World Ain't Ready

by idiopathicsmile

Summary

Enjolras presses his lips together. He already looks pained, and Grantaire hasn't even opened his mouth yet. That's got to be a record, even for them.

"I need a favor," he says at last.

"With what?" says Grantaire. "Ooh, are you forming a cult? Can I join? I'd be awesome at cults, I just know it." He ticks off his qualifications on his fingers. "I love chanting, I look great in robes—"

(High school AU. Grantaire the disaffected stoner is pulled into a cause bigger than himself. Or: in which there are pretend boyfriends for great justice.)

Notes

Warnings for language, underage drinking, mild underage drug use, bullying and homophobia, and rom-com level hijinks.

Title taken from 'Shake the Sheets' by Ted Leo & the Pharmacists.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

If anyone asked, Grantaire would say his favorite subject is detention. That person would probably assume Grantaire was just being a little shit, because, well, Grantaire. But the thing is, it's also not far from the truth.

Anyone can get written up—hell, the briefest glance at his high school transcript will tell you that—but when you get held after often enough, you start to get the hang of it.

"Sup, Miz P," Grantaire says as he slips in and takes his usual spot in the back. "How's business?"

Mrs. Peterson doesn't look up. Fair enough.

Grantaire rubs his eyes, yawning until his jaw cracks. He rests his head on the desk and pulls the knit cap over the top of his face. He’s spent the last couple of years honing the ability to sleep anywhere. If you play your cards right, detention is just a somewhat uncomfortable nap.

Apparently, fate has other plans. Or, more likely, fate doesn’t give a shit.


It takes another few seconds to realize that the voice is addressing him, that the reason it sounds so loud is because the speaker is standing right next to Grantaire’s desk. He pulls himself upright, peeling up his cap to crack one eye open against the florescent light.

Almost from his peripheral vision, he registers blond curls, a noble profile, fierce eyes that are just—wow. Grantaire swallows and glances down at his hands, the motion almost involuntary, like looking away from the sun. There’s a smudge of green on his thumb. Weird, he can’t remember the last time he drew anything green.

"…hey," Grantaire mumbles. "What?"

"How does this work?" says the new guy.

"It's a desk," says Grantaire slowly. "It—keeps things from being on the ground."

"No, this. Detention."

Sun-staring be damned, Grantaire turns to face him. New Guy seems to be a junior or a senior. Normally, when people are first-timers at this point, they're nervous about being in trouble. New Guy doesn't seem worried at all, just focused. Extremely focused.

"Uh, we sit here quietly for an hour."

"Then what?" says New Guy. The focus is not diminishing. It’s like being in a very small lightning storm. There’s that same charge, that sense of something interesting about to happen.

"Um. When the hour is up, we go home."

“They take our phones, too?” Grantaire offers. New Guy looks confused until Grantaire thinks to add, lamely, “I mean, we get them back when the hour’s up, but um.”

“What,” says New Guy, “is the point of this?”

"Uh, are you familiar with how high school works?" Grantaire says, half to himself. New Guy doesn’t seem to hear. He takes the desk in front of Grantaire and pulls out a notebook and a pencil, no doubt preparing to write his congressperson about the injustice. Apparently, their conversation is over.

Grantaire raises his eyebrows, although there’s nobody to see it.

“Dude,” he says, “What did you do?”

“What?” says New Guy, hand stilling over the page.

“To get in trouble. Detention. What did you do?”

New Guy turns around, but instead of answering the question, says, "Does this school really not have a single gender-neutral bathroom?"

Grantaire tries not to goggle at him. He fails pretty hard. “What?”

New Guy leans forward slightly. The lightning storm feeling returns. "Over two thousand kids go here every year," he says. "Statistically, the odds that there isn’t a single one who identifies as transgender—it's not even worth considering."

Grantaire takes that all in, mulling it over for a moment. "So, that’s why you’re here? You used the girls’ bathroom?" New Guy glares, and Grantaire raises his hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, whatever, do what you need to do, no judgment.”

“You don’t need to be transgender to see what an unsafe environment that’s gonna make for anyone who falls outside the, the traditional gender binary,” says New Kid. “And it should be the school’s number one duty to ensure the safety of its students, especially the ones already at the margins of society.” There’s an edge of irritation to his voice, like it’s something he’s said several times today.

Mentally, Grantaire translates this to, ‘I didn’t use the girl’s bathroom, I just kept harping about it until my teacher got super uncomfortable.’

Columbus High is not a mecca of love and tolerance. Last week, Grantaire's Government class debated gay marriage, and literally the one person arguing in favor was Cosette Fauchelevant, who only got away with it by virtue of being a pretty girl. Otherwise, middle ground was somewhere around "Sure, gays are an abomination, but maybe it doesn't make sense to compare them to axe murderers." There were also plenty of kids well beyond the middle ground.

Grantaire had spent the period drawing on his hands with a felt tip pen. When he ran out of room on his hands, he continued down his wrists. By the time the teacher noticed, his arms were covered to the elbow in elaborate, feathery swirls.

She'd sent him to wash it off, but he couldn't get it all and for the rest of the day, whenever people noticed, they gave him an amused smile, like, 'How high were you?’ and he smiled back, brittle.

New Guy is still talking. “—and a U.S. History teacher, of all people, should realize how the legacy
of—"

U.S. History, that narrows things down a bit.

“Was it Walker?” says Grantaire.

“I—yeah, maybe?”

Other kids are starting to filter in. A football player named either Matt or Mark sees Grantaire and grins companionably, miming a joint with his eyebrows raised. Translation: ‘Are you here for smoking up?’ Grantaire shrugs back broadly: ‘Who can even say at this point?’ Matt-or-Mark laughs.

“That’s rough, man. Walker’s a dick,” Grantaire tells New Guy. Up at her desk, Mrs. Peterson is shuffling her papers in a way that implies detention is about to start. “Listen, word to the wise,” he adds in an undertone. “It’s what, your first week here?”

“First day,” says New Guy tightly.

“Wow. Okay, so you’re still making impressions and stuff. Uh, yeah. Maybe you don’t want to be known, right out of the gate, as like, bathroom kid, y’know?”

The resulting glare is terrifying, both in its intensity and in how it actually doesn’t make Grantaire want to stop talking. All that attention is—it’s like being zapped with electricity, or drinking a Red Bull way too fast.

Grantaire tugs at the hem of his knit cap. “No, sorry, free country and all that,” he says.

New Guy turns around, pointedly.

Grantaire can’t seem to shut himself up. “Yeah, what am I saying, you’re gonna do just fine. Stay gold, Ponyboy, or whatever. Honestly you should be giving me advice. With a face like that you’re gonna get any girl you want—”

At the word ‘get’, New Guy’s shoulders tense. He whirls around. “Women aren’t—fucking—Pokémon,” he hisses, just as the rest of the noise in the room dies down.

“Enjolras!” says Mrs. Peterson. “We absolutely do not allow that kind of language in here.”

That is how Grantaire learns New Guy’s name, and how Enjolras gets the second detention of his academic career.

“Damn fucking straight, Miz P,” says Grantaire, and that’s how Grantaire winds up joining him.

Enjolras believes that the separation of church and state is vital to a truly free society. He maintains that both the two-party system and the campaign finance system need aggressive overhaul, and that America’s shrinking middle class is creating “a kind of neo-Feudalism”. (That’s a direct quote.) He is horrified that Columbus High has no recycling program, thinks too many school funds go into football, and he still has a lot of feelings about the bathroom thing.

All of this Grantaire learns as they wait for the start of their second detention together. And all of it springs organically from the one question Grantaire had asked, upon slipping into Mrs. Peterson’s room six minutes early and finding Enjolras already sitting there, which, for the record, was “…‘Sup?”
Grantaire ran most of the way to detention. Like, actually ran, from one side of the school to the other, weaving in and out of the crowd. He may have jumped over a freshman at one point, details are hazy. He'd been banking on the theory that Enjolras would be one of those early-to-everything types. This proved true, which is good; Grantaire hasn't even power-walked since finishing his gym requirement last year, and there's a stitch in his side that's making his usual slouch kind of painful.

(For the record: totally worth it.)

Enjolras is half a sentence into the military industrial complex before he seems to realize Grantaire has stopped responding at all, and is just watching him talk, with a helpless grin that grows wider and wider at each catalogued injustice.

Enjolras sighs. "You don't believe in a single thing I'm saying, do you?"

"Not a goddamn one of 'em," says Grantaire, cheerfully.

It could be his imagination, but Enjolras's shoulders seem to slump.

"No, no, keep going, you were on a roll," Grantaire tells him. Enjolras looks skeptical. "Hey man, my big plans were to zone out or graffiti my desk, this is ten times more interesting. You're like a space alien. What's your post high school plan? Is it super hero?"

For once, Enjolras doesn't take the bait, only smiles and says, "Poli sci." The smile is not directed at Grantaire; it's one of those inward expressions, like someone remembering a private joke or a good dream or a secret love.

Grantaire's not jealous of an entire field of study, don't be ridiculous.

He lasts about five minutes into their second detention together before he starts kicking the back of Enjolras's chair. He isn't even doing it on purpose. Or well, he is now, because every kick makes Enjolras turn around and look at him again, and every time that look gets even more intense, like he's about to set something on fire with his mind.

This wasn't the initial plan, though. Grantaire's just keyed up. And there's no outlet, because he didn't bring anything to occupy himself. His homework and sketchpads are all chilling in his locker. He never needs them in detention. By this point, he's always asleep.

Somehow, though, it's harder to drift off with those distractingly soft-looking curls in the middle of his sightline, less than three feet away. Why did Enjolras choose the same desk as before, the one right in front of Grantaire's usual spot? It's a rookie mistake.

Enjolras is doing homework, or at least trying to. He's got two open textbooks on his desk. History or world politics, most likely; there's a lot of maps involved. It could be biology, too: disease epidemics or migration routes. Grantaire's money is on politics, though.

He gives the chair another kick. Enjolras doesn't turn this time, but his shoulder blades visibly tense under his hoodie. Grantaire tries very hard to track only the motion, and not the shoulder blades themselves, nor the shoulders, which are—well. Anyway.

'This is so stupid,' Grantaire thinks, because it is. But the thought is so familiar that it recedes into the background noise of his mind, so it doesn't have much bearing on his actions.

His actions are to kick the chair again.
Enjolras twists around to deliver another glare.

_Ha. Yes._

'Bored,' Grantaire mouths with a shrug. Enjolras glances towards Mrs. Peterson's desk. He opens his mouth, probably to say something like, 'We're not supposed to talk in here,' realizes the inherent paradox, and turns forward again.

Grantaire kicks the chair. No response.

Grantaire grabs a scrap of paper, scrawls "entertain me," and scoots it onto Enjolras's desk. He taps his fingers. His hands are twitchy, like he's just run across the school again, or lit a stick of dynamite.

No wonder. Enjolras whirls around, eyes wide. Along with the satisfying flare of outrage, there's a questioning, incredulous look to his expression. Grantaire thinks it's meant to convey something like, 'How could you possibly have the nerve to—' but he chooses to interpret it as, 'How?'

In response, Grantaire shimmies his shoulders. It's hard to mime dance moves from behind a desk, but he does a pretty good job.

Enjolras just snorts and turns around again. Disappointing. Grantaire is still pondering his next move when a book is thrust into his face. He looks up. Enjolras is—somewhat forcefully—handing him a faded school-issued paperback. His expression is triumphant, a man calling a bluff. Grantaire squints down at the cover.

_Grapes of Wrath._

He has no idea what it's about, vaguely recognizes the title as one of those things people reference when they want to be fancy. (Grantaire takes a dim view to the classics. He still has _Great Expectations_ trauma from his time as a freshman. He may be a junior now, but some wounds don’t heal.)

But lacking anything better to do, he flips to the first page:

"To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth."

He's almost to the end of chapter four when detention lets out. Three more lines, to be exact.

"Hey," says Enjolras. "I need that back."

Two and a half more lines. He shakes his head without looking up. "Let me finish this paragraph, dude, hang on."

"You're actually reading it?" says Enjolras. The surprise in his voice is palpable. Grantaire snaps the book shut.

"What part of this shocks you," he drawls as he surrenders the paperback, "that I took you up on your offer, or that I can read?"

"I didn't mean it like that." For the first time, Enjolras looks uncomfortable.

Grantaire shrugs.
"Did you like it?" Enjolras asks after an awkward pause. It’s polite, stilted. A gesture of apology, maybe, or pity.

The guy clearly thinks Grantaire is an idiot. Grantaire can’t think of anything worse than getting trapped in some pretentious literary discussion where, he knows, he will flop around trying to sound smart, fail to sound smart, and accidentally justify every one of Enjolras' suspicions.

"I dunno, man," says Grantaire. He buries his hands in his pockets. He's carrying two quarters, a crayon, three cigarettes, and a permanent marker. "It's rough going. Doesn't even have any pictures. Or, well," he pulls the marker from his pocket and twirls it meaningfully between his fingers, "it didn't."

The expression on Enjolras's face is something to behold. He sucks in a sharp breath and flips frantically through the pages, searching for damages.

Grantaire cracks up. "No, man, I'm just messing with you. Your book's fine," he says.

Enjolras storms out of the room.


Grantaire swivels around. "He has detention again?" he says, disbelieving.

"He has detention for the rest of the week," says Mrs. Peterson.

'Jesus,' thinks Grantaire, 'what did this guy do?' And then another thought, right on its heels: 'What can I do to get three more detentions?'

In the end, all it takes is sneaking into the first floor men's faculty bathroom before school and filling it floor-to-ceiling with packing peanuts.

If anyone asks, it's a political statement.

Nobody asks.

Eponine's lunch is two packets of string cheese and half a jar of maraschino cherries. Grantaire can't decide whether or not to offer part of his sandwich. Precedent suggests there's a 50% chance she'll be grateful and a 50% chance she'll be offended. He takes a long, thoughtful sip of root beer.

"Hey, can you give me a ride home?" she says. She looks tired, but it could just be all the eye makeup.

"Sure." He runs his finger along rim of the root beer can, gives the pull tab a twang with his thumb. "So, like, I assume you mean my home?"

"Um, yeah," says Eponine flatly. She has a point, he thinks, given that she lives about a block from school.

Eponine spends a lot of time at Grantaire's house, even when they're not actively hanging out. Often, with no warning, she'll show up at 10 on a school night. Sometimes she brings her little brother.

Grantaire has no idea what that's about. He’s tried to make her talk about it, but he never got far.
This was early in their friendship, before he realized that the secret to getting along with Eponine was that you never asked. She is aggressively nonchalant about the whole thing, and it's not like Grantaire minds the company. His parents go to bed early and she knows where the spare key is.

"You'll have to wait around for an hour, though."

Eponine shrugs and spears a cherry with her spork. "That's fine. Detention again?"

"Yeah."

"You're smiling."

"Am I?"

Eponine is clearly confused about why he's so chill with the sudden rash of detentions, which is getting excessive even for him. But he doesn't feel like talking about it, and she doesn't press him.

That's one of the nice things about being friends with Eponine: the not-asking goes both ways.

Grantaire shows up early to all three remaining detentions. And each time, Enjolras is already there, at the same desk, almost like he's waiting for him. Wishful thinking, of course. Wishful thinking edging into downright wishful hallucinating.

Their conversations are lively as ever. It's the only part of the school day where Grantaire feels completely awake.

And it isn't even because the guy is almost implausibly handsome. (Grantaire pictures a Renaissance painter, easel at the ready, frowning at Enjolras. "Look," the painter mutters, "You're supposed to be a glorious sun-drenched avenging angel, I get it, but Jesus, can you tone it down? The hair, the mouth, c'mon. Less is more, y'know?")

That part is—distracting, sometimes. But whatever this is, the thing that makes Grantaire keep pushing, keep needling; it would be there no matter the color of Enjolras's hair.

Watching him talk feels like being in a movie.

Enjolras leans forward a little when he gets going, lowers his voice, makes sustained eye contact. It creates the sense of being on the inside of something clandestine and thrilling and important. Enjolras could be the noble general inspiring his troops to one last stand, the rebel leader assembling his ragtag crew, the last honest politician in Washington holding the floor.

In the film version, Grantaire would probably, like, grab his sword and run out into the front lines, but then again, half the reason people watch movies is because it's the one situation where the scrappy, idealistic underdogs actually stand a chance.

So it's no wonder that Grantaire keeps baiting him. It never takes much.

(On Wednesday: “Aren’t all senators basically the same, though?”)

(Thursday: "But do we, like, need civil liberties?")

(Friday: "Hey, Enjolras. Enjolras! What are your feelings...on justice?")

The real mystery here is why Enjolras keeps responding. He must know by now that Grantaire is
only in it for the amusement factor. The downward curl of his mouth at each new question says as much.

But either Enjolras is the easiest person to provoke in the universe (possible) or Grantaire has some special skill at getting under his skin (wishful thinking), or.

Or. The other option is that Enjolras needs to talk about these things, and Grantaire is the one person in school willing to listen. It’s within the realm of possibility. The only other kids at Columbus with strong opinions about this stuff have surely branded Enjolras a crazy gay terrorist-loving commie by now.

It must be lonely, to carry around that much conviction and have nobody to share it with. If that’s the case, Grantaire almost wishes he could buy into the whole grand utopia. But it’s not like joining in on the self-delusion would do either of them much good in the end.

Grantaire tries not to get wistful on the day of their final detention together. It’s probably the last time the two of them will ever occupy the same classroom. Enjolras has “honors student” written all over him; barring another set of parallel detentions, Grantaire doesn’t see their schedules overlapping again.

(They do have the same lunch period. Sometimes when he’s talking with Eponine, Grantaire will catch a flash of blond out of the corner of his eye. Enjolras eats alone. There aren’t enough tables for him to have one to himself, but nobody ever takes the seats around him. It’s a tiny no man’s land.

Grantaire knows he shouldn’t care. He’s reading into things, creating a drama that isn’t there. Enjolras is the last person you’d ever call a victim. It’s like having sympathy for a volcano or a forest fire. Anyone who tried to sit by him probably got glared into oblivion.

But it’s hard to watch: Enjolras with his head down, doggedly chewing, surrounded by empty chairs.

Grantaire has seriously considered extending an invitation. Well, half-seriously. The thought has occurred to him. He doesn’t even want to think about how Enjolras would react, the way his shoulder muscles would bunch up and his mouth would tighten. Grantaire isn’t sure he’d be able to laugh it off. Rejection in the open air is not the same. Outside of detention, the rules are different.

Mostly, Grantaire tries not to look.)

Grantaire wants to say something to mark the occasion, he’s just not sure what. He spends the last half hour watching the clock on the wall tick down, trying to compose a decent goodbye—something that will come off as clever and funny and memorable, but also cool and effortless and, you know, natural. It’s tricky.

When the clock hits 3:45, Grantaire’s still got nothing. It doesn’t matter; before he can even open his mouth, Enjolras is out of his chair and halfway to the door.

Grantaire watches him go.

Eponine spends most of the weekend with him, which helps. On Friday, she sneaks over at eleven with a bottle of vodka and they do their time-honored tradition of drunken video games and trash-talking. Grantaire’s trash-talking gets zestier the more he drinks, but his gaming skills get much worse.

"Yeah, how do you like that?" he crows, as a marine takes a machine gun round to the back. "How
does it motherfucking feel?"

"Grantaire, that's your guy," says Eponine. "I'm shooting you."

"Dude, why do you assume I'm rooting for myself?" he says. Grantaire can't help it. He wants to be on the winning team.

Eponine just frowns. "You want to pause the game for a while?"

"Why?"

"Because you've been running face-first into that wall for like five minutes."

He squints at the screen. Come to think of it, this particular patch of wall looks familiar. So does his army dude’s little jog-in-place dance. A whole world of energy, going nowhere. Grantaire tries very, very hard not to read this as a metaphor for anything in his life. His face crumples. Stupid vodka.

"I'm pausing," she says.

So instead they listen to music—on Grantaire’s ancient boom box because his laptop speakers are beyond any repair—and draw. Well, Grantaire draws, Eponine colors. He’s working on a series of ponies decorated like monsters.

“Got anything to smoke?” Eponine asks after a few minutes.


Eponine picks out the pony covered in Frankenstein scars. "Quit calling him that, he’s my friend. I’ve known him since I was four."

It’s hard to imagine Montparnasse as a child, mostly because Grantaire can’t picture him not selling drugs. Whenever he tries, he just gets the mental image of a guy passing out candy behind the school, secretly cutting the Pixy Stix with, like, sand.

“When’s he getting out?” says Grantaire instead.

“Five months.” Eponine delicately shades the pony with a blue crayon. She has a good sense of color. He’d tell her that, but she’s weird about compliments sometimes.

“Ugh,” says Grantaire. “God, we might as well just get a hobby or something.”

Eponine snorts. "You could always join that new club they're doing," she says.

"What?"

"It's like a charity, activism-y…” she waves a hand. "You haven't seen the posters? They're everywhere."

"You know I never read signs."

"The first meeting is next week. The guy who started it is, like, terrifyingly determined to recruit people."

At the words 'terrifyingly determined', Grantaire's heart does a funny clench. "Blond kid with a weird name?" he asks, so casually. "Wears a lot of red?"
“Yeah,” she says.

“Think you’ll go?” He’s studying the zipper on his hoodie.

Eponine shakes her head. “Sounds pretty boring. I only know about it because—some people are, uh, thinking about going.” ‘Some people’ has to mean Marius. Eponine’s been hopelessly in love with him for years. She’s secretive about it, but she always seems to know his schedule. It’s one of those things they don’t talk about. She puts the crayon down and looks into Grantaire’s face. “What about you, think you'll go?”

“Why would I?” he says. His voice sounds fucked up, muddied. He swallows. Maybe he’s coming down with a cold.

Grantaire isn’t hurt that Enjolras never asked him to join his stupid save-the-whales club or whatever, never even mentioned it during the hours they were pretty much locked together in the same room. Enjolras might have been desperate to bring in new members; he was not desperate enough to go to Grantaire.

And seriously, why would he? It makes sense. It doesn’t bother Grantaire. Certainly it’s no surprise.

Enjolras lent him that book, but that wasn’t a friendly gesture so much as it was a “for god's sake, quit bothering me” gesture, which, fair.

Sure, they talked, but Grantaire’s pretty sure that, in a pinch, Enjolras would happily deliver the same rants to inanimate objects or animals or babies too young to crawl away.

The point is, they're not friends. Enjolras probably won’t even acknowledge him in the hallways. They’re not anything. And Grantaire doesn't care, and he doesn't want to spend his afternoons sitting around crying about seagulls covered in oil spills.

But. He’s pretty sure he's the first kid at the school Enjolras really talked to. And it's stupid, but it feels like that should count for something.

Eponine gives him a look.

"Is there more vodka?" he asks.

"Not for you," she says. "Here." She scoots a fistful of crayons his way. "Take a pony."

Eponine isn’t always much of a talker, but she sees a lot more than she lets on. That’s why he can’t tell whether or not it’s a coincidence when she leaves the gold crayon and the red crayon far out of his reach.

Grantaire’s last class of the day is World Mythology, and the final ten minutes are the worst. They're supposed to be getting a head start on their homework, but Mr. Clark has zero control over the class, so instead everyone talks. It's too loud to sleep by a factor of about ten. Grantaire’s options are: have the same conversation he has every Monday with Eddie Greer (“How was your weekend, man?” “Haha, got completely trashed. You?” and so on) or listen to music.

He puts in his earbuds and turns up the volume.

The thing is, Grantaire had actually wanted to take World Myth. He went through a big mythology phase as a kid, couldn’t get enough stories about heroes and monster-men. If nothing else, he figured
it would be an easy blow-off class. Looking around the room, he gets the sense that 24 other people had the same thought. It's basically wall-to-wall jocks and burnouts.

Well, jocks, burnouts, and Jehan Prouvaire.

Jehan's a year younger, but Grantaire remembers him from middle school. They were in mural club together. Jehan was so clumsy, he was banned from even touching the paints. It never seemed to bother him. He would sit on the ground, cleaning everyone's brushes and reading aloud from whatever book happened to be in his backpack at the time.

It was a weird mix: Shel Silverstein and Rumi, Edgar Allen Poe and Gwendolyn Brooks. Some Shakespeare, some Elizabeth Barrett Browning, seemingly whatever he could get his hands on. Jean stammers when he's called on in class, or when he's addressed directly, most of the time, but he’s never had any problem reading. Even facing the wall, paintbrush in hand, you could hear the reverence in his voice:

"Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.

Grantaire tended to be the last to leave, and often at the end, it would just be him and Jehan, talking about whatever. Grantaire would ask him to re-read a poem, or they’d trade thoughts about Lord of the Rings. Jehan is surprisingly funny if you get him going on something. He'd had a lot of feelings about hobbits that year.

Grantaire wonders if Jehan remembers any of this. He certainly doesn't seem to have changed much since middle school. If anything, he's only become more like himself.

Because Jehan lives by his own rules. He dresses like the back room of a thrift store: awful sweaters, pants either way too long or half an inch too short. Sometimes his jeans have rhinestones on the back pockets. He wears the same glittery salmon-colored loafers every day. He's halfway into his sophomore year, and his look remains unchanged. For that reason alone, he may be the bravest kid in Columbus High.

And people give him shit for it, of course. A lot of people do. As far as Grantaire is concerned, this alone is proof that Enjolras is wrong. Humanity is capable of being mean to Jehan, therefore a brighter tomorrow is never coming.

It’s a hollow way to win an argument, but that’s kind of a moot point these days. It’s been two months since his last detention with Enjolras, and their only interaction has consisted of Grantaire trying not to watch him across the cafeteria like a creeper. (Enjolras no longer eats lunch alone; he’s fallen in with Combeferre and his merry band of overachievers. Grantaire can’t compete with that shit, so the window has closed anyway.)

He shakes his head. Whatever, it’s not like Grantaire is sitting around writing sad poetry in his journal. Enjolras is busy with save-the-world club; Grantaire is busy living his life.

From the other side of the room, he watches a senior named Clyde approach Jean's desk. Clyde’s saying something. Jehan doesn't look up from his book. Clyde keeps talking. He's trying to mimic Jehan; it's evident from the way he tosses his hair and flips his wrist—two things Grantaire’s never seen Jehan do, for the record. Jehan's lips press together. Clyde says something else.

These aren’t Grantaire's stupid fucking bids for attention. It's designed to be hurtful. You can read it
in Clyde's posture: tense, aggressive, leaning too far into Jehan’s space.

There are supposed to be rules against this kind of thing. Grantaire has read the student handbook three times: once in the fitful, optimistic summer before he started high school, and then twice in the years after that, looking for rules to break. In theory, CHS has a zero-tolerance policy against bullying. In practice, it’s as mythical as a hydra.

Jehan doesn’t give a reaction, although he also hasn’t turned a page for the last five minutes. Eventually, Clyde gets bored and wanders back to his buddies. Jehan keeps staring down at the book, hands very still.

Grantaire isn’t sure what possesses him to do it. But suddenly he’s yanking the headphones out of his ears and crossing the room. Mr. Clark doesn’t notice, busy playing computer Solitaire. Someone needs to fire him. When Grantaire reaches Jehan's desk, he crouches so they're eye level.

"Hey," says Grantaire. And Jehan must remember at least a little of mural club, because he looks up at that, and says, very, very guardedly,

"H-hey."

Grantaire casts around for something to say. 'It's going to be okay' is worse than meaningless. 'Stay strong' would be condescending, not to mention hypocritical. The pause stretches out between them. Grantaire doesn't know how he thought he was going to be able to help in the first place.

So instead he just blurs out the first thing that comes into his head. "Okay: screw, marry, kill—Norse mythology, Greek mythology, Egyptian mythology?"

"Uh, what?" says Jehan, brow furrowed.

"It's a simple question," says Grantaire.

They regard each other for a moment, then Jehan breaks into a slow smile.

"Okay, see this—this is actually—yeah, okay, I have it,” Jehan says, like he’s solving a riddle. “So it goes marry Norse mythology. The wedding feast alone would be worth it. Kill Egyptian mythology. Not as any kind of a—the stakes are just different, y’know? It'll rise again; I mean, resurrection’s in the lifeblood. And, uh, screw Greek mythology, but use every kind of protection so you don’t get, y’know, swan herpes."

"Or bull herpes," Grantaire adds helpfully.

"Or flying-showers-of-gold-coins herpes," and okay, Jehan wins this round.

"That is the worst herpes of all," says Grantaire solemnly. "Sorry, I gave you the easiest Screw Marry Kill in history."

"Yeah, pretty much," says Jehan. He’s bouncing in his seat. "My turn. Screw, marry, kill: the color yellow, the sound of cymbals, trepidation."

They play Screw Marry Kill until class gets out, and they keep playing out the door and down the hallway. In the middle of making Grantaire decide between sleep, laughter, and pizza, Jehan says,

"Actually, I'm headed to a—want to come with me?" He smiles. "I'm going to a meeting."

Something about the way he says the word, with weight and fervor, makes it clear that this isn’t yearbook club. Grantaire looks back at Jehan’s bright, hopeful eyes and knows immediately where
he’s heading.

He swallows. “Uh yeah, okay.”

The group meets in Ms. Hucheloup’s classroom, but Jehan wants to make a stop in the sophomore hall so he can grab his backpack and, apparently, dig through the assorted textbooks, notebooks, paperbacks, and wads of colored tissue paper heaped at bottom of his locker.

Grantaire waits. It's stupid, but his heart is beating faster at the thought of showing up at save-the-world club. That's why he doesn't immediately notice that Jehan has has a big photo of Walt Whitman stuck up on the inside of his locker door, like a movie star.

He's trying to decide whether or not to say anything about it when a dark-haired figure leaps toward them, shouting something and wrapping an arm around Jehan. Grantaire's adrenaline has a full three seconds to kick into high gear before he realizes it's just Courfeyrac.

Courfeyrac is loud but harmless. They had Health together last year, and prior to that, Grantaire remembers him vaguely from the middle school play. God knows what he’s doing in the sophomore hallway.

"Jehan, oh Jehan, I've missed you!" Courfeyrac is saying, jokingly nuzzling into Jehan’s shoulder. Jehan looks at the floor. One corner of his mouth quirks up. “Hey Courf,” he says. “How’s it going?” His total lack of surprise is itself surprising. This must be their normal routine, Grantaire decides, part of Courfeyrac being Courfeyrac. He can get away with this stuff by virtue of being a theater kid; people expect it of him.

"Horrible,” says Courfeyrac, “I've been suffering from the worst case of Jehan withdrawal you can imagine. It was tragic. I was five minutes from putting a wig on Bossuet and making him say stuff about Dante, just to fill the void." Grantaire snorts, and Courfeyrac looks up at him. "Oh, hey Grantaire.”

"Sup," says Grantaire.

Jehan had twisted away to root through his locker some more, but he straightens up, smoothing out two pieces of crumpled notebook paper.

"Grantaire has a band name for you," Jehan says.

“You’re starting a band?” asks Grantaire.

“Yeah,” says Courfeyrac.

“Well,” says Jehan, “he doesn’t have a guitar yet, so mostly he’s just been naming a band. Over and over.”

“Hey!” Courfeyrac protests. “The name is an important step.”

“So is learning instruments, I’ve heard.” Jehan nudges Courfeyrac’s arm, but he’s smiling.

Courfeyrac makes a mock-offended face. “So Grantaire,” he says, “this name—”

Grantaire shrugs. “Dude, I don’t know. I’ve got no idea what he’s talking about.”
“None of us ever do,” says Courfeyrac. “He’s a madman, pay him no mind.” Jehan coughs. “A mad genius!” he amends. Jehan coughs again. “A mad, brilliant genius who is going to share with me Grantaire’s wonderful band name out of the kindness of his own—”


The scary part is that Courfeyrac seems to mull it over. "It's got a ring, I will grant you that," he says, "but I don't know how much merch that's gonna sell."

"Dude," says Grantaire. "You don't have a guitar and you're already thinking about merch?"

Courfeyrac is untroubled. "And groupies," he says. He hooks his elbow through Jehan's free arm. "Jehan said he'd be my groupie, didn't you?"

"Learn your chords and I'll think about it," says Jehan. "As long as it doesn't interfere with my career," he adds, closing his locker and scooping up his backpack.

"Why, what are you shooting for?" Grantaire asks. He's expecting 'professor' or 'poet laureate of the United States', which is why he cracks up when Jehan says, deadpan,

"Cat burglar."

"That’s great,” says Grantaire. “I mean, hopefully nobody notices the string of robberies that keeps matching up with your tour schedule, but.”

“Nah, it’s cool, we’ve got alibis all worked out,” Courfeyrac tells him. “So, what’s up, man?”

“Not much. Me and Jehan are going to a thing.”

Courfeyrac grins. "Oh, you’re going to the ABC too?"

“That's what this is called?” asks Grantaire, stopping in his tracks. Jehan had been vague about the name, earlier. Grantaire is starting to see why. “Are we fighting for the rights of oppressed letters? Like, the ones way far down in the alphabet? Or the ones that just kind of suck, like Q?”

“It’s an acronym,” says Courfeyrac. “Or an initialism, if you wanna get technical.”

There is a pause.

“...which stands for...?” Grantaire prompts.

Jehan and Courfeyrac exchange a look.

“There’s been, uh. Some controversy on the matter,” says Jehan at last.

"We've been going to every meeting since it started," says Courfeyrac. "It's awesome, you'll love it. But we can't remember what it's supposed to spell. And by now, it's been long enough that we're afraid to ask."

"The A is Activists or Americans," says Jehan. "We think. But it might also—there's 'accelerate' or 'activate' to think about, couple of other things. The C we're pretty sure is 'change'."

"Or coalition," Courfeyrac adds.

"And the B?"
Jehan looks grave. "That," he says, "is anyone's guess."

All of Enjolras' recruiting must have paid off. It's not a bad turnout.

Surprisingly, Grantaire knows or at least recognizes most of them. It’s a lot of the kids Enjolras has been eating lunch with. Combeferre’s there, of course, and Musichetta, who played saxophone in middle school band back in the day.

Courfeyrac greets her with a kiss on her hand and a line of Shakespeare. She wins Grantaire’s approval forever by being completely unimpressed. "Fair maiden?" she says with a snort. "Seriously?" (She's Haitian. Between her, the two dudes she’s brought along, Combeferre, and Bahorel from Grantaire’s Consumer Ec class, half the ethnic diversity in Columbus High is in the room. It’s like a 90’s cartoon. Very Captain Planet.)

It’s a little surprising to see Bahorel. Grantaire doesn’t know much about him, just that he does wrestling, and it’s easy enough to paint a picture from there. Granted, the only other information Grantaire has is that sometimes Bahorel comes to school in bright lavender jeans, which is not a standard wrestling team move. Either the guy’s got hidden depths, or he’s stupid and colorblind. Grantaire has long assumed option two, but his presence now is testing that.

Less surprising is Feuilly, who last year spent all of Current Events trying to get people worked up about the war. (Grantaire mostly brought in articles about old women getting arrested for keeping eighty dogs in their apartments, or drunk men crashing their riding mowers into their local police stations. Human interest pieces.) In the back corner, he can spot Cosette, and, making moon-eyes at her from a distance—Grantaire's heart breaks on Eponine’s behalf—is Marius Pontmercy.

Counting Jehan, Courfeyrac and Enjolras, that makes brings the ABC up to eleven members. It’s impressive. In a school where even most of the pot heads are conservatives, Enjolras has managed to find ten allies, all of them united for a common cause, and the desire to effect real change in the world. Well, except for Marius, who clearly just wants to make out with Cosette. And Bahorel, who could be there by accident.

When Enjolras looks up and sees Grantaire, a muscle in his jaw twitches gratifyingly. At the very least, it answers the question of whether or not Enjolras remembers him.

"Hey," says Grantaire. He tries not to bounce on the balls of his feet.

"Why are you here," says Enjolras flatly.

"Gosh, I don't know," says Grantaire. He scuffs the toe of one shoe against the smudgy linoleum, holding onto a straight face through sheer force of will. "I guess I felt like making a difference by getting involved in my local community," he manages.

Enjolras breathes in and out. His jaw muscle is starting to get worrying.

"Is everything al—" Combeferre starts hesitantly, and Enjolras seems to shake himself, remembering that the room is still full of people, specifically teenagers, and that any impending drama will be sensed on an almost preternatural level.

Enjolras takes a deep breath. He lets it out. "Grantaire," he says, and his voice is level but tight with tension, "can I talk to you outside for a second?"
"Sure thing, chief," says Grantaire.

Enjolras doesn't waste any time. The second the door shuts behind them, he leans forward, eyes blazing, and hisses, "So help me, if you are here as a—joke, or a prank, if anyone comes to me saying you've done anything—anything—to make them feel uncomfortable or, or bullied—"

And, okay. Logically, empirically, Grantaire understands that laughing has got to be counterproductive, but God, he cannot help it. The sound comes out more bitter than he was expecting, but what can you do?

"Luckily, it's almost three," Grantaire says, "so I can't steal anyone's lunch money."

Enjolras rolls his eyes. "I get that your whole sarcasm and apathy thing looks cool or whatever to the rest of the world," he says, "but we're trying to accomplish something here, so—"

“I know, I know,” Grantaire breaks in. “Repress all my bullying urges. Don’t worry, I’ve got this. Wedgies will go unwedged, Indian burns unburned, nurples unpurpled. I solemnly pledge to keep my grubby mitts off your justice club."

Enjolras grits his teeth. His face is getting sort of red.

And contrary to popular belief, Grantaire does have a self-preservation instinct somewhere. It’s buried under several thick layers of bullshit, but it still glimmers through from time to time. It’s the reason he bites back his next comment, finds himself saying,

“Look, you asked why I’m—Jehan invited me, okay? No worries.”

Enjolras blinks at that, looking surprised in a way that’s about equal parts enjoyable and insulting.

And then, because Grantaire’s self-preservation instinct only goes so far, he adds, “besides, you never know. Maybe I’ll see the light and decide I’m just nuts about change. Or coalition. Or communism. Or—uh. Carburetors? Cat Stevens? Help me out here.”

“It’s ‘cooperation’,” Enjolras snaps.

Cooperation! Grantaire makes a mental note for Jehan and Courfeyrac. “Yeah,” he says breezily. “Sure, yeah, that too.”

Enjolras looks at him for a long moment. “Jehan invited you,” he repeats slowly.

Much as Grantaire normally loves driving Enjolras up the wall, this level of scrutiny is starting to make his hands itch. He nods, grateful for a chance to talk about something else.

“Yeah, we have World Myth together,” he says. “You’re lucky to have him on your side. He’s a cool little dude."

Enjolras looks at him again. Grantaire has lost all concept of what he’s even doing wrong at this point. Is he supposed to be saying something? Is this a test? It’s like they’re in a play, and nobody ever thought to give Grantaire his half of the script. The silence stretches out between them.

He leans against a locker. “This is a nice hallway,” he says a few seconds later, when it becomes clear that Enjolras is not about to explain what’s going on. It earns a confused furrow of the eyebrows. “But you’re probably gonna have better luck leading your revolution from inside the
As the meeting begins, Courfeyrac gives him a quick lowdown on how the ABC works. “You caught us on the first meeting of the month,” he whispers. “That’s probably the most interesting one. Everybody gets three minutes to make the case for their favorite cause, and then we vote on what we work on for the next month.” In theory, no one person is in charge—everything is strenuously democratic—but Grantaire is willing to bet that, in practice, everyone lets Enjolras speak a few minutes longer.

Then they draw up what Courfeyrac refers to as “a plan of action”, which sounds cool except all the steps are actually really boring. Apparently it’s a lot passing around petitions, planning fundraisers, and writing letters to senators or whatever.

But it’s kind of interesting to hear everybody’s pet cause. It’s almost like show and tell, which was always his favorite part of Kindergarten. Musichetta wants gun control. Jehan has a lot of feelings about school funding, and also single moms for some reason. Courfeyrac can wax poetic about minimum wage. Bossuet is big into animal rights. Cosette is passionate about the environment, and Marius is passionate about whatever Cosette is passionate about.

Enjolras is passionate about everything.

Seriously, everything. At first, Grantaire thought the whole social justice sampler plate thing was just a love of committee rule run amuck, but after seeing Enjolras get equally fired up about inflation, carbon credits, and corn syrup, it dawns on him. The group operates this way because it needs to. Enjolras never could have picked one cause to champion. He wants, fiercely, to change the world in every direction at once.

Enjolras was compelling enough in detention. Watching him around people who actually care is spellbinding. He talks a lot less than Grantaire would’ve expected, listens more, nods and takes notes. Sometimes he smiles. Halfway through the meeting, Grantaire already knows there’s no way he’s going to be able to stay away from the ABC.

“Why are you here?” Enjolras snaps, as Grantaire files in behind Bahorel at the start of the second meeting. From his expression, he was hoping that last time might have been a fluke.

Grantaire widens his eyes. “Shit,” he says, “you mean this isn’t cheerleading try-outs? I must’ve taken a wrong turn somewhere.”

On the third meeting, Enjolras asks again, “Why are you here?” and Grantaire gazes thoughtfully at the ceiling.

“Like, on the planet? I don’t know, I think I’d rather leave that one to the philosophers. Oh hey, Combeferre! Just in time. Help a bro out, we’re getting existential over here.”
It becomes almost routine. Meetings are Mondays and Fridays, and Grantaire comes to every one of them, and every time, Enjolras asks why. If this was anyone else, it would count as banter. But Enjolras seems, at best, resigned to Grantaire’s presence. He keeps asking, though. Grantaire keeps coming up with new reasons, and Enjolras keeps asking. Maybe they’re making progress. Maybe part of Enjolras looks forward to the latest smartass answer, maybe Enjolras would even be disappointed if Grantaire stopped showing up.

Grantaire tells himself this, and is struck by a sudden memory of being eleven years old, pointing a homemade wand at an automatic door and trying to convince himself he had moved it by magic.

‘Okay, brain,’ he thinks. ‘Thanks.’

Grantaire's trying to retrieve his Algebra textbook from where it's slid into the back of his locker without tipping over anything else. It's a real-life Jenga situation.

"Hey," says Eddie Greer.

Eddie always winds up with the neighboring locker, or desk when they’re in the same class. They're friends through sheer proximity, because school officials can’t kick that fetish for alphabetization. It’s not so bad. Last year, they sat side-by-side in Spanish, and Eddie laughed himself red-faced at how Grantaire hassled the teacher.

("Hola, cómo te llamas?"

"What…is my name? Señora, I'm hurt, I thought you knew me."

"Grantaire, por favor. Cómo te llamas?"

"So you do know my name. Señora Johnson, why must we go through this act?"

"Señor, por favor. Cómo te llamas?"

"Uh, my name is Grantaire."

"Grantaire. Chico. Dios mío, por favor, en Español."

"My name is…el Grantaire?")

"Hey, so you and Prouvaire've been cozy lately," says Eddie now. "He giving you make-up tips or something?"

"Gotta master that smoky eye look," Grantaire deadpans.

"Careful, man," Eddie tells him, "if you keep talking to him, he's gonna think you're his boyfriend."

Grantaire closes his locker. "Jehan's not gay, he's just weird," he says. "It's fine, he's cool."

"Please," says Eddie, dismissive. "The kid's flaming. Watch your ass with that one." He laughs.

"Literally."

Eddie’s just trying to be funny; Eddie doesn’t mean anything by it. Grantaire makes himself laugh. It doesn't sound right, but Eddie doesn't notice. He thumps Grantaire on shoulder and walks off.

Enjolras and his friends have a plan. Enjolras and his friends have a series of plans, outlined and detailed on white boards and notebooks and probably Courfeyrac’s blog somewhere.
What they don’t seem to understand is that you can’t change the world without changing human nature. And the simple fact is, people don’t suddenly get better. Even if you wanted to, you can’t just wake up someday smarter, more compassionate, braver. It doesn’t work that way.

As he stuffs the book into his backpack, he thinks that he really needs to stop going to meetings.

“Why are you here?”

“No worries,” he says. He considers patting Enjolras on the shoulder and then thinks better of it, lets his hand drift back down. “I’m only in it for the snacks.”

Enjolras presses his lips together. “There are no snacks,” he says.

“I know,” says Grantaire. “And I think I deserve a lot of credit for how well I’m handling my disappointment.”

For the first time in years, he finds himself sketching real people again. Suddenly his algebra notebook is half filled with scribbled portraits: Musichetta arguing with Bahorel, mid-hand gesture. Jehan’s look of concentration as he drafts a petition. Courfeyrac stretched out with one arm around Jehan’s shoulders and his feet in Marius’s lap. Enjolras and Combeferre, heads bowed together, conspiring. Cosette lugging a giant stack of books about alternative energy. Enjolras scowling at the mention of corporate personhood. Joly’s patented “everyone get ready, I’m about to make an awful joke” smile. Enjolras brandishing a pencil as he talks about voter registration.

He tries not to draw Enjolras more than the others, but there’s a pattern to which sketches he puts the most time into, and that’s as telling as anything.

At first, part of the routine is walking to Ms. Hucheloup’s with Jehan and Courfeyrac. They’re both so nice, it takes weeks to realize that Courfeyrac doesn’t actually want Grantaire to join them. He covers it well most of the time, but there’s a slight twist of disappointment to his smile whenever he looks behind Jehan to see Grantaire standing there.

Which would hurt, except it’s also about the time Grantaire figures out what’s going on: Courfeyrac is desperately crushing on Jehan.

Grantaire had assumed that all the dramatics was just Courfeyrac functioning on default settings. And in a way, he was right. Courfeyrac is affectionate and tactile with everybody, will greet any member of the ABC by jumping into their arms and shouting “darling!” (Feuilly looked confused. Enjolras was surprisingly tolerant. Cosette almost dropped him, which was just about the funniest thing Grantaire had ever seen.)

But it’s different with Jehan, more careful. Courfeyrac will mess up Jehan’s hair, or squeeze his elbow, or lift him by the waist and spin him around, but he always, always glances back at Jehan’s face afterwards, as if checking in: ‘Is this okay? Are you having fun? Am I going too far?’

Jehan is harder to read. For a while, Grantaire has no idea if the feelings were returned. None of the usual signs are helpful: Jehan stammers and blushes no matter who he’s talking to. He actually does it less with Courfeyrac. And in the end, that’s what tips his hand: around Courfeyrac, Jehan is comfortable enough to be bold. He actually calls Courfeyrac on his bullshit more often than even
Musichetta, it’s just harder to notice because Jehan does it so fondly.

Watching them dance around each other is equal parts adorable and nauseating. Still, bros before—other bros. Or something. Grantaire has zero interest in playing third wheel. Seriously, fuck tricycles. So the next Friday, when Jehan hops over to Grantaire’s desk, saying, “Come on, time to head over,” Grantaire waves him off.

“I think I left my phone in my car,” he says. “You guys go ahead, I’ll see you there.”

When he rejoins them in Ms. Hucheloup’s room, Courfeyrac mouths “thank you” over Jehan’s head, and Grantaire knows he got it right. Courfeyrac looks so pleased, Grantaire considers seeing if the gratitude extends to a pack of M&Ms or something. Cupiding is hungry work, and, well, there are no snacks in justice club.

“Why are you here?”

“Because eighteen years ago, one of my dad’s sperm was way luckier than its brothers.”

It’s hard not to like the members of the ABC, even to root for them in some detached way. These kids seem convinced that somebody’s actually going to read their letters and petitions, that it’s not all destined for the trash can of some bored intern. Giving them shit would be like kicking a basket of unusually political puppies. Besides, Grantaire spends two hours with them every single week. He could never get away with being perpetually obnoxious.

So when he does act out, he tries to make it count.

**Things that Grantaire is Officially Not Allowed to Do at Meetings, a By No Means Comprehensive List Assembled Over the Course of Several Months**

1. Refer to the collective members of the ABC as Enjolras and the Enjolrettes
2. Attempt to chime in to discussions by quoting the battle speech from Braveheart.
3. …Or any other, completely unrelated scenes from Braveheart.
4. Underscore anyone’s speeches by shouting “Amen!”, “Can I get a witness?”, or “Cowabunga!”
5. Underscore anyone’s speeches by waving one of those giant foam fingers from sporting events.
6. Underscore anyone’s speeches by playing dramatic music in the background.
7. Okay, who the hell gave Grantaire a kazoo?
8. Giggle every time someone uses the word “duty.” Seriously, are you five?
9. Make a series of straight-faced, somber-sounding comments designed to include the word "duty" as many times as possible.

9a. [Amended, after the giggling proves contagious.] Okay, now nobody is allowed to say "duty", are you happy?
9b. I wasn't laughing, I was coughing, and anyway that's not—look, can we move on?

10. Anything involving sock puppets, for any reason.

11. For the purposes of 10, "sock puppets" also includes puppets not made of socks.

12. Okay, who the hell gave Grantaire his kazoo back?

Chapter End Notes

A tremendous thank-you to the many people who have looked over various drafts of this story, including estelendur, threetynes, effectively-immortal, and sonhoedesrazao, and most especially to bedlamsbox, who has shepherded and guided this fic from its very beginnings.

"Stay gold, Ponyboy" is a reference to The Outsiders; Grantaire isn't just being weird. Well, a little weird, I suppose.

Jehan's poem is 'The Cry of the Children' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

This story is by default set around the time I was in high school, so about 2005 or 2006. If you don't feel like reading a period piece, feel free to imagine that everyone has smartphones and Facebook accounts that they just don't talk about, and they're burning CDs for each other out of retro nostalgia.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Eponine makes a scene, Enjolras makes a proposal, Grantaire makes a decision he can't take back. (Also, there are jokes.)

Grantaire doesn't realize he's been avoiding Combeferre until he's faced with it, until there's no escape.

It's about ten minutes after one of the ABC meetings has broken up, and Grantaire is loitering by the south exit when he approaches. There's a brief uncomfortable moment where they have to decide how much to acknowledge each other and Grantaire opts for a silent nod but Combeferre must feel differently, because he says,

"Hey Grantaire," and now they have to exchange words.

Grantaire pulls his earbuds off, pauses his mp3 player. "Hey."

"Are you waiting for a ride?" Combeferre asks politely, the keys to his sensible used Volvo dangling from one hand. Sometimes talking to Combeferre feels like talking to a teacher; he's so mature, it's hard to trust him.

"I am the ride," Grantaire says, shaking his head. "I'm waiting for Eponine."

Combeferre seems to consider this. He slips his keys back into his coat pocket. "I'll wait with you," he says.

This probably merits a response, but Grantaire can't think of one. 'Thanks' doesn't make much sense, since it's not like he'd asked Combeferre to do this.

"Good meeting today," he offers, mostly out of a desire to say something. It's not until Combeferre gives him a weird look that he realizes how bad that probably sounds coming from the resident unbeliever.

And yeah, Grantaire makes an effort not to heckle anyone but Enjolras. But looking over at Combeferre's guarded expression, he realizes that maybe not everyone else draws that distinction.

He racks his brain for some way to fix this. "It's pretty nuts you can remember all those numbers off the top of your head and shit," he offers.

Combeferre doesn't seem to know what to do with that, either. "I just read about this stuff a lot. I guess it's always in my head, so."

Grantaire is laughing before he can stop himself. "Man, you are exactly the same," he says. "Remember when we used to play war at recess and you'd bust my chops over historical accuracy?"

Something in Combeferre's posture seems to unbend. "It was World War Two," he protests. "You wanted a talking robot dog."
"I stand by that," says Grantaire. "Can you imagine how much faster we would've beat the Germans with robot dogs on our side?"

"That's not even an issue of historical accuracy, that's just fidelity to genre," says Combeferre.

Grantaire laughs again. "Yeah, you probably said it just like that when we were eight, too."

Combeferre gives a small smile. "I was a weird kid," he admits.

"No, it's cool, remember? We compromised. I had a regular dog named—"

"Sparky," Combeferre supplies immediately.

"—who I secretly pretended was a cyborg, but undercover."

"I knew it!" says Combeferre, and then his expression goes more sober, almost cautious. "I'm surprised you remember all that."

Drug use only affects short-term memory, but he guesses Combeferre isn't in a position to know.

"How could I forget, dude," says Grantaire. "Those were the glory years."

He actually has to hear the words leaving his mouth before he realizes how pathetic they sound. It's bad enough when an adult breaks out the 'high school is the greatest time of your life' routine, but Jesus, who admits to peaking in second grade?

He throws a laugh on the tail end but it's way too late, that comment is just sitting there, like a turd in a public pool. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, wondering where Eponine could possibly be. If he hadn't said he was waiting for her, he could make his excuses now, retreat to his car, and text her the new plan. Except Eponine never has her phone on, so Grantaire is stranded even in his imagination.

"Hey," says Combeferre, "so a bunch of us are getting together this weekend to watch a movie if you want to—"

He trails off; Grantaire is already shaking his head.

There's a reason why Grantaire is the first to leave every meeting. The ABC is technically a student group, open to everyone. When they assemble in Ms. Hucheloup’s room after school, that’s fair game. But most of the members are also friends—all of them are, to one degree or another, except Grantaire. It makes things weird sometimes.

Last week, he didn’t flee fast enough and he wound up holding an invitation to Joly’s birthday party. Joly had been passing them out to everyone in the room so he couldn’t very well skip over one person, but there had been a definite hesitation before handing one to Grantaire, and it had spoken volumes.

Grantaire had kept the presence of mind not to throw the thing away. Someone might’ve noticed, and there was no need to make any of this more awkward than it had to be. But the way he jammed the card into his backpack had probably made it clear he wasn’t intending to RSVP.

Playing third wheel is bad enough, but twelfth wheel? Just—no. God no.

"Sounds great, but I've got plans that day," says Grantaire as casually as he can.

Combeferre's eyes narrow. "That's interesting, since I didn't say which day it was."
Shit. Grantaire could smack himself. It's times like these he has trouble believing he used to be one of the smart kids. He stares down at the floor, wondering how quickly he could dig an escape tunnel.

"Well, you know," he mumbles, "It's just—kind of a busy week, and uh—" There's a tapping at the door, and when he looks up, Eponine is standing on the other side of the glass. Bless that girl.

Grantaire pulls the door open.

“Hey, Eponine,” says Combeferre.

"Dude,” says Grantaire, “where's Gavroche?"

Eponine crosses her arms. "Staying at a friend's house," she says. "Why?"

They start toward the parking lot. "I assumed you went down to the middle school to pick him up. I've been waiting here forever, what the hell were you doing?"

"Stopped by my place," says Eponine. She shrugs, and there's a telltale clinking from her backpack. "We were out of vodka, so I got schnapps. Peppermint."

"Ugh," says Grantaire with feeling.

“Don’t get shit-faced tonight,” she says. “Last time you fell asleep at like eleven and I had nothing to do. I was so fucking bored.”

“Won’t be a problem with peppermint schnapps.”

She juts her chin, defensive. "It was that or gin, and they would've noticed the gin. What." The last word is in a much harsher tone, directed over his shoulder. Grantaire turns around.

Combeferre is standing a few feet behind them, one hand on the door of his Volvo. Grantaire winces; he'd kind of forgotten Combeferre was there. Then again, it's been established that Grantaire isn't winning any genius points today.

“If you want to say something, say it,” Eponine bites out.

Combeferre blinks back at her from behind his glasses, face impassive. "You shouldn't have that on school grounds," he says at last.

"You're the only one that's watching," she says viciously. "Grantaire, are we leaving or what?"

"Have a good weekend," Grantaire mumbles over his shoulder.

Combeferre nods, wordless.

"I hate that guy," Eponine says as soon as they've both climbed into the van. She draws her knees up on the seat. "Did you see that look when he saw me? Like I'm a barefoot orphan in one of those Save the Children ads."

Grantaire would classify it as more of a "I am staring at your forehead so I don't look at your boobs by accident" look, but he isn't sure if that would help or hurt Combeferre in her eyes.

"I think he's okay," says Grantaire weakly. "He was nice in elementary school."

"Doesn't mean anything," says Eponine. "I was a dick in elementary school."
"You're a dick now," says Grantaire.

"Were you, though?" he asks later, when they’re back in his room.

On the screen, Eponine's soldier lobs a grenade and crouches behind some crates. "Was I what?"

"Were you one of the mean kids? Like, when we were little." She's holding things down enough that Grantaire feels alright momentarily swapping out his controller for the bottle. He takes a swig and suppresses a shudder. Good lord, his memory had not been exaggerating how bad that shit is.

"You really don't remember me, do you?" says Eponine.

He shrugs. "You weren't in my orbit."

She'd been popular, he knows that much. Too popular to talk him, although he doubts he’d tried; that hadn't been a concern at the time. He can vaguely remember hearing her name, other girls upset that they didn't have something Eponine Thenardier had: new shoes, gel pens, pierced ears.

He wouldn’t have been able to pick her out of a lineup, though. Between skipping fourth grade and flunking his first go-round of freshman year, there was a big chunk of time where they weren't even in the same grade.

By the time they started hanging out, she was riding the downswing of a shift in reputation. These days, it’s easy to forget where she came from. People smile at Grantaire, talk to him in the hallways, laugh when he answers “How was your weekend?” with “Man, can’t remember; must’ve been good, right?” They keep more of a distance from Eponine. Not that it bothers her, she says. She says it frequently, blinking too much and not quite meeting his eyes.

"Well, I was a bitch," she says. She pauses the game and rubs at her eyes, sighing. They've been pausing the game a lot lately, Grantaire thinks. Normally they've got more dedication. "It was a long time ago. Why, what does it matter?"

"Doesn't, I guess," says Grantaire. He crawls over to hand her the bottle. Eponine accepts it and takes a long swallow. He tries very hard not to ask if she's okay. "So how've you been?" he asks instead.

“Got a job,” she says. He’s thinking it’s the setup of a joke, but she doesn’t volunteer anything else for a long moment.

“Seriously? Where?”

“Fabric store.” Another swallow. “The one next to Panera.”

“When?”

“Three weeks ago.” At Grantaire’s shocked expression, she laughs, but there’s a hard edge to it. "I don't know, maybe you'd be in the loop if we ever saw each other."

"What?"

"It's not too late, you know," she says. "You could drive back around and meet up with Combeferre and all his perfect friends, and fucking drink warm milk and talk about world affairs, or watch opera or whatever the hell it is they do for fun."
"Um." He tries to take that all in. "Hey, if you want to hang out more, you should just say something, because I’m not—"

"God, Grantaire!" she snaps. "Not everything is about you!"

Grantaire swallows. He tries to compose a reply that doesn’t start with “I”. It’s a struggle, which kind of underscores her point.

He ponders this riddle for a while, and then he says, "Want some pizza?"

Eponine's head is in her hands. “Obviously,” she says, not moving.

"Then let's make a pizza."

That does earn a look. When her face resurfaces, even Grantaire can tell her eye makeup is smeared. "You can't cook," says Eponine.

"It's a frozen pizza," he admits. "But I'll put it in the oven for you."

By the time the kitchen is filling with the acrid smell of burning plastic, things are already halfway back to normal.

"You maybe should've unwrapped it first," she says.

Grantaire pries open the oven door and grabs a pair of tongs with the other hand. The pan smokes and hisses and almost slides out of his grip. He flings it into the sink with a loud clatter. "Well, yeah," he says, "in retrospect."

As they wait for the ex-pizza and pan to cool off enough for the garbage can, he pours them each a bowl of cereal.

"You could always come with me to the meetings," he says.

Eponine just snorts.

Well, he thinks, she has a point.

Jehan is reading instead of paying attention in World Myth. Nobody could blame him for that. The funny thing is, the book he's sneaking is The Iliad. It may even be in the original Greek; Grantaire only catches a glimpse of it as they pass notes back and forth.

He grabs the picture he'd been drawing (a duck dressed as Poseidon and wearing a snorkel) and scribbles on the back, you are the worst at slacking ever.

Jehan's reply comes a few minutes later: I took World Mythology to learn world mythology. I'm not letting World Mythology get in the way of that. (This duck is amazing. Can I keep it?)

sure, as long as you promise to take him on walks & clean up after

"Thanks," Jehan says later, when the teacher is done for the day and they're waiting in that awkward space before the bell rings.
Grantaire shrugs, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Not a problem." It took about sixty seconds to draw; he hadn't been trying too hard.

"Oh, I actually have something for you," says Jehan. He pulls out a book from his backpack. "Have you ever read any World War One poetry?"

"Uh, not much of a poetry guy," Grantaire says, scratching the back of his neck. He takes the book, though, turns it over in his hands. The cover is black and white. "Or a huge fan of those old-timey..."

"It's not like you're thinking," says Jehan. "Borrow this, you'll like it. World War One was kind of the death of old-timey anyway. The Lost Generation, y'know. Hemingway and all that."

Grantaire makes a face—even the Cliff Notes of *The Old Man and the Sea* was hard to get through.

"Musichetta hates Hemingway, too," says Jehan, laughing. "Oh man, at lunch the other day, she and Enjolras were joking—"

Grantaire almost drops the book. "Enjolras made a joke?"

Jehan squints at him. "What are you talking about? Enjolras jokes—"

"I mean, droll little asides to Combeferre about gerrymandering, sure."

"Have you ever seen him outside of meetings?" says Jehan. It almost sounds like an accusation.

Grantaire thinks back to that week of detentions, the set of Enjolras's shoulders as he stormed out of the room.

"Actually, yeah," he says.

"Have you ever spoken to him when he wasn't annoyed or in the middle of something?"

"Does he have other settings?" says Grantaire. "I think he was born holding a clipboard." His poor mother, he thinks. That couldn't have been comfortable.

"He's different when he's just hanging out," says Jehan.

"Well, I don't have any way of knowing that, do I?"

"Whose fault is that?" Jehan snaps, so sharply that Grantaire flinches. Jehan shakes his head. "Sorry," he says, quieter. "We missed you last weekend."

"You did, maybe," says Grantaire. "But who is this 'we'? Do you have an imaginary friend?"

Jehan huffs. "Nobody in the group hates you," he says, which doesn't answer the question. "Honestly, I think we could all get along great if everyone just—"

"What, hugged it out and made friendship bracelets?" says Grantaire. "Jehan, you're great, but the whole world isn't flowers and poetry." He feels bad as soon as he's said it, but Jehan doesn't look hurt, just distinctly unimpressed.

A corner of Jehan's mouth quirks up. "Have you ever read Dante?" he says. Grantaire shakes his head. "Yeah, okay. Grantaire, you're great, but you don't know everything." His voice is soft, but so forceful that Grantaire feels winded. It's like getting dropkicked by a rainbow.
The bell rings. Jehan just sighs and says, "Thanks again for the duck."

The thing about Enjolras's angry face is that he has more than one. Grantaire is becoming an expert on the topic, and he can confidently report that the guy's got a cornucopia of pissed-off expressions at his command. Each look conveys a slightly different mood.

There's the fire-in-the-eyes clenched jaw of determination, often present when rallying the troops. There’s angry-on-someone-else’s-behalf, which is heavy on the eyebrows. Then there's the bitter twist of his mouth at the mention of global atrocities.

Minor-to-moderate annoyances are more likely to earn an eyeroll-and-compressed lips combo. Grantaire inspires this look a lot. Sometimes, when the offense is especially weird, it's paired with raised eyebrows and a twitch at the corner of his mouth, almost like he's trying not to smile. Almost. Maybe. Well, it's not impossible.

(It's just not probable.)

The point is, Grantaire knows he's in trouble the moment he walks in the room and Enjolras hisses, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Because when Grantaire looks up from the three plastic bags he’s carrying, Enjolras's face is—it's a look he’s never seen before.

Grantaire has no idea what’s going on. He’s not late to the meeting or anything. He’s actually, he realizes, glancing around, the first one here besides Enjolras. Grantaire had skipped the tail end of World Myth—earning himself a perplexed look from Jehan in the process—to make a Taco Bell run. He’d thought it would be funny to bring everyone snacks. Apparently, Enjolras disagrees.

"God," says Enjolras. "I really thought that even you wouldn’t—I mean, way to go, Grantaire. Way to hit people who can't hit back." His voice is flat, cold. There’s a staccato quality to his words, each syllable bitten off. "Way to trivialize an issue that affects millions of the most vulnerable people in the whole country. Way to—"

It feels dangerous to interrupt, but Grantaire can’t stop himself. "What the hell, man, how are you getting this from three bags of tacos?"

Enjolras widens his eyes, almost manic in disbelief. "Seriously, Grantaire? You expect me to buy that it's a coincidence? Seriously?"

"Uh, yeah," says Grantaire, "chalk it up to my eternal optimism and also how I have no clue what the hell you're talking about."

"You brought three bags of Taco Bell to our first meeting to work on rights for undocumented immigrants," says Enjolras. "What kind of stupid—"

"Look," says Grantaire.

Enjolras doesn't seem to hear him "—goddamn joke are you trying to—"

This isn’t like the other times, Grantaire realizes. After months of baiting and pranks and stupid comments, they've finally reached the you're-banned-from-this-group-forever moment, and he never even saw it coming. His mouth is dry. His heart is doing crazy things in his chest.
"Please, Enjolras," says Grantaire quietly. It at least puts the element of surprise on his side. Enjolras breaks off mid-word and looks at him. Grantaire thinks he probably has about seven seconds before another tirade. "For the love of God," he continues, "who spends thirty bucks on tacos just to be shitty to people? Does that seem like my M.O.?

"I don't know," says Enjolras. "You never contribute anything, you don't give a shit about a thing we do or say, as far as anyone can tell you're not even interested in—all you do is hang around being disruptive."

"Disruptive? Last time I didn't even say anything!" This is true. Grantaire had been exhausted, had felt so low that he almost hadn't bothered to show up. In the end, he wound up going out of habit. Listening to everyone talk, seeing them just be themselves, had actually helped, which is sort of pathetic when you think about it.

"You sit in the back with your notebook," Enjolras spits out, "writing whatever it is you write—"

Grantaire doesn’t exactly flaunt his drawing. He likes working unobserved, likes catching people in unguarded moments. He’d assumed that Enjolras only noticed him when he was making a ruckus. It’s stupid—of course shutting your mouth doesn’t turn you invisible—but Grantaire feels weirdly exposed all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry," says Grantaire, "is paper not allowed at meetings anymore? Because like half the group is in trouble—"

"They're working on stuff," says Enjolras. "God knows what the hell you're up to," he adds darkly.

Grantaire huffs a bitter laugh. It’s that or cry. “Oh my god, what do you think I’m doing? Spying for the Russians? Spying for the NSA? Planning my next sinister fast food stunt? Has it occurred to you, for like, a second, that maybe I have nothing to hide and you’re completely insane?"

"Yeah? Show me one page of your notebook," says Enjolras, eyes flashing. "One page, Grantaire."

He tries to calculate the odds of flipping to a random page that doesn't contain a single sketch of Enjolras—not his face, not the light glinting off his ridiculous hair, not the sweep of his hands while making a point.

The chances are—well, it's not impossible. More than 25%, he thinks. But probably less than 75%. For all his flaws, Grantaire’s not much of a gambler. His fingers tighten on his spiral-bound.


"Just—tell me," says Grantaire, speaking low and fast, "tell me what's more likely; that I would go out of my way for some cutesy, racist punchline? Or that I'd show up with a bunch of random food, having totally forgotten what you guys talked about last meeting? Look at me. I've worn this hat every day this week so I don’t have to comb my hair. Do you honestly think I have my shit together enough to—"

"And it's just some big random chance that—"

Grantaire wants to throw his hands up in the air, but he can't with the tacos weighing him down. "Look, first I thought KFC, but after Bossuet's chicken rights speech last week, I don't want to be within 10 feet of a drumstick. Then there was McDonald's, but they've got fuck-all for vegetarians, so what was Musichetta supposed to do? The only other place was Panera, and in the words of Meatloaf, I'd do anything for love but I won't buy twelve dollar cheese sandwiches for you and all your friends."
"Jesus," mutters Enjolras. Grantaire doesn't know if it's directed at KFC's slaughtering practices, the inflated price of a Panera deli sandwich, or the lightest joking mention of love in conjunction with the two of them. He figures it's better not to ask.

Enjolras rubs at his eyes. He looks—he looks exhausted, Grantaire realizes with a start. His face is drawn and kind of pale, and his shoulders are uncharacteristically slumped.

Grantaire feels dumb for being surprised. This is high school; everyone's running on some amount of sleep deprivation. He can't remember ever being awake for all of morning announcements. But somehow it's weird to see Enjolras tired, weird to think about him getting tired in the first place, or thirsty or hungry or sad.

Grantaire finds himself wanting to give Enjolras a hug. He doesn't even try to imagine how that would go down.

'Where's Combeferre when you need him?' he thinks, because Combeferre would know what to do. Enjolras and Combeferre are easy with each other, casual. They listen to each other and take each other seriously and make mystifying inside jokes. Combeferre could get away with hugging him.

"Are you, uh," Grantaire says hesitantly.

Enjolras looks up, blinking. "I have fifty thousand things to—look, it's just been a long day, okay?" He no longer sounds angry at all, just sort of quiet and—unfocused. Grantaire doesn't know what to do with that.

"Anything I can do to help?" he blurts out.

Enjolras shakes his head.

"Seriously," says Grantaire. Unthinking, he shifts the bags over to one side, reaches out and touches Enjolras's arm with his free hand. They both look down at it, the bitten nails, the marker streaked across his knuckles. Grantaire snatches his hand back.

"Why are you here?" Enjolras says, and it's the same words as every time before, but they sound different now, almost beseeching.

Grantaire has several retorts waiting. He looks back at Enjolras’s face and doesn’t say them.

"I—I don’t know," he says instead, helplessly.

Enjolras gives him a long, searching look. Grantaire can’t tell if it’s the worst answer he could’ve given, or the first time he’s ever gotten it right.

It feels very weird to have this moment surrounded with the smell of cheap refried beans. Enjolras must be thinking the same thing, because his eyes flick from Grantaire to the plastic bags dangling from his hands, all the tacos and burritos wrapped in hopeful, colorful paper.

"I'd throw them away," says Grantaire, "but I also doubt you're a fan of landfills, so."

"Fine," says Enjolras abruptly.

Grantaire stares at him. Is it fine? Are they still fighting? Did he just win an argument against Enjolras? Does it count as an argument if both sides just sort of crumble?

"Oh hey, Taco Bell!" says Bahorel from the doorway. "Shit, dude, if you got chalupas, we are best
friends now."

"...dollar menu burritos?" Grantaire offers.

"Close enough, bro." Bahorel makes grabby hands at one of the bags as the rest of the ABC files in after him. Grantaire almost cries with gratitude.

After Tacogate, things are awkward. First Grantaire tries to behave better than usual, as if making the case for himself. This lasts about half an hour before the annoyance sets in; why is Enjolras determined to think the worst? The guy has wild expectations for all of humanity, except for one tiny Grantaire-sized pocket. After that, Grantaire tries to act the same as before.

So the next time Enjolras is lambasting the Democratic party as "a bunch of spineless, feckless moderates", it's easy enough to break in with,

"How do you know they're so feckless? What if they've got, like hidden feck reserves and they're just stockpiling all their feck and waiting it out for the next feck emergency?"

"Feckless is an actual word," says Enjolras through gritted teeth. "It means—"

"I know that," says Grantaire patiently. "Don't be a fecking idiot. Hey, no, you walked into that, dude."

Bahorel and Joly laugh. Feuilly looks uncomfortable. Musichetta’s half-smile hovers somewhere between fed-up and amused. Combeferre clears his throat and changes the subject.

It’s more or less how these things always go. Grantaire wonders if he’s the only one who feels like it’s starting to become rote, like he’s impersonating himself. He might be imagining the tension. He doesn’t think so.

When the meeting ends, Enjolras pulls him aside with a whispered, “Can I talk to you for a second?” and Grantaire’s stomach drops.

“Yeah, sure,” he says, swallowing. There’s a long pause, during which Enjolras volunteers nothing. “Do you have a topic in mind, or did you mean, like, in general?”

Enjolras looks around. Most of the group has dispersed, but Cosette and Marius are doing their usual drawn-out, lingering, oh-so-casual goodbye. They’ve got their backpacks on as though they’re about to leave, but Cosette’s handing Marius a mix CD and he seems to need to go over it with her track by track so in reality it could be another twenty to thirty minutes.

“Not here,” Enjolras says in an undertone.

“My car?” Grantaire suggests, because if they’re going to inexplicably play out an FBI movie, they might as well do this right. Enjolras nods, decisive, and they head out to the parking lot.

Grantaire had assumed that once they got into the van, Enjolras would put this whole mystery to rest, but he still isn’t saying anything. There’s no way this is a good sign, he thinks, or even a medium one.

The silence stretches out, then laps them. Grantaire drums his fingers on the steering wheel, fighting
the urge to turn on the radio, or hell, even his windshield wipers—anything to break up this awful, dragging pause.

The one thing Grantaire wants to ask is, “Am I out of the group?”

He doesn’t. For one thing, there’s a reasonable chance Enjolras will say something like, “You were never in the group.”

Enjolras presses his lips together. He already looks pained, and Grantaire hasn’t even opened his mouth yet. That’s got to be a record, even for them.

"I need a favor," he says at last.

"With what?" says Grantaire. "Ooh, are you forming a cult? Can I join? I’d be awesome at cults, I just know it.” He ticks off his qualifications on his fingers. “I love chanting, I look great in robes —"

"No," said Enjolras, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's about Jehan."

"Jehan's forming a cult?" Grantaire tilts his head to the side, pretends to consider this. “Yeah, I'm down. So, like a free love, hippie kind of thing? Dream journals and ukuleles for everyone?"

Enjolras makes the strangled sound of a man about to get derailed despite every one of his best efforts. Shit like this shouldn't make Grantaire feel proud of himself, shouldn't give him a warm bloom of triumph in his chest, but there you are.

"For crying out loud," Enjolras says. "First of all, you'd be terrible in a cult—"

"Fuck you, man," says Grantaire cheerfully. “You never know, I could have hidden aptitude.”

“They’d be begging you to leave in an hour,” says Enjolras, “and anyway, it’s not like it’s a skill to —God, never mind. I’m starting over."

Grantaire shrugs. “Knock yourself out.” The sick feeling in the pit of his stomach is receding; if it was a simple matter of kicking him out of the club, there’s no way it would be this hard for Enjolras to find the words.

“Courfeyrac wants to ask Jehan to prom,” says Enjolras instead, staring up at the car ceiling.

The fact in and of itself makes sense, but given the circumstances, it’s one ordinary detail floating in a sea of weird. Maybe this is what it feels like inside a surrealist painting.

“...and he wants my blessing?” he guesses.

Enjolras shakes his head. “He hasn’t asked yet. He’s afraid to.”

There’s something in his tone that doesn’t quite fit, but Grantaire can’t identify it. “Jehan’s gonna say yes, though.”

“That’s not what he’s worried about. People have been harassing Jehan at school.” The line of Enjolras's mouth goes hard, bitter. “Apparently, it's been going on for months."

'Apparently', Grantaire mouths. Apparently. Like it was only brought to his attention today. Maybe it was, because beneath the outrage, Enjolras sounds surprised.

Something in the quality of Enjolras's shocked, righteous voice sets Grantaire's teeth on edge. What planet has he been living on, that Jehan being tormented is even news? High school was designed to
crush kids like Jehan; most people figure this out early in freshman year. Who the hell is Enjolras, to waltz in three years late, acting like he's the first person to uncover some scandal?

At any rate, he's still talking. "Courfeyrac is afraid," Enjolras is saying, "He's worried that, if people see Jehan dating a guy, on top of—" He waves a hand in a gesture that presumably means 'every single thing about Jehan', "that it's going to get—bad." He looks up at Grantaire.

"I don't see how he could do anything to make it worse than it is," says Grantaire flatly. "Have you seen how that kid dresses? If high school was a savannah, Jehan wouldn't even be a wounded gazelle. He'd be a gazelle with no legs."


"He's a sweet kid," says Grantaire, "and there's no accounting for taste. I still don't see what this has to do with me. Do you want me to have someone killed? I'm flattered, but I'm not that well-connected."

"No—I." Enjolras takes a deep breath. "I was talking to Combeferre about it, and his theory, for why people are so—so awful to Jehan, is that he's essentially the only one in school who isn't conforming to everyone's pre-conceived notions of, of gender and sexuality. There's nobody else like him, so he bears the brunt of everyone's bigotry and prejudice. And I was thinking." He breathes in deeply again. "If it wasn't just Jehan and Courfeyrac—if there were other couples, maybe it would —"

"Make a bigger target?" Grantaire guesses.

"Diffuse their anger," says Enjolras. "Dilute it. Complicate the narrative in people's heads. At the very least, create some solidarity."

They are circling closer and closer to the actual reason for this conversation, Grantaire thinks, like water down a drain. Somehow he still has no idea what's going on. "So, you want me to go around outing people? I don't think I'm qualified for, like, detective work. Honestly, most of your friends would be better at that kind of—"

Enjolras makes a frustrated sound deep in his throat. It is a sound Grantaire has never heard before, which is sort of astounding, given how often he witnesses Enjolras's frustration.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" says Enjolras.

"Doing what?"

"Being completely obtuse, is it on purpose?"

"Usually, you have no problem thinking I'm an idiot," mutters Grantaire. "Why can't you believe it the one time I actually—"

"You're not an idiot," says Enjolras sharply.

Grantaire stares at him."Well shucks, dude, now I'm blushing," he drawls, as Enjolras continues, "—you're just intellectually lazy."

"Wow," says Grantaire. "Do you still need that favor? Is this you trying to sweet-talk me? Man, you better hope you stay that pretty, or the dating scene is gonna be rough."
Enjolras throws his hands in the air. "I'm not trying to—okay, look." In one breath, he blurts out, "I need you to go to prom with me. I need you to pretend to date me."

"What," says Grantaire. He knows what he heard, he’s registered the sounds, but his brain unhooked itself from his ears somewhere around 'prom', and he isn't sure he's processing anything.

*Pretend to date me.* Grantaire would've been less shocked if Enjolras had said, 'Let's pretend to be Power Rangers.' Actually, in comparison, the Power Rangers thing sounds awesome. Maybe he can voice it as an alternative, because—what is even happening?

Grantaire's never dated anyone. He tries to imagine playing the role of a boyfriend, and for some reason, his brain conjures up 1950's stock footage of couples sharing root beer floats and riding on paddle boats. He and Enjolras would probably sink the boat, he thinks. They'd paddle in opposite directions until the whole thing tipped over. They'd go crashing into the lake, and Enjolras would be furious, and Grantaire would make a joke and Enjolras would get even angrier, and Grantaire would have to pretend not to watch droplets of water skate down Enjolras’s collarbone and the whole thing would be a disaster.

Going to prom together—has Enjolras ever smiled at him? Grantaire doesn't think so. Even with lofty political convictions on the line, he's not sure Enjolras would be able to reign in an evening's worth of glares and judgment long enough to pass as someone who doesn't hate him, let alone as someone who wants to—make out with him, for crying out loud. Grantaire can't picture Enjolras holding his hand. He can't picture them sharing a limo or getting stupid pictures taken or slow dancing or anything. Grantaire has a pretty good imagination, and it's not like he's never tried to imagine kissing Enjolras, but it's a blank.

Enjolras is looking at him. Enjolras is waiting for an answer.

"Please," says Enjolras, quieter. "I need you to." Some stupid, shameless part of Grantaire's mind perks up its ears at the word “need”, and then Enjolras adds, "Should I go down the list? Combeferre is waiting to ask out a girl he likes, Feuilly is going to be away the weekend of prom, Bahorel’s got a girlfriend, Joly and Bossuet already have plans, and Marius can't keep a secret."

Grantaire tries not to be hurt that he was the last option. "What about posting something on Craigslist?" he snarks.

Enjolras shakes his head. "Seemed too risky," he says, so readily it’s clear he had thought of it already. Grantaire literally ranked below Craigslist, fucking awesome.

"Let's be real," says Grantaire. "Kids are stupid, but they're not this stupid. Nobody on the planet is buying us as a couple."

"I know this is asking a lot of you," says Enjolras slowly. "I understand that. I've been thinking about this, and if you agree to it, I can pay you twenty dollars."

"You think we should pretend to date," Grantaire says. His voice sounds dead to his own ears, hollow. "And in exchange, you're offering me money."

"I don't have a job yet," says Enjolras, "but by the time prom comes, I can probably make it more like forty."

Grantaire doesn't realize he's angry until he's furious, until he's spitting the words. "Get out of my car."

Enjolras stares at him. "What?"
"Leave, get out! Is some part of that too complicated for you? Now who's being mentally lazy, Jesus."

Enjolras's eyes are wide. "What are you—"

"Get. The fuck. Out of my car," says Grantaire through gritted teeth.

Clearly Enjolras is surprised, because he obeys, slamming the door behind him. Or maybe he just wants to be out of there. Grantaire counts to a hundred. He rests his face on the steering wheel and pulls out his cell phone.

In defiance of space, time and all precedence, Eponine answers on the first ring.

“What the actual hell,” says Eponine later, flopping down on Grantaire’s bed.

“I know,” says Grantaire, “I know.”

“You realize that’s basically the plot of Pretty Woman, right?”

Grantaire rolls over and squints at her from the floor. “Believe it or not, it’s not cheering me up to be compared to a hooker,” he mumbles.

“Wasn’t trying to cheer you up,” she says. “I just think it’s funny.” She pats his knee where he’s sprawled on the floor. “You’re out of detergent, by the way.”

“What?”

"Laundry detergent. You're out. You need to put it on the shopping list or whatever."

"Nah, that'll just look suspicious." Grantaire's mom knows he doesn't wash his clothes often enough to put a dent in the bottle. "I'll pick some up the next time I'm out. She’ll think she got an extra and forgot about it."

"Whatever," says Eponine again. She pulls out a bottle of nail polish, unscrews the cap, and starts in on her toenails. "What are you gonna do if your parents wake up and realize their washing machine's full of girl's clothes?"

Grantaire snorts, trying to picture the expression on their faces. "Tell 'em I'm trying to find myself. Then while they're freaking out, you can make a rope ladder from my sheets and climb out my window."

"We're on the first floor," she points out. "It's like a two-foot drop."

"Fine, you can make a rope ladder out of pillowcases, I don't know. Did you bring anything to drink?"

"No," says Eponine. "You haven’t been a fun drunk lately."

"Ugh," says Grantaire, rubbing a hand across his eyes. She maybe has a point. He sighs. “Man, why’d he have to offer me money?"

Eponine glances over at him. "It's bugging you this much?"

"What?"
"The whole—" She makes a vague flapping gesture with the hand holding the nail polish. Grantaire would tell her to be careful about getting it on the floor, except she’s seen his floor. "—the Julia Roberts thing."

"Of course not," he says immediately.

"Because, you know," says Eponine, "as shit to complain about goes—"

"Ugh," says Grantaire again.

"No, seriously," she says. "A super hot person comes up to you out of the blue like, ‘Hey, let’s tell everyone we’re dating! Oh and also here’s twenty bucks, just—’"

"Would he have offered Combeferre money?" he says, before he can stop himself. "Or Bahorel, or Joly, or, or Courfeyrac?"

"Asking Courfeyrac would defeat the whole—"

"That’s not my point and you know it," says Grantaire. "If it was one of his friends, hell, if it was anyone else, anyone at all—he would’ve counted on them, to do the right thing."

Eponine makes an unimpressed face. "‘Will you be my pretend gay boyfriend for great justice?’"

"I’m not saying it wasn’t a stupid plan," he says.

"Would you have done it, though? If he hadn’t said anything about money?"

Would he? Grantaire hasn’t given it much thought. If Enjolras had asked him the way he would’ve asked Bossuet or Feuilly or any of the others, no defensiveness, no bribes, just ‘Please’. Just ‘I need you to,’ like back in the car, and Grantaire can still remember how those words had felt for one dizzy second, before the other half of the sentence came into play. And oh great, Grantaire had almost forgotten how, in Enjolras’s estimation, he ranks below Craigslist.

He stares up at the ceiling. "Well, I guess we’ll never know," he says.

"He’s a douchebag," says Eponine flatly. She wiggles her toes.

If he was, this would all be so much easier, thinks Grantaire.

"He’s really not, though," he says. Because that’s the thing. Enjolras wants what’s best for the world all the time, so earnestly that it’s almost hard to watch. He loves his friends. He loves his country. He believes in people. Just not, you know, Grantaire.

"No," says Eponine. "He is. He makes you sad, I get to call him a douchebag. That’s how it works, get with the program." She starts in on the other foot. "Hey, when I’m done, want me to do your toes?"

It’s early March, so it’s not like anyone’s going to see Grantaire’s bare feet for months.

"Yeah, sure," he says. He picks his head up off the ground long enough to give her a weak half smile. "What would I do without you?"

"You’ll find out on Friday, I guess," she says, most of her concentration still on the nail polish. "I’ve got a field trip all morning, so I won’t be at lunch."

Grantaire lets his head drop again with a sigh. Without Eponine, there won’t be anyone to keep his
"He's a douchebag," Eponine repeats.

Well, that's just eerie.

Grantaire should probably be more grateful not to be eating lunch alone.

The guys at the table—skateboarders, or at least they carry around skateboards and pretend to know what they're doing on them—were happy to let him join them. He sits with them in Algebra, which is to say, at the back of the room, cracking wise. It's not so bad. He doesn't even have to lie about his grades, because unlike his other classes, Grantaire actually is only sort of scraping by in Algebra.

They're nice enough, he guesses. It's not their fault that they're as dull as paint. He's been zoning in and out of the conversation for about five minutes and when he checks back in, yep, they're still talking about pot.

And, okay. Grantaire's reputation may be overblown, but it's true that not so long ago, there was a year of his life where he was high more than he wasn't. It is, in fact, a big part of how he got through that particular year. He still smokes up with Eponine sometimes, supplies permitting.

Still, much as Grantaire enjoys a good pipe or whatever, there's a limit to how long people can talk about pot before the whole thing becomes aggressively boring, and it's about fifteen seconds.

The bottom line is, they're doing an awful job of keeping his mind off shit.

Still, Grantaire is keeping his eyes on this side of the cafeteria. He's determined not to spend lunch sneaking looks at what he's come to think of as the ABC table. It's not an official thing, and not every member sits there—some of them don't have the same lunch hour—but it's a good chunk of the group: Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Marius, Jehan, and Musichetta. And Enjolras, of course.

Grantaire is fighting not to wonder if Enjolras is telling his friends about what happened, if it's still okay to come to meetings, if Enjolras is angry, if Enjolras is—Grantaire doesn't have much shame but he has a little, and mooning over someone who puts you on the same moral level as a prostitute feels below even him.

So yeah. Grantaire's keeping his eyes far, far away.

He misses Eponine, her uncanny ability to read a situation. Eponine would assess things in a second and start in on a purposely wordy tirade about her favorite reality shows, bringing him up to date on whatever fresh bullshit has happened now. She has awful taste in TV, and she'll talk about it forever if allowed. Eponine would pull on his sleeve, keep her eyes on him, subtly angle herself in his line of sight and prattle on about challenges and eliminations until Grantaire could breathe again like a normal person.

He wants to bang his head on the table. Instead, he decides to buy some nachos, mostly so he can have an excuse to stand up and walk around for a bit.

As Grantaire joins the back of the lunch line, he can see Jehan standing maybe ten people ahead of him, bad fuzzy haircut bobbing up and down, as if to some internal rhythm. Anyone else would be listening to music. Jehan's probably thinking about Leaves of Grass.

Matt-or-Mark from detention walks by.
"Hey Mike!" says the girl in front of Grantaire.

"Hey, Melissa," says—well, Mike, apparently. "Gimme five," he says to Grantaire, and Grantaire does, even though it cheapens the institution of high fives to hand them out left and right.

Ahead of them, Jehan is smiling at the lunch lady and paying for his food. Mike looks up at Jehan, glances back at Melissa to make sure she's watching, and starts to walk forward. Grantaire has enough time to think, 'I don't like this,' and then it happens very quickly: Mike elbows Jehan in the side, hard. Jehan's lunch tray clatters to the ground, milk carton spraying everywhere, spaghetti sliding across the tile.

"Sorry," says Mike. The insincerity in his voice is as stark as the red sauce spattered on the floor. Grantaire is standing a good distance away, but he can still hear it when Mike leans in closer, and coughs out a word that sounds a lot like "fag."

Grantaire feels sick.

The set of Jehan's shoulders, the resignation as he crouches down to scoop up the remains of his lunch: this is all something Grantaire understands intimately. It's almost too familiar to register.

That's not what's bothering him. Because Grantaire chose the exact wrong moment to look back out at the cafeteria, and so he instead he'd caught the expression that flickered, just for a moment, across Courfeyrac's face.

It's like being punched in the stomach.

_Courfeyrac is afraid_, Enjolras had said, and at the time Grantaire had been too confused, and too wrapped up in his own bullshit, to stop and think about what that meant.

Courfeyrac likes Jehan, probably never shuts up about the kid in his absence, wants to take him to dances, lights up when Jehan smiles and murmurs "hey" at the ground. And Courfeyrac is afraid for him.

They live in one of the safest parts of the state, but Courfeyrac, who is effortlessly likable and does public speaking for fun, feels genuine fear that someone is going to harm the boy he likes. And this is normal. This is the most mundane thing in the world. They're in high school, they're too young to vote or buy cigarettes, they're still kids. And Jehan might not be safe here, and Courfeyrac knows it.

Distantly, he registers that Jehan has scooped up all the noodles and sauce and dropped it the garbage. That was fast, he thinks. Well, probably Jehan’s had practice.

The lunch lady hands him a new tray of food, her expression carefully blank, and Grantaire remembers that brand of kindness, how it made him want to cry more than than the bullying because it meant so much, and it shouldn't have been necessary in the first place.

Grantaire wants to run a mile, or punch Mike in the mouth, or make Jehan a magic goddamn suit of armor, but anything he can think of is so pointless, and so small, and just. There's nothing Grantaire can do that will accomplish anything. But he is suddenly, sharply, so tired of doing nothing, of being such a goddamn coward all the time.

He knows he's about to do something stupid. It's not a new feeling. What’s new is how little he cares. He is so angry he can barely see, and is this how Enjolras feels all the time? He knows he should be shocked they could ever have something in common, but at the moment Grantaire doesn't care about that either.
Later, he won’t even be able to ask himself, ‘What was I thinking?’ because he’ll remember how quiet his mind had been. His internal monologue is just sort of white noise and static, undercut with a drumbeat of ‘fuck it fuck it fuck it fuck everything’.

Grantaire sets down his empty plastic lunch tray. He's crossing the room before he fully understands what he’s doing.

"Enjolras!" he says. Enjolras doesn't hear him, hasn't actually witnessed the scene with Jehan and Mike, is deep in conversation with Combeferre.

Grantaire doesn't care.

"Enjolras!" he says, louder. Enjolras stops talking and looks up. He’s not angry—or at least, Grantaire doesn’t think he is—but the easy smile slides off his face. He has a bottle of green tea in one hand, and the other hand is holding his fork like he’d been underscoring a point with it. Combeferre looks up too, frowning slightly.

Actually, a lot of people look up; Grantaire might have been shouting. He’s standing about fifteen feet away from the table, too far away to have this conversation in private, and Grantaire doesn't care about that either. In some detached way he thinks this probably makes more sense; if they do this once, in front of everyone, they won't need to keep telling the lie over and over to make it spread. This is going to get around on its own.

"What?" says Enjolras. The expression on his face is hard to read. Confusion, maybe. Eyes wide. They’re breaking every pattern they’ve ever had and—guess what—Grantaire still doesn't care.

"I changed my mind," he says, willing Enjolras to understand.

But Enjolras shakes his head, not following. His eyes, if anything, are wider.

"What you said yesterday in my car," says Grantaire, meaningfully, and he can see the exact moment Enjolras gets it, because he sets down the tea with a clunk.

“What did—” says Combeferre. Musichetta shakes her head and Courfeyrac shushes him, watching intently. Jehan slips into his seat, leaning so close that his chin almost brushes Courfeyrac’s shoulder. Neither of them seem to notice.

Enjolras’s knuckles are white on the fork. It makes a weird rattling sound against the table. Then he takes a deep breath and sits up straighter, like he’s steeling himself, like he's bracing for some bullshit joke and Grantaire wants to laugh at how little he feels like joking right now.

"You were right," Grantaire says. "About—some things." ‘Do this once,’ he thinks. ‘Make it look good.’ He takes a deep breath, summons the most sincere voice he can. "About us. I think we should date. Enjolras," he says, "will you go to prom with me?"

It feels like jumping off a cliff, or in front of a loaded gun. Marius makes a high-pitched noise. Musichetta mouths ‘Oh my god.’ Jehan may or may not gasp. And even though he had to know this was coming, Enjolras is gaping at Grantaire. Combeferre keeps glancing between the two of them, still frowning.

Most of the lunch room is staring, and it occurs to him suddenly that Enjolras is under no obligation to say yes. Enjolras could still be angry about yesterday. Enjolras could have realized if even Grantaire thinks a plan is stupid, it’s probably worth abandoning. Enjolras might have already found some sketchy Craigslist replacement.
Enjolras could say no, and leave Grantaire standing here.

All of the adrenaline, or anger, or temporary insanity flees him in the space of a breath. He stays upright thanks to muscle memory alone.

Enjolras opens his mouth but says nothing. His jaw works.

There is not enough oxygen in the cafeteria. There is not enough oxygen in the world. Grantaire has taken a leap, and now his fragile mortal body is about to hit the ground, or the bullet, or the—metaphor.

He’s glad Eponine isn’t here to witness this. He bites his lip.

"Yes," says Enjolras.

"What?" says Grantaire, feeling dizzy. He has a sudden crazy urge to sit down on the floor, as if everything might make more sense from there.

Enjolras nods. "Yes, let's—I. We should date." His voice has a slightly breathless quality Grantaire has never heard before. Abject panic, if he had to guess. He knows the feeling.

If they were in a romantic comedy, the whole cafeteria would break out into applause. But this is Grantaire’s actual life, and so instead there is a ringing silence.

"Cool, okay then," says Grantaire. "Great. Um." He rocks back on his heels. "I'll just—" he adds, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the skateboarders.

"Yeah," says Enjolras. "Great. Okay." He clears his throat, then nods. On the other side of the table, Combeferre is all but blinking in Morse code trying to catch Enjolras’s eye. Enjolras misses it. He seems to be careful not to turn his head in that direction. His thumb toys with the lid on his bottle of tea, twisting and untwisting.

"Cool," says Grantaire. "Yeah." And then he steps away before it all turns into a horrible sestina where the two of them just keep repeating the same six words over and over until the world ends.

He's made it five steps when Courfeyrac shouts,

"What? No no no, dude! No. Get back here!"

Grantaire pivots around.

"Boyfriends at the table," says Courfeyrac. "New rule. You ask someone out, you sit next to them, because we are not children."

"I—my lunch," says Grantaire.

Courfeyrac waves a hand, magnanimous. "Grab your food and then get your ass back here."

And Grantaire nods, because it is the path of least resistance.

Back at the table where Grantaire was sitting before he embarked on the third-worst decision of his life, the skateboarders are no longer talking about pot. That may be the silver lining in this whole affair. Instead, they look up at him, eyes huge, mouths hanging open.
"I want you to know that I blame you," Grantaire tells them solemnly, reaching for his lunch. "This never would've happened if you could just learn to smalltalk."
"I just—don't see the point?" Grantaire says after a moment. "Look, I promise I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm not some—" He sighs heavily. "And I know I can trust that you would never, to me. So if something comes up and you think we need to convince people, just do whatever you're comfortable with, and I'll deal."

"Uh, no," says Enjolras. "That is a terrible plan. What if I'm comfortable going way further than you?"

How are they still talking? How are they still having this conversation? How hard is it to leap out of a moving car when you're the one driving?

Grantaire eyes the door handle longingly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Grantaire returns to the ABC table, they’ve rearranged themselves to make room for him, which is nice. His new spot is right next to Enjolras, which is—something he’ll have to get used to. He sits down, glancing carefully to the right, but Enjolras isn’t looking at him. Enjolras is staring at the label on his bottle of tea like it’s about to start rapping the solution to world hunger.

It’s a very particular look.

Enjolras’s reverie doesn’t seem like it’s ending anytime soon, and it’s not like Grantaire would know what to do if it did. Instead, he picks up his sandwich and takes a bite. Around them, the usual cafeteria din has picked up again.

The room is so loud, it takes a moment to realize that nobody at the table is speaking. He looks up. Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Jehan, Musichetta, and Marius look intently back.

He swallows. “So, hey guys,” says Grantaire, in the lightest voice he can muster, “what’s new with you?”

“Courf got a guitar yester—” Marius starts, but he breaks off, distracted by Musichetta lunging across the table to slug Grantaire on the arm. Her fist connects solidly with his bicep, hard enough that he can’t tell if it’s a joke or if she’s genuinely trying to hurt him. He rubs the stinging skin and takes a few deep breaths.

“Oh my god, R,” she’s saying, and he’d forgotten about that dumb band camp nickname but at least it implies her intentions aren’t murder, “is this why you’ve been such an asshole this year?”

“I’m always an asshole,” says Grantaire, the words almost leaving his mouth on auto-pilot. “Where have you been?”

Under normal circumstances, that would be the end of it. Today, Musichetta just rolls her eyes.
“No!” She points accusingly at him. “Don’t you start that!” But she’s holding her mouth like she’s trying not to smile, and after a few seconds, she caves. “It’s just awesome to finally be able talk about this.” Musicetta rolls her eyes again. “I mean, I know, I know, it’s like everyone says, ‘some boys act like jerks when they like someone’, but oh my God, you must like him so much because you’ve been unbearable.”

Grantaire’s hands freeze on his sandwich. Musicetta is not a cruel person, which means this is going to be so, so awkward in about 30 seconds when the truth comes to light. He glances over his shoulder. Maybe he shouldn’t have just burned his bridges with the skateboarders. He’s left himself no escape route.

Musicetta is still talking, because there is no God. “Like, now that we’re finally done with all the bullshit pigtail-pulling, can I just say—” But she startles and cuts off mid-word, shooting a sharp look at Courfeyrac. It doesn’t take a detective to realize he’s nudged her or possibly kicked her under the table.

Is the ABC always this violent at lunch, or is Grantaire just a bad influence, he wonders. Courfeyrac gestures her closer, using the hand that isn’t holding Jehan’s hand under the table. With no stealth whatsoever, he inclines his head in her direction, whispering something that audibly includes the phrase ‘gonna scare him away,’ like Grantaire is some tiny woodland creature they’re luring out with breadcrumbs. Everyone else looks in other directions, politely pretending not to notice, although there’s no way they don’t. Courfeyrac sucks at whispering.

Grantaire downs some root beer. He inspects his lunch. It occurs to him that he’s not sure what kind of sandwich he’s eating. He can’t remember what he packed yesterday, and although he’s about a quarter of the way through, he hasn’t registered anything beyond rye bread and an edge of nausea.

To distract himself, he tries to make a list of things he’s feeling that aren’t dread. Gratitude towards Courfeyrac, that this particular train of conversation has been safely derailed. Annoyance at being treated like a fragile baby deer.

Above all else, a deep and profound confusion at Enjolras’s silence. Jehan had said Enjolras was different when not in “to arms, comrades!” mode, but he never mentioned that the guy was basically a mime. It’s weird. Grantaire is missing the hell out of those tirades right now.

“He wasn’t that bad, come on,” says Jehan now.

Musicetta shakes her head. “Jehan, you remember middle school? He was the sweetest kid. I was wondering what the hell was going on when he showed up and started being such an incredible ass —”

“So,” says Combeferre, voice deceptively casual. “You two are dating now?”

Grantaire looks to his left, waiting for Enjolras to explain that this is all an elaborate hoax being perpetrated on the school at large, but Enjolras just uncaps his green tea and says, mildly,

“He asked me out, didn’t he?”

Grantaire stares at him. Granted, a crowded cafeteria is not the best place for Enjolras to let his friends in on the plan, but the longer they delay this, the more people will say things they’ll regret later.

Enjolras glances in his direction for a moment, an almost-reflexive flick of the eyes, and Grantaire tries to communicate with his face how totally messed up this is, but Combeferre picks up on it from
across the table, brow furrowed in concern or suspicion, so there’s no option but to reign it back in.

“That’s so great, you guys!” says Marius, beaming, and god bless that kid’s allergy for subtext. He doesn’t even seem to realize how excruciating this conversation is. Good for him.

As if on cue, Courfeyrac flings down his fork and shouts, “I called it!” He draws himself up to full height and glances around the group, radiating triumph and smugness. “For the record, I totally called it!” Nobody steps forward to affirm what Courfeyrac may or may not have called. “Someone back me up here,” he says.

“He didn’t call it,” says Jehan.

“Traitor,” says Courfeyrac, but the word might as well have tiny cartoon hearts floating around it. “Man, I wish I’d put it in writing.”

“I don’t remember you calling it,” says Combeferre.

“I know I did,” Courfeyrac insists. “C’mon, Marius, help me out, wasn’t I saying something about this a few weeks ago?”

Marius sips his Capri Sun, meditative. “No, you really weren’t,” he says at last.

But Courfeyrac is undaunted. “No, seriously, after the incident with the tambourine. I know I said something to someone. ‘Those two are definitely gonna get together—’”

“I know for a fact you never said they’d date,” Marius insists, and with that he vaults to the number one spot on Grantaire’s list of favorite people. Seriously, Grantaire may throw him a parade. “You said someday they’d snap and start angrily making out on a desk,” adds Marius, “totally different,” and Grantaire’s opinion reverses so fast it breaks the sound barrier.

“I should’ve put money on it,” says Courfeyrac mournfully. “Jehan, we should’ve—”

“When did this start?” says Musichetta. “In retrospect, it explains so much.” Her face lights up in sudden epiphany. “I guess now we know the real reason you kept coming to meetings, huh?”

Grantaire feels like he’s just swallowed a bucket of ice water. Why, for the love of God did it not occur to him until just now that one side effect of pretending to have a crush on Enjolras is that people might be smart enough to piece together his actual crush on Enjolras? It’s like every nightmare of showing up to school naked except worse because there is zero hope of waking up. He can’t look Musichetta in the eye. He sure as hell can’t make himself look at Enjolras.

Instead, he turns his focus to his hands, where he’s holding his can of rootbeer so tightly the metal is starting to warp.

Musichetta grins. “Everything is making sense, this is so awesome. Oh hey, Grantaire, is this what you—”

“So Courfeyrac! Let’s hear more about this guitar,” he says loudly. “It sounds fascinating, and also like a thing I’d like to discuss in greater detail for, say, the next—” he glances up at the clock, “—twenty-one minutes and uh, 15 seconds.”

Combeferre, Courfeyrac, Jehan, Musichetta, and Marius all give him variations on the same perplexed look.

“Guys,” he says weakly, “some privacy here?”
“You asked him out in front of a third of the school,” says Combeferre drily, and Grantaire winces because that is an excellent point.

“Yeah,” he mumbles, “and now maybe I’m wishing I’d been smarter about the whole thing. For example, by doing this pretty much any other way.”

“No, it’s, uh, it’s fine,” says Enjolras. “It was fine, it’s fine.”

Grantaire stares at him.

Marius actually claps his hands together and makes that high-pitched noise again, as if Enjolras has turned into a video of a sneezing baby panda.

“Enjolras, what did you say in his car?” says Combeferre suddenly.

“What?” says Grantaire.

“You mentioned something he’d said to you earlier.”

“—which, I think we were all having a mini-stroke,” says Musichetta. At Grantaire’s questioning look, she adds, “You said Enjolras was right about something. I’m not sure how we even heard you over the sound of Hell freezing over.”

“He’s right about stuff all the time,” Grantaire protests. Enjolras knows nearly as many statistics as Combeferre. When it comes to worldview and like, opinions, the guy is delusional, but in terms of backing up each point of his insane rhetoric with factoids, he definitely does his homework. “I bet right now he could tell you, like, the capital of Portugal without breaking a sweat.”

“Lisbon,” says Enjolras, almost involuntary, and Grantaire laughs.

Enjolras gives him a surprised-looking smile. Grantaire is helplessly smiling back before he remembers that the whole thing is just a sham and Enjolras is pretending to like him for reasons of social justice. He covers for whatever his face is doing by taking another big bite of his sandwich. He chews. There’s some kind of lunchmeat in here, he thinks. Either lunchmeat or wet cheese.

Musichetta clears her throat. “So what I think happened, in Grantaire’s car.”

“Oh?” says Courfeyrac. “Do tell.”

Grantaire works his jaw frantically, but he already knows he won’t be able to swallow fast enough to stop this.

“I think yesterday, Enjolras confessed all his feelings, but Grantaire wasn’t sure he wanted to make the leap and come out of the closet. And then for some reason, today he had a change of heart—”

“Sure,” says Courfeyrac, “he looked across the room and saw the way the florescent light set off Enjolras’s hair—”

“So he decided he could only fix it with a big cheesy grand gesture,” says Musichetta.

“It’s like something from a movie,” says Marius and Grantaire nods hysterically because yes it is, and the common factor is that it’s fiction, and then Enjolras says in a strangled voice,

“Yes. That’s exactly how it happened, you’re right.”

Grantaire raises his eyebrows at him and Enjolras raises his eyebrows back in a way that somehow
manages to convey ‘don’t blame me, you were just nodding like a crazy person so I assumed you wanted to go along with it, and also do you have a more convincing story?’

It’s a pretty impressive maneuver.

“Aww,” says Musichetta.

“So,” says Enjolras, “Courfeyrac, about this guitar—”

And then bless Courfeyrac’s one-track mind, they are treated to several blissful minutes of something about stratocasters and amps and reverb. Marius has taken piano lessons since elementary school and so knows the relevant questions to ask, and Grantaire finally starts to relax.

“Yeah, so all we need to do now is find a bassist and a drummer, and we’re good to go,” says Courfeyrac. He smiles. “Oh, and I need to learn how to play the guitar.”

“I can show you the chords my cousin taught me,” says Jehan. “It won’t take long because I only know two. Uh, C and E minor.”

“E minor is an important chord,” replies Courfeyrac. They’re sort of staring into each other’s eyes, it’s hard to watch. Grantaire almost wishes they’d start actually making out so he could have an excuse to look away.

“Grantaire plays the drums,” says Musichetta, and Courfeyrac’s head snaps around.

“You do?” he says.

Grantaire coughs. “Uh, dude. Snare drum in middle school band. That is not the same thing.”

“You did what?” says Enjolras, almost sharply. Grantaire swivels toward him, readying for a confrontation, but Enjolras doesn’t have his preparing-for-battle face on. Any of them. He's just—looking.

“Yeah,” Grantaire says with a crooked smile. “You know me, the only thing I love more than school spirit is marching.”

Enjolras clearly doesn’t know what to do with that, and Grantaire assumes that will be the end of it, but Musichetta barrels on.

“He was so cute,” she says. “It was before his growth spurt, so he was just this tiny little guy with a mouth full of braces and an amazing haircut, dragging around a drum that was almost bigger than him—”

“It wasn’t almost bigger, it was a snare drum!” Grantaire protests. “They’re literally the smallest drum you can play in marching band!”

Musichetta snorts. “You could’ve fit inside it.”

“If I was a contortionist, maybe.”

“Can we go back to the part where Grantaire was in middle school marching band?” says Enjolras.

“Every year,” says Musichetta gleefully, “except for the semester where he did the school musical.”

“You were in the school musical?”
It’s weird to think about this period of his life. Grantaire generally tries not to.

“You didn’t tell him about this stuff?” says Courfeyrac. “Enjolras, how much do you know about your boyfriend?”

“Give him a break, we’ve been dating for less than ten minutes,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras blinks. “Thank you,” he says, glaring at Courfeyrac.

“So, the musical—” Marius prompts.

Grantaire rakes his hands through his hair in frustration. “Come on guys, he’s your friend. Shouldn’t you be telling embarrassing stories about him?”

Although he kind of can’t imagine anyone having any dirt on Enjolras. Enjolras belongs to that rare and privileged race of beautiful people who never look bad in photos or get anything stuck in their teeth or make huge mistakes that ruin years of their lives in stupidly permanent ways—

“Oh, that’s easy,” says Courfeyrac with an impatient shake of his head. “Let’s see. He’s failed his driver’s test three times, he still doesn’t have a license, he doesn’t know any music from this decade, and one time he walked into a wall because he was thinking about affirmative action.”

“It was a door!” protests Enjolras, but there’s something like a smile toward the corner of his mouth. It has the feeling of a well-worn argument, comfortable between friends.

“It was the door to the janitor’s closet,” Courfeyrac explains. “And it was locked.”

“You could make the argument that if a door’s always locked, it effectively is a wall,” says Combeferre. “Like, spiritually.” Not a line of thinking Grantaire tends to hear from sober people, but nobody at the table seems to find it unusual.

“Sure,” says Enjolras. “What musical was it?”

Marius answers immediately. “Peter Pan! I did tech crew, it was fun.”

“So, Grantaire,” Enjolras says, and for once it’s not scolding or accusing, it’s just his name, spoken like any other friend’s name. Enjolras tilts his head, and his eyes are on Grantaire, focused, but without a trace of anger. “Were you in tech crew, too?” he asks. Grantaire’s adrenaline doesn’t know what to do with itself; his heart is pounding, out of habit, he assumes. It’s disorienting.

Grantaire swallows. “Uh, it was a long time ago,” he hedges.

“He was Peter Pan,” says Courfeyrac, in a voice choked with laughter.

“Courf was Captain Hook!” Grantaire blurts out, but the misdirection goes nowhere.

Enjolras coughs. “Peter Pan, seriously?”

“That’s the danger of trying out for school plays when you’re a dude,” says Grantaire. “Only like, six guys ever audition, and then there’s always a billion male parts to fill. They were all but knocking boys unconscious and stuffing their limp bodies into pirate costumes.”

“They could’ve cast girls in some of the boy parts,” Musichetta points out.

Courfeyrac and Grantaire shake their heads.
“The director said it would mess with the realism,” says Courfeyrac.

“Of Peter Pan,” says Jehan with a snort.

“It was a strange time in our lives,” Courfeyrac adds in a solemn tone. He spoils the effect by laughing, and leaning forward conspiratorially. “Oh man, so funniest Grantaire story!”

“No,” moans Grantaire. “No, how is this happening. Courfeyrac, wouldn’t you rather talk about your guit—”

“So it’s the last show, and it’s the very last scene, right? Where all the adventure has happened, and they’re back in the nursery, and Peter’s saying goodbye to Wendy. And it’s this, like, super bittersweet dramatic moment—”

“Oh god,” says Grantaire. He knows what’s coming. “Courfeyrac almost took his eye out trying to pick his nose with his hook-hand,” he says desperately, appealingly. It occurs to him that he has spent the last several months all but training everyone in the ABC to ignore his attempts at distraction. Maybe this whole thing is karma kicking him in the ass. It’s not a pleasant thought.

“Yeah, but that’s no problem,” says Enjolras, dismissive. “Worst case scenario, he gets an eyepatch. He’s already playing a pirate.”

“There is a flaw in your logic,” says Grantaire. “I know there is—”

“Courfeyrac, you were saying?” says Combeferre, and Jehan prompts,

“Bittersweet, dramatic moment—”

Courfeyrac grins, clearly relishing the attention. There’s going to be no stopping this story now that the focus is back on him. A pox on all theater kids.

“And Grantaire’s got the flying harness on under his costume,” Courfeyrac continues, “because he’s supposed to leap out the window and, and soar away majestically. So he says his last line, and he jumps up, you know, very spritelike, very in-character, and the people backstage yank up the ropes—”

“Oh hey,” says Marius brightly, “I remember this!”

“—but they yank the ropes too hard, so instead of sailing through the open window, he goes careening right into the backdrop. It’s a stage set, it’s made of plywood, and from the waist down, he smacks into this thing, full speed, like a bird hitting the side of your house, like—” Courfeyrac claps his hands together, “WHAM.”

And yes, Grantaire remembers this, too. It’s difficult to forget how it feels to take a sheet of plywood to the nuts. It was lucky he hadn’t been in the habit of cursing back then, or he would have been suspended for life.

“And meanwhile,” says Courfeyrac, “we’re all in the wings waiting for curtain call, so we can see the wall almost collapsing, he hit it so hard.”

“The whole set was shaking,” Marius confirms. “We were afraid it was gonna fall over.”

“It’s reverberating, like an earthquake.” Courfeyrac mimes a shaking wall frame. “And from the audience, you just hear this collective gasp, and nobody has any idea what to do, like suddenly the play has kind of stopped happening? And everyone’s watching this little kid, clearly in pain, just
dangling from a rope, whimpering."

“But Grantaire, tiny thirteen-year-old Grantaire is such a goddamn professional, the audience has barely breathed in again, and he just shouts,” Courfeyrac flings an arm out, “‘Farewell, Wendy! Uh, sorry about your house!’ Aaaaaand the curtain falls!”

“In my defense,” says Grantaire, “I was thinking about affirmative action.”

Everyone cracks up. Everyone cracks up, including Enjolras. They are laughing, smiling, at a thing he said. This is the weirdest moment of his life, and there are currently a lot of contenders for the title.

Out of lack of anything better to do, Grantaire picks up his sandwich and takes another bite, still not tasting it. He thinks mustard and ham might be involved. He looks around at the table, as the ABC kids struggle to get their breath back, and back down at his lunch. There are maybe three bites of sandwich left. Grantaire resigns himself: he is never going to know what it contained. He knows a lost cause when he sees one.

Everyone is packing up their stuff—Enjolras has barely touched his food, someone should make him eat something, someone he'd actually listen to—when Jehan grabs Grantaire's sleeve.

"So, Grantaire,” says Jehan, in what he must think is a casual voice. "Monday. Same time, same place?"

"What?"

"Lunch," Jehan enunciates. "You, us, food, probably more 'that's what she said' jokes than you care to hear. Surprisingly, Musichetta’s the worst offender, but, y'know."

Lunch every day with Enjolras and his friends. Would it have killed Grantaire to think this through at all? Yes, being in Enjolras's presence is like basking in the light of a grumpy sun, but that's for meetings, for sitting in the back of the room at a safe distance, unnoticed — although that's not strictly true, because Enjolras had seen him drawing in his notebook, and his face still burns at that, somehow. Grantaire's not sure how he's expected to deal with this, sharing a table, sitting knee-to-knee, constantly at risk for falling under that steely blue gaze, that judgment. A whole week of this. Jesus.

"I don't know if I can," Grantaire starts, just as Enjolras is saying,

"Of course he will." They stare at each other for a moment, Enjolras giving him an inscrutable look. If Grantaire had to guess, it means something like, 'I am already doubting your commitment to this plan.' There's no way it looks properly boyfriendly, so he forces himself to smile gently, like he's sad about missing this spectacular shitshow.

"Eponine," he says by way of explanation. "I can't leave her alone —"

Enjolras snorts. "She's not a puppy."

"She can sit here too," says Courfeyrac with a shrug. "Hell, let's make it a party."

"If everyone's okay —" says Grantaire.

Courfeyrac snickers. "Uh, okay. Show of hands, who's in favor of the hot goth chick joining our table?"
It's sarcasm, but the group has been conditioned by hours worshipping at the altar of the democratic process, and they start in on the vote before they can help themselves. It's unanimous, which is maybe not a surprise. Combeferre's hand is the first up, which maybe is.

The bell rings soon after and people start to disperse. Musichetta’s got a history quiz she needs to get ready for, Marius’s next class is on the opposite side of the school. Grantaire waves them off, rolls the remnants of his lunch into his paper bag and chucks it into the trash.

When he turns around, Enjolras is standing there.

“Uh, hey,” Enjolras says, “We still need to talk about how we’re going to—” He inclines his head in a way that’s got to mean something like ‘figure out how to navigate this whole pretending-to-be-in-love gambit’, and Grantaire nods.

“My car again?” he says. “After the meeting.” Remembering what Courfeyrac had said, he adds, “I can give you a ride home if you, uh—” It’s only then that he stops to wonder if Enjolras might be sensitive about not being able to drive yet. It doesn’t square so well with the whole ‘fearless leader’ thing. He clears his throat. “If you want. At the very least, it’s a pretty good excuse to talk where nobody will—”

Enjolras gives him a sharp look, eyes darting pointedly around the cafeteria, and Grantaire fights the urge to roll his eyes. Nobody’s standing close enough to listen in on their conversation. True, several kids are staring at them like zoo animals, but it’s not like someone’s going to lipread one out-of-context remark from Grantaire and start screaming ‘Imposters! J’accuse!’


“Great,” says Grantaire. “Yeah,” and oh god, are they back to the sestina of doom?

Very quietly and without moving his mouth, Enjolras says, “People are watching.”

“And this surprises you how?”

“I just—we should—” Enjolras starts to take a step closer, then hesitates, and Grantaire gets it. Enjolras wants to do this well, because it’s for a cause and also because Enjolras does everything well. In order to do this well, he needs to be convincing. In order to be convincing, they probably shouldn’t be saying goodbye standing two feet apart. People who are actually dating tend to be pretty okay touching each other. A kiss on the cheek, or something. A hug? Grantaire isn’t sure, but some gesture is probably called for.

Enjolras’s overwhelming impulse to be perfect is at war with his impulse to treat Grantaire like toxic waste.

Grantaire laughs. It’s funny from a certain angle, he thinks. A not-so-charitable part of his brain doesn’t feel any real desire to bail Enjolras out of the situation.

“We could shake hands,” Grantaire offers in an undertone. “Seems fitting.” The whole thing is, after all, a transaction.

Enjolras glares at him.

“Yeah, okay, this has been fun,” says Grantaire, turning away.

“Wait,” says Enjolras, “please.” He grabs at Grantaire’s sleeve, and Grantaire is struck by a sudden inspiration. A stupid inspiration, most likely. Grantaire frees his wrist, reaches out, and squeezes
Enjolras’s hand, in what hopefully looks to the outside world like affection. He holds the grip for a long moment, schools his expression into something smile-like.

“See you at the meeting,” says Grantaire.

“See you at the meeting,” Enjolras echoes.

Grantaire is out the door and down the hallway before he has a chance to see the look on Enjolras’s face.

Bahorel is waiting at the door of Con Econ with a congratulatory fist bump.

It's freaky. Grantaire knows for a fact that Bahorel has B lunch. While today’s drama was unfolding, Bahorel was in wood shop, on the other side of the school. Somehow, in the space of a single passing period, he's still heard all about it. Bahorel never gives the impression of trying to keep up on school gossip, but he is always, always in the loop. How he pulls it off is a mystery.

Grantaire suspects witchcraft.

When someone's got dark magic at their disposal, returning their fist bump is common sense. Grantaire dutifully bumps back and takes his seat. The rest of the school probably still hasn’t heard, which means he’s going to get a short reprieve. He pulls out his mp3 player and earbuds just in case.

Bahorel trails after him, looking bored. "Hey," he says, "you should bring us tacos again today. You know, to celebrate."

Grantaire snorts. "Wow, dude, I'm touched."

"Hey man, I was rooting for you two!" Bahorel protests. Grantaire must make a skeptical face at that, because Bahorel grins and says, "Yeah, not really. Guess I always assumed he was a eunuch? But I'm happy for you. So just think how happy I'd be if there were tacos."

Grantaire involuntarily flashes back to the look of pure fury and disgust Enjolras's face last week. He swallows, forcing his voice into something light.

"Someone else's turn to pull snack duty, I think," he says.

"Huh," says Bahorel. He squints into the middle distance, makes a thoughtful clicking noise with his tongue. "Marius’s got Home Ec this semester," he volunteers. "We play our cards right, he could bring us cupcakes."

"Like all his cupcakes aren’t going straight to Cosette," says Grantaire. “More of them than she could ever eat, embarrassingly frosted."

Bahorel sighs. "Love is the worst," he says bleakly. 'Amen,' thinks Grantaire. He doesn't say it out loud, though, for obvious reasons. Bahorel drums his fingers on the desk. "Hey," says Bahorel suddenly, "speaking of things that are the worst. Did you get six or seven on the homework?"

"There was homework?" Grantaire says it mostly out of instinct, though. He actually did the assignment a few hours ago in Earth Science, because he was bored as hell and it had seemed like a bad idea to let his mind wander. After a little digging in his backpack, he finds the worksheet and
smooths it out on his desk. Six and seven aren't pretty, but they are present. "Okay, pull up a chair."

This earns another grin from Bahorel. "Best friends for life," he says.

Bahorel’s got the most conditional sense of friendship he’s ever seen. It's awesome.

After Con Econ is Algebra, which is—well. Word’s definitely gotten around.

Grantaire keeps his earbuds in for the whole hour, music as loud as it will go. It drowns out most of what people are trying to say to him, and anyway it’s not like his math grade’s going to suffer more than it already does.

The battery on his mp3 player dies in the hallway. It's shitty timing, because three minutes into World Mythology, Eddie Greer raises his hand. "Mr. Clark," he says, "Can I move? Grantaire's making me uncomfortable."

Grantaire’s not bothering anyone. He’s slumped at his desk, hood of his sweatshirt pulled down to his eyebrows, trying to draw.

"Please, Mr. Clark?" Eddie's saying.

Mr. Clark makes a confused face, but the rest of the class start shifting around in their chairs and giggling—some nervously, some in anticipation. Grantaire slumps further. Fucking teenagers.

"Uh, you should probably, uh, stay where you are?" says Mr. Clark, eyes not leaving the computer screen. He must have a riveting game of solitaire going on. God, this school is a joke.

Eddie raises his voice. "But Mr. Clark," he whines. "I don’t feel safe here. Grantaire likes boys."

More jostling. More giggling. Grantaire grits his teeth and stares at the surface of his desk. He tries to think back on how he dealt with this kind of shit before, back in freshman year. Fighting back hadn't helped, he remembers that much. Running to the teacher had been a colossal waste of time.

"Mr. Clark!" Eddie shouts.

"Okay," says Jehan loudly. Grantaire blinks. He looks up. Across the room, Jehan is flinging all his stuff—notebook, pens, textbooks, scraps of paper, copy of the The Odyssey—into his backpack. Jehan’s bag is dark gray, utilitarian, which strikes Grantaire as weird; it doesn’t seem like something Jehan would own.

It’s also not big enough to hold all the random detritus Jehan seems to gather everywhere he goes. It takes several long seconds for him to cram everything inside. His motions are abrupt, twitchy.

"Okay," Jehan says again. "That's—" He swings his backpack onto one shoulder and Grantaire’s first thought is that Jehan is leaving, has finally realized that this stupid class is not worth his time. Grantaire will miss the hell out of him, but on the other hand, he certainly understands the impulse to cut and run in these kind of—

Jehan stalks across the room. Stalks the wrong way, away from the door, and towards where Eddie is still making a big show of pulling faces and tossing his head.

Jehan’s sweater looks like something a grandma would knit if she’d laced her tea with LSD. It’s about three sizes too big, and covered with ladybugs. Their wings are red and spangly; their mouths, cheerful little V’s of yarn. Somehow, Jehan still gives the impression of a person about to fuck shit up. Grantaire has no idea what’s happening anymore.

He’s not the only one. The look on Eddie's face is sort of amazing. "What?" Eddie croaks.

"Uh, m-move," Jehan says, resolute. He sounds a nervous, but not afraid, just the same level of uncomfortable he always is if he’s talking in front of groups. "You don't want to sit with him, I do. Move, we're, uh, we're switching places."

"Nobody's moving," says Mr. Clark from his desk. "There are assigned seats for a reason."

Jehan clenches his jaw. "Yeah," he says, "and I'm reassigning them."

"I'm not going to go sit—" Eddie snarls.

"What, in my chair?" says Jehan, lip curling derisively. "Rhinestones aren't contagious. You'll be fine." He raises an arm and points behind himself, at the vacated seat. "Seriously, move. Everyone will be happier."

There’s a long pause. Mr. Clark clears his throat. "Jean," he says, "I'm going to have to ask you to sit down—"

Jehan is too absorbed in his contest of wills to even turn around. "Working on it," he says, terse.

"—in your assigned seat."

"You can ask," Jehan mutters.

"Jean, if you keep this up," says Mr. Clark gravely, portentously, “you'll have to go to the principal's office." He nods to himself with the air of a man who has just played the ultimate trump card, looking over at Jehan expectantly, eyebrows raised.

"I'm not going," says Jehan.

Mr. Clark sputters. "Jean."

Jehan whirls around. "Nobody ever, ever gets in trouble in this class. They act out all the time, but. You know they wouldn't listen to you anyway, so you let them do whatever." His fists are clenched at his sides. "Do you know the, the things people have said to me in this room? And how many times have you tried to stop—" He takes a deep breath. "But me, when I act out, I'm supposed to face the consequences, y'know, 'Jean's a good kid, he'll do what he's told.'"

His lip curls. "You think that because I follow the rules, I respect you. But I don't. I behave because I'm here to learn. Nobody in this room respects you less than I do. Um, so yeah. I'm not walking to the office, and I don't think you're gonna carry me. I'm going to wait here until he—" Jehan jerks his head at Eddie, "—gets up and moves, so we can all do what we're supposed to be doing, which is to read a very, very dumbed-down retelling of the Trojan War."

“I—detention,” says Mr. Clark. “For the rest of the week.”

Jehan sneers. “It’s Friday.”

“Jean, you have detention for all of next week.”
“Sure,” says Jehan. “Sounds good.” He turns back around to Eddie.

"These are comfortable shoes," he adds quietly. He rocks back onto his heels. "I can stand here for a long time."


Jehan sits down next to Grantaire, slightly out of breath. He pulls the textbook from his backpack. "We were on page 57," he says mildly. "P-paragraph three."

"Whoa," says Grantaire in an undertone.

"Hey Grantaire," says Jehan. Then, glancing at Grantaire’s still in-progress drawing: "Is that another duck?"

It is. Hermes this time, with a winged helmet and a little jetpack.

Grantaire pushes it towards Jehan’s new desk so he can have a better look. “You can have it as soon as I’m done with the feathers,” he says. “If anyone's earned a duck today, it's you."

When the bell rings, Jehan hitches his backpack onto his elbow. “Walk with me?"

Grantaire’s struggling to invent a reason to lag behind so Jehan and Courfeyrac can have their usual pre-meeting quality time, but with everything else happening today, he’s caught off-guard.

“You haven’t thought of anything to leave in your car today, have you?” asks Jehan. His tone is so nonchalant, Grantaire is nodding along before he’s worked out the implications.

Jehan knows about the cupiding. Busted.

“Uh, sorry,” Grantaire mumbles.

Jehan shrugs. “It’s fine. I’m not mad, I promise.” He heads out the door, gesturing for Grantaire to follow. And what the hell, given what’s just gone down, it’s the least Grantaire can do. Besides, it’s been too long since he’s gotten a look at that creepy Walt Whitman poster.

“I mean,” says Jehan, as they maneuver through the hallway-clogging end-of-day-yay-it’s-Friday crowds. “For one thing, it’s not like I mind walking alone with him. But at some point, it becomes an issue of—well, you don’t need to do it every time.”

“What,” says Grantaire, “so I can follow you two around playing romantic accordion songs?”

“Play it on your snare drum,” says Jehan with a snort. Grantaire opens his mouth to reply and Jehan adds, “No, seriously, are you gonna tease me about that now, today? After—”

Grantaire winces. Yes. Right.

“That was the dumbest way you could’ve possibly come out, you know,” says Jehan, almost gently. “I mean, from a pragmatic point of view. It was stupid.”

“Believe me, I’ve reached that conclusion,” says Grantaire.

“Sweet, yes.” Jehan opens his locker door. “But stupid.”
“Sweet but stupid—are we talking about Grantaire?” says Courfeyrac, swooping out of nowhere with typical drama kid flair.

“I’m not sweet,” says Grantaire, almost to himself. He assumes they’re heading over, but when he turns around, Jehan and Courfeyrac haven’t moved.

“Uh, so,” says Jehan. He shuts the door of his locker and leans against it, sharing a look with Courfeyrac, who nods and takes a deep breath.

Grantaire glances between them uneasily. This has the feeling of something planned.

He’s only half-joking when he says, “Is this an intervention, or—”

“We were talking,” says Jehan. “Me and Courf. And look. What you did today in the lunchroom. Yeah, it wasn’t the smartest thing.” He smiles. “But it was kind of cool, too.”

“Never seen Enjolras speechless before,” Courfeyrac cuts in. “Next time you do something like that, you’ve got to film it, because Bossuet straight-up didn’t believe me.”

“Anyway,” Jehan adds, a little pointedly. “In case things get—well, yeah. You know, the Eddies of the world and all that. We’re here for you, okay? The ABC is here for you.”

Courfeyrac nods, sincerely. It’s weird to see, and Grantaire is hit by a tidal wave of guilt. The whole point of this stupid charade is to help them, and instead they’re putting themselves on the line to help him, all for the sake of a giant lie.

“That’s, uh,” Grantaire swallows. “I appreciate what you’re, uh. I do. It’s great of you guys, but. I don’t. You don’t. It’s fine.” He swallows again. It isn’t working so great. What the hell even is today. “We should get going, don’t wanna be late for the meeting,” he mumbles, turning away.

Jehan and Courfeyrac follow him down the hallway.

“Yeah,” says Jehan, as though Grantaire hadn’t spoken. “But we’re going to anyway.”

Grantaire shakes his head. “I can handle this, it’s okay.”

They catch up with him in a few more steps, Courfeyrac bumping his shoulder companionably.

“You can’t stop us from being this badass, dude,” says Courfeyrac. “It’s our nature.” His tone is light, easy, like he’s offering to lend a DVD or something. Grantaire wants to shake him. Courfeyrac strides forward, unconcerned. Then he looks ahead for a moment, and Grantaire sees his eyes flick over the crowd, as if scanning for possible threats. Jehan’s face is shrewd, too. There’s still a smudge of pasta sauce on his sleeve.

It occurs to Grantaire that both of them know precisely what they’re getting into. He swallows again, because good lord does he not deserve this. At the same time, he doesn’t think they’re going to let him turn it down, at least not today. Grantaire has witnessed Jehan’s stubbornness firsthand, after all. Which reminds him.

“So speaking of badass,” says Grantaire. “Courfeyrac, allow me to fill you in on some recent events regarding one Sir Jehan Prouvaire.”

“Oh?” says Courfeyrac, his standard grin back out in full force.

Jehan covers his face in his hands. “It wasn’t a thing,” he mutters.
“Dude,” says Grantaire. He spreads his arms wide, almost knocking a freshman in the face, but whatever. “Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, but don’t doubt for one flipping second that it was A Thing.”

Recounting the saga of Jehan’s schoolroom defiance carries them all the way to Ms. Hucheloup's room. Grantaire doesn't know what’s more fun: watching Courfeyrac all but swoon at tales of his crush's heroics, or watching Jehan blush himself into new and exciting shades of burgundy.

“Jehan Prouvaire, the Sophomore Who Wouldn’t Sit Down,” says Grantaire. “Jehan Prouvaire, terror of shitty teachers everywhere.”

Not to be outdone, Courfeyrac chimes in with, “Jehan Prouvaire, champion of the people, defender of the weak!” (“Hey!” says Grantaire. )

Jehan is trying mightily not to grin, but there’s a definite hop to his step. “You guys are insane,” he says.

“Jehan Prouvaire, destroyer of worlds!” says Grantaire

“Jehan Prouvaire, rebel with a cause!”

They reach the door of Ms. Hucheloup’s room. Grantaire spins around and clasps his hands over his heart. “Jehan Prouvaire, my hero!”

Jehan laughs. Courfeyrac presses his lips together. “Careful, don’t want to make your boyfriend jealous,” he says, and his tone is light, but there’s the slightest purposeful quality to it.

At the word ‘boyfriend’, Enjolras’s gaze snaps over to them from where he’d been writing something on the board. Grantaire tries to look away. It doesn’t work.

“Um, hey,” says Grantaire, holding up a hand in greeting. The gesture feels weird and stilted, like they’re in a badly choreographed skit.


Courfeyrac and Jehan’s hallway powwow means that the rest of the group has had time to assemble, so everyone gets a front row seat to this inanity. From his peripheral vision, Grantaire can see Cosette mouthing something to Courfeyrac. He’s not a lipreader, but his best guess is ‘Awww.’

He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to react to that, and it’s some small comfort to see that clearly, Enjolras doesn’t know how either.

“Great, so now that everyone’s here, we can get started,” says Combeferre smoothly, and they both flash him a profoundly grateful look as Enjolras takes his place up front and Grantaire grabs a seat in the back.

So it turns out World War One poetry is actually good. Go figure. Grantaire can see what Jehan meant about the death of old-timey, but he’s not sure he agrees. It doesn’t feel modern, exactly. The writers are all named Wilfred or Vera or Rupert, and hell, most of it rhymes, like freaking sonnets or
something. The world they’re describing, on the other hand—

It’s like someone reached into an old photograph, snatched up all the young, smiling boys and girls in hats and knee-breeches, and flung them into the apocalypse. Here are a bunch of kids born before cars, trying to describe what basically sounds like hell, and the only tools at their disposal are these fucking quaint rhyme schemes and a language that wasn’t designed to hold this kind of horror.

Did they even have the word “fuck” back then? Grantaire’s not sure.

The result is nightmarish and riveting, and it feels true in a way that almost never works for him. He never made it through “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” last year in English, and he laughed at the end of Romeo and Juliet; he’s not a good person. But the book holds his attention for pretty much the whole meeting.

Which is all kinds of fortunate. If the goal is to make it look like they’re getting along, the fastest way Grantaire could break the illusion is by pulling his usual heckling routine. And he knows he probably won’t be able to restrain himself if he listens to what people are saying—alright, to what Enjolras is saying. Zoning out is by far the safest route. It’s for the good of the group.

By this point, the members of the ABC know better than to ask his opinion on world matters, and although they’re probably still curious about the Pretend Love Story of the Century, everyone’s Pavlovian response is to ignore Grantaire during meetings, so it’s not that bad. A couple of times, he gets the sense someone’s watching him, but every time he looks up, the whole group is absorbed in their cause du jour. He’s willing to admit that an hour reading about snipers and poisoned gas might be making him more paranoid than usual.

The plus side is that time goes by pretty quickly. The downside is that with the end of the meeting comes the end of the meeting.

Grantaire loiters in the back, still half reading as people start to trickle out. Joly and Bossuet both feel the need to wave goodbye at him, which is new, and, he assumes, yet another weird side effect of sham-dating the group leader. He gives them each a nod. Musichetta laughs and winks on her way out the door.

“Bye Grantaire!” says Cosette. Marius stands a few feet away, trying not to look like he’s waiting for her. He’s busy inspecting a blank wall, so it’s not exactly a perfect crime. “See you Monday,” she adds, and something about the tone of her voice and the set of her jaw makes it clear that Courfeyrac and Jehan managed to brief her on their mission. He tries not to wince. He’d forgotten about Government; that shit’s not going to be a good time.

“See you,” he says.

Jehan hovers in the doorway. His face lights up when he spots the black-and-white cover in Grantaire’s hands. He raises his eyebrows and Grantaire gives him a thumb’s up. Jehan nods, looking smug.

In the meantime, Courfeyrac is clapping Enjolras on the shoulder, saying something Grantaire can’t hear and probably doesn’t want to. Enjolras rolls his eyes but smiles, grudgingly by the looks of it.

When Courfeyrac sees Grantaire looking over at them, he raises his voice to address them both.

“Enjoy your weekend, you guys,” he says, shooting inexplicable finger guns in Grantaire’s direction as he backs out of the room. Jehan follows him, also doing the eyeroll and reluctant smile routine, which is a pretty common reaction when it comes to Courfeyrac. (“What?” Grantaire hears
Courfeyrac say as the two of them start down the hallway. “Name one situation that isn’t better with finger guns.”

“Yep, that’s Courfeyrac,” Grantaire mutters. By now the only ones left in the room are Combeferre and Enjolras. They look up at him, which is fair, since Grantaire was talking to himself like a crazy person. Normally, he’d make some effort to cover for himself, but after everything else today, he is beyond petty mortal embarrassments.

“What,” says Grantaire, “like neither of you ever pretend you’re narrating the movie about your life.”

Combeferre, who probably organizes all his thoughts in carefully formatted, footnoted paragraphs, laughs. “Yeah, but not in my voice. Morgan Freeman, maybe.” He turns back to Enjolras. “Remind me about that article I mentioned,” he says. “I’m not sure where I read it, but there’s only a couple of places, so.”

Enjolras nods, untangling his backpack from a chair. “Definitely, sounds like what we need.” The backpack retrieval process takes a noticeably long time, especially considering the huge gulf in intelligence between Enjolras and a piece of furniture. It occurs to Grantaire that they’re both dreading Combeferre’s departure, and the conflict that’s bound to start the moment they’re alone together.

“Everyone’s heading out, then?” says Grantaire, desperate to hold onto Combeferre’s calming presence as long as possible. There’s got to be some way to game it so that the three of them walk out together. “Combeferre, you’re parked pretty close, right?” he tries.

It’s a stupid question; obviously he knows where Combeferre’s parking spot is. There’s no way either of them has forgotten the incident with Eponine last month.

But Combeferre just shrugs a shoulder. “You two go ahead,” he says, “I was gonna walk to the library for a bit.”

If it was anyone else, Grantaire would suspect an ulterior motive. The town library is a few blocks from the school, but it’s small and not well-stocked. Combeferre probably has a better selection of philosophy books in the backseat of his car alone. Maybe it’s a nicotine craving kind of thing, Grantaire thinks, where Combeferre needs to peruse a card catalogue every few hours just to feel normal.

He tries to casually ascertain if Combeferre’s hands are shaking. No dice.

After a round of “Have a good weekend”’s all around, Grantaire and Enjolras begin the walk back to Grantaire’s van.

The silence makes him twitchy, but he’s not sure he can begin a conversation right now that wouldn’t lead off with, “Hey, remember that time at lunch when you tried to touch me but couldn’t manage it because apparently I’m made out of cat vomit? Hoho, there’s one for the scrapbook, eh?”

They’re halfway across the parking lot, when out of nowhere, Enjolras says,

“Is that a good book?”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire, and before he’s thought it through, he adds, “You’d hate it.”

Which kind of kills that.

He unlocks the van and they climb in. Grantaire clears off the passenger seat, throwing all the papers
and empty boxes into the back and silently daring Enjolras to criticize the mess.

Enjolras doesn’t, maybe just to be contrary. Instead, he takes a deep breath and says,

“So. We need to talk about this.”

Grantaire’s hand stills on his seatbelt. “Yeah. Okay.” He backs out of the space. “Also, I have no idea where you live, so.”

“Left out of the parking lot, right at the third light, right on Miller, left on Hemlock,” says Enjolras. “And I think we should have a system. Over the course of maintaining this, uh—”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘lie’,” says Grantaire helpfully. “Sham. Pretense. Charade, if you’re feeling fancy.”

Enjolras powers through. On some level you have to admire the dedication. “Whatever,” he says. “I—look. If we want to pull this off, there’s probably going to need to be at least a little bit of. Uh.”

“What,” says Grantaire. From the corner of his eye, he thinks he sees Enjolras make some kind of gesture, but he doesn’t track it too well because he is busy driving a car, hello. “Give me something to work with here, dude. A noun. A syllable count, rhymes with ‘purple’, something.”

“...physical contact,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire can hear the gritted teeth from here, like it is actually paining him to get the words out.

Grantaire sucks in a breath and says nothing.

“It’s just,” Enjolras says into the silence, “I can see so many situations where—one of us would be uncomfortable with the level of touching or the nature of it, but maybe wouldn’t feel like he could say anything or do anything without blowing his cover.” He sighs. “There are about a million consent issues, and if we aren’t careful, someone could wind up feeling really violated.”

‘Someone,’ thinks Grantaire. No prizes for guessing who. All of the vague phrasing in the world can’t hide the fact that apparently Enjolras doesn’t trust Grantaire to keep his hands to himself. Grantaire’s knuckles are white on the steering wheel; he flexes his fingers and breathes out through his nose.

Enjolras is fidgeting in the passenger seat. “So I think,” and he’s still talking, fuck his noble determination, even Grantaire doesn’t think he’s bad enough to warrant this much distaste, “it would be a good idea if we could have some kind of—of codeword, so if we’re in front of people and y—and one of us needs some space, he has a way to let the other person know without tipping off everyone to what’s going on.”

Grantaire snorts. His hands are still wrapped around the steering wheel in a death grip, but his voice comes out just how he wants it to, flippant and annoyed.

"Wow, someone thinks highly of himself."

"...what?"

"Want me to roll down the windows so there's more room for your ego? Jesus. You're good-looking or whatever but you're not a fucking veela."

"I literally don't understand what you're saying right now," says Enjolras, and Grantaire can hear the barely restrained frustration in his voice. "Do you get what I'm—I just, can we please have some
"Yeah, sure dude," Grantaire sneers, and when was the last time he was even this angry? Oh right, yesterday, in his car, with Enjolras. There is a definite pattern going on. "Let's set up a safeword in case you can't handle being in the same five-foot radius. Uh, how about mondegreen? Boysenberry. Achromatic. Or hey, there's always 'You're an incredible douchebag', wait no, that's like four words—"

Whatever fragile strand that had been holding back Enjolras's temper snaps. “Of all possible things, why are you making this difficult——”

“Dude,” says Grantaire, “I’m not going to jump you!” at the same time Enjolras yells, “For crying out loud, I am trying to respect your boundaries!”


“What?” says Enjolras. He sounds equally lost, which in this moment is a fucking achievement. Then, “Uh, the light’s green, you can——”

There’s a good chance it’s been green for a while. He hits the gas so they don’t have to find out.

Neither of them seem to know what to say for a few minutes. They pass Eponine's house and its ever-changing assortment of gaudy cars parked out front. They pass the field where Grantaire used to play soccer. They pass a lot of respectable-looking suburban homes, sprinklers arcing back and forth across gleaming green lawns and stretches of sidewalk. Grantaire's mind is reeling.

Enjolras is not an idiot. He claims to believe Grantaire isn't one either (just lazy in the thinking department, not like Grantaire has spent hours trying to puzzle out what the hell that means). But Jesus, it would take actual brain damage to be worried about Enjolras trying to violate his boundaries.

He doesn’t want to think about it again, so of course he does: that awkward moment in the cafeteria, seeing that look of uncertainty cloud Enjolras's face, weigh on his posture. Enjolras, who strides boldly forward in all things. What does it take for someone like that to show hesitation? The mere idea of touching Grantaire.

"I just—don't see the point?" Grantaire says after a moment. "Look, I promise I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm not some——" He sighs heavily. "And I know I can trust that you would never, to me. So if something comes up and you think we need to convince people, just do whatever you're comfortable with, and I'll deal."

"Uh, no," says Enjolras. "That is a terrible plan. What if I'm comfortable going way further than you?"

How are they still talking? How are they still having this conversation? How hard is it to leap out of a moving car when you're the one driving?

Grantaire eyes the door handle longingly. "For one thing," he says after a moment, "I think most nuns would be comfortable going further than you."

Enjolras starts. "What are you trying to—"
"Back in the cafeteria? You had to psyche yourself up just to—and even then, you couldn’t. Not sure who you think you’re fooling, but you are not a good actor." Grantaire, on the other hand, has managed a pretty decent smirk, and his voice sounds wry, detached. The middle school drama department would be proud, he thinks.

Enjolras throws his hands in the air. "Yes, because like I just said, I’m trying to respect your personal space! What part of that is even hard to understand?"

The part where Enjolras is worried about Grantaire feeling violated. The part where his hesitation to touch Grantaire back in the cafeteria supposedly came not from disgust but consideration. The part where Enjolras would assume all of this went without saying.

Short answer: most parts.

"Sorry, my lazy intellect is just struggling to piece this together," says Grantaire. "If it's going to make you feel better, fine, whatever, we can have a safeword. But I feel like a lot of shit goes without saying. We only need to keep this up in public, at school, so it's not like we need to go around, uh—" Making out against a wall, his brain helpfully supplies. Your fingers in his hair, his breath warm against the junction of your neck and shoulder, right before his lips—

Grantaire shivers. Stupid brain, what did he ever do to it? Other than several years of steady poisoning with drugs and alcohol. Whatever.

He clears his throat, beats down the mental images with a mental club. "But in terms of selling this," Grantaire gestures between them, "we could pretty much stick to—I mean, hand-holding seems like a good bet." Grantaire bites his lip, very pointedly not thinking about Enjolras biting it instead. "Uh, assuming you're okay with it?"

"It's fine," says Enjolras. "Are you okay with hugging?"

"No," says Grantaire.

Enjolras doesn't push him for any explanation, which he appreciates. "Friendly arm around the shoulder?"

Grantaire considers this. "Yeah, okay."

"Your turn to suggest something," says Enjolras, and Grantaire is at a loss. They’ve covered most of the public affection stuff that isn’t kissing, so what the hell is he even supposed to say.

"Obnoxious pet names?" he volunteers after a beat or two.

"Fine," says Enjolras.

"Not regular-bad, like ‘honey’ or whatever,” Grantaire warns. “We’re talking names science hasn’t even invented yet."

“I already said yes.” Something in his tone clearly adds, ‘If you wanted me to say no, why did you suggest it in the first place?’ It’s a fair point, but still. Enjolras should know better than to underestimate the depth and breadth of Grantaire's ability to annoy.

"You have no idea what you've unleashed, dude. I’m going to call you so many stupid things,” he vows. It’s like Pandora’s box, if the box was just filled with words like “Muffinbear” and “Buttoncakes.”"
"No, see, it's almost better if you do," argues Enjolras. Possibly just contrariness again. "You're still pretending to be you."

Grantaire thinks that if he was ever in a real relationship, he'd be too afraid the other person might take it the wrong way. But Enjolras takes everything the wrong way anyway, so there's a perverse kind of safety built in.


Grantaire can't imagine a universe in which it would ever seem like a good idea to actually kiss Enjolras. He can't imagine a universe in which Enjolras would ever, ever be willing to kiss him. He is sure of very few things in this world, but here is one of them: that shit is just flat-out never happening.

So in the interest of science fiction, he mumbles, "Sure, why not."

He thinks from the ensuing pause that maybe Enjolras wasn't expecting that. Fair enough, because what normal person would nix hugging and greenlight kissing?

"If other stuff comes up, we can take it on a case-by-case basis," says Enjolras. "And if one of us starts feeling weird about anything, even stuff we've agreed on, they can use the safeword anyway. Which we still need to choose." And truly, Enjolras cannot be diverted. He's like a politically correct missile. "Something better than boysenberry."

"In case the hand-holding gets too intense?" Grantaire can't stop himself from asking.

"Humor me," says Enjolras.

"Ugh, fine." Grantaire drums his fingers on the steering wheel. "Dear," he says finally.

"What?"

"If one of us doesn’t like what’s going on, he can be like, ‘okay, dear.’ To the outside world, it won’t look suspicious, but for you and me, it’ll definitely be weird enough to grab our attention."


Actually. That sentence was a single word away from being a compliment, what the hell is up with that. Enjolras is losing his touch.

"Hey," says Grantaire, "speaking of the outside world, when are you gonna let your friends in on the plan?"

Even with his eyes on the road, he can tell by the quality of the silence that something’s up. It’s not just the duration, it’s the intensity.

"We can't tell them," says Enjolras, and Grantaire almost swerves into oncoming traffic.

"The fuck?" He turns the wheel sharply and pulls over by the side of the road instead, puts the van in park, and turns to stare at Enjolras. "The fuck?" he says again, for good measure.

Enjolras runs his hands through his hair. He looks miserable. "In order for this to work at all, nobody can know," he says heavily.

"And you don't trust your friends?" says Grantaire. He feels irrationally angry on their behalf.
"I would trust any of them with my life," says Enjolras, and it should sound like the dumbest of teenage hyperbole, but this is Enjolras so instead it's all quiet heartfelt conviction. "But Marius can't keep a secret."

"So don't tell Marius, then."

"I don't think the rest of them can keep a secret from Marius."

"If you just tell Jehan," says Grantaire.

Enjolras sighs. As if recounting a chess match, he says, "Jehan tells Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac tells Marius. Marius tells the entire school without even trying to."

"Feuilly."

"Feuilly has fourth hour with Marius. There's a lot of downtime and Feuilly's not a good liar."

"Combeferre," Grantaire presses, and this earns a definite wince.

"It's the same as Jehan," says Enjolras, resolute. "Combeferre and Courfeyrac have been best friends for years. They don't keep stuff like that from each other. There's no way around it: he'll tell Courfeyrac, and Courfeyrac—"

"—will tell Marius, got it." Grantaire casts around wildly, trying to think of someone free from Courfeyrac's dark vortex of charisma. "Joly," he says, triumphant.

Enjolras has the grim air of a man who has already examined every option and found them all lacking. "Joly tells Musichetta, who tells Cosette—"

"Oh shit, who immediately tells Marius." In retrospect, that one's obvious. "It's like Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, but instead of movies it's just lies and agony."

"I, uh, didn't think it would bother you that much," says Enjolras, fiddling with his seatbelt. How shitty of a person do you think I am? Grantaire wants to ask. Instead, he shrugs.

"It's fine. I mean, this is going to make for a fucking weird couple of days, but shit, maybe it'll build character or something."

"A weird couple of—" Enjolras echoes. He makes a strangled noise. It can't possibly bode well. "Grantaire," he says slowly, "when do you think prom is?" Given Grantaire's attitude towards school functions, that's more or less a rhetorical question, and he lets his silence speak for him. Enjolras's face fills with a gradually dawning horror. "Oh my god," he says. "You have no idea, do you?"

Grantaire frowns at the road, reasoning it out. He doubts they'd hold prom on, like, a Wednesday. It's got to be on a weekend. Presumably not tomorrow, or someone would've said something.

"A week from now?" Grantaire ventures. The look of horror in no way subsides. "…two weeks?"

Enjolras makes a sound halfway between a hysterical laugh and—well, actually it is just straight up a hysterical laugh.

"How could you not know this?" he says despairingly. "It's been all over the morning announcements. We voted on a theme yesterday."

"Why?" says Grantaire. "What—why?" Enjolras scrubs a hand over his face. "Dude, talk to me, use
your words, this is disturbing."

"Shit shit shit," says Enjolras. Outside of the taco incident, Grantaire's not sure he's ever heard
you—shit, well, this explains so much." He stares out the window, or possibly he stares at it, like he's
contemplating bashing his head against the glass. He turns to Grantaire, takes a deep breath.
"Grantaire," he says, mournfully, "Prom is two and a half months from now."

It's a very good thing they're pulled over and the car isn't moving. This would not be a good way to
die.

"It's March," Enjolras continues. "How could you possibly think—"

Grantaire snaps around. "Dude," he says, "what have I ever done in my life to seem like the kind of
guy who knows when prom is?"

"March," Enjolras repeats, voice half an octave higher than usual.

"Well I thought it was weird," says Grantaire defensively. "But given that you and Courf had just
been talking about it, I figured it had to be coming up soon. I mean, why even ask now if—"

"Because I wanted to plan ahead," says Enjolras, which is maybe the first part of this whole
adventure to make any sense. Enjolras probably plans out his underwear and socks days in advance.
In a binder, with colored tabs.

"Why didn't you mention that at that time?" Grantaire hisses.

Enjolras squints back at him. "Well, you didn't let me get very far," he says, and he doesn't even
sound accusing.

Grantaire stares bleakly forward. Two and a half months. It’s some fucked up ironic playacted
version of a life Grantaire wouldn’t even have fantasized about, wouldn’t have been able to concoct
even at his most drunk and pathetic, on the floor of his room with his head in Eponine’s lap. Pet
names. Pecks on the cheek.

They’re going to need to keep the lie going to so many people.

Now he knows why Enjolras was so quiet at lunch. He was summoning the will to live. Grantaire
closes his eyes, rests his forehead on the steering wheel, and breathes in deeply through his nose.

"Uh," Enjolras is saying. "Look. Given you didn't know that, if you want to back out of this, I'm not
going to—I mean, you can. Back out, if you want to." His voice is careful, hesitant. Grantaire twists
his head to face him. Enjolras is fiddling with the seatbelt again.

He closes his eyes again. "No," says Grantaire. "Whatever, at this point, the damage is done. Might
as well see this through." He takes another deep breath. Eyes on the prize. Courfeyrac and Jehan
deserve a normal prom. Well, he thinks, for some definition of normal. Two and a half months is an
insane amount of time, but Grantaire's endured worse, for longer, and for worse reasons. "Uh,
assuming you're still in," he adds, cracking an eye open.

Enjolras looks back at him levelly. "I'm in if you're in," he says, and Grantaire laughs.

"Wow," he says. "you are dedicated to the cause, dude, I will grant you that." He puts the van back
in drive, eases onto the road again. They're quiet for a minute. "You know, I think there might be a
relatively painless way to do this," says Grantaire at last. "I mean, it's not like a sham marriage or
something. We sit together at lunch, do the minimum required displays of affection, and once a week we have a pretend date."

Enjolras coughs. "That works out to more than ten pretend dates," he says.

"Well, obviously we won't actually do anything," Grantaire snaps. "Just—in case someone asks one of us what we did last weekend. We can make something up each week. We'll need to be careful, 'cause there are only three restaurants in town, and someone might notice if we're never where we say we were."

"So a lot of nights in," says Enjolras. A corner of his mouth twitches. "Imaginary nights in."

"If anyone asks, you don't believe in feeding the slobbering capitalist hellbeast of corporate America and the, the commercialization of love," says Grantaire. "Also, none of the restaurants in town are vegan, so."

"I'm not vegan," Enjolras protests. Grantaire waves this aside.

"Yeah, but you probably believe in, like, vegan solidarity."

Enjolras bristles but doesn't contradict him. "We'll need to keep the details straight with each other," he says instead. "And debrief every now and then."

Debrief. No matter how high the stakes are, Grantaire can't help laughing at such a stupid word. "I'll meet you in the janitor's closet by the gym," he agrees. "Tuesdays, 1:47 sharp. Make sure you aren't followed. Wear a disguise. Trust no one."

Is it too much? Enjolras puts his head in his hands. Probably, yeah.

"Sorry," says Grantaire, which doesn't get much reaction. Fair; why would Enjolras think he means it? "I can give you a ride home from meetings. That's twenty minutes, two days a week." Penance, which has to mean more than an apology. It's an awful lot of time to spend alone together, but Grantaire got them into this mess, he can bear this much at least. And however much Enjolras may hate him, it's a free ride. It's got to beat waiting around for your mom to pick you up.

Maybe.

Enjolras looks up at him, making Grantaire lose his train of thought. "And if we need to we could, uh, trade e-mail addresses?" he finishes.

"And phone numbers," says Enjolras.

Grantaire shakes his head. He likes his phone. He trusts his phone. He doesn't need to carry something in his pocket that could at any moment ambush him with Enjolras's voice. "E-mail's fine," he says. "As far as this weekend, let's say you're coming over to my place. We'll order Chinese, watch some movies."

"What movies?" says Enjolras, and then pre-empting Grantaire’s eyeroll, "I'm not poking holes in your plan, but we should have specifics worked out in case someone asks."

"Who'd ask?" says Grantaire with a snort.


Yeah, point. "Okay, so pick something, I don't care."
“It should be stuff we’ve both seen,” Enjolras muses, which makes sense except the Venn Diagram of movies they have in common probably begins with *Muppet Babies* and ends once Enjolras was old enough to toddle away from the TV and start agitating for fair trade organic juice boxes. Grantaire isn’t up on the latest sad-sack black-and-white foreign films and documentaries, and there’s no way Enjolras could tolerate anything with enough explosions to interest Grantaire.

“*Die Hard*?” he suggests, just to be difficult.


“No, that’s fine,” says Grantaire, and it feels like a huge admission of *something* when he adds, “Me too.”

Enjolras nods. “Okay then. Sounds good.”

And the problem is, it does sound good. All of the 1950's going steady bullshit holds no appeal for him, but that actually would be. Well, kind of nice. No hassle, no letter jackets or malt shops, just kung pow chicken and watching well-orchestrated robberies on TV, sharing a couch, maybe surreptitiously inching closer during the tense parts, arms brushing and yeah, Grantaire is jealous of his alternate reality self, what of it?

"You missed my street," says Enjolras, and Grantaire forces back a groan because of course he did.

He's in the middle of executing a very sloppy three-point turn when Enjolras says suddenly, "What did you mean, the damage is done?"

Grantaire blinks. "You know. By now, the whole school knows I asked you out. Some words tend to stick, you know? ‘Gay’ is a pretty sticky word."

"Nobody's treating me any different," says Enjolras, sounding confused, and hooray for him.

"Well, yeah," says Grantaire. "They're terrified of you."

"That's not—" says Enjolras. He stops, considers. "It’s not the same. Most of them didn’t like me to begin with." His voice isn't hurt or proud. It's matter-of-fact. Grantaire wonders, not for the first time, if he's dealing with some kind of alien. Enjolras is the rarest of breeds, a teenager who genuinely doesn't seem to care what other people think.

"Man," says Grantaire, and he can't keep the admiration out of his voice. "You could teach a class on how to be a badass motherfucker without even trying. You and Jehan."

"I thought Jehan was a legless gazelle," says Enjolras.

"About that." Grantaire doesn’t love admitting he’s made a mistake—and okay, especially not to Enjolras—but he can’t stand being this wrong about something this basic. "I, uh, might have jumped the gun there," he allows. “That kid is a true Gryffindor. You should've seen him today, it was nuts. Attack mode."

"What, did someone insult Mary Shelley again?" Enjolras's tone is wry but also amused, fond, maybe even warm. This is what he sounds like when he talks about his friends, thinks Grantaire. It's a world away from that angry kid in detention, ranting about abstract concepts to the first burnout willing to listen, however mockingly.

The ABC has been good for Enjolras, he thinks. He wonders how much longer he can stretch this
"No, actually it was the guy who sits next to me, he was—" Grantaire stops. There's no way to tell this story without coming across like an incredible victim. His face heats. "I don't know, it's a whole long thing. But Jehan went toe-to-toe against him, didn't back down at all. The teacher tried to send Jehan to the principal’s office, and he called Mr. Clark’s bluff. You should’ve seen it, you would've been so proud."

"Yeah, that sounds like Jehan," says Enjolras, and Grantaire can hear the smile in his voice. "Glad to hear he's standing up for himself, I think he finds it a lot easier to fight when it's about someone else. Which is noble, but—it can be frustrating."

Grantaire can't hold back his laugh. "Wow, coming from you that is quite the statement."

"What’s that supposed to mean?" Enjolras snaps. Grantaire bids a silent farewell to those ten seconds of perfectly civil talk. Rest in peace, friends. Your time came too soon.

"Nothing," he says, "it's just—you're kind of the crown prince of fighting on other people's behalf, you know?" Silence. Even with his eyes on the road—trying not to miss the turn again, shit—it's not hard to imagine Enjolras seething next to him. "Democratically elected representative of fighting on other people’s behalf? Committee co-chair? City comptroller?"

Is he trying to wind Enjolras up or calm him down? He’s not even sure anymore. Enjolras must pick up on this, because after a second he sighs and says,

"If you’re insulting me right now, you’re doing a terrible job, given that I can’t tell." He doesn’t sound angry. He doesn’t sound happy, either. Grantaire risks a glance to the right and Enjolras is rubbing his eyes, looking tired. Someone needs to make sure that kid gets enough sleep.

"Not an insult," Grantaire offers. "I'm only saying it's a good thing you weren't around in the days of slavery. There’s no way you wouldn’t have John Browned yourself to death."

There is distinct silence coming from Enjolras’s half of the car. Which is a shame, because it leaves Grantaire rambling to fill the vacuum, and that can only end in tragedy.

"Harpers Ferry?" he’s saying. There’s no reason in the world for Enjolras not to get this reference. “C’mon, they cover this freshman year. Best case scenario, you get your own catchy song. Even then, not like it’s much comfort to your friends and family when you’re a-mouldering in the grave.”

"Wait," says Enjolras, “you didn’t—” and Grantaire seriously can’t hold it back:

"Oh my god, dude, can you do me one small favor? If you want anyone to believe for a second that we like each other even a little, can you not look completely poleaxed any time I know a thing? It’s fucking insulting."


Well, no surprise there. Grantaire pulls into the next driveway, wrests the van around.

"Hemlock," says Enjolras helpfully.

"I know, okay?" It comes out much sharper than intended. He takes a deep breath and lets it out. “I know, I remember, just—shit.”

They loop back to Hemlock in silence. Grantaire’s face is burning again. It’s so unfair; normally,
he’s a good driver. Normally, it’s one of the few adult things he has a handle on.

When he first got his permit, he and Eponine used to jump in the van and cruise down side roads for hours in no particular direction. They never got lost, because Eponine has a freakishly good internal compass. He remembers those first few drives, sipping his frozen Coke and humming along to her weird, angry music, trying to force the outsized grin off his face. He’d been so worried she would notice how pathetically happy he was at small things, that she’d reason it out and realize that Grantaire was no longer the kind of kid who did stuff like this, hang out with kids his age and drink shitty slurpees from 7-11.

(Their friendship got easier once he discovered that a fair number of her metal songs were actually about, like, fighting dragons. What makes Eponine cool is her attitude, not her taste. Case in point: lingering crush on Marius Pontmercy.)

When he makes the turn onto Hemlock, he gives the steering wheel a huge, dramatic flourish, bringing one hand over the other in a windmill motion and splaying his fingers.

“The long nightmare is almost over,” he assures Enjolras. “Let’s get you home.”

Enjolras directs him to an unremarkable-looking suburban house at the end of a cul-de-sac. Grantaire isn’t sure what he was expecting — a castle? An estate? An underground secret rebel base? But it doesn’t seem fitting for someone so memorable to live someplace so mundane. Grantaire puts all his focus into easing into the driveway, as if he can make up for everything that’s happened on this train wreck of a drive home by nailing this one last move.

He puts the van into park. “See you Monday,” he says. “And, uh, enjoy our imaginary date tonight, I guess.”

“Tonight doesn’t work for me,” says Enjolras. Grantaire fights down a brief, irrational pang of hurt. How is he being stood up in a fake relationship? What, does Enjolras have another, way more fun imaginary date to go on? Why is every step of this so goddamn difficult, Grantaire wants to ask. Instead, he gives Enjolras a flat look. “You do realize this is pretend, right?”

“Obviously,” says Enjolras in such an acid tone Grantaire can’t quite hold back his flinch. Enjolras sighs. “Marius and Combeferre are coming over to work on a Lit project. They’re going to notice if you’re, you know, not there on a date with me. Uh, how’s Saturday?”

“Fine. Sure.” he says, and Enjolras moves to unbuckle his seatbelt. “Oh, one more thing,” says Grantaire. “Just, like, to be clear. If you offer me money again, I’m gonna punch you in the jaw.”

Enjolras blinks. “But you don’t believe in this kind of stuff at all. It’s not fair if you don’t get anything out of it.”

“Sheer joy of fucking with people?” Grantaire offers. It earns him a distinctly unimpressed face. “Look, if you’re so obsessed with the idea of equality or whatever, we can always leave it at, ‘I hereby have the right to someday ask you out of nowhere for my own bizarre, slightly sketchy favor.’”

At the word ‘sketchy’, Enjolras starts. “If there’s anything you’re not comfortable with, we can go over this again. I really, really don’t want—”

“Jesus, will you give it a rest,” says Grantaire. “I get it.” He snorts. “My bathing suit area is safe with you.”
Enjolras’s eyes narrow. “Is that a crack about me being a virgin?” he says, and Grantaire chokes on nothing.

“Uh, no. No, it’s not. I actually didn’t know you were one, so uh, thank you for somehow managing to make this more awkward than it was. That is a skill.”

“So why do you keep acting like it’s funny—”

“Because you’re acting like I’m worried about my fucking virtue when I don’t have any evidence you can even deal with holding my hand!”

Enjolras looks at him like he’s insane. “We already held hands. Today, in the cafeteria. It was literally three hours ago.”

“No, I held your hand,” Grantaire corrects. “You had your hand held.”

“What’s the difference?”

Does Grantaire seriously need to spell this out? “I’m still not sold you could touch me voluntarily if there wasn’t, like, a gun to your head, so—”

Enjolras unbuckles his seatbelt in a flurry of motion, looking very determined, and then the world goes upside down because Enjolras is reaching out, and his fingers are shockingly warm against the skin of Grantaire’s inner wrist, as the pulse beneath it races like a frightened rabbit. Their faces are just a little too close together.


“...That’s my wrist,” says Grantaire, and while true, it’s just about the dumbest thing he could’ve said because Enjolras lets go. He looks almost sheepish, but it could be a trick of the light. “It’s okay, practice makes perfect.”

And maybe Enjolras is embarrassed, because instead of rising to the bait he just levers open the car door, saying, “See you Monday.”

“See you,” Grantaire echoes. He watches Enjolras heft his backpack on one shoulder, make his way down the driveway, and disappear into the offensively banal house.

Well, he thinks, this is going to be fun to explain to Eponine.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone whose freshman history class didn’t cover Harpers Ferry, some quick background on John Brown. The "catchy song" Grantaire references is "John Brown's Body", a Civil War marching song whose melody would later be adapted into "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", "Solidarity Forever", and many many others.
He wrenches open the door and immediately regrets it; white sunlight stabs into his face and he cowers back like a silent film vampire. As his vision returns, two things occur to him: the ringing has finally stopped, and Enjolras is standing on his doorstep.

Grantaire blinks. He opens his eyes. The situation is unchanged.

“Let me in and I’ll explain,” says Enjolras.

Eponine brings her brother over that night, so there’s no chance to talk about anything until Gavroche is safely in the kitchen, raiding the fridge — and the pantry and the freezer and possibly also the stale Halloween candy stashed in the junk drawer with the rubber bands. Gavroche’s super power is the ability to eat anything and not be sick. He could wolf down a pound of Smarties, wrappers included, and then ride a Tilt-a-Whirl for an hour, no problem. The kid’s appetite is only matched by his efficiency, so Grantaire has to give her a very shortened version of events.

“One day, Grantaire,” says Eponine when he’s finished. “I left you alone for one day. Not even a whole day, because I saw you in Spanish this morning. And now you’re doing exactly what you said you wouldn’t, for free?”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire from the floor. “In my defense, it didn’t even seem like a good idea as it was happening?”

Eponine wrests her eyes from the computer screen and swivels the desk chair to face him. “How long are you on the hook for?”

“Two and a half months.” He flops an arm over his eyes. “And I’m gonna have to eat lunch with them, so I was meaning to ask — “

“Yeah, no, it’s fine.” Her voice is oddly flat. She twists side to side, chair squeaking. “I can sit with someone else for a while.”

“No, I mean. I asked, and everyone’s okay with you joining us if you are.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” says Eponine. The chair has gone quiet. Grantaire peers up at her.

“I know you might have, uh, problems with some of the group,” he stammers out.

“It’ll be fine,” says Eponine. “I’ll just be sure to sit as far from Combeferre as I can.”

“No,” says Grantaire. “I mean, uh.”

“Who, Marius? We get along fine.” Grantaire chews his lip, not sure how to proceed. Eventually, she takes pity on him. “I know he’s in love with Cosette,” she says conversationally. She is blinking a lot, though. “He’s got Government with me, she’s in my sixth hour. I’ve been passing notes between them for the whole year.”
“Eponine…” he says, before he can stop himself. She doesn’t get to call him a doormat and then actively hook up her crush with another girl.

But Eponine sighs and shakes her head. “No. I want them to be together. ‘Cause if they aren’t, there’s always gonna be some stupid particle of my brain going, ‘Oh, he smiled at me again, maybe this time it means something!’ If they aren’t, I’m just always, always, going to be…” She trails off. “Fuck that, you know? Salt the earth and move the hell on.”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire, swallowing. They don’t drink or get high on nights Gavroche is with them. They’ve never talked about it, it’s just how they do things. Tonight it’s a crying shame; he could stand to feel fuzzier right now.

“So who else is at that table?” says Eponine, spinning back toward the computer. “That Haitian chick, right?

“You’ll love Musichetta,” he promises. “She’s—” ‘Nice’, he nearly says, but that’s not accurate. “Well, actually, she’s a little mean, but she’s your kind of mean.”

“Well, that’s promising,” says Eponine. “We all know I get along best with obnoxious assholes.” She stretches out her foot to ruffle Grantaire’s hair, and he rolls away, making indignant noises. “Which I guess bodes well for dealing with your new pretend boyf—”

There’s a creak in the hallway, and he catches himself leaping up to shush her, like it’s a war movie and she’s going to give away their positions to the enemy.

“It’s the heating,” Eponine reminds him. “The hell, were you afraid it was my brother?” she says, and she’s joking, he can tell she’s joking, but not fast enough to prevent the stricken look on his face. “Oh my god, you are. What, worried he won’t keep it secret?” Eponine is looking away, but he can see her face reflected in the still-dormant computer screen, the ironic twist to her mouth.

If anyone can protect a secret, it’s Gavroche. He wonders if she knows about the times Grantaire has tried to pump the kid for information about their weird family shit. Grantaire knows he should feel guilty about invading her privacy, but Gavroche kept completely mum anyway so it’s a moot point.

“I know he can,” he says now. “I just —” Don’t want your kid brother to think I’m this much of a loser, he can’t make himself say. Gavroche has taken to wearing a knit cap and covering his school folders in scribbled cartoon characters and monsters. He’s pretty damn good for a twelve-year-old, and watching Gavroche pore over paper, frowning in a very familiar way never fails to fill Grantaire with a weird stew of pride and panic.

“The whole massive deception thing,” says Grantaire at last. “Not setting a very good example.”

“Fair,” she says. She smirks. “What about the whole gay boyfriend thing?”

Grantaire would rather not deal with it, but he doubts there’s hope of stemming that particular tide. It’s only a matter of time before the story crosses into the middle school rumor mill.

“He’s bound to find out eventually.”

As if on cue, Gavroche slips into the room, closing the door behind himself with his foot and balancing a plate piled with food on his head. “Who’s bound to find out what when?”

“Grantaire’s got a boyfriend,” says Eponine.

Gavroche retrieves the plate, grabs a Poptart, and takes a huge bite. “You’re into dudes?” he slurs
through a mouthful of s’more filling. Those things are disgusting. Grantaire only puts them on the shopping list because Gavroche devours them whenever he’s over.

If someone asked, Grantaire would deny feeling nervous. Then again, Grantaire is a huge liar, and he’s got bad associations with middle school and shit like this. He clears his throat.

“Sometimes.”

Gavroche crams the rest of the Poptart in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “Okay,” he says at last. “Whatever.” He throws his narrow shoulders into a shrug, bobbing his head for a second and then letting it loll to one side. It’s a move he’s been pulling a lot lately, one Eponine swears he lifted from Grantaire. “My turn on the computer.”

“Give her five more minutes, dude,” says Grantaire. “Eat your gross-ass Poptarts.”

Gavroche sighs enormously. “And I was gonna do you a favor.”

“What, illegally download a bunch of music I didn’t ask for? From shady websites that’ll get me put on government watch lists ‘til I’m ninety?”

Sometimes, Gavroche’s grin goes disturbingly Cheshire. “And for free, too. You’re lucky you know me, jackass.”

Grantaire pulls himself up and steals a fistful of chips from Gavroche’s plate — mostly as a diversion so he can tackle the kid into a sidehug, over Gavroche’s protestations (“Ack! No feelings! Show your love like a normal person, by buying us useless shit!”)

“I am, dude,” says Grantaire, “I really am.”

Midnight rolls around, and when Eponine taps Gavroche on the shoulder, all she says is, “Brush your teeth,” which is how Grantaire knows both of them are staying over tonight. Gavroche scowls up at her from where he’s wreaking havoc on Grantaire’s iTunes but doesn’t argue, which is how Grantaire knows it’s something worse than usual.

When Gavroche is in the bathroom, Grantaire squeezes her shoulder and she doesn’t shrug it off, just rests her hand over his and lets out a long, rattling sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he says at last. ‘At whatever shitty hand life dealt you this time,’ he means, but he chickens out at her expression. ‘The table thing. To put you through that. Courfeyrac chews with his mouth open, just to warn you.’

“S’fine,” she says. “It’s distraction, and that’s what — you know.” ‘I don’t know,’ he thinks. ‘I never have any goddamn idea,’ but he does understand wanting to think about other things, that particular mental slight-of-hand, better than he understands almost anything.

“Everyone’s okay with me sitting there? Are you sure?”

“They voted,” he reminds her. “All in favor.”

She frowns, forehead wrinkling. “Even — everyone, really?”

“Even everyone,” says Grantaire. “And the first to say yes was Combeferre, so maybe you should lay off him.”
“Really?” says Eponine.

“His hand went up so fast, I thought he was gonna throw his shoulder.”

“Really,” she says again, and this is unlike her.

“Really.”

“Really,” says Gavroche from the door. His grin is especially shit-eating.

Grantaire feels a thin thread of apprehension. “What did you do to my music?”

“Got rid of all your shitty stuff,” Gavroche announces, flopping onto the floor. “Now your boyfriend has a fighting chance of thinking maybe you’re cool. It took forever, it was like half of your music.”

Grantaire buries his head in his hands.

“I hid it in a subfolder on your desktop, I’m not an animal,” says Gavroche cheerfully.

“It’s a wasted effort,” says Eponine. “Enjolras already knows he’s not cool.” She extracts some pajamas from her pile of clean laundry on the floor.

“And he’s dating you anyway?” says Gavroche. “Whoa. Marry this dude.”

He can hear Eponine snickering on her way out the door. Grantaire drags his hands over his face and into his hair. “That’s not legal in this state.”

Gavroche shrugs blithely. “Then do an illegal wedding,” he says. “Please, like you couldn’t find a bribable priest.”

“Not quite how it works,” says Grantaire. Once Eponine is out of earshot, he takes a deep breath and opens his mouth, but Gavroche cuts him off.

“Before you even ask, I have no idea what’s going on,” he says, eyes still trailing toward the computer and its siren song of fucking with Grantaire’s files.

“Please,” says Grantaire in a low voice. “I know it’s — I know there’s always something, but this seems bad, and I just want to make sure things are okay.”

“Goddamn tall order there, chief,” Gavroche mutters. He shakes his head. “Look, I don’t know, okay? You’re her best friend and she barely tells you shit, how much do you think she shares with me? I wouldn’t worry, dude. It’s just family shit, you know?”

That would be comforting if Grantaire didn’t privately suspect the Thenardiers were capable of anything.

“If you guys are in danger — “

“Eponine and I will kick whoever needs kicking in the balls,” says Gavroche, like it’s the world’s most reassuring sentence.

Grantaire half smiles. “I was gonna say ‘Call the police.’”

“Point of fact, we’ll probably call you,” says Gavroche with a shrug. “If it comes to that. I don’t think it will, for what it’s worth. ‘Ponine hasn’t tried to teach me self-defense in months.”
Before Grantaire can puzzle that out, Eponine returns, face freshly scrubbed and much younger looking without makeup.

“Dibs on the bed,” she says, like it’s not predetermined at this point.

Gavroche sleeps on the floor, as usual, and Grantaire pretends to sleep on the floor, also as usual. He thinks about reading more of Jehan’s book, but there’s no way that’s going to put him in a good frame of mind for dreams, so instead he just stares the ceiling down and watches the time on his ancient digital clock slowly slip, number by number, into morning.

Eponine and Gavroche leave at 6 a.m., so there’s no chance of Grantaire’s parents being awake to discover them. They’re muzzy-eyed and subdued, and Grantaire tiptoes into the kitchen and grabs them each another packet of Poptarts.

He watches them go from the window, waving, but they don’t see him. The street outside is dark and quiet, the wet grass impossibly green, supersaturated like it’s been photoshopped. Eponine wrestles her bike from behind some bushes and they both climb on, Gavroche perching on the handlebars.

The last time they came over, they each had a bike of their own. It’s never clear, when it comes to the Thenardiers, what details are weird and harmless, and what’s a sign of something much worse. Gavroche seems to think she’ll talk about it if she needs to, and he tries to content himself with that. Then he notices he’s swaying on his feet, so tired he feels physically sick, and he drags himself back to his room and flops into bed, ready to pass out for the next 15 hours.

Grantaire wakes up to a shrill, terrible noise. He’s so out of it that he’s turned off his phone, unplugged his alarm clock, flung them both into the trashcan, and is halfway through a horror movie-style freakout, wondering if the sound is coming from inside his own head, before he figures it out.

“Mom,” he yells, “get the door!” Nothing. But then, she might have said something about running errands at some point, he’s not sure. What time is it? He scrubs his hands over his eyes, then remembers he’s just disabled every clock in the room, right. “Dad!” he calls, like that’s going to do something. He holds his breath, counts to three, and sighs it out. Then he flings off the covers and staggers to his feet, ready to have words with whatever asshole decided to go around ringing doorbells in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

The sound continues all the way down the hall. He wrenches open the door and immediately regrets it; white sunlight stabs into his face and he cowers back like a silent film vampire. As his vision returns, two things occur to him: the ringing has finally stopped, and Enjolras is standing on his doorstep.

Grantaire blinks. He opens his eyes. The situation is unchanged.

“Let me in and I’ll explain,” says Enjolras.

There’s a flash of blue in the edge of his vision and he peers past Enjolras’s shoulder to see a sedan idling in the driveway.

“The hell,” Grantaire mumbles. His voice is creaky with sleep. “Who is that?”

Enjolras grits his teeth. “Let. Me. In.”

Grantaire shrugs elaborately and steps aside, leaving Enjolras to follow. He shuts the door, and now Enjolras is standing in the front hall, looking golden and perfect and thoroughly out of place.
Grantaire runs a hand through his own hair, which has no doubt formed some kind of topiary shape while he was sleeping. He is sharply aware that he hasn’t put on deodorant or brushed his teeth today, and he’s still in pajamas: a threadbare shirt from an 8th grade field trip and boxers.

After a second, Enjolras notices too, because his eyes widen a fraction and fuck, Grantaire refuses to be self-conscious about this, just refuses.

“Whatever, man, you’re lucky I’m wearing anything,” he mutters. “What the hell, I was asleep.”

“It’s 5 p.m.,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire shrugs. “Never said it wasn’t.” He wipes the sleep from his eyes, grimacing at the taste in his mouth. “Wait,” he says slowly, “why are you in my house?”

“My mom,” Enjolras starts, and that explains the car, at least, “She heard about our—pretend date, whatever, and today she took it into her head to give me a ride. I kept saying she didn’t need to, but she was going that way anyway.” He sighs. “It took the whole way here to convince her not to stop in and meet you.”

Thank god for that. Still, Grantaire can’t stop himself from saying, “That long?”

“She’s a lawyer, Grantaire. She argues for a living.”

“And you couldn’t give me any warning?”

“Well no,” says Enjolras with exaggerated patience, “because I don’t have your phone number.”

“You couldn’t e-mail me?” says Grantaire.


This is probably true. Grantaire chews on his lip. He hasn’t checked his e-mail since about 2 a.m.

“Why did you tell your mom—” he says finally.

“I didn’t,” Enjolras counters. Grantaire shakes his head, confused. “Marius,” says Enjolras mournfully, and wow, that kid really can’t keep a secret.

"Jesus," says Grantaire.

Enjolras narrows his eyes, one hell of a scowl forming on his face. "He means well." Watching Enjolras come to the aid of his friends is both heartwarming and—irritating, or something. Grantaire fights the urge to scowl back.

Instead, he snorts and rolls his head to the side. "'He means well' is one of those things you only say when you can't think of anything nice about a person. 'He may be a walking liability but hey, he doesn't actively want evil shit to happen'. Hooray, let's fucking buy him a pony."

"I don't know," says Enjolras, "there's something to be said for choosing kindness over cheap snide remarks."

Grantaire can feel his shoulders hunch, because wow, does Enjolras have a knack for making him feel like living roadkill.

"When does your mom get back from wherever she's going?" he mumbles.
Enjolras blinks, apparently caught off guard. "I don't know, a few hours."

That could be promising. "Is your dad home?" Grantaire asks. It occurs to him that he doesn't even
know if Enjolras has a dad. Enjolras Senior could be dead or divorced or in fact, a lesbian woman.
He's half bracing himself for a lecture on heterocentrism or the dangers of normalizing the nuclear
family, but instead Enjolras says,

"Yeah?"

"Do you think he'd notice if I immediately dropped you back off?"

Enjolras winces. "I can't think of any way he wouldn't."

Grantaire scrubs a hand down his face again. "Fuck," he says with feeling. There is a cosmic
injustice happening here. He wishes he still believed in God, so he'd have someone to lodge a
complaint with.

"Grantaire?"

"What?" He peers over his hand at Enjolras, whose eyebrows are climbing his forehead.

"Are you, uh, planning on putting on pants at some point?" Enjolras clears his throat. "Really, at any
point?"

Grantaire glances down. Right, boxers. Fuck. "Don't try to change me, baby," he deadpans. It's met
with total silence. When he risks a look back, Enjolras's lips are pressed into a tight line. What
exactly was Grantaire expecting?

He huffs a sigh and pads down the hallway, motioning with a jerk of his head for Enjolras to follow.
After a second, he hears tentative footsteps. His room is at the end of the hall. He's not about to invite
Enjolras in with him while he changes, but it feels equally weird to make Enjolras wait outside the
door like a dog. Grantaire points out the kitchen as they pass it.

"Uh, do you want anything to eat or drink?" he says. The words come out oddly formal, like he's his
own butler. Eponine and Gavroche know by now to just take whatever food they want; he's not used
to playing host. "We've got, I don't know, chips, apples, juice—"

"You're seriously not going to put pants on?" says Enjolras shrilly.

Somewhere within the churning, nauseous swamp that is Grantaire's mind right now, there is a solid
fragment of annoyance, like a piece of debris or a makeshift raft. Grantaire could explain himself, but
he can't help how much better it feels to be angry.

"Oh my god, dude, didn't realize you were Amish. I'm showing less skin than an old-timey bathing
suit, what is your problem?"

"I'm not asking you for crazy things right now," Enjolras snaps. "For the love of God, I am asking
you to wear pants."

"Fine," says Grantaire. He lets his lip curl derisively. "I will cover my shame if it means so much to
you." He stalks down the hallway. There's no way to hide what a godawful mess his room is right
now, so he doesn't try, just whiskes the door open. "Wait here," he says over his shoulder. Enjolras
nods curtly, and the annoyance grows, strikes a spark of something like belligerent mischief. "In the
meantime," Grantaire adds, "here's a little something for your fainting couch." He drags down the
neck of his T-shirt to bare his collarbone, makes a mock-scandalized expression.
Enjolras stares at him.

Grantaire ducks into his room and throws the door shut, takes a deep gulping breath of air. There's a mirror over his dresser but he can't look his reflection in the eye. 'Dude,' he thinks, 'what are you even doing?' He has no answers for himself.

He glances around the floor. The cleanest clothes in his room all belong to Eponine; her laundry is still heaped under his bookshelf, even though he knows he told her to stop doing that. He barely has the space for all of his shit, let alone hers.

The cleanest clothes that he owns are probably the pair of jeans crumpled by his bed. He hops into them, zips up, throws on a hoodie so nobody has to be traumatized by his elbows, either.

His toenails are still dark purple from when Eponine did them. He doesn't think Enjolras noticed, probably too horrified by, oh, everything from the ankles up. He snorts—now there's a bright side—and grabs some socks.

On closer inspection, his jeans are actually spattered with paint. Dried paint, but still: it has to look sloppy as hell. On the other hand, the longer he hides in here, the more it's going to seem like he's trying. Brushing his teeth isn't negotiable, though. The inside of his mouth is a terrible place right now. His teeth are like, fuzzy.

When he peeks out into the hallway, it's empty. Whatever, he trusts that Enjolras was smart enough to find the kitchen again if he got hungry.

His hair, when he finally brings himself to look in the bathroom mirror, is as bad as he imagined, sticking out in every direction. Should he brush it? Although what does it matter, Enjolras has already seen him at his worst, nothing can undo that. On the other hand—Grantaire rakes his fingers through his curls and studies the effects: none whatsoever. God, this is stupid. As if all that's standing between Grantaire and Enjolras's good opinion is a respectable hairdo. Stupid, stupid—maybe some water would help it lie flat?

His hat is back in his room. He spits out a mouthful of toothpaste, darts across the hallway, retrieves the hat from under his dresser, and tugs it on.

He's left Enjolras waiting for what is probably way too long, but with any luck Enjolras will just assume Grantaire fell asleep again or something. He glances around the room. In fact, maybe that's not a bad plan; maybe he can hide in here for a few hours until it's time to give Enjolras a ride home.


The kitchen is empty. For one brief, wild moment, Grantaire thinks that maybe Enjolras was the one to chicken out, that he snuck out the back door or climbed out a window or something. As much as he hates to admit it, part of him is also kind of—not thrilled at the thought.

He's just backtracking to the hallway when he hears Enjolras calling, "Oh, um, I'm over here," from the direction of the living room. Grantaire feels a rush of what he's going to pretend isn't relief. When he shuffles through the doorway, Enjolras is standing with his back to him. Grantaire follows his line of sight, and his stomach sinks again. There's a reason Grantaire doesn't spend much time in the living room.
Why couldn't his parents just take the whole stupid trophy case down? How is it even still standing? Where are neighborhood vandals when you need them?

"I didn't know you had a younger brother," says Enjolras.

Grantaire coughs, awkward. "I don't."

There's a pause.

"Then this is all you?" Enjolras sounds tentative. With a sweep of his hand, he indicates the rest of the case and its rows of awards and photos and newspaper clippings.

"No, dude, I fucking bought them on eBay to impress you," Grantaire snaps.

Enjolras doesn't quite seem to hear him. "You won the Spelling Bee. Twice." He nods toward the twin plastic trophies, the framed photograph of a smiling gap-toothed ten-year-old Grantaire shaking hands with the principal onstage.

"Uh, yeah." Grantaire crosses his arms. "Fifth and sixth grade. Lucky for me I didn't have to go against Combeferre. He had that shit in the bag."

"And some sort of middle school drumming competition—"

"Third place," says Grantaire.

"Third place out of the entire state," says Enjolras, who of course is taking the time to read all the stupid little plaques. "Ribbons for the science fair, the art fair, Best Anti-Drug Speech—" Grantaire fights back a snicker. There's an irony he hasn't appreciated in a while. "Perfect Attendance—"

"Yeah, I don't know how the attendance thing made it into the line-up. I think my mom was just filling out the row."

Enjolras gives the shelf one last look and turns to face him. "My mom knows your mom," he says.

"…okay," says Grantaire.

"They're in the same aerobics class."

Grantaire squints at him. "Never said they weren't," he says slowly.

Enjolras huffs an annoyed breath. "I mean. I keep thinking you're going to ask how my mom knew the way to your house—"

"I just assumed I was being punished for something," Grantaire says. "Like, karmically."

"My mom has been to your house before," says Enjolras, dogged. "She knew your mom had a son, but she was under the impression that the son was about twelve. I couldn't figure it out, but. There are pictures of you as a kid all over the hallway, in the kitchen, in here there's a whole display—and then, nothing from the last four or five years. At all. It's like you died."

This is not the conversation Grantaire expected to be having. "Yeah, well." He glances down at his be-stockinged feet. "They lost some enthusiasm for the whole parenting thing when I flunked the easiest possible year of high school."

"What?" Enjolras furrows his brow. "How were you held back? Combeferre said he was in second grade with you—"
Oh god, how has Enjolras not yet heard about this particular failure-parade? "We were. Then I skipped a grade. Then I flunked a grade. Now we're in the same grade again." Grantaire spreads his hands. "It's a living fable. Icarus, wings, blah blah blah."

Enjolras’s expression would fit a lot better on a social worker. His eyes are so wide. Eponine's voice comes filtering back again, 'Like I'm a barefoot orphan in one of those Save-the-Children ads.' Suddenly he understands why she was such an asshole to Combeferre. Grantaire can deal with annoyance, anger, disappointment, disgust, whatever, but Enjolras's pity is intolerable.

"Grantaire," says Enjolras quietly, "you won spelling bees. You were in marching band. You had perfect attendance. What happened?"

"What happened to me? Between middle school and now?" Enjolras nods. "See, this is awkward." Grantaire drops his voice to a whisper. "Has nobody told you about puberty?" He mock-sighs. "Man, I am not the person to give you this talk, but—a few years from now, you're gonna start noticing certain changes. Your voice will get deeper, you'll find hair growing in places where there wasn't hair before, and you're gonna start getting these urges, but don't worry, it's all perfectly natural —"

"Forget it," Enjolras snaps. "I thought since we were stuck together anyway, we might as well have a normal human conversation—"

"Believe it or not, 'Yo Grantaire, why are you such an incredible fuck-up?' is not the world's best icebreaker—"

"Oh," says Enjolras. "I didn't mean to, uh, cause offense--" he stammers, looking genuinely stricken. Months of needling Enjolras for any kind of response, and here's a new expression altogether. But although Grantaire tries and tries, he can't feel any sense of victory. It's not like Enjolras asked to be here, making mortifying conversation in front of the mortifying monument to who Grantaire used to be.

Grantaire crosses his arms. "It's fine, dude, you didn't, like, offend me. Just, for future reference or whatever. Maybe keep in mind you're not my fucking shrink." He trails off, because what are the odds Enjolras is going to have dealings with another guy of Grantaire's particular sad sack pedigree? Grantaire should be trying harder to shine a positive light on the whole greater community of 17-year-old has-beens. Represent his people.

He's not sure why he thought crossing his arms was going to help. It only feels awkward. He shakes them free, but now his hands are left sort of flopping there at the end of his wrists. He crosses his arms again.

"Sorry," says Enjolras, which is a first. Grantaire looks up at him. He has the sense he should probably make a big deal out of this, pantomime tremendous shock, pretend not to understand how that word could possibly come out of Enjolras. It sounds like the kind of thing Grantaire would do.

Sometimes he is just so tired of himself.

Instead he shrugs and, out of lack of anything better to do, jabs a thumb at a framed newspaper photo of mural club in action.

"See the kid on the end there, totally not looking at the camera? That is a rare glimpse of young Jehan Prouvaire in the wild."

This earns a smile from Enjolras, or at least, the sight of Jehan does, face still round with baby fat,
clad in a turtleneck and corduroy overalls, gaze a thousand miles away.

Enjolras shuffles a half-step toward the photo. "Is that—"


“No,” says Enjolras, “I mean, is that you? In the front.”
Grantaire has no memory of this photo being taken, but he can imagine how it went. The tallest members of mural club are in the back, standing. The rest of the kids are kneeling in a second row below them. 12-year-old Grantaire has formed a third row all by himself, sprawled at their feet with the ease of a kid accustomed to being the shortest in any group photo. He’s resting his head in one hand, a deliberately goofy glamor pose, his hair is wild, and he’s got a long-handled paintbrush clenched in his teeth like a rose. His grin is toothy and manic and most of the reason Grantaire has a hard time looking at pictures like this.

“No,” says Grantaire. “I am the much, much cooler kid lying directly behind him, too close to be seen.”

“It’s definitely you,” Enjolras insists. “You’ve got the same nose.”

Grantaire shakes his head. “Won it from him in a card game.”

Although maybe he should have just let it go, because now Enjolras is peering intently at the photo. “You have the same eyebrows, too,” says Enjolras.

“Those were the stakes,” Grantaire babbles, “nose and eyebrows, best two out of three.”

“And the same teeth.”

Grantaire has never in his life gotten the feeling that there is anything particularly distinctive about his teeth. He clamps his lips shut on instinct.

“Also, what card games does a middle schooler even know?” says Enjolras. “I mean, unless you were a much cooler middle schooler than me.”

“I was not,” says Grantaire with feeling.

“You can’t know that,” says Enjolras. “You didn’t know 13-year-old me.”

“I don’t need to. Seriously. You dodged a bullet not meeting that kid.” Grantaire pokes a finger at the glass. He doesn’t want to imagine how that version of Grantaire would’ve reacted to Enjolras.

(Unfortunately, he can, with sickening clarity: “Hey Enjolras, want to hear some facts about bats? Enjolras, I can do a cartwheel, wanna see? Hey Enjolras, Enjolras, who’s your favorite scientist? What’s your favorite mythological creature? Hey Enjolras, I drew you a picture, do you like it? Do you? Do you? Hey Enjolras—”)

God, Grantaire does better when he doesn’t think about this shit. His mind races for a subject change, any subject change.

“I think I might have a picture of Tiny Courfeyrac somewhere,” he offers. “From the school play. I’ll try to find it sometime.” For the sake of his own sanity, he’s going to wait until he can dig up a picture that doesn’t also include Tiny Grantaire in Peter Pan tights and pointy-toed shoes. “Tiny Courfeyrac is hilarious. His face is made of freckles and he has, like, no hair. Seriously, there’s nothing funnier than a little kid with a buzzcut. He looks like a baby chicken.”
“I may need to see that,” Enjolras allows, and wow, is that the slightest trace of a smile? Maybe not, but the possibility gives Grantaire a small flare of goodwill, gives him the courage to take a deep breath and say,

“Look. This doesn’t have to be, like, torture. Neither of us wants to have a shitty Saturday, and we aren’t terrible fucking people.” When he looks over, Enjolras doesn’t contradict him, which is nice. “We just need to not kill each other for a while, and then I can drop you back at your house, and drive off before your parents have a chance to meet me. In the meantime, I’ll lend you a book or you can use my computer or something. Okay?”

Enjolras gives one last glance at the trophy case, in a way that is seriously testing Grantaire’s goodwill reserves. Finally (finally) he nods.

“Okay.”

So Grantaire heads back down the hallway, forcing his stride casual as his mind maps the current mess on his floor with frantic intensity, trying to remember if there’s anything embarrassing in plain view. He's lucky; Eponine and Gavroche drop by often enough that it’s not like he keeps porn lying around. He's also lucky in that nothing he owns is half as humiliating as that stupid trophy case. Well, except for the insides of some of his drawing notebooks, but Enjolras is surely smart enough not to rifle through Grantaire's papers, and if he isn't, well, Grantaire can always just change his name and move to a different country. Dye his hair. Grow a mustache. Join the French Foreign Legion.

"I take it you're an only child?" says Enjolras as they pass a framed photo of seven-year-old Grantaire, missing his front teeth and flanked by grandparents.

Grantaire shakes his head. "I've got a half-brother. He’s twelve years older, I think."

"What's he like?" says Enjolras, with what can't possibly be genuine interest, come on. Grantaire cranes his neck around to throw him a look; why play nice with the whole small talk routine when nobody else is even around? But Enjolras shrugs and says, "What? I always wanted siblings."

Enjolras is an only child. This is perhaps the least surprising piece of information Grantaire has ever heard. Enjolras—wants to vicariously experience having brothers and sisters through other people? Whatever.

"I don't really know him. Like, we didn't grow up together or anything. He lives on the other side of the country, and he doesn't visit."

"What does he do?"

"Heroin, I think," says Grantaire. "I'm under the impression he sleeps a lot, so probably not cocaine or meth."

"That's not funny," says Enjolras stiffly.

"Yeah," says Grantaire, "I know." He was little when Louis dropped out of college and most of that drama went down, so mostly he remembers walking in on a lot of tense parental conversations he was too young to understand.

Enjolras doesn't say anything for a moment. Then, "You're serious?"
"I have that capability within me." Grantaire pauses. "Also, how the fuck would that be a joke? The old junkie brother routine, of course." They've reached the door of his room. He twists the knob and starts to step inside, but Enjolras remains in the hallway, looking thoughtful.

"That's why there's no pictures of him," he says, and shit, this is edging dangerously back into therapist territory.

"Technically, I'm still the good son," Grantaire agrees. "Try not to shit yourself from shock."

It's probably just as well that Enjolras chooses to ignore that comment. "Well, I'm sorry that happened," he says. "It must've been hard for you."

"We weren't close," Grantaire says again. "It's not some big—I mean. Is it weird that there's somebody walking around with my DNA who—? Yeah, whatever, it's weird. But I never knew him and he's shown zero interest in getting to know me, so like—"

"Do you want to talk about something else?" Enjolras ventures.

Grantaire shoots him a grateful smile. "God yes. Fucking anything." They're still just hovering around Grantaire's doorway, doorknob digging into Grantaire's spine like it's after blood. Grantaire steps inside, gives the door a little "there you go" flip and then Enjolras is following him, and then Enjolras is standing in Grantaire's bedroom, and Enjolras is taking in all the posters and sketches stuck to the wall, and Grantaire is forcing himself not to imagine how it all must look from his perspective.

Inside, it's dim and cavelike—one of the bulbs in the overhead light has burned out. Enjolras's hair is the brightest thing in the room. Enjolras is in his room, which is not something Grantaire has even fantasized about. His fantasies are not that ambitious.

Of course, his fantasies aren't this nerve-wracking either. Enjolras is silent for an uncomfortably long time.

"If you want a book, the books are—" Grantaire manages to not actually say out loud 'the books are in the bookcase' but it’s a close enough call that he can’t feel good about it. Luckily, Enjolras doesn't seem to notice, just takes a step toward the sagging shelves and the mound of Eponine’s clothes beneath them. Grantaire is struck with a sudden, vivid, horrifying image of Enjolras snagging his foot on a bra, like an angry wolf cub with one paw caught in a lacy purple bear trap.

"Look out," Grantaire blurts, pulling him back by the sleeve of his red hoodie.

"Um," says Enjolras. Grantaire lets go, flexes his fingers.

Enjolras looks down at the heap of shirts and C-cups and panties, and back at Grantaire. There’s the beginnings of a frown on his face, and Grantaire wastes a long moment trying to guess what Enjolras is thinking. Assuming the worst, that seems like a safe bet, but what would that even be here? It’s probably not “Oh, I guess this guy is a secret crossdresser”, because that wouldn’t be such a big deal to Enjolras. Maybe he’s decided Grantaire is a kleptomaniac, who knows.

“I keep telling Eponine not to leave all her shit in my room, but,” Grantaire mutters, which only earns an abrupt nod. Whatever judgement Enjolras has made, this in no way softens it. Awesome. Grantaire coughs. “I’m gonna go get you a chair.”

When he returns, dragging a dining room chair behind him, Enjolras is standing by the bookcase with a book in each hand.
Grantaire raises his eyebrows. “Is this some new smart kid trick? Two books at once? Double reading?”

“Couldn’t decide,” says Enjolras stonily. He angles the covers up. “Which one should I—?”

“Oh my god,” says Grantaire, when he finally makes out the titles, “neither.”

“What?” Enjolras is full-on scowling now, but it’s different than his standard scowl, some added element. Defensiveness, almost. “They’re your books.”

“Yeah, but—” Grantaire sighs. “Look, *1984*, you’re gonna think you love it, and then you’re gonna get to the end and realize you hated it all along. And *Fight Club*? Believe me when I say this nation is not prepared for an Enjolras who has read *Fight Club*.”

“Want to maybe speed this up by recommending something, instead of just telling me why whatever I pick is stupid?” Enjolras snaps. If Grantaire didn’t know any better, he’d say it almost sounds hurt.

“Whoa, man, calm the hell down,” says Grantaire. He deposits the chair in the middle of the room and climbs over several piles of crap until he reaches the bookcase. He stares down at the faded spines, at a loss. It’s all shit from middle school and freshman year; he hasn’t bought a lot of new books since. Well, wedged between his bed and the wall there’s the copy of *Grapes of Wrath* he picked up after their final detention together, but that’s a secret he’s taking to his grave.

Grantaire’s book collection is evenly divided into classic literature bullshit accumulated for school, and the dorky fantasy books he’d devoured for escapism. A lot of magic swords and square-jawed moody heroes and busty princesses-disguised-as-barmaids or whatever. Even at the time, Grantaire had known it was over the top. Enjolras would probably rather toss one of those paperbacks in a blender and drink the pulp than read the thing. Grantaire wouldn’t blame him. The imaginary Enjolras who lives in Grantaire’s head and judges every single thing Grantaire has ever done makes some good points sometimes.

“Have you read Harry Potter?” says Grantaire tentatively.

“For crying out loud,” says Enjolras. “Yes, I’ve read Harry Potter, I’m not a *Martian*.”

Grantaire is seized by a sudden, burning desire to learn absolutely every opinion Enjolras has about the wizarding world. If Grantaire had even the slightest chance of getting the answers, he’d ask. But he knows he’s already screwed that one up. Enjolras would rather be anywhere else on the planet right now, including like, inside volcanoes or at the bottom of oceans.

“What’s going on, dude?” says Grantaire quietly. “Sensing some hostility here.”

There’s a very long pause, long enough that Grantaire is just about to say “fuck it” and leave him to the tender mercies of the cheesiest fantasy novel available, and then Enjolras busts out with,

“What does Eponine think about all of this? Pretending to date?”

Grantaire blinks. “What? Uh, she thinks it’s stupid as hell. Why?” He wishes he could read Enjolras’s face better, but Enjolras isn’t even looking at him.

“Was she okay with it? Did you even run it by her first?”

“Why the fuck would I need to?” says Grantaire. “It’s not her call. Like, at all. I didn’t ask her what pants to put on this morning either.”
For some reason, this makes Enjolras sigh, resolute. Whatever mysteries are swirling around in his head, he’s come to a decision.

“Okay, for the record,” he says. “I get that it’s none of my business, and I don’t want to start a fight right now—”

“Ooh, can’t wait to see how this sentence ends,” Grantaire interjects.

“But. For the record,” says Enjolras, and he glances up then, looks Grantaire straight in the eye. “That is a shitty thing to do to a person.”

Nothing is making sense. It’s all the downsides of being high, with absolutely none of the fun parts. “The fuck are you talking about, man?”

“I’m not stupid.”

“What—?” says Grantaire. Enjolras’s eyes flicker down at the pile of Eponine’s clothes and then back up. Something in his brain clicks just then. Clicks hilariously. “Oh my god, dude, do you think me and Eponine are hooking up or something?”

“...you aren’t?” says Enjolras, brows knit together.

Grantaire laughs so hard he almost falls over. Then he actually does fall over, because his floor is a death trap.

“Oh my god, man,” he wheezes from atop a pile of papers. “Oh, you are fucking with me. Eponine, what the hell?”

Enjolras bristles, but less...intensely than before. A hedgehog instead of a porcupine. “You’re always together. She leaves her underwear in your room, it’s not an unreasonable thing to—”

“There’s like six bras in there,” says Grantaire. “A lady’s not gonna forget her bra six times in a row, I don’t care what kind of crazy passionate lovemaking you think is going on here. So either Eponine’s got twelve boobs, or she does her laundry at my house.” He sucks in a big gulp of air. His stomach muscles ache. “Fuck, I need to remember to tell her about this, she’s gonna literally laugh her ass off.”

Enjolras opens his mouth, and Grantaire cuts in quick with, “No, don’t tell me what ‘literally’ means, I meant literally.” He gazes up at his ceiling. “Fishermen in the Pacific elbowing each other, all ‘what’s that weird object flying through the sky?’ ‘Oh wait, that’s Eponine’s ass, soaring on the winds of hilarity.’”

There’s a quiet huffing from Enjolras’s direction, something suspiciously laugh-like. By the time Grantaire looks over at him, there’s no way to know for sure, but whatever weird storm seems to have passed.

“Me and Eponine,” says Grantaire. “What the fuck, man. Don’t worry, I didn’t hook you into some screwed up pretend-cheating drama. Imaginary-me is a one-imaginary-man kind of guy.”

“Is actual—you gonna tell me what to read, or should I just go look at the trophy case some more?” says Enjolras. “Stare at the pictures. Commit all the plaques to memory. Really do a deep read of those newspaper clippings—”

“Oh, fuck you.” Grantaire struggles to his feet. “Here, this one, read this.” He tugs the book out by its spine, deposits it in Enjolras’s hands.
“The Golden Compass,” Enjolras reads. He flips it over, frowns. “It says ‘for ages twelve and up.’”

“I read it when I was eleven, fuck the police,” says Grantaire. “No, it’s good, you’ll like it.” Enjolras gives the polar bear on the cover a long, considering look. “Hey, either you have fun reading a book, or you prove me wrong,” Grantaire wheedles. “Win-win?”

Maybe the argument works, or maybe Enjolras resigns himself to the fact that Grantaire doesn’t have anything better. At any rate, Enjolras settles into the dining room chair in the middle of the room, and Grantaire settles in at his desk.

His hands hover at the keyboard. There’s clearly no way he’s going to be able to relax enough to do his usual aimless dicking around on the internet, not with the computer screen directly in Enjolras’s line of sight, vulnerable at any second to that laser-focused disapproval.

Instead, he starts searching through his music files, trying to figure out the scope of Gavroche’s damage. The kid didn’t lie; he did keep a folder of everything he deleted from Grantaire’s iTunes. The thing is, he also renamed most of the tracks, stuff like “this song is disguised for ur own good.mp3” and “just forget about this one just let it go” and “COME ON DUDE SERIOUSLY”.

At least this way Grantaire’s actually going to get something done today, he thinks, slipping in an earbud and cuing up the first song. It takes about five seconds—until the guitars come in—for him to recognize what it is, and another few seconds to replace Gavroche’s title (“go sit in a corner and think about what u did”) with the actual track name. At this rate, he could be done in an hour if he focuses.

It would probably be easier to focus if he wasn’t quite so vividly aware of Enjolras sitting in the chair behind him. As it is, he can’t help glancing over his shoulder every few seconds.

But every time he checks, Enjolras is reading intently, and after the twelfth or thirteenth time, Grantaire starts to calm down, until he’s no longer flinching at every noise behind him, until he starts to fall into a rhythm. (It turns out Gavroche mostly left the track order in place, so all Grantaire has to do is identify the album and things get way easier from there.) Until the sound of Enjolras’s breathing, the quiet repetitive shush of turning pages no longer makes Grantaire straighten up in his chair—until it starts to feel almost comforting, a pleasant background hum like rain or the ocean or frying bacon. It’s almost like hanging out with Eponine when she’s in one of her less chatty moods, him drawing, her listening to music on headphones.

Unfortunately, as Grantaire’s stomach finally settles, it comes with the painful reminder that the last thing he ate was some chips off Gavroche’s plate almost 24 hours ago. He could go for some Chinese, actually, but he’s not about to say that out loud, turn this night into some fucked up mirror version of their pretend date.

He tugs out the other earbud and swivels around. Enjolras is staring down at the book, lips moving slightly as his eyes scan across the page. He’s smiling just a little. Grantaire watches for a good long moment, telling himself it’s to savor his victory about the book, and not about how hard it is to look away from a genuinely happy Enjolras. Just before the look can go from “besotted” to “creepy,” Grantaire clears his throat.

“Wanna order a pizza or something?” he mumbles, syllables tripping all over each other.

Enjolras resurfaces slowly, blinking. “What?”

“Guessing your mom didn’t feed you before she whisked you away for our romantic evening together,” says Grantaire. “Pizza?”
This gets the expected eyeroll, but Enjolras concedes, “I am pretty hungry. We could split a large?”

Grantaire assumes they’re going to haggle for a long time on toppings, but Enjolras’s only stipulations are no sausage. There are probably dick jokes to be made here, but in this tentative almost-peace, Grantaire is not the man for the job. Enjolras calls in the order, and then—and okay, Grantaire should’ve expected this—they have a lengthy fight about who’s going to pay.

“How is this complicated?” Grantaire finds himself saying. “My house, my rules, my pizza.”

Enjolras doesn’t back down. “This, today, is my fault. I should’ve thought to keep Marius away from my mom, and now I’m intruding on your weekend, so why can’t I—”

‘Because I was in love with you before you offered to buy me a pizza,’ Grantaire tries hard not to think. “Such a gentleman,” he says out loud. “But if you were only prepared to pay me twenty bucks to date you, there’s no way you have money to burn on delivery food.”

“My parents gave me some cash as we were leaving,” says Enjolras, “specifically so I could cover myself.”

“Are they seriously that cool with—thinking you’re dating a dude?” Grantaire pauses with the realization that he doesn’t even know for sure if Enjolras is gay. He seems like the kind of person who could conceivably throw himself into this situation on pure ideology.

One corner of Enjolras’s mouth tilts up. “They already know I’m not going to give them grandchildren,” he says, which doesn’t answer anything. It’s none of Grantaire’s business, of course, Enjolras is equally unattainable either way. It’s like getting worked up when a celebrity gets married. Your chances can’t shrink from zero.

“No, they’re okay with it,” Enjolras assures him, misinterpreting Grantaire’s frown. “They’re fine, they love me, it’s not a problem.”

“...oh,” says Grantaire.

"I figured," Enjolras starts, "well, I figured if nothing else, you wouldn't want to have to lie to your parents, so I told my mom you weren't out to your family yet, and not to mention it to anyone. She was starting to ask a lot of questions and that distracted her, so I played it up, said you were kind of—miserably closeted, sorry if it, uh."

Grantaire lets out a shaky sigh. "That was—good thinking. In fact," he adds, when Enjolras's expression starts to waver back towards concern, "I think you just won yourself a free pizza, congratulations."

And to Grantaire’s immense relief, they’re back to arguing who’s going to pay. Enjolras makes his case well, surprise surprise, but Grantaire gets in some good points, too. (“Keep your money, you’ll put it to way better use. What am I gonna do with an extra twenty dollars? Blow it on drugs or snacks.”) The debate ranges far and wide, and then Enjolras lays the killing blow, which is to fix Grantaire with those terrifyingly earnest eyes and say, “Please let me do this.”

There’s just no pulling ahead of that.

And so Enjolras wins, but then the delivery guy rings the doorbell while he’s in the bathroom, and Grantaire seizes his chance. Fortune favors the brave, he thinks, sliding down the last bit of hallway in his socks.

He’s so buoyed by his victory—and the chance to rub it in Enjolras’s face, maybe—that when he
opens the door and sees Mike from school, wearing the trademark ugly polo shirt and holding a large flat box, Grantaire’s first instinct is to smile and say, “Hey man, didn’t know you were a pizza guy, how’s it going?” He gets as far as “Hey” before Mike’s narrowing his eyes, hissing,

“What the hell,” like this is some kind of trick and then Grantaire remembers, right, he’s a pariah again.

It’s been almost three years, but it all comes back to him in a flash—that spike of panic, the way his throat dries up, the way his hands shake. Just like riding a bike. Yesterday, Mike was knocking Jehan to the floor without the slightest shred of remorse, and that was in school, surrounded by teachers and possible witnesses. Here, there’s nothing to keep him from beating Grantaire to a pulp, and it’s clear by the way Mike’s standing that he knows this.

“Um,” says Grantaire in a small voice, “just uh, just let me pay—” He reaches into his back pocket. His wallet isn’t there.

It’s equally not-there the second time he checks, blinking stupidly. The pocket on the other side is empty, too. So are his front pockets.

Mike glowers. Grantaire tries to pull back his thoughts from where they’re rapidly skittering away. He can only think of one other place it could be, although he doesn’t remember seeing it on his desk.

“Um,” he says, darting a glance back towards his room. “I need to—” His heart is beating like it wants out of his ribcage.

“Just give me the fucking money,” Mike spits out, and Grantaire chokes on a hysterical laugh, because suddenly this is a mugging, this is a mugging plus a pizza, this is absolutely the stupidest way anyone will have ever died. Nobody will be able to look his tombstone in the eye.

“I don’t,” Grantaire stammers, “I don’t have the, I need to—” he jerks an arm behind himself. Mike takes a step forward, and it should be hilarious, anyone trying to look threatening in that stupid polyester shirt. Grantaire suddenly does not see the humor.

“Please,” says Grantaire, “I just—”

“Listen, homo—” says Mike.

“Oh look, pizza’s here,” says Enjolras cooly. Grantaire whips around. He watches as Enjolras strides up between them, pulls a crisp twenty from his pocket and hands it over. “This should cover it.” Mike glares at Enjolras, who looks back, level and unafraid, and then turns to smile at Grantaire.

“My treat,” says Enjolras. His smile goes sharper, mischievous, and Grantaire can tell it’s to mess with Mike, he can tell, but if anything that just makes it hotter, that underlying edge of ‘fuck the man’ and shit, Grantaire is so gone. Enjolras leans closer to Grantaire. “Since it’s been such a nice night.” He tugs the box and the receipt from Mike, sets it on the chair by the door.

Mike’s eyes flicker back and forth between them. “You—”

“I need my change,” Enjolras tells him. “Eighteen fifty seven including tax, right? So one forty three.”

Mike tries to stare him down. Enjolras snorts and holds out one palm, imperious.
“What about tip,” Mike grits out as he counts the change and hands it woodenly to Enjolras. “I was five minutes early—”

“Right,” says Enjolras. He tilts his head to one side. “Sorry, I always forget, I know it’s twenty percent for waitstaff and barbers. How much do you tip a homophobe? I—zero percent, right? Zero?” His tone is flippant but his eyes are bright with purpose. He glances over at Grantaire as if for confirmation. “Pretty sure it’s zero.”

Grantaire’s whole body is so confused. His fight or flight system is in turmoil, his libido is having a grand old time, and he’s not breathing enough. Mostly, he’s got to force himself not to hug Enjolras, although come to think of it—Grantaire goes to throw an arm across those perfect shoulders; surely he’s allowed that much at this point. He only realizes mid-motion how much taller Enjolras is, how awkward this is going to look, even if Grantaire stands on tip-toes. It’s too late to take it back, so Grantaire slides his arm around Enjolras’s waist instead, trying not to think about it too hard.

Technically, it’s still nothing Enjolras hadn’t suggested ahead of time. It’s half a hug, more or less, and Enjolras has every opportunity to test out their stupid safeword if need be.

He doesn’t.

He does slightly raise his eyebrows, which is fair. The best way to camouflage this is to make it ridiculous, Grantaire thinks, looking up at Enjolras through his lashes and saying, “Oh, Enjolras,” in the gooiest tone he can muster. “You’re so smart. So good at math.”

Enjolras does the little mouth twitch that Grantaire associates with repressed laughter, probably just that jazzed to have the opportunity to troll a bigot like this.

“Thanks, babe,” he says. “I try.” And then Enjolras is wrapping his own arm around Grantaire, palm coming to rest on his hip so casual, like it’s not burning a hole through Grantaire’s hoodie, like it’s not suddenly the only thing Grantaire can focus on, tucked cozily against Enjolras’s side.

“Tell you what,” says Enjolras to Mike, in an entirely different tone. “If you leave right now, we won’t call your manager and explain how you tried to physically intimidate a customer.”

“Whatever,” Mike snarls. “We don’t need business from you people. Enjoy your food, fags. Fucking disgusting,” he mutters. He slams the door.

Neither of them say anything for a second.

“I think that went well,” says Enjolras finally.

“Oh,” says Enjolras. “Right.” He pulls back, out of Grantaire’s reach. “Are you okay?” Enjolras asks him, and Grantaire nods, jerkily. “God, what an asshole. He’s in History with me, he’s basically the dumbest person alive. He didn’t know who the current Vice President is, how can anyone—you really are okay?”

Grantaire grabs the pizza and turns on his heel back towards his room, leaving Enjolras to scramble behind him. “Fine,” says Grantaire, and the advantage here is not having to look into Enjolras’s face to say it. “Why?”

“You seemed, I don’t know, uncomfortable,” says Enjolras, and shit, if Enjolras has developed the
ability to read his body language they are gonna be in some hot water.

“Just hungry.”

Grantaire is clearing off enough space on his floor for two people and a pizza box when Enjolras adds,

“By the way, your wallet’s in the medicine cabinet.”

“The hell?” Grantaire looks up from the dirty clothes he’s kicking under the bed. He’s irresponsible with his things as a rule, but he feels like he should’ve noticed making a move like that. “How the fuck did it wind up there?” he mutters to himself.

“Because I put it there,” says Enjolras with great patience. “You weren’t going to let me pay, and it was right on your desk, so. I figured no matter what, you weren’t going to check the bathroom.” Enjolras pushes some papers out of the way with his foot, meditative. “Sorry,” he says. “It didn’t occur to me that the pizza might come early. I just—I really, really wanted to pay.”

Grantaire wills himself not to be charmed by the fact that Enjolras essentially stole his wallet out of chivalry. This goes about as well as anything that relies on Grantaire’s willpower.

“You must be fun to play boardgames with,” he mutters, and Enjolras just shrugs.

“Courfeyrac says I’m banned from Risk forever.”

“Fair,” says Grantaire. “Fair.” He sets the box on the rug, flings himself down, and snags a slice. Pizza is pizza, delivered by a bigot or no.

They chew silently for a while. Maybe it's awkward for Enjolras, but Grantaire isn’t sure he cares at this point. It's hard to believe he's only been awake for a couple of hours. He just wants to curl up in bed and sleep.

Grantaire takes another piece. Enjolras eats his pizza the weirdest way—first he rips off the crust and eats that, then he nibbles all the way around the edges and around again, in a spiral. Grantaire can't see any benefit to doing it this way. Maybe there’s some reason Grantaire just doesn’t get. If he asks, they’re only going to find a way to argue about it.

His neck is so sore. He thinks longingly of being a middle school drama kid, all the stretching and trust exercises and massage circles. He could ask Enjolras to form a two-person massage train. Or, for the same emotional effect, he could just repeatedly slam his head into the wall. Enjolras probably gives terrible neck rubs anyway, he thinks, cold and impersonal, all clammy robot fingers and insufficient pressure. Not that his hand had felt cold or impersonal on Grantaire's hip, tugging him closer until he was snug in the half-circle of Enjolras’s arm, but.

Grantaire lets his head loll back and forth as he chews, trying to free up some of the tension. Enjolras glances up mid-bite and gives him a weird look. Like he can judge, eating his pizza like a serial killer.

Then again, recent experience has shown that maybe Grantaire is into Enjolras's murder face. Fuck.

Enjolras looks away again, back at the half-empty pizza box between them. Something about the downward slump of his gaze reminds Grantaire of those early days in the cafeteria, Enjolras sitting alone in a crowded room.

'If I had even the slightest idea what would make you happy, I'd do it,' he thinks. Even if it was
idiotic, or humiliating. Stand on his head. Sing the alphabet backwards.

Their eyes meet. "Did you ever do drama or anything?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras shakes his head, swallows. "Why?"

"Nothing, just. You did a good job. With Mike, the white knight routine." God, this is agony. What is Grantaire doing. He puts on a half-hearted old-timey Hollywood producer voice. "You're a natural, kid," he says, wincing inwardly and maybe outwardly too.

"You too." Enjolras says it without irony.

"For real? I was worried it was over the top—"

"I think subtlety is lost on a guy who's convinced World War One was the first-ever war," says Enjolras with a wry twist of his lips.

Grantaire laughs before he can stop himself. "Yeesh." He gets to his feet, stretches his arms above his head, feels his back pop satisfyingly in about four different places. He twists towards his computer, jogging the mouse until the screen floats back up at him. "Good news is you can probably go back in like an hour. A three hour date is respectable, right?"

"You're asking like I'd know," says Enjolras behind him.

"You can borrow the book, by the way," Grantaire tosses over his shoulder as he climbs back into his chair. "I mean since clearly I was right and you think it's awesome, figured I'd spare the embarrassment of having to ask. No worries. You can take it back with you, because it's fucking great, because I totally won the argument." He tucks the earbud back into place. He doesn't have the mental energy left to fix his remaining files, so he'll probably just watch something. "Not a big deal, you don't even have to thank me, seriously, don't make it weird, it's cool." He clicks over to the Comedy Central website. "I'm not even gonna gloat about it, y'know? And to be clear, by 'it' I mean that thing where I was totally right and you were—"

"Are you watching the Daily Show?" Enjolras's voice is closer than it should be. Grantaire startles. He spins around on the chair and Enjolras is only standing about two feet away.

"Yeah," he says, shrugging.

"Can I watch with you?"

"No," says Grantaire, before he realizes how that's going to sound. Enjolras frowns. "I mean," he adds, "you're not, like, forbidden." He sighs. It's a dumb story. Eponine gave him shit about it for weeks. "The day I got this computer, I spilled half a can of rootbeer into the speakers, and they've never worked since." He twirls the free earbud in his fingers. "Hence the headphones."

"I thought you were just being considerate," says Enjolras.

Grantaire chuckles. "No."

"You only use one earphone at a time."

"Yeah," says Grantaire. "I like to stay alert."

Enjolras shakes his head. "You regularly slept in detention."

"You remember that?" Grantaire blurs out, several shades too sentimental. He searches his mind for
a fix. "It was a cunning ruse, surprised you fell for it." Much too late to be useful, his brain alights on a better question: ‘Why were you looking in the first place?’ Seated in front of him, Enjolras would’ve had to make a deliberate effort to turn around and see.

“You snore,” says Enjolras.

There is, of course, no way for Grantaire to disprove it. Instead he says, “Hey, if you want to take a turn on the computer, I can do something else.”

“No,” says Enjolras, “that’s okay, it’s just. You’re only using half of your headphones.”

“...yeah?” says Grantaire.

“We could share.” Enjolras says this slowly, as though it’s obvious. Grantaire keeps forgetting how this must be from the other side; irritating and vaguely confusing, not a nightmare jungle of hormones and emotion. Oh gosh, why didn’t the thought of sharing headphones occur to Grantaire? Maybe because he’s not a masochist.

“Uh,” says Grantaire.

“It’s fine,” says Enjolras. “Not a big deal, whatever.” His eyes slide down to the floor again. It’s not a look that seems right for him.

“Do you want to?” Grantaire ventures.

“I missed Monday’s show.”

Maybe this will somehow not be excruciating, Grantaire thinks, holding out the earbud with a flourish. Enjolras wrestles the chair across the floor and next to him. The headphones tether them together, so that there’s no way around how their shoulders knock, arms brushing. Grantaire pulls up the episode, rests his temple on his hand until there’s nothing Enjolras-like in his peripheral vision, and hits play.

There’s something surprisingly intimate about laughter in close proximity. Grantaire sort of wishes he’d known that ahead of time, could've taken it into consideration. The sense-memory of being crowded up against Enjolras as his body shakes was absolutely information Grantaire didn't need. The better it feels, the worse this is for Grantaire in the long run, and it feels very good.

Enjolras smells like something citrusy—soap or shampoo or who knows, maybe his pores just naturally give off orange essence, maybe that's the next step in human evolution. He's a restless TV watcher, shifting in his chair, swinging his foot, and his laugh is as perfect as the rest of him. They're close enough that Grantaire could lean over and rest his head on Enjolras's shoulder, if they lived in a different reality.

It's unfair. It's profoundly unfair. It's torture. Grantaire wants to stay here forever.

When the closing credits start up, Enjolras clears his throat, awkward. "I didn't get to see most of Tuesday's, either," he says, and Grantaire's pretty sure this isn't true, but he nods, cues up the next one. He gets to sit next to Enjolras, who in turn doesn't have to make conversation with him. Everyone wins.

Then they watch six more episodes.

"Shit," says Grantaire, when he thinks to check the time, "dude, it's almost ten, we've gotta get you home."
Enjolras looks up at the computer clock with a start and yanks out the earbud.

"Shit, did I get you in trouble?" says Grantaire. "You probably have, like, a curfew, right? Are your mom and dad gonna be mad?" He tries to imagine the scene: Enjolras's parents waiting up for him. Mrs. Enjolras with her mouth pressed tight. Mr. Enjolras, face full of fatherly concern. *Honey, we love you, but you need to tell us if you're going to be out late, okay?* He'll admit he fills in the blanks more from TV than personal experience.

This gets him a sour look from Enjolras. "If they were worried, they'd call. They know my number."

Grantaire can't begin to guess what he's done wrong now; Enjolras is a creature of unfathomable whims.

"Okay," he says, "whatever."

Enjolras stands, grabs the book, says, "Are we going?"

"We're going," says Grantaire.

"They're still gonna want to meet you," Enjolras announces from the passenger seat as Grantaire eases onto the darkened subdivision road.

"Tell them I'm shy," says Grantaire, and Enjolras snorts. "Tell them I'm a shy, delicate flower," Grantaire pushes. "With all these, like, issues from being, what'd you say, miserably closeted? And that I'm afraid of adults. Because of, y'know, the wounds." He eases to a stop at the sign, considers this. "Is this gonna make things weird between your mom and my mom?"

"No," says Enjolras distantly. When Grantaire glances over, he's turned towards the window. "My mom didn't really like your mom," he explains to the glass. "Said she seemed—insincere."

"Ouch, man," says Grantaire with a laugh. The knowledge is giddying, somehow. He's reminded of the first time he got high for real. A pleasant ache spreading out in his chest like he could do anything. "Ouch," he says again.


Grantaire turns on the radio to fill in the silence, some generic pop dance hit where he's picked up the melody through sheer osmosis. He hums along as they drive down the empty streets.

"Did Mike seriously think World War One was the very first war?" he asks suddenly.

"And that the Ten Commandments were the very first laws," Enjolras confirms. "The teacher tried to back him up on that one, it was ridiculous."

"Told you, man, Walker's a dick." Grantaire shakes his head. "You shoulda listened to me, I could've clued you in—"

"In between misogynistic bullshit about 'getting girls'—"

"Women aren't Pokemon!"" Grantaire quotes, grinning with nostalgia. "Man, you are a trip."

It’s hard to believe this is the same guy that put his arm around Grantaire’s waist a few hours ago. Then again, he kind of isn’t. “I’ve fucking got it,” Grantaire mutters.

They roll up to Enjolras’s house in silence. The second the wheels touch the driveway, floodlights flicker on, lighting up the whole yard and scalding his retinas.

“Fuck,” says Grantaire, scrunching his face against the spots forming in his eyes.

“Came with the house,” says Enjolras. “We don’t know how to turn them off.”

“Nothing like suburban paranoia.” He puts the van in park, looks over at Enjolras unbuckling his seat belt. “See you Monday,” says Grantaire. Enjolras hesitates, one hand on the car door, glancing up the driveway at his house. “Dude,” Grantaire adds, “I’m not meeting your parents.”

“I know, you already said that.” Enjolras’s eyes are on an upstairs window, the only window lit up from inside. It could be Grantaire’s imagination, but he thinks the curtain is moving slightly.

Grantaire does some quick detective work. “That their room?”

“Yeah,” says Enjolras.

“What are the chances they’re spying on us?”

“Uh.” Enjolras turns back to face him. “Very, very high.”

Luckily, thinks Grantaire, looking back up at the window from the corner of his eye, Mr. and Mrs. Enjolras have a terrible vantage point.

“What?” says Enjolras. Half his face is illuminated by the floodlights. The effect is otherworldly, he looks like a painting, but when doesn’t he? More important for Grantaire’s purposes, the side in shadow isn’t visible from the house.

“This is easy,” says Grantaire. “Okay, don’t freak out.”

“Why—” Enjolras starts, but Grantaire is already unbuckling his own seat belt, leaning in, looking past whatever stoic expression Enjolras must be making right now, until his lips are almost brushing Enjolras’s ear.

“From this angle, to them, it looks like I’m kissing you,” Grantaire whispers. And then, in case it comes out as longing or pathetic or worryingly breathy as it feels, he adds the most obnoxious kissing sound he can manage. He pulls away, straightens back up. Seriously his neck is killing him. He hopes this isn’t going to be a feature of pretend-dating.

Enjolras is still in his car.

“Everything cool?” says Grantaire. He has a momentary flash of panic that maybe he’s given too much away, but Enjolras just nods distractedly.

“See you Monday,” he says, climbing out of the van.

“See you.”

Enjolras didn’t just hide Grantaire’s wallet in the medicine cabinet, he hid it in a box of band-aids, and he hid the displaced band-aids under the soap dish. Grantaire grips the counter and tries not to
smile.

He is so, so fucked.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Grantaire tells himself, all the way to the cafeteria, that he’s only nervous because he’s worried whether or not Eponine will fit in at the lunch table. It’s not a particularly strong argument, even in his own mind, but he gives it a shot.

(Warnings for mentions of racial slurs and violence. That said, it happens in an episode involving Bahorel, so it’s not as much of a bummer as it might sound?)

By Monday, Grantaire’s sleep schedule is so off-track that he actually wakes up fifteen minutes before his alarm. He twists around in bed, trying to convince himself he’ll be able to fall back asleep, but when he remembers what lies ahead of him today, the adrenaline kicks in and he can’t even keep his eyes shut.

“Well, shit,” he says out loud. This is going to be such a mess.

He might as well head out early. He’d rather avoid the last-minute crush of cars lining up around the school, and anyway, there’s the novelty of showing up at Spanish class on time, instead of slinking in after the bell all, “Lo siento, señora.”

Half an hour later, Grantaire’s rolling into his parking spot. He’s still groggy enough that it takes a second to register anything unusual. In the adjacent space, Combeferre is perched on the hood of his Volvo, sitting there with a book and a to-go cup of coffee, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. He looks up when Grantaire climbs out of the van. There’s another to-go cup on his other side, and Combeferre hands it over, nonchalant.

“Good morning,” he says pleasantly. “I didn’t know if you were a coffee person or not, so I got you a cider, hope that’s okay.”

Grantaire’s got nothing against cider, but he’s never seen the point. At some moment in history, a guy went, “Apple juice is great, but what if we tried making it hot as soup?” and then none of his friends stopped him. He takes the cup anyway. Instinct whispers that saying no would be a bad call.

He leans against Combeferre’s car, staring down at the steam curling from the hole on the plastic lid. It makes him think of smoke, and how much he wishes he had a cigarette right now. Combeferre shuts the book, stares out philosophically at the school.

“You gonna give me the ‘he’s my best friend and if you hurt him you’ll pay’ speech?” Grantaire asks after a minute.

“Nah.” Combeferre takes a slow sip of coffee. "You’re smart enough I assumed we could keep it as subtext.”

“Listen,” says Combeferre abruptly. “I just—I think it should be said.” He’s clearly steeling himself for something, but Grantaire can’t even begin to guess what’s going on, what kind of terrible strings have come with this single serving of warm juice.

“O-kay?”

Combeferre takes a deep breath. “Enjolras doesn’t do things halfway. If he agreed to date you, it’s because he likes you a lot, and I’m sorry, Grantaire, I want to trust you, I do—”

“But you don’t,” Grantaire supplies.

He’d love to take a big swig of cider, for the excuse of hiding the bottom half of his face if nothing else, but even the air around the cup is too hot. There’s no reason to add extra physical pain to this conversation. It’s doing just fine on its own.

“You don’t often give us a reason to,” says Combeferre, and something about the cautious expression on his face starts to jog one corner of a memory. It’s hazy, but Grantaire’s pretty sure he’s caused that look before. The problem is, that’s all he knows. Whatever happened, either he forgot on purpose, or it couldn’t survive three years of booze and THC.

The more he thinks about it, the more he’s not sure they talked at all last year. He’s been so intent on avoiding Combeferre, it hasn’t occurred to him that maybe Combeferre was doing the same.

“Did we, like, have a fight at some point?” he hazards. “Like, a few years ago?”

Combeferre’s eyes go flat behind his glasses, in that stoic, self-contained way probably developed from years of being the only black kid in his whole grade.

“Not exactly,” says Combeferre, like that’s an answer and not a riddle. Grantaire scratches the back of his head with his free hand, trying to imagine what he might’ve said to make someone like Combeferre write him off. Depending on when this happened, there are some not-great possibilities.

“If it was,” Grantaire mumbles, “I mean, I was kind of a spazz for a while, like, if I made some comment you should probably—”

Combeferre sets down the coffee. “Grantaire,” he says, “I asked you a question in the cafeteria, and you barked like a dog at me. For about a minute and a half.”


He probably deserves the incredulous look Combeferre levels at him then. “You, ah, didn’t happen to explain.”

Grantaire nods. Another unsolved mystery, what else is new.

“If it’s any consolation,” Combeferre adds, turning away to retrieve his cup, “your friends thought it was hilarious.”

That at least explains some of it. If Grantaire was with a group, it was the first half of his second run of freshman year, and he was too high to tie his own shoes. The dog noises are still beyond him, though.

“What’d you ask me?” he says, and he can see the doubt in Combeferre’s face, the suspicion it’s about to set off another round of barking.
But Combeferre has courage and tenacity and all those other motivational poster words: “Uh, if you wanted to join Science Olympiad,” he says.

And okay, it’s starting to make sense because even now, the idea of getting drafted into some cutthroat competition against genuine smart kids from all over the county is giving him a headache. 14-year-old Grantaire must have been looking for the fastest way to end the conversation. That’s the only thing he can figure.

“Why would you—” Grantaire blurs out. Combeferre raises his eyebrows, pushing Grantaire to continue, reluctantly. “If you were recruiting, who looks at the kid who’d already fucking flunked freshman bio and thinks ‘yeah, he’s my guy’?”

Combeferre’s brow furrows. “Nobody just—stops liking science,” he says, with so much faith that Grantaire suddenly has no idea what to say.

To think Grantaire could have avoided this entire scene had he only done the sensible thing and showed up late to school. He rubs his eyes.

“You shouldn’t—I mean, don’t, like, take it personally,” he mumbles, half at Combeferre and half at the blacktop. The blacktop is maybe more receptive. He swallows. In his hand, the cider is no help. It’s still almost boiling; he can feel it through the protective cardboard sleeve. He may be gripping it a bit tightly, though.

“We’re getting off track,” says Combeferre. “It’s fine. Everyone does things freshman year they look back on and can’t explain.” Maybe that’s Grantaire’s problem. Two freshman years. Double the cringing. “My point is, Enjolras—”

“I promise I’m not gonna bark at him, dude,” says Grantaire. “Seriously, I can’t even tell you for sure what that was about.”

“You’ve mocked him for the whole year, and now suddenly there are public declarations of love, you have to admit it looks fishy—”

“Are you worried this is like, a prank or a bet or something?” Grantaire swallows back an ill-advised laugh. Wrong teen movie, he thinks, with a miserable smile. “C’mon, dude. Life’s not a WB show.” He wipes the condensation from the steam off his chin. “Don’t tell me you thought me and Eponine were hooking up, too?”

Combeferre sputters a mouthful of coffee onto the asphalt. He coughs. “You’re not?”

“Eponine? Jesus, what are people even on? We’re zero percent attracted to each other. She’s a cross between a sister and that weird feral cat that keeps climbing in your window until you’re like, ‘Guess I’ll just go with it.’”

Combeferre’s eyes narrow for a second, not crazy about a woman being compared to a cat, but then he processes the rest of the sentence and seems to relax some.

“She’s not my girlfriend, or anything,” Grantaire babbles. “I wouldn’t do that to someone, I mean what the fuck—”

“So you’re serious about this,” says Combeferre.

Combeferre is smart. Combeferre analyzes and dissects and always pushes towards understanding, never jumps to an easy conclusion for the sake of jumping. If he doesn’t buy in, this whole thing is likely to fall apart.
Grantaire might as well go for broke. He pulls the cup away from his face, looks Combeferre dead in the eye.

“I am gonna do the absolute best I can,” he says. “I’m gonna—I can’t say take it seriously, because let’s be real, if somebody ran up and chopped my nose off, I’d be making nose jokes from here to the hospital, but like. It’s important to me, okay? It fucking matters to me. And I promise—” this part is harder to say, stings in his throat “—if anyone gets hurt in all of this, it’s not gonna be Enjolras.”

“If he hurts you, I’ll make him regret it,” says Combeferre, almost casual with it. “We’re all stuck in the same room for two hours a week, there’s no time for teen drama.”

Grantaire had not stopped to think about what would happen after prom, once they go from being fake boyfriends to fake former boyfriends. Everyone but Bahorel has at least a year left of high school, so the ABC will definitely still be alive and kicking. Grantaire doesn’t know if he has the personal strength to show up as the jilted ex, everyone trying not to look too obvious in their pity—and okay, that’s a lie, Grantaire knows he doesn’t have the personal strength.

He thinks about the lively clamor of debate, the sketches multiplying in his algebra notebook, walking to Ms. Hucheloup’s with Jehan and Courfeyrac. He swallows. He’s been wondering how in the world he’s gonna make it until Prom, but shit, what is he going to do after?

Combeferre must catch some of the look on Grantaire’s face, because he says gravely, “I don’t think I did this right. I wasn’t trying for a showdown in the parking lot. I really do want to believe you, Grantaire.”

Which is all well and good, but as someone who actually passed honors bio, Combeferre has to know how little that means. A scientist doesn’t go by squishy feelings. A scientist looks at the facts. A scientist notes, that objectively, Grantaire is a jackass, observes that there is something fishy about the whole situation, and shit, Grantaire is going to need to step up his game so hard—

Combeferre sighs. “Look, what I was trying to say—he acts like nothing bothers him, but things do. He’s had a hard year, so just—be nice to him, okay?”

Grantaire looks down at the untouched cup in his hands, looks back up at Combeferre.

“What’s his first hour?” he says.


“How does he feel about cider?”

Combeferre smiles.

Consumer Economics is on the opposite wing from Grantaire’s Spanish class, so he’s going to have to wrestle the hallway crowds if he wants to dodge that tardy. He slips into the room five minutes before the bell. Nobody notices. Everyone’s doing the usual: milling around, bullshitting about how great their weekend was.

It takes a second to find Enjolras. Which is weird; normally he’s the definition of “stands out in a crowd”. Now Grantaire has to scan the room twice before spotting him in the front, hunched over a book, head propped on one hand.

“Hey,” says Grantaire. Enjolras doesn’t look up, absorbed in whatever he’s reading. A textbook,
from the look of it. “Hey,” Grantaire repeats, almost a mirror of their first detention together, and despite everything going on in his mind right now—and there is a fair amount of ‘everything’ churning around—the symmetry of it makes Grantaire laugh. Enjolras’s head whips up, sleepy eyes struggling to focus. There’s an indent from the sleeve of his hoodie on his chin.

It’s his grogginess more than anything that lets Grantaire look him in the eye. If he’s lucky, maybe Enjolras won’t even remember this. “Morning, honey,” says Grantaire. “Brought you this, because I’m the best boyfriend ever.” He presents the cup like a holy grail.

Enjolras squints at it and shakes his head. “Uh thanks, but I don’t drink cof—” The smell of what is definitely not coffee seems to waft towards him, and he peers up at Grantaire. “Uh. Thanks,” he says, slower.

The whispering behind them gets more pointed. Grantaire glances over his shoulder, and oh great, Jehan’s bully Clyde from World Mythology is here, along with four or five cronies. In most of Grantaire’s shittier classes, there’s at least one okay person to balance things out—Cosette in Government, Jehan in World Myth, Bahorel in his own Con Econ class. He casts around for a friendly face, finds none.

“Wow,” he says in a hushed voice, “your Con Econ class suuuucks.”

“I’m aware,” says Enjolras dryly.

Grantaire tries to imagine Enjolras bringing his usual rhetoric into a room like this. There’s no way that went well. Behind them, the whispering has become snickering. Enjolras doesn’t look surprised.

“Screw ‘em, man, they’re just jealous,” Grantaire tells him. He taps the cup with one finger. “Not everyone gets to wake up to a piping hot cup of fancy juice.”

“Sounds like a euphemism for something,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire laughs, mostly from surprise.

“Whoa dude, dirty mind.”

“Dude,” says Enjolras. “Man.” He almost drawls it, except that would make no sense because Enjolras has never drawled a single word in his entire life.

“What?”

“You said there would be terrible nicknames, and then you didn’t deliver.”

Grantaire gets himself ready for a lecture about responsibility or something, but nothing comes. It takes Grantaire a second to realize he’s just trying to make conversation that could sound enough like flirting to any eavesdroppers.

“Maybe I want to wait til we’ve been together a while before I bring out the big guns,” says Grantaire. “Y’know, go a whole week, see if we can make it past the honeymoon phase.”

“Really? Because I was starting to think maybe you were all talk, dude—”

Grantaire jams his hands into his pockets, rocks back on his heels. “Oh yeah? Just effing try me, babypie. Honeytoes. Poodlehands.”

For someone who’s never done drama, Enjolras’s fake laugh is surprisingly convincing. Happy-sounding. It turns heads, literally.
“You weren’t kidding,” says Enjolras. “Where’s your first hour?”

“Spanish,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras frowns up at the clock. “You’ve got a minute to get there.”

“You.”

“You’re gonna be late.”

“Does seem likely.”

Enjolras makes an exasperated sound. “You’ll get in trouble,” he says, and Grantaire nods sagely.

“Yeah, turns out they don’t like it when you’re tardy.”

“Go,” says Enjolras. “Now.” Even half asleep, his death glare could rally armies or move mountains, and Grantaire’s just one man. He’s to the door when Enjolras calls out, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Hey, I had a nice time on Saturday.”

“Damn right you did,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras’s eyeroll is visible from across the room, but he’s smiling just enough that an outsider might see it as fond. “See you at lunch,” he says.

“Aye aye,” says Grantaire, bolting out the door. It leaves him with forty five seconds to get to Spanish on time, but even so, adrenaline almost takes him there. Not quite, though, and the third tardy of the semester means Grantaire’s got detention, which means skipping the meeting tonight. Probably a blessing in disguise.

Señora Johnson seems weirdly bummed to be punishing Grantaire. He has a sudden queasy sense that the rumors must’ve reached her. When the class breaks into pairs to write their dialogues, she lets Grantaire and Eponine work in the relative quiet of the hallway so readily that he knows it’s true.

Eponine lowers herself to the grimy tile floor, spreading her skirt around her. When Grantaire sinks down next to her, she frowns at his Spanish notebook, the list doodled in the margin: bunnyteeth, cupcake breath.

“Let me guess, it’s all part of Pretend Gay Lovers for Justice?” she mutters.

“God, can you not—” he throws a paranoid glance around the hallway, but of course it’s just them. “Stupid petnames,” he explains.

“You’re putting a lot of effort into this,” says Eponine. Grantaire spreads his hands in a helpless gesture, ‘what can you do?’ and she shakes her head. “Do you have ‘cheese pudding’ yet?”

“How are you so good at this,” he mutters.

“Natural talent.”

“Do you mind if—”

“I write the skit? Yeah, whatever.” She’s a lot better at Spanish than Grantaire, in part because she’s good with languages and in part because Grantaire got a late start. He studied French from seventh
grade until he fucked up his first freshman year, wound up making the switch on the assumption that Spanish would be easier. Maybe it is, but now when he tries there’s always a 50/50 chance he gets confused and uses the wrong language.

“You have to help with my English essay, though,” says Eponine.

“Easy,” he tells her. “Write about loss of innocence. Doesn’t matter what you’re reading, doesn’t matter who you’re talking about, nobody gets to end more innocent than they started.”

She nods slowly. “That’s not terrible.”

“Speaking of innocence, dude.” He laughs. “You have got to get your shit out of my room because it looks so shady.”

“To who?”

“Enjolras thought—”

“Uh,” says Eponine, “why was Enjolras in your room?”

“Oh man, his mom dropped him off after you guys left, it was the most fucked up thing. Apparently, Mar—somebody told her about, uh, Operation Cheese Pudding—”

Eponine frowns at his slip of the tongue. “You can say his name,” she says. “He’s not Voldemort. Also, what the hell do you care if Enjolras thinks we’re banging?”

“He seemed pretty mad I put you in that position,” says Grantaire, almost defensive.

“So? Who gives a shit? You guys aren’t actually together—”

“Thanks,” he says. It comes out slightly louder than intended, “thanks, man. That is abundantly clear to me, but thanks—”

“Also, how do you jump from ‘pile of laundry’ to ‘doin’ it like animals’, like what kind of perv just assumes—”

“It was a pile of your underwear, Eponine,” he starts, but she just shrugs.

“I know there were some shirts in there.”

Grantaire sighs.

“Look,” she says, “if talking smack about him doesn’t help, I’m out of ideas.”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Guess I thought you’d find it funnier—”

“What, that anyone would think someone wanted to sleep with me?”

“Uh, no?” says Grantaire. There’s a rip forming where the sole of his shoe meets the canvas. He picks at it. “That anyone would think someone wanted to sleep with me, maybe. Hello, you are actually hot, like the only reason guys leave you alone is because they’re afraid of you, but c’mon, me? Seriously?”

She gives him a blank look. “You do know that most of the school at least suspected it, right?”

“Freshman year,” she says. She means her freshman year, Grantaire’s second attempt. He’s not sure why it keeps coming up today, over and over again. It’s like trying to force down vomit or something. “When we started hanging out?”

He jiggles his foot thoughtfully. The tail end of that semester was probably the beginning of people he didn’t know giving him mysterious high fives. He’d assumed they were happy to see him. In retrospect, he should’ve been able to figure out there was something scuzzy going on.

“Nobody, like, said anything direct about it to me,” she’s saying, “just, y’know, there was a sudden sharp increase in people calling me a slut, so like.”


He’d been aware back then, on some level, that her social standing had been sinking as his had risen, but it never would’ve occurred to him that the two were connected, that he was the cause. “That is so, so shitty,” he says.

“I mean, welcome to the planet,” says Eponine, and Grantaire shakes his head.

“No, seriously, the fuck. It’s such bullshit, what kind of fucked up patriarchal double standard—”

“Patriarchal what?” says Eponine with flat amusement. For some reason, Grantaire thinks he might be blushing.

“Think I picked it up from Musichetta,” he says at last. “Seems like something she’d say.”

“Musichetta’s the one you think I’m gonna like, right?” says Eponine, raising her eyebrows. “Yeah, bro, she sounds like a goddamn party.”

“She’ll like you,” he insists. “Maybe don’t say anything sexist or slut-shaming around her, but—”

“No, no,” Eponine raises her hands, protesting. “Sluts are great, power to the sluts. How else would I be able to stand talking with you, given all the raunchy, sweaty monkey sex we’ve apparently been having?” She giggles. “The kind of sex that leaves like ten bras on the floor, how would that even work?”

“I know,” he says, “I know.”

The problem isn’t just what people say to him in class. The problem is before class, after class, passing periods, the goddamn bathroom. He shouldn’t be surprised; he’s lived this before, back when his crimes were being a do-good spazz with a love of musical theater and zero survival skills. Grantaire thought he remembered how bad it had been.

He had not.

Cosette has always sat next to him in Government, but today somehow she seems to especially occupy that space. Brett Anderson, who in classroom debates has compared gay people to both pedophiles and axe murderers, is trying to catch Grantaire’s eye like he wants to start shit and she reaches across the desks and grabs Grantaire’s hand, gives it a squeeze.

“How was your weekend, Grantaire?” she asks, somehow fierce and pleasant at once.

“Good,” he says, and then on the off chance it will make her smile, “y’know, went on this pretty
“Yeah?” The way Cosette beams at him almost makes up for how their teacher will no longer look him in the eye.

Grantaire tells himself, all the way to the cafeteria, that he’s only nervous because he’s worried whether or not Eponine will fit in at the lunch table. It’s not a particularly strong argument, even in his own mind, but he gives it a shot. When he spots the back of Enjolras’s head from across the room—he knows Courfeyrac was kidding about the romantic properties of fluorescent light, but damn—the whole thing collapses in a pile of stomach butterflies.

If only feelings were like smallpox, he thinks. If only surviving enough turns of this bullshit cycle of longing and humiliation could grow him some scar tissue, leave him tougher and smarter and immune to the sight of Enjolras’s red hoodie, the span of his shoulders, the way he’s leaning forward, intent, to listen to whatever Jehan is saying. The day scientists brew up a vaccine for stupid crushes, Grantaire will cry literal tears of joy.

Eponine appears at his elbow. “Come on,” she says, “you can do this”, and he can’t tell if she’s talking to him or to herself. “You can do this, they are *such nerds*. What’s the worst that could happen?”

He still isn’t sure who it’s meant for, but that doesn’t stop him from answering. “One of us says something so politically incorrect they chase us out of here with pitchforks and we have to eat lunch in the parking lot.”

“It’s like sixty out,” says Eponine. “So.”

“Yeah,” he says, lingering.

“Oh my god, you have already even done this, you are such a wuss,” she says, yanking him by the arm. And seriously, Grantaire needs to get some less brave friends. Of course, at this point, all the cowards are giving him a wide berth for the rest of high school. ‘You fucked this up,’ he thinks as Eponine strides forward and plunks her lunch onto the table.

Combeferre stops talking mid-word. Eponine drops into the chair on the other side of the table, and Grantaire takes a cautious seat across from her. Enjolras looks up at Grantaire, who says “Hey” in a casual tone he may or may not have practiced Sunday night.

“Hey,” says Enjolras.

Eponine hunches forward, and when she wordlessly pulls a fork from her lunch bag, something in the way she’s holding her shoulders gives the impression she’s gripping a switchblade. Jehan leans away, watching her carefully.

Enjolras flashes an expression that says either “please help” or “this is your fault” and Grantaire shrugs.

“Hey guys, this is Eponine,” he says. “Her hobbies include ponies and murdering me at any video game. Absolute carnage. It’s ugly.”

Eponine doesn’t smile, but she does mutter, “It is.”

“Eponine, this is Jehan. He’s the one who almost made Mr. Clark shit his pants last week, it was
magical. That’s Musichetta, she plays clarinet sometimes and kicks ass all the time. That’s Courfeyrac—"

“We’ve met,” says Courfeyrac with a friendly smile. “Back in Theater One, right?”

It’s Grantaire’s turn to give Eponine a confused look. In two years of Spanish dialogue assignments, he’s never heard her utter a line above a monotone. He can’t picture her onstage.

“I was finding myself,” she deadpans, although that’s brought slightly into question when Marius adds,

“Yeah, remember me and you and Courf and Combeferre sat at the same table?” He scratches his nose. “You and Combeferre did that skit, what was it, the Oscar Wilde play about honesty—”

“The Importance of Being Ernest.” Combeferre and Eponine say it in something like unison, eyes meeting for a moment before Combeferre coughs and turns to Marius. “What was going on with that German reading, I was so lost—” and Eponine unpacks the rest of her lunch with single-minded intensity. It doesn’t take long: a gas station hard-boiled egg and six pickles wrapped in foil. By Eponine standards, this is a very normal meal, but Grantaire can’t blame the rest of the group for not knowing how to react.

“So,” says Courfeyrac, clearly trying to make a joke out of it, “I get the feeling you’re a big fan of pickles?”

She gives him a look. “They’re okay,” she offers, and absolutely nothing in her tone invites further questions.

Grantaire met Eponine two and a half years ago; she was close with the senior burnouts who had adopted Grantaire in a kid mascot capacity. They’d let him hang around because he was eager to please and always had money to spare when they pooled their cash for food or alcohol or a baggie of what he’d later learn was pretty shitty pot. Eponine, on the other hand, they liked. She can bring the charm when she feels like it. He’s not sure why she’s picked now to bring the moodiness instead, but her timing could be better.

All he knows is the table is silent and he’s desperate for a distraction, any distraction. Unfortunately, only one occurs to him. He turns to Enjolras, pulling on the jauntiest voice he can manage. “How was the rest of your morning, gummytoes?”

‘Gummytoes,’ Jehan mouths, raising his eyebrows.

“Ridiculous nicknames were a condition of our relationship,” says Grantaire solemnly. “Isn’t that right, sweetnose?” he adds, hooking his chin on Enjolras’s shoulder before he can talk himself out of it. As a distraction, it’s a rousing success. Maybe too rousing, because when Enjolras turns his head, it brings their faces so close that Grantaire loses the ability to process human speech. For a moment, all he can think about is that technically they okayed kissing, so technically there’s nothing to stop him from bridging that very narrow distance and just—

“My condition is he takes his stupid hat off sometimes,” says Enjolras, light, carefree, actually smiling. Grantaire can’t look him in the eye from here and form words, so instead he glances at the rest of the group and stage-whispers,

“We compromised. Now I have to wash it.”

“Thank god,” says Eponine, stabbing another pickle with her fork. Grantaire’s posture relaxes; if she’s willing to bullshit with him, it means she’s getting more comfortable and maybe this will stop
“Hey,” he protests, mock-indignant. “I thought women preferred, y’know, a natural musk, don’t tell me I’ve cultivating this manly funk in vain—”

There’s a sharp pain in his ankle. Well, no wonder, he thinks, checking under the table. Enjolras is kicking him. Grantaire frees his chin in a hurry and applies himself to his sandwich; surely even Enjolras can’t find a way to judge him for eating food.

“Hey,” says Musichetta, who has, he realizes with an unpleasant start, been worryingly silent up to this point. “Sorry, I just—I have to ask—” Her eyes are fixed on Eponine, and a million sirens start going off in Grantaire’s head, “—where did you get your dress?”

Eponine stares at her. “Um, I made it,” she says, so hesitant it’s almost a question. Grantaire can’t decode the look on her face at all, but it’s not the tone of voice she’d use for a joke, and wow, he is just learning new things right and left today.

“For real?” says Musichetta.

Eponine nods.

“Okay,” says Musichetta in a tightly reined-in voice. “Okay. Eponine. Please, for the love of God, tell me you watch Project Runway, because Cosette’s dad won’t get cable and Bahorel claims he only watches it ironically and I am dying over here, what even was that last challenge—”

“Oh my god I know!” Eponine shouts. Actually shouts. “Fucking miscarriage of justice—”

“It’s so stupid, you know they’re just keeping him around because he starts shit—” Musichetta is beaming like she’s falling in love, and Eponine waves her fork.

“Oh my god I know!” Eponine shouts. Actually shouts. “Fucking miscarriage of justice—”

“Completely,” says Musichetta in a solemn voice. “Completely.” She turns to her left. “Jehan, switch spots with me,” she commands, “Eponine and I have Matters to discuss.” Jehan blinks at her, probably more upset by the principle of the thing than by the prospect of moving. “Matters,” Musichetta repeats, taking Eponine’s hand.

“Guys, this is so romantic,” says Grantaire.

“Shut the fuck up, Grantaire,” says Eponine easily. She inclines her head to Musichetta, eyes alight. “And those patterns! We have got to talk about those patterns—”

“Come join us on this end of the table, Jehan,” Courfeyrac urges. “This is the fun end, where all the pretty people sit.”

Grantaire pretends to look down at himself and realize he’s on the wrong side. Enjolras rolls his eyes, which—okay, maybe it wasn’t hilarious, but still. Great boyfriend skills there, A+.

“Hey Courf,” says Grantaire, “What’s new?”

Courfeyrac pours way too much syrup on his pancakes. “Found out what the plays are next year. Romeo and Juliet in the fall—”

“Ugh,” says Grantaire. “What a shitty story. If I wanted to watch teenagers make poor life choices, I’d set up a lawn chair in the freshman hallway, for—” He breaks off because Jehan, Courfeyrac,
and Enjolras are giving him a weird look.

“Well, that’s uncanny,” says Courfeyrac.

Grantaire swallows. “What?”

“Uh,” says Enjolras. What would even render Enjolras speechless? In the name of all things holy, what has Grantaire done?

“Enjolras is on record as having said the same thing,” Courfeyrac explains. “The exact same thing—”

“I think he said ‘folding chair’?” says Jehan. “But, like, the thesis definitely holds up—”

“Well,” says Grantaire. “I guess sooner or later we had to agree on something. I mean statistically, it was bound to happen.”

“Other than dating each other,” Jehan supplies.

Courfeyrac grins. “That’s so cute, it’s almost like your shared hatred of romance is its own—”

“No, come on,” says Grantaire. “It’s common fucking sense.”

“Wait, what’s common sense,” says Eponine, dragging her focus away from where she and Musichetta having been gazing into each other’s eyes over pleating or whatever. “What do those words even mean to you, Grantaire? You tried to shave while driving. You thought ‘Life in the Fast Lane’ was ‘Life in the Vaseline.’ You tried to cook raw bacon in the toaster.”

They’d both been pretty high at the time, but this doesn’t seem like the crowd to play that card. “I don’t remember you trying to stop me,” he says instead.

Eponine shrugs loftily. “Morbid curiosity.” She twists back toward Musichetta. “Long story short, he set a toaster on fire, tried to put out a grease fire with orange juice, and I think the remains are still hiding in his room somewhere. Anyway. So Grantaire, what’s this about you and fucking common sense?”

‘I like her,’ Musichetta mouths, and the urge to firstbump wrestles with the urge to roll his eyes because no shit.

“Romeo and Juliet—” says Enjolras.

“—are morons.” Grantaire smiles at him, because it seems like something a person in an actual couple would do once they hit finishing-each-other’s-sentences territory. Enjolras approximates a smile back. It’s not as dazzling as a real one, but—it’s not awful, either. Grantaire looks away.

“Oh, okay,” says Eponine. “Well yeah, I guess it’s kind of—sweet or whatever, but of course it’s all bullshit, how is this even a thing we’re arguing—”

“It’s not bullshit,” says Combeferre from the other end of the table. Everyone pivots to look at him. “It’s not,” he repeats, fidgeting with his fork. “It’s just badly taught.”

“Okay, genius,” says Grantaire, “how would you teach it?”

Musichetta takes a swig from her water bottle. “Congratulations, Grantaire. You’ve just unleashed the kraken,” she mutters, as Combeferre straightens and starts in with,
“Well, for one thing, we could stop presenting it as a love story—”

“It’s not a love story?” says Marius, who, come to think of it, is exactly the kind of guy who sees the girl he likes in every single song and movie and Hallmark card and breath mint commercial. Marius, who probably glued a picture of Cosette’s face over Juliet’s in his copy of the play. Marius, who probably clutches it to his bosom and weeps over it at night—

Marius, who is one of a very small number of people still willing to talk to him in public. Marius, who isn’t political, who followed Cosette into the first meeting of the ABC like a cartoon character floating after the scent of a pie, but is still taking a stand and setting himself up for the same harassment as anyone else in the group—and why? He and Grantaire have barely spoken, but somehow the guy is right there anyway.

Marius, who means well.

So instead of laughing himself assless at the indignant look on Combeferre’s face, Grantaire leaps in to muddy the waters.

“Dude’s got a solid point. I’d pay good money to see you teach it as a buddy comedy or a musical or, like, a gritty revenge thriller—”

“But it is a gritty revenge thriller,” says Combeferre, nodding like it’s actually a good point. He may not trust Grantaire’s integrity as a human being, but he’s still willing to give Grantaire’s brain way too much credit. Nice of him. “Romeo and Juliet aren’t supposed to be ideal lovers—Romeo starts the play in love with someone else, do you think Shakespeare threw that in by accident?”

"Okay," says Eponine. Her voice is a fraction too loud. "Just what was Shakespeare doing, Combeferre?"

Grantaire doesn't know if he's ever seen Combeferre look so thrown. With an uncomfortable laugh, he straightens his glasses and glances around the table.

Eponine doesn't look away. "I'm not kidding. Please, tell us what he was getting at."

To a casual observer, she might look pissed off. Grantaire thinks he knows her well enough to get that this is more complicated. Her chin is tilted in challenge, but she's twisting her paper napkin into oblivion. He wishes he had some way to telegraph this to Combeferre, who seems genuinely unsure whether to continue.

Then he remembers: words. Right.

"Come on, Combeferre," says Grantaire. At this point he's curious enough he doesn't even need to fake it much. "If anyone has decoded hidden messages in a Shakespeare play, it's you. Remember that language you invented in second grade?"

"Gormlish," Combeferre supplies.

Grantaire grins. "Fucking only spoke in Gormlish for a whole week, it was incredible. The teacher sent him to the school psychologist, thought it was a 'warning sign'--"

"Of what?" says Enjolras. He sets his hand on top of Grantaire’s hand where it’s been resting on the table. This coming from a guy who thirty seconds ago was doing violence to Grantaire’s shins. Enjolras’s fingertips stroke absentely over Grantaire’s palm, and come on, Grantaire would be in his rights to deliver his own volley of kicking back. In fact, he should.
“Yeah, not happening.”

“Yes, who knows?” Grantaire manages. “Starting his own country? I guess it was a warning sign in a way, just of, like, ‘Help, I am way too smart for second grade!’”

“How’d they get you speaking English again?” says Enjolras.

“Dr. Simplice,” says Combeferre.

“Oh god, I hated her,” Grantaire says before he can stop himself. “What kind of school shrink doesn’t keep candy in her office?”

Marius frowns. “Wait, why were you visiting Dr. Simplice?”

“Looking for candy, obviously,” he gets out. “So what magic trick did she use on you, Combeferre? I assume she didn’t glare you back into coherence.” For someone working in an elementary school, she’d shown a shocking lack of patience with children.

(‘There are a lot of people in the world who are never going to like you, Grantaire,’ she’d said once. ‘It doesn’t matter how hard you try, that’s just how life is,’ and he can remember thinking, even at the time, ‘That’s kind of a harsh thing to lay on a nine-year-old.’)

Combeferre smiles, nostalgic. “She asked me to teach her Gormlish. I tried to do, you know, an immersion-style approach but then she had questions about how the grammar worked, and it was too complicated to explain through pantomime, so—”

“Combeferre, why’d they never move you forward a year?” says Courfeyrac. “I feel like a kid who makes up his own language for fun could’ve handled it.”

Grantaire has to forcibly remind himself that he doesn’t mean anything by it. Courfeyrac never bore witness to the saga of Grantaire’s early childhood; he was in a different district until middle school.

God, he can feel Combeferre trying not to look at him. It’s all up in his senses like a bad smell.

“I wouldn’t have been mature enough,” Combeferre explains, which is ridiculous, because Combeferre has no doubt been saving for his 401K since his very first allowance. “I did sort of—I had the option.” Grantaire didn’t know this but it’s not surprising. “Five or six of us did,” Combeferre adds, humble. “At the end of third grade, they told us we could skip to fifth if we wanted.”

Grantaire remembers it well, how fifth grade had sounded like a distant magical wonderland. Adulthood, almost. He’d been the only one who had decided to make the jump, which at the time made him feel tremendously special.

Combeferre shrugs. “My parents sat me down and we talked it over. It was my choice, of course. But they made a strong case that, in the long run, my emotional health was more important. I mean, I still needed to learn how to talk to kids my own age.”

It’s not that Grantaire freezes or anything, but he doesn’t breathe right for a second and it may carry into his body somehow because Enjolras gives his hand what feels like a reassuring squeeze. But on second thought, that makes no sense; nobody else can see it, so what would be the point? When he dares to turn his head, Enjolras is turned towards Combeferre, saying,

“In English?” and his voice is completely casual.
Grantaire could have imagined it; nobody can maintain a perfect steady pressure when holding hands for a long period of time. At least, he doesn’t think so. It’s never been a concern.

“You were gonna give us your take on Romeo and Juliet,” says Eponine, folding the foil from her lunch into a tight wad.

Combeferre turns to look at her. “Uh, do you actually want to know?”

“I’ve asked you three times,” she says flatly.

“That’s Eponine-speak for ‘yes please, good sir, if you would be so kind,’” Grantaire throws in, even though he’s not sure if that’s true. Either he’s right and she won’t mind, or she’s being a dick and she deserves it.

But she doesn’t contradict him, only chucks the ball of foil into her lunch bag and says, “God, why am I friends with you.”

“I don’t know,” says Grantaire. “I always assumed you were using me for something.”

“Access to your computer,” she slurs through a bite of hardboiled egg.

“Which is five years old and doesn’t have working speakers?” says Enjolras.

Jehan waggles his eyebrows in an uncharacteristic fashion. “Ooh, you’ve been in his room?”

“Hey hey,” Grantaire shouts over Courfeyrac and Musichetta’s laughter, “you don’t know! Maybe we stayed in my driveway and described our computers to each other all night. Maybe that’s our thing.”

“He has a blue bedspread and his bookcase is covered in constellation stickers,” says Enjolras, who should know by now that this will only encourage them. Except maybe he does know, because at Courfeyrac’s answering innuendos, he just ducks his head and laughs.

“Uh yeah,” says Eponine, “has anyone noticed we are still goddamn talking about Romeo and Juliet?”


Grantaire used to think Combeferre would grow up to be an absent-minded professor. Now he gets it, though: Combeferre already is an absent-minded professor, just one with the bad luck of being stuck in high school. If you concentrate, you can almost hear the bow tie and tweed jacket in his voice.

Although to be honest, Grantaire is only listening with about half of his brain. The other half is consumed tracking the back-and-forth sweep of Enjolras’s thumb across his lifeline. It feels like all his nerve endings have migrated into the palm of his hand, the very cells in his body leaning towards Enjolras like a plant towards sunlight.

Grantaire gives himself a hard mental shake and tunes back info Combeferre’s spiel. “—isn’t that they don’t get to end up together,” he’s saying, with an emphatic jab of his celery, “the tragedy is they were ordinary kids born into the middle of a blood feud, and there was nobody looking out for
them. What did they do wrong, Grantaire? Why do they die?”

Grantaire blinks, unprepared to be called out. It really is like school. “Super shitty communication skills?” he ventures, but Combeferre brushes that aside.

“But what’s their sin? You can say they’re annoying, you can say they’re overdramatic and they don’t know what they’re doing, but Christ, Juliet is only thirteen—”

“But doesn’t that make her, like, forty in old-timey years?” says Eponine.

“No,” says Combeferre. “Actually, it doesn’t. Even by the standards of Shakespeare’s time, thirteen was very young for marriage.” He waves the celery in the direction of Enjolras and Musichetta. “Does Juliet make some bad calls? Sure. Like you said before, maybe don’t flirt with the stranger who’s creeping around in your yard at night. Fair. But it doesn’t mean she deserves to die.”

“Nobody’s saying she deserves it,” Enjolras starts.

“Seriously,” says Grantaire, “we’re not chasing her down with pitchforks, we’re just saying—”

“You’re saying it was their fault,” Combeferre cuts in, and Grantaire wouldn’t have thought he was capable of such casual rudeness, but maybe this is his book kraken nature emerging, like an Incredible Hulk that runs on literary enthusiasm. “But they’re kids. They’re young, silly kids, doing what young, silly kids are supposed to do. They sneak around, they lie to their parents—”

“They fall madly in love with their parents’ mortal enemies,” Grantaire adds helpfully. “Over the course of like twenty minutes. At a party.”

Combeferre puts the celery down and rubs at the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “Can you honestly tell me there’s a more relatable human experience than having feelings for someone when you know you shouldn’t?”

Grantaire has no answer, other than the urge to hunch his shoulders into nothingness, to disappear, to scuttle away to the nearest dark corner at lightning speed, like a methed-up cockroach.

Luckily, nobody notices that his well of bullshit has gone briefly dry, because Combeferre breaks off into a cough, throat spent from the mini-lecture. Enjolras lifts his hand free to slide over his iced tea, and Combeferre blinks down at it, forehead wrinkled, as if only now remembering what liquids are.

“It’s for drinking,” says Courfeyrac. He mimes knocking back a bottle. There’s no way to make that gesture without it looking super filthy, but Grantaire can’t quite summon the energy for the required blowjob joke. Given the way Eponine and Musichetta are giggling, he thinks they’re probably on top of it.

Enjolras picks up his sandwich and puts it back down. He doesn’t resume the hand-holding.

Whatever. Not a big deal.

Grantaire drums his fingers on the table and looks around for someone else to talk to. Musichetta and Eponine are conspiring in low voices, heads together. Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Marius have transitioned into something about Pre-Calc. Grantaire would pay fifty dollars to never hear the word “cosine” again.

“Jehan, my man,” says Grantaire, “are you ready for our detention today?”

“What, emotionally?” says Jehan. “Sure, I’ve seen The Breakfast Club.”
“Good,” says Grantaire. “Great, yes. It is exactly like Breakfast Club.”

“Less dancing,” Enjolras offers.

“Little less, yeah,” Grantaire says. Enjolras shoots him a quick little smile, warm and personal, like he’s acknowledging some inside joke and Grantaire needs to stop being surprised that Enjolras is so good at this. Enjolras is good at everything; it’s how he rolls.

Jehan looks between them for a moment. “Hey, maybe there’s something to it, though. Didn’t you guys meet in detention? Almost like—”

“Jehan, if you take this metaphor an inch farther, it’s gonna get disturbing so fast,” Grantaire warns. “And if you traumatize me, I won’t be able to show you the ropes today.”

“There aren’t ropes to be shown,” says Enjolras. “You sit at a desk for an hour. You’re not allowed to talk. They make you hand over your phone, but then they give it back. It’s a perfect microcosm of the containment-based public school mentality.”

“Try not to fall in love with any annoying blond kids,” says Grantaire, because he thinks it will get a laugh.

But Jehan just scrunches up his nose and says, “I’m good.”

“You’re still giving me a ride home today, right?” says Enjolras.

There’s a slight edge to the look in Enjolras’s eyes, and Grantaire has the sudden sense this is code for ‘we need to talk, specifically about a way in which you have screwed up.’ Oh joy.

“I guess I can hang around after detention, if you’re okay with someone busting into the meeting an hour late—”

“What does it matter,” says Enjolras. “It’s not like you pay attention anyway.” He softens this at the last minute with a playful-seeming nudge to the ribs.

Grantaire is so focused on that, it takes a half-second to protest, “Hey, I totally listen sometimes!”

“Yeah?” says Enjolras. “Tell me: what was the topic at our last meeting?”

“Making the world a better place,” says Grantaire, with his most shit-eating expression. Enjolras, hemmed in by circumstance, backed into his role, is forced to let it slide with a counterfeit-fond look. He’s probably pulling a muscle from not rolling his eyes. Serves him right.

“You guys are disgusting,” Jehan tells them. “And I say that as someone with an incredible gag reflex.” Musichetta’s head whips around. “Oh hey no, I didn’t mean it like that,” he protests, raising his hands in a futile gesture against the rising tide of “That’s what she said”s. Grantaire grins. He’s gonna miss these kids.

Bahorel has his feet up on the adjacent desk when Grantaire walks into Con Econ. “Grantaire!” he calls. “Step into my office.” He gives the surface of the desk a tap with the heel of one boot, swings his feet back to the floor.

When Grantaire takes a seat, Bahorel reaches over and plucks at the cord on Grantaire’s headphones, using it to yank up the mp3 player and swing it into his hands.
“What’ve you got?” he asks, but he’s already scrolling through the songs. He hums to himself, then gives a surprised half-laugh. “Wow,” says Bahorel, “you like some shitty music.”

“Uh,” says Grantaire.

“No, no,” says Bahorel, shaking his head, “nothing wrong with that. I like a ton of shitty bands. Sometimes you need a good shitty song, you know? Also, you’ve got some decent stuff on here.” He’s still scrolling; something makes him suck in a surprised breath. “More than decent. Hey, if I make you a list of what I want, can you burn some stuff for me?”

“I guess?” Grantaire offers.

Bahorel tears out a sheet of notebook paper and grabs a pen. “Cool. Oh and head’s up, Joly’s having a movie night next weekend.”

“Thanks for the warning,” says Grantaire. “Also, why do I need a warning?”

“Right, sorry. Should’ve led with that. Because you’re definitely going, and you get zero say about it. Like, if you have surgery scheduled for Saturday, cancel it.”

“Important movie?” Grantaire ventures, watching as Bahorel flicks one-handedly through the mp3 player.

“Nah,” says Bahorel. “First season of his favorite show.”

“The whole first season? We’re gonna sit around and watch twenty episodes of something?”

“Thirteen, I think. It got canceled halfway through.”

“Not filling me with confidence about this show,” says Grantaire.

Bahorel shrugs a shoulder. “Maybe not,” he says. He doesn’t look up from the list, which is steadily growing. “But you owe him,” Bahorel adds.

Grantaire isn’t sure he’s ever spoken to Joly, much less gathered debts. “How?”

“Punking out on his birthday party like a little baby,” says Bahorel.

“He didn’t actually want me to come,” Grantaire argues, “he was—being nice or whatever.”

This makes Bahorel look up from the screen. “What’s your source on this?”

Bahorel is a difficult person to bullshit. Maybe it’s a wrestling thing. “He’s got no reason to like me.”

“Joly doesn’t need reasons,” says Bahorel airily. “That’s just Joly bein’ Joly. Dude likes everyone. If you’re not a douchebag, you’re a treasured friend.”

“And I qualify?” says Grantaire. “Good to know.”

“Eh,” says Bahorel, handing over the mp3 player and his list. “Why not, y’know?”

The page is dense with Bahorel’s jaggedy handwriting. Grantaire peers at the assorted albums and tracks, trying to find any common thread. It’s mystifying. “Is this my shitty stuff or my good stuff?”

“Bit of both,” Bahorel tells him. “I’m eclectic.”
“You’re greedy,” says Grantaire. “There’s like forty things on here.” Bahorel does cartoony puppy eyes, and Grantaire sighs. He doesn’t relish the hours of CD-burning ahead of him, but maybe he can pay Gavroche a few bucks to do it. Maybe Gavroche will be able to figure out if there’s any pattern in Bahorel’s requests, or if they’re designed to mess with his head. “Fine,” he says. “Maybe not tonight, but by the end of the week.”

Bahorel nods. “Gotcha.”

“Man, how are you so much cooler than the rest of the wrestling team?” Grantaire means it as a joke, but it makes Bahorel look up sharply.

“Why, are they being assholes to you?”

Grantaire shrugs again. He didn’t come here to sow discord within the world of high school athletics. “Not—I mean, you know. Not more than anyone else.”

“Fuck, man,” says Bahorel. He contemplates the surface of his desk for a moment. “Did I ever tell you the story of how I quit the team?”

“You quit?”

“Quit, kicked out, reports vary,” says Bahorel offhandedly. “So there was this guy, he was a senior, and he was mad that the coach was paying me so much attention. And he’d try to stir up the dumbest shit, like, ‘Oh, he only wins his fights because he uses kung fu’ or whatever, calling me Jackie Chan, and I was like, ‘Hello, asshole, he’s Chinese and I’m Korean’ and he was all, ‘Like there’s a difference’ and I was like, ‘Uh yeah, try saying that in Korea, you dumb fuck’ and he was like, ‘Ching chong ching chong’ and then I punched him.”

He mimes a right hook. “American-style. And like, you’d think if there was a guy who’d be able to see the humor in getting hit, it’d be a wrestler, but no. He was clutching his face and he just kept saying, ‘You punched me!’ Like, dude, I know. I saw it, too. And the coach said I could stay on the team if I wrote, like, a letter saying sorry. But this kid didn’t have to write one for being a racist crybaby, and then in the end my letter was deemed too smartass to function as an apology, so.”

“You literally got kicked out of wrestling for fighting,” says Grantaire.

“Well yeah.” Bahorel grins. “When you say it like that, it does sorta sound unbelievably punk rock.”

“Shit.” Grantaire has to shake his head. “If I could, I would totally buy you a drink right now.”

“I’ll settle for hours of your finest in audio entertainment,” says Bahorel.

“Or at least, a super random, weirdass grab bag of stuff.”


“Huh?”

“A superball.” Bahorel unzips the top of his backpack and points inside.

“Sure,” says Grantaire, peering over. Bahorel’s backpack doesn’t have any books in it; as far as he can tell, it’s quarter-sized rubber balls all the way down. “Uh, do I ask why you—?”

“Fucking multitudes,” says Bahorel.
Grantaire is, of course, exactly the wrong person to trust with anything that bounces. Mr. Clark is acting like he’s going to confiscate it about 45 seconds into World Mythology. There’s no way that’s anything but an empty threat, so Grantaire starts testing how often he can throw the ball against the ceiling and catch it off the floor before Mr. Clark is forced to stop pretending it’s not still happening.

It gets old pretty fast though, since all the kids who would’ve thought it was funny before just keep glaring.

Jehan shoots him a supportive wince but mouths, *maybe stop?* Grantaire knows better than to trust his own self-control; he bids the ball farewell for the hour and rolls it onto Jehan’s desk.

Jehan’s still managed to hold onto Eddie’s old chair, while Eddie slouches into his seat on the other side of the room with an exaggerated casualness. Grantaire thinks about Bahorel swinging booted feet off his desk and wonders for a moment if it’s a coincidence that in every class he has with a member of the ABC they’re now sitting next to him.

Then again, Cosette has occupied her spot since the start of the year, so that would be one hell of a long con.

“So,” he says when the bell rings, “ready to face your moral correction?”

“Sure.” Jehan hoists up his bag—a Herculean task, since most of his locker seems to be crammed inside. His entire body lists to the left for a precarious moment.

“Detention bros,” says Grantaire. He has a sudden urge to loop his free arm through Jehan’s, but it’s probably a bad idea to get all cuddly with someone he isn’t pretending to date. “Wanna do a prison break thing? Dig an escape tunnel with sporks? Hide the hole in the wall behind a motivational poster?”

“Nah,” says Jehan. “I’m gonna suffer real stoically and use it in my art. Come out paler and wiser and just a little dead in the eyes. Put out a chapbook about freedom.”

There’s a weird moment when they first walk in where Grantaire is heading for the back of the room before he remembers, right, the back is no longer his friend. Jehan just grabs the spot right in front of Ms. Peterson’s desk. He digs around in his backpack and unearths first one book, then another. The tattered paperback gets dumped on his own desk. The library book he extends in Grantaire’s direction.

Grantaire has about five seconds where he wants to make a joke about moms who carry around crayons and toys to distract unruly toddlers, but. It’s a biography of Wilfred Owen. Grantaire takes the book.

It’s not a bad detention, as these things go. It’s kind of hilarious having Jehan there, because he’s the worst possible person to punish this way. The moment he starts reading, he no longer cares where he is. He’s somehow less present than Grantaire is sleeping.

But sneaking back into the meeting an hour later is awkward, there’s no way around it. The ABC is in the middle of some involved debate, and everyone looks up when Jehan and Grantaire slink in. An annoyed crease settles into Enjolras’s forehead, which is funny given that he was the one who suggested this in the first place.
Sixty whole minutes of pretty much toeing the line has Grantaire antsy as hell. He can’t stop himself from blowing Enjolras a kiss as he slips to his usual spot. It’s a dumb thing to do, harmlessly self-destructive, like poking a bruise or smelling something that you know has gone bad, except Enjolras just smooths out his face into something bashful and amused as Courfeyrac punches him in the arm.

“Back to the issue at hand,” Enjolras says, over Musichetta’s snickering, and then Enjolras’s eyes are firmly fixed on his notebook again and the meeting takes a swerve back to boring.

When Grantaire’s hands get too twitchy for reading, he fishes around for a Con Econ worksheet and starts drawing on the back. Nothing particular in mind, just fucking around. He tries a freaky tree, to see if it feels familiar. It doesn’t, but it’s kind of soothing: lines packed together, branches spindling upwards, root systems spindling downwards. When it’s finished, he twines in another set of roots and conducts them into another tree, another hopeless bundle of twigs reaching for the sky.

“Hey.”

Grantaire starts, drawing a gash across the paper. He glances up. The room is emptying out. The meeting must be over. Enjolras is looking down at the jagged tangle of trees and it takes all of Grantaire’s self-control not to cover it with his palm. Boyfriends probably don’t hide their weird fucked-up scribblings from each other. There’s a long beat where Enjolras still doesn’t say anything. Grantaire feels catalogued, dissected, a butterfly pinned to a wall. Something less pretty. A moth, maybe. He clears his throat.

“If you want that ride home, my car’s outside,” says Grantaire.

Frowning, Enjolras opens his mouth but luckily Joly takes that moment to call out from the door, “Hey Grantaire! Do you wanna come to my house on Saturday? We’re gonna watch the best show in human history.”

“Sure! You mean that thing that got canceled—” he starts, because Grantaire will always be a little shit at heart.

Joly clutches his chest dramatically, spinning out of the doorway.

Enjolras pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. “Can we talk in your car?”

“You know the room’s not bugged, right?” says Grantaire. “Not to break your heart here, but I’m guessing your teenage justice fan club is not a priority to the CIA.”

Enjolras gives him a look. Not the fakey smiles Grantaire’s been almost getting used to but an actual real “why is it my lot in life to have to put up with you” look.

It’s Grantaire’s turn to sigh. “Let’s go.”

“Can you just—” Enjolras is saying, and Grantaire doesn’t look over as he starts up the car, but he can hear the weariness in his voice, picture the fed-up slump against the window, “—think about these things?”

It’s a close one, but Grantaire does manage to turn the unhinged laugh bubbling up in his chest into a cough. He’s not sure it’s possible to think about this mess more. At this point, his neurons have
probably branded an image of Enjolras’s face into his gray matter.

“Who died and made you thought police,” he mutters, and Enjolras’s head thunks against the glass, annoyed. It’s a weirdly young gesture. For two seconds, he’s any high school junior on the planet.

“Why would you agree to go to Joly’s thing?” says Enjolras despairingly. “You do realize it’ll be all day, right? Even factoring out commercial breaks, half a season of an hour-long show is something like nine hours—”

“Thanks, dude,” says Grantaire. “The math may be beyond me, but even I can tell that thirteen is ‘many’. I knew what I was in for.”

“So that’s another nine hours we have to—”

We. Grantaire obeys a stop sign a little too abruptly. They both jerk forward. “Shit. You’re going too?” It’s so hard to envision Enjolras cutting loose that he hadn’t even stopped to consider the possibility. But of course Joly would invite him, and of course although Enjolras is deeply judgmental about most forms of fun, he has a soft spot for his friends—

“So you didn’t do this just to bug me,” says Enjolras slowly.

It’s not that Grantaire is surprised his very presence is a punishment. It’s just something he’d rather not mull over every second of the day.

“Fuck you,” he says, “it’s my weekend too.” How far away from each other can they sit without raising suspicion? Maybe Grantaire can fake a cold, start a quarantine corner.

“Why did you say yes, then?” says Enjolras. “You don’t even like Joly.” It’s not accusing; his tone is reasonable, like it’s a known fact, like he’s repeating something Grantaire told him.

“Uh, what?” He and Joly have never spoken directly to each other, but Joly laughs at Grantaire’s jokes sometimes and he’s fun to draw. He walks with a cane a lot of the time, but when he’s sitting he holds it like a baton or uses it to poke Bossuet. He’s so ticklish, Musichetta can reduce him to helpless laughter by wiggling her fingers from the other side of the room. It’s incredible.

“He invited you to his birthday—” Enjolras starts.

“Oh my god, am I ever gonna live that down? Bahorel is already all up in my business about it. Believe me,” says Grantaire, “I regret skipping that damn party.”

“You should,” says Enjolras. “There was an ice cream cake and a karaoke machine.”

Grantaire pauses. If this was anyone else, he thinks, that would read like good-natured ribbing, but it’s Enjolras, so who knows. He’s so distracted trying to decode this that it takes a second to grasp the full import.

“Wait,” says Grantaire, “don’t tell me you sang karaoke—”

“I guess you’ll never know.”

Grantaire’s making a turn anyway so he darts a glance to the right, where the slight tilt of Enjolras’s head makes him look self-satisfied.

“You get that without other information, I’ll assume the most embarrassing thing I can think of, right?” says Grantaire. “Here, I’m assuming it right now.” He stares ahead at an imaginary vision.
“Ooh, *that* song, really? That’s...certainly a bold statement—”

“Fuck off.” Those words, coming from that mouth, delivered in that light, casual tone, are so unexpected that Grantaire almost swerves off the road.

“Growing your vocabulary, chief,” he says as he rights their course. “Shit, we’re not even fooling around and I’m already corrupting you.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you’d patented the word ‘fuck’,,” says Enjolras.

“Yeah,” Grantaire agrees, “that was a good investment. The next Tarantino film that comes out, I’m gonna buy a rocket ship.” He pauses, considers this. “The one after that, and I can buy an astronaut to fly it.”

“Joly’s been to space camp,” Enjolras volunteers. “Combeferre too, I think.” He sounds proud, like it’s a great achievement. Like embarrassing hobbies are a personal medal of honor.

“Sorry about ruining your weekend,” Grantaire finds himself saying.

“It’s okay, I already ruined yours,” says Enjolras.

After he’d dropped Enjolras off on Saturday, after he found his wallet stashed in the box of band-aids, Grantaire had stood in the middle of the hallway for a second, stopping to fit the palm of his hand to where Enjolras had rested it against his hip.

“It’s fine,” says Grantaire. “Whatever, free pizza.”

“Just—think about these things,” Enjolras says again.

Grantaire nods. “Got it,” he says. He taps his fingers against the wheel. “I just think it’s funny—” he starts, then he cuts himself off. For one thing, if he’s honest, he doesn’t actually find it that funny.


“Nothing.” It stings, a little from the sheer unfairness, but he can’t see anything to gain from hashing it all out. Enjolras’s stare is boring into the side of his head, though. He’s already seen where a contest of wills gets them. He lets a gust of air out the side of his mouth. “I can’t believe we had that fucking endless conversation with the consent talk and the, the fucking safewords, and then you go and chuck it out the window—”

“What are you talking about?” and that’s a new tone on Enjolras, concern with a nauseous edge to it. Maybe he should read Fight Club after all. Maybe he’s got a violent alter-ego he needs to have words with.

“At lunch?” Grantaire prompts, and when that gets nothing: “Okay, please at least tell me you remember kicking me—”

“That had nothing to do with consent,” says Enjolras. “That was—do I seriously need to spell this out for you?”

“With big spaces between all the letters,” says Grantaire, and Enjolras makes an annoyed sound in the back of his throat.

“You were about five seconds away from blowing our cover,” he says.

“By putting my fucking head on your shoulder?”
“Oh my god, Grantaire, really?” Enjolras snaps. “No, when you all but said you were straight.”

Um. “What the hell?”

“You said something to Eponine about—not washing, or pheromones, I don’t know, but it was definitely about being attracted to women. Do I need to explain to you why that’s a problem? Honestly, what were you doing?”

And maybe it’s just the accumulated stress of the day, or maybe it’s the aching muscles in his neck or the ridiculousness of being lectured in maturity by someone who doesn’t even have a driver’s license, but Grantaire is, abruptly, out of patience.

“Oh my god, dude, I was being bi!”

The second the words are out of his mouth, all he wants to do is yank them back in and force them back down. He breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth. When he opens his eyes, the earth is still turning. This moment is still happening. He’s still driving the car.

“Oh my god, dude, I was being bi!”

The second the words are out of his mouth, all he wants to do is yank them back in and force them back down. He breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth. When he opens his eyes, the earth is still turning. This moment is still happening. He’s still driving the car.

“Okay,” says Enjolras, “I can see the logic there. It’s not a terrible plan. But you couldn’t have warned me that was the plan beforehand? I mean, it kind of complicates some stuff. Statistically, it’s a lot less likely that you’d—”

Distantly, Grantaire is aware that his hands are shaking on the wheel. “Please stop talking,” he says. Wonder of wonders, Enjolras does actually stop. For at least four seconds.

“Wait,” says Enjolras. “Being?” Being bi, as opposed to pretending to be. He’s a sharp one, or maybe that’s just the power of contrasts at work.


“You’re—”

“Yeah,” he mutters. He doesn’t look at Enjolras. He’s not sure he could. They reach the turn for Hemlock. It isn’t the most graceful left he’s ever made, but the car does stay on the road. He thinks he might be proud of that.

“Fuck,” says Enjolras. “That was really, really unfair to you. I’m sorry.” For the life of him, Grantaire can’t think of anything to say. “I shouldn’t have put you in that situation, it was—I’m sorry.” Even at his best, Grantaire’s not sure he’d be able to wrap his mind around the slight tremor in Enjolras’s voice, the way his face has gone pale and nervous.

He looks like he’s about to throw up. Grantaire might join him. His hands have gone from twitchy to sweaty. He swallows, breathes in and out.

“On top of all of society’s bullshit,” says Enjolras, “to have to deal with it from the school’s social justice club—we should’ve had your back. I should’ve had your back. You deserve b—”

“Please please please stop talking,” Grantaire is saying, before he can close his mouth. “Please, just.” He swallows again, although it’s harder this time.

They reach Enjolras’s house in silence. It’s still shockingly unremarkable. Grantaire yanks the gear into park and rests his face on the steering wheel.

“Uh,” says Enjolras.
“Don’t say anything,” Grantaire bites out. If he has to hear one more word, Grantaire is going to—well, probably curl up in a ball and start shaking again.

From the passenger seat, there’s the click of a seatbelt. He sucks in another breath, waiting for the sound of the car door.

It doesn’t come. Instead, there is a light tap at his elbow. Grantaire looks up. Enjolras has climbed out of his seat, hovering awkwardly over the gear shift. Watching Grantaire’s face very carefully, he reaches out and pats his shoulder, as if Grantaire was an ailing lion—something delicate but capable of mauling.

Grantaire can’t begin to imagine why. “Sorry,” he gets out. He rubs at his eyes. He’s not crying, that’s something. “Sorry, sorry. You must think I’m nuts, but like. I’ve never actually said it out loud before. Eponine doesn’t count, she figured it out on her own.” He swallows, makes himself look at Enjolras, makes himself try to smile. “You’re the first person I ever came out to. Sorry for dragging you into this very special moment.”

Enjolras shakes his head. He starts to open his mouth, then catches himself.

“No, you can talk,” says Grantaire.

“It’s okay,” says Enjolras. The tentative shoulder patting has turned into shoulder rubbing. Grantaire wishes it didn’t feel quite so good. He’s fighting the urge to push into it.

“No, it’s stupid,” he says. “I fake came-out to the whole school, and now I’m shitting myself about this?”

“It’s not stupid,” Enjolras insists. “It’s probably easier to distance yourself from that, since you know you don’t—that it’s not real.”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire. He stares out the windshield, not really seeing anything. “And like, with the fallout at school, the worst of it’ll be over after we break up. And then the rest of it, it’ll all be done once we graduate. But this,” he sighs. “This is gonna be the rest of my life. Having this conversation. Being in this fucking situation.”

Enjolras coughs. “Well,” he says, “to be fair, probably not this exact fucking situation.” There’s a slight twist to his lips, and he’s raising his eyebrows, almost hopeful, and for some reason, suddenly Grantaire is laughing so hard he can’t breathe.

It’s as worrying as the shaking, in a way. He sucks in big gasps of air every chance he gets but his lungs burn. Enjolras is still crouched next to him, clearly not comfortable letting him drive off like this.

“That really was unfair to you,” Enjolras says again as Grantaire starts to get himself back under control. “If you weren’t ready to be out, and I forced you into feeling like you had to—I’m sorry I took that from you. That you didn’t get to pick who you told first.”

Grantaire waves it aside, careful not to dislodge the hand still rubbing back and forth at his shoulder.

“Sokay, I didn’t really have any, like, grand ideas about my first time,” he says, and Enjolras lets the innuendo pass without pursed lips or judgey eyebrows or anything. Nice of him. And then, because apparently this is honesty hour and Grantaire’s shutting up skills are on vacation, “It does kinda suck, though. Not that I told you, whatever. But that you know.” With his free hand, he wipes his forehead, because yep, he’s sweating. Gross. “It’s like being naked next to someone who’s wearing a snowsuit.” Enjolras’s hand freezes. “Sorry if I just made you picture me naked,” Grantaire blurts
out, like he hasn’t cringed enough in this conversation.

“It’s, uh.” Enjolras coughs. “It’s okay. And I don’t know, would it help if—not to make this about me, but would it feel more equal if I came out to you, too? If we were both, uh, metaphorically—” He trails off instead of actually saying ‘naked’, which is probably better for Grantaire’s continued mental health.

“Maybe,” says Grantaire. “Are you even in the closet?”

“I mean, I don’t pretend to be straight, but I haven’t talked about it to anyone but Combeferre and Courfeyrac.” Enjolras sighs. “My orientation is complicated.”

“How?” says Grantaire. “Does it involve time travel?”

“Not yet,” says Enjolras, “but it’s a long story.”

The idea of Enjolras talking like a regular person who has hopes and fears and sometimes wants to kiss people is dizzying.

“You want to get back into your seat, then?” Grantaire suggests. “You’re gonna pull something if you keep squatting like that.” He’s not sure how Enjolras hasn’t noticed how uncomfortable he must be.

Looking maybe a little sheepish, Enjolras climbs back into the passenger seat, as Grantaire tries not to mourn the loss of the shoulder rub. Enjolras tips his head back, squinting thoughtfully at the roof of the van.

“I’m not kidding when I say it’s a long story,” he warns.

“Yeah, dude, too bad I’ve got that super urgent meeting to get to,” says Grantaire, shaking his head sadly.

Enjolras acknowledges this with a flick of his wrist and settles in. “So, when I was thirteen or fourteen, it seemed like everyone kind of lost their minds,” he says. “I mean, the boys and girls had always been weird about each other, and I could never figure out why we had to be, like, pitted against each other—”

Grantaire can picture that, tiny gold-haired Enjolras campaigning for gender equality on the playground. “But suddenly the guys in my class were talking about women, in this way that honestly felt kind of creepy. Just, body parts. Detached from the person. Like we were all butchers or something.”

This is even easier to imagine, Grantaire thinks. He can see the disapproving scowl in his head. It’s an expression he’s witnessed enough in real life anyway.

“And they’d say, ‘What are you, gay?’ but it’s not like I was having those kinds of thoughts about men either,” says Enjolras. “Porn does nothing at all for me. I mean, I can tell when someone’s attractive. But I pretty much never see anyone, no matter how good they look, and think, ‘Oh, I want to...’” he waves his hand. “You know.”

Grantaire kindly doesn’t make Enjolras finish that sentence, even though he suspects that Enjolras’s impression of a horny teenager would be comedy gold.

“So you’re asexual, then?” he says instead. No reason to be disappointed, he reminds himself, not for the first time. It isn’t like this is the one factor keeping them apart.
Enjolras shakes his head. “I mean, I wondered, but. I still thought about sex. And it was—I mean, when I thought about it abstractly, it was definitely with guys. And then when I was fifteen, I wound up infatuated with this senior at my old school, and that is how I found out I was capable of—thinking of it non-abstractly—”

“Wanting to bone someone,” Grantaire supplies, generous. “Got it.”

“So for about a year, I thought I was either bad at being gay or bad at being asexual,” Enjolras continues. Grantaire winces in sympathy but his tone is casual, unbothered. “And then I was looking something up and I found the word for it, literally by accident. Demisexuality.”

“Wait,” says Grantaire, “so your orientation is that you’re pretty much not interested in fucking people, and when you are it’s for an actual good reason?” It makes a certain amount of sense, he has to admit. “Congratulations, man. You are immune from like 80% of all teenage bullshit.”

Enjolras’s eyebrows draw together. “It’s not a superpower.”

“Well yeah,” Grantaire allows. “It won’t get you a spot on the X-Men. But damn, that has got to come in handy. World’s wisest dick, in this very car.”

“It’s terrible,” says Enjolras. Grantaire opens his mouth to say something sarcastic, yeah, I bet, but Enjolras cuts him off. “No, it’s terrible. Because then when I am attracted to someone, I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing. At all.” He smiles to himself, weary, some private joke.

“Uh, yeah, nobody does,” says Grantaire. “I mean, by the time most people are thirty, they’ve probably fallen in love like a dozen times. It’s not like they’re going around making A plus choices.” He sighs. “It’s how it goes, man. We’re all in the same shitty, shitty, godawful sinking boat.”

Enjolras rubs at the bridge of his nose. “Think I’ve been spending too much time with you, because that was almost comforting.”

“Breathe deep, it’ll pass,” Grantaire babbles. And then, very ill-advisedly, he lets out a helpless snort. For once in his life, Enjolras doesn’t snap his head up all paranoid, just makes a confused noise that is—yeah, it’s completely adorable, whatever. Objectively, it’s cute. “Oh god,” says Grantaire. “Sorry, I’m just—trying to picture the one-in-a-million magical unicorn of a dude that would actually do it for you.” He manages to say this mostly without bitterness, he thinks. “Like, Tom Paine but with perfect abs.”

Enjolras makes another, more annoyed sound. “I already told you—”

“Yeah, yeah, your love is a deep and pure thing unsullied by how a dude looks in a Speedo, I get it,” says Grantaire. “Okay, so Tom Paine but he rescues kittens from trees and teaches physics to orphans.”

“I don’t think I explained this very well,” Enjolras says, which is not, let the record show, an actual denial of the Tom Paine thing. “It’s not—it doesn’t have much to do with how a person looks but my reasons aren’t better. They’re as stupid and arbitrary as anyone’s.”

“Roses are red, violets are blue, I agree with you on campaign finance reform, let’s suck face,” Grantaire recites.

“No, see, that would be a good reason,” says Enjolras, which—wow, that is its own conversation, right there. “No, it’s more. Agh.” His head thumps against the back of the seat again. “This is really hard to articulate. But it’s not—it’s not logical. It’s, ‘oh, I like the way he swings his backpack onto his shoulder’ or ‘I like the thing his mouth does when he speaks a foreign language.’”
Grantaire takes a moment to pretend he isn’t going to waste at least an hour tonight trying to decide if there’s anything distinctive about the way he carries his own backpack, or if he’s ever spoken anything other than English in Enjolras’s hearing. Just a moment. It’s a nice dream.

Enjolras is looking straight forward, not making eye contact in a way that’s starting to feel intentional. “Stupid stuff,” he says again. “I like how he—acts on principle, not because he’s trying to seem like a good person, but just because it seems like maybe he can’t not do it, even when there’s no benefit to him.” And this is so specific that, factored in with how Enjolras’s gestures have gone halting and jerky and how he’s blinking a little too much, Grantaire is suddenly struck by the clear and ringing realization that Enjolras is talking about a real, living person.

“Wow,” says Grantaire thickly. “Uh, that’s. Good luck with—all that, I guess. Once we break up. Fake-break up. This guy sounds—I mean, I’ll be honest, he sounds like the most boring dude alive, but. Have fun.”

And maybe hysterical laughter is contagious, because Enjolras’s response is pitch forward against his seatbelt and laugh for so long, and with such an increasing degree of desperation, that Grantaire spends the whole drive back home with the nagging sense there’s something—an inside joke, a reference, some secret clue to the whole messed-up situation—going way over his head.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Grantaire never got past page four of *Dante's Inferno* but he skimmed the Cliff Notes at a bookstore last month, and he's pretty sure he's in a circle of hell right now. Not one of the heavy hitters; he's still got some perspective. But definitely, you know, present.

(In which the fake dating reaches new heights.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grantaire isn't worried Enjolras will treat him differently, now that the cat's out of the "godless bisexual" bag. Enjolras is many things, but he's not a hypocrite. Given his political leanings, it's clear he'd be down with godless queers of all stripes, even if he were straight.

Of course, that's all a moot point now, since Enjolras is officially into dudes. Into dudes but with a libido as slow-growing and majestic as the mighty Sequoia.

Into dudes and crushing on one of them, which is something Grantaire needs to stop thinking about, so naturally he spends the entire drive home thinking about nothing else.

The thing is, Enjolras doesn't know a lot of people. For that matter, Enjolras doesn't even seem to see beyond his own personal social justice island, so it would almost need to be someone in the ABC. But no matter how hard Grantaire mulls it over (and he runs a stop sign trying), he can’t come up with a promising candidate for Mystery Dream Date.

Enjolras’s first two clues are so vague that they might have been general examples, and the one about being a good person applies to literally every member of the ABC. Hell, you could argue it even applies to Grantaire, he thinks as he rolls up to the intersection of Hemlock and Miller, nearly colliding with a red truck because on second thought maybe on Friday Enjolras had seemed kind of struck by Grantaire’s refusal of any payment for the fake dating, and also wouldn’t that explain the weird laughing jag?

But that doesn’t work, he reminds himself as he swerves at the last second, the owner of the truck expressing a lot of feelings out the window. Enjolras has never wanted Grantaire to have anything to do with the ABC, was only relieved when Grantaire lent him a book instead of trying to talk to him, is upset that Grantaire is coming along to Joly’s. Enjolras doesn’t want him around. It’s a fairly damning piece of information.

Besides, if Grantaire was the one he liked, that would turn Enjolras’s third clue into some kind of weird passive-aggressive half-confession, and who does that shit?

It somehow doesn’t spare him from a mostly sleepless night, punctuated by some bizarre dreams around 4 AM.

He wakes up the next morning resolved to stop obsessing. Maybe the whole description was about
that guy at Enjolras’s old school. Maybe Enjolras met a college kid over Christmas break. That doesn't make perfect sense, but the alternative is spending all future ABC meetings jealously glaring at any guy who displays convictions or carries his backpack interestingly.

At any rate, Grantaire’s got other problems to worry about. Or—not worry. Because he’s not anxious now that Enjolras knows the truth about his orientation. He’s not. It's not like this can change anything: it wouldn't make Enjolras think less of him, and Grantaire is so far down into the hole that it couldn't possibly help him much either. So there's no reason at all to get worked up about it. But every few minutes, Grantaire's mind drifts away and comes back to land on 'Enjolras knows.' And every time, it’s an electric shock.

Between the fake dating and the genuine Kinsey scale business, Enjolras has Grantaire's two biggest secrets on lock. Enjolras has all the tools needed to destroy him. On some level, he has to be aware that he's holding the button to a fucking nuclear detonator. And yeah, Grantaire feels a bone-deep trust that Enjolras isn’t going to use it against him, but he could. Grantaire doesn't even know which half of that sentence is scarier.

All that intimacy and they'll never even make it to first base, Grantaire thinks, rummaging in his locker for the book they're reading in English. *Ethan Frome*. He's praying they won’t have to write an essay about it, since his only thought on the whole thing is, ‘…bummer.’ No amount of messing with the font and margins is gonna make that three pages double-spaced.

It's been years since he could drag up the energy to really care about that shit. He's read *The Grapes of Wrath* three times, though. That's not even about Enjolras, it's just—he keeps picking it up again. He almost wants to make Eponine read it, just so he could have someone to talk to, because there are parts that make his brain feel like it’s going to vibrate out of his skull, but also parts he knows he's not getting. He’d ask a teacher, if he didn't think that was bound to end in tears. They’d be tears of boredom, but still.

He'd ask Enjolras, except for every single thing about that idea.

*Ethan Frome* is stuck to the bottom of the locker, in a dried up puddle of something that's attracting ants. He pries up the back cover with a snort: one more misfortune for Mr. Frome. Grantaire can relate. Especially when he shuts the door of his locker and Enjolras is standing right there, Jesus.

Too late, Grantaire reminds himself that boyfriends probably don’t curse in surprise and drop shit when they see each other. By then, the book is already sliding dangerously out of his fingers. They both make a grab for it, hands knocking together. Enjolras's skin is warm. Grantaire jerks back.

"How's your day going?" Enjolras asks, hooking his thumbs on the straps of his backpack. With his shoulders hunched under the weight of textbooks, he looks almost life-size, like you could hug him without searing yourself on his skull. If Grantaire's smile comes out a little helpless and uncalculated —well, one of the few perks of this set-up is nobody can call him on it.

A foot away, Eddie Gruer makes an involuntary grunt of disgust.

It’s so stupid. Last year, Eddie and his girlfriend made out all over the sophomore hallway, with such moist, sweaty fervor that Grantaire could sometimes hear the smacking sounds through his headphones. What would Eddie even do if they took it any further? Grantaire’s best guess involves a lot of vomiting.

“’It’s starting to get better,'” Grantaire says, as warm as he can make his voice go. Would it be over the top if he, like, reached over and stroked Enjolras's bicep? Yes, he thinks, yes it would be.
Shame.

Enjolras starts to twist around to see what Grantaire's reacting to, catches himself, and looks to the other side of the hallway instead, where the window reflects a clear view of Eddie yanking notebooks from his locker.

Enjolras smiles then, dangerous in a way that makes Grantaire's insides squirm happily. "That's so sweet," he says. "I missed you."

"Aww, since yesterday?" says Grantaire.

"Well it felt like longer," says Enjolras, and Grantaire can't think of any retort to that, so he ducks his head. A stray curl falls directly into his eyes. Enjolras tucks it back in place. The pad of his thumb brushes the shell of Grantaire's ear and Grantaire fights conflicting urges to run in the other direction or purr like a cat.

Behind them, there's a slam of metal on metal, and Eddie stomps by, with a face like puking is an option after all. It's an even balance of terrifying and exhilarating. So is the look of vicious satisfaction on Enjolras's face.

"As hobbies go, it's cheaper than skydiving," Grantaire offers.

Enjolras nods, watching Eddie's retreating back. "Was that alright?" he asks in a low voice once Eddie's out of earshot. Grantaire makes a sound of agreement.


That could mean almost anything. "Uh, like what?" says Grantaire.

"Eddie's the reason people call him Jehan Prou-fairy."

Grantaire frowns. He hadn't known that, but then, he also didn't know he was ruining Eponine's reputation as it was happening. Grantaire's track record on this shit is not amazing.

A week ago, he would've described Eddie as a friend. Not a close one, but still. They talked in class. Eddie's made him laugh more times than he can count.

Grantaire’s also lost count of the number of times he’s gritted his teeth when Eddie's jokes skated towards douchey. Gritted his teeth and said nothing. It's okay, he's kidding. It's just a joke, he doesn’t mean it. And if he does mean it, you wouldn't be able to change his mind anyway. Grantaire's run that tape into dust. It's not like he didn't know on some level who he was dealing with.

"Fucking people," he mutters, all-inclusive. The warning bell rings. Grantaire doesn't move.

"Don’t write off everyone,” says Enjolras. “It’s just a, a vocal minority who—"

Grantaire steamrolls right over that, doesn’t even care. “Everyone lets him do it, though. If they know it’s wrong and they let it happen, that’s not better—”

“Maybe they need someone to show them there’s another way,” Enjolras counters. Christ, his eyes are so blue. Grantaire has to look away. He picks the floor. “Hey,” says Enjolras. “If nothing else, we made him uncomfortable?” It's tentative, almost consoling, and the idea of Enjolras trying to cheer him up is enough that Grantaire can manage a weak smile. Enjolras seems to find this reassuring. There’s some mischief in his tone when he adds, "I think if I'd kissed you, his brain
would've exploded.”

Grantaire skims right fucking past all possible mental images, and also the sound of Enjolras's voice saying 'if I'd kissed you' which is mental napalm.

"Projectile vomit," he says instead. "Have you seen the Exorcist?" Enjolras shakes his head. "Well, have you seen a fire hose?" says Grantaire. He mimes a stream spraying from his mouth.

"Gross," says Enjolras, and his face contorts in disgust, but maybe he is a true teenage boy after all because he also sounds a little delighted.

Enjolras the fiery-eyed crusader could move mountains, but Enjolras the human makes Grantaire feel like a giant butterfly is living behind his sternum.

"Oh, also.” Grantaire leans in and drops his voice to the barest whisper, because he's nothing if not accommodating of Enjolras's paranoias. "That move with the reflections in the glass? That was some spy level shit."

They both instinctively eye the window, where their ghostly doubles stand with their heads together, conspiratorial. Cozy. "Or like, a magician," Grantaire rambles. "Smoke and mirrors."

The hallway isn't empty but it's sparse, and Enjolras is apparently comfortable enough to whisper back: "I think we're getting better at this." It probably helps that the whispering looks coupley as hell.

"Better than the time with the pizza?" says Grantaire. They're standing really, really close. He should move away. He knows he should. "Because that was a train wreck."

"I mean, it worked." Enjolras's breath is warm against his ear. Grantaire bravely soldiers on. "Granted," Enjolras adds, "by the skin of our teeth—"

Our teeth. 

"By the thickness of Mike's skull," says Grantaire. "Now there is a boy who doesn't know the capitol of Portugal."

They're still angled slightly towards the glass. Blurred and half-transparent, reflected across a hallway, they are almost convincing.

Grantaire skates along on that high until Government, when he walks in to discover that someone has drawn a dick on his desk. He stands there for a minute, blocking the aisle, trying to convince himself he's looking at a coincidence and not, like, a hate crime. People do just draw dicks on things sometimes.

There’s no reason it means anything. He knows this. The timing is hard to get around, though. He dumps his books on top so he doesn’t have to look at it, so that nobody will see and think—what, even? That he drew it himself for some quick porn? That he’s so attracted to dudes that it appeared overnight, like the Shroud of Turin? Last week, he would’ve laughed once and moved on, but now suddenly he’s a fucking conspiracy theorist.

Cosette files in right before the bell and smiles at him, talks to him when she can, but it’s a harder to smile back when the whole time they’re sitting there, that stupid cock and balls is lurking under his
Earth science is boring, so boring. Grantaire almost misses being the kind of kid who raised his hand just to make puns about rocks. He does miss the days when that's why people hated him; at least it was for something he was doing, not something he's pretending to do.

He finishes the homework in about ten minutes, and then he doodles all along the edges: stars, trees, feathers, hands. Not anyone's hands in particular. Not Enjolras's hands, reaching out to fix Grantaire's hair, casual, warm. Just, hands. Generic.

Grantaire shades in the tendons and thinks that if he's going to keep lying to himself, he should probably get better at it.

The only two people at the lunch table when he shows up are Eponine and Combeferre. They're sitting across from each other, avoiding eye contact. She's got a battered CD player and headphones, and Combeferre is seemingly absorbed in his textbook. Except it's Combeferre, so maybe the single-minded enthusiasm for German verbs is real.

She frees one ear when she sees him. Muted, tinny music seeps out of the earphone. It's hard to tell, but if he had to guess, it's some angsty 90's band where a girl with weird lipstick snarls stuff about everyone who's ever wronged her. Eponine's kind of going through a phase.

Also, she doesn't have any food.

"Did you forget your lunch?" Grantaire asks.

She nods, but she nods while blinking a lot, which means no. He reminds himself not to push, that their friendship relies on not pushing, but he doesn't miss the way her eyes track his bag of chips when he sits down, and he can't stop himself from saying,

"Want some breadsticks or something?"

She squints at him, and he scrambles for a supporting argument—it's only fair after all the free booze, or maybe some kind of "pay me back later by keeping your brother in line" joke—but Eponine just mumbles,

"Like, if you want to, whatever," which means yes.

By the time he returns, bearing a cardboard boat of garlic bread, the rest of the ABC has arrived, and things are less weird. For a very relative definition of less weird, Grantaire thinks, snagging the free spot next to Enjolras and greeting him with a quick little side hug that hopefully looks nonchalant and cool.

In the end, it's hard to tell whether Enjolras treats him differently post-coming out. They won't even
be alone together again until the ride home on Friday. When all your interactions are built on a lie, what’s baseline?

He gives Grantaire an awfully weird look for asking Combeferre what the hell Mercutio's deal is, though.

"You know you didn't have to reread the play just because he told you, right?" Enjolras says, and Grantaire uses every last ounce of his willpower to bite back the sarcastic comments pushing at the roof of his mouth. He thought they were over this whole utter-shock-that-Grantaire-knows-what-books-are thing.

"It wasn’t a problem,” Grantaire says instead. “I know they work you guys to the bone in Honors Lit, but over in Dishonorable Lit, they give us slower kids some downtime.”

“Between the naps and the macaroni art,” Eponine slurs through a mouthful of bread.

“Regular English is like fifty percent naps,” he agrees.

“Hey,” says Enjolras. Grantaire turns, wary. What has he done to offend? “Stop calling my boyfriend slow.”

They’re being playful now. That’s a thing, apparently. Grantaire can do this, he can totally do this.

“Make me” is the first response he can think of, so he goes with that. His stomach sinks a second later; Enjolras was being fake-supportive but Grantaire took it to fake-flirty, shit. In front of an audience, too, which means Enjolras is trapped having to respond. Grantaire’s given him a reason to get offended after all.

Backing down would give them away. He raises his eyebrows, trying not to show it on his face. He’ll apologize later.

Enjolras raises his eyebrows back and leans closer, tracing one hand up Grantaire’s forearm. Grantaire swallows, involuntary. He tries not to shiver. He may not always register how hot Enjolras is, upstaged by the sheer force of that personality, but at present he is acutely aware.

“You sure you want to go down this road?” Enjolras says in a low voice.

Grantaire doesn’t just want to go down the road, he wants to barrel down it. He wants to break every speeding law ever invented. He also wants to run screaming in the opposite direction. It’s confusing.

“I’m sure you’re great at macaroni art,” says Musichetta, breaking the spell.

Combeferre twirls his fork. “Do, uh, you still want to talk about the Mercutio issue?”

“More than anything,” says Grantaire with feeling. “What is even his deal?”

“Hoo boy,” says Combeferre. “How long do you have?”

Grantaire can't always follow what he's saying, but he appreciates the way Combeferre talks about books, like a detective sniffing out a trail of clues. He also appreciates how the lecture lets Grantaire and Enjolras off the hook for a while. They don't need to fill the silences with coupley chatter, because there are no silences.
And, if he's honest with himself, Grantaire appreciates how, as Combeferre gets going, Enjolras leans to the right until their arms brush.

No meetings on Tuesdays means Grantaire can actually leave school at an hour that makes sense. In theory.

"I think I have a flat tire," he says as he and Eponine approach the van, which is sagging at an awkward angle.

Eponine swears under her breath and jerks her headphones off. "I fucking hate these fucking people," she says, pointing to the three-inch nail embedded into the treads of the front left tire and yep, that would do it.

So Eponine walks over to the middle school to retrieve her brother, while Grantaire calls Triple A and hangs out on the median. He wants to reread Romeo and Juliet, or maybe *Grapes of Wrath* again, except he doesn't have either with him, so instead he just reads ahead in Ethan Frome. For the record, his only reaction is still "bummer." He should've made Eponine leave him her CD player.

She and Gavroche take forever to get back. The Triple A guy beats them to it, rolling up in his truck and changing the tire with a grumpy efficiency. He doesn't talk more to Grantaire than is strictly necessary. Everything about his quick, jerky movements and constant eye-rolling screams "kids these days", as if Grantaire managed to drive onto the upturned point of a nail through sheer youthful recklessness.

"Whatever you did, son, don't do it again," the Triple A guy mutters as he climbs back into his truck. Grantaire watches him drive away, eyes stinging, knowing that in five minutes, he's going to have so many snappy comebacks it'll be like fireworks going off in his skull.

That night, Gavroche agrees to burn all of Bahorel's requested songs in exchange for some handheld video game thing he found wedged behind the nightstand. It was close to Grantaire's heart once, but the graphics are shitty and he hasn't played it in years. Gavroche claims he's interested in it for the vintage appeal, a thought that seems designed to make Grantaire's head hurt.

The kid is also fascinated by Bahorel’s music choices. "This mix is like, *art*," he breathes, poring over the crumpled piece of notebook paper. "Who *is* this guy?" Behind him, Eponine makes frantic throat-slitting motions, like Grantaire can’t tell it's a bad idea to expose an impressionable young middle schooler to the concept of Bahorel.

"Just—some dude," he says vaguely.

Gavroche's eyes are round and earnest. "Does he go to school with you? Can I meet him?"

"He's a Republican," Grantaire invents, as Eponine blurts out, "He wears socks with sandals."

Gavroche looks back and forth between them, shrugs, and returns his attention to the list, where the next item he reads makes him laugh out loud. Just who is Bahorel? The world may never know.
"You won the eternal respect of a twelve-year-old last night," Grantaire reports the next day in Con Econ.

"Well, yeah," says Bahorel, who's got this irritating habit of never being wrongfooted by anything. "I'm basically a role model." Yesterday, he pierced his own belly button with a safety pin because he was bored in class. Grantaire nods. "Step one to building up my child army," Bahorel muses.

"Dream big, man," says Grantaire, handing over the pile of CDs.

"Oh, awesome." Bahorel reaches into his backpack and pulls out a bulging plastic bag full of jewel cases. He dumps it onto Grantaire's desk. "Trade."

"What?"

Grantaire peers inside. It’s a pile of mixes, if he had to guess, given that none of them have album titles and they're all labeled things like, "songs about birds (that aren't really about birds)" and "WHAM KAPOW KAPOW" and "Spy rock!!!!" One CD case has no words at all, and is just covered in penguin stickers.

"Did you think I was just gonna take a bunch of your shit?" says Bahorel. "Have some faith."

Grantaire, stupidly, is almost choked up. "Thanks, bro," he manages.

"Not a problem," Bahorel tells him. He settles back in his chair. "So," he adds, casual, "you over whatever issue you had with me?"

It's such a sudden turn that Grantaire is blindsided. "...what?" he decides on at last.


Grantaire shrugs. That whole half of the year is kind of a blur. Not in a good way. He remembers struggling to focus on anything, and he remembers not being able to eat much, skipping lunch anyway because he couldn’t handle the cafeteria. A few people stand out to him, older boys who seemed to have taken a vow to make his life hell, but for the most part, the other kids are indistinct, an ebbing, flowing sea of disdain and indifference. He’s not sure he knew Bahorel’s name.

"We had art together," Bahorel adds, prompting. "It was only three years ago, dude. You never did the assignments, you just sat in the back and drew, like, screaming faces?"

Grantaire has no memory of this, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Whenever he finds sketches he did back then, it’s like seeing the work of a stranger.

"Sorry," says Grantaire, shaking his head. "I've got nothing."

Bahorel seems to have trouble believing this. "I tried to talk to you, like, once a day every day for a week," he says. "And you—" He waves his hand of front of his face. "—right through me. I’ll be honest, man, I kind of assumed you were a racist."

Grantaire frowns.

"Oh no, that’s not where I’m going with this," says Bahorel. "If I still thought that, we wouldn’t be
having this conversation. I could just never figure out, like, what I did.”

“What’d you try to talk to me about?” Grantaire ventures.

“Anything.” Bahorel rolls his pen around on the desk. “Good morning, do you know where the tempera paints are, that is a seriously badass screaming face—”

“I don’t know, man,” says Grantaire after a moment. He could leave it there, but. Bahorel thought he was racist, damn. “Look, tell you the truth, if I saw a dude in a wrestling shirt—”

Bahorel’s pen veers towards the edge of his desk, and snatches it up before it can hit the floor. “Shit,” he says. “Yeah. Man, I loved wrestling, but wrestlers, not so much. There’s a reason I quit, you know?”

Maybe in fifteen years Grantaire will get tired of thinking about that story. Maybe. “Did you quit, though?” he says. “Or did they throw you out for knocking the shit out of a guy?”

“It was a public service,” Bahorel tells him. “Brett Andriacchi, he graduated last year—”

Grantaire looks down at his hands. “Yeah. I was, uh, I was familiar with his work.” Bahorel clears his throat like he’s going to say something comforting, and that’s not what Grantaire needs. What he needs is to not need that. “If I’d only known,” he says, “you could’ve had all my tempera paint.”

"Well thanks, bro.” Bahorel seems to sense that this portion of the conversation is over, thank god. He grins. “But if you really want to thank me, tell Enjolras to listen to—well, you’ll know it when you see it. It is so his speed, but,” he sighs, “dude like, vowed to never take my advice again after I told him to watch the South Park movie, so.”

"I'll do my best," says Grantaire. He feels a sudden sharp regret for last night's smear campaign. "Wow, man, you’re doing God’s work."

Bahorel shrugs. "Had to be done. Hey, don't forget. Use your boyfriend powers if you need to."

"Boyfriend powers?"

"You know what I mean," says Bahorel.

"Levitation?" he guesses after a moment.

"C'mon." Bahorel tugs the stack of CDs into his backpack. "He's pretty clearly got a giant fucking soft spot for you. Just, you know. Bat your eyelashes at him."

“Nobody bats their eyelashes,” says Grantaire. “other than like, cartoon skunks. It’s not a thing.”

“You’ll figure it out,” says Bahorel with a grin. “I don’t know, wiggle your butt at him?”

Maybe Grantaire feels okay about defaming Bahorel’s name after all.

If Bahorel’s mixes are an art form, he’s in an abstract phase. Grantaire listens to "Spy rock!!!!" from passing period through the first half of Algebra, and it's the weirdest playlist he's ever heard: there's two tangoes in a row, some overblown new wave song, rock, a jazz instrumental piece, something classical with a harpsichord, techno, rock again, country, and then what seems to be just straight-up a
chapter of an audio book.

It’s easy to find the Enjolras mix. ‘songs for tearing shit down’ is covered in crappy drawings of raised fists (so crappy Grantaire can only identify them because they’re labeled that way).

He holds off playing it as long as he can. Every time Pete Taffney crosses the room, he makes a point of knocking into Grantaire’s desk, until Grantaire wants to just flip over the whole thing and light it on fire. He cues up the CD instead.

And lo, Bahorel has come through for him. The very first track is so angry and so determined and so Enjolras, it’s incredible. He wants to blare the song from the school’s PA system, like he’s in an 80’s movie. Scratch that, he wants to live in a world where he could convince Enjolras to give it a chance, where Grantaire’s eyelashes could have any effect. It’s the same world where it means something that Enjolras held his hand all through lunch today, didn’t even let go to drink his iced tea—just went through the contents of his lunch bag one-handed like it was natural.

It’s a nice place. This song is its national anthem, he decides, tapping his fingertips on his desk in time with the drums.

When the track ends, he skips back to the beginning, and again, and again. It gets better every time. He wants to soak up the sound waves in his bones. He wants it to permanently change his heartbeat. The song isn’t the national anthem after all; it’s the whole country. Maybe that’s what he’ll do when he graduates: leave the real world for everyone else to deal with, crawl inside the song and build a house there, in the space right before the last chorus.

Three things happen on Friday, all of them inevitable: Eponine shows up without a lunch again, someone in the hallway elbows Grantaire in the back so hard it bruises, and he gets into a big fight with Enjolras on the drive home.

The lunch thing he saw coming. The elbowing could be an accident. The fight, though—Grantaire’s got no excuse.

Except that Enjolras was right: they are getting better at lying. It’s easy to pretend, moment to moment, that the fact that they’ve learned how to smile at each other at a cafeteria table or across a hallway implies some kind of progress. Grantaire holds back his more assholish snark. Enjolras has started laughing at his jokes sometimes.

Grantaire reminds himself it’s a lie frequently. It’s almost a mantra: later that Tuesday when Enjolras walked him to World Myth and acted interested in the story of Atalanta, on Wednesday morning when Grantaire snuck into Enjolras’s Con Econ class to hand him a note that just said “what up, chowderboots?” with a heart drawn around it and Enjolras not only smiled, but slipped it into his front jean pocket, on Thursday when they held hands and it barely felt weird: this is not real.

They walk out of the meeting together, joking about who is going to carry whose books, and the minute they’re both in the van with the door shut, Enjolras is all business.

“That thing you said on Tuesday,” he says. “About being in remedial English or whatever.”

Tuesday was three long days ago. Grantaire thinks hard. “Okay?”

“You know Feuilly is in regular Lit, right?”
Panic mode. Grantaire’s palms sweat on the steering wheel. “Obviously I didn’t. How would I know that?”

“He didn’t make it into advanced,” says Enjolras, in carefully measured tones, “because he wasn’t on the accelerated track in middle school. He moved around a lot, and it was paperwork nobody was willing to sign.”

‘Wow,’ Grantaire thinks to himself. ‘You fucked this up so hard, man.’

“That sucks,” he says out loud, trying to forestall whatever righteous lecture is coming. Enjolras just nods. “He actually went to the administration last year, trying to make the case to get him moved up, and do you know what they said?” Enjolras’s eyebrows knit together. His mouth twists, bitter. “‘We don’t think you’re honors material.’”

“Jesus,” says Grantaire, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

Feuilly’s school before this one was in the city, where he walked through a metal detector every morning and carried all of his books to every class because the school couldn’t afford enough lockers. Grantaire thinks about Feuilly’s backpack, held together with duct tape. His gray, threadbare sneakers with their fraying laces. Somehow, Feuilly wakes up every day with the patience to read *Moby Dick*. To seek it out.

*Honors material.* You’d think Grantaire would reach a point where people would stop surprising him with their shittiness, but the day hasn’t come yet.

“He was talking about starting a, kind of a book club,” says Enjolras. “Or a combination book club and study group. They’d cover all the AP Lit books and study together, and then at the end of the year, take the test.” He glances sidelong at Grantaire. “There’s no rule saying you have to be in an AP class to get AP credit.”

“That sounds like Feuilly,” says Grantaire. There’s a reason even Enjolras looks up to that kid.

“I told him you might be interested,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire stares at him. They’re very lucky he hasn’t taken the van out of park yet, or they’d probably both be dead. “God, why?”

“You were saying your class was too easy—” Enjolras starts.

“I was saying it’s good for naps. I like naps.” Grantaire breathes through his nose. His hands are shaking. On some level, he knows he’s being ridiculous. He breathes. He breathes. He clenches at the steering wheel until his knuckles go white. What’s wrong with him?

“You ask questions when we talk about books,” says Enjolras, like this is evidence of something, when the truth is, Grantaire only asks questions because he knows he isn’t smart, and at some point he stopped caring about looking stupid. He’s not about to—taking fucking *tests*, sweating over timed essays and smacking against the walls of his own ignorance.

He has the sense he’s supposed to say something to this. At least look Enjolras in the eye.

There’s an air freshener hanging limp from the rear view mirror. It’s cheap kind you find anywhere, shaped like a pine tree, formerly green but long ago bleached by the sun to a pale blue. It’s fighting a losing battle against pretty much everything else in the van. He should probably just throw it away.
“I know you don’t like talking about this,” Enjolras is saying. “But if the reason you stopped—I mean, in ninth grade, if people were giving you a hard time, you don’t have to—I mean, obviously that’s different now.”

On some level, he can see Enjolras’s point. It’s not like kids could hate him more for joining Feuilly’s ridiculous crusade. Grantaire no longer has a reputation to protect.

“That’s not why I—” Grantaire starts, and Enjolras’s mouth snaps closed. It’s disorienting. It’s not until Enjolras voluntarily shuts up that Grantaire realizes he doesn’t actually know what he was going to say.

Sometimes, at lunch, he feels like he’s in one of those Highlights puzzles: Circle what doesn’t belong. Jehan’s always reading five books. Combeferre seems to get stronger and brighter with each literary discussion, like Mario eating Power Mushrooms. Musichetta drops in jokes like of course we all know who Sylvia Plath is. Enjolras gathers facts like a soldier gathering ammunition.

Grantaire, at his very best, five years ago at the absolute pinnacle of his achievement, had a stomach full of ulcers, panic attacks before each test, and insomnia so bad he regularly went two days without sleeping. Sometimes he would tiptoe into the living room as the sky outside was getting pink and sit at the foot of the trophy case, staring at all the ribbons and awards, trying to convince himself he was any relation to the smiling boy in the photos.

“I’m sure this is like, hard for you guys to wrap your giant brains around,” he gets out, “but I never did this shit for fun. Tell Feuilly I wish him the best, but I’ve got zero interest in joining his little nerd parade.”


Grantaire shakes his head. “You’re the one who fucking dragged me into this.”

“Oh my god,” Enjolras snaps. “I’m sorry, okay? I should’ve asked you first, but Feuilly was looking for people, and just.” His jaw works. “It gets old, okay? Hearing you constantly call yourself dumb and complain about how bored you are, while you do absolutely nothing about it.”

It’s one thing to know that nothing between them has changed. It’s another to face it, out loud and stuck in the same van. Grantaire reminds himself it’s for the better: a dose of reality, clean and stinging, like Neosporin on a cut.

“Well,” says Grantaire, pointed. “Given that we’re only pretending to like each other, maybe you can just suck it up and take one for the team.”

Enjolras says nothing. They ride all the way to his house in silence. Bahorel’s mix is still knocking around in the bottom of Grantaire’s backpack. He’d been waiting to play Enjolras that first track. He hadn’t even thought about how stupid it all was, sharing music like they’re friends.

When Grantaire pulls into the driveway, he manages a hollow “See you Monday” and Enjolras looks back over his shoulder, one hand on the door handle, incredulous.

“Tomorrow,” he says slowly. “Joly’s thing?”

“Right,” says Grantaire, to the sound of the car door slamming. Oh fucking joy.
Grantaire never got past page four of *Dante's Inferno* but he skinned the Cliff Notes at a bookstore last month, and he's pretty sure he's in a circle of hell right now. Not one of the heavy hitters; he's still got some perspective. But definitely, you know, present.

There's nothing objectively wrong with Joly's basement. There's nothing even so bad about the couch Grantaire is trapped on. It can't help the part it has to play in this, the latest catastrophe of his life.

The thing is, he almost didn't even sit next to Enjolras. When he climbed down the steps and into Joly's rec room, Enjolras only managed a weird, strained smile from over the back of the couch. Grantaire didn't see the point in straining it past breaking point. He was all ready to stretch out on the carpet, but when Joly finally stopped fluttering around him ("Grantaire! You made it, you made it! Yes!" as if his presence was like beating the upper level of some arcade game), Courfeyrac patted the middle cushion in invitation, and well.

What was Grantaire supposed to say, “No thanks, my boyfriend’s alright but I prefer the cold hard embrace of the floor?”

At first, it wasn't that bad—it's a big couch, and by sprawling towards Courfeyrac, Grantaire could manage a comfortable four-inch no man's land between him and Enjolras. The problem started when Courfeyrac dragged Marius off the armrest where he'd been perching—”Get off there, little buddy, you're gonna hurt yourself”—and onto the cushions. And with that, a comfortable buffer became being mashed up together, Grantaire getting another noseful of that orange-y scent.

Which would be terrible already, but then of course Marius had to gallantly insist that there was plenty of space for Cosette as well, hey no worries, and in the scramble to make Cosette comfortable, Grantaire was nearly knocked to the ground, except Enjolras yanked him back by the waist (one hand brushing Grantaire's bare skin where his T-shirt had ridden up, not that Grantaire wants to die or anything) and long story short, Grantaire is about half on the sofa, half on Enjolras's lap, and 100% wishing for death.

"Can you move over?" Grantaire mutters to Courfeyrac, who just grins.

"Hey, it's cool, we're not at school, you two don't have to leave room for Jesus here."

Courfeyrac is a good and kind and generous person but every now and then Grantaire hates him.

Half of Grantaire's ass is on top of Enjolras's thigh. He can feel the warmth of skin through two layers of jeans—he can feel Enjolras breathing—and Enjolras has his hand on Grantaire's knee in a way that may look affectionate but is really there for stability, because Grantaire is so reluctant to properly transfer his weight—half his weight—that he keeps almost tipping onto the floor. Still: Enjolras's hand. Grantaire's knee. This is not a drill.

They've watched two episodes of Joly's show like this, with every molecule of Grantaire focused on keeping his balance, on sitting normally, breathing normally, willing his heartbeat into its usual rhythm, chasing his mind away from any thoughts that would freak him out or—oh god please no—get him hard.

It's safe to say Grantaire has zero idea what the show is about.

"You guys okay over there?" Courfeyrac asks, over the title sequence of the third episode—Joly insists they can't be skipped—and Grantaire realizes it must look almost as awkward as it feels, the sharp angles he's folded his body into, trying to take up as little space as possible.
"I'm fine," says Enjolras. "You okay, honey?"

_Honey._ Coming from him, it somehow sounds more ridiculous than Poodlehands. Grantaire swallows back a snicker.

"Is your back bugging you?" says Bahorel from where he's lying on a footrest. "Told you to get ice, man. Basic fucking bruise care."

Enjolras freezes next to him—and also under him, oh God what is Grantaire's life.

"What happened to your back?" Enjolras asks.

It occurs to Grantaire that in terms of "vital information to share with the person you're pretending to date", physical damage might make the list. He sighs. Words can't even describe what little energy Grantaire has for another fight later about how he's a sloppy liar.

"Some asshole shoved me in the hallway," says Grantaire. "Remember?" he invents. "I told you on the drive home from school." Mentally, he congratulates himself: Enjolras doesn't know how much Bahorel knows, so he doesn't know how much he can bluff about it, which means there's nothing he can say. Case closed. Point dropped. Maybe Grantaire's not so stupid after all.

The hand on Grantaire's knee tightens a fraction, then lets up. "You didn't mention it left a bruise," Enjolras says with a trace of frustration, like he's realized the genius of Grantaire's maneuver.

Ha.

"Shh," says Joly.

Grantaire stares at the screen, glassy-eyed. He's not even sure this is the same show they were watching before. It's a western but there are spaceships? It's sci fi but everyone has cows?

"Why are there no Asians in the future," Bahorel whispers, which makes Musichetta give a loud, sudden laugh, which makes Grantaire almost slide off Enjolras's lap, which makes Enjolras move his hand up, until it's resting not against Grantaire's knee, but on his _thigh_, and Grantaire can't do this. He has lost every trace of his ability to do this.

"Joly, where's your bathroom," he blurts out.

Joly digs up the remote and pointedly puts the TV on pause. "Out the door, second door on your left," he says, and Grantaire beats a hasty retreat.

Joly’s parents’ bathroom feels older than the rest of the house. There’s a black and white tile floor and an actual clawfoot tub. Grantaire curls up on the floor, resting his cheek against cool, solid porcelain. The wallpaper is patterned with the repeating image of three kittens sitting in a basket. He stares until it goes blurry, reconciling the lines of baskets into rows, columns, diagonals.

"Ten years from now, this will all be hilarious," he tells them.

The words come easy, not because he agrees, but because it's something he used to hear a lot. 'Those kids who are bothering you, they're gonna grow up to work at McDonald's,' or 'All this won't seem like such a big deal when you're rich and successful.'
'Things will be so much better in college.' A teacher told him that once when Grantaire was in middle school, as if college isn’t functionally a thousand years away to an eleven-year-old. As if it’s possible to believe in the future when the present is the bottom of a pit, and time is a shitty, inefficient bridge.

Grantaire switches to the other side of his face, and reminds himself it’s okay. Another minute and he can go back, say his back hurts too much for the couch, lie on his belly alone on the floor. He can do this.

Someone knocks.

"One sec," he says, scrambling up to turn on the sink.

"Grantaire, what the hell," says Enjolras, and Grantaire scrunches his face, sighs, and opens the door. Enjolras is standing in the middle of the hallway, posture tight, jaw clenched, and if they have this fight here, it will raise a lot of questions for their friends.

"Get in before someone sees you," Grantaire hisses. He's ready to yank in Enjolras by the shirt collar if he needs to, but Enjolras steps inside, no comment, and Grantaire pulls the door shut behind him.

He's just wedged them together into a tiny enclosed space. A tiny enclosed space with kitten wallpaper. Grantaire would love to talk to his future self right now, because for the life of him, he can't see where he’s gonna find the laughs in this situation.

"What—" Grantaire starts, but Enjolras talks right over him.

"Did you really get beaten up at school?"

"Okay, 'beaten up' is ridiculous," says Grantaire. "Someone pushed me in the back once, it was probably an accident, it's nothing—"

"Really?" Enjolras's nostrils flare. "Because Bahorel said it left a bruise."

Grantaire scrubs a hand over his face. He would rather drown himself in the bathtub than deal with this.

"Bahorel exaggerates," he points out. "Is that, like, news to you?"

"He tells jokes," says Enjolras. "But I have to think he meant it because nothing about this is funny."

One thing they can agree on, at least.

"I'm telling you it's fine." If Grantaire makes him angry enough, will Enjolras drop it? Smoke and mirrors, he thinks. He summons up his most annoying smile. "Can't you take my word for it, Muffintoes? A good fake relationship is built on trust."

But Enjolras doesn't take the bait, which come to think of it, is a bad sign. "Prove it," he says.

"What?"

A muscle in Enjolras's jaw twitches. "If it's nothing, I'll be able to tell. Show me."

"Dude." Grantaire tries to snort, but his mouth has gone dry. "I'm not stripping for you." It's aiming for contemptuous. He can feel that the curl of his lip is all wrong.

"You answer the door in your underwear," says Enjolras, and Grantaire knows what this is, knows
that it's only Enjolras trying to catch him out on a lie, but certain parts of his body are very aware of what it sounds like. Is the room suddenly ninety degrees?

Enjolras must take his silence for the unconditional surrender it kind of is, because he only says,

"Do you know who did it?"

Grantaire shakes his head.

"Do you know who might've done it?"

What kind of question is that? "Yeah, half the fucking school." Grantaire doesn't even think before he says it, but Enjolras goes still.

"Why, have people been harassing you?" he says slowly.

"Are you surprised?" Grantaire can't get over it, this endless well of indignation. If righteous fury could power cars, he'd have clean energy all figured out. "I assume they've said shit to you, did you think they'd spare me because of my charming fucking personality?"

"People have made comments, or tried to," says Enjolras. "Nobody's touched me. If it gets physical, that's serious. Has anything happened besides this?"

Grantaire's not about to divulge the saga of the nail in his tire, or the penis on his desk. "Maybe it's none of your business."

"Really?" Enjolras bites out, voice crackling with sarcasm. "You don't think it looks kind of odd that the person you're supposedly dating has to find this shit out from Bahorel?"

"Oh no," says Grantaire. "No, you do not get to lecture me right now on being convincing. Do you have any idea how suspicious it looks that you followed me to the fucking bathroom?"

"I told them I had to make a phone call," Enjolras counters.

It's Grantaire's turn to be incredulous. "Seriously, dude? Okay, let's review. I leave for the bathroom, you suddenly remember that you had a very important call, we're gone for exactly the same length of time, and then we resurface twenty minutes later. They are absolutely gonna realize something's up. I hope you're prepared to explain to them how we're totally not fighting. Shit." He rests both hands on his head. On his hair, actually. He's not sure where his hat is. It has wisely fled the scene. "I mean, fucking best case scenario, they assume we slipped away to make out."

There's a pause. The room feels even smaller than before. Grantaire contemplates flushing himself into the ocean, like a dead goldfish. Logically he knows this wouldn't work, but the toilet is right there. It's tempting.

"It probably is," says Enjolras.

"What?"


"It's a terrible story," says Grantaire, automatic. "They won't buy it."

"Why not?" says Enjolras. "We're dating."
'Because you'd sooner tongue-kiss a paper shredder than touch mouths with me,' Grantaire manfully does not say.

"Okay," he says instead, "think about this. Why do your friends think we’re together? Because we told them, and for whatever reason, they bought it. Okay. But if we—if we’d actually left to mack on each other, we wouldn’t admit it. Think how that would look, walking back in like, ‘Oh hey what’d we miss while we were totally foolin’ around in Joly’s parents’ bathroom.’ We’d have to, like, put out signs, while making it look like we weren’t putting out signs. Before, it worked because they took our word for it. Here, we’d have to rely on, like, fucking—subtext."

He gestures between them: the tight line of Enjolras’s jaw, the tension in Grantaire's shoulders that hasn't fully settled for days.

"Uh, do you see the problem here?"

"That's easy to fake, though," says Enjolras. "Mess up your hair."

Grantaire obediently runs one hand through his hair, feeling stupid. Especially because Enjolras is watching him do it. And because judging from his expression, Grantaire somehow didn’t do it right.

Enjolras shakes his head, fingers twitching at his sides as if fighting the urge to just skip the middle man and dishevel Grantaire’s hair correctly. "More than that."

"Do I need to explain to you how making out works?" says Grantaire. "Because it doesn't generally involve—are you trying to give yourself a hickey?"

Enjolras has moved in front of the mirror, pinching at his collar bone with a determined frown.

"There is no way in hell that's gonna work," Grantaire tells him.

"Have you tried?" says Enjolras, in what would be a withering tone except this moment is so idiotic that his voice couldn’t wither anything.

"No, but if it was that easy, don’t you think every pathetic eighth grade boy on the planet would be rolling up to middle school covered in marks?"

Enjolras rolls his eyes. "Are you going to just stand there and criticize, or—"

"What's the alternative," Grantaire breaks in. "What, man? Help give you a hickey? Because I only know how to do it the standard way, and I can't imagine you're gonna—"

HIs lungs are burning because he’s holding his breath, he realizes. He takes a deep exhale. Enjolras doesn’t even look up right away, focused on his reflection, scrutinizing the unmarked skin of his own clavicle.

“Okay,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire knows he’s staring. He doesn’t think he can be blamed. “What?”

“Okay,” Enjolras repeats. “That didn’t work. It would sell our story better than maybe anything else. So if you’re offering—"

Well, that’s it. Grantaire has lost his mind. He’s officially gone crazy, and there’s nobody to witness it except for the wallpaper kittens.

“Look,” says Grantaire. “I don’t care either way. But if you’ve never done anything with anyone,
maybe getting a hickey from someone you don’t even like isn’t the best place to—”

“Are you looking out for my honor right now?” Enjolras asks. “It’s not an issue. I didn’t have any grand ideas about my first time.” A corner of his mouth twitches, and Grantaire realizes belatedly he’s being quoted. “Anyway, it’s not sex. It’s not even kissing. It’s letting someone bite you, one time, kind of slowly. I’ve never understood the appeal.”

From Grantaire’s very limited experience, this is doing the act a disservice, but he can’t think of a way to say, like, ‘this is gonna involve a lot more sucking than you seem to realize, dude,’ without sounding incredibly creepy. And it would be convincing, he can see that. The longer they stay in this room, the more they’re going to need a cover story.

“If you’re sure,” he hears himself say.

“I’m sure,” says Enjolras. His brow furrows with sudden concern. “Are you alright with this? I mean, don’t feel pressured or—”

“I’m fine,” says Grantaire, trying to smirk. “I mean, I hear it’s just biting someone, one time, kind of slowly.”

“So how do we, uh.” Enjolras makes a vague gesture.

Grantaire peers up at him. There are a couple of ways he could reach Enjolras’s neck with his teeth, but he can’t think of anything that wouldn’t involve either pressing their bodies flush together, or making it very obvious he’s trying not to. This whole enterprise is screamingly dumb, but it’s still his mouth on Enjolras’s skin, and he can’t trust his dick to remember what a bad idea this is.

“Sit on the edge of the bathtub,” he says. Enjolras squints at him. "Dude, I'm not doing this on my tiptoes.”

"Fair," says Enjolras, shuffling over and taking a seat.

The logical thing would be to straddle his lap, but even thinking those words is too much. Instead, he steps to the right, bracing one knee on the edge of the tub and the other leg against the side. Enjolras gives him an expectant look through his lashes, and it sends his balance wobbling. This is going to be an issue, he thinks.

"Can I, uh, put my hands on your shoulders?" he asks. Enjolras nods. Grantaire lays a palm on each deltoid—maybe if he keeps it clinical in his head he won't go insane, somehow. That's got to be the key: stay removed. The clavicle, the trapezius, the sternocleidomastoid muscle—it's tissue and bone, like anyone’s tissue and bone. A blank canvas.

The neck of Enjolras's T-shirt has twisted to one side. Grantaire straightens it back out. He picks a spot and sets the pad of his thumb on it. The skin is smooth and warm. What was he expecting, feathers?

"I'm thinking here?" he says. "If that's okay. Close to the collar so it looks like we tried to hide it." "Makes sense," says Enjolras. Grantaire can feel the rise and fall of each breath. He's no expert, but it seems shallow.

"You know you don't have to do this, right?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I know."
"Like, if we start, and you change your mind, we can always—"

"I know," says Enjolras.

"Okay. As long as you know." Under his hands, Enjolras's pulse is racing. Grantaire can relate. For very different reasons, but still. He rubs his thumb in a small circle. "Hey," he says, as gently as he can. "It's okay. Seriously. It may feel weird for a second, but if I do this right, there won't be, like, pain."

"I'm fine," Enjolras insists, and maybe his glare would be convincing otherwise, but he can't bluster his way past basic biology.

"Dude, my hand's by your neck. I can feel your heartbeat," says Grantaire, and the beat in question kicks into triple time.

"Um." Enjolras's eyes widen.

"It's okay," Grantaire says again. "If you're nervous, or whatever. I know everyone acts like they've done this shit a million times, but most of them're lying, so."

"Have you?" Enjolras clears his throat. "Done it before, I mean."

It's lose-lose. If Grantaire plays up his own cluelessness, that's not exactly reassuring. If he acts like he does this every day, it only serves to make Enjolras even more self-conscious about his own lack of experience. The truth—'yeah, but not as much as I'd like people to think'—would disgust him on a couple of levels.


Enjolras tilts his neck to the side. Helpful of him, Grantaire thinks distantly. The motion is enough to make Grantaire's mouth go dry. 'You can do this,' he tells himself. 'It's not actually that difficult. Just lean forward and put your mouth on his skin.'

He can't move.

"Problems?" says Enjolras.

"Sorry, it's just—super weird to like, out of nowhere, chow down like a vampire.""Isn't that how it usually works?"

"Uh." Grantaire bites his lip. "Usually it's part of a bigger thing? And there's—kissing first and stuff, so it's more of a. You kind of work up to it?" This is not a line of thought he needs right now. Enjolras must not either, judging from his heartbeat. "Okay, like, just so we're super super clear, you can stop me at any time, underst—"

"Oh my God Grantaire, just—bite me already," Enjolras snaps.

Grantaire can't keep it together; he laughs. "Wow, man. Feels like all the romance has gone out of this relationship."

Enjolras huffs out a breath, and Grantaire sees his chance. He swoops down and sets mouth to clavicle, applies teeth because there's no time for finesse and if he overthinks this he will spend the rest of his life hovering six inches away, helplessly breathing in the smell of citrus. The breath cuts off into a gasp. Grantaire jerks away.
“Oh shit, man, did I hurt you?”

“No,” says Enjolras. “I was surprised, but it’s fine. Just, um, what do I do with my hands?” He tips his head up, eyes wide, painfully earnest. Of course, this is Enjolras; ‘Painfully Earnest’ could be the name of his autobiography. But it’s a striking look on him. He looks like—well, like a nervous teenager about to fumble his way through his first sexual encounter. But one that was worried about getting it right. It’s—sweet. Would be sweet.

Grantaire’s chest clenches in a way he doesn’t like. “I don’t care,” he gets out, and when he leans in and puts his lips on Enjolras’s collarbone, it has the added benefit of hiding his face.

It’s trickier this time, Enjolras’s palms resting on the back of Grantaire’s head, almost too light to feel. Grantaire tries to be less abrupt, but going gently means that for a long moment, he’s left mouthing against skin in something way too close to a kiss.

Enjolras swallows. Grantaire can’t see it, but he can feel the muscles working. Thyrohyoid, sternohyoid, omohyoid—

What would it be like, to have someone sucking on your collarbone when your body is only at all interested in five people on the planet? Uncomfortable, he guesses. Awkward. Boring, maybe: get this over with. There’s a terrible equation at play: the more considerate he is, the longer they’re stuck here.

He brings in his teeth gradually, tries to increase the suction in slow, careful degrees. Not lingering, not romantic, just—he doesn’t want to be an asshole about it. Enjolras holds himself very still, but this close, Grantaire can hear each inhale and exhale, feel the slight hitch in his breathing.

He’s never been so aware of his hands, the awkward twist of his body against the tub, the way sounds seem to echo in the small space.

The problem is, the combination of body heat, breathy noises, and the fact that his tongue is on Enjolras’s skin, warm and clean-tasting, is enough to make the dumb animal parts of his brain sit up and take notice. It is going to be a real issue if they don’t move things along. Grantaire digs in his teeth and sucks harder, and Enjolras makes a quiet, shocked “ah” that, out of context, is going to haunt Grantaire’s fantasies forever.

God, he hopes it doesn’t hurt or anything, because he’s starting to suspect Enjolras wouldn’t call this off if it did.

As if making his point, Enjolras chokes back what sounds like another gasp. Grantaire slides one hand off his shoulder and rubs it along his arm, soothing. The hands in his hair sweep up and down Grantaire’s scalp in steady motions, and if focusing on something else helps Enjolras to ignore the teeth at his neck, Grantaire’s glad he can provide that service. He wishes he wasn’t quite so aware of how good it feels, the synapses in his brain singing at each brush of fingers. He inches his hips away and keeps going; there’s nothing else to do.

It’s terrible and it’s awkward and it’s more than a little uncomfortable but in a weird way, it’s almost relaxing, too. If he’s honest, he loses track of time.

“So, uh,” says Enjolras eventually, and the way the vibrations buzz against Grantaire’s lips means that Grantaire doesn’t process the words at first, “Are you, um, is it enough, do you think?”

Grantaire pulls his mouth away. The sound is wet and loud, and despite his absolute best efforts, he’s hard. Grantaire regrets every event in human history that led to this moment, from the invention of
the video camera to his own birth to the hiring of whoever designed Joly’s parents’ basement.

He ducks and drops down onto the edge of the bathtub, hunching in on himself protectively until he can get his breath back, and let the situation in his pants subside.

“Did it work?” says Enjolras, almost in his ear.

Grantaire hadn’t thought to check. What is he doing. He cranes his neck, the rest of his body angled safely away. The mark is lurid against Enjolras’s skin, bright red, shiny, like a smudge of paint Grantaire put there.

“It worked,” he confirms. Unthinking, he wipes at the spot with his thumb. Enjolras flinches.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Enjolras says, but his eyes are somewhere above Grantaire’s head, tracing the rows of kittens-in-baskets along the walls.

Grantaire more meant, ‘Sorry for the way that I will definitely, definitely jerk off later thinking about some of those sounds you made,’ but he appreciates the out. He nods. There’s no reason to; Enjolras isn’t looking. They sit side by side, staring straight ahead. Grantaire can’t imagine what he’s supposed to say. All he wants to do is apologize again. He’s not even sure why.

Grantaire counts to ten and then he can’t take it anymore. He knows he’s going to start talking before he even knows what it will be about. It’s like riding a raft off a waterfall.

“Do you think each cluster of kittens is supposed to be the same kittens, like are we seeing one moment over and over again, or are we surrounded by a bunch of clones?” he says for some reason, out loud, of his own free will. It’s not “sorry” but that’s about the best thing that can be said for it.

“Is this an art thing?” says Enjolras.

“What?”

“Like, a theory, or—Jehan said you knew a lot about art.”

“I don’t, dude.” He taps the sole of his shoe against the tile, staccato. “I—like, okay, there’s stuff I like and don’t like, but it’s not, like, knowledge.”

“You hate when people assume you don’t know something,” says Enjolras, “but you hate when they assume you do, too.”

Grantaire closes his eyes, tips back his head. “Remember when I said you weren’t my shrink? Remember that? Because I do. It’s stuck with me, somehow.”

There’s a second where he thinks maybe they’re going to fight again, but Enjolras just says, “How long do you think before it’s okay to go back?”

It’s a fair question. He has no idea how much time has passed. Five minutes? An hour? He should’ve checked his phone before they started.

“In a bit,” he says, mostly to the kittens. He’s gotten his body under control for now, but he could use a few more seconds before he has to see Enjolras or contend with the mark sitting there stark on his collarbone. He traces a thumb along the crease of his own elbow, which only brings him back to the thought of rubbing Enjolras’s arm. He’s not sure why he did that. It’s not like anyone will be able to tell.
Because that is, after all, the point of the operation. He frowns.

“What?” says Enjolras.

“Do I need to do anything? To make it seem like I’ve been—” He flails one hand around, in a way that he hopes can somehow get him off the hook for using words. “I mean, is there even time to—”

Enjolras makes a choked off noise that Grantaire’s mind tries not to move into a new, dirtier context. “You know,” he says at last, “you’re good.”

Grantaire’s not sure he likes the sound of that. He pulls himself to his feet, steps up to the bathroom mirror, and tries not to stare.

Because Grantaire looks wrecked. His lips are very red, which in retrospect makes sense, his cheeks are flushed, and his hair—there are no words.

Well, maybe there are a couple. “What did you do?” he manages. It occurs to him that the impromptu scalp massage might have been less Enjolras trying to take his mind off what was going on, and more Enjolras’s stubbornness about the proper way to mess up hair, his inability to let any argument—no matter how trivial or harebrained—go.

Grantaire rakes the curls down with his fingers, but they spring back up and of course, he thinks wildly, of course his hair obeys Enjolras and not him.

“What did you do?” he says again. “Seriously, do I need to walk you through the steps of making out with someone? Explain to me, in your mind, how this would even—”

“Calm down,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire takes a deep breath because if Enjolras is telling him to chill, the wheels have officially come off. “And I don’t see the problem. We’re kissing, presumably my hands are in your hair, it could happen,” he adds, because it turns out Enjolras has a talent for reciting Grantaire’s sappiest, most private daydreams like a grocery list.

It all sounds so absurd under the harsh bathroom lighting. Grantaire could cry, he really could.

“This isn’t—making out does not do this to hair.” He jabs a finger at his head. “The fuck are we supposed to say? ‘Oh hey guys, what’s up, yeah we just fooled around for a while and then Grantaire got mildly electrocuted, no big deal—’”

“Nobody is going to jump to conclusions from that,” says Enjolras. “And you can fix your hair when you get home, why is this such a—”

“Because it’s fucking ridiculous!” Grantaire hisses.

“Here,” Enjolras says, calmly. “I’ll fix it now—”

Grantaire shakes his head. He’s not about to roll that dice again.

“Oh, come on,” says Enjolras “Let me just—” He reaches a hand towards Grantaire’s head.

Grantaire shivers at the memory of fingers on his scalp and flattens himself against the door with a thump. In tandem, from the other side of the door, someone knocks.

“Uh hey,” Marius’s voice filters in, “Grantaire, are you okay?”

“Peachy,” says Grantaire.
“Because you were gone for a long time,” Marius continues. “And we started to get worried! Have you seen Enjolras?” He sounds slightly hesitant. “I thought he’d be in the hallway, but I can’t find him and I don’t think he—”

“Nope, haven’t seen him,” Grantaire singsongs to the door, panic bubbling into his voice.

“So, you’re really okay, then?” says Marius.

“Yeah,” says Grantaire. “Yeah, totally.”

“No emergency or anything?”

“Nope,” Grantaire tells him. “Not at all.”

“Great,” says Marius. There’s a four-second pause. “Because I kind of have to use the bathroom?”

“Oh. Right. That’s totally fair,” says Grantaire. “I totally get that, it is so understandable.”

Enjolras throws him a wild look. Grantaire shakes his head helplessly. Enjolras inclines his own head towards the door, with purpose, and Grantaire registers that in among the many lies they’re telling today, they want people to know they’ve been alone together in here. They just don’t want people to know they want people to know, and suddenly this story is one set of identical twins away from being a madcap comedy of errors.

With the air of pulling off a bandaid, Enjolras reaches over, grabs the knob, and whisks the door open.

Marius stares at them. They stare back. “I found Enjolras,” says Grantaire weakly.

Marius nods. He keeps nodding. He’s stuck there; he can’t actually enter the bathroom because Grantaire is frozen in the doorway.

“Well,” says Enjolras, too loudly, “we should, uh, get going, don’t want to miss another episode.” He tugs at Grantaire’s forearm, pulling them into the hallway. “Bye, Marius,” he throws over his shoulder, “enjoy the bathroom!”

Marius is still nodding as he reaches for the door. It takes him two tries to shut it correctly.

“I think we broke Marius,” says Enjolras in a low voice as they head back to the rec room.

Grantaire gives him a shell-shocked look. ‘Enjoy the bathroom,” he repeats.

“What?”

“That’s what you said to him, just now.”


“Enjoy the bathroom,” says Grantaire, slowly this time.

Enjolras snorts. He presses his lips into a thin line, but the same corner twitches again. Grantaire can feel the laugh bubbling up like it’s in his own chest, that burn behind the sternum. He wants to pull it out into the open.

“Enjoy the bathroom,” Grantaire says again, and somehow that’s what it takes. Enjolras slumps
against the wall and does something that could nearly be described as giggling.

“Oh my god,” Enjolras chokes out. “Why did I say—those words, that order, what was even—”

“On the plus side, this is Marius we’re talking about,” says Grantaire. “There’s a chance he didn’t pick up on it. ‘Awkward’ is where he lives. It’s like, does a fish notice water?”

Enjolras wipes at his eyes, still fighting to get his breath back. “Say something nice about Marius.”

“What?”

“He’s on your side,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire is too tired to argue against a point he actually agrees with.

“He means well.”

“That doesn’t count, I already said that. Something else.”

Grantaire pushes himself for another revelation about Marius. Nothing feels significant. Marius doesn’t understand irony. He’s good at German. They’ve been in the same school district since kindergarten, but for a long time Grantaire only knew him as ‘that kid who doesn’t have parents.’

Marius’s grandpa came to pick him up from middle school play rehearsal once, all bushy white eyebrows and palpable lack of interest in talking to kids. Grantaire remembers trying to convince himself he wasn’t afraid of an old man, and failing pretty hard. The fact that Marius went through a whole childhood of that and emerged without being noticeably fucked up is nothing short of incredible. Grantaire’s parents were supportive for years and even so, he’s a mess. He swallows.

“Dude’s got a great nose,” says Grantaire. “I mean, he’s good-looking in general, but he is just killing it with that nose.”

“Come on,” says Enjolras. It’s a reprimand, but not an oh God, Grantaire, shut the hell up. It’s more of a Courfeyrac stop hugging people so we can start the meeting already. Or maybe anything is bound to sound less confrontational after a giggle fit.

“Dead serious,” Grantaire tells him. “Why do people only write love songs about eyes and lips? Have you seen those nostrils? They’re intense. All full of, like, passion. And probably nose hairs, but —”

That corner of Enjolras’s mouth quirks again, and for a second Grantaire feels infinitely powerful, like he could scale a mountain or swim across the Pacific or make Enjolras laugh a second time—

A door opens behind them. The rec room, right. Bossuet sticks his head out. “Thought I heard voices,” he says. “Did you guys get lost, or—?”

“Everything’s fine,” Enjolras says, turning away.

They’re made it just inside the room when Courfeyrac looks them up and down and starts to laugh. Heads turn in their direction. Judging from the expressions on the faces peering up at them, Enjolras’s hickey is very visible and Grantaire did not manage to fix his hair.

“Guys,” says Courfeyrac, “when I said ‘don’t leave room for Jesus,’ I didn’t actually mean—”

“It’s not—” Grantaire says.

“How was your phone call, Enjolras?” Jehan asks sweetly from a chair.
“Great,” says Enjolras. “It went well.”

“Good conversation?” says Musichetta, waggling her eyebrows. Joly and Bossuet chuckle on either side of her. Somehow it doesn’t matter that it’s all a sham, that this is exactly what they’re going for. Grantaire’s face is burning anyway.

“Here,” says Cosette, reaching up to hand Enjolras something. “You left your phone on the couch.” She looks like she is fighting valiantly to keep a straight face. On some level, Grantaire appreciates the effort.

Enjolras accepts the phone with as much grace as he likely can. “Thanks,” he says, gruff.

Musichetta, on the other hand, is not fighting to keep a straight face at all. “So this phone call,” she says, “did you make it with your mind, or—”

“Are we ever going to watch the rest of the show?” says Joly mournfully, and in that moment, Grantaire could hug him.

Grantaire watches the rest of the show on the floor, leaning against a foot rest. Enjolras is curled up next to him, an arm wrapped around Grantaire’s middle, and for once, Grantaire doesn’t go into panic mode. He’s used all his panic for the day.

At some point, Enjolras looks over, as if to check on him, and just to be obnoxious, Grantaire rests his head against Enjolras’s shoulder. It’s okay, he reminds himself, Enjolras could call it off if he wanted to. He doesn’t, and after the steaming pile of garbage that is the past two hours, Grantaire is resolved to not feel bad about letting himself enjoy it for a few hours: the warmth of another person’s body, the feel of Enjolras’s hair against his cheek.

Grantaire watches the rest of the show and absorbs literally none of it.

“What did you think?” Joly asks him later, as everyone is milling around upstairs making their goodbyes—Enjolras is going with Musichetta, Cosette, and Combeferre to work on a presentation for speech class. Grantaire is starting to suspect that, besides the imaginary dates, Enjolras’s social life revolves around being dragged to other people’s birthday parties and working on group projects.

“Your carpet is really comfy,” says Grantaire.

“About the show.” Joly drops down onto a kitchen chair. In the window behind him, the sun has long since set; they spent a whole day on whatever that was and nobody seems disgruntled about it. Grantaire wonders what he missed.

“Can me and Courf get a ride with you?” Jehan asks. “His mom drove us here, but she’s probably asleep now.”

Grantaire nods. “It was great, Joly,” he says.

“Yes! It was!” Joly punches the air. “Who’s your favorite character?”
Well, fuck. “Oh...man,” says Grantaire weakly. “How could I possibly...choose?” He hasn’t had a line reading that shitty since elementary school, but Joly beams and holds one fist out.

“Knuckles, dude! It’s amazing, right?” he says, and Grantaire fistbumps him because Grantaire is not a monster. “Sometimes I’m like, ‘Well he’s my favorite, obviously!’ but then it’s like, ‘Wait, what about him? What about her? What about her, you know? It’s like asking me to pick my favorite episode. Although I think maybe I liked the eighth one the best?” He kicks his feet, tracing figure 8’s over the tile with the tip of his cane. “Oh frick, though, that opening one gets me every time! What about you?”

Pretending to know what the hell Joly is talking about is one lie too many for Grantaire. “I...think I’d have to see them again to decide,” he invents. “Could I borrow the DVDs?”

Joly beams.

It’s a good thing they drop off Jehan first, because he seems to only have a vague sense of where he lives. His landmarks are all trees and bushes and houses painted an unusual shade of beige—useless in the dark. They get lost for half an hour, driving in ever-larger circles.

Courfeyrac’s the one to spot the turn-off (“Hey, isn’t your house on Foster?” “That...sounds familiar.”) and they get Jehan home with minutes to spare before his curfew sets in.

“Tell me you know what street you live on,” says Grantaire as Courfeyrac climbs into the front seat.

“Yes,” Courfeyrac tells him. “Hey, so, uh.”

Hearing Courfeyrac hesitate about anything feels like cause for concern. Grantaire gives him the time it takes to back out of the driveway and then turns to ask,

“What’s up, man?”

Courfeyrac is frowning. “Are you doing okay?” he says. “I mean, I thought I heard you saying someone knocked you over in the hallway?”

“Oh my god, it’s fine,” says Grantaire. “I took an elbow to the back. What is people’s deal? Does it seem like I can’t handle it?”


Not everything is about you, Grantaire, Eponine said once. God, he needs those words tattooed on the inside of his eyelids. Courfeyrac has other shit on his mind; that was the whole point of this exercise in the first place.

“No,” he says, heartfelt as he can.

“But you’re getting shit for it, and I know Enjolras is getting shit. Is it really worth being afraid all the time?”

'Don’t fuck this up,’ he thinks desperately. Courfeyrac is good enough at reading people to know if Grantaire says something too far out of character. If he smiles and says it’s all sunbeams, it will look suspect. He needs an optimistic version of himself. What does that even mean?
“I mean, it’s not like it was a party before, either,” says Grantaire at last. “But then it was, ‘Would my friends be okay if they knew who I really was?’ ‘What if people find out anyway?’ ‘How long am I gonna have to hide this?’” The words are easier to find than he thought they’d be, but harder to say. He breaks off, keeps his eyes on the road.

“I guess,” says Courfeyrac quietly. “I don’t know. You guys are really brave.”

“I’m not,” says Grantaire, with too much force. Course-correction time. He schools his face into something calmer. “But if I’m gonna be afraid either way, might as well have a little control over it, you know?” He darts a sideways glance at Courfeyrac. “Might as well get the benefit of dating this awesome fucking guy who somehow likes me back or something.” Grantaire tries not to say it too pointedly. “And we know our friends have our backs, that’s not nothing.”

“But watching someone you like put up with all that—”

“Well, yeah,” says Grantaire. “But it’s Enjolras. Not like he blended in before, you know?” Courfeyrac says nothing. Too harsh? Grantaire scrambles to soften it up. “I don’t know, dude. I like him so much that I guess if he thinks he can deal with it, I trust him? Or respect his choice, or something. And we get to—I mean, we’ve got each other’s backs on this whole other level,” he says, wistfulness creeping into his voice like ivy. Enjolras should have a person like that someday.


“Sometimes it does. But most things suck some of the time. At least this way, the bastards don’t always win.”

Courfeyrac rests his feet on the dashboard, meditative. “Also, probably nice to be able to take a stand against The Man just by kissing a cute guy.”

Probably, yeah. Grantaire forces himself not to sigh.

“It’s pretty great,” he says instead. Fortunately, Courfeyrac seems too lost in thought to notice how hollow it comes out.

In the little slice of road illuminated by headlights, the dotted yellow line rolls towards them, into view and then out of sight under the van, over and over.

“Speaking of which,” says Courfeyrac cheerfully, like the past few minutes never happened. “Okay, A.) Please don’t hook up in someone else’s bathroom again, gross. But B.) Enjolras gets all blushy and awkward any time I try to ask him about how it’s going with you two, so can I just say it’s good to know you guys are getting some action?”

“Why would you ask him about that?” Grantaire blurts out. He has the sudden, horrible realization that he and Enjolras might need to meet up and make sure they’re on the same page with their imaginary sex life.

“To give him advice,” says Courfeyrac, breezy. “You remember how shoddy our school’s sex ed was, right? ‘Here’s a diagram of a dick, here are some venereal diseases, don’t get teen-pregnant, the end.’”

“I promise nobody’s getting pregnant?” says Grantaire.

“Good. No offense, but you’d be hilarious as parents.”

Kids make Grantaire nervous. They’re so fragile; there’s so many ways to screw it up. Say the
wrong thing, and congratulations, you’ve ruined a childhood. Gavroche is the one exception, and that’s because he’s fucking indomitable.

Neither of them say much for the rest of the ride.

Grantaire breaks the silence a few minutes later, when they roll up to Courfeyrac's driveway. "You get that the having-our-backs thing works both ways, right? Like, if you, or if—someone you cared about needed it. I mean, in the end, it's your call what you want to do. You and whoever else. But if you need it, it's pretty obvious your weird nerdy justice club would do anything for you."


Grantaire waits in the car until he sees Courfeyrac unlock the front door and slip safely inside. There’s some big feeling behind his eyes, in his chest, in the joints of his arms and his fingers, but he doesn't know what. He can't even tell if he's happy or sad, just that there’s a lot of it.

He grabs Bahorel's mix and cues up the first song for the drive home. For the time being, it's the only cure-all he knows.

"Hey," says Grantaire, "I thought of another thing about Marius."

It's Monday, after the meeting. They're in Grantaire's van again, and mostly he just needs some way to fill the silence. For once, Enjolras have any corrections or admonishments. There's no reason they have to talk at all, but it's better to give his nervous energy some focus. Why is he even nervous? Nothing's going wrong. Maybe that's enough; it's certainly out of the ordinary.

Maybe he needs to keep his mind occupied so he doesn’t get them into a car accident turning to look at the mark still only half hidden by Enjolras’s shirt. Grantaire can’t remember how long hickeys usually last but he hopes it fades soon because his self-control is just not up to this.

(The other kids have to have noticed it. If they were on slightly better or much worse terms, Grantaire would ask Enjolras if anyone’s said anything. Instead, they’ve got their tenuous, half-unspoken ceasefire, and Grantaire will say anything to keep his brain busy.)

"What?"

"His thing with Cosette." Eponine's feelings aside, Grantaire is man enough to admit the reality of the situation: "It's cute. I mean, totally gross and annoying also, but. It's like a puppy shitting on your rug: you can't hate it, either."

Next to him, there's the sound of Enjolras shifting around restlessly, plucking at his seatbelt. "What thing with Cosette?"

"Seriously, dude?" says Grantaire. "The thing where they're a hundred percent in love?"

"Huh. Are they?" says Enjolras, who is supposed to be the smart one here. Grantaire doesn't even know what to say for a moment.

"Yes? In a super obvious way?"

He can almost hear Enjolras's forehead scrunch up. "I mean, they're friends," he says, "but I don't
"I think they're dating."

"Yeah, well what does that mean?" Grantaire points out. "Look at us. We're dating and we don't even tolerate each other most of the time."

"If they aren't together, are you sure they're interested in each other?" says Enjolras.

"Please. Every conversation they have is a Disney movie. Big wide-eyed faces. The hum of destiny all around them. Squirrels and birds flitting about, singing up a storm. 'Oh Cosette, I like The Postal Service too! How incredibly significant.'"

Enjolras snorts. "Sorry, I must've missed the part where they bonded over the U.S. mail system."

"No, dude. The band, The Postal Service."

Several more seconds of fidgeting noises. "Are you messing with me right now? That's the name of an actual music group?"

"How could you not know this?" says Grantaire, feeling suddenly defensive. "The Postal Service. They're a mainstream band. You've definitely heard them."

"I haven't," says Enjolras, and Grantaire had really hoped they were beyond this kind of knee-jerk contrariness.

"No, come on man," he says. "They're on the radio. Their stuff's on TV. They've got that one song that everyone on the planet knows."

"Not everyone, apparently."

"You've heard this song," Grantaire insists. "If you're not actually a Martian, you've heard this song."

"Sorry," says Enjolras.

"You'd know it if you heard it."

"Could you sing a few bars?"

Whatever, Grantaire can totally do this; he sings in his car all the goddamn time. He swallows.

"It's the one, it goes like, 'I am thinking it's a sign, that the freckles in our eyes are mirror images and when we kiss, they're perfectly aligned—'" Without any backing track to protect him, his voice feels almost delicate in the airless van, and several shades too honest.


"Fuck you, obviously there's more," says Grantaire. "This doesn't sound familiar at all? Really?"

"How could I tell from that little bit? It was like ten seconds."

Grantaire sighs. It's a decent point. He sings the next couple of lines and glances expectantly at Enjolras, who frowns, thoughtful.

"I don't know, maybe?"

Grantaire takes them through the end of the first verse. He's not sure why this is so important to him, except at this point, the thought of enduring this level of humiliation for no reason is unbearable. It's a
much sappier song than he remembers. His eyes are burning, and he's starting to feel very weird about the whole thing, but when he stops, Enjolras says,

"What's the chorus like? If I'm going to recognize any part of this song, it's probably the chorus."

And so Grantaire takes a deep breath. "They will see us waving from such great heights, 'come down now,' they'll say," he sings. “But everything looks perfect from far away, 'come down now,' but we'll stay." He clears his throat. "C'mon dude, tell me this is ringing a bell for you," he says.

"It might be?" Enjolras hazards. "I don't know, maybe if you sang the next verse?"

Grantaire takes advantage of being at a stop sign to look over at him, where something smile-like is pushing at the corner of his mouth. Then he remembers: Joly's basement hallway, the look on Enjolras's face as he struggled to hold in a laugh. Everything comes together, like solving a riddle.

"Oh my god," says Grantaire slowly. "You're fucking with me."

Enjolras bites his lip. "What makes you think—"

"No, you are, oh my god. You are one hundred percent fucking with me." For some reason, it's the best thing Grantaire's ever heard. This isn't Enjolras being combative or trying to prove a point; he's giving Grantaire a hard time for the sheer fun of it. It's like something Bahorel would do. Hell, it's like something Grantaire would do. Relief surges through him, and not just because he doesn't have to sing any more of that stupid song.

"I wasn't trying to make you feel foolish," says Enjolras. That's the word he uses, 'foolish,' like they're in Little House on the Prairie or something.

"Nah man, it's cool, I get it," Grantaire says. "I know how fucking with people works, it's kind of my wheelhouse."

"But it's a real song?" says Enjolras, as if to check.

"Yep."

"By the Post Office."

"Postal Service," Grantaire corrects.

"Why use a name that's already being used for something else? That's idiotic."

"Um, tell that to the Beatles," says Grantaire.

Enjolras shakes his head. Grantaire's still driving, and he doesn't look over or anything. He just knows Enjolras is shaking his head.

"The Beatles don't count, they spell their name with an A. It's a pun?" Good lord, it is a pun. Grantaire feels very stupid. "The Postal Service, though. Those words already have a meaning. It's like calling your band Hamburgers, there's no point—"

"Are you kidding?" says Grantaire. "Hamburgers would be an amazing band name. 'Gotta love that Hamburgers sound.' 'Hello New York, we're Hamburgers!' 'Oh hey, did you get that new Hamburgers album?' 'Yeah, I used to like Hamburgers, until they sold out.'"

"Wow," says Enjolras. "Their fall from grace happened really fast."
Grantaire shrugs. "Sex, drugs, and rock n roll, man. 'I remember when Hamburger used to be about the music—"

They're still talking when Enjolras's house comes into view. Grantaire has this moment where he's tempted to circle the block so they can stretch it out for another minute or two. He has the sense, right then, that Enjolras wouldn't call him on it. Then again, Grantaire's brain is not to be trusted on the subject. Enjolras is a human Bermuda Triangle; he jams the system.

Grantaire had forgotten how much he used to dread passing periods. That combination of crowds and low supervision is a general recipe for badness. He starts loading up before classes as much as he can; the less trips back and forth to his locker, the better. The resulting back pain is doing nothing for his health, and it has the uncanny side effect of making him early to class, but nothing can be done about that.

On Tuesday, he's the first person to World Myth except Mr. Clark, who politely pretends not to notice. Grantaire grabs his usual seat, turns down the volume on his headphones and pulls out a handout from the career center.

On the back is the drawing he's been working on all day. "Struggling on" would be more accurate. He wants to design better cover art for Bahorel's mix, the one about fighting the system, but he can't get it to match the picture in his head. Less of a picture, more of an idea. Normally, he would've given up at this point; today he keeps unfolding it again, trying shit and erasing. He's not sure why; he's not planning to show it to Bahorel, and he still hasn't found the courage to even play the CD for Enjolras.

Maybe he just wants to know he can do it.

Someone taps his shoulder and Grantaire jumps, but when he whirls around, it's just Jehan.

"Good morning," says Jehan. He's so bouncy, it borders on an impression of Joly. "Would you like some ridiculous teen gossip?" Grantaire nods—why not if it's got the kid in such a good mood—and Jehan slides into his seat. "Guess who's going to prom?"

"Oh man." Grantaire grins. "Dude, that's great!"

"You didn't guess," says Jehan with a sigh, its effectiveness undercut by the way he hasn't stopped bouncing. "It's me, though. Is the answer, it's me." He points to himself for clarification.

"High five," Grantaire says, and they slap hands. "So did Courfeyrac—" He breaks off, not quite sure how to ask 'What made him stop worrying the student body would murder you?' without bringing down the mood.

"Hoho, who said it was Courfeyrac?" says Jehan slyly. He bounces twice. "Yeah, no, it was Courfeyrac. We were talking after Lit, and he went into this thing about, like, finding someone to stand back to back with, and joining forces against prejudice, and I kept thinking, 'Uh are you asking me out or asking me to fight crime with you?'"

"You would make an awesome superhero, just saying," Grantaire interjects. "Maybe it goes against your cat burglar dreams, but—"

Jehan smiles. "And finally, I just said, 'Look, if we're gonna team up against evil, can we do it at
least once in awkward formalwear surrounded by cheesy decorations and insipid pop songs? With, like, slow dancing and stuff?"

"You asked him to his own prom?" It's easy to forget sometimes that Jehan is a sophomore; too young to qualify for a ticket by himself. "Bro, that takes some serious game."

"It may turn out I have moves," says Jehan, tapping the heel of a glittery salmon-colored loafer against the chair leg. "A move or two, perhaps."

"And he said yes?" Grantaire prompts, as Jehan rolls his eyes.

"Oh my god, Grantaire, context." Three bounces. Another smile. "He totally did!"

The plan is working. The plan is actually working, a fake relationship spawning a real one. Grantaire can't fathom it. Maybe Enjolras was right, after all. Maybe none of this has to be in vain. He wants to cheer, or jump up on his desk, or run through the hallways yelling, "Nice try, fuckers!"

He wants to hug Jehan. (He wants to hug Enjolras.)

Hell, he just wants to see Enjolras, to be where he is. Waiting until the ride home on Friday feels like an impossibly long wait to talk about this. God, he can't wait for Enjolras's reaction, the scope and brilliance of his smile.

It's been a while since Grantaire has stopped to appreciate just how fucked he is, but it hits him now with the clarity of a ringing bell. Seriously, he thinks, still grinning from the sheer strength of Jehan's delight, like gravity that pulls up. Seriously.

So fucked.

Chapter End Notes

1. Updates for the time being are still every other Sunday.

2. "But wait," you say, "How does the South Park movie, a film which contains as its centerpiece a musical number lovingly modeled after 'One Day More', exist within a Les Mis AU?" To which I say, "...LOOK OVER THERE!" and run in the other direction.

3. Re: Joly and his show, I mock because I love, promise.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Eponine cranes her head around. "I'm liking your fake boyfriend," she says to Grantaire. "How am I liking your fake boyfriend? It goes against the laws of nature."

"I keep forgetting you know," Enjolras tells her, with surprising grace.

"Unfortunately, we can't drop the act for too long, because her brother doesn't," Grantaire warns.

"I mean, I assumed, if he's in middle school," says Enjolras. "But how hard can it be to fool a child?"

Eponine laughs. "Oh buddy."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Do you think it'd be creepy to give someone a skirt?" says Eponine that night. They're sitting on the floor of Grantaire's room, a bottle between them, although neither of them are drinking much. For one thing, it's schnapps, which has not gotten less disgusting. Besides, Spanish is bad enough first thing in the morning; showing up with a hangover would just pour on an extra zesty sauce of terrible.

And okay, also Grantaire may have some half-formed plan of trying to get to school early tomorrow and sneaking into Enjolras's first hour again, so they can get at least a few seconds to themselves to gloat about the improbable success of their plan. Enjolras's plan. Whatever.

Of course, god knows how, given it would be in front of an entire Con Econ class. Maybe Grantaire could slip him a note, would that be awkward? But shit, what would it even say?

He frowns. Eponine was definitely talking just now. "What?"

"Like, as a gift."

In theory, they're watching old Mr. Show episodes on Grantaire's poor, wheezing laptop, but the video player keeps stalling, so there's no point bothering with the headphones for now. Eponine's flipping through a book, Grantaire's coloring the white part of his shoes with a permanent marker.

"Think it depends on who?" He draws a square, shades it in. "And, like, how. If it's a total stranger, and they wake up in the middle of the night and you're standing next to their bed, holding out a skirt you made from their shower curtains and staring at them, that's probably creepy."

"Musichetta's birthday is coming up," says Eponine, folding a corner of one page back and forth. "I don't know, she said she liked mine, so—but maybe it's not something people do?"

Grantaire caps the marker, drags his hands down his face. "Dude, I don't think you want me as the, like, arbiter of normal? I mean, exhibit A: my entire fucking life."
"You can't make a frozen pizza," Eponine agrees.

"Fuck you," he says, automatic. "But I don't know, maybe if you pretend hard enough like it's cool, it won't occur to her to wonder?"

"Yeah." Eponine bites her lip. The laptop makes a noise like a tired old man, and Grantaire closes the lid to put it out of its misery.

"She said she liked it," he says.

"Yeah."

He uncaps the marker again and starts in on his other shoe. "How long have you been making clothes and shit anyway?"

She exhales, thoughtful. "I don't know. Years?"

"Why didn't I know this?"

"Uh, didn't think you'd care?" she says, and she has a point, probably, but Grantaire blurts out, "Because I'm such a shitty friend?"

"Because you've worn those same pants every day for like five days in a row," says Eponine.

He doesn't see what that has to do with anything. They're comfortable, and cleaner than most of the other stuff on his floor.

Eponine sighs. "You're fine," she says.

"Yeah, okay." He twists the marker into the loop of his shoelace, winds it up tightly, like a noose. Eponine has stuck with him through everything without questioning it, and he doesn't even know what she does when he's not around.

"Hey." She bumps his shoulder. "You are."

Grantaire shakes his head. There are patches of time where he's not worried about anything, and patches of time where it all hits him at once, like suddenly the air weighs eighty pounds and he needs to lie down or he'll fall over. He’s not sure how long he’s supposed to keep it at bay. Tomorrow, he'll drink in the sight of Enjolras's victorious face and it will get him through an hour or two, but there's still passing periods to worry about. There's still the back of the room before class starts. There's still Algebra.

"Everyone who's saying shit about you right now is doing it because they're afraid, you know that, right?" says Eponine. She considers this. "And also because they're fucking awful, but."

"Yeah," he says. He wishes, not for the first time, that knowing this was helpful on a moment-to-moment basis.

She sets down her book and turns to face him, wincing. "Grantaire, don't make this weird but I think I need to hug you right now."

"What?"

Eponine leans forward and wraps him in her arms. There's a long second where he just sits there, his own arms flopping at his side, before he remembers how hugs work and he reaches up to pull her
closer. Her jacket is soft and smells like cigarettes. He has no idea what to say. There’s no script for this. He rests his forehead against the side of her arm and swallows. Crying would count as making it weird, he's pretty sure.

"Hey Grantaire?" says Eponine, voice hushed.

"Yeah?"

"Can I keep my sewing machine at your house for a while?"

No context, no explanation. There's the Eponine he knows and loves.

If his smile comes out a little wobbly, that’s between him and the sleeve of her jacket. "Go ahead, man.”

In the end, Grantaire can't summon up the nerve to go talk to Enjolras before school. But lunch is hilarious anyway, a constant struggle not to look up from his food every time Jehan and Courfeyrac do anything coupley, which is most of the time. Whenever Grantaire fails, which is also most of the time, he inevitably looks up at Enjolras, and they try not to grin at each other like idiots because it's working.

On the sixth or seventh occasion where Grantaire's turkey sandwich fails to keep his attention, Eponine makes a disgusted sound from around a mouthful of fries.

"Okay," she says, after some chewing. "Musichetta and Courfeyrac, swap seats. I refuse to be surrounded by gross couples on both sides.”

“That’s fair,” says Jehan, shrugging. Musichetta vacates her chair, looking amused, and Jehan pulls it out for Courfeyrac with a flourish.

Courfeyrac laughs. “Such a gentleman.”

Eponine makes a face.

“Hey, we aren’t even the grossest couple at this table,” Jehan counters, although the words don’t register right away because Enjolras chooses that moment to sling his arm around Grantaire’s shoulders. Grantaire could be imagining it, but he thinks they’ve been more handsy with each other since the weekend. On some level, once you’ve bruised someone’s collarbone with your mouth, it’s harder to freak out about holding their hand. Grantaire lets himself lean into it, get cozy.

“That’s fair,” says Grantaire, belatedly. Enjolras laughs softly by his ear, and Grantaire’s poor sandwich doesn’t stand a chance.

When he goes to drop off his lunch bag, someone’s written “FAG” on his locker in large, black letters. Presumably, in case he forgets. He wishes he had a can of paint. He wishes he had the energy to be angry about it, that he had a goddamn teaspoon of fire in his heart.

He stares at it until the warning bell rings, thinking, ‘At least they managed to spell it right.’
In World Myth, they’re watching some terrible eighties movie so Mr. Clark can work on his online dating profile or whatever in peace. The acting is so bad, it feels like everyone’s delivering their lines by accident, and Grantaire could do better special effects on MS Paint. He feels bad for everybody who spent money to see this movie when it came out, although maybe they didn’t know any better. It was the eighties, after all.

There aren’t any relatable characters, but for some reason, there is a robot owl flying around ancient Greece. Jehan and Grantaire spend most of the hour passing notes about the owl, detailing its increasingly elaborate backstory. That owl is at the root of everything, they decide. Gods and heroes may come and go, and say some very stilted words, but that owl is the one pulling the strings, from within its tiny mechanical talons.

Grantaire draws the owl with a hat like a 1920’s mafia boss, puffing on a cigar. Jehan captions it with a haiku. The movie never gets better, but the time goes by fast enough. If Jehan occasionally loses focus and needs to be poked out of a dreamy-eyed reverie—well, on some level, Grantaire gets where he’s coming from.

Eponine is furious about the graffiti. Absolutely furious. Grantaire's trying not to enjoy it too much.

"Seriously?" she mutters, hovering over Grantaire as he gathers up his things. "I am so fucking done with these people."

"Language, Thenardier," a teacher says mildly from somewhere behind them. Eponine wordlessly jabs a finger at the big block letters on his locker. Grantaire's back is to the hallway, so he can't tell if the lack of response is the teacher not seeing, or choosing not to say anything.

"Wanna take bets on how long before the administration does something about it?" says Eponine.

Grantaire closes his locker. "Are you kidding me? It'll be there when we graduate. Some poor junior next year wondering what they did to deserve it."

"Those assholes," she seethes.

"It's fine, man. It's not like they fucked with something that actually belongs to me. Like, the day they do something to my hat, that's the day shit goes down."

She shakes her head. "They're cowards, too, that's the worst part," she says, and Eponine bypassing a prime opportunity to give Grantaire shit for his clothes is a sign of a world gone horribly askew.

"We picking up your sewing machine today?" he says. The part of him that is delighted by her anger on his behalf, that wants to wrap himself up in it like a warm hoodie fresh from the drier, is not a part of him he feels like indulging.

"And Gavroche," says Eponine. Then, "Those goddamn assholes."

She slams open the double doors, and they step out into the gray, chilly afternoon.

"Look on the bright side." Grantaire's not sure he's ever spoken those words together out loud before. Not in years, at any rate. "At least we're not those poor bastards." He nods towards the lines
of school buses milling in front of the school. He has definite bus memories. The day he got his license was a beautiful moment in his life.

Eponine snorts. "When that's your silver lining," she says, and they stop for a moment to watch all those unfortunate souls lining up to get on. Grantaire catches a familiar glint of gold from his peripheral vision. Enjolras has one foot on the bus step, and a look on his face like a soldier marching off toward a battle he knows he can't win, but that he can't help fighting.

Grantaire's jogging up before he's really thought it through.

"Hey," he says.

Enjolras turns around. "Hi?"

"Don't block the fucking door, freak," says the guy standing behind Enjolras.

"If you're so eager to get on a bus," says Enjolras, stepping out of line with a roll of his eyes.

Seeing Enjolras be sarcastic is a pure joy. "Buses are the worst," Grantaire offers. "Like somebody heard 'hell on wheels' and took it as a challenge, how literal can we get here?"

"They went above and beyond," Enjolras agrees. "Courfeyrac usually gives me a ride home when there's no meeting, but." He shrugs. "Thought he'd have other plans today."

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days," says Grantaire, waggling his eyebrows.

Enjolras shakes his head. "I just didn't want to be a third wheel."

"Preach," says Grantaire. "Between them and the Marius-and-Cosette situation, the ABC is getting downright incestuous lately. And us," he adds, a beat behind, in case anyone is listening in. "Nothing more romantic than social justice, I guess."

"What's the point of fighting for a new world if you don't love the people in it?" says Enjolras, serious, but he's looking over his shoulder. "Look, I should go before they leave without—"

"I can drive you home," says Grantaire. He regrets it the second the words leave his mouth. If there are any eavesdroppers, Enjolras is trapped; what kind of person opts for public transportation over a free ride with the guy they're dating? It's a clumsy move, but Enjolras must truly hate the bus, because he looks nothing but relieved.

"That'd be—thanks," he says, heartfelt the way only Enjolras can.

He's kind of dreading what Eponine will say when they rejoin her, but she just gives Enjolras a long look and says,

"I call shotgun."

"Can't argue with that," says Grantaire. "My hands are tied, shotgun is a holy thing."

"I'm not arguing," Enjolras says, climbing inside, and Grantaire realizes he doesn't yet know he's going to be sharing the back with a twelve-year-old. Poor Enjolras.

"We're detouring to the middle school first," Grantaire explains as he starts up the van. "We're picking up Eponine's little brother, and then her sewing machine, and then we'll get you home. Sorry, this won't be that much more efficient than the bus. We can try to recreate the sound of screaming children if you miss it."
"Blare shitty-ass country songs on the radio," Eponine suggests.

"Spill something unsettlingly sticky on the floor," says Enjolras.

Eponine cranes her head around. "I'm liking your fake boyfriend," she says to Grantaire. "How am I liking your fake boyfriend? It goes against the laws of nature."

"I keep forgetting you know," Enjolras tells her, with surprising grace.

"Unfortunately, we can't drop the act for too long, because her brother doesn't," Grantaire warns.

"I mean, I assumed, if he's in middle school," says Enjolras. "But how hard can it be to fool a child?"

Eponine laughs. "Oh buddy."

"Who the hell is this?" are Gavroche's first words when he slides open the back passenger door.

Grantaire twists around in case he needs to intervene, but Enjolras just says, "I'm Enjolras, hi."

"Why does a name that stupid sound familiar," says Gavroche, scrambling inside and yanking the door shut.

"I'm Grantaire's—" Enjolras starts.

"Right, right, you're the boyfriend." Gavroche is openly staring at him, in a way that makes Grantaire wince on his behalf. "Not what I was expecting, but sure. How'd you guys even meet?"

"Detention," says Enjolras.

It is, of course, the exact right thing to say. Gavroche raises his eyebrows. "Wow, how does a dude like you get detention?"

"Gavroche," says Grantaire, but Enjolras doesn't seem offended.

"It's a long story."

"Give me the short version," says Gavroche, kicking the back of Eponine’s seat in the most annoying possible way.

Grantaire puts the car in drive and backs out of the parking lot as Enjolras squares his shoulders and explains in a solemn undertone,

"I threw a shoe."

What the hell. When he glances in the rearview mirror, Enjolras seems sincere.

"Seriously?" Grantaire blurts out.

"Seriously," says Enjolras.

"Why?" Of course Gavroche sounds impressed at this. Of course.

"You said the short version," Enjolras reminds him.

Grantaire really wishes he was in a place where he could ask for the rest of that story. “Oh good,” he says wryly, “he passes muster with a twelve-year-old.”

“Hold the phone, I haven’t decided yet,” says Gavroche. He delivers another thoughtful volley of kicks to Grantaire’s seat. “What’s Grantaire’s favorite color?”

Grantaire makes a face. “You don’t have to answer that,” he says.

“Green,” says Enjolras gravely. He’s right, which is surprising until Grantaire glances down and remembers his sweatshirt is green. Lucky guess.

“What’s his favorite food?”

“Gavroche,” says Grantaire, “what the hell is this supposed to prove?”

“He likes a lot of food,” says Enjolras. “Nachos, maybe?”

“Is he a good kisser?”

Grantaire holds his breath and wishes for death.

“He’s a great kisser.” A sudden and embarrassing rush of gratitude floods through him. It’s a stroke of genius on Enjolras’s part, because it makes Gavroche halt the questions immediately.

“Ugh, never mind.”

When Grantaire checks back in the rear view mirror, Enjolras is looking right at him. Grantaire doesn’t try to camouflage the grateful look on his face.

“Okay, dude, if we’re done with Interrogation Hour,” says Grantaire.

“Wait!” says Gavroche. “One more. Just—one more, okay? And this one is the most important. What music do you like?”

Courfeyrac hadn’t been exaggerating about this much: Enjolras’s grasp of modern music is poor. Every now and then at lunch he’ll reference a song, but it’s always from the seventies or something. Grantaire’s not sure Enjolras listens to a single band formed after Gavroche was born.

“The Postal Service?” Enjolras volunteers, with the eagerness and precision of a man who has learned exactly one phrase of a foreign language.


They’re coming up on the Thenardier house. “Well, there’s one group I’m into lately,” says Enjolras slowly, “but they’re pretty new. Have you heard of Hamburgers?”

Grantaire bites his lip and makes some horrible snorting sound of repressed laughter. When he peeks at the rear view mirror, Enjolras meets his eyes immediately. Enjolras doesn’t wink but he does raise his eyebrows and deliver something like a smirk. Grantaire doesn’t swoon but he does almost hit a telephone pole.

He swerves them back to safety at the last second.

"Jesus, R, you could kill us with this thing," says Gavroche, and then to Enjolras, grave, "Don’t think
Enjolras hesitates. Out of sheer goodwill and kindness, Grantaire jumps in to bail him out. "Like if Rilo Kiley and Modest Mouse had a baby," he says, "and then that baby was raised by Of Montreal. Inside a Radiohead album."

"Huh," says Gavroche. "OK Computer or Kid A?"

"OK Computer," Enjolras parrots back.

"Hamburgers spelled the normal way?"

"Just like the real word," says Enjolras.

Grantaire very carefully keeps his eyes on the road ahead. He can't pull into the Thenardier driveway, since it's crowded front to back with its usual mystifying assortment of cars, so he parks them half in the road, half on the yard.

"Alright, time to help me carry, you nerd," says Eponine. Enjolras unbuckles his seatbelt. "Not you, man," she says, "my weirdo brother." She stretches back and tries to pull Gavroche's hat off, but Gavroche clutches it to his head protectively.

"Well, if he's offering," says Gavroche.

Eponine shakes her head. "Nope. Get your ass up, monkey."

"Jerk," Gavroche mutters, rolling open the van door and hopping down. When the twin door slams have sounded and Eponine and Gavroche are cutting across the lawn, Grantaire levers the van into park so he can climb up onto the seat and twist around.

"D'you have enough room back there?" he says. "Should I move the seat forward, or—"

"It's fine," says Enjolras, forehead wrinkled in surprise or confusion. Grantaire forces himself not to apologize for what a mess the back of the van is.

"So," he says instead, "all-time favorite Hamburgers album?"

"'Doesn't Cut the Mustard,'" says Enjolras, so promptly it's clear he'd had it ready to go in case Gavroche asked. He seems relieved to get a chance to use it. What a nerd. "You?"

"'Hold the Pickle,' probably."

Enjolras rolls his eyes and makes a sound somewhere between a sigh and a snicker. "Gross."

"What, do you not—oh," Grantaire says, shaking his head in mock-disapproval. "You and your filthy imagination, I swear."

"Hey, Courfeyrac said you wanted to name his band after herpes," says Enjolras.

"'The Worst Herpes', and that was mostly Jehan. Credit where credit's due, Hamburgers is a much better name."

"I'll pass that along." A corner of Enjolras's mouth quirks up in that way that makes Grantaire glad he's sitting down. "Maybe it'll become a real band after all."

"Cool." Grantaire laughs, rests his chin on the headrest. "Feel free to reshape reality if it means..."
"you're not on the hook for lying to a little kid."

"They still need a drummer, you know," says Enjolras. He fixes Grantaire with an expectant look.

Grantaire pastes a smile on. "Not ready for the rock n roll lifestyle, dude."

"I'm serious." 'As if that's a sentence that needs to be spoken out loud,' thinks Grantaire sourly. He ignores the part of his brain that points out how Enjolras has been almost relaxed so far, how he does seem capable of making a joke when the mood strikes him. "Courfeyrac still wants to ask you."

"I can save him the trouble."

The confused crease has returned to Enjolras's forehead. "Did you not like playing drums?" he asks.

Grantaire feels very tired all of a sudden. He rubs his eyes.

"It was fine," he lies.

He'd loved it.

When Grantaire first got his drum, he'd played it for so long, and with such enthusiasm, that his parents threatened to ground him if he practiced more than two hours a day. Sometimes he still finds himself tapping a pencil or a pen against his desk, some half-remembered routine still lingering in his muscles and bones long after it's left his head.

"Snare drum isn't the same thing," he says, lightly as he can. "Unless they're really into Sousa marches—"

"You already own drumsticks," says Enjolras reasonably. "If you won band trophies, you can keep a beat, and all you're up against are the demo rhythms on Marius's keyboard."

"Demo rhythms probably have more work ethic," says Grantaire.

"Less stage presence."

"Dude," says Grantaire, "why are you pushing this?"

"Why are you so determined not to do anything?"

Grantaire untwists and drops back into his seat. "Okay, genius, think about this. I assume you're gonna be the embarrassing friend that shows up to every gig and every battle of the bands and memorizes all the words." He refuses to feel fond about the mental image of Enjolras at some shitty community center, in the front of the crowd, mouthing along to Courfeyrac's dumb lyrics like they're hymns.

"Yeah," says Enjolras like it's a given, because of course it is.

"Uh okay dude, if I'm in the band too, that means we'd have to see each other all the goddamn time. Senior year would be, like, The Sad Ex Routine, twenty-four seven."

"Why would it be an issue then, and not at meetings?" says Enjolras.

Grantaire rests his forehead against the wheel and sighs. "Obviously I'm not coming next year. We can't keep this going indefinitely, so. A clean break." It's not like Enjolras to be this shoddy with his plans. "What'd you think would happen?"
"I figured we could do that thing where you stay friends after?" says Enjolras. "Like, a mutual, 'it just didn't work out'—"

Grantaire snorts. "Uh yeah, nobody'd ever buy it."

"Why not?"

'Because if we were really together, I'd only leave if you dumped me,' Grantaire somehow doesn't say out loud.

"Also, it doesn't actually solve the problem, like, okay, then we're stuck pretending to be friends," he says.

"Oh," says Enjolras, barely audible. Grantaire would be embarrassed too, he thinks, to fail to put something so basic together for this long.

There's a knock at the back of the van: Eponine and Gavroche with the sewing machine. He hadn't even seen them carry it across the yard.

"It's not locked," he calls.

One of the back doors opens, and Eponine sticks her head in. "Grantaire, help me lift it," she says. "Fucker's heavy."

Grantaire's out of his seat before the last syllable, climbing past Enjolras and hopping out the back door.

Eponine's sewing machine looks like it was made in about 1910. It also weighs the same as a medium-sized boulder. He can see how she and Gavroche could drag it down the stairs and over the grass, but it's going to take their combined strength to load it in.

"I can help," says Enjolras, scrambling up.

"You're fine," says Grantaire.

"It really looks like you could use a hand."

Grantaire crouches down and gets his shoulder under one corner. "Not your problem," he grits out through his teeth. "Sit back down." He attempts to lift with his knees. It kind of works, although when he tries to stand, his legs buckle and he veers dangerously to the left. "Ah, Jesus, somebody else push here," he hisses, and Eponine essentially headbutts the sewing machine into the back of the van.

"Fuck," Grantaire pants. "What the hell, why is your sewing machine made of rock, this is not the fucking Flintstones."

"Cast iron," Eponine corrects.

"Dude, your boyfriend offered to help," says Gavroche, who isn't breathless at all, the little shit.

"That's what you get for trying to be all chivalrous," says Eponine. "Let this be a lesson, Young Gavroche. Chivalry's dead, and chivalry had it coming."

Grantaire walks back around to the front seat and climbs in. Behind him, he can hear a series of shrieks that says Eponine's second grab at her brother's hat was more successful. He checks the side mirror, and sure enough, Eponine is dangling the hat above Gavroche's with one hand and messing
up his hair with the other.

"Help, child abuse!" Gavroche laughs. "CPS! Someone call CPS!"

"CPS?" asks Enjolras.

"Child Protective Services," says Grantaire in an undertone. "They look into complaints about neglect and stuff—" He's not sure how he knows this, except through osmosis: it's just part of Eponine and Gavroche's vocabulary.

Enjolras leans forward, lowering his voice. "Is that really something to joke about?"

"Depends on how you deal with shit, I guess."

"Why," says Enjolras, "What's—"

"Whatcha guys talking about?" Gavroche’s voice filters in through the back of the van.

"Nothing," Enjolras calls, a beat too soon.

The top of Gavroche’s head pops into view. “What kind of nothing?” he asks, squeezing past the sewing machine.

Grantaire forgets sometimes, how much more that kid sees than what he lets on. It's way too late to pretend like they weren’t whispering. If he can just shift his posture into something warmer, he thinks.

He wraps a hand around Enjolras’s arm like it was there all along, and Enjolras, bless him, plays along, leans in, touches the back of Grantaire’s neck and tips their foreheads together.

“I was just telling Enjolras how blue his eyes are,” Grantaire says, looking up like Gavroche is interrupting something. "I can keep going if you want?"

"Ugh," says Gavroche. "Never mind."

"Wait, where the hell are we going?" says Gavroche when they turn onto Miller.

"Grantaire's gotta drop his man off at home," Eponine volunteers, craning her neck to look back at him through the rearview mirror.

Gavroche gives the back of the seat a wistful kick. "Ugh," he says, "seriously? He's not coming back to hang out with us?"

"Sorry, I've got homework," says Enjolras, and Grantaire takes a moment to appreciate the way Enjolras doesn't dismiss him or put on some phony talking-to-kids voice, just treats Gavroche with the same level of respect he treats anyone else. Well, anyone who doesn't support the flat tax.

"He has so much homework," Grantaire chimes in.

"Um, duh, you can do it at Grantaire's house?" says Gavroche, with the perfectly honed disdain of a middle schooler. "He's got a computer, whatever you need, dude. Rulers, graph paper. All the junk food you can eat," he wheedles.
"We tried studying together once," Enjolras invents. "It, uh, wasn't productive."

Grantaire assumes it's a dig at how irritating and distracting he'd be in any kind of one-on-one learning scenario with Enjolras. He lets it slide because, hey, fair.

"I'm not apologizing," he says, over Eponine's snickers. "Whatever, I'm mouthy, it's who I am."

"And I'm not complaining," says Enjolras, which is about the time the pieces fit into place about what he was actually implying, and Grantaire is suddenly very glad that the only person who can see his face is Eponine.

"This is terrible," says Gavroche. "This sucks. Let's talk about anything else, I don't care. I would rather hear about how blue his eyes are, Jesus Christ—"

"As blue as Windex," Grantaire supplies. "Blue as one of those blue raspberry popsicles that dyes your tongue for fucking days."

"Blue as anti-freeze," says Eponine. "Blue as Smurf butts."

"Wait," says Enjolras from the back. "Specifically the butts?"

"Specifically the Butts is my second-favorite Hamburgers album," says Grantaire.

"How can they have more than one album if they're a new band," Gavroche mutters.

They reach Enjolras's house in what feels like no time at all. There's a weird moment where Grantaire sort of wishes Gavroche would make the case again, for Enjolras staying. Really crank up the puppy eyes.

Enjolras unbuckles his seatbelt. "Will you walk me to the door, Grantaire?"

"How is your boyfriend more ridiculous than you," Gavroche moans. "How is that even a thing a person can do—"

"Sure thing, Cookiefeet," says Grantaire, because it's been a while since the last horrible pet name, and because it makes Gavroche slap his forehead and emit a series of hilarious noises.

When they get out of the van, Grantaire offers Enjolras his elbow, like they're in some terrible period piece where everyone wears waistcoats and nobody talks about their feelings. It's a riff on the absurdity of escorting Enjolras to his own door. It's a commentary, it's ironic—Enjolras links his arm through, bumping their shoulders together as they head up the front walk.

"Are they okay?" says Enjolras. "What's their situation?"

"I don't really know," Grantaire admits, before he can stop to think about what a bad friend that makes him sound like. But then it's too late, so he adds, "Eponine won't talk about it, Gavroche follows her lead. I don't think they're in, like, physical danger. But they stay overnight with me sometimes, on weeknights. Like, that's not normal, right?"

He almost can't believe he's talking about it out loud; it's been so long since he tried to ask Eponine what was going on. He'd forgotten it was even something that could be put into words, spoken about.

"I don't think it is," Enjolras affirms.

"And I don't know, sometimes I think, 'Well, maybe it's just typical teenage angst, fighting with your
parents, whatever.' But I don't know. Sometimes Eponine has a camera, sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes she has money for lunch, sometimes she doesn't."

"You buy her food all the time," says Enjolras, like it's been weighing on him. Grantaire will admit it probably looks weird from the outside.

"Yeah, and that's new, and I can't imagine it's a good sign she's letting me." He sighs. "But it's like, I can try to find out what I want to know, or I can try to be what she needs, but I can't do both?"

"Sounds like a lot for one person to deal with," says Enjolras.

Grantaire nods. "She's really tough, though. Gavroche too."

"He clearly looks up to you," says Enjolras. "He has your mannerisms, it's uncanny."

"God, don't remind me. Eponine says that too. Fucking nerve-wracking."

"Why?"

"One Grantaire is already too many Grantaires."

Enjolras shrugs, and Grantaire can feel the movement all down his arm. "He could do worse."

"Well, sure," says Grantaire. There are shittier men to emulate out there, he knows that. Mike, for instance. Clyde, Eddie. Gavroche's actual dad.

They've reached the door. Grantaire wishes he'd thought to walk slower. He turns to leave, but he doesn't get far; Enjolras hasn't actually surrendered his elbow.

"Oh god." Enjolras is frozen with one foot on the welcome mat.

"What?"

"We need to keep him away from Bahorel at all costs."


Enjolras gives his elbow one last squeeze. Verisimilitude. "You too."

"Man," says Gavroche, looking up from the computer and rubbing his eyes. "I can't find anything about your boyfriend's favorite band. How indie are they?" His voice is an even split between frustration and awe.

"Hamburgers?" says Grantaire. "Yeah, they're pretty underground."

The next day, Joly and Bossuet are waiting at his locker after second period.

"Morning," says Bossuet.

"Morning," says Grantaire.
"What’s up with this garbage?" says Joly, pointing to the graffiti that Grantaire has been doing his damnedest to ignore.

"Someone felt like expressing themselves," he says with a shrug. Bossuet shakes his head, sympathetic.

"Sucks, man."

"Yeah."

"You got a marker or something?" says Bossuet. "Maybe you could scribble it out."

The thought's occurred to him, but Grantaire can't shake the feeling it would be letting them win, somehow. Blacking it out means acknowledging how much he wants it gone.

Joly tilts his head to one side. "You know," he says slowly. "You could change the F into a P, squeeze an H before the A, turn it into "phagocytosis.""

They regard the locker door for a long moment. "Or you could make the F a B," Bossuet suggests.

"'Bag'?"

"Or, like, 'bagel'," says Bossuet.

"Beagle," says Grantaire.

"No, wait!" Bossuet looks very self-satisfied. "Eagle."

"Yes!" Joly half-shouts, head bobbing with enthusiasm. "'Eagle', make it say 'eagle'!"

Grantaire can't keep the smile off his face, watching the two of them. He digs into his pocket. "Hang on." There's no telling the random shit Grantaire could be carrying right now. At first pass, he comes up with three crumpled pieces of paper, a mangled stick of gum, a finger puppet, and half a pack of cigarettes. "Shit, can you hold this?" he says, depositing the whole fistful into Bossuet's outstretched hand.

At the second try, he grabs up his permanent marker, and uncaps it with a flourish. "Let's make this happen," Grantaire says. He reaches up and adds the single line that converts the F to an E. He scrawls the L and E at the end, trying to match the original handwriting as much as he can.

"Love it," says Bossuet.

"Yes!" says Joly. "Eagles are rad!"

Grantaire tacks on an S, and dutifully adds, 'ARE RAD.' "The people need to know," he says solemnly.

Joly cackles and punches the air.

"Nice," says Bossuet, leaning against Eddie's locker. "Not sure it's complete without a visual aid, though."

"Ooh, draw an eagle!" yells Joly. He points a finger at Grantaire. "R, I challenge you right now to draw the raddest eagle you can!"

"Rad as science will allow," Bossuet agrees.
Grantaire sketches a stern bird face with a stern bird beak. He draws on a pair of sunglasses.

"I think he needs a leather jacket," says Bossuet, and Grantaire fills in the body, the feathers in the front mostly covered by the a pair of dark lapels.

"So rad, so rad." Joly is hopping from one foot to the other. "Draw a speech bubble, make him say something! Make him say something almost too rad to handle."

Grantaire taps the end of the marker against his lips, thinking. Finally, it comes to him. He outlines the bubble and writes, "Broccoli? No way!"

"I'm glad we were here to witness this moment," Bossuet says. "But, and I don't think this can be overlooked, maybe he needs a skateboard?"

"You may be correct," says Grantaire.

"Raddest eagle in history," says Joly.

"Ahem," says Vice Principal Javert.

Well, shit.

Grantaire spins around. The marker is uncapped in his hand. It doesn't look good.

"Do I need to remind you about the rules against vandalizing school property?" says Vice Principal Javert. Grantaire shakes his head.

"Sir," says Bossuet, "his property had already been vandalized, he was just—"

Javert's laser focus tracks to Bossuet's hand, and the crumpled cigarette pack inside. He raises his eyebrows.

"I suppose you'll say you're holding that for a friend?" says Javert acidly.

"I don't understand," Enjolras says later that day, at the lunch table, as they wait for the others to join them. "How did you and Bossuet get detention during passing period?"

Grantaire shakes his head. "Artistic differences."

Enjolras opens his mouth like he's going to protest, or at least ask a follow-up question, but that's about the time that Jehan, Courfeyrac, and Marius walk in, and everything takes a turn for the worse.

Grantaire can tell something is wrong from ten yards away. They're walking with their heads bent together, and Jehan is saying something very quickly, the motions of his hands jerky and insistent. They look furious. Not like they're fighting with each other, but like something has—

"Hey," says Grantaire, "Jehan, what happened to your shoes?"

Because for once, Jehan's pinkish-orange glittery loafers are nowhere to be seen. He's wearing what are probably his gym shoes, plain white Keds. It's disconcerting.

"There was an incident," says Jehan, dropping onto a chair, his posture tight.
“Those, those fuckers—” says Marius, who has never said anything harsher than ‘oh my gosh’ in Grantaire’s hearing.

Courfeyrac is silent, but the way he and Jehan lean into each other is half-comfort, half-defiance. The fingers of his free hand twitch on the table.

The three of them are so angry, it takes a while for Grantaire to piece together what happened: apparently, while Jehan was changing in gym, a pack of upperclassmen grabbed his shoes, "said the kind of bullshit you’d expect’ as Jehan puts it, in a voice crackling with disdain, threw the shoes into a urinal, and peed on them.

Someday, Grantaire's going to lose his capacity for surprise at how shitty people are. It has to be coming. He’s sure of it.

"What is our gameplan," says Courfeyrac. "Tell me, what do we need to do here, because we can't do nothing, this is so fucked up—"

"It's destruction of property, that's pretty serious," says Combeferre.

"It's literally a hate crime," says Enjolras.

"Is it your word against theirs, Jehan?" says Musichetta.

Jehan shakes his head and starts digging in his backpack. "People saw," he says, "I'm making a list of everyone who was in the room. Most of them wouldn't take my side, but there are a few we might be able to talk to, and a few more that weren't there but will probably at least back me up that these guys have been bothering me—"

"A list, that's a good idea." Combeferre retrieves his own notebook and pen. 'I'll take notes, make sure we don't forget anything."

"Maybe you don't need witnesses," says Eponine. "Is there a security camera?"

Marius looks dubious. "Uh, in the locker room?"

Is there? Grantaire doesn't remember there being one, but what does that prove?

"I don't think there would be," Enjolras says. "With—privacy acts, the Fourth Amendment, it might even be illegal—"

"Doesn't mean it isn't there," says Eponine, and Enjolras flashes her an impressed look. In a very different world, they could be friends, he thinks.

"Worth noting," says Enjolras, gesturing with the hand that isn't wrapped around Grantaire's arm, where it has been since—Grantaire doesn't even know when. Things are happening very quickly.

Grantaire tries to listen, but his attention keeps slipping. There's a queasy feeling in his stomach. His freshman year—his first freshman year, when he'd started to fall apart in noticeable, ugly ways, there were guys who said things to him, who pushed him around. Sometimes, it was bad enough to merit a trip to the nurse's office—a scrape, a bloody nose, something that might've been sprained—but that was personal. Grantaire had been an annoying little shit and an easy target, that was all. The problem hadn't been anything bigger than him.

There is something undeniably creepy about the whole episode.
"We can't let them win," Musichetta is saying. Privately, Grantaire thinks that if the guys in question happen to be on the football team—hell, if they're on the baseball team, the administration is going to do everything possible to cover their asses. It's David versus Goliath, if Goliath had nukes.

He can't keep his eyes off the ground. He's so used to those ridiculous loafers that it feels like someone just reached down and erased where Jehan's shoes would be.

Marius follows his gaze, confused. "Grantaire, are you okay?"

"Fine," he says. Enjolras is turned away, focused on whatever Musichetta and Jehan are talking about, but his thumb rubs back and forth on Grantaire's arm, almost absently. Grantaire thinks that if he was in the habit of congratulating Enjolras for a job well done on all this fake boyfriend stuff, there would be some gold stars being handed out right now.

He's aware he should be paying attention, but it's not like he has anything to contribute. He knows the school's anti-bullying policy back to front, but expecting that to have any bearing on what will happen feels almost like superstition.

Part of him wants to bolt. He's not sure what's keeping him there. Well, on some level, Enjolras's hand on his arm. That's not the whole story, though. There's an electricity at the table. It feels like they should be poring over maps or something. It feels like they're planning a war. Grantaire has every expectation they're doomed, but there's a certain charge in being on a sinking ship together.

He looks down again at those stupid blank Keds. It's like blotting out the word on his locker: on some level, the bastards are still getting what they want. (A hundred accumulated memories, parents and teachers and coaches: "Ignore them, Grantaire. They're only after a reaction.")

'Well hell,' he thinks. 'I'll give them a reaction.' The sharpie pen that got him that detention is still in his pocket. He pulls it out with his free hand.

"Hey, Jehan," he says. "Your shoes are looking a little 'white flag of defeat.' Want me to fix them?"

He gestures with the marker, fumbling for something that will ease some of the tension, make Jehan smile. "Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe mud wrestling? Emily Dickinson flipping Hemingway the bird?"


And then it's easier: Jehan sets his gym shoes on the table, and Grantaire at least has something to do. A chrysanthemum blooms across one toe, petal by petal. He draws violets and roses and daisies, a butterfly flapping on the arch support, because why not?

An iris, a lily, a tulip—there had been a while where he'd been interested in botany and he'd doodled flowers all the time, had gotten pretty good at it. Why had he ever stopped? Right, because people gave him shit. He draws a pansy coming up from the sole, curling out in front of a sprig of lilacs. Daffodils, orchids, poppies. When the first shoe is done, it's covered heel to toe in the curliest, most graceful lines he can manage. He grabs its twin, and he knows already they won't be symmetrical, but maybe that's better—

"This should really be in color," says Eponine into his ear. Grantaire shakes his head without looking up; the bell will have to ring and some point and he needs to have this done.

"I only have black." He starts in on a sunflower, working as fast as he can without getting sloppy.

She brings her hand in front of his face: a fistful of markers and pens of every stripe.
"Took up a collection," she says quickly. "Combeferre has every highlighter color ever invented."

He nudges the finished shoe in her direction. "Then uncap something and start coloring."

It's like all of their stoned, drunk craft hours were practice for this moment. Grantaire is absorbed in his work, but he can catch Eponine's hands out of the corner of his eye, and she's a whirlwind.

He's vaguely aware the conversation is still happening, but he doesn't have the brainpower to spare. In a weird way, he feels a kind of peace. He's exactly where he should be.

"Guys," says Musichetta, "The bell's gonna ring in like five minutes."

"Get in here and help me with all these goddamn petals," Eponine tells her.

The discussion shifts, then. It's still going, but everyone seems to grab a color and find a spot to fill in. There's a jumble of hands around each shoe, a flurry of traded gel pens and markers. Grantaire draws the last vein of the last leaf, gives himself a second to stretch out his fingers—it's more drawing in one day than he's done since he quit sketching at meetings—snatches up a teal highlighter, and dives back in.

The last flower is finished about thirty seconds before the bell. The shoes are a riot of color, half Monet, half acid trip.

"So, we’ll talk about the rest at the meeting, then?" says Jehan. Everyone—well, everyone who had been paying attention—nods. "Good," he says. Then he beams. "Holy hell," he says in a hushed voice, "these are such cool shoes."

Jehan undoes the laces like he's unwrapping a Christmas present. It's the second time today Grantaire has made someone happier just by drawing something. His hands are starting to cramp, but he can't bring himself to complain about it, even in his own head. He flexes his sore fingers and smiles.

When he looks over, Enjolras is watching him intently, with some hard-to-define expression.

"What?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras coughs. "You've got marker on your face."

“Well, yeah,” Grantaire says, “there’s basically no way I don’t.”

“Right—here.” Enjolras’s thumb traces over one cheekbone, almost too light to feel. Grantaire swallows.

“If you do the old mom trick where you lick your finger and try to rub it off, I’m breaking up with you,” he manages. The bell rings, and Enjolras steps back.

It's not until Bahorel is slipping into class and miming a confused finger at his own face that Grantaire remembers: right, he never actually did anything about the marker.

The teacher grants him a bathroom pass with no resistance or suspicion. Really, except for Mr. Clark, most teachers have been more chill with him in the past couple of weeks. He can't tell if it’s a sympathy thing, or just that his decreased interest in fucking with them lately has created some kind of accidental truce. It makes life easier, even if it does add to the feeling that every feature of his reality is tilting off-course.

In bad ways, in good ways—Grantaire doesn't even have the energy to ride out each wave of feeling
anymore. Is he friends with Joly and Bossuet now? Did it really take nothing more than a manufactured interest in Joly's show and some dumb jokes about birds? Is Jehan going to be safe walking around with shoes that are basically a multi-colored "kick me" sign? What was up with that look Enjolras gave him just before the bell?

Because he doesn't think it was intentional; it wasn't cozy or settled enough to be a fake boyfriend look. It was more like surprise. Grantaire shakes his head. What he wouldn't give, to have the capacity to genuinely surprise Enjolras. He's the least objective witness of all time; it's got to all be in his mind.

At any rate, Enjolras wasn't lying: when he looks in the mirror, he's got an impressive case of markerface going on. There's a blue fingerprint at the hinge of his jaw and some mottled green on his forehead, but most noticeable is the streak of ink across his left cheekbone, bright red. It looks almost like it's there on purpose.

For a moment, he's not sure if he wants to wash it off, or find another red marker for the other side. Just own it, like makeup. Like warpaint.

“Yo,” says Bahorel, when Grantaire returns, freshly scrubbed. The red is still there, but you have to be looking for it. “Yo, did you make your boyfriend listen to his mixtape yet?” When Grantaire shakes his head, Bahorel claps both hands to his forehead and groans. “It’s been weeks, dude!”

It has. Grantaire doesn’t know how to explain that it’s out of his hands, that the opening track is his now. Playing it for anyone else would be like reading his diary out loud in public, or peeling off his skin and letting passerby gawk at his circulatory system.

What would he even do if he exposed that song to Enjolras and Enjolras didn’t like it? What would he do if Enjolras said, “Turn that off” or “Don’t you think the lyrics are a bit much?” or “I don’t like the singer’s voice”? How could he cope if Enjolras just shook his golden head and shrugged, unaffected?

“No, try,” says Bahorel solemnly. “Absolutely killing me. Also, I’ll tell you the answer to number four if you can help me define ‘capitalism’ in a way that doesn’t sound sarcastic—”

Grantaire had honestly thought he couldn't screw up his Algebra grade any worse. It was a failure of imagination. His headphones-and-music-for-every-second-of-class system is shaping up to be his downfall. When they get their quizzes back, it's his second F in a row.

The one good thing about Algebra is there are no assigned seats, so every day is a different chance to find a spot where nobody will try to bug him. It hasn't happened yet, but it could. Maybe. You'd think the front row would be safe, but today, the girl next to him keeps trying to catch his eye. The main thing he knows about her is she’s a freshman, which implies she’s got to be good at math. They’ve never spoken, for obvious reasons. Not a lot of common ground.
Today, she's wearing a cross necklace and the expression of someone steeling themselves for a confrontation. He's not sure if she's trying to save his soul or just make him turn his mp3 player down.

The teacher is writing something on the board. It's hard to concentrate with all these guitars in his ears. What is Grantaire going to do if he winds up having to retake a math class again? How can he even pretend like he’s a soldier in Enjolras’s war when he can’t deal with the prospect of a ninety-pound girl saying something mean? The freshman reaches out and sets a folded piece of paper on his desk.

He flicks it to the ground and turns up the volume.

Jehan and Grantaire are supposed to be doing a worksheet, but it's a matching exercise, and for some reason Mr. Clark made the numbers align with letters in an entirely predictable pattern that Jehan cracks about three minutes in.

"Is it kind of fucked up," says Grantaire, "that this class bills itself as World Mythology when all we've done the whole semester is talk about the Norse, the Greeks, and the Romans?"

Jehan starts to open his mouth, and Grantaire thinks to add,

"I mean, okay, we had that day trip into ancient Egypt, but I don't know if that even counts. We get one picture of the Egyptians, and they’re just drawn like a bunch of white people with tans and eyeliner. Seriously, have we talked about Asia even once? Weren't there people in Australia at some point? Isn't the rest of Africa also technically part of the world?"

"Be glad Marius isn't here, because he'd totally be cooing right now," says Jehan.

"What?"

Jehan taps a toe against the chair leg, arrhythmic. He keeps looking down at his shoes. It seems to relax him.

"You're starting to sound like him," he says. "It's cute, that's all."

"Like Marius?" Grantaire has never heard Pontmercy sound off on the importance of Australian mythology.

"Okay, come on," says Jehan.

Grantaire replays what he said back in his head. He used to try to match Enjolras's cadences, that style of ranting, back a million years ago when he lived to earn an eyeroll or an exasperated snort at meetings. It was hard to get right; he couldn't, generally. He wasn't aiming for an Enjolras impression today. It wasn't even on his mind, he just can't stop thinking about how screwed up it is that someone could act like "World" means three countries and nobody would call them on it, where is the outrage —

Something panicky flutters in his chest.

"I'm not saying we should go picket the Bullfinch estate or something," he mumbles. "I'm not saying, 'Let's go sue Thor,' just—it's fucked up, right?"
The tapping pauses. "Grantaire—" Jehan sighs and rubs his forehead. "Yeah," he says, "you're right. It's fucked up."

Somehow, it's still only Wednesday.

In the time between lunch and the last bell, his locker has been painted over, all traces of the world’s raddest eagle lost to history. He presses his fingertips to the door and they come away dry. It must have been a rush job. Not so surprising. He wishes he’d thought to take a picture.

When he does the combination and swings it open, a piece of folded glossy paper tumbles out and onto the floor. Someone must've slipped it through the door. He stoops to pick it up, and for some reason his mind goes back Joly's birthday invitation from a million years ago. Maybe Musichetta is having a party, he thinks.

The paper is the wrong size for a card, and there's a Jesus fish on the front. Grantaire revises his guess.

He doesn't want to read it, so of course he does, eyes racing over the text before he can make himself stop. It's a pamphlet for one of those youth brainwashing camps, some kind of "pray the gay away" bullshit, and Grantaire's mouth is dry. He can't breathe. Somehow this is so, so much worse than everything else that's happened to him.

When he darts a glance over his shoulder, there is a small knot of conservatively-dressed kids at the other end of the hallway, trying very hard to act like they're not watching him. He looks down at the pamphlet and back at them. Distantly, he notes that their poker faces are terrible. Distantly, he thinks that's probably what happens when you decide all the performing arts are the work of satan.

Distantly, his hands are shaking.

'Freedom,' says the pamphlet, 'from the pain and shame of—'

The kids are still watching him and he thinks, wildly, 'Don't let them see you reading it.'

He picks up his backpack. He closes his locker. He lets the pamphlet drop to the ground. He thinks, 'Step on it as you walk by.' He puts one foot on the paper, but it's much more slippery than he anticipated. His balance lurches away, his feet slide out from under him, and he's bracing himself for impact when a hand catches at his elbow, another at the small of his back.

"Are you alright?" says Enjolras.

The soles of his shoes make contact with the tile again. Enjolras's hands are light but solid, steadying. They don't rush to move away, even when it's clear his feet are safely back on the ground. Grantaire exhales through his nose, trying to let the panic out.

"Fine," he says.

"Oh hey," says Enjolras, noticing the pamphlet, "you're getting those too?" He says it like they're talking about weather.

"This is my first," Grantaire manages. "You've gotten—plural?"

Enjolras shrugs. "For a while. It's dropped off, though. I think after last History debate, they realized
I'm beyond redemption." His voice may have a certain element of pride to it. "Whoever 'they' are."

Grantaire flicks his eyes towards the four kids at the opposite end of the hallway. At least one of them is wearing a Bible camp T-shirt. All of them look horrified. No wonder; Enjolras has stepped around to face him more squarely but his hand is still low on Grantaire's back. Grantaire wonders if it makes him a bad person how much he hopes Enjolras kind of forgets to stop doing that.

"Just a guess," he says.

Enjolras glances back at the likely culprits and snorts. "Turn your head more to the side," he commands. "No, the other way." Grantaire dutifully rotates his head a few inches, and Enjolras leans in, breath warm on the side of his face. "Remember that night you dropped me off?"

Grantaire nods very slightly.

"From their angle, does this look like a kiss?" Enjolras half-whispers.

Grantaire's knees don't go weak, exactly, but that hand at his back is a big help in keeping him upright. He shakes his head. It's hard to tell from this close, but Enjolras seems to deflate. They pull apart a little.

"No worries," says Grantaire. He toes the scuffed linoleum and tries to school his features into something sweet, uncomplicated. "I'll just pretend you said something super romantic."

"And a little dirty," Enjolras suggests, making Grantaire give a bark of surprised laughter.

"Seriously, dude?"

Enjolras traces his hand up between Grantaire's shoulderblades and back down, a move designed to look flirtatious from far away. In a low voice, he says,

"For someone who gives me a hard time about how innocent I supposedly am, you are very easy to shock."

The thought of Enjolras trying to shock him on purpose does things to his bloodstream. Giddy, dangerous things.

Grantaire leans a few inches forward. "When you do it, yeah. It's like hearing profanity from a Carebear."

"A Carebear, really?" says Enjolras, and hopefully his head is angled downwards enough that the Christian Coalition can't see the face he's making.

"It's a metaphor," Grantaire informs him. "Poetic license, dude."

Enjolras raises his eyebrows, good-humored. "I'm almost a head taller than you. If one of us is a Carebear, it's not me."

"Or Superman," Grantaire volunteers.

"So either I'm a flying superhero or a cartoon bear?" says Enjolras. "Do I get to pick?"

"Or like, Jesus," says Grantaire, just to add some spice to the mental picture. "Picture Jesus waggling his eyebrows and making filthy jokes, okay? It's hard to process."

"Purity is a social construct," Enjolras informs him, and Grantaire leans forward to rest his head
against Enjolras's shoulder and hide whatever naked affection has got to be all over his features. "A person can be a virgin and still have all kinds of thoughts," says Enjolras, almost defensive.

Grantaire should really take a step back. That is a thing he should be doing. Enjolras traces his hand up past Grantaire's shoulderblades, fingertips just stopping at the nape of his neck. Grantaire does not make any kind of embarrassing sound, because he is a goddamn professional.

"Thoughts," he says instead.

The hand sweeps back down his back, and Enjolras huffs. "You know what I mean," he says. "Also, who's to say Jesus didn't make dirty jokes? He and the apostles were pretty young, and they probably had a lot of downtime, wandering around in the desert."

"Turning water into wine," Grantaire agrees. He hasn't seen the inside of a church since his uncle’s second wedding. "Chilling with like, lepers and prostitutes."

"Exactly," says Enjolras, as if he's been waiting the whole day for someone to say it. Grantaire pulls back far enough to get a look at him, and Enjolras smiles at him, warm, and reaches up to carefully tilt Grantaire's head to the side again. "Are they buying it, do you think?"

For an instant, he's confused, and then he remembers. Right. The lying. Grantaire cranes his neck so he can whisper back. "I don't know, do they look mad?"

"Furious," says Enjolras happily. "Here, you can see." He pivots them both a quarter turn, until Grantaire's back is to the lockers. It's a surprisingly fluid move, like something from a waltz. To anyone watching, it would look like Enjolras pushed him against the wall to kiss him.

Grantaire checks from the corner of his eye. The four kids are taking emphatically with each other. It's a small enough school that he can recognize one of them. The girl from Algebra isn't there, but the tallest one is in his English class. She's quiet, well-behaved, a good student.

Well, of course. It's not just the bullies that hate him now.

"It's more convincing if you don't keep looking at them," Enjolras observes.

"Sorry," says Grantaire. He shuts his eyes.

"Um," says Enjolras, "are you okay? Should we stop?"

"No, I'm cool," Grantaire tells him, willing it to be true. He can do this. He can. He should probably open his eyes again.

Enjolras is giving him a worried look.

"I'm fine," says Grantaire. He tries to smile like he's said something sweet.

"Okay," says Enjolras slowly. Then, "Have you ever heard Feuilly talk about Jesus?"

Grantaire shakes his head.

"He makes a pretty good case for how, if Jesus were alive today, he'd be a fundamentalist's worst nightmare." The hand on his upper back has migrated to the side of his neck. It feels nice. "Spending all his time with the people everyone else judges. Outraged about poverty, outraged about prejudice —" Enjolras doesn't have to fake anything, talking like this. His eyes are bright. He's brimming with joy. He really does look like he's in love.
If Grantaire meets that gaze from this close, he's going to go crazy. If he looks away, he can't escape the horrified glares from the other side of the hallway, which is getting less funny by the second.

The girl in English with him, he thinks her name is Stacy. She's a good artist. When they do presentations, her posters always look nice. He lent her a pen once. She's peer edited his essays before, and she drew a smiley face on the paper even when he did a shitty job.

She thinks he's going to Hell, that he deserves to be there.

Are there more Feuillys in the world, or more Stacys? It's not a hard question. He blinks.

"It bothers you," says Enjolras suddenly.

"What?"

"It bothers you," he says again, and damn, Grantaire wishes he had the internal energy reserves to lie right now.

He shakes his head, eyes hot. What does Enjolras know about it, striding tirelessly forward like an advancing army, miles above all the muck and the stupid teen bullshit? Enjolras, who can say, 'Most people didn't like me to begin with' the way you'd say, 'I'm allergic to peas.'

"Sorry, we can't all be fucking—men of steel," Grantaire bites out.

"I think it bothers Jehan sometimes," says Enjolras simply. "And I know for a fact it bothers Courfeyrac." He frowns. "He said you talked to him, when you dropped him off from Joly's. That you told him the group had his back and—"

Grantaire doesn't particularly want to get into the things he told Courfeyrac. "Most of that was just straight-up borrowed from stuff he told me," he says. "Uh, he and Jehan kind of gave me this talk—"

A muscle in Enjolras's jaw twitches. It is definitely not the "trying not to laugh" muscle. "I know," he says. "They told me." He sighs. "You know, when I asked you in the first place, I figured—people would go at least somewhat easy on you. Y'know, since you're popular—"

"I'm not—" Grantaire gets out, and Enjolras says, "I know. I'm sorry," so sincerely that Grantaire has to look away again.

The truth is way more complicated, but even if he felt like getting into it, he wouldn't know where to start. What he wants to do is cover his face with his hands, but that would absolutely break up the scene they're staging. The show must go on, he thinks.

"My point is," Enjolras continues, "I was under the impression that you knew you could say something, if problems came up. But I'm getting the sense that people have been treating you pretty badly—"

Grantaire frowns. "How did—"

"Bossuet told me about your locker," says Enjolras. "I have sixth hour with him and Courf. That's what I came here to talk to you about, but," he glances behind Grantaire and makes a face, "apparently covering up a bird in a jacket is more important than undoing a hate crime."

"Okay, it wasn't a hate crime," says Grantaire, swallowing. "It's nothing like what happened to Jehan, it was just—some asshole with a marker—" But his voice is all fucked up and he can't meet
Enjolras's eyes, he can't sell it. He sucks in a breath. "It bothers me," he says softly.

"Hey." Enjolras tips his chin back up because, improbably, they're still keeping the act going. The pads of his fingers are careful on Grantaire's jaw and he still smells like oranges, Grantaire is going to have the weirdest associations with citrus fruits for the rest of his life. "Want to get out of here?" he whispers, like it's a wonderful secret.

"Fuck yeah," Grantaire whispers back, and Enjolras wraps an arm around his shoulders.

"Want to, uh, drive me home since there's no way I didn't just miss the bus?"

When he looks up, the cluster of teen evangelists has dispersed. He doesn't know when that happened, how long they've been playacting for an audience of zero. He makes an executive decision not to point this out. The hallway's still not empty, so it's justifiable that Grantaire lets his arm settle around Enjolras's waist.

"Was this all a long con to get a ride home?" he says instead.

"You caught me," says Enjolras dryly. "Those were paid actors, they don't even go here."

They head down towards the south exit. The wrestling coach glares at them as he walks by.

Enjolras squeezes Grantaire's shoulder. “Please tell me there is somewhere in this horrible town that sells ice cream.”

“Nope, sorry, we’re an ice-cream free county,” says Grantaire. “There’s an ordinance and everything. Sherbet mafia, what can you do?”

“The problem is, I almost believe you,” Enjolras says, shaking his head. “God, I hate the suburbs. College towns have their problems, but at least you can walk places. At least there are places to walk to.”

It occurs to him that he doesn’t actually know where Enjolras used to live. "We can stop by a store or something," he offers. “Not totally sure how ‘I’ll drive you home’ became ‘I’ll pick up your groceries’, but whatever, I’m flexible.” He tries to make this sound chill and not pathetic. It’s a fine balance. Grantaire is kind of sucking at chill lately, he can feel it.

“No,” says Enjolras. “I meant is there a drive-through or an ice cream shop or something.” When he sighs, they’re pressed close enough that Grantaire can track the rise and fall of breath. “Just—I’ve had a really unpleasant day, and I’m guessing you have, too?” he says. It’s almost an even split between a question and a statement, but Enjolras is back on solid ground an exhale later. “After all of that, I think the world owes us ice cream.”

No matter how Grantaire takes that statement apart, it sounds like Enjolras is suggesting they get this ice cream together. Half-formed images of 1950’s-style malt shop dates dance in his head. Will they split a milkshake? Serenade each other with songs on the jukebox? Will he wear Enjolras’s letter jacket? (Only if fighting The Man becomes a varsity sport.)

“More importantly,” Enjolras continues, “it’ll give us a chance to talk about what we’re doing on Friday.”

“What?” says Grantaire. “What’s on Friday?”

Enjolras’s forehead takes on a familiar wrinkle. “Uh, our date? Remember, since I can’t do Saturday this week?”
Come to think of it, Grantaire does remember this coming up at the lunch table. And it makes practical sense for them to plan this before Friday actually happens. They’ve managed to trade phone numbers since that first disaster at Grantaire’s house, but he can’t begrudge Enjolras for wanting to get everything settled face to face. It’s all very reasonable. Much more reasonable than a sudden craving for quality time alone with Grantaire. He takes a moment to remind himself that he isn’t disappointed.

“Anyway,” says Enjolras, “you’ve given me multiple rides home every week, and I have the sense you’re not going to let me give you gas money, so if I get you a cone—”

“Oh no, you’re not covering this. I still owe you for the pizza, remember?” They reach the security camera by the door, and Grantaire gives it a salute. It’s not so bad; it’s miles better than anything else he had going this afternoon. “And even if I buy yours today, I’ll still owe you money, unless you’re planning on ordering yourself like, a literal fish tank full of ice cream—”

They push through the double doors. “You’re only young once,” Enjolras tells him. “Carpe diem.”

“That’s the spirit. Wait.” Grantaire stops in the middle of the sidewalk, sunlight streaming down on them. Improbably, it is beautiful out. “Motherfucker, was that a pun?”

Ten minutes ago, he was being damned to hell. Now he’s heading off to eat sundaes with Enjolras. Shit, he thinks, what a weird day.

Chapter End Notes

Hey friends! Hope you’re having a good week. Two things:

1. Updates are still every other Sunday. My guess is that’s about where they’ll stay.
2. Looking at my outline and how much more is still coming, there is no way this things is going to wrap up in the originally planned ten chapters. Maybe eleven? That is the dream, that is the hope.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Enjolras looks over and his posture visibly relaxes. It's touching, even if it is all for show; the receptionist isn't trying to pretend not to watch them over the edge of her desk. Teenage boyfriends in the wild. Or rather, in captivity. They should get a zoo plaque.

In which Enjolras and Grantaire fight The Law. If by "The Law" you mean a vice principal. And by "fight" you mean they make him pretty uncomfortable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If there's one thing Grantaire can barely deal with, it's how young freshmen look to him these days. He can remember being fourteen and yes, it was not a particularly good time, but he can't remember ever being that tiny, that wide-eyed. They're babies. He wants to make them all crawl back up into the womb for a while.

That said, when the only freshman in his Algebra class blocks his way out the door, she might as well be a wall. She's roughly the size of a dachshund, but yeah. He's not moving her.

"Grantaire," she says. "Um, I need to talk to you."

"Fuck," he says, then instantly feels bad about cussing in front of someone so impressionable. "Well, I'm going to Con Econ next, so."

She squares her shoulders. "I'll walk with you."

"Look," says Grantaire as they weave through the crowds, "I can save you some time. I'm sure God is great and all, but the homosexuals got to me first, and frankly, their recruitment package was better. Bright colors, coupons, nobody trying to make me feel like a living sin, it's a pretty good deal over—"

"I don't think you're going to hell," she says in a rush. "Could you please just let me talk?"

"Go ahead." He doesn't remember freshmen being this pushy, either.

"Um, okay, so like." She drops her voice as though she wants to whisper, then seems to realize there's no way he'd be able to hear over the noise of the hallway. "When you met, uh, your boyfriend. How did you know he was gay?"

"How did I know my boyfriend was gay?" Grantaire repeats, slightly less wary. Whatever clueless straight girl line of questioning is going on here, at least it doesn't seem mean-spirited. "I mean, when he asked me out, that was a pretty good clue—"
"You asked him out," she protests, and Grantaire had forgotten that not everyone is privy to the official version of events the ABC got.

"He asked me out, I freaked out about coming out, changed my mind, and asked him out," he recites.

"Oh," says the freshman. "Okay, so before he—asked you out, how could you guys tell? Because, uh, there's this girl in my bio class—"

"Maybe it's none of your goddamn business," Grantaire starts, just as he registers her mumbling,

"And she's pretty great, and uh."

"Oh shit dude," says Grantaire, "oh my god, sorry man, are you—"

"Okay, obviously," she says, all bravado but she's blinking rapidly. It makes him think of Eponine, which is maybe why he finds himself softening his tone.

"C'mon, there's gotta be someone else you can—"

She's shaking her head. "You're the only—the only gay person I know," she says briskly.

"Technically bi," he tells her. "And I mean, you see where my gaydar is, so I don't know if there's any kind of hard and fast—"

"Oh," she says glumly. "Okay."

"Maybe find out what her opinion is about gay rights first? Like, if she's against them, either she's straight or she's so closeted there's not much point?"

She sniffs. "That's just common sense."

"Yeah," says Grantaire, wincing. 'The only gay person I know' keeps bouncing around in his head. God, what an awful situation. This is probably not the time to ask what her name is. Maybe tomorrow he can steal a peek at the attendance sheet or something. "I don't think there's a cheat code. You just—muddle through, try to pick up signs, and hope you're lucky."

Shit, he is so, so bad at this. The poor kid. "Look," he says, "shit, uh do you have some paper?"

She produces a notebook from the pile of books she's carrying and hands it over. It's got Sailor Moon on the cover. For reasons Grantaire can't explain, it kind of makes him want to cry.

He flips to a clean page and pulls out his marker. "Okay, here's my e-mail address," he tells her, struggling to write while he walks. His handwriting isn't pretty but it's more or less legible. "If you want to talk about anything, you can write to me, okay?"

She accepts the notebook with a dubious frown.

"I know at least three other LGBT kids, and all of them are way smarter than me, so if you stump me, I can get you a second opinion," he promises her. And then, on sudden inspiration, "And if people start bothering you, or if you just need some help, there are like ten kids who will automatically be on your side."

"Your weird little club?" she says.

"My boyfriend's weird little club, yeah."
The freshman makes a face. "Your boyfriend is scary."

"Nah," says Grantaire. "You just have to get to know him."

"If you say so," They're almost to Con Econ when the warning bell rings and she whirls around. "I've gotta go," she tells him, "I've got gym."

"Don't forget," he says. "E-mail me if you want." She nods and turns away towards the crush of people. "Oh and hey! Good luck."

The girl twists back to face him, Sailor Moon notebook clutched in her hands. "You too."

"Weirdest thing," Grantaire says at the lunch table the next day. "This little freshman girl like, asked for my guidance."

"She want to learn how to melt a Tupperware in the microwave?" Eponine asks coolly.

"That happened once," he says. "No, she wanted me to teach her how to spot other young lesbians. Or something, man. I'm her only window into the queer community, isn't that fucked up?"

"Is it really that shocking in this town that you'd be the only gay person she’s got access to?" Musichetta points out.

"Bi," he corrects absently. "And is it not disturbing this poor kid has to turn to me for advice? Like, what the fuck?"

"What did you tell her?" says Enjolras from where he's resting his head on Grantaire's shoulder. Enjolras has been doing this thing lately where, if he's tired, he just kind of tips half his bodyweight onto Grantaire. It is wonderful and horrible and his hair is very soft against Grantaire’s cheek.

"I gave her my e-mail and said she should go to the ABC if she has problems," says Grantaire. Enjolras is very still. "Really?" he says.

"Why, was that okay?" Given that Grantaire is barely even a part of what they do, he'll admit there's a decent chance he was overstepping.

"Yeah," says Enjolras, "it's great."

"He's just hurt that no baby gays have ever asked him for mentoring," says Courfeyrac.

"Aww, he wants one too," says Eponine. "Like a Tamagotchi," and Combeferre chokes on a mouthful of carrot and hummus.

Grantaire makes a big show of reaching over and rubbing Enjolras's back soothingly. It's for comic effect, he tells himself.

"Don't take it personally, pumpkintoes. It's not that they don't like you, they just think you're terrifying." Enjolras makes a wounded sound. His hair is sticking to the side of Grantaire's face.

"Freshmen aren't toys," says Jehan, with the indignation of a guy who was a freshman himself only last year. He frowns, then adds, reluctantly, "But is it just me or do they somehow seem really, really young?"
On Tuesday, he gets called out of Earth Science to go to Javert’s office. He spends the whole walk there wondering what he’s even done. It can’t be about the eagle, he and Bossuet served their time for that last week. It can’t be a drugs thing; he hasn’t been high in school for almost a year. He’s doodled some borderline disturbing stuff on worksheets lately, but that would net him a meeting with the school psychologist, not the vice principal.

His most deviant act in weeks was throwing a superball around in World Myth. He has really, really not been on top of his game.

The receptionist tells him to wait, which is kind of funny, since if Javert was the one to call him down, presumably Javert should be ready to see him. He’s not sure if it’s an intimidation thing, or if Javert just doesn’t give a shit about Grantaire’s time, doesn’t respect the sanctity of studying sedimentary rock.

When he goes to take a seat, Enjolras is already there, wedged into one of the uncomfortable-looking chairs, frowning down at a book and almost vibrating with intensity. Grantaire plunks down next to him.

"Fancy meeting you here," he says.

Enjolras looks over and his posture visibly relaxes. It's touching, even if it is all for show; the receptionist isn't trying to pretend not to watch them over the edge of her desk. Teenage boyfriends in the wild. Or rather, in captivity. They should get a zoo plaque.

"This definitely narrows down the reasons I could be in trouble," says Enjolras, so low Grantaire has to strain to hear him. Enjolras makes an impatient sound and tugs him closer so they can whisper, and Grantaire both loves and hates how casual Enjolras is about it, like this is their everyday thing, his hand on the back of Grantaire's neck.

Of course, technically it is, but.

"Any idea what we've done?" Enjolras murmurs.

"To earn a visit to the vice principal? It'd probably help if I knew what a vice principal actually does," says Grantaire.

Enjolras smirks at that; a rare expression on him, but he seems like the kind of person who would have enemies, and Javert is basically destined for the role. If Enjolras is an action hero at heart, Javert was born to be the villain in a kid’s movie, the kind who falls into a swimming pool at the end.

“Maybe it’s like in the government,” says Enjolras, “and he’s there in case something happens to the principal.”

“Casting the tie-breaking vote when the principal-senate’s an even split,” Grantaire agrees, and when Enjolras doesn’t immediately reply, “What? It was just in a quiz.” (For “What are two duties of the vice president?”, he’d gone with that, and “Breathlessly await the death of the president,” for which the teacher, to her eternal credit, gave him half a point.)

“The receptionist probably knows,” Enjolras whispers.

“Whether or not she works for an emergency backup principal?” says Grantaire. “Yeah, ask her if he sleeps in a glass case.”
Enjolras shifts in his chair. The tip of his nose brushes Grantaire’s cheek, accidental. “Like Snow White?”

“Like a fire extinguisher. Let’s not imagine someone having to kiss him awake, okay? Have mercy.”

When the office door swings open behind them, Javert is sporting a sour expression, as if he somehow managed to hear the whole exchange. Of course, that must be a key skill for anyone working in a high school: mastering the look that says “I know exactly what you were just saying about me, and I’m not hurt but you are in a world of trouble.”

Grantaire swivels back to Enjolras and raises his eyebrows, trying for a laugh. Enjolras gives him a grim nod in reply and takes his hand.

"We've had reports," says Vice Principal Javert, "that you've been violating school policy."

Well, yeah, thinks Grantaire. Javert probably wouldn’t call them out of class to congratulate them on really sticking to the rules. Grantaire finds himself glancing over at Enjolras, as if there’s some insight to be gained in his response to a piece of news so vague as to be useless.

“What policy would that be?” asks Enjolras, quietly serious.

Javert coughs. Behind the huge desk and the dour face, he’s starting to look uncomfortable. Grantaire’s not a good enough person to feel bad about it.

“The rules against public displays of affection,” says Javert.

The grip on Grantaire’s hand goes viselike for a second, Enjolras’s face pale and his jaw tight. He clearly can’t see the humor in the situation. It's too bad, because Grantaire can't stop laughing. Actually, physically can't stop. It may be a panic response, come to think of it.

Could they get out of trouble if they explain the lack of true affection taking place? Kids don’t get punished for acting in school plays, after all. Maybe they can pass it off as some kind of experimental theater—

“You’re joking,” says Enjolras. Grantaire loses it again, doubled over, gasping.

“We’ve had complaints from multiple students,” Javert starts, and this may be true, but Grantaire has got to guess that the epicenter of those particular complaints stemmed from Stacy’s little pack of Bible study kids on Thursday. ‘Way to turn the other cheek, assholes,’ he thinks. What Would Feuilly Do?

“Which displays bothered them?” says Enjolras.

“Students have said you make them uncomfortable,” Javert tells him, which is probably a badge of pride as far as Enjolras is concerned.

Sure enough, Enjolras leans forward, eyes bright. In with all the ice cream and the dumb jokes about pretend bands, Grantaire had almost forgotten about this, the full glory of avenging angel mode. Grantaire wipes his eyes.

“What exactly have we done that’s inappropriate?” Enjolras sets his jaw. “I want to know the charges against us, I think that’s fair.” ‘Charges’, like they’re being arrested. Grantaire giggles helplessly. His stomach muscles ache. “Are you alright,” says Enjolras in a quiet voice. He leans in
to whisper again. “What are you doing?” he hisses.

Grantaire shakes his head and struggles for air.

“The students didn’t get specific,” says Javert, in a voice the crackles with disapproval.

“You called us down here for a rumor?” says Enjolras, and his hand on Grantaire’s is shaking. “You don’t even know if it was something worth pursuing—”

Javert breaks in. “If students find that your behavior is distracting them, or making them feel unsafe, it’s our responsibility to take the steps we need to take.”

“Unsafe?” Enjolras snaps. “Do you understand what it’s like going to this school as a queer kid? If you want to talk about unsafe—”

“I would appreciate it if you could calm down,” says Javert, making a big show of sighing in a very adult and rational way. “If you don’t feel like you can talk about it reasonably right now—”

Enjolras is seething. It is beautiful to watch. “How can I be calm,” he gets out, “when the people I love are in actual danger—Jehan Prouvaire has put up with verbal abuse for years, he’s had his property ruined, there have been threats, my boyfriend’s locker was vandalized—”

“This is all hearsay,” says Javert. “I can’t talk about other student’s cases with you, but I think you can agree it’s unfair to expect us to respond to things we haven’t been told.”

“If you’re not hearing everything, maybe that’s because the LGBT presence at this school knows better than to go to you for any kind of help. Maybe it’s that you’re not listening. Jehan Prouvaire—”

“I’ve already told you, we’re not here to discuss other students, that is strictly confidential—”

“I know Jehan’s tried to meet with you about the endless, horrible harassment he’s—”

“We’re getting away from the issue,” says Javert. “What we are here to discuss, right now, is that more than one student has come to me saying your conduct makes them uncomfortable.”

“What conduct?” Enjolras flings his arms up. “My boyfriend and I hold hands, we touch each other on the arm or the back—”

Javert folds his hands together. “I have reports from students who feel targeted by your actions.”

“How could anyone feel targeted by our actions?” Enjolras asks tightly. “It’s not like we’re cuddling at them—”

Privately, Grantaire thinks that if anyone has ever figured out how to cuddle at someone, it’s Enjolras and the way he’ll wrap an arm around Grantaire when someone’s watching, as if daring them to react.

“You aren’t in trouble yet,” says Javert. “But I don’t think it’s unreasonable to tell you to tone it down—”

“Tone down what?” Enjolras raises their joined hands in the air. “This is about as physical as we get, since God knows what people would do if we went around kissing each other—”

“When many, many students feel that it encroaches on their ability to learn, it becomes an issue,” Javert snaps.
“So what you’re saying,” Enjolras leans in, voice crackling with intensity, “what you’re saying is that my boyfriend and I need to cater to their homophobia by giving up one of the very, very few things that makes life bearable in this awful place—”

“I’m saying you have a chance right now, to correct your behavior,” says Javert. “You don’t seem to understand how serious this is. A significant violation can be considered a form of sexual harassment towards other students. Which is the kind of thing that tends to make it onto permanent records.”

Grantaire, who had managed to sober up in the cleansing fires of Enjolras’s outrage, loses it again. He laughs so hard they both break off to stare at him, Javert annoyed at the inconvenience of all these messy emotions in his office, Enjolras starting to look a little alarmed.

“Oh god,” Grantaire gasps. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just—” He sucks in a deep breath, talking quickly as his voice quakes with more oncoming laughter, “you’re talking like we’re in some legal thriller about this, this super sacred ‘policy on PDA’ but the school doesn’t actually have a policy on PDA—” The laugh bubbles up again and he shakes, fighting it, takes another deep breath. “Like, at all. There is nothing in the student handbook about it.”

“That isn’t true,” says Javert.

“Have you read the whole thing?” says Grantaire.

“Uh.” Enjolras turns to face him. “Have you?”

“Many times,” Grantaire assures him. “It’s not there, I promise you.”

He’s expecting some doubt, he’s expecting to have to make his case, but Enjolras just turns to Javert again, anger lighting every inch of his face, and God, Grantaire could kiss him right now. Or, he couldn’t, but damn does he want to.

“That’s interesting,” says Enjolras, his voice deadly.

“The policy is very clear,” Javert insists.

Grantaire shakes his head. “Where is it clear, man? Find me the page.”

Enjolras smiles, leans back in his chair. “We’ll wait,” he says.

“The overall tone is that we have a responsibility to create a safe, comfortable learning environment, which is jeopardized by inappropriate behavior.”

“Like what, hate crimes?” says Enjolras.

“That is an extremely grave charge to make without evidence,” Javert intones.

“Yeah,” Grantaire wheezes, “why do that when we could sit here getting lectured for breaking rules that don’t exist—”

“How often do straight students get called in here for holding hands?” says Enjolras. “Also have I mentioned my mother is a lawyer? What does it look like if the media gets involved, and there isn’t even an official rule you can fall back on—”

Grantaire raises his eyebrows, chewing hard on his lip to prevent another outburst of hilarity.

“Well, in the meantime,” says Javert, “the student handbook is extremely clear on insubordination. I
think both of you could benefit from a detention, and a three-page essay on the importance of respecting authority.” He leans away with finality.

Enjolras stares at him, mouth opening and closing with no sound.

“Come on,” says Grantaire.

“This isn’t fair,” says Enjolras quietly. “It’s not fair.”

“I know.” Grantaire tugs at his elbow. “Get up, dude.”

Enjolras allows himself be pulled up, but he doesn’t look away from Javert.

“Who are you trying to protect,” says Enjolras, “your students or the status quo?”

“We’re done here,” says Javert from behind his desk. “If you could both get back to class—”

“We should go,” Grantaire says, tugging Enjolras away before he gets them in actual trouble. They make it as far as the door and then Enjolras digs in his heels, suddenly immobile. He turns around.

“We’re not stopping,” Enjolras announces. “You can’t scare us into stopping.” That muscle in his jaw jumps attractively, and Grantaire thinks that this moment would be in the trailer of the film, with big, sweeping strings coming under it. Cellos, probably.

And, because it will piss off Javert, which might pacify Enjolras, which might get them out of there with nothing worse than another day in detention and a bullshit assignment, Grantaire brings his free hand to the side of Enjolras’s face and lets his thumb stroke that ridiculous perfect cheekbone in a way that hopefully looks very romantic to an outside observer. Hopefully. Enjolras turns his eyes back to Grantaire, who pushes through what would probably be panic if he thought about it to say, in the warmest and fondest and most publicly affectionate voice he can muster,

“I don’t think a hurricane could stop you, babe.”

This close, he can see exactly how Enjolras’s eyes shut for a second, breathing hard, how he opens his eyes again and squares his jaw and Enjolras is still furious, this was a terrible idea, Grantaire has finally pushed their act too far. He needs some way to extricate himself from this situation but Enjolras is looking right at him and Grantaire is frozen in panic, shit, he has officially fucked up everything beyond repair—

Enjolras kisses him.

It’s over in a second but undeniably it happens, and then Grantaire is standing there with the sense memory of the warm press of Enjolras’s lips on his, mouth kind of tingling.

“Get out of my office,” says Javert.

Grantaire really hopes that the way he startles, the way he jumps at remembering there was another person in the room, is somehow not very obvious.

“Let’s go,” Enjolras tells him, like that wasn’t Grantaire’s game all along. And thankfully, it turns out that Grantaire’s feet still know how to walk if Enjolras tugs hard enough at his arm. Small victories.

They walk past the receptionist and the waiting area, back into the hallway. Enjolras opens his mouth. His mouth, which was recently on Grantaire’s mouth. Grantaire watches and thinks that if
Enjolras asks if he’s okay, if that was alright, Grantaire will absolutely lose it. Kissing. They just kissed on the lips. Enjolras kissed him.

Not for—not because he’d wanted to kiss Grantaire (Enjolras kissed him), but for the same reason any of these things ever happen. To defy authority, to make a statement. Social justice kissing.

(Enjolras kissed him.)

Grantaire needs to get it together, and to get it together fast, before Enjolras does something stupid, like apologize.

“Did you see the look on Javert’s face?” Grantaire says, although of course, he himself did not see it. His eyes must have moved in that direction on the way out the door, but any footage they picked up didn’t make it into his memory. Javert could have been dressed as a bumblebee and playing a tuba for all Grantaire knows. It still feels like a safe bet, though: that Enjolras got whatever scandalized expression he was going for.

“Not so much the look as the shade of purple,” Enjolras agrees, vehement. If he’s relieved at the subject change, Grantaire can’t fault him for that. “God, I can’t believe him. It’s not as if we’re making out all over the hallway or something—”

Grantaire narrowly avoids tripping over his own shoes. “Yeah,” he chokes out.

“The students ‘weren’t specific,’ what do you think they even said? ‘Oh help, they’re being gay at us!’” Enjolras bites his lip, which Grantaire tracks because he hasn’t actually been looking away from Enjolras’s mouth. “Or, I mean, I’m not trying to erase your bisexuality but—”

“Man, it’s cool,” says Grantaire, trying to shake himself out of whatever fog his brain is in. “I get it.”

Enjolras nods. “And meanwhile—meanwhile, Jehan has been putting in very specific complaints for days, and he’s gotten nowhere. I mean, there’s that letter we wrote on Friday—” While Bossuet and Grantaire were in detention, the rest of the ABC had carefully drafted out a letter detailing in writing all of the worst bullying Jehan’s dealt with this year, naming names and demanding action. Grantaire knows this chiefly because it’s all Enjolras could talk about on the drive home.

Grantaire hadn’t quite had the heart to point out that there was no strategic reason to tell him about this, to share progress reports like they’re buddies. Hadn’t had the heart or the willpower; there’s nothing like hearing Enjolras excited about plans.

“We’re still brainstorming what to do if we don’t get a response,” Enjolras says now. “But we kept a copy, and there’s no way it’s not helpful to have it all down on paper, on the record.” He’s said both of these things already, but Grantaire can’t begrudge him; it’s got to be on his mind all the time. “Jehan handed it in this morning, but honestly I wouldn’t hold my breath that they’re going to get back to us.” That part is new, and uncharacteristically negative. Maybe it wore on him, coming face to face with what passes for authority here.

“Yeah, but you’re going to kick their ass,” says Grantaire. “I almost pity those poor bastards. They don’t even know who they’re dealing with yet.” Something in the way Enjolras glances over at him then makes Grantaire realize it’s dangerously close to how he was talking in Javert’s office. “The ABC is going to break this shit wide open,” he adds, bringing them back into the safety of the collective ‘you.’ It could be his imagination, but Enjolras seems to relax a fraction.

“Where’s your fourth hour?” says Enjolras. They’re coming to the stairs, and Grantaire had sort of meant to ask, because it is definitely pushing coincidence that they’d have classes anywhere near
“Earth science,” says Grantaire. And, because Earth Science is probably too much of a blow-off class to be on Enjolras’s radar, “In the basement, fittingly enough.”

“I’ve got Lit.” Enjolras diplomatically leaves out the ‘Honors’ part. “Second floor,” he says, pointing upwards, as if the direction of the second floor from here was somehow ambiguous.

Grantaire nods. “Okay, see you at lunch.” He starts to head down the stairs.

“I’ll walk with you for a bit,” says Enjolras, falling into step with him again.

“And come back late to Lit?” Grantaire mimes a faint, back of his hand pressed to his forehead.
“Wow dude, I really am a bad influence on you.”

Enjolras huffs. “You didn’t invent delinquency, you know. And Mabeuf won’t get me in trouble. He hates how the administration handles this stuff. I mean, he can’t come out and say it, since he could lose his job, but it’s obvious.”

Grantaire tries to imagine having that much faith in an adult. He pretty much can’t.

“Anyway,” says Enjolras, “I’ve been meaning to tell you. Courf and Combeferre and I have been talking about it, and I think we might float, as a possibility for something for the group to vote on—”

“Yeah?”

“In terms of ways the ABC can make the biggest practical impact. Constantly switching focus lets us feel like we’re getting something done, but in the long run, it doesn’t do us any favors. We were talking about shifting our priorities.” Enjolras pauses, darting a glance sideways.

Unless these priorities suddenly include nachos, Grantaire still isn’t sure why he’s being brought in on this.

“Okay?” he says.

“We thought we might suggest starting an anti-bullying program,” says Enjolras. “We won’t give up on what we’ve been doing, but we’ll establish ourselves as a safe space. Kids can come to meetings and talk about what they’re going through, and we can try to help them, share strategies. Maybe volunteer to escort them to class if they’re worried for their safety.”

“Oh shit,” says Grantaire, “and the administration will probably be forced to back you guys up, since it’s not like they can come out in favor of bullying. You could like, get funding for this.”

Enjolras nods. “Yeah, Courfeyrac found that particularly delightful,” he says, somehow both fond and serious. “And we could—it wouldn’t be just for LGBT kids, but if any of them do show up, we could easily put together some resources for that, too.”

“Oh, admit it: you just really, really want your own little gay freshman to mentor,” says Grantaire, but Enjolras doesn’t take the bait, or even seem to notice the bait.

“Nobody should have to be afraid to go to school,” he says.

Grantaire swallows, eyes watering. “That’s, uh, that’s a pretty good idea you guys have,” he croaks.

Enjolras stops in his tracks. “You really think so?”
“Um.” No matter how many times Grantaire keeps swallowing, the lump in his throat is still there. “Yeah,” he says, but even when Enjolras starts walking again, he seems to be mulling something over. “What?”

“You never like our ideas,” says Enjolras.

“I don’t not-like your ideas,” Grantaire tells him.

Enjolras doesn’t seem to take much comfort in that. “You think they’re worthless.”

“I think they’re pointless,” Grantaire corrects. “Like, writing to your senator or whatever, it’s not gonna do anything. It’s nice you guys are trying, I guess.”

“Do you think this is pointless?”

“No,” says Grantaire, with more feeling than he was really going for. “Fuck, if it’d been in place before, when I talked to that girl—”

“Well yeah,” says Enjolras slowly. “That’s how we got the idea. That’s exactly what we should be doing: making connections with the people who could use our help and reaching out to them.” He smiles, weary and brilliant. “Even if we can’t make the school protect us, nobody can keep us from protecting each other.”

Grantaire wants to hug him so badly that he has to cross his arms over his chest. He doesn’t trust himself not to reach out.

“That’s, uh. That’s—really cool,” he says. When he looks over, Enjolras is watching his face intently. It’s a little too much eye contact for Grantaire’s comfort.

“You never like our ideas,” Enjolras says again.

“Look,” says Grantaire, sighing. “If I was jacking you around on this, you’d be able to tell. I’d be way more of an asshole about it.”

“You’re not an asshole,” says Enjolras. He coughs. “I don’t know. I just—I thought you should know what was going on, because you’d know if we were dating, so.”

They reach the door to earth science. “Well,” says Grantaire, “That’s me. See you later.”

Enjolras starts to turn around. “You really think it’s an okay idea?” he says again.

“You know I’d tell you if I didn’t,” Grantaire reminds him.

“Yeah,” says Enjolras. “I know.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “See you,” he says as he heads back towards the stairs to Honors Literature, to go have have lofty literary debates about books Grantaire’s never read, literally over Grantaire’s head.

Grantaire sits through the remainder of a lesson about plate tectonics, actually taking notes because at least it’s something to do with his hands. He doesn’t think about Enjolras’s lips, soft and a little chapped. He doesn’t think about the look on his face right before the kiss. All of that is easy to explain.

The craziest part of the whole affair, when you get right down to it, is that Enjolras asked for his opinion. Asked, and seemed to want to know.

From the front of the room, the teacher says something about seismic shifts and Grantaire thinks,
'Dude, you have no idea.'

The whole debacle in Javert’s office means they have another detention together, which is something Grantaire doesn’t even think about until he walks into Mrs. Peterson’s room and Enjolras is waiting for him. Like, Enjolras has actually saved him a seat.

“So, have you thought about what you’re gonna write in your essay?” he says as Grantaire settles in. “The one about how important it is to respect authority, I mean.” His voice has a slight wry tilt to it that Grantaire is really coming to enjoy.

“The thing is,” says Grantaire, who has written his share of apology essays, “they can make you hand in something, but other than having you do it again if it’s just blatantly bullshit, they can’t make you write something good.”

“It’s so messed up,” says Enjolras. “How would anyone think they could change our minds just by forcing us to pretend we agree for three pages?”

“Oh, they don’t. It’s just a power move.” Grantaire shrugs. “They’re fucking with us,” he says. “Anyway, I think I’m gonna cite motivational posters. Like, look up the ones on leadership and quote as many of them as I can. Describe the ocean sunsets or soaring birds in lot of detail, because they’re so symbolic about the importance of authority.”

“Mountain vistas,” Enjolras supplies. He leans in. “And I was thinking of putting it in terms of the Founding Fathers. Write about them setting up a new government, how a society depends on people following the rules—as long as the rules in question aren’t, y’know, hateful, oppressive tyranny.”

“Oho,” says Grantaire.

“I feel like there’s a way I could get away with it, but that I’d have to be subtle about it?” says Enjolras, sighing. “I don’t know, maybe I’m not the best at subtlety when I write sometimes.”

Grantaire manages to keep a straight face at that, which, he can’t help thinking, is really, really nice of him.

Freshman Algebra Girl is named Molly Dubicki. Grantaire figures this out by cunningly peering at the top of her worksheet.

She claps her hand over the paper. “I’m not gonna give you the answers,” she hisses. “Just because you’re—”

“I wasn’t gonna ask,” says Grantaire. “Hey, didn’t hear from you this weekend.”

“Maybe I don’t need your help,” Molly tells him, eyes sweeping the room as she talks. Grantaire gets it. He does.

“No, fair,” he says in an undertone. “If you’ve got absolutely everything about your situation all figured out, that’s totally understandable. But if you’re okay with it, could I maybe have your email, too? My friends are working on some stuff. I could keep you informed.”

Molly hesitates.
“Yo, Dubicki,” says Pete Taffney from the back of the room, “Why are you wasting your time talking to Grantaire? He’s never gonna like you back, don’t you know he’s a huge—”

“Oh, shut up,” Molly interrupts. She blinks, looking surprised by her own daring.

“No worries, man,” says Grantaire over whatever bullshit Pete Taffney is saying. He doesn’t bother to try to hear it. He doesn’t even bother to turn around. Not worth it. “I’m just giving her fashion advice.”

Molly slips a corner of notebook paper into his hand. “How many days in a row have you worn those jeans?” she says.

Grantaire shrugs. What is people’s deal? “Thanks,” he mutters, tucking the scrap of paper into the smallest pocket on his backpack.

“Still not giving you my answers,” she says.

“Still not asking for them.”

“But you’re flunking,” says Molly, more concerned than a fourteen-year-old has any right to look. “I’m pretty sure you need to pass Algebra to graduate.”

Grantaire huffs a breath out one side of his mouth. Well, shit.

He waits a few days to make his move. “Look,” says Grantaire, flopping against the wall of lockers in a way that will, with any luck, garner a lot of sympathy, “I swear to god, I will draw you anything in the world that you want, for as long as you want, for the rest of your life, if you can just make factoring make sense.”

“Seriously?” Joly shuts his locker and grabs his cane. Grantaire has the distinct sense that if Joly’s hands were free, he’d be rubbing them together with glee. "Oh man,” he says, “Oh man. I know so many math jokes, this is gonna be incredible.”

Back in the day, four or five months ago, Grantaire had somewhat assumed that Joly was dating Musichetta. Well, that, or maybe that Bossuet was. He was pretty sure it had to be one or the other. The three of them are always together. Musichetta’s outgoing generally, but her vibe with the two of them is different; she’s Courfeyrac levels of affectionate, much more than she is with, say, Courfeyrac himself. Grantaire actually never got to the bottom of it. He’d had too much other shit to deal with.

But he's reminded of this when Bossuet and Musichetta materialize out of the crowd, Bossuet's arm around her waist in a way that seems to settle the question, until she steps up to greet Joly by kissing him on the cheek and muttering, "Get a haircut, dude, you look like a tall hobbit", as if just to keep the mystery alive.

"No way," says Joly, "Bossuet has enough haircut for both of us." Bossuet's hair has always been short, but he recently buzzed it down to stubble.

"True," Musichetta allows. She reaches up and strokes the top of Bossuet’s head, something Grantaire has only ever seen a woman do in razor commercials. He reassesses his reassessment. They are definitely together.

Except Joly immediately joins in, so maybe it's not weird to pet someone's scalp in public after all?
Grantaire's not thinking about the incident in Joly's parents' bathroom, he tells himself. He's not.

"It's so cool," Joly's saying with a laugh. "Grantaire, Grantaire you've got to try this. It's all bristly, like petting a friendly hedgehog."

"If we ever open a pub, that's what we're calling it," says Bossuet, grinning, totally untroubled. He tilts his head down a few inches. "R. get in here, dude. For good luck."

Grantaire reluctantly reaches up and runs one palm over Bossuet's skull, even though it feels a little like being roped into the chilliest orgy of all time. It has got a cool texture, though.

"So," Bossuet says, straightening back up as they head to Ms. Hucheloup's, "how was the rest of your day, Joly?" He pronounces it with about quadruple the necessary L's. Jolllly.

“You guys, I’m gonna be a tutor,” Joly enthuses. “A professional tutor!”

“You’re being paid?” says Musichetta.

Joly beams. “In art,” he says. “Grantaire is paying me in a lifetime supply of art.” Bossuet and Musichetta exchange a look. There is a lot of humor in the look, enough to skate towards ominous.

“What,” says Grantaire.

“I hope you realize you’ve committed to illustrating Joly’s whole webcomic,” Musichetta tells him.

“Oh frick,” says Joly, in a voice filled with awe. “I didn’t even think of that. Frick. This is awesome.”

Grantaire looks back and forth between the three of them. “Just what am I on the hook for?” he asks, only kind of pleadingly.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s super charming,” says Bossuet. “Astro-cat. It’s the adventures of a cat astronaut—”

“And you passed up the chance to call it Catstronaut?” Grantaire butts in. “Really?”

Joly shakes his head. “Too late, I already registered the domain name. Are you free on Wednesdays after school?”

“Yeah, dude,” says Grantaire.

“Cool! We can get in a solid two hours of math, no problem,” says Joly, cheerfully, like this is not the worst possible thing a person could do with their time. Now that it’s not an abstract idea, the prospect of a full two hours dedicated to Algebra makes his palms sweat. Joly continues, untroubled, “and then we can talk character designs. Grantaire,” he says, turning serious, “how are you at drawing exploding rocket ships?”

In spite of the churning in his stomach, Grantaire smiles. “Finally, someone’s asking the real questions.”

The ABC meeting goes well. Grantaire spends most of his attention taking notes on a pile of Joly’s old Astro-cat outlines, but even he can tell it goes well. They discuss the possible shift in directions. People are excited, energized. At one point, Enjolras actually has Grantaire explain to the rest of the group about Molly, and Grantaire tries to pretend like being asked to speak at a meeting is not a sure
sign of an impending apocalypse.

When they put it to a vote, Marius hands him a makeshift ballot, same as everyone else. Grantaire checks the box and hands it in, because why the hell not?

It’s unanimous.

Enjolras seems to be in good spirits afterwards, especially in the van, when Grantaire finally remembers to give him Molly’s email address.

“Thanks,” he says, tucking it into his pocket. His eyes feel considering as Grantaire shifts into gear and backs out of the parking lot. “You’re good at this stuff.”

“Are you kidding?” says Grantaire. “It was Hell. She acted like I wanted her math answers, and she gave me shit about wearing the same jeans too much.”

“Who even pays attention to that kind of thing?” says Enjolras, who does seem to wear the same red hoodie an awful lot. Grantaire had been picturing a closet full of 15 identical hoodies, like a cartoon character. On some level, he’ll admit this explanation makes more sense.

"Here is the deal," says Joly on Wednesday in the library, and his voice gives the effect of opening a briefcase between them on the table, even as he steals the last of Grantaire’s pretzels and roots through his backpack. "I got a pile of exercises off the internet. We're gonna go through them together. Ask me whatever you need to solve them. If you’re confused about anything, you have to tell me. We don't move on until you're sure you understand me. That's my first rule.”

“...okay,” says Grantaire. He has the sense this is a speech developed ahead of time, with help. “How many rules are—”

“Second rule,” Musichetta breaks in, “You’re not allowed to interrupt him.”

“What are you two even doing here?” says Grantaire. Bossuet looks up from some kind of game he’s playing on his phone. “Oh, I’m his ride home,” he says.

“If it’s any comfort, R, I promise we’re not paying attention,” says Musichetta, who is folding some kind of origami thing that looks tantalizingly more fun than Algebra. To be fair, gargling with toenail clippings sounds more fun than Algebra right now.

Joly holds up three fingers. “Third rule is, you're not allowed to skip anything."

Grantaire nods.

"When you get a whole page right, you get a sticker," Joly’s saying. He pulls a plastic shopping bag from his backpack. "They're scratch-and-sniff," he adds. "Fourth rule is, you're not allowed to pretend that isn't awesome. The popcorn one actually smells like popcorn, it is insane." 

Grantaire keeps nodding. Part of him wants to give Joly a hard time about this sudden transformation into a first grade teacher, but he doesn't want to face Musichetta’s wrath. And to be honest, he doesn't want to risk missing out on stickers. "Can I smell it?"

"Not until you've finished a whole page," says Joly, scooting the bag back out of his reach. "Fifth rule. Last rule."
"Hit me." Grantaire balls up the empty pretzel bag and contemplates throwing it into the trash, versus the embarrassment of missing. There are a decent number of people in the library. He tucks it into his backpack instead.

"At no point are you allowed to say 'I'm bad at this' or 'I can't do math' or anything like that. You aren't even allowed to joke about it." Joly looks very serious, and Grantaire freezes. He had been counting on sarcasm to get himself through this. It feels like having his only lifeboat tugged away. He really wishes they were the only ones at the table.

"That's, uh, gonna cut down on my available comments," says Grantaire.

Joly nods. "Great. Take all that energy and use it for Algebra."

"Joly," says Grantaire, at a volume that makes the librarian look up from her desk disapprovingly. He sighs. "You can't make me good at this just by forcing me to pretend I'm not shitty—"

"Uh uh," says Joly. "Uh-uh, nope. Here is the thing about math. It's not an art. It's just a series of rules. The rules are always the same, and if you know how use them, they always work." He leans in. "There is no such thing as 'bad at math', okay, it's a made-up concept. It's a conspiracy. There's only two reasons it feels like you can't do this stuff." Joly holds up two fingers. "Either it's never been explained to you in a way you got, and-or you never tried hard enough. I'm gonna explain it awesome, so no worries there, and I'm gonna make you try your butt off, so like. Literally you can't fail. It's not even an option."

Grantaire blinks at him. It makes sense that maybe every member of Enjolras's posse has a core of steel somewhere inside themselves, but Joly’s attitudes are indistinguishable from those of a muppet 70% of the time, so this is a lot of take in.

"Anyway," says Joly, leaning back. "You get stickers. So! First up, factoring trinomials!"

"Uh," Grantaire swallows. "I actually don't understand how to do it with two numbers, either. With the—where it's just x-squared and whatever." He literally doesn't even know what to call it, that's where he's at.

But Joly seems, if anything, cheered by this. "Awesome, dude!" he says. "Hang on, let me write up some sample problems." He has to make up his own exercises because it didn't even occur to Joly that Grantaire could be so far behind. Grantaire nods vaguely.

"Yo," says Joly, "cheer up. When we get through the first twenty, I'll tell you all about Astro-cat's backstory." He raises his eyebrows. "Trust me, it is a doozy."

It is a doozy. Joly’s approach to writing stories is the same as his approach to teaching math: throw in everything, see what sticks, and then go with that, even if it’s blatantly ridiculous. He explains slope problems in terms of tiny creatures trying to climb through the graph. He comes up with a little dance for multiplying binomials, and he makes Grantaire practice it with him in the library, which would be humiliating except Joly somehow has the power to make Musichetta and Bossuet do it, too.

And everything, absolutely everything has a mnemonic device, except Joly creates his own, so they make no sense. But the fact is, they’re so transcendentally dumb, they stick in the memory, like a four-chord pop song that rhymes “more” with “anymore.”

Grantaire can’t think about the order of operations without remembering Joly leaning forward to prompt him, “Grantaire, why does Astro-cat say time travel isn’t worth the risk?”
“Because what if there are Back to the Future hijinks and you wind up cockblocking your parents?”

“Grantaire.”

“...Practically Everyone Meets Dinosaurs, Astro-cat Says.”

And then Joly muttering, “Darn straight” with a tad too much conviction.

This means Grantaire can’t take a quiz without smiling to himself like an idiot, but his grades are climbing. Well, comparatively. It’s hard to feel awesome about a D-, although Joly beams when Grantaire mentions it (“You went from 30% to 60%! You fricking doubled, dude! Do you want me to, like, plot it on a chart?”), Bossuet claps him on the back, and Musichetta folds him a celebratory paper frog.

“Get it?” says Joly, tapping the frog on its behind to make it hop. “Because you’re improving leaps and bounds.”

“Nope,” Bossuet tells him cheerfully. “You tell the nice lady thank you, and you take your free origami.”

It’s a fair point, thinks Grantaire. “Thanks,” he says. Musichetta nods, magnanimous.

He picks it up, sets it on the palm of his hand. The corners are crisp and she used special paper, something shiny. All for a fucking $D$ minus, but.

Grantaire keeps the frog.

Chapter End Notes

So it turns out if you google "Astro-cat", you will actually get quite a few results. The idea’s already kind of been taken. But fortunate for the webcomic world of circa 2006, teen Joly does not know this.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Outside, it's almost raining, a gross dampness somewhere between mist and drizzle, like even the sky can't muster the energy for a storm.

Chapter Notes

A quick head's up that this chapter contains some stuff that could conceivably be triggery? Check the end notes if you're concerned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grantaire doesn't exactly plan on giving Enjolras a ride home.

There really is no reason to do it; there's no meeting today, no covert news to exchange, nothing to fight about. There's not even any non-covert news; Enjolras walked him to Algebra a few hours ago and they spent the whole time gossiping about various members of the ABC. Cosette and Marius are now officially together, and this may be why, when Grantaire catches up with Eponine at the end of the day, she already has plans in place to hang out with Musichetta.

Which is fair. She could no doubt use some distraction right now, and given how long she's held a torch for Marius, she's earned the right to pick what form of distraction she wants. It would be petty as hell to feel ditched. Grantaire gets that, but he can't stop himself from asking, "So, what do you think you guys'll get up to?" and maybe it doesn't sound as casual as he's hoping.

"Man, I don't know." Eponine doesn't seem to notice his awkwardness. She's dabbing at one eye with the tips of her fingers. "Eat chocolate, do makeovers?"

"Finally discover the look that says you," Grantaire volunteers. "Express your inner self."

"Maybe I'll just get some eyeliner, write 'boys are stupid' across my forehead," she says, and Grantaire would take exception to that, except it's also not a bad summary of his life situation right now.

She livens up when she sees Musichetta. They greet each other like they've been apart for years, even though they must've just spoken.

"Well, have fun," he tells them, and Eponine lifts a hand for goodbye without turning around.

Grantaire had been hoping they could chill at his place tonight, play some video games—with or without the drinking, to be honest he doesn't care. Lately he feels like one of those old-fashioned wind-up toys, like someone's been cranking the key in his back a few degrees tighter each day. Reading the books Jehan lends him can reverse the key a half-turn; so can hearing Eponine invent new exciting curse words as she sews her prom dress or working on Astro-cat concept art. But the moment it's over, the key is twisting forwards again. The seconds crawl by but the weeks are too fast
to track. He knows he should be sleeping more, but whatever.

Outside, it’s almost raining, a gross dampness somewhere between mist and drizzle, like even the sky can’t muster the energy for a storm.

If he’s honest, he’s feeling twitchy as he heads towards the parking lot, and that could be half the reason he finds himself keeping an eye out in front of the buses. Enjolras is easy to spot anyway, and would be even without the bright red hoodie like a battle pennant against the gray sky. Grantaire can’t play it like he’s being nonchalant, just shoves through the crowds until they’re side by side.

Enjolras is looking away. Grantaire says, "Hey," and touches his elbow. In February, it would’ve given him a heart attack to put a hand on Enjolras’s arm, and now it's something he doesn't have to think about, a habit he picked up without trying. Something he’ll have to unlearn next year.

In some ways, this was easier when they weren't getting along, and the lines between how they acted in front of people and how they acted in Grantaire's van were roughly as wide as Ohio. Fucked up as the whole sequence of events has been, on some selfish level Grantaire is glad he's gotten a chance to see Enjolras laugh or talk to a twelve-year-old or condemn a Vice Principal or get so distracted by a point Combeferre's making that he is in real danger of absentmindedly biting into his sandwich before he's taken it out of the baggie.

Enjolras has smiled at him in private the same way Enjolras is smiling at him now, but there it was thoughtless and here it's an act, and in either case it can never mean the things Grantaire wishes it could.

It is absurd to be wallowing in these thoughts when nobody is forcing them to talk right now. It's all on Grantaire; he did this to himself. He's not sure what he was thinking. He should just get himself and his slew of messy feelings out of the way, hightail it safely to his van before—

"Hey," says Enjolras quietly. Even though his backpack is far from full, there's a certain slump to the way he's standing. It's no longer shocking to see Enjolras tired, but it still catches at some ridiculous urge in Grantaire that he doesn't even have a name for. It makes him wish he owned a big pile of quilts, and also that it wouldn't be super weird to invite other people to come nap in his giant quilt-nest for a while.

"If you're not feeling the bus," Grantaire starts, and Enjolras is already nodding, eyes closed.

"Please," he says.

Enjolras is silent all the way to the parking lot. Grantaire half-wonders if maybe he's distracted by some official piece of business that can only be discussed away from prying ears, but when they climb into the van, Enjolras curls in on himself and doesn't say a word.

"You okay?" says Grantaire.

"Yeah," says Enjolras. It's hollow, but Grantaire has no right to push. Instead, he pulls onto the road and the now-familiar path between the school and Enjolras's house. The drizzle has solidified into rain. He applauds their commitment and turns on the windshield wipers.

Outside, rows of sprinklers are still spraying across neatly tended lawns. "That's got to be a waste of water, right?"


"Sprinklers when it's raining. Like, most of it's just gonna wind up in drainage ditches anyway."
Grantaire taps his fingers on the wheel. "I mean, the whole sprinklers thing is probably pretty fucked up in general? Like, there are places where people are dying of thirst and we're literally pouring water on the ground—"

"Are you making fun of me?" says Enjolras, abrupt. They're at a stop sign, so Grantaire glances over, where Enjolras is eyeing him warily, knees pulled nearly to his chest.

"How would that even work?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras shakes his head. "You're talking like—I don't know, it almost sounds like you're doing uh, an impression of—"

They haven't had this kind of argument in weeks. That should be the most surprising part of this exchange.

"Whoa man," Grantaire says. "Can't I notice a fucked up thing on my own?"

"Sorry," says Enjolras. He thunks the back of his head against the headrest and sighs. "You're right, that wasn't fair. I just—it's been a not-great day, and I'm a little—" He breaks off.

"It's cool, we all have our moments," says Grantaire. "The Man got you down?" Then, "For the record, I'm still not making fun of you."

"There was—we had a debate today, in my speech class," Enjolras says. "Theoretically, it was about charter schools but it turned into me trying to argue separation of church and state again, and Clyde Mucci outright calling me a pedophile to my face." He shifts in his seat, twisting the seatbelt back and forth. "So, uh, that was my afternoon."

"But you don't care what people think of you," Grantaire blurts out, like some kind of gross groupie.

"No," says Enjolras wearily. "But hearing anyone talk that way about anyone, it—I don't know. Sometimes it's very, very hard to believe in this country."

“I hear that,” says Grantaire.

The van splashes through a puddle, windshield wipers squeaking back and forth. On either side of the road, sprinklers spin jerky circles, and the water runs off the lawns and into the gutter.

Out of nowhere, Enjolras says, “Did you know they used to treat homosexuality as a mental illness?”

Grantaire thinks of that re-education pamphlet in his locker and tries not to shudder. “They kinda still do."

“No,” Enjolras says, “Not fringe groups. I mean, psychologists. Most of them. As late as the seventies. It was in their official handbook of, of disorders.”

It’s like Grantaire’s brain is trying to stretch around this new knowledge, and doesn’t want to. “So like, depression, schizophrenia, ‘likes cock’?" he says. His hands are tight on the steering wheel. He knows it’s the wrong time to be flippant. He can’t help it. Sometimes he gets why people deface history textbooks.

But Enjolras only says, “Basically.”

“Jesus.”

When Grantaire glances over, Enjolras is staring out the window, tracing a drop of water with his
finger.

“It’s what they were taught in school,” says Enjolras. “It’s what all the experts said. If you were a scared gay kid, or a scared bi kid before 1973, and you looked it up or you went to a therapist or you took a psychology class—and of course, it wasn’t just ‘you’re sick’, it was ‘you’re sick and even if you don’t feel sick, that’s part of the sickness.’”

Grantaire thinks about Jehan ignoring Clyde in World Myth class, Molly and her Sailor Moon notebook, Enjolras finding the word ‘demisexual’ by mistake.

“Fuck,” he says. He can’t think of anything else to say for a long moment. Nothing feels big enough. Even ‘fuck’ is woefully inadequate. Finally he adds, “Christ, man. You ever wanna throw in the towel and hop the border to Canada?”

“No,” says Enjolras. “Never. Not for a second. That was my point. The APA used to treat it like mental illness. And then they stopped. And not because they felt like it, but—people made them stop. All of these activists and radicals and psychologists who were secretly gay came together and forced their hand. Look it up sometime, it’s amazing. There was so much risk, and they had absolutely no way to tell if it was gonna work, and they did this thing that had never been done before. I think about that all the time.” Grantaire doesn’t have to look to know that the light is back in Enjolras’s eyes. It’s in his voice. “With a lot of things, but gay rights especially. Their arguments are so weak, there’s no way they can win forever. It’s so clear.”

"God, what I wouldn't give—" Grantaire breaks himself off before he can say anything damning.

"What?" says Enjolras.

"I don't know," Grantaire mumbles. "Must be nice, like, to be that sure. About anything."

"It's horrible," Enjolras says. Grantaire darts a look at him and he laughs, uncomfortable. "No, I'm sorry. A lot of the time it's not. Usually it's not. But just. I know it could be better, but ninety nine percent of the time I feel like I'm yelling at a wall. I can tell they're not listening. I can tell they don't take me seriously. I can see them looking at each other going, 'What’s this freak talking about?' And I keep thinking, 'There's got to be some way I can say it that would get through to them and I keep trying, because I can't not, but——" Enjolras swallows.

"Okay, you're right," says Grantaire, because seriously, Enjolras and Sisyphus could form a support group. "It's horrible." If only there was some way to lend Enjolras some tiny sliver of Grantaire’s hard-won ability to not give a shit, he thinks. But of course, that would never work. Caring is the source of Enjolras’s super powers. It’s just some Greek tragedy bullshit where the thing that makes him strong also keeps him from ever, ever cutting himself a break. When Enjolras doesn't volunteer anything else, it's his turn to sigh. "If you're wondering, I'm still not making fun of you."

"I know," says Enjolras, "and I appreciate it." He sags back in the chair, eyes closed again.

Grantaire can't think of anything to say to that. All he can think about is that heap of imaginary quilts.

“Sorry to——” Enjolras starts, and Grantaire says,

“No,” a little too violently. A thought surfaces. He takes a deep breath. "Hey," he says, "I think there's a song you need to hear."

With his free hand, he reaches over and cues up the first track of Bahorel's mix tape.

The nice thing about driving is that it takes up a lot of attention. There are street signs to obey and
cars to watch out for and it means that he doesn't spend every single second frantically searching for Enjolras's reaction from the corner of his eye. It's more like every other second.

When the track ends, Enjolras is sitting very straight. "Um, sorry," he says, "if this is weird, but—"

Grantaire's heart is pounding harder than the drums. He can feel the nervous thrum of his pulse in his entire body and his palms are tingling, it's completely stupid, what is wrong with him—

"Uh," Enjolras is saying, "could we maybe listen to that one again?"

"Oh my god," says Grantaire, fighting not to laugh in relief. "Right answer."

The track ends for a second time, and Grantaire says, tentatively, "Do, uh, you wanna hear it ag—"

"Yes please," says Enjolras in one breath.

This is the best day of Grantaire's life.

The next time they replay it, they're both thrashing around in their seats.

By the fourth time, Enjolras is humming along to the chorus. Granted, he's basically tone-deaf so it's more like an ambient buzzing, but.

The fifth time, Grantaire rolls down the windows, fucking rain be damned, and cranks up the volume until the song is pouring out onto the suburban streets. It's a public service announcement.

They make it to Enjolras's driveway halfway through listen number six, but maybe Enjolras doesn't notice, because he doesn't say anything. Neither does Grantaire, who puts the car in park and lets the song play out. They sing along on the lines they know. Enjolras is half-shouting so Grantaire brings his voice up to match, sings louder. Together, it's almost deafening.

When the track ends, Enjolras blinks like he's surprised to be at his own house. After a second, he turns back towards Grantaire. His eyes are tired, but he's almost smiling.

"Thanks," he says. "That was—really, thank you."

"Not a problem," says Grantaire.

Enjolras makes no move to get out of the car. He looks down, then back up again, seems to square his shoulders. Grantaire thinks maybe Enjolras is gonna ask for the name of the band, but instead he says, "Grantaire, can I talk to you about something tomorrow?"

Grantaire scratches the back of his head. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, after the meeting?"

"In my car?" says Grantaire. Enjolras nods. "So like, when and where we always talk anyway?"

"Yes," says Enjolras. He says it like he totally gets what's going on right now, which—good for him.

"Do I point out we're already talking? Like, right now? In my car, in fact?" Grantaire pokes at the air freshener to illustrate. They watch the faded cardboard tree swing back and forth on its string.
Enjolras huffs. “I know.” His eyes follow the air freshener, like a hypnotist’s watch. “But just. I need some time to get my thoughts together first. Figure out what angle to come at this from.”

“Are you gonna make a presentation? Climb in here with posterboard and notecards and a five-minute time limit?” Grantaire taps the air freshener again. “I mean, yeah, I’m down, why not.” Enjolras turns to look at him. “I won’t actually make you stick to five minutes,” Grantaire tells him. Somehow, it comes out like a confession.

Enjolras is still looking at him. Grantaire swallows.

“I just—want to get it right,” says Enjolras, which applies to literally everything he does, so again, Grantaire’s not sure what that’s supposed to clarify.

“Is it important?” he guesses.

“It is to me,” Enjolras says, although again, true across the board of many things. Grantaire tries to force his mind not to spin out immediately to the absolute worst possible option. It’s an instinct, and it’s harder to reign in when he doesn’t sleep enough.

“Bad news?” he ventures.

Enjolras bites his lip. “I hope not,” he says, quiet. He looks so uncertain, it almost makes Grantaire’s breath catch. His lungs hurt.

“Is it about the ABC?” he says.

“Kind of?” says Enjolras.

It could be more of what they talked about after Javert’s office, Grantaire thinks. A new direction for the group, Grantaire brought in for his unbiased opinion. Enjolras cares about his club and his causes so much, he could genuinely be this wound up about it. But Grantaire isn’t sure that explains all the tension in the van, the way the air feels too thick all of a sudden, even with the windows down, even with that brave little pine tree doing its best to restore and freshen.

“Am I gonna lose this round of twenty questions?” Grantaire asks.

“Uh, yeah,” says Enjolras. “Almost certainly. And I’d rather—just, it’ll be better if we talk tomorrow. Please?” His legs are crossed, one foot jiggling against the seat.

In all the time they’ve done this, in all the time he’s known Enjolras, or talked to him or whatever, Grantaire’s not sure he’s ever seen Enjolras this nervous before. Not his awkward concern months ago when Grantaire came out. It’s more restless. It’s—the only comparison Grantaire can think of is that time in Joly’s parents’ bathroom, which is a stupid comparison to draw because nobody is about to suck on anyone else’s collarbone, and also maybe Grantaire is staring at Enjolras’s mouth now, great.

His lips are a little parted. They’re not sitting that far apart. Enjolras kissed him, it’s only fair. Grantaire could unbuckle his seatbelt and—he gives himself a firm mental shake.

“Yeah, man, of course,” says Grantaire. “Whatever you need.” This is also way too telling, but Enjolras maybe doesn’t notice, only smiles back at him in a way that makes Grantaire add, “I hope it’s good news?”

“Me too,” says Enjolras, levering open the door. “See you tomorrow.”
Grantaire can’t resist. “In the same time and the same place that we always see each other, under the same conditions that we always—”


“See you,” says Grantaire helplessly.

It’s kind of funny, Grantaire reflects, eating a carton of noodles over the sink after his parents have gone to bed, that Molly thought Enjolras is scary. Because yeah, Enjolras has some scariness in him, but like Bahorel, he contains multitudes, and a lot of those multitudes are ridiculous. Enjolras is smart, and funnier than Grantaire would have guessed, but he is also a weirdo, and when he’s uncomfortable, he can be awkward as hell.

Grantaire freezes, fork halfway to his face.

Sometimes, Enjolras is incredibly awkward.

Awkward enough to, for example, confess to someone he liked them by describing them to their face in the most indirect, convoluted way possible.

Awkward enough to stare at them from across a lunch table and blame it on a smear of marker. Awkward enough to talk himself into letting them give him a hickey in Joly’s parents’ basement and then—Grantaire drops his fork—make some sounds that maybe weren’t necessarily pain?

And afterwards, when Grantaire had sat curled up on the edge of the tub, desperately praying for his body to calm the fuck down, where had Enjolras been? Curled up right next to him, not making eye contact, breathing hard. Enjolras, who’s only attracted to people he likes.

This is a crazy thing to let himself dwell on, but it’s like that turning point with an optical illusion, how once you’ve realized the vase can also be two faces, the lines shift in your mind and you can’t unsee it.

Enjolras has listened to a lot of his problems and defended him from bullies and laughed at his jokes and taken him for fucking ice cream sundaes. Enjolras kissed him, when he really, really didn’t have to.

Enjolras sat in Grantaire’s van and listened to Grantaire’s favorite song six times in a row, rain pelting the roof, music blasting from the speakers, sound waves knocking into their bodies, yelling along.

Grantaire sets down the carton. He almost throws it away; the idea of calmly standing here eating noodles is suddenly outrageous.

He scrubs a hand through his hair. (His hair that Enjolras put a lot of energy into messing up.)

Maybe Grantaire accidentally flirted with him while wearing only a T-shirt and underwear? Maybe that happened, wow. Looking back, can he be sure Enjolras’s staring was 100% disapproval?

All those times Enjolras has wrapped his arm around Grantaire. If he even meant one of them—

Grantaire feels like one of those guys on TV insisting that UFOs are real, that Bigfoot is alive and hanging out in Arkansas, that all of the signs are there if you just line them up right and squint. Enjolras liking him back, Grantaire being the kind of person anyone could like the way he likes
Enjolras, is the wildest conspiracy theory of all. But the shapes have rearranged themselves in his head, and he can’t make himself unsee it. There are so many things it suddenly explains, weird silences and stilted conversations given meaning.

Enjolras wants to talk to him tomorrow, and Enjolras wants to get it right.

It takes Grantaire two hours to do about five minutes’ worth of Government homework.

Seismic shifts, he thinks in bed that night. All these weeks, what if Grantaire had no idea what he was doing? What if he’s not the only one?

At no point does he fall asleep.

"Hey," says Eponine, hushed, in the last few seconds of Spanish, "gotta get to pre-calc early, can you do me a favor?"

The fact that Grantaire says, "Yeah," is a testament to what a good mood he’s in, and okay, how much he loves her, because Eponine asking for a favor could mean pretty much anything.

But Eponine just pulls a paperback from the depths of her bottomless purse (seriously, he's pretty sure he gets a glimpse of a bottle of shampoo and a screwdriver in there) and slides it over. On the cover is a bunch of squares, like giant pixels. The Book of Questions, it says.

He flips it open. Apparently it is, in fact, just a list of questions. "'Where can a blind man live who is pursued by bees?'" he reads out loud. "'If the color yellow runs out with what will we make bread?' Dude, is this a book or a prank?"

Eponine gives him a look like he just blew his nose on the pages. "Well, don't read it," she snaps.

"What do you want me to do with it, wear it like a hat? Deep fry it?"

"Just—give it back to Combeferre," she says, which is the most shocking option yet. She's talking fast, and he gets the impression she deeply regrets asking his help but it's been such a bizarre week, such a bizarre couple of days, that his nerves are jangling everywhere and he can't stop himself from blurting out,

"Why?"

She stares at him. "Because it's his book?"

That much, Grantaire did manage to put together via context, no matter how much it doesn't compute. "Why do you have Combeferre's book?"

"Because he lent it to me?" she says.

"Combeferre, who you hate?"

Eponine stuffs a fistful of pens into her bag and eyes the clock. "Am I allowed to change my mind about people? Is that a thing I can do?"

"Yeah, sure but—" All this time eating together, Grantaire's never seen them have a civil exchange. Then again, how much else does he notice when Enjolras is leaning against him at the lunch table? (His stomach does a giddy twist.) He's willing to accept there's stuff he could be missing: conversations, personal turning points, pinky-sworn vows of eternal friendship.
His question is cut off by the bell. The chair scrapes as Eponine jumps to her feet. "Gotta get going," she says. "His locker's—"

"I know where his locker is." Grantaire's never been there himself, but the lockers are laid out alphabetically, and for all his shortcomings, he's got a solid grasp of the alphabet.

Eponine doesn't even stay to sass him. Grantaire doesn't even care. "Adios!" he calls to her retreating back. All the way down the hall it feels like the soles of his shoes have been replaced by clouds.

Grantaire wishes he knew how to talk to Combeferre. It's fun getting him on a tangent about something, but that's making Combeferre talk at him. They can't have an exchange of ideas; Grantaire doesn't have the goods, and it seems weird to try to discuss like, curfews or the price of gas or something.

Combeferre looks surprised to see him, which is fair. Would he be surprised to see Eponine? What is going on with this school?

"Yo," says Grantaire. He's grateful for the paperback. In his outstretched hand, it is both apology and explanation for his presence.

Combeferre blinks, but he too, seems to live in this reality in which he and Eponine have exchanged not just words, but whacked out psychedelic books. "Okay," he says, wedging it into his locker. Grantaire had imagined, vaguely, that the inside of Combeferre's locker was probably cleaner and more organized than a tray of surgical instruments, but it is in fact a disaster. Grantaire can't identify what some of the shit in there could even be. Something smells like it's rotting.

Combeferre gingerly shuts the door and turns back around. Grantaire thinks he might frown, very slightly. "Did she like it?"

"No idea," Grantaire says, digging his hands into his pockets. "I mean, she got pissed when I made fun of it, so I'm guessing she gives some portion of a shit?"

Combeferre seems reassured by this somehow. He nods. From the inside of his locker, there is the sound of something falling over and hitting the ground.

"Wasn't anything breakable," Combeferre tells him. He frowns. "I think," and Grantaire feels a rush of goodwill that has him adding, "I don't know, man, it's Eponine. She hates liking stuff. If someone goes out of their way to get a book back to you, that's probably a good sign?"

"Or a sign they want to get rid of it," Combeferre points out, readjusting his glasses. and maybe this is how a person talks to him; you don't have to bring the philosophical questions, he'll find them anyway.

"If she wanted to get rid of it, it'd be gone," says Grantaire. Eponine loses shit all the time. Hell, half her clothes are still at his house. Her phone charger. Her laptop charger. More than one textbook. It's ridiculous. He keeps thinking he needs to lay down the law, but he hasn't had the energy to make it a whole big deal.

"Thank you," Combeferre tells him gravely. Grantaire shrugs. All things being the same, he'd rather have them get along. Lunch is easier if Eponine isn't in fight-or-flight mode all the time. "Hey." Combeferre shifts the books in his hands. "As long as we're talking, how do you feel about laser
“It’s tag with lasers?” says Grantaire. “Like, I don’t know why we haven’t added lasers to
everything, if we have the technology. Laser hockey. Laser sandwich. Laser dogs.”

Combeferre half-smiles. “I wanted some way to celebrate when we’re all done with finals. It won’t
be free, but it’ll cost less the more people we can get on board.”

Grantaire nods. He’s a little touched Combeferre is inviting him along. It’s not like they’re close.

“So really,” Combeferre says, “as long as you RSVP by the sixth, we should—”

The sixth. It stands out to Grantaire before he can even remember why: the sixth, May sixth, is the
night of prom. It’s a thing he officially knows now, because weeks ago Musichetta took it upon
herself to make sure everyone bought tickets on time, and she dogged Grantaire about it like the
freaking Ghost of Christmas Future.

“Yeah, yeah, dude, I know,” he’d said, “pre-sales end April 7th, you’ve told me so many times that
not only do I know, it is literally the only thing I know anymore. What country are we in? What year
is it? How does pizza work?”

“Grantaire,” said Enjolras, one corner of his mouth pulling up.

Grantaire put a hand on either side of Enjolras’s head. “What is this? Is this pizza? I don’t even know
anymore—”

“He bought his ticket yesterday,” Enjolras told her. “I saw him do it. April 6th, an entire day to
spare.” And then to Grantaire, “Please don’t eat me.” And then Eponine whispered something that
made Courfeyrac and Musichetta laugh for the rest of lunch.

It was a nice moment. It was, he realizes with a lurch, a nice moment that happened almost a month
ago. Today is April 28th. Prom is in a week.

Fuck, prom is in a week.

The fluffy white clouds vanish under his feet.

From time to time he can forget, but that sick shocky feeling, like he’s a bundle of fraying wires, is
always waiting for him. All this time he’s been passing notes with Jehan and talking music with
Bahorel and making sweet if incredibly awkward conversation with Cosette. He’s inching up his
Algebra grade and working to decode the accumulated inside jokes of Joly, Bossuet, and Musichetta
—they’re almost never funny in context ("you had to be there" Musichetta says, "then again I was
there, and it mystifies me half the time—") but seeing Joly crack up at some unlikely series of words
never loses its entertainment value.

He’s been giving Enjolras a ride home twice a week, and spending the whole day looking forward to
those ten minutes.

He’s been so wrapped up in it, diving headfirst into the bright, fizzy distraction of the ABC, that he’s
stopped taking time to remind himself how soon it’ll come crashing down.

The bottom line is, all of these people who cheer him up and make him laugh and turn his head away
from the angry young conservatives in the corner won’t be around next year. Or, they will be, but
Grantaire won’t. He’s pouring all of his energy into a bucket that will be dumped out on May 6th, in
a week. School will end and then there will be senior year, and everything that’s wrong will still be
there because people don't change, and he’ll have Eponine probably (unless she decides to hang out with Musichetta instead, which she might because Grantaire is an asshole), but everything else that's been keeping him going—everything else—

Jesus Christ, the amount of time he's spent trying to get a real smile out of Enjolras—

The amount of time he spent last night, trying to mash the puzzle pieces of their every interaction into something else, like he could fold it all up into a love story if he just tried a little harder, bent his memories a little more—

It feels so small and sad all of a sudden, his utter delight that he and Enjolras could like the same song, like it meant something, some deep spiritual connection, their souls high-fiving out on the astral plane. One piece of pop culture in common, and what, suddenly he’s Marius or something? Marius, who sees his and Cosette’s names written in the stars, written in every goddamn constellation including the Big Dipper, but—Marius is cute. He’s easy to like. People have crushes on Marius.

The reality is, Grantaire hasn’t even been building castles on sand, he’s built them on imaginary sand that he hopes could maybe, possibly exist.

The reality is that Grantaire can’t RSVP to Combeferre’s laser tag party, because by the time finals end, the fake dating will be over and Grantaire won’t even be talking to those kids anymore. Eight days. That’s what’s left. Eight days, and then prom, and then nothing.

"Hey," says Combeferre, and shit, he sounds worried, probably about whatever freaky thousand yard stare Grantaire is doing. He glances down the hallway. "Want to walk with me? What's your next class? I'm—" He inclines his head towards the west wing. "Uh, I have AP Physics," he says, and Grantaire thinks, hysterically, 'Of course you do,' and says, in what may sound like a normal human voice,

"That's fine, I can—head down." Grantaire has Lit next, in the east wing. Regular lit. Naps and craft projects. He can be late. He doesn't really care.

"Oh, good," says Combeferre. They walk. "I've been meaning to say," he starts. Jesus Christ, everyone’s been intending to talk to Grantaire lately. Grantaire wonders what the hell Enjolras actually wanted to discuss. Thank god he had this conversation first, he thinks. Thank god he didn’t—

“I’m sorry,” Combeferre tells him, and Grantaire really, really can’t imagine for what. Combeferre's never done anything to him but give him free cider that one time, and maybe be suspicious about the pretend relationship. It's not Combeferre's fault that he's smart enough to recognize an empty husk when he sees one.

As if reading Grantaire's thoughts, Combeferre clears his throat and says, "That speech I gave you in March, in the parking lot—"

Grantaire can't imagine where this is going. His mind is a blank. Well, that's not true; his mind is squirming furiously in every direction, but it’s motion with no purpose, like a swarm of something. Insects, bacteria, rats.

“I don’t,” says Combeferre, “I mean, if you don’t want to come because you’re worried it’ll be weird, I want you to know I really wish I hadn’t said all that. It’s been a rough couple of months for all of us, and I’m glad you’re around. So if you can’t make it or you don’t want to spend the money on laser tag, that’s fine. But if you want to come—you’re invited, okay? That’s all I wanted to say. You’re invited.”
There's a beat. He's done.

Grantaire knows he should say something. He knows that's what comes next.

"That's great," says Grantaire. He thinks he says it. "I have to get to class now."

Grantaire goes to Lit. He sits down. The teacher says some stuff. His body occupies a chair for an hour.

The bell rings. He goes to Government. He sits down. Cosette tries to talk to him. He says he's tired. She seems to buy it. He puts his head on his desk. He doesn't want to be awake but he doesn't want to be asleep. The teacher says his name. It's his turn to read something. Cosette whispers the page number.

The bell rings. He flees.

"Eponine," he says. "Eponine, you need to get me the fuck out of here."

Eponine doesn't ask questions. They haven't done this in years but she knows the drill. She doesn't even look surprised.

Maybe she saw this coming. She always was the smarter one.

"Got a Government quiz I can't miss," she says, shutting her locker. "Very start of the hour, it'll be done in ten minutes. Nothing else I need until English."

He nods. That gives them two hours. If he focuses on that, he can make it through ten minutes of Earth Science. Probably. He closes his eyes and takes a breath. It comes out shaky.

Eponine touches his arm. "If you want," she says slowly. "Montparnasse stopped by yesterday." She raises her eyebrows. Her tone is significant.

In October, April was a thousand years away. Now Montparnasse is out of jail, and Eponine has pot. Time fucking flies.

Shit, he has missed being able to get high.

"Yes," he says. "Please. Where?"

"Meet you at my house in twenty minutes," she tells him.

Eponine doesn't ask him over anymore. It's on the long list of things they don't talk about. He gives her a look.

"It's fine," she says. "They won't be home."

"If you're sure," he says, as the warning bell rings.

"Sure," says Eponine. "Get your ass to fourth hour. See you soon."

They used to do this all the time. Freshman year—his second freshman year—there was this weird mental spiral he used to get sometimes, a claustrophobia inside his head. Pretty much anything could set it off: a frown from a teacher, a dickish comment, retaking an English quiz he’d failed the year before, whatever. Once, he got it from walking past the sophomore honors biology room, which he’d
never even been in.

It got to the point where Eponine could tell if he needed to skip by looking at his face. They had a routine. She would say when and where to meet, and then he’d slip out of class, ask to go to the bathroom or whatever, walk casually towards the east entrance, and make a break for it through the woods behind the school.

It’s not the most direct route, but it has the least visibility, and with it, the smallest chance of detection. He was paranoid about getting caught back then. In retrospect, it’s funny: like his teachers would’ve been wringing their hands over the absence of another teen burnout. (“How am I supposed to teach my class without that kid who sits in the back never speaking, just staring morosely out the window?”)

The truth was, by that point, nobody was trying to talk to him about his potential anymore. But it hadn’t sunk in all the way yet, that he was no longer the kind of kid people worried about.

When Montparnasse was arrested halfway through sophomore year, Eponine and Grantaire cut down on the habit, for obvious reasons. (Well, Eponine probably could’ve found another supplier, but she’s sentimental like that.) By then, Grantaire’s freaky little brain cyclones had settled down, so there hadn’t been as much of a reason to skip.

Still, it turns out Grantaire can navigate the woods by memory. Years later, and he knows which branches to duck, where to watch out for those tiny green burrs, the best place to emerge back by the road again without freaking out drivers. Some shit stays with you.

He reaches her place first. In theory, he knows how to get in through the back window—Eponine showed him once, in what felt less like a gesture of trust and more like a demonstration of important life skills. He stays outside, though. Eponine’s house when she isn’t in it is one of his least favorite places in the world. He’s not sure why it makes his skin crawl. Aside from how the flashy, colorful cars in the front are never the same ones, it’s probably a normal house.

He hovers around the back door, trying not to look natural in case the neighbors get suspicious. There’s no way it works. He’ll have to rely on their apathy instead. He’s already antsy and bored. There’s nothing to do. His backpack jammed behind a bookcase in Earth Science; he was supposedly just stepping out to use the bathroom. He’ll need to remember to pick it up before Algebra.

He curls up on the back stoop, closes his eyes. Breathing is still easier here than at school. He’s not sure how much time passes. He left his phone in his backpack.

“You could’ve gone in,” says Eponine, appearing from nowhere. Maybe she’s been taking drama lessons from Courfeyrac. Or maybe Grantaire is just not as goddamned eagle-eyed as he thinks.

“I hate your house, dude.” He pulls himself back up.

“I told you,” she says, “they’re not here today.” Once she gets them in, she hustles him up the stairs anyway. Old habits.

Eponine’s bedroom is some kind of twisted monument to the girl she must have been years before Grantaire ever knew her. Pink light fixture, pink canopy bed, Disney-themed everything. Freshman year—her freshman year—she used to hide her weed in a pink jewelry box shaped like a treasure chest, dotted with plastic gems.
That much, at least, has changed. There’s a pile of books in one corner; she grabs a fancy-looking hardcover of Grimm’s Fairytales and flips it open, to where an egg-sized compartment has been sliced out of the paper. The edges are smooth but the angles are crooked. It looks like she might’ve done it herself in shop class. God knows what she told the teacher: a prop for a play? an experimental art piece?

Maybe she just stared at him. Eponine can get a lot of mileage from a good stare.

Her pipe is lying on the windowsill. He snorts.

“What?” she says, retrieving the baggie and carefully replacing Grimm’s to its prized spot on the floor under a bunch of other shit.

“You’re doing like, Nancy Drew moves to stash your pot, but your pipe gets to chill in the open?”

“Well, yeah,” says Eponine, rooting through her pockets for a lighter. He hands his over. “You ever tried to hock a cheap pipe? Zero resale value.”

Eponine’s different in her own house, edgier. He can’t always tell what’s a joke and what’s a horrible truth in joke’s clothing.

That old jewelry box is nowhere to be found, as far as he can tell. Eponine lights a stick of incense, perches on the windowsill to pack the pipe. He is 90% sure she used to have more furniture.

“Everything okay?” he hazards.

“Sure,” she says idly. She climbs down to join him on the floor. “You need a refresher on how to do this?”

“Fuck you,” he says, as she takes the first hit. “Give me that.” He takes the lighter and the pipe from her, but on his first try, he breathes way too deep. He can feel it, his lungs clenching, panicking. After defending his honor though, he can’t wuss out, just forces in the burning smoke and holds it down and down.

Eponine raises her eyebrows.

“Muscle memory,” he says, and then immediately ruins it by coughing everywhere as he passes back the pipe.

“The lungs aren’t a muscle, they’re an organ,” she tells him primly.

“Science fact,” says Grantaire. “Did you pick that up from Combeferre?”

“It’s very common sense,” Eponine says on the exhale. “Your turn. Go easy, Rambo.”

“Eponine,” he says.

They’re lying on the floor, heads by the incense because she’s got some theory that if the smell really settles into their hair, there won’t be room for the pot. Grantaire has suggested spraying each other down with Febreeze, but she won’t entertain the notion.

“What?” she says. There’s only ashes left in the pipe; they went through it fast. He may be slightly higher than intended.
“Eponine, didn’t you use to have a bookcase? And a desk? And a—like. Probably a dresser?”

“Things change,” says Eponine, philosophical.

Grantaire meditates on her ceiling, which he hates. He hates her whole house. “Some things don’t.”

“Well, yeah.”

“But also some things do,” he says.

A gentle rustle implies Eponine is nodding. He doesn’t look away from the ceiling but he surmises a nod has taken place. That much he can believe in. His hair has flopped into his eyes again. He sweeps it away. It’s very soft. Enjolras did that once for him, under vastly different circumstances. False pretenses. Grantaire hates his life.

“I just—I like him so much,” says Grantaire, which were not the words he was planning on.

“I know,” says Eponine. She says it with more patience than he deserves, but maybe that’s the drugs talking.

“Him and all his fucking friends,” he adds. “He’s so great, and all the people in his group are so great, and I’m gonna miss them so fucking much—”

“Why?” she says vaguely. “Where’s everybody going?”

Grantaire rolls over halfway so she can see his look of disbelief.

“After the break-up?” he says, but that’s wrong; a fake relationship doesn’t get the dignity of a real ending. He makes his fingers into claws, mimes belated quote marks.

“What?”

“It’s not like I can keep worming my way in—” He swallows.

“Man, why do you assume everyone’s gonna shun you?” Eponine can make the word ‘shun’ sound totally ridiculous. It’s something about the way the sound moves forward in her mouth, he thinks. The N is like, crisp. “That’s not even—at any case, you’ve still got a whole week left,” she says. “You should enjoy it.”

“How,” says Grantaire.

“Like, just.” She waves a hand in the air. “Roll it all up into one ball, and tear through the—through the iron gates—”

“Whoa,” he says, shaking his head. “You smoked what I smoked, how are you on acid right now.”

Eponine huffs. “It’s poetry, you fucking jackass.”

“Maybe it’s not the worst thing anyway,” says Eponine a little later.

“Mm?” Grantaire cracks an eye open.

“Being friends with someone you—like, have feelings about. If you’re too fucked up to date, maybe it’s not so bad to—hang out, I don’t know.”
Her voice is slow, thoughtful. She’s not talking about Enjolras. Cosette and Marius, he thinks. Poor Eponine. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“It’s not the worst thing,” she says again, “maybe. There’s so many things people can do to each other. Worse things than—I mean. Liking someone, not liking them back. Whatever, you know? If you really think somebody’s cool, you just want to be around.” She exhales. “Not the worst thing.”

“Maybe,” says Grantaire. In the quiet of her room, with his back on the floor and his feet braced against her cotton candy pink walls, he can stand to think this way. His muscles are loose. His mind is blurry. Above him, an iridescent dolphin is giving him the stinkeye from inside a Lisa Frank poster, but. For the first time in a long time, he feels relaxed. He feels okay.

He thinks he might doze off for a while, because then she’s patting his calf with her foot. “Sober up. We’ve got ten minutes before it’s time to sneak back into school.”

Coming back is harder than leaving. Maybe there’s a metaphor in there somewhere, but Grantaire's focus is on slipping through the hallways unnoticed. They timed it wrong; fifth hour isn't over yet. There's another five minutes. Meanwhile, his backpack is still in Earth Science. He’s not sure he thought this through so well.

He's rounding a corner when someone shouts "Grantaire!" For a second, he is very confused. Then he sees Bahorel running towards him. Then he's confused all over again. Bahorel should be in Con Econ. Grantaire should be there too, but you know.

"Shit, dude," says Bahorel. "Shit, are you okay?"

Grantaire nods slowly. He's a little dizzy, but other than that the only real complaint is that he has no idea what Bahorel's deal is at the moment.

"Okay, cool, let me just tell the others." Bahorel pulls out his phone, thumbs flying over the keys. This is also weird, because most of the people they know in common are too rule-abiding to have their phones on during class. There's sort of no point sending them texts.

Grantaire opens his mouth to bring this up just as Bahorel finishes typing, slips his phone back into his pocket, and swoops in to squeeze Grantaire into a hug that could double as a wrestling move. Assuming it's legal to strangle your opponent. Squeeze them around the middle and pick them up off the ground. Grantaire's not sure. Wrestling is a messed-up sport.

Is Bahorel drunk? He doesn't smell like alcohol. In the absence of a better theory, though, it is Grantaire's working hypothesis.

Because Bahorel pulls back and then stands there, an arm's length away, shaking his head. "That was nuts, man," he says. He thumps Grantaire on the shoulder, but more carefully. "Nuts. I want the full story from you later, okay?"

"There's, uh, not really a—" Grantaire starts, just as Enjolras comes running around the corner.

Grantaire tries to think of some way to signal with his eyebrows 'What is Bahorel's problem?' except Enjolras seems to be riding the exact same crazy train, because his first words are,

"You okay?" and he's breathing like he came straight from running laps in gym.
"I'm fine," Grantaire says.

"He's fine," says Bahorel.

"Thank you," Enjolras tells Bahorel gravely. "Thank you for everything. Uh, you should get back to class—"

"Yeah, no doubt they miss me," Bahorel agrees. "See you at the meeting." He throws Enjolras a salute, delivers another quick, suffocating hug, and jogs off.

"You really are alright?" says Enjolras.

"Um, yes?" says Grantaire. Enjolras's arms are crossed in front of him, like he's cold. He looks sort of small. "Are you?"

Enjolras doesn't seem to hear him. "What happened?" he says. "Where were you?"

"Stepped out for a while," Grantaire tells him with a practiced shrug.

"Why?" says Enjolras, who is asking a lot of questions for someone who still hasn’t explained what the hell he’s doing in the hallway during class. Except maybe Grantaire didn't ask him out loud? His thoughts are sticky and slow-moving. Enjolras’s forehead creases. “Did someone threaten you? Did you feel like you needed to hide?”

Is this the flip side to hanging out with a movie hero, that everything needs to be some huge melodrama? ‘Hey, I noticed you were away for a bit, by any chance were you tied to train tracks while a football player snarled and twirled a mustache?’

"Not a big deal, man." His balance threatens to tilt but he catches himself conveniently against Enjolras’s shoulder, the well-worn hoodie fabric comfortable under his palms. Enjolras reaches up to steady him, automatic. Grantaire takes in a deep breath of orange-y smell and thinks maybe if he stands very still, everyone will forget about him and he can just stay here indefinitely, like a mostly washed-out stain. (‘Yo, Enjolras, you’ve got something on your shirt.’ ‘Oh, that’s just Grantaire.’)

Despite himself, he’s giggling. He muffles it against Enjolras’s collarbone.

Enjolras shudders. "What,” he says, except it's not quite a question. He pulls back and peers down, eyes narrowing. "Grantaire,” he says slowly, “are you drunk?"

It's not really funny and Grantaire's not really that high, but Grantaire can’t help it, Enjolras sounds so scandalized.

"Dude," he laughs, "uh, wrong intoxicant?"

He can see the realization dawn on Enjolras's face, but "dawn" implies a sun, and that implies some degree of warmth. Enjolras is all angles and lines. Enjolras pushes him away.

"Are you high?" says Enjolras, voice almost cracking. "Did you—did you literally leave school in the middle of the day to get high?"

They’ve been locked into the bubble of their pretend world for so long, Grantaire had genuinely forgotten Enjolras could do this to him, make him feel like pond scum with one look.


“Are you—you’re not even going to apologize?” says Enjolras, dangerously calm.
“For—fucking what.” Grantaire throws up his hands. “Look, I’m sorry not everyone can meet your godlike standards, but it’s a free country—”

“Oh my god, Grantaire,” says Enjolras. His eyes could freeze cities. “Did you stop to consider, for one second, how it would look—”

How does a fake relationship get to control every aspect of his life? “Given that we aren’t actually dating, I think it’s okay to spend one lunchtime—” Grantaire snaps.

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras. He breaks off, like he’s too furious to even make sounds. He sucks in a breath, nostrils flaring. “You were gone. Do I need to spell it out—”

“I skipped a lunch,” says Grantaire. “Don’t you think you’re taking the clingy boyfriend act a little far, dear?”

Enjolras stares at him. Stares and stares. His face is white.

“Eponine was gone, too,” Grantaire points out. He clenches his hands, trying to get them to stop shaking. “You gonna freak out on her, or am I special?”

Enjolras is so quick to judge him, so prepared. Maybe he’s been waiting the whole time for Grantaire to fuck up. Through all of the planning sessions in Grantaire’s van and the smiles across the cafeteria and yeah, the arm around his waist in the hall, maybe Enjolras has been running a countdown in his head until the day Grantaire inevitably proved himself unworthy.

Never mind that he had reason to. Never mind that he was right.

“What the hell are you talking about?” says Enjolras. “Eponine left Government because she was sick—”

“How do you know that?” Grantaire says. Enjolras fixes him with a disdainful look, and he remembers suddenly that Eponine and Marius are in the same Government class. Marius saw her make excuses and leave. Grantaire, on the other hand—

“You disappeared,” says Enjolras, “for two fucking hours.”

“Uh,” says Grantaire, “how do you know that?”

“Because we looked, Grantaire.” Enjolras’s voice is climbing. “Because we pieced together your schedule and we found your teachers and we asked. Because we checked—the nurse’s office, the library, every bathroom, the parking lot.” He swallows. “The ditch around the parking lot. Because we all decided to skip fifth hour to keep looking. Bossuet had a big presentation and he took a zero on it, just in case—”

Grantaire’s head hurts. His vision is swimming, and his mouth is dry. “Okay, why is that my fault?”

“Jesus Christ, can you just think for one fucking second,” says Enjolras. He’s angrier than Grantaire has ever seen him. Angrier than he was at the principal’s office. Angrier than that stupid bullshit a million years ago with the tacos. “We go to a school where kids get attacked and threatened as a matter of course, do you have any idea how—” He shakes his head, almost convulsive. “Joly was halfway into a panic attack. Cosette was somehow convinced it was her fault for not being able to foresee—and you know what the funny thing is? Your Earth Science teacher told us you’d probably skipped. And we were so mad at her, for even suggesting—Courfeyrac kept yelling, ‘He wouldn’t leave without telling one of us, he’s not stupid—’”
Enjolras lets it hang there. His hands are fists at his sides. “And you left to get high,” he says. “God, Grantaire, what was your plan?”

Grantaire swallows like he’s gonna try to speak, but he can’t imagine what he’d say.

“You know,” and Enjolras is almost vibrating with fury, but his voice is controlled, clipped. “You’re right, it is a free country. And when you’re on your own, fine, you can go be a fuckup, it’s your call, I don’t care. But when your bullshit hurts my friends—”

“They’re my friends, too,” says Grantaire in a small voice.

Enjolras gives him a look as cold and dry as marble. “Are they?”

This is the boy that Grantaire thought might like him back. He wishes he could time travel and shake himself. Sometimes a vase is just a fucking vase. “I’ll, uh,” he mumbles to the scuffed tile floor, “I can—I’m gonna tell them I’m sorry. At the meeting.”

But Enjolras is shaking his head, looking past him. “Don’t come to the meeting today,” he says.

“What?”

Enjolras breathes through his nose, gestures between them with one hand. “I can’t sell this right now.”

It feels like being punched in the stomach. He manages to nod. He thinks he manages to nod. He can’t argue with it, can’t argue any of it.

“Do you, uh, need to go to the hospital?” says Enjolras.

Grantaire squints at him. “What?”

“Because of the drugs.” Enjolras gives him a look like he’s an idiot, and on top of everything else, it is just too much.

“Dude,” says Grantaire. He laughs, ragged and snide. “Nobody in the history of time has ever overdosed on pot.”

“Fine,” says Enjolras. He has one foot like he’s about to go, and if Grantaire skips the meeting, that means he can’t drive Enjolras home, which means they can’t talk in his van. Eight more days and—smoking didn’t work at all; he’s still panicking.

“Enjolras,” he croaks, “uh, what were you—”


“In my van after the meeting.” Grantaire rubs at his itchy eyes. “There was something you wanted to talk to me about? Or ask me, or—”

Enjolras stares at him. Grantaire stares back, trying to read anything there that could seem like fondness, any sign that he wasn’t insane for thinking maybe he wasn’t alone in this stupid crush.

“God,” Enjolras says, “never mind.” He turns on his heel.

Nearly ten weeks of whatever the fuck they’ve been doing, and after everything, at the end of the day, here it is: Enjolras walking away. Grantaire stuck in place, watching him go.
Well, thinks Grantaire, slumping against a locker. Some things don’t change after all.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning: a description of what's probably a panic attack, onscreen drug use, and general poor decision-making

The story of how homosexuality got removed from the DSM is fascinating and weird and inspiring. You can listen to a really well-done This American Life episode about it here (the transcript is also available if you're on a computer with no sound).

The Book of Questions is not a prank; Grantaire has no context for Neruda. Eponine is not on acid; Grantaire didn't recognize her very paraphrased take on "To His Coy Mistress".

Updating schedule is still every other Sunday. If you are not feeling great about how where things are at right now, please keep in mind that literally nobody on the planet is more invested in the health and happiness of sad teen Grantaire than me. Also I did some math and I can say with 80% confidence this thing will be 14 chapters total.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Of course, with the end of Sunday comes Monday. It's the definition of a pyrrhic victory, but what can you do?

Chapter Notes

Warnings for brief onscreen violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s no point going back to class.

The problem is, Grantaire’s backpack is still in Earth Science. He trudges down to the basement, peers through the door window. He’s aware he should wait for passing period but it’s hard to care. Everything feels a little numb and distant.

Mrs. Freeman looks up from her desk. They make direct eye contact. Grantaire rubs a hand over his face. Well, shit. But there's no way around it: he needs his bag back. His phone’s in there. When he looks up again, she's opening the door, stepping out into the hallway. She's got his backpack in one hand.

"Found this behind a bookcase," she says.

"Um," says Grantaire.

"You know," she continues, almost conversational, "your grades have been improving?"

Well yeah, Grantaire wants to say. Given that nobody talks to him anymore, it's easier to focus on the wonders of schist or whatever.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and she fixes him with a surprise blast of I'm-so-disappointed face. One of the side benefits of his slide into obscurity was not getting that particular look anymore. He's never dealt with it well.

"Your friends came to check on you," she tells him. She doesn’t need to say anything else. They both know what kind of person he really is.

He nods, swallows. His mouth is dry.

"Look," says Mrs. Freeman, "I understand you're having a hard time right now. But that's no excuse for truancy."

He nods again.

"Considering—circumstances, I won’t report your absence to the office. This time," she tells him.
He has not stopped nodding. He is a human bobblehead.

"Let's let this be a learning experience," Mrs. Freeman says with a sniff. She wrinkles her nose, probably smelling the incense for the first time. From the look on her face, he gets the sense it is not the cunning cloud of concealment that Eponine imagined.

He blinks at her. He is not certain he is blinking fast enough.

She sighs and hands over his backpack. "We're reading the chapter on groundwater systems," she says. "Questions one through eighteen but we're skipping number six. Nineteen and twenty for extra credit."

"Okay." He pulls the strap over one shoulder and starts to walk away.

"Grantaire," she says, and he swivels to face her. Either the tiles are more slippery than usual or his reflexes are shot. She sighs. "I'm sure this can't be easy, but don't be an idiot, okay?"

'Lady,' he thinks, 'you are about seventeen years late to the party.'

Grantaire climbs back up the stairs, sneaks down the hallway. The bell’s ringing as he eases the side door open. Nobody stops him. He scuttles back to his van like a beetle crawling under a log. It’s barely one o'clock. The sun is out. He backs out of the parking lot and drives home.

The one saving grace is that it's Friday. There's nothing to keep him from collapsing facedown onto his bed and sleeping until he forgets his own name if he wants.

He wants.

When he opens his eyes again, it's dark out. Very dark; the red glowing numbers on his clock say 10:22. He stares at the ceiling.

On some level, he knows he should go eat something, but the blankets are warm and he's not hungry. He wonders what they talked about at the meeting. Maybe it's good this happened, he tries to tell himself. If Enjolras doesn't want him around—well, in the long run that will be easier. He should look on the bright side. This is what he wanted anyway: a clean break. Only now that it’s here he’d give anything to take it back.

This is ridiculous. He can't lie around wasting away, living out emo song lyrics, just because Enjolras can't stand to look at him. He was never Enjolras' favorite person to begin with. In the long run, nothing's even changed.

He wrestles himself out of bed and shuffles towards the door. From the kitchen, he can hear a cabinet opening and closing. The familiar shush of the dishwasher starting up. His dad, probably. Grantaire pads back deeper into the room, to give his dad time to go back upstairs.

He could call Eponine, see if she wants to come over. He realizes, with a lurch, that she doesn't even know yet about the mini-manhunt, about his fight in the hallway and the cold fury on Enjolras's face. The last time he and Eponine talked, he hadn't even fucked everything up yet.

Except really Grantaire fucked everything up hours before, when he decided to skip.
Except really Grantaire fucked everything up when he asked Enjolras to prom in the first place. When he started going to meetings. When he saw Enjolras that first day in detention and didn't run in the other direction.

There's no point calling Eponine, he thinks. It would go straight to voicemail anyway. On the off-chance she'll answer an e-mail, he grabs his ancient, blundering laptop and signs in.

There's one new message in his inbox, no subject line.

It's from Enjolras.

He stares at the screen. The screen stares back. The timestamp says it was sent six hours ago. Enjolras must have written it right after he got home. What possibly couldn't wait until Monday?

Does Enjolras want to talk to him, or—? His stupid hands are shaking, and his palms are sweaty. He clicks. The new window loads, interminably slow.

"Told them you were ill," it says.

That's it. No greeting, no sign-off, just one sentence, like something a robot would write. Well, what in the world was Grantaire expecting? An apology? A “Hey, just kidding”?

("Dear Grantaire, don’t worry! The past 24 hours have been a dream sequence. Everything is fine. All your mistakes can be fixed. Everyone still wants to be your friend.")

His vision swims.

His dad is probably upstairs by now. Grantaire really should eat something. He should get up, leave the room, find food, eat it, rinse the dishes, change his clothes at some point—

He digs the heel of his hand into his eyes and looks back towards his bed. It’s not really a hard call.

Saturday night, he gets a call from an unknown number. When he mumbles "…hello?" into the speaker, a female voice says,

"Good evening sir, just calling to let you know your special order came in. Five crates of severed baby doll heads, just for you."

Grantaire rolls onto his back, knocking aside papers and an empty pizza box. "Hey Eponine."

She does this sometimes, calls him when work is slow with made-up orders, or stays on the phone pretending to deal with customer complaints. ("I'm sorry, ma'am, we don't sell wads of human hair here. Have you tried Joann's?")

Today her manager must not be nearby, because she drops the act almost immediately.

"Talked to Musichetta," she says in an undertone. "Sounds like people were pretty freaked out yesterday."

"Yeah."

"Kinda figured you'd tell someone you were leaving, dude."

Grantaire pulls his knees to his chest. "Didn't think about it."
"She said Joly got so worried, he threw up," she says, and Grantaire freezes. "Didn't even manage to do it into Javert's office or anything. Waste of puke."

It’s such an Eponine take on it, he can almost smile. "Yeah," he manages.

"So, like," says Eponine, "if you're somehow still wondering if these people gave a shit about you —"

He exhales, shaky. "They wouldn't, if they—I mean, if they knew what really happened."

"Enjolras told them you missed because you were like, delirious with fever."

At the mention of his name, Grantaire squeezes his eyes shut. "I know."

"You're lucky he covered for you."

"He's never gonna forgive me," says Grantaire in a rush. "Eponine, he was so, so angry. He is never gonna—"

"Dude," says Eponine, "you can't know that. Never is a long—"

"I fucking understand how 'never' works," he bites out. "You weren't there, okay? It was bad."

"It might not be as bad as you—"

"It was," he says flatly. "Trust me. It was."

"Grantaire, what do you want me to say?"

He shrugs, which is maybe the stupidest possible response. The fact that he has absolutely no idea what he wants from her doesn't make it less annoying that she's not giving it to him.

Eponine hums. "So today, a lady tried to shoplift six skeins of Merino wool by shoving them down her pants," she says. "Turned out she had a terrible wool allergy. We had to call an ambulance. She was, like, screaming at us for not putting a warning on it. Like, 'Danger: wool contains wool'."

"Eponine—"

"'Do not shoplift. Do not put on butt.'"

"Eponine, what's your point?"

"Don't get a job, Grantaire," she says. "It's a trap."

He sighs heavily. "It's so—I mean, he hates me. He hates me and I don't blame him. What am I supposed to—"

"I don't know, man," says Eponine. "It'll be alright."

That sick feeling in his stomach has returned. "Eponine," he says, "I really don't think it will."

"If it makes you feel any better, I spent the last, like, hour getting yelled at by a woman who tried to stuff yarn down her pants. And then trying to figure out what to do with her ass-yarn, which was its own whole—"

"Why do people always say that, 'if it makes you feel better' and then some shitty thing that
happened to them? What kind of terrible fucking person would I be if that cheered me up?"

“I don’t know,” says Eponine. “How’s it going sitting around in your room, listening to the same Pink Floyd album over and over and feeling sorry for yourself?”

“Joke’s on you, madam. I’m not sitting, I’m in the fetal position.”

She snorts.

"Want to come over?” he says, half-heartedly. He’s got a feeling he’d be terrible company, but at least she could get some laundry done. Maybe she could make fun of his hair and blather on about the shows she watches. It might distract him for a few seconds. “After you’re done closing or whatever?”

"Musichetta's picking me up,” she says. Grantaire rubs his eyes. Of course she is. Eponine sighs. "Just—don't spend the whole weekend by yourself. Invite Jehan over or something."

"Like he's not on some awesome date with Courfeyrac."

"Joly and Bossuet."

Yesterday he gave Joly what sounds like more than half a panic attack through his own sheer idiocy. He’s never seen Joly’s panic attacks, but he’s heard about them. It’s possible he made Joly cry. Honestly, Grantaire's not sure he could look either of them in the eye right now. He groans.

"You know that thing you do where you make everything way harder than it needs to be?" says Eponine.

Grantaire throws an arm over his eyes. "It's my superpower. I mean, it's not even surprising I ruined everything, but it's like, how could I ruin everything this badly?"

Eponine makes a very unimpressed noise. “I don’t really know what to tell you, Grantaire. Nobody’s dead. Nobody’s dying. In the vast scheme of things, this is not that big of a problem to even have.”

"Thanks for the fucking sympathy," he snaps, but her manager must be back, because Eponine only says, blandly pleasant,

"Alright sir, and we will definitely call you when the Hello Kitty flannel comes back in stock."

"Sorry," says Grantaire. "That was shitty, I'm just—shitty, today, like, as a person. Have fun with Musichetta."

"Thank you," she says. "Please let us know if there's anything we can do to enhance your customer experience. Have a great night, and I hope you keep us in mind for your future fabric needs."

She hangs up.

He lets his head drop back to the ground. His scalp itches. He hasn’t washed his hair since Thursday. Hasn’t had the time, he thinks with a twisted smile.

Eponine’s right about a lot of things. The whole weekend’s been nothing but Dark Side of the Moon and whining to himself about what a fuckup he is.

‘God, Grantaire, what was your plan?’
The truth is, Grantaire never has a plan. Curl up and feel like shit. Restart the first track when the last one runs out.

He looks down at his phone.

When he dug it out of his bag this morning, he had nine missed calls and four voicemails, all from his supposed disappearance. One of the voicemails was from Jehan, one was from Bossuet. At least one was definitely from Enjolras. He made himself delete them all, because otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from listening.

He’s not sure if any of the calls were Joly, but maybe Joly was freaking out too badly to hold a phone. He rolls over onto his stomach, trying to think of a subtle way he could maybe figure out if Joly’s okay now. Would it be weird to send a quick “Yo are you recovered from your panic attack” text? Is it something they can talk about? Will it just bring up the whole mess in Joly’s mind again? Why is everything so fucking complicated?

He looks down at his phone. He pulls up Joly’s number. “hey dude” he types. That feels like a safe enough beginning. It needs something else, though, he can tell. He scratches at his scalp. What wouldn’t freak Joly out? Probably he can’t answer that question. Okay then, what would make Joly happy?

Very slowly, he types out, “hey dude tell me something cool about space?”

It is the dumbest text he’s ever written to anyone, up against some steep competition. They don’t know each other that well. They only hang out when Joly teaches him Algebra shit or talks to him about his webcomic. If Joly’s still panicking, if Joly’s still got anything important going on at all, there’s no way he’s gonna have the energy for such a pointless question.

Grantaire hovers his thumb over the “Send” button. “Well fuck it,” he says, out loud. “Fuck it, man. You can’t make it worse than you already did.” He brings his thumb down. The message sends.

He looks down at his phone but it doesn’t immediately do anything because Joly isn’t telepathic. How long will it be before he can tell if Joly is officially not-answering his text? Spending a whole weekend curled around his phone waiting for a reply from someone he doesn’t even know that well doesn’t actually feel less pathetic than spending the whole weekend obsessing about his many failures.

He scratches at his head some more. His fingers come away shiny. “Maybe you should take a shower, dude,” he says.

The shower actually helps about five percent. If he thinks about Enjolras, or what happened Friday, or what’s going to happen Monday, it’s like staring into an abyss, but the warm water is nice. The soft towels are nice. Feeling less like a greasy ape-creature who slithered into human clothes is nice, too.

He changes into pajamas, since it’s not like he’s going anywhere. The first shirt he reaches for is the one he was wearing that first weekend they were fake-dating, when Enjolras’s mom dropped him off at the house and they sat in this room together and—Grantaire puts it down, grabs something else. It’s a shirt Gavroche gave him for his birthday last year, which Grantaire has always suspected was stolen.

His phone is lying on the floor. Grantaire pokes it with his toe. He sits at his computer chair, and spins back to face it. He wonders how long he can look at it until he cracks and checks it.
Grantaire has ten new texts from Joly.

He scrolls up to read them from the start.

frick that is harsh, man. ONE cool thing?

like asking me to pick my favorite child if i had 5000 children and some of my children were BLACK HOLES

EVERYTHING ABOUT SPACE IS COOL

ok one thing: the universe is always expanding in every direction & always expanding faster & eventually its gonna grow faster than the speed of light!!

also we’ve got a planet in our very own solar system that spins sideways and each pole gets 42 YEARS of day/night bc thats how far uranus is tilted

(that’s what she said)

sorry

no wait! my actual favorite space fact

in the 50s when we put out our first satellite we threw on a radiation detector for the heck of it, nobody thought there was radiation in space

BUT TURNS OUT above the atmosphere theres giant belts of charged particles trapped by earths magnetic field

they’d been up there the whole time, wrapped around the planet, protecting us from solar winds & nobody even knew

Grantaire hugs his arms to his chest, blinking fast. “thanks” he texts, which makes no real sense. His phone buzzes in his hand.

ps want 2 come over bossuet is making GRILLED CHEESE

The good news is that clearly Joly’s not cowering in a corner somewhere with his head between his knees. He’s getting ready to eat some fried sandwiches. Probably he’s okay.

The bad news is Grantaire needs to find a way to get out of this without hurting Joly’s feelings, but also without putting on real pants or leaving the house or getting into a car or talking to anyone not aware of what an incredible, sprawling mess of a person he is. Grantaire doesn’t deserve to be around Joly and Bossuet, buttering bread and laughing at their weird jokes.

sorry dude, not feelin too good, he sends.

OH NO are you still sick??? feel better soon! D: D: D:

Grantaire throws his phone back on the ground. So there’s the long and short of it. He can’t even send someone a dumb text without making them feel shitty.

He lies back down on the floor. It’s not that he wants to waste his whole weekend, but he’s not sure there’s anything he can stand to do. Sitting at his computer makes him think of sharing headphones with Enjolras. Reading Grapes of Wrath is the same problem. He could listen to one of Bahorel’s mix tapes, but that’s still tied back to the ABC. Working on Astro-cat brings him to Joly again, and
Bossuet and Musichetta by association. Everything is a winding trail that twists, inevitably, around again to how badly Grantaire has fucked it all up.

He rolls onto his side.

'Why are you so determined to do nothing?'

Enjolras said that to him, once. It’s a fair question. That’s the problem with Enjolras: he’s usually right.

He twists onto his back instead. It’s not fair that even doing nothing reminds him of Enjolras. He lets his head thunk against the floor. Sleeping it is.

On Sunday, he wakes up at nine in the morning, which is a sure sign of the end of days. Dogs will walk upright. Dinosaurs will return to earth. The stars will fall into the drainage ditch around the school. Peanut butter and jelly will switch places. Americans will be okay with bi people.

The trouble is, he’s slept so much already, he can’t force himself back under.

On his phone, there are no new messages, just that string of agonized frowny faces from Joly. He stares down at it, wrapping his arms around himself.

hey, he taps out, feeling better today. Except that’s a pointless message. If Joly wasn’t worrying, if he wrote that just to be nice—and Joly is nice, so it’s possible—there’s no point in annoying him. Joly didn’t sign up for real-time updates on Grantaire’s every mood fluctuation. On the other hand, if Grantaire managed to make Joly worry about him all over again, he is officially the worst person alive. Saying something now is a fine line. He’s not sure how to walk it.

wanna come over and play video games? he watches himself type.

“What are you even doing?” he says, because apparently now he’s talking to himself, apparently he’s become a guy who talks to himself. “Become a guy who’s brave enough to send a fucking text,” he says, and then he hits send.

Then he turns off his phone, tosses it into the garbage, and forces himself to do all of his Earth Science homework. Including the extra credit, just to torture himself. Then he does his Spanish homework.

When he finishes pregunta treinta, he retrieves his phone and fumbles it back on. If Joly loves one thing more than he loves space, it’s sending four or five texts in a row:

yes!!!

not great at video games but i WILL LEARN

what’s your address?

never mind, bossuet called your bf

Grantaire barely even has time to register the swoop in his stomach, what a terrible conversation that must have been, because the last message reads,

over in 1 hr let me know if that’s not ok

And the timestamp says it was sent fifty three minutes ago. “What the hell is with you people and just
fucking showing up at my house?" he mumbles. Then he pulls on some jeans and brushes his teeth, since he kind of doesn’t have a choice.

Joly and Bossuet show up just as Grantaire’s trying to clear off space on his floor. He appreciates the way they don’t react to how gross his room is, how they ask if he’s okay but don’t push it, seem to take it at face value that the reason Grantaire keeps staring into nothingness and freezing is the remnants of some terrible flu. They catch him up about how last night went, in some detail since apparently they both have strong feelings about cheese.

“Munster?” says Bossuet, “more like Muns-trocity” and Joly laughs until he drops his controller, as his in-game avatar takes five bullets to the torso.

“Oops,” says Joly.

“Eh,” says Bossuet, “don’t mourn him, he died doing what he loved.”

“Getting shot in the chest,” says Grantaire, taking up the controls.

Bossuet shakes his head. “Laughing about cheese. It was some life he lived. A bold life, full of flavor.”


“Get out of my house,” says Grantaire.

Joly throws an arm around Grantaire’s shoulders and snatches up his cane in the other hand to wave for extra emphasis. “Too late,” he shouts. “You invited us in! Vampire rules, there’s nothing you can do!”

Grantaire turns to Bossuet appealingly.

“Think he means nothing you can fon due,” says Bossuet, as Grantaire covers his ears with his hands and shakes his head. “There’s no use, friend, you’re surrounded.”

Against the onslaught, Grantaire manages a weak smile.

They play video games for a while longer. Joly really is terrible. He finds this hilarious, but it means he’s not that fun to play against, so they wind up watching some soap opera on mute, dubbing in their own dialogue. Bossuet is surprisingly good at doing voices.

“Sandra,” says Bossuet in a deep, weighty tone as a cleft-chinned guy runs his mouth to a blond woman with very fluffy hair. “I have a horrible secret, and it—seriously, it is a big deal, so like, be prepared. Sit down first. Maybe get a juicebox.”

“Oh Bernard, I have a secret too!” Joly croons, more or less in time with the lady. “I’ve never used a vacuum cleaner. They’re just—so loud!” Overcome with emotion, she sinks into her chair, and Joly adds, “It bothers me a lot, I guess?” The woman stares directly into the camera, eyes wide. “Oh Bernard, my floor is so dusty—”

“We can work through this, darling,” Bossuet says as the man on the screen grabs her by the wrist. “We can, uh—” The actor runs his other hand down her side. It’s probably supposed to be
passionate, but she doesn’t look like she’s having a good time, so it just comes off unsettling. Bossuet shakes his head, at a loss, and Grantaire cuts in with,

“What fabric is this? Sandra, do these pants come in men’s sizes?”

“Maybe,” Joly replies as Bossuet throws Grantaire a grateful look and the actress gazes meaningfully offscreen. “Hang on, let me stare into nothingness, that tends to jog my memory.”

The actor is yelling, and Bossuet fills in, “What about my super interesting secret?”

“That I totally had!” Grantaire adds, because this cleft-chinned dude is not shutting up. The camera zooms to a close-up of his yelling face. “Such a big sec—”

“Sandra,” Joly half-shouts, “I’m a werewolf!”

The show goes to commercial break.

“Dude,” Bossuet complains over what’s probably a car ad. “We had a rule, Joly. One werewolf per show.”

“Did you get it in writing?” asks Grantaire.

“No,” concedes Bossuet. “But we did set it to verse—”

“Not my fault you’re so good at howling,” says Joly. “Blessing and a curse.”

Grantaire sits wedged between them and forgets about his shit for entire minutes at a time.

It has to end eventually. Around six, they leave for family dinner with Bossuet’s five brothers and sisters. Grantaire can’t imagine. Well, he has the option of not needing to, because Bossuet invites him to come back with them, but Grantaire can’t stomach the idea of a bunch of screaming kids right now. He has the strength for sitting on the couch with the two of them, and that’s about it.

“Thanks for having us over,” Joly says as they’re heading out the door, because apparently his mom raised him right or whatever.

“One more cheese pun for the road?” Bossuet suggests, digging around for his keys.

“No whey,” says Grantaire, and the loss of dignity is worth it for the look of pure unfiltered delight on Joly’s face.

Joly gives him a quick hug around the neck. “Give us a call if you’re ever feeling blue,” he says. Or probably feeling bleu but Grantaire still needs to swallow past a lump in his throat when he says,

“Thanks, man. That’s—thanks.”

“You know,” Joly adds, an ominous bent to his smile, “just in queso.”

“Get out of my house.”

In the light of their goofiness, he was almost starting to feel like a human being again, but when they leave, they take his good humor with them. He spends the rest of the night lying with his face
mashed into the pillow, waiting for Sunday to be over.

Of course, with the end of Sunday comes Monday. It's the definition of a pyrrhic victory, but what can you do? Grantaire drags himself out of bed. He drags himself into his car. Bahorel's mix is still in the CD player. He turns on the radio instead, twists the volume knob until the windows rattle. He drags himself to school.

When he climbs out of his van, Combeferre's car is sitting there innocently on the other side. Grantaire clutches the straps of his backpack, suddenly glad he didn't have the energy to eat anything this morning.

Enjolras didn't want him at the meeting, couldn't stand the thought of having him in the room. Given how stubborn he is, Grantaire can't imagine anything's changed over the weekend. Is he still allowed at the lunch table? Should he send Enjolras a text, to make sure? He thinks of that curt, awful email and slips his phone back into his pocket. He's not sure he can deal with it right now.

But then, if he shows up at the table and Enjolras gives him that look again—

God, he's so tired. Tired of lying all the time, tired of trying to imagine himself through Enjolras's eyes, tired of being tired of stuff.

He pulls out his mp3 player, puts in his headphones, and scrolls to the angriest, loudest, least political music he's got. White suburban angst escorts him out of the parking lot and onto the sidewalk. He shoves open the doors, elbows his way through the crowd.

What's it even going to look like, if Enjolras tries to keep the act going in the face of how angry he is right now? A forest fire trying to pass itself off as a scented candle. It's going to be absolutely terrible and there is nothing at all Grantaire can do about it. If, he reminds himself, he's even welcome in the cafeteria anymore. Grantaire's mouth is dry.

He switches to a song with more shouting, makes a dive for the drinking fountain.

Maybe it's the music or maybe he's just that distracted, but either way, he doesn't see it coming. He doesn't even register that someone's yelling at him until he feels a sharp yank at the back of his hair.

Then his head slams into the drinking fountain and he stops tracking things for a while.

Everything goes dim. His ears are ringing. The actual pain registers third, hits him in waves. "Jesus fucking Christ," he's saying, like it's a magic spell that's going to stop the raw throbbing behind his eye. He's pulled himself upright but he can't make his legs work, he keeps sliding down the wall.

"Oh shit, Grantaire!" a voice calls, and then Jehan is there, kind wonderful Jehan with his stupid haircut and an ugly sweatshirt and the intelligence to ease Grantaire down onto the floor instead of trusting him to keep upright. "Are you okay?" Jehan asks him. Grantaire thinks he might be frowning but it's hard to tell because one eye isn't opening so easily and the other one won't stop watering.

"Ow," says Grantaire. "Fuck."

Jehan brushes the hair out of his eyes, which is a nice thought but kind of pointless since Grantaire can't see out of either.

"How can you tell if someone's got a concussion?" says Jehan.

"Don't know," says Courfeyrac, who might have been with Jehan the whole time, Grantaire's not
sure. “Hand me your phone? I'll call Combeferre, Joly if he doesn’t pick up—"

Jehan must nod or something, because there’s a pause and then Courfeyrac's saying, "Oh thank god thank god, listen man, are you anywhere near the South wing?” and Jehan's rubbing Grantaire's shoulder, asking, "Did you see anything? Who it was, or—"

Grantaire shakes his head. He's trying to force himself to breathe through his nose, but he keeps forgetting. It hurts so much.

"We only saw him from the back," says Jehan. "Tall, backwards hat, I think a football jersey? The number on it ended in something round, like a zero or an eight, if that rings any—"

He shakes his head again, swallowing back a hysterical laugh. There's a parable here, he thinks, about taunting homophobic athletes for fun, even if it seems like a good idea at the time. It’s like bullfighting, except Grantaire’s not the toreador, he’s the cloth the toreador waves in front of the bull or—what do bulls eat? Hay?

That can’t be right.

Jesus, his head hurts.

"Fuck," Jehan says, "we're gonna need to call Enjolras—"

"No," says Grantaire. Jehan and Courfeyrac are silent. He might've said it a little too loud. "He'll worry," he adds weakly.

"He'll worry more when he finds out you were keeping this from him," Jehan points out.

Grantaire swallows. "Please," he says. His eye is still watering and he thinks he might be shaking. He wants to be stoic and tough and badass, but it's taking everything in him not to curl up and cry. If there's ever been a moment in his life he wasn't prepared to deal with Enjolras, it's now. "Please. Humor the guy with the head injury, I don't—"

"It's okay," says Courfeyrac soothingly. "We won't call Enjolras. I promise."

He lets his head drop. "Thank you," he mumbles.

"Oh my god, what the hell is going on," shouts a familiar voice, and Grantaire squints up at the hallway as Courfeyrac adds,

"but maybe I texted him while you were talking?"

Grantaire doesn't even have time to glare, because then Combeferre is dropping down into his space, saying,

"Does it feel like you're going to throw up?"

"What?" Grantaire croaks. Combeferre's voice is patient and calm, and maybe if Grantaire focuses on him, Enjolras will just go away.

"It's a symptom of concussion," says Combeferre. "Are you nauseous, dizzy?"

"I don't think so?"

"Blurry vision? Headache?"
Grantaire laughs, an ugly, almost sobbing sound. "You know, now that you mention it, I guess I do have a slight ache in my head, right—" he gestures at the eye that is too swollen to open, "around here?"

"If he's making jokes, is that a good sign or a bad sign?" Enjolras's voice filters down from somewhere above him.

"I don't know, I'm not a psychologist," says Combeferre. "Grantaire. Are you having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly? Do you feel tired or anxious or emotional?"

For some reason, it sets Grantaire off again. "Oh snap," he gasps, "What if I've had a concussion my whole life?"

"Okay, at the very least, nurse's office," Enjolras is saying. There's an edge of tension to it, like the others are going to violently disagree.

"Yeah, definitely," says Courfeyrac. "I'll check with Bahorel, see if we can track down the guy who pushed him—"

Grantaire groans. "Needle in a haystack, dude," he says. "Or, needle in a giant pile of needles. I mean, good luck—"

Someone's patting his head. Jehan, he assumes. Jehan is so great.

"The nurse probably won't be able to diagnose a concussion for sure," Combeferre warns. "But—ice, painkillers—can you stand?"

"I could stand for painkillers," says Grantaire, heaving himself up. About eight hands reach out to help him. He wipes his eye, the one that's not swollen. He can just about keep it open.

"Bell's gonna ring," says Jehan. "Who's walking him there?"

"I'm fine," Grantaire says. It's at least four different lies at once, but the point is, he can stand. He can walk. He's not dizzy, except from pain.

"I'll do it," says Enjolras.

Over the sound of the bell, Grantaire forces back an almost animal panic. He knows they need to talk at some point, but he'd hoped they could do it on something like equal footing. Or, since that's impossible, that when the time came, Grantaire would at least not be trembling and crying a little and probably oozing pus. It hadn't seemed like so much to ask, frankly.

But the others are nodding, getting ready to leave.

"See you at lunch," Courfeyrac says. "Feel better, dude."

"We're gonna figure out who did this," says Jehan. "People must've seen his face. We can find him." He pats Grantaire on the shoulder again. "Get some ice."

"Don't let her give you anything with ibuprofen," says Combeferre. "It'll—"

"Thin the blood, yeah, I know," says Grantaire. He doesn't add that obviously any nurse would know, too. It feels like a dick move. "I'll ask for Tylenol," he tells him, giving a thumb's up.

Courfeyrac squeezes him in a one-armed hug. "Hey, just make it to lunch. Four hours, and then we'll be hanging out again," he reminds Grantaire.
For all his drama kid nonsense, Courfeyrac really is a good guy. “Yeah,” says Grantaire. “See you.”

“Stay strong,” says Jehan, which as advice goes, is like Everest saying, ‘Have you considered maybe being a really tall mountain?’

Grantaire nods, and watches as they peel off in various directions for their first hour. The hall is clearing out. Soon, it’ll just be the three of them: Enjolras, Grantaire, and whatever misplaced sense of duty made Enjolras volunteer to help him walk across a hallway.

“I can get there,” Grantaire insists once the others are out of earshot. “It’s not far, and my balance is fine.”

“Is it?” says Enjolras, in a weird, clipped tone.

“Check out how awesome I am at standing,” he counters. But when he risks a glance back, Enjolras’s lips are pressed together and his are eyes wide. It doesn’t look like anger at all, and Grantaire stumbles a half step. Classic hubris.

Enjolras wraps an arm around his shoulders, very mindful of his eye. “Whoa,” he says gently, and this is just way over the top as far as their act goes. No subtlety. Less is more. Zero stars, Enjolras.

“I really am okay,” says Grantaire, and he tries to step away, but he doesn’t get very far, because Enjolras’s arm is still there. Grantaire cranes his neck to face him. He’s going for some kind of “what the hell, man?” expression, but he’s stopped short again by the look on Enjolras’s face.

“Grantaire,” he says, “for the love of God—fight me on anything else, anything at all, but please don’t fight me on this one thing, okay?” It’s the movie hero voice again. Grantaire never stood a chance against the movie hero voice. It’s just not a fair fight.

When he nods, he can feel the sleeve of Enjolras’s hoodie against the back of his neck. “Okay,” he says. They start walking.

The more the hallway empties out, the more it comes obvious they’re not talking to each other. By the time the bell rings again, their footsteps are almost echoing on the dingy tile. That’s the problem with two and a half months of pretending to date, he thinks. At this point, silence between them actually feels weirder. They should be gossiping about ABC stuff or commiserating about their shitty classes or making fun of each other.

Grantaire doesn’t remember the walk to the nurse’s office taking about twenty years. Then again, it’s been a while.

“Um, about the other day,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras stops walking. “Can we please just—not right now?” he says. It sounds as worn-out as Grantaire feels, as frayed, almost pleading. He hates that anything could make Enjolras talk like this, hates even more that he’s pretty sure it’s his fault.

“Sure,” he says, and if it wasn’t awkward before, it definitely is now. The silence is like some big, loping creature tromping alongside them, sucking all of the air out of the hallway. Grantaire can’t take it. “Hey, at least it’s Monday,” he adds, words just kind of tumbling out of him.

“What,” says Enjolras, “why?”

“The Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday nurse is way nicer than the Thursday-Friday nurse,” he explains. There really was nothing like showing up at the end of the week with a bloody nose, only for the
healing professional to sigh and roll her eyes, like 14-year-old Grantaire’s whole fucked up life was some conspiracy designed to separate her from her magazine.

“Tell me about it,” says Enjolras. Grantaire frowns; when was Enjolras sick? He hasn’t missed a day of school since they started this whole mess. “She acted like we were whiny children. She literally refused to tell us if you were in the back, something about patient confidentiality, but Combeferre said—” He cuts himself off abruptly. Grantaire can feel the way his muscles tense, just in the arm across his shoulders.

“Sorry,” he blurts, instinctive, helpless, before he can clamp his lips shut. “I really, really didn’t—”

“Please, can we please not—” says Enjolras through gritted teeth. Grantaire considers another whole day of staring into the abyss. He’s just not strong enough. Like Eponine said: roll it all up into a ball, push the ball through the door or whatever. He’d rather know for a fact Enjolras never wants to see him again than spend another hour hovering helplessly in limbo.

He’s pretty sure, anyway. He still hasn’t read Dante.

“No,” he says. “Sorry, but. I think we need to talk.” It sounds a lot more certain than it feels. Middle school drama nerddom really is the gift that keeps giving. “You said I could argue with you about other stuff,” he points out.

It doesn’t feel like a dirty trick until he says it out loud. "I did," says Enjolras heavily. "You're right. But do you really want to have this fight when—"

He thinks he might wince. "So you are still mad at me," he says.

"Grantaire," says Enjolras. It actually sounds contrite, which makes him feel about a million times worse.

"'Cause, like, honestly, you should be," he makes himself say. "There'd be something wrong with you if you weren’t."


"Oh," says Grantaire. He lets it sink in for a moment, Enjolras's arm stiff and uncomfortable across his shoulders. He's sort of wishing he'd opted for the purgatory route after all.

He's not sure what he was expecting. Maybe he thought it would feel better, picking the brave thing. Well, probably it sucks less if you’ve got the character for it, or the integrity or whatever. Enjolras breathes in like he wants to say something else, and some part of Grantaire is viciously glad to be able to cut him off, to say,

“We’re here,” abrupt, and incline his head towards the door of the nurse’s office.

They made it, safe and sound. One more success for the buddy system.

Grantaire pushes open the door and they step inside. The whole front room is empty. "Well, okay," says Grantaire, bracing his hands against the counter. "I can take it from here."

“Are, uh.” The word ‘uh’ is not usually part of Enjolras’s vocabulary. Grantaire peers up to watch him say, “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Dunno, man,” Grantaire tells him, “I’m not psychic.”
“Do you—want someone to wait with you?” Enjolras’s jaw is firm but there’s almost a quaver in his voice. Something about it burns up the last of Grantaire’s patience.

“There’s nobody here,” says Grantaire wearily. “You don’t have to pretend.” Thank god for budget cuts and the fucked up priorities that ensure the nurse’s office is perpetually understaffed even as a brand new scoreboard sparkles high above the outdoor bleachers.

"Okay, yeah." Enjolras disentangles himself, steps away. At the end of the day, it almost doesn't matter if Enjolras spends the rest of the week gritting his teeth through a roiling ocean of righteous fury. Given his star performance in the hallway earlier, apparently he is capable of selling it either way. “The guy who did that to you, we’re gonna get him,” Enjolras says, and he already sounds more like his old self. “See you at lunch.”

"I guess," Grantaire mutters. He hunches over the sign-in sheet, writes his name, his grade, and the date. Under "Reason admitted", he puts "one hell of a shiner" because he's pretty sure nobody ever reads it anyway.

"Grantaire, is that you?" a voice calls from one of the side rooms, and a very familiar woman steps out. Same long blond braid over one shoulder, same blend of determination and concern on her face.

"Hey, Fantine," he says quietly, "how's my favorite nurse?"

"Oh honey," she says. Fantine has always called him that, from the start, and Grantaire has always jealously hoarded that word spoken in that voice. She's just doing her job, but every time she says it, it's like she's handing him a fuzzy baby duckling to cradle in his hands. "Really hoped I wasn't gonna have to see you like this again."

Just her slight sad smile has him feeling a little better. Fantine is the best nurse.

"You know me, couldn't stay away," says Grantaire. He tries for a roguish wink, but she doesn't laugh the way she sometimes used to. Probably it's not as effective with his other eye stuck in the closed position.

"And you're Enjolras," she says. "His boyfriend, right?"

Half of Grantaire's peripheral vision is out of order. He pivots around to where Enjolras is loitering ten paces away, one foot out the door.

Caught out, Enjolras squares his shoulders and steps back into the room. "Uh, yeah, nice to meet you," he says hurriedly. "Shouldn't he get some ice or something? His eye's pretty bad."

"Head wounds look worse than they are," says Grantaire. Fantine pulls him more directly under a light, inspecting the damages through the weak fluorescent wash. The pads of her fingers are so gentle on his chin, he could cry.

"Oh honey," she says again. She straightens up. "Okay, ice pack," she says, pointing to Grantaire. "Hall pass." She points to Enjolras. "You guys can come back and have a seat for a sec." They follow her past the counter to a row of small, cubby-like rooms, each equipped with a cot and not much else.

The smell of rubbing alcohol hangs in the air. Ah, memories.

"They're all free right now, so you've got your pick," says Fantine. "Grantaire, you want the third one?"
"Fourth," he says. It's not a hard choice.

"Third room's got a window," she reminds him.

"Fourth room's got that poster," Grantaire counters. Given the choice, what kind of person turns down Van Gogh in favor, like, reality?

"Sunlight."

He shakes his head. "Overrated."

"Alright then," she says, ushering them inside, "here, enjoy its cavelike charms. I'll be right back."

Grantaire shuts the door behind her. He drops onto the cot and peers at the poster, mostly out of habit. It's probably a good thing that he doesn't know how many hours he's spent staring at those swirls, wishing he could climb through the cheap plastic frame and into that valley, stand in the peaceful blue-toned village and look up at the stars.

The print is smaller than he remembered, blurrier. Enjolras is leaning against the opposite wall, scrutinizing it with an intensity that almost makes Grantaire uncomfortable on its behalf.

"The real one looks better," says Grantaire, because he still can’t shut up, because he can’t deal with the quiet and because he is filled with a sudden fierce need not to let Enjolras pass judgment on Starry Night based on some low-budget copy. "The colors are brighter and when the resolution’s cleaner, you can see, like, the texture. With the brush strokes."

Enjolras turns back to him, and Grantaire swallows.

"I mean, I’ve never seen it, seen it," Grantaire babbles. "But I’ve seen better copies. This one’s kind of shitty."

He needs to stop talking. It’s not like Enjolras has done anything to indicate that he’s in the mood to chat right now. Literally the opposite. He’s kind of expecting to be snapped at, but Enjolras just gives him an unreadable look. "You chose it over the window," he says, and Grantaire shrugs.

"The window looks out onto a parking lot."

Enjolras hums. "You're on a first name basis with the school nurse," he says slowly.

"Who, Fantine? Yeah, she's basically in love with me." He twists around to lie on the cot. Since there's no dignity to be had anyway, he might as well get comfortable. "You want some lollipops or Batman band-aids, I can hook you up. Q-tips. Tongue depressors."

Enjolras seems to mull this over. "Were you sick or something?" he says.

"What?"

"Going to the nurse's office so much."

"Nah," says Grantaire. He folds his hands under his head. The water stains on the ceiling haven't changed. "A lot of the time, I was just trying to miss class."

"A lot of the time," Enjolras echoes.

"Some are born fuckups, some achieve it, and some have it thrust upon them," says Grantaire to the ceiling.
He's anticipating one of those old, familiar annoyed noises, but Enjolras just sighs.

There's a light knock on the door and Fantine slips in with an ice pack. Grantaire puts it to his face gratefully. The cold makes him flinch, but he pushes past it, already anticipating that blissful numbness.

"Hold, don't press," she chides.

"Does he have a concussion or not?" says Enjolras from the wall. He says it kind of rudely, really.

"Pretty sure that’s just my personality," says Grantaire, and then remembering that the presence of a witness around means they’re back in-character, “Pudding-cup.” He’ll admit he’s starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel where stupid petnames are concerned. Not that it’s going to matter soon.

Fantine peers into Grantaire’s eyes, blocking Enjolras from his view, which is a stroke of luck. She goes through the whole list of symptoms again. It's boring; his answers haven’t changed since Combeferre did it and Fantine doesn’t laugh at his jokes, either.

When she’s done, she tells him sternly that it’s not conclusive and he needs to go visit an actual doctor to know for sure that he’s in the clear, blah blah blah. When Grantaire scrunches up his nose—he hates calling the doctor’s office—she ruffles his hair and calls him honey again. Or, “hon” actually, but it’s the same thing. He can’t stay annoyed in the face of that. Hell, he can barely contain his disappointed noise when she steps away.

She pats her pockets. “I’m so sorry, Grantaire, I was going to bring you Tylenol, and—something else, I think.”

"His hall pass," says Grantaire.

"Yes, sorry," says Fantine. “I had to check in a kid with an upset stomach, but I don't think it's gonna be a problem—" she drops her voice to a whisper, "because between you boys and me, I've got a sense he's faking."

From the next room, there is the sound of a guy violently retching all over a tile floor. Fantine shakes her head, resigned. "Okay, yeah, it probably had to happen that way," she says, and then she’s gone again.

"Sorry," says Grantaire when the door closes.

"For—what?"

'That you're stuck here with me,' he wants to say. He shrugs a shoulder, although he's not sure it's visible, lying down. "You're missing first hour," he says instead.

"Con Econ," says Enjolras dismissively, and wow, he truly must hate the study of economics, with the heat and force of an exploding star. “If we’re gonna be here a while, can I sit down?”

Grantaire obediently draws up his knees to clear some space. A lot of space, in case Enjolras doesn’t want to be anywhere close to him. It doesn’t matter, it’s a fairly small cot. When Enjolras perches next to Grantaire’s feet, Grantaire can feel the warmth against his shins anyway. “Sorry,” he says again.

“It’s not—” Enjolras sighs. From this close, Grantaire can’t look at him anymore without craning his neck. Not worth it. “I am mad at you,” Enjolras says, as if it would’ve slipped Grantaire’s mind. “But.” The cot creaks; Enjolras must be shifting around. “I don’t know,” he says slowly. “You were
under a lot of pressure. I asked a lot of you. And really, if I’m honest, it was unfair of me to—”

“No,” says Grantaire. “No, no, come on, man.” He can’t have this conversation at the stains on the ceiling. He scrambles up to look Enjolras in the eye. “Don’t pull that shit.”

“What?” says Enjolras.

“That whole—” Grantaire spits out, “That whole thing, like ‘Yeah Grantaire, you fucked everything up, but don’t worry, nobody really expected better, after all, it’s you—’” His voice is doing something terrible, some kind of choked, hiccupy bullshit. He swallows.

Enjolras’s eyes are wide again. “That isn’t what I meant, at all.” He starts to lift one hand, but he brings it back to rest against his knee. His forehead wrinkles. “I’m sorry,” he says, sounding—Grantaire’s not sure. Ragged. “We can talk about this now, if that’s what you want, but I don’t actually know how useful I’m gonna be while you’re sitting there with a massive black eye that is almost entirely my fault—”

“Uh,” says Grantaire, “what the hell are you—”

“Can one of you get the door?” Fantine calls. Enjolras climbs down to let her in. She’s carrying a bottle of pills and a precariously full glass. “Here.” Grantaire only has one available hand, given the ice pack. There’s some shuffling and then she hands the water to Enjolras and deposits the bottle in Grantaire’s free palm. “Take two. If it hurts after that, take a third one. If it hurts after that, cuss as much as you’d like, I won’t tell anyone.”

She drops her voice. “Our other guest threw up all over his clothes,” she says. “And the floor, and the wall, and me.” Grantaire peers down, and sure enough, from knee to ankle, her slacks are spattered with—well, it’s pretty gross. “I need to go down to the office, see if someone will lend us some spirit wear or something—”

“Go Comets,” Grantaire deadpans, automatic.

“—are you boys alright here for a moment?”

“His hall pass?” says Grantaire.

From the other side of the door, a boy’s voice yells, “Nurse? I feel sick again—”

“I can wait, it’s fine,” says Enjolras, and she throws him a harried, thankful look on her way out the door.

Grantaire pops two pills and reaches for the water. Despite everything, his mind still takes a moment to notice the way their fingers brush. He swallows half the glass trying to forget. The brim of the cup knocks into the ice pack, and Grantaire doesn’t whimper. He bites his lip.

“Does—uh, does your face hurt?” Enjolras asks from his side. The ‘because it’s sure killing me!’ joke auto-completes in his head, but Grantaire spares him.

“The ice helps,” he says. “More importantly, in what fucking way is this your fault?”

“Come on,” says Enjolras. He looks—well, he looks miserable, to be honest. “Would you be in this situation if it wasn’t for me?”

“I asked you out,” Grantaire reminds him, taking another careful sip.
“Don’t be cute,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire mentally awards himself a gold medal for not coming back with anything sarcastic. He can sneak it into the trophy case when his parents aren’t looking. “I thought it up. I asked you first. You never would’ve had the idea on your own. You never would’ve —”

“Fuck you, it was my decision,” says Grantaire. He shifts the ice pack to his other hand, lets his eyes shut. “Jesus, dude, it was one of like, two brave things I’ve done this whole year, can you not take that from me?”

He doesn’t need to open his eyes to know that Enjolras is looking at him. Whatever, he doesn’t care. “I did it for Jehan and Courfeyrac,” he adds. “So if you want to blame anyone, you’d have to blame them. Or those skateboarders at lunch that day, for not distracting me. Or, if we really wanna get crazy here, the actual fucker who slammed my head against a drinking fountain—"

“I made it worse,” Enjolras insists. Grantaire cracks open one eye to peer at him. “I did. I start conflicts. I make enemies. I can never walk away from a fight. I provoked a lot of people, what if it was one of them who—” He breaks off, swallows.

“Dude,” says Grantaire. “Do you—want some water or something?” He holds out the cup but Enjolras shakes his head. Grantaire leans against the wall. “I don’t know, man. At most, it’s maybe ten percent your fault, but like. If I hadn’t asked you out, or. If I hadn’t also done shit with you just to piss people off, or if I’d picked a different way to class. Hell, if I hadn’t been listening to music, maybe I could’ve anticipated—”

“You’re still wearing headphones in the hallway?” Enjolras interrupts, horrified. “I told everyone to stop doing that weeks ago, we need to be on guard—"

“Oh god,” says Grantaire, “this is actually a war to you. Like, in a not very metaphorical way.”

Enjolras doesn’t seem struck by this revelation. Or, like, surprised. “Well, yeah,” he says, somber. He lets the back of his head rest against the wall next to Grantaire. “I don’t see the point of pretending it’s not. If they’re attacking us—"

Grantaire nods thoughtfully. The motion jostles a corner of the ice pack right into the worst part of the bruise. He holds in his wince as much as he can, but it’s clearly not good enough, because Enjolras stops mid-word to say, tentative,

“Do you, uh, want that third Tylenol?” and a circuit in Grantaire’s brain suddenly snaps into place.

“Holy fuck,” he blurts out.

“What?”

“Oh, uh, on Friday. When nobody could find me. You thought I was dead.”

Enjolras closes his eyes, breathes out through his nose, and nods. “It—it occurred to me, yeah.”

“And everyone’s freaking out, and you’ve got to keep the lie going, and they’re all looking to you to take charge, and you—” An avalanche is going off in his head. He stares at Enjolras. “Oh my fucking god, if you could find a way to blame yourself for this, did you—”

It sounds so insane he’s almost expecting Enjolras to contradict him but Enjolras only nods again. Grantaire is beginning to understand why Enjolras didn’t want to talk about it before, but the momentum is dragging him down a mountain and he can’t stop talking.
“And then—and then I like, roll up, stoned and cracking jokes—” Grantaire wants to throw up, not in a concussion kind of way.

Enjolras pinches at the bridge of his nose, still not opening his eyes. “Did you really not put this together until now?” he says, and in November—hell, in March, that kind of question from Enjolras would raise every hackle Grantaire’s got, but now he’s so tired. Enjolras seems tired, too, and Grantaire just doesn’t see the point.

“Well, I was pretty high,” he says instead.

“Yeah, I could tell,” says Enjolras. He peers over at Grantaire, puzzled. “It was like you were trying to smell my shirt?”

“Hahaha,” says Grantaire, because he chose the room based on a painting he liked when he was 13 and so kicking out the window and barrel rolling to safety is not an option.

“I just,” Enjolras says, serious again. “I don’t understand why it wouldn’t occur to you, that people— I mean, you saw how we reacted over Jehan’s shoes. And that was shoes. You’re a human being.”

If nothing else, thinks Grantaire, they’ll always have this moment together. Stuck on the same flimsy too-small school cot, the smell of disinfectant thick in the air, trapped by circumstances and the vomit of a stranger. Enjolras reminding Grantaire of his status as a living person. This is their Casablanca.

Well, Grantaire’s Casablanca, since Enjolras probably won’t remember this conversation in a month.

“Yeah, but like, Jehan’s—you know.” Ever since Grantaire started really drawing again, his hands have been mottled with pen and marker ink. Blue, red, orange, green— he’s got a smear of graphite down the side of one palm, highlighter on his wrist for some reason. Last week, Bahorel was bored enough in Con Econ to paint Grantaire’s nails with white-out, and traces linger at the edges. Grantaire picks at it idly.

"Jehan’s what?” says Enjolras, and Grantaire glances back up, even though he doesn't want to. It's a measure of self-defense, knowing what's coming so he can steel himself, once again make his case, try to prove he's not a walking garbage pile. Grantaire makes himself look over at Enjolras, fixes his good eye on him.

Enjolras looks confused. Not confused and indignant or confused and judgmental. Garden variety confusion. No fire, no ice, just a slight frown and adorably furrowed brow. A thought floats in from nowhere that Grantaire has, in recent weeks, encountered this face way more often than the fury face.

"You know," Grantaire mumbles, although it's clear from Enjolras's whole demeanor—and okay, the words Enjolras just said—that he does not, in fact, know. "Jehan's, like, part of—" and some wildly unreasonable corner of Grantaire's mind is pissed off at how Enjolras fails to intuit the rest, to draw the necessary conclusion and bail Grantaire out of this sentence. How Enjolras instead says,

"Part of what?” Because he's got the audacity to not actually be a god, suspiciously perfect teeth and hair aside, and so he can't just tap into Grantaire’s muddled thoughts and retrieve the thread.

“The whole—” Grantaire waves an arm, like that will complete the picture. “The whole—whatever the ABC stands for. He’s one of you, of course it’s a problem when—”

“Wait,” says Enjolras. He grabs Grantaire’s free arm, looks down, visibly realizes he’s grabbed Grantaire’s arm, and lets go. “What are you talking about? How do you not get that, to anyone who
doesn’t know—I mean, you go to meetings, too—"

“I don’t contribute anything,” says Grantaire. “I sit in the back and fuck around, or draw or read, that doesn’t—”

“Except for detentions, have you ever even missed a meeting?”

“You know,” says Grantaire, “once you’re done with middle school, they actually stop giving out trophies for perfect attendance?”

“For the love of god, you’re pretending to be my boyfriend—”

Grantaire scrapes a shred of dried white-out from his cuticles. “Key word: pretending.”

Enjolras takes a deep breath. “Grantaire,” he says, patient, “they don’t know that.”

“But you do,” Grantaire persists. “You could’ve, like—calmed them down, or—”

“How?” says Enjolras, voice almost cracking. “What was I supposed to say? ‘Oh hey, don’t worry, we’re not really dating so his life doesn’t matter’?” And okay, out loud, Grantaire will admit it sounds callous enough to be out of character. “There wasn’t much time to talk anyway, we were all running around. Nobody was thinking clearly—”

That much makes sense to him now. “No, I mean, in retrospect, of course you’d be angry, that I was making you do this whole search party routine—”

At that, Enjolras looks up. “I wasn’t,” he says. He sounds almost hurt, although God knows why. “I wasn’t angry, looking for you. I was scared.” Enjolras swallows. “I was very, very scared.”

‘Enjolras’ and ‘scared’ can barely fit into the same sentence, but especially not because of—Grantaire shakes his head.

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras quietly. “I thought you might be dead. And we can argue about this, but in my mind, it would’ve been my fault.” He sighs. “And I know you don’t see yourself as part of the group, but you’re still”—He looks over at Grantaire, a little helplessly. “You’re—”

“A human being,” Grantaire finishes. “Yeah, no, I get it,” he says heavily. “I put you guys through hell. I’m actually not sure why you haven’t punched me in the face yet, so—”

“Don’t,” says Enjolras. “Don’t, please don’t even joke about that, I really, really, really can’t—” He drags his hand over his eyes.

It was in poor taste, Grantaire can see that now. He sighs and tries to shift his wrist. It doesn’t disturb the ice pack much but it does send a shiver of pain right down Grantaire’s brain stem. It catches him so far off-guard, he can’t stop the tiny, agonized bleat that comes out.

“I’m giving you that third Tylenol,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire—very carefully—shakes his head. ‘I’m just being a baby. Scale of one to ten, it’s like, a five, tops.”

“Yeah,” says Enjolras, “but what’s your ten?”

Grantaire grits his teeth and doesn’t say, ‘The thought of making you afraid.’ “You keep forgetting,” he says, “that I’ve been flown crotch-first into a solid wall.”
Enjolras hums thoughtfully. “Do you miss acting?” he asks, which is kind of an incredible segue. Kind of an incredible question, too.

“Oh my god,” Grantaire half-laughs. “No, I don’t miss acting, are you kidding? After two and a half months, I miss not-acting.” He has the neck cramps to prove it. His muscles are so tight, he’s surprised they haven’t snapped yet, head flopping back like a broken marionette.

“It gets stressful,” says Enjolras.

“Lying to all your friends,” Grantaire agrees, and Enjolras nods, emphatic.

“Good lord, I feel so guilty.” And of course he would, Enjolras has actual principles and shit. It hadn’t even occurred to Grantaire, how rough this has probably been for him. “My parents, too. They’re so happy for me.” Enjolras winces.

What a thing to connect about, Grantaire thinks: ‘Oh hey, I find it agonizing to pretend to date you, too!’ Or, it hasn’t all been agony, but he’s still a big enough person to suck it up and say, consoling,

“Look on the bright side: in five days, this whole mess is behind us. We can, like, forget each other’s names.”

“Yeah,” says Enjolras, toneless. Hey, Grantaire gave it a shot. “How much longer do you think she’s gonna be?”

“No way to tell, man. The office is stingy with its spirit wear. A pair of sweatpants is like eighty dollars. She’d have way better luck just raiding the lost and found.” Grantaire frowns. “Hey, that’s weird, right? Like, school spirit is for rich kids only or something?”

Enjolras shrugs. “Sure, maybe,” he says. His voice is vague. His gaze is on the poster again, and also a thousand miles away. Fitting; Enjolras doesn’t belong in this cramped, ugly room, wedged in with the guy who ruined his Friday.

“If you want to get back to class—” Grantaire starts, but Enjolras just shakes his head.

“You know what my Con Econ is like.” And it’s such a dumb comfort, because Grantaire has indeed witnessed Enjolras’s Con Econ, and it is shitty, but still, the fact that Enjolras would rather be here than there, that despite the myriad ways Grantaire has fucked up, this cheap vinyl cot is not his last choice, makes Grantaire feel warm for a moment, like the first inhale of a cigarette. Like swallowing a mouthful of cider.

“You know,” he says suddenly. “Depending how badly you want to skip.”

“Yeah?” Enjolras sounds a lot less distant now. When Grantaire peers over, Enjolras has turned to face him.

“I could probably get you out for the whole hour.”

“How?”

“Um.” Now that those eyes are on him again, Grantaire realizes it could be a tremendously stupid suggestion, but he doesn’t have any plan B. “I mean, Fantine’s super nice and she’s always kind of taken my side, so I think maybe. If we, like,” Grantaire takes a deep breath. “Kind of—played up the whole injury thing. Acted super couply. I think she’d let you stay.”

Enjolras breathes out through his nose and looks away. He’s silent for a long time.
Grantaire always has to take shit too far. He backpedals, “Of course, it’s cool if you’re not up for it, and it is pretty much manipulating her, so if you’ve got like, ethical—”

“I don’t,” says Enjolras. “She already saw you beaten up, so—it’s like with my parents. It might make her happy, thinking someone—”

“Huh.” Grantaire turns that over in his mind. Out of nowhere, he hopes that Fantine likes Enjolras, that she didn’t notice what a dick he was about checking for concussions. Maybe she likes him anyway; you can never tell with nice people.

“It’s more—how coupley would we need to be?” Enjolras asks, somber, and Grantaire sucks in a deep breath, feeling like the grossest person alive.

“I’m not—” says Grantaire. “I mean, given all the bullshit I’ve pulled. Obviously I’m not gonna force you to cuddle me.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “For one thing, you were high, you didn’t really know what you were—”

It would be so easy to leave it there. But Grantaire’s guilt levels aren’t easing up any time soon. “Uh, maybe this is information you don’t have,” Grantaire tells him, “since they don’t talk about it this way in Health. But smoking pot is not that different from drinking. It’s not like I was on crack, I pretty much knew what I was doing and saying.”

“Except you didn’t know we were worried,” Enjolras says slowly. “You didn’t work that out.” He bites his lip. He’s sitting hunched forwards, almost folded up, and Grantaire wants to give him a hug more than he can quantify. After the many reasons he’s given Enjolras to be mad at him, the idea of touching him is terrifying. Leaving him sitting here alone would be worse, Grantaire thinks, reaching out a hand that is only shaking a little and setting it on Enjolras’s shoulder. Enjolras doesn’t push him away, which feels like a minor miracle.

“I still don’t get that,” says Enjolras. “Why that wouldn’t even occur to you. And I’ll be honest, I still can’t understand why you did it in the first place, unless it’s an addiction or—”

“It’s not an addiction.” Jesus, thinks Grantaire, somebody really needs to teach this boy some fundamental information about marijuana. “I was stressed out,” he says, which sounds so small and inadequate in the face of the damage he’s done. “The—keeping the act going for so long, it was stressful. I wanted a break.” That’s not much better, but nothing can make it sound good. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I am, I am really, really sorry.” He swings his foot, watches the arc of his sneaker. “And like, I don’t mean sorry like please-forgive-me-sorry, because you don’t have to. Just—if there was something I could do, I would do it.”

Enjolras still hasn’t shrugged off the hand on his shoulder. He’s sitting up a little straighter. Could it somehow be helping? Grantaire sweeps his thumb back and forth.

“The favor,” says Grantaire on a sudden inspiration. “Back when we started, I said you owed me a sketchy favor for going along with this. So that can be one thing. We can write that off.”

Enjolras shakes his head so hard Grantaire can feel the muscles move under his palm. “That’s not fair,” he says. “That was our agreement. You can’t redo it now.”

“I want to do something, though,” Grantaire insists. “Please.”

“Well,” says Enjolras with a tentative smile, “get me out of Con Econ?”
Chapter End Notes

Updates continue to be every other Sunday.

Space facts (and space feels) come courtesy of nudistfeline.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Enjolras breathes out, almost a laugh. “Were you a cat in a previous life?”

“Maybe.” Grantaire considers this. “I always thought I’d be pretty good at hiding under furniture and shitting in a box.”

Grantaire has entered a strange and terrible dream world, where he can do things like mumble, “If you put your arm around me, maybe,” and Enjolras will scoot closer and carefully drape his arm around Grantaire’s waist, with no witnesses, no audience to speak of, and when Grantaire startles and then tries to relax, Enjolras will simply say something like,

“It’ll be more convincing if we’re already, when she walks in,” in a totally reasonable tone of voice.

“In media res, gotcha,” says Grantaire. He doesn’t point out that they still have no idea when Fantine’s getting back, which means they could theoretically be stuck like this for a long time. Enjolras has to be smart enough to know this, and doesn’t seem to have a problem with it, so maybe he wasn’t all that angry after all. Or maybe he should see a doctor about his intense loathing of consumer economics.

Or maybe it’s been a stressful couple of months and people don’t touch him because he’s terrifying, so he’s short on hugs.

“What’s—” Enjolras is looking over at him, and Grantaire has no idea what’s on his face but it’s got to be giving something away. He slides down to tuck his head under Enjolras’s chin, against his sternum. It twists Grantaire’s body in way that’s not entirely comfortable, but his whole side is warm, and he can feel Enjolras’s throat work against the crown of his head, through his hair. He tracks the rise and fall of two breaths, and then Enjolras says, “What are—”

“Shh,” Grantaire whispers. “I’m sleeping.”

“With one hand pressed to your eye?” Enjolras points out, hushed like he’s half-bought into Grantaire’s premise anyway.

Grantaire had almost forgotten about the ice pack. At this point, that arm is basically numb from fingertips to elbow. He shrugs the opposite shoulder, which Enjolras has to be able to feel.

“Although, if you pretended to be asleep, you could lay on your side and I could hold the ice in place,” says Enjolras.

The idea appeals to Grantaire’s sore shoulder, but he says, regretfully, “That pretty much defeats the purpose of—if I’m not conscious, you don’t have much of a reason to hang around.”

“Maybe,” says Enjolras, “you could—kind of lay on me, so I wouldn’t be able to leave without waking you up.”

“How?” says Grantaire. “Like, without, uh, crushing you—”
Enjolras coughs. “Not—on top of me, but you could, like. Rest your head on my leg. If you’re okay with it.”


“Wait,” says Enjolras. “Uh, get up for a sec.”

It feels like dragging an iron bar away from a magnet, but Grantaire pulls himself up again.

Enjolras stretches away, towards the wall. The room is small enough that Enjolras can just barely reach the lightswitch from the cot. He clicks off the lights, and everything goes completely dark because, yeah, there are no windows.

“If you’re hoping to trick her,” says Grantaire, “I mean, the second she opens the door, the light’s gonna flood in—”

“Counting on it,” Enjolras’s voice floats back. “If she disrupts us just by coming in, it’ll put her on the defensive for the rest of the conversation.”

“Probably makes the sleeping more convincing, too,” Grantaire frowns into the darkness. There’s a long pause, and he wonders if they’re both stuck on the same awkward riddle. “Uh, how am I gonna get into place blind and one-handed?” he mutters, trying to flex his lifeless fingers on the ice pack.

“I can help you down,” says Enjolras, like it’s nothing, “uh, where’s your arm?”

Fantine could come back at any second. There’s no time to freeze up. Grantaire reaches out, finds Enjolras’s wrist on the third try and places it on his own bicep.

“Here you go,” Grantaire says. At least with the lights killed, he can grimace at himself in peace.

“Good,” says Enjolras. “Okay, so.” The hand on Grantaire’s arm trails up to his neck to cup the back of his head, very gently. Grantaire swallows and reminds himself that the situation is ridiculous, a farce. “If you can scoot to the side and lean back,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire does, because Enjolras’s fingers are in his hair and Grantaire is only one man.

Enjolras helps him down. It takes about five times longer than it has any right to, because Enjolras is absurdly careful. They move so slowly, Grantaire can only imagine how stupid it would look with the lights on. Some kind of bizarre underwater mime routine.

“Okay?” says Enjolras when they’ve finally transferred custody of the ice pack and managed to get Grantaire lying curled up on his side, head pillowed against what Grantaire is telling himself is Enjolras’s calf, even though it feels a lot more like thigh, because thinking about lying with his face that close to Enjolras’s crotch is an express ticket to madness.


“Shhh Fantine,” Enjolras stage-whispers. “My boyfriend’s sleeping, I don’t want to wake him up.”

Grantaire takes a moment to appreciate the full manipulative power of the scene Enjolras has just put together. “Whoa, man,” he says, “you’re like, an evil genius.”

“Thanks,” says Enjolras drily.

Grantaire’s head is at an awkward angle. He twists about an inch, telegraphing it as much as he can,
but Enjolras is so careful about holding the ice pack steady he seems to forget that some of
Grantaire’s hair is tangled in his fingers, which means a light momentary tug, which means Grantaire
lets out a completely embarrassing sound just as his cheek brushes against the surface of Enjolras’s
jeans, and Grantaire hates everything. Absolutely everything.

“Did that hurt?” says Enjolras, because bless that total idiot, he can’t tell the difference between a
pain noise and a painfully turned on noise. But he also sounds genuinely worried, so Grantaire
manages to choke out a,

“No, no, you’re fine.”

There’s a silence that Grantaire can’t gage, because Enjolras has gone still, and without being able to
see or hear him, the only senses left are smell and taste. Enjolras has his usual vaguely citrus scent
and licking him is firmly out of the question, so. Options are limited. In case Enjolras is using this
moment to beat himself up about things way beyond his control—and given his apparent martyr
complex, it feels like a possibility—Grantaire finds himself babbling reassurances. “It doesn’t hurt, I
swear. Pretty much the opposite, in fact,” he says. God, Grantaire could kick himself. He could kick
himself in the face. He would violate all laws of physics and also human anatomy if only he could
shut himself up.

“Courfeyrac’s always singing the praises of head rubs,” Enjolras says. “Do you think it’d help? To
take your mind off the eye?” He runs his fingernails lightly through Grantaire’s hair, up and back
down, and Grantaire blessedly remembers how to shut up. He forgets every word of the English
language instead, but it feels like a fair trade.

Grantaire’s scalp is tingling. He bites his lip, lets himself relax into it. “What eye?” he mumbles.

Enjolras breathes out, almost a laugh. “Were you a cat in a previous life?”

“Maybe.” Grantaire considers this. “I always thought I’d be pretty good at hiding under furniture and
shitting in a box.”

“Be serious,” says Enjolras.

“Meow,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras huffs—annoyance or half a laugh, Grantaire can't be sure in the dark, just feels the air
against his face.

"I mean," Enjolras persists, because this is a thing about him—he has a hard time letting a thought go
until he's all the way done with it. Grantaire has a sense that Courfeyrac's non sequitors and
Combeferre's tangents both annoy and delight him—loops in the path where Enjolras would always
rather be moving forward. “When someone scratches your head, you go boneless."

Boneless. What a word. But his brain doesn't even know how to panic with the way his scalp is
buzzing under Enjolras's fingers. If he had the capacity for alarm right now, it would probably bother
him how he's kind of arching his neck for more. It's okay, Enjolras can't tell, he reminds himself.
Superhero aspirations aside, the guy doesn't have night vision.

"Granted," Grantaire says, very belatedly, "I'm not, like, amazing at science but I'm 90% sure cats
have bones."

"Floppy then," says Enjolras. "You've pet a cat before, right?"

If Grantaire thinks of what Enjolras is doing right now as petting, he will lose his mind.
"Why can't I be a dog?" he says instead. "Dogs are fun. Cats just kill things and hate you." Eponine had a cat when they first met, and then abruptly she didn't have one anymore, and wouldn't talk about it. Grantaire spent the following year trying to convince himself it ran away or got hit by a car, something normal. He never quite got there.

There's a soft rustling that might be Enjolras shaking his head. "Dogs are—simple."

"Cats are simple," Grantaire retorts. "A cat brain has the same number of neurons as the human stomach. The stomach, Enjolras."

Enjolras makes a sound in his throat. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Ten seconds ago you said you couldn't do science, and then—"

"Party trivia isn't the same as knowing stuff," says Grantaire.


"Yeah?"

"Do you go around saying that at parties?"

"Sure," says Grantaire, a little breathy because Enjolras's fingers have worked their way to the soft hair at the nape of his neck. "Every party I go to, it's two drinks and then, 'Who wants to hear about cat brains?' It's a big hit, let me tell you."

"Will you be breaking that out at Combeferre's party?"

"Laser tag? Well, no," Grantaire says patiently. "Because it's happening after prom, so."

"Right." Enjolras sounds gruff, maybe like he's expecting Grantaire to make fun of him for being such a space case. It's a walking-into-closed-doors-thinking-about-affirmative-action move. Grantaire wants to tell him not to worry; he can't think of a single joke to make. He's got no idea how the deadline would slip Enjolras's mind, since god knows it hasn't left Grantaire's since Friday. Enjolras's fingers start to lift away, and maybe Grantaire chases after them an inch or two.

"Hey," he says, "what if she walks in?"

"I'm starting to think she won't," says Enjolras, but his hand is back in Grantaire's hair so whatever. "Maybe she forgot, she seems pretty scattered."

"Hey, that's Cosette's mom you're talking about," says Grantaire. "She's a good nurse, she didn't—"

"Then where is she?"

"She does like, three people's worth of work all the time," Grantaire says. "And they only give her half the week so they don't have to pay her benefits. She's—shit there's a word for it, she's like. A contractor. A part-time contractor. They can fire her whenever."

"That should be illegal," says Enjolras, full of fire but still stroking Grantaire's hair and it's everything Grantaire's ever wanted, which is why he's not surprised to hear footsteps outside. Regretfully, he makes a shushing sound, just in time for Enjolras to cut himself off before the door opens, and the black behind Grantaire’s eyelids is flooded red.
“Finally got that hall pass,” says Fantine, “so you can—oh.”

The door clicks shut and everything’s dark again. Grantaire opens his mouth and either Enjolras can feel the flex of jaw through jeans, or he’s that attuned to Grantaire’s usual smartass routine, because he drags the hand off Grantaire’s scalp and over his lips. Fantine must not have left, he thinks. The coast isn’t clear. Message received. He nods minutely, and the hand descends back into his hair.

“Sorry,” Fantine whispers, “is he asleep?”

“Yeah,” Enjolras whispers back. “He’s been so scared lately. I wanted him to get some rest if he could. He just nodded off.”

“Don’t worry, he’s a very sound sleeper,” she tells him. This is not totally the case. Grantaire has logged hours dead to the world on these school cots but that’s mostly because he wasn’t sleeping much at home. Something about his room had keyed him up. “Poor little guy,” she says, and Enjolras makes a hum of agreement while something in Grantaire’s stomach sinks because is this how she’s been talking about him when he’s not around? Like he’s five? There’s quiet, and then the air stirs like Fantine’s closer, leaning towards them.

“I have been so worried about that boy,” she whispers.

Grantaire’s eyes prickle. Enjolras can probably feel how he’s swallowing, almost convulsive, but Grantaire can’t think of any way out of this moment. It’s all humiliation, no escape. Karma punishing him for trying to use Fantine’s feelings for something he wanted.

“You’re not the only one,” Enjolras tells her in a low voice, playing his part to a T. “We’ve all been trying to watch out for each other, but—”

Fantine makes a sympathetic noise. “Oh no, kiddo, it’s okay. You can’t protect someone every second of the day. At least he’s got people in his corner this time.”

“This time?” says Enjolras.

“I’m sure he’s told you all about his first year here—” she says softly, as every muscle in Grantaire’s body tightens. But Enjolras only says,

“Yeah. Awful.”

“I know it’s a cliche, but kids really can be so cruel,” Fantine agrees. “My daughter was bullied when she was younger, for not having the right brand of shoes, all those nonsense excuses people invent. And it broke my heart, but I’ll be honest, I don’t know what I would’ve done if someone had hit her.” Enjolras’s hand stops moving. “But Grantaire would never tell on anyone,” she says. “I’d ask, and he’d barely admit something was even wrong. He’d just shrug and change the subject, make bad jokes.”

Grantaire frowns. He’d thought at least some of those jokes were funny, come on.

“That sounds like him,” says Enjolras. “It’s, uh, frustrating sometimes.”

“You’ve just got to wait it out,” she says. “Make sure he feels safe, you know? And lollipops. He likes lollipops. Rootbeer flavor, that’s his favorite.”

“Good memory,” Enjolras whispers.

“Nah,” says Fantine. “Nobody likes the rootbeer ones. They’re the black jellybean of suckers.”
“Makes sense,” says Enjolras, “he loves rootbeer.”

There’s no reason to be surprised that this is something Enjolras knows, something he’s noticed. Grantaire has a can at lunch pretty much every day; it’s an easy pattern to pick up and Enjolras is bright. Enjolras has seen him drink rootbeer, and mentally recorded it for whatever reason—data about his fake boyfriend, maybe. Somewhere in Enjolras’s brain, there is a folder labeled “Grantaire” and in that folder, among the information stored is this, the soda Grantaire drinks without even thinking about it.

Grantaire is giving this way too much thought.

“It’s twenty-seven minutes until the end of the period,” says Fantine. Grantaire is stunned that she could guess so exactly, but when he cracks his eyes, there’s a tiny blue rectangle hovering in the air, shedding a faint blue glow on the underside of her chin. Cellphones. Grantaire had forgotten about cellphones as a light source. “What’s your next class?” she asks Enjolras.

“Consumer Economics,” Enjolras says. “But—” He shifts on the cot. “He’s finally, finally asleep. I just—I don’t want him to wake up and I’m not there.”

This would be a pretty good line of thinking if Grantaire was a baby or a tiny child, but it strains credibility here, he thinks. A seventeen-year-old has the critical thinking and object permanence to understand his boyfriend hasn’t stopped existing.

But Fantine only says, “You don’t have any tests or quizzes this hour, do you?”

“We’re watching an informational video about malls,” says Enjolras.

“Okay, I can see why you’d rather be here,” Fantine admits, and something about the shape of her vowel sounds tells him she’s smiling the way he remembers. “And I know he’d rather you were, too.” She sighs.

Sensing weakness, Enjolras goes in for the kill; Grantaire can hear the whisper of cloth against cloth, the slight contraction of muscle in his thigh as he leans toward her. “I don’t think he’s sleeping too well at home,” he says quietly. “It’s been such an awful month. If I can help at all, I need to, because I just don’t know what else to do.” His voice catches. It’s masterful; Grantaire never should’ve doubted his acting abilities. “I need to. Please.”

Grantaire wonders what Enjolras’s persuasive essays are like; if without the sound of his voice making each line glow, it’s more obvious what a cheesy person he can be, or if he’s got the conviction to sell it on paper. If his teachers are sitting there throwing down their red pens to wipe away tears, even when the prompt is, like, ‘Should we have school uniforms?’

Fantine only says, “Who’s your teacher?”

“Miss—”

There must only be one unmarried female Con Econ teacher, because Fantine says, “Oh, Dahlia? I’ll send a note to the office and tell her what happened, it’s fine. But when the bell rings, you do have to go to second hour. Both of you.”

They’ve officially fooled a medical professional. Poor Fantine. Nice people. It’s a hard world for them.

“Yes ma’am,” says Enjolras. “And thank you. Really.”
“You seem like a good kid,” she tells him. “Don’t get on my bad side.” Footsteps shuffle to the door. There’s a swish, a slight rush of air and a sliver of light glowing red through Grantaire’s eyelids, not nearly as much as before. A click.

Given how much Enjolras talks sometimes, it’s amazing how quiet he can be when that’s what he wants. If there was a clock in the room, Grantaire would be able to hear every tick.

“You were bullied,” Enjolras says softly. He’s almost whispering; it’s hard to read his tone.

There’s no way to deny it or shrug it off. Fantine is an inherently trustworthy person; Enjolras is bound to take her word over anything Grantaire chooses to say about it now.

What Grantaire chooses to say is, “Yeah.” There’s a long beat; Enjolras waiting for him to fill in some blanks that Grantaire would rather leave fucking empty.

“Badly,” says Enjolras.

“Not really,” says Grantaire. “Not like Jehan.”

“That doesn’t mean anything and you know it.” This time, even at a whisper, Grantaire can hear the agitation. “They hit you.”

He doesn’t say, ‘Thanks, I was there.’ The fact he’s a little proud of this probably says a lot about him as a person. Out loud, he stammers,

“Not—Fantine made it sound like it was a weekly event or something. Pizza Day, Punch Grantaire Day. I could probably count on one hand the number of times anything actually needed ice or drew blood.”

Enjolras huffs, not laughing. Disbelief, maybe. “Why in the world would that sound comforting to you?”

It hadn’t occurred to him to be comforting. It hadn’t occurred to him comfort might be needed. But Enjolras takes the plights of the world so personally sometimes, big and small. Unemployed factory workers in Detroit, single moms in New York, undocumented immigrants in Houston, vets with no benefits, homeless kids, starving kids, the lack of a school recycling program—it’s all part of the same thing to him. Grantaire has unknowingly added his name to the list, another water droplet in the ever-shifting cloud of wrongs to be righted. Pity, maybe the one thing on the planet he doesn’t want from Enjolras.

“Get some perspective, man,” says Grantaire. “High school’s shitty. Kids have it way worse than I ever did, every day of the week—”

“Yeah,” says Enjolras, “but most of those kids don’t suddenly stop doing everything they love, and lose interest in school to the point where they—”

“That’s not how it happened,” Grantaire says heavily. “I didn’t flunk ninth grade because of bullying.”

He can tell Enjolras isn’t buying it. He’s not sure how, since they’re still sitting in the dark, but he has that sense. He’s proven right a second later, when Enjolras says,

“Well if it wasn’t that—”

Grantaire sighs. If he’d picked the room with the window he could be halfway to the state border by
now. This is a conversation he doesn’t want to have with anyone, but especially not with Enjolras. People had asked him about it—for a while, a lot of people: teachers, a couple of different child psychologists, his parents. Grantaire has never come clean.

The truth isn’t just depressing, it’s boring.

“Enjolras,” he says, “the reason I failed ninth grade was because it was too hard.”

He wasn’t expecting thunderclaps or explosions or electric guitar chords, but it still feels shocking, to suddenly live in a world where he’s said it out loud. He put himself there. He takes a deep breath, sighs it out again.

“You don’t believe me,” Grantaire says into the silence.

Enjolras sounds guarded, careful. “I don’t think you’re lying but I think it was probably more complicated than that.”

“It wasn’t,” Grantaire tells him. Now that he’s started, some part of him wants to say it over and over again. Dig himself the pit, climb down and keep digging.

“And the fact that people were hitting you had nothing to do with how you suddenly couldn’t concentrate enough to—”

“No,” says Grantaire. All those years of pretending to be smart, that desperate constant shell game, and now when he puts it in the open, Enjolras won’t even accept it, like Grantaire is just being humble or traumatized or something. It’s too bad Grantaire isn’t in fancy English, because then he’d probably know what kind of irony this is. Dramatic irony. Situational irony. Bang-your-head-against-a-wall irony.

Grantaire can’t think of what else to do. He goes for the big guns. “I actually flunked eighth grade algebra,” he says. “Nobody talks about that now, but man, it was the biggest fucking deal when it was happening. My parents sat me down, we had this big long talk, it was like two hours. They were all, ‘Look, you can get away with this kind of thing now, but once you’re in high school, it’s on your permanent record. Grantaire, this is your future at stake. Grantaire, you need to start taking this seriously.’ Like, basically, ‘time to buckle down and be the freaky genius we know you can be’, right? But here’s the thing.”

He takes a deep breath. Here’s something else he’s never told anyone. “You see, it turns out, the teacher who had recommended skipping me ahead? Totally incompetent. Like, got fired for it. She tried to get kids moved forward all the time—she was teaching on about a second grade level, so anyone who was like, even kind of bright looked like a genius.”

It’s easier to say this in the dark, somehow. “I’d never performed where I was supposed to on IQ tests, couldn’t even crack 120, which my parents said was because it didn’t stimulate my brain enough or whatever. But like. Man. You know how when you’re little you can kind of have one thing and that’s what you’re about? Like, there’s the kid who likes horses. There’s the kid who likes basketball, or space, or whatever. I don’t know, maybe that’s not universal, but like—”

“Cowboys,” says Enjolras.

“What?”

“Uh, that was mine. I wanted to live in Wyoming and ride a horse, herd cattle.”

It’s so amazing, Grantaire forgets about his story for a second. He wants to carry this piece of
information in his palm, like seaglass. Hold it up to the light.

“Cows? Like, for beef?”

There’s a rustle that’s probably a shaking head. “No,” Enjolras says. “I wasn’t going to kill them. I was pretty unclear about the whys. I thought maybe you could just—own a lot of cows. Or—not even own them, but look after them, take them for walks. You know, in nature.”

“Jesus.” Despite everything, Grantaire laughs. Or maybe he laughs because his problems are so stupid and the world is so big and Enjolras’s life plans used to be to hang out with a bunch of cows, no endgame.

The ABC Corral.

“I hadn’t quite figured out that the open range was only open due to, to systematic genocide,” says Enjolras. “So, that was that.” He coughs. “God, sorry, you were in the middle of—what was your—what were you about?”

Grantaire chews on his lip. “Well, for a while it was bats. For a while, it was space. For about a week, it was karate, but I quit because I sucked. But more than that, it was just like. Being smart. That was my point. Not even ‘knowing stuff’, just ‘being smart.’” He’s glad Enjolras is the one holding the ice pack because he’s not sure he’s got the strength right now. “Except, like, if you’re smart, you don’t actually have to try that hard, you know? And I mean, I knew from pretty early on that I was working way more than everyone else in my class. I got good grades but sometimes homework took me six hours a night and I was always fucking lost in math.”

“Combeferre’s smart,” Enjolras points out. “Combeferre is maybe the smartest person I know, and he works at it all the time—”

“Combeferre doesn’t count,” says Grantaire. “Combeferre’s an island. Combeferre—and like, Feuilly, Jehan, all your smart friends. You guys are in it for sheer fucking love of learning. I was just running a con on myself. Like, struggling to hold onto my grades, struggling to trick myself into thinking I wasn’t struggling. I can’t really tell you how not-fun it was.”

Grantaire spends a lot of time trying not to think about his first freshman year, to the point where he can forget how bad eighth grade really was. In some ways, it was worse. Stress ulcers at thirteen, there’s something Grantaire doesn’t miss.

He can’t seem to make himself stop talking. It’s a disease. “Like, man,” says Grantaire. “Courfeyrac talks about doing Peter Pan and all that, but the funny thing is, other than hitting the backdrop, I don’t really have like, memories of it. I had my math textbook hidden backstage and any time I wasn’t on, I was studying. That’s all I remember, like, showing up late on cues, getting yelled at. Being the lead in the school play was this annoying distraction from algebra. Which, let’s remember, I still flunked.”

“But maybe,” says Enjolras, fundamentally unable to let shit go, what is his problem, “if you’d had—I understand the bullying wasn’t the main cause, but if kids your age had been supportive—”

“Oh my god, dude, it was not their fault.” Under Grantaire’s head, Enjolras flinches; he is probably talking too loud. Grantaire lowers his voice. “You know why they hassled me in ninth grade? Because I was an obnoxious little shit. Because the worse my grades got, the more I bullshit I pulled. Like, just endlessly. Raising my hand to show off, using big words like that was proving something, talking to anyone who would listen about how totally great my GPA was. So yeah, sometimes they hit me, but believe me, it was provoked.”
Enjolras is frozen underneath him, the muscles in his thigh tense.

Grantaire pauses, trying to imagine how this must sound from Enjolras’s end. “You’re gonna tell me I’m victim blaming,” he says at last.

He’s not entirely sure Enjolras hears. “I don’t give a shit what you said to them,” says Enjolras. “There is nothing, nothing you could’ve done to deserve—who was it?”

“What?”

“The, the people who hit you. Tell me their names.” There is something a little intense in his voice. Not like that’s news, exactly, but this is intensity at close quarters, in the dark. Grantaire shivers. Whatever, there’s ice pressed to his face, he’s allowed.

“Dude, they graduated years ago,” he says. “I’d like to say they’re manning deep-friers somewhere, but I’ll be real with you, they’re probably all presidents of their frats. That being how life—”

“It’s disgusting,” Enjolras interrupts. “It’s disgusting. That they did that, that they got away with it, that as far as I can tell, there was literally nobody on your side—”

Grantaire would shake his head if he had the room. “Yeah, I had no friends, but it was like, very simple cause and effect. I really can’t overstate to you how fucking annoying I was.”

“I meant the administration,” says Enjolras. “Teachers or coaches or your fucking parents.”

He wishes it wasn’t quite so satisfying, hearing Enjolras drop F-bombs. He wishes he wasn’t filled with an urge to record that little soundbite, play it back whenever he needs it.

Grantaire realizes, a humiliated half-beat later, that there wasn’t any reason for him to actually divulge how he’d had no friends. He could’ve told the whole story without ever letting that nugget drop. Oh fucking well.

“Someone should’ve—” Enjolras is saying.

“No way, man,” Grantaire counters. “I don’t blame them at all, okay? At all. Like, imagine how I am at meetings, times ten. Times fifteen. Nobody was gonna come to the defense of that—”

“I would’ve,” says Enjolras.

The thing is, it’s probably true.

“Be glad you weren’t there, then.”

“Why?”

Grantaire is wincing just thinking about it. “Because you would’ve never gotten rid of me. If any kid had been nice to me then, shit, it would’ve been over for you. Your arms forever sagging under the weight of fifty pounds of friendship bracelets.”

He thinks his point is well-made, but Enjolras only says, “I like friendship bracelets.”

“Come on, dude.”

“No. It’s good symbolism. A bunch of threads that could snap on their own, but you braid them together—”
Of course, Grantaire thinks with a fond smile that is blessedly invisible. Of course Enjolras can turn friendship bracelets into a metaphor about coalition-building. He is ridiculous.

“Damn,” Grantaire says, “maybe we would’ve been friends. If you’d been around then. Maybe we’d be friends now.” He laughs. “How’s that for a mindfuck?”

Enjolras doesn’t laugh. Maybe Grantaire was being presumptuous, but it still seems rude, the way he falls silent. It feels pointed.

“Sorry if that’s, like, too much to process,” Grantaire snaps, and Enjolras seems to shake himself.

“No,” says Enjolras, “you’re probably right. We would’ve been.” It sounds so sincere, Grantaire feels like kind of a dick. He’s not sure why he always assumes the worst when it comes to Enjolras. With the exception of that time Grantaire made everyone think he was dead, Enjolras has been pretty nice to him lately.

Well, Grantaire has been pretty nice to him, too. Grantaire’s passed up some prime opportunities to make fun of him.

Enjolras thought cowboys were basically just friends with cows. It’s magnificent.

The problem is that knowing the many ways Enjolras is a loser only makes Grantaire want to hang out with him more. It’s perverse. It also stirs up something Grantaire hadn’t remembered until now, and suddenly can’t forget.

“So hey,” Grantaire says, going for nonchalant even as every tremor and minute hesitation in his voice is no doubt painfully, nakedly clear. “What was that thing you wanted to talk to me about? Uh, on Friday morning?”

The hand in Grantaire’s hair slows. “Nothing,” says Enjolras. “It was—I had a question, but it, uh, it resolved itself.”

Grantaire has no idea what he’s supposed to say to this. “Well, that’s convenient,” he says at last.

“I actually—” Enjolras says, and then nothing.

“What,” says Grantaire.

“I had a different question, but maybe you don’t want—”

Maybe he’s gotten bored, because he’s tracing small circles in Grantaire’s scalp. It’s distracting, but not distracting enough.

“Dude,” Grantaire says. “You can’t start a sentence like that and then stop. Obviously now I need to know.” And it’s not going to be about Enjolras liking him, Grantaire knows it’s not going to be about Enjolras liking him, even if every star had aligned in Grantaire’s favor and Enjolras did, briefly like him at one time, Grantaire burned everything to the ground when he pulled that stunt on Friday.

Grantaire knows this. He really, really does. He hopes Enjolras can’t feel how hard his heart is beating anyway.

“If you don’t want to answer it, you don’t have to,” says Enjolras.

“Ask the goddamn question,” says Grantaire.

“Um.” Enjolras takes a deep breath, presumably not for actual suspense-building reasons although
Grantaire is nearly yelling inside his own head. “All those activities you used to do—”

Grantaire sighs. At himself, mostly. A little at Enjolras. “That wasn’t about the bullying either. I quit them to focus on school, about four months before I flunked. Comic timing, man.”

At “flunked” Enjolras flinches, almost imperceptible. Honors student reflexes, Grantaire thinks wryly. He remembers it well, how the threat of someday fucking up that bad had loomed over him like some impossible bogey man. He’d lived in fear for so long, gnashing his teeth and tearing his hair like he could scare it away if he just moved fast enough, made enough noise. And when it was too late, when he finally crunched the numbers and realized he couldn’t win, that it was over, it had been like climbing into a bathtub full of warm water. Failure had been waiting for him.

Grantaire had made a shitty smart kid. He makes a pretty great burnout.

Well, not so much at present. He’s not even sure what he is now.

“Sorry,” says Enjolras. “If—I wasn’t trying to make this like that one time in your car.”

“That one time in my car,” Grantaire echoes. So much shit has gone down within the walls of that van, there are roughly forty thousand possible candidates. The first one he jumps to is sitting camped out together in Enjolras’s driveway, yelling the words of the same song, like a secret they had on the rest of the world.

“When you came out,” Enjolras says. “And you said it felt like I was wearing a snowsuit—”

“I mean, it can’t be like that time,” says Grantaire, “Not like you can turn around and tell me you also failed a year of school. Or like. Robbed a convenience store.”

“Those things aren’t comparable.” He can hear Enjolras setting his jaw; it’s uncanny. “Most thirteen-year-olds wouldn’t be able to handle high school. That’s why we don’t put them there. I wouldn’t have done well, either.”

Grantaire snorts. “Like anyone would’ve fucked with you.”

“In eighth grade I still cried in public,” says Enjolras.

Shit, thinks Grantaire, they would’ve knocked the crap out of him. Unthinking, he burrows closer. If anyone asks, it’s because—well, Grantaire doesn’t actually have a cover story this time. But the only person who could ask is Enjolras, who luckily has other things on his mind.

“If I could level the playing field between us, I would,” he’s saying, earnest.

Well, that would take one hell of a bulldozer. “It’s okay,” Grantaire tells him. “You don’t have any big secrets. That’s not, like, your fault.”

He stops talking because Enjolras is shaking. With laughter, Grantaire realizes a relieved half-second later. What the fuck. What a weirdo.

“Everything alright?” Grantaire hazards.


“What?”

“It’s a long story.”
Maybe Combeferre made a pun about U.S. foreign policy or something, who knows? Grantaire heaves a mental shrug.

“Oh, okay,” he says, but because Enjolras had sounded serious before the mysterious giggle fit, he adds, “Seriously, I accept there’s no, like, dirt on you to uncover.” What does it matter, in the long run, if Grantaire lays everything out before him and Enjolras has nothing to offer in return? Not like they’ll be logging any quality time after this weekend.

“Would it help if I told you something you could theoretically use against me?” says Enjolras, and Grantaire would never, not in a thousand years, but it’s still not something he can turn down.

“Maybe.”

“I use women’s deodorant,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire laughs until his lungs ache. “Wow, sorry, I’m not laughing at you,” he manages. “Just—your sense of proportion is—completely amazing.”

“Repeating a grade when you’d been a grade ahead is not like committing a robbery,” says Enjolras, who blessedly sounds more snippy about that than the laughter. Then again, let he who has not recently had a wild fit of hilarity throw the first stone.

“Is it a political statement, or—”

“Not exactly?” says Enjolras. “I just hate how men’s deodorant is marketed. They can’t say, ‘it will help you smell better’, it has to be ‘climb a rocky cliff with your bare hands while drinking beer and objectifying a woman.’ And it smells like my grandpa.”

It’s moments like these that the invisibility of an unlit room isn’t worth it. Grantaire would pay good money to know what Enjolras’s face is doing right now.

“What kind do you use?” he asks instead, and Enjolras, totally unashamed, says, “I don’t know what brand. I smelled every deodorant in the aisle one day and it bugged me the least. I think it’s called Tropical Orange Breeze? That can’t be right. Citrus Whisper? Something like that.”

The mysterious scent that’s been clouding Grantaire’s judgment for two and a half months is women’s deodorant. It feels fitting, in a way he can’t begin to explain.

“Thank you,” says Grantaire, wiping at the eye that isn’t covered in ice. “Thank you for that. I mean it.”

“It looks glittery in the tube,” says Enjolras. “It might go on glittery, I’m not sure.”

The thing about faking sleep while lying in a dark, quiet room with a hand carefully carding through his hair is that it only takes a lull in the conversation for the pretense to get a lot less pretend.

It doesn’t seem like he should be able to fall asleep again. Grantaire spent half the weekend in bed, but it turns out three days can’t fix weeks of bone-deep tiredness. Even remembering that he’s almost in Enjolras’s lap can’t stir up enough panic to keep his eyes open, to keep his thoughts from drifting softly away. He’s not sure how it happened. That first car ride home, Enjolras’s hand around his
wrist was electrifying. Before that, all he'd been able to imagine was keeping those eyes on him for a few seconds, that note of annoyance or disbelief or surprise in Enjolras's voice. 'Why are you here?'

'I could ask you the same thing,' Grantaire thinks sleepily. There are easier ways to get out of class, ways that don't involve dark rooms and too-small school cots, his head weighing down Enjolras's leg. 'You could've just said you had a stomach ache,' he thinks, and then he's gone.

The bell's ringing when he wakes up, groggily wiping at the corners of his mouth and sincerely hoping he didn’t manage to drool all over Enjolras's jeans. The pain in his eye has subsided for now under the double assault of Tylenol and cold, which he’ll appreciate as long as he can.

"Sorry," he mutters, reaching up to retrieve the ice pack.

"Not a problem," says Enjolras, whose hand has probably lost all feeling. "Hang on, let me get the lights."

Neither of them are prepared for it, judging by their twin winces when the florescent bulbs flicker on overhead. Grantaire awkwardly levers himself back upright, seeing stars. He drops off the cot and frowns at the blurry poster. He really does feel like it used to be bigger or something.

Enjolras is scrambling down behind him.

"Still better than Con Econ?" asks Grantaire, mostly just for something to say.

"The mall is a central fixture of American society'", Enjolras recites. "Yeah."

Grantaire stands there trying to do the math on how long he must've been asleep. You'd think even a shitty video would on some level be more of a laugh than hanging out with someone who's not even conscious.

"Sorry I wasn't better company," he says awkwardly.

"It's fine," says Enjolras, "and anyway—"

The door swings open. "You two need to get going," says Fantine, and then "Morning, Snoozy," to Grantaire. It’s no honey but he’ll take it.

“Thank you so much,” Enjolras says, with his customary earnestness. “For everything.”


'Tell that to the Thursday-Friday nurse,' thinks Grantaire. “Hey now,” he says. “You’re the best and you know it.”

“I am pretty great,” she admits, with the same smile she used to give him. Grantaire smiles back. He can’t not.

“You’ve got English next, right?” says Enjolras at his shoulder. Grantaire nods. “C’mon, I’ll walk you.”

From the way Fantine raises her eyebrows, he’s just earned himself major points in her book. “Nice to meet you, Enjolras,” she says. “Can I talk to Grantaire first for a sec?”
“Sure,” says Enjolras. He touches Grantaire lightly on the arm. “I’ll be outside.”

They’ve done a million things more intense than a gentle tap to the forearm, but for some reason Grantaire still needs to collect himself before he can pull off a decent “Yeah.”

When Enjolras has shut the door politely behind himself, Fantine turns back to look at him. “So,” she says, “it’s been a while.”

Grantaire nods. Three years, something like that. He stopped fleeing to the nurse’s office once he fell in with Montparnasse and then Eponine, and other options became available.

“Good to see you again,” says Fantine, “even if it was for not-great reasons. How’ve you been?”

“Alright,” he says, rocking back onto his heels. “Y’know.”

“Your boyfriend’s cute.”

He pauses mid-rock. “Not, uh, totally sure that relationship’s gonna last,” he mutters.

The floor tiles aren’t as stained as the ceiling tiles, which is weird when you think about it. Surely the ground should be seeing more wear and tear. How hard is it to be a ceiling, really?

“Grantaire?” she says. He makes himself look up. “High school relationships usually end. Sometimes badly.” Fantine smiles, tough and sad like a bartender in an old movie. “But whatever happens, be good to each other, okay?”

“M’trying,” he mumbles.

“You’re doing fine” she says. She nudges him, companionable. “Hey, Cosette showed me a picture of Jehan’s shoes. They look incredible. Glad you’re still drawing.”

He nods. “I wasn’t for a while, and now I—am again,” he says lamely, and she beams. Well, she’d been worried about him. She’d said so. Come to think of it, he’s not sure how he feels about that. “It’s, um, good to see you too, by the way,” he adds, blinking hard.

“Okay,” she says, “give me a hug and get outta here.” Fantine smells like soap, which makes sense, given the vomit thing. She gives him a quick, tight squeeze. “Stop by any time. Head wound optional.”

“But you’re so busy—” he protests.

“Doing paperwork and cleaning puke,” says Fantine wryly. “Trust me, I don’t mind the distraction. Now go before you’re super late to class.” She ruffles his hair on his way out the door. He doesn’t want to think about how his hair looks right now. He also doesn’t really care.

Enjolras is waiting for him in the front room, leaning against a wall and frowning at a pamphlet. It’s titled ‘In The Know About PEER PRESSURE’ and even the font makes Grantaire cringe.

“Those are crazy-outdated,” Grantaire says.

Enjolras jumps and stuffs it back into the plastic display rack. He rubs the back of his neck. “I could tell.”
The only thing worse than a PSA trying to look cool is a PSA that was trying to look cool twenty years ago. It’s embarrassing for everybody.

“The jeans?” guesses Grantaire as they head out.

“And the hair,” says Enjolras. “And the—did everyone have braces in the nineties? Was it a law?”

Grantaire snorts. “Maybe they were peer-pressured into it.”

But Enjolras doesn’t answer, too busy glaring terrifyingly at anyone in the hallway who looks at them wrong. It’s the little things in life.

When Enjolras finally speaks, it’s low and thoughtful, like he’s been plotting it out since the nurse’s office. “Two things,” he says.

Grantaire imagines a pair of giant bullet points hovering in the air. “Yeah?”

“First of all, I never would’ve—” Enjolras glances back and forth, paranoid as always “—asked you to do this if I’d known you had a history of being harassed.”

“Well, yeah, dude,” says Grantaire. “I worked that out when you apologized for how I wasn’t popular anymore.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “This was never about putting people in danger. It’s hard not to want to—rattle the cage a little, I don’t know, but safety’s more important. Maybe it would make sense to tone down the, the public displays of affection.”

His first instinct, irrationally, is to be hurt. He has to take a deep breath to remind himself it’s not personal, that this is a logical response to a new threat, that judging from how they spent first hour, Enjolras doesn’t seem to have any real issue with touching Grantaire.

It’s still a shocking move, somehow. Almost a white flag.

“Is that what you wanna do?” Grantaire ventures.

“Doesn’t matter,” says Enjolras. “That’s not the priority. Nobody’d hold it against you, if you wanted to back off.”

They keep walking. Grantaire considers this. He considers Jehan and Courfeyrac flirting at the lunch table, the disgusted looks from the Bible study kids, the impact of his head against the drinking fountain, all the hands reaching out to help him back up.

Fuck it. He’s done two brave things this year, might as well try for three.

“What if,” Grantaire says slowly, “I don’t want to back off? Like, at all?” Enjolras reaches out and wraps his arm around Grantaire’s shoulders, tugging Grantaire closer, and Grantaire doesn’t really have to act when he resumes his usual hold on Enjolras’s waist and cranes his neck to give Enjolras a gooey look. “Hi, Cookie-bear.”

“I’m fifty percent sure you’ve already called me that,” Enjolras tells him.

“Why, are you making a chart?”

The mention of charts seems to bring Enjolras back to his invisible agenda. “Okay, the other thing,” he says. “If something comes up, and the stress gets too much and you have the urge to leave—”
“Yeah, I get it, I can contain it for another week.”

“No,” Enjolras actually stops walking for a second. “No, if it’s bad enough that you need to, go. Just bring someone with you, and let me know.” He glances down and Grantaire thinks he’s probably mostly seeing the eye, because the line of his mouth hardens. “This isn’t supposed to be torture.”

Grantaire can’t think of any way to say that it hasn’t been without also saying way too much. He settles for cuddling in close and looking as coupley as possible as they pass the U.S. History classroom. Grantaire waves cheerily at Mr. Walker with the hand that isn’t on Enjolras’s hip. Mr. Walker glares. Enjolras glares back.

They don’t step apart until they reach the door to English.

“See you at lunch,” says Enjolras.

“Enjoy calculus,” says Grantaire. “Somehow.” People are staring from inside the classroom, although it could be more for the black eye than the homosexual antics. Enjolras glances over at them and back at Grantaire, and something in the tilt of his head says, ‘Are you sure about not backing down, or—?’

And there’s only like a week of this left anyway. Grantaire can be tough for a week. Tough enough to go up on his tiptoes and risk a quick, light kiss on Enjolras’s cheek. It lands almost at his ear, but hopefully that’s not visible from a distance.

Grantaire can feel his own pulse in his fingertips, but whatever. He drops back down to the balls of his feet and looks up at Enjolras through his lashes. Says, sweetly, “Thanks for walking me to class, Yogurt Blossom.”


It’s not until Grantaire takes his seat and starts hunting around for a pencil that he realizes somehow, when he wasn’t paying attention in the nurse’s office, Fantine managed to slip two rootbeer suckers into his backpack.

Nice people, man. Fucking wildcards.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The whispers follow him from English to Government, like passive-aggressive ghosts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Here’s something Grantaire had forgotten: it turns out that walking around school with a black eye makes people uncomfortable. Or maybe it hadn’t his first time around, when the bruises were just about his personality—okay, and people being assholes; Grantaire can appreciate that maybe it’s kind of fucked up to hit a thirteen-year-old, even a really, really (really) annoying one.

But now, kids keep their distance in the hallway, leave a radius around him, and Grantaire had almost forgotten what it was like, not having to wrestle his way through elbows casually aimed at his ribs and feet calculated to trip. He doesn't think it's out of consideration, more that it's hard to gawk at him from close range, but he'll take it.

He half wants to run into Vice Principal Javert, flash him a thumb's up, say something like, "Wow, sir, it's a good thing you're here to defend us all from having to look at boys holding hands! I'm getting weepy just thinking about it, oh wait, that's the broken blood vessels."

The whispers follow him from English to Government, like passive-aggressive ghosts. When Cosette sees him, she winces, sympathetic.

"Your mom says hi," he tells her.

"Yeah," says Cosette. She tilts her head. "Does it hurt?"

He shrugs. "I mean, it doesn't feel good. Probably looks worse than it feels, though. Like, it looks upsetting, right?"

"Want me to help you cover it up?" she says, holding up her purse. "I've got concealer and we're about the same skin tone."

"Nah." At their lockers, Eddie Greer had jumped and literally taken a step back. The skin still hurts, but Grantaire actually forgets how freaky he must look most of the time. Other people can't. There's a certain kind of power in making them flinch. Grantaire might be standing taller than he has been, walking with his shoulders back. "Maybe some people can stand to be a little upset."

Cosette smiles as if he's done something cute.

"Imagine I'm raising an eyebrow," he tells her, because he doesn't want to risk moving his face muscles.

"I think this relationship's been good for you, that's all," she says.

"Dating Enjolras?"
"Dating each other," says Cosette. "It's like, you're a little more serious and he's a little more, like, sometimes now he'll actually talk to me about stuff that's not the hole in the ozone layer?"

Grantaire tries to imagine Cosette and Enjolras having a heart-to-heart. In his mind, they're getting pedicures with cucumber slices over their eyes, because that is just the kind of shit his mind pulls.

"What do you talk about?" he asks.

"Oh, just—what we did over the weekend, stuff like that," she says. "Music. He didn't do that before." Cosette smiles again, says, conspiratorial, "I think he's gotten less weird about being a real boy, you know?"

"Pinocchio, seriously?" says Grantaire. Maybe he's slightly defensive, but come on, of all possible choices, a singing puppet in lederhosen? There's half a dozen Disney princes alone that would—

Cosette laughs. "You know what I mean," she says. "Anyway, after Joly's party, when he had—" She gestures at her collarbone and Grantaire can feel his face heat, reflexive. "People in Calculus were staring, and when I offered to lend him my scarf, he said pretty much the same thing. Like," she lowers her voice and tries to school her features into Enjolras-level intensity, "let those bigots stare."

"How do you get Pinocchio out of that?" he protests, because he is just not equipped to think about Enjolras walking around acting proud of the mark Grantaire put on his neck. Showing it off, almost. Social statement or not, there is a mental image Grantaire probably shouldn't dwell on.

Shouldn't dwell on in public, at least.

At lunch, Eponine listens to the story of what went down before school with her hand tightening and re-tightening on her spork like she honestly might shank someone.

"What are we doing about this?" she says, leaning forward. It's addressed to the table at large. It's a fool's errand, and not even one where Grantaire can help by pulling out a marker and drawing something. Instead, he keeps zoning out, tracking the rise and fall of their speech, melodic, like distant music. Courfeyrac answers, then Enjolras, then Musichetta.

Enjolras is sitting on one side, Eponine is on the other. They're both so close, it reminds him of a game from middle school drama, having to work together as a three-headed monster. Mostly he focuses on that, on their breathing. He's too warm and his side is cramping, but he doesn't want to move.

"We're gonna find this fucker," says Jehan. Grantaire nods, indulgent, and lets the sounds wash over him.

“Your prom photos are gonna look so badass” is the first thing Bahorel says in Con Econ. Grantaire has to smile at that. Fifteen years from now, all the ABC kids will be squinting, confused, at their photo albums. Who was that weirdo with the messy hair? Why had he apparently come straight from a bar fight?

"Speaking of which," says Bahorel, businesslike. "You've got a tux rented and all that, right?"
"Already got one. My uncle got remarried last summer, and it was a whole big thing. Ice sculptures and shit." Grantaire had spent most of the reception hiding out by the service entrance with his oldest cousin, passing a flask back and forth. It was that or trail behind his parents all evening, really soak in the look on their faces when anyone asked them what Grantaire had been up to lately.

Instead he got a first row ticket to the look on their faces at the end of the night, when Grantaire was too drunk to open the car door on his first or second try.

The tux had actually been the least agonizing part of the experience. It's still hanging somewhere in the depths of his closet.

"Just checking, man," Bahorel says. "Yo, you going to Battle of the Bands this Thursday?"

Grantaire hadn't been planning to, but this is shaping up to be a rough week, and in all honesty, the less time he has to brood on his own, the better. Loud music is just icing on the cake.

"Sure," he says.

"Rock." Bahorel gives him a solemn high five.

It turns out, and really Grantaire should’ve seen this coming, that they’re watching the same documentary that Enjolras had put so much effort into skipping. 30 seconds in, he can see why. Well, Enjolras probably would find it offensively capitalist, while Grantaire just finds it offensively boring, but yeah. For the record, Grantaire would also much rather spend the hour in a small, dark room quietly stroking Enjolras’s hair than listen to a narrator describe what a food court is.

Not that it’s at all the same situation, but the point is, Grantaire is 100% relieved when Bahorel starts a note-passing campaign. At least, he is until he actually unfolds the wad of notebook paper stealthily tossed at his head:

OK dude can we talk about what really happened friday?

The lights are off in order to better set the scene for this idiotic video. It means he can’t really look over and read Bahorel’s expression, gage how much trouble exactly he’s in.

what? Grantaire scrawls, stalling. Grantaire watches Bahorel frown, then grab his pen and write something, intent. It’s an unusual degree of focus from Bahorel, and Grantaire has to imagine it means nothing good. The second bad sign comes when Bahorel hands the paper over, instead of chucking it or folding it into a little sailboat or wedging it into Grantaire’s shoe.

You disappear, come back smelling like weed & then Enjolras says you had a fever? Come on.

Shit. Shit. Grantaire had been counting on Enjolras’s coverup abilities, but the guy can’t erase memories, and Bahorel did see them that day. It makes some amount of sense that, of everyone in the ABC, Bahorel would know how pot smells. It makes some amount of sense that, if Bahorel knows how pot smells, he could also tell Grantaire was high.

Grantaire has no idea what to say, how to let the question rest without yanking down the whole shaky scaffolding of lies.

Maybe sensing that nothing like an answer is coming, Bahorel reaches over and plucks up the note. A few seconds later, the paper returns to his desk:

For the record bro I am not judging. Ppl who live in glass houses + word on the street is your parents are a bag of dicks, so guessing they won’t get you prozac. But if Enjolras knows you’re self-
medicating, why couldn’t he guess why you’d stepped out?

Grantaire squints down, trying to pretend the problem is Bahorel’s terrible handwriting.

“Self-medicating”, like Grantaire’s got cancer. Grantaire’s parents are not exactly huge fans of his, but he has no doubt that if he came down with, say, leukemia, they’d shell out however much was needed for treatment. Except what Bahorel actually thinks he needs is Prozac, like a person with depression or something. Where does Bahorel get these notions? Like so many things about him, it is a mystery.

Still, it’s an easy out served up on a platter and Grantaire has no other good options.

He didn’t know about the self-medicating, he writes. He passes it over and watches Bahorel scribble a reply by the flickering blue glow of the TV.

Fuck, dude. That is something you tell your boyfriend. Surprised he was so chill about it but I guess E has a huge soft spot for you + makes sense this bullshit would fuck with your mental health stuff.

Mental health stuff. He can’t get over how confident Bahorel is with his crackpot theory. Are there people going around saying Grantaire’s got brain issues? On the screen, footage of escalators plays under up-tempo music that would’ve sounded dated even before Grantaire’s birth. On the paper, Grantaire writes, Who told you about my mental health stuff?

Bahorel takes a long time on the reply, like he’s fucking composing a novel or something. It gives Grantaire ample time to invent all kinds of paranoid possibilities, rumors that could be circulating. Not just queer but queer and crazy. He’s trying to remember to take deep breaths when Bahorel gently tosses the note back.

Wasn’t that hard to figure out, dude. Freshman year all you did was sit around being sad and drawing fucked up shit. Thought you were just a bummer person. Don’t know if it’s depression or etc but now it’s obvious something was up. Luckily you’re friends with the one group in school who won’t be assholes about it. Do you see Mr. Myriel?

Mr. Myriel is the new school psychologist, except it feels weird to call him a new anything because he’s basically a million. Grantaire has only ever seen the guy from a distance. He looks like a cartoon tortoise, down to the neck, the bald head, the little glasses. Even his Hawaiian shirts somehow add to the effect.

Joly meets with him Tuesdays after school, which Grantaire only knows because it’s why they always do Algebra practice on Wednesdays. He’s vaguely aware that Joly’s visits have something to do with the panic attack thing. He thinks Joly might have some kind of disorder. Joly doesn’t hide it but he never makes a big deal about it either, just acts like it’s normal. It probably is to Joly, living with it every day. Hard to imagine.

Except, well—Freshman year all you did was sit around being sad and drawing fucked up shit—maybe not impossible. It’s different, of course. He can see how it might’ve looked from the outside, but Bahorel doesn’t get it. Grantaire’s never had the luxury of some handy diagnosis to explain why the inside of his head is so shitty sometimes. Grantaire doesn’t hyperventilate or throw up. He doesn’t feel endlessly sad all the time and he’s never wanted to kill himself. He used to read the pamphlets in the nurse’s office and wonder if there was something wrong with how his mind works, but it doesn’t fit. Nothing’s ever fit.

Grantaire stares at the matter-of-fact words, shrinking and compacting as they near the edge of the page. “Depression or etc.” He imagines lying on a therapist’s couch: “Help me doc, I’ve got a bad
“Joly won’t shut up about how great he is is Bahorel’s response. Kid went on a 15-min rant in Panera last week. Frightened some children.”

The mental image is a welcome relief. Well I was on the fence but shit, I want to scare kids in Panera! Grantaire writes.

The mood must be lightening, because this time, Bahorel has folded the note down into a dense triangle and flicked it into Grantaire’s backpack. Follow ur dream (Also do you know a good dealer? Mine moved to Delaware, wtf WHO MOVES TO DELAWARE)

Grantaire considers this. Not the Delaware part; he has no answers there. He writes, I mean, define good. Eponine gets a discount but Montparnasse’s usual markup is high enough it might not amount to real savings. He rolls the paper up like a scroll and taps it across Bahorel’s desk just as the overhead lights come back on in full, eye-searing force. The movie must have somehow ended.

“Bahorel?” says Mrs. Koval from the front of the room. “What do you have there?” Grantaire freezes. She’s walking towards them and all he can think is that Koval is the kind of teacher who will read an intercepted note out loud to embarrass you. She’ll go to humiliate them, and instead—He stares at Bahorel, who is crushing the paper into a ball like he can render it invisible. Too late, she’s seen it. They are both so busted.

Passing notes in class about drugs. They are both so fucked.

“Hand it over,” she says.

“One sec,” says Bahorel. He grabs a water bottle from his backpack and takes a long drink, but there are five minutes left, and no way is he gonna be able to stall long enough.

“Bahorel,” Mrs. Koval says again. She reaches out.

“No yeah, be right with you,” Bahorel says, and then, very calmly and without breaking eye contact with her, he stuffs the whole page into his mouth. Mrs. Koval doesn’t quite seem to know how to respond. She and Grantaire watch his jaw work, like a sarcastic cow. Bahorel chews for what feels like a very long time, swallows, swallows again, and sips his water. “Sorry,” he says, still sounding a little parched. He coughs. “You wanted something?”

“Detention,” says Mrs. Koval, and Bahorel raises his eyebrows.

“For drinking water?”

“Quit while you’re ahead,” she snaps.

“Okay, that’s probably fair,” says Bahorel, unbothered. He turns to Grantaire. “Tell me what happens at the meeting tonight. Got a feeling it’s gonna be a good one.”

Grantaire nods. Bahorel destroyed evidence for him. It really does seem like the least he can do.

“The hell was that?” says Grantaire when the bell rings. “If we’d been texting, would you have taken apart your phone and eaten it? Where’d the freaking spy training come from?”
Bahorel grins and gestures back at Grantaire. “Oh come on, dude. Seriously, tux plus black eye?” He sounds almost wistful. "That is some James Bond shit right there."

“I mean, if you want one too, it’s probably not that hard,” Grantaire points out, to which Bahorel looks way too thoughtful.

Grantaire's algebra quiz comes back with a B+ on it and he sits there looking blankly at the top of the page, thinking that there must be some mistake. Joly's good but he’s not a miracle worker. You’d really think a math teacher would have a handle on totaling points and stuff. Grantaire flips through his answers, free of red corrections more often than not. It’s eerie.

"Grantaire," says Molly. When he looks up, she frowns. For really the first time today, he regrets his ghoulish appearance. "Are you coming to the meeting today?" she says. "You weren't there on Friday."

"How do you—" he stops. "Wait, were you there?"

She nods, only rolling her eyes a little. Why did nobody keep him informed? Granted, there's been some other stuff going on, but still.

"Feeling better?" she says. "I mean, other than the—" Molly waves a hand at her face.

"Maybe." The painkillers and ice have long since worn off, but it’s nowhere near the memory of first impact.

“What happened? Lauren Harris said somebody jumped you behind the school—”


“Lauren Harris?” says Molly, disbelieving. “She’s really popular—

Grantaire has to laugh at that. “Uh, Molly, dude. Being a popular freshman is like being famous in Canada. You gotta accept the rest of the world is not gonna know who you’re talking about."

“Lauren Harris,” she says again, like Grantaire doesn’t know who the president is.

“Why,” says Grantaire. “Wait, is she cute?”

“She’s fourteen and you have a boyfriend,” says Molly, flat.

“No no, I meant—”

“She’s not as funny as she thinks she is,” she says with a sniff. “Also, maybe she’s a liar since it doesn’t seem like you’re in a coma?”


Molly rolls her eyes. “I noticed.”

When he walks into Ms. Hucheloup’s that afternoon, Molly’s not there yet, but shockingly, Eponine
is, lounging in a chair in the middle of the room, backpack at her feet, like it’s perfectly natural.

If she's not going to react, Grantaire won’t either.

"Am I driving you home today?" he says.

"Nope, Musichetta." She nods at the desk next to her. "Saved you a spot," she says, like they're not surrounded by other empty chairs.

"Thanks," he says.

When Molly comes, she brings two other freshmen, although they both look too skittish and mousy to be the famed Lauren Harris. More importantly, she brings a big ziplock of homemade oatmeal cookies. Grantaire keeps waiting for someone to explain how there’s no snacks in justice club, but when Enjolras does enter, he barely seems to register it, deep in conversation with Feuilly.

Not everyone else is so focused. Joly takes a bite and waves his cookie in the air. “My favorite food, in this very room!” he shouts.

“Dude,” says Musichetta, “you’ve got like six favorite foods.”

“Sixteen point six repeating percent of my favorite foods!”

"Aw, you don't need to buy our love, young Molly," says Courfeyrac from where he and Jehan are sharing a chair.

"Fuck no," Eponine slurs, mouth full, "don't listen to him. Our love for you is dangling by a thread, kid. Keep 'em coming, and we'll see." As she chews, she nabs two more cookies, wraps them carefully in paper towel, and tucks them into her backpack. Molly blinks at the open display of selfishness, although Grantaire would bet money they’re for Gavroche.

Combeferre is the last to arrive, cradling a messy stack of print-outs.

“Okay, then,” says Courfeyrac loudly. “We’ve got some new faces, so maybe we should go around and introduce ourselves, then explain what’s going on?”

Grantaire regrets taking the seat next to Eponine almost immediately, because she will not let him zone out. If he tries to draw something, she’ll wrench the paper away. “Set a good example for your baby lesbian,” she whispers.

“I am not a role model,” he whispers back. “Also she has a name.”

“Fucking pay attention,” hisses Eponine, and then Combeferre turns and looks at them, which makes her kick Grantaire in the shin, which is completely unfair since she started it on every conceivable level.

“So, here’s the situation,” Courfeyrac says when the introductions have gone around, and maybe it’s true that Grantaire did miss the names of both new kids. Not that it matters so incredibly much, given how little time he’ll be spending with them. One more meeting until prom.

Courfeyrac untwists himself to stand. “You newcomers have found us at an interesting moment,” he’s saying. “First of all, all the out kids in this school are in the room right now. All four of us. Uh, should we raise our hands, or—?”

Grantaire can’t help thinking that even without the high school rumor mill, it’s at least half-obvious.
If Courfeyrac and Jehan had been sitting any closer at the start of the meeting, they would’ve been wearing the same pair of pants.

“You mean they can’t tell by our incredible fashion sense?” says Grantaire, and Eponine snorts like she psychically knows his whole outfit is stuff he found on his floor that morning.

Courfeyrac tactfully ignores this and continues. “The four of us have been harassed over the past couple months. Slurs, property destroyed, and today, Grantaire was physically attacked in the hallway.” He smiles, crooked and sarcastic. “Maybe it’s all just a crazy random coincidence, but it’s starting to feel like there could be a pattern here.”

“The other part of the pattern,” Enjolras chimes in, “is that the school administration has done nothing to punish the people doing this, and nothing to make us feel safe, or like our safety is even the goal. We’ve tried to talk to the vice principal and the principal in the past, and it gets us nowhere. So today is about trying to figure out the next step. Combeferre?”

“Yeah.” Combeferre nods at the stack of papers in his hands. “I’ve been looking into what the chain of command would be here, for appealing a decision past the principal. As far as I can tell, we’d want to schedule a one-on-one with the superintendent. I have his name, phone number, and email address—Feuilly?”

Feuilly lowers his hand. “That’s great,” he says. “And if that doesn’t work?”

“If that doesn’t work,” says Combeferre, “we go to the next school board meeting and we make a public, formal complaint.” He shuffles through the papers. “The next one is exactly one week from now, at 7 pm. If we haven’t gotten to talk to the superintendent by then, there’s another one two weeks after that.”

“Okay,” says Eponine, “and like, nobody lose their shit, but if we can take a second to imagine that maybe the school board isn’t gonna care—”

“After that, we would be file a complaint with the state Board of Education,” Combeferre finishes. “I have their address and a couple of phone numbers—Enjolras?”

“How long do you think this whole process would take?” says Enjolras. “Start to finish.”

Combeferre shakes his head. “I mean, I have no idea. But my sense is—a long time. Definitely they could drag this out until after the school year ends. I’m not actually saying this is what we should do.” He sighs. “Just, this is what it looks like if we play by the rules.” Bossuet’s raising his hand. “Yeah?”

“Uh, Bahorel wrote a statement to read in his absence,” says Bossuet. “He said, ‘pick a relevant moment,’ so.” Bossuet clears his throat. “‘Have we considered that maybe the solution here could be punching someone? Or ideally, punching a lot of someones?’”

“We don’t even know who we’d be punching yet,” points out Jehan. “You can’t punch the abstract notion of homophobia.”

“If anybody could, though,” Bossuet says. Then, “Sorry, is it my turn to call on someone? Uh, Cosette.”

“I think we should maybe also consider getting the press involved,” says Cosette. “There’s a lot of writers in the group, we could manage a pretty good letter to the editor. Explain what it’s like going to school here if you’re LGBT, how the administration won’t even meet with—”
“Technically they did meet with us,” says Grantaire. “Just, to tell me and Enjolras we were in trouble for PDA—”

“Wait, when?” says Musichetta. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, you guys are nauseating, but it’s all in the googly eyes and the dumb smiles, you’re not, like, grabby.”

“They didn’t like that we were holding hands,” says Enjolras. Grantaire flashes back to the way that confrontation ended, with Enjolras kissing him in the vice principal’s office as Javert told them to leave. It is possible his eyes may be a little googly at the memory, but he thinks he’s allowed. One corner of Enjolras’ mouth slides up and Grantaire realizes that moment is the closest thing they’ve had to a victory against the administration since they started all of this.

If only the solution to their problem was more kissing. Grantaire would bravely volunteer.

“Well, that definitely goes in the letter,” says Bossuet wryly.

“I don’t see the local paper caring any more than the school board,” Grantaire protests, and Cosette shakes her head.

“Not the local paper,” she says. “Every paper we can think of. Cities, colleges, I mean, let’s send one to the New York Times, what does it hurt—”

“We humiliate the school into doing something,” says Enjolras, looking much more intrigued than he did with the school board stuff. “If we drag their apathy into the spotlight, at some point it becomes more of a hassle for them to put up roadblocks than it does to just help us and be done.”

“Breaking news, being queer in a small town is not a fun time’,” says Grantaire. “I mean, we better all pray that absolutely nothing interesting happens and zero celebrities die, because I don’t see this story gathering much—”

“Actually,” says Eponine slowly. “I mean. If you look at it from the outside. Two rich, cute white boys, one is a total honors student, whatever, and the other with this tragic past, all the bullying and shit, who’ve only ever dated each other—and you could do a whole thing like, ‘I only want the guy I like to be safe’, blah blah blah it’s all for love. People would eat that up with a spoon. A lot of people would. It’s a good idea.” She throws Cosette a small, reluctant nod that almost makes Cosette fall out of her chair.

“Oh my god,” says Joly reverently, “we could probably get Enjolras on TV—”

At this, Enjolras starts to look queasy, but the energy in the room is picking up.

“We’d want to keep it very calm and to the point,” says Combeferre. “People think high schoolers, they’ll be ready for something overdramatic and ridiculous. We stick with the facts, but the facts themselves—”

“You guys are gonna be famous!” Joly enthuses, and something in Grantaire’s stomach clenches.

“Enjolras?” says Grantaire. “Uh, can I talk to you outside for a sec, hon?”

“I know,” says Enjolras once the door has shut behind them. “By the time the paper’s printed, we won’t be doing this anymore.”
Grantaire rubs at his face and nods. “You probably shouldn’t even say we were dating, because it will play into stereotypes about gay and bi people’s relationships being shallow or doomed or whatever.”

“Yeah,” Enjolras agrees.

“We can’t use Eponine’s angle at all.”

“Probably not.”

“Fuck.” It’s hard not to sag against the wall of lockers, let something else support his weight for a while. The metal is cold but solid against his back. “The superintendent’s gonna do jack shit, the school board will yawn us out of the room, and it’s hard to pin our hopes on the Board of Education riding in to rescue us.”

There’s a long pause, and he realizes he’s waiting for Enjolras to contradict him.

“It is hard to imagine this working if we stay within the system,” Enjolras says instead. “Nobody in charge seems inclined to listen to us.”

“Well, yeah, we’re bad kids,” says Grantaire. He points to himself. “Loud stoner with a long string of detentions.” He points to Enjolras. “Known troublemaker, threw a shoe.”

At that, Enjolras almost smiles. “It was a political statement.”


“Not dangerous enough to get anything done,” says Enjolras wearily, and something about the way he slouches reminds Grantaire that for all that he can sometimes seem like he’s a hundred feet tall, Enjolras doesn’t even have a driver’s license yet.

If they painted the whole mess as a story of young love, all of the shit that keeps them from getting taken seriously—their youth and lack of life experience, Enjolras’ general prettiness—could actually work for them.

Grantaire bites his lip. “If we worked really fast,” he says, “and wrote a letter today in the meeting, and sent it to the papers before five—”

“Even then, if they did any kind of follow-up, which we’d want them to do, by the time they got in touch again, we wouldn’t be together,” says Enjolras, and it’s a fair point, but it still feels like watching their best possible chance of success drop into a garbage disposal.

“What if we didn’t break up, though?” Grantaire hears himself say. “There’s no law saying we have to stop on Saturday. If you don’t mind keeping it going a bit, we could—

“I just,” is all Enjolras needs to get out before Grantaire’s stupid brain catches up with his even stupider mouth. “I appreciate the offer,” says Enjolras, and the fact he’s being kind about it hurts so much worse, like he’s got to protect Grantaire’s delicate feelings, “but I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” Enjolras isn’t even meeting Grantaire’s eyes, that’s how uncomfortable he is, because apparently there is no bottom to how embarrassing this moment can be, apparently it goes on forever, a humiliation black hole.

Maybe Enjolras’s sexual orientation doesn’t involve time travel but suddenly Grantaire is wishing his own did, that he could spin himself back a few seconds, long enough to impart some valuable wisdom about shutting the hell up.
“For one thing,” Enjolras is saying, “what if a journalist is smart enough to figure out what’s going on? The stakes are starting to get too high for us to keep lying. It’ll be hard enough to convince people about the things that actually happened, and—”

Grantaire has to cut him off fast, before the panic at the back of his throat can condense into bile. “Yeah, no I get it, man,” he says. He blinks, nods, wedges his hands into his pockets, starts a staring match with a floor tile, anything to distract from the weather systems whirling behind his eyes. “That’s cool, it was. Just an idea, so.”

It must fail because Enjolras says, much too serious, “Grantaire? I really, really do appreciate that you’re trying to help.”


“I mean it,” says Enjolras. He takes a deep breath. “Look, we haven’t talked about it in a while, but I don’t see why we can’t be the kind of, of pretend exes that are still civil to each other. If you wanted to keep coming to meetings, after, there’s nothing stopping you from—”

The bile is on its way anyway, apparently. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” he gets out, and then he turns around and yanks the door open.

When he steps back inside, Enjolras close behind him, it feels like everyone in the room is watching them.

“We’re holding off on contacting the news for at least a week,” says Enjolras with finality.

Musichetta is scribbling something on a paper on Eponine’s desk. Cosette, Feuilly and Jehan are crouched in front of it, too. Grantaire has a sense it might be the first draft of a letter. “Are we gonna vote on this,” says Musichetta, “or will you just, like, wave around a scepter?”

“Give him a break,” Grantaire mutters, but Enjolras steps forward to say,

“Being out to the school is not the same thing as being out to the whole country. Can you respect this is a big decision for some of us?”

It occurs to Grantaire that to the rest of the group, it’ll probably look like they broke up because Grantaire couldn’t handle the pressure of standing up to the rest of the world. It will look like Grantaire wasn’t in it for the long haul, that he left as soon as shit got difficult.

And it’s not like he’ll ever have a way to prove otherwise. Not like he’ll ever need to, even. On no level does it really matter, but still. ‘I would’ve stuck with you,’ he thinks to the back of Enjolras’s head. So many of the secrets he’s keeping are shitty, or in the case of whatever’s going on with Eponine, shitty and incomprehensible. It’s nice to have something he can hold for himself.

They spend the rest of the meeting talking about how to best approach the school superintendent, who drives a car with a Confederate flag sticker on the back, so really, they might as well address him in pig latin, with homemade finger puppets.

It’s boring and pointless but the upside is that Eponine stops trying to force him to pay attention and he spends the rest of the hour drawing an owl dressed like a detective. It takes a lot of concentration, all those little feathers.
In the van afterward, Enjolras is very quiet. Normally, Grantaire would leave him alone and let him do his thing, but this is one of two car rides left together and Grantaire is greedy. Also, Enjolras has his knees pulled up, which is something it seems like he only does when he’s upset.

“How’s it going?” Grantaire ventures as they roll out of the parking lot.

“Everything happens so slowly,” says Enjolras. It’s the kind of thing he’s said before, but he doesn’t sound angry this time. More muted. He waves an arm; Grantaire catches the motion from the corner of his eye. “Everything, not just this. The problems are so big and important and urgent, but there’s so many layers of bureaucracy, you can’t make anything happen as fast as it needs to. It’s like sitting in a burning building, and nobody else will even admit they smell smoke.” He sighs. “There are days where I wonder how anything ever actually changes, gets better.”

“Well, a little faster with people like you around, I guess,” Grantaire says. Then he freezes, hands clenching at 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock, wondering if the entire last week of their fake relationship is going to be about helplessly incriminating himself further and further.

Enjolras doesn’t even respond to that, though. What he says is, more firmly than before, “We are gonna find who hit you, you know.” He’s slumped in his seat, but he’s starting to uncurl; his sneakers are braced against the glove compartment. “It’s not like Jehan in the locker room, it happened in a crowded hallway with witnesses everywhere. Hell, Jehan and Courfeyrac saw him from behind, we’re going to—”

“Oh, okay,” says Grantaire. “What’s the next step, though? You realize if you do find him, trying to make the school do literally anything about it is gonna be a whole other giant struggle?”

“Grantaire, ten seconds ago you were telling me not to give up,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire shrugs. “Yeah, but like, pick your battles, man.”

Enjolras’s feet drop to the floor with a thud. “In terms of winnable fights,” he says. “He hit you in front of a lot of people. I don’t see how much more black and white it needs to—”

“First of all, if he’s an athlete, they’ll cover his ass no matter what,” says Grantaire as they round a turn. “Second, it was a crowded hallway, so how hard do you think it’ll be for him to find someone who will swear it was someone else? Also, even if you catch him, even if he admits it, the school could still treat it like a fight and not, you know, a hate crime, which would let him dodge most of the punishment and come back to bite me in the ass, since like I said, I have a million detentions, so it’s easy for them to paint me like a bad—”

“What’s the purpose of starting out like we’ve already lost?” Enjolras breaks in. He doesn’t sound as testy as he could be, really, for which Grantaire thanks his lucky stars. “What does that accomplish?”

Is Enjolras seriously capable of making himself think only useful thoughts? Grantaire tries to imagine what the inside of his head must be like. A series of to-do lists, broken up by goofy jokes and weird deodorant preferences.

“I’m not saying you’re definitely gonna fail,” says Grantaire. Enjolras scoffs. “I’m not,” he insists. “I can’t picture it working, but I didn’t picture the whole sham-dating thing working, and look at Jehan and Courfeyrac, so.”

“If you didn’t think it was going to work—” Enjolras starts.

“I don’t know, man.” Grantaire tries to laugh lightly. “I don’t have the best track record in making decisions. If we try to figure out why I do what I do, we’ll be here all night.” Enjolras doesn’t laugh,
which is, after all, his right. “But if, okay, if we find the guy, and the school still doesn’t do anything—
you should be aware that could happen. I’m not trying to be a downer,” he adds. “But like. Personal experience, okay?”


“Sorry,” says Enjolras. “Sorry. I need a second,” and the gritted teeth are audible. “I am so goddamn angry at this school, it just,” he says.

“Preach,” says Grantaire, with worryingly little sarcasm. Like, he does, literally, want to hear this rant. He stalls as long as he can, taps a rhythm on the steering wheel to give Enjolras time. “But if you rally everyone to track him down, and we find him and the school won’t punish him, what’s your plan?”

“I’m sure Bahorel will have some ideas,” says Enjolras darkly.

“No,” says Grantaire.

“What?”

“No,” he says again, close to involuntary. “Look, you can’t hit anyone.”

“If you’re going to say ‘Don’t sink to their level’—” Enjolras seethes.

“No, obviously. You couldn’t sink that far if you tried, but like.” Grantaire risks a glance at him, safe driving be damned. “You get this would ruin any other plan your group can come up with, right? The Board of Education and the, the fucking New York Times aren’t going to listen to a kid who’s running around knocking the shit out of people—”

“We have no guarantee any of that will even work,” says Enjolras. “The papers, the board, you said it yourself, they might not care. I’m not saying we do it right now, but what if the only form of justice we have is—”

Grantaire slams his brakes a hair too early for the stop sign. “Enjolras, I don’t give a fuck if you wanted to be Zorro when you were a kid, this is not the wild west, you can’t just—”

“Zorro wasn’t a cowboy,” Enjolras retorts, maddeningly calm.

“You’ve already gotten in trouble this year. If they’re looking for a reason to give you shit, and you fucking punch a kid, how fast do you think they’re gonna remember that whole anti-violence policy?”

“We’re the ones those rules are supposed to protect,” says Enjolras. “And anyway, Bahorel got away with it.”

“Because he was an athlete,” Grantaire points out. “They had to drop him from wrestling or that kid’s parents would’ve pitched a shitfit. But if I had to guess, they were probably hoping he’d do football instead or something. It’s not the same. Javert hates you. He is going to suspend you if he gets the chance.”

“Who cares?” says Enjolras. “You don’t go to school for a few days, it’s not a bad trade.” He says it so off-hand, so casual, Grantaire’s stomach clenches.

He swallows. “Uh, for one thing, if you make them mad enough, they can absolutely ban you from Prom and then this whole two and a half months will have been for fucking nothing?”
“Oh,” Enjolras says.

“Yeah.” Grantaire’s neck aches, the way it has been lately. He rolls his head from side to side, but the tension doesn’t leave. “Please don’t hit this guy?” he says, looking sidelong at Enjolras, who still does not seem nearly concerned enough.

Grantaire telling Enjolras to care about something. Now there’s a sign of a world turned upside down.

“I’ll try,” says Enjolras, which isn’t much more of a guarantee than ‘oh.’

“Promise,” Grantaire insists, which is stupid; this isn’t the elementary school playground. He can’t make Enjolras pinky-swear. If Enjolras wants to punch someone, he will, and there’s nothing Grantaire can do about that.

Instead of promising, Enjolras says, “You really don’t think he deserves some payback?”

Grantaire sighs. “Of course I want him to suffer, I’m not a saint. Just, if you hit him, or if you even act like you’re gonna do it, and the administration comes down on you—it’s not worth it, okay?” Too much? Too much, he thinks. “Or anyone else in the ABC,” he tacks on, and Enjolras doesn’t seem to notice, thank god for his ability to miss every nuance of a conversation.

“I won’t hit him,” says Enjolras.

“And you won’t threaten him,” Grantaire presses, to which Enjolras says, dutifully,

“I won’t him or threaten him with violence.”

Grantaire’s shoulders settle a half-inch. “What else would you threaten him with, hugs?”

Enjolras snorts. “I’m still not a Carebear,” he says. With the topic safely changed, Grantaire is ready to start singing for joy even before Enjolras twists his hands on the seatbelt and says, "Can we—that one song, can we hear it again?"

“I won’t hit him,” says Grantaire, cuing it up gratefully.

They listen all the way through but it still ends too soon. Grantaire skips back to the beginning without asking. They don’t speak, except that Grantaire sings most of the chorus under his breath.

"I miss my headphones," says Grantaire when it’s over. "Walking around, listening."

"Yeah," says Enjolras. Then, "What do you think of the rest of this album?"

"I just have this track," Grantaire admits. "Why, is it good?"

When he glances over, Enjolras is shrugging. "I think so," he says.

Enjolras and Cosette talk music sometimes, he thinks, with a queasy thread of jealousy. Enjolras has a whole world of opinions that Grantaire knows nothing about. "Y’know," says Grantaire, "it doesn't have to be my shit all the time. If you want to bring something to play—"

"We only have one more meeting before prom," Enjolras points out.

Grantaire sighs. Right.
"Uh, hey," says Eddie Greer. It's the first thing he's said directly to Grantaire in months. Grantaire and Eponine are sitting around waiting for Spanish to start. It's not a class they have with Eddie. He shouldn’t be here.

"What," says Grantaire.

"I just—" Eddie darts a look around, shuffles his feet, and looks at the floor. "$I wasn't trying to—it wasn't, like, on purpose—"


"Yesterday," says Eddie.

What did Eddie even do yesterday, other than react to Grantaire’s face? Nothing out of the ordinary, unless there’s something Grantaire’s missing. He thinks back to that exchange and it occurs to him for the first time that Eddie might’ve been wearing a hat and some kind of jersey. Eddie’s not in any school sports but he is a football fan, Grantaire remembers that vaguely from when they used to talk. School colors are blue and white; it’s not impossible some actual team has those colors.

Eddie had looked at him and flinched. Of course, whoever bashed Grantaire’s eye wouldn’t have seen it then, too busy scrambling away before Grantaire could turn around.

He’s shaking but Eponine’s squeezing his shoulder and he realizes, suddenly, that he’s not really afraid. Or, he is, but he’s so many other things that the fear is getting crowded out.

Grantaire swallows. "Oh," he says. "You mean, yesterday when you knocked my head into a drinking fountain?"

Eddie’s eyes widen. "Look," he says. "I didn’t mean for you to hit it that hard, it was supposed to be a joke, you know?"

Grantaire feels like maybe his insides have been replaced with fire, or coffee. It's scary, but it also feels kind of good, to be this angry all at once. A joke. Like that’s supposed to mean something to Grantaire. Like that’s supposed to calm him down, that his pain is someone else’s punchline.

“Oh,” says Grantaire, “oh, hey, well, if it was a joke that changes everything. So just, like,” he tilts his head to one side, tucks his fist under his chin, “can you explain it to me?”

Eddie walked in pale, but at that, he goes paler. Any more and he’ll be almost translucent, and Grantaire won’t have to see his dumb, boggled face.

“I—” is all Eddie can pull off. “Uh.”

“No, man, take me through it,” Grantaire pushes. “You know I love to laugh. So okay, I’m walking down the hallway, and you, I guess, lightly slam my face into a drinking fountain—what’s the payoff? Why is it funny, Eddie? What am I not getting?” His voice is climbing. His eyes burn like they’re about to start shooting lasers. It almost feels like he could.

"Please," says Eddie, dropping his voice. "My—uh, my dad just lost his job."

“You know,” and Grantaire’s words are so crisp it barely sounds like him, “I’m pretty sure I don’t actually care?”
“We're so—I mean, I don't know if we can afford it,” Eddie mutters.

"What the hell is your point,” says Eponine.

"For the suit," says Eddie, like that clears something up. "Please, man. I’ll—like, turn myself in, but. Please, don’t sue us." Where in the world would Eddie get the impression he was facing a lawsuit? Who does Grantaire know who would be persuasive enough and brash enough to sell it?

Some pieces begin to fall into place.

"Do you think I'm that nice?" Grantaire asks. "Thought you thought I was disgusting."

Eddie freezes. “I could lose my scholarship, man.”

“Yeah, what’s college gonna do without this one asshole telling the same unfunny gay jokes over and over?”

"You haven't even said you're sorry," says Eponine coldly. “You fucking jackass.”

It makes Eddie jump. "Yeah," he says, as if remembering some magic word. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I am so sorry."

“Well, I don’t really think I’m gonna forgive you,” says Grantaire.

“Please, please don't sue us. Please.” Eddie’s shaking. That doesn’t make them even. Grantaire has shook for so much longer. Eponine was right: there’s something uniquely unfair about being tormented by cowards. It’s not just scary, it’s insulting.

The clock shows thirty seconds before the bell rings. Grantaire drags the pause out for twenty of them. “Turn yourself in, leave all of us alone for the rest of the year and maybe, maybe I’ll think about it,” he says at last.

Enjolras is already at the lunch table when Grantaire gets there.


Enjolras pulls the sandwich from his bag and lays it on the table, much too precise. “Did you?” he says, setting his bottle of tea next to it. “That’s surprising. He’s never struck me as all that bright.”

“Well, he seemed pretty convinced I wanted to sue him,” Grantaire says. “It was weird, you know. It was almost like maybe someone had cornered him and made a huge deal about their mom being a lawyer—”

“I really am very proud of her,” says Enjolras levelly.

“—and then maybe didn’t explain that she’s a real estate lawyer.”

“You know,” says Enjolras, “now that you mention it, that might have slipped my mind?”

Grantaire really would’ve liked to see that, he thinks. If anyone ever had the commitment to work that bluff, paint it not as a sad, hollow threat but a dire warning—Enjolras is maybe the only person
who could make legal action so scary from the outset that it wouldn't get his ass kicked.

"Oh my god, dude, you are insane," says Grantaire. "How did you even, like—"

"We asked around," Enjolras says. "One of Courfeyrac's theater friends saw Eddie do it—"

Even if the kid in question didn't know Eddie or Grantaire personally, they probably took the time to absorb and memorize every detail of the encounter, just to have a better story to tell later. God bless theater kids, thinks Grantaire. God bless Courfeyrac, who probably charmed it out of them in under a half-second.

"And then you, what, ambushed him in the hallway and started yelling about lawsuits?"

"I didn't yell," says Enjolras with dignity. "I just pointed some things out to him. How, even if the school doesn't care about our civil rights, this country has laws against assault. How 18-year-olds are tried as adults. How much a lawsuit costs. Prison sentences." He takes a sip of green tea, offhandedly. "I might have invented some legal terms. He really is not a very smart person."

He says this as a joke, almost, but seriously, it takes some fucking nerve for Enjolras to lecture everyone else on keeping their wits about them, keeping their guard up, and then storm up to confront a bully.

"So you just, like, leapt into the lion's den by yourself and started fucking with the lions?"

"Oh," says Enjolras. "No, I wasn't alone. I took Bahorel."

Something in Grantaire's stomach sinks. He can only imagine one reason Enjolras would invite Bahorel instead of, say, Combeferre. "You said you weren't gonna threaten to hurt him," Grantaire points out.

Enjolras fumbles vaguely for his sandwich. "We didn't," he says. "Bahorel didn’t say anything, he was just there for, uh, moral support."

Grantaire pictures Bahorel looming silently behind Enjolras, arms crossed, maybe not making threats, but—frowning, cracking his knuckles, using every pre-match psych-out move he ever picked up wrestling at Columbus High.

"And for scenery?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras shrugs. "Bahorel has a deep and abiding interest in law," he deadpanns, as Grantaire chokes on a mouthful of chips.

"Wow," Grantaire says, coughing. "You're insane, for real."

"Is it okay?" says Enjolras. "Eddie was almost crying, so I didn't think he was going to cause you any trouble, but I told him to find you in Spanish, so Eponine would be there in case."

"Uh, thanks," Grantaire mumbles.

"He promised he’d confess to the principal, and we’re still gonna try to make sure there’s consequences," Enjolras adds. "But I don't know." He takes another sip of tea. "After everything, I thought you might find it kind of funny to see him scared?"

He says it so nonchalantly, like 'I thought you might want to borrow a nickel.'

"Wow," says Grantaire. "Well, that's. Certainly a blood-chilling way to put it."
Enjolras puts the tea down. His brow furrows. "Was I wrong?"

The thing is, he wasn't. The level of consideration that went into this kind of makes his throat hurt. Well, this is what Enjolras is like with a plan: no detail forgotten, no minutia ignored. The kid does his homework.

In this case, that homework involved dangling a homophobic jerk’s fear around like a cat toy.

"You weren't wrong," Grantaire tells him. "I'm not sure how you pulled this off, but it was somehow both creepy and sweet."

"Creepy and sweet," says Courfeyrac, materializing out of fucking nowhere and almost giving Grantaire a heart attack, how does he do that, "are we talking about Enjolras?

"How do you do that?" Enjolras mutters. "And I'm not."

"Not creepy or not sweet?" says Courfeyrac, as Enjolras seems to seriously weigh which word is more objectionable. "Because your boyfriend's looking at you like he wants to write your initials all over his trapper keeper. Just saying."

Courfeyrac's not being mean, Grantaire reminds himself as he reflexively turns back to his food and tries not to hunch his shoulders. Courfeyrac is, in his way, trying to be nice.

Grantaire can't tell whether or not his silence has been long enough to feel weird. "I mean," he says, picking up his sandwich. He makes himself glance sidelong at Enjolras. "You made Eddie almost pee his pants using, like, fake Latin. Can you prove you're not a wizard?"

Courfeyrac pats Enjolras on the back. "You hear that? You're his hero, Enjolras."

"Yeah," says Grantaire, managing something like a smile. "You're my hero."

It comes out at lunch that nobody in the ABC thought to arrange for a prom limo.

"Seriously?" Musichetta keeps saying, and Grantaire would be annoyed at her annoyance, except when she sat down, the first thing she did was cut her sandwich down the middle and deftly slide half to Eponine. ("Here, help me eat this thing, I've got to fit in my stupid dress by Saturday.")

"Seriously?" Musichetta says again.

Jehan coughs. "Is it...important we get one? They still let you in if you come in a car, right?"

"Nobody thought about this?" says Musichetta. "Nobody planned anything? Prom is this weekend."

"Maybe we had other stuff on our minds," says Courfeyrac a little pointedly. "Remember? Remember the rest of this year?"

"Maybe that's why we should put some thought into not having a shitty Prom," Eponine throws in. "For, like, morale."

"Is that what the night is about, though?" says Enjolras. "Spending a lot of money on a fancy car? Most of you drive, is it really so bad if we just—"

Musichetta puts down her remaining quarter of sandwich and groans. "If we go in separate cars, it's
gonna be such a mess. Bossuet will get lost, Bahorel's whole car will be late because he'll insist on going through the Taco Bell drive-in for the sheer comedy, who even knows what Grantaire's car will do—"

At the mention of his car, Eponine sits up straight. "You guys," she says. "You guys, I think we're forgetting an important thing: Grantaire owns a giant sketchy van."

"I do," says Grantaire. "I really do."

"It's not that sketchy," Enjolras protests, and Grantaire pats him on the arm.

"Yes, Pumpkin-mint, you're very brave."

"Can your giant sketchy-ass van hold twelve people?" asks Musichetta, eyebrows raised sarcastically.

"If you stack 'em like firewood," says Grantaire. "There's not twelve seats, but—"

"Actually," Eponine says, "as long as people are okay sitting on laps—" and Marius bluses, presumably at the idea of being belted into the same seat with Cosette. Eponine doesn't seem to even notice. She laughs. "I mean, granted, then we're rolling up to the dance in a massive stoner van, but."

"No wait!" Courfeyrac's eyes have lit up. "That's amazing! It's like taking a monster truck to Prom. We have to do this!"

"Thanks for offering to drive us," says Enjolras, which for the record Grantaire did not do. Still, the driver's seat is the only spot in the van where nobody will expect him to conserve space by sitting in Enjolras's lap. Eye of the goddamn storm.

Which means he's designated driver for the evening. Not like he was planning on getting wasted, but the option has been officially closed to him. Goddamn Eponine and her outside-the-box thinking.

"We could take the money we don't spend on a limo and donate it to charity," Combeferre suggests without looking up from his textbook. Grantaire hadn't been 100% sure he was even listening.

"What's the one with the kids and the dimes?" says Grantaire.

"Uh, March of Dimes?" says Courfeyrac.

"No, man."

'The kids and the dimes,' Eponine mouths blankly, but Marius guesses,

"Unicef?" which sounds right.

"Or Doctors Without Borders," Musichetta suggests, and really, Combeferre is a smart guy because maybe the one way to make her stop caring about limos is to turn it into a moral crusade.

"We can put it to vote at the meeting," says Enjolras, because he is Enjolras. Grantaire gives him a pretend pretend-fond smile. Enjolras gives him a pretend-fond smile back. "You're a lifesaver," Enjolras says. It's very pretend-heartwarming.
Eponine is going to stay home on Thursday night. She is very, very adamant about this.

"What did Battle of the Bands ever do to you?" Grantaire mutters, lying on his floor as he finishes his final draft of the first few pages of Astro-Cat.

Eponine doesn't look up from her sewing machine. She hasn't been looking up from her sewing machine lately when she's at Grantaire's house. He has the sense she might be kind of behind on making her prom dress, except she also won't accept his help, which is such bullshit. Grantaire doesn't get clothes but he's good at making shit. She knows he's good at making shit. It's like she's determined to make this as hard on herself as possible.

"Yeah, dude," she says through a mouthful of pins, "why the fuck would I not wanna spend three hours in a high school gym with a bunch of people I can barely stand during the school day," she pulls out the pins and plunges them into the fabric of the desk chair like a furniture voodoo doll, one hand still working the sewing machine. "Listening to band after band of angsty rich kids, thinking it's so super edgy to call themselves 'Deathkill' or 'Punchstrike', yelling about, 'some girl in my chem class doesn't wanna do me, it's the worst thing that's ever happened to anyone on the planet!'" The machine whirs and hums. "It is a goddamn mystery, Grantaire."

"Joly said there's gonna be at least one ska band," says Grantaire.

"Oh," says Eponine, sarcastic, "well, if there's saxophones."

"If it's shitty we can hang in the back and poke fun?" he offers.

"How much is cover?"

"Five bucks."

This is about the cheapest it could possibly be, but Eponine still makes a disgusted sound. "I'm not gonna pay money to watch shitty people play shitty music. There are so many ways to get that need met for free."

Grantaire looks up from filling in the inky blackness of space. "C'mon," he says, "It'll be fun. Musichetta's going. Her, me, Bahorel, Joly, Bossuet—"

Ever since he found out Eponine was going to Prom with Bossuet, he's been trying to rile her up by implying they're desperately in love. He's starting to believe they really are "just friends," though, because no matter what dirty jokes he makes or how hard he works his eyebrows—and he's given himself a headache trying—she fails to take the bait.

"Your boyfriend's not coming?" says Eponine instead.

"My fake boyfriend? Can you picture him at a Battle of the Bands?"

"He likes bands, right?" she says, dragging fistfuls of cloth under the chugging needle of the machine. "And he loves battles."

"How does he feel about 'of the', though," Grantaire mutters.

"You're such a loser."

Grantaire stretches out on the floor. "C'mon," he says again. "Nobody you hate is coming. Nobody you even, like, have shit with. Like, Cosette's away or something, so." The absence of Cosette will all but guarantee the absence of Marius, he doesn’t need to add. It's a scientific principle.
“I don’t give a shit,” Eponine bites out. “They can go stare into each other’s eyes for the rest of their lives, whatever.”

"Combeferre’s not coming either, I don’t think, if that helps—"


"Make it a design feature?" Grantaire offers. He still doesn’t know what that means.

"Dammit," she says. "No, I can fix it. Ugh." If Eponine has been making her own clothes for years, is it always this fraught? Grantaire shudders. "And I don’t have shit with Combeferre," she mumbles distractedly. "I freaking told you that. He's fine, okay?"

She had freaking told him that, it’s true. On the other hand, she has not stopped being weird about the guy. Grantaire mulls this over, the way she never fully relaxes when he’s around, the lending of poetry books and Eponine’s secret love of pretty words.

"Wait," Grantaire says, "is Combeferre fine, or is he...fine?"

"That’s the same word twice," Eponine tells him flatly, not getting it on purpose. Deflecting. Holy shit.

"Oh man, do you like him?" he says. He thinks about Combeferre as a kid on the playground, cleaning his glasses and fact-checking their war games, and feels something close to pride. Brainy weirdo Combeferre is all grown up and winning the affections of badass rocker girls.

"Oh my god, Grantaire," she snaps. "Can you please get it into your head that maybe I have more important shit to think about?"

It’s a prom dress, thinks Grantaire, it's not like she's defusing a bomb.

"Okay," he says. He takes a deep breath, commits himself to the lines of Astro-cat's spaceship. "But like. You don’t have work, Musichetta will be there—"

"I can't go, okay?" says Eponine sharply. "Leave it, dude. Leave it."

Grantaire leaves it.

She sews like a maniac until two in the morning and when she settles down on the floor with a pillow he’s pretty sure is hers, that’s how he knows she’s staying over. The next morning, while she’s in the bathroom, he’s searching the floor for a clean-smelling shirt when he finds something boxy and hard-edged under a jacket.

It’s her jewelry box, the little plastic treasure chest she used to hide her pot in. Grantaire has asked her, so many times, not to dump her stuff all over his room, but she never stops, there’s always more, and he doesn’t get why—

He thinks of her bedroom, the dwindling furniture, and he leaves that, too.

Joly has enough enthusiasm about Battle of the Bands to make up for her, though. Joly has enough enthusiasm to carry eight or nine sullen teenagers on its back. You could crowd surf on Joly’s enthusiasm for Battle of the Bands.
Joly hasn't been this keyed up since—well, okay, since Monday, and Molly’s cookies.

And then since Tuesday, when Grantaire remembered to show Joly his quiz grade.

And then since this morning, at seeing Grantaire's finished Astro-cat pages.

The point is, Joly is an enthusiastic guy, and Joly will not shut up about Battle of the Bands. Supposedly, they're going over Grantaire's algebra homework, except Joly keeps getting sidetracked by his need to stare into space and tap his fingers on the table and announce to no one, "They're gonna battle it out, who reigns supreme, using only music, ahhh!"

It actually gets to the point where when Bossuet says, "Man, I'm feelin it too, but these equations aren't gonna solve themselves," Grantaire literally finds himself nodding along, like, 'Enough fucking around, let's get back to math.' Are there no constants remaining the world?

Other than the obvious: Eponine's sarcasm, the ABC's determination, the general shiftiness of the rest of the student body, and the horrifying state of Grantaire's room, van, and hair. Nachos. Fantine being the best nurse in the world. Enjolras’s convictions, and Grantaire's ridiculous feelings for someone who doesn't love him back.


"'Oh, math,' is your superhero catchphrase," says Bossuet. "The Denominator. 'Divide and conquer!'"

"C'mon, get cracking," says Musichetta.

Bossuet grins. "That's your superhero catchphrase. You've got, like, squirrel powers."

Musichetta shakes her head and nudes Joly's math notebook towards him. She's been a lot more engaged in the tutoring project since they instituted a policy that if Grantaire calls himself stupid, she and Bossuet get to hit him with rubber bands.

She claims this comes from cognitive behavioral theory. Jehan had looked dubious when Grantaire tried to explain it.

Grantaire is more confused they've never been kicked out of the library. When he'd brought this up, she just looked mysterious and said something about well-behaved kids getting away with more shit. His best guess is that Musichetta's got some dirt on the librarian.

The thing is, the rubber band attack clause is kind of getting results. At the very least, he's more likely to stay on track.

Not that Grantaire is the one who needs help focusing today.

"Ten bands in one night," says Joly. "That is fifty cents a band, is that not unreal?" He bobs up and down in his chair. "This! Is gonna be! So cool!"

Grantaire throws a glance over at the librarian's desk. She is aggressively pretending not to notice that Joly is more or less shouting.

"I hope you plan on bringing extra socks," Joly says to Grantaire, "because I strongly suspect they may soon be rocked off!"

The window of time to actually get the work done is shrinking, and the smaller it gets, the less
patience Grantaire has for Joly's boundless chatter. He's opening his mouth to say "maybe cool it with the Battle of the Bands talk, dude" when Joly sighs and adds,

"It's just so nice to have something good happen, you know? I feel like everything that's happened lately, every single thing, it's always bad news. I'm looking so, so forward to—just dance it out, you know. Dance it all out.” He wiggles his shoulders.

“Hey,” says Bossuet, fishing change from his pocket, “want anything from the vending machines, Jolybean?”

“Yeah!” Joly is still grooving along to some imaginary guitar solo.

“What do you want?”

“I trust your instincts!”

Musichetta snorts and grabs her purse off the back of her chair. “Well, I’m coming with, in case your instincts are dumb.”

“Hey now,” Bossuet says, laughing.

As they leave, Grantaire thinks he hears her say, “Pizza Combos,” with an air of a trump card. If Bossuet has a comeback, it’s swallowed up by the double doors.

Back at the table, Joly has folded the fingers of his left hand into rock n roll horns and is trying to draw it with his right, laughing at his own clumsiness. If Grantaire was sucking at something that badly in front of someone else, he would not be laughing. He feels a sudden pang of envy, and then a pang of guilt.

“You wanna get in on this?” says Joly. “Professional artist and all?”

“What’s Mr. Myriel like?” Grantaire says, without really planning to.

Joly beams. “Awesome. Completely awesome. So so so so great. He gets it, you know? He gets it. I can tell him all my weird head business and he’s never like, ‘You’re over-reacting’ or ‘Don’t cry’, he’s like ‘Joly, you have a right to feel what you feel, but that doesn’t always mean it’s constructive, so let’s work on strategies to—blah blah blah, it’s incredible.”

“Strategies to’ what?”

“Oh, like,” Joly shrugs like it’s something everyone knows, like this is normal small-talk, “not to ruminate or fixate on bad thoughts, stuff like that. Why?” He grins again. “Ooh, are you thinking of meeting with him? You should, Myriel is the best.”

Grantaire twists his hands trying to think of a way to point out that he’s not, in fact, crazy. There’s no way to put it that doesn’t sound like he’s calling Joly crazy instead. It’s a fucking puzzler.

Joly must mistake his silence for some sort of deep inner angst, because when Grantaire looks up, Joly’s fixing him with a sympathetic smile.

“It’s scary, right?” says Joly. “That first step, it’s the worst.” He twirls his cane absentmindedly. “I can come with you if you want, introduce you.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Grantaire chews on his lip, wondering how he’s supposed to get out of this. “I think this is something I need to do on my own,” he says at last.
“That’s fair.” Joly nods, meditative. “I’m so happy you’re gonna do it, though.”

He’s worked himself into a corner: either pretend like he’s started meeting with Myriel—and the guy has no reason to cover for Grantaire—or actually meet with Myriel and pretend there’s something wrong in his brain chemistry. Maybe he has Bahorel confused, but someone with a psych degree is bound to be harder to fool.

Grantaire deeply regrets bringing it up at all. He’s not even sure why he did.

“Wow,” says Bossuet, Musichetta at his side, bearing the apparently not-dumb snack of pretzel bites, “I can’t believe he finally got you off Battle of the Bands.”

"Oh frick, yes! Battle of the Bands!” Joly shouts, punching the air. The librarian doesn't even look up.

But when Grantaire stops by the next night to give the three of them a ride, the scene is more subdued. Joly's leaning heavily on his cane all the way to the van. Bossuet’s got his other side and Musichetta opens the car door for him. They all look a little drained.

"You okay, man?" says Grantaire.

"Tonight might be more of a sitting night," is all Joly volunteers. There’s a brand-new anarchy sticker on the handle of his cane and someone—Grantaire’s money is on Musichetta—has painted his nails black. Grantaire can’t tell if it happened when Joly was still psyched about tonight, or if this was a last-minute attempt to rally. He can’t even tell which would be more of a bummer.

“If you’re not feeling great—” Grantaire hazards, but Joly shakes his head and says, with surprising fierceness,

“If I waited until I felt great to do things, I would never do anything.”

Bossuet and Musichetta don’t seem worried, just quiet. On the way to the school, Grantaire plays them the first track of Bahorel’s mix and they seem to think it’s alright, but they don’t really get it. If Grantaire’s honest with himself, he’s okay with that, because it makes the fact that he gets it and Enjolras gets it feel like a bigger deal, a secret handshake in an uncomprehending world. Then again, he reminds himself as he puts the van into drive, Bahorel gets it too.

Musichetta has him drop off her and Joly in front of the school. As the van pulls away, she’s holding his elbow like a Victorian gentleman, whispering something in his ear.

“They’re cute,” Grantaire says on the ride back to the parking lot.

“Huh?” Behind him, Bossuet is still mostly absorbed by his phone.

It occurs to Grantaire then that of everyone in the ABC, Bossuet is probably the person most likely to give him a straight answer on the Musichetta situation, so he just goes for it. “Are they together?” he asks.

Bossuet looks up from the little screen, blinking like a man coming out of a trance. “I...don’t think so?”

“Do you like her?”
“Musichetta’s great,” says Bossuet. “Also, we’re meeting Bahorel by the door of the gym. He says he’s got a plan, so, uh, let’s all try to approach those words with a positive attitude.”

Their fear turns out to be misplaced: the plan is almost impossibly reasonable by Bahorel standards. He’d managed to wrangle three folding chairs, figuring that Joly and a rotating cast of two friends could set up in front of the band while the rest of the crowd stood behind them.

That said, they’re thwarted.

“Fucking self-appointed parent volunteers,” Bahorel seethes. “It’s like ‘lady, how can you go mad with power when you don’t even have any power—’” This veers off into something about fascists that Grantaire can’t really follow.

Musichetta sighs. “She said if we sat in the front, everyone else would want to sit and it’d be a fire hazard. I told her, this is a medical thing, and she said Joly could stay but just Joly.”

“I’m not sitting by myself,” says Joly, sounding almost offended, “that is so boring.”

He and Musichetta have moved their chairs against the wall, as out of the way as possible. The third chair is still folded. Musichetta knocks it back and forth in her hands.

“Finally, she told us we were welcome to all sit in the back, behind everyone standing, like it was a huge compromise and we should be touched she thought of it,” she reports.

“Great,” says Grantaire. “A whole evening of staring at people’s asses.”

“Don’t be cheeky,” Bossuet mutters, and it’s not until Joly’s snickering that Grantaire even realizes it was a joke.

“So we have to make it a whole thing?” Joly asks once he’s composed himself. “I just wanna have fun tonight, who cares if we can’t see the bands. I know what a band looks like.”

So they push their chairs behind where a crowd is starting to gather around the first band, which is called Accursed, which is maybe an even worse name than the ones Eponine made up as a joke. Grantaire keeps singing, “That’s-a cursed, pizza pie,” in a bad Italian accent until Musichetta’s grinding her teeth.

“You and Bossuet want to take first standing duty?” Joly offers. “I still want another five minutes of Grantaire doing this name bit.”

“Joly, you magnificent bastard,” says Bahorel once Musichetta and Bossuet have reluctantly made their way forward.

Joly smiles and ducks his head but doesn’t argue, and Grantaire resigns himself to an unsolvable mystery where the three of them are concerned.

Maybe not so shockingly, Accursed is less than stellar. Their drummer is off-rhythm at all times, just enough to make Grantaire want to jump out of his skin. Jump out of his skin, and then use the resulting chaos to reach one skeleton arm over and slap the drumsticks away from this poor fool. Grantaire keeps a better beat bored in class with a pencil in one hand.

The sound won’t carry far enough to make out any of the lyrics, which realistically is only a good
thing, but cut off from whatever energy there might be in the crowd, facing only people’s backs, it doesn’t feel much like a concert.

“Wow, they’re shitty,” Grantaire says, between songs one and two of their allotted three-song set.

“Yeah,” says Joly. He makes a frustrated noise. “I want to be up there! There’s nothing to do here!”

“We could heckle the band,” Bahorel suggests. “Not like they can hear us from down here anyway.”

“Please,” says Grantaire. “Please, please, let’s.”

When the next song starts up, a loud blur of guitars and bass and deeply mismanaged drums, Bahorel cups his hands to his mouth and yells,

“Boo!”

Grantaire laughs and follows suit: “Boo! Are you accursed to suck?”

“Boo! This experience is disappointing!” Joly adds.

“Boo! This is a waste of electricity!”

“Boo! I want my fifty cents back!”

“Boo! You’re not even ska!”

“Boo!” Grantaire shouts. “Send your drummer back to middle school jazz band!”

“BOO!” Bahorel yells, louder. “Take your white boy suburban angst and SHOVE IT!”

“BOO!” Joly screams. “HOW HARD IS IT TO MAKE A FLAT ROOM HANDICAP ACCESSIBLE!”

All of which is to say, Grantaire’s not so surprised when the three of them are forcibly ejected from the Battle of Bands. What is a surprising is that Joly is absolutely delighted.

“Yes!” Joly crows from his chair, which they had to carry outside, past the back doors of the gym. “Oh man, is that the most rock n roll thing you have ever done, or what?”

“It’s in my top ten,” says Bahorel charitably. After the din of inside, the relative hush is hard to adjust to. The sky is as dark as it ever gets this close to the city, that browny-pink of used gum on the sidewalk. It’s just chilly enough that Grantaire’s wishing he had a jacket.

“How long are we partying outside the school?” he asks, rubbing his arms.

“The party don’t STOP,” says Bahorel, and Joly reaches up to give him a high five. Which is nice, but Grantaire really hopes they’re not out here for the rest of the night.

Cars swish past them. Somewhere in the distance, a fire engine wails, on and on.

Grantaire’s phone rings.

His stomach dips on the off-chance it’s somehow Enjolras, but when he fishes his phone from his pocket and checks the screen, it’s an unknown number. Weird. Grantaire almost assumes it’s a misdial, but on the fourth ring, he figures what the hell.

“Oh, hello?” he ventures.
“Grantaire, oh my god,” says Eponine, except he almost doesn’t recognize her because her voice is shaking. “Grantaire, okay, you need to pick up me and Gavroche from the gas station on fifth, the one by McDonald’s.”

“What?” he says stupidly. Bahorel and Joly are giving him a curious look.

“We’re at the gas station by McDonald’s,” she says again. “Look, Grantaire, you need to come get us.”

“Eponine? What happened?” The siren must be coming closer; it’s louder. Much louder.

“They did it,” Eponine mutters, although it sounds almost like she’s talking to herself. “Those motherfuckers finally did it.”

“Eponine, are you guys alright?” he says. The fire truck barrels by, shrieking, making his whole body vibrate and recoil. The aftershocks seem to hang in the air, like a bad smell.

Or like the black pillar of smoke that is starting to snake up past the treeline.

The smoke coming, he knows, from years and months of skipping school, from the direction of Eponine’s street. He covers his ear against the fading siren. “Dude, do you know what’s going on with this fire?” There’s a feeling in the pit of his stomach like he already knows the answer.

Eponine laughs, wild and jagged. “Yeah,” she says, “insurance fraud.”

“What?”

“Grantaire,” says Eponine, “I know you had that thing tonight, but.” From the other end of the line, he hears her take a deep breath, steadying. “My parents burned our house down,” she says quietly. “Me and Gavroche are at the gas station. I need you to come pick us up, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Updates continue to be every other Sunday. Haha remember those days when I seriously thought this story was gonna be done in ten chapters? We were so much younger then. Anyway, my current guess is 15 chapters total, possibly 16.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Shell station by the McDonald’s on fifth has never felt so sinister.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few minutes are not too clear in Grantaire’s mind. He knows he must say something, because Bahorel offers to give the others a ride home. He knows he must not explain it very well, because Joly says to tell Eponine they said hi, and "we missed you, dude, you would’ve been so good at yelling stuff."

He climbs into his van, skids out of the parking lot to the sound of nothing but his own turn signal. His thoughts are already too noisy and he needs to concentrate, needs to pay attention at intersections and keep to the speed limit and stay on the road.

He doesn't need to remember the way to the gas station. All he has to do is head towards the smoke.

The glowing numbers on the tape deck say 9:57. It doesn't seem like something should be allowed to go this wrong so early in the night. House fires and cinders floating in the air and the tremor in Eponine's voice on the other end of the line, these are otherworldly things, meant for the sick, surreal lurch of two a.m. His friend's life has been blown into fragments, a before and after with a sharp crack down the middle, and The Daily Show isn't even on yet. The world is still awake, and Eponine's house is burning down.

He thinks of her sharp, rusty laugh through the cell phone speaker like a serrated knife and he steps on the accelerator. He thinks he obeys traffic laws all the way there but he’ll never be sure.

The Shell station by the McDonald’s on fifth has never felt so sinister. The yellow is garish against the smoky sky, and there's something mocking in the neon signs for beer and lotto tickets, the ad on the door for Cool Ranch Doritos.

Eponine is leaning by the entrance, smoking a cigarette and shivering despite a sweatshirt, her bare legs too pale against the black of her combat boots. A man in a suit gives her a dirty look on his way out, for the smoking or the boots or maybe for the shortness of her skirt. She hunches her shoulders against it, and Grantaire wants to punch that guy in the mouth.

The car horn feels like a bad idea. Grantaire pulls right up in front of her, rolls down the passenger window.

"Hey."

Eponine looks up and sags with relief. "Thank fuck," she says, grabbing at the door. When she scrambles into the van, he can see that her skirt is actually a nightgown, faded pink with little ducks. It looks old, but he knows he's never seen it before. She flicks the cigarette out the window, a familiar gesture made wrong, too fast, too jerky.

He can't decide whether or not to touch her. Very lightly, he sets a hand on her elbow. She jumps.
"Eponine, are you okay?" he says. "Where's Gavroche?"

"He'll be here in a sec." Eponine tugs the sleeves of her sweatshirt down past her thumbs and rubs at her arms. "And don't worry, we're fine. We got out before they lit it."

It's tossed off so casually that he can only stare at her. Grantaire still can't push the facts of it into his brain. It's one thing to sit in his room, surrounded by his posters and drawings and all of Eponine's shit, and think, 'Mr. and Mrs. Thenardier would do anything.' It's another thing to sit in the Shell parking lot with smoke curling behind them and think, 'Arson.'

"They set your house on fire for the insurance," he repeats, like saying it out loud will make him understand.

"Gasoline." Eponine floats a hand up like climbing flames. "Whoof. Went up a lot faster than I thought it would."

Grantaire doesn't know what to say to that. Her voice is a monotone, numbness or a front. Either way, she doesn't need the terror clawing at the back of his throat, the tremor in his hands and the churning in his stomach.

He breathes through his nose, trying to match her calm. "Where are your parents?"

"Back at—" she jerks her thumb in the direction of home. "Still talking to the firemen, I think. I told 'em we were stepping out for cigarettes." Eponine picks at the cuff of her sweatshirt. "When Gavroche comes out, we should book it. Not sure how long before they think to check on us."

"Are you—" he starts. Eponine is rubbing at her eyes, which look weird without makeup, unfinished. He's only ever seen her this way when she's about to go to bed. It makes her seem younger, somehow smaller.

"Look," says Eponine in a low voice. She glances back at the door. "I told Gavroche if he was good, he could shoplift one thing, but he's gonna be back soon, so real quick. We need to get out of here, go to your place, grab real clothes—"

"Yeah, of course. And you guys can crash there, obviously, it's—"

Eponine is shaking her head. "And you and I have to do something tonight, but first we need to find someone to watch Gavroche, because if we tell him he's not allowed to follow us, he is definitely gonna try."

"Yeah," says Grantaire, because Gavroche insisting on going wherever he's not allowed to go is the first part of this whole nightmare that makes perfect sense to him.

"He knows some of what's going on," says Eponine, "but you're gonna have to play along and not ask a lot of questions because he doesn't know all of it, and there's stuff I wanna keep from him." Her eyes are on the window again, and it pulls Grantaire's gaze to the glass, to her misty reflection that's about as solid as the girl sitting in his van. He doesn't know if he's ever seen her more tired. "Just, for now. If I can."

"Like what?"

"I don't know if he realizes yet that we can't come back," she says.

"To the house?" Grantaire doesn't know much about fires but that pillar of dark smoke looks pretty final to him.
“To the family.”

“Eponine,” he says, dragging his voice back from the octaves it wants to climb, “What the hell is going on? Why—”

"One step at a time," she says, glancing back at the gas station shop again. "Your house first."

"And then what?" he asks. She doesn't turn to look at him. "Eponine, what are you guys gonna—"

Someone's knocking on the side of the van and Grantaire almost yells before he realizes it's just Gavroche.

"Yo," says Gavroche, hopping inside and yanking the door shut behind him.

'Drive,' Eponine mouths, and Grantaire does what he's told.

Presented with the vast array of offerings at the Shell station on fifth street, Gavroche chose to steal a single package of batteries.

“I can’t believe you,” Eponine tells him as she picks through the piles of her clothes. “Like, is there a more boring thing you could’ve taken?” but it’s halfhearted, a poor line read.

“Yeah,” says Gavroche, ripping the cardboard backing away from the plastic. “Why didn’t I pick something cool, like pork rinds or chewing tobacco?” He reaches into the pocket of his hoodie and pulls out his Gameboy, flips open the back hatch, and loads it with new batteries.

Eponine plucks it out of his hands. “Why are you fucking with that,” she snaps. “Gavroche, get up and get changed.”

“How’s he gonna—" Grantaire starts to say, because Gavroche is the one person in the room who doesn’t leave piles of clothes strewn conveniently all over the floor. But Gavroche just flops onto his belly, tugs up a loose corner of Grantaire’s comforter from where it’s dragging on the ground, shoves some old science fair shit out of the way, and resurfaces holding a pair of his own jeans.

There’s no time to boggle at that, but Grantaire can’t quite keep a lid on his, “The hell—”

“Magic,” says Gavroche, straightening back up. “Also, getting the sense you’ve never looked under your own bed before. Like, maybe ever.”

Grantaire stares at his comforter, sagging like the world’s saddest magician’s cloak. “Oh my god,” he says, “what else is under there?”

“C’mon,” Eponine commands, and when he turns around, she’s stepped into jeans and shoved her combat boots back on, purse dangling from one hand. “Gavroche, we’re not leaving until you put on your goddamn shoes.”

“I don’t get why we’re leaving at all,” Gavroche grumbles when they’re back on the road.

“Me and Grantaire are running errands,” says Eponine briskly. “And we’re leaving you with
Montparnasse for like an hour, so—"

“Dude, no,” says Grantaire, leaning forward and staring at the yellow dividing line so he doesn’t have to meet the glare he can feel on the side of his face.

“His whole house smells and he never lets me pick the channel,” Gavroche puts in.

“We are not leaving your little brother with a drug dealer, Eponine, I don’t care what—”

“I trust him,” she says, steely, and he remembers that, but he also remembers how quickly she dropped away from that group once she and Grantaire started hanging out. It wasn’t because of fifteen-year-old Grantaire’s incredible charm and charisma.

“Yeah, but do you trust all his friends?” he says slowly. And it must land because she doesn’t yell at him, doesn’t say anything at all for a long moment, just leans forward in her seat until her shoulder blades jut out from under her sweatshirt.

“Then—fucking—who?” she grits out.

“Joly and Bossuet—”

“They’re still at the thing,” says Eponine. It’s only 10:21, and almost impossible to believe less than an hour ago, Grantaire was standing with them in that gym. The memory feels like a different country, one he can’t return to.

“You know they’d do it if you called them,” he argues. They’re still heading toward the school by default. “Hell, Musichetta would watch twenty kids and a hamster for you if you asked. You can use my phone, it’s—”

“No,” says Eponine with something close to violence. “No. We’re not pulling her into all this, okay? I have one friend who doesn’t know what a car crash my life is right now, can we please, please—”

“Jehan,” says Grantaire. “Courfeyrac.”

“We don’t even know if they’re home.”

“Well shit,” he tries not to yell, “it’s a pretty nerdy group of people, odds are we’ll think of someone who’s not out partying on a Thursday night—”

“Oh,” says Eponine, pulling herself back up. “That’s—that’s smart, yeah. Do you have his number?”

He actually thinks she might mean Combeferre, until he remembers who he’s dealing with. Exposing this much of her life to someone she’s got feelings for is basically Eponine’s worst-case scenario. It wouldn’t have her relaxing a fraction in her seat, wouldn’t send her mouth twisting up slightly at one side in an echo of an amused smile. What would be funny to Eponine, even now? Grantaire’s discomfort, maybe.

Well, shit.

He grips the wheel with one hand, fishes his phone out of his pocket with the other. Even two hours ago, the thought of making this call would’ve fucked with his head. Now, he can’t even feel that worry, punching in the numbers. What’s a paper cut to an amputee?

It rings four times, and then a very familiar voice says, “Hello?” and Grantaire wants to hold the
sound in his ears, curl around whatever’s left in his life that’s still normal.

“Uh, hey,” says Grantaire instead. Next to him, Eponine is tired and drawn. The smell of smoke clings to her hair, but that could be his imagination. It still feels like he’s calling from a battle field. He takes a deep breath, tries to spin some lightness back into his voice. “D’you happen to remember that favor you owed me?”

Enjolras doesn’t seem fooled. “Grantaire,” he says, much too serious, “what do you need?”

“Are you home?”


“Um.” Grantaire swings the wheel wide, makes the turn onto Miller. “You ever babysat before, dude?”

“No?”

“Cool,” says Grantaire. “Yeah. Okay.” He laughs, high and nervous. “Well, I guess the good news is that you’re about to bust up some gender norms. We’ll be over in ten minutes—” Eponine is waving at him, trying to get his attention. She puts a finger to her lips, pointedly. “—and uh, don’t tell anyone.”

“You want me to babysit in secret,” says Enjolras.

“Yeah.” Grantaire wonders what Enjolras was doing before his phone rang, if he was working on homework or reading a novel or researching colleges to visit next year. It’s hard to blame Eponine for not wanting to involve Musichetta in all of this. If Grantaire had the option of keeping Enjolras separate from the car crash of his own life, he would take it. As it is, he just winces. “That’s—um. That’s a pretty good summary.”

Enjolras breathes out, a staticky rattle. “Don’t ring the doorbell, my parents are still up,” he says. “Call me when you get here, I’ll come down and let you in.”

“Okay.”

“Careful about setting off the floodlights, they’re—”

Despite the circumstances, Grantaire has to snort thinking about that night in Enjolras’s driveway, sitting there in the dark bathed by interrogation-grade bulbs. How the biggest concern had been trying to make it look from far away like they might have been kissing, his vision burning white, his lips by Enjolras’s ear—

Grantaire clears his throat. “Trust me,” he says, “I have not forgotten about the floodlights.”

There’s what might be half a laugh from the other side of the speaker. “Yeah.”

This is their first phone conversation. It’s also their second-to-last phone conversation.

“See you soon,” says Grantaire.

The stupid thing is, talking to Enjolras helps. Grantaire doesn’t have to remind himself to breathe as much for the last leg of the drive. At least there’s a plan now. Or, not a plan, because Grantaire still has no idea what’s happening, what he and Eponine are going to have to do. But at least there’s a direction to head in, even if it’s just left on Hemlock.
Grantaire pulls over in front of the neighbor’s house, in case Enjolras’s parents happen to look out the window or something.

“C’mon, monkey,” Eponine’s saying, twisting around in her seat.

“M almost to a save point,” Gavroche protests, thumbs flying over the buttons.

“Gavroche.” She almost never calls him by his name. He must notice, because he only says, “Fine” and stuffs the Gameboy back into his pocket to the sound of a level being forever lost.

They trek across the neighbor’s lawn, the grass shushing wetly under their feet. “Why are we coming here again,” Gavroche mutters.

“Because Enjolras needs to hear your top ten favorite post-punk albums,” says Grantaire, and Gavroche hits him on the arm.

“Wait,” says Gavroche, “this is Enjolras’s house?”

“You’ve seen it before,” Grantaire points out. Eponine says nothing, keeps walking, eyes forward.

Gavroche has to trot a little to keep up. “Looks different in the dark,” he says, and there’s no arguing with that, thinks Grantaire. Everything does. He shivers. He really should’ve grabbed a sweatshirt, but it’s too late now.

There’s light flickering in an upstairs window of Enjolras’s house. His parents, Grantaire assumes, watching some late night TV in their room. With any luck, they’ve got the volume on high. Grantaire grabs his phone, hits redial, swallows hard like that can settle his stomach.

This time, Enjolras answers on the second ring. “Are you here?” he says.

“Front porch,” says Grantaire.

“One sec.” The line goes dead. Military efficiency, which to be fair is what they need right now. Grantaire shifts his weight around. He thinks he can hear feet thumping down stairs. When he turns back toward Eponine and Gavroche, she’s in the middle of a half-whispered speech. Grantaire is torn between a hunger for any insight into what the fuck is going on, and a hunger to leave them some tiny scrap of privacy. He studies the welcome mat instead. There’s a pair of muddy crocs to one side. Gardening shoes, maybe. Grantaire’s dad used to garden, he thinks. Now they pay somebody to do it.

How long does it take someone to answer the door? Eponine is still whispering. Grantaire cranes his neck back, trying to get a decent view of the sky: light pollution still browning the edges, a sliver of moon doing its level best. They’re facing the wrong way to see the smoke.

The door opens, and there’s no time for it, but Grantaire’s brain takes a moment anyway to notice that Enjolras is barefoot, that he’s got on a black fleece jacket and plaid pajama pants, that he’s wearing glasses, for some reason. Glasses and a very worried expression.

Enjolras doesn’t say a word. He flicks a glance up, towards the sound of what’s probably a TV, as if indicating the need for stealth. As if the need for stealth has to be indicated. Grantaire nods, and they trail after him, up the stairs and down a hallway. Grantaire’s always hated this part in movies, when
the characters are walking in places they shouldn’t. It stresses him out too much, his heart in his throat no matter how stupid the script is, how contrived the situation: you need to get out of there.

He’s only grateful when Enjolras ushers them through a door and closes it safely behind them. He breathes a deep sigh of relief and it’s only then he realizes the incredibly obvious: they’re in Enjolras’s room.

The walls are a steely blue and the furniture is very plain and new-looking. Books are heaped and piled and splayed facedown on every conceivable surface, including other books. There’s a crooked row of origami creatures on the desktop computer—Musichetta’s handiwork, no doubt—and a bulletin board tacked full of photos which Grantaire will never get to examine, never get to check for awkward candid photos or gloriously bad childhood haircuts, because they would not be here if there wasn’t something desperately wrong.

Enjolras stands in the middle of the room, watching the three of them. “Is part of the favor that I can’t ask what’s going on?” he says in a low voice.

Eponine says nothing, her gaze distant and her hands pressed to her temples. It seems like a good idea not to disturb her.

Grantaire looks from her to Enjolras, and opens his mouth, but Gavroche beats him to the punch, perched on the desk chair like he was invited.

“It’s no big deal,” says Gavroche. “Mom and dad burned our house down ‘cause they needed the money, and Eponine doesn’t want to lie to the cops about it, so we’re lying low for a bit.” He bounces on the chair, swivels back and forth. “Probably stay at Grantaire’s, I’m guessing. They are gonna be pissed when they find out.” Eponine’s posture goes rigid, like a puppet yanked hard on a string, but Gavroche has spun around to jog the mouse and frown at the screen. “What’s your password, dude?”

“It’s on a sticky note under the keyboard,” Enjolras says. “Grantaire, can I—talk to you for a sec? In the hallway?”

Eponine braces her hands against the top of the computer chair. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t delete anything important,” she says.

“Oh come on,” says Gavroche, craning his neck to look back at them. “You guys see each other all the damn time, why do you have to go off together when—”

Grantaire really wishes he had a better plan than what he actually does, which is to run one hand down Enjolras’s bicep like he can’t help himself and say, “You’ll understand when you’re older.” Luckily, it does work, in that Gavroche is distracted by making grossed-out faces and it hopefully doesn’t look too weird when Enjolras grabs Grantaire’s arm and pulls him out of the room. Hopefully it looks—well.

Grantaire needs to focus. He breathes in through his nose as the door shuts behind them.

“Is he telling the truth?” says Enjolras quietly. “Their parents—”

“Yeah.” Grantaire squeezes at the back of his own neck, trying to force out the tension. “And congratulations, you now know about as much as I do, because Eponine won’t tell me shit.” The odds of Gavroche listening at the door with Eponine in the room to distract him are low, but Grantaire drops his voice anyway. “Except that she’s pretty sure her parents are gonna kick ‘em out for not going along with it.”
“What?” Enjolras whispers. His eyes are very wide behind his glasses.

“I mean, they’ve been kicked out for a day or two before, but—permanent. And she doesn’t want Gavroche to know, which. Can’t really blame her.”

“Why am I looking after him?” Enjolras says. “What are you guys—”

Grantaire shakes his head. “She didn’t tell me. If he can’t be around for it—man, I hope we’re not confronting their parents. Her dad’s basically a psychopath.”

Enjolras’s forehead is creasing, so Grantaire adds, reassuring, “I don’t really think that’s what it is. Eponine’s too smart for that. It’s probably just something illegal.” This does nothing to smooth the lines on his face. “Something less illegal than arson,” Grantaire adds. “And not drugs.”

That much Grantaire had managed to work out while driving: if she was willing to go to Montparnasse for babysitting, he must be far away from whatever is going on.

“What if it’s dangerous?” Enjolras is more moving his lips than making sounds. It means Grantaire has to lean far into his space to hear.

“Then that would explain a lot,” says Grantaire, almost into his collarbone.

“I want to go,” says Enjolras, and Grantaire takes a step back to look up at him. “I can go, Eponine can watch her brother—”

“She’s the only one who knows what’s going on,” Grantaire points out. “Also, she’s way, way tougher than me. I’m useless in a fight.”

Enjolras nods like maybe this was the resolution he wanted all along. “Okay, me and Eponine will go, and you can stay here with—” And it would sting, seeing Enjolras so capably write him out of the action, but Grantaire can’t focus long enough to be offended.

“I’m the only one with a driver’s license,” he says instead.

“Yeah,” says Enjolras. “Sorry. Just—this is a terrible plan. You don’t even know what you’re doing.”

Yeah, but I never do anyway,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras just crosses his arms and closes his eyes, head bowed, almost the way he did that day in the nurse’s office when they talked about Friday. ‘Enjolras is worried’ he thinks out of nowhere, and he doesn’t know what to do with that thought, the way it tugs at his ribcage and grips his throat.

“Please,” says Enjolras, “please take this seriously.”

What he wants to say is that he doesn’t know another way, that he gets how high the stakes are but it’s like something from an old cartoon, those scenes where Daffy Duck strolled off the edge of a cliff without realizing it, how if he didn’t look down, kept whistling, kept his feet moving and his eyes ahead, he could manage a few normal steps before gravity kicked in. That’s what Grantaire needs, the hover before the freefall, because if he thinks about the rocks below, he’s not gonna be any use to anyone.

Is that comforting, a metaphor about plummeting to his death? Shit, Grantaire is not good at this.

“I am,” Grantaire says instead, and it makes Enjolras open his eyes again at least. “I swear I am, it’s
just if I stop making jokes my head’s, like, gonna explode, so—"

There’s a quiet knock behind them and Eponine’s voice, flat and deadpan through the door. “Hey, you guys done being gross or whatever?”

Enjolras jerks a hand at his own head. ‘Mess up your hair,’ he mouths, because they’re back to this again and Grantaire is never, ever gonna get the chance to explain to him the mechanics of making out.

“Sorry,” Grantaire tells the door. Enjolras repeats the motion and Grantaire stuffs his hat into his back pocket and rakes his fingers across his scalp a few times. There’s no time to argue and the only person they even need to fool is Gavroche, who at twelve hopefully doesn’t have a fine grasp of the mechanics either.

Who also has a lot of other stuff on his mind because *his parents burned his house down*, shit shit—

The door opens. Eponine emerges, pulling it shut behind her. Her narrow shoulders are squared and her mouth is a thin line. For some reason, the strap of her purse slung across her body makes him think of soldiers.

She turns to Enjolras. “I told him he had an hour to explain all of rock history to you, so just. Pretend you’re interested and you’ll be fine,” she says in an undertone. “Grantaire, we’ve gotta get going.”

“Yes.” The hallway carpeting is soft and spongy under his feet. On the wall across from them is a painting so bad that it could only be something Enjolras made as a little kid. It’s been painstakingly matted and framed. If Enjolras’s parents step out, they are so screwed, but now that Grantaire has to leave, he doesn’t want to.

“Eponine, are you okay?” says Enjolras.

“They waited before we were out to start the fine, we’re fine,” she says. “Grantaire—”

But Enjolras sidesteps her, blocking her from the stairs. “I meant the part where your parents threatened to disown you for not lying to the police.”

At ‘disown’, her eyes narrow. “Grantaire, did you fucking tell him?” Eponine hisses. “What, he flutters his eyelashes and you just—”

“I need to know what’s going on,” Enjolras cuts in, over what has to be the audible sound of Grantaire’s pulse. “Look, Eponine, you guys came to me for help, and I’ll do it, because I owe him a favor and because I trust you, but—”

“Dude.” Grantaire tips his head back against the wall. “She’s not gonna tell you and it seems like we don’t have much time, so—”

“All the more reason to get it over with,” Enjolras presses. “If I’m gonna be an accessory to a crime, I need to know what crime that is, okay? We are gonna help you either way, but *we can help you better if we understand what’s happening,*” he says, because apparently there is no lost cause in the world he won’t fling himself at.

Except that Eponine is sighing shakily and when she opens her eyes again, she nods. “It’s not—we’re not gonna hurt anybody,” she says. “I just need to pick up some stuff.”

“From where?” says Enjolras.
“The library.”

Enjolras gives her a look. “The library’s closed,” he says, and Eponine rolls her eyes. “Breaking and entry?”

“It’s not stealing anything,” says Eponine, defensive. “I left some stuff there, a folder. I didn’t have time to find a better hiding place.” Relief washes through Grantaire’s whole body. No violence, no confrontations, no theft. All they have to do is sneak up to a locked building, figure out a way to infiltrate it when Grantaire can barely manage his own locker, and then sneak out again without—

“Do you need it right now?” says Enjolras softly.

“I don’t want to wait,” she says. “It’s—important, okay?”

“How important?”

“Yo, guys?” Gavroche calls from inside.

“One sec, dude,” Grantaire fires back.

Eponine leans in and whispers in a rush, “Look, Gav was—my parents never wanted him. They don’t give a shit about him. I fucking raised that kid. But if I go against them, they will take him from me. That’s how they think.” She glances up at the ceiling and clenches her jaw, missing the horrified expression on Enjolras’s face. It’s hard for an outsider to comprehend just how bad her parents are, Grantaire knows that well enough. It comes in lurches, like crashing down a series of awful waterfalls. Grantaire wants to pat him on the shoulder, although god knows Eponine needs it more.

The look in her eyes says she might bite his arm off if he tried.

“I snuck out some stuff before the fire,” she says, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. “Some of it’s just—shit we’ll need to get jobs or IDs or whatever, but I took what I could. Printouts of emails they sent, receipts for a fuckton of gasoline. I think I can pretty much prove it was on purpose. So. They push me, I push back.”

Enjolras is clearly still trying to take this all in, but he says, “If you wait for the library to open again—”

“Doors open at nine to patrons but the workers are in there way before,” says Eponine. “The first two papers in that folder are our birth certificates. If anybody finds it, the people they’re gonna try to get ahold of—”

“—are your parents,” he finishes.

“Yeah,” she says.

“What the hell are you guys doing out there?” They all jump, but it’s just Gavroche, sullen, through the door.

“We need to go now,” Eponine says, clipped. “While the cops are still busy with the fire—”

“Yeah,” says Enjolras. His face is very grave and Grantaire takes a moment to feel truly and profoundly guilty for putting him in this situation.

Grantaire digs his fingers into the back of his own neck again. “Cheer up,” he says, summoning up a wobbly smile. “This is basically a heist, you love those.”
It doesn’t pacify Enjolras, which, in retrospect, is not a shocker. “If anything goes wrong—”

“...If we get arrested, you’re my one phone call,” Grantaire tells him, which is only half a joke because if Eponine is with him, who else does that really leave?

Enjolras gives him a long look that Grantaire can’t decipher. It might be ‘how do we allay the kid’s suspicions?’ because he can hear muffled footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. Grantaire knows only one way guaranteed to make a 12-year-old look away. As the knob starts to turn, he stretches to his tiptoes and reaches up to lay one hand lightly on the back of Enjolras’s neck so that when the door swings open, Grantaire can already be leaning in to kiss him on the mouth.

It’s as quick as Grantaire can make it, basically a peck, no more lingering than that time Enjolras kissed him in Javert’s office. Time still unspools a little, slows breathless around the way Enjolras is holding Grantaire’s arm at the elbow, warm and steadying, around that momentary press of their lips together, even the burn in his calves from standing like this, the way he feels vividly and acutely aware of every cell in his body—

“Oh god,” says Gavroche, “my eyes!”

Eponine just says, “We have to go,” both hands gripping the strap of her purse.

Enjolras steps away, frowning, but his eyes stay on Grantaire, or actually on Grantaire’s T-shirt. “White’s not great for this,” he says, and the shirt is actually a very very faded gray but it is true that Grantaire is hardly dressed for a break-in, whatever the hell that requires. A robber mask? A catsuit? “Hang on, I can lend you something or—wait.” In one decisive motion, he unzips his jacket, pulls it off, and presses it into Grantaire’s hands.

“Thanks,” Grantaire manages.

“Be back soon,” says Enjolras.

“We’ll try,” says Grantaire.

“Jesus, you two, keep it in your pants,” says Gavroche.

As Eponine tugs him away, Grantaire thinks that, no matter what else happens, at least he got to see Enjolras blushing at mockery from a 12-year-old.

In the van, Eponine is quiet again, like she used up all her words with Enjolras. There’s no immediate excuse to talk; Grantaire knows the way. Right on Hemlock. The smoke is visible again, a sooty streak past the side of the road. He thinks he can feel her gaze following it. He wants to say something, but everything sounds cheap and stupid in his head. He wants to make her smile, but he gets that it’s probably out of the question.

“Never thought I’d say this,” he decides on at last, “but Christ, man, thank god you always leave your shit all over my room.”

Eponine swivels back to face him, but her whole body is leaning towards the window. “Grantaire,” she says, almost gently, “do you still really think that was an accident?”

It’s painfully obvious as soon as she says it. Grantaire rolls to a stop sign, and he’s never felt dumber
than he feels right now. He’s lagging so far behind, trying to separate what he knows from what he thought he knew, and he can’t quite reassemble the parts into a whole picture again. All those nights she showed up with her brother and another bag of laundry, of books, her backpack, her sewing machine, Gavroche’s jeans.

“Thought maybe you kinda knew,” says Eponine quietly.

He shakes his head. “No idea. None.”

“Well yeah, I put that together,” she says, twisting back towards the glass.

How long has her shit been colonizing his room? It’s been a fact of his life for so long, it feels static, ever-present, like a painted-in backdrop. Since Christmas, or—before that, actually. Since Enjolras moved to town. Or, before that.

“How long’ve you known?” he says. It’s beyond surreal to talk about this out in the open, in view of all the ordinary things in his van. The mystery of Eponine’s family solved at last, and in the shittiest possible way. He’d thought it would be impossible to get answers from her, that it would be one of those things he’d go to his grave never knowing, but maybe it was always only a matter of asking the right questions. Asking questions at all.

“Didn’t know tonight was the night ‘til this week.” Her hands are twisting together from inside of the sleeves of her sweatshirt. “But they’d been talking about it for like a year. Year and a half, maybe. There’s a lot of debt. Credit cards and whatever.”

“Yeah.” A semester of Con Econ has taught Grantaire how to define bankruptcy and calculate APRs, but not how to quantify human desperation, the Thenardier parents cutting off their own kids like an animal chewing its leg off to get out of a trap.

Except Mr. and Mrs. Thenardier were probably less upset about it than that. Less like losing a limb, more like kicking off a pair of shoes they never cared for anyway. Eponine has always been the one watching out for her brother; that much is not a shock.

He’s holding the wheel like he wants to crush it in his fingers. Breathe, he thinks for the hundredth time in two hours. It’s still a struggle to remember. They don’t talk again until they reach the library.

“How are we doing this?” he says, once Eponine’s gestured at him to park in front of the adjacent woods and he’s killed the ignition. Grantaire is pretty sure it looks just as suspect for a giant weird van to be loitering on the edge of a forest, but he’s so far out of his depth that he’s willing to trust her instincts over his own.

Eponine seems startled. “I need you to wait here. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

“You’re breaking into the library by yourself?” On top of everything else, it’s too much. He wants to shake her by the shoulders. He settles for unbuckling his seatbelt and turning to glare at her.

“The building’s from the fifties,” she says. “There’s a lock on the front door, the end. A window in the back never shuts all the way, you can get in with a screwdriver.”

“Do you have one?” he asks.

She doesn’t even blink. “In my purse.”
“How long have you been planning this?”

“I haven’t,” says Eponine. One shoulder hitches up in what would be a shrug if there was anything casual about the motion. “Figured it’d be good to know how to break in somewhere, in case me and Gavroche needed a place to sleep.”

Their lives have been so different for so long. The realization just keeps hitting him and hitting him. “Eponine,” he says. She looks back at him, but her hand is on the door handle. “Are you sure you don’t want some help? How are you gonna get past the alarms and—”

If they had more time, he thinks Eponine would be rolling her eyes. Instead she shakes her head once, sharp, and says, “No alarms, no cameras, no motion detectors. This isn’t Ocean’s Eleven. It’s like breaking into a garden shed. okay?”

“Have you broken into a garden shed before?” he says.

There’s no answer, and to be honest, he wasn’t expecting one. “Five minutes,” she says instead. “Count to five hundred and I’ll be back.”

“That’s like—eight and a half minutes,” he throws back, automatic, but she’s used the distraction to lever open the door and jump to the ground.

“Joly taught you well,” she tells him, “wait here,” and then the door slams and she’s running across the grass and away from the narrow island of light cast by his headlamps.

Grantaire sags back into his seat.

He inhales, exhales. It comes out shuddery in both directions. If his hands weren’t still on the wheel, he’s aware they’d be shaking.

“Has it been five hundred seconds yet?” he mutters. Probably not; he’s not even sure if it’s been enough time to walk to the building. No alarms, no cameras—it doesn’t seem like it should be so easy to sneak into a library. Then again, the reference computers are all about the same age as Gavroche, so who knows? Combeferre shelves books on weekends and he’s got stories about people trying to sneak a look at porn sites, thwarted by the loading times.

If Eponine goes to the library enough to know about sticky back windows and security measures, she probably ran into Combeferre at some point, although god knows what her cover story would’ve been. Come to think of it, Combeferre could even be how she learned these things. Maybe her weirdness about the guy never had anything to do with hormones or butterflies, not a crush but simple reconnaissance. There’s seemingly no limit to what Grantaire didn’t know, doesn’t know.

He rubs his forehead. He swings his feet. He counts half-heartedly to fifteen and loses focus. His thoughts are like a flock of hungry birds; they won’t stop moving, won’t settle on any one thing. What second would he be on if he’d been counting from the beginning, like Eponine had told him to? He thinks about flipping on the radio but it turns his stomach, the thought of playing music while she risks arrest trying to protect her and her brother from the schemes of their own parents.

Grantaire’s afraid of a lot of things, but he’s never been claustrophobic. He’s feeling it now, though: the confines of the van pressing close around him. Eponine had said to wait; that’s his part of the plan and at the moment, maybe the only way he has of helping. Another teenager skulking around the area would just look suspicious.

Still, every single time a pair of headlights appears in the distance, he takes a long, rattling moment to ask himself what he should do if it’s a cop car. He can’t even call her; she didn’t have her phone on
her when she left her house and he doesn’t know where it is now, in his room or a few blocks away, incinerated in the rubble.

When he tries to turn his head, the muscles will barely move. He grips the back of his neck as hard as he can, like he can force the tension out if he pushes hard enough. It only hurts in a different way. It’s like when teachers yelled at him for being too nervous to focus: the problem can’t also be the solution.

The library is only a few blocks from Eponine’s house but he can’t find the smoke again through the window. He’s not sure if the fire’s burned out yet, if there’s nothing but a pile of cinders in the yard or if little chunks survived here and there, her dolphin poster flapping in the ashy breeze, its wet purple eye staring down at whatever remains of Eponine’s bedroom.

That day they got high under that poster, Eponine already knew this was going to happen. He wonders how long Gavroche has known. Long enough to hide a change of clothes under Grantaire’s bed, but that could’ve been three days ago or three months ago; it’s true that Grantaire never looks.

Gavroche is smart enough that he might honestly know everything already, no matter how hard Eponine’s tried to shield him. If he does, it doesn’t seem to bother him much, blessed with a middle schooler’s lack of foresight. Grantaire thinks of Gavroche bouncing unconcerned in Enjolras’s desk chair and hopes the two of them are getting along, that it’s not excruciating for either of them. Gavroche is a lot to spring on an unsuspecting person, and there’s no real reason to think Enjolras is going to be especially good with kids.

You can never tell with that guy, though. Wearing the jacket helps, in some obscure way. That it’s warm, or that it’s comfortably too big, or that it smells like Enjolras, which is to say, like oranges, which is to say, like women’s deodorant. ‘What a weirdo,’ Grantaire thinks, burrowing deeper into the soft fleece.

The worst thing is when cars slow down as they pass by him. Maybe he’s just imagining it, the drivers squinting through their windshields at the mysterious van by the side of the road. If he kills the engine or turns off his lights, that’s just gonna make him harder for Eponine to find. All he can do is try to shape his mouth into a smile, do his best impression of a good kid experiencing engine trouble, and pray none of these people are in the Neighborhood Watch.

He rubs his forehead again and picks up counting from fifteen.

At forty-one, Eponine materializes out of the shadows. There’s no folder in sight but she’s clutching her giant purse to her chest. The tension in his neck eases just a little.

“Everything okay?” he asks as she climbs back into the van.

Her arms are still tight around her purse. “Honestly, think I’ve lost any sense of what that word’s supposed to mean,” she says.

He stills halfway through buckling his seatbelt. “Hey. Did something—”

“No,” she says. “We’re fine. I have it.” She closes her eyes and hunches forward, and all he can think is, ‘Then why don’t you seem any calmer?’

Grantaire’s very cowardice about asking these questions is part of the reason this is all such a mess now.

“What’s wrong?” he says.
Eponine sighs. “That was the easy part,” she tells the windshield.

“Why,” says Grantaire, “what are we breaking into now?” By the interior light of the van, he watches her forehead wrinkle in the distant cousin of an almost-smile. “If we’re stealing the Declaration of Independence next, can I just say—”

She shakes her head. Her face is a mask again. “We’re done. We’re gonna go back to Enjolras’s house, pick up Gavroche, drive back to your place. Gavroche can take the bed tonight, I’m not sleeping,” she adds.

He grabs the clutch, wrenches the van back into drive.

“You’re going the wrong way,” says Eponine.

“There’s too many cars to turn around in the middle of the road,” he points out. “Keep an eye out for the next turnoff.”

“That’s gonna be the library parking lot,” she says without humor.

He pulls into the parking lot, swings the car around. It’s a clumsy move, but she’s way beyond giving him any shit about it.

“What’s the hard part?” he says quietly.

When he looks over, her arms are only tighter around her purse. He thinks it’s gotten darker outside somehow, although it’s not like the sun has set extra since 10. They sit there listening to the hum of the engine, the air roaring past the windows.

“Everything that comes after,” she says.

“I mean,” says Grantaire, “you guys can stay with me as long as you need—”

“No,” she says, “actually we can’t.” Her voice is starting to wobble away from a monotone. “Grantaire, your parents are pretty dumb but they are gonna notice two extra people living full-time in your house.”

He feels ridiculous, like a little kid lobbying for a pet horse, but he can’t stop, because other than this, he has no idea at all where they could go. The lack of options is a terrifying, sucking vacuum.

“They don’t know what I do,” he mutters.

“So we just hide in your room any time they’re home ‘til you go to college?” says Eponine. He wants to say, ‘Well, that’s my plan’ but she must somehow read that in his sullen silence, because she doesn’t ease off it. “If they run into me, fine, whatever, you’ve got a friend over. But if they see Gavroche for a second, it’s gonna raise so many questions. Do we just—‘Oh hey, Gavroche, you can’t use the bathroom until Grantaire’s parents are asleep, better hold it for five hours. Better go pee out a window.’ I can’t do that to him.”

“What are you gonna go, then?” he asks, and he thought this was a fight but there’s no edge to his voice. It just sounds plaintive and desperate and queasy.

Her boots knock against the bottom of the seat. “You’re gonna be a dick about it.” says Eponine, which can only mean bad things.

From there, it’s not hard to figure out. Just a matter of finding the worst-case scenario.
“Montparnasse?” he says. “You agreed it was bad to let him babysit, and instead you’re gonna fucking move in with him?”

“He’s got his own place—”

“Yeah, where he deals drugs,” Grantaire half-yells.

“Drugs you’ve bought,” she says, “so maybe don’t fucking get on some high horse about what he does for a living.”

His hands are clenching at the steering wheel again. “He’s gotten caught, Eponine. He’ll get caught again. You know how fucked up the laws are, you could probably get arrested for being around while he was dealing—”

“I’m not marrying the guy. Two months and I’ll have a deposit on a crappy apartment someplace.”

“You work part-time at a fabric store,” he says. “How are you gonna afford an apartment—”

“I think they’ll give me more hours if I ask,” says Eponine. “Under forty, but—Donna just quit and I could pick up her shifts, which would give me thirty hours. So that and another part-time job, like maybe twenty hours doing fast food or something—”

Every time Grantaire thinks he’s gotten a handle on what’s going on, things get more incomprehensible. Reality is unraveling. “You can’t work fifty hours a week and go to school—”

“Well, yeah,” she says slowly, and that’s when he finally starts to grasp why she hasn’t been laughing tonight.

It’s too much. His heart is pounding and he can’t drive like this, can’t even see. He pulls over on the side of the road, gravel crunching way too loud under a van that is suddenly thick with silence. Grantaire is furious, he doesn’t even know at who.

He closes his eyes. “Your plan is to live with a drug dealer and drop out of high school—”

“Oh my god,” Eponine yells. “What, Grantaire? What in the fucking world am I supposed to do, because I have been staring down this shit for over a year and no better answers have fucking appeared. So please, please use your genius brain to swoop in and find the magic solution—”

She’s shaking.

“Eponine,” he says.

“—because either I’m a fucking idiot or there isn’t one.” Eponine hugs her knees.

“If you, like, told someone, I’m pretty sure—there’s like, foster care—”

“Are you fucking serious,” says Eponine. “Just—live with some random strangers? How do I know it’s not gonna be the same thing all over again? Hell, they could be worse—”

“I think the odds are pretty good they won’t be,” says Grantaire.

“I don’t want odds,” she says savagely. “I am not taking chances, okay? This is my brother—”

“If you think he’s gonna be safer hanging out with a bunch of criminals—” he shoots back.

“Stop acting like you’re better than them,” says Eponine. “You’re not.”
“You didn’t call them for help, though,” he says. “You called me.”

When he turns to look at her, Eponine’s eyes are out on the road, out of reach of the headlights, where the black sky disappears into black ground. He doesn’t know why he ever thought she looked young. “Just drive, okay?” she says at last.

“I’m sorry,” he says when they’re moving again.

“It’s fine,” says Eponine, colorless. “You haven’t had time to get used to it, whatever.”

He shakes his head, feeling sick. “No. I’m sorry for, like—you’ve been dealing with this incredible shit all year. I was rambling on and on about my teen drama and you had, like. Actual problems, that I had no idea about—”

“Uh, none of that’s your fault.”

“But if I’d known,” he says, “maybe I could’ve—I don’t know, not spent the whole year whining about my stupid crush—”

“Grantaire, I didn’t want you to know.” For some reason, she sounds surprised. “Like, yeah, could I have done with less of the Enjolras Will Never Love Me variety hour? Obviously. But I was never gonna tell you.”

It stings, to hear it put that bluntly. “If you didn’t trust me—”

Eponine is shifting around in her seat, turning to face him, maybe. “No,” she says. “It’s more like—I just wanted someplace I could—think about other stuff, I dunno. Like, I put way more work into that prom dress than I needed to. It was good to—not to think.”

The thing is, he kind of gets what she means. He’s got that year of his life where he was almost never sober to prove it. He wishes he could tap into a little of that numbness right now, to be honest: something to distract from the guilt still closing heavily over him.

“But I could’ve helped more,” he says. “I could’ve—”

“You did fine,” says Eponine, sounding more exhausted than anything. “Also, I stole some stuff from your parents, so.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing huge. Medicine, one time when Gavroche was sick. Saw the Imodium in the cabinet, and I just.” He can hear the shrug in the rustle of her shirt. “Also, some of your mom’s tampons, those things are frigging expensive. So like. Sorry.”

“Dude, I don’t care,” he tells her. “Not like she’s gonna trace the missing tampons back to me, you know? Or the—is Imodium one of those things you can take to get high?”

“It’s for diarrhea.”

“Yeah, so we’re probably clear,” says Grantaire.

“Not like I wanted to,” she says.
He shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. You needed it more, y’know?”

“No,” Eponine says, “I mean—all of it. Not like I wanna live in that gross-ass house. Not like I wanna work at a fucking fabric store for the rest of my life. It’s like—” She laughs, raw and unsteady. “God, everything is so fucked up. Like, suddenly I’m a teen mom and I didn’t even get laid first? What is that?”

“Immaculate conception,” he says.

“So, like, don’t yell at me, okay?” she says. “I’m not doing this for fun. I need you to be cool about it.”

Lack of any other choices aside, Grantaire has no idea how he’s supposed to ever be cool about anything that would make her sound the way she does right now, like someone reached over and squeezed all the life out of her voice.

“Can you do that?” says Eponine.

“I mean, I’ll try,” he says weakly. He wonders if any of the cars around them on the road came from battle of the bands, how the rest of the music sounded, what it would feel like to still be able to care. A thought hits him. “How are you gonna get to work?” Montparnasse’s house is at least five miles in the wrong direction.

“Ride my bike,” she says, and Grantaire winces because there’s a long stretch where she’ll have to ride on the shoulder of the highway.

Then he winces again, harder. “Do you, uh, still have your bike?” he ventures. “Like, I don’t remember seeing it in my yard, so if it was in your garage when—”

“FUCK!” she screams. When he looks over, her hands are balled into fists, and she’s shaking way worse than before. “Fuck fuck fuck, my fucking bike—”

“It’s okay—” he starts.

“No, Grantaire, it’s not,” she snarls back. “It’s not fucking okay. That’s another fucking paycheck, that’s—what am I gonna—”

“You can borrow my bike,” says Grantaire.

She doesn’t seem to hear him. “Oh my god, I can’t believe I forgot,” she’s saying. “I can’t fucking believe I forgot,” she’s saying. “I can’t fucking believe—I was gonna bike to your house yesterday but then Combeferre offered me a ride, I can’t believe I—god, I’m so stupid—”

“Seriously,” he says. “Take my bike. You can keep it, when’s the last time I—”

“Jesus Christ, Grantaire, I do not want your fucking bike!”

“Okay,” he says. They make the turn onto Hemlock in silence.

“Sorry,” she says flatly.

“S’allright.”

She sighs. “Probably will need to borrow your bike.”

“That’s fine.”
“Thinkin’ I might be pretty bitchy for a while,” she says. “Just to warn you.”

“It’s okay,” says Grantaire. “Your life’s basically a supervillain origin story right now, so.”

“No superpowers, though,” says Eponine. “No sex and no superpowers. Like, what the fuck is the point?”

“If I figure it out, I’ll let you know,” he says as they pull up in front of Enjolras’s house.

“Finally,” she says. “I am so ready for this night to be over.”

Grantaire puts the van into park and doesn’t state the obvious, which is that tomorrow night is probably not gonna be a picnic either. There are not a lot of good nights in her immediate future.

Crossing the lawn, Eponine looks over at him and seems to notice the jacket for the first time. “Could’ve taken that off once you realized you were staying in the car,” she points out.

“I was cold.”

“Right,” says Eponine. “How much do you hope he lets you keep it and you can set up, like, a creepy shrine in your room?”

“Five percent,” he allows.

“Please. Fifteen at least.”

“Compromise,” he says, pulling out his phone. “Ten.”

“Twenty,” she says. “Were you smelling it?”

Her tone’s still not entirely right, but maybe pretending to be okay is her new okay for now. He pushes redial.

“Hey,” says Enjolras.

“Hey.”

“Did you guys—” It sounds like he’s choosing his words carefully, which makes sense since Gavroche has gotta be right there. “How’s it going?”

“Got what we needed,” says Grantaire. “We’re closing in on your front porch.”

“The door should still be unlocked,” Enjolras tells him. “You guys can let yourselves in. Do you remember where my room was?”

Across from the most hideous beloved painting of all time. Grantaire nods, then makes a face at himself. “Yeah. Be up soon.”

Maybe it’s better than Eponine handled the break-in, because it turns out even sneaking into someone’s house with permission makes his skin crawl. Every step feels weird and wrong, like a giant alarm will start ringing any second, or a pack of attack dogs is waiting behind a hatch somewhere, ready to pounce.

He and Eponine climb the stairs. From the other end of the hallway, a sitcom laugh track goes off; Enjolras’s parents must not have gone to bed yet. Eponine gives him a look he’s pretty sure is supposed to mean ‘don’t freak out’ and he wills himself to the door of Enjolras’s room, where he can
just make out voices on the other side.

“—my god, dude,” Gavroche is saying. “No no. Rage Against the Machine, Rise Against, Against Me. They’re three separate bands.”

“I’ll add it to my notes,” says Enjolras amiably.

Grantaire’s hand is on the doorknob but he’s standing there like an idiot until Eponine elbows him in the back and he remembers what they’re doing. There’s no point in knocking, he just opens the door and they slip inside. Gavroche and Enjolras are at the computer, where Gavroche has about ten different windows open and where Enjolras is, in fact, taking notes on a yellow legal pad. Two cups of untouched chamomile tea sit between them. At the sound of feet, Gavroche spins around on the chair.

“Hey guys,” Gavroche says. “Dude, your boyfriend doesn’t know anything,” he adds, sounding almost impressed. “Where’d you find this guy?”

“Detention,” says Enjolras. “Grantaire, can I talk to you for a—”

Gavroche makes an annoyed noise that is basically a carbon copy of Eponine losing at Call of Duty. “Again?” he says. “Seriously? Show some respect, man, our house just burned—” he’s cut off by Eponine hugging him, hard. He doesn’t squirm out of it or act annoyed, even jokingly, and Grantaire thinks Gavroche has to know more than he’s letting on. He’s a smart kid and no matter how hard Eponine must’ve tried, there’s no way she could hide everything—

Enjolras is tugging him out of the room by the elbow again. “We’ll be back in a sec,” he says, and the door clicks shut behind them. Grantaire darts a glance down the hall, towards the source of the laugh track.

“How was the heist?” says Enjolras, looking so reasonable in his glasses and his pajama pants and his navy blue replacement hoodie that Grantaire suddenly, abruptly, can’t even pretend to keep it together. He can feel his face crumpling, that cartoon moment where gravity remembers its job description and the drop starts.

He knows he’s supposed to make a joke but it’s too hard. Even making words seems like an impossible mountain to climb. His throat tightens, and his eyes burn.

“Grantaire, are you okay?” Enjolras asks, and Grantaire thinks of Eponine in his van, curled around her purse before he knew how bad it all was: ‘Think I’ve lost any sense of what that word’s supposed to mean.’

He shakes his head, immediately regretting it, but he can’t smile and say everything’s fine; he literally doesn’t have the capability.

“What happened?” Enjolras crosses his arms, not angry, more like he’s trying to compose himself. “Did you run into their parents, or—”

Grantaire shakes his head again. He’s blinking so much his vision is like a strobelight, but it’s possible Enjolras gives him a concerned look.

“If you didn’t hate hugs,” says Enjolras slowly, and Grantaire must pull some kind of face even through the sheen of tears and the wobbly chin because Enjolras adds, “it was your one condition when we started—”

All Grantaire can do is make a weird snorting noise and keep shaking his head. The truth is, he can’t
remember why he’d said that, other than it seemed like having no boundaries might kind of freak Enjolras out. He blinks and blinks and fails to square his jaw because his chin is still going. He makes himself look back up at Enjolras.

Enjolras, who is very tentatively opening his arms.

Grantaire doesn’t consciously decide to hug him but then he’s diving forward and and then he’s squeezing Enjolras around the middle, probably too hard, probably getting snot and tears on the poor guy’s shirt. Enjolras’ hands come up to rest on his shoulder blades, warm through the borrowed jacket, layer after layer of kindnesses Grantaire will never have any way to pay back. He doesn’t even have the energy to feel that bad about it.

“Were there problems?” says Enjolras, and Grantaire is pressed so close he can feel the point of Enjolras’s chin on the top of his head, the flex of jaw as he talks, sound resonating in his chest. At the very least, it’s something to focus on beyond his own stinging tear ducts.

“No,” he gets out. “No, it—the, the heist went fine, like, she got the stuff. I didn’t even—I—I didn’t have to help, it was. Like—actually it was, uh, pretty boring?”

Enjolras has the grace to pretend like his babbling makes sense. “Well, that’s—fortunate,” he says. That’s all he says, and Grantaire wishes he would keep talking because the resonating is really nice. “But something happened, right?”

The resonating is less nice when it’s urging Grantaire to share. “It’s not—really your problem,” he stammers, in that hiccupy almost-crying voice he hates more than anything. “I already cashed in my favor, you don’t have to—”

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras, and it might sound stern except for how lightly he’s touching Grantaire’s back, “my favor lasted two and a half months, and in the process, you were harassed and beaten up. All I’ve done tonight was spend some time a middle schooler and learn a little about music. Realistically, we’re not even yet.”

“It’s—” Grantaire instinctively looks down, which means pressing his forehead against where he can feel Enjolras’s heartbeat. Something about it lets him breathe steadier. Maybe it’s just having a rhythm to focus on, although he’s not sure that, say, an electric keyboard would be the same help. “Éponine’s plan, for what to do next, is that she’s gonna quit school, get a second job and live with this guy she knows who is shady as fuck, like, dude literally just got out of jail for dealing drugs—”

Every time he thinks about it, he gets angry all over again. The words catch hard in his throat, and he swallows. His face would be burning even without the tears, he thinks, just at the tremulous rise and fall of every word coming out of his mouth. But the bonus of standing this close to Enjolras, other than the body heat and the softness of his shirt and that citrusy smell and the pulse still thrumming under Grantaire’s forehead, is that he doesn’t actually have to look into Enjolras’s face, which makes it easier to go on.

“—and she’s, like, trying to be a badass about it but she’s clearly freaking out so bad, and I do not fucking blame her, like, her life is ruined, it’s just—so fucking unfair—”

“That’s, uh, that’s a lot to deal with,” says Enjolras.

“For her,” says Grantaire. “Like, fuck, why am I even getting so worked up? What right to I have to be bummed, it’s so so so much worse for—”

“It isn’t productive to think that way,” Enjolras cuts in, and Grantaire wants to laugh, make a crack
about Enjolras’s weird robot logic, but he still can’t find it: the laugh or the words or the punchline, and a second later Enjolras adds, “And I’m not sure that’s her only option.”

Grantaire sighs. “What else is there? I brought up foster care and she flipped out—”

“Feuilly’s in foster care,” says Enjolras. “He likes the family he’s with right now.” His arms have settled more around Grantaire and it’s so nice, Grantaire is briefly annoyed; they could’ve had two and a half months of this if only he’d communicated better.

“She said it was too much chance,” Grantaire tells him. “Which, I mean, they could put her and Gavroche with really shitty people.”

“Actually, Eponine might have more leverage than she thinks,” Enjolras says, so calm and reasonable that Grantaire feels an absurd flutter of hope, at odds with the rest of the night and also most of his personality. “But first, I should probably—that’s not actually why I wanted to talk to you. I, uh, need your help with something.”

“With what?” says Grantaire. “If you say like, ‘overthrowing the patriarchy,’ I admire your pluck, but dude, it’s been a long day, maybe tomorrow if that works—”

This close, he can feel the stutter of amused breath against his hair before Enjolras says,

“No, unfortunately. It’s—look, I need you to help me explain something to Eponine, because you know her better and I have the sense she won’t take this well unless we’re really careful.”

“What?” You’d think the universe would run out of ways to screw her over eventually, but Grantaire knows better. The universe is fucking creative with this stuff.

“It’s not—bad, exactly.” Enjolras is picking his words with extreme caution again. “It’s—in the long run, it’s good news but I don’t think she’ll see it that way at first and I don’t want her to panic—”

“Not that I don’t love super cryptic shit,” says Grantaire, “but give me a clue here at least. A code word, a hint—”

He thinks he can feel Enjolras bracing himself. “I told my parents,” says Enjolras. “When I stepped out to get the tea.”

“You told them—” Grantaire repeats dumbly.

The muscles in Enjolras’s arms have not untensed. “Everything I knew, about her whole situation,” he says in one exhale.

“What?” says Grantaire, so loud that Enjolras pulls him down the hallway, away from his bedroom door. Pulls him by the waist, pretty much, since they’re still hugging, but Grantaire is barely paying attention to that. “Are you 

“I trust them,” Enjolras says. “Also, I wanted a lawyer’s perspective on this—”

“She’s a real estate lawyer,” Grantaire hisses. “How can you just—”

“Grantaire, can you appreciate that she might still have a better grasp of the law than a couple of teenagers?” says Enjolras. “Arson and insurance fraud on this scale, they’re very very illegal. So’s forcing your children to lie to the police. Eponine’s the witness to a felony. If she’s willing to testify against her parents—people make deals about this kind of stuff, she could get some say what happened to her and Gavroche, where they were placed.”
Grantaire tries not to wig out. He tries not to do the easy thing, which would be to leap to the worst possibility and stay there. The steady thud of Enjolras’s heartbeat is helpful but it can’t work miracles. It’s a struggle to process: maybe it’s not over yet, that maybe everything won’t be terrible. It involves mental muscles Grantaire hasn’t flexed much.

“You’re on your own, to explain this to her,” he says at last. “Like, if there’s a trial, that means a chance she could lose, and she is not in a gambling mood right now.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “It might not be that much of a gamble. If her evidence is good, if there’s any record of the horrific parenting they’ve—”

“Oh god, Grantaire has no idea why this didn’t occur to him sooner. “shit, good luck making her talk to an adult about this. Eponine doesn’t trust anyone over 25 unless they’re like, a dead author or a dead musician, her favorite teacher is the one she calls a bitch slightly less often than the others—”

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras, and yeah, Grantaire’s maybe edging on something beyond an inside voice, but the more he tries to picture Eponine sitting in a courtroom, the harder it is to hold on to that shadow of a promise.

“If you think the jury is gonna believe an angsty teenage girl over her mom and dad,” he says, “it’ll be, like, hours of ‘oh she’s just doing this for the attention, oh look at the music she listens to, she’s so fucking troubled and emo.’ Never mind she even didn’t tell me for a fucking year, just let it weigh on her and weigh on her—”

“Grantaire,” Enjolras says again, with something like urgency. Grantaire knows he’s getting worked up again, knows he needs to calm down. He presses his face back into Enjolras’s shirt.

“Sorry,” he mumbles into the cloth, “just—Jesus fucking Christ, I fucking hate her parents so much—”

“Grantaire.”

“What, dude?”

“Uh,” says Enjolras.

From behind them, someone coughs.

Grantaire whirls around and even if he didn’t suddenly realize that, in tugging them away from his bedroom, Enjolras had moved them down the hallway, even if Grantaire hadn’t just now noticed the open door at his back or the fact that the man and woman standing in it both bear a strong resemblance to Enjolras, Grantaire would still be able to tell that he was looking at Enjolras’s parents, because that is just how Grantaire’s luck works.

In retrospect, of course it would happen like this. Of course Grantaire would meet them for the first time in the middle of the night, uninvited in their house, his hair a tangled cloud around his head, wearing head to toe black and a giant baggy jacket like a delinquent, obviously distraught, still wet around the eyes and cussing into their only son’s chest. Of course.

The woman who is definitely Enjolras’s mom has his same jaw—the clench of it if not the shape. The man who is definitely Enjolras’s dad is tall and thin, with such pale blond hair that his beard and eyebrows are almost translucent. He raises those eyebrows now, looking alarmed.

“Is this a bad time,” says Enjolras’s dad, softly, politely.
Grantaire stares at him. He has no concept of what in the world he is supposed to say, so he just blurts out the first thing in his mind. Maybe not so surprisingly, proves to be a bad call.

“Oh, shit,” says Grantaire.

Chapter End Notes

Updates continue to be every other Sunday (although as we get into these, the final stretches, the cushion of stuff written in advance is basically gone and any ability to stick to a schedule will ride more and more heavily on my time management skills. Which is to say, wow this is gonna be a JOURNEY.)

Current prediction is 15 chapters but my track record in this department is, uh, hilarious, so we'll see.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“Nice to meet you too,” he mumbles, although in the list of words he’d use to describe this encounter, ‘nice’ ranks miles below ‘too weird to fully process’ and ‘honestly still a little terrifying’ and even ‘oh shit’.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The second thing Grantaire thinks to say, after “Oh shit” is “Oh my god, I’m so sorry, I just—it’s been a, kind of an insane night and—”

The third thing he thinks to say is, “You know what? Never mind, I actually stand by ‘oh shit’” but that much he keeps to himself, because he’s technically still Enjolras’s fake boyfriend and that means at least trying not to give them reason to believe their son has made a horrible, horrible mistake.

Their son that Grantaire really should let go of. As tempting as it is to cling to that warmth, to wrap himself around Enjolras like a spider monkey in a tree, he can tell that’s not what he’s supposed to do. Reluctantly, he disentangles himself and crosses his arms against the sudden chill. A mistake: it only draws attention to how big the jacket is on him, how sloppy he looks, eyes red-rimmed and puffy.

Should he shake their hands? Ask for permission to date their only child?

“Sounds like it,” Enjolras’s dad is saying, and it takes Grantaire a second to realize it’s not in response to his thoughts but the most recent words Grantaire actually spoke out loud. There’s no judgement in his voice; if anything, it feels sympathetic.

Well, yeah, Grantaire realizes. Enjolras’s parents actually have a pretty good idea of how insane tonight’s been because Enjolras told them. Enjolras told them, and their response was not, ‘Who are these shifty characters you’re associating with?’ It was ‘Let’s take Eponine’s evil parents to court.’ Maybe people like Enjolras don’t spring out of nowhere, he thinks.

“Do you really think it’ll work?” says Grantaire. He directs it at the dad, since Enjolras seems to have inherited the laser focus of fury thing from his mom’s side. She’s not a tall woman but even her silence is intimidating. “Mr. and Mrs. Thenardier are, like, con artists. They’re good at lying, it’s kind of their calling.”

Enjolras’s mom unclenches her jaw enough to speak. “If your friend has enough proof, I think the odds are very good.”

“The odds,” Grantaire repeats, too nervous to tamp it down. “Do you mean, like 99% good, or 51% good?”

“It’s too early to say,” she says. “Beyond that, she definitely has options. But before this goes any further, we need to know: Grantaire, are you absolutely certain she’s telling the truth?”

An adult reading the situation as a spoiled girl’s cry for attention is basically the worst thing Grantaire
can imagine. He turns back to Enjolras, flashes him what’s got to be a pretty panicked look.

Enjolras squeezes his shoulder—apparently ‘told them everything’ didn’t extend to their fake relationship. “It’s okay,” Enjolras says.

After everything else that’s happened this year, Grantaire doesn’t have any reason to be afraid of a law-abiding suburban mom, a woman he is, come to think of it, literally never going to see again. Her gaze is flinty, no bullshit in a way that only makes Grantaire vividly aware of the scope and breadth of his own bullshit, but Grantaire has stared down friends and bullies and Vice Principals. Hell, he’s stared down her son.

He meets her eyes. “Ma’am,” he says, “I am one hundred percent sure.”

She nods. “Well then, we have our work cut out for us,” she says in a tone that’s all determination and channeled fury and rolled-up sleeves. It’s the most comforting thing Grantaire’s heard all night.

“And really, no wonder she couldn’t deal with Grantaire’s mom because even this woman’s hastily tossed-off afterthoughts have a weight and solidness to them that’s kind of knocking him in the chest. The outright fraud of the Thenardiers must drive her crazy, he thinks.

“Nice to meet you too,” he mumbles, although in the list of words he’d use to describe this encounter, ‘nice’ ranks miles below ‘too weird to fully process’ and ‘honestly still a little terrifying’ and even ‘oh shit’.

And then her husband gently nudges her arm and they both introduce themselves, and they use their first names, but to be honest, that information passes right through him without landing for even a second. His brain is just not operating at peak capacity tonight. It’s already too late to ask them to repeat themselves, one distracted moment forever committing them in his mind as Enjolras’s mom and Enjolras’s dad.

Maybe he can ask Enjolras later, although it’s not like this is something he needs to know in the long run.

Enjolras’s dad purses his lips thoughtfully. “Your friend,” he says, “sorry—”

“Eponine,” Grantaire supplies.

“—can we talk to her?”

“Uh.” Grantaire cranes his head around to look back at Enjolras. “I should probably, like, warn her first, that you guys know. I think she might be kinda—like, she does not have a ton of trust in adults?”

“Well, no wonder,” says Enjolras’s mom in a carefully modulated voice that somehow still contains untold rage. Her forehead furrows in such a familiar way that Grantaire has to look away for a second, blinking hard.

“Would you have any advice for putting her at ease?” asks his dad.

Of all the ways Grantaire saw this talk possibly going, it did not occur to him that Enjolras’s parents might consult with him for, like, wisdom.

“Man, I dunno,” he says, reflexive. “I’m basically her best friend and she didn’t tell me sh—anything, like, for as long as she possibly could—” Grantaire swallows, stretches his arms behind his back as if that’s gonna loosen up something in his mind. “Oh, okay, one thing, she wants to keep her
brother out of this, so you’ll probably need to split them up if you want straight answers.” He winces. “She’s gonna hate that, though.”

“If I go with him—” Enjolras offers.

“Thank you,” says Grantaire with feeling. “Yeah, that’s good. She trusts you, he thinks you’re great—”

Enjolras shakes his head. “All he does is tell me I don’t understand music.”

“You took notes,” Grantaire says. “Trust me, you’re his favorite person right now.” He thinks back to Eponine wrapping Gavroche in a hug, Gavroche’s shocking grace about it all. “Second-favorite,” he amends.

As for the rest of it, all he can do is try to think like Eponine. What would put her at ease? A cigarette, probably. A cigarette and whatever snarly girl band she’s into right now, played at top volume. A thick layer of eye makeup to hide behind. A lack of any adults in the vicinity.

None of it is stuff he can give her. At this point, it’s a matter of the next best thing. “I think probably just one of you should talk to her,” he says. “So it’s not—so she doesn’t feel, like, surrounded, you know?”

They nod seriously. Grantaire’s not sure why this throws him so bad, since they did literally just ask for his help. He tries to see them through Eponine’s eyes. For some reason, what he comes back to is that first day at the ABC table, her fingers closed deliberately around her plastic spork, combative. Which of them would she rather be alone with? Whoever reads as less of a threat. Whoever reads more like, if push came to shove, she could take them in a fight.

Enjolras doesn’t talk about his own family all that much, seems almost embarrassed of how well he gets along with them. Grantaire has gleaned that his dad teaches at the local community college, although in person the man gives off more of a kindergarten teacher vibe. Something in his face makes it easy to picture him herding a pack of unruly six-year-olds, nearly overwhelmed by their shouting and tears and skinned knees.

It’s not a tough decision, really. Real estate lawyer or mild-mannered professor? Clenched jaw or nearly invisible eyebrows?

“You,” he tells Enjolras’s dad. “Definitely you. No offense,” he adds to Enjolras’s mom, because even though they’re not exactly forging lifelong bonds, he doesn’t want to spend the one day of their relationship on her bad side. “But definitely you.”

Enjolras’s parents exchange a look and then his mom says, “Alright”, decisive. Someday Grantaire wants to know someone well enough they can hide secret messages to each other on their faces, even if it means working out some elaborate code system first.

“Anything else we should know?” Enjolras’s dad asks.

Grantaire thinks hard. “Her brother’s the most important thing in her life, no competition, so if you want to convince her about something, maybe explain how it’s better for Gavroche?”

“Better than living with a drug dealer,” Enjolras mutters and Grantaire almost laughs because in that moment all he wants is to hug Enjolras again.

Inside the drooping sleeves of the fleece jacket that doesn’t belong to him, Grantaire curls his hands into fists. If he wants to do this right, he’ll need to concentrate.
“I should, uh—” he nods towards the other end of the hallway.

“How do you want to do this?” says Enjolras quietly.

Grantaire pictures walking back into that room together, a united front, and he bites his lip, thinking of his own advice. It’s hard to know what Eponine might do if she feels cornered.

“Uh, alone, I think,” he says.

Nobody contradicts him. It’s like part of him is waiting for Enjolras’s parents to step in and point out that he is in no way qualified to handle this, to talk Eponine through her initial rage and thorny paranoia, to convince her to put her trust in some total strangers. This is important shit and Grantaire is Grantaire.

“Everything okay?” says Enjolras’s mom and Grantaire realizes, with the abrupt clarity of glass breaking, that while all of that is true, somehow he is still the most qualified person in the house. The most qualified person he knows.

Damn.

“Yeah,” he mumbles.

He paces down the hall and slips back into Enjolras’s room. Inside, Gavroche is still curled up by the computer. He’s unearthed headphones from somewhere, and he’s listening to some YouTube thing while he hunches over his GameBoy, face inches from the screen. Eponine’s on the floor, fiddling with a pair of scissors and a roll of duct tape. She blinks up at him and he recognizes the fog of focused distraction.

“What’s happening?” Grantaire asks, because it seems like the safest place to start.

Eponine holds something up and he tilts his head, seeing what appears to be a very spiky pinwheel. It’s only when he takes a step closer that the points resolve into petals. It’s a flower, like if a carnation was gunmetal gray, all angles and corners.

“For prom,” she says.

“You still going?” he blurts out.

She rolls it back and forth between her fingers. “Sank so many hours into that friggin dress, I better.”

Already, the stilted calm she had outside Enjolras’s house has loosened into something more like how she’d sound shooting the shit in Grantaire’s room: half-amused, half-bored, slightly pissed at the world. It’s a stunningly fast turnaround. Then again, Eponine has had ample opportunity to learn how to fake it.

“What happened out there?” she says. “You two disappeared.”

“Long story.” Grantaire takes a deep breath. “Look—”

But Eponine cuts him off, shoving the duct tape and scissors back into her bag. “Where’s Enjolras? Are we clear to leave?”

“That’s the thing,” says Grantaire. This seems like a conversation to have at eye level, so he drops down next to her on the floor. When he looks back at her, she’s watching him carefully. “I’m gonna tell you something, and I need you to stay calm ‘cause this is not—it’s gonna sound bad, but it isn’t.”
“What.” In Eponine’s mouth, it’s not really a question.

“Enjolras told his parents.”

“Fuck.” Eponine jumps to her feet and pulls at her brother’s arm. “Gavroche, hey Gavroche, we’ve gotta go—”

“Do we have to?” Gavroche tugs off the headphones, pushing slowly away from the desk.

“No, we don’t,” Grantaire tells him. To Eponine, he adds, “it’s okay, seriously.”

Eponine is scooping up Gavroche’s shoes. “Put these back on,” she snaps. If she storms out of there and knocks into Enjolras’s parents, there’s no way that’s gonna go well. Grantaire moves to put himself between them and the door, in the most casual-looking way he can, so there’s really no way it looks casual at all.

Gavroche’s eyes dart back and forth between them. “What happened?”

“Enjolras told his parents we’re here,” says Eponine through her teeth.

“The hell?” says Gavroche. He pauses, one shoe on and one shoe off. “Why would he think they were gonna be cool about it? Hello, it’s gotta be way past his bedtime or whatever—”

“Not just that,” Grantaire tells her. “Everything, Eponine. He told them all of it.”

Eponine’s hands spasm on her purse. Her eyes are huge. “Why.”

“Because he wanted to help—”

“Does he not get it?” she hisses. “Does he—”

“They wanna help too,” says Grantaire.

Eponine makes a sound that would be a scoff if it wasn’t so angry. “Oh, and suddenly we trust these people? We’ve never even met them—”

“Enjolras trusts them,” he says. “Does he seem like the kind of person who would—”

“Oh my god,” says Eponine, throwing up her hands. “Your fucking thing with Enjolras doesn’t—”

“It’s not—it’s not about that.” Grantaire pitches his voice to be as calming as he can with his heartbeat in his throat. “Look, you know him too. He’s not a liar, okay? He’s not a liar, and these people raised him, so if he thinks we can—”

“What the fuck do they think they’re gonna do?”

“They’re serious,” he insists, “they were saying, if you took this to court—”

“Are we gonna get arrested?” says Gavroche. Eponine and Grantaire both turn back to stare at him, and he continues, uncertain. “Like, dad told me if we said anything about it, to a cop or whatever, at this point, we’d get in trouble for not doing something sooner—” He frowns. “Is this one of those things where dad’s just full of shit?”

“Yeah,” she says hoarsely. She steps around to hug him again. “Yeah, dude,” Eponine tells the top of his head, “you’re supposed to run it by me when he does stuff like that—”
Gavroche shrugs as well as he can within Eponine’s chokehold. “You were stressed with all your shit, I didn’t wanna—”

“Gavroche, it’s super illegal to make your kids lie to the police,” says Grantaire.

Eponine looks up at him. “You heard that from Enjolras?”

“Who heard it from his mom,” Grantaire presses, “who—”

“Who’s a real estate lawyer.”

“Who, can we agree, might know a little bit more about this than we do?” says Grantaire.

Eponine is very still. Gavroche delivers a final squeeze and reclaims his spot by the computer. She rubs at her forehead. “Grantaire, I know they broke the law all over the place, I’m not stupid,” she says. “But they get away with this shit. It’s what they do.”

“But you’ve got evidence,” he says, and then, because it is maybe his best chance at tricking her into liking these people, “Also, Enjolras’s mom is so angry at your parents, it’s incredible. Like, Enjolras squared—”

“Why,” says Gavroche, swiveling back and forth on the desk chair. “It’s not her problem—”

“I dunno, maybe real estate lawyers and arsonists are natural enemies?” Grantaire turns his focus back to Eponine. He can’t tell how much it’s okay to say in front of Gavroche, so he adds, carefully, “If you told them everything you know, about what your parents have done—not just the fire, but everything—would it be enough to get them put away? Like, forever?”

“Yeah.” She says it so fast it kind of chills his blood. “No question.”

Grantaire closes his eyes. “Please, please, please talk to them. Please. They can fix this.”

“No, they can’t,” says Eponine.

“They could make it suck less,” he presses. “This whole thing is so, so fucked up, if they can help even a little—like, if they can even make it five percent less awful, isn’t that—”

“I don’t like this.” Eponine is leaning against one of Enjolras’s bookcases, folded back in on herself, like at the gas station. “I don’t—fuck, they’re gonna hate me.”

He was prepared for her to yell at him, to call him names and question his judgement, but this is harder to take, the white around her eyes, the smallness of her voice. Is it okay to touch her or is that Gavroche-only territory?

“You’re not really a fan of theirs, either,” he says, as gently as he can.

“No, I meant Enjolras’s parents.” She nods towards the direction of their room. “Mr. and Mrs. Perfect. Like, okay, they think they wanna help right now, they think I’m one of their son’s little friends. But if I talk with them, they’re gonna realize—”

“What,” says Grantaire. Sarcasm has always been their default mode and he doesn’t know what else to try. “Did you hypnotize your mom and dad into burning your house down?”

“No,” she says, “but just, like.” She bites her lip. “Fuck, I wish we could smoke in here.”

“Your cancer sticks are in the van,” Gavroche informs her.
“Fuck,” she repeats.

“They think your parents suck, so you’ve already got something in common,” says Grantaire. He can’t stop wondering how much of this conversation is audible from the hallway. It’s hard to keep the door completely free from his line of sight. Eponine follows his eyes and then rolls hers.

“They’re like, right outside, aren’t they,” she mutters.

Grantaire was not made for a life of secrets and intrigue. He nods.

“So we don’t actually have a choice,” says Eponine.

He turns back to her. There’s a window on the other side of the room, an unlit pane of glass that probably overlooks forest. Their reflections are clear against the dark. “We could always climb out,” he says. “Granted, we’re on the second floor, so we’d need to, like—”

“—make a rope ladder from the sheets,” she finishes. “Damn, we probably could. I bet he’s got, like, crazy threadcount—”

“No doubt,” says Grantaire, who is not 100% clear on what threadcount is. He sighs. “If you really, really, really don’t want to do this—”

“No.” She uncrosses her arms and pulls back her shoulder blades, reminding of soldiers all over again. “C’mon, Gavroche,” she says tightly, “let’s not keep the nice people waiting.”

It’s a relief, but not much of a victory. Grantaire touches her elbow gently. “At the very least, no matter what, it’s not gonna be the worst thing that happened to you today,” he says.

“On that cheery note,” she deadpans, but he can see her posture relax a fraction.

“Talk to them,” he says, “it can’t take more than like an hour, and when it’s all over, I’ll go get you one of those disgusting slushies you like from 7-11. The really gross kind, that bright blue shit that dyes your whole mouth like you’re some kind of Smurf vampire—”

Eponine puts her hand on the knob. “Sweet talker,” she says. Her voice trembles just a little.

“Deep breath,” says Grantaire.

“Fuck you,” says Eponine, but she seems to follow his advice, because her shoulders go up and then down, and then she opens the door.

Enjolras and his parents look up from some quiet, private conversation. “Uh, hey,” says Eponine. She waves jerkily. Behind her, Gavroche peers into the hallway with such open suspicion that it would probably be funny if it wasn’t, you know, actively upsetting.

Nobody seems to know what to say for a second. “Have you kids eaten dinner yet?” Enjolras’s dad ventures, and Grantaire opens his mouth to bring up the fact that it’s past 11, but Gavroche beats him to the punch.

“Why,” he says shrewdly. “What have you got?”

Grantaire hadn’t thought tonight could get weirder, but in his defense, he had no way to foresee that he’d wind up sitting at Enjolras’s kitchen table, watching Eponine and Gavroche devour a midnight
dinner like they're in a commercial for cold leftover enchiladas. Enjolras's dad had offered to reheat it, but Eponine turned him down and Gavroche seems to be following her lead.

Grantaire turned down food altogether, but Enjolras’s dad had made a concerned face and somehow Grantaire wound up with a cup of orange juice, in a mug decorated to look like an elephant. The handle is its trunk, there’s a chip on one ear and it's missing the tip of a tusk. He's holding it as carefully as he can, since god knows he has rained enough chaos down onto this household tonight. Destroying treasured childhood relics would be the cherry on top of a shit sundae.

He keeps coming back to the elephant, but really it’s a minor detail of a harder-to-absorb picture, from the Thenardier kids hanging out in the open to Enjolras in the chair next to him in pajamas and those damn glasses to Enjolras's dad at the sink, washing the empty enchilada pan and humming. Grantaire doesn't know the melody but it's not bad; the tone-deaf thing must not be genetic. Enjolras swings his leg, restless. It's in time with the humming and Grantaire thinks that it's probably something familiar to them both, a casual background detail of their lives.

Part of him feels like he should've taken half an enchilada so he'd have something to do, but his stomach hasn't settled since he got the call outside the school.

The thing is, when he thinks about it, the fire doesn't actually explain everything, like where Gavroche's bike went or why Eponine stopped packing a lunch, why the food she brought to school before that never made any sense. It wasn't her being quirky; she's never had pickles for dinner at his house, never eaten only a wedge of spreadable cheese and a handful of raisins like she was daring him to say something about it. She chooses normal food when she has the luxury. Grantaire takes another sip of juice and runs his thumb down the elephant's trunk.

When Enjolras's mom walks back into the room, she's got her laptop in her arms. "Everything alright?" his dad asks, drying his hands. She nods and takes a seat at the table. Everyone collectively sits a little straighter.

"Okay," says Enjolras's mom. Grantaire feels like maybe he should give her a nickname in his head, but nothing's coming to him. He's too worn out to be clever. "First of all, you kids can stay here tonight.” Eponine and Gavroche gape at her, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “That goes for you, too, Grantaire. It's been a long night and we're well past curfew at this point. Just call home so they know you're alright, and Enjolras can set up the trundle for you."

Grantaire doesn't have a curfew, he's not sure what a trundle is—it sounds like the name of a bridge troll from a kid's book—and there is zero reason to call anyone, but he doesn't see the benefit of pointing this out.

"Be right back," he says, stepping out to the front hallway.

He's not expecting any missed calls, and when he checks his phone, there aren't any. That much, at least, he can depend on.

How long before he can walk back into the kitchen? He's not sure. How long would this conversation take if he was actually having it? Maybe he should drag his feet, give Eponine and Gavroche something like privacy. Of course, with Enjolras there, that's not totally an option.

Grantaire's walked through this hallway five or six times now but he's never gotten the chance to look around. There's a big whiteboard hanging next to the door, mostly covered in takeout menus, but also a calendar scribbled with appointments, shopping lists, and in the center, Enjolras's most recent report card: straight A’s, except for a B- in U.S. History and a dire warning from Mr. Walker about a "chronic and severe problem with insubordination".
Back when Grantaire was an honor roll kid, that B- would have been a source of profound shame, one that would have exiled the whole piece of paper somewhere private, but in Enjolras's house, it's displayed for all the world to see. Hell, from what Grantaire knows about Mr. Walker and Enjolras's family, maybe the insubordination comment is a point of pride.

Once he's started snooping, it's hard to stop. Half-hidden under a flier for a college open house, he finds a snapshot of Enjolras and his parents standing on what appears to be a mountain, looking windblown and maybe sunburned, squinting into the camera and smiling widely. Grantaire thinks he's seen Enjolras with that smile before, but he can't place where. The longer he looks at the three of them, the creepier he feels. No way it hasn't been long enough to fake a phone call, he decides, heading back. If anyone asks why it took so long, he'll say his parents yelled at him for making them worry or whatever.

When he pokes his head back into the kitchen, it's just Eponine and Enjolras's dad at the table, talking in low voices. They blink up at him, and he shifts his weight.

"Everything cool?" Grantaire asks Eponine.

She nods. "His mom and the boys are watching TV," she says, inclining her head toward what he assumes is the family room.

"Yeah," he says. "Uh, want me to stick around, or—?"

"No, it’s fine." She’s not shaking anymore, but it’s hard to tell what to watch for, what ‘fine’ would even look like at the moment. She sounds tired, which makes sense.

Grantaire fights the urge to hover and loses. "Are you sure?"

"Well, yeah," says Eponine, edging into something like testy. "That’s, y’know, why I said it."

"Yeah, fair. See you." He nudges her arm as he passes. "Raincheck on that gross blue slushie sh—uh, stuff," he finishes weakly, under the mild eye of Enjolras’s dad.

Eponine raises her eyebrows. "Go be with your boyfriend," she says, and if she's feeling comfortable enough to be kind of a dick to Grantaire, that is about the best that can be hoped for.

When he walks in, Gavroche is lying on the carpet, Enjolras's mom is typing on her laptop from an armchair, and Enjolras is alone on the couch.

"What're you watching?" says Grantaire.

Enjolras wrinkles his nose in disgust. The screen flickers off his glasses. "Some comedy thing," he says.

"It's funny," Gavroche puts in from the floor.

"You sitting down?" Enjolras says, and in response, Grantaire wiggles into the six inches of room between Enjolras and the arm of the sofa, trying to make him laugh. It's only when Enjolras gives him a vaguely approving look, like 'Good job maintaining the boyfriend pretense' that Grantaire remembers that's what they're doing. He hadn't even given it that much thought; it had felt like the natural option.
He trains his eyes on the screen instead. Grantaire would know Gavroche picked the channel even if the kid hadn't defended it and wasn't right now clutching the remote with both hands, because no way would Enjolras or his mom pick a stand-up special this profane.

It makes him want to wince and promise them both that Gavroche is never allowed to watch this shit at Grantaire's house, but that's not really true. Gavroche watches whatever Grantaire and Eponine are watching. He's seen a lot of late-night HBO.

Every time the comedian says something off-color, Gavroche sneaks a glance back up at Enjolras's mom, almost like he wants her to be mad or something. Her attention is focused hard on her computer. From the look on her face, Grantaire's got the sense she's not exactly playing Solitaire. The one time Gavroche does manage to catch her eye, all she says is,

"Scoot back, Gavroche. It's not good to sit that close."

"I've been fine so far," Gavroche mutters, crawling a few inches away from the screen as the man on stage makes a crack about nightclubs that Grantaire doesn't actually get.

They sit in silence. As stupid as the stand-up routine is, Grantaire appreciates not having to say anything for a while. He draws up his knees on the couch, lays his cheek against the soft, cool fabric of the arm rest. Enjolras is warm on his other side. He'd moved over to make room, but the point of his elbow is at Grantaire's waist. Their shoulders are pressed together. Sooner or later, something is gonna cramp from sitting like this, but for now, it's a better distraction than the screen.

"Everything okay?" Enjolras says in his ear.

"Yeah. Why?"

Enjolras shrugs, and Grantaire tries to return his attention to the TV, where the audience is laughing and clapping. Most of the routine is about how men want to get laid and women don't, and all he can think about is Eponine, people giving her shit for supposedly hooking up with Grantaire even as they were nodding to him in the hallways for the first time, asking about his weekend with significant smiles.

The people who used to talk to Grantaire because they thought he was sleeping with Eponine are the same people who don't talk to him now because they think he's sleeping with Enjolras. Come to think of it, there's probably a pattern there.

It's easy to imagine what Musichetta would say about that, or Courfeyrac or Jehan or Enjolras.

"This guy's totally sexist," Grantaire whispers.

Enjolras blinks at him. "Yeah."

Grantaire’s laughed at a lot of shit over the years that he didn’t actually think was that funny. Maybe most of the school hates him now, but at least Grantaire no longer has to fake it.

The camera cuts to the audience, who are cracking up again. "You know I'm right!" the comedian shouts. "You know I'm right!" Something about the way his eyes flicker over the crowd reminds Grantaire of Eddie in World Myth, refusing to sit next to him. If the situation was any less dire, Grantaire would go over and grab the remote, force a channel change. He would rather watch the Weather Channel than this shit. He would rather watch fucking C-SPAN.

Grantaire jerks his chin at the screen. "He's not even, like, making jokes, he's just—"
"Yeah," says Enjolras. "Believe me, I know."

"Lately I can't even watch a hot sauce commercial without being like, 'Is this racist?'" Grantaire admits.

Enjolras's laugh rumbles in his chest, against Grantaire's side. "If you have to ask," he says.

"Yeah," says Grantaire. "Seriously, man, you've ruined everything. Thanks a lot."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Enjolras tells him.

"That's a lie." Grantaire tries to lever himself upright in indignation, but there's not much room to stretch. "I know I've called you an evil genius at least once."

"Evil," Enjolras protests.

"Genius," Grantaire says. "I'm like the nicest boyfriend ever, Fishcheeks."

Enjolras snorts. "Where'd you learn to do those? Did you take a class?"

"I'm naturally gifted," Grantaire jokes, but the words stick out awkwardly once he's said them. All of Grantaire's former smart kid baggage is just sitting right there. He coughs. "Anyway, that was the very last one I had, so."

"There must be a formula to it or something," says Enjolras, thoughtful.

"Nah. The spirit's gotta move you." Grantaire's arm is gonna fall asleep if he doesn't shift it soon. He tries to think of some way to rearrange himself that doesn't involve shoving Enjolras away. The only solution that comes to him is to wrap an arm around Enjolras's shoulders, so after about five seconds of hesitation, that's what he does.

Enjolras leans into it. He must be really tired. This is confirmed when Enjolras mumbles, "No, there's—there's definitely a system. Usually it's a food and then something else. Cookiefeet. Honeythumbs. I feel like maybe you called me a strudel once—"

He's right. Strudel-lips. Grantaire's got the full list somewhere.

"Are you sure on Honeythumbs, though?" he says.


"Yeah, quiet," says Enjolras, half into Grantaire's deltoid, "quiet, Tomatoshirt."

Grantaire giggles. "Wow, that was so *bad.*"

Enjolras is still with concentration, drawn as ever to a challenge. "Sandwichgloves," he says at last.

"Worse," says Grantaire, over Gavroche's frustrated shushing. "Actually, literally worse—"

"Applepants," says Enjolras.

Grantaire gives himself a second to mull this over. "Provisional pass," he offers, "because I'm so nice," and Enjolras makes a sleepy noise of approval. It's hard to look down at the curly blond head resting against the crook of his neck and not spin together a lot of thoughts he'll regret later. Enjolras shifts. His hair tickles Grantaire's nose and if Grantaire sneezes into Enjolras's scalp he will never forgive himself. Instead he reaches over to carefully brush it down, enduring a second sleepy noise
with as much bravery as he can.

On TV, the comedian is doing his impression of a gay dude, tossing his head and mincing around the stage. He holds out one arm, letting the hand flop down and in that single flick of wrist, Grantaire feels the last sinew of his patience break.

“Gavroche,” he says, “c’mon dude, can we watch something less stupid? Like a screen of just static?”

“I’m watching this,” Gavroche insists, with the slight falter of someone who has maybe realized his mistake but, armed with middle school stubbornness, is ready to go down with the ship. There is probably a way to win the argument with reasoning or principles or something, but Grantaire just says,

“Dude, I will pay you a dollar if you put on something else.”

“Five bucks,” says Gavroche. “What am I gonna buy with one dollar? Also,” Gavroche abandons the stand-up special to roll over onto his back and fix Grantaire with his biggest possible eyes. “My house just burned down.”

‘Too soon, man,’ Grantaire thinks, but maybe if anyone has the right to decide when it is or isn’t too soon, it’s the kid lying on the living room carpet. He can already imagine how long Gavroche will play that card. Of course, none of that is gonna even the score, like, on a cosmic level.

“It’s the lip wobble that really sells it,” says Grantaire, reaching for his wallet. Unfortunately, his wallet is trapped under his own ass, and there’s no way to get to it without disturbing Enjolras, whose breathing has gone suspiciously even. He winces. “I’ll owe you.”

Unmoved by Grantaire’s plight, Gavroche flops back to his belly and grabs up the remote. “And I want a slushie, too,” he says.

It is absolutely worth the cost when Gavroche changes the channel, even if his second pick is apparently an infomercial for a blender. Grantaire’s not gonna fight it. In a way, it’s weirdly calming to watch all the fruits and vegetables go in and come out transformed, uniform, into a thick smooth liquid. The demonstration stretches on and on, determined to make the case. Grantaire had no idea so many different problems could be solved just by throwing down one easy payment of 29.99. He wishes anyone believed in him as much as the smiling host believes in the power of the new and improved motor.

Maybe Grantaire can’t turn a pile of carrots and apples into a delicious healthy drink, but he’s got other strengths. A blender can’t drive or draw pictures that make Jehan smile or get Eponine to talk to someone about her problems. Blenders have no sense of humor or taste in music. They’re small and easy to clean, but relatively speaking, so is Grantaire.

The host turns to the camera, earnestly cutting an orange in half and then stuffing the whole thing into the pitcher, rind and all. Grantaire looks down to get Enjolras’s reaction to this maverick move, but Enjolras is gone to the world, snoring softly and, if the damp spot on Grantaire’s shoulder is to be believed, possibly drooling a little. It seems unfair to begrudge him that.

The glasses are starting to slide off his nose and Grantaire reaches with the arm not pinned around Enjolras’s back, unsure how to retrieve them without waking him up. It’s delicate operation, requiring focus and hand-eye coordination and no sudden movements.

“Need some help?” says a voice out of nowhere, and Grantaire startles so bad he almost sticks a finger up Enjolras’s nose. Enjolras’s mom has finally moved from her computer. He peers up at her.
Maybe Grantaire has decided there’s no point in being afraid of her, but that doesn’t mean he can
talk to her like a normal human either.

“I was just—” he stammers guiltily. He feels absurdly caught out although he can’t even think of
why, really. Rescuing Enjolras’s glasses has got to be the decent thing to do in this situation.

His mom reaches down and gently plucks them off, sets them folded on the arm of the couch. “So,”
she says, “Grantaire.”

“Uh huh?” he gets out, and he’s torn between wishing Enjolras was awake to bail him out of this,
and being very thankful that Enjolras is not conscious to witness the way Grantaire’s heartbeat
immediately accelerates.

“Enjolras mentioned you like art?” She takes a seat on the ottoman across from him, like they’re
having a normal visit, like it’s not past midnight and her son isn’t sleeping half on top of him.

Grantaire wrestles his focus from the TV, where no piece of produce is a match for the reinforced
stainless steel blades and everything operates according to a logic that can be predicted and
understood.

“Yeah?” It’s not so crazy, really, that she would know this, he reminds himself. Enjolras had
mentioned that his parents asked a lot of questions in the beginning. For the first time, he wonders
how Enjolras might have answered, how it would have sounded to these people. He likes art. He
used to play the drums. Presumably not he swears like a sailor, he drinks and smokes pot, all he did
last semester was give me a hard time.

“Have you been to the art museum downtown?” she says.

It’s such a normal question that Grantaire doesn’t know what to do with it. “Well, uh, I mean, yeah.
We did a—um, in eighth grade I was in Mural Club, and we had a field trip there. To see the, uh, to
see the murals.” He makes a face at himself before he can help it, but she’s polite enough to overlook
his agony.

“Have you been since then?”

“Um.” He tries not to chart the distance in his head between then and now, but this late it’s hard to
steer his mind away from that mighty canyon. “No,” he says in a small voice, praying for no follow-
up questions.

“Because there’s a pottery exhibit I’ve been wanting to check out,” Enjolras’s mom continues. “And
I can’t get Enjolras excited about it, but maybe if he had some extra incentive. We’d certainly spring
for another ticket if it meant getting him to see some culture—”

Grantaire blinks at her.

“You could bring other friends, too,” she says. “I’m not suggesting, you know, a double date with
your boyfriend’s parents, only that we don’t go downtown enough, considering how close it is, and I
think it can be helpful to be exposed to those sorts of, of experiences—”

She’s talking very quickly. He watches her jaw twitch and it dawns on him that she seems kind of
nervous, although God knows why. Grantaire hopes he’s not doing something to freak her out. He’s
certainly not trying to.

“Sure,” he says. ‘Maybe don’t buy my ticket in advance, though,’ he thinks. “That would, uh, that
would be nice.”
“Well,” she says. She seems surprised, like she thought it would take way more convincing. To be fair, if this was something that had a chance of actually happening, he no doubt would be doing his damnest to wiggle out of it.

Grantaire scrambles to cover for them both. “So, do you like pottery, or—”

It feels like the lamest conversational gambit in the world, but thankfully it seems to work. “I took some classes after college. That’s actually how I met—” she inclines her head towards the door.

He can’t keep the grin off his face. “Wow, you guys got together through a pottery class? That’s like, the most seventies thing in the world. Did he have an afro?”

“No,” she says, “but his hair was longer than mine.” She smiles back at him, because Grantaire is having a normal human conversation with Enjolras’s mom and it’s not even a catastrophe yet, no big deal. He wills her to keep talking, and blessedly, she does. “My dad—Enjolras’s grandpa—was so scandalized. When Enjolras went through his ‘no haircuts’ phase, Dad kept telling us it was payback.”

“When was this?” says Grantaire.

“The height of it was sixth grade,” she says. “I’m sorry, if we knew you were coming, we would’ve tried to find the old pictures to show you, but they’re in a box somewhere. One of many.”

“That’s okay,” he tells her. “I know he wanted to be a cowboy when he was a kid, that’s kind of all I need.”

She raises her eyebrows. “But did you know it was his Halloween costume three years in a row?”

“No.” Grantaire is delighted despite himself.

“Sixth grade, strangers kept asking if he was a cowgirl, which didn’t bother him, or Woody from Toy Story, which did.”

“Of course it did,” he says, looking down at Enjolras’s head, mashed against his shoulder. Grantaire’s face may be doing something dopey and ridiculous, but seriously, who’s going to judge him for it, Enjolras’s mom? “Like, of course.”

“I’ll have the photos the next time you come over,” she says.

Grantaire’s trying to think of what he’s supposed to say to that when the door opens behind them and Enjolras’s dad sticks his head in. His face seems paler than usual, worn out, although it hasn’t been longer than maybe half an hour. He locks eyes with his wife.

“Hey hon,” says Enjolras’s dad, “can you come in here for a sec? We could use your guidance.”

Grantaire twists around, trying to get a better read of the situation. It sends Enjolras sliding down a few inches and Grantaire tightens his hold before Enjolras can flop over or roll off the couch.

“What’s,” Grantaire mumbles, “is everything—”

“It’s alright,” says Enjolras’s dad. “We just—we agreed it would be good to get some legal advice.”

‘We’ meaning Enjolras’s dad and Eponine, Grantaire realizes after some confused mental fumbling. That’s nice, he thinks. Normally if Eponine’s in a ‘we’, it’s her and Gavroche and she’s worried about something. Enjolras’s dad sounds worried, too, but that’s a reasonable reaction to the
Thenardiers.

Enjolras’s mom is collecting her laptop. “Be right back,” she tells Grantaire, although she can’t have any way of knowing that for sure. Enjolras’s parents aren’t liars, though. Enjolras’s parents are sincere.

“Oh,” says Grantaire, and she leaves. The door closes behind her. The infomercial is still playing. The host is feeding an onion into the blender. Grantaire gets the sense he missed something.

“We should get one of those,” mumbles Gavroche, who come to think of it, was uncharacteristically quiet through that whole opportunity to laugh at how uncool Enjolras was. He must be half-asleep, too. It’s not exactly surprising. He’s been through an exhausting amount and no matter how hard he fronts, at the end of the day, he is twelve.

“Looks handy,” Grantaire agrees.

Maybe he should buy one for Eponine and Gavroche. That way, they could make their own weird slushies whenever they wanted. Then again, he thinks, as Gavroche yawns on the floor, where would they even keep it? Enjolras’s mom had said there were options, he thinks, and he tries to hold onto that. Enjolras is half-crushing Grantaire’s sternum, heavy but oddly comforting, like the weight of a huge pile of blankets when you’re sick. Grantaire tries to hold onto that, too.

The infomercial guy throws some garlic into the pitcher, and then a cup of broth. He must be making soup, Grantaire decides. Some things are not bottomless, twisty, unknowable riddles. Some things are simple, straightforward, exactly how they appear as long as you know what to look for—

He drifts off to the lullaby whine of a televised blender.


“No,” he mutters, a contrariness that’s part of his muscle memory. The muscles in his side have locked up. Enjolras is almost on top of him, and he’s not sure how he managed to fall asleep because it’s not particularly comfy.

Eponine’s back. He lets that filter in. “Where’s—”

“Mr. and Mrs. Perfect went to bed,” she says. “They weren’t sure about waking you guys up but someone needs to help me carry him back.”

For one disoriented second, he thinks she means Enjolras, but then she turns back towards her brother. Right.

“This was easier when you were smaller,” she mutters.

Grantaire glances down at the warm, sleeping body pinning him to the couch. “Um,” he says.

Eponine doesn’t look up. “Shove him off.”

Enjolras half-stirs at the sound—she’s not trying that hard to be quiet—and presses his face further into the fleece. Grantaire has never wanted to shove anyone less but it’d be one hell of a dick move to make her haul 80 pounds of ungainly middle schooler by herself. He frees his arm first, uses it to
carefully roll Enjolras to the side. Enjolras doesn’t wake up at that either, but his face scrunches, disapproving in a way Grantaire would do anything to fix if those could be his priorities right now.

“Yo,” says Eponine. “Get the feet.” She reaches down and hefts Gavroche up by the armpits. Grantaire steps forward to lift his skinny ankles and between the two of them, they can drag him off the ground, although he sways in the air like a human hammock.

“Is he really gonna sleep through this?” Grantaire whispers, changing his grip to the kid’s knees, which feels minimally more stable. It puts an end to the swaying, at any rate.

“Loser never wakes up.” Eponine starts to walk them backwards, moving with a certainty that suggests she was smart enough to ask where the guest room is at some point. “You would not believe what he’s slept through.”

This is probably true.

“The door,” she says.

Grantaire tries to turn the knob using his elbows, his face, and his foot before he realizes he can quickly shift the weight to one hand and be fine opening the door the traditional way.

“Please tell me this room is on the first floor,” he says.

“Through the kitchen.”

It’s not like Grantaire is trying to test what exactly Gavroche can sleep through but it is not easy to carry a person when you’re verging on too tired to bear your own weight. Grantaire keeps almost dropping him all the way across the shiny tile floor.

“Oh my god,” says Eponine the third or fourth time he has to pause to shift his grip. She giggles, more from exhaustion than the sheer freaking hilarity of the situation.

“Remind me never to kidnap anyone,” says Grantaire. “Way harder than you’d think.”

She doesn’t have a response to that, and he can’t know for sure what she’s thinking as she backs them through another door, but given how hard she’s fought to keep her own hold on this surprisingly heavy bundle of pre-teen attitude and knobbly elbows—well, Grantaire’s got some guesses.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

“Whatever, we got him here in one piece,” she says as they safely deposit Gavroche onto the middle of a folded-out sofa bed, and if he’s suspects Eponine’s misunderstanding him on purpose, that doesn’t feel like a good enough reason to call her on it.

Unencumbered, Eponine stretches her arms over her head and half sits, half collapses onto the edge of the mattress. Behind her, Gavroche is still somehow sound asleep, his legend borne out. She doesn’t invite Grantaire to take the spot next to her, just glances up at him like it’s been implied forever and he’s weird for standing. Friendliness, Eponine-style.

God, he’s missed her.

“Crazy day,” says Grantaire.

“Yeah.”
He waves a vague hand in the direction of the kitchen table. “How’d, uh, how’d it go?”

“Oh god,” she says, rubbing at her eyes. “They said so much stuff, it’s all—it was a lot? And some of it, like, she wants us to talk to another lawyer before we decide anything. Like, great, let’s have this whole conversation again.” Her free hand plucks at the edge of the blanket. “But you can quit freaking out about Montparnasse because we’re not gonna live with him.”

“No?”

Eponine sighs. “So it turns out, with foster care, they don’t wanna move you, like, out of the school district if they don’t have to. And Feuilly’s foster family is already approved or certified or whatever.” She folds the hem of the blanket back and forth, presses it into a fine zigzag. “We can probably stay there until we figure out something else, like Enjolras’s mom already called them about tomorrow and that’s okay. So that’s not, like, terrible, right?”

“I think they’re alright, yeah,” he says. Feuilly doesn’t run his mouth a ton before or after meetings but through the osmosis of the group, Grantaire has gleaned pieces here and there. “They’re really into all that nature shit. Camping trips or fishing or like, whatever people do outside.”

“Gross,” says Eponine.

“Are you okay with it?” he asks.

“If it’s learn to put a worm on a hook or leave school and work two jobs—”

“Yeah.”

It feels like this night has been happening for days, but in all likelihood less than two hours have passed since she was weighing the window as a potential escape route. The speed and magnitude of her about-face is beyond welcome, but it’s also inexplicable, which in Eponine’s case, feels like it can only mean bad things. He can’t figure out what would’ve changed her mind so fast, and he can’t figure out how to ask.

Eponine lets the edge of the blanket drop. “Did you know I can adopt Gavroche?” she says out of nowhere. “Like, be his guardian.”

“You’ve been his guardian since you were like, nine,” Grantaire points out. She looks away, biting her lip and he’s starting to worry he’s somehow fucked everything up when she pulls a quavery smile.

“Damn fucking yeah I have,” says Eponine. “But they were saying I could for real adopt him. Legally.”

It’s a beautiful thought, but: “Wouldn’t you have to be way older? And like, your parents are still alive—”

“Turns out the rules are different for siblings.” She glances back at Gavroche, still sacked out, mouth hanging open. “If you can prove your parents aren’t getting the job done, which—” Grantaire nods. “Yeah,” she says. “You have to jump through some hoops and there’s a lot of bullshit, and I wouldn’t be able to do it tomorrow, but. Legal guardianship.”

“That’s fucking incredible,” says Grantaire.

“I know.” Eponine’s smile grows. “I didn’t believe them either, I made them show me the website but like, if they’re lying, they put a ton of fucking work into it.”
“They’re not liars,” he says again.

“Whatever,” she says, but she’s blinking a lot so that means she agrees.

“So, was it like, okay?” he hazards, prying off his sneakers and tucking up his feet.

“It was friggin’ weird,” says Eponine. “They’re—” She squints into space like she’s searching for the word. “I told Enjolras’s dad a bunch of stuff about the fire and—stuff.”

“Uh huh,” Grantaire says.

“He just—let me talk, like forever,” she says. She sounds confused.

“He didn’t interrupt you?” he says. “That seems like basic manners.”

She shakes her head and then keeps shaking it, long enough that he starts to get worried. “They’re so—I dunno. They’re weird. The dad especially, he—” Her mouth tightens, and Grantaire can’t breathe.

“Eponine,” he says, “Eponine, if something happened and you wanna go, we can leave right now, my van’s out front—”

“No,” she says. “It’s not—he’s not, it’s okay. Just, uh.” She presses at her eyes with her fingertips.

“So we were talking, and like, I kinda gave him the Disney version,” she says. “Didn’t wanna freak him out, y’know?”

Grantaire remembers Enjolras’s dad peering into the room, his wide eyes and bloodless face. “Uh huh.”

“I mean, I didn’t lie,” she adds. “But I made sure I mentioned, like, Gavroche’s grades are really good, and my manager says I’m the fastest at the register, so if I need more hours—and y’know, people make a big deal about the cost of food but you can feed two people for under forty a month if you’re careful—”

“And if you never buy a lunch,” says Grantaire slowly.

“Ugh.” Eponine buries her face in her hands. “I knew you were gonna flip out about the food thing,” she says into her palms. “Fricking knew it.”

“Eponine,” he says, as chill as he can and so not chill at all, “if your parents stopped feeding you guys, that’s insane, that is so definitely child abuse—”

“Well, no,” says Eponine, “because I’m not a child. I have a job, I can—fuck, the food thing is whatever, I just hate being yelled at when I didn’t even—” She sucks in a breath. “That’s not the point. So he was saying it’d be good to ask a lawyer about some of this stuff and I was like, ‘sure, if your wife’s still awake, bring her in’ and he said.” Her voice falters and she crosses her arms, rubs at them like she’s cold.

There’s a folded blanket on a chair by the bed but it feels far away. Grantaire bites his lip. “What?”

Eponine closes her eyes. “He got up and he turned like he was gonna leave and then he came back and he said—” She swallows. “He said, ‘Well, Eponine, you’re a very brave girl and I’m proud of you.’”

There’s a long pause where Grantaire is waiting for the rest of it, for what could possibly upset her
this much given all the horrifying shit she can shrug off like she barely even noticed it. He’s trying to figure out if it’s even worth asking when she peers up at him over her hands. Grantaire has never seen her cry, and she’s not crying right now, but only because it’s like every single muscle in her body is fighting it.

She pulls up her knees, tucks into a ball. He can track her ragged breathing in the line of her spine, convulsing through the sweatshirt.

“Who fucking says that,” she bites out, “who in real life actually fucking uses those words?” and he realizes this is the whole reason, and there’s no other shoe that’s gonna drop. “I mean, what is that?” She juts out her chin, hugs herself so hard her knuckles are white, almost skeletal. “Like, I tell you I’ve shoplifted and you tell me you’re *proud of me*? Were you listening to a word I said? Are you *stupid*? We have one conversation, okay, *one*, and you decide I’m fucking *brave*? Motherfucker, you don’t know me, who are you to tell me what I am?”

She shakes her head again. “You weren’t there, so don’t show up out of nowhere like you’re gonna fix everything with some bullshit about what a good person I am, about how you’re—fucking—proud of me. ‘You’re a very brave girl’, fuck you, *you don’t know.*” Her eyes are bright and shiny and Grantaire thinks he can tell before she can that her tear ducts get to a certain point, there’s only so long you can hold it in.

They’ve both way overloaded on their quota of hugs for the year, but when Grantaire reaches out to pat her shoulder, she kind of collapses on him and he folds his arms around her.

Eponine sobs into his shirt, and even though he was the one crying earlier in the night, he still has no idea how to handle it from this side, how to be helpful, whether rubbing her back would feel soothing or just condescending. He forgets how little she is sometimes. She’s so sharp and tough and loud that it seems almost crazy she can fit like this, that he can span her back with his forearms as she takes one heaving breath after another.

“Be real with me,” he murmurs. “Are you wiping your nose on my jacket right now?”

She chokes out a weak, gurgling laugh into the shoulder seam. “Enjolras’s jacket.”

“I’ll have to wash it,” he says.

“You’ve got plenty of detergent left,” says Eponine. She inhales on half a sob. “Seriously, who the fuck—are these people? ‘You’re a very brave girl and I’m proud of you—’”

Grantaire moves his hands up and down just slightly. “Is it gonna ruin the mood if I say I’m proud of you too?”

Her only response is to squeeze harder and mumble, “What is these people’s *deal*?”

“His mom wants us to all go to the art museum together,” he says. “Like, a bunch of friends and then Enjolras’s parents, just hanging out.”

“Fucking pod people,” she says. “‘Oh hey, it’s midnight, welcome to our home, would you like as much food as you can eat? Here, you each get a cloth napkin from this fucking basket of cloth napkins we keep on the kitchen table all the time, you know, because that’s *such a normal thing people do*—”

Grantaire smiles. “They have Enjolras’s report card on display, like, he got a B- and it’s still right up there by the door—”
“They have three different kinds of milk. Did you notice, when he opened the fridge?” Eponine snuffles into his shoulder. “Name me one situation where you’d need that many kinds of milk.”

The report card has him thinking of that vacation photo he’d found, the trio of grinning sunburned faces. She’s got a point. “They’re a sitcom family,” he says. “Can’t you just imagine the jaunty theme music—”

“Nah,” says Eponine. “Sitcoms have conflict. They’re a commercial for, like, salad dressing or Pillsbury or something. ‘Oh gosh, we’re just so happy to be in the same room together! More crescent rolls, please!’”

He laughs. “Sure thing, honey, would you like three different cups of milk with that?”

“Those little, like—” She pulls back far enough to trace a tight circle with her fingers. “Those things nobody ever eats except on TV, where it’s a little hotdog wrapped in a triangle of dough, can’t you just picture his mom pulling a tray of those out of the oven, with like perfect makeup on—”

“Dad’s more the baker of the family,” says Enjolras from the door. They both turn to look at him, and he shuffles his feet awkwardly. “Mom doesn’t really have the patience, she just burns stuff.”

“Wow,” Eponine says. “How long have you been lurking outside, waiting for somebody to make a stereotype so you could bust in here like PC Batman?”

Enjolras coughs. His hair is too short to be that messy, but it’s sticking up on one side. “I just got here,” he says. “I woke up on the couch and I heard voices.” He’s also managed to find his glasses again, so hooray, Grantaire gets to once more deal with how cute Enjolras looks all bespectacled, this time with no catastrophes to distract him. Awesome. Fantastic. “You left the door open, so I assumed it was okay—”

“I’d watch the hell out of politically correct Batman, are you kidding?” says Grantaire. “Somebody says Muslims are all terrorists and he, like, crashes in through the wall—” Grantaire tries for a Christian Bale-style rasp. “Be respectful of other cultures or I’ll punch you with my batfists!”

“Was it?” says Enjolras. He frowns. “Was it okay, I mean. I can go, I just wanted to find Grantaire to tell him—” Enjolras makes a face and turns slightly to address Grantaire. “—to tell you that my parents went ahead and set up the trundle, so whenever you want to sleep, you can, but. I can go.” Enjolras gestures behind himself, as if they’d otherwise assume he was gonna tunnel out through the floor, and Grantaire feels a helpless, crushing fondness, ten times heavier than the weight of a head against his chest.

Eponine hums thoughtfully. “I have a question for you,” she says, wiping at her eyes.

“Sure.”

“Is there any ice cream in this freaky little corner of Pleasantville? Like that all-natural organic shit where the farmers feed their cows only grass, and braid flowers into their tails and read them poetry?”

“Ben and Jerry’s?” says Enjolras.

“That works,” says Eponine. “And bring spoons.”

Grantaire wants to point out that they’re technically guests here and maybe it’s uncool to order him around like a butler, but Enjolras is out of the room before there’s time to make the case.
He opens his mouth and Eponine just stretches her legs out in front of her like they’re hanging out at a beach. “If I can’t exploit a rich white boy’s guilt about all this, what’s even the point?” she says. In the low light, he can see her eyes are still red from crying. It’s his own recent history: that gross sticky feeling that doesn’t leave no matter how hard you scrub at your face.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Dude,” says Eponine, “when you were on the phone with your parents, I had to convince Gavroche not to steal a roll of toilet paper from these people’s bathroom.” At his questioning look, she adds, “They’ve got 4 ply. It’s like wiping with a towel.”

“Uh huh.” His eyelids are heavy. He doesn’t even want to think about what time it is. “Ice cream after midnight,” he says. “Breakfast of champions. Breakfast of—shit, people who have to be up again for school in like, a couple hours.”

She shakes her head. “Nah, his mom is calling us in absent for first period so we can go back to your place and change clothes, and me and Gavroche can pack, like overnight bags.”

“But we’re not sick and we’re not her kids,” says Grantaire. “How’s that gonna work?”

“No idea,” she says. “But they seemed really sure about it, so.”

“Hey.” Enjolras reappears in the hallway, holding a carton of ice cream in one hand and two spoons in the other.

“Three,” says Eponine, holding up that many fingers. “You’re supposed to be a smart kid, can’t you count?”

“Is it the best idea to wake up your brother just so he can—” Enjolras starts.

“Kid’s not waking up without cold water to the head,” she says. “Three spoons, unless you and Grantaire wanna share.”

Enjolras’s forehead wrinkles, only now detecting the backwards-ass offer for what it was. “Uh, thanks,” he says.

“Yeah,” says Eponine, “I am like, the Mother Theresa of offering people their own food. Go get yourself a spoon, dummy.”

With a nod, he vanishes again.

“Be nice,” says Grantaire.

“I am,” she says. “You’re still wearing his jacket.”

“I—uh,” Grantaire looks down at himself like it’s a surprise or something. “Yeah.”

She rolls her eyes. “You guys together for real now? You were out in that hallway so long, I thought maybe—”

“What?” he says, a hair louder than he was going for. “No.”

“Just asking,” Eponine mutters.

“Where do you get these notions?”
“Uh, the thing where he was hardcore cuddling you when I came in?” she says. “Hardcore.”

“He fell asleep and I didn’t wanna wake him up,” Grantaire protests.

It only earns him a kind of predictable snort. “Yeah, I bet you didn’t.”

“Don’t be a dick,” he says, punching her gently on the arm. “Anyway, this whole mess is totally over in two days, so if you can just not make it a huge thing, that’d be, like, aces—”

There’s a light knock at the door and Grantaire spins around. “Three spoons,” says Enjolras. “Are we eating this in the kitchen, or—”

“Doesn’t matter,” says Eponine, waving him over. "I'm not kidding, Gavroche wouldn't wake up if we shouted."

"Superpower," says Grantaire.


Grantaire moves to give Enjolras enough room, Eponine pries off the lid and they dig in. It's something with a lot of chunks of stuff, Grantaire's not really sure, but it's sweet and it's cold and there's something impossibly decadent about eating ice cream on a bed.

"Is this what slumber parties are like?" Grantaire asks between spoonfuls.

“Not sure,” says Enjolras, who is concentrating hard on trying not to lose any ice cream chunks between the carton and his mouth. “Never been.”

Grantaire considers this. Everyone in the room knows that Grantaire was an outcast during prime slumber party years, but for the first time it really hits him that a boy who hated haircuts and was very intense about cows was also probably not swimming in buddies.

“Eponine!” says Grantaire. “Eponine, you had friends in middle school! Tell us about slumber parties!”

She chews thoughtfully. “Sorry, can’t help you,” she says. “Figured if I went, the kids would expect me to have them over, too, and that shit wasn’t happening with my family, so.”

“Oh my god,” says Enjolras. “Oh my god.” He digs his spoon so deep into the ice cream it sticks up like Excalibur and just abandons it in there, stares up at them. “They did it for the insurance money,” he says.

“Yeah?” says Grantaire.

“For the insurance money,” he repeats. “Eponine. Your parents are Scooby Doo villains. Your parents are literally Scooby Doo villains.”

Eponine’s jaw drops.

“He’s kinda got a point,” says Grantaire.

“They are,” she says. “Holy shit, they really are.” She embeds her spoon next to Enjolras’s and runs a hand through her hair. “Oh my god.” She laughs. “Shit.”

There’s the logical thing to say, dangling there in the open, so Grantaire goes with it. “And they
would’ve gotten away with it, too, if it hadn’t been for you meddling kids—”

“And your little brother, too,” Enjolras finishes.

“That’s what I was gonna say,” says Grantaire. “Like, word for word. High five, dude. High five.” His spoon joins theirs so he can slap hands with Enjolras. “Jinx.”

Eponine is still laughing, the sound going ragged at the edges. “Fucking, fucking—jinkies.”

“No, no, no, I want to be Velma,” says Enjolras. “She was the only one with any sense.”

“No way, blondie.” Like it’s nothing, she reaches over and ruffles Enjolras’s hair. “You are one hundred percent Freddie. ‘Hey gang!’ That’s you. ‘Hey gang, let’s go solve a mystery!’”

“I wanna be the dog,” Grantaire says, because Eponine’s eyes are sparkling like she’s about to make a joke he won’t like. “I call the dog, okay? Nobody else gets to be the dog.”

“You know what?” she says. “Yeah, you can be the dog. You’ve earned it, Grantaire. You’re the giant weird cowardly cartoon dog. Enjoy.” She nudges the carton towards them. “Now come on, guys. There is so much bad decision left in here.”

The three of them tear into the remaining ice cream, until there’s only a sad puddle of bad decision left sloshing around in the bottom, and Eponine is swaying even sitting down.

“Maybe sleep, dude?” Grantaire suggests, and whatever sarcastic retort she had is undercut entirely by the size of her yawn. “And maybe, not to get crazy here, take off your boots first?”

“Not the boss of me,” she murmurs as she flops down next to her brother. “And get the lights.”

Grantaire takes the carton from her hands. “That’s our cue, I think,” he says to Enjolras. It’s only after they’ve said goodnight to her, as they’re standing up to go, that he remembers he doesn’t know what comes next. They step out into the kitchen, Enjolras shutting the door behind them as softly as they can. “Uh.” Grantaire clears his throat. “So, like, where’m I sleeping?”

“C’mon.” Enjolras commands them forward in a way that maybe is some percentage Freddie, although it’s a weak comparison, Grantaire thinks, because Freddie always wanted his gang to split up and Enjolras wants to bring his gang together, which is an important distinction because shit always, always went wrong in that show when they went off in separate directions. Chase scenes every time, you’d think they’d learn.

Grantaire follows him out of the kitchen and down the hallway, up the stairs and into Enjolras’s room and only then does he start to piece together what a trundle is.

“There’s two beds,” he says dumbly.

Enjolras nods.

Grantaire can’t figure it out. A future of solving mysteries from within a psychedelic van is not in his cards. “There was one before,” he hazards.

“Yeah,” says Enjolras. “That’s—the second one’s collapsible, it’s stored under my bed in case there’s company, and then it, y’know, uncollapses.”
It seems like the wrong time to share his bridge troll theory from before. This could be one of those pieces of information most people already have, he thinks, like how you can’t judge a book by its cover or it’s a really bad idea to try to shave while you’re driving. How was Grantaire supposed to know? He never went to slumber parties.

“Your parents put us in the same room,” Grantaire says instead.

Enjolras rests his hands on top of his head, like he’s just run a few miles, and Grantaire belatedly looks away from the bared sliver of skin between the end of Enjolras’s hoodie and the beginning of his pajama pants. He drags his reluctant eyes back to Enjolras’s face, to the wince underway there.

“If it’s a problem, you can sleep on the couch,” says Enjolras. “Or I can, or—”

The clock on the windowsill helpfully shows 2:36 AM in glowing blue digits. It’s too late to deal with this shit. “No,” Grantaire says. “It’s fine.” People sleep in the same room without it being weird all the time. Not just slumber parties, but—summer camp, or siblings sometimes, or college roommates. Sailors on an old-timey ship. Prisoners in the same jail cell. Will Eponine’s parents go to prison? Good riddance, he thinks.

“You’re clearly not okay with it,” Enjolras starts.

Grantaire jolts from where he’d been kind of staring into space. “I don’t have a problem,” he says. “Separate beds, whatever. I’m tired enough to sleep in a pile of hay.” Tired enough, in fact, that his mental filters can’t stop him from blurting the thought that actually is tugging at his mind. “But like, your parents think we’re dating. Why the hell would they put us in the same room?”

“Uh.” Enjolras’s eyebrows draw together, stormclouds gathering before the scowl. “Maybe they figured things were serious enough that we wouldn’t use tonight as an opportunity to get into each other’s pants?”

“Whoa man,” says Grantaire, raising his hands in the air, sharpening his tone enough to hide the completely bizarre undercurrent of hurt. It’s not like he suggested fooling around, but he can’t meet Enjolras’s eyes when he adds, “Just saying, they don’t know me, and you’re their only son—”

It doesn’t smooth the furrow in Enjolras’s brow, but the furrow shifts to something more like confusion. “They trust my judgment,” he says, “and anyway—” Enjolras closes his mouth with an abruptness that’s suspicious as hell. Grantaire has clamped down on way too many ill-advised comments not to recognize one in action.

“What?”

Enjolras shakes his head. “It’s gonna bother you.”

“Oh great,” says Grantaire, “in that case, let’s go ahead and keep it really really vague so I can stay up all night thinking up things that could mean.”

Enjolras’s eyebrow furrow deepens and maybe Grantaire has been staring long enough that it’s getting creepy, but then Enjolras lets out a nervous gust of breath and says,

“I think they already think we’re sleeping together, so,” and Grantaire forgets to look away, or make any sense at all of what his own face is doing. It’s not impossible that his eyeballs could be bugging out of his head right now.

“Well, for one thing,” says Enjolras, whispering kind of pointedly, “I came home from Joly’s movie party with a very noticeable hickey—"

All of the fighting spirit floods out of Grantaire so fast, it leaves him lightheaded. Conveniently, a huge pile of panic is waiting in the wings to take its place. “Oh shit.” Grantaire covers his mouth with his hands. “Oh shit, oh no.” He’s sat at these people’s kitchen table. He’s smiled at Enjolras’s mom. He’s drank their orange juice.

“What?” Enjolras sounds lost. That’s great. Grantaire wishes he was still lost.

“Oh my god.” Grantaire’s horror is almost too great to speak through. “Did they, like, talk to you about it?”

“Not directly.” Maybe sensing this is not a reassuring answer, Enjolras adds, “They just, uh, made a point of giving me the birds and the bees talk.” He smiles ruefully. “Or, you know, four different iterations of that talk, four nights in a row.”

The day Grantaire turned thirteen, he found a copy of Our Bodies, Ourselves lying on the floor just inside his room. That’s the closest his parents ever got to discussing this shit with him. Or at least, Grantaire’s always assumed the book came from his parents. There’s might’ve been some helpful folklore creature at work, a lesser-known Tooth Fairy relative. The Sex Ed Goblin.

The idea of talking about sex with the people who taught him to ride a bike and used to drive him home from marching band practice is unthinkable.

“Enjolras,” says Grantaire, “I am so, so, sorry if you had to hear your parents say the word ‘condom.’ I really, really am.”

But Enjolras does not seem to be freaking out about this an appropriate amount. “It wasn’t all about safe sex,” he says, “it was relationship stuff, too. Communication.” He shrugs. “They would’ve given me the talk years ago, except back before I knew what demisexuality was, I told them I was probably asexual, and then when I figured out it was more complicated, I didn’t really—know how to bring it up again. Coming out once was hard enough, you know?”

It’s a lot to take in, and the machinery of Grantaire’s mind chugs wearily in the attempt. “So it wasn’t terrible?”

“Oh, it was,” says Enjolras in a rush. “It absolutely was. My dad made a printed handout with vocabulary terms.”

“Yeesh,” says Grantaire.

“Yeesh, yeah, for sure.” Enjolras tilts his head to the side. “But what I’m saying is, I’m sort of glad it happened, too? So don’t feel bad about it. Anyway,” he says, coughing, “it wasn’t your fault in the first place. I could’ve hidden that hickey better—”

“For a week?” says Grantaire. “From your parents? No, you couldn’t.”

“Probably not,” Enjolras allows.

Grantaire doesn't want to keep talking about that goddamn hickey, and he definitely doesn't want to do it while looking at Enjolras, but unfortunately, looking away brings his eyes back to the pair of twin beds. Enjolras follows his gaze. Grantaire can feel Enjolras follow his gaze. He's not sure how, but he can.
“How have they not chased me out of here with a shotgun,” Grantaire mutters.

Enjolras makes an odd face. “Does all your information about families come from old sitcoms?”

“Um.” Given his recent talk with Eponine, it cuts uncomfortably close to home. It’s too late for this, or too early, or too—Grantaire’s head hurts. He’s thinking so hard, on such little fuel, he almost expects to smell burning brain matter. “Huh.”

“They trust me,” Enjolras says again. “And from their point of view we’ve been dating for more than two months. Have they done anything to imply they have a problem with you?”

“No?” Grantaire sits on the edge of the bed that is apparently his for the night. “Actually, your mom invited me to the art museum.” He considers how that sounds. “Not, like, me and her chilling out together, but—”

“Oh, I know. She’s been after me about it for weeks. Sometimes, when she gets an idea in her head, she just—” Enjolras makes a slicing motion with his hand, like a slow, inevitable karate chop, and Grantaire laughs, rubbing his forehead.

“Oh my god, you are so her kid,” he says.

“Thanks,” says Enjolras quietly, pleased. “Uh, what’d you say? When she asked about the museum?”

“I told her sure,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras nods, and then yawns. “What time is it?”

“You don’t want to know.” No amount of sleeping through Spanish will make up for how late it is now. “We’re gonna be, like disgustingly tired tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Mind if I turn the lights off?” Enjolras asks.

“Go ahead.”

There’s a click and then Grantaire is blinking through the dark, trying to adjust. The only illumination is the blue glow cast by the alarm clock by the windowsill. When he turns, he can just barely follow the movement as Enjolras walks over to the dresser and takes off his glasses, leaves them folded on a stack of what’s probably books.

“Want to borrow something to sleep in,” says Enjolras, “or—”

“My jeans are loose enough, it’s not that bad,” says Grantaire. “Besides, I’d swim in anything of yours.” Such as the jacket he has yet to take off, he thinks, grimacing. Come to think of it, there’s a certain appeal to sleeping in something that isn’t covered in other people’s drool, tears and snot. “Uh, maybe a T-shirt if you’ve got one?”

“Pretty sure I own a T-shirt,” Enjolras says wryly.

“You know what I mean.” Grantaire doesn’t even bother unzipping the jacket, just wrestles it off over his head. His own shirt is sticking to the fleece, damp in places, and he pulls at that, too. He can’t imagine anything better in this moment than clean, dry cotton.

When he finally manages to free himself—it takes way too long, really he should’ve unzipped the jacket first—Enjolras is turning around with a T-shirt in one hand.
“Here, found a—” says Enjolras, grip faltering for a second and Grantaire remembers that given Enjolras’s weird hangups about seeing people in their boxers or whatever, Grantaire probably should’ve done him the courtesy of changing in the bathroom.

“Thanks,” Grantaire says, and his doubts are confirmed because Enjolras surrenders the shirt and then turns away at roughly the speed of light. “Sorry,” he adds. He pulls it on. The fabric is worn and very soft. Tomorrow he will have the time to feel properly humiliated. He crawls under the covers. The sheets smell like one of those generic detergent scents: rain or wind or mountains. Who goes around smelling mountains so that companies can copy the odor? Is mountain-smeller still available as a career path?

“It’s okay.” Enjolras’s voice is muffled like he’s lying facing the wall. “Hey, with the museum,” he says. “That was nice of you. It probably meant a lot to her, saying you’d go.”

Grantaire shrugs, a pointless gesture in a bed in the dark with nobody watching. “We break up in less than two days, so not like it’s any skin off my nose, you know?”

There’s a long pause, so long he thinks maybe Enjolras managed to drop off mid-conversation and Grantaire was only talking to himself, that particular minor lurch of loneliness.

“It’s late,” says Enjolras at last. “Go to sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

Updates are still every other Sunday (central standard time). Thanks for reading!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Still, the coffee does not do its job. Grantaire’s awareness drifts in and out of focus for the rest of the school day, like his brain is a radio and someone else is working the dial.

Chapter Notes

Head's up: this chapter contains a very brief suicide mention. In context, I don't think it would be triggery, but just to be safe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grantaire’s never been one of those people who can remember their dreams, which is probably for the best, because when he wakes up in the dark covered in sweat, heart slamming against his ribs, there’s no nightmare storyline to unlearn, just a vast, crushing sense of unease, a hazy certainty something bad is about to happen. Then he looks down at the unfamiliar blankets clutched in his fists and he remembers that it’s okay, no need to panic; the something very bad already happened.

If only his nerves would get with the program. If only he could have a chat with the chemicals spiking through his bloodstream, reason with the part of his brain that is suddenly wide awake, ready to crouch in a corner and defend him from enemies.

It’s still dark out, but falling asleep again feels unlikely. He stares up at Enjolras’s ceiling, trying to convince himself to keep his eyes off the clock, since it’s not like having that knowledge will help. If anything, it’ll be worse, cold evidence of just how burned out he’s gonna be for the rest of the day.

Grantaire does everything he can think of to keep from looking. He tries to count to a hundred, but he gives up at eleven because numbers are boring. He runs through the lyrics to his favorite song, front to back. He replays the mental image of 12-year-old Enjolras getting mistaken for a cowgirl. He replays Eponine’s delighted smile at the Scooby Doo jokes.

He doesn’t replay the memory of Enjolras sleepily burrowing into Grantaire’s shirt.

It’s all a stopgap measure, though; Grantaire’s impulse control is awful when he’s tired. He rolls onto his stomach, props himself onto his elbows, and peers right at the only light source in the room. 4:49.

He drops back down. “Shit,” Grantaire mumbles, muffled into his pillow so he doesn’t have to worry about waking—

“What?” says Enjolras.

Grantaire cracks one eye open to peer over at him. “Oh crap, dude, sorry, I was trying to be quiet—”

“It’s fine.” Enjolras is sitting up in bed. There’s a book in his hands but it’s not open. “You didn’t wake me up or anything.”
“You okay?” says Grantaire.

Enjolras sighs. “Relatively speaking? I don’t think I have the right to complain about anything in my life. Maybe ever again.”

“It’s a lot to deal with,” Grantaire agrees. He rolls onto his side. “She kinda played the ultimate bad news trump card. Other than maybe, ‘you’re the only one who can see me because I’ve been dead all along,’ but—”

“If I’d just known sooner,” says Enjolras, “Or if my parents had known sooner—they could’ve gotten her and Gavroche out of there before the fire. Months ago.” He turns to look at Grantaire. By the eerie glow of the alarm clock, his face is an impressionist painting in blue. “I start this student group because I want things to be better, and what happens? My friends get attacked, and it turns out a girl I eat lunch with every day was going through things I can’t imagine, while I was just—consumed with—stuff that in the scheme of things, must be almost inconsequential—”

“You worry about, like, the state of the world though,” says Grantaire. “Clean water. World peace. That’s not exactly—”

Enjolras sighs again and lowers himself onto his back, lets his head hit the pillow with what would be a thunk if it wasn’t, you know, a pillow. He digs his palms into his eyes.

“You worry about, like, the state of the world though,” says Grantaire. “Clean water. World peace. That’s not exactly—”

“I worry about other stuff, too,” Enjolras cuts in. “Selfish stuff. And maybe if I’d been able to see beyond—all of that, I could’ve—”

“Wow, man.” Grantaire props his head up on his arm for a better vantage point. “Now there’s some thinking that feels, I dunno, a little unproductive—”

Enjolras sighs again and lowers himself onto his back, lets his head hit the pillow with what would be a thunk if it wasn’t, you know, a pillow. He digs his palms into his eyes.

“Was that something I told you?” he says. “Are you quoting me right now?”

Grantaire frowns. “Seriously, are you okay, or—”

“I have no right not to be,” says Enjolras to the ceiling.

“See, that’s not how okay works?” Grantaire says, and when Enjolras rolls to face him, Grantaire realizes for the first time how close they’re lying, curved toward each other like a closed set of parenthesis. There’s maybe two feet of space between the twin beds, but on a queen mattress, they would be in the same bed right now. Granted, it’s an important two feet of space, but—Grantaire’s lost the thread.

He finds it again when Enjolras says, “What do you mean?” in a small voice, so unlike himself that Grantaire wishes suddenly there was someone else in the room, so there could be a reason to reach out and touch Enjolras’s arm, brush the hair off his forehead, even just set a hand on his knee. Some point of contact, something solid. Nothing feels real in this light.

“There’s no, like,” Grantaire stumbles for words that can do the reaching for him. It’s tough when his every thought feels like it’s being sifted through a thick wad of cotton. “It’s not some fucked up arcade game where you have to earn, like, sadness tokens and then at the end you get to cash them in for sadness prizes, like, the fucking privilege of feeling really shitty. You can just be sad, it’s okay. Don’t start feeling bad about feeling bad, you’ve got way too much shit to do to waste your time on that.”

Curled up under layers of blankets, Enjolras is not his usual towering presence. He frowns.

Grantaire tucks his free hand under his head, like if he can conquer the urge to touch if he only
contorts his body a little more. “Besides,” he says, “I don’t think you get how much you helped.”

“Please. I just babysat and, and slept on you,” Enjolras protests.

“None of the good shit tonight would’ve happened without you,” says Grantaire. “If all it cost me was an hour of my time and a little drool on my shoulder, what does it—”

“Oh god, did I drool?” Enjolras says. “I am so sorry, god, about—all of that.” He sounds almost solemn, and this is the opposite of what Grantaire wanted. Grantaire’s not sure where he’s screwing up. Every cog in his head is turning at half-speed and it still feels like this conversation shouldn’t be so freaking difficult.

“Who cares,” he says, “it was your jacket.”

“No, I mean—”

“You were asleep,” says Grantaire. “I wasn’t gonna, like, shove you off the couch—”

“Not like you could’ve, in front of my mom,” says Enjolras bleakly.

It’s like arguing with a wall. A bummed-out wall with an annoying martyr complex. “Give it a rest, man,” says Grantaire. “Honestly, I would’ve done the same thing if she hadn’t been there. so—”

“Would you?” says Enjolras in the darkness, and Grantaire freezes. His pulse is beating in his fingertips. He wishes Enjolras had spoken a little louder. It’s hard to read someone’s tone in a near-whisper.

“See?” Enjolras says. “It was weird of me to—”

“What, dude?” Grantaire is just too tired to lay here letting him be wrong about stuff. “Sleep? Have feelings? Anybody would be worn out from all the shit we put you through tonight, and cuddling is not actually, like, some huge hardship.”

Enjolras is opening his mouth, to say something else wrong, and Grantaire barrels on. “Hey, remember earlier tonight, when I fucking cried on you? Not better. Not less embarrassing. And you were great about it, you didn’t give me shit at all. So if that’s—”

“Because when someone’s that upset, holding them is literally easier than not doing it,” says Enjolras, like it’s obvious. Which it is.

“Yes,” says Grantaire. “That is my point.”

Enjolras stares up at the ceiling, crossing his arms thoughtfully. "Oh."

It's hard not to bask a little, because Grantaire's pretty sure he just flat-out won the argument.

It's also hard to bask too much, because on second thought, Grantaire can't totally remember how this fight started, or the larger point he was trying to make.

“So if—” Enjolras starts, trailing off uncharacteristically.

“What?”

Enjolras hasn’t looked away from his ceiling. He shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“Will you accept that you’re allowed to be sad?” Grantaire presses.
“I can’t even wrap my head around it,” says Enjolras. “The Thenardiers and all of that. It’s just so awful.”

“Believe me, I know what you mean,” Grantaire says.

“And there’s no—it’s like.” The blankets rustle and Enjolras rolls over again to his back. “Did you know there’s enough food on the planet? For everyone, I mean. Like, we talk about world hunger and food shortages, but if you look at the amount of crops we produce worldwide and you add it up, it’s enough. If you could wave a magic wand and move all the food around—if you could get everyone to agree it was our top priority, and we put everything else aside—we could feed everyone tomorrow. Every single person who’s dying of malnutrition, or who’s going to die, they don’t have to. It’s not just wrong that people starve, it’s completely senseless.”

Grantaire doesn’t point out that the magic wand thing is probably a more realistic plan that asking people to put aside their petty greed and bullshit. Enjolras is hurting and he’s also right, and so Grantaire says, “Uh huh.”

“And it’s—it’s almost the same thing with Eponine and Gavroche.” Enjolras is crossing his arms again, and Grantaire looks around the room for an extra blanket or something, but in the dim light, everything at the edges is just shadows. “I just keep thinking about—gay couples, or lesbian couples, couples where somebody’s trans or bi or anything else where they can be barred from adopting, for no other reason. Or people who can’t afford to have kids, or people who have health problems, or can’t get pregnant, or whatever.” He swallows. “There are so, so many people who want kids, who would’ve been so good to Eponine and Gavroche, and would’ve kept them safe, and just—been good parents, done everything right. And instead, those kids get—” Enjolras makes a sharp gesture with one hand. “—all of that, and it’s not—I know this makes me sound like a spoiled child, but it’s not fair, it’s profoundly not fair—”

“It’s not,” Grantaire agrees.

“And it’s senseless,” says Enjolras, “it happens for no reason, because there’s enough, like—there’s enough love in the world for everyone, but it’s the same as with the food supply, it’s a problem of, of distribution—”

“Yeah.” Grantaire’s voice is hoarse.

“But there’s no way to fix it. Even in my head. I mean, legalize adoption for all orientations, reform the foster care system, but none of that would’ve helped Eponine and Gavroche.” Enjolras sighs. “There’s no solution. So many people want kids and can’t have them, but then when there are kids, they get wasted on people like Mr. and Mrs. Thenardier—”

“Well, you can’t make people love each other,” says Grantaire. “Even if it would solve a lot of problems, that’s not—”

“I know,” Enjolras says. “Believe me, I get that. It’s just—”

“—senseless. Yeah, it is.” Grantaire twists around to check the time. The clock shines its unforgiving numbers back to him with the cold certainty of an evil robot.

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

“Nope.” Grantaire flops back down. “We’re gonna be zombies tomorrow. Unless you can pull, like, a two hour nap right at this moment—”

“Not likely,” says Enjolras. “I haven’t slept since—” He drops off but he doesn’t need to, because
it’s not like Grantaire has forgotten the pleasant weight of his body on the couch.

“If it would help you sleep,” Grantaire starts.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing.” It’s too strange to say out loud, to suggest even in this hazy in-between space between the sleeping world and the waking one.

“Tell me,” says Enjolras, rolling over and putting them face to face, like that’s supposed to make it easier for them to talk and not a thousand percent harder.

“Seemed like you managed okay with a human pillow,” he ventures. “And okay, fair, that was also before we ate most of a pint of ice cream, but if—I dunno, if it would be useful—you don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but—”

“Are you sure it won’t be weird?” says Enjolras.

“it’s only weird if you make it weird,” Grantaire says.

The blankets rustle Enjolras inches backwards, towards the wall—moving away, Grantaire assumes, until Enjolras looks back up at him and Grantaire realizes that he was actually moving to make room. On the bed. For them to share. Because Enjolras is freaking out and Grantaire is the only person around, and Enjolras has trusted him with this. Cuddling.

Grantaire watches him across the two-foot gap. Enjolras isn’t a coward, doesn’t backtrack or make it into a joke, doesn’t drop his gaze. Very deliberately, he lifts one corner of the comforter and holds it out.

Grantaire can’t think of a word to say, but he doesn’t have to, that’s not what Enjolras is asking. He doesn’t have to do anything but move forward and try not to make it weird. Grantaire’s legs tangle in the sheets as kicks them off but Enjolras doesn’t falter, and then Grantaire is climbing out of bed and crossing the space between the two twin beds and then he’s easing under the comforter, gingerly to allow Enjolras something like personal space but it’s so warm with all the surplus body heat that Grantaire wants to fall asleep right there. That or, like, start crying again. It feels so good.

“You’re gonna fall off the edge,” says Enjolras.

“No I won’t,” Grantaire insists, but making the argument uses enough of his focus that he starts to wobble backward.

Enjolras pulls him in with one arm and after some uncoordinated flopping around, Grantaire winds up on his side, tucked under Enjolras’s chin. It’s not so different, really, from that hug in the hallway, Grantaire tells himself as he drapes his own arm over Enjolras—it’s the same thing except sideways and under blankets, and nobody’s crying this time, which is better.

“You’re gonna fall off the edge,” says Grantaire.

“No I won’t,” Grantaire insists, but making the argument uses enough of his focus that he starts to wobble backward.

Enjolras pulls him in with one arm and after some uncoordinated flopping around, Grantaire winds up on his side, tucked under Enjolras’s chin. It’s not so different, really, from that hug in the hallway, Grantaire tells himself as he drapes his own arm over Enjolras—it’s the same thing except sideways and under blankets, and nobody’s crying this time, which is better.

“See? Not gonna fall,” says Grantaire.

“I’m happy for you,” Enjolras says, somewhere between dry and exhausted. Then, “Are you sure it’s not weird?”

The sheets are clean and the bed is soft and he’s lying in Enjolras’s arms. Grantaire closes his eyes. “Provisional pass,” he mumbles. Enjolras smells citrusy, and his side moves with his breathing, and his heart is beating just this side of too fast. His arm around Grantaire is very light and very still. He’s never gonna fall asleep like this, Grantaire thinks, rolling his eyes without bothering to open them.
It’s no surprise that Enjolras would be terrible at relaxing. It’s no surprise that Enjolras would be this upset about needing a hug.

“Seriously,” says Grantaire into Enjolras’s chest. “It’s fine. It’s like, a human need. More than that, even.”

“What?” Enjolras asks, still holding himself so carefully, it’s ridiculous.

“People need, like—they did this study, with baby monkeys,” Grantaire explains. “They separated them from—from their moms, and then they made fake moms, out of—”

“The monkeys did?”

“No,” says Grantaire patiently, although he’s so comfortable and his head is so heavy, that every syllable has to be pulled out separately. “The scientists, they made fake moms for the monkeys. They’d make one that was basically, like a food dispenser with arms and legs, and then one that was made of like, towel material—”


“I’m getting there. So what they found was, the monkeys didn’t give a shit about Wire Food Mom, all they wanted to do was hug Soft Towel Mom and they would just, like, try to get her attention, but they couldn’t because, you know, she was towels, but they’d keep trying and—”

Enjolras’s arm tightens around Grantaire, involuntary. “Oh my god,” says Enjolras, “why would anybody do that to monkeys?”

Grantaire frowns. “It was an experiment—”

“No,” says Enjolras. “They didn’t need to torture a bunch of innocent monkeys to prove something that—that fucking obvious, it’s such a stupid—when was this?”

“Like, the fifties, I think? Back when doing science just meant you could put on a white coat and, like, be a dick to animals—”

“They didn’t need to do that,” Enjolras says again. His hold on Grantaire’s waist has eased up somewhat, but it’s still on the clutching side. Grantaire’s face is squashed into his chest, just like old times. In about four seconds, the heat of Grantaire’s breathing reflected back at him is gonna be oppressively hot, but now he just enjoys it. Enjolras being defensive of baby animals just brings everything to another level.


“Yeah?”

“Let’s go rescue them.” Grantaire tries to pull away far enough to look up into Enjolras’s face, but when he peers up, Enjolras is struggling to keep his eyes open. “The monkeys,” Grantaire adds, by way of clarification.

“From the fifties?” Enjolras’s words slur just a little.

“Time travel,” says Grantaire dismissively. “We’ll go back, we’ll break into the lab, scoop up every last one of ‘em—”

“Mmm, no,” says Enjolras, “where would we put them?”
It’s almost too easy. “In your ranch,” Grantaire tells him.

“What?”

“The one in Wyoming.”

“Can’t look after both,” Enjolras mumbles. “Cows and monkeys, it’s two different, like, skillsets.”

“Fine,” Grantaire says. “You can herd cows and I’ll watch all the monkeys. And cuddle them.” He gives Enjolras a little squeeze, to demonstrate or something. “Man, I’m gonna be so lazy with it, though. You’ll come in after a long day of, uh, wrangling cattle and I’ll be watching TV and eating bonbons, I’ll have only cuddled like half the monkeys, it’s gonna be a disaster—”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You’re not really listening, are you,” says Grantaire. “You’re not even hearing my amazing plan.” Only then does he remember that getting Enjolras to sleep was the whole point in the first place, so he can’t really be annoyed it’s working.

Holy shit, it’s working. “M a genius,” murmurs Grantaire.

“Mmm-hmm,” says Enjolras, already more or less dead to the world. Grantaire knows on some level that being all entwined together in a bed is gonna have some drawbacks, that if he was thinking clearly he would probably be freaking out about this, but Grantaire’s putting off so many other things til tomorrow, he figures he can add one more to the pile. He drifts off trying to think of some good monkey names.

Grantaire wakes up with sunlight sifting straight into his face. He lies very still for as long as he can, eyes screwed shut like he’s hoping the sun will blink first, and it’s only when he notices the feel of unfamiliar sheets that he starts to piece together last night’s series of events and why—what the freaking hell—he’s in Enjolras’s bed.

That nugget of information is enough to make him open his eyes, but it only confirms what he’d already started to suspect from the absence of snoring and the lack of any knees or elbows digging into him: he is the sole occupant.

Grantaire fell asleep cuddling with Enjolras and woke up alone. He can’t shake the feeling that whatever happened is his own fault. What are the odds Grantaire’s unconscious body attempted to sleep-grope him, or sleep-hump him, or sleep-kiss him tenderly on the forehead? What are the odds that Grantaire’s unconscious body revealed the whole agonized mess of feelings via some kind of elaborate sleep-pantomime, and Enjolras had to escape to the living room couch?

He rolls over and buries his face into the pillow. “Okay, that is a crazy thing to worry about,” Grantaire tells the stuffing. “Like maybe actually crazy. Get ahold of yourself, pal.” The part of his brain that never, ever stops noticing this kind of thing, not for any reason, reports that it doesn’t smell significantly like Enjolras. Which is fair, really, since the smell Grantaire associates with him is deodorant and most people don’t go around wiping their armpits on pillowcases.

Eponine had said something about Enjolras’s sheets, that they had a lot of threads in them or—

Holy shit, Eponine and Gavroche. Grantaire needs to make sure they’re still okay. He’s bolting out of bed before he’s given much thought to the fact he has no plan on how to help or what in the world
he’s gonna say, only that he should be downstairs and—why is his shirt so loose and so soft?

Oh, right.

Grantaire pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a few deep breaths. “It’s gonna be fine,” he
mutter, although it’s not convincing from this angle. At the very least, It’s gonna be less bad than
getting his head knocked into a drinking fountain, less bad than his best friend realizing she doesn’t
have a house anymore. Everything is relative.

Also, he’s really, really hungry.

Maybe Grantaire can slip out and grab them some McDonald’s or something. When he reaches into
his jean pocket, his car keys are still there. He hopes they didn’t jab Enjolras in the leg or anything.
Of course, that is literally the least horrifying possibility his brain can even construct, but it doesn’t
change the fact that Grantaire needs to go downstairs. He can’t spend the entire rest of his life
barefoot in the middle of Enjolras’s room. Enjolras’s parents seem pretty understanding but there are
limits.

He really should’ve taken those pajama pants when they were offered, he thinks, padding down the
stairs. His jeans are too loose from sleeping in, grubby on the inside. The hems drag on the carpet
and he keeps stepping on them.

In proper sunlight, the hallway looks even more ridiculously wholesome, from the artsy framed
photos of clay pots to the overflowing tangle of shoes by the door. The smell is what puts the whole
thing over the top, though: garlic and onions, shimmery and golden and somehow managing to make
him more hungry. He sniffs the air, trying to find the source, trying to remember if he’s ever heard of
dinner-scented Febreze, before he realizes it gets more noticeable the closer he stands to the kitchen.

Cooking. In retrospect this did not require, like, stellar detective work.

“Jinkies,” Grantaire mutters as he shuffles through the door.

“What?” says Enjolras from the stove, and Grantaire has about a quarter of a heart attack, although of
course it’s Enjolras’s house and he’s free to hang out soundlessly in whatever rooms he pleases.

Also, maybe Enjolras wasn’t being totally silent. Maybe the hiss of frying onions was noticeable
from halfway down the hall and Grantaire just failed to put this together because he didn’t know how
onions sound and also he still feels raw and bruised behind the eyes from sleeplessness.

“Have you seen Eponine?” says Grantaire. His voice comes out like a rusty hinge.

Enjolras sets down the spatula and turns around. The glasses are nowhere to be seen but there’s a
focus to his gaze that suggests he’s put his contacts in for the morning. He’s fully dressed in normal,
clean clothes—socks, even. Behind him, the onions are crackling merrily away.

Grantaire feels like the world’s sloppiest, most incompetent burglar. “Good morning,” he amends.

“Have you seen Eponine?”

“Morning,” says Enjolras. The line of his mouth thins. “She and my dad went to the bank, to see if
her parents thought to clean out her account yet.”

“Fucking hell,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras nods. “Basically. Uh, do you want to sit down, or—”
One more dot in the massive pointillist mural of the Thenardier’s crimes. If Enjolras’s parents can
bring them to justice, Grantaire may have to give them a medal. Mail it to them anonymously. The
shitty thing is, swirling around with all the sick, incredulous outrage, there’s a small patch of relief
that he and Enjolras are apparently still on okay terms. Maybe Grantaire didn’t sleep-grope him at all;
maybe Enjolras woke up and got out of bed for the reasons most people wake up and get out of bed,
and Grantaire can look him in the eye without it being a whole thing.

There’s an island with two tall, swively chairs. Grantaire takes one and finds himself with a front-
row seat in watching Enjolras stir onions around a pan.

“What are you doing?” Grantaire asks.

“My dad was gonna take us out to eat, but then the bank account thing came up, so I figured I’d
attempt the one thing I’m capable of—”

“Don’t say that, you’ve already done so much,” Grantaire interjects.

Enjolras looks up from his skillet to give Grantaire a weird look. “I meant it’s the only dish I can
cook,” he says. “Unless you count, you know, grilled cheese or cinnamon toast, which seems like
cheating.”

“Nah, you can count it.” Grantaire fidgets on the chair. “The last time I used a toaster there were—”
Billowing clouds of black smoke. A minor grease fire. Light property damage. “Setbacks.” He rocks
the chair back and forth some more. He doesn’t want to doubt Enjolras’s judgement, and the kitchen
does smell delicious, but— “Dude, onions for breakfast?”

Enjolras wipes his forehead. “Frittata,” he says, and then, maybe realizing this is less than
illuminating, “It’s a giant thick omelette where you finish cooking it in the oven.” Now that he’s said
it, Grantaire takes in the egg carton on the counter next to the stove, a cutting board full of various
chopped vegetables. “Anything you don’t eat?”

“Uh, pennies?” says Grantaire. Enjolras takes a breath and Grantaire adds, “No, I was being serious.
I’ll eat pretty much anything. I mean, I’m not wild about cantaloupe, but.”

A corner of Enjolras’ mouth quirks up. "Nobody is wild about cantaloupe," he says.

“Hey, does Courfeyrac still need a band name?”

“It beats the thing about herpes,” Enjolras concedes. “Okay, so I will try to leave out cantaloupe.
Anything Eponine or Gavroche don’t like?”

The swivel chair was a bad call. Grantaire can’t stay still, and the chair telegraphs his restless nerves
for the world to see. For the kitchen. Whatever. “Nothing I know of,” he says. “Honestly, Gavroche
might eat pennies. Where is that kid anyway?”

“Sleeping,” says Enjolras, dumping handfuls of cherry tomatoes into the pan.

Barring a rush of cold water to the face, he’ll probably remain that way. Grantaire has to smile at
that. “Indestructible.”

Enjolras’s stirring becomes more a series of jabs. “Luckily,” he says.

Grantaire twists back and forth in the chair. He wonders how messed up it would sound to say, like,
‘Hey, after our fake relationship ends, could I call you sometimes and ask you to be mad about stuff
I’m mad about?’ The thing is, Enjolras is a good enough person that he might do it. Enjolras’s voice
in his ear late at night, sleepy and righteous and—Grantaire needs to pull himself back together.

“I'd offer to help with the cooking,” he says instead, “but—”

“Oh my god, that would be great,” says Enjolras with feeling.

“Dude.” Grantaire scratches the back of his neck and wonders for the first time what his hair is doing. “The rest of that sentence was gonna be like, ‘Any time I try to make food, a trail of wreckage follows.’ There would be tears and fire and screaming—”

“Can you break eggs into a bowl and whisk them?” Enjolras says.

“I...genuinely don’t know?”

When Enjolras's dad and Eponine return, the first thing she does is stop in her tracks and peer into the oven and then back at Grantaire.

"Did you cook something?" she says. "You?"

Grantaire and Enjolras look up from his mom's laptop, last night's Daily Show paused mid-joke, Jon Stewart's face frozen in cartoony outrage.

"He did," says Enjolras.

"Co-cooked," Grantaire corrects. "If that. I just crushed some eggs into a bowl and fished out most of the shell pieces, Enjolras did all the real work—"

"Ugh," says Eponine. She fills up a glass of water at the sink, adds some ice from the freezer. "Gonna go wake up my brother, try to be less gross when I get back."

It's hard to stay annoyed at her, though. It turns out Enjolras's dad elected to go ahead and also drive her to Grantaire's house to pick up her shit, but she still thought to grab Grantaire a change of clothes. Granted, this includes a T-shirt Grantaire never wears, because it's not black or gray, but it means clean boxers and jeans, which are a minor miracle.

Breakfast is weird for how normal it all feels compared to yesterday, sitting around the kitchen table in daylight hours. The egg thing turned out well. Predictably, Gavroche eats three helpings, doused in ketchup and hot sauce because his tastebuds are as indestructible as his spirit.

There's a moment where Enjolras's dad asks if anyone wants milk and Eponine starts kicking Grantaire under the table, but other than that, they could be any dude and his best friend sharing a meal at his boyfriend's house during what's technically school hours, no big deal.

Enjolras's dad keeps complimenting the food in more and more elaborate ways, which at first seems nice, and then over the top, and then gradually Grantaire realizes it's mostly about embarrassing Enjolras in front of the supposed boyfriend.

Enjolras plays the part well, slumping in his chair like he wants to die.
His dad also insists on giving Enjolras a big hug before they head off for school, but this doesn't really seem to embarrass him at all.

The temptation to be just slightly truant proves too great, and they make a stop on the way for coffee—or in Enjolras’s case, cider.

“I’ll pay,” Grantaire says. On some level, he likes the symmetry of it, their first full day of fake dating and the last bracketed by an overpriced cup of too-hot apple juice.

Enjolras doesn't put any effort into protesting, even a few minutes later when Grantaire reaches back to hand him a very full cardboard cup. Enjolras just sits there in the back of the van, sleepily blowing steam away from the lid and Grantaire drives, trying not to watch him in the rear view mirror.

Still, the coffee does not do its job. Grantaire’s awareness drifts in and out of focus for the rest of the school day, like his brain is a radio and someone else is working the dial. At lunch, there’s some kind of disagreement at the table, the gist of which is that nobody bothered to make dinner reservations for Saturday, which means they’re out of luck as far as their town’s two nice restaurants are concerned, and that it’s unclear whose fault this is.

The sound of his friends passionately disagreeing about something is so soothing that Grantaire nearly faceplants into his sandwich, and is saved only by Musichetta on his left yanking him back by his shirt collar.

“Catch your own goddamn boyfriend,” she grumbles at Enjolras, more or less propping Grantaire against him.

Grantaire thinks of Enjolras pulling him back from the edge of the bed, but ‘He did fine last night’ is not a smart thing to say with this group of people, and the conversation flows on.

He stays leaning because it is easier that sitting up again, and after a while, Enjolras tips his head to the side so that it’s resting against Grantaire’s. Given that Enjolras is also tired enough to nod off, they have zero structural integrity this way, thinks Grantaire. This is not a good plan. And then he doesn’t move.

"Did you remember to leave something in your car this time?" Jehan asks they watch the clock for the final minute of class. A countdown to the last walk to save-the-planet club. If Grantaire's honest with himself, he's even gonna miss that: third-wheeling with Courf and Jehan twice a week.

All the same, he needs to start preparing for the future.

"Yeah, wouldn't you know it," Grantaire says. "Totally forgot my pencil." Jehan looks down at the pencil already in Grantaire’s hand. "My backup pencil. Which clearly I need, if I'm gonna be that careless with my stuff."

In response, Jehan just rolls his eyes, and Grantaire pats him on the shoulder. Jehan's sweater is dotted with pom poms, and the pom poms have little googly eyes glued on them.
"If you did a really fast cartwheel, could you make your shirt roll its eyes too?" says Grantaire.

"That’s the best reason I’ve ever heard to learn cartwheels, grant you that," says Jehan.

“I could teach you,” Grantaire offers.

Jehan doesn’t look away from the clock. Freedom is so close. “This summer,” he says. “You’re gonna teach me cartwheels and I’m gonna grow tomatoes.” It’s a tossed off comment, like there’s no question they’ll hang out, and Grantaire realizes that the end of his sham relationship with Enjolras likely won’t mean the end of talking to Jehan, who will probably still be there on Monday, recommending poems and playing Screw Marry Kill to win.

He’s not sure if this would be overwhelming on a full night’s sleep, but as it is, he’s touched.

He’s also still an asshole, and ten seconds before the bell, he can’t resist the urge to twirl the pencil in his hands and add, "Have fun whispering sweet nothings with your gentleman-friend."

"Oh my god," says Jehan. "This isn’t even the pot calling the kettle black, this is the pot calling the kettle a pot. Are you guys gonna get married right after graduation? Be one of those high school sweethearts couples?"

Five seconds now. They watch the longest hand twitch back up to 12, to zero.

"I don't think you need to worry much about that," says Grantaire.

Skipping the stop at Jehan's locker, the trip from World Myth to Ms Hucheloup's does not exactly pass Mr. Myriel's office, but it doesn't not-pass it either. Grantaire isn’t intending to go inside or anything—he's only got a few minutes before the meeting, and anyway, there's no need. Joly hasn't bugged Grantaire about therapy since that one time in the library. It's not a visit, it's a drive-by. Bahorel made the dude sound so mysterious, who can blame Grantaire for wanting a glimpse of the tortoise in the wild?

Or the tortoise's closed door, because, as it turns out, the school counselor's office has no windows. Privacy. It makes sense. If Grantaire was having an emotional breakdown, he wouldn't want a bunch of rubbernecker's, either.

What keeps him standing there, though, is not the absence of a window but how the whole door is almost papered over with comic strips, chiefly Calvin and Hobbes. Grantaire hasn't read the newspaper funnies in years because he's not a child or an old person, but he doesn't remember the pictures being so well-done. A year of trying to capture the ABC on paper has him wildly jealous of Calvin's faces. They're so simple but so good. It's like a magic trick. He peers closer, trying to understand.

"Can I help you?" says a voice behind him. Grantaire turns reluctantly, feeling ambushed, but of course there's no law saying a school counselor can never step out of their office. Mr. Myriel doesn't have a class to supervise. He's not a prisoner.

"Oh," says Grantaire, "Uh, I wasn't creeping outside your room or anything, I was just—"

"An art appreciator," says Mr. Myriel, smiling. The smile doesn't look particularly tortoiselike. Reptiles aren't too good with that human warmth stuff.
Grantaire makes a vague move with his head that splits the difference between a nod and a shrug. Mostly what he wants is for Mr. Myriel to leave so he can get another good look at the comics.

"You're Grantaire, right?" Mr. Myriel says.

Grantaire frowns. "How did—" Although, come to think of it. "The black eye's pretty distinctive, huh?" He rocks back onto his heels and Mr. Myriel flashes him a look that is, like, Fantine levels of sympathy. He wonders if it's something they practice in shrink school.

"Did you want to step inside for a minute?" Mr. Myriel waves a hand behind himself, at the still-swarming hallway. "All that background noise is hard on an old man's hearing."

The meeting looms, and Grantaire shouldn't be taking up this poor guy's time. On the other hand—

"Do you have candy?"

Mr. Myriel scoffs. "You think I'm new to this? Starbursts and Jolly Ranchers."

Privately, Grantaire admits he probably would've caved for, like, old Pez.

He steps aside to let Mr. Myriel unlock the door of his own office, and shuffles in after him. Grantaire knows enough not to be surprised that there's no therapist couch like in the movies, but the room is shockingly, hilariously small. All the travel posters in the world can't change how much it feels like climbing into somebody's locker.

"Nice to see the school takes our issues so seriously," Grantaire mutters, folding himself into a chair.

Mr. Myriel shrugs. "I have simple needs, and given that I'm five foot five, asking for more space felt greedy." Even so, it seems to take some effort for him to navigate the narrow gap between the wall and the side of his desk. "So, do you want to talk about it?"

"Being short? Yeah, d'you ever have to, like, climb onto your kitchen counter to reach the stuff in the cabinets?" Maybe that's part of the reason Grantaire hasn't learned how to cook. Your knees get tired, clambering up there any time you need a glass.

"I'd recommend a step stool," says Mr. Myriel. He takes the other chair, settles into it. "You know," he says, "I'd been hoping you'd meet with me at some point, Grantaire," and just like that, the room goes from tiny to suffocating.

Grantaire's hands tighten on his backpack. When is it okay to just ask for his candy and scram? "Oh, uh," he stammers, "I'm not here to talk, you don't need to—I don't have, like, problems—"

Two and a half months of lying every day, but in retrospect, this is still probably the biggest lie he's ever told. From the way Mr. Myriel blinks at him, Grantaire's got the sense it's not successful.

"In that case, you are a very, very lucky person," says Mr. Myriel mildly.

"No, okay obviously I have problems, but it's not stuff you can do anything about. I don't have—" Mental health stuff. Depression or etc. "Therapy problems."

"Therapy problems." Mr. Myriel repeats it blankly, which doesn't seem fair. Of all the people in the school, it seems like he should get what it means.

Grantaire sighs. "Like. I don't hear voices. I've never tried to kill myself. I don't have an eating disorder. I'm not, y'know, crazy?"
Mr. Myriel says nothing, busy rearranging the paperweights on his tiny desk. Grantaire thinks of Joly sitting in this plastic chair, confiding all his ‘weird head business.’ ‘No offense to—mentally ill people,’ Grantaire adds. ‘I don’t have a problem with—’ It sounds like how some of the guys in his class talk about gay dudes. ‘Hey, doesn’t bother me, as long as they stay far away.’ ‘I just—I’m not —’ There’s no way to dig himself out of this hole, which come to think of it, is kind of the nature of holes and digging.

“Okay,” says Mr. Myriel.

“Okay?”

Mr. Myriel looks up from the paperweights. “If you don’t think working with me is the right move at the moment, that’s up to you.”

“Thanks,” Grantaire says, standing up because he’s got a meeting to be late to, and there is no reason to stay. He shoves aside the tireless contrary part of himself that maybe wanted to fight about it, that wanted Mr. Myriel not to give up, to keep making the case. He scoops up his backpack.

“Some Starbursts for the road?” Mr. Myriel holds out a bowl and Grantaire eyes the brightly wrapped squares of high-fructose corn syrup. At least this conversation wasn’t completely in vain, he thinks, grabbing a huge fistful, like the world’s rudest trick-or-treater.

“One thing,” Myriel says, quiet, and Grantaire glances guiltily from his haul, back to Myriel’s pale, watery eyes.

Grantaire steps away from the door. Late as he is, he can be a little later. “Yeah?” He dumps the candy into a pocket of his backpack.

“You know how sometimes you go to the doctor even when it’s not cancer?”

“Yeah?”

“Or how people take medicine for a minor cold, so it doesn’t get worse? Or how you don’t say someone is weak for getting the flu?”

Grantaire nods.

“I’ve never understood why we hold our brains to such a different standard than our bodies,” says Mr. Myriel. “That’s all.”

“That’s—it’s totally different,” says Grantaire. Nobody gets sick because they have, like, a selfish kidney or lungs that take everything too personally, or blood that never learns when to stop getting its hopes up—

“Cells and chemicals,” Mr. Myriel says. “They either help us or they don’t. Nobody really understands how the brain works anyway, so I figure, why not treat the colds, so to speak? What’s the risk, that we feel too okay?”

Grantaire is getting the weirdest flash of deja vu, although he can’t think of why. “Uh,” he ventures, “The risk is I’d totally waste your time?”

“Do you think there’s a chance it would help to talk to someone about the bullying?”

The funny thing is, the bullying isn’t even the hardest part of his life right now. It’s not second hardest, either. Bronze medal at best, he thinks. It is true Grantaire might be under a dash of pressure
Come to think of it, he’s not sure who he’s gonna vent to, when it’s all over. Eponine’s got a world of her own shit to deal with, and although he’s not above sadsacking his way into some just-dumped sympathy from Jehan or Joly and Bossuet, she’s the only person who will ever know how it all really went down. Well, other than Enjolras, but that’s one hell of a dead end.

“It’s—kind of a long story?” says Grantaire, scrubbing a hand through his hair. He tries to imagine how he’d explain the events of the past two and a half months to an outsider, where he’d even start. (“I met this boy in detention. He was in there for throwing a shoe. Except really he was in there because he wants to change the world—”) He laughs, and hopefully it doesn’t sound completely deranged, although he’s not sure if he’s the best judge of that right now. “Kind of a really, really long story?”

“Again,” says Mr. Myriel, “this is what the school pays me to do.”

There’s parts of it Grantaire has never even told Eponine, because she was there and he didn’t need to, or because, in the case of the hickey or playing that song in his van or sharing a bed this morning, he can only imagine how much she’d make fun of him. There is a certain appeal in coming clean to someone, especially to someone who doesn’t have Eponine’s biases. If he started from the beginning and told the whole saga, Mr. Myriel wouldn’t shrug and call Enjolras a douchebag. He probably wouldn’t call Grantaire a loser, either. That’s not his vibe.

Also, Grantaire would love to see someone react to some of this shit.

He chews on his lip. “Uh, how good are you at keeping secrets?”

“That depends,” says Mr. Myriel. “If it affects your immediate safety, or the safety of another person, I’d—”

“Oh, no, dude, nothing like that,” Grantaire says. “Definitely not life or death.”

“Well, in that case, not to toot my own horn, but—” Mr. Myriel lifts both hands to mime blowing into an imaginary instrument. “So—is there a day you would be available?”

“Tuesdays or Thursdays?” He swallows. “And, uh, after this week, I could do Monday or Friday.”

Mr. Myriel puts down his pen. “I’ve never heard a teenager sound so unhappy about having their Fridays free.”

“Yeah, well I’m an exceptional boy.”

“I don’t doubt it,” says Mr. Myriel, and Grantaire would explain that it was sarcasm, except shit, he really does need to get going. Sensing his antsiness maybe, Mr. Myriel adds, “Is Monday after school good?”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire. “Uh, Monday’s good. Look, I kinda have to be at this thing right now—”

“Want me to write you a pass?”

“Nah,” says Grantaire, “I’ve got that covered.”
“You’re late,” Courfeyrac chides when Grantaire slips into the room. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Grantaire holds up his backpack. “Who wants candy?”

The thing about Grantaire’s final ABC meeting is that most of the group has no idea it’s any kind of ending, and can’t know, which cuts off any chance of a tearful goodbye speech.

The thing about Grantaire’s final ABC meeting is that although he wants it to last forever, the actual business conducted at these things is generally pretty dull, and today is not an exception.

None of the spots around Eponine were free, so he’s taken a seat on the far side of the room, which means he can at the very least get a glimpse of everyone.

Maybe as the club gets bigger and people no longer know each other, they should start arranging the chairs in a circle, so they can learn each other’s faces, and the group can have that “no one person is in charge” feel that Enjolras is always going for. Columbus High’s own knights of the round table. Maybe Grantaire can suggest it at some point. Not now, when everyone’s busy doing whatever they’re doing, but he could ask someone to bring it up later. Cosette, maybe. She’ll probably be good for some sympathy, too. Although she seems to know Enjolras better than him, so her loyalties may lie elsewhere.

He and Enjolras have never talked about how they’re gonna orchestrate this fake breakup, what it will even be about. Sloppy of them. They’ve been trying to put a positive face on their charade for so long, they never bothered to fake the accompanying fault lines. They’re running out of time to hammer together some basic outline of what their issues were. Well, something to talk about on their ride home.

Their very last ride home.

Grantaire knows he needs to stop thinking this way. He does. It’s just hard. To distract himself, he digs out his non-backup pencil and opens his notebook to a fresh page.

He wants to do a picture of the whole group. Not how they look sitting in the room right now, since a camera could do that better, and also it would mean drawing a lot of boring chairs and desks. He’ll draw them standing in a row instead, he decides, like a class portrait or a superhero lineup. Come to think of it, he likes that better.

AMERICA’S BOLDEST CRUSADERS he writes in bubble letters at the top of the page. It’s a better distraction than he was planning, because it means coming up with powers for everyone, too.

Giving Bahorel super-strength feels too easy, so Grantaire draws him with the power of music instead. DJ powers, guaranteed to motivate his allies and deeply confuse his enemies.

Bossuet is a friend to animals, Grantaire thinks, adding an overlarge bird on his shoulder. Joly is a no-brainer: flight. Musichetta can turn people to stone with a single raised eyebrow. Eponine can phase through solid objects without a scratch. Jehan hypnotizes the bad guys with poetry; Grantaire draws him holding a copy of Leaves of Grass above his head like Moses with the Ten Commandments. Courfeyrac is a shapeshifter. Cosette has dominion over plants. Combeferre is psychic. Feuilly can lift objects with his mind.
Marius can—well, Grantaire will come back to him later.

No, that’s mean. Marius can speak any language, which sounds stupid but it means he can also talk to machines, which is awesome. Molly has the ability to grow 20 feet tall. He doesn’t know what to do for her little freshman friends, but he gives one X-ray vision and one superspeed, and if they don’t like it, that’s out of Grantaire’s hands.

Making Enjolras have lightning powers is even more obvious than making Bahorel have punching powers. He bites his lip, thinking.

Someone says his name. Grantaire looks up. “What?”

“Do you want to go with us?” says Combeferre. “Talking to the superintendent?”

Oh right, Operation Make Anyone In Charge Care About Homophobia. “Not...really?” he says.

“Are you sure?” says Jehan.

“Don’t pressure him,” says Enjolras.

“Thanks, baby,” Grantaire says, because for the time being, he can.

In the end, he gives into the simple option and draws Enjolras with a flaming sword. When the flames are orange, it cuts through anything. When the flames are blue, it can heal. Not that there’s any good way to show this in a pencil drawing. Really, Grantaire needs to trace over all the lines in pen, erase the old stuff, and track down his colored pencils. Except maybe he could use markers a little too, for some of the bolder colors—

“We’re done, man,” says Eponine, kicking his chair. She pulls at the paper. “What’ve you got?”

Enjolras is on the other side of the room, talking to Combeferre and Jehan about something. Grantaire could put up a fight, but the truth is, he’s kind of proud of this drawing. It’s not perfect, but the poses and the faces are better than what he could’ve done at the start of the year.

He lifts his palm away and Eponine hums. “Man, why do I get the weak power? Give me something cool.”

“Phasing is awesome,” Grantaire protests. “You could, like, go anywhere—”

“Anybody with a lockpick could do that,” she says. “Ice powers. I want ice powers.”

“I already have someone who can turn people to stone, though. Does it really add anything to—”

“Water powers, then,” says Eponine. “And like, clouds and shit.”

It’s not terrible. Grantaire nods. “Musichetta giving you a ride?”

She shakes her head. “Feuilly. Since I live with him now?”

Oh. “Right.”

“Hey, can I come get my dress from you tomorrow morning?” she says. “Me and Musichetta are getting ready together before we go over to Courfeyrac’s.” At Grantaire’s no doubt blank face, she
add, "At six? For pictures and Chinese food?"

That must have been how the restaurant debacle resolved itself. Grantaire feels alright about having missed the thrilling conclusion.

"Sure," he says. "I mean, not like I'll have somewhere else to be." He means it as a joke, pretty much, because who really has plans on a Saturday morning? It falls flat, though. He can feel it fall flat.

She punches him on the arm. "Well, we're hanging out on Sunday. You owe me a blue slushie and I owe you an ass-kicking at Call of Duty."

"Probably more than one ass-kicking by now," he says. Their gaming has really fallen by the wayside.

Eponine sighs, put-upon. "Well, I'll just have to do what I can."

"Look," says Enjolras as they climb back into the van. "About what happened in the meeting—"

"Why?" says Grantaire. "What happened?"

"Were you paying attention? Like, at all?"

"I never have before." Grantaire starts up the engine. "Why would I start today?"

He's bracing for a fight—and maybe kind of hoping for one, too, because it's a distinct letdown when Enjolras just sighs and buckles up. He didn't seem mad about Grantaire being late, either.

When this is all over, they won't be going back to their old normal—Grantaire provoking and Enjolras sometimes, thrillingly, failing to rise above it. New normal won't be them fighting. New normal won't be anything.

"What'd I miss?" says Grantaire. "At the meeting." There's a pause. "Are you giving me, like, an incredulous look right now," he says, backing out of the space. "Because I can't see. Because I'm driving."

"If you didn't care enough to listen before, why are you suddenly interested now?" says Enjolras.

"Dude, I zone out at everything. I will zone out at my own funeral," says Grantaire. "Or—okay, bad example. If I ever get married, I will zone out at my wedding. At the birth of my first child. Definitely next year at graduation—"

Thankfully, Enjolras talks over him. "It was about meeting with the superintendent this afternoon."

"This afternoon?" Grantaire frowns. The last he knew, the ABC couldn't even get ahold of anyone at his office.

"Combeferre got a call on his cell today right before sixth hour," says Enjolras. "It was the superintendent's receptionist, letting us know the only available timeslot before the summer was at 4."

"4 today," Grantaire repeats.
"Yeah."

"Well, that's a ratshit move."

"Yeah," Enjolras says. "So we did some emergency planning and they're heading over to meet with him now. Combeferre, Jehan, Courfeyrac, and Molly."

"Molly?"

"She volunteered."

A second later, the other half of it hits him. "Not you?"

Enjolras sighs heavily. "I'm worn out. I don't trust myself to stay calm, and if I get upset, that's a liability we don't need. I just—"

"No," says Grantaire. "That makes sense. Also, if anyone mentions you're there on behalf of your boyfriend, when we break up, it's the same problem as before—"

"That's true," says Enjolras.

"Which, uh, actually reminds me, like." Grantaire takes a deep breath. "We need to figure out what we're telling people on Monday, why we broke up. Really, we should've planned this way earlier."

"We've had other things to worry about," Enjolras points out, which is fair. "And, uh, what do you think would be the most convincing?"

Grantaire's had most of the meeting to reflect on it, but he's still at a loss. "Maybe we could say you wanted more time to focus on your studies—"

"No," says Enjolras. "Come on. Half my friends already give me grief about focusing on my studies too much—"

Depressing as this conversation is, Grantaire really wants to know which half. If it's Combeferre, that is a massively hypocritical move.

"Fine," he says. "Your turn."

Enjolras flops back against his seat. "You realized you liked somebody else."

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"The hell," says Grantaire. "Who leaves their boyfriend for some random person who doesn't even like them back? Fuck it, man, we'll just tell them you weren't ready to get serious—"

"Have you met me," says Enjolras.

"We really should've built some problems into this pretend relationship," Grantaire mutters. "Maybe if we acted like you got tired of my bullshit—"

Enjolras makes a irritated noise. "Why does the breakup have to be my fault?"

Because Grantaire is really relying on his friends' sympathy to get him through this, and that goes out the window if Grantaire is the one who walks out. Because the idea of Grantaire somehow,
improbably catching hold of Enjolras's affections and then throwing it all away is ludicrous.

"Fine," says Grantaire. "We broke up because I was stealing from you. Because a witch's curse removed my ability to love. Because it turned out I wasn’t a person at all, just a swarm of sentient bees in a trenchcoat."

"Can you please—" Enjolras hisses, and Grantaire cuts him off.

"I made the last two serious suggestions anyway," he says. "So if you've got something—"

"We could always." Enjolras twists the seatbelt back and forth. "We could always just—say it's too painful to talk about, when people ask."

It's simple. It's elegant. It doesn't force their friends to take sides. Nobody's cheating or stealing or bees. He nods, trying it out in his head.

"Do you like it?" says Enjolras.

This is their last ride home together. It's their last time alone in the van. It's their last time alone ever.

Grantaire swallows. "I like it," he says.

When Grantaire gets back home, he doesn't even bother to take his pants off before flopping into bed. He doesn't have anywhere to be until tomorrow night. It feels like he could sleep through his entire senior year if he wasn't careful, which means, he thinks, he should probably go ahead and set an alarm for tomorrow night. His last thought before he nods off is to congratulate himself on having such foresight.

He wakes up because Eponine is poking him in the face.

"Huh?" he manages.

"Your phone's out of battery," she says. "I tried calling you twice, and then I let myself in."

"Oh shit, is it prom yet?" says Grantaire, throwing off the covers.

Through the window, the sky is very blue. "Saturday morning," she says. "I'm here for my dress?"

"Yeah." He stretches, watching Eponine gather up her bundle of shiny taffeta. He lost almost a full 24 hours, he realizes, including all of Eponine and Gavroche’s first night at their new setup. "Hey, how was it at la casa de Feuilly?"

"Loud," says Eponine. "I'm sharing a room with a five-year-old. Her hobbies are yelling and smearing grape jelly on all my shit."

"Watch out for ants, dude."

"I know," she says. "And oh my god, it's so dumb. The parents, they make you, like, tell them before you leave the house. Every single time. Like we're in school or something."
Grantaire turns this over in his mind. "So, are you guys gonna stay, or—"

"Well, yeah," she says, and the 'duh' is implied in the lift of her eyebrows.

"And you're okay?" says Grantaire.

Eponine sighs. "I—yeah. I mean, I keep thinking of things I should've saved from the fire, like, waking up in the middle of the night, 'Damn, why didn't I think to grab that?' It would've taken ten extra seconds to—god, there's so much stuff I could've sold on eBay," she says. "Heirlooms and shit."

He doesn't really know what to say to that, and Eponine adds, "I should get going. Musichetta's waiting outside."

"Yeah," he says.

She glances in the direction of the driveway and then back to him. "You need help with your tux or anything?"

"I'm seventeen," says Grantaire. "Why can't you take it on faith that I can dress myself?"

"Cause you've never shown signs of it yet. Why don't you ever wear that shirt?"

He frowns down at his clothes. "It's too bright."

"It's a muted green," she says flatly.

"Searing my eyeballs."

"Someday I will get you to wear an actual color," says Eponine. "Yo, don't forget about Sunday. This five-year-old demon baby is making me wanna shoot something. Like, more than usual."

"Won't," he says. The thought of consuming way too much sugar and losing to Eponine at videogames is a life raft and he's clinging hard. "See you in, like, seven hours, I guess—"

"Six and a half, yeah." She pauses in the door. "Hey, are you ready?"

"For what?"

"Oh, y'know," says Eponine, "the most magical night of our fucking lives."

For all his bravado about being able to dress himself, Grantaire really should've sucked it up and asked for Eponine's help. He's just proud of himself for remembering black socks go with black shoes and black pants. Trying to tie a tie feels like a spatial reasoning problem, and one that he's failing.

Grantaire tries tying it in the mirror, he tries taking it off and doing the knot head-on—he even, in a last-ditch effort, tries tying it with his eyes shut, but it is a colossal no go.

The clock is telling him he's got about five minutes if he doesn't want to be late for Courfeyrac's, and Grantaire finally gives up and just drapes the thing around his neck. Presumably he knows at least one person who will be better at this shit than him. It's almost impossible to imagine otherwise.
He steps back and studies the rest of his reflection. The bruise has faded since Monday, but it's noticeable up close and it most definitely does not make him look like James Bond. His hair is a mess because his hair is always a mess. It's a property of his hair and nothing can be done about that, other than maybe hoping it's okay to wear a hat to prom.

Thankfully, the suit has done nothing but hang in his closet since his uncle's wedding, so it's not wrinkled or anything. It's weird to put on something he knows he hasn't worn in nearly a year. For one thing, the fact that it still fits him is ironclad evidence that he hasn’t gotten even slightly taller. He flops his arms around, trying to get used to the feel of the jacket, which is awfully confining compared to a sweatshirt.

"Who invented you, tuxedo," he mutters into the mirror. "And why."

The weird thing is, even though he's the exact same size as before, it feels like the suit hangs better on him. He's not sure why. It's probably not a mystery, just the way he's holding his shoulders. Back at his uncle's wedding, all he'd wanted to do was disappear. A week of not wanting to give people the option of looking away from his black eye has forced him to learn how to stand straighter.

"Style tip," he tells his reflection. "Get the shit beaten out of you, and then get pissed off about it."

He's got his keys, his wallet, his phone, and at this point maybe thirty seconds to make it on time, which means no more excuses to drag his feet, he thinks, heading out through the kitchen.

"Grantaire?"

Oh, shit. He turns around slowly.

His mom must've just gotten in from a run, because she's wearing jogging clothes and her breathing is ragged. She's giving him a confused look.

"What," he says.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

Grantaire doesn't even try for sarcasm. His parents have never really gotten his sense of humor. "Prom. Remember, you gave me money for a ticket?"

She has to remember this happening, but she won't stop looking at him. It's like she can't get over the surprise of seeing him in a suit of his own free will. He wonders what she thought he was planning to actually use the money for. Hosting a keg party. Starting up a meth lab.

"Who are you going with?" she says. Grantaire stares at her but it doesn't feel pointed. It doesn't feel like she's trying to interrogate him, just make smalltalk. Awkward, excruciating smalltalk.

His keys slide out of his hands and land loudly on the counter. "Uh, you wouldn't know them," he stammers.

She hasn’t nodded and walked past him yet. It's so weird.

"Your, uh, your girlfriend?" she says.

"Who?"

"The, uh, the sullen girl with all the eye makeup—"

That can only mean one person, but it snags at him to hear someone talk about Eponine that way. He
eyes the clock above the oven and yeah, he is officially late because his mom chose today of all days to inexplicably try for some kind of Hallmark moment.

"She's not my girlfriend," he says.

"Come on," says his mom knowingly, "she's over here all the time."

He can't say quite what it is, but suddenly he's furious. "Actually," he says, "actually, if you're curious or something, I'm going with—you met his mom once. Enjolras. My boyfriend?"

His throat is dry. Even as he watches her face crumple, he can't quite believe he said it out loud, that he can't take it back, that there's nothing left to do but ride out the shockwaves.

"Oh," she says. "Um. Are you—"

Grantaire swallows. "Dating a guy? Yeah."

"How, uh." One hand goes to her face, where it hovers, useless. "How long have you known?"

He closes his eyes. "A long time. Like, years."

When he opens them again, she's still looking at him. "Oh sweetie," she says softly. She takes a step forward, and she's covered in sweat, which means if she hugs him he'll have to change and it'll make him even later, but he can make it work, he thinks, he'll find a way. "Is that why—"

"What?" he says, blinking hard. His chest aches. "What, Mom?"

"Is that why your grades—"

Grantaire freezes. His eyeballs won't work for a long moment, won't focus on anything. He swallows again.

"Wow," says Grantaire loudly. "Wow. God, why I am surprised?" That's the part that gets him, the way he thought for a moment this could be something else. He's been around way too many chill adults lately.

"I only meant—"

He's so angry he's shaking. "No, trust me, I get what you meant," he says. "I tell you something like that, I come in here with a bruise on my face, but hey, let's talk about my ninth grade GPA. Like, priorities, right?"

“What’s.” She squints in the unlit kitchen, frowning. “Is that a black eye?”

“It’s been there since Monday,” he yells.

“Don’t use that tone, I haven’t seen you in a week,” she says. “What happened to your eye?”

"No," he says. "No, you know what? I think this all works a lot better when we just don't talk to each other. We had a system, and it was going great, so let's just forget this happened, and—" He crosses the kitchen, adrenaline sour in his bloodstream.

"Do you—" she starts. When he turns around, she’s still standing in the middle of the tile floor, sweating from her run. It must be windy out, because her hair is sticking up in every direction. “Do you want me to get your tie for you?”
“No thanks,” says Grantaire, “I’ve kinda learned to rely on other people.”

He's reached the door. He whisks it open. Slamming doors is childish and cliched but he's looking forward to the sound, to shaking the frames of this goddamn house.

"Wait—" she says.

"What," he bites out.

"Your keys."

They're sitting where he left them on the kitchen counter. He stalks over, grabs them, and does what he should've done the second he heard her voice: he flees.

It's a bad idea to drive when you're drunk, everyone knows that. It's probably also a bad idea to drive when your hands aren't steady enough to fit the key into the ignition. Grantaire takes a deep breath. He squeezes the steering wheel. In the rearview mirror, his eyes are red but not as bad as they could be.

He hates feeling this stupid: for getting all worked up, for raising his voice, for fucking up his own exit like that, for turning down her help with his damn tie. He had the option of not rolling up all sloppy and unprepared and asking favors when he's already late—

He breathes out and in again. It's a necktie, it's not a national tragedy. Musichetta went to Catholic school at some point, he's pretty sure. She'll be able to fix it for him. She'll do the knot like it's absolutely nothing, joking about helpless white boys the whole time, and then Joly will make a pun about tuxes, somehow, and Combeferre will have an obscure fact about the history of men's dress clothes, and who even knows what Jehan will be wearing—

This time, he gets the key in on his first try. He backs out of the driveway and away from that house, rolls down the windows, and cranks the volume on the stereo until he can feel the bass in the soles of his feet.

The most magical night of our fucking lives.

“Alright,” he mutters, “let the magic begin.”

Chapter End Notes

Admittedly, at this point I am the girl who cried wolf (or, like, the girl who cried "Surely this story will be done in 10 chapters!" "Surely at 58K it is halfway over!" "Okay, but it definitely won't be more than thirteen chapters!") but guys, guys, this time I am relatively sure there is one chapter left.

Also, um. I am gonna be out of the country from the 8th to the 14th, which means I can't
100% guarantee I will be able to get chapter 16 up on time.

I will work VERY hard to try to keep to the schedule, but this means writing and editing at a pace I've never been able to maintain before. So just to make sure I don't wind up forcing myself to post something rushed and unpolished or, y'know, crying a lot, gonna go ahead and say that while normally I update every other Sunday, Chapter 16 may be up to a week late. I really really really don't want it to be, but it may be. Sorry!
"Grantaire!" Joly shouts when Grantaire walks in. "Guys, look who’s here!" He lifts his head from the depths of Courfeyrac’s couch, gestures with his cane like an old-timey auctioneer. Somebody has fastened a small bunch of flowers and a polka-dotted bowtie around the handle, which is to say, even Joly’s cane is better-dressed than Grantaire.

Through a chorus of greetings, Grantaire blurts out, "Musichetta, you know how ties work, right?"

"Hi to you too," says Eponine, on Musichetta’s other side. Bossuet and Bahorel are busy hanging off the arm of the couch, cracking each other up about something, but Musichetta gives Grantaire an odd look and he realizes it might be traditional to say hi to the person you're supposedly dating first.

He casts around for Enjolras, tucked into a smaller couch with Combeferre and Jehan. Judging from their posture, which is about half sitting, half football huddle, they'd been discussing Serious Issues before his big entrance.

Grantaire waves. "Hey."

"Hey," says Enjolras.

Grantaire has the sense that doesn’t count as enough of a real conversation, so he crosses the room to join them. Jehan’s outfit is disappointingly normal—everything fits right and nothing is hideous, in a way that kind of suggests an outside hand—but on second glance, he’s wearing the shoes Grantaire drew on, the “take your bigotry and cram it” florals, along with clashing checkered socks. What a cool kid.

“So, uh,” Enjolras starts.

“So sorry I’m so late,” Grantaire says breathlessly.

“Bahorel’s girlfriend’s later than you,” says Jehan with a shrug. “The one who ‘goes to a different school’,” he adds, sarcastic quote marks plain in his voice.

“I am telling you guys, my girlfriend exists, okay?” Bahorel shouts, laughing, from the other side of the room. “If Ashley’s not real, who have I been making out with all this time—”

The suggestions fly fast and loud, too much for Grantaire to follow. He knows, because Bahorel
does not stop talking about her if the subject comes up, that half the group has met this girl. Their skepticism has the feel of an inside joke constructed before Grantaire’s time. It’s not a game he can play.

“Uh,” he says.

“You look nice,” Enjolras says dutifully. He could be reading it from a card.

It’s windy enough outside that if anything, the trip from his van to the door made Grantaire’s hair worse. His tie is still draped limply around his neck like a feather boa that gave up. But Enjolras is right; this is what a person says to their prom date. It’s as if they’re trapped in a scripted scene, or a cuckoo clock—there’s a path to follow, lines and actions spinning on gears beyond their control.

Was he supposed to get Enjolras flowers? There definitely seems to be an above average amount of flowers in the room, but since nobody’s going home between here and the dance, he doesn’t see the point in making someone carry around a bouquet all night.

"Thanks-you-too," Grantaire recites, craning his neck to track down Musichetta.

“I can get that for you, if you want,” says Enjolras. “The tie.”

Grantaire turns back around. ‘Of course you can,’ he thinks, with a snideness that even he can tell is completely unfair.

He nods and Enjolras unfolds himself, looking somehow taller than usual in his suit. He also looks deeply uncomfortable—he keeps tugging at the ends of his sleeves and hunching his shoulders and shifting around like somebody’s cat shoved into a doll’s sweater. It’s reassuring on some level that Grantaire is not the only person who hasn’t gotten the hang of the whole tux thing yet. It also makes eye contact marginally easier than if Enjolras was lounging around like a male model.

Enjolras frowns, absently worrying at the hem of his jacket. “By the lamp, maybe? So I can see.”

“Makes sense.” Grantaire lets himself be steered into the light, stands as still as he can with Enjolras this intent on him. Or intent on his clothes, but Grantaire’s nerves can’t tell the difference. They aren’t touching but Grantaire can sense it, the fingers tugging gently at his collar.

It brings them uncomfortably close, although of course they’ve been closer before. It feels different in full daylight, though. There’s a moment where he looks up and Enjolras is holding one end of the tie in each hand, lips parted in concentration, and Grantaire thinks, ‘If we were doing this for real, this is where I’d kiss you’ and then Enjolras’s eyes flicker towards his and Grantaire has to look away.

He dedicates himself to memorizing the wood grain of the floor, mapping the lines and swirls. The rest of the room is too chaotic to focus on, too full of motion. Someone is chasing someone, there’s a blur of color and mixed laughter.

“Can you, uh, tilt your chin up,” says Enjolras. “Can’t quite see what I’m—”

“Yeah.” Grantaire tips his head back, shifts his attention to the ceiling, which offers unfortunately less in the way of distraction.

Enjolras doesn’t seem to be having much success. Grantaire can tell he’s trying to make some kind of loop or twist or something, but he keeps pausing in the middle and then starting again.

“It’s just this one part I’m having trouble with,” he explains.
“It’s okay,” says Grantaire, tracing the trim that runs along the top of the wall. He could pretend he was annoyed but the truth is, standing here quietly is a lot easier than diving into the party and doing his best impression of a person whose life is going great.

Part of him hopes it takes Enjolras another ten minutes to figure out the knot. Long enough for some more deep breaths, long enough to call up anything good a person’s ever said about him and wrap it around himself like a coat.

“I only learned how to do this yesterday,” says Enjolras, apologetic.

Grantaire tries to remember the next step of a conversation like this, what he’d say if he was going to say something normal and calm. “Did your dad teach you?”

“Looked it up on YouTube,” Enjolras says. “The directions weren’t very clear, so I had to keep pausing, but I did figure it out after a while.”

The mental image of Enjolras alone in his room, tirelessly practicing his double windsor for tonight and scrutinizing video footage to make sure he had it right, makes Grantaire smile.

He wishes he’d never mentioned Enjolras to his mom. If he was going to blow up at her, he could’ve found another way to say he was bi. There wasn’t any reason to sully his sham relationship by dragging it into this mess.

Enjolras sighs. “You can look down again, it didn’t help.”

Grantaire traces the circuit of the trim a third time. His eyes are starting to burn from forcing them to keep to the edges of his vision, but it’s still the best plan available. “I’m good,” he croaks.

“Don’t worry, I’m gonna figure this out,” says Enjolras.

“Take your time.”

“Maybe if—” There’s some kind of wrapping or tucking motion near Grantaire’s throat, and then Enjolras says, “Ha!”, triumphant, and on instinct, Grantaire glances back up to see his victorious grin. It falters almost immediately. “Everything okay?” says Enjolras.

“Why?”

“Uh, your eyes are kind of red.”

“Are you asking if I’m high?” Grantaire says, bristling.

“Is that what I said?”

Grantaire takes a step back and rubs at his eyes. “No,” he mumbles. “It’s, uh—I kind of, came out to my mom and it didn’t—” At that, Enjolras lets the tie drop, whatever progress he’d made slipping away into the ether. “It could’ve gone worse but it didn’t go, like super great either, so—”

“Why, what’d she do?” Enjolras asks in a low voice. His hands are on Grantaire’s shoulders. “Do you need a place to stay?”

“No.” Grantaire tries to match his volume. “I’m not disowned. She didn’t shout or anything. I mean, really, nothing’s changed, but like.” Nobody’s watching them, tucked away in the side of the room, but when his throat tightens, he is acutely aware that they’re not really in private either. He breathes, shuddery. “She wasn’t, she didn’t say anything homophobic, she just, y’know, didn’t say anything
good, either.”

Enjolras’s mouth tightens in distaste. “Did she say anything at all?”

“She asked if that’s why I flunked a grade,” he says.

“What the fuck,” says Enjolras. Grantaire briefly considers making a joke, not that he’s sure what it would be, since the hilarity is not exactly flowing, but he can’t look Enjolras in the eye and manage anything light-hearted, because Enjolras has this expression like he was just punched in the face. His posture has gone tense, grip tightening unconsciously.

“Anything I can,” Enjolras starts. He makes a face. “Of course, it’s not like there’s anything I can do to make it better, but is there, I don’t know—”

“Uh, man.” Grantaire scratches at the back of his neck. “Man, I dunno.” Maybe he should feel weird asking, but with Enjolras’s impromptu accidental shoulder massage, they’re already halfway there. “A hug?”

Enjolras is a quick learner, Grantaire thinks, watching him step forward, arms out. On Thursday, he was so hyper-cautious at the start, it was like being held by a shy ghost. A good hug takes commitment. Maybe it’s not surprising then, that Enjolras got the hang of it so soon, how to judge the correct amount of pressure, tucked snug against each other. Even getting a faceful of dress shirt doesn’t totally ruin it.

“Not everyone is your parents, y’know?” says Grantaire quietly.

“Not everyone is your parents, either,” Enjolras says, more or less into Grantaire’s hair, and that’s like a second hug.

“Statistically, you’re right,” Grantaire mumbles.

“I know that you’ve said I’m not your shrink—” Enjolras seems to be choosing his words with extreme care. “But have you ever maybe thought about going to an actual therapist, because that is not—that’s not a reasonable reaction—”

Grantaire’s bark of laughter is loud enough that Cosette looks over from where she’s talking with Courfeyrac and Marius. It is not the most unhinged sound he’s ever made, but he doubts it would rank in his all-time normal laughs, either.

Volume control. Of course. “Way ahead of you,” he says to Enjolras’s probably rightly concerned silence. “That’s, um, why I was late yesterday, I wound up, like, making an appointment with Mr. Myriel.”

“That’s good.” Enjolras pulls back to give him a look that is almost too earnest to handle. “That’s—a really smart idea. Everything I’ve heard about your family—”

“Not for that,” says Grantaire, automatic. Only then does he recognize the pickle he’s put himself in. “For, uh, other stuff,” he finishes dully.

Enjolras nods. “Yeah, your self esteem issues?”

“My what?”

“Okay,” says Enjolras. “Something else, then.”
“I don’t have low self-esteem,” Grantaire insists. “I’ve read a whole pamphlet about it in the nurse’s office—”

“Grantaire, that pamphlet was written in the Reagan administration,” says Enjolras, and it’s not like Grantaire didn’t notice that the art direction is way behind the times but he’s not sure quite how much has changed about, like, human nature. “Nobody knew anything back then,” Enjolras adds, with absolute assurance. “They elected Reagan.”

Grantaire pulls him back into that hug because hiding his face in Enjolras’s chest means he’s in the clear to go ahead with whatever kind of ridiculous, sappy smile his face feels like forming.

“What’re you two doing over there?” Courfeyrac calls.

“Practicing our slow-dance,” says Grantaire. He moves them back and forth in something like a rhythm and Enjolras lets himself be swayed as Grantaire hums the first melody he can think of, which might be a carpeting jingle actually, but it’s too late, he chose this road. Grantaire does not listen to a lot of whatever it is people slow dance to.

“Well, tear yourselves away from each other for like, a second, because the imaginary girlfriend is pulling up,” says Musichetta from the window.

Bahorel’s girlfriend is round and freckled and her hair has been dyed purple due to some bet or dare that Bahorel welched on, to her endless amusement.

"You owe me so many favors," Ashley keeps saying all the way to Courfeyrac’s foyer, because apparently it's too windy to take prom photos outside. "So many favors. Undisclosed favors."

Grantaire thinks that sounds ominous, but Bahorel only turns to grin at her and say, "Ooh, undisclosed."

"Not a euphemism," she's saying, and then without warning, the two of them are making out against a wall, rattling the framed photos of Courfeyrac’s family in matching Christmas sweaters. It’s hard to know where to look. Everyone else walks by them with a jaded calm. Ashley seems like a lovely girl but Grantaire is suddenly very glad she goes to a different school.

In the foyer, there’s more milling around while Courfeyrac’s mom tracks down the good camera, and Musichetta knots Grantaire’s tie correctly on the first try—carrying on an animated conversation with Bossuet the whole time, which frankly feels like showing off.

“Hey,” Musichetta says, when she’s finished and Grantaire is left worrying at his collar, which feels too tight now no matter what she insists or how many times she calls him a baby. “R, where’s your boutonniere?”

Grantaire stops tugging. “Where’s my what?”

“The little flower pin thing you give a dude,” says Joly, nodding at the blooms on his cane.

“Like, a corsage?” says Grantaire. “Isn’t that a dating-a-girl thing?”

“Girls get corsages, boys get boutonnieres,” Courfeyrac explains.
“Why?”

“I don’t know, gender roles?” says Musichetta.

Looking around the group, it dawns on Grantaire that everyone else seems to have the flower situation firmly handled—even Eponine, who would certainly have an excuse to not be on top of that business. The blossom she gave Bossuet is made of duct tape, the kind she was folding in Enjolras’s room, but it actually looks cool, like a robot flower. Cosette got Marius some kind of soft baby blue thing, Jehan and Courfeyrac have matching ones, presumably because they bought them at the same time in some sort of obnoxiously cute date situation, and Ashley cheerfully hands Bahorel something that involves a chopped up lei and a lot of glitter glue.

(“It’s a statement,” says Ashley when Bahorel peers down at it, “about the artificiality of—”

Bahorel laughs. “It’s a statement that someone needs to take your bedazzler away.”

“Never,” she says and then they’re making out against the door and Grantaire is searching for any other place to direct his eyes.)

“Uh, I didn’t get you a fancy flower pin,” Grantaire tells Enjolras with a wince. “Sorry.”

Enjolras shrugs, hands in his pockets. “It’s okay, I didn’t get you one either.”

Musichetta giggles. “Wow, you two. Saved by your own mutual obliviousness, it’s unbelievable—”

“See, this is why you’re meant to be together,” says Jehan. “Sitting around, forgetting your own anniversary for years to come—”

“Where’s Feuilly?” says Grantaire abruptly and only a little to change the subject.

“Weekend camping trip with the foster-parents,” says Eponine. “Gavroche is going too. They offered to let me come, but it was like,” she weighs two invisible options with her hands, “go to prom or pee in the woods, so—”

“The classic dilemma,” he agrees. “Although, there’s trees pretty nearby, so it’s not like you need to choose. Sucks about Feuilly, though.”

“Feuilly’s into it,” she says. “Boy Scout shit.”

“So he ditched us at the last minute for peeing in the woods?” Grantaire shakes his head as Cosette mutters,

“There are, you know, other camping activities—”

“Oh, no, it’s been in the works forever,” says Bahorel, surfacing for air at long last. There’s lip gloss all over his face.

“You knew this,” says Enjolras.

“No I didn’t,” Grantaire insists.

Enjolras raises his eyebrows in a way that feels meaningful. “That he was going to be away for prom?” he says, and Grantaire remembers in a hurry. Feuilly’s absence this weekend was the only reason Enjolras didn’t pick him as the fake boyfriend, way back when.

If Feuilly’s foster parents had gone camping some other week, Grantaire wouldn’t even be here. If
Marius wasn’t terrible at secrets, he’d be the one not-exchanging boutonnieres with Enjolras right now. If Joly hadn’t already agreed to go with Musichetta. If Bahorel hadn’t met Ashley yet. If Combeferre hadn’t been planning on asking out some girl. If Craigslist had felt slightly less shady.

It’s dizzying. All of the past two and a half months are built on such random, flimsy foundations. It’s like being cast in a play because the director decided to fling darts at a phone book.

He is deeply thankful when Courfeyrac’s mom emerges from a side room with the good camera and a toothy grin. “Group photos, kids, let’s get cracking!”

Grantaire’s not sure if anyone has ever taken a photo of the entire ABC before. Probably the closest thing is that drawing he made at the meeting yesterday, not that anybody saw it besides Eponine. All he can think, as Courfeyrac’s mom attempts to herd them all into frame, is that he hopes an ABC superhero team would be better at fighting evildoers than it is at standing in a straight line.

There’s so many of them, they have to pack in close to make the shot. It’s uncomfortable and boring and it takes way, way, too long because people keep blinking or talking or sneezing, but Grantaire doesn’t hate it, standing elbow to elbow with these kids, trying not to laugh at Joly’s dumb science puns, trying to remain neutral in Bahorel’s covert tickle war and convince Courfeyrac to stop messing with his hair.

Couples photos, though. There’s an agony Grantaire somehow failed to foresee.

“Enjolras, can you put your hand on his waist?” says Courfeyrac’s mom. “Step closer to each other, come on. You can’t scandalize me, you’ve met my son.”

Grantaire shuffles a half-step back in his shiny useless dress shoes, but Enjolras stays exactly where he is, so when his arm stretches forward, they look less like prom dates and more like the saddest two-person conga line in the world. Enjolras’s hand isn’t on Grantaire’s waist; it’s hovering too lightly to feel through the suit jacket. Grantaire has done enough acting to be able to tell when a scene isn’t hitting the right marks, and they are bombing right now.

He knows this even before the heckling starts. “Boo,” says Bahorel, goodnatured, “enough of the irony thing, do this for real.”

Grantaire’s not trying to hold up the process, and he certainly doesn’t want to drag it out, standing here in front of all their friends, waiting for this painful sham to be frozen forever on film.

“If you’re not comfortable—” Courfeyrac’s mom starts.

“Ten minutes ago, you couldn’t pry them apart,” says Musichetta. “Guys, c’mon, you were like, just touching so much more than this, so—”

Grantaire doesn’t know how to tell her that the hugging didn’t make this easier for him, that if anything it’s harder now to step back into the role they set for themselves two and a half months ago, to take a step closer with everyone watching and pose within the stiff, awkward circle of Enjolras’s arm like it’s all perfectly natural, like it’s nothing. The suit fabric of Enjolras’s sleeve rustles against the suit fabric of Grantaire’s jacket, slick and unfamiliar. His shoes pinch and the tie is choking him. The overhead light shines down on them, too bright and far too focused.

“Can you guys maybe try to smile?” says Courfeyrac’s mom, with such hope and patience that Grantaire’s heart goes out to her.

Unfortunately, that feeling doesn’t translate into better control of his smile. On the second try, he manages to unstick his lips from his teeth, but he doesn’t need a mirror to know it lands in grimace
territory.

Eponine rolls her eyes. “Oh my god, there are so many more of these to get through, and I’m so hungry, can you guys just—”

“Give them a break,” Jehan says. “Maybe if we stopped all staring at them—”

“Can we have a see?” says Grantaire, and Courfeyrac’s mom obligingly sets the camera down. “Hey.” Grantaire turns to whisper to Enjolras. “I was just thinking, do we even need to take this picture? Like, who’s gonna want a copy?”

Enjolras considers this. “My parents,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” Grantaire whispers back, “but—not like they’ll want one after tonight, right? So what does it matter?”

Enjolras’s mouth twitches downwards. “If you can find a way to explain that to everyone—” and yeah, Grantaire’s got nothing. Enjolras sighs. “Your tie is crooked,” he mutters.

“Can’t be, Musichetta just fixed it for me,” says Grantaire. He has been picking at it, though. He doesn’t have the self-discipline not to. Maybe he needs one of those cones like dogs get after surgery. He reaches up to fix it, aligns the knot with the notch in his collarbone since surely that’s got to put it in the center.

“Sorry I couldn’t get it,” Enjolras says. “I really did try,” and if this is how much he beats himself up about failing to correctly make a knot in a decorative piece of fabric, a knot he’d learned less than 24 hours ago, his disgust at not being able to psychically ferret out Eponine’s family drama makes a sliver more sense.

“Don’t worry, not like I could do it either,” Grantaire points out. “You managed your own, at least.”

Enjolras shrugs. “Thanks for the cider,” he says. “From yesterday. I was meaning to say.”

“Well, thanks for finally letting me pay for something,” says Grantaire. Enjolras hums, noncommittal. It can only mean one thing. “Oh my god, is the money for that cider hidden somewhere in my car?”

“How would I have managed that?” says Enjolras, biting his lip. “I was barely awake.”

“I know better than to doubt your powers.” In a half-hearted attempt to prepare the van for impersonating a limo, Grantaire had cleared all the clutter out before changing clothes. No bills had surfaced, and few hiding places remain. “Is it jammed into a seatbelt buckle? Is it under the floor mat? Is it wedged into the engine?”

“So, to be clear, you’re suggesting that while the car was going at least thirty miles an hour, I climbed out a closed window, opened the hood of your van, and took the time to wrap three dollars around part of the machine powering the car—”

“See,” says Grantaire, “you say that, and all I hear is the lack of a firm denial—”

Enjolras shakes his head. “I’m not a ninja, Grantaire. Reel it back in—”

His mouth is way too close to amused for that to be anything but a pun.

‘Reel it in,’ Grantaire mouths. A second later, the pieces come together. “Oh my god,” he says, delighted despite himself, “you weirdo, you hid it in the tape deck!”
“It’s not hiding if I tell you,” says Enjolras with great dignity, except he’s grinning too, like the force of Grantaire’s smile is pulling it out of him. “But that would be a pretty clever play—”

“How much of tonight is just tape puns?” Grantaire asks. “I need to know right now, okay, I need to prepare—”

“Okay, you guys are done,” says Cosette.

Grantaire starts. He peers over at her. “What?”

At some point since Grantaire sort of temporarily forgot there were other people in the room, Courfeyrac’s mom found the time to pick up her camera again. She holds it in the air.

“But we didn’t—”


The whole messy, frustrating, bizarre spectacle of the last two and a half months might be worth it for the chance to watch from the driver’s seat as twelve people squeeze themselves into a six-passenger van. Grantaire has a newfound respect for clown cars, which is a sentence he never saw himself thinking.

The fact that everyone’s in formalwear really adds something. It feels much more intentional, watching them scramble in tuxes and tulle and impractical shoes. Less like teenage shenanigans, and more like the first step of some elaborate high-stakes con, or a wedding gone badly awry.

Literally every person in the van manages to step on Eponine’s dress on their way in. Marius disappears into a pile of flailing limbs and, mysteriously, reemerges with glitter in his hair. Musichetta loses an earring and then finds it again in Bossuet’s shoe. Bahorel offers to ride on the roof so many times that it starts to feel less like a joke and more like he may genuinely not realize he isn’t Spiderman.

For reasons nobody seems to be able to articulate, prom is at the Lithuanian Cultural Heritage Center.

“Are we sure?” Grantaire says. He means both “is this the right venue?” and also “are we confident Lithuania is a real country?” because no matter how hard he racks his brain, Grantaire can’t bring up one concrete detail about it. Feuilly would be able to put this to rest, Grantaire thinks sadly. Shame he’s not here.

“It’s been in the announcements so many times,” Combeferre puts forth mildly from the back, where he and Enjolras are double belted.

Grantaire opens his mouth but Enjolras beats him to the punch: “He doesn’t listen to morning announcements.”


“Grantaire, I will give you forty dollars if you can guess our prom theme,” says Courfeyrac.
It’s tempting. Grantaire owes slushies to an ever-increasing number of people. “Uh, Lithuania?” he tries.

“Turn left up here,” says Musichetta from the passenger seat.

“Two more guesses,” says Joly from her lap.

“Oh man.” Grantaire spins the wheel. “I’m gonna say, ‘high school’? Or wait, ‘Love’? ‘Bad decision-making’?”

“That’s not a theme, that’s a summary,” Jehan’s voice drifts up from the floor. He’d opted to skip all the double-belting in favor of lying on his belly, one arm looped around Courfeyrac’s ankle for stability.

“C’mon,” says Grantaire, “does everyone else seriously know this?”

“I know it, and I don’t even go here,” says Ashley, mouth briefly detached from Bahorel’s again.

“Give me a hint, someone,” says Grantaire.

“What do kids like?” Cosette prompts, and Grantaire leaps to the challenge.

“Candy? Ninja Turtles? Making fart sounds with their hands?”

Eponine just sighs. “You are gonna be so disappointed.”

At the very least, the building is real, and it’s way nicer than the school gym. There’s a chandelier in the lobby, and nothing smells like decades of stale sweat. Someone has put up a big sign that announces in construction paper letters, “COLUMBUS HIGH SCHOOL PROM - A NIGHT OF FAIRYTALE ROMANCE.” Beneath it is a drawing of a castle. The castle has cartoony eyes and a wide grin. Grantaire’s nightmares will be many and lingering.

“C’mon, guys,” says Cosette, pulling a digital camera out of her tiny wrist-purse. “Let’s get another picture before we go in!”

If Grantaire can avoid a repeat of the debacle at Courfeyrac’s house, God willing, he will. “We just took pictures,” he whines. “Why do we need more? Our faces haven’t changed between, like, dinner and now.”

“Let the woman take a picture,” Eponine snaps. Grantaire turns to blink at her, and in so doing, actually looks at her for the first time tonight.

“Shit, dude, your dress,” he says. Grantaire has witnessed every stage of its creation, which mostly involved Eponine slicing up thrift store gowns and then sewing things together while swearing, but he hadn’t stopped to appreciate, really, that at the end of the process she was going to have something she could wear on her body, like actual clothes. He doesn’t know what the terms are for this kind of shit, but Eponine’s dress is definitely actual clothes. “You’re like an evil queen in a YA novel.”

“That was the goal,” Eponine mutters. “Pretty much. Hey, are we taking this damn picture or what?”

In the frantic flurry of motion and cat-herding that follows, Grantaire thinks about how awkward his
presence is gonna make all these photos after tonight. His face in the lineup will mar every keepsake, turn it into a reminder of a relationship about to expire.

“I can take the photo,” says Grantaire. “Cosette, get in there.”

“I should,” says Combeferre. “Since I’m the only one in the group who’s, uh, unattached.” He says it like it’s no big deal but he also says it less to the group and more to an abandoned program lying on the floor. It should be comforting in some way to know that Grantaire is not the only person in agony right now. Somehow it is not. They’re both members of the Forlorn Single Losers club, but Grantaire is stuck in the undercover division. He lets Combeferre take the camera. At least it’s a group picture so he can focus most of his attention on giving rabbit ears to Bossuet, and away from Enjolras pressed against his other side.

Grantaire drags his feet on his way to the dance floor—he refuses to call it a ballroom; this is not an Austen novel. He wants to be at the tail end of the group for some reason. Maybe all those meetings left him with a fondness for the back of everyone’s head.

“Hey,” says Eponine in his ear.

“You were right about the theme,” he says.

“Well, obviously.”

“Do you think the people who planned this thing have ever read a fairytale?”

“I know,” she says, “have you seen any wolves yet?”

“Or witches, or trolls or, like Rumplestiltskin,” he agrees. “One of the interesting ones. None of this true love, magic shoes, singing bluebirds horseshit—”

Eponine snorts. “Sure thing, Cinderella.”

The main thing Grantaire and Cinderella have in common is that tonight is running on a countdown. “Mouse footman,” he says. “At best.”

“What are you guys talking about?” says Enjolras, swooping out of absolutely nowhere.

“You two have fun,” Eponine says, and with that, she wanders off like the traitor she is.

Prom is boring. Why had Grantaire never stopped to consider that? The past two and a half months have been a madcap struggle to make it here, but at the end of the day, it’s just a big room full of the people they go to school with, some lame snacks on one side. There should at least be a bouncy castle, he thinks. He got a black eye for this; it doesn’t seem like too much to ask.

Beside him, Enjolras slouches uncomfortably. “Do you—want some punch or something?”

“How about I want something better, like a whole dance floor just to ourselves.”

Grantaire casts around for someone else to talk to—Jehan or Joly or Bahorel—but he hung back too long, they’re lost in the crowd. Probably there are other single people somewhere in the room but all Grantaire can see is wall to wall couples. The air is thick with Axe and perfume. It’s all the irritating parts of regular life but magnified, and in dumber clothes.
Enjolras must notice the couples thing, too, because he reaches down and takes Grantaire’s elbow, as if that is all it takes to blend in, as if it doesn’t make them stand out more.

The DJ is half-asleep at his equipment, blasting away on a playlist of top 40 hits from five years ago. Parent chaperones circle the dancefloor, trying to intervene when the moves get too raunchy, but they’re fighting against a storm of blind, surging hormones. They might as well stop the tide with a kitchen sponge.

Grantaire can only imagine how all the thrusting and ass-shaking must look to Enjolras—a pit of cheaply-scented debauchery. But when he glances over, Enjolras is busy studying the decorations, which are mostly crepe paper. Grantaire feels cheated of the hilariously judgey expression that has got to be his right to witness. Surely that is the main perk of being Enjolras’s prom date in the first place, he tells himself.

“Do you wanna dance?” says Grantaire.

Enjolras startles, because apparently the crepe paper is just that fascinating. “What?”

“Do you wanna—” Grantaire inclines his head towards their bumping, grinding peers, and Enjolras follows the motion and swallows visibly, eyes widening. The very quality of how his arm is wrapped around Grantaire’s arm changes, tenses. “Never mind,” Grantaire says. The sound is absorbed by the noise of the room, the chatter and giggling and outdated bass beats.

“What?”

“It was a joke.” Grantaire is desperate to be heard that he overshoots on volume and almost yells it.

“Okay,” says Enjolras, quiet but distinct, polite. He turns away to stare at the crepe paper some more.

Grantaire twitches. What do people actually do at a prom? ‘Spike the punch bowl’ is the first thing that comes to mind, but Grantaire’s driving. Dancing is officially ruled out, now and forever. It’s too loud to carry on a real conversation, and anyway, what is there left to say? Grantaire is out of lines. The machinery of prom ground them together and then left them stranded here, no instructions. He wishes, for the millionth time, that he was at least wearing comfortable shoes.

Enjolras says nothing. They’re standing arm in arm in the middle of a crowded room and nobody is watching them. They have maybe four hours left of their pretend relationship, but there’s nothing left to act out, no goals, no audience and no point.

Grantaire yanks his elbow free. Enjolras looks down at him. The room is full of girls in brightly colored dresses and boys in dark suits, and it’s all kind of warping together in Grantaire’s vision, a kaleidoscope with a terrible soundtrack.

“I’m gonna,” Grantaire says. He jerks his arm behind himself. “I’m gonna be back in five minutes, I just have to, uh, go to the bathroom or something—”

“What?” Enjolras says again, like an old person.

“Back in a sec,” Grantaire yells, although in the final few hours of this sham, he can’t think why it would matter.

Enjolras nods and Grantaire barely sees it, already shoving his way to freedom.
There is a side hallway, off the main entrance, that is nothing but display cases full of information about Lithuania. At the moment, it is Grantaire’s favorite place on earth. It’s got a lot of selling points: it’s cool and quiet, and nobody can look at his eyes or fail to get his jokes or say anything about the way he rests his forehead against the smooth, chilly glass.

Lithuania is a small country in Northern Europe. It’s bordered by Latvia, Belarus, Poland, and Russia. It is home to nearly three million people, and Grantaire feels an embarrassed pang for never having known about them before now. It doesn’t seem right that he could live for seventeen years and miss stuff like that, entire countries. He has a sudden, queasy sense of just how little of the world he’ll ever experience, a paper-thin wedge: the billions of people he won’t meet, all the places he’ll never go.

He shivers. How long has he been out here? He didn’t think to check his phone first, so he has no way of knowing, and no way of guessing how much longer he can stay until it becomes a problem. He’d fake some fast-acting stomach flu except he’s everyone’s ride home.

He uncrosses his arms, moves on to the next display case.

“What are you doing,” someone hisses behind him, and Grantaire jumps before he realizes that it’s just Jehan.

“Did you know Lithuania was the first Soviet republic to declare independence?” says Grantaire.

“Everybody knows that,” says Jehan, dismissive. “I meant, what happened back there?”

Grantaire closes his eyes and sighs. “Nothing,” he says as Jehan pulls a phone from his pocket and starts typing. “What’re you doing?”

Jehan doesn’t look away from the screen. “Letting people know I found you, since the last time you disappeared with no warning was enough of that to last us all forever.” He types for a long time. He’s a very slow texter. After an eon, he puts away the phone and frowns at Grantaire. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” says Grantaire.

“Are you and Enjolras fighting?”

“No.”

“Because I saw you shout something and leave, and he was standing there—”

“I didn’t,” Grantaire starts, although in retrospect it might have been a dick move to abandon Enjolras to the gaping jaws of the crowd. “It’s, I get how that looks but he’s not—Enjolras is fine.” He can taste the bitterness in his own smile. “Enjolras is doing great.”

“How would you know that,” says Jehan, voice climbing, “you’re not in there. You didn’t see how he looked when you left—”

“Whatever, he’s probably just mad about something, like that’s news,” says Grantaire. “Maybe he’s plotting to overthrow the prom king and establish, like, a prom president—”

“Don’t be a dick,” says Jehan. “You’re not actually that good at it.” Grantaire isn’t sure what happens with his face just then, but it makes Jehan stop and soften his tone. “Look, I get that he can
probably be clingy and overprotective, and whatever you said, I’m sure it didn’t come out of nowhere, but this is really stressing people out, so can you guys try to—"

Grantaire buries his hands in his hair and takes a deep breath. If Jehan’s upset, that means Courfeyrac is hardly having the best night of his life either. After all this work, all the times Grantaire didn’t screw up, he’s still about to ruin their prom. “I can’t tell you what’s going on,” he says, “but I swear you don’t need to worry about it, okay? There’s no problem. He’s fine, I’m fine. Go back inside and I’ll just—”

“What,” says Jehan, “spend the rest of prom hiding from your boyfriend?”

There’s no point. There’s no point to any of it. Grantaire is too worn out to convince anyone he’s happy, and too tired to invent a plausible reason to be sad.

“He’s not,” he hears himself say. He scrubs at his face with his hands. “Jehan, he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Oh my god,” Jehan hisses, “I am gonna try to be supportive in a second, but first, I have to. Did you need to break up with him in the middle of prom?”

“No,” says Grantaire. He slides down the wall, lets gravity seat him on the floor. “We were never together, okay? We never dated.” Nothing changes, to say the words out loud, but somehow it feels like cutting down a tree, or yanking a plant out by the roots.

Jehan frowns down at him for a beat, then joins him on the hard tile. “Uh, does Enjolras know you guys never dated?” he says slowly.

“It’s not a metaphor.” Grantaire sighs again. “Yeah, he knows. It was his idea.”

“To...never date?”

That, too, thinks Grantaire bleakly. “To pretend like we were.”

“Okay, Grantaire,” says Jehan, forehead wrinkling. “I am gonna need so much more information—”

And so Grantaire takes a deep breath and tells him everything.

Or, not everything, because it’s a long story and Jehan probably has plans for the rest of his life. Cat burglary and tomato farming. But Grantaire gives him the rough outline, the Cliff Notes.

“So yeah,” says Grantaire, “now we’re here.”

Jehan opens his mouth. He closes his mouth. The look on his face is indescribable. He opens his mouth again.

Grantaire winces. “I know what you’re gonna say—”

“Do you,” says Jehan shrilly, “do you, Grantaire?”

“Um.” Maybe not.

“Why would this seem like a good idea?” says Jehan.

“Oh,” says Grantaire, “No, it didn’t, but I didn’t know what else to do—”

“Other than pretend to date Enjolras.”
Out loud, it does sound a little stupid. “Yeah.”

“For three months.”

“Two and a half,” Grantaire corrects, automatic.

Jehan shakes his head. “Oh my god, your heart was in the right place, but I can’t—where was your head? Where was his head? If you wanted to show your support of my relationship with Courf, you could’ve, for instance, told us you supported us—”

“You guys weren’t together yet,” says Grantaire. “And he thought if there was, like, a same-sex couple already going to prom, Courfeyrac would be more likely to ask you—”

“Yeah,” says Jehan, “and then I asked him instead. Weeks ago.”

“We—” Grantaire’s not sure why he’s never stopped to think about this, but there wasn’t a great reason to maintain the pretense after Jehan and Courfeyrac started dating. “We wanted to make sure you guys would last until prom,” he says.

Jehan gives him that look again. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Grantaire squints at the floor. “It seemed—important? We wanted you guys to have fun together at a dance, it just—”

When he glances over, Jehan is kneading the bridge of his nose with both hands. “I appreciate it,” he says. “I do. You were trying to help, and I promise that means a lot to me. I don’t know how much longer Courf and I will be together, but—”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Jehan sighs. “I mean, I like him, but I’m 16, you know? I don’t—” He pauses. “Was your plan to just keep doing this indefinitely, until Courf graduates or we break up?”

“No,” says Grantaire heavily. “No, this is the last night.”

“Ah,” says Jehan. “Okay.” He pats Grantaire on the back. “But you’ll still see each other all the time. Meetings, for one thing.”

Grantaire lets his head rest on his knees. “I’m not gonna go to meetings anymore, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s gonna be a bad breakup,” he gets out. “Because that’s—easier than—”

“Okay,” says Jehan, rubbing between Grantaire’s shoulder blades. “Shh shh, it’s okay, I get it.”

“You can say it,” Grantaire sniffs, “you can go ahead and say how fucking dumb I am—”

Jehan keeps rubbing. It reminds him of Fantine, although Grantaire can’t say why. “That’s not the word I’d use. Anyway,” Jehan adds, wry, “if it’s any consolation, you’re exactly as dumb as he is.”

“At least Enjolras didn’t pretend to date someone he’s in love with,” says Grantaire into the fabric of his own ridiculous dress pants.

Jehan’s hand stills. “You haven’t told him anything about how you feel, have you?”
Grantaire shakes his head.

“You realize you have to, right?” says Jehan.

“No, I don’t,” Grantaire says, peering up at him. “Oh my god, why would I do that?”

“If someone liked you, wouldn’t you want to know?”

Jehan says it so calmly, so reasonably, that Grantaire wants to scream. He inhales and exhales through his nose instead, wipes at his eyes.

“If I tell him now, after everything, that’s gonna look so creepy, like I was tricking him into—”

“So your reason for not telling him is that you should’ve told him sooner?” says Jehan. “Do you see the problem with that argument.”

“He’s gonna hate me, Jehan,” he says quietly. “He’s gonna—it was starting to get easy, to talk or hang out or whatever, and if he knows, he won’t—”

“Oh,” says Jehan. “Where do I even. Oh hell, okay, let’s count.” He holds up a finger. “One: you don’t know that. Two,” he continues, “Enjolras does not understand human feelings, but if you think he would hate someone for liking him, that’s, uh, that’s on you. Three: you’re not planning on talking to him again anyway, so what are you losing?”

“But he could just, he could forget me and be fine with it,” says Grantaire, “or he could remember me as this creepy, creepy guy who—”

“Grantaire, look at me,” says Jehan. “Look at me. You draw pictures of ducks for fun. You snort when you laugh. You’re the size of a terrier. You couldn’t be creepy if that was your goal.”

Given that Jehan’s clothes never fit, it can be hard to get a sense of his true dimensions, but now that they’re both wearing more or less the same thing, it’s undeniable that Jehan is a little taller than him.

Grantaire straightens his back but even sitting, Jehan’s shoulders are still an inch or so higher. “It’s messed up,” Grantaire insists. “It’s so messed up. Wouldn’t you be creeped out if you learned this random person you didn’t even like had all these gross feelings—”

“No,” says Jehan, firm. “Stop. Sorry Grantaire, I love you like a brother, but. Do you ever listen to yourself speak? Ever?”

“What do you—”

“This random person’, oh any random dude off the street that he faked a relationship with for a very long time—”

“He didn’t pick me,” says Grantaire. “Jehan, I was his last choice, okay? I was his last choice, which I know because he told me I was his last choice, everyone else was busy that weekend and he literally considered Craigslist before he—”

“Yeah,” says Jehan. “Yeah, you know, that isn’t so surprising given that he didn’t know you back then, and you seemed quite set on not helping him out with that—”

Grantaire twists his hands together. “Is this you being supportive right now,” he says, “because not that you aren’t, like, nailing it, but—”

Jehan rolls his eyes and throws an arm around Grantaire’s shoulders. “Shut up, you weird little baby
bird. My point is, do you think there is *maybe a possibility* that in the, what I’m thinking would have to be, considerable amount of time it took for you guys to coordinate a fake relationship that fooled all of your closest friends and *his* closest friends, do you think there’s a chance at some point in there you both relaxed enough to actually realize you could have fun together, which is, by the way, *what I said from the very beginning, why does nobody ever listen to me?*

Now that Grantaire thinks about it, that line of reasoning from Jehan does sound distantly familiar. “Did I, like.” He claws at his tie. “Say something dickish about hugs and friendship bracelets?”

“I don’t remember,” Jehan says, “but it wouldn’t, y’know, shock me?”

Grantaire chews on his lip, trying to imagine making that joke today. It wouldn’t work, even in his own head; Enjolras likes both friendship bracelets and hugs, so the absurdity doesn’t really—

“Is this the sound of me being right?” asks Jehan, and Grantaire shrugs. “You said yourself it was getting easy to talk to him,” Jehan continues, “so is it such a wild possibility—”

They’re looping back to their original argument, and Grantaire finds firmer ground. “If he had fun too then I definitely can’t ruin it by telling him—”

“So instead you’re just gonna let him think you’re being weird now because you don’t wanna be friends?”

“That’s not—” Grantaire frowns.

“You didn’t witness Courfeyrac trying to cheer him up after you left,” says Jehan. “It was grim.”

Grantaire pulls himself to his feet. “He’s sad?”

“Do you ever listen to what *anyone*—” Jehan sighs and stands. “Yes, Grantaire. He’s sad. Remember when I thought you dumped him?”

“So my choices are either ruin it by doing nothing or ruin it by confessing all my stupid—”

“Either you ruin it by doing nothing or you take a risk and maybe it will be *fine,*” says Jehan. “*Those* are your choices. Be brave, baby bird. Fly.”

Grantaire breathes out through his nose. He thinks about Enjolras, curled up glumly in the passenger seat, all the times Grantaire vowed to himself that if he knew how to make Enjolras feel better, he would. All the promises Grantaire made with ease because at no point did it occur to him that life might call his bluff. Would he do anything to fix it? Even if ‘anything’ meant looking Enjolras in the eye and saying—

“What if I’m a baby chicken, though,” says Grantaire.

Jehan groans in frustration. “You asked him out in front of the whole cafeteria,” he says. “You can do this. It will be fine. I can’t picture Enjolras being angry about this. Honestly—”

“What?”

“Talk to him,” says Jehan. “It won’t be terrible. I don’t want to promise a reaction from him because I’m still, you know, sort of—piecing my fragile reality back together, but I would be stunned if Enjolras was a jerk about it. Also, we need to hang out tomorrow so you can explain to me how you guys managed to pull this off, because talk about long cons.”

“Popular,” says Jehan, and Grantaire shakes his head. “Monday, then. Give me a ride home and we can watch this Dracula movie I found, it’s incredible—”

“Have you learned your own address by now?” Grantaire says, remembering that night of driving in endless circles on the way back from Joly’s movie night. Maybe Jehan remembers it too, because he grimaces. Then his mouth drops open. “What?”

“In Joly’s basement, when you guys hooked up—”

“Pretended to hook up,” Grantaire corrects.

“That hickey, was that stage makeup, or—”

“No.” Grantaire fights the urge to hide his face in his hands. “The, uh. The hickey was real.”

Jehan says nothing. He’s pressing his lips together very hard.

Only then does Grantaire realize just how that must sound. “I wasn’t, like, taking advantage, okay. It was his idea—”

Jehan’s mouth has gone white. He closes his eyes. “Grantaire,” he says. “Grantaire. Please talk to him. Please. Talk to him. Please.”

“What—”

“Talk to him,” says Jehan. “C’mon, let’s go back inside, so I can find my boyfriend and you can find Enjolras and, in the name of all that is good in this world—”

“Talk to him?” Grantaire guesses, stomach roiling. His hands shake and sweat. All he wants to do is curl up in a ball somewhere, but Jehan’s right, there are two options left, and only one of them is worth taking.

Jehan knocks their shoulders together. “Smart boy.”

The room is packed, too full to spot Enjolras right away. In the time Grantaire was moping and picking up vital facts about Lithuania, the crowd at least doubled. Curse American teenagers and their constant tardiness, Grantaire thinks wildly. If he wants to do this, he needs to do it fast. He feels weightless, but in a frantic temporary way, like a balloon that’s been inflated but not tied. Given any time to think, and the courage Jehan pumped in will sputter out again.

“Courf!” Jehan shouts, and then Courfeyrac is pacing over to them, and Grantaire turns his head so they can reunite in peace or whatever. Courfeyrac’s hand is on Jehan’s back and Jehan whispers something in his ear that hopefully isn’t, “Oh hey, did you know Grantaire and Enjolras’s whole relationship is a huge sham?” but the conversation doesn’t seem long enough for that, and anyway, Grantaire thinks, toeing the ground, they might not even be talking about him. Rumor has it there is an entire world beyond Grantaire’s ridiculous life.

Courfeyrac turns to Grantaire. “Don’t know where he is,” he says. “He went to get something to
drink and didn’t come back—"

Grantaire nods. His internal organs flop around in his body. ‘Get this over with,’ he thinks. ‘Be brave for five seconds and get this over with.’

“Thanks,” he says, shoving himself in the direction of the refreshments. It means cutting across the dance floor but there’s no time to worry about that, because Grantaire is racing against his own cowardice, and any second his resolve will fail.

He stretches to his tiptoes, struggling to see over the clusters of heads. It’s dim, and above him, the disco ball flings specks of light in a woozy circle, helping nobody. The DJ is playing some down-tempo pop song, a woman’s voice crooning about forever, and Grantaire dodges past the awkward lurkers on the sidelines, past people making out, past couples having their first dance and moving so goddamn slow that it feels like he’s fighting his way through a forest of sequins and body odor.

He’s breathing hard by the time he emerges. The refreshments table is long and white and covered with cheap snacks in fancy bowls, and Enjolras is nowhere to be seen.

“Goddammit,” he says. “Are you serious?”


Grantaire balls his fists at his sides. “Where is he?”

“You don’t know—” Eddie starts, but Grantaire is done, he is so profoundly done with all of this bullshit.

“Where the fuck is my boyfriend?” he says, “and before you answer, keep in mind I never technically promised not to sue you.”

“Jesus, chill,” says Eddie, but he also takes a step back. “He went outside.” He nods towards a side exit.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, to cry?”

Grantaire can feel his lip curl but there’s no time to stay and defend Enjolras’s honor. “Fuck you,” he yells over his shoulder, diving back into the crowd and wrestling his way through another dozen personal moments, that treacly ballad still hanging in the air around him like a bad smell.

His lungs burn. His eyes water. His heart hurts. He weaves and elbows and dodges and stumbles back out on the other side, and only then does it occur to him this could maybe be a trap. Side door left of dance floor, he texts Jehan. If I’m not back in 10 min, come get me. Then he takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders, and wrenches open the door.

It’s a parking lot, chilly after the jungle heat of hundreds of bodies. Enjolras is standing under a sodium light, looking somehow more intense than usual with the color bleached out of him. Grantaire is so relieved to see him again, just to take him in with his own eyes, he doesn’t immediately notice they’re not alone.

“Enjolras, I need to—” he starts.

And then five feet away, Mike whirls around. “What the fuck are you doing, freak?”
Grantaire’s brain-to-mouth filter is still a few paces behind, wrestling through the dancefloor. “Enjolras,” he says, “so help me, if you’re cheating on me with Mike—”

It’s a bad joke in so many ways, not just stupid but dangerous, and Grantaire knows this even before Mike flashes him a murderous look and Enjolras hisses,

“Get back inside.”

“Listen to your gay boyfriend,” Mike snarls, and there’s only a few things this could be, an ever-shortening list that condenses into one possibility around the way Enjolras’s fists clench, the way he’s glaring at Mike, the fury coiled in his posture.

“Are you guys fighting?” says Grantaire, and Enjolras doesn’t spare a glance in his direction, just grits out,

“Grantaire, back inside, now.”

His heart is pounding so loud his ears throb and it’s a struggle to stand, just to keep that much gravity at bay. Mike is a bully and Mike is dangerous but Mike is also a coward, he thinks. Mike fucked with Jehan because he knew Jehan wouldn’t call for help. He only ever threatened Grantaire when he thought nobody else was around. He stopped once he knew the odds weren’t in his favor.

“No,” says Grantaire.

“This is none of your business, go,” says Enjolras coldly, and Grantaire crosses his arms like he can ignore the way his stomach drops.

“It is until the end of tonight,” he says.

“Two hours,” says Enjolras, still not looking at him. “What’s the difference?”

“The fuck are you—go run back to your pansy little friends,” Mike shouts.

Enjolras takes a step towards Mike and Grantaire realizes then that this is not a rescue, that Enjolras wants to attack.

“Enjolras,” says Grantaire, “you can’t do this.”

“Yeah?” says Enjolras. “Are you sure?”

“Please, it’s not worth it—”

Enjolras grits his teeth. “You didn’t hear what he said—”

“Yeah, and I don’t care,” Grantaire says. “Nothing’s worth—”

“Grantaire, please,” says Enjolras, voice almost cracking, and somehow that’s what gives Grantaire the strength to push on.

“Listen to me,” he says. “Please, please listen. If you do this, you won’t get away with it—”

Grantaire can’t believe he’d forgotten; it had been scored into his mind for so long. In his first attempt at freshman year, back in the beginning when he’s still cared, he’d made a diorama out of marshmallows for some kind of extra credit project in French, and Mike’s older brother John had ripped it apart on the bus, thrown fistfuls out the window and laughed. Grantaire had made some kind of protest, you can’t or I’m telling, and John had just grinned with that savage joy of informing
a little kid there’s no Santa Claus, and said—

“His parents are on the school board,” Grantaire tells him. “His dad goes to the same country club as the superintendent, they play golf every Saturday. If you hit him, it’ll look so bad for everything we’re—everything you’re—Enjolras, it will look so bad.”

“Shut up,” Mike says.

Enjolras shakes his head, eyes wide. “What does it matter,” he says. “I never met with the superintendent, I’m not part of the group arguing for you, and after tonight, we’re nothing—”

This was the intent from the very beginning, Grantaire realizes. This is why Enjolras sat out the appointment on Friday. It had nothing to do with trying to contain his anger. It was about leaving that anger a back door.

If Grantaire was only hurt, he could sink into that feeling until speech was impossible. Thank god for the growing part of him that is instead wildly pissed off.

“Enjolras,” he says, “of course it reflects on us. If you do this, they’ll try to make it some fucking West Side Story thing where both sides are to blame and not the bullshit it—”

“Shut your fucking mouth, homo,” says Mike.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Enjolras yells, and Grantaire rests his hands in his hair and laughs like a crazy person because there’s certainly no reason left for Enjolras to defend his honor.

“If you want to ruin any chance we have for getting justice,” Grantaire starts, “be my guest and—”

“Do you think the superintendent did anything to help us?” says Enjolras. “Do you—Combeferre said he wouldn’t even look them in the face, and if that—” He sneers at Mike “if that’s the school board, what’s left to ruin? At least this way, someone gets what they deserve—”

“Like you can even land a punch,” sneers Mike, and Enjolras stiffens, shoulders bunching under his suit jacket.

“Enjolras,” Grantaire shouts, “he wants you to hit him!”

Mike glares at him. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Something fucking weird is going on,” says Grantaire. He thinks back to that night at his house, the way Mike stepped aside the minute Enjolras came into sight. It wasn’t just a matter of numbers, Grantaire thinks. Mike would never push someone like Enjolras, someone who might have the means to truly push back. “Has he ever even given you shit before? Why would he start now?”

“Shut up,” Mike says again, eyes darting.

Enjolras freezes. “Golf every Saturday,” he says, and for no reason Grantaire can see, Mike goes pale. “And the day after my friends finally talk to the superintendent, the son of his golf buddy picks a fight.”

“Yeah?” says Grantaire, confused, but Mike has a distinctly hunted look about him.

“So how would Mike know about it? Because the superintendent warned his parents this morning, and then his parents told him, or maybe he overheard,” Enjolras says. “And then he goes out and tries to discredit us, even if it means getting hit—”
Mike says nothing.

“If we were doomed, why would they keep talking about it?” says Enjolras. His eyes are shining. “If there’s no hope of us winning, why’s everyone so scared? What do they know that we don’t? Who else is on the school board?”

They turn to stare at Mike, who is grinding his teeth together.

“Get out of here,” Enjolras tells him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” says Mike.

Grantaire rolls his eyes. “Or we’ll tell the whole school you cornered us to ask for a threesome.”

Mike looks physically ill. “Nobody’ll ever believe you,” he says. Sweat beads on his forehead, darkening the edge of his shirt collar.

“Most people won’t, yeah,” says Grantaire. “But somebody will. It’s a big school. A lot of people. And some words stick, y’know?”

“You sick perverts,” says Mike. “Fucking wishful thinking—”

“Look, I’m dating that guy,” Grantaire says, gesturing at Enjolras. “I’m into smart, funny people who smell good. You’re pretty clearly not my type.”

“My parents are gonna make sure your whining for attention never gets anywhere—” Mike spits.

“You sure about that?” says Enjolras.

“Freaks,” says Mike.

“Bye,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras starts to take a step forward, and Mike is scuttling for the door, mumbling to himself on the way out. It’s not quiet; Grantaire could probably make out the words if he wanted. He doesn’t have the energy for it. The door swings shut.

Up in the sky, the moon is almost perfectly cut in half.

“I need to talk to Combeferre about this,” says Enjolras, more to himself than to Grantaire. “And Jehan and—”

Any second now, he’ll be heading inside again. Grantaire can feel his window closing. His stomach lurches. “Wait,” he manages.

Enjolras turns back to him. “Thank you,” says Enjolras, a little stiffly. When he meets Grantaire’s eyes it feels forced, like it’s taking all his willpower to keep looking Grantaire in the face. Only Enjolras could make eye contact sting like that, thinks Grantaire. And only Grantaire could be stung by it. “That was—that would’ve gone seriously wrong if you hadn’t shown up, and it would’ve been my fault.” Enjolras bites his lip. “Thanks. That was, uh.”

“What’d he say?” Grantaire asks. “To make you that angry.”

“It.” Enjolras’s hands are in his pockets. His gaze sweeps to the ground and up again to Grantaire, deliberate. “It doesn’t matter, never mind.”
If it made Enjolras want to punch someone, it had to be something, Grantaire thinks. He can sense a dodge in progress, but he doesn’t have the right to push. At any rate, it’s not like there’s a shortage of stuff to discuss.

Grantaire closes his eyes. “Before you go in, we need to talk,” he says.

When he opens his eyes again, he’s still said it.

Enjolras blinks. “Okay,” he says, expectant, and that’s when Grantaire realizes that in order to bring this whole mess to light, he needs to not only come clean but shape all his confessions into words and vocalize them right to Enjolras’s face. All of his nerves descend on him at once. It’s like getting hit by a sandbag, but all over.

“But first, I need to sit down,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras dubiously surveys the parking lot, the blacktop littered with garbage.

“You can stand, whatever,” Grantaire says. He drops to the ground, braces his spine against the rough brick of the Lithuanian Cultural Heritage Center, and takes a deep breath. Words. This is gonna be so terrible. He exhales, shaky, and breathes in again. He hugs his knees. There’s no point in trying for dignity at this point. Enjolras has seen him cry. “Look—”

“Did Jehan say something to you?”

Grantaire peers up at him. “Yeah, why?”

Enjolras shrugs, hands still jammed in his pockets. Grantaire can’t tell if he’s working through the leftover adrenaline from the fight, antsy to start plotting the next move, or just really eager to end this conversation.

All of the things Grantaire needs to say curdle at the back of his throat. “I wanna be friends,” he gets out. It comes out wavery, almost a question.

Enjolras’s face contorts for a moment. “Don’t let Jehan bully you like that,” he says at last. “That’s not—I’ll talk to him.” He starts for the door.

“Don’t—can I please just get through the whole thing before you—” Grantaire sighs. “Don’t go,” he says in a much smaller voice than he was hoping for.

There is no answer except for the absence of footsteps on pavement. Grantaire digs a knuckle into his unbruised eye. He doesn’t want to deliver this speech to Enjolras’s shoes but he can’t think of an easier alternative.

“I really do want to,” says Grantaire.

“Oh, suddenly?”

Grantaire sits up, surprised by the acid in his voice. “No, for a while,” he says, and Enjolras makes a sound that is almost a scoff. “C’mon, dude, don’t you think I’d know whether or not I wanted to be friends?”

“Yes,” Enjolras says pointedly. “God, you’re a smart person, and I can see that, but sometimes I really wish you’d do me the same courtesy—”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” says Grantaire. “When have I ever implied—”
He breaks off because Enjolras isn’t listening, just pacing the blacktop. “How many times do you think you need to say it?” he’s saying. “I know I’m stubborn, I know it can take a while sometimes for something to sink in, but at some point, even I get it, Grantaire, given how very very hard you’ve worked to make it obvious.”

Enjolras swallows. He’s blinking hard. Watching him is like a kick to the stomach, an impact that knocks all the air out and leaves a bruise. Grantaire stares and says nothing.

“I’m so tired of this,” says Enjolras, shaking his head. His eyes are fixed to a single point in the sky. “I really, really am. Everything. Lying to my friends. Lying to my parents. But even more than that, I am tired of telling myself there’s something I can do about this.”

“What are you—”

“I get it,” Enjolras says again. “It’s not like I don’t know. I’ve told you so many things, things I’ve only told my closest friends, things I’ve never told anyone, and you listened, and you said the right stuff back, and I’d think, ‘Well, this time is different. This time, it has to mean something.’” His lip trembles. He pulls it taut. “And then, every single time, you’d turn around and say, ‘Hey, good news, soon we don’t have to see each other anymore!’ Or, ‘Oh, I’m definitely never coming to meetings again.’” His throat works. Even in the bleaching light, his face has gone patchy. “Hey, wouldn’t it be completely insane if we were friends or something? God, Enjolras, isn’t it just—beyond any possible imagining?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Grantaire insists.

“No?” says Enjolras. “Then how did you mean it?”

Grantaire winces. “I didn’t think you’d care?”

“I’m not a robot,” Enjolras snaps, crossing his arms.

“More like, how a ship doesn’t have to worry what a barnacle thinks of it,” says Grantaire, “or a dog isn’t gonna stress out about a tick’s opinion—” Enjolras makes a face, and Grantaire sighs and returns to the important point. “I promise I wanna be your friend, man.”

“And the reason you’ve never acted like it before this second—”

“Yes I have,” Grantaire interrupts. “All the freaking time. I’ve hugged you more in the last 48 hours than I’ve hugged anyone in years—”

“Three times?”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras seems to deflate slightly. “That’s, you were under so much stress.”

“Have you ever hugged someone you didn’t like?” says Grantaire. “It doesn’t feel good. It doesn’t help.”

“Then why go to all this effort to pretend you didn’t want to talk to me,” says Enjolras, so halting and unsteady that all Grantaire wants is to try for hug number four.

There’s no avoiding it, he realizes. Grantaire should’ve known there wasn’t going to be a way to do this cleanly, to come out with a scrap of dignity intact. He bows his head.
“Look,” says Grantaire wearily. “I’m gonna tell you a secret. And if you still want to hang out after that, if you’re okay with it, we can definitely be friends, and I—um, I’d really like that.” He takes a gulp of air. “And if you don’t, that’s okay, too. I’ll understand.”

Enjolras nods.

Grantaire screws his eyes shut.

No matter what happens, tomorrow he’ll play Call of Duty with Eponine and Monday he’ll watch a movie at Jehan’s house. He’ll work on Astrocat and he’ll draw his own stuff too and he’ll give Gavroche too much sugar and maybe he’ll drag Eponine downtown to the art museum this summer.

Long-term, his life is not over. It’s just the moment he’s in now that sucks, and time is a shitty, slow bridge, but it will eventually carry him somewhere else.

“So,” he starts. “Uh, back in March, when I asked you out? Or pretended to ask you out. I did it because I wanted to help Jehan and Courfeyrac, and because I was, like, fed up with all the bullshit at school. Including my own bullshit. But the thing is.” He bites his lip, but it’s too late to stall anymore. “I also, I’d kind of—had this huge crush on you. Pretty much since that first detention.”

Above him, Enjolras is silent. Grantaire presses on. “And man, I know how gross that sounds, but like, that wasn’t my reason to do it. Honestly, it was a reason not to do it, because I didn’t really wanna spend time with you back then. And not,” he hurriedly adds, “it wasn’t your fault. I just, I didn’t like who I was around you. Like, I’m not normally that much of an asshole—”

“I know,” says Enjolras, distant.

“And in retrospect, of course I should’ve told you, uh at least before that time in Joly’s basement, that wasn’t fair, but I never tried to take advantage of the whole—the whole thing. If anything, it just made everything agony—” He breaks off. Enjolras is frowning, and Grantaire is not doing the best job making the case for their friendship. “I mean, I enjoyed a lot of it,” he admits. “But like, making jokes with you, getting your opinion on stuff, hanging out in my car. Shit like that. Also, if it helps, I feel weird about that, too.”

“But you liked me,” Enjolras says slowly, as if struggling to wrap his head around it. “Back when —”

“Yeah,” says Grantaire. “And like I said, if it makes things too weird, that’s fair. Or, like, summer’s in a month. Maybe I can skip meetings for the rest of the year, work through it by the time—”

Enjolras shakes his head. “Next week you’ll still be out of the closet. If you can stand to keep coming to meetings, you need to. You don’t wanna seem vulnerable to people like Mike.”

“If it’s awkward, though,” Grantaire says.

“I’ll work through it.” Enjolras squares his jaw into his most determined face. “Just, like—” His forehead creases. “Um. Can I ask when you stopped?” he says quietly.

“What?”

“You said you had a crush on me.” Enjolras frowns again, like he’s waiting for Grantaire to contradict him. “And so I just wondered when—” He huffs. “You know, it isn’t really any of my business, never mind.”

Only then does Grantaire catch onto the grammatical shuffle he’d been playing. By sticking with past
tense, he built himself an escape hatch without even trying, and this is his opportunity to clear the air while still escaping most of the consequences. It’s very tidy. On some level, it’s the smart thing to do.

On the other hand, he could quit lying to Enjolras.

Grantaire grips his knees. “Here’s the thing,” he says. “I never stopped.” The world doesn’t end. He keeps going. “Hell, I like you more now, knowing how weird you are. And funny and cool and—yeah, it’s only gotten way, way worse.” He stares at the blacktop, at the tiny stones and grit encased in the tar, and tries to swallow around the heaviness in his throat.

No response.

“Sorry,” says Grantaire. “I really am gonna try not to make it a big thing, but—”

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras, oddly strangled, “can you stand up, please?”

“I don’t actually know,” Grantaire tells him.

“Okay,” Enjolras says. “Okay, that’s—” and then he’s dropping to his knees in his fancy prom suit until he’s in Grantaire’s space and Enjolras is smiling, which doesn’t make any sense but it’s nice, since it implies he’s not righteously furious, and then Enjolras is very carefully reaching up to fit his hand to the side of Grantaire’s face, thumb ghosting over one cheekbone which makes even less sense but is also nice, and when Grantaire starts to give him a helplessly confused smile, Enjolras beams like Grantaire has done something brilliant. “Grantaire,” he says. “Will you go out with me?”

“What,” says Grantaire.

“I thought you knew I like you,” says Enjolras nonsensically. “I thought you knew and we were, we were politely ignoring it—”

“What.” Distantly, Grantaire wonders if he’ll ever be capable of saying another word.

“How could you not tell,” says Enjolras, and his voice climbs in something like indignation but his thumb is gentle, stroking down Grantaire’s cheek. “I’ve been really obvious—”

Grantaire’s mind reels and reels. “Sorry, I’m still, like—” He makes a flailing gesture with one arm that Enjolras actually doesn’t see because their faces are too close. “Still processing?”

“That’s okay.” Enjolras is inches away. “But can you kiss and process at the same time?” he asks hopefully. He must’ve moved forward at some point, although Grantaire thinks he might’ve too, because he can’t feel the wall at his back anymore. Of course, he also can’t feel the ground or the outside air or really anything except for the way the pad of Enjolras’s thumb has come to rest on Grantaire’s lower lip.

“I think we should try,” says Grantaire.

It’s their first kiss that isn’t about anything else, which in a way makes it their first kiss, Grantaire thinks hazily as they bridge that last bit of distance. They don’t have to worry about how this looks or who they’re hoping to distract. He can just close his eyes and notice the cold tip of Enjolras’s nose and his much warmer mouth, the way their lips move together, kind of clumsy at first, and then less clumsy, and then Enjolras slides his hand to the back of Grantaire’s head and Grantaire gasps. It’s about half from the kiss and half from Enjolras’s fingers tangled in his hair, which feel really, really —

“Are you okay,” Enjolras says breathlessly.
Explaining would take way too many words, so Grantaire just leans in and kisses him again, as deeply as he can, and Enjolras must get the message because he hums, pleased, and presses closer and then the door opens behind them.

“Hey guys,” says Jehan, “everything alright?”

Grantaire breaks away to apologize for giving the poor dude a heart attack except when he checks, Jehan is not exactly slack-jawed and double-taking. Jehan takes in the scene—Grantaire sitting, Enjolras kneeling, their knees tangled together—and Grantaire notices for the first time that it must be uncomfortable, the way they were both stretching to make the angle work, but this had somehow escaped him until now.

“Did you talk to him?” Jehan asks, conversational.

“Yes, Jehan,” says Grantaire.

“Was I right?”

“Goodbye, Jehan,” says Enjolras pleasantly.

“Bye, kids.” Jehan whisks the door open. “Have fun kissing on the ground,” he calls as he disappears back inside.

“He didn’t seem very surprised,” Grantaire observes.

“He thinks we’re dating,” says Enjolras.

“I told him we weren’t,” Grantaire says, “that’s why he made me talk to you.”

Enjolras considers this. “He could probably guess how I felt, since I’ve been incredibly obvious from the second I realized I liked you.”

Grantaire shakes his head. “Sorry, when was this supposed lightning bolt?”

“The day you asked me out in front of everyone,” says Enjolras. At Grantaire’s uncomprehending look, he adds, “I don’t know. It was—brave, and principled. Also pretty hot?”

“Um,” says Grantaire. “I thought you were horrified?”

“Oh, I was.” Enjolras raises his eyebrows. Grantaire just continues to look uncomprehending. “Come on,” says Enjolras. “I almost asked you out a week ago.”

Something is starting to come back to him, a fizzy feeling that had deflated so completely he’d stopped thinking about it, cut off the thoughts like a severed arm.

“When we were singing that song in my van,” says Grantaire slowly.

“And the only reason I didn’t—”

“Was because I disappeared to get high,” Grantaire finishes. He pulls away, feeling queasy.

“Well,” says Enjolras. “You called me ‘dear.’”

It takes Grantaire’s brain a long, discombobulated second to work out why this is such a problem. Their word that meant ‘stop.’ Their word that meant ‘you’re going too far’.
Grantaire’s not sure what made him say it, what he was even going for. Enjolras had been standing there, furious and unbending, and Grantaire had wanted to hurt him mostly because he didn’t think he could. It had felt like yelling at the sky.

“I didn’t really,” says Grantaire, “I mean, you weren’t even touching me, so what would—”

“I thought you knew how I felt, and you were telling me to back off,” says Enjolras.

“No,” Grantaire says, “No, no.” Holding Enjolras when they’re both still on the ground means more or less crawling into his lap but Enjolras doesn’t protest, just pulls him in.

“I know,” Enjolras mumbles into his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“Mmm-hmm,” says Grantaire.

“I could’ve just told you in your van,” says Enjolras. And then returning to their original argument, because Enjolras can never let a point go unmade, “Also, you caught me checking you out two days ago—”

“What?”

“In my room, when you took off your shirt?”

“I thought you were, like, disapproving,” Grantaire says.

Enjolras laughs. “No, I uh. Definitely approved,” he says, and Grantaire is filled with a sudden irrational urge to take his shirt off again, even though it’s chilly outside and they’re still at prom. “Can you confess something back?” says Enjolras. “This is terrible.”

“I bought Grapes of Wrath,” Grantaire tells him. “Went out and bought it immediately, read the whole thing in a night.”

“Did you like it?” Enjolras sounds almost shy.

“Dude, I’ve read it seven times,” says Grantaire. “I could probably recite parts of it by heart—”

Enjolras makes a wordless noise and then they’re kissing, much harder than before. Grantaire can barely even follow what’s going on but he gets his hands on Enjolras’s back, under the jacket, where he can feel the muscles moving through a thin layer of dress shirt. Enjolras has discovered open-mouthed kissing and his hands are back in Grantaire’s hair, and the next time Grantaire fully notices their surroundings he’s basically lying on the pavement with Enjolras on top of him and he is fine with that.

Enjolras pulls back a few inches. His lips are very red. “I don’t have a Steinbeck fetish,” he says.

Grantaire’s skin is buzzing, and his suit is no doubt getting dirty. There are rocks in his shoes. ‘Come back,’ he thinks. “Okay.”


“I like you too,” says Grantaire, laughing. It feels so good to say it, he’s not sure how he’ll be able to stop. Then Enjolras moves forward again, his thigh shifting between Grantaire’s legs, and some combination of the motion and his smile makes Grantaire shut up in a hurry. Grantaire’s hips twitch up, involuntary, and it is maybe the most mortifying moment of his life until Enjolras presses back.

Grantaire gasps again. Enjolras kisses him, and if it wasn’t for the fact that they’re still doing this on
cold, grimy blacktop, Grantaire would probably assume it was some kind of unusually hot fever-dream.

As it is, though.

Reluctantly, Grantaire frees his mouth. “Hey,” he pants. “Hey, this is, uh, really really great but if we keep going like this, I just, um.” He’s struggling to catch his breath, and also to put a couple of inches between their bodies, which is tough because it’s definitely not what his body wants.

“Maybe,” he manages to say, “maybe you don’t want to lose your virginity outside, in a parking lot, behind the Lithuanian Cultural Heritage Center?”

“Virginity is a cultural construct,” says Enjolras, lips moving down Grantaire’s throat. Grantaire shudders.

“Oh no,” says Grantaire. He takes in a lungful of air. “But maybe I don’t want to lose my virginity in a parking lot by the Lithuanian—”

Enjolras pulls away, eyes wide. “Oh no,” he says. “Oh no, I’m sorry—”

“You’re cool,” Grantaire says from the ground.

“Do you, like,” Enjolras hesitates, sounding extraordinarily nervous, “want it to be, uh, more romantic, or—?”

Grantaire hides his face in his arm. “No, no, no,” he says rapidly. “No, god. I’m not talking flower petals and smooth jazz, just maybe. You know. A room with walls and a floor. A door. A ceiling’d be nice but not, like, essential, I guess?”

“That,” says Enjolras seriously, “is a very attainable goal.” Grantaire peeks up at him. “Will you go out with me?” he repeats. Grantaire laughs and sits up, trying to brush the grit off his clothes.

“Oh my god, of course,” says Grantaire. Then his face falls. “I’m not free until Tuesday, though.” It feels like an absurd amount of time to wait.

Enjolras must feel the same, because he chews his lip thoughtfully. “Are you free tonight?” he says. “Like, after you drive everyone home? My parents aren’t necessarily expecting me back until tomorrow morning.”

Grantaire’s face heats and Enjolras adds hurriedly, “Not that we have to—do anything like that tonight, we could just—hang out in your room and talk about Grapes of Wrath, and I wanted to ask about the Golden Compass anyway—”

“Yes,” Grantaire says. “Yes, oh my god, that is the perfect date, yes.” He laughs again, runs his hands through his by now impossibly disheveled hair. “Oh my god, your poor parents, thinking you’re out somewhere fooling around, when really you’ll just be, like, having a literary discussion —”

Enjolras coughs. “I mean, maybe a little fooling around, if that’s—”

Grantaire nods so hard he can feel it in his upper arms.

“We should probably go back in though,” says Enjolras, glancing sadly at the door.

“Yeah,” says Grantaire. “Just—give me a sec to calm down.”
“Want me to help fix your hair?”

“That won’t help,” says Grantaire. “I mean, it won’t help me calm down.”

“Yeah?” Enjolras turns to look at him again.

The reminder of what they were just up to brings Grantaire back to how he ruined the mood. “Sorry,” he says again. “It really isn’t—I don’t give a shit about, like, romance—”


“What?”

“I kind of wanted to slow dance with you,” Enjolras says in one breath. He rolls his eyes at himself. “I know it’s cheesy, I know it’s such a cliche, but I’d been thinking about it—”

Grantaire stands up. He takes off his shoe and shakes out the pebbles. He puts his shoe back on. “Enjolras,” he says. “That is a very attainable goal.”

Inside, it’s dark and warm and so loud that they have to talk into each other’s ears to be heard. Enjolras laces their fingers together and his face is resolute but his grip is shaky. Grantaire squeezes his hand.

“It’s cool,” he says.

“What now?” says Enjolras.

“Now we hang out by the dance floor until the DJ picks something that works,” says Grantaire.

The disco ball spins. Enjolras watches it thoughtfully. “What’s wrong with this one?”

It’s too loud to pick out the lyrics, but Grantaire can tell from the familiar hook that the track blasting from the speakers is 50 Cent’s “Candy Shop.”

“This song is really objectionable,” Grantaire tells him. “It’s not a slow dance song.” He nods to the dance floor, where kids are gyrating and shaking their hips and moving all over each other.

Enjolras doesn’t seem to notice. “I have waited two and half months for this,” he says. “I’m not gonna stand here all night waiting for the DJ to do his goddamn job.” The light in his eyes is so much more potent than a disco ball.

“If we ignored every other beat,” says Grantaire, “we could probably still—”


They walk onto the dance floor. Nobody’s watching them, too busy bumping and grinding and occasionally rolling their eyes at the parent chaperone’s doomed attempts to keep tonight PG.

Grantaire puts his hands on Enjolras’s waist, and Enjolras follows suit, tucking Grantaire’s head under his chin. It’s basically how they were standing at Courfeyrac’s house, Grantaire thinks. He wonders if their friends will even be able to tell the difference between their fake relationship and their real one. He has a feeling the line there is less distinct than he would’ve thought.
Enjolras’s hands are careful on his back. They sway to every other beat. Enjolras hums, tuneless and Grantaire can feel the reverberations. He breathes in and smells oranges.

“Hey,” he says. “Y’know, if it doesn’t work out with the school board—”

“It could,” says Enjolras.

Grantaire nods. “But if it doesn’t. Cosette’s plan—telling the press about what happened, making it a whole thing. We don’t have to, but if you’re up for it, I am.”

“Yeah?”

“For the record.”

“For the record,” Enjolras echoes. “Yes. Of course. Obviously. Sorry, how could you not tell I like you?”

“Fucking likewise,” says Grantaire. Then he ducks his head and giggles, because he can’t help it. “Sorry, this song is so dirty. And sexist, it’s terrible—”

Enjolras shrugs, serene. “I can’t hear the words.”

Around them, taffeta rustles against suit fabric and the bassline thrums. Every part of the dance floor but Enjolras smells disgusting. Some gravel remains Grantaire’s other shoe but it is very, very hard to care from inside Enjolras’s arms.

From the speakers, 50 Cent is still discussing his penis.

“Prom magic,” says Grantaire. “Enjolras, were you aware that tonight is the most magical night of our lives?”

“Fuck that,” says Enjolras, pulling him closer. Grantaire doesn’t need to step back to know that Enjolras is grinning, which is good because Grantaire also never wants to move again. “Fuck that. Things are gonna get so much better,” he says with feeling, and Grantaire smiles, closes his eyes, and believes him.

Chapter End Notes

I owe so many people so many thank yous in conjunction with this story. It is absolutely incredible how kind and helpful and lovely you've all been. At some point when I am not jetlagged and completely out of it, I will come back in here and add some sort of lengthy, emotional acknowledgements section, and you can all be vaguely embarrassed by how many feelings I have on the topic.

For now: thank you (so much), and I love you (so much).

End Notes
Got questions? I'm on tumblr at idiopathicsmile, or for fic-related things, idiopath-fic-smile.

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic] World Ain't Ready by fulldaysdrive, Fanart for World Ain't Ready by saltkettle, More fanart for World Ain't Ready (but by a different artist) PLUS FAN VIDEO by Syysmyrskytuuli, Cover Art for World Ain't Ready by stellarer.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!