The Quirkiest of Foundations

by Aurelia_Combeferre

Summary

In which a slew of strange and disturbing cases have Enjolras, Eponine and their friends teaming up. This new world is far more than what one dreamer can handle.
Crushed Dandelions

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I

Feuilly is the first one in their little group to meet Elodie, one blistering hot day just two weeks before the monsoon while he’s teaching a village by a riverside how to make rafts out of old soda bottles. “She’s a little rocket scientist, and I’m actually being literal here,” he tells his friends later during their weekly ramen night. “She got one of those old pop bottles, filled it with water, and figured out a way to send it across the room. Made a mess of course and nearly ruined a bicycle pump, but you have to admire the quick-thinking there for an eight year old.”

“Are you sure she’s eight, or does she just look eight?” Musichetta asks. In a city wherein people have had to go without for so long, many children still look too stunted for their ages. It’s true even for some of the older generation; there is a grim reason that Gavroche, who is past twenty-five now, makes guessing his age something of a game.

“She really is eight years old; I asked her mother and her playmates. She eats well, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Feuilly replies. He fishes in his pocket for his phone to pass around the group. “It’s a bit blurred since everyone was running about.”

Eponine is the last to take a look at the photo. She cannot help but smile on seeing the image of a little girl with dark brown braids, and her tanned face and arms all streaked with dirt. Her grin is impishness in itself, reaching her eyes and chasing away any shadows from her cheekbones. She is a distinct spot in the whirl of motion that Feuilly has captured, as if she is meant to stand out. This is a child who can want for nothing.

She tries to keep this picture in mind in the weeks to come, when smiles become rare and hope suddenly becomes so hard for a young life to hold.

II

It turns out that Elodie’s father is a lawyer, to be more to the point a professor of international law. “It’s an up and coming field, what with this world getting so small,” this bombastic man says one day to the younger attorneys of the city hall. “You boys are in the wrong field.”

Enjolras only raises an eyebrow to this comment; he couldn’t be happier with what he’s doing after all. As the other lawyers hem and haw over their colleague’s jibe, he notices a small shape crouched at the door of the conference room they are in. It takes a moment for him to match this face to a picture he once saw; he only realizes much later that it is because of how different her eyes look when she is not laughing. “Elodie?”

The little girl nods. “Is Papa done with his meeting yet?” she asks in a voice that is little more than a whisper, a sound all too easily lost on the wind. It is a hot day but she is wearing a thick sweater and hugging herself.

‘If you can call it a meeting,’ Enjolras thinks, casting a baleful glance at the raucous group. He clears his throat, catching the attention of the man in the middle of it all. “Sir, I believe that Elodie is looking for you,” he says calmly.

The older lawyer turns towards the door, and looks at Elodie for a moment. The girl doesn’t rush
towards her parent but stiffens for a moment before bowing her head and scampering down the hall. It is not the first time that Enjolras has ever seen a colleague shooing away a child but something about this silent exchange perturbs him deeply.

He mentions this to Eponine that same evening when he gives her a lift home from work. “He’s a strict man but what I saw when he looked at her was another thing altogether,” he says by way of finishing his story as they are waiting at a red light.

She bites her lip for a long moment. “How was she?”

“The same as in Feuilly’s picture of her, but quieter. She wasn’t ill or bruised all over,” he replies.

Eponine is silent for a little longer. “If you see her again, maybe you could ask a little about how she is, what she is up to at school, what games she likes—”

“Eponine, I don’t know how to talk to children.”

“You’ll never know till you try.”

He sighs, knowing that she has a point. Nevertheless he knows that unlike her he still has a long way to go when it comes to learning how to elicit knowledge of people’s troubles. One reason that Eponine is so good at this is because she herself is a survivor. He clasps her hand for a moment before catching her dark gaze. “I’m sorry if this....comes off in the wrong way, but when you were a kid, were you ever afraid in that way?”

“For a little while. What child wouldn’t be?” she says. She rubs a long mark on her forearm; it is almost faded now but the same cannot be said for the memory behind it. “I could not understand for a long time why being with my family, why being home meant being hurt all the time.”

Enjolras nods as he takes this all in, but before he can ask about what changed for Eponine, the stoplight suddenly turns green.

III

The first time Eponine really gets to talk to Elodie is at a neighbourhood fair, part of the yearly traditions of the older districts of the metropolis. Eponine has been convinced to help her friends man a photo booth despite all her misgivings about all the glittery and feathered costumes. It is difficult after all to argue with Grantaire’s sense of whimsy when combined with Cosette’s reasoning that this fairground venture is for a good cause.

Amid the throng of children crowding around for their turns to wear the outfits for pirates, princesses, and even swamp creatures, Eponine spots Elodie trying to wipe her face. “Come here for a little bit,” she cajoles. She pauses on seeing how raw and red Elodie’s cheeks are. “You shouldn’t wipe so hard,” she chides more gently.

“Mama will get mad that I’m dirty,” Elodie says, holding out her hands that still have chocolate under her fingernails.

“I s’pose we can do something about that,” Eponine offers, searching her pockets for a softer towel handkerchief, a present from her sister. She sees the child flinch a little as she dabs the chocolate and mud off her skin. “Your name is Elodie, right?”

The girl nods. “You’re Mister Feuilly’s friend, and Mister Enjolras’ girlfriend. They talk about you a lot,” she announces.
Eponine blushes deeply, making Elodie and some other children laugh. She can’t imagine referring to herself and Enjolras as a girlfriend-boyfriend pair, owing mostly to the very odd circumstances of their first meeting. She’s not sure if she can ever find the right words to explain their own way of being together, so she gives up on explaining this to Elodie. “Where are your parents?”

Elodie suddenly seems to take an interest in the ground. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm, maybe you should wait here instead of wandering about,” Eponine suggests. It won’t be long till some of the boys can help her track this child’s parents. “Why don’t you try one of those costumes there? I’ll take your picture.”

“Any costume?”

“Yes, any!”

“Even the pretty ones?”

“Especially the pretty ones.”

It takes a while till Elodie settles on a pink lace dress. It is something that Eponine never liked (and privately resolves never to inflict on children of her own if fate should grant such a thing to her), but it is admittedly straight out of the princess stories in old books. As Eponine is helping Elodie pull the dress over her grubby street clothes, she notices a single round mark at the back of the girl’s neck. It is far too perfect to be a birthmark, and a little too red to be a scar. “Did you hurt yourself here?” she asks cautiously, touching Elodie’s neck lightly.

Elodie freezes. “No.”

“Oh? You have a mark here,” Eponine says. “A little one, bigger than my fingernail.”

Elodie nods solemnly. “I was a bad girl. That’s why I got it.”

Eponine’s jaw drops. “How?”

“It got put there,” Elodie says, squirming a little as she speaks. “Can you take my picture now?”

Everything in Eponine’s mind is screaming at her to inquire more, to dig into the story behind this scar, but it’s far too noisy and chaotic for her to get another question in edgewise. She bites her lip as she gets out her Polaroid camera and snaps a picture of Elodie putting a wreath of yellow flowers in her hair. The image could very well be from her memories of lying under the summer sun and getting covered in dandelion fluff.

She shakes her head and forces herself to look at Elodie properly when she has changed back into her street clothes. The child is a little thin, but perhaps not overly so for her age. She is clean and well-clothed, and there is nothing about her gait or her expressions to suggest any impairment. Yet the young doctor cannot help but search Elodie’s eyes for that skittishness she knows all too well. ‘Like Azelma all over again,’ she catches herself thinking. Yet it’s hardly anything to go by and there is no use in pursuing her suspicions in the absence of outright proof.

Elodie suddenly tugs on Eponine’s hand. “There’s my Mama. I have to go.”

“Alright. It was nice to see you, Elodie,” Eponine says as she hands the picture to her. She silently watches the little girl run up to a well-dressed woman, excitedly waving her Polaroid in the air. Elodie’s mother hardly smiles and her arms are stiff when she picks up the child. In a way she reminds Eponine of a spun sugar sculpture: beautiful to look at but with hardly the strength to stand.
Eponine bites her lip so hard that she tastes blood, feeling defenceless for the first time in years against something that is at least for her, far more than memory.

IV

The next time Eponine meets Elodie, the child is in no condition to talk but she is far from quiet as she is carried from an ambulance and into the emergency room of the Saint-Michel Hospital. Her screams pierce through Eponine’s dreams for nights to come, which is saying a lot for someone who has done her own share of crying out into an unforgiving night.

At the door of the emergency room, Eponine and Combeferre exchange looks. “Your case or mine?” she asks him.

“Yours. You’re better with kids like her,” Combeferre replies quickly.

Eponine bites her lip, knowing exactly what Combeferre means. Nevertheless it takes all her courage to go up to the curtained off trauma cubicle where Elodie is flailing and kicking at the nurse trying to take her vital signs. “Elodie! It’s me, it’s Eponine!” Eponine calls as she hurries over to the child. “I’m here to help you,” she adds more soothingly.

Elodie gasps for breath. “Hurts a lot.”

Eponine nods grimly, knowing that there is no reason that Elodie can feel otherwise, not with her limbs bent at all the wrong angles. Watching her try to breathe is already painful enough and Eponine has to fight back tears as she quietly surveys the girl’s injuries. “Where was she found?” she asks the paramedic who brought her in.

“Under a car,” the paramedic replies. “A parked car, in the family garage.”

Eponine takes a deep breath before stroking Elodie’s hair in an effort to calm her just to make the task of intubating her a little easier. “Hang in there, baby. It’s going to hurt but you’re strong enough. You’ll make it,” she whispers almost pleadingly. It takes a while before the little girl is stabilized enough and can be sent upstairs for emergency surgery. As always, Eponine rushes ahead of the gurney just to be able to scrub in as quickly as possible.

This time she pauses in the operating theater’s changing room to get her phone, where she hits ‘3’ on the speed dial. Thankfully the call is picked up after only one ring. “Auguste, have you got a moment?” she manages to choke out.


Eponine shuts her eyes and takes a deep breath. “You might have been right about Elodie.”

V

That same night Enjolras and Courfeyrac visit the Saint-Michel Hospital. They have with them a tall thermos of coffee and a large carton of stir-fried noodles, which they bring straight to the surgery department’s call room. “We come bearing gifts!” Courfeyrac announces as soon as Combeferre lets them in.

“Acceptable,” Combeferre says with a grin even as he begins to send text messages to Joly, Musichetta, and Marius to come over and partake of this unexpected feast. “Eponine is working at the pedia ICU. One floor up,” he informs Enjolras.

Enjolras grits his teeth on hearing this, though he figures he shouldn’t have expected anything
different given Elodie’s injuries and Eponine’s stubbornness about bedside monitoring. He brings some of the coffee and the noodles upstairs to the ICU complex. The nurse’s station, where the doctors hang out to write their orders down, is at the far end of a long hallway lined with tiny rooms interspersed with cabinets for special equipment. Enjolras walks quickly so as to be less obtrusive but he still catches sight of where Elodie is spending the night. The little girl is alone in a small cubicle, hooked up to huge monitors that dwarf her tiny body. Most of her is swathed in thick bandages, and what little that Enjolras can see of her face is so puffy and discoloured such that she is almost unrecognizable.

At the nurse’s station, Eponine is furtively writing in a chart, gripping her pen so hard that her knuckles have gone white. Her face is drawn and tired, but her eyes are clear and calm. She looks up from her work and manages a wan smile. “Are you here for the medico-legal report?”

“Among other things,” Enjolras replies as he sets down the food and reaches over to squeeze her shoulder. He can still smell the harsh antiseptic on her hands; it clearly hasn’t been long since she left the operating room. Then he carefully reads through the form that Eponine hands to him, and the words *linear frontal skull fracture, spiral fractures on upper limbs, multiple broken ribs, third degree burns of varying ages from cigarettes* leap out among the more familiar legal terminology. “Will she live?”

Eponine bites her lip. “It’s guarded—meaning that it could go either way.”

“You did your best.”

“Not really. If I did, she...she wouldn’t be in the ICU now. I met her too and I knew something was not exactly right.”

He sighs as he recalls her telling him about how Elodie was at the fair. “You didn’t have any solid proof,” he reminds her. “It’s not wrong to err on the side of prudence—-“

She shakes her head. “In many of these cases there isn’t solid proof till it’s almost too late, and sometimes it really is too late.” She pauses to take a few deep breaths as she fights to hold back tears. “I’m tired of just patching kids up when they *shouldn’t* be in the emergency room or the operating room to begin with, when they *should* be safe at home with a family that actually cares for them. I’m tired of mopping up the mess when there is something more that can be done for them.”

Enjolras nods quietly, understanding every bit of the frustration coursing through Eponine’s entire being. He feels the same way too, just about other equally important issues. However his reasons do not have that same painful dimension as Eponine’s do. No, he doesn’t understand everything and he knows better than to throw around empty words of empathy.

Instead, he waits till she lets go of her pen and reaches for the coffee he has brought up in a cup. “Where are her parents?” he finally asks.

Eponine drains half the coffee cup before setting it down with a fierce glint in her eyes. “At home. They just came here to drop off some things she’d need and they said they’d go home for dinner before coming back here. I don’t know if the staff will let them,” she says. She taps a pile of papers. “These are going to the Child Protection Unit, within the hour.”

“I see,” Enjolras says, figuring this is a cue for him to leave her alone to her work for a little longer. Before he can get up and beat a retreat, he feels her hand close around his wrist. “Eponine?”

She looks him in the face and nods. “After I get those papers to the unit, I need you.”
The newspapers call it a mad, bad, case. Why would a well-educated and upstanding lawyer try to do away with his own child? What kind of outstanding mother doesn’t want her own daughter? How dare do these young lawyers and this upstart surgeon accuse this pair of abuse?

And why is there so much furor about a girl who just may never wake up after forty days?

On the forty-first morning, Feuillly groans with disgust as he tosses a newspaper aside over breakfast with some of his friends. “Some people just don’t get it, do they?” he fumes. “They’ll do anything for a few column inches.”

“Blog space. You have a dying medium right here,” Bahorel says as he scrunches the newspaper into a ball. He laughs at the furious gazes that Jehan, Bossuet, and Marius give him. “Come on guys, I can’t believe you don’t go paperless.”

“Sometimes nothing beats tangible print,” Jehan pronounces.

Feuillly rolls his eyes as the table erupts into a discussion about the fate of the written word. After a while he notices Eponine getting up from the table to take a call. Her harried look drops into one of disbelief before she claps a hand over her mouth and quickly hangs up. “News?” he asks as soon as Eponine rushes back to the table.

“That was from one of Marius’ interns,” Eponine replies. “Elodie just might be waking up.”

“As in opening her eyes waking up?” Bossuet asks.

“No, as in said a word and can move her legs waking up. It’s not all about the eyes,” Eponine explains quickly. She buries her face in her hands. “Finally. I cannot believe it.”

Courfeyrac raises his coffee mug. “It seems as if we have more of a case to fight if she can make a comeback,” he tells Enjolras.

“It may be a long while till she can string together a sentence, much more participate in a trial by giving a deposition,” Enjolras reminds him. “You’re right though in the sense that it changes the nature of the case altogether.”

Most of the other people at the table wince, having heard enough discussions regarding the gravity of frustrated murder in comparison to a fully commissioned homicide. ‘Elodie’s parents will get what is coming to them,’ Feuillly thinks. He is not overly soft-hearted but he has always made it clear that he has the least sympathy for those who would hurt a child.

After breakfast he makes a detour to the small novelties shop a few blocks away from the hospital. There are all kinds of stuffed toys, plush items and cozy niceties for children here, but Feuillly doesn’t want to buy anything that could crowd up Elodie’s hospital bed. His eye is immediately drawn to a tiny bouquet of roses, fashioned out of blue, white, and red ribbons. “Perfect for Bastille Day,” the store’s proprietor quips as Feuillly scrounges up some change to pay for the trinket.

“Perfect for what it stands for,” the artist says as he sets down the last coin. From here he walks more briskly to the hospital, where he almost immediately gains admittance to the paediatrics ICU.

He has lived enough of life to learn not to trust in miracles. Elodie is not sitting up, not feeding herself, or really doing much more than seemingly staring at the wall in front of her bed. Many of the bandages are still there, though by now her shaven head can be covered by a simple knit bonnet. Despite her state her eyes light up with recognition as Feuillly enters the room. Her lips move slowly
as she mouths the word “hello”, and then her friend’s name.

Feuilly laughs as he shows her the roses and pins them to her bonnet. “Yes, it’s me. Welcome back Elodie. We’ve all missed you.”
“That’s it, I’m signing you out for the evening. No night duty for you later.”

The voice cuts through Combeferre’s train of thought as well as the paragraph of the clinical abstract he’s making some final edits to. He sighs as he deletes a whole line of gibberish before looking up at the older surgeon leaning on the other side of the desk. “I’ll finish this up first, Mabeuf. My patient needs this by tomorrow for his insurance.”

Mabeuf makes a scoffing noise before wiping his own spectacles. “You said a similar thing yesterday, and stayed so late that you gave the custodian a fright. Now enough of that.” His dry fingers hover over the red switch on the extension cord that Combeferre’s computer is plugged into. “You’ll be blind before you’re thirty if you keep up like this.”

“Give me five minutes,” Combeferre insists as he gives the document a last glance. He can feel Mabeuf’s eyes on him as he sets up the staff room’s rickety but reliable printer, and then connects it to his computer. He watches the printer cautiously for a few moments to make sure that the paper does not jam and then breathes a sigh of relief when he at last sees his work on the table. “Who is going to be on night duty then later?” he asks Mabeuf.

“I’ve already asked Navet. He’s already manning the emergency room,” Mabeuf says confidently. He claps Combeferre’s shoulder. “I heard that one of your classmates is throwing a party tonight. You guys ought to catch up.”

‘Catch up and skip the post-party revelry,’ Combeferre decides silently. There is only so much he can take when it comes to sobering up his colleagues. After gathering up his things and thanking Mabeuf, he heads up to the intensive care unit, where he is sure to find at least one of his friends at work.

True to form, he finds Eponine and Joly already there and reviewing charts at the unit’s nurses’ station. “There is always a risk with ventilators, and doubly so for her since she was hooked up to one for weeks,” Joly says to Eponine, who is looking very upset.

“I still know my microbiology, Joly. I was just hoping for the best,” Eponine says tersely. She sighs when she sees Combeferre. “Elodie has pneumonia.”

Combeferre grits his teeth at this bit of news. He knows all too well how difficult it is to battle an infection acquired in a hospital. “Need I ask the cause?”

“Pseudomonas, yes. It turned the entire petri dish green,” Eponine says, pointing to a picture of the bacterial culture recovered from her patient’s ICU cubicle. “It just had to be a resistant bug.”

“The strain is resistant to the old stuff, but thankfully not to those new carbapenem antibiotics....yet,” Joly points out a little more cheerily as he begins writing in Elodie’s chart. “I’ll get her started on another round of IV meds right away.”

At that moment the ICU doors swing open, this time admitting Enjolras, who clearly has come straight from his office. “You’re here early,” Combeferre greets him.
“I’m actually on my way to another meeting. Something happened?” Enjolras asks as he places his briefcase on a nearby counter.

“A lot,” Eponine says, reaching over to squeeze his wrist. “Elodie is quite sick, as in she came down with something sick.”

One of Enjolras’ eyebrows shoots up even as he rests his chin on her shoulder as he peers at the chart. “How could she get sick here?”

“It’s what we call a nosocomial infection,” Joly says before launching into an explanation of the situation. “For now all we can do is wait for the antibiotics to kick in,” he finishes.

“I see,” Enjolras mutters, looking far less puzzled than he did a few minutes ago. “Well I have good news, again about Elodie’s situation.” He steps away from Eponine in order to open up his briefcase, then he hands her a thick yellow folder with the initials E. C printed on it. “I got these files from the guidance counsellor at Elodie’s school. She’s been concerned about her situation for a while, especially after a parent-teacher conference last year.”

Combeferre taps his fingers. “What happened then?”

“It’s more of what didn’t happen,” Enjolras replies, indicating the papers he’s brought.

Eponine bites her lip but manages a smile when she looks at Enjolras again. “How did you charm her into giving the files?”

“Her brother was on the payroll of a former colleague of mine in Congress,” Enjolras explains. “He was the one who did the talking.”

“Nice job. It should help you and Courfeyrac cement those charges,” Joly says approvingly.

‘Charges that those parents’ aren’t willing to face though,’ Combeferre thinks before he excuses himself to allow his friends to finish their work while he visits Elodie. Unlike all the other occasions when he’s dropped by, this time he has to don a hospital gown and a surgical mask over his clothes as part of an additional contact precaution given her condition. He finds her dozing lightly, one hand still clutching a book of fairy tales. The tome is open to a page depicting in exquisite detail a maiden traipsing through a thicket filled with vines and butterflies. Before Combeferre can make a discreet exit, Elodie stirs and opens her eyes, looking at him confusedly. “Hello Elodie. It’s just me, Dr. Combeferre. How are you feeling?” he asks her in a stage whisper.

The child blinks a little less groggily before reaching for a keypad; she cannot speak with an oxygen mask on her face. Her fingers move deliberately and laboriously as she types out the word “Ouch.”

“So you’ve got a bit of a bad bug, kiddo, but Dr. Joly will give you something to fight it,” he tells her. Elodie nods trustingly before typing, “Mommy and Daddy?”

“Where?” Combeferre asks, and he sighs when Elodie’s fingers flutter as if to signify ‘all over’. “You’ve got a bit of a bad bug, kiddo, but Dr. Joly will give you something to fight it,” he tells her.

Elodie nods trustingly before typing, “Mommy and Daddy?”

“Not here yet,” Combeferre replies even as he begins to look around for any sign of a recent visit from this girl’s parents. It takes him a while to locate on the bedside a small card with the words “Get well soon!” emblazoned on a festive backdrop, followed by hastily scrawled signatures. He sighs, recognizing the card as having been bought from the gift shop downstairs. As he looks around he realizes that nearly all the other niceties here are of his friends’ doing: aside from the ribbon roses that Feuilly brought a few days ago, there are now pictures and posters and even a little red flag on the wall next to Elodie’s bed. Cosette has painted Elodie’s toenails with neon pink sunbursts and flowers, while Grantaire has drawn all over her plaster casts. ‘If it weren’t for the ICU rules, they’d
fill this place with stuffed toys and all the movies she could ask for,’ he muses.

Elodie suddenly smiles behind her mask and it’s enough for Combeferre to know that Eponine and Enjolras have just entered the cubicle. He has to keep a straight face when he sees his friends, for while he is all too used to the sight of Eponine in a hospital gown and a mask, he cannot say the same for seeing Enjolras in similar attire. In fact his best friend looks downright ridiculous. “You wouldn’t make a good doctor on TV,” he remarks.

“How are you doing today?” Enjolras quips back before waving awkwardly to Elodie.

“Hence my chosen line of work,” Eponine laughs and shakes her head. “I’m sorry baby, but you can’t have chocolate for a while. Maybe you can have chocolate ice cream once we can get those tubes off,” she says as she adjusts Elodie’s socks.

“Strawberry better.”

“You’ve got good taste,” Enjolras says approvingly. He crouches to look her in the face. “I talked to your teacher, Sister Simplice. She misses you.”

At the mention of school, Elodie’s eyes seem to mist over. “I miss her too,” she types back.

Combeferre swallows hard as he looks away from the screen and meets his friends’ eyes. Over the past few days, Elodie has never mentioned missing home.

II

Musichetta has never been fond of class reunions, both official and unofficial, but the need to keep up a network of colleagues often overrules her reluctance to socialize in such gatherings. On this evening the deciding factor happens to be her friends; someone has to make sure that Combeferre, Joly, and Eponine do not spend the night with their backs to the wall. “You guys owe me pizza and an indie film marathon,” she jokes with them as they are in an elevator bound for the top floor of a swanky mall complex. “I’m going to be in need of serious detox after this trip.”

“Make it Friday,” Joly laughs ruefully as he slips an arm around her shoulder. “We’ll get to sleep in a little longer since the clinics open later on Saturdays.” Of course this is only tentative; in her line of work she has to be ready to drop everything and run to a delivery room at a moment’s notice.

In the meantime Eponine bites her lip as the elevator door opens to reveal a sleek metal and glass lobby leading to a brightly lit and noisy bistro. The woodwork gleams in that expensive way that makes them all hesitant to approach the place. “We’re underdressed,” Eponine whispers, indicating her green blouse and black slacks.

“It’s only Barley’s. It’s a smart casual place,” Combeferre reminds them. Yet now the relaxed dress code takes on an uppity air because of the bistro’s patrons. It’s not often that so many doctors, some of them coming from formidable backgrounds, gather here to celebrate a successful round of certifications and specialization exams. Tonight, Musichetta silently thanks whatever higher powers inspired her to wear a dress to work. At the very least no one can accuse her of having her standards slip entirely.

Any hope of remaining relatively inconspicuous in this fathering disappears the moment that Musichetta catches someone waving all the way from the bar. “Oh my gosh, I cannot believe it! Is it really you, Chetta?” this old friend squeals.
“There’s only one of me Irma,” Musichetta replies candidly. “You’re looking good Irma.”

“Not as good as you. What’s your secret?” Irma Boissy croons as she joins them. “You’re one lucky guy Joly. It’s been a long time you two,” she adds by way of greeting Musichetta’s companions.

‘And still some things don’t change,’ Musichetta notes silently as she studies her former classmate. She realizes after a moment that Irma’s giddy manner and neon colored clothes are not youthfulness but only a fading shadow of it. The glamour vanishes when the light plays upon the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, bringing forward that inexorable age of thirty.

Irma seems heedless of this as she takes Musichetta’s arm to lead her to a side table. “We must catch up! When did you arrive in town?” she gushes after ordering a drink.

“I never left,” Musichetta replies. “i work at Saint-Michel.”

Irma’s jaw drops. “You’re kidding.”

“Am not. Joly works there too, and so do Combeferre and Eponine,’” Musichetta says.

“No wonder that place is in the news! You guys really are the Toxic Quartet,” Irma laughs.

Musichetta rolls her eyes at this old medical school moniker. In hindsight she is not at all sorry that she and her friends earned a reputation for having the most ER admissions while on duty, or for being assigned to the most draining and complex cases. ‘How else could we learn to be ready for anything?’ she realizes. She orders a glass of iced tea before catching Irma in the middle of sending a text message. “So what are you doing nowadays?”

“Traveling while waiting for results on my interventional cardiology fellowship applications. I’m headed next to Istanbul,” Irma replies with a dismissive wave of her hand. She glances from Musichetta to Joly, who is now chatting with a former teacher of theirs. “So when is the wedding?”

“No plans yet,” Musichetta answers with a bright smile. The truth is that Joly’s increasingly rigorous research on infectious diseases and her own unpredictable schedule do not make a fortuitous combination for family life. As it is, choosing a wedding date would be the least of their problems.

“You shouldn’t forget about your ovaries,” Irma chides. She sighs and shakes her head. “You’re still lucky to have him. Most other guys our age would consider us Christmas cakes no matter how accomplished we are.”

Musichetta scowls at this derogatory idea. “Why wait for those?”

“Honey, it’s evolution. Why would a man go for someone less fertile when he has more viable options like a nubile twenty-something nurse?” Irma mutters. She pauses to take a sip of her margarita. “What are you specializing in?”

“Obstetrics.”

“Ugh. No wonder you don’t have time for a wedding. I don’t know how you can put up with such a messy thing day in, day out.”

“I can’t imagine doing anything else,” Musichetta declares proudly. To this day she cannot quite put into words what happened at her defining moment nearly six years ago, during her first rotation as an intern in obstetrics. How can she sum up all the anticipation and determination channelled in that instant of catching a child as he or she enters the outside world? It is an intoxication that is worth all the hours she spends on her feet.
Irma merely takes another sip of her drink as she regards Musichetta. “Don’t we wish we could all say *that* at this point in life?”

Musichetta nods sympathetically. “How is cardiology working out for you, really?”

Irma heaves a sigh. “It pays the bills, and I’m never out of patients. You know what they say about that specialty; you get one patient, you have them for life.” She stirs her drink for a few more moments. “So what does Joly do at Saint-Michel?”

“He’s with the hospital’s infectious diseases team. It’s a bit of lab work and a lot of surveillance,” Musichetta explains.

“Resistant bugs and mutants all over?”

“Yeah. Just another day on the job for him.”

Irma chuckles bemusedly. “At least he was never a germophobe. So how is it like having your boyfriend on the job?”

“Nothing unusual, to be honest,” Musichetta says. She sighs when she sees Irma’s disappointed face.

It is not as if she and Joly have any steamy call room escapades or duty hour shenanigans to discuss, simply because they no longer have a need for those sorts of thrills. She looks around and sees Joly laughing a little uneasily with some of the boys, so she holds his gaze long enough to shoot him a smile. He laughs again, but this time it reaches his eyes, and that is just enough for her.

III

It is only nine o’clock by the time Joly wishes he could call it a night. He’s not sure if the slight ache in his temples arises from his trying day at work or from the increasingly loud hubbub of gossip and tale-telling at the party. ‘*At least we can still hear each other over the music,*’ he tells himself by way of consolation as he sets down a glass of red wine. Gone are the days when he and his friends spent nights under the sway of strobe lights and pulsing trance music.

Before he can get up and search for Musichetta and their friends, he feels a hand tap his shoulder. “Long time no see, Joly!” bellows a man with a receding hairline and the beginnings of a paunch.

“Same to you, Benoit,” Joly replies, hoisting his mostly empty glass. “How’s the wife and your kids?”

“Good, good,” Benoit says, all the while signalling to the bartender to bring over another round of drinks. “So when are wedding bells ringing for you and Dr. Laurain there?”

“We’re waiting for the ten year mark,” Joly jokes. Sometimes he cannot believe that he and Musichetta have been a couple, albeit on an on-and-off basis, since they were nineteen years old. He considers it as one of life’s daily miracles that she does not seem to have any plans of walking out on him even after all they’ve been through.

Benoit slaps Joly’s back again. “Enjoy the bachelor life. I wouldn’t rush it if I were you.” He jerks his thumb towards where Combeferre and Eponine are listening to another friend’s hoary anecdote. “Are those two ever going to shack up again?”

Joly shakes his head. “Haven’t you forgotten how *that* ended?” To this day he is convinced that dating each other was one of the less intelligent decisions that Combeferre and Eponine have ever done. ‘*They’ll never be a romantic pair for as long as they have even the remotest chance of becoming rivals,*’ he reflects ruefully, remembering too many nights bickering about their med school
thesis, ward assignments, reports, and even guidelines on patient care. He’s only thankful that his friends have learned to work together instead of tearing each other apart.

Benoit clucks his tongue before picking up the bottle of lager that a server has brought over. “He doesn’t know what he’s missing; she’s still quite the firecracker. Unless it’s true that she’s screwing a politician?”

Joly grits his teeth at this crass turn of phrase. “She’s with my friend Enjolras.”

“College friend of yours, am I right?” Benoit asks.

Joly nods. “Former roommate, leader of the political party....you name it.”

Benoit raises an eyebrow sceptically. “I’m surprised he and Eponine didn’t meet earlier then, given that you, Combeferre, Musichetta and so many of your other friends are mutual connections.”

“Enjolras was already at law school all the way across the country by the time any of us met Eponine,” Joly points out. It is just as well that things worked out that way, for he cannot imagine a worse combination than Eponine’s despondent twenty-two year old self meeting with Enjolras’ arrogance at that age. “Besides, law and medicine are realms apart,” he adds.

“Before the case of the Chenier girl,” Benoit scoffs. “Nasty business, going up against the famous Attorney Chenier himself.”

“Someone has to do it.”

“Glad it’s not me. I heard she’s going to pull through?”

‘If she can get through the pneumonia first,’ Joly almost says, but he bites his tongue. He doesn’t need Benoit’s pumping him for information on Elodie’s condition. “She has a chance,” he says at length.

Benoit whistles, perhaps understanding more in Joly’s guarded words. “How far are they going to take this case then?”

“As far as necessary,” Joly replies quickly. Yet even so he already knows that this will be a long fight, and a story that Benoit is best staying away from.

IV

“I hear you’re interested in doing some child protection work, Dr. Thenardier.”

Eponine looks up from picking at a bowl of spiced peanuts. “Hello Touissant,” she greets. For a moment she wonders what Mr. Fauchelevent’s secretary is doing in this gathering, till she recalls that the philanthropist has assisted various medical missions and projects over the past few years. “What do you mean by interested?” she asks after a moment.

“I heard you’ve been taking care of more than one case involving children in perilous home situations,” Touissant clarifies.

“I only do referrals. A kid is brought to me, I pick up on the danger signs, and then I alert the unit,” Eponine explains with a shrug. “All the doctors are required to do it.”

“Most don’t go as far as you do, and not just in the case of Elodie Chenier,” Touissant points out, her stammer now greatly diminished. She reaches into her purse and brings out a thick brochure. “Mr.
Fauchelevent hopes you’ll be interested. It’s a certificate course, and there are several schedules for you to pick from. You can always approach Mr. Fauchelevent for any help with funding.”

“A course on handling children in crisis situations,” Eponine reads aloud. The scenarios these words conjure are very compelling, and she cannot help but flip through this brochure despite that nagging feeling in the back of her mind, dissuading her from this new diversion. She pauses when she comes upon the requirements for applying for the course. “I don’t have a degree in social work though.”

“It’s not an absolute prerequisite,” Touissant says.

“And I have duty hours to keep up.”

“As I said, you can pick your schedules.”

“Are you sure that Mr. Fauchelevent wouldn’t rather offer this to someone else?”

“There was only one brochure in his office, and he marked it out for you.”

“Why?” Eponine blurts out. “I’m not exactly therapist or social worker material. Does he remember that I’ve got a ton of issues that I could possibly project on people?” It’s part of why she prefers being a surgeon; there is no need to go into the labyrinths of people’s minds and possibly get lost in that dangerous exchange between patient and practitioner.

“You care,” Touissant says. She pauses as if to collect her words. “Even if Mr. Fauchelevent had someone else in mind, I would encourage you to give it a try.”

‘And not Cosette?’ Eponine wants to say, but she knows better than to argue with Touissant about this matter right now. Nevertheless she decides she’ll have a good talk with her friend at the soonest possible time, maybe the next day if possible. “When does Mr. Fauchelevent want me to meet him about this?”

“Before the first day of the application period,” Touissant says, indicating the dates on the brochure. “That’s about two weeks. Try to think about it, won’t you?”

“I will,” Eponine promises, but even then she’s not sure how much thought she can put into this possible venture, not with so many things on her mind. Aside from Elodie’s case, she has other patients to care for, a conference she’ll be presenting a paper in, and most importantly, a series of major exams for her own specialization. ‘But it’s a need too,’ something still nags at her throughout the rest of the party.

Thankfully by eleven o’clock she and her friends are able to take their leave of the party and head back to their respective homes. Eponine quietly lets herself into the tiny apartment she shares with Azelma and Gavroche, even if she is half-sure that at least one of her siblings is still awake. The place is admittedly too tiny for all three of them: aside from the main room that serves as living room, kitchen, library and work room, there are two tiny bedrooms and a single bathroom. Yet it’s an island of sanity in this city, not just for her and her siblings, but apparently even for their friends if the weekly ramen gatherings here are any indicator. She rolls her eyes on finding on the rickety card table some of Courfeyrac’s books parked near Feuilly’s spare sketchpad, as well as Bahorel’s boxing gloves. ‘What is it that they say, me casa es tu casa?’ she wonders silently as she locks the apartment’s front door before going to knock on what Gavroche calls his ‘cave’. “Gav? You still up?”

In a moment Gavroche opens the bedroom door. “Yeah, but Zelma isn’t. She’s got an early day,” he says with a yawn as he scratches his leg through his pajama pants. “Where have you been?”
“Reunion,” Eponine says with some distaste. “Courf isn’t sleeping in the other room, is he?”

Gavroche shakes his head. “Enjolras told him to actually do his overtime in the office for once.”

“I wonder how he did that,” Eponine laughs, indicating the books that their friend has left behind.

“Poor, poor Courf,” Gavroche says in a mock theatrical voice. “By the way Mr. Fauchelevent called.”

“Yeah. I met up with Touissant. Long story,” Eponine says. She’s not sure she wants to explain the situation when she hasn’t made up her mind yet about it. ‘Gav and Zelma could have sometimes used a doctor with that sort of training,’ the thought occurs to her, but she pinches herself to clear it away. If she’s going to take this chance, she has to find something more than guilt to propel her. She mulls about this a little longer after bidding Gavroche good night and going into the room she shares with Azelma. She readies for bed quietly so as not to wake her sister, and then sends a ‘good night’ text to Enjolras. Inasmuch as she wants to hear his voice, now isn’t the hour for a probably impolite phone call.

However not even a minute after she puts her phone on the bedside table, she hears it begin to ring. “Hey Auguste. Aren’t you busy or asleep yet?” she asks.

“I was just calling it a night,” Enjolras says, not sounding the least bit tired. “How was the party?”

“It was okay, for as long as people weren’t talking about people,” Eponine replies, burrowing under the blankets of her bed. “How’s the overtime going?”

“I can’t get Courfeyrac to stay still. Maybe I should have left him in your apartment,” Enjolras confesses.

“If you did that, I’d have to go over to your place,” Eponine says. She feels her face grow hot as her mind lingers on the idea of meeting up with him at this late hour, perhaps sitting on his sofa and talking over coffee, and then some. She can’t deny that this is one of her favourite daydreams.

“You’d leave Gavroche alone with them?” Enjolras asks amusedly. “That’s torture.”

“For them, not him,” Eponine quips. She sighs as she catches a glimpse of the brochure she’s tossed on her bedside table. As it is, she hardly has time for things outside of work, how much more this? “So will you be coming by again tomorrow?”

“Yes, that’s why I’m calling,” Enjolras replies. “Have you got a lunch break tomorrow, Eponine?”

“Late lunch. I’m scrubbing in at ten, so the earliest I can safely promise you a meet-up is two.”

“Wow. I don’t know how you do it, Eponine.”

“Same with you,” Eponine whispers. How can someone live with so much drive every day? Sometimes she fears he’ll inadvertently burn out or overstretch himself, and heaven help them all if that ever happens. “I’ll let you know once things become definitive.”

“Alright then.” He pauses over the sound of rustling paper. “It’s about a case I need some expert opinion on. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” It’s just medical advice, so this shouldn’t be a problem. She tries to hold back a yawn as she lies down. “I’m really beat though, so inasmuch as your voice keeps me awake, I’m going to just have to settle for dreaming about it now.”
“Of course,” he laughs. “Good night Eponine.”

“Good night Auguste.” She’s still smiling even when she hangs up, because somehow there’s always something more in those simple words.
Maurice Courfeyrac goes to the law office nowadays with a spring in his step, or at least with less trudging than he used to. ‘Anything is better than just shoving paper around,’ he decides as he bookmarks yet another site about child development. While working in the field of human rights is challenging, not to say risky, he lives for the breadth of experience that these investigations entail. The learning and interactions make the piles of documents and transcripts on his desk worthwhile.

He looks up from his work and sees Enjolras in the next cubicle answering emails and reading through a case file while keeping up a very involved phone call. It quickly becomes clear to Courfeyrac just who his friend is speaking to since there is no one else he knows who can keep Enjolras so focused and yet so at ease in the same breath. He has to keep from smiling too widely as he brings out his phone to get a picture for future leverage purposes, especially when negotiating about flexible overtime.

Of course Enjolras is oblivious to this observation, even when he finishes replying to the last email and then gets up to begin pacing the cubicle. “Alright, I’ll keep that in mind when I review the statements. It’s a lot to cover---no, no, it’s fine. I don’t care if this means I have to throw out half of the so-called evidence, since it’s better than presenting implausible statements in court,” he says into the phone. He grins as he adjusts his grip on the gadget. “Seven in the evening it is then. Of course. You’re amazing, Eponine. I’ll see you later.”

Courfeyrac whistles as soon as Enjolras ends the call. “Someone has a hot date tonight.”

Enjolras rolls his eyes at this term. “It’s our sanity break from the rest of you. We were supposed to have a late lunch before this happened,” he says, gesturing to all of his paperwork.

“Late lunch to discuss a case again?”

“I needed her opinion on the Transnonain Four.”

Courfeyrac blanches on hearing this case. He’s far from a squeamish man; he has seen his share of harrowing testimonies and evidence exhibits, but there are few things that have been able to sicken him more than the story of five tenant farmers who suffered at the hands of a brutal overseer. “So you’re questioning the witness statements?”

“At least those that deviate greatly from the usual clinical course of starvation,” Enjolras replies. “There are other injuries that may not have been caused by what we all originally thought.”

Courfeyrac hisses as he tries to block out what he recalls of the morgue photos and witness interviews. “You’ll review the coroner’s report again?”

Enjolras nods grimly before retrieving a paper from his desk and handing it to Courfeyrac. “Have you seen this yet?”

The younger attorney flinches at the sight of a table of medications and equipment, as well as their corresponding prices. “How can the Cheniers pay for all that? Insurance can only get them so far.”

“Mrs. Chenier owns several lucrative businesses and has some good investments. That’s on top of
what Attorney Chenier makes with his law practice and consultancies,” Enjolras explains.

Courfeyrac shakes his head at the irony before him, of parents who can buy the world for their child but do not have it in them to give the one thing that is needed most and costs nothing. “How much longer will Elodie be in the hospital?”

“Eponine, Joly, Pontmercy, and the rest of the team have not given a specific timeframe,” Enjolras says. The look on his face is bittersweet, as if he is thinking back on some sure but distant hope. “Even if she gets to be discharged soon, she’ll be in physiotherapy indefinitely.”

“None of her near relatives want to take her, or have anything to do with this situation,” Courfeyrac points out. “She’s going to have to become a ward of the state.”

“A situation we ought to avoid; she wouldn’t last one week in those homes,” Enjolras says as he gathers up some of his papers and puts them in his briefcase. “If you find anything on the forensics database, send it along to my email. I’ll look at it later.”

“Get to your date first!” Courfeyrac chides him but by this time Enjolras is halfway out the office door. Then again, he has to concede the fact that Enjolras and Eponine never seem to be able to have time for conventional dates. The breathless pace of their relationship suits them though. Courfeyrac cannot imagine himself or any of their other friends living this way, which makes him all the more glad for what he does have with another one of the Thenardier girls. ‘I wonder if Azelma’s classes are done for the day,’ he thinks as he starts looking for his phone to contact his favourite schoolteacher.

Before he can send out a message he hears footsteps and harried arguing in the hallway outside the office. For a moment he curses the fact that he has to deal with this impending confrontation just when his friends are away; Enjolras has his meeting, Bahorel and Feuilly are off doing some fieldwork in a riverside community, while Bossuet is in the infirmary bandaging a singed finger. ‘So this is how it is to hold a fort,’ he thinks amusedly as he sits up straight in his chair and adjusts his tie.

He has never been intimidated by the Cheniers, and he is not about to begin now, especially when he sees the furious and desperate looks on their faces as well as on that of their lawyer Dupont, an old friend from law school. Atty. Chenier is all bombast as usual, while his wife looks like a porcelain doll suddenly animated. It’s not a good picture but Courfeyrac still finds it in himself to greet cheerily, “What can I do for you today?”

Atty. Chenier huffs as he tosses a paper in Courfeyrac’s general direction. “Explain this.”

Courfeyrac sees immediately that this is the same list of medical expenses he saw earlier. “I don’t see a problem. You requested for an itemized list every week, you consented to the procedures—”

“Not all of them! And this thing about long-term care, absolutely ridiculous!” Atty. Chenier fumes.

Courfeyrac pauses to read the list, all the while trying to remember what procedures these two did not give their express consent to. It takes a few moments before he can safely put aside the paper. “If I recall those procedures were emergency procedures that had to be instituted while you were at work, and she was away with her country club friends. It was that or your daughter would have died that very hour,” he says seriously. “As for long term care, why is there a problem with that?”

“We cannot pay for it any longer,” Mrs. Chenier speaks up. “We’ve already spent enough.”

“What do you propose to do then? You know that you can’t leave your daughter uncared for,” Courfeyrac says. He doesn’t need to remind them of the consequences if the Child Protection Unit
decides to investigate them for child neglect and abandonment on top of the already pending charges of deliberate child abuse.

“We are proposing allocating a sizeable amount that will be allocated for Miss Elodie’s health expenses. It’s part of a legal settlement,” the lawyer chimes in.

‘Bullshit,’ Courfeyrac thinks. He knows an easy way out when he sees it. “A settlement with who?”

“The unit of course and this law office,” the lawyer says.

“I highly doubt that the Saint Michel Hospital will accept that. As for this place, it’s a public office, and as a rule we don’t take out of court settlements paid to the office itself,” Courfeyrac reminds him. “If cost is such a problem, then work it out with the doctors at Saint-Michel. There are other facilities that may be able to provide for your daughter’s health care and perhaps at lesser expense.”

“Are you sure about not taking the settlement?” Atty. Chenier asks once again. “You hardly have the resources to take this case further, even to the courts.”

“We do well enough and will continue to do so. Our expenses are not your concern,” Courfeyrac replies in a level tone. It’s no secret that he and Enjolras have taken on this case pro bono. He doesn’t even want to know how much his physician friends have had to shell out from their own pockets at some critical junctures in Elodie’s hospital stay.

“Courfeyrac, please,” the lawyer beseeches them. “Do not be obstinate.”

The adjective makes Courfeyrac chuckle for a moment. “Takes one to know one, Dupont,” he tells his colleague. “As it is, you’re obligated to still provide care for your daughter, whether you ask for her to be transferred elsewhere or not. Believe me, we will have ways of finding out whether you comply or not.”

Atty. Chenier swears and pounds his fist on the desk. “Are you threatening me, Courfeyrac?”

“Oh no, only reminding you of our databases and surveillance especially since this case is now on public record,” Courfeyrac replies.

“It would not have gone public if not for you and your friends,” Mrs. Chenier spits at him.

‘There wouldn’t be a case at all if you didn’t maul your daughter and throw her under a vehicle,’ Courfeyrac wants to say, but he reminds himself to be diplomatic. “If you are indeed incapable of caring for her, we shall have to consider terminating your parental obligations and of course your rights. It’s perfectly legitimate. We do this all the time,” he says. “You might want to do this in light of your impending expenses in the courts.”

“Are you equating us to the shelter scum and deadbeats you like associating with?” Atty. Chenier sneers.

This jibe, which Courfeyrac knows is directed to the fact that he is associated with the Thenardiers, Feuilly, and a few other hard-up friends, is enough to have him gritting his teeth and fighting the urge to deck this man. “I’m not. You’re on entirely different footing and will be treated as such,” he says. He watches Dupont’s eyes go wide while the Cheniers exchange aghast stares. “Is there anything you want to discuss? I need to have my lunch,” he adds.

“We’ll be back, mark my words. Tell Enjolras that he has to be here at our next meeting,” Atty. Chenier says. “It’s imperative.”
“Then set an appointment outside. Thank you very much!” Courfeyrac says. It’s all he can do not to heave a sigh of relief when the trio slams the door on their way out. After sending a text message to Enjolras explaining the situation and suggesting the termination of the Cheniers’ parental rights, he then sends Azelma a simple text with a smiley face. He breathes a sigh of relief when he sees her reply, asking him how he is. He’ll definitely be in some need of her care, or at least the sight of her face, by the time this work day is up.

II

“Dad, I’m driving Touissant to her physiotherapy appointment! Is there anything you and Mom need?”

Cosette checks her purse for her car keys even as she hears her father’s footsteps in the foundation’s office. She looks up at M. Fauchelevent just as he enters the front hall. “A run to the grocery, a bill, something, anything?” she offers with a smile.

M. Fauchelevent’s bushy gray eyebrows quirk upwards for a moment. “I’ll let you know if I remember anything. You might want to text your mother about groceries though.”

“Okay then,” Cosette says as she slips her keys in her dress pocket instead. “I’ll see you later Dad.”

“Don’t stay out too late, Cosette. You know that Marius is more than welcome to have dinner here instead of in the staff room,” M. Fauchelevent reminds her.

“Dad!”

“It’s Fantine’s idea, not mine.”

Cosette rolls her eyes affectionately. She will always be her father’s little princess, no matter how old she gets and no matter how wonderful other men in her life will treat her. Thankfully her mother is more willing to watch and let her grow up a little bit. “I’ll ask him to call here first to confirm with you, like a proper gentleman,” she promises. “And I’ll be back by seven.”

Thankfully this answer seems to appease her father, who smiles before retreating to his office. Cosette runs to meet Touissant at the door of her own office, should in case she need help getting into the van. She smiles when she sees the kindly woman hobbling faster towards the driveway; it’s a good day for her, a spot of hope amid the usually stormy days of half-dragging her to the rehabilitation medicine department and checking on her medications. It’s ironic that her most difficult patient should be the one who helps her most in caring for others.

It’s a long drive to the Saint-Michel Hospital, and so Cosette has to put on some music to keep her awake, but she takes care to keep the volume low enough in order to let Touissant have a nap. The tune she picks is a mellow jazz instrumental, a piece she heard Grantaire, that man of many talents, cover during a weeknight gig at a cafe. She taps out the tune on top of the van’s stick shift, loving the way the music makes her blood sing both in the present moment as well as in memory. ‘Because Marius and I danced to this song,’ she thinks, sucking in a deep breath at the recollection of his fingers gingerly gripping her arms. She’s not at all sorry that he’s so awkward about so many things, not for as long as he is sure about her.

The parking lot is not particularly busy when she pulls in, but there are still enough people to gawk when she steps out of the van. Somehow the idea of a petite girl like her driving such a huge vehicle is still so strange to so many people, and it’s an irony that Cosette finds some humor in. As she and Touissant are lining up at the reception desk, she hears her cellphone ringing. “Hello Ponine. What’s
“Hey Cosette. Are you accompanying Touissant to the hospital today?” Eponine asks.

“Yeah. Her session is starting in a while; I just have to sign her in. You want to meet up?” Cosette replies, even as she marvels at her friend’s knack for keeping a schedule straight.

“I’ll meet you at the physical therapy room in ten minutes,” Eponine says. “See you in a bit.”

“Okay then,” Cosette agrees before Eponine hangs up. Something in her friend’s tone is questioning, even a little puzzled. ‘What does Eponine have up her sleeve this time?’ she wonders as she and Touissant go up for their turn at the desk.

Five minutes after they arrive at the rehabilitation medicine department and Touissant starts her meeting with the therapist, Eponine arrives with a large cup of coffee in hand. Cosette steps out into the waiting room to meet her. “Had a rough surgery?” Cosette asks, still smelling the antiseptic on her friend’s arms and clothes.

“No just a lengthy one,” Eponine replies. “Have you met up with Pontmercy yet?”

“I’m going to surprise him. It’s not a bad time, I hope?” Cosette confides.

“I don’t think so,” Eponine says. She brings a brochure out of her pocket and puts it down on a table. “Touissant handed this to me last night. She said it was from your father.”

Cosette immediately recognizes the flier for the certificate course on handling youngsters in crisis. She’s a little startled to see this in her friend’s possession, but in a way she’s not entirely surprised. Her father has his secretive ways of getting to people. “So are you interested in it?”

Eponine sips her coffee first. “I thought you would be.”

“I’ve earned a lot of certifications already, in different areas,” Cosette replies candidly. ‘Which is probably why Papa didn’t run this by me first,’ she catches herself thinking but she smiles to hide the slight sting. “It would be good for you,” she remarks.

“Your dad knows lots of doctors and other qualified people who can take this course,” Eponine says.

Cosette looks down, knowing the other question beyond her friend’s words: ‘It’s because of where I came from, isn’t it?’ She has to pick her next words very carefully. “You care about these things.”

“I can’t help it,” Eponine says. “There are days when I wonder if it’s my case file that they should be reviewing in the psychiatry department.”

The words bring back another memory to mind, of seeing Eponine stagger in after an almost sleepless night only to fall asleep in such a way that her sleeves had rolled down her too thin arms, showing a whole new collection of bruises. ‘Familiar seeks familiar,’ Cosette realizes; that had happened during their first year at university, when Eponine was still sometimes literally dancing with danger. “You’re not your parents.”

Eponine doesn’t say anything for a time as she takes a longer sip of her coffee. “Did you know that they---at least my mother---tried contacting me recently?”

Cosette cringes. “What for?”

“ Asking if she and my father could move in with us,” Eponine says. “Like hell I’m letting them
anywhere near Azelma and Gavroche. It’s a good thing I didn’t wait till college graduation to help them run away from home.”

Cosette sighs at the memory of that frenetic night some time in their second year of college, when she’d woken up to find the two younger Thenardiers curled up on Eponine’s bed while her friend desperately tried to explain matters to their resident adviser. “Did they try getting in touch with Zelma and Gav?”

Eponine shakes her head. “As far as I know, no. There’s a restraining order in place, though I’m not exactly sure if they remember it.”

“You won’t be alone facing them this time,” Cosette reminds her. She squeezes Eponine’s shoulder. “The past isn’t going to change, but tomorrow is always different. Who knows what other good we all can do, right?”

“I’ve always liked your optimism,” Eponine says even as something like a thoughtful smile tugs at the corners of her lips. “Now especially.”

“You know, if you want to talk about that course, you can drop by our place for dinner. Mom is cooking, so that’s going to be good,” Cosette offers.

“Maybe later in this week. Enjolras and I have plans for tonight,” Eponine replies.

Cosette cannot help but smile for her friend. “Going out to dinner?”

“Yeah. There’s this bistro that supposedly has good pasta and coffee. That satisfies both ends of the equation,” Eponine explains.

Cosette tries for a moment to guess what this place might be, but she decides to let the mystery be for now. She’s sure to hear about it soon enough. “If you come across a place with good crepes, please tell me as soon as possible.”

“Pontmercy should learn to make those for you,” Eponine says. She laughs as she looks past Cosette. “Speaking of which....”

Cosette turns around in time to see Marius in the middle of a discussion with a physical therapist and a wheelchair bound patient. The sight of him is enough to make her spine tingle in the best way possible, especially when his face brightens with that abashed but openly adoring expression she loves best on him. It doesn’t matter that everyone in the room can see the grin that is surely forming on her face.

Eponine rolls her eyes and pokes Cosette’s elbow. “I’ll let you know when I’ll join you guys for dinner. I’ll see you around, Cosette.”

Cosette gives her friend a brief hug before retreating to one side of the room to wait for Marius to finish his work. It seems like an eternity till at last he is able to bid his patient goodbye and then meet her near the middle of the room. She greets him with a light kiss on his cheek. “Missed me?”

Marius goes very red and ducks his head. “Is it Touissant’s appointment today?”

“Yes. You want to say hello?” Cosette asks.

“In a while,” Marius replies. He brings out his phone and checks his calendar. “So are we still on for Saturday? I’ve got the tickets.”
“It’s a date,” Cosette promises. “Tonight could be too, if you’ll join us for dinner.”

Marius swallows hard. “At your place?”

“Yes, unless you know somewhere else to get a free dinner,” Cosette replies. She knows that being around her parents still terrifies him, especially given their bumbling start. Sometimes she wonders if they will ever get used to each other.

When she looks at Marius again, she finds him searching through his phone’s directory. “Marius, what are you doing?”

His smile is both guilty and shy. “Calling your father to confirm that I’ll be there. It’s polite to RSVP.”

It’s enough for Cosette to reward him with a warm hug. For all of Marius’ awkwardness, he does know best when it comes to surprises.

III

Avenue 54 in the heart of the metropolis is not an area Azelma Thenardier frequents. In fact she can only think of maybe five reasons for her to be in this part of town, and four of those reasons are somehow connected to Maurice Courfeyrac.

‘It shouldn’t take him so long to get here from his office,’ she tells herself as she watches the huge hands on the market district’s clock tower slowly approach six o’clock. She doesn’t have her siblings’ uncanny ability to work out distances, and so for her any attempt at estimating travel time is almost leaving everything up to chance. Nevertheless she trusts enough in Courfeyrac’s good graces to believe that he won’t leave her hanging, or will at least contact her if he is delayed for some good reason or another.

The clock is beginning to strike six when she catches sight of his sleek silver colored sedan pulling up to the curb. The vehicle seems almost uncharacteristic of a man with Courfeyrac’s suaveness and elegance, but the main reason he drives this old thing is because he likes having enough room to give any one of his friends a lift. ‘As well as other reasons,’ Azelma thinks with a wicked grin as she crosses her arms. “You’re late, Maurice,” she calls to him as he rolls down the passenger side window.

Courfeyrac gives her an apologetic look. “Did I keep you waiting long?”

To answer him she saunters up to the open window and plants a wet kiss on the side of his mouth, pulling away before he can kiss her back. “It’s a quarrel,” she says.

He gives her a petulant look before opening the car door on the passenger side. “What do you say we negotiate it?” he asks.

Azelma’s eyes are glinting with pure mischief as she hops into the car and loses no time kicking off her shoes before climbing into Courfeyrac’s lap. It’s a tight squeeze given that they are in the driver’s seat, but Azelma couldn’t care less, not for as long as Courfeyrac’s hands are on their proper place around her waist as he is kissing her.

He pulls away after what seems to be a delicious eternity just to allow her to catch a much needed breath. “Am I forgiven now?” he asks as he rubs a finger over her swollen lips.

She places a hand on her chest to feel her heart still pounding against her ribs. “Now you have to apologize for making me look like this. There’s no way we can go shopping for ramen ingredients
“Zelma, this is a night market,” Courfeyrac reminds her. His eyebrows wiggle suggestively as he begins running his thumbs closer to her hips. “Who says we have to go shopping right away?”

Azelma’s lips form a surprised ‘o’ as it dawns on her what he’s got in mind. “We have to get out of this street. Someone might come by and see us---like one of my students.”

Courfeyrac grimaces. “Well we don’t want to be accused of corrupting innocent young minds.”

“You’re already guilty as charged when it comes to me,” she whispers. Why she’s allowing this trickster of a lawyer to have such a place in her mind and heart is still something of a mystery to her, but she’s not about to complain. She laughs as she slides into her proper place in the passenger’s seat and buckles up responsibly. “So where to?” she asks.

Courfeyrac pauses to think even as he grips the steering wheel. “I know this place. It’s actually an inn, there’s a good deli nearby, and it’s a heck lot better than a seedy motel.”

“You make it sound like we’re going to stay out all night, Maurice. I still have work tomorrow.”

“Some of the best stuff doesn’t get brought out till nearly 1am. I’ll drop you off at work, I promise, and we can go by your apartment to get your clothes.”

It’s a reckless idea, but then again Azelma was never the most cautious person anyway. Besides she always can nap during her lunch break. “You’re lucky that Gavroche is out with friends tonight and that Eponine is on a date, or they’ll never let us hear the end of it,” she laughs.

“We can’t keep on kicking them out of your place,” Courfeyrac agrees.

She giggles at the memories of more recent evenings at home, or at least those outside of the now regular ramen nights with their friends. “You’ve practically taken over our sofa. The landlady is beginning to ask how many of us really live in that place,” she informs him.

“I like it your place,” Courfeyrac confesses as they get to a red light. “You’re there, your siblings are fun, there’s food all the time....”

“There you go again,” Azelma chides. She knows that this conversation is beginning to get dangerous, but all the same she has to have it out with him if only for practical reasons and to figure out what to do with all of their friends’ teasing. “Don’t you think it’s a bit too small?”

“Small?”

“I could stay over at your place just as well.”

Courfeyrac cringes, clearly catching on to what she’s saying. “A bachelor’s pad is no place for a lady like you, to be honest. My place...well you’ve seen it. Horrible.”

“I could fix it up,” Azelma offers. The idea is almost embarrassing, given that she’s been going out with him for less than a year, but she figures it will make more sense eventually, maybe even sooner if she has anything to say about it. “I don’t have to do it right away.”

Courfeyrac is quiet for a far longer time than usual, but soon there is a glint in his eyes that is enough for Azelma to know that all will be well. “Which side of the bed do you prefer?” he asks with a mischievous sidelong grin.
“The right side,” Azelma answers immediately.

He groans with mock dismay. “Oh snap. That’s the side I also like.”

“No fair. You have to give way to a lady,” Azelma says as she slaps his hand. “I don’t care if it’s your bed. You asked.” She laughs unashamedly at his pleading look, even though she knows that this point of this debate will be moot if, when they get around to moving in together. ‘The only thing left to worry about is breaking it to Eponine and Gavroche,’ she realizes. Of course it will be a big adjustment for the three of them especially since they’ve divided the rent and other expenses quite well among them for the past few years.

For now though she is content to push these plans out of her mind, more so when she and Courfeyrac pull up outside a squat and quaint looking inn. They get a room that is actually something like a snug loft, with a living area leading up to an elevated and screened off sleeping alcove. “We could ask for pizza delivery or head down to the deli before going to the market,” Courfeyrac says as soon as they drop their bags by the door.

“Wrong order,” Azelma insists before kissing him soundly, all the while practically dragging him by his shirt collar up to the oversized bed in the alcove. The sheer spontaneity of this tryst is exhilarating since she has rarely been so bold, so willing to live in the moment. It’s just as well that she’s finally found a person who is more than ready to bring out this side of her, especially when she has to be such a staid and stable character for much of the day.

More than two hours later, when she is sated and sprawled across his chest, she meets his gaze and notices the pensive, almost philosophical look on his face. “You’re not thinking about work,” she teases.

“No, only about all the ways to make wrong ramen,” he replies.

“You’re such a typical guy. Always thinking with your stomach.”

“Not with a lower portion of the anatomy?”

She laughs at this earthy quip. “Don’t you dare say that around Gavroche. He’s already got a filthy enough mind as it is thanks to Bahorel,” she says.

Courfeyrac sticks out his tongue at her before suddenly propping himself up on his elbows, forcing Azelma to also sit up. “Something is going on outside.”

Before Azelma can ask she also hears the commotion of running footsteps, shouts, and sirens outside. She wraps a blanket around herself before peering out of the small window in the sleeping loft. From here she can see several police cars forming a crazy trapezoid around another car that has skidded onto the curb. The streetlights show all too well the crimson stains spreading on the pavement, including a trail of footsteps leading away from the scene but towards the buildings on their side of the street.

“There goes the evening,” Courfeyrac mutters just as a thud sounds through the air. He looks up at the ceiling. “That can’t be---“

It is at that moment Azelma hears the terrible groan of wood beginning to give way, a split second before Courfeyrac tackles her as the loft seemingly collapses all around them.
“You’re telling me. I remember I was twelve when I had to bring Gavroche to the ER one night. Quite the picture really, me hauling him onto Montparnasse’s bike because he couldn’t walk all the way to the bus station since he was so weak and feverish. I still remember how the docs and nurses looked at us.” She shudders as if she is at the scene once more. “I guess someone filed a referral there but no one really asked us what was going on, or what they could do to help. I don’t think they really knew how.”

“Hence this course? If you ask me it should be mandatory in medical school.”

“Not everyone has the stomach for it, you know.”

‘Or the heart,’ he thinks as he clasps her hands tightly. He smiles on seeing the maverick light in her eyes, that very same look she had when she fought to save his life, or more lately when she’s thinking up some comeback versus their clever friends. She is so beautiful in this moment and he cannot take his eyes off her. “You’ll do the world a great deal of good.”

“Not the world, Auguste. Maybe a few lives would do,” Eponine quips. She catches one of his pinkies with hers. “Your office doesn’t exactly have a minors’ desk division. Are you sure you don’t want to sign up for it too?”

“I’ll find something along different lines, after we finish our cases,” Enjolras replies, tugging lightly on her finger. Doing child protection is a worthy venture, but he knows that he’s more suited to other battles. “Maybe Feuilly or Bossuet would be interested in it too. It would help them a lot with their community fieldwork.”

“Not Bahorel or Courfeyrac?”

“Bahorel is more into the weapons and security thing. Did you know he was trying to become a forensics expert back when we were classmates?”

“That’s news, to me. What about Courfeyrac?”

“He prefers other specialties,” Enjolras says. He pauses to catch himself before he winds up talking shop around her again; although he knows that she likes hearing about what he does, even he knows that their conversations shouldn’t be limited only to the cases they work on. “What do you say to having some dessert and coffee?” he suggests.

“It’s about time,” she says amiably even as her phone begins to ring in her purse. She frowns on seeing the number on her screen. “It’s from work. Great.”

Enjolras sighs, knowing that Eponine will have no choice but to take the call. One thing he likes about his profession is that he can usually put calls on hold without any ill consequences, which is definitely not something Eponine has the luxury of doing. “I’ll see what they’ve got on the menu?”

She nods before picking up the phone. “Navet, what’s up? What, the ER? Are you serious? She’s okay, right? At least...okay, I’ll be right over,” she says, her smile quickly falling into a dismayed look. She cringes as she ends the call. “My sister is in the ER again. She’s gotten into some scrape, at least she’s going to be fine, but they still need to notify me to pick her up. I’m so sorry, Auguste,” she apologizes.

“It happens. We can go out again later in the week,” he says, trying not to make his disappointment
too apparent. “If Azelma is in the ER that means Courfeyrac is there too.”

“Now what on earth could they have been up to this time?” Eponine wonders with a frown. “Navet isn’t being specific though. This can’t be good.”

“I see,” Enjolras says. He hands her the dessert menu and catches her wrist to squeeze it lightly. “We can just get coffee and something light to go.”

“Okay,” she concurs, still sounding mortified at this interruption. She pockets the phone with a frown. “How do you ever put up with this?”

“With cutting our time short?”

“Yeah. I’m always bailing on you, or vice versa, or we’re always meeting up late. You’d think I’d be the clingy one about all of this, but I’m the one getting all the after hour calls.”

“You, clingy?” he scoffs. “Anyway, I’ve done my share of overtime too.” The rueful look she gives him says it all, but all the same she holds his hands again, as if to tell him that even these brief moments more than make up for the balance.

II

It is not often that Bossuet ends up truly alone after work hours. Even on the nights when Joly and Musichetta want time just to themselves, he can usually count on finding any of their other friends at a cafe or gallery, or at least at someone’s apartment. ‘I must be the only one who forgot to make plans for the evening,’ he muses wryly as he carefully dons a very scratched up but snug helmet before hopping on the motorcycle he’s spent the past few weeks tweaking and attempting to make improvements on. He’s not sure what freak temporal convergence has allowed for Jehan and Grantaire to be visiting a gallery out of town, for Bahorel to be home with his parents, for Feuilly to be attending a community theatre production at the outskirts of the city, for Combeferre to be at an important research grant meeting, all this while the rest of their friends are out with their respective significant others. Perhaps he’ll figure it out before ramen night tomorrow.

Ending up at Avenue 54 is far more deliberate though. Bossuet can practically feel the years falling away as he approaches this winding road, which has seen some of the best and the worst of his life before meeting Joly and Musichetta. Sometimes he thinks he can catch a whiff of cotton candy and charcoal on the breeze, but he soon realizes that the air is thick instead with exhaust and the cloying, woody aroma of old spices. He rolls his eyes on seeing how many cars now clog up the thoroughfare; he could still remember a time when this place was more of a glorified sidewalk. Nevertheless the sight of kiosks and booths forming a large huddle further down the street heartens him somewhat; some things never change in this metropolis.

As he looks for a place to park his motorcycle, he notices a number of police cars forming a barrier near a bend in the road. His hair stands on end when he finds an ambulance in this mix; despite his own impressive track record of hospital and clinic visits, the mere sound of an ambulance still sets him on edge. It’s almost always a sign that the trouble is too big to handle or simply laugh off. Of course a building with its roof caved in definitely counts as a bad situation, more so when he sees all the paramedics and policemen swarming at the scene. Through a break in the chaos he catches sight of a couple sitting on the curb while being interviewed by a paramedic. For a moment he blinks, wondering if he is seeing things, but the rueful though cheery expression on the duo’s faces are all too familiar to him. “Courf! Zelma!” he calls as he brings his bike to an abrupt stop and jogs over.

Courfeyrac waves at him, never mind the fact that a bandage swathes now most of his right hand. “What brings you here, Bossuet?”
“Nostalgia,” Bossuet replies. It’s a pull none of them have with regard to this side of town. He gapes as he realizes that Courfeyrac has a blanket draped around his shoulders, and is garbed in nothing else. Azelma interestingly enough is in the same state. “As for you two...”

Azelma groans and buries her face in Courfeyrac’s shoulder. “Shut up, Bossuet. This is just a case of bad timing. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Bossuet now ends up snorting, not because his mind was on any particular track, but only because Azelma’s plea has the opposite effect. Thankfully the arrival of the paramedics is enough to distract him from going too far down this line of thought, and before he knows it he’s asking for permission to accompany his friends in the ambulance. The ambulance driver gives him a sceptical look but motions for him to hop in anyway; perhaps he’s seen worse in the way of driving buddies.

As he gets comfortable between the stretchers, he notices the paramedics extricating a man from the wreckage his friends were sitting by. “You weren’t alone?” he asks warily.

“He’s the one who made the roof cave in,” Courfeyrac explains. “Apparently he was being chased; he was pretty scratched up already when he fell in.”

Something about this stranger prompts Bossuet to take a second look, and his jaw drops when he sees the police make a circle around this victim. ‘That’s going to add to the jail time,’ he realizes. He can only hope that this man, whatever crime he committed, will be treated well in the prison infirmary. He makes a mental note to ask about this tomorrow even as the ambulance drives away from Avenue 54 and in the general direction of Saint-Michel Hospital.

When they get to the emergency room, Navet is already there triaging a number of patients. He groans on seeing Azelma, Courfeyrac, and Bossuet. “I should have known one of you would be involved.”

“Just them, not me for once,” Bossuet informs him cheerily.

“That’s a change,” Navet grumbles as he hands some forms to them. “Please fill them out. I’ll have to make some calls.”

Bossuet tries not to laugh when he sees the crestfallen looks on Azelma’s and Courfeyrac’s faces. “Everyone will know about it eventually. You have to go home and to work tomorrow,” he tells them. He waves at Combeferre, who is just running into the emergency room. “Nice to see you at work!”

Combeferre sighs deeply and adjusts his spectacles when he sees his friends in dishabille, but still has a friendly smile for Bossuet. “Nice to see you on your feet.”

“Same with you. The joys of night duty, huh?” Bossuet says as he claps Combeferre’s shoulders. “Is it always this crazy?”

Combeferre shakes his head. “You haven’t seen this place in the early hours of New Year. Firecracker injuries, stuff done while under the influence, and the occasional heart attack or stroke.”

Bossuet winces, counting himself lucky that his grades in science classes were enough to deter him from pursuing a career in the health sciences and a preponderance of grisly scenes. ‘That is if we’re not dealing with hoary cases like the Transnonain quartet,’ he thinks as he watches Combeferre rush off to see to a more critically injured patient.

He fetches a ball pen from the nurses’ station so he can help his friends with their paperwork. He knows the top of the form almost by heart: name, birthdate, age, civil status, nationality, gender,
address, and contact details. When he gets to the portion on past illnesses, surgeries, and allergies, he realizes that he can fill out many of these details for Courfeyrac and Azelma, perhaps to a lesser degree with the latter. “Did I get this right?” he asks as he holds up the form.

Courfeyrac scrunches his face on seeing the completeness of the information. “That’s freaky.”

“You guys have been working together for years, of course he has to know something,” Azelma mutters. “By the way I’m allergic to penicillin,” she says, tapping the form.

“Whoa. What do you use for antibiotics then?” Bossuet asks.

“Depending on the bug, either erythromycin or clindamycin. I don’t know how Eponine figures out what to give me,” Azelma says with a shrug.

“Same here,” Bossuet admits. “Joly has mentioned something about gram positives and gram negatives but I don’t know how he makes head or tail of it.” He counts himself lucky that his best friend is an infectious diseases expert; though Joly has warned him that he would rather not have Bossuet or anyone he knows needing his expertise. ‘What with all the exotic bugs he deals with…..’ he catches himself thinking even as he hears the ER doors swing open again. He turns and realizes that Enjolras and Eponine have just walked into the room, clearly having just come from dinner. A few of the younger nurses and even some of the patients end up clambering on chairs or out of bed just to shamelessly ogle Enjolras, while a few orderlies and other patients let out wolf-whistles and catcalls at Eponine, but that stir dies down pretty quickly when Navet hands his stethoscope to Eponine.

Eponine takes one look at Azelma and Courfeyrac, and shakes her head. “Do I even want to know the history of this?”

“Only the latter part of it is um, pertinent,” Azelma replies, not daring to look her sister in the eye.

“We heard on the radio about the roof cave-in,” Enjolras cuts in. “What were you two doing in the night market area anyway?”

“Ramen supplies,” Courfeyrac replies cheekily. “Rare ingredients, come on! We have to spice things up,” he adds when Enjolras merely raises an eyebrow.

“This ramen addiction will be the death of us,” Bossuet quips as he hands the forms over to Eponine.

“Understatement. What are you doing here?” Enjolras asks, turning to him.

“I am merely a passer-by in this picture, an extra if you will,” Bossuet says. Some part of him is revelling in the schaudenfraude; for once he is not the patient in the hospital bed, but all the same he would not wish for anyone to be in Courfeyrac and Azelma’s position.

“That or you’ve stolen my lucky piece,” Courfeyrac sighs. “This is still counted in our office health policy, is it?” he asks Enjolras.

“Yes, that is the one mercy in this situation,” Enjolras grouses.

Azelma elbows Courfeyrac. “Good thing. We’ll need the savings,” she says in an undertone.

“Savings for what?” Eponine asks, looking up from filling out the forms.

Azelma smiles sheepishly. “Maurice and I were talking about living arrangements.”
Eponine crosses her arms. “You mean moving in together?”

“Yeah, what does it look like, Ponine?”

“I wish you’d told me about this before I signed our new lease agreement two weeks ago.”

Azelma rolls her eyes. “The idea came up just a few hours ago, and it’s not as if I’m moving out from our place right away. You still have time to make arrangements.”

For a moment Bossuet worries that the look Eponine gives her sister will actually melt the paint off the wall of the ER. It’s warranted though; he knows that the Thenardiers are still paying off the last of the expenses from Azelma’s hospitalization months ago, and that Eponine occasionally shells out for medications and equipment for her more underprivileged patients. “She’s right. You need to give her and Gavroche some sort of a grace period,” he informs Azelma.

“Not just that. Seriously, can’t I turn my back for one night without some incident?” Eponine fumes. “Will I have to go by your place every night to make sure you and Courfeyrac are still alive?”

“I’m only a year younger than you, Ponine. I know how to take care of myself,” Azelma retorts.

Eponine rolls her eyes. “Fine then. Tell me a solution to the rent problem?”

“You can get someone else to move in, like Enjolras,” Azelma replies nonchalantly.

It’s all that Bossuet can do not to laugh when Eponine blanches while Enjolras goes very red. Courfeyrac is completely useless and just bursts into uproarious guffaws. “You have to admit that is a practical arrangement,” Courfeyrac points out gleefully. “You won’t even have to worry about getting an extra bed for him.”

“No more flexible over time for you this week,” Enjolras retorts. He sighs when he sees Combeferre walk up to them. “I’ll help you get these two discharged as soon as possible,” he tells him.

“I rather like the comedy though,” Combeferre says dryly. “Auguste, there’s someone you ought to see though. You too, Bossuet.”

Bossuet swallows hard; if Combeferre ever calls their friend by his given name, the situation is almost always serious. He trails Enjolras and Combeferre over to the critical care area, where there is a man hooked up to several tubes and machines. The sporadic beeping and slow lines on the monitors are enough even for Bossuet to know that this unfortunate has just been brought back from the brink of the grave. Something about him seems familiar and he does a double take. “He was at the scene.”

“He was the one who caved in the roof,” Combeferre explains. “Enjolras, I’m sure the name Chretien Dupond rings a bell?”

Enjolras starts but the look in his eyes is enough to confirm the identity of this patient. “Why were the police after him?”

“No one knows. I know you were looking for him,” Combeferre says.

Enjolras nods. “He’s the sole reliable witness for the Transnonian case.” He grits his teeth and crosses his arms. “There must be some story or some mistake if he was taken for a fugitive. This man should be under witness protection instead.”

III
One of the things Eponine dislikes most about ER work is the waiting time for lab tests and procedures. ‘At least one good hour wasted every time,’ she groused silently as she looks through the receipts for the blood tests, x-rays, and other ancillary procedures needed before Azelma and Courfeyrac can both be given a clean bill of health. Of course she understands that tests such as complete blood counts, blood typing and crossmatching, and even serum tests for viruses can’t and shouldn’t be rushed, and that there is a logical order that has to be followed before clearing a patient for x-rays and imaging procedures. All the same it grates on her whenever she cannot proceed without having the numerical findings or films in hand.

‘It’s worse when I know they’re fine just by taking a look at them,’ she thinks as she glances to where Azelma is looking through her phone while sitting up on a gurney. Courfeyrac has managed to maneuver himself into a wheelchair and is now across the room pestering Enjolras and Bossuet. Eponine sighs before catching her sister’s eye. “Is it something Gav and I are doing?”

Azelma puts down her phone. “What?”

“Why you want to move out,” Eponine says. She could almost cringe at the tone she knows her voice is taking. “I could take on more chores—”

“Ponine—”

“—make sure Gav cleans up the place more—”

“Ponine, really—”

“Maybe even fix the budget—”

“It’s not about the two of you!”

Eponine falls silent on hearing her sister raise her voice. “Then what is it then? I know our place is small but it’s been fine for the three of us all these years. It’s even close to where you and Gav work.”

“Ponine, the only reason we picked that apartment was because we needed a place that fit what you were making as a first year resident, and what I was making as a part time teacher. Gavroche was still doing internships then. Those were canned bean days, remember?” Azelma points out.

Eponine grits her teeth at the mention of canned beans. Till this day she cannot stand the stuff if only for the memories it brings up. “We’re still not exactly out of the woods yet.”

“We’ll never be, really. I’m not letting that stop me and Maurice,” Azelma insists. “We’ll be fine. Just tell me how long you need to smooth things out and I’ll do it.”

Eponine bites her lip as she looks at her sister. Sometimes she still can’t help but see Azelma as the waif who could wriggle her way out of the smallest window in the hovel they used to call home. Yet the scars on her sister’s skin don’t belong to that frightened child, but to a young woman who once braved gunfire and a road accident in an attempt to save the lives of others. “You’ve only known Courfeyrac for six months,” she finally says. “How sure are you about this?”

“Sure enough so that you can stop fretting about it,” Azelma replies. “You think the same things too about Enjolras, I know.”

“But in such exact terms,” Eponine retorts even as her cheeks begin to grow hot. ‘It could be more than a possibility when it comes to him,’ she realizes as she feels a frisson of delight run down her spine.
Azelma smiles knowingly. “You do have your own life you know. Something beyond just looking out for me and Gavroche. You can’t end up fifty and realizing you’ve worried about nothing else.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Eponine replies. All her doubts earlier about taking the certificate course are dispelled with her sister’s words. This venture is now something she is determined to own. Before she can explain this to her sister she sees the ER nurse walk in with a stack of papers. “Are those the test results?” she asks.

“Yes. On the left are the results for Mr. Courfeyrac, on the right for Ms. Thenardier,” the nurse says as she puts down some of the papers at the foot of Azelma’s bed.

Eponine picks up the tests at the top of the stack and breathes a sigh of relief on seeing a familiar set of numbers in front of her. The sight of normal lab values is always comforting to find. That is, till she notices Azelma going very pale as she puts down another sheet of paper. “Zel? What’s wrong?”

“It must have been that night last month....” Azelma whispers. She almost reflexively crumples up the result she is holding but at the last moment she lays it flat on her blanket. “I can’t get an x-ray.”

Eponine’s eyes widen when she sees that the paper is for a pregnancy test, which is pretty much mandatory for any female patient their age. It’s another story though when the test result is her sister’s, and there’s a positive sign on it.
“Maurice, there’s just no other way to say it. You’re a dad.”

Unfortunately for Courfeyrac his legs had chosen to give out at that precise moment, thus necessitating another round of tests and an extra hour in the emergency room. “At least we’re sure that nothing is wrong inside my skull or in my heart,” he jokes later as he and Azelma are sitting outside the out-patient OB-GYN clinic.

Azelma only lets out a tired sigh as she rubs her eyes. She’s quite a sight wearing a dress borrowed from her sister, who thankfully keeps more than one change of clothes in the surgery staff room. “That’s good for you at least.”

Courfeyrac reaches for her arm but she shakes her head. “Once again, I’m sorry Zel,” he says. “I didn’t mean to be so careless.”

“It’s not that. I was part of it too,” Azelma whispers. She looks down at her hands which have somehow found their way to her midsection. “Guess you’re stuck with me and this.”

“We’re talking about moving in together?” he asks as he rolls up the sleeve of his bandaged arm. It’s just too bad that he’s a little shorter than Combeferre, so of course his borrowed clothes make a rather poor fit.

“Yeah but it was supposed to be simple and us coasting our way along, something we wanted to do, not something we have to do,” she retorts bitterly. “You’re going to wake up every day to me all hormonal and sick, and then later you’re not going to get a wink of sleep when the kid comes along. How is that going to play out?”

“I don’t know,’ he admits. While he has imagined once in a blue moon how it would be to finally settle down and have a family, especially now with Azelma in the picture. However he has never thought it would happen this soon. ‘I thought Joly and Musichetta would marry first, or Marius and Cosette, or Enjolras and Eponine,’ he muses.

It is at that moment that the clinic door opens and Musichetta peers out. “Come on, get in here you two. Eponine told me to make sure you get the first slot for the morning,” she says with a smile that is rather perky for this early hour. Nevertheless her expression is serious as she looks through a clipboard, which has the forms and work-ups from their recent trip to the ER. “So what happened?”

“Messed up with the condom, decided to heck with it, just that once,” Azelma mutters with a scowl on her face as she sits in one of the chairs in the tiny office, while Courfeyrac remains standing. “That was six weeks or so ago.”

Musichetta purses her lips as she jots this down before proceeding to ask a whole series of questions about Azelma’s symptoms and health, as well as other queries pertaining to Courfeyrac’s own habits and lifestyle. The sheer comprehensiveness of the interview leaves Courfeyrac agog. “Do you really ask all of those to each patient?” he asks Musichetta after a while.

“Yeah, since I don’t have just one patient but two,” Musichetta explains as she tucks her wavy hair behind her ears. She takes a deep breath and looks from Azelma to Courfeyrac. “So have you two
talked about this?”

“Somewhat,” Courfeyrac says. They haven’t actually sat down and had ‘a talk’ about this newfound development and all the practical details of it, but all their conversation so far has involved a baby in the picture. It’s probably better than dancing around the issue entirely.

Musichetta glances to where Azelma seems to be studying the floor. “So who else knows?” she asks.

“Eponine, Enjolras, Combeferre, Bossuet, and Navet,” Azelma says as she looks up, “Gavroche is so going to kill you, Maurice. He thinks that twenty-four is too young to be an uncle.”

“If we have a boy, he gets first crack at being a godparent. That should appease him,” Courfeyrac says. He’s not sure what his own kin will have to say about this impending arrival, but he has learned not to count on a warm reception from that quarter.

“Some godparent he will be. He’d spoil a kid rotten,” Azelma mutters, but at least she utters this with a smile. “That should balance out Eponine being the mother hen.”

Musichetta cracks up a little at this. “Well let’s get started with taking a sonogram, shall we? We’ll need to get a few more every now and then to check up on the baby,” she says as she gets up to show them to a small side room.

“That’s how we’ll eventually learn the baby’s gender, right?” Azelma asks.

Musichetta nods. “Not right away of course. Unless you want to keep it a surprise?”

“I’ve had enough of surprises,” Azelma says. Thankfully she seems to be in better spirits the entire time the sonogram is being conducted. Her eyes go wide when Musichetta turns the sonogram monitor so that she and even Courfeyrac can have a good look. “Wow. So that’s how he or she looks for now?”

The screen shows a blob, or at least that is what Courfeyrac can see, but if he puts his eyes just the barest bit out of focus, he can almost visualize a sort of form in there. He gingerly reaches for Azelma’s arm again and this time she doesn’t pull away. “Zel? What do you think?”

“I think we can do this,” she whispers. She wipes away a tear before pressing his hand. “We’re not kids anymore, Maurice.”

“About time I guess,” he concurs. Twenty-nine is still a little young for fatherhood in his book, and he hopes to high heavens that he does not mess this up.

II

When Eponine wakes up in a chair at a corner of the surgery residents’ room, it occurs to her for a moment that her strange evening might have been one long strange dream. ‘Or not,’ she realizes when she looks down and sees that she is still wearing the same green dress from the night before. She shuts her eyes and rubs her temples as the memories rush back to her. This probably has to be one of the worst ways to find out that one is now an aunt.

‘At least Musichetta agreed to fit Azelma and Courfeyrac into her schedule,’ she thinks, now once again thankful for her ever-accommodating and helpful friend. She stretches slowly and gets out of her seat, feeling a little achy all over thanks to her odd sleeping position. As she goes to her locker to find her toiletries, she hears the staff room door open. “I’ll be out for rounds, don’t worry,” she calls absent-mindedly over her shoulder.
“You might want to change first,” Enjolras replies, now making his appearance. Despite the fact that he finally left the hospital just before dawn, he still has managed to find the time to wash up and change into fresh clothes. “I went by your place, and Gavroche helped me get some of your things for today,” he explains as he hands over a bag.

“Thanks Auguste,” Eponine says before kissing his cheek by way of gratitude. She’d dearly love to linger owing partly to the fact that he smells so good at this hour, but she’s all too aware of her own grubby state so she hangs back. “So you’re here to also give Courfeyrac a lift to work? He can’t drive with his hand in that state.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “He asked for the day off. Considering the recent circumstances, it would be unkind not to oblige.”

“Bet you didn’t imagine this was how our evening would end up. So what are you going to do?”

“What do you say to getting some breakfast first?”

This has to be the best idea of the morning so far. “Give me five minutes,” she tells him before she goes into the washroom where she can take a quick shower, brush her teeth and change her clothes. There isn’t any hot water but she doesn’t mind so much since the cold wakes her up well enough. ‘This isn’t fair to him,’ she can’t help thinking as she towels off and then ties back her hair into a simple ponytail. Enjolras always has a lot on his plate, and he deserves a partner who can make his life easier, not someone who does not have time to look out for him and ends up cutting short their time together because of work.

This line of thought has her stomach in knots when she steps back out and sees Enjolras still in the staff room, having just ended a call. His eyes are dark, which means he is pondering something either grave or momentous. “Auguste, what is it?” Eponine asks as she sits next to him.

Enjolras blinks before turning to look at her. “It’s about Chretein Dupond, that man who was brought in last night.”

She nods slowly. “He’ll live.”

“While he’s in here. Outside he’s a fugitive and he needs witness protection. I don’t understand why the police went after him. There has to be some explanation,” he says, his tone now rough and frustrated. “I’ve made calls all night, here and while I was away, but no leads are turning up. I just called the police precinct and they’re being cagey.”

“You’ll find some soon enough, I’m sure,” she says insistently as she clasps one of his hands in both of hers. ‘Come back to me,’ she pleads silently, knowing all too well how caught up he can get in his work. She reaches up to rub his shoulders, and she winces at the tension she finds there. “If there is any way I can help, you can tell me.”

“Can you please contact his family? I need to get everyone’s names down for the witness protection program. It extends to them too,” he says after a moment.

“You’ll have the names as soon as possible,” she reassures him. Thankfully he feels more relaxed now under her hand. “Now remember you did ask me to breakfast. Let’s go.”

Enjolras lets out a ragged breath. “While you were showering, Joly came by with a message. There’s a caseworker visiting Elodie in a few minutes. You should go there,” he informs her.

“So should you. You’re representing her. Anyway that man Dupont is in the ICU complex too and I know you want to look in on him,” Eponine reminds him. She takes the opportunity to slip her arms
around him, like she’s wanted to do since yesterday. “Shall we?”

He catches her lips in a brief yet hard kiss that leaves her flushed in the face. “Very well then.”

They pass by the cafeteria for canned coffee and some pastries before heading right upstairs to the intensive care unit complex. “The social worker is here to see Miss Chenier. She also wishes to speak with you both,” a nurse informs Eponine and Enjolras.

“Oh,” Eponine says, seeing now that there is a woman dressed in a crisp button-down blouse and slacks, seated at Elodie’s bedside and nodding as she watches the girl type out something on the keypad. By now Elodie’s hair is starting to grow back; dark fuzz can be seen just under the brim of her knitted cap. Elodie suddenly looks up from her typing and her face brightens up as she waves to Eponine and Enjolras. Eponine waves back before the social worker calls Elodie’s attention again to continue the interview.

“Have her parents been here to visit?” Enjolras asks the nurse.

The nurse shakes her head. “You two are here more often than they are.”

Those words are said with such pity that Eponine has to look away, if only not to let the nurse or Elodie see any sign of her uneasiness. ‘It is just like what Maman and Papa did when Gavroche and Zelma got sick while I was in college,’ she recalls. She remembers seeing the Fauchelevents more often in those days, and having them give her updates as to her siblings’ conditions, while her parents’ phones were always being out of reach or answered by their drinking buddies. She feels Enjolras’ hand squeeze hers briefly behind her back, so she grasps his wrist tightly, seeking a grip amid the memories.

After a while the social worker in Elodie’s room motions for them to enter the cubicle. “You must be Doctor Thenardier and Attorney Enjolras,” she greets cordially, holding out her hand. “I’m Mrs. Plutarque, from our social welfare services.”

Eponine tries to keep a straight face as she shakes this lady’s hand. Even after all these years the mere mention of this agency leaves a bad taste in her mouth. “Is this your first time to assess her case?”

“I have read the preliminary paperwork, Dr. Thenardier,” Mrs. Plutarque says calmly. “It seems as if both of you and your friends have assumed quite a lot of responsibility for the girl.”

“Only in emergencies, or when we can’t reach her parents,” Eponine replies.

“Seems as if that has happened often enough,” Mrs. Plutarque mutters. “Would you consider filing for the termination of the Cheniers’ parental rights? That way Elodie can become a ward of the state and placed in a more...stable arrangement,” she asks Enjolras.

“That’s a consideration, but the arrangement would have to be made before filing the motion,” Enjolras replies. “One of Elodie’s relatives or a family friend will have to take her in.”

“That’s an optimistic assertion, Attorney Enjolras,” Mrs. Plutarque says bluntly.

“Surely there must be someone Elodie prefers?” Eponine asks.

Mrs. Plutarque nods. “Elodie! Who would you like to stay with when you get out of the hospital?” she asks candidly.

Elodie’s grin suddenly grows pensive, even a little anxious as she looks towards the adults. The child
Mrs. Plutarque laughs. “Elodie, she’s your doctor. You can’t stay with her.”

Elodie frowns and points to Enjolras. “What about him?” she manages to rasp out

Enjolras shakes his head. “You need to pick a relative, Elodie. That’s how it goes.”

The girl shakes her head before getting her keypad to type out. “Who’s going to take care of me?”

Eponine takes a deep breath as she clasps Elodie’s hand; already she can see tears in the child’s  

eyes. For a moment she is not sure if she can find her voice. “We’ll find someone. No matter who it  
is, we’ll see you.” She knows better than to make any promises.

III

“He’s stable, don’t worry.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “Even with that many tubes?” To his eyes, Chretein Dupond appears to  

be an inch away from death, but if Combeferre says otherwise, then it’s better to trust in that.  

“Let me frame it this way: he might not need the ventilator by the end of this week,” Combeferre  
says as he puts his phone back in the pocket of his scrubs. “That will only be the beginning of your  
problems.”

Enjolras nods grimly. “The police were chasing him on a supposed charge of robbery. I’m seeing if  
he has an alibi.”

“Ah, you’re hoping for a case of mistaken identity?”

“Yes. He lacks a motive.”

Combeferre whistles. “Let us hope that it is indeed the case.”

Enjolras does not need to voice out the dire picture that is surely going through Combeferre’s mind.  
The circumstances of Dupont’s injuries are so strange such that they cannot simply be explained by a  
police oversight. ‘Whoever was chasing him was determined if Dupont got up to the rooftops,’ he  
notes as he watches Combeferre answering more text messages. “Once he is discharged, he may  
have to go under a different name,” he says.

“That bad?” Combeferre asks. “Are his former bosses so intent on silencing him?”

“Perhaps. It will have to stay that way for as long as he is a witness on the Transnonian case,”  
Enjolras says. The sheer impunity of the situation irks him immensely since it’s among the many  
things he has spent the past few years fighting, to the point of even almost losing his life in the  
process. ‘To this day it is still so difficult to come forward with the truth,’ he thinks, clenching his fist.

Combeferre claps his shoulder. “Don’t push yourself too far again, my friend. You still have people  
counting on you and waiting for you. More than ever.”

“Of course.” For a moment Enjolras’ mind goes back to where he was just a few minutes ago, with  
Eponine at Elodie’s bedside. ‘I did not have to promise anything; it just happened in the course of  
fighting for things,’ he realizes, feeling both unnerved and heartened. When did he ever allow things  
to get so personal?
This question is still on his mind long after he’s left Saint-Michel Hospital and has already started his own work at his own office. For the first hour he busies himself with sorting through paperwork particularly for the Transnonian case. In the course of things he finds a note from the Cheniers’ lawyers asking for an appointment; he makes sure to set this on a weekend when Courfeyrac, Combeferre, and Eponine are all likely to be present. ‘One front taken care of, another coming up,’ he decides as he carefully locks up some of his papers and then takes a bus downtown to the police criminology laboratory where Bahorel spends part of his work hours.

The criminology laboratory, a once decrepit office, is still under a state of renovation. Over here the cloying odor of fresh paint mixes with the reek of formalin to produce a stench that nearly makes Enjolras sneeze. Nevertheless he wills himself to ignore it as he goes to the microscopy room, where he knows Bahorel is assigned to. He finds the weapons specialist examining what appears to be a piece of carpet. ‘Are you looking for gunpowder?’ he asks by way of greeting.

‘Alas, only egg stains,’ Bahorel replies. ‘The alleged owner of this carpet thought that egg white would help remove traces of blood.’

Enjolras rolls his eyes at this absurdity. ‘Has the lab examined any evidence yet concerning Dupont’s incident last night?’

‘Dupont, as in Chretein Dupont of the Transnonian estate?’ Bahorel clarifies.

‘Yes. He was chased last night on Avenue 54,’ Enjolras explains.

Bahorel chuckles with disbelief. ‘That was him? You have just identified our John Doe.’ He sets down the carpet sample and motions for Enjolras to follow him towards the closed off room for processing lab samples. ‘Where is he now?’

‘Under the care of a surgeon.’ It is all that Enjolras can divulge in this place, given that there may be other ears listening. ‘What was found at the scene?’

Bahorel quits the room for a few moments and then returns with a handful of pictures. ‘These bullet casings. There were a few slugs found at the scene, none of them bloodied.’

‘They removed two from him though,’ Enjolras recalls quietly. ‘No blunt objects or blades?’

Bahorel shakes his head. ‘The bullets are from a standard issue semiautomatic pistol.’

Enjolras grits his teeth. ‘Could be anyone.’

‘Not exactly,’ Bahorel says in an undertone. ‘This particular gun is already known to the police.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It was the same one that almost did you in, months ago.’

IV

Gavroche doesn’t usually worry about his sisters. After all they are old enough to take care of themselves. However he knows that something is up when he wakes up to Enjolras’ showing up at the apartment to get a few things for Eponine such as her medical equipment. ‘Do I have to break anyone’s nose today?’ Gavroche asks Enjolras on the latter’s way out.

‘That depends on what your sisters say later,’ Enjolras answers quickly.
‘At least not Enjolras’ nose,’ Gavroche decides quickly. “Where are Courf and Zelma?”

“At Saint-Michel Hospital. They’re not hurt or sick.”

“Why are they there then?”

“Ask them later. See you after work,” Enjolras says over his shoulder on the way out of the apartment.

This does not make Gavroche feel better; normally Enjolras is so direct even with the most uncomfortable matters, so if he’s being evasive that means there is something quite personal afoot. It takes a lot of effort for Gavroche to block the matter from his mind for the rest of the work day, or at least till he returns home for their usual ramen night.

As usual nearly everyone is on time, except for Enjolras, Bahorel, and all the doctors working at Saint-Michel. Gavroche loses no time in scooting over to where Azelma is cooking some fish cakes and vegetables. “A big golden bird told me where you and Courf were last night.”

Azelma turns red. “Oh stop it. It wasn’t our fault the roof caved in.”

Gavroche’s eyes go wide. “What roof cave in?”

Azelma cringes for a moment. “Maurice and I were hanging out and then some fugitive running across the rooftops stepped on the wrong spot and brought the ceiling down with him.”

“Hanging out? Is that what you and Courfeyrac are calling it nowadays?” Grantaire sniggers from where he is stirring pesto and cheese into a small pot of shoyu broth.

“R, I’m trying to be proper!” Azelma hisses.

“Gav isn’t a kid, and this is mature company. If you two got a room, just say you got a room,” Grantaire says before he licks some cheese off his fingers. “Courfeyrac, if this recipe gives me the runs tomorrow, you’re becoming my personal nurse,” he calls.

“Fat chance!” Courfeyrac shouts, holding up his bandaged hand. “You live with Jehan, I live alone. I’m the one at a disadvantage.”

Jehan gives Grantaire an affronted look. “I can’t believe you forgot about me.”

“We’re sharing food, and my stomach bug is your stomach bug,” Grantaire points out.

Jehan grimaces at this idea. “Sorry about his sense of humor, Cosette,” he tells the woman helping him chop up some century eggs.

Cosette merely laughs. “I work at a nursing home, Jehan. I’ve heard everything.”

Gavroche can’t help but smile a little wickedly; he still remembers Cosette from the time she and Eponine were classmates in undergrad. “She was the one with the best jokes, if you know what I mean.”

“Worse than this one?” Bossuet asks, glancing at Grantaire.

“Ten times as worse!” Gavroche crows.

Cosette clucks her tongue. “You’re one to talk.”
Gavroche isn’t about to apologize for this, or whatever else will come out of his next conversation, which happens to be with Courfeyrac. “So why were you out all night?”

“We had to go the ER,” Courfeyrac replies.

Azelma sighs as she wipes her hands and goes over to Courfeyrac. “We may as well tell him. No one can keep a secret in this room,” she says.

“Tell me what?” Gavroche asks.

Azelma pauses as if she is trying to compose herself. “You’re going to be an uncle in maybe seven and a half months.”

“An uncle....what?” Gavroche chokes as he realizes what his sister has just said. “You’re knocked up?”

The ensuing silence in the room is so thick that one can hear a pin drop. “Thanks Courf, now I owe Bahorel twenty bucks when he gets here,” Grantaire grouses.

“Wait, I’m supposed to be the one making betting pools here, not becoming the subject of them!” Courfeyrac squawks.

“That’s a habit that has to stop, pronto,” Azelma mutters. “What were you betting on anyway?”


“The bet was supposed to be in my favor since Courfeyrac accidentally stood in front of an x-ray machine back in law school and he’s supposed to have been firing blanks since then,” Grantaire explains.

Gavroche gapes at his friends in disbelief. “That’s just gross.”

“And that’s not how it works,” Cosette chimes in. “So you guys found out through a routine work-up?” she asks the parents-to-be.

Azelma nods miserably. “Surprise of the night.”

“You felt nothing before?”

“Nothing dramatic like in the movies, if you know what I mean.”

Gavroche wisely steers away from this ladies’ talk, but he knows that this mental peace is not going to last long, especially when Eponine, Combeferre, Joly, Musichetta, and Marius all turn up just a few minutes later. “Did you and Enjolras know about Zelma and Courf’s spawn?” Gavroche asks his oldest sister almost accusingly.

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly our place to spoil the surprise,” Eponine retorts dryly. She looks around the apartment. “You guys didn’t get beer.”

“For her sake,” Courfeyrac says, gesturing to Azelma before he has to evade her attempt to pinch him. “What, I’m trying to be responsible!”

Gavroche laughs, even as he gets the sinking feeling that soon enough, that word will now become all too familiar to all of them.
Mornings are busy but straightforward times for Marius Pontmercy. He has the hours between 7am to 11:30am almost down to a science: after punching in on the hospital bundy clock, he meets the interns rotating in his department, and then gets the updates and ward census from them before making his rounds through the wards. Nevertheless nothing is routine; such is the way of life in the field of neurology after all, wherein a stroke manifests as a thousand deficits across a variety of patients.

This Friday he feels his spirits lifting as he looks through the census of neurology patients. A number of them are set to be discharged before noon, while most of the remaining patients have taken better turns. For one thing Chretein Dupond is off the ventilator and will probably be out of the ICU by Monday, while Elodie Chenier has finally been transferred to a regular room at the paediatrics ward. ‘One slow step at a time,’ Marius reminds himself as he makes his rounds. By nature he is cautious with prognosticating his patients, but all the same he wants to allow himself just that tiniest fraction more of hope when it comes to Elodie, especially given all the challenges still ahead of her.

It heartens him to no end when he hears laughter coming from Elodie’s room. Everyone has taken great pains to move every single card and gift down from the ICU cubicle to these new accommodations, and now the once drab room is bedecked in pink and green. Elodie is sitting up in bed and giggling at Enjolras’ attempts to spoon-feed her some strawberry ice cream. Eponine is seated nearby and writing on a chart, but she is clearly having difficulty keeping a straight face thanks to Enjolras’ and Elodie’s antics. Marius almost feels bad for having to knock on the door and interrupt this scene. “Did I come in at a bad time?”

“Not at all. Eponine and I will clear out if you need to make your rounds,” Enjolras replies as he wipes off some ice cream that has somehow gotten all over his cuffs.

“I think you should stay,” Marius says. He can see how at ease Elodie is around the couple, and he knows that this will make his work much easier. “Have you been up to see Dupond?”

Enjolras nods. “Thank you for caring for him. His family will appreciate it.”

Marius makes a mental note to give some merits to the clerks in his department; they were the ones who have been pulling Dupond through some difficult nights. “Hello Elodie. Do you remember me, Doctor Pontmercy?” he addresses the child.

Elodie nods slowly. “Where is Miss Cosette?”

“She’s at work, but I’ll tell her to visit,” Marius replies gamely. “Maybe she’ll come after work later.”

Elodie’s grin grows wider. “Are we playing the brain game again?”

“Yes, we have to,” Marius replies. “It’s just a neurological exam,” he explains when he sees Enjolras’ eyebrows shoot up and Eponine look up quickly from her work.

“A B for effort,” Eponine deadpans as she signs the chart and hands it to Marius. “You two knock yourselves out.”
Marius sighs when he sees Eponine’s penmanship; it’s quite a task to decipher everything through her bold strokes and flourishes. He carefully sets the chart down and brings out a reflex hammer, a tuning fork, and of course his stethoscope. “Elodie, I need you to sit up straight, look at me, and follow what I say,” he instructs. He is aware that she knows this, but he just needs to call her attention. “What date is it today?”


“It’s July twelve,” Marius corrects gently. “Where are you?”

“Saint-Michel Hospital."

“Your name?”

“Elodie."

“And who else is in this room?”

Elodie pauses and looks to Enjolras and Eponine. “Doctor Pontmercy, Miss Eponine, and Mister Enjolras,” she says slowly. Her speech is raspy and halting, but only time will tell if this is due to disuse or some lingering injury.

Marius has to keep this in mind as he asks Elodie to do a series of simple tasks as well as answer a few questions. He has known for a time that Elodie has been lucky to have many things still intact such as the ability to swallow or discriminate between various tactile stimuli. However, now that she is more able to communicate, it becomes more apparent that Elodie has difficulties of a different sort. She takes longer than expected to work out simple equations or to tell the time, and her brow furrows with frustration when she cannot recall the names of her friends from school and her neighbourhood. “Did I win the game?” she asks Marius after a while.

“You did very well,” Marius says, hoping to reassure her.

Elodie manages a brave smile. “Can I have more ice cream?” she asks Enjolras and Eponine.

“One scoop is enough for today, kid. You can have more tomorrow,” Enjolras says firmly.

Elodie rolls her eyes in that knowing way some children have. She shoots a winsome grin at Eponine. “Can I please?”

“Not yet. We’ve still got to let your tummy adjust to having more food again before you can have that much,” Eponine explains as she adjusts Elodie’s knitted bonnet. “Now you’re staying down here, you know what you can have?”

“More books?”

“Yes, and movies. As long as you promise to get some sleep, you can watch something later. I’ll have someone bring it for you.”

Elodie is practically beaming, that is until her eyes train on where the hospital room door is opening again. “Mom? Dad?”

Attorney Chenier’s face is impassive, though his wife at least has the decency to smile at their daughter. “What are you doing here?” the older lawyer asks.

“Rounds,” Eponine replies, even as she steps just a little closer to Elodie’s bed.
Mrs. Chenier nods sceptically. “Elodie, my darling, what do you say to your Mama and Papa?” she croons. “Didn’t you miss us?”

The agonized grimace on Elodie’s face as she looks first at Enjolras and Eponine, then at her biological parents, is almost more than Marius can bear. He knows all too well how it is to have such heavy words on one’s lips. “I’ve been a good girl,” he finally hears the girl say.

“You should be. We’re going to bring you home soon,” Attorney Chenier says gruffly.

Elodie’s round eyes go wide and she almost seems to shrink into the bed. “When?”

“Once we fix some things up and some people stop giving us trouble,” Attorney Chenier says, even as he gives Enjolras and Eponine a venomous look. He nods cordially to Marius. “How is my daughter doing, Doctor Pontmercy?”

“She is on the mend, but she will still need care once she is discharged,” Marius replies.

“That should be your job,” Attorney Chenier snaps.

“She has to get used to life outside the hospital,” Marius says. He cannot imagine how the Cheniers will manage caring for a daughter who still cannot go to the bathroom by herself, and will have problems remembering birthdays. “This is not a long-term care facility.”

“Excuses,” Attorney Chenier sneers. “Are you ready to defend a malpractice suit, Attorney Enjolras?”

Enjolras is not the slightest bit fazed by this jibe. “You can be assured that Elodie will not be discharged until her condition is more markedly improved,” he simply says. “We will discuss this again at the hearing in two weeks. You have already received your subpoena, I believe.”

Marius tries not to flinch at this legalese; he’s never liked the sound of it, which is one reason he opted out of pre-law back in college, and almost failed medical jurisprudence back in medical school. He does not hear what Attorney Chenier has to say before he and his wife quit the room without so much as another look at their child. When Marius looks at Elodie again, he sees that she is shaking despite all of Eponine’s rubbing her back and her attempts to coax her into conversation. “She can’t go with them,” Marius finally says to Enjolras.

“I’m scared,” Elodie finally says more loudly. “Do I have to go with them?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Enjolras says. He takes a deep breath before crouching so that he’s able to look Elodie in the face. “We’re all going to help you find someplace safe to live, as long as you want to be there.”

‘Why couldn’t she be your kid instead?’ Marius catches himself thinking. Yet when he looks at Enjolras and Eponine again, and at how Elodie is clinging to both of them as much as her still immobilized arms will allow, he wonders just how close his thoughts might be to the truth after all.

II

Jean Valjean, or better known as Jean Fauchelevent, has never had a doubt that Eponine would sign up for the certificate class. This is why he is hardly surprised when he gets a text message from Dr. Mabeuf, Eponine’s superior, asking to meet to discuss this matter. “I hope that I will not be depriving your department of a good resident because of this offer,” he greets Mabeuf at the latter’s clinic. Thankfully this is during the early afternoon, a time considered generally as a lull in the daily hustle and bustle of the hospital. The quiet as well as the office’s good lighting makes it that much easier for
even a reserved man like Jean Valjean to linger for more than small talk.

“I’m writing this up as part of Doctor Thenardier’s continuing medical education credit, so the department’s training program will shoulder part of the cost,” Mabeuf replies candidly as he puts his hands on the desk piled high with all kinds of books and papers. “It is just as well, considering recent developments in this hospital.”

“Such as?”

“After the incident earlier this year when the hospital had to be placed on lockdown after that attempt on Auguste Enjolras’ life, it has become clear that this institution can do much better in terms of our medico-legal work. It is not only true for unusual circumstances such as uprisings and assassinations, but even for how we manage our women and children’s desk, or suspected abuse cases, or even the simple matter of determining whether our ER cases warrant the intervention of a lawyer. That’s why we’re reworking and basically restarting our medico-legal department, including the women and children’s desk section.”

Jean Valjean whistles at this news. “You do not have a doctor who is also a lawyer on your staff.”

“Hopefully that will change; can you convince either Doctor Thenardier or Doctor Combeferre to attend law school?” Mabeuf asks. “You know as well as I do that there has been quite a bit of cooperation lately between our surgical department and the commission on human rights.”

Jean Valjean smiles at this diplomatic way of phrasing the rather delicate situation. “Has it suddenly become problematic?”

“The Chenier case, yes. All this accursed publicity....and that before the hearing too. Trial of the year my foot,” Mabeuf says with dismay. “Then the Transnonain witness, Dupond, is being cared for here too. Sometimes I am not sure who may be more in danger: the patients or the residents caring for them.”

“They are safe as long as they are on the premises,” Jean Valjean points out. “Remember that new CCTV system I helped you install months ago?”

Mabeuf cracks a smile. “It’s being put to good use. I was referring though to danger once they go home or at least away from the hospital.”

Jean Valjean nods slowly. He knows all too well how it is to live while continually looking over one’s shoulder, constantly on the lookout for unwelcome recognition. “How may I be of help?”

“The Chenier case first. Apparently it seems as if the girl will become a ward of the state, unless arrangements are made for her,” Mabeuf explains. “Doctor Thenardier is, understandably, reluctant to discharge Miss Chenier if she is to be placed in a halfway home or juveniles’ center. Those facilities are no place for a girl needing physical and occupational therapy, not to mention psychosocial support.”

Jean Valjean looks away just so Mabeuf cannot catch his stricken expression. He still remembers with a painful clarity the day he met Fantine at a soup kitchen when she was desperately begging for an extra ration of food to bring to her sick daughter. ‘It took her long enough to stop waking up at night and looking about in case someone would evict her and Cosette again,’ he recalls. He can only imagine what Elodie may be going through. “So you want me to find a permanent guardian?”

“You know people. Good people,” Mabeuf says. “More importantly, people with experience. Attorney Enjolras and Attorney Courfeyrac have been working on this, but their search has not been
promising.”

“How soon should this be done?”

“The hearing is slated for two weeks from now.”

Jean Valjean hisses; this is hardly enough time to pinpoint much less properly screen a suitable guardian for this child. Nevertheless he has to try his best. “I have much to consider. I’ll let you know though if someone suitable comes to mind.”

Mabeuf breathes a sigh of relief. “Please do.”

The conversation swiftly turns to other topics, but all the while Jean Valjean wonders if there is anyone he knows who has the necessary resources, but is magnanimous enough to take in such a child. ‘Patience is now suddenly one of the world’s rarest commodities,’ he realizes grimly, more so when he goes upstairs to make a brief visit. Elodie is fast asleep and unaware of his presence, or perhaps of the fact that she is utterly alone; everyone else is at work at this hour. She is so painfully thin, almost as skinny as Cosette was during those dark days. Somehow Jean Valjean is reminded of a fledgling bird all too easily buffeted by the wind, too easily crushed in a careless grip, yet undoubtedly alive and vivacious.

It is at that moment he gets a text message, from Cosette of all people. ‘Dad, I’m down at the rehabilitation medicine department again with Touissant. Can we talk ASAP?’

‘Sure’, Jean Valjean replies back, wondering now what his child has to say.

III

For all of Jehan’s natural capacities with spoken word, he finds himself utterly tongue tied when it comes to Grantaire. “You make rehearsals utterly impossible!” he yells at the man painting a frieze along one wall of their favourite cafe.

“Too bad. You make a fine muse in that attitude,” Grantaire quips from his precarious perch on a scaffolding. “An exquisite shade of red there.”

“Shut up. Just shut up,” Jehan mutters. It’s difficult to focus on projecting his voice when Grantaire’s ribald and amusing one-liners have him constantly on the verge of laughter. To be honest, the only way to leave him speechless is to kiss him, and Jehan knows that is only the prelude to yet more distraction.

Grantaire knows this of course and is shameless about taking advantage of this fact. “Do I have to? The crowd likes the sound of my voice too.”

“Do you have time to practice?” Jehan asks. The ‘duet’ pieces he and Grantaire sometimes do are among the crowd-drawers here at the Revolution Cafe. It’s just too bad that lately they haven’t had much time to work on new material. “Of course we could just play off each other....” he trails off.

“I like it when we do.”

“Hah, and we’ll get hauled out for obscenity again?”

“What’s a little raunchiness among friends? It’s not good company if you cannot be weird together.”

“Tell me about it,” Jehan laughs. “Can we do one more good collaboration, before Courf and Azelma meet their spawn?”
“Why do we have a deadline?”

“We’ll have to be G-rated then.”

Grantaire snorts sceptically before wiping paint off his face. “Tell that to Eponine and Gavroche. You think that any force on earth can censor those two?”

‘Or us,’ Jehan catches himself thinking. Though his friends are among the most opinionated, no-holds barred people he’s ever met; Grantaire still stands out for his sheer love of audacity coupled with a penchant for picking up on obscure knowledge. He isn’t perfect; every week Jehan finds himself hiding the key to their alcohol cabinet, but Grantaire is the one Jehan would choose day after day.

“Jehan, what do you think of this?” he hears Grantaire call after a few moments. “Tell me what I shouldn’t ruin here.”

Jehan obliges and hops off the small stage before crossing to where Grantaire has set down his brush. “A mob scene?” he asks, noticing the landscape that Grantaire has painted of a crowd gathered near the city’s oldest bridge.

“Not just any mob scene,” Grantaire says. “Take a closer look.”

Jehan’s jaw drops when he realizes that the figure closest to his face is none other than a miniaturized rendering of himself, down to his badly bleached but comfortable jeans. He looks around and sees that all their friends, even little Elodie, even other kids they’ve met in their work and a number of the cafe regulars are in this painting. “Slice of life?”

“Nope.”

“Memory? No, not memory. Not entirely.”

Grantaire smiles cryptically. “Mind’s eye.”

Jehan surveys the painting more carefully, taking in the attitudes that Grantaire has so skilfully captured. None of his friends are painted in their usual work clothes, but just as they are, standing hand in hand or with arms around shoulders and waists. He realizes that the end of the bridge fades out into a ball of light where ancient buildings ought to be. “I love that view best,” he says. He just wishes that Grantaire did not paint himself standing too close to the water, almost in shadow.

Grantaire gives him a crooked grin just before reaching into the pocket of his baggy pants. “Speaking of friends....” he mutters, holding up his vibrating phone. He puts the call on speaker. “Hello Feuilly, got bored all of a sudden?” he drawls.

“Um, no. Listen, are you with Jehan?” Feuilly asks.

“Yeah.”

“At the Revolution Cafe?”

“Are you stalking us?”

Feuilly curses on the other end of the line. “Don’t budge. Bahorel and I will pass by for you in a few. We’re heading to the courthouse. Everyone is going to be there.”

Jehan feels his heart drop in his stomach; he can already guess what this is about. “So who’s going to
be Courfeyrac’s best man?”
Everything in Enjolras’ rational mind says that this entire trip to the courthouse is foolishness, and that he’ll be damned if he doesn’t speak up and decides instead to hold his peace. Nevertheless this is a time when the ten-seconds-before-speaking-rule applies more than ever. ‘Diplomacy first,’ he reminds himself as he straightens out the cuffs of his suit jacket.

He goes to where Courfeyrac is pacing by the window, furiously rehearsing his vows and looking quite uncomfortable in his tuxedo. “Courfeyrac, a word with you,” Enjolras says as he clasps his friend’s shoulder firmly.

Courfeyrac stops in his tracks. “You’re going to stop me and Azelma.”

“Well no. But since you asked me to be your best man, I must know more about what’s going on,” Enjolras deadpans. Of course this information will be vital in the unlikely event Courfeyrac and Azelma end up divorcing, but the truth is that Enjolras is speaking more from curiosity and bewilderment. “When you arrived at work today, you didn’t have plans of getting married. What happened during your lunchbreak then?”

“Correction, I didn’t have plans of getting married today,” Courfeyrac admits as he scratches the back of his neck. “I went out with Azelma, our discussion turned to that and we figured that there wasn’t much use in waiting anyway.”

“Yes, but marriage? That’s a legal proceeding. How did you get a license so quickly?” Enjolras asks.

“Good thing I know the city registrars and more than one justice of the peace.”

“Did you consider the other practicalities of your move?”

Courfeyrac breathes a sigh. “Azelma always wanted the perfect wedding, the entire white lace and flowers deal that her parents had. She didn’t want to be showing at her wedding too, so I had to at least give her that even on short notice.”

Enjolras rubs the bridge of his nose. It’s difficult to argue with someone who is so passionate and gung-ho about change the way that Courfeyrac is. The fact that he threw himself into his relationship with Azelma, and now parenthood and marriage without even asking any questions only makes swaying him nigh impossible. “Are there other material reasons for such expediency?”

“None. No money issues, no skeletons in the closet. Come on, stop thinking like a lawyer all the time, Enjolras,” Courfeyrac says.

Enjolras nods at the resolute tone of his friend’s voice. “So you have been planning for a while now to eventually marry her?”

“I’ve always known she was a keeper,” Courfeyrac explains. “She’s one in a million, no, scratch that stupid expression, she’s one in the world, and I’d do anything to make her happy.”

Were this coming from someone else, Enjolras would roll his eyes at the saccharine words, but they
are nothing but the truth where Courfeyrac is concerned. “So everything is in order?”

Courfeyrac nods. “I’m ready when Azelma is ready.”

Enjolras casts a glance towards the closed door of the next room, where Azelma is getting ready with Eponine’s help. “Shall I check?”

“Wait, let me get out of here first. I can’t see her in her wedding dress just yet,” Courfeyrac says before quickly exiting the room.

Enjolras chuckles at this superstition; it’s surprising what people will stick to when life milestones are concerned. He then goes to the door and knocks once. “How are you two?”

The door flies open and Eponine walks out, rubbing her temples. She’s still wearing the same clothes she had at work today; it’s a good thing for once that she is in a dress instead of scrubs. “I can’t believe it,” she groans as she gives him a desperate look. “How can I stand as maid of honor to this?”

“She’s your sister,” Enjolras deadpans.

Eponine gives him a withering look. “I can’t believe you agreed to be the best man. We’re straight out of a movie cliché.”

It is all that Enjolras can do not to smirk at what Eponine has pointed out. He now sees in the next room Azelma fidgeting with her short lace veil. Her simple white dress flows so well around her figure such that it becomes difficult for anyone to guess if she’s gained any weight, at least barring any close inspection. “What time are we supposed to start?”

“Five in the afternoon,” Azelma says, glancing at the clock, which reads ten minutes to the appointed hour. “Can you not talk for too long? I can’t keep Maurice waiting.”

Enjolras nods to her but he is not about to make any promises. He takes Eponine’s hand to lead her to a quiet corner of the hallway. “What did you tell her?”

“Everything from how she can’t just up and leave home to get married when she did tell me of a grace period before her moving out, all the way to my asking about how sure can she be about marrying him when she’s known him for all of six months! Joly and Chetta have been dating for years and there are no wedding bells there, yet!” Eponine fumes. “What did you tell Courfeyrac?”

“We talked of practicalities,” Enjolras says. “You know I don’t argue using sentiment.”

Eponine rolls her eyes. “This isn’t logical, Auguste. I know that there’s no real reason for them to not push through with the wedding. They’re both of legal age and of usually sound mind.”

“But the problem is?”

“Azelma is my sister. My younger sister. I’m not saying she’s immature or anything, but she’s been with Courfeyrac for only half a year. That’s too short!”

“Six months is also how long we’ve known each other,” he reminds her.

“We’re not the ones with our names on a marriage license!” Eponine blurts out. She goes red as she claps her hands over her mouth. “Did I really say that?”

“You did,” Enjolras says, even as he averts his gaze if only to hide his own awkwardness at this matter. ‘If I had to get married today, it could only be to Eponine,’ the thought occurs to him. He
realizes now that if he had to marry on any day, whether this same hour, the next day, or decades
down the road, Eponine would always be the woman he wants in the picture.

Weddings are really not the best places for these sorts of epiphanies, especially the sort that can take
one’s breath away.

He suddenly feels Eponine squeeze his hand. “Auguste? Are you alright?”

“I am.” He takes a deep breath as he meets her eyes, still wide with embarrassment. He touches her
cheek, just to make her laugh. “So in the end....”

“I still gave my blessing,” she admits awkwardly. “And you?”

“Who am I to stop them?” he says. He glances at the clock, which says that they have just over five
minutes left before the scheduled ceremony. “Shall we?”

Eponine finally nods before going back to the room they just vacated. “Come on, Zel, we can’t be
late for your wedding!” she calls.

“Finally!” Azelma rushes out and hugs her sister tightly. “Thanks for this, Ponine.” She whispers
something in Eponine’s ear that has her blushing. “Enjolras, go on to your place.”

“What was that about?” Enjolras asks Eponine, but she is still so flustered that she waves him off
towards the hall where the ceremony is supposed to be held.

He figures that this ceremony will be small and private, but still he is astounded at how so many
people have turned up for this wedding. Of course Gavroche is there as well as their entire band of
friends, but even a number of friends from the human rights commission office and Azelma’s own
colleagues are now sitting in the hall. Even Cosette’s parents are here and have graciously offered to
help sponsor the reception. “Everyone is here for the food,” Courfeyrac jokes. “How is Azelma?”

“Just you wait,” Enjolras replies. Of course Courfeyrac nearly squirms with impatience but that’s all
gone the moment he sees Azelma entering the room and walking down the aisle. Azelma blushes
when she makes eye contact with Courfeyrac, but her hands are steady when they finally find his.
The sight of them is so surreal for Enjolras, even throughout the exchange of vows. It doesn’t help to
see Eponine there as the maid of honor, picture perfect in her lavender dress. Enjolras sees his
partner’s eyes glisten but she smiles brightly at him; these tears just may be those of joy.

Of course the wedding reception is at the Revolution Cafe. Enjolras does not find out exactly how
this place got booked on such short notice, though he does get some inkling of the repayment at hand
when he sees Jehan and Grantaire talking with the cafe’s proprietor about where to put another set of
complicated murals. Dinner happens to be a do-it-yourself stir-fry buffet, an arrangement that suits
the very varied culinary predilections of the newly-wedded pair, not to mention their friends.

Enjolras is on his second heaping bowl of vermicelli topped with grilled beef when he sees Eponine
nod to him and signal for him to follow her outside to the cafe’s back terrace. “What is it?” he asks as
he closes the door behind them.

Eponine looks around all the same to make sure they won’t be overheard. “I have to give a maid of
honor speech, just like you have to give a best man’s speech. I have no idea where to begin!”

Enjolras tries not to cringe; this is one part he has not thought about. “It’s supposed to be some sort of
toast or honouring.”

“More like roasting in this case. I’m not letting my sister get away scot-free with pulling this surprise
on all of us,” Eponine says in an undertone. “I’m calling big sister privileges on this one.”

“Are you going to regale us with stories of your childhood?” he asks curiously.

She smiles at this suggestion. “I might. Those were good times, better than high school and some of uni at any rate.”

“And very characteristic of your relationship.”

“I think so. What about you?”

Enjolras pauses to think. There are a number of choice anecdotes about Courfeyrac’s life, particularly during college and law school, which he cannot mention without causing awkwardness or even pain for Azelma. “I’ll have to go with how Courfeyrac is becoming a responsible adult,” he finally says.

“Has that even happened?”

“I spoke in the present tense. Your sister will have to do the rest of the work.”

“Auguste, you’re cruel!” Eponine laughs. “Some best man you’re shaping up to be!”

“If I was doing this traditionally, the speech would not be G-rated,” he points out. “But since this is Courfeyrac, and he’s marrying your sister, this is not going to be normal.”

“You’re just too much of a gentleman,” she laughs.

“You’re still the big sister to the hilt.” He looks to the door, wondering if they are already missed in the gathering. “So are we settled here?”

She nods. “So I get to do the embarrassing part. That means you ought to go after, and be the one to propose the toast.” She kisses his cheek and lingers by his ear. “Make it good.”

“Challenge accepted.” He squeezes her hand briefly before opening the door to allow them to make their discreet entrance back to the party.

II

It is not often that Feuilly pushes his limits whether it comes to work or alcohol, but whenever he does his body makes him pay for it in spades the very next day. ‘Next person who gets married ought to make it on a weekend,’ he swears inwardly as he rests his elbows on his desk and buries his forehead in his fists. His last solid memory was of dancing after the cake was cut and Grantaire announced he was paying for a keg of lager. That had to be at about ten in the evening, which means there are several hours unaccounted for.

He groans as he looks at the clock, which only reads ten in the morning. Even now he’s quite certain that he will be confined to his desk for most of the day and that fieldwork is out of the question. He winces at the sound of typing coming from the next room. “Enjolras, are you still actually conscious?” he calls croakily through the connecting door between the offices.

“Designated driver privileges,” Enjolras replies, not even looking up from his work. He is alone here, since of course Courfeyrac gets this day off. “How are things over on your side?”

Feuilly looks to where Bahorel has his feet up on his desk and a sombrero on his face while snoring in the next cubicle, while Bossuet is hungrily scarfing down what he calls a triple-bacon-sandwich. “Extremely non-productive.”
Enjolras puts aside his typing and goes over to Feuilly’s desk. “May I please borrow your community data? I’m reviewing the on-site reports of the Transnonain case, and I need to triangulate.”

“It’s not much without Dupond filling in the details,” Feuilly points out. There is still no telling yet how intact the man’s recollection of events will be, given that he took several direct hits to the cranium. From Feuilly’s experience with the injured, such as Elodie Chenier, he knows the odds may not be good. “Have you got any other sources?”

“His family, yes. I’d like to start with the neighbours now,” Enjolras says, pushing up the sleeves of his button-down shirt. “They have certainly seen things the Dupond family has missed.”

Feuilly nods slowly before going through a pile of papers till he locates the folder that Enjolras needs. It’s a hodgepodge of handwritten notes and depositions, and he’s not sure how useful all this notepaper will be for this high-profile case. ‘Better than nothing,’ he decides as he lets his friend return to work.

He’s proven right when a few minutes later Enjolras quickly walks back into the office. “We need to hear more from this man,” he says, pointing to a name signed on a deposition. “It’s a familiar name.”

Feuilly freezes on seeing the name his friend is pointing to. He gapes at Enjolras only to be met by a look that signifies that he is not joking about this matter. “How is he involved?”

“He lives in the neighbourhood, and was appointed to the local housing council,” Enjolras says. “He is astute as we all know, and would perhaps know a thing or two.”

“He may be part of the problem.”

“That is possible.”

Feuilly grits his teeth. “Why would he want to help you?”

“Because this is a legal investigation,” Enjolras replies. “He can get subpoenaed by the courts anyway if it comes out that he knows something material.”

“Must you resort to that?” Feuilly asks. He clucks his tongue when Enjolras rolls his eyes. Sometimes it’s not easy working with a lawyer who likes taking the harsh road on matters. “No matter the situation, such information does not come for free.” He knows that knowledge requires a certain currency, whether it is in goods or favors. As it is, he cannot imagine what they can possibly give to a former senior inspector.

Enjolras grips the edge of the desk. “How can he be legitimately persuaded then?”

“You might wish to choose another informant. Given recent history, he may not be forthcoming,” Feuilly points out. “He may not be willing to help you out, in particular.”

“That is true,” Enjolras says. He turns as if to leave but stops in the doorway. “What is his standing with the community?”

“Reclusive,” Feuilly replies. In all the visits he and Bahorel have made to the Transnonain farms, he has never seen or even heard of this informant. ‘Perhaps he’s gone or living by another name,’ he decides.

Yet Feuilly knows in the marrow of his bones that such men will survive for as long as they will themselves to. This is why people like this man still stalk his nightmares; they do not easily fall prey
to accidents and coincidences. ‘He had no reason to die, at least not during the last time he was working in this side of town,’ he recalls.

It does not take Feuilly very long to search the databases for the numbers he needs. All his work with local community organizations gives him access to reams of records that would otherwise be barred from public viewing. Sometimes he feels it’s unfair to have such a privilege but at this present time he cannot imagine how such information can be wielded with minimal danger of abuse or misuse by malevolent parties or controlling governments. For now though he sets this aside as he zeroes in on the number he needs, a direct line to one of the obscure offices of the neighborhood.

His fingers feel heavy as he picks up the phone and presses button after button. Someone picks up the phone after a couple of rings. “Night Watch Office, Third District,” a rough voice greets.

Feuilly has to swallow past the lump in his throat. He’s not a scared child of the streets anymore after all. This, plus the distance, should give him less reason to fear. “Good morning, Sir. I’d like to speak with Mr. Sebastien Javert.”

“Speaking. May I know who is calling?” the voice answers gruffly.

“The Commission on Human Rights.” Feuilly half expects the person on the other end of the line to hang up but he can still hear the sound of breathing. He clears his throat before speaking again. “We would like to ask you a few questions about the Transnonain incident.”

This time the silence is longer. Feuilly looks up and sees Enjolras looking through some notes that have just arrived. Enjolras’ brow furrows as he opens up one of the notes and he shakes his head at the contents before setting it down. Feuilly swallows hard at this; even from where he sits he can see the ominous red ink on the missive, bringing across the point more graphically than the direst of threats.

III

It has been years since Eponine’s last psychology-related class during her medical school days, but even so the terms and theories swiftly come to mind once more the minute she begins reading for her certificate course. The exhilaration she feels at this only heightens on the first afternoon of class when she walks into the room and realizes she actually understands the terminology that peppers the other students’ conversation. ‘It’s really putting a name to things I already know,’ she realizes as she finds a seat near the front of the rickety classroom.

The instructor, a kindly looking woman whose hair is wrapped up in a demure white shawl, goes towards Eponine’s seat. “Dr. Thenardier, it’s a pleasure to have you in our class. My name is Doctor Elizabeth Magloire, PhD of course.”

“It’s a pleasure, Dr. Magloire,” Eponine says politely. “I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

“That’s true, but your name is difficult to miss nowadays. You’re gaining quite the reputation as a trauma surgeon.”

“I’m still taking the sub-specialty board exams next year. Then I can wear that designation properly,” Eponine explains.

“Best of luck with that then,” Dr. Magloire says as she begins looking through the class list. “I see that Attorney Enjolras will not be taking this class?” she asks disappointedly.
“His schedule won’t allow for it,” Eponine replies as she begins unconsciously rubbing the mark on her forearm. She sees Dr. Magloire’s eyebrows shoot up on noticing this. “Sorry Doctor.”

“No there’s no need for that. I ought to adjust the air conditioning in this room anyway,” Dr. Magloire says amiably. “We’ll have an orientation for most of this session, so you can relax in the meantime.”

‘I hope I won’t regret this,’ Eponine thinks as she watches Dr. Magloire cross the room to adjust the thermostat, then return to the podium at the front of the room in order to officially begin the class. She sees that most of the other students are a few years younger than her; some of them do not even look as if they have graduated from college. There are some middle-aged students and even a couple of senior citizens, but these have already formed their own groups. ‘This is what I get for being a very old 29,’ she decides. Much of the time she doesn’t feel her age, that is to say that she doesn’t feel young. It’s difficult to do so with a life that has phases so divergent that they almost seem to be different lifetimes in themselves.

The feeling doesn’t fade when Dr Magloire asks the members of the class to stand up one by one to introduce themselves, stating their names, occupations, and why they’re taking this class. Many of the students are taking it for the additional professional credentials or because of requirements in their workplaces. By the time it gets to Eponine’s turn, she still hasn’t quite zeroed in on an answer. Nevertheless she gets to her feet and fights the urge to wipe her clammy hands on her pants. “My name is Eponine Thenardier, I’m a surgeon, and I’m taking this class....” she trails off. So many answers leap to her lips. ‘I know what it’s like to be in crisis. I want to help kids who are like me. Because sometimes I think that this is saving me.’

She looks down just long enough to find her voice. “I’m taking this class because I want to do something more for the patients I meet,” she finishes.

Many of the members of the class nod approvingly but a few shoot questioning, almost scrutinizing looks in her direction. Eponine does not look away even as she sits down; inasmuch as she does not want to explain her life and circumstances here, she knows better than to show any sign of fear or shame. Nevertheless she feels more than just a frisson of relief when Dr. Magloire claps her hands cheerily and begins the course orientation, explaining the syllabus painstakingly. What sounds like simple reading and case studies suddenly seems formidable and in fact some people are squirming in their seats.

“And lastly, you are all be expected to log in two weeks of practicum at a shelter, halfway home, or institution,” Dr. Magloire finishes with a look that would be blithe if not for her serious tone. “As early as now, I want you to start considering where you will fulfil this requirement. That will be all for this afternoon; you can approach me after for questions or to clarify your reading assignment for our next meeting. Class dismissed.”

Eponine closes her eyes briefly, willing herself not to tremble. ‘You knew this was part of the course, so woman up and deal with it,’ she reminds herself. In her mind’s eye she sees herself standing before a safe that is supposed to be locked but is now creaking open to reveal a yawning darkness. It’s a dream she’s had over and over since getting into medical school, and she knows it’s only a matter of time till the vision may change. ‘I don’t need this now,’ she tells herself over and over as she gathers up her tote and takes the bus back to Saint-Michel Hospital.

It’s at times like these that she is thankful for a good emergency or two decked to her care. For as long as she is scrubbed in everything in her consciousness is focused on that life on the operating room table, on putting back broken and torn sinews so that a body may carry its spark just a little further. This afternoon her patient is a construction worker who has gotten impaled on a spar. It is not
a simple matter of drawing the metal out for each inch brings with it added peril of bleeding, further lacerations or simply damage that will not become apparent till later. Her hands are light and quick, suturing together torn flesh and stopping blood where it wells up. She does not feel the hours passing, not till she finishes closing the wound and the scrub nurse calls out the time: 6:00 in the evening.

“A little slow today, Ma’am?” one of the older nurses asks concernedly. “That was three, nearly four hours tops.”

“It was a deep one,” Eponine replies. That’s true, but even so she knows that on any other day, she would have been out of the operating room in three fourths or half the time. ‘I just have a lot on my mind,’ she decides. With her sister’s surprise wedding and now this new class requirement on top of the usual things she has to deal with at work, it’s no wonder she’s a little under the weather. Nevertheless she steels herself to make her usual rounds, saving Elodie’s room as the last on her agenda as always. All is well, as far as patient care is concerned, and it eases her tired mind greatly.

When she gets to Elodie’s room, she finds Cosette there, talking with the girl about a novel. Not surprisingly it’s a tale of high adventure, judging from the cover. “Hello you two,” Eponine greets as she sets her tote down. “How are you doing?”

“Splendid!” Elodie manages to say, nearly tripping on the word. Her arms and legs are out of their casts now, but she still stays in one place, not quite used anymore to the freedom of movement. Nevertheless her smile still stretches from ear to ear. “I have exercises today!” she adds.


“I was supposed to get some sleep last night but the Courfeyracs had other ideas,” Eponine deadpans. She’s never going to get used to hearing her sister’s given name paired with her friend’s surname. “I’m glad your parents showed up. It was quite the surprise.”

“When Marius told me what Courfeyrac and your sister were up to, I just had to text them right away,” Cosette explains. “He’s always liked looking out for you and your siblings.”

“If Zelma had a church wedding, she would have asked Mr. Fauchelevent to walk her down the aisle’ Eponine can’t help thinking. “At least we don’t have to worry about any controversial incidents. That’s one upside of not having time for a bachelor party or bridal shower,” she quips.

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up for the next wedding.” Cosette points out. “They’ll still want to have their cake and eat it too.”

“You’ll be next,” Eponine teases. “The way you and Pontmercy—“

“Still too soon!” Cosette laughs with protest. “But what about you and—“

Eponine shakes her head. She cannot quite picture this step just yet, not even if her sister’s wedding has a way of giving interesting suggestions. ‘Not till some things clear up,’ she thinks, glancing at her patient.

In the meantime Elodie squirms uncomfortably. “I need to pee,” she whispers a little embarrassedly. “How do I go to the bathroom?”

“You have a bedpan,” Eponine reminds her.

Elodie shakes her head. “Do I have to?”

“Oh do,” Eponine says before getting into position to help pick up Elodie and move her to the small washroom a few steps away. She makes a mental note to secure commode privileges for Elodie, in order to make this task easier as well as to give her some semblance of control. ‘This should be her mother’s work,’ she thinks but she banishes this thought. She can’t imagine Mrs. Chenier doing this for her child. Eponine has to admit that in some way her own mother was better when it came to dealing with the nitty gritty of raising children. She can remember one night when her mother taught her and Azelma how to wash their hair under a cold tap. Somehow she could still laugh then, which is more than her favourite patient can say.

It takes time till Elodie is settled back in bed and reading her book again. Eponine quickly finishes writing in a chart and is just about to excuse herself when suddenly she sees Elodie put down her book. “Why don’t you and Mister Enjolras want to get married?” Elodie asks.

Eponine blinks, surprised that Elodie should ask. “What makes you think so?”

“I know,” Elodie says, putting her hands on top of the book. Her eyes are curious and a little frightened as she looks at Eponine. “Don’t you love him?”

This time Eponine bites her lip. She’s always avoided trying to properly name what she feels for him, since for the first time in her life she wants to let things just be. It’s the only way she can imagine being their being together, given everything that confronts them. She knows she can lose him if she pushes things more than what is feasible for their position.

Yet how long can that last? Eponine sighs before meeting Elodie’s still curious look. “You’ll understand when you’re older, baby. You just will.”
Even at the best of times Sebastien Javert did not choose to live in luxury, or even in quarters befitting his station. Nevertheless he has to admit that the outpost at the edge of the Transnonain hamlet is skirting the bottom line of frugality. ‘This is a box, not an apartment,’ it occurs to him as he pulls some dry clothes off a rope strung from window to window of his single room on the ground floor of a tenement. Nevertheless it is a dry box, and big enough for a wrought iron bed, a squat chest of drawers for books and clothes, two chairs, and a table. The walls are bare but clean, with no cracks, and the only source of light is a single bare bulb in the middle of the ceiling. It is only a room to be alone in since everything else such as cooking and washing has to be done at the common facilities down the hall.

‘A room to hide in,’ he also decides as he sits down to relieve the ache in his knees. This is something new, or perhaps it is only rearing its head now thanks to his being relatively sedentary ever since his arrival in this neighbourhood. Ever since his failure to quell the uprising in the capital, followed by his resignation from the police, he has felt the need to hide his face. The sun can summon him and the neighbours can yell, but he is not going to allow anyone to connect him with the former Senior Inspector of the East Police District.

As he runs his fingers through his graying hair, he hears footsteps in the hall and a single urgent knock on the door. “Good morning. Is anyone home?” a strong voice calls.

Javert sighs deeply at this polite but insistent inquiry. He knows better though than to ignore this, lest he be served a more unwelcome sort of summons. He combs out his hair and dusts off his shirt and long shorts in order to achieve a more decorous look before getting up to open the door. “To what do I owe this visit, Attorney Enjolras?” he greets.

“To the people, and the Dupond family,” Enjolras replies cordially. He is dressed in a blue-button down shirt and trousers, rather casual for his usual line of work but still acceptable for a visit of inquiry. “How have you been, Mr. Javert?”

Javert huffs and crosses his arms. Thanks to this young man’s courtesy, he also has to answer in kind instead of just sending him away. Yet he will do all he can to keep this meeting short. “I was undisturbed, till your friend Feuilly made that call. You are endangering me.”

“That is hardly my intention,” Enjolras replies. “Your protection will depend on whether the witness protection program will consider you as a material witness for the Transnonian case.”

The taste of metal wells up in Javert’s mouth as visions of that night of blood flit before his eyes. “I didn’t see everything.”

“You saw more. Their faces. The injuries. Everything that happened before the Night Watch took the victims to the hospital, or the morgue,” Enjolras says. “The report you filed at the end of your shift was rather middling in detail. I believe I am not the only one who has noticed by now.”

Javert tries not to flinch even as he is keenly aware that Enjolras has gotten to the truth of the matter. ‘He will not leave without those details,’ he realizes, knowing all too well the fierceness of this young man’s manner. “Are you alone?” he asks.
“The office is aware of my whereabouts,” Enjolras says with a knowing smile.

‘**Good that he’s learned some prudence,**’ Javert decides before motioning for Enjolras to enter the apartment, where hopefully they will have less chance of being overheard by the neighbourhood spies. “**Where is Chretein Dupond?**” he asks once he closes the door.

“**Alive and well,**” Enjolras replies calmly.

Javert nods, knowing that Enjolras is being discreet about this particular witness. Everyone in the neighbourhood has been living in fear ever since Dupond was run out of the hamlet with gunshots at his heels. “**How is Dr. Thenardier?**” he asks more convivially. “I heard she’s busy taking care too of another of your clients?”

“That she is,” Enjolras replies without missing a beat. “**Is there more you intend to ask in the way of small talk?**”

“**Of course not,**” Javert says. Even so he can tell that what had started as Enjolras’ obvious attraction to the young surgeon has grown into a far more interesting and perhaps dangerous partnership. “My report may have been circumspect, but I heard that the forensic investigation yielded more evidence.”

“**Evidence always requires verification,**” Enjolras replies. He brings out a sheaf of labelled sketches. “**Please verify if this is the place where the ambush occurred and if these are the individuals present at the incident,**” he says.

Javert surveys the sketches carefully, hoping his face does not betray any sign of recognition. The artist and the witness providing the information were very thorough, capturing the perpetrators’ visages down to every last pockmark. “**They are,**” he says at last.

“**Are you acquainted with them?**” Enjolras asks slowly.

“**Not intimately,**” Javert clarifies. “**This is not a big hamlet though, and they are well known.**”

The lawyer nods before bringing out another document, this time a ballistics report. “**This is from the investigation concerning the attack on Dupond, in the area of Avenue 54. Are there any details here that are known to you?**”

Javert frowns as he surveys the report. It’s fairly run of the mill: five entry wounds, four exit wounds, one slug retrieved from the victim’s body, all from a police issue firearm. “**What about it?**”

“**That gun was previously confiscated by your investigating team,**” Enjolras answers, but now all humor and candor is gone from his tone. “**Saint Michel Square, nearly nine months ago.**”

‘**Of course he’d remember,**’ Javert thinks. “**That pistol was locked up and decommissioned.**”

“**Apparently not. The bullets match the scenes perfectly.**”

“**If you mean to imply that I released the pistol back into the force, you are wrong. This sort of treachery is precisely why I resigned from the force. I told you as much before.**”

Enjolras’ expression is grim as he crosses his arms. “**You did not bring up specific names.**”

‘**Because it is difficult and deathly to untangle that web,**’ Javert thinks. He still cannot forget anything of what he uncovered when he was figuring out his decision in the aftermath of the investigation of the assassination attempts at Saint-Michel. “**Your reforms have failed to purge them,**” he finally says.
“They are still on the force?”

“What is stopping them from opening up the caches and using a decommissioned weapon? It would cover up their tracks well. I would suggest you place your commission’s forensics team and weapons specialist—Bahorel, isn’t it, under protection as well. As well as the surgeon who extracted the bullets from Dupond.”

Enjolras’ eyes narrow as he retrieves the ballistics report. “So you know of a threat?”

“There always was one,” Javert says. “Your investigations of past atrocities are tracking old footprints; the root is in the ways of the police force.”

“Would you speak out against it?”

“I would not dare.”

“You are no longer associated with them.”

“What good would it do?” Javert retorts. ‘It will only provoke disorder once more,’ he realizes. He can only imagine the chaos that would arise once the full extent of impunity is revealed, especially to a still agitated and revolutionary-minded populace. “I will only be branded as a traitor.”

“A man doing his duty. As you always have done,” Enjolras answers. “This is not the time for cowardice.”

The word is like a slap to Javert’s face. “This is the time for prudence, Attorney,” he snarls. “Go home. Go back to Dr. Thenardier, get her out of this. That little girl too, and your friends.”

“I will not. Not without my answers,” Enjolras says.

Javert surveys Enjolras’ face, knowing marble when he sees it. In that he has not changed, or in fact has only grown more resolute. Who is he to go up against such cold fire? He gets up from his seat to retrieve a paper and a pencil. He writes several names, backwards so that they can only be read in a mirror. “Begin there,” he says, shoving the paper at Enjolras.

The young man nods. “Thank you, Mr. Javert. I assure you, you will not regret this.”

“I fear I may.”

“Should you wish to leave this area, I will help see to it.”

Javert frowns, wondering if it will be necessary. “Do not return then.” He knows that by saying this he is leaving himself open to a more official summons from the commission or even a court subpoena, but this is a small price to pay for peace of mind and peace for this beleaguered area. “If you are seen in this neighbourhood again, I cannot guarantee your life, Attorney.”


Javert nods curtly. “Send my regards to Dr. Thenardier and her family.” He does not wait for Enjolras to make any reply before closing the door, already feeling the first stirrings of danger intruding on this too-fragile peace.
Eponine never likes that time of the year when the trainees at Saint Michel Hospital start looking out for the lists and rankings posted on the department bulletin boards. It’s a time when thorns and claws seem to appear everywhere, even among the closest of friends and colleagues. ‘The narrower the list, the worse the fight,’ she notes grimly when she hears two of her fellow surgery residents trading insults in the staff room during lunch break.

As she returns to correcting a clinical abstract on her laptop, she hears a chair scrape the floor next to her desk. “Tough as nails even now, I see,” she hears a deep voice drawl lazily. “Shouldn’t you be afraid of the competition?”

“I’m not about to start now, Reynault,” she retorts, shooting a glance at her fellow resident. “Shouldn’t you be scrubbing in by one?”

Reynault whistles. “Starting off the chief resident vibe as early as now? It would be a first to have a girl chief resident in this place.”

“There was one seven years ago. Her name was Dr. Stael. She still does consultancies here,” Eponine says. ‘If that happened again, I’m not sure how the guys would all handle it,’ she thinks as she looks to where some of the other surgeons, including Combeferre and Navet, are discussing football statistics. There are only eight residents who have the necessary rank to be considered for the chief position, and it so happens that she is the only lady in this bunch. It’s a curious situation, and one that gives her more to hope for than she’d dare to publicly admit.

Suddenly the chatter falls silent as the staff room door opens. “Hello Dr. Mabeuf!” Navet greets cheerily, taking care to cover the computer monitor that is still live streaming a football game.

Mabeuf nods by way of acknowledgment. “Is everyone here?” he asks as his eyes survey the room. “I am sure you have all already guessed what I will be announcing in a few minutes....”

The room erupts in murmurs and whispers, forcing Mabeuf to hold up his hands for quiet. “Screening for the chief resident post begins today. The promotions committee has gone over the evaluations of the senior residents, to come up with a short list of five candidates. Now this does not reflect on your capacities as surgeons, but only whether you are suited for this responsibility at this point in time.”

“Oh cut the drama, who is it going to be?” Reynault mutters.

Mabeuf gives him a warning look before clearing his throat. “For everyone’s consideration: Dr. Daniel Combeferre, Dr. Martin de Potiers, Dr. Fabian Perez, Dr. Ambroise Tallien, and Dr. Edward Snow. Congratulations to you gentlemen.”

Just hearing Combeferre’s name on this list is enough reason for Eponine to join in the applause, even as she becomes aware of the pitying looks that some of her colleagues are giving her. Nevertheless she gets out of her seat and crosses the room to where Combeferre is shaking the hands of some of his neighbours. “If the committee didn’t pick you, we’d have to refer them for mental status examinations,” she says proudly to him as she clasps his arm.

Combeferre smiles warmly at her but there is still a bit of worry in his eyes. “Why not you too?”

“Me, taking charge of this lot? Only when pigs have wings,” Eponine quips. Nevertheless she can’t deny that hollow feeling in her stomach on hearing Mabeuf’s announcement. ‘Some dreams are just a little bit too big for you,’ she tells herself.

That is until she sees Mabeuf nod to her. “May I please have a word with you, Eponine?”
She bites her lip and nods, all the while aware of the ‘oohs’ and clucking tongues around her. ‘He’s probably going to tell me why I didn’t make the cut,’ she realizes as she follows Mabeuf to the consultants’ cubicle. She tries to keep a straight face when she takes a seat while he is looking through his desk. “Did I do something wrong?”

Mabeuf laughs. “What gave you that idea?”

Eponine feels her face burn at this query. “The list,” she manages to say. “My evaluations are that bad, aren’t they?”

A look of comprehension crosses the older doctor’s face. “You should have been towards the top of the list, Eponine. However I had you pulled out of consideration for a particular reason that does not reflect at all on your capabilities as a surgeon.” He holds out a folder with her name on it. “How would you like to be the officer in charge of our new Social Interventions Department?”

“Is this the same as Medico-Legal?” Eponine asks tentatively as she begins reading the department’s mission and description written on the folio’s first page. She’s heard talk that the medico-legal department has been under reorganization, but she has not imagined it would take on this form.

“Not exactly. I’m keeping that office for filing the usual accident reports, medical certificates and death protocols. This work is far less retroactive,” Mabeuf explains. “As you probably already know, this hospital tends to attract a....great deal of cases requiring the help of social services or even the courts, even before the patient is discharged. This office is meant to investigate these cases and facilitate the proper interventions and liaisons necessary for our patients’ continuation of care.”

Eponine bites her lip again as she mulls over the processes outlined in the folio. “Shouldn’t a social worker be in charge of this?”

“The hospital administration would feel more assured with the quality of care, at least from a medical perspective, if there was a physician in charge. Of course you will be working with the social services and other government offices; much of your job will be coordinating with them once you have pinpointed the needs of the patient,” Mabeuf explains.

“Is this why you allowed me to take that certificate course?”

“That is one of the reasons.”

For a long time Eponine is silent as she looks at the folio and then casts a glance towards where Combeferre, Navet, and the other surgeons have returned to their usual chatter that now includes a lot of betting about the chief resident post. ‘I did want it a little,’ she thinks. It’s not easy being a woman in her profession and she can use every edge given to her. ‘Yet it would have only been for a year,’ she reminds herself. By this time next year she should be taking the specialty board exams to become a full-fledged trauma surgeon and officially graduate from the residency program. This new assignment is something more indefinite, something that could be hers for a long while.

She takes a few more moments to survey the flowcharts, proposed procedures, and contacts outlined in the folio. At least she’s not going in entirely alone. “So when do I start?” she asks.

“Next week.” Mabeuf pauses to glance at a calendar. “Unless you still have other responsibilities relating to the Chenier case?”

“Hopefully not, Doc. The trial starts tomorrow,” Eponine answers. She’s going to have to check up on Enjolras later to make sure that he eats a proper dinner and gets to sleep at a decent hour. A good plan for this starts running through her mind even as she and Mabeuf discuss a few more details.
about this upcoming assignment and then she excuses herself to get back to her work.

Much to her dismay Reynault is still in the staff room; it appears that the cholecystectomy he’s been assigned to has suddenly been deferred. He smirks at Eponine as she is returning to her desk. “What did the boss want to talk to you about?”

“Some extra work,” Eponine replies nonchalantly. She’ll leave it to Mabeuf or someone else to properly make the announcement about the new office.

Reynault laughs as he glances from her to Combeferre. “Guess there’s no more time for fucking with the future boss, Thenardier?”

“Shut up,” Eponine mutters through gritted teeth. It’s no secret that she and Combeferre were a couple back in medical school; to this day she’s thankful that it ended there since she likes him better as a colleague and ally than as a bickering boyfriend. Thankfully most people at work do not bring up this fact, if only to avoid the awkward storytelling.

“Reynault, don’t you have rounds to make?” Combeferre calls exasperatedly. “You really ought to start working on that professional behaviour.”

Eponine shuts her eyes, silently thankful for this save. ‘It is that or I would have demolished Reynault myself,’ she decides. She looks up when Combeferre approaches her workspace.

“Someone has to make brain bleach or a filter for that guy.”

He’s better taken care off with a suture,” Combeferre says, miming stitching a mouth shut. “I still cannot believe that you didn’t make the short list. You’re just as good as I am.”

She shrugs, knowing that this is the truth as well as his way of trying to make her feel better. Even she knows that his brilliance as a surgeon is unmatched; their superiors already regard him as a force to be reckoned with. ‘He’ll keep this situation discreet,’ she decides quietly as she meets his eyes.

“Dr. Mabeuf offered me a position,” she begins. “It’s doing social interventions for our patients---lots of child protection, counselling, social services with a legal edge.”

Combeferre’s eyes go wide behind his spectacles. “That’s big.”

“I know.”

“Bigger than being chief resident, I think.”

“I can handle it.” He is not the only person she has to convince. “That’s why I’m studying too, to be able to do this.”

“You’re the best person for the job. No one else has your intuition,” Combeferre says as he claps her back. His smile is worried, bemused, and puzzled all at once, something that isn’t new to her. “But it’s a new item. Terra incognita.”

“So much the better for me.”

“Of course. Once again, congratulations.”

“Thanks! Good luck with the rest of the screening!” she calls over the sound of the pager summoning Combeferre to the operating room. ‘He can’t help thinking that way,’ she reminds herself. It’s that competitiveness that led to more fights than she’d like to remember; it’s fortunate for her, Joly, Musichetta, and a lot of other people that their friendship was always more important than any promotion or evaluation. She can only hope that will continue to last.
The rest of the afternoon is quiet for her, with a few relatively simple surgeries, and of course the rounds she usually makes before going home. ‘Who will I find visiting Elodie this time?’ she wonders amusedly as she makes her way down to the paediatrics wing. Eponine feels something grow warm in her chest when she hears a certain baritone voice coming from the hospital room, so she quickens her pace but takes care not to walk in just yet. She has feared all day that she would not hear from this particular person, given that earlier this morning he left to make a seemingly dangerous visit. She presses her knuckles to her mouth to muffle her laughter at the sight of Enjolras coaching Elodie through some of her physical therapy exercises. Elodie’s eyes are narrowed in an effort to concentrate as she lifts her arms and tries to hold them steady for a few seconds; she manages it for ten seconds before grimacing and letting her arms lie flat again. Enjolras smiles proudly at Elodie and pats the top of her head encouragingly before handing her a cup of water.

It is at that moment that Elodie looks towards the door and practically beams on seeing Eponine. “Look at what I can do again!” she announces gleefully as she starts lifting her arms again, and this time she manages to catch Enjolras’ hands to help hold her up. “Don’t drop me!”

“Okay but you hold on tight,” Enjolras coaxes her. “Can you try to count to fifteen?”

Elodie shuts her eyes and starts counting, and reaches twelve before her grip starts to slacken. Enjolras notices this and sets her down carefully on the bed. “That was longer. Good job,” he says.

Elodie grins up proudly at him and then at Eponine. “I couldn’t get them to move yesterday but they’re better now.”

“You’re doing so well, baby,” Eponine agrees as she helps Elodie adjust her blankets. She reaches over to clasp Enjolras’ wrist, and their hands meet halfway so that his fingers can wrap around hers in that firm way she’s come to enjoy so much. “You’re early today.”

“I got back in town sooner than I thought I would,” he explains. His smile is satisfied, even enthusiastic perhaps at what he’s just learned. Nevertheless there is still a very telling strain in his neck and shoulders, something that is palpable even in the way his fingers run over Eponine’s. “It was a good trip,” he adds, catching her gaze meaningfully.

She nods, understanding now that his talk with Javert must have been more informative than either of them had expected. “Now just for that, you’re getting the night off,” she says. “You need your rest before tomorrow.”

Elodie seems to stiffen at the word ‘tomorrow’. “Will I still see you both?”

“I might be busy for a few days, but once I have time, I’ll come by,” Enjolras replies.

“I’ll be here though,” Eponine says more reassuringly. She has no idea how this case will play out, even if the evidence is very strong. It is still possible that the Cheniers may win and force her to sign out of this girl’s case. This is why she does not dare to make any more promises just yet. So instead she just settles for rubbing Elodie’s back and then tucking her in before excusing herself to finish writing on her patient’s chart. She waits for Enjolras to finish saying goodnight to Elodie before taking his hand and going with him out the door. On the way out she notices a clumsily drawn picture at Elodie’s bedside. It is of a house with a yard covered with flowers and trees. There are three people standing by the house: a little girl with braids, a woman in pants and a long coat, and a man in a suit and with messy light hair. Eponine feels a lump in her throat but she only squeezes Enjolras’ hand more tightly as they make their way out of the paediatrics wing.

They do not say anything all the while they are in the elevator, and even as they are crossing the street to where Enjolras has parked his car. Nevertheless the silence and proximity are more than
comfortable especially once they are alone in the car. As she buckles up in the passenger seat she sees Enjolras take a deep breath and crack his knuckles. “So what did the former inspector have to say?” she asks as she rests a hand on his knee.

“He sends his regards,” he replies, patting her fingers before starting the car.

Eponine rolls her eyes, unable to imagine such words from Javert. “How much help did he give?”

“Enough,” he replies. He takes a few deep breaths. “It’s pretty bad though. Transnonain is only the tip of the iceberg. So is everything else that has happened when it comes to the police.”

Eponine tightens her grip on his knee, remembering all too well what had nearly ended his life several months ago. She shakes her head before other memories can come to mind; now is not the time for her to dwell in her own past. “This is your work. I guess you can say it’s all cut out for you now,” she says once they get to a traffic light.

“A little too clearly,” Enjolras confesses. “It’s going to keep the office busy. Hopefully it won’t send too many cases your way.”

Eponine laughs, knowing now she has to tell him of the events in the staffroom. “It’s unavoidable, now that I’m Saint Michel Hospital’s officer in charge for Social Interventions!”

“Social interventions?” he repeats. “That’s social work?”

“Some of it, but also liaising with offices like yours, or anything that needs outside intervention and community work,” she explains. “I’ll be seeing a bit more of you.”

He laughs. “Is that a good thing? Whatever happened to going for chief resident?”

She shrugs. “It’s not for me. I will still be doing surgery though, but this is something else.”

“Something good,” Enjolras says, his smile now reaching his eyes for the first time since they’ve left Elodie’s room. He gives Eponine a quick kiss on her forehead before the stoplight turns green. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, feeling suddenly warmer and lighter than before. She grips his hand before he can steer the car towards the main highway. “Can we go to your place tonight?”

“It’s a mess. Are you sure?” he asks.

“Your mess is my idea of order,” she scoffs. “Besides I think you need the rest and you won’t get it by driving me to my place and then back.”

“How will you get home?”

“It’s not going to be the first time I’ve stayed over at your apartment. Gavroche would appreciate the quiet at my place too, for once.”

He sighs and relents when she squeezes his arm again. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I thought I was amazing?” she jokes.

“That too.” They turn right on another road, the one leading to his apartment just a short drive from the Saint-Michel area. In a few minutes they are at his place, and as soon as Enjolras opens the door for them, she pulls him in and sets him down on the sofa. “Don’t move. I’ve got this,” she says before kissing his lips.
“I should take a shower,” he points out.

“Okay then, but don’t disturb me in the kitchen. It’s supposed to be a surprise,” she calls over her shoulder as she sets down her work bag and goes off to survey his cupboards. She laughs when she hears him grumble a little before going off to shower; he’s always too curious about whatever she is cooking up, particularly if he does not see her working from a recipe. ‘He still needs to learn to improvise there,’ she decides amusedly as she brings out some sliced bread, tomato paste, canned mushrooms, salami, bell peppers, and even a jar of black olives. She decides to cut the crusts off the bread and make the rest of the ingredients into a sort of ragout topping. ‘Now for some cheese’, she thinks, and much to her relief there is still some in the refrigerator, left over from one culinary experiment that Bossuet and Grantaire attempted a few days ago. She carefully layers the cheese and the ragout on the bread before putting everything under the grill, where it only takes a few minutes till the cheese is melted and the bread sufficiently hot.

It is just as well since as she is putting these homemade pizzas on a plate, she hears Enjolras trying to sneak into the kitchen. “What did I just tell you?” she teases.

“I could smell that,” he argues as he goes up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist. She squirms and swats at his hands teasingly before he kisses the top of her head. “I didn’t know I still had olives in the storage,” he mumbles in her hair.

“You were saving them for a rainy day that wasn’t coming,” she replies, looking up at him. “I’ll make some coffee for us first.”

“That’s my job now,” he insists. “Only fair since you cooked.”

She rolls her eyes but acquiesces anyway, letting him set up the coffee machine while she brings their dinner to the living room and sets the coffee table, taking care to keep his papers to one side where they will not get splattered by food or drink. It surprises her how easily this is all coming, but yet it seems so natural, so right to look out for Enjolras in this way. ‘And him for me too,’ she realizes, feeling oddly delighted and a little apprehensive at this thought.

Eponine knows that she has never been this way before, not even with Combeferre during the best days of their relationship. She sits on the sofa and shuts her eyes as she remembers Elodie’s question of several days ago. ‘He does know, does he?’ she wonders. Why else would they be in this apartment, with her so bent on taking care of him the night before one of the touchiest cases of his career?

The comforting aroma of brewed coffee soon banishes these apprehensions from her mind, more so when she sees Enjolras emerge shortly after with two large mugs. “Hope I didn’t take too long?” he enquires as he sets down the mugs next to the pizza.

“The pizza is too hot,” she says, indicating the still steaming platter.

“So is the coffee,” he admits. He scoots up to her, resting his chin on her shoulder while she begins running her hands through his hair. “I hope I’ve prepared enough for tomorrow,” he says after a while as he relaxes under her touch.

“I’m sure you have,” she whispers, kissing his jaw. “Unless you want me to help go over arguments?”

“Maybe later,” he says. He raises his head to look at her. “Thank you, Eponine.”

She kisses his lips gently. “Anytime, Auguste.” There’s no one else in the world she wants to do this
for, and if that isn’t love yet, she figures it’s slowly getting there.
It’s not often that Feuilly has occasion to ‘go smart casual’, which in his definition means putting on a shirt with a collar and closed toed shoes. ‘All of a sudden though this feels like being overdressed in a hospital drama,’ he notes as he makes his way through the out-patient department of the Saint-Michel Hospital. It is not even eight in the morning, but the waiting rooms and corridors of the OPD complex have all been transformed into long, snaky queues of patients and their companions all listening avidly to be called into the various clinics. The sudden downpour outside doesn’t help matters very much, and many of the newcomers peel off raincoats or toss aside umbrellas to reveal the fact that their clothes are soaked and muddied. In fact a number of patients, particularly the very young or the elderly, are still in their pajamas. ‘A fact that would faze some,’ Feuilly can’t help but notice when he sees a troop of medical students recoil when a man covered with sores limps into a nearby dermatology clinic.

He arrives at the trauma surgery clinic in time to see Eponine setting her tote bag on her desk. “Good morning. Is it too early for a courtesy call?” he greets politely.

She makes a show of checking her watch before motioning for Feuilly to take a seat. “If you mentioned it five minutes ago, yes. Though it’s not early since you did want to contact me last night.”

“I didn’t want to intrude on you and the Chief,” Feuilly says. “So you two just hung out?”

Eponine laughs at this nickname for her partner. “At least till we both decided to get some sleep. We can’t have him drowsy at the trial later.”

‘Good thing that Enjolras finally has someone looking out for him,’ Feuilly thinks. More interestingly, it seems as if Enjolras is returning the favor, if the large sandwich that Eponine puts to one side of her desk is any indicator. “Hopefully Courfeyrac got some rest too,” he muses aloud.

“That’s my sister’s lookout,” Eponine says. She glances about as if to make sure that no one is eavesdropping. “This feels almost ridiculous. I understand these formalities when working with other offices, but when it’s you guys at the human rights commission, that’s another thing.”

“Is familiarity breeding contempt?” Feuilly asks.

“I think a ‘state of amused wariness’ is more likely,” Eponine replies. “Are Bossuet and Bahorel also joining us?”

Feuilly shakes his head. “They are interviewing a witness for a new case. Sadly it might end up here in your office.”

“Story of life here in Saint-Michel. Apparently this is a high-traffic hospital, so the stats say. I know this is one of three big general hospitals in this city, but this has a crazy case load.” She pauses to bring a paper out of her work tote. “This is a primer about this new office. There’s also a directory. I haven’t met everyone yet, so I guess that’s going to be part of my work for the next few days.”

Feuilly carefully looks over the list of contacts from various social welfare agencies, law offices, and even law enforcement units. He can’t say he likes all the individuals concerned; some of them are
part of the reason his community work is so hard to begin with, but nevertheless a crusade is a crusade. “So how will our coordination system here work?”

“Both ways: if this hospital gets a patient who is suspected to be a victim of abuse, neglect, or some human rights violation, we get to coordinate with you on the legal handling and representation. Likewise, you can get our expert opinions as well for some cases,” Eponine explains. “Being an ordinary witness though is another story especially given the rules on privileged communications and disclosure.”

Feuilly sighs, knowing that this is the very reason that Eponine has not been subpoenaed as a witness in the Chenier case. ‘Every nerve of her wants to fight harder for that girl,’ he notes; he knows that feeling all too well and he sees it clearly in the way Eponine’s fists clench at times when the Chenier case is brought up. This is one of the times he is glad not to be in the positions that she, Enjolras, and Courfeyrac are with regard to this case.

His reverie is interrupted by the sound of his phone ringing, which is something that only happens when it’s an emergency. He excuses himself and goes into a corner of the office. “Hello Chief. What’s happening?” he greets.

“A lot. Where are you, Feuilly?” Enjolras asks calmly.

“Saint Michel.”

“Have you got a vehicle?”

“My motorbike,” Feuilly says. He frowns at the continued drumming of rain on the roof; he definitely does not want to go out in this weather. “Where should I be?”

“Avenue 54 bus stop. There is a pick-up you have to make there,” Enjolras replies. “Within the hour, I think. If he’s not there in an hour and five, call me.”

Feuilly feels something sinking in his gut, for he knows already who is waiting at that location.

“Then where to after?”

“The commission office. Don’t stop by Saint-Michel unless it’s necessary,” Enjolras replies. “I’ll call Combeferre and ask him to take care of the Duponds.”

“Alright,” Feuilly says, relieved that at least Enjolras has this part covered. “Do you want to speak with Eponine? I’m in her office right now.”

“I’ll call her. Thanks for this. Keep your eyes on the road,” Enjolras says before hanging up.

When Feuilly looks at Eponine, she’s already got her phone out and she’s about to press on the speed dial. “You’d better scoot. It sounds urgent if Enjolras is calling.”

Feuilly nods, knowing better than to speak too openly about this problem. He’s certain that Eponine is privy to some of it anyway, but he still doesn’t want the rest of the OPD crowd knowing about it. “Could you please keep Bed 8 at the ER open?” he asks. “This might get bad.”

“I’ll keep the staff posted. Update me,” Eponine agrees. “And don’t forget your helmet!”

“Yes Ma’am,” Feuilly says, saluting before he leaves the room. He’s only thankful that he didn’t park his bike too far from the OPD entrance, and he hopes that this little difference will help him save a life in the nick of time.
The road is so slick and slippery, such that Feuilly does not dare to drive too fast or take some of his accustomed shortcuts. The raging downpour does not do any favors for visibility, and for a moment Feuilly fears he may even miss this familiar bus stop. However there is no mistaking the sight of a man darting out of the bus stop, fleeing from two others.

He knows that these men may have guns. He knows that today, he is unarmed. He knows that the road is a peril in itself, but Feuilly slams his feet hard enough on the gas pedal of his bike, making the engine roar dangerously as he veers sharply to place his vehicle between Javert and his pursuers.

“Go!” he shouts to the former inspector. He knows that Javert will not go far, and maybe will even fetch some help. However that’s a few minutes away, and even so the older man needs every spare second that he can get.

Feuilly grits his teeth as he grips the handlebars of his motorcycle, readying to drive faster than he’s ever done in his life.

When it rains, Fantine brings her potted plants indoors. ‘Too much water can be a bad thing,’ she thinks as she straightens up from hauling in a rosebush into the kitchen, and then wipes her muddied hands on a dish towel. It isn’t just true for plants, but more so for people. She should know, after once having spent half the rainy season with her ankles deep in stagnant water.

As she’s scrubbing the dirt out from under her fingernails she hears footsteps coming in from the garage. “The repairs to the roof are holding up,” Jean Valjean says as he also picks up a wet cloth to clean his hands of grease. “That’s less to clean up after the storm.”

Fantine sighs with relief as she hands the liquid soap to him. Inasmuch as she doesn’t mind cleaning up and setting things in order, it is always a great relief to have someone helping her out. ‘Someone who can stop a mess before it happens,’ she thinks. She’s met a lot of men who have fancied themselves as troubleshooters, but Jean Valjean goes more than a few steps beyond that.

Jean Valjean smiles knowingly when he notices the large potted plant nearest the sink. Perhaps he is already thinking of where in the garden it can be permanently planted once it gets too big for its present receptacle. “What’s your next project?” he asks.

“Bonsai,” Fantine replies. She’s been reading about it, and she’s always liked the idea of loftiness put in such a small form. “I just need to find the right seedling.”

“Doesn’t that take a while to train?”

“It’s a challenge.”

“A real labor of patience,” he concurs.

‘More than patience,’ she thinks. She enjoys bringing these signs of life into their yard and into the halls of their home, Jean Valjean’s office, and even the foundation house that they run. She likes to think that the sight of fresh flowers and lush greenery give hope to their neighbours. Of course it’s messy and in some ways not as practical as sewing, but it is infinitely satisfying especially to a woman who has sworn never to pick up a needle again if she can help it.


“Of course not,” Jean Valjean replies cheerily. “Were you about to go out in this weather?”
“To the courthouse----to watch the trial, not to get married!” Cosette replies. Indeed she is dressed a little more formally than usual, with a blazer over a tailored dress. “I’ll drive there.”

“No, let me,” Jean Valjean volunteers. “It’s raining too hard.”

“I’ll take the van. I’m good with it,” Cosette insists. She wrings her hands before looking at her parents again. “That’s not what I want to ask you about though.”

“What is it, darling?” Fantine asks. There is something very serious about Cosette’s countenance, even for someone so notably pensive. “It’s nothing bad?”

“I don’t think so,” Cosette says. She takes a deep breath and smiles. “I know you’ve been looking for a guardian for Elodie, and so far no one’s come up to the social worker’s standards. I was hoping that I could be the one to take her in instead.”

“You mean for a few days, once she is discharged from the hospital?” Fantine asks, seeing that Jean Valjean has gone pale. That may be necessary, though Fantine worries how the child will hold up with such a transition.

“No, as a permanent guardian,” Cosette says a little more cautiously. “I know how to care for a child in her condition, and I have the time for it too. I’ve had a bit saved too and a stale job, so I do have some financial capability,” she adds.

“Cosette, must you?” Fantine blurts out. At that moment Fantine is not sure if she should be proud of her child or fearful for her. Sometimes, just sometimes, Cosette loves too much for her own good. ‘She’s really my daughter in that way,’ she realizes.

Cosette leans against the kitchen bench. “It has to be someone who Elodie knows and who also cares about her. I know that Eponine and Enjolras would do it in a heartbeat, but they can’t since there are rules about the case. Those rules don’t apply to me though.”

“You’re so young!” Fantine insists, only to instantly regret the words when Cosette gives her a surprised look. ‘I was even younger when I had her,’ she reminds herself. She looks beseechingly at Jean Valjean. “What do you think?”

“In the end it’s Mrs. Plutarque’s decision who’ll be on the short list that the court will review. She’s the social worker, and all that the rest of us can do is give recommendations,” Jean Valjean replies after a few long moments. “Taking care of a child, especially one with Elodie’s needs, is a full-time job in itself.”

“You two taught me well,” Cosette answers.

The full confidence in Cosette’s voice is enough to bring tears to Fantine’s eyes. She’s always feared that Cosette would resent her especially for all the hardships of their earliest years together, but somehow that darkness seems to have no grip on this young woman’s soul. ‘And she won’t be doing this alone,’ she realizes.

Jean Valjean clears his throat. “Does Marius know?”

Cosette nods. “We talked about this. It’s good since he’s Elodie’s neurologist, so he knows just how to help. He’s all in.”

Fantine can see all too well past the blush creeping up on Cosette’s cheeks. Clearly this has been on her daughter’s mind for quite a while. ‘Is she already imagining a life with Marius?’ she wonders. The sense of déjà vu is unsettling; didn’t Fantine once imagine that very sort of thing too with a man
who also promised her ‘forever’? ‘But Marius hasn’t promised anything yet to Cosette,’ she reminds herself.

Jean Valjean crosses the kitchen to the basket where they all keep the car keys. “Fantine, what do you think?” he asks.

Fantine takes a deep breath, now wishing that he didn’t leave this up to her. She knows he does this because he still believes that she knows Cosette best. If she is to be honest, she is not sure if she still has that position, or if it’s now filled by Marius, Eponine, and Musichetta. “It’s worth a try,” she finally says.

Cosette lets out a visible sigh of relief. “Thank you Maman.” She fishes through her purse for her phone. “Are you sure you don’t want to watch the trial too?” she asks.

Fantine shakes her head. “I’ll be fine. Tell me more about it later.” She’s not sure she can sit peacefully in the gallery, not when she knows the talk will open up the Pandora’s box she’s tried to keep hidden for all these years.

III

“Haven’t seen you bring one of those in a while.”

“That is because you haven’t had a working lunch in some time, Courfeyrac.”

Courfeyrac frowns with distaste at the idea of spending yet another hour cooped up in the courthouse anterooms, at least till he sees the half-baguette that Enjolras is unwrapping. “When did you find the time to make that?” he asks. On most days, Enjolras’ idea of a sandwich is a thin layer of peanut butter on dry toast, but there have been some occasions when he’s come up with a lunch that outdoes the selections from the best delis in their area. “Where is the other half of that?” Courfeyrac asks, indicating the baguette’s cut edge.

“It’s in another sandwich,” Enjolras deadpans even as he brings out his phone. He wipes his mouth before taking the call. “Feuilly? Ah that’s good. No injuries—sorry to hear about the ankle. At least Combeferre is on duty today, I heard. So he’s at the witness protection house already? Good. Thank you very much. Courfeyrac and I will meet with you guys later. Good luck.” He is visibly relieved as he pockets his phone. “Feuilly put Mr. Javert into the witness protection bureau’s care,” he explains.

Courfeyrac smiles, for that’s one victory for today, however small. “I still can’t believe you let him go out in the rain, on a bike, to pick up that fellow.” He’s not one to hold grudges, but he finds it difficult to completely forget the former inspector’s shabby treatment of the Thenardier siblings and Enjolras during the uprising. ‘To think he isn’t the only one of his kind,’ he notes ruefully.

“They live to fight another day,” Enjolras notes at length. “Feuilly busted his ankle though, so I also owe him one there.”

Courfeyrac winces, knowing how their friend will dislike the temporarily reduced mobility. “So he went to Saint-Michel to get it checked out?”

“Combeferre is taking care of him even as we speak,” Enjolras replies. “Are you sure about this plan, or rather, a lack thereof?”

“Yeah. Not about to argue this time. You probably get why,” Courfeyrac replies.
Enjolras glances at the clock on the wall. “You need to be back here in an hour and a half.”

“No problem with that,” Courfeyrac says as he gets his car keys and checks his wallet to make sure that he’s got enough money on him to pay for two. ‘The trattoria is just ten blocks away,’ he decides. He’d gladly jog that distance if not for two things: it’s still raining hard, and also because Azelma intends to go back with him to watch the trial since classes have been called off thanks to the weather and she’s already managed to send her students home.

As he’s parking outside the Trattoria Medici, he catches sight of Azelma already seated at a table for two, carefully perusing the menu. At just under nine weeks along, she’s quite a good way from having her pregnancy show, but Courfeyrac can pick up on the smaller differences such as the way she is more careful about moving, or even the swell of her breasts under her lilac dress. ‘I don’t blame her after we had a close call,’ he thinks, remembering the night at the inn. Yet what hasn’t changed is the impish smile that spreads on her face when she sees him, and more so when she pulls him to her so she can give him a deep and sloppy kiss.

“Wow, Zelma, I’m not even sure that was PG-13 rated anymore,” he jokes when they come up for air.

“That’s all for now. Ask me more about it later,” Azelma replies, swatting his cheek playfully before they take their seats. “So what do you want to order?”

Before Courfeyrac can answer he happens to glance out the window to where an immaculately polished dark blue Mercedes Benz was pulling up to the curb. He grabs the menu and puts it up as a sort of shield. “What do you recommend?” he asks.

“I’ve never been here before, so I wouldn’t know,” Azelma hisses.

“Enjoying your lunchbreak, Mr. Courfeyrac?” Atty. Chenier greets as he walks up to the young couple’s table. “You must be Mrs. Courfeyrac. A pleasure to meet you,” he adds as he notices Azelma.

“I’m not about to take my chances with the courthouse cafeteria,” Courfeyrac answers cordially. He feels Azelma grab his hand and he pats her palm lightly. “You’re here in the neighbourhood early.”

Atty. Chenier grunts. “It’s not too late to do something about the case.” He brings a small rectangular paper out of a briefcase. “What will it take to make you drop the charges?”

Courfeyrac’s eyes go wide as he realizes what his opponent is handing to him. This is different from the time that he tried making a settlement with the office; this is more definitive. ‘It’s enough to solve everything,’ he realizes. With that amount of money, he and Azelma can pay off their debts, get a larger place to live in, and still have some left for when their baby is born. He does not want to look at Azelma now, though he is certain that she is also mulling over these things too. ‘Come on, try to be professional now!’ he chides himself even as he tries to remember Elodie in her hospital room, everything that his friends have done to save this girl, the fact that the Cheniers have tried this trick before, and of course the very fact that there is a just thing to do about this horrible situation.

It is Azelma who breaks the silence. “It is a little late. You can’t just get him to change his mind like that.” Her eyes are dark with suspicion as she regards the older lawyer. “What makes you think that he’ll even say yes to it?”

“You are aware that he’s taken on this case pro bono. It’s an enormous drain on your finances,” Atty. Chenier replies haughtily. “You’re a schoolteacher. Surely you are a practical woman.”
“I’ve had kids like your daughter in my class,” Azelma retorts as she tosses the menu aside. “They deserve better than parents like you.”

Atty. Chenier’s eyes narrowed at her. “Some civility, please.”

“Yes, and you can grant us that by leaving us alone,” Courfeyrac says more sternly. He’s not about to let this man bully Azelma by reminding her of their present financial difficulties, or even by dredging up the past. “Please go,” he adds, gesturing to the door.

Atty. Chenier gives him a venomous look. “I had hoped to find you more reasonable than your friends. I’ll see you all in court, Mr. Courfeyrac.”

“He’d better not be late then,” Courfeyrac mutters as he watches Atty. Chenier leave. Even as he says this, he’s sure he’s lost his appetite. “I’m sorry about that, Zelma,” he tells his wife.

Azelma shrugs. “Are you sure Elodie isn’t adopted? How can a kid that sweet come from his genes?”

“Guess there’s something to be said for innocence,” Courfeyrac says. It’s an interesting thought that he mulls over for the remaining hour, till he and Azelma make their way back to the courthouse.

They find Enjolras still there conferring with Feuilly has a bandage wrapped around his ankle and his hair is still wet, but otherwise he doesn’t look much worse for wear. “Heard you had quite a ride,” Courfeyrac greets Feuilly.

“Tell me about it,” Feuilly says with a grimace. “Me versus two thugs. Good thing I refuelled my motorcycle last night.”

Enjolras claps Feuilly on the shoulder before looking to Courfeyrac. “Cosette is considering becoming Elodie’s guardian,” he announces.

Courfeyrac’s jaw drops with surprise. Why didn’t he and his friends ever ask her before? “That’s wonderful,” he says. “Mrs. Plutarque will surely agree with this.”

“Ultimately it’s the court’s decision,” Enjolras says. “Hopefully it will work out.”

Courfeyrac manages a smile. He knows that Cosette will do a terrific job caring for Elodie, particularly if Marius is involved. ‘Will Elodie be amenable to it though?’ he wonders as he and Enjolras bid goodbye to Feuilly before making their way to the main courtroom. He notices how set Enjolras’ jaw is as they take their seats. “Did Mr. Chenier try to talk to you too?” he asks discreetly.

“Understatement,” Enjolras replies. He grits his teeth as he glances towards the Cheniers and their legal counsel. “Attorney Chenier has more to lose than custody of his only child. If the lawyers’ association puts its mind to it, he can get suspended or disbarred,” he adds in an undertone just as the judge calls the court to order.

The first witness to be called for the prosecution is one of the Cheniers’ neighbours, a nervous looking spinster by the name of Cassandra Earhart. She gives the impression of restlessly tottering in place as she swears to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but she goes pale when her bespectacled eyes meet the Cheniers’. The judge clears his throat and nods to her and then to Enjolras. “You may begin your cross-examination, Attorney Enjolras.”

Enjolras calmly steps up to the bar. “Good afternoon Your Honor. Good afternoon Miss Earhart.” He stops a few paces away from the witness stand. “These are only a few simple questions, Miss Earhart. Just for the record, how long have you been occupying 21 Flame Tree Road?”
Miss Earhart’s wrinkled face turns a pleasant shade of red. “Probably about twenty-seven years or so.”

“And how long have you been acquainted with the Chenier family?”

“Ten years. I still remember the day they brought that little girl home from the hospital. Such a sweet little angel.”

Courfeyrac can hear some of the spectators in the gallery and of course some of the defence counsel muttering at this witness’ seemingly sentimental replies. ‘Hold it together, Madam, please,’ he begs silently. He glances up towards the gallery, where he can see Azelma sitting with the Fauchelevents and Feuilly. Much to his distaste he notices also a man with a large camera avidly following the proceedings. ‘There is a source of toilet paper,’ he thinks, now wondering what the dirty press will make of this trial.

He turns his attention back to where Enjolras is continuing to ask Miss Earhart more about the Chenier family. “How often did you interact with them?” he questions.

“Why, nearly every day, young man,” the old woman says. “The little girl would come to my place for cookies, well she used to.”

“Used to? Did Elodie ever stop?” Enjolras asks.

“Hmm, about a year ago. She was moving up in school,” Miss Earhart says. “Though her other classmates still stopped by. I always thought she was busy doing something.”

“Did you ever see Elodie interact with her parents?”

“Yes. It was no different from other kids with their parents. They’d get mad if she was out of line, but only just then.”

“Did they ever yell at her?”

“Sometimes.”

“What would they say to her?”

Miss Earhart frowns. “That she was a bad child. Well that was only when she was mischievous.”

“I see. Did they ever strike her?” Enjolras asks more seriously.

“Only on the bum. Well except for one time across the face, but that was just because she was getting a little too loud.”

Enjolras’ eyes narrow even as murmurs start throughout the gallery. “Did you ever notice any bruises or wounds on Elodie?”

“On her arms and legs. But don’t all children get them?” Miss Earhart replied.

“What about anywhere else?”

“Hm, once when she went swimming. But that was because she fell.”

Enjolras steps closer to the witness stand. “Could you tell us then what happened on the afternoon of the sixth of May?”
The elderly woman grimaces. “I was baking some pies, and I thought that maybe the Cheniers would want an extra one I made. I always ask them first. Anyway I heard Mrs. Chenier leave first, followed by her husband. It wasn’t a schoolday, so I thought that Elodie was with them or someone else, so I didn’t think much of it for a little bit. But one of the kids, the Danton boy across the street, lost his ball in their yard. I went with him to get it, passing through the hole in the hedge, and suddenly he came running to me saying that he found Elodie in the garage and that she was bleeding, poor child!”

“What did you see in the garage?” Enjolras asks slowly.

“She was under their big Mercedes Benz, under one of those big front tires. Someone had put a handkerchief in her mouth to keep her quiet, I cannot imagine who!” Miss Earhart shudders quite visibly. “But there was no one else in the house, and it didn’t look like someone had entered. The police said much the same too, I heard.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I called for an ambulance, of course.”

“Was anyone else with you?”

“No, just me and the boy. The Dantons have moved out of the neighbourhood since, I don’t know why.”

Enjolras takes a deep breath. “Tell me about Elodie’s injuries. What did you see?”

“Well I saw that her arms and legs were at an odd angle. She was covered in blood, poor girl. She wasn’t saying anything at first till I called her name, and then she wouldn’t stop screaming.”

“What was she screaming?”

Ms. Earhart frowns. “She didn’t seem to be herself. She was asking her parents to stop something they were doing, she was saying that she was being a good girl.”

Courfeyrac shuts his eyes, feeling sick at the scene that is now coming to mind. ‘What sort of father would do that to his girl?’ he wonders as he glances towards the Cheniers, who are tight-lipped and disdainful as they listen to this questioning. It is all he can do to keep from looking back at Azelma up in the gallery. ‘No, it’s not simply about the right thing anymore,’ he realizes. It’s about being a father, pure and simple, and that’s something he finds more inviolable even more than the strictest letter of the law.
“Using a seized gun is a refinement on the hired gun concept. Those are ballistics that will not be traced simply because eyes are already blind to them. They are already supposed to be buried in the system.”

It’s Javert’s deadpan tone, more than the substance of his explanation, which sends a chill down Combeferre’s spine. “That is too audacious,” the doctor points out as he hands over the small bottle of vitamins. “Do they honestly think that no one will find out?”

“That is why our bureau of investigations rarely allows consulting detectives like your friend Bahorel on their cases,” Javert replies. “I’d have him put in a safehouse too if I were you.”

‘He’d consider it a cage,’ Combeferre thinks as he shakes his head. He would not dare suggest such isolation to his friend, not even if it would be lifesaving. One look at Javert is enough for him to know that he is somewhat of the same vein; in the two weeks he’s been sequestered in a small apartment downtown, he’s taken on a sort of languor that cannot be healthy. Yet Combeferre cannot decide if this is a better fate than the ones that Dupond and Enjolras have just narrowly escaped.

He wills himself to focus his attention back on his pensive patient, who is now beginning to pace the tiny studio apartment. “If you need anything more, or if there is an emergency, please feel free to call. Bossuet will come by tomorrow,” he informs the former inspector. “That cough should clear up in a few days, I believe.”

“These lungs aren’t what they used to be,” Javert says as he takes a seat. “There are no innocents in Transnonain. Dupond was also part of the cruelty too.”

Combeferre nods. “We’re all aware of that.” As a doctor it’s not his place to judge what his patients do and do not do, but as a philosopher he cannot help but come to the conclusion that all humans give in to the Id if it is properly fed by external brutality or privation. It always comes down to a question of limits, and whether they are absolute. “Nevertheless we do as we must, for justice’s sake.”

“Of course.” Javert weighs the bottle of vitamins in his hands again. “Give my regards to your friends. I thank you for your assistance.”

“You’re welcome,” Combeferre says cordially as he gathers up his things and shrugs on his coat. He waits two minutes before quitting Javert’s apartment and making his way down to the small convenience store that he and Enjolras have chosen as a stake-out point and rendezvous. He breathes a sigh of relief when he catches sight of his friend sipping a cup of instant coffee while looking through notes on a tablet. “He’s in the clear,” he says by way of greeting as he takes a seat.

Enjolras smiles briefly as he looks up from the tablet. “That’s good. So it really is just a cold?”

“Nothing that will have him laid up,” Combeferre says. He frowns when he sees that the notes that Enjolras is reviewing are none other than Dupond’s deposition prior to his injury. “That’s as good as a dead end, Auguste.”

“Not if we can extract anything more,” Enjolras replies, pointing to a terribly blank spot on the
screen, where some vital bit of information probably ought to be. “Is there no way of properly communicating with Dupond in his state?”

“I told you his GCS score is eleven. He’s just a few steps above from being comatose,” Combeferre explains. He already fears that despite everything that he and Marius do for their patient that Dupond will be aphasic for much of his life. “It is possible that he can in time come up with some system of communication, but it will not be easy to tell if his memory is intact.”

“How long will that take?”

“With all honesty, I will have to say that I do not know.”

Enjolras grits his teeth with unmitigated frustration. “The trial is slated for three weeks from now. It may even have to be held out of town since the case was originally not filed in this district. It may even be safer that way. If so, I will have to make arrangements for Javert and the other witnesses.”

“What of the Chenier case?” Combeferre asks.

“The jury may hand down its decision in a few days, or in two weeks at most.” Enjolras looks through the calendar on his phone. “After that will be the custody hearings. We’re only just beginning this fight.”

“Does Eponine know?” Combeferre clucks his tongue when he sees Enjolras raise an eyebrow. “About you having to be away,” he clarifies.

“It’s not a certainty,” the lawyer points out. He drains what must be about half of his coffee before turning off his tablet. “She’ll be fine.”

Combeferre nods slowly, amazed at the confidence in his friend’s tone. If this had been any one of his other friends, he might throw in a line or two about complacency when dealing with one’s partner. Yet this is Enjolras dealing with Eponine, something that Combeferre had once thought he would never see. ‘Well I’ll be darned,’ he catches himself thinking. “You’re pretty serious.”

“About?”

“Her.”

Enjolras takes another sip of his drink. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“She’s extraordinary.”

“I’m still surprised you hardly mentioned having a girlfriend, and you never named her, when you were still together in medical school.”

“We had our hang-ups then,” Combeferre replies. Enjolras had been a bit of a stranger during those years, and definitely uninterested in any talk of romances in their circle of friends. ‘Not to mention that Eponine told me to keep things low key and off the radar,’ he recalls a little ruefully. While he’s always been proud of Eponine, he now finds himself wondering why he hadn’t let the rest of the world know of this fact. It’s ironic now to see this sort of admiration and pride coming from the one person they both know to be so difficult to move. “We’ve all come a long way, thankfully.”

Enjolras is silent a little longer as he finishes the remainder of his coffee. “She did far more than just save my life.”

“Thankfully everyone knows that,” Combeferre agrees as he checks his watch. It’s almost one in the
afternoon, and high time that he and Enjolras returned to the neighbourhood of Saint-Michel. ‘This would be so much easier if we weren’t commuting,’ he thinks but even so he knows that they have to take public transport as a matter of safety in numbers. The case seems too ripe for something like a road accident to occur.

They are five blocks away from their destination when they first hear the ambulance sirens. Enjolras grits his teeth as one ambulance nearly crashes into a post when rounding a corner. “Sounds like you have your work cut out for you,” he deadpans.

“Tell me about it,” Combeferre says as they begin walking faster. He whistles when he sees Eponine walking briskly out of a small ground floor office and crossing the crowded lobby towards them. “I told you I wouldn’t be out of post.”

“Good then, since you’re right on time,” Eponine replies. “We have an MVA. In this case it means multiple vehicular accident. Bus meets van, meets motorcycle and several other pedestrians.”

Combeferre winces even before he hears a piercing scream from the emergency room. “Everyone is scrubbing in?”

“Damn straight,” Eponine whispers. However she still manages to smile when she sees Enjolras. “Thanks for bringing him back on time, Auguste. Good luck with the hearing later.”

Enjolras nods by way of understanding. “Will you need a lift later?”

“I’ll call you!” she calls over her shoulder as she grabs Combeferre’s arm to drag him to the trauma section. The chaos of the lobby is nothing compared to the hullabaloo of the emergency room, with nurses, aides, and medical technologists running hither and thither, yelling to each other over the beeping of alarms. A few stop to take the time to reassure frantic and sobbing relatives, which is only a small comfort in this frenetic scene.

Combeferre spots a wailing man next to the trauma room. “Save my father! I don’t care what it takes, Doc, I’ll do anything!” he yells when he sees Combeferre.

“We’ll do our best, Mr----“


Combeferre nods before donning a pair of gloves and a mask, and then backing into the trauma room. He knows even before stepping close to the gurney that he is up against nearly impossible odds, for mangled flesh and broken bone can only do so much to hold lifeblood. ‘I’m a man of my word though,’ he reminds himself as he begins setting out the necessary sutures, antiseptic, and bandages. He glances around and notices one of the young interns practically pelting across the emergency room. “Kate, I need an extra hand here!” he calls, if only to stop this kid from careening right into the wall.

The intern nearly trips over her feet at the sound of Combeferre’s voice. She has to shake her dark hair out of her face before rushing into the trauma cubicle. “I heard he was the guy on the motorcycle,” she says breathlessly. She blanches when she sees this man’s bloodied shin. “Is that---“

“Open fracture, class IIIb,” Combeferre replies. ‘Class IIIc if he is unlucky,’ he realizes. This is the sort of injury wherein amputation is often necessary to save the person’s life, especially when contending with something as terrible as possible infection. ‘A horrible but necessary loss of function,’ he tells himself as he begins stopping the bleeding from this patient’s numerous wounds.

Suddenly someone yells “Code!” from the far end of the ER. Combeferre glances up just long
enough to catch sight of the nurses wheeling a crash cart to the room’s critical care area, where Eponine, Mabeuf, and Navet are hard at work trying to resuscitate a patient. The crimson stains pooling on the floor are telling enough of the dire outcome.

Combeferre sees his trainee go pale. “Do you want to sit down?” he asks.

She sighs with relief as she slams against the wall. “How do you get used to it?”

“You don’t,” Combeferre tells her flatly. “You just have to do what you can so you can rest easy with a clear conscience each night.”

II

‘How I choose to raise my daughter shouldn’t be the jurisdiction of this court!’

Though these words are perfect legalese, they are still enough to have Enjolras gritting his teeth even hours after the latest hearing of the Chenier case. ‘There is a man who will never be held accountable,’ he thinks with unmitigated disgust as he goes through his case files back in the quiet of his apartment. The impunity sickens him, almost as much as the Transnonain case. He shakes his head as he thinks back on Dupond, a father deprived now of the voice to speak to his own children. There is no limit to how cruel and ironic this world can be.

He looks up at the clock, which now reads ten in the evening, and rubs his temples. He cannot remember having dinner or even anything more than the five cups of coffee he’s managed to down in as many hours. He takes a deep breath, now thankful for the fact that he is not prone to palpitations or tremors even after ingesting alarming amounts of caffeine. As he rubs his temples he hears a familiar tread approaching his doorway. “Whatever happened to calling?” he asks a little confusedly when he opens the door.

“I forgot,” Eponine replies as she steps into the room. “I’m sure you prefer this though.”

“Definitely,” he concurs as he closes the door. While he’s a little surprised at her sudden visit, he is more than willing to admit that the mere sight of her does more for him than any of her text messages or hurried calls. It only gets better when he sees her bring a large burger out of her work tote. “Are you going to split that?”

She laughs out loud as she sits beside him on the sofa. “No, I got it for you. I’ve already had something to eat.”

“What’s so funny then?” he asks as he begins unwrapping the sandwich.

“Just remembering,” she replies as she crosses her legs.

“Do tell.”

“Back in med school, there was this roadside diner that sold sandwiches, and big ones at that. Sometimes, if the guys saw someone buying a big sandwich, they’d ask ‘Can we experience?’ and then take a big bite out of it there and then!”

“Isn’t that a little unbecoming?”

“It’s how everyone got fed.”

The story brings back Enjolras’ own memories of his student days, when he, Courfeyrac, and the rest of their moot court team would literally empty their pockets of every coin just to be able to afford a
small pie or a half-sized pizza during training sessions. “What about disease risks?”

“Better than hypoglycaemia. That can be lethal,” she reminds him before getting up and crossing to the kitchenette. “What do you want: lemonade or apple juice?”

“Apple. Thanks,” he calls over his shoulder as he gets up to fetch a blanket and some pillows. It pretty much goes without saying that she’ll spend the night there again, and though he figures that neither of them is particularly averse to sharing his bed, he’d still like to give her the option of the sofa anyway. When they both get back to the sofa, she immediately curls up in his lap, thus answering the question perfectly. He carefully covers them both with the blanket, prompting her to snuggle even closer such that he can rest his chin on her shoulder.

She sighs before handing him one bottle of apple juice and then opening another for herself. “That accident was completely senseless. Another speeding case,” she says after a while.

He drains his drink and sets the bottle aside. “I take that there were mortalities?” he asks as he begins trailing his fingers along the line of her spine, delighting in the way she still leans into his touch.

“Five dead on arrival or within an hour of getting to the ER, and then two more within the next hour. One of them passed away on my operating room table.” She is quiet for a while as she drains half of her bottle of juice. “I wish I’d been there sooner. Those few minutes might have mattered.”

“Eponine, there are only two full time trauma surgeons at Saint Michel: you and Combeferre. You did what you could,” he reminds her. Of course he knows that she hears this all the time from everyone else, but this is one occasion wherein he hopes that she will actually take these words to heart.

She manages a smile even as she clasps his hands tightly. “That’s comforting, somewhat.”

“I mean it,” he says. It’s more than just the fact that she saved him from near certain death not too long ago; the truth is that he is in awe of how she can still remain so caring and fearless despite the daunting odds in her work, both in and out of the operating room. “No one else has your fire.”

“That’s big, coming from you.” She twists to face him properly. “Really big.”

He takes a deep breath, knowing that they can throw around these sorts of words all night, but he has had enough of being circumspect. “I love you.” He sees her eyes widen, but since she’s not making any move to get away from him, he decides to continue. “I know it hasn’t been that long and some couples are together for years before this even comes up. You deserve better though.”

She looks at him for a long time, as if she is trying to figure out how to best answer him. “How long have you had these feelings for me?”

“It’s more than just feelings,” he says, now afraid that she will just brush this off, or worse, walk out the door. He finds himself grabbing her hand once more. “Things aren’t easy between us, but that doesn’t change things or my decision. It never will.”

She nods slowly and brings up their joined hands so that she can clasp his cheek. The feel of her callused hands on his skin is like touching fire, but of the sort that compels him to lean towards her.

“I was wondering for a while if this was always going to be a one way street,” she whispers as she touches her forehead to his.

“Not with you, ever,” he admits. Just to get the point across he brushes his lips against hers, giving her the chance to kiss him back if she so wishes. She whispers his name against his mouth before bringing up her hands to cradle his head as she deepens the kiss. The feel of her lips on his and her
hands on his scalp and running down to her shoulders are intoxicating and more sensual than ever, but he finds himself alert and certain in a completely new way.

And yet it is at that moment that they both hear knocking on the apartment door. “Why now?” Eponine whispers as she squeezes his shoulders.

“It might be important,” he reminds her. “I mean there’s got to be a reason—–”

“Auguste! We know you’re in there!” a man’s gruff voice calls. “Your umbrella is outside.”

The very sound is enough to make Enjolras’ spirits sink, but he hides his grimace by burying his face in Eponine’s hair and giving her a kiss on her ear before maneuvering her so she is sitting on the sofa while he gets to his feet. ‘A fine time to drop in for a visit,’ he thinks as he straightens out his clothes before crossing to take a look at the peephole. He has to keep a straight face on seeing who is waiting for him outside. “Good evening Father. Good evening, Mother,” he says cordially as he opens the door.

“It’s been a while, Auguste,” his mother says. She is the unchanged one of his parents; his father is thinner and grimmer now, but his mother has that charming smile that soon gives way to haughtiness the moment she begins to speak. “How have you been doing?”

“Fine enough,” he replies.

“I hear you’re recovering well from your injuries,” his father says.

It is all that Enjolras can do to keep his tone cordial. “Those were months ago.” Of course they wouldn’t really know; neither of them came to visit him even when it came out on local news that he’d gotten shot at the rally. “I have company now, but you can come in if you like,” he says.

“Yes, we can see that Dr. Thenardier is with you,” his mother says, now sounding scornful. “As to coming in, well it depends how much you and your father have to discuss.”

Enjolras’ hand tightens on the knob. “What about?”

His father looks him in the eye, his expression now one of cold confidence. “You will drop the Transnonian case. Immediately.”
Eponine had known for some time that meeting her partner’s parents was inevitable. In fact she does know their given names: Claude and Ari, all thanks to stories and the times she’s seen Enjolras fill up forms. It does not matter that she cannot imagine his meeting her parents in the foreseeable feature. ‘Though of course knowing my luck it has to happen like this,’ she muses ruefully as she discreetly straightens out her clothes and her hair.

She bites her lip as she listens to Enjolras remonstrating with his parents. Now she can see, with a clarity she owes to her ongoing training, the distance that is even larger than the gap of the doorway. ‘There is a resemblance but nothing of the heart,’ she realizes as she gets to her feet. Ice blue eyes, golden hair, classically shaped nose broad shoulders, perfect posture---it’s all there in the faces of his parents, but there is nothing of the charm, warmth, or even conviction that run through every fibre of his being.

“You clearly do not understand the gravity of this situation, Auguste,” Claude snarls, now crossing his arms. “The shareholders of the Transnonian estates have influence in the chambers of commerce. You know how I stand there. I will not allow my stubborn son to ruin this.”

“Your recent business affairs have nothing to do with my casework,” Enjolras replies coolly, not even taking a step back from the door. “Their influence does not put them above the law, or excuse them from treating their tenants with decency.”

The word ‘decency’ and the way Enjolras says it make Eponine flinch. Is there any other way for him to say it to the two people who should care for him most, but who have deliberately been incommunicado for months? She feels that cold weight in her chest, the way she does when she is absolutely certain that there is something wrong, or that she is now suddenly privy to some ongoing horror. ‘Like with Elodie,’ she can’t help thinking, even as she regrets that one time she was silent. Now she must be quiet once more, since this is Enjolras’ battle to fight, not hers.

She is about to excuse herself to the bathroom or to the kitchen when she realizes that there is a pair of eyes keenly watching her every move. “Did you put him up to this?” Ari snaps.

“Not at all, Ma’am,” Eponine replies calmly.

The older woman doesn’t say anything but she surveys Eponine from head to toe. “You’re very young for a surgeon,” she finally concludes. “At which hospital do you aim to become a consultant?”

Eponine blinks at this question; not only is a consultancy as a trauma surgeon still far away from considering at her level of training, there are other directions away from this tried and tested path that she has been seriously considering. “Only at places with a good community medicine program.”

“That is diverging from your field of expertise.”

“Not all our work is in the operating room; it’s sometimes in making sure people do not have to always go under the knife,” Eponine replies.

“It is not lucrative. You ought to be more practical especially given your previous circumstances.”
Ari’s face twists with displeasure as she once again looks over her son and Eponine. “Birds of a feather flock together indeed.”

“They’ll do what they will, Ari,” Claude says, breaking off from his own argument. “You clearly have made it your life’s mission to become a disappointment. Don’t you have ambition? Oh yes, you do, Auguste, but you’re throwing it away on your drunkard friends and these useless crusades of yours. We thought you were getting somewhere when you ran for office, but you just threw it out the window. When will you grow up?”

“You heard your father. It’s about time you started acting like a responsible adult. We let you have your way by going to law school but that is going to change,” Ari chimes in smugly. “It’s not too late to let go of your cases—”

“I will not do such a thing,” Enjolras cuts in. “In this matter, I am not obligated to either of you.”

“To who then? The people?” Claude sneers, giving Eponine a particularly withering look. “Will they pick you up when you fail? You will be nothing, and then you will have to hear me say ‘I told you so’. ” He smirks when he sees that his son is silent. “You have till tomorrow to officially drop it. Do not disappoint me or your mother.”

Then just like that, they leave without saying as much as a ‘goodbye’ or even ‘see you soon’. The door slams so hard that Eponine feels the urge to check if it is still anchored properly on its hinges, at least till she sees that Enjolras is gritting his teeth in that way he does when he is trying to bite back some words. “Auguste?” she asks tentatively.

He grips the doorknob tightly for a moment before stepping away. “It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit,” she mutters under her breath. She knows all too well how his stoicism covers up how deeply he feels things. ‘How long has this been going on?’ she wonders as she follows him back to the couch, taking one side while he settles on the other. Not surprisingly he simply grabs a case file and starts reading before she can ask him anything.

He shifts on the sofa before giving her a questioning look over the top of his paperwork. “You did not have to stay for that scene.”

“It would have been bad manners to just walk out,” she points out. ‘Especially after what we were talking about,’ she almost says, but she settles for squeezing his knee. He is still so tense under her hand, and she cannot help but feel a frisson of worry.

He gives her a withering look. “It happens. We’ve always had our differences.”

“You can’t just ignore those.”

“Can we not talk about this?”

The vitriol in his tone stings more than this single phrase ever could and she gets up from her seat. “Well excuse me for even trying to help,” she calls over her shoulder as she stalks to the window, which is the furthest she can get from him without actually leaving the apartment. ‘They’re wrong. You’ve already proven them wrong,’ she wants to tell him, but now she sees that gulf once more, but now it is between her and him. It pains her to see him so hurt, but all the same there is nothing she can do for him if he does not wish for it.

“Eponine, I don’t need to be psychoanalyzed,” he says tersely. “I don’t need someone sifting through my so called baggage.”
“I’m not trying to do that!” she retorts as she turns to face him.

At these words he is back on his feet and swiftly walking towards her, stopping when he is but a step away. “Then what?”

“I just want to know what’s going on.”

“What good is that going to do?” he asks as he crosses his arms.

“Do you think I’m just going to let you take that?” Eponine answers. The more practical part of her mind is screaming that yes, she does not have the answers for this situation. She may be a surgeon and training to be a caseworker, but what does she know about healing memories? Yet she only has to look at him again and that fierce surge of protectiveness comes again, sweeping away all apprehensions as well as logical arguments. She closes the distance between them with a last step and grabs his hands firmly, entwining her fingers with his. “Not on my watch, Auguste.”

Enjolras’ eyes widen with surprise just for a moment but soon that intense look of concentration fills them, a sure sign that he is taking in her words and more. He kisses her forehead and sighs into her hair. “You already have much to deal with---“

“I want this,” she insists before reaching up to kiss him. He returns her kiss with a vigor that is both desperate and passionate, such that she can feel herself losing her footing till he braces her with an arm over the small of her back. Somehow they make it back to the sofa, where they simply continue to kiss, hungrily taking in the sureness of each other’s hands running through hair or down the lines of each other’s backs. She breaks their kiss first for lack of air but she makes sure she is looking into his eyes before she speaks again. “And I’m staying.”

“Are you sure?”

“Your life tangled with mine, vice versa. That’s kind of where this is getting to, right?”

He drops a kiss on her neck, and the way he lingers there sends a rush of heat down to her very core, such that she presses her curves against the planes of his body. He smirks against her skin and rubs her wrists to calm her. “It’s been that way for a while, Eponine,” he says as he moves up so that they are face to face, the tips of their noses just barely touching.

Eponine grins widely before kissing him, glad that at last he’s finally noticed.

II

Although Grantaire spends many of his daytime hours teaching art classes, he does not dare consider himself an educator in this field. “Merely an admirer and purveyor of the craft,” he says when Cosette asks him about this while they and Marius are visiting Elodie the next morning.

The little eight year old girl’s brow crinkles at this statement. “What’s a purveyor?”

“One meaning is someone who likes talking about ideas or things,” Grantaire explains. Actually ‘to believe’ is a more accurate way of putting it, but such solid hope does not take root in a man like him.

“It’s not all talk in your case, Capital R,” Cosette reminds him gently. “Papa framed that sketch you made for his birthday.”

“Did he now?” Grantaire can feel pleasant warmth growing in his cheeks; he knows that Mr. Fauchelevent has some discerning tastes. “What does your mother think?”
“She adores it too, but not as much as the subject,” Cosette laughs.

Marius nods knowingly. “You should think of having an exhibit or a gallery. It is a good investment.”

“A white elephant,” Grantaire points out. Perhaps he should have taken up Industrial Design so as to make art ‘functional’, but he loves working with a brush and a large expanse too much to settle on sketches and production line work. ‘I could never do the Math anyway,’ he reflects ruefully. He suddenly sees Elodie reach over to her bedside table for a piece of paper and coloring pencils. “Are you going to draw them?” he asks, discreetly gesturing to Marius and Cosette, who have now gone to the window for some modicum of privacy.

“Not like that. It’s gross,” Elodie whispers, making a face when she sees the couple cuddling. She begins drawing two figures, clearly a man and a woman standing side by side, only that she’s giving them fancier clothes than their real life counterparts.

“Cosette’s sundress isn’t cut that way,” Grantaire points out.

“It’s not a sundress, it’s a princess dress,” Elodie tells him flatly. “I’m also giving Doctor Marius some prince clothes.”

Grantaire snorts when he sees that Elodie is drawing Marius with a fancy hat and cloak, like one of a young royal in an old movie. “Why are they a prince and princess?”

“She’s pretty and he’s nice,” the girl simply says. “Besides she acts like a princess since she’s so nice and she has a wonderful Mama and Papa. Doctor Marius is brave too so of course he is a prince!”

“Are they also from far, far away?” Grantaire teases. It is then that he catches sight of Elodie’s other sketches, many of which involve castles on mountains, and people slaying dragons. He laughs when he recognizes himself as one of the knights slaying a particularly oversized flying dragon. “I’m not that brave, little Elodie.”

“Mr. Jehan says you are, since you’re always with him,” Elodie says.

Grantaire blushes more at this second-hand compliment from his partner. “When did he say that?”

“The last time he was here. What did he mean?”

“Well because it’s not always easy doing great things with Jehan, and he thinks that my being with him is a good thing.”

“I think it is,” Elodie insists as she brings out more sketches. One of them happens to depict several princesses in a ball. In this picture Musichetta, Azelma, Cosette, and a few other female acquaintances are distinctly recognizable. “What sorts of things?”

“I’ll tell you someday,” Grantaire says. He may have a broad sense of humor, to put it nicely, but he’s sure his friends would give him trouble for corrupting Elodie’s young mind. He searches the picture carefully and notices several startling details. “Aren’t you in the picture?”

“I’m too little to be a princess,” Elodie replies. “Princesses are pretty. I’m not,” she adds, tapping her still short hair.

“You drew me as a knight, and look at my mug,” Grantaire argues as he points to his face.

“That’s different.”
“I noticed you didn’t draw Eponine too, as a princess.”

“She says she’s not a princess,” Elodie says a little sadly. “But can you keep a secret, Mister Grantaire? I think she doesn’t *know* she’s a princess.”

“Why?”

“Because she isn’t living in a palace, not yet. I think that Mister Enjolras is also a prince in disguise since he says he’s not a prince either.”

“Well not all the fairytales have everyone as a prince or princess,” Grantaire says. Of course royalty is present in many a good popular story, but he finds them bland compared to the deities of his favourite Greek myths. ‘*Paling too, in the face of other heroes and heroines,*’ he muses.

In the meantime Cosette has also noticed these sketches. “These are so pretty, Elodie!” she gushes. Elodie mumbles an embarrassed ‘thank you’ before handing one sketch to Cosette. “Do you have a dress as pretty as this?” she asks.

“Someday I will,” Cosette says, squeezing Elodie’s shoulder. “What’s your favourite fairy tale?”

Elodie pauses to think. “Rapunzel. I want hair as long as hers.”

Grantaire grins, finding this comparison so apt, given that Elodie has spent so much time stuck in the confines of Saint Michel Hospital. Yet will she have a fate just as blissful once she can leave this tower?

Before he can say a word to this, a buzz comes from the intercom on the wall. “Is Dr. Thenardier around?” a voice asks from the nurse’s station.

Marius goes over to press a button on the intercom. “She’s not in now. Why?”

“She needs to sign Miss Chenier’s case file,” the nurse replies in a low voice. ‘Her parents are here, asking to bring her home against medical advice.”
Even before the last crackle of the intercom fades into silence, Cosette already sees Marius heading to the door. “What are you doing?” she asks.

He gives her a smile that is both mysterious and at the same time determined. “I haven’t signed out of the case either. This might take some time, Cosette,” he says before walking out and leaving the door halfway open.

‘He’s going to stall the Cheniers,’ Cosette realizes, and the surprised look that she sees spreading over Grantaire’s face only confirms this notion. “I’ll call Mrs. Plutarque and Eponine,” she says. “I think you ought to call either Enjolras or Courfeyrac.”

“Good idea,” Grantaire says as he brings out his phone. He laughs mirthfully as he looks towards the door. “I like him more and more every day, Cosette.”

“How can you just like him?” Cosette quips. Of course Grantaire rolls his eyes at her romantic gushing, but honestly she can’t care less. ‘Say what you will about him, but Marius is still my knight in shining armor,’ she thinks as she searches her phone for the numbers she needs. Sometimes, especially in such a crowd of strong and abrasive personalities, it’s easy to overlook Marius’ quiet yet valiant ways. She smiles, sure that he’s putting up quite the fight already, even though she and Grantaire have only just begun to work.

Her call to Mrs. Plutarque goes straight to voice mail, but thankfully Eponine picks up after only a couple of rings. “Hello, Ponine? You need to come up to the pedia ward right away,” she greets.

“I know. I just got the call here in my office,” Eponine replies tersely. “I’ll be up in a while. Can you keep Elodie calm till we all get there?”

“Sure,” Cosette says, even though she isn’t sure who Eponine means by ‘we’. Before she can clarify this, Eponine hangs up, which is just as well since when Cosette looks around she sees Elodie with a worried expression darkening her bright eyes. “It’s going to be fine,” she says as she sits next to the girl.

“Someone’s coming, right?” Elodie asks anxiously. Her thin hands bunch up her blanket. “Is it them?”

The way Elodie says that single word nearly makes Cosette feel queasy, but she just has to take a deep breath even as she hears the argument growing steadily louder and beginning to echo throughout the corridor of the paediatrics wing. She feels Elodie squirm closer to her as a particularly harsh exclamation pierces the air, followed a moment later by the appearance of Attorney Chenier and Mrs. Chenier haranguing Marius as they all walk into the doorway.

“If you delay us any further, I’ll have you all charged with kidnapping and illegal detention,” Attorney Chenier threatens. He snaps his fingers at Elodie. “Get your things. We’re going home now.”

“But Papa—-” Elodie protests.
“Elodie, be a good girl and do as your father says,” Mrs. Chenier says. She frowns at all the drawings and books around Elodie’s bed. “You’ve been keeping too much junk around here.”

“Be reasonable. She still can’t walk about,” Cosette argues. She can see Marius and Grantaire already discreetly moving so they can get between the Cheniers and the hospital bed if necessary, but she hopes to the high heavens that the situation will not come to that. “Maybe we should have this discussion elsewhere, not here—”

Yet it is at that moment that Elodie sits up in bed and looks to the doorway. “I don’t want to go home! I’m not well yet!” she tells Eponine. “Please don’t make me go home!”

“Don’t be silly, you’re perfectly well!” Attorney Chenier bellows.

“If she says she’s not feeling well yet, we’re just going to have to find out why,” Eponine retorts firmly as she goes to Elodie’s side. “Hello Elodie. How are you doing?” she asks.

The little girl immediately springs into Eponine’s arms and holds on tightly, burying her face in Eponine’s white coat. “Do I have to go home?” she sniffs.

Eponine sighs before rubbing Elodie’s back and giving her a tissue to wipe her nose with. “It’s going to be fine. I just need to talk to your parents for a little bit,” she tells Elodie before setting her back down on the bed.

“We don’t have time for anymore wrangling,” Attorney Chenier barks. “Just sign her discharge papers and get it done with.”

“It is not that simple,” Eponine replies. “You will have to sign a waiver first. If you insist on having Elodie discharged against medical advice, this hospital and us physicians will not be responsible for any untoward consequences to her health or otherwise.”

“You’ll make us sign that after everything we’ve spent on her already?” Mrs. Chenier screeches. “We’re not made of money and we certainly don’t want you to palm off your jobs on us.”

“Come on, we have to go,” Attorney Chenier says. “Elodie, stop dawdling!”

“But I don’t want to go!” Elodie sniffs.

“Then where will you go?” Mrs. Chenier asks. “You can’t stay with them!”

Elodie’s eyes are wide and her lip quivers as she looks first at her parents, and then at Eponine. “Do I have to?” she whimpers.

It is just as well that Mrs. Plutarque and Courfeyrac soon enter the room, both of then looking as if they have run most of the way upstairs. “What is the meaning of this?” Mrs. Plutarque asks the Cheniers.

“It means, Madam, that we will no longer pay for Elodie’s hospital stay,” Attorney Chenier replies. “She is leaving right away with us.”

“This is impossible. You know very well you cannot do that,” Mrs. Plutarque says. “It would be cruel—”

“You can’t detain her here either. My husband and I know our rights,” Mrs. Chenier cuts in coolly. “She’s taking up an extra bed which can be used for another patient who really needs it more than she does. I’m sure that the hospital wouldn’t like this situation.”
“We’re also sure that you and your spouse haven’t forgotten your restraining order,” Courfeyrac chimes in. “You want to have her discharged to stop paying her hospital bills, very well then. All the same she can’t go home with you though, since that would violate the court order being enforced for her safety.”

Attorney Chenier rolls his eyes and swears while Mrs. Chenier pauses and gives her daughter a brief look of concern. “This is ridiculous. We’re her parents,” she finally says.

“She will go to a foster home or halfway house until the custody case is decided on,” Mrs. Plutarque says as she crosses her arms. “She cannot stay with you two.”

Cosette tears her gaze away from this argument and looks to where Elodie has buried herself under the blankets. This child needs a haven, desperately, and she will not find it in the middle of this firestorm. So she clears her throat and steps forward. “Mrs. Plutarque, she can stay with me. You might remember that I applied to be her guardian,” she says gently.

Mrs. Plutaruqe stares at her for a moment before her eyes widen with comprehension. “Ah yes you did. This is on very short notice though, as you can see.”

Cosette nods. “I’ve been preparing for a while.” The truth is that she and her parents are so used to taking in people almost at the drop of a hat, and so it never really takes much work to shelter a guest. ‘She is more than a guest this time, and she will definitely take a lot more care,’ she reminds herself. “That is of course, if it’s permissible?”

“I personally approve of the idea,” Courfeyrac says, giving Cosette and Marius an encouraging smile.

Marius grins at this show of confidence. “I’m with you on this one, Cosette,” he says in his girlfriend’s ear. He nods to the social worker. “What do you think, Mrs. Plutarque?”

The social worker sighs deeply. “Since no one else is around, you will have to do.” She looks steadily at the couple. “It’s a good thing you’re both in the health profession.

Cosette looks to Eponine, who is biting her lip while listening keenly to all of this. She knows that her friend has been aware of the possibility of this scene, perhaps anticipating it, but knowing does not make this matter any easier. ‘I’m sorry Ponine,’ she wants to say, but now is not the time for such an awkward apology. “Is it fine with you too?”

“You and Marius will do great,” Eponine says, smiling quickly before anyone else can catch the slight hurt in her eyes. “I’ll write up the home care instructions for Elodie.”

Attorney Chenier gives Eponine a dark look as she excuses herself, and then he fixes his steely glare on the rest of the group. “If the brat gets too much for you, don’t call us to take her back,” he warns. He throws a castigating look at his wife when he sees her hesitate and move as if to hold out her arms to Elodie, and this is enough to get the woman to follow him out the door without a single parting word.

Suddenly the air in the hospital room seems so much easier to breathe. “I guess this means welcome to the family, Elodie,” Grantaire quips after a few moments.

Everyone laughs but Cosette still catches the very shaken and sober look on Elodie’s face. ‘Please accept me,’ she begs silently. ‘I may not be Eponine, but I’ll try my best.’

Suddenly she feels Marius’ hand brush against her wrist. “Shouldn’t we call your parents?” he asks when she turns to him.
“Ah yes. They need to finish fixing things up at home,” Cosette says as she brings out her phone. She can sense that they’ll be celebrating tonight, and she hopes that by the time that rolls around, this anxiety can fade a little bit, or just enough to help Elodie hold herself together in the storm.

II

The moment Eponine feels her eyes begin to grow hot, she wipes her face before her tears can leave blots all over the discharge papers she is signing at the nurses’ station. ‘I thought we got over this years ago!’ she can’t help thinking. There had been a time when she could still afford to get attached somewhat to patients, when ‘separation anxiety’ was still perfectly understandable. Now she knows why there have to be rules about maintaining a professional distance; aside from ethical issues, there is the fact that there would be nothing of her left she allows herself to get so intensely involved in her patients’ dealings.

She sighs with dismay as she picks up her pen to continue writing the prescriptions and instructions for her patient’s home care. Of course she isn’t completely immune to Elodie’s stay of execution; the little girl makes it so easy to pretend when she laughs, begs Eponine to tell her stories, and basically brightens up during each afternoon visit. ‘It’s just instinct,’ she tells herself; after all isn’t it understandable for a woman of her age to feel protective towards a vulnerable child? Yet there is still a pull she cannot quite put into words, something that reaches deep down into the very fibre of her memories. ‘She’s not you, not your younger self. Stop projecting these things,’ she repeats to herself over and over.

At that moment she hears her phone ringing, but when she brings it out she finds an unfamiliar number on the screen. Unlike most people though, her situation requires for her to at least investigate these calls. “Hello. Who are you looking for?” she greets.

“For you, Eponine,” a familiar voice greets smoothly. “Montparnasse speaking by the way.”

“I thought you lost my number years ago. What’s new?” she replies. It’s always good to hear from a fellow survivor, especially when his voice brings back memories of afternoons in abandoned lots, picking up cigarette butts to warm cold fingers, and lessons on climbing fences and darting along rooftops to escape the neighbourhood watch.

“You tell me. And I didn’t get this number from my old files; you’re listed on the doctors’ directory. What’s this I hear that Zel is now also known as Mrs. Maurice Courfeyrac?”

“It’s true. Don’t let it get out though.”

Montparnasse laughs sardonically. “Tell that to the courthouse paparazzi.” The sound of crumpling foil comes from his end of the line. “Your folks are asking about you.”

Eponine shuts her eyes as she tries to imagine Montparnasse looking a bit more drawn and far less boyish as he drops by the penitentiary. He’s one of the few people she personally knows who still contacts her parents without risking any legal ramifications. “What do they want now?”

“What else do they want with two lawyers?”

“It’s not happening. Their sentences are final, no chance of parole. Tell them to give it up.”

“I’m not telling them anything, I’m only giving you a heads up,” Montparnasse says. “You might even want to consider changing addresses.”
“I’m not letting them bully me, Zelma, and Gav,” Eponine retorts. All the same she figures she may as well change the locks on her apartment, just for her peace of mind. “Must you contact them?”

“Who else is going to make sure they get fed, or that they aren’t bumming favors from the wardens?” Montparnasse says. “They’re flaunting your brother-in-law’s name to scare the other inmates.”

Hearing this is enough to make Eponine cringe. “I guess I should warn Courfeyrac then.”

“Well if there’s anyone who needs warning, it’s your man. Talk has it he’s rubbing elbows with a certain former inspector?” Montparnasse asks pointedly.

“He’s not rubbing elbows with Javert; he’s only getting him as a witness.”

“What a smart bastard.”

“Takes one to know one, so that makes us three of a kind,” Eponine laughs. She wouldn’t have survived her adolescence if Montparnasse had not taught her a thing or two about being ruthless on the streets. ‘The thing is he doesn’t grant that knowledge to just anyone,’ she remembers a little bitterly; while this helped save her from many a scrape, it still left her siblings out in the open.

Montparnasse also chuckles at the other end of the line. “Anyway the boss is coming back, I’d better go. Watch your back, Thenardier,” he says before abruptly hanging up.

“Damn you Montparnasse,” Eponine hisses as she tries to dial his number again, only to be told by the operator that the number is out of range. ‘He knows more but he’s still got his skin to save,’ she realizes. She doesn’t even want to know what sort of business her former boyfriend is still mixed up with to this very day.

As she erases the call from her cellphone’s log, she suddenly imagines the landline in her phone ringing and someone else—her siblings, or Enjolras, or Courfeyrac, or even Elodie picking it up only to drop it with fright. ‘You can’t drag them into this,’ she chides herself. The phone call has only driven home the reasons she cannot indulge that fantasy life that Elodie loves to console herself with. How can she care for such a fragile child when there are so many shadows lurking in the corners, when she does not have enough hours in the day to manage everything, and when even the state of her lease is so uncertain? ‘You really can’t hang on to anything, can you, Eponine?’ she can almost hear her own voice saying even as she tries to fight it back with the memories of the past few months, all the way up to last night at Enjolras’ apartment.

There has to be a way that she has to stop thinking of herself as being on probation in her own life.

Before she can send a message to her siblings to explain Montparnasse’s phone call, she sees Cosette exiting Elodie’s room. “Do you have a minute?” her blonde friend asks awkwardly.

“Yeah. I was going to explain some stuff to you about caring for Elodie. You know, the home care stuff,” Eponine says, hoping that she still sounds calm.

“That’s one thing,” Cosette says with a slight smile. She takes a deep breath and wrings her hands. “I know that Elodie wishes it was you and Enjolras taking her in. I’ll do my best, but she’s always going to have a special place for you two.”

“Cosette, please don’t.” Eponine mutters. This somehow feels even worse than the time not too long ago when she learned that Marius was head over heels for Cosette. She had only been attracted to Marius, and in fact the succeeding days proved how fleeting that feeling had been. It’s a very different story though when it comes to being protective towards Elodie.
Cosette looks down. “I’m sorry about this.”

“Why should you be?” Eponine slams down her pen against the station counter. “You and Marius will be able to give Elodie a good home, someplace that’s safe, wherein she’ll never have to worry about people leaving or not being there for her. Your parents are there. It’s a big house, near good schools...” she trails off when she sees Cosette’s stricken expression. ‘It’s everything I can never give her,’ she almost says but she wills herself to control her tongue for once.

“If you want, I can just take her in temporarily,” Cosette offers. “Long enough for you and Enjolras to get things together so you can be her guardian.”

“No. She’ll love you, and my taking her in would uproot her again,” Eponine says flatly. “I have to do what is best for her.”

“She’ll do better with people she already considers family,” Cosette points out.

That last word falls like fire on Eponine’s ears, and she has to shut her eyes. She remembers all the sidestepping she had to do at school when anyone asked about her ‘home situation’, all the nights crying to Montparnasse after tiffs with her father, and most vividly of all, the time when she became certain that any attempt at a ‘real’ family life would mean excluding her parents from the picture. ‘I don’t even know what that is,’ she muses. She wonders if Enjolras and Elodie are also just as clueless as she is, but the thought only makes her uneasy. “You know better than I do,” she finally says. “Me as a mother? I don’t even know how to do it.”

“Eponine, no one does,” Cosette reminds her. “Not even my mother knew everything.”

It is all that Eponine can do not to laugh ruefully as she suddenly remembers tearful scenes in the Fauchelevent household whenever she and Cosette were back in town for home visits. “She did get a lot right,” she replies. “I mean, just look at you.”

Cosette shrugs. “She’s not the only woman I look up to, you know.”

III

Combeferre never knows what to say to the Dupond family, even if they have become a familiar presence already at the Saint-Michel Hospital. ‘Will it ever be more than the fact that he is stable?’ he wonders silently as he checks his patient’s vital signs and looks him over for any bedsores. “How is he taking his physical therapy, Ma’am?” he asks the wan woman sitting next to the hospital bed.

Mrs. Dupond sniffles and wipes her face. Her despair is almost palpable even before her words leave her lips. “He shoos away his therapist sometimes. Like he doesn’t want to do things anymore. I’ve tried talking to him, but what can I do?”

Combeferre looks to the silent man lying with the blankets drawn up to his chest. ‘Chretien? How are you feeling today?’ he asks calmly.

Dupond gazes briefly at Combeferre before he resumes staring into space again. “Fine. Nothing is changing,” he says in a soft, slurred voice. “I want to go home.”

“You will some time. You’re making progress,” Combeferre assures him.

“Won’t be. Won’t be doing,” Dupond raises both his hands for a few moments. “No go.”
“One thing at a time, Chretien, honey,” Mrs. Dupond pleads. “You’ll be biking again, fixing the roof—”

“No, no!” Dupond snarls, weakly clenching his fists and yanking so hard that he nearly rips out the IV line taped to his left hand. “Can’t!”

Combeferre takes a few deep breaths as he listens to Mrs. Dupond’s entreaties growing more and more frantic with her husband’s monosyllabic retorts. He knows that behind Dupond’s broken speech is the pleading of a man who misses being the protector, and who cannot accept that his spouse and his children have spent the past weeks feeding him through a tube and changing his diapers. ‘This isn’t disability, it’s robbery,’ he realizes, and once again he inwardly curses those men who assaulted Dupond that night on Avenue 54.

He clears his throat as he lays a hand on Dupond’s shoulder. “It’s difficult, yes, but you’ve come so far,” he says. He looks to Mrs Dupond, who is now dabbing at her eyes. “She’s just trying to help you.”

Dupond’s lips quiver as he glances from his wife and then to the physician. “Tired.”

Mrs. Dupond’s face crumples as she gets up and excuses herself to the small hallway outside the neurology ward. Combeferre sees Dupond close his eyes and wave him away, which becomes the physician’s cue to simply finish checking over the IV lines and other monitors attached to his patient before leaving to continue his rounds.

He finds Mrs. Dupond pacing the hall as she dabs at her eyes. “How do you do it, Doctor?” she asks brokenly when she sees him. “How can you see people like this every day?”

Combeferre looks down as Mrs. Dupond’s question suddenly brings back a vivid memory, that of the afternoon when Enjolras was shot and rushed to the emergency room of this very hospital. ‘At least then I could trust Eponine to save him,’ he thinks, which is more than he is willing to say for himself where taking care of Dupond is concerned. He looks steadily at the wan woman in front of him. “I just do the best I can,” he finally says.

“How do you do it?” she asks between sniffles.

“No. Not really.” He knows that the day he is no longer bothered by the sight of suffering will herald the end of his vocation as a physician. The horror is a motivator in itself, but certainly not as strong as either duty or compassion. “It’s always a little different each time around.”

Mrs. Dupond nods as she wipes away the last of her tears. “You’re a good boy. Most other doctors would turn us out by now.”

Combeferre bristles slightly. “I can name a compassionate colleague or two, dozens more.”

Mrs. Dupond shakes her head with wry disbelief before looking back towards the room she has just vacated. “I miss him. He was so kind...you know I used to call him my prince...” She blushes at her sudden sentiment. “You’re a nice young man to listen to all of this everyday. Your girlfriend is a very lucky woman.”

Combeferre shakes his head, knowing all too well who the matron is referring to. He’s not sure how she found out, but then again it is not as if he has been deliberately hiding the fact that he’s made a particular friend in the past month. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Yet. I’ve seen you two talking at the bookshop,” Mrs. Dupond teases. “Her name is Flora—”
“Florence,” Combeferre corrects her.

“Ask her out already!”

“Someday, soon.”

Mrs. Dupond smiles a little more hopefully as she goes back to the hospital room. “I’ll try to talk to Chretein again. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it will work.”

“If you need help, do not hesitate to ask,” Combeferre offers. He figures that he will have to seek assistance from a properly trained counsellor either in the psychiatry department or from among the agencies that Eponine works with. Sometimes looking to solutions is the only balm he can afford for himself and his patients when the wounds in question are of the more intangible sort.

His mood lifts a little by the time he returns to the surgery staff room, which is abuzz as usual with lunchtime chatter. As soon as he opens the door though, everyone in the room falls silent. “Did someone die?” he asks.

“No, we just don’t want to be rude to the new chief resident,” Eponine calls from where she is reading through some articles.

“What new chief resident—“ Combeferre begins before everyone breaks into applause. The truth hits home when he sees Mabeuf also applauding enthusiastically. It cannot be a joke if even the boss is in on it. “Just now?” he asks.

“The committee made its final decision yesterday, but I was thinking of how to break it to you,” Mabeuf replies cheerily. “Congratulations, Combeferre. You’ll do this department proud.”

“Thank you. I hope not to disappoint,” Combeferre says politely as he shakes Mabeuf’s hand. Of course the back of his mind is already pondering on all the things he will have to work on thanks to his new position; there will be courtesy calls to schedule, documents to accomplish, and endorsements to make, but none of that diminishes that wonderful sense of accomplishment that suffuses his being. Not even the eye rolls and silent grumbling of some of his former competitors does much to bog down his mood.

He looks to Eponine, who is already engrossed in writing a paper for her class later that day. “Looks complicated,” he remarks on seeing the statistics she is studying.

“It takes getting used to,” she says as she continues typing. She smiles over her laptop screen. “You were such a shoo-in. Everyone was going to protest if the committee didn’t make you the chief resident.”

Combeferre manages a smile as he sits down, feeling that old sense of competition beginning to dissipate. It only seems fitting that now they should taking on these separate challenges instead of trying to edge out each other. ‘It makes changing the world a little easier,’ he decides. He notices that Eponine is sighing deeply, and it dawns on him what she is probably thinking of. “Just because you sent Elodie to a better home, that doesn’t mean you won’t see her again,” he says tentatively.

“It’s not that,” Eponine says wryly. “Cosette pretty much wants me to come over every day just to help get Elodie settled in.” She looks around as if to make sure there are no eavesdroppers. “Auguste’s parents are in town. They turned up at his place last night.”

Combeferre feels as if something has hit him in the stomach as he imagines what must have transpired; there is no way that such a meeting would have gone well, especially if Eponine happened to be caught in the crossfire. “What did they say to him?”
“A lot of things. That he’s being a disappointment, that no one will be there for him if things go wrong....” she trails off. “They’ve done it to him all his life, haven’t they?”

“It was worse when we were kids,” Combeferre says. There’s no point mincing words when describing his best friend’s situation; anyway he knows that Eponine can see past euphemisms and whitewashing. “Every bad test, missed goal on the football field, or even just speaking out of turn, they’d always call him worthless. A mistake. Not fit to be their son. You get the picture.”

She nods slowly. “They never hit him?”

“They never dared.” He pauses to see Eponine’s reaction, and to his relief she seems anything but fazed by this turn of events. “How is he holding up?”

“Stoically,” she quips as she smooths out a crease in her white coat. “If it wasn’t for the obvious resemblances, I’d think that Auguste was adopted.”

Combeferre laughs, knowing what she means. “Nothing of his idealism and spirit.”

Eponine nods again. “I guess it’s true what they say that family are the people one chooses.”

“Perhaps,” Combeferre concurs. In a way it makes sense that things should fall together this way, what with all of his friends finding each other and working with one another. ‘It’s the art of fixing the broken things,’ he realizes even as he hears Mabeuf calling him for their first meeting with the consultants of the department waiting in the next room.

The call comes when he is in the middle of meeting with a client seeking assistance on a debacle involving the local police. “Excuse me, I have to take this call,” Enjolras says as he quits his seat and goes to the far corner of his tiny office. “Good afternoon Mr. Bamatabois,” he greets this court official.

“Thank you for picking up right away, Attorney Enjolras,” the official greets smoothly. “The venue has already been finalized for the Transnonain trial. It will be in the Sixth District, in Port Town.”

“Beginning the ninth of next month?” Enjolras clarifies. He knows the place being mentioned; in fact he lived there for a time during his internship as a law student. ‘All the way across the country,’ he notes, remembering the four days it took for him to drive to his temporary home.

“Yes, that very day,” Bamatabois replies. “Javert has already been informed. The witness protection program has already made his arrangements. You only need to worry about your own plane ticket.”

“I see. Thank you Mr. Bamatabois,” Enjolras says. As he ends the call, he feels that same eager anticipation he always has when there is a breakthrough in a case; now that the trial has been scheduled, there is less of a chance for the defendants to make any legal manoeuvres against Dupond, Javert, and the families of the murdered tenants at Transnonain. ‘They have delayed justice long enough,’ he thinks as he goes back to his meeting.

As soon as his client is gone, he sets about to booking his flight. All the while his phone beeps with message after message; for a moment he worries that they will be from his parents badgering him about the case, but to his relief he finds more welcome names in his inbox. ‘Combeferre is now a chief resident, Elodie is home from the hospital with Cosette, and there’s a ramen night to celebrate. This can get interesting,’ he muses.

At that moment a yawn sounds from the next cubicle. “Ramen night at the Fauchelevents!”
Courfeyrac says cheerily as he pushes back his chair and saunters over to Enjolras’ workstation. He puts his hands akimbo as he catches sight of the computer screen still showing the airplane ticket reservation. “That’s where the trial is going to be?”

“Yes. It’s safer for the judge and the defendants since they won’t have to deal with agitation within this metropolis,” Enjolras explains. “Two weeks away.”

Courfeyrac whistles. “Should I book a ticket too?”

“No need to,” Enjolras replies. “Azelma needs you here more.”

Courfeyrac’s shoulders slump with visible relief. “So who will be accompanying you?”

“I’ll go alone,” Enjolras replies. Technically he won’t be travelling with Javert, even if they will be headed to the same place.

Courfeyrac whistles. “Just like old days, when you worked there?”

“I won’t be incommunicado this time,” Enjolras assures him.

“I don’t think that Eponine would let you disappear for that long anyway,” Courfeyrac teases. He sticks his thumbs in his belt loops. “I saw your parents driving by the mall. Have they contacted you yet?”

“They dropped by last night,” Enjolras replies.

Courfeyrac cringes. “Damn. Was Eponine over there too?”

Enjolras nods, all the while remembering Eponine’s quiet but firm resolve during the debacle, and everything she said and did in the aftermath, all the way to her staying the night till they woke up in each other’s arms at the crack of dawn. ‘No one else you know can be so strong,’ it occurs to him.

“She wasn’t scared,” he remarks.

“That’s our girl,” Courfeyrac agrees. “If you’re going to be away for two weeks, you might need to warn her in case there are any reprisals.”

“That goes for you, Azelma, Combeferre, and so many others too,” Enjolras points out. Now that he thinks about it, their entire group of friends is entangled in this case one way or another. He is not sure if he ought to deplore this as a downturn in professionalism or as an affirmation that he is no longer living so apart from his friends.

It only becomes clearer to him later that evening at the Fauchelevents’ house. Even if the place is so big that their motley band can move about comfortably all over the ground floor without ever bumping into each other, they all still end up crammed in the living room, rolling shakers of condiments across the tables to each other and passing around huge bowls of soup. “This is what we do every week, Elodie,” Musichetta jokes with the little girl who is joining them for a little while before her bedtime. “We’re not boring grown-ups.”

Elodie giggles, nearly spilling soup all over the pillows propping her up. “What about spaghetti night?”

“There, you heard the kid!” Bahorel hollers. He whistles to where Eponine, Azelma, and Gavroche are returning from the lanai, where they have been holding some serious discussion for the past half hour. “No long faces allowed tonight, you three!”
“Says the one extending his face with a goatee!” Gavroche retorts, miming stroking a tuft of facial hair.

As Bahorel makes a cheerful verbal rejoinder, Enjolras catches Eponine’s eye long enough to see her gesture to the lanai. He picks up his bowl of ramen as well as hers, and then follows her to the next room. “How did that family meeting go?” he asks as soon as they close the door behind them and sit on the floor cushions strewn all over the tiles.

“You make it sound too serious,” Eponine quips as she takes her bowl of soup and balances it on her lap while he merely sets his aside. “Though it is something pretty bad.”

“Work related?” Enjolras asks.

“That’s the one thing that’s going right, sort of,” Eponine replies. She takes a deep breath and bites her lip. “My parents are sort of trying to make contact. Not directly, sending out feelers if you will. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Enjolras squeezes her wrist. “They’re in prison. They won’t come and harm you.”

“They still know how to make things difficult. They’ve tried it before, they can do it again,” she explains. She sighs as she adjusts their hands so that her fingers are wrapped around his. “I can’t hide my past from you, Auguste. It’s too obvious and messy.”

“We’ll handle this,” he tells her. He knows better than to say that they’ll be safe and that everything will be okay. In fact he does not know what to expect at all from a possible confrontation with the older Thenardiers. ‘Eponine doesn’t need a rescuer though,’ he realizes. He knows that he will have to step up to do something more difficult, but certainly more worthy of the strong persons that he hopes they are shaping up to be. “What I mean to say is that you can count on me,” he adds when he feels her squeeze his hand once more.

“Thank you,” she whispers. She pauses to eat some more of her soup before meeting his gaze more eagerly. “So now that Elodie is living here, that makes the entire custody thing moot?”

“Pretty much, even if her parents have yet to be officially sentenced,” he replies. He takes both her hands, knowing that he cannot put off announcing his own news any longer. “Almost as soon as that happens though, I have to fly out for the Transnonain trial.”

Her eyes go wide as her lips form an ‘o’ of surprise. “That’s going to take two weeks, you said?”

“Two, maybe three at the very worst.” He pauses, wondering if she will be upset. “It’s not very long.”

“I know, but I am also aware of how you and I can sometimes go stir-crazy,” she jokes. “I’ll be fine. I’ll even make sure that Courfeyrac doesn’t break your office in your absence.”

“He’s not that bad,” Enjolras scoffs. He can live with his friend’s brand of disorder to some degree. “Though I need to make sure that mail and newspapers don’t pile up outside my door.”

“You know, more of your clients should switch to digital.”

“Easier said than done.”

She rolls her eyes. “Just give me your spare key.”

“Will do,” he says over the knocking on the lanai door. “What’s going on there?” he calls.
“We’re just opening up a bottle of wine, among other things,” Prouvaire replies. “Want any?”

“Time to rejoin the rest of the world,” Eponine says ruefully as they get to their feet. “At least we have some days to talk about this.”

‘Thank whatever powers are out there for that,’ Enjolras thinks as they return to the living room. An assortment of mismatched glasses, filled with either wine, cider, or soda, is already lined up on the table. “Are we really being this formal?” he asks.

“How often do we get to celebrate anything, and two things at that?” Courfeyrac asks as he picks up a glass of wine. “You do the honors.”

Enjolras rolls his eyes, knowing that he’s never been much of a toastmaster. Nevertheless he picks a glass of cider and holds it up despite the catcalls and laughter of some of the more raucous of the company. He looks to all of his friends gathered in the room, a sight which he would have deemed impossible just a few months ago. “To everyone here and to their dreams. May they come to fruition sooner rather than later.”
Sometimes Courfeyrac and Azelma don’t make it to their bed. ‘There are worse things though than waking up surrounded by test papers,’ he notes as he opens his eyes and stretches on the floor of their apartment, taking care not to jostle the stack of quiz booklets that he and Azelma have been correcting all night. It would be an evening well spent in his reckoning if there weren’t four more piles of this sort still needing checking, but Courfeyrac eventually decides that this is just his inner impatient student talking and perhaps he’s better letting it be.

He turns to where Azelma is still fast asleep next to him, lying on her back with one hand resting on the slight curve of her midsection. For a moment he worries she will stir and get to her feet so she can race to the bathroom to deal with her morning sickness, but she remains slumbering heedless of his attention. He inches over so that he is kneeling in front of her before his hands find the hem of the long shirt that covers most of her skinny frame. It’s one of his shirts, a ratty old varsity number from college days, and he’s not sure why his wife has turned it into something of a security blanket. Yet it looks better on her than on him, and he’s not about to complain.

She whimpers and stirs as his fingers brush against the insides of her thighs. “Dammit Maurice.”

“Good morning to you, Zel,” he says cheerily, tempting her further with a kiss between her breasts. “How’s my baby-mama this morning?”

She scowls and pushes herself up on her elbows. “I hate that term.”

“What do you want me to call you then?”

“Something like darling, mistress, maybe the best thing that’s happened to you?”

“Minx!” Courfeyrac laughs before kissing her, even as he already feels her nimble hands making their way to squeeze his rear end. He takes the opportunity to make love to her right there and then, reveling in the closeness of their bodies and the raspy sound of her voice in his ear as he brings her to the point of ecstasy. It will not be long till these passionate moments will become more difficult for them to catch, and this is why he holds her close even though they can both hear their respective cell phone alarm clocks breaking the morning quiet.

Azelma groans as she nuzzles his collarbone. “I should call in sick today. Get Ponine to write me a medical certificate for my absence.”

“She could?” Courfeyrac asks.

“But won’t,” Azelma amends ruefully. “Enjolras is too much of a good influence sometimes. Anyway I’ve got forty kids counting on me to watch them through the day.”

“You can take a day off during their exam week. You’ll just be proctoring then,” he suggests.

She gestures to the piles of test papers around them. “I’ll still have to come back to this anyway.” She sits up and he sighs at the sudden lack of warmth, at least till she starts touching his thighs again. “What time are you off today?”
“Four. It’s the sentencing of the Chenier trial today.”

“You’re telling me,” he says. While he can’t say that this is his messiest or most difficult case, it has become a tiresome struggle that hits too close to home on most days. He traces a long scar that runs down Azelma’s ribs, wondering how she could survive so much. “After this, all that we need to do is make sure that Cosette gets permanent custody of Elodie.”

“With Marius as a father....” she trails off, and somehow this has Courfeyrac cracking up. “You know that it’s going to happen!”

“Nothing, it’s just that I sometimes imagine Marius as this little baby bird hopping out of the nest....” Courfeyrac begins before Azelma bursts out laughing. “He’s good but he’s got this bewildered way of going about things!”

“An introvert,” she remarks. “You might find he knows more than he lets on.”

“I’m sure. I’m sure,” Courfeyrac concurs. As he sits up, he catches sight of Azelma touching her belly again. It occurs to him that he has no idea how to manage if their child turns out to have a quiet temperament, since he’s so far been readying for a little one with either his devilry of the mind or one with Azelma’s sense of mischief. “Still can’t feel anything there?” he asks.

She shakes her head a little melancholically. “Musichetta says it’s normal for first time moms not to notice till they are almost halfway through.”

“Oh.” It is all he can do to hide his disappointment at this reminder that it will be a while yet till he can meet this little one who’s already turned their lives upside down. ‘Slowly there tiger,’ he tells himself as he stands up and helps Azelma to her feet.

Yet what can’t wait though is getting a new place to live, as evidenced by how many times he and Azelma literally bump elbows as they go about getting ready for work. The apartment is even smaller now that he’s bought a bed big enough to accommodate both of them, and suddenly he can’t imagine what else they can possible squeeze into this space. ‘Can’t let a kid grow up in this mess,’ he decides, and that’s when he realizes that he can never again laugh at any of his older colleagues for worrying about their own children, for fretting about house payments and mortgages, or even the simple question of ‘am I doing this right?’ It’s a thought that sits at the back of his mind throughout his busy morning, even when he finally goes for his lunch break.

Today his one-and-a-half-hour off has him driving to the Fauchelevents’ place. To his amusement he sees Marius’ car parked at the curb. ‘Amorous Marius, now that’s an idea,’ he thinks wickedly as he rings the doorbell.

To his mortification, it’s Fantine who meets him at the door. “Wipe that grin off your face, Courfeyrac,” she chides him lightly. “If you don’t mind waiting a little bit, you can join us all for lunch.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Courfeyrac says jovially as Fantine lets him in. He finds Marius, Cosette, and Elodie in the lanai, engrossed in a sort of drawing game. “I didn’t know you make house calls, Marius,” he greets his friend.

“No, I’m only going home for lunch,” Marius replies. “Please join us. I need a teammate since the girls are creaming me.”

“I’ll let you win!” Elodie chirps. Her hair has finally grown out enough for her to wear it tied up in
colourful little elastic bands, and she’s finally gotten rid of some of the elastic bandages on her knees and elbows. The only drawback now is that her scars, both from her injuries and surgery, stand out starkly against her pale skin. Courfeyrac can’t help but wonder how she’ll hold up if, when she decides to return to school, but all of that is lost when Elodie begins to loudly and breathlessly explain the picture guessing game in progress.

“How do you keep up with such energy?” Courfeyrac asks Marius and Cosette.

“I learned in college,” Marius deadpans as he begins to doodle. “Shouldn’t you be at the courthouse?”

“Not just yet,” Courfeyrac replies, aware all this time of Elodie’s eyes watching carefully. “I don’t have to be there till one-thirty.”

Cosette, as if sensing his discomfort, smiles and clears her throat. “How is Zelma doing? Is she still planning to do online tutorials next year?”

“Yeah, when the little one comes along. More flexible time, according to her,” Courfeyrac replies. Yet even so he wonders how long Azelma can stay out of a classroom setting, especially given how particularly close this is to her heart.

Cosette nods as she helps Elodie retrieve a pencil. “Are you going to find out the baby’s sex in advance?”

“Yeah. Azelma said that she’s had enough of surprises,” Courfeyrac laughs.

“So do you want a boy or a girl?” Elodie chimes in.

Courfeyrac has to pause for a moment. “Either. As long as he or she is healthy and alright.” The truth is that he is not sure what he wants more: a son who he can teach everything to, or a daughter he can spoil to the high heavens. He can see Elodie raring to press him for an answer but suddenly the girl breaks out into a laugh and manages to scramble to her feet in order to launch herself into Eponine’s arms as the latter walks into the lanai.

“How are you doing, baby?” Eponine asks cheerily as she scoops up the little girl. “Drawing again?”

Elodie nods gleefully. “I’m winning!” Her grin grows perplexed when she sees that Eponine is wearing a sleek green dress and blazer in lieu of her usual scrub suit. “Your dress is so pretty.”

“Why thank you. I had to wear it for a presentation today.”

“Has Mister Enjolras seen you wear it yet?”

Eponine shakes her head. “He’s real busy today. So am I; I just passed by after class and I have the night shift later.”

“I heard he’s going away?” Elodie asks worriedly.

“It’s only for two weeks, and it’s for a case,” Courfeyrac assures her. “He’ll be back before you know it.” It’s also for Eponine’s benefit too; it’s the longest that she and Enjolras will be spending apart ever since they’ve gotten together, and Courfeyrac can only imagine what she may be thinking in anticipation of his absence.

“Will he be allowed to contact anyone during the trial?” Marius asks.
“I don’t know. Even if he could, he can’t comment on the case. That’s how high profile it is,” Eponine points out. “We met up yesterday. He seems to have everything covered.”

“When would he be otherwise?” Courfeyrac quips. He hopes he can say the same for himself with regard to the Chenier case but he knows better than to voice this out. Instead he smiles and goes along with the picture game, up until he has to leave to return to work.

He notices as he leaves the Fauchelevent house that the street is more crowded with parked cars; in fact there is a polished blue station wagon nearly double parking Marius’ car. ‘Curioser and curioser,’ he thinks, knowing that this is an unusual vehicle for the neighbourhood. He looks about for the culprit in order to tell him or her to move the vehicle before Marius has to leave as well, but since no one is in sight he settles for sending a message to his friend to warn him of this impending bugaboo before making his way back to the courthouse.

II

As far as Eponine is concerned, the biggest disadvantage to taking daytime classes is that she often gets reassigned to the night shift at Saint Michel Hospital. ‘Of course with privileges such as being senior house officer,’ she gripes silently as she finishes printing the evening shift’s muster list, complete with each person’s post of the night. There is no way she can please everyone for sooner or later someone is going to gripe about having nothing to do in the wards or conversely, having too much to do in the emergency room. ‘Hang it all,’ she decides as she glances up at the clock, which reads just five minutes to four in the afternoon. She tacks the muster list to a bulletin board, and then pulls her white coat over her clothes before heading to the nurse’s station to get charts for her rounds.

She hears her phone beep with messages, and she looks to see two new missives from Enjolras and Courfeyrac. Enjolras’ message is simple: ‘Verdict: guilty, hopefully no appeal’, while Courfeyrac has sent a more exuberant, ‘We did it!’ Eponine can feel tears springing to her eyes as she breathes a sigh of relief. There is now something more tangible to help Elodie through the nightmares and reassure her that she will be safe from the two people who have endangered her life. ‘Will she miss them though?’ Eponine cannot help but wonder. She of all people should know how difficult it is to completely cast off blood ties.

As she’s walking through the adult surgery ward, she notices one of her patients, a frail little widow, sitting up in bed and balancing a container of food on her lap. “Doc, let’s eat!” the old woman calls to her cheerily.

“I’ve eaten already, Mrs. Gutierrez,” Eponine says politely. Nevertheless she does have second thoughts about refusing when she sees the creamy, caramel covered custard that her patient is enjoying. “Looks like crème brulee,” she remarks.

“Ay, no!” the spinster says, sounding affronted. “This is much better---leche flan, made the way that it’s supposed to be at home.”

“How?”

“With duck eggs and carabao milk, not with the usual chicken eggs and condensed milk. You won’t find anything richer.”

Eponine cracks a smile at this lavish idea, which sounds like heaven in a dessert dish, as well as a way to send someone to the emergency room. ‘I’d better make sure her insulin is adjusted later,’ she decides quietly. “So your son gave it to you?”
“I wish! Thank heavens for neighbours,” Mrs. Gutierrrez huffs. She wipes her mouth before speaking again. “So I heard you’re handling some social work now too for the hospital?”

“Interventions,” Eponine replies. “It’s not really welfare and funding, more of helping out patients in crisis situations.”

“You mean working with the police and detectives?”

“Sometimes.”

The widow whistles. “You’re very brave to do that.”

“Maybe,” Eponine says with a shrug. ‘Sometimes I’m just the person who does what no one else will,’ she tells herself. It’s sometimes more reactive than proactive, but if it makes a difference to people she’s not about to complain.

In the meantime Mrs. Gutierrez takes another bite of her custard. “Do your parents know what you’re up to at work?”

“They don’t have to know,” the younger woman says. The very idea is enough to make her shudder, at least till she imagines the stunned look that would surely spread across her mother’s face if she ever got wind of her activities. She has to hold back a snort, more so when Mrs. Gutierrrez gives her a puzzled look. “We’re a little out of touch nowadays.”

“You should try to reconnect.”

“Someday.”

The old woman sighs deeply. “Don’t wait too long. You might regret it.”

‘Not if extending the olive branch would do more harm than good,’ Eponine thinks. She’s not about to let on regarding this, so she simply smiles and begins writing in her patient’s chart. It’s easier to leave things off this way.

She returns to the surgery staff room in time to find Combeferre, Reynault, and the other surgeons assigned to the day shift already packing up. “Want us to get something for your dinner?” Combeferre asks her.

“I already have rations,” Eponine replies, gesturing to the refrigerator. She’s taken to bagging up her leftovers nowadays; what little extra money saved goes a fair way in helping pay the share of the rent that should have been Azelma’s.

Reynault elbows Combeferre and winks. “Careful! You know what the bosses say about relationships within this department!”

“Shut up, Reynault,” Combeferre mutters.

“Please. A man and a woman, especially with the rather hot history you two have, can’t just be friends,” Reynault sneers.

“You just ripped that from the movies,” Eponine says with unmitigated disgust as she steps away before Reynault’s eyes can wander lower. “And in case you didn’t get the memo, I’m with his best friend.”

Reynault bursts out laughing. “How can you stand that?” he asks Combeferre.
“Go home, Reynault. You’re not getting paid for overtime,” Combeferre retorts acidly. Thankfully it’s enough for their colleague to get the point, and so he departs but not without casting a last sneer over his shoulder. Combeferre shakes his head before looking at Eponine. “Just ignore him.”

‘Easy for you to say,’ Eponine almost says. Combeferre is not the one being doubted at every turn thanks to his past or his affiliations. “He does have a point though. It looks weird.”

“We’re all adults here,” Combeferre points out. “ Mostly.”

Eponine cracks a smile. “So you don’t find it weird?”

“To be honest, I couldn’t be happier for you both. You take care of each other,” Combeferre says as he picks up his bag. “Well except with this---that’s my department. Feel free to tell me when you want Reynault to get a demerit.”

“Not over this!”

“Unprofessional behaviour counts.”

“I never knew you to be so vindictive! Go get some sleep!” Eponine laughs before shooing Combeferre out the door. It’s a side of him not many people know, thankfully, and she does fear for Reynault the day he discovers it.

The evening goes by quickly, with only a handful of emergencies and referrals to keep Eponine busy until past midnight. It’s about two in the morning when she finally can return to the staff room for some much needed shut-eye. As she pushes two chairs together to make a sort of bed, she hears her phone ringing. “Hey. I thought you’d be flying out by now,” she says by way of greeting.

“Boarding is in a few minutes,” Enjolras replies. “How is everything?”

“Pretty good, considering this is the night shift,” Eponine says. She can hear the hubbub of the airport in the background, and it makes it easy for her to imagine him seated at a cafe, perhaps with a cup of coffee and a stack of papers before him. “So I take you’ll be heading straight to work, literally?”

“I have maybe two or three hours between landing and having to be at the courthouse there.”

“Sounds fair. Do you get any phone or internet privileges there?”

“Phone, yes. Not sure about internet, but I’ll let you guys know.”

Eponine sighs deeply, trying to imagine how Enjolras will hold up without being able to communicate so freely. ‘That, or he might get so absorbed in his work that he might forget anyway,’ she thinks for a moment, but she decides not to dwell on it. “I’ll just say it right out. I’m really going to miss you. I know it’s just for two weeks but I can’t help it. I wish I’d been with you just now instead of doing night duty,” she admits.

“Well we do what we have to do,” Enjolras concurs ruefully.

“Don’t we always?” Eponine quips. She shuts her eyes as she hears in the background the drone of the public address system announcing a boarding call. “That’s your flight, I guess?”

“Yes. I’ll contact you when I land,” he assures her. “That’s maybe in about four hours.”

She manages a smile. “Go get them. I know you will.”

“I love you, Auguste,” Eponine manages to say before the connection goes choppy and they both have to hang up. As she sets her phone down and curls up on her makeshift bed, she lets out a contented sigh, knowing that she doesn’t have to hear him say it back.
Port Town, or simply the Cape as it was known, has always been ancient, to the point of being dubbed anything from ‘quaint’ to ‘decrepit’. ‘Stagnant should be added to the list though,’ Enjolras thinks as he pockets the key to his accommodations at the Brownbeat Lodging House. The past five years has been enough to turn the burgundy carpet into a dingy pink, and to deepen the shadows on the walls, but otherwise the hostel was just as it was during Enjolras’ days as an intern in the regional court. In fact the very air still holds that crisp tang of saltwater mingled with the more acrid odor of machine oil, two things that could only be expected from the country’s oldest trading post.

He only has to walk down the street corner and follow the cobblestone road for five more blocks along the dockside before the overpowering seashore smells are dispelled by the decidedly more welcome aroma of freshly brewed coffee. All the same, Enjolras makes it a point to take a look around before ducking into a small place that had a wooden sign with the single word Kaffeeklatsch above the door. He cracks a smile as he took in the sight of the cozy front room, which in lieu of spindly cafe tables and high seats, is furnished with low round tables and small plush stools arranged in circles. As he casually sets down his briefcase in one of the corners, he hears a giggle from behind the cafe’s counter, where two young ladies are chatting with a blond man dressed in a uniform of the Marine corps. However this little interlude is soon broken up by the appearance of the cafe’s proprietor, a tall man garbed all in black save for his navy blue apron.

“Look what the judiciary circus has finally brought in!” the proprietor greets loudly. “Will you still have your usual?”

“Yes, with two shots of espresso this time, Mr. Trouillefou,” Enjolras replies calmly. He smirks when he sees the proprietor roll his eyes, knowing that the man prefers the nom-de-guerre ‘Clopin’. “Not to go this time.”

“Interesting!” Clopin mutters as he grabbed two large mugs. He snaps his fingers at the soldier chatting to the baristas. “Run along, Theodule. I’m not explaining to your commanding officer why you’re out of the barracks again.”

The soldier’s eyes widen. “But I was given leave---“

“You’re not paying my girls’ salaries. Now git!” Clopin retorts, stepping out of the way only to let his two staff members return to taking orders from the other customers in the coffee shop. He soon emerges from the counter carrying the two mugs, and sets down one in front of Enjolras. “You’ve brought quite the storm here. It will be mayhem down by the courthouse because of all the agitators who want a piece of the Transnonain trial.”

“My apologies for the inconvenience,” Enjolras deadpans. “How is business?”

“Good. I just haven’t expanded the place. Can’t have customers yelling at each other over a large space when this space is meant for civilized talking,” Clopin grouses. “Now don’t get any ideas; I don’t serve your characters of interest here.”

‘At least that you know of,’ Enjolras thinks as he sips his drink, silently enjoying the slight nip of cinnamon mingled with coffee. “I take that it is not only the protests causing the disturbance?”
“The press, or more of the paid rags of the landowners.”

“What are they saying?”

“To quote: that you are unpaving hell,” Clopin mutters. “Proof you haven’t changed much. Six months in here, you overturn the entire damn regional court.”

“Ramifications,” Enjolras points out calmly, even as the memories of his old indignation begin coming to mind once more. “Pointing out one questionable decision only led to the others being put under review. It was only a matter of time.”

“Says the one who is always in a hurry for justice,” Clopin scoffs. “How can you talk like that even after it almost put you in your grave before your time?”

“Because there is no time for cowardice,” the younger man answers. If ever that close encounter with mortality has only emboldened him, reinforcing his conviction that no one should be victimized by political impunity or even the simple impingement of rights. “You yourself should know that, after all the effort and struggles you’ve had getting this place on its feet.”

Clopin sighs deeply. “Well my business doesn’t usually come with death threats, except perhaps in the odd case of unwashed hands and food poisoning.” He sets down his drink and rests his long chin on his fingers. “Your business, well it’s brought the military into this place.”

‘Just like at the uprising months ago,’ Enjolras thinks. He hopes that this time he won’t have to get shot before something good happens. “How are they behaving?”

“Maximum tolerance...on paper. That’s more from the police though; they’re the ones who’ve been laying the gunpowder in a figurative sense,” Clopin explains.

‘There’ll be reprisals for Javert after this,’ Enjolras muses. He discreetly checks his phone to verify the text message that Javert and his security detail have arrived safely. He sees Clopin roll his eyes at the sight of yet another marine wandering in. “They aren’t from the local outpost?” he enquires.

“The problem is that they are; they think that they can get away with everything,” Clopin mutters. He rubs the back of his neck. “So I heard you’re running the commission on human rights. Same bunch who convinced you to get away from this hole in the wall?”

Enjolras nods. “We’re doing well.” It had taken several weeks for him, Courfeyrac, Feuilly, and Bahorel to come up with a plan to work more deeply in the civic system besides taking on cases in the local courts, and still a few more months before he could leave this town and put said plan in action. ‘It was all about not being afraid to jump from the frying pan and into the fire,’ he reflects back on the very thing that Feuilly told him one night nearly five years ago.

Clopin nods understandingly before shooting a reproving look at the baristas trying to sneak adoring glances behind the counter. “No significant other still?” he asks.

“She’s a trauma surgeon at Saint Michel Hospital,” Enjolras replies.


“That’s how it began,” the younger man says before he takes a discreet glance at his watch. It is just about ten o’clock, which means he has about three hours left to prepare for the trial. As he finishes his coffee he watches Clopin back at the counter dealing with yet another group of marines—or perhaps just more of Theodule’s friends, since apparently the young soldier has not heeded the proprietor’s warning and has instead lingered by the door.
Just as Enjolras gets up to leave, he sees Theodule break away from his boisterous comrades. “You must be Attorney Enjolras. You’re a friend of my cousin,” the sailor greets. “The name is Theodule Gillenormand, Lieutenant of the Second Marine Division.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “Who is your cousin?”

“Marius Pontmercy,” Theodule says. “No resemblance, no?”

It is all that Enjolras can do to keep a straight face at this poor attempt at an introduction. “We were roommates in college,” he simply says.

“Ah I see. His pre-law days,” Theodule remarks with a look that would be haughty if not for his obvious swaggering demeanour. “I’m sure you cannot imagine him doing that entire ‘Order in the court!’ thing.”

Enjolras only shakes his head. “That is law as seen on TV….and only on TV.” He’s really not about to explain the difference between real life law and glamour shots, not when he really has to begin with the day’s work.

Theodule merely blinks. “Aren’t those based on real life?”

“Some of them,” Enjolras replies through gritted teeth as he sets down his coffee mug and picks up his briefcase. “Unfortunately I have other appointments today, and I believe your comrades must be missing you.”

“Going to the courthouse already?” Theodule scoffs. “Troublesome business isn’t it? Those agitating tenants, can’t they just---“

“Those tenants are my clients, Mr. Gillenormand,” Enjolras says sternly. “Therefore I am not at liberty to discuss them, today especially.”

Theodule blinks confusedly once more. “There are rules about that?”

“Yes. Good day to you, Mr. Gillenormand. I will give your regards to Pontmercy.” He waves goodbye to Clopin and takes his leave of the café before Theodule can think of following or making some sort of verbal parting shot. Even before he shuts the café door he can already hear Clopin, his baristas, and a few other patrons laughing. ‘Either one of those cousins is adopted or there is a genetic trick at work,’ he muses as he heads away from the portside road towards the town’s sloping main avenue.

Even from a mile off he can already see the television station trucks and cameras trained on the slowly growing huddle of protestors outside the courthouse. Before he can take a detour down a side street, he hears a whistle followed by the protestors shouting his name and cheering him on.

“Fight the good fight, Attorney!”

“We’re with you!”

“Time to kick those oligarchs’ butts!”

Of course Enjolras nods and smiles cordially at this outpouring of support; this isn’t the time to be curt and overly business-like, or to stoke the flames unnecessarily. ‘This is what Courfeyrac and Bahorel call working the crowd,’ he catches himself thinking as he makes his way through the crowd. He is halfway there when suddenly he nearly walks into a cameraman. “Excuse me, please,” he says, crossing his arms.
“Attorney Enjolras, we need only a single comment. Is it true that one of your friends is the physician of Chretein Dupond, the man who was supposed to be the star witness of this case?” a burly journalist demands, shoving the camera closer.

“His physician is known to me. That’s all,” Enjolras says. He’s not about to let these press know which of the trauma surgeons of Saint Michel Hospital is handling the Dupond case. ‘Especially if there are more legitimate means of acquiring the information,’ he thinks as he steps away.

He is at the courthouse steps when he finally sees a group of men in non-descript uniforms escorting Javert from a black car. Javert’s eyes go wide and his thin face turns stern and disapproving when he sees the crowd. “A circus!” he mutters even as he is led into a side door.

Enjolras moves to follow Javert but is stopped by the guard at the entrance. “Identification, Sir,” the guard says as he crosses his arms. “And a security check that’s all.”

Enjolras’ brow furrows as he catches sight of the metal detectors and bomb squad kit carelessly stashed near the doorway. He deftly brings out his driver’s license as well as a police clearance, and it is all he can do to keep a straight face when the guard blanches. “Have the other prosecutors arrived yet?”

The guard swallows hard. “Third room to your right. That’s where they’re meeting.”

“Thank you sir,” Enjolras says cordially as he enters the building amid much cheering and applause.

II

It is already two in the afternoon by the time Azelma has given out the last of her students’ report cards and finished conferring with parents. “Forty down, one to go,” she murmurs, placing her hands on her belly. “But the thing is you’re going to be with me for a long time.”

She closes as her eyes as she wills herself to concentrate; perhaps today she may feel her baby’s first kick. Yet still there is no light flutter under her palm, so she revels in the quiet for a few minutes before picking up her phone to call Gavroche. “Still up for this afternoon?” she greets.

“Yeah. I was able to get Eponine up too, believe it or not!” Gavroche crows triumphantly. “Apparently surgeons run on coffee, not batteries...”

“Very funny, Gavroche.” Eponine mutters from nearby. “I’m going along since you’ll be looking at places that aren’t as far from Saint Michel.”

“Not far from Saint Michel? How convenient since it’s also right near Enjolras’ workplace too,” Azelma teases. “I thought I’m the one supposed to be getting nesting instincts.”

“Now don’t you start. Gav and I will be there in half an hour, if that’s fine for you,” Eponine says. Azelma giggles at her sister’s petulant tone. “Make it fifteen. See you both!” After she hangs up she sends a message to Courfeyrac to inform him where she’ll be starting her search for their future home. The neighbourhoods in question are not particularly upscale, but far less chaotic than any of the places she and her siblings have lived in. ‘Not quite the picket fence dream but it will do,’ she tells herself as she looks through the map on her phone, where she has highlighted addresses that she’s found through various advertisements and even through word of mouth.

She walks out of the schoolhouse in time to see her siblings already waiting by her husband’s car in the parking lot. Eponine is on the phone again; her grin and her very animated manner make it clear who she’s talking to. Gavroche is smirking smugly and rolling his eyes at this sight. “She’s so far
gone,” he mouths mischievously.

“You know, Navet ought to set you up with someone one of these days,” Azelma chides him. All the same she can’t help but laugh when her sister does end her call. “Not even Montparnasse and Combeferre made you laugh that much,” she quips.

“I was just telling Enjolras that I got the voicemail he sent me once he got to his hostel,” Eponine says in a level tone, but her reddened ears give her away.

Gavroche makes a show of yawning. “So are we going to look for apartments now?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get your hackles up,” Azelma says as she hands over the car keys to her brother. She sits shotgun and spreads the map out on her side of the dashboard. She laughs when she sees Eponine curl up on the backseat and closing her eyes. “More evidence you need a new place: the commute back to the old apartment is brutal.”

“Shut up,” Eponine mutters. “First you move out, then Gav says that he, Navet, and the boys want to get a place....did I do something wrong?”

“No not at all,” Azelma replies. “Come on, you can’t keep raising us forever. That would be wrong. Life stages, remember? Industry, identity, then intimacy....”

Eponine groans at this concept straight out of psychology classes. “Thanks for reminding me of my homework, Zel.”

Of course this only sets her laughing again as Gavroche starts the engine. Soon they are off, driving down the freeway towards the center of the city. It’s an odd place to find little residential enclaves and apartment complexes, but what can she expect from a city full of contradictions?

The first apartment they visit is in a sleek though not necessarily posh neighbourhood, a street of snug brick complexes boasting glass-and-metal interiors. “Too small though, at least if there’s a kid coming along,” Azelma pronounces as they are shown a large apartment that is unfortunate to have only a single bedroom and a tiny bathroom. “I mean I could divide the living room, but that’s not going to work in the long term.”

“Rules things out for me and the guys then,” Gavroche says with a frown. “All our personal things will just turn into one huge blob of stuff in one room.”

Azelma clucks her tongue before elbowing Eponine, who is still carefully surveying the room. “You getting this place?”

“I don’t have basis for comparison yet,” Eponine replies. She sticks her hands in the pockets of her jeans and looks around again. “I could see it though.”

‘Which means that there’s more than a fifty-fifty chance that she’ll get it,’ Azelma thinks but she keeps this opinion to herself. It’s oftentimes best to let her sister come to these realizations on her own time. It’s just as well, since the next two hours are spent surveying one place after another, to the point that even Gavroche gripes that he’s getting mixed up.

“Oh okay we need a break then,” Eponine decides after hearing Gavroche’s complaint. “Those places aren’t going anywhere, and we’ll know if they get snapped up.”

“I did want to give Maurice an idea where we’d move to,” Azelma says.

“You’ll have to take him through all of them again anyway, and I am sure you’ll have different
opinions then,” Gavroche points out. “Besides I can’t think straight without pizza....”

Azelma shrugs by way of conceding. Sometimes even that famed Thenardier stubbornness gives way before hunger. She’s not about to complain though when Gavroche points them to a small pizza parlor that he’s heard of, located three blocks away from the apartment they have just surveyed.

They are just about to enter the place when Eponine suddenly goes pale and begins to walk faster. “Don’t look to the right!” she warns.

Her words have the opposite effect though and Azelma sneaks a glimpse out of the corner of her eye in time to catch sight of a woman with frizzy hair and caked on make-up walking briskly towards them. ‘No one else wears that same shade of rouge,’ she thinks as she grabs Eponine’s arm to keep from losing her balance on the curb.

It is enough for this pursuer to catch up. “Well if it isn’t the Thenardier brood,” the woman greets with an overly saccharine smile plastered to her face. “My, my, have you moved up in the world.”

“Hello Miss Magnon,” Eponine greets curtly. “It’s goodbye as well. We were just going—“

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Magnon coos. Her voice is like smooth smoke on this gray street. “Don’t you have news for your dear parents?”

It takes all of Azelma’s effort not to bring her hands anywhere near her midsection. “Go away,” she says in an undertone.

Magnon looks Azelma over and a knowing smile spreads over her face before she bursts out laughing. “My dear, how many months are you along?”

“That’s none of your business!” Gavroche retorts as he steps between his sisters and this woman.

Magnon draws herself up to her full height. “No need to be so uncivil, boy. Remember I can still take you off by your ears,” she says in a low voice. “Your parents are getting old and of course they will need some form of support.”

“Which they have, courtesy of the penal system,” Eponine answers tartly. “Even if they didn’t have life sentences, there are still restraining orders, so they won’t have any bit of us.”

Magnon laughs even harder. “That boyfriend of yours has taught you well. Quite the catch, isn’t he?”

“Don’t bring him into this,” Eponine mutters.

“Well if your sisters won’t help, what about you?” Magnon asks Gavroche. “You are still your father’s son, you’ll always have his name.”

“Just go away, please,” Azelma whispers. She doesn’t even know if Magnon has brought any friends with her; in fact it’s possible that at any moment someone could run up and attack them. She can feel something stifling her, akin to that cold clammy feeling of a night in a crawl space, under the floorboards of a hovel where her parents, Magnon, and several others are having a ‘meeting’. ‘Gavroche cried then,’ she recalls. Yet she wills herself to meet Magnon’s mocking look. “You stay away from my family.”

“Is it going to be as simple as that, Mrs. Courfeyrac?” Magnon sneers.

“If you do anything to my husband or my daughter, I will kill you,” Azelma says.
“Such bold words----” Magnon begins as she takes another step towards them, only to be cut off by the shrill sound of a car alarm. “What the hell!” she yells as she wheels around.

“There. Now you have your audience,” Eponine says triumphantly from where she has now darted back to the car and pulled on the door. She calmly sticks the car keys back into the ignition to stop the alarm. “Happy now?”

“You little bitch!” Magnon spits. However she goes pale when she sees a police officer sauntering up towards them. “It’s nothing, officer---”

The police officer raises an eyebrow as he glances from the Thenardier siblings to Magnon. “Whose car is this?”

“It’s my husband’s,” Azelma answers. “And these are my siblings. They’re with me.”

The officer nods before doing a double take when he gets a look at Eponine. “You’re Doctor Thenardier! You saved my nephew’s life two months ago.”

“What’s your nephew’s name?” Eponine asks, cracking a smile.

“Julien. Last name de la Mole,” the policeman replies. “He’s doing well now, Doc. Just thought you’d want to know.”

“Thanks for telling me. We’ll be fine, hope we didn’t disturb you too much, Sir!” Eponine says before taking the opportunity to half-drag Azelma and Gavroche into the pizza parlor.

“Who would have thought, saved by a copper’s mind and a surgeon’s knife!” Gavroche laughs as they find a table and hide behind some menus. He jabs a thumb to where the policeman is now berating a very flustered and embarrassed Magnon. “She’s not going to squawk her way out of this one.”

“I’m not afraid of her,” Eponine mutters as she brings out her phone to get a picture. “I’m not letting anyone force us to move or give up anything.”

Azelma wills herself to nod even though she can still feel her heart pounding in her chest. “Aren’t you the least bit worried?”

“I’m tired of them chasing us away from our lives,” Eponine says. She gives her sister a quizzical look. “A daughter? Did you have that ultrasound already?”

“No, it was just a trick of the tongue,” Azelma replies. ‘Do I know? Do I really?’ she wonders with bewilderment as she begins to peruse the menu.

III

“This is more than payment for Courfeyrac and Azelma’s reception; this is free labor!”

Grantaire would roll about laughing at Jehan’s griping, that is if they were both on the floor instead of perched on a scaffolding just under the ceiling of the Revolution Cafe. “Poetic injustice, my dear,” he chuckles as he reaches over to wipe some blue paint off the tip of Jehan’s nose.

“A poor sublimation is more like it even if we get free food,” Jehan groused as he looks at his hands now covered with green and brown camouflage patterns. “Why couldn’t they just let you paint a
mural instead of a ceiling covered in flags?"

“It’s not as if you’ve never done anything on commission before.”

“Normally I am stringent with my terms, Capital R.”

“Oh you being of hubris!” Grantaire says dramatically, and this time he has to grab Jehan’s jacket lest the poet have an unwelcome meeting with the floor. “Do you think your artistic principles make a good roasting, or an excellent broiling—”

“You do have those artistic principles too,” Jehan retorts as he dips his roller brush in a can. “You just don’t bandy them about.”

Grantaire merely shrugs, but even so he knows that Jehan has hit on a grain of truth. ‘A too quiet courage,’ he thinks as he reaches out to fill in a square with red paint. He wishes now that he was on the ground so he could properly view the full effect of insignias and emblems of various countries all marshalled together in this interior.

Jehan leans backwards at the sound of the cafe door clattering open. “Hello Mr. Fauchelevent! Hello Elodie! Nice to see you in these parts.”

“We’re just getting out of the rain,” Mr. Fauchelevent says as he sets Elodie down on one of the cafe’s sofas and helps her remove her raincoat. “Don’t mind us.”

Elodie seems to have other ideas since she scrambles off the seat and takes a few wobbly steps forward. “Mister Grantaire, does your mother know you draw on walls?” she asks.

“She likes it when I do,” Grantaire replies as he grabs Jehan’s brush away from him. “We’re calling it a day, love,” he informs the poet.

“Finally!” Jehan says before they both climb down to the safety of level ground. He reaches out to ruffle Elodie’s hair but the girl shrinks away. “Why, is something wrong?”

“I might get my clothes dirty and Miss Cosette will be mad,” Elodie says, looking down.

“She won’t be mad. She’s not afraid of dirty clothes,” Mr. Fauchelevent assures her.

Elodie nods trustingly before losing no time in giving Jehan a hug. She looks past him towards a spot on the wall. “Is that me?”

“Yes it is, kid,” Grantaire says proudly, now remembering that he has already included her in the cafe’s signature frieze. “Look at you, a little fighter.”

“I’m not brave,” Elodie says. “I cry too much.”

“Crying is a way of letting others know that you need help. So there is nothing wrong with that,” Grantaire informs her. ‘Maybe it might make her too soft, but she’s got already enough marble and steel to look to,’ he decides even as Jehan signals to the cafe proprietor, who is already waiting with a menu.

Just as they are all sitting down at a cushy corner booth, ready to tuck into ice cream sundaes and freshly warmed empanadas, the cafe door clatters open once more to admit five more customers. “Since when did the police take an interest in this place?” Grantaire finds himself wondering as he notices that the newcomers are clad in the telltale blue of the local squad. He tries to occupy himself by drawing squiggly lines on his glass of chilled Irish coffee as well as on Elodie’s ice cream bowl,
all the while keeping one ear cocked for the conversation a few feet away.

Jehan gestures with his lips to the group. “Suspicious?”

“Always,” Grantaire mutters. Even though the law enforcement have been more benign as of late thanks to changes in the regime, nothing can shake Grantaire’s well-founded cynicism about this agency. ‘Because there is no antidote to that sort of power,’ he reminds himself.

He may just be proven right if the way that these police officers are boisterously discussing their exploits is any indicator. “Of course I got them well, Seargent. Shipshape, not sloppy as you said,” the most junior officer says over the razzing and teasing of his comrades.

“That’s one thing, but are you going to nail the inspector, the one who’s singing?” a more grizzled enforcer asks.

“Why would I want to nail him?”

“You’d best stop going after guppies and chase after sharks, mate. Especially those who like telling on each other’s business.”

It is enough for Grantaire to set aside his drink and lean in, regardless of the reproving and puzzled looks that he is getting from Mr. Fauchelevent and Elodie respectively. “Whatever it is, the point is not to make it appear like an inside job,” the most senior officer of the group says solemnly.

“How? People aren’t that stupid,” the junior officer protests.

“Leave that to the guys on protection detail. They’re good at this, you’ve seen them do it before. They’re already across the country and in place anyway.”

’Son of a bitch,’ Grantaire thinks as he brings out his phone to begin sending a message under the table. “Jehan, we need to call Enjolras,” he types before shoving the gadget on his boyfriend’s lap.

Jehan glances from the phone and at the police officers. “Bad news?” he mouths.

Grantaire nods. “He’s got company. Bad company.”
Combeferre knows trouble when he sees it, more so when he hears it—years of learning to differentiate heart murmurs, abdominal bruits, and abnormal breath sounds can do this to a person after all. It is quite another thing though when the trouble comes in the form of laughter, particularly in the surgery department’s staff room during lunch break. ‘Now what on earth have they gotten their hands on this time?’ he wonders as he casually dumps his gloves in the trashcan by the door. Judging by the fact that Eponine is not around, since she is still at her downstairs office, it is probably once again overloaded with testosterone and not safe for work.

“That’s not even the worst picture!” Navet hollers over the laughter and catcalls of the group. “You should see the ones from the Christmas parties!”

“Not those! Those are out of focus!” one of the other junior surgeons says.

“Evidence is still evidence,” Reynault snickers. “Come on, next page.”

‘Page? They cannot be looking at what I think they’re looking at!’ Combeferre thinks as he finally steps forward. He finds himself wishing that he was hallucinating, dissociating, or at least in some altered state, but there is no denying the snapshot on the page of the thick book on Navet’s lap.

“Where did you get this?” he asks slowly as he confiscates the tome.

Everyone draws away from Navet, who now looks around with a stupefied expression. “It was lying around,” he manages to say.

“Lying around the Thenardiers’ apartment, you mean?” Combeferre asks frostily as he takes a look at the photo in his medical school yearbook. The truth is he doesn’t need the picture to jog his memory; he will always remember that Valentine’s Day in medical school when he went out on a limb and wrote Eponine a letter that he had projected on a screen before a lecture. The look on her face, captured in that photo, is one of sheer adoration. It would be heartening, if he could still believe that she was still that starry eyed young girl.

Navet swallows hard. “Gavroche and I were cleaning out some stuff and it was lying around, as I said.”

“I see, and it somehow has ended up in your possession?” Combeferre asks as he shoves the book back at his junior resident. “Give this back to Eponine later, and apologize.”

“It’s only a picture, Combeferre!” the incorrigible Reynault protests. “Unless it’s a sore spot—”

Combeferre reddens at the snickers this tack produces. “I plead being twenty-two.”

“It is sweet, you have to admit,” one of the older residents comments. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I didn’t know she had it in her either,” Reynault mutters.

Combeferre crosses his arms. “That is none of your business.”
“No, it’s evidence based. You actually risked your manliness to do that, and she fell all over it, and now years later she’s with your best friend who is as romantic as a brick wall!” Reynault gripes. “Well there is one sensible thing you could do with a brick wall——“

“I would like to hear the end of that sentence, Reynault,” Eponine calls dryly as she saunters in the staff room, one hand clutching a cup of coffee while balancing case files with the other. She frowns when she sees the book on Navet’s lap. “So that’s where it went?”

“Never pictured you to be so sentimental,” Reynault quips.

“No, I don’t leave blackmail fodder in the wrong hands,” she retorts as she sets her things down and snatches up the yearbook. She then puts the offending book in her cubicle. “Show’s over boys.”

“You heard the lady,” Combeferre adds in a tone that makes it clear that he will not tolerate any more idle conjectures on this subject. As he goes to his desk to write up the records of his latest operation and transfer pictures from his camera to his laptop, he hears someone pulling up a chair. Before he can berate the culprit, he catches sight of a pair of horn rimmed glasses. “Good afternoon, Doctor Mabeuf.”

“Am I bothering something important, Daniel?” Mabeuf asks gently.

Combeferre pinches the bridge of his nose. “Commentary over the med school annual to be exact.”

Mabeuf nods as he glances from Combeferre to where Eponine is hard at work on some papers of her own, occasionally glancing at a screen showing a live feed of the Transnonain trial. “I’m not siding with Reynault or the others, but for comment’s sake, I do remember you and Eponine when you were still medical students. You two, as well as Joly and Musichetta made a good team especially when things got toxic and the training wing got overloaded.”

“We make part of a good team, but we’re not a team per se,” Combeferre explains. He’s not about to detail all the quiet walkouts and excuses that were in between those picture perfect moments. “I had my priorities while she had a scholarship to hold down. We could never build each other up.”

Mabeuf sighs. “Outside of the classroom and the workplace you mean?”

Combeferre nods just as several phones start ringing at full volume throughout the staff room. He fears he’ll go deaf by the time he locates his phone at the far end of his desk, but all that flees from his mind when he sees Bahorel’s number on the screen. “Hello, what’s going on?” he greets.

“Combeferre, are you in the ward now?” Bahorel asks slowly.

“The staff room. Why?”

“There’s been a very serious breach. The Dupond family needs to go on lockdown right now.”

Combeferre gets up from his seat and sees at the corner of his eye that Eponine is on the phone, perhaps with Feuilly, Bossuet, or any one of their colleagues from the human rights commission. “I can arrange for Dupond to be transferred to another facility. It will take more than an hour though,” he says.

“He’s not safe on the road,” Bahorel points out. “Don’t you have a basement or something?”

“We do....” Combeferre trails off even as he recalls what exactly is in the basement of the Saint-Michel Hospital; it is something that unsettles most of the living. “Who else is compromised?”
“If I tell you, I will have to kill you,” Bahorel says in a singsong tone. “ Seriously, it’s classified info for now. I’ll just keep you guys posted. Don’t take any visitors.”

“Will do,” Combeferre says before hanging up, even as he notices Eponine also quitting the room. He sends a text message to Marius lest his friend be startled at the sight of his patient’s empty bed. After fetching a wheelchair and a small oxygen tank, he heads straight to the neurology ward. He finds Chretein Dupond half asleep while propped up in bed. “Chretein, we have to move you for a bit,” he says as he clasps his patient’s shoulder.

Dupond groans and shakes his head. “No, not again. Tired.”

“It’s not for another procedure, don’t worry,” Combeferre reassures him as he grabs some blankets from the bedside table. He pushes the wheelchair over to the bedside and manages to maneuver Dupond into the seat; by the time he is done, his arms are burning with the effort of making sure that Dupond doesn’t land on the floor by mistake. “Now I have to strap you in,” he explains as he finds the wheelchair’s lone restraint.

Dupond’s expression is bewildered but at the same time he does not look sorry to be out of bed. “Where are we going?”

“Downstairs,” Combeferre replies. He takes a deep breath before looking at Dupond. “To the morgue. We have to hide there.” He is afraid for a moment that Dupond will lash out or protest, but the man is quiet with a contemplative look, and he knows that his patient understands the situation. “It’s only for a few hours.”

“My family?” Dupond asks.

“They’ll be safe,” Combeferre says as he wheels his patient into the elevator. “Dr. Thenardier will take care of them.”

Dupond’s lips move as if he is making a silent prayer. “Where?”

“I’ll tell you soon,” Combeferre replies. He presses the button marked ‘B’ on the elevator, ignoring any curious looks in his direction. “It’s cold here,” he says casually as he covers Dupond with a blanket and then wheels him out of the elevator.

Combeferre hasn’t been in the morgue since his days as an intern, when he had to assist at an autopsy of a woman found lifeless in her residence. It is not that he feels revulsion towards the remains of the departed, to be more to the point it’s an unease that imbues his being as he and Dupond enter a side room. ‘No one really rests here,’ he realizes as he rubs his arms. Here lie the forgotten, those whose stories have yet to receive the final word, or those who do not have the means yet to be properly buried or cremated. He has to pinch himself if only to stop imagining what may lie in the darkness.

Dupond on the other hand does not seem fazed in the slightest. “Who?” he asks as he feebly gestures to the drawers at the end of the autopsy room.

“None we know,” Combeferre says.

Dupond lets out a croaky laugh and shakes his head. Combeferre manages to keep a straight face even as he finds a wobbly stool to sit on. He brings out his phone and stares at the screen, as if he could only will his friends to call and say that they are safe. However when his phone does light up, it’s another familiar name on the screen. “Hello Florence,” he greets, hoping to sound cheerful.

“Hey Daniel. Are you doing anything later?” Florence’s voice is as smooth as velvet, but it somehow
evokes summer days and cool springs in Combeferre’s mind. “A friend of mine has a gallery opening, and I have free tickets.”

“I’ve got work to deal with,” Combeferre says. There is no way he can detail to her what the situation is, not without scaring or endangering her. “It might tie me up a bit, but as soon as I can get off, I’ll let you know, okay?”

“That’s cool. Don’t overwork yourself,” Florence replies. “I hope to see you later.

“You too,” Combeferre replies before the connection grows choppy and he has to hang up. ‘When did my day become something out of a spy epic?’ he wonders as he rubs his temples and shuts his eyes.

II

“So how long were they in there?”

“Two hours. That’s not so bad; some autopsies last longer than that.”

All the same Musichetta cringes at the end of Joly’s narration. “I have to give props to Combeferre. I would have run out screaming.”

“You wouldn’t. I would,” Joly insists. “Remember how I was in anatomy class?”

“All too well,” Musichetta says, sticking her tongue out at him if only to lighten the mood a little. ‘Maybe it’s just because you work on the other end of the life-death spectrum,’ she tells herself as they begin wandering down yet another aisle of clothes in the department store. She counts herself lucky that she has a fairly low mortality and morbidity count among her patients, but even so she knows that more years of experience may just even that score out.

She turns at the sound of Joly clearing his throat. “Chetta, have you read the label yet on this?” he asks, holding up a silky yellow cardigan.

“Will you put that back in the shopping cart? I don’t want it to snag on anything.”

“It says always hand wash. You don’t have the time to do that.”

“I will make the time, Patrice!” Musichetta retorts as she gets the sweater and puts it carefully back into the shopping cart. “I need something nice that doesn’t scream ‘just came from the hospital’ all over it.”

Joly sighs deeply. “Is this why you also insisted on taking me shopping?”

“Yes of course,” Musichetta says. She’d make a joke about it if not for the affronted expression on Joly’s face. “Come on. You can’t keep hiding under lab coats. Sometimes we can go out, sometimes we can do more than ramen nights and late night coffee with the gang, and sometimes it’s just good to look nice.”

“You make it sound like dressing up for college parties again,” he points out.

“Ugh, those!” she says with a shudder. “I look at the pics and I wonder ‘what were we thinking?’ I can’t believe you let me leave the house wearing a jumper dress!”

“I can’t believe you let all of us leave wearing shutter shades,” Joly says, shuddering with horror at the memory. “I know it was a thing then, but now....”
“The best eyesight is hindsight, but excuse me for wanting to sharpen foresight as well,” Musichetta says as she grabs two button down shirts and tosses them at Joly. “Come on, try these on.”

Joly nods, but when he gets a look at the fitting room line, he blanches. “Can’t we wait for these to go on sale next week?”

“Both of us have case audits next week, so it’s now or never,” Musichetta says. Shopping after work isn’t a good idea, but it is not as if their respective schedules have given them any other choice. All the same she sighs deeply when she sees Joly’s glum face and the way he scuffs his shoes. “Oh alright, if you just try on the shirts we picked out, just so we don’t have to keep walking up and down the place, we’ll stop by the puzzle store before we go home.”

Joly’s face brightens. “You get to pick the monument this time.”

She can’t help but return his grin. “Yeah. Our room needs a Taj Mahal.” While some people think that their collection of three-dimensional puzzles is a bit much for their limited space, she still cannot bear to have this romantic miniature absent from their collection. ‘It’s a good story after all,’ she reminds herself as she hands some garments to Joly and then brings the rest of the clothes to the queue for the ladies’ fitting room.

Almost as soon as she finds a place, someone else gets in line behind her, effectively keeping her in the queue. The woman ahead of her in the line suddenly drops a package of lingerie, and Musichetta picks it up. She freezes when she realizes who she’s handing these clothes to. “Good evening Mrs. Enjolras.”

Ari Enjolras’ brow furrows for a second till her eyes widen with recognition. “You’re a friend of my son. Your name is Laurain, isn’t it?”

“Musichetta Laurain,” the younger woman corrects amiably. “How have you been? I didn’t know you were still in town.”

“I see you’ve heard the latest news,” Ari huffs. “Claude and I were just passing through.”

“On a holiday?”

“Of sorts.”

The line isn’t moving, and Musichetta can’t stand even the thought of the awkward silence that is sure to fall. “So I heard that you met Eponine.”

Ari’s eyebrows shoot up. “You’re her friend?”

“Have been since med school,” Ari’s disdain is so palpable that Musichetta swears it almost comes off her in waves, but the younger woman still has to smile. “She’s one of the brightest and bravest people I’ve ever met.”

“She is certainly a survivor,” Ari sniffs. “Don’t get me wrong; I approve of intelligence and resourcefulness in a woman, and I have respect for those who make their own way in the world. I am sure that Auguste appreciates those qualities too, but I hardly doubt they would be enough to retain his attention for very long.”

“Eponine is more than that,” Musichetta says. She figures that Ari must still be startled by the fact that the boy with a reputation for being an unmoving stoic is capable of something more intimate. “For one thing she is as stubborn as he is.”
Ari snorts with disbelief. “Is such a thing possible?”

“It is. I think it makes the world as we know it a little bit better,” Musichetta replies. “They’re good for each other.”

“I want him to be happy and to do well.”

“She gave him back his life. It doesn’t get better than that.”

Ari is silent for a moment and Musichetta wonders if she will relent, but suddenly that hardness returns to Ari’s expression. “We’ll see how that lasts,” Ari finally says before barging her way into an empty fitting room.

Musichetta rolls her eyes as she waits for her turn in line for a few minutes longer. It is only when she is finally in one of the cubicles that she shakes her head with bemusement; while she has known Ari to be obstinate, she has never imagined Ari to be in such denial. ‘I wonder how much of that is coming from her husband though,’ she muses as she begins trying on a dress. She cannot imagine ever having this sort of discussion with her friend’s father.

When she leaves the fitting room and hands some of the clothes back to the saleslady, she finds Joly already waiting by one of the clothes racks, with some shopping bags at his feet. He is looking idly through his phone but his gaze quickly meets hers. “It doesn’t have to be the Taj Mahal,” he says.

“What do you want to get?” Musichetta asks as she peers over his shoulder and finds that he is looking through photos of their puzzle collection.

“I think the Petronas Towers would look nice by your side of the bed,” he says shyly.

She gives him a tight hug and a sloppy kiss by way of thanks. He always knows how to make the pieces fall into place.

III

Javert knows better than to fall asleep too early, even in a supposed safehouse. ‘All the same I’m getting too old for the night watch,’ he tells himself as he leaves lights on in the small bungalow, if only to give any plotters the impression that the place is the dwelling of an insomniac with a fear of the dark.

He shakes his head when he finds that there is literally no reading material in the dwelling; he is not allowed access even to newspapers until the trial is over. There is nothing here to distract him from his memories, of the things he must continue to relay under oath the next morning. ‘Such as the real reason I did not go very far, not at all,’ he reflects as he sits down.

It now seems so long ago. He had resigned from the police force after learning of how the top brass employed assassins in an attempt to silence the more radical factions. However in his haste, he had burned too many bridges and blocked up all the avenues that would have allowed him to slip into obscurity overseas. He laughs sardonically as he looks at his hands now spotted and gnarled with age; there is little employment nowadays readily available to a man of his age and bearing.

He gets to his feet quickly and wraps himself in his coat before looking for a bag of green tea and some hot water. He takes this hot beverage with him to the house’s bare backyard and situates himself in one of the poky corners near the far wall. Moments or perhaps hours pass before he hears the roar of an engine in the street, followed by the shattering of glass. His heart hammers in his chest as he waits for an explosion, footsteps, or any other sign of someone coming in to finish the job, but the night remains silent long after his would be attackers have sped away down the street.
Javert fishes for his phone and covers the screen with his hand to conceal any sign of light. He carefully dials a number and waits with bated breath for an answer. “They came tonight,” he simply says.

“I see. You have to get out of there as soon as you can. Kaffeeklatsch in fifteen minutes,” Enjolras asks from the other end of the line.

“I’ll be there,” Javert says just before hanging up. It is quite wise and yet typical of Enjolras to choose a place where there is safety in numbers, but it is not something the former inspector would agree to if given more leeway. ‘More secrecy is needed,’ he reflects as he carefully grabs a few valuables and a few changes of clothes before quitting the house. Yet isn’t concealment the very root of their problems in the first place?

He doesn’t put on dark glasses or push his hat down over his brow when he walks into the coffee shop, but he abandons his straight posture and sticks his hands in his pockets while he looks about the place. It does not take long to spot Enjolras seated in a corner, apparently busy with a video chat. Javert merely gives him a nod of recognition en route to the counter to place an order.

The tired looking barista raises an eyebrow when Javert mentions that he simply wants some hot red tea. “We have some coffee specials, Sir...” she begins.

“The red tea only if you please,” Javert retorts gruffly. The young woman rolls her eyes before shoving a tall mug of scalding hot water and a teabag at Javert, all the while muttering something about ‘old fogeys who ought to stay at home’.

Enjolras watches this exchange with some amusement. “I must apologize for this location. It is in close proximity to your temporary accommodations though,” he explains to Javert.

“I see,” Javert says before he takes a cautious sip of his cup of tea. He notices now that Enjolras has a worn out backpack by the table; anyone who doesn’t know any better could easily think that this young man is yet another insomniac student cramming paperwork. ‘Which only makes me out of place here,’ Javert can’t help thinking as he drinks more of his tea.

Enjolras checks his watch and then shuts down his laptop. “I should warn you, the accommodations are a little different from those originally assigned to you, but it is simply to get off the streets tonight. Tomorrow we will have to file an incident report and get better lodgings.”

“I didn’t bring much of anything,” Javert gripes.

“You will not need to worry about that,” Enjolras says as he packs up his laptop. He rolls up his sleeves and then shoulders his backpack. “We leave now. Stay close.”

Javert finishes more of his tea before following Enjolras out of the cafe. It unnerves him somewhat to see how purposeful and calm this young man’s stride is; he is apparently no stranger to this town. ‘Probably some youthful misadventure,’ he concludes, more so when they end up outside a squat, slightly rundown motel.

Enjolras lets out a mortified sort of sigh. “Again, better than the streets,” he mutters as they enter the lobby. The motel’s concierge does not seem ruffled by their sudden appearance, but only hands them a key and tells them not to make a mess.

As they walk through the winding corridor of the motel’s second floor, it becomes clear to Javert that this place is not really a place for a seedy rendezvous; the place is eerily quiet save for the occasional blare of the televisions behind closed doors. “Transients?” he asks.
“Truckers,” Enjolras deadpans as they get to a room at the end of the hall. “A few backpackers too, but this is not really a tourist hostel.”

Javert nods as he opens the door and is greeted by the sight of a room that is furnished only with twin beds, a table, and a sink. “I imagine that someone of your stature would choose more comfortable lodgings,” he remarks as he sets down his few belongings on one end of the table.

“Not on a starting salary,” Enjolras replies as he puts aside his own bag and then leans against a wall. He is silent for a while, as if thinking something over. “What did they do to the safehouse?”

“A pillbox,” Javert says. He knows the explosive all too well. “To you?”

“Knives.” Enjolras crosses his arms. “Very sloppy though. The attackers were not even masked.”

“They meant to kill,” Javert points out. ‘In my case it was only a scare perhaps?’ he wonders worriedly. If that is so, whoever attacked his safehouse knows him, or of him at least, and is perhaps anything but a hired hitman.

Yet this is not the only worry on Enjolras’ mind, particularly when the young man checks his phone and grits his teeth. “What do you know of the assassins once hired by the police force?” he asks.

“What?”

“Wasn’t that why you resigned months ago?”

Javert nods as he recalls the last time Enjolras confronted him about this fact. “They are not an organized group. Little more than petty thieves at times, just given a gun.”

“And they are trusted with targets?”

“A bullet is a bullet, isn’t it?”

Enjolras nods slowly. “You never saw who threw the pillbox?”

“Of course not,” Javert scoffs. “No criminal, not even the worst, would be as stupid.” The image of Eponine’s father comes to mind; the man had at least burned the papers to his transactions prior to being arrested, even if he had failed to wipe out the digital records. ‘Never saw a worse plea for innocence,’ he thinks with a smirk.

“So you’re suggesting we won’t find any evidence?” Enjolras asks pointedly.

“It is elementary,” Javert says. “Even the most inexperienced thief you know can tell you that; that’s why I could not apprehend her.”

Enjolras’ eyes darken. “That is not what happened. She told me as much.”

“Do not be naive. She was fifteen, old enough to be of use to her parents. She was just smart enough to limit her involvement and hide whatever evidence there was of it,” Javert points out. Of course there is the possibility that Eponine’s shady past may have been due to being under duress much of the time, but as far as he is concerned she cannot be completely free of any culpability given her capacity for rational thinking.

“The case is closed,” Enjolras says. “I do not see why you are bringing this up.”

“To make a point, Attorney Enjolras,” Javert replies. “Whoever did this knows you too...and perhaps everyone else as well.”
“Are you saying...”

“I’d call home now if I were you. You’d best hope someone still picks up.”
To Change Your Stars

16: To Change Your Stars

The last time that Marius shared accommodations with anyone had been during his pre-med years, when he had made the mistake of crashing on Courfeyrac’s sofa for a month. ‘At least this time I won’t have to spend a month purging my mind,’ he notes with unmitigated relief as he stretches and looks around the guestroom—now his room—at the Fauchelevents’ home. Even though Courfeyrac’s bachelor pad has its own creature comforts such as a whirlpool bath and a state of the art sound system, Marius is sure that none of these are worth enduring the discomfiture of witnessing some of his friend’s more private escapades and then some.

On the other hand, life at the Fauchelevent home is simple and runs with its own share of orderly chaos, something quite different from what Marius is accustomed to, but he is starting to appreciate rather dearly. It isn’t a conventional arrangement. For one thing, how many guys agree to move in with their girlfriends in a house wherein sharing a bed is out of the question, and said girlfriend’s parents keep a close eye on everything? That doesn’t even take into account the fact that much of the day’s routine revolves around a fretful eight year old girl who still can’t sleep alone in the dark. Yet no matter what way Marius looks at the situation, it’s still family, something he never thought he’d have, much less be invited to. ‘I can live with concessions,’ he tells himself as he gets out of bed.

As he dons a freshly laundered blue button down shirt and black slacks, he hears the creak of a door elsewhere in the hallway, followed by the shuffling of small feet still clad in socks. Marius loses no time in venturing out of his own room. “You’re up early today, Elodie,” he greets the pajama clad girl who is clearly contemplating how she’s going to get down the stairs by herself.

Elodie gives him a toothy grin. “It’s cartoon time, Doctor Marius.”

“It’s Saturday, of course,” Marius concurs as he scoops her up to carry her safely to the first floor. He remembers to set her down on the last step and catches her when she leaps off; it’s one of the little things she has to do every day if only to bolster her spirits further throughout her prolonged recovery. As he adjusts his hold on her skinny form, he catches sight of the clock, which reads just past six in the morning. “What do you watch when it’s this early?” he asks as he carries her to the kitchen.

Elodie wipes her nose on her sleeve. “Anything. Sometimes I can’t sleep. But Miss Cosette reads me stories and that makes it a little better.”

“Which story did she read?”

“Rapunzel. I asked.”

Marius can’t help but ruffle Elodie’s hair before he carefully sets her down on a chair next to the kitchen workbench. On most days this place is Fantine’s province; cooking is some sort of meditation and she detests anyone poking around her work, but no one can complain when the results include creamy scrambled eggs tossed with lightly sautéed tomatoes, or fluffy pancakes studded with chocolate chips or smothered in cream cheese and jam. Today though nearly everyone else is sleeping in after a long week at work, and Marius will just have to make do with whatever he can come up with for himself and Elodie within the next ten minutes. It takes him some time till he locates the cupboard where all the cereal is kept in large porcelain crocks. He gets some frosted cornflakes for himself, and pours a whole bowlful of strawberry and chocolate puffs for Elodie, who
watches him intently the entire time.

Elodie nods as she scoots over to get her bowl of cereal. “Can I eat while watching TV?”

Marius hesitates, wondering what Cosette or the older Fauchelevents will have to say about this. Yet who is he to deprive her of something that was a highlight of his own otherwise quiet childhood? “Only this time,” he says before reaching out with one arm to steady her by her shoulders as they slowly make their way to the living room.

As soon as she is settled on the sofa, Elodie grabs the remote and begins flipping through channels. Her dark eyes go wide when she comes across a news segment covering a fierce argument in the Transnonain trial. “Is Mister Enjolras going to win his case?” she asks after a moment.

“I really hope so,” Marius replies before getting a spoonful of cereal. Sometimes he forgets that Elodie’s biological father is a lawyer too, albeit facing disbarment in light of being convicted for attempted murder. “He’s been working very hard on the case.”

“I heard some people don’t want him to win,” Elodie says as she looks into her own bowl. “Are they bad people, Doctor Marius?”

“They believe a little differently, that’s all,” Marius says. ‘This is one of the reasons I quit pre-law for medicine,’ he reflects. In his vocation he does not have to judge a person’s arguments or make slanted appeals to a jury; what evidence he gathers is always in the interest of saving or improving life. “That doesn’t mean they are bad people.”

“Bad people are those who hurt others, right?” Elodie asks slowly.

Marius takes a deep breath, if only to better bear the weight he hears in Elodie’s tone. “You mean those who actually want to hurt people and aren’t sorry for it.”

“So I’m not bad?”

“You’re a very good girl, Elodie.”

The child is quiet a little longer as she eats her cereal, all thoughts of watching cartoons forgotten. “I want Mister Enjolras to come back soon since Mister Grantaire says that Doctor Eponine is stressed without him, and I heard stress is very, very bad.”

“Wait, what did Grantaire say?” Marius asks slowly.

“Something about a package Mister Enjolras needs to give to Doctor Eponine,” Elodie replies blithely. “Can’t he just mail it to her?”

It is enough for Marius to nearly choke on his food. “You’ll understand when you’re older,” he manages to say once he can breathe.

“Everyone says that and no one tells me anything,” Elodie whines. “I’m older than I was yesterday!”

“Not that sort of older,” Marius says. He cannot imagine how Elodie might be when she is old enough to understand these questions or go on a date, and heaven help them all when that day comes.

Elodie looks quizzically at him. “So why was it so funny if it’s a grown-up thing?”

“It’s only a silly joke,” Marius says. It is all he can do not to sigh with relief when he hears footsteps
upstairs, more so when Cosette makes her appearance after a few moments. “Good morning Cosette,” he greets as he gets to his feet.

Cosette smiles widely, more so when Elodie waves to her and scoots to the side to make room for her on the sofa. “Why do you look so puzzled at this hour, Marius?” she asks.

“Doctor Marius won’t tell me grown up things,” Elodie pouts before shoving more cereal in her mouth.

“She’s asking me about something Grantaire said two nights ago,” Marius explains as he plops back on the sofa. He just manages to catch his cereal bowl before it tips all over the place. “One of the more adult things,” he clarifies.

Cosette bursts out laughing and then kisses the top of his head. “You don’t have to tell her everything at once, Marius,” she points out before turning to look at Elodie. “Do you want orange juice or chocolate milk with that?”

Elodie chews noisily for a few moments. “Orange” she manages to say with her mouth full. “Can it please be in the big glass?”

“The one with flowers, yes,” Cosette says before grabbing Marius’ arm to pull him to the kitchen. “We need to talk.”

“About?” Marius asks as he sets aside his bowl.

Cosette glances towards the living room. “I think we should let her go back to school soon. She needs to be around kids her own age,” she whispers.

“Between you and me, Cosette, I don’t know if she can manage it yet. She’s still a little uncoordinated and she lags when reading and calculating,” he points out. Although there are schools near their home for children with special needs, he knows that this can only go so far in ensuring Elodie’s emotional welfare. ‘She doesn’t need any more heartbreak from anyone trying to bully her,’ he decides when he hears their foster daughter singing along merrily to a TV commercial. “Maybe we can arrange for some homeschooling for her, so she doesn’t fall too far behind.”

Cosette shrugs. “That can’t go on forever. I don’t want her to grow up feeling so different or alone.”

“She’s got us.”

“It’s different. You know it.”

Marius swallows hard even as he squeezes her hand. He knows all too well how it is to be the only child in a houseful of adults, to be underfoot all the time, and to be tongue-tied with kids his age. He can only imagine what Cosette has endured with her more itinerant upbringing. “I think it would be a good idea to ease her in first. Let her have some friends over here, maybe have small group tutoring before we enrol her in a proper school?”

“What’s it with you and these baby steps?” Cosette asks, but her smile is one of agreement. “We should ask Elodie too, of course. I don’t want her to be unhappy with our decision.”

Marius nods, but even so he wonders if Elodie will overestimate her own capabilities. ‘Then again her optimism may be helpful,’ he decides as he and Cosette return to the living room.

Elodie grins at them as she shows off her empty cereal bowl. “I’ve been good!” she chirps. “And I’ve been quiet too!”
“You’re always a good kid,” Cosette says as she puts down the large glass of orange juice on the coffee table. She scoops up Elodie and pulls her messy hair out of her face. “It’s going to be a sunny day. Do you want to go to the playground later, after your physical therapy?”

Elodie wrinkles her nose. “I can’t climb to the slide.”

“I’ll push you on the swings and we can try the see-saw,” Cosette offers. “It will be fun.”

The girl is quiet for a long moment before she nods. “Are you coming too?” she asks Marius.

“Yes. I’ll be here after lunch,” Marius promises. He wonders what sort of scene they’ll make: him and Cosette pushing Elodie in a wheelchair or holding on to both of her hands as she takes longer, less wobbly steps. ‘A bit too believable,’ he catches himself thinking, but he shoos away this nagging voice if only to help bring the picture to life.

II

As soon as the outpatient department closes for the afternoon, Eponine heads over to Enjolras’ apartment just to check things there. She can’t help but feel a knot in her gut as she sorts through the mail outside his door and then does a little straightening up throughout the place. ‘He’ll be back in a week. You should stop fretting,’ she chides herself as she sits on the sofa. All the same, she figures she can’t help it entirely, especially with the strange turns the trial has been taking. She reaches for her phone but doesn’t press the speed dial just yet; at this hour of the day her call would just go to voice mail. ‘Save it for later when you have a better story to tell him,’ she decides as she pockets her phone. She won’t call him just because she misses his voice; she’ll do it when she can hearten him with good news of home, and now all the more she is determined to make the afternoon go in her favor.

She takes the opportunity to change out of her work clothes into a more casual t-shirt and jeans before locking up the apartment and jogging to the bus station. She carefully counts out several coins in her hand before handing them to the bus conductor. “The Temple Square,” she says.

The conductor raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure about that, young lady?”

“I’ve been there before,” Eponine replies. ‘Better alone than in bad company,’ she tells herself as she finally boards the bus and takes a seat by the window. It’s just to take in the air; the truth is that she can find her way to this neighbourhood even if she was blindfolded.

It takes a quarter of an hour before the bus is officially in the area of ‘downtown’, and still ten minutes more before the spires and bustling activity of the commercial district give way to the sullen grayness of the tenements and housing projects. “You absolutely sure this is where you’re going, Miss?” the conductor asks Eponine as the bus stops outside a graffiti covered waiting shed. “I could drop you off another block, where it’s safer.”

“I know the neighbourhood,” Eponine answers calmly before alighting from the vehicle. The air is thick in this part of town; the heavy smell of rain mingles with the dank stench of rubbish and excrement, such that Eponine can practically feel it all settling on her skin. It’s something she wills herself to ignore as she crosses the street towards a two-storey building painted in a faded shade of lavender. A sign with the words: “Saint Maria Goretti Home for Girls” hangs by the splintered door.

Eponine knocks twice before she hears the click of a latch being undone so that the door can be opened part way. “Good afternoon. Eponine Thenardier here, to speak to Mother Asuncion,” she says.
“Yes, she’s been expecting you.” The door opens wider to reveal a harried looking woman of about thirty years of age. She has red hair that would perhaps be lovely if it was not tied up so severely in a bun. “You’d better wait in the office; she’s just dealing with one of the newer girls.”

Eponine nods as she sneaks a glance at the tag on this woman’s blouse; the name emblazoned there is Cecily. “Are you a counsellor here, Ma’am?” she asks.

“My glorified title,” Cecily says in a long suffering voice before motioning for Eponine to follow her down a long hallway with large rooms on either side. None of these chambers has a door; Eponine now understands that this is intentional as the jambs show no holes or any signs of having carried any hinges. Now and then Eponine catches glimpses of the house’s residents, all of them girls between the ages of twelve to eighteen. Many of them are wearing plain but clean white t-shirts and cut-off jeans, though there are a few still wearing the tattered frocks, oversized shirts, or pajamas that served as their street clothes. Many of the girls are chatting in small groups, but there are a few trying to work on lessons, or simply sitting about listlessly. A few peer curiously at Eponine and start whispering excitedly among themselves. Before Eponine can greet them, a piercing scream comes from a small cubicle at the end of the hall. Most of the girls fall into a terrified silence, a number back away, but no one ventures towards the source of the disturbance.

“That’s our isolation room,” Cecily says, sounding wearier than ever. “Had to break up a fight, the perpetrator is in there---"

The isolation room door swings open and a tall, imposing woman steps out. Her purple nun’s habit makes her seem even more formidable, more so when it becomes clear that under her wimple is an unlined but nonetheless ancient face. Eponine makes a slight bow almost without thinking of it. "Good afternoon Mother Asuncion."

The nun smiles and reaches out to shake Eponine’s hand. “Eponine. How long has it been?”

“Nearly twelve years now, Mother.”

“Twelve...that would make you near on thirty now, wouldn’t it? How time flies!”

Cecily gapes at Eponine. “You were---"

“Just for three years,” Eponine replies quickly. She steps away to let Mother Asuncion give a few instructions to Cecily, who suddenly appears all too relieved to scamper off to her errands. As soon as Cecily is out of the way, she clears her throat. “Did I come at a bad time, Mother?”

“There is never a bad time, only God’s time,” Mother Asuncion says kindly before showing Eponine into a small room that serves as both counselling room and directress’ office. It is the only room in this hall with a proper door. She motions for her guest to take the one cushioned chair in the room. “When you called asking to work with us, I was quite surprised. I know you’re a very busy doctor,” she says as she gets a magazine from her desk and holds it out to Eponine. “Look at you, child, now picture perfect in that white coat!”

Eponine has to keep a straight face when she sees that the magazine is none other than the local health journal; this particular issue has a feature article on the surgery department of Saint-Michel Hospital, accompanied by the obligatory group picture of the consultants, fellows, and residents.

“That was a while back---I mean, I’m still a surgeon but like I told you this doesn’t have much to do with surgery.”

“Well you’ve done us proud,” the nun says. “How are your siblings? You have a sister and a brother, am I correct about that?”
“They’re fine. Zel is a teacher and she just got married, while Gav is an electronics engineer.” There had been a time wherein she’d been furious at being separated from her younger siblings, who’d been put in various foster families while she’d lived several years in this house. ‘Now, I’m not sure that Zelma would have done well at all here,’ she realizes.

“I see. And any word from your parents?” Mother Asuncion asks.

Eponine simply shrugs. “How many girls are living here now?”

“Thirty-six. A manageable number, I’m sure you remember,” the older woman says. “Some of them have medical conditions—heart ailments, weak lungs, and I suspect a touch of the tuberculosis, and even a bit of the rickets. We need help there.”

“I could do that, and more,” Eponine points out. “I did say I was coming to do social work.”

“That’s mostly Cecily’s job, but you can see that the poor dear is overwhelmed,” Mother Asuncion says as she glances to the door. “I could let you handle some of the cases we’re trying to get placed within the next few weeks, or any newcomers. Cecily will still handle the long time residents.”

“That works,” Eponine agrees. She knows all too well how some individuals in Cecily’s line of work feel about having to give over their patients and clients to practicum students, however qualified they may be elsewhere? “How many of the girls are in school?”

Mother Asuncion takes a moment to think. “About twenty are enrolled, but as to who actually goes....” she trails off. “I am sure you remember how difficult it can be for these girls to keep up in school, and not just academically.”

Eponine can only nod even as her mind suddenly sees again schoolyard fences, ill-fitting jeans, and whispering girls all throughout the schoolyard. ‘Without Zel, Gav, or even Montparnasse around, I convinced myself that I didn’t need to confide in anyone,’ she thinks. Of course the price of that stoicism had been a reticence which not even Combeferre had been able to break during their better days in medical school. Even now she sometimes cannot believe it is her own voice finally speaking out about those dismal days.

After a few moments Mother Asuncion claps her hands. “Can you start in the middle of next week? Wednesday perhaps, after five as you asked for in your schedule?”

“Yes, I’ll be here,” Eponine says. It’s going to be a tight squeeze in her schedule, at least till she finishes her practicum hours for the course. ‘Just for a few weeks,’ she reminds herself as she and Mother Asuncion go over a few rules and reminders for her work.

When Eponine finally excuses herself, she hears hushed whispers and tittering from outside the office door. When she steps out, she finds about ten girls all huddled together in the corridor. The tallest of these youngsters motions for her friends to be quiet before crossing her arms and affecting a bored slouch. “Is it true that you used to live here, Ma’am?”

“I was here for three years,” Eponine says.

The older girls trade sceptical looks. “So who dumped you here? Your parents, or a boy?” one of the other girls sneers.

“The courts,” Eponine replies bluntly. “Believe me, none of you girls want that.”

“Dunno. That sounds pretty rich: a chick from this part of town picks up, works with the swells, and shacks up with a swanky lawyer,” the first girl says flippantly. “What’s the secret, lady?”
Eponine sighs, knowing all too well what they want her to say. It does not help that the truth is far stranger than the fantasy. “I did not see any of it coming. All I wanted when I was here was to get back to my sister and my brother.”

“Sentimental!” a third girl laughs.

“It’s the truth, take it or leave it,” Eponine retorts. There is no awe-inspiring dream or vision in the story of her teen years, no all-important conviction or earth-shattering realization. ‘I just knew I had to protect the two people who still mattered to me,’ she recalls.

The girls exchange glances. “Well that’s mean of you to hold out, Doctor,” the second girl pronounces before spitting on Eponine’s sneakers and then storming out.

Eponine scowls as she gets a tissue to wipe off the spittle. She of all people should know how troublesome quick fixes can be.
Gavroche considers himself an expert at moving; he’s done it enough times to know how to be packed and ready within an hour or two. ‘It’s always a balance between cooperation and attrition,’ he tells himself as he piles yet another box of his belongings into the back of Navet’s car, which is already crammed with detritus courtesy of two other friends moving in with them into their new apartment.

Of course Eponine is helping with the move, or at least with what she can before she has to go to work. “Now I got you a whole lot of detergent, so you boys have no excuse to dodge doing the laundry,” she admonishes him. “It’s idiot proof.”

“Aw Ponine, this is a proper situation, not a frat house,” Gavroche drawls. “Not that I ever lived in one.”

“Well thank goodness for that,” Eponine quips. “But seriously you boys....”

“Save the mother hen act for Enjolras....and whatever kids you will have,” Gavroche retorts. He laughs when his sister goes red up to the tips of her ears; it’s one of the things he will miss now that he’s moving away from the apartment they’ve shared since their days as students. He dusts off his hands on his pants and takes a last glance at the boxes stacked in the car. “It’s all good then. Guess I’ll see you at ramen housewarming in two days?”

“Yeah you will,” Eponine says before giving him a high-five. “And you’d better take care of my baby bro, Navet, or it’s demerits for you!” she calls to the young man in the driver’s seat.

“Aye, aye boss!” Navet says, giving her a mock salute. “Come on Gav, we have to go before the rush hour traffic starts.”

‘Doesn’t make a difference with the distance,’ Gavroche thinks but even so he gives his sister a last hug before hopping into the shotgun seat of his friends’ car. “Oh shut up. You sods have sisters too,” he tells Marcel and Lance, their two other friends chortling in the backseat.

“Yeah, but who ever thought that Doctor Bad-Ass Eponine Thenardier has that sentimental side?” Marcel manages to choke out between his guffaws.

‘I’m her only brother, she’s got every right to,’ Gavroche muses silently. As stifling and annoying as it sometimes seems especially at his age, it’s his sister’s determination that has kept him away from many a dangerous scrape. He knows that it will be her face that comes to mind when the word ‘mother’ is mentioned, and not the visage of the woman who birthed them and Azelma.

Lance, ever the slightly oblivious one, loses no time in opening a jumbo bag of chips and waving it in his friends’ faces. “Here you go guys. Traffic jam fuel!”

“Aw come on, I’m trying to drive here!” Navet says as he waves the bag away. “I don’t want to end up in the ER where I work, especially on my day off!”

“Wouldn’t that suck? Everyone prodding at you, putting one of those catheters up your---” Marcel sniggers irreverently.
“I don’t want to think about that!” Navet gives Gavroche a pleading look. “Please tell him off!”

Gavroche gives Marcel a bored look. “Marcel, don’t scare the children.”

Navet groans with dismay. “Gav, you do that one more time, you’re getting the bottom bunk bed next to the toilet!”

“Hooray for bathroom hogging privileges!” Gavroche quips, pumping his fist for effect.

“Face it, we just can’t win,” Lance mutters. “Why did we agree to let you be our roomie?”

“You need someone who knows his way about,” Gavroche says smugly. Sure, they’ve all seen their share of hard times, and Navet in particular is a tough survivor in his own right, but he’s still the one who knows best how to get out of a tight fix.

That is assuming that the fix doesn’t involve fast moving vehicles running the yellow light. Navet swears and jerks the steering wheel fast enough such that the oncoming car strikes their van’s trunk, sending all their belongings rattling and jostling all over the place. Marcel and Lance yell as they throw themselves away from the impact while Gavroche, being strapped in, can only cover his head with his arms. Yet even before he can straighten up in his seat, Gavroche can already hear the angry shouts coming from outside the car, and they are from voices he thought he would never hear again.

‘For a very good reason,’ the thought occurs to him as he undoes his seatbelt and steps out of his friend’s car.

The offending vehicle is a non-descript green sedan, now with its front fender twisted out of shape. “You stupid kids!” yells the driver, a balding man with a paunch to match his decrepit look. With him is a wiry woman in a shapeless coat, now haranguing a traffic enforcer.

Gavroche keeps a straight face as he crosses his arms. “Hello Panchaud. What brings you to this part, Mamselle Miss?”

The pair turns at the sound of these names from the underworld. “You’re getting big for your britches, little Thenardier,” Panchaud growls at him.

“Not so little anymore,” Mamselle Miss says in a thin voice. She’s quite a different caricature from her partner Magnon, who is more pert and welcoming in bearing. The sight of her doesn’t faze Gavroche, not even when she takes a step towards him. “If only your dear mother could see you now.”

“Send her a postcard from me then,” Gavroche replies. He glances briefly at Navet, wondering if he should tell him, Marcel, and Lance to make a run for it, but his good friend is too resolute to move and the other two are too frightened to do anything. ‘Guess it’s me manning the barricade,’ he realizes.

Mamselle Miss gives him a pointed look. “Is that the way you speak to your elders, boy?”

Gavroche feels the heat rising to his cheeks, more so when he sees that the entire street, or at least the nearest two blocks, are all watching this scene. However he has been called ‘Thenardier’, the name he’ll never quite escape, and he intends to live up to the audacity implied there. “Am I still shorter than you, Mamselle Miss?” he asks cheekily.

The woman’s jaw drops. “Why you little—–“

Panchaud steps forward to grab him by his arms. “Now you listen up good, brat,” he spits. “You and your sisters have been very naughty children ever since you went to the good side of town. Share
your blessings, for the love of God!"

“It’s not sharing if there’s squeezing,” Gavroche shoots back as he shakes himself loose. “I’m a man of nuts, bolts, and wires, and that’s not much good to you lot.”

“And the others---"

“Know every case just as well as the next, and would decide the way the judges already have.”

Panchaud flings another gob of spit at the curb. “Useless child!”

“Told you he’s gone too high and mighty for us,” Mamselle Miss says sourly. “There, a wrecked car for nothing, hope you’ll pay for that!” she hollers at Gavroche.

“We’ll see what the CCTV says!” Navet shouts, having now found his voice. “We had the right of way!”

It is all that Gavroche can do not to give his best friend a warning look, even when Panchaud and Mamselle Miss hop back into their sedan and speed off, regardless of the traffic enforcer’s yelling after them. He wipes his hands on his pants and returns to the van. “Guess it’s us facing those swells,” he tells his friends resignedly.

“What was that about?” Marcel asks.

“You don’t want to know!” Gavroche and Navet reply in unison. It is enough for them to burst out laughing, if only to make the farcical discussion ahead of them a little easier.

II

Even on this busy day, perhaps more than ever, Eponine has the radio on listening to the running commentary of the Transnonain Trial. ‘If only to keep the Duponds updated,’ she tells herself as she turns the volume down enough to allow for conversation with the visitor she has summoned to her office. “Courf, I know it’s a hassle, but we have to review that restraining order versus my parents. There has to be a way we can stop even indirect attempts at contact,” she tells her brother-in-law.

Courfeyrac nods seriously. “For Azelma’s peace of mind too. Do you happen to have a copy of the restraining order?”

“At home. I’ll scan it and send it to you,” Eponine says. ‘First it was Montparnasse, then Magnon, now Panchaud and Mamselle Miss. Who will turn up next?’ she wonders silently. The more disturbing part though is the manner of these appearances; there is no telling if anyone will be able to prevent the next encounter from spiralling into outright violence. For a moment she sees red splattered all over the vinyl flooring of her apartment, but she pinches herself to will this vision away.

Courfeyrac touches her elbow concernedly. “If you want to stay someplace safe, Zel and I are always ready to put you up.”

“I’ll think about it,” Eponine says. There is of course the possibility that this may bring danger to the Courfeyrac household, but she figures that there is more safety to be had in numbers. “I don’t want them knowing where you live.”

“For now.”
“You’ve already picked out a new place?”

“We’re debating between a full two storey place or this nice split level pad. Both are big enough for the little princess when she gets here.”

“Good options.”

Courfeyrac grins approvingly. “So when are you and Enjolras getting your own place together?”

“I don’t see why he’d need to move out of his apartment,” Eponine points out.

“What about wanting to?” Courfeyrac asks, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Maybe.” The thought makes Eponine smile so widely that she has to look away before Courfeyrac can tease her mercilessly. She then happens to catch sight of her calendar and all the dates encircled in red, particularly one in the next week. “What are you getting for Elodie next week? It’s her birthday.”

Courfeyrac’s expression grows thoughtful. “Zel and I are getting her these gift cards to this bookstore. Safe bet, I think. What about you?”

“A pair of binoculars. A former patient of mine makes those,” Eponine says. She can still remember Feuilly’s story about Elodie being able to turn a water bottle into a rocket, and now she hopes that this little gift will help reawaken that impetuous curiosity once more. “Imagine what she’ll do with them.”

“Enabler,” Courfeyrac teases. “Remind me to screen what gifts you’re giving my kid.”

“Hey, no curtailing my aunt privileges!” Eponine retorts, putting her hands akimbo. They talk a little more in this vein for the next few minutes, until Courfeyrac has to excuse himself and rush back to his appointments. Eponine turns up the radio once more and listens for a quarter of an hour longer before she gathers her things together and heads to the halfway house.

The clock strikes five exactly as she is knocking on the front door. “Here I am, as I said,” she greets Mother Asuncion. “How is everything?”

The nun sighs and wrings her hands with both dismay and relief. “Cecily is trying to keep murder from happening in the kitchen. Two new girls arrived today, and she hasn’t finished their intake interviews. Could you do those?”

Eponine nods eagerly; intake interviews are similar in many ways to history taking, which is pretty much part and parcel of her usual work. It helps that the girls, twelve year old twins named Annette and Aimee, are relatively peaceable and even cooperative. “You’re not going to declare us insane or anything?” Aimee asks towards the end of her interview.

“No. That’s not my job,” Eponine replies, unable to keep the quizzical tone out of her voice. “Why do you ask?”

“A doctor talked to our mother and that’s what happened,” Aimee explains. “She said it could happen to us too; it’s supposed to run in the family.”

“It’s not a sure-fire thing, it just means you and your sis just have to take care of yourselves better,” Eponine answers reassuringly. She hates it when her colleagues make these sorts of pronouncements, as if psychopathology is inevitable for their patients. “While you’re here you can learn a little bit about how to do just that.”
Aimee cocks her head. “The other girls were saying you know things.”

“Such as?” Eponine asks, but even so she can already hear the titters and whispers outside the small counselling room. She keeps a straight face as she looks at Aimee again. “That’s a story for another time. I’m sure you’d rather get your dinner though.”

Aimee nods and mumbles her thanks. “See you next week, Doc.”

“Saturday,” Eponine corrects. As soon as Aimee is out the door, she looks towards the shadow she sees there. “Almost well played,” she calls.

“You’re a damned liar, Doc.” The voice belongs to the girl who spat on her shoe. “Why don’t you just tell everyone who gave you a free ride out of here?”

“Because it wasn’t a free ride,” Eponine says bitingly. She can see the girl clearly now; she is a painfully thin thing with buck teeth and frowsy hair. “I don’t believe I got your name last time we talked.”

“What is it to you?”

“I want to know.”

“They call me Tess,” the girl says, biting the inside of her cheek. “So who was it?”

“No one. Unless you’re referring to having a scholarship to nursing school, which wasn’t exactly free since I was working as part of the terms,” Eponine explains. ‘And also to provide for Zelma and Gav,’ she almost says, but Tess doesn’t need to know this, not now.

“What sort of work?” Tess asks as she crosses her arms.

“A lot of typing and paperwork for the most part.”

“Sounds too much for a girl to do.”

Eponine smiles wryly, remembering a time when she had thought very much the same thing, and come crying to Fantine about having too few hours in a day. “It always seems that way, but at the beginning.”

Tess makes a disgusted noise. “Couldn’t you just have gotten a good guy to pay for it all? Makes life a lot more fun, don’t you think Doc?”

“I wouldn’t even consider that an option.” Eponine can practically hear her mother’s bad advice echoed in Tess’ query, and now she understands with a sickening clarity that this is how her own family’s story began so many years ago. ‘Patterns and repeating the familiar....’ she catches herself thinking for a moment till she looks down at her own callused hands. The marks there spring from a very different story, inexplicable at this point in time, but one she knows she will not be ashamed to tell someday.

The teenager looks away for a moment, as if trying to marshal some argument. “So does that attorney fellow know about this place?”

“I told him.”

“Well then?”

Before Eponine could say anything a crackling sound came from a radio in the kitchen. “Hey Doctor
Thenardier, you might want to hear this!” Cecily shouts. “Trial’s gotten interesting!”

Eponine quickly grabs her phone and presses ‘2’ on the speed dial, hoping against all hope to hear more than the ringing of a phone.

III

“You said you and your companions acted under orders?”

“We did, your Honor.”

“Can you name or point out who gave the direct order?”

“Your Honor, they are right here in this room.”

Almost as soon as Javert utters these damning words, shouts and curses rage from the bench to the galleries, and not even the judge’s harried pounding of the gavel can restore order. ‘A dam finally broken,’ Enjolras notes silently as he casts a glance at the livid defense counsel and then at Javert sitting stoically in the witness stand.

The judge jumps to his feet and flings the gavel away. “This court will reconvene tomorrow at 9am sharp! Good evening to you all!” he roars before stomping away, accompanied by some other lawyers and a few cronies. As he slams the door the gallery starts booing him for ‘delaying tactics’ or flinging wadded paper and food debris at the defense bench.

Enjolras looks around for a side door where he and Javert can exit unnoticed but to his dismay there is only one exit—the grand entry hall where so many protestors and media men have been camped out all afternoon. “Stay in sight,” he warns his witness as they begin to make their way through the crowd.

Javert gives him a grim look. “This will be the end of the police institution.”

“Or the rebirth,” Enjolras retorts. As far as he’s concerned this is mopping up the dregs from that upheaval so many months ago, a final effort to banish the ever lingering shadows. As they near the doorway he notices Clopin breaking through the ranks of the crowd and past the police barrier. “What is this?” Enjolras asks in an undertone.

“You guys need cover,” Clopin mutters as he gestures discreetly to where some members of the riot squad are watching them intently. “Where are you headed?”

“Follow me,” Enjolras replies. He can see the local detachment of marines is now taking an interest; Marius’ cousin has even broken off a conversation with a pretty girl in order to watch the multitude chanting slogans and waving placards. The sight of more uniforms only riles up the crowd further, and someone screams an insult before flinging a water bottle towards a marine. However the bottle doesn’t quite reach its target and instead splatters all over the ground, drenching Enjolras, Javert, Clopin, and several others around them.

Even before Enjolras can wipe his face he can already see camera flashes going off as newshounds angle closer for a photo of this embarrassing development. He spots the water bottle rolling near his feet and deftly picks it up. “Make better use of this,” he says sternly as he hands it back to its owner.

A newscaster then takes the opportunity to spring forward. “Attorney Enjolras! Will this open up investigations of other police atrocities once you return home?” he barks.
“Of course. The human rights commission will continue to fulfil its mandate,” Enjolras replies cordially. Yet at that moment the word ‘home’ sets off every nerve of his, for the images that come to mind are no longer of his parents’ opulent dinners in a vast but mostly empty house by the sea. The word now tastes of slightly salty broth, and carries with it the sound of raspy but lilting laughter.

He doesn’t let on about this of course till they are safely out of the crowd and at a bus stop. “Thank you for your help,” Enjolras tells Clopin. “That saved us a lot of injury there.”

“So is this your safehouse?” Clopin asks, gesturing to a nearby inn.

“Certainly not,” Enjolras replies. The truth is that he has arranged for Javert to stay at another inn a few blocks down, but he’s not about to divulge this so openly. “Will you be watching the trial tomorrow?”

“The entire Kaffeeklatsch will be tuned in,” Clopin says with a broad grin. “You two watch your necks.”

Javert nods gruffly. “Till we meet again.” He glowers at Enjolras as soon as Clopin and his companions are halfway down the street. “I have his file. He’s got quite the story.”

“So does everyone,” Enjolras points out in a clipped tone as they begin walking to Javert’s lodgings. “You are too trusting.”

“Have you ever heard of good faith? The last time I checked the police regulations did not forbid it.”

Javert gives him a long look. “Prudence. That is all I can advise. Good evening, Attorney,” he says before going up some stone steps to a small but snug lodging house at the end of an alley.

‘A few more days and then he can return to his own devices,’ Enjolras tells himself as he makes his way to his own room at another inn, this one closer to the waterfront. It is only now that he gets a good look at all the messages and voicemails he’s received over the course of the afternoon. ‘Either everyone at home was listening in, or we have a very quick grapevine,’ he notes as he begins sending back replies.

At last he gets to that one voicemail that has him making a call. Thankfully it only takes a single ring before the call comes through. “Hello Eponine. I found your voicemail just now,” he greets.

“I figured as much,” Eponine replies. She sounds chipper but there is an unmistakable worry and weariness to her voice. “How are you? I was listening over the radio today, and I heard that things got crazy out there.”

“Aside from all the yelling? Just a water bottle in the wrong place.” He wonders what her expression must be when she hears this bit of information. “No surgical care needed this time.”

“That’s a consolation,” Eponine laughs. “So delaying tactics? That’s the news going about here.”

“More of giving the defense time to catch its breath,” Enjolras says as he sits on his bed. To his surprise he hears the clinking of keys on the other end of the line. “Were you just about to head out?”

“Yeah. Thought I’d take up Courf’s offer to stay with him and Azelma,” Eponine says. “You should know: Gav moved out with Navet and their pals today, but they had a run in with some of my parents’ associates. So most likely nothing is going to happen, but I’m not taking any chances.”

Enjolras felt a cold pit settle in his stomach. “What did they do?”
“Bashed in a bumper, exchanged a few words....nothing the boys couldn’t handle.” Eponine is silent for a moment. “Don’t worry. I just thought I’d tell you.”

“Of course I’m going to worry. You’re far away and that group is just there,” he points out tersely. He has no idea how close the threat really is; all that he knows is that the Thenardier parents and the worse elements of their former drug ring are in jail for life, but the business is far from done. It is now all he can do to keep from pacing the room. “If there is anything----“

“There’s nothing you can do till you’re back here,” Eponine insists. She takes a deep breath and the sound is followed by the rustling that can only come from her sitting on the stairs or some hard surface. “I wish you were. It’s just two weeks....”

“It’s been a hectic two weeks,” Enjolras concurs. “To be more to the point, eleven days.”

She snorts. “So you’ve been counting?”

“I do keep a planner.”

“I know. I was just teasing you, Auguste. So what are you doing now?”

“Catching a breather before going over case notes,” he replies.

“You’re by the sea. You should take a stroll or something. It would do you good,” she suggests.

“There isn’t much of a beach here, Eponine. It’s a harbour, so it’s deep and most of the good space was taken up by a pier,” he reminds her.

“I can picture you getting a boat out and just lying in it to think....”

He laughs at this seemingly absurd picture. “If you were here, I’d convince a friend to let us sit out on the roof of one of those fishing boats.”

“I’d like that, someday.” She sighs again. “So three more days?”

“Hopefully. No, scratch that, it will be just three more days,” Enjolras tells her. It’s all he can do not to imagine her with him right now, sitting next to him in this very room. It’s something he’s not going to let on to her yet, at least not over the phone. “Then the first flight back. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” Eponine says. “I’d better go and you’d better rest. Call me later?”

“Sure. By ten later.”

“Alright. Talk to you later, Auguste. Take care.”

“You too, Eponine.”
Cosette is not usually unsettled by a rainy Saturday; on times like these she ends up staying home to help her parents with paperwork or planning the next week’s activities for their foundation’s house. This time the day’s agenda calls for something different---bringing Elodie out of the house for a check-up. It’s doubly difficult today since Marius is out at a neuroscience conference. “It’s not going to be painful, I promise. You’re not going to get any shots,” Cosette tells Elodie reassuringly as they are putting on their rain gear.

Elodie bites her lip as she pulls on a pair of pink rubber boots. “Why do I have to go to the doctor? I don’t feel sick.”

“Because we have to make sure you’re strong enough to go back to school,” Cosette explains as she holds out a small rain jacket so Elodie can slip her arms in. A frisson of nervousness courses down her spine even as she buttons up her own raincoat; all she wants to hear is that Elodie is fine and on the mend. She’s not sure what to do if the doctor gives a less than ideal verdict. ‘Just remember what Marius said---one thing at a time,’ she tells herself as she and Elodie make their way to the van.

For a while Elodie is quiet, seemingly content with watching raindrops make trails all over the car windows. “Are you and Doctor Marius ever going to get married?” she asks.

“Maybe. Not right away,” Cosette replies. She glances at Elodie and sees that the girl’s eyes are deep and her brow is furrowed. “Is something wrong?”

Elodie looks down, clearly struggling with her own question. “Where will I stay when you have kids of your own?”

Cosette swallows hard at Elodie’s question. “You’ll stay with us.”

Elodie nods slowly. “But I’m not really your little girl. Won’t I be different?”

“It doesn’t matter, Elodie. We’re family now,” Cosette says. She grips the steering wheel tightly as she thinks about what she may have to do to help set this right. Being a foster parent is one thing but adoption is another. ‘Permanent,’ the word occurs to her. It’s an adjective that she knew nothing of when she was Elodie’s age. “Just because you’re not born to someone that doesn’t mean you’re not family to them,” she adds with a smile.

“How do you know?” Elodie asks.

Cosette is quiet for a while, for she can feel her own secret tugging at her lips. She takes a deep breath and relents. “Because I’m adopted too. You know what that means?”

Elodie’s eyes brighten with realization. “So Mister Fauchelevent....”

“Was not there when I was born,” Cosette finishes. “He and my Mama met when I was a little older than you are now, but he always took care of me like I was his own kid.”

Elodie swings her feet as the car reaches another traffic light, the last before Saint Michel Hospital. “What happened to your real dad?”
“He left,” Cosette simply says. Fantine has never been forthcoming about this topic, and even though Cosette has been tempted time and again to get down to the bottom of the matter, she really would rather not cause her mother any pain. ‘It certainly hurt when he didn’t come back for us, whoever he was,’ she decides as the light turns green and she steers the car towards the hospital parking lot.

It does not take long for the paediatrician on duty to give Elodie a clean bill of health and write up a medical certificate declaring her fit to begin her studies in a highly supervised school. “We should get ice cream sundaes to celebrate,” Cosette suggests cheerily as she and Elodie are on their way out of the out patient department.

“Is Doctor Eponine working here today?” Elodie asks. “I want to get some ice cream for her too so she’ll feel better. I heard she’s so busy all the time.”

Cosette takes a moment to recall her friend’s schedule. “I think she is. Let’s hope she’s not busy in the operating room again!” At any rate it is always good to catch up with Eponine, even if it’s just for a hurried chat in the midst of work. It takes a quarter of an hour before they finally get the ice cream and make their way to the Social Interventions Office near the emergency room.

They arrive in time to see Eponine humming to herself as she combs out her hair and retouches her makeup, having clearly just scrubbed out. She starts but laughs when she realizes who has come to visit her. “I thought everyone would still be sleeping in after the ramen housewarming last night!” she says as she motions for Cosette and Elodie to take seats. “What’s with the ice cream?”

Elodie grins toothily as she puts a large chocolate sundae on Eponine’s desk. “This is for you!”

Eponine’s eyes widen with surprise. “Why thank you. But what’s the occasion?”

“Because I heard you’re sad,” Elodie explains before taking a spoonful of her own strawberry parfait. “When is Mister Enjolras coming back?”

“Late tonight or early tomorrow,” Eponine replies. “Today we’ll find out the ending of the big case.”

Cosette wipes her mouth daintily even as she thinks back on all the commentary regarding the Transnonain case and all its possible outcomes. “I heard talk that if the case is decided in favor of the tenants, the landowners might still appeal the decision?”

“That’s the least that could happen,” Eponine says. “I’m worried that they won’t even wait for that. They won’t take it sitting down.”

Cosette knows exactly what her friend’s grim tone signifies, but she doesn’t dare to discuss it in Elodie’s presence. “Elodie just got the all clear to start attending a learning center near home,” she says after a moment. “Half day sessions, small class sizes—”

“Everything we never got as kids,” Eponine jokes. “Aren’t you excited, Elodie?”

“Only if the teachers will be nice,” Elodie says in a small voice.

“You’ll get to meet your new teacher on Monday,” Cosette promises. It is at that moment that hurried knocking comes from the door. “Uh-oh. I think you’re needed, Eponine.”

“Tell me about it,” Eponine says before shoving a last spoonful of ice cream in her mouth, then hurriedly wiping her lips as she throws her stethoscope around her neck. She opens the door and her eyebrows shoot up with surprise. “Tess? What are you doing here?”

“Had a bit of a scrape,” a surly voice replies. It belongs to a girl with wiry black hair, whose
sleeveless blouse and torn jeans hang off her skinny frame. There are bruises around her arms and even on her neck. “Some jerk here---“

“She was asking for it!” a young man snaps from elsewhere in the corridor. He too sports a bruise but around his left eye. “That little tease....”

Eponine’s eyes narrow at this scapegrace, more so when an intern slinks up to hand her a clipboard that clearly holds an incident report. She takes a moment to read the forms there before looking at Tess and the young man. “We’ll talk inside, now,” she says, indicating the office door.

Elodie cranes her neck to take a better look. “Are they in trouble, Miss Cosette?” she asks.

“She was asking for it,” Cosette replies, taking the opportunity to scoop up Elodie and get her away from the room. She hasn’t seen Eponine this ferocious since their days as nursing students, specifically during the evening that the Thenardiers’ old gang tried coming for Azelma and Gavroche while they were hiding out in Eponine’s dorm room. ‘Elodie doesn’t need to see that sort of scene, not yet,’ Cosette decides. There are some dangers she cannot entirely protect her foster daughter from; these are the shadows that await her as she grows older, that have little to do with her wounded past but more to do with the woman she will become.

Elodie doesn’t say anything until she and Cosette are back in the safety of their van. “Where did that girl come from?”

“A house far away from here,” Cosette says. She has already guessed that Tess is one of the residents of the halfway home where Eponine is volunteering.

Elodie frowns. “Where are her mama and her papa?”

“I don’t know.”

“They should be with her if she’s in trouble and hurt like that.”

“Should,” Cosette agrees. There is no need to tell Elodie though about the differences between expectations and realities, especially where parental figures are concerned.

II

‘The jury finds the defendants guilty of five counts of murder, three counts of kidnapping, and five counts of attempted murder---’

This time the judge does not even get to finish reading the ruling before uproar rips through the courtroom. Though the trial adjourns before sundown, it is already nine in the evening before the sound and the fury die down enough for anyone of importance to leave the halls. “You know where to go from here,” Enjolras tells Javert as they are packing up their papers. “You will be met at your destination.”

The former inspector nods grimly. “Your own way back may not be as straightforward.”

“Perhaps,” Enjolras says. He has made his own travel arrangements but he is not about to let on about them, not here. In fact the only persons privy to any part of his plan are Eponine and Combeferre, and all they know is his expected time of arrival at the airport.

Javert looks down for a moment and sticks his hands in his pockets. “This debacle is not over. You have only stumbled on the beginning of the puzzle.”
"I am aware of it. The commission has a good many cases to handle now, and they will undoubtedly be linked to this one."

"I will not be so ready to stand as a witness this time."

Enjolras nods wryly. "You have done a brave thing all the same. The country is in your debt." He extends a hand cordially. "May you have a safe journey, Sir."

Javert raises an eyebrow before giving him a perfunctory handshake. "You as well, Attorney," he says before going with the two guards who will be escorting him to a car that will bring him away from Port Town, to another small settlement by the sea.

Enjolras waits a few minutes before discreetly quitting the courthouse and then making his way to his own lodgings to pack up his belongings. He frowns when he finds that it is only nine-thirty in the evening, far too early to head to the airport for his midnight flight. 'At least there'll be time to tell Clopin how to watch his back,' he decides as he brings his luggage away from his room and heads straight to the Kaffeeklatsch.

As soon as he enters the cafe the entire place erupts with cheering—save of course from a corner where a number of policemen have gathered for coffee. Clopin looks up from where he is haranguing a customer and then goes up to pull Enjolras aside. "Bold as fire, my friend," the proprietor says in an undertone. "Careful or you might get singed badly."

Enjolras clasps his arm. "If you or any of the others has trouble with----"

Clopin dismisses this with a wave of his hand. "We know how to pull our heads in here. You though, you've always been a little impossible to hide." He rolls his eyes as several Marines enter the cafe, all talking at the top of their lungs. "This is their last night in town. They'll all be deployed elsewhere tomorrow...thankfully."

"They have behaved themselves well enough, unlike on other occasions," Enjolras points out.

"Because no one wants your commission investigating them. You're not going to let this go," Clopin says sagely. "Do you want anything for the road?"

"The usual, and a salami sandwich," Enjolras replies. He finds a corner seat as Clopin goes off to the counter, and takes the opportunity to go online and start reading the news. A wry smile crosses his face as he comes across the first blogs and news feeds detailing the trial; the coverage at this point is still rather brazen and even tongue-in-cheek. 'Formality on Monday,' he notes, already bracing for the official press conference that the commission will have to host.

After a few moments his phone begins to ring and he sees that the call is from Feuilly. "How is everything back there?" he asks by way of greeting.

"All good, Chief," Feuilly reports. "How is the former Inspector?"

"Well and away," Enjolras says. "His contact?"

"Bossuet is speaking to him right now. We'll keep posted on that tonight," Feuilly assures him. "Anything for the press release that will tide the hounds over till Monday?"

"Simply that we will continue our work. Confidentiality still applies, so we have to deflect any other inquiries about the rest of the cases," Enjolras replies. "Any new ones though from yesterday?"

"Two---military complaints though," Feuilly says. "Bahorel suspects private armies at work."

"I am aware of it. The commission has a good many cases to handle now, and they will undoubtedly be linked to this one."

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"Two---military complaints though," Feuilly says. "Bahorel suspects private armies at work."
“Something wrong with weapons tracking again?”

“Yes. Bigger guns have gone missing.”

Enjolras is quiet for a moment as he recalls the conversation that he and Bahorel had about ballistics, and specifically a certain firearm that he has come in close contact with. “From the evidence locker?”

“Worse—the procurement office.” Feuilly makes a humming sound. “Big fish there.”

“I’ll send you a draft soon for a letter of inquiry,” Enjolras offers. It’s the least he can do if his colleagues will spend the night doing press work and ensuring Javert’s safety.

Feuilly clucks his tongue. “You need a vacation, Chief. Or at least a big bowl of ramen.”

“How much of that did I miss?” Enjolras asks dryly.

“Well just Gavroche’s cooking. He, Navet, and some friends had a housewarming last night,” Feuilly says. “Lots of fun, though most of us didn’t get up till noon.”

“Who did?”

“When have you ever known Eponine to sleep in?”

Enjolras winces now, remembering that his partner is on all night duty even at this moment. It may be a while before he can meet up with her. “Thankfully tomorrow is Sunday, that’s a break for all of us.”

“Don’t exempt yourself,” Feuilly warns. “Oh snap, Bossuet has messed up the connections again—gotta go, Chief!”

Enjolras laughs as his friend hangs up; he can only imagine the chaos in the office right now. Within an hour he is already heading to the airport, all the while composing the gist of that letter of inquiry. By the time he boards his flight, he already has a draft penned in a notebook. ‘All in a good night’s work,’ he decides; it is clear there is little he can get done for the rest of the weekend.

It is just as well, for he comes home to torrential rain that forces him to unpack his raincoat. He doesn’t even really unpack when he gets back to his apartment; all he has effort for is to set his things aside, brush his teeth, and undress for bed. All the same it feels good to finally be back in his own room, where usually nothing comes after him in the way of assassins or detractors. ‘At least for now,’ it occurs to him before sleep claims him.

He wakes to the feel of the bed dipping, and a hand lightly touching his face. “Eponine?” he murmurs almost instinctively.

“Yeah it’s me.” Her voice is so close, almost in his ear. “As in it’s really me, you’re not dreaming.”

He opens his eyes and sees her next to him, looking like she has just come straight from work; she is still in her red scrubs. All the same she is beautiful and he does the right thing, which is to kiss her by way of greeting. “I missed you,” he says when he pulls away.

Eponine smiles as she presses her forehead to his and pulls him closer, and for the first time in so many hours Enjolras knows he’s arrived safely home at last.
It is the feeling of warmth that brings Eponine back to the waking world, just an instant before she becomes aware of the welcome pressure of an arm around her waist or the pounding of a downpour against the windowpanes. “Good morning again, Eponine,” she hears Enjolras whisper in her ear before his lips brush against hers.

“You too Auguste,” she murmurs even as she opens her eyes. For a moment she fears that she is dreaming and that she’ll wake to an empty bed, but that is before she takes in the sight of him lying next to her, looking far better rested than she’s ever seen him. She kisses him back gently and wraps her arms around him to keep him next to her. “How long have you been awake?”

“A minute, maybe two,” he admits in a low voice as he leans into her touch. “It’s not yet ten in the morning by the way.”

“More time for us today then,” she says with a grin as she stretches slowly, relishing the heat of his body next to hers, as well as the slight ache of her muscles. “So no work today?” she asks.

“I owe everyone a day off,” he says as his hands move down her back, tracing slow and sensuous circles on her skin. “They deserve it after last night’s over time.”

She snorts and buries her face in his shoulder. “Oh you do have a heart after all, Auguste.” The way he arches his eyebrows has her laughing and planting a light kiss on his lips. It is at that moment though that she hears the tell-tale growling of his stomach, reminding her of what her original surprise for him was. “So what do you want for breakfast?”

“Shouldn’t the question be ‘how do you like your eggs?’” he asks half-teasingly as he kisses her nose.

“Yes but the thing is you don’t like eggs all that much, period,” she quips. “And I don’t like clichés.”

He laughs as he props himself up on one elbow. “Pancakes. I haven’t had those in a while.”

“I’ll shower and get started on those while you unpack your stuff,” she says as she gets out of bed and heads to the bathroom. It is only when she’s drying herself off that she realizes that most of the clean clothes she’s left over several visits are either her work clothes, or things that are a little too dressy to be cooking in. ‘So much for cliché things,’ she thinks as she locates one of Enjolras’ t-shirts and pulls it on.

When she steps out of the bathroom she finds him tossing his dirty clothes as well as the sheets in a hamper. “I hope you don’t mind my borrowing this,” she says, indicating the shirt.

Enjolras’ eyes widen with surprise for a moment but his look soon turns to one of appreciation. “You should keep it. It looks better on you than it did on me.”

Eponine now cannot help the blush rising to her cheeks. “You charmer,” she whispers, running a hand over his shoulders playfully as she walks past him to the kitchenette. She could almost laugh at herself, really, but it’s not every day that she gets to do this for her lover. ‘At the very least he’ll get a good breakfast for once,’ she decides as she gets out the ingredients for pancakes, as well as a whole
jar of blueberry jam with which to cover them with.

This time when she’s done with the cooking she finds Enjolras already dressed in a shirt and boxer shorts, and now busily putting a large duvet on top of the mattress. “It’s not exactly a breakfast in bed….” he trails off embarrassedly when he meets her gaze.

“We could be eating on the floor or out on your fire escape in this weather, and I wouldn’t mind too much,” Eponine reassures him as she sets down the food. It feels a little odd to be sharing breakfast and exchanging stories today, when there is no case to solve or life to save within the next few hours. ‘Like time is holding its breath somehow,’ she thinks as they finish their meal. “So what do you want to do on your first full day back here?”

“Take a look at this new photography exhibit at the public library,” he suggests. “I noticed it on my email alerts.”

She hums with approval. “There’s a good cafe nearby.”

“That takes care of lunch then,” Enjolras says. He takes a deep breath before looking at her again. “How’s the quest for a new apartment going?”

“I’ve had some possibilities, but nothing final.”

“Well, what do you think of this place?”

Eponine’s jaw drops. “Are you asking if I want to move in with you?”

Enjolras’ cheeks redden for a moment but he nods as he clasps both of her hands. “You’re here a lot, and this place is more convenient for you since it’s much closer to Saint Michel. I’m fine if you’d rather have your own place still.”

“You can do better with winning me over,” she jokes before kissing him. “All the same, it’s a yes. I’m staying here, with you.”

He smiles with relief before cupping her chin and kissing her back. “When do you want to move?”

This time it’s her turn to blush. “Starting today? We can get my stuff after lunch. It’s going to take some time for me to settle everything, but I don’t want to sleep alone tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agrees before kissing her forehead. He then starts picking up the dirty dishes from the foot of the bed. “I’ll wash these. It’s only fair,” he insists when she gets up to help him.

She sticks out her tongue as she sits back down on the duvet. “You’re so bossy.”

“It’s called getting things done,” he says over his shoulder as he brings the dishes out of the bedroom.

Eponine laughs as she gets out of bed to look for her work tote, certain that there must be a text message or two that requires her attention. To her surprise her phone is devoid of any new missives or voicemail. ‘Knowing our luck something crazy will happen as soon as we step out,’ she muses as she goes to finish dressing for the day.

II

“What about Sybil?”

“I could never look at that name in a good way after psychology class. I like the name Erin.”
“I used to date a girl named Erin....”

“We’ll never pick a name for our daughter at the rate we’re going.”

Courfeyrac knows better than to laugh at Azelma’s griping, so he settles for flipping to another page of yet another book of baby names. It’s already noontime on Sunday, a perfect time to go for ice cream and have this sort of discussion. “Maybe we can go down the literary route and pick a name of a character from a book.”

“Maurice, no. Just no,” Azelma says flatly as she holds out a spoonful of pistachio ice cream. “You do not know how hard it was growing up with my name. Teachers never got it right.”

“Like how would they say it?” Courfeyrac asks before letting Azelma spoon feed him the ice cream. He wipes his mouth before speaking again. “Ach-elm or something?”

“I’ve heard ‘Ten-ardier’ and other worse things,” Azelma says ruefully. “Eponine had it worse. You know how her name should never be pronounced with a long E, but that’s how it came out a lot of the time on the first day of classes.”

The attorney has to keep a straight face as he imagines this mispronunciation of his sister-in-law’s name. “What about Gavroche?”

“He went by ‘Gavin’ for a while till the teachers forced him to use his real name,” Azelma explains as she pulls the book out of her husband’s grip. “What about some derivative of your name?”

Courfeyrac shakes his head. “Everyone has a name like ‘Marie’, ‘Maria’ or something close to it.”

This time he doesn’t hide his playful grin. “I want our daughter to have a name as memorable as her personality will be.”

“You are the king of assumptions.”

“Oh course I am. I took a minor in Economics.”

Azelma rolls her eyes. “I’ll pick one name, you pick another, and we’ll combine. Nicknames can wait. That settles the discussion.”

‘There’s still the question as to which name goes first.’ Courfeyrac thinks but he decides to let it pass for now. “Julie, or Juliette. It was my grandmother’s name,” he says.

Azelma silently mouths the name and then nods approvingly. “I’d like to add the name ‘Alix’ too.”

“Alix, like Alice, the girl who went down the rabbit hole?” Courfeyrac asks.

“My favourite story,” Azelma points out. “The perfect escape. Some theorists say that the entire adventure was all just in Alice’s head, but I think that’s what makes it so much the better.”

“That is good as long as she can come out of the rabbit hole, or the looking glass,” Courfeyrac remarks. The twists and turns of the human mind startle him, which is probably part of the reason he did not do well in his own psychology classes during his undergraduate years. He sees Azelma pick up the book again and now it is his turn to quietly try out the name. Somehow it seems lacking on his tongue. “Alix, or something else?”

“Alexandra then,” Azelma suggests. “That’s twice as regal.”

“Alexandra Julie Courfeyrac....that can still come out to Alix, I think?”
“It works.”

“You’re a genius, Zel,” Courfeyrac says before digging into his own bowl of chocolate chip ice cream. “Here you go.”

“There better not be nuts,” Azelma jokes as she gets the spoon from him. She shuts her eyes, clearly relishing the treat. “Mm. I’m getting this next week.”

“I know you’re eating for two, but I’m pretty sure Chetta had something to say about too much sugar,” he points out. “Something about gestational diabetes?”

“Which I do not have,” she retorts smugly. Her eyes widen as she looks past him, over his left shoulder. “Don’t look now, but I spy with my little eye my sister actually out on a date.”

“Is that word even in Enjolras’ vocabulary?” he quips as he manages a discreet glance to the left. He has to hide his grin behind his bowl of ice cream when he catches sight of Eponine and Enjolras seated at the cafe’s patio. ‘I’ll be darned,’ he muses as he watches his friends eagerly discussing something to do with a guidebook from the exhibit across the street.

Azelma brings out her phone and scrolls through the screen for a few moments before setting the gadget aside. “We’d better leave them be.”

“True. They don’t often get a day like this,” Courfeyrac concurs. The point becomes all the clearer when he sees Enjolras chuckle openly before he takes Eponine’s hand and kisses her knuckles. “Let’s just tease them about it later,” he decides.

“And risk my sister’s wrath?” Azelma asks. “We may as well start looking for the goodies for Elodie’s birthday party tomorrow.”

“I still don’t know what to get for a little girl.”

“You’d better start practicing with that, Maurice.”

Courfeyrac nods as he reaches over to pat the swell of Azelma’s belly. ‘You’ve got to give me some time to learn, little one. I don’t want to let you down,’ he thinks.
Jean Valjean has one major task for this Monday afternoon, and that is to keep Elodie busy while Fantine and Cosette finish up preparations for her birthday dinner. ‘How does one address such endless curiosity?’ he wonders bemusedly as he watches Elodie trying to coax a turtle towards the side of a pond in the local park.

The little girl sighs when the turtle suddenly dives into the water instead of clambering onto the stones at the pond’s edge. “Guess it doesn’t want chocolate,” she says as she pockets a half-eaten candy bar.

“I think they prefer vegetables, or perhaps a bit of fish,” Jean Valjean says as he ambles over to the water’s edge. He notices one large turtle pulling at some scraggly plants on the far edge of the pond. “Those perhaps.”

Elodie shrugs as she watches the turtle for a few moments. “Don’t they ever want something else?”

“Maybe. It’s best not to tempt though with things that may be bad for them,” Jean Valjean reasons as he gives her a handkerchief to wipe her sticky fingers with. Even now he notices that Elodie is still too meticulous with her clothes; he’ll be more than relieved the day he finds her leaving chocolate stains on her dungarees. He checks his watch and finds that it’s already past four in the afternoon. “We’d better go home so you can put on your nice dress for the party,” he says as he takes Elodie’s arm.

The girl grins up at him as they start walking but soon her avid gaze is distracted by the sight of other children riding bikes or playing with skipping ropes, things she cannot do yet. “Grandfather, what should I say if people at my new school ask about my parents?” she asks.

Jean Valjean tries not to sigh since he knows that Cosette has been meaning to discuss this with Elodie but as usual the child has beaten them to the draw. He manages a smile as he looks her in the face. “What do you want to tell them about your mama and papa?”

“I don’t want to tell where they are,” Elodie says as she looks down. “Can’t I say they are far away?”

“You can. It’s the truth,” Jean Valjean replies. Thankfully the penitentiary where the Cheniers are incarcerated is two hours away from the city limits. “You don’t have to talk about everything.”

“But if I’m adopted that means I can tell everyone that Cosette---I mean, Miss Cosette is my real Mama,” Elodie thinks aloud. “Why is it taking so long?”

“Because there are rules to follow before it can happen,” Jean Valjean says patiently. The desperate tone in Elodie’s voice is heartbreaking, since it reminds him all too well of another little girl so long ago. ‘How did I ever handle it when Cosette asked why I wasn’t her father instead?’ he wonders silently. Of course the situations are very different; Cosette had been twelve already, with a mother who always cared for her. Elodie is only nine years old and practically orphaned for all intents and purposes. This is why Jean Valjean brings himself out of his train of thought and stops walking so he can crouch and look Elodie in the face. “No matter how long it takes, she’ll always love you.”
“How do you know?”

“Because she’s a little bit of an angel. Don’t you think?”

Elodie cracks a smile and tugs at his hand so they can continue walking. “How did you and Grandmother Fantine meet long ago?”

It takes a moment before Jean Valjean can answer properly. “We were living in another city, years ago. We had dinner at the same place.”

“Was it a nice place?” she asks more eagerly.

“It was warm.” It was one of the few comforts he remembers being available in that shelter, but he is not about to reveal that detail just yet to Elodie. “We met, talked, she introduced me to Cosette, and we all found we liked each other very much.”

Elodie frowns at this prosaic narrative. “What about Doctor Marius and Miss Cosette?”

“I am not really sure what happened with them, really,” Jean Valjean admits. To this day he cannot exactly imagine what had transpired in the waiting room of the neurology department of Saint-Michel Hospital; for one thing how did they manage to converse without asking each other’s names? ‘Maybe there is such a thing as destiny if they found each other despite that slip-up,’ he decides as he and Elodie cross the street and walk four blocks back to their home.

They find Fantine in the living room, arranging all the presents, cards and decorations left over from a surprise visit from Elodie’s former classmates and teachers earlier that day. “I’ll take it from here, Jean. Cosette is still getting dressed upstairs,” she says as she scoops up Elodie. “Are you tired? You can take a nap for a little bit if you like,” she asks Elodie.

The little girl shakes her head. “Can I stay up later? It’s my birthday.”

“You have a long day tomorrow. You can’t be sleepy on your first day at school,” Fantine says gently as she carries Elodie upstairs.

Jean Valjean takes the opportunity to retreat to the lanai, where Fantine has set up some of her bonsai projects. The sight of these delicate but relentless plants brings a smile to Jean Valjean’s face even as he finds a small compilation of poetry and sits down to read. One again he is glad that he had this lanai built when he, Fantine, and Cosette first acquired this house, for it is meant precisely to enjoy cool evenings such as this one. In short order he becomes so engrossed in his reading such that he hardly notices the shadows growing longer, not until he hears the doorbell ringing followed quickly by the irreverent repartee of Azelma, Gavroche, Prouvaire, and Grantaire.

When he wanders into the living room a few minutes later, Elodie is already downstairs, wearing a new pink dress with a strawberry motif, and shrieking with laughter at Prouvaire and Grantaire’s impersonations of various cartoon characters. “Sorry for corrupting the youth again,” Grantaire says cheekily when he sees Jean Valjean.

“That’s supposed to be my sister’s job,” Gavroche quips.

“Excuse me, I’m forming minds here. I don’t know about the rest of you,” Azelma retorts. “Alexandra agrees with me,” she adds as she puts a hand on her midsection.

“Alexandra, eh? How did you get Courf to agree to that?” Prouvaire asks. “I imagined he’d choose something a little fancier.”
“He gets to pick her second name---Julie,” Azelma deadpans. “There’s no particular reason for it.”

“It’s still a very nice name,” Jean Valjean concurs. “Classical sounding.”

“There, he agrees with me,” Azelma says smugly. “I knew we couldn’t go wrong with that combination.”

Elodie scoots over to sit in Azelma’s lap. “Can you really feel the baby move?”

“Most of the time.” Azelma takes Elodie’s hand and places it on the right side of her abdomen. “I think that’s her foot over right here.”

Elodie’s eyes widen with sheer wonder. “She’s kicking my hand away!” she whispers with awe.

“All babies do that,” Cosette chimes in as she sets down a platter of nachos arranged around small dishes of various dips. “When are you going on maternity leave?” she asks Azelma.

“Before the Christmas break,” Azelma replies. “I just have to get my kids through their exams, and then I can take it easy.”

“I don’t know how you do it. I remember my mom being tired all the time when she had my baby brother,” Grantaire remarks as he puts a huge dollop of jalapeno dip on a large jagged chip.

“Courfeyrac’s energy wears off on her,” Gavroche notes.

“Let’s just hope that it’s only on me and not on Alexandra,” Azelma says with a sigh. “To think I heard that Maurice was a little hyperactive as a kid!”

“She could take more after you,” Jean Valjean remarks more reassuringly. She is no longer the silent waif with downturned eyes, no more than Eponine is a sullen child or Cosette a skittish one. ‘Those scars run deep,’ he notes ruefully. Yet he finds signs of hope all the same in Azelma’s banter, or in the way she brightens up when her older sister walks in with Combeferre, Joly, Musichetta, and Marius.

“Saint-Michel doctors score one, the law office zero!” Grantaire snickers. “You guys are early.”

“That’s because the human rights commission had a press conference this afternoon,” Musichetta says as she pinches Grantaire’s ear playfully.

Joly looks up from where he is helping his friends set down all the gifts they’ve brought. “Leave some nachos for Bossuet, but go easy on the chilli sauce.”


Marius reddens as he sits beside her. “It’s a college story gone wrong.”

Elodie glances over at them from where she’s crawled now into Eponine’s lap. “Is college really funny?”

“It sometimes is, but when it’s your turn you have to remember to study well,” Marius replies.

“Listen to his advice, Elodie,” Jean Valjean says approvingly. As far as he’s concerned Marius’ good sense and wisdom more than make up for his awkward moments and tendency to be oblivious.

The little girl nods slowly. “What about you?” she asks Eponine.
“Hmm, you should ask Cosette about that. We went to school together,” Eponine replies as she absent-mindedly reties a bow in Elodie’s hair.

“Did you have fun?”

“Sometimes. We were busy on many days—that’s what happens when you’re studying nursing.”

“Never could do all that hard science,” Grantaire says. “The most I ever got was anatomy classes and some geometry.”

“Do you mean Life Drawing Class?” Musichetta clarifies.

“No, but a good hard look into the human framework,” Grantaire says gleefully. “All bone, not very much viscera.”

It is at that moment that Jean Valjean hears the phone ringing but before he can get up to answer it, Fantine is already there picking up the receiver. He feels something twist in his gut when he sees her put down the phone after a moment. “A prank call?”

“No, a scam. I heard a recorder. Good thing I hung up right away,” Fantine says.

“You sure?”

“I heard the beeping.” She smiles as she pats his back. “Dinner is ready by the way.”

These words are enough to break the hubbub of conversation and have everyone getting out of their seats to help pass around dishes, cutlery, and eventually the food. In the middle of all of this the door opens once more, this time admitting Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Feuilly, Bahorel, and Bossuet. Of course there are whistles and catcalls when Azelma gives Courfeyrac a long smooch, but that soon changes to groans when Eponine merely nods to Enjolras when he takes a seat next to hers. “Don’t you guys even touch each other?” Prouvaire asks exasperatedly.

Enjolras raises an eyebrow despite the laughter of most of the group. “Within the bounds of propriety.”

“Seriously, molasses moves faster than you two. No, glass moves faster,” Azelma mutters.

Courfeyrac nearly spits out a mouthful of soda. “Glass? Since when does that move?”

“Glass is actually a liquid. You might observe that the bottoms of old windowpanes are thicker than the top portions,” Combeferre says before taking a swig of water.

“Where can we see that?” Elodie asks.

“You can find some of those in the old cathedrals,” Fantine chimes in. “Usually in the windows that are highest up.”

‘Right where no one goes,’ Jean Valjean cannot help thinking. There is a certain irony about having something that is in plain sight yet is inaccessible at the same time. As he reaches over to help Elodie put fill a soup bowl, he hears the sound of an engine revving in the street followed by the terrible crash of shattering glass.

Elodie screams and jumps into Cosette’s lap while Enjolras, Eponine, Bahorel, and Prouvaire dash to the front door, followed shortly by nearly everyone else. Marius, among the few who have stayed behind, grabs a remote to turn on the porch lights while Fantine rushes again to the phone, this time
to call the police. ‘Time to help them along,’ Jean Valjean thinks as he brings out his phone and opens up an app that shows him footage from the CCTV network around the house. He shakes his head as he zooms in on the image of a pickup truck speeding away from the front of the house. “A covered license plate. This is just a scare tactic,” he mutters.

“But who?” Fantine asks, putting her hand over the receiver. She looks to where Cosette is still trying to calm down Elodie, who is shaking and sobbing into her shoulder. “Maybe you should bring her to the lanai,” she suggests.

Before Jean Valjean can suggest that Azelma go there as well, he sees the pregnant woman already making her way to the living room. He follows her there and sighs deeply on seeing the jagged shards of glittering all over the floor and the chairs nearest the broken window. Even with Feuilly, Azelma, Marius, and Joly all cleaning up the mess there is still too much to do. “They didn’t just use any old rock,” Feuilly says, gesturing to part of a rusted dumbbell lying amid the broken glass.

Jean Valjean hisses when he sees the projectile; even without touching it he can already imagine the considerable strength needed to hurl it into the window. “The police will want to see---”he begins before a howl of pain cuts through the night. He rushes to the door only to see Combeferre waving his arms frantically and shaking his head. “What’s wrong?” he calls.

“Caltrops!” Enjolras shouts from someplace in the dark. “They’re all around the cars and the driveway.”

The elderly gentleman cringes at the mention of these tire spikes, more so when he sees Courfeyrac and Grantaire half carrying Bossuet back to the porch. “We should get you to a hospital,” Jean Valjean says when he sees the spike sticking out of the sole of Bossuet’s right shoe.

“For tetanus shots,” Bossuet says bravely as he sits down on an armchair. “We’ve done this before.”

“We used to live in a dorm with some....hazards,” Joly says by way of explanation as he hurries over to inspect his friend’s injury. He clucks his tongue as he grabs a low stool to prop up Bossuet’s foot. “Good thing Eponine brought some of her things.”

“Are you seriously going to remove that spike here?” Courfeyrac asks worriedly.

“Yes, and clean out the wound,” Combeferre replies as he enters the room, followed shortly after by Eponine and Musichetta. “We’ll have to get you some antibiotics too.”

“Did you see any details of the car?” Feuilly asks Eponine.

Eponine shakes her head as she rifles through her work tote for a pair of sturdy scissors, a flashlight, and a set of forceps. “It could have been anyone. They didn’t mean to kill, or if they did then maybe seeing all the cars here spooked them.”

“So who were they after?” Azelma asks worriedly.

“It might be easier to answer who of us weren’t they after,” Feuilly says. He gives their host an apologetic look. “Sorry for the mess, Mr. Fauchelevent.”

Jean Valjean smiles grimly. “As long as no one was hurt too badly.” When he turns to look for supplies to treat Bossuet’s foot, he sees Elodie already standing in the doorway, pale with fright. “Elodie, are you alright?” he asks.

The girl nods slowly. “What if they come back?”
Jean Valjean sighs, knowing that the ‘they’ in her sentence is not just about whoever threw the weight into the window. “Not for you, Elodie. Never for you.”

-II-

After the police have surveyed the scene and Elodie has calmed down enough to open her presents and blow out the candles on her birthday cake, everyone calls it an early night. ‘Not exactly to rest though,’ Enjolras notes as he watches Grantaire, Prouvaire, Combeferre, Feuilly, Bahorel, and Gavroche drive off to one of the poet’s gigs. Joly, Musichetta, and Bossuet have just left for the Saint-Michel Hospital’s emergency room, while Courfeyrac and Azelma have already gone home.

The young man turns at the sound of a step on the stairs and he sees Mr. Fauchelevent there, rolling up his sleeves. “You’ve all done a lot here. It’s time to go home and rest,” the elderly gentleman says.

Enjolras looks down, knowing that he’s been read all too easily. “What about the rest of you?”

“We’ll be fine. Cosette always stays with Elodie. Marius won’t let anything happen to them,” Mr. Fauchelevent says as he sits down on a seat that has been carefully cleaned of any glass shards. He sighs deeply as he regards the younger man. “It will not do you any good to wonder who the actual target was. I gather that all of you have been handling difficult cases lately.”

“Not all of this would necessitate reprisals or provocation,” Enjolras points out. “I would rather solve this before another person gets hurt.”

“The police have already been here,” Mr. Fauchelevent says firmly.

‘I suspect that they have something to do with it,’ Enjolras thinks. Until he and his colleagues get to the bottom of the cases concerning abuses of the law enforcers, he will always have some cause to worry about reprisals. “It will not be enough. I know we have to work with the official channels....” he trails off, now unable to let on more about his frustration without divulging important information. He takes a deep breath before looking at his host. “Hopefully this is a simple act of spite, a misdemeanour.”

“I hope the same as well,” Mr. Fauchelevent concurs. He turns to see Fantine exiting the kitchen.

“Do you still need any help?”

Fantine shakes her head. “Not till morning. I’ll replace that glass pane myself—your help would be very much appreciated of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“You taught me well.”

Enjolras takes the opportunity to excuse himself to the washroom where he knows that Eponine is cleaning up the surgical instruments she and Combeferre used to treat Bossuet’s injured foot. He finds her standing at the sink with her sleeves rolled up, rinsing antiseptic off the forceps. He cannot help but plant a kiss on the top of her head before standing beside her. “Should I pack these up?” he asks, indicating some of the dry instruments near the counter.

She nods as she looks up briefly from her work. “Over there,” she says, indicating a case lying next to her work tote. After a few moments she shuts off the tap and sighs deeply. “It could have been my parents’ gang. That’s something they would do. I’ve seen it before.”

“It could be goons linked to the Transnonain case,” he replies. “Among other things.”
Eponine bites her lip and shakes water off the forceps. “Does this mean we’re sort of screwed?”

“There is safety in numbers.”

“I don’t want to endanger you. Ever.”

In that moment Enjolras fears that she will push him away, suggest that she herself move out, or simply run. He grasps her wrist, if only to get her to look at him. “You’re not going to be alone in facing this---if they are the ones really responsible for the attack. You have your siblings and our friends.”

“You,” she finishes as she meets his gaze and grasps his palms in her wet hands. “Maybe you could return the favor and help me with some legal moves if necessary---it’s only fair after I got those bullets out of you.”

He can’t help but chuckle at the candid way she says this, more so when she also laughs out loud as well. “If it doesn’t come to that?” he asks as he hands her a dish towel for her hands.

“I do have cases in the halfway house. Some of the girls are going to need representation soon enough,” she points out. “So either way, I’ll be sharing case files with you.”

Enjolras doesn’t say anything to this but he kisses her cheek and steps away to continue packing up the tools in the case. Just when he slips it into her work tote he feels her plant a kiss behind his ear.

“So are we going to be boring and go straight home tonight?”

“Home isn’t boring. Not anymore,” he points out.

Eponine laughs again. “I’m still getting used to it. Something tells me you’ll always surprise me.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Funny. Combeferre always said I’m predictable.”

“That was before this year, no doubt,” she says with a smirk.

Enjolras smiles before kissing her, by way of acknowledging the truth in her words.
Combeferre prides himself on the fact that almost all of the meetings he conducts during office hours are strictly concerning his patients, academics, and hospital matters. ‘All the same one can’t avoid being social in this profession,’ he reminds himself on Tuesday morning as he carefully hangs his white coat in his locker, where it should be safe from any mishaps that may occur in the staff room during his absence. There is no way he can completely avoid the hospital’s grand foundation day luncheon.

He takes a deep breath as he checks himself over in the mirror on the inside of the door; it never does well for a chief resident to appear nervous, especially over something that is hardly a life and death matter. “I do not know how you and Musichetta manage it,” he says to Joly, who is waiting near the cubicle door. “You guys are discreet, but I’m sure people ask questions.”

“You situation isn’t the same as mine. Chetta has been pretty much one of us for years now, so she’s used to anything that anyone can throw at her, and to all the associations,” Joly points out. “You and Florence though….well that depends how much she already knows.”

“I tell her everyday of everyone, but vicarious experience is hardly anything,” Combeferre says dryly.

“Hence inviting her to this luncheon instead of to a ramen night or to the Revolution Cafe?”

“Bringing her to ramen night would not be a polite introduction.”

Joly laughs before bringing out his phone to check for messages. “Speaking of hanging out, will you be going to our place later? No ramen; we’re still trying to clean up the damage from the last microwave misadventure, but there’s pizza and board games. It’s not going to be everyone though since I know that Eponine is on night duty later, Gavroche has a work meeting, while Marius and Cosette have to help out Mr. Fauchelevent with some foundation work.”

“Well you’d better hope that the law office doesn’t have some emergency, or it will just be you, me, Muschetta, Grantaire, Prouvaire, and maybe Azelma sharing all that pizza,” Combeferre points out. All the same he knows that overtime is highly possible for their friends today, given the previous night’s events. ‘Who would go through all the trouble of throwing a rock through a window?’ he wonders as he and Joly leave the staff room and make their way to the Rock Lobster Diner, located just three blocks away from the hospital.

As they reach the restaurant’s sprawling veranda, he catches sight of a petite, bespectacled woman sitting at a bench, avidly poring through the day’s newspaper. Her strawberry blonde hair is tied back in a bun and she is wearing a white blouse with a blue A-line skirt, but the effect hardly reminds Combeferre of a prim schoolteacher. ‘It’s different when she smiles,’ he tells himself just moments before he’s rewarded with the newspaper being set aside and that grin he’s come to consider as one of the highlights of his day. “Hello. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long, Flor,” he greets.

“A minute and a half maybe,” Florence replies as she gets to her feet. She pauses as she regards Joly for a moment. “Wait, don’t tell me just yet. You’re Joly, from the infectious diseases department.”
“Right on,” Joly says gaily as he shakes her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. Your name is Florence, if I heard it right?”

Florence smiles approvingly. “Thanks for also pronouncing it correctly.”

Combeferre looks to where he can see Mabeuf and some other colleagues motioning for him to join them near the buffet table. Even from where he stands he can catch the enticing aroma of lemongrass in the soup for the day. “Shall we?” he asks.

“I’ll wait for Musichetta. She’s with some of the other obstetricians,” Joly says as he holds up his phone. “What about Eponine and Pontmercy?”

“Eponine is still in the operating room, and I don’t know yet about Pontmercy,” Combeferre says. For all he knows, Marius might have slipped out to pick up Elodie from her first day of classes, given that he hasn’t seen him since his morning rounds. ‘At least we finished Dupond’s discharge orders,’ he notes, feeling some relief that at last he has been able to send this patient home, albeit under another name as part of his witness protection arrangements.

In the meantime Mabeuf waves once more to them. “I need to introduce my favourite chief resident!” he calls over the din of people mingling.

Florence sighs as she jabs Combeferre in the ribs. “Your cue, Daniel.”

“Yours too,” Combeferre insists. He’s not about to leave her feeling stranded in the middle of this important gathering, especially on a day like this. This is why he takes her arm and brings her with him to where Mabeuf is waiting. “Sir, I also have someone to introduce,” he says. “I’d like you to meet Florence Johnson. Florence, meet our department head Doctor Adrian Mabeuf.”

Mabeuf’s smile brightens as he shakes Florence’s hand firmly. “Are you also working in the medical field, Miss Johnson?”

“I work more with words,” Florence replies candidly.

“Florence is a lecturer at the Humanities department of the National Polytechnic University,” Combeferre explains. It’s no mean feat to be in Florence’s position, and Combeferre is determined to get this fact across in every introduction.

It takes quite a while till they finish meeting with more of Combeferre’s colleagues, and it is only then that they get a table of their own at the back terrace. “Are they always this garrulous?” Florence asks as she takes a seat.

“You should see them when the bosses aren’t around,” Combeferre replies.

Her lips form an ‘o’ of surprise. “Doesn’t that already count you as well, Mister Chief Resident?”

He shrugs, knowing that she is right in some way. Although he is still a trainee, he still has the responsibility of setting an example and if necessary, laying down the rules. ‘Does the idea of first among equals apply here?’ he wonders even as he catches sight of Joly, Musichetta, and Eponine now walking out onto the terrace. “Over here!” he calls to them.

Musichetta beams when she sees who Combeferre is with. “It’s good that you could join us!” she says amiably to Florence. She slaps Combeferre’s arm. “What took you so long?”

Florence’s expression is just bordering on cordial as she shakes the ladies’ hands. “So this is the Toxic Quartet,” she mutters.

“Why has that moniker preceded us?” Eponine quips.

“He has mentioned it,” Florence cuts in stiffly.

Eponine sits up straight and puts her hands on the table. “Of course he would. Combeferre loves telling those kinds of hoary stories.”

Florence’s smile no longer reaches her eyes, even when she looks away from Eponine. “Yes, especially about his friends.”

Combeferre clears his throat even as he inches his chair closer to Florence’s. ‘Of course she’d be a little awkward, you idiot!’ he chides himself. He has never hid from her the fact that he’d once dated Eponine, but sometimes he does forget that to be told of the history and to actually meet the person concerned may be two entirely different matters.

Thankfully it is at that moment that Joly politely asks a waiter for five glasses of water. “Will you want anything else?” Joly asks the rest of the group.

“I’ll check the buffet,” Eponine says as she stands up and puts her bag on the chair. “Anyone else?”

Musichetta taps Joly’s arm. “Could you please get me some salad? My feet are killing me after running all the way here.”

“Oh,” Joly says. He nods to Combeferre. “What about you and Florence?”

“We’ll check it ourselves when there’s less of a queue for the food,” Combeferre says. ‘Here goes nothing,’ he thinks as he watches Eponine and Joly head to the buffet line, while Musichetta sends a message on her phone and Florence sips from a glass of water. “Was that necessary?” he asks Musichetta after she sets down her phone.

“I’m just trying to clear the air,” Musichetta replies. She smiles more sympathetically at Florence. “Sorry about the inside joke.”

Florence nods by way of acknowledgment as she sets down her water glass. “I thought your ex-girlfriend was working in another office,” she says icily to Combeferre.

“It’s an additional assignment to her surgical residency,” Combeferre clarifies. “So yes, I still work with her on a daily basis. That’s all.”

Florence crosses her arms. “How can you be so sure?”

“She’s living with his best friend, Enjolras,” Musichetta supplies. “They’re pretty serious.”

“Don’t guys have a rule about not dating a friend’s ex?” Florence inquires as she wipes her glasses.

“I’m making an exception for them,” Combeferre answers, having to speak more loudly thanks to the hubbub in the restaurant’s main room. He sees her sigh when she puts her glasses back on; it is not the first time he has wished that he was even half as persuasive as Enjolras or Courfeyrac. “I was a boy, a very different boy, when I was still seeing her. She was a very different girl. What worked then is simply not going to work now.”

“You still see her every day,” Florence retorts.
“Flor---“ Combeferre begins before suddenly a loud roar fills the air, and everyone on the terrace is thrown to the floor with the force of the explosion at the front door of the restaurant.

II

If Bahorel could do away with one part of the judicial process, it would be with the preliminary sessions with the local fiscal’s office, as preparation for the actual trial. “Doesn’t our commission get some leeway here? Our cases are special jurisdiction,” he gripes to Bossuet as they are taking a break by a coffee vending machine in the courthouse.

“We do, but the problem with this case is that the victim’s family originally filed with the local court instead of with the commission, so we have to clear it first here,” Bossuet says sagely as he leans against one of the less dusty spots on the corridor wall in order to give his still bandaged foot a rest. “I doubt the fiscal will like it though; that man is going to seed and he’s not going to stand for another good case going to either Enjolras or Courfeyrac.”

Bahorel snorts. “Whose fault is it that he’s already gathering moss?”

“Those questions, my friend, are why you never could get into law school, and are also why I am a thorn of a paralegal,” Bossuet says. “No, I do not envy our friends for the wrangling. I think they’ll have to fight a little dirty this time.”

“A change as good as any,” Bahorel says. While he definitely respects Enjolras’ adherence to virtue and Courfeyrac’s sense of honor, he sometimes wishes that for expediency’s sake that his colleagues could use the more nefarious parts of their training. ‘Especially when facing what could be another private army,’ he wishes silently as he finishes organizing a series of papers on various firearms that have been purchased clandestinely or worse, have gone missing from the evidence lockers of both the police and the military. ‘It makes the Transnonain machinery look like a nerf gun game,’ he tells himself as he and Bossuet head towards the increasingly shrill voices coming from the fiscal’s office.

He snorts obnoxiously, a little too loudly in fact, at the sight of the fiscal standing on his desk in an attempt to placate two screeching defense attorneys as well as nearly everyone else on the side of the leering defendant dressed in old fatigues. It is in contrast to the prosecution’s half of the room, where Enjolras sits calmly, with one eyebrow raised and his arms crossed as he watches this fiasco. The kin of the victim are also silent but their looks are more wan and wearied, as if they will wither at any moment under the heat and fury in this room.

Bahorel saunters up to Enjolras and then hands over the entire sheaf of papers. “This is enough to arm all the night watch detachments of the capital,” he says grimly. “What are you going to do?”

Enjolras doesn’t say anything for a few moments as he surveys some of the numbers. “Thank you, Bahorel,” he says warmly before motioning for Bossuet to also join them. “How many of our other cases deal with missing guns?”

“About two or three,” Bossuet replies, limping up to them. He gestures to his tablet. “I’ve got a soft copy here, but I’ll transfer it out before giving this thing back to Joly.”

Enjolras nods, clearly understanding what Bossuet means to do. He gets to his feet just as the din on the other side of the room dies down. “Mr. Torralba, you have mentioned that your security detail recently procured some firearms,” he says, looking directly at the defendant. “Does your office make a record of the serial numbers?”

The defendant sneers at Enjolras and for a moment he appears as if he will spit on the floor. “Of course. We’re not a stupid office.”
Enjolras’ lips quirk upwards in a slight smirk as he points to a number on the list. “Does your registry include personal firearms?”

“Yes. What do you take me for?”

“Someone who can answer why this confiscated firearm T2143589 was found in your possession.”

A click sounds from somewhere in the crowd and the fiscal still standing on the table suddenly pales. “Security!” he screams.

Bahorel rushes towards the glint of gunmetal but before he can land a blow on this would-be assassin, he hears a yelp followed by the sound of a body being tackled to the ground. “How did you---” he sputters when he realizes that it is none other than Enjolras who has sprung to action and is now digging a knee into the gunman’s back.

“He wasn’t aiming at us,” Enjolras replies before turning to look with stern disgust at the goon who is now whimpering incoherently for mercy. “Thank you for adding to the evidence against your employer,” he adds as he confiscates the pistol and hands it to one of the newly arrived security guards.

The defendant’s face is livid as he looks at Enjolras. “You won’t get anything out of me.”

“I’m sure that can be negotiated, especially with the rest of these numbers,” Enjolras replies.

The fiscal shakes his head. “That will be all for today. We will meet again tomorrow---” he begins, only to be drowned out by groaning and jeering from both sides of the room.

Enjolras’ brow furrows as he eyes this official. “With all due respect---”

“For my heart, I cannot take anymore,” the fiscal mutters. “For the love of God, track down all those numbers first. Save us the drama,” he adds in a softer undertone.

Bahorel cannot help but turn up his nose at this performance while he retrieves the portfolio of contraband firearms. “Our fiscal is in the wrong profession,” he grumbles.

“Wrong district. He should aim for a provincial post,” Bossuet suggests.

“Nevertheless we must not lose the opportunity to solidify this case,” Enjolras says in a level tone before excusing himself to speak to his clients.

Suddenly a shrill shriek comes from outside the office. “News! Someone check the news!”

“Why, what’s going on?” Bahorel calls as he goes to the door only to be met by a skinny clerk frantically looking through a smartphone.

“There’s been a bombing at a restaurant,” the clerk replies breathlessly. “The Rock Lobster.”

Bahorel hisses as he pictures this location; it is on a busy strip of cafes surrounding a promenade that opens out onto Saint Michel square. “Bet the entire hospital is mobilized to take care of everyone.”

“Even Joly and the infectious disease crew?” Bossuet asks as he puts his own phone to his ear. “You’d think he’d pick up at lunchtime.”

“There was supposed to be some lunch event there---” the clerk chimes in. “At least that’s what the news here says.”
Bahorel brings out his phone and dials up Joly’s number, only to also have the line go dead. ‘No use calling Eponine and Combeferre, they’re probably busy,’ he decides as he scrolls down to find Musichetta’s number. The sound of the phone beeping makes his stomach churn. “Chetta is not picking up either,” he reports.

In the meantime Enjolras is gritting his teeth, having failed at another attempt of speed-dialling. “Nothing from Eponine or Combeferre either,” he says tersely. “I can’t even get to voicemail.”

Suddenly the clear sound of bells comes from Bossuet’s phone. The paralegal nearly drops the gadget but manages to grab it and put the phone on speaker. “Marius! What’s going on?” he calls.

“Bossuet? I’m trying to find out,” Marius replies. “The hospital luncheon---it’s a foundation day today---it was at the Rock Lobster.”

“Shit.” Bahorel clenches his fist as he steps closer to the phone. “Has anyone told you anything?”

“No, but I have to go to Saint-Michel right away,” Marius says. “No one is picking up and I know they all went to the Rock Lobster. It’s not looking good.”
For a moment Eponine feels as if the breath is knocked out of her lungs, leaving her stumbling to the floor. She already feels the heel of her left shoe twisting the wrong way, sending a tearing pain through her ankle before she catches herself with a nearby table leg. The shock is still rippling through every sinew even as she tries to blink past the smoke stinging her eyes. It is so thick that she cannot even see the people who should be next to her. “Joly!” she yells as she makes another effort to get to her feet.

The reply comes in a cough followed by a wheeze. Eponine crawls towards the sound, only to have her hand come up against a pair of spectacles with one lens already shattered. “Damn it,” she mutters as she finally reaches her friend, who has managed to pull himself to a sitting position. “Are you hurt?” she asks once he’s somewhat caught his breath.

“Just some bruises,” Joly says as he tests his limbs “What on earth was that?”

“Some sort of bomb,” Eponine says as she takes in the sight of singed and charred furnishings outside the restaurant, amid the dozens of stunned and bloodied victims. The doorway to the back terrace is blocked off with a broken doorjamb and a toppled cabinet, but she can already hear Combeferre, Musichetta, and Florence yelling for them on the other side. “We’re here! We’re alright!” she shouts.

A grunt sounds from where Mabeuf has extricated himself from under a table. He gasps with relief on seeing Eponine and Joly. “Please tell me you don’t need medical attention too,” he says.

“Sorry to disappoint you Doc,” Eponine replies, gesturing to her ankle and to Joly’s throat. She can already hear the wail of ambulance sirens approaching the scene, but there is no time to wait for these rescue vehicles to get into position. She drags herself towards the blocked off terrace door. “How many are hurt out there?” she calls.

“Thirty. Mostly falls and minor injuries but we’re fine,” Combeferre replies. “Inside?”

“Still can’t say,” Eponine answers, even as she watches Mabeuf go off to check on some of the other physicians on the premises. She looks up as a creaking sound comes from the precariously placed doorjamb. “You’ve got to find another way around. This building is going to go.”

Joly swallows hard as another ominous crack comes from the ceiling. “Any minute now!” he hisses, tugging on her jacket sleeve.

Eponine bites her lip as she grabs onto Joly for support as they painfully make their way to the front veranda. It’s all she can do not to rail at her incapacitated state, especially when there are so many
others trapped or otherwise wounded. ‘At least it’s not your hands,’ she tells herself; that sort of injury would put her out of work indefinitely, and she’s not about to risk that sort of misfortune.

Outside, the stench of burned plastic mingles with that of blood and scorched flesh, but Eponine wills herself to soldier on till she and Joly get to the railing of the veranda, where they can now see that the smoke is coming from a smouldering sedan a few paces away from the garden wall. The street is so crowded with collapsed masonry and destroyed vehicles, giving paramedics and fire-fighters no choice but to make their way to the scene on foot. ‘They’ll need help down there. Will you be fine here?’ Joly asks her concernedly.

‘Yeah. Maybe get me an icepack,’’ Eponine quips weakly.

‘Will do,’’ Joly laughs grimly before hurrying down towards the explosion site.

Eponine hardly has time to sit down till she suddenly hears a cry from the veranda’s stairway and turns to see a sidewalk vendor cradling a little boy. Both of them are covered in soot and have cuts and bruises that show under their tattered clothing, but the boy is gasping for breath. ‘He just fell over! Someone help him!’ the mother begs. ‘Please!’

‘Set him down,’’ Eponine says as she gingerly ambles down to the landing. She puts her fingers to the child’s neck to feel for a pulse, only to find it already absent. ‘We need help here!’ she shouts before beginning to give chest compressions.

The child’s mother shrieks and begins to sob. ‘No! Is he going to die? Please don’t let him die!’

Eponine cannot answer apart from gritting her teeth as she continues to pump on the child’s fragile chest. She can feel her arms beginning to burn with the effort of having to apply so much force in such a quick fashion, but there is little else she can do to try to sustain this boy’s life. It seems as if an eternity has passed by the time someone taps on her shoulder and says, ‘You’re hurt too, Doc. We’ll take over.’

She looks up and recognizes one of the paramedics from the Saint Michel hospital’s ambulance crew. ‘Thanks,’’ she mouths before quickly moving away to allow the paramedic to take over while another finally positions an oxygen mask and ambu-bag over the child’s face. She drags herself to a step and stretches out her leg in order to give some relief to her now swollen ankle. She winces as she begins to feel other aches in her body, perhaps from bruises and abrasions she wasn’t quite aware of. ‘Like I’ve fallen against gravel again,’’ she can’t help thinking as she checks her limbs over.

An EMT passing by notices this and stops in front of her. ‘Doc Thenardier? Doctor Joly told us to get you to Saint-Michel,’’ he says.

Eponine nods, since she knows better than to protest her friend’s orders. ‘I can get down myself,’’ she insists. Nevertheless she grits her teeth as she hobbles down the stairs, only to end up sitting on the sidewalk in an effort to relieve the pain. She shakes her head as she looks to the ambulances, which are already full of the wounded. ‘You might just have to walk to Saint-Michel yourself,’’ she decides.

An ambulance driver passing by calls her name. ‘There’s still room up front, Doc, if you don’t mind.’

The doctor breathes a sigh of relief. ‘Yes please.’ Yet even as she straps herself into the front passenger seat and the engine starts to rev, she can already hear a great groan coming from the wrecked diner. She looks out the window only to see the building’s facade crumble, sending more dust and glass all around the pavement. ‘No!’ she screams as she tries to open the car door. ‘I have
“We’ve got to get the rest to safety,” the ambulance driver growls. “We’ve got some critical and near-code red for you to work on there.”

Eponine tries to protest again but that is till she hears the groans of the patients in the back of the ambulance. ‘You have to be fair to them too,’ she tells herself as she settles back in her seat. She buries her face in her hands, but nothing can block out for her what she saw and what she knows is most likely to have happened to her friends.

It feels like an eternity till she is at last wheeled into the emergency room at Saint-Michel, where some of the more able physicians and staff members have now stationed themselves. “Looks like you’re out of action today, Thenardier,” one of the more senior consultants, a gruff fellow named Brissot, says as he looks over the radiograph taken of Eponine’s injured foot. “Where is Combeferre?”

“I don’t know,” Eponine replies. She does not wish to voice out anything, but she is not sure if this is denial or stubborn hope. She bites her lip as she watches Brissot examine her swollen foot before instructing the nurse to bring over some ice packs. “How long will I be out?” she asks.

Brissot gives her a patronizing smile. “No high heels for at least a week, my dear.”

“I meant unable to go to the OR,” Eponine clarifies but Brissot is already hurrying to another patient. She reaches for her phone, which till now she has left neglected in her pocket. Much to her dismay she finds that the gadget has somehow switched itself off or powered down. ‘Lovely timing,’ she grouses as she tries to turn on the phone, only to find that the battery is not charged up enough to sustain the gadget for more than half a minute.

After a few minutes she hears the screaming of more ambulance sirens, and so she takes the opportunity to maneuver herself into a nearby wheelchair. “Doc Thenardier, what are you doing?” a nurse asks when she catches Eponine wrapping a bandage over the cold packs on her ankle.

“Someone’s going to need the bed more than I will,” Eponine says through gritted teeth as she wheels herself to the sink and washes her hands. She winces as the antiseptic stings her fingers but she dries her hands anyway and dons a clean pair of gloves just in time to see twenty patients being carried or wheeled into the emergency room; the more critically injured ones are laid on beds while the others make do with chairs, stools, or mats on the floor.

She finds among them the mother she had met earlier; one look at this woman’s downturned eyes and hunched shoulders is enough to fill Eponine in on the child’s ultimate fate. “I’m sorry Ma’am,” Eponine says as she wheels herself to this woman’s side.

The woman nods and sniffs. “Thank you Doc. At least you tried.” She looks up despondently at the ceiling and shakes her head. “I should have taken James for burgers instead. He wanted those but I told him we couldn’t have burgers twice in one week, so we’d just get some of those cheap meals in the diner’s kitchen. They always give us things to eat. I told him burgers were too much, and now I’m going to have to bury him—and I don’t even have enough for that!”

Eponine swallows hard as she hands some tissues to the woman and rubs her shoulder in an effort to calm her down. ‘It never gets easier,’ she tells herself even when her patient has calmed down enough to have her wounds cleaned and sutured. It’s always these demises that give her sleepless nights and mornings when she wakes to teardrops on her pillow.

It is only when she is helping a third patient, an elderly man with a laceration on his shoulder that
Eponine hears a throat clearing behind her. “Time to call it a day, Eponine,” Mabeuf says firmly. He has a bulky bandage wrapped over his left forearm, but otherwise he seems unscathed. “You’ll bust that leg further if you keep wheeling yourself around like that, so no night duty for you either.”

Eponine nearly drops the suture she is knotting. “But everyone else—”

“We’ve got help from other hospitals,” Mabeuf replies kindly. “Combeferre will man the OR, while Musichetta and Joly are at the satellite first aid station.”

“What!” She quickly ties off the suture and covers her patient’s wound with gauze before turning to look at Mabeuf. “How did they get away?”

“Over the terrace and down a back alley. Combeferre’s friend Florence got a few partial thickness burns on the way out but that’s the worst of it,” Mabeuf replies. “Good thing she was able to keep her head about her, so I hear.”

Eponine smiles approvingly at this. ‘Hope that today didn’t scare her off,” she muses as she refills the cold packs with some ice from the emergency room’s pantry. The last thing that Combeferre needs is someone who will bail at the slightest sign of trouble. As soon as Mabeuf goes off to one of the screened off trauma cubicles, she wheels herself out to her ground floor office in hopes of getting some work done, and perhaps giving patients an opportunity to seek other sorts of help. She manages to use her uninjured foot to push her office door open and manages to wheel herself into the office. Just before she can close the door, she hears footsteps in the general direction of the emergency room and turns to see Enjolras just leaving that place. His tie is askew and his clothes are dusty, making it clear that he has just come too from searching the scene of the cataclysm.

Enjolras catches sight of her almost immediately and his terse expression brightens into one of shock and relief as he hurries to her. “It’s not fractured, is it?” he asks as he points to her bandaged foot.

“It’s only a twist,” she says as she clasps his hand. “No OR for some days.”

“Yet you’re still here at work?” he remarks as he pushes her wheelchair nearer to her desk. “Now I do not need more evidence for your stubbornness.”

She rolls her eyes and tosses one of the cold packs at him. “Takes one to know one. How did you know I was here?”

He smirks as he catches the cold pack effortlessly. “Musichetta and Joly were still at the scene when Bahorel, Bossuet, and I got there. Pontmercy gave Combeferre a lift since they were called here to Saint-Michel just before that. Now why wasn’t anyone answering their phones?”

“Mine had a drained battery,” Eponine says as she tries to get out of the wheelchair. She nearly falls over but thankfully Enjolras is quick to catch her by her elbows. She grins at him as she regains her balance. “Bet you were worried sick?”

Enjolras doesn’t say anything, preferring instead to give her a light kiss and wrap his arms around her tightly. His shirt smells of smoke but there is still that spicy aroma of his cologne and that warmer, more potent scent that she has been waking up to for the past few days. ‘So close, too close again,’ Eponine realizes as she pulls him closer and nestles her face in his neck.

He presses another kiss to her cheek before easing her into her desk chair. “We are still at your workplace,” he reminds her.

She sighs as she finds a box with which to prop up her foot. “So you’ll be heading back to the commission’s office soon?”
He glances at his watch. “Not for half an hour. That’s more than enough time for coffee.”

“Best idea anyone’s had all day,” Eponine concurs as she gets more comfortable in her seat. It is at that moment that she hears a knock on the office door. “Come in!”

“Haven’t heard that sort of welcome in years, Eponine,” a low, silky voice replies. A pallid young man walks in, all the while smoothing out his crisp black button-down shirt. His dark hair, which would have been wavy if left to its own devices, is carefully set with gel, thus completing this perfectly put together illusion. He stops a few paces from her desk and looks her over. “I see you were at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

‘Like you are right now,’ Eponine almost says but she checks her tongue and manages a smile. “This isn’t your usual stomping ground, Montparnasse.”

“How dry,” Montparnasse says, putting his hands on the tabletop. He nods to Enjolras. “Good thing you’re here, Attorney. This makes my trip so much more convenient.”

It takes all of Eponine’s self control not to cringe at the suspicious look that crosses Enjolras’ face. She has never imagined that these two men would meet, much more as to how such a conversation would go. Anyway there is no point in wishing the floor would swallow her there and then, so she sits up straight and looks at both her guests. “Enjolras, meet Stephan Montparnasse. Montparnasse, meet my partner Attorney Auguste Enjolras.”

Enjolras nods and shakes Montparnasse’s hand cordially. “A pleasure to meet you. Eponine mentioned you’ve been working out of town?” he asks.

“Mostly,” Montparnasse replies. He nods approvingly as he looks around the office. “Nice space. Never thought I’d see you get a corner office at thirty. You’re doing better than your ex the chief resident.”

“Okay enough with the flattery. Why are you here?” Eponine asks. “Please don’t tell me you’ve been in contact with my parents again.”

“Don’t you wish!” Montparnasse laughs, taking a seat at the edge of the desk. “It’s about today. Don’t even get involved.”

“A bit late for that. I’ve been stitching up people,” Eponine points out.

Enjolras merely raises an eyebrow. “Who told you to give that message?”

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you, her, then myself,” Montparnasse replies. “Let’s not add to the collateral damage.”

“Tell that to all the patients and their relatives outside. This is an atrocity,” Eponine retorts. “If you don’t say anything, you could be charged with obstruction of justice.”

“No investigation, no charges,” Montparnasse says coolly. “There won’t be an investigation since the ones behind this are too high up and too deep.”

Eponine grits her teeth but she feels Enjolras’ hand inch just that much closer to hers. She sees that knowing, challenging fire in his eyes, and it’s enough to send a thrill through her body. “That’s what everyone likes to think till the warrants come out,” she says.

“You’ll be silenced,” Montparnasse answers dispassionately.
Enjolras smiles coolly at him. “Nothing can stop this incident from going on record—here in this hospital, at other institutions, and of course the media. There’s already footage of the aftermath of the bombing, and it shouldn’t be difficult to retrieve CCTV clips from the area.”

Montparnasse simply crosses his legs. “You don’t know shit.”

“Fifteen dead, fifty wounded at the scene,” Enjolras says more seriously. “The count isn’t even done yet. Also there is a question of using military grade explosive, judging from the debris at the blast site.”

Montparnasse’s lip curls as he regards the attorney. “You run in dangerous circles. Then again, you seem to fancy it,” he says as he glances at Eponine.

Eponine leans in closer, ignoring the pain from her injured ankle. “You mentioned collateral damage. There was a specific target. Who?”

“I’m sure you two can figure it out—you seem up to the challenge,” Montparnasse says with a nod as he gets to his feet. “I’d hate to interrupt your moment.”

Enjolras looks him in the face. “I would suggest coming forward as soon as you can instead of waiting for a subpoena.”

Montparnasse hesitates for a moment but he shakes his head. “If it gets to that point, I’ll be waiting for your obituaries,” he says in a voice that is both wry and morose before he walks out of the room.

“We’ll see about that,” Enjolras mutters. “I’ll have a word with him,” he tells Eponine before kissing her forehead and walking quickly to the door.

“Auguste, don’t!” Eponine hisses but he is already halfway out the door. ‘Such a stubborn man!’ she groans inwardly as she sits back in her chair. Yet even so she cannot help but start to wonder just who the target of the attack might have been. ‘Someone who has handled a patient who’s made the news,’ she decides. There are only about five faces that come to mind, all of them close colleagues of hers. ‘And one especially, who let a patient go today.’

Her guess is confirmed when Enjolras returns after a couple of minutes, his expression grim. “The bomb was for Daniel,” he says as he sits next to her again.

“I thought so,” she whispers. Of course some people will not forgive Combeferre for having brought Dupond back to some level of health. “How did they know he was there, at the Rock Lobster?”

“According to Montparnasse, it wasn’t difficult to figure out. It’s publicized that it was the hospital’s foundation day today,” he explains. “The bomber took a chance on it. A very good one.”

Eponine nods slowly as she clasps his hand, running her thumb over the calluses there. “What are we going to do?”

Enjolras takes a deep breath as his fingers slide between hers. “Eponine, I think the question may be what is Combeferre willing to do?”

II

Cosette can still remember all of it: the pointing, the whispers, and even the pitying looks from the teachers at the end of each school day. ‘It doesn’t change even when one gets older,’ she realizes with a pang when she steps out of her house to greet Marius and Elodie when they come home for lunch; the neighbours are already nudging each other and trading all too knowing glances. “Maman
made some cupcakes for dessert,” she says as she scoops up Elodie, hoping to distract her. “They have strawberry icing, your favourite.”

Elodie grins mischievously as she throws her arms around Cosette’s neck. “I think my teacher Miss Mabel likes Doctor Marius.”

“Everyone likes Marius.”

“No, I mean really likes Doctor Marius.”

Marius turns scarlet at this exchange. “I told her that the lack of a wedding ring was temporary,” he blurts out. “I mean, that was the first thing that came to mind—–”

Cosette has to hug Elodie closer if only to conceal her own very wide smile. If she could, she’d be jumping up and down thanks to Marius’ confession. “And what did she say?” she finally asks as they enter the house.

“She apologized,” Marius mumbles bashfully. “Maybe it wasn’t the best thing to say...”

“It was the right thing,” Cosette says. She kisses Elodie’s forehead and sets her down. “We’re having lunch in the lanai. Marius and I will follow in a few minutes.” She waits for the little girl to scamper off before looking at Marius again for a long moment. “A wedding ring?”

Marius turns even redder and clears his throat before dropping to one knee. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while—far longer than just one lunchtime. I know it seems sudden and it’s fast, but it would also be good for Elodie....”

“You’re right. There’s just one thing though,” Cosette says as she takes both of his hands and pulls him to his feet. She is quiet for a moment, just to figure out how to best phrase her question. “If Elodie wasn’t here, if Eponine or someone else had adopted her, would you still have asked me anyway?”

His confused expression softens as he kisses her chastely. “Always. From the first time I saw you, Cosette, I’ve wanted you to be in my life. I want to stay in your life, if you’ll have me.”

She doesn’t hide her smile when she kisses him back. “Yes—a thousand times yes.”

Marius breathes a sigh of relief, just a moment before his phone rings and he has to let go of her to take the call. “Hello, Marquez? Yes, I am at home, just had to pick up my daughter from her classes. What? No, where?” He pales and holds a hand to his head. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Yes. See you there.”

Cosette feels her gut clench even before she can speak. “Marius, what happened?”

“I have to go back right now to Saint-Michel,” Marius says. “There was an explosion at the Rock Lobster, right during our hospital’s anniversary luncheon.”

“Oh God.” She shuts her eyes, already imagining any one of their friends caught up in this cataclysm. “What sort of explosion?”

“Marquez didn’t say anything but it doesn’t sound good,” Marius replies. He cringes as he looks towards the lanai. “I’m sorry, I know the right thing now is to go in and talk to your parents—–”

Cosette stops him with a kiss. “You have a duty, Marius.” She smiles as she squeezes his hands. “It’s going to be fine. We’ll talk later.”
Marius sighs gratefully before rushing into the lanai to make his hurried goodbyes to the older Fauchelevents and Elodie. In the meantime Cosette switches on the TV and turns up the volume. ‘Who could do such a thing?’ she wonders as she gets to see the first footage of the smoky, rubble covered street outside the diner. “Be careful,” she says when she hears Marius return to the living room. “Please call me when you’re safe.”

“I promise,” Marius says before kissing her. “I’ll be back, Cosette. You know it.”

“Go,” she says more insistently, now practically shoving him out the door. As he shuts the door she can’t help but place a finger on her lips, trying to trace how his mouth felt on hers. ‘He’ll be fine. You have to worry more about the others,’ she reminds herself. If Marius could somehow find her in the middle of a riotous city, as he did so many months ago when they first met, surely she can count on him to return safely home.

When she walks into the lanai, her father is quietly listening to the news while Fantine is keeping Elodie distracted by arranging the cupcakes into a sort of tower. “Marius said he wanted to talk to me later,” her father says after a moment. “What did you say to him?”

“About what?” Cosette asks.

Mr. Fauchelevent sighs deeply. “I presumed too much,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Papa, what’s there to be sorry about?” She pulls her chair closer to his. “Marius and I did talk, but I really think he ought to speak with you first before I tell you. It should be a discussion from man to man before it can be a father-to-daughter thing, I think?”

“It should be otherwise; we’ve never discussed this before,” Mr Fauchelevent answers. He looks at her pensively for a moment. “He’s a very good man.”

“You’d be proud to call him a son, or a son-in-law,” Cosette replies. “You and Maman aren’t going to lose me. Ever.”

Fantine looks to them curiously. “Aren’t you going to ask for permission, Cosette?”

Cosette blushes deeply. “I’d prefer your blessing, Maman.”

“Blessing to do what?” All the adults look at Elodie, who is grinning at them impishly from behind a cupcake she’s managed to sneak from the tower. “Are Miss Cosette and Doctor Marius getting married?” she asks.

“Now how would you guess that?” Fantine asks her.

“Because everyone is so serious,” Elodie replies blithely.

‘She’s really such a brilliant child,’ Cosette thinks fondly. “Marius and I want to. We haven’t really made plans yet, but—-“

Elodie screeches with delight. “You’re going to have a wedding! That means you’ll be Mrs. Pontmercy!”

“Yes, yes of course,” Cosette manages to say. She almost laughs with disbelief on hearing what her married name will be. “It’s just so sudden.”

“So if you’ll be Mrs. Pontmercy, and you’re adopting me....does that make me Elodie Pontmercy?” the child asks.
“Adopting is different, but eventually you will be,” Cosette replies. ‘Will Marius’ relatives be happy about that though?’ she wonders after a moment.

“We will celebrate later---and catch Marius off guard,” Fantine remarks. “It’s only a welcome to the family, don’t worry.”

Cosette rolls her eyes, knowing how her mother’s sense of humor can be. “I hope it will be tonight. Marius might get stuck at the hospital since so many of his colleagues got injured.”

“In the blast?” her father asks.

“There was a luncheon at the diner. It was the hospital’s foundation day,” Cosette explains. “I hope Eponine and the others are alright.”

“They’re probably busy,” Mr. Fauchelevent says over the sound of the doorbell ringing. “Now who could that be?”

‘Probably a neighbor asking to watch TV or looking for ingredients,’ Cosette thinks as she gets to her feet and hurries out before anyone can ask. She’s always taken to answering the door, especially given how her father seems so skittish about this particular matter. To her surprise the person outside isn’t a neighbor at all, but a broad shouldered young man in a blue military uniform. “Good afternoon. May I help you?” she asks cautiously.

The stranger flashes her a debonair smile for a moment before bowing a little more respectfully. “I’m Lieutenant Theodule Gillenormand. Does my cousin Marius Pontmercy live here?”

Cosette pauses even though she recognizes this name from Marius’ stories as well as his face from some old family photos. ‘You can’t just send him away,’ she tells herself as she opens the door more widely, but not enough to let him in. “He’s at work now. There’s been a serious emergency.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I had hoped on asking him to join me for lunch during my furlough,” Theodule says. He grins more widely at her. “You must be Miss Fauchelevent, the philanthropist’s daughter. My cousin is a lucky man then.”

Cosette merely smiles at this compliment. “I can give you his contact number, and you can coordinate with him. I’m sorry, it’s really a hectic time.”

“I have his cell number---but I prefer to do things in person,” Theodule replies. He tips his hat to her. “I hope to see him, and you again soon.”

“Thank you,” Cosette says. She waits for him to turn on his heel and walk away briskly before she retreats into the house. “That was Marius’ cousin. The one in the military,” she explains to her family when she returns to the lanai.

“That one, Gillenormand?” Mr. Fauchelevent asks. “Wasn’t he assigned elsewhere?”

“Port Town.” The name of the place falls differently on her ears now thanks to what she knows of the Trasnonain trial. She brings out her phone to send a casual message to Enjolras; for all she knows he might have run into him during his recent trip. She can’t help but frown when she receives an answer in the affirmative. “Papa, how often do military detachments get reassigned?” she asks her father.

“Depends. Sometimes every two years, sometimes longer,” Mr Fauchelevent asks. “Why?”

‘I do not like the timing of this,’ Cosette almost says but she merely shrugs. “I was only wondering
when the last time he and Marius met was,” she simply says. There is no use giving her parents cause
to worry over such an odd series of connections.
These Things We Do Not Dare Say

23: These Things We Do Not Dare to Say

Combeferre can feel the late hours in his bones as he scrubs out of the operating room that night. ‘Yet how many people can really manage sleep nowadays?’ he wonders while he checks his phone. Amid the missives and voice mails from Florence and a few other friends and colleagues, he finds one particular text message from Enjolras: ‘Now what urgent thing have he and Eponine been up to?’ the surgeon wonders as he heads out of the operating room complex. He pauses when he glimpses a form stirring on a sofa in the hallway’s waiting area. “Florence?”

Florence sits up more quickly and puts on her spectacles. “It’s so late, Daniel. Are you going home already?” she asks as she holds back a yawn.

Combeferre sighs as he holds up his phone. “I have to visit a friend of mine. It sounds important.”

She sits up straight and tugs her jacket sleeves down over her bandaged arms. “Should I join you?”

“No, you don’t have to. It must be nearly eleven o’clock and you have to give a lecture tomorrow.”

“Eleven thirty. You sure you’ll be fine?”

He manages a smile as he adjusts his backpack’s straps. “I’ll call you.” It’s a time-honored excuse that he and all their friends have used, yet lately there have been times when he’s wondered how much water it really holds. ‘Best to end the night on a good note,’ he decides before kissing her cheek and walking her out as far as the parking lot, where they part ways.

It is nearly midnight by the time he arrives outside his friends’ home, but he is hardly surprised to still see the lights on in the windows. “Did you two unlearn sleep?” he asks by way of greeting when he lets himself into the apartment, only to find Enjolras and Eponine curled up together on the sofa while reading through folders of cases.

“Only selectively,” Enjolras deadpans as he looks up from his work.

Combeferre rolls his eyes at this, more so when he notices two large coffee mugs on a nearby table. “Did you know that sleep promotes the healing process?”

“With all of this on my mind, it’s going to be half-assed sleep. I may as well save him the trouble of my tossing around in bed,” Eponine replies as she reaches up to ruffle her partner’s hair.

Enjolras smirks and shifts slightly to allow Eponine to prop her injured foot on his leg. “How many patients did you have?” he asks Combeferre.

“Five major, ten minor. I had two mortalities though,” Combeferre replies as he takes a seat. He bites his lip to avoid speaking words of sweat and blood; he’s not going to bring this war to his friends’ haven.

Eponine sighs deeply as she leans back against Enjolras’ shoulder and tugs on the sleeves of her oversized t-shirt. “That brings the death toll to twenty. The late news just reported eighteen from different hospitals.”
'And there will still be more,' Combeferre almost says. He knows even now that not everyone who was rescued will survive the night. The explosion itself had been bad enough, but the cave-in pushed several other souls almost to the point of no return. For a moment he sees again before him gaping wounds and singed flesh but the sound of Eponine suddenly hissing in pain jolts him back to the present. He waits for a few moments as Enjolras carefully repositions an ice pack on Eponine’s leg. “So what have you called me here for?”

Enjolras looks at him steadily for a moment. “Daniel, we learned that the bombing at the diner was meant to take out someone.”

“What?”

“You.”

That single word makes Combeferre’s head spin and he has to take a few deep breaths. It sounds like it could be a joke, but it cannot be if Enjolras is the one saying it. One look at Eponine’s serious and almost blasé face confirms the situation. “Why?”

“Because you saved Dupond,” Enjolras says. “I’m sorry that you got caught in the reprisal.”

“It could have been anyone—-Pontmercy, Navet, Courfeyrac, or even the two of you,” Combeferre reasons. ‘Especially the two of you,’ he almost says, but there is no need to drive home the point when Eponine winces again, this time prompting Enjolras to pull her a little closer in an attempt to make her more comfortable. “Who told you about this?” Combeferre asks after a moment.

Enjolras and Eponine exchange looks, and after a moment Eponine shrugs. “It was Montparnasse.”

“Wait….the Montparnasse?” Combeferre sputters in disbelief. “Auguste, why did you allow that jerk near her?”

“I allowed him,” Eponine cuts in. “I know that we have a history, but he’s the one who knows things.”

“I don’t like this, you two,” Combeferre mutters.

“It’s less than ideal, but it is better than having the blind leading the blind,” Enjolras points out.

Combeferre sighs, not seeing any alternative. “Well, what should I do?”

“Would it be possible to get out of town for a few days?” Enjolras asks cautiously.

Combeferre frowns as he mulls over his options, all of which include taking a few days off work. None of these are particularly easy to arrange. “There is an upcoming conference. I could arrange to join the delegation,” he decides. “Best use I can make of three days away. I’ll clear it with Doctor Mabeuf—-“

Eponine crosses her arms. “What about Florence? Aren’t you going to tell her?”


It is all that Combeferre can do not to cringe, for this is not how he imagined making his lady friend’s presence known to his best friend. “She’s a lecturer at the university. We’ve been going out for a few months. I was hoping to introduce her to you guys today, but things happened.”

“She also got caught in that mess at the diner,” Eponine says. “That’s why she has to know.”
“This has nothing to do with her,” Combeferre retorts.

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “It does. If she is spending a significant amount of time with you, she may have to be on the lookout as well.”

Combeferre can’t help but shake his head. ‘She didn’t sign up for this,’ he chides himself silently. He shudders as he recalls the sight of her bandaged arms. “It’s not that simple.”

“But shutting her out is?” Eponine asks. “You’re doing it again.”

It’s the tone of her voice, more than her words, which brings Combeferre back several years to another living room. He can almost see again that floor strewn with books and notes, the puddles of coffee congealing on a splinterly desk, and of course Eponine’s eyes so dark with that dangerous and angry fire he knows too well. Yet suddenly it’s more than memory since she’s looking at him now with the same indignant vitriol only that this time it’s not about her and him. “I can’t drag her into this; she already has enough to deal with at work, with her family, so many other things. The last thing she needs is to be part of this.”

Eponine rolls her eyes. “What are you going to say when you go out of town? She’s not going to buy this going away for a conference, hook, line and sinker. Everyone knows you never abandon your post.”

Combeferre sighs and throws up his hands before looking to Enjolras, only to find his best friend seemingly staring into space with a certain pensive expression. “Any other ideas?”

“None of them involves dodging that discussion with Florence,” Enjolras replies in a level tone. “I thought you would understand why disclosure isn’t possible.”

“This isn’t exactly a legal case or witness protection. At least not yet.”

“It’s not that,” Combeferre mutters. He suddenly cannot find the words to explain this trepidation and the gut feeling he has about how such a talk would transpire. “This might be too much for her,” he finally blurts out.

Eponine snorts. “You don’t know that. You won’t know till you tell her. You’ll lose her if you keep her in the dark.”

“That’s the thing I’m trying to prevent!” Combeferre snaps.

Enjolras levels a stern look at him. “Do you trust her?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then why the reticence?”

Hearing these words from Enjolras of all people is more than Combeferre can take, and so he gets to his feet. “It’s late. Thanks for the warning, you two,” he says.

“Combeferre—” Eponine begins.

“Good night,” Combeferre says brusquely as he shoulders his backpack and storms out of the apartment. He doesn’t even wait to hear if either of his friends call after him or try to seek him out, but hesitation finally catches up to him in the parking lot outside the building. Once there he brings out his cellphone and goes to Florence’s name in the phone’s directory. For a moment his finger
hovers over the ‘Send a message’ option before he pockets the phone again. ‘It has to be this way,’ he reminds himself as he sets out on the long quiet journey home.

II

“It is the best irony in the world that we’re using the military’s own crime lab to investigate the armed forces itself.”

Courfeyrac knows that his face mask cannot hide his amused smirk at Bahorel’s quip, so he turns away before any of the other investigators in the crime lab can notice. “It was long in coming. It has been years since anyone has properly audited this institution.”

“Everyone thinks we’re the only ones nuts enough for the job,” Bahorel remarks as he looks up from his microscope. “The question is who keeps a watch on us?”

Courfeyrac shrugs at this truly unsettling query before looking through another list of evidence, this time of bullets recovered from another crime scene. “That’s why none of us can stay in the commission too long. It’s only for the next year and a half.”

“A very long time and you’re already planning your exit?” Bahorel asks. “Am I hearing things right?”

“I need to think forward for eighteen years now, or more, in case you’ve forgotten,” Courfeyrac says dryly. “Consider me a responsible family man now.”

“Who would have thought it would be Azelma who’d set you straight?”

“It’s more of Alexandra’s doing. Azelma and I weren’t exactly planning at first.”

“It was going to bite someone in the butt one day—I’m honestly surprised we don’t have a mini Joly or mini Musichetta running around,” Bahorel jokes. “If Enjolras and Eponine don’t watch out, they’ll have quite a holy terror on their hands.”

Courfeyrac nearly bursts out laughing at the mental image of his friends chasing after a dark-haired child with blue eyes. “Not too soon.”

Bahorel whistles as he puts back the bullet he’s surveying into an evidence case. “I heard that Combeferre’s new girlfriend, Florence, was also caught up in that mess yesterday. Poor girl.”

“Girlfriend? Wait, since when did Combeferre find time to——” Courfeyrac sputters before he realizes that other people in the crime lab are listening in. “How did this happen?” he asks in a whisper.

Bahorel scoffs. “A guy meets a girl——”

“No, dumbass, how could we not know? Again?” Courfeyrac groans. “This is the second time he’s gotten a girlfriend and kept her under the radar!”

“You don’t have to know everything.”

“When it is this important it is!”

Bahorel clucks his tongue. “You’re worse than a teenage girl at a sleepover sometimes. If he doesn’t want to introduce his girlfriend to everyone, that’s sort of his business. Maybe she’s not meaning to stick around for long?”

“This is Combeferre. It should be serious,” Courfeyrac insists. “Now that the cat is out of the bag,
he’ll have to confess soon, or he’s not hearing the end of it.”

Bahorel chuckles before putting away the box of retrieved bullets. “Think that the chief is done with his hearing yet?”

Courfeyrac checks his phone and sure enough there is a message there from Enjolras. “The camp cafeteria in fifteen minutes. Looks like the case will be heading to court after all.”

Bahorel grins gleefully as he doffs his gloves and his lab gown. “Bet that the fiscal wanted the case off his hands. He’s too much of a milksop to handle it.”

“Careful about the walls,” Courfeyrac says, gesturing to where the lab’s supervisor is now casting a look in their direction. It’s a relief when he and Bahorel finally pack up and head to the cafeteria. Sometimes Bahorel’s lack of an indoor voice proves to be a liability in these situations.

Thankfully the cafeteria is mostly deserted when they arrive; in fact one of the ladies at the lunch counter is dozing heedless of the chatter of the few officers passing through the premises. One look at the congealed beef stew in the lunch selection is enough to have Courfeyrac and Bahorel settling on packs of chips and soda in lieu of a heavier meal. “That food is mutiny fuel,” Bahorel comments darkly as they find a table in the corner near the door.

“It keeps the fastfood chains around here in good business,” Courfeyrac jokes even as he catches sight of Enjolras already entering the cafeteria. “Caveat emptor!” he calls in a stage whisper as he gestures to the lunch counter.

Enjolras nods before taking a seat and setting his briefcase aside. “How did it go?”

“Quite productive. We narrowed down a great deal of the evidence,” Bahorel says happily. “Is the fiscal still alive?”

“Very much so,” Enjolras replies as he brings out a large flask of coffee. “An additional security check was enough to persuade him to proceed with the preliminary meeting.”

“That paper pusher should really find another office. Rumor has it he’s on his way out anyway,” Bahorel mutters confidentially.

Courfeyrac opens up one of the cans of soda. “How is Eponine doing? I heard she had to take the night off work?”

“She’s back today,” Enjolras replies in a matter-of-fact tone. “There’s a lot she has to do even when she’s not scrubbed in.”

“That means double time for Combeferre though,” Bahorel remarks. “Poor guy.”

Enjolras glances down for a moment, but Courfeyrac catches the tell. “You’ve talked to him?”

“You may as well know that he was the target of yesterday’s bombing,” Enjolras answers seriously. “We had a discussion about this.”

Courfeyrac doesn’t quite hear all of this, thanks to the disbelief flooding his mind. “Why would anyone want to hurt Combeferre?”

“Reprisal for the Transnonain case,” Enjolras explains before taking a sip of his coffee. “Javert was right that this case would only be the beginning of things.”
“Did you imagine that it would go this far?” Courfeyrac asks. “So many people dead---“

Bahorel swears before motioning for them to be quiet. “Brass coming in!”

Courfeyrac now notices in his peripheral vision a group of men clad in the blue of the Marine corps. One of them, a rugged and tall blond fellow slaps a comrade on his shoulder before breaking away from the group and marching up to their corner. “Attorney Enjolras! This is a pleasant surprise!”

Enjolras merely nods. “Good afternoon to you, Lieutenant Gillenormand.”

“I believe simply Theodule will do for civilian conversation,” the lieutenant replies gamely.

Courfeyrac has to stuff a handful of chips in his mouth if only to keep from laughing out loud. The name is not unknown to him; he has heard Marius mention it in passing. ‘How can they be cousins?’ he wants to say. There is nothing of Marius’ affable though awkward bearing in this blusterer. One look at Bahorel’s face is enough for him to guess that his friend is also on this same irreverent train of thought. “Are you with the new regiment?” he asks.

Theodule gives him a surprised glance. “Who are you?”

“Lieutenant, meet my colleagues Maurice Courfeyrac and Remy Bahorel,” Enjolras cuts in by way of making a cordial introduction. “Courfeyrac, Bahorel, meet Lieutenant Gillenormand.”

“We also know your cousin, Doctor Pontmercy,” Courfeyrac says as he shakes Theodule’s hand. “Have you been to see him yet?”

“Not yet, unfortunately. I had meant to yesterday, but he was not at home,” Theodule replies. “How odd, and to think I should run into Attorney Enjolras here---“

“There was an emergency yesterday, Lieutenant. You’d have better luck and better health if you see your cousin at his office,” Bahorel chimes in.

Theodule makes a tutting sound as he takes a seat. “Yes, the bombing. Such a mess. Is your office investigating this, Attorney?”

“We’re not at liberty to divulge that,” Enjolras replies.

“Oh. So what brings you then to the camp?” Theodule asks as he leans forward and puts his hands on the tabletop and smiles widely at Enjolras. “An official visit?”

“Another investigation.”

“Let me know then if I can be of assistance, Attorney.”

Courfeyrac now has to break eye contact with Bahorel, who is on the verge of laughter. “Do you get many guests, Lieutenant Gillenormand?” Courfeyrac asks.

“On an official basis,” Theodule replies. “Do you frequent my cousin’s home?”

“I am afraid that my schedule leaves me little time to do so,” Enjolras answers.

“That is a shame, since I was hoping to visit again this weekend,” the marine says, shaking his head. “Do let me know when you will drop by. The more, the merrier so they say.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “I see.” He pauses to take another sip of coffee. “I hear that the military is conducting its own investigation of the events of yesterday?”
Theodule nods a little less enthusiastically. “Naturally. It is our duty.”

“I will be looking into that first,” Enjolras says as he closes his flask, grabs his briefcase and gets to his feet. “Good day to you, Lieutenant Gillenormand.”

Theodule nods quickly before getting up and scooting back to where his comrades are taking their seats in a far end of the lunchroom. In the meantime Courfeyrac looks to where Enjolras is glaring at Bahorel, who has long given up choking back his laughter. “Well that was....odd.”

“Not entirely a waste of time, thankfully,” Enjolras says, giving Bahorel another withering look. “He may be helpful just yet.”

“He wasn’t interested in helping you per se!” Bahorel says between guffaws.

“It is still a way in,” Enjolras says firmly. “Now keep straight faces, both of you. We can’t afford to lose one of the few allies we have here.”
Musichetta knows that something is afoot when she sees Combeferre give Eponine little more than a cursory nod for the second consecutive lunchtime in the cafeteria. “Why are they at war again?” she asks Joly later that day while they and Bossuet are making an expedition to the flea market.

Joly shrugs confusedly before glancing towards where Bossuet is still trying to haggle with a book vendor some paces away. “Maybe some problem in the staff room? I haven’t seen him doing this to Eponine since they broke up in medical school.”

“Even then he could still work with her,” Musichetta points out. She dreads to think that there is an actual communication breakdown between her two friends; it is not something they can afford during such a tense time in the hospital. “Maybe---“

“Chetta, you know what can be the cause of it.”

“I really don’t think so.”

Joly shrugs once more. “It’s the only thing that fits the temporal order of events. They are fine on Monday night, then Tuesday afternoon Combeferre brings Florence over, then Wednesday he and Eponine are on the outs. It’s Thursday now.”

“They’re so past that, Patrice,” Musichetta points out. “I don’t think anyone could expect Florence to be so completely at ease, especially given how things turned out.” It’s a shame really, since she figures she might have been able to have a fun conversation with Combeferre’s new partner if not for events. ‘Maybe some other better day,’ she decides even as she catches sight of a woman walking away from a stall full of music boxes, carrying some carefully wrapped packages.

Florence stops in her tracks and glances about anxiously while she tightens her grip on her purchases. “Wait, I know you two. Don’t prompt me,” she says when she sees the pair. “Musichetta and Joly?”

“Bingo!” Musichetta replies cheerily. “Is that for a personal collection?”

Florence looks down for a moment. “Not exactly. It’s for work. What about you two?”

“Redecorating,” Joly replies. “We have our personal collections---oh excuse me,” he adds before going off to help Bossuet lug away what appears to be a large crate.

Musichetta laughs and shakes her head. “We do this now and then,” she explains to Florence. “Meaning at least when our paychecks permit it.”

A slight smile crosses Florence’s face. “So what do you collect?”

“Charms. Which is to say, anything that can go on a bracelet,” Musichetta replies proudly, holding
up her wrist to show a delicate chain sporting six small star pendants in various colors. ‘One for each.year in the wards, one for each year I was certain of what I want to do,’ she muses. She indicates the packages that Florence is still carrying. “That’s for work, meaning your classes?”

“Prompts.” That cool reserve seems to have vanished, and in its place now is a sort of embarrassment. “I teach creative writing to a class of about fifteen. I’m trying a new approach,” she confesses.

“What will you do with the music boxes after class?” Musichetta asks. She smiles sympathetically when Florence’s blush deepens. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“My mother used to make them,” Florence answers, raising her chin. Her eyes widen as she looks past Musichetta. “Your boyfriend is.....”

Musichetta merely glances over her shoulder and laughs when she sees Bossuet practically hanging off Joly as they argue playfully about the crate. It’s a sight she can describe even with her eyes closed, but she’s never going to tire of seeing her boys like this, with Joly’s too long hair brushing against Bossuet’s semi-bald head. “They do this all the time,” she drawls before she whistles to them. “Hey Bossuet, you have to meet someone!”

“Yeah, Joly was just telling me!” Bossuet hollers. “Hello Florence!”

Florence manages a dumbfounded nod. “Are they---“

“We like to share,” Musichetta says nonchalantly. “Did Combeferre tell you that?”

“Not so baldly,” Florence replies more bravely. She shakes Bossuet’s hand more warmly. “I heard you’re also in the legal field?”

“Para-legal,” Bossuet says. “I do work with the human rights commission.”

“With Daniel’s best friend?” Florence clarifies.

“With both of them,” Joly chimes in. “Enjolras and Courfeyrac are lawyers. They work with our friends Bahorel and Feuilly.”

“The criminologist and the community worker,” Florence finishes. “I haven’t even met you all, and this is already confusing me.”

Musichetta laughs before she hears the sharp growling of someone’s stomach. “Alright, alright, let’s get something to eat. Ramen night at the Courfeyracs’ new place is a few hours away,” she says as she loops her arm through Bossuet’s. “Why don’t you come with us, Florence?”

The teacher hesitates. “I do not think I’d be welcome.”

“We’re inviting you,” Joly offers. “The more the merrier on those nights.”

Florence hesitates, and that silence says more to Musichetta than a whole diatribe ever could. “At least join us for a snack. We’ll make plans later,” she suggests. “And we can help you with those packages.”

The prospect of help has Florence nodding. “For a while then.” She sighs with relief when Joly takes one of the heavier music boxes. “Where to?”

“Watch and learn,” Musichetta says. Such a question is best answered by Bossuet’s feet, which take
them towards a whole row of kiosks hawking grilled meats, tiny wrapped sweets, little bottles of various cordials and spirits, and glasses of iced juices. In short order the four of them are seated at a small table, trying not to jostle each other’s elbows as they sample a platter of sausages and cheeses.

“Bad for the arteries, good for the soul,” Joly quips as he wipes his hands. “If Combeferre could see us, he’d have a thing or two to say.”

“I won’t tell him,” Florence says. “How long have you guys all known each other?”

“Mostly since college. Combeferre goes back a much longer way with Enjolras and Courfeyrac though,” Bossuet explains. “I believe they met while they were in diapers.”

“That’s Enjolras and Combeferre. They lived in the same neighbourhood and their mothers were in the same prenatal classes. Courfeyrac came along in high school....detention,” Joly says.

Florence chokes. “Daniel, in detention?”

Bossuet nudges Musichetta. “How the heck doesn’t she know that about him? It’s basic!”

‘Putting his best foot forward, maybe?’ Musichetta decides as she takes a sip from a bottle of four seasons cordial. “Maybe you should ask him to tell you that story some time,” she says.

Florence shrugs ruefully before knocking back some iced tea. “I hear that Courfeyrac is the only one of you guys who is actually married.”

“Yes, to Eponine’s sister, Azelma,” Joly explains.

Florence nearly spits out her drink. “Wait....and Eponine is dating Enjolras, who was her patient once and is Daniel’s best friend? You guys are all cool with this?”

“We saw that happening before they both did,” Bossuet says sagely. “Enjolras almost always never loses an argument, and Eponine is the epitome of stubbornness. Of course something was going to happen.”

“Anyway we’re all adults here,” Musichetta says. It’s clear that poor Florence is trying to wrap her head around this very enmeshed situation, perhaps for fear of making some faux pas. The effort, as clumsy as it is, is endearing nonetheless. “How did you and Combeferre meet?” she asks.

“At a bookshop. We both were aiming for this book of old maps, last copy,” Florence says as she wipes her mouth daintily. “I let him have it; I was a few cents short, but I slipped him my number. So what about you three?”

“Literature class, drama module. We had to do a scene together,” Bossuet replies.

“What sort of scene?”

“A thousand and one reasons not to eat baked beans.”

Musichetta snorts at the memories of nearly losing her voice in front of the class, only to see Florence also on the verge of laughter. “You know the sketch?”

Florence nods gleefully. “Have done it before in class.” She pauses to spritz some alcohol on her hands. “It’s one of my favourites.”

Joly quickly drains what’s left of his own glass of juice. “Combeferre has some explaining to do,” he says as he sets the glass down.
“About what?” Florence asks warily.

“Why he’s taken so long to introduce you to everyone,” Joly says with a grin. “Where have you been all his life?”

II

“You’d do that, Doc? Really?”

“What else is this office for?”

The bedraggled old man seated across the desk slumps with relief and buries his face in his hands to hide his tears. “Thank you. I was worried I’d never be able to go after the bastards who hurt my niece.”

“It’s only doing justice,” Eponine says a little pointedly. The last thing she wants is her work being used for vendettas, no matter how grievous her patients’ cases may be. ‘Sometimes the line is a little thin,’ she catches herself thinking as she hands her visitor an endorsement to the public attorney’s office. “Now about the financial aid—-“

“I’ve already sold my house.”

“I wish you didn’t have to do that. There are ways, Mr. Harris.”

The gentleman sits up stiffly, such that the rips in his tattered coat nearly give a little further. “I do not want to be in debt.”

“There’s nothing about borrowing, it’s more of grants and reimbursement,” Eponine explains. She hands over some brochures to Mr. Harris and waits a few minutes for him to peruse them. “I’m sorry we can’t do anything to cut costs; your niece’s hospital stay is subsidized as it is, but these will help.”

“I’ll discuss these with my children,” Mr. Harris says as he pockets the brochures. He gets to his feet and gives Eponine a slight bow. “I’m glad that there are some swell folk like you who care.”

Eponine manages a cordial smile as she shakes his hand. “I’ll see you soon, Mr. Harris.” She waits for the door to shut and the footsteps to fade before she sighs deeply and picks up the case file on her desk. It never gets easier, whether she is working here or at the halfway house; thankfully she only has a week’s worth of work left at the latter place. “I’ll never be able to tear myself completely away now though,” she whispers as she scribbles some details into the last page of the chart and then locks it up in her desk. There are some scars she figures she has to wear a little more proudly.

She opens one of her desk drawers and pulls out a granola bar, but just before she can unwrap it she hears a knock on the door. “Who is it?”

“Got a moment?” Cosette asks as she opens the door a crack.

“Sure,” Eponine replies, motioning for her friend to take a seat. “Are you here with Elodie, Touissant or someone?” she asks.

“No, just making a pharmacy run,” Cosette says, putting a bag of medications on the desk. “Are you going to the ramen night later?”

“Yeah, since it’s my sister’s housewarming,” Eponine says. She cocks her head as she notices the blush suffusing Cosette’s cheeks. “That’s not what you’re here about, I know it.”
“Sort of,” Cosette says, turning even redder. “Marius and I have something to tell everyone later, but I thought you ought to know first since there’s something I want to ask.”

Eponine glances down to her friend’s hand, where there is now a small diamond ring. Of course she should have guessed. “You’re getting married, when?”

Cosette is now practically beaming. “January. We don’t want the wedding to go with the Christmas rush.” She takes a deep breath and lets out a happy sigh. “Could you please be one of my bridesmaids?”

For a moment Eponine is stunned, not so much by the question but for the earnestness in Cosette’s voice. “What about other friends---?”

“Family,” Cosette says. “We went through a lot together in college, and even if we didn’t talk for years after, I didn’t forget all of that.”

Eponine nods despite the tears she can already feel pricking at her eyes. “Alright then. Who else are you asking to be a bridesmaid?”

“Musichetta. I don’t plan on having a big wedding,” Cosette replies. “Of course, Courfeyrac will be one of the groomsmen. I am not sure if Marius will ask his cousin Theodule to stand up too.”

The mention of this Marine has Eponine snickering. “I heard he’s in town. Enjolras, Courfeyrac, and Bahorel ran into him yesterday.”

“He turned up at the house right after Marius went on duty because of the bombing,” Cosette explains.

“Really?”

“Yes. I don’t like the look on your face, Eponine.”

“Of course you don’t. You know how I am,” Eponine teases. She glances at the clock, which reads five minutes to five. “I’ll catch up with you guys at ramen night. And I won’t tell a soul.”

“Please,” Cosette says. “You sure you don’t want to hitch a ride? We can go together.”

“I have to see to some things,” Eponine replies, pointing to her paperwork. “Unless you want to wait at the hospital cafeteria—”

“I get the picture. I know how awful the food is,” Cosette laughs. “Don’t be too late.”

“I won’t,” Eponine promises. She brings out her phone the moment Cosette shuts the door and searches for a number on speed dial. Not surprisingly, the call goes straight to voice mail. She takes a deep breath before speaking. “Auguste? It’s me. I think there’s something you ought to know about Marius’ cousin Theodule. It’s rather fishy and I don’t think we can discuss this in front of the others. Call me as soon as you can, please.”
“They weren’t kidding when they said you leave no stone unturned.”

It is the icy tone of this otherwise blustering comment that has Enjolras levelling a stern look at the defense counsel. “It would be negligent to proceed otherwise.”

“Of course. I was just impressed at the depth of your team’s research,” the older attorney mutters. He holds out a hand perfunctorily. “Till tomorrow’s hearing then.”

Enjolras shakes this man’s hand cordially before stepping away to check his phone. Not surprisingly there are a number of text messages, mostly about the evening’s upcoming revelry, but it is the one voice mail there that piques his curiosity. He presses a number on speed dial and hears the phone ring two times before the call comes through. “Something’s up, Eponine?” he asks.

“Yeah, it’s a case of fishy timing,” Eponine replies in a low voice. “I talked to Cosette. Apparently right before the bombing, or might I dare say during the bombing, Theodule showed up at the Fauchelevents’ house. He was looking for Marius.”

“He did mention that,” Enjolras says. “I am sure though that the visit was not purely social or familial.”

“That’s what I thought. Usually officers don’t use lunch as a furlough time,” Eponine comments. “What disturbs me is that he somehow knows the Fauchelevents’ address. Who knows what else he knows?”

‘Enough to be cagey with talk of the investigation,’ Enjolras notes silently. In his experience, it’s always the ones who readily spill the beans who end up actually becoming the worst informants. “Is there anything else?”

It takes a moment before Eponine answers. “Auguste, are you alone?”

Enjolras looks around the still busy court room and lets out an irritated huff. “Give me a few seconds,” he instructs even as he begins walking to the men’s restroom. He chooses the cubicle furthest from the door and locks it for good measure. “Well then?”

“I just combed through some articles and files, and it turns out that Theodule’s regiment---the 12th Marine Corps, is a reorganized group with a number of notorious officers. Some of them roughed up patients who were once admitted here.” She hums over the sound of rustling paper. “I’ll give you the files later.”

He cranes his neck towards the sound of someone walking towards the restroom. “At home. Don’t send them on email.” He pauses as the sound seemingly dies down. “Will you need a ride to the party?”

“Not today. I’m going with Gav to get a housewarming gift,” she replies.

It’s all he can do not to chuckle at the sly tone in his partner’s voice. “Should I warn Courfeyrac about anything then?”
“Oh no. We’re not being evil. Just being siblings.”

“Alright then. You guys take care.”

“Yep. See you in a bit!” she whispers furtively before she ends the call.

Enjolras quickly pockets the phone and flushes the toilet, then waits a few moments before stepping out of the cubicle. Somehow the sight of an empty bathroom only makes him more uneasy, more so when he leaves the premises and notices the security camera just outside the door. ‘Then again it could have been anyone,’ he reminds himself as he exits the courthouse. All the same he takes a more circuitous route to the highway and down to the neighbourhood where Courfeyrac and Azelma now reside.

It takes a while before he finally finds his friends’ home at the end of a long winding road shaded by a canopy of ancient trees. ‘Jehan would say that this is like some path built by fairies,’ he muses as he finds a parking space near a brick wall. He gets out of his car just in time to see Combeferre alighting from a taxi. Enjolras sees Combeferre nod slightly and walks up to meet him at the gate.

“How have you been?”

Combeferre shrugs. “Still alive, as you can see.” He glances at his watch and at the reddish sunset now fast being overtaken by the deep blue of early evening. “Right on time, as always.”

‘While nearly everyone else has had an early day off.’ Enjolras notes as he clasps his friend’s shoulder. “Who is on duty at Saint Michel tonight then?”

“One of the more junior surgeons,” Combeferre says. He sighs deeply as he meets his friend’s gaze. “I never thought I’d hear you giving brutal advice about relationships.”

Enjolras nods, having already expected this conversation. It’s always Combeferre who brings up these matters. “I apologize if it appeared unseemly. It was unsolicited after all.”

“I was the one rude enough to walk out,” Combeferre points out. He fiddles with his keys for a few moments. “My bid to attend a conference is still pending. Heaven knows if I’ll be able to actually get out of town.”

The attorney grits his teeth, knowing what this may mean for his friend. “Will you need any other sort of assistance?”

“A cover? Hopefully not, since that would be more difficult to explain, no matter how temporary,” Combeferre says. He glances towards the house. “They don’t know, do they?”

“Courfeyrac and Bahorel, but only because they will help with the investigation,” Enjolras explains.

Combeferre lets out a ragged breath. “I know what you and Eponine want me to do, but I won’t do it to Florence. Not now. She’s vying for tenure, her family has its problems, and she doesn’t need to be burdened with this.”

“The question is if she would see it as a burden.”

“I did not get into a relationship to turn it into a confessional.”

Enjolras grits his teeth, more so when he notices Courfeyrac stepping out into the front yard. “You know her better than we all do,” he deadpans before nodding to their friend. “I take we’re late to the party?”
“Only for the hors d’oeuvres,” Courfeyrac says with a grin. “You’re lucky that Azelma has stopped the rest from starting in on the rest of the food before her siblings get here.”

“Perfectly timing the festivities, I see,” Enjolras remarks as they go into the house. The living room along of this place is larger than Courfeyrac and Azelma’s former lodgings, and far less cluttered as well. All the same the personal touches are everywhere, such as Courfeyrac’s favourite leather covered recliner or Azelma’s collection of colourful floral prints. The entire effect is sleek yet homey, and so Enjolras can’t help but grin approvingly. “A very good job, Courfeyrac. Combeferre, what do you think?’

The doctor is silent, staring at a woman happily jostling for space on a sofa with Joly, Musichetta, and Bossuet. “Florence?!”

Florence grins sheepishly as she pulls her strawberry blonde hair out of her face. “Hello Daniel. Your friends asked me along.”

“Enthusiastically at that,” Combeferre says, eyeing the trio of miscreants. “What have you been telling her?” he asks them.

Musichetta laughs heartily. “Wouldn’t you want to know?”

“You should be more afraid of what I’m asking about,” Florence quips sweetly.

The room fills with laughter, particularly from the corner where Bahorel, Grantaire, Prouvaire, and Feuilly are building a very shaky tower of cards. “Now there is your bane, Asclepius!” Grantaire hollers.

Courfeyrac pats Combeferre on the back, if only to stop the man from blushing even harder. He nods to Florence, who is getting to her feet. “Florence, may I introduce the other third of the terrible threesome, Auguste Enjolras. Enjolras, meet Florence Johnson.”

“Objection! We are the terrible threesome!” Bossuet calls.

“Thank you for owning the title,” Enjolras quips. Nevertheless he shakes Florence’s hand firmly. “It’s good that you could be here.”

“I need to meet Daniel’s friends,” Florence says with a grin. “He mentions you a lot.”

Enjolras nods cordially, even as he remembers how it was to introduce Eponine to this same group of friends not too long ago. ‘Definitely far from formal, even given the circumstances,’ he notes quietly. Yet for all her apparent stiffness, it is apparent that Florence has thrown Combeferre for a loop. “I heard you’re in the academe?” he asks Florence.

“I teach English literature—poetry in particular, and creative writing. Undergraduate mostly, but sometimes I handle masteral classes,” Florence replies more brightly. “So I hear you’re working now with the human rights’ commission?”

“Working? He’s practically heading it,” Azelma chimes in as she sets down a large pitcher of iced tea on a table already loaded with an oversized tureen of ramen and several platters of meats, vegetables, and condiments. Marius and Cosette are a few steps behind, carrying more dishes of food. “Let’s face it, it’s your division that does the most work,” Azelma says, gesturing to Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Feuilly, Bahorel, and Bossuet.

Courfeyrac laughs before kissing her soundly, bringing both hands down to rub the swell of her belly. “I think Alex is proud of her daddy,” she whispers.
“Aw, you two are so sweet,” Cosette coos as she helps pass around some bowls of ramen. “Zelma, when are you due, really?”

“End of January,” Azelma replies. “That’s not a sure thing, since babies are supposed to have some timing all on their own.”

“In my experience, once a mom hits the 36th week, it’s pretty much a constant labor watch from then on,” Musichetta chimes in.

Marius squeezes Cosette’s hand. “We could always reschedule the wedding to February.”

“Yeah for some time when Zel is not about to---wait a minute, did I hear you right, Pontmercy?” Courfeyrac asks.

“Wait, what....” Marius begins before he turns pale. His eyes are wide when he meets Cosette’s aghast expression. “I’m so sorry! I know we had a plan and all. This is awful, I’m so, so sorry!”

Bahorel stops in the middle of slurping up some noodles. “Oh come on, you two just kiss and make up!”

“You guys aren’t getting the urgency of this!” Courfeyrac groans. He gives Marius and Cosette a distraught look. “First there’s Combeferre not telling me about Florence, and then you two don’t tell me about your engagement! What’s next, Enjolras and Eponine eloping?!”

“Now don’t give me any ideas,” Eponine catcalls from where she and Gavroche are just entering the house, carrying a large yellow box.

Enjolras laughs as he goes over to help them with their load. “You just missed a very important announcement,” he informs her.

“Oh I knew about that. Cosette asked me to be one of her bridesmaids,” Eponine whispers.

Gavroche snickers as he glances at his sister and Enjolras. “So Courf and Azelma met less than a year ago and are now married. Marius and Cosette met that same week too, and they just got engaged. So when are you two going to change status?”

Eponine swears and tries to pinch Gavroche, who merely dances away amid the laughter of the rest of the group. Enjolras can feel the heat rising to his cheeks but he still manages to look steadily at Marius and Cosette. “All the same, congratulations to you both.”

Cosette beams at these words. “Thank you. We’ll definitely keep you guys updated with the details.”

As everyone else starts congratulating the newly engaged couple, Enjolras looks to where Eponine is eagerly showing Azelma what appears to be a small iron tree in a pot, with empty picture frames dangling from the branches. ‘Did I hear her right?’ he wonders, more so when he remembers their conversation prior to Courfeyrac and Azelma’s wedding just months ago. At that moment she happens to look his way and the smile that brightens her face makes him catch his breath, not just for the joy but the certainty he now finds there.

II

The housewarming winds down by ten in the evening, but Eponine feels anything but weary; in fact as far as she’s concerned the night has just begun. “We should get some groceries. We’re out of food and cleaning supplies,” she informs Enjolras as they get into his car.
“At this hour?” Enjolras asks, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe we should go after work tomorrow.”

“More importantly, we’re out of coffee.”

“Well then, which store can we still go to?”

“Down to the convenience store at the corner. I’m not up to restocking all the cupboards just now,” Eponine says as she adjusts her seatbelt and stretches a bit to ease up the strain on her still healing ankle. She checks her blouse pocket for the small green flashdrive she tucked away there, full of the files her partner will need later. “It shouldn’t take long.”

Enjolras nods and keeps his eyes on the road until they reach a bend wherein the traffic has ground to a halt. He rolls down the window on the driver’s side in order to take a better look at the road ahead of them. “Well this is a gridlock. Two cargo trucks at right angles, and neither is budging.”

She groans when she takes a look at the rearview mirror and sees all the cars all lining up behind theirs. “Now we’re stuck.”

“Some way will clear up, soon enough,” he says as he shuts the window and fastens his seatbelt again. He touches her hand to prompt her to look at him. “Now we have a bridal shower to plan, on top of Azelma’s baby shower.”

Eponine finds herself smiling, just from the way he says the word ‘we’. “Your team will have cases going to trial by that time, while we doctors will be prepping for the sub-specialty board exams. This is going to be crazy,” she points out. “Cosette will want a perfect wedding day, and of course everyone will pull all stops out for my sister.”

Enjolras smirks at this. “I can only imagine what might happen the day Alexandra will be born.”

The very idea has Eponine rolling her eyes. “Everyone will be camping out all over the hospital. They only allow fathers and immediate family in the maternity complex’s waiting room.”

“They’ll be invading your staff room.”

“Until Combeferre shoos them out.”

“Good luck to him on that count,” he deadpans. He is silent for a few moments as he looks pensively out at the traffic. “Do you really have ideas about eloping?” he asks in a tone that is both bemused as well as a little wary.

“It’s a crazy thought I’ve had after seeing classmates getting all nutty about engagements and weddings during nursing school, or even senior year in medical proper,” she explains. She bites her lip if only to keep from imagining herself and Enjolras heading off in search of a chapel instead of food. ‘It could happen right now if we talk about it long enough,’ she realizes even as she feels a thrill coursing through her body.

Enjolras nods as he adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. “I understand its merits, but is it really what you want for a wedding?”

“I’ve never really given it much thought,” Eponine admits. She takes a deep breath as she looks at her lover, knowing that he’s not going to be the one to drop this topic. “Are we really having this discussion, now? We just moved in together a few days ago.”

“It’s a bit soon, yes, but everyone is joking about it and I want to know what you think,” Enjolras says, going rather red. “I mean, should I tell our friends to back off?”
Eponine snorts. “You may as well tell pigs to fly. They’re not going to stop till they accidentally ruin whatever attempts at a proposal. They won’t pass up an opportunity to.”

A slight smile tugs at the corners of Enjolras’ lips. “I’m taking that as a fair warning.”

“You should,” Eponine says as she squeezes his hand. “Now I guess you have thought about it---and not just during my sister’s wedding.”

“About asking?”

“What about that, or anything after?”

Enjolras takes a deep breath before planting a light kiss on her lips. “I can’t ask you yet. Or rather, I won’t. You’re right that it’s a bit soon.”

“That, and we’re still too busy. I think all these upcoming events might scare us out of the idea permanently,” Eponine laughs as she runs her hands through his hair.

“Hopefully not,” Enjolras mutters. “But the door is still open?”

Eponine nods before kissing him back. “Of course.”
“Let me get this straight---Combeferre was actually allowed to decorate your staff room this year?”

“He is the chief resident after all. Mabeuf had to allow him the privilege.”

Enjolras laughs before glancing up at the red traffic light at the other side of the intersection and then back at his partner seated just a few feet away. “So everyone’s cubicles are covered in red and green?”

“Red and green with glitter,” Eponine says, shaking her head at the images that brings to mind. It does not help that she will have to endure this for much of her twenty-four hour shift at the Saint Michel Hospital. She sneaks a look at her watch, which shows the time to be just half past six in the morning. “At least the glitter is mostly on the angels standing watch near the pantry.”

“It sounds like a sneaky way of checking who’s taking too many snack breaks.”

“Like anyone is really going to mind during the discharge party today.”


“It’s better than calling it the paperwork chain gang,” Eponine points out. She looks down at her fingers, which oddly enough aren’t exactly made for typing. Every day she is thankful for grammar and spelling checks. “It’s a bit of a party anyway. We have at least twelve patients up to leave today, and maybe more might be cleared later. Everyone wants to be home this Christmas Eve.”

“Of course,” he says wryly before shifting his gaze back to the road as the traffic light turn green. “I won’t be able to hang around long at Saint-Michel; I have to give a document to Mrs. Plutarque right away. It’s for Elodie’s adoption case.”

“Then after?”

“I have meetings with clients. You know that.”

She sighs at the unspoken words that suddenly seem to hang thickly between them, so she squeezes his knee. “I’ll be home as soon as I can tomorrow,” she reminds him as she fishes in her pocket for her ID to show to the security guard watching the hospital’s parking lot.

Enjolras is quiet as he parks the car and then carefully pulls the key out of the ignition. He takes a deep breath as he clasps Eponine’s hand. “We’ll find a little time off. Maybe not just tomorrow.”

Eponine nods as she brushes her thumb over his knuckles by way of assent. The world doesn’t stop during the holiday season, and nor do their respective crusades and obligations. “The operative words being ‘little’ or ‘not just tomorrow?’ she asks.

“That depends on how much work I can finish,” he says as he adjusts his grip on her hand so that his fingers touch the inside of her wrist.

She shivers with delight at the increased contact. “Any day but New Year’s Eve though.”

“What’s happening then?”
“The trauma team is needed in full force by evening. The ER is usually full within an hour after the first fireworks go off.”

Enjolras winces for a moment, clearly imagining what sorts of injuries Eponine and their friends have to treat. “Well then, what about before that?” he asks before he kisses her brow.

“Deal.” She shoulders her new sleek green bag, one of the presents she has received from him this Christmas. It’s a little bigger than her old work tote and has far more pockets and compartments—something which most ladies’ bags nowadays do not have. As she steps out of the car, she sees Enjolras adjusting his new blue tie, which happens to be one of her gifts to him, apart from museum passes and a case for his camera. “You should wear that shade more often, Auguste. It’s very classy,” she remarks.

“I am sure you also meant coordinated?” he teases while he gives the tie one last sharp tug and then steps out of the car.

“Maybe,” Eponine quips as she rubs her fingers together to stave off the slight chill nipping under her nails. ‘Of course anyone can see that the color of the tie matches his eyes,’ she thinks gleefully as they step into the bustling hospital lobby. There are visitors already walking in with arms full of wrapped packages or huge baskets of foodstuffs, while orderlies wearing Santa hats carefully wheel patients from the emergency room to the radiology department or to the elevator. In the middle of everything is a Christmas tree decked with delicate stars fashioned from dyed translucent shells and tiny lights that make the branches seem covered in icicles.

Enjolras gestures to some interns pushing a cart piled high with stained plywood planks and bundles of hay. “What are those for?”

“A crèche scene. The hospital chaplain insisted on it,” Eponine replies with a shrug as they walk up several flights of stairs to the surgical wing. This place is even busier than the lobby, thanks to patients being woken up by nurses and visitors, or the night shift’s staff grabbing breakfast or meeting up with the colleagues who have come to relieve them for the day. Yet even through all this activity, the air rings with cheery shouts of “Merry Christmas!” or “Happy Holidays!”, and more than once Eponine and Enjolras have to pause to return the greetings.

They soon find Combeferre outside the staff room, sipping a cup of coffee as he looks through the ward’s latest census. He blinks blearily at his friends. “Nice and early, you two. There’s free coffee in there, courtesy of Mr. Copperfield. He came here just an hour ago.”

Eponine nods, recognizing the name of a patient who’d been sent home earlier that week. “How is he?”

“Very chipper,” Combeferre answers. He looks pleadingly at Enjolras. “Care to take some fruitcake and caramel off my hands, or rather, off my desk?”

“I’m getting a cut of Eponine’s share already,” Enjolras says. “You could bring some of your food to dinner later, or ask Florence to help you out.”

Combeferre sighs. “She already gave out to her students some of the macaroons I got. Maybe, just maybe she still has some people to give food gifts to.”

“At least you’re not going to starve,” Eponine drawls as she opens the staff room door. Her jaw drops as she takes in the sight of the staff room covered not only in red and green garlands, but with little angels stationed by all the cubicles and shelves. “Were you bored last night?”
Combeferre snickers. “The interns were bored. You should see their quarters---those kids took advantage of the fact I had to operate on a kid who’d taken a fall.”

Eponine rolls her eyes as she goes over to her desk, which is piled high with Christmas cards as well as all sorts of cookies and pastries. There are also cans of coffee and gourmet sardines, two bottles of wine, a basket of fruit, and a plethora of scented candles. She sets to one side two boxes of cookies and some of the fruit. “The rest is going home,” she explains to Enjolras and Combeferre. “You may as well add some of this stash to your dinner contributions.”

“What are you going to do with the scented candles?” Enjolras asks as he picks up one bright pink candle in a glass holder. “We don’t have enough room at home for all of them.”

“Mother Asuncion collects them. I’ll drop those off at my next visit to the halfway house,” she replies, also setting the candles aside. Although she’s already through with her practicum at that place, it’s impossible for her to make a complete break with the place. ‘Not when it did something for who you are now,’ she decides as she finds a large card in the pile and carefully sticks it to the wall of her cubicle. It’s actually a photo of some of the girls at the halfway house, all of them holding up letters that spell out “Merry Christmas Doc!” These girls have signed the bottom of the photo, and even more greetings cover the back of the picture.

Even with some help it takes two trips to bring all the remaining gifts as well as some of Combeferre’s own haul down to Enjolras’ car. “Try to keep the rest out of trouble later—especially my siblings. I don’t want you guys transferring Christmas Eve dinner to the ER,” she tells Enjolras before giving him a chaste peck on the lips.

Enjolras smiles against her lips as he tucks a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Eponine.”

She quickly walks back to the hospital lobby, but all the same she throws a glance over her shoulder to watch him driving off to work and whatever else the day will bring. ‘It’s not the first time you’ve spent Christmas on duty,’ she reminds herself as she heads back up to the surgery ward, where Combeferre is waiting to endorse the ward’s cases and discharge papers to her and the team starting their shift.

“That makes thirteen people we’re sending home before dinner: Acosta, Chaney, Cruz, Donovan, Dunn, Fitzpatrick, Harrell, Holloway, Peterson, Porter, Raymond, Terrell, and Whitehead. I had the interns drafting papers last night. So as soon as the forms are properly edited and approved by you, the patients can pack up,” Combeferre tells her towards the end of the discussion as he hands her a pack of brown envelopes. “It’s your call if Gaines, Murillo, Spence, and Villa will also be discharged.”

Eponine nods as she begins stacking up the charts of these patients. It heartens her to no end to hear that they will be leaving this hospital soon. As she reviews the census she notices one name next to some hastily scrawled notes. “How is Mrs. Escobar?”

Combeferre grits his teeth. “She’s impatient to go home to her grandchildren, but her hip and her hand are still troubling her. I gave her a dose of painkillers an hour ago, so her next dose should be about ten or so.”

She bites her lip and looks down again at her copy of the ward census. The words *multiple fractures to both right upper and lower extremities, motor vehicular accident*, and even more grimly, *osteoporosis* leap out from the notes alongside her patient’s name. “I’ll talk to her.”

can’t spend your week-long leave recuperating from fatigue.”

“Then help me hope for dry roads and sober parties tonight,” Eponine retorts. “Now get some rest. You can’t afford to be drowsy during dinner at the Fauchelevents’ place.”

Combeferre snorts. “Perish the thought. Merry Christmas, Eponine,” he says before going back to the staff room to sign out for the day.

Once her friend is gone Eponine quickly reviews some charts, and then peeks into the packet he handed to her. She laughs on seeing that all the envelopes are already labelled with the patients’ names, and emblazoned with a tiny Christmas tree at the right lower corner. ‘Trust him to add this sort of cheer,’ she thinks as she leaves to begin making her rounds of the ward.

At length she passes by a cubicle in the last room in the hall and sees Nita Escobar sitting up in bed, eyes closed as she hums along to a Christmas carol on her bedside radio. Her long hair falls in a silvery cascade over the bandages swathing her right arm. “Good morning, Mrs. Escobar. How are you feeling?” Eponine greets.

Mrs. Escobar opens her eyes and looks around, only to sigh when she sees Eponine. “Oh my dear. Aren’t you going to be home for Christmas too?” she asks softly.

“Doctors don’t really get holidays, Ma’am,” Eponine says as she adjusts her patient’s IV line. “How are you feeling today?”

“I hardly slept,” Mrs. Escobar mutters. “It’s my hand. They always say it’s worse with the hand. Lots of nerves there, I heard?”

“That’s only part of the story,” Eponine explains. She helps Mrs. Escobar sit up and rearrange the pillows on her bed. “Are the little ones coming to see you today?”

The elderly woman makes a sighing noise. “I want to be home to see them. We always go to Midnight Mass together.”

“If you’re in so much pain we can’t let you go home yet. Not like this,” Eponine says seriously.

“Can’t you just give me a huge dose of medications and let me go out for a bit? I promise I’ll be back,” Mrs. Escobar whispers. “You don’t even have to tell the bosses. It could be our secret.”

Eponine bites her lip even as she feels the answer tugging at her lips. It would be so easy, she knows. After all she had been able to manage it, albeit clandestinely, during her teenage years. “I’m sorry Mrs. Escobar. We can’t move you yet till we’re sure you’re healing well.”

Mrs. Escobar lets out a despondent whimper but she forces her lips up into a brave smile. “New Year’s Day. You’ll see.”

“Maybe, just maybe,” Eponine says, hoping to at least sound more optimistic. “The kids can stay as long as they like. We’re extending visiting hours till early evening.”

Mrs. Escobar starts using her uninjured hand to sweep back her hair. “Does that go even for the doctors and nurses here?”

“No, not really. Everyone who’s here now gets tomorrow off, so it’s not so bad.”

“Still, it’s Christmas Eve. I am sure your family will miss you.”
“They understand,” Eponine replies as she hands a comb to her patient. “It’s not the first time I’ve spent the holidays away.”

The old woman makes a huffing noise. “What about that charming young man, Attorney Enjolras? I saw you two earlier; you’re such a lovely couple. You should ask him to visit you here.”

“He has plans tonight too.”

“With his parents, naturally. I’m sure that your parents would be delighted to meet him too.”

Eponine bites her lip to hold back a sardonic laugh. “My parents don’t like visitors very much.”

“You can’t be sure till you bring him home to them!” Mrs. Escobar says lightly as she swats Eponine’s arm. “With a daughter like you, and a future son in law like him, what’s not to be proud of?”

‘Little does anyone know!’ Eponine almost says. Maybe it’s just as well, since on most days she feels a little less like that hardened girl from the shadows of downtown. She manages a nod as she gives her patient an once-over. “I’ll adjust your pain meds, and we’ll see how that works later,” she reassures Mrs. Escobar before excusing herself to the nurses’ station.

Just as she’s signing out an entry in a chart, she hears the light patter of footsteps followed by a childish giggle. “Doc Eponine! Watch me!”

Eponine drops her pen and turns in time to catch a little girl half-skipping, half-running down the corridor. “What are you doing here, Elodie?” she laughs as she crouches to look at the child. She sees now that Elodie’s black hair has finally grown out enough for her to clip it back properly with dainty little barrettes that are as pink as her lacy dress. “Are you here with Cosette or Marius?”

Elodie gives her a toothy grin. “Both, but they’re still talking for so long with one of Papa’s—I mean Mister Marius’ friends, so I thought I’d run ahead to see you and give you your Christmas gift.”

“That’s really sweet, but I think it’s time we go looking for them before they start worrying,” Eponine reminds her.

Elodie pouts as she holds out a wrapped package. “Don’t you want to open it first? Please?”

“Alright then,” Eponine concedes as she receives the gift. She carefully pulls away the wrapping paper to reveal a white t-shirt. The shirt has a drawing of a woman in a long, regal looking dress with a shawl draped over her arms, and with a green stethoscope around her neck. “Thank you. Did you make this?” she asks Elodie.

“Yes and Miss Cosette helped me stick it on the shirt,” Elodie announces. “I made more drawings for everyone too!”

It is at that moment that Eponine catches sight of Cosette running frantically towards them. She waves to her panicked friend. “Elodie is fine, don’t worry.”

Cosette nods with unmitigated relief as she reaches them. “Thank you, Ponine,” she says before quickly scooping up Elodie. “Please don’t run off just like that, Elodie. You scared me there,” Cosette chides her foster daughter gently.

“Why would you be scared? I was with Doc Eponine,” Elodie asks as she throws her arms around Cosette’s neck.
“It’s a very big hospital here, remember?” Cosette replies. She smiles when she notices the shirt Eponine is holding. “Do you like it?”

“It’s almost too cute to wear,” Eponine remarks.

“Elodie insisted that we come here so she could give it to you, since you’re at work tonight,” Cosette says. She sighs as she looks at her friend. “I really wish you could be around later. I never could get you and your siblings to join us for the holidays back when we were in college together.”

Eponine shrugs as she recalls all those years when she’d watched Cosette pack for the holidays, while she herself sorted through hand-me-downs or worked extra hours for new things to give to Azelma and Gavroche. “I didn’t want to impose.”

“It’s not imposing if there’s an invitation involved,” Cosette points out. “You really ought to have a word with Dr. Mabeuf or Combeferre for making you do duty on Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve!”

“We drew lots. The department does this every year,” Eponine explains. “Anyway I get to go on leave up to the morning of New Year’s Eve. That’s kind of fair.”

“That’s good. You need the rest, Ponine. I don’t recall you taking a leave all year.”

“That’s also another reason I was allowed so much time off.”

Cosette laughs as she adjusts her grip on Elodie. “Then I’ll have to make sure that Marius and I aren’t away for too long on our honeymoon, so he can also have a little vacation time when Elodie has her summer break.”

“Where are you guys going?” Eponine asks.

“We’re taking a cruise,” Cosette whispers in a conspiratorial tone as she sets Elodie down. “That’s one of the most foolproof ideas we’ve got.”

“Yeah, as long as you don’t let Courf or Grantaire, or even my brother find out about your ports of call,” Eponine quips.

Cosette giggles again. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“More like tell Marius to be on guard?”

“Don’t worry. He’s getting better at sidestepping them.”

Eponine grins even as she hears her phone ringing in her pocket. “Now speaking of them...” she mutters as she presses the button to take the call. “Hello Grantaire. What’s going on?”

“You might want to come down to the kiddie ward now, Ponine,” Grantaire says loudly. “Come on, before you miss it!”

“Miss what?” Eponine asks before she realizes that Grantaire is raising his voice in order to be heard over a chorus of voices singing. “Who is carolling now in the ward?”

Grantaire laughs. “Why don’t you come and see?”

Eponine rolls her eyes even as she hears the ‘click’ of the call ending. “Looks like Grantaire is carolling in the pedia ward, or at least he’s with someone who is,” she explains to Cosette and Elodie.
Elodie quickly tugs on Cosette’s hand. “Can we watch too?”

“Just for a little while. There are still some things I have to do,” Cosette says. “I have to meet with Mrs. Plutarque later,” she explains in an undertone to Eponine.

The doctor nods, remembering her discussion with Enjolras earlier that day. “The adoption is finalized?”

“I’m praying for it,” Cosette whispers as they follow Elodie to the paediatric ward. By far it’s the most festive place in the hospital; there are bushy garlands dangling from the ceiling and colourful lights strung over every doorjamb. The aromas of gingerbread and chocolate hang in the air, mingling with the deep smell of a rain shower. Somewhere in the ward a baritone voice sings, ‘Come they told me, pa rum pum pam pam. A new born King to see, pa rum pum pum pum,’

Eponine stops in her tracks as she guesses the identity of this singer. ‘I can’t believe Gav still remembers that song!’ she thinks as she runs ahead to the room where the voice is coming from. She stands in the doorway, almost in disbelief at the sight of her younger brother sitting in the middle of the ward, tapping gently on a beat box in time with the lyrics. Navet, Grantaire, Prouvaire, and Feuilly are also there, walking among the rows of beds to hand out cookies to the patients and any visiting relatives.

Elodie tugs at the sleeve of Eponine’s coat. “Doctor Eponine, come on!”

“I’ll follow in a while, baby,” Eponine says as she ruffles Elodie’s hair. If she closes her eyes she can almost imagine Gavroche again as a little boy, running around their family’s cramped apartment and singing this carol at the top of his lungs. Yet she wills herself to keep her eyes open as she listens to her brother singing, now with the youngsters joining in with the refrain. ‘Then He smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum. Me and my drum,’ she whispers as she finally steps forward into the ward.

Prouvaire waves to her. “Eponine! We didn’t know you’d be coming here too!”

“I was invited,” Eponine says, gesturing to Grantaire. “Whose idea was this?”

Feuilly points to Grantaire, who points to Prouvaire, who then points to Navet and Gavroche. “Communal brainwave then,” he says with a shrug.

“A very good one!” Musichetta calls from the doorway, where she is now standing with Joly and Bossuet. All three of them are covered in glitter, and Bossuet has a paper leaf stuck to his wrist. “We could hear you guys all the way from the nursery.”

“Were we too loud?” Navet asks sheepishly.

“I think you helped some of the fussiest babies get to sleep,” Joly reassures him. “They didn’t even notice us sticking the leaves on the bassinets.”

Eponine smiles at the mention of this yearly tradition of her colleagues in the obstetrics department. “How many babies are there now?”

“Seventy eight,” Bossuet answers gleefully. “That’s what you get when you add up the numbers from the Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Musichetta quickly glances down as her phone begins to ringing. “Make that seventy nine,” she says as she turns to leave. “I’ll be back in maybe an hour!”

“How can she tell how long a delivery is going to take?” Prouvaire asks in astonishment.
“It’s a very rough estimate, but I will admit she’s usually right on the dot,” Joly replies. He smiles sympathetically at Eponine. “No chance of sneaking you out even for an hour of dinner?”

Eponine shakes her head. “That’s only going to happen if you party in the ER, and I told your Chief to keep you all out of that place, tonight.”

“What a shame. Bed 8 there is very comfortable,” Grantaire says. “Isn’t it, Navet?”

The younger surgeon turns bright red. “I only closed my eyes for a minute then!”

“You’re lucky Combeferre wasn’t making late rounds that night,” Eponine snickers even as she hears her phone beeping. She bites her lip on finding a message from an intern stationed at the emergency room. “Speaking of the ER, I have to get back to work. Merry Christmas guys!”

Gavroche reaches over to ruffle Eponine’s hair. “You too, sis!”

Eponine tries to tug his ear but Gavroche evades her attempt and sticks out his tongue at her. Eponine rolls her eyes but all the same she can’t help laughing as she rushes downstairs. ‘Are they going to make that a tradition too?’ she wonders as she walks into the emergency room.

One of the nurses there looks her over cautiously. “Finally there’s a doc who threw off the Grinch hat.”

“Maybe the Christmas spirit was just a little slower this year,” Eponine calls over her shoulder as she goes to where some interns are swarming around a man who is holding out a bruised and swollen arm. It’s not easy to celebrate in a busy hospital located in one of the more chaotic neighbourhoods in the middle of town. “What happened there?” she asks.

The patient gives her a crooked grin. “Fell while fixing the neighbor’s roof. Didn’t want them to stand in puddles tonight.”

Eponine nods as she begins examining this man’s injury. “Sort of a Christmas gift?”

“Nah, I do this all the time for them. The kiddies like sitting on the roof and that ruins the metal,” the man says nonchalantly.

‘Which appears to be often,’ Eponine realizes as she notes all the scars on this man’s arms, clearly the work of mishandling tools and probably other similar falls. As reckless as it is, the goodwill buoys her spirits further even as she treats this man’s injury, and later goes to help the interns finalize the discharge papers in the ward. It’s such that she hardly notices the time passing by, at least till she hears the nurses on the afternoon shift greeting each other as they line up to punch out at the bundy clock, which now reads past eight.

One of the older interns smiles broadly as she hands over a newly finished chart. “Doc, what do you want to order for Christmas dinner? We’re thinking of going for burgers and soda.”

“Nothing special like pizza or even cake?” Eponine asks.

The intern shrugs. “Some of us are low on budget. It’s almost the end of the month.”

Eponine shakes her head, knowing this will simply not do on Christmas Eve. “What’s your name?” she asks, noticing that this trainee’s jacket covers her nameplate.

“Rory.”
“Alright, Rory, how many of you are on duty tonight?”

Rory takes a few moments to count. “Twenty-four.”

“Okay then,” Eponine says, now working out some calculations. She digs in her pocket for her wallet and hands over a few bills. “The Marshmallow House cafe is still open today. Please get some hot chocolate for everyone.”

Rory stares at Eponine as if she’s suddenly announced that the sky was green. “Are you sure Doc?”

“Yeah I am. It’s Christmas Eve only once a year,” Eponine replies. Of course she knows all too well what it’s like to be away on this night of all nights. It’s safe to say that just behind all the revelry in the interns’ room is a little bit of homesickness, especially for those trainees whose families reside out of town or out of the country. ‘Someone has got to do it,’ she reminds herself as she goes back up to the ward to make her evening rounds.

By this time the lights are dimmed to allow some of the patients to sleep, and what conversation is carried out in hushed whispers. There is a soft glow from a single lamp in the corner where the Nativity scene is set up, with carefully painted papier mache figures of the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, shepherds, sheep, and a cow all crowded under a small thatched shed with a makeshift manger. In the manger is a wooden statue of the infant Jesus, but wrapped in a hospital blanket. Eponine smiles wryly as she bends to adjust the blanket. ‘A bit better than what we had at the halfway house,’ she decides as she follows the sound of soft voices from Mrs. Escobar’s room. She peers in and finds the elderly lady sitting up in bed, with several children all curled up next to her. The oldest of these youngsters is holding up large book and reading out loud, “The angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy....” For a moment Eponine catches her patient’s eye and sighs; it is not exactly midnight mass at home. Yet Mrs. Escobar’s smile is tranquillity in itself, more so when she manages to pull one of the little ones to her and kiss her forehead.

Eponine hears her phone ringing and has to step out as she searches for it in her pockets. Her fingers are shaking when she takes the call. “Zelma? Hey, what’s going on?”

“Azelma! Do you have your laptop with you at work?” Azelma asks excitedly.

“Yeah, why?”

“Go online right now!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at Christmas dinner with Courf and his folks?”

“That’s tomorrow night. Today we’re at the Fauchelevents, of course!”

Eponine realizes that there is a chorus of excited voices and laughter on the other end of the line, soon drowned out by Bahorel’s loud rendition of ‘Feliz Navidad’. “Are you guys all going carolling or something?” she asks as she hurries to the staff room, stopping only to get a huge cup of hot chocolate that Rory hands to her.

Azelma giggles. “Nah, not really. It’s still raining anyway and we don’t want to add to the water.”

Eponine snorts as she starts up her computer and logs on to a video chat. In short order she receives a request from Cosette to enable her laptop’s webcam. “Hey Cosette. Whatever happened to dinner?” she greets her friend.

“It’s more of eat when you’re not laughing out loud,” Cosette says as she holds up a plate of
spaghetti. She pauses to adjust her rather goofy looking reindeer headband. “We need you to help beat your siblings and your brother in law at Monopoly! They cleaned us out last round!”

“Oh gosh, is that the only reason you want me around?” Eponine laughs. She pauses to sip her hot chocolate, relishing its slightly nutty fullness on her tongue. “Where’s everyone?”

“Right here!” Cosette replies as she reaches out to pick up her laptop. “Eponine is online! Say hello guys!” she calls to where everyone is crowded onto one sofa, several chairs, and a piano bench. Bahorel and Feuilly are playing a scale as Courfeyrac idly strums a ukulele, while Marius hands out some cups of eggnog to the rest of the group.

“Someone keep that away from Elodie and Azelma! Grantaire mixed that batch!” Florence calls as she plops herself on Combeferre’s lap.

“Not guilty! Last one in the kitchen was Courfeyrac!” Grantaire says as he throws maracas up in the air for Prouvaire to catch.

“I can tell. Next year I’m mixing the eggnog,” Enjolras grouses as he puts down a cup of eggnog near the armrest of the sofa. He wipes his hands over his now reddened cheeks. “How many shots did you put in this thing?”

“Just enough to taste it?” Courfeyrac chimes in cheekily.

“Then you’ve got pretty obstinate taste buds then,” Marius retorts after taking a sip of his own drink. “Cosette, where are Mom and Dad?”

‘Oh so that’s how things are now?’ Eponine thinks gleefully even as she sees the view on the laptop swing around to show where Mr. Fauchelevent and Fantine are kissing under the mistletoe. “Merry Christmas!” she calls.

Fantine nearly jumps as she pulls away from her husband. “What? Eponine---oh! How are you?”

“Pretty good,” Eponine says, unable to hide her amusement. “I hope that they aren’t driving you nuts.”

“This house has been quiet for too long,” Mr. Fauchelevent remarks. He looks so much younger, a little less like a venerable patron and more like someone’s jovial grandfather. “I heard you’re on duty again on New Year’s Eve. Perhaps on New Year’s Day?”

“I think I can make it,” Eponine replies. She waves as Elodie runs up and climbs into Fantine’s arms. “It’s almost your bedtime, baby.”

Elodie shakes her head. “I want to stay up to see Santa Claus. I even made a little chimney for him to go downstairs!”

“Marius put it on the roof,” Fantine explains. “Good thing he overcame his fear of heights.”

Elodie tugs at a small gold necklace. “Look what Maman got as part of my Christmas gift!” she says proudly as she holds up a heart shaped locket engraved with the initials E.F.

“We got the adoption papers signed today,” Cosette says from off-camera. “It was the last thing the courts did before letting out for the holidays.”

Eponine can feel something pricking at her eyes, and she wonders if this is evident on camera. “I think you win in terms of having the best Christmas gift.”
“Your brother has a close second; he fixed Azelma and Courf’s wifi,” Cosette says as she brings the laptop back to where everyone is crowded around the sofa and ribbing poor Marius over a pair of boxer shorts printed with a risqué design reminiscent of Michelangelo’s statue of David. “Who is that from?” she asks, barely able to hide her laughter.

Bossuet raises a hand shamelessly. “You always said you appreciated Renaissance art!”

“Not in that form!” Marius sputters. “How am I supposed to---“

“It’s for my eyes only,” Cosette says as she sets down the laptop and takes away the offending garment from Marius. “Michelangelo did not know what he was looking at!”

Eponine has to clap a hand over her mouth lest her interns hear her laughing in the staff room. “I have a feeling that a lot of Marius’ presents are going to be along that line this year.”

“Comes with the territory of being engaged,” Courfeyrac says smugly.

“You and Zel robbed us of a chance to even throw you a bachelor party!” Bahorel complains. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“You guys are going to spoil Alexandra, isn’t that good enough for you?” Azelma replies as she puts her feet up and places her hand over her swollen middle. “I can already imagine what next Christmas is going to be like.”

“With two little girls running around? We’re doomed,” Eponine remarks even as she hears the crackle of the hospital public address system. “Looks like that call is going to be for me. I have to go.”

“Aw man, someone should divert all emergencies from your ER!” Gavroche groans.

“Ask the chief resident sitting there---that’s why I’m on duty this Christmas,” Eponine retorts before draining the last of her hot chocolate. “I’m kidding Combeferre, we drew lots anyway.”

Combeferre shakes his head. “Don’t be afraid to call for help if you need it. Good luck Eponine.”

“Thanks. See you all soon!” Eponine replies more cheerily before she has to end the call and hurry downstairs. She looks up and realizes that the rain has finally stopped, and it’s enough to make her sigh with relief. Perhaps this will be the only call for the evening.

Nevertheless the sight of seven gurneys being wheeled into the ER is telling enough; road accidents always take hours to deal with. It is past midnight before Eponine can say that everyone is out of danger, and still longer before she can send some patients upstairs and a few others safely home. When she checks her watch again, it is past five in the morning. ‘Thank heavens for endorsing and going,’ she thinks as she hears the greetings and chatter of the members of the day shift.

As she packs up her gear, she catches sight of Rory and the other interns also trying to blink sleep from their eyes. “Time to go home, kids. You did well out here,” she tells them.

Rory cracks a tired smile. “Maybe the universe will be nicer next year and give us a break. Thanks for everything, Doc. When’s the next time you’re going on duty with us?”

“Next year,” Eponine says. “Don’t give Doc Navet a hard time on your next shift okay?”

The interns burst out laughing. “We’ll behave, Doc,” one of the cheekier ones says. “Sometimes!”
Eponine rolls her eyes. She’s done with handing out demerits for the rest of the year. “See you guys around,” she calls over her shoulder as she heads out the hospital lobby. The air is crisp and the street is still cold and wet, so she loses no time in finding a bus headed in the general direction of home.

She takes off her shoes before tiptoeing into her apartment, knowing all too well that her roommate would appreciate the quiet after a long night. After taking a quick shower, she slips silently into the bedroom and loses no time in burrowing under the thick blankets. She sighs contentedly when she feels Enjolras’ arm drape over her waist. “I’m back,” she whispers as she curls up under his chin.

Enjolras presses a sleepy kiss to the top of her head. “Merry Christmas, Eponine.”

Eponine smiles against his neck and squeezes his hand before drifting off to sleep. When she wakes, there is sunlight peeping through the curtains, and more importantly, there is the smell of hot coffee and freshly toasted bagels. She rummages through her closet for a sweater to pull over her nightclothes before stepping out of the bedroom. She finds Enjolras already sitting at the table near the kitchenette, so she steals up to him to give him a hug from the side. “Merry Christmas Auguste,” she greets.

Enjolras kisses her cheek. “About time you woke up. Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” she says as she sits down next to him. “What time did you get in?”

“Three or so,” Enjolras replies. He puts a large paper bag on her lap. “Almost all of your gifts are here.”

Eponine grins as she looks through the assortment of gifts, ranging from a set of bath soaps and oils from Musichetta, to a set of new pens from Prouvaire and Grantaire, all the way to a t-shirt with the words, “Everyone’s Favorite Doctor” shirt from her siblings. “I bet you got lots of photos from last night,” she tells Enjolras.

“A good many of them are not fit for public consumption...thankfully all after Cosette sent Elodie to bed,” Enjolras replies dryly. “I have one more Christmas gift for you,” he adds as he hands her a rolled up sheet of paper.

Eponine unrolls the sheet only to find that it’s a page of the calendar. The last days of the month of December are encircled with a red marker. “What is this?”

Enjolras gives her an awkward smile. “Well do you remember yesterday that I said I had work to finish, and then we could take some time off?”

“Yes, and?”

“I finished what I could, and managed to free up the rest of the year.”

Her eyes widen as she realizes what he just may be trying to say. “You have all this time off?”

“I don’t have hearings, meetings, or deadlines till January,” he clarifies as he clasps her hand. The warmth of his palm on hers is so reassuring, almost as much as the earnestness in his eyes. “I’d like to be around during your leave, or at least give you the option of my company.”

Eponine leans in to give him a soft, sweet kiss. “You’re not just an option, Auguste,” she whispers as she reaches up to run her hands through his hair. She glances back at the calendar and then at him, understanding now the magnitude of what he is saying. “I’ll always want you, no matter for how long---whether it’s just a day or much more.”
Enjolras sighs contentedly as he rests his forehead against hers. “So what do you want to do?”

She smiles more widely as she twists his hair around her fingers. “Something we haven’t done yet. Maybe like actually get out of the city, together?”

“No disturbances, no calls....”

“Yeah. Off the grid. Where?”

“The coast isn’t that nice at this time of the year, but there are good lakeside towns not far from here, a few hours’ drive away,” he says thoughtfully. “Lots of options there.”

“Sounds good. We can go today. My siblings aren’t expecting us to see them,” she suggests.

“Will do,” he concurs before kissing her more soundly. He reaches for his phone and begins scrolling through the directory. “One more thing we need to do before actually going off the grid, as you say.”

Eponine laughs when she sees that he’s about to call Combeferre. “Yeah, calling my chief resident and your best buddy. Two birds in one stone.”

“Whatever works,” Enjolras says before pressing the call button on his phone. “Hello? Um...Florence, if Combeferre is awake, I’d like to speak with him. Yes. Okay. Hello Combeferre. How are you? Ah, good. Eponine and I have a big favor to ask. We’re going to be out of town till the 31st. I promise, I’ll help Eponine get back to work before evening. If you could please make sure that the others don’t call us up unless it’s a death or something like Azelma and Courf having their kid—yes, you got it. Thanks so much. We’ll contact you once we get to our destination. Thanks again. Merry Christmas!”

Eponine hugs him tightly once he sets down the phone. “Only you could be so bold about just going off at the spur of the moment.”

“I’ve had more than a day to think about this,” he points out as he rubs her back. “Besides when it comes to being bold, I’m only keeping up with the best.”

She laughs before getting up to look for a map and begin planning their itinerary. She can’t ask for a better partner for a road trip, or for any other journey for that matter.
Marius does not consider himself a superstitious man, but on Christmas Day he finds himself donning his second best blue shirt, the very same garment he wore on the day he was interviewed for his neurology residency at Saint-Michel. “It’s presentable,” he tells Cosette while they are waiting for their ticket to be punched in at an exit on the freeway. “Classic, careful, non-controversial....”

“If it makes you feel good, then you look good,” Cosette reassures him. “If it’s really that nerve-wracking, we don’t have to go today. We can meet your family on some other occasion.”

“This is my grandfather’s favourite time of the year. He’ll be in a good mood,” Marius insists. He bites the inside of his cheek when he catches a glance of his reflection in the rear view mirror. He is no longer the pallid boy with a slouch who packed his bags to head off to medical school all those years ago. There are new shadows and angles on his face nowadays, but there is certainly a look in his eyes that he finds much better and more worthy of respect. ‘I have to be, for them,’ he reminds himself as he sees Elodie stir and yawn in the backseat.

The little girl sits up and stretches dramatically. “Are we there yet?”

“We’re getting near,” Marius replies. He figures they should be there in about a quarter of an hour, that is if they do not get lost looking for his grandfather’s manor among the estates on the long winding country road.

Elodie nods solemnly. “Will there be other kids there? Or will it all be grown-ups?”

“I’m not sure,” Marius replies. For all he knows maybe one of his second cousins has managed to bring another little one in the world. “If ever they might not stay as long.”

Cosette twists in her seat to get a better look at Elodie. “It’s going to be okay. Marius’ grandfather and aunt are nice.”

“I’ll be good,” Elodie says. “That’s why they’ll like me.”

“They’ll like you because you’re Elodie Fauchelevent,” Marius says as he steers the car to the right. ‘It will take some getting used to,’ he reminds himself; he knows that there will be days when someone is going to make a little mix up on a form or two, and there will be many more days when Elodie will still refer to him and Cosette as “Doctor Marius” and “Miss Cosette”. ‘I don’t think we’ll get used to it until the wedding day,’ he realizes.

Elodie peers out the window for a moment. “Will I have to eat in a different room?”

“Why do you ask?” Cosette wonders worriedly.

Elodie grimaces. “Because that’s what I used to do in the other house. They said I’d only be noisy and break things.”

“You might not be able to sit at the same table with me and Cosette, but I’ll make sure you’re in the same room,” Marius insists. He’d called ahead to make arrangements, and thankfully it had been his grandfather’s trusted butler Basque who’d picked up the phone and had only been too happy to help.
“You’re a big girl now, and I think people will want to talk to you.”

“About?”

“What you do at school, what you like to do—“ Cosette begins but even then there is a slight anxiety in her voice. “They will want to get to know you since you’re Marius’ little girl too,” she says more bravely.

“Next time your parents should join us too,” Marius tells Cosette.

“They are your parents too. You called them Mom and Dad last night when we were all chatting with Eponine,” Cosette teases.

“I don’t have anyone else to call parents,” Marius points out. ‘My grandfather tries, tried, but how can he do it when he’s slandering my own father left and right?’ he wonders.

“Sometimes I think they are everyone’s parents,” Cosette says in a more confidential tone.

“They may as well be,” Marius concurs. Sometimes he’s not sure what’s worse—being an orphan in the way he and Feuilly are, or to have biological parents as cold and conniving as the older Thenardiers. He steers the car towards a brightly lit outpost and slows down at the sight of two burly men dressed in green uniforms vaguely resembling combat fatigues. He rolls down his window carefully. “I’m Marius Pontmercy. I’m here to see my grandfather, Don Luc-Esprit Gillenormand.”

The guards exchange questioning looks. “Who are you with?”

“Euphrasie and Elodie Fauchelevent,” Marius replies. He waits with bated breath as the guards mutter something into a radio; surely he did not expect that he could just show up for Christmas dinner after so long a time away? “Basque knows we’re coming,” he informs them.

One of the men nods brusquely. “Go to the big house. There’s parking.”

“Thank you and Merry Christmas!” Cosette chimes in cheerily. She smiles angelically on seeing Marius’ baffled expression. “Everyone needs to hear that, today.”

“I was always afraid of those guards,” Marius mutters as they carefully drive up a long, winding road towards a sprawling house surrounded by a garden of low hedges interspersed with fountains set amidst shallow pools. He can’t help but notice how out of place the Fauchelevents’ van looks amid the flashy sports cars and limousines in the parking space some paces away from the front door, but he merely sighs as he steps out of his vehicle and helps Cosette and Elodie out.

They are met by a balding but tall man who grins warmly at Marius. “It’s been a while, Marius Pontmercy,” he greets before pulling the doctor into a hug. “We’ve all missed you here.”

“Thank you Basque,” Marius says as he pats Basque’s back and then steps away. “May I introduce Cosette Fauchelevent and Elodie Fauchelevent.”

Basque bows gallantly to them. “Welcome to the Gillenormand Estate. Dinner hasn’t been served yet, but the master has been expecting you.”

Marius risks a glance at Cosette and Elodie, wondering what they think of this, but that thought passes as they follow Basque to the great house. They pass through the vast front hall with its marble floor reflecting the shimmering lights from crystal chandeliers, and are shown into a smaller room that Marius knows to be his grandfather’s private study. Nothing seems to have changed here; the books still sit in their perfect leather bindings, never gathering dust thanks to the careful efforts of the
housekeeper. A slightly stooped gentleman paces near the window, occasionally muttering to himself as he shakes his white hair out of his eyes.

Basque clears his throat and bows. “Don Gillenormand....”

Luc-Esprit Gillenormand straightens up. “You may go, Basque.” He turns and looks at Marius. “What do you say to your father, my boy?”

“Merry Christmas, Grandfather,” Marius replies cordially. Maybe this man raised him, but he will never be the father that Marius knows he once had. “How have you been?”

“Well except for my rheumatism. I heard that isn’t your line though,” Gillenormand says a little gruffly. He pauses and smiles on seeing Cosette and Elodie. “Now who are these charming young ladies?”

Marius draws himself up to his full height and slips an arm around Cosette’s waist. “Grandfather, meet my fiancée Cosette Fauchelevent, and her daughter Elodie. I intend to adopt Elodie after the wedding.”

Gilenormand kisses Cosette’s hand. “Any relation to that philanthropist Jean Fauchelevent?”

“He’s my father,” Cosette answers proudly. “I did not know you were acquainted.”

“Sadly we are not; I have only heard of him,” Gillenormand replies. He grins at Elodie. “Now how old are you, my dear?”

“Nine years old and two weeks,” Elodie replies with a wide smile.

Gillenormand laughs before meeting Marius’ eye. “I had wondered what happened to the Cheniers’ daughter. Who would have thought—”

“Grandfather, please do not mention it here,” Marius entreats.

“The Cheniers are a good family, what’s the shame in that?” Gillenormand says. His eyes narrow as the study door opens. “Celeste, can’t you see that Marius is home for Christmas?”

Marius turns to see his oldest aunt standing there, staring at him as if he’s some apparition. “Merry Christmas Aunt Celeste.”

The spinster nods and adjusts her lace collar. “Theodule has just arrived.”

“Tell him to wait for the buffet,” Gillenormand says. “Keep him away from the bar as well.”

Celeste seems to bristle at this. “He wishes to speak with Marius.”

‘Whatever for?’ Marius wonders as he and Cosette exchange wary looks. While he has no quarrel with his cousin, he is not on very close terms with him either, and he cannot think of what matters they can converse on at length. ‘Unless it is about the day of that bombing,’ he realizes, feeling a wave of unease at the memory of the day he came close to losing so many of his friends, and even his own life.

Elodie looks up at him. “Mister Marius? Are you okay?”

Marius nods and adjusts one of Elodie’s hair ribbons before looking at his aunt. “I’ll find him during the party later.”
Celeste shrugs. “Well he can’t stay out of the barracks too long, so don’t keep him waiting.”

“Well he should make better use of his furlough!” Gillenormand growls. He nods to Marius. “Give me your arm. Like old times, my boy?”

“Yes, like old times,” Marius agrees. Not everything, in fact most things, have gone badly with him and his grandfather, but there were always little moments and rituals of warmth, such as walking to the stairs together. He is nearly startled at how light and feeble the old man’s hold now is on his arm, but he pats Gillenormand’s hand as they walk slowly out to the back terrace, which opens out onto the vast garden where the celebration is.

A servant hands over a huge sack of coins and small bills. Gillenormand motions for Elodie to put her hand in the bag. “Come on, grab something.”

“Elodie, don’t,” Cosette warns uncomfortably.

Marius shakes his head slightly. “It’s a Christmas thing,” he whispers. He knows all too well how his grandfather can be easily offended even by a guest’s polite (and just) refusal to participate in this grab-bag game. “Just one go, Elodie,” he tells his daughter.

Elodie pulls out a handful of loose change. “So many!”

“Ah when you have bigger hands, you’ll get luckier,” Gillenormand chortles. “You too, Cosette.”

Cosette uneasily pulls out two twenties. “Thank you, Mr. Gillenormand.”

“How modest of you two,” Gillenormand says before going to the edge of the veranda. “Gather up!” he bellows heartily before tossing coins off the veranda.

Marius swallows hard as he notices in the crowd Basque, as well as several youngsters who he knows to be Basque’s grandchildren. There are other servants here, faces he’s known since his boyhood. ‘Surely by now some of them should be retired,’ he realizes, but no they are here, bound to this land and this man as if they had known nothing else. He excuses himself from this scene on the pretext of finding some seats for Cosette and Elodie, but all the while he makes sure not to look his grandfather in the eye.

Almost as soon as they find a table near the veranda, he catches sight of a man in a jaunty black suit chatting up some flashily dressed women near the bar. This man looks in Marius’ direction and raises his glass by way of greeting. “Marius Pontmercy, how are you?” he calls jovially.

Cosette smiles encouragingly at Marius. “Just ask how he is. He’s probably more interested in telling than asking.”

Marius kisses her cheek by way of gratitude before getting up to cross the room to his cousin. “Merry Christmas Theodule. Good thing you’re on leave today,” he says as he reaches the bar.

“Same to you, Marius,” Theodule says with a grin. “Finally I get to talk to you. I’ve run into everyone else except you.”

“I’ve heard,” Marius replies. He knows better than to mention the fact that he brought Cosette with him. “How long are you on break?”

“For tonight only. I’m back to barracks tomorrow,” Theodule explains in a tone that is both droll and yet long-suffering. “At least this city has more interesting things than that port we were in.”
“What do Marines do in a place like this if there’s no coastal patrol?” Marius asks.

“Peace-keeping. It’s not often we’re mobilized,” Theodule drawls. “People in this city have this thing against blue uniforms.”

Marius shrugs; he’s not about to discuss police and military brutality in a party of the former who’s-who of this nation. “Aunt Celeste said you wished to speak to me.”

“I was curious about something,” Theodule replies almost flippantly. “How is the investigation of the bombing at the Rock Lobster going?”

The neurologist has to take a moment before making his reply. “There’s no official statement yet from the investigators.”

“Because people have not been cooperating,” Theodule says a little exasperatedly. “Your board of directors, all the way down to the rank and file are not very talkative. Don’t you have a department that handles these matters?”

“We have an office for Social Interventions. That’s a liaison for various departments and offices outside of the hospital,” Marius answers tentatively.

Theodule nods slowly. “Who’s in charge there?”

“Doctor Eponine Thenardier,” Marius replies. He sees Theodule’s eyebrows shoot up. “Have you heard of her?”

“Isn’t she a surgeon?” Theodule asks.

“Yes she is.”

“I heard she’s got a reputation for being mixed up in some high-profile cases, such as the one of your friend, Attorney Enjolras.”

Marius shrugs again at this understatement. “They’re partners. She’s the one you ought to talk to about hospital matters.”

Theodule nods once more before taking more of an interest in his whisky. “When are you headed back to work?”

“Tomorrow,” Marius says. The frenzy of the neuro ward will be almost a relief compared to this awkward party. “By the way, Doctor Thenardier will not be at work till New Year. Is this urgent?”

Theodule smiles in a way that would be cocky if not for the slightly affronted expression in his eyes. “I can look her up. Thank you Marius,” he says before hurrying over to where there is a pretty redhead beckoning to him.

Marius takes the opportunity to return to where Cosette and Elodie are chatting up Aunt Celeste. “I’d better warn Eponine that my cousin might want to contact her office,” he admits to Cosette.

Cosette’s eyes go wide with apprehension. “About what?”


Cosette cringes. “Marius, I love you with all my heart, but have you the slightest idea what you might just have done?”
The *Eyrie Pensione* is a tall, creaky and narrow house nestled among the precarious crags overlooking a vast lake just three hours away from the capital city. “How old is this building?” Enjolras asks a little warily as he and Eponine lug their two large backpacks out from his car parked on a gravel path a few paces from the house’s stoop.

“I don’t know. I heard of this place when I was on a medical mission here with my department about two years ago.” She gasps and clasps his hand excitedly. “Oh, look at that view!”

For a moment Enjolras is silent as he takes in the sight of the sun setting over the hills on the far side of the lake, casting a last burst of golden rays over the water. “In a few days we’ll get to see the sunset from the *other* side of the lake,” he observes as he brings out his camera. “We’ll be facing the city then, when the lights go on in all those skyscrapers. We’ll see the moon from that side too, so it’s more of a moonrise than a sunset, actually.”

Eponine smiles at these words. “To think they used to say you never noticed these things.”

“Not openly,” he admits. ‘*You know better though,*’ he almost says but that’s before he feels her let go of his hand so she can clamber up onto a rock. “Could you look this way?” he asks as he begins to adjust the settings on his camera.

She tosses her hair dramatically as she drops her backpack on the ground. “Won’t it be more dramatic if I’m looking away, towards the lake?”

He shakes his head; he won’t have her looking away when the best part of this image for him is the intense yet carefree light in her dark eyes. He takes a deep breath as he presses the shutter button and then quickly checks the digital display. It’s a good picture, but it doesn’t quite sum up what his eyes see. “This lighting is terrible.”

“It’s sunset. Maybe you’ll have better luck in the morning,” she suggests.

“With a completely different effect,” he grouses. He turns at the sound of someone stomping up the path towards the house. “Good evening Ma’am. We were just taking pictures,” he greets a stout woman who is regarding them with a wary expression.

“Do you two mean to check in?” the lady asks as she approaches them. She wipes her cracked and peeling hands on her apron. “I don’t like casual passersby at this late hour.”

Eponine nods as she scrambles off the rock. “We’re hoping to stay for two nights here,” she replies. “Only one room, it doesn’t really matter how big.”

“Backpackers. We already have enough trouble in this town,” the woman says with a huff. She takes one step closer and her jaw drops with astonishment as she looks at Enjolras. “Congressman Enjolras? What are you doing here?”

“It’s simply Attorney Enjolras now. I haven’t been in the Congress for nearly a year,” Enjolras corrects.

“Ahh of course. You do human rights work, so maybe it ought to be Commissioner Enjolras,” the proprietor croons as she shakes back her frizzy graying locks. She smiles more easily at Eponine. “Then you must be Doctor Thenardier?”
Eponine seems to bristle for a moment, prompting Enjolras to discreetly squeeze her arm. “How did you know my name?” she asks.

“My dear, everyone knows you’re one of the best surgeons around,” the lady replies. “You can call me Madame Esmeralda. Shall we step inside?”

Enjolras quickly picks up his luggage again and sprints ahead to open the door for the two women. He has to bend a little to avoid bumping his head on the low doorjamb, but thankfully the front room has a soaring ceiling that allows him to straighten up. ‘Things go upwards instead of sideways here,’ he realizes as he looks around the front room that he can probably cross in less than fifteen strides. Yet somehow there are cozy seats and a fireplace all crammed in here, alongside a low table he takes to be the concierge’s desk.

“Unfortunately we don’t have anything as nice as a honeymoon suite here,” Madame Esmeralda tells Eponine. “There’s a double bed though, but it’s in the attic. It’s warm at least, and the washroom is close by, near the door.”

“We’ll take it,” Eponine says. She shrugs as she meets Enjolras’ questioning look. “We get privacy and body heat.”

“Your pragmatism knows no bounds,” he deadpans even though he knows perfectly well that she’s giving him that cheeky half-smile of hers for a reason.

Madame Esmeralda rifles through some drawers before handing a key to Eponine. “You might have heard that I serve only breakfast here, and that my guests and boarders have to go to town to get lunch and dinner. Tonight though, I’ll fix something up for you two. It’s not safe to go down there.”


Madame Esmeralda curses under her breath. “Nothing you two nice ones should get mixed up in.”

Before Enjolras can ask further he feels Eponine’s hand tug on his arm. “We should get settled in first,” she mouths.

“Of course.” He can’t keep his eyes off her as they lug their bags up four flights of stairs to the attic room. It’s a snug space furnished simply with an old four poster bed, two wicker chairs, and a rather dilapidated looking armoire. A round window on one wall offers a view of the crags.

Eponine drops her backpack and throws herself on the bed. “Damn it.”

“Damn what?” Enjolras asks as he sets down his own things and takes off his shoes. He sits next to her on the bed and grunts when she pulls him down to lie next to her. He reaches over to touch a finger to her nose. “Eponine?”

She gives him a sideways glance. “How did you ever deal while you were still in office?”

“With the lack of privacy?”

“With having a reputation.”

“Mostly by staying out of scandal and focusing on my work,” he informs her. Those days as a legislator feel like another lifetime ago, and perhaps in a sense they truly are. ‘A year ago, if anyone said I’d be here with someone like Eponine, I would have told them to sober up,’ he muses ruefully.

Eponine lets out a long sigh. “Weren’t you ever scared?”
“I preferred not to dwell on it,” he replies as he starts running a hand through her hair. “I never thought you the sort to prefer obscurity.”

“Better than notoriety, and we all know how close I got to that,” she retorts. She moves so that she is lying on top of him, with her hands on his chest. “At least if I’m going to be notorious now, it will be for a good reason.”

“Wouldn’t the word be ‘renowned’, or even ‘great’?” Enjolras asks as he brings his fingers to the waistband of her pants and moves up to touch her back under her shirt.

“You’re talking like a lawyer. You and your semantics,” she jokes.

“It’s not semantics,” he insists as he reaches up to kiss her neck. “It’s called being truthful.”

She laughs before undoing the first button of his shirt. “There is something else you can do with that mouth of yours, Auguste.”

He gives her another kiss, this time behind her ear. “Of course,” he whispers, feeling her shiver as he pulls her close so he can show her how well he understands.
The sound of a fresh morning breeze rattling the shutters cuts through Eponine’s dreams and rudely jolts her back to the waking world. She winces at the cold before carefully tugging on the quilt to cover both herself and Enjolras, who is still dozing with his head on her chest. Fortunately the movement doesn’t wake him, allowing Eponine to revel at the warmth of his body fitting so perfectly with hers and the calm rhythm of his breathing almost in time with her own. ‘No dream can ever feel this good,’ she decides as she starts running her fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth it down.

After a while Enjolras stirs and tightens his grip on her waist. “Five more minutes, please,” he mumbles drowsily into her shoulder.

She laughs as she scratches the nape of his neck. “Someone slept too well?”

He lifts his head to look at her before moving up to give her a long, slow kiss that leaves her breathless and yet feeling every nerve tingling in a pleasant sort of way. “You tell me why.”

Eponine shivers at the delightful memories that the mere sound of his slightly raspy voice brings up. “We’ve got time, so why don’t I just show you instead?” she whispers as she brings up one foot to rub along the back of his knee all the way up to his thigh.

Enjolras’ breath catches for a moment but he smirk as he moves so that he is lying on top of her, taking care to rest his weight on his elbows. He kisses her teasingly on the hollow of her throat, making her shiver and grip him more tightly. “Are you quite sure about that, Eponine?”

She nods before pulling him close to kiss him more fiercely, only to end up moaning against his lips when she feels his hips pushing against hers. Their lovemaking is quiet and unhurried, with his fiery and affectionate whispers answering her ardent caresses. It feels like a blissful eternity till they both catch their breath even as they remain entwined with each other and cocooned under the covers. It is then that she looks into his eyes and laughs with delight. “I can’t believe we’re here. I can’t believe you’re here with me.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why is it so difficult to convince you?”

“No. It’s only because this is so new, to me at least,” she admits as she brings up her hands to trace the sharpness of his cheeks and then the angles of his jaw. “You’re the only one who ever stayed.”

“You’re the one I’d always go home to,” he says before dropping a soft kiss on her brow.

She hugs him tightly, smiling into his shoulder when he strokes her hair. Yet even so it is at that moment a knock sounds on the door. “Who is it?” she calls.

“There’s breakfast ready,” Madame Esmeralda hollers. “You two forgot about dinner!”

Enjolras only swears under his breath, which sends Eponine into a fit of laughter. “I’ll go on ahead downstairs. She might be embarrassed to deal with you first,” she says.

“I guess that means you get dibs on the hot water,” he replies dryly.
Eponine kisses him by way of thanks before slipping out of bed and grabbing a long sleeved green shirtdress and a pair of jeans. It doesn’t take her long to wash up and make herself presentable enough to head downstairs to where breakfast is being served in the small kitchen garden adjoining the house. From here there is a view of the town, with houses roofed with rusting sheets of galvanized iron, all the way to larger and older edifices covered with shingles. To her surprise Madame Esmeralda isn’t there; the only person seated at a corner table is a thin young man with dark hair parted down the middle and looking quite lost in his blue hoodie. ‘He must have arrived in the middle of the night,’ Eponine decides as she pours herself a cup of coffee and takes a seat a few tables away.

For a few moments the stranger remains absorbed in poking at a plate of cheese omelette and bacon strips, till he looks up to see who else has entered the garden. His polite smile widens into one of astonishment as he gets to his feet. “Doctor Eponine Thenardier, I presume?”

Eponine sets down her drink slowly. “Who are you?”

“Armand St-Just,” the young man says quickly. He blushes as he looks back at his food for a moment. “I’m a correspondent for the Daily Beacon. One of my colleagues wrote an article about the Saint-Michel Hospital’s surgery department earlier this year.”

‘At least he’s not from a tabloid,’ Eponine thinks with some relief. “What section of the Beacon do you write for?”

“Art and Culture. I’m doing a feature on the weaving room in town,” Armand replies. “Are you here for a medical mission, Miss Thenardier?”

Eponine shakes her head. “What time does the weaving room open today?”

“Eight in the morning, I think,” Armand says as he checks his watch. “I thought I was the only guest here at this inn; I didn’t hear anyone else upstairs.”

She has to take a sip of coffee if only to hide her secretive smile. ‘Maybe he knows what’s going on in town,’ she decides as she watches him stir his own cup of tea. “Have you been in the town proper yet?”

“Not yet. I’m headed there after breakfast,” he answers a little nervously. “Is it also on your itinerary for the morning?”

“Maybe. What exactly about weaving are you doing a story on?”

“The future of loom weaving, especially since it seems to have become a niche market for things like church vestments or expensive wedding gowns. No longer the people’s industry if you will.”

Eponine sips her coffee again and looks towards the sound of Enjolras’ footsteps headed towards the garden. She grins widely on seeing him dressed in a new red sweater and a pair of black jeans. “Looking sharp,” she calls to him.

Enjolras does a double take when he sees who she has been talking to. “St-Just, it’s been a long time.”

Armand nearly starts on hearing his surname. “Enjolras? What are you doing here?”

“Sight-seeing,” Enjolras replies as he takes a seat next to Eponine’s. “I take you’re here for a story?”

“I was just telling her about it,” Armand replies. He glances at Eponine and then at Enjolras. “Are
“Among other things,” Eponine says, giving Enjolras a mischievous look. “Now how do you guys know each other?”

“College,” Enjolras explains. “We were neighbours.”

“My sister Marguerite and I had a place down the road from where he and the guys were staying,” Armand adds. “At least before Marguerite and Bahorel broke up.”

“Now that’s a story I haven’t heard.” Eponine quips. “Since Bahorel never mentioned it, I figure that it was not a good parting of ways?”


“You’re lucky my brother-in-law isn’t here to hear that,” Armand says. “Should I give him your regards?”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “My cordial regards, to be more to the point.”

“You’re the one who called him a dilettante,” Armand mutters balefully. “You’re lucky that duelling was banned on the campus grounds.”

Eponine laughs as she gets to her feet. “You guys catch up. Do you want anything in particular?”

Enjolras smirks at her. “That’s a very dangerous question.”

Eponine ruffles his still damp hair and rushes off, if only to hide the blush rising to her cheeks. ‘How on earth does he do that?’ she wonders as she finds a large bowl to fill with cereal and then piles a plate with bread, omelettes, and sautéed tomatoes. She returns to find Enjolras listening calmly as Armand explains something about the map of the town. “Something interesting?” she asks as she sets down the food on the table.

“Aside from the weaving room, there are some cafes and a canopy walk,” Enjolras replies as he points to some areas on the map. “We can check those out today.”

“The canopy walk is said to be interesting at sunset, when the animals start emerging for the night,” Armand suggests.

“A good opportunity for you to fiddle with night vision,” Eponine remarks as she pats Enjolras’ arm.

“Are you still doing photography?” Armand asks Enjolras incredulously.

Enjolras takes a moment to swallow a mouthful of cereal. “Not all that often,” he replies.

“You should consider using drones. They can be discreet and hands-off,” Armand says. “Perfect for getting crowd shots or playing spy camera, if you like.”

‘Sounds like something Gav would be interested in too,’ Eponine catches herself thinking as she digs into her own breakfast. She has to sit on one hand to keep from checking her phone for any messages from her siblings; it’s very rare that she gets to be this far away from them. ‘It’s not like you guys are still kids waiting for your parents to come home,’ she reminds herself.

Half an hour later, the three of them are walking down the long road leading to the center of town. Their path takes them past small but sturdy houses with yards that have been converted to vegetable gardens, as well as some trails branching out towards the fields or the fishponds further off. For the
most part though the area is heavily wooded, and now and then Armand eagerly points out birds hopping from branch to branch, or lizards sunning themselves on rocks.

At a bend in the road, Armand motions for them to pause. “Monkeys crossing. Don’t feed them,” he says in an undertone as he points out five gray macaques bounding across the road.

Enjolras brings out his camera. “Looks like they’re standing watch on the road,” he says as he walks ahead to where the monkeys have found a place on a fence.

Eponine is a step behind him. “Don’t you know that monkeys are very territorial?” she hisses.

“I’m not getting too near,” Enjolras argues as he pauses to zoom in on the monkeys, who are now watching him.

She grabs his shoulder at the sight of the biggest monkey now rising as if to spring, but she only has enough time to jump aside when the monkey shrieks and lunges in their general direction. She hears Enjolras cussing loudly and when she turns she finds that he’s landed hard on the seat of his pants. “Auguste! Are you alright?” she asks as she rushes to help him up.

He gives her a withering look as he gets to his feet. “Don’t say it. I get the picture,” he grouses over the sound of Armand’s barely muffled chuckling from somewhere nearby.

Eponine can’t help but giggle as she checks Enjolras over for any bites or scratches. She looks past his shoulder and notices several children laughing uncontrollably and rolling near the curb, while some older bystanders are watching with wary and sceptical expressions. “Okay, nothing to see here!” she calls to the youngsters, which only elicits more shrieks of laughter.

Armand manages to regain his composure after a few more moments. “Nothing broken or anything?” he asks. “Meaning both you guys and the camera?”

“It’s a good thing this thing has a case now,” Enjolras says as he inspects the gadget and gives Eponine a knowing look. “Thanks.”

She simply smiles before taking his arm as they continue walking towards the town, now this time taking care to avoid disturbing any more of the denizens of the nearby woods. In a quarter of an hour they are at the center of the town, near a small church and a dilapidated looking building bedecked with gaudy emblems. They cross the street towards a long, squat building with a faded sign marked as the Easter Weaving Room. “This is it?” she asks aloud.

Armand nods as he checks his watch. “The actual weaving area is out back. I’ll go on ahead and try to see if I can get you guys to come in and watch the process for a bit, but there’s always the shop out front if you want to take a look.”

“Do they also dye the threads here?” Enjolras asks.

“That’s further on down, near the woods, and you don’t want to smell that,” Armand replies before walking up to a front office to make inquiries while Enjolras stops to talk to someone who has recognized him in the street.

Eponine takes the opportunity to go off to the weaving room’s shop, which is filled with tables and shelves loaded with articles such as thick table runners and wall hangings covered with designs of lizards, diamonds, and waves. There are other finer works here such as colorful striped napkins and dish towels fashioned from softer abaca fibers, and in one corner a whole rack of delicate off-white handkerchiefs, veils and linens made from pineapple silk. Even from the doorway she can hear the rhythmic clacking of the looms, the creaking of pedals and occasionally a snatch or two of a ditty
from someplace distant, maybe down the hall. ‘Once, they did this sort of thing in houses, not in huge rooms,’ she catches herself thinking as she starts wandering through the room.

As she’s perusing some handkerchiefs she hears a step next to her. Before she can move away to give this person room to take a look, she feels a hand yank at the hem of her shirtdress. “What the hell?” she snaps as she slaps these fingers away.

“Sorry about that, girlie,” a short man cackles as he leers at her. “Couldn’t resist the view.”

“Go away,” Eponine says slowly. She looks around and sees that there are other people in the shop, and one of them is a face she could have sworn she saw earlier on the road, a burly man in a green military cap. ‘Maybe it’s just a coincidence,’ she decides but that is before she sees this man bring out a phone and start sending a message, occasionally glancing in her direction. As quickly as she can she exits the shop and crosses the street to where Enjolras has set up his camera on a fence. “What are you doing?” she asks as she touches his shoulder.

He motions for her to crouch next to him. “There’s a zoning operation going on down there. That’s why Madame Esmeralda didn’t want us to come down here last night,” he informs her. “I got a good look at the uniforms and they aren’t from local authorities.”

“What means?”

“Private army.”

Eponine crosses her arms. “Weren’t we supposed to be on break from work this week?”

“I’m only forwarding these pictures back to Courfeyrac and Feuilly,” Enjolras insists. “That’s all.”

“Why is it that you just can’t let things go?” she gripes.

He gives her a sidelong glance. “If someone came running up here asking for a doctor in the house, you’d get up too.”

“That’s different!”

“Necessary all the same.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose before giving his arm an indignant little squeeze. “Haven’t you learned anything from this morning yet?”

Before Enjolras can say anything a terrifying crash sounds from inside the weaving room followed by shrieks and running footsteps. “Was there a reason you left?”

“I think this one is different!” Eponine says quickly as they run to the building just as the back doors fly open as a dozen middle aged women and a few children flee the place. Eponine manages to scampers past the commotion and into the backroom, only to see two men brandishing guns as they shove Armand to the floor. She immediately snatches up a piece of a broken loom frame and swings it at the goon positioned nearest the door, hitting him smartly across his back. The man yells as he tries to grab her but she deals him a punch in the gut that sends him to his knees, giving her the opportunity to kick away his pistol.

Armand sits up and holds a hand to his throat. “Thank you. I thought that I was a goner there.”

Enjolras nods from where he has also managed to disarm the second thug and immobilize him with a hand on his collar. “There’s rope in that corner.”
Armand manages to stand up and retrieve two lengths of thick cord. “They came looking for some of the ladies. Something about relocation,” he explains. “They were getting rough so I had to do something.”

Eponine grits her teeth as she gives Enjolras a knowing glance before tying up the goon she has managed to take down. “You brought this upon yourself,” she snaps when she hears this man protest.

“Where does a girl like you learn to tie these knots?” the man whimpers.

“Taking care of people who have been hurt by someone like you,” she retorts as she checks the knot. She looks to Armand. “Are you hurt?”

“Not really, but I think some of the ladies may have bumps and bruises,” Armand replies. Enjolras finishes tying up the second thug and takes a step back. “Who sent you two?”

This thug squirms to catch the eye of his accomplice. “Don’t say anything!”

“I seriously wouldn’t advise silence in this situation,” Enjolras says sternly. “You’re in a precarious position, gentlemen. Your boss, or bosses probably do not take kindly to failed missions, or orders badly executed. On the other hand, once it gets out that there is an illegal zoning operation in this town, everyone involved could face jail time for illegally grabbing property, among other offenses. I doubt your families would appreciate that.”

Eponine has to hide her smile when she sees these men pale. “You’re not being paid very well for this,” she says. “Otherwise you’d have shot someone a while ago and then run for it.”

The two men glance at each other. “She’s right,” one of them mutters.

“Shut up!” his friend hisses. “Don’t you know who they are?”

Eponine studies these men and realizes that neither of them is the fellow who was shadowing her earlier. “There’s more of them,” she tells Enjolras and Armand. “One of them was in the shop earlier.”

Enjolras nods as he makes a show of counting on his fingers. “Quite the crew,” he says as he picks up the guns and hands them to Armand. “I’ll make a call.”

Eponine follows him to the doorway of the backroom. “What if the police are the problem? They’re probably tolerating the zoning, maybe even enforcing it,” she whispers.

“That’s why I’m calling the central bureau,” Enjolras explains in a hushed voice. “These aren’t ordinary witnesses. They’re former military personnel. We have to look up their records and check if they’re tied to any of the regiments who were dissolved for recent offenses.”

“This is retroactively reverse-engineering the web? Not sure if that makes sense.”

“No one is talking. They’re not getting paid, but they have other reasons to keep silent.”

“Enjolras, these two are asking for a lift to the capital!” Armand shouts from inside the back room. “Deal or no deal?”

“No deal,” Enjolras replies. “I do have something for you, St-Just. Something to add to your story.”

“I like the sound of that,” Armand replies.
Eponine retrieves Enjolras’ camera from where he had set it down before rushing into the fight. “You would have been a very controversial journalist,” she tells Enjolras.

“Or a very dead one,” he points out before getting his phone to begin searching for numbers.

**II**

“You seriously just let them go out of town and off the grid?”

Combeferre gives Grantaire a look of disbelief over his cup of coffee. “I’m not their babysitter, Capital R. They’re old enough to take care of themselves,” he retorts, hoping he’s loud enough to be heard over the din in the *Revolution Cafe* following another of Prouvaire’s stirring spoken word performances.

“Combeferre, what if they get engaged while they are away?” Grantaire asks. “What if they eloped? That’s the second time we’ll have messed up in a year!”

“Those two are going to end up engaged on the most ordinary day of the year. Besides there is no way Eponine will allow her siblings to miss her wedding,” Combeferre points out. ‘*Though of course it would always be nice to give a best man’s speech,*’ he thinks as he stirs his coffee.

Grantaire sighs as he picks up his bottle of beer. “We’re all getting old. I mean, who would have thought that Courfeyrac would end up married and Pontmercy would get engaged?”

“You said much the same thing when Enjolras and Courfeyrac sat the bar exams years ago.”

“Yeah and now all of you docs are going to be specialists not just hospital slaves. Never thought I’d see the day, given our propensity for near-mortality.”

Combeferre merely shrugs and sips his own drink again. ‘*No use telling Grantaire about who the target of the bombing was,*’ he decides. He looks up as the cafe door clatters open, admitting a clean-shaven man with reddish hair tied back in a short ponytail that seems to be in sharp contrast to his still immaculately pressed gray suit. “Now there’s a face neither of us has seen in a while,” he remarks more to himself than to his friend.

Grantaire slams down his beer bottle. “Raoul de Chagny? He must be lost in the neighborhood.”

‘*Maybe he’s looking,*’ Combeferre realizes as he watches Raoul searching the room. He waves to this former classmate of theirs. “De Chagny! Over here!”

Raoul looks around and gives them a blustering smile before hurrying over. “Doctor Combeferre, you’re just the person I needed to see.” He nods cordially to Grantaire. “How are you doing, Grantaire?”

“You look quite well to me, de Chagny,” Combeferre remarks. “Still in the family business?”

Raoul nods. “It’s doing well.”

“That’s good. What can I do for you?”

“It’s more of something you can hear out,” Raoul says as he takes a seat. “I saw Marius Pontmercy at his grandfather’s party last night, for the first time in years. A lot of military officials were there, such as my father and my brother. I didn’t get to speak with him, unfortunately, since he had company. I did see him speaking with his cousin, who is in the Marines.”
“That’s not news,” Grantaire says impatiently.

Raoul looks at Combeferre and Grantaire seriously. “Theodule Gillenormand is part of an incident investigation committee. They’re taking an interest in Saint-Michel Hospital.”

Combeferre’s hand tightens around his coffee cup as the faces of Dupond and so many other patients flash before his eyes. ‘Does de Chagny know of them too?’ he wonders, remembering now his friend’s military background. “What sort of interest?”

“On paper, investigating the Rock Lobster bombing,” Raoul replies. “But only on paper, or at least what they can do to protect some of their rogue regiments.”

“Define rogue,” Combeferre says.

“Outside the capital, there are still some detachments being employed as private armies. It’s all under the table but it exists,” Raoul explains. “I’m asking since I’m trying to clear up my family’s records; we would rather not do business with those sorts of elements. I was asked to find out if they have been operating in this city too.”

Combeferre nods, deciding now to hazard a guess. “You believe we’d know?”

Raoul nods again. “One of the witnesses in the Transnonain case was admitted there, and so were many of the injured in the Rock Lobster bombing. I daresay that those two incidents may be linked.”

“This is a very nice detective yarn, but what motive?” Grantaire asks sceptically.

‘What if Eponine and Enjolras are already starting off an investigation?’ Combeferre wonders silently. He takes a moment to sip his coffee, all the while studying de Chagny’s ponderous demeanor; surely there is more than just filial loyalty and necessity involved there? Yet before he can ask, he sees the cafe door clatter open again, this time admitting a much more welcome face.

“Florence!” he calls, waving to his girlfriend.

Florence smiles with relief as she hurries over and tosses her bag on the table. “I had quite the day---” she begins before she catches sight of Raoul. “De Chagny! How are you doing?” she asks.

Raoul smiles cordially. “I’m doing well, Florence. So are Christine and Pierre; he’s taking after his mother and enrolling in voice lessons.”

“Do you still hear from Meg and her mother?”

“Sometimes. They’re in London now, for a new production.”

Grantaire cackles at Combeferre’s befuddled expression before elbowing Florence. “How is it you know him, Florence?”

“More of I know his wife, Christine. We used to take dance together, at the studio run by her best friend’s mother,” Florence explains happily. “And you guys?”

“College. He and Marius were seatmates, along with this other guy Armand St-Just,” Grantaire says.

“What a merry row that was,” Combeferre sighs.

Florence grins at him. “In more ways than one?”
The doctor nods wearily. He could not remember how they had all survived that semester together; Grantaire and Bahorel had never quite gotten along with Raoul, while Enjolras was known to have ferocious tiffs with St-Just’s good friend (and eventual brother-in-law) Percy Blakeney. ‘Does Florence know of Raoul and Christine’s secret too?’ he wonders, but he knows better than to voice out such a scandal in a public place.

In the meantime Grantaire waves to Prouvaire, who is just jumping off the stage. “Look what the cats dragged in.”

Prouvaire smiles broadly as he goes up to Raoul and pulls him into a warm hug. “It’s good to see you. I was worried you’d fallen off the face of this earth!” the poet greets. “I didn’t know you were into spoken word too, De Chagny.”

“I’m still gaining an appreciation for the art,” Raoul says as he claps Prouvaire’s back. “I’m glad you’re still on the scene.”

Combeferre sighs with relief as the talk turns to poetry and performances; while this is not his line of expertise he is only too happy to listen especially if Florence joins in the discourse. She seems to shine before his eyes as she avidly discusses with Prouvaire, Grantaire, and Raoul the finer points of oratory and even slam poetry delivery. ‘Does she get to talk about this with her students?’ he wonders even as he catches her gaze and sees her smile in that way she did during the party at the Courfeyrac home. It’s the smile of a woman relishing something delectable, almost as if it was a wicked little secret. Yet what shadows could she possibly have?

He knows the hour is late when he feels her hand touch his. “Come home with me, Daniel.”

“Tonight? It’s a work night,” he points out. There is the fact that he’s never been to her place before, and it seems odd for her to invite him over so spontaneously.

She swallows hard. “We have to talk.” She clasps his fingers tightly. “It’s not the bad talk, I promise. At least I don’t think it is.”

Raoul nods to her. “I’ll give your regards to Christine and the Girys.”

“Thank you,” Florence says before lacing her fingers more tightly with Combeferre’s to lead him out of the cafe. Her hand is warm, almost more than Combeferre expects, yet it does not alarm him overmuch.

They do not say anything throughout the short walk from the cafe to Florence’s apartment just five blocks away. It is only when they are in the elevator that she turns to look at him. “I teach drama. I learned everything I know from the Girys. Our dance classes always had recitals.”

“That’s a matter of course,” Combeferre agrees. “Doesn’t every performing arts class do so?”

“Yes, but those times....they meant a lot to me,” Florence says. “You could say they are defining moments in my life.”

“Rather far from teaching English though.”

“Many teachers are frustrated performers. We like having a captive audience.”

Combeferre chuckles as the elevator door opens to the seventh floor. “Since your students aren’t back yet from the holidays, are you bored?”

“Bored, paralyzed with ennui, going stir-crazy, you name it,” she says as she fishes in her pocket for
her keys and stops in front of a door. She takes a deep breath before unlocking the apartment. “Make yourself comfortable. There is something I want to show you.”

He can’t help feeling a little trepidation as he follows her into the small studio apartment; she has never been so ready to admit him before into her personal space. Yet all questions are driven out of his mind as he catches sight of a table piled high with music boxes and snow globes of all shapes and sizes. “I didn’t know you collect these,” he tells her as he sits down on the sofa.

“Some of them were my mother’s,” she explains. “I didn’t know how special each box was till Christine told me about how useful these things were for learning tunes. I wish I’d taken an interest a little bit sooner since my mother was gone by then.”

“Florence---”

“I know her secret, about her child. Raoul is a saint.”

Combeferre swallows hard, already guessing what she may have to say. “And what else do you know?”

Florence inches closer to him and grabs both his hands. “I know who they were trying to get at the diner. It’s you, Daniel. It’s too obvious. Why couldn’t you tell me before?”
It goes as a matter of course that they will take turns driving, for safety’s sake as well as out of a sense of fairness. On this morning though, as Enjolras finds himself in the passenger’s seat while they are driving to another town, the one thing he wants now is to get some sleep. ‘Which of course would be more possible if Eponine could keep her singing to herself,’ he grouses silently as he tries to stop his ears with his fingers.

Eponine is only singing of course to keep awake while she drives, and of course she’s enjoying this thoroughly to the point of drumming her fingers against the steering wheel. ‘Don’t tell me not to live, just sit and putter. Life’s candy and the sun’s a ball of butter. Who gave you the right to rain on my parade?’ she sings.

Enjolras groans as he rubs his eyes. “Can you try something a little softer, Eponine?”

She gives him a confused look. “Those are too sleepy for this hour.”

“Well this is a confined space and airconditioned at that. You can think of something,” he mutters.

She huffs and bites her lip before turning her attention to the road again. ‘Your smile is not the first heartbreaker. My eyes are not the first to cry—’

He winces, knowing exactly where this song is going. “What about something that is actually within your range?” he suggests.

“What exactly is my range then?”

“Mezzo soprano. Prouvaire told me.”

Eponine rolls her eyes. “That is no fun. Most of the good parts are soprano.”

“Can’t you save it for later?” he grouses. He sighs when she swears under her breath as she adjusts the gear shift on the car. “Thank you,” he mutters before shutting his eyes.

Yet it is all too short, for soon he hears her humming, then singing, “Memory, all alone in the moonlight!” She pauses to elbow him lightly. “I can smile at the old days. I was beautiful then—”

“Eponine, really!” He sits up straight in his seat and rubs his eyes. Of course she is smiling triumphantly at having seemingly roused him, but that does not mean he has to be happy about it in this moment. “Can’t it wait?”

“I have to stay awake too,” she argues. “It’s too quiet in here, and besides you snore!”

He gives her an indignant look and crosses his arms. “I do not snore.”

“You do when you’re drunk or sick,” she mutters.

“Which I’m not,” he retorts. He turns and finally sees a small gas station swiftly coming up on this otherwise deserted stretch of highway. “Now there’s a pit stop. Please.”
“What do you want a pit stop for? We just gassed up an hour ago!”

“I can get some sleep, while you can find some place to do your Sound of Music routine, if that’s what you really want.”

Her look is venomous as she floors the gas pedal, and then when they reach the gas station she slams on the brakes so hard that the car screeches to a stop. “Auguste, you can still be such a jerk,” she snaps as she unbuckles her seatbelt and flings the door open.

“Where are you going?” he calls after her as she’s stomping off.

“To find a hill, what else?” she shouts over her shoulder.

Enjolras watches her walk off to the gas station’s restroom before he settles back in his seat and shuts his eyes. He grits his teeth as he tries to will his body into lassitude, but sleep continues to evade him minute after minute. ‘This is ridiculous!’ he tells himself as he opens his eyes and rubs his temples.

He checks his watch and finds that it is only ten in the morning, but the road markers near the car tell him that they are more than halfway to their destination. ‘Can’t spend the rest of the day bickering’ he decides as he gets out of the car, taking care to lock the doors.

He looks around and finds that this station has taken the concept of ‘self service’ to a ridiculous extent; there is no one standing by the gas pumps or even manning the cashier. As he walks towards the rest room, he hears what sounds like an engine slowing down near the gas station. He turns around and sees a black pick-up truck stopping a few paces behind his own car. There are seven men crowded in the truck bed, and the flash of gunmetal in their hands is unmistakable in the morning light.

Enjolras rushes to the door of the ladies’ restroom and tries the door handle once, only to find it locked. He takes a step back and kicks the door, once, twice till he hears the latch give. He rushes into the bathroom and shoves a mop bucket against the door, just as Eponine emerges from one of the cubicles. “Auguste, what the hell are you doing here?” she hisses.

He puts a hand on her mouth despite her attempts to pull away. “There are gunmen outside.” He nods as he sees her eyes widen with shock. “We have to get out to the open.”

Eponine tears herself away but grabs his hand to drag him to the cubicle furthest from the door. She hops up on the toilet tank and works the window open, wincing as it creaks. She slips through easily and Enjolras follows suit a moment after. The crunch of their shoes on the concrete is almost too loud for his liking, but it’s nothing to the roar of gunfire coming from the other side of the bathroom.

The only other structure in the vicinity is a small hut at the edge of a field of weeds and tall grass, about a quarter of a kilometer off. ‘Better than the woods!’ Enjolras decides as he and Eponine sprint in this direction. The shouts and footsteps are drawing nearer with each second, but he cannot look back or take his eyes away from the shack. Suddenly he sees a blur of motion at the edge of his vision, a mere moment second before Eponine’s scream pierces the quiet. He swiftly leaps to wrest her away from the two men who have seized her in a chokehold, but he is pinioned in a moment by three other burly thugs who lose no time in pushing his face into the dirt. He tries to throw them off, only to have the wind knocked out of him by a kick to the stomach.

Through the haze of pain he feels himself being dragged forward, towards Eponine’s continued shrieking. “Let him up! Make him watch!” one of the men barks. “Right here in the field?” another asks. “What if someone sees—-“
“Never mind your fun, there’s no time for that!” the leader of the group retorts. He laughs as he pulls Eponine up by her hair and presses the muzzle of a pistol to her left temple. “Too bad we’ll have to ruin this pretty face.”

Enjolras attempts once more to pull himself loose only to receive a kick to the back. For a moment he meets Eponine’s eyes, now wide with a look of terror he has never seen before. Yet instead of the click of the pistol another sound, that of an uproarious argument sounds through the field. He catches sight of two other men grappling a few paces away from this debacle, one apparently trying to prevent the other from reaching this scene. However this second man breaks away and lunges straight for the man holding down Eponine. The leader of the gang swears as he now grapples with his comrade, throwing him to the ground and shooting him in the leg.

It is enough to startle the rest of the gang, enough for their grip to loosen just enough for Enjolras to jab one of his assailants in the side. He twists the wrist of the man pointing a gun at him and manages to pry the weapon loose. He finds his footing and stands up straight, training the weapon now on the men who are now fleeing pell-mell across the field. A series of yells and curses are enough to tell him that Eponine has managed a similar escape. He catches sight of a stranger, dishevelled and breathing hard, but on her feet and also holding a gun. “Are you hurt?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “You?”

“I’ll live.” He looks back to where the men have now nearly reached the roadside. “There were seven of them in the truck—”

“One right here, you great fool!” a coarse voice comes from nearby, from where one of the thugs has dragged himself onto a heap of grass.

Eponine pales at the sound of this voice and starts running towards this stranger. “Dad!”

II

She’d know that voice anywhere, no matter how roughened it may be by cheap cigarettes and alcohol. All the same her mind still reels with disbelief as she takes in the vivid crimson of blood pooling in the dirt, the limbs shaking with pain and of course the mask of agony that is the face of Nicolai Thenardier. It takes a few seconds before the words finally come to her lips. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s a job,” Thenardier says before biting his lip once again. “They bring us out of prison for the work then slip us back in. Pretty neat work.”

Eponine feels her gut lurch even as she hears Enjolras cuss at this bit of news. This is not something they have ever considered, not even in their wildest conjectures. “Help me here,” she asks, but he is already there using one hand to stem the blood flowing from Thenardier’s shattered left leg. “How far are we from the next town?”

“An hour, but we may as well bring him to the prison infirmary,” Enjolras replies after a moment. “He won’t be safe elsewhere, even if he was admitted under another name.”

The mention of the penitentiary makes Eponine’s head swim as memories of scratchy uniforms and narrow cells surface before her eyes but she takes a deep breath to allow the world to come into focus once more. “Then let’s bring him. Hopefully the car is still in working order,” she manages to say.

Thenardier laughs throatily. “Thought you’d dump me off a cliff.
It is all that Eponine can do not to give her father a withering look as she goes to support her father on his right side while Enjolras takes the left. It is an agonizing trek back to the car, even with all this assistance Thenardier curses with every step and attempts one or two feeble punches. In fact, Eponine almost cries with relief when she finds the vehicle undisturbed. “I’ll be back in a moment,” she says as soon as her father is settled in the backseat. She races back to the restroom to soak a handkerchief and fill a can with some clean water. All the while she listens with bated breath for more engines, footsteps, gunshots or any sign of their would-be-assassins returning. ‘How can I trust anything I see?’ she tells herself as she quits the restroom.

She returns to find Enjolras talking quickly into his phone. “The wardens know we’re bringing your father back in,” he tells her. “They at least sounded surprised on the phone that he got out.”

Eponine manages a bitter laugh as she gets into the backseat in order to continue treating Thenardier’s wound. “What will they say when they learn who shot him?” she asks over the revving of the engine. She shuts her eyes now that she cannot bring herself to look at her father, or to do more than press on his wound and occasionally check his pulse.

Suddenly she feels his fingers grasp her wrist when she’s checking his pulse. “I’ve never killed a man,” Thenardier says softly. “You remember I can do a lot of things, just not that.”

“You still took the job,” Eponine mutters as she looks at him. He’s unusually calm, almost like a man whose conscience is clear. “You had to know there was a mark.”

“I was told to only go after this car,” Thenardier answers. “I didn’t know who was in it, but when I saw you there....” He trails off and shakes his head. “Not you, my girl.”

Eponine bites her lip as she regards him for a moment. In all her memories of cold nights and hungry days, she cannot clearly recall her father with blood on his hands, or for that matter raising a deadly weapon. ‘He always preferred to run,’ she recalls even as she finds herself nodding. “So you called them off, or tried to?”

Thenardier gives her a crooked grin. “Does that at least get me a better chance in the prison, or in your good books, Nin?”

She has to look away once more. “You haven’t called me that since I was a little girl.”

“You were hardly around. You were always up and about and running, as soon as you got ideas,” Thenardier replies. He winces as the car is jolted by a rough spot in the road. “Now I don’t know if I’m going to last this out, but I’d best tell you that it’s the prison higher-ups who are getting a cut, and some military brass. Not the old Gisquet or politicos, just the brass.”

“From where?” Enjolras asks, casting a quick glance over his shoulder.

“Are you taking my testimony right here, Attorney?” Thenardier asks.

“If you’re willing to talk, we can get something started,” Enjolras replies.

“Check the 12th regiment; they call him the commander now there,” Thenardier says as he manages to sit up. “Used to go by the name Patch.”

Eponine nods curtly, knowing she’ll have to check this alias against her previous research. ‘Not now, not now,’ she reminds herself as she continues to press on the bullet wound. She peers out the window and bites her lip on seeing the looming watchtowers and high walls of the prison compound. “Dad, how many were involved in this job?”
“Seven in my car, but who knows how many other jobs?” Thenardier says. “All under the same brass.”

“That will do,” Enjolras chimes in as he slows down the car before the prison gate. “The rest of the details can wait later in the investigation.”

‘He knows that if we talk about anything more, we might end up making a deal,’ Eponine thinks as they drive up to the prison’s main building. She has to leave Enjolras to deal with the prison administration while she takes charge of bringing Thenardier down to the infirmary. To her shock, the infirmary premises are far more than just a tiny clinic; there’s actually a small operating room next to the consultation room. “How often do you have to scrub in?” she asks the attending physician after she’s properly endorsed the case.

“On the average, maybe once every two weeks. Usually stuff like broken bones or stabbing, but a gunshot wound...well that goes on the blotter,” the infirmary doctor replies. “It’s still a gang war in here, bars or not.”

‘More than that, evidently,’ Eponine almost says. “I take he’ll have to go under the knife twice?”

“I’ll have to debride the wound and apply external fixation for now, then when the injury is cleaner, we’ll see if we can properly nail the bones together,” the surgeon explains. “I hope your father doesn’t mind going about with bars sticking out of his leg for two weeks.”

“I would think that his cellmates would enjoy the spectacle,” Eponine quips.

The physician has to hold back a snort of laughter. “You have to inform your mother. She’s still listed as his next of kin.”

Eponine grits her teeth and manages to nod before quitting the infirmary. ‘This will be the one time I will have to break that restraining order,’ she decides as she asks for permission to use the phone to call the women’s penitentiary. She takes a deep breath as she waits for the operator to pick up.

“Good morning, may I please speak with Pauline Thenardier?” she asks. While she hasn’t had many issues with her surname over the past few years, she can only wonder how it sounds within the four walls of a prison. ‘Here goes nothing,’ she tells herself as she hears her mother’s voice berating a guard, followed by the scratching of a chair being pulled up to a table.

“Eponine my dear! Why are you calling?” Mme. Thenardier croons, but she still manages to sound as shrill as nails on a chalkboard. “It’s already after Christmas.”

“Hi Mom. I hope you had a good one.” Eponine sighs as she leans against the desk, all the while looking out for any eavesdroppers. “I just have to tell you that Dad got a bullet to a leg on a gun job. I found out since I was supposed to be his mark but he stopped the hit at literally the last moment.”

For a moment the other end of the line is silent. “He got shot?”

“He’s in surgery right now. He’ll be fine,” Eponine says slowly.

Mme. Thenardier shrieks. “That useless son of a bitch! If I could just get my hands on his filthy neck----“

“Mom, you’re on the phone!”
“I hope your lawyer boyfriend has more common sense than that halfwit father of yours!”

Eponine has to bite her lip if only to stifle a snort. “Anyway I have to go, I might be tying up the line—”

“Eponine, wait! How’s Zel doing?” Mme. Thenardier asks. “I hear she’s having a baby.”

“She’s okay,” Eponine says. This is all she can answer, especially when there are rules to follow.

“I hope that after what your father did, we’ll get to see you girls,” Mme. Thenardier whispers. “There are points for good behaviour right?”

‘It doesn’t work that way,’ Eponine almost says, but she bites her lip hard until she tastes blood.

“There are rules. Anyway you might want to know too that Gav is okay.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do we get a cut in jail time?” Mme. Thenardier drawls. “Come on, Ponine. I’m sure you can talk to your man—”

“That’s not our call; it was decided years ago,” Eponine replies. “I have to go. Bye Mom.” She puts down the phone and takes a deep breath before walking away from the desk. ‘This is exactly why I ended up in that halfway house while Zel and Gav had to be sent away,’ she reminds herself as she heads out to the lobby of the prison building.

She wills herself to get as far as the parking lot before she has to sit down on a concrete bar. The warmth of the noontime sun soon banishes that trembling feeling in her limbs and she finds herself more able to breathe easily and able to walk back to Enjolras’ car. She opens the back door and frowns at the bloodstains on the seat. They are not overly large, so she finds what is left of the can of water and soaks a handkerchief again to try to get the dots out.

“You’re going to need detergent for that,” Enjolras calls as he walks up to her. “We can find some elsewhere, down the road.”

She wheels about to face him. “How could you be so calm? I almost got you killed again!”

He grits his teeth. “I was the one who wanted a pit stop, remember?”

She nods as she lets him open the passenger side door and she slides into her seat. He also gets into his own seat and takes a deep breath, and somehow his fingers don’t reach for the keys but instead manage to touch her hand.
The fact that the courts are on holiday till the New Year allows Courfeyrac to work from the comfort of his own home, or to be more to the point, the decadence of his recliner. \textit{This is the best way to go about multi-tasking}, \textit{he} decides as he turns down the music on his laptop in order to better listen for Azelma’s footsteps as she’s decorating their daughter’s nursery. He’s not about to take any chances, especially since they have just a month to go before the day they are set to meet their first child.

He goes through the tabs on his browser and clucks his tongue on seeing yet another comment on an article that has caused quite an upset on some social networks and news sites. “Bet you didn’t think it would get this crazy, St-Just,” he mutters as he rereads once again his college friend’s expose on the zoning in the vicinity of the Easter Weaving Room. \textit{Then again he had to have an inkling somewhat, considering who he was with,} \textit{he} decides as he looks through the photos that accompany the article. He has to admit that Enjolras’ photography skills have improved over the years, such that each image is the sort that tells more than the proverbial thousand words.

“Maurice, are you okay with heating up leftovers for lunch, or would you rather get a bite to eat at the mall before we start shopping?” Azelma asks as she waddles down the stairs. She takes one look at her husband’s work, rolls her eyes and lifts the computer off his lap. “There’s nothing we can do there. They can take care of each other, wherever they are.”

“That’s the best reaction to ‘my sister and my almost-brother-in-law turned their romantic vacation into a whodunit’,” Courfeyrac jokes as he motions for Azelma to sit on his lap.

“The only other person who could have that reaction is Gavroche,” Azelma says nonchalantly. “Speaking of which, he said he found a nice cafe for the baby shower.”

“That’s going to be on January 2, am I right?”

“Yes. Don’t even think about scheduling anything on that afternoon!”

“Yes Ma’am!” Courfeyrac says before giving her a smooch. “If I slip up, feel free to give me extra detention hours.”

“Uh-uh. Nothing of that sort till Alexandra gets here---and I think I might have another punishment up for you by then,” Azelma says as she swats at his hand, which has somehow come to rest on her thigh. She lets out a dramatic groan when the doorbell rings. “Seriously, visitors at this hour, on a Sunday?” she asks as she gets to her feet.

Courfeyrac checks his watch. “Since it’s just about eight in the morning, it’s probably Combeferre coming in from the night shift.” He still keeps track of these things, if only to know who to call for in the event of an emergency. He opens the door before the bell can ring a second time, and can only sigh sympathetically on seeing his friend’s weary face. “Rough night?”

“Somewhat,” Combeferre replies as he trudges into the house. He cracks a smile at Azelma. “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty damn good,” Azelma says as she makes herself comfortable on the sofa. “Have you had breakfast already?”
Combeferre holds up a bag of bagels by way of reply before taking a seat on an easy chair. “I don’t know how to talk to Florence,” he says. He rubs his hands together, as he does when he’s trying to turn a phrase in his head. “It’s about the Rock Lobster bombing.”

“You were the target,” Azelma chimes in. “Enjolras told Maurice, and to be honest, it’s not that difficult to figure out.”

Combeferre’s jaw drops. “How did you guess?”

“No one blows up a restaurant just randomly, so most probably the target was the hospital’s event,” Courfeyrac begins. “If it was a purely personal thing like a disgruntled patient getting back at a doctor, then there are cleaner ways of going about revenge. This was a statement. There aren’t many other doctors in Saint-Michel who’ve earned the distinction of making so many enemies.”

“Sometimes I don’t know whether to love or hate how your mind works, Courfeyrac,” Combeferre mutters as he opens up the bag of bagels. “I didn’t want to tell Florence about it, even if she was there. She somehow put things together, and to put it mildly, she was unhappy about it.”

“Of course she’d be angry,” Azelma says bluntly. “You kept her in the dark!”

“It was only for her own good. She’s got so much to deal with and the last thing I want is for her to be a target because she knows too much,” Combeferre points out. “I’ve told her that, but she says that I’m missing the point.”

It’s all that Courfeyrac can do to keep a straight face at Combeferre’s genuinely baffled words. “My friend, I think I’m with Florence on this one. That was a bad move.”

“Tell me why?”

“Because whether she’s a target or not is not your call, genius. That’s the call of whoever failed to kill you. You’d do better by warning her to be on her guard.”

Combeferre gives him a withering look. “Okay, granted that you may be right there, it still begs the question of my missing the point. What exactly did I do wrong?”

Azelma crosses her arms over her very rounded middle. “It’s more of what you’re doing again.” She sits up and rubs her back before looking straight at Combeferre. “I may not have seen everything of what happened while you were still at med school with my sister but I kind of have an idea of some of the reasons you two didn’t work out. You didn’t exactly give her credit where it was due.”

“Azelma, I was trying to help her. You know how things were difficult then for her and you, and Gavroche,” Combeferre reasons. “The last thing she needed was stress.”

“Okay, I was a bit of a jerk when it came to the academic rivalry,” Combeferre explains. “It seemed fine then, given the culture at school, but in hindsight there was no excuse for it.”

“It’s not that!” Azelma says. “You always treated her like a princess and fine, that’s something she needs time and again because heaven knows she doesn’t take care of herself. You went too far often and treated her like a china doll who couldn’t be there for you. You didn’t allow her to care for you.”

“Azelma, I was trying to help her. You know how things were difficult then for her and you, and Gavroche,” Combeferre reasons. “The last thing she needed was stress.”

“You thought she couldn’t handle things. You never told her anything,” she continues. “You never told her, and I only learned this all from Maurice, Enjolras, Chetta, and everyone else, how crazy things were. You never told her that a lot of the time you were worrying about everyone else. You never told her that each time you went home for the weekends you were always checking that Enjolras and Bahorel hadn’t landed themselves in jail because of some protest. You were trying to
make sure that Grantaire hadn’t turned his liver into fatty ooze because of his drinking. You were always wondering if Bossuet would be okay during the time he couldn’t find a job—“

“Zelma, what could she have done then? We were all at school.”

“You don’t know. You’ll never know now.”

Courfeyrac clears his throat. “She does have a point. I mean, I knew then that you were dating someone even if you didn’t mention her name. I figured after a while that you were giving her a rosy picture of things, or just saying that everything was alright with your world since you never mentioned anything about your girl helping you out.”

“You never said anything about it then,” Combeferre points out.

“I couldn’t since I never knew her side of the story,” Courfeyrac explains. “It would have been unfair.”

“What Maurice and I have been trying to say is that you’re doing it again with Florence,” Azelma says. “I’m sure there’s a great reason you’re attracted to her. I’ve talked to her and she’s pretty awesome. Can’t you at least give her a chance to be what you need now?”

Combeferre takes a deep breath as he looks down. “She said something like that. I don’t want her to be a martyr.”

“News flash: she probably doesn’t look at it that way,” Courfeyrac says. There are times when Combeferre can be incredibly obtuse, especially for someone who works with people for a daily basis. “You ought to bring a peace offering, and come clean.”

Combeferre nods. “More of clean things up. Maybe before the New Year.” He stops and reaches for his phone, which is beeping with one text message after another. “It’s from Feuilly. He’s telling us to tune into the news now.”

“What for?” Courfeyrac wonders aloud as he goes to retrieve his own phone, which he’s left charging near the dining table. He finds there text messages from Feuilly, Bahorel, and Bossuet all telling him to check out the news, but also a missed call from Marius. ‘A distress call perhaps,’ he thinks as he presses the callback option. “Hello there Pontmercy. What’s going on?” he greets.

“Courf, could you please help me out here?” Marius asks. “For some reason Raoul de Chagny, yes Raoul de Chagny, is here at my place mentioning something about my cousin’s military investigations not really being an investigation. Something confusing. Is the commission doing something about it?”

Courfeyrac is left stunned at the mention of this former classmate. “Get him on the phone, please. Better yet, video call. I’m going online.” He snorts on hearing Marius’ footsteps mingling with the sound of his friend’s voice asking Elodie to finish playing a computer game. ‘This must be good if even the old military brass are getting involved,’ he decides as he opens up a chat window on his computer.

To his surprise it isn’t just Marius’ name that comes up on screen, but also that of Armand St-Just. ‘Wouldn’t hurt to get the trio back together,’ Courfeyrac decides as he also sends a chat invitation to the journalist. He laughs when he sees in one window Armand sitting at a desk sipping coffee, and in another window Marius and Raoul eating pretzels. “The Three Musketeers, reunited,” Courfeyrac declares as he tweaks the microphone.

“Three----wait, that you there, St-Just?” Raoul asks. “I read your article about the weaving room
incident. How long has this been going on?"

“Apparently that particular operation has been going on for a week, but according to my fellow correspondents the lake area has been getting zoned for several months to make room for some infrastructure,” Armand explains. “Some people don’t want their neighbours stealing from the fields and fishponds, so they employ private armies.”

Raoul groans at this. “Anyone I know?”

“They say the chief is pretty damn high up---and investigating it?” Armand asks. “I don’t know. You tell me, but won’t you get disowned?”

“That’s where I come in,” Marius says. “I don’t know everything that my cousin is up to, but I know that he was transferred here for a specific reason. He and his fellow Marines were detailed in Port town till the Transnonain trial, and then they were moved for a ‘peacetime’ assignment.”

“Peacetime my foot if they are the ones who blew up the diner,” Courfeyrac scoffs. “The question is though, who is giving orders for everything?”

“No one knows and of course my cousin isn’t talking,” Marius says. “He did mention that he wanted to talk to whoever was in charge at Saint-Michel, and I told him to talk to Eponine. Cosette was angry with me for that since she said I might be endangering her.”

“That might be the case, but then again…” Courfeyrac trails off. ‘If Marius’ cousin meant ill he certainly could end the investigation in another way,’ he decides. “Maybe he knows something, and wants to check it.”

“To what end?” Armand asks.

“To supply his bosses, what else,” Raoul says. “The code of silence in the military is sacred. He’ll be risking a lot if he means to do the right thing.”

“You mean reassignment, grave physical injury, disappearance----“ Marius begins.

“Why else do you think I left the force?” Raoul asks. “I wasn’t about to let Christine and Pierre always worry if I ever was coming home. Too bad there wasn’t witness protection back in the day.”

‘All the same it still isn’t a guarantee,’ Courfeyrac muses. He knows it’s only by dint of luck and good covers that Dupond and Javert are still alive and incognito today.

Suddenly a shout comes from where Combeferre and Azelma are watching TV. “Maurice, you have to get here right now!” Azelma yells.

Courfeyrac dashes over to the sofa and grips Azelma’s shoulder on seeing the news feature about the escapees from the state prison and the shooting of M. Thenardier. “At least Zel, this means he’ll be doing more prison time. He’s never, ever coming near you, Alex, or anyone in the family.”

Azelma manages to nod. “But why would he escape? And who did this to him?”

Courfeyrac shrugs as he sits next to her. “I don’t know, love. I pity the poor soul who will be given the job of finding out.”

The next town on their itinerary is two whole hours away, but a sudden downpour turns the trip into
one-hundred eighty minutes of awkward silence. ‘How long can we possibly keep this up?’ Enjolras wonders as he and Eponine finally reach another lodging house, this time one located at the edge of a cliff. It happens to be the sort of house that is built downwards as opposed to rising towards the skies, and it’s hardly surprising that the few rooms available are at the lowest level. “At least you kids get garden access,” the proprietor says kindly as he hands the keys to them. “You might want to check it out once the rain stops.”

“Maybe. Thanks for the tip,” Eponine says before closing the door. She takes a deep breath as she looks at Enjolras. “Take off your shirt.”

“Wait, what?” he asks, wondering if he heard her correctly.

“I saw you get kicked in the stomach and your back during the fight. It wouldn’t hurt to take a look,” she points out.

“Ah that,” he mutters. He could certainly feel his body aching for most of the drive, but fortunately it hadn’t been too bothersome. “It’s probably nothing—”

“I want to be sure,” she insists. “Now sit.”

“Fine then,” Enjolras huffs before sitting at the edge of the room’s lone bed and then pulling off his t-shirt. He winces on seeing the wedge shaped bruise marking his midsection. “Does it look bad?”

She doesn’t say anything for several moments but she moves closer so she can inspect his back. Her touch is cool and soothing on his skin, and he can practically feel the tension dissipating under her fingers. “You’ve been through far worse. I think you’ll be fine,” she finally pronounces as she tentatively puts a hand on his knee.

It is at that moment that he catches sight of the marks around her neck, and he brings up a hand to push her hair back so he can get a better look. She tenses for a moment and he pulls away. “I’m sorry—”

Eponine grabs his hand and moves now so that she’s sitting right in front of him. “Don’t you dare think this is your fault. Don’t you dare,” she whispers fiercely.

“If it wasn’t for my being rude, we wouldn’t have been at that gas station in the first place.”

“You know what? If you hadn’t suggested that pit stop, one or both of us would be dead. We wouldn’t have stood a chance in a car chase while dodging bullets.”

Her words bring up a number of horrific scenarios before his mind’s eye, none of which he can imagine escaping so easily from. “I don’t think this is what you had envisioned for your vacation,” he says after a few long moments. ‘Or for anything,’ he almost adds but there’s no need to say that what with the way her grip tightens on his wrist.

“Talking to my parents for the first time in fifteen years is what takes the cake.” She shrugs as she starts picking lint off the bedclothes. “It’s not as if it’s going to change anything though.”

He raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I was my father’s favourite, Zel was Mom’s baby, and neither of them really cared much about Gav. In the end they were more concerned about trade-offs and getting a cut in their jail time.” She shakes her head and laughs ruefully. “What a pair we make—both practically orphaned since our parents don’t really give a shit about us anymore.”
Enjolras gives her a wry look, remembering now that night when his parents unexpectedly showed up at their apartment. “We could have had worse introductions.”

“Typical of us, not getting it right.”

“According to who?”

Eponine laughs again, but this time there is a note of mirth. “You really deserve so much more, Auguste. I mean you deserve someone who’s not going to drive you crazy, someone who’s not going to get you in these dangerous situations.”

“You deserve the same too,” he points out. “After everything—“

She shakes her head before taking both his hands in hers. “I’ve told you before, that is not who I want.”

There is only one answer that Enjolras wants to give to this, and that is to give her the lightest of kisses. “Likewise,” he says against her lips. The smile that brightens her face at this single word is the most beautiful thing he’s seen all day, giving him a sense of hope that he does not dare to describe out loud, at least not yet. So he settles for kissing her once more and pulling away just enough to rest his forehead against hers. “You once said that you would stay.”

She nods as she puts one of her hands on his chest, as if to convince herself of the fact that yes, he is alive and with her. “I still mean it. Do you?”

“More than ever.” He brushes a stray strand of hair away from her cheeks. “One day, this is going to be far more than just a promise.”

She throws her arms around him and plants a kiss on his ear, only to end up smiling in his hair when he pulls her close. “I’ll hold you to that.”
To Ring in the New

The next few days are far more sunny and languorous, and yet they fly by far too quickly for Eponine’s liking. “Next year we’re going to have to spend some time with Azelma, Courf, and their baby, but we can still manage to go out of town,” she remarks as she and Enjolras are driving back to the capital on the afternoon of New Year’s Eve.

“We can block at least three days off,” Enjolras concurs. “Though do you really want to wait a whole year before getting another break?”

She frowns and shakes her head. “Maybe summer, after my specialty board exams. I’ll need it by then.”

“It’s a good way to celebrate passing with flying colors.”

“You sound more confident about my exams than I do.”

“I’m confident about your expertise in your field,” he says, giving her a sidelong glance. “We’ll celebrate, most definitely.”

She smiles widely as she squeezes his knee, all the more since she’s sure he’s not just saying it because of the fact that she saved his life. ‘What other plans might we also have in a year?’ she wonders silently, and the answers that immediately come to mind make her feel pleasantly warm all over. She knows these daydreams will keep her smiling despite her hectic shift later that evening.

Within an hour they are at their apartment, where Enjolras starts unpacking their things while Eponine takes a quick shower and gathers the items she’ll need for work. “Auguste, what are you going to do later? It’s New Year’s Eve,” she asks.

“Probably meet up with the others,” he replies as he sets aside some linen and cloth diapers intended as a baby shower gift for Azelma. “Unless they have plans, of course.”

“Combeferre and Chetta are on duty with me tonight, while Joly and Marius are on call but it’s still possible for them to come in if things get crazy. Most probably they will,” Eponine explains. “Maybe my sister will host something, or Jehan has a spoken word gig someplace.”

“I’m sure I won’t be out of options,” he reassures her as he picks up his car keys. “I have to restock the cupboards, but I’ll give you a lift to work first.”

“Saint-Michel is the opposite direction from the grocery store.”

“Well you can’t be late tonight.”

‘It’s not his only reason though,’ she realizes and so she gives him a kiss before they head out. In less than half an hour they arrive at Saint-Michel, and she walks into the hospital with an added spring in her step. As she’s passing the reception desk she catches sight of a familiar figure hurrying out of an elevator. “Cecily! How are you?”

The caseworker stops in her tracks and looks around for a moment before finally catching sight of
Eponine. “That was a close one! I just came from upstairs and the doctors said you weren’t in yet,” she says by way of greeting.

“I’ve been out of town. What brings you here?” Eponine asks.

Cecily reaches into her bag and brings out a folder. “Here’s the certification for your casework—-you need it for your course, am I right?” She looks down for a moment before speaking again. “Mother Asuncion has been asking if you could stay on.”

“As a volunteer?”

“Something more than that. She wants some regular medical follow up for the girls.”

Eponine bites her lip. “Shouldn’t she ask a paediatrician, maybe someone who is a specialist in adolescent health?”

“She doesn’t trust that sort,” Cecily says, rolling her eyes. “To be honest, I’m overworked and badly paid, and I could use the extra hands.”

“I’ll see if I can make it work---or point you to someone who can,” Eponine says. The last thing she wants is to unexpectedly leave Cecily in a predicament if other commitments should come up. “I’ll get back to you in two days, if that’s okay?”

“Please do.” Cecily checks her watch and sighs. “I’d better get back before the girls get up to mischief. Tess tried to put a firecracker under Mother Asuncion’s desk yesterday.”

Eponine cringes. “What’s the damage?”


“You too,” Eponine says, now picturing quite vividly all kinds of shenanigans at the halfway house. ‘I wonder if the girls have figured out that Mother Asuncion is also frightened of spooks,’ she catches herself thinking as she walks up to the third floor. She rolls her eyes at the raucous laughter and jeering she can hear even before she opens the door of the surgery staff room. “Alright boys, time to behave again,” she greets as she saunters in and drops her bag on her desk.

“About time you got back, Eponine,” Combeferre calls over the groaning and griping of Reynault and some of the other surgeons. He lets out a long suffering sigh on seeing Navet and his fellow first year residents making a poor attempt at hiding several bottles of cider. “See what I’ve had to put up with.”

“Someone should change the job description for chief resident,” Eponine quips. She sees Combeferre sigh and look down at this. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing,” Combeferre replies. “I see you enjoyed your trip?”

Eponine nods as she searches through her bag for a package of caramelized peanuts, one of Combeferre’s favourite treats. “A certain lawyer told me to thank you for keeping us off the grid.”

“Many thanks to him,” Combeferre says, grinning as he takes care to hide the gift in one of his desk drawers. “Have you heard yet about what happened to your father? It was on the news a few days ago.”

“Are you talking about the jailbreak, his getting shot in the leg, or that Enjolras and I had to bring him to the prison infirmary?”
“Yes---wait a minute, what were you two doing there?”

‘Wonder then what story the wardens told the journalists,’ she thinks as she crosses her arms. “Someone hired him to join a hit squad going after me and Enjolras,” she explains, taking care to lower her voice. “No one expected him to call off the hit at literally the last moment.”

He whistles at this new bit of information. “All of that, along with what happened to you guys and St-Just at the weaving room? Did you have a vacation at all?”

“Eventually,” Eponine says, not even trying to hide her smile. Of course she’s never going to tell anyone of the days that she and Enjolras decided to spend in their basement room at the inn, in lieu of rushing off to still more sightseeing in other towns. Even now as she’s reading through papers and charts she swears she can still feel the warmth of his kisses and the sureness of his hands on her hips. It’s such that she has to duck into the bathroom and splash her face with cool water before heading out with the other residents for evening rounds.

The first fireworks start lighting up the sky, albeit sporadically, as early as eight in the evening. “Tonight we dine at the gates of hell,” Navet remarks after one particularly bright display as their group finishes up writing in some charts. “Are we ordering pizza and drinks?”

“Pizza yes, but absolutely no alcohol,” Combeferre warns.

“Last year we made do with grape juice,” Eponine informs Navet. The New Year’s Eve dinner is a tradition in the surgery department, a sort of send-off and toast to one of the most gruelling nights of the year. As far as she knows no other department in Saint-Michel celebrates this occasion with as much gusto. ‘Though I do wonder if there’s an equally good celebration elsewhere,’ she muses, trying now to imagine a dinner with the Fauchelevents or the Courfeyracs. It’s a thought that lingers rather maddeningly even after the last of the pizza has been consumed and everyone is either sleeping off their meal or trying to stay awake by playing games on Reynault’s computer.

Just as she sits down and opens up a book, she hears the intercom crackle twice. “Doctor Thenardier please report to the roof top,” a monotone voice says.

“What on earth?” Eponine asks aloud as she pushes her chair back from her desk. She looks around and almost laughs to see that Combeferre and Navet are now mysteriously absent from the staff room. All the same she discreetly slips out of the staff room and waits for the elevator. She takes a deep breath as she presses a button marked ‘R’; even if she has a number of intelligent guesses as to what is afoot, she knows better than to be too certain.

As soon as she steps out of the elevator, she hears Gavroche chuckle heartily before he pulls her into a bear hug. “Ponine, you’re almost late!”

“Late for what?” Eponine asks as she claps him on his back, only to get pulled into another hug by Azelma and Courfeyrac. “What are you guys doing here?”

“A last minute venture,” Enjolras chimes in from where he is watching the fireworks to one side. “We didn’t want you to spend another holiday away,” Azelma says in her sister’s ear. “You’re almost never around at New Year’s Eve.”

Eponine nods even as she can feel tears pricking at her eyes thanks to her sister’s words. She can also see Navet and his other roommates passing around cans of soda, while Combeferre and Florence are talking intently under one of the lights. In the middle of everything Joly, Musichetta, and Bossuet are cuddled together on a large mat. “Then after? What will you do?”
“Probably hang out a little bit. It’s not as if we’re in a hurry to get out,” Courfeyrac replies.

“And it will be the last free late night you guys will have for years,” Gavroche kids.

“No way. You’re pitching in on baby-sitting duty,” Azelma warns. “Everyone is getting a turn.”

Eponine smirks as she leaves her siblings to bicker and goes to stand by Enjolras. “You are so full of surprises,” she says as she reaches up to ruffle his hair.

He catches her hand and kisses her fingers. “As if you weren’t?”

“I am just keeping up,” she says nonchalantly as she slips an arm around his shoulders.

Suddenly Joly whistles. “Countdown guys! Twenty! Nineteen! Eighteen!”

Eponine gives Enjolras a knowing look and squeezes his hand. “Just this one cliché?” she asks.

Enjolras grins as he pulls her into his arms. “I prefer to name it a good tradition.”

“Let’s call it,” Eponine whispers before reaching up to meet him halfway in a kiss. She is pretty sure that she can hear someone yelling for a camera, but that does not matter when Enjolras is kissing her back so fiercely such that she feels as if she is on fire from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She only dares to break their kiss when the need for air becomes too great but all the same she can’t bring herself to stop looking at him or even to let him go. “Happy New Year, Auguste.”

Enjolras smiles brightly as he cradles her face. “Happy New Year Eponine.”

She ruffles his hair before they rush off to also greet her siblings and their friends. The sky is bright now with red, green, yellow, and even blue fountains of light, a sight that has her laughing out loud if only for the feeling of being so new and alive. It only feels like a moment though before the distant scream of sirens starts growing over the crackling of fireworks. ‘So much for celebrating,’ she can’t help thinking as she gives Azelma a one-armed hug from the side.

Azelma shoves Eponine away gently. “That’s your cue, Ponine.”

“Isn’t it always?”

“You’ll do well,” Azelma says. “Go get them, sis.”

Eponine nods resolutely before rushing down after Combeferre and Navet towards the elevator leading back to the emergency room.

II

The three surgeons reach the emergency room just mere seconds before the first stretcher is brought in, with its unfortunate occupant still reeking of smoke and spilled beer. Before Combeferre can say anything, Eponine is already at the hapless sufferer’s side, making a quick examination even as one hand is up to stem the patient’s worst wound. The chief resident looks now to the rest of the team gathered in the emergency room; here are the youngest surgeons such as Navet, alongside even younger trainees—here he spots Eponine’s favourite intern, a tall girl named Rory who is a reassuring presence for her more nervous classmates. ‘How long ago was it when we were first here?’ he wonders as he picks up a stethoscope and drapes it around his neck. “Two interns to each bed, five on crit care, two on triage,” he says. He can only hope that this division of tasks will help them all hold out till morning; contrary to what it seems, he is not a commander in this place but merely a hand pressed against a crack in a dike.
The next patients come in ones and twos, and soon after in large groups. The floor is soon slick with blood and spilled disinfectant as the surgeons clean out burned flesh, wash out wounds, and try to set broken bones. It falls to Combeferre to deal with the worse cases, such as that of a boy with his face half burned away. “Keep him stabilized. I’ll scrub in for his case,” Combeferre tells Rory.

“Gunshot wound case coming in!” a nurse shouts from the lobby.

Combeferre sighs as he hears running footsteps alongside the clatter of a gurney. He peers out of the curtained off crit care area and sees several orderlies wheeling in a blond man clad in a military dress uniform. The soldier is screaming as he tries to keep one hand on a piece of bloody gauze pressed to his midsection. “Traitors! Those bastards!”

“Where the hell did you get this one?” Navet asks from where he is rummaging through a supply cabinet.

“Found him bleeding in the street,” one of the nurses says. “He was dragging himself here—“

Combeferre grits his teeth at this; this is one story he’s not going to tell Florence later if only to spare her the nightmares. “What is this man’s name?” he asks the nurse.

“Theodule Gillenormand, a lieutenant of the Marines,” the nurse reports. “Stray bullet, apparently.”

Combeferre only has to look at Theodule to know that perhaps, this is not so. “Start an IV, stabilize him—and get him to the OR right away,” he says. He will just have to trust Reynault or another second year surgeon to take care of this soldier, since Eponine already has her hands full with another critical case. ‘What wouldn’t I give for Mabeuf and the consultants to come in!’ he thinks, ubut there’s no waking up the most senior surgeons until dawn.

There is no time to wait for an elevator so he rushes up the stairs, intent on sparing every second he can. He is on the second floor when he hears some snappish conversation coming from one of the seats near the stairwell. “Azelma, are you alright?” he asks with alarm on seeing the young woman and Courfeyrac resting there.

“I just strained myself a bit,” Azelma says as she leans back in her seat and rubs her back. “This is what I get for lugging around several kilos all in one day!”

Courfeyrac shakes his head sceptically. “Zel, you’ve been having these...twinges on and off all day!”

“But didn’t Musichetta say—-“

Azelma shoots a venomous look at her husband before suddenly wincing and biting her lip. “Oh crap. This is weird. This is bad—-“

“And what, six minutes apart,” Courfeyrac says. “I’m timing.”

“Shut up!”

Combeferre is just about ready to shake his head and let them be till he notices a puddle on the floor, right under Azelma’s seat. “I hate to break it to you guys—-“

Azelma pales as she realizes what he is saying. “No! No, it can’t be, it’s too early!” She grabs Courfeyrac’s arm. “Make it stop!”
“Sorry love, but that’s gonna be Chetta’s call,” Courfeyrac says, wincing as her nails dig into his arm.

“I can’t have the baby now! New Year’s Eve is a shitty birthday!” Azelma whimpers.

Combeferre quickly brings out his phone. “Chetta?” he asks, half-afraid he’ll hear his friend at work in the labor, or worse, in the delivery room.

“Shouldn’t you be scrubbing in, Ferre?” Muschetta drawls. “I’m chilling with your girlfriend and the guys down at my staff room.”

“That’s going to end soon, I’m afraid,” Combeferre says. “Courfeyrac and Azelma will be down in a bit. Looks like we’re adding another to the party pretty soon.”
“Okay, the year is well rung in. It’s time to call it a night.”

Marius swallows the last of his grape juice and gets up to put the glass in the sink. “Is anyone else getting up early tomorrow? I think I should take charge of breakfast,” he says as he continues to help Cosette, Fantine, Jean, and Elodie clear away the dishes from their New Year’s Eve feast.

Fantine raises her hand. “I’ve got errands to run. Don’t worry about lunch; we have enough leftovers as it is.”

Elodie stands on tiptoe to wash her sticky fingers before giving Marius a pleading look. “What about your vacation, Papa?”

“I’ve got a lot of patients,” Marius says apologetically. “But that’s only for the morning. Once I get home, we’ll go shopping, like I said we would.”

Cosette nudges his elbow teasingly. “Bonding?”

“Getting things done too,” Marius replies. It’s all he can do to keep a straight face just knowing that he and Elodie will be shopping for a surprise for Cosette to give after the wedding reception. ‘Nothing too cheeky,’ he decides; there is just no way he’s taking his soon-to-be adopted child to a lingerie store or one of the many jokey shops his friends frequent.

Just as he is about to go up to his room for the night he hears his phone ringing. “Not now!” he groans to himself; while neurological emergencies can happen at any time of the day or night, he’s not too eager to spend the first hours of 2015 in the intensive care unit or the emergency room. When he checks his phone he finds that the number there is Joly’s. “Happy New Year, Joly. Did something happen?” he greets, hoping to still sound cheery.

“Happy New Year, Pontmercy. To answer your question, you’d better come down here quick to Saint-Michel,” Joly replies, sounding oddly calm despite all the shouts and running wherever he is. “Your cousin Theodule was shot.”

Suddenly Marius has to sit on the floor. “Is he alive?”

“He’s in surgery right now,” Joly says. “Do you know how to contact your aunt and your grandfather?”

“I’ll send a message,” Marius answers. He’ll have to course it through Basque, since neither of his relatives owns a cellphone and they won’t appreciate being woken at this early hour. “Is he stable? If they need to come right away----“

“I don’t know, I’ll keep you posted,” Joly replies. “Wait Bossuet, don’t just go that way---“

“Joly! The connection is getting choppy!” Marius says but soon the line goes dead. He tries to call his friend back but the phone connection fails. ‘Family is still family,’ he reminds himself as he rummages through his closet for a clean shirt, a good pair of pants and his white blazer; chances are his patients will need him soon enough. He swallows hard before tiptoeing out of his room and down
the hall to Cosette and Elodie’s. He’s just halfway there when he hears a door open and he sees Cosette step out, also holding her cellphone. “Cosette, is something wrong?” he asks worriedly.

“Azelma just went into labor,” Cosette says in a low voice. “It’s too early; the baby wasn’t supposed to come till the end of the month.”

Marius feels as if something has just landed in his stomach. “End of the month would mean she’s at least thirty-four, maybe thirty-five weeks along, right?”

Cosette nods. “That means she’ll just have to deliver her baby. I think I should go and be with her; I know that Musichetta is there but it will be different since she has to be the doctor here.”

“Wouldn’t Eponine also be there?” Marius asks.

“She’s probably operating on someone right now,” Cosette replies. She pauses to study Marius. “Did you get a call too?”

“My cousin Theodule. He got shot, and he was brought to Saint-Michel,” Marius explains. “It’s weird. Shouldn’t he have been brought to the barracks infirmary?”

“Maybe he wasn’t at the barracks,” Cosette whispers. “Maybe he was out celebrating.”

“A very big ‘maybe’,” Marius mutters. ‘It would be too farfetched to think this has to do with his investigations,’ he decides, even as he recalls everything that Armand and Raoul have uncovered over the past few days. He swallows hard when he suddenly feels Cosette’s arms around him. “I’m not close to him—”

“But you don’t wish him harm either,” she finishes. “We have to tell Elodie we’re going to Saint-Michel.”

Marius embraces her more tightly for a moment before letting go of her and following her back to the bedroom. By this time Elodie has also awoken and is now rubbing her eyes. “Where are you going?” she asks softly.

“To the hospital. Aunt Azelma is having her baby,” Cosette explains gently as she combs out the little girl’s hair.

Elodie frowns at this and hops out of bed. “Can’t I come?”

“It’s going to be a long wait. For now, you get some sleep and you can stay with Grandmother——” Marius begins before Elodie shakes her head. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“I’m a big girl. I can stay alone,” Elodie says with a small smile.

“I can leave a light on,” Cosette offers. “That way it won’t be so scary.”

Elodie manages a plucky smile. “I won’t be scared if you come back in the morning.”

“Which we will. We’ll call you too if we’re going to be delayed a bit,” Cosette reassures her. “Then later, you can come too with Grandfather and Grandmother so you can meet the new baby.”

Elodie nods before jumping up to hug Cosette and then Marius. “Okay. Good mor—night,” she whispers before scrambling back under the covers.

Marius looks to see Cosette pulling on a sweater and picking up her purse. Her eyes are glistening when they leave the room. “She’s growing up so fast,” she remarks. “Did you know she refers to
Azelma’s baby as Cousin Alex?”

“Already?”

“She’s never had a little cousin before.”

Somehow this has Marius imagining Elodie playing with a little girl who looks a little like Azelma, but this quickly shifts to picturing Elodie standing on tiptoe by a bassinet and trying to tickle a baby with blonde hair. ‘Not just yet,’ he reminds himself. There is no way he and Cosette can manage to care for another, still younger child until he’s finished with his final exams for residency. He could almost laugh at himself for thinking so forward, especially when they still have a wedding to plan.

He and Cosette arrive at Sant-Michel hospital within the hour, despite having to park outside the hospital premises thanks to all the ambulances and vehicles swarming the area near the emergency room. They head up first to the third floor, just in time to see the recovery room doors shut behind a gurney. The silence is thick and heavy, broken only by the occasional whisper or sobs from relatives gathered in the waiting areas. “Is Theodule Gillenormand still in surgery?” Marius asks a nurse who is at the station.

“He’s still in the recovery room,” the nurse replies. “I’m sorry Doctor Pontmercy but you have to wait till he’s transferred to a ward.”

“Then I will.”

“Are you family?”

Marius nods as he goes back towards the recovery room and peers in through the glass pane at the door. He can just catch a glimpse of Theodule in the second bed, hooked up to monitors and yawning groggily. “At least he’s alive,” he whispers.

“And safe,” Cosette adds as she takes both of his hands. “We can talk to him later—maybe before your other relatives get here?”

“I do hope so,” Marius says, hugging her close. She smells of vanilla, an aroma which he did not imagine to find so comforting until he met her. ‘As long as I have her, I know it’s going to be fine,’ he realizes as she takes his hand to lead him downstairs to the obstetrics complex.

In contrast to the surgery wing, this place is one of mayhem with doctors and nurses quickly walking this way and that, relatives frantically making calls or pacing the halls, and of course all the labouring mothers who are trying their best to bear up with pain. Despite all this confusion it is easy to spot Prouvaire, Grantaire, Bahorel, Feuilly, Joly, and Bossuet all crowded onto a dilapidated sofa, passing around an oversized bag of potato chips. “Who’s with Azelma aside from Chetta?” Cosette asks by way of greeting.

Grantaire salutes to her by way of greeting. “Florence has the honor of it.”

“Wait, where’s Courfeyrac, or Gavroche?” Marius asks.

“He’s still at the admissions desk. Gavroche went with Enjolras to get Azelma’s stuff,” Bahorel explains.

Cosette nods understandingly before crossing to the labor room. She slips in before the nurses can say anything, and judging by the enthusiastic voices of Azelma, Musichetta, and Florence, it seems as if she’ll be staying there too. In the meantime Marius finds a seat on the crowded sofa. “How far along is she?”
“I heard something about being dilated up to six or seven centimetres. That’s pretty good,” Joly replies. He winces as a screech comes from one of the rooms. “Good thing that the anaesthesiologist came in here a while back for Azelma’s epidural.”

“I don’t understand how women, especially in the days before painkillers, could stand to have more than one child,” Bahorel muses. “I guess dutiful sex leads to other duties?”

“It’s not a duty if they want it,” Feuilly points out. He waves to Courfeyrac as the latter practically barrels into the hallway. “Easy there, you don’t want to end up in orthopaedic surgery.”

Courfeyrac is breathing hard as he leans against the wall. “Any news?”

“None yet,” Prouvaire says. “It’s a good thing?”

The lawyer nods as he wipes his face and then looks at Marius. “Thanks for coming too. I know it’s a hard time, what with your cousin also being injured. How is he?”

“On the mend,” Marius replies. “He’s in good hands.”

“So is Azelma.” Courfeyrac shuts his eyes as he catches his breath. “How did you deal before, Pontmercy?” he asks after a few moments.

“With what?”

“Being a dad. I know you and Cosette talked for a while about taking in Elodie, but I remember it was still so sudden. One day she was still here at the hospital, the next day you guys had to bring her home with you.”

Marius takes a deep breath as recollections of that tumultuous day play out before his mind’s eyes. ‘It was only half a year or so ago,’ he realizes but it still feels as if he and his family have been together for so much longer. “We had to stick to our plans, for one thing,” he begins.

“That helps,” Courfeyrac says. “Except when things like this happen.”

“We weren’t supposed to bring Elodie home that early---in fact we didn’t even know if we’d be her foster parents at all.” Then it becomes clear to him at that moment just what Courfeyrac needs to know before he returns to Azelma’s side. Marius clears his throat and gives his friend a smile. “I got it.”

“Got what?”

“All we were ready for was to do what would be best for her, no matter what the courts would have decided on. I guess you could say we got more than lucky there.”

II

Courfeyrac has never been an overly patient man, especially in the face of uncertainty. In fact each minute only increases his anxiety exponentially, more so when he sees Azelma swallow hard with another contraction. “I thought the epidural was supposed to take away the pain?” he asks.

“It does, but I’m still supposed to feel the pressure---how else will I know when to push?” Azelma replies through gritted teeth. “This sucks. How long have I been here?”

“It’s four in the morning. Definitely New Year’s Day, love.”

“Shut up. I lost track of time, that’s why I said it was New Year’s Eve back there!”
Cosette and Florence are quite unable to hide their laughter at this. “At least we still got that surprise celebration in,” Florence reassures Azelma. “Your little one just wanted to join in the fun.”

“You guys should make it a tradition of sorts,” Cosette suggests. “Maybe not here at Saint-Michel unless everyone is staying on after residency training.”

“Then next New Year’s Eve we’re opening up the law office for the occasion,” Courfeyrac jokes.

“You guys are not doing overtime next year,” Azelma insists. “I’ve waited years to get my own sister to celebrate with us and you’re not messing up this new trend!”

“I was only joking. Someone else is going to want me around too,” Courfeyrac says as he rubs Azelma’s swollen middle. “Come on, hurry up. We can’t wait to meet you, Alex.”

“Don’t give her ideas. I heard that a fast labor is just as bad as a slow one!” Azelma retorts.

It is at that moment that Courfeyrac hears a knock on the door and turns to see Enjolras and Gavroche there. “Perfect timing guys,” he greets them, seeing the large bag they have brought. “I’ve got room 461 reserved for Azelma. We can bring all these things there.”

“One thing first!” Musichetta calls as she walks in from the nearby staff room. “Aside from Courfeyrac, only one other companion is allowed in the delivery room. Azelma, have you decided yet?”

Azelma shakes her head. “It was supposed to be Ponine. It has to be someone who won’t pass out on seeing all the mess.”

“You two,” Cosette says, indicating Gavroche and Enjolras. “Enjolras is pretty much family at this point.”

“So are you,” Musichetta points out.

“Draw lots then,” Gavroche suggests. “That way it’s all fair.”

Azelma laughs even as she puts her hand on her belly again, clearly signalling another contraction. “Well get to it. I don’t think we have much time!”

Courfeyrac turns and sees that all their other friends are at the doorway, listening eagerly to this conversation. “Game everyone?”

Joly nods as he tears up a sheet from a prescription pad, marking one scrap with an ‘x’ and then putting all the pieces into Feuilly’s hat. “There’s one piece for each person, even for the ladies,” he says as he passes around the cap.

They all unfold the slips of paper at the same time, and Enjolras holds up the piece marked with an ‘x’. “I’ll hold all the cameras, since Courfeyrac has his hands full,” he quips, seeing that Azelma has once again seized her husband’s hand.

Musichetta looks up from where she is examining Azelma. “You’re already fully dilated, Zel. Do you feel like you want to push?”

“More like I have to,” Azelma grunts. “Is my baby going to be okay? She’s coming too early and this labor is going faster than I thought it would.”

“We’ll just have to manage the situation as best as we can. She’s not overly premature, so that’s one
good thing,” the obstetrician says reassuringly. She nods to Courfeyrac and Enjolras. “The nurses will show you how to scrub in outside the delivery room.”

“Thanks Chetta,” Courfeyrac says. The fact that soon he and Azelma will soon be holding their eldest child is something that almost takes his breath away, but he wills himself to walk as quickly as possible to the large sinks outside the delivery room. The water is bitterly cold against his skin and the yellow disinfectant leaves nasty stains under his nails but he still scrubs hard all the way past his elbows, not willing to take any chances with infection.

A phone suddenly rings and Enjolras has to stop in the middle of his own ablutions to take the call. “Hello. Yes, I’m still here at Saint-Michel. Azelma is in labor---she’s being brought to the delivery room now. It’s rather quick, but it seems to be going well. No, Courf hasn’t worn a hole into the floor. I’m going in with him right now. I’m not going to faint---I’ve seen blood before. Yes, I’ll get pictures. Good luck with the surgery. I’ll see you soon.” A small smile briefly crosses his face as he puts his phone among the gadgets that have been entrusted to him. “Eponine has another operation lined up,” he explains as he goes back to washing his hands.

Courfeyrac cringes, already imagining how his overprotective sister-in-law will certainly be fretting. “You two are going to be next,” he remarks after a while.

Enjolras raises an eyebrow as he shakes his hands dry. “That’s not in our plans.”

“Says the man who a year ago actually said that any attempt to get kissed at New Year was a waste of time, and any attempt at a fling was an unnecessary diversion?” Courfeyrac asks. He laughs when he sees his friend turn red up to the tips of his ears. “A very different time though.”

“Indeed,” Enjolras says after a moment as they start donning sterile gowns over their clothes. “You and Azelma will be great parents. That’s something I never doubted.”

“I hope you’ll be right,” Courfeyrac says, knowing that this is high praise coming from a friend who’s seen his share of less than ideal parenting. Yet all the same it bolsters his confidence greatly as he enters the delivery room and finds Azelma already there, eyes shut and taking deep breaths in a clear effort to relax. Most of her is covered with a blanket except for the area between her legs. Musichetta is already busy but she still manages a mischievous smirk on seeing the two men. “Where do I go?” Courfeyrac asks.

“Right here,” Azelma cuts in, motioning for him to stand at her right side. “Enjolras, why didn’t you go home and get your camera?”

“Then I’d only be able to get pictures of after the delivery,” Enjolras quips. He is standing to one side, looking quite awkward and out of place. “It’s mayhem out there this morning.”

Courfeyrac would say something to this, but that thought is lost when he hears Azelma groan as her grip on his hand tightens enough to virtually cut off his circulation. “Are you pushing, Zel?”

She doesn’t say anything for several long moments and is already red in the face when she can catch her breath. “What does it look like, genius?”

“This is the first time we’re going through this---“

“The last one you mean!”

Courfeyrac winces at the vehemence in her tone, and looks to his friends for reassurance. “Do you hear this all the time here?” he asks Musichetta.
“Azelma is already quite calm by comparison,” Musichetta says as she taps her friend’s knee. “You’re doing great.”

“What are you seeing down there?” Azelma asks. “Okay, never mind. I’ve seen the videos and I’m just not going to ask anymore.”

Enjolras blushes. “Wait, who uploads videos of childbirth?”

“Enthusiastic fathers,” Musichetta deadpans. “Doctors too. Seriously, hasn’t Eponine ever showed you any of the training videos on her laptop?”

“I think you might want to sit down, my friend,” Courfeyrac says, now genuinely afraid that Enjolras is going to faint. He feels Azelma tense again and this time he clasps her hands and bends to whisper reassurances in her ear. “You can do it, Zel. It’s not going to be long.”

“It feels like it,” Azelma whimpers. She gasps and squeezes his fingers. “You wouldn’t be so casual if men could have babies too!”

Courfeyrac knows better than to argue about this so he merely pulls her hair back from her face and wipes her sweaty brow before she has to push again. These are among the few things he can do as the minutes blur into each other, all the way until suddenly a baby’s high pitched wail pierces the air.

“Baby out at five-ten am!” Musichetta shouts. “Hello Alexandra!”

Courfeyrac’s breath catches at the sight of his daughter crying heartily and waving her arms as Musichetta dries her off. “She’s gorgeous,” he whispers before kissing Azelma’s forehead “Zel, just look at her.”

Azelma is grinning from ear to ear as she catches her breath. “You mean she’s perfect,” she murmurs. “Is she going to be alright?”

“I think so,” Musichetta replies, now somewhat teary-eyed as she places the baby on Azelma’s chest. “Congratulations you two.”

Courfeyrac now laughs with delight as he counts little Alexandra’s fingers and toes, more so when she turns to the sound of his voice. “Hey Alex. Happy New Year and happy birthday. Your Mama and Papa are here,” he greets. He sees Enjolras taking one picture after another and gives his friend the thumbs-up sign. “Thanks for that.”

“It’s an honor,” Enjolras replies. He turns one of the phones to show the picture he has just captured. “There. Your first family picture of you three.”

“Send it to me. It’s becoming my new wallpaper,” Azelma says.

“Are you kidding? I’m putting it everywhere,” Courfeyrac insists. After all, who is he to keep such a moment of joy to himself, especially this early in the year?
It is already past seven in the morning and although he hasn’t gotten much sleep aside from a short nap after an early dinner, Enjolras is too wide awake to even think of dozing off. ‘At least there’s still some part of the day that can be spared for it,’ he notes as he walks briskly to the convenience store on the hospital’s ground floor. Of course there are a myriad of things that have to be dealt with such as the matter of Theodule’s mysterious turning up at the hospital, but the year is still too new to sully with such shadows. ‘It would be better to allow Lieutenant Gillenormand at least 24 hours of undisturbed recovery before any questioning,’ he decides as he picks up a large cappuccino and two sandwiches, one filled with bacon and tomatoes, and the other with pesto and chicken.

While he is at the counter he catches sight of a matron in a thick purple sweater and a long skirt, fishing in her purse for her phone with one hand while gingerly holding a cup of coffee with another. He swallows hard; he’d know her face anywhere. As quickly as he can he pays for his purchases and steps outside to stand next to this lady. “Good morning Mother.”

Ari nearly drops her phone as she wheels about to face her son. “You saw me, Auguste?”

The attorney nods solemnly. He has never been good at this sort of chitchat, even with her. “You’re quite far from home.”

Ari sighs deeply. “It’s New Year. I just had to see you---even if your father won’t.”

“How did you know I’d be here at Saint-Michel?”

“You weren’t at your apartment. I figured you’d be with your friends, or someone here would know.”

‘She’s risking too much by being here,’ Enjolras realizes. He can remember all too clearly his father’s biting words and equally cutting silences, dealt out at the slightest cause for displeasure. If his mother is willing to endure that, he’s not going to add to her pain by turning her away so unceremoniously. “When did you fly in?”

“Last night. I got the last flight in before the sky got too smoggy,” Ari replies, gesturing to the gray haze overhead. “What are you doing here so early?”

“Courfeyrac---I’m sure you remember him, and his wife Azelma just had their first kid,” he says with a grin. As disconcerting and awkward as it had been at first to witness the delivery, he cannot regret having been part of such a landmark event for his friends. “It’s a girl.”

Ari cracks a smile as they move to sit on a bench outside the store. “So he’s the first among your friends to have a kid? I never would have thought. I always imagined it would be Combeferre.”

“That’s going to take a while,’ Enjolras muses as he takes a sip of his own coffee. “You could have just called, Mother.”

“Again, I had to see you. You don’t have an answering machine and I’m sure that the phone just would be ringing off the hook,” Ari points out. She looks down for a moment, as if considering her own drink. “I watch the news too. I saw the trial and you were brilliant. Still very much the debater.”

“Well, thanks.” He gestures for Ari to take one of the sandwiches but she shakes her head. “How is
“Father doing?”

“He enjoyed Christmas, as always. Had way too much of my turkey, as usual,” Ari laughs softly. “So tell me about Eponine.”

Enjolras takes a deep breath, not sure now what to make of his mother’s questioning. “You already know she’s a surgeon, here at this hospital.”

Ari gives him a sceptical look. “Is that all you can say? I figure she’s quite different from the girls that you, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac used to pine after.”

“Not me,” Enjolras mutters. “I was busy.”

“Yes, so busy that you didn’t notice how many people—girls and guys—were so ready to throw themselves at you,” Ari says, shaking her head. “You didn’t even want to go to your prom!”

Enjolras cringes at the memories that come to mind. “Everyone knows how that ended.”

“I understand that you didn’t want to bring your date to a hotel after; that would have been a mistake,” Ari says nonchalantly. “On another note, how’s your friend Grantaire doing?”

“He’s doing well. He’s also with Courfeyrac upstairs.”

“Did he ever move on after what you said to him in class?”

“He has more than moved on. He’s living with Jehan now.”

Ari grins approvingly before sipping her drink. “I always thought they were cute together.”

“They’re happy.”

“Like you are with Eponine. I saw how your face brightened when I mentioned her name. Is it already serious with you two?”

He nods slowly. “We’ve talked about things. It might take a while, but we do have plans.”

She stares at him incredulously. “You love her. I never thought I’d see that day.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “Does that also require an explanation?”

Ari shakes her head before taking a longer sip of her coffee. “When you two aren’t busy, I’d like to bring you both out to dinner.”

Enjolras can only stare at her, now more confused than ever. “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s a new year,” Ari says. “I understand that Eponine is very important to you, and if I’m ever to say... get reacquainted with you, she’s going to be in the picture. I’d also like to know the person who loves my son almost as much as I do.”

He does not say anything for a few moments, wondering if this is a ploy of his father’s doing, or perhaps the beginning of some concession he may not be willing to make. ‘Yet what good will silence do?’ he finds himself asking. He manages a nod. “I’ll talk it over with Eponine.”

“Thank you, Auguste,” Ari checks her watch and sighs. “I have friends to see—and I’ll be in town till the next week. Don’t take too long.”
“I’ll let you know. Happy New Year,” Enjolras says. The words come out more easily than he expects, and somehow he figures it’s all worth seeing a smile, a genuine one, on his mother’s face. ‘When was the last time that happened?’ he wonders as he goes up to the fourth floor, where he knows all his friends are still camping out at Azelma and little Alexandra’s hospital room.

As he’s getting out of the elevator he hears a familiar step on the nearby stairway and catches sight of a petite figure in very rumpled scrubs, with her hair in a messy bun. “Eponine, have you had breakfast yet?” he asks when he is sure she is within earshot.

Eponine lets out a ragged sort of noise that’s somewhere between an exclamation and a gasp of relief. She rushes to him and immediately steals his coffee cup to drain what’s left of the drink. “Thanks,” she murmurs before hugging him tightly.

“You’re going to need a lot more than that,” Enjolras says as he awkwardly pulls the exhausted surgeon close so that she can rest her head on his chest. “Meaning I actually got you something to eat.”

“I can have it later, thanks,” she says, hardly able to conceal a yawn. “Can we see Azelma and the baby now, before I fall asleep on my feet?”

“As it is you’re practically semiconscious, Eponine.”

“Am not. I have to.”

“What am I ever going to do with you?” Enjolras asks with mock exasperation as he supports her with an arm around her waist. He looks around for a sofa, or at least a seat where he can safely set her down but there is no suitable surface in sight. “Azelma and Alexandra won’t be going anywhere for a while, and we can see them anytime later today.”

The mention of her niece’s name has Eponine blinking and rubbing her eyes. “You saw them already.”

“I’ve got a picture, just as I promised.” He brings out his phone to show her the photo he took of Azelma and Courfeyrac holding Alexandra for the first time. “That’s one of the better shots.”

Eponine barely muffles a squeal of delight. “She’s so adorable! Oh my goodness!”

“Yeah? All wrinkly and covered in fluid—”

“All babies are like that at first, Auguste. Your babies are going to be that way too.”

Enjolras has to hide his smirk in her hair. “They’ll still be beautiful, I’m sure.”

Eponine nods and buries her nose further in his shirt. “But Alexandra is all cleaned up now and she looks more adorable, so I really have to see her.”

He groans, more so since he can feel every curve of her pressing up against him. “Right now?”

“Mnhmm.” She yawns again as she slips an arm around him. “It’s just for a few minutes, just to say hi.”

“You know that never quite happens.”

“Don’t care.”

He sighs as he feels her grip tighten, so he takes the initiative to dig in her bag for the small packet of
He nods and takes her hand as they make their way down the hall to Room 461. Just as he expects, nearly everyone is still piled into the room, doing their best to keep their voices down. Azelma is sitting up in bed, obviously exhausted but still chatting amiably with Musichetta and Gavroche. Courfeyrac is seated next to the bed and cradling little Alexandra, the latter somehow able to doze off despite Prouvaire and Grantaire cooing and fussing over her. Combeferre has also fallen asleep with his head on Florence’s lap, which is just as well since she’s batwing away all of Bahorel and Bossuet’s attempts to draw on him. Marius, Cosette, Joly, and Feuilly are crowded around a tablet, apparently playing some sort of game.

“Zel, how are you?” Eponine asks her sister.

“Magnificent,” Azelma replies. “In hindsight I’m glad that you weren’t filming the delivery, since after that, you will never make me an aunt.”

“I have assisted at deliveries before, thank you very much,” Eponine retorts.

Gavroche clucks his tongue on seeing Eponine. “What’s the scientific term for sleepwalking again?”

“Sonambulism. Shut up,” Eponine mumbles. “What are you guys still doing here?”

“Actually I’m about to tell them to give me and the ladies some quiet,” Courfeyrac says in a stage whisper. “Look who’s been waiting to meet you, Eponine.”

Eponine’s breath catches as she gets a good look at her niece. “She looks a bit like Gav did when he was born,” she whispers.

“You remember that?” Azelma asks.

“Yeah. You tried to go to sleep since Mom told you to, so you wouldn’t hear her screaming. I had to be the one to sit with her till Dad remembered to come with the doctor,” Eponine deadpans. “That is when I swore off going into obstetrics.”

Florence winces at this. “How old were you then?”

“Five.” Eponine gently strokes Alexandra’s palm and smiles when the baby’s tiny fingers curl around hers. “Alex has Courf’s eyes though.”

“Yeah, we’re all going to have to worry about this one being a head-turner,” Bahorel says. “Between her and Elodie, we’re going to have our hands full, so don’t get too busy with the procreating.”

Grantaire nods to Prouvaire. “We’re thinking of adopting.”

“Wow that’s cool. A boy or a girl?” Feuilly asks eagerly.

“Won’t it be easier to adopt a baby?” Gavroche asks.

“In some ways, yes. Many older kids get passed over for adoption, and somehow it just seems the right thing to at least consider,” Prouvaire explains.

“You guys would do great with that,” Eponine says, but the last word comes out as a yawn.

“Maybe it’s time to call it a night...or a day, Eponine,” Florence suggests. “Daniel already called for the day shift to take care of the patients in recovery.”

“Now while we’re on that topic, how is your cousin?” Enjolras asks Marius.

“He’ll pull through,” Marius replies. “My aunt and my grandfather have not yet said when they are coming to visit. I don’t know what to tell them.”

“What’s the story?” Enjolras asks.

“Stray bullet,” Feuilly scoffs. “So they say.”

’Now that’s a puzzle for later,’ Enjolras decides, more so when he sees Marius’ pensive look. “For now, it is wise to refrain from drawing conclusions.”

“I am trying to think of the truth that won’t kill my aunt,” Marius replies.

“We can talk to them later—–for now there’s a nine year old waiting for us at home,” Cosette reminds him as she rubs his back. “Courf is also right; it’s been a long day especially for Azelma and Alex.”

After a last round of congratulations and unsolicited advice to the new parents everyone clears out of the hospital room. Enjolras has to carry Eponine’s bag for her, but he keeps one hand on her arm for safety’s sake as they trudge out to where he’s parked the car half a block away. She’s asleep as soon as she’s buckled up, and so he has to keep the radio at a much softer volume to stay awake as he carefully drives back to their apartment. “Eponine?” he asks as he nudges her but she only mumbles and curls up further in her seat. He steps out first, but only so he can open the door on her side so he can unbuckle her seatbelt and scoop her up in his arms. He nearly starts when she stirs and drapes an arm around his neck, but all the same he kisses the top of her head before carrying her to the elevator and up to their home. She is light, but not fragile in his arms; perhaps it is because of the reassuring warmth of her body or the way her fingers sometimes brush against his neck, as if she is dreaming. It takes some work to get the front door open while he is still holding her, but he manages the feat anyway, even if he has to kick the door shut after. He carefully brings her to their bed and removes her shoes and socks, all the while taking care not to wake her. “Sorry,” he mutters when he hears her hiss at the sudden chill on her feet.

She opens her eyes slowly before shaking her hair out of her messy updo. “Can’t believe you carried me this far.”

“I was wondering if you’d protest,” he says wryly as he rummages for an oversized shirt and a pair of sweatpants, which he places next to her knees. The sight of her blinking up at him with her hair all over her face is oddly adorable, and he can’t help but give her a lingering glance as she finds the clothes.

Eponine gives him a sleepy smile before slowly changing out of her work uniform into the clean nightclothes. “Thanks for waiting up for me today,” she whispers as she flops on the pillows.
“You’re welcome,” Enjolras says before finding his own nightclothes and going off to brush his teeth. He’s sure that she’s fast asleep by the time he returns to the room, but all the same he kisses her cheek as he lies beside her, pulling her close so that her back is to his chest. “Happy New Year again.”

She shifts closer to him and curls up under his chin, clasping his hand to her heart. “You too.”
The Charm Offensive

34: Charm Being the Best Weapon

I

The surgery department’s rounds on the second of January are always known to be particularly taxing; the number of casualties and the extent of their injuries only become truly apparent when the smoke has cleared and the adrenaline has petered out. ‘Now is the time to clear up all those muddled stories,’ Combeferre muses as he sorts through all the hastily written charts piled up in the nurse’s station. He puts a stack of ten charts to one side, and two dozen others to another. “These need to be rewritten,” he instructs the interns and younger residents, gesturing to the larger stack. “Now is the time to go back to your patients and get more detailed histories and physical exams.”

Naturally this announcement is met by silently despairing looks and gritted teeth, but of course no one dares to say a word. “Is there a deadline for this?” Navet asks, barely holding back a yawn.

“For the interns, by the end of the day,” Combeferre replies. He nods to Navet and some of the more tired residents. “All you have to do is check them.”

Navet nods with relief at this hint for a brief respite. “What about the rest of the rounds?”

“I’ll do them myself,” Combeferre replies. ‘This time I really refuse to let more people get mixed up in this,’ he decides. While he trusts Navet a little more than some of the other younger residents, he has no desire to entangle his colleague further in what is shaping up to be a dangerous web. ‘If we must pay the price for our assistance, someone must be left to hold the fort,’ he decides as he goes to where Eponine is busy conversing with some friends from the ophthalmology department.

“Pontmercy will meet us upstairs,” Eponine informs him. “He’s still at neurology grand rounds.”

“They ought to call those things ground rounds,” one of the ophthalmologists mutters. “I don’t know why the consultants have to terrorize even the interns.”

“It’s practice for other presentations. We can’t have our trainees snivelling at conferences,” another ophthalmologist chimes in. He nods to Combeferre. “Does your department still make the interns present cases at rounds?”

“Every other week,” Combeferre replies. He still remembers all too clearly how it felt to be quaking in one’s shoes when presenting a complicated case before a group of fearsome or worse, disinterested consultants. “I don’t believe in nipping their confidence in the bud.”

“If only everyone agreed with that,” the oldest ophthalmologist in the group muses aloud before motioning for his trainees to continue on their rounds in the ward.

Combeferre looks down, feeling the weight in his colleague’s words. ‘Is the department’s politics that apparent?’ he wonders, but the grim expression he sees on Eponine’s face is an answer enough. “I’m making nearly everyone rewrite the New Year’s Day charts by the end of today.”

“Yeah, I saw what you did.”

“It was hectic, but there’s no excuse for being sloppy.”

Eponine snorts. “I’m not saying that they shouldn’t rewrite their stuff, but you have to remember that
half the patients were disoriented while their companions not much better off. I wouldn’t be optimistic about getting that many perfectly crafted histories even with this effort.”

“How hard can it be to get a history of a firecracker injury?” Combeferre asks while they begin walking up to the hospital’s top floor.

“It’s a different story if one doesn’t know exactly where the explosion came from,” Eponine deadpans as she fiddles with her pen. She pauses to check her phone. “Could you recommend a good place to take a lawyer and his mother to dinner?”

“You probably should ask Grantaire about that—-” he replies before it fully dawns on him what Eponine is inquiring about, more so since he now notices that she is wearing a dark green blouse, black slacks and leather pumps in lieu of her usual outfits. “Aunt Ari is in town?”

“She flew in before New Year’s Eve, and had a talk with Auguste yesterday morning. Apparently she wants to have dinner out,” she explains, rolling her eyes with the last statement.

“Did she say why?”

“To get reacquainted with her son again, supposedly.”

This revelation leaves Combeferre silent for a little while; he has never known Ari Enjolras to yield to anyone save her own spouse. Yet somehow even that adage seems to hold less and less water, among many other things that Combeferre himself once held as solid principles. “She also wants to get to know you, otherwise she would have insisted on a mother-son thing only,” he points out.

“She made her opinion of me pretty clear when we were first introduced,” Eponine says with a scowl.

“Opinions change,” Combeferre reminds her. It’s not often he gets to use that ‘I told you so’ tone on either of his good friends, but when he does it’s often well-deserved. Of course Eponine isn’t happy about it and she makes this clear by sticking out her tongue at him as they leave the elevator.

The quiet that greets them is a little unsettling but almost expected; after all there are only fifteen rooms for patients. All of them are suites that seem incongruous with the more Spartan accommodations throughout the rest of the establishment. ‘Then again creature comforts are supposed to be therapeutic too,’ Combeferre notes silently as he goes to the nurse’s station and retrieves a chart marked as ‘T. Gillenormand.’

The head nurse gives Combeferre a withering look. “I hope you can discharge that cad as soon as possible, Doctor Combeferre. He’s behaving very improperly towards some of my nurses even when I have them go in pairs or groups.”

“Numbers don’t deter men in uniform,” Eponine quips.

The nurse sighs knowingly. “Only gentlemen. Well then if you can set him straight...” she trails off as the elevator door opens and Marius steps out. “Good morning Doctor Pontmercy. I’m afraid your aunt and your grandfather have not yet called when they will visit Lieutenant Gillenormand.”

“They should soon; they are the ones who arranged for his transfer to this floor,” Marius says. “I doubt that my aunt will allow him to return to the barracks, even if that would be an option.”

The two surgeons exchange looks; there’s no need to further outline the mortal peril that now follows Theodule owing to whatever information he may have in his possession regarding his comrades’ shenanigans. ‘There, the codes of honor and silence will be selective,’ Combeferre notes grimly as he
walks ahead of his friends to the door at the far end of the hall.

Inside the room, Theodule Gillenormand is sitting up in bed, aimlessly flipping through channels. Somehow his very presence somehow makes the already cushy suite seem even more ostentatious; he looks around with the air of a man who is used to luxury and does not deny himself anything in off hours. He gives Combeferre and Marius a bored look that soon shifts to one of surprised interest when he catches sight of Eponine. “I didn’t know they were allowing nurses to wear white coats,” he quips. “Can I request for you?”

“Unfortunately I am already busy as an attending physician in the operating room,” Eponine deadpans.

Theodule gapes at her. “You’re a surgeon?”

Combeferre sees Marius clearly fighting to keep a straight face. “Theodule, I’d like you to meet Doctor Eponine Thenardier,” Marius says after a few moments. “You said you wanted to visit her office.”

Theodule’s small moustache twitches. “I never said I would.”

“What were you saying then last Christmas?” Marius asks.

“I was only inquiring,” Theodule mutters gruffly.

“Because that is your job description,” Eponine says as she takes a seat and crosses her legs. “I’ve been wondering for a little while why your regiment is suddenly here in the capital after working halfway across the country. I guess I should have checked a map since the answer was there all along.”

Theodule laughs softly. “She’s a charming one.”

“She’s the one you have to talk to about the Rock Lobster incident,” Combeferre says. “Her office is helping handle the legal assistance of a number of the casualties.”

Theodule’s smile turns into a leer. “So you’re interested in the military investigation?”

“Yes, I am interested in why there is a military investigation in the first place---both of the incident and of other people who have been connected with the hospital,” Eponine says. “It’s not that difficult to look up who is in your regiment, and where they’ve been, and I’m wondering if you’re really investigators or enforcers of something else.”

“You don’t have proof.”

“I’m not supposed to have proof; admittedly your leader is good at covering up tracks, all the way from using supposedly confiscated arms and prisoners who have disappeared from the public view. It’s just too bad that some operations have been getting botched.”

“Such as?”

“Putting a bullet into you, for one thing. A stray bullet would have a different trajectory.”

Theodule pales, something which would normally alarm Combeferre if not for the fact that he is certain that this man’s sudden pallor comes from fear as opposed to surgical causes. “How can you be sure?” the lieutenant asks.
“Why don’t you tell us how you got hit?” Eponine asks coolly.

“I was waiting for a cab near the square when I felt something hit my stomach,” Theodule says. “I didn’t see anyone.”

“But you heard. You turned,” Eponine points out.

“Only a footstep.”

Combeferre clears his throat and eyes Theodule seriously. “The plan is to discharge you by the end of the week. You will need some extra care and follow up as you continue to recover. I doubt that returning to your barracks would be a feasible option for you, indefinitely.”

“I do have family,” Theodule says, looking to Marius.

“They can only protect you for so long. You know how Grandfather reacts to scandal. What’s he going to say if he discovers that your regiment has been up to funny business,” Marius says. “You have to tell someone what you know; otherwise no one can help you.”

Theodule scoffs. “We have our ways of dealing with things,” he says more slowly. “There will be a court martial soon---“

“With you as the defendant,” Marius cuts in. “I’ve talked to...old friends. Believe me, everyone is already selling out each other.”

“Now you’ll sell me out too?” Theodule splutters. “We’re supposed to be family.”

“Who said anything about selling you out? We’re trying to help you, and I wouldn’t have asked Doctor Thenardier to come here if we couldn’t do anything,” Marius retorts.

“What’s he for then?” Theodule asks, gesturing to Combeferre.

“An impartial third party,” Eponine explains nonchalantly. “We’re not here to take any official legal statements—we just want to know why you got shot.”

For a moment Theodule’s expression is unreadable; it is neither that of a man deep in thought nor that of a man wrestling with a decision. His eyes are wide though with apparent uncertainty as he looks at Eponine. “I don’t know everything. The commander does. He is the one with the whole picture.”

“You know enough, or they wouldn’t have tried to go after you,” Eponine mutters.

“I had been hoping to inquire about any motives,” Theodule says, almost as if he hasn’t heard Eponine’s words. “Only to get a census of sorts.”

“Which I wouldn’t have been able to give you,” Eponine replies thickly. She glances at her watch and shakes her head. “I have to be at the out patient department in a few minutes. I hope you recover quickly, Lieutenant Gillenormand.”

Combeferre quickly follows her out of the room. “Are you dropping the questioning?”

“He’s not talking, and I believe he’s said enough to confirm what my father told me,” Eponine whispers.

“What should I do then?”
“Eponine bites her lip before speaking again. “Get him discharged, I’ll help Pontmercy ensure he stays with his family. He’s not going to do as much good as he is, but he shouldn’t die either. He knows of the private armies, but of course I wasn’t going to mention it around him.”

“Then where will you and Enjolras find your answers?” Combeferre asks.

“Not just us. I think Bahorel might be helpful, and who’s that friend of yours, De Chagny?” Eponine replies. She takes a deep breath and clenches her hands into fists. “It’s out of my hands now as a surgeon. This, this is something different.”

‘Which is why I have a feeling you’ll be staying on in that office even after we graduate from residency,’ Combeferre almost says, but he holds back from voicing this out. “Just be careful. You two especially. I know you both too well.”

“Then it’s good that you’re not in too deep...”Eponine trails off. “If, and only if, things get really bad and....you can guess, but if that happens, please look out for Gavroche. He’s the only one I worry just a little bit about even if he’s grown up so much.”

“I understand. He’s your kid brother,” Combeferre reassures her. It is all he can do to remain unfazed at what he knows Eponine is trying to say; at the very worst he could lose two of his closest friends. “It’s not going to come to that,” he finally says. “If anything, you’ll all see it through.”

II

The morning passes so quickly owing to the amount of work that Eponine has to do, but the afternoon brings with it a quiet anxiety that grows with every passing hour. By five in the afternoon her mind is awash as she runs into her ground floor office and locks the door. She quickly doffs her white coat, folds it up and stashes it in a drawer. ‘It’s just dinner with Auguste’s mom. You’ve handled work dinners and oral exams, this shouldn’t be anything,’ she tells herself as she searches through her bag for her comb and some makeup.

Her hands do not shake; as a surgeon she cannot afford to have anything even remotely close to a tremor. Nevertheless she can feel her heart racing and her stomach twisting in knots even as she combs out her long hair and touches up her foundation and eyeliner. She frowns at the result she sees in her pocket mirror; while it certainly suits her well on most work days, it now seems so plain beside the glamorous image she figures that Ari would have wanted for a prospective daughter-in-law. ‘At least it’s not overly unsightly,’ she consoles herself, noting that her eyebags are a little less prominent and her cheeks not so sallow or sunken.

She gets out her phone, first to send a message to Cecily accepting the offer to continue volunteering at the halfway house, and then to check for road directions to the Flying Saucer Gastropub located a few blocks away from Avenue 54. “Only Grantaire would suggest such a place for varied tastes,” she laughs to herself as she saves the directions to her phone and then heads out to the hospital lobby. She makes sure to count out just enough money for the bus fare to this part of town; the rush hour traffic is enough reason for her to eschew taking a cab. The fact that Enjolras soon sends her a text apologizing and warning her that he will be a few minutes late owing to being caught in traffic near the courthouse only bolsters her decision further.

The gastropub is located on the ground floor of a brick building fronting the river that runs through the capital. ‘There’s probably a reason these places aren’t nearer the water,’ Eponine notes as she counts five artisan beerhouses and regular pubs within the immediate vicinity of this establishment. She is shown to a corner booth already set for three diners, within a short distance from the buffet. The varied aromas from the long tables make her stomach growl and she has to cough and drink some water to throw off attention from the sound.
Not even five minutes later she catches sight of Ari walking into the restaurant, dressed impeccably in a cream colored frock with a beaded gray shawl. Her dark blonde hair is up in an elegant twist instead of in a coif. “Hello Eponine. I heard from Auguste that he might be a little bit late,” Ari says by way of greeting. “Where is he coming from?”

“The courthouse,” Eponine replies. She can’t help but notice how Ari seems a little drawn yet more cheerful than she could possibly imagine. “I’m sorry that this was on short notice; there’s really no other night during the week we can both make it.”

“You are busy professionals after all,” Ari says without rancor. “Please relax. I’m not here to eat you or make your night miserable.”

Before Eponine can protest she looks down and realizes that she’d already wadded up her table napkin in her hand. “The invitation is rather abrupt too, to be honest.”

Ari nods as she sets her satin purse down the on the table. “I understand that I was not as...forthcoming when we were introduced. That was then. I don’t expect you to become my best friend or the daughter I never had, but I want you to know that I do want to get along with you.”

“That’s nice. What about your husband?” Eponine asks.

The older woman takes a sip of water, but it is clear from the rather surprised look in her eyes that Eponine has struck on something. “Claude prefers to present a united front,” Ari finally says. “It doesn’t change the fact that I’m still a mother.”

“I’m glad you know that. But why now?”

“It’s New Year.”

Eponine shakes her head. “Auguste needed you last year, when he was shot and almost died. Everyone tried to contact you but you didn’t visit. You didn’t even call back. It had to be Courfeyrac who took the part of being his next of kin.” She has to fight to keep her voice from rising. “Why?”

Ari looks down. “Would my son even have noticed?”

“It would have mattered,” Eponine says. As obstinate and arrogant as Enjolras was then, he had still been anything but an outright ingrate. “Somehow it would have.”

“Claude did not want trouble, and he made it clear he would not have it from either me or Auguste,” Ari looks away for a moment. “I wanted to go though.”

Eponine bites her lip at the desperation she can hear in Ari’s tone. “He’s as argumentative as his father,” Ari says tersely. “You have no idea how difficult it is to get in between them.”

Eponine takes a deep breath. “Is your husband always that way?”

Ari doesn’t answer but only sips her water again. “I do not intend to remain so out of touch with my son again. It’s just not the way it should be.”

‘So she’s going for defiance now?’ Eponine wonders but she figures that’s a question that is better left for another occasion. “If it’s fine with Auguste, then good.”
“Knowing him it’s going to take some time to win back his trust,” Ari sighs. “I’m sure you know how he feels everything so deeply even if he doesn’t quite let on at length.”

The younger woman cracks a smile. “So what else are you doing in this city, for the rest of the week?”

“I’m mostly with old friends. There are a few benefit events, maybe some sightseeing,” the matron answers. “I heard from a friend of mine who funds a lot of efforts that you recently did some volunteer work at the Saint Maria Goretti Home for Girls.”

“It started off as my practicum in crisis care for children,” Eponine explains. “I’ve decided to stay on.”

“It is a unique way to spend what little spare time you have,” Ari says with a bemused air.

“I wouldn’t consider it as just spare time,” Eponine remarks. She’s not about to let Ari have the last word on this matter, and it’s all she can do to smile innocently at Ari’s agog expression.

It is just as well since the gastropub’s door clatters open and Enjolras walks in, looking harried for a moment then apologetic when he catches sight of Eponine and Ari. “What did I miss?” he asks.

“Nothing much,” Ari replies before drinking again from her glass of water.

Eponine grins sweetly at her partner as she signs for a waiter to bring over some menus. “Oh you have no idea, Auguste.”
“Okay quiet time at the office is over. Courfeyrac is back from his paternity leave.”

Feuilly nearly chokes on his black coffee and has to wipe his mouth before looking at Bossuet. “The word ‘quiet’ isn’t in your vocabulary either. Most of his paternity leave was during the long weekend, so it was not as if we were at the office.”

“Yeah but now we’re sure he’ll be at the office all day instead of being summoned at any time by Azelma going into labor,” Bossuet points out.

‘Unless Alexandra, heaven forbid, has some emergency,’ Feuilly thinks but he bites his lip and knocks on wood to banish the thought. He looks at the corkboard covered with memos and notes concerning all the cases and hearings this week, and realizes that things have come to the point wherein the papers are starting to form layers. “How do we have time to breathe this week?” he asks aloud.

“It’s just the post-holidays rush. You’ll see people dragging their feet soon,” Bahorel drawls from where he is still noisily munching on a breakfast burrito. “You’ll see the hell that will come when this matter about what happened to Lieutenant Gillenormand comes to light.”

Feuilly cringes at this thought; he’s been able to forget about this impending investigation in light of the New Year celebration and Alexandra Courfeyrac’s birth, but now the reality hits with a sobering clarity. “Have you seen the medico-legal report yet?”

“Eponine is trying to get a copy but I don’t think she can give us more details unless there is a formal request or subpoena,” Bossuet says. “Gillenormand is still a patient too and the hospital has to protect him in a way.”

“It’s ironic that he can just march up to any office and ask for anything, while we have to go through the red tape,” Bahorel mutters.

“It’s what keeps us above the table,” Feuilly argues. He doesn’t like it anymore than they all do, but he knows this is part of the line between their daring and nefariousness. Before he can mull about this further he hears Courfeyrac sauntering in, yawning dramatically but still with a spring in his step.

“Looks like little Alex isn’t keeping you and Azelma up much,” he remarks.

“We take turns. It’s harder on Zel though since she actually has to feed the kid,” Courfeyrac says as he settles into his cubicle. After a few moments he marches out, now carrying an empty coffee cup. “I heard through the grapevine that Enjolras’ mom had dinner with him and Eponine last night.”


“Maternal nature, I guess?” Courfeyrac shrugs. “My mom was that way with my brother’s girlfriends---“

“And you are the exception?” Bahorel asks.

“I have my charms,” Courfeyrac laughs.
“Because you introduced Azelma as your wife, and everyone knows not to cross you there,” Enjolras chimes in as he enters the office and finds his own workspace.

Courfeyrac smirks as he starts filling the coffee cup. “How was dinner?”

Enjolras looks up from his reading. “Refreshing.”

“Aw come on! Details!” Bahorel exclaims over Bossuet’s and Courfeyrac’s groans of protest. “You’re holding out on us!”

“As your soon to be brother in law, I demand a full account,” Courfeyrac insists. “Because yes, your mom is like an aunt to me but I’m not going to hold back if she makes my sister-in-law cry.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “I believe it would better to say that all discussion was forthcoming.”

“Come off it, Courf,” Feuilly says. All the same it is clear from Enjolras’ relaxed countenance that whatever happened last night was perhaps more favourable than what anyone expected. “But there is a chance of another good meeting?”

“With my mother, at least,” Enjolras says with a warm smile.

“Good for you,” Feuilly says with a nod before sorting through some files. He doesn’t even want to imagine how a discussion or rather confrontation could take place between Claude and Eponine. ‘Well that’s someone who’s not going to be attending a wedding,’ he decides as he settles back into his workspace and opens up a video file sent to him from Bahorel’s work email. He raises his eyebrow as he comes across what appears to be CCTV footage of the Saint Michel square. “Bahorel, how did you get this one?” he calls.

“Talked to the doorkeeper,” Bahorel replies nonchalantly. “Not enough people appreciate what video capture does for studying ballistics.”

Feuilly’s jaw drops as he looks back at the recording, which is now showing Theodule Gillenormand crossing the street, pausing as if to address someone, and then suddenly falling to the pavement. “This won’t be usable in court!”

“It’s a start,” Bahorel retorts. “Take a look. Military grade weapon.”

“How do you plan on tracking it?”

“I know another doorman. People saw him get followed, but I think he was pretending not to notice.”

In the middle of everything, Enjolras mutters something and gets up from his seat. “Why is Raoul de Chagny sending me an email about an event?” he asks aloud as he goes to refill his own cup of coffee.

“While you were smoothing things over with your mother dearest, I took the liberty of sorting through some military contacts,” Courfeyrac replies cheerily.

“You know how perilous this is?” Enjolras asks, crossing his arms.

“I had de Chagny’s help. He’s immune there,” Courfeyrac says.

“It can only take him so far. I’d rather not have either you or De Chagny risking your lives for this investigation,” Enjolras points out. He grits his teeth as he returns to his cubicle and then surveys his computer screen. “There is an awarding ceremony and dinner on January ten for some generals in
“the city’s regiment,” he says more calmly.

“Including Gillenormand’s regiment?” Bossuet asks.

Enjolras nods. “It is a good opportunity to gather some information and make a few contacts.”

“What about taking down that so-called Patches?” Bahorel chimes in. “I can’t think of a more dramatic venue for it.”

“When he faces justice, it will be with a warrant or a proper subpoena,” Enjolras says firmly. “Unless a more conclusive lead comes up, he will not be questioned within the next five days.”

Bahorel rolls his eyes. “What if he tries funny?”

“We’ll have to fight this gentleman’s war as long as we can,” Courfeyrac replies. “It’s not like last year when we had nothing to lose,” he adds more softly.

Feuilly remains silent, all the while trying to picture such an event and any number of possible confrontations or horrific scenarios. “A closed venue, a number of jumpy people possibly with their own security details, and any number of innocents,” he remarks. “Enjolras, you can’t afford to appear suspicious or like you’re watching.”

“De Chagny already said so in his email,” Enjolras says. “I’d also like to have some company---from this office preferably.”

“Eponine should still go with you. She’s got good eyes and even better hands,” Bossuet suggests. “I’m pretty sure the invite already suggests a ‘plus one’.”

“She should have her own invitation---and you two get to bring whoever else you like,” Feuilly quips.

Bossuet checks his phone. “I’m out on that day. If I recall we have a meeting set up with some clients, and I’m decked to it.”

“Understandable,” Enjolras says. “Courfeyrac, please don’t take this as a slight, but I would rather that you distance yourself from at least this part of the investigation, until the perpetrators are accounted for and safely in custody.”

Courfeyrac nods gamely. “At the risk of earning your ire and that of my siblings-in-law.” He pokes Feuilly in the ribs. “What about you?”

Feuilly shakes his head. “You know how I feel about these events.” He has never been sure how to describe it but the unease he always feels in fine company has never allowed him to stay longer than a few minutes at these events, unless in the company of very good friends. “I’d be bristling all the time. It wouldn’t do us any good.”

“You are discreet,” Enjolras reminds him.

“Take Bahorel with you. He’d know what to do about jumpy armed security personnel---which will be rampant on that night. You know that my only advice to you on those matters would be to get documentation and run,” Feuilly says, nodding to his colleague. “Not to mention he does know what to talk about in these occasions.”

Bahorel laughs heartily. “When do wine and cheese make good conversation fodder?”
“When boring people into submission,” Courfeyrac quips. “At any rate you have more to dish out than the who’s who.”

“I can only hope,” Bahorel says. He claps Enjolras on the shoulder. “If we’re rubbing elbows with the rich and insecure, we have to look the part.”

Enjolras gives him a withering look. “That sort of preparation is unnecessary.”

Feuilly has to hide his chuckling behind a bunch of papers. “Courfeyrac, you know you’re going to pay in spades for this,” he tells his friend.

“And gladly,” Courfeyrac says. “It will tide me over till Marius and Cosette get married—-which will make us a little awkward at some point or another anyway.”

II

“What do you mean my son lets you go to this neighbourhood alone?”

It takes all of Eponine’s resolve not to laugh out loud at Ari’s flabbergasted expression. “He doesn’t have much reason to go to this part of town,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone, taking care to lower her voice lest they be overheard on the bus. “Anyway he’s usually at work while I’m here.”

“There’s no need to worry. Eponine is known to the people in this neighbourhood by now, and no one roughs up one of their own,” Musichetta chimes in. She rolls her eyes and tightens her grip on a bar as the bus sways. “I’m on Ari’s side for this one thing though—-we should have taken a taxi.”

“It won’t do,” Eponine says as she adjusts her grip on the large paper bag she carries in addition to her work tote. ‘That usually ends with scratches or stolen side mirrors,’ she notes, biting her lip at the sight of the dingy and rusty cars that still front the alleys and byways of this slum. All the same it makes her smile to find that there are fewer broken windows and walls covered with fresh graffiti. Perhaps this is what happens when light at last streams to the depths of this maze.

Ari looks around fearfully as the bus nears the Temple Square. “I don’t understand why you can’t just write a check to send one of those girls to school or sponsor their Christmas party. You don’t have to endanger yourself on a regular basis.”

Eponine looks mischievously at Musichetta. “Ari, I hate to break it to you but working in Saint-Michel already puts one in some sort of jeopardy.”

Musichetta elbows her friend. “Ponine, you might make her faint.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ari says steadily. “People do live in worse conditions.”

“Survive, maybe. Not thrive,” Eponine retorts as the bus doors squeak open. She can hear Musichetta’s sneakers scraping the pavement just a little more softly than the sharp clacking of Ari’s shoes as they all cross the street to the halfway house. She grins on seeing the fresh coat of lavender paint on the walls and the new fittings on the door. Even before she knocks the door suddenly flies open. “Hello Aimee,” she greets the girl standing there.

Aimee laughs out loud before grabbing Eponine’s arm so tightly that for a moment her jagged nails almost dig into her skin. “Tess was bragging that she’d scare you away today.”

“Scaring me? What nonsense,” Eponine scoffs as she follows Aimee into the house. She waves to some of the girls in the hall, including Aimee’s twin Annette as well as Tess. The latter merely gives Eponine a smirk of acknowledgment before making as if to spit on the floor only to stop at the last
moment. ‘Out to shock as always,’ Eponine thinks even as she hears Ari’s surprised gasp at Tess’ gesture.

“Okay girls, all of you back into the mess hall,” Cecily orders as she steps out of an office. She smiles warmly on seeing Eponine. “Thank you for coming. I take you’re Doctor Laurain?” she asks, directing the query to Musichetta.

Musichetta nods. “That’s me. Eponine told me that some of the girls need some special attention.”

Cecily sighs. “You have no idea.” She hesitates on seeing Ari. “She is----”

“Mrs. Enjolras. I think Mother Asuncion would like to speak with her,” Eponine replies.

“She’s in her office,” Cecily says briskly before crossing the hall and knocking twice on the directress’ door. “Mother Asuncion, Eponine is here with a guest.”

Within a moment the nun opens the door and nearly starts at the sight of the new arrivals. “Inside my office, please,” she says breathlessly.

Eponine hands the large paper bag to Mother Asuncion. “I have more scented candles for your collection, Mother.”

“Thank you, Eponine,” the nun says, clasping her wrists. She grins widely at Ari. “I’m glad Eponine is bringing more friends here. I’m Mother Asuncion, the directress of this halfway house. You are...”

“Ari Enjolras,” Ari says with a demure bow. “I’m the mother of her fiancé.”

Eponine’s eyes go wide. “I’m not engaged.”

“Formally engaged, you mean,” Ari replies with a look that is almost daring Eponine to contradict this. She smiles more warmly at Mother Asuncion and sits down. “I was told that Eponine is a volunteer doctor for this institution.”

“Yes. I am so happy she can give us her time even if she is so busy being a surgeon,” Mother Asuncion says, folding her hands.

“You run a house in a rather interesting neighbourhood, Sister,” Ari remarks.

“We have to be with the community. We cannot bring the girls too far away,” Mother Asuncion says.

“Is it risky?”

“This work always is.”

Eponine clears her throat. “I’ll be at the mess hall. Excuse me,” she says. ‘Leave Mother Asuncion to charm Ari into doing some good,’ she decides as she crosses to the mess hall and sets down her work tote at a table a little bit away from Musichetta is interviewing one girl who is just beginning to show in her fifth month of pregnancy. Elsewhere in the room Cecily is giving a math lesson to some of the younger girls, while the rest of the house’s residents are watching TV and passing around cookies.

Cecily breaks off from her lessons to retrieve some folders. “Here are the girls who need some health consults today.” She taps the shelf next to her. “Okay if any of you have sniffles, bumps or anything to complain about, Doc Eponine is right here.”
“No injections, right?” Annette asks worriedly.

“None today,” Eponine promises. That will be another challenge to work out; perhaps she might have to arrange for a trip to a clinic where vaccines will be more readily available. For the meantime other things demand her attention such as treating some wounds, soothing rashes, and teaching some girls how to delouse their hair.

In the middle of everything she hears some yelling and swearing from the corridor, and not surprisingly Tess’ voice is in the din. “Oh what now?” Eponine asks as she quickly sets aside her equipment and hurries out to where Tess is tearfully screaming now at another big girl. “Tess, Martha, what’s wrong?” she asks sternly.

“I was just telling her how she looked,” Martha sniffs haughtily.

“Next time you call me a beanpole, bitch—“Tess mutters.

Eponine has to grab Martha’s arm before she can hit Tess. “That’s enough. Aren’t you a little old for insulting each other like on a playground again?” she asks. She shakes her head on seeing that Martha’s nose is red and runny. “I’ll see you in the mess hall in a while. We’ll do something about the cold.”

“Sounds like the asthma already,” Martha mutters. “I know you aren’t the doctor for that.”

“We’ll start something and then get you some help,” Eponine suggests. She sighs as she looks at Tess, who is now leaning against a wall affecting an impassive attitude. “You don’t have to listen to her.”

“She was right. Look at my dress,” Tess snaps.

Eponine takes a step back and realizes now that Tess is wearing a long black dress with a red overlay. The gown does not yet fall perfectly over the adolescent’s skinny frame but still is suitable for a formal event. “If you take it in at the waist, I think it will look quite nice,” she comments.

“Mother Asuncion wants me to put sleeves on it,” Tess says with a scowl. “I’ll look like some granny.”

“Maybe we can talk to her about it,” Eponine suggests. ‘She told me the same thing the one time I got asked to a dance, and I stayed in a corner all night,’ she recalls, feeling that sinking pit of shame in her stomach just from recalling that night so many years ago. She feels her phone vibrate in her pocket and she checks it to find a message from Enjolras: ‘Stuck shopping with Bahorel? This should be interesting,’ she thinks gleefully as she steps aside to make a call.

Enjolras picks up right away. “Eponine please. You need to bail me out of this.”

“That depends. Why is Bahorel taking you shopping?” Eponine asks with undisguised mirth.

“Because I’m invited to attend this military ceremony on the tenth, and apparently what clothes I have aren’t good enough for the event,” Enjolras grouses. “It’s an opportunity to pursue some leads.”

“I see,” Eponine whispers. ‘Probably has to do with this strange investigation of the regiment,’ she decides but she bites her lip before she can ask Enjolras about this. “So you need clothes,” she remarks.

“Eponine, you can’t let him go to a party in his favourite suit,” Bahorel’s voice cuts in.
“His favourite suit is none of your business, it’s mine!” Eponine retorts. She laughs when she hears Enjolras reprimanding Bahorel for the interruption. “He does have a point though. You don’t exactly have a very formal suit,” she says once she figures that her partner has calmed down a little.

“Is this necessary?” Enjolras gripes.

“It is, or you’ll never get through the door,” she points out. “So who else is going—”

“You have an invite too; it should be in your email,” Enjolras informs her, dropping his voice further. These words almost have Eponine cringing as she mentally reviews the contents of her wardrobe. “The tenth. I’m not on duty then. I’ll be there,” she says after a moment. ‘You started this inquiry, you’ll finish this together,’ she reminds herself even as she finishes the call and then takes a deep breath. She watches Tess gathering her own dress around her waist. “Where did you get that?”


“I think we can fix that. When’s the dance?”

“Valentine’s. I’m the red and black queen of hearts, what do you think?”

“You’ll make an impression,” Eponine says approvingly. She turns at the sound of the door opening to the directress’ office, and to her surprise Ari is laughing. “What happened?”

“You’re friends are taking my boy shopping,” Ari says, holding up a status update from one of Courfeyrac’s social network accounts. “I pity them. I’m sure you know how difficult it can be to bring him shopping. I suggest you simply get his sizes and then pick out items in his preferred colors. He won’t refuse something coming from you.”

“I’d prefer talking with him about it.”

“If it’s a formal event they’re preparing for, judging from where your brother-in-law is, shouldn’t you be in attendance?”

Eponine takes a deep breath. “I’ll have to go dress shopping later.”

Ari nods slowly. “There are some good boutiques I can show you to. Mostly classic things; you cannot go wrong there, ever.”

The younger woman tries to imagine what sorts of finery Ari would have in mind. “I am on a budget.”

“I said good, not lavish,” Ari reminds her gently. “Come on, give it a chance.”

‘The things I do to get answers,’ Eponine tells herself before managing a nod. “Later then. And please, let’s not tell Auguste about this.”

“Naturally.” Ari says with something of a sly smile. “If you can leave him speechless, imagine what you can do in a crowd.”
“Last time I checked, the guest list wasn’t even approaching fifty.”

“The first twenty or so were what Marius and I agreed on; the rest is my mother’s insistence.”

Eponine sighs sympathetically as she ties off a bow on yet another centrepiece for her friends’ wedding reception. “I guess your parents just want you and Marius to have a beautiful church wedding. I heard that theirs was rather simple.”

“I remember it. It was raining. The church was mostly empty except for my parents’ friends. I was the bridesmaid and flower-girl, and I was ten years old,” Cosette says ruefully as she puts a finished centrepiece on one side of the table in the lanai. “I know that it would be nice to have more of Marius’ relatives and some old school friends of mine at the wedding, but these are people we haven’t been in touch with in years.”

“You need to put your foot down on that one. I don’t think you and Marius want to be dealing with the reception line all evening,” Eponine points out.

Cosette laughs before reaching for some more ribbons and plastic doves for another centrepiece. “Not to mention that problem with Marius’ cousin. He may be living with their relatives now but things might remain cool on that front for a while.”

“Why, I thought his aunt likes him?”

“She does, but she’s not the only relative he has.”

Eponine flinches at these words, more so when she recalls Theodule’s expression on the first time she and Combeferre interrogated him. “So how are you going to manage your own problem?” she asks Cosette after a moment.

“I’ll have to do it without breaking my mother’s heart, and you know how difficult that can be.” Cosette gives her friend a sly look. “Speaking of which, I heard that you spent some time with Enjolras’ mom?”

“Dress shopping for tonight’s party,” Eponine says with a shrug. It’s a very succinct way to describe one of the most chaotic shopping trips she’s ever been on; for one thing she did not know that Ari Enjolras was on speaking terms with so many designers. “At least she had some good ideas.”

“She seems to like you.”

“She likes me because her son does. I doubt we’d get along well if we met in other circumstances.”

“Now don’t underrate yourself,” Cosette chides her. “Maybe she’s a stiff society matron but her nose isn’t that long for her to trip.”

Eponine snorts at this mental image. ‘At least she’s not trying to fill in for my mother,’ she notes silently even as she notices Elodie tiptoeing into the room in an attempt to sneak up on Cosette. She has to fight to keep a straight face up until the moment Elodie whispers “Boo!” before jumping into Cosette’s lap. “She’s better at this than you were in college,” she quips when she sees Cosette’s stunned expression.
“Marius is teaching her too well,” Cosette says even as she begins combing out Elodie’s hair. “Now what are you up to, darling?” she asks the child.

Elodie gives her a toothy grin. “Grandmother is asking something about the band for the party,” she says in a stage whisper.

“That’s our debate for today,” Cosette mutters resignedly. “We’ll finish making those centrepieces and favors some other day I guess. Thanks for coming, Eponine.”

“No problem. I should be able to pass by here sometime next week,” Eponine says.

Elodie gives Eponine a curious look. “Mister Bahorel said that you and Mister Enjolras are going to a big party tonight.”

“It’s a dinner for very important people,” Eponine explains, even though she can feel the urge to cringe at this understatement.

Elodie nods slowly. “So you’ll be in a pretty dress?”

“Yes of course.”

“Will there be dancing?”

“I don’t know.”

Elodie shakes her head. “There should be dancing. Mister Enjolras should dance with you.”

Eponine blanches at the idea, more so when she sees Cosette about to burst out giggling. “Not all parties go that way, Elodie. Sometimes people just want to talk about things,” she manages to say in a level tone.

“That’s boring, Doc,” Elodie points out. “You don’t have to be at a party for that.”

Cosette laughs before scooping up Elodie. “Now I shouldn’t keep you from your plans. You guys have fun tonight. And stay safe!”

Eponine nods. “Good luck dealing with your mom,” she calls as Cosette and Elodie leave the lanai. ‘This is even scarier than the time that Zel and I found sharks while swimming,’ she can’t help thinking. After all, the last time she checked, sharks did not bite unless provoked. This is far more than she can say for the people in the middle of her investigation.

She heads home shortly after in order to give herself ample time to prepare for the evening’s festivities. The very idea of having to put so much work into dressing up for a party makes her feel ridiculous, making her roll her eyes a few times while she dries off after a quick shower. ‘I cannot imagine how it would be to always dress up like this,’ she muses as she carefully pulls out her attire from where she’s hidden it at the back of her part of the closet. This wine red dress falls to her ankles for formality’s sake, but also shows a little bit of her cleavage and has a dangerously long slit that draws enough attention to her legs. To add to the effect is a pair of high heeled bronze shoes with a gold motif. It’s these cheeky details that have her grinning when she takes a look at herself in the mirror; although it has been some time since she’s stepped into anything so elegant the look somehow seems to suit her better than it ever did before.

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She has already finished pinning back her hair from her face by the time she hears Enjolras’ key in the door. “Cutting it a bit close, aren’t we?” she teases as she glances over her shoulder and finds that he is still in the polo shirt and slacks he wore to work that morning.
“It’s only research of another sort,” Enjolras deadpans as he sets down his briefcase. His eyes go wide and his mouth hangs open as he gets a good look at her. “Eponine...” he breathes.

She laughs before drawing him down for a long kiss. “Is that all you can say, Auguste?”

“No, it’s just that...” he trails off as he brushes his thumb across her cheek. “You’re amazing.”

She blushing at this familiar though heartfelt compliment. “Thanks. You’d better take a shower while there’s still hot water.”

“Then you complain I’m not romantic,” he retorts before kissing her nose. “Give me ten minutes.”

She smiles to herself as she puts on her makeup, even taking care to use mascara and a slightly darker shade of lipstick than she’s accustomed to. As an additional touch she puts on a pair of rose gold earrings, the only piece of fine jewellery she’s acquired for herself. She uses the rest of the time to catch up on some reading, until she hears Enjolras leaving the bathroom. She looks up and her mouth goes dry at the sight of him in a new black suit. “Oh damn.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?” Enjolras asks as he begins combing out his hair.

“I’d kiss you right now but I don’t think you want lipstick on your collar,” Eponine says as she goes over to help him straighten his tie. His fingers brush against hers and the sensation sends heat pooling in her stomach. Nevertheless she tugs on his tie smartly and fixes the knot. “There, now you look dashing.”

He smiles before lifting her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles. “Are you ready?”

She nods before getting to her feet and walking with him to the elevator. They don’t say anything up until they are in the car and already almost at the freeway. She feels his hand on her knee and she pats his hand reassuringly. “You’re more used to formal occasions than I am.”

“Usually they are laced with less intrigue and far more ennui,” he says, giving her a wry smile.

If only in vino veritas could hold up in a court testimony,” she quips.

Enjolras smirks. “That was what Grantaire used to say whenever Courfeyrac and I reviewed for exams back in pre-law. I believe there’s a similar restriction when it comes to those so-called truth sera.”

‘Those things can end up being more lethal than useful,’ Eponine recalls. “How then will you convince any of those military officers to come forward, short of issuing a subpoena?”

“Some discussion with the higher echelons of command might help,” Enjolras replies. “Military officers have a code of honor among themselves.”

“And a code of silence—-which Gillenormand refused to break.”

“Conspiracy to murder is grounds for a court martial. I doubt anyone wants to risk that.”

She sighs as she taps her fingers on the dashboard. “It won’t be enough. It will take more than that to make them come forward.”

“Then we’ll find out whatever it is,” Enjolras says firmly.

Eponine takes a deep breath as she clasps his hand, running her fingers over every callus she can find. These are marks of a man who usually is sure of what he is doing, and is not afraid to face the
odds. “You’d better hope they do have some sort of price,” she mutters.

“That’s a little cynical,” he points out.

She shrugs. “It’s practical.” She falls silent as they arrive at the entrance to the Mycenaes Gardens, a sprawling courtyard surrounding a brightly lit gazebo. “There’s Bahorel’s car. Is he bringing anyone with him?” she asks, pointing to a sleek red convertible parked some paces away.

“I don’t believe he mentioned anything along those lines,” he replies as he pulls the key out of the ignition and then gets out of the car so he can go over to her side and open the door.

She takes his arm to further this display of gallantry, which becomes more necessary as they make their way through the garden. All along the bridges over the koi-filled ponds and the meandering pebble-lined pathways are guests greeting each other and mingling, and a number of them nod to Enjolras or Eponine by way of recognition.

“Aren’t you two just the cutest!” an old lady croons. “I’m not sure you remember me, Doc. I’m—“

“Yvonne Dunn,” Eponine finishes, now remembering this patient recently discharged from the surgery ward. “How are you doing?”

“Very well. Say, is that Doctor Navet still single? Because one of my granddaughters really needs to find a good man,” Yvonne says, touching Eponine’s arm. “She was dumped by this cad, the poor thing, and now she’s convinced that there are no good men in this world.”

Eponine laughs a little uneasily. “I’ll have to check on that,” she says. As far as she knows Navet is still dating casually and she has yet to hear of anyone particularly significant in his life.

Yvonne nods before giving Enjolras a warm smile. “Your wife is one of the best doctors I’ve ever met. You’re a very lucky man.”

Eponine nearly starts but when she glances at Enjolras she sees him flush for the briefest moment. “We’re not yet married,” Enjolras replies in an even tone.

“Oh dear, my mistake,” Yvonne says apologetically, wringing her hands. “I do hope it will be soon, you two look so adorable together.”

“Enjolras!” a deep voice calls. Everyone turns to see a tall man with reddish hair walking up to them, wearing a simple suit with a single military decoration pinned to the lapel. Oddly enough he is carrying a red cape. “It’s good that you and Doctor Thenardier could come to the party.”

Enjolras nods by way of acknowledgement. “It’s good to see you, de Chagny.” He touches Eponine’s elbow to call her attention. “Eponine, I’d like to introduce Raoul de Chagny, my former classmate. De Chagny, meet my partner Doctor Eponine Thenardier.”

Raoul shakes Eponine’s hand. “A pleasure. I’ve heard a lot of good things from mutual friends, and your brother-in-law most especially.”

“Thank you too for helping them out,” Eponine says. It’s as gracious as she can be without going into too much detail especially in this company. “My family appreciates it.”

Raoul smiles warmly before catching the eye of a petite brunette walking up with two glasses of champagne. She is dressed in a pastel pink and purple gown with a billowing skirt. “Christine darling, I’m sure you remember—“
“Yes I remember Enjolras, and this must be Florence’s friend Doctor Thenardier,” the woman named Christine chirps cheerily as she hands one of the glasses to Raoul. “She called me to catch up a few days ago, Raoul,” she explains before smiling at Enjolras and Eponine. “You can call me Christine.”

Raoul grins before kissing Christine’s cheek and handing the cape back to her. “You dropped this again, Lotte,” he says. “Enjolras, I’m sure you still remember Christine too, from that pol-sci class. Eponine, meet my wife Christine.”

“It seems as if everyone met in university,” Eponine quips.

“I wish I’d met you in university too,” Christine answers. “Florence told me you do great work as a surgeon and as a sort of counsellor,” she whispers.

“I’m not really a counsellor; I just coordinate a lot of social services for our patients,” Eponine explains. “So how do you know Florence?”

“We used to take ballet together when we were kids,” Christine says before sipping some champagne. “It’s too bad she quit performing before high school because of a knee injury.”

Eponine nods as she tries to imagine Florence at least twenty years younger, dressed in a frilly tutu. “She teaches drama, so I guess you could say she never really quit the stage.”

“It’s different when one is up there,” Christine says with a wistful sigh as they begin crossing the garden.

“You still perform on stage?” Eponine asks.

Christine shakes her head. “I can’t go on tour nowadays. I’ve got a son to take care of. His name is Pierre.” She opens her tiny purse and brings out her phone to show a photo of a handsome raven haired boy who appears to be about ten years old. “So I run my own studio and choreograph productions. We have a ballet coming up by summer. Maybe you and Enjolras would want to watch?”

“That would be nice,” Eponine agrees. ‘I ought to pass that on too for Cosette, Elodie, and Marius. I think they’d like that too,’ she decides quietly.

In the meantime Christine looks towards where Enjolras and Raoul are conversing. “I remember Enjolras being always into his books and projects. No one thought he would ever look elsewhere.”

“He’s still very much into those things, by the way,” Eponine informs her.

“At least he’s not all alone dealing with everything,” Christine points out with a gleeful grin. She frowns at the sight of a burly and balding man in full military dress uniform, talking boisterously a few paces away. “That’s General Fersen, the leader of this city’s regiment. He’s not very polite to my Raoul or any of our people when they have to work with him.”

‘What can I expect from the fellow known as Patch?’ Eponine thinks, but she bites her lip before she can make any untoward remarks. She does take note of the two black-clad and formidable looking bodyguards standing close to this general, never quite out of arms reach even when he’s exchanging anecdotes with one of his fellow generals.

It is at that moment that the general breaks away from his conversation and throws a look of scrutiny towards Enjolras and the rest of their party. “It is an honor to have you here with us, Attorney Enjolras,” he says with a slight nod. “I’m General Fersen, of the 112th Marines Regiment.”
“A pleasure to meet you, General,” Enjolras replies cordially as he shakes this man’s hand.

General Fersen’s smile turns into a knowing smirk. “The pleasure is mine, Attorney. I have heard much about your commission’s work.”

“I am sure,” Enjolras says coolly. “I hope your assignation in this city continues to agree with you?”

The general is silent for a moment as he looks Enjolras over from head to toe. “It is tolerable.” He nods to Raoul. “Good to see you here Mr. De Chagny and with Mrs. De Chagny too.”

“As always, it’s only business,” Raoul says stiffly even as he pulls Christine closer to him.

Fersen nods curtly but his sullen expression turns into a leer when he catches sight of Eponine. “Now who is this fine young lady?”


“Ah yes, I should have known,” Fersen says, reaching out as if to shake her hand but he catches her by her wrist and closes the distance between them. “Your reputation as an excellent trauma surgeon precedes you.”

“So does your regiment’s reputation, Sir,” Eponine retorts as she swats away his hand.

Fersen chuckles as he touches his own wrist. “How spirited. I hope you will continue to enjoy the party, Miss Thenardier,” he says with a grin before sauntering off to meet some other comrades on the other side of the pond.

Eponine takes a deep breath if only to suppress the shiver coursing through her body. She nods as she meets Christine’s worried gaze. “I see what you mean.”

“He certainly does his homework,” Enjolras remarks. “Though the same can’t be said for policing where his eyes go,” he adds in an undertone.

Eponine nudges Enjolras’ side lightly. “He’ll be back.”

“Yes and we’d better not make it a one on one encounter,” Enjolras says firmly as he clasps her hand.

She laughs, knowing full well what he is doing even as they follow the de Chagnys to the gazebo at the center of the gathering. There are even more people here than there are in the garden, all converging around the buffet spreads and cocktail tables on the sides of the room. The middle of the gazebo, which is located under a skylight, is bare save for a very large area of parquet fronting a stage with a live band playing a lively jazz beat. No one is dancing yet but everyone is milling about and socializing, thus giving Raoul ample opportunity to make more introductions to various military officials.

At length they catch sight of Bahorel at one of the cocktail tables, dressed in a bright maroon suit. In front of him is a heaping plate of various tapenades and canapés. “Get here you guys. Chatter is no substitute for sustenance!” he calls to them.

“What have you met General Fersen yet?” Enjolras asks.

Bahorel shakes his head. “While you were dealing with that cobra, I got a good listen from the other vipers. Turns out that there was some party on New Year’s Eve, and the regiment was part of it.”
“Was Gillenormand there?”

“ Seems as if he was followed out by some drunken comrades of his, but one person there wasn’t exactly soused,” Bahorel looks around before speaking again. “Designated driver packs a gun and they make it look like a drunken mishap if everyone else was packing too.”

Christine’s eyes widen with alarm. “For what reason?”

“They were worrying that Gillenormand was going to talk,” Eponine chimes in before grabbing an olive from the plate.

“He was closest to actually getting any answers about the Rock Lobster incident,” Enjolras explains. “It is only one point in the entire constellation.”

“This is another constellation too,” Raoul remarks as he gestures to the rest of the room “Loyalties shift in the military all the time, but you will need the support of at least one of the persons I have introduced you to.”

“For a court martial?” Bahorel asks querulously.

“It is clear to me that a civil trial will be necessary,” Enjolras answers. “After all the regiment and the private armies have to account for their offenses outside of the abuse of their military office.”

Christine looks at Raoul and shakes her head. “Don’t get too involved. Please don’t. This is just as bad as that thing so long ago---“

“That was different, Christine,” Raoul points out.

“It’s still about trying to catch murderers. Who knows what they’ll do to you if they find out your part in trapping them?” Christine whispers.

In the meantime Eponine touches her partner’s shoulder. “They have a family. Can we keep them off the subpoena list?” she asks.

Enjolras’ eyes are deep with a thoughtful look. “We will need to find stronger evidence then.”

“We will. We have to,” Eponine insists. The memories of her own deposition years ago, for her parents’ case, swirl in front of her mind and prompt her to grab another olive if only to draw attention away from her turmoil.

In the meantime Bahorel chews on a canapé noisily, nearly drowning out the first strains of music. “Now allow me to turn this doubles plus one into a proper sextet,” he says as he wipes his mouth and straightens out his coat. “See you all on the dance floor.”

Raoul coughs and meets Christine’s still petulant gaze. “Shall we dance?”

She sighs but an affectionate light brightens up her eyes at this query. “You didn’t have to ask,” she says before kissing him and then going with him to the dance floor.

Eponine grasps Enjolras’ hand. “Shouldn’t we dance too?” she asks. “Everyone is there.”

Enjolras raises an eyebrow. “Just for the sake of blending in?”

“It could be fun. When was the last time you danced like this?”

“Eight, maybe nine years ago, at a cotillion for Joly’s younger sister.”
“Sounds better than college physical ed, which was my last go at it,” Eponine mutters. She tightens her grip on his hand as she catches sight of more officials entering the room. “We have to move around.”

“Point taken,” Enjolras says as they quit the cocktail table and find a place towards the side of the dance floor. “Whatever you do, don’t look down,” he whispers in her ear.

Eponine bites her lip and nods even as she takes both of his hands. ‘At least it’s not a tango,’ she realizes as she hears the band start up a fast swing tune. She takes a deep breath before Enjolras leads her into a spin and then catches her hands again. As they dance, she manages to catch sight of where Bahorel is sweeping his partner over his shoulder, and just further off, where Raoul and Christine are leading the dance in the middle of the floor. Suddenly she feels some sharp pressure on her toes, making her swear under her breath. “Auguste!”

“Sorry about that,” Enjolras mutters as he takes a step back and lets go of her left hand. “Take a look to that side,” he says before pushing her into another spin.

She nods imperceptibly as she catches sight of Fersen and his retinue entering the gazebo alongside some other cronies. “He seems to have a chip on his shoulder,” she remarks when she sees him arguing with another official.

“Indeed,” Enjolras concurs as he catches Eponine again. “And the bodyguards?”

“All over the place,” Eponine replies before sneaking a kiss to his neck. She laughs when she sees him go red, only to gasp when he pulls her closer again. The music is faster now and she can feel her heartbeat speeding up in time with it, more so when Enjolras’s hand goes to her back and she can practically feel his fingers tracing her spine through her dress. The urge to kiss him properly is nearly overwhelming but she wills herself to keep her composure and just look at him. Her breath catches when she meets his eyes and sees all the intense concentration and desire in his gaze. It’s enough for her to get lost in him, just this once, regardless of whoever might be watching them on the floor. As the song ends in a crescendo of drums and trumpets, she makes one last spin but this time she ends up snugly in his arms, practically nose to nose with him. “Oh wow....” she murmurs.

Enjolras smirks before brushing a stray strand of hair out of her face. “Table again, in five minutes,” he says before letting go of her.

“Be careful,” she whispers. ‘He’ll probably try to find out what that argument with General Fersen is all about,’ she notes. As for her, the need to get a drink far outweighs her curiosity and so she heads towards the buffet table in search of a glass of water.

Bahorel meets her there, already halfway through consuming a tall glass of iced tea. “That was hot. You and Enjolras have everyone in the room jealous now.”

“You and your friend were dancing well too,” Eponine reminds him.

Bahorel laughs heartily. “Technique can be learned, fire cannot.” He drains his glass and then nods to another woman hoisting her drink across the room. “Now for a more personal mission—”

Eponine nods approvingly. “Good luck.” She finds a tall glass of four seasons juice and drinks it down slowly, relishing the coolness of the concoction. A slower tune has started now on the dance floor, thus allowing for some of the oldest couples present to dance more sedately. She leans back against a table to watch, but when she looks around she sees Enjolras being accosted by two of Fersen’s bodyguards. She slams down her glass and moves to go to him but suddenly another black clad figure steps in front of her. “Excuse me, I was just leaving,” she says firmly.
“Now young lady, there’s no reason to be alarmed—“the bodyguard says, holding up his hands.

“Sir, you are in my way,” Eponine retorts as she tries to sidestep past this man. She grits her teeth when this stranger moves directly in front of her. “Let me pass, won’t you?”

“The buffet table is right here,” the guard begins again. “You may get in line on that side.”

Eponine shakes her head as she begins to look around for her friends, and at last catches sight of Bahorel still sharing a drink with the woman he had been eyeing. Eponine whistles and Bahorel looks in her direction, only to nearly go livid at what he sees. This distraction also has the bodyguard looking away for a split second, giving Eponine the opportunity to shove him and then bolt for the other side of the room. A shout comes from where Enjolras has just decked one of his attackers, sending this bodyguard crumbling to the floor even as more rush to the scene.

“Get the police!” Eponine calls to Christine, who has now noticed this chase. ‘*That should get her out of harm’s way,*’ she decides as she runs as fast as she could to evade Fersen, who is striding in her direction. She sprints to where Enjolras has managed to take the fight out to an adjoining terrace but before she can get there she catches sight of a flash of gunmetal. With a burst of speed she tackles Enjolras, sending them both to the tiled floor just as a bullet buries itself in the nearby masonry.

Enjolras winces in pain for a moment before moving to put himself between Eponine and the man pointing a gun at them. “Drop the pistol, General,” he orders.

“You assaulted my men,” Fersen growls. “Now get up, or I’ll shoot her while I make you watch. I doubt she’d like it if you took the bullet for her.”

Enjolras slowly gets to his feet, all the while keeping his gaze fixed on Fersen. “Let her go. She’s not the one you want.”

“Either you’ve gone soft or you must really think I’m stupid,” Fersen mutters.

The younger man smirks at him. “You’re right about one thing.” In a swift motion he grabs Fersen’s wrist and twists the gun out of his grip. Fersen howls and tries to kick out but Enjolras swiftly forces him to the floor and pins him down. “You don’t have a permit to carry *this* weapon. Or rather, you had.”

Eponine immediately confiscates the weapon and unloads the bullets. “How did you know about that?” she asks Enjolras.

“I’ve seen that particular gun, a whole year ago,” he replies, his eyes hooded as he regards their would-be-assailant.

“Enjolras! Eponine!” Bahorel shouts as he rushes up with Raoul and several other generals and colonels. “Okay, we’re late to the party. Looks like you got him.”

“The precinct superintendent himself should be here in a few minutes,” Raoul informs them. “You’re being taken into custody for assault and illegal possession of a weapon. That’s not your service firearm.”

“How would you know that?” Fersen sneers as he tries to get out of Enjolras’ grip.

“Because *I* sold you your service pistol three months ago,” Raoul retorts even over the footsteps of more spectators and the approaching wail of police sirens.

It is only then that Eponine lets out a breath that she did not even know she was holding. ‘*It’s over,*'
she realizes, and although part of her brain still reasons that there are many legal trials to overcome before justice can be said to be truly served, the feeling of having seen a nemesis in the flesh and living to tell the tale is too good to be denied. “You got him,” she tells Enjolras just as Fersen and his retinue are being led away.

“We all did,” Enjolras says, looking also to Bahorel, Raoul, and Christine. “Thank you for all your assistance. This was far more than what was supposed to happen.”

“He was teetering on an edge for a while. This night just accelerated events,” Raoul points out. “It looks like the celebration is breaking up and that award is going to be given another time.”

“Just as well; this is going to be hell to pay in the morning,” Bahorel concurs. “We’d all better scoot before the paparazzi get here.”

Christine nods eagerly. “I did tell Pierre we wouldn’t be out late,” she reminds Raoul. “It was good to meet you two,” she tells Eponine and Enjolras.

“Yeah, we’ll contact you if we’re watching the ballet,” Eponine says. She cautiously looks Enjolras over. “You didn’t get hurt, I hope?”


“Anytime.” She hugs him tightly, reveling in the feel of his heartbeat against hers. “So where to?” Enjolras lifts her chin and turns to meet her lips in a searing kiss. “Home sounds like a good idea.”

“It’s the best idea you’ve had all evening,” she whispers mischievously before standing on tiptoe to kiss him back.
Facing Down Dragons

37: Facing Down Dragons

It is only a matter of days till more stories emerge from the woodwork, allowing the human rights commission to put together more than one solid case against General Fersen and his numerous cronies. “Hopefully after this arraignment, more military and police units will give up working for warlords,” Enjolras tells Eponine while they are having breakfast on the morning of January 31.

“We’re going to be on the watch for a long time. Maybe forever. We do work in the bottomless pit sectors,” Eponine points out before snatching up a spoonful of cereal.

“I prefer to call it part of humanity’s ongoing struggle upwards,” Enjolras says as he sets down his bowl of granola.

“You’d be bored in that perfect world you love to talk about.” She laughs before reaching over to sample some of his food. “You’re always looking for something to fix.”

“Change the environment, and the human condition will strive to adapt.” He deftly lifts a small piece of caramelized banana from her bowl. “That’s the way progress works.”

Eponine sticks out her tongue before stealing more of his granola. “How long will today’s arraignment be?” she asks more seriously.

“Around three hours. We should be done before noon,” Enjolras replies. He pauses, trying to imagine any possible delaying tactics that the defence may use to stall the proceedings, before finally deciding that these measures can only go so far. “That’s more than enough time to see to things before the wedding later.”

“Everything is going to be a madhouse by then. Fantine is doing most of the worrying for everyone,” Eponine remarks. She hooks her pinkie around his and tugs on his finger lightly. “Will you be okay?”

“With the wedding preparations or the arraignment?”

“I may as well say both.”

“I already am,” he says as he runs a finger over the lines and calluses of her palm. It isn’t just for her benefit; on the contrary he is sure, absolutely certain in this moment that there is something beyond the shadows that trail his memories and will converge in the courthouse. ‘One would say it’s light,’ he muses silently before eating more of his breakfast. “What time will you meet Cosette later?”

“Lunchtime. It’s cutting it close too, but I need to cover at the OPD today since our junior residents have an exam,” Eponine replies. “At least Chetta is giving me a ride. The church is quite far off.”

“I’d better check if there’s a less scenic route,” Enjolras notes. “Especially since we’ll be driving home late at night.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Make it early in the morning. It’s a Saturday so of course we’re all taking advantage of that.” She checks her watch and quickly drains what’s left of her coffee. “I have to get going now.”

“Need a lift?”
“I’ll be fine. I have an early meeting too.” She gives him a quick kiss. “Give the general and his boys hell.”

“See you tonight,” he says as he brushes a stray strand of hair out of her face, making her blush before she picks up her bag and rushes out the door. As he gathers up the dishes he sees before him the images of just some of the people whose lives have been disrupted in some way or another by Fersen’s machinations, from poor Chretein Dupond to Javert, to even the workers of the weaving room. ‘This much I can do for them,’ he reminds himself, knowing that nothing will truly make up for Dupond’s injuries, or those of so many others whose cases will be brought forward today.

When he stops by the law office he finds Feuilly, Bossuet, and Bahorel all gathered around one computer, laughing and slapping each other’s backs. “I take that isn’t related to any legal proceeding?” Enjolras greets his friends dryly.

“It is----the upcoming wedding,” Bossuet replies gleefully.

Enjolras raises an eyebrow as he sees the video they are working on, so aptly titled “Marius Now Amorous.” “Are you planning to show that at the reception?”

“It’s nothing that even Alexandra can get corrupted by, so no need for Courfeyrac or Marius and Cosette to worry about the little ones,” Bahorel laughs. “Is Courfeyrac coming in today?”

“He’s on best man duty, so probably not,” Enjolras informs him.

Bahorel nods and cackles as he advances the video to show a photo of their group of friends having a water fight outside their college dormitory. “Look at us then, all sticks and bones.”

“And with questionable color vision,” Enjolras adds, noticing Bahorel’s obnoxious floral printed board shorts in the photo.

Feuilly bursts out in helpless laughter even as he reaches for a postmarked envelope. “This came in today,” he says, handing it to Enjolras.

The attorney nods on seeing the typewritten address on the envelope. ‘At least Javert is doing well,’ he notes as he reads through the brief missive. “Any other important calls?”

“The toilet paper press, that’s all,” Bossuet says with unmitigated disgust.

“I see.” He pockets Javert’s missive and heads to his workspace, if only to put it in some order. As he answers email, goes over documents and answers a few calls, he is all the while aware of his friends boisterous laughter; a sound that might have been irritating in another day and age. ‘Not anymore, not after almost losing it,’ he tells himself. Somehow the hustle and bustle helps ground him in the here and now, and to revel in things that are fast becoming more than probabilities with each passing day.

He heads to the courthouse at nine in the morning, already bracing for the torrent of questions that will surely meet him there. Just as soon as he gets out of his car, he catches sight of Armand St-Just waiting on the curb. “I thought you’d be with your fellow correspondents,” Enjolras greets him curiously.

“They’re interviewing the defence counsel,” Armand replies. He sighs as he regards his friend. “You’re everyone’s prosecutor. Ever the avenging angel. That’s what they call you.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “I’m only doing what has to be done. In other circumstances, someone else would rise to expose all this injustice. That is what people in your profession do too; they break the
“If only that were true all the time,” Armand says as they begin walking to the courthouse. “Do you think after this trial, you could grant my paper a sort of exclusive?”

“You should contact Feuilly, Bahorel, and Bossuet. They are the ones who did a lot of groundwork for this case.”

“I meant a sort of a man of the hour piece. Something of human interest.”

Enjolras takes a moment to think. “I suggest you contact Mr. Fauchelevent—-that is Marius’ future father-in-law, and ask him about his foundation for the elderly, or his other causes. You could also ask Eponine about the work she does at a halfway house.”

“Some wouldn’t find that sort of work sexy,” Armand comments.

“It is just as necessary as any legal battle,” Enjolras points out.

Armand nods slowly. “I’ll look into that. Thanks a lot.”

By this time they are at the courthouse, where the journalists are still gathered around the lawyers representing General Fersen and his group. Enjolras takes the opportunity to walk into the building, only attracting the notice of the crowd at the very last second, leaving them no choice but to rush forward before the security guard bars their way. ‘*Shakespeare said that there would be a time for such a word,*’ he thinks as he finds his place in the courtroom designated for this proceeding. In a matter of minutes the hall fills up, with the defence counsel noisily admonishing a defiant looking General Fersen and several other tight-lipped military officers on one side of the room. The other side is far more silent as the witnesses and complainants for the prosecution all take their seats; Enjolras spots Mrs. Dupond in this crowd, leaning on Armand’s arm. Following close behind is one of Dupond’s children, pushing her father in a wheelchair. Chretein Dupond’s eyes are tired but there is a light in them that Enjolras has not seen in so many months.

In due course a great majority of the accused plead ‘guilty’, but there are two or three who defiantly plead ‘not guilty’, much to the displeasure of the crowd. At last the judge presiding over the arraignment takes a deep breath before looking at General Fersen. “General Fersen, you are charged with five counts of murder, eight counts of conspiracy to murder, twenty counts of illegal possession and trafficking of firearms, thirty counts of assault, and twenty counts of illegal seizure of property. How do you plead?”

General Fersen puffs out his chest. “Not guilty.” He glares at Enjolras despite the outraged jeers and catcalls from the opposite side of the room. “Don’t you have any other charges to add, Attorney?”

“What charge, specifically?” Enjolras asks coolly.

“You should be dead,” General Fersen sneers. “That or you should have turned tail when the threats to your life became so apparent.”

‘*You do not forget someone who almost dealt your death,*’ Enjolras realizes. He can see Fersen’s face as it was a year ago, unmasked and coolly arrogant as he lifted a gun to fire three shots in the middle of the square at Saint-Michel. The man is thinner now, perhaps more haunted but the impudence is still there, further spurring Enjolras’ already fierce determination. The young man gets to his feet and looks the general in the eye. “Yes, I would be dead now—-were it not for my friends who went far beyond what duty and friendship would require. It would be an insult to them, to everyone here, and to so many others if I were to accede to your wishes and remain silent.”
General Fersen laughs. “Then you do not fear what I can do to your life?”

“You do not have a claim to it, or to anyone’s,” Enjolras retorts. He looks at the astounded judge. “Please continue with the arraignment, your Honor.”

The judge nods solemnly. “The trial will commence this second of February at nine in the morning.” With the single pounding of the gavel comes a chorus of cheers from the prosecution side as well as flabbergasted howls and protests from the defence. Even before Enjolras can finish speaking with Armand, the Duponds and the other witnesses and complainants, he can already hear his phone beeping with one message after another.

At length he picks up his phone just in time to get a call from Feuilly. “Hello. Are you all still at the office?” he asks his friend.

“Just about to leave, Chief. Looks like we’ve got a lot cut out for us next week,” Feuilly says, his voice filled with happy trepidation. “How’s everyone there?”

“Good. The Duponds send their regards.”

“Nice. Is Mr. Dupond walking again?”

‘Not physically,’ Enjolras notes, seeing something like a smile gracing the injured man’s face. “He’s on the mend.”

Feuilly lets out a sigh of relief. “That’s good. So what are you going to do now?”

Enjolras checks his watch, which reads just about noon. “For now, there’s a wedding to attend. I’ll see you all there in a while.”
The chapel of Saint Karol is the sort of quiet church on a hill that serves as a sanctuary to pilgrims and world-weary souls seeking clarity on the heights. ‘It would be the very sort of place to calm down in any other circumstances,’ Fantine frets silently as she paces the vestibule of the church. The afternoon sunlight streaming through the long windows lends a warm golden glow to the chapel nave and makes the various statues in this church seem far less forbidding. ‘Like they do have actual halos,’ Fantine muses as she stops in front of an image of the Virgin Mary. She wrings her hands as she looks up at the grand clock on the church’s wall and finds the time to be half past three. “It’s a Saturday, Jean! I thought people would actually get away from work earlier and be here on time!” she complains to her husband when she hears him walk in through a side door.

Jean Valjean merely smiles as he puts a hand on her arm. “The wedding is at five, and Cosette is already here with Eponine and Musichetta. There is still a lot of time yet, my dear.”

Fantine sighs as she takes a seat at one of the pews. “Don’t you remember how hard it was to have our wedding all those years ago? We almost had to postpone the ceremony!”

“We got to the church on time, the priest still agreed to officiate, and Cosette was still part of everything like we planned,” Jean Valjean reminds her. “To be honest I never really cared for too much mocha even on a wedding cake.”

“I still remember you frowning about it,” Fantine says with a rueful laugh. She glances up at the clock and crosses her arms. “Shouldn’t we call the boys now?”

“Give them fifteen minutes more,” Jean Valjean replies. “I’m sure one of the girls would know by now if the boys were going to be late.”

Fantine shakes her head as she gets to her feet and hurries over to a room just adjoining the church foyer. “Have any of you called up Marius and the groomsmen yet?” she asks worriedly.

Elodie hops out of the room. “Uncle Courfeyrac told Doc Eponine that they’re having trouble with the map!” she reports.

It is all that Fantine can do to hold back a sigh of frustration, if only for Elodie’s sake. ‘I can’t have her worrying on her parents’ wedding day,’ she decides as she watches her adoptive granddaughter twirl about in a pink dress trimmed with lace and ribbons. ‘I could almost forget that she was ever in crutches or braces,’ she realizes even as she sees Elodie suddenly turn and run up to where Eponine and Musichetta are emerging from the side room. “Any luck yet?” Fantine asks. .

“I called Florence. She and Combeferre aren’t far off but they’ll meet the guys at the gas station so they can get here by convoy,” Eponine says, holding up her phone. Both she and Musichetta are dressed in the same delicate shade of purple, only that Eponine has chosen a simple v-neck dress while Musichetta has opted for a more daring off-shoulder gown.

Musichetta rolls her eyes. “I wish they’d thought of that earlier,” she remarks as she helps Elodie straighten out her headband, which has gotten askew thanks to all her dancing around.

Fantine nods slightly, allowing herself to feel just a little relief. “I hope that when you girls have your
weddings that things will go more smoothly.” She almost regrets this when she sees Musichetta merely shrug, but this allows her to catch the thoughtful look that crosses Eponine’s face. “You know I’ve always wanted to see you settled and happy, Eponine,” she finally says.

“I don’t think I can put both adjectives in the same sentence and mean it,” Eponine quips. She grins as she checks her phone. “They’ve met up. They’re on their way.”

“Good.” Fantine quickly rises and steps into the next room, where she can hear Cosette humming the way she does when she’s daydreaming. She has to pause at the sight of her daughter in a flowing dress of pure white lace, with delicate purple orchids in her golden hair. “Are you ready yet, my darling?” she asks gently.

Cosette practically beams at this question. “I can’t wait. Is it fine to be a little nervous though?”

“It is. I’d worry if you were perfectly calm,” Fantine says as she places her hands on her child’s shoulders.

Cosette looks up at her mother. “You were so perfectly sure when you married Papa!”

“Yes but of course I wondered how would we go about things, if we could last, if it would truly be till death do us part,” Fantine says. She smiles as images of that tranquil church in the middle of the city now surface before her memory. “That was till I saw your father waiting for me at the other end of the aisle. Then I knew that he would always wait, that I would always want him to wait...”

Cosette nods as she hands a tissue to Fantine. “Your mascara might run, Maman,” she whispers.

Fantine manages a laugh as she dabs at her eyes. “Silly me. Why am I crying? It’s your wedding day and I’m supposed to be happy. You and Marius will still be living at home----“

“It’s all going to be different though, Maman,” Cosette finishes as she takes Fantine’s trembling hands in hers. “What’s not going to change is that we’ll still be a family. Marius looks to you and Papa as his parents too.” She smiles on hearing voices and footsteps in the church vestibule. “That must be everyone now!”

Fantine races out of the room in time to see first Eponine and Elodie, followed shortly after by Musichetta, Florence, and Azelma with Alexandra in tow. Up near the sanctuary, Courfeyrac and Marius are talking; one look at the groom’s flushed face is enough for anyone to guess the substance of their conversation. The rest of their friends as well as Marius’ relatives and other guests are finding seats all throughout the church. “Was there a traffic jam or some roadblock?” Fantine asks the other ladies incredulously.

“A container van had a flat tire,” Florence explains. She grins widely at Cosette. “You look gorgeous. Marius is going to be floored.”

“That or forget to breathe, so Maurice keeps saying,” Azelma chimes in approvingly. She glances back towards the sanctuary. “Looks like the priest is here.”

Cosette emerges, now carrying her bouquet in one hand and a basket in the other. “Can we start the wedding now?” she asks, nearly breathless with excitement even as she hands the basket to Elodie.

‘This is it,’ Fantine realizes even as she manages a nod. She steps aside to allow Jean Valjean to give Cosette a hug, and has to turn away even as she feels a lump growing in her throat. “Take my arm, please,” she says to Combeferre, who has now made his appearance with Bossuet and Jehan.

Combeferre nods gallantly. “Tell me if we’re walking too fast.”
‘I won’t have to,’ Fantine decides. She knows that she cannot retain her composure for too long, more so when she hears the first strains of the wedding march. She watches as Elodie walks down the aisle, tossing white and purple petals all along the aisle. Following shortly after are Musichetta and Bossuet, then Eponine and Jehan. It is then that Fantine feels Combeferre’s hand tighten on her arm, a signal for her to also walk down the aisle. She glances back to where Cosette has taken Jean Valjean’s arm. ‘God bless you,’ she prays silently as she and Combeferre step out of the side room.

It seems like an eternity till she hears a murmur throughout the congregation, a sure sign that Cosette is now walking down the aisle. She sees Marius’ eyes widen and glisten with tears even as an incredulous smile spreads across his face. “You’d better take care of her, Marius,” she whispers as she takes her place to the side of the aisle with the other ladies.

The priest looks from Marius to Cosette and Jean Valjean. “Who gives this woman to this man?”

“I do,” Jean Valjean answers. He smiles at Cosette. “You go to him with all our blessings, my daughter.”

“Thank you Papa,” Cosette says, laying her hand in Marius’ own.

By now Fantine cannot hold back the tears stinging her eyes. “That was beautiful, Jean,” she murmurs when her husband goes to her side.

“They deserve only the best,” Jean Valjean replies, squeezing Fantine’s hand as the ceremony continues.

II

Gavroche already knows that despite all concessions to propriety, the Pontmercys’ wedding will be poles apart from the reception. “We can’t be behaved all day,” he tells Navet as they go for yet another round of drinks at the bar in a nook of a garden cafe. Nearly everyone else is on the dance floor, the only exceptions being Cosette’s parents and Marius’ older relations, who are apparently content to watch all this revelry.

“The question is, what’s a wedding without a little trouble?” Navet quips before passing a bottle of beer to Gavroche.

“A divorce in the making,” Gavroche mutters as he clinks his beer bottle with Navet’s. He takes a sip even as he watches the rest of the guests gather around where Marius and Cosette are about to release several doves from a large wicker cage hanging from the ceiling. ‘You can’t fool with physics,’ he can’t help thinking, only to be proven right when the cage door swings open and nearly hit Marius square in his face. Gavroche looks to Navet, who is fighting back his laughter. “Fancy getting back to work a little bit early?”

“No, no, a thousand times no,” Navet pronounces before guzzling nearly half of his drink. He lets out a hearty belch and wipes his mouth. “Look, it’s time for the bouquet toss.”

Gavroche smirks at the sight of all the single lady guests now crowding the middle of the dance floor while Cosette climbs onto the small stage where the band has stopped playing. The bride grins as she turns her back on the group and throws her bouquet into the air. Everyone jumps and reaches out for the bouquet, all except for Eponine, who actually ducks as the flowers sail past her only to land right in Grantaire’s lap.

“Ponine, seriously?” Musichetta sputters as she shoves Eponine’s shoulder playfully. “You know who that was meant for!”
Eponine rolls her eyes. “Cosette just doesn’t know her own strength.”

“Enjolras, it looks like you’re in trouble!” Courfeyrac shouts over everyone’s laughter as Grantaire dances around the room and sweeps Prouvaire into a hug.

“That isn’t enough evidence,” Enjolras says smugly. He brings out his phone and taps the screen. “Excuse me I have to take this call,” he adds as he steps out of the room.

“You’re going miss the garter toss!” Feuilly protests but his colleague still quits the dance floor in favor of the garden. He whistles to Gavroche and Navet. “Come on and join us?”

Navet elbows Gavroche. “Care to tempt fate?”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Gavroche says. It is at least worth seeing Marius turn as red as a beet when he retrieves the sky blue garter from under Cosette’s skirt. All the men are jostling each other in jest until Marius throws the garter like he’s making a baseball pitch. The flimsy accessory spins twice in the air before landing squarely on Bahorel’s head.

Bahorel chuckles as he holds up the garter. “With your permission?” he asks Grantaire and Prouvaire.

Prouvaire nods before shoving Grantaire forward. “I don’t own him anyway.”

Grantaire grins before gamely taking the garter and putting it on his arm all the way to his elbow. “Shall we dance?”

Bahorel bows gallantly. “Certainly.”

Now even Gavroche can’t help laughing, more so when he hears his two friends humming the tune to that famous stage classic. He waits for Navet to find a partner from among one of Marius’ cousins before going over to discreetly elbow Enjolras. “Seriously, no plans?”

Enjolras eyes him seriously. “I’ll let you know if there are.”

“You’re a cool guy. I’m not worried a mite,” Gavroche drawls. He smirks as he watches the rest of their friends continue to dance. “Just don’t do anything this silly when it’s your turn.”

“You have my word,” Enjolras says with a mirthful smile tugging on his lips before he excuses himself to join the rest of their friends to see the newlyweds off.
Saying Yes to Our Lives

39: Saying Yes to Our Lives

I

“You wouldn’t believe what your Daddy said next, Alex. He said I’d knocked him out with my eyes, not with my hands!”

Just hearing this is enough to have Courfeyrac muffling his laughter into his pillow, if only to conceal the fact that he’s been awake for a while. ‘If Azelma keeps this up, Alex will be speaking in sentences in no time,’ he muses as he listens to his wife continuing to talk to their baby daughter.

At length he feels a finger jabbing his back. “I know you’re awake, Maurice,” Azelma croons in his ear. “Time to open your eyes.”

Courfeyrac groans but that’s before he hears a slightly indignant wail from next to him. “Alex, tell your Mama that it’s time to get back to bed,” he mutters.

“No, she’s saying it’s time to get up and go to work,” Azelma retorts. “Go on Alex, wake up Daddy.”

Before Courfeyrac can protest he suddenly feels tiny fingers waving in his face, forcing him to open his eyes. There’s no way he can keep a smile off his face on seeing his daughter regarding him with that wide-eyed expression that she has only around people she recognizes. “Good morning beautiful,” he whispers before kissing the baby’s forehead and then sitting up.

Azelma smiles triumphantly as she adjusts her hold on Alexandra, who is beginning to squirm restlessly. “What, and none for me?” she says, pretending to pout.

Courfeyrac laughs before giving Azelma a sloppy kiss. “Will you girls be coming around for lunch today?”

“What’s this, early Valentine’s Day plans?”

“No, I just miss you ladies.”

“We’ll be there about one. I still have to meet with the principal about reducing the classes I’ll be teaching for the next term,” Azelma replies, glancing down to stroke Alexandra’s cheek. “You’re going to be my best student, Alex,” she tells the child.

“I can’t wait to start teaching her calculus,” Courfeyrac muses.

“Maurice, you took removals in calculus,” Azelma reminds him.

“I know how not to teach the subject,” Courfeyrac points out, earning him a pinch from his wife. ‘Grantaire would call this planning too far forward, I call it practical hoping,’ he decides as he finally gets out of bed. It’s this sort of thing that has been making up a large portion of his daydreams lately, and he’s pretty sure that this is partly responsible for his permanent goofy grin.

After driving Azelma and Alexandra to the schoolhouse, he heads straight to the law office, knowing by now that his colleagues will be busy at work. He arrives in time to see Enjolras, Feuilly, Bossuet, and Bahorel gathered by Bahorel’s van. “What’s going on?” Courfeyrac asks.
“Fieldwork,” Bossuet explains. “There are more depositions and witnesses to meet out of town, for still more new cases. Want to come along?”

Courfeyrac whistles at this new development. “I’ve got a client to meet, and a lunch appointment.”

“You mean a date?” Bossuet asks.

“Family outing,” Courfeyrac says. “You’re going to the courthouse today though?” he asks Enjolras, who is dressed in his second-best suit.

“The Fersen case will be decided today,” Enjolras says calmly. “This may encourage a more thorough clean up of the military ranks, especially now that more people are coming forward to expose more acts of impunity.”

“More like tearing open the cockroach lair,” Bahorel snickers.

“I thought cockroaches were solitary. You must be talking about termites,” Feuilly points out.

Courfeyrac can’t help but crack up at the resigned look that Enjolras gives him as Bahorel and Feuilly begin to argue about some points of entomology. “So ramen night at Grantaire and Jehan’s place this week?” he asks.

“Are the Pontmercys back from their honeymoon?” Enjolras asks.

“Yeah. I’m surprised Marius got that much time away from work,” Bossuet notes. “Anyway the thing about having ramen night at Jehan and Grantaire’s place is because they want to clean up and get it prepared for the social worker’s first visit...”

“How practical,” Enjolras remarks dryly before picking up his briefcase and nodding to his friends. “Best of luck with your endeavours today.”

“Gloat on our behalves, please!” Bahorel quips as Enjolras goes to his own car. He chuckles as he claps Courfeyrac on the shoulder. “This sort of flexibility is why I did not proceed to law school.”

“Not to mention that secured evidence does not usually cause bodily harm,” Bossuet notes. “Say hello to Azelma and Alex for us, Courf.”

Courfeyrac grins at this. “You guys stay safe. Combeferre is on duty at the ER today.” He laughs once more at the good natured carping this produces, all the way till his friends get into their car and drive off. Once he is alone he takes a look at his phone’s wallpaper, which is none other than that first picture of him, Azelma, and little Alexandra. ‘I’lI never get enough of this,’ he realizes even as he goes indoors to begin his work.

II

‘What on earth can Mabeuf be summoning both me and Combeferre for?’ Eponine wonders as she pulls off the memo from the corkboard at her cubicle. She takes a deep breath as she douses her hands with alcohol to remove the lingering smell of latex, and then carefully combs out her hair. Most likely it is only something to do with the upcoming exams and graduation for senior residents, two things which cannot come soon enough.

She finds Combeferre waiting outside Mabeuf’s office, looking around pensively. “Do you know what this is about?” he asks her.

“Not a clue,” she admits. “You know how he’s always liked suspense.”
Combeferre sighs deeply. “If I get that way when I’m older, you guys have permission to mock me.”

“I’ll leave your correction to Florence,” Eponine says. She laughs when she sees how Combeferre blanches at this; it’s still taking some time for her chief resident to wrap his head around the fact that now she somehow gets along with his current girlfriend. ‘Again, another unexpected thing,’ she notes even as she watches him checking his phone for messages.

Suddenly Combeferre hands the gadget to her. “Looks like congratulations are in order again. You and Enjolras can rest a little easier nowadays.”

“For now,” Eponine quips as she gets a look at some blog entries and news clips detailing the end of the Fersen trial. “I never doubted that he would see this case through,” she adds more softly even as they step into Mabeuf’s office.

The senior surgeon quickly looks up from the case report he is writing. “Please sit down, both of you.” He regards Eponine and Combeferre for several long moments. “You might have heard that Saint-Michel Hospital offers only a limited number of junior consultant positions to each graduating batch of residents, and that the trauma surgery department usually only has one opening----“

Eponine takes a deep breath if only to quash the growing dread in her gut. ‘Of course it’s not going to be offered to me,’ she realizes. After all Combeferre, being the chief resident, has always been a more promising candidate. Although she’s known this for a while, the sting is still surprising.

“---this year there are two positions,” Mabeuf’s voice suddenly cuts in. “Two consultancies for two graduates. There are no others who are as qualified.”

Combeferre’s face brightens with sheer joy. “It’s an honor, Sir.” He looks to Eponine. “Are you alright?”

It takes a moment before Eponine realizes that she is nodding. “I heard you right, Doc Mabeuf?”

“You did. Two positions, two new consultancies—that is if you want it, Eponine,” Mabeuf says more slowly. “In your case you will still get to keep your OIC position with social interventions, more so since there are further expansions to be made to that work.”

“I’m in.” The words no longer seem so alien on Eponine’s lips, not when she can hear them in her own voice and more importantly, have them resonating in her mind and heart. “So when do we start?”

“Right after graduation---just pass your exams first!” Mabeuf chuckles heartily as he puts his hands on the desk. “This place really needs to build up its capacity to serve the populace. We have always had a good training program, but it’s only recently---and mostly because of you two and your trauma team---that it’s been meeting expectations. Since this is a consultancy, you two will also be free to use your expertise in other hospitals and locations. You won’t be confined to just Saint-Michel anymore.”

Eponine grins when she sees Combeferre’s smile grow wider; of course her friend would always appreciate the additional opportunities to delve into research and other training. ‘As for me, there is already a place,’ she notes, seeing that the time on her watch now reads almost four in the afternoon. The day shift is ending already at Saint-Michel, but her own day is far from ending.

Within an hour she is at the door of the halfway house, where she is nearly pounced on by Aimee, Annette, and several other girls. “We’re going to have a movie marathon, Doc!” Aimee chirps as they pull her to the dining room. “Mother Asuncion said that we could stay up tonight!”
Eponine grins on seeing the house’s younger residents setting up a portable DVD player in a corner. “You girls are starting a little late.”

“They wouldn’t start without you,” Cecily calls from her office. “But could you first take a look at Marie? She’s got the sniffles.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Eponine says. “You girls decide what movie you’ll watch. I’ll be with you in a few minutes.” On her way to Cecily’s office she catches sight of Tess standing in front of an old mirror, almost bemused on seeing herself in her altered red and black dress. Tess happens to look up as Eponine passes, and the look she gives the doctor is conspiratorial and full of gratitude. “You look lovely,” Eponine tells her.

“So-so. It feels rather….nice,” Tess drawls, but her disaffection is betrayed by the wondrous light in her eyes. “I’m going alone so I won’t have to dance with anyone.”

“You’ll sit everything out?” Eponine asks.

Tess laughs. “No. Who says I want to?”

“Smart girl,” Eponine agrees. “Be careful though.”

“Course I will. You’ll get pissed off if I’m not,” Tess quips.

Eponine rolls her eyes knowingly before walking off to join Cecily, who is offering tissues to a small girl with a blocked up nose. ‘You won’t need any sort of magic tonight,’ she realizes, remembering how it felt to detest the reflection she had seen in that same mirror one night so many years ago. This time she knows she’ll hear great stories from Tess next week.

It is already past nine in the evening by the time Eponine leaves the halfway house, only after promising the girls that she’ll be back the next week. She walks into the apartment just in time to catch Enjolras taking off his shoes. As quietly as she could she sits next to him on the sofa and plants a quick kiss on his cheek. “Congratulations on the case, Auguste.”

Enjolras smiles at her gratefully. “You’re back quite early.”

“The girls were more up for a movie night. Romantic comedies,” she says ruefully. She can’t blame them, given the time of the year. She scoots closer to him and smiles when she feels him relax against her body. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“No. Do you feel like having anything in particular?”

“Anything, as long as it doesn’t involve my having to get up from this sofa.”

Enjolras smirks as he gets his phone out to look up some online delivery services. “I take that your day was more than busy?”

“The usual workload,” Eponine replies. She points to a menu showcasing various pastries and scrolls down to point to a chocolate mint cake. “Let’s get that.”

“Indulging your sweet tooth again?”

“It’s not every day that you win a case, and that I get asked to be a junior consultant. I start this summer, as soon as I finish my training.”

He looks at her incredulously before kissing her soundly. “Eponine, now that is good news.”
“Says the man who just won another landmark case?” she points out as she tugs on his hair lightly.

“It’s only part of my work. You on the other hand are making quite the difference,” Enjolras reminds her. “This is going to be a hectic summer.”

“I never knew you to back down from a challenge.”

“Touche.”

Eponine laughs as she curls up against his chest and allows him settle his arms around her waist. After a while she feels his chin rest on the top of her head, like he does sometimes when he’s deep in thought. “Auguste?” she asks.

He takes a deep breath before moving so he is sitting right in front of her. “There is one plan I want to ask you about. Will you let me?”

It’s enough to have her holding her breath even as she realizes what he could possibly be referring to. She can feel a knot in her stomach even as she takes both of his hands in hers. “Go on.”

Enjolras’ expression is serious even as he looks her in the face. “I know it hasn’t been all that long since we met, but I am certain that you are the one I want at my side for whatever else comes up in the years to come. I want to be with you when you’re facing new challenges, and I want to be one of the reasons for your happiness.”

She can already feel tears pricking at her eyes as she squeezes his hands. “You already are.”

His eyes brighten even as a smile tugs at his lips. “Eponine, will you marry me?”

“Yes.” It’s a whisper at first, so to get the point across Eponine kisses him and presses her forehead to his. “Yes, and it will always be yes.”

Enjolras’ smile widens with relief that is soon replaced by a quiet but nonetheless vivid sort of joy even as he kisses her back. “It doesn’t have to be right away---I know that we’re busy this summer.”

“I have two weeks in April to review for the exams,” Eponine says. She grins at his puzzled expression. “That’s as good as a time as any for a wedding, don’t you think?”

“It’s only a margin of time to plan,” he reminds her. “Are you sure?”

She nods as she runs her fingers along his knuckles. “I think taking the exams as Doctor Eponine Thenardier-Enjolras would be more practical than taking them under my maiden name and then having to apply the legal change after.”

“That has to be one of the most interesting but most practical reasons for moving up a wedding,” Enjolras remarks. He looks down at her hands. “I didn’t get you an engagement ring since you’re always scrubbing in and I figure it would be troublesome to keep on taking it on and off. If you give me a moment---”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I want to.”

She laughs before letting go of his hands so he can go to their room and search for whatever gift he’s gotten her. ‘I can’t believe it. He asked, I said yes,’ she realizes. It goes against what most people would think of them, but then again so many things have changed in the past year and she’s not the
least bit sorry about it. She sits up straight when she sees Enjolras return with a small blue box. “What is it?”

Enjolras smiles a little awkwardly before putting the box in her hands. “Take a look.”

Eponine’s jaw drops as she opens the box and finds a necklace with a delicate pendant in the shape of two hands clasping each other. “It’s lovely.”

“Good. I was worried it would be a little strange,” Enjolras admits.

“No. It’s not weird at all,” Eponine says, touching his face. “You know me so well.”
Epilogue

Epilogue: In All Things

The morning of April 24 finds Enjolras already at the law office, meticulously composing letters and case digests for colleagues who are not likely to do the necessary reading till the last hours of the weekend. He bites the inside of his cheek when he checks his watch and finds the time to be a little before eleven; in a few minutes he will have to start preparing for another long awaited appointment. ‘All the same I’d like to get ahead and claim some of the next few days,’ he decides as he presses the ‘send’ button on yet another email.

He catches sight of his cell phone lighting up and he reaches for the gadget before it can start ringing. “Hello Combeferre,” he greets calmly.

“Enjolras. Have you forgotten what day it is today?” Combeferre asks in a harried tone.

“I certainly have not. It’s scheduled for one in the afternoon. Two hours is more than enough time,” Enjolras replies. He raises an eyebrow at the hubbub of conversation on the other end of the line, but when he figures out the substance of this fuss and fury he almost can’t help laughing. “I gather that Eponine isn’t there yet?”

“I told her that she didn’t have to scrub in for one of our ER cases—"

“You’d have better luck telling water not to be wet.”

Combeferre groans exasperatedly. “That’s no excuse for either of you.”

“We cannot undo work or the past few hours,” Enjolras points out.” Rest assured that I will be there on time. I’m sorry if this is rather untoward.”

“Of course,” Combeferre says a little more jovially. “Traffic is bad, so I’d get moving if I were you.”

“Noted. Thank you, Combeferre;” Enjolras replies before ending the call. He checks the clock again and grits his teeth before sending a last round of messages and then packing up his papers. ‘I wasn’t expecting this either,’ he realizes as he changes out of his usual shirt and slacks into a more formal suit. There are still some days when he fears he’ll wake again in a hospital room, or be confronted with darkness and a void where the past year has been. Yet he only has to feel the sun shining on his face or hear his friends talking or even just Eponine’s laughter to begin to dispel the shadows. The rest he can manage mostly on his own.

As he finds a parking space near the courthouse he catches sight of a taxi also pulling up to the nearby curb. In a moment Eponine steps out, carrying her usual bag as well as a dress carefully wrapped in a garment bag. She scowls playfully when she catches sight of him. “You’re not supposed to see me yet!”

“You’re still in your scrubs. It doesn’t count,” he reminds her. The smell of antiseptic still lingers on her hands, lending an odd sort of familiarity in this situation. “There’s no rule against getting married in that attire though.”

She sticks out her tongue in a show of mock disapproval. “You’re just impatient.” She glances towards the courthouse entrance, where her siblings and their friends are watching with aghast and amused expressions and looks at him conspiratorially. “I’ll be with you in fifteen minutes.”
“Make that half an hour. You two have to freshen up,” Musichetta says briskly as she rushes to meet them. She sighs at Eponine. “You’re the only doctor I know who’d scrub in on her wedding day.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Eponine quips but she does allow Musichetta to lead her to where Cosette, Fantine, Azelma, Florence, and Ari are waiting to whisk her off to get ready for the ceremony.

Prouvaire clucks his tongue at Enjolras as soon as the ladies are out of earshot. “Usually it’s the groom waiting at the altar, but now you’ve thrown even that out the window.”

“As if you wouldn’t do something just as outrageous when you and Grantaire have a chance?” Feuilly points out.

Grantaire slings an arm around Prouvaire’s shoulders as they enter the courthouse and the hall designated for the ceremony. I’ll have all of you know that we have quite the party planned for when Jehan and I can bring our son home.”

Bossuet looks up from retying his shoelace, only to duck again when he nearly collides with Joly. “You guys got the adoption done already?”

“We’re almost there,” Prouvaire says. He brings out his phone and scrolls to a photo of a boy who appears to be around four years old, with olive skin and dark hair. “He’s adorable.”

“And answers to the name of Darren,” Grantaire adds more loudly.

Gavroche nods to Enjolras. “You’d better take care of my sister, or you’re going to be acquainted with this once she is through with you,” he says while bumping his own fists together for emphasis.

Courfeyrac stops in the middle of bouncing Alexandra in an attempt to get her to sleep. “You didn’t give me the same warning when I married Azelma!” he says in a stage whisper.

Gavroche thumbs his nose. “No, she was the one I warned.”

Courfeyrac blanches amid the laughter of the rest of the group. “By the way there are some lovely young associates who I’ve been talking to and they’ve mentioned that they would like to meet my interesting brother in law.”

Gavroche’s cheeks redden, more so when the topic now turns to his own dating prospects. In the meantime Enjolras cannot help checking his watch, more so when he sees that the fifteen-minute mark fast approaching. He sighs when he hears Combeferre chuckling. “I am not nervous.”

“You’re fidgeting. There is nothing wrong with that, my friend,” Combeferre reminds him. He smiles wistfully at his friend. “It’s not going to be settling down for you two. You are going to do great things together, and get into a lot of trouble at that.”

“A good thing we are well practiced in that line,” Enjolras notes.

Combeferre sighs. “Too well.” He looks to where Florence has just entered the hall. “Everything ready?”

Florence nods excitedly. “Places everyone!” She grins as she runs up to Combeferre and takes his hand. “Do you mind if I stand here too?”

Enjolras doesn’t hear the rest of this conversation, for his attention is swiftly diverted by the hubbub that ensues as Cosette and Azelma enter the hall. Fantine follows shortly after, leading Elodie by the
hand, and then Ari and Musichetta. A murmur sweeps through the room even as Enjolras now catches sight of Eponine walking down the aisle. She has eschewed the usual flowing white bridal gown and veil ensemble in favor of a sleek off-white dress and simply wearing her long hair down and pulled back from her face. The only piece of jewellery she has on is the necklace he gave her several weeks ago. Yet all the same it’s Eponine’s bright smile that has Enjolras feeling as if his heart will burst out of his chest. His breath catches when she closes the distance between them and puts her hand in his. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispers.

She ducks her head but there is no hiding the slight blush that rises to her face. “It's not exactly traditional, I know.”

“Nothing is,” Enjolras says. ‘There is no other way we could be, and there is no other way I’d have it,’ he tells himself even as the justice of the peace begin the ceremony.

At last the officiator nods to Enjolras and Eponine. “You two may now exchange your vows,” he intones.

Enjolras takes a deep breath to collect himself, even if he has written down these words himself and rehearsed them time and again. For a moment everything seems to go still but he sees Combeferre bringing out the wedding bands, while nearby Azelma and Musichetta are already passing around tissue paper. He then meets Eponine’s eyes, which are bright with a happiness and certainty he has never seen before. “I, Auguste Vincent Dautier Enjolras, take you Eponine to be my lawfully wedded spouse. I will honor you in your endeavours, share with you both joys and challenges...” He pauses to put Eponine’s wedding ring on her left hand. “I will be loyal to you in all things, and love you all the days of my life.”

Eponine nods as she squeezes his hand and also slips his wedding ring onto his finger. “I, Eponine Sabine Sorel Thenardier, take you, Auguste, to be my husband, companion, and partner for life. I promise to be at your side through all that comes our way—the good and the bad, the expected and the unexpected. I will be true to you and love you from this day and forevermore.”

The officiator clears his throat over the sniffles coming from some of the onlookers. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Enjolras allows himself only a brief kiss, but all the same he feels Eponine smile against his lips. “Something funny?” he asks, seeing the mirth in her face even as they make their way down the aisle.

“We’ve finally made it,” Eponine whispers. “Rather, we’re making it.”

“It’s only the start,” Enjolras agrees. He takes her hand and feels her fingers wrap around his as they step out of the courthouse and into the still busy afternoon.

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