she knows.

He realises now that he has mishandled things terribly. He has sometimes lain awake at night, wondering how he could somehow make the truth plain to Cosette whilst still sparing her innocence, but he has always pushed the thought aside in the end, put it off for another day. Cosette had been in raptures over her wedding; Éponine had gone from a ragged waif who stared at him with mistrustful eyes to a young woman of sturdy character. And Javert....

Valjean swallows. He thinks he ought to feel gratitude for the mercy that Javert has extended to him; the mercy he continues to extend every day that they spend together. But instead, his mind travels only to the strange, desperate feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach that night as Javert braided his hair, his fingers brushing the back of Valjean’s neck.

He has been content. And in his content, he has been selfish. Is that not always the way, after all? And now, he is being called to account.

That his darling Cosette should feel such torment – and all because of him! He cannot stand it. He had thought only to continue to intrude upon her happiness until she was safely married to Marius, but now even this seems to him to have been an atrocious transgression.

No, he will tell her everything. Better that he spare her further misery from his secrets and his lies – better that he simply tell her the truth, that he give her reason to cut him from her life like gangrenous flesh, so that the rest of her can heal. What kind of father would drive his daughter to such distress?

This is it, he realises – this is the last time he will ever see her, and she is not even her. He will never hear himself called Papa again, never again embrace the beautiful young woman that he dared to think of as his own daughter.

He opens his mouth to speak, not even knowing what he will say. But before the words can come out, Cosette leans forward, gripping the edge of the table.

She has not even seen me, Valjean realises with a start. She does not know that I am here.

Across the table from Cosette sits Javert, his head bowed, eyes fixed on the table before him, hands folded in his lap. His shoulders slump infinitesimally; in anyone else, the posture would be considered upright, but in Javert it is a clear signal that something is terribly wrong.

Valjean wants to speak – he wants to ask what has happened here, but a dreadful silence seems to have descended over them all. Nothing moves, and no one speaks.

It is not until Cosette whispers a name, her voice low and harsh, that the spell is broken.

“Fantine. My mother’s name was Fantine.”

Valjean’s heart stills in his chest. He has not heard that name spoken aloud in over a decade. It had not seemed proper; the name of a martyr was a sacred thing. Fantine’s name had been something he reserved only for prayer these last ten years. To hear it now....

“Yes. That is so.” Javert’s response, spoken in Cosette’s voice, is barely audible. It is not a tone Valjean has ever heard him use before.

“And... you were there as she died. You and Papa both. You saw....”
Javert’s shoulders seem to sag ever so slightly further forward, as if her words are a blow. “That is so.”

“But... but why?”

Cosette sounds so bewildered that Valjean can almost feel his heart break within his chest. He is mildly aware of Marius taking a tentative step forwards, his arms outstretched, before hesitating and lowering them uncertainly. How Valjean longs to do the same – to take Cosette in his arms and comfort her, as a father should. But he feels rooted to the spot, knowing in his heart that he has forfeited the right to do any such thing. He had been Cosette’s custodian only so long as she had no other; it had been pure selfishness on his part that she had not joined Marius in matrimony months ago. He should have insisted that they married the moment it had become clear that Marius’ life was no longer in danger.

“I arrested her.” Javert’s tone is implacable. “Monsieur Fauchelevent acted only to protect her.”

Cosette blinks, shaking her head. “Had... had she done something wrong? Was she a criminal?”

There is a brief pause. “At the time I believed – I had thought that –” Javert lifts a hand, making a small, sharp movement as if to cut off the flow of his own words. “But no. I will not offer an excuse. The fact remains that I alone am responsible. Monsieur Fauchelevent bears none of the blame.”

Valjean opens his mouth to protest – Javert has simplified the events of Fantine’s death to the point of absurdity, excising the entirety of Valjean’s involvement, his failure to provide protection for one of his workers in most need of it – but the words, whatever they may have been, die in his throat.

What could he possibly say that would fix this dreadful situation? What actions could he take that would not be tinged with his own selfishness, his own desire to satisfy Cosette’s curiosity so that she would be content in his presence once more? No, best to let things run their course, let Cosette see the truth of him and come to her own conclusions.

Cosette’s fingers tighten around the edge of the table, her shoulders tensing, her face twisting as she clearly tries to piece things together in her mind. She shakes her head, a terse, decisive motion.

“Cosette,” Marius says at last, his voice strangled. Cosette turns her head and notices them for the first time, standing at the threshold of the room. She stares at them a moment as if she does not comprehend what she is seeing, and Valjean’s blood turns to ice.

“How long have –” she begins to ask, in the same confused, frightened tone.

“Cosette,” Marius says again, opening his arms once more and approaching her. “My darling –”

To Valjean’s surprise – or even horror – Cosette takes a step back from Marius’ approaching form. She raises a hand almost as if to ward him off, her eyes wide.

“I need...” she mutters distractedly. She lowers her eyes, biting her lip. “I need to think. Please. I just – I’d like to be alone. Do not follow me – I will return.” Her eyes dart upwards for the most fleeting of moments – to Valjean, to Éponine, before lingering briefly upon Marius. Her jaw tightens, even as her voice trembles. “Please.”

She hurries towards the door, her strides long and brisk. Valjean finds himself moving aside to clear the way for her without even thinking about it; he is left helplessly adrift, storm-tossed, flotsam bobbing in her wake. He can hear her fumbling about in the corridor, before the front door opens and then closes again with a finality that brings about a silence overwhelming in its enormity.

He only barely notices Marius taking an abortive step in her direction before pulling himself back
once more. The boy looks as lost as Valjean himself feels, his forehead creasing in dismay. His mouth opens as if he wishes to call after her, but then it closes again, and Marius deflates, leaning back against the wall, rubbing at his eyes.

Valjean realises, with an uncaring vagueness, that his own legs have weakened to the point where the only thing keeping him upright is his grip upon the back of a chair.

What has just even happened – what is his beloved Cosette thinking right now – oh God, what has he done –

It takes him a long moment to comprehend that he is sitting in the chair now. His body feels heavy, his heart a stone in his chest. He can sense the uncertain presence of Éponine at his side, hovering hesitantly at his elbow as Marius remains frozen in place, staring after Cosette.

Valjean wishes that he would go after her – for all Cosette had insisted that she wanted to be alone, he knows that she would not turn Marius away if he followed her. It would be better if he did – the boy should chase her, reassure her that he still cares for her, despite the fact that the man who masqueraded as her father for all these years is merely a liar, a thief, a deceiver of the highest order.

“Go to her,” Valjean says after a long moment’s silence. “You should – she will need you now, Monsieur Pontmercy.”

Marius hesitates, blinking. He opens his mouth, perhaps to protest – but ends up closing it again, his words unsaid. Instead, he nods once, quickly, before turning away and dashing down the corridor.

Once again, the front door opens and closes.

“I too will go.”

Valjean looks up to find Javert standing, head bowed, his hands clasped neatly behind his back.

“Javert –” he begins to say, but is cut off.

“I had thought – perhaps I had –” Javert shakes his head slightly. “It is of no consequence. Know that I will not come here again. It is better that I....” He trails off and looks down at himself, as if he has only just remembered the form he currently inhabits, and his lips tighten slightly. “Well. I suppose that you shall be stuck with me for some time, but I will make myself scarce until we are all returned to our own bodies. After that, I will return to my apartment, and you shall see no more of me –”

“Javert, please –” Valjean feels a sudden surge of desperation and digs his fingers into the table as if it is a lifeline, his crippled hand protesting at the strain. But Javert ploughs on relentlessly, gathering steam as he goes, his speech picking up speed to match his footsteps as he begins to pace the kitchen.

“It will be for the best, anyway – if I am gone much longer, then surely Madame Durand will send for the police.” Javert shakes his head agitatedly. “Ha! The police will come right to your door – again! And again, it will be I who has led them there, though God knows I did not –”

Cutting himself off, Javert plants his hands on the table and leans down over it, his shoulders hunched, his eyes bright and trained on Valjean’s face. Valjean tries to slide back in his chair, unable to make himself rise, pinned down by that wild stare – it is not the gaze of the triumphant predator, but rather that of the cornered prey. Javert is no threat to him – has not been a threat since he was pulled from the Seine – and yet, Valjean finds himself unable to resist.

“You confound me, Valjean. You live this absurd life – you do these preposterous things, you lift heavy carts and kidnap children and hand yourself in to the authorities and infiltrate the barricades
and throw yourself into a river after the man who tried to ruin you – and yet. And yet! My whole life always ends up circling back to you, no matter what I do. I could not avoid you if I tried. I had started to think that maybe I should just give in to it, that maybe we –” He cuts himself off sharply. “No matter. I have been reminded today of exactly why I should not want – of why I should stop meddling in your life, and leave you to your own affairs.”

He straightens up, hands behind his back, head bowed, eyes averted; and for one terrible moment Valjean is transported back to a study in Montreuil-sur-Mer, and the way Javert had looked when he had come in to demand his own dismissal.

Valjean raises his hand, opens his mouth to speak, pauses to try to gather at least some of his scattered thoughts – and Javert seizes the moment, ducking his head further in the briefest of nods before turning on his heel and departing the room.

For a moment, Valjean sits in the chair and tries to take in everything that has just happened. A week ago, his life had seemed endlessly complicated; now, he would give anything to have it back, to have his tentative friendship with Javert, to have Cosette laughing excitedly as she planned her wedding. How foolish he had been, to think that Cosette marrying Marius and leaving him alone would be the worst thing that could happen!

Distantly, he realises that Éponine is also no longer in the room – that she has probably been gone since the beginning of his conversation with Javert. He cannot blame her for leaving. He wonders whether she has followed Marius in his attempt to locate Cosette, or if she has merely sequestered herself in some other part of the house in order to keep herself out of the firing line.

Cosette.

He finds himself hoping that Marius has found her, that he has reassured her that she will be looked after, that she will not have to worry about the stain of a criminal father who was not even her father to begin with. Marius is not so terrible – he is basically a good man at heart, even if he is prone to wild flights of fancy – and he would do anything for Cosette. Valjean cannot fault him. Certainly he is better for Cosette than Valjean will ever be.

It is well. They will be married. And then it will no longer be his concern. That is what is proper.

But while the problem of Cosette may be squared away, the problem of Javert remains.

Ignoring the dull pain in his chest, Valjean forces himself to his feet; to the kitchen door; to the back door of the house; to the garden beyond.

Dappled sunshine falls upon his face, light and shadow shifting in concert with the susurrus of the leaves. Bees dance between flowers, indifferent to his presence. It seems a terrible joke that the world should be so lovely, when everything in his life has fallen into ruin.

He spies Javert further along the path, standing with his arms behind his back and staring at something indiscernible, almost as if keeping watch. Valjean supposes that Javert has nowhere he can go – not without putting Cosette’s body at risk, anyway.

Javert has noticed his approach, of course, even though he has not moved a muscle in acknowledgement of Valjean’s presence. Valjean knows this as easily and certainly as he knows the basic truths of the universe, such as the fact that his heart is pumping blood around his body, or that God exists and He is merciful. It is simply a given that Javert has heard him coming.

Valjean watches from a distance, unsure of what he will do now that he has found the man. It is
disquieting, how quickly he is becoming used to seeing Cosette as Javert – how easily his daughter’s form has become that of his former pursuer. Javert has pulled his hair back with a black ribbon today – the two of them had not talked when they awoke this morning, had barely looked at each other, the events of last night hanging heavily in the air – and Valjean is taken aback at how this is simply Javert, now.

He wonders if the others now see Valjean himself as Éponine – if his bearing and expressions and speech have imprinted themselves onto this body until everyone else has come to accept that this is simply what Jean Valjean looks like, who Jean Valjean is.

He opens his mouth with the intention of speaking, but he has no idea what the actual words will be – they will be as much a surprise to him as they will be to Javert.

“We spoke to Magnon this morning.”

Javert stiffens a little, but does not otherwise react. Valjean continues on.

“She said that she was the cause behind our... condition, and that it should resolve itself in a few days’ time.”

There is silence between them in the lushness of the garden. Javert does not turn, and Valjean watches as the breeze lifts the strands of his hair from the back of his neck.

Perhaps he should go. He does not believe Javert will do anything that could harm Cosette; he does not want to leave things as they are, but at the current moment, he does not see how they can be resolved.

“I meant what I said, Valjean,” Javert says, just as Valjean begins to turn away. “I do not expect you to forgive me. I do not ask for that. But for what it is worth... I told her only the truth. And the rest she already knew.”

Valjean pauses, frowning. “She knew?”

Now Javert does turn to look at him, glancing at him curiously. “Yes, I – it has been the same with me, though I only had cause to notice it this morning. You have not... you have not found yourself remembering things from a life that is not your own?”

Valjean shakes his head, his throat feeling dry. He glances towards the house, though there is no sign of life from within. He had noticed this morning that Éponine had been... that there had been a different kind of light in her eyes when she had looked at him. Perhaps that, then, explained it. Perhaps his past has been laid bare to her also. The layers of his artifice are being slowly stripped from him. He suppresses a shudder.

“Then Cosette knows it all,” he murmurs, half to himself. “Well, then. Perhaps that is for the best. She has seen it now as if with her own eyes. She knows of... what I have done. How I did not protect Fant... how I did not protect her mother. She understands my failings.”

“Your failings?”

Valjean looks up to find Javert staring at him as if he has grown an extra limb.

“How can you speak of your failings?” Javert shakes his head, disbelieving. “Valjean, you are being absurd. You cannot honestly think you have any fault in that. You did not know. How could you have known? And the moment you uncovered the truth, you did everything in your power to protect her. And you kept your vow – for twelve years, you have raised her daughter! Despite everything
that – despite everything I –” Javert stumbles and grinds to a halt, his eyes once again on the garden. “Do you think she would not forgive you for concealing this from her?” he eventually asks, his voice low. “You do her an injustice. But what is the use of *me* telling you this? She will tell you so herself just as soon as she returns.”

Valjean feels his shoulders sag. How can he explain this to Javert? He does not doubt that Cosette, sweet child that she is, will forgive him – but what right has he to her forgiveness? How many more moments of happiness does he intend to steal?

He had thought that perhaps, of all men, Javert would have understood him in this. Inexplicably, he finds his mind turning back, returning once again to their shared past and to the words he had spoken at the trial of Champmathieu: *I wish Javert were here; he would recognise me.*

It does not matter if Cosette forgives him. Even if she returns in a moment and puts everything she has learned from her head and never speaks of it, never thinks of it again, he will still be the same man as he was before. He will still be Jean Valjean.

This morning has been a correction. Cosette, Javert, perhaps Éponine....

Everything is now as it should be.

He looks up, forcing himself to look Javert in the eye and smile. “I am sure you are right,” he says, before he turns and goes back towards the house.
Cosette

Cosette does not know this part of the city.

She does not know where or how far she has wandered. She has walked without purpose or aim, barely paying attention to anything occurring around her.

The truth of the matter is, however, now that the chattering voices in her head have receded somewhat, she has begun to regret her impulsive flight. She feels heartsick as she remembers the way Marius had come towards her as if to take her in his arms – and oh, how she realises now how comforting that would be! But no, instead of flying to him, she had run away, wanting in that moment only to be alone to sort through the strange new knowledge that had been thrust upon her.

And now, for the life of her, she cannot remember why.

She has so many things to ask Papa, so many things she wishes to understand. She does not think he will blame her for being a little cross with him. To think that he has been carrying so many burdens alone for all these years! Had he honestly thought that she would not be glad to take some of that weight from him, to share the sorrow of what had happened to her mother, and thereby halve it?

_Fantine._

It is strange, she thinks – for as long as she can remember, she has thought that hearing her mother’s name would unleash a flood of memories, of certainty: _Yes, I remember her now – how did I ever forget?_

But there is nothing there. Fantine is a stranger to her, the fleeting borrowed memory of her face already fading like a dream upon waking. She tries desperately to fix her mother’s features into her mind, waxy and skeletal as they are – tries to find something of herself in them that she can use as a reference – but they become indistinct before her mind’s eye, sliding away from her quicksilver-fast. She can only bring to mind those things that weren’t intrinsically _her_ – the spaces where her teeth should have been; the lines etched into a face far too young for them; the sparse, brittle hair that somehow seemed too much for her bony face, despite its lack of length. There is only what she was – poor, desperate, terrified – and nothing of who she was.

She cannot tell anything about this woman beyond her fear, cannot see what she would have looked like had she been well, what kind of soul would have shone in her eyes. She knows, in a place within her that operates away from the realm of emotion, that her mother had loved her. The inspector had told her as much, in the few, halting words he had managed this morning. He had not said much, but he _had_ muttered that she had sacrificed everything for Cosette, that she would have been broken-hearted had she known that she had delivered her own daughter into such a wretched place. Although in the end, Cosette thinks, it was a path that led her to Papa, to Marius, to a better life.

Perhaps that will have to be enough: to know that Fantine had loved her beyond all reason, to know that her death was not entirely in vain.

For one moment, Cosette almost wishes that her mother had chosen differently, had chosen for the two of them to beg together on the streets, never to be separated, starving but alive. It is ridiculous and unfair, and probably they would have both ended up dead, but she is finding it quite the burden to know that her mother laid down her own life for her. Cosette does not even remember Fantine, and yet the woman had given up her life for Cosette’s happiness and safety.
But then again, it would not do for Cosette to wallow, to selfishly wish for things that cannot be, to refuse to honour her mother’s sacrifices. Surely she would have wanted Cosette to be happy and well, rather than live in the shadow of what happened, to be broken apart by the knowledge that somebody had died so that she might live.

Maybe Papa will be able to tell her something of the woman her mother was – what she looked like in health, the things she liked, what her hopes and dreams were. She knows that Papa knew Fantine in a town called Montreuil-sur-Mer, and that Inspector Javert had also been there, but she cannot quite put all of the pieces together. The inspector had only told her that Papa had tried to protect her mother, and Cosette had remembered snatches of Javert’s own memories – but they are fading now, and warped through the scratched lens of his own perspective.

She will have to get the truth from Papa – and if he refuses, then she will get it from the inspector. Cosette knows and understands that they have their secrets, but they cannot reasonably expect to keep the knowledge of her own mother from her, surely!

The more she walks, the more Javert’s memories seem to slip from her grasp. The Seine is still there, a permanent undercurrent at the edge of her consciousness; she does not think she will ever be rid of it, even if – when – she is returned to her own body. But the memories that came to her this morning in the bath are more ethereal, only half-there. She cannot trust herself to know whether they are real.

She wonders whether the revelations of this morning have broken the hold that the inspector’s memories had on her – whether there were so many gaps in her own mind that Javert’s memories had simply rushed in to fill the empty spaces, a river bursting its banks and seeking the lowest ground. Perhaps now that she is gaining her own knowledge of her life, the inspector’s memories are receding.

Or perhaps, she thinks ruefully, it was all merely a result of her inebriation, and her own mind has regained control with the return of her sobriety.

Whatever the case may be, she now feels more like herself than she has since she went to the stationhouse.

She realises that her tired feet have taken her into a small park, awash in the heady scent of flowers. She lowers herself onto a bench, letting her eyes take in the colours, the ducks bobbing on the pond. One of them waddles towards her with an indignant series of quacks, and she spreads her hands helplessly.

“I am sorry, but I have nothing for you. Perhaps I shall have to come back some other day.” She looks the duck in its beady eye. “Would you like that?”

The duck quacks again, and she smiles. At least she does not look so fearsome as to scare away inquisitive birds! Although she knows that appearances can be deceiving anyway, especially where the inspector is concerned.

She is unsure of how she will be able to broach the subject of Fantine with him again. She is still angry with him. His joy at the moment of her mother’s death is not easily forgotten or forgiven, and it makes her sick at heart to think that this is what she will remember of her mother – Fantine’s features have already faded almost entirely from her mind, but the terrible exultation that Cosette felt at the moment of her passing has lingered, as impossible to forget as Fantine’s face is to remember.

On the other hand, she still has enough of Inspector Javert’s memories to know that it was not the fact of her mother’s death that thrilled him so in that moment, but... something else? She cannot grasp it; the more she reaches, the more elusive it becomes.
She knows that he feels terrible guilt over something, over many things, although she cannot match the emotion up with specific memories. And while she knows that she should not pry, it is her life, too, and it is so close that she can almost touch it. She stretches out towards it – but then the roar of the Seine intensifies suddenly, and a feeling of horror spreads within her gut, a sense of her own wrongness, of something overwhelming and unforgiveable, the world turned upon its head, something that can only be fixed by –

“Inspector Javert! Inspector Javert!”

Cosette turns at the sound of her borrowed name, hoping that whoever is calling to her does not notice the way she startles, the way her breath comes too loud and fast.

Disconcerted, she realises that it is one of the police officers who had accompanied her on her ill-fated trip to the café yesterday. Briefly, she wonders whether other people’s lives are so prone to such coincidences, but then she brings her mind back to the moment at hand. The man’s name – Martin, yes, she remembers now. He looks like he has fared somewhat better than she did in terms of their little excursion; but then, she supposes, he could hardly have fared any worse!

She is aware she must look frightful: her hair in disarray, her face unshaven, and wearing what are clearly another man’s shirt and jacket, which are far too wide in the chest and yet much too short at the wrists. The Lord alone knows what anyone who might see her must think of her – and certainly, she sees surprise in Sergeant Martin’s eyes.

“Inspector, I – are you still on leave?”

Her actions of last night were bad enough, in terms of bringing the inspector’s reputation into disrepute – what must Martin be thinking, pitiful as she looks now? What kind of explanation can she give as to her current appearance? She thinks of what she knows of Martin from their brief acquaintance, and what she knows of Inspector Javert... and hopes that she is making the right choice.

“Sergeant Martin,” she murmurs, trying to put the vaguest edge of menace into her voice. “What have I told you about interrupting other officers while they are engaged in covert work?”

Sergeant Martin jerks back as if he has been slapped. “I’m sorry, Monsieur! I’ll just go and –”

Cosette allows herself some satisfaction at her successful ruse, but only for a moment. She holds up a hand to halt the flow of words. “All is forgiven, Sergeant – it is obviously something urgent. What has happened?”

Martin fidgets in agitation, waiting for her as she stands and casts an apologetic look back at the offended duck. “There is a disturbance on the street, Inspector. It was... it has been poorly handled.”

“Never mind that,” Cosette says. Curiosity rises within her as Martin gestures for her to follow him. “Just tell me what has happened.”

Martin nods, swallowing. “We arrested a man yesterday at the markets – he had been accused of attacking a young lady, but in the event, she could not be found. In the absence of other witnesses, we were obliged to let him go.”

Cosette nods, hoping that her mild consternation is not plain on her face. Martin is speaking quickly and breathlessly, and after the strange morning she has had, she finds herself needing to concentrate hard in order to follow what he is saying.

“He was meek as a kitten when we let him go,” Martin continues. “Said everything right – yes,
Monsieur; no, Monsieur; of course not, Monsieur – but it seems this was all a trick. No sooner was he released this morning than he was back at it and attacked a woman in an alley.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” Cosette gasps before she can stop herself; at Martin’s surprised glance, she quickly drops her voice to a gruff mutter. “Is she hurt?”

Martin purses his lips. “Not yet, Inspector – but....” He trails off, uncertain, before Cosette gives him what must be a fearsome look, because he swallows quickly and takes up where he left off. “Two officers heard raised voices in the street. When they came to investigate, he grabbed the woman. And now, Inspector, he is holding a knife to the woman’s throat and saying he will not come out unless we leave him be.”

Cosette stops dead in her tracks. She had not realised that a woman’s life might be on the line – that some poor innocent was being threatened!

No, she cannot do this. Not if her actions – or inaction – could cause somebody harm. She does not know the first thing she is supposed to say or do under such circumstances. She does not even know why she followed Martin in the first place, instead of giving her excuses and leaving the police work to the police officers.

When did her life get so terribly out of hand? Just a few days ago, she had been discussing dessert items for her wedding and practicing her new signature when nobody else was looking. Now, she is supposed to be taking the lives of her fellow citizens into her hands and delivering them to safety. It is too much!

She opens her mouth to protest – no, to be firm, to intimidate Sergeant Martin if absolutely necessary – but the words die in her throat as her eyes register the scene in the alley.

Trembling before her, knife pressed cruelly to her throat, is the woman from the stationhouse – the one who had grabbed Cosette’s hand, who had asked Cosette what kind of man she was. Aghast, Cosette realises that she has not thought of the woman since then – that she had assumed that the woman had been released as promised once she had sobered up, and that she had resumed her life.

The first assumption is clearly correct. The second, however....

All of the woman’s former bravado has disappeared, to be replaced only by terror. Her eyes bulge wide; her breath comes in the lightest of hitches, the soft skin of her throat creasing around the blade with each gasp. Her ragged dress is falling off her shoulder, exposing her once more – but it seems less a deliberate act, and more a consequence of the sorry state of her clothes.

The ruffian holding her captive is large, brutish, and has an air of anger and desperation about him. Cosette knows that such men are dangerous, and that this would be beyond her, even if he were not keeping a hostage.

She cannot do this. Maybe she can leave under some pretext, run back to the stationhouse to find someone more senior – if she can even find the stationhouse from here –

“Inspector Javert!”

It is barely more than a whisper, escaping as loudly as it dares around the pressure of the blade – but it might as well be a scream, so badly does it startle Cosette. The woman’s wide eyes meet Cosette’s own; she begs without shame. “Inspector, please – I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for what I did, I’ll do anything, I’ll go to prison – please, just help me, please –”

Cosette hesitates, her heart in agony. She wants nothing more in the whole world than to help her –
she would give up everything were it to mean that this poor woman would be safe – but what can she do?

“She’s just a whore,” a contemptuous voice behind her grunts. “Would it matter?”

Cosette only just stifles her gasp as she turns towards it, identifying its owner as a police officer by his uniform and pistol – he is not a man she recognises from her adventure the day before at all, and for that she is grateful. He is flanked by Martin and another officer she does not recognise; they hold their weapons nervously, and in this moment, she is more afraid that the woman will come to harm from a misfired bullet than from a cut throat.

It occurs to her that she had not grabbed even the inspector’s cudgel when she left the house, such had been her hurry to escape. Oh, what a fool she is!

She takes a step towards the officer who spoke up, hoping that her height and authority will be enough to at least somewhat intimidate him. “Officer, we are sworn to protect the people of this city. You would do well to remember this.”

The officer sneers at her, taking in her unkempt appearance, his eyes running up and down her body with disdain. “This is the Inspector Javert that has everyone running scared? Pull the other one.”

“You – you there!” The man holding the knife finally speaks up, his eyes darting back and forth frantically between them. “I told you – leave me be, or she dies. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Behind her, Cosette hears one or two of the officers quietly scoffing, but she ignores them. Before she can respond to the man’s words, the woman gasps; Cosette turns her attention back towards her, towards her pleading eyes, towards the tears that are threatening to spill from their edges. “Please! At least promise you’ll find someone to help my kids – there’s no one who’ll look out for them –”

For once, Cosette is not surprised when the memories come – just the briefest of flashes this time, Fantine upon her deathbed once more, her rigid body going limp as her soul departs for a kinder place – and she knows that she cannot abandon this woman. She has no one else.

Javert’s elation surges through her once more, and she does not try to push it away this time but rather harnesses it, lets it fill her with an energy that displaces all doubt and hesitance within her.

She does not know what kind of man she is, but she is a woman who cannot merely sit by when a defenceless person needs her help. Papa, after all, would never do such a thing; he would never turn away when an innocent is being threatened. Can she do any less? She can only hope that God will guide her in the right direction.

“I will help you,” Cosette says, hoping that she can keep the tremble from her voice. “If you’ll only tell me what you want –”

“I already said.” The man’s voice is ragged and desperate. “I told them – I’m only trying to get back what was stolen from me –”

“He says he was robbed,” Martin cuts in in an undertone. “That some man or other made off with his money, and his family will be ruined.”

“It’s true,” the woman calls out, her eyes never leaving Cosette’s face. “The good man has been robbed – I was trying to help him, I promise you. There was no need for this. I would have told him –”

The man’s hand tightens on the knife, and she chokes off, tears finally spilling down her cheeks.
Cosette resists the urge to bite her lip as she tries to think this through, tries to find the right words to say. “Then you know who robbed him, Madame?”

“Yes, Monsieur, I do – his name –”

“I know the man who robbed me,” the man yells. “That dog Thénardier. This wench was his mistress.”

A shudder runs the full length of Cosette’s spine at the sound of the name Thénardier.

Why... it must be dear Éponine’s father....

She has known for some time that he is a bad man. She had pitied him after she and Papa had visited his family in their ghastly hovel, but since then she has come to learn the truth. Not that there is any man who does not deserve God’s mercy, but after listening to Éponine talk about him, she has found that the very small but very definite desire has arisen within her to kick him – just once, perhaps, but very hard.

Her thoughts whirl. Éponine’s father might not be someone who deserves her pity for his own sake... but he may still hold in his clutches one who does.

“What should we do, Inspector?” Martin asks, his voice quiet but filled with tension. “We cannot let him go – he may attack a respectable woman.”

Cosette swallows down her objection to his words. “Do you know... do you know the name Thénardier?”

Martin nods, giving her a quizzical look. “Oh, yes, of course. You remember – he’s been under a death sentence since he escaped from La Force.”

A death sentence! Cosette feels her blood run cold in her veins. Could anyone possibly deserve such a punishment, no matter what their crimes? She feels her resolve wavering. How does anyone manage to navigate such dilemmas? How does one live, knowing that their choices might seal another’s fate?

Cosette raises her eyes and forces herself to look into the frightened face of the woman in the alley. Her father had shown her such people before, when they had given alms on the streets and in all sorts of hovels besides. He had always taken care to show her how fortunate the two of them were to live so comfortably. But can she dare to hesitate now, when this poor woman’s life is in her hands?

“Then... Thénardier is still a wanted man,” she says. “And – and we would welcome help in finding him?”

Martin opens his mouth, a question clearly on the tip of his tongue, before he obviously thinks better of it and nods. “Yes, Inspector.”

Fixing the man with the knife under the hardest stare she can manage, Cosette clenches her fists. She has no idea of the limits of the inspector’s authority, but surely he can do this?

“Do you think you have found where Mons – where Thénardier is hiding, then?” she asks, dropping her voice to a low growl.

The man blinks, uncertain. He is clearly hedging his bets. “I... perhaps.”

“I can tell you,” the woman cries out. “Just like I told him! I know where he goes to ground –”
“Then maybe you can both help us,” Cosette says, hoping desperately that this gambit will work. “We have also been looking for Thénardier. If you would help us find him, then perhaps... perhaps I could....”

She hesitates. What is it exactly that she needs to say?

“Inspector.” Martin’s voice is urgent at her side. “Do you mean to make them both police informants?”

“Yes,” she says, relief flooding her that Martin has provided her with the words she was inelegantly groping for. “If they have information that is useful for us, then surely it would be to our advantage.”

She hopes desperately that Martin will not raise any objections – though surely, even if he wanted to, he would not dare to voice them straight to the fearsome Inspector Javert’s face?

For good measure, she glares at the man and says gruffly, “Do you disagree, Sergeant Martin?”

Martin visibly swallows, shaking his head. “No, Inspector. It is only that... well, you have always been so against such methods.”

Cosette feels a momentary unease at this – is she implicating the inspector in practices he would not usually condone? But as quickly as her concern arises, she dismisses it. She remembers once again the savage, tidal joy that had risen in Javert as her mother had died. Perhaps that was not the reason for his happiness, but there it was, all the same. Javert can make it up to her now, she thinks. He owes her at least this much.

Drawing in a deep breath, Cosette tries to call to herself whatever elements of Javert might still remain inside his form.

“Monsieur,” she calls out, surprised by how loudly her voice emerges. “Monsieur, you say you know where we can find Thénardier, and you say he has robbed you.”

“That’s right.” She can see the man’s eyes shifting uncertainly, but his hand does not loosen on the knife.

“Then we have a common purpose,” she says, hoping that her voice does not sound as desperate as she feels. *May God guide me!* “Tell us where we can find him, and perhaps this does not need to end badly.”

She watches as the man frowns, surprise writ large over his features. Perhaps he has had some dealings with the inspector in the past, and he is as amazed as Sergeant Martin was that Javert would make such an offer.

“End badly?” he asks, his voice unsure. “I don’t think you and I have the same idea of what that means.”

Cosette frowns, pausing to think. What can she say to convince the man that she is in earnest? What would Javert say? Cosette thinks that she honestly has no idea how the inspector might respond – in fact, as she now knows, he most likely would never have made such an offer in the first place. She only knows what she would say, things she has said to Éponine, when her friend told her with hard eyes that she was no good, and not someone that either she or Papa should be bothered with.

“You have done nothing so terrible that it can’t be put aside,” she calls out to him. Looking at the knife in his hand, she adds, “Not yet, in any case.”
This is what she truly believes – is it not what Papa has taught her all these years, after all? That there is no man so far down the path to ruin that he might not still turn back towards the light?

“It’s not too late,” she says, and she knows that everyone must be able to hear the quaver of fear in her voice. What if she fails? Will this poor woman’s blood be on her hands? “You are not a murderer, Monsieur,” she says, her stomach twisting into a terrible knot.

The man stares at her a long moment, and she can see terror flashing in his eyes. He has undoubtedly done wrong, Cosette knows that, and perhaps he even deserves his punishment. But if the cost of him receiving it is a woman’s life... well, Cosette does not think the price is fair.

“I wouldn’t have done it except for my family,” he calls, and finally, finally, she can see the knife beginning to shake in his hand. “I would never....”

Behind him, she hears the officer from earlier spit onto the cobbles. “A typical story,” he mutters, but she ignores him.

“I know you would not have,” she says, not caring now whether she sounds like Javert or not. The knife wobbles in the man’s fingers, and surely any moment now it will fall....

The man only stares at her a moment longer, and then, with a sigh, drops his hand. Cosette stands stock-still, stunned, as the knife clatters to the ground. She is aware of noise, of motion – the other two officers running past her with a shout, the woman falling to her knees with a gasp, the man holding his empty hands in plain view as the officers seize him – but she can barely comprehend the meaning of it all.

Did he – does that mean – has she – ?

Someone is talking to her, barely audible over the thrum of her heart. With an effort, she tries to focus.

“... With no violence, and with no need for us to use our guns,” Martin is saying. “Inspector Javert, I do not know how –”

Cosette lets him continue, though his words rather drift in one ear and out the other. As he rattles on, she keeps the thought firm in her head that whatever Sergeant Martin might say or believe, it was not Inspector Javert who had done this, but she, Cosette Fauchelevent! However faint she may feel, however her knees may wobble, she has done this. She has stopped bloodshed – perhaps she has even saved a life.

She looks over to where the woman is now pulling up her ragged chemise into some semblance of decency. It makes her shudder to think that a woman could be in such a desperate position – and not just a woman, but a mother!

Cosette wonders if there is anything that could possibly be done for the woman, and is struck by the sudden realisation that she has no real plans for what she will do once she is married. All of her thoughts in recent months have been tied up in organising her wedding, in becoming Madame la Baronne de Pontmercy, in spending all of her days with Marius – her husband! – in pure wedded bliss, and never having another care in the world. In her daydreams Papa comes to visit them, and Éponine too, and oh, she is the happiest woman on Earth.

It is therefore with a dawning dismay that she now wonders what else her days will be filled with. Will she become a lady of leisure while Marius runs his law practice, gardening a little perhaps, decorating their rooms as she likes them? How can she spend the rest of her life in comfort,
surrounded by those who love her, for no reason other than good fortune, while this woman cannot even afford clothes that will properly preserve her dignity? Cosette cannot begin to imagine what she would feel if her own circumstances were to fall so far as to drive her into the arms of a man like Thénardier.

Of course, she will continue to give alms, as she always has done. But is there not something more she could do?

She bites her lip, thinking. She has not had any reason to meditate overly long on the night Monsieur Gillenormand at last gave his assent for her and Marius to be married, but that does not mean she has quite forgotten how Papa had announced with some solemnity that Mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent was in the possession of... oh, she has forgotten the exact amount now, but she remembers the way that Monsieur Gillenormand’s eyes had danced as he had called her a millionairess.

Naturally, the money will be for her and Marius both, but she cannot believe that he would object to her putting at least a little of it towards some worthy purpose. She thinks that it is something that would make Papa proud. She hopes that it is something that would make her mother proud.

Sergeant Martin taps her on the shoulder, and she manages not to startle.

“We’ll take them back to the station,” he informs her. She nods curtly, before a thought strikes her.

“You have the woman’s details?” she asks.

“Of course. Name and residence.”

“Good.” Cosette glances at Martin’s notebook, memorising the woman’s particulars. She will have to make contact with the woman – with Béatrice, she corrects herself – once she is back in her own body. She can only hope that this is in the very near future, for both their sakes!

Sergeant Martin coughs. “I’ll let you get back to... ah....” He gives an awkward jerk of his head that somehow encompasses the entirety of her less-than-pristine appearance. “Your covert duties, Monsieur. I hope I didn’t jeopardise anything you were working on –”

Cosette waves her hand dismissively. “Do not concern yourself, Sergeant.” A thought occurs to her. “But do not speak to me again unless I speak to you first.”

“Yes, Monsieur!”

Martin beats a hasty retreat, and Cosette takes advantage of the distraction to make her own departure. Hopefully the story she told him about being on a surveillance mission will be excuse enough to not fill out any paperwork or give any reports – she simply could not manage such a thing, especially given her current state of exhaustion! She will have to fill the inspector in on what happened when she gets back home.

The thought of home brings her up short, her step faltering for a moment. In all the excitement, she had forgotten about the situation with Papa, about the fact that the last he saw of her was her back as she practically ran out the door.

*How much time has passed? He must be frantic with worry!*

She quickens her pace, hurrying back through the park, trying to orient herself to the general direction from which she came. Her legs tremble with fatigue, the stress of the day’s events catching up with her now that the danger has passed, but she forces herself on. She cannot bear to leave Papa
in a state of distress for one moment longer!

After some time – she cannot tell how much – her feet carry her to a small bridge over the Seine, and she takes advantage of the view along the river to look for familiar landmarks. She can make out Notre Dame in the distance, etched against the blue of the sky. It is enough to go by – she will be able to navigate her way home once she is closer.

Cosette is about to turn and make her way down to the street below, when a cursory glance over her shoulder reveals a man running along the opposite bank of the river, his head turning frantically this way and that as he hurries along.

No – it cannot be –!

“Marius!” she calls out before she can think better of it, and he comes skidding to a stop, almost tripping over his own feet as he tries to look in all directions at once. She wants to call out again, but the last thing that she needs to do is cause yet another scene in the inspector’s body.

Instead she waves as his eyes move in her direction; it takes a few more passes before he notices her, but then a smile breaks across his face like dawn over the horizon, and he waves back excitedly. His mouth opens to call out to her, and perhaps her sudden alarm is visible even from this distance, because he closes it again. If Marius were to call her name out to her on a busy bridge in the middle of the day, eyes full of adoration and voice full of love, then no number of excuses about being on a spy mission will be able to salvage the inspector’s reputation!

She hurries down to meet him, pulling up deliberately short, even though she wants nothing more than to throw herself into his arms and let him hold her up. Oh, her sweet Marius – he always knows what to do, always knows how to find her when she needs him most!

Her beloved stumbles to a panting halt before her, looking at her searchingly, and she smiles in reassurance. His arms practically quiver with the strain of keeping from reaching out to her.

“Co – I mean – Inspector Javert!” He fumbles for words, his eyes wide with worry; eventually he manages to get out a complete sentence. “Are you well?”

“Very well, Marius.” She cannot entirely keep the silly smile from her face, although she does at least make an effort. “You would not believe what has happened – it is all quite astonishing!”

Marius looks rather surprised at her good humour; she supposes that she cannot blame him, all things considered.

“But, come!” She motions him onwards with a jerk of her head, and they turn towards a nearby alleyway that looks as if it will lead in the right direction. “I will tell you all about it on the way home, and then I believe I shall sleep for a week.”

They stumble through the alley, relief making them both giddy. Marius is trying to tell her something – about someone called Magnon, and the name is familiar, although she cannot quite place it just now – but all she can hear is the sweet sound of his voice, the words themselves devoid of meaning, and all she can see is the faint blush that spreads across his cheeks, the dancing light in his eyes –

A glance in every direction tells her that they are alone; no windows open onto this alley. Steeling herself, she grabs his wrist and pulls him behind a pile of crates, ignoring his startled yelp.

Oh, she would take him into the most passionate of lovers’ embraces right now if she could – she would kiss him until he was senseless, and then kiss him some more, public indecency be damned – !
She must settle instead for something much more solid and manly, barely more than a brief clap on the back between friends. She could not face anybody ever again if she were to get the inspector arrested for performing lewd acts! But she simply must touch Marius, otherwise she may go mad.

The embrace ends far too soon; she pulls back with regret, seizing his hand for the briefest of moments before letting go. Marius looks as if he is kiss-dazed, his eyes opening only reluctantly behind their long lashes.

Cosette stifles a giggle. “I apologise! But you see, I could not bear to go one more moment without touching you.” Even now, she must restrain herself. It would be so easy to stay here with her beloved... but no, the impropriety would be far too great, and she must settle things with Papa.

The thought is enough to sober her somewhat. There are far too many things that need to be sorted out for her to get carried away here.

“Apologise?” Marius shakes his head slightly, bewildered. “Never! Oh, my sweet Cosette –”

“Hush, now. We must make our way home as quickly as possible – I must speak with Papa. There are many things we need to discuss.”

She can see a road up ahead; together they head towards it, and she resists the urge to touch his back, to make him startle in his endearing way. But if her hand brushes Marius’ as they go, well, these things happen when one is walking down a narrow alley alongside another.
It has been at least fifteen minutes since the footsteps passed Éponine’s door.

Light and careful their tread had been, but Éponine is not so far removed from her unfortunate youth that she cannot recognise the sound of feet where they should not be, or fail to notice the slip of a shadow beneath the door.

The footsteps have not returned, and there is only one place their owner could be: Cosette’s room.

Éponine knows that it was not Cosette who passed by. Cosette would have knocked on Éponine’s door, no matter whether she was distraught or happy or someplace in between; in any case, Éponine doubts that she will return to the house any time soon. Even from what little Éponine saw of Cosette’s encounter with Inspector Javert, she knows that Cosette has received far too many terrible revelations for one day. Éponine could not blame her if she stayed away for some time, although she knows her dear friend well enough to know that she would never do such a thing to her father.

No, it had not been Cosette who passed her door. She knows who it was, and although she knows the upcoming conversation will not be easy, it comes as a relief in a way.

It had been a special kind of torture to sit in her room and try to force distraction upon herself with a book, while Monsieur Fauchelevent’s life had fallen apart downstairs. It had been the right thing to do – she’d had no place in whatever had gone on between Monsieur Fauchelevent and Inspector Javert – but it had been agony. She plucks at the pages of her book now, hands restless with unspent energy.

When she can stand it no longer, she slams her book closed and goes to the door. Opening it, she steps into the corridor.

Monsieur Fauchelevent stands before the closed door to Cosette’s bedroom, his eyes downcast, his hand tensing as if it wishes to reach for the handle. She knows that he will not go in; even if she had not been on the receiving end of some of his memories, she has spent enough time with the man to know that he would never intrude upon Cosette’s private space without her permission.

Éponine does not know everything that has gone on this morning – or everything that has happened over the many years of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s life, for that matter. She hopes that she will not come to know too much more, unless Monsieur Fauchelevent himself gives over the information willingly; already she feels too much like an unwanted voyeur in his life.

What she does know is that a distraction is required. Cosette will come back eventually; of this, she is certain. She is also certain that the longer Cosette is away, the more Monsieur Fauchelevent will continue to dig himself deeper into a burrow of despair.

There are three things that Éponine knows Monsieur Fauchelevent particularly cares for: God, Cosette, and his garden. The first, she has no affinity for; the second, she cannot provide. Perhaps, she thinks, she ought to find some place for Inspector Javert in her list; she cannot say she understands it, but Monsieur Fauchelevent does seem to enjoy his company. But when she had left them before, there had been an odd tension in the air between them, and the last thing she believes Fauchelevent needs is more tension.
That leaves the garden.

Not that she is particularly knowledgeable in this area, either, but it is certainly preferable to the alternative.

And –

A memory unfurls at the back of her mind, and it takes her a long moment to recognise it as her own. A twilit garden, still and sullen in the stifling heat; a watering can; the soothing patter of water on parched leaves; an old man who trembled before her as if she was something far more frightening and mysterious than a half-starved gamine.

Her chest aches slightly as she remembers Father Mabeuf. Marius had told her of his fate, months after the events of the barricades. Although she had not known him beyond their brief interaction, he had seemed a kindly man, poorly treated by life, and their encounter had lodged itself within her without her realising. To offer help to a stranger in need – it is something that she had not thought within her nature at the time.

And yes, she had then used his kindness to her advantage, when he had provided the opportunity. It is not something she is particularly proud of. But she could have got Marius’ location from him without watering the garden – that had been done purely on impulse, when she saw the plants’ drooping leaves and the old man’s despair. Helping him had made her feel strangely proud of herself, in a way that had been utterly alien to her at the time.

It is too late for Father Mabeuf, now. It makes her insides twist, the fact that she is now in a position where she could help so many people she has known – if not for the fact that they had died, while a quirk of fate meant that she had not only lived, but prospered. Her life had been spared out of sheer bloody luck, and some days she wants to weep at the injustice of it all.

But it is not too late for Monsieur Fauchelevent. If she could not save any of the others – if she let down even her own siblings, allowed her brother to be killed and her sister to be lost – then at the very least, she can try to help her own benefactor in his time of need. Is that not exactly what she had demanded of the inspector?

She squares her shoulders. She will do this.

If only she knew how.

“It has not rained for many days.”

It seems as good a place to start as any. Monsieur Fauchelevent startles ever so slightly, which startles her in turn; if she herself is always alert to her surroundings, then she knows that Monsieur Fauchelevent is doubly so, his awareness honed to a razor’s edge by a lifetime spent looking over his shoulder. He must truly have been deep in thought, to be so unaware of her presence.

Or perhaps, she thinks with a shiver, he has simply stopped caring, willing in his anguish to stand still and let whatever demons pursue him to catch him and devour him whole.

She is not the person to fix this. How could she be?

And yet, there is no one else.

She clears her throat and tries again.

“The plants will need watering. Will you come and help me?”
Monsieur Fauchelevent does not turn, his eyes fixed on the door handle. His lips barely move; she strains to hear him. “They will keep for another day.”

Éponine shrugs, trying to force a jollity she does not feel. “I will just water them myself, then, and hope that I do not water them too much. I don’t know much about gardening, after all.” She scratches at her chin exaggeratedly. “Those orchids that Cosette planted are looking a little dry – I’ll start with them. They couldn’t require more than three buckets of water each, surely?”

A small thrill of success runs through her as Monsieur Fauchelevent’s head jerks up, and she silently congratulates herself on having retained and deployed at least one piece of information from Cosette’s incessant garden-related ramblings. She loves Cosette like a sister, but she will never understand how her dear friend can keep it all straight in her head. For the longest time, Éponine’s knowledge of plants had barely extended beyond *this probably won’t kill me if I eat it.*

Monsieur Fauchelevent’s jaw tightens almost imperceptibly; he still does not meet her eyes. “Please, Éponine. They will be fine. I will do it later.”

“Nonsense! Just leave it to me, Monsieur Fauchelevent – you need to rest.” She waves a hand indifferently and turns on her heel as if to leave. An anticipatory smile twitches at the corner of her mouth.

“... Wait.”

Sure enough.

The word sounds as if it has been dragged from Monsieur Fauchelevent with the greatest of reluctance. She turns back to him, smoothing her face into the picture of innocence.

Monsieur Fauchelevent is facing her now, although his eyes are closed. He takes a deep breath and releases it slowly, before opening his eyes again.

“We will be back in our bodies in a few days’ time. I will do it then. I would hate to ruin your dress – any of your dresses,” he adds hastily, “– by traipsing about in the mud.”

Éponine raises an eyebrow curiously. “Is that your only objection? That my clothes would get dirty? Because you know that –”

“My garden will be fine for a few more days.” Despite his quiet words, there is a firmness in his tone. She is glad to hear it; anything is better than the despondency that had seemed to hang from him like a physical weight, dragging him down and making him appear small.

She ignores the content of his words, however – he has not answered her question. “If my clothes were not an issue?”

“I would not object. But it is a moot point –”

This time, she does turn and walk away from him, hurrying into her room even as his words trail off confusedly behind her. Hastily she digs through her drawers – she knows they’re here somewhere –

Grabbing her prize, she strides back out of the room. Monsieur Fauchelevent is standing right where she left him, looking perplexed.

“Here.” She shoves the bundle of clothes at Monsieur Fauchelevent, forcing him to make the choice between taking it or letting it drop to the floor; he takes it, although she is not sure that it is an entirely
conscious decision on his part. “I will start watering the garden in five minutes, whether or not you
decide to join me.”

He unfolds the clothing, looking at it in confusion.

A strange feeling tightens Éponine’s chest – like nostalgia, but with an ache running beneath it. She
should have thrown the clothes out – they had been barely better than rags even when she had traded
them with that boy, and they had ended up in far worse condition after the barricades, torn and
soaked through with blood and who knows what else.

And yet, she had held onto them throughout her convalescence. Toussaint had cleaned them before
Éponine had been lucid enough to know what was happening; after that, Éponine had insisted on
keeping them with her, not allowing Toussaint or Cosette to mend them for her. Instead, when she
was well enough, she had mended the clothes herself with stitches made slow and clumsy by injury
and inexperience both. It had been a torturous process, the needle uncooperative between the
inexpert fingers of her left hand, but eventually the trousers and shirt had been brought back into a
semblance of order.

But... then, what? She had had no further use for them, either, her most improbable elevation
rendering them nothing more than an embarrassing reminder of where she had come from. But she
had not been able to stomach the thought of throwing them away either, and so she had tucked them
away in the back of a drawer, buried beneath all manner of buttons and lace.

Monsieur Fauchelevent is still staring at the clothes as if he has no idea what they are for, and she
pulls herself from her reverie. “You can get changed in my room – no, don’t argue. You already
woke up once in my bed; you’ll survive a few minutes in there now. Or you can go down to the
porter’s cottage and get changed there. It’s your choice.”

From the way his shoulders drop slightly, she guesses that he doesn’t wish to go there – she supposes
that Javert is probably lurking about somewhere downstairs, and the cottage would be the most likely
place for him to escape to. One way or another, they are likely to run into him at some point.

Well, too bad.

She opens her bedroom door; Monsieur Fauchelevent stares at it dazedly.

“Four minutes.” She favours him with a small smile, hoping that it is soft enough to make her look
amicable, rather than intimidating; perhaps at this point, a friendly face is the best thing she can offer
him. “I’ll meet you in the garden.”

It takes all of her self-control to keep her steps slow and natural as she walks towards the staircase, to
keep her eyes fixedly ahead, as if to look back over her shoulder at Monsieur Fauchelevent should
break whatever fragile spell she has weaved.

Passing through the corridor, she notices the flowers that Marius had bought this morning abandoned
on a shelf. She carries them with her to the kitchen; there is a half-finished cup of water on the bench,
obviously abandoned amongst the morning’s uproar. It will do.

She arranges the flowers as best she can, trying to encourage her troubled mind to ease itself in the
task. Surely Cosette will appreciate them upon her return. It was thoughtful of Marius to buy them
for her – she can admit that, admit that he is a good man, albeit a rather silly one, and that the two of
them make a good pair. The envy that would have once crept over her at the thought of the two of
them together now seems a ridiculous and petty thing. She can see that for her – and, she suspects,
for anyone in the world except Cosette – to be wed to Marius would be an exercise in eternal
exasperation. Better to consider him a dear friend to be enjoyed in small amounts and then foisted back upon Cosette when he becomes too much of a nuisance!

Once the flowers can be arranged no further, she finds herself once more looking for a distraction. Monsieur Fauchelevent has yet to come downstairs; she has not even heard the slightest creak of footfalls from above. The whole house seems suspended in a pause between breaths. After the bustle and excitement of the past few days, it is disconcerting.

Her fingers tremble ever so slightly as she gathers some bread and fruit into a basket, and some cups as well; she pulls Monsieur Fauchelevent’s battered old hat onto her head and barges out the back door before she can think too hard about the things that Cosette said this morning, about the way that she had had to help Monsieur Fauchelevent into a chair before he collapsed in his grief.

She busies herself drawing buckets from the well, then filling the cups and the watering cans both. It is more summer than spring today, the sun’s warmth seeping into her skin, and she can feel the first trickles of sweat running down the back of her neck.

The progression of time seems impossible to determine – has it been five minutes? Maybe it has been fifty. How would she know?

Uncertainty makes its home in the pit of her stomach, and she fidgets, sipping water compulsively, setting the cup down and picking it up again to give her hands something to do. She has not thought ahead far enough to work out what she will do should Monsieur Fauchelevent simply decide not to join her. She would like to water the plants anyway – some of them are looking rather sad and droopy, and at least it will give her something to occupy herself with – but she has no desire to accidentally harm those that look more delicate. Maybe she can just give them a little water? Maybe –

The creak of the back door intrudes on her musings, and she looks up to see – herself, but as she was at the barricades. It is like travelling back in time, a strange déjà vu – although Monsieur Fauchelevent looks hesitant where she knows that she would have been brash, brimming with a false confidence she never truly felt.

Monsieur Fauchelevent wrings his hands slightly as he hangs back by the door, and she is startled into a smile – he has even tucked his hair back under his hat. Well, it is more practical for the task at hand.

“I’m glad you could join me,” she calls out to him, and it is sincere.

The change in her feelings towards him had been a gradual thing, from early distrust – for what old man would ever take in a young woman out of sheer concern for her welfare and expect nothing in return? – to grudging respect, to genuine admiration and affection, even as she had puzzled at the mystery surrounding him.

He steps out into the garden in a way that is almost tentative, yet she notices a difference – he moves more comfortably than she has yet seen him move in her body, his limbs looser, his bearing not quite so stiff. It had not even occurred to her until now that he would be so uncomfortable in her skirts and petticoats, although really, it should have been obvious – after all, she herself would dress in trousers more often if she had the choice!

His feet, she realises, are bare, and she cannot help but smile. He must notice her looking, for he merely mutters something about not wanting to ruin her shoes. She nods, and does not say anything about the glimpse of memory that flits through her mind: of Monsieur Fauchelevent – Father Madeleine, a voice in her mind supplies – allowing himself the simple pleasure of curling his toes.
into sun-kissed earth, hidden away from prying eyes. She does not know when or where this memory comes from, or what the meaning behind this name is, but it pleases her to know that he has managed to snatch moments of contentment from the maelstrom of his life.

She passes him a cup of water, holding it out for several long seconds until he has no choice but to realise that she will continue to hold it out until he takes it. Reluctantly, he takes a small sip; she eyes him until he takes another. The man treats food and drink as if it is some sacred thing of which he is unworthy. She thinks, now, that she understands it a little more than she used to, but that does not mean she has to like it.

“So, Monsieur Fauchelevent.” She gestures out at the garden – and, for the first time, she truly comprehends how massive it is. It is no wonder it has been left to grow wild and unruly, in all but the small beds she has watched him so carefully tend. “You will have to show me where to begin.”

“Here will do,” he murmurs, and points her to a nearby bed of flowers. She starts to water them tentatively – strange, that she had watered Father Mabeuf’s garden without a care for how much or how little she gave each plant, but now she is nearly paralysed with indecision, waiting for Monsieur Fauchelevent’s every instruction. She supposes that now she knows just enough about gardens to know that one cannot simply pour water on them willy-nilly; her past self’s ignorance had given her a confidence that was supremely undeserved.

The flowerbed watered, she turns back to Monsieur Fauchelevent for further guidance. He is looking at her oddly, watering can dangling forgotten from his hand, confusion creasing the corners of his eyes. It is an improvement from the melancholy of before, at least.

“I....” He shakes his head as if to clear it. “I apologise. It is just – I think I understand something, now.” He peers at her again, as if wanting to ask her a question but not knowing how.

There is something in the way he looks at her that makes her think of how she feels when she captures an unwanted glimpse of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s memories – uncertainty and curiosity and guilt.

She has certainly seen more than her fair share of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s life – it is only just that he should see some of hers. If he should see things that make him change his mind about her – make him throw her out on the street – well, it is nothing she would not deserve. It is his house and his money, and she has lived a fine life for the past two years, far finer than gutter scum like her could surely expect to continue.

She swallows, jutting her chin out – in defiance, surely, not fear. “You’ve seen my memories, haven’t you? Well – might as well come out with it.”

He continues to look at her with that peculiar expression. There is a long silence – he is obviously choosing his words carefully.

“Would I be correct,” he says slowly, “in thinking that I am not the first old man whose garden you have watered?”

The question is so unexpected that she does not know how to respond. A long moment of silence passes, before she manages to get out, “I – pardon? Surely that is not – I mean, I....”

She trails off into bewildered silence. Of all the things – that?

And yet, now that he knows without her telling it, it feels an oddly personal and private thing, a closely guarded secret taken from her unwillingly. If this is how she feels about such a trifle, then
how would he feel to know what she has seen of his life? How must he feel, to have Cosette unthinkingly let forth a torrent of secrets about his and the inspector’s shared past?

She gathers her thoughts and tries again.

“Yes, I suppose so. But – you must have other questions? Remember other – things?” She can hear the desperation at the edge of her voice. “I have done so many terrible things in my life, even I cannot remember them all.”

Monsieur Fauchelevent seems surprised at her outburst. “I remember only the garden, Éponine, and the man you helped.” His eyes lower a little – guilt at having intruded upon her life, perhaps? “I remember how hungry you were, how desperate, and yet you helped a man you did not even know.”

“In exchange for information!” She feels sick to her stomach; her face is burning hot. Does he remember that she was thinking of Marius at the time, that she had no care for Cosette or her feelings?

The thought of Cosette makes her feel even worse. Does he remember the way that Éponine treated Cosette when they were children – how good it had felt to crush Cosette’s spirit in order to win her mother’s approval? Éponine barely remembers it herself – had forgotten all about it for so long – but she has had almost two years in which there has been time enough to stop and think about things, to sort through the jumble of half-remembered events and feelings that had been pushed aside. It is not so much the things she did to Cosette that she remembers, but the sweet satisfaction of a compliment from her mother for keeping Cosette in her place, or the relief of knowing that at least it wasn’t her who was getting a clip over the ear.

She has tried so hard not to think about this, and whenever she does bring it up, Cosette – sweet, forgiving, ridiculous Cosette – says that it is nothing, that Éponine did not mean these things, that she was a child and could not help what happened. As if Éponine had not enjoyed it!

“And besides,” she says, before he can get his reply out, “you know that that’s not what I’m talking about. Do you remember – do you remember Cosette? What I did to her? How I would torment her, and laugh about it afterwards?”

“I do.”

Two simple words, and yet, they knock the air from her lungs. She forces herself to breathe again, slow, steady breaths, even though everything within her screams at her to take in as much air as possible. Her mind is blank, except for the voice that tells her that this is it, it’s all over, it was nice while it lasted, but the truth has come out –

She barely notices that Monsieur Fauchelevent is still talking. With difficulty, she tries to take his words in, although she’s not sure why she’s even bothering.

“– Not your memories though, Éponine. I remember seeing you. I remember a little girl following the example she was set. I remember thinking that a child could not be blamed for the cruelty of the parent.”

Éponine blinks, still not quite daring to believe her own ears. In the end, it is not his words but his expression that reassures her; he is not asking her to leave. He is not telling her that she is no longer welcome under the same roof as Cosette. He is saying nothing of the sort at all.

She slowly releases a long sigh from between her teeth. She had not realised just how wildly her heart had been beating. Even two years later, she is still always on the brink – always expecting that
the happiness she has found here will be ripped away from her at any moment.

“It was not so terrible at the time,” Éponine admits. “It was only later that... well. You know.”

It had taken a long time for the memories of how she had once been cosseted and pampered to fade. She had, even for a long time after they had come to Paris, believed her father loved her.

She is not sure at which point she had come to realise that this was not true. It had not been some great revelation from on high, a single straw that broke the camel’s back; looking back, she cannot draw a line between ignorance and comprehension.

Maybe her father had loved her at some point. Maybe some part of him loves her still, in his own way, although she doubts it; if he does possess some form of love for her, it is a love that is unhelpful to her, best left behind and forgotten.

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“Perhaps,” Monsieur Fauchelevent says, turning away. He kneels on the grass at the verge of the garden bed, running his fingers over the sun-warmed soil. “But I remember even then there was a baby crying upstairs the whole night without anyone to tend him. I remember that you had a small sister. And I remember that I did not even think to take them from that place.”

It takes her several moments to understand what he means by that. Éponine blinks, opening her mouth and then closing it again, before staring down at her hands. She does not know what to say – to think. How different her life could have been, had Monsieur Fauchelevent scooped her up that night, along with Azelma and Gavroche, too. What would she have done had he tried, if her mother had let her go? She would have cried, no doubt, wept for her parents, perhaps tried to run away. But would she eventually have settled into her new life and found happiness the way Cosette has? And would it have been her in the velvet bonnet and silk pelisse, coming to give alms in some dingy hovel?

Éponine shakes her head, trying to banish the thought from her mind. It is hard to think about: what her life might have been like if only things had been different. But it is useless. All her life she has had time to think if only this or if only that. She is tired of it.

She glances up to find Monsieur Fauchelevent looking at her sadly, as if her silence is a confirmation of his words: that somehow, he has failed her. That in all his goodness, he is still not good enough. There is always something more he could be doing, something above and beyond what he has already done. And more than that, it is as if he wants her – and Cosette, and Marius, and even Javert – to forget that he has even done these things at all.

It is strange – she has lived with him for near on two years, and yet he has always been on the periphery, a benevolent but detached presence. He is, she realises, exceedingly good at deflecting attention from himself – to the point where she had not even noticed this until now.

She cannot change her past – not even Monsieur Fauchelevent can do that. But she can change her future. Now, she actually has a future to be changed.

“Monsieur Fauchelevent,” she says, looking up at him and smiling her brightest smile, “will you teach me to garden?”

Chapter End Notes
... And with that, we're unfortunately going on hiatus for a few weeks because real life is busy at the moment. Thank you all, and we'll be back soon!
"Oh, Gustave! When I am with you, I Feel as if there is Nothing I cannot do - that all the World was made Only for thee and me!"

"Oh, my sweet Stéphanie!" breathed Gustave, his Cerulean eyes seeming to pierce to the Core of her very Soul. He took Her up into his embrace, her golden Hair pouring over his Chest, her coral Lips trembling, her fair cheeks suffused with blushes as she Melted into his Arms, her white hand resting gently upon his Breast.

All the passions Woman raged in her bosom, a Warm and unutterable Voluptuousness seizing her. Gustave himself was now in the Full vigour of Manhood, the heat and blood of his virility pounding in his -

Javert's nose wrinkles in disgust. Such tawdry filth - and just left lying around on a bench, where anyone wandering through the garden might happen to stumble across it!

Somebody will have to have a talk with Cosette about this - because clearly this book belongs to her. Whatever else he may think about Éponine, he trusts the girl to have better taste than to read this - this nonsense. No, this sentimental claptrap has Cosette's name all over it. The overwrought declarations of love and affection, the heroine's penchant for staring pointlessly into her paramour's many-hued eyes, the imbecilic hero's inability to do anything but spout bad poetry and almost die of consumption - it is beyond belief! He could replace the names with Cosette and that booby Pontmercy, and it would make no difference.

Cosette's taste in literature runs parallel to her taste in fiancés, two trains headed towards a destination that no one in their right mind would want to arrive at. Javert supposes that being raised in a convent might do strange things to a girl - he has heard stories, after all - but this is ridiculous. If Gustave were an impressive specimen of a man, then at least Javert might be able to understand how a woman could be attracted to him on some base, animal level - but as it stands, he is fairly certain that Gustave could be defeated by a stiff breeze. Javert is at page ninety-seven - having skimmed his way through most of the inanity and vulgarity, of course, leading to a very quick read indeed - and Gustave has yet to demonstrate any kind of physical prowess or mental ingenuity. He is utterly pointless.

The fact that Javert is even reading this rubbish in the first place is merely a consequence of his having beaten a tactical retreat - to go to the cottage would be to deny Valjean his home if he wished to go there for some privacy, while to go into the house would be to risk running into Éponine, or possibly Valjean himself. There is nowhere else he can go; best for him to stay in the garden for now, at least.

Furthermore, he is certain that his unfortunate encounter with this... novel has been facilitated by the niggleing remnants of Cosette's thoughts and memories that seem to have embedded themselves into his mind. Surely he would not have even picked the thing up, were it not for the voice in his head that suggested it might prove an entertaining diversion. It was either that, or give in to the sudden inexplicable urge to go into the kitchen and bake a strawberry tart. He does not know how to bake strawberry tarts - he does not even like them - and yet for a few moments, it had seemed like a perfectly reasonable method of distracting himself from just how badly his life has fallen apart.
He grimaces. Is it not enough that this farcical situation has most likely ruined the few things in his life that had some kind of meaning - has he now acquired Cosette's affinity for all things feminine as well? She does not even have good taste in terrible novels.

A faint murmur of voices carries to him on the breeze, just loud enough that he can catch a few words. He strains to hear - it is Valjean and Éponine, saying something about the garden.

So Valjean is still here, then. He pulls himself back a little on the bench, tucking himself in behind the bushes. Better to stay here out of the way, where no further harm can be caused.

He flicks through the novel, idly wondering if there is any further mention of Stéphanie's older half-brother Antoine, who was last seen pulling on his National Guard uniform and running out the door to battle miscreants at the end of chapter four, his Heraclean muscles straining manfully against the cruel confines of his coat. The one mildly interesting character in the whole perverse story, and he has not even been mentioned again except for the occasional sneering remark from his idiot sister! If nothing else, this collection of kindling masquerading as a book has served as a handy reminder of just how terrible the entire pastime of reading truly is.

He is not sure how much time has passed when he hears it - more voices, much louder than before. It is not difficult to pick out the newcomers as Marius and Cosette, and he cannot help but feel dismay at how chirpy Cosette sounds, even as his shoulders relax infinitesimally in something that may be relief. If somebody had asked him a week ago whether he was capable of twittering about like a damned bird, he would have arrested them on the spot.

He puts the book aside, and nightmarish visions of Gustave's ghastly and altogether dubious virility along with it.

Surely it is not eavesdropping if the discussion concerns him, which it almost certainly does? In any case, Cosette is not subdued in her excitement, and snatches of conversation carry to him easily. If they wish to keep their secrets, well, they should not yell them out to the whole wide world.

"... Papa, you have been very silly to keep these things from me! How you could possibly think that...."

Ha! It is as he knew it would be - Cosette has forgiven Valjean his frankly idiotic deception, and all will be well. Javert will remove himself from Valjean's life just as soon as he is able, and Valjean will move in with Cosette and Pontmercy, the father to a newly minted baroness, and she will lavish him with affection and riches both. In time, Valjean will come to accept Cosette's forgiveness - what other choice will he have?

Rising to his feet, Javert creeps towards the source of the voices, peering through a gap in the bushes.

He blinks, confused. Cosette is talking with - someone? A young man in a cap, feet bare, head hanging as if he cannot stand to look Cosette in the eye.

It is only when the man turns his head slightly - to further avoid Cosette's gaze, not to meet it - that Javert realises with a start that it is Valjean himself, dressed in a manner most unbecoming for a young woman.

He feels his face heating for some strange and unfathomable reason, and curses this body's whims for what feels like the umpteenth time. One part of him wants nothing more than to march over to Valjean and demand to know what he is doing in men's clothing, while another part reasons that Valjean is a man, and perhaps it is Javert himself who is in the wrong - perhaps he should be asking Valjean from where he got his trousers. But no, to wander about in such a manner would surely be
confusing and horrifying to anyone who should see him -

"... think that I would love you less for anything you have done? I love you even more, Papa! I cannot imagine how difficult things were for you - how easy it would have been for you to give up - and yet! What a life I have now because of you, full of love and happiness!"

Cosette has taken Valjean's hands in her own, ducking her head in an attempt to catch his downcast eyes. There is a quiet determination to her actions; she will not let him wriggle out of this, Javert realises, will not allow Valjean to slip by with charm and deflection, as he has so often done throughout his life.

Indeed, she pulls him into her arms, cautious but firm; Valjean seems able to do nothing but accept it, stunned, arms rising mechanically to embrace his daughter.

There are murmured words that Javert cannot hear, but it is of no importance. All that matters is that Valjean and his daughter are reconciled; the rest will follow in due course. They will all be back in their rightful bodies soon, and Javert will return to his duties, to his apartment. Perhaps Valjean will attempt to maintain an acquaintance, but Javert can easily put a stop to that.

Yes. It is well.

"I am famished, Papa," Cosette says as she pulls back, even as she keeps her hands on Valjean's shoulders, her face settling into a smile that seems to personify happiness itself. Javert pauses, watching the softness in his own eyes as she looks at Valjean's downturned face, the smile that seems to illuminate them. His smile has never looked that way before, he is sure of it. What would ever have made him smile like that? "I will just go to the kitchen to get something to eat, but rest assured that you and I will talk more upon this! I shall convince you of your goodness, even if I must say it every day for the rest of my life."

"I will come with you," Valjean says - Javert does not fail to notice that he responds only to the banal topic of fetching food, and avoids the rest of Cosette's words entirely, as if they were never uttered - and Cosette shakes her head. She says something that Javert cannot catch, but then there is something else - something that sounds suspiciously like you should speak with the inspector - and it takes far too long for Javert to parse the words, to realise that Valjean has turned in his direction and is walking towards him with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man approaching the guillotine.

It is surely only a couple of seconds before he manages to gather his wits, but it feels like an eternity. What has happened to him? Maybe it is time he retired, after all - perhaps he is too old, too weighed down by conflicting thoughts, too plagued with doubts and a conscience and Valjean.

It occurs to him after another long moment that he is still staring through the gap in the bushes, his eyes fixed upon Valjean as the man looks this way and that, deciding where would be best to begin his search for a police inspector who does not want to be found - or, perhaps, merely wondering if he can avoid Javert altogether while also avoiding Cosette's ire for having done so.

Javert does not particularly wish to talk with Valjean - but, even more than that, he does not wish to be caught spying on Valjean's conversation with his daughter, or to have it appear as if he is hiding from him. He does not hide from that which scares him. Not that he is scared! Quite the opposite. He merely wishes to spare Valjean the awkwardness of trying to make conversation when there is nothing to be said. But -

He stumbles back in the direction from which he came, almost tripping over a tree root in his haste. He very nearly flings himself back down upon the bench - for surely it is an acceptable place to be found, far enough away from where Valjean and Cosette had their conversation as to make it appear
as if he has not been listening.

This will do. There is nothing to give away his hurried steps back through the garden. Yes, he is overwarm in his voluminous skirts, and his bosom heaves mightily from the sudden exertion, but surely it is nothing that cannot be explained away by the warmth of the day. He closes his eyes for a moment, trying to call forth the impassive façade of Inspector Javert that used to come to him as naturally as breathing.

The end result, he suspects, is not quite as he would have hoped... but at least he does not look half-crazed. Probably.

Opening his eyes, he picks up the book from the bench with the intent of pretending to be enthralled by its contents, his sluggish mind realising too late that it is that book, which is possibly the least appropriate thing imaginable -

But it is too late. He can hear the scratch of dry grass beneath Valjean's approaching feet - and so he merely curls his lip into a sneer, hoping to convey the sense of disdain that the act of reading in general and this book in particular so richly deserve.

"Javert? I -" Valjean stops in his tracks, and Javert would swear that his own heart momentarily does the same. Valjean's shirt is unbuttoned at the neck, his sleeves and trouser legs rolled up, his feet bare - and although it is not Valjean, he cannot help but stare. Why, he cannot imagine - he has certainly never had any interest in Éponine, and has seen more than his fair share of semi-naked women and men both.

He bites the inside of his cheek in an attempt to focus. Whatever this madness is, it will surely go away once he is back in his rightful body. He must remember that in order to do right by Valjean, he needs to leave the man in peace with his family. He must remember that the last time he attempted a conversation with him, it had ended with Javert dismissing himself from Valjean's presence.

The things that Valjean has offered him over these past two years have, of course, come with a price. There is nothing in life that does not. Javert has not known how to begin repaying what he owes, or how to tip the scales back towards some semblance of balance. He had thought there was nothing he could do. Too late he has realised that by remaining in Valjean's life, he has been edging the scales ever further out of kilter.

He sees it quite clearly now. There is nothing more to discuss.

It is this thought that allows him to regain control of himself. He inclines his head in the barest of nods. "Valjean."

Valjean's eyes are slightly narrowed, and he frowns in confusion as he takes in the sight before him.

"Javert? Are you reading a book?"

Javert lowers the book to his lap, his nose screwing up in distaste even as his cheeks start to burn inexplicably. In the end, he can only bluster his way through and hope for the best. "To call this collection of wastepaper a book implies that there was some kind of writing and editing process! No, I am not reading it. It was sitting here on the bench - rightfully abandoned - and I was merely attempting to ascertain its lawful owner, that I might advise them not to leave their rubbish lying around."

"Of course." Valjean's face is studiously blank, his eyes lowered. There is a greyness in his face that Javert does not like - but what is he supposed to do about that? There is only one person who can
remedy it, and she has already told Valjean that she forgives him.

An errant strand of hair slides out from under Valjean's cap and across his cheek. Valjean tucks it behind his ear, tilting his head slightly, and Javert feels a strange tightening deep in his gut - an odd sensation that has plagued him these past few days.

"Well!" He pauses, struggling to find some words - any words. "I thought I heard voices - did Cosette return?"

It is not technically dishonesty to ask a question one already knows the answer to. He watches intently as Valjean raises his head slightly to glance at him, as if, perhaps, trying to ascertain whether he was eavesdropping - but no, Javert thinks, there instead seems to be a wonderment in his expression, even as he ducks his head again to try and hide it.

But the question is also a reminder of the reality of their circumstances. If there is one thing that Javert has learned, it is that Valjean will always assume the worst possible interpretation of any given situation - that his joy over his daughter's love and forgiveness will most certainly drown in the inexplicable sea of his self-loathing. It is infuriating.

"She did."

Javert waits, but there is nothing more. "And?"

Valjean shrugs, a barely discernible lift of the shoulders. "And she said that she forgave me, as I knew she would. She is too kind and loving a child."

Javert quashes the urge to jump up and shake Valjean by the shoulders until his brain rearranges itself into that of a reasonable person. The fool! He takes a deep breath, measures his words carefully. "And then?"

"And then she bade me to come find you."

"Well, here I am."

The silence that settles over them is heavy as a blanket; sweat runs down Javert's back. He is at a loss for words.

Eventually Valjean sighs and takes a tentative step forwards. He gestures abortively at the bench. "May I...?"

Javert blinks. "May you - Valjean, it is your garden and your bench."

"Still. May I?"

Javert lowers himself carefully onto the bench, elbows resting on his knees, head hanging. The smell of crushed grass and warm soil clings to him, and Javert is suddenly, unaccountably, returned to the mairie of Montreuil-sur-Mer, on a morning when he had stood and waited for what seemed like hours for the mayor to return from no one seemed to know where. Ordinarily, Javert would not have minded waiting on a superior in this way, and it was not his place to question it, in any case. But by that time, Javert had long suspected that this Monsieur Madeleine was not who he claimed to be; he would wait for a mayor, but by God he would not wait for...
Just as the thought had begun to come to fruition, Madeleine had returned, the same scent of crushed grass and soil on his clothes, the same small duck of his head as he apologised for keeping Javert, but it seemed he had walked rather further this morning than he intended. The memory is still bright within Javert's mind: the many moments it had taken him to compose himself before answering, fighting down both his anger and the small hitch that had caught in his breath.

Swallowing, Javert moves slightly away from Valjean, as far as the small stone bench will allow - really, he should stand, he should leave Valjean in peace in his garden... were it not for the fact that he has nowhere else he can go, nowhere in which he will not be intruding on Valjean and his family in some way.

If Javert were a different man and if they had shared a different past, he would rest a reassuring hand on Valjean's shoulder, offer a friendly ear so that Valjean could unburden himself. But he is decidedly not that man. He does not know how to go about such things, or if it would even be welcome.

It is just one more failure on his part. Nearly two years he has known Valjean as something more than a criminal, a number, a beast to be hunted... and yet, now that it is his turn to repay the favour, he finds himself unable to think of a way in which he could possibly help him, unless it is by removing himself entirely from Jean Valjean's life.

Thus he finds himself lost in thought, the breeze cooling the sweat on his neck and ruffling the pages of the book. It will be strange, to be back in his body and his position within the police once all this is over and done with - within the next few days, if Magnon is to be believed, and he will certainly not be holding his breath over that. To go back to his life as it was before, as if he had simply gone away to the country for a week, instead of - of this, this ludicrous farce! He has never even been this long away from work before, his foolishness after the barricades notwithstanding, and the itch to get out and do something is almost overwhelming. If only -

A choked noise interrupts his reverie, and fear grips him; he looks over at Valjean to see that he is sitting upright now, his eyes bulging wide, his mouth slightly open in fear, or horror, or...?

Javert follows Valjean's line of sight, and... oh. Horror seems an appropriate response.

For Valjean is looking at the book upon his lap - Javert had forgotten it was even there. With great trepidation, he looks down at the page it has opened to.

She felt him moving Inside her with a great and Powerful force, the Sheer Girth and potency of his member filling her to the very Brim with womanly ecstasy even as his Pair of overripe plums Slapped against her. Oh! What Bliss! Surely she was being cleft in twain by his robust and potent Thrusts, which transported Her to the dizzying heights of Heaven Itself -

He snaps the book shut with violence, the sound cracking the air; he presumably flings it off his lap, because when he regains the power of thought, the abominable thing is lying on the ground some distance away.

Perhaps this is what it is like to be Pontmercy - to feel such utter mortification at all times. Little wonder the ninny can barely string a sentence together! Javert almost feels in this moment as if he might understand him, and truly that is the worst thing of all.

"Well!" he gasps. "Valjean, you must tell your daughter not to leave such things lying about the garden where just anyone can see them. In fact, she should get rid of them entirely. She is to be a married woman - it is not seemly!"
Valjean looks scandalised, his mouth still working soundlessly. The silence is unbearable; Javert does his best to fill it, no matter how or with what.

"I will tell her myself, when I tell her that I am leaving here and that she has no reason to forgive me my trespasses against yourself or her mother. Yes! I will speak with her before I leave, and then take myself off -"

Unsure of what else to say, Javert begins to stand, before the press of a warm hand against his own cuts him short; at this moment, he would be incapable of speech even if his life depended on it. Disbelieving, he shifts his gaze downwards, to see that Valjean is looking at him with alarm, his hand pressed against Javert's where it still rests on the grey stone of the bench. It is not the first time that Valjean has done so - Javert has very vague, hazy memories of gripping Valjean's hand like a lifeline in those feverish days after the Seine - but he had been out of his senses then, and he would not, he tells himself, have permitted it if he had been in his right mind.

Is this so different, then? Javert stares down at where Valjean's hand covers his own. It is merely the action of one who has taken pity on his foolish companion, nothing more; any observer who should chance to look upon them would merely see two girls of close acquaintance sharing confidences, sitting very close together -

"Javert." The voice cuts through the din in his mind; he turns slowly to look at Valjean, who is taking a deep breath, his eyes closed, a faint flush across his cheeks. His eyes open again, and Javert finds himself looking straight into them; to his surprise he sees they are filled with a wild alarm.

"Javert." Valjean tries again. "What do you mean when you say you will take yourself - when you speak of -"

Javert blinks, frowning, wondering for a moment what it is that he has done to cause Valjean anxiety. He runs through what he just said in his mind again and -

Oh.

"I do not mean - certainly not that," he says quickly, hoping he does not have to be more specific, discomfort rising in his chest. Will he never be free of that foolishness? It seems on some days that even his own body is conspiring not to let him forget it. The ache in his ribs and the cough that comes with it have not left him since that night; to breathe easily these past few days has, in some ways, been more disconcerting than being trapped within a body not his own. "That is not... I simply meant what I said before. That you need not concern yourself that I will intrude any further into your or your daughter's lives. But I will not... you need have no fear that I will...."

He trails off, uncertain. What is it that Valjean wants him to say? And what is it that he means? He is aware that he owes Valjean too much for things to continue as they have; he does not even know what it is that he owes. The debt of his life seems a miserable, insignificant thing, as much as it had astonished him at the time that Valjean had spared him. It is not even the reason he had taken himself to the Pont-au-Change that night - or at least, not the whole of it. But having been turned away from that solution, he has no intention of returning to it now. Not even now that he understands that he must leave this place, leave Valjean, and have nothing further to do with him. Even if he no longer sees him, Javert is now aware of the justness of what Valjean has opened his eyes to, and what he must do, and continue to do, even if Valjean is not there to know.

Javert glances at him now, hoping that he has quelled his fears that there will be no return to a darkened bridge; if not, he does not see how he will ever escape. Valjean does not look so panicked as he did before, at least, though Javert can see that he is far from reassured.
"You will leave, then, when -"

"Yes. I should have done so long ago."

As the silence descends between them, Valjean's hand tightens around his own, and he should pull away, not press back - why is he pressing back - ?

It hurts more than he would have thought, to force himself to let go, to make himself stand up. If Valjean were in his proper body, it would be impossible to escape that grip if Valjean did not wish it, but they are neither of them in their proper bodies. Nothing about this situation is proper.

He bends down to pick up the book, dusting it off and smoothing the creased pages. He holds it out to Valjean. "I believe this is your daughter's. She should take better care of her belongings."

Valjean's fingers slowly wrap around the book; their gazes lock. "You should tell her that yourself."

Javert is the first to look away. How can the man stand to look him in the eye?

He releases the book. Valjean slowly lowers it onto his lap.

He bows sharply. "Good afternoon, Monsieur Fauchelevent."

Chapter End Notes

With thanks to Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* for inspiring Cosette's racy literature :D
Jean Valjean awakens to the gentle tapping of rain against glass, a soft pillow cradling his head, and a sense of déjà vu.

There is no panic this time, no need to frantically grab at his own face or run to the mirror. His body fits him like a well-worn glove; he recognises the aches and twinges, feels the familiar weight of himself sinking deep into the mattress.

Even so, he should get up – this is not his place. He lingers a moment longer than absolutely necessary within the bed’s comforting embrace, before hauling himself up and making his way across the room. He is surprised at how slow and heavy his steps feel, even as he becomes aware of the return of strength to his limbs.

It is not a surprise to see his own face in the mirror – and yet, it is only once he has seen it that he is struck by a tremendous sense of relief. He shrugs his shoulders, contorts his expression, and watches as his reflection does the same. His beard may be a little longer and scragglier than he is used to, but aside from that, it is as if the past few days never happened.

He is himself once more. Jean Valjean. But his sense of relief is short-lived: already it is ebbing like the tide, the room suddenly stifling. He hurries over to the window and jerks it open, taking a deep breath of the cool air that seeps into the room, uncaring of the raindrops that spatter on the sill.

An irrational part of him almost expects to see that the garden has turned verdant with the rain; in reality, of course, it has merely gone from being brownish and dry to brownish and wet, apart from a few cultivated sprays of colour. But he can see the potential for new life that is just beneath the surface, patiently waiting for someone to come along and release it.

Valjean finds himself somewhat calmed, but it is not enough to put him fully at ease. Indeed, a restless energy seems to suffuse him all of a sudden, and he paces once more to the mirror. Who is this man who stares back at him? And why do those around him seem so willing to forgive him his innumerable trespasses? Is it that they somehow feel obliged to do so... or are they merely confused, mistaking him for an honourable man?

It is for the best that they have all been returned to their bodies – sooner than expected, but then, Magnon had only been making her best guess as to how long her enchantment would take to wear off.

Things will continue on now as if they had never changed: Cosette will be married to Marius, Éponine will move out of the shadow of her fraudulent benefactor to live her own life, and Javert – Valjean is half-dressed before his mind catches up with his body. He fumbles one-handedly with the buttons on his shirt until he realises that he has full use of both hands now. Even so, it is a struggle, and in his haste he gives up before he reaches the collar.

His boots dangling from one hand, he rushes to Cosette’s room, despite the fact that, somehow, he knows Javert will not be there.

He thumps on the door. “Javert!”

There is no answer.

Valjean calls Javert’s name again. When there is no reply, he opens the door, barely registering that
he is intruding upon Cosette’s space.

It is as he thought – the room is immaculate, the bedclothes arranged with a precision that he knows goes beyond anything Cosette would ever bother with. Nothing other than that has been touched. But it is completely devoid of Javert.

He turns and clatters down the stairs, unsure even as to exactly why he is in such a desperate state. Javert had promised him that he would not allow himself to come to harm, and Valjean knows him to be a man of his word... although then again, Valjean has also spent the better part of two years trying to convince Javert of the merits of a less rigid adherence to the concept of absolute honesty. Panic seizures him for a moment, and he almost trips down the stairs.

No, he has to believe that he would not do such a thing. Not even Javert would attempt that terrible act twice. Surely he would not. The man is merely doing what Valjean has always thought he one day must: removing himself from Valjean’s life, distancing himself from the creeping stain of Valjean’s criminality that must surely be causing him distress. He is a police inspector! To force him into a position where he must shelter a recidivist out of some perceived debt of loyalty – it is wrong. Valjean should let him go, for his own good. It would be the Christian thing to do.

And yet... Valjean cannot shake the memory of a hand underneath his own, the slightest brush of a knee beneath layers of fabric. The hand had been too small – he does not like to think too hard on whose hand it actually was – but for a few brief moments he had clasped Javert’s hand within his own, had felt Javert press back, as his stomach had wound itself into an ever-tighter knot.

He does not know what it means, but he knows that he has to see Javert before he leaves. To convince him to leave; to convince him to stay; to... Valjean knows not what he will do, only that he must try.

A jubilant voice breaks into his thoughts as he emerges from the corridor and hurries towards the sitting room.

“Cosette! My darling! I have not slept a single wink all night, knowing that I would see your exquisite beauty again today! I know that it is very early, but I could not bear the thought of being apart from you for even one second more.”

He dashes around the corner and sees Marius standing in the open front door, the lower half of his face still stuck in an expression of delight even as his eyes move through confusion and towards something approaching terror. Following his gaze, Valjean watches as Javert takes a step towards him, too close, and Marius quivers. The boy cranes his neck, his mouth popping open as if awed by the majesty of the spectacle looming before him; his voice, when he eventually finds it, is small.

“... Inspector Javert?”

“Monsieur le Baron.” Javert inclines his head, but does not otherwise move. Marius gulps.

Valjean’s relief is overwhelming. He does not think he has ever been so pleased to see Marius. He may have to get the boy some sort of present, in order to thank him for delaying Javert for these few precious seconds.

It is obvious that Javert had been about to leave – he is wearing Valjean’s ill-fitting clothes, his own filthy uniform tucked under his arm. His face is still unshaven, which is surely testament to an attempt to slip out of the house as quickly as possible.

“Javert –” he begins, before trailing off, floundering helplessly. What on Earth does he want to say?
Javert, for his part, continues to stare down his nose at Marius – surely he must be pleased at having regained his great height! – but Valjean can see the tension bound up in his jaw.

He tries again. “Javert. Will you at least stay for breakfast? Surely you must be hungry.”

“There is no need.” Javert takes another step forward, and Marius, curse him, scurries out of his way with a sudden alacrity, disappearing back the way he had come. Valjean, on the other hand, has found himself in the opposite predicament: he is rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but watch helplessly as Javert steps out the door.

There is a pause; Javert turns to face him, although his eyes are fixed on a point somewhere over his shoulder. “My apologies for taking your clothes – I will have them cleaned and returned to you shortly.”

“That is not – Javert, do not worry yourself over that!”

It is all happening too fast! Their lives have been interwoven over so many decades – as captor and captive; as police inspector and mayor; as hunter and hunted; as, perhaps, good acquaintances – surely it could not all be coming to an end in such a simple fashion? He has spent so many years trying to be rid of Javert, and now – now that he actually may enjoy his company – now the man chooses to remove himself from Valjean’s life?

“Thank you for your hospitality, Valjean, and everything you have given me – it cannot be repaid. Trust that I will heed the lessons you have taught me well.”

Valjean opens his mouth to protest, but Javert barrels on, his quiet words gathering a force that Valjean cannot resist.

“Mercy, Valjean. I have hounded you without pity, but now I finally understand. There: now you are free of me.” The corner of Javert’s mouth quirks in something that could almost be amusement. “It is quite something else, to be the man of mercy. I think I can see why you enjoy it. It is – liberating.”

Valjean can barely think straight – he can feel the rapid hammer of his pulse against his skull, and it seems to be drowning out all else. But – liberating? No, that cannot be right – in the years since his encounter with the Bishop he has piled good deed upon good deed, and yet they seem to conspire to crush him. They are never enough, each serving as a reminder that there is yet more that he could be doing, yet another unfortunate soul that he could be helping. God has only allowed him his physical liberty so that he may use himself as a tool of mercy, of charity; to think that such acts should also serve to liberate his soul within this mortal life verges on blasphemy!

A respectful nod of the head, and then Javert turns away from Valjean once more and disappears into the garden. His footsteps fade, and he is gone.

Just like that.

It is almost worse, Valjean thinks dizzily, that Javert is not truly gone – that he will only be a short distance away, within Paris. Valjean knows where he works; he knows where he lives. He could follow the man home right now. His proximity will surely be an agony.

But is this not what he wanted? For Javert to rid himself of him? His conscience should be assuaged. He knows that it is the correct thing, and yet it feels so horribly wrong.

Ah! He cannot think.

He is not aware of the fact that his boots still dangle dumbly from his hand until he is unexpectedly
relieved of their weight; blinking, he turns his head to see Éponine placing them on the ground.

“Good morning, Monsieur Fauchelevent,” she says. Her smile seems to bring with it some air of reassurance, although he cannot imagine why.

“Good morning.” He can barely form the words.

She rests her hand on his arm; with a force that is both gentle and inexorable, she steers him out of the room. He cannot resist... but even if he were able, he would not. What would be the point?

He finds himself guided to a chair in the kitchen. He sits without thought, barely registering that the table is laden with food.

“The past few days have been... trying, wouldn’t you say?” Éponine says as she sits across from him. Her fingers twitch as they curl hesitantly around her teacup, before she sighs and changes hands. “It isn’t surprising that you feel the need to rest.”

Valjean hums in distracted agreement, though he thinks it probably comes out more like a grunt. He knows that he should apologise, but he cannot quite find the words.

She nudges both a bowl of soup and a plate of rolls closer to him, and he mechanically takes a roll in his hand and brings it to his mouth. He has learned these past few days that it is simplest to accede to her not-so-subtle hints. It is not so difficult; the habit of eating on command is an easy one to slip back into.

“It’s a shame,” Éponine murmurs, and he wishes she would leave him be. “As glad as I am that I’m myself again, I was hoping to shift those rocks at the bottom of the garden today. If I’d known that we’d be returned to our bodies so soon, I would have made sure to do it last night.” She rubs at her shoulder absently, and there is something almost melancholy in her tone. It is strange, to know exactly which ache she is attempting to dispel.

She looks up suddenly and smiles. “Ah, but I must speak with Marius for a minute. Please excuse me.” She jumps out of her seat before Valjean can fully comprehend what is happening; he hears her greeting Marius, and then Cosette’s cheerful thank you, dear Éponine, and –

Cosette?

No, he cannot speak with her! He has had too much of everything already this morning – too many kind words and farewells both – and he cannot take any more of either of them.

But Cosette slides into Éponine’s vacated seat even as the voices of Éponine and Marius fade, and she smiles, pulling one of his hands between both of her own.

“Good morning, Papa.” Her smile turns impish. “I trust that you are Papa?”

He cannot refuse a direct question from her, although it is a closer thing than he would perhaps like to admit. “Good morning, Cosette. Yes, I am... myself again.”

“I am very glad to hear it.” Her grip tightens around his hand, her delicate fingers showing a surprising strength. “I fear I did not manage to fully convince you of your goodness yesterday, so I must remind you again today.”

He starts to pull back, but she holds tight. He sighs. “Cosette, please –”

“You are a good man, Papa.” There is the slightest hint of a tremble in her voice, but her eyes are
steel. “The very best of men! And I will not hear you say otherwise.”

Very well, he can refrain from saying so; it will not change the fact that it is the truth. It is tempting to simply give in to her sweetness and allow himself to be convinced; she says the words so earnestly, with such sincerity and tenderness, that for one brief, glimmering moment, a part of him is almost swayed, wants to be swayed. But no, it is just the misguided love of a girl for her father. No, he corrects himself, for her protector.

Her fingers tighten around his once more, almost warningly, and he looks upon her face just in time to see her eyes narrow slightly. If he did not know better, he would think that she had seen the path his thoughts had taken.

Cosette studies his face for a moment longer, before smiling once more and sitting back a little. She removes her hands from around his own, and it is hard to believe that mere moments ago he had been trying to pull away from her, for now he wishes nothing more than for her to take his hand once more. “It is strange to be back in our own bodies, is it not? It is a relief in so many ways, and yet there are things that I will miss.” She shakes her head. “I must admit that certain things are... chafing at me.”

There is a wistfulness to her expression that he is not sure he understands. Yes, there is a relief within him that comes from having their situation resolved, but it is mostly born of the knowledge that Éponine is free of his old, battered body, free of the memories of his misdeeds and torments. He can only hope that for Éponine the memories will fade with time, until the past few days seem like little more than a strange dream.

“No, he corrects himself, for her protector.

“Do you know, it is the oddest thing,” Cosette says, and there is something calculating about her. “I recall now that Inspector Javert told me that you once ran a very successful factory.”

His heart seems to lodge itself suddenly in his throat. He swallows around it, forcing down the urge to run while at the same time trying to sort through the dozens of questions that swirl through his mind.

“Did he, now?” he eventually manages. “And when did he tell you this?”

“The other evening.” At his obvious startlement, she adds, “I believe he thought I was asleep, and I admit it has taken me some time to remember all of what he told me. I think I already knew some of it from his memories, anyway.” Her tone turns slightly chiding. “At first, I was not sure I could be remembering correctly. You had never mentioned it, after all! To think that my own father single-handedly raised an entire town from hardship to prosperity, and never once said a word about it! Papa, you never fail to amaze me.”

Valjean says nothing, unsure of what she wants from him. She picks up again a moment later in any case, her voice an excited chatter.

“Since you have not denied it, I will assume that it is true. And if it is true... really! What good fortune that would be! It would make you the perfect person to help me with my plans. Since I myself know nothing of how to run such a business.”

His mind is awhirl; comprehension evades him. “I – Cosette, you –” He pauses and takes a breath, a slow inhale and exhale. “Cosette, are you saying that you want to run a factory?”

Her eyes sparkle. “There are so many needy women, Papa, and I will have all the time and money in the world. I met a woman when I was –” Her eyes dart to the side suddenly, a sure sign of evasiveness – it has always been so, ever since she was a child. It occurs to him that he knows very
little of what Cosette has been doing these past few days. He opens his mouth so as to find out what exactly it is that she is hiding, but she ploughs on. “I met a woman named Béatrice who was in desperate circumstances. She has small children, Papa, and no way to earn money but to... well.”

The image leaps into his mind unbidden: Cosette’s mother – Fantine – in her desperate state, gaunt and half-crazed, her every thought bending towards the welfare of her child. The woman had been under his care, and he had failed her.

How can he tell Cosette that it is impossible to save everyone? That no matter how many poor wretches she might take under her wing, there will always be more? That the weight of their lives will become heavier with each passing day?

Cosette is still talking; he tries to pick up the thread of conversation once more, and is brought up short by a single word: Thénardier.

The woman relies on Thénardier in order to survive; the woman has two young children. Yes, he can see why Cosette would be particularly moved by her plight. Well. Perhaps he can give the woman some money, rent an apartment for her and her children, find her some employment and arrange for the children to have an education. Once he has made the arrangements to have her comfortably accommodated, Cosette will no longer need to concern herself about the woman’s wellbeing; she will be able to resume her life as it was before, a life of comfort and contentment.

He thinks of his darling Cosette working long hours, shouldering the burdens of her workers, treating their worries as if they were her own, and a terrible ache spreads through his chest. He has worked so hard to ensure Cosette’s happiness, to keep her from ever having to do anything she does not wish – she suffered so much, while still so young. She does not realise the burden that she is wishing to take upon herself. Just because one is not doing the hard labour does not mean that one does not suffer. To be responsible for the wellbeing of others is an anxiety that he would not wish upon anyone, let alone Cosette.

“I sense that you are not overjoyed at my news, Papa.” Cosette takes his hand again, and he does not resist. “I admit that it is all very sudden, and that I do not know the first thing about running a factory. But I could not stand to be tucked away in that grand old house, not now that I have been reminded of my good fortune in life – not now that I know what it is like to help someone in need! Not now that I know that I could be the difference between someone’s life and death!”

He opens his mouth once more – what on Earth did Cosette do while she was out of the house? – but she continues determinedly. “I will do this, Papa. It would be so much nicer to do it with your help – I certainly do not want the factory to fail, or for the workers to suffer due to a lack of knowledge or foresight on my part – but if you decline to assist me, I will do it on my own nonetheless. I will make Marius help me.”

Valjean rubs at his eyes with his free hand, even as his other hand tightens around Cosette’s. When did his little girl become so shrewd? For he can see that she has backed him into a corner – there is no way that he will allow her to throw away her money into an unsound business venture, and she knows it.

Perhaps the last few days have influenced her unduly – Javert’s memories whispering in her ear, his subordinates complying with her every order. There is a certain resolve in the set of her jaw that is new, and suddenly he realises that his daughter – that small, frightened child! – is now a woman. He had known it before, but it had never truly sunk in.

His throat tightens. She does not need him at all, now. There is a certain pride in that, a knowledge that he has raised her to be determined in her wants, to care for the welfare of others –
“Papa.” She is full of concern for him – it practically radiates from her – but he cannot look her in the eye. “Papa, please. I can ask Marius for help, but there is only so much he can do. Just think of what the two of us could do together – how much I could learn from you! Marius will be so busy, and I will be so lonely in that enormous old house. I can think of nothing I would rather do than help these poor women, Papa, and there is no one I would rather do it alongside than you.” She reaches out one of her hands and touches his cheek, compelling him to look at her with the gentlest of pressure. He cannot help but look at her; she is smiling, her eyes bright with tears. “I have everything I could ever want. If I could share even a little of that happiness with another unfortunate soul... well, would that not just be the most wonderful thing?”

He has been robbed of the power of speech. The thought of spending his days with Cosette, of passing on to her the knowledge that she so clearly craves, of once again devoting his time to helping those who need it most – it is enticing beyond all measure. She is but young, after all, and not knowledgeable in the running of factories. Perhaps he could merely assist her in finding some space, in hiring some suitable superintendent who might be made to understand the situation of the women, and then step aside. It would not be so terrible, surely?

Nonetheless, there is still so much that could go wrong. He could not sign his name to anything, of course. Marius would need to be responsible for that. There could be no possibility that anything could be connected to him, should he ever be revealed.

He manages to force the words past the lump in his throat. “I shall think upon it,” he says faintly. Cosette’s smile is blinding in its brilliance. “Oh, Papa!” She hurries around the table and throws her arms around him; he is able to do little but sit there, stunned. Her joy in his presence is too much; he is undeserving of it, undeserving of the forgiveness and love that she hands out as readily as she hands out alms.

And yet, true charity does not ask questions as to whether the recipient is worthy or not; true charity simply gives. She has given him her forgiveness, and so, perhaps, he must accept it, whether or not he deserves it. It is something to think on, anyway.

There is dampness at his collar where her tears have spilled over; he does not know whether he is capable of such things himself anymore, but, he thinks, he is closer to it than he has been for a very long time.

Perhaps, he thinks numbly, there might be some part of him that played a part in the thoughtful, compassionate woman that Cosette has become. Clearly there has always been an innate goodness to her, and that is why she is so kind-hearted a woman, but perhaps....

He closes his eyes with a barely audible groan, resting his head gently against hers. It is all too much! He knows that he does not deserve her love, but it is so exhausting to resist it. She is relentless, deliberately so, and she clearly knows all his weaknesses.

He does not know how long they stay there like that, but eventually she lifts her head with a sniffle. “Ah, Papa! The rain has stopped – come, let us go into the garden.”

He opens his bleary eyes and looks out the window to see that the rain has indeed lifted; the sun has painted the leaves and branches a brilliant yellow against the black of the clouds.

He also sees –

“Is that Marius?”
“And Éponine.” Cosette blows her nose with an inelegant honk; her face is red and blotchy, but she is smiling. “All the worms had come out onto the path in the rain, and Marius was worried that they would get stepped on. I do believe that he and Éponine are rescuing them.”

Curious despite himself, Valjean pulls himself to his feet – he had never realised just how much his joints ached, until he was relieved of the pain for a few days – and peers through the window. It is hard to make out the details, but sure enough, Marius appears to have something balanced on the end of a twig, holding it as far away from his body as possible. Éponine’s contribution appears to mostly consist of laughing at Marius and dangling worms in his face, her skirts dragging unapologetically through the mud.

Cosette comes up alongside him. “Do you know that poor Marius had to circle around the house and come in through the back door when you were speaking with the inspector? I think Javert terrified him.” She giggles. “It is fortunate that he did not attempt to greet him with a kiss.”

The sudden reminder of Javert is almost like a dousing in cold water. They have been returned to their correct bodies, Cosette has forgiven him, and yet...

It is as if he is constantly juggling a dozen problems at once, all of them seeming almost insurmountable, all of them equally fragile. He is keeping the problem of Cosette airborne – much to his surprise – but now he has been reminded that the problem of Javert has slipped beyond his grasp, and will surely shatter against the floor.

“Do not be fearful, Papa.”

He turns, startled. Cosette taps her finger against her temple, and Valjean wonders with a shudder how much of Javert she has retained. “He will not do anything rash.” She coughs, and it almost sounds... embarrassed? “I fear that my actions will have made things difficult for him with his colleagues. I did not get a chance to explain to him what happened, and I do not think it would be wise for me to visit his apartment again.”

“You have not explained to me what happened,” Valjean mutters half-heartedly under his breath.

“I will write him a letter today,” Cosette continues, as if he had not said a word. “He will need to know everything.”

It is probably too late for that, he realises – even though Javert is still technically on leave, Valjean is certain that he will return home only long enough to clean himself up and change into his spare uniform, before throwing himself back into his work. He may even now be on his way to the stationhouse. Still, it is better that Cosette send him the letter late than not at all.

It will have to be enough for now to know that he is well. Valjean pushes down the anxiety that rises in his gut. “You are correct – of course he will need to know.”

Cosette hums in agreement, before her mouth twitches into an amused smile. “I do believe Marius is rescuing a snail. Should we go out there and remind him that snails are better at eating plants than helping them grow?”

“There is a place in a garden for all of God’s creatures,” he murmurs.

“That is true,” Cosette says, and holds out her arm to him. Dazed, he takes it, still barely believing that he is being invited to do so. To an outsider, his life would be exactly the same as it was a week ago... but he feels as if his soul is just beginning to undergo some sort of profound upheaval. It is terrifying.
Taking a shaky breath, he allows Cosette to walk him outside.
Javert wakes early with a strange hollowness in his chest, and it takes him several long moments to place himself – to remember that he is in his own room in the building he has lived in for more than five years, and no longer in the porter’s cottage in the garden of the Rue Plumet house, Valjean asleep in the bed by the window, mere feet from where Javert himself lies.

Blinking in the pre-dawn darkness, Javert is tempted to simply remain in bed a moment longer – and that thought alone is enough to jerk him out of bed and to his washstand. He coughs as he dresses, a twinge in his right arm making him wince as he buttons his shirt. It had been so easy to forget these things when he had been inhabiting the body of Mademoiselle Fauchelevent. Now that he is back in his own, it is almost as if he is feeling its age – and all its attendant limitations – for the first time.

Two and a half weeks have passed since Javert left Jean Valjean’s home in the Rue Plutet, and he has not seen him again since then. He has been working extended shifts lately, and retiring to his rooms only to sleep a few fitful hours before returning to his duties. Once or twice a note has arrived for him, unsigned, but addressed to him in what he knows is Valjean’s handwriting. He has not opened them, but instead simply fed them to the small stove in his room. Obviously, he has made no reply. In the past, he had often sent some urchin to the Rue Plumet with a note of explanation if he was going to return home late – more than once since he has been back he has found himself beginning to scribble a few words on a scrap of paper, telling Valjean that he will not be home this evening and asking him to come by some other time. Perhaps it had been sheer force of habit, for Javert doubts he ever truly had any intention of sending them to Valjean. In any case, every note he writes ends up crumpled in his pocket.

The only letter he has opened was one in an unfamiliar hand. He had thrown it away from himself as soon as he had realised it was from Cosette, though not before he had absorbed at least some of its contents – about a woman in an alley whose life had been spared on his authority and the fact that he is now responsible for her being an unofficial police informant. At the time, he had not wished to think about it, and the note had ended up in the stove with the others.

He does not know if Valjean has come by his rooms – if he has, Madame Durand has not mentioned it. It seems likely that Valjean would ask her not to tell him that he had come by. Javert scowls as he thinks of the way his portress, smitten as she is, would have nodded, eyes gleaming conspiratorially, her hands running over her hair as they always do whenever she is speaking to Valjean, as if she were a blushing young maiden instead of a married woman in her fifties.

Nonetheless, if she has any thoughts on his extended absence from his rooms, the state of his uniform on his return, or the fact that he now does not seem to be at home to his former acquaintance, she has kept them to herself, which Javert appreciates.

He leaves early, making his way to the stationhouse on the Rue de Pontoise before the dawn has fully risen. The sergeant at the desk rises as he enters, bidding him the same cheery good morning as he has every morning since Javert has returned – this time as himself – not seeming to be deterred by the fact that Javert has never returned the greeting. Whatever Cosette had done here has obviously
left quite an impression on his fellow officers, and Javert is not altogether sure he likes it.

“I have some post for you, Inspector,” the sergeant says, shuffling papers on his desk until he finds the packet he is looking for and passing it across with a small smile. Javert glances down at the stack of letters as he takes it – it is nothing, one or two notes from officers making reports on their activities, something scrawled in handwriting so terrible Javert is unable to discern exactly what it is, and –

Javert’s breath comes to a shuddering halt as his eyes fall on a letter in a thick white cover, of far better quality than anything he would usually receive.

_He would not – surely Valjean would not –_

He forces himself to continue to look through the notes with no undue haste, muttering a small word of thanks before finding an unoccupied desk in the recesses of the stationhouse. His hands do not shake as he removes the letter from the pile, he tells himself.

Javert is not sure what to name the thud in his chest as he realises the handwriting is not Valjean’s – surely it should be relief that the man has not exposed himself in this way, put himself so close to danger simply because Javert has not answered his notes, when he had already told Valjean that he would not see him again. Yes – it is only relief after all.

Blinking, Javert realises that he had been so expecting to see Valjean’s neat, almost overly even hand that it has taken him several moments to collect himself. In Montreuil-sur-Mer, hours had sometimes slipped past as he had stared at some note or other from Madeleine, searching for some evidence of his suspicions, some tell-tale sign of the mayor’s origins. It had been futile, of course, for Madeleine was far too careful for that – but this, in its own way, had only convinced Javert even further of his guilt.

The handwriting is not Valjean’s, but it is still a hand that Javert knows well.

*  

The marble hallways of the Prefecture of Police are quieter at this time of the morning than they might otherwise be. Javert’s footfalls echo as he makes his way through them until he finds the door he wants. He knocks and is admitted to the office inside, standing before the vast mahogany desk of the secretary to the prefect of police.

He bows. “Monsieur le Secrétaire.”

Monsieur Chabouillet does not look up at once, but finishes what he is writing and sets his pen aside. “Inspector.”

There is a weariness about him, Javert notes, that he has not observed before. But then, it has been more years than he cares to count since Chabouillet had raised him from the lowly position he had previously held and sent him to the prospering town of Montreuil-sur-Mer to commence his duties as police inspector. Perhaps anyone who knew him then would see much the same weariness in him now.

_Perhaps if not before, then certainly after the last few weeks...._
He puts the thought aside.

“You requested to see me, Monsieur?”

“Indeed I did. I have some questions for you.”

Javert looks down, uneasy. It has been two and a half weeks since they were returned to their proper conditions. Surely, if there had been some problem – if someone had noticed something amiss – Chabouillet would not have taken so long to call him here?

Evidently, Chabouillet is in no hurry to enlighten him. Javert watches as he blots his page, folds it, and lays it aside before looking up.

“I take it I’m correct in assuming that you remember the man Thénardier, who was arrested at the Gorbeau tenements? He escaped from La Force and was sentenced to death in absentia.”

The discomfort sitting in the pit of Javert’s stomach grows even harder to ignore. Of course he does. He could hardly fail to. He has spent, after all, an uncomfortable amount of time with the man’s daughter.

“I remember, Monsieur.”

Chabouillet’s smile is brief. “Of course. I know you were frustrated at how the trial came to nothing in the end, so perhaps this will be cheery news to you: he was arrested in Mantes travelling with a forged passport. Not so great a crime, and he might have simply passed us by, had it not been that one of the officers there was reminded of an escaped prisoner who was said to be travelling with his daughter, and had the idea to search him.”

Chabouillet sits back in his seat slightly, cocking his head to the side, regarding Javert in silence.

“The informant you brought to us, this Vaivre, he has given us several of Thénardier’s aliases which were previously unknown to us. Thénardier was carrying letters signed with some of these names, apparently, and it was this that gave him away. Without your work there, he might have slipped away from us. You are to be commended. As usual.”

Javert lowers his eyes and says nothing, hoping that Chabouillet does not see the way his lip twitches. He wants to contradict his patron – to tell him that this was not his doing at all. It riles him both that Cosette should have used his authority to prance about bringing criminals under police protection, and that he should get the credit for something that was not his work but hers. He cannot explain this, however – Chabouillet would certainly think he had gone mad, and with good reason.

He grimaces, uncertain of what he can say without somehow blurring out the truth of the matter. He can already feel the words rising within him. But, Monsieur, I did not – you will allow me to explain –

“Are you quite all right, Javert?”

“I – yes, Monsieur.”

Chabouillet gives him a doubtful stare, but thankfully decides to let the matter drop.

“He was taken to the city prison, where he remains. Though he insists, of course, that he is not Thénardier, that he has never heard of any Thénardier, and that the girl is not his daughter but a ward he is keeping on a promise to his dying sister.”
Javert says nothing. There are too many echoes of Valjean in this story, and it is too easy to turn his mind back to the night he pursued him through all the crookback lanes of Paris and into the Genrot alley. He coughs.

“Has no one identified him?”

“There is no one in Mantes who can.” Chabouillet leans forward, and now Javert understands why he has been called here. “Would you know Thénardier if you saw him again?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Chabouillet’s lip quirks up in the beginning of a smile. “You know it is with good reason that I trust your instincts on such matters.”

Javert has never squirmed in his life, but he finds himself suppressing the urge to do so now. This cuts too close to the bone – far too close. He knows that Chabouillet is referring to the Champmathieu trial and all that had come after. Javert has still not rid himself of the pride he had known for having been proven correct, despite the fact he is, at this very moment, concealing the man he had once denounced. And he still recalls with mortification that Monsieur Chabouillet had actually apologised to him for disbelieving his denunciation of Madeleine.

It is yet another contradiction that sits uneasily within him. Whenever his thoughts have become disordered in this way, it has always been Valjean who is at the root of it, Javert thinks, swallowing. Whenever doubt has crept into his life, whenever he has found himself in confusion, there has always been Valjean.

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“You will be given something to cover your expenses, of course. There is a diligence that runs to Mantes tonight – you should go and engage your seat at once. You should be able to return no later than tomorrow evening, I should think. There will be no reason for you to be missing from your duties.” Monsieur Chabouillet pauses, and his eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. “Again.”

Javert is sure the hiss of his breath between his teeth must be audible, but Chabouillet’s expression does not change.

“I – no, Monsieur. There should be no need for that.”

The moment stretches out uncomfortably as Javert waits for Chabouillet to dismiss him. He has always been aware of what he owes Monsieur le Secrétaire – Javert suspects that the fact there had been no particular consequences for the letter he had sent to the Prefect was due to his intercession – but never before has he felt quite so uncomfortable in his presence.

“I trust you know how highly I esteem your service,” Chabouillet says at last, as he folds his fingers together. “And that you are aware that you may speak to me should anything ever be amiss.”

Javert’s mouth goes dry as he bows his head and prays to whomever is listening that Chabouillet cannot see the way his pulse ticks at his throat.

“Of course, Monsieur. I know.”

*
Javert has spent the night in less comfortable places than the imperial of a diligence, but not recently, and not since the Seine left him with the cough he has not been able to rid himself of. It is strange how little he notices it now – or had noticed it, until he had woken in Cosette’s form. After that lightness, that youthfulness that he does not remember ever having himself, his own body feels slow and weighted down with a thousand tiny aches and pains.

It reminds him that he is growing old.

The diligence had not been overcrowded and the night pleasantly warm, but Javert had not slept during the journey. Instead, he had thought back over Chabouillet’s words to him before he had left his office, turning them over and over again in his mind, as if that might reveal some deeper meaning. He supposes he has been foolish to think that what had happened could have remained completely undetected, especially to anyone who has known him as long as Monsieur Chabouillet has. If Javert’s behaviour of a few weeks prior had been reported on by anyone even mildly competent, it would surely have raised his curiosity, if not his suspicion.

As Javert walks, his left knee aching, towards the centre of town, he thinks back over what Cosette had written in her note about the woman in the alley – *A life for a life*, she had said, as if such things were possible. The girl had meant well, he supposes. Perhaps she had intended to convey that one day, she might forgive him.

Perhaps. But then, what does it matter? That part of his life is done with now.

Or it will be, soon. He has not given much thought to the idea that he is on his way to condemn Éponine’s father to his fate. Their relationship does not make any difference to the fact that Thénardier is a blackmailer, a housebreaker, a man who would have murdered Jean Valjean in the squalor of the Gorbeau tenements if Javert had not arrived when he did.

Javert almost shakes his head in frustration. It seems to him that Éponine has no remaining tenderness for her father, and yet he remains uneasy. Can he deny that there is at least a thread of self-interest in his actions? Thénardier seems to have dogged Valjean’s footsteps almost as persistently as Javert himself. Is he fearful of what may happen if he remains alive? Is he condemning the man only so he might not reveal that Valjean still lives, and that Javert himself has been concealing him?

This time, Javert does shake his head. No.

At one time, this would have been simple: a criminal would receive his just punishment for his crimes. Drawing in a deep breath, he strives to reach that simplicity once more. There is nothing to be considered. Thénardier is not a man brought low by circumstance. He is not a pitiable unfortunate. He is not another Jean Valjean. Looking up at the still-dark sky, Javert finds himself recalling what he had said to Valjean the day he had gone to demand his dismissal from the police: *It is very easy to be kind. The difficulty lies in being just.*

An enquiry to a man with a cart by the side of the road sends him in the direction of the city prison, just as the dawn fully breaks across the sky. He knocks on the grate and is admitted to the half-lit room beyond.

“You’ve come too late,” the guard informs him when Javert tells him why he is here. “You missed him. He escaped in the night.”

Javert looks up sharply, rendered almost speechless with disbelief. “He what? How has this happened?”
The guard shrugs helplessly. “It wasn’t my shift. They told me when I came in. Perhaps he had something on him and filed the bars. I don’t know.”

Shaking his head, Javert attempts to compose himself, furious over the wasted time, the wasted money – and the fact that, yet again, Thénardier has slipped through their fingers. It is as if the man is made from aether!

“Was he not searched? Good God, do you not know the man is under a death sentence?”

The guard’s lip twists. “Like I said, I wasn’t here. All I know is that he was in his cell one minute, and then next time they went to check on him, he was gone. That’s it. The only one in the cell now is the girl.”


“The one he was travelling with,” the guard says with exaggerated patience. “His niece.” The guard raises an eyebrow lasciviously. “Or so he said.”

Monsieur Chabouillet had mentioned that Thénardier had been recognised only due to the fact that he had been a man travelling with a young girl whom he claimed was his sister’s child, Javert remembers now. He had not thought overly long about it at the time, preoccupied as he had been, but of course – it can only be Azelma. He certainly remembers her – Valjean had once asked him if he knew what had become of her, and so, for his sake, Javert had made some discreet inquiries, but they had all come to nothing. The girl had vanished along with her father.

“So at least one of ’em will get what’s coming,” the guard says to Javert’s silence, perhaps by way of consolation. “She’s wanted as an accomplice, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Javert says, as the guard motions for him to follow.

She will have reached her majority by now, Javert thinks, if he is recalling her age correctly from after her arrest at the Gorbeau tenements. If she is caught and identified, there is no doubt as to what will happen next. The girl is a criminal, after all.

But then, two years ago, he would have said the same of Éponine. He would have said the same of Valjean. God knows Éponine had been nothing more than a scrawny, ragged creature before Valjean had taken her in. But he had tended her until she had become the woman Javert now knows – a woman he never would have suspected of existing beneath the grime of poverty. A woman who can lecture him about how he ought to take more care to be kind to Jean Valjean.

It may not be Azelma. Javert frowns as the guard unlocks the door leading to the cells. He does not know yet – the man may not have been Thénardier at all, but rather some other villain, and the girl some unfortunate waif.

“Here,” the guard says, as they halt outside a cell, gesturing with a flick of his head. “This the one?”

The girl sits in her cell, knees drawn up, her expression sullen, her eyes red-rimmed, as if she has been crying. It is obvious to Javert that she takes less after her father than her mother – that tower of a woman who had planted her feet and thrown a paving stone at his head while her husband had cowered behind her. But the girl’s resemblance to her sister is plain enough, and Javert remembers her face, in any case. The girl in the cell is undoubtedly Azelma Thénardier.

She stares at him, eyes hard, and Javert wonders if she recognises him too. Strangely, he wonders if everything that has occurred over the past two years now shows on his face. If, were she asked, she would say he is the same man who had arrested her in the snowy alley in the shadow of the
The girl is no different from the hundreds of others he has seen over the course of his career. Hardened criminals with no regard for the law whatsoever before they have even turned eighteen. There is nothing special about this one.

She drops her eyes from his finally, looking down at her bony knees. She pulls in a deep breath and squares her shoulders, obviously waiting for what she knows is coming.

“Well?” the guard prompts, tapping the cell bars with his cudgel. The girl glances up, fear at last flitting across her face.

“This is not her.”

The guard cocks his head. “What? Not who?”

“It is not Thénardier’s daughter.” Javert swallows, forcing himself to look the man in the eye. “Azelma is her name, but this isn’t her.”

The guard blows air out through his lips, irritated. “Then who is she?”

Javert does not allow his gaze to waver. He does not allow himself to think. “How should I know? All I can say is that this is not the girl we are looking for.”

“Then what should we do with her?” the guard asks, seeming genuinely dumbfounded.

“What do you usually do with people who have been mistakenly arrested? Set her free. Put her back on the street where you found her,” Javert says, impatience rising within him. Is the man simple?

The guard opens his mouth in seeming protest, but before he can make a sound, Javert narrows his eyes, and his mouth snaps shut again. “Yes, Inspector. But –”

Javert does not wait to hear what he has to say. He turns on his heel and marches back down the corridor. He imagines he can feel the guard’s eyes on his back, but he does not turn – he is not sure he even breathes until he is back on the street, the door of the city prison slamming shut behind him.

The sun is fully up now, and Javert moves to the other side of the street, crossing his arms across his chest to wait. He does not have to wait for long – not fifteen minutes later, Azelma appears, her ragged skirt only just covering her knees, whatever items she had gone into prison with held close to her chest. Javert watches as she warily glances first one way up the street and then the other, before her shoulders sag, her head dropping. Her eyes are still on her feet as she crosses the street at a trot, clearly eager to be as far from the prison as possible, and she does not notice him standing in the shadows until she is almost by his side.

“Azelma Thénardier.”

The girl almost jumps out of her skin at the sound of her name – or, perhaps, simply at the sound of his voice. She turns, eyes wide, her hands clutching at her meagre possessions. For a long moment they simply stare at each other, until her eyes dart away, and Javert can see she is beginning to search for an escape route.

“Do you know who I am?” he asks.

“Yes, of course,” she retorts. “You’re the police.”
Perhaps, then, she does not remember him. There is no reason why she should, he supposes – he must be only one of many policemen she has encountered over the course of her life, and probably not even the only one who has arrested her. Despite her bold face her fingers are trembling slightly, and she bites her lip in the same way Éponine does when she is nervous and trying to hide it.

“‘You know my name then,’” she says. “‘Why’d you say it wasn’t me?’”

Javert ignores the question. “Are you going to meet your father?”

“If I was, would I tell you?” she snaps defiantly, but Javert does not miss the slight hitch in her voice. He continues to stare at her, until she licks her lips, her shoulders sagging slightly. “‘I don’t know where he is,’” she says finally. “‘And that’s the truth. I swear. Last I remember he was saying everything would be all right. And when I woke up this morning, he was gone.’”

Javert finds that this does not surprise him. Had Chabouillet not said that Thénardier had been identified as an older man travelling with a young girl? He does not doubt the man would leave his own daughter in a prison cell if he thought she might hinder his escape.

She is alone, then. Her father has abandoned her, the same way he has seemingly abandoned all his children. The same way countless other fathers did, when their mistresses and their brats became more trouble than they were worth. For a moment, Cosette’s stolen memory – of freezing feet and chilblained hands, dragging a bucket through the winter forest – is bright in his mind. He hardly needs wonder what might have become of her had Valjean not appeared in her life when he did.

“‘Come along, then.’”

He turns without waiting to see whether she will follow. When he does chance a glance over his shoulder he sees to his mild surprise that she is coming with him, like a child who is used to doing what she is told. She has to trot to keep up, but Javert does not slow his pace. He fears that if he stops, if he slows down for even a moment, he will find himself turning back towards the city prison.

If they are lucky, he thinks, if there is a diligence running soon and if there are seats available, they can be back in Paris before sunset.

He has only the slightest idea of what he will do once he gets there. But he knows Éponine has wished to see her younger sister again. He knows Valjean would never turn away any soul in need.

As it happens, they are in luck: the diligence to Paris has been terribly delayed due to a broken axle, and they will not need to wait overly long for it to arrive. Chabouillet had given him only enough money for one seat on the diligence, so he pays for Azelma’s from his own pocket. She does not say a word to him as they wait for the coach but merely looks at him with dark, watchful eyes. Every now and then, he thinks he sees her smirk, and then she drops her eyes, looking away. She does not try to run from him, and when the diligence arrives, she climbs up to the imperial without an argument.

“I’m hungry,” she says, as the coach pulls away with a rough jerk. “I’ve had nothing since yesterday.”

“Didn’t they feed you at the prison?”

“‘Course not. They never do.”

Javert thinks that unlikely, but he does not see that it matters. Reaching into his pocket, he hands her the roll he has wrapped in his handkerchief, which he had intended for his dinner. “Here. Eat.”
She snatches it from him and raises it to her mouth, holding it in both hands like a rat, her eyes, bright and hard, never leaving his face.

“Here, what’s your game, then?” she asks, when she has swallowed the last of it, picking the crumbs from his handkerchief.

He ignores her, unmoving, his arms crossed over his chest. At his silence, a small, cynical smile begins to creep across her lips.

“I know about men like you,” she says, her lip curling. “I reckon I know what you’re after.”

Javert is too tired even to get angry. “Go to sleep, if you’re not going to speak any sense,” he says. “It’s a long journey.”

To his surprise, she stares at him only a moment longer, before slouching over in her seat and pulling her legs up, almost immediately falling into a doze.

It is only now that he is sitting in the diligence with no way of escaping his thoughts that the full enormity of what he has done spreads itself out before him.

It is done – and it is too late now to go back.

But is it?

Javert does not move, his unseeing gaze still directed at the countryside as it moves past. It is not too late. He can still go to the Prefecture; he can still admit what he has done and hand himself over. The girl need not come. He can take her to the Rue Plumet and say he did not see her again after she was released. What is one more lie? He certainly has no intention of revealing Jean Valjean to them, and is this not simply more of the same?

Javert knows it is not, but he pushes the thought aside. There is no telling where it will lead if he allows it. He can feel a fear so deep he can barely fathom it waiting on the edge of his consciousness to swallow him whole, and he cannot yet give in to that; not until after he has done what needs to be done here. He will turn himself in, he will explain his deception in Mantes, and he will be punished. After that, he may do as he wishes.

Javert cannot stop himself from smiling grimly at the thought of what he will say to Monsieur Chabouillet. He has wronged his patron, after all – it seems that his faith in Javert has been misplaced all along. It is one thing to conceal the existence of a man whom everyone but himself has forgotten, a man whose life is replete with good works and mercy. It is quite another to look a man in the eye – a fellow servant of the law! – and lie. It seems he was correct – he has never been far from the gutter, and it is just as easy as he always suspected it would be to slip back into it, even after all these years.

Beside him, Azelma twitches in her sleep, curling in on herself and scratching her hair. The smell of rain is in the air, and Javert can see storm clouds gathering on the horizon, waiting to empty themselves.

The first fat, hard drops of rain spatter against the canopy of the diligence as they approach the city. By the time they reach Paris and disembark it is pouring with rain, and together they stand on a corner, waiting for a vacant fiacre. It will cost him the last of his money, but he knows that if they walk, she will undoubtedly flit away from him like a wisp, and disappear into the abyss of the Paris streets.

By the time a carriage stops, Javert can feel the rain seeping through his coat, chilling his skin. He turns to the girl as the fiacre waits by the road. “Come along.”
But she plants her feet and glares at him, her eyes just as fierce and sharp as her mother’s had been. Now that she is back in Paris, a city she knows well, it seems she is far less willing to follow him. “I ain’t going nowhere with you,” she says. Her eyes run over him speculatively, and Javert can almost see her thoughts: police inspectors do not make much money. They generally pay prostitutes for their services by turning a blind eye. “Not till I see some coin, at least.”

Javert swallows. “I am not going to harm you. Nor will you be made to do... anything you don’t want to do.”

“Heard that before,” she mutters, looking away from him, disgust curling her features.

Javert glances at the fiacre, and can see the driver is becoming impatient. “Hurry up. Or we’ll be left out here in the rain for who knows how long.”

“Coin first,” she repeats, though Javert can see that she too has started to shiver in her thin dress. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere drier than this,” Javert growls, as the fiacre driver twitches his whip. He swallows down his distaste and tries at last: “Your sister is there.”

Her head snaps towards him, her expression plainly incredulous. “My sister?” Then wariness replaces the bright hope in her eyes once more. “What’s her name then, if you know her?”


“My sister is dead.” Azelma’s voice is flat, but it is tinged with the slightest hint of doubt. “My father told me so – he said she went off to the barricades and got herself shot.”

Javert resists the urge to grind his teeth. “That much is true. She was on the barricades. But she still lives, I promise you.” Reaching up, he opens the door of the fiacre. “And on that, I am afraid you will simply have to trust me.”

A sneer spreads across the girl’s face, which, even as it rankles him, Javert must admit he understands. But after a moment or two’s further hesitation, she comes forward, climbing up into the carriage.

“Touch me,” she says as he settles in across from her, “and I’ll scream. I will!”

Javert does not dignify this with a response.

The rain is still heavy when they finally reach the Rue Plumelet. Opening the front gate, Javert realises that he neglected to consider how the house might appear to the girl, with its forbidding gate and overgrown garden. Cosette has insisted on some neatening and pruning, but that does not change the fact that the garden is still almost as wild as it has ever been.

Well. There is nothing Javert can do about that. He will simply have to hope that the girl’s native curiosity and desire to see her sister will be enough. He turns back to encourage her, but sees that she is already pushing through the slightly sagging gate to follow him along the silvery curve of the path to the house. Her eyes are wide as she looks about, blinking the rain from her eyelashes.

He takes a breath before he lifts the iron knocker on the door. All he needs to do is deposit Azelma here with her sister and Cosette, and then he may take himself off to the Prefecture to announce his crime and request his dismissal. He has not considered what reason he will give for his behaviour – what reason could there be? There is nothing he can think of that will explain his actions, except the truth – and that is not an option. He will simply have to lay the matter of his deception out and let
them draw whatever conclusions they will.

He knocks on the door, and waits.
There is something lulling about the rhythm of the needle, the endless loop of up and down, the flash of silver as the lamplight is caught and thrown back.

Éponine’s left hand is still not so confident as she would like. She cannot quite get it to hold the needle in a way that feels natural, and it cramps easily, unused to such things; her right hand struggles to hold the petticoat exactly as she needs it to be.

Still, she is making steady progress, her stitches more precise than once they were. It is a pleasure she had never known in her younger years – to feel the satisfaction of being productive, to undertake work of her own choosing, to know that she is accomplishing something without it being at the expense of another.

The fact that Monsieur Fauchelevent could easily give her money for a new petticoat – would insist on it, if he knew that this one was torn – is all the more reason for her to mend it herself. He has already given her more than she can ever even begin to repay, and the thought of taking further advantage of his generosity turns her stomach.

Not a day has gone by since they were returned to their proper bodies in which Cosette has not worn Monsieur Fauchelevent down a little more – reminding him of his goodness, getting his opinions on business matters, asking him questions about the birds that flitter about the garden. She has, Éponine thinks, paid more attention to her father’s wellbeing than she has to her upcoming wedding, which is looming perilously close.

But then again, the wedding preparations are well in hand – Cosette has a mass of people at her disposal, each of them well aware of their jobs. There is very little that Cosette needs to do at this point.

It is not just that, though. If someone told Cosette tomorrow that her grand wedding had been cancelled, Éponine is almost certain that she wouldn’t care a fig so long as by the end of the day she was married to Marius, with her Papa and Éponine there to share in her happiness. No, Cosette’s attention is elsewhere these days, her eyes alight with a sense of purpose that Éponine has not seen in them before. Their little... misadventure seems to have awoken something within Cosette that cannot be put back to rest quite so easily, a twitchy kind of energy looking for a suitable place to go. It is fortunate, Éponine thinks wryly, that Marius is not the type of man to view such changes with displeasure; quite the opposite, it would seem.

She supposes she can understand, somewhat. As much as her own youth had been spent beneath the thumb of her father and other such men, she had often been free to roam the streets, to do such foolhardy things as go to a barricade and get herself shot, if it so pleased her. Her father’s indifference to her wellbeing had, on rare occasions, proved to be a boon. It had not been a shock to Éponine to find herself walking amongst men as one of them – at least, not nearly as much as she suspects it was for Cosette.

Cosette has filled her in on some of the details over the past weeks – whispered excitedly in the hours after Toussaint has gone to bed and Monsieur Fauchelevent has retired for the evening – and Éponine has to admit she’s impressed. She never would have thought it possible before – Cosette Fauchelevent, a copper! – but it makes an odd kind of sense. She has long known Cosette to be clever, to care about those in need, to have a way of talking others into giving her what she wants. Why wouldn’t she talk some filthy knife-wielding beggar out of harming a helpless woman?
Lightning flickers beyond the window, white light flooding the room for the briefest of moments; the thunder rolls through mere seconds later, and a sudden cool breeze sets a shiver scurrying over her skin. The pitter-patter of rain on leaves swells into a drumming. It’s no kind of weather for anyone to be out in.

Éponine lights another lamp to combat the shadows, and tries to bring her focus back to her mending. They are all back in their rightful bodies now, and there’s no use in wondering about what they could be doing, were things otherwise.

She’d be lying if she said that she did not miss some things about being in Monsieur Fauchelevent’s body, but there is also something to be said for the calm that her life has settled into since they were all returned to themselves. It is good to be herself again, to not have an ever-present unease at the back of her mind – the fear of accidentally bringing her benefactor to harm, or of their situation becoming permanent. The relief she’d felt after waking in her own body again had far outweighed the disappointment, even if she’d enjoyed having Monsieur Fauchelevent’s great strength for a time.

More than anything, though, she misses having the full use of her right hand. It seems cruel, to have been reminded of exactly what she had lost, only to have it snatched away again. She had not made proper use of it while she had the opportunity, had thought that she had several more days before she was forced back into her own broken body. To have had such a chance and then not have made use of it, not fully appreciated it – it had been utter foolishness on her part.

Still, she does not miss the creaking joints, the tight ache of scars across her back, the stolen glimpses of a life not her own. It is selfish, she realises, to bemoan her own state, when she is in fact fortunate beyond all good reason. The dreams of Toulon are fading, for which she is grateful, not so much for her own sake as for the sake of Monsieur Fauchelevent. The man has had so much taken from him, and it pains her to be a participant in this, unwilling as she may be.

She can only hope that he hasn’t remembered too much of her own life – even just thinking about what he might know makes her stomach twist in an embarrassed agony. She thinks that he would probably not say anything, even if he knew all her deepest secrets.

Not that she has had many opportunities to have a proper conversation with the man, anyway. They have spoken about lighter things on many occasions; she has cajoled him into the garden more than once, and now she knows more about nettles than she would have ever thought possible or necessary. A few mornings ago, she had wandered outside only to find that the rocks at the bottom of the garden had been shifted, and Monsieur Fauchelevent had been building up a bed of soil in their place. The sunlight in that particular spot, he had said, was perfect for growing certain vegetables, and he had explained the particulars to her until she’d felt dizzy.

But anything beyond that seems to be an impossibility. She cannot blame him for it entirely; it is almost more awkward now that they are back in their own bodies than it was while they were not. They have quite literally been one another, and how do they pick up where they left off after that?

It is not only that, though. Cosette has been a sunbeam upon Monsieur Fauchelevent’s gloomy disposition these past couple of weeks, and he has brightened accordingly. But there is still something within him that resists all attempts at coaxing forth – that curls inwards, instead of growing towards her.

As much as Éponine feels guilty about it, the part of her that was Monsieur Fauchelevent knows the reason why.

_Javert._
She does not pretend to understand it – thankfully, she had not been privy to too many of Fauchelevent’s actual thoughts, with most memories being restricted to fleeting sensations and snatches of emotion. She cannot recall much about any opinions that the man may have held. But she simply knows that it is Javert who is at the heart of his unease; hell, she would probably know this even if she hadn’t spent several days in his body. Despite his talent for dissembling, he is in some ways painfully obvious in his thoughts, and this is one of them.

While Cosette can sometimes charm a reaction of genuine pleasure out of him, more often than not his smiles are clipped-off things that do not reach his eyes. He spends exactly as much time in the garden or house as needs be – complimenting Toussaint on her cooking, teaching Éponine about plants, discussing plans for the factory with Cosette and Marius – but when he is no longer required, he disappears back to his cottage. A certain sadness has settled over him like a shroud – lighter than that which seemed to hang off him before Cosette had set him to rights, but still present all the same.

Éponine puts her petticoat aside with an annoyed sigh; the stitches are uneven now, and she is annoyed enough at Javert that she is at risk ofstabbing herself with the needle in her anger. The lamplight trembles and gutters, and she crosses to the window, jerking it further closed until only the lightest of breezes eddies about the room. Despite the goosebumps that the cool air coaxest from her skin, she knows that the room will quickly become intolerably stuffy if she closes the window all the way. The house seems to have soaked up the heat of the past few weeks; it will not relinquish it so easily.

Bloody Javert! She would go to his apartment and give him a piece of her mind, if not for the further problems it would inevitably cause. And all this, after he had promised her that he would look out for Monsieur Fauchelevent! Would it be so difficult for him to drop in and say hello – to even just respond to one of Monsieur Fauchelevent’s letters? Cosette’s father is not a greedy man; Éponine thinks he could subsist near-indefinitely on the briefest of contacts from Javert, although she would much prefer he had something far more sustaining. She does not pretend to understand why Monsieur Fauchelevent values Javert’s company so highly, but if that is what it will take to ease the stoop of his shoulders, the crease of his brow, then so be it.

Cosette, surprisingly, seems rather sanguine about it all. Whenever Éponine tries to raise the issue, Cosette merely says that Javert will come around. Éponine knows that poor Cosette has been subjected to more of Javert’s thoughts and memories than any soul could ever deserve, and thus probably has an idea of what she’s talking about, but it is still an inadequate explanation. It has been weeks!

A muted thumping noise startles her from her reverie; it takes her a moment to realise that it is not the tap of tree branches against the windows, but rather someone knocking at the front door.

She casts about the room for a weapon, her breath coming faster. For someone to come calling at this hour, in this weather – no, it cannot be anything good. There are few people in the world who know anything about the inhabitants of this house, or even that it exists in the first place.

The only acceptable explanation would be that Marius has decided to visit because he is suffering from some kind of mysterious malady that can only be cured by proximity to his beloved – it would not be the first time that he had turned up at an entirely inappropriate hour, for no good reason – but he has a particular way of knocking that is easily recognisable, and it is nothing like what she just heard.

The thought occurs to her that maybe her father is alive and has discovered her whereabouts. Surely not, but –

Slow dread builds within the pit of her stomach, and she grabs a poker from beside the empty
fireplace. Making her silent way towards the door, she considers her options as she goes. Toussaint is most likely asleep; Cosette, last she saw her, was in the kitchen. Monsieur Fauchelevent is in his cottage as always, and the rain is so heavy that even if Éponine went to the back door and yelled for him, she doubts he would hear.

The most pressing issue is surely Toussaint, who has become deafer and frailer in even the short years that Éponine has known her. She cannot stand the thought of leaving the old woman in the house unprotected. Perhaps Éponine could send Cosette to fetch her father, while she herself goes to wake Toussaint and sneak her out the back door? It could work.

“Éponine!”

The word is little more than a hiss, but it still makes her jump. Speak of the devil: Cosette is a pale ghost in the half-light, flour smeared across her cheek, rolling pin in hand.

“Cosette! You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry.” Cosette’s voice is a breathless whisper; Éponine strains to hear it over the thunder of her own heart. “So you do not know who it is, either?”

“I –”

The rapping sound echoes through the house once more, clear and strong, but a little more agitated this time. Éponine glances at Cosette, as if she will somehow have the perfect solution at hand; Cosette’s eyes are wide, and her throat works as she swallows hard. It is easy, here in this comfortable house, for Éponine to forget that Cosette knows what it is to be hunted.

Her younger self would have fled by now, or confronted the intruder head-on. But now she has the welfare of others to think of, and she is torn as to what she should do. To fetch Monsieur Fauchelevent; to usher Toussaint to safety; to run for the hills –

“Mademoiselle Fauchelevent!”

Éponine nearly drops her poker in surprise. Beside her, there is a sharp intake of breath.

The voice is familiar, although it takes her a moment to place it. No, it simply cannot be – why would he come here now –

“Mademoiselle Fauchelevent!”

Louder, this time, with the slightest edge of what – if she did not know better – Éponine would call desperation. She looks back to Cosette, only to see her face breaking into a delighted smile. Her friend is mad – no one should ever look so pleased to be in the presence of Inspector Javert, especially when he has been so woefully neglectful of Monsieur Fauchelevent – but Cosette is already making her way towards the front of the house, peering out the window.

“It is the inspector!” she calls out excitedly – needlessly – and she runs to the door, putting her rolling pin aside almost as an afterthought.

Éponine approaches more slowly, poker still in hand. Caution is second nature to her – it is in her blood – and a late-night visit from the police is still not something that she can ever automatically assume is a good thing.

Cosette pulls the door open upon the dark night, to reveal a darker shadow in the doorway. It is still as stone. The rain falls harder, pummelling the ground, and the aroma of wet earth rises to greet
Éponine as she draws near. Despite her wariness, she finds herself thinking of the fragile young plants that she and Monsieur Fauchelevent have been tending; she hopes that they are not being battered about too much by the weather.

Lightning illuminates everything for the briefest of moments; even so, she cannot make out Javert’s face. His hat is low, his collar high, and still he does not move. Éponine tightens her sweaty fingers around the handle of the poker, even as she tries to peer around Cosette to get a better view.

“Inspector! You have come – I knew you would.” Cosette sounds thrilled – as if she had not been wielding a rolling pin like a cudgel in trembling fingers mere seconds ago! “I have been telling Papa that you would! Why, only yesterday I said....”

She trails off. Her voice, when she finds it again, is strange. Uncertain. “Oh, but you have brought – this is –”

Cosette falters once more, and Éponine wishes she could see what has bewildered her friend so. “Oh!” Cosette says suddenly, and her words come quickly now, each tripping over the last in its haste. “But I have been remiss – please, come in out of the rain, you must be freezing –”

Cosette takes a hasty step backwards and fully opens the door. The dark shape remains in the doorway, barely discernible from the night beyond. The three of them stand there, none of them moving so much as a muscle; Éponine has to remind herself to breathe. She does not understand what is going on, does not understand whatever it is that just passed between Cosette and the inspector. Whether something happened between them, or whether Cosette merely recalled something from her memories of Javert, she cannot tell.

It seems as if they may all stand there indefinitely, but then lightning rends the sky once more. It lasts but the blink of an eye, yet it seems to last a lifetime.

Éponine takes in everything before her: Cosette, her hand raised to her mouth, her brow creased in confusion. Javert, stock-still in the doorway, a hat and greatcoat that seem to be wearing a man, rather than the other way around. Azelma, bedraggled and shivering, her eyes round like the moon.

For it is Azelma – even with only the briefest of glimpses, she knows it to be an absolute fact. Azelma even scrawnier than last Éponine saw her; Azelma unkempt, her clothes in sad condition; Azelma two years older and, Éponine thinks dazedly, perhaps now taller than Éponine herself; Azelma alive and so close that Éponine could cross the distance between them with a few steps –

The clang of the poker hitting the floor is quickly followed by the thud of Éponine’s knees following suit. She barely registers the pain; her breath comes in short heaves, her ribs conspiring to crush the very air from her lungs. That would, she thinks, explain why her heart bounces off her ribcage with every beat.

She realises belatedly that her hands cover her face, and that they are wet; she knows that she should peel them away, but she cannot. If she were to look again, then Azelma wouldn’t be there, her seeming presence a mere trick of the weather, and her heart simply could not stand such a thing.

Cosette’s voice is saying something, but she cannot make it out. Her hands are still over her face. Everything is very distant.

“Éponine?”

Cold fingers brush uncertainly over her own – cold like death – and she shudders.

“Éponine. It’s me.” The fingers tug at her hands, pulling them away from her face, and she averts her
eyes, closes them against the apparition that speaks with her sister’s voice. It cannot be true – better not to get her hopes up in the first place, rather than have them dashed upon the rocks –

“Éponine. Will you look at me?” The hands upon her face are cold and wet, but the breath that brushes her cheek is warm. Her head turns; her eyes open; Azelma is there before her, folded on her knees in the hallway, her ragged dress dripping puddles upon the floor.

Éponine’s mouth opens, but all that comes out is a sob. Azelma pulls her close, clinging tight, and Éponine collapses into her, barely able to hold up her own weight.

Could it be that she is not so terrible a sister – could it be that one of her siblings, at least, still lives? Not through any particular ability or accomplishments of Éponine’s own... but still, she could help Azelma now, surely? There is nothing she would not do for her.

Her head spins, and she clutches at her sister, at her hair, her clothes, her face. She is so solid, so real, even here in the darkness – although, she thinks distantly, Cosette must have fetched a lamp, for she can see more clearly now – and yes, it is her, it must be her.

But, oh – a part of her realises that she should thank Javert, apologise to him for the uncharitable things she has thought and said and done. For surely this is an act above and beyond his duty, and who knows how he managed to track Azelma down? For that matter, if Azelma is here, then where is their father?

She wipes her nose unabashedly on her sleeve, and looks up towards the doorway.

“Thank you –” she begins.

The night is empty, but for the rain.
Valjean

Chapter Notes

Note!: Poor Marius' awkward boner aside, this chapter is why it's rated M :)

The candle has almost burned down to a stub.

Jean Valjean squints tiredly at the page before him, the words seeming to dance before his eyes. He is tired, but not yet tired enough for sleep. Thoughts still chase themselves through his mind, and so, he reads. True, he does not take much of it in — if someone were to ask him about his evening’s perusals, he would barely know where to begin — but it matters not. The words occupy his eyes, and the steady tattoo of rain his ears. It is enough, perhaps, to drown out all else.

If he were to allow his eyes to stray away from the pages before him, he would see the empty space that stares at him like an accusation. The mattress had stayed on the floor for two nights before he had risen early one morning and hauled it back onto his bedframe. Things are back to the way they were; it is as if it never happened, except that now his small, cramped cottage somehow feels too large for him. He still finds himself carefully picking his way around the edges of the room when there is no need, avoiding by habit something that is no longer there.

And if there is a carefully rolled length of black ribbon sitting on his bedside table... well, it is simply that he does not wish to dispose of another’s property. He had tried to take it back to Javert’s apartment a few days previously, but in the end, he had turned back at the corner, trying to ignore the vaguely ill feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach. After all, the man most likely would have either been at work or asleep. And he had made it perfectly clear to Valjean that he wished to end their association.

Mercy!

Valjean knows that he and Javert do not always see eye-to-eye — to put it mildly — but in this case, Javert’s thought processes are positively confounding. How could he possibly think that it would be a kindness to remove himself from Valjean’s life, to leave his letters unanswered, to not even send the briefest of words to let him know that he is well? Theirs had been a strange, tentative acquaintance — one that he had dared, at times, to think of as a friendship — and yet, its swift severance has cut him deeper than he could have possibly imagined. Cosette’s gentle reassurances offer him little comfort; indeed, they merely serve to remind him that Javert is gone, dragging his bewilderment to the front of his thoughts time and time again, when he would so happily let it sink into the depths.

No, it has been no mercy at all.

Why it bothers him so much, he cannot even say. He had thought before that perhaps it was merely that Javert was the only person in the world who knew him for who he truly was, the only person with whom he did not have to wear a mask. But now his secrets are out in the open — he feels as if they are written across his skin for all to see, even though only a handful of souls know the truth of it — and yet, it has not eased the strange ache within him. If anything, it has become even worse, and he can think of no way to relieve it other than to see him, to speak with him even briefly, if only to reassure himself that Javert is well.
Still – it is clear that Javert does not desire this. Valjean has made a fool of himself enough times with his letters. He will simply have to content himself with helping Cosette to establish her factory, and hope that it will continue to provide at least some sort of distraction. It still bewilders him to think that she is undertaking such an endeavour, but she has shown no sign of having second thoughts – she can be stubborn as a mule when it suits her. He must admit that the time they spend together is pleasant, even as he knows that it will surely come to an end soon. For the foundations will be laid for her business, and she will be married and move into the house on the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire – oh, she says that she will still spend time with him, that there will be so much for him to do, but she is still flushed with the eagerness of youth. She does not understand the demands that will be placed upon her by all these things she wants, does not understand that the frayed rope holding them together will slowly continue to unravel until it inevitably snaps, casting him adrift for good –

He jumps as a knock sounds at the door, nearly upsetting his candle in his startlement. Who on earth could it be at this hour, in this weather? Surely it must be either Cosette or Éponine, and so he hurries to the door, pulling it open without a second thought.

“Quickly, come in, you must be soaked –”

He finds, quite suddenly, that he is no longer capable of producing words. For the dark figure before him is undoubtedly Javert – recognisable not only from the height, but from how little of him is visible from behind his collar.

Surely he has fallen asleep over his book and is now dreaming! It cannot be. He has thought of little else these past few weeks, has pestered the man with letters to no avail, and now Javert has simply appeared on his doorstep in the middle of a raging storm, as if by magic? No, he cannot believe that this is real.

And yet, the man is here, inscrutable in the gloom. He tips his hat, and water sluices off it.

“Valjean.”

Valjean’s heart stutters for a moment at the sound of his name – for when they parted, he was merely Monsieur Fauchelevent, the alias stinging when it came from Javert in a way that it never had when coming from any other. He shivers – undoubtedly due to the cool breeze that the open door is inviting into the cottage.

He finds his voice somehow, and can but offer a feeble “Javert” in response. He clears his throat, trying again, forcing his mind to remember basic social niceties. “Please, come in. You must be freezing – here, let me take your coat and hat –”

Javert removes the items, handing them to him without a word, and steps into the cottage. Valjean hangs them on the hook, uncaring of the growing puddle that they are already leaving, and takes a moment to compose himself.

When he turns, Javert is looking at him dispassionately. In the flickering light of the candle, Valjean can see that even despite the coat and hat, his clothes have been drenched through. His hair is plastered to his neck; water drips from the end of his nose.

Valjean’s breath hitches as he suddenly recalls the weight of a cold, wet body in his arms; the way in which his whole physical existence had narrowed down to putting one leaden foot in front of the other, to shouldering a limp, unresponsive weight and simply refusing to let go, no matter how his own body protested that he could not hold him up any longer; that he was old, and had already dragged one man back from the brink of death that evening. It is something he tries not to think on very often.
He forces himself back to a state of relative calm. Yes, Javert is pale with cold, but it is simply due to the rain, nothing more. He can see that the man is shivering but trying to hide it, his whole body a long line of tension, and Valjean hurries towards the rarely used fireplace. “I will light a fire – just give me a moment –”

“There is no need.” Valjean turns back, confused, to see Javert staring straight ahead, avoiding his gaze. “I will be gone within a few minutes, and I do not wish for you to waste the firewood.”

“I was about to light it in any case,” Valjean lies as he arranges kindling. He lights the tinder on the candle and coaxes the flames to life. “There.” He turns back to find that Javert’s expression has not changed. “You will stay until you are dry, will you not?” Valjean asks him tentatively; it is a ridiculous question, as the only way Javert’s clothes will dry in any time less than an hour is if he takes them off and hangs them before the fire.

But I have no clothes horse, Valjean tells himself as he feels his cheeks colour slightly, unaccountably, and puts the thought from his mind.

“I will only stay a moment,” Javert says, unmoving, his eyes directed at the slowly kindling fire. “In truth I should not have – I do not know why –” He blinks suddenly, rapidly, before turning his gaze to Valjean’s face at last. “Only it struck me that I should like to see you just once, before...” He laughs, the sound hollow in the close confines of the cottage. “Well, why should I not? It is a small enough thing to ask, is it not?”

Valjean can feel his pulse hammering in his temples as he tries to make sense of Javert’s words; a tidal fear rises within him, and it takes him several long moments to overcome it.

“Javert, it is – of course it is a small thing to visit me. I have – I admit, I have missed your company these last several weeks,” Valjean says, knowing he is speaking too quickly. In fact, he is almost babbling. Silence has always served him well in the past, but now, he is not certain he could remain silent if he tried. “I am not sure why you would think you could not visit me. It would grieve me if –”

“I have found Azelma,” Javert says, cutting off his flow of words. “She is at the house.”

“Azelma is – ?” Valjean’s mouth is running ahead of his thoughts; it takes him a moment to actually process Javert’s words. Azelma is alive? Is here? Was brought here by Javert? It cannot be – and yet, Javert is surely telling the truth. If there is one thing that Valjean can be certain of in the madness that has been his life of late, it is that Javert would not jest about such things, nor lie about them. And what reason could he possibly have for doing so?

He does know that Javert had made some enquiries about Azelma in the past – after all, it had been Valjean himself who had put the idea in his head in the first place. Perhaps this is what Javert has been doing these past few weeks; perhaps he has been unable to answer Valjean’s dispatches because he has been too busy tracking down Éponine’s lost sister.

Even as hopeful thoughts spring up in his head like weeds, each more fanciful than the last, Valjean knows that the truth is a far more prosaic thing. Javert had said that he did not want to see him again... and that is obviously still the case, given his manner. The man is clearly unhappy to be in his presence – he has the air of a caged rat, bound by whatever it is that he is trying to tell Valjean. Once he has managed to get the words out, he will surely turn on his heel and depart once more.

And yet, Valjean cannot help but cherish the smallest glimmer of hope. Javert had come here after all, he had sought him out – perhaps he will not –

He brings his mind back to the issue at hand with some difficulty. “Azelma is here? Is she with
Éponine? How did you find her?”

Javert’s eyes remain fixated on the burgeoning fire; its light casts his face in deep shadows, his expression indecipherable. “She is in the house with Éponine and your daughter, yes. I did not search for her – she well-nigh fell into my lap.” He speaks in a detached manner; he could be discussing the most mundane of matters, rather than something so astounding as the fact that Azelma yet lives and has been reunited with her sister. Despite everything, Valjean spares a moment to thank God for granting Éponine this blessing; as much as the girl has tried to hide it over the past two years, Valjean knows that the absence of her family has hurt her terribly.

Javert is still talking, and Valjean hurriedly picks up the thread of conversation once more. “My superior, Monsieur Chabouillet, informed me that Thénardier and a girl who could be his daughter were apprehended in Mantes. I went to investigate, but Thénardier had escaped, leaving his daughter to take the fall for his crimes.” A hint of venom briefly enters his tone at the name Thénardier, and it is almost reassuring to hear him speak so – for it is preferable to the near-monotone he otherwise affects. “I told the prison guard that the girl they had locked up was not Azelma – a lie, obviously – and they released her. I brought her back to her sister, and now I shall turn myself in.”

Valjean’s thoughts race as he tries to take it all in. Javert lied to the authorities? He is going to turn himself in? To whom? For what purpose?

Even as he thinks it, though, Valjean realises that he knows exactly what Javert intends to do, and why. As much as he seems to have changed over these past two years, Javert is still the same man at his core – one who adheres to rigid ideas of right and wrong, particularly where his own actions are concerned.

Emotions war within him: pride in Javert for having performed such an act of mercy at what was clearly a monumental personal cost, and terror for how he will pay said cost. While it does not seem that Javert is looking for a high place from which to throw himself, it does seem that he is planning on going to his superiors and throwing himself on his sword, which is terrible enough in its own way. Valjean has absolutely no doubt that Javert will do it, and paint himself in the worst possible light while doing so; the fact that he has come to Valjean first is a minor miracle.

And perhaps that is a crack in Javert’s façade through which the light of salvation can shine – the Javert he once knew would never have stopped to make a personal farewell before going to turn himself in. Perhaps there is a part of him that can be reasoned with, now. For surely it would be unreasonable for Javert to throw his life away over having helped a young girl in desperate circumstances?

Ah, if only this blasted rain would stop – it hammers on the roof, muddling his mind, forcing the two of them to stay within the confines of this too-small room, which suddenly seems too close and stuffy with the fire burning bright –

A hoarse, wet cough interrupts his hectic thoughts. Valjean looks up, blinking, to where Javert stands by the door. His wet clothes still cling to him, and surely the rain has done him no good; Valjean reaches out a hand in concern, but Javert turns his head to face him, and the wild look in his eye very clearly says don’t. Valjean lets his arm drop, worry gnawing at him all the same.

The coughing subsides after a minute, and Javert stares into the fire as if it can give him all the answers he seeks. He has moved closer to it, although Valjean does not think he realises that he has done so. The light softens the harsh lines of his face, and Valjean suddenly recalls the nights they have spent in the company of one another, sharing a bottle of wine and a vigorous discussion. What he would give to be able to go back to that! He would never ask for anything more than Javert’s friendship, and there would be none of this clawing terror, none of this nonsense about treating the
rescue of a destitute and frightened girl as some sort of crime –

He realises that Javert is muttering under his breath, too quiet for him to make out. He approaches slowly, carefully, as if approaching a spooked horse. He is not certain that Javert even notices him.

“It is exactly as I have always feared,” Javert says, speaking as if to himself. “Once you have taken one step down that path, it is all too easy to take another.”

Valjean hesitates before leaning forward. He does not know if Javert is seeking a response, but all the same, he cannot help but offer one. “A more compassionate path, Javert?” he says tentatively, seeking Javert’s eyes in the shadows.

At last, Javert turns to look at him sourly. “It might start with compassion, Valjean, but it has its end in Hell.”

The words are like a slap in the face, and Valjean blinks, the breath almost knocked from his chest. “You cannot still truly believe that,” he says after a long moment in which the silence seems to bend the air between them.

Javert makes a slow, weary gesture with his hand. “What does it matter? It is done now. I have done it, and now I must face it.”

He turns away and strides across the room, reaching for the sodden mass of his greatcoat by the doorway. It takes several moments for Valjean to shake his mind loose of the terrified paralysis he has drifted into – to follow him and to reach out, wrapping his fingers around Javert’s arm to stop him just as he reaches the door.

“Javert – Javert, wait –”

“Is this why you dragged me from the water that night?” Javert snarls, turning to face Valjean suddenly, his eyes dark in the candlelight. “So that I should become a liar? So I should betray everything that I ought to uphold?”

Valjean can feel that Javert is trembling. Or perhaps he himself is.

“No,” says Valjean desperately, reaching for his hand, as if that will convince Javert to call off the dogs of his worse nature. “For mercy.”

Javert is stock still in the flickering darkness, pale and wraithlike in his dripping clothes. He is a man who is capable of great stillness, especially when sunk in thought – but now, there is a dark wilderness in his eyes that Valjean has not seen there before. His mouth feels dry as he watches the roll of Javert’s throat as he swallows.

“Javert,” he says, raising his free hand; it hovers uncertainly near Javert’s face, before dropping back to his side. “Do not do this.”

Javert does not respond at first, but then blinks at him as if rising from a fugue. “Do not – Valjean, what –”

“Do not go,” Valjean says, aware of a rising heat in his throat. “Stay. What would turning yourself in accomplish? Whom would it help? What profit would there be?”

Javert does not answer him. He only continues to stare down from his greater height, his warm breath against Valjean’s face. It comes to Valjean slowly how closely they are standing – how tightly he is gripping Javert’s hand and how Javert is leaning back against the closed door, pressed back by
the gentle pressure of Valjean’s body.

“Valjean,” Javert says, and then falters. He wavers as if on a precipice, and Valjean will not let him fall; his hand comes up again almost of its own accord, and this time it brushes against Javert’s jaw, hovering there for the briefest of moments before sliding around to the back of his head. His fingers tighten in the slightest degree; it is barely enough to be noticeable, but Javert responds as if a man compelled, his head following the trajectory that Valjean has unconsciously set it upon, his eyes sliding closed even as their lips meet.

It is but the lightest brush of skin to skin, and yet, it is everything. Valjean is aware of the wet thump of Javert’s coat as it slips to the floor, and then of the hesitant fingers that flutter at his waist. He breaks off the kiss – for that is what it is, he thinks dazedly – and lets their foreheads fall together, his breathing far too loud in his ears. His own eyes have fallen closed at some point, and he finds he cannot open them again just yet. If he does not open them, then perhaps this moment will last forever, his body and soul suddenly, frighteningly awakened to desire after so many long years.

He realises that this has not come from nowhere, that this has been building ever since the barricades’ wake; his heart has been dammed off for so long that it did not even recognise the flood that was building just beyond the gates.

He is but one man. How could he resist such a thing?

His fingers tighten once more around the back of Javert’s head, and he is only vaguely aware of his other hand extricating itself from the intertwine of Javert’s fingers; he mourns the loss of contact, but then his hand is resting against Javert’s side instead, and somehow they are in each other’s arms even as their mouths meet once more. It lasts longer this time, although it is no more skilled than the last. He has never had reason to consider such things; if, when he was young, he had ever wondered what it might be like to draw so close to another, he has long since forgotten it. He has so long considered himself beyond this, beyond any possibility of this.

This time when he pulls back, he withdraws far enough to be able to look at Javert’s face, to take in every detail even as his hands clutch at the man’s body as if he is the only thing keeping him anchored. It is then that a new fear seizes him – he had not meant to do these things – he cannot hope that Javert shares in this sudden revelation. Surely in but a moment Javert will overcome his shock, he will push Valjean away, and he will disappear into the night. Valjean’s stomach roils sickeningly.

“Javert, I am sorry – I did not mean –”

“Valjean. Stop.”

The words – barely more than a low whisper – stop his babbling cold. Javert’s eyes are open now, and Valjean has no choice but to meet them.

He has crossed a line, he realises dimly, somewhere in a corner of his mind that is not blank with fear. He is unsure of what to say, or whether he should speak at all.

“I should not have done that,” he says at last, forcing the words past his lips. “It was – it was not –”

He stumbles to an awkward halt, his face flushed with heat. Javert is silent, and his expression holds a shadow of scorn. Valjean cannot tell what he is thinking, his eyes veiled in the darkness. As he watches, a bead of rain slides from Javert’s jaw and down the line of his throat; it hesitates, trembling, just above the fold of his cravat.

“Was it a mistake?” Javert’s voice when he finally speaks is low and rough, as if his throat is dry.
“Why would you – did you do it only because you thought –”

Javert cuts himself off, his words running aground. And yet somehow, Valjean is able to divine what he meant to say: *Did you do it only because you thought it was what I wanted? That it would stop me leaving here?*

Valjean hesitates, swallowing. He recalls suddenly that Javert had spoken of how once you have taken one step along the road to Hell, it is very easy to take another. He cannot say the words – he does not even know for certain what the words *are*. As he forces himself not to avert his eyes, he finds that he can say this: “I would give myself to you in any way you wish, so long as it were not for the sake of pursuing your own damnation. That is the only thing I ask.” His hands tighten once more, and he realises that he is praying silently, the words running together in his mind, *please, God –*

Javert’s lips are upon his this time, with none of the hesitance of their previous attempts. Valjean barely has time to draw breath before he finds himself pulled crushingly, overwhelmingly close; the smell of the rain and the dirt of the road still clings to Javert, and beneath that, there are the sharp, clean scents of sweat and soap. He loses himself in it, the bliss of the moment briefly silencing even the most persistent of doubts in his mind; his greedy hands touch everything they can, wanting to take more even though they cannot possibly touch any more of Javert than they already are.

This is madness, surely – but if so, then he does not care. And surely it cannot be madness to want this, to lose himself in one who has been so central to his life, the gravitational pull that has lured Valjean into its orbit time and time again? They have always found each other, despite everything – despite the many times that Valjean had wished otherwise – and they are no longer the men they once were. Surely it cannot be wrong – surely –

He breaks for air, unpractised and unskilled in what they are doing, and brings his hands to the sides of Javert’s face. He runs his fingers through the coarse whiskers – more grey than dark now – and marvels at the feel of his skin, the lines worn deep through long years. They are neither of them young anymore, and they both wear their years plainly for anyone to see... but there is no shame in that.

To think that this is the face that tormented his dreams for so long – and now he is caressing it with his thumb, entranced by the slight hitch of breath that results – God works in mysterious ways, indeed, and he cannot question them. Not now.

“Valjean.”

He waits, his throat tight with untaken breaths. Javert’s eyes are searching, as if scouring his soul for any sign of doubt. The weight of the past – of the bagne, of Montreuil-sur-Mer and the barricades and the Seine – bears down on them. The vastness of their history is inescapable, but Valjean can only hope that Javert understands him in this, that he sees him, the way he has always been able to see him. If he withdraws from him now, after this, after everything else, Valjean is not sure what he will do.

“Valjean, I –” Javert begins again, before he blinks, his expression becoming one almost of bewilderment. It is not a face Valjean has ever seen him make before. “I do not know what it is....”

He has no knowledge of how these things are done, what words should be said. But Javert’s stuttering breath is warm against his cheek as he leans forward and kisses Valjean again; perhaps, Valjean thinks, there are no words. Javert’s fingers curl against his lower back, and he shudders.

He is aware of the surge of his veins, the pulse in his throat. It has been years since he felt the swell
of his blood like this; after Toulon, it had seemed unbearable, as if that place had purged him of any desire for such things; and later, it had been impossible to think of for other reasons. If he had ever awoken with the scurf of a dream still clinging to his mind to remind him that he was still a man of flesh and blood, he had lain still until the last of it had receded, beaten back by prayer.

There is no prayer that will stave off the hot rush of his blood now, Valjean realises with a gasp; and in any case, the only prayer he can think of is a simple, repetitive, *Please, God, do not let this be wrong. This cannot be wrong.*

He groans against Javert’s mouth, and is almost surprised when it is answered with a soft, ragged pant. His blood aches within him as he presses forward against the dampness of Javert’s clothes and the heat of his body, his hands dropping to his chest to curl in the stiff fabric of his waistcoat.

“Please,” he whispers suddenly, as Javert lifts his head slightly so his stubble rasps against Valjean’s cheekbone. He hears the liquid sound of Javert’s throat as he swallows, and he clings to him, both of them propped up by the wall at Javert’s back.

Valjean is honestly not sure he could explain himself if Javert asked him what it is he’s pleading for; he can only groan when Javert shifts slightly, his thigh brushing over the desperate heat at his groin. He cannot stop himself from shuddering even at that light touch, his fists tightening, bunching Javert’s wet clothes within them. He arches forward, seeking him, finding him, his hips stuttering.

The hardness at the apex of Javert’s thighs is almost a shock, as is the small sound he makes when Valjean moves against him. He watches as Javert’s head falls back, the pale length of his throat exposed above his cravat, his eyes falling shut.

Valjean leans forward, resting his forehead between his fists, his hips jerking forward in a clumsy, awkward motion. He cannot think; he cannot allow himself to think, or he knows that this will end. Javert’s fingers are tangled in the hair at the nape of his neck, and his feet shift so his thigh rests more firmly between Valjean’s legs.

It is almost nothing, but it is enough – the bolt of pleasure that arcs through him is unbearable in its intensity, and he cries out, his throat raw. The sudden rush consumes him, and he sinks into it willingly, overwhelmed.

“Valjean, by God, *Valjean*....” Javert’s voice is hoarse, and sounds as if it is coming to him from very far away. He can feel Javert’s fingers scrabbling against his back and the sudden, frantic cant upwards of his hips, but he feels as if everything around him has slipped away, obscured by the fog that mists his vision and makes his head slow.

He does not know how much time has passed before he realises that they have sunk to the floor, that he is kneeling over Javert’s supine form, bracing himself with his palm against the door. Javert’s eyes are closed, his head turned to the side, and Valjean can see the pulse ticking in this throat, pressing against his collar with every beat. He does not know what to say, what there could possibly be to say. His blood feels sluggish in his veins, his heart hammering in his chest. Without thinking, Valjean reaches down to brush away the sweat-dampened hair from Javert’s forehead, his fingersgrazing lightly against his warm skin.

Javert’s eyes jerk open, his head turning as he stares up at Valjean, blinking as if he is waking from a dream. Valjean freezes; for a long moment they remain where they are, and then Javert scrabbles to sit up, sliding his legs up from between Valjean’s thighs, pushing himself back into the corner.

“Valjean – I am sorry – it was not my intent when I came here to –”

Despite the sickening clench in his stomach, Valjean is seized by the strange, disturbing compulsion
to laugh. “Javert, I know it was not. I did not imagine for a moment that it was.”

Javert’s tongue darts out, his eyes travelling slowly between Valjean’s eyes and his lips. It is strange, to see him so hesitant – what had once been the towering embodiment of the law is now merely a man, dishevelled and slightly bewildered. Even when he had been inhabiting the body of Cosette, Valjean had still been able to see Javert in the way he had held himself; in the way he had spoken and the expression in his eyes. It had been a shock to see it: Cosette has always been so sweet a child, and Javert so fearsome a man, that he would not have thought it possible. It seems incredible to him that anyone who had looked upon them all during that time would not have known immediately of the change that had taken place within them. But perhaps, he thinks, it is simply that he knows them so well. The strange affliction had forced a greater level of intimacy upon them all. He still shudders when he thinks of what Éponine might have seen in the darkness of his memories, and the manner in which Cosette learned of her mother. He had held onto his secrets for so long that he could not recognise himself without them. The strangeness had forced things to the surface that ought to have lain buried, forgotten.

But it also shone the light of truth, Valjean is forced to admit, though his stomach turns over at the thought. He might have remained in his darkness forever, had Magnon never woven her spell. Might he have found himself here, had it never happened?

Javert clears his throat; when he speaks, the words are uncertain. “When you said that – when I –” He closes his eyes momentarily, as if he is waging some kind of internal battle. The subject of his worry is plain as day, however, and Valjean does not wish to let him suffer.

“If you are asking whether I – did what I did only to keep you from leaving, Javert, I promise you, I did not.”

Javert appears unconvinced. “I do not underestimate your capacity for self-sacrifice, Valjean,” he says, looking as if the words taste sour on his tongue. “Two years ago it was the Seine. Today it is....”

Valjean represses the urge to sigh. Perhaps the strangest thing about all of this is how they are already falling back into their old patterns of argument. “Javert. I would not. You know I would not.” He can feel his face burning, and he holds Javert’s gaze only with difficulty.

Javert eyes him assessingly, his policeman’s stare taking everything in. Once, Valjean had feared that gaze; now, he has no reason to hide from it. Let the man see him for what he is, all of him, and judge him accordingly.

“Then you have not – before this –”

Valjean cannot bring himself to answer. Despite what has just passed, what he has just said, it is still difficult to speak of such things in blunt terms. He settles for a quick shake of the head, averting his eyes for a moment before forcing himself to look back up again, only to see that Javert is averting his eyes. Understanding dawns within him all of a sudden – and really, he should not be surprised. Their lives have been entangled for so long, and they are not men to seek out the company of others; who else would Javert have ever turned to?

The silence begins to grow awkward, and so he tries to fill it.

“Stay. Please.”

Javert does look at him now, inscrutable in the dimming flickers of firelight. Valjean ploughs on before he can speak. “At least for tonight. It is still raining, and your clothes are wet – I would not
forgive myself if you fell ill. Stay, and make your decisions in the morning, once you have slept and eaten.”

Javert moves to his feet, slowly, carefully, and Valjean holds his breath. For one long moment, they simply look at each other; then Javert reaches out a hand, and Valjean takes it gratefully, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet.

His whole body is loose with exhaustion, but it is good – mostly – and he thinks that he would just like to collapse into bed. Surely at some point he will suddenly and fully comprehend everything that has happened this evening, but for now, he simply wishes to sleep.

The question of bedding suddenly presents itself, and he moves to pull his blanket back, to remove the top mattress and drag it back to its place upon the floor. He hesitates, his hands hovering above the bed – no, it is far too much to ask Javert if he would like to share his bed. The very idea seems too forward, even though they have just done far, far more than merely sleep together –

He glances up and catches Javert’s eye. A moment of understanding seems to pass between them, and Valjean sags a little in relief; they shall sleep together, then.

There is a hand at the side of his neck, fingertips resting lightly against the skin of his throat, and he shivers.

“May I?” Javert asks, and Valjean nods. Sure fingers slip through his cravat, unknotting it and pulling it away from his neck before folding it neatly and placing it on the table.

His waistcoat follows, and his shirt after; he returns the favour for Javert, draping his still-damp clothes near the dying fire. He feels that he should be more excited at the prospect, his nerves singing at this slow shedding of cloth, but he is tired – tired and relieved and pleased and still confused, somehow – and so it is merely with a quiet enjoyment that he allows Javert to remove his clothes, and vice versa. If he is fortunate, there will be more opportunities in the future to do this properly, to learn and be learned in turn.

He removes his own trousers with a small amount of embarrassment – not only for the act itself, but for the condition his clothes are in. To be in such a state, at his age – !

But he is not alone in this, and so he can cope with it. He allows himself one quick glance at Javert – a promise of things to come, God willing – and blows out the candle before either of them can lose their nerve. He climbs into the bed, and barely dares breathe as the mattress sags beside him. The bed is small, and Javert fits himself in close to Valjean without uttering a word.

The darkness makes Valjean brave, and so he wraps one arm lightly around the other man. Javert’s skin is warm in some places and cool in others, and so Valjean presses himself closer against those places most in need of warmth.

He has never lain so with another. It is terrifying, and exquisite.

The fire sinks lower, the rain falls in a steady patter; despite everything, he finds himself lulled towards sleep. Anything that happens tomorrow can be dealt with, so long as Javert is still here when he wakes.
Théodule

Whilst he cannot with honesty say he is ready to enter the married state himself, Théodule has to admit that he does indeed enjoy a good wedding. Weddings, after all, put matrons in mind of their youths and maidens in mind of their futures – and everyone present in mind of *amour*.

And there is one maiden, of course, who has drawn the attention of everyone in the room, Théodule thinks as his fingers twirl at his moustache. The new Madame la Baronne de Pontmercy is luminous in her white lace, the celestial body around which all others here merely rotate.

Théodule sighs. He must confess to a pang of regret that the chance to taste of that particular forbidden fruit has now quite passed him by, although said regret is overshadowed by a reluctant appreciation that his cousin has in fact pulled off the feat of marrying such an enchanting creature. If he were in a less charitable mood, he might admit to a certain astonishment that the wedding had ever come to pass at all – but who could be uncharitable on such a day?

Of course, their entire situation is... unusual, on a number of levels. The afternoon spent at the café with Marius feels like some sort of fever dream, the half-remembered, delirious ramblings of one who has surely taken one too many blows to the head. He cannot be sure that it even occurred; his only link to the whole nightmarish episode is Marius, and he has only seen the man a handful of times in the interim. His cousin has spent the past few weeks flittering about like some sort of dithering butterfly, barely bothering to alight in one place before taking off again.

Théodule suspects that at least some of this has been a deliberate attempt to keep him from bombarding Marius with awkward questions. Questions such as *How did this ever come to occur in the first place?* and *Are you in fact certain you are marrying your darling Cosette, and not a policeman wearing her face?* and, recalling how Marius’ eyes had been aglow in the café, *Would you even care if you were?*

Still, the whole strange affair has thrown him somewhat off-kilter of late. Even now, he wonders as to whether everything has been satisfactorily resolved. He finds himself scrutinising the face of the bride, seeking any hint that she is not in fact some grizzled old police inspector – the man would not be able to look at Marius with such adoration, surely! Certainly such radiance could not be affected!

And yet....

And yet, if someone had come to him two months ago to suggest that anything of what had apparently happened in the Fauchelevent household was possible, he would have, in good conscience, pronounced them insane. In light of this, can he really be so sure?

Perhaps he will simply have to spend some more time in the company of Marius’ lovely new wife – for the purposes of friendly interrogation, naturally. If he should happen to find out just how revealing her lace bodice is in the process, well, that cannot be helped.

It is with these thoughts in mind that he marches up to the happy couple. Cosette is in the midst of an animated conversation with some friend of hers he does not recognise, and so he sets his sights on Marius instead, snagging him by the sleeve and pulling him into a relatively quiet corner. Marius does not quite stumble over his own feet along the way, but it is a close thing, glued as his gaze is upon his wife. His eyes are aflame with the kind of longing that can only be kindled by years of deprivation, and for a moment, Théodule almost feels some sort of sympathy for him.

On the other hand, it is entirely his own idiotic fault for putting himself in this position in the first
He claps his cousin on the shoulder, and Marius startles only slightly. “I say, Marius! How does it feel to have relinquished your freedom?”

“How?” Marius is decidedly distracted; Théodule suspects that he could say whatever he feels like right now and it would not matter one bit, although he is loath to put his theory to the test. You seem to be coping remarkably well with the fact that another man has been inside your wife is exactly the kind of thing he should not say, lest he be booted from the wedding before he has had time to get even a bit sozzled – so instead, he settles for leaning in conspiratorially, raising his eyebrow ever so slightly as he does so.

“So, cousin – did things... arrange themselves to your liking?” he asks in a low whisper. The phrasing pleases him. Marius can interpret his words any way he chooses, and Théodule can always plead ignorance if he should become upset.

Colour rises in Marius’ cheeks as he blinks, a mystified expression crossing his face. “Why – yes, Théodule. Of course they did. I am as happy as I’ve ever been.”

Well, this tells him nothing. Théodule watches his cousin’s face carefully, but it is suffused only with a kind of delirious joyousness that is utterly impenetrable. Clearly, he will have to be more specific.

“I mean, in the matter we spoke of in the café,” Théodule murmurs, leaning in even further. “Have things... returned to their normal state of affairs?”

For a moment, Marius stares at him – as if, Théodule thinks not without some slight resentment, he is the crazy one – before his mouth opens, then closes again. It does this once or twice more without producing speech, before he finally manages to utter the words, “Oh – yes – that – I assure you, cousin, that Cosette is... herself again. I am certain of it.”

“Well, by Jove, how on earth did it all come about?” Théodule enquires. He finds a genuine curiosity rising within him – why, he is not sure, since it would be better if he put the entire sordid episode from his mind and forgot it entirely! Knowing how it happened will give him entirely too much to ruminate on.

“You would not believe me if I told you,” Marius says with a slight shake of his head, a feeble tremble running through him.

Théodule is all too ready to believe that. Still, he is not quite willing to give up this line of inquiry just yet.

“But did you not say that your venerable father-in-law had also been struck by this mysterious condition?” he asks, leaning over slightly to peer around Marius’ shoulder to where the bridal party is seated. Cosette’s father sits by her side, grave, quiet, his arm in a sling – the result of some unfortunate accident, apparently – his eyes downcast as Cosette chatters charmingly to her friend. Marius had never told him who Monsieur Fauchelevent’s temporary inhabitant was. Could it be they have not vacated his form after all?

Marius glances quickly over his shoulder, his eyes wide. “Théodule, I promise you – all is as it should be. Cosette has returned to her own body, and Monsieur Fauchelevent likewise,” he whispers beseechingly, grasping at the braid of Théodule’s uniform sleeve. “Please, forget I ever spoke of such things.”

Théodule frowns, continuing to look past Marius as Monsieur Fauchelevent leans over to pat Cosette
on her delicate hand, before excusing himself and standing to leave the table, his brilliantly white hair shining in the candlelight. He slips away without a further word to anyone, sliding through the gently milling crowd and disappearing like a ghost to parts unknown. No one else seems to note his departure at all – they are all far too busy with their own conversations to pay much attention to anything else.

Théodule purses his lips. He would have liked to examine the old man at greater length – but then again, he is barely acquainted with him. Perhaps further study would not have yielded conclusive results.

But in any case – in but the flashing of an instant, he finds both his eyes and his mind are quite somewhere else indeed. For Cosette’s companion has turned so that Théodule can see her face, and ah, she is quite a lovely creature indeed, her dark hair glinting in the overabundance of candlelight, the pleasant swell of her bosom heaving ever so slightly within the confines of its bodice. Her jaw has a stubborn set to it – clearly she is no delicate flower! – but that is all the better, Théodule thinks. After all, where is the thrill of the chase if the quarry simply hands itself over?

At present, Cosette is engaged in plucking a deep red rose from one of the glass bowls on the table and laughingly tucking it behind her friend’s ear, which only serves to set off her dark eyes all the better. Marius is speaking, but Théodule must admit that he is not taking in a single word of what his cousin says. He can only stare, enraptured, as the girl leans down to kiss the bride on her glowing pink cheek, before she stands, turning – though not, Théodule notes, before she runs a coolly assessing gaze over his person with an air of faint amusement.

Théodule is enchanted. And more than that, he is intrigued.

It comes to him suddenly that Marius is still speaking.

“... please, Théodule, you must promise you will not breathe a word of that... that incident to a soul. I swear to you that all is as it should be. There is no need to think of it again. Ever.” Marius swallows. “In any context.”

“Yes, cousin, indeed. Quite,” Théodule finds it in himself to murmur, as his eyes follow the mysterious mademoiselle as she moves through the room to take her seat at a table not far from the bridal party. Beside her sits another young girl with whom Théodule is not acquainted, who is at present using a fork to shovel the food from her plate and into her mouth as quickly as humanly possible. It is not a particularly ladylike display, but the girl with the rose in her hair seems unperturbed – as Théodule watches, she takes up a small lace handkerchief and dabs it against the other girl’s face, cleaning away some morsel of food that has stuck there.

It speaks to a generous heart, Théodule thinks. How he longs to find out just how generous!

“Théodule? Théodule, are you listening to me?”

With effort, Théodule turns his attention back to his cousin, who is staring at him with something close to panic in his wide dark eyes.

“Of course, Marius! Every word. I quite understand the situation. Please, let your mind rest easy. The secrets of your heart are safe with me.”

Marius stares at him a moment longer, opens his mouth as if he intends to argue, but then apparently thinks better of it and closes it again.

“Thank you, Théodule. Sincerely.”
Marius beats a hasty retreat, hurrying, as always, back to Cosette. He looks at her as the parched man looks upon an oasis; it must be killing him to know that he cannot drink from that particular spring for many hours yet! That his cannon must remain unfired until the wedding feast is over! That his stallion must remain in its stable until the last of the guests have finally been seen off!

At least now Théodule is free to direct his full attention towards Cosette’s exquisite friend. She seems like the type to have a sharp tongue – which, quite frankly, is all part of the appeal. If she would turn that tongue towards him, then that would be delightful.

He turns back in the direction of her table, already starting to stride towards it – and then he stops in his tracks. The rose-bedecked beauty is gone, although her uncouth young friend is still there, eating two different desserts at once. A quick sweep of the room indicates that she is no longer present, although a door that leads out into the main hallway is just swinging shut.

Oh-ho! Perhaps she plans to lead him on a merry chase, to lure him somewhere secluded? Well, he is getting bored here, anyway. Maybe it is time to conduct a little reconnaissance.

He departs the room and strolls the hallway nonchalantly, trying to decide where to look.

If I were an enchanting damsel, where would I go?

Not that such thoughts are much help – after all, even if he could somehow intuit the girl’s plans, she presumably does not know her way about the house. And besides which, the thought once again puts the idea into his head of Marius’ strange tale – and God knows he has spent enough sleepless nights pondering the possibilities implicit in that!

He peers into a few rooms, nodding his greetings to a couple of lovely lasses along the way. Normally they would turn his head, but tonight he is intrigued by this mystery woman. Many of the guests he recognises on sight as acquaintances of his great-uncle or aunt, but Cosette’s friend is an unknown quantity.

But, ah! He is at the library, and surely this must be the place she has chosen for their assignation. For who but those struck by Cupid’s arrow would retreat to a library when there is wedding cheer to be had?

He steps inside, his boots sinking into the plush rug, and opens his mouth to call out – when a noise stops him cold.

It is a noise he recognises very well. It is, in fact, the sound of two people kissing – and ah, there is a breathy moan as well.

Could it be – ?

Is she here with someone else? Could he have misread her signals so badly – could that look of mild amusement have been actual contempt, rather than just a charming facsimile?

Or is it simply some other young lovers, taken by the same mood as he, who have also realised that the library is the perfect place for adventurism?

Théodule admits to himself that he finds the idea somewhat stimulating. Surely whatever lovebirds have made their nest here amongst the books would not mind if he gave them his silent blessing – or took steps to ascertain that his quarry has led him on a merry chase, only to be felled by some other hunter. In that case, Théodule can only doff his hat to the lucky man who has gained her favour. He cannot begrudge a man who has bested him in love. It would be quite churlish.
It is with this supreme benevolence in mind that he approaches the shelves, soundless as a cat as he crosses the rug; truly Aphrodite must smile upon his endeavours, for the floorboards beneath him do not creak.

His heart beats a brisk tattoo in his chest, the anticipation almost overwhelming him. What will he see there? Will his enigmatic lady love grind his hopes and dreams under her delicate heel? Will he instead intrude upon some scullery maid, ducking away from her duties in order to better acquaint herself with the son of some wealthy industrialist? It is all terribly thrilling!

He peers around the corner, and...

Ah.

Well. He had not predicted that.

For leaning precariously against the shelves is Marius’ new father-in-law, and leaning against him is that towering brute of a policeman from the café – the one who, for some undefined amount of time, had become the borrowed form of the sweet bride whose wedding party Théodule has unceremoniously crept away from.

Can it be...?

No, surely he must be mistaken. Or else he has misunderstood the nature of their meeting, and his ears had simply been leading him astray before.

He chances another quick glance.

Ah. No.

He averts his eyes, feeling like he has intruded upon something he should not see. He feels almost as strange as the time he had followed Marius in order to espy him meeting with some comely lass, only to find the man face down weeping on his father’s grave instead. That had not been a pleasant adventure. Why is it that such things always seem to happen to him?

He knows he should really make his way from the room and try to forget all about it, perhaps return to his pursuit of Cosette’s mysterious friend instead... although he finds his heart is not quite so in it as it was before.

Théodule blinks, attempting to bring his thoughts into some semblance of order. For the most part, they are merely along the lines of perhaps Marius was not quite so far off the mark as I thought, and so that besotted creature is the much-ballyhooed Inspector Javert, devourer of men? and good heavens, Marius, if you absolutely had to set your cap for one of the two older gentlemen of your acquaintance, why on God’s green earth did you choose that one?

It occurs to him all of a sudden that if Monsieur Fauchelevent had been afflicted by the same malady as Cosette and the inspector, then he could be somebody else. Could he be the inspector’s lady love, trapped tragically within the body of another? The whole situation makes his head hurt – but no, Marius had said that it was resolved, and there is presumably no reason to doubt him.

It also occurs to him that he should ask Marius as to whether he is aware of the nature of his father-in-law’s acquaintance with the inspector... although given that his cousin’s eyes have not popped entirely from his head and he has actually been seen to have emerged from his rooms over the past month, Théodule will have to assume for the moment he is not.

Silence falls once more, and Théodule chances another look.
Monsieur Fauchelevent’s hand does not seem nearly so injured as he claimed earlier in the day. A remarkable recovery, truly.

Théodule gulps, the sound seeming so loud in his ears that he is certain it has given him away, and any moment now the faces of the two men will show themselves around the corner of the bookshelf, and all will be lost....

His heart shuddering in his chest, Théodule awaits his fate – but nothing happens. The only thing that intrudes on the silence in the library is the sound of a soft, low whisper.

“The road to hell is not quite so terrible, it would seem. But I suppose that is the point.”

The inspector’s voice seems to echo loudly, despite being little more than a murmur. He does not sound as Théodule remembers him sounding on that day in the café, which is hardly a surprise – really, Théodule would hope that he would not sound like a lovestruck young lady trapped in the body of a rather intoxicated old man – but he does not sound quite like the stern, severe Inspector Javert of Marius’ poorly concealed reveries, either.

“Javert, please. Will you not make light?”

Théodule licks his lips, glancing towards the door. It is one thing to accidentally catch sight of a moment of amorousness, but it is quite another to listen in on a private conversation. Now, if only he can make as silent an exit as an entrance....

“You should return, at any rate. Your daughter will be missing you.”

Monsieur Fauchelevent stammers out some sort of protest, but the inspector shushes him, his voice low. “I know that you wish to remain here at least as much to avoid the wedding party as to enjoy the dubious pleasure of my company. Well, I will not have it! You will go out there and share in your daughter’s joy – you will tell her that her happiness is your happiness – you will see that she loves you still!”

“I wish you would come back with me,” Fauchelevent says, as Théodule creeps away, praying to whatever gods will heed him that the floorboards do not creak. “I know Cosette invited you. You would be welcome.”

“It is not my place. What on earth do I have to say to such people? It would not be appropriate. You have raised your daughter to a lady, and she keeps company as such. You made me promise to look in, and now I have looked in. That is enough.”

“Javert, I wish you would –”

Théodule takes the sudden, sharp inhalation of breath and the sound of lips upon lips as his cue to make once and for all to the door. He pushes it open soundlessly and is, finally, blessedly, in the hallway beyond. Liberty at last!

Heaving in breath, he leans weakly against the wall, his knees trembling. He feels as if he has aged fifty years in the last five minutes.

He almost jumps out of his skin at the sound of the sharp voice to his left.

“What are you doing here, Monsieur?”

Théodule blinks, wondering if he is seeing things. But no – the beauty of earlier has returned, her dark eyes narrowed, her lips set in a most forbidding frown. He cannot say that her voice is sweet –
in fact, it contains a distinct rasp – but somehow, this only adds to her allure. She is as divine as ever, but just at this moment, Théodule must admit, she does not look at all pleased to see him here.

How to explain himself? He has been thrown quite into perplexity by what he has seen – by what he knows is happening just beyond the doorway behind him. Quickly! He must recover his gallantry, lest this lovely creature suspect him of being some kind of tongue-tied oaf.

But in the end, she saves him the trouble. “You’re Monsieur Marius’ cousin,” she says, her frown deepening slightly, as if she finds the idea somewhat disagreeable.

“Well, I see you know me, but I am as yet unacquainted with you,” Théodule says, with all the chivalry he can muster. He feels quite ensnared – the hunter become the hunted! What on earth is wrong with him? “May I have the pleasure of your name, Mademoiselle?”

She stares at him, mouth twitching a little at the corner. “Fauchelevent. Éponine Fauchelevent.”

Théodule sweeps into a low bow, hoping that it disguises his surprise. Just how many Fauchelevent beauties can there be? Where is the old man getting them all?

“Would I be right in assuming you are some relation to the bride?”

“Her... cousin,” Mademoiselle Fauchelevent says. When he rises from his bow, he finds she is still looking at him coolly – almost as if she is measuring him up. “Monsieur Fauchelevent took me and my younger sister in when we were in need. I am most indebted to him. I owe him everything. My happiness. My life.”

“Indeed!” ejaculates Théodule what is perhaps slightly too loudly. Without meaning to, he throws a glance over his shoulder towards the door of the library. Is he still in there? And doing what?

When he turns back, he finds that Mademoiselle Fauchelevent has followed his gaze. She turns her eyes upon him, and Théodule is most intrigued to see how they glitter in the low light of the hallway.

“He has been my protector when I have had no one else,” the girl says, taking a step towards him and leaning in gently, her lips curling slightly.

Théodule, unable to help himself, leans in to her too. He is but a moth to her flame! The perfume from the rose in her hair seems to cloud his senses with its sweet, almost cloying scent. Enchantress!

“There is very little I would not do for him,” she breathes when their faces hover close together. “For instance, if anyone – anyone – were to threaten his happiness... why, I would have to –”

Théodule blanches as she names both a body part and what she would do to it, covering up the slight yelp he produces with what he hopes is a convincing cough.

When he raises his eyes again, Mademoiselle Fauchelevent is staring at him, expression flat, eyes narrowed.

By Jove! She has the face of an angel and the mouth of a sailor. Théodule feels as if he is a fatted calf, struck upside the head and ready for the slaughter.

“I quite understand, Mademoiselle,” he manages to murmur after several seconds of silence have ticked by.

“I am sure you do.” She casts him one last, long look, before turning and making her way back.
towards the festivities in the hall.

For a long moment, all Théodule can do is remain glued in place, his heart in his throat, his eyes fixed on the door the beauty has just disappeared through. At last, clearing his throat, he forces himself away from the wall, tugging at the jacket of his uniform, and doing his best to ignore the tightness in his pants.

“I say,” he mutters to himself, for once in his life utterly unsure as to what direction to take. He feels quite flummoxed. What a strange and mysterious evening this has been! To think that he is less likely than both his cousin and that alarming Inspector Javert to feel love’s soft sweet embrace this night!

Swallowing and feeling the tug of duty within him, he starts back towards the reception, when he is arrested by the sound of feminine laughter drifting from somewhere further along the hall.

*Oh-ho!* he thinks, turning on his heel, unable to resist the allure of that dulcet siren’s song. Perhaps the evening can yet be salvaged.
Javert

Chapter Notes

Maybe kind of bumping up against the upper limits of that M rating here? Only a bit though.

“Oh! Why, Inspector Javert – it is you.”

Javert halts, his hand still resting on the handle of the servants’ entrance. He hopes that Cosette – that Madame Pontmercy – cannot see the way he grits his teeth before he turns to face her.

“Madame.” He inclines his head slightly as she approaches, swathed in white lace, orange blossom woven through the dark chestnut curls of her hair. She beams at him radiantly, but with her head cocked to one side, as if she is confused.

“Why, Inspector, I thought you had not come. You didn’t respond to your invitation, after all – I thought perhaps it had gone astray, though I sent you more than one. When Éponine told me she had just seen you slip into the kitchen, I thought she must have been mistaken – but here you are! Of course, I am certain you were just about to come and congratulate me, were you not?” She smiles at him sweetly, her face practically glowing with happiness.

Javert sets his jaw and decides to be gracious. “Of course, Madame.”

“Well, good.” She walks towards him and holds out her arm, looking up at him from behind her flowers. “I must confess, however, that the hall is a little stifling. Perhaps the cool evening air will clear my head. Will you walk with me a while?”

Javert swallows. He has never been invited to take any woman’s arm before – and certainly not one of Madame Pontmercy’s station. And most certainly not after what has just passed in the library between himself and the woman’s father.

Sucking in a quick breath, Javert puts that particular thought from his mind before it can progress any further. It is not possible to consider such things. Not if he wants to leave this place with his sanity intact. Composing himself, he takes the girl’s arm and opens the door.

Cosette is right – the night air is certainly refreshing after the heat of the house. Javert finds he is grateful for the way it cools the flush that has crept up his collar at the sudden memory of the library. If he had known he was going to run into the girl, he would have taken more care and not allowed himself to become so – so entangled. It had not been in the slightest bit seemly, but it cannot be helped now. Perhaps Madame Pontmercy finding him before he had a chance to make his departure will remind him to be more... prudent in future.

Not, Javert thinks as he looks out at the darkening sky, that he has ever been prudent when it comes to Jean Valjean.

“I have wanted to speak with you for some time now,” Cosette says softly as they make their way out into the garden. The sun has only just finished setting, and the well-tended plants are bathed in the greyness of twilight. With its clipped box hedges, winding paths and delicate climbing roses, it is
Javert does not answer her. He is certain she has already discerned he has been avoiding her. Perhaps
she does not know why, but the girl is not a fool. She will have guessed at least half the reason, if not
the whole.

“I do not believe I ever had a chance to fully explain some of what went on whilst we were... well.
You know of what I speak, I am sure.” She glances up at him. “Or to apologise for some of my
actions. I admit, I forgot how very much I owed you in those moments. Were it not for you – and for
Papa, of course – I would have been a widow before I even married.”

There is a sour taste on Javert’s tongue as he tries to find a way to respond. “The one does not cancel
out the other, Madame;” he finally says, bile rising in his throat. Surely, he thinks, even Cosette’s
seemingly boundless well of mercy must run dry at some stage. She cannot have forgiven his actions
towards her mother. Nor should she.

“Perhaps not,” she says after a moment, her fingers tightening slightly on his arm. “But perhaps it
does not need to.”

Javert swallows down his instinctive desire to protest her words. Has she become so wise, while he
has learned nothing at all?

They walk together in silence, passing beneath an arch of climbing roses. Javert does not know what
to say – what it is she would have him say. It does not feel right to offer his apologies. There are
some things that are beyond the reach of mere words.

“And you know, I think I have become quite accustomed to having you in my life, Inspector;”
Cosette says, at last breaking the silence. “I have so few friends, after all. It would be remiss of me to
lose even one of them.” She glances up at him, and there is a certain mischief in her eyes. “And even
if I had more friends than I could count, I dare say that few people have known each other as we
have. Wouldn’t you say, Inspector?”

Javert keeps his gaze resolutely on the garden ahead of them. What is he to say to this? He suspects
that he never saw as much of her memories as she apparently did of his – enough to know what had
become of her mother, certainly, and perhaps a hint of other things he does not allow himself to think
of too closely. All he ever saw of her life were the brief flashes of freezing feet and cowering terror,
before a sudden, overwhelming sense of safety drowned out all else.

“And... dear Papa certainly enjoys your company.”

Javert inhales, unable this time to stop himself from glancing down at her sharply. Does she know...?

Had she seen some trace of it in his mind, before he himself had even recognised his thoughts for
what they were?

But her expression is serene, her blue eyes lowered, strands of chestnut hair drifting across her
cheeks in the evening breeze. It is impossible to believe that she suspects.

Éponine, on the other hand, is a different matter entirely. There has always been knowledge beyond
her years in that girl’s eyes. Javert cannot say he likes it one bit. But as long as she keeps her
thoughts to herself, he does not see that there is much he can do about it.

With difficulty, he turns his mind away from his suspicions. He understands what he is being offered
– a place at Madame Pontmercy’s table, and a place at her father’s side. He closes his eyes briefly.
He does not deserve it. There is, perhaps, no man who does.
“I can only endeavour to be worthy, Madame.”

Her smile is soft and brief. “It makes me happy to hear you say so.” She turns her eyes up towards him, and for a moment, Javert detects something almost sheepish in her expression. “And I hope that… well, I do hope that nothing I did during our unfortunate episode has caused you too much inconvenience.”

Javert frowns. To tell the truth, things have not quite been as they were at the stationhouse – but at least after his fifth refusal the men have stopped inviting him to whatever odious cafés they frequent during their off hours. “It is nothing I cannot deal with, Madame,” he eventually manages to get out. “Do not trouble yourself on that account.”

She looks at him, a hint of dubiousness crossing her face. “And you will not mind losing Béatrice once she enters employment with me?”

Once again, Javert wonders how he may phrase things diplomatically – that certainly, he does not mind losing the services of an informant he never desired in the first place, regardless of how pleased Monsieur Chabouillet might have been. But it seems that Cosette has not waited for him to respond, ploughing on heedlessly: “Do you know, I met her two little boys only last week? Two dear little ones! How I hope I will one day have two like that of my own.”

She chatters on, her happiness rising in her voice, and Javert is happy for her to fill the silence of the garden on her own. The darkness is near-complete now, and servants are beginning to light the lamps by the gate. They round a corner of the path, the house coming back into view behind a row of tall trees. The windows are brightly lit against the darkness, and almost without his conscious will, Javert finds himself studying each one in turn, as if it may be possible to pick out one silhouette from the others that crowd the rooms beyond.

“… And if you do not, I am quite certain that Éponine has half a mind to arrive at your home entirely unannounced.”

With a jolt, Javert’s attention is catapulted back to his one-sided conversation with Cosette. He stares down at her, his mind utterly blank.

“Madame?”

“There, I knew you were not listening,” Cosette says, laughing lightly. “But then, it is getting late. I should let you be on your way. I only wanted to make it clear that unless you stop making yourself so scarce, and allow Éponine and Azelma to thank you properly for what you did for them, Éponine will have no choice but to hunt you down in your own rooms. So please do see that you make time to visit them properly. Soon.”

Javert nods, hoping his unease is not plain on his face. It is Marius all over again. He does not need or want gratitude for these things. In fact, it would be better if they were not spoken of at all. He is still endeavouring to be at peace with the choices he has made, to see mercy as Valjean sees it, and to understand himself capable of it.

And this, in the end, is what it has come down to. There is the law – but there is also mercy. Is that not what his eyes had been opened to two years ago? Had it not been that very thought that had stopped him from walking back out into the storm that night? There had been Valjean’s hand on his arm and there had been everything that had come after, but it was Valjean’s quiet words, for mercy, that had made his breath catch in his throat, that had stopped him cold in his tracks.

Swallowing, he halts as they reach the steps of the house.
“It is late, as you say, Madame,” he says, as she slides her arm from his. He inclines his head slightly, hoping that she will, at last, dismiss him. Javert cannot say with honesty that he dislikes Cosette, or anything even close to it. She is a good girl, and an even better woman. But he is certain that he will never be at ease with conversations such as the one they have just had, most especially since even as he knows she desires honesty between them, he cannot and will not speak of what has grown between himself and Valjean since the morning they had woken together in the porter’s cottage, the rain still tapping against the window and Valjean’s arm across his chest.

“Well then, I release you,” Cosette says, smiling as she turns to go back inside – only to be stopped by another figure emerging from the house. Javert is momentarily blinded by the light that surges from the doorway, but he hears Cosette’s laugh and her footsteps as she trots up the stone steps. “Papa! Oh, I was just about to come find you. Where on Earth have you been?”

Javert blinks, squinting slightly – but yes, of course it is Valjean. He is still only a silhouette standing in the brightness of the doorway, but Javert knows him all the same.

“I was just seeing the inspector off,” Cosette continues, her silhouette joining Valjean’s by the door as she takes his arm. “Do you know, Papa, I believe he was attempting to slip out without wishing me congratulations. Do you not think –”

Javert’s eyes are beginning to adjust now, and in the moment that follows, he sees Cosette’s brow crease slightly as she looks at him, as if she is thinking back over what she has just said – of the fact that he had been here without making his presence known to her, and whom he might have been seeing instead.

The silence that follows is excruciating. Javert can see Valjean’s shoulders hunch slightly, his fingers curling against his daughter’s arm.

“Well!” Cosette says perhaps a little too brightly, just as Javert begins to wish the earth would open and swallow him whole. “In any case, he has done so now, and so he is free to leave.” She hesitates, glancing between them. “If – if that is what he wishes.”

Javert fervently hopes that the flush that is currently creeping along his hairline is not visible in the darkness – he bows his head just to be safe. “Thank you, but I will be going. It has… forgive me, it has been a long day. Madame Pontmercy. Monsieur Fauchelevent.”

He turns to go, only to be halted once more.

“Javert, perhaps I will see you – that is, perhaps, later –” Valjean’s voice is thin in the darkness, but it holds Javert fast where he is. It is a long moment before he half-turns back to where Valjean and Cosette stand together on the steps, and nods.

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The door to the porter’s cottage opens easily. It is, of course, just like Valjean to leave his home, meagre as it is, unlocked.

Javert cannot help but frown a little – to think that Valjean will just allow him to waltz into his home willy-nilly! It is beyond ridiculous. It has been over a year since the man offhandedly showed him the secret entrance from the Rue de Babylone, as indifferent as if he were discussing the weather, and it occurs to Javert that Jean Valjean has had him tamed for far longer than he had realised.

He hovers indecisively at the door, before deciding to leave it open; it is more inviting, perhaps. Certainly, the lilting breeze is pleasant within the cottage’s stifling confines, and it is unlikely that
It is embarrassing, how readily Javert will try to anticipate what will please him. And it is all a sign of just how far he has fallen, that he often finds himself thinking first of what Valjean would say is the right path, rather than thinking of what the law decrees. Of course, it has been that way for two years now; wherever he goes, he now goes dragging his conscience, his doubts, behind him.

Javert had once told himself, with what he had considered utter resolution, that he could not serve two masters at once. He has avoided the question as much as he can, except at times like this, when the drift of his thoughts becomes unavoidable. The conversation with Cosette has been like a stone in his shoe the entire walk home. He has kept his thoughts on a narrow path all his life – there are so many things he could have done, could have become if he had let himself falter even for a second; if, at any moment, he had let himself fall into the gutter that lay on either side of him.

He had spent his life walking that very narrow path, never allowing any deviation. And it is difficult, he finds, to break the habits of a lifetime.

He still often finds his feet leading him towards Monsieur Chabouillet’s office, whether he wills it or not; he has written and rewritten and screwed up and smoothed back out a dozen letters of self-denunciation, each more self-flagellatory than the last. They have all been reduced to ashes, every last one, but the sickening heave in his gut as they burn is even worse than the dread that grips him while they are still whole. Each small destruction is a further step away from what he knows he once would have considered inviolably right, and sometimes he wonders how he can stand it.

Often his mind will carry him away to places, to logical conclusions, to all kinds of terrible scenarios. The worst is the one where Chabouillet looks at him as if he is mad – where he tears up Javert’s letter of resignation and tells him with barely disguised pity to take some time off. If Monsieur le Secrétaire himself would not care that one of his men would take it upon himself to pervert the course of justice so egregiously, then what is the point of anything?

He barks a short laugh. If nothing else, he has come to recognise that he is a terrible failure when it comes to handing in his resignation.

As always, it comes down to Valjean. Javert is certain that he would be able to resign in a perfectly orderly fashion, were Valjean not so intimately tangled up in the whole affair. Then again, Javert never had reason to resign in shame before their paths crossed in Montreuil-sur-Mer – Valjean creates the circumstances of his disgrace, and then Valjean prevents him from remedying them.

He had thought before that he had something in his life that it might grieve him to lose. But now....

Things have slowly unravelled themselves in his mind over the past few weeks: the hitch of his breath at the mairie, the time when his gaze had lingered on Valjean’s back one autumn day in the garden. If he thinks too much about it there will doubtless be no end to other similar moments, and Javert wishes to retain what little pride remains him.

Javert finds that he is fiddling with his gloves, a nervous tic he would once never have even contemplated, let alone allowed; he pulls them from his hands and folds them neatly. He then divests himself of his coat and hat, which had been far too old and cheap for the sumptuous wedding of a baron and his baroness. After a moment’s hesitation, he allows the waistcoat to follow suit, and loosens his cravat. It is dark, and there is no one else here to see. He lights a candle and seats himself.

His dignity has been in tatters since the barricades; it is merely that he did not fully recognise the fact until he found himself pinned breathless and desperate against this very door. He knows full well that he could have slipped from Valjean’s gentle grasp at any given moment. Those fumbling hands had
restrained him more surely than any irons, rendering him helpless with the lightest touch; it had been a delight to obey their hesitant requests.

The following morning, he had awoken to find his limbs entangled with those of another, the strange, living warmth of a ribcage rising and falling against his own, a fleeting, treacherous feeling of security warming the pit of his stomach. He had turned awkwardly and opened his eyes to see the reality of it, Jean Valjean illuminated in the early morning light, white hair and scars and jaw slack in sleep. Not a saint, not a criminal, not a martyr – just a man, a man pressed up warm against him, and Javert had thrilled and despaired all at once. If he had been going to call this thing between them off, that would have been the time to do it. But he could not bring himself to, a selfish flame of want and need burning brighter within him than he could have ever thought possible.

And in the end, that is what it had come down to – for all his arguments back and forth, within himself, with Valjean, he had known at that moment that he could not do it. He knows that this would be an unhealable wound; even as he now does battle with himself, as he composes his resignation once more in his mind, he knows deep down that he will never hand it in. And he knows perfectly well the reason why, even if his mind still skitters away from naming it.

Javert is so lost in thought that it is not until Valjean has actually stepped across the threshold that he realises he is no longer alone – Valjean is in the habit of being as silent as a cat, but Javert has always considered himself very difficult to sneak up on.

He stands, resisting the urge to fidget – he feels almost as if he has been caught lurking somewhere he ought not. A ridiculous thought, but then again, what about his life has not been ridiculous of late? It seems strange to think he can find being in Valjean’s cottage ridiculous, considering the days he had spent traipsing about in his daughter’s body. But there are some things he dare not consider too closely – he can either deal with whatever it is between him and Valjean, or he can deal with Magnon’s witchcraft, but it cannot be both! Valjean has apprised him of what happened in that hovel and assured him that Magnon has repented of her ways. Javert supposes he will just have to believe him; he suspects that even Valjean would find it difficult to forgive him if he used what he had told him to barge into whatever hole the woman has secreted herself in and arrest her. And even if he were to do such a thing, how on earth would he explain himself? The idea makes him blanch just to think of it. After everything else, perhaps, it seems a very small thing to do. No worse than the fact that he is forced to admit that the smallest sliver of respect for Pontmercy has wormed its way into his heart after hearing he had felled that devil’s dandy with a book, of all things. Certainly it is the most useful purpose any book has ever been put to that Javert can think of.

“I didn’t expect to see you back soon,” he at last says to Valjean, who has been hesitating near the doorway.

Valjean shrugs slightly, turning away and beginning to unwrap the black sling from his arm – a small deception Javert has let pass unremarked upon. There is a small flower tucked into his buttonhole that was not there when last Javert saw him; it is Cosette’s work, surely.

“I did not want to linger.” Valjean takes off his coat, hanging it by the door, before removing his spectacles and placing them gently on the table. He glances back towards Javert, his fingers tugging at the starched linen at his throat. “You know I have never felt at ease in a crowd.”

Well, Javert supposes half the truth is better than none of it. A blind man could see how melancholy Valjean has been these past few days. And he has not been so caught up in his own petty concerns that he has not seen the way Valjean’s eyes become shadowed after visits to the Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire. He has often found himself sitting across from Valjean to find the man’s eyes not on his book, but rather staring at some indeterminate spot on the wall, as if contemplating some future that
he alone can see. As the weeks have gone by, he has hesitated less and less to reach across the table and cover Valjean’s hand with his own. It is strange to think he should do such a thing; stranger still to believe that Valjean would find some comfort in it.

It should be laughable – the once-fearsome Inspector Javert, fumbling for the right words to reassure a former criminal that his daughter loves him still! – and yet, it does not feel so strange as it once would have. He may be unskilled at such things, but he finds that he has the urge to at least make an attempt.

Still... how does one make Jean Valjean see reason? The man is vexing beyond all good sense. Cosette’s changed position in his life has been a blow, but Javert has come to understand – at last – that such blows need not be fatal. The range of mercy is wider than that. It must be, for him to be here now.

“Come.” He holds out a hand, allowing Valjean to come to him in his own time. He does, of course, crossing the small room in his placid way. “The day has been long. You must be tired.”

“A little,” Valjean admits, the ghost of a smile upon his lips. His hand briefly touches Javert’s, and he seems inclined to draw away again – but Javert holds him fast and pulls him closer. Valjean does not resist but leans in, resting his head against Javert’s shoulder with a barely audible sigh.

Such easy closeness is still a new and alien thing, and it is difficult not to forget himself in it. Javert has never been a kind man, and he still doubts he ever will be, but this, perhaps, he can do. In any case, it is pleasant enough to speak quietly into the place where his lips brush against Valjean’s hair, to lose himself ever so slightly in the man’s scent.

“Tomorrow you will need to see to that thing that is overtaking the garden by the back wall.”

Valjean does not answer him immediately. “What thing?”

“For Heaven’s sake, Valjean. I don’t know what it is called. But Mademoiselle Thénardier says it will choke the other plants if it is not cut back. I believe she expected me to do something about it. But I am not going to meddle in your garden without your supervision. Good God! I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Éponine had spoken to him of the problematic plant during one of the few brief, halting conversations they have had since the night he brought Azelma to her; it is never long before he begins to see a look in her eye that he knows means she will soon start to speak of what he has done, and then it is necessary to cut the conversation off quickly and take his leave.

But having thought now of Azelma, he is reminded of something else.

“And another thing, Valjean: when I came to the house three days ago, I found Azelma reading with her feet on the sofa. I know you have set her to read two pages of scripture a day, but this was... decidedly not scripture.” Javert can feel the same irritating flush creep up his neck as he says it. It seems ridiculous that this should still happen after all that has passed between them, and yet.

“What was it?”

Javert opens his mouth to say, but it is a terrible enough thing that he even recognised the book to begin with – for it had been that same ghastly book from that day in the garden with Valjean! – let alone reminding Valjean of it at all. He had never been so mortified in all his life. The less said about the horrifying Gustave and Stéphanie, the better.

“It... does not matter,” he says eventually. “Suffice it to say I am sure you are not teaching the girl her
letters for... such purposes.” But he cannot resist adding: “Honestly, Valjean, you ought to keep such books locked up. Or better yet, burn them along with your autumn leaves. If I did not know better, I would suspect your daughter of actually having given the book to Azelma.”

That this is exactly what he suspects, he does not say. Especially not when he realises that Valjean has actually started to laugh – it is soft, almost soundless, but it is still a laugh.

“I would not have said this is a laughing matter,” he says sourly.

“As long as she is reading, Javert.”

“Valjean, I am not...”

Valjean’s lips press against the corner of his mouth, and Javert can feel his smile against his skin. His heart shudders within him, and everything he had been going to say – about propriety, about improving literature – quite abruptly leaves his head. But it is easy, then, to let his eyes slide shut, his hand slip over the long line of Valjean’s back; it is easy to put cares from his mind and let the darkness of the night descend around them. No, Gustave and his overripe plums can keep for another day.

Valjean rests his head against Javert’s neck when he pulls away. He can feel the warmth of his breath against his throat, the flicker of his eyelashes on his jaw.

“You will help me with the bramble by the back wall tomorrow?” Valjean asks, his voice barely audible.

“If you think I will be of some use,” Javert replies, without much enthusiasm. He does not mind the work, but the fact remains that most of the pleasure he gains from gardening rests in watching Valjean, his feet bare and his sleeves rolled to the elbow as he sinks his fingers into the soil, his white hair shining in whatever sunlight remains in the pale blue of early evening. Nothing has changed in that regard from their earlier acquaintance, except that now, in the moments when it is only he and Valjean at the house, he has stood and rested his hand on the broadness of Valjean’s back, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath his shirt.

It is the memory of that warmth against his fingers that makes Javert turn his head, his hands grasping at the small of Valjean’s back. The day may have been long and strange, and he does not know what is in Valjean’s head regarding the future... but Valjean’s mouth opens willingly as Javert kisses him, his hands sliding up Javert’s back to rest at the nape of his neck.

Javert still does not understand where this has come from; he has passed five decades with nothing of this, with no memory of anything or anyone else ever having stirred his blood in this way. Even if he thinks back to those moments in Montreuil-sur-Mer, whatever he had felt had been a strangled, stillborn thing, and he would never have recognised it for what it was, even if he had allowed himself to consider it.

Now, here in the cottage, Javert feels his mouth go dry as Valjean slowly removes his shirt, the candlelight slipping between the lines of his shoulders; in the half-light the marks of the bagne are barely visible, and for that Javert is grateful. They have not spoken of it, but Javert is certain Valjean must have seen his thoughts in his eyes that first morning they had risen together, and Javert had seen him unclothed for the first time. The silvery scars that cross Valjean’s back are something that Javert cannot understand how the man could forgive. Telling himself that he had not personally been responsible for them had not done a thing to salve his conscience; they have not spoken about it, and Javert honestly doubts they ever will. The past can never be undone, but perhaps, perhaps....
Perhaps here, with Valjean’s skin hot beneath his touch and the silence of the night wrapped around them, he can bring himself to hope that the past will be swallowed up by whatever future awaits them.

The bed creaks as they lie down upon it; really, it is not nearly big enough for the both of them, but that hardly seems to matter as Valjean draws him down, pressing one hand to his hip, the other fumbling with the buttons of his shirt.

The man he had been would never have allowed this, Javert thinks dimly as the worn linen slides from his shoulders. Perhaps, then, he has changed after all. For all the resignation letters he has not sent, for all the times he has imagined going to Monsieur Chabouillet’s office and revealing the whole sorry tale – he would never in the past have even acknowledged the warmth that blossoms in his chest, or the possibility that he would ever groan beneath the touch of another, let alone the touch of the man whose steps he has hounded for decades.

Valjean draws back with a hiss as Javert’s thigh brushes against the hardness between his legs; he swallows heavily, eyes dark in the flickering light of the candle. For a moment, they do not move, hands bunched in each other’s clothes, legs tangled, the mattress sagging beneath their weight.

“What is it that you want?” Javert asks as the candle gutters, casting deep shadows across Valjean’s face. “I would... you know I would give you anything.” He licks his lips, his mouth dry. His voice feels as if it is scraping his throat raw as it emerges. “Anything, Valjean. Only... only tell me it is enough.”

Valjean looks up at him, blinking as if he has not understood. He raises one hand, running his fingers over the side of his face, his thumb tracing over his cheekbone. “Of course it is.”

Valjean’s hand curls around the back of his head to release his hair from its ribbon. Javert can see the way Valjean’s breath trembles as it sweeps down, coming to rest against his throat; his eyes are intent as he combs his fingers through it, catching strands between them before his hand comes to rest on the side of his neck. “Javert,” he says, before lifting his head to kiss him again.

Javert can feel his pulse beating against Valjean’s palm, and he slides his own hand down, through the thick white thatch of Valjean’s chest hair and over his stomach to rest just at the band of his trousers. Valjean shifts beneath him, his hand still tangled in his hair as Javert slowly unbuttons him and draws him out, his warm length hard against his palm. Valjean shudders, a sound that is almost a whimper leaving his lips, the skin of his stomach going taut as Javert moves his fingers over him.

This is still strange to him. Before this, he has never touched another person with the intent of giving them pleasure; he has rarely ever touched anyone at all except to lay a hand on a man’s collar or to grab a woman’s shoulder. It seems like it should be impossible that anyone could respond like this – to twist against the mattress and gasp out his name as if it is a prayer. And the fact that it is Valjean....

Javert lowers himself until his forehead rests against Valjean’s, his hair – the parts of it that are not tangled up in Valjean’s fingers, at least – falling down around them. He is painfully hard inside his trousers, the cheap wool chafing against him, and he almost jumps, gasping, when Valjean’s hand brushes against him, seeking his skin, his fingers trembling. Javert shuts his eyes; he does not want to think of how this has come to be; he does not want to think of anything but –

“Valjean.” The name slips from his mouth between two rough breaths. Javert shifts, his left knee knelt on the bed, his right still-booted foot resting on the floor. Raising himself a little over Valjean’s supine form, he grasps the bedhead in one hand, and with the other closes his fist around them both.

It is easy to get lost in this – in the hectic rasp of breath and the hot, slick slide of skin. Javert had
never been tempted to it; it had seemed something base, just something else for idle men to indulge themselves with, or something foul and bestial but unfortunately necessary. It had been linked almost inextricably in his mind with the filth of the bagne, with the degrading spectacle of the women of the town as they went about their business. He had never imagined this.

Or perhaps it is simply because it is Valjean that he now feels this thick rush of blood, this pooling of dark heat in the pit of his stomach. He knows he is speaking – short, harsh syllables that can barely be called words, and in any case are probably little more than God and yes and Valjean. Valjean arches against him, pushing himself into the tight circle of Javert’s fist. He breathes in Valjean’s panting exhalations, their foreheads resting against each other, until at last Valjean tilts his head back, his eyes closed, the sinew of his throat straining against his skin.

Javert lets his head drop, burying his face in the warmth of Valjean’s neck, inhaling the scent of his sweat and the soap he washes with. Valjean lets out a cry as Javert’s teeth graze gently against the pulse in his throat, and the sound seems to flood Javert with heat, burning away whatever is left of his ability to think. He can feel it gathering within him, that dark pull of release, the momentary void, and he cannot suppress the long groan that comes with it. The bed shudders, and his foot slips against the floor, scrabbling for purchase as he closes his hand more tightly around them. His knuckles are white around the cold iron of the bedhead.

Valjean gasps out something that might be his name before he goes taut against him, breath trapped in his throat, and Javert feels the sudden warmth of his release against his fingers. He is not far behind, crying out, his nerves scraped raw.

He is not certain how long he lies as if boneless, crumpled over Valjean’s body, the sweat on their chests mingling between them. But he does know that it takes him far too long to move once he realises that he is lying in an unceremonious heap on top of the other man, his hair – messy from Valjean’s fingers – splayed over the skin of his throat. He groans as he finally dredges up the energy to shift, the bed creaking torturously as he turns to lie on his back. Javert stares up at the ceiling, his lungs still struggling to keep up with his need for air. He can hear Valjean’s own breath already beginning to slow – but he has always had more energy than seemed quite proper.

They do not speak. They almost never do.

The candle is still flickering on the table, burned down almost halfway by the time Valjean stirs.

“We should –” he begins, before looking away, a hint of colour in his cheeks. He gestures at the mess that coats his stomach, and Javert swallows, clearing his throat. There is a bucket of water and a small linen cloth, and it all only takes a moment – but it is still difficult to meet Valjean’s eye. It always is, afterwards – they have barely begun down this road. Javert finds himself wondering if it will ever get any easier.

He is surprised when Valjean catches his hand, twining their fingers together.

“You are always accusing me of being a saint. I am no such thing – I am but a man, the same as you.” Valjean’s voice is soft, and the sentiment is something that had only been half-formed in Javert’s mind; it had not been a thing he could put into words. His breath catches as Valjean closes his fingers over the back of his hand, drawing their palms together, and perhaps for the first time in his life, Javert thinks that this is enough.
Another M-rated chapter! Also we messed up our timing and this chapter had to go out unbetaed, so please forgive any typos.

The bed creaks under Cosette’s weight as she sits upon it. She slips off her shoes, curling and uncurling her aching toes. Her wedding day has been utterly wonderful, but she has been awake since before sunrise; as much as she is looking forward to what she knows will now come, a small, treacherous part of her wants nothing more than to collapse back upon the bed and let herself be claimed by blessed sleep.

Still, that part of her is small. A much larger, more insistent part of her is almost twitching with pent-up nerves, her fingers longing to grab Marius and pull him down onto the bed with her. That would be difficult, however, given that her new husband is still near the door, fidgeting with some knick-knack that he has picked up off the bureau.

Perhaps it is for the best that she has a few minutes in which to collect herself. Her life has been a whirlwind over the past few weeks – as if getting married were not enough, she has also taken steps towards opening her own factory, spent time helping dear Éponine to settle her somewhat unruly sister into the house in the Rue Plumet, and attempted to tend the first hesitant shoots of Papa’s happiness. All of this would be a significant enough undertaking on its own, without the brief interlude in which she became a most fearsome police inspector for several days!

No, there is no one who could rightfully blame her for taking a moment to be with her own thoughts. Javert’s memories are quieter within her mind now, having faded over the past few weeks. They have not gone entirely, but they are certainly far more tolerable than once they were; her fear that she would never truly be herself again has, she thinks, proven to be unfounded. Maybe she feels flashes of irritation where once she would have only laughed, and she cannot quite tell whether the fact that she has barely picked up a book since their unfortunate incident is due to how busy she has been, or the lingering influence of another. But it is barely noticeable, and she is sure that, in time, it will resolve itself.

Cosette has come to regard these moments with something almost approaching fondness, rather than anxiety. She can look back upon their misadventure with amusement now, if also a strange, lingering sense of dissatisfaction that she does not wish to think upon too deeply. But she does not regret what happened, even despite the pain and confusion that had accompanied it.

In the end, the missing pieces of the puzzle had come together as she slept. One night a couple of weeks ago, after they had all been returned to their bodies, she had dreamed of the river – or, more precisely, the bridge that straddled it. There had been none of the terror, this time – she had been a mere observer from within, noting the roiling thoughts of the mind whose body she inhabited without feeling them, both a part of them and apart from them. The leaden clouds had hung low and heavy as if weighed down by sin, obscuring all else until there was only herself above and destruction below.

Cosette had understood, then, what had somehow eluded her in the past. It had been so obvious an answer that even in her dispassionate state, she had chided herself for not having realised it long beforehand.
Thoughts of Papa had filled her mind as she removed her hat – Papa as she had never seen him in her own life, in so many guises that it would have astonished her, had she been capable of it – and she had hauled her aching body up onto the parapet, the horror of her own existence making her limbs clumsy.

In that moment she had known how easy it would be to let herself fall, to allow her trembling knees to complete the task that she did not wish to consciously undertake. But that would not have been just; one does not go to their superior with the intent of handing in their resignation if one does not intend to follow through with the act itself.

She had looked down at the fate awaiting her below, and found it proper and correct. Standing upon that perilous edge, she had waited for the inevitable, for Javert to give them both to the Seine’s dark embrace once more –

But she had woken in her bed, herself, with little more than a startle. For once, she had been spared the worst; for once, she had come out of another’s memories knowing exactly who she was.

She does not know whether her mother would have forgiven him, although she does know that Papa has. In the end, it is only a question of whether she forgives him... and it is not really a question at all. She does not have it within her to hate him – not when he helped save Marius, and not when Papa seems to enjoy his company so.

He is not the same person as the formidable policeman who hounded Papa – and, by extension, herself – nor is he the same person who so terrified her mother. Cosette has felt his remorse firsthand, and she knows what it did to him, knows that there is nothing to be gained from holding onto her anger. She cannot believe that God would want her to hate Javert, when He so obviously has plans for him.

She had not lied, when she had said that she considered him her friend. It is a strange thing, but she is becoming used to strange things. After all, she is in the process of purchasing a factory, with the intent of starting her own business – it seems downright preposterous, if she thinks about it too hard! Marius has been sorting the legalities, and Papa has been helping her with the practicalities, although she is under strict orders not to think about it further while she and Marius enjoy the first days of marriage. She is not so upset about this as she could be, for it means that Papa will be keeping himself busy, and she will happily hand over things to him for a few weeks if it provides him with a sense of purpose.

But after that... well, she has so many ideas she wishes to put into action! The thought that she could help women like Béatrice fills her with a determination that she had not realised she possessed – a determination that, it seems, can withstand even Aunt Gillenormand’s pointed comments about the seemliness of a baron’s wife running a factory. She does not wish to cause disharmony amongst Marius’ family, but even more than that, she does not wish to find herself sliding into a life of unearned leisure. She is most fortunate that Marius approves of her enterprise; she does not know what she would do if he did not.

She is most fortunate to have Marius in general. This adventure of theirs has only strengthened her feelings for him, and, she knows, his feelings for her.

She would not have thought it possible to love him more than she already had, until she took him aside a few days ago and told him about what she had learned of dear Papa’s past. To see his eyes widen as she relayed the sad tale of Papa’s youth, to hear him swear with all sincerity that he would do everything he could to ensure Papa’s happiness for all time – it had brought tears of joy to her eyes.
To think – she is now married to this wondrous man! He is hers, and she is his, and he cares for her strange little family as much as she does.

Cosette knows that Marius loves Papa – that Papa is, in many ways, the father that Marius never knew. For all that the wedding reception had been bustling with people, it had been the absences that Cosette had noticed most keenly: her mother, Marius’ father, Éponine’s brother, Marius’ friends. People she had not even known in life, but who, she thinks, had deserved to be there more than all of Monsieur Gillenormand’s various acquaintances and relatives and men he knows from business. It had pleased her to invite Azelma, to invite Béatrice and her two little boys; it had pleased her also to know that Inspector Javert had decided to attend after all, despite his attempts to hide the fact.

She and Papa have both spent so much time in isolation that she is only just beginning to realise how few people she has in her life. To widen her circle of those she cares for, even only a little, is a joy.

For the moment, though, there is one loved one whom she cares for above all others.

Marius is still hovering near the closed door, picking through the books on the shelf without, she thinks, paying much notice to their contents. He is so dashingly handsome in his wedding finery, and suddenly she is aware of the quickening of her heart, her exhaustion giving hasty way to anticipation. They are here for a reason, after all – and has she not been yearning for this moment for so very long?

It occurs to her with great suddenness that this is it – that tonight, she will truly become a woman. The whole day has had a hazy quality to it, a blur of vows and people and gaiety, but now it is just the two of them here in this room. It seems at once both like a dream, and very, very real.

She has been somewhat leery of drink ever since that unfortunate afternoon at the café, but she is grateful now for the few glasses of wine of which she has partaken over the course of this evening. To finally fulfil her marriage vows with Marius – to be Madame Pontmercy in every possible respect – is something that has played at her mind for so long that its realisation does not seem possible. What once she would have done with all eagerness has built up upon itself over the course of two years, becoming something so immense that she feels somewhat intimidated by it, even as she finds herself nearly bursting with excitement. She can only hope that she will manage to please Marius, and enjoy herself in turn.

That being said: if her nerves are trying to get the better of her, then she can only imagine what Marius is feeling! It is hardly a secret that her darling husband – her husband! – has been, ah, anticipating their wedding night for quite some time. Now that the time is finally at hand, poor Marius seems to be holding back, though whether it is for his own benefit or out of respect for her, she is not sure.

Affection swells up within her, quelling at least some of her nerves. Surely it is time to put the both of them out of their misery! Finally they can resolve this thing that has been hovering over them for two interminable years – why on earth are they dallying now?

“Marius,” she calls softly, and his attention jerks to her. “Come to me.” She cannot help but smile as she adds, “Husband.”

He hastens over to her with all speed, but then hesitates when he reaches her, lower lip caught between his teeth. She pats the space next to her on the bed, and he drops down upon it as if his strings have been cut.

But still he refrains from touching her – if anything, he sits further from her than he usually would, his hand hovering near her shoulder before retreating once more.
Really, she cannot stand it anymore – her body is practically crying out for him now, the low, sweet heat deep within her becoming more insistent with each heartbeat – and so she touches his cheek, her fingers light but insistent, and guides him towards her until their lips meet.

Her face burns hot with something more than embarrassment now, and she is seized with a sudden boldness; she takes his hand and places it upon her heaving breast, holding it there until she is certain that he will not remove it, and then allows her own hand to wander down her husband’s side, towards places that she has only ever been able to imagine until now. Her fingers trace the waistband of his trousers – and while she has long dreamed of this moment, she finds her touch is less the playful tease of a seductress, and more the artless fumblings of some timid maid.

Gathering her courage, Cosette moves her hand lower again; she and Marius gasp in tandem as she finds what she was seeking, her fingers tracing the hard line of him beneath his trousers. She is transfixed by the sight, unable to look away as he grows beneath her caress. To think that finally she is allowed this – that she can touch and look to her heart’s content!

A hot spike of mortification runs through her belly as she remembers that first morning after she had awoken in a body not her own, how she had had to do battle with her baser urges in order to keep herself from cataloguing her newfound acquisitions. Although she had been successful in practising self-restraint – if only just – she thinks now that perhaps she has retained some instinctual knowledge of what would bring a man pleasure, for suddenly she is certain that if she moves her hand just so –

She pulls her hand back with no small amount of regret, hoping as she does so that Marius is not dismayed by her actions. While she is certainly not averse to the idea of bringing him to the edge of bliss using only her hand, it is not what she wishes tonight – and certainly it is only Marius that she wishes to be thinking of. Perhaps some other time, when the last echoes of their misadventure have faded from her mind.

She raises her eyes to his face – and oh, he is beautiful, his mouth slightly open, eyes closed, colour high in his cheeks. His hand, she notes with some amusement, is still plastered to her bosom as if its very existence depends upon it.

He opens his eyes with what seems to be great effort; speech appears to be a struggle. She understands completely.

“Cosette...?”

“My dear Marius,” she murmurs. Feeling somewhat ridiculous, she moves back from him and lays herself down on the bed. Her heart hammers wildly as she pulls ever so slightly at her skirts, revealing her legs almost to the knees. “Do you not think that it is time for you to perform your husbandly duties?”

His eyes widen more than she would have thought possible; his mouth moves, but nothing resembling words comes out.

“Come,” she says, holding out an arm in invitation, and after a moment’s pause he scrabbles up the bed towards her – and oh, now he is above her, his eyes staring into her own, his breath warm on her face.

“My darling Cosette,” he breathes, and their mouths meet once more; his body presses ever so lightly against her own, and she can feel all of him, feel the promise of pleasure that is restrained only by a single, ever-so-inconvenient layer of clothing. Suddenly there is nothing she wants more than for the impediment to be gone; she breaks off the kiss with reluctance, and he pulls back slightly.
“Will you...?”

Cosette allows her eyes to drop down meaningfully for a moment, even as embarrassment threatens to overwhelm her. When she can bring herself to look him in the eye again, he is staring at her as if she has just offered him all the riches in the world.

She smiles and inclines her head reassuringly, and he sits up, fiddling hurriedly with his trousers while she hitches once more at her skirts, bringing them above her knees. It is so difficult to know what is right! How is it that she has fantasised about this moment for years, and yet never sorted out the particulars in her mind?

It occurs to her that her furtive readings, while somewhat enlightening in a general sense, have left her woefully unprepared for the finer details of what is expected. The heroes and heroines in her novels have always simply slid together like well-oiled machinery, articles of clothing magically vanishing along the way, their hands appearing wherever they are required and then disappearing once more. It is all very entertaining, but perhaps, she thinks, less instructional than she had once believed.

She suspects that it would be terribly untoward of her to hike up her skirts entirely and put everything on display... but on the other hand, she would not put it past Marius to simply refuse to lift them for her without her giving him instructions to do so. His regard for her modesty is touching, but sometimes also exceedingly frustrating.

Certainly neither of them has the patience right now to remove her dress entirely – and oh, as much as she craves to do so, the thought slightly terrifies her. For him to see all of her – for her to see all of him –

And besides, it is her wedding night. It is only right that she should remain in her dress, that she should be wearing it when she and Marius become husband and wife in deed as well as word.

She looks back up at Marius, and for some reason the first thing she notices is that he has finally taken his boots off. The second thing she notices is –

Oh –

She has read descriptions – heard tales – briefly been in mortified possession of her own – and yet, nothing has prepared her for the sight before her. To think that they will be joined so intimately – that –!

Her legs spread seemingly of their own volition, and her knees rise accordingly; the movement sends her skirts spilling down around her, leaving her most closely-held secrets on display.

Biting her lip, she lifts her eyes to Marius’ face; he is as a man hypnotised, looking upon her with wide eyes. He is, perhaps, as entranced by her as she is by him – and it feels as if a weight has been lifted from her chest, even as part of her wishes to crawl into a hole and expire of embarrassment. They have looked upon one another; they are both enthralled; Marius has seen everything that she keeps most private, and wants her still.

The relief is profound, and her heart sings.

“You are... Cosette, you are beautiful,” he whispers. There is none of his usual eloquence; none of the usual words that transport her to rapture as he utters them, his eyes shining. But he is still looking upon her with a reverence that she is certain must be blasphemous when directed at a mere mortal. To think that another could look upon her womanhood with such unconcealed worship in his eyes!
Her breath heaves in her chest – surely no one has ever felt so abandoned as she does right now! – and she spreads her legs a little further again, deliberately this time, even as a voice in her mind tells her that such things are unbecoming. It is an invitation, and he takes her up on it, with a cautiousness that both charms and frustrates her in equal measure. She rests a hand on his hip and gently pulls him down until he is almost lying on top of her, and –

She gasps as he brushes against her, the warm, solid reality of him just barely touching that part of her that she has kept hidden away for him, and a lovely warmth pools deep within her belly. It is as if unknown parts of her are coming alive all at once, unfurling like a leaf at the first touch of the springtime sun.

“Marius... please.” Boldly, she hooks one leg around his thigh and applies the lightest of pressure. “Would you leave me waiting now, when I have already waited so long?”

“I –” he begins, and then he nods, his cheeks flushed, his hair hanging over his eyes in a most endearing way. He brushes his lips against her throat, and the sensation sends a delicious frisson down her spine; her hips roll in an artless, instinctive fashion, and then she feels it – feels him. He pauses, barely inside her, and she takes a moment to let herself adjust to his presence – oh, such a welcome intrusion within her! – and take a few shaky breaths. She wonders how she has ever lived without this wondrous pleasure, this consuming heat that urges her on.

Marius resumes his movement, slow but firm, as inexorable as the tide, and she cries out as he fills her all the way. It is deliriously good; she hears herself breathlessly begging him for more, even though such a feat would surely be an impossibility.

He pulls back within her, and it is simultaneously the best and the worst thing she can imagine – the glorious feeling of him moving inside her that sets her quivering; the possibility that he will withdraw altogether, and leave her bereft! But then he is moving forwards again, falling into a thrusting rhythm, and oh. She reaches a trembling hand up to the back of his head, and pulls him down until she can scatter kisses upon his cheek and whisper words of love into his ear.

My husband – my Marius –

Pleasure blooms within her, a slow crescendo building towards pure bliss, and she clutches at him even as he becomes ragged and desperate and beautiful, as his pants become groans and then cries – and then with one last shudder, he gives in to his release. He trembles above and within her, and he is lovely in his abandonment. After a long moment he all but collapses onto her, although he rolls most of his weight off quickly enough.

Cosette lies upon the bed, waiting for her breathing to calm itself, and wonders at what just happened. It was not quite as her books would have had her believe – the stars did not realign themselves in the heavens, her body was not seized within the grip of ecstasy itself at the moment when Marius had been overcome by his own completion – but, she thinks dazedly, it was undoubtedly very, very nice. So nice, in fact, that she thinks she would like to try again in the very near future. Perhaps the throes of ecstasy will come with practice; certainly, she is not one who is inclined to give up without exploring all possible options.

She turns over onto her side, and allows her arm to slip around her husband. His eyes are closed, his lashes dark against his cheeks, but they open with a struggle upon her embrace.

“Cosette,” he murmurs. “My darling.”

“My sweet Marius,” she replies, brushing his hair away from his face with a smile. He drops a kiss upon her forehead and sighs sleepily, his eyelids drooping once more. For once, he appears to be free
of the frenzied energy that seems to permeate so much of what he does; to see him so unguarded seems more of an intimacy than the act they just performed together.

There is a certain satisfaction to seeing him in such a state, and knowing that she bears a large degree of responsibility for it. Inexplicably, she finds herself craving something that it takes her long moments to identify – a pinch of snuff?! – and she shakes her head slightly to dispel the thought. Where that had come from, she does not even know.

Part of her wants to free herself from the confines of her wedding dress, to remove Marius’ clothes with unhurried deliberation, to do something about the dampness which is surely ruining the bed even now. But instead she merely moves in closer to him, enjoying his warmth, the fact that she is now free to touch him as she has always desired.

Any cares she may have had now seem insignificant. There will be time enough for them later; for tonight, she is content.
It is surprising how little five hundred francs runs to these days. After finding new rooms and new furniture, replacing her silks, buying a fine bonnet and bracelet for Mamselle Miss and a new hat for Montparnasse (if only so she doesn’t have to hear him complain any longer about the one that had been squashed), Madame Magnon is beginning to find there is very little left over.

Sighing, she clinks her few remaining coins in her palm before putting them away, hidden safely beneath a loose panel at the bottom of her drawer. The money was fine while it lasted, but now it is gone, and she will have to find some other source of income in the very near future. For a moment, she wonders if it might be worth pushing her luck with old Fauchelevent... but then she recalls the look in the Thénardier brat’s eye, and quickly decides against it.

It is all very vexing, Magnon thinks, frowning as she leaves the bedroom and makes her way out into the bright, sunlit sitting room. Miss is draped over a couch, a book in one hand and an apple in the other, while Montparnasse – the little fool – is carefully arranging his hair in front of a glass on the wall.

Huffing a little, she pushes Miss’ feet from the sofa so she can sit. Unperturbed, Miss simply raises them again, this time placing them on Magnon’s lap, lowering her book slightly and peering at her from over the top of it.

“Oh, don’t brood. Something will come up. You know it always does.”

Magnon crosses her arms, leaning back against the sofa, and stares at the ceiling. Of course, Miss is right – she usually is. But then, Miss almost always ends up landing on her feet. Was it her, after all, who had to spend a year in Saint-Lazare?

No, it bloody wasn’t, Magnon thinks, looking at her sourly as Miss takes another bite of her apple as if she hasn’t a care in the world.

Obviously, her bad temper is plainer on her face than she thought, as Miss puts down her book with a tolerant roll of her eyes. She extends her arm with indifferent grace, deigning to let her fingers brush against Magnon’s cheek; Magnon knows an order when she sees one, and she seizes the hand in her own before bringing it to her lips, bestowing a kiss upon each finger in turn.

No – if everything goes belly-up, then Miss will find a way to slip whatever bonds she may find herself in. It’s an ability that Magnon both envies and resents, but perhaps it is not entirely terrible... for whenever Magnon finally escapes from whatever misfortune has beset her, Miss always finds her again.

“Come on, now. What’s the matter? What could be so bad?” Miss says soothingly, shifting her hand to run her fingers through Magnon’s hair.

“Nothing, I suppose,” Magnon admits, letting herself be soothed. If nothing else turns up, at the very least she supposes she might be able to squeeze a few francs out of old Gillenormand. Certainly, it runs the risk of attracting Javert’s attention, but what in life doesn’t?

She snickers a little. Perhaps she shouldn’t be so sour after all. Perhaps her silly dabbling hadn’t had the desired result, but, the five hundred francs aside, it had given her something to gossip about.
“Well, whatever you’re going to do, I’d advise you to do it quickly.”

Magnon looks up, scowling at the sound of Montparnasse’s voice. As if he has any right to lecture her!

“Oh, shut up,” she says irritably, her bad mood returning. “And what have you contributed recently? Nothing but trouble. Your idiot plan to blackmail the old fool fell through, just like I said it would. You’re lucky we didn’t all go down for that.”

Montparnasse’s glare is vicious. “Oh, and I suppose your ridiculous little scheme was a roaring success?”

“Well, it got us five hundred francs, didn’t it, you preening cock?” she snaps, though she’s aware that what Montparnasse says is... well, it’s not entirely untruthful. She’d been quite foolish, and she’s aware of how fortunate she had been to get out of that with her neck intact. Even if Montparnasse’s hat had not been so lucky.

Whatever the case, her words shut Montparnasse up, if only for a moment. He attempts a sneer, but it’s clear his heart’s not in it.

“Well, anyway,” he says, turning back to the glass and adjusting his new hat upon his head. “I, at least, am going out. There’s plenty to be getting on with. If you –”

The sudden sound of a knock at the front door cuts him short; as one, the three of them turn to look at it.

“Were you expecting anyone?” Montparnasse murmurs, his petulant air of a few seconds ago now entirely absent.

“No,” Magnon replies under her breath, barely noticing as Miss sits up properly. God, she’s gone soft in her relative luxury – not a single weapon within grabbing distance, but rather cushions and fruit. It’s laughable, really.

Still, the day that Montparnasse has fewer than three weapons on his person is the day that he is either imprisoned or dead – even now, she can see him slipping a small knife from his sleeve as he approaches the door with the predatory stealth of a cat. And surely nobody who meant them harm would bother to knock, especially in such a hesitant fashion.

Her breath stops in her throat as Montparnasse cracks open the door. There is a moment of silence, and she cannot see his face to gauge his reaction; she tenses, ready to run if need be, her heart thrumming in her chest. Then there is a quiet exchange that she cannot make out – just a few words – and then –

She nearly jumps out of her skin as Montparnasse barks out a laugh. He saunters back into the room, turning his back on whomever is waiting at the door without an apparent second thought for any of their safety, and flicks her a sharp-edged smile.

“They’re all yours,” he says, and then he leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, as if he’s waiting for the entertainment to begin.

Curiosity should never override good sense, she knows this, and yet she finds herself at the door all the same.

Peering out through the gap, it takes her a moment to register what she’s seeing – and then it comes to her. That jittery boy from the hovel. The one who took out Montparnasse with a book.
She does not know whether to fear him or to laugh at him. Certainly he does not appear in the slightest bit threatening. But then she remembers the circumstances surrounding their meeting, remembers the threats that the Thénardier girl had spat at her... and suddenly she finds that she is talking and cannot stop.

“What’s all this, then? I told you I was going straight, and I’ve been good as my word! All this stuff here is completely legit – bought it with the money the old man gave me – and I haven’t done nothing I said I wouldn’t, I swear –”

The boy seems oblivious to her pleas, and she trails off as she realises that he’s barely even taking in what she’s saying. Instead, he is looking off to the side with a daft look in his eyes. Magnon cracks the door open further to see a lovely young thing by his side, holding onto his arm tightly, clearly as besotted as he is.

*Ugh. Young love.*

Magnon catches a glimpse of gold upon the girl’s finger, and puts two and two together: this must be Fauchelevent’s daughter, the one who’d had the misfortune to trade places with Javert. Unfortunate girl; lucky Javert!

The two of them – *Marius and Cosette,* she recalls Montparnasse telling her – seem harmless enough. Still... Magnon wants nothing to do with this. She hasn’t broken the law since that encounter in the hovel, and therefore they have nothing on her.

“I made that deal in good faith,” she says, trying to find a middle ground between aggression and wheedling that will convince them of her good character. “If you’ve come to extort me –”

“Please, Madame Magnon,” breathes the girl, her eyes almost feverishly bright with excitement. “We’ve come to make a request of you. My darling husband and I do so wish to get to know each other better, and we were thinking, what better way than...?” Cosette breaks off, glancing up at her husband, her eyes filled with adoration. “It’s just that – well, we *know* you know how to....”

Magnon blinks in confusion. She’s going to throttle Montparnasse – why on earth had he felt the need to drop her into the middle of this without so much as a word of explanation? “What –”

The boy on Cosette’s arm raises a hand, and Magnon flinches back – but it is not a weapon he clutches in his trembling fingers, but money. *A lot* of money.

Wheels turn in her head as she tries to make sense of this completely unexpected turn of events, and – oh.

*Oh.*

*Get to know each other, eh?*

Her mouth spreads into a smile; she tries to keep it friendly and welcoming rather than lecherous, and mostly succeeds. A small voice in her mind tries to warn her that this could be a trap – but no, they are both clearly too foolish by half to convincingly take part in any kind of deception.

The girl gifts her with a hopeful smile – and really, what kind of person would Magnon be, to deny such an enchanting creature that which she so obviously desires?

Magnon opens the door wide, ushering them inside. “Please, please – come in. Make yourselves at home.”
Miss was right – something always *does* come up.

Chapter End Notes

... And that's it! Thank you all for reading – we really appreciate it. :)

Thanks again to our beta, rabbit_habits, who beta'd way more than she originally signed on for. This was originally supposed to be a *lot* shorter and a lot sillier – sorry about the tonal change! This is what happens when you let Jean Valjean have POV chapters. :(

Thanks again to all of you!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!