A Reflection of Starlight

by AutumnGracy

Summary

Curiosity causes Valjean to follow Javert to the Seine, and what he sees there changes everything. Now they must struggle to understand one another as their worlds come crashing down around them.

A story about compassion, tenderness, and reconciliation. Based entirely on Brick canon.

Notes

Hello and welcome to the slowest burn you've ever read. I hope you get as much enjoyment reading it as I got out of writing it, and then some.

See the end of the work for more notes.
A Chance Encounter in the Depths

Chapter Summary

What he saw. What he did.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Dawn begins at midnight.”

- Leo Jozef Suenens

***

Either mechanically or for the sake of fresh air, Valjean stuck his head through the window, leaning out. The street was short, and the lantern illuminated it from end to end.

Amazement overwhelmed him. There was no longer anyone there.

Javert had left.

Valjean stood motionless, unable to comprehend how this could be.

In retrospect, he would not be sure why he had done this, only that something strange had come over him—a sense of wonder, of suspicion and curiosity—and he had ceased, for a moment, to think rationally.

There was something almost foreboding in the atmosphere. That shadowed, empty street. The motionless, heavy air. The blackened sky. The lack of a presence that should have been there, its absence like a lingering ghost, silent, beckoning him into the depths of the night.

Trance-like, he descended the stairs and reopened the door, entirely oblivious to the porter’s questioning voice behind him, walking out into the street.

His gaze darted around, the houses quiet, air hushed and still.

Without any particular intention or inclination of one, he drifted off towards one of the street-crossings.

And then he thought he could hear, from a nearby alleyway, the sound of footsteps the like of which came from a pair of very particular boots.

Valjean blinked, following the sound unthinkingly into the night as a traveler lost in the wilderness follows a distant light source.

He trailed the man at a very healthy distance, careful to step lightly.
Javert’s head was hung in a manner completely unlike him, hands clasped behind his back as he continued down backstreets and alleyways to a destination unknown.

He didn’t seem to be wandering aimlessly, Valjean thought, but then he did not seem to be in any particular hurry to get anywhere, either.

They reached the Quay des Ornes, skirted it, and passed the Greve. Javert stopped a little ways off from the post of the Place du Châtelet, at the corner of the Pont Notre Dame, where the Seine formed a sort of square lake. A dangerous point of the river, the waters surged and crashed against the bridge, swirling and coursing rapidly beneath it, swollen by the recent rains.

Here Javert stood, propping his arms up upon the parapet and resting his chin on them, gazing off at what Jean Valjean could not say.

Valjean’s instincts tore him in two. One, the stronger, more sensible one, said there was no reason for him to be here—nay, reason enough for him not to be here—and he should return home, to safety, to his daughter. But there arose another instinct, quieter, its craving for answers somehow equaling if not overpowering the other instinct’s urgency. And it told him he should stay, he should try to make sense of the situation; there was a sort of safety to be had in sense. Each urge, however, negated the other, and he was left not knowing what to do.

He was not even sure why he had come in the first place; he was tired, and hungry, and filthy, and he desperately wanted to see Cosette.

And yet.

Something was off. Perhaps off in a way that was favorable for him. He wasn’t sure. He wanted to be sure. He wanted to know if he was truly safe in Paris—if they could stay there, as Cosette had begged him to, and not have to fear their world one day being torn apart by officers of the law.

Was such a thing even possible? That Javert might, in the act of repaying one favor with another, allow Valjean’s presence in the city to go unrecognized? He had never known Javert to be merciful, or even kind. Surely such a thing, contradicting his duty as an inspector, would be inconceivable to him.

And yet Javert had left.

He had, just as he had finally gotten a firm grip on him, allowed him to go free.

Or had he?

Had he really? Or was he merely giving him a chance to flee, a gesture of gratefulness: one night, before he brought down the full force of the prefecture upon him in the morning?

Had Valjean been allowed to go free temporarily, or permanently? This was not something he could possibly fathom himself asking directly; the question, however, was gnawing away at him incessantly, wracking his nerves, slowly driving him mad as he gazed upon the man, part of him wanting to flee and part of him wanting to walk right up to him and demand to know—as was his right as a citizen—what was to be done with him.

He resolved, at long last, merely to watch. Until morning, perhaps, if need be. Surely something in the inspector's actions would tell him whether he was planning for his arrest the coming day.

Although, already, Javert had been standing motionless for what seemed like hours, and Valjean had been unable to glean anything of use from him as of yet. The only thing of remark was that the
man had been tangling his fingers in his whiskers—a gesture indicative of a deep pensiveness, and one which Valjean had never seen him do before. Still, the man said nothing, did nothing—and Valjean did not know what to make of it.

All of a sudden, Javert rose.

Tense and overly self-aware, Valjean followed far behind.

He paled when he saw that Javert was headed towards the station house at the corner of Place du Châtelet, the lantern on its door still lit. He watched him enter the station with a sense of dread, choosing to hide himself behind the corner of a nearby building.

_No, no, Javert was going to tell them; he should have taken his chance …_ 

But then again, could he not presumably just be making his daily report before heading home? A report that, if fortune was favorable, might not contain a single word about a certain long-escaped convict?

Sweat dripped down the back of Valjean’s neck.

What to do? If Javert truly was sealing his fate here, would he even be able to escape with Cosette if he ran back home now? The seemingly endless darkness of the barricades and the sewers had stripped him of his sense of time. Was there enough night left to wake his poor daughter, to give a no-doubt unsatisfactory explanation and convince her to flee, to pack necessities and plan a route? Could he even bring himself to do that to her again?

And with her love for Marius! She would never agree to it. How could he tear them away from each other now, when he didn’t even know if the boy would live?

He tortured himself with these thoughts, feverish, shuddering.

In the space of fifteen minutes, Javert exited the station. Alone.

He returned, to Valjean’s surprise, to the precise spot along the quay that he had been standing at earlier. He stood still, chin resting on his hands as before.

Valjean’s brow furrowed. What on earth was he doing?

Again, Javert rose, only this time he merely bent his head, gazing at the body of water beneath him. He remained thusly for a minute or so before removing his hat and placing it on the parapet beside him. Then he hoisted himself up and rose to his feet upon the edge of the divide, looking down into the river’s depths.

Valjean froze, breathless.

Javert stared into the gulf below, leaning over the edge to better his view, and then straightened himself, shoulders sagging. A moment later, to Valjean’s horror, he allowed himself to fall forwards.

And with that, he disappeared over the quay without a word.

Valjean gaped, unable to process what had just occurred.

It had happened so quickly, and with so little warning or fanfare, that it seemed more like a fleeting shadow—a phantom flashing in the night—than a real man, and a real act.
Was it a trick of his eyes? Was this some kind of dream? Had the stress of it all driven him mad? Surely it was not possible that Javert, that singular, steadfast man that he’d known for so many years, was even remotely capable of—

It was not until the muffled sound of a splash met his ears that he came to his senses and bolted for the water.

He did not even consider the rapids below, or the distant whirlpool, or the great height from which he would fall. It was in an instinctual panic that he vaulted over the parapet and flung himself into the Seine, unthinking and motivated beyond all logic.

The force of the impact drove the air from his lungs, and the cold temperature ignited every nerve in his body as he struggled back towards the surface. Gasping and coughing, his eyes darted around frantically. He could see nothing; all was black as pitch. For split-seconds, serpentine slivers of light reflected off the rushing water, but they illuminated nothing, and only served to confuse his senses.

“Javert!” he called as he fought to stay afloat, turning this way and that. He could hear only the sounds of the rapids and the rough panting that escaped his own throat. “Javert!”

Despite his efforts he could find no trace of the man. Gritting his teeth, he dove under. It was impossible to make anything out; the river might as well have been night itself made liquid, and it gave him a horrible sense of claustrophobia.

Again and again he dove down, rose for air, dove down again, following the river's current. Each time his gasps were more and more pained. “Javert!” he cried over and over, his voice growing hoarse. The water stung his eyes and sapped the strength from his body.

Once more he sucked in a breath and dove below, the world swallowing him up as he swam deeper and deeper.

Blindly, he groped in the darkness, and by chance his fingers brushed past something that felt like wool. With a start he reached out for it, the river already trying to drag it away, and he managed to grab hold of what he realized was the edge of a greatcoat. Fumbling, he followed it up until his hands met a torso, and he wrapped his arm around it and tried to make his way back to the surface.

The heavy burden caused him to make little headway, and Valjean began to wonder if he too might drown in this seemingly endless abyss. The weight of the wet, wool coat was no doubt an unnecessary hindrance, but he didn’t dare waste time trying to remove it. Besides, any attempt he might make at undoing the buttons would be blind: clumsy and pointless. He gritted his teeth, his lungs burning, kicking as hard as he could while he tried to propel himself skyward with his one free arm.

He thought it a miracle when he finally breached the surface, and filled his chest with the night air in greedy gulps.

He could not allow himself to rest before starting again, knew he had no time to spare. So, wheezing, he swam forwards, fighting against the current in an effort to make it back to the nearest bridge.

It was most certainly over-exertion, but the current seemed so much stronger than before, and he could feel himself being pulled back, back from salvation. If he stopped for but a single second, he knew he would be swept away, and he stretched and strained in the darkness, barely able to
breathe.

Finally, with one last lunge, he caught hold of one of the bottom rungs on the side of the Pont Notre Dame. Bracing his feet against the hard stone, he began hauling himself upwards rung by rung, the dripping body shifting limply on his back with each change in angle, dead weight.

When Valjean managed to climb over the railing, he slumped straightaway onto the other side. He didn’t even care how hard his shoulder was struck upon the landing. He just wanted to be still for a moment.

Unable to summon up any more strength, he sprawled out on the cobblestone, panting between coughs.

The rush of relief from being once more upon solid ground suppressed his senses and almost allowed him to forget all else. But mere seconds later his eyes popped open, and he scrambled to his hands and knees.

“Javert, Javert—” The words were mere breaths now, barely making it out of his throat.

He hovered over the inspector, panic setting aflame every fiber of his being and strangling his pounding heart.

“Javert—”

He pulled back the dark, wet locks of hair from the man’s face, revealing eyes that were sunken and shut. Tapped his palm against its clammy cheek, jostling his head frantically.

Javert did not stir. It seemed no spark of life remained within his waterlogged body.

Valjean's voice broke. “Javert …”

He did not know how long he had been searching for, did not know how long either of them had been adrift in the Seine, and it ate away at him, the suspicion that he was too late, that Javert was gone—and that somehow, despite it going against all sense, it was his fault.

But he refused to give up.

Only glancing briefly at the surrounding streets to reaffirm that, yes, there was unfortunately no one around he could call on for aid, Valjean steeled himself and set to work. He only thanked his lucky stars he’d once had the occasion to see this lifesaving technique performed on a sailor in Toulon.

Giving a few thrusts to the man’s ribcage, he tilted his head and put his lips to his, forcing air into his lungs. More thrusts, another breath. His motions fell into a pattern, words surfacing in his mind along with it:

No,

Javert.

If you die,
after all of this,
I do not know
how I can forgive myself.

Why;
why
have you done this,
Javert?
Why?

I do not
understand.

Javert,
live.

Chest compression, air; compression, air—he repeated these actions mechanically, oblivious to everything around him. Not a single thought entered his mind; not once did he ask himself in earnest if the attempt was futile, if he should not give up. Indeed, there was a terror in him that all might be for naught, but somehow this only drove him further onwards.

On and on he continued, for he did not know how long, until suddenly the body beneath him convulsed.

Javert’s abdomen heaved, and he retched up river water on the cobblestone, spasming violently. Still unconscious, he choked and gagged on his own reflexive, half-thwarted breaths, the water dribbling down the side of his cheek as he quivered.

Panting, Valjean sat back, overwhelmed with emotion at the sight: relief and joy and anxiety all at once. As he watched the man’s coughing slowly subside, chest rising and falling, he felt as though a crushing burden had been lifted from him.

For the first time in his life, he found himself looking at Javert without even a hint of fear. Not for himself, not anymore. Only for him.

He gathered the man up and clutched him close, cushioning his lolling head in the crook of his arm and gazing down at him with worry.

His heart pounded in his chest.
He was acutely aware of the damp, heavy weight of him in his arms, the coolness of Javert’s skin, and the gentle, sporadic tremors of his torso as the man’s body tried to purge itself completely of the Seine.

Hunched over him shelteringly, and still trying to catch his breath, he bent his brow to his and prayed.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Death is Only a Door - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil

Final Confluence - Austin Wintory

The Gravel Road - James Newton Howard

The Ocean on His Shoulders - Garry Schyman

Sonmi's Discovery - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil
Of Soft and Harsh Words Spoken in Darkness

Chapter Summary

Javert is surprised to find himself awake—and, by extension, alive. He is not exactly pleased. An argument ensues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“But I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul; and I felt then that I should survive to exhibit what I shall soon cease to be—a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others and intolerable to myself.”

-Mary Shelley

***

Javert was unaware of having woken, or of having slept, and so it was with confusion that he found light filtering back into his vision. He blinked a few times, his mind numb.

He could make out, by some very dim light, that he was in an alleyway; this he knew by the well-worn dirt and refuse between the two brick walls, one of which his back was to.

As his senses sharpened and he gained more mental clarity, he became aware of a distinctly unpleasant sensation throughout his entire body.

For some reason, he was wet, and the chill night air caused him to suffer greatly for it.

His shirt and trousers clung to his skin insufferably; his greatcoat hung heavy on him like a coat of mail and smelled like a wet dog. His Wellingtons were filled with water, his stockings drenched. Strands of his hair stuck to his face.

He felt a burning sensation in his lungs, and an unpleasant taste in his mouth. And his chest—dieu, it felt like someone had knocked the wind out of him in a tavern brawl. His ribs complained at every breath he took.

Coughing weakly, he rose to his hands and knees.

Bewildered, he tried to remember what could have brought him to this state.

Vaguely he recalled letting himself fall into the black void of the river, the waters sucking him down and filling his lungs. This accounted for the sogginess of his clothes. But he could not comprehend how he’d come to be on dry land again; how it was that one could be swallowed up in that particular part of the Seine and emerge a yet living man.
Javert managed to prop himself up into a sitting position, supported only by the rough brick of the alley wall behind him.

How had he come to be here? How was it that he, against his own will, was still alive?

Slowly he turned to his left.

Sitting only a few feet away, slumped against the alley wall and clad in the soiled uniform of a National Guardsman (minus the tailcoat and shako), was a gut-wrenchingly familiar face.

Valjean’s head was hung, his eyes closed, lips slightly parted, breathing softly—he had, it appeared, fallen asleep.

And he, too, was sopping wet.

The implication of this hit Javert like a crash of thunder, shattering something in his breast.

Of course. Of course it would have been him.

And that only made it all the more horrible.

Javert clutched his head, clenching his teeth.

He knew not what to do with himself.

Already he had been an outsider: a lawman, isolated from the rest of society—or so he felt—but now, now he found himself cast out from even that position, and suddenly everything around him was foreign. He was adrift in a vast sea, his bearings lost, anchorage unchained beneath the waves—irretrievable.

How dare Valjean have done this to him; how dare he save him when he did not want to be saved!—how dare he drag him back into this world he no longer had a place in, trapping him with his kindness and binding him to this existence which no longer served a purpose!

At the barricades it had been one thing, but now …

He quivered, clawing at his scalp and choking back sounds which were somewhere between grunts and sobs interspersed with spasmodic coughing, conflicted in every corner of his soul.

A breath sounded next to him. “Javert …”

At the sound of Valjean’s voice he tensed, shivered with anger and also something else indescribable.

“Why did you come after me?” he all but shouted at him, whipping his head around and fixing his indignant eyes upon his face.

Valjean seemed taken aback by the sudden outburst, but quickly relaxed. He blinked, looking at him curiously. “Why did you not come after me?”

Imbecile! He would actively seek his own damnation for inquiry’s sake?

“You stupid old man!” he half muttered to himself, half spat at him.

Confusion and concern spread across Valjean’s features. He reached out to touch his arm, but Javert swatted his hand away.
“You should have left me there!” he snarled. “Why did you not leave me there?”

Valjean looked at him with a hint of horror in his expression, drawing away as if singed. “But—you would have died!”

Javert’s chuckles turned into a growl as he grabbed him by the collar. “That was the point!”

The man gazed up at him from beneath a wet mop of white curls, far too little fight in him, and far too much naivety in his eyes for Javert’s liking. “But why?” he asked. “Why would you wish something so horrible upon yourself?”

He shook his head. “You truly are a fool, Jean Valjean,” he breathed, drawing back a little. “How am I supposed to live with this? To live with—with you?”

The man gulped, brow knitting. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Why?” Javert snapped. “Why save the life of a man you know means to arrest you?”

“Why should that have anything to do with it?”

Javert shook with fury. “That has everything to do with it!” he retorted, throttling him.

“What … what are you saying, Javert?”

In one fierce motion Javert pinned him to the ground, his long dark hair dripping past his face. “I am the only person in Paris who knows who you are! If it weren’t for me, you could just—you could just—” His voice lost its strength. “—walk away from all of this.”

The man’s eyes were large beneath his ferocious grip. “What are you …?”

“No one has to know, Valjean! You can just walk away!” He rose to his feet, backing away and shaking his head, eyes wide. His voice became a hushed entreaty. “Just walk away.” He bolted for the end of the alley, back towards the siren-call of the river—but a strong hand caught his wrist, jerking him to a standstill.

He had almost entirely expected it. And yet the grip on his arm—holding him back from certain death—only made him more agitated, further deepened his inner turmoil.

He grimaced, hanging his head and squeezing his eyes shut, angry tears spilling hot down his cheeks.

He had not cried at the river; he had not cried in the face of death, when all had been lost to him. In truth he had not cried since he was a child, almost too young to remember. He had forgotten the way it burned his eyes, the taste of salt on his lips.

He had not shed a tear in more than forty years.

What was it that caused this upheaval, this cracking in his soul? Why this; why now?

“Why?” he breathed, his voice on the verge of breaking, refusing to turn around. “Why do you do this?”

There was a pause, silence. The grip of the hand around his wrist seemed to grow gentler, almost tender.

Valjean’s voice was soft, lacking the blame he expected to be there. “If you are saying what I
think you are, how can you expect me not to try and stop you?”

Javert gritted his teeth, the roughness returning to his tone. “What do you want me to do, Valjean? Do you want me to take you back to prison? Is that what you want?”

“Of course not; but—”

“Then why will you not let me go?”

“This has nothing to do with what I want for myself! You must know that. This is about you!”

Javert shuddered in his grasp, revulsed by the idea that someone should pity him, should think he needed saving. Especially him.

But, as much as he wanted to deny it, he knew the man was too strong to wrest away from, knew the grip on his arm would clench and hold him like an iron shackle the second he tried to run. “Unhand me, Valjean.”

“I will not. Not until I understand what has led you to this thinking.”

Javert stared at the ground beneath him in contempt, holding his tongue.

He heard a sigh. “You … no longer wish to arrest me; is this true?” Valjean gave pause for him to answer, which he did not. “But,” he continued, “duty says that you must. Is this the source of your conflict?” An uncertain scoff escaped his lips. “No, it cannot be for that, not merely that alone, that you would—” His voice stopped short, and when it next spoke it was hushed, wondering and almost fearful. “Would you?”

Again, Javert gave no reply. Even if he had managed to form a reply in his mind—which he had not—the words would have caught in his throat, for his windpipe seemed twisted up in a knot.

“No, I cannot believe that you would lay down your life for the likes of me,” Valjean continued. “Not you. Not … after all of this. There is something else which has driven you to this state, something more. Is there not?”

It was all he could do not to struggle against him, so great in him was the urge to escape. His entire being had to be focused in order to remain still. Turning around, looking him in the eye—that was out of the question entirely.

He was not used to this sort of treatment, and knew not how to react to it. Bound and restrained he had been before, yes, but never for what was perceived as his own good. It was the complete reversal of all he was familiar with.

And god, how he hated it.

“Speak to me, Javert.” It was more plea than demand.

Javert’s hand, balled into a fist for some time now, trembled, growing ever tighter, so that even his shortly-trimmed nails bit into the flesh of his palm. “You expect me to outpour my heart to you?” he asked. “To you?”

“Judging from your previous actions, I expect you have no one else willing to listen,” Valjean countered, “At least, not at this hour of the night.”

Javert’s head drooped. “I do not understand why you care. I do not understand why you’ve done
what you have."

  “Because it was the right thing to do, Javert!”

  “I know that,” he conceded angrily. “But why; why the right thing in your eyes?”

  Valjean was silent for a moment. “Did you expect me to hate you?” he wondered aloud. “Because the law said you should be my doom? Fear you, yes—and with good reason—but hate? No, not that. How can I hate a man for doing his duty? How can I hate him for obeying the law?”

  Javert tensed, drawing up inside himself until his voice was the only thing left of him. The words slipped from his mouth, heavy and bitter on his tongue. “The law is fallible.”

  The grip on him loosened suddenly at that, and he could almost feel the other man’s surprise. That he would say such a thing! And mean it! Unthinkable!—even unto himself.

  “It is meant to bring justice, to be fair,” he continued, not sure why he was saying this to him. “All men are equal under the law. They are judged not by who they are, but by their crimes. I had always thought that a good thing, sensible and right.” He jerked his arm free, clenching his fists yet tighter, his hackles rising as he gazed disdainfully down at nothing. “And then there was you.”

  He could feel the man’s eyes on the back of his head, probing.

  Valjean seemed to be waiting for him to continue, but he gave no further words.

  They stood in the alley, one gazing at the other’s back, the other blind to all around him. Silent. Frozen.

  Finally, he heard his voice behind him once more. Its tone was different somehow. Weary.

  “Come back to l’Homme Armé with me, Javert.”

  He nearly gave a start, looking back in disbelief that the man would have the nerve to even suggest such a ridiculous thing. “What? No; of course not.”

  The man’s expression tightened in what might have been pain. All the fight had gone from him. “Javert, please; we’re soaking wet, and we’re both exhausted.”

  “I have my own bed to go to,” he growled.

  “I know that, but …” He seemed to hesitate at his own choice of wording. “I don’t think you ought to be alone tonight.”

  Javert scowled. “I’m not some orphaned gamin you need to coddle. Don’t think I need anything from you.”

  “Don’t think I’ll let you go off by yourself after what you just tried to do,” Valjean retorted. “Put away your pride for once, Javert. You are in pain. I wish to help.”

  “I don’t need your pity!” he barked, whipping his head around to glare at him.

  Valjean drew back, a hint of caution in his step. Then he stiffened, balling his hands into fists at his side. “Wherever you go tonight, I am going with you.”

  Javert’s grimace twisted up into a sneer, venom dripping from his words. “Then I’ll go to the station house.”
Valjean stared at him, unmoving. His eyes searched for something in Javert’s. “No, you won’t,” he said after a moment. “Not in the state you’re in.”

The man’s defiance irritated him so greatly that for a moment he returned to his former authority through pure rage. “So help me, I’ll have them arrest you on the spot!”

Despite this threat, Valjean remained motionless, his face solemn and resolute, a stone statue in the alleyway. “Somehow, I doubt that you would.”

“Valjean, if you do not leave me be this instant I will bring down the full force of the law upon your—”

“I am not afraid of you, Javert.”

Javert’s mouth clamped shut, his eyes widening, taken aback by his impudence, his brazenness. What power had he left to control if not that of instilling fear?

His bluff had been called and he did not know how to proceed, for bluffing itself was not something he was accustomed to.

“I told you,” Valjean said quietly, “I submit to you willingly. I was already prepared to surrender myself. That you threaten me with arrest—that means nothing to me.” His eyes stared off without focus. “As far as I am concerned, I was already your prisoner. And I am your prisoner still, if that is what you wish. But I tell you that no matter what happens, no matter what you say to me, I will not leave your side tonight. You may threaten me with death if it pleases you. That is fine. Death is nothing. I will go where you go.”

“If you do take me to the station house, I will not resist you, but know that I will have no other choice but to tell your fellows what has just occurred. And I know that’s not what you want. It’s not what I want either; I don’t wish to see you suffer that. So please just—just come home with me. If you will not follow me there, I will be forced to follow you back to yours. And I suspect you would not want a convict knowing where you live.”

Javert stood staring at him in disbelief. He clenched his teeth.

He could not scare the man away by threat, or by force, as he was outmatched. So it was a thorny reality that he was simply not going to be able to go anywhere tonight without him by his side.

He had, of course, never had any mind to go to the station house; nor had he intended to go back to his own living quarters. If he were to be honest with himself, he had no real intention of going anywhere at all if not back into the Seine, but it was obvious that Valjean would not allow him to return there.

The corners of his mouth drew down, his eyes narrowing; he stood defeated.

“You rob me of my dignity,” he breathed.

Valjean hung his head. Sighed remorsefully. “I know. And I am sorry for it. But the fact remains that I will not let you leave unaccompanied. Will you go with me, then?”

Javert gazed off down the street, where the rapids roared in the distance. He turned his face away into the shadows.
Begrudgingly, he dipped his head.

***

It was about two in the morning, and not a candle was to be seen in any window they passed. The only illumination they had was the occasional street lamp, softening the bluish black of the night—but they were few and far between, and so they were left shivering and nearly blind.

“I must confess,” Valjean said as they slogged down the darkened street, “I am glad you conceded to come with me when you did, for I do not know how much longer I would have been able to stand there arguing in the cold.”

“Frankly, I do not know why you had as much patience as you did,” Javert muttered curtly.

Valjean’s brow shot up. “Pa—? Ah! No, no, you misunderstand;” he said, looking up at him in embarrassment, “I would have stood there for as long as it took to convince you, only—only I have not eaten or slept in some time, and I had to carry that poor boy halfway across Paris through the muck—and then the river’s current, and the temperature … I was unsure how much longer I could remain on my feet.”

His expression seemed almost apologetic. “In fact, earlier, when you would not awaken, I tried to carry you back to l’Homme Armé with me, but, ah—my legs gave out. I am not as young as I used to be.”

Throughout this explanation Javert’s expression had grown increasingly horrified, but it was the last admittance that sent a searing pang of guilt through him, followed by a bolt of incredulity.

This man! This ridiculous man—who had fought at a barricade all night and then traversed through miles of sewage to carry another to safety—this man who had faced his own end many more times in a single day than any man ought to and had barely made it home alive—had followed him straight into the Seine and somehow found the strength to not only drag him out of the rapids but to try carting him on his back across the city! It was madness! His willpower—nay, his sheer audacity—was not to be believed.

Crazy, senseless, saintly idiot! How was he even able to stand after all of this? It angered Javert just to think about it.

“You are a fool,” he told him, not knowing what else to say.

Valjean merely smiled sadly to himself. “There are worse things to be.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:
Adagio for Strings, Op. 11 - Samuel Barber
Colors - Crossfade
Going Under - Evanescence
Omoidasu - Kow Otani
The Storm - Bruno Coulais
Tanin No Jinsei - Kow Otani
Temple of Sacrifice - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil
This Night - Black Lab
Tu Vas Me Détruire - Riccardo Cocciante & Luc Plamondon
Where Will You Go - Evanescence
Chapter Summary

Valjean earnestly tries to work things through, but the inspector is having none of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another, and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it.”

-James M. Barrie

***

“Who goes there?”

Valjean blinked wearily as the porter thrust a lantern in his face.

“Mon Dieu, Monsieur Fauchelevent, is that you?”

“Forgive us the hour.”

They stood in the entrance to Rue l’Homme Armé no. 7, shrinking back from the beam of light.

“I had heard you come in earlier,” the porter explained, “but I was half-asleep, and then you left so suddenly that I thought I might have dreamt it. What on earth has happened to you? You’re soaking wet!”

“I am duly aware,” Valjean sighed, rubbing his temples. “But never mind that.”

“Who is this that you are with?” the porter asked, swinging the lantern to illuminate the figure of Javert, who had been standing further off.

“He is a friend.”

“Well, come in, come in,” he prompted, ushering them through. “Merciful Lord, it’s too cold out here for you to stand around like that!” He shut the door behind them and took the candle from his lantern, lighting the one that stood waiting on the side table in the hall. “I’ll go and wake your servant for you.”

“No,” Valjean said abruptly, turning to him and raising his hand, “that would be unnecessary. I would rather not wish her to see—”

He was cut off by the sound of footsteps descending the nearby staircase.
“Ah,” he sighed to himself as Toussaint came into view.

The woman gave a start at his appearance, clutching at her heart in an overly-dramatic way that slightly bothered him. She began prodding him with all the questions the porter had—the condition of his clothes, his long absence, his companion—and he had to shush her and implore she compose herself, for fear she would wake Cosette.

“Pray, tell me mademoiselle Euphrasie [1] is sleeping,” Valjean said, keeping his volume low.

“She is to my knowledge,” Toussaint replied, “though I doubt soundly. She was very upset at your leaving, what with the condition of the streets.”

“I do not doubt it, but allow her to rest. Her fears will be quelled in the morning.”

“As you wish, monsieur.”

Valjean turned back to the porter, who had been trying to make his leave. “You did not tell her about the other night, did you?”

The man shook his head adamantly. “No, I thought it best not to. She did ask after you, but I didn’t have the heart to tell her the manner in which you’d left.”

“That is well,” he said with a nod. “Goodnight, then.”

The porter nodded back to him with a “Good morrow,” and returned from whence he’d come.

When Valjean turned back around, Toussaint was staring at him. She appeared troubled.

“What is it?” Valjean asked.

“Monsieur, forgive me my curiosity, but—your uniform, the state of your clothes … Were you caught up in the rebellion?”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose,” he sighed, shaking his head, “Though I would prefer greatly not to speak about it.”

“Ah, I did not mean to pry; I was only concerned for your health.”

“That is kind of you.”

“You look exhausted. Is there anything I can do to be of assistance?”

“Oui, thank you. If it’s not too much trouble, could you perhaps bring us something hot to eat?”

Javert shot Valjean a look that was both resentful and mortified. “I do not need—”

Valjean silenced him with but a wave of his hand, furrowing his brow.

“For the both of us,” he said to her.

“Of course,” the woman replied, dipping her head. “There is some broth and bread left from supper; I’ll heat that up right away. And, uh …” Her voice dropped as she gazed down at Valjean’s ruined clothes, her nose wrinkling. “I’ll bring you up a wash tub as well.”

“Dieu, yes. That would be lovely.”
She nodded and headed towards the kitchen.

Valjean picked up the candle and started towards the stairs, and when Javert took his lead and began ascending them, Valjean caught the woman’s arm, turning to whisper in her ear.

“Heed these words and relay them to the porter, Toussaint—whatever excuse he tries to give you, please do not let that man leave here unless I am with him. He is not well.”

Knitting her brow questioningly, she nevertheless nodded before returning to her task.

When Valjean arrived upstairs, Javert was waiting for him.

His eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he refused to look directly at him, but Valjean thought he could see the hint of a tired smirk curl the man’s lips.

“Fauchelevent,” he huffed. “Really?”

Valjean’s cheeks reddened as he tossed him a sheepish grin. “In all truthfulness, it was given to me willingly by the man himself.”

“Oh?”

Javert had not sounded as though he were truly interested, but he’d spoken the word as a question, and so Valjean carried on, if only to have something to talk about.

“You see,” he said, lighting some of the tapers around the room, “after he’d broken his leg, he was unable to continue his chosen profession as a carter.”

“I remember that.”

“And so I helped him to find work in a convent, in Paris.”

A spark of intrigue lit the man’s dulled eyes. “In Paris?”

Even distant and distraught as he was, Valjean could see something of the inspector resurface, calculating the implications of his words, linking past events as though trying to solve a puzzle.

It did not cost Valjean any security now to tell him these things, and if it helped the man regain some sense of himself, then it was well worth the privacy.

“Yes, and that is where I fled to when you hunted me down—the convent of Petit Picpus. To be honest, I had completely forgotten he was working there, at that point. And, actually, I did not even know where it was I had ended up after climbing that wall. So it was quite a surprise when I heard, from out the darkness of those gardens, a voice address me as ‘Father Madeleine’.”

“He did not know what had occurred in Montreuil-sur-Mer?”

“News travels slow inside nunneries, it would seem.” A sad, guilt-ridden smile crossed his face. “He knew nothing of what had transpired there.”

“You abused his trust, then.” Javert spoke as though in a dream—not directing his remarks towards anybody in particular, with little emotion in them.

Valjean’s smile fled, leaving but guilt. “Only because I had to.”

He headed down the hallway towards his bedchamber, busying himself as he spoke. Javert
“He was more than happy to assist me in finding sanctuary inside their walls in repayment for helping him those many years ago—even going so far as to introduce me as his brother, Ultime,” he explained, sitting on the bench stool at the foot of his bed and pulling off his sodden shoes and spats, tossing them to the floor below haphazardly. “He did, actually, have a brother by that name—only he had died years earlier.”

A measure of repulsion arose in Javert’s voice. “You used a convent to hide from the law under a dead man’s name?”

“When you put it like that it sounds much worse than it seemed,” he said, peeling off his stockings. “Trust me, I did not want to deceive the sisters either, but … desperate times. Bref, that is why you were never able to find me after that night.” His expression took on an air of nostalgia as he moved to his dresser, gazing off at nothing, which surely in his mind was something. “We worked together, tending to the gardens. It was a peaceful time. Ah,” he sighed wistfully, “he has passed away now, old Fauchelevent; bless his soul. But, he died with a smile on his face, having lived a good life, and he is with his brother now in Heaven.”

As he rolled up his wet sleeves there was a knock on the already open door.

“Excusez-moi,” Toussaint said, wash tub hanging empty in her hand, “Will you be taking the bath first, or the food? I can heat the water up for you, but it will take awhile.”

Valjean turned first to her, then Javert. “You go first,” he told him.

“All due respect,” he said, giving the servant a sardonic grin, “I think I have gotten wet enough for one night.”

“It will make you feel better,” Valjean huffed. “Besides, you cannot stay in those clothes; they need to be hung to dry by the fire. You may as well get the smell of silt off you.”

Javert shot a look of contempt at him.

Valjean held it steadily.

“Fine,” the man said, crossing his arms and thrusting his eyes elsewhere.

“Shall I warm the bathwater for you, monsieur?” Toussaint asked.

His voice was gruff. “Don’t bother.”

“As you wish.”

While she was fetching the water, Valjean began retrieving things from the dresser and the trunk by the window: a plain white shirt, a pair of tan trousers, linen stockings, a woolen blanket. The clothes he handed to Javert, who took them begrudgingly; the blanket he set on the mattress, which he pulled off the bed frame and began dragging down the hall.

Javert watched him from the doorway in some confusion, but was interrupted as Toussaint brought up the last of the water and gave him a towel and a bar of soap.

As the man was washing up, Valjean began retrieving things from the dresser and the trunk by the window: a plain white shirt, a pair of tan trousers, linen stockings, a woolen blanket. The clothes he handed to Javert, who took them begrudgingly; the blanket he set on the mattress, which he pulled off the bed frame and began dragging down the hall.
firewood rack into the hearth and lighting some kindling beneath it.

By the time Javert emerged from his bedroom, freshly dressed in clean, dry clothes, Valjean had managed to get a decent sized fire going, and it cast flickering shadows on the dark, flocked wallpaper and filled the room with warmth.

Javert took one look at the arrangement of the furniture, cast his eyes upon Valjean, and said, simply, “No.”

“Yes,” he countered resolutely, getting to his feet. “Now give me your coat so I may hang it to dry.”

Narrowing his glare, Javert stalked off down the hall, grabbed his coat, and held it up before him with a look of revolt, letting it drop to the floor like a sack of wet flour.

Valjean returned his gaze with one of regretful frustration, taking the greatcoat and hanging it from a hook on a coat rack, which he placed to the side of the hearth.

He picked up the blanket from his mattress and all but shoved it into Javert’s arms, heading off to his room to retrieve the rest of the man’s clothes.

When he returned, he found the inspector hunched over on the mattress, legs drawn to his chest, the blanket draped over his shoulders. Head hung low, his hair obscured his face. The only thing Valjean could properly make out was the man’s tight-set frown.

Turning away from him after a moment, Valjean spread the damp garments out on the floor before the fireplace, puzzling at something that had spilled out of the bundle.

He held it up in the firelight. It was a little piece of paper pressed between two thin panes of round glass. The wording upon it was unreadable, ink having diluted and spread from water damage.

“What is this?” he wondered aloud, handing it to Javert.

The man took it from him and stared at it. It seemed to hold some importance for him, for how long he looked at it, but the longer he looked, the duller his eyes seemed to become.

Without explanation or ceremony, he tossed it into the fire. He watched the flames lick at it, turning the glass black, before letting his head droop once more.

Valjean studied him curiously.

Footsteps sounded behind them. Toussaint appeared, carrying a serving tray that bore two steaming bowls of broth and a loaf of bread.

“Here you are, messieurs;” she said, carefully placing the tray on the table, “nice and hot.”

“Merci, Toussaint,” Valjean said, bowing his head. “That will be all for tonight. I am sorry to have disturbed you thusly. You may go back to bed now.”

A look of relief flashed across the woman’s face. She nodded and, after casting a brief, worried glance at the inspector, disappeared back into the kitchen, from which the attic, which served as her quarters, was accessed.

Valjean was about to cut the loaf of bread when he stopped short, his hand hovering over the
knife as a something occurred to him. His eyes strayed slowly from the glinting blade to the dark figure behind him, not quite meeting it. Carefully, he took the knife and slid it into the waistband of his trousers, tucking it out of sight beneath his shirt.

He broke the loaf in two with his bare hands, spilling crumbs over the plate. Then he took a bowl of broth and a half-loaf of bread and held them out to Javert.

The man did not stir.

“You will eat,” Valjean said.

“I am not hungry.”

He frowned. “Really. What have you eaten today?”

“I am not,” he repeated, his tone gaining an edge, “hungry. I did not ask to be fed.”

“You are in my house; you will eat.”

Javert turned to set a baneful eye upon him. “I do not recall expressing any desire to come here.”

Valjean’s frown deepened. He stared at him for a moment before giving a weary sigh. “I am giving this to you. Take it. You need something to warm yourself.”

Javert only glared up at him, stubbornly resolved.

Valjean set the dishes down at his feet, eyeing him knowingly. He set to devouring his own portion at the table—it did not take him long; indeed, he had not eaten for days—then he returned to his bedchamber and set to washing himself clean.

The smell of the Seine and the undertone of the sewers left him, gradually replaced with that of lavender scented soap (it was, as it happened, the kind he bought for Cosette, but perhaps Toussaint was trying to tell him something by giving it to him). Valjean rubbed his mop of curly white hair dry and changed into a fresh pair of trousers and a linen blouse, topped with his usual brown waistcoat. He really didn’t wish to bother with formalities of appearance at this hour, but he’d be damned if the man was going to catch a glimpse of him in a nightgown.

When he returned, he found Javert sitting precisely where and how he’d left him. But, to his satisfaction, the dishes beside him were empty. A little smirk played on his lips; he hid it away before coming any closer.

Halfway across the room he paused, observing the man from a distance.

Having rarely seen each other, each time they met it seemed as though the years melted away and no time had passed at all, caught in this eternal game of cat and mouse.

But now, looking at him in proper light for the first time in over a decade, Valjean became keenly aware of just how much time had passed.

The last time he’d gotten a good look at him was in Montreuil-sur-Mer. It felt like a lifetime ago. Now, the man’s long brown hair—so dark as to almost be black—was tinged with streaks of grey in varying shades. So too were his thick side whiskers, spanning the length of his jaw line, beset with patches of salt and pepper against his brown skin.

His eyes were the same icy, piercing blue they had always been, but there was something tired
about them now—circles ringing them that could not fully be explained by lack of sleep.

The solemn air of challenge still hung about him, yes. Buried beneath it, however, was the slightest hint of insecurity, uncertainty—and that was new.

Taking in his countenance, it seemed to Valjean that he was sulking like a petulant child, but there was more to it than that: a hollowness, a consternation to him.

He sighed.

He knew exactly what he ought to do; the trouble was how to go about doing it.

Obviously, the man needed comfort of some kind—reassurance perhaps—but Valjean was unsure how to give it to him without making him only further withdraw.

Javert was a stern man who harbored little to no self-pity and allowed himself few pleasures—this Valjean knew from their time in Montreuil-sur-Mer—and thus far he had bristled at every attempt to show him kindness. This was—though fully expected—extremely problematic if he was to help him work through whatever it was that had brought him to such a dire frame of mind.

At the same time that the man was overly confident and prideful, always thinking himself to be in the right, he seemed to care nothing for himself, no vanity or self-indulgence to be had. Not once could Valjean recall having ever seen him partake in any activity that could be considered leisurely.

In fact, now that he thought about it, the first time he had ever seen him in a light which painted him as human—belonging to the race of men and not some statuesque, otherworldly observer like one of the figures on the Notre-Dame—was when he stepped into the mairie asking for his own dismissal. That was, Valjean realized, the first time he had seen anything within the man that he could relate to on a personal level. And then, again, and more deeply so, as Javert had stepped up onto the parapet above the Seine.

Valjean had been too overcome with apprehension and disbelief at the time to fully process what emotion seeing Javert consider his own demise had instilled in him, but he took the time to contemplate this now.

Even at the barricade, bound and fated to die as he was, the man had not lost his composure. He had remained, as always, stiff and stoic, as though he was not really a part of the goings on around him. Stripped of control, he still retained perfect authority over himself—unflinching, callous. He did not allow anything to affect him.

Yet, mere days later, when his situation ought to have been resolved, he faltered. He seemed, for the first time in his life, indecisive. The inspector—that stony shadow that seemed to possess no self outside of what others perceived him to be—was troubled. He had become lost inside his own mind. There was a tempest raging in his skull, with nothing and no one to quiet it—a storm of what must be doubt and self-loathing, grief and helplessness, drowning his senses.

This state was not unfamiliar to Valjean.

Despite having always been on his own, solitary and aloof, Javert had never seemed to be alone—that was preposterous, of course, as there was never anyone with him (save, perhaps, for some subordinate officers during a patrol).

It had never really occurred to him until now, but Valjean could not think of a single time he had seen the man interact with another human being outside of what his duties called for.
Surely he had at least one friend—a family member, perhaps. Surely he’d had at least one of those things.

And yet Valjean could not think of any.

Could it be? That he …?

Valjean went and stood over him, gazing down with a disheartened frown.

The man refused to even look at him.

“Javert …” He sighed and crouched down so that they were level with one another, putting his hands on the man’s shoulders.

“You have to talk to me, Javert. S’il te plaît. [3] It’s the only way I know to help you.”

Still Javert would not raise his head, only further curling into himself.

“You cannot pretend that you are fine. We both know that is a lie.” His brow knit, voice lowering to a volume barely above a whisper. “Your pride is not worth this, Javert. It is not worth your life.”

“You do not know of what you speak,” came a hushed reply.

“Then tell me; tell me so that I might understand.”

But Javert remained silent.

“It is not wrong for a man to ask for help now and again,” Valjean insisted. “There is no shame in that; we all have our troubles, and some cannot be resolved by oneself alone. Pardieu! That does not make you weak; that makes you human! And there is nothing terrible about that.”

He let his grasp trail down to the man’s forearms. He wished to take his hands, but they remained tightly drawn, clutching the blanket around himself like a shield.

“My entire life, I have never known you to have a single drop of self-pity. You have always given the whole of your hours in service to the people. Do you not think that, just this once, you should allow yourself a little of that courtesy? Do you not owe that to yourself, Javert?”

He could make out a conflicted scowl beneath the man’s bangs.

Valjean took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them, they were a little clearer, a little more resolute.

“Javert,” he began, “I will not pretend to understand what exactly is going through your mind right now. But I am going to tell you a story.” His gaze trailed to the floor. “Once—a long, long time ago—I found myself in a state not too dissimilar from yours at present. It was just after I had been handed my yellow papers in Toulon.”

He paused, eyes losing focus, drifting back in time. “I had nothing but the clothes on my back, and not nearly as much wages as I ought to have earned in nineteen years’ hard labor. So, having little other choice, I set to looking for honest employment almost immediately.”

“In Grasse I came upon a distillery, where men were working as balers, and because they were hard-pressed for help they allowed me to join them. I asked them how much they were paid a day, and they said ‘Thirty sous’ and it was so; but when I went to collect my pay the owner gave me
only fifteen. I objected to this, but he said ‘That is enough for thee,’ and threatened me with the galleys if I kept up with him. And so I left.”

“There is nowhere a convict can go where he is not shunned. I went from town to town, just looking for something to eat and a place to lay my head. These things were denied me. As soon as they saw my papers, they wanted nothing to do with me. It didn’t matter that I meant no harm to them, or that I had money. They would have none of it.”

“In my desperation, I tried going to the prison, and asking the turnkey for lodging, just for one night. ‘The prison is not an inn,’ he told me, ‘Get yourself arrested and you will be admitted.’ And so I went on. I was lowered to begging, and yet, still, I was turned away at every door. I asked for a glass of water and was greeted with the barrel of a gun. ‘Thou marauder,’ they called me.”

“The night was falling, and a cold wind was blowing from the Alps. I was exhausted beyond measure. I saw a sort of hut in someone’s garden, lined with straw, and I thought it was some road-laborer’s dwelling, vacant for the evening. But in fact, it was the kennel of a dog, and just as I lay down to sleep, I heard a growl, and was chased back out by claws and fangs. I sat on a stone by the roadside and said to myself, ‘I am not even a dog!'”

“It was late into the night when a man finally took pity on me. I had knocked on his door already expecting to be turned away—such was my lot in life—but he sat me at his table and fed me from the finest silver, talking to me of sweet, meaningless things.” He gave a quiet scoff. “I barely heard a word he said, my mind was so clouded.”

“That night, I slept in a proper bed for the first time in decades. Some time later I awoke, and I tossed and turned; I could not get back to sleep. It was all so foreign to me.” His voice grew hushed. “I was never more alone in my life than I was on that night. I was no one, with nothing, and nowhere to go—and no one to care. I was so lost,” he breathed. “Even the man’s charity could not jar me from my hopelessness.”

“Looking back, I couldn’t tell you why I did it. It was some kind of compulsion, an act of desperation—madness. In my mind, I think, it was partly because I felt I had been cheated out of honest pay from my time in the galleys. This made the act seem fair—just, even. I must have known it was not, in some small way—yet still, I did it, this terrible thing! I crept into the man’s quarters and stole his silver, stole the very plates he had fed me from.”

“It was the worst thing I have ever done. He was the first person to show me kindness, and I betrayed his trust. He chose, despite appearances, to see the good in me—and I only reaffirmed the bad. That breach of faith, that cold-blooded deed, is something I can never atone for.” Valjean paused, lost in thought for a moment.

“I fled into the darkness with the only things of value he possessed upon my back,” he said. “It didn’t take long for someone to become suspicious of me. Within an hour or so of my departure, I was apprehended by gendarmes.”

“I was so afraid,” he breathed. “I knew what I had done. I knew that in one foolish act I had sentenced myself not only to the guillotine, but to the pits of Hell. They confronted me about the silver; I made some pathetic attempt at an excuse, said the man had given it to me. And so, to my horror, they dragged me back to the Bishop’s house to see whether or not this was true.”

“There was a self-deprecating humor in his tone. “It’s the wee hours of the morning, the sun has just barely risen, and this man comes to the door to find me bound and caught by the scruff of my neck, a sack of silver at my feet.”
His humor fled. A shadow fell across his face as his voice lowered once more, steady and slow. "I just wanted to die, in that moment. If I’d had a pistol, I’d have blown my brains out on the spot. It was too much, the humiliation—I’d have rather perished."

"I could not bring myself to look at him, this righteous man that I had scorned. The gendarmes address him as ‘Monseigneur’. I gave a terrible start at that. ‘Monseigneur!’ I say. ‘So he is not the curé?’ You must understand, the man never told me who he was. He did not live as a person such as he ought; he had traded his palace for the small hospital building that adjoined it, in order to afford them more room. He had no decorations, no finery to speak of at all. His lodgings were so poor I had scarcely believed he could even be a curate, let alone a curé. ‘Silence!’ the gendarmes say. ‘He is Monseigneur the Bishop.’ And I was struck with fear in my heart. I kneel trembling on the ground, waiting for this holy man to condemn me, as he rightly should, as I had no doubt he would."

"And the Bishop, he—" Valjean chuckled, choking back tears. "He turns to me and he says ‘But I gave you the candlesticks also; why did you not take them?’ And I—I could not believe … He vouched for me, lied on my behalf—and for what? He owed me nothing, less than nothing. But he insisted that they free me, that I was innocent, that it was all a misunderstanding. He bids me take the candlesticks before I go; he calls me his friend. ‘Go in peace,’ he says. ‘And by the way, when you return, you need not climb the wall thusly; the door is never fastened with anything but a latch.’"

"And when the gendarmes had left, he looks at me and he says ‘Do not forget that you have promised to use this money in becoming a better man.’ And he speaks my name, and he tells me ‘You no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and perdition, and I give it to God.’"

"So it was that I was released from the jaws of death thusly, with a small fortune in my possession, absolved of my crimes and utterly bewildered. I could not comprehend what it was that had just occurred. Dumbstruck, I wandered down the road. Eventually I had to stop and sit, to collect my thoughts, for they were storming so—and yet so oddly calm and singular. I knew not anything in the world, then; I sat senseless, oblivious to all around me."

"It was during this moment of reverie that a little Savoyard came along, tossing a coin to himself. As he passed me on the road, his hands slipped, and the coin rolled beneath where I was sitting. Without thinking, I put my foot over it. I don’t know why; it was an instinctual thing, I suppose—from my time before Toulon. Money was scarce, then. So I step on this coin, and the boy, he asks for it back, politely at first. When I did not stir he grew angry, shouting abuse at me, and I must have threatened him somehow, for he went away soon after that."

"The evening chill set in, and I regained some of my sense. When I got up to leave, there I saw a little coin where my foot had been, and I stared at it in surprise, wondering from whence it had come. Then I realized what I had done, and was struck with horror. Again I had committed a crime, and this time had not intended for it in the least. To steal from some poor child! Mon Dieu, how could I have done such a thing? For the second time that day I was filled with guilt and self-reproach. I searched desperately for him, up and down the hillside. At one point I even asked a passing priest to have me arrested, I was so overwhelmed,” he laughed sadly. “But the man rode away; I had frightened him off. I continued long into the night, looking for that boy—crying out until I was hoarse. But he was gone. There was nothing I could do. In the wake of my own salvation, I had damned myself once more."

"Ah! I could not live with myself! I fell to my knees and wept; I saw the wretch I had become. All those years in Toulon and I had never shed a tear, not once—not since they’d bolted that iron
collar around my neck. And now I could not control the emotion outpouring from me. It was as though I had been asleep all that time, and had only just awoken. I was horrified at the kind of man I had become. I used to be a tree-pruner; I’d lived simply and honestly, harboring no thoughts of malice—how was it I had come to be this way? Who was this man that stood before me, this vicious brute, this cold-hearted convict? I did not recognize him; I was afraid of him. It was never my intention to become this man! How could I have let such a thing occur?"

“Finally, as I saw what I was, the enormity of the Bishop’s gesture dawned upon me, overwhelmed me. That he had taken pity on this man, that he had granted him refuge, and then, when he deserved punishment, mercy! I had never encountered such a person as he, never been touched by so great a kindness in my life, and it seemed to me then that this man encompassed all that was right and good in this world, and that I, by comparison, all that was wrong.”

“I believed that henceforth I must choose to be either one or the other—an angel or a demon—there was no middle ground for me. If I was to choose the path of righteousness I must become the utmost symbol of it. If I was to continue in my path of degradation, why, I would be the worst criminal, the most evil scum on the face of the earth! And this I knew I could not do. I was already horrified by what I had done; there was no way I had it in me to commit another such act. So I made my choice, and I heeded that man’s words and took them as an oath.”

“Ever since then, I have strived to be a better man. But … The things I did that night, I can never escape from. I have spent my life trying to make up for them, but it is still not enough. It will never be enough. I had been out of my mind. It was only a brief thing, that madness, but it caused so much damage.” The corners of his mouth drew down. “So much.”

He put his arms around Javert, drawing him to his chest.

The man stiffened, shuddered—yet he did not try to pull away as hard as he could have, and within a moment or two sat still, like some small wild beast that knows it’s been caught, and thinks feigning death its only respite.

“Do you understand what I am trying to say, Javert? Twice that day I ruined my own life—twice, saved only by the grace of God. I lost control of myself in my despair; I fell into a lonely gulf and allowed myself to drown. The foolish decisions I made during that lapse of judgment nearly cost me everything I had—and still have, in a way.” One hand trailed up to cradle the back of the man’s head. “Do not make the same mistakes, Javert. You are a better man than I.”

At that the statue in his arms was made flesh; Javert trembled. Falteringly, he lay his head upon Valjean’s shoulder.

Valjean almost started at this, his brows rising. He drew the man closer—gently, tightly—squeezing his eyes shut.

Javert said nothing. He did not cry; he did not stir. He gave no sign of anguish save for his silence, and the rigidness of his muscles.

After a moment Valjean withdrew from him and sat back. In lieu of words he could not quite conjure, he laid his hand upon the man’s shoulder.

“You should get some rest,” he murmured as he stood.

Turning his back to him, he was a step away from the canapé when he heard a voice, just barely rising to meet his ears.
“You should have left me there.”

He stopped in his tracks. The sound of it cut him to the core; it was not something spoken in anger or in certainty, but, rather, with the sound of pain and pleading—a pitiful lament.

The muscles in his abdomen clenched; his face contorted in a sort of agony of the spirit, squeezing his eyes shut as one might when faced with a scene too tragic to bear, when one’s only recompense is to surrender oneself to its overwhelming severity.

His arms hung at his sides uselessly, head bowing. “Why?” he breathed.

“You know why.”

Valjean stared at the floor for a moment. He turned to look back at him with sad, sad brown eyes, shaking his head solemnly—almost imperceptibly. “I really don’t.”

Javert held his gaze for the space of mere seconds before the weight and the sincerity of it caused him to shudder and cast his eyes away, back into the sheltering shadows of the ball he had curled himself into, thrusting his head back down, face buried in arms and knees and blanket.

Valjean considered him morosely for a moment longer. He felt that—at least on this particular night, and with what little the man was willing to communicate, even at his earnest behest—that there was little more he could say to affect him at the present hour.

So, letting out a quiet sigh, he settled himself on the canapé opposite him by the hearth, kicking off his shoes and spreading the covers out on the pink upholstery.

Drawing up the blanket around him, he cast one last look at the man before rolling over.

“Goodnight, Javert,” he murmured.

He prayed that the good Lord might calm the man’s turbulent soul.

After awhile, as the fire was dying down and sleep began to claim him, he shifted his head on the pillow to glance back again.

Javert lay still on the mattress, turned so that his back faced him. He’d pulled the blanket around himself and coiled up in such a way that all Valjean could see was green wool, but the form beneath it rose and fell steadily, and it gave him a measure of peace.

His eyelids drooped closed as he watched, and he fell into a long-forthcoming repose.

***

Footnotes

[1] As Valjean uses Cosette’s formal name here, Javert does not recognize it, because he has never heard her addressed thusly by anyone before.
Similar to a couch, an elegant three-person sofa with an exposed and elaborately carved wooden frame.

Here Valjean addresses Javert in an informal manner, using “te” (or “thee”) instead of “vous” (you). Speaking informally to someone shows you feel you are familiar with them. This can be a sign of disrespect if you’re not close with the person (Javert addresses Valjean informally until he saves his life at the barricades) or a gesture of intimacy and confidence. Valjean is trying to appeal to Javert by subtly showing their familiarity.

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

First Light - The Cinematic Orchestra
Fix You - Coldplay
Follow You Down to the Red Oak Tree - James Vincent McMorrow
Il Mostro - Ashram
Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier
Lost - Michael Buble
Nascence - Austin Wintory
Please, Surrender - Your Hand In Mine
Polonia - Christopher Beck
Scarlet - Brooke Fraser
The Sixth Station - Joe Hisaishi
Timshel - Mumford & Sons
You Are The Moon - The Hush Sound
False Promises

Chapter Summary

Javert attempts to get himself out of an awkward situation and only partially succeeds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We avoid the things that we’re afraid of because we think there will be dire consequences if we confront them. But the truly dire consequences in our lives come from avoiding things that we need to learn about.”

-Shakti Gawain

***

Javert’s brow bunched as the sound of a creak from the floorboards drove him back to consciousness. Hazy, he lifted his head to peer across the room in the direction the noise had come from.

A young girl was standing there in her nightgown, barefoot, her chestnut brown hair hanging over her shoulder in a messy braid. She drew in a sharp breath at the sight of him, taking a step back, the candle she held flickering.

Her voice was light and fearful in the darkness. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Javert rose a little to better look at her, trying to blink away his weariness. It did not work.

His mind was still clouded from slumber, and he failed to address the situation with the authority he normally would have. “Valjean let me in,” he mumbled, turning back to his pillow. His eyes had closed for a moment before he heard her respond.

“How is Valjean?”

At first he knit his brow. “What do you mean ‘Who is Valjean’?” he muttered to himself, “He’s right—” He cut himself off.

The girl did not know.

Of course the girl did not know.

“I mean, Fauchelevent,” he corrected, closing his eyes once more. “Monsieur Fauchelevent let me in.”

“Papa?” she breathed. “Is he—?” She held her candle out a little further to illuminate the room. “Oh!” Her fear dissipating, she skirted around where Javert lay on the mattress and knelt before
Valjean, placing the candle on the floor in front of the canapé. “Papa,” she implored him softly, jostling his shoulder.

Javert was so exhausted it did not even occur to him to question her use of the appellation. “Let him sleep,” he heard himself say as he drew the blanket back up, “He needs it.”

She must have believed him, for after a minute he heard her footsteps recede, and the careful shutting of a door.

***

“Monsieur …”

The flash of Javert’s piercing blue eyes opening gave the old woman a start, and she flinched and instantly withdrew from him as though worried he would seize her.

He knit his brow at her as the night’s events flooded back to his groggy mind.

“Pardonnez-moi; I did not mean to frighten you,” she exclaimed, clutching the fabric of her dress, “but I wondered if you needed to be somewhere to-day? It is getting rather late into the morning—nearly eleven o’clock.”

He propped himself up on his elbows and rose to a sitting position on the mattress with a huff.

Eleven o’clock! He had never slept so late into the day in his life.

Normally by this time he would have— Well.

Certainly on any normal day he would have already reported at the station long before this hour and headed out on a patrol or started whatever daily tasks that might be assigned to him—but this was not a normal day. In fact, the very thought of returning to the station and resuming his work repelled him.

No, he couldn’t possibly go back there—not now, anyway. Not after what he’d done, or what he’d failed to do. He didn’t dare show his face there again.

“I know you had a very unpleasant night,” the servant said, “so I let you sleep in—perhaps longer than I should have.” She bent her head. “I do apologize.”

“No,” he said, tucking his legs beneath him, “There is no need for that. I suppose that I … probably did need the rest. Besides which, I have not anywhere to be at present.”

“Oh! That is good, then.” She appeared a little lost for what to do next; it would seem Valjean did not often entertain guests. Or maybe it was the manner in which he had come and spent the night that caused her befuddlement: sprawled out haphazardly on the floor in front of the parlor fireplace like some vagabond. “Would monsieur like to take breakfast now? The mademoiselle had offered to wait until you had all risen to partake.”

“The—?” He shook his head. “Yes, that girl; I remember now. What was her name again?”

“Mademoiselle’s name is Euphrasie, though she is mostly addressed as Cosette. Do you wish for me to retrieve her? I can start setting the table right away.”
“What? No, I don’t—” He hung his head and let out a sigh. “Nevermind. Do what you wish, I suppose. It doesn’t matter.”

She cocked her head at him and eyed him curiously for a moment. “You don’t need anything else? A wash basin? A comb?”

Javert placed a hand over his face, rubbing his temples and quietly grumbling to himself. “No.”

“Tout ce que vous préférez,” she said with a shrug. “I shall begin the arrangements for breakfast, then.”

When she had walked away Javert stole a glance over at Valjean, who was still sound asleep on the canapé.

He couldn’t say he was surprised the man slept like a log, considering what he had been through. Of course he could sleep soundly, while it had taken Javert what must have been hours to fall asleep. Violent and tumultuous thoughts had wracked his brain for the majority of the night, until it was finally forced to surrender to the sheer exhaustion of the rest of his body.

He flopped back onto the mattress, crossing his arms and sighing deeply. It was impossible for him to recall being in a more awkward situation in his life. Frowning, he glared at the ceiling for a minute before shutting his eyes.

_Cosette_, he thought to himself, _Cosette._

So the girl he'd glimpsed last night was indeed the child that Valjean had stolen from the inn in Montfermeil. That prostitute’s child.

Valjean still had her? How queer. He’d have thought the man would have—

“Are you truly awake?” came a voice.

He found the girl in question peering down at him curiously, her hands clasped behind her back. She wore a pretty white dress that reminded him somewhat of a doily, beset with light blue ribbons at the waist and sleeves. A matching bonnet covered her now neatly combed hair.

“Bonjour,” she said with a little smile, the giggle she suppressed betrayed by her eyes. “I do not think we have been properly introduced.”

“Your name is Cosette, is it not?”

“It is.”

“You may know me as Javert. There, we have been introduced.”

She laughed. “Hardly. Come, sit at the table with me; Toussaint is downstairs making breakfast. Let’s not wake him,” she said, nodding to Valjean. “If things are how you said, it is probably for the best. And, we can talk privately for a little while, and that will be fun.”

“Joy,” said Javert, following her to the adjacent dining room and pulling up a chair.

“Monsieur Javert,” she began once she was settled, “you are a friend of papa’s?”

He narrowed his eyes and averted his gaze, the corner of his lips drawing down.

“Oh!” she laughed. “The face you are making! I think you must be his friend, then.”
He looked back at her and raised an eyebrow.

“He does not have many friends,” she continued, seemingly without notice. “In fact, I do not know that he hath any, now. There was one, at the convent: an old man—his brother, actually, so I am not sure that he counts—but he passed away quite some time ago, I’m afraid. Since then I have not seen papa with anyone else. That is not to say he is not friendly, monsieur, you understand—but he hath not any friends—or at least, that I knew of. But then there was you! Ah, it makes me happy to see him with another person.”

“I think you are misinterpreting our relationship,” Javert said, crossing his arms.

“Oh?”

“I am not his friend.”

She stared at him in surprise for a second. Her face fell. “Oh.”

The expression on the girl’s face wrung some guilt from him—a newfound emotion, and one he was not used to. It caused him embarrassment. He had not intended or expected to care what she thought of him, or of the man she was calling her father—but he found quite suddenly that he did, and he couldn’t fathom why.

“That is, we are—” The inspector floundered for words. “It is true that we are not friends. While this may be, we are …” He made a face. “—acquainted.”

Her brow furrowed, and she examined him thoughtfully. “Oh.”

“You are in the habit of using that word rather often.”

She blinked; he had coaxed a smile from her. “Am I? I had not noticed.”

The conversation was, thankfully, interrupted by Valjean’s servant—Toussaint, as he recalled the girl saying—entering the dining room with a tray full of food.

“Here it is; here it is!” she chimed, setting the dishes down carefully, her fingers nimbly avoiding the most heated sections of the porcelain. She arranged the coffee carafe and its accoutrements in the center of the table—the creamer, a small bowl with some sugar and a tiny spoon in it, and, of course, two teacups on their respective saucers. At either end of this was laid a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, another of strawberries, a plate with thick slices of bread on it, and a pat of butter in a dish.

“Ah, wonderful; I am starved,” Cosette exclaimed, reaching out to fill her plate.

“That would probably be because you failed to eat anything last night,” Toussaint could be heard remarking under her breath as she poured them both a cup of coffee.

The girl shot her a repugnant look. “I did not have an appetite for it then; you know why.”

“I keep telling you, child, you cannot starve yourself on your father’s account; it will only serve to grieve him.”

“That was a long time ago! And I had my reasons then, too.”

“Ah,” the old woman sighed, “mademoiselle. You are sweet, but you should think of yourself now and then.” With this she descended the stairs, perhaps to avoid further argument.
“Don’t pay her any mind; she exaggerates,” Cosette told him. She popped a strawberry in her mouth and was silent for a moment, closing her eyes in a huff.

Javert glanced over at the food and considered, almost seriously, taking some, if only because there were two place settings, and too large a serving portion for one young girl to finish all by herself. He didn’t feel terribly hungry, and wasn’t in the habit of eating breakfasts to begin with, but then again, refusing to touch the meal presented to you was a sign of bad manners, and furthermore would only make things even more awkward, which he was desperately trying to avoid.

Begrudgingly, he took a slice of bread and began taking bites out of it.

After awhile he noticed the girl had paused in the middle of buttering her own slice, and had been staring at it for quite some time now.

“Do you know,” she said with a sullen scoff, “Papa used to refuse to eat bread like this. He would only eat black bread, and you know how coarse and tasteless that is. I implored him to treat himself, but he refused, saying that he felt no need to. It was only because I threatened that I would eat only what he ate did he start eating white bread.” Her sparkling blue eyes were far away and there was a little smirk on her face.

“He does that a lot, you know. He buys me all these lovely things and never any for himself. At the other house, he even sleeps in a separate building—this little shack in the back. He won’t even light a fire for himself. I keep having to spend time with him in there, just so that, for my sake at least, he keeps the place warm.” She shook her head. “He can be so strange at times.”

“Mm.”

She took a few boiled eggs from the bowl and cut them into pieces, poking them around on her plate with her fork instead of eating them. Her countenance was detached.

“You are really not his friend, monsieur?”

“No.”

The girl let out a sigh. “Ah, then you will be one of the people he gives charity to.” This seemed to be a question, though it was phrased otherwise.

“Certainly not,” he retorted, one side of his face twisting up.

“But did you not come here because you needed a place to sleep?”

“No; if you must know, I was dragged here against my will. Trust me, I am no more happy that I am here than you are.”

“You are not that unpleasant, monsieur,” she told him lightly.

He rolled his eyes and gave a grunt.

Cosette nibbled on her eggs absently, her cheek resting on her hand. After a moment she glanced over at Valjean on the other side of the room.

“What happened to him yesterday?” she asked, turning back at Javert. “He looked awful. Oh, you must tell me!”
He closed his eyes with a frustrated noise. “I would rather not.”

“Hm?” She cocked her head at him. “But why?”

“It is not for me to tell.”

“S’il vous plaît?”

“No.”

“Hmph.” She stroked her chin thoughtfully, leaning over the table. A mischievous look began to form in her eyes. “What if I asked Toussaint to make you something sweet?”

Javert wrinkled his nose, narrowing his eyes as he cast them towards her. “I do not accept bribes.”

Cosette blinked, her face going blank for a moment before bursting into laughter. “You are amusing, monsieur,” she said. “I think I like you in spite of your roughness.”

He stiffened. “You should not be so loose with your words around men you don’t know.”

“Well …” She trailed off, tapping her cheek and letting her eyes wander upwards. “It’s true that I don’t know you, but Papa let you in, so you must be all right.”

Scoffing at this, he folded his arms across his chest and risked a brief look at Valjean—who was still sleeping, face buried in his pillow, arm dangling off the side of the canapé. He had the appearance of a drunkard that had finally made it home after a taxing night of revelry.

“You call him your father,” he remarked distantly. “Is he truly?”

The girl was quiet for a moment, and Javert stole a glance back at her.

Her cheeks had reddened, eyes avoiding his. “O-of course he is my father!” She looked at him apprehensively. “Why would you question such a thing?”

Javert took in her expression and measured his words carefully. “No reason,” he said, shifting his gaze away again and trying to sound nonchalant. “He just seems rather old to have a child as young as you. It surprises me. That’s all.”

Cosette studied him for a moment. “Well. I suppose that is true. But what of it? I was not always in his care, but he took me in when I was young, and told me he was my father. So, he is. It is perfectly simple.”

Javert was silent.

Something about the girl’s defensiveness suggested to him that she’d contemplated this subject before and harbored a certain amount of unease over it.

Did she question if Valjean was really her father?

Javert glanced over at the still-sleeping man, with his snow-white hair and weathered complexion.

Was he?

Javert was unsure. It would certainly make things much simpler.
The girl had brown hair. Her mother’s had been golden blonde.

Javert could remember a slip of a story he’d heard once, from the locals in Montreuil: that when the man who called himself Jean Madeleine had first arrived in town, there had still been the hint of brown in his greying locks. And that had been rather damning, in his mind, for the Jean Valjean of the galleys had, as he well remembered, been a brunet.

Javert contemplated this.

After awhile Cosette sighed. She began toying with the silverware. “I tried asking him about my mother,” she said. “About what it used to be like, the two of them. But he always said that it pained him too much to talk about. I mean, I understand, but—still. He never speaks to me of his past. I wish he would. Sometimes he seems troubled—afraid, almost—but he will not tell me why. It hurts, that he does not trust me with these things.”

Javert looked away. “He has his reasons.”

“Oh?” A spark of curiosity entered her tone. “That makes me think you know something of him.”

It was Javert’s turn to grow embarrassed. He glared at the floor. “That is not what I meant.”

“But do you? Know of his past, I mean?”

“It is not for me to—”

“I beg you, monsieur, won’t you tell me? You do know something, I can tell; won’t you please confide in me? Surely whatever it is could not be more horrible than—”

“I am going to wake your father,” Javert cut her off, rising from his chair in a huff. “He has been sleeping long enough.”

He stormed purposefully to the other side of the room, feeling her eyes on his back.

“Valjean,” he muttered under his breath, jostling the man’s shoulder.

Valjean’s eyelids fluttered, expression contorting.

“Valjean.”

The man grunted, squeezing his eyes shut painfully as he turned over, mumbling something along the lines of “Cosette, it is too early” as he rubbed his face. After a deep breath he shifted into a sitting position and looked up, his mouth opening to say something—but he stopped short, blanching at the sight of the dark figure looming over him. His eyes widened, a look entering them not unlike that of a rabbit that has awoken to find a weasel in its burrow.

It took a moment for the fear to leave his face as he recalled the night’s events, and for his muscles to loosen. He hung his head in his hands, letting out a tremulous sigh.

“Javert,” he breathed, as though in this one word he affirmed his security.

After a moment he turned to meet his eyes again.

“The girl is asking too many questions,” Javert said. “She is irritating me.”

Valjean blinked, poking his head around Javert to find his daughter staring at him from across
“Cosette, leave the inspector his privacy.”

“Inspector!” she exclaimed. “I did not know he was a man of the law! What is he doing here? Why is he wearing your clothes?”

“You see?” Javert grumbled. “Too many questions.”

Valjean pinched the bridge of his nose. “He—” Another sigh escaped his lips, deeper and wearier. “He had a rough night, Cosette. He needed a place to sleep. That’s all.”

The girl bunched her face, crossing her arms. “The both of you are withholding things from me, and I do not like it.”

Her father sat with his head in his hand. “Toussaint,” he pleaded.

The woman stuck her head out of the doorway. “Monsieur?”

“I need you to go down to the market and replenish the larder.”

“Begging your pardon, but last I checked, it was—”

“And buy something decent for supper—a goose or a pig.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. “If you’re set on asking, I suppose.”

“And Cosette, would you please go with her to help carry it all?”

“But that isn’t fair!”

“And why would that be?”

“You’re just making an excuse for me to leave you alone together! You’re going to talk about things behind my back.”

“And Toussaint is going to need help with the baskets.”

The girl pursed her lips, sticking her nose up at him. “Fine.”

“She has entered into that rebellious sort of age,” Valjean explained as the women left.

He stared down at the floor absentmindedly for a moment. “I wonder if that boy survived,” he mused to himself. “But,” he mumbled, “there is little helping that now.”

“What did you say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He looked up at Javert. “Have you eaten?”

“I was made to, yes,” he replied stiffly.

“That is well.” The man rose to his feet, running a hand through his hair. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I need to … ah, you know.”

As Valjean headed towards the water-closet, Javert called out to him, with a hitch of annoyance in his voice, “I do not know why I am here.”
Valjean paused, glanced back over his shoulder at him. The ease of his gaze disarmed him. “Because I asked it of you,” he said. “And I am glad for it, and I would very much like it if you stayed awhile longer.”

Javert did not know what to say to that, and so he stood in silence, keenly aware of his own foreignness. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, studying the patterns in the floorboards until Valjean returned.

“Did you manage to sleep well?” the man asked.

“I slept.”

“But not well?”

Javert cast a contemptuous glance back at him. “Why would you even expect me to?”

“I did not; that is why I asked.”

He scoffed. “It doesn’t matter.”

Valjean was quiet for a moment. “I slept later than I meant to. I am surprised that you stayed.”

“So am I,” he grumbled, “But certain circumstances prevented my leaving.”

“I did not want you to leave.”

Javert bit the inside of his cheek.

“In any case,” Valjean said, his voice carefully low, “If you are to leave, I wanted to be sure of you before you left.”

“Be sure of what?”

The man frowned. “You know what.”

Javert’s countenance darkened, his head hanging a little, not out of embarrassment, but out of bother. “Ah. That.”

“Yes, that,” he sighed. “I need to know. Javert, are you still …?”

“Thinking of killing myself?” he said bluntly. Even as he uttered them so stoically, the words felt like knives in his gut. “You need not worry about that.”

“I need to hear you say ‘no’,” Valjean said firmly, locking eyes with him. “And I need you to mean it.”

Javert was silent. His eyes fell back to the floor, veiled by his long hair. “No,” he finally said.

He was able to say this because, at present, he was not actually thinking about it, and therefore to say so was not a lie. This did not mean that he would not later fall back into such thoughts; he did not deny this to himself. But it was enough to say that at this very moment his mind was preoccupied with other consternations, because that much was indeed true. It did not matter to him how long the duration of this truth would endure, so long as it was true as of the precise second he said it, because he wanted more than anything to escape the hell that was this awkward confrontation between them.
Rising from up off the wall, he headed towards the fireplace, where his coat hung on the rack and his clothes upon the floor.

“Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to commandeer your bedroom for a moment.”

Valjean watched him go with a perplexed, distrustful sort of look on his face.

Safely behind the security of a closed door, Javert stripped off the clothes the man had given him and put his own back on, methodically rebuckling the thin leather straps of his black stock collar. He refastened his belt around his waist, to which his sword and cudgel were still affixed.

Donning his greatcoat—which was mostly dry at this point—he retrieved the black leather gloves which Valjean had left inside its pockets and made his hands into fists a few times to properly fit them back on.

He cursed the fact that he no longer had a hat with which to hide his face in shadow; he felt strangely vulnerable without it. Naked.

He plucked a few strands of debris from his shoulders before reentering the hallway.

Out of habit, he patted the spots on his coat where his inner pockets were, having felt them unusually flat.

“Damn,” he said.

“What is it?” Valjean asked.

“My manacles and my snuff box, they must’ve—oh, never mind,” he said, biting back his words with a grain of salt. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he snarled.

Valjean stared back at him, off put, vaguely concerned.

Javert considered his face and thrust his own away, seeking mechanically to smooth and retie his hair behind him only to find that he had nothing to tie it back with anymore. He let out a breath through clenched teeth.

“I think I will take my leave now,” he remarked, heading for the stairs.

“Oh?” Valjean said, half curiously, half argumentatively. “And where are you going?”

Javert stopped halfway down, gripping the banister.

“Where are you going to go, Javert?”

“I am going to the station house,” he finally said, resuming his descent. “I need to report for duty.”

Valjean paused at this, allowing him to continue into the front hall. “Are you sure that you—?”

“I will be late,” Javert interrupted him.

“Javert …”
“Thank your servant for me,” he said, opening the door.

As he stepped outside, a hand caught his wrist, jerking him to a standstill like a leashed dog.

Slowly, Valjean’s grip loosened; his hand trailed down to his, opening it as he might a child’s and clasping it between his own.

His voice was quiet, sincere. “Take care of yourself, Javert.”

Javert gave a shudder, jerking his arm from his grasp as though singed. The limb quivered as it returned to his side, his fist balling and unballing itself.

After a moment of silence he thrust his head down and stalked off.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Dance with the Fish – Bruno Coulais
First Light - The Cinematic Orchestra
Fur Elise - Beethoven
The Growing Recognition of the Genius of Birds - The Cinematic Orchestra
Katy’s Tune - Kila
The Living Sculptures of Pemberly – Dario Marianelli
The Mother’s Portrait – Bruno Coulais
The Wolf in the Trap

Chapter Summary

Javert makes another effort to simplify things. He fails spectacularly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The doorstep to the temple of wisdom is a knowledge of our own ignorance.”

-Benjamin Franklin

***

Henri Joseph Gisquet was a little over a month away from the respectable age of forty, and already he had embroiled himself in a number of political scandals, most of which, arguably, were not entirely his fault. He had a serious air about him, dark, solemn eyes, a full face and thin lips that were framed with laugh lines. There was a slight wave to his greying hair, so that his bangs curled up on one side of his brow. His side whiskers spanned the length of his jawline; his chin and the rest of his face was clean shaven. His left arm had been amputated just below the wrist, and he wore his shirtsleeve pinned closed on that side.

He had a sullen, preoccupied air today; this was, perhaps, in part due to the recent passing of his patron, M. Périer, who had fallen victim to the cholera epidemic three weeks prior. There was also the fact that the uprising had been quashed not even a full day ago, and there were likely endless reports of theft, property damage, altercations, and arrests now filtering in—never mind the full bureaucratic nightmare of the aftermath that Gisquet would have to personally deal with. Javert did not envy him his post.

Gisquet did not divert his attention from his paperwork as Javert entered, nor did Javert expect him to. He stood before the man’s desk in the aspect of dignified humility, his hands folded behind his back, his posture and expression purely military.

“Monsieur le Préfet,” he said, “I must request something of you.”

“Oh?” There was an absentmindedness to his tone.

“I request that you dismiss me from duty effective immediately.”

The Prefect’s demeanor shifted abruptly into something grave as he looked up from his paperwork. “What?”

“You must turn me out, monsieur. I have committed a delict. I have offended the law.”

“Offended the—” Gisquet’s brow furrowed in scrutiny. His voice dropped to a hush. “Pardieu,
“Javert, what have you done?”

“Nothing,” Javert replied, just as grave as he. “I have done nothing. That is my damnation—I have done nothing when I ought to have done something.”

“What is it you have failed to do?”

“Uphold the vow I took when I was permitted this post.”

“You speak in riddles; tell me plainly what you mean.”

Javert’s bent his brow to him in shame. “I find myself incapable of carrying out a task that I know is called for under the law. It ought to be done; I cannot do it.”

“What is this task? And why does it repel you so?”

“Apprehension of someone who has broken the law: that is the task. As to why I cannot do it … I don’t know that I can properly voice that.” He fumbled with the hem of his coat sleeve for a moment, lost in thought. He shook his head. “It does not matter; I must be dismissed.”

Gisquet studied him. “Is this person kin to you?”

“No.”

“A friend, then?”

His head drooped a little. “No.”

“Then why do you feel you cannot apprehend them?”

Javert stared down at the floorboards, eyes narrowing as though to help him find the most fitting words.

“Obligation,” he finally said.

“An obligation higher than that of yours to uphold the law?”

A frown twitched at the corners of Javert’s lips. “My uncertainty on this matter is why I must be dismissed, Monsieur le Préfet. Such indecision cannot be tolerated in the ranks of the police.”

The man sat back in his chair, taking a deep breath and biting his lip. “Perhaps, yes. But, tell me, what causes this upheaval in your judgment? This is unlike you, Inspector. You are not close with this person, you say?”

Javert only shook his head again, slowly.

“What, then, is the core of the issue?”

“I am not ... sure.”

“Of your reservations?”

“Of the law.”

Gisquet’s eyebrows rose, then bunched once more. He was silent for a moment, frowning in contemplation. “You mean to say, perhaps, that you find the particulars of the law, as it applies to
this person, morally objectionable?"

Javert gave a nearly imperceptible start, lifting his face.

To hear the Prefect utter those words—in the easy tone in which he had—both upset and elated him. For the man who personified the law to imply that there was something besides the law which ought to be taken into consideration when upholding it—strange and terrible, wonderful and awful.

So! This was not an enigma! This situation in which he found himself trapped was not a hitherto unknown occurrence.

What! So other lawmen could feel this way? And still keep their posts?

He felt the remains of the judicial system in which he functioned crumble to dust at his feet.

“There is something more to the relationship you have with this person, or the way in which you view them or their unlawful acts—and you hesitate because of this, non?”

“Non. I mean—that is to say, oui.”

“Ah. And is it that you are uncomfortable arresting them personally, or is it that you do not think they should be arrested at all?”

At all? No. Wait; yes? Not entirely? One cannot go about choosing opposing halves of a judgment in this profession. What was it that he should say here? He knew not what the truth was anymore—he was incapable of distinguishing what his own idea of morality was from that of the law’s—that was the whole of the problem.

The Prefect considered him very seriously, leaning forward on his desk. “Javert,” he said, his voice suddenly low, “I trust that you will answer truthfully to me. Has this to do with the rebellion?”

Javert faltered. “In what way, monsieur?”

“I mean to say, has this issue sprung from a political standpoint?”

“No.”

“It has nothing to do with the insurgents?”

He shook his head. “No; that is the truth.”

And it was, because while Valjean had been at the barricades, and had assisted the insurgents, none of those things were what had caused Javert this dilemma. It was what Valjean had done, and who he was, that had thrown him into this gulf of uncertainty.

Gisquet studied him. “I believe you.”

“It arose amidst the chaos on the streets;” Javert explained, “but it hath not to do with the insurrection itself, monsieur.”

“I see. Then, let us return to the matter at hand. Ah, but you have not answered my question. Do you believe this person ought not to be arrested at all, or is this purely a problem of personal comfort?”

Javert's glance skirted to the edges of the room, running along its wooden trim. He opened his
mouth to say something, but nothing came out; he had not produced a single thought. He frowned, his features further contorting in consternation.

Gisquet let out a sigh. “You know, Javert, you are not the first person in the history of the prefecture to feel conflicted on the justness of a law.”

Javert was no longer aware of what expression he was displaying on his face. “But Monsieur le Préfet, one should not be conflicted on their duties at all; that is why I have come! The law should make clear the line between right and wrong—should be unflinching in its judgment—and so should those who uphold it!”

“Yes, this is true,” he said. “That is how it should be. But that is an ideal, and things are not always so clear-cut. The law cannot always be applied to every situation and be expected to perfectly fit. We ought not need question the law, this is the hope—that, applied equally, it should promote fair conclusions. But there will always be times when the law falls short of its intended purpose, and we must reexamine the principles from which it was writ. If this was never done, there would never be any reform, any progress in the name of justice.”

“Do you understand what I am saying, Javert? I am not angry with you for bringing this to me. You ought not be ashamed to find yourself questioning things sometimes. It is the sign of a healthy mind. One needs to take a step back every now and again and evaluate one’s actions in accordance with their own sense of righteousness.”

Javert was staring at him, too shocked to hide his bewilderment.

“Now,” he continued, leaning back again, “you know as well as I that there are sometimes scoundrels in our ranks—gutless fools that are just clever enough to twist the law to fit their own agendas, cowardly thugs that hide behind their authority and use the power it grants them for the sport of it. You have never struck me as that type; nor do you do so now.”

“You say you are conflicted over the law. You know not what to do. You wish to advocate inaction when the law calls for action. Most men here would simply do nothing and not speak of the matter—but you, Javert, you come to me, you bare yourself plain. You are honest and forthcoming; that is good. You do not wish to disobey—you would rather be dismissed than bring shame upon your fellows. You are humble; that is even better. You wish above all to be just—in the truest sense of the word—even if it means ill for you. That is best of all.”

“No, I will not dismiss you. A man like you is invaluable to me. Mon Dieu! I would rather have fifty well-meaning men that occasionally question things working under me than a thousand unconscionable brutes that never gave any thought to their duties beyond following orders.”

Javert’s eyes widened; his face grew hot. He looked away.

“Now, about this matter which perturbs you. I suppose you cannot tell me the identity of the person in question. What of the nature of their crime?”

Again, he was silent, his face conflicted.

“Ah, no; you cannot tell me that either?”

Forlorn, Javert shook his head.

“Hm.” The man drummed his fingers on the desk and then rubbed his chin. He sighed in consternation, eyes drifting off.
“If this person were a danger to the public, I do not doubt you would have already apprehended them. Am I right to assume you judge them harmless? Unlikely to pose a threat to those around them?”

Javert drew in a breath. Letting it out in a restrained sigh, he gave a nod.

“So the matter is not pressing?” Gisquet asked. “Were action to be taken, it need not be immediate?”

Again, he nodded.

“Then you may have time to deliberate on it, if you wish.”

Javert thrust his face up to look at him incredulously.

The man considered his expression. “It’s not as if it will disrupt your other casework, is it?”

“No, but—Monsieur Gisquet, the point of this is that I cannot come to a satisfactory conclusion! Time will not aid me in doing so. In any case, it should not matter; I should not be permitted to decide such things for myself as though I were above the law. I am merely an agent of the police—a servant of justice, not justice itself!”

The Prefect cocked his head at him. “Then is this to say that, left to your own devices, you would not strive for what is just?”

“I…” He ran a hand through his hair, reeling at this introspection. “I do not know, any longer, what is just.” His voice fell, a hint of humiliation in his tone. “Without the law, I do not know myself.”

Gisquet propped his chin up on the desk. “Let me pose a question, Javert. Suppose you had decided that inaction was the proper approach, despite it going against the law. Suppose you chose to do nothing. Would you still have brought this matter to me?”

“Of course!” he replied, shocked that this would be doubted. “I’d have informed you right away, and then I’d ask to be dismissed, because I would have failed in my duties!”

“Then,” the man said, leaning forward and fixing his gaze upon him, “Have you not already made your decision? Because, I’ve just described exactly what you came here to do.”

Javert tensed, recoiling in horror. He opened his mouth to speak, but failed to produce a sound, and slowly closed it again as his eyes trailed to the floor, calculating his own actions.

He shuddered in spite of himself.

Could it be true? Had he already reached a conclusion? Already transgressed, overstepped his authority in the depths of his soul, unbeknownst to himself?

Such rebellion! It could not be tolerated.

“Dismiss me, then!” he cried, upstarting—a desperate, pleading tone in his voice that he’d never heard before.

Gisquet sat motionless. “No,” he said, “I should think not.”

Javert searched his face, dumbstruck, terrified.
“You shall report for duty three days hence, at the usual hour,” the man said indifferently, busyng himself with rearranging the items on his desk. “—when you’ve had time to collect yourself. That will be all, mon inspecteur.”

Javert stood frozen before him. Trembling, he clutched his head, eyes darting this way and that beneath his knit brow.

Then, in one swift, humiliated action—his face burning like a brand—he bowed to him and fled the room.

***

After Javert had left his office, the Prefect parted the paperwork that lay strewn across his desk to reveal a neatly penned letter, dated “About one o’clock in the morning” of that day: June 7th. He tilted his head contemplatively, brushing a thumb across the carefully written words. Then he folded the letter and filed it away in the corner drawer.

***

Javert exited the Prefecture building in the manner of a man pursued, hiding his face from the fellow officers of the law that he passed on his way, his footfalls clumsy in their hastiness. His skin seared beneath his heavy coat, a sweat breaking out under his collar. He could feel his own pulse throbbing at his temples, beating through his bulging veins as his body sought to rid itself of the heat borne of indignation and embarrassment that colored his face and muddled his mind.

With a heave he threw open the great wooden doors and hurried down the narrow corridor into the street.

He’d thought the rush of air as he reached the outside would provide him some relief, but he found that though he’d escaped the building and the questioning eyes of his superiors, he was no more calm or collected than before—perhaps even less so. The urge to run still coursed through him, propelling him onwards, as if he could somehow outspeed his own shame.

He found himself between the Pont Neuf and the Pont Saint-Michel, stopping at the parapet that divided the Quai des Orfèvres from the Seine. He gripped it’s edge fiercely, head hanging, as he panted and stared into the murky water far below. The river’s roiling current seemed, to him, less turbulent than the inner workings of his mind at present.

He felt as though he were being burned alive, a tempest raging in his skull. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek and fell from his chin.

No singular thoughts could bubble up from the maelstrom that was his mind; vague notions and terrors swirled endlessly inside of him, overlapping and entangling, too many emotions that he had seldom felt before churning and crashing in his head, driving him mad.

He felt trapped, cornered, tangled and ensnared; he yearned desperately for escape, but even that seemed hazardous now, perilous and nearly impossible.
No, of course he could not throw himself off the quay at this hour of day.

That would be ridiculous.

Firstly, it was broad daylight—there were pedestrians, and it would cause a horrible scene. Secondly, someone might jump in after him, and that was no good; the waters here were far too treacherous to traverse, even if one was young and strong, and healthy—that Valjean had managed to pull him out unscathed was pure luck. Thirdly, and most prominent in his mind, ending one’s life was not something one did in the presence of others. Such things were the domain of the night, when all was silence and solitude, and one’s thoughts had their way with them. It would not do to dwell on the consideration of such a thing—not here, not now.

Not after last night.

None of these thoughts occurred to him consciously; rather, shadows of them danced at the back of his mind, skirting his awareness but barely. He had not come here to do that—this was all he knew, even as his own body seemed to revolt against him and pine for the abyss, if merely to escape dishonor.

As to why he remained staring down at the water below, he had the inclination that it was because the twisting currents—tumbling in conflict and swallowing each other whole—matched what he was experiencing inside himself at that very moment.

His breath was ragged as he gazed down at it, his long dark hair, having been deprived of its usual tie, hung past his face, obscuring his features from prying eyes.

It had been mere hours—half a day at most—since he had nearly drowned, and he felt almost as though he were back in that moment again, back in that horrible state of his soul, writhing in internal agonies. Only, everything seemed so much different in the sunlight.

Before, with the skies overcast so that the whole of the world was swathed in shadows black as pitch, and with the dim red light of the street lamps like echoes of hellfire, it had truly seemed he’d stood upon the precipice of fate—of divine judgment, of eternal consequence.

But now there were bright colors, and blue skies. The sun was unobscured, and birds were sitting atop the gutters and downspouts, twittering pleasantly.

What a difference a day makes! A little starlight and the world was born anew.

No, it was impossible to think of self-destruction in a place like this, surrounded by such things. It made him ache for the shadows and the sanctuary of the night.

His gut was wrenching, knotting itself up in a million different ways, and he felt as though someone had lit a brazier of coals within his stomach. His face burned.

The waters sucked him in.

Then a sensation of movement broke him from his thoughts, grounding him once more on the quay: he felt someone take hold of the back of his greatcoat, gripping the heavy wool half-capes like a vice.

Javert did not start—the action had been gradual enough for it not to alarm him.

He did not need to turn around, did not need to verify who it was that stood behind him; he knew exactly to whom that hand belonged.
His lips split into a bitter grin. A low, dark chuckle rose from his throat, reverberating in his chest like that of a demon’s. It was the laugh of a man on whom the universe has played a cruel joke, and cannot help but be amused at his own plight even though he does not find it very funny.

“Bien sûr,” he said to himself. Of course.

“You did not go to the station house,” said Valjean.

Javert let out another self-deprecating chuckle.

“I fail to find the humor in this. What are you doing back here?”

“You think I’m going to jump, do you?”

“I’d be happy to have my suspicions proven wrong.”

“Well, then,” he said sardonically, “be you happy.”

“I would be, if you would but step away from the edge.”

Javert stood gazing out at the river contemplatively, as though he were but a tourist passing through the area. “Perhaps I enjoy the view.”

“Perhaps I should club you over the head and drag you away from here. That would make a fine spectacle for passersby.”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “I’d like to see you assault a police agent in front of the Prefecture building.”

Valjean’s voice was humorless, rough. “Make any move towards that water and I will not hesitate to.”

A small, sour smirk played on his thin lips. “Mm. I don’t doubt it.”

“Then spare us both the trouble and turn around.”

Javert remained motionless.

“Do you know,” he said after a moment, his tone oddly casual, “what I came here to do today? Not to the Seine, I mean—to the Isle.”

Valjean made no reply, but Javert thought he could feel the man’s grip on the back of his coat falter for a split second.

He risked a glance back at him with one icy blue eye.

After a quick inspection of his features, Javert realized what the man could have interpreted his words to mean.

How was it that Valjean could believe he’d just incited a warrant for his arrest, and yet still cling to him thusly, holding him back from the water’s edge as though it were his own life he were protecting? In fact, the man’s grip on him was only tightening—as if to say ‘even damnation shall not dissuade me from stopping you’.

This display of foolish, unflinching devotion softened him some. He turned his eyes back towards the river, unable to look upon the man’s expression any longer.
“No,” he said, his tone dropping, “It was not for that.”

It took Valjean a moment to respond. “What, then?”

“I came to ask that I be dismissed from the police.”

He could feel the man give a start.

“What? Why would you—?”

“I thought it my only recourse from this dilemma,” Javert said, “besides that other way. But,” he laughed humorlessly, “do you know what the Prefect’s response was? That I was ‘too valuable’ to him, and he could not let me go. Apparently, he shares the view of a certain mayor I met some years back, and insists I am too hard on myself.”

He turned to face Valjean, something between a smirk and a scowl on his face.

“Isn’t that hilarious?”

The man let go of his coat and took a step back. “Mon Dieu,” he exclaimed, “you look terrible! What’s happened to you?”

“What’s happened to me?” Javert chuckled incredulously. “You mean, besides half drowning last night? Besides losing my purpose in life and my sense of right and wrong? Besides owing my life to a convict and having my worldview turned upside down? Being dragged out of the river and forced to take supper with the very person responsible for my distress? Having my dignity rent to piecemeal before my very eyes? Besides all that?”

He had not become aware of his voice rising until it was already almost a shout.

“What is it you’re asking, Valjean? Which one of the hundreds of things you’ve stolen from me are you wishing to comment on?”

Valjean had gone ashen, the color draining from his face. “You’re not well,” he said, half to himself.

“Not well?” Javert repeated with another chuckle, “Not well, you say? Oh, but look at me!” He threw his arms out. “I am the picture of health, the shining example of authority! Why, do you not recall the words of Monsieur le Préfet? I am invaluable to him, the best at my job; he would rather have one very confused inspector who’s lost his grip on reality and the will to live than a thousand unconscionable brutes that actually know how to do their damn jobs! Apparently, the whole of the city wants to save me, when I am not worth saving! When I do not want to be saved! When I don’t know how to go on any longer!”

Livid, he all but throttled him. “Of course I’m not well!”

Valjean stared up at him in shock.

“That is it!” he cried, upstarting, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him away, “We are going to my house, we two, and we are going to have a very long discussion! You will not resist me in this; you are ill in more ways than one and ought to be seen by a doctor!”

“I don’t need your damn pity!” he raged, struggling to free himself. “I don’t need a doctor! I don’t need anything from anyone, and especially not from you!”
“What you need is a dose of poppy-milk and a long bed-rest!”

“I need nothing; unhand me!”

“Stop this; you’re out of your mind!”

“You will release me, Valjea—”

“I meant it!” the man roared, gripping his collar with both hands and shoving his face in Javert’s so that he had no choice but to fall prey to his blazing brown eyes, “I meant what I said about using force, Javert! You’re not well! And if I have to bludgeon you over the head before you submit to being helped, then so be it! Otherwise, you’ll come with me quietly and you will stop fighting! Unless you’ve a penchant for getting your skull bashed in! Do I make myself clear?”

Javert froze, his muscles going rigid.

With how gentle his demeanor usually was, it was easy to forget that, despite being quite shorter and older than him, Valjean was much, much stronger—and could, with the right motivation, be capable of violent and tremendous things if he so wished.

“Do I make. Myself. Clear?”

Slowly, his expression neutralizing and falling into shadow, Javert bowed his head.

Valjean held him there a moment more, studying his face. “Good.”

He released him from his grip—which had been like an eagle’s or a lion’s—but retained a firm hold on his wrist.

They began walking; rather, Valjean began leading him away from the quay, and Javert trailed after him like an unhappy ghost, resigned to its fate.

He remembered, in a moment of lucidity and random recall, that he had been given three days leave. So this affair with Valjean would not affect his work. Not that he wanted anything to do with the man right now, not that he even wanted to return to his duties—but at least it would not inconvenience the prefecture. And, to tell the truth, he didn’t have any idea as to what he was supposed to be doing right now.

“It doesn’t matter,” he mumbled to himself, hair falling in front of his face.

“What was that?” Valjean asked, glancing back at him.

“Nothing,” he breathed, head down.

Nothing matters, anymore.

Halfway to the house he fainted.
**Javert:** *rolls up to the prefecture building* Hey yeah could I get uhhhhhhhhhh ... dismissed from duty

**Gisquet:** Dismissal machine broke

**Javert:** Understandable. Have a nice day

---

Here's an actual picture of Gisquet, though he's probably much older in it than at the time of this story.

Suggested listening:

Far From Home - Five Finger Death Punch

Thistle and Weeds - Mumford & Sons

The Humbling River - Puscifer

Into the Ocean - Blue October

Lost Cause - Imagine Dragons

Travel to Edinburgh - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil

Violin Concerto #2 in E, BWV 1042 No. 2. Adagio - Bach

Winter - Paul Halley
**Bedraggled and Belittled**

Chapter Summary

Javert is forced to admit his failing health, but he damn well isn’t going accept assistance without a fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sometimes we lay aside our own troubles when we wipe away another's tears.”

-Seneca

***

The passing of time ceased to be coherent for Javert.

Things came in vague flashes to him: images, sounds, and a host of irksome and confusing sensations. He understood that he had been dragged to Valjean’s house, but not much beyond that.

Strange, though—why had the man brought him to a flat earlier, if he had his own house? Why did he even have a flat? Why had his girl and his servant been there, and not here?

It didn’t matter. He was too beset with feverish afflictions to care, anyway.

But Valjean, and—there was another man with him, now—a doctor?—they were bothering him. He hated their presence, worrying and simpering over him like he was some kind of pathetic child. Why couldn’t they just leave him alone? He hadn’t asked for this.

He struggled in vain against them at first, nearly losing his balance at times, with the room swirling about him as if he’d somehow become the unfortunate centerpiece of some hellish carousel. He gave up after he’d stumbled back and hit his head against the wall, his vision swallowed up by an encroaching tunnel of blackness.

Obnoxiously, he still retained some sense of what was going on around him, and he could hear Valjean and the doctor sharing worried exchanges in the hallway, though their voices seemed to swell and recede like the tide.

“—be trying to give him water? I’m afraid he’ll choke.”

“—the time being. If you can just keep him cool …”

“—have been the water in his lungs—”

“—the windows open.”
He tried to blot out the noise and the incessant pounding in his temples, to no avail. Was that his own blood he was hearing pumping through his veins? Surely it could never be this loud.

Twisting and turning in bed, he tangled himself up in the sheets.

Damn this insufferable heat! It was driving him out of his mind.

Eventually, for all his torment and rage, he had to give in to exhaustion and lay back against the pillows, despite his restlessness.

Helpless, he found himself losing control of his own body, his own senses. His thoughts became nothing more than muddled urges and feelings of unpleasantness and despair.

The doctor must have left, at some point, because he no longer heard him, but he'd had as little awareness of his departure as he had of his arrival.

The only thing left was the voice of Valjean—murmuring softly beside him in what must have been words of reassurance—and his occasional touch—on his shoulder, his hand.

Things seemed darker; he was no longer certain what hour it was, or how long he had been here, or why he should even care.

Still, this ... Undignified, demeaned, locked up and put to bed in the house of a convict—his situation revolted him.

If only Valjean would go away, if only he’d leave him be.

But he couldn’t even rail against him. Not now, anyway. He could barely make sense of what was happening around him.

He knew only burning and throbbing and hopelessness, languishing in his misery.

By the time his consciousness finally spiraled away into the abyss, he greeted it with open arms.

***

The richly colored light of the setting sun filtered through the curtains, casting soft and elongated shadows onto the plain wooden boards of the floor and walls.

Valjean sat in his wicker chair in what was normally Toussaint’s bedroom on the upper story of their little house on Rue Plumet, his pen scratching quietly away upon a piece of paper which he had arranged on a book upon his lap.

He paused in thought for a moment, turning to look to his right where Javert still lay unconscious in bed, a wet cloth draped over his brow.

The color of his face had dulled, leaving sickly blotches of red on the tip of his nose and around his sunken eyes. Sweat glistened on his skin, a visible sign of both his temperature and his distress, and once in a while he would thrash weakly about on the sheets with a string of incoherent grunts.

Sighing, Valjean returned to his letter.
“My dear Cosette,” it read, “You must forgive me. I know this morning I was harsh with you, and unjustly so. It was true, of course, that I was only making an excuse for you to leave the flat so that I could talk to that man in private; it simply had to be done.

And I know this is inconvenient, what with my earlier absence—which I truly apologize for—but the inspector has taken ill and hath not, it would seem, anyone else to care for him. He was not well when he came to the flat—you may ask Toussaint about it; we arrived at an odd hour and in poor condition. He was railing against me and I granted him a little liberty for it, but it seems even that was a mistake. Now he's fallen victim to a bad fever and Lord knows what else, and he is quite out of his mind at the moment.

I do not know when I shall be able to return home, but it will probably be in no more than a few days at most. Do not worry; everything is fine. I did think we were in some trouble earlier—and that is why I had us switch houses—but I think it has passed.

My dear, may you be happy to hear this—we do not have to move to England.

Oh, and please apologize to Toussaint for me. I shan’t be home for dinner; she does not have to prepare anything special—that is, of course, unless you wish her to.

I shall be at Rue Plunet if you should have need of me—but, I think, it may be better to wait on that account, if it can be helped.

All my love.

Post Script: I know about Marius. You do not need to keep secrets from me. It’s all right.

Post Post Script: About the boy—I did not mean to pry. Your blotter was open.”

He gave the note a thorough rereading, and, nodding his head to himself, folded and sealed it up, scrawling the address for his flat at l’Homme Armé on its front and going outside to seek a gamin or two that might not mind playing courier for a couple of sous.

***

It was late into the night when Javert awoke.

Moonlight streamed into the room from behind the silk curtains on the window to his right—not much, but enough to give some illumination to his surroundings, washing everything in a hushed and rich blue.

He blinked, his head still throbbing—though it was not as badly as before—perspiration on his brow along with a damp, folded cloth that had probably been a lot cooler awhile ago.

Groggy, he found that someone had stripped his shirt off, and he lay beneath a thin sheet which provided little feeling of security.

Normally this would have been cause for offense and alarm, but the fever was still upon him, and he was yet unpleasantly warm beneath the meager covers, so he did not mind it as much as he wanted to.
There was a gentle, stray breeze drifting in from the partially opened window, and that helped a great deal.

He could also see the stars from between the curtains. That didn’t hurt either.

He gazed out at them for awhile before turning his head to the left.

There, just next to him, his head buried in his arms on the bedside, sat Valjean, fast asleep. His face was turned away from him, so all Javert could see was a mop of curly white hair, but his posture was so slouched that he knew the man must have fallen prey to exhaustion quite some time ago.

He should have been surprised to find him there, really, but he found that he was not.

To his side sat a water basin on a low table, an empty teacup, some small glass bottles, and a little silver teaspoon. On the night stand was a brass candlestick whose contents had melted into a useless cascade of wax drippings.

Sighing, Javert settled back into the pillow and closed his eyes. He swallowed; his throat was dry—but he certainly wasn’t going to quench it right now. If he tried to get up, it would wake Valjean, who would no doubt begin that “long discussion” he’d promised earlier—and Javert was in no mood to argue at present.

He didn’t even know what he was doing here, other than that he hadn’t really anywhere else to be for the time being.

He wondered vaguely where his hat had gone. He couldn’t quite recall. It had probably been stolen by some vagabond by now.

He let out a frustrated sigh.

After a moment he opened his eyes and looked back at Valjean.

Because he had nothing else to do, he watched the man’s chest rise and fall with the steady breaths of slumber.

It was oddly soothing.

What he felt as he looked at him wasn’t entirely clear, even unto himself—but one thing was for certain, and this is: it was not hatred. Nor was it contempt.

No, he knew not what the sight inspired in him—if it was indeed anything at all—because he had no basis for comparison for it. He had never felt remotely like this before.

Eventually he shifted in bed and turned once more to face the stars, and after awhile he fell back asleep.

***

When Javert woke the next morning—or was it evening?—he had no idea how long he’d slept—he felt a little better.
Or, at least he’d thought he did, until he rolled out of bed and tried to stand.

Footsteps hurried up the stairs at the sound of his fall and the clattering of the candlestick he’d sent flying off the table in his last-second groping.

Valjean appeared in the doorway, catching his breath, his eyes alight.

“Javert!” He heard him say as he tried to pick himself up. “Ah, you're awake.”

_Ugh_, he thought in disgust; he could hear the relief in his voice.

To his annoyance, within the second a strong arm wrapped itself around his back, underneath his shoulder, and supported him as he rose to his feet.

“Are you all right?” Valjean asked, eyeing him with concern as he sat him back upon the mattress.

Javert only gave an irritated groan as he rubbed his face.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“No,” he grumbled under his breath. “I’m _fine_; I just need a moment. My balance is—”

“You need to lie down,” Valjean interrupted him, pushing him back as he tried once more to stand. “You’re not well. And you haven’t had anything to eat in a long time. Are you hungry?”

“I…”

He wanted to tell him no, that he didn’t want any food, especially not when it came from his hands, but the truth was his stomach felt like a hollow, aching pit, and his throat was bone dry.

“Regrettably,” he finally admitted between clenched teeth.

Valjean’s countenance brightened at that. “Good. I’ll get you something right away; just stay there.” He paused at the door and pointed a finger back at him. “And don’t try to get up in my absence.”

“Mm,” he mumbled. “What time is it?”

“About half past four, I’d imagine,” his voice came from the hallway, already on his way down the stairs. “Don’t fool yourself; I’m not letting you go _anywhere_ today, even if you have some place to be.”

The man sounded almost cheerful in his promise of captivity.

Javert growled in response, even though Valjean couldn’t possibly hear him. He begrudgingly settled back into bed.

_Had_ he actually been planning on making his escape? While he wanted to, he doubted it was even possible. He still felt like he was spinning, reeling, tossed about by unseen waves. And to his dismay the fever he’d thought he might’ve been rid of was making its presence known again, as though it were laughing at his attempts at independence.

And he did not, actually, have anywhere to be anymore. At least, not today.

Everything was already terrible; it couldn’t make things much worse if he allowed himself to
rest here for awhile. Right? No, everything was inexorably dreadful. This was just the icing on the cake. What was a little more salt in his wounds? He’d almost stopped caring by now.

He didn’t even complain when Valjean returned to the room with a tray-full of sweet buns and tea, shoving a cup into his hands.

“This is the best I could do on short notice;” he said, “my servant isn’t around at the moment. I’ll try to get out and buy something more—meat and vegetables, to make some soup perhaps.” He busied himself with slicing the buns in half and spreading butter and jam on them. “That would be good, I think. Something heavy and rich, to give you back your strength. You haven’t eaten in at least a day—maybe a day and a half—and that can’t possibly be doing you any favors. Here,” he said, handing him the little plate, “eat.”

Keeping his eyes off of him, Javert did as he was bade. He found after a few bites that he really was quite hungry, but kept from wolfing down the food in front of him, because then it would prove Valjean right, and he grateful—which he was not. For the most part.

At least Valjean was eating alongside him. Any amount of distraction was a godsend. And he didn’t think he’d be able to eat with the man breathing down his neck and watching his every move. He already found himself unable to stand his gaze for any longer than a moment or two.

He gulped down the tea in one go and reached for another slice of bread, trying to ignore the way Valjean was hiding a smile from him as he refilled his cup. No doubt the man was pleased with the return of his appetite, but Valjean’s concern over his wellbeing frankly bothered him.

As if the man could read his thoughts and sought to further embitter him, he reached out all of a sudden and placed the flat of his wrist on his temple, checking his temperature.

Javert nearly choked, caught in mid-swallow. He bore the man’s touch with restrained repulsion.

“Hm,” Valjean said with a frown, drawing away, “You’re still overly warm, but … that you are eating—that is progress.”

Javert only growled at him again, as if that could ward off his sympathy. He knew it wouldn’t, but he wasn’t about to give up the fight and submit to his aid like he thought of himself as some poor, weak old invalid. No, he was a beast—a powerful thing to be feared and respected—and he would make sure Valjean remembered that.

But even as he said these things to himself, he began to feel strangely sleepy—dizzy and numb. There was a buzzing in his brain, and his eyelids felt heavy.

“I feel … My head is—” His face contorted, brow furrowing.

It was almost as though he were drunk—or at least, he felt similar to what he could remember drunkenness feeling like, from the few times it had ever actually occurred.

He shook his head, trying to clear the fog from his thoughts. He was unsuccessful. With every second he felt himself slipping more and more into a haze.

It was almost as if …

He remembered, suddenly, the sight of those little glass bottles on the nightstand.

He narrowed his eyes.
“You put something in my drink, didn’t you?”

“Opium,” Valjean said flagrantly, shrugging his shoulders as he sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “The doctor recommended it. You had some before, too, but I doubt you’d remember that, what with the way you were.”

“No,” Javert groaned, grimacing and shifting his head on the pillow. “I don’t want … This is wrong. I don’t—”

“A dose this small is harmless,” Valjean said, touching his arm in a gesture of reassurance. “It only calms the nerves.”

“You drugged me,” he accused, jerking his arm away.

“You needed to be drugged,” Valjean countered. “Lord, do you even recall anything from earlier? You nearly threw the poor doctor out the window!”

“He probably deserved it.”

“He most certainly did not. Now quit your complaining; the drug has done you good.”

Javert gave a noise like something between a growl and a grunt. “It muddies my mind,” he complained. “I don’t like them, these things. They make you foolish and lethargic.”

“Then go back to sleep,” Valjean offered.

“I’m not tired.”

“Well,” he sighed, “we can either talk, or I can leave you alone to sleep. Which one would you pref—”

“Sleep!” Javert exclaimed hastily.

Valjean chuckled at that, damn him. “I thought as much,” he said, gathering up the empty plates.

He turned back in the doorway with a surprisingly earnest expression. “Really, though, do try to get some rest. I’d like to see you well.”

Javert didn’t know what else to do, so he just hissed at him as he left.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Claire de Lune – Debussy

Quiet Water - Toby Fox
A Measure of Understanding

Chapter Summary

At long last the truth comes out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We must live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

-Martin Luther King Jr.

***

The moon was high and round in the sky—unhindered now by clouds—and filled the little city with a dreamlike quality of light, turning its browns and greys into various shades of blue. The sky was speckled by thousands of white pinpricks, the lamplight of the streets too dim to eclipse the Milky Way, in all its glory, hanging far above like some great forgotten spill of cream.

No candles or firelight lit the room on the second story of #55, Rue Plumet; rather, the hearths were empty and the windows had been left open to encourage a breeze. Moonlight poured into the interior instead.

It was probably on account of the opium, but Javert had slept late.

Valjean was glad for this.

True, he hadn’t gotten the man to converse with him—not on the things that really mattered, the things that needed to be discussed—but at least his health seemed to be improving, if only a little.

Valjean watched him as he slept; he lay still, his slumber more peaceful than it had been the day before. Perhaps his fever was subsiding. That would be good, yes.

He needed him lucid. He needed to speak with him.

The man’s outer appearance was hard and stoic, yes, but Valjean no longer trusted that to be an accurate indicator of his mental state. After all, it had come as a shock to him when Javert had jumped off the quay—his actions immediately beforehand had betrayed little of what was going on in his mind. There seemed to be a disconnect between body and soul.

Or perhaps …

Could it be, Valjean wondered, that he was simply bad at reading this man? He had never known him well—he still felt he knew little of him, although certainly more than before—and maybe there were signs in the man’s countenance that he had missed, because he’d never become
He did not know Javert. This was slowly and painfully becoming clear to him.

Valjean had never asked himself what the man might be like personally—if there was anything more to him than that cold exterior—and he was beginning to worry that no one ever had.

Javert had made the decision to end his life almost immediately, it had seemed—as though there was little to consider in the matter, as though he didn’t expect his death to affect anyone.

Could this be true?

Was there, in fact, no one to be affected by his death?

Valjean felt a chill pass through him at the thought.

To lead such a lonely life …

He had trouble believing such a thing could possibly be true, but something told him—a dreadful sensation deep down in his gut, as he watched the man sleep—that it was.

He exhaled slowly, sinking further in his chair, hunched over, with his arms dangling between his legs.

Presently he heard a grunt, and the shifting of bed sheets.

He looked over to find Javert rubbing his face and trying to sit up a little.

The man glanced over at him in turn, his gaze lingering on him for a moment before he crossed his arms and thrust his face in the opposite direction.

“Do you often spy on people as they sleep?” he muttered, clutching his head and massaging his temples. “You voyeur.”

Valjean made no argument to defend himself. He only sighed and turned away.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to get any rest with you eyeing me like a hawk.”

Still, he was quiet.

“Javert,” he finally said. His tone was low, and solemn, commanding attention without demanding it, stealing the protest from the other man’s lips until they both sat in the darkness, silent, serious.

He gazed off into the room, unfocused. His voice was even, hushed.

“Have you been alone, all this time?”

There was a pause.

“What do you mean?” Javert replied slowly.

“Friends, family,” he continued, his eyes still distant, “someone you were intimate with. Was there no one?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking.”
Valjean was quiet for a moment. “It is true then,” he said to himself.

“What is true?”

He did not answer him.

“What are you talking about? What is true?”

“That you are alone in this world,” he breathed. He let those words hang in the air before speaking again. “Do you even know it? Has it ever occurred to you?” There was a lament in his voice. “Do you even know what it feels like, to be loved?”

Javert was silent.

Valjean sat, staring off into the darkness. He hung his head in his hand.

The whisper barely made it past his lips. “You poor wretch.”

“I am not a wretch,” he growled. “Don’t call me that.”

Valjean whipped his head back to look at him. “How can you—? You don’t even know, he said, shaking his head. “You don’t … have any idea what I’m saying, do you?”

“I really don’t.”

“It is no wonder, then,” he thought aloud, stroking his chin. “All these years, I had thought— I had not realized, that you were …” His eyes flicked about, seeing something more than his surroundings. “It is no wonder, then, that you …”

“You’re rambling to yourself.”

Valjean sat in consternation, picking at his lip. He sat and stared out at nothing. He shook his head, looked away.

“Nevermore,” he mumbled. “Something must be done.”

He let out a long, drawn out sigh. “And I had thought I was alone. Mon Dieu, at least I saw people’s hearts. At least I had a few who would help me in my time of need, who showed me kindness. At least—at the very least—there were people who saw me as a man.”

Javert turned towards him. “Are you saying I am not human?”

“No!” Valjean countered, facing him once more and throwing up his palm. “I am saying—I am saying you have never …” His brow knit. “—been treated like one.”

“I don’t want to be human;” he said gruffly, crossing his arms, “I want to be respectable.”

Valjean threw his hands out, exasperated. “That’s not what I—!” He stopped himself, settling back into his chair. “No; I suppose you can’t even understand what I mean, can you?”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head in defeat. “Never mind.”

“You know, Javert” he said after a moment, a little more composed, “It occurs to me that while I had those I might call friends—or, at least, good-natured people I was acquainted with—they
were all ignorant of my past. Of my true self. There was never any intimacy between us. So, it remains that … Javert, I think—after all these years, you are the only person who has ever truly known me.”

The man gave a scoff. “Isn’t that ironic.”

“It is. Because, well, you have never really known me at all.”

The man paused. “I think I’m beginning to.”

Valjean looked up at him. “Are you?” he wondered aloud.

Javert said nothing more on the matter.

Finally he spoke again. “Why did you try to get yourself dismissed from the police?”

Javert chuckled darkly. “You really can’t think of a reason?”

The man sighed. He was quiet for a moment. “Because of me?”

Javert gave another scoff. “Do I truly look, in this state, like I am capable of upholding anything at the moment? Besides,” he said frankly, “I have broken my oaths.”

“What, by not arresting me?”

There was assent in the man’s silence.

“I do not think you should be discharged over that.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” he laughed.

“That is not what I meant.”

“I don’t care what you meant.”

Valjean frowned. “Really, though. You are the best at your job. You have a frighteningly keen intuition. I’ve never seen a man with as much conviction as you.”

“I have had enough undue compliments in the last few days, thank you.”

Valjean rolled his eyes in the dark.

He thrust his gaze in the opposite direction, shifting his weight and crossing his arms.

“But honestly, am I—? Was I the only thing that brought you to this?”

“You and what you did to me,” he finally replied.

“And what have I done to you?”

“You have …” The man fought for words. “—complicated things.”

Valjean looked at him in confusion. “By saving you?”

“By proving me wrong.”

“About the kind of person I was?”
“About … everything.”

He was quiet for a minute. “Perhaps, if your view does not account for kindness—for the possibility of change, or of basic humanity, then it deserves to be proven wrong.”

There was a resignation in the man’s voice that Valjean had never heard before. “Perhaps.”

They sat in silence.

“I wanted to thank you,” Valjean said quietly.

“For what?”

“For letting me go. For keeping my past unspoken. For showing mercy.” He turned to gaze at the floor. “It was not something I expected. I wanted to thank you for that.”

“Don’t. I’ve had enough of your pity already; I think gratitude would kill me. Besides, I did not intend to. It only happened.”

Valjean gave a half-humorous scoff. “I see.” His face fell. “But thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

There was a pause.

“I mean that literally. Don’t mention it. Ever.”

He tried and failed to suppress his chuckles.

“It’s not funny.”

“All right.”

Javert let out a whuff of air, settling back into the pillows and closing his eyes in a huff.

“Don’t think I don’t resent you for this. I’d rather you left me alone to die.”

“Nonsense;” he said, “you will not die of this.”

“That is not what I meant.”

After a moment Valjean gave a deep, morose sigh. “Is there nothing I can do to dissuade you from this line of thinking?”

“No.”

“Why?” he asked, no hint of contempt or frustration in his voice—only weariness. “Why is that?”

“You have taken my raison d’être.”

Valjean’s brow knit. “I do not understand. How is it I have done such a thing?”

“You—” The man’s face contorted as though pained. “I cannot— You have rewritten everything I thought I knew of this world! I know nothing now; I doubt myself, I doubt my actions, I doubt the very system I have lived by! How can one go on thusly? I cannot function in this world—your world, where convicts may become saints, where men like you are permitted to exist!”
Valjean was struck by this. He sat back in his chair, features furrowed in consternation. “Men ... like me?”

“Men who become something other than what they are.” Javert’s voice dipped to a hush, to breath. “The heart is an immotile thing. People whose souls are filled with blackness—they are incapable of change. That which is rotten at its core cannot bloom.” A tremor ran through him. “Someone like you ... should not be possible.”

“You don’t believe in reform?”

“I believe in obedience. I do not trust in reform.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

Valjean lowered his eyes. “I see.”

The idea caused something of a horror in him. To not believe in the possibility of redemption! No matter how long sought, how much sacrificed in its name! That seemed a terrible world to live in. To truly believe that one misstep could damn a man’s soul for eternity ... Where was the hope? Where was the point?

Considering his past experiences with the man, he could not say he was surprised Javert thought this way. Still, to hear him say this, even now, after everything—Valjean could not help but feel worthless, debased. Could not help but have all his insecurities well up in him, to wear again that burning shame.

And yet, had Javert not set him apart? Had he not made distinction of him? Had he not let him go, when he should have arrested him?

“What am I, to you, then?” he wondered aloud.

Javert stared out into the darkness, a woeful look on his face. “Upsetting,” he said.

Valjean frowned. He propped his chin up on the arm of his chair, thinking. “But why does the possibility of reform trouble you so?”

The man’s expression quivered, teeth clenched under furrowed brow. “Because then I—!” He cut himself off so quickly that it seemed a deliberate denial of thought. And, Valjean noticed, there was something truly fearful in his eyes.

For a long time they said nothing, silence descending on them like a shroud.

Finally Valjean spoke. “So, this is your true conflict, then ... You find the world is not as you imagined it to be, and you question the way in which you have lived. To go on in this world, you must become another man, you must reexamine the tenets by which you operate within it—and that terrifies you.”

His voice was low. “But would you truly throw such an opportunity away? Would you so easily end your life, and thereby extinguish your ability to do good, rendering that revelation meaningless? You see the misery of others, the suffering that exists upon this earth, and you would rather quit it than bear the burden of a conscience?”

He was quiet for a moment.
“Truly, Javert, tell me truly—after learning the sorry state of this earth, after becoming one of the few who can see it for what it is, would you so soon deprive it of one who actually possesses the power to change it for the better? Would you do that, Javert; would you steal a good man from this world that needs them most?”

Javert’s eyes had widened, wreathed by shadows and sickliness, his expression tormented.

“Can you really be so much of a coward that you see this world—its injustice and its tragedy—and say ‘It is no use’, and resign from it? And damn yourself even so? Can you really be that afraid? Fear—that is not like you; that is not the man I know. I have watched you face insurmountable odds, face your own doom, without so much as flinching.”

“Is it really this—the dawning of enlightenment, the gravity of newfound reason—that compels you to give up, to set down your arms and cry ‘All is over’? Is it not within you—do you not possess the strength—to adapt to these things, to live in this new world accordingly, whereby you might do it some good?”

“I don’t know how!” he breathed, and there were tears in his eyes, humility on his lips, and anguish on his face. He squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing in the agony of the soul. “I don’t know how.”

Then there were tears also in Valjean, and he saw within him that same man, fresh from the galleys and divine deliverance, weeping at the sight of what he’d become, and struggling to find a way to remake himself, floundering and doubting in a world he no longer could bear.

“Javert,” he implored, leaning over, “Do you trust me?”

The man was so overcome with inner turmoil that he barely managed a nod of assent, begrudging and conflicted as it was.

Valjean touched his arm. “Then let me guide you.”

Javert clenched his teeth, his shoulder instinctively shrinking from his touch.

“I do not mean to say a police agent should let a convict do his thinking,” Valjean explained. “That would be inappropriate. But if you find yourself in want of someone to discuss matters of morality with, I would be more than happy to indulge you. If you find yourself faltering, if you find these dark thoughts overwhelming you, please, for the love of all that is holy, do not hesitate to come to me. If you need a crutch in this trying time, I will be that crutch—if you will only permit it.”

His voice was no more than a breath as he clasped the man’s hand in his. “Do you?”

The man trembled, turning his face away.

“Please permit it.”

Javert only hung his head.

Valjean studied him sadly before bowing his head as well.

“I will be here for you. Know that. If nothing else … please,” he breathed, “know that.”

The movement was so imperceptibly small that it was hard for him to tell if he was imagining things, but Valjean thought he saw Javert give a nod.
Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

This is Your Life - Switchfoot

The Words - Christina Perri
After that night’s tenuous exchange, neither man was overly eager to reopen conversation.

Javert was distant, Valjean solemn. Both remained silent, reluctant to make or hold eye contact for any period of time.

Valjean had let him alone to sleep, after their discussion, and they had each slept for an excessive amount of time—Valjean because he had gotten little rest prior, and Javert because he was not yet well, his body growing weary after even the smallest expenditures of energy.

In the morning—almost evening, as it was—Valjean rose and brought him a simple meal, something between a breakfast and a lunch. A brief attempt at pleasantries was made, on the side of functional necessity: he inquired after his health and whether he needed anything further; he talked of his venture to purchase some richer foodstuffs.

Then, finding him in no mood to discuss anything further, Valjean reassured Javert he would be close by in another room, if he should require something, and left him to his rest.

Surely Valjean understood the awkwardness of the situation they found themselves in almost as well as he, Javert thought—for the man was giving him some leash, by lack of supervision. He was giving him his space, and in so doing sparing himself the trouble of dealing with his admittedly unpleasant—and at times disparaging—attitude. Yes, now that Javert was doing a little better, the man was making a slow retreat from him. He must feel some amount of embarrassment about this—about what they’d said last night. That was why he was letting him alone, now.

Or, Javert wondered, could he be doing this out of trust?

And, if so, was he worthy of that?

Why was Valjean silent now, drifting back into the shadows? Was it out of fear that he would worsen the situation that he held his tongue?
Had Javert finally succeeded in driving the man away?

It didn’t matter, Javert told himself. It shouldn’t matter. He ought to be glad for some relief from the man’s incessant fretting, worrying over him like he was some babe.

He tried to go back to sleep, because he knew not what else to do, but found himself staring off at nothing instead, unable to fall back into the peaceful emptiness of slumber.

Besides the restlessness of already having slept a great deal not so long ago, there was something more which irritated him. It was difficult to pin down exactly which thing was causing this unease, but he eventually narrowed it to a sort of personal dissatisfaction at his current state.

Maybe he was not exactly brimming with the violent resolve of before, but he needed to be doing … something.

His thoughts were not entirely coherent, despite his own attempts at making them so. All he could understand was that he needed to regain control, needed to free himself from this wretched state of dependency and internal conflict which had no resolution in sight.

But how to do that?

He considered how it was he might achieve these things as he gazed out the window—at the walls, the ceiling—ruminating in a quiet gloom.

Hours went by in this fashion, and it was only the presence of another human being which broke him from his reverie, prompting him to spout quite suddenly an utterance in which was encompassed the whole of his reflections:

“Do you have a straight razor?”

Valjean, who had been bringing up some fresh linens, turned to look at him with a start. Perhaps it was the strangeness of the request and its implications that gave him pause, or perhaps it was because this was the first time Javert had addressed him with such an informal air and begun correspondence of his own accord.

The inspector ran a hand over his scruffy face with a look of displeasure. “I feel disgusting, like this.”

Valjean considered him for a moment, his eyes falling as he finally nodded.

When he came back, bearing a shaving kit and a dry cloth, Javert reached out for them—but Valjean hesitated.

“You’re not well; your hands are unsteady, and you may cut yoursel—”

“Don’t bother with your petty excuses,” Javert interrupted darkly. “We both know why you’re afraid to give me a blade.”

The corners of Valjean’s mouth drew down, his brow furrowing. He somehow managed to look simultaneously defeated and resolute. “Then you will not protest me doing it for you.”

“Do as you wish,” he growled back at him. “But don’t let yourself think I’m so undignified as to
bleed myself out on your sheets. I think even you can concede I have a little more self-respect than that."

“Perhaps, but I will not risk it, even so. You know that. And,” he sighed, kneeling one leg on the end of the bed, “on the practical side of things, it really will look better if someone else does it for you. You can’t see your own face.”

“I could if you gave me a hand-mirror.”

“That would make for clumsy work, juggling both at once. Now sit still.”

Javert scowled at him, his muscles tightening instinctually at the mere proximity of the man.

With a pensive look, Valjean took a glass vial of oil from the kit and wet the cloth he’d brought, proceeding to dab Javert’s face with it.

The razor unfolded with a click.

Valjean took a gentle hold of his chin and tilted his head up, carefully scraping the blade across his skin and shaving off the long grey stubble that had been left to grow over the past few days. He stopped occasionally, pausing to clean and re-lubricate the razor’s edge.

All the while Javert held his eyes shut with a look of rancor.

It was a struggle to keep his expression straight. No one had ever touched him so intimately before, and it was surprisingly unnerving. The only reason he allowed it now was that it seemed he had no choice. The scratching of the razor seemed so loud in the silence of the room, and he could feel, briefly, the puff of the man’s breath. His skin prickled. He wondered half-seriously if Valjean wasn’t drawing this out just to torture him.

Valjean tilted his face up higher, and then suddenly the blade was sliding over his throat, and a shiver ran down Javert’s spine. He tensed, his eyes popping open, his skin pimpling with goose-flesh. A harried breath escaped his lips, and he remained rigid, frozen on the bed in a sort of terror.

A convict had a blade to his throat! And he had allowed this!

The man could end it all with a single swipe—slit his jugular and be done with him then and there.

But he wouldn’t, he knew he wouldn’t, and Javert told himself that—and yet! Yet there was a blade to his throat, and the man who held it was someone he had hunted, and antagonized, for decades! Who had every reason to use it against him!

Javert sat powerless beneath him, totally paralyzed until the skin of his neck was bare and the razor withdrew. With a shiver he let out the breath he had not realized he’d been holding. He swallowed. Squeezed his eyes shut.

A cloth dabbed at his face again, dry, and he was hardly aware of it in the wake of the blade and the host of hair-raising sensations it had caused him.

Slowly he recomposed himself. He reassured himself of the softness of the touches, and the intent behind them.

Jean Valjean was a convict, but it was evident that, for whatever reason, and despite everything, his life was safe in his hands.
Javert reminded himself also that the man was an idiot, considering he’d chosen to save him rather than secure his own freedom—and that he should be annoyed at him for insisting on doing this himself.

“There,” Valjean said, straightening up and wiping the blade off, “That looks much better.” He snapped it shut and put it back into the kit.

Javert opened his eyes to glare at him, running a hand over his face experimentally. “I’m not going to thank you,” he said.

“I didn’t ask to be thanked.”

He scoffed at him. “You annoy me.”

“That’s not the first time you’ve expressed that sentiment.”

“Mm.”

“Would you like some supper?” Valjean asked, gathering up the supplies he’d brought.

“I don’t care.”

“I’ll bring some soup, then.”

***

Javert waited until he was sure Valjean was asleep before he rose, treading lightly on the floor.

The dizziness that had plagued him the day prior had lessened greatly, and with enough focus he was able to keep his balance without having to lean against the wall.

Valjean had—by some measure of luck or lack of foresight—left the rest of Javert’s clothes folded upon the little bench seat opposite the bed, and his greatcoat and other accoutrements hung on the knobs of the headboard.

Surely, Javert thought, pulling on his boots, surely it was the cool night air the past few nights which had eased his suffering and allowed him to make this much recovery.

Layer by layer, button by button, he regained a measure of his dignity—his white linen shirt, with its broad sleeves and ruffles—the grey cotton waistcoat, and navy tailcoat, with its shining silver buttons—his double-breasted greatcoat, with its warm, heavy wool and sheltering half-capes. He fastened his belt around his waist once more, sword hanging at his side. And then, his black stock collar, and finally his leather gloves. With this he felt a little more complete, a little more himself. It wasn’t much, but it helped things some.

Even so, as he donned the familiar outfit, he felt his appearance became a betrayal. He was no longer the man who meted out justice, who was the utmost portrayal of integrity, authority. He was no longer that man who had resided under this coat. To clothe himself again in this garb was, in a way, to put on a mask which had once been his true face; he felt its strangeness, so familiar and yet so foreign, and it bothered him.

He crept out of the house unnoticed, only somewhat surprised to find the doors unlocked.
It was dark outside, but there were stars, and ample moonlight, and he found his way through the city without trouble. The air was still, yet cool, and aside from the occasional chirping of crickets, Paris was silent.

The streets were deserted. It seemed even now, days later, the effects of the insurrection were still present—the blood of those rebellious souls still fresh in the minds of the citizens. They did not dare to venture out of doors at this hour of night. Not yet.

It was the first night he had spent alone in the city since the night he had waited for Thénardier to exit the sewer and had been given Valjean instead. The first night since he had almost been swallowed up by the Seine, the cold river water filling his lungs, and been pulled from its depths at the last minute, forced to breathe once more.

There seemed a trepidation in the atmosphere, a strange sense of foreboding—as though the city itself knew what he had done, knew what he was doing now.

As if it watched him.

Judged him.

A stray breeze rustled the trees in a garden he passed; their leaves whispered his shortcomings.

As he crossed onto the Île de la Cité he began to feel acutely the strain on his not-yet-healthy body, but he pushed forward, determined to ignore it, determined to finish what he’d started.

He neared the tall, wrought-iron fence with a sense of slowly being crushed beneath his own scrutiny.

It was a huge, castle-like building on the bank of the Seine, and its towering height only served to make him feel lower.

The sentry gave a start at his approach; it must have been too silent to perceive until he had gotten disconcertingly close. The man went to raise his rifle, but, halfway to aiming it, he faltered.

It is likely that Javert, having just entered into the circle of light cast by the lantern hanging on the wall, had become recognizable to him.

The gun’s barrel dipped once more towards the ground. He nodded curtly. “Inspector."

Javert bowed his head, his voice low. “The master of the house, if you would.”

The sentry’s eyes narrowed. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“I know.”

“He is sleeping.”

“I’m sure.”

The man frowned at him. “It had better be of the utmost importance.”

“It will not take but five minutes of his time.”

“And yet it cannot wait until morning?”

“I would rather it not.”
The man gave a huff, sighing. “Wait here,” he ordered, shouldering his rifle and disappearing into the garden.

Javert stood anxiously, his stomach twisted up in knots. He could feel his skin growing once more uncomfortably hot beneath his clothes.

The river sang behind his back.

It was a splendid garden, well-kempt, the trees and bushes neatly pruned, paths swept clear of debris. On the left wall there was a wealth of handsome Japanese lacquer-work. A number of small statues and flowers lined the walkways.

All of this was lost on Javert. He who so admired skillful architecture and craftwork the like of which he knew he would never have had been consumed by his conscience and become apathetic and unappreciative of all around him.

At a length the sentry returned.

Another man trailed behind him, wearing a long nightshirt, a blue greatcoat hastily thrown over it, held closed only by a few polished buttons. Halfway across the garden he paused and dismissed the sentry, waving him away with his hand and a shake of his head.

He approached the fence. “Javert,” he mumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, “what the devil do you mean by waking me in the middle of the ni—” He stopped short, his hand freezing in place for a second before drawing away, his eyes widening.

Javert could only attribute this to his own disheveled state. No doubt the man was aggravated by this intrusion on his privacy, being wrested from his bed, and no doubt he was offset by the intruder’s bedraggled visage.

But Javert could not stand to wait any longer; he needed to set things right.

“Dismiss me,” he breathed shakily, hanging his head.

No more military attitude, no more pretense of self-respect, no more authority remained within him. He could not summon the strength for them anymore. He was too tired—exhausted not only in his bones but in the depths of his very soul.

“Please, I beg of you. I am unfit for duty. If you do not dismiss me I will resign.” His tone dropped. “But it would be better to dismiss me; I deserve that.” The last words he spoke under his breath: “I have failed in all that I set out to do.”

The Prefect of the Police stood staring at him in bewilderment.

A metallic clatter sounded from the street to their left, and both men gave a jolt, turning to look in the same direction.

It was very dark, and there was a sparsity of streetlamps, but there was decent enough light yet to discern the figure of a man standing a little ways off from them. He was of unremarkable height, with broad shoulders, and standing as he was in the shadows he would not have been recognizable to Javert save for the shocks of curly white hair that reflected the moonlight and formed a glowing halo on his head.

The man was staring in shock at a cat, which had evidently just knocked over a metal bucket onto the flagstones, thereby ruining his hiding place. He turned to look up at Javert with as much
fearful horror in his eyes as Javert had, his mouth hanging open.

Gisquet squinted. “Who’s there?” he demanded. Then, in a quieter voice meant for Javert, “Who is that?”

Javert was not paying attention. The sight of Jean Valjean had filled him with terror. “No, no —” He shook his head, stepping back. “Not you; not here.”

He grit his teeth, shuddering and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Without so much as a word to his superior he turned and fled into the night, failing to notice Gisquet calling after him in confusion.

He put no thought to where he was going; it seemed almost as though it had already been decided upon for him. Skin feeling cool and clammy even as the fever was burning him alive from within, he could not seem to suck in enough air to satisfy his irritated lungs. His gut was wrenching, and he almost tripped over himself as he ran.

The ex-convict had a limp in his right leg where a heavy chain had once been shackled to his ankle, and this affected his gait when running especially.

But, in his sickly state, Javert was far from able to reach the speed he ought to have been capable of.

Perhaps this was why Valjean managed to catch up to him half-way across the Quai du Marché Neuf.

“Javert!” he cried, no doubt horrified by the sight of him so close to the water’s edge.

Javert spared him not even a passing glance.

Valjean yanked him backwards by the cape of his coat before he was able to finish climbing up onto the wall that divided walkway from river.

“Let me go!” Javert screeched as Valjean grappled him.

“No!”

“I can’t do this anymore!”

Still he struggled to free himself, to clamber back up onto the divide, but the man had him securely pinioned against the parapet, shackling him down by both his wrists.

“I can’t do it!” Javert yelled. “I can’t do it, I tell you! Just let me go; this is better for the both of us!” He grunted and writhed in his grasp, choking on his own breath, his voice terrible. “Why will you not let me go?”

“You know why!” Valjean cried, forcing him around to look him in the eyes. “Because you are a good man! Because you don’t deserve to die in such a way!” He shook his head furiously. “Because I have suffered too much and too long in my life to let another person endure the same kind of torment. Not when they’re in front of me, not when I can do something about it!” His eyes were wet; his voice teetered on the edge of cracking. “Because I can’t, do you understand? I can’t!”

“Goddamnit, Valjean; I’ll dive straight into the Seine and I don’t care if you’re still latched
around my wrist!”

“*Then I will drown with you!*” Valjean bellowed, throttling him against the concrete and shoving his face in his. “It doesn’t matter what lengths I must go to prevent it; I cannot let you do this thing! If I die in the process so be it! But I will not let you go; I will never let you go! *Javert!*” His voice became a shrieking roar. “*I will follow you into the mouth of Hell, do you understand?*”

Javert shuddered in his grip. Never before had anything struck such terror into his heart as those words, and the countenance of the man from which they issued.

Such a person! He was horrified by him.

Was it true? Could he not escape him even in death?

If he jumped now, if he ended his life, Valjean would only follow suit, and that was not something he’d wanted; that wasn’t something he could bear—and the man knew this! And the man used it against him, to tether him to life! It was despicable, what lengths he would go to, even for the sake of his own enemy! It revolted him. That he would forfeit his own freedom, his own life! Incredible, abhorrent! How could he deal with this man, who in giving himself up knew not what it was to give up? Whom in yielding refused to do so?

Was there no way for him to destroy himself without destroying him as well? Would he be chased forever into the void? Chained to his destiny, chained to this man?

Was there no way out?

“*Damnit!*” he burst, sinking to his knees, “*Damn you, Valjean!* Damn your pity, damn your mercy, damn your kindness; *damn you!*”

With this last cry—nearly a scream—his voice broke.

“*I can’t take it anymore,*” he breathed, curling up against the parapet, “I can’t take it; I can’t.”

Valjean released his grip on the man’s wrists as Javert drew his arms about himself, clawing furiously at the fabric of his coat as he quivered.

“I can’t live like this.”

He found Valjean wrapping his arms around him, pulling him into a tight embrace.

Part of him reviled at this, and he wanted to shove him away and scramble to his feet, but he was simply too weak and too tired to care any longer.

“You will get through this; I will help you through this,” Valjean was saying, breathless, his fingers tangled in the cape of his greatcoat. “I promise you that. Just let me help you. Please,” he begged desperately, his words strained, “for the love of God, just let me help you.”

Javert grimaced, tears gliding down his cheeks as he clenched his teeth. He further curled into himself, burying his head in the man’s shoulder.

His voice was cracked and hoarse, muffled by the fabric of Valjean’s waistcoat.

“*Why couldn’t you let me die with my dignity?*”

Valjean could not seem to find the proper response; he merely clutched him tighter. Clasping Javert’s head in his hands, he pressed his lips to the side of his brow, pausing there for a moment.
before withdrawing them and mussing his long dark hair. He gave Javert another squeeze, cradling him in his arms as he rocked him gently back and forth, hand on the back of his head.


There was a painful pleading in his tone, and it struck Javert sharply in the breast.

From his demeanor and what little Javert could hear of the man’s breathing, it seemed to him as though Valjean was crying also. He did not expect to understand why, and he did not want to understand why, but he found that he did—and he hated it, and he hated himself; he hated everything, and he was lost.

A sob escaped his throat.

Finally, going limp in his arms, he surrendered. He had no strength to fight him any longer, no willpower left to resist. Not even his pride could muster up enough disgust to motivate him.

Javert was exhausted; he could not continue.

He couldn’t even find the force to stand, to hurl himself into the river as he’d so wished only moments ago; he’d spent up all his energy in his despair and his fury. All he could do was sit there, cocooned in this other man’s embrace, as the sobs shook him and the tears flowed freely from his eyes.

Valjean said nothing further. He did not need to; they understood one another. He simply held him there, pressing him to his chest and absorbing his cries.

Javert did not know how long they’d been there when Valjean finally spoke again—though it must have been some time, as he’d calmed significantly, his sobs dying down to ragged breaths.

“Come,” he said quietly, “We ought to head back. The streets are not safe at this hour, and you need to lie down.”

Javert did not dispute these points. He was too tired to dispute anything anymore.

“Can you stand?”

Valjean rose a little, putting an arm under his shoulder and helping him to his feet. Seeing him steady, Valjean went to reach for his wrist—but paused in the air for a moment, choosing carefully to take his hand instead.

Quiet now, Javert allowed him to do this without protest. He did not even find himself bothered when he felt the man’s fingers entwining around his own as he led him away from the quay.

In fact, the warmth of the hand clasped around his almost made him feel secure, although he did not know why this could possibly be.

Unconsciously, he clasped it back.

He found himself walking closer to him, nearly brushing against the man’s shoulder.

Little by little he leaned upon him. By the time they had made it back to Rue Plumet, he could barely support his own weight, his legs feeling less like legs and more like wet clay, his head spinning, blotting out his sense of balance.

Valjean had to all but drag him up the stairs, and when Javert finally collapsed upon the bed he
felt as though he would never rise again.

His consciousness faded out slowly, back, back into fever-dreams, as Valjean spoke softly to him, murmuring words of consolation.

Javert could not understand what the man was saying—his thoughts were too muddled by pain and fatigue—but he latched onto the sound of his voice, having nothing else to take hold of.

He was floundering in a vast ocean, caught somewhere between life and death, heaven and hell—and the man’s presence was the one thing he could cling to, tying him, rooting him to the world, an anchor in a tempest-tossed sea.

And, for the first time in his life, he found it a source of comfort instead of agitation.

***

Javert's head throbbed. He was too hot to think, to care, to feel anything other than the desire to be able to close his eyes and block out everything around him by drowning it in the black void of sleep.

Sleep, however, was unattainable—at least in the proper, restful sense of the word. What he experienced was not sleep, but rather roiling bouts of semi-consciousness, feverish agonies propelling him in and out of reality and the waking world.

It felt simultaneously as though some terrible force had seized his skull and was in the process of slowly crushing it, and as though someone had set loose a hive of bees inside his brain. And, too, it felt like he was lying on a bed of coals.

This left him in a sorry state.

He could barely manage to get up to relieve himself—stumbling down the hall, nearly tripping over himself or fainting—let alone entertain thoughts of argument.

Half the time he couldn’t even seem to keep his eyes open. Hours would be gone in mere blinks, and yet, time crawled by impossibly slowly, drawn out by his pain. He writhed and tossed beneath the sheets, agonized, able to do little more than grunt his displeasure.

Valjean ended up having to do the simplest things for him.

He did not even have the strength to complain.

In fact, he was not even entirely cognizant of the goings on around him. Sometimes he had only a vague awareness of things: a pressure upon his skin, a brief warmth—and that was all.

It seemed the sensation of touch was what drove him back to semi-consciousness above all, however—most of his memories consisted of Valjean. The man always seemed to be close by. Placing a cool, wet cloth on his forehead. Checking his temperature. Smoothing the hair from his face. Fluffing the pillows behind him. Tilting his head and putting a glass of water to his lips, holding it steady as he took tentative sips.

Most often there was the sensation of a hand clasping his own—or, laying upon his shoulder or
the top of his head.

He felt like a limp, discarded ragdoll: ugly and worthless, falling apart at the seams—no future use left but to await final destruction.

But Valjean handled him as though he were made of delicate porcelain, each touch careful and cautious, like he feared he might break him.

Javert had never considered what the man’s touch might feel like, nor would he have cared—but he found himself surprised at how such rough, work-worn hands could yet be so gentle.

Still, his touch was a source of personal torment; it both aggravated and soothed him. Valjean’s constant presence annoyed him, and yet it was oddly reassuring.

“Why?” he breathed hoarsely, his voice the only thing in the sweltering darkness besides the dabbing of the cloth at his brow. “Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Care,” he croaked despairingly. “Why?”

Valjean was quiet for a moment. “You know why,” he murmured.

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

Javert tossed his head on the pillow, unable to even lift it. “I don’t understand you,” he lamented.

A hand rested on the side of his head, thumb stroking his temple.

“I can’t ignore someone’s suffering,” Valjean said. His tone made it sound more like a confession than an explanation. “Not when I can do something to prevent it.” And then, more softly, “It doesn’t matter who it is.”

Javert had never before had anyone to catch him should he fall, and though he had not asked for this—and arguably still rebelled against the idea that he should need it—the knowledge that there was someone looking out for him, someone he could rely upon if necessary, was vaguely … relieving. It did not sit entirely well with him. Nor, however, did it disquiet him. He wasn’t sure quite what he ought to make of it, and so he relegated it to the realm of fact: cold and hard, unquestionable. Valjean was simply there; that was all.

He didn’t need him.

He shouldn’t need him.

But he was there.

***

Javert thought, in his fever-dreams, he could recall sinking into the depths, thrashing about and
gasping for air instinctively as the water filled his lungs—in the end, no better than an animal in his death throes, despite his best efforts at composure.

And then, as his convulsions subsided, as the strength fled his body and the cold, quiet darkness permeated his very soul—just as he was slipping away into the abyss—he'd felt a pressure, a warmth: someone wrapping their arms around him and pulling him away.

He had thought it was an angel.

He was not entirely sure that he'd been wrong.

***

Chapter End Notes

LuneandBarbeque made a comic for this chapter!!

AROS Comic: It's Okay ... by LuneandBarbeque

Also the earlier WIP version for the previous piece which I just really like on its own.

Suggested Listening:

Clipping - Mutemath

The Cloud Atlas Sextet for Orchesra - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil

Easier to Run - Linkin Park

Fear Not This Night - Asja

Final Confluence: Austin Wintory

Kesselring - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil

Let Go - Frou Frou

Let Me Go (triple layered) - Panic! At The Disco

Let Me Hear (piano cover) - Tehishter

Won't Let Go - Tom Tykwer / Johnny Kilmek / Reinhold Heil

Yellow (Coldplay cover) - Jem
Absolution

Chapter Summary

Valjean nurses the inspector back to health; Javert reflects upon himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It requires more courage to suffer than to die.”
-Napoleon Bonaparte

***

Javert's head pounded. He thrashed. Something was holding him down, digging into his upper arms and lower legs. He was tied to a tabletop by thick, heavy ropes, like those of a ship’s rigging. He strained against them, but only succeeded in chafing himself.

It was dark, dusky blue, and he could only just make out the silhouettes of ruined buildings and piles of broken furniture. The cracks of rifles in the distance echoed off the walls. The air smelt of gunpowder and blood. He could not see the stars for the lingering haze of smoke.

Soon, they would come back for him, the schoolboys. They would kill him. He knew they would. They wouldn’t exit this world, lose this fight, without taking him with them. The last, minor revenge that they were capable of.

He wished they’d killed him sooner. This waiting … he couldn’t stand it. Better to be over with as soon as possible.

A figure stole towards him in the inky blackness, drawing to his side.

Javert could not make out their face, but he knew who it was. “You …”

So, that was how it was to be, then. Perhaps it was more appropriate. This way, there was a sort of closure to his death. An ending to a story which had gone on too long, a resolve of an ancient conflict.

“Do it, then,” he said. “Take your revenge.”

“Shh,” the figure hushed him. They glanced back over their shoulder.

Javert felt a hand on his chest. There was a pressure, and the man was reaching through his breast, through his ribcage, and a sharp and sudden panic seized Javert as he realized what was happening. He writhed under him, to no avail; the ropes held him tight. Bound like a lamb at slaughter, he was at the man’s mercy.
He felt hands cup around his heart—large, powerful hands, that could crush the life from it. He trembled in terror and in agony. “N-no; what are you—?”

“Shh,” the man implored, working to pull it from his chest. “Please.”

How could he do that? How could anyone do that—take his heart right out of his chest without killing him? And still it beat, even as it was pulled away, and he could feel it, feel the man’s hands around it, holding it like some tiny, fragile bird.

Javert let out a stunted growl, a whimper, horrified. This feeling! This vulnerability!

To have that wretched, weak and wicked thing torn from its cage. To be exposed like this! He was paralyzed with fear. “No, stop it; sto—”

“I’m sorry,” the man breathed, and Javert caught a glimpse of his face. It was sad, and scared, and full of remorse. “I can only save so much of you.”

“What?” Javert gave a start as he realized what the man intended to do. “No!” he burst, “No, you ca—”

Cries rose from the other side of the barricade, and they drew closer, followed by footsteps.

The man looked in their direction with panic, turned his gaze to him again. “I’m sorry,” he said again, edging off the table and slowly backing away.

“No, you can’t do this,” Javert managed to say, despite the pain that wracked his body as he tried to liberate himself. “You ca—”

The footsteps rounded the corner.

With one last helpless, frantic look at him, the man bolted, fleeing into the night.

“No!” Javert cried, still tied down and trapped as the man made off with the most defenseless and carefully guarded part of his soul.

He was supposed to kill him, not—not …!

“How dare you!” he screamed after him, “How dare you! Who gave you the right? Valjean!” His voice broke as the rebels came into view, all blazing red with blood and glory. “Valjean!”

They drew to him with a look in their eyes as steely as their blades.

And still he cried after that cursed thief. “You bastard!” The strength left him, and he lay trembling, the tears streaming down the sides of his face. “Valjean …”

“We ran out of bullets,” said one of the schoolboys.

They surrounded him, and he shuddered before them, stripped naked of his calm and his composure, his chest wide open and gaping, like a black maw, raw and visceral and hollow. They could see right into his core, and he had nothing left to shield himself from their wrath.

They left him alone in the barren, smoke-filled streets, bloodied and broken.

The ropes that had tied him to the table were gone, but the martingale remained, and the hobbles around his ankles. He had not enough strength left to try to sever them. He only lay, exhausted, dying in the alleyway, the only spark of life amid a pile of corpses, breathing its last breath.
At a length he heard footsteps again, this time more orderly, slower. He knew the schoolboys had gone, to their deaths or otherwise. So who now could this be?

Out of the darkness came a group of shadowy men, pausing as they passed him.

“Why, it’s Javert,” one of them remarked.

The police, the guard—his colleagues and superiors! They had come to survey the final quelling of the insurgents.

They did not, for some reason, sound as though they’d expected to find him alive.

A tiny ray of hope shone within him. They could help him, heal him, save him.

But they only stood there, staring down at him morosely, their faces black masks in the night.

Javert gazed up at them, imploring them with his eyes, a hint of fear beginning to form at the back of his mind.

“It’s a pity,” he heard someone say.

“Yes. He was such a good officer.”

“Is there nothing to be done then?”

“Look at him.” A hand gestured towards his bloodied breast, and the gaping hole where his heart used to be. “Someone’s stolen his resolve. Ripped it right out of his chest. He is useless, now.”

Javert quaked with fear. “N-no, that’s not—” He tried to protest, to defend himself, to hide the wound, but they had seen, and he could not deny what had happened. “It’s not my fault,” he begged, worming his way into the corner. “It’s not my fault; I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want to—”

“The law in him is dead,” said another. “He let his soul be touched. Now he can never return to the way he was. It would be better to put him out of his misery, before he falls any further.”

“No, no,” Javert choked out, “please, I can fix this, I can— If I bring him in, if I take back what he stole—”

“It wouldn’t change things. Already, you have been tainted. There is no way to repair what has been done. Come, now. Don’t grovel. Retain what little dignity you have left. We’ll make it quick.”

Javert shook, his eyes bulging, whimpering escaping his throat. He tried to squirm away from them, but it was no use; his way was blocked by broken tables and chairs and overturned carts.

They closed in around him, looming over and blotting out the sky.

The hole in his chest throbbed under the weight of those judging eyes. So empty, so tender.

“Pathetic,” someone said.

“Hush now,” murmured Chabouillet, taking a hold of him by the hair and positioning his head on the chopping block. “No one has to know.”
“No,” Javert wept, the tears hot on his cheeks, his body wracked with shivers and sobs. “No …”

He looked up at the glint of steel hanging over his head and gave a desperate thrash.

For this his face was shoved back into the cold, unforgiving stone. He heard the grinding of metal sliding over metal, and gave a shriek as the blade of the guillotine came down.

That shriek seemed to echo into eternity. Finally it faded away, and left him floating in the void, black and infinite yet pressing in around him, crushing.

It was torture. He was no longer living, but he was not quite dead. Somewhere, somehow, he was still rooted down by something, some string that still tied him to this mortal coil.

He heard, faintly, a sort of thumping, muffled and steady. Gradually it grew louder. He was pulled back by that noise, and with it came vague flashes of sensory information.

The texture of fabric, brushing against him.

Footfalls on earth, rapid, running.

Someone’s ragged, breathy gasps.

With a low moan he realized what that thumping was. It was the pulse of his heart, still beating after everything, clutched fiercely against Valjean’s chest. Javert was bound to it, this last vestige of himself, the only part of him to make it out alive. And he rued its life, even as he clung to it.

He sobbed in the darkness, desolate and powerless, conquered and defeated. He wanted to blink out of existence, to disappear into the forgiving fold of death.

But the man would not even let him have that!

Why had he salvaged this piece of him, this terrible and ugly thing? Why did he guard it so dearly, spiriting it away from harm?

Javert did not understand. Did not want to understand.

But the man’s warmth seeped into him all the same, and he had no defense against it.

Somehow, this incomprehensible kindness hurt more than anything he had ever felt in his life.

When Valjean finally stopped running, safe now from their pursuers, he knelt down and doubled over, catching his breath. And he held out the heart that he’d carried like an infant in his arms for miles and miles, and gazed at it wonderingly, worriedly, as though inspecting it for damage. Panting, he pressed his lips to it in relief.

At this sensation, an agony ripped through Javert. Screaming, flames leapt from his heart and he found his body reformed in a gout of fire. He tried to tear his soul asunder, tear himself to pieces, rip that vile, beating organ out of his chest—anything to end this excruciating pain—but all it did was make the flames burn brighter.

He felt Valjean grip his shoulders.

“What have you done?” Javert roared at him, the fire rising, swirling about him in blazing gusts. “What have you done?” He let out another howl of pain, shaking him off and stumbling back.

The man wrapped his arms around him, squeezing him to his chest—trying to comfort him,
even as his clothes and snow-white hair caught fire.

He didn’t even seem to notice himself being burned alive, and Javert was too overwhelmed to care.

And as the flames consumed them, all Javert could hear was his own screams.

***

Javert worried him. The man’s fever was dangerously high. His heartbeat raced. He was beset with fits in which he would seize up, shuddering and thrashing in bed, clawing at the sheets in pain or desperation for Valjean knew not what. For brief moments his eyes would open wide, and glazed, and he would look as though he were gazing upon the face of Death itself. But mostly, they remained closed, squeezed shut in agony, his brow beaded with sweat, his teeth clenched. He gasped for breath, and groaned, and whimpered like a dying dog.

The man was delirious. He cried out in his sleep, sometimes with fear, sometimes with anger, sometimes with pleading. Mostly it was in garbled French, but sometimes Valjean thought it sounded like something else entirely.

The snatches of words he did manage to catch broke his heart.

“Let me die,” he kept saying. Sometimes it was a scream, full of fury, and others, a plea so anguished it brought Valjean to tears.

And then, sobbing: “I don’t want this. I don’t want this.”

Sometimes it was nothing more than his name, “Valjean,” in a cracked and yearning voice. Whether it was his aid the man begged for, or his own death at his hands, Valjean could not tell.

He could do nothing but sit by his side, and try to calm him, with gentle reassurances and equally gentle touches. He stripped him down to his drawers, he wiped the sweat from his skin with a cool, wet rag, and tried to nurse him on a glass of water as often as he could.

Still, it was not enough.

The man’s fever only worsened. The life seemed to drain from him, the delirium growing deeper and deeper.

Valjean considered calling a doctor again, but whatever drug they might prescribe, he feared it would merely sap what little strength Javert had left, and leave him in a deep and dreadful sleep from which he might never awaken.

He did not know what else to do. In desperation, he brought up the wooden washtub from downstairs and filled it bucket by bucket with water from the well on the boulevard.

Frowning remorsefully, he slipped his arms under the unconscious inspector and carried him like a child to the tub.

“I’m sorry for this,” he said, carefully lowering him down, underclothes and all, into the water.

Javert gave a start, his eyes flashing open with a gasp, glassy and unseeing. Breathing erratic, he
struggled to escape, a terrified look on his face.

Valjean wrapped his arms around the man’s torso, tugging him back, trying to steady him and prevent him from injuring himself. “It’s all right!” he exclaimed, holding him down. Water splashed all over him and the hard wooden floor he was kneeling on as the man fought against him. “Javert! Javert, it’s all right! Settle down.”

Still the man shuddered, but he seemed to realize that he was thoroughly trapped, for his attempts at fleeing grew feeble.

“Shh,” Valjean hushed. “Shh …” He smoothed back the dark, wet strands of hair that had plastered themselves over the man’s face, murmuring comfort to him, his lips hovering just above the top of his head.

Javert calmed a little, but not much. He was shivering convulsively. His ice-blue eyes stared out at nothing—which was, in his mind, perhaps something—as tears welled in them, tracing glistening paths down his cheeks. In between his gasps for air, he whimpered fearfully.

Valjean held him fiercely, the tightness of his hold helping some to suppress the hiccoughs that shook Javert’s chest.

“You are safe,” Valjean promised him, unsure if the man could even understand him. “I’m right here beside you, d’accord? I won’t let you go. Just lay still; it will get better. That’s right. Just like that.”

The man bowed his head, curling into himself.

“There you are.”

Javert leaned into him, his breathing ragged and strained. He shuddered against him, teeth chattering, seeking the warmth in his arms like a man who was freezing to death.

Valjean had heard somewhere before that particularly bad fevers could, at a certain point, actually make the victim feel cold, but he had never thought it could be this bad.

To Valjean, the water in the tub was luke-warm. But to Javert, it must feel like it had come straight from a glacier in the Alps.

Valjean rocked him gently back and forth, back and forth, hoping it would soothe him some.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he murmured, touching his brow to the top of the man’s head. “I never meant for any of this to happen. I didn’t know what it would do to you. I just—I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I just wanted you to live.”

Javert squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in the crook of his shoulder, quivering. He sat like that for a long, long time.

Eventually, the tension in his muscles began to dissipate, and he relaxed a bit, going limp against him and falling back into the haze of sleep.

Valjean checked the man’s forehead.

It was warm, but not the blazing hot of an hour ago. The water had done its job.

He let out a small sigh of relief, pressing his lips to the man’s brow and sending a prayer of
thanks to God.

Slowly, so as not to disturb him from his slumber, he lifted Javert out of the tub and laid him down on a pile of blankets he’d stacked on the floor. He towed off the water from the man’s long hair, combing his fingers through it and carefully teasing out the tangles, ponderously contemplating the strands of grey amid the brownish-black.

He waited for the man’s undergarments to dry before hefting him back into his arms and returning him to the mattress.

“Sleep well,” he whispered as he drew the sheet up over him.

And for the first time in days, Javert did.

***

Everything had been on fire. His very soul. This terrible agony of living—of having one’s entrails exposed, of receiving mercy, kindness—love, even—from someone who had every right to hate him, from someone for whom it should be impossible to be good—was more than he could bear. Javert had burned up because of him, because of what he’d done to him, and the flames had eaten him up until nothing else existed in the world but torture and misery.

And then all at once those fires had been doused, extinguished instantly by a plunge into freezing water.

The blackness, pressing in on him …

The Seine?

Had Valjean pushed him into the river? Had he jumped? Had they fallen in together? He could not remember. All he knew was this penetrating cold that froze the blood in his veins.

The flames were gone; he was himself once more, real, corporeal. His body was no longer hellfire but flesh, solid and heavy and clammy in the cold waters. And he sank, and sank, and sank, farther and farther away from the light. The air bubbled up from between his lips and floated towards the surface.

So—it was not by fire he would die, but ice. But at this point, death was a release. He couldn’t bear this suffering any longer. Better that the water should numb him and let him slip away.

And yet—and yet—he railed against it, as it stole the life from him. This burning in his lungs, the ache in his chest—he couldn’t help but fight. He thrashed, convulsed, powerless against the depths of the river. He could not even retain his dignity in the face of death, not at the very bitter end. Suffocating, gasping for air where there was only water.

No; he didn’t want to live, but he didn’t want to die—not like this …

Not like—like—

He gagged, the taste of silt in his mouth.

And then he felt arms wrap around him, and pull him upwards. Water and bubbles churned all
around him.

He broke the surface, and tried to inhale and couldn’t, because his lungs were full of water. Choking, he retched it up, and gasped. Blessed, blessed air filled his lungs, and he coughed and sucked down as much of it as he could.

He was dead weight in the water, held up only by Valjean. The cold had sapped the strength from his muscles. He could do nothing else but breathe, and breathing was hard enough.

And god, it was cold, so cold. But Valjean was warm.

Shivering, Javert pressed himself against him.

He didn’t even want to be alive anymore. It was too hard. But the man wouldn’t let him die. And, to tell the truth, dying was hard, too.

His mind wanted to die, but his body wanted to live. And he didn’t have the strength or the resolve to fight it, or to fight Valjean. The world had become a terrifying place, and he was afraid of it, and afraid of himself. All around him was shadow, and all he could do was cry and gasp for air.

Everything was grey and uncertain and horrifying to him. He had fallen, plunged so far. Yet something kept him aloft, kept him from descending into that final abyss.

Somehow, the one thing in this world that should have been his ruin had become his bastion, and Valjean held his head above the surface, and promised he wouldn’t let him go, promised things would be all right.

And Javert didn’t know why, but he trusted him. He trusted him with everything he had. Sobbing, and devoid of any energy, he sank against him and closed his eyes. He was so tired. All he wanted was to sleep.

Slowly, the man’s warmth began to seep into him once more, driving out the cold of the river. And the world was still dark, but it was a comforting darkness, forgiving.

In his chest, through his veins, he felt his heart pumping, pumping, pumping. His head filled up with that noise, like a drumbeat, a cadence from the rear lines, urging him to press onwards, onwards ...

‘You will get through this;’ the man’s voice echoed in his mind. ‘I will help you through this.’

‘I promise.’

***

Release finally came in the form of a rain storm, the summer heat vanishing in cloud-cast skies and drizzle, low thunder rumbling in the distance. The raindrops pattered on the windowpanes of the little second-story bedroom, racing and converging upon one another as they fell. Javert could hear the spattering of the rooftop gutters disgorging their contents into the puddles swelling on the street below.
The incessant burning that had plagued his body for the past few days began to subside—slowly, as though unwilling to give up its hold on him.

He found himself awake for longer periods of time, and the pounding in his head lessened to a dull ache. His mind was a little clearer. Once more he became capable of coherent thought—something more than just raging displeasure that voiced itself in bestial noises of pain.

Valjean seemed content to leave him alone, now.

It was clear to Javert, at this point, that Valjean was doing this out of trust. And, moreover, mutual understanding. The man really did want him to get better—and he knew his presence could be a bother just as often as a comfort, perhaps more so. Therefore, he allowed him his space. He allowed him silence, peace. Dignity.

Of course, he still entered the room often, bringing meals and fresh water, checking his temperature, asking him if he needed anything, inquiring as to his recovery. Sometimes he attempted to make small talk, or prompt him to share his thoughts. He spoke softly, but without hesitation, and if Javert was not in the mood to engage him Valjean would not press the issue.

He still slept often and long, but Javert increasingly found himself staring up at the ceiling, or looking through the window, restless not so much in body as in mind.

His health may not have been on the brink of disaster now—it was more of an annoying inconvenience, really—but aside from that his situation hadn’t changed all that significantly in the past week since he’d been brought back to life.

A thought occurred to him then, as he lay in his torment—one word: absolution.

As previously stated, the fight had gone out of him; he was too tired even for acts of self-destruction. He had surrendered, allowed life to toss him about on its strange tides. He thought no more of trying to swim against its current—even if he wanted to.

So this was his fate now, this was the way things were: that he would live—must live, for he had no other choice, it seemed—that he needed to find a way to continue in this world despite being broken, his convictions dissolved, his moral compass spinning endlessly.

He could not kill himself.

He could not even try to; not after all of this.

What, now, would killing himself accomplish? Before, he had sought surcease of strife—to silence once and for all the dissonant voices in his mind, the conflicts that tore him apart from within. He had sought to preserve his dignity.

But he had been stripped of his dignity. There was no more of it to lose.

In killing himself, after all of this, there was nothing to be gained. The act of suicide did not present itself to him as a solution, now, but rather as an option of escape borne of cowardice. An escape that he no longer had the power to follow through with.

But still, he was overcome with weariness when he thought of what lay ahead of him.

His superiors would not allow him to quit the police; rather, they would not drag him from his post and make an example of him as he so wished. He understood this, in a way. He was a senior officer, with much experience and a near-perfect track record, who had hitherto been very useful to
them. His absence would leave a hole that would need to be filled.

This would be inconvenient.

However, even if they allowed him to falter, even if they gave him back his job with no repercussions, he could not help but believe he would not live up to what they expected of him—what they deserved of him, of any man of his post. He did not feel as though he could be particularly useful to anyone, anymore. Not now, not in this state. Certainly he questioned his ability to continue meting out justice, when he was no longer entirely sure what “justice” even was.

Where had his strength gone? His ruthlessness, his vigor? Where was his conviction? Drowned in the river, no doubt. In his mind, he could not possibly be fit for duty.

But he could not bring himself to fight them on this; for if there was anything of the man that remained unchanged it was his respect for authority. And authority deigned that he, Javert, would retain his position as inspector.

Did he wish to? No, perhaps not. Was there any other way of life for him? No, perhaps not. In any case, he would take whatever work they assigned him and complete it to the best of his abilities, without complaint. He could not argue with his superiors, even if he questioned their judgment.

It was in this sad resignation that he found himself thinking of that word. Of absolution.

He had not contemplated the existence of a god, or what it should desire of him, personally, until that night at the river, when his newfound sense of morality forced him to admit the presence of something that had a higher authority than the law. He had shuddered in the face of this new superior, unable to understand it, unable to agree with it. In light of this, he had chosen to hand it his resignation in the only way he knew how.

Perhaps this had been a mistake.

Perhaps, like his superiors in the prefecture, this superior did not want him to resign.

Maybe this was how Valjean had known where to find him. Had arrived at precisely the right time to watch his descent. Had somehow managed to find him in the blackness of those waters on a night with no starlight to guide him—and successfully fight against a current that had hitherto spared no man, heaving his body up onto dry land.

There were too many coincidences, Javert thought.

Conceivably, could they not all be part of some grand scheme, some orchestrated unfolding of events in which he—Javert, the merciless inspector—was set down another path?

He almost laughed at himself for entertaining the idea.

Such a thing was like to sound from the mouth of a priest or a nun, not a policeman. And while he’d never questioned or argued with their beliefs, so too had he never actually, personally, considered them.

And yet he found himself drawn back to the theory, examining it ponderously.

No, he thought to himself, if there was a god—some omnipotent, all-seeing conductor—why would it concern itself with him? How many people were there on this earth more deserving of its attention?—how many saints and martyrs, how many poor, wretched souls starving to death in the
streets? Why was his existence of any particular consequence?

But ah! Was there not a saint involved in this? Was there not a man on whose side divine providence always seemed to be? A man on the verge of martyrdom, sacrificing his own well-being for that of others? And had he, Javert, not hunted this man, not caused him to suffer greatly?

So was that it, then? This god was intervening in things for Valjean’s sake?

But no, he realized, how did sparing his life do Valjean any good? If anything, it seemed to only cause him further hindrance.

If some supernatural force was acting on behalf of Jean Valjean, would not extinguishing the oppressive counterforce of he, Javert—the man’s primary antagonist—have been the logical thing to do?

But then, to believe that a divine creator was watching over the man meant also to admit that it had seen his suffering—his starvation, his imprisonment, his expulsion from society and subsequent torments—and done nothing.

Why? Was it not capable of changing things? Did it not have empathy?

How much power did such an entity actually have over mankind? How much of people’s actions were of their own will, and how much was of God’s? Was there any such thing as free will, or were they all just puppets on this great blue stage?

If an omnipotent god existed, why would it allow them to suffer in the first place? Was it itself not the force responsible for every occurrence wherein suffering could be found?

Or, was mankind responsible for its own suffering, it being a byproduct of their freedom of choice?

But then, did God not care what they did? Did it not care what they experienced?

Why, then, was there a god to begin with? Why worship it at all?

He lost himself in this thinking.

There was a reason—he said to himself—that he had not entertained such ideas before. There were too many questions without answers, too many irresolvable conflicts of logic. To truly consider such things was to lose oneself in a wave of existentialism, to doubt the whole of the universe—and one could not live thusly. There was a reason he’d thrown himself off that quay.

Then, circling back around to that thought, he wondered again why, if there was a god, and if it contrived to help Valjean, had it allowed him to survive? Knowing that he, Javert, was the only force left in the world that could conceivably do him harm?

It made no sense.

Unless …

Upon reviewing the facts, it could almost be construed that, were there some kind of cosmic plan, it was actually playing out in his favor. Had he not been thrice now pulled back from certain doom?

At the barricades he’d been fated to be executed. It was a sure thing—and logical, too.
Understandable, even. But then, out of seemingly nowhere, Valjean had appeared. He had demanded charge over him, led him away from his captors. He had cut his binds and freed him. All this from a man who had every right, every excuse, to take his life. But it just so happened that, despite their history, Valjean harbored no animosity towards him—that he was in the habit of saving people—and that he was in the right place at the right time, possessing the exact amount of leverage needed to prevent his death.

And then, that night at the river. There was no reason for Valjean to have followed him. There were, in fact, an overwhelming multitude of reasons for him not to have followed him. And yet there he had been, to see him fall, to drag him out and force the air back into his lungs.

Finally, the second time, his last attempt. How had Valjean even known he’d left? Had he woken up just as he’d exited the house? No, Javert had been far too quiet for his departure to have jarred him from his sleep. This meant that Valjean had truly just happened to awake precisely when needed to in order to notice his absence and catch his trail.

And even then, even after he’d found him, Valjean could have let him go. He could have let him drown, admitted his mistake in saving him and allowed the issue to resolve itself. After all, he—Javert—had not even been grateful. He’d spurned him and fought him at every turn. But the man was so saintly and stubborn that he couldn’t let go. All that was required from him was a little apathy—in his own defense, to his own benefit, no less! And he could not even do that. He’d forced him down and spoken softly in his ear, held him as he’d lost all his composure, helped him back to his house, back into his bed.

All of these little miracles had been entirely dependent on the actions of one man in particular. Was that what was going on, then? Was Jean Valjean an agent of God as he, Javert, was an agent of the police? Was he a tool through which a greater force meted out divine providence?

Considering the facts—and running on the idea that there truly was no such thing as a coincidence—it really did seem almost as though God was trying its very best not to let him die.

But why? What use could he be? What good could he do—especially now, broken and defeated?

He didn’t understand.

These thoughts plagued him endlessly as he lay there.

He could, after a time, manage to ascertain at least a handful of reasons for him not to kill himself. It would inconvenience the prefecture. It would annoy his superiors—both earthly and, possibly, otherwise. After having been seen with him of late, it would draw undue attention to the man who went by the name of M. Fauchelevent—arouse unwanted suspicion on the part of the police.

And, then, perhaps worst of all, it would be like spitting in Valjean’s face.

After all the man had done for him—even if he hadn’t really wanted him to—it would be reprehensibly cold and ungrateful for him to cast those efforts away as though they were meaningless. He might have been an unfeeling man, but he was not a spiteful one.

No, the problem was not in finding reasons not to die. The problem was, no matter how hard he tried, Javert could not find a single reason for him to live.

Except one.
Absolution.

That word … He had never truly considered its meaning possible. To the man of a week ago, the idea that one could redeem oneself—could falter and fail in matters of morality and yet later manage to succeed in them, and overwhelmingly so—was a silly notion: impossible at worst, an alien concept at best.

But the man of a week ago was dead. He had drowned in the depths of the Seine.

Another man was left in his stead—a shell, a husk, to his own thinking, but unquestionably different—capable of at least considering ideas that the former could not have, if not entertaining and even possibly accepting them.

The idea of absolution made him curious, if nothing else.

His whole life he had sought to earn his keep honestly, and to do good. He did good by keeping order. It was a very simple affair. He missed its simplicity. He missed being able to feel irreproachable, to feel confident that he was serving society some benefit. He missed knowing he was right.

He couldn’t return to these things, not in the way in which he’d originally construed them. But perhaps he could find another way to regain them.

What he wouldn’t give to feel sure of himself again!

If it was at all possible to do the world some further good—even if it was different than his original sense of the word—that would please him.

So, perhaps he had oversimplified things. Perhaps he had been a little blind. Those things had begun to be straightened out in his mind. Even if it only seemed to make everything more complicated, at least he was getting somewhere.

And where exactly was he going? He asked himself this and it took him a long time to respond.

To do good and not evil: this was the first ambition he’d had in life. It was the only true ambition he had ever had, if he stopped to think about it. All other desires he harbored were merely means to that end.

Was that not still his goal? To do good?

Even if his understanding of how one went about achieving “goodness” had irrevocably changed, could he not still aspire to it? It would take time, and deliberation. It would not be a pleasant or easy path to take. But, if he was to go on in this world, it was the path he knew he must take—the only one that he had ever seen.

Earlier, that path had forked for a moment and driven him to his wits end. To uphold the law, which was good—or to repay his savior, which was also good—those had been the forks in the path, that the conflict which had nearly caused his own demise.

But he had a little more understanding now of what goodness could be—just a little: a collection of shards to piece back together. Doing so would cause him pain, yes—confusion and doubt. But if he could reconstruct what goodness truly was—how one might attain it …

If he strived for that, perhaps—just perhaps—he could be absolved.
The law and morality were not necessarily the same things. He understood that now. He needed to learn exactly how they differed, and how to tell where that line was crossed.

If he could do that …

If a convict who had given up all hope in humanity and all goodwill could become a saint, could not a broken old policeman find a way to redeem himself? Make up for past transgressions, misunderstandings?

Perhaps this was why the fates conspired to keep him alive.

He contemplated his hand, eyes running along the creases and folds in his palm, traveling the length of his life-line.

He had never really noticed how long it was. Not surprising, he supposed, as he hadn’t read the lines since he was a very young child. It was surprising, though, that he would recall such things. He had never believed in them.

But it really did seem as though something were keeping him alive—as though fate had a hand in things. As though it were saving him for something.

Maybe, he thought, as his eyes traced the line, maybe there was some way to …

He let his lids droop shut with a sigh and sunk back into the pillows, crossing his arms over his stomach.

Yes … Perhaps.

He slept better that night.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Alone Made of Ice - Maldito

Awake My Soul - Mumford & Sons

Bitter Sweet Symphony – The Verve

Freedom - Anthony Hamilton & Elayna Boynton

Ghosts That We Knew – Mumford & Sons

Hatching - The Cinematic Orchestra

Hidamari no Mori Uta - Masakatsu Takagi

Human – Daughter
Meguri - Masakatsu Takagi

Thoughts - Michael Schulte

Ubugoe - Masakatsu Takagi

When it's Cold I'd Like to Die - Moby
The Difference Between Justice and Kindness

Chapter Summary

Javert receives a letter from his superior; Madeleine's ghost comes back to haunt him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He is a hard man who is only just, and a sad one who is only wise.”

-Voltaire

***

Javert lay there listening to the songs of the birds outside the window, his eyes closed.

It did not seem quite like morning—although the birds implied otherwise—for the rains, though lessening now to only occasional, light showers, continued to obscure the sun behind grey clouds, and so the day provided little extra light through the misted windowpanes.

He heard the bedroom door open—carefully, slowly, as though the enterer did not wish to wake him should he still be asleep—and close with a barely perceptible click.

There was no mystery in Javert’s mind as to who it was; Valjean had been the only one to check on him for all the days he’d spent in the house, and seemed to be the sole occupant.

Presumably, that old woman at the flat had been his only servant, and he had judged it best to leave her to care for that girl. Javert could not say he blamed the man for giving his daughter priority over some pathetic, washed up excuse for a police agent with failing health and an ill humor—not to mention someone who had been his greatest antagonist through the years. Besides, the fewer people here to witness him in such a miserable, humiliating state, the better.

He opened his eyes if only to show he was awake, but did not turn to look at him.

“How are you feeling?” Valjean asked quietly, respectfully keeping his distance.

“Better, I suppose,” he answered begrudgingly. There was little reason for him to spurn such a harmless question, even though he wanted to.

“Your fever has gone down?”

“Some.”

“Ah, really. That is good.”

Valjean cleared his throat, approaching the bed. “Er, Javert,” he began, a hint of trepidation in
his voice, “A courier brought a letter for you, a few days ago. You were not well enough to read it, then, and I did not want to trouble you about it. But I thought you would want it now.” He glanced away. “I do not know how they knew where to send it—that you would be here—but …”

Javert took the paper from him with some perplexion, breaking the red wax and unfolding it curiously.

“I’ll …” Valjean stepped quietly back towards the door. “I’ll let you read it in private.”

The letter was stamped with the official seal and forwarded by “Du bureau du Préfet de la Police”.

Javert cringed at the sight of it, a chill passing through him, but forced himself to continue.

“First Class Inspector Javert,” it read in the Prefect’s flawless penmanship, “It seems to me that I may have underestimated the amount of mental duress you are under at present.

When you came into my office earlier and asked to be dismissed, I was, needless to say, quite shocked to hear such a thing from you, and perhaps did not take the matter as seriously as I should have. I really did think you were being unnecessarily harsh with yourself concerning the issue which you brought to me—it seemed a petty thing (if I judge your character correctly), certainly not something one should be discharged for, especially in these trying times—and I thought setting you straight on it and asking you to retain your position was the right course of action. It appears, however, I may have been mistaken in that.

If you truly are so conflicted on the matter—or, perhaps, have something else troubling you that you do not wish to disclose and which prevents you from carrying out your duties—I shall not stand in the way of your resignation. Be that as it may, I will not dismiss you. Given your past service and your record of accomplishments, you assuredly do not deserve such a dishonor, and I shall not bring myself to do it; I do not care what you say to try and damn yourself in my eyes. You are one of the top agents in the prefecture, your diligence and dedication to the post far outclasses that of many others, and you have keen senses when it comes to all sorts of criminal goings on. Indeed, this is a perilous time—the aftermath of an insurrection, made only worse by the chaos of this cholera epidemic—and the city needs all the capable men it can afford.

That said, I do urge you to reconsider your stance on this. Your fellows may not act like it, but it would be a blow to the prefecture and to the city to lose you from the police. I may be able to replace your post, but it is not the same as being able to replace you yourself.

For the time being, I am granting you unpaid leave until such a time as you may deign to return, and I have given your assignments to Mullins. Please contact me directly with any further correspondences; I don’t want you relaying letters to me indirectly through the stations again.

It is my hope that you will be well again shortly.

De bonne foi,

–Henri Gisquet”

He stared at the letter long after he had finished reading it, his brow furrowed. Finally he let out a sigh and folded it up, setting it beside him on the sheets.

He did not know what to do.

To be dismissed—as he should be—was one thing … but to willingly resign from the Police of
his own accord? Could he do such a thing?

No, he supposed, he could not. Not because he didn’t want to, but because his superiors had expressed a desire for him to stay, and though it had not been an order, it felt like one—or, at least, an obligation.

He could still hear Madeleine’s voice, telling him he would not be dismissed, telling him to go about his usual tasks, because he was needed. Javert had reluctantly accepted these duties, but insisted upon his dismissal all the same. Madeleine had brushed him off.

No, he reminded himself, shaking his head, not Madeleine—Valjean.

Madeleine had never been real.

Or—no, he had, but—Madeleine … he did not exist any longer; there was only Jean Valjean. There had only ever been Jean Valjean.

The man really did not take matters of dismissal and resignation very well, Javert thought to himself with a mournful smirk. Himself, Fauchelevent, the poor, the ignorant … even that wretched woman from the street—he simply refused to give up on people.

Javert couldn’t entirely dismiss this predisposition as foolish, he supposed—given the outcome of the Fauchelevent affair, especially—but perhaps, in his own case, it had been … unnecessary.

Still, he could not return to those thoughts, that yearning for the void—not now. They would see where Valjean’s choice had led them; he did not have it in him to undo it, at this point.

But this brought him back around to his current conundrum—what was he to do?

How was he supposed to resume his duties now, like this?

Why did Gisquet even think it wise to keep him on after having seen the way he’d behaved the other night?

It had not been hard to ignore Madeleine's wishes of his further employment, considering their relationship, and how Javert had viewed him. But to ignore the earnest entreaties of Gisquet, a man he looked up to, respected not just as a superior but as a person … No, he couldn’t bring himself to do that. He couldn’t disregard the Prefect of Police when the Police was his lifeblood, all he had ever known.

Yet how could he go back to his post, now? How could he don those clothes again, and go out into the public as a representative of something he was no longer even sure of?

He ruminated despondently on this.

Some time later, Valjean appeared in the doorway. He carried a tea-tray, so his entrance was functional—yet he paused at the threshold.

“What … What was it about? That letter.”

Javert turned to regard him.

The expression on the man’s face belied the fact that he was trying to suppress a great deal of unease. Surely he had noticed the official seal on the letter, and worried for his security.

Javert narrowed his eyes at him, knitting his brow. “It had nothing to do with you. Why do you
doubt me still?"

Valjean opened his mouth to say something, closed it, looked away.

Was that guilt in his eyes, Javert wondered?

“I don’t,” he said quietly, not meeting his gaze. “At least, I don’t want to. I don’t think I need to.” His voice lowered, hard to hear now. “It wouldn’t … It wouldn’t even matter, anyway; I would not resist you if you were to arrest me. I told you before: I am your willing prisoner, if you should decree it so. Though I do not think you shall,” he added, “—not now. I trust you; I do. But I just …” He shivered. “That is just the way of me now,” he breathed—sadly, as though to himself. “I am afraid. I have always been so, so afraid.”

Javert studied his face with intrigue.

What was this feeling, rising in his breast? Was this empathy? What this was that felt like?

“You needn’t be,” he said, trying to soften to roughness of his usual tone, and failing miserably. “Not of me.”

Valjean stared down at the tray he was carrying, his eyes distant, brow furrowed. He let out a deep breath in what might have been a sigh of relief. Or, perhaps, Javert thought, something more melancholy. He looked back up at him, his face solemn, serious.

“Thank you,” he said.

Javert could only hold his gaze for a moment before turning away.

He stared at the window, silent, but it was not the outside he was seeing.

“Why do you give in so easily?” he breathed. “Why do you not resist arrest, when you have so much to lose?”

The other man was quiet for a moment. “Because you are not wrong. The law does call for my arrest; I cannot fault it that.”

“But why, why not resist? You have the strength to outmatch even a group of officers.”

“It …” He sounded remorseful. “It is not in my nature, Javert.”

Those words pierced something inside of him, drew blood.

“No,” he murmured to himself, “I suppose it isn’t.”

Wordlessly, Valjean set down the tea-tray on the bedside table and pulled up a chair, pouring tea out into the delicate porcelain cups, wreathed with painted flowers in pinks and purples and greens. Javert recognized them after a moment as thistles.

It seemed strange to see such large and weathered hands grasp such fragile things as teacups. They should be clumsy, Javert thought; those hands were powerful and built for laboring, not refinement. They were a stark contrast against the intricate floral designs and elegant styling.

Valjean finished pouring the second cup and handed it to Javert, not meeting his eyes, and Javert took it from him without looking.

The inspector remained quiet for a long time. He stared down at his own reflection in the cup of
tea in his hands. “Your face, before … Don’t look at me like that,” he said, turning to gaze at the sheets. “I’m no Judas. I told you—you have nothing to fear from me. And I meant it. When have I ever lied to you?”

Valjean stared at him blankly before his eyes drifted up and to the side, quirking an eyebrow. He began to count upon his fingers.

Javert flushed, both with indignity that Valjean should treat his word so lightly, and in horrified self-consciousness as he realized that he had, in fact, lied to him on many occasions—although perhaps not intentionally at the time.

He recalled his various mistruths as Valjean tapped the tips of his fingers: ‘I will wait for you here’, ‘No, I’m not still thinking of killing myself’, ‘I am going to the station house’ …

“Oh, stop that, will you!” he finally exclaimed. “I’m being serious!”

Valjean broke count and looked back at him with a mischievous grin.

It was the first of such expressions he had ever worn in front of him, and the sight of it warmed his face. There was a playfulness, an honest happiness and amusement within that look, and Javert was not quite sure he had ever seen such a thing directed specifically at him before.

He wanted to hate the way the man’s expression made him feel—like he’d suddenly walked into a ray of sunshine—but try as he might he could not. He growled his displeasure.

“If I had it in me to arrest you, I would have done it that night,” he started again, thrusting his face in another direction as he recomposed himself. “But you know what I chose. You know I can’t bring you in.”

Valjean studied him for a moment, considering his words, before bowing his head. “I suppose that is true.”

“Do not doubt me again.”

Valjean only stared down at his lap. He was quiet for a long time.

“Javert,” he said finally, his voice hushed. “You once said you believed it was easy to be kind, and that it was hard to do what is just. But you were wrong; it is the other way around.” He let out a sigh. “I do not resist my own arrest, because it is just. I belong in the bagne, in the eyes of the law. This is not wrong. But it is not kind.”

“You could have arrested me then, if you’d liked. You had every reason to. But you didn’t. You say it is easy to be kind; I say that it is not. I think you understand what I meant, now. And in not arresting me, you chose not the easy path, which was just—but the hard one, which was kind. That is what you have done, Javert: you have done me a kindness. And I know at what price it came. So I must thank you, Javert; truly. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Javert’s cheeks flushed. His lips drew down as he thrust his gaze in the opposite direction.

“I told you;” he muttered, not sure if what he was feeling was indignation or embarrassment, “I told you not to mention it. I told you gratitude would kill me. I told you—I never intended to let you go! It just … happened.”

Valjean let out another sigh, this one longer than the first. “Javert, things like that don’t just happen.”
“Stop it; stop this,” he breathed, grimacing.

“Whether or not it was conscious, you made a decision to—”

“I didn’t choose to do anything!” he snapped, whipping his head around to glare at him with blazing eyes. “I didn’t! I would never let a convict go free; I would never!”

Valjean had given a start, backing into his chair with a jolt as though he’d been slapped.

Javert stared at him, panting, trembling as the rage within him died down and sputtered out. He sat frozen, a feeling of guilt already growing in his gut at his words.

Valjean had looked shocked, but there was no fear in his eyes, and—though shaking a little at first—he composed himself and leaned forwards in his chair, clasping his hands together in front of his chin and gazing at him intently.

“Javert,” he said, “I hate to tell you this, but you are indeed the proud new owner of a conscience.” His expression was serious for a moment longer before dissolving into a few suppressed chuckles. “Well—I say proud, but …”

Javert’s brow twitched, he clenched his fists in the sheets. “Don’t mock me!” he snarled.

“I’m not mocking you, honestly!” Valjean laughed, “I’m trying to thank you! But you’re being far too humble to admit what you’ve done.”

“I’m not being humble; I’m—” He faltered, gritting his teeth, his protestation petering off into a spout of grunts and growls.

Valjean eventually managed to restrain his amusement, taking in a deep breath. “Listen,” he said, growing serious again, “I know it is not easy to admit what you have done—even to yourself—considering the way in which you’ve lived. I know the conflict it has caused you. And I am sorry for that. But it remains that you have done something good, Javert—something kind. And that took far more courage than what was merely just.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever understood that until now. But I know that somewhere, somewhere inside of you, you know what you’ve done, and you know why. And I want to give that part of you my sincerest thanks. Scorn it all you like right now, but maybe one day you will understand the enormity of your gesture, and what it means to me.”

He let out a breath and closed his eyes. “Now come, drink your tea; it’s going to go cold.”

Javert was at a loss for words. He did not know what it was he felt, and he did not know how to express it.

Had he really made a decision—as he rode in that fiacre, as he stood by that lamppost—to let Valjean go? Was this true?

Yes, it was. He had admitted as much to himself on the bank of the Seine. He had not fully comprehended how it was he had come to decide it, but it had been done all the same.

He had let a convict go free when they ought to have been arrested. Valjean wanted him to be proud of this?

No, he thought to himself, it was not just any convict, however—it was Jean Valjean. And Jean Valjean was markedly different from the criminals he knew. Jean Valjean had saved his life.
Valjean had saved his life, and, in turn, Javert had spared him arrest. This was a transaction of sorts—a debtor repaying a debt. It was good to repay debts.

But the thing was—and he admitted this to himself—he didn’t have to repay that debt. Yet he had done so anyway. Had that taken courage? He didn’t know. He hadn’t felt anything like courage, or even certainty, then.

He understood why Valjean should be grateful, but he hated the idea that he had done a criminal a favor—a favor which involved him spitting in the face of the law. And yet, the law was …

He was not certain any longer whether or not it was wrong that he should have allowed Valjean to go free. He was uncertain of the justice of the law, and so he was uncertain of the justice in an act that opposed the law.

Ugh, this damnable uncertainty! It vexed him to his core.

Having nothing else to do, Javert gulped down the cup of tea that he’d been holding in his lap and set it back down on the saucer with a clatter.

He gave a frustrated sigh and ran his hands over his face, growling under his breath.

How on earth was he supposed to go on like this, when he couldn’t be sure of anything anymore?

He sat with his head in his hands, hunched over on the mattress.

“You are troubled,” Valjean said quietly.

Javert groaned in response to this. “They will not dismiss me from my duties,” he mumbled into his hands. “Not over a matter of indecision, anyway. They do not know the extent of it. But I cannot tell them.”

“If they are willing to let this … situation go unquestioned, why do you still feel the need to resign?”

“This isn’t about you,” he growled, glaring back at him. At the look on Valjean’s face, he begrudgingly softened his tone, glancing away. “At least, not entirely. It is true you are the cause for the state I find myself in, but …” He narrowed his eyes. “—it is not you who is entirely to blame.”

“And the state you find yourself in is what, precisely?”

“Uselessness!” he barked indignantly. “Wretchedness! Weakness! Indecision! I do not know how to do my job any longer!”

“How to—?” Valjean looked bewildered, perplexed. “You are a police officer; your job is to protect the people!”

“And was I not protecting the people when I called for your arrest in Montreuil-sur-Mur?” he sneered.

Valjean faltered at that, flinching. He opened his mouth, but slowly closed it again, letting out a breath as he looked away. “That is true,” he said quietly.
“Then you see wherein the problem resides,” Javert grunted. “I no longer have a way of gauging the justice of my actions. Barring this, how, then, can I act at all? It’s not as though I can go around assessing the moral character of every thief and brigand I find. I don’t have the time for such nonsense.”

“Besides, a lawman that can be bargained with—that metes out mercy and is lenient in his application of the law—is not a man who is feared. And a lawman who is not feared is not respected. What good is a police officer who is not respected? What authority can he possess? He is useless—worse than useless—he is worthless.”

Valjean surveyed him sadly. “You are not worthless.”

“I am to the police,” he scoffed.

“No, you aren’t. Did your superior not say that he preferred to have men that doubted themselves over men who followed orders blindly?”

Javert narrowed his eyes at that and turned away.

“Furthermore, justice is better upheld when one takes the context of things into consideration. For example,” he sighed, “that poor woman.” He grew downcast, his eyes losing focus. “Fantine.”

Javert looked back up at him. “Who?”

Indignation filled Valjean’s face. His voice became terrible, and there was something of a thunderstorm in his features. “The woman that you killed, Javert!”

He bore the brunt of this blow as he had when the mayor had ordered him to leave the room so many years prior: like a Russian soldier, unflinching, merely stiffening. Only this time, there was a trembling in his eyes as he was thrust back to that time which had gone so long without recall, forced to reassess his own actions from this new perspective he had gained.

‘You have killed that woman!’ he could hear him say, his eyes wide with horror and disbelief in the darkness.

“You remember her; I know you do,” Valjean seethed. “I know you remember that night. When you dragged me from the hospital. When a good woman died for nothing—nothing but your pride. Look upon it with fresh eyes, Javert. You did not care then. You did not care about context. You did not care that she had been forced into that life to support her child. That it was that aristocrat who dealt the first blow, and she had only fought to preserve her dignity. That there were witnesses who could attest to this.”

“No,” he fumed, “you did not see the possibility of a struggling mother, of an honest, sickly woman in need of help; you saw only a whore, a sinful creature of the night. And what charges were brought against the man who’d tormented her? None. The wretch walked free. You did not see his cruelty beneath his finery. You saw only what you wanted to see—because it was simple, because it was easy. You saw only a harlot that had marred the face of a bourgeois, and you did not care that her child would die because you sentenced her to prison.”

Javert thought he saw in the man’s features not Jean Valjean, but Madeleine—the mayor, his superior—returned from the grave to rebuke him once more for his actions.

He had come to understand, at the river, that Madeleine had always been Jean Valjean all along, and not just some disguise—but it was with a sudden start that he realized that Madeleine still lived inside this man—nay, that he was this man, and this man was he.
Madeleine had never died. Here he stood before him at this very instant.

A sudden nausea gripped him at this revelation.

“It was only my intercession in the matter that spared her that indecency;” Valjean continued, “but that too was soon negated.” He threw up his hands. “And the way you treated her, in her final moments! There was no reason for that kind of callousness! She died because of you! A child endured another year of abuse—of starvation and brutality—because of you! She grew up without a mother, because of you. Lost her only family. Because you did not care for context! Well,” he said venomously, “you seem to care for it now.”

Javert shuddered beneath him, the corners of his mouth drawn down, his face in shadow. He grimaced, clenched his teeth, bit his lip.

Valjean stared down at him for a minute or so before he let out a sigh, his features softening, anger melting away into melancholy.

He studied Javert, how he had tensed and curled within himself.

“Forgive me,” Valjean said, his voice hushed now. “I should not have been so harsh with you. I had meant only to …” He let out another sigh and shook his head. “That did not go where I intended it to go. What I meant to do was to show how important it is to put more than just the law into consideration. Because true justice is sometimes different than it appears to be at first. Now that you are able to put things into more than one perspective, I should think you’ve actually become more valuable to the police, not less.”

Still, Javert was silent, lost in thought.

Madeleine was alive. Madeleine stood here before him.

And yet this man was more than Madeleine, he was so much more, so many other men: a tree pruner from Faverolles, a thief, a convict, a galley-slave. A hardened criminal, beastly and powerful—an upstanding citizen, protector of the weak and the forgotten. It seemed impossible to reconcile these things as making up a single being. Surely they contradicted one another. It was hard for him to understand, but perhaps this man was indeed all of these things at once—an angelic demon, a saint capable of devilry, a man who had done bad things and was yet good in spite of it.

Valjean was staring at him, he finally noticed, with a guilty look on his face. “I … Javert, please; I am sorry. Truly. You did not mean for her to die. I know that.”

They remained motionless, heads hung.

“It is true that I was callous,” Javert finally said under his breath. “I was angry with you. For having duped me, for having lied and pretended for so long. For making me look like a fool. And then, that you should have pardoned me, for something which you had every reason to condemn me for, and yet something on which I was not wrong to begin with … It felt like I was being mocked, somehow. I let that resentment skew my handling of things; I let something which ought to have been professional become personal. I acted with undue aggression.”

He was quiet for a moment, lost in memory. “I did not intend for her to die. But at the time, I did not care. She meant nothing to me; I had my sights set on you. That you were asking to retrieve her child … It was mere stalling, a plan to escape—that is what I believed. And even if I’d thought you were pleading in earnest, that you would make good on your word, it did not matter to me. I felt no compassion for that woman or her plight. I did not even consider the child. No, I had no proof that
“And that you would act as though you had a right to make requests of me, as though you were yet that mask you wore—I had thought it to be a mask, anyway,” he grumbled to himself, “—it repelled me; it made me laugh. That a convict had been appointed mayor, that a prostitute was treated like royalty by him … I was sickened by the entire affair. That I had allowed these things to come about beneath my watch.”

His face was stony. “I should not have been the one to arrest you,” he said. “The matter was too personal; someone else ought to have been charged with the task. But they did not know that; they did not know the extent of my contempt—and I had been the one to implicate you in the first place, so they gave the order to me. And I leapt on it.”

The inspector let out a sigh, the tension leaving his muscles. “That girl, at your flat. Cosette,” he murmured. “She is the daughter, isn’t she. She is that woman’s child.”

“Her name was Fantine,” Valjean breathed.

Javert paused. “She is Fantine’s child.”

“Yes.”

Javert considered this solemnly. “I thought so.” He closed his eyes. “I had heard there was a young girl travelling with you, after you escaped from Toulon. I knew it must have been her. That you had taken her from that inn in Montfermeil. But I had not quite expected that you …” He reopened his eyes and sat staring out the window at the treetops, dusky grey beneath the clouded sky. “I was surprised, that you had kept her. That you had raised her. I had thought she was a sort of prop, at first—another part of your disguise. I had expected you to give her away, eventually. I did not expect that you would … love her.”

Valjean’s voice was reflective, distant. “Neither did I. At first, I had intended to take her to a nunnery, where she would be safe. But then I saw her, and I rescued her from that horrible place, and she called me ‘papa’. And I … felt something I had never felt before. An entirely new sensation awoke within me, when I looked at her. I knew I needed to protect her. I knew I could never let her go.”

“The papers,” Javert recalled, “they said Fantine was your lover. I did not know why you would bother to fetch the child of a dead woman who had no family. So I assumed …”

Valjean’s face went blank. “What?” His cheeks filled with color. “Mon Dieu, non; we were never—”

“I see that now,” Javert said. “When I asked the girl why she called you ‘father’, I had half expected … But ah, no. You are not at all related to her, are you?”

“No.”

Javert was gazing off, wistful. “You continue to find ways to surprise me, Jean Valjean.”

Valjean contemplated this. “I will take that as a compliment,” he said.

“You know, Javert,” he began again after a moment, “You say you don’t know, anymore, what is just. That you are incapable of telling right from wrong, of cruelty from kindness. But I think on some level you do; you do know. If you didn’t, you would not have done what you did. And you would not be concerned over the issues. In fact, I would say your worry over whether or not you
will do the right thing is precisely what indicates that you already know what it is."

Javert gave a start; he sat in bed, wondering, his elbows resting on his crossed legs, his head bowed. He furrowed his brow.

“We shall see.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Somehow I still don't have suggested listening for this chapter?? ﾍ(\UFF01)/-

̄
Chapter Summary

Cosette and Toussaint pay a visit; Valjean finds himself feeling something completely unfamiliar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him.”

-Booker T. Washington

***

It was around nine or ten at night, he figured—judging by the time elapsed since sunset—when Javert found himself sleepless.

He had, in the past few days, found himself perfectly capable of getting up and walking around by himself again, although he only attempted these exercises during the times he thought Valjean to be away. His head still buzzed a little, his thoughts muddled, but his fever had almost completely disappeared, and now the breeze wafting through the open windows and rustling the linen curtains actually imparted a certain amount of lasting coolness to his flesh.

He rose and ventured out into the hall to relieve himself, perhaps more out of restlessness than actual necessity. Afterwards, to his own surprise, he found himself continuing down the hall towards the stairs instead of returning to his room, the wooden floorboards cool beneath his bare feet.

Moonlight illuminated the interior of the house, and everything was hushed and quiet, save for the tentative chirping of crickets outside the windows every now and again.

The third stair he placed his weight on gave a little creak, and he eased up off of it, cautiously readjusting his footfall so as not to make a noise as he descended further into the house.

He didn’t know quite what it was that he was doing; he had not planned to go out. But then again, he hadn’t seen the rest of the house the entire time he’d been here, and he didn’t even know where it was Valjean slept, so perhaps after all of this he had grown a little curious—if, for nothing else, on account of boredom.

A few steps from the bottom of the stairs he halted, caught off guard.

There, sitting on the floor and leaned back against the wall by the stairs was Valjean, his arms folded, his head bent, a book lying face down over his lap. His eyes were closed and his chest rose
and fell steadily, his breaths as silent as the first winter’s snow.

Javert gave a start at the sight of him.

What was Valjean doing down here?

Was he …?

Had he been keeping watch, all this time? Been sleeping on the floor beside the stairs, so as to catch him if he tried to leave without his knowledge?

Was this why Valjean had inexplicably been able to follow him to the Prefecture building, despite the late hour of the night and complete lack of warning?

Javert stared down at him with wide eyes, gripping the banister tightly. There was something about the scene which inspired a sort of fearfulness in his heart, and he nearly trembled.

Slowly, carefully, he backed away, up the stairs, down the hallway, into his bedroom.

***

In the morning, Valjean awoke under a blanket he could not remember putting on, and he sat blinking and groggy, staring at it in confusion.

Honestly unsure as to how it had gotten there, he did not make any mention of this to his guest.

***

Towards evening, there came a knocking at the door.

Valjean gave a start. He had not expected anyone, and for a moment his old instincts rose in him: the sudden terror and conviction that he was being hunted, the urge to flee.

But against these things he steeled himself, and, resolved that it was surely nothing, he approached the door, undoing the latch and opening the locks.

Before he had time to process the identity of the two people at his doorstep, his daughter flung herself at him.

“Papa!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

He stumbled back in surprise, managing to retain his balance, finding himself suddenly enveloped by ruffles and lace and perfume.

Blinking, he put his arms around her in turn.

He had not embraced Cosette since before he had left for the barricades, and with a rush the emotions he had felt over her during that time, and the night after, came flooding back. He clutched
her tightly, squeezing his eyes closed and committing to memory once more the sensation of being embraced by his daughter, the thing he treasured most in the world. Earlier, in that hell of blood and gunshots, death and muck, he hadn’t been sure he’d ever have the fortune to feel this again, to be able to hold her in his arms. And then, when Javert had come upon him—when he’d told the fiacre driver to go to Rue de l’Homme Armé—Valjean had believed it would be the last time he would ever see Cosette.

In one quick motion he placed a kiss on the side of her brow as he drew back.

“Papa,” she repeated, clasping her hands behind her back and bouncing lightly where she stood, as though anxious. “You left so suddenly, and without saying goodbye! Ah, I know you did it out of the goodness of your heart, but you could have at least come to visit. It is not as though the flat is that far away. And you have still not told me where you went those few nights past! What were you doing? Why did you leave, when the streets were so unsafe?”

“Oh, my dear,” he sighed, “I cannot tell you; I am sorry. Perhaps one day. But not now.”

She folded her arms across her chest with a harrumph, stamping her foot. “I was deathly worried about you, you know! And so was Toussaint! You did not even bother to tell the porter where you were going. It was all very naughty of you! Pray you will not do it again.”

“I shan’t, trust me,” he said, scrunching up his face. “If I had my way I should never have to do any of that ever again.”

“What on earth were you up to, monsieur?” Toussaint asked, closing the door behind her and readjusting the way she held the covered basket in her arms. “You make it sound rather perilous.”

“Not now, Toussaint,” Valjean pleaded.

“If you insist.”

“Ma chère,” he said, turning back to Cosette in perplexion, “what are you doing here?”

“Why, I came to visit you, of course! It has been more than a week, and you haven’t sent any word since that letter! You must be so tired of it, cooped up in here by yourself!”

“I am not entirely alone, Cosette,” he said, glancing back warily at the stairs.

“I know that, but he is sick, and you have no one to cook or clean for you! So I spoke with Toussaint and we decided to bring you some things and make you a proper supper!”

“Ah, I see,” he said, recalling the old woman’s heavy-laden basket.

“How is he, papa? The inspector. Has he gotten any better?”

“Yes, I think—I think he is recovering, albeit slowly.”

She lowered her voice, speaking close to his ear. “You said he was … not in his right mind, no?”

Valjean grimaced, knitting his brow and glancing away. “Er—well, that is true. But he has come around a little since then. Though it has not been easy for either of us.”

“That is sad. May I see him?”

He looked up at her with trepidation. “See him?” He swallowed. “I suppose so. But one must be
careful around him. Do not ask him too many questions about what has happened. He has only just recovered, and I think it may be unwise, to stress him with any further inquiries about it.”

“That’s all right. I’ll be gentle with him, papa. I promise.”

He sighed. “As long as you are careful. Here,” he said, nodding towards the stairs, “He is in Toussaint’s room. But let me speak with him first, will you?”

Valjean climbed the stairs alone and carefully turned the knob, standing in the doorway humbly.

“Er, Javert,” he began, “My, uh …” He wet his lips nervously. “Cosette decided to pay a visit. She asked to see you. To know that you were well. And she insists on us having a proper supper.”

“What?” Javert exclaimed, sitting up rigidly in bed. “Oh—” He muttered something beneath his breath, glancing away. “Christ.” He groaned, touching his forehead. “Very well, then,” he sighed in defeat, “I suppose I haven’t a choice in the matter, have I?”

“Well, one could attempt to dissuade her, but it probably wouldn’t … Ah, no; I do not think so.”

“Mm. Wonderful. At the very least, will you—could you stall her for awhile? If I must be seen like this, I’d prefer to have a moment to collect myself, if you will.”

“Of course; of course. Do you want me to bring you a wash basin?”

Javert gave another sigh, rubbing his face. “That would be helpful.”

Valjean complied, and Javert set to making himself a fraction more presentable.

A number of minutes later Valjean knocked on the door and entered at his invitation.

Javert eyed the shaving kit he held in his hands questioningly.

“I thought you might … It has been some time, and I thought perhaps you might want to make use of this again,” Valjean said. “That is not to insinuate anything, mind you; I do not mean to say you look unkempt, per se, but I— Ah, you know what I mean.”

He held the kit out to him.

Javert hesitated, looking up at him. He searched his face for a moment before taking it, bowing his head without breaking his gaze.

Valjean waited for him to finish out in the hall.

When the man finally exited the bedroom, Valjean drew in a breath, his eyes lighting up.

Javert had tied his now neatly-combed hair with a blue ribbon—Valjean knew not where he’d gotten it; likely he’d found it laying around in Toussaint’s room—and shaved the stubble from his face, neatly trimming his side whiskers.

Though his head was bent, he stood straight, and despite the circles around his eyes and slight gauntness to his face, his skin was no longer discolored by fever, and he looked almost healthy again. Once more he’d had to borrow from Valjean’s wardrobe, wearing black trousers and the white linen shirt of before, this time with a white damask waistcoat and a black tailcoat, a dark grey cravat at his neck.
Valjean was struck by the sight of him so formally composed.

He was not sure he had ever seen the man dressed so sharply before, and it lent him an air of refinement that he had otherwise never given off. This was unexpected, and Valjean was caught off guard.

It was a stark contrast to his appearance the past week, or even the past years.

For most of the times Valjean had encountered him, Javert had been cocooned in the stuffy and faded wool folds of his greatcoat, chin withdrawn into his collar, face hidden beneath the brim of his hat. He had always appeared guarded and withdrawn, shielded from the rest of the world by the sheer amount of layers he wore and the distance he seemed to cultivate.

To look at Javert as he normally presented himself in public, the first word that would come to one’s mind would be “gruff”, but all of a sudden the man seemed rather elegant, and, gazing upon him, Valjean felt something flutter beneath his breast.

When Javert turned to look at him, all he could think of was how the blue of the ribbon brought out the blue of the man’s eyes, and he had never quite noticed how striking they were.

Fierce and predatory, cunning, yes—they had always been these things, but there was something else about them which he now noticed, and he couldn’t put his finger on it, but it was something in the way they caught one’s attention, the way their gaze had the power to imprison.

The man had never looked upon him with fondness, and Valjean wondered suddenly what it would be like, how it would feel, to receive warmth from those cold and piercing blue eyes.

“What?” Javert said finally.

With a start Valjean realized he’d been staring at him for what had been perhaps quite some time.

“N-nothing,” he said, turning a shade of pink. “It is just—you look …” He swallowed the lump that had grown in his throat. “—good. You look good, Javert. I mean—” he hastily corrected himself, flustered, “that is to say, you look well.”

Javert narrowed his eyes at him. “Right,” he said after a moment, heading down the stairs. “Let us hope it is enough to quell your daughter’s worries. I don’t think either of us could survive another round of her questioning. The less concern I incite in her the better.”

“That is certainly true,’’ Valjean heard himself say, following him downstairs as he tried to whisk away whatever it was that had come over him.

“Monsieur Inspector!” Cosette exclaimed as Javert entered the dining room, where Toussaint was already busy arranging place settings on the table. She looked nearly as surprised at the man’s appearance as her father had been. “Oh, you have come to join us after all! I was unsure you would have recovered enough to do so. But you look much better than I had expected!”

Javert merely grunted in response to this.

“Father only said that you were ill, so I did not know to what extent, but I thought—what with how long you were bedridden—that it must have been serious. But you are feeling better now, monsieur?”

“I suppose.”
“That is good. Toussaint and I made stew with all sorts of vegetables and things to improve one’s health, and baked some fresh loaves of bread. I hope you find it to your liking. Was papa the one cooking for you while you were here? What was it like? At the convent, it was the sisters that prepared our meals, and then, after we left, we had Toussaint for that, so I have never actually tried his cooking. How was it?”

“It was …” He scrunched up his face. “—not bad.”

“Did he burn anything? Add too many spices or some such?”

“Not that I could tell. Although, I cannot say I was paying attention to those things.”

“Hm. You know, now that I think on it, he never watches us in the kitchen. I wonder where papa learned to cook.”

“It was probably in Montreuil,” he mused to himself absentmindedly.

The color drained all at once from Valjean’s face.

Cosette’s expression went blank. “Eh?”

“In—” The man gave a start, obviously remembering himself and their situation. He cleared his throat. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

She cocked her head at him, raising an eyebrow. “Monsieur Javert, how long have you known papa?”

“Cosette!” Valjean interrupted, “What did I tell you earlier? Let the inspector alone. He is not well enough to put up with your prying.”

The girl huffed, let out a defeated sigh. “Very well. But I do not see why the two of you must be so secretive about yourselves!”

“Listen to your father, child,” Toussaint advised sagely, without looking up from her work. “He has always made decisions in your best interest, so I trust he has a good reason to hold his tongue. Even saints have a right to their secrets.”

Valjean blinked. “I— Yes; thank you, Toussaint.”

Cosette let out another frustrated puff of air, crossing her arms and dipping her head. “All right, all right. I am sorry, papa. Monsieur Javert. I will not ask of your history again. But pray, you will tell it to me one day, won’t you?”

The two men exchanged wary glances, narrowing their eyes at one another for a brief moment before looking in the opposite direction.

Cosette frowned at them. “Very well, then. Keep your secrets. I am used to having things kept from me, I suppose.”

The corner of Valjean’s lips drew down at this.

“Why do you not all sit down while I begin serving the food?” Toussaint suggested.

They complied, Valjean sitting at the head of the table, Cosette next to him on the side, and Javert in the middle chair on the opposite side, distancing himself from them out of what was probably a mixture of respect and nerves. Facing away a little, his arm was slung over the back of
the chair and his gaze was on the wall. Valjean noted his estrangement, but said nothing.

“So monsieur Javert, what exactly is it that inspectors do?” Cosette asked as Toussaint began pouring out drinks. “I must confess I do not really know the particulars of the occupation.”

The man glanced at her before averting his gaze again. “We inspect,” he said, taking the cup of milk from the old woman’s hands without looking.

Cosette’s lips curled up in a cat’s grin that was poorly hidden as she bit back a giggle. “Oh, really? I could not have guessed. And what is it you inspect?”

“Reports of theft and vandalism, assault, disturbances … You know the sort of thing.” he said as Toussaint placed down platters and bowls of food in the center of the table. “That is the base of it—the problems that plague the streets as a whole. Then the more tedious work: the checking of shipment lists and imported goods, the routine inspections of certain unseemly establishments that might pass along disease or some such. Patrols of frequently problematic neighborhoods.”

“Sometimes there is other work, similar to what gendarmes do. Protecting the peace, settling disputes, escorting certain high profile individuals. And then, as a police agent, one often finds themselves playing the spy, or becoming embroiled in a lengthy game of cat-and-mouse.” He closed his eyes. “Catching criminals—forgers, murderers, pickpockets, the like. Foiling insurgents. Lastly there is the desk-work, the filling out of reports and filing away of information related to cases and the goings on of the prefecture. It is typically a thankless job,” he sighed, “But I’ve never mended that.”

Valjean sat staring at him, eyebrows raised.

The man had not sounded so composed for nearly a week. Perhaps exposure to outside influences was a better idea than he’d supposed.

“What do they do, when people get sick?” Cosette continued. “Lawmen, I mean. You have been gone a little while, now.”

“They shift the duties around to other officers, who likely are not pleased with the extra labor,” he said, rolling a soup spoon between his fingers absentmindedly. “Though Mullins seems the sort to want to prove himself, if that comes as any comfort.”

“When do you think you will be well enough to resume your work?” she asked.

He paused. “Soon,” he said.

Valjean searched his face. Javert didn’t seem to be lying, though he might not be the best judge of the man’s internal workings.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Cosette exclaimed. “It pleases me to hear you’ve recovered that much. I was worried for you.”

“Mm. It seems I have caused a great deal of people to worry over me as of late,” he muttered, his eyes flashing towards Valjean for a second. His voice was flat, with a grain of salt. “I shall endeavor not to do so again in the future.”

Toussaint ladled out soup into heavy ceramic bowls and put one down on Valjean’s plate. “You have been awfully quiet so far, monsieur,” she said, pausing to look at him before drawing her hand away.
Valjean gave a small start. “I had not noticed.”

“Are you feeling well?” she asked.

“Me? I suppose I—” His gaze strayed from her back to Javert, and rested on him for a moment meaningfully before landing finally on the tabletop. “I am quite well, now, I should think. Quite.”

When he looked back up he found Javert narrowing his eyes at him, his brow furrowed. The moment their gazes locked Javert turned away again, fiddling with the edge of his napkin.

As they took to eating, Valjean and he were relatively quiet, only speaking when spoken to, and never to each other. Cosette talked of the things that had passed while Valjean was away, and Valjean listened to her, hearing not her words so much as the simple sound of her voice, young and sweet, sounding to him as music sounded to others. He gazed at her fondly, a vague smile on his lips, not quite focused.

While recounting the past week, she inevitably came to his letter, and, remembering its contents, grew energetic, her words tumbling over themselves in their rush to escape her lips. She questioned and scolded and praised her father—sometimes all in one breath—over the matters of Marius and of his discovery of their love, and of their no longer needing to move to England.

As she spoke of her beloved, Valjean could see, from the corner of his eye, Javert growing ever more perplexed.

The man mouthed the boy’s name—once, twice, narrowing his eyes. He seemed to be trying to recall something. Finally his face lit up with realization, and his lips parted a little, tilting his head up as if to say, “Ah.” He then fell back to troubled contemplation, his eyes flicking about.

Valjean, for his own part, said as little as possible on the subject of Marius, afraid to encourage Cosette’s anticipation. She still did not know what had become of the boy—that he had gone to the barricades and nearly died with his insurgent friends, that Valjean had dragged him through the sewers, that he lay now at his grandfather’s house suffering from a plethora of wounds from which he might not recover.

Valjean was unsure if he was even still alive, though he could hope.

But then, how sweet it might be if the boy did not survive! He would no longer be around to steal Cosette away from him, and they might continue on in this happy existence as loving daughter and doting father forever. No one could blame Valjean for the boy’s death, not even he himself, for he had done everything in his power to prevent it.

To share the rest of his life with Cosette, to hear her singing in the mornings and be blessed with the touch of her smooth little white hand on his rough large one, and the peck of her lips on his cheeks … To walk again in the deserted fields and pick wildflowers, Cosette twisting them into crowns for herself and even for him, listening to the call of birds and soaking up the sunshine on their skin … No more of the Luxembourg garden, where he’d had to endure the sight of others gazing at her, perhaps inappropriately. They would only visit the forgotten places, where nature in its beauty had not been ravaged and cultivated by man’s savage hand.

Ah, that such a thing might be so!

But all at once he grew again horrified at himself for the thought of it, for the idea that he could take joy in the death of an innocent youth who had never done him wrong.

No, the boy ought to live. The boy ought to be able to see her again. They deserved their
happiness. And Valjean—well, he would find something to do with himself. That his daughter’s life might be full of joy and light and love … That was all he really cared about.

He sighed a little, having completely forgotten to listen to what she’d been saying, and only gazing at her morosely, unaware of himself.

“Would you not say so, papa?” he heard her say.

His head shot up. “Hm?”

“That we might move back here within the next week.”

“Oh! Oh, yes, I suppose that could be done.”

“Maybe he will come to visit me again in the garden,” she mused to herself.

“Who will, dear?”

“Marius, papa!”

Valjean gave a start at this.

“Marius … in the garden,” he repeated dumbly.

“Yes! That is where we met! Er—” A blush colored her powdered cheeks. “That is to say, we spoke to one another, through the fence.”

He blinked, trying to picture what had been going on outside his knowledge. “Ah. Through the fence. Yes.”

Javert snorted.

“I have not seen him in quite some time,” Cosette continued, oblivious to this. “I fear he may have forgotten me.”

“No one could ever forget you, Cosette. I am sure he is missing you dearly,” Valjean said. “Now come, will you not eat your food? You have barely touched it.”

She gave a little sigh and swirled her spoon in the bowl of stew, her chin resting on the palm of her hand.

“I hope he is well,” she murmured.

Neither man spoke a word.

***

After dinner was over, and Toussaint and Cosette had set to clearing away the dishes and washing them in the kitchen, Javert beckoned him into the front hallway with the wag of his finger.

Bemused, Valjean approached him.

“That is why you were at the barricades that night,” Javert accused.
“Hm?”

“Marius. That boy. The Pontmercy boy. You knew he’d gone there, didn’t you? You went to preserve him for your daughter, because she is in love with him. The reason for your presence there had nothing to do with politics, did it?”

Valjean frowned at him. “What, did you think I’d gone there to overthrow the government?”

“I suppose I didn’t know why you were there, honestly,” he said, looking away. “There were insurgents there; insurgents are criminals. You yourself are a criminal. It made some amount of sense. And it’s not as though the government has ever done you any good.”

Valjean narrowed his eyes, cocking his head. “That may have some grain of truth in it, but do you truly believe I would throw away my life for a fool’s promise of a revolution? There was little to no chance at its success.”

“True! But at the time, I did not know you had anything to live for other than yourself.”

Valjean eyed him, taking in a deep breath. “Well,” he said, letting it out, “you know better now, don’t you.”

Javert only stared at him. He folded his arms with a huff, shutting his eyes and giving a begrudging nod.

“Besides,” Valjean added, “I should think by now you would understand that I am not a man of violence.”

“You carried a musket,” Javert said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“That I used it to harm anyone does not necessarily follow.”

“Yes, sure!” he sneered, ‘‘Savior of the barricade’.”

“I did not earn the trust of that young man by bloodshed.”

“Oh? Then how came you by that uniform?”

Valjean blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“The clothes you wore that night. They belonged to a member of the National Guard.”

He furrowed his brow, not entirely following his drift. “They did.”

“Yes, and what became of that man, hm? Do you expect me to believe he willingly stripped himself down to his undergarments at your behest? That there was no violence involved in your procural of that uniform?”

“You misunderstand; I never—”

“What became of him, Valjean? Where is the Guardsman to whom that uniform belonged?”

Valjean frowned, his eyes hard. He straightened himself, tilting up his chin. “That Guardsman stands before you now, Javert.”

The firm expression of conviction fled the man’s face. “What? What say you?”
“The uniform and the arms belonged to me; I did not steal them off of anyone.”

“You are …” He seemed taken aback. “You are telling me you are member of the National Guard?”

“Yes.”

“But how? Why?”

“There was a census, last year, if you recall,” Valjean explained, throwing up a palm in gesticulation. “My being obliged to respond, and being noted as a resident of Paris in good standing … it would have been suspicious of me to refuse service. And I did not mind it so much. I only had to perform duties perhaps three or four times a year.”

“But you … How old are you?” Javert asked. “The cut-off age for compulsory service is sixty. You are older than that. You are sixty three years of age, are you not?”

“I am. But they did not know my true age. I could have gotten out of it if I’d wished, but when one is attempting to hide one’s identity, it is advisable not to disclose the real year of one’s birth.”

Javert only stared dumbly at him. He opened his mouth as if to make some rebuttal, but promptly shut it again, thrusting his face in another direction. “I see how things are, then,” he finally huffed.

“Good.”

“Still,” Javert said after a moment, “your efforts to save the boy were in vain, it seems.”

Valjean started. “Why do you say that? Do you know something I do not?”

“What? He was dead when you brought him to the house.”

“He was still breathing, Javert. Even you must have seen that.”

“That means nothing. Did you not look at him? He was a corpse. That the corpse yet breathed, that does not mean a thing.”

“There is a chance,” Valjean said, resolute.

“I doubt that very much. When I said there would be a funeral there, I was not exaggerating.”

“We will see.”

Javert leaned against the opposite wall. “It has been more than a week. The boy is probably already dead.”

“You are an awful pessimist.”

“I am realist.”

“You are a pessimist who is so pessimistic that he thinks himself a realist.”

Javert knit his brow. He glanced at the wall. “Hm,” was all he said.

After a moment his lip twisted up in a smirk. “I see you hired a provincial as your servant,” he said. “‘Birds of a feather’ and all that.” His voice lowered thoughtfully. “You’ve lost your accent,
though.”

Valjean felt a slight, unexpected pang of sadness at that. “Yes,” he murmured to himself, “I’m sure I have.”

“In Montreuil, no one could place where you—”

Javert stopped short when Cosette poked her head out into the hall.

“Papa, Toussaint and I are going to go now,” she said. “Are you sure you would not like for her to stay with you? I know how to take care of myself.”

“No, no, she should remain with you,” Valjean insisted. “I know how to take care of myself also. And I have far fewer needs than you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “I am a simple man; I can get by with very little help. Now run along home, my sweet, before the streets get too dark. Nights are not always friendly towards beautiful women wandering alone.”

“Worry not, monsieur,” Toussaint assured him, appearing behind Cosette and carrying the basket she had brought, filled with the now empty dishes from supper, “I will take good care of her.”

“It is not the will which I worry is lacking,” Valjean said.

“If some no-good night-prowler approaches us I will club him over the head with this,” the old woman said, gesturing to her basket, heavy with tableware, “and he shall not know what hit him.”

“Toussaint!” Cosette giggled.

“Laugh if you will, mademoiselle. Old Toussaint knows a thing or two about what it means to be a woman in Paris.”

“Oh? You shall have to tell me.”

“Perhaps later,” she said, noticing the way Valjean was staring at her.

“Alas, papa, we are leaving now,” Cosette told him, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Do come back to us soon. I miss you when you are away. And Inspector, I hope your health continues to improve. I shall feel safer on the streets knowing you are out there.”

Javert seemed unsure how to respond.

“Bonne nuit,” Toussaint said, nodding to the both of them and opening the door.

When they had gone, the two men stood in silence.

Javert had not moved from where he leaned against the wall, his arms still crossed over his chest, face downcast.

“I think,” he said finally, “it would best for the both of us if I should leave tomorrow.”

Valjean looked up at him, opening his mouth. Slowly he closed it, searching his face before glancing at the floor. “If that is what you wish.” He bit his lip, turning away and clutching his arm.
“But, are you certain you will be …?”

“I will be all right.”

Valjean turned back to study him. “Javert, I—”

“I cannot stay here forever,” Javert said, holding his gaze unflinchingly although bowing his head.

“I know that,” Valjean conceded, “I just …”

“I know I have not given you many reasons to trust me,” the man interrupted. “But sooner or later you are going to have to let me go.”

Valjean was silent.

Javert gave a frustrated sigh, tilting his head to the side. “If anything else, it would be … embarrassing, to go back on my word now. Cowardly. And you must concede that I do still have a certain level of self-respect.”

“I must confess,” Valjean said, “you have always used the words ‘self-respect’ rather strangely, Javert.”

“I am sure that you know what I mean in this particular instance.”

“I do,” he admitted.

“Begrudge me a little understanding, then.”

“I just … worry for you. That is all.”

“Yes, well, I am beginning to suspect nothing I can say or do will change that.”

“Say that you will not harm yourself—ever, ever again. Say that if you should return to this dark place in your mind, you will come to me first, before anything else. Say that you will try, Javert. And mean it.”

The man grit his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut and turning his face from him. “I will try.”

Valjean slowly bowed his head. “Dieu, I pray so.”

The air was quiet for a moment.

“What are you going to do, when you leave?” Valjean asked. “Will you return to your job as an inspector?”

The man slowly dipped his head in a grave nod.

“And that will not perturb you?”

“It may. But those issues that might perturb me are issues which need to be addressed, if I am to find any kind of resolution. And anyway,” he said, glancing away, “that is not the point.”

“What is the point?”

Javert looked up at him for a moment, blinking. “The point is that the prefecture has expressed
need of me, and ... I do not know any other life.”

Valjean pondered this. “I see.”

“Would you prefer I resign?”

Valjean could not be sure of the man’s tone, but he doubted he was seriously considering his opinion on the matter.

“No, no—quite the opposite, in fact. I think it is good for you, to go back to what you know. It is just that returning to that particular occupation may be a double-edged sword. It may cause you just as much turmoil as comfort.”

“That is a risk I am willing to gamble on, if only for a little normalcy.”

“Mm. Perhaps it is for the best.”

Javert roused himself from where he had been slouched against the wall. “In any case, I shan’t trouble you any further.”

“Trouble?” Valjean echoed in surprise, letting his arms fall limply to his side. “You have not been troubling me.”

A snort issued from Javert’s nostrils, his lips curling back into a scowling smirk as he headed towards the stairs. “Please.”

“Truly!” Valjean insisted, following him with concern. “You have not! Is that what you believe? That I have just been doing this out of a sense of obligation? That I have been waiting to be rid of you all this time? Do you really think after all of this that I would not—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Javert grunted.

Valjean stopped halfway up the stairs. “But you must know it isn’t true,” he said sadly.

Javert paused with his hand on the doorknob of the bedroom, glancing off for a moment, head drooping. “Goodnight, Valjean,” he said.

And then he was gone.

***

Chapter End Notes

Also still missing suggested listening! Wtf! \(\_\_\(\_\)\)
Phantom Pains

Chapter Summary

Valjean finds it is hard not to relive his past when the inspector is around; Javert prepares to take his leave.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If you do not understand my silence, you will not understand my words.”

-Unknown

***

“Where exactly is it you are supposed to be sleeping?”

Valjean gave a start, flailing for a split-second as the gruff voice jolted him back to consciousness. He looked up in a panic to find Javert standing over him.

The man was dressed in his usual attire once more: a white blouse under a plain grey waistcoat, and a black stock collar. Over all this hung his long blue tailcoat trimmed with shining silver embroidery, the double rows of silver buttons spanning the width of his chest. Matching blue trousers disappeared into black Wellington style boots. He held his greatcoat draped over his arm, along with his thick leather belt, fixed with his sword and other accouterments.

“Certainly not here on the floor,” Javert said.

Valjean blinked, feeling cornered and vulnerable. “I—er … You will have to forgive me; I fell asleep last night reading a book.”

“Mm. A book.”

“Yes.”

“On the floor.”

“Well—sometimes, when you’re reading something good, you get wrapped up in the story so much that you no longer notice the time, or what you’re doing. You know how it is.”

“I would not know how it is, no. But that is well. You may have your books. Only, tell me, where is it you actually live in this house? I count the bedroom you had me in—which, by its sparsity and hair-ribbons and half-finished needlework I found in the dresser must belong to your servant—and then, the second room, which is obviously your daughter’s, if the lace and ruffles and vanity are any indication. So tell me—as I only count two bedrooms, neither of them being yours
—where exactly is it that you sleep?"

Valjean stared up at him open-mouthed. "In a separate building. In the back."

"Ah. I do recall your daughter remarking upon that, yes."

"It is quieter there," Valjean added, trying to rationalize his choices.

"Strange habits you keep. Though perhaps not so strange for someone who’s used to avoiding the law."

"That may factor into it, yes," Valjean admitted, rising to his feet and brushing himself off. He looked up at Javert considerately. "Would you … join me for breakfast? A proper breakfast, this time—at a table."

The man stared at him for a moment in silence. "I suppose," he finally sighed, turning his face away condescendingly.

***

"Do you cook very often?" Valjean asked, kneading out dough on the counter with flour dusted hands.

Javert found himself surprised at how easily they seemed to fall into casual conversation. He supposed it was to be expected; they couldn’t talk about the uncomfortable particulars of their situation all the time. It would drive them both insane. And then, they still had some measure of civility, the two of them, and yet abided by such social constructs as meaningless, formal chatter. Still, the ease with which they spoke was perhaps a sign that he had been spending too much time with the man.

"Not particularly," he answered, staring through the kitchen window into the messy garden out front. He wondered why on earth no one had bothered to trim it properly.

"Neither do I," Valjean said. "Though I find it to be a pleasant sort of labor."

Javert picked at the cracks in the windowsill, his finger tracing the grain of the wood. "How so?"

"The act of creation, I think, provides by default a measure of gratification. And then," he scoffed to himself, "you get to eat the results. Come," he said, pulling a couple glass jars from the cabinets, "Do you want peaches or raspberry preserves on yours?"

Javert glanced back at him, his brow twitching.

Why was the man acting like they were friends? They were not friends. This was not permanent.

Still, he could not help his mouth from watering at the thought of peaches. How the oven’s heat would only further bring out their tangy sweetness. He did not, as a matter of fact, happen to have much fruit in his diet (though this was more due to financial restrictions than taste), and what he did permit himself was only what was necessary to ward off maladies of malnutrition.

He could hear Cosette’s voice asking him how her father’s cooking was. The truth was, it was
much heartier and savory than what he was accustomed to having, and though he didn’t like the idea of taking anything from the man’s hands, he couldn’t rightly scorn it.

“The former,” he said begrudgingly, clawing at the cuff of his coat.

“Do you prefer them?”

“Eh?”

“Peaches.”

“I … suppose so. I am more partial to sweet things than bitter.”

“Ah. And what is your favorite fruit, would you say?”

“Favorite? I don’t know;” he exclaimed, frustrated, “I haven’t had many.”

“Haven’t had many?” Valjean repeated, raising his eyebrows. He let out a chuckle. “And how old are you?”

Javert merely stared at him. “I’m not giving you that information.”

Valjean frowned. “I wasn’t really asking in earnest, though now you’ve made me curious. But fine. Don’t tell me. I assume you’re in your fifties, though.”

“You would be correct in that assumption,” he remarked carelessly.

“Early fifties, or later?”

Javert clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes and letting out an agitated sigh. “Eleven,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“You are eleven years older than me. If that matters to you, for some reason.”

“Ah. So that would make you …”

“Fifty-two,” Javert said. “Are you that bad at sums? You were born in sixty-nine, the same as Bonaparte. I was born in seventeen-eighty. You are eleven years my senior. I do not know why you care.”

“I don’t know,” remarked Valjean wistfully, glancing back at him as he was dividing the dough into sections and patting them into balls. “I find it interesting.”

“Why?”

“Because we have lived very different lives, and … I wonder, I suppose, what it would have been like had we met as younger men.”

“We did meet as younger men.”

Valjean gave a twitch at that, his countenance darkening. His eyes flicked to and fro as a shadow fell over his face. He turned around so that his back was facing him. “Javert,” he said carefully, hanging his head, “I do not remember you from that time. The first memory I have of you is from Montreuil.”
Javert cocked his head ever so slightly, his brow furrowing. “Is that so,” he murmured, searching the man’s demeanor.

“You must understand,” Valjean said, his voice lowering as he gripped the edges of the countertop. “The guards … you didn’t see them as people. They were the cudgel strikes in the dark, the all-seeing eyes, the voices shouting in your ear. They were the lick of the lash on your back, biting into your flesh, and the dogs nipping at your heels. Blue phantoms at the edge of your vision. They had no faces. They were ghosts.” He was silent for a moment. “I don’t remember you,” he said again. “I don’t remember any of them. The only thing that I remember is the wounds.”

Javert studied him. The way the man had stopped what he was doing, the way his muscles had tensed, his shoulders drooped. The way his flour-dusted hands were gripping the counter far tighter than was necessary.

“I see,” was all he could think to say.

Valjean gave a small sigh. “I didn’t mean bring that up. I would rather those things be left where they belong, in the past.”

“Mm.”

Eventually Valjean resumed his work, rolling out the rest of the balls of dough and cutting them into squares. But there was little ease in his actions, and his mind seemed to be elsewhere. At one point, he stopped what he was doing and clutched at his shoulder as if it were bothering him, his fingers scrunching up the fabric of his shirt. He turned away, pressing the limb close to his body as though he meant to hide the action from him.

“Would you put some water on to boil?” he asked quietly.

Javert roused himself from the wall and complied wordlessly, casting glances back at him every so often.

Valjean did not notice him stealing these glances; he seemed to be trying to refocus himself on his work, his expression bunched and strained as he knifed out dollops of fruit preserves onto the squares of dough and folded their corners inwards over them.

Javert only watched him silently, unsure what other emotion exactly the intrigue he felt was tinged with.

“What do you want?” he asked.

As he was putting the baking sheet into the oven, Valjean turned to look back at him over his shoulder with a blank expression. “Hm?”

“You asked me to boil water. I assume it’s either for coffee or tea. What do you want?”

“Oh,” he said, looking a little sheepish. “Yes, well, which would you like?”

“You’ve been plying me with tea for a week and half,” Javert sighed, folding his arms across his chest, “So if it’s all the same to you …”

“Coffee, then,” Valjean said. “Though I am afraid I don’t have any milk to go with it at present.”
Javert let out a singular and foul sort of laugh, which turned to noiseless chuckles. “You clearly do not drink it very often, if that is cause for concern.”

Valjean looked at him for a second in surprise before the corner of his lips began to twist up in a hesitant smirk. “Ah, no; not really. Cosette likes it, though. But she always puts milk in it. And sugar.”

“Hmph. Young girls do often seem to be fond of overly sweet things, yes.”

“I thought you preferred sweet things to bitter?”

“I also prefer convenience and the prudence of frugality,” he said, searching the cupboards.

“I see,” said Valjean. “It’s in the rightmost one, I think,” he added.

“Mm.”

“Javert—” Valjean began, pausing in the middle of toweling off the flour from his hands with a kitchen cloth. He seemed to have lost his train of thought and come upon an entirely new one, for his mouth stayed open for a moment before saying, “You know, it occurs to me that we have only ever been on the basis of last names for nearly thirty years now. What is your Christian name?”

Javert stopped, his arm halfway into the cupboard, and turned to look at him. He narrowed his eyes, his brow furrowing.

“You do have one, don’t you?”

“If you’re asking if I have a name other than ‘Javert’, then yes; I do.”

Valjean stared at him promptingly, leaning over and propping his chin up on the counter. “And it would be …?”

“None of your business.”

He blinked. “Ah.”

“If you must know,” Javert informed him with a grain of salt in his tone, “I dislike it. So forgive me if I fail to see what good it does me to give others the opportunity to address me as something I do not wish to be called.”

Valjean readjusted the way his chin rested in his palm. “Hm. It is not quite fair, though, as you already know mine.”

“I don’t see how it matters, considering it is also your surname. ‘Jean Valjean’, ” he huffed with a hint of a smirk, “brother to Jeanne Valjean, son of Jean Valjean, married to Jeanne Valjean. Your parents were not exactly creative. Furthermore, it is a silly name, to begin with.”

Valjean had a far off, melancholy sort of look to his eyes. “Sometimes,” he said softly, “if you love something, you give it a part of yourself. I don’t think that’s silly; no, not in the least.”

Javert had no retort for that.

***
Valjean sat staring at the place settings—the coffee service and the china plates of tarts—feeling the familiar strangeness and strange familiarity of the other man’s presence.

“What?” Javert demanded from the opposite side of the table.

Valjean let out a soft chuckle, knitting his brow. “It is just … I never in my life would have expected I’d be sharing a table with you. And I must admit, it feels rather queer.”

Javert’s mouth screwed up. “I think if either of us has reason to be surprised by this turn of events, it should be me. Though, I did not exactly ask to be dragged here.”

“No,” Valjean conceded quietly. “But …” He gave a sigh, knitting his hands, his thumbs beneath his chin. “Javert,” he said carefully, “do you think that, if things had gone differently in Montreuil—if you had not suspected me, if we had not quarreled thusly—do you think that perhaps we … might have become …” His words trailed off into silence, and he sat gazing with a melancholy wistfulness at the thistle patterning wreathing his plate.

“Become what?” Javert asked gruffly.

“Become …” He let out another sigh, deeper, defeated. “Never mind. It would have been improbable, anyway. Forget I said anything.”

“All right.” There was a bite to the man’s tone, and suspicion in the way his eyebrow rose at the utterance.

Valjean fell to taking mouthfuls of raspberry tarts and coffee, if only to make the silence less questionable.

Javert stared at him for a moment, his arms folded, before following suit.

“Your daughter asked me how your cooking was,” he said after a few minutes.

Valjean blinked, looked up at him.

“It is not terrible,” Javert admitted, “I will give you that. Far better than what I would have expected from a convict. Tell me,” he mused, “was I right, before?”

“About what?”

“That you learned to cook in Montreuil.”

“Er, well, relearned, really,” Valjean responded, rubbing the back of his neck and glancing away. “It was not as though the practice was entirely foreign to me. But it had been nineteen years, and I did end up having to teach myself some things, after I got out, yes.”

His eyes drifted over the shining silver carafe and its accompanying set, considering them for awhile.

“I had never really had much more than the bare necessities in the way of foodstuffs in my life, hitherto that. And when I finally came into a bit of money, I have to admit, I did spoil myself in that regard for awhile. I hadn’t ever had any choice in the matter before. Suddenly I was actually able to eat whatever and whenever I pleased, and as much of it as I should desire. And … well. A significant amount of coin went into the pursuit of culinary experimentation. Barigoule, bacheofe,
tartiflette … You name it, I probably tried to make it. ‘Tried’ being the, uh, operative word,” he chuckled. “I became more sensible in time. More frugal. Guilty, even. But in those first few months, you know.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, his eyes unfocused. “It was so remarkable, in the beginning—just to be able to eat until you were full. To be allowed such rich and hearty things. I had to force myself to wait, to allow things to cook thoroughly, to eat more slowly, so that I could actually savor them. You get so accustomed to leaping upon whatever scraps you’re presented with, you know, in the galleys—devouring them as quickly as possible. And you would never quite be able to sate your hunger. Not fully, not with the amount of labor you had to endure, not with what little food they actually …”

He trailed off, realizing with a start that he had begun to regress into a mindset and a time he had not meant to revisit, especially considering his company. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he said, his face growing hot as he turned it away.

“Because I inquired on the subject,” Javert remarked with an apathetic shrug. He traced the rim of his metal coffee mug absentmindedly. “Don’t pretend I don’t know what it’s like,” he said after a moment. “—in the prisons, I mean. I was there. I am well aware of the state of things. It is regrettable, perhaps,” he muttered, “but there is little to be done about it. I could make a case to you as to why things are the way they are—allocation of funds, shipping requirements—but I do not feel like debating this with you, and I am sure you do not want to hear it. I will restrain myself to saying only that you ought not presume the men employed to manage such institutions are indifferent to their faults, or that they take joy out of the miserable conditions therein. It may not be abundantly evident, but the state does not, in fact, profit from the misery of its wards.”

Valjean furrowed his brow, searching his face.

“We were only men,” Javert added. “We ran the place as best we could, given the circumstances.” He frowned, shutting his eyes. “I shan’t speak any further on the matter.”

Valjean was quiet for a long time. “Why did you become a guard?” he asked.

“Why did you become a criminal?” Javert shot back.

Valjean flinched. He narrowed his eyes. “Do you not know why I was impriso—”

“Oh, spare me,” Javert cut him off. “I am not an idiot; yes, of course I read your file. I know the charges brought against you. I know why you were sentenced thusly. That you had a family, that you were poor laborers, peasants. There are only so many reasons a man has to steal a loaf of bread.”

Valjean’s expression did not soften at this. “It was winter,” he said.

Javert’s brow bunched. “What?”

“It was winter, then. There was not any work to be had for a tree pruner, and—”

“Don’t think I don’t understand why one would—”

“No, I do not think you do understand, Javert. I do not think you understand at all. It was the dead of winter, and there had not been a fire in our hearth for days, and if it was just myself it would not have mattered, but there were—”

“Yes, yes, you had a sister; I know. And her husband had died earlier that year, and she had—”
“Do not speak to me of my sister,” Valjean said. His voice had dropped into a cold and even tone that threatened rage, and his brown eyes were bright and hard. “I will not hear it from your lips. I will not have you taint my family’s memory thusly. You know nothing of them. You know nothing of their suffering. Do not presume to tell me what it was that we endured.”

“You are an unfeeling man, Javert. And you do not have a family. You would not understand. You haven’t felt what it is to be beseeched by the eyes of starving children. Children whose sole hope at life rests on your shoulders, when you yourself are well nigh powerless. You do not know the guilt and shame it is to be called upon for aid that you cannot provide. To be begged and pleaded with by your own flesh and blood to render that which you are incapable of rendering, despite your own desperation to do so. You think you know everything there is to know about me, Javert. But you know nothing. You have never known a single thing.”

All the while he had been speaking, Valjean’s countenance harbored a terrible calm, an icy composure that masked a fiery resolve.

And all the while, the color had been slowly draining from Javert’s face.

Upon taking in the man’s expression, Valjean’s piercing gaze began to soften.

Javert’s Adam’s apple bobbed. He had long since stopped blinking.

Valjean opened his mouth a fraction of an inch. Shut it. He put his head in his hands. “I—” He let out an exasperated puff of breath. “I did not mean to—”

“No,” Javert interrupted, his voice hushed—a husk of its former pitch. “You are right to say that of me. It is true. I do not know the things of which you speak. I would not understand. It is not my place to comment on them.” A shadow had fallen over his face.

“Javert, I …”

“This is why it is right that I should leave.”

“What? That’s not—”

“You have the audacity to claim I am not troubling you,” Javert said, scoffing humorlessly, “when you cannot go a single day without me reminding you of the darkness of your past.”

Valjean’s mouth twitched, twisted. He had no counterargument to that. He bit the inside of his lip, furrowing his brow.

There was a crestfallen triumph on Javert’s face. “You see?” he said. “Now do not make another argument that I should stay. Because we two, we are as different as night and day. As le soleil et la lune. Left caged together long enough and we will tear each other apart like dogs. And neither of us wants that, do we? Come, let’s be peaceable; let’s part ways in silence. Like good fellows.”

Valjean gazed out at the swirling patterns in the wood of the table, unable to bring himself to look at the man’s face, filled with a torturous amount of emotion.

“You know,” he finally said, looking up at him with a sad grin, “you really are beginning to sound like yourself again, Javert.”

The man narrowed his eyes at him. “Is that meant to insult me?”
Valjean paused for a moment. “No,” he said softly, dropping his gaze back to the table.

“Hm.” Javert rubbed his chin pensively, staring at him. “Then,” he said with a sigh, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet, “You will not argue with me when I leave.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

That's All – Genesis

The Unforgiven (Metallica cover) - Gregorian Chants

The Warden - Old Crow Medicine Show

What the Water Gave Me - Florence + The Machine

The Wolf - Mumford & Sons
Chapter Summary

Javert goes home and tries to resume his life where he left off, but he finds things are not quite the same.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We must ourselves walk the path.”

-Buddha

***

“Javert, wait!” Valjean sprang up from his chair in pursuit of him, all pretense of pride fleeing him in wake of his worry.

Halfway into the hall, the man looked back at him. There was a frown tugging down the corners of his mouth, and agitation in his ice-blue eyes as he fixed his belt around his waist and thrust his arms through the sleeves of his greatcoat.

“You can’t just leave like this,” Valjean said.

“Can’t I?”

Valjean stared at him, mouth half open, unsure what to say to that. He hung his head, diverting his gaze. “I know that you must leave,” he said, his voice hushed, “I know that you cannot stay here, that it would be wrong to try to keep you here against your will. I know that. But you can’t just … Not like this.”

“What is it that you want from me?” Javert demanded.

“I want—” Valjean looked up at him, stopped himself.

He really didn’t know what he wanted. All he knew was that he felt a terrible ache in his chest, and that it would only deepen at the man’s passing.

“I don’t know,” he admitted guiltily. “Please, Javert, I was harsh with you this morning and I did not mean to be. I do not want for us to part with animosity in our hearts. I only wanted to help you. And I … I am afraid for you, Javert. I am afraid for you.”

The man stood gazing down at him with piercing, confounded eyes that searched and searched his face.

Valjean swallowed, his throat going dry. “I—I know that this is the only way for you to regain
control of things, but I just …” He grit his teeth, glancing away for a moment in conflict before grasping his courage and wrapping his arms around the man. He did not look up at him—could not look up at him—instead burying his face in the faded iron-grey wool at his chest. “Your life is invaluable,” he breathed, his words strained. “Please don’t make light of it; don’t take it for granted. You are a good man, capable of doing much good in this world. You are important. Do not forget that. Do not forget that you are loved.”

The man had tensed in his grasp, leaning away from him, but not speaking.

Valjean’s fingers twisted in the back of his coat. He was very nearly ashamed of the amount of overbearing worry he harbored for the man, but more than that he was terrified for him. He still felt as though there were a million things between them that needed to be said, but every conversation stung—and not because of hate, but because of pain. Perhaps the only way for them to heal was to let the wounds close, to keep away from one another.

But Javert—how could Valjean ever be sure of him? The man had nothing and no one, and if he turned his back on him, and tried to go alone …

“Please, Javert.” He squeezed him tightly. “Please promise you won’t ever harm yourself again. That you will come to me first. That you won’t go quietly into the night without so much as reaching for another’s hand. Please,” he begged, his voice breaking, “for the love of God; I couldn’t bear it.”

He held him for a moment more before he felt two large hands grab hold of his shoulders. He allowed himself to be pushed away, to be held in a crushing grasp and scrutinized.

It was not loathing on Javert’s face, but an angry sort of resolve, the corners of his mouth drawn tight, his brow creased. “Listen here,” he seethed, “I won’t.” His fingers dug into his flesh like talons. “I won’t, do you hear? But not because of you. Not because of you, or anyone. Because it is my choice.”

Javert let him go with a shove, taking a step back as if to further drive him his point. “Now stop this,” he said, clenching his fists. “I want you to stop this. I am sick to death of your pity and your sentiments and your care. They are unnecessary. They rob me of my dignity. I tell you that I will carry on, I will muddle through somehow, and I want you to heed those words as law. Because they are law to me now. I made a choice, and I cannot go back on it. I cannot go back. Do you understand?”

Valjean stood studying him. He slowly dipped his head, not breaking his gaze. “You told me not to doubt you again,” he said quietly, their eyes locked. “Give me reason not to.”

“If you will but trust me to, I will give you every reason in the world.”

They stared at one another, their eyes hard, and questioning, demanding.

Valjean’s expression softened some. He extended his hand to him.

Javert took one look at it and choked back a scoff, turning his face away. “Do you wish to test me; is that it?” he breathed. “Is that what you’re doing? To see how far you can bend me until I break?”

Valjean’s frown deepened. Slowly, remorsefully, he lowered his hand, staring at him in silent entreaty.

Javert glared at him. He clenched his teeth, scowling to himself, his eyes downcast, his nose
creased like the muzzle of an angry dog.

“Oh, very well then,” he spat out, begrudgingly extending his own leather-clad hand.

Valjean took it, giving it a squeeze as he gently shook it, gazing into his eyes. He forced himself to allow the man’s fingers to slip through his, to let his arm fall back to his side, to stand motionless.

Javert reached up to tip a hat that was not there, and growled inaudibly at the realization. He turned away, headed towards the door.

Valjean could not prevent himself from clasping the man’s wrist as he crossed the threshold, his fingers just barely brushing against it. He gazed down sadly, ashamed of himself.

He could not tell whether or not it was anger that caused the man to tremble so.

He closed his eyes. “Take care of yourself, Javert.”

Another tremor ran through the man’s shoulders, his spine, his wrist. He hung his head. “I will,” he breathed, and there was a hitch in his voice, and again Valjean could not tell if it was anger or something else.

“À la prochaine,” Valjean said softly.

“Adieu,” said Javert, taking back his hand.[1]

Valjean watched him leave, standing in the doorway and having to draw on every last ounce of willpower not to go after him.

When Javert got to the end of the pathway, he paused at the gate, his head still down. He turned it back a fraction of an inch.

“Profitez de votre liberté,” he called back to him. *Enjoy your freedom.*[2]

And then he was gone.

***

It was strange to walk by himself once more in the light of day. Strange to hear the birds call in the trees above, and not to be watched by worrying eyes.

The world seemed surreal to Javert. Almost dreamlike, he made his way back to his flat.

The porter was overly inquisitive with him. She chided him as usual, for having left for so long without giving proper notice, for having caused her grief. He made excuses, half-witted lies about an investigation that got out of hand, and how he’d had to stay longer than he’d intended. He promised he’d pay the rent within the following day or two. This seemed to satisfy her.

When he shut the door to his flat behind him, he paused motionless in the entryway, staring at the room the way in which one would study an intricate painting, finding unexpected meaning in the mundane.
The clothes he had worn as a disguise at the barricades sat on the floor in the corner where he’d tossed them seemingly ages ago to await washing. A blanket sat folded on his bergère, and his official briefing for the operation still lay, along with a newspaper and an empty mug, on the table beside it. The covers of his bed were undone from when he’d risen last, and a stack of books sat gathering dust on their shelf.

The sight was familiar, and yet completely foreign to him. He had been gone for less than a fortnight, but it may as well have been decades. The room seemed haunted. He felt, as he entered, shucking his greatcoat off and hanging it on the hook by the door, that he was intruding upon someone else’s space. The space of a dead man.

What would that man think of him?

He didn’t want to contemplate it.

***

Gisquet was eager to hear from him. Relieved, even.

Javert had half-expected he would have to plead and supplicate to have his post back, but it was returned to him without question, without even debate. He didn’t understand how the man could so easily allow him back into the fold after his earlier display. Had he not seemed like a lunatic? If not, at least unfit for service in some capacity?

“You have everything sorted, then?” the man had asked.

“Yes.”

“And you are certain? That you wish to continue your duties with the police?”

“If you will have me.”

“Very well.”

“You do not harbor reservations about it?”

“I told you,” Gisquet had said, busying himself with folding up a letter and stamping his official seal in wax on it, “I need you. You are good at what you do. I would like for you to return to your situation, so long as you are satisfied with it.”

“I see.”

Rather bewildered, but not ungrateful, Javert left it at that.

He had been put on desk duty for the next few weeks, but that was entirely understandable, and he didn’t mind it in the least. He wasn’t sure he was ready to do field work again, anyway. Better to have some time to ease back into things. No doubt this had been Gisquet’s intent, and Javert was not surprised to find the man occasionally inquiring about him.

His fellow officers welcomed him back quickly. They had, of course, no idea what had happened to him in the time he’d been absent.
One of his subordinates, Leroux—an over-eager lad of barely twenty, with a fiery mop of hair and a dusting of freckles—seemed particularly concerned over him, and put forth a number of questions at his return.

“Inspector! I heard you had fallen ill,” he said.

“Did you, now?”

“Yes, and I was beginning to grow worried. You have never been gone for quite so long before, sieur. Was it very serious?”

“I suppose.”

“Ah; I hope it was nothing catching. But you are better now?”

Javert had only shrugged and given a vaguely affirmative grunt.

“You do still seem a little—oh, je ne sais—different, somehow. Tired, perhaps. You ought to get more sleep, you know; you may not be entirely recovered just yet.”

“Mm.”

He fell back into his work naturally, the familiar routines and practices quieting a significant portion of the turbulence in his mind. It allowed him to forget things, for a time.

When he tried to sleep, however, his thoughts drifted back, and he lay awake, restless, clawing at his bed sheets and tossing about. His solution was to work himself into exhaustion, so that by the time he finally made it into bed he was too tired to think, and fell asleep almost instantly.

***

In two weeks’ time, Javert was back out on regular police business. Inspections. Investigations. Patrols. He was not sure how to feel about this. There was a subtle mire of uncertainty, of insecurity, that permeated his soul at all times, especially in regard to his duties.

He looked at the wretches and malefactors of the streets, and his heart was lacking in conviction. Not so long ago he would have condemned them all equally. Now he wavered. The claws which were his hands no longer gripped their prey as tightly as they used to. At earnest pleading and tears, he could be seen to falter.

Everywhere he went, he saw possibilities which he had not considered before—possibilities of which he had been aware, but not entertained. The pessimist became the realist.

This did not go unnoticed by his colleagues. Mostly, it was the younger officers who remarked upon it behind his back.

‘He seems to be in a melancholy, wouldn’t you say?’

‘He hangs his head a little, now.’

Javert pretended not to hear them.
Only Leroux was bold enough to ask directly if something was troubling him.

Javert did not know how to answer that. Being honest, as he was wont to be, he said only that it was none of his concern, and he could manage himself just fine, *merci beaucoup*.

This did not appear to satisfy him, but Javert waved him away anyway.

At the moment, he was conducting a patrol on the Quay du Tournelle.

He paced along the water’s edge, hands folded behind his back.

Glancing up, he noted the position of the sun.

It was almost time for him to meet with another officer to conduct a routine inspection of the port, and after that, if things went smoothly, they would head back to the nearest station house to fill out their report and break for lunch.

He withdrew his pocket watch and pressed the fob to open its face, only to find it no longer in working order, the hands stopped, droplets of condensation on the inside of the glass, obscuring its markings. His face grew hot at this sudden and unwelcome reminder of his plunge into the Seine, and he scowled as a growl rose in his throat, his grip on the watch tightening.

In a fit of frustration he drew his arm back and made to throw the broken timepiece into the river, but his hand hovered in the air, trembled, lowering after a moment as the anger on his face melted into defeat.

He leaned over the railing, letting out a sigh. The watch dangled from his fingers upon its silver chain, caught now and then by the light of the sun over the glittering water. He stared at its dewy face in melancholy reflection, swinging it in slow circles, his chin in his hand.

Again he heard the voices of his past rise up from the depths; they echoed like ghosts in his mind, phantasms that blended into one another:

‘One would have to be a terrible man to do such a thing as lift a cart like that on his back.’

‘Monsieur Javert, I beseech your mercy. Don't put me in prison! You see, there is a little girl who will be turned out into the street!’

‘Monsieur le Maire, I have come to request you to instigate the authorities to dismiss me. I must be turned out. You were severe with me the other day, and unjustly. Be so today, with justice.’

‘Come, now! Why? I do not understand.’

‘Monsieur, six weeks ago, in consequence of the scene over that woman, I was furious, and I informed against you.’

‘Informed against me! As a mayor who had encroached on the province of the police?’

‘As an ex-convict.’
‘Javert, you are a man of honor, and I esteem you. You exaggerate your fault. You deserve promotion instead of degradation.’

‘Inspector Javert will apprehend the body of Sieur Madeleine, mayor of M. sur M., who, in this day’s session of the court, was recognized as the liberated convict, Jean Valjean.’

‘Monsieur le Maire!’

‘There is no longer any Monsieur le Maire here!’

‘Do you think that I deserve a recompense?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Well, I request one.’

‘What is it?’

‘That I may blow that man’s brains out.’

‘Take your revenge.’

‘You are free.’

‘It is well. Go upstairs. I will wait for you here.’

Javert gave a low groan under his breath, rubbing his face, leaving it in his hands.

‘I will wait for you here.’

He could still feel the gravity that had seemed to suck him downwards into the abyss as he stood upon the parapet that night. How still the air had been. The cold and midnight waters closing in all around him, stealing the air from his lungs.

Javert found himself picturing what it must have looked like. Valjean diving in after him. Hauling him back up onto dry land. Exhausted, panicked. Desperate. Valjean’s mouth on his, trying to breathe the life back into him. Javert was no fool; he knew the significance of the ugly bruises that had formed on his chest in the days following. They were gone now, but he could still remember how sore he had been.

He tried to rid himself of the images, but found that he could not.

He felt again Valjean’s arms, his hands—around his wrist, his waist, the back of his head. The
sobs wracking his frame.

‘Why couldn’t you let me die with my dignity?’

He shuddered at the remembrance of the man’s lips on his brow.

‘I am sorry. But you must live, Javert. You must.’

Opening his eyes, he finally let his hands slip from his face, gazing out over the river that had so nearly claimed his life. Sunlight reflected off of its waters, dancing and sparkling.

He looked back at his watch. Back to the river. Back to the watch.

‘You must live.’

Shutting its case, he shoved it back in his pocket and headed towards the port.

***

Footnotes

[1] While Valjean says the equivalent of “Until next time,” showing he would like (and expects) to see Javert in the future, Javert merely says “Go with god”: a phrase that is not taken lightly and indicates that the speaker doesn’t intend to see the other person ever again.

[2] While this is an approximate translation that better conveys the tone, what Javert is really saying is “Profit from your liberty.” This shows that he doesn’t care whether or not Valjean is happy because of his freedom, but rather, whether or not Valjean uses it to be of benefit somehow. It’s implied that he expects Valjean to continue being an upright person in return for his liberty.


***

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title, "Qui n’avance pas, recule," is a French proverb meaning "Who does not move forward, recedes."

Suggested listening:

Alibi - 30 Seconds to Mars
Bittersweet Symphony - The Verve
The Cave - Mumford & Sons
Get Though This - Art of Dying
Holding On To You - Twenty One Pilots
New Start - Jolé
On My Own - Yutaka Yamada
Please Don't Go - Barcelona
Roll Away Your Stone - Mumford & Sons
Shake it Out - Florence + The Machine
Snake Eyes - Mumford & Sons
Stay Alive - José González
Under the Tide - Chvrches
Three weeks after Javert had returned to service, something strange occurred.

“Javert, someone left a package for you at the station while you were away,” the desk Sergeant told him.

Javert turned to look at him, furrowing his brow. “Hm?”

A package? This was not a common occurrence. Letters and legal correspondences he received on a frequent basis, yes, but Javert could not think of a time when he had been sent anything beyond that.

“A pretty girl dropped it off,” crooned one of the younger officers in the distance.

“Oh, Javert’s got an admirer,” cooed another.

“Quit that,” the Sergeant shot back at them.

“Oh, no, she was much too young for him,” the first lad continued. He wiggled an eyebrow. “Unless …”

“Lefèvre! Must I ask again?” the Sergeant sighed, putting his head in his hand. “Ignore them. It’s on the desk there.”

Javert turned to find a small grouping of things sitting on the writing desk which most definitely did not belong there.

He inspected the package with equal parts suspicion and hesitation.

It was a little thing, wrapped up in brown butcher’s paper and tied with a simple piece of string. Beside it sat a folded note and a single white carnation.
The front of the note said “Pour l'Inspecteur Javert de la police de Paris.”

Glancing over his shoulder to reassure himself that the nosy young officers had been shooed from the room, he opened it.

“To replace the one you lost,” it read. Signed only “-V”.

He pulled the string loose and unwrapped the small bundle to reveal a tiny silver snuffbox in the shape of a compass, finely etched with details. There were already tobacco leaves inside it.

He wrinkled his nose.

Was this considered bribery? Possibly. But to what end? His continued silence? The man ought to know by now that he wasn’t going to implicate him.

He closed the lid and brushed his thumb across it, considering the design for a moment before shoving the box into the breast-pocket of his greatcoat.

***

A week and a half later, a letter appeared in the station house, again addressed to him.

Javert stuffed it into his coat and opened it later, in the privacy of a small courtyard.

Enclosed were two Louis d’or and a note.

“I noticed you have had to go without a hat, of late,” it read. “You ought to buy another; it suits you. And Parisian summers are wont to make one wish for something to shade their eyes. Seeing as I am the reason you ended up losing your old one, it only seems right that I reimburse you for it.”

Javert frowned. Part of him wanted to throw the coins back at the man’s feet and scorn his charity, but another part reasoned that it was rational for Valjean to owe him for the things he had lost.

He grunted unhappily to himself, begrudgingly putting the coins in his purse.

***

It was really more money than was strictly necessary for a top hat. Did Valjean expect him to waste that much coin on something that only needed to be functional?

He bought one that was similar to his previous hat, thick and well-made and not the collapsible kind. Even though it was nothing extravagant, it did outshine, literally, the one he had lost, as he’d had it for so many years that it had become dull from sunlight and age quite some time ago. It had, in that respect, rather matched the rest of his ensemble. This new hat was far blacker than the faded iron-grey wool of his greatcoat, and it almost looked a bit silly, to wear them simultaneously.

He certainly wasn’t about to buy a new coat, though. Firstly, they were an expense he would
prefer to avoid if possible, and secondly, he was rather attached to his current one. It had been his primary defense against the elements for so long that he disliked the thought of wearing any other. In fact, he’d had that coat so long that he could not remember when exactly he’d even acquired it. Before Montreuil-sur-Mer, that was certain. He stitched the satin-lining when it needed mending, and despite numerous encounters with stoves and stray embers from fireplaces, its outside was still in remarkably good shape.

Javert quit the hatter’s with a great deal of leftover change in his coin purse and a vague sense of satisfaction. He felt better with a top hat on his head. The weight was familiar, sheltering. It shaded his eyes from scrutiny and hid the ever-encroaching grey of his roots.

He wondered if he shouldn’t use some of the excess coin to buy himself a decent supper for once. Surely the portress would not mind cooking up a bit of beef.

***

It was late July, and Javert was troubled.

He had not seen Valjean in more than a month.

But it did not feel like a month. It felt like only yesterday.

Everyone he spoke to, everywhere he went, everything he did, he felt watched. The hunter felt hunted. Whenever he was faced with some moral dilemma pertaining to his duties as an agent of the police, he heard the voice of Jean Valjean spouting some word of wisdom or warning.

Were these things the man had actually said? Sometimes. Other times, they seemed to issue forth unbidden from the recesses of his mind, entirely on their own.

Was this what having a conscience felt like? What this his conscience speaking to him, guising itself in the voice of he who had awakened it? Javert could not tell if the things he heard in his head were what he expected Valjean to say to him, or if they were things he was trying to tell himself. Who the counselor; who the counseled?

They invaded his mind with maddening frequency. Always, he felt as though Valjean was just behind him, looking over his shoulder. He fancied that if he turned around fast enough he might be able to catch a glimpse of him.

But there was never anyone there. Only himself, and his troubles.

***

Another week, another letter. This was becoming distressing. The first parcel was perhaps acceptable in an annoyingly sentimental sort of way; the second agreeable only to the appeal of logic. This third one had a bothering effect upon Javert.

He already had a suspicion as to the tone of the letter’s content before he opened it, and this was
confirmed within the very first sentence.

“This is going to sound odd,” it read, “but how much do manacles cost? Do they reimburse you for such things? What was that little piece of glass that you threw into the fire? I hope it was not anything important.”

Javert growled under his breath, crumpling the note as his hand balled into a fist.

***

“Stop. Sending me things. Through the station houses.”

There was an unquestionable look of shock on Valjean’s face at finding the inspector on his doorstep. “Ah—Javert, you—”

“You are trying to win me over with money.”

The man blinked. “What?”

“You keep sending letters with coins in them. It is bothering me. I dislike philanthropy.”

Valjean looked partially offended and partially guilty. “That is not—”

“It reeks of charity. That, or bribery. And I do not accept either.”

“I wasn’t …” Valjean let out a frustrated sigh. “I was trying to repay you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He himself was not sure if he had meant this to be a callous rebuke or an honest assurance. Perhaps both.

Valjean averted his gaze, staring at the paving stones with a vaguely shamed expression.

“What?” Javert demanded.

“It was only …” His voice was low, his words mumbled. “I wanted to write to you.”

Javert furrowed his brow, searching the man’s face. “Why?”

Valjean squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head before looking back at him with a sad, lopsided smile. “You don’t really understand any of this, do you?”

“I do not know what you mean.”

Valjean’s face fell. “No, I suppose you would not.”

Javert narrowed his eyes at him, trying to ascertain what the man was going on about.

“Stop clogging up the prefecture’s postal system with personal correspondences,” he said. “It is making a fool of me, and people are asking questions.”

Valjean shrugged. “Then give me your address,” he said simply.

“That is not what I meant.”
Valjean looked wounded. He opened his mouth to speak but slowly shut it again.

“No,” Javert grumbled glancing away and gaining a bit of color in his cheeks, “I suppose that is what I meant.” He jabbed a finger at him. “But I don’t want you knowing where I sleep!”

“Why? You ought to know by now I would never do you harm. Do you think I would show up there uninvited?”

“Yes,” he said between his teeth. “Well,” he added, faltering, “—no.” He clutched his head. “I don’t know. But I don’t feel comfortable with the idea of it; do you understand?”

The man looked a little disheartened. “Yes,” he sighed, “Begrudgingly so.”

“Then you will not send anything further through the stations?”

“No. Not if you wish it.”

Javert wanted to say “good”, and yet the word would not pass his lips. The defeated expression on the man’s face caused him a pang of grief. He sought to find a way to express this strange turmoil, to resolve and expel it from his soul.

“I don’t understand why you care,” he said after a moment, averting his gaze.

Valjean looked up at him with curiosity and concern in his eyes.

“I already told you,” Javert continued, “you do not have to fear for my life any longer. I am beyond that. Why does—” His expression twitched. “Why do you care what happens to me besides that?”

Valjean’s brow furrowed greatly, his brown eyes staring into his in absolute perplexion, tinged with disbelief and something akin to horror. “Why would I …?” he repeated dumbly, trailing off. “Mon Dieu, man,” he exclaimed, throwing a hand up, “do you think I would just— Do you think I would not care for you? Do you think I would not worry? How is it you believe one can save another man’s life and then toss him away as though he meant nothing?”

Javert scrunched up his face. “You are not ‘tossing me away’. I— What do you even mean by that? I never belonged to you to begin with!”

Valjean drew back a little, his head receding towards his shoulders like a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

“All I am asking is for a little privacy, a little respect,” Javert muttered. “I do not see how that constitutes as you abandoning me, not that I would care if you did or not. I never asked you to worry over me, you know.”

Valjean was beginning to look like a dog that had been struck. Had he a tail, it would have been between his legs. “I know that,” he managed to say, “but I just—”

“But you cannot help yourself,” Javert concluded for him.

“Truly, I cannot.”

“Well try, would you?” he snarled. “I don’t find your constant reminders of our situation very pleasant.”

“Javert, will you not—”
“And furthermore, Monsieur Fauchelevent,” he said, “it may not have actually occurred to you, but perhaps I just want to be left alone, eh? Perhaps more than anything that is what I need.”

Valjean cringed. “I had thought I’d been—”

“No, you have not!” Javert’s words tumbled over one another in their haste so that they seemed to blend into one long, hissing utterance. “Sending me letters and packages and continuously invading my space with your sentiments does not in my mind constitute as ‘leaving me alone’! Now will you cease and desist from doing so? Do I have your word on it? Oui ou non?”

“O-oui,” Valjean stammered, shrinking back from him with a look of remorse. “I told you, I will stop if you dislike it so.”

“Well, then. I dislike it,” Javert said, readjusting his hat and turning to leave. “So.”

Valjean’s voice sounded from behind him, hesitant. “Only … How am I to know you’re well?”

Javert paused to look back at him over his shoulder. The expression on his face was something between severe agitation and vague consideration.

“Trust,” he growled, tugging the brim of his hat over his eyes and stalking off.

“Attends,” Valjean called out to him pleadingly. Wait.

Again Javert paused, but this time he only turned his head back a fraction of an inch, not deigning to look at him directly. The muscles in his abdomen clenched. “I think you mean ‘attendez,’ monsieur.” This last word was spoken with particular venom.

“A-attendez,” Valjean said sheepishly, defeated.

“What is it then? Speak.”

“Will …” The man seemed to find some difficulty in forcing the words past his lips. “Will I see you again?”

Javert was at a loss for what to say; for many moments he stood still, his mouth clamped shut, his face falling into shadow. “Do not count on it,” he finally said.

And then he left.

***

When he tried to sleep that night, Javert found himself plagued by something that strangely resembled guilt. He did not think he ought to feel remorse for what he’d said earlier, but then, what men are truly masters of their conscience? Agitated, he tossed and turned in the sheets, running over their conversations again and again in his mind.

Valjean’s defeated expression haunted his thoughts, and he could not whisk away the memory of it no matter how hard he tried. And he tried very, very hard.

‘There was no need for that kind of callousness!’ the man’s voice echoed.
Javert growled, his voice rising to a frenzied shout as he clawed at his scalp. “Get out of my head!”

***

Valjean tried to wrap his head around what the man’s departure had made him feel.

Worry, firstly. A terrible, anxious dread that permeated his heart and sat in his stomach like a stone. There was no way for him to be sure of Javert’s state of mind, no telling what he might do in his absence.

Valjean had wanted the man to stay with him; it was the only way he could be certain of his safety—but he knew it was impossible. He knew Javert was right, that he needed to figure things out by himself, to reimmerse himself in the familiar routine of everyday life. It was the only way he would be able to feel normal. To regain his independence, and learn to live again: this was the final step of his recovery.

It was necessary that Valjean should not be there. He would only remind the man of his follies and their uncomfortable past.

Valjean understood this. And yet still he worried, could not help but worry. He wished Javert would remain at his side.

Despite its awkwardness, Valjean missed his company. The house seemed a little emptier without him. Never before had he been able to speak so freely with another person of his feelings and his past. It had been oddly cathartic. Like a confession.

Perhaps—though the man would probably never admit it—it had been cathartic for Javert as well?

As far as Valjean knew, the inspector had little reason to hide his past or feel the need to confess anything, exactly, but then again Javert never seemed to speak to anyone about himself, and could probably benefit from some regular human interaction.

It was clear to Valjean that both of them were sorely lacking in companionship. And if it wasn’t for their history and their current situation, the obvious solution would have been for them to fill the gaps in each other’s lives.

But they were no strangers, and this was not to be. On account of the world around them, the two men were at odds with one another. Opposite hearts, on opposite sides of the law.

In the eyes of the public, it would be wrong for Javert to associate with him. For a police officer and a wanted criminal to become friends. Even if they did not share a rocky past, the relationship would be tenuous and fragile at best, painful and self-destructive at worst.

Valjean admitted these things to himself, and there seemed reason enough for any level-headed person to cut ties, and yet those reasons meant next to nothing to him.

If he could only see the man safe, see him at peace with himself—happy, even—it would be worth anything and everything to him.
And so he could not help but unconsciously seek him out, visiting the busy centers of activity in the city far more frequently than he ever had before. He left the house often enough to cause even his daughter and servant to remark upon it. They believed it was a sign that he was finally overcoming the shyness that was so typical of him.

Hearing this caused him some amount of surprise. He had not noticed any change in himself or his behavior.

Indeed, it was strange, but somehow he had gained a certain amount of self-confidence with the coming and going of the inspector. Suddenly it was Valjean who was buying ingredients from the market, or delivering payments on the house and the flats, and to her astonishment, Toussaint found herself quite unnecessary at times.

And it was not as though he had been looking for Javert, but if Valjean happened to glimpse him across the crowd, he did not feel surprised, and he would stand and watch him from a distance for however long he could, silent and still.

On very rare occasions, Javert would happen to glance in his direction as well, and their eyes would meet, and there would be a fluttering in Valjean’s chest, a sort of fearful yearning.

Neither man dared approach one another. They merely stared at each other from across a sea of faces.

It was always Javert who turned away first. He would tug down the brim of his top hat to shade his eyes, and stalk decidedly off in another direction with an agitated frown on his face.

Valjean would watch him go, always, until Javert disappeared into the crowd. And he would gaze awhile at where he’d been, feeling hollow, before finally letting his eyes fall and turning to go.

***

The events of early June seemed a dream to Javert now, surreal. He could barely concede that they had occurred.

Should such things not have shattered him?

Yet here he stood whole once more, going about his duties as usual.

Had any of it truly happened, then? It did not feel like it.

He could almost forget it all—but then there was Valjean, and sometimes he would see him in the street, and their eyes would meet, and he’d be forced to concede the reality of things, and he would grow red and hot and stalk off into the crowd, pretending he had not seen or recognized the face of a wanted convict, and—as an officer of the law—done nothing.

To see Valjean was to admit to himself he had been broken, that he was but a man made of piecemeal fragments of his former self, cobbled together and affixed with a resolution that had never quite permeated his bones. It was to remember the crushing pain in his breast that was his half-formed conscience, and what calamity of the soul had brought it forth. To be forced back into that doubting and questioning state, unsure of himself, unsure of the world around him.
Each time he saw Valjean, he found himself once more on the bank of the river, shivering in the darkness of the unknown, drawing back in horror at the strange and tender parts of himself he had hitherto not believed existed, and the terrifying expanse of grey that was his once-thought world of black and white. It was to revisit the abyss.

In short, to glimpse the man was torture.

And so perhaps he was not entirely to blame for avoiding him, for throwing himself into his work and pretending that nothing significant had come to pass.

Presently, he was investigating the rumors of a smuggling operation.

His inquiries had led him to an abandoned domicile near Place de la République. It had been a tenement at one point, but had long since closed its doors due to structural and health concerns. Of late, men had been seen to come and go in and out of it at night. There were always vagabonds and squatters to be found in the city, and this would not be anything remarkable, save for the fact that they came at regular intervals, always in similar numbers. They did not speak, and they carried small crates.

Now, Javert did have a flair for the dramatic. He preferred to wait until his quarries had put themselves in the most incriminating situation possible before he arrested them. And he could have waited until nightfall to observe these operations himself. To call up some other officers and spring a trap on them. But Javert also liked to make as certain of his suspicions as possible before taking any action or inconveniencing other lawmen for what might not turn out to be anything at all. He harbored an intense dislike for the embarrassment of being proven wrong in front of his peers.

And so, for all these reasons, and because he had a hunch that the building would be abandoned in the daylight, Javert chose instead to conduct a private investigation of the premises beforehand. His intentions were, if he found evidence of a smuggling operation, to leave it all as he had found it, sweep away any trace of his presence, and summon a few officers to lay in wait with him as the sun set.

The entryway to this decrepit building was in what was essentially an alleyway, narrow and small and not well looked after. He looked about himself to assure that there were not any prying eyes around, and tried the door. It was, as he expected, solidly locked. However, this did not prove to be any hindrance to him, as he had brought a lock-pick’s kit along with him expressly for this purpose.

Teasing the tumblers into place with his ear to the door and his eyes on the street, he managed to have it open in under a minute. Noting that its hinges had been recently greased so as to silence the entrance and exit of its traffic, Javert shut the door slowly, carefully, casting his gaze about in the darkness. There were no windows in the place save for the two on the upper stories, and those had obviously been boarded up to protect the glass. Therefore, no light permeated the building once the front door was closed.

He gripped his cudgel tightly, pulling a lucifer match[^3] from his pocket and striking it against the rough plaster wall. It burst into flame after the third try with a hiss and angry sparking. He slunk further down the hallway, took a half-burnt candle from its sconce and lit it, waving the match out and sticking it back in his pocket. He proceeded down the hall, back to the wall, shielding the candle’s brightness with his gloved hand.

The first room he came to he entered, after pausing to listen by the doorway. There were no actual doors in this place save for the one that had been at the front—only empty frames.
There was nothing in the room except a small table against the back wall that held a cast-iron candelabra.

Beside it on the floor along this wall lay an ugly, matted rug, filthy with dirt and debris.

Javert found it odd that there should be a table and a rug in a place so lacking of furniture and basic furnishings that it didn’t even have doors. He narrowed his eyes, glanced behind him for good measure, and nudged the rug aside to reveal a trap door.

The corner of his mouth tugged into a smirk. He knelt, setting the candle down and undoing the metal latch on the door. It creaked softly as it was opened.

It was impossible to discern what lay beneath due to the lack of light. However, he could smell the scent of freshly turned earth wafting up from below, and that was an anomaly in the cellar of a building that had been so long abandoned. No doubt there was a recently dug tunnel within, leading further into the ground.

Javert shoved one arm into this hole as far as it would reach, holding out the burning candle to illuminate the cellar’s depths. In its flickering light he could perceive a great many large crates stacked up against the wall, alongside numerous, fat barrels. These barrels had taps on them, and one of the crates had been opened to reveal empty bottles.

All the markers of a very profitable and very illegal wine smuggling operation.

One doesn’t get taxed on business the government does not know one transacts. Nor, for that matter, are they inspected for health hazards or proper working regulations.

His lips drew back to expose his teeth and gums in a savage grin, the like of which a wolf bears when it corners its prey. He sat back.

All of a sudden he felt the shifting of air on the back of his neck, a keening of his senses, and he whirled around just in time to see the flash of a knife come within inches of his face.

He had put an arm up to swipe the offending wielder’s wrist out of range, but, to his bewilderment, this proved unnecessary, as something else had gotten to his attacker first.

The man gave a strangled cry as another, burlier man dragged him back into the shadows. They grappled with one another, the first received a blow to his stomach, the second a slash across the face. The burlier man grabbed the other’s arm and twisted it, causing him to drop the knife, which clattered on the wooden floorboards. He thrust the attacker face first against a support beam, using his weight to keep him pinned there.

This man, Javert’s savior, turned to look back at him.

“Here; restrain him, will you?” he panted.

It was Jean Valjean.

Javert gave a frightful start at the sight of him.

“You! What are you doing here?” he exclaimed.

“Not important. Get out your manacles, quickly!”

Growling, Javert leapt up and drew the restraints in question from the pocket of his greatcoat,
latching them around the offender's wrist with a click and effectively binding him to the post.

“Into the hall,” Javert demanded, glaring at Valjean with a baneful grimace.

Baffled, the man complied.

Javert promptly thrust him up against the wall by the front of his shirt. “How long have you been following me?” he hissed.

He noticed a thin red line across the man’s right cheek, a drop of blood trickling towards his chin.

Valjean seemed taken off guard by the amount of hostility he had encountered. “I just happened to see you pass by, and I thought— You seemed to be on an investigation of sorts, and I was merely curious, that’s all.”

“Curious? Since when does what I do interest you?”

“Since always! Javert, I do not understand why you take such offense to this; I wasn’t spying on you. If I hadn’t come along, you might have been—”

“I would have been fine!” he countered, bristling. “How do you expect I’ve been doing my job for the past thirty years if I didn’t know how to handle myself? I didn’t need your help! And I don’t need you looking after me like I’m some sort of pathetic infant!”

Valjean’s brow knit. “I was only trying to—”

“One of these days someone in the prefecture is going to recognize you, and you will regret ever having pulled me from the river.”

The man’s eyes shone with a stony resolution. “I will never regret that.”

Javert growled at him. “I am getting sick of you playing the hero for me. And quit following me around! I do not know if you do it intentionally or if we both have extraordinarily bad timing, but I’ve seen you staring at me across the street and I am telling you it is getting very, very bothersome. Do you intend to torment me for the rest of my life? Is that why you’re doing this?”

“Javert, I don’t—I don’t know what you’re saying. I’m not trying to torment you.” He bent his head a little. “I just … worry for you, sometimes.”

The man’s thin lips drew back in a toothy scowl. “Don’t. I do not need to be worried over.”

“You say that, but—”

“But nothing! I do not need you. I do not need your concern. I don’t want to see your face everywhere I go! You think you are being kind, being compassionate somehow by reminding me you exist, but you are wrong! Every moment spent in your presence, in thought of you, is agony for me, do you not understand that? I am trying to forget you.”

Valjean gave a start, going limp in his grasp. At that moment it seemed a spark had been snuffed in him; he stared out at the floor with eyes that seemed suddenly dull. “Oh.” His voice was low and meek. “You … you really feel that way?”

“Yes.”

Valjean was quiet. He gazed off in silent contemplation, unfocused. “I see,” he finally breathed.
“Then I won’t … bother you, any further.”

Again, Javert wanted to say “good” and yet the word would not pass his lips.

“Be off with you, then,” he said. As Valjean was heading for the door, he added “—and stay away from the police stations, you idiot.”

The man lifted his head a little at that, pausing for a moment before letting it fall again and taking his leave.

“Adieu, Javert,” he murmured sorrowfully.

For some reason, those words hung like a stone in his gut long after the man had left.

***

Footnotes


[2] Valjean is addressing Javert informally again here. Javert does not wish for them to be familiar, so he corrects his grammar by changing the conjugation of the verb to the formal version, then calls him “monsieur” (“my sir”, an address more suited to strangers)—to distance himself and further drive the point home.


Chapter End Notes

"La Douleur Exquise" or "The Exquisite Pain" is a phrase describing the agony of wanting someone who doesn't want you.

Suggested listening:

Different Lives - Hugo

Duvet - Boa

Haunted by the Thought of You - Jill Tracy

He's Everything You Want - Vertical Horizon

I Can't Stop Loving You - Ray Charles

I Gave You All - Mumford & Sons

I Dreamed a Dream – Michael Henry & Justin Robinett
I Will Remember You - Sarah McLachlan
If You're Gone - Matchbox 20
Keeper - Yellowcard
A la Claire Fontaine - Les Petits Minous
Place de la Republique - Coeur de Pirate
Porcelain - Moby
Recover - Chvrches
Reminder - Mumford & Sons
Say Something - Christina Aguilera
Selfish Man - Flogging Molly
Smother - Daughter
The Open Road - Eyeclimber
The Walk - Imogen Heap
What Hurts the Most - Rascal Flatts
Where Are You Now - Mumford & Sons
Chapter Summary

In the year following the rebellion, Javert continues life as normal, and avoids Valjean as best he can. He almost manages to forget about him—until one day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I don't really know why I care so much. I just have something inside me that tells me that there is a problem, and I have got to do something about it. I think that is what I would call the God in me. All of us have a God in us, and that God is the spirit that unites all life, everything that is on this planet.”

-Wangari Maathai

***

The summer fled.

Soon it was autumn, and the leaves danced among the streets. People took to buttoning up and donning layer upon layer to keep the increasingly chill breeze at bay. The birds began to migrate south, flocking together and filling up the skies, making good on half-remembered promises of gentler climes.

Javert did not seek out Valjean.

A girl spent her days making bandages and lint, worry in her eyes. In the evening, she took her servant and visited the church, praying in the empty pews. Her father regarded these things stoically, saying nothing.

Mid October, the girl was allowed to see her paramour for the first time in months. He was so happy to see her, he did not even seem to care how pale he still was.

Come late November, the snow began to fall, blanketing the city in white. All was still and silent. Fires roared in their hearths. Vendors roasted meats and nuts over crackling flames, beheld by ruddy, grinning faces and hungry eyes. Church bells sounded the day joyously on Christmas morning, and people from all walks of life celebrated in their own way, drawing close together for comfort and for warmth, visiting family and old friends.

Still, Javert did not seek out Valjean. He walked the snowy streets with his head down, facing into the wind, bundled up in his stuffy wool greatcoat as he made his rounds and hunted malefactors down dark and icicle-hung alleyways. He pretended the bitter cold did not cut him to
Sometimes, when the sun was out, a young couple would go riding in an open carriage, holding hands beneath the blanket. They visited shops, and talked with endless excitement. In the quiet moments, when no one was looking, they stole kisses.

At night, the girl returned home to recount her adventures, eyes bright, and her father would nod and smile at her. But there was a sadness behind his eyes that she did not perceive.

As always, there was Le Carnaval. The jours charnels came and went, and for a brief space of time the streets were filled with dancers and jugglers and musicians. Everyone wore masks. The scent of crêpes and waffles and beignets filled the air.

A man attended a wedding with his right arm in a sling. He brought his daughter down the aisle with his left, and he cried as he stood at the altar. Afterwards, they all retired in carriages to a mansion for the wedding feast. Only some of his smiles were genuine. He left early.

Shrove Tuesday became Ash Wednesday, and people flocked about with little grey crosses on their brows, all their gaiety and hubris turned to humility. So it was with every year, and its flamboyant hypocrisy made Javert want to growl and laugh at the same time. So many drunken escapades, so many reports to fill out.

As much as he grumbled, he preferred those crimes of innocent passion over every other. There was a lightheartedness to them that always managed to coax a smirk out of him despite himself.

Behind the closed doors of an elegant drawing room, a man told his new son-in-law of his past. The boy was upset. The man was upset. They parted in despair.

Winter melted into spring, and plants poked their stalks tentatively through the soil, reaching, reaching, reaching for the sun. Snowdrops stuck their noses up through the dwindling snow. Crocuses dotted the recovering grass with clusters of purples and whites and yellows. Again the ground became green, and the air began to warm, and Javert did not have to worry so much about burning his coattails on the too-hot stoves of the station houses.

In the cellar of a great mansion, two chairs and a rug had been set beside an old wood stove. There, surrounded by cracking plaster, a man was received by his daughter, and permitted an hour with her every day before dinner. She disliked this arrangement, but he said that he preferred it. For a short, blessed space of time, she spoke to him of all sorts of stories and charming trivialities, and the sight of her face filled his heart with fondness. He told himself it was enough.
The birds returned, and hopped about the dirt in search of sustenance, chirping and singing gaily in the recently renewed sunshine. Buds burst into blossoms. Tiny pink and white petals littered the more well-to-do streets. The simple green leaves of the other streets, so new and tender, were also beautiful in their own sort of way.

Young paramours walked the gardens and stole glances and kisses beneath parasols and fans and branches. Laughter and song carried on the mild breeze. All of Paris was in love.

And still, Javert did not seek out Valjean.

One day, a man arrived in the cellar of a mansion to find the stove had not been lit. His daughter complained at the idea of him being cold. He told her that it was near summer now, and there was no need for a fire.

Soon, the chairs too disappeared.

The man understood.

Some time later, his daughter sent the maidservant to the man’s apartment to ask why he had skipped a day’s visit. The man only smiled gently at her. It had been two.

Javert kept himself busy, but he no longer needed to work himself into exhaustion to be able to fall asleep. He brushed the dust off his bookshelf and resumed reading in what little spare time his job permitted. When the darkness and the silence overtook him as he lay beneath the sheets, he felt a vague, vague pull of something, but he did not want to know what it was, and he ignored it.

In the early morning, an old man could be seen walking, each day towards the same destination, which he never reached. He would gaze longingly at a mansion across the road, as though there were something there he desired. Shaking his head, he would go back the way he came.

Without fail, he made this walk daily, head down. He did not do anything, or talk to anybody. The street children would laugh at him, because they thought he’d lost his senses.

With every passing day, his steps grew a little heavier, and his pace slower, as if he was shouldering some growing burden. And with every passing day, he turned back sooner, and the walk grew a little shorter.

***

It was early May now, 1833, and the city was in full bloom. The heat had returned, and the sun —once and still occasionally pleasant—began to threaten oppression.

Eleven months had passed since the failed uprising that had nearly claimed Javert's life.

He thought no more of the river.
The black expanse of death did not seem any more enticing to him than it did before 1832, and he went out of his way to avoid it (or at least, as much as he usually had).

Everyone at the prefecture appeared to have forgotten whatever it was they’d believed had happened to him last June. They spoke no more on his “gloom” or his “softening”. It was only noted that he was slightly more open to reasoning from malefactors than he had been in years prior, and more considerate when it came to the context in which a crime had been committed.

But besides this, he remained the same man he had always been. A melancholy dreamer, devoid of pleasures or companions, stalking the streets with silent, watchful eyes. A cunning wraith.

Today, it was raining.

Javert always felt ridiculous under a parapluie. He was never quite sure why. Perhaps it was because they reminded him of parasols. Perhaps it was because he had to carry his top hat under his arm lest it make the entire arrangement awkward—and this left him feeling, paradoxically, even more exposed to the elements. But if he did not carry one, his coat would become soaked after a time, and it is a particular kind of hell to bear the heavy weight of sodden wool upon one’s shoulders for the length of an entire day; this he knew.

He was passing through Le Marais, down Rue Vieille du Temple, and had just crossed the intersection with Rue des Quatre Fils when he noticed a dark form on the ground by a low stone wall, just off to the side of the street on a well-worn footpath.

It was a person, he realized, a man—probably a drunkard, passed out after one too many glasses of wine.

Javert was not unused to a sight like this; alcohol was wont to make men feel tired at unusual times of day and forget their surroundings. Many times he’d had to escort the hapless civilian back to their homes on account of such foolish things.

The man was lying on his side, with his face towards the ground. He wore all black. The rain had soaked his wool jacket and the workman’s cap that obscured his face.

Javert approached him. He nudged the man’s back with the toe of his boot. “You. The streets aren’t for sleeping. Get up, then.”

The man did not stir.

“Get up, I say; you’ll catch your death of cold out here.”

Still there was no response.

Javert furrowed his brow, frowning.

This man was very drunk. That, or dead. At least, he would have considered the possibility of him being dead, had he not noticed the man’s chest rising and falling.

No, he looked like a laborer who was down on his luck and who had gotten himself intoxicated at a local tavern to dull the pain and succeeded only in dulling his senses.

“Are you listening to me?” he said, crouching down and brushing the man’s cap back, “You need to—”

He froze.
Beneath him was not some poor, inebriated workman, but Jean Valjean.

He was very pale, yet his cheeks and eye sockets were flushed with an unhealthy reddish hue. He had let his beard grow out, and his face was strangely gaunt, haggard looking—so much so that Javert almost didn’t recognize him—but the snowy white curls plastered to his forehead were not to be mistaken. His breath was ragged. Eyes closed and wreathed by tired shadows, his expression seemed vaguely pained.

Javert was taken aback.

What had happened? How had he come to be there? What had affected this change?

It was hard to reconcile the man who had slogged through miles of sewage with a corpse upon his back after days of fighting—and who’d pulled him from the raging rapids of the Seine—with the frail, sickly looking creature beneath him.

How many months had it been since Javert had last seen him, exactly? How many months since he’d callously brushed him off, finally succeeding in driving him away?

He didn’t know. Eight? Nine? It had been summer, then.

Could it be true? Had almost a year passed? It certainly didn’t feel that way, but …

A strange sensation overcame him—a pang of guilt, of dread.

What had happened to Valjean during that time? What suffering had the man undergone while he, Javert, remained willfully ignorant?

Images flashed in his mind: letters sent to the station house, a confrontation on a doorstep. A familiar face across the crowd, gazing at him solemnly. A fight in an abandoned tenement. His fist on Valjean’s collar, shoving him up against the wall. A drop of blood trailing down the man’s cheek as he looked up at him in confusion, and fear, and sadness. His own rough words came back to him, soundless growls and silent snarls in the space of his mind. Those brown eyes, fixed on his, so filled with hurt.

Javert sat staring down at him, paralyzed.

Finally he slid his arms under him and picked him up, hefting him onto his back and carrying him away.

***

“How long has he been like this?”

Javert stood a little ways away, clasping his hat in his hands and watching the doctor examine Valjean.

He was a beady-eyed little man, with a strong frame but lithe fingers. His hair clung to his head in light grey wisps, sticking out at the sides and thinning substantially at the top. A pair of gold-rimmed spectacles clung to the bridge of his large nose. His name was Pascal. For some reason, he seemed vaguely familiar.
He was frowning a little, and that did not give Javert any consolation.

“I do not know,” Javert said. “I found him thusly on the streets earlier to-day, and his condition has not changed. I suspect this did not strike him suddenly, though.”

“No, I would agree with that assumption,” the doctor said, turning back to the bed on which he’d laid Valjean. “Well,” he sighed, “let us see here, then.”

He began to undo the top button of Valjean’s shirt.

Javert gave a start. “Don’t!” he cried sharply.

The doctor jumped, whipping his head around to look at him in perplexion. “Whyever not?”

“I just—” Javert faltered. “You cannot—” He balled his fists around the brim of his hat. “I forbid you from doing so.”

The man narrowed his eyes, throwing up a questioning palm. “What harm will it do? I am only trying to gauge the extent of his—”

“He is malnourished, yes; that is plain to see. You do not need to go and count his ribs. I think the extent of his illness should be quite clear in his face alone. Will that not suffice?”

The doctor furrowed his brow. “I suppose it could.”

“Then let it.”

There was a hint of annoyance and suspicion in his voice. “As you wish, monsieur.” With a huff, he turned back to Valjean, pressing his wrist to the man’s pale forehead and pausing there for a moment. “He hath a serious fever. That is certain. He needs liquids and a cool compress. I would remove his shirt if I were you—since you don’t seem to want to let me do it myself. Open the windows. Let in a breeze. Get him to eat, if he wakes. Ask him what ails him, how long this has been going on, and what if anything he believes may have caused it.”

“It is hard for me to judge the thing when he’s unconscious like this—but the fact that he’s unconscious at all is not very promising. His breathing worries me. It is too ragged. I would guess it was pneumonia, if it were not for the state of his ribs. Even without removing his shirt, they are pronounced enough to count. I cannot tell if it is due to a lack of food, or a drawn out malady that saps his substance. Perhaps both.”

“In any case, he needs to eat, and soon. Not something insubstantial, either. His body needs energy to fight whatever it is that’s trying to kill him, and by the looks of things, it doesn’t appear to have any at present. In fact, this rather resembles consumption, only he does not have a cough, and there is no blood in his lungs. It is strange. But, at least—at the very least—it is not cholera, and that is something to be thankful for. Keep a close eye on him; there is nothing more I can do for him at present, I am afraid. Call for me if he should wake, or if his condition worsens somehow. Though, that is hard to imagine at the moment.”

Javert gave a grave nod. “What do I owe you?”

“Owe? Nothing. I have given you but words, mere breath, and that is free. No charge, this time around.”

“But—the cab fee,” Javert protested.
The doctor shrugged. “I will not begrudge a little money, if it bothers you so.”

“I do not like debts,” the inspector said, digging a few coins out of his purse and thrusting them into the man’s hands.

“Again, I say you do not owe me, but that is all at your discretion, monsieur.” He dipped his head and made for the door. “Take care.”

“A moment, then.”

The man turned to look back at him over his shoulder. “Oh? What is it?”

Javert knit his brow. “It seems to me we may have met.”

The doctor only stared at him, his face blank. He blinked. “You tried to throw me out a window.”

Javert opened his mouth preemptively, narrowing his eyes and glancing in another direction. “Ah.” Then, quieter, he said to himself, “I’d thought he was embellishing that account.”

***

The sun was setting, and still Valjean had not woken. Had not even stirred in his sleep. He lay like a dead man, the only sign of life the rise and fall of his chest.

Javert had forced himself to follow through with the doctor’s orders and remove Valjean’s shirt, even though it made him uncomfortable. He covered him with the bed sheet first and undid the buttons blindly beneath it, so as to spare the both of them their dignity. Part of his hesitation lay in the fact that he had a vague apprehension of what lay under it: years and years worth of ugly scars. But the dread of seeing them did not make itself so plainly clear to Javert; he was merely instilled with a substantial amount of discomfort at the thought of glimpsing the man shirtless.

The wool coat Valjean had been wearing now hung from the hook by the door. What had happened to the cap, Javert could not say; it had likely fallen off without notice as he’d picked him up.

He drew up some water fresh from the well and soaked a cloth in it, folding it and laying it on Valjean’s brow. He wrung it out and repeated the process every so often to keep it cool. Erring on the side of caution, he decided not to try and force any liquids down the man’s throat, in the event that it should end up in his lungs instead of his stomach.

He had little else to do, so he sat by the hearth in his chair, casting anxious glances back at Valjean in between pages of the newspaper. When he had read it in its entirety, and eaten a meager supper of porridge, he found himself with neither tasks to complete nor bed to sleep in. He would be sleeping on the bergère tonight. Not that it caused him any grief or real discomfort—he was used to such arrangements when conducting lengthy fieldwork—but it did keep him awake longer than he might have hoped, although this might also have been attributed to his worry over the state of Valjean’s health.

He sat slouched in the chair with his head against the middle of the backrest and his feet propped up on a stool, listening to the pops and snaps of the wooden wick of the candle on the
nearby side table and pondering what on earth could have led Valjean to the situation he’d found him in.

It was raining. Valjean had gone walking on Rue Vieille du Temple. He had been carrying a parapluie, but had not opened it, for the inside of it had been dry.

Either the rain had started only after he’d fallen, or …

No, that was silly; why would one carry a parapluie and not use it? Surely the rain must have started later.

But then, it had been raining nearly all of the day. Was he supposed to believe that Valjean had gone out in the early morning and had lain there all day without anyone so much as noticing him? Surely someone would have found him during that time—would have come to his aid.

So, then, had he gone out in the rain and never opened his parapluie? Why would he have done such a stupid thing? Had he been so ill he had not noticed the weather? But then, if he had not taken note of it, why would he have thought to bring a parapluie at all?

It perplexed him.

Surely the man had been out of his mind at the time.

How long had he been ill? Had he known himself to be? Had he told anyone?

Where were his daughter, and his servant? Should they not have confined him to his bed in such a state? Were they no longer around to do so?

Why? Where had they gone?

Javert could not know.

Perhaps tomorrow he would stop by Rue Plumet to find out.

He contented himself with this thought as he fell asleep.

***

It was late, late at night. The moonlight streaming through the open windows was indicator enough of that. And then, the gentle breeze that brushed his skin did not even carry the sound of crickets.

Groggy and barely conscious, Valjean found himself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. His eyes drifted slowly to the rest of the room—a small, ramshackle flat, almost Spartan in its sparsity. There was the small bed he lay on, an armoire, a dresser, a low bookshelf, a desk, a side table, and a bergère, simply made but with an elegant pattern of fleurs de lis on the fading blue fabric.

Sitting in this bergère was a man, slouched and lying with his feet propped up on a tufted footstool, legs crossed, his face lost beneath long dark hair that dripped past his shoulders.

It took him a moment to realize the man was Javert.
He gazed at him for a long time, uncomprehending of anything but his presence. He could not remember how it was he had come to be here. The significance of his health combined with the unfamiliar surroundings and Javert’s presence alone did not occur to him.

His feelings and memories from the past year blended together seamlessly in his mind. He could not recall what had happened when, or what was happening now. It seemed to him that Cosette’s marriage had been years ago, and Javert’s plunge into the Seine but weeks, or even days.

He thought, as he gazed upon the man, that the room began to fill with water from whence he knew not. The blue of the moonlight became the blue of the Seine. It surrounded Javert, engulfing him as he sat sleeping in his chair, strands of his hair sent adrift, undulating, bubbles of air escaping his nostrils.

Unable to rise or even conceive of himself as capable of doing so, Valjean reached longingly, desperately for him, his arm a terrible weight to lift, trembling with the effort and reaching, reaching, even as the man, though motionless, seemed to recede from him.

Then his vision dimmed, and the water became black, and he saw and felt no more.

***

Footnotes


[2] The popular name for the ancient Jewish quarter of Paris; it is northeast of the Ile de la Cité (“the isle of the city”, an actual island in the Seine, near the center of Paris, which houses the Palais de Justice and the Notre Dame Cathedral).

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Cold - Novo Amor
I Just Know - Jacob Lee
Smother - Daughter
Subete no Atakai Michi – Masakatsu Takagi
Fire and Rain - James Taylor
Waves - Dotan
The Wisp Sings - Winter Aid
Winter Winds – Mumford & Sons

Je Joue de la Guitare - Jean Leloup
In the morning, he found that Valjean had shifted in his sleep, and lay off towards the side of the bed with his arm draped off the mattress haphazardly. While the man showed no further signs of recovery, this gave Javert some measure of hope.

He had to leave the flat for a few hours to explain away his situation to his superiors in the most vague and unassuming way possible, and to buy some food staples. He had thought about going to Rue Plumet, but had decided against it. What good would it do to cause the man’s daughter to worry herself sick over him? It would be better to let her believe he had simply gone on some journey.

Besides that, Javert realized that if he informed Valjean’s family of this (if a foster-daughter and an old servant counted as such), they would only expect Valjean to be returned to them, and this Javert could not do until the man was at least lucid. For if someone were to see his scars—a doctor, for example—it would be bad business. Javert suspected both the women of being entirely ignorant of Valjean’s past, and though he doubted they would be moved to any legal action by the sight of some prison-brands, he knew that Valjean would not want either of them to know about the life those entailed.

When he returned to his flat, Valjean was yet unchanged.

With a great sigh and furrowed brow, Javert dragged his armchair over to the bedside and pondered over some of the files he’d been given to work on at the station house. Reports of robberies, murders, vandalism—things that may or may not be related, and that his commissaire felt worth him looking into. Things that he would normally read over at the station house while filling someone else’s desk position, but was perfectly able to do at home. Scribbling notes to himself across the paperwork strewn about his lap, he paused occasionally to refresh the compress on Valjean’s head.

He could only half focus on the files. Anxiety disrupted his concentration. The longer he sat there, with no evident change in Valjean’s condition, the more disquieted he became.
He had been under the impression that the man would simply wake up. But now he began to reflect on the doctor’s words, and worry that Valjean’s condition was much more serious than he’d initially believed.

He did not know how long the man had gone without food or drink. What he did know was, it only took about two weeks for the average person to starve to death, and mere days for thirst to turn deadly.

Against his better judgment, and because of his nagging dread, he tried to get some water down the man’s throat, pressing a cup to his lips and tilting his head up. At first, it only made Valjean sputter and choke, dissolving into a fit of coughing that still did not manage to rouse him from his coma. But then, Javert wised up and pinched the man’s nose shut in his further attempts, and this seemed to ease things a bit. Valjean still sputtered, but in between gagging—which was made ineffective due to the closing of his airway—he swallowed reflexively. In this manner Javert managed to get at least two small cups of water into him, and he was satisfied with himself.

But the bells tolled the hours outside, and the sun drifted towards the horizon, and Valjean still did not awaken.

Another night passed. Morning became day, and day faded again into evening.

The man yet slept.

Javert contemplated him, leaning on the side of the bed with his arms folded on the mattress and a disheartened frown on his face. There was a twisting in his gut and a tightness in his chest as he stared at the man’s pale, gaunt face and motionless form.

He no longer feared for Valjean’s health, but rather, for his very life. The longer he went without waking, the more likely it became that he never would.

A shadow fell over Javert’s face. He clenched his fists in the sheets. He grit his teeth. “I won’t forgive you if you die, you know,” he said under his breath. “After all of this. You can’t. I forbid it, do you hear? I forbid you to die.”

This produced little effect upon the man.

Javert sat there, staring at him unhappily. His frustration turned to melancholy, to anguish, and despair.

“You vex me,” he murmured. “Do you know that?” But there was no anger in his voice, only gloom.

He hung his head, his hair dripping past his shoulders. He put his face in his hands. When next he spoke, his tone had softened, and was little more than a whisper.

“Come back to me, you fool.”

There was only darkness, and the gravity of the silence that followed in his wake.

“—vert …” a voice breathed.

He looked up with a start, jolting halfway up from his chair.

Still Valjean slept, but his once mute expression had contorted, vaguely pained, or perhaps confused, and his breathing seemed a little more deliberate.
Javert’s ice-blue eyes flicked about him wonderingly, just barely daring to hope.

“Valjean.”

The man’s face twitched. He grimaced for a second, let out a low, stunted groan. Then his expression melted back into that of restless sleep.

Javert studied him, his shoulders sagging in both disappointment and relief. He let out a sigh from the very bottom of his chest, and slowly sat back down. Slouching, he buried his chin in his crossed arms on the side of the bed, staring off for a moment before closing his eyes with a huff.

***

At some point he had fallen asleep, and when he awoke, it was much later in the evening. The light streaming in through his dusty windowpanes was colored with hues of pinks and oranges.

He looked first at Valjean, and, finding his situation not much changed, left to visit the water-closet and then put some water on to boil. He brewed himself a cup of tea, and sat back down in his chair with a slice of buttered bread, glancing briefly at his case files before deciding to give up on them entirely for the night.

He cast his eyes back to the occupant of his bed, sighing and putting his empty plate on the floor before rising to his feet to check on him once more.

He tried to remember exactly how Valjean had taken care of him when he had been in a similar state. They had both suffered from fevers. But then, Javert had not become malnourished like this, and certainly he had been a little livelier and coherent than this.

As Valjean once had, Javert pressed the flat of his wrist to the man’s forehead, gauging his temperature. He was still overly-warm, and his brow was beaded with sweat.

To his surprise, Valjean’s eyes fluttered open, just a fraction of an inch. They fell upon him, glassy and numbed. The man reached up his hand, trembling, and touched Javert’s cheek.

Javert gave a start, but remained still.

“Javert …” Valjean said slowly, his speech slurred. “You are … a good man. Do you know that?”

He felt his face grow hot, blood rising to the surface of his skin as a shiver passed through him. “W—what?”

Even though Valjean was looking at him, his gaze was far-off, somehow.

“I don’t … want you to die,” he mumbled, his hand falling away. It made a half-hearted attempt at clutching his shirt, but failed miserably and, devoid of strength, drifted back to the mattress like a fallen leaf.

Javert drew back, swallowing. “Are you in your right mind?”

“Don’t … jump,” he breathed, his eyelids drooping shut again.
“Valjean.”

He didn’t want the man to lose consciousness again.

“Don’t.” There was a hitch in Valjean’s voice that made it sound less like a word and more like a whimper, and Javert wanted to shake him and tell him he was beyond that, that it would never happen again. How dare he doubt him!

But the man had already fallen back into the void of sleep, and Javert suspected he wouldn’t have understood anything he said anyway. Besides that, he could not bring himself to be angry over such a thing. It caused him more guilt than irritation.

“Damnit,” he breathed.

Was Valjean reliving his suicide attempts because of the fever, twisting his sense of time? Or because he had never stopped worrying about it to begin with? Was the illness only bringing to the surface his inner fears, unburying them where they had lain not yet dead in graves of courtesy and forbearance, stifled under the pretense of composure?

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Javert was relatively sure—knowing Valjean—which it was.

He slumped back down into his armchair and rubbed his face in his hands.

***

The next morning, he was able to get Valjean to drink some more, though the man would still not fully wake. He mumbled incoherently in his sleep, tossing and turning weakly beneath the sheets. Annoyingly, this continually dislodged the compress on his head, which kept having to be replaced, but Javert was not at all perturbed by this. In fact, he was rather pleased that Valjean was showing any sort of signs of life at all.

He resumed his place of watch, contenting himself with a cup of coffee with a freshly rented newspaper.

After some time, he heard a voice.

“Javert …”

His eyebrows rose. He turned to look at his bed, where Valjean lay, his head turned towards him on the pillow, a quizzical expression on his face.

Javert put down the paper he was reading, carefully folding it up in his lap and trying to conceal the emotion he felt. “Oh? Have you finally regained your senses, then?”

“You …” He swallowed, his voice hoarse from disuse. “You’re really here?”

Javert narrowed his eyes. “As opposed to …?”

Valjean opened his mouth but closed it without speaking. He turned his head to look up at the ceiling. “Where am I?” he asked. “What is this place?”
“This is where I live,” Javert replied, raising an eyebrow. “Though I thought that should be rather obvious by now.”

“This is your bed?”

“Seeing as I haven’t a reason to own more than one, yes.”

“Oh.” His face fell. “I am sorry,” he said, rolling over on his side to face the wall.

“What?”

“I have imposed on you. I have caused you trouble.”

“What on earth are you talking about? You have done nothing. It was not as though you fainted in the street on purpose; it was not as though you knew it would be I that found you.”

“No, but I—” He swallowed, appearing embarrassed. “—but monsieur, why did you not take me to a hospital instead?”

Javert knit his brow. ‘Monsieur’? The man had not addressed him so formally since the barricades, or perhaps even earlier.

‘You will address me as ‘Monsieur Inspector’,’ he suddenly heard his own voice demand, rising up from the memory of nearly a decade ago. He could still remember the feeling of his hand around Valjean’s throat. He seemed to himself so much younger then, suddenly.

Confused, he brushed the thought away.

Another followed swiftly on its heels. ‘I think you mean ‘attendez,’ monsieur,’ came his voice again, from the prior summer.

Javert frowned. For so long he’d wanted the man to address him with the respect afforded to a stranger and an officer of the law, to distance himself from him—but now that Valjean actually did it, the words sounded wrong to his ears.

“A hospital?” he repeated incredulously. “Of course not. What if someone were to see your scars and recognize you as a convict?”

The man faltered. “Ah—I see, yes. But,” he continued, crestfallen, “it wouldn’t really matter, anymore.”

“Of course it matters. What’s wrong with you? Do you want to go back to prison?”

“No, but …”

“But what?”

“It is only … you did not have to do this.”

“What should I have done? Just left you lying there, face-down in the street?”

Valjean was silent.

“You are being ridiculous; you know I could not have done that.”

“I …” Valjean began slowly, “I know that it … bothers you. That I bother you. I know it cannot
please you to harbor a convict in your home.”

“That’s not—”

“You did not have to do this. You did not have to bring me here. I know that I am only an unhappy reminder of the past, for you. It would have been better if you had passed me by and pretended not to know me. I suppose you may feel obligated to lend me your hand, after what happened last year, but you do not owe me anything, Javert. If I am bothering you, it is better that you should send me away.”

“What?” Javert said, cocking his head. “How can you say such a thing? Why do you believe I could just …?” He let out an exasperated breath. “What the devil is wrong with you?”

“What is wrong with me?” Valjean echoed dumbly. “I don’t know. I am dying, I suppose. That’s all.”

Javert bolted up from his chair, its legs scraping against the floorboards with a screech. He stared at him in shock for a moment before approaching the bed, cornering him with the fierceness of his gaze.

“Of what?” he demanded, half in anger and half in fearful panic.

“Of … I know not what. Grief, perhaps.”

“What? People don’t die of grief!”

“You will have to take that up with the doctor,” Valjean said, propping himself to a sitting position against the pillows. Still he would not look at him, only staring into the distance, his eyes glassy.

“Valjean!” he exclaimed, a semi-scowl on his face. “How long have you been this way? Did you not tell anyone? Why were you out in the street like that, in the rain? Where is your daughter, and your servant?”

“Gone,” he said.

“Gone where?”

“Away.”

“When shall they return?”

Valjean seemed lost in thoughts of something else. His tone was bleak, his expression as numb as it was grave. “They will never return.”

The inspector stiffened. He recalled the outfit the man had been wearing when he’d found him. It had been entirely black. Mourning clothes? “You don’t mean … They are not— Surely you do not mean to say that they are dead.”

“No, they are very much alive. It is just that I will never see them again.”

Javert faltered. “Why?”

“Cosette is married, now. She has gone out of my life. Her husband … He does not approve of me, as well he shouldn’t. I used to visit her, every day, but no; no more.” He paused. “It is better, this way. For her. For them both. They deserve their happiness. I would just be in the way.”
“Do you mean to tell me you have been alone all this time?”

“Since February.”

“February! And how long have you been ill?”

“I know not. Weeks? Months, perhaps. I can’t make much sense of time, anymore. There is nothing to mark the days, now.”

“You have been ill that long and you didn’t—? You haven’t bothered to—? But you did send for a doctor, you said?”

“No; the portress was the one who sent for him,” Valjean sighed. “I told her not to bother, that it was an unnecessary expense, but the issue seemed to be of some importance to her.”

Javert was taken aback. “Wh—what were you going to do, let yourself waste away to nothing without telling anyone? You look half-starved! When was the last time you ate anything?”

Valjean pondered for a moment, his dulled eyes flicking about once, twice. He shrugged.

“You don’t know?” he exclaimed in disbelief. “What are you—? Why are you doing this to yourself? Why not tell anyone you were ill? Why let yourself starve? Why suffer in silence? Why do you not care? Why did you not reach out to someone?”

Valjean’s face reminded him of the stone and marble statues of the cemetery, forlorn and vaguely mournful, forever gazing into the distance in quiet lamentation.

“I did not wish to bother anyone,” he said simply. “And … I have no one left.”

Those words struck Javert sharply in the breast, like a blow from a heavy club or cudgel, driving the air from his lungs and bruising his ribs.

“Besides,” Valjean continued, “it will be better, this way. I won’t trouble anyone any further.”

“Trouble?” Javert repeated, his eyes wide.

“It is probably just my time,” the man said, half to himself. “And it is not so terrible. That I should retire from the world … It is but a little thing. No one needs me, anymore.”

If his previous words had been bruising to Javert, it was this that shattered him. A stunted breath escaped his throat.

What did a man who lived only for others do when he found there was no one left to live for? Did he, lacking purpose, fail to see reason to further exist?

Javert shuddered.

He found himself suddenly peering into a looking glass, his reflection staring him in the face.

‘You have taken away my raison d'être,’ he heard himself say, those many months ago. ‘I am worthless.’ ‘Just let me go; this is better for the both of us!’

Again this man had caused his very soul to tremble.

The way Valjean had been before, so resolute, so sure of himself, fixated on the preservation of life and plying him with sage-like wisdom as though it were his duty—Javert had never expected
there would be within him such stuff as what he himself had suffered through: resignation, despondency, the utter lack of concern or esteem for his own life, the torments and tribulations of a spirit on the brink of despair, held together only by obligation to others.

He had not ever considered what the man was like when there was no one around to see him. In what regard he might hold himself.

Cosette’s words came rushing back to him from the depths of his memory, unbidden and never truly contemplated:

‘Papa would only eat black bread. I implored him to treat himself, but he refused. It was only because I threatened that I would eat only what he ate did he start eating white bread.’

‘He buys me all these lovely things and never any for himself. At the other house, he even sleeps in a separate building—this little shack in the back. He won’t even light a fire for himself. I keep having to spend time with him in there, just so that, for my sake at least, he keeps the place warm.’

He cursed himself for not seeing it earlier—that the man was like this. It should have been so obvious.

‘I have suffered too much and too long in my life to let another person endure the same kind of torment!’ Valjean had cried that second night at the river.

The significance of those words had not occurred to him, them.

Had Valjean felt so deeply disturbed by Javert’s solitary lifestyle because he too had, though unwillingly, been a victim of that all-encompassing loneliness? Was that why Javert’s plight had bothered him so? Because Valjean had seen something in him of himself?

Unlike Javert, the man knew what it was to love, and to yearn for companionship—but, because of the kind of life he’d been forced to lead, he’d never been allowed the opportunity to fulfill those desires. For Javert, who had never known or cared for such things, it was not hard to live without them. But for Valjean …

‘I have not seen papa with anyone else,’ Cosette had told him. ‘He hath not any friends—or at least, that I knew of. But then there was you!’

His throat tied itself into a knot as he clenched his teeth, his expression quivering.

Was he really the only other person in Valjean’s life besides his daughter?

‘Javert, I think—after all these years, you are the only person who has ever truly known me.’

‘Isn’t that ironic.’

‘It is. Because, well, you have never really known me at all.’

It was only now that Javert was realizing the full extent of that fact.

At the time it had seemed true in the sense that he’d just then come to realize that Valjean was a good person—a more moral man than he.

But it was only now that he realized that Valjean was a good person who hated himself. That self-sacrifice came so easily to him not just because he had dedicated his life to helping others, but because he had never cared about himself to begin with.
No wonder he’d never resisted arrest.

‘It is not in my nature, Javert.’

‘I told you before: I am your willing prisoner, if you should decree it so.’

No wonder he had saved him at the barricades and dragged him out of the river, knowing full well that it would likely mean his own imprisonment. Valjean held the life of a stranger—or even his worst antagonist—in higher regard than his own.

When there was no one around, he deprived himself. Derided himself. Valjean’s strength and courage, Javert realized—his concern and his kindness—all existed solely for others. He only entertained self-respect for the benefit of those around him, to spare them worry—and without their presence it vanished. He fell into a sea of apathy and negligence. Of total disregard for his own well-being.

Without his daughter, who had remained to him?

Only Javert.

And Javert had shoved him away. He had insisted he did not want to see him, that he did not want to hear from him. That he did not need him.

‘No one needs me, anymore.’

Had Valjean, in reaching out to him, in trying to stay in contact, not only been seeking comfort for Javert, but also for himself?

‘It was only … I wanted to write to you.’

Had the man been clutching desperately to the seams of what held him together, searching for meaning in a life otherwise devoid of purpose? Had he, in Javert, found a reason to live?

Javert was overwhelmed with guilt.

Could it be that yet again his callousness had driven someone to death’s doorstep?

To think, if he had not chanced upon him that day in the street, if the evidence of the man’s struggle had not been thrust in his face …

He knew that, of his own accord, he would not have sought the man out. He would not have inquired as to his current whereabouts, or the state of his health. He would not have questioned why he no longer saw that familiar face gazing at him from across the crowd.

He thought of Valjean often, yes—he would never be able to fully drive him from his mind—but he could not bring himself to contact him, not when the man reminded him of all his failures in life.

Valjean would have let himself die—because of him, because of his indifference—and he never would have even known.

Javert tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

“You—you—” He shook, turning an anguished and wrathful eye upon Valjean, his voice rising to a sharp cry. “You hypocrite!” he accused.
“You speak of the sanctity of life,” he began, gesticulating wildly, “of how it must be preserved at all costs, even when one has nothing left to live for—and yet you allow yourself to waste away; you care nothing for yourself! You say that no one needs you, as though that were as good a reason as any to forfeit your life, and you willingly surrender to death and despair! You say that you will die, that it is nothing! That no one will care, that it doesn’t matter! You treat your life as though it were meaningless, as though all you’ve done and yet may do is inconsequential, when you know that’s not the truth!”

He grabbed Valjean by the collar, forcing him to face him, his fists clenching around the fabric of his shirt.

“Look at me, damn you!”

Valjean gave a start, leaning back from him.

“How can you say all these things about holding out hope, about forgiveness and second chances and revering the gift of life and yet think nothing of your own? How can you pull a man back from the brink and tell him he must live no matter what, and then resign yourself to death because you think it suits you? How dare you. How dare you!”

“You are a monster of a man! How dare you ask anyone to follow your advice when you can’t even follow it yourself! Why should I have listened to you, all those months ago, if you don’t even believe your own words, eh? Were all of your speeches and sermons meaningless, then? Empty, sentimental nonsense? Do you wish to make a liar of yourself, Valjean? To make me a fool for having believed you?”

“You told me you would be my guide, and this is the example you are setting? I might as well just die along with you! And I’d do it too; I’d do it just to spite you! You bastard! How dare you treat yourself like this! If your life is worthless, if you are worthless, then I am less than worthless!”

“You have the arrogance to save a man’s life and then throw away your own? You would abandon him after all of that, after everything you’ve said and done, after constant reassurances that you would be there for him? That you would be his crutch, that you would be the light that delivered him from darkness? How dare you do this to me; how dare you!”

During this passionate outburst, Valjean had remained trapped in his grasp. Slowly, the man’s eyes, which had hitherto been dull and glassy, had opened wide and filled with the light of terror and guilt. He trembled, not daring to breathe.

“I am sorry,” Valjean managed to say, a shadow falling over his face, “I am sorry; I—”

Javert’s stomach churned.

“No!” he barked, giving him a throttle. “No! I don’t ever want to hear that word from your lips again! Do you hear me? Not ever again! You will learn to respect yourself before you have the audacity to love anyone else! Because what kind of love is that? Do you know what that does to a person? How can you expect people to accept your affections—to allow you into their hearts—and then not give a damn if you die?”

Valjean seemed so small and fragile in his grasp, shuddering like some tiny, helpless thing. “I thought you hated me,” he said meekly, his voice small and broken.

“Of course I don’t hate you, you idiot!” he cried. “Do you think so little of me that you honestly
believe I would rue my own savior? What kind of a man do you take me for?” He released him, stepping back and shaking his head in disbelief. “I might come off as ungrateful, but—sacre dieu, Valjean!”

The man sat there shivering on the bed, at a loss for words. “You—you really …” His Adam’s apple bobbed, voice breaking. “You don’t hate me?”

“You ridiculous fool!” Javert raged. “I’ve never hated you in my life!”

Valjean’s expression contorted into anguish and pain. He hung his head low, low, slouching over as the tears spilled down his cheeks. A sob escaped his throat. He curled up tightly on the mattress, burying his face in arms and knees. The only thing to be seen was the gentle tremors of his white curls.

Javert stared at the shivering form on his bed, his expression twitching in consternation.

He felt distinctly that he had caused this in some way, or at least had a hand in it, but he had no idea what the situation called on him to do.

Valjean seemed so small, there, despite his frame. He somewhat resembled a rabbit kit that had found itself face to face with a predator, had tried to retreat to its burrow only to find itself lost, and now sat frozen in fear, desperately hoping its stillness would allow it to blend back into the brush.

The corners of Javert’s mouth drew back in a lopsided frown. He went over to his dresser and pulled a faded blue wool blanket from the bottom drawer, draping it with a flinging motion over Valjean.

The man gave a start, lifting his head a fraction of an inch before letting it fall again, clutching the blanket around himself tightly.

Javert studied him for a moment more before reaching out a hand.

As soon as it neared Valjean’s shoulder, the man jolted back, flinching at the touch before it could even occur. As though he expected it to be violent. As though he expected to be cuffed.

Javert’s brow knit. His hand withdrew, falling back to his side. “Why do you act as though I would—” He stopped himself, clicking his tongue and thrusting his face away.

To be true, the man had received nothing but bruises from his touch.

Javert’s thoughts drifted back to his hand around the man’s throat. To his claws digging into his shoulders at the mouth of the sewers. Gripped around his wrist so tight as to almost twist it as he all but dragged him to the fiacre.

The crack of a whip in the air, in his hand, lashing at the flesh on the bare backs of men without faces, men with numbers instead of names. One of which had been, at some point, almost assuredly Valjean.

The man still bore those scars, no doubt. Scars that he himself may have put there.

It should come as no surprise to him that Valjean would flinch at his touch. He had not considered this before, and though he told himself it should not be cause for remark, something about it disquieted him. Made him flinch in turn.

Unable to attempt any further contact, he turned away and headed into the small adjoining
kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers, pulling out tins and spoons. He filled the dented copper
kettle with water from the covered pails kept by the cupboard, and struck a match, lighting a fire in
the blackened belly of the stove.

There was a frenzied frustration to his actions, and he moved with less grace than he was
accustomed to, bumping into the counter, setting things down too quickly, too loudly. The kettle
came down with a clatter on the stovetop. The chipped porcelain teacups rattled in their saucers.

Javert bit his lip. He pried the lid off the tin and pinched out the mixture of leaves and herbs
into the wire basket of the diffuser, hanging it inside the kettle, its chain held in place by the lid.

Smoothing his hair back and tucking the stray wisps behind his ears, he knelt before the stove,
staring through the unlatched door at the flames within. Their familiar, flickering dance and
crackle calmed him some, but could not alleviate the whole of his distress.

From around the dividing wall came the sound of a sob, there for but a brief second before
being choked back into silence.

Javert squeezed his eyes shut, running his hands through his whiskers as was his nervous habit,
and chewing on the inside of his cheek.

A myriad of half-formed curses sputtered and died within his mind. At that particular moment,
he would have rather liked to upset something. But he merely sat there, rubbing his face and gazing
at the cook-fire.

Eventually the preliminary hissing of the kettle drew him back to his senses, and he stood and
lifted the lid from it, pouring it out. He stirred a spoonful of honey into the one, because he did not
have any milk, and because he figured it would be a boon to a parched and fevered throat.

He carried the cups out, one in each hand, setting the first down on the table beside his bergère
and shoving the other at Valjean.

The man started, flashed his glimmering brown eyes up at him for a second with a questioning
look before letting his head droop again.

“Drink,” said Javert, thrusting it further towards him. “You have not drunk anything substantial
in days, and you—you’re not helping yourself, with your tears. So drink.”

Valjean had no choice but to take the steaming cup from him, as it was very nearly being
pressed against his knees. He held it begrudgingly, cup in one hand, saucer dangling from the
other, his arms still wrapped around himself under the blanket like a shield.

Javert sat down in his chair, searching the man’s face.

He did not entirely comprehend what it was that had caused Valjean to cry. It seemed to stem
from the realization that he, Javert, did not hate him. But then, it was obvious even to an unfeeling
man that these were not tears of joy, or even relief.

Javert did not understand. The only thing that was clear to him was that the man had been
broken in some way or another—partially on account of his callousness—and the responsibility of
fixing him had somehow fallen squarely on his shoulders. However, he had no idea how to
accomplish this. He did not know what it was that he ought to be doing, or saying, and so he sat in
silence for what may as well have been hours, waiting for he knew not what and listening to the
man’s stunted sobs slowly fade.
Finally he turned his head to look at him once more.

Valjean sat still, in much the same position he had before, but he no longer trembled beneath the bed sheets, and his breathing had evened. At some point he must have drunk the tea, because the cup sat empty in its saucer on the mattress beside him. This indicated progress. But still, the man sat curled up and cloaked in the covers like a turtle withdrawn into its shell.

Was this what he had been like himself, before? After the river?

No; even then, he had not been this far gone. There had still been a little fight in him. He had resigned because he felt it the right—the only—course of action left for him to take, not because he had stopped caring about himself, or life.

How things had changed since then! It was a complete reversal of roles. Only there was no satisfaction to be had in this, and Valjean was much better at coaxing the will to live back into a man than he.

And last time, Javert had not even been in so bad a state as this. He had made himself unapproachable on purpose, with his stubbornness and his anger, his pride and his resentment.

But Valjean was different. He was not filled with any such violent sentiments. And it was not as though he was the kind of man to refuse help or turn a blind eye to kindness and gentle words. That was not the problem here. The problem was, the man was so far gone that such gestures could no longer reach him.

And Javert did not know what to do with that.

Valjean was like the smoking wick of a candle, blown out too soon. The spark in his soul had fled.

To where?

Javert knew not.

But he knew that he must rekindle it.

It was unclear to him how one went about this sort of thing. How do you return to someone their vivacity, their will to live, when they do not even care that they’ve lost it?

Valjean would know.

But he could not ask him. The man before him now was not the Valjean he’d known. Yet it was he all the same. Somewhere, deep inside, Valjean was yet there. Not dead; only buried.

And it was his job to unbury him.

*I will not let you go quietly into the grave*, Javert thought. *Not after all of this.*

***

Chapter End Notes
The chapter of this title is a reference to the chapter title "The Last Flickerings of a Lamp Without Oil" from the brick.

Suggested Listening:

Any Other Name - Thomas Newman
A Bad Dream – Keane
Comptine D’un Autre Été - Yann Tierson and Jay Haze
Diaspora Oratorio – Bear McCreary
Hope There’s Someone – Antony and the Johnsons
Meguri - Masakatsu Takagi
Valjean – Penny & Sparrow
The Wolves (Act I and II) – Bon Iver
Wonder (feat. The Kite String Tangle) – Adventure Club
You Found Me – The Fray
Solidarity

Chapter Summary

Javert tries his best to break Valjean out of his despondency.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Friendship is, strictly speaking, reciprocal benevolence, which inclines each party to be solicitous for the welfare of the other as for his own.”

- Plato

***

“You need to eat something,” Javert said.

Valjean gave no indication of hearing him, still curled into a ball beneath the blanket.

Javert’s ice-blue eyes flicked towards him, narrowing. “Are you listening to me?”

No response.

Agitated, Javert got up out of his chair and stood over him. “You don’t even know when the last time you ate anything was,” he accused, throwing up a palm.

Still, Valjean would not look up at him.

A shadow fell over Javert’s face. His arms dropped back to his side. “You are dying,” he entreated, his voice hushed. “Does that not even matter to you?”

“Damnit, man, you will eat something. You are in my house. You are in my bed. You have no right to refuse me. The doctor said you must eat, or you are going to die. And I will not have your death on my hands, do you hear me?”

Valjean’s head lifted a little, just enough for one brown eye to peek out at him from beneath his white curls. “You called a doctor for me?” he murmured.

“Of course I called a doctor, you ninny. You were half dead when I found you.”

The eye retreated. “You did not have to do that. Doctors are expensive.”

Javert let out a low growl between his clenched teeth. “Stop this,” he hissed, balling his hand into a fist. “Stop fighting me on everything. This is hard enough as it is. And if you are so worried about my personal expenses, then you will not make the doctor’s visit in vain. Tu comprends?” He paused. Glared at him. “I said, do you understand?”
Valjean gave no reply.

“Oh, for the love of god!” He grabbed the unresponsive man by his shoulders. “If I put food in front of you, will you eat it?”

Valjean looked back at him with a weary expression on his haggard face. He sagged in his arms, casting his eyes down and away. “I suppose so.”

Javert released him, stalking backwards towards the stairs. “Good. You will wait here, then, while I make arrangements with the portress.”

As he was shutting the door, he poked his head back into the room and added, “If it makes you feel any better, the man did not charge me a sou.”

***

It took Valjean a long time to finish even the meager meal Javert had brought him. He seemed to have no appetite, taking only small mouthfuls at a time, and not looking at his food. It was as though eating was merely a chore to him, and he only acquiesced to it because he was being made to by way of unspoken threat.

He sat in bed, leaning against the wall, holding the half-empty mug of coffee in his lap. His demeanor was a little less pathetic, now, but no less despondent, and Javert could see no real change affected in his features. There existed within him no more will to live than there had been when he had first awoken.

He was turned towards the window, staring out at nothing with unfocused eyes. And so he had been for at least an hour.

Javert studied him from his chair. He put his head in his hand. “I do not know how to help you,” he admitted. “Tell me what you require from me. I am not you. I do not have your infinite patience and your understanding. I do not know what it is that you need.”

But there was only the creaking of the building, old wood and plaster settling under their own weight.

He glanced back up at him. “Will you not speak to me?”

Valjean only gazed off sadly.

Javert swallowed the lump in his throat, furrowing his brow. “I do not know how to help you,” he admitted. “Tell me what you require from me. I am not you. I do not have your infinite patience and your understanding. I do not know what it is that you need.”

But there was only the creaking of the building, old wood and plaster settling under their own weight.

He glanced back up at him. “Will you not speak to me?”

Valjean only gazed off sadly.

Javert swallowed the lump in his throat, furrowing his brow. “I want—I want you to recover. I do not want to see you like this. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do to make things better. You need to tell me how to help you. Tell me what it is I can do to fix things.”

“I do not know,” Valjean said quietly.

Javert squeezed his eyes shut, his head drooping back down. He ran his hands over his face and then left them there, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a disparaging sigh.

“Valjean,” he began, hesitant and unsure of exactly what it was he wanted to say, “I … The only things I know about saving people are from you. So—so …” Lifting his face so that only his
mouth remained covered by his hands, he gazed off without focus, squinting as though if he tried hard enough he would be able to see the words he so desperately needed. “You told me once that life is invaluable,” he said, rising to his feet and approaching the bed. “So why do you not value yours?”

Valjean only looked up at him wearily.

“Why?” Javert asked, taking hold of his shoulders and gazing into his eyes. “Why?”

The man turned his face from him, hanging his head with a look of muted anguish.

“Do you not think you’re good enough? Is that it? You don’t think you’re good enough to deserve to live? You, who have saved the lives of so many others?”

A shadow obscured Valjean’s expression. “A year ago, you would have been happy to see me dead.”

The corner of Javert’s mouth drew back. “A year ago, I was under a very different impression of you. Of things in general. So forgive me if I have the sense to change my opinion in light of new facts.”

Valjean gave but a sigh in reply to this.

Javert’s brow furrowed with grief. “Do you really think so lowly of yourself?”

“You know what I am,” he breathed.

“What are you, then? I want to hear you say it, Valjean; I want to hear it from your lips.”

The man opened his mouth. Faltered. Grimaced.

“You are going to say ‘I am a law breaker, a convict, a criminal, and no one has need of me’, yes? Is that what you’re going to say?”

Valjean’s silence belayed his guilt.

“Well, so what? That does not mean you deserve to die. That your life is meaningless. Who told you they would prefer you dead, eh? Who told you that?”

Valjean made no reply.

“That’s right!” Javert scowled. “No one ever said that, you coward! You’re the only one on God’s green earth that thinks it would be better off without you. And why?” he said, throwing up his hand, “Why, Valjean? What would your daughter say? What of Cosette? And her mother! And your Bishop! What would they say to you if they knew you had allowed yourself to fall this far? Do you think it would cause them joy to see you suffering like this? No! You say it is for the sake of others that you let yourself die, but nobody ever asked that of you!” He clenched his teeth, his words hissing out between them. “This doesn’t do anyone any good, Valjean.”

Valjean only stared off at the bed sheets.

“Will you not look at me when I speak?” Javert growled. He tilted the man back so that he had little choice but to comply. “No one benefits from this.”

“I am sorry,” Valjean breathed. But he did not sound like his heart was in it.
“You are not! I can see it in your eyes! You are apologizing because you think you’re inconveniencing people with your troubles, but that’s not the point! That’s not the damn point! You can’t—you can’t do this to yourself! Who gave you the right to decide such a thing? To let yourself die? I won’t allow it. I shan’t!”

Valjean hung, numb and limp in his grasp. “Why?” he said. “I know you feel obligated to repay me for saving you, but I—”

Javert trembled. Before he was even aware of what he was doing, he had struck the man across his face.

Valjean’s head turned from the force of the impact, and he did not right it again. He sat frozen, his eyes wide, his lips parted. He seemed to be in shock. Slowly he reached up and touched his cheek, wonderingly, as though amazed to find the spreading pink blemish that no doubt stung there. Faltering, he turned to look up at Javert.

Javert was sure he appeared cold with fury. And he was. “Obligation?” he echoed incredulously, his voice made of icy fire. “You think I do this out of obligation? Letting you deliver that boy to his house, letting you go after the barricades—that was obligation. This? This is not obligation.”

There was something akin to fear in Valjean’s eyes.

“Tell me,” Javert said, “was it obligation that drove you to drag me out of the Seine? To jump in and risk your life for someone who had never done you a drop of good in their life? Someone who didn’t want to be rescued? Were you obliged to do that, Valjean? Tell me!”

The man shivered beneath him.

“No! You weren’t, were you? It was something entirely different that compelled you to do what you did! And it is that same thing that compels me now. God help me,” he muttered, shaking his head, “I do not even know what it is, but it won’t let me be! I cannot just sit idly by and watch you—you—”

He gave Valjean a jolt, fingers digging into his shoulders. “Don’t ask me to do that. Don’t you dare. You have no right to. After everything that you did, everything that you said, you have no right to give up. You have no right to ask me to let you go. Not when you understand just how impossible a request that truly is. And I know you do,” he said, letting go of him and stepping back.

“I know you understand how that feels. So take a good look at yourself, Valjean, and what you’re doing. Because I’ll be damned if you don’t find the same scenario in your memories of last year. Put yourself in my place;” he growled, “you’ve been there before. What would you do if it were me in that bed? If it were me you found lying half-dead in the street, starved and glassy-eyed and suicidal? Eh? Eh? You know precisely what you’d do.”

Valjean shuddered beneath his veil of shadow. Two tears traced their way down his cheeks. Slowly, slowly, he looked up at him. “Javert … I am sorry; I—”

“Damnit!” Javert cried, hoisting him up by his collar. “I told you, I don’t want to hear those words from your li—”

“N-no, you don’t understand,” Valjean said meekly, meeting his gaze. “I—” he reached up and placed his shaking hand on Javert’s breast, just over his heart, a quiet emphasis to his words. “I am
Javert faltered, gazing into his eyes, the anger and frustration melting into desperate wonder. He searched Valjean’s face. Gradually, his grip on him relaxed. He lowered him gently back down.

Valjean turned his face away. “I had not considered it that way,” he breathed. “I only thought that I was doing what was best for everyone. To take myself out of their way.” He bit his lip. “I did not think it was the same as—as that. As what you … went through. But you are right. I cannot ask that of you; I cannot ask that of anyone. I should not have let this happen to myself.”

“It is true, what you say. I do not afford myself the same regard I do others. I do not feel I deserve it. I am a hypocrite, yes. I can see that. I have kind words for others and none for myself. To me, that was just; that was fair. But to think on how you almost—” He shuddered. “I would not wish that on anyone. Even myself.”

“You must understand,” he said quietly, “I feel I’ve given all that I could give. I did not think my life had any further value, any further point.” He paused in thought, tilting his head and shutting his eyes. “But then, neither did you. And you were so, so wrong.” His brow creased. “And maybe I am wrong. Maybe you do well to prove me so. But it is hard, for me. To see it. I just … I don’t know.” His voice teetered. “I’m just so tired.”

Javert looked him up and down.

The man was still crestfallen, ashen and thin, but he seemed more himself, somehow. Yet still, he did not have that something that he used to. Javert was not sure what it was, but he knew that it was missing. Some sort of … vivacity. Some spark of something.

The corner of his mouth drew back. He fell back into his armchair, slouched limbs draped over the sides of it haphazardly as he pondered the situation.

His eyes flicked back to Valjean, who was staring off at the floor. Still, the man’s gaze, the man’s face, seemed dulled, numb.

What more could he do?

Javert let out a frustrated breath and sat up a little, slouching forwards and hanging his head. He shut his eyes. Touched his forehead.

“I have been … unkind to you,” he began. “You have many times done right by me without cause to do so, and I have not been grateful for any of it. It is wrong of me, and I know that. You were only trying to help me, and I pushed you away.”

“You have never deserved the way I’ve treated you. I have always been conscious of that. It is only …” He wrung his hands where they dangled between his legs. “It is hard for me to admit these things to myself. To admit that I am in the wrong. I’m not accustomed to it; I’m not accustomed to thinking about things. About myself, about how I should feel, and why. And more than once I’ve found myself regretting something I’ve said to you, even as I said it.”

“I don’t …” He swallowed. “I don’t know how to express the things I feel towards you, when half the time I don’t even fully comprehend what they are myself. It is confusing for me,” he said, gesturing outward with an open palm. “The whole world is confusing, these days, but especially you. Always you.”

His voice grew quieter, softer. “It was easier not to think about it, to drive it all out of my mind.
To pretend none of this had ever happened. For so long, it was the only way I could bear to go on— the only way my life could regain any semblance of normality. And then, I thought that it would be better for you, as well, were we never to see each other again. That you were too benevolent to admit that you’d benefit from my absence. You had a life of your own—a good, honest life—and I did not want to taint it any further with the past. I thought that by pushing you away I was doing us both a favor.” He hung his head, a shadow falling over his face. “Perhaps I was wrong in that.”

He gave a great sigh.

“Back then, when I was out of my mind with fever and helpless at your hands, I kept asking you why you were doing what you were. Why you cared. And you said that I already knew.” His expression twitched. “Well, I did. I did know. But I could not admit it to myself. Because it hurt too much.”

Valjean looked up at him questioningly.

Javert locked eyes with him, getting to his feet. “You ask me now, why I do this? As if you don’t already know.” He licked his lips, shook his head. “You feign ignorance, but the reality is, you know exactly why I do what I’m doing, just as well as you know why you couldn’t let me go.”

Valjean held his gaze a moment more before casting his face to the floor.

Was that guilt on his face, Javert wondered?

“Somewhere in the back of your mind, you know what you’re doing is wrong,” he told him. “You know that you are being ridiculous. You know why I care for you.”

Valjean slowly lifted his head to look at him, his brow furrowing, his eyes searching, searching his face for something. “Why you … care for me?”

Javert stared at him. He narrowed his eyes. “What, did you think—?” He studied Valjean’s expression. His eyebrow twitched. Clicking his tongue, he thrust his face away, cheeks hot. “Of course I care for you, you idiot.”

He scrunched and unscrunched the fabric of his trousers, shoulders tensed.

Valjean was quiet for so long that it made him curious. Swiveling his head back a fraction of an inch, he spied fresh tears falling down the man's face.

“Oh,” Valjean breathed. And then his expression contorted, and he buried his face in his hands. And with that, it seemed the spell on him had been broken.

Javert watched him suppress his sobs in silence. His shoulders sagged, as all his pretense of anger and frustration melted into solemn regard.

So that was what you needed to hear.

He squeezed his eyes shut, turning away and clenching his fists. He could not bear to look at him any longer. Damnit, he cursed himself. Damnit.

“Valjean,” he heard himself say.

The man looked up at him with one watery brown eye.

He felt the heat spread though his skin, and thrust his gaze to the floorboards. “Do you … want
me to bring you up a washtub?”

Valjean gave a begrudgingly submissive nod.

“Right. I’ll go get some fresh sheets while I’m at it.”

As he was ducking into the stairwell, he heard Valjean call his name.

He turned around.

Valjean’s voice was soft. Apologetic, even. The tear streaks glistened on his cheeks, a shadow veiling his eyes. “I didn’t … think it would hurt anyone.”

Javert gazed at him for a moment in silence. “Neither did I.”

And then he disappeared.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

Cold - Crossfade

How to Save a Life – The Fray

My Oldest Friend – Andrew Belle
Androcles and the Lion

Chapter Summary

Javert finds the key to Valjean's recovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It takes courage to love, but pain through love is the purifying fire which those who love generously know. We all know people who are so much afraid of pain that they shut themselves up like clams in a shell and, giving out nothing, receive nothing and therefore shrink until life is a mere living death.”

-Eleanor Roosevelt

***

When Javert had dug the shaving kit out of his dresser and thrust it towards Valjean, the man had stared at it dumbly for a moment, and then looked up at him strangely, before the faintest trace of a smirk—and a sad one, at that—ghosted on his lips.

“Shave that hideous thing off your face,” Javert had said, pointing to his own upper lip, “before I do it myself. You look like a vagrant.”

He was not really serious, but all the years he had known Valjean, the man had never once allowed the whole of his facial hair to grow out like that. At least, not fully. Madeleine had been clean shaven, mostly, and though Fauchelevent had a beard, it was only along his chin, and had been neatly kempt.

For some reason, it caused Javert unease to see the man’s personal grooming in such a state of disarray. And so he had brought up the washtub and a set of newly laundered clothes, and thrust a shaving kit at him.

Now he waited at the top of the staircase with his back against the door and his arms folded over his chest.

When Valjean finally admitted him back into the flat, Javert found him looking a little less worse for wear.

The man had toweled his hair dry, and where it had previously hung limp and disheveled, it now clung to his scalp in light, bouncing white curls. It was good, too, to see him in a clean blouse and a fresh pair of trousers. The change of attire made him seem a bit less like a corpse and a bit more like a man. And, perhaps best of all, that damnable mustache was gone, and it took a number of years off his appearance.
Javert surveyed him head to toe with a stoic face, and said only the word “Better,” before changing the bed linens.

He could feel Valjean’s eyes on his back as he moved, tucking the sheets beneath the mattress in military-style precision. He looked back at him. Resumed his work. Looked back at him again. “Do you have something you wish to say to me?” he asked gruffly.

The man glanced down at the floorboards from where he stood against the wall. “N-no. Only, I am sorry for causing you such trouble.”

Javert gave an exasperated sigh. “You are not causing me trouble,” he said, turning back the sheets.

“It was not my intention to, no. But I am.”

“I say again that you are not, and I would ask that you refrain from revisiting the issue.”

Valjean was quiet for a moment. “You did not have to put me up at your flat,” he mumbled.

Javert turned to look back at him over his shoulder. “You have no one else.”

Valjean hung his head.

“Besides,” he added, spreading the blanket out over the bed, “You dragged me back to your house, when you had no reason to do so. Me, you could have actually entrusted to a hospital. But you did not. You, on the other hand—you, I could not entrust to anyone.”

“No,” Valjean finally said, “That is not true. I … could not entrust you to anyone else, either.”

Javert paused in the middle of stuffing the pillow into a new case. “Well,” he said, continuing, “Then we understand one another.”

When he had finished smoothing the covers out, he turned around and frowned at him, putting a hand on his hip. “Listen, now; I am going back to work tomorrow. You will not give me any grief by trying to do something foolish. You will remain here until you are well, do you hear? Pas d'arguments.”

Valjean gazed off with a sullen little sigh. Slowly, he gave a nod.

“Bien,” said Javert.

After a moment, Valjean spoke up again, his voice meek. “You should reclaim your bed, though. I would prefer to relinquish it to you.”

“Nonsense; I am not the one who is ill. I doubt it is even easy for you to stand, just now. Besides, I am used to sleeping in chairs; it does not bother me. You, however …”

“Javert, I slept on a plank for twenty years of my life.”

Javert gave a pause, his face going blank. He blinked. Narrowed his eyes. “Yes, well, all the more reason to give you the bed.”

Valjean turned his face from him. “I do not like it,” he said quietly. “I do not like the idea of putting you out of your own bed.”

“That,” Javert sighed, “is your problem, not mine.”
Later, they ate a supper of gibelotte, and, Valjean having retired back to the bed, Javert settled down in his bergère under a blanket. He was reaching over the side table, about to roll down the wick of the oil lamp and extinguish its flame for the night, when he heard Valjean murmur his name from across the room.

He looked up. “Mm?”

“Thank you.”

Javert gazed at where Valjean lay on his mattress, back turned to him, facing the wall. Closing his eyes, he put out the lamp and plunged the room into forgiving darkness.

Some time into the night, Javert was awakened by a sort of animalistic sound, a strange grunting.

For a moment he sat in confusion in his chair, half asleep, agitated and bewildered. He soon remembered why it was he had been sleeping in his chair instead of his bed, and realized that what he was hearing was not grunting but whimpering, and not an animal, but Valjean.

Blinking and rubbing a hand over his face, he turned to look in the direction of the sound.

He could not see much; all was shadowy silhouettes in the moonlight, but he was able to make out the outline of a quivering lump on his mattress.

All of a sudden, and with a startling cry, Valjean bolted upright in bed, his mouth hanging open as he panted, his voice hoarse and ragged and the only thing to be heard in the room. By the way it cracked, Javert was entirely sure the man was crying. He also seemed to be seized by a sort of fit, trembling involuntarily, and he clutched at the covers around him, drawing them about himself as though they would protect him.

He didn’t seem to be aware of the possibility of there being anyone else in the room to see this, and Javert wondered if the man even knew where he was. Somehow, he doubted it.

Was it the galleys he dreamt of? The strikes of the guards, the lash at his back, the shackle biting into his ankle as he toiled under the hot sun?

Was it the cracks of gunshots in a fog of smoke, the blood of schoolboys watering the streets?

Was it the river?

Javert could not know.

Perhaps it was Javert himself Valjean dreamt of, a ruthless shadow in the night, pursuing him without end, always there at every turn, waiting to drag him back to hell.
Valjean sat shuddering beneath the blanket, withdrawn into himself like a frightened child.

Javert had no way to tell how long he listened to the man’s stunted, gasping sobs before Valjean finally laid back down, curling up on the mattress and still trembling uncontrollably. For the duration of the episode, which may have been anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, Javert remained motionless in his chair, silent. He was trapped quite thoroughly in the freeze of a helpless bystander, so fixated by the scene before them that it does not occur to them that they are part of it.

How long had he suffered these fits? Only Valjean knew the answer to that. Perhaps since the beginning. It seemed to Javert that this was not a singular event.

Had the mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer woken up in a cold sweat, crying out in the night with no one around to hear?

This was not the sort of thing that a person would wish to be witnessed; it was a private moment of torture that wasn’t meant to be seen by outside eyes, and Javert felt almost guilty for watching it, though he had little choice in the matter. And then, too, he would not have known what to do if it had occurred to him to intervene. He would have no idea what to say, and besides that, this was not, he suspected, something that could be fixed by words.

So he sat in the darkness, a statue, a stony observer. But he did not feel like stone. No, his heart did not feel like it was made of stone at all.

And long after Valjean had fallen back asleep, Javert remained awake, staring at where he lay across the room and feeling distinctly as though something had pierced his breast.

***

The days following passed with a strange sort of charm.

Javert would return from his shift to find Valjean asleep in his bed, breathing softly, and he would stand and watch him for a moment before pulling off his boots and putting on the kettle.

It was totally unheard of for him to entertain guests, yet it felt not as strange as Javert would have expected to come home to another person.

Valjean slept most of the day away, and when he was not sleeping, Javert plied him with coffee and as much food he could get the man to eat.

With each passing day, Valjean’s health seemed to improve, albeit slowly. Still, Javert was thankful for any progress at all.

When he was out stalking the streets, he would randomly recall that Valjean would be waiting for him at home, and the thought filled him with a strange sensation of he knew not what. But somehow, he found himself, without notice, a little more eager to get back.

***
On the third day after Javert had resumed his work, Valjean awoke to someone opening and closing the door of the flat, which happened to be old, and whose hinges were rather rusty. They let out a telling creak whenever anyone entered the room, and at the sound of them Valjean opened his eyes, awakened from a dream he could not remember.

His gaze went immediately to the front of the room, expecting to see Javert, but instead, the sight that met him was of a short and somewhat portly woman. She wore a cream colored apron over a green dress. A few strands of dull, graying brown hair had slipped out from under her matching cream colored bonnet. She turned to look at him with seemingly the same amount of surprise with which he looked at her.

“Oh! Monsieur, I—” She faltered, swayed on her feet uncertainly. “I didn’t know anyone was up here. I am sorry; I have disturbed you. It is most unseemly. I did not mean to intrude.”

“No, it is all right,” Valjean breathed, propping himself up against the pillows and suddenly finding himself very grateful for the fresh clothes and bed sheets Javert had provided him. “You do not wrong me, madame.”

She bowed her head to him. “Still, I apologize. I knew he had some visitor, but I believed them long gone. There was a doctor, who came, and he looked rather grim, and I had thought that … Ah, never mind.”

“What is it?”

“I had expected you to have been taken to the hospital, monsieur; that is all. I am surprised to find you here.”

“I, too, find myself surprised by the turn of events,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“He did not wish to send you to the hospital, then? Seemed I your case was rather severe.”

“Er, no; he wanted me to stay here.”

“I see. Perhaps that is for the better. Sometimes taking the very ill to the hospital only makes them worsen. All those other patients, around them, coughing and souring the air and whatnot. Passing along catching things to each other. Yes, remaining here was probably a good course of action for you. I see that your health seems to have improved some already.”

He folded his hands in his lap, twiddling his thumbs absentmindedly. “Some, I suppose.”

“Well, you are still rather pale, monsieur. But you are lucid, and speaking, and that is good. Are you in pain?”

“No,” he sighed. “It was not that kind of illness.”

“Ah, I see.” She paused, studying him. “It is odd that Javert did not make clear to me your stay. If I had known he would leave you like this during the day, I would have offered to check in on you.”

Valjean got the feeling he knew exactly why Javert had failed to mention him. ‘If someone were to see your scars …’

“Do not trouble yourself over me,” he said, waving his hand dismissingly at her. “I am all right on my own, now. I do not need to be looked after night and day.”
“If you say so.” She looked about herself as if she had forgotten something. “Ah, yes, I had come in here to— Well, if you do not mind, that is.”

“Mind what?”

“I only came to collect the dishes,” she explained, glancing away and putting a hand on her hip. “That Javert,” she complained, clucking her tongue like a mother hen, “he is so bad at remembering to take them downstairs to be washed. I keep having to fetch them for him, elsewise I run the risk of cooking a long meal only to open up the cupboards and find them bare of anything to serve it on.”

Valjean let out a weak chuckle at that.

“The funny thing is, he hardly ever eats anything,” she said, ducking into the kitchen. Valjean could hear the rattle of crockery and porcelain. “Big man like that … You’d assume he’d have an appetite to match. But no; a little bowl of porridge, a slice of bread with jam, and he is satisfied. I shall never understand how he grew to the size he has, eating like that.”

She exited the kitchen with an armful of dishes, stacked upon one another, and Valjean nearly laughed at the height of it.

“You see?” she said, nodding to her burden. “All the cups in the kitchen, gone. He hoards them up here, like some sort of dragon. Honestly! Sometimes I think if he could subsist on nothing but coffee all day, he would.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of Valjean’s lips.

The woman slowed to a halt near the door, her eyebrows rising as though something had only just occurred to her. “You know,” she said, turning to look back at him, “I think you are the first and only guest the inspector has ever had in all the time that he’s been here.”

“Is that so?”

Somehow, he was not surprised. And yet this simple statement of fact touched him on some level, moved his heart to soften a little and fall to pondering.

“Yes,” said the portress, looking off at the wall, now. “You are. In fact, I cannot even say that I’ve really seen him with anyone, before.” She glanced back at him again. “He must be very fond of you, monsieur. To let you in like that.”

Valjean lifted his face to her with a small start. “I—” His brow furrowed as he closed his mouth. “Hm.”

After she had gone, he sat in bed, staring off in thought.

Even though Javert had said that he cared for him, earlier, Valjean suspected it had more to do with a sense of debt than any real affection. After all, he had never known the man to be affectionate, not to anyone. Not even to himself.

The fact that he had not taken him to a hospital, or left him in another’s care, could easily be explained by the fact that Javert could not in good conscience put him in a position where his past might be discovered and reported to the police.

And all his declarations, and speeches … They had been a means to an end, which was to keep Valjean from dying. Because, he presumed, Javert felt partially responsible for his situation, and
also because there was no one else to care for him, and if he died, it would put a stain on Javert’s hands.

Javert was stoic, averse to feeling, a slave to the law, and the prejudices it brought with it. He did not have a tender bone in his body, not for others, no. And certainly, he would never allow himself to care—to truly care—about the welfare of a convict, beyond what was strictly necessary in the name of duty.

Valjean was apprehensive to believe anything else of him.

Oh, how he wanted to.

But he could not.

After that summer, after those things the man had said to him … Valjean could not allow himself to hope, any longer, for fear of the crushing defeat of being mistaken. Of humiliation. Of rejection.

He could not bear to open that wound in his chest back up—to liberate the foolish wishes of his past, or hear the beating of his heart. He had lost everything, and he could not stand to lose a single thing more. And so he kept himself guarded, and warned against any misconceptions borne of flights of fancy. To dream was to die again.

No, surely all that had occurred since Javert had found him on the street could be explained away by rational, sensible means, and not those of tenderness.

But, from an outside perspective …

He mulled the man’s actions over in his mind wonderingly, contemplating the words of the portress.

‘*He must be very fond of you, monsieur. To let you in like that.*’

Sighing, his eyes drifted down, landed on the blouse he was wearing, with the too-long sleeves. Javert’s blouse.

He tilted his arm, examining the cuff.

He frowned despairingly.

Fond?

***

On the fourth day, Javert threw the door open upon his return with undue force. There was a tension to his posture and a grimace on his face. Without so much as saying a word to him, he stalked off into the kitchen, head down, muttering to himself.

Valjean sat up in bed and followed him with his gaze, still half-asleep, but curious.

He could hear the man throwing open cabinets and rummaging inside of drawers with a hasty sort of fervor. He knit his brow, unsure what caused the man such unrest.
Javert stormed back into the room carrying a little tin box with a handle on it, which he set down with a clatter on the side table.

“I need you to do me a favor,” the man muttered coarsely.

Valjean’s eyebrow shot up.

“Hold something for me,” Javert said.

“Hold what?”

The man pried, with some difficulty, the black leather glove off his left hand to reveal a deep gash in his palm. The flesh was split diagonally from index finger to opposite wrist, oozing with fresh blood. Already the whole of his hand was stained and sticky with it. “This,” he said.

Valjean’s mouth fell open, horror entering his eyes. What little color he had regained in the past few days now drained from his face. “My God,” he breathed, “what happened to you?”

“Occupational hazard,” Javert grunted. He fumbled at the latch of the little metal box, and swung back the lid.

Inside, Valjean could see a roll of clean white cloth, a spool of thread with a needle stuck through it, a pair of tiny silver scissors, a small brown glass bottle filled with dark liquid, a bunch of rags, and various other medical supplies.

Javert withdrew the spool and tossed it at him.

Startled, Valjean nevertheless managed to catch it.

“Thread that for me, will you?” It was obvious by the way Javert clutched at his wound, and by the strain of his voice, that he was in a significant amount of pain. And yet he seemed unfazed, as though he were used to such things.

Valjean obeyed as Javert took a seat in his chair, holding his hand out over the table. He sat down opposite him on the floor, handing him back the needle and spool.

“Right, then,” said Javert, taking it from him and offering up his shaking, bloody palm.

“Ah—” Almost reflexively, Valjean grabbed the rags from the box and took hold of Javert’s hand, dabbing at the blood. He could not bother with washing it; it was a deep wound and needed to be closed quickly. They had little time to build a fire and wait for the water to boil. He tried to suppress the tremor that ran through his spine at the flash of white he glimpsed amid the red. The cut had exposed bone, and the thought of it—of what it must feel like—turned his stomach.

Javert reached into the kit and took out the little brown bottle as Valjean was doing this. His attempts at uncorking the lid one-handedly were unsuccessful.

Valjean took it from him and yanked the stopper out with a popping noise. He looked down the narrow neck of the bottle at the yellow-brown substance inside. “Iodine?”

“Mm. Pour it.”

Valjean glanced up at him, grimacing. “Are you su—”

“Pour it. Just do it.” He took a wooden dowel from the medical kit with his one free hand and placed it in his mouth, clamping down on it with his teeth to mute the forthcoming pain.
Letting out a shaky breath, Valjean gripped Javert’s hand in his own and carefully doused the wound with the bottle’s contents.

Javert gave a noise that was something of a grunt and a hiss, his expression contorting as he trembled in his seat. “Good, then,” he forced out, his words muffled by the bit. “Right. Now hold it closed for me.”

Frowning, Valjean tried his best to pinch the gash closed. “Are you certain you don’t want me to d—”

“No,” Javert growled, “You’ll take too long, you sissy.” He took up the threaded needle and, without a moment’s hesitation, pierced it through his flesh. Hissing in pain, he bit down hard on the dowel as he worked, stabbing the needle through skin and muscle, pulling the thread through, stitching the wound closed. Each time he made a new stitch, Valjean cringed along with him.

“How did this happen?” he asked him, trying not to stare too hard at the dark crimson that now covered both of their hands, or at the exposed muscle of the man’s palm.


“This ought to have been examined by a doctor.”

“Doctors cost money.”

“You summoned a doctor for me,” Valjean reminded him.

“That was different.”

“How?”

The man did not respond.

“This is really very serious,” Valjean breathed. “You should have gone to see someone for it.”

“Why pay for something I can fix myself?”

“This is not the sort of thing to be stingy about, Javert,” he implored. “Truly. This is not a light matter. If this were to fester—”

“Then there is nothing more a doctor could do for it than I could. You think I don’t know what I’m doing? I’m an old hand at this.” A laugh rumbled in his chest. “Police officers get their fair share of scars, just like convicts. If you think this looks bad, you should have seen some of the other ones.”

When he had finished the sutures, Javert cut the end of the thread from the spool and thrust it towards Valjean. “Tie it into a knot at the end.”

Valjean complied, doubling and redoubling it until he was sure it would not go through.

Javert pulled on the needled end of it, and drew the sutures closed with a stifled cry.

Valjean withdrew, tensing up. “Ah, Lord. I cannot— How can you do that to yourself?”

“Practice,” Javert grunted. “Though it is easier by far to do this when one has both their hands available to them.” He reached for the roll of cloth but accidentally pushed it off the side of the table.
Valjean retrieved it for him with haste. “Let me do it,” he implored, hushed. “You’ve done enough already.”

He took Javert’s hand in his, careful not to jostle it too hard. It was dark, and large—larger, in fact, than his, if only by a little, but somehow more imposing. More powerful and fearsome looking. Valjean imagined that this was how Androcles had felt as he’d pulled the thorn from the lion’s paw.

As gently as he could, he wrapped the roll of cloth around it, over and over. The first layer became quickly spotted with red; the second only very slowly, and the third remained a pristine white.

Javert watched him intently as he did this.

To Valjean’s surprise, he heard the man give a quiet scoff.

“Is that the secret to you, then?” Javert said, seemingly to himself.

Valjean knit his brow. “Hm?”

“You’ve barely spoken a word for four days,” said Javert. “I come home with an injury, and suddenly you’re prattling on as if there was nothing the matter with you.”

“I don’t catch your drift.”

“That’s the key, isn’t it? You only care about your own wellbeing when someone else’s is tied up in it.” Before Valjean could make a reply to this, he added “Maybe the quickest way to bring you back to your senses would have been to take another dip in the Seine.”

A sort of panic lit Valjean’s soul. “Good God,” he breathed, looking up at him in horror, “Don’t even joke about that. Not ever!”

Javert smirked. “And just like that, you have your wits about you again.”

Valjean stared at him, his mouth open in a protest that never made it past his throat. He felt the blood rise hot to his cheeks, and turned his face away.

“See; there. You do not even have a rebuttal.”

Valjean gave a defeated sigh. “That is not fair of you,” he mumbled, bowing his head.

“Oh? And how is that?”

“You mock me for something that ought not be considered a fault.”

“Firstly, I am not mocking you; I am criticizing you. Secondly, even an admirable quality such as humility can become a fault by excess. You take the best traits of man and exaggerate them abominably. It is exceedingly aggravating.” He snorted. “I can see why your daughter gets upset with you. Your servant, too. I’m sure you must drive the old woman up the wall.”

“She is not my servant, anymore,” said Valjean. “She is not anybody’s servant, anymore, as far as I know. She went away when Cosette married, to work at her husband’s house; only, she did not get along with the other servants, so they dismissed her. I disliked that, but I had no say in the matter. She belonged to Cosette.”

Another smirk. “And you do not?”
Gloom washed over Valjean’s features. His eyes dulled. “No.”

Javert studied him. A moment passed in silence, broken only by footsteps creaking on the floorboards below.

Scowling, then, Javert took hold of his collar, drawing him up to his face. “Look here, you. This business with your daughter—it has got to stop. She cares for you, and deeply so. She has expressed as much to me before.”

He let him slip from his grasp as he sat back in his chair. “Her husband has no right to keep her from you,” he told him. “He does not own her. The girl may do as she pleases, and I am entirely certain she would wish to remain in contact with you. She worries for you more than you know. And that you have resigned yourself to this pointless isolation … Bah! She would throw a fit if she knew the state you were in. And I’ve half a mind to tell her just this instant.”

“You wouldn’t!” he breathed in horror, his expression an entreaty.

“I would.”

“No, you cannot; you do not understand! It would break her heart to see me thusly; I know that. I cannot do that to her. Please,” he begged. “Please, you cannot tell her of this.”

“Well,” the man said, tossing him a look, “if you get better then I suppose I shan’t need to, shall I?”

“Are—are you threatening me?”

“An astute observation,” Javert said. “Yes. If you do not make a marked improvement in your health then I am going to tell your daughter and I’m going to deposit her on your doorstep—and then you will have hell to pay from the both of us.”

“But you do not even know where she lives!”

“I am a police inspector, I would remind you,” he exclaimed, “—first class! And I can damn well find out!”

Valjean shivered. “N-no, please, you can’t! You can’t tell her; oh, Dieu, no.”

Javert jabbed a finger in his direction. “Stop treating yourself like shit and I just might consider my discretion on the matter. Otherwise …”

“No, please, I—I’ll—” He groped about helplessly, eyes darting to and fro as though searching for something to aid him. “I will take better care of myself. I will, I swear it! Only, she must never know I’ve allowed this to occur!”

“Hmph.” Javert smirked triumphantly. “You may not care anything for yourself, but you do care for the happiness of others, and I will use that against you if I must.”

“You can be a cruel man, sometimes. Do you know that?”

“Yes,” he sneered, “and you can be a stupid one. Now what do you want for supper?”

***
Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

Promise - Ben Howard
Qui Vivra Verra

Chapter Summary

In which Valjean regains something he never quite had to begin with.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Chrissy. I was thinking about you a lot while I wrote it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“As long as you’re alive, there’s always a chance things will get better."

-Laini Taylor

***

“You cannot be serious,” Valjean said.

Javert looked up at him from his armchair, where he sat with the remains of breakfast sitting on a plate in his lap. “Whyever not?”

“Why not? Look at yourself, man!”

The man considered his injured hand as if he hadn’t noticed it before, and gave a dispassionate shrug. “What, this? This is nothing.”

“You cannot go back to work like that.”

“Of course I can. Not on patrol, obviously;” he clarified, “they’ll just chain me to a desk for awhile. Have me fill in for other officers. What’s the matter with that?”

Valjean gave a huff, turning his face away. “Nothing, I suppose.”

“You want me to stay here and suffer with you,” Javert chuckled. “Is that it?”

With a start, Valjean shot him a confounded and abused sort of look. “No, I just—”

“What?”

A frown tugged at Valjean’s lips. “You are surely in great deal of pain from that, and yet you take nothing for it.”

Javert furrowed his brow. “So?”
“So, why? Why torture yourself? You could easily call on a doctor, or go to an apothecary for a bottle of laudanum.”

The man looked confused by his agitation. “I could.”

“And why don’t you?”

Again, Javert shrugged, the corners of his mouth drawn down. “I don’t need it, that’s why. It is an unnecessary expense.”

“Unnecessary! Mon Dieu, have you no nerves? I saw the thing; that gash was deep! It must be agony for you, even holding it still. And besides, the medicine is not that expensive. I mean, it’s even cheaper than gin.”

Javert ignored his chiding, taking a swig of coffee from his mug as though there was nothing bothering him at all. “You’ve had worse before, without anything to cope.”

Valjean stared at him, dumbstruck, his mouth falling open. “That … was prison! They didn’t give you the option! And the pain was meant as a punishment; it was supposed to be suffered through! You are not a prisoner; you do not deserve to endure something like that—especially when it is so easily remedied. What is it you’re trying to prove? You carry pain like it’s a badge of honor! Well, I tell you, it is not.”

“You nag like an old fish wife,” Javert snapped at him. “I do what I please! I don’t need it; I won’t have it. I tell you, I do not care. Why should it bother you so?”

“Because I—!” Valjean faltered, closed his mouth for a moment, eyeing him severely. When next he spoke his voice had lowered drastically, and he turned his face a little to hide the reddening of his cheeks. “—cannot stand to see you in pain, obviously.”

A scowl twitched on the man’s lips as he looked back at him. He growled under his breath, scraping his fingernails against the wood of the tabletop and thrusting his gaze towards the other side of the room.

“Ugh, fine,” he muttered. “If it matters that much to you. I’ll pick something up on the way home.”

“On the way to the station, and you shall take some before the start of your shift.”

Javert cast his cold blue eyes on him with annoyance, his mouth scrunching up all on one side of his face. “Comme tu veux,” he sneered pejoratively, giving him a venomous, lopsided smile. As you wish.

***

When Javert got back to his flat after work, he found Valjean sitting up in his bed with his nose stuck in a book, and a pile of them surrounding him on the mattress.

“Your choice in literature is … interesting,” Valjean said, lowering the book without even glancing up at him.
“I don’t much care for reading,” said Javert, shrugging off his greatcoat and hanging it up by the door.

“But did you not just rent a newspaper the other day?”

Javert looked over at the offending item where it sat on the table. “What, that? I only picked it up because it had an article I wanted to read.”

Valjean knit his brow. “That … is generally why people read newspapers, yes.”

“No, you ninny;” he retorted, rolling his eyes, “it’s not like that. Truly. I abhor the trite and petty state of contemporary journalism. It’s little more than gossip in printed form. Sensationalism marketed to the busybodies and the gullible. Only, on the rare occasion, there is actually something useful published in there.”

“I see.”

“Really, I don’t partake in much literature. I don’t find the pastime terribly pleasurable.”

“Hm. But if that is true, why do you own any books at all?”

“One must endeavor to keep oneself somewhat educated,” he explained. “Even if I don’t particularly enjoy it, it is proper that as an officer of the law I should have at least a couple intellectual pursuits. Even if they are purely out of necessity.”

“I got the sense of that, yes. Philosophy, history, law … It is all rather dry.”

“And what would you prefer I read?” he said, raising an eyebrow to accent his perpetual frown.

“I don’t prefer you to do anything; it is just that you have very different tastes.”

“Oh? What do you read, then?”

“Me? Er …” A little blush colored his cheeks as he turned to face the window, brushing the tip of his nose. “Tales of adventure, or mystery, or drama … That sort of thing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Volumes of poetry, even, sometimes.”

Javert snorted. “Entertaining drivel for the masses,” he said. “What do you get out of reading such trivial things? I don’t see the point.”

“The point?” Valjean looked back up at him curiously. “To enjoy oneself, I think. To see things from another person’s perspective, to experience things you never would have otherwise experienced. To discover things you would not have even known to wonder about. There is a reason this kind of ‘drivel’ is popular, you know. Not just because people are content to consume anything that’s put in front of them. It’s quite the opposite, in fact. And just because a book doesn’t outright concern a particular study doesn’t mean you can’t learn anything from it. I think that’s the kind of book you learn the most from, to be honest.”

Javert narrowed his eyes at him ponderously. “Hm.”

“You should read something other than law books, some time, Javert. Like … L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane, or Robinson Crusoe, or L'Ingénu …”

“Why should I?”

Valjean paused in thought. He shrugged. “I do not know if you would enjoy them,” he admitted
finally. “You are a very different sort of man than me. But one can derive a great deal of happiness from books, and they give you something to do in your quiet hours. They are very useful things. They help one grow as a person, I think. You ought to at least try a few before you scorn the entire pursuit.”

Javert scoffed. “I remember,” he said after a moment, “in Montreuil, when I asked around about you, there was this group of women—gossips, the lot of them, happy to tell me everything they knew. They said they’d asked to see the inside of your house, because they’d heard great rumors about its lavishness or some-such, but then when you invited them in they found it mostly bare, with only a couple pieces of simple furniture. The only wealth you seemed to have was a pair of antique silver candlesticks and a great deal of books. They were very disappointed.”

A nostalgic smile warmed the man’s face as he gazed off, suppressing a laugh. “I remember that,” he chuckled. “They told me my wallpaper was ugly. Too dark, they said. As if I cared about such things.”

Javert smirked. “Mm.”

A moment passed in silence.

He looked Valjean up and down. “You seem … better,” he remarked.

The man gave a start. “Ah, do I?” He blinked. “I suppose I must be, compared to when you found me.” His gaze was far off, and Javert did not understand why, but a shadow fell over the man’s face for a brief moment. “Yes, it would seem my health is returning.”

***

The next day was Sunday, and when Valjean awoke, it was mid-morning, and Javert was gone. He picked up one of the books that was still lying beside the bed and flipped it to the last page he’d been on, expecting to have nothing better to do for quite some time, when he heard the door creak open again.

He looked up from the book in surprise. “I thought you’d gone to church,” he said.

Javert stared back at him blankly for a second before giving an amused snort. “Church?” he scoffed, grabbing his tailcoat from the armoire and shoving his arms through the sleeves. “No.”

Valjean knit his brow at him. “Why do you act as though that were humorous?”

The man shrugged, shaking his head a few times with a lopsided grin as he fastened his belt.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What were you doing, then?”

“Using the water closet, if you harbor a particular need to know,” he snarked.

Valjean felt his face grow hot. “Ah.” He looked away. “And whither are you going?”

“Out.”
“To work?”

“No; I don’t work today.”

“Oh. Then why are you—”

“Come for a walk with me,” Javert interrupted.

“Eh? Why?”

“Because I want to see if you can.”

He averted his gaze. “O-oh.”

“Also I need to return this,” Javert told him, picking up the latest issue of Le Moniteur from the side table and waving it in the air. “And I have a report to drop off at the station house. I won’t bring you anywhere near it, of course. But a walk along the river and some fresh air will no doubt do you good.”

Valjean gave a solemn nod. “Yes, I suppose it might,” he said, clutching at the sleeve of the white linen nightshirt. “Give me a moment to change into something a little more presentable.”

“Take your time,” said Javert, closing the door.

“Javert?”

The man poked his head back in with a quizzical expression.

“I don’t, er …” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t have any clothes of my own.”

Javert’s pale blue eyes flicked to the side, where the only outfit Valjean actually owned still sat dirty in the corner. “Ah. Right.”

***

Valjean felt strangely vulnerable as he exited the building, and he was not entirely sure why. Perhaps it was because he had not gone outside in quite some time. Or because it was broad daylight. Or perhaps it was because he was stepping out into public wearing another man’s clothes—not that anyone would have known that, since fixing the issue of length was simply a matter of rolling up the shirt sleeves and cuffs of his pants.

Maybe it was because he’d grown unused to walking with anyone that wasn’t his servant or his daughter. He was especially unused to walking with a police officer, and especially one that just so happened to be Javert.

Whatever the reason, Valjean felt out of place. Wary. Watched.

He cast his eyes about himself as they started down the street, taking in their surroundings. When he finally recognized them, he began to laugh under his breath. “This … This is Rue des Rosiers,” he said to himself.

“And why do you find that comical?” asked Javert, turned to look back at him with an eyebrow
“Because—to think, all this time, we were only a few streets away from each other!”

“Mm,” hummed Javert, looking a little put off by this thought, “Yes. Hilarious.”

“Well, I think it’s rather funny, anyway. All the times we must have almost crossed paths. All the times you might have ended up catching me by pure chance.”

Perhaps if you ever left your house at a reasonable hour, I might have,” he grumbled.

He cracked a wry grin. “Perhaps.”

The air was indeed, as Javert had suggested, refreshing—even more so than Valjean had expected it to be. He hadn’t realized just how long he had been spending indoors of late. Even before Javert had found him. For months, now, all he had really done outside of the flat was go on the occasional walk, but those had grown shorter and shorter, until he’d finally collapsed that day.

Today, the sun was shining brightly, and there was a pleasant breeze on his skin. It was too warm to have worn the wool coat he’d been brought to Javert’s flat in, so he’d left it where it had been all week, hanging on the hook by the door.

He felt as though he had been asleep for ages, and had only just awoken.

Javert strolled along at his side, a silent companion, occasionally stealing glances at him. Assessing his recovery, Valjean supposed. Yes, his health had certainly improved. He felt better than he had in many weeks. His earlier decline had been so gradual that he had not fully realized its extent. He found himself surprised at how different he felt now. No longer did each step seem so far, or his legs so heavy. No longer did his strides fill him with guilt.

Though perhaps that had more to do with the change in destination than anything else.

His gaze drifted out across the river from the quay, tracing the flashes of sunlight reflected off its surface.

It was strange to think that it had almost claimed Javert’s life.

To struggle for so long against fist and knife and gun, only to submit to a body of water at the end of it all. Strange, and wrong, that he could have plunged into obscurity like that, gone in the blink of an eye. His life snuffed out in silence, without any witness but God.

A man who had lived the whole of his existence alone, dying, too, alone.

Would people have mourned him? Or would they have forgotten?

It was wrong, Valjean thought, so wrong that a soul could endure so much suffering, and pass out of the world without so much as a taste of reward or a word of remark. That one could allow oneself to do that, to die unfulfilled! To disappear one night without a trace, to slip into shadow with nothing and no one left to his name …

No, the man deserved so much better than that. Everyone deserved better than that.

‘Even you.’

Valjean gave a start. He turned to look at Javert, but the man had not opened his mouth, and was not looking at him.
The voice had come from within himself. It shocked him to realize this—both that he had suddenly seen his and Javert’s actions as parallels, warranting the same consideration, and that he had drawn this conclusion of his own accord.

It was true that Javert had tried to spell it all out for him earlier, but it was only just hitting him now. As with revolutions, revelations need to come from within in order to be successful. The only law one can heed is one’s own.

And this concept struck Valjean quite thoroughly, that he ought to afford himself the same regard he afforded Javert. Not because he himself believed it deserved, but because he had, for the first time in a long time, glimpsed himself as part of a collective, as part of mankind. As a matter of course, Valjean felt that all human life was precious, and that everyone should be treated with kindness. That everyone deserved forgiveness of past transgressions, should they recognize them as such and seek absolution. That everyone deserved a second chance.

Was he not also a man, then? Ought he not afford himself these things also?

He had always considered the idea selfish, but perhaps Javert was right, and it had only ever been hypocritical to assume that. He didn’t care about his own hypocrisy when it came to his humility, but he could not deny that if he had found someone else in his position, he would have done exactly what Javert had been trying to do. And in truth, he had done such things for a number of people in the past, who were all in various states of desperation and despair.


For the very first time he was considering himself as he had considered those poor unfortunate souls—as he had considered Javert: deserving of pity, of life.

His eyes scanned the river, the glints of light, the softly undulating currents, like grain in a field, like faces in a crowd.

Javert had sentenced himself to death, and had tried to let the Seine swallow him up. And he had come so close to succeeding. Too close. To flickering out like a candle in the wind. Wasted.

Valjean shuddered to think on it. If he hadn’t followed him that night …

His brow furrowed as he pictured Javert convulsing in those shadows, so filled with pain, and so, so alone.

What if there had been no one to pull him out, and breathe the breath back into him? He would be gone. Just like that. Nothing more; no chances at happiness, or consolation, or love. He would just be gone. Sunk into a cold, dark void, never to return.

He would have taken the despair he’d felt in that moment and cemented it so that it lasted for eternity. How could there be any peace in that?

Valjean had never felt it just that the bible said God condemned those who took their own lives. It had always seemed wrong to him. God must know the extent of their suffering. How could He be so cruel as to cast them down for it, when they deserved only pity?

But perhaps, Valjean mused, perhaps those passages were never meant to be taken literally. Perhaps the only hell suicides faced was that to which they had resigned themselves.

And they did not deserve it. No one deserved that loneliness, that pain. No one.
He gazed out at the river they walked beside, and contemplated the terrible fate that might have been. That had almost, almost been.

And he became acutely aware of the man at his side, and he glanced over at him, and thought of all that had transpired since then.

He remembered with perfect clarity the anguish which had consumed the man’s soul when he’d pulled him back from the parapet. Surely that had been the lowest point of Javert’s life. And surely it had seemed to him, in that moment, that there could be nothing left in life but that agony. That there was no future for him, anymore.

But look at him now! He was back at his station, in his element again, a man in his own right, independent and well on his way down the road of recovery. Perhaps his spirit was not fully healed yet—these things took time, Valjean knew—but he was still here, he was still here, and that was all that mattered. Because with life came opportunities for change, and mending, and happiness. Death closed those doors. It provided nothing but an exit which led to an empty cell, from which there was no escape.

But Javert was still here, and he still had time.

And, looking at him, Valjean was overwhelmed with love, and simple, immense gratitude for the man’s continued existence. He gazed up at him in a sort of adoration. And again he turned back to the river, and watched the light spike off the shimmering surface, and he saw himself from outside of himself, and he saw himself in Javert, and Javert in himself, and he could no more deny himself commiseration than he could him.

He remembered the man’s humility in the mairie, and how he’d pleaded earnestly for his own condemnation.

And, parallel to this, he saw himself revealing his criminal past to his son-in-law, allowing him—and even encouraging him—to push him away, to harbor resentment towards him in his heart.

He recalled how much he had wanted to take Javert’s hands, in his office, and tell him that his actions were not wrong, that he should not berate himself for them. That he was a good man, who had only ever tried to do right by the world, and did not deserve the disgrace for which he asked.

What would Javert have said to him if he’d known how he’d defaced himself in front of Marius? If he’d known that he’d deliberately caused a divide between himself and his son-in-law, and, vicariously, his daughter? Would he be angry with him? Would he have grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled in his face that he was a fool, too humble for his own good? Valjean suspected he might have.

And that speculation, too, surprised him—for hadn’t he thought mere days ago that the man didn’t care about him?

But he did, Valjean realized, as fleeting images from the past week flashed before his eyes. He did care. Valjean had been afraid to believe it. But he could not deny the evidence he had before him. No, it was true—perhaps it was on a very small, hidden level, but Javert did care about him. He had prevented him from letting himself waste away and fall into the abyss. That meant something, whether he’d been obligated to do it or not.

Javert and he, Valjean suddenly thought, were rather like two faces of the same coin. In many ways they resembled each other, if viewed from an outsider’s perspective. And what one had done, so had the other done in turn: set at liberty; pulled back from death; hammered the sense into;
given shelter in a time of need. Yes, he mused, it was all rather circular, wasn’t it? And just as Javert deserved to live, and to be given all the chances that life afforded, perhaps he, too, ought not be so quick to give up on this world.

He knew not what it could possibly have left in store for him, but then, neither had Javert, and soldiering on had been, undeniably, the right decision.

Giving up was the end of everything, not just the bad, but all the good, too. And even if the world had nothing for him, choosing to live in it, and hold out hope despite everything, was still the right thing to do.

He gazed out at the river which had almost claimed both their lives, and the way the sunlight played off of it, twinkling. And he saw that even at its most disparaging, at its worst and most painful, life was precious, and beautiful, and a blessing in and of itself. That even in the darkest moments, there were these little beacons, reasons to keep on believing in a better future. That even if he were to die having accomplished nothing, downtrodden and outcast, it would still be beautiful, miraculous, that he had lived at all.

Even in the face of endless tribulation and insurmountable odds, it was better to stay alive than to submit to despair and desolate oneself. The will to survive was a testament to the human spirit, and the highest mark of courage there was.

And he felt, for the first time in his life, a resolution begin to form in his gut: to live, and live for life’s sake alone.

He imagined Javert sinking beneath the tide, and the incomprehensible, tragic waste that would have been his death.

*Life would always be the right choice. Even if it were nothing but misery.*

He thought this as he stood, and he realized then that he had been standing for quite some time now, his pace having slowed to a standstill.

And he found Javert had stopped also, and was considering him studiously.

The man noted his gaze and cast his own out over the river as well, leaning over the divide with his arms resting on the parapet. “It looks different in the light of day, doesn’t it,” he said, giving a pause. “I often find myself thinking that.”

Valjean considered his words pensively.

Did the man somehow know what was occurring in his mind? Did he see the signs of it, on his face? In his eyes? He wondered.

It seemed that, in this instant, the both of them existed on the same page.

“Javert,” he said softly, his eyes on the rays and reflections of the sun. He turned to look at him. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

Javert was quiet for a moment. “Do you know something?” he murmured as he glanced back out at the river. “So am I.”

Valjean drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “Javert?”

“Mm.”
The chapter title is a French proverb that has a lot of meanings, but the literal one is: "Whosoever lives will see"

Suggested listening:

Holocene - Bon Iver

Opening Titles (Les Ailes Pourpres) - The Cinematic Orchestra

Reclamation - Austin Wintory

So Much Life - Bear McCreary
Espérant Contre Toute Espérance

Chapter Summary

Valjean finds himself well enough to do what must be done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[quote pending]

***

It occurred to Valjean, as he waited behind a nearby building for Javert to return from the station, that this was precisely where he had been, and what he had been doing, almost exactly a year ago. It was this very building he had hidden behind while he’d watched for Javert to reemerge from the station-house at Place du Châtelet that fateful night.

Back then, he had been consumed with fear, not knowing what was to become of him, not knowing what Javert was planning to do. He had been almost entirely sure that the man had entered the station house to inform on him and instigate the authorities to arrest him in his stead.

It dawned on him that Javert could in fact be doing that this very moment—only, now, Valjean did not have a single shred of doubt that the man would not. This took him by surprise, and he wondered at what point he had placed such complete trust in him. He found he could not say. He contemplated this turn of events as he leaned back against the cracking plaster, his arms folded over his chest, waiting patiently.

A few minutes later, Javert rounded the corner. He glanced only briefly at him, giving him a vague nod for him to follow.

Quiet, Valjean trailed beside him. Yet calm all the while, he marveled at how the two of them could simply be walking together in public like this. And even more so, that there was this—this unspoken something between them that he could not put a name to, which allowed them to speak without words, and erased their disquiet.

Since when were either of them so comfortable around one another? It was a mystery to him. Even as he questioned it, he told himself that he should not; that such developments in relationships ought not be examined too closely, but be allowed to happen as they went along. Like the natural world, the expanse of one’s heart was best left uncharted, wild and new, for to analyze its depths was to make them shallow, and to catalog its contents was to kill the wonder they inspired.

He let his eyes drift over their surroundings—the busy streets, the bright colors of the flowers and the clothing of passersby. The sun was shining, and the air was warm. Every so often a fiacre or a tilbury would pass them on the street, the horse’s hooves clopping on the cobblestone,
growing louder and then dying away.

In the distance, he could hear laughter, and someone singing some Spanish ditty—badly, but passionately—and the chirping of birds where they flitted about the rooftops and windowsills. His gaze lingered on a young couple, sitting on a bench beneath the trees in a little garden, looking at each other with smiles on their lips and in their eyes.

He turned to glance up at Javert.

Javert, in turn, looked over at him. “You’ve got your color back, you know,” he remarked.

“Ah—do I?”

“Yes,” said the man, averting his gaze towards the neatly trimmed hedges on the side of the street. “You’re doing better than I expected you to. I wasn’t even sure you could make this walk.”

Valjean rubbed the back of his neck, turning his face away. “Well, I have been feeling significantly stronger these past few days. Better than I’ve felt in quite some time, to be honest. Months, perhaps. It was a slow illness.”

“Mm.” Javert pursed his lips, sliding his ice-blue eyes back towards him for a second. “Eating actual food probably helped.”

Valjean glanced back up at him, his face turning red before he directed his gaze back down towards the cobblestones. He cleared his throat. “Yes … well.”

“Don’t go doing that again,” the man warned him. “When I told you to profit from your liberty, starving yourself to death wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“I am sorry about that.”

“See that you take care to be a little more grateful the next time someone sticks their neck out for you, eh? It wasn’t an easy decision for me.” He frowned deeply, staring off at nothing with narrowed eyes. “What if you hadn’t been there to save me that night, hm? Do you know how angry I would have been if I’d killed myself only for you to end up letting yourself waste away? And for such a damned stupid reason, too. Really. It was extraordinarily ungrateful of you.”

Valjean bent his head to him, cringing. “I … hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Evidently not.” Javert shot another glare his way. “Don’t do it again.”

Valjean gave a sigh, his shoulders sagging. “I won’t.”

“Do I have your word on that?” Javert asked, raising an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Of course! I don’t take such matters lightly, you know. I mean the things I say, always.”

Javert’s eyes flicked up and down, studying him. “You had better.”

Valjean gave him an agitated look and let out a puff of breath, casting his gaze elsewhere.

They continued on a little while in silence before Javert spoke again.

“You will go to her, will you not?”

“What?” Valjean turned to him, furrowing his brow.
“Your daughter.”

He gave a start. “I—er …”

“Don’t make me have this conversation twice,” Javert chided. “Your daughter loves you, and you obviously cannot stand to be without her. Her husband is an ass if he does not like you. That is his problem. You are the father; fathers have priority. If the man doesn’t wish to see you, then make arrangements so he doesn’t have to. But don’t let him sever your ties with her, honestly! What kind of father are you, going off without a word like that? You would bow to his every whim, even if it hurt her? I would bet you anything she is either very sad or very angry with you. Perhaps both.”

The creases in Valjean’s forehead deepened. He gave another sigh. “It is true she did not want me to go,” he admitted quietly. “I knew that. And it made things all the worse.” He shook his head. “It was hard for me to do. To leave her. But I thought, at the time, that it was for the best.”

“Ah, yes; clearly child abandonment was the best possible choice for you to make in this situation.”

“Javert!”

The man smirked, exposing his teeth and gums. He refused to meet his gaze.

Valjean folded his arms behind his back, letting his head droop a little. “I thought I was doing her a service. Doing both of them a service. It was never my intention to cause her pain. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was trying to spare them indignity of having a—” He glanced at the passing pedestrians self-consciously, clearing his throat and lowering his voice. “—of having ties with a man like me.”

Javert clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes. “I know why you did it; what I am saying is that your reasoning was idiotic. You get so caught up in your idea of how everyone must perceive you that you forget to actually consider the reality of their opinions.”

“That—” Valjean paused, his mouth open. He shut it and looked away “Hm.”

“Anyway,” Javert sighed, “either you reinitiate contact with the girl, or I will have to do it for you. And I’ll tell her just what a fool you’ve been, while I’m at it. So take your pick. I’m sure I know which one you’d prefer.”

Valjean’s face was burning. “The former, obviously,” he grumbled. “I just … need some time, that’s all.”

“For what?”

“To come to terms with myself, I suppose.”

Javert stared at him with a strange sort of look. “And how long will that take?”

Valjean cocked his head at him, exasperated, throwing up a questioning palm. “I don’t know; how long did it take for you?”

The man gave a start, his eyes widening a little as his steps faltered for a split-second. He huffed, a shadow falling over his face as he muttered something under his breath. He licked his lips, bit them. “That is far too long,” he said at length. “Besides, I threw myself back into the daily routine, didn’t I? Even if I hadn’t yet made peace with things. That’s just how you go on, you
know. There is no defining moment, when everything becomes clear again, when the world starts making sense. You just press forwards, one day at a time. Until one day you find that it doesn’t hurt so much, anymore. And maybe living isn’t as hard as you thought.”

Valjean gazed up at him wistfully. He contemplated his words, as his eyes drifted out over their surroundings. The people chattering amongst themselves, enjoying the summer air. The leaves rustling in the trees. A group of children playing in the street.

Strangely, he felt a measure of contentment at this scene. Being here, in this place, in this moment, with this company.

A few blocks down, a child screamed in play, their cry petering off into laughter.

The sky was blue, and the clouds drifted lazily overhead like wisps of cotton. He felt the warmth of the sun on his skin, and a gentle breeze tousle his hair.

A bee buzzed lazily past him, on its way to a cluster of violets at the bottom of a wrought-iron fence.

All around him, life—and the world—went on. And despite its heartache, there were always some pleasures—these little moments of bliss, easy and free. Sure, there was suffering—but there was this, too. The good inside the bad. Flowers grew up through the rubble. And though these small blooms of happiness were but fleeting, somehow, they outweighed all the rest of it.

Two weeks ago, death had come knocking on his door, and he had welcomed it in unquestioningly, like an old friend who was long overdue. Just to live had become a sort of agony for him. To exist in a world without anything to care about became a chore, monotonous and dull. He did not think he could ever feel anything but grief, ever again. Just to wake, to rise, to eat, had become so arduous a task that he could not help but ask the point of it.

The world had been nothing but gloom to him, then. And he had been just an old, forgotten man, waiting to die. He had not thought that happiness, or even contentment, could ever again touch his soul.

And yet here he stood, and all around him, the world seemed at peace with itself. He could not, at present, find anything to complain about it. It was summer, and he was in Paris. The plants were in bloom, the children were in love. And beside him stood someone he cared about very much—and who, by some miraculous turn of events, cared for him in turn.

Valjean drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He turned back to look at Javert, a sad, lopsided smile tugging back one corner of his mouth.

Javert regarded him for a moment before dipping his head and resuming his walk.

Wordlessly, Valjean fell into step behind him.

***

Javert paused at the door of the apartment building as Valjean spoke his name, the key in the lock. He looked back over his shoulder at him.
Valjean could not hold his gaze, and glanced away from him, staring at the dirt between the paving stones at his feet with a guilty expression. “I … should probably leave tomorrow.”

Javert narrowed his eyes at him quizzically.

“The truth is, I probably could have left days ago,” he said. “I’ve had my strength back for awhile, now. I just …” He drew in a deep breath and let out a lasting sigh. “—didn’t want to leave, I suppose. It was never my intention to take advantage of your hospitality. And you—you have been very hospitable, truly. More so than I would have ever expected, or deserved. And I thank you for that.” He frowned. “I should not have overstayed my welcome. It was wrong of me. Only … it is hard to leave a place when you feel you have nothing to go back to. I could not muster the will.”

The man chewed pensively on his lip. “I have been in a sort of haze, of late. Like a trance, like I was not fully awake. My thoughts were clouded. But you have helped clear them, some. I know I was not very receptive to your words at first. But I am grateful to you for them. Not only because they made me cognizant of things I had not hitherto considered, but also because …” He faltered, trying to hide the redness that was creeping into his cheeks. When his voice came out it was hushed and sounded as though it had been hard to force past his lips. “It—it means a lot to me, that anyone would—that you would—bother yourself with me, like this.”

Valjean’s expression grew somewhat wistful. “I feel a bit as though I have only just awoken from some dream,” he murmured. “The world feels … different than before. I don’t know. Newer, somehow.” He shook his head. “If that makes any sense. Perhaps it is just that I’m noticing things in it for the first time in a long while.” He furrowed his brow. “No, I—the world is probably the same. It is probably just me. Lord; forgive me, I am rambling. I, ah—” He touched his forehead. “My point was that— I think I will be all right, henceforth. On my own, I mean. So you—you do not need to trouble yourself over me any longer. And … I should probably go home.”

Javert looked him up and down. “If you feel so inclined,” he finally said.

“Well,” he said, hanging his head, “I have put you out of your bed for long enough. And really, I did not mean to cause everyone such concern. I am embarrassed, to be honest. I slept in your bed; I ate your food. I would not listen to you; I gave no thanks for what you did.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I acted more a child than a man. My behavior was disgraceful. Deeply, truly, I am—” he grimaced, his eyes darting this way and that. He seemed to be looking for the right words. With a little sigh, he appeared to give up. “Very sorry,” he said, closing his eyes. “I would like to pretend that this had never happened. Though I’m sure it’s a foolishness you won’t soon forget.” He chuckled wearily to himself. “Not with your memory, anyway. No, I don’t think I’ll soon live this down.”

He grew morose again, staring off into space. “I want to express my gratitude for all you have done for me. For everything, I mean—not just this. Although, this, especially, at the moment. So, thank you. I know I have said those words a lot, but I feel as though I could not say them enough. And I apologize for being like this. For allowing myself to get like this. To become a burden. I have abused your good will, and I—”

“You are not a burden,” Javert said flatly.

Valjean gave a start, looking up at him.

Valjean knit his brow, staring at him thoughtfully. Frowning, he turned his face away. “I wish I could believe that,” he murmured. “Truly. But that is not how I feel.”

“I don’t give a damn what you feel,” said Javert. “You are wrong. You have been wrong about a lot of things, yourself included. That’s the problem with you, you know. You take your own opinions about yourself and you project them onto other people’s. You don’t stop to consider yourself from an outside perspective. You think you do, but you don’t. Now,” he said, opening the door, “you will come inside and stop spewing your sentiments all over the street where anyone could overhear them, or so help me I will drag you up the stairs myself.”

Valjean followed him into the building obediently, bowing his head. “S-sorry; I did not mean to —”

“Just stop talking,” Javert sighed, rubbing his temples in exasperation as he headed for the stairs. “I am sick of having to listen to you rub your own face in the dirt. It’s becoming an annoyance.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You don’t deserve the things you keep saying about yourself, so will you please just stop talking. And don’t apologize, lord’s sake.”

He ran a hand over his face and turned to find Valjean pausing on the landing halfway up the stairs. “Are you coming or not?”

Valjean flushed. “Er, I have to—” He nodded towards the door of the water-closet.

“Oh. Well, come along when you’ve finished, then. But take a moment to think on what I’ve said, will you? You’re too harsh with yourself; I mean that.” He hesitated at the door of the flat, his hand resting on the old brass knob. He glanced over his shoulder. “And Valjean,—”

The man looked up at him curiously.

Javert softened his gaze some. “It gets easier.”

The man furrowed his brow at him. “What gets easier?”

“Living,” he said, giving him one last glance before ducking into the room and shutting the door.

***

While Valjean was preoccupied, Javert grabbed the man’s clothes out of the corner of his flat and took them downstairs. He thrust the bundle at his portress with the commanding air of a superior. “Wash this,” he said.

“I’m not your laundress,” she complained, putting her hand on her hip.

His expression remained rigid. “These aren’t my clothes.”

She cocked her head at him, staring for a moment in confusion before memory served, and her eyes slid away. “Oh.”

“I’ll pay you,” he said.

“How much?”
“How much do you want?”

She thought for a moment. “Get me next month’s rent on time and I’ll consider it even.”

Javert’s eyes flicked away. “That is not exactly fair to you, mada—”

“By the fifth and not any later.” She snatched the clothes out of his hands before he could protest any further, sauntering off with her head held high.

His lip twitched as he watched her go. “I dislike debts, madam!” he called after her.

“Then pay your rent on time and stop hoarding all the dishes!”

***

Valjean did not speak much during dinner. In regaining his health, both physical and mental, he seemed to have also regained his self-consciousness, and sat looking embarrassed, not daring to meet his eyes.

That night, the man refused to sleep in his bed any longer, insisting on his chair despite Javert’s insistence that he did not give a sou where he laid his head so long as it was quiet. They had something of a standoff over this for a number of minutes before Javert was finally forced to give in and take back his mattress.

***

In the morning, Javert awoke with the rising of the sun—as was his habit—to find Valjean still asleep in his bergère, slouched back with his arms crossed over his chest and his chin resting on his collarbone.

Javert stared at him for a long time, searching his sleeping face.

It was true, the color had returned to it some time ago. Not only this, but it was no longer so gaunt and sickly thin. The hollows beneath his cheekbones had filled back in. There were still faint circles under his eyes, but Javert supposed this was to be expected.

Grief … Could people really die of that? He hadn’t thought so. But then, he had never really had anything which would have grieved him to lose. Not like Valjean.

That girl … He never would have believed the man could love her so much. To take her in like that, to raise her like his own child—he really had been sincere. A year ago he would have laughed at the idea that a convict could become anything even resembling a decent parent. Now he was not so sure.

He wondered if the man was really fit to be left to his own devices again. With such a humble nature, he would certainly not put it past Valjean to leave before he was in any shape to, if only to lessen the burden he thought he was weighing him with. It was entirely possible that the man was lying about the progress of his recovery.
But then, Javert thought, he couldn’t keep the man here forever. It wasn’t like he wanted him to stay, either. Truly, the idea that he should have harbored a wanted criminal in his house and played nursemaid to him for nearly two weeks was utterly preposterous. And yet he had done it, and did not find himself all that surprised. He was, oddly, surprised only by his lack of surprise over having done this thing—not for just anyone, of course, but for Valjean. He could not fathom why, but there it was. Valjean was … somehow different than other people to him. Why, exactly, he could not say, other than there was simply too much between them.

It was high time the man left, and he told himself this, and it sounded rational—and yet when he looked at him he was only filled with a vague and unsettling concern, and he found himself not quite comfortable at the idea of casting him off again just yet.

What if it was all pretense? He used to think Valjean a sly and cunning dog, always somehow outwitting him at the last possible moment. Now he had come to feel that Valjean was just an impossibly lucky fool, who had retained only a meager amount of cleverness from his days in the galleys. But what if the man was just cunning enough to trick him into trusting him and letting him go, before falling back into his despair? It was something he could see Valjean doing, and, in fact, something he had tried to do himself only a year ago.

‘How will I know you’re well?’ he heard Valjean’s voice echo in his mind.

‘Trust,’ said his own.

And he supposed that was the answer, really. Hadn’t he himself not been fully recovered when he’d insisted on leaving? Hadn’t he held himself together, if only for his own dignity’s sake, if only to keep his word to the man? And here he still was, all this time later. Maybe he wasn’t quite fully recovered, even now, but he was surviving, and things were slowly falling back into place.

If he could do it, then Valjean could do it. The man had promised him not to let this happen again—and didn’t Valjean always keep his word?

Yes, if he held him to that … Valjean would do it, wouldn’t he? If not for himself, then for him. That was the way his nature was, it seemed. He could only care about himself in the interests of others.

With a sigh, Javert supposed that this required him to express interest in the man. A voice in the back of his mind reminded him that his failure to do so the prior summer was one of the reasons Valjean had allowed himself to spiral into such a dismal state in the first place. If he had let the man stay in contact with him, maybe this wouldn’t have happened at all.

Glancing away, he rose to his feet and crossed the room, staring out the window pensively. Frowning, he watched a tilbury pass on the street below.

Did he dare do it? Did he dare let the man become a part of his life?

His eyes flicked back over his shoulder, to where Valjean lay sleeping in his chair, wearing his night clothes.

With a start, Javert realized that perhaps, without intending to, he already had.

***
“Are you really well enough to leave?”

Valjean looked up at him with a start, the mug of coffee still pressed to his lips. He swallowed and slowly set it back down, clearing his throat. “Yes.”

Javert stared back at him, his chin resting in his palm, his arm propped up on the countertop. His expression was stony, his eyes probing. “You are certain of this?”

“Do you think I would lie to you?”

“If you thought that doing so would be a favor to me, then yes.”

Valjean opened his mouth to protest. Paused. “Well,” he said, his eyes darting away, “I am not. I meant what I said; I told you that. I will not allow myself to deteriorate into such a state again. It would be … I would feel guilt over it.”

“Hm.” Javert continued to stare at him, unmoving. That was not really what he wanted to hear, but it was better than nothing. He took a sip of coffee and turned his gaze to the wooden countertop, scarred with knife marks and stained with various faded colors. He drummed his fingers over it, glancing at nothing in the direction of the wall. Finally, he resigned himself. “You may … write to me, if you wish.”

Valjean looked up at him in shock. “Do you mean it? Do you—” His brow creased. “—really want me to?”

“I—I don’t know,” he admitted between his teeth. “But if you desire to send me letters, now and then, I won’t object to it. I doubt that I’ll reply, but I will read them.”

Valjean was gazing at him intently, emotion flickering in his eyes.

Javert hated to be looked at thusly, but all he could think was that it was better—that light in his eyes—it was so much better than that dullness they’d had before, that hollow, empty stare.

“Look here,” he grumbled, refusing to meet his gaze, “I comprehend that you … care for me, for whatever reason. I don’t really understand why. But given past events, I suppose I have no right to scorn your attempts at further communication. And I’m—” He growled under his breath, fighting to speak. “My callousness, before, was undeserved. It is partly my fault that you ended up in the state that you did. I didn’t think that it would matter, to you. I didn’t think you should be concerning yourself over my well-being. I am not used to that kind of attention, so frankly it had been making me uncomfortable. But that is on account of my own insecurity, not any fault of yours.”

“I don’t—” He touched his forehead, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t think about things. I don’t like thinking about things. I’m not in the custom of it and it hurts, dammit; it hurts to have to consider myself and my actions, to throw myself into doubt and uncertainty, to review all the things that I’ve done and become my own jury and judge! How am I supposed to view myself objectively when I am already biased? How should I know what I ought to believe? It is agony to stand before myself and reevaluate the world!”

He grit his teeth, shaking his head. “Everything is complicated; everything is so damn complicated now, and you will forgive me for saying this, but it is you who has made it so, by taking the scales from my eyes and leaving me stumbling blindly in a foreign land! So you must understand that just to look at you—just to think on you—is to remember my own shortcomings, and I can’t bear it, Valjean; I just—I just can’t!”
He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, rubbing his face. “I didn’t drive you away because I hated you, or because I was angry with you. I did it because you make me... very uncomfortable. Uncomfortable with myself. And I used a number of excuses to rationalize away my need to estrange myself from you, but that was the real reason. And so,” he said, turning red and forcing the words from his mouth, “—and so... maybe I cannot deal with seeing you, just yet—but if you write to me I will read your letters, and I—I don’t dislike you, Valjean. That is all.”

He glanced back towards Valjean after a moment to find the man staring up at him in awe, his eyes alight, his expression bearing the effect of being dazzled.

The man’s voice was little more than a fearful whisper. “You... truly mean that?”

“I...” Javert bowed his head in a begrudging nod, letting out a puff of air. “Yes.”

Valjean opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Hand trembling, he slowly reached out to touch Javert’s forearm, his fingers just barely lighting on his shirtsleeve, as though afraid he might be rebuked.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, a sea of depth behind his tone. “Thank you. Truly.”

***

It seemed odd to send Valjean packing, partially because he did not have anything to pack. He prepared to leave with only what had been brought with him: the clothes on his back, a parapluie, and an old woolen coat which had become too hot to wear. The ritual of departure was, in effect, sorely lacking. Perhaps this was why both of them seemed to have trouble finding what to say.

For the millionth time, Valjean apologized to him, both for his own actions and “for causing such trouble.”

And again, Javert had to argue that neither of them had really had a choice in the matter, and therefore were not to blame.

Turning halfway to the door, Valjean bit his lip. He looked like he had a great deal he wanted to say, but he also looked like he had no idea what any of it was.

Javert was, for all intents and purposes, in a similar dilemma. He felt there were things he ought to be telling the man, but possessed no inkling as to what they might be.

Reluctantly, Valjean headed for the door, and, reluctantly, Javert let him.

As he watched him go, he felt something biting at the back of his mind, urging him to speak. “Attends,” he said.

Valjean turned back around.

Javert stared at him from where he leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. He shut his eyes for a second, giving a resigned sort of sigh, frowning. Then he stood straight and extended his hand to him.

Valjean looked at it in amazement, his eyes darting up to Javert’s face, then back to his gloved
hand, and back to his face again. He fumbled for some sort of response. “You—you really ...?”

Javert gave another sigh, shorter this time, and frustrated. He rolled his eyes and stared back at him, raising an eyebrow and accentuating the gesture impatiently.

With an embarrassed start, Valjean reached out and, tentatively, took his hand.

As they shook, Javert drew close, looming over him with an authoritative glint in his eyes. “You will not forget the oath you swore to me,” he said.

Valjean looked up at him, turning red and shrinking back a little. “N-no; of course not.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Good.” He stood over him, searching for something more to say, but not finding anything. Staring down at the white curls below him, he grew aware of just how much taller he was than Valjean. Nearly a full head. Why was he only just now noticing this? It was probable that he had never before stood so close to the man, and he realized this with some confusion, as he did not know quite why he had chosen to do so at present.

Valjean was looking up at him warily, his eyes darting away, and then back to his face again, as though he expected to be pounced upon at the drop of a hat.

Javert felt as though he should actually be backing away, but held his ground out of sheer stubbornness. “Well, then,” he said softly, “be off with you.”

Valjean bowed his head to him. He turned back to the door, pausing in the open doorway with his hand on the knob. “Au revoir,” he mumbled.

“À la prochaine,” said Javert.

Valjean gazed back at him for a moment before quietly shutting the door.

***

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title “Espérant Contre Toute Espérance” means “Hoping Against Hope” and is a reference to A) A verse in the Bible about keeping faith, B) the Latin phrase “Contra Spem Spero” and C) the poem of the same name by Lesya Ukrainka.

Suggested Listening:

It's Love, Isn't It - Joe Hisaishi (From Howl's Moving Castle)
Debts

Chapter Summary

Valjean tries to keep his promise. Javert and Marius encounter one another in the street.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“*The bravest thing I ever did was continuing my life when I wanted to die.*”

-Juliette Lewis

***

When Jean Valjean returned to the little flat on Rue de l’Homme Armé, he was met with two equally incredulous pairs of eyes. These eyes belonged to the porter and his wife, who stared at him from the doorway in utter bewilderment, struck mute.

It was the lady of the house who broke the silence first. “Monsieur!” she exclaimed, clasping Valjean’s hands between her own in a fit of joy. “*Mon Dieu,* it’s truly you! Ah, you disappeared one day; you were gone for so long … We thought—!” She released him, drawing a hand over her mouth. Her eyes grew wet. “Oh, but you are safe! Here you are. And you look so much healthier! I understand now; we thought you had met some terrible fate in the streets, but you were merely recovering elsewhere. That is great news. Ah, I am so glad to see you well.”

“We really did fear the worst for you,” he husband chimed in, much more composed than her, though still visibly surprised. “We thought we were going to have to find another tenant to rent out the—”

His wife elbowed him in the stomach with a dirty look.

He choked on his words, cringing briefly before looking back up at him with a lopsided grin. “Ah, that is to say, we were afraid we should never see you again, Monsieur Fauchelevent. But you have returned to us. That is good, very good.”

“But where were you, all this time?” inquired the portress. “Why did you not give us word of your departure? We were worried sick about you.”

“I am very sorry, madame,” Valjean told her, dipping his head guiltily. “I should have sent some sort of note before this. It did not occur to me to do so, in truth. I have troubled you, and I apologize. But you see, it was never my intention to leave like that. I had only gone out for a walk. Somewhere along the way, though, I collapsed. As it happened, an old acquaintance of mine was
passing by, and he recognized me and brought me to his home to recuperate. I did not think to contact you; I am sorry. My mind was preoccupied with other things.”

His brow furrowed in deep contemplation, and he let out a sad little sigh. “To be honest, I … did not think I would be missed. I see now that I was wrong. Furthermore, I would like to apologize for my behavior, earlier. I was indeed gravely ill. I denied that, despite the fact that it was obvious. You tried to help me; you tried to get me to eat. You called a doctor on my behalf. That was very kind of you. I told you it was unnecessary, but it was not. At the time, however, I did not really care that my health was in such a decline.”

He hung his head. “I was so grieved over the loss of Cosette. I just … fell into despair. Life seemed bleak to me, then, and devoid of further meaning. I stopped caring what happened to me. I did not even notice that my apathy was hurting anyone else. It was a selfish sort of thing, in a way. All the things you did for me these past few months … I do not even remember if I thanked you. It was very rude of me—very ungrateful. And for that I am sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

The woman gazed at him, her grey-green eyes sparkling. Her lip trembled. “Oh, monsieur,” she murmured, putting her arms around him, “there is no need for that. I am just happy to see you well.”

Valjean stiffened at the embrace, taken quite thoroughly off guard by this display of affection. He turned red, rubbing the back of his neck as she drew away, wiping her eyes on her apron.

“Er, thank you,” he said, giving them a quick, embarrassed bow. “I was not expecting such a welcome.”

“Ah, I am going to make you something special for dinner,” the portress proclaimed, putting her hands on her wide hips. “How does roast beef sound? With gravy, and honeyed carrots. And I’ll bake some more of those lady-finger potatoes. You will eat them, won’t you?—now that you’ve gotten your appetite back.”

He gave her a sheepish smirk. “Of course.”

***

Valjean settled back into home life in a resigned sort of way. He was not without sighs and despondencies. But for all that, he tried to carry on as best he could, forcing his muscles into action, forcing himself to eat.

Whenever he felt the gloom beginning to engulf him again, he would get up and go to the window to watch the street below, and he would hear Javert’s words in the back of his mind.

‘There is no defining moment. You just press forwards, one day at a time.’

‘It gets easier. Living.’

They repeated themselves to him, and he could not tell if it was just happening of its own accord, or if he were telling himself these things intentionally. They became a sort of mantra.

‘You are not a burden.’
When the portress brought him up his food, or came to refill the hanging basin in the water-closet, he smiled at her, and though the smile did not reach his eyes, it was not entirely disingenuous. When she smiled back at him, sympathy in her expression, something felt a little better about the world. Just a little.

He thought of Cosette, and sometimes Marius, but did not attempt to contact them. Nor did he walk any longer towards Rue des Filles du Calvaire. He told himself he would go there in time. But not yet. He wasn’t ready. He did not know when he ever would be, but he dared to believe that one day the thought of knocking on those grand doors with the ram’s head knockers would not cause him such unrest.

He did not write to Javert. Part of him wanted to. Part of him was too embarrassed. It seemed the proper thing to wait awhile before making any further correspondences with the man, though he was not entirely sure why. Perhaps the real reason was that he did not know what to say.

In the early morning, just before dawn, he would walk down to the river and watch the sun rise over the Seine. The sky would glow orange and pink over the black silhouettes of the city, and sparks would flash off the surface of the water. He wasn’t sure what it was the sight inspired in him, but it was certainly something, and he felt it swell in his breast and make him feel not so hollowed out inside. When the shadows started to shorten, he went back the way he came, and returned to the flat before too many people were out on the streets. Then he would partake in a bit of breakfast.

Eventually, the portress’ food was no longer so hard for him to finish, and it started to regain its flavor. He forgot that eating was a chore, and did it instinctually. He felt actual hunger for the first time in months. His senses grew sharper, and his thoughts grew clearer. Things seemed somehow realer than before.

He would put water on to boil and make himself tea just for the sake of it, and borrow the latest issue of Le Moniteur from the porters to read as he drank.

And one day, without notice, he found himself rolling out of bed in the morning purely out of habit, without having to argue with himself.

***

Javert worried his lip, staring down at the little sheet of numbers he’d drawn up.

He performed this ritual often. He had a calculating mind and a head for numbers, as well as a phenomenal memory, and therefore needed only himself to manage his finances.

And he always managed, some way or another.

But the last few weeks had not been kind to his pocketbook. Firstly, there was what he had paid the doctor for his cab, and what he had paid for the bottle of laudanum Valjean had insisted on his having, and then, his expenses for food had been doubled the past two weeks in light of his unexpected guest. Not only that, but he needed to buy another set of leather gloves, and, at some point, replacement supplies for his medical kit. On top of this, his working hours had been diminished that first week of May due to his worry over Valjean’s health, and, thereby, his wages.

He sat staring at the expenses and earnings on the slip of parchment, twining his fingers in his
whiskers and letting out a sigh.

There was a knock at his door.

“Entrez.”

It was the portress, bringing up his dinner. She set it down on the desk beside him, glancing over his shoulder at his busywork in the flickering candlelight.

“Running the numbers again, are we?” she remarked.

“Mm.”

She leaned in closer, inspecting the sheet, to his discomfort. “Oh,” she said, her eyebrows rising, “but you need not worry about that.” Her finger hovered over the word “Loyer”.

Javert’s brow knit. “What do you mean?”

“Well it’s already been paid, hasn’t it?”

He cocked his head at her, narrowing his eyes. “It hasn’t.”

“Yes it has,” she insisted. “Or did you forget? You’re not the type to forget a thing like that.”

“Madam, what are you speaking of?”

“That man that came by. You know. He gave me your payment for it.”

Blood ran to Javert’s face. “That—man?”

“Your friend, monsieur!—with the white hair. He dropped by ereyesterday; said he owed you some money.”

Javert grit his teeth, gripping the edge of the desk with hands that had suddenly become talons. “He did what? Are you telling me he paid this month’s rent for me?”

“Not just this month, monsieur—the next two as well.”

A scowl drew back Javert’s thin lips. “That little—”

“Are you saying you had no part in this arrangement?” the portress asked, her face going blank.

“No part at all! No part, and no knowledge!” He let out an aggravated grunt, putting his head in his hands and clawing his fingers through his hair. “That little devil; he knows I don’t want his damn—”

“For someone who dislikes debts, you’re very quick to scorn charity,” she tutted. “I wouldn’t mind it if someone happened to pay off some of my expenses every now and again.”

“Charity is a debt, madam,” Javert exclaimed, whipping his head up to look at her in frustration. “I told him he didn’t owe me anything! I told him I didn’t want any money from him! He thinks I’m some poor wretch to give alms to anonymously, like some beggar, blast him—”

“What are you going to do,” she asked with a smirk, “withdraw the payment? That money belongs to me now, I’ll have you know.”
Javert stared up at her, his nose wrinkling up on one side, his eyelid twitching. “I—yes, well—that is true, but—rather,—”

The woman began to chuckle. “You don’t take kindly to having friends, do you.”

He was flustered. “I—he is not—I don’t have ‘friends’. And if I did, that man would certainly not be one of them!”

This outburst only prompted her to laugh. She clutched her abdomen, barely able to hold herself in check, her shoulders bouncing up and down as she turned towards the door. “Yes, sure; sure. Turn your flat into a sickroom and forfeit your bed for a fortnight; he pays you back in spades without your knowledge—but you are certainly not friends, no!” She cast a cracking smile at him as she started down the stairs. “Of course not. My mistake, monsieur. Enjoy your supper.”

Javert trembled with anger in his chair, his hand balling into a fist on his desk, crumpling up the piece of parchment as he heard her footsteps descend. He let out a conflicted series of grunts, choked with anger. “He’s not my damn friend, do you hear?” he shouted after her.

A badly concealed laugh could be heard from the lower story. “Whatever you say, monsieur!”

***

It was late May, and it had been about two weeks since Valjean had left his flat.

Many times, Javert had gotten the urge to check in on him. But something told him not to. Told him to place confidence in him. Told him that Valjean would keep his word.

It was Sunday, and Javert was passing through the crowd of parishioners who were just exiting from Mass at Saint-Sulpice, when all of a sudden a familiar face caught his eye. He stopped in his tracks, glancing back over his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes.

That black mop of hair, those freckles …

He gave a start. The Pontmercy boy! Could it be?

The young man was heading down the stone steps when he turned to look in Javert’s direction. And then he, too, froze, as the last of the congregation passed him by and dissipated into the street.

The stared at one another in mutual astonishment.

“You’re alive?” they both exclaimed.

Marius recoiled in shock. “I— You— But how? The barricade! They had you executed; I heard the shot! H—how can you still be …?”

Growling, Javert grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back towards the chapel.

“Inside. Now. We’ll not be having this conversation overheard.”

Bewildered, the youth allowed himself to be dragged back into the building without protest.

“Monsieur!” he exclaimed when they found themselves alone, backing into one of the alcoves.
“I cannot— How is it you are still alive? I don’t—”

“Hush, now,” Javert chastised, glancing around at the empty pews. “Not so loud. We’re in a chapel, not a confessional.” Javert studied his face for a moment, frowning. He clicked his tongue, glancing away and narrowing his eyes. Looked back to Marius. “I ought to arrest you, you know,” he grumbled finally, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

Marius paled.

“You are an insurgent, after all,” he continued. “But that would prove to be rather … inconvenient.”

“Ah,” said Marius.

“Besides, there has been an amnesty since then, and, well …” He cast a probing eye at him. “What exactly have you been up to of late? Not making more trouble, it seems. I have not seen or heard from you for more than a year, and no one has mentioned your name in the Prefecture.”

“I am not surprised at that,” Marius said carefully, “as I was confined to bed for nearly five months after the barricades.”

“Five months!”

“Well, four and a half. My collarbone was shattered. The doctor would not permit me leave the house. And then, they all insisted having guests would be bad for my health, that I would get too excited and worsen my injuries, setting back the healing process. So I had to wait all that time to see my poor Cosette again!”

“Cosette!” Javert exclaimed. “Cosette? So you are the one she married! Of course,” he muttered to himself, smacking his brow, “Of course you would be; I should have expected as much, if I had not believed you dead.”

“Wait, you know her?” Marius asked. “But how would you two have—” He stopped himself short and shook his head, violently, as though trying to dislodge the line of thought that had been forming in his brain. “No, no. This isn’t right, speaking to you like this. As though nothing has happened. For all I know, you are a ghost!” His previous, panicked fervor returned. “I thought you dead!” he exclaimed, thrusting out his hands. “Yet here you stand. How can this be? How can you yet live? I saw—at the barricades—”

“He did not, if that weren’t obvious enough.”

“But, then …” The boy clutched his brow, his gaze distant. “He didn’t kill you,” he murmured to himself, as though coming upon a host of interior revelations. “He didn’t kill you …” All of a sudden his face lit up with a strange mixture of shock, terror and joy. “So then, he—he saved you! He asked to be the one to kill you on purpose, so that he could take you out of their sight, and …! Oh!” Tears welled in his eyes. “I had thought— But you are safe. He is not a murderer after all.”

He looked back up at Javert as though remembering himself. “Oh, monsieur!” he exclaimed. “I recognized you. I had thought you seemed familiar to me. And then, when I realized who you were, when I asked your name, I was filled with dread at your fate. Spy or not, you were a good man, and I—I could not in good conscience let them sentence you to die. I was about to plead for them to stay your execution, but then I heard that dreadful pistol shot, and he appeared around the lane with a somber air and said ‘It is done’, and I thought—! But you are alive! He did not kill you
after all! Ah, I am happy!"

Javert was caught completely off guard by the boy’s concern. He was at a loss for words.

“Just a moment, then—” Marius said, rambling to himself now, “You made it out of the barricades alive. And someone pulled me from the barricades. Someone delivered me to my grandfather’s house. Basque said that there had been two men there, at the door that night, and the coach driver said that one of them was a police agent. Mon Dieu, Inspector, could it have been? Was it you who saved me from the barricades?”

Javert was taken aback. “What? Of course not! What do you mean, ‘was it you’? You do not know how you ended up there?”

Marius shook his head fervently. “No! I have sought desperately, for quite some time, to find who saved me, but I have had no leads! All I knew was that there were two men who brought me to the house, and one of them was a police agent! But, do you mean to tell me it was not you?”

“The police agent was I, yes.”

“Then you have saved me! I owe you my life!”

“Not in the least! I may have been there, but I was not the one who dragged you from the barricades. How is it you do not know this? He did not tell you?”

“He …? No, monsieur! The man left before anyone could thank him, and he never returned. The porter saw him, but he was covered in muck, and blood, and gunpowder, and it would be impossible to recognize him. But you, you know who he is! You were with him; you know his identity, do you not?”

“Of course! But—do you mean he never— You didn’t …?” His eyes shot open. “Wait,” he exclaimed to himself, “Wait, wait, wait—but if you are married to Cosette, that would make you—” A sort of incredulous fury wrote itself upon his features. “Why, you are his son-in-law!”

Marius knit his brow. “I— What do you mean?”

“You are Val—” He bit back the name before it could fully escape his lips. “I mean, you are married to Monsieur Fauchelevent’s daughter! That makes you his son!”

“Yes, but I do not see why you—”

“You absolute booby, do you really mean to say that you—”

“Monsieur! May we return to the topic at hand? I don’t—”

“You are his son, by god! And still he did not tell you!”

“Tell me what, monsieur?”

“He saved your life, you fool! He was the man who rescued you from the barricades; he was the one that dragged you through the sewers! All because you were in love with his daughter! And that ninny, he kept it from you all this time!”

The boy’s eyes bulged. “Quoi?” He backed away against the wall and slid down it as his legs failed him. “You mean to tell me Monsieur Fauchelevent was that man? That man who grabbed hold of me as I fell? Who stole me away from the battle?”
“Yes, for the love of god; yes! Did the possibility never even occur to you?”

“Well, I— It is complicated. I thought it was he that I saw at the barricades at first, but when I questioned him, when I asked him if he knew Rue de la Chanvrerie, in which we’d fought, he denied it! And so I assumed it had been a man who only resembled him! Not just that, but I had spoken of the matter in front of him, expressed my disquiet at being unable to find my savior and repay them, and he did not act as though it were at all relevant to him!”

“Are you saying he lied to your face?” Javert scowled, clenching his fists and wishing very much to break something in half. “Sacre dieu, when I get my hands on him—”

“I realized some time later that it really had been him I saw,” Marius continued, “but I thought to myself ‘He did not fight there. What did he come there for?’ and then I thought, ‘Javert! He must have come there for the purpose of revenging himself!’ That was what I thought, monsieur—that he knew you were there, that he must have heard some word of your capture, and he had gone to the barricade to kill you! But this!” All the color had drained from the boy’s face, and he sat trembling on the floor, his eyes flicking about in a frenzied terror. “This means that …! Ah! It was me he came for! It was he that was responsible for preserving my life that night!”

“If you knew he was there, and that everyone else at that barricade that day died, why in the blue blazes would you not have assumed it was he that had carried you away?” raged Javert.

“But monsieur,” Marius protested meekly, “that would have been impossible to me at the time. Because the man who emerged from the sewers … the coach driver said the policeman arrested him! So I thought he would be in jail, or even prison, perhaps—but I made inquiries, and none of the arrests made that night matched that description. And yes, I knew Monsieur Fauchelevent was at the barricades, and that he had denied it to me, but I assumed the reason he’d denied it was because he’d been there to kill you! If he’d been there on my account, well—what reason had he to lie about it? None! None at all. So you see, in my mind, he could not possibly have been the same man who saved me!”

“Oh, but he was,” Javert said, tilting his head back menacingly.

“I see that now, yes. It all fits together so well; it is a wonder I did not see it before. Dieu, I have been blind! He was my savior. Oh, Christ, and all this time I’ve been …!” His face contorted in grief, and he put his head in his hands. “I am a monster,” he sobbed, his voice muffled. “I have been so cold to him; I have pushed him away …”

“It was you who was keeping his daughter from him!” Javert realized aloud. “It was you who nearly drove him into the grave!”

“I did not know! I did not know it was he to whom I owed my life! He told me of his past, that he was a wretched man, a wanted convict who’d broken parole, and I—”

He froze mid-sentence, turning to look up at the police inspector with horror at the words he’d just uttered.

Javert stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

But the boy only gaped.

“Oh, right,” Javert said, rolling his eyes and thrusting up the palm of his hand, “I suppose I should mention I’m duly aware of that fact.”

“You—you what?”
“I am aware, boy.”

“That he is a convict? That his name is Jean Valjean? You know?”

“Yes.”

Marius stared at him, bewildered. “Oh,” was all he could say in his stupor.

“But,” he finally said, “Why, then, have you done nothing? Do you know the whole of it? That he escaped the galleys, that he denounced another man and committed forgery to steal away his fortune?”

Javert’s brow bunched. “What say you?”

“Yes!” he said. “I have looked into the matter. In a certain arrondissement of the Pas-de-Calais, there was a manufacturer, a reformed convict by the name of M. Madeleine, who made a vast sum of money in the manufacturing of jet beads. He used this money to fund schools and hospitals. He visited the sick, supported widows. He was like the foster father of the poor. He refused the cross; he was appointed mayor. None knew of his former crimes. And then, a man came along, Jean Valjean, and he revealed him, and he forged his signature in order to withdraw from Lafitte the whole of Madeleine’s savings! He destroyed that kind and generous soul, and I heard that later the unhappy man drowned in the sea at the galleys! In effect, monsieur, Jean Valjean killed this man!”

Javert gazed down at him dumbly for a second before his lips split into a savage grin. A rumbling, noiseless chuckle reverberated in his chest, turning to a bellow, and the man threw his head back, his hands on his hips, bursting into peals of terrible laughter.

Marius beheld this with fright.

“Killed him!” Javert echoed, still laughing, “Killed him, you say! Oh, that’s good! That’s really capital!”

“Why?” the boy squeaked, curling into himself. “Why do you laugh?”

“Jean Valjean did not kill Monsieur Madeleine;” Javert exclaimed, “he was Monsieur Madeleine!”

Marius started. “What?”

“Those two men, Valjean and Madeleine, they were not two men, but one! Jean Valjean came to Montreuil-sur-Mer and made his fortune there, and he did not steal it from Lafitte, but merely reclaim it! I would know; for I was working in that town while he was mayor. I had known him from his previous sentence years prior in Toulon, and I grew distrustful of him after a series of events which recalled those memories. It was I who sent him back to the galleys! And he did not die there, but faked his own death to escape, and I had heard rumors that made me suspect as much. I have hunted that man across all of France!”

“Ah!”

“In fact,” Javert continued, regaining his composure, “I was making fit to arrest him when he climbed out of the sewers with you on his back.” He lowered his voice. “But seeing as I owed him my life, I was … less ruthless in the endeavor than I should have been. He convinced me of your case; he would plead nothing on his own behalf, but mon dieu,” he said, touching his brow, “he would not shut up about you—how you needed to be seen by a doctor, how you ought to be returned to your family.”
“I permitted that you might be taken to your grandfather’s address—only because, at the time, you appeared to me as a man surely destined for death in short order. Which, naturally, ended my obligation to arrest you as an insurgent. After we quit the place, I should have taken him to the nearest station house, alerted the gendarmes to him right then and there, but I—” He let out a frustrated grunt, turning his face away. “Things … happened. I did not end up informing against him. Much the same as you have not, and probably for similar reasons.”

“I see,” breathed the youth, still lost in his shock. “You … you spared him, because he saved you. One mercy in turn for another.”

Javert’s eyes slid away, a grimace on his face. “Perhaps not in so few words, but … something like that, yes.” He thought for a moment more, then abruptly changed pace. His gaze became a glare. His voice lowered to a growl. “He almost died because of you, you know.”

Marius looked back up. “What?”

“The way you kept him from his daughter. He felt he had nothing more to live for. When I found him—and this happened purely by chance—he was already on Death’s doorstep. He’d been starving himself out of grief for months. He wouldn’t even call a doctor for himself. You are lucky I came along when I did. Otherwise, you would not have a father at present.”

A fresh bout of horror flashed across Marius’ face. “Truly? And to think— Oh, pardieu, we must go to him immediately!” He got to his feet in a passionate fervor. “I owe him everything, and I have been horrible to him! All this time I’d thought him a wicked man, a criminal, a murderer, whose only grace was his conscience and his devotion to Cosette, but now I see it clearly! Good God, he is a saint! I have to go to him. I must apologize; I must beg his forgiveness! Excusez-moi, Inspector,” he said, straightening himself and smoothing out his tailcoat, “but I have to leave this very instant. Oh, where is Cosette? I have left her in the street; ah, I must find her. We will go to his house; we will—”

“I am coming with you,” Javert said.

The boy did not appear to hear him.

Javert trailed after him out of the chapel, folding his arms over his breast in the manner of Napoleon as Marius fretted and flitted about in the crowd.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Undertale - Toby Fox
Reparations

Chapter Summary

Marius rushes to set things right.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.”

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson

***

“Marius, there you are!” exclaimed Cosette. “Nicolette and I were waiting. You disappeared without a word. What kept thee?”

“Cosette!” he said, taking her hand in his, “Cosette, oh, I have been a fool. You will not believe what’s occurred. Bon Dieu, we have to leave immediately!”

“What has happened? Marius, you look affright! Are you all right? Is someone chasing you?”

“Ah! There is no time. I’ll explain on the way. Nicolette,” he said, pressing a coin into the bewildered old servant’s hand, “hire yourself a cab and go back to the house. Cosette and I have to go somewhere at once. There is no need for worry, we are not in any trouble, it is only that something terrible and wonderful has occurred and I need to set things straight with someone.”

“I— But monsieur, your grandfather—he expects you for dinner; what am I to say to him?”

“Say to him that I’ve some business I need to sort before coming home, and that I don’t know how long I’ll be away,” he told her as he signaled to the driver of the coach they’d taken there. “Stay!” he added quickly. “And set another place at the table while you’re at it. God willing, we shall have another guest.”

The old woman cocked her head at him, furrowing her brow. “As you wish,” she said. “But do try to get back at a reasonable hour, would you? It would be a shame to miss supper. And I hate reheating food.”

“I will take however long I take,” he said, stepping up into the carriage and helping Cosette. “And I shall not apologize for it. You will be made to understand why shortly.” He shut the door in
the woman’s face.

He barely observed Javert having entered the coach, and it did not occur to him as being anything out of place.

Javert tapped on the partition glass. Marius stuck his head out the window.

“Driver,” they both called out, one voice light and fervent, and the other deep and flat, “Rue de l’Homme Armé, number seven.”

***

Marius was horrified.

He sat hunched over on the velvet seat cushion of the coach, biting his lip and staring off at nothing. His mind was beset with revelations and a host of sharp and poignant emotions, and he hardly noticed Javert and Cosette conversing in the background.

He had been overwhelmed with guilt over his words, his actions, and his very thoughts towards M. Fauchelevent. They hung over him like looming shadows, condemning, accusing.

So much wrong he had done, believing himself in the right! He had kept the man from his child, pushed him away without informing her, thinking it better, thinking him a bad influence, thinking him—

Marius gave a start in his seat, his eyes flashing open. “Oh,” he breathed, clamping a hand over his mouth, “Oh, no.” He was seized with a great terror, and a feeling of repulsion rose in him towards himself.

He saw suddenly in M. Fauchelevent something of his father. The man’s words rang in his ears like an echo from the tomb.

‘Do you think, sir, you, who are the master, that I ought not to see Cosette anymore?’

‘I think that would be better,’ he’d replied coldly.

‘To go away now, never to see her again, never to speak to her again, to no longer have anything, would be hard,’ the man had said. ‘Truly, sir, I should like to see a little more of Cosette. As rarely as you please. Put yourself in my place; I have nothing left but that.’

Marius quivered. In his mind’s eye he saw two men, relinquishing their child to another family so that they might have a better life, and all the things with which they could not themselves provide them. He saw those two fathers cast away, forced out, because the family saw them as a disgrace, tainted. He saw them grieve at the loss of that which was most precious to them, each in their own secret agonies. He saw them try, time and time again, to be granted audience with that child—and, time and time again, be denied, and recede back into the shadows in heartbroken submission. Sacrificing themselves for the well-being of their child.

He saw a father hide behind the pillars of a chapel and watch for years a boy whom he was not allowed to visit, and who was not aware of just how desperately their father yearned for them, loved them, needed them. He saw letters torn up and thrown into the fire, and a child none the
wiser. A child who had no other knowledge than that, wordlessly, their father had faded out of their life. A child who gradually grew first to resent them for their absence, and then, in time, to forget them.

He saw a man dying alone and unloved, forgotten by the world. A tear on the cheek of a corpse. A uniform and a sword, sold off at market like mere scraps of cloth and metal. A garden of flowers trampled underfoot.

A child learning only too late of their father’s goodness, and of their noble heart. Learning too late of their unfulfilled desire to be a part of their life, snuffed out by prejudice and intolerance.

‘He almost died because of you, you know. The way you kept him from his daughter. He felt he had nothing more to live for.’

Marius shuddered, suppressing a sob. His eyes filled with burning tears. “Oh, God. Oh! God help me. What have I done?”

Those old wounds which had only just begun to close were opened up again, and deeply so, and what anguished veneration he had felt for the father he had never had the chance to know now directed itself towards the father of Cosette. Towards the man who was, by way of marriage, his father also.

Two fathers.

Dread and shame filled his soul at the idea that the fate of the first, which he lamented with all his heart and would have given anything to change, had almost befallen the second, and this time of his own accord, by his very hand. What he regretted about the one he had nearly caused the other. What kind of son was he, that he could banish the yet living father at the same time as he mourned the loss of the dead one?

In the manner that his grandfather had torn Colonel Pontmercy from him, so too had Marius torn Fauchelevent from his daughter. Only worse, even worse than that! For he had given the man his word that he should see Cosette every evening. And he had, without discussion on this point, and without explanation, slowly recanted that word, because he had discovered certain things about the man since then which drove him from dissociation to disdain. However, all of these unsavory things which he had thought to be true had just been proven false to him.

He was left with a portrait of himself disowning this man whom he should have called father under the pretenses of assumptions which he had never even bothered to ask the veracity of from the man himself. Even when he knew that the man—the slave of his conscience—would never lie about it. Because, he, Marius, had surmised the answers, and did not wish to hear them.

But the man was not a forger! The man was not a murderer! The man had ruined no one, killed no one. No one! He had even shot the helmets off those guardsmen instead of killing them. He had saved the revolutionaries by procuring for them a mattress to stop the artillery, and at the same time saved the guardsmen by way of warning shots. He had saved the spy Javert from execution, at the cost of his security. He had saved him, Marius, from certain death at the hands of the National Guard.

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “Do you know? I was even angry with him, because I thought he had been at the barricades and done nothing to help me! You were there, Cosette! I said I’d give the whole of our fortune to find the man that saved me once more. And he said nothing! Nothing, Cosette! Why would he do that? What possessed him to do that?”
“I have an idea of it,” Javert muttered, leaning back against the carriage seat with his arms crossed.

Marius looked up at him. “And what would that be?”

But Javert only replied “Later,” and flicked his eyes to Cosette.

Marius understood instantly. There were many things about her father which ought not be spoken in front of Cosette, and whatever this was, it was one of them. Somehow, it must pertain to the man’s criminal background.

“Suffice to say,” Javert continued, flicking some dust off the sleeve of his coat with a measure of disdain, “the man is too humble for his own good.”

“I am aware of that now, yes,” Marius said.

“I have always been aware of that,” said Cosette.

“You do not know the half of it,” Javert sighed.

Marius shook his head, turning to his wife with renewed panic. “Oh! Cosette. I have been so cruel to him. All that he ever asked of me was to visit you. I said that he should see you every day. I promised him that. And then I made him feel unwelcome there! I told them not to light the fire in the cellar stove any longer. One day I even made them take the chairs.”

The girl gave a start. “What! It was you who ordered those things? But papa—I mean, Monsieur Jean said—”

“No, do not call him that any longer,” Marius interjected. “It was wrong of him to make you do that. It was wrong of me to make him feel that he must. No, call him ‘father’, call him ‘papa’, call him all of those adorable names which you used to.”

“Truly? I may?”

“Bon Dieu, yes. It is not right that you need ask anyone permission to. Never call him ‘Monsieur’ again. If he insists upon it, rebuke him. He is no stranger; he is family!”

“Oh!” She beamed. “Thanks!”

“You should not thank me, Cosette,” he said, shaking his head. “In fact you should be very angry with me. I have consulted you on none of this. I had good reason to, or so I thought. But I made decisions about you and your father that I had no authority to make. I gave him permission to see you and then took it away.”

“The fire and the chairs—that was truly you, then?”

“Yes.”

“But papa said he was the one who ordered that!”

Marius paled. Those words had just pierced his heart.

Across the carriage, Javert clicked his tongue, turning his face away.

“No,” Marius breathed. “Did he? Oh, Lord. He would, wouldn’t he? But it was I who ordered that.”
“You!” The girl looked heartbroken. “But why?”

“I had thought him someone else; I had wanted to make him to feel unwelcome. I had hoped he would not come around anymore.”

“‘Someone else’?” she echoed. “‘Make him feel unwelcome’? I don’t understand you. Why would you want him to leave? How could you think ill of him? What has he done to you?”

“He has done nothing to me, Cosette. He saved my life! He gave us the whole of his fortune. I have misjudged his character.”

“Misjudged! On what grounds? He has never been anything but kind to you. Has he not?”

“He has. He has been more than kind to me. Oh, you do not even know how kind he has been.”

“Then why did you drive him away? Why did you think so poorly of him?”

Marius grit his teeth, glancing away. “I cannot tell you that.”

The girl had been close to tears; now she was close to fuming. “Why? Am I not good enough for your trust? Am I not intelligent enough to understand? You say that you love me, but you keep these secrets from me. You and papa both! Am I naught but a child to you? You are my husband; I am your wife. You are not supposed to keep secrets from me.”

“I am sorry, Cosette. Truly, I am. I would be honest with you if I could. But it is his secret, too, and I do not have the right to share it. Javert, he knows of what I speak.”

“Javert!” She looked to the inspector, aghast, and then back to Marius. “You mean to tell me even he knows this great secret about papa, when I do not? How is that fair? I am his daughter!”

“It is unfortunate,” Javert said, his voice deep and even as he cast his pale blue eyes on Cosette, “but trust me when I say, you are better off not knowing certain things about your father’s past.”

She stared at Javert, at a loss for words. Her brow furrowed, her lips parted. “But—but he is not a bad man. I know that. I know that! He is not a bad man at all.”

“He is not,” agreed Javert.

Marius studied the inspector’s face for a moment before turning back to his wife. “Cosette, all you need to know is that your father is a saint, and there was a misunderstanding between us, and I have been terrible to him, and I realize that now and regret it deeply. He did not deserve the thoughts I had of him. I must make reparations. He has sacrificed everything for us. We must be good to him, we must treat him like a king.”

“That is what I have been trying to tell you for months!” Cosette exclaimed.

Marius shrunk in his seat, grimacing remorsefully. “I know. I thought you only admired him the way you did out of ignorance, and devotion, and love for he who raised you. But I was wrong; he has more than earned every word of praise you’ve given him. It was I who was the ignorant one. It was I who was the fool.”

“I am very cross with you,” Cosette said, folding her arms over her breast and sitting back with a huff.

Marius hung his head. “As you well should be.”
The three of them sat in silence for awhile.

“To be fair,” Javert remarked, “none of this would have occurred if your father had enough sense to tell him the whole story.”

“That is right!” Cosette remembered, thrusting her face up. “I should be cross with him, too. He let you push him away and he said not one word to me about it! He let you do as you liked, even though it hurt both of us! Neither of you defended me when I asked, and you kept secrets from me. The two of you are wicked, wicked men. I shall not let you hear the end of it.”

Javert raised his eyebrows at him.

“Oh, don’t look at me thusly,” Marius chided him. “You thought ill of him too, until he saved you.”

The man shrugged apathetically. “This is true. I deny nothing. And I too pushed him away, wishing to sever our ties. That does not, however, make you any less of a booby.”

Marius stared at him for a second, his eyebrow twitching. He drew in a breath and gave a deep sigh, letting his shoulders sag in defeat. “That is fair.”

***

Javert threw the door open, and it sounded with a loud bang against the adjacent wall.

“You insufferable idiot!” he cried.

Valjean started in his chair across the room and appeared to choke on his tea, the cup nearly slipping from his grasp, spilling a little liquid into its saucer. He eyed Javert with a look of mute horror, bewildered at this sudden and violent intrusion.

“What do you think you are; some kind of martyr? You go around saving people and haven’t even the decency to tell them! Who do you think benefits from your humility, eh? Not you! Not them!” he accused angrily, gesturing to the two children rushing through the doorway past him.

If Valjean had been startled by the appearance of the inspector, he was terrified at that of his daughter and son-in-law. He bolted up from his chair, taking a step back towards the wall, his eyes alight with panic. To Javert he seemed like a schoolboy that had been caught doing something he knew he shouldn’t. However, instead of the fear of being reprimanded, he had within him the fear of being praised.

Cosette flew to him like a moth to a flame. “Papa!” she cried, and she flung her arms around him.

The man’s face flooded with a sort of restrained joy at this utterance. “Cosette,” he murmured, dumbstruck. “You are here, you come to me, you call me ‘papa’.” His eyes began to well with tears. “But—” He looked up and found Marius standing a little ways off. “Ah! You too?”

“Father!” Marius managed to say, his voice cracking.

This word affected a great shock upon Jean Valjean. “‘Father’!” he repeated in disbelief, his
gaze darting from Marius to Cosette and back to Marius in a state of bewilderment.

This seemed to break the spell that Marius had been under, and the boy rushed to him, clasping his hands in his. “Yes, father!”

“Do you mean—” The man seemed at a loss for breath. “You pardon me, then?”

“Pardon?” Marius exclaimed. “Why, there is nothing to forgive! I am in your debt, monsieur. I owe you my life!”

“You!” Valjean exclaimed in a fright, locking eyes with Javert. “You told! But why; why tell all that? You said—” His brow knit. “Why have you done this?”

“Why have I—?” Javert was overcome—incredulous, revolted. His disbelief hardened into outrage. “Because he asked, you great dolt! I didn’t expect you to have hidden it from him!” His tone grew harsh, his tongue a lash. “Damn you, Valjean! Damn everything you stand for if it means you won’t even allow yourself a little bit of happiness! What are you so afraid of, you old fool? That people will appreciate you? That you’ll be respected? Mon dieu,” he mocked, throwing up his hands, “what an atrocity! Poor monsieur Fauchelevent, being given the credit he deserves!” His sharpened words turned to a roar. “You infuriate me, do you know that?”

Valjean only stared at him, his face pale and drawn.

“Papa!” Cosette said again, clutching him by the lapels of his tailcoat. “Oh, you will let me call you that, won’t you? Marius says I may. No more of that ‘Monsieur Jean’ nonsense. You are my father, even if it’s not by blood. I don’t care what you say about it. Papa, you’ve been so mean. I was made to believe you were on some journey, far away. But you have been here the whole time! I sent Nicolette, and each time she returned saying ‘he is absent,’ but you weren’t! And you have grown sick, and you did not tell us! How could you? If I had known— Oh, you have been so very naughty! Monsieur Javert has told us everything.”

Valjean’s eyes bulged. “Every—?” His gaze darted to Marius. “She knows?” he breathed fearfully.

“That you saved my life, yes!” the boy exclaimed. There was a look in his eyes that said he understood the real question Valjean was asking: if she knew of his past, all of it—and that he’d spared her those details which might paint him in an unfavorable light.

Relief washed over the old man’s face—and gratitude. “Ah,” he said.

“You went to the barricades and rescued him from that dreadful place,” said Cosette. “If not for you, he would be dead! My poor, sweet Marius. You saved him for me.”

“Not only that,” Marius interjected, “but you saved Monsieur l’Inspecteur as well! If not for you, we would both have lost our lives at the barricades that day.”

Cosette’s eyes sparkled with tears. “Oh, papa. Why did you not tell us?” That angelic voice began to crack. “You let them push you away. All this time, you were missing me, and I was missing you! And there were so many times that I wanted to see you. But you let yourself slip away from us, as though we would not notice! You thought you would make us happier by leaving. How could you think that?”

Two tears glided down her cheeks. “I love you, papa. I don’t want you to go away. Why would you believe I would? You are so mean to think that. And here I was, so grieved that I had not seen you in months. Do you know how happy I was when I heard whither we were going? I said to him
‘Ah! Rue de l’Homme Armé! I have wanted for so long to go there, but I was afraid to ask!’ And my heart nearly burst for the joy of it, I had been missing you so. Oh, papa,” she sobbed, “You almost died! ‘Out of grief’, Monsieur Javert told us. ‘He was on Death’s doorstep’ he said, just like that. And you were going to let yourself die without sending one word to us. How could you?”

“I am never letting you out of my sight again. You are coming to live with us at Rue des Filles du Calvaire, and you will eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with us, and I won’t let you have any more of that black bread. No; Marius and I are going to spoil you rotten. You will have good, hearty food, plates and plates of it. And you’ll always have a fire in your hearth in the winter, and warm, thick blankets, and those pretty rugs from Persia. Your armchair is still waiting for you, in your room, with the Utrecht velvet, and the nightingale in its nest outside the window—I had so wanted you to have those things. I said to myself ‘I shall enlist Marius and grandpapa and I shall spoil him silly!’ But then you never came. Marius says that it was his doing, that he made you feel unwelcome, but it was your fault too, you know—for not pressing the matter.”

“You shall come now, though; I will make you! You do not have a choice. Marius and grandpapa and I, we all want you there. And so you shall be! And you and I will go for walks in the garden, and look at all the flowers. Oh! Wait until you see how beautiful it is. All the roses are in bloom, and the paths are lined with river sand and violet shells. I grow strawberries there, did you know that? I tend them all by myself. They gave me a little plot of earth to do as I wished with. It is in a charming corner, and the sun shines brightly there. It makes the berries sweet. And I’ll pick you baskets and baskets of them and you shall see how good they taste. Next year we will plant some together, and see whose grows the fattest. It will be yours, I will wager, and I will not even be cross over it.”

Valjean stood staring at her in wonder, too struck to speak.

“Oh, I’ve missed you so!” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “To think, all this time, you were so alone. You did not even have Toussaint. It must have been so sad, to live by yourself like that. No wonder you grew ill. Well, not anymore. I won’t have it!” she said, stamping her foot. “You shan’t stay in this dreadful place a minute longer; we’re going to take you away to come live with us forever and ever, and I will make it so you are never let to feel sad again! We shall all live happily, and it will be like the end of the story books you used to read to me.”

Valjean’s Adam’s apple bobbed. He turned to look at Marius, who still stood just beside them. “And you,” he breathed in fearful disbelief, “you permit this?”

“Of course!” the boy exclaimed, wringing his hands. “You are my father. You have been my father all this time, and I have refused you, and been callous towards you, and chased you away, when I should have welcomed you like his Excellency himself. No, it is I who should be asking you for permission.” He grimaced, hanging his head.

Once more he clasped Valjean’s hands in his own, and sank to his knees on the floor, squeezing his eyes shut with an air of reverence. “Monsieur,” he began earnestly, “I beg your forgiveness. You have been a better father than I deserve, and I, an ingrate. I have been horrible to you, and cold. You have been nothing but generous towards me. I have misjudged you; I am a fool. You have my sincerest apologies for the way in which I’ve treated you. I regret everything. You are a saint. Would you do me the honor of allowing me to call myself your son?”

Valjean gazed down at him with wide eyes. He seemed to be at a loss, too overwhelmed to know what to make of anything any longer, to know what he ought to say, to do. “Of … allowing …?” he repeated dumbly.

“Say you will pardon me,” pleaded the boy.
The old man opened his mouth. Trembled. There was a certain amount of terror written on his face as he backed against the wall. He seemed to be afraid of the adoration which had just been expressed towards him. “I—Y-you—”

Marius looked up at him with heartbreak.

“Papa …” Cosette murmured.

Valjean looked to her. Back to Marius. His gaze darted between them fretfully. For a second it met Javert.

Javert only stared at him, stoic.

Curious, he thought. The man really was afraid of being praised. More than afraid. The idea of it terrified him.

Valjean gave a sort of start, clutching his arm and glancing away anxiously. He cringed, as though pained by something. “This …” He lifted his eyes to them once more, questioning, nervous. “This is—truly what you wish?”

“Yes!” Marius cried. “God, yes.”

“Please, papa, say you’ll let us be good to you.”

Valjean faltered.

“Pray, say you’ll forgive me, monsieur.”

“I would forgive you, sir,” Valjean finally said, unable to meet his gaze, “but really, there is nothing to forgive. Knowing what you knew of me …”

“I knew nothing of you!” Marius exclaimed. “You told me only the worst of yourself, and left out the good. You allowed me to push you away because you thought it was what you deserved. But you deserve nothing of the sort! Permit us to take you home. Please. You shall spend all your days with us. You shall see your Cosette whenever it pleases you. I shall give you all that I can give, and more. I assure you, I desire this with the whole of my heart.”

Valjean looked at him. Gazed at Cosette. Shut his eyes. Javert could see his resolve breaking at the promise of his daughter. “Oh—oh, very well, then,” he said, loosing a shaky breath.

A relieved smile broke out across the boy’s face.

Cosette beamed. She threw her arms around her father. “Ah! We’re going to be so happy together,” she told him, fresh tears springing to her eyes as she brushed a white curl behind his ear. “You’ll see. I promise.” And she placed a kiss upon his brow, laying her head on his shoulder.

This seemed to crack the final barriers Valjean had erected inside himself. His face contorted, and the tears finally spilled down his cheeks as he buried his face against her. Clutching her fiercely, he suppressed a sob. He smoothed her bonnet tenderly.

“The proof that God is good is that she is here,” he murmured.

Marius rose to his feet slowly and approached them. Tentatively, he touched the man’s shoulder.

Valjean did not stir.
As though this signaled that he had permission to, Marius put his arms around them, drawing them both into a gentle embrace.

From where he leaned against the wall, Javert watched all of this solemnly, his arms crossed over his breast.

Then, dipping his head, he quietly slipped out the door.

***

Chapter End Notes

Why are so many chapters missing suggested listening? *Look around you narrator voice* We just don't know \_(ツ)_/\
The Humility of the Sinner on Being Permitted into Eden

Chapter Summary

Marius and Cosette take Valjean to the Gillenormands', but his remorse follows close behind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think the most important thing in life is self-love, because if you don't have self-love, and respect for everything about your own body, your own soul, your own capsule, then how can you have an authentic relationship with anyone else?”

-Shailene Woodley

***

The three of them all sat inside the Gillenormands’ carriage, Cosette beside Marius, and Valjean on the seat opposite them.

The whole ride to the house, Cosette had been rambling happily on about all the things they would do together—the Jardin du Luxembourg, the opera, the theaters, the billiards hall, the charming little cafés they had found in the past months, and all the other sorts of things for people with money to do in the city of Paris. She insisted her father must absolutely see their garden, and spoke of the little robin redbreast that lived in the stone wall and poked its head out at her every day as she passed, and the orange cat with the white stockings on its feet which came by sometimes, and which she was afraid might one day kill the poor bird.

And now and then she would fall back into chiding him, and her husband also, the former for believing himself to be unnecessary or unwanted in their lives and the latter for persuading him of such ridiculous things.

The two men allowed her to say all that she wished and did not attempt to argue with or correct her. Marius had an air of sheepishness and guilt; Valjean had one of embarrassed wonder.

When the carriage stopped, the driver had to announce to them that they had arrived, for they had taken no notice of it.

“Cosette, mon coeur,” Marius entreated, “will you wait outside for a moment?”

“Whatever for?”

“I wish to speak with your father in private.”

She pouted for a second before shrugging and smiling mischievously at them. “Very well,” she
said, “But do come quickly. I am too excited to wait. And if you take too long I shall drag you both out by your ears.”

When she had gone out of earshot, Marius dropped his nervous grin and replaced it with a look of fervor, running his hand over his face, through his hair, whilst staring wide and glassy-eyed at the floor of the carriage and taking deep breaths. Shaking his head to himself, he lifted his face to look at Valjean. “You!” he exclaimed. “I have too much to say to you, and not the privacy or the time. We shall need to talk elsewhere of things. But while it is fresh in my mind—” He covered his eyes for a moment, then threw out his hands.

It was then that Valjean saw the boy was close to tears.

“I ordered the servants not to light the fire in the cellar stove anymore; I had them take the chairs,” Marius said. “And you—! You told Cosette that it was your doing. Why?”

“I did not want her to think ill of you,” he said, hushed.

Marius’ expression tightened in anguish. “How can you say that?” he breathed. “You, whom I have so wronged, for so long.”

Valjean only smiled sadly at him, pain in his eyes. “One understands, monsieur, when one is being shown the door. There need not be a disturbance in the happiness of the household on account of that.”

“But—the indignity of it all!” he protested, clutching his head. “How could you stand it? How could you allow yourself to be driven out thusly, when I promised you—I promised you—that you should see your Cosette every day?”

Valjean’s gaze fell to the carriage floor. “It was your right to make that offer,” he said. “As it was your right to take it back. Even without discussion, be it may. When departing on account of strife, it is better to do so in silence, don’t you think? I did not need words to understand your sentiments, anyway. They were perfectly clear to me. And I could not argue with them. I had no right to.”

“But, to be forced into the shadows, without protest …”

“I was not angry with you, monsieur. I held no grudge on it. You need not feel guilt.”

“My guilt is not what concerns me in this matter, but—truly, you have every right to hate me.”

“Valjean only smiled sadly again, shaking his head. “Hate? No. Not you, not now.” He stared at the floorboards, solemn. “I must admit, I did not always love you. When I first learned of you, of your love for Cosette, my first instinct was—and I will not deny it—one of hatred. You were going to steal her away from me. She was the only person I had, the most precious thing in my life. To lose her … I could not bear it. Even if the cause was a happy one. To be honest, in the beginning, I resented you with every fiber of my being.”

“When I learned you had gone to the barricades expecting to die, I was filled with relief. Is that not a monstrous thing?” he said, glancing up at him for a second. “I was glad that you were going to die. Because Cosette would remain at my side.” Giving a sigh, his gaze returned to his feet. “But then I realized what a terrible thing that was, to take joy in the death of some poor boy I’d never even met, and who had never done me wrong. I realized that, were you to die, Cosette would be grieved by it. That she loved you dearly. And that you gave her happiness, with your affections.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Her happiness … that was the only object of my life. To destroy it by
letting you die, when I had the knowledge and the power to prevent your death—how could any man be so selfish? I fancied myself her father, but I had no right to lay claim to her life. To dictate her path, or choose who she loved. Simply knowing of her love for you, and of your plight—I was obligated to protect you from that fate. And so. Even knowing it would one day tear her from me, I donned my uniform and went to the barricade. I watched you, and at the very last moment I took you by the collar and dragged you away. I carried you through the sewers, and bandaged your wounds, and even as I did those things, I hated you.”

“For months, I hated you. And I thought, on the occasion, that you might yet die, and that I could absolve myself of blame for it, because I had done all I could to keep you safe. Do not mistake me, monsieur; I knew how black and terrible such thoughts really were. And immediately after thinking them, I reviled at myself. But still, I thought them! With what avarice my heart did cling to her, sometimes; I loved her so.”

“Yet you recovered, and you met with her again, and when I saw how truly you loved her, and how happy she was at your side, I could not hate you any longer. Indeed, I grew to care a little for you in turn, because you loved each other so. Therefore, when you deigned fit that I should leave, I accepted it.”

Marius shook his head vehemently. “You should not have gone without a fight.”

“Sir, I fought as much as my conscience would permit me.”

“Which was next to nothing at all! All this time, you knew what you’d done, you knew I owed you my life, and you allowed me to think ill of you, condemning yourself by omission! Can you truly hate yourself so?”

Valjean grimaced, glancing away. “Humility is not the same as hate.”

“But you allow yourself to be punished as though it was!” he protested.

Ignoring this comment, Valjean turned to look out the window. “We should get going, he said quietly. “Cosette will be waiting on us.”

Marius gave him a tight-lipped frown, even as he opened the carriage door. “I am not through talking to you, monsieur. We shall speak more on this later.”

Wordlessly, Valjean exited the carriage.

***

“So!” M. Gillenormand exclaimed, “The original returns.”

Jean Valjean stood on the steps of the estate, Marius and Cosette at his sides. His posture was diminutive; he held his hat in his hands.

“And where have you been all this time, eh?” the old man asked. “Why, I wit it’s been a month or two since you’ve last come. What have you been doing, that you haven’t the time for your children?”

“Grandfather!” Marius exclaimed, upstarting. “You misunderstand.” He shook his head. “Oh,
you would not believe what I have to tell you. All this time I had been thinking ill of him, when in reality, Monsieur Fauchelevent had—"

“I have been on a journey,” said Valjean. He stepped forward, past Marius who had leapt in front of him to his defense, and he touched the boy's arm gently, dismissively, as he passed.

Marius looked at him in surprise, stopping short.

“That is why I have not been around as of late. You see,” Valjean said softly, “for some time now, my health had been on the decline. I could only take short visits with Cosette. You understand. It was very hard for me. I was embarrassed. I did not want anyone to see me. My strength was failing. There came a time I could not bring myself to come at all. A little while after this, a friend of mine took me to his house to recover. And so I have, albeit slowly. That is where I have been, monsieur. I regret that I have not been able to pay a proper visit prior to this. It was a long and ponderous illness. You have my apologies.”

All of this was spoken with perfect calm and a trust-inspiring humility.

Marius was staring at him, dumbstruck.

M. Gillenormand blinked. This information seemed to have taken him by surprise, and he took a moment to consider his words. “Hm,” he hummed quizzically, “An illness, you say?”

“Yes, but I am over it now.”

“Well.” The man tapped the butt of his cane on the porch. “You could have sent a letter.”

“I did not wish to trouble you,” said Valjean. “It would have caused me guilt to burden anyone with worry over my health. And then, I suppose, I have a certain amount of pride, which prevented me from clarifying the situation.”

The two gentlemen stared at one another, motionless. They searched each other’s faces.

“I see,” said Gillenormand. “Come in, then,” he sighed, gesturing to the hall. “Nicolette has set a place for you.” As he turned away, he glanced over his shoulder at his grandson. “Honestly, Marius,” he chided, “you could have just said it was your father that was coming to dinner.” He let out a scoff. “Being all dramatic like that—you would have thought it was the Duchesse de Berry, for God’s sake.”

***

There was still quite some time before dinner, so Cosette made good on her promises and took Valjean on a tour of the garden. They walked slowly, arm in arm, stopping to look at everything. Marius trailed them at a respectful distance.

Brimming with pride, Cosette pointed out her little strawberry patch, which was indeed well-tended, and Valjean praised her for it. “But you shall need to place some netting over them when the fruit begins to grow,” he said, almost absentmindedly. “—suspended up on sticks, so that it’s taut and does not touch the plants. Elsewise, the birds and the squirrels are going to make off with the berries before they have a chance to fully ripen.” He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully, staring at the lines of rounded triplet leaves and little white blossoms with their yellow centers.
“And you shall need to hoe a little between the rows, now and then, to discourage competition, and enrich the ...” He trailed off, noticing that both children were now staring at him with some amount of surprise, their faces blank.

Cosette stifled a giggle. “He used to be a gardener, at the convent,” she told Marius. “So he knows all sorts of useful things about plants.”

“Ah, I see,” her husband returned. “Perhaps, then, he would like to help you out here?”

“Oh, I intend to make him,” she said with a conniving grin, turning back to Valjean. “You’ll help me take care of everything, won’t you?”

Without thinking, Valjean nodded hastily at her, clasping his hands behind his back.

“See?” she said to Marius. “I think he will enjoy himself. He hasn’t gardened in a long time, did you know that? We had that lovely garden in the back of Rue Plumet, but we never did any actual gardening there. When we first moved in, he said I might do with it whatever I wished. I liked it how it was, and so we left it alone. The bindweed and the butterflies, the honeysuckle, and the brambles, and the birds ... it was all so romantic. I think he liked it that way, too. The way it grew. Isn’t that right, papa?”

Valjean gave a start at the sudden emergence of old memories these words caused in him. It was indeed true. When he had first bought the house, he’d taken one look at the garden, and the tree-pruner and the gardener in him cried out to return it to its former glory. But the convict in him said “no”, and bade him leave it be, lest it attract attention to them. And then, there was something of divinity in its wilderness. With its abundance and diversity of plants and animals, and its profound and peaceable solitude, it reminded him somewhat of Eden. It was their secret shelter, and in a way, to his thinking, he and Cosette were the only two people in the world.

Over the next few years, he took pleasure in watching her roam about the garden, which in itself was a sort of wilderness, uncharted and begging to be explored. She poked her head into the thickets and bent down on hands and knees to examine things. She would accidentally dirty her dresses with mud and grass stains, and he would only smile at her. Often times she would drag him out of his little gardener’s shack with a loud proclamation of having found something exceedingly interesting, and he would open the door to find her holding up some strange looking rock, or some tiny captured creature.

Once he even opened the door to find her proudly holding up a juvenile couleuvre d’Escaulape that was twining itself around her fingers in a panic.

‘Cosette,’ he said very gently, ‘That is a snake.’

‘I know!’ she beamed. ‘Isn’t it marvelous? I found it climbing up a tree! I didn’t know snakes could climb trees. Look at his eyes! Look, papa, they’re like little copper bowls.’

And she was, of course, perfectly right.

Over the years, the garden had become her province, her secret hideaway, and he avoided it respectfully, just as one might avoid another’s bedroom, as it was their personal space. But still, he would watch her sometimes out the window, chin resting in his hand on the sill as he smiled serenely.

These images drifted through his mind, fading into one another phantasmagorically and opening up a wellspring of emotion. Cosette, trying in vain to catch tiny frogs, which darted away from her
the moment she closed in on them. Cosette reading one of his adventure books on the stone bench whose base was slowly being taken over by ivy. Cosette, smiling up at him in the dappled sunlight. Toussaint having to drag the both of them into the house for supper—Cosette from her garden, Valjean from his shack. Cosette, telling him excitedly of all the things she’d done and seen and read that day as they passed the plates around.

A heartrending nostalgia gripped Valjean suddenly, and the fondness and need of his daughter that he had been fighting so hard to stave off came rushing back to him in full force. He felt the hotness of tears grow at the back of his eyes, and he drew in a deep breath and blinked them away.

“That’s amply enough, boy.”

“A heartrending nostalgia gripped Valjean suddenly, and the fondness and need of his daughter that he had been fighting so hard to stave off came rushing back to him in full force. He felt the hotness of tears grow at the back of his eyes, and he drew in a deep breath and blinked them away.

“Papa?” came his angel’s voice.

He looked up at Cosette with a start.

“You have gone very quiet, just now,” she said softly. “Are you well?”

Valjean managed a smile at her and gave her a nod, turning his face away. “I am fine.”

He reminded himself that she was a married woman now, and she was not his. He had been her guardian, and now she no longer needed one.

“Were you missing gardening?” she coaxed with a knowing smile.

He tried to stifle his cracking voice as a stunted chuckle escaped his lips. “Something like that.”

***

The dinner was superb. This was surely not considered anything extraordinary in the Gillenormand household, but Valjean had no precedent for the sort of luxury they afforded themselves. Sure, he had for the past few decades been wealthy enough to enjoy the same, but he rarely touched his money, and then, never for himself. When he was mayor, the only lavish dinners he’d ever attended were ones he had been coerced into going to by the townsfolk, and which he accepted as a matter of duty and course rather than self-indulgence. For all else, he kept his meals simple, which affected some respect in the eyes of the nuns, as humility was seen as a grace. The only reason he had ever begun eating richer foodstuffs was on account of his daughter’s insistence. Even then, those meals were not anything particularly special—not, at least, compared to this.

How many courses could a meal possibly need? How much money went into these people’s budget for food? He wondered at this.

To his relief, Marius did not mention any of his prior deeds or heroism, though he’d clearly wanted to before. The boy, it seemed, was observant enough to take note of when someone would prefer something not discussed.

Cosette, too, was silent on these matters, but she was not silent on anything else. For the length of the dinner she talked and talked, and had to be reminded once in a while to pick up her fork and actually eat something. She babbled on about her father’s naughtiness, and his illness, and then, about how she had kept his room waiting for him. “And you will love the library,” she told him. “It has shelves upon shelves of books, all the way up to the ceiling, and some of them are very old. We can take turns reading them to each other, like we used to. And the weather is so nice; we can go out in the garden and sit beneath the trees.”
Valjean said almost nothing about any of these things. He only flashed a smile at her, and hung his head a little. There was a tightness in his chest.

After a little warming up, M. Gillenormand seemed, in fact, rather pleased at Valjean’s presence there. “It will be nice to have another man in the house,” he remarked. “We are too evenly matched at present. We must remind them all who wears the trousers in the family.”

Valjean grinned weakly at him. He felt the tightness in his chest grow.

“You are picking at your food, papa,” Cosette observed.

“I have been sick for a long time,” he reminded her quietly. “And my health has only just returned.”

The truth was that he was not hungry. Whether this was because he was not used to eating very much, or because of the supreme awkwardness he felt at being there, was unclear. Likely it was a mixture of both.

“But having been ill is only more reason to eat heartily,” she protested.

“Ah, well,” he murmured, stabbing into a piece of asparagus, “I suppose that is true.”

***

After dinner, Marius called Valjean aside to speak in private. The boy was in high spirits, as far as he could tell. There had indeed been an overabundance of excitement that day.

Valjean thought of Javert revealing everything to him, and what a shock it all must have been. He really wished the man had not done that. At the same time, when he put thought to it, surely the two, having perhaps thought one another deceased, could not escape speaking of him upon their meeting—he being the common thread that tied them together, and the reason both of them were still alive.

Vaguely, he wondered where Javert had disappeared to. One minute the man had been in his apartment, yelling at him and gesticulating wildly, and the next, he was gone. Truthfully, Valjean had not even noticed him leave. He had not even thought of him until this moment, his mind being preoccupied by other things. And it was to those things he returned now as he followed Marius through the house.

He glanced briefly around at the furnishings and the grand architecture, now lit by sconces dripping with wax, and felt just how out of place he was in a refined house like this.

The door clicked closed behind him. When the sound of the latch faded, it seemed to take all other noise along with it, leaving the drawing room shrouded in silence.

Marius had gone to the window, to peer out at the sky. The moon cast the floor in shades of blue; the rest was black.

Valjean remained by the door in the darkness, like a servant unbidden. The half-hearted smile he’d worn for the duration of the night had fled his face just as soon as they were alone with each
other. In its wake there was only shadow.

After a moment Marius seemed to notice Valjean had not moved to follow him, and he glanced over his shoulder at him curiously. Seeing the expression on his face, Marius blinked and turned to look at him.

Valjean could not bring himself to meet the boy’s eyes. His gaze rested on the patterned hardwood of the floorboards halfway between them, his head bowed. “Is this … really all right, monsieur?” he said quietly.

Marius’ brow furrowed. He cocked his head. “Whatever do you mean?”

Valjean swallowed, a lump in his throat. “That I should be here. That I should be granted audience with Cosette, and your family. That I should be … tolerated.”

Marius’ mouth fell open. “Tolerated? Monsieur, I— Father, how can you still …? I welcome you with open arms into our home. I would have you live here, if you will but accept the invitation. I want you here. Do you doubt my sincerity in that?”

Valjean faltered. “It is not that I doubt you, monsieur, but I feel you have been forced to certain conclusions about me that I perhaps ought not warrant in your mind.”

Marius looked befuddled. “Been … forced? What, because Javert told me what you did for us? How is that forcing me into anything? And what do you mean, that you ought not warrant my conclusions of you? It’s not as though Javert was lying. You saved my life; you saved his life! You did so much for all of us. How is my praise, my admiration of you, unwarranted?”

Valjean clutched his arm, his eyes trailing to the wall as he grimaced. “It is true; I did do those things. But I feel that— Monsieur, that does not outweigh what I—”

“Why are you still doing that?”

Valjean paused. “Doing what?”

“Addressing me so formally.”

“Because,” he said, “you are the master of the house, sir.”

“I am not the master of the house; my grandfather owns this property, not me. And I am certainly not the master of you—you, who are my elder, who are my savior, who are my better! I am your son, but even then, only by law. It is I who should be addressing you as the master!”

“Please,” he breathed, “don’t.”

“Then ‘father’ will have to suffice.”

Valjean cringed.

Marius studied him for a second, eyes searching his face. “Why do you act as though it pains you when I call you that?”

“Because I don’t deserve to be.”

The boy looked hurt. “You do! You do deserve it. That is what you are to me, both on paper and in my heart!”
“Sir, I am afraid that you think me a better man than I am. You forget what I have told you.”

“I forget nothing. I know who you are. Jean Valjean. I know you well. Not as well as I’d like, I must admit—but, as I am beginning to suspect, better than you know yourself. Javert was right,” he said, shaking his head, “You truly are too humble for your own good.”

Valjean frowned at that, turning his face away.

“Father,” Marius entreated. “Valjean. Is there no way to prove to you the veracity of my opinions? To prove that you deserve to be rewarded, and loved? That you deserve a place with us here?”

Valjean opened his mouth to speak, but found no response available to him. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He drew in a deep breath and sighed. “I would like to believe I belonged. Or at least, that I was accepted, despite my being what I am. But … monsieur—”

“Son. Call me son. Or at least, call me Marius. I cannot bear to hear you call me ‘sir’.”

Valjean squeezed his eyes shut. “Marius.” The name was hard to force past his lips. It felt wrong to address him in that way. “You could not even bring yourself to tell your grandfather of my past.”

“Because he does not need to know all that! It is irrelevant!”

“Irrelevant! I should think not. You say this is all your grandfather’s property. Do you have the right to make him shelter a convict under his roof, unknowingly? Your aunt and he—what would they think of me, if they knew? Would they be so eager to invite me into their home?”

Marius paused at that.

“And what if some trouble came to you because of me?” Valjean continued. “A past like mine brings its fair share of shadows, monsieur. You are aware of that, and it worries you. Otherwise, you would not have done what you did. Come, sir. If you did not feel you owed me debts, what would you think of me, knowing who I am?”

Marius’ eyebrow raised. “But I do owe you—”

“Pretend that you do not. Please. What would you think of me, had I not rescued you?”

The boy crossed his arms. “For one thing, I would be dead, so I would not think anything.”

“And if you had survived?”

Marius thought for a moment. His expression hardening, he took a step forward, standing up straight and rigid, and raising his head. There was a sharpness in his eyes. “I would think that you were a good man, monsieur. That you were very brave, and very strong. That you had a heart of gold. You started over in a new town, under a new name, and did your best to be an honest man. As a businessman, and the mayor, you brought happiness and fortune to all that resided therein.”

“And when those venerable positions were taken from you, you sought not revenge, but mere escape. In your travels, you rescued a little girl from an inn in Montfermeil, a very terrible place, and showed her kindness that she had never before experienced. You took that girl in as your own, and raised her with love, and were the best parent one could ask for; both mother and father to her.”

“Monsieur, the world has treated you badly, and all you ever gave it in return was charity. You
might have been a criminal once, but that was nearly two decades ago, in another life, another time. You are a changed man; that much is clear to me now. Even before, I had an inkling of it—but now I know for certain. Somehow, you took that old life, that old self, and molded it into something so gentle and so pure that it is scarcely to be believed.”

“But the world thought so little of you for so long that you don’t know what it is to respect yourself anymore. You refuse to accept praise, even when it is due. You refuse to see the good inside yourself. Because for all your life, people told you it wasn’t there. But it was! It is! Even nineteen years in the galleys, you kept a spark of it, and you fanned its flame, and now, monsieur, you shine brightly, and you bring warmth to all around you.”

Jean Valjean trembled at those words. He bit his lip. He turned away. When he spoke, it was in a low, hushed tone, almost as though to himself. “And if that man, whom you had accepted into your family, your home, was one day arrested by the police and revealed to be an ex-convict, bringing shame upon your household, and outrage in your relatives' hearts … what would you do?”

Marius was silent for a long, long time. “I would be very upset,” he murmured.

There was triumphant defeat on Valjean’s lips. “Ah.”

“With the police.”

Valjean’s eyebrows shot up. He knit his brow, looking back at him, open-mouthed.

“Because they would have made a mistake, monsieur,” Marius explained, staring him dead in the eye. “They would have come for dangerous man, a vicious old wretch, a wolf hiding amidst sheep. And I see no such person here.”

A tremor ran through Valjean. He grimaced, clenching his teeth and casting his face down, expression quivering. He tried to stop the tears, but they escaped and fell hot down his cheeks. All he could do was cover his eyes with his hand and turn away.

He wanted to protest, to say something, but his voice caught in his throat, and he couldn’t form the words.

Instead, it was Marius’ that filled the silence. “Will you at least allow us to be kind to you, and host you here until I can find a way to satisfy your doubts?” he entreated.

Valjean barely managed to make a reply. “If that is what you wish,” he breathed.

***

It was sometime past midnight, and Jean Valjean could not sleep. The bed was too soft. His mind was too full.

In the blue silence of the room, he lay awake, staring up at the patterns of inlaid wood on the ceiling. Looping knots and Tudor roses, sharp angles and spreading leaves; his eyes wandered aimlessly. He had slept in his clothes, because everything else was back at his flat, and because he was afraid to make himself any more comfortable.

Restless, he rose from the bed and opened the window. The thin white muslin curtains billowed
in the sudden breeze. They settled back into place as he crossed his arms and gazed up at the sky.

Softly, one by one, crickets chirped to one another below. Cosette was right: his window faced the garden, and opposite, to the left, grew a clump of acacia trees. Beyond them, beneath the glittering stars, stretched the rest of the garden. Its winding paths, all lined with river rocks and sand, gleamed pale against the grass.

Valjean studied it solemnly.

After a moment, he turned and left the house.

Outside, the air was still and warm against his skin. Were it not for the crickets, one could almost believe the earth had ceased moving, and stood frozen in time.

It smelled sweet; the garden was filled with flowers. Bushes of lilac and rose drooped under the burden of their newly grown blooms. Honeysuckle and grape vines clung to the tall wrought-iron fence.

Along the wall of the house grew hyacinths and muscari, lilies of the valleys, and bluebells, all mixed together in a neat little plot.

Valjean’s footsteps crunched quietly on the stones of the path.

There is something mystical and secret about a garden at night, when all the world is sleeping. Trees stand sentinel. Leaves are lit by faint, reflected starlight, dew glittering on their surface. Buds and blossoms close up tight, like dreamers drawing blankets about themselves. Life slumbers.

One is beset by strange feelings when one wanders in the dark, surrounded by nature.

Absentmindedly, Valjean ran his hand along the rough bark of a tree. He pondered without thinking. Something long-forgotten pulled at him, but he could not name it.

In the very center of the garden, he knelt down on the path, and sat cross-legged, gazing up at the sky.

The moon was fat and round, glowing like a window unto heaven. The stars put pinpricks of light in his eyes.

If Valjean was searching for an answer somewhere up in that vast, twinkling expanse, he did not know to what.

He sat there for a long, long time, his face upturned and stoic.

Finally, he sighed and rose to his feet, heading back from whence he’d come.

He paused along the path to examine the bloom of a white rose that had not quite closed all the way. He fingered the silken petals thoughtfully, drawing in close and breathing in its scent.

It smelled like the perfume Cosette always wore. The white of its delicate petals reminded him of her dress.

He thought of her, and himself, and the garden.

The Gillenormands’ garden. With her little patch of strawberries, so carefully tended.

Standing, he surveyed the whole of it.
All the plants were elegant and beautiful, surely hand-picked at one point or another, and perfectly manicured. All the flower beds were kept separated from the grass, covered evenly with mulch and lined with pebbles. Not a single weed was in sight.

He frowned, furrowing his brow.

Was there really a place for him here?

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

Ubuge - Masakatsu Takagi

Songs from "Friday Afternoons", Op.7: Cuckoo! - Choir of Downside School, Purley
Chapter Summary

Marius takes Jean Valjean on a trip to Vernon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“To be fully seen by somebody, then, and be loved anyhow - this is a human offering that can border on miraculous.”

-Elizabeth Gilbert

***

“Father,” Marius began during breakfast, “I have reached a decision. I am taking you on a trip.”

Valjean looked up with a start, a deviled egg halfway to his mouth on a fork.

“Oh, yes!” Cosette exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “That is splendid idea. You shall get to know each other better, that way.”

“What?” said Valjean. “To where?”

“Vernon.”

“Vernon!” he exclaimed in surprise. “But why? That’s a full day’s journey from here. What is there?”

“You shall understand when we arrive. It is a pilgrimage of sorts. There is someone I am due to pay a visit to.”

Cosette let out an excited little gasp. “It’s a mystery, then! How romantic. Won’t it be fun, papa? It will be like an adventure.”

Valjean’s brown eyes slid over to her with a look of uncertainty. “I suppose.”

“It is settled, then,” said Marius, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. “Tomorrow. We shall depart at six o’clock.”

***
The ride to Vernon took eleven hours by coach, and then some, as it stopped every now and again along the way to pick up new passengers, or let others off.

For the duration of the ride, Marius gazed at the passing scenery out the window, his chin propped up in his hand and a pensive look in his eyes. He seemed troubled.

At one point, the boy’s silence became so unbearable that Valjean asked him what he was thinking about.

“I am trying to compose what I must say to you,” Marius told him.

This was not a terribly satisfactory answer, but it satisfied Valjean in the sense that it warded him off from asking anything further.

The journey continued quietly, with only the occasional chatter of the other passengers to fill the carriage.

Valjean did not know what it was that he should be doing here, but he had been promised an explanation, and if nothing else, he was a patient sort of man, and so he waited.

At some point, he fell asleep.

***

When they finally disembarked the coach, having reached their destination, both men were suitably rested but in sore need of exercising their legs.

With little to no explanation of where they were going, Marius headed off down the street after they’d rented a room at the inn and deposited their luggage there. Valjean followed him curiously, with the slightest bit of agitation.

At one point they passed through a group of market stalls. Marius paused to buy a bouquet of flowers from one of the stands. He did not give any reason for this, and continued on his way.

To Valjean’s surprise, they neared a church. He began to wonder just how literal Marius had been when he’d said they were going on a pilgrimage.

The boy skirted the building to the right, heading for the other side. Valjean trailed a few yards behind. When the cemetery came into view, he understood.

The flowers had not been purchased for anyone living. It was in fact a true pilgrimage.

He followed Marius solemnly to one particular grave, marked by a wooden cross painted black, inlaid with white letters that read “COLONEL BARON PONTMERCY”.

The boy crouched down on one knee at the base of it, carefully placing the bouquet on the mound. He paused in thought for a moment before rising again. “Monsieur,” he said quietly, his gaze towards the ground, “This is my father.”

Valjean bowed his head to the grave in respect, as one might nod to a passing gentleman on the street.
They stood quietly for awhile.

“I suppose,” Marius finally said, “You are wondering why I brought you here. Well. I shall tell you.” He knelt down in the grass, running a finger through it ponderously. “I was not always a Republican, you know,” he began. His voice was hushed, as though he was not entirely speaking to Valjean. “In fact, for most of my life, I was a staunch Royalist, like my grandfather. It was one of the only things we had in common. I am aware now that they had in fact groomed me to be of that persuasion. But I am getting ahead of myself.”

He let out a sigh. “I never met my father, monsieur. He was absent from my life since the beginning. I was led to believe he was a man of questionable morals, and that I should not be yearning for his company. That I was better off without him. The reasons behind this were never fully explained to me. The family spoke as little of him as possible, and on the rare occasions when his name was mentioned, it was couched in disdain. Even having never met the man, I grew to resent him. In my mind, he must have been an unfeeling man, of poor character. I mean, what sort of monster abandons their child? At a certain point I simply stopped thinking on him entirely.”

“Then, one day, I was told that I must visit him. This was something I had never expected to hear, let alone do. As it was, the man had grown severely ill, and demanded to see me. Rather dumbstruck, I was sent off to Vernon to meet him. When I arrived, however, I found I was already too late. He had died, perhaps only moments prior. He still lay prone upon the floor, his eyes unseeing. It came as a shock to me. This was the first time I could recall seeing him, and so my only memory of him is as a corpse. I paid him my respects, as one does for the dead. I wore crape on my hat. But I had never known him, and could not grieve him, nor could I find any real reason to do so. Therefore, he quickly passed out of my mind.”

“Some time later, on a whim, I went to mass at Saint Sulpice, as I had in my youth, and I paused behind a pillar, sitting upon the chair at its base. A man approached me, saying ‘Sir, that is my seat.’ It was the warden of the chapel. His name was Mabeuf. He was the first to die at the barricades; Courfeyrac told me he was shot raising the flag. I do not know why he went there. He was not a man prone to fighting. His passion was his garden, and his books. He died honorably.”

“Anyway, I met him for the very first time at the chapel. I asked him why he had placed his seat behind a pillar, when he could have chosen any spot in the sanctuary from which to observe the mass. He explained to me that the spot held some significance for him, as he had watched a father hide behind that pillar for years in order to gaze upon his son, whom he was prevented from seeing by the rest of the family. For a full decade the father came to mass to see his child, as it was the only way he could, and he wept silently. Mabeuf and he became friends after a fashion. He asked him of his situation.”

“The man admitted that he was a veteran of the war—on what was considered by most to be the wrong side—and had been stripped of his proper rank and titles by the current regime, and allotted only a meager salary. That his wife had died early, leaving only one child, who was his joy, but that the mother’s family demanded to raise that child themselves, claiming it as their right. This would not have necessarily been a bad thing.”

“However, the family was comprised of very stern Royalists, and they disagreed with all that the father had done during the war. They had only begrudgingly accepted his marriage, and now that the wife was dead, they hated him openly. They thought of him as a brigand, a villain. But the family was wealthy, and well-regarded. The child’s future would be brighter in their care. So the father relinquished him to them. Only, the stipulation was that he must never attempt to contact the child, or else the family would disown the boy, and cast him penniless into the street.”
“So, although it broke his heart, the father abided by this terrible arrangement so that his son might grow to be happy and rich, while he, the father, languished in poverty and obscurity. M. Mabeuf told me that the man was a Colonel under Bonaparte, and that he had lived in Vernon. He remarked upon the sword-cut on his cheek. ‘His name was ‘Pont’-something or rather,’ he said. And I grew pale. ‘Pontmercy?’ I suggested. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘That was it.’”

“So you see, monsieur, this was how I first learned of my father. Mabeuf and I became close; we spoke often, and he told me all that he knew of the man. How my father had so desperately wished to see me, but could not, for fear he would ruin my future. Is it not despicable, monsieur? He loved me dearly all my life, and they stole me from him, and drove him away. They made him out to be horrible. They made me believe he did not love me at all. To think that he died, having never been allowed to know me, or express to me how much he cared! That he died never knowing if I even knew who he was, or what he’d done.”

Tears welled in Marius’ eyes. He bent his head, squeezing them shut. “There is nothing I can do to avenge him,” he murmured despairingly. “I can only pray that he is able to see me now, and understand how sorry I am for what happened to him, and how deeply I’ve come to respect him. The poor man!” He choked back a sob and laid his brow upon the beam of the wooden cross. “My father …”

If Jean Valjean had been sobered by the sight of the cemetery, and of the grave, he was sobered many times further by this display.

After a moment Marius regained some of his composure and resumed his speech, licking the salt from his lips. “My family rid themselves of everything he’d owned. His house. His belongings. All of it. They even sold his uniform, and his sword, because they meant nothing to them. Just sent them off to market, like mere trinkets, ugly and cheap. I did not know enough to preserve them. I let it all happen, unblinkingly.”

“Now I have nothing left of him. At one point, I had a slip of paper which he wrote to me, bequeathing me the title of Baron, which Napoleon had bestowed upon him for his achievements. It was my most valued possession. I kept it in a little locket ’round my neck. But one day my grandfather discovered it somehow and threw it away.”

He sniffed and tried to clear his throat. “After M. Mabeuf told me about my father, I took it upon myself to find out all I could of his life, and his accomplishments in the military. I’ve no idea how many books I took on loan. Entire nights were spent that way. It was all I could do for him, you see. To learn his past, and think of him with the reverence and the credit he deserved. I was denied the knowledge of him in life, and so I could only know him in death. For weeks I did nothing but read. I found my father was a true hero. I came to venerate Napoleon, as he had. Practically overnight I became a Bonapartist.”

“My family knew nothing of this. I had grown quite suddenly to despise them, but I held my peace for some time. In secret, I had a hundred cards made up bearing my name with the title of Baron. I had no one to give them to, so I carried them around in my coat pocket. However, one day my grandfather discovered them, and became furious with me. I came home to find him in a rage. He threw the cards in my face. He insulted my father, and me, and made remarks that I could not abide by. I had no recourse but to let my emotions burst forth.”

“We fought bitterly. It was over in an instant. When he found out about my newfound devotion to my father, and my shifted political views, he threw me out of the house. Perfectly simply, with a smile on his face. He disowned me. Just like that.” The malice and pain in the boy’s voice was unmistakable. “Just as they all said they would.”
“I am sorry,” Valjean managed to say.

Marius only nodded his thanks. “That was five years ago,” he said. “It is hard to believe, even now, that any of them can truly love me, doing what they did. All my life, to be so prepared to cast me out at a moment’s notice! To toss me away like rubbish if I made any sign of turning out as something other than what they’d wanted me to be. The deuce,” he muttered. “They may have taken care of me, but it was like—like they only did it because I was some asset to them. Like they were putting aside capital for their future, making another upstanding little Royalist, a well-respected lawyer, to one day go out into the world of politics and earn them praise, and respect, and money.”

Again, he shook his head, as if to dispel their hold over him. The setting sun caught the black of his hair and made it flash. “Without any further argument, I packed my things and left. I rented a tiny apartment in this ramshackle old building. I had next to nothing. My grandfather, in his overarching benevolence [1] granted me a stipend of sixty pistols every six months. I returned it unopened each time. I lived in poverty, if only to spite him. My clothing grew threadbare. I was quite nearly starving.”

“During this time I made a number of new friends. They were very into politics. We did not always see eye to eye, but I grew enchanted by them all. They were so passionate—it did not take them long to make me a Republican. I spent many happy evenings in their company. Even so, my situation what it was, I was miserable. And then, monsieur, one day, I saw your daughter walking in the gardens. Her beauty astounded me. I was smitten. My misery only increased. For you see, I could not bring myself to approach her. At times I thought I had lost sight of her forever, and we would never meet again. But then she would reappear, and fan the flames of my heart.”

“Eventually I had to confess myself; I left her letters beneath the stone on your garden bench. We grew enamored with one another. We met often, in the garden, late at night. I offer my apologies to you, monsieur; I know it is inappropriate that we should have done so without your consent. But I assure you that just to gaze at her, just to sit by her side, was enough. Hours were lost in one another’s eyes. I felt the luckiest, happiest man in all the world.”

“Then she tells me you are to move away, and that you are bound for England, and I know not what to do with myself. She could not stay. I had no means to follow. I was crushed. The grief of losing her overwhelmed my senses. I would rather have died than live without her. So I wrote her farewell, and headed off to the barricades to join my friends, suspecting—no, even relying on—that I would be killed there.”

“But you intercepted my letter. You came and you spirited me away from death, and brought me back into my grandfather’s keeping. Apparently they thought me dead at first. The servants told me that the shock of it sent my grandfather into a sort of breakdown. He confessed his love for me to what he thought was my corpse. But then I opened my eyes.”

“He was so happy I’d survived that he very nearly forgot about the feud we’d had. But even now, I dare not speak politics in front of him. And he will make digs at me, sometimes, and throw salt in my wounds. Do you know, monsieur, that he once asked me if I had not any close friends, and I said ‘Courfeyrac, but he is dead,’ and he replied ‘That is good.’” The boy shivered.

“Still, we try to get along now, despite these things. He has a hot temper, and sometimes I can see it rage, but then he thinks better of it, and curbs his anger, and bites his tongue. It is good of him. And I know—at least now—that he truly does love me. Somewhere. Even so, I cannot forgive him for what he did. Nor my aunt. It was atrocious.”

He ran a hand through his hair, once, twice. He let out a sigh, wiping his eyes with the back of
his hand. “So you know now my sad history, monsieur. Perhaps you can already guess why I have told you all of this. I shall explain myself anyway.”

“Without my knowledge, my father was driven away from me over misguided assumptions and petty grudges. My family feared his deeds would taint their perfect lives. So they took me and barred him entry into my life. He allowed this to happen because he thought he had less of a claim to me than they, and that it would be better for me. That I would have a better future. He sacrificed himself for me. The family painted him as a marauder and bound him with a shroud of silence. He did not deserve this. I was all that he had, and they would not let him see me. This was agony for both of us.”

“He was a great man, who should have been venerated by all around him. Who should have had statues made, and trees planted, in his honor. Who should have been allowed all the happiness in the world. But he died heartbroken, and alone, his deeds forgotten. I knew nothing of his struggles, or his sacrifice. Or even of his grandeur. It was only chance that revealed to me the honorable man that he was. But by then, he was already lost to me. I was unable to make things right, to make amends. It will haunt me for all of my life. His fate was tragic, and undeserved. And I can do nothing for him.”

With this, the boy rose to his feet and looked Valjean square in the eyes. His voice grew hard, and sharp-edged, a solemn oath, and he spoke as though half to himself. “But I can still do something for you.”

Jean Valjean was quite taken aback at the depth of this sentiment. He found he had no words at his disposal.

“Do you see now, sir, what it is that I feel?” Marius asked, “I realized, on the ride to your apartment, that I had done to you what my grandfather had done to my father the Colonel. I recoil at myself!” He drew a hand to his brow. “To think of the grief he must have endured at our separation! To think I myself forced that on another, of my own accord! I had thought you were a murderer, a brigand—a dark cloud casting shadow over us—but you are none of these things. I made assumptions about you, and drove you away based on them. Just like my grandfather. I was not thinking. The parallels had not occurred to me.”

Valjean bit his lip, staring at the ground. His soul was in turmoil. “You pardon me out of guilt for what has happened in the past,” he finally said, “not because I am deserving of a pardon. You feel that, in embracing me, you might atone for what befell your father.”

“But you are wrong! It is not out of guilt I do this, but gratitude!”

“Monsieur, I know better than anyone that there is a very fine line between those two things.”

“What of it? I feel guilt insomuch as I have done you wrong, and treated you unkindly when you were not deserving of it. Is it not right that I should feel guilt over a misdeed? It is not on account of my father the Colonel that I do this thing, that I welcome you into our house and beg your forgiveness; it is on account of the fact that you, sir, are an angel! You are deserving of my everything—admiration, praise, trust, love. I am in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing,” Valjean insisted. “I only did that which I could not help but do. Is such a thing truly deserving of praise?”

“Deserving of—? You saved my life!”

“Out of obligation, yes. Duty obliged me to act.”
“Obliged?” Marius repeated dumbly. “You were obliged to do nothing! Yet you withstood hell and high water to bring me home. You gave away your daughter to me. You bestowed on us a fortune. And you revealed yourself to me, out of the prick of your conscience, when there was no need to do so; when you could have remained silent and enjoyed bliss and secrecy for all your years, with none the wiser.”

“You are wrong,” said Valjean. “I did need to reveal myself to you. My conscience would not permit me do otherwise. I deliberated for a long time on it, to be fair. There was much I had to lose, and it pained me greatly to admit these dreadful things about myself. But in the end, there really was no other choice that I could make. All that I have done, I have done out of obligation. So you see, it is not really anything deserving of praise.”

Marius clenched his teeth, furrowing his brow. “Humility is a heavenly virtue, monsieur, but you take it too far. You deny yourself just reward. You have a fear of admiration. It is wrong that good men should go unrecognized on this earth. Do you think God is pleased with your martyrdom, when it is so unnecessary?”

“You are a devout Christian;” he went on, “I understand. You believe your reward will be in Heaven, and that it matters not what recompense you receive here in life. But have you ever stopped to consider that perhaps right here, right now, these things are your reward? That the reward for one’s good deeds comes not from on high, but from below, in what has been sown? It seems to me that God has said ‘Enough. This man has done his part; let his suffering now end and let him have a taste of gratitude. Let his children welcome him home. Let him live in peace and be cherished for the rest of his days.’”

“And you, monsieur, you turn to God and say,—” Here he gesticulated, putting his palm up in front of himself and smiling at some unseen being. “—‘No thank you; I shall have my recompense when I am dead.’” Then he pivoted on the balls of his feet to face the opposite direction. “And the good Lord says ‘But I wish you to have it now. Do you not wish your struggles to cease?’ And you reply ‘That is all right. I will wait.’ Well!” he exclaimed, looking back at him sternly, “That is some ingratitude, monsieur!”

The corners of Jean Valjean’s lips drew down; his eyes bulged.

“I do not understand you,” Marius continued, throwing his arms out in frustration. “You go out of your way to paint yourself terribly, and to deny yourself happiness, and you expect God to venerate you for it! What happens when you cross the Pearly Gates and the Lord has to explain to you that He already tried to reward your goodness several times over on earth, but you continuously denied him? I fear that would be a very embarrassing conversation to have.”

He drew in a breath and let it out slowly, his temper cooling. “You fear to accept my affections and my invitations because you are afraid they are undue, or that I am not sincere in them. But you know very well that they are due! And I have thought a long while on how I might prove that I am sincere in believing you a great man, worthy of all the love a heart can muster, and I have come to this.”

“Monsieur, you think I venerate you out of obligation, because you saved my life. While I do of course owe you a debt of gratitude for that, it is not the sole reason I cherish you. Nor, in fact, do I cherish you merely because of the countless good deeds you have done throughout your past. Truly, I cherished you even before being made aware of any of those things.”

“I cherished you simply because of the kind of man you were—kindhearted and gentle, and worthy of respect. I loved you purely for you yourself. It had nothing to do with your charity or your heroics. Even after you revealed yourself to be a convict, still, I thought of you as a good
Valjean protested. “But when I asked if you thought I ought not see Cosette anymore, you said that you thought it would be better. How can you tell me you thought me a good man, when you so clearly did not?”

The color drained from the boy’s face. “I—” He stopped, mouth open, and hung his head. “I cannot deny that I said that, though I wish it were not the case. I regret those words immensely, I assure you. But understand, monsieur—the things you told me produced a great shock on me. You tell me that you have been to the galleys, that you are sought even now by the police for outstanding crimes—on the day after you became my father by law, no less! I had no proper time to think on the matter.”

“Even so, I still thought reasonably well of you—but when Cosette entered the room, my thoughts turned to her, and, like you, I wished to shield her from your past, and whatever shadows it might bring. I had the impression that your character was honest and decent, but now doubt had been cast in my mind. I could not be sure of you. We meant to have you live with us, but I became wary of this. However, you shall at least recall that when you asked it of me, I assured that you should see your Cosette every day. On my honor, truly, I did mean that in earnest.”

Valjean’s brow knit. “But then why—”

“I must explain myself, monsieur; I had made an error, in more ways than one. In an effort to understand the sort of man you were, I tried to research your history. The information I managed to dredge up was piecemeal, rudimentary fragments. I attempted to stitch them into a sensible story with educated guesswork. This was a mistake. The assumptions I made were completely incorrect.”

“How do you mean?”

“I … had thought that you denounced a benevolent mayor in the Pas-de-Calais as a criminal and forged his signature at the bank to steal his fortune while he was being detained,” he blurted out.

Valjean’s face went blank. “You what?”

“Javert was the one who finally set me straight on the fact that Jean Valjean and M. Madeleine were in reality one in the same. And Javert!” he exclaimed. “I thought that you’d killed him at the barricades! I knew of no other reason you were there; you did not fight. It seemed to me that you must have gotten wind of his capture and gone there to seek vengeance while the conflict still permitted it.”

“In light of this I believed you were a forger, a robber of the worst kind, and a murderer to boot, who had just so happened by some miracle to also be a decent father. That was why I drove you away; that was why I went back on my word. Not because I had ruminated on what you had told me earlier and decided that you were unworthy of a place in our family, but rather, because I misled myself into conceiving a horror of you.”

Valjean stared at him in perplexion, trying to wrap his head around this.

After a moment Marius went on. “If I had not come across that misinformation, and been led to dreadful conclusions about you, I think that with time I would have softened and lost my fear of you. To be certain, you never proved yourself anything other than a gentle soul. And at the beginning, I was terribly impressed with your honesty. It seemed to me a sure mark of your reform.”
The boy wet his lips and bit his tongue, shaking his head. He thrust his face up to look at Valjean with a pleading expression. “What I am trying to say is, despite the history that you divulged to me, still, I loved you! You do not think that I did. That is the whole of your reservations. But it is true! I did. And I can prove it.”

Valjean had been struck mute for quite some time now, growing more and more uncomfortable. At present, he was close to tears. Truly, he wanted to be loved, to be cherished, to live out his days in happiness, with those he cared for most. He wanted to believe that he deserved these things. He wanted someone to convince him of this, as he could not in good conscience convince himself. He wanted this, but he was not sure it was possible.

And he was afraid. Afraid of accepting something that he perhaps ought not deserve.

Jean Valjean had been many things throughout his life, but if there was one thing he could not bring himself to be again, it was a thief.

His voice on the verge of breaking, all he could find the courage to say was, “How?”

“It is very simple,” Marius said, stepping forwards and clasping Valjean’s hands. “Like this. You will remember our discussion in the drawing room, on the morning after the wedding.”

“Clearly.”

“You will remember how you denounced yourself to me as a criminal, still wanted by the police.”

“I tell you, it is with painful clarity that I recall that morning. I remember all that was said.”

“Do you? I am afraid you are forgetting something, monsieur.”

“And what is that?”

“That I told you I would procure for you a pardon.”

Valjean gave a start, his eyes widening. He had indeed forgotten this.

“You said it did not matter, because the authorities all thought you long dead. There was nothing to be done at the time—or at least, nothing that needed doing—so that topic was dropped. But still it stands, monsieur—and you are forgetting this—that I was ready and willing to defend you as an honorable man, even against the judicial system itself. Even knowing who you were, I was happily going to accept you into our home. I had already accepted you into my heart.”

“I was only overcome with vertigo at your sudden denunciation, and temporarily doubted your character. But even then, a part of me knew that doubt was unfounded. No matter who you used to be, you had obviously turned over a new leaf. That you had done misdeeds in your past was of no consequence to me, faced with who you were in the present.”

“So you see,” he said, giving his hands a squeeze, “I really have loved you from the start. Just because … because you are you. Because you are a good man, and nothing in your past changes that. We are not slaves to our history, or the selves whom we once were. Everyone is capable of greatness, of virtue, their origins notwithstanding. There is no better proof of this than you.”

At this, Jean Valjean trembled from head to toe. The tears which had been welling his in eyes finally slid down his cheeks. Their trickle became a stream, hot against his skin. He bent his head, expression contorting so that his eyes squeezed themselves shut and his teeth clenched in a grimace
of what might appear to any other man to be grief. He put his face in his hands.

For some time he stood like that, too struck to do anything else. The evening breeze tousled the curls of his hair as the tears slipped through his fingers and watered the grass.

After awhile he heard Marius’ voice. “Father,” the boy said softly. “You are my father.”

He had not the heart to dispute it.

Carefully, his son drew him into an embrace.

Valjean could say nothing; his throat was too choked. His arms found the waist of Marius’ tailcoat, and clutched the boy’s slender frame close. He buried his face in his shoulder and wept.

***

They stayed two days in Vernon.

In the wee hours of the morning, just as the sun was beginning to rise, a man with white hair could be seen exiting one of the local inns and wandering into a deserted field nearby.

By the time the sky had lightened to a light and placid blue, there could be found in the cemetery, beneath a cross of black wood, two bouquets: one bought at market, the other comprised entirely of wildflowers.

***

The ride back to Paris, though no shorter than it ought to be, was considerably more tolerable than the first one, and though silence prevailed for the most of it, it was pleasant.

Marius and Jean Valjean both directed their gazes out the windows, content to absorb the serenity of the passing pastures and farmland.

The driver of the diligence was not the same coachman that had taken them two days prior, but, if he had been, perhaps he may have noticed that two of his passengers seemed much more at ease with themselves than they had been earlier.

***

“So, you return!” said Cosette as they entered the hall. “And how was your journey?”

“Excellent,” said Marius with an air of surety.

“Wonderful.” She turned to her father. “And you?”
Valjean had been setting down their luggage, which he had insisted on carrying himself. He straightened himself and looked up at her with a placid gaze. There was something of adoration in his eyes. “Cosette,” he murmured.

His daughter cocked her head at him.

He approached her as though in a dream, and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her to his chest and cradling the back of her head in his hand.

She stood stiff in his grasp for a second—he had surprised her, it seemed—then relaxed.

He placed a kiss on her temple, brushing back a lock of chestnut hair behind her ear.

It seemed to him that all his life he had been denied, or denied for himself, all manners of happiness, and now, for the first time, he felt something open up in his heart, like some well-rusted gate, and allow in a flood of it. Cosette was the first truly good thing he had found on this earth; and yet, even so, he had kept his distance from her, as though his mere presence, his mere affection, had the vague possibility of tainting her innocence. He had guarded her at arm’s length, and kept watch over her from afar.

As she had grown into a young woman, especially, it had seemed to him that she had become something luminous, and angelic—something far too beautiful and precious to hold with his dirtied hands.

But she had been right—they had both wanted each other’s company, and it was a damned foolish thing that he’d done, thinking to better her life by quietly slipping out of it.

‘Child abandonment,’ Javert’s voice echoed in his head.

It had been, in a way, hadn’t it? Not quite the way he’d intended. But still. To Cosette … How could she have understood his reasons for leaving? To be true, he really hadn’t even given her any. He had just stopped coming one day. When she had sent servants to inquire after him, he had pretended to be absent, away on some journey, when the reality was he was withering slowly away like a plant denied a taste of the sun.

But everything felt so different now. Still he entertained some trepidation in the face of these delights, but there was a distinct lightness in his chest. It seemed as though the air had been stifling, and someone had finally opened a window. His soul breathed a sigh of relief. Guilt, and fear, and self-restraint had kept him in a perpetual state of tension for so long that he could not remember feeling any other way, and yet now, a weight had been lifted from him, and he allowed himself to loosen.

Cosette’s love had been a gift to him, which he had never believed himself rightly deserving of, and for the first time he permitted himself full reception of it. To Jean Valjean, who had never experienced much in the way of happiness or affection from the world, there was no higher form of ecstasy than this.

“Papa?” came Cosette’s voice. “Are you well?”

He had been holding her for quite some time now, he realized, pulling away.

“Did something happen?”

He let out a self-deprecating chuckle, glancing at the floorboards. “I suppose.”
“Your father and I have had a chat,” Marius proclaimed, “and I have convinced him to my way of thinking.”

“And what way of thinking is that?”

“That he should move in with us, and allow us to be good to him. That he is a good man, worthy of every kindness we could hope to outpour, and that he shall not object when we do so.”

She clapped her hands with delight, her blue eyes sparkling. “Splendid! My Marius, my well-beloved lawyer, you know how to convince people of things, don’t you?”

The boy turned a shade of pink and flashed a sheepish grin at her.

“So,” she said to Valjean, “you are past this divide that you created between yourselves, then? You would say that you are satisfied with one another? That you are close?”

He glanced back at Marius, and they searched their faces questioningly.

“Close enough to understand one another, I think,” said Marius. “Though I hope to further the understanding in the days to come.”

Valjean studied him. His face warmed. He directed his gaze at the floor, and gave a subtle nod.

Cosette’s eyes flicked to her husband and her father in turn. She seemed to be considering something. “Well,” she said finally, crossing her arms, “Marius. Father. Now that you are on better terms with one another, perhaps, I think, an explanation is due?”

They blinked at her stupidly.

“What do you mean?” asked Marius.

“I mean, the both of you have been ridiculous fools, and you have yet to provide me a decent reason for your behavior. Marius, you pushed papa away from us. You say you thought poorly of him, and that is why you did it, but wherefore? What could have caused you to dislike him at all? I asked you this and you refused to answer me. You say yourself he is a saint.”

She then fixed her gaze on Valjean. “And you! You let him do as he liked even though it broke your heart. Even though it broke my heart! You did not even say anything to me about it. You just allowed yourself to be cast out. Why? What caused this rift between you two?”

Jean Valjean looked at Marius.

Marius looked at Jean Valjean.

They held each other’s gazes for a moment.

“Politics,” they both said.

The girl was aghast. “Politics!” she exclaimed in disbelief. “You did all of this because of politics?”

“Yes,” they said, hanging their heads.

“Why, I—!” Her face began to flush. “How could you? Over such a stupid, inconsequential thing. Politics are all well and good for table talk, but to drive one another away over them, to ruin each other’s happiness—I’ve never heard such a thing in my life! What’s wrong with the two of
you? How could you be so ridiculously stubborn and fickle? And to keep all these secrets from me, and leave me in the dark, as though I were just some child to you, too young to understand. How dare you? The nerve!"

“I’m sorry,” Marius offered. “It is just that—we had this discussion, one day—a sort of argument, if you will, and—”

“So that was what you two were going on about in the drawing room that morning!”

Valjean gave a start. “That morning?”

“Yes! The morning after the wedding. I remember it very clearly. I came to greet you both, and you denied me, and refused to continue talking in my presence. I asked again and again, and neither of you would defend me. I was only there to bid you well, and keep you company ’til breakfast. It was very mean of you. But now I see. You said you were talking figures. Well! It was politics, wasn’t it?”

Marius raised an eyebrow. “Er …” Again he and Valjean shared a glance. “Yes.”

“There! I knew it. No wonder you were being so stubborn. Politics can make asses of even the best of men, I do declare. Good gracious, but you let it turn so ugly! You should have let me diffuse the situation; it was very rash of you. Ah, but there is nothing to do about it now. Only, pray you shall never let such idiotic things come between you again! And if I find out you’ve been keeping any more secrets from me I shall be very cross indeed. No more of these fights behind closed doors. Do you understand? I will have none of it.”

Marius bowed his head to her. “I assure you, ma chère, it shall never happen again.”

***

A few hours after supper, M. Gillenormand summoned both Marius and Valjean to the drawing room. Wordlessly, he beckoned them to sit at the table opposite him, which they did.

There was the distinct feeling of an impending interrogation in the atmosphere.

Gillenormand knit his hands with a very serious air. He stared at them knowingly,promptingly. The silence began to grow unbearable.

The old man raised his eyebrow. “Politics,” he said, as though an entire inquisition could be contained in that word. He leaned back into the chair, splaying his arms over the padded armrests. His demeanor was unimpressed. “You mean to tell me you refused to see one another over politics.”

Marius and Valjean gazed back at him stoically, their expressions identical.

It was clear to both of them that Cosette, in her considerable ire, had made complaint of this to her grandfather.

Marius cleared his throat. “Father,” he said, “all things considered, we thought that you of all people would understand.”
The old man’s consternation dissolved. And then the three of them were wearing the same tightly drawn mask.

The room fell quiet for a moment.

“Ah,” said Gillenormand with a grain of salt, “I see.” After a second, his tone turned abruptly more cheerful. “Well!” he exclaimed, looking at Valjean, “That must mean you're a Royalist!”

Valjean blinked, his face going blank. “I…” His eyes darted to Marius.

Marius shrugged.

Valjean began again. “I suppose that I, er, could be of that persuasion, yes.”

“Oh, don’t be so modest!” the old man told him, rising from his seat and skirting around the table to his side. “If you quarreled that bitterly about it with my lovely Marius here, that means that you and I have a number of things in common. Come, Fauchelevent,” he said, clapping him on the back with vigor and leading him away, “Let’s discuss King and country somewhere the little dissenter can’t hear us.”

Valjean glanced back over his shoulder at Marius with a look that requested aid.

But all Marius could do was throw up his hands and frown at him apologetically.

“Say, Fauchelevent,” he could hear his grandfather’s dwindling voice saying, “do you like brandy?”

“Oh, I don’t usually drink. But then again, it may prove necessary on this particular occasion.”

“That’s the spirit! Nicolette! Go and fetch the snifters and the decanter of that Armagnac I bought!”

“Right away, sir.”

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] 600 francs (1 pistole = 10 francs).

Chapter End Notes

Suggested listening:

Iguazu - Gustavo Santaolalla & Ryuichi Sakamoto

One Summer's Day - Joe Hisaishi
Railroad Man (live piano version) - Ryuichi Sakamoto
Valjean comes home.

“Only a man who has felt ultimate despair is capable of feeling ultimate bliss. It is necessary to have wished for death in order to know how good it is to live. The sum of all human wisdom will be contained in these two words: Wait and Hope.”

-Alexander Dumas

Basque, Marius and he loaded Valjean’s belongings into the back of the wagon with care. It was some trouble, as the street was too narrow to permit such vehicles, and the items needed to be carried down the street to the intersection.

There were only three trunks in all; he owned little more than clothes and books. What furniture had been left in the apartment was old and of a simple nature: plain wood, wicker. Chairs, tables, beds, cookware—he had no need of these things any longer. He left them for the porters, or future tenants. A few things that had been deemed worth keeping had been brought along, though, such as the canapé, some nicely patterned quilts, the small chest of drawers from his bedroom, and various other smaller things.

The silver candlesticks had been wrapped up in a blanket to keep them from harm, and placed lovingly in one of the trunks beside his bible and the little copper crucifix that used to hang upon his wall.

“All that money, and those are really the only things of value you own?” Marius had remarked, puzzled.

Valjean only smiled sheepishly at him and shrugged. “Fineries have never really been an object in my life,” he said. And then, more wistful, “It is not their market-worth that makes them valuable to me, anyway.”

The boy looked curious, but made no further inquiries. He contented himself with saying “Ah, well, then again, you are a humble man, I suppose.” It is probable that he found it more of a relief that there were so few possessions to transport than an actual concern.

The only thing Valjean would not let them touch was his valise, which he insisted on carrying himself, and sat on the opposite seat of the carriage as though it were made of delicate porcelain instead of thick, sturdy old wood.
Cosette laughed at him over this. “He treats it like it were a person,” she quipped. “I am rather jealous of it.”

“What is in there, anyway?” asked Marius.

“Oh, nothing either of you would find terribly interesting, I suspect,” said Valjean. “Just some old remnants of things. They are important to me, that’s all.”

Valjean had discussed in Vernon with Marius the use—or lack-thereof—of the six-hundred thousand francs he had given them. Marius had refused to touch the money on principle, as he’d thought it stolen. But now that this mistaken assumption had been rectified, Valjean had insisted he put it to some use. After all, what good did such a fortune do anyone by sitting in a bank?

And so Marius had, at long last, and at the behest of Valjean, rented for their own private use a splendid little carriage of dark cherry wood, with Utrecht velvet seat cushions in a charming shade of maroon. Its windows had glass panes with hardly a defect at all, and they shone clear and new in the sun. The outside of the carriage was highly detailed with spiraling ornamentation on each edge and inlaid carvings of flowers. It was in this they all sat together on one side, with Valjean’s valise opposite.

As they left the now empty apartment on Rue de l’Homme Armé, Valjean was struck with a sort of thoughtfulness—something of wonder, and nostalgia. It had little time to grow into anything particular before Cosette began to chatter pleasantly.

“My, but it’s such beautiful weather out,” she said, fanning herself gently with a silk fan Marius had purchased for her. “Plenty of sunshine, but not yet too hot. I suppose June will be hotter. It was a good day for this. Imagine if you’d had to lug all of those things in the rain!”

And then, “Papa, we should go for a walk in the garden again when you’ve finished putting your belongings away. Maybe my robin red-breast will be there to-day.”

Here she paused in thought. “You know, you should have a little corner in the garden to yourself as well. You could grow sweet peas and carrots. There are far too many flowers there already; we should plant something useful. That’s why I started my little strawberry patch. Maybe you could teach me how to raise vegetables. Oh! We could have squash, too. Or maybe turnips? I don’t know. I want to garden more with you. I think it would be fun.”

“We could go looking in the market for different seed packets,” Marius suggested. “Though … it is rather late in the season, isn’t it?”

Cosette frowned at this for a second, but then she turned to look at Valjean with bright eyes. “Papa, you would know. What things are best to plant this time of year?”

Valjean’s eyebrows raised. “Well, let me think …” He tugged pensively at his beard. “It is almost June now, so … squash would be good, and beans. Melons, too, and cucumbers. It’s far too late for sweet peas, I’m afraid. Perhaps next year. I suppose we could try to plant turnips, though the timing’s a little off …”

Marius raised his eyebrows, apparently impressed with his off-hand knowledge of such things. He glanced back at his wife, and Cosette smiled at him as if to say ‘I told you so’.

“You might consider planting some more fruit trees,” Valjean continued, now totally absorbed in his wandering thoughts. “I did notice there was a hearty old apple tree near the back. But one might add a cherry tree, or a peach, or even perhaps a pear. And then, also, there are other sorts of
berries you might like to grow, like raspberries or blackberries. Though I’m not sure you would find the thorns very pleasant. Hm. You might just want to start with vegetables;’ he said, scratching his head, “the preservation process is much simpler. Besides, it’s not the right time of year for planting much else.”

“Then vegetables it is,” declared Cosette. “Marius, what kinds do you think we should buy?”

“Me? I have no idea. I shall like whatever you do.”

“Squash would be nice,” Valjean suggested. “There are all sort of varieties, and they keep through the winter. You would have a lot of options for cooking with them.”

“Let’s plant some of those, then,” said Cosette. “You also said it was the right time for melons, did you not?”

“Yes, if we plant them quickly.”

“That was what your brother grew, vrai?”

Valjean blinked. “Eh?”

“You know. At the convent.”

“Oh!” A hasty grin planted itself on his face, not quite straight. “Oh, yes. It was. What a splendid memory you have.”

Cosette glanced down at the carriage floor, her voice sobering some. “We should plant a little patch in his honor. He was a good man.”

Valjean nodded slowly.

He wondered suddenly what old Fauchelevent would think were he still here to see this. Surely the man would never have foreseen the little girl they’d raised becoming a Baroness, wealthy and beautiful beyond measure. She had been, it seemed then, on her way to becoming a nun. And Valjean had just been some old gardener, whom she saw during mealtimes and holidays. The both of them had been hiding in seclusion, nothing of remark. It seemed the girl would pass the whole of her life there with him, plain and chaste, married only to God.

But now look at her! She was radiant. At one time, a sister had remarked that she would be ugly. What farce. The whole of her countenance was like the warm rays of the sun. Happiness had made her so. And now, she was married, and belonged to a wealthy family, with riches of her own, no less (though that was due to him). She was a part of high society. Her life was made of joy—of hyacinths and nightingales.

He had meant for her to have these things, always, but had been afraid that it was not within his power to provide. Money is only good for some things. But for once in both their lives, it seemed, fortune had been in their favor. Chance and luck and a million other little things had led them somehow to this day. To look back at their circumstances from where they were now, quite frankly, Jean Valjean was amazed.

Cosette turned her head and beamed at him. “Isn’t this exciting, papa?” she asked. “You are finally coming home.”

Home.
Valjean started inwardly.

It was not a word, per se, but an idea—one of which he had never had the occasion to grasp.

Jean Valjean had never had a home, in the truest sense of the word. He’d had houses. There was never, in any of those buildings, a sense of belonging. Even in the house of his youth. For his parents had died young, and his sister had raised him, perhaps more out of duty than love. And for duty he stayed, for who else would provide for them all? It was not that he wasn’t fond of the children—who were more like younger cousins than nieces and nephews—but he felt like a pillar of support holding them up rather than a part of the family itself.

Maybe if he had not worked all day long, and collapsed after supper in exhaustion each night—if he’d had more time to spend with them—it would have been different. Maybe if his parents had not died early, or if they’d had any other relatives that they could have relied upon, it would have been different. Maybe if his sister had not been ten years older than him, and acted less like a stepmother and more like a sibling, things would have been different.

But they were not different. As it was, he had experienced all of the toil and stress of supporting a household with little to no experience of being a part of one.

And then came prison, and afterwards, houses ceased even to be houses, let alone homes, and became little more than places he might take refuge for a time. Nothing was ever permanent. He was always painfully aware of the ever-looming threat of discovery. That he might be forced to abandon everything at the drop of a hat.

Even after he’d found Cosette, and fashioned a father of himself, he could still not feel that he belonged. Danger lurked around every corner, and he mustn’t attach himself too firmly to anything or anyone, for both their sakes.

He kept three houses in three different parts of Paris, and moved from place to place multiple times a year in order to avoid the risk of detection. This transience only served to further estrange him. He would have liked to be part of a family, and have a real home—in fact, he wanted nothing else in life—but in reality—and he reminded himself of this often—Cosette was only someone he was looking after, and these places that he paid for only brick, and stone, and plaster, nothing more.

And so it had been for all his life.

Yet here they were, and these two children professed that he was their father, even though they knew he was not. They brought him to their home, and they said that he was family, that he belonged there. They did this purely because they loved him, and not because he could benefit them—for truly, what more could he give them? Already they had a fortune, and the love of many. There was nothing further he could do for them. But they insisted upon having him. Even Marius, knowing what he was!

It was true: no one needed him anymore.

They wanted him.

And it was this realization that jarred Valjean into reverie. He could not remember a time when he had been wanted purely for himself, and not because of what he could do, or had done. Perhaps this was why he had kept his good deeds from Marius and Cosette, and insisted upon keeping them from their grandfather. Because he’d wanted to be loved for love’s sake, and not gratitude.
For so long he had kept his distance from people—out of fear, or respect, or shyness. And then, he felt, what right had he to form relationships with good and honest people—who were, by necessity, ignorant of who and what he truly was—when that dreadful past could spell disaster for them? Surely, he thought, they would draw back in horror to find out the man they’d been friends with was actually an ex-convict, dangerous and strong and still wanted by the police.

And how could anyone love him, knowing what he was? What he’d done? Nineteen years in the galleys, chained up like some beast, with eyes full of cunning and a heart full of hatred. Why, he’d been barely a man at all. More like an animal, most days. He looked at himself and he did not understand how anyone would love such a cold-blooded creature. Did not understand why the Bishop had done so, though he thanked him in his prayers, and would have gladly lain down his life for him, if he’d had the chance. How he’d wronged him! How terrible he’d been! And yet the man had smiled upon him warmly all the while, despite having the evidence of what he was thrust at his feet.

And now Marius—Marius knew him also, and did not turn away. He welcomed him with open arms; professed his faith in his goodness.

These things were to be, then? He would live out the rest of his days in peace and happiness, with his children by his side? In the safety of acceptance?

He could hardly believe such a thing was possible.

Marius had tried to convince him that perhaps this was God trying to reward him for all he’d done. The idea had seemed almost sacrilegious to him at the time. He was used to giving and not receiving. He shied away from recompense. Prison, and life in general, had taught him to expect nothing but bruises from people. That nothing was offered without conditions, and rewards were either a trick or a trap. He feared himself, he feared God, he feared to take what was undue, even if it wasn’t undue at all. Because what if it was? Everything seemed a test of his character, a test set by God, in which he must prove himself worthy of that undeserved mercy the Bishop had bestowed upon him.

That the Bishop had shown him kindness was unprecedented.

That God might look upon him fondly, and offer respite, was unfathomable.

And yet, gazing out the carriage window, on his way to Rue des Filles du Calvaire, with his two loving children beside him, Jean Valjean almost dared to believe it.

Truly, if nothing else, something miraculous had occurred.

Sudden emotion surged in his breast—a feeling that he had not felt in a long time, if, perhaps, ever—and he struggled to identify it, but at long last he realized it was contentment, and it was joy, and even hope.

He looked back at his children (it was so very strange that he had children), and it felt as though he were seeing them for the first time. He could feel their love of him in his aching chest, distinctly, and without doubt. And his eyes welled with tears as he looked upon them, and his heart, like a wild bird escaping its cage, said ‘home’ and soared.

He had to turn his face away, so they would not see him cry.

Gazing out at Paris as it slowly passed them by, the city, like himself, in that instant, seemed reborn.
The chestnut horse pulling a fiacre, with the stripe of white down its face, black blinders and head bobbing. The wildflowers poking through the cracks in between the cobblestones. The women standing in lines at a market stall, baskets in hand, chattering softly to one another. The painted walls and carefully lettered signs of storefronts. The clouds drifting in the blue, and the sun shining above.

It all seemed new, and bright, and fresh.

The fiacre passed them by, and through its window one could see, for a fleeting moment, a couple stealing a kiss.

To think that these were the very streets he had walked for months in gloom, with the sky caving in on him! To think he had almost withered away, ceased to see, to hear, to feel anything beyond despair! All had seemed so dark then. The colors had drained from everything and left only ugly grey. Happiness had been so far from his grasp. Confined to the echoes of the past, and slowly fading, never again to be attained.

Were these truly the same streets? How many times had he walked them, and seen nothing but the road ahead, and a distant destination he could never reach? Had he been blind? He could hardly remember any of this vivacity.

How was it that the world could feel so different, when nothing at all had changed?

No, he thought, the world had stayed the same; it was he who had changed.

Like that horse, with its blinders, he had seen only the stones beneath his feet, dragging the burden of his past, and spurred on only by the lash of his conscience.

Then someone had come at the end of his journey, when he had grown thin and weak and could no longer move, and removed those blinders, and unhitched him from the harness and lain him down in green pastures.¹

And who was this person who had picked him up and carried him away when he had fallen?

He let out a breath.

*Javert.*

Memories of the past month came flooding back to him. The man’s words rang like some prophecy fulfilled.

‘*One day you find that it doesn’t hurt so much, anymore. And maybe living isn’t as hard as you thought.*’

Valjean was overwhelmed. Everything was like a dream. He had not thought that he would ever see a day like this. And he almost hadn’t! He had almost allowed himself to drown in a lonely gulf, and let sorrow swallow him whole. To eat his soul away from the inside out until there was nothing left of him but a husk.

How close he had been! If someone had not intervened …

The image of a grave flashed before his eyes, unmarked but for a slab, with a young couple knelt before it, weeping.

He shuddered.
That such a thing had almost come to pass!

But Javert, Javert—he had dragged him back from the edge, breathed the life back into him. He had preserved him so that he might see this day. Had promised him a future. Valjean had feared to put faith in one—such had been his defense for decades—but here it was, before him.

For so long it had felt as though the door of life was slowly closing on him. But suddenly he perceived it opening wide.

It was true; it was all true, everything Javert had said. Everything Valjean had not dared to believe in. And this was not the end of things, but the beginning. He had lived, and because he had lived, he now saw that which had been impossible become reality. His struggles had not been in vain, and now he reaped the benefit of what he’d sowed.

Beside himself, he watched the buildings go by as the tears poured down his face.

“Father!” he heard Cosette exclaim. “Are you well?”

He leaned his head against the carriage door, his gaze not straying from the window. “Very,” said he.

And for once it was not a lie.

***

It was Saturday, and the station was filled with flowers.

There must have been about forty bouquets, of all different shapes and colors, and they sat haphazardly on nearly every available surface in the room.

Javert was mortified.

“The note says they’re from one M. Pontmercy,” the desk sergeant had told him. “Though I’m … not entirely sure why he insisted on signing it with ‘Baron’. I trust you know the fellow?”

Javert had grimaced. “Unfortunately.”

Now he stood in the center of the room, which should be neat and orderly in a Spartan sort of way, but which was instead now flooded with pointless, brightly colored clutter the like of which was supremely embarrassing.

Leroux sidled up to him curiously, having just arrived on shift himself. “Good Lord,” he remarked, surveying the overabundance of flora, “What did you do?”

“I accidentally earned the gratitude of someone that has money,” Javert muttered, pulling down the brim of his hat. “Clearly, that was a mistake.”

“What are you going to do with it all?”

“What, me? Nothing. What use do you suppose I have for them? Bisset!” he called sharply over his shoulder, “Lefèvre!”
The two young officers poked their heads around the corner.

“Get rid of this mess,” said Javert, making a sweeping gesture towards the flowers. “This is a station house, not a florist’s. Take them to … oh, I don’t know; the hospital or something. They’re always in want of cheer and pleasant odors over there.”

“Yes, sir.” Bisset looked to Lefèvre. “After lunch?”

“After lunch.”

Their gazes drifted over towards the bouquets ponderously. They glanced at one another.

“And yes,” Javert sighed, running a hand over his face, “before you ask, you may hold onto some for your paramours. Or whatever it is that you call them.”

The two officers grinned at each other deviously.

“Leroux,” Javert added, turning to his right, “do you want any of these? There’s certainly enough to go around.”

The man gave a start. “Me? Er …”

“Surely you can think of someone that would appreciate them.”

Leroux rubbed his chin pensively. “Well—hm. I suppose, now that you mention it …”

“Good,” he said, shoving a few bouquets into his arms, “take them. And tell Mullins to bring some back for his wife. I’m off to inspect a bordel.”

The two young officers in the doorway chuckled at him as he brushed past them.

“What,” said Lefèvre, “and you’re not going to take any of these for the lovely ladies?”

“Oh, shut up,” Javert shot back, rolling his eyes. “I’m sure you’ll make up for it later tonight.”

“Ooh,” crooned Bisset, eyeing his companion mischievously.

Lefèvre smacked him upside the head.

Bisset only laughed.

***

It was partially Javert’s fault for giving him so many, but when his shift was over, and he was on his way home, Leroux could not help himself from giving the flowers away.

A girl of perhaps six, with threadbare clothes and wide eyes, was the first victim of his charity. She grinned when he held one out to her, and he could see that she was missing a tooth.

The next recipient was a shopkeeper whom he knew, with wrinkles around her mouth which only deepened when she stopped sweeping and looked up at him.

Then there was a beggar asleep by the mouth of an alleyway, with his tattered top hat upturned
on the ground before him. Leroux had no money on him, so he put a flower in it.

Things continued in this fashion for some time.

A group of three handsomely dressed young women who were out reading a book together and eating their lunch under a tree.

A couple of skinny gamin boys who looked to be brothers.

A mother with a wailing infant in her arms, desperately trying to shush the poor thing.

When he finally reached the tenement in which he lived, there were only five flowers left.

In return for them, his mother placed a kiss upon his cheek.

***

When Javert returned home after submitting his final report for the day, containing his assessment of the brothel and its workers, he discovered that his portress was out for the evening.

Upon ascending the staircase and opening his apartment door, he found a small package on the floor at his feet, evidently left there to be found by him as soon as possible. Undoubtedly, the portress had put it there, since she was the only other person with a key to his apartment.

That, or someone had come while she was away and picked both the locks.

Illuminated by the sunlight pouring through his window, its oblong, conical shape betrayed its contents.

He bent down and picked it up, solemnly unwrapping the delivery. A pleasant scent wafted up to meet him as he folded back the paper.

It was a dozen yellow roses.

Already suspecting who they were from, he opened the tiny vellum card that had been tucked between the flowers.

‘Thank you,’ was all it said. No signature.

It would have been unnecessary anyway; he recognized Valjean’s handwriting, as he had a very good memory for such things. He traced the loops of the letters thoughtfully.

He put the card in the breast pocket of his coat.

Mid-afternoon saw a soft breeze tug playfully at the edges of the papers on his desk as he wrote up studies on case files. Beside them sat a bunch of roses in a cracked ceramic pitcher. The air was mind-numbingly warm, and every so often his eyes would stray from his work to the flowers, and he would gaze at them contemplatively, his chin in his hand.

***
It took Valjean a while to settle in. There was this pervasive feeling of otherness, of not belonging, that he could not shake. He quite often felt himself questioning reality.

Such opulence that surrounded him! Such fortune and happiness. Why was he allowed to be a part of it? He continually had to stifle his own declarations of doubt, because he knew that Cosette and Marius wanted him there.

Many times, when he found himself questioning things and berating himself, Javert’s voice rose from the depths of his mind to politely remind him that he was an imbecile and ought not be so hard on himself, for it didn’t do anyone any good. When this happened Valjean felt like a child being scolded for continuing a bad habit behind his mother’s back. In this manner he waged war with himself, and gradually forced himself to be at ease.

A lingering fear. A catch in his throat. A deep breath. A helpless smile. Such was the course of his internal struggles.

But bit by bit the doubt in his heart was replaced with wonder, and the fear with gratitude. He allowed his children to escort him to plays, and to the Luxembourg, and the Opera House, though he kept the brim of his hat tugged low, for he was aware that Javert was not the only police officer in Paris.

Still, after a number of weeks, even this fear began to quit him. That feeling of being watched, of being hunted, faded some.

Who was there to remember him now, anyway? He was so changed. And he had even become, in a fashion, respectable. Children. A family. Money to spare. Good will and warmth all around. Who had reason to think ill of him? It was likely that his past was gone for good.

For the first time in his life he started to feel something like relief.

Things were so good, in fact, that he sometimes wondered if he had not really died from that illness earlier, and all this was actually his personal portion of Heaven. Certainly, wherever Cosette existed was, for him, a sort of paradise.

And if there was one thing he did not deprive himself of, it was her affection. For it had only increased twofold since his brief absence from her life, and the girl showered him with kisses and pleasantries every day.

He had grown great in her mind, it seemed, having risked his life to rescue her beloved, and then having languished away in solitude on her behalf (or, at least, he had thought at the time that it benefited her, though he now understood otherwise).

Even so, she managed to keep herself from spilling all that she knew of his adventure to M. Gillenormand and his daughter, as it was clear that this was to be preferred by both father and husband. That perilous escapade was, as she coyly put it, their “little secret.”

At night Marius and he, and sometimes M. Gillenormand, would open the parlor windows to let the air in and listen to Cosette play the piano.

The girl made good on her promises that they would read to one another in the garden, just the two of them. Those slices of euphoria were worth everything to him. To lay on a blanket beneath a tree, with his hat over his eyes, and birdsong in his ears, and Cosette’s voice reading from a volume of poetry, was bliss. He wished for little further in life.
Valjean did not forget that these things were owed to Javert. In the moments when he was alone, he thought of the man often. He had been given permission to write to him, and he did not take this for granted. Nor lightly.

It was not on account of busyness that he put off doing it, but rather, he was still working up the courage to. He was more than a little daunted by the man.

At times he would look out at the garden, or at the flickering flame of a candle, and grow thoughtful, and compose letters to him in his head.

But none of them seemed quite right to Valjean. And when he actually considered putting pen to paper, his mind went blank, and he shied away from himself, turning pink and stuffing the writing supplies back into the drawer of the desk in embarrassment.

Basque was the one responsible for the upkeep of the garden, as Valjean soon found out. It was he with whom he consulted on the matter of cultivating part of the garden for himself, which Cosette and Marius pressed for. The plots beside her strawberry patch were cleared, the flowers replanted elsewhere, and the land was sectioned off in four squares. Basque insisted on helping him till, though Valjean had asserted that he was perfectly capable of doing it himself. It was then divided into neat rows of furrows, spaced according to which type of plant was to be put there.

Marius and Cosette took Valjean to the market, where they perused the stands and argued, in the lightest sense of the word, for this or that, until which packets of seeds they would buy had been decided upon. There were two plots of squashes—all varying types—a plot of cucumbers, and another of melons.

Marius, who was entirely ignorant of such proceedings, watched Cosette and him as they planted them. Valjean invited him to join them multiple times, but he just smiled awkwardly and shook his head.

Valjean, for his part, was in bliss. It had been far too long since he had felt the sun on the back of his neck and the soil warm beneath his hands.

The air hung low and heavy, lingering on their skin. It smelt sweetly of freshly turned earth, and sweat, and honeysuckle, which clung to the wall by the strawberry patch.

The robin red-breast came out of its wall to observe their work, perching upon the handle of a shovel that had been stuck spade-down into the ground. It cocked its head at them and sat still for awhile before apparently deciding it was safe. Then it flitted about the furrows, its tiny brown feet running in quick bursts, its ear to the ground, its neck straining, until at last it would pluck a worm wriggling from the tilled soil and swallow it greedily. It even stopped and sang a few notes at Valjean, as though thanking him for the easy meal.

One day he even met the cat which Cosette was so afraid would one day eat her robin. The creature was aloof, and sat on top of the stone walls, spying on them apathetically. Valjean tried to
coax it down, but it just stared at him.

“Papa! Don’t encourage him,” Cosette complained.

Valjean only chuckled softly.

The cat reminded him of Javert.

***

About two weeks into his new arrangements, Valjean exited the house just before sunrise. In all aspects, his appearance was that of someone who was being very careful not to get caught doing something they knew they weren’t supposed to be doing.

Tugging down the brim of his cap to obscure his face, he headed towards the nearest hospital.

As he had suspected it might, it had recently taken on a new attendant, and one that matched his description (which was quite particular).

“Why, yes,” the young nurse had said in surprise. “She’s in right now; just started her shift. If monsieur will follow me …” Helpfully, she pointed him in the right direction, and he meandered down the corridor until he caught sight of his intended target.

Quiet, he stood in the doorway until he was noticed.

Gasping, the woman nearly dropped the wooden tray she was holding when she saw him. Her hands fumbled for a grip on it; her mouth fumbled for words. “Oh! I— Why, monsieur, you—”

He gave her a lopsided smile as he doffed his cap. “Bonjour, Toussaint. It has been far too long.”

“But—but what are you doing here?” the old woman asked. “And how did you know where to find me?”

“You were working at a hospital when I met you, remember? So I thought …”

She blinked. “Oh,” she said, staring at him for a moment before putting the tray down on a nearby table. Mechanically, she smoothed the apron of her dress and tucked a strand of grey hair back beneath her bonnet. “But … but why have you come? I mean no offense, monsieur, understand—I am happy you are here—but I did not expect that I would see you again.”

He frowned. Let out a sigh. “I heard that they dismissed you.”

She gave a small start. “Y-yes, well … mademoiselle had—I mean, Madame la Baronne—had more than enough servants at her disposal there, and …” She wrung her apron in her hands, her eyes avoiding his. “—there was no need to have an old nursemaid such as myself around anymore.”

Valjean searched her face. “I heard that you had quarreled with the other servants.”

She looked up at him in a fright, her face flushing. “That’s …”
“And I also heard that they had been cruel towards you.”

She met his eyes for a second, clutched her shoulder and looked away again in defeat.

“That was very wrong of them,” he said, walking towards her and placing a hand on her shoulder. “And they had no right to expel you for any disruptions it caused, as you were not the one to blame.”

“I did fight with them,” she admitted.

“A struggle in self-defense is not a struggle which ought to be vilified,” he assured her. “It was they that were in the wrong, not you. You should not have had to pay for their intolerance. You should not have been made to leave.”

She shrugged back at him sadly. “What is there to be done? It is over now. I have found a job here. The work is not too hard. The pay is enough.”

“But are you happy?”

Her brow knit. “I … Monsieur, what are you saying?”

“I am saying that I am the one who hired you to begin with. And so, I am the only one who ought to have the authority to dismiss you.”

“But you—”

“But nothing. I gave your contract to Cosette. If she no longer expresses need of you, then it follows that you should return to me, not to the streets.”

She stared at him, petrified. “Monsieur, are you offering me a job?”

“I am offering you an invitation.” He extended his hand to her, knitting his brow. “Come home, Toussaint.”

She covered her mouth. Her eyes were sparkling with moisture as she took his hand. “Oh, monsieur. I missed you so.”

***

“What! You again?” M. Gillenormand stood at the entrance to the house, bewildered. “What are you doing back here?”

“Monsieur wishes me to work for him,” said Toussaint.

Gillenormand turned to Valjean, who stood beside her on the doorstep, resolutely composed. “Fauchelevent! What is the meaning of this?”

“The meaning, sir, is that you have three servants at your disposal including the porter, and it would please me to have one of my own.”

The old man blinked stupidly at him. “But they belong to you also,” he said. “Surely I thought that you understood that?”
Valjean shrugged. “It is well. This changes nothing, however. I wish to employ her; she is employed.”

“She has quarreled with the other servants,” Gillenormand protested.

“I have had her for four years,” said Valjean.

“But she—” Here Gillenormand stopped himself. It was possible that he had been about to remark on her stutter, but had thought better of it. He fought for some argument. “She is a provincial.”

“I am a provincial,” said Valjean.

A look of horror played upon the old man’s face for the briefest of moments. “You! Ah, I did not— You have no accent.”

“I have lost it.”

Gillenormand stared at him. There was something of desperation in his watery eyes the like of one who is losing a battle and painfully aware of it. “She is very old,” he complained.

Valjean fought to keep his composure. He succeeded spectacularly. “You are ninety-two,” he said.

Gillenormand’s mouth tightened. “I do not think it wise.”

“I am attached to her.”

The old man bit the inside of his cheek. “Very well.”

***

Needless to say, Nicolette and the porter were not happy with Valjean. Basque, on the other hand, could not have cared less.

Cosette, while initially surprised and somewhat embarrassed, had eventually admitted that she too had found herself missing Toussaint (much to her own surprise), and had felt badly about her earlier dismissal.

Mme. Gillenormand, who had hardly noticed the old nursemaid’s absence, remarked nothing on the matter of her return.

And Marius was only impressed by Valjean’s brazenness.

Toussaint herself, who was now protected by the ever-present threat of Valjean’s disapproval, was bothered very little by the other servants, and turned her nose up at them with a knowing look when she caught them talking behind her back.

***
One morning, Marius received a small package. Within, he found a leather pocketbook that looked vaguely familiar. He knit his brow and opened it.

On the very first page, stained with old blood and grime, and made nearly illegible by water damage, was written:

‘My name is Marius Pontmercy. Carry my body to my grandfather, M. Gillenormand, Rue des Filles-du-Calvaire, No. 6, in the Marais.’

Marius gave a terrible start. For a moment it felt as though his heart had stopped. He stood staring down at the handwriting, which was his own, in something of a horror.

So long ago. And yet so near! He could remember writing it, remember the despair and utter hopelessness he’d felt. It seemed only yesterday. And also a thousand years past.

For the briefest of moments, the sight of that note conjured up ghosts and shadows, flooding his senses. The scent of gunpowder. The cries of young men rallying themselves. The crack of gunshots, and the explosions of heavy artillery. A bloodied shirt made into a flag, flapping weakly in the breeze. Enjolras’ eyes, gleaming with resolve, his expression severe. A lopsided smile on Courfeyrac’s face, belaying what they were all aware of, and afraid to say. A churning in his gut. Dread.

He swallowed nervously. A chill passed through him.

From whom could the pocketbook have come? Where had it been? For what purpose had it reemerged in his life, bringing forth phantoms from the edge of his memory?

His hand, trembling some, sought the slip of parchment it had been accompanied by. Bewildered, he unfolded it.

“I believe this belongs to you,” it read. “You may surmise as to how I came into possession of it. I failed to give it back, as I believed you to be dead this long year (if I had not, I would have informed upon you. Count yourself lucky on that). I’m not sure why I kept the thing, to be honest. And I am not sure you will want it back, considering where it has been. But I return it to you now as a matter of course.”

“Post Script: You do understand that if you keep signing your name as ‘Baron’ no one is going to take you seriously, right?”

The note was signed only with “He whom you may remember as a spy that night.”

It took Marius a moment to realize that it meant Javert, and another to realize that the man had probably signed it thusly so as to not incriminate himself on his failure to arrest him, and his continued silence about his unlawful acts.

“Oh,” he breathed to himself. “So that was how they knew where to bring me.”

After a moment, his brow furrowed in consternation. “But why did he keep it, I wonder?”

How strange it was, that suddenly, after all this time, things from that night kept coming back to haunt him. First, the living specter of Javert. Then a scrap of the waistcoat he’d worn to the barricades. Now this.
What was the meaning of it all? It seemed almost to him as though it must be some kind of omen. But of what, he could not say.

Sighing, he inspected the pocketbook. Really, it was quite nearly ruined. The pages were all stuck together, and badly stained besides. Only the leather casing could be saved. And, after all of this, he was not sure that he wanted to use it again. But then again, he could not bring himself to dispose of it.

Sighing, he could decide upon nothing more but to place it in the bottom drawer of his desk.

Something to remember them by.

***

Valjean was out with Cosette in the garden. They were kneeling in the dirt between the furrows of the cucumber patch, picking out newly sprouted weeds.

“They are very persistent,” she remarked.

“They are only trying to survive,” Valjean sighed, plucking another out of the soil and placing it in the basket at his side. “It is not their fault there is no place for them.”

She laughed at him. “I had forgotten how cryptically you speak of plants.”

That coaxed a smile from his lips. “Well, they have just as much a right to be here as anything else. The least we can do is try to understand them.”

“They are little weeds, papa, and you are very silly. They are going in the compost heap. They do not need to be understood.”

He made no reply to this. Merely, he murmured something about ‘potential’ under his breath, and eyed the next sprout his fingers closed around longer than was necessary before uprooting it.

He was staring pensively at the contents of the basket when he heard a distant voice.

“Monsieur,” called Nicolette from across the garden, “there is someone for you at the door.”

Valjean looked over his shoulder curiously. “Oh? Very well, then.” He stood, panting. “I shall be there presently.” Brushing the dirt from his hands, he gulped down a few mouthfuls of water from the jug before heading out.

***

It was about three weeks since Javert had encountered Marius on the street and set him straight. Ever since he had walked to Valjean’s flat one day only to find it no longer occupied, he had carried a vaguely smug and satisfactory sense of accomplishment in his breast.

Never again would that foolhardy old convict be left to his own devices, to wallow in his
loneliness and waste away in some ridiculous attempt at martyrdom. He was going to get what he deserved whether he liked it or not. His children would make sure of that.

At present Javert was sitting at the desk in the station-house, writing up a report on one of his most recently completed investigations.

It had to do with a string of arsons, which were always hard to investigate, as they left little discernible evidence in their wake, but which he nevertheless was certain were connected. The modus operandi was too similar for him to discredit it. A fire would be set in some nondescript building. The nearby citizens rushed to put it out, fearing for their own property to become a casualty of the blaze. Meanwhile, a local shop, devoid of its usual security, would be discreetly robbed.

He had just finished surveying the smoldering remainders of one such blaze that very morning, and speaking with the local proprietors. There were a couple descriptions of people who had happened to be in the area at the time, but none of these was by any means conclusively the arsonist. Besides that, it was possible, and even highly likely, in his opinion, that this was an organized group, and not a single offender.

When he was done with his report he was going to pen a note to his superiors about a possible trap that might be set to catch said group. It would involve a lot of public relations, and multiple officers, and setting things up so that one shop in particular at the center of the arsonist’s crime pattern would seem prime to burgle on a very specific day.

Javert dipped his pen back into the inkwell and had just finished tapping the excess ink off the nib, about to put pen back to paper, when the sound of the station-house door opening and shutting jarred him from his work.

It was not the commonplace creak and clatter of wood and latch that drew his attention, but rather a strange prickling on the back of his neck at the noise.

He looked up from the desk and froze.

There, between two officers leading him like a beast of burden, was a horrifyingly familiar figure.

The shocks of curly, pure white hair that obscured his downcast face, and the barely perceptible, limping gait that favored the man’s right leg, were not to be mistaken.

Javert stared open-mouthed, his eyes widening. Forgotten, the nib of his pen drooped and formed a dark, spreading stain on his report.

Of all the times he had unwittingly come across this man, none of them compared to the terrible shock it caused Javert to find him here.

Clapped in irons, the man was forced forwards by the two officers—one pulling him by the front of his shirt and the other tightly gripping the short chain that ran between his manacles.

Javert could only just make out his expression in the dim light of the gas lamps: baffled, lost, eyes unfocused but just a little too large, staring off at nothing. The man’s face could almost be mistaken as blank—but Javert had seen that look worn by too many criminals and poor, pathetic wretches as they were taken into custody to be fooled.

It was the look of someone who had just lost everything, and stood uncomprehendingly in the rubble, unable to understand how this could have come about.
Slowly, the man’s head turned, his face rose, his pace slowed to a standstill.

Javert’s blood froze in his veins as Valjean met his gaze. The man’s glassy eyes cleared for a moment in recognition, and a million other emotions that Javert tried and failed to put a name to: shame, fear, pain, dread, bewilderment. None of these seemed to encompass the depth of expression in the man’s eyes as they fell upon him.

For a moment everything seemed to stop, and all that existed in the entire world were they two, fixed upon each other in mutual stupefaction.

And then the younger of the two officers muttered something derogatory under his breath and delivered a kick to the back of his knee, sending him stumbling forward.

Valjean caught his balance just as the elder yanked him onwards.

Hanging his head once more and letting his face wilt back into shadow, he fell into step between them and shambled away.

Javert sat immobile, watching them until they disappeared. He did not realize how strange he must have appeared until a hesitant voice caught him off guard, making him start involuntarily.

“Inspector?”

He whipped his head around to find Leroux peering at him curiously. There was something of concern in his features.

The boy cocked his head. “Are you—?”

“I’m fine,” he snapped, straightening in his seat.

“Sorry. It’s just, you looked like you’d seen a ghost!”

“It’s nothing,” he said vehemently, clearing his throat and forcing his gaze back in the direction of his paperwork. He stared unthinking at it until Leroux walked away.

Face its usual stern mask, jaw set tight, only his eyes betrayed him.

The inkblot on his report sucked him in like a black abyss.

He felt a chill in the depths of his soul.

***

Footnotes:

1This is a reference to Psalm 23.1-3: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.”

Chapter End Notes
THIS IS THE END OF BOOK ONE

~~~

Suggested listening:

Gymnopedie No. 1 - Erik Satie

His Theme - Toby Fox

~~~

AROS (Book One) Suggested Listening: Main Themes:

Alibi – 30 Seconds to Mars

After the Storm – Mumford & Sons

Beautiful Crime - Tamer

Believe – Mumford & Sons

Bridge Over Troubled Water – Simon & Garfunkel

Carry You Home – Zara Larsson

The Cave – Mumford & Sons

The Chain – Fleetwood Mac

Concrete Angel (Radio Edit) – Gareth Emery ft. Christina Novelli

Cosmic Love – Florence + the Machine

Cuckoo Song - A Silent Film

Demons – Imagine Dragons

Die Trying – Michl

Duvet – Boa

Face To Face - Daft Punk

Fallen Angel - Aimee B

Fear Not This Night – Asja

Fighting – Yellowcard

Fix You – Coldplay

Fix You (remix) – The Siren / Vita Chambers

Follow You Down to the Red Oak Tree – James Vincent McMorrow

Forbidden Colors – David Sylvian
Forest Fires - Axel Flóvent
Give Me a Sign – Breaking Benjamin
Hello My Old Heart – The Oh Hello’s
He’s Everything you Want – Vertical Horizon
Hold On – The Brevet
Holding On To You – Twenty One Pilots
How To Save A Life – The Fray
Human – Daughter
The Humbling River – Puscifer
Hurt (Around Her Neck remix) – Johnny Cash
If You Only Knew – Shinedown
In the Shallows – Daughter
King – Lauren Aquilina
The Ladder – Andrew Belle
Laura Palmer - Bastille
Legacy – Nicky Romero vs. Krewella
Let Go – Frou Frou
Let Me Go – 3 Doors Down
Locked in a Room – Oren Lavie
Look After You – The Fray
Lost – Michael Buble
Lost Cause – Imagine Dragons
Lullaby – Nickelback
Meant To Live – Switchfoot
Medicine – Daughter
Move Along – The All-American Rejects
My Oldest Friend – Andrew Belle
Never Say Never – The Fray
Never Too Late – Three Days Grace
No Light, No Light – Florence + The Machine

Not Alone – Linkin Park

Numbers – Daughter

On My Own – Yutaka Yamada

Promises (Myon & Shane 54 Summer Of Love Mix) – Andain

Rain – Breaking Benjamin

Recover – Chvrches

Resolve – Sleeping at Last

Savin' Me – Nickelback

Say Something – Christina Aguilera

Scarlet – Brooke Fraser

Seine - Sarah Donner

Shake It Out (Benny Benassi Radio Edit) – Florence + The Machine

Sigh No More – Mumford & Sons

Slip – Elliot Moss

Sound the Bugle – Phil Collins

Stay Alive – José González

Strong Hand – Chvrches

Surrender – Cash Cash

Take Me Home – Cash Cash

This is Gospel (triple layered) – Panic! At the Disco

Timshel – Mumford & Sons

Wake Your Soul - The Hope Arsenal

Wherever You Go – Audrey Assad

Whispers In The Dark – Skillet

Yellow (Coldplay Cover) – Jem

You Are The Moon – The Hush Sound

Your Ghost (Slow Version) - Axel Flóvent

The Walk – Imogen Heap
Chapter Summary

No one knows what to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life."

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson

***

Valjean had stared at the two unfamiliar men that stood on the doorstep.

"Monsieur," said the elder, a strangely careful tone in his voice, "we are with the police."

The blood froze in his veins. Time seemed to slow, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. He smiled weakly at them. "Did … did Javert send you?"

They gave no answer. Instead, the younger said, "Monsieur, you must forgive our impertinence—it shall only last a moment—but … we are going to need you to roll up your sleeve."

He went white, and found his throat had gone dry. "May I ask as to why?"

"We merely need to verify something. It pertains to a case we are working on. We shall be out of your way shortly."

Valjean bent his head. "I … I see." Hand trembling, he fumbled at the button of his right cuff.

"No, monsieur." There was a certain gravity in the officer’s voice. "The other one."

Valjean went still, his arms falling to his side again. A shadow had fallen over his face.

Slowly, he undid the cuff and drew back his shirtsleeve to reveal the nasty, oblong burn on the inside of his forearm. He could not bring himself to look up at the two men.

"Monsieur," he heard the elder officer ask, "How long have you resided in Paris?"
Valjean’s shoulders sank; his eyes no longer saw. A chasm opened up in his chest.

“Take me,” breathed. “Only, do it discreetly.”

***

“Who was that man you brought in just now?” Javert asked the younger officer when he’d returned, doing his best to feign indifference.

“Oh, that old fellow! The scoundrel, he was an escaped convict by the name of Jean Valjean, hiding under a false identity! Sentenced to life, he was—for theft and breaking parole—when he broke out. It’s not the first time he’s done so, either. Apparently he managed to escape Toulon five times during earlier convictions.”

“And how was he apprehended?”

“Seems someone recognized him on the street.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know who it was?”

“No, they sent an anonymous tip to the station house by way of post. But they had newspaper clippings to defend their account, and we did a thorough background check of the man with those who knew him. They indeed could not account for him being in the city for much longer than a decade. The first damnation was the burn on the inside of his arm; we were told that he would have one. Besides that, he bears all the brands of a convict for life, and the scars of a galley-slave. There is no question as to his identity, Inspector; it is cut and dry. Oh! That such a happy thing hath occurred by chance. It was a stroke of luck.”

“Yes,” he forced himself to say, “certainly.”

*Newspaper clippings?* he thought dumbly as the man left. But who would have held onto such things for so long? Whoever had turned him in to the police had been waiting a long time to do it. That, or they had access to a number of resources and were very, very determined.

A former criminal that had known him from his days in Toulon, perhaps? It would explain why they didn’t come forth themselves to ask for a reward. But what would they have to gain by it, then? Revenge? But for what?

He clutched his head, his thoughts buzzing, his blood boiling.

*A burn on his arm?* But he hadn’t had one in Toulon. This was something more recent. Not something another galley slave would have known. Unless it was from his second imprisonment, which was possible. But still, why would a fellow convict turn him in? It didn’t feel right. But who else would have recognized him as a criminal, as Jean Valjean? And why did they not come forward to claim credit for his capture?

Who could have done this? Who, who, who?

He had to remind himself that he was still in the police station, and people could be watching him.
No one could know that he knew the man. Why, Valjean had been the entire reason he’d been transferred to Paris! That was over a decade ago, and people had forgotten his original purpose for being there, but still. If someone caught wind that he’d known about his presence in the city, and done nothing … God forbid, if someone knew the intimacy they’d had! He would be thrown out of the police, cashiered, expelled! Not only that, but they would probably charge him with something—’willful neglect of duty’ or ‘aiding and abetting’ or some such. He would likely be spending some time in prison himself.

But nobody knew about that. Nobody knew of the nights they had spent together. And thank god, because Javert knew how it would look; he knew exactly how it would look, and the thought of it horrified him.

But he was safe in that regard. For now.

Unless …

No. He shook his head. There was no way anyone could know. The only person in the whole wide world who had any idea of their relationship was Valjean. And Valjean would keep his silence; keep their secret. It pained Javert to realize it, but he knew it was true the instant the thought had crossed his brain. He knew it just as surely as Valjean had not called out for him as he’d passed.

No, Javert thought. He would not get in trouble for this. Because nobody knew, and no one ever would.

Valjean …

“Sergeant,” he heard himself say, in a tone that was coarse and stern and not unlike his own, but somehow thin and hollow.

The man looked up from his desk. “Inspector?”

“I am going out. See to it that you pass along the description for that arson case to the next man on shift. If the commissaire comes asking, tell him he will have his report by tomorrow.”

“Very well.”

With this, Javert tugged the brim of his hat down over his eyes and promptly quit the station-house.

***

The waters held a gravity Javert had not felt in almost a year.

He removed his hat and placed it on the parapet. He did not know why. It was the middle of the day.

He stared numbly out at the river’s surface: so calm, now—but, like him, raging underneath.

Once, barely more than a year ago, at this very spot, he had almost drowned himself in indecision. He had thought—he had hoped—that the world had forgotten that.
It had not.

And, laughing, it had woken him from his dream and spat him back out at precisely the same place.

He stood there in silent agony, grinding his teeth. Trembling, he ran a hand through his hair, clutching at the greying roots.

Voices whispered in the back of his mind, sinister and jeering. They tumbled over each other like currents of a stream.

_Did you think_

_you could escape?_

_Did you think_

_you really wouldn't
have to choose?_

_Did you really think—_

_You damn coward._

_You don’t have the power._

_He's where he belongs._

_You know that’s a lie!_

_You can't do anything._

—to a second offender._

—to go against the grain—

—worth to you?

—to go against the grain—

_What would you do?_

—the matter into court._

—to why you’re even alive!

_They’ll cast you out._

—to a second offender._

—to go against the grain—

—to why you’re even alive!

—they’ll cast you out._

—to do any good.
Nothing you do will ever—

—into the river.

—the way of things.

You turned your back.

—would be admitting—

—you let him die?

You won’t succeed.

—throw you away.

—could go on anyway.

He’s just a criminal.

—forsake yourself for—

—better than that!

—really pretend?

—his only chance.

You did before.

—avoid making a mistake!

—his friend?

—will drag you down.

—can’t just stand by while they—

You think he deserves this?

—how the world works.

—incapable of change.

You told yourself—

Was it a lie?

(You know it was.)

I MADE MY CHOICE

—the only way to—

You traitor.

—would be impossible!
—a fork in the path.

You have to choose.

He means nothing!

—be so cold?

You have to try.

—would end your life!

—be dead anyway.

You can’t do anything!

—don’t know that!

Monsieur le Préfet—

—would give a damn?

He doesn’t know.

—you kicked out.

You can’t be sure.

—pathetic.

—will make things worse.

Your debt is paid!

—boiled down to just—?

‘Have you not already made your decision?’

You Pilate.

You can’t even—

You miserable little—

—live with yourself if you—

—of a gypsy?

—the second you try to—

You’re nothing to them!

—even care what you have to say.

—how far you’ve fallen.

Just walk away.
the lowest scum of the earth.

know he doesn’t deserve—

matter what you think?

If he hadn’t set you free …

any other man, you wouldn’t care.

makes him so special?

He’s not hurting anyone!

convince them of that?

Does it even matter?

in their good graces.

They never cared about you.

to play the game.

already lost.

can wash your hands of—

never sleep.

have come to this eventually.

You can’t just let them—

to death!

If you just—

You simpering idiot.

Do you really think—

going to kill him!

It’s all your fault.

were never capable—

in the first place.

if he dies—

the world worth living—

to kill yourself?

even do that right, you coward.
—be irreproachable?

—be counting on you.

—has no one else!

—you’re duty to—

You’re nothing.

—think anyone will even care what you have to—

Shut up! he silently screamed.

And with that he went rigid, the space of his mind becoming once more a black void. His expression slackened; his arms fell to his sides, shoulders sagging.

The familiar rattle of a door opening and closing sounded across the quay, and a chill traced up his spine. The breath stopped short in his chest.

He did not need to look up to know what it was: a group of officers exiting the station-house and leading Valjean across the Pont au Change to a holding cell in the belly of the Conciergerie on the opposite side of the river.

He shuddered at the prickling thought that someone should be looking at him, and could not bring himself to lift his head, remaining instead hidden beneath the sheltering strands of hair that had escaped their queue in his fretting and formed a black veil.

He stood rooted to the spot, a heavy feeling in his stomach like a sinking stone. His face burned.

Footsteps sounded on the bridge.

The sense that he was being watched grew too much to abide by. Fitful, his hand shaking, he reached out for his hat on the parapet and tugged it down on his head, its forgiving shadow obscuring his eyes.

And then, keenly aware of what he was doing with an acute, stabbing pain, he squared his shoulders, turned, and walked away.

***

The Conciergerie had admitted its first prisoners in the year 1391, but the original building’s structure dated all the way back to the tenth century, where it once served as a Merovingian palace. Three towers still remained from this time—thick, looming, and devoid of all decoration—and from these, its feudal origins were clear.

The rest of the building had long since been made into a beautiful feat of modern architecture befitting the governance that took place there. However, deep beneath those lavish halls—inside the ancient, cramped prison cells—its history of brutality stood plain.

Valjean stared up at the ceiling from where he lay on the hard wooden bench seat, nothing more than a thick plank secured against the back of the cell. Besides the covered wooden bucket and the
water-jug in the corner, it was the only thing within. The floor was strewn with straw.
Occasionally, a rat could be seen scampering along the walls. The air, which was foul, smelt of
urine.

The interior belly of the Conciergerie was in a state of disrepair, and in increasingly prevalent
need of restoration work. Sections of stone and mortar had begun to crumble, and its plaster was
cracking and falling away. Yet, these unappealing details were cosmetic only, and were therefore
left to compound. In this way, the interior of the cells resembled the interior of their occupants:
decrepit, ugly, fallen into deterioration in their abandonment, their issues ignored by the majority
until they became so grossly flawed that they could no longer operate as the world had intended.

It was raining outside, and the water splashed onto the floor in a little puddle by the window,
left uncovered in the summer and providing an entrance for the elements. The effects of this could
be seen in the many years' worth of calcium and lime deposits left on the wall beneath the window,
tinged reddish brown by the rust from the fat iron bars.

It gave one the impression that the jail itself was bleeding, corruption and the filth of the soul
seeping from every pore.

The ceiling too had its fair share of water damage, and every now and again a droplet welled
from its stained and fractured surface and fell to hit Jean Valjean squarely on the brow. He took no
notice of this. He flinched each time, but this was merely an involuntary, instinctive reaction to the
brief jolt of cold contact. It did not occur to him that he should move himself from where he was in
order to prevent his further discomfort and dampening.

He was, as it were, lost in his own mind, oblivious to all around him. Yet at the same time he
remained acutely aware of his surroundings and their horrible implications.

This sort of scenery and situation was so agonizingly familiar to him that he felt almost at
home, though it was not a home which he had ever yearned to return to.

The man had become numb.

All of this had happened before, and all of this was happening again, and he felt as though he
should not be surprised by it. Perhaps he had been a fool for ever believing he could’ve escaped
the crushing of that great and indifferent wheel which we call society.

It might even have been better, he mused despondently, if he had never been issued his yellow
papers and been allowed back into the world once more. Because then he would not have been
made soft, vulnerable, and he would not have been allowed to discover love and come into
possession of things he cherished.

It would be easier to bear this torment now had he remained rigid, had his heart remained a
stone. But it had been made flesh long ago, by a Bishop and a little girl, and now it broke and broke
and kept on breaking at the thought of all that he was losing.

If only that woman had not told him to knock on the Bishop’s door! If only he’d been spared the
ability to feel this kind of pain. If only he had stayed a hardened criminal for all his life, and never
learned to feel anything but hatred and contempt for those around him. It would have been so much
taller. But he could not return to that callous impassiveness now, could no longer protect himself
beneath its shield of apathy and spite. He was only filled with a great sadness, so great that it
overwhelmed him and muted all his senses.

He refused what food was given to him. He was barely aware of its existence, or why he should
desire to consume it. He would have ignored the water, too, but thirst can drive an already mad man insane, and so he forced himself to take a few sips here and there.

To the guards and other persons in the jail he spoke no word. Not a single cry did he give, not a single plea did he utter. Deep in his bones he felt that humanity and even possibly God Himself had abandoned him. To reach out to them, to beg for mercy and understanding, would be futile. No tears passed down his face. Even the act of lamentation was forgotten, for it served him no purpose or benefit. Already it had been proven to him long ago that his sobs would coax no sympathy from the world.

And so he lay unmoving in utter despair, dumb and mute, the fires of his soul turned to ash. There was no light in his eyes, no will to live, and they stared out without focus, his face expressionless.

He had been broken.

***

The only reason Javert had slept was that he had, after wandering trance-like through the city for most of the evening, succumbed to exhaustion. He paid a cab to take him home only because he knew that should he fall asleep in the streets, he would robbed, or worse.

He fell upon his bed still fully clothed, in something less like sleeping and more like fainting, and lay there for he knew not how long until the sunlight woke him. And then he lay there for longer, his head empty of thought.

When he finally did rise, it was only to put on his coat and hat and exit the apartment once more, his head down and his hands folded behind his back as his legs carried him to where he knew not.

***

Jean Valjean sat, as he had for hours, on the wooden bench, his head in his hands. He had not moved, he had not spoken, and he did not intend to. Even his thoughts, once tumultuous and distraught, had fallen silent. If he could have shriveled up until he was nothing, until he had blinked out of existence, he would have done it, and done it gladly. But the only escape he was capable of anymore was the blotting out of everything around him.

In the palms of his hands, there was nothing in the world at all. Not Cosette. Not Javert. Not himself. Nothing at all that could hurt him. Only darkness.

A faint murmur ran through the air.

Against his will, his senses stirred. He could hear distant footsteps echoing down the corridor.

From the other cells, detainees suddenly came alive, chattering amongst themselves.

“Well, hullo hullo,” one called out.
Someone let out a wolf whistle.

“Say, mam’selle,” said another, “what’s a pretty thing like you doing in a place like this?”

Valjean froze, his eyes opening wide beneath his hands.

No. No, please; don’t let it be—

“He’s in that one there, madame.”

No.

“Papa?”

A shudder ran through him. At the sound of his daughter’s voice, he felt as though the weight of an entire ocean had crushed him. He seized up on the bench, his muscles locking in place.

You shouldn’t be here, he wanted to say. But the words would not pass his lips.

“Papa!” Cosette said. There was heartbreak and a fearful desperation on her lips. “Oh, papa, it’s not true what they say, is it? They’re saying terrible things about you—that you are a thief, a criminal. It’s a mistake, isn’t it? It is only someone who looks like you. Right?”

Jean Valjean was silent. He could not bring himself to look at her. He could not bring himself to speak.

“Papa?” Her voice wavered. “Tell me it’s not true. Papa, please! Will you not defend yourself?”

If Valjean had been able to defend himself, he would not be here right now. But the moment those two officers had shown up on his doorstep, all defenses had crumbled to dust beneath his feet. He had dreaded this day for too long, and the hopelessness of the situation paralyzed him. There was nothing on earth he could do.

“Papa …” There was a long pause. The atmosphere seemed to shift, somehow. “Is this … why you would never speak of your past? Why we had to change houses so often? Because you were …”

His silence was assent enough.

“Will you not look at me?” she pleaded.

He could not.

The girl’s volume dropped to a hush. “Then, all this time …”

There was no worse shame in this world than what Valjean felt at the tone of his daughter’s voice at that moment—at the idea of what she must be feeling, must be conceiving of him. Of them.

All of a sudden her voice pierced the silence, cracking and strong and despairing all at once. “It doesn’t matter!” she exclaimed. “I don’t care what they say about you; I don’t care what you did! I know the kind of man you are. You took me in. You were good to me when no one else was. You have loved me all of my life, and I you. I forgive you, father! I forgive you.”

There are some things the soul is incapable of defending against, and unexpected forgiveness is one of them. The words that Cosette had just spoken split a crack through the walls of his heart.
He looked up at her, the hands falling from his face to reveal a torrent of tears, his expression the picture of love, and of guilt, and of agony.

The brief glimpse of her aspect was too much to bear, and like a man blinded by sudden light, he had to cover his eyes for a moment before resuming his gaze.

“Cosette,” he breathed, his voice broken. “Cosette.” His hand clamped over his mouth as though to stifle a cry.

Slowly, he rose to his feet from the bench and approached her, arms reaching out preemptively before he drew her to him.

She reached through the bars also and embraced him, and they held each other tightly, sobbing openly.

“Hey!” exclaimed the guard that had escorted her, who now stood a fair distance away, “No physical contact!”

Cosette shot him a teary-eyed glare that would have frozen over the fires of Hell.

The man gave a start. He cleared his throat, turning red and quickly averting his eyes. “It … it’s against regulations. Madame.”

She only stared harshly at him until his gaze shot to the ceiling, the corners of his mouth drawn tightly down under the waxed curls of his mustache.

Valjean stepped back a little and clasped her hands in his, his eyes trailing the floor. He squeezed them shut for a moment and collected his thoughts.

He was not ignorant of the fact that this might be the last time he would ever see her, and he steeled himself in preparation for what he knew that he must tell her.

Swallowing, he squeezed her hand. Covered his eyes. And then a part of him had fled, and his frame no longer shook, and he found himself capable of speech.

“Cosette,” he said, reaching through the bars of the cell and grasping her shoulders, “listen to me. Your mother’s name was Fantine. She loved you very much. And she suffered greatly, trying to provide for you. She would be proud of the woman you’ve become. I want you to remember that, always.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “And I … I am proud of you, too. So, so proud.”

Here the words began to catch in his throat. “Cosette,” he said, bowing his head. “You have been the light of my life these many years. If there was one good thing I can say that I did upon this earth, it was helping you.” Again he raised his eyes to meet hers. “And you, in turn—you helped me. In ways you cannot even understand.” He shook his head, fresh tears springing to his eyes. They coursed hot down his cheeks. “Oh, God. I was so alone before you came to me. I did not even know what it was to love. But you taught me how, and for that I will be forever grateful. I have made many mistakes in my life, but you were never one of them.”

“I regret only that I could not have spent more time with you,” he said remorsefully, “and that I could not have been the sort of father you deserved. Cosette.” He cupped her face in his hands. “My child. I’m so sorry. Fate has deigned that I must go away, now. That I must leave you. I wish it were not so. But I have not the power to fight it. May you be happy, despite my absence. Do not weep for me; I cannot bear to see thee cry. Only, think of me a little, sometimes, now and then. Not too long.”
“You must remember to look for the good things in life. The world is not all bad. You are proof enough of that.” He shook his head. “Whatever happens to me, you mustn’t be afraid. Whatever they decide, remember that it is just, and it has been a long time forthcoming. One can only run from their judgment for so long. I am not resentful of it. You have made me a very happy man, and the light of your presence was a better gift than I deserved. These past years have been the best of my life. It is a nice thing to part with.”

He swallowed back a sob. “Now you must promise me something. You and Marius, and your future children—you must remember to love one another, and be kind to those you meet. There is already too much suffering on this earth. We must all do our part to lessen it some. We are all each other has, in the end. However the world mistreats you, you must always treat it kindly in return.”

“Secondly, you must not let circumstance and misfortune harden your heart. If you are in need of help, you must swallow your pride and ask for it, however small a thing it may be. Pride has been the ruin of many men, including myself. Do not let it build up walls around your soul. It will only bring you ill. Will you promise me this?”

Grieved beyond words, the girl could only nod, her face contorted in pain.

“Now—now do me one last favor, Cosette.”

“Anything.”

“You must leave this place.”

“What? No; I ca—I can’t.”

“You must.”

“No!” She shook her head. “I won’t leave you. I won’t leave you down here all alone. This is a dreadful place; the least I can do is …”

Heartbroken, Valjean looked past her and locked eyes with the guard, a beseeching expression on his face. “Sir.”

The man approached them and grasped Cosette’s arm. “Madame. If you will—”

She turned to the guard with a start, jerking her arm back. “No!” she cried. “Don’t touch me.”

“Madame, I don’t mean any harm. I just—”

“You don’t understand. You don’t even care! You’re all just a bunch of—of heartless brutes!”

“It is regrettable,” he said, reaching again for her arm, “but you cannot stay down here, mada—”

“By what order?” she demanded, jerking away again, “By what law? I shall remain.”

“You cannot. I am sorry.”

“No you’re not!” She fought his hold on her. “Don’t lie to me. Give me one good reason I can’t—”

“I— Madame, if you would just—”

“You don’t have the right to simply—”
“I don’t want to use force on you mada—”

“—me one good reason to—”

“—would just—”

“I refu—”

“He doesn’t want you here!” he shouted, grabbing her wrist and gripping it tightly. He looked apologetic, his voice softening again. “He doesn’t want you here, madame.”

Cosette froze at this, staring at him with wide eyes. Slowly, she turned her head to look back at Valjean.

Valjean turned his face from her, trembling with guilt, his face once more in shadow.

The guard pulled her to her feet.

She was still staring at Valjean as he led her away, her steps numb and clumsy, like she was walking barefoot on ice.

When she had passed out of the line of his sight, the muscles in Jean Valjean’s thighs trembled, and his legs gave way beneath him. He dropped to his knees, his palms spread out on the floor, his head hung. “Cosette,” he murmured, his voice breaking. “Cosette.” He put his face in his hands and sobbed. “Oh, God. Cosette. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry! My child …”

For nearly an hour, he wept.

Eventually, he had no more tears to cry, and he fell silent once more. The light which had pierced through that veil had departed. His soul returned to gloom.

***

Javert approached the cell with some trepidation.

He stopped a number of yards from its door, choosing to peer through its bars at an angle so as not to be seen.

There, sitting slouched over on the bench seat against the far wall of the cell, his face in his hands, was the lone figure of Jean Valjean.

His bright white shocks of hair stood out in stark contrast to the drab and dark setting.

He looked almost as though he was weeping, but he gave no sound or indication of it, his breathing even as he sat motionless, a statue.

Javert stared at him solemnly, studying his demeanor.

Valjean was an escaped convict who’d broken his parole and committed multiple thefts. By all accounts, a cell was where he belonged.

And yet Javert could not deny how horribly out of place the man seemed in one.
He did not belong in a jail cell, or a *salle*, or toiling in chains on the deck of a battered ship. Javert sensed this poignantly.

Valjean did not belong here. This is what he felt. What he knew, however, was that the law said Valjean deserved all this—that his punishment was just. And he, Javert, was a slave to the law.

Technically, it was not he who had put Valjean in here. There had been no betrayal on his part; he had not become a Judas. Was this not what had stayed his hand earlier? The refusal to allow himself to commit a betrayal? And had he not suffered because of this? Had he not nearly been destroyed because of this, the inconceivable choice between upholding two different sorts of justice?

Should he not be relieved at this, the resolution of his original dilemma? Should not a burden be lifted from his chest?

A criminal had been put behind bars. On any other occasion, this would be cause for celebration, for him to feel pleased with himself, for him to take a pinch of snuff and finish the day with a sense of righteousness and accomplishment. Under any other circumstances, he would be happy to see a convict put once more in their place.

And yet.

There was, within his breast, an overarching feeling of wrongness, of fallacy and injustice. It permeated everything around him. Again, as at the Seine, his doubts consumed him in conflict—confusion, fear and powerlessness all roiling about in his gut. And yet he remained perfectly calm on his exterior, no sign of turmoil in his countenance even as a tempest raged within him.

He did not call out to Valjean, gave no hint of his presence there. He did not wish to. For it was not Valjean he had come to have a discussion with, but himself.

Javert urged himself to logical thought.

The man was a criminal. That he had committed wrongs against the people of France could not be denied. It may have been long ago, but that changed nothing; the warrants were still outstanding. He broke out of prison. He was given a sentence and he did not serve it. The state demanded justice.

Legally, there was nothing wrong with this. There was nothing he could argue for there being wrong with this. Objectively, anyway.

If some faceless old convict had been behind those bars, a stranger to him, he would not have given a second thought to their situation, and he told himself this, and he knew it to be true.

But this was not just some shadow among shadows, some nameless, unfortunate wretch, but Jean Valjean. And the fact that it was Jean Valjean gave him pause. Gave him more than pause. Stopped him dead in his tracks.

Yet, again, the legal tiger in him roared. ‘This is right,’ it insisted, ‘this is just. You are biased, you are selfish, and you are wrong. This man earned his place in society, and did it willfully. He deserves whatever punishment they deem fit.’

Only now there was a detachment between himself and this part of him. He was no longer the tiger, but its handler. The beast wanted one thing; the man wanted another. They fought bitterly.

‘He is a malefactor,’ said the one. ‘He is a saint,’ said the other.
'We must be rational,' they both agreed. But they disagreed on the rationale.

For a moment, man submitted to beast, overpowered and outmatched.

_Come_, he told himself, _you owe him nothing! He is a criminal. His misdeeds are his own. You commit no fault here by inaction; it is your right. Duty does not call on you for more._

Here he reviewed the facts.

In saving his life, Valjean had put him in a bind of debt.

Javert had repaid this by letting him go instead of arresting him.

In pulling him from the river, and nursing him back to health—even if was not something Javert had wanted him to do—Valjean had reinstated that debt.

Javert had repaid it by dragging him off the street and nursing him in turn.

Then, Valjean had paid three months of his rent for him.

This Javert settled by calling his children’s attention to his goodliness.

Each debt he had accrued, Javert had paid. He reminded himself of this.

There was no debt.

_There was no debt._

And yet.

And yet!

He felt that something more was owed of him. He knew not what, or why, but he felt the chains of obligation weighing on his soul.

Again, he felt a burning need for himself to take some action, to alter what was occurring. And again he knew the absolute lack of societal obligation on his part to do so.

He was a police officer. This man was a known convict who had to his name irrefutable charges of crime. Both of them were, according to the law, the government and the people of France herself, exactly where they ought to be in this very moment.

But nothing about this situation brought Javert even the slightest sense of satisfaction. Indeed, the whole of his being revolted at it, reviled and recoiled. The sight of Valjean in a cell caused him infinite disquiet.

Why, why, why?

_You know why,' echoed the man’s voice._

And somewhere, deep down in the depths of his soul, he did.

It was that same, unknowable, unnamable thing that had had caused him to pick Valjean up off the street and carry him home, to leave Valjean at his house instead of arresting him. The same thing which had driven Valjean to save his life—once at the barricade, twice at the river.
What was that something? He could not say. But he felt its pull on him, stronger than that of the law, and he sensed it was some sort of duty, in and of itself. A duty that overrode all other duties. That turned its cheek to adversity. A duty whose call he could not help but heed.

He could not in good conscience allow things to continue in this manner. This had become clear to him. He could not sit idly by, a mere spectator as the matter unfolded before his eyes. To do so would be to deny the significance of everything he had come to understand about himself and the world in the past year.

Would that not in itself be an act of betrayal?

No, he had to do something. He may have sworn his life to the law, but he had come to see it differently of late, and he felt that in this instance, its justice was not just.

Gisquet’s words came rushing back to him. About reexamining oneself and the law, about the merits and even necessity of doubt. About reform, and how it came about, and how it was sometimes right to question things which were regarded as absolutes, and thereby affect change upon them. About how mankind could never progress without these little revolutions.

It was in that moment that he knew, his occupation be damned, exactly what he had to do.

Wordlessly, he bowed his head to no one and turned to exit the jail in the same manner in which he’d arrived.

***

Cosette strode through the door, her face downcast, her demeanor unsettlingly cool. She closed it behind her, pausing for a moment at the threshold. “I have been to the jail-house,” she said.

Marius, having heard her enter, and having been worried at her absence, had been in the process of rising from the armchair, but this stopped him cold. He gaped at her in horror. “You didn’t!”

“I did.”

He fell back into his seat as though all strength had suddenly deserted him, staring off at nothing. “Good God.”

Valjean’s words came back to him, the day he had denounced himself.

‘Cosette!’ he’d exclaimed. ‘—oh yes, it is true, you are going to tell Cosette about this. That is right. Stay, I had not thought of that. One has the strength for one thing, but not for another. Sir, I conjure you, I entreat now, sir, give me your most sacred word of honor, that you will not tell her.’

‘She saw the chain-gang pass by one day. Oh! My God!’

The man had wept silently at the thought of it. ‘Would that I could die,’ he’d breathed.

Marius shuddered.

That Cosette should have found out in such a way, that she should have gone to him in the midst of his despair—in the jail house no less!—and confronted him about his past …
“It will have destroyed him,” he murmured.

***

Javert approached the archive’s counter with an air of stoic urgency.

The clerk looked up at him expectantly.

“I need every file you have on Jean Valjean of Faverolles.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Just to make all of this 100x worse, Valjean sees him on the quay. Just try to picture Valjean watching Javert turn his back on him and walk away to the lines of "And still I dreamed he’d come to me ..." and not cry.

Suggested listening:

Clipping - Mutemath
Forbidden Colors- David Sylvian
Gnossienne No. 1 - Erik Satie
The Humbling River - Puscifer
I Dreamed a Dream - Michael Henry & Justin Robinett
Lacrimosa - Mozart
Misery Loves Company - The Wedding
Old Abram Brown - Choir of Purley Downside School
Sail - Awolnation
Sonatica - Bear McCreary
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Some ugly and beautiful truths are revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

***

Cosette approached her husband like a specter, floating noiselessly across the floor until she loomed behind him in his chair. “It was not politics that made you push him away. Was it.”

Marius shivered at the sound of those words. So light in pitch, yet so damning. “No,” he breathed, bowing his head, “it wasn’t.” He put his face in his hands, and the room fell silent.

“Did he tell you who he was?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he felt I had a right to know.”

“You,” she repeated, a tone of incredulity seeping into her voice. “He felt that you had a right to know.”

Marius parted his fingers and looked up at her with one fearful eye.

She stood rigid, like a beautiful statue carved from ice. “You, who are his son-in-law of but a few months—”

“A day,” he could not help correcting her.

“What?”

“We were only married for a day when he told me.”

She stared at him, unblinking.

He felt that he had just fanned an ember, and waited for himself to be burned.
“A day. He felt you had a right to his past after a single day, when I, who was his daughter, who had shared his life for nearly a decade, did not! Do I not have a right to know anything, then? Am I just some—some pretty bauble in a fancy dress, to be fawned over and put on display? Have I no brains? Have I no feelings? Am I not a real person to you?”

“He was trying to protect you, Cosette!” Marius burst, tears welling in his eyes.

“I had a right to know! More than anyone, I had a right to know.” Her voice was beginning to wobble now, like some top that had come to the end of its revolutions. “Especially more than you!”

“I know that!” Marius shook his head, sitting up defiantly in his chair. “But he was afraid. He did not want to burden you with the darkness of his past. You were a little girl when he came to you; you were his child. You didn’t ask to have the galleys looming over your head! To bear such a terrible secret. Should he have allowed you to lay awake at night in fear that one day he would be stolen from you, and you would be all alone again? How could he have done that to you? He was scared that you would hate him, or be afraid of him.”

“I would never hate him!” She protested, balling her fists.

“He said you saw a chain-gang pass by one day. Did it not frighten you?”

She drew back some at that, biting her lip and knitting her brow.

“He thought you would be horrified to find out what he was. That you would no longer love him. Good God, Cosette, he was terrified of it. He wept, when he thought that I should tell you! It was a pitiful sight. He begged me to never reveal it to you, to give him my word. How could I refuse him that? He said—he said he would rather die than you ever find out. Please—Cosette, mon amour—please understand. You are the most precious thing in the world to him. To both of us. We only wanted you to feel safe.”

The girl’s frown tightened. Her lip began to tremble. A stunted breath escaped her throat, the precursor to a sob. “Oh, Marius,” she said, her voice breaking, “Marius.”

He rushed to her side as she crumpled to the floor, putting his arms around her.

“I’m so afraid, Marius. I’m so afraid! I can’t lose him again.”

“I know.” He squeezed her to his chest, as though he could somehow protect her from the maelstrom that threatened to devour both their lives.

“I’ve been a terrible daughter,” she sobbed. The tears traced little rivulets down her powdered cheeks. “I let him fade out of my life; I let you push him away. I let him leave without saying anything. I think I almost forgot him, sometimes, I was so happy. I should have protested, I should have demanded to see him. I should have yelled at you. But I let you all do as you pleased, and stayed silent. Did you know? I never even wrote him any letters. Marius! He must have thought I didn’t care. He must have been so alone.”

“Oh, God. And he almost died like that! It was only chance that brought him back to us. And when we finally had him, when he finally understood how much he was loved, when we finally saw just how good a man he really was—when we were finally happy, he—he …! They dragged him away, they put him in chains, they humiliated him. And now I don’t even know what will happen to him.” She looked up at him with wide, watery eyes. “Will they put him back in prison, Marius?”

He gazed down at her, brimming with anxiety, with anguish and despair. “I don’t know,” was
all that he could say. “I don’t know. I’m sorry, Cosette.” He squeezed his eyes shut, conflicted with himself. “I would like to lie to you, and tell you that everything will be all right. But you’ve been denied too many truths for too long. So I will tell you what I know of things. Your father …” Shaking, he let out a tremulous breath. “Oh, God. It’s likely that he may be executed.”

She gave a violent start. Shuddered in his arms. “No,” she breathed. Then, louder, “No; they can’t! They can’t; he is a good man, the best man! They can’t just …” She trailed off, a low moan escaping her throat.

Marius grimaced. “Cosette, listen. He hasn’t committed any real crime in decades. The offenses they’ll want him for now are for breaking parole, and escape from prison. Those aren’t violent crimes. And he is older, now. Not as likely to be a threat. To be true, he’s been an exemplary citizen for a very long time. They may be lenient with him.”

She looked up at him pleadingly. “Do you think they’ll let him go?”

Marius’ face fell. “No. If he is lucky, it will only be prison. For life. If he’s very lucky, maybe a little less. But considering his original crimes, and considering he was deemed ‘extremely dangerous’, I doubt that he’ll ever be allowed out of chains again.” He wet his lips, eyes flicking away. “For them to let him go free, after all that he’s done—all they think him capable of doing … That would take a miracle.”

***

The stack of papers was set down on the counter with an audible thud. It was about four inches thick, and contained a varied assortment of files, old and new.

Javert eyed the pile with scrutiny. “This is everything?”

“As much as I was able to find on him, sir. Police reports, official documents, newspaper clippings, testimonials from witnesses … It’s all there.”

“Good.”

The clerk handed him a record slip with a notice of withdrawal. “May I ask what you need them for?”

Javert dipped the pen in the inkwell, signed his name and the date, and handed the writing materials back to him. “No.”

Without another word, he tucked the files under his arm and left.

***

Cosette was inconsolable. She had shut herself up in the drawing room, sobbing loudly, having thrown herself over the canapé in a fit of grief. She refused everyone but Toussaint, and could barely speak for her tears. The old woman only sat there and held her, stroking her hair and
murmuring words of comfort that did not possess the power to fulfill their purpose.

Toussaint herself was barely able to hold back tears, but blinked her eyes dry and steeled her voice for the sake of duty.

Marius, too, grieved in his own way. He locked himself in the library, pulling volume after volume of law books off the shelves in the fruitless hope of finding he-knew-not-what that might allow him to make some argument on his father’s behalf. Furiously, he scribbled down passages on sheets of rag paper and parchment.

***

M. Gillenormand did not understand what had happened.

One day his children had been happy, filled with love and songs and smiles, and the next, his son-in-law had been thrown into jail for what charges he knew not, and his little Marius and precious Cosette fretted and wept and denied him answers. All he was given was mere hearsay from the servants.

His daughter was most bewildered of all, and roamed the house in a state of confused shock, muttering to herself about “bad business” and “deceptiveness” and some such. She entreated entrance into the library, but her nephew would not admit her, and pleaded hoarsely for her to go away. As for Cosette, she did not know how to approach the child, and knew not in what regard she ought to hold her in light of her father’s jailing. In the end, she too shut herself up in her room, and only left to go out of the house.

Having been deserted and left in the dark by everyone, finally, M. Gillenormand cracked, and banged on the doors of the library with his cane, threatening to break them down if Marius did not let him in.

Begrudgingly, the boy unlocked the door, and Gillenormand stormed in, cornering him so that Marius had no other recourse but to lean back from his grandfather as far as he could over the curio cabinet, gripping the edge of its mahogany frame for dear life as he was assaulted by a barrage of angry, tearful questions.

Gillenormand was a volatile man, and when something impassioned him, it sent him into a rage, and he became of force of nature to be reckoned with.

“I may be old, but do not dare presume I’m senile,” the man fumed. “Don’t dare believe I am too stupid or too fragile to handle the truth of things! You are unhappy, you cry, you tear your hair out. Your father has been carted off by the police, and you will not tell me why. They say he is a robber, a thief, a brigand—is this true? You do not act surprised! You are grieved, you mourn, you are not so much in shock as in despair.”

“Fauchelevent is a good man; you hold him in esteem do you not? Yet he has done ill, so they say. Which is it? You know things of him that I do not; you withhold things from me. I am not oblivious, I can see that. What is it that you fear to tell me? I am sick of being treated like some poor old fool. No more of this cloak and dagger nonsense! You will explain to me all you know of his past and this situation, or so help me, I shall storm down to the Conciergerie and hear it from the man himself!”
"No, you cannot do that!" Marius breathed in terror. "Don’t do that to him; he doesn’t deserve the indignity of it. Cosette has done it, and I fear it has already devastated him. A second humiliation—spare him that, will you?"

"I will not! That is, unless you deign fit to enlighten me yourself."

"Oh—oh, very well, then," he squeaked, clawing at his scalp, "It cannot be helped. He is family, he has lived in your house and eaten your food; you have a right to know of him. It cannot be hidden any longer. He may be dead in a number of days, and if you are to learn of things there may be no better time than now."

With this utterance, he delved frantically into the story of Jean Valjean—the man’s initial crime of petty theft, his sentence and his stint in Toulon, lengthened time and time again to outrageous proportions by his successive escape attempts. His release, and broken parole, his acquisition of a jet goods manufacturer’s, his ascension from Monsieur Madeleine to Father Madeleine to Monsieur le Maire. How he had become the benefactor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, and funded hospitals and schools, visited the poor and infirm, and gave charity and wisdom to all. How the good mayor had become the envy of every town in the Calais.

His recognition and recapture by Police Inspector Javert, his year long stint in Toulon and daring escape. His retrieval of Cosette, and how he had taken her away from some horrible place and raised her as his own—been the most gentle, loving parent one could ask for. Their time in the convent, and then their move to Rue Plumet #55, and his own meeting with her in the Luxembourg.

How Valjean had given charity to his impoverished neighbors only to find himself the victim of a trap, set by evil, brutish men—yet had held his own against them, and had managed to escape Javert at the last possible moment without being recognized.

How he, Marius, had found Cosette again, finally, in a secret garden, and had left her a love letter. How they had grown to adore one another, and then, how she had told him they were to move to England, and that there was nothing she could do about it.

He told him how, believing himself doomed to live a life without her, he had gone to die with his friends at the barricades, only to be dragged to safety at the last minute by her father, who had watched over him from the shadows on her behalf. How the man had saved the life of the spy Javert, whose rescue surely spelled his own doom. How, having waded through the sewers with an injured Marius on his back for hours, he emerged only to find himself face to face with Javert, who had asserted that he would arrest him. How Valjean had pleaded for Javert to allow him to return Marius to his family, and how, after which, Javert had let him go.

Marius explained how Valjean had told him only the worst of himself, how he had been afraid of tainting their perfect happiness with his presence, and allowed himself to be pushed away without complaint. How he had grown ill from heartbreak in the absence of his Cosette, and had almost allowed himself to die, resigned to his fate, before being found and nursed back to health by Javert. How it had been Javert who’d revealed Valjean’s goodness to him, because Valjean himself was too humble to admit these things.

All the while he’d spoken of these things, M. Gillenormand’s eyes had grown wider and wider. "My God, he is a saint!" the old man exclaimed in horror. "He has rescued my two little children, my Marius and my Cosette. He is the one responsible for all your happiness, for the beating of your hearts!” He grabbed Marius by the shoulders. "Why did you not tell me this? He is the one who saved your life, who delivered you to me. I owe him all of my thanks. I owe him everything! We owe him everything! And he has been living under my roof these past months, and I did not even..."
know! Why did you not tell me directly, when you first were made aware of these things?"

"Because he was a convict, because he was wanted by the police, because there was an outstanding warrant for his arrest! I thought that if you knew, you would have had him hauled off to jail!"

"Jail? Me, put him there? Mon Dieu, what is wrong with you, child? Of course I should not have done such a thing. I owe him everything I have!"

"How was I to know the way you would perceive him?" Marius defended tearfully. "You and I have radically different views about a great many things, father!"

"What kind of man do you take me for, that you would believe I might forsake the savior of my children? You foolish boy! If you feared for him so, why not tell me only of his merits? You may have felt you needed to hide his imperfections, but you did not have to hide his goodness along with them! I have a right to know these sorts of things. Dear lord! Look what you’ve done, with your silence! The man may be executed, and I shall have never had a proper chance to show him my gratitude! All these months he has been with us, and I might have shown him such kindness—but I did not even know to. I did not even know to! Oh, you wicked child! He is my son-in-law, pardieu—and he deserves so much more from me than what I have given him."

"Ah! What shall we do?" the old man lamented. "He has given you your life, he has returned you to me. He has given us Cosette; he has made us all rich! And now he sits in a cell and awaits his own doom. They may have killed him before the week is out! Oh, Marius, Marius, what are we to do? You are a lawyer, you know the judicial system. Tell me, is there anything to be done for him? Anything at all?"

Marius’ expression quivered. The tears that had been welling in his eyes made their way down his cheeks. "I do not know," he said.

***

_Pit._

_Pat._

Droplets fell softly onto the papers he held clutched in his trembling hands, the first of them clear, the second crimson.

Tears sliding down his cheeks in silence, Javert had bitten into his lip so hard as to draw blood, and it trickled slowly down his chin in a single stream as he quivered.

_I didn’t know_, was all he could think. The phrase repeated over and over in his head like a mantra. _I didn’t know._

No one had bothered to inform him exactly what had happened in the Court of Assizes that day. It was probable that even those who had issued his orders were unaware of the details.

He had been woken in the middle of the night by a gendarme bearing an official notice: a warrant for arrest. He had known only that his convictions had not been misguided, that Madeleine was indeed the escaped convict Jean Valjean, and that this had been proven beyond a doubt some
number of hours ago in a court of law.

At the time he did not consider how they might have proved it, and the later newspaper articles about it left little doubt as to what had occurred for them to reach this conclusion: Jean Valjean had been brought to the court of Assizes in Arras, and the Public Prosecutor—with ‘ineffable zeal’—had proved him to be part of a chain gang from the galleys of the South.

There was no reason for Javert to question any of this. No reason at all.

Logically, the Prefecture must have decided to give the letter he’d sent them earlier a second glance, and found some kernel of plausibility there. They had then seized the mayor and brought him to Arras, where it was determined he was indeed the true criminal. This gave Javert a sense of pride—that he had seen what others had not, that he had been proven a talented inspector, cunning and shrewd. That he hadn’t—as they had so delicately put it—‘gone mad’.

As to the question of why Valjean had not been arrested immediately following this trial, Javert did not think on this much. He did not doubt the faculties of the court or its officials, and so he had assumed that the man must have broken his bonds and escaped, or otherwise conned his way out of immediate detention.

The technicalities of the situation were inconsequential to him at best. He had been, at the time, incensed. The only thing he’d cared for was that he had been right, that this fact was now recognized by his superiors, and that justice was finally being served. Then, also, that he should be so lucky as to be the one who carried out its sentence.

Not once had he requested to view the official transcripts for it. He had believed the word of the law and the papers with all his heart, and entertained no skepticism towards them.

And so it came as a horrible shock when he found the gulf of disparity between what he and the public had believed to be the case and what had actually transpired in the Court of Assizes.

That a government official could have lied to the press about what had happened! That the Public Prosecutor had made himself out to be the clever spy, the righteous unmasker of truth to whom all credit in recapturing the convict was due—and that his fellow officials should not correct him on this! The idea repelled him.

Javert had allowed himself to be played the fool, to be willingly duped by those whom he’d trusted, and he’d had unceasing faith in the transparency and honesty of the government and its appointed representatives.

Everything had been cut and dry, open and closed, clear as crystal to him.

He had found satisfaction in seeing the man brought so low. In seeing the town reject Madeleine, disown him, dispel in a matter of hours the reverence and respect they had held for him and immediately forget all he had accomplished for them whilst in office.

He had entertained a savage joy in the man’s downfall.

And now—

And now …

I didn’t know, he said to himself as the tears coursed down his face.

The manner in which Valjean had entered the courtroom, the way he’d announced himself as
the real Jean Valjean, the very words which he'd used to methodically denounce himself in the eyes of the court, had been perfectly preserved in the transcript.

It had all been written down, without bias or conjecture: the audible shock of those present, the disbelief of the magistrates, had all been recorded. How Valjean had openly invited his own arrest. How the officials had been too stunned to pass a sentence on him. How the jury had risen and parted like the Red Sea at the passing of that unhappy man.

Javert had read it all in abject horror.

It was almost too much to be believed, that the man could have done this to himself, could have convicted himself thusly—but there upon the paper was the plain evidence of the fact, and Javert could not bring himself to deny it.

‘God, who is on high, looks down on what I am doing at this moment,’ Valjean had said, ‘and that suffices.’

Javert felt within those words the whole of Valjean, and he knew without a doubt that this witness’s testimony was indeed the real record of the truth, and that all that had been published in the papers had been lies and propaganda, created to shine a favorable light upon the officials and their decision.

It was so like Valjean to do this—to sacrifice everything for the sake of a stranger, for the sake of his conscience and the Bishop and God. So damnably like him.

Javert had never understood that before. No one had ever understood Valjean, because no one had ever bothered to try. And the evidence of his goodness had been buried and erased and forgotten because it made things that much easier to swallow.

The world was simpler in black and white. Javert knew that well.

But this! This was too much. That society should turn a blind eye towards that grave act of heroism and sacrifice played out in that courtroom. That Valjean had publicly defaced himself, knowing he would be shown no mercy. That he pled nothing on his own behalf, because he was accustomed to being beaten down by the world around him. That he so readily gave himself up to save the life of a stranger, dooming himself and forsaking all that he’d worked so hard for, because it was what was just, what was kind … even when he wished with all his heart that he should not have had to do so.

It made Javert want to hang his head in his hands and weep.

The man’s words overwhelmed him.

‘Gentlemen of the jury, order the prisoner to be released! Monsieur le Président, have me arrested.’

‘You were on the point of committing a great error; release this man! I am fulfilling a duty; I am that miserable criminal. I am the only one here who sees the matter clearly, and I am telling you the truth.’

‘You can take me, for here I am: but I have done my best.’

‘I have tried to re-enter the ranks of the honest. It seems that that is not to be done.’
You’re not to blame, Javert wanted to tell him. You tried so hard.

‘They were right in telling you that Jean Valjean was a very vicious wretch. Perhaps it was not altogether his fault.’

‘The infamy from which I have tried to escape is an injurious thing; the galleys make the convict what he is; reflect upon that, if you please.’

‘I have nothing farther to add; take me.’

‘You do not believe me! That is distressing. Do not, at least, condemn this man! What! These men do not recognize me! I wish Javert were here; he would recognize me.’

At this mention of himself Javert felt a churning in his gut, a piercing, as though he had been impaled with a sharp blade, and his hand drew instinctively to his abdomen, clawing at the fabric there as though he truly expected to find himself wounded and bloodied. Doing thus, he heard something like a low noise of an animal; it was in fact a moan that had escaped his lips.

‘I do not wish to disturb the court further. I shall withdraw, since you do not arrest me. I have many things to do. The district-attorney knows who I am; he knows whither I am going; he can have me arrested when he likes.’

‘All of you, all who are present—consider me worthy of pity, do you not? Good God! When I think of what I was on the point of doing, I consider that I am to be envied. Nevertheless, I should have preferred not to have had this occur.’

How could he confine himself, his grief, his desolation, to that alone? How—how could he ...?

Javert was helpless as the decade-old scene played out before him, resurrected by the papers in his hands. Humble and simple creature that he was, he stood in fearful awe of the man those words painted behind his eyes.

Valjean seemed to him some immense angel, stoic and ill-fated, offering up its wings to be hacked from its body, and its wrists to be bound in chains. All without a cry, without tears, and with only the vaguely pained expression of one who has borne great suffering for all their life and done so with a forced smile.

Javert beheld this unfathomably tragic being, this selfless martyr, with terror. He found himself blinded by a sudden light, so great was the illumination imparted to him from that text.

The man had sacrificed all that he had—his fortune, his future, even his very life—in the name of justice. That kind of selfless righteousness was all Javert aspired to and more—so much more—because Javert had never had so much to lose.

And then Madeleine had come back, while they permitted him, for one last night to the town, in
order to settle his affairs, in order to do one last act of mercy and bring that dying woman her child—

And Javert had been monstrous. He had smiled! He had taken hold of the man by his neck, and laughed! He had been terrible.

The way he had mocked him, derided him, been so spiteful towards him, when the man had already given himself up, had already accepted his fate—brought it upon himself, even!

Javert shuddered at himself.

All his life he had walked in darkness. And now that he finally saw the light, it was already on the verge of being extinguished.

He felt powerless, defenseless, lost in his realizations, and how they always seemed to come too late.

Could he even do anything to help him now? He was deathly afraid that he should fail in his endeavors, and his attempts at aid would be rendered useless. That the law would find his revelations worthless, and would not relent as it brought down its hand in judgment. That all had been for naught, and all because of him—because of his prideful certainty and his callous disregard for anything that went against his own convictions.

Was this God’s punishment for him, for being so hard-hearted all these years? That only now, when he finally grasped all the facts, when he had finally attained a true understanding of things, would Valjean be ripped from the world and set ablaze, a fiery monument to all he’d done wrong in life, the culmination of his failures?

If anyone should be punished for that, it should be he himself, not Valjean. But then again, was destroying Valjean not the best possible way to do so? Yes, it was a fitting punishment, the worst and the most appropriate torture Javert could conceive of.

Now the man was rotting in a cell awaiting judgment for the fourth time in his life, and he—Javert—was the only thing standing between him and the inevitable.

And he did not know if he would be enough.

Hands shaking, he finally lowered the papers back down.

Agony overwhelmed him, writhing and roiling into a veritable rage. He wanted to whip the files from his desk, and throw the desk against the wall in fury.

But he remained seated, shuddering in the candlelight. Dread and guilt welled up from the bottom of his soul and overcame him completely.

“Merde,” he swore, his voice broken as he put his head in his hands. “Merde …”

The tears were wet against his palms. He clawed at his scalp in a fit of grief.

“Putain …”

***
Sleep did not come to Javert for a long, long time.

He lay in his bed, staring up into the darkness, his eyes wide.

All his life he had striven to be honorable, to be an upholder of all that was good and just. Unworthy of disdain. Righteous. And so he had thought himself, until Valjean had let him go free—and he had allowed the man his liberty in turn. Then, his certainty was replaced by confusion. His soul was in upheaval. He realized that he had been ignorant of many things. But he only understood so much as he was blind, and this understanding did not allow him true sight.

Now, however, that perplexion was replaced by, again, certainty—of a very different kind.

The vision he’d seen in his mind at the river was now complete: the wretched convict faded into the venerable mayor. And then, the mayor, too, faded, and left, to his amazement, only a man—a man who was simpler and greater than any of the faces he had worn. A man who was willing to lay down his life in the name of justice—of true justice, without petition or reward. A man who had succeeded in becoming an avatar of goodness, where he, Javert, had failed.

Javert hacked at the branches of evil. Valjean pulled it out by the root. One treated the symptoms, the other, the cause.

Javert had thought he knew what justice was, back then. He had become it, the hand of it—or, at least, had tried his best to.

But then he realized that the justice he’d sworn himself to was but a pale imitation of the truth. It fell flat before the genuine article—the real, honest justice: selflessness, kindness, humility, patience, mercy.

Love.

Beyond all boundaries and measures, love.

And it was this true justice that Valjean personified.

Not him—not Javert, the rigid and upstanding police officer—but Valjean.

The effect upon him at this conclusion was, probably, the same effect upon Malchus when Jesus healed his ear in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Javert trembled. Again, he recounted the past. And with the light shed by new information, he perceived details he had never noted before.

The way Madeleine—no, he told himself, Valjean—had dropped the docket he’d been holding when he’d told him the real Jean Valjean had been found. The slight pallor that had spread across the man’s face for the duration of the conversation thereafter.

How Valjean had asked him, trying to sound casual, when the trial was to be—and had somehow remained composed when he learned it was the very next day.

In that moment, Javert realized, Valjean had already decided to intercede. That was the only reason he would have asked when the trial was. There, in that very office, right in front of his eyes, Valjean had made the decision to give himself up.

And who was responsible for his having to make this decision? Javert himself. For if he had not informed against him, there would have been no need to tell him about the Prefecture’s
apprehension of Champmathieu, and therefore, Valjean would have never known of the man’s plight. At least, not in time to do anything about it.

But because of Javert, he was faced with the terrible decision of whether or not to let another man be sentenced to prison or death in his stead. And his conscience would not allow him to let someone else be damned in his place, knowing himself to be the true offender. So he had made up his mind right there and right then to reveal himself, surrender his life—and with it, any further benefit he could provide to that town. All on account of Javert.

And Javert stood before him, and denounced himself. Had asked to be dismissed.

But Valjean would not do so. Valjean commended him! Even knowing that, because of him, everything he had ever worked for would be destroyed. Knowing that he very well might die. He looked upon this man who had—perhaps directly and perhaps not—effected his downfall, and he smiled upon him, with pity and respect. Here Valjean had been given one last opportunity to shame—and rightfully so!—the man who had ruined him—and what did he do? He refused to. Not only this, he took the blame which Javert had placed on himself and tried to invalidate it. Tried to make him see the good in himself!

‘You are a man of honor, and I esteem you,’ he’d said. ‘You exaggerate your fault. Moreover, this is an offense which concerns me. Javert, you deserve promotion instead of degradation.’

Javert shuddered at those words in a sort of reverent horror. They rent his soul apart.

‘I esteem you.’

I esteem you! How could he say that? How could say that, how, how, how, when he knew that on the very next day, in consequence of Javert’s actions, he would sentence himself to hell? After all of their bickering at the station house, after Javert had failed to treat him with the veneration he deserved, after Javert had given the dogs his scent! After everything, how could Valjean look at him like that, commiserate him like that, offer him his hand?

Javert writhed under the covers, turning his head and burying his face in the pillow. He curled into a tight ball, shivering and tugging at the sheets, at the roots of his hair.

The man had been infinitely kinder to him than he had ever deserved. Always, always. Why? Javert had never caused him anything but pain. And yet still Valjean persisted, still he treated him with tenderness—with admiration, even!

In light of the man’s circumstances, Valjean had treated him more graciously than perhaps any other person ever had. Javert doubted even Chabouillet could be so kind.

I was wrong, he thought, I was so, so wrong. I was always wrong about you.

Truly, there was not a more benevolent or courageous soul Javert could think of in the whole of the world.

And that soul was about to be snuffed out.

Could he prevent this?

He did not know.

Wracked with this uncertainty, he fell finally into a terrible slumber.
A vision flashed before his eyes: a man at the center of a maelstrom of wind, wisps of clouds blown away and replaced by smoke. A flurry of embers and ash whipped around him.

The air was a lash, tearing at his clothes, his flesh, ripping the feathers from the snow white wings that matched his snow white hair.

Javert thought himself to be yelling, to be crying out to him, but he could not hear his own voice amid the rushing of the wind.

The man held his gaze with only a melancholy expression, motionless and mute.

The stench of blood and gunpowder and burnt flesh filled his nostrils, and he beheld the figure before him with terror as it plunged downwards, devoured by flames.

One single white plume drifted towards him on a breeze, and Javert reached out to it. As he touched it, it was met by a floating ember, and it turned to cinders instantly and disintegrated at his fingertips. He gave a jolt, flinching back.

With a cry he found himself suddenly in his bed, his fingers clawing at the sheets, his breath ragged.

Panting, he stared up at the ceiling and shut his eyes, sweat beading on his brow.

The trial was in two days.

And for the first time in his life, Javert was afraid.

***

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is meant to evoke not only Cosette, M. Gillenormand, and Javert's horrible enlightenment, but also as a reference to the biblical end of the world.

Suggested Listening:

A Thousand Fathoms Deep - Fakesensations

Back to You - WILD

Gentle Execution - Bear McCreary

Illuminated - Hurts
I Move On (Sintel's Song) - Jan Morgenstern/Helena Fix
Lacrimosa - Mozart
Moonlight Sonata (#14) - Beethoven
On the Hill - Ryuichi Sakamoto
Please Surrender - Your Hand in Mine
The Sheltering Sky Theme - Ryuichi Sakamoto
Sonmi's Discovery - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil
Temple of Sacrifice - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil
Wonder - Adventure Club ft. The Kite String Tangle
A Trio of Conspirators

Chapter Summary

Javert pays a visit to the Gillenormand estate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable ... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

***

Cosette sat on an ornate concrete bench in the garden, her head bent, her hands clasped tightly around her rosary in fervent prayer. But no words passed her lips, nor crossed her mind, but half-formed pleas towards a silent god.

The garden was cast in grey; the sky threatened rain. The air was warm against her skin, but she did not feel warmed by it.

All of a sudden a hand touched her shoulder, and she sat up with a gasp.

It was Nicolette, and the woman was regarding her with some amount of pity in her eyes. “You are wanted in the foyer, madame.”

“For what purpose?”

“There is a policeman asking after you.”

Her face screwed up in resentment. “Tell him to go away. He can talk to Marius if he likes. I do not want to speak with him.”

“He says you know him.”

She knit her brow. “Know him?” Then her heart gave a leap of recollection. “Monsieur Javert!” she exclaimed to herself, darting from the bench. “I had entirely forgotten!”

***
“Monsieur!”

Javert gave a start as Cosette rushed into view, stopping dead in her tracks between the rooms and staring at him.

“It really is you,” she said, her features scrunched in emotion, the folds of her dress scrunched in her fists. “I didn’t know if you would come.” She approached him, wringing her hands, a look of supplication on her face, and a frantic tone in her voice. “You knew about papa, didn’t you? You knew all along. And yet you didn’t tell anybody! You and Marius both, you—”

“Hush now,” he murmured, glancing around. “No one needs to know that. It could get us all in a great deal of trouble.”

“Ah—that’s true; I didn’t—” She obediently lowered her voice, and took a look around as well. “You’re a police officer, and so—”

“And so it would be inappropriate for me to ignore a wanted criminal, yes,” he spoke between his teeth. “Especially inappropriate if someone were to have seen me fraternizing with one, vous comprenez?”

She gave a quick couple nods of her head. “Je comprends,” she whispered. “But ... why did you say nothing?”

Javert’s eyes continued to slide nervously around the foyer. “Surely you can guess.”

She knit her brow. “He is a good man, I know that, but as an officer of the law, what made you — Oh, but that’s right,” she recalled, clutching the strings of her bonnet, “he saved your life at the barricades, didn’t he. Is that why?”

“That’s part of it, yes—but it hardly matters now, and that’s not why I’ve come. Where is Pontmercy? I need to speak with him, too. The both of you. In private.”

She looked up at him, her blue eyes sparkling plaintively. “You’ve come to help us, then?”

“As much as I can, yes.”

“Oh!” She took his hands in hers, and the disparity of their sizes was hard not to notice. “Thank you. Thank you. I didn’t know what to do. I—”

“Inspector!”

They turned to find Marius descending the stairs, leaning over the banister and craning his neck out to look at them.

“They told me it was a policeman; I didn’t know it was you!” He hurried down the remaining steps to meet them. “So you’ve heard, then.”

“I saw them take him away,” Javert muttered, flicking his eyes to the floor. “I didn’t ... I wasn’t sure what I should do. What I could do. But I’ve made up my mind, and I won’t let him go without a fight. Even if it’s one I may not win.”

The boy’s face lit up. “You mean to come to his defense, then! Publicly?”

“I ...” He clenched his teeth. “There is no other choice that I can make.”

“That’s great news!”
Javert could see the boy daring to hope they had a chance, now, and he was afraid it might all be for naught. He doubted he had the kind of authority either of them thought he did.

“This will help things so much,” Marius was saying, clutching his head in what looked like relief. “To have an officer on our side, someone who can testify his goodness, someone respected —”

“I fear you overestimate my influence,” Javert interrupted. “My word might hold some sway, but in the face of charges like these—of his previous sentences, his history—I’m not sure what I can do.”

“Anything you are capable of doing is a boon to us, sir,” he told him. “Truly.”

Cosette nodded vigorously in agreement.

Javert took the two of them into account.

There was something among them already of conspirators; this being due to their prior exchange and subsequent intercession on behalf of Valjean—only this time, circumstances were far more dire, and the atmosphere was one of desperation.

Javert saw the reliance in their eyes and shied away from it internally.

The poor, desperate children.

Did they have any idea of just how dire the circumstances were?

Did they have any idea of just how powerless he was?

God forbid, that he should fail them—that he should fail him, when he—

Javert shook his head, driving the thought away. Letting those doubts in would cripple him, he knew. And he needed all the clarity he could retain.

He cleared his throat, glancing away. “Yes. Well. I will do what I can.” His voice turned sharp. “Now listen to me carefully. Did your father keep any valuables under lock and key? Bank notes, old legal documents? Were there any containers he never opened? Anything, anything at all.”

“Er, no, I don’t think so,” Marius said. “He gave us all of his finances to look after—his bank notes, his papers—well, his false papers, but—”

“Marius,” Cosette said, her eyes wide as she touched his arm. “His valise. Remember? He would not let anyone else carry it when we moved here. I have never even seen the inside of it; I do not have any idea what is in there.”

“Yes, good!” Javert exclaimed. “Where is that, then?”

They ascended the stairs into what had been Valjean’s bedroom.

“There,” she said, pointing to a small trunk beside his dresser.

The portmanteau was not very opulent, but it looked to be made of very thick wood, and its lock was large. Unassuming, sturdy and strong. Something a convict would hide his valuables in, Javert thought. Yes, this had to be what he was looking for.

“I do not know where he kept the key,” Cosette confessed.
“That is of little matter to me,” Javert mumbled, pulling his lock-pick’s kit from the pocket of his coat and kneeling down. He began teasing the tumblers into place, with his ear pressed to the brass lock.

“What do you expect to find in there?” Marius asked.

“Something helpful.”

In reality, he didn’t know. Part of him hoped he might find the note Fantine surely must have given Valjean to bequeath him custody of Cosette—just in case that long forgotten ‘kidnapping of a child’ charge came to head. Other than that, thank-you notes from people he had given charity to, accounts of his previous lives—anything that could paint Valjean in a moral and favorable light when presented to a jury.

With a metallic click, the latch undid, and Javert opened the lid. He was hit with an odor of camphor, and various other aromatics.

The first thing he saw inside, to his bewilderment, was a mass of black fabric.

He blinked, taken off guard by this unexpected sight.

Clothes?

Knitting his brow, he set the things aside carelessly and began rummaging through the stack of papers beneath, muttering frantically to himself.

His eyes darted over the lettering, searching desperately for he knew-not-what, turning the parchment and paper scraps over in the light.

***

When Cosette saw the bundle Javert had tossed on the floor, her lips parted, and she grew very still. Trance-like, she approached it, picking through its contents with wondering eyes.

A little black dress, sized for a very young girl. Tiny black shoes that her feet might yet have fit into. A petticoat, a bodice, an apron. A fichu. Woolen stockings. All black.

Mourning clothes. The clothes that her father had bought for her the day he had taken her away from the inn.

It was as though she had come upon the remains of another world, and quite suddenly recalled her origins in it.

A shudder ran through her.

That terrible place! That terrible life! She had nearly forgotten it. The memory had blurred into nothing but a vague and menacing shadow in the back of her mind. But now, with these artifacts, she recollected it in sudden, dizzying detail.

The corner in which she slept, with her broom close at hand. The little knife that was both her sword and her doll. The tattered rags that were her clothes, too thin to keep her warm. Dirty bare feet and hard wooden clogs. The sting of her fingers from the pricks of her sewing needle. Hunger
and shivers and that constant, nagging fear.

The jeers of the patrons, the threats of the Thénardiers, the disgust of their daughters. She had been little more than a dog to them. No, even their cat, and their patrons’ horses, had been treated better than her—as though she were not even fit to be an animal. Everything had been insults and centipedes and grime.

And yet as she recalled these horrors, so too did she recall their abrupt and happy end: the moment the man had entered her life. How he appeared at her side from out of the darkness of the forest, and how, though she had been terrified only moments prior, she felt no fear. How he had taken the heavy bucket from her aching hands, and carried it for her all the way back. The unbelievable things he had said, had done, in her defense.

How he had simply swept her away, in the course of one day, and replaced all the cruelty and loneliness and despair with softness and gentleness and joy.

She stared at the clothes in the candlelight, frozen, as a measure of understanding, and then a wave of grief, overcame her.

How he had loved her!

To keep her clothes after all this time, preserved like this!

Other men had chests of gold and silver—vaults of jewels, hoards of valuables, guarded greedily under lock and key.

His secret treasure was but his memory of her.

Marius called her name, but she was barely aware of him doing so, and made no reply.

Her numb expression contorted into anguish as a low moan escaped her throat. Burning tears welled in her blue eyes and coursed hot down her cheeks as she crumpled the dress in her hands.

She flung herself over the side of her father’s bed and wept, burying her face in the faded black fabric and sobbing uncontrollably.

***

Javert didn't know how long he knelt there, skimming through old pieces of parchment by candlelight while Marius tried to console his grieving wife.

Scraps of newspapers, hastily scrawled notes, technical drawings, unsent letters or journal entries (he could not tell which)—there was certainly a wealth of documents at the bottom of the valise, but ...

“Damn,” he breathed. Damn, damn, damn.

“What is it?” he heard Marius ask.

Javert shook his head. “None of this is …” He brushed his thumb over a stack of papers he was holding, his hand clenching. “None of this is of any use to me.”
The boy’s footsteps approached him. “You went through everything inside?” Marius asked, leaning down.

“Yes.”

“I see. That’s unfortunate.” Javert felt a hand on his shoulder. “Perhaps, then, we should . . .”

The touch made his skin prickle, his senses sharpen, and all at once Javert became distinctly aware of the pitiful, muffled hiccoughs coming from the other end of the room. His eyes slid away. “Oh.” Carefully he replaced the papers in the valise and shut its lid, rising to his feet.

“Cosette,” Marius murmured as they left the room, “We will be in the drawing room if you need us.”

***

As soon as the boy shut the door Javert turned to him with a frown on his face. “I know the look of a man when he has a secret to keep, Pontmercy. What is it?”

That gave rise to a bloom of red beneath Marius’ freckles. “I, ah—look,” he said, wringing his hands, “Cosette knows nothing of what I’m about to tell you, and I would prefer for it to remain that way.”

“Fine, then. Out with it.”

“It does nothing to help our current situation, but it is relevant to it, and it’s something which I feel you ought to know. You remember, perhaps, that family I informed upon to you, the winter before last? The one from the Gorbeau house?”

Javert’s nose wrinkled. He tilted his chin up, staring down at him with angry anticipation. There was a troubled, suspicious feeling brewing in his gut. “I have not forgotten that incident, no. What of it?”

“Well, I—I have met with the father since.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Met with him?” he repeated incredulously. His countenance became terrible. “With Jondrette? That wretch! He escaped jail; he is still at large! You knew him! You knew he was a criminal! Why did you not inform the authorities?”

Marius turned pale. “Ah! Because—because . . . His name is not Jondrette;” he confessed, his words stumbling out over themselves helplessly, “his name is Thénardier! And he saved my father’s life at Waterloo! I only realized it that night. I could not bring myself to have him arrested, damn him; it would be like spitting on my father’s grave! I hate him; I do—but I made a promise, a sacred vow—you understand, monsieur! I could not do it, though I wanted to. I could not!”

“You damned—! Of all the stupid, sentimental things . . .” he growled. “Do you know what you’ve done? That man is a blight on humanity! He was given the death sentence for a reason! How many innocents have you endangered by letting him go?”

Marius trembled beneath him, his eyes wet. “I am sorry, monsieur, truly! I am! I would like to see him brought to justice—just so long as it is not me that brings him there. Oh, I would gladly see
him rot, yes; he disgusts me. He is a terrible man.”

“I am glad we agree upon something. But that’s hardly the issue. Why do you bring this to me now? Has he some hand in this?” Javert scowled. “He has, hasn’t he.”

“Oh, God! I—” Marius shook his head as though trying to dispel his emotions, his face red. “He came asking for money, said he had information to sell me which was of some concern to me. I had no idea what he was on about. He made me pay him twenty francs before he would say anything.”

“And what did he say?”

“Nothing that I didn’t already know. He recounted Valjean’s past, his earlier crimes. Tried to convince me the man was a petty pickpocket, and a murderer at that. But the young aristocrat he’d perceived as a corpse on Valjean’s back in the sewers had been me! He brought a scrap of the waistcoat I’d worn that night as evidence, and I shoved the rest of it in his face.”

“The man is no murderer;’ I said, ‘the man is a saint! And here is the proof! It is you who is the criminal; it is you who is the liar, the thief! I know who you are, you two-faced louse. Your name is not Thénard, but Thénardier! You do not even remember me. I lived next to you for a time. In the Gorbeau house. I know of your shady goings on. In fact, it was I who alerted the police to your little ransom scheme! And now you try to sell me information I already know, all twisted up with misgivings and half-truths. You try to ruin the name of a good man. Of my father! Furthermore, that man is in the house this very moment, and you should be glad I do not alert him to your presence here.’”

“ ‘Get thee gone, you villain! You are lucky I do not summon the police on thee. I would, too, and justly so, if my father did not owe you his life. I abstain from having you hauled off to jail—from which you escaped, and where you ought to be at present—only for that. I will grant you mercy, just this once. But nevermore! You shall have nothing further from me. Casse-toi, you brigand, you—you bandit! Waterloo protects you!’”

Marius’ shoulders sagged. “I thought perhaps that would be the end of it. That he would leave us in peace. But I was wrong. About a week later, he sent me a blackmail note, threatening to reveal Valjean to the police if I didn’t give him fifteen thousand francs. Fifteen thousand! It was ludicrous. And how dare he, how dare he try to use Valjean against us! There was no way I would give in to such a vile demand. Besides, I knew that if I gave him anything, he would just keep coming back for more, because his threat would always be relevant, and he is just that type of man.”

“So I sent him back a letter saying that I knew things I could use against him, too. That if he made my father to suffer, I would do everything in my power to ensure he suffered in turn. That seemed to sober him. He was quiet for a number of weeks. I hoped he’d finally gone to America, like he’d said he was planning to. That he had disappeared for good, lest I bring the law down upon him. But then—then—!” The boy’s composure was quickly running out.

“Then what?”

Hand shaking, Marius reached into the breast pocket of his tailcoat, withdrawing a creased up envelope, which he handed to him. “Then yesterday I received this in the post.”

Grimacing, Javert opened it and unfolded the piece of rag paper within.

Scrawled across the middle of the page in large, scratchy letters, were the words,
“WATCH YOUR ANGEL BURN.”

Fury and disgust rose up like a gale inside of him. Seething, his lips drew back to reveal his clenched teeth, the paper trembling in his hands.

*You bastard.*

*You bastard!*

*You, you, you; you’re the one who’s done this!*

A low growl escaped Javert’s throat. “So,” he accused Marius, “by trying to appease the ghost of one father, you have condemned the other one.”

The boy looked up at him in fright at that remark. His eyes flicked about, his mouth opening. He clawed at his scalp, black tufts of hair sticking up between his fingers. “Oh, Christ,” he moaned, “you’re right. This is all my fault. If I’d just—if I’d mustered the courage and turned him in to the police, none of this would have happened. I—I shouldn’t have—” Tears welled in his eyes. “If my father had known the kind of man his savior had turned out to be—if he knew I had aided that man on his behalf, knowing he would only cause trouble …” He shook his head. “I thought I was doing right by him, but—what would he say to me, now? I have caused this. I have brought this upon us. I have failed them both!”

Javert scrutinized him. The flare of his temper died back a bit.

Upsetting that booby of a boy wasn’t going to do anyone any good; he was already upset enough as it was.

Frowning, Javert took hold of the lapel of Marius’ tailcoat, tugging him upright. “You are wrong,” he told him. “You think that man would hold his peace behind bars? No, he’d have nothing to lose by revealing your father’s identity. In fact, he’d have everything to gain. Revenge, for one—on you, for slighting him. And then, he would have found some way to lighten his sentence by giving the man’s name to the authorities. Claim Valjean was his accomplice in something, make a trade-off for the information, and voilà. Suddenly the death penalty becomes a mere life sentence. Which he would no doubt attempt to escape from again.”

“Ah! That’s true. He would, wouldn’t he.”

“If there’s one thing that man knows, it’s how to turn a profit. He had secrets; he would have found someone to sell them to eventually. The rat. Of course, you absolutely should have turned him in. I’m just saying that it wouldn’t have mattered whether or not you did; he’d have used Valjean’s past to his advantage at some point or another. So put no more thought into it,” he said, handing him back the letter. “Revenons à nos moutons. We need to focus on the trial now, not your abominable idiocy, or your guilt.”

“Yes,” Marius said, closing his eyes and drawing a deep breath, “I need to prepare my case.”

Javert blinked. “*Your* case?”

Marius looked up at him with surprise and indignation. “What,” he scoffed, “do you suppose I would do nothing? I am his son! Furthermore, and most relevant to this, I am a lawyer, monsieur.”

Javert stared at him with wide eyes for a moment, one corner of his mouth drawn back. “No,” he finally said. “You shall not be going anywhere near that courtroom.”
“What? But why?”

“Firstly,” he said, throwing a hand up in frustration, “no one else can know of your part in the rebellion; it will discredit you immediately, and possibly get you into a great deal of legal trouble. Even if it does not, you don’t want your clients at the law firm knowing your political views are so radical. It makes for bad business.”

“Then I shall not mention it; I will keep my tongue and my composure in check.”

“I do not trust you to do that.”

“You should! How do you think I’ve managed my career if I could not be professional in the courtroom?”

Javert scowled at this. “I hold that you are an overly emotional fool and have thrown away your life for less. I don’t believe for a moment that you’ll be able to approach the matter of your father’s judgment from a professional angle. That requires a level of personal disconnect that I do not think you possess. At least certainly not in regard to this. If you did possess it, you would have turned in that blackguard Jondrette. No, I shall not be letting you anywhere near that courtroom.”

A furious breath issued from the boy’s nostrils. “You would restrain me from testifying in defense of my own father?”

“Absolutely.”

“And what do you propose, then?” he demanded. “Who is going to testify on his behalf? You?”

“Yes.”

The boy stared at him stupidly.

“Look here,” said Javert, “You are a student, I am a policeman. You’re only twenty-something, and I have been on this earth for over five decades. You are a newcomer in the world of law; I have been a part of it all my life. Which one of us is more reputable? Which one of our testimonies is going to hold more sway? Who do you think they are going to listen to, eh? You or me?”

Marius’ throat bobbed.

“You are his son-in-law. You cannot testify on his behalf; you have obvious reason to be biased in his favor. No one will be able to take your word without at least a decent sized portion of doubt as to its veracity. Besides which, you are a lawyer; it is your job to make up excuses for criminals.”

“Pardonnez-moi, monsieur, but I do not think you know of what you—”

“Spare me your lectures, boy. It does not matter whether or not you are an honorable man. The jury and the magistrates will look at you and see someone who furnishes lies for a living. Me, they will trust. Even more so because they will not see a reason for me to bear preference towards a convict over the law. I have been that man’s antagonist for thirty years, and for me to come forth now and defend him will hold far more gravity than anyone else, especially you.”

“You do not understand!” Marius insisted, violently shaking his head. He seemed desperate now. “I told him once that I would procure for him a pardon. ‘My grandfather has friends,’ I said. He told me it was useless, that he was thought dead, and that sufficed. But now he needs someone’s intercession! It is I that must do this thing; I have the power to do it, don’t I? Don’t I?”
“No,” said Javert. “You do not. You are a child; you are kin to him, no matter if he is not related
to either you or your wife. By adoption and betrothal, he is your father-in-law. You will be biased
for him. Furthermore, I have heard the rumors: he has given you a vast sum of money. The whole
of his fortune. You may call it a dowry if you like, but in the eyes of anyone else, if you defend
him, it will look like bribery.”

Marius paled at this. “Bon Dieu,” he breathed, “that’s right—the money. I had not considered
…”

“They will throw your plea out of court,” Javert warned him. “Not only this, but they will
charge you with aiding and abetting.”

His eyes bulged. “Aiding and—”

“Abetting; that’s right. You come to them recounting the whole of his past, arguing for his
benevolence—and you know what they will say to you? ‘Why, how convenient; you have his life’s
story. And how long have you known this? Why did you do nothing when you discovered he was a
wanted convict? Perhaps it has something to do with the thousands upon thousands of francs he
gave you? Hm? Or the fact that you are married to his daughter; perhaps this swayed you.’” His
tone turned sharp, a growl. “I am telling you, boy: if you go in there to defend him like that, he
won’t be the only one getting a guilty sentence.”

Marius trembled. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“Lastly,” Javert said, “your family may have friends in high places, but do you really expect
them to give a sou about some galley-slave they’ve never met nor heard about until this day?”

“But he saved my life,” Marius protested.

“Yes, from being taken by the National Guard. You were a rebel, a Republican. Your
grandfather and his friends are all Royalists, and hotheaded ones at that. Just about anyone in Paris
could tell you that. How do you suppose they’ll receive the news that this man had to save you
from being shot because you tried to overthrow the government?”

“Then we don’t tell them all that! They only need to know we’re indebted to him for preserving
my life, not what events led to the situation. My grandfather will vouch for him. He will! He likes
him very much. Even now, when he knows what he is, after I have told him everything. He will
convince his friends to—”

“To what? To demand pardon for this man they’ve never met? To bribe the magistrates? Look
at it from their perspective, boy. They’re being asked to give their word that this man will not
commit another crime, will not harm another soul, when they have no proof of it. If they vouch for
him, and he later proves them wrong, it will put a stain on their reputation and they will be made to
look like fools.”

“But he would never do such a thing!”

“They don’t know that!” he hissed. “It will be a possibility in their minds. A possibility whose
repercussions are far too severe for them to consider doing you this favor.”

“Do you really think they’d have it in them to refuse me, to refuse my grandfather? To shut the
doors in our face and ignore our earnest pleas? There are some who’ve been friends of the family
for over sixty years. Sixty years, monsieur!”

“Listen,” he said, giving an exasperated sigh, “you may go to them if you like. You may crawl
on your knees and grovel at their doorstep and make yourself out like some pathetic wretch if you want, but I wouldn’t place all your eggs in their baskets. And it would look bad, very bad for all of you, were any matters or even rumors of bribery to turn up.”

“Besides, even if you managed to convince them to join your cause, even if they tried to sway the opinion of the judicial system without bribery, you can’t just expect the court to fall at your feet because your family’s friendly with a few of its officials. That’s not how the law works. Or at least, that’s not how it’s supposed to work. It’s immoral, it’s unlawful. The magistrates ought to know that. If they are honest men, they might not take kindly to being asked to curb their judgment. In fact they might recoil from the idea and be persuaded to do the exact opposite, just to prove a point. No, I would stay far away from this, if I were you.”

Marius’ gaze fell to the floor, crestfallen. “But monsieur …”

“No ‘buts’,” said Javert.

Marius gazed at him with hard eyes and a tight-lipped frown. “Inspector, if you are going to do this, at least allow me to propose a stratagem.”

Javert narrowed his eyes. “I am listening.”

“First,” Marius said, “You must tell me all that you know of the man. And you may as well settle in, because we’re going to be here all night.”

***

Chapter End Notes

"You mean to tell me this chapter's missing suggested listening too??"

Yes.
Hours slipped through their fingers as they sat in the drawing room, Javert recounting everything he could remember about Valjean’s past, Marius sitting slouched in his chair, nodding gravely, scribbling notes to himself now and then.

They had set a fire in the hearth, despite the summer air, more to dispel the unease than to warm them. Its murmurs were a comforting boon—the pops and crackles filling up what would have been a disquieting silence.

Javert lost himself in his retelling, staring off numbly at the floor. He ran his fingers through his hair, worrying the greying locks until the most of them had escaped their queue, to which he paid little mind.

Marius sipped sparingly from a snifter of cognac—“to settle his nerves,” he said. It was here that he learned of the Bishop’s mercy, of the spark of charity which had set off the powder keg of Valjean’s epiphany, and his subsequent reform. It was here that he was made to understand just how terribly his father had suffered—hunted for decades, always so close to discovery, and recapture. And, too, how despite these constant, crushing downfalls, and ever-present terrors, he had continued to devote as much of himself to the causes of virtue as possible.

Javert did not tell him of those nights at the river, of the days of feverish agony he had endured with Valjean by his side. The boy already knew Valjean had saved his life; he did not need to know just how many times. And Javert found himself, on account of pride, or perhaps humility, unable to admit what he had done. Unable to articulate what exactly had occurred between them those short weeks.

It was too personal a thing to him, not only because of his own shame, but, also, somehow because of Valjean as well. He did not know what it was, but there was something strange between them, something fragile and deep and inconceivably strong that had grown in those moonlit spaces of silence, and he guarded it fiercely.
Instead, he spoke of Montreuil-sur-Mer, and of the trial at Arras. The more he expounded upon
the man’s self-sacrifice, the more he came to comprehend the extent of it himself. And the more
acutely he felt the injustice, and his own blindness.

He had always been a calm and collected man, for all his life, and yet in this there was
something that grated at the edges of his conscience and drove him into a passion. As the
conversation went on, he found it hard to keep his emotions in check. But it was good practice,
Marius insisted, for facing the magistrates. And he supposed the boy was right.

When all was said that could be said of Jean Valjean, they turned to the judicial system. A
lawyer and a policeman, they had between them no meager grasp of the particulars of the penal
code. Even so, they were keenly aware of the near hopelessness of their situation, and the
staggering height of what was required of them to resolve it.

Jean Valjean faced a death sentence. That much was clear. And they could not argue that he
was innocent of any of the crimes with which he was charged under the law. So their argument had
to be, purely, against the law itself. Against the whole of the judicial system. And all they had to
their case was his reform, which may not amount to anything at all in their eyes. A small caliber of
ammo indeed. It was like trying to topple the walls of a castle with nothing but grapeshot.

Some time late into the night, or early in the morning—Javert could not tell which—they grew
too exhausted to continue, and they retired, Marius insisting he use the spare bedroom instead of
going all the way back home at such an hour. Javert was too tired, and too worried, to consider
arguing with him.

He stripped himself down to his underclothes and crawled unhappily under the fine linen
sheets, his mind a cloud, still constructing his defense.

***

Javert found himself on a path, a straight and well-swept road of dirt, leading through the forest.
A cool and swirling mist cloaked the wood. It sent shivers up his spine, like breath against his
skin.

He thought, perhaps, that it was early morning—sunlight filtering through the fog before him
from the East. Yet it seemed like sunset. And he did not know why, but it felt like something was
coming to an end, and his heart hung heavy in his breast with a sort of dread.

Someone was walking up ahead of him, silent as a ghost. He could see details of them now and
then, within the mist. The hint of color: a yellow tailcoat. A flash of grey curls; a bent head. It was
a figure he knew well, and yet had barely known at all.

With sudden terror he realized where they were, and where the path was heading.

Again, he called his name. And again, his cry produced no sound, like the scream had been
stolen from his throat.

The man paused upon the path. He turned his head, slightly, as though he knew who was
waiting there. But he did not look at him. And after a moment of mournful contemplation, he faced
forward again, dejectedly, and resumed his steady pace.
And Javert had to watch all over again as Madeleine headed to Arras.

Had to watch as the color faded from his hair, and his finery turned to red rags, and the rags fell to tatters on his back, amid a million bleeding scars. And still he walked with the same steady pace, without a single word.

Javert reached out for him, straining, but to no avail; the man continued to fade away.

*Isn’t this what you wanted?* a voice whispered in his head.

*No,* he breathed, shuddering. He had never been so sure of anything in his life. *No!*

And he fought, and he cried out to him, but his efforts were in vain.

The mist had swallowed him up.

***

Javert awoke with a cry, tangled up in the sheets. Slowly, as he came to his senses, the grip he’d had on the edge of the mattress slackened. The early sunlight bathed the unfamiliar room in gold. Even in the warmth of summer, a shiver ran down his spine.

He clutched at the pillow, curling into a ball, and lay there listening to the sound of his own ragged breath, and waiting for the pounding of his heart to subside.

Then he pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, his head hung, his face in his hands. And he forced himself, finally, to rise.

***

Cosette joined Marius and he at breakfast, but was silent, and hardly touched her food. She had a sallow look about her, as though, along with her happiness, her very color had begun to fade. It was just as well; Marius and Javert spoke little either, and had a similar lack of appetite. The Gillenormands did not even show themselves; they were holed up in their respective bedchambers.

Afterwards, Javert and Marius returned to the drawing room, exasperated but determined. They argued for which directions to take their case, and the grounds on which they could support it. Marius compiled all the notes that he had taken the night before, and charted out a logical progression of discourse. He was, Javert had to admit, more versed in the art of subtle coercion than he. And he brought up a few legal technicalities that Javert had failed to consider. However, they were not, he worried, something which made an entirely sound argument.

They spent the entire day thusly, and had to be reminded by one of the maidservants to eat something for lunch, as they had completely lost track of time. Law books and scraps of paper littered the table between their chairs.

Eventually the atmosphere grew so tense, and they so frustrated, that it necessitated a break. Without knowing what else to do, Marius went for a walk in the garden, and, at the offer, Javert
accompanied him. They strode along the pathways in silence for some time, each lost in their own trails of thought.

“You’re a decent fellow, Pontmercy,” Javert finally said, without bothering to look up. “I did not think terribly well of you, before. You are something of a coward, and an idiot. But you are also clever in your own way, and your heart is in the right place. I cannot begrudge you that.”

Marius glanced over at him, his eyebrows raised. “Ah—thank you.”

“I suppose I don’t regret allowing him to bring you home. Even though you were an insurgent.”

“That is ... considerate of you.”

“Mm.” He stopped, staring down at a cluster of heliotrope. “Why were you even at the barricades? You seem too chicken-livered for a thing like blood soaked revolution.”

The boy gave a pause. Let out a harried breath. “That’s a fine thing to say.”

“It is impertinent, I know. But still. You’re not quite the type. And you appear to have gotten on just fine without so much as a whisper of anarchy since.”

A lopsided frown formed on Marius’ face, then flashed away. He turned to look at the grass at his feet. “I was there because ... they were my friends, monsieur. Their cause was noble, and one that was likely to get them all killed. And perhaps I, being poverty stricken, and believing my love forsaken, did not feel I had anything further to live for, at the time—and may as well exit this world in the company of brothers. At least then I could say that I ... stood alongside my compatriots, and died for something worth fighting for.”

Javert turned to study the shadow that had fallen over the boy’s eyes. He had not expected such a response, least of all one whose implications resonated with him. “I see,” was all he could think to say, as he averted his gaze once more.

Marius began walking again, downcast. Javert matched his pace. They did not speak again for a number of minutes.

All of a sudden Marius stopped. “If we lose this case, will you ...”

An image of the rapids flashed before him, like a maelstrom, sucking him in.

“—remain a friend to us?”

Javert blinked. Knit his brow. He opened his mouth to speak, but the boy, unseeing, cut him off.

“You will be the only link to him we’ll have.”

At that thought, a nausea gripped him, and a dizzying disorientation, as though someone had pushed him from a height. His head reeled.

He had not hitherto attempted to picture himself in a world where Jean Valjean was dead, and though he could not admit it to himself, he knew the reason why.

“No, I’m sorry,” Marius sighed. “That is—perhaps that is too much of me to ask. But you are a good man, Inspector, and I am grateful to you for your help. And I will continue to be grateful to you, no matter the outcome of this case, or whether or not you choose to remain in contact with us.”

Javert was still too unhinged by his previous statement to formulate a response. So when Marius
resumed walking, he only trailed after him in silence, his mind tumultuous.

‘If we lose this case ...’

The river rushed around his legs.

‘If we lose this case ...’

He squeezed his eyes shut, balling his fist and driving the tempest from his thoughts, until all he could hear, and all that he knew, was the crunching of rocks and sand beneath their feet.

***

They returned to their discussions of the case until the sun began to set, refining their argument until it took a final, polished form. Then they practiced its delivery, to Javert’s great chagrin. He ran through it again and again, until he had the structure memorized, until he felt he could refute a number of possible counterarguments.

And then they had prepared the case as much as they could, and there was nothing more to be done. Javert pocketed the notes they’d drawn up, and bid his farewell.

Part of him wanted to say some word of parting to Cosette, but he did not know what he could possibly do for her. It was best, he decided, to let her be.

Marius had offered to let him spend the night with them again, but Javert had only shaken his head and declined. He needed a night to himself, to clear his thoughts. To steel his will. To ... come to terms with things.

That, and he needed to make himself presentable, which required a shave and a fresh change of clothes.

Just as he was about to leave, he found himself beckoned by one of the old servants—Cosette’s nursemaid, if memory served him correctly. He was surprised to see her here. Hadn’t Valjean said she’d been dismissed? Well, no matter. She was here now, anyway. And she apparently desired something of him.

“Monsieur,” she said, “may I speak with you in private for a moment?”

Too tired and defeated to even be annoyed, Javert begrudgingly followed her into one of the empty rooms, and she shut the door behind them.

“What is it you want?” he asked.

She folded her arms behind her back and glanced away for a moment. “You remember me, perhaps?”

“Your name is Toussaint.”

“Yes. Well.” She wet her lips. “I know you have been working diligently with Marius in an effort to prepare a defense for M. Fauchelevent. And I could not help myself from wondering why you would care to come to his defense at all. Make no mistake, I believe he is a good man. I don’t know what he did in the past, and I don’t care to. I have lived with him for over four years, and that
is far more than enough for me to see he is a saint, his former history notwithstanding.”

“But you, monsieur ... as far as I know, you’ve only had the occasion to be in his company for little more than a fortnight. So I did not understand why you would feel so strongly for him. But then I remembered how it was that we met, and I ...” Her tone dropped significantly. She bowed her head. “You jumped into the river, didn’t you?”

The blood drained from his face.

“You don’t have to answer that.”

Javert fought for a response, but could find none. Rather, he did not understand how this woman could know such a thing, unless—

“Did he—?”

“No, monsieur. He did not tell me. But I am not altogether unobservant. There were ... signs.”

A shadow fell over him, and he held his tongue.

“I was in the hospital for a long time, you see,” she told him. “Watched people come and go. I know the look of someone who has tried to take their own life. That numb, glassy stare. Total apathy towards their surroundings. Dumb, and mute. Sometimes they come back out of it. Others, they had to send them to Bicêtre, or Chaillot.”

“M. Fauchelevent told me I was not to let you out of the flat without him. He did not give much explanation for it save to say that you were not in your right mind. But I considered your sodden clothes, and when I asked about the bathwater, he spoke of you needing to wash off the silt. Where else could you have been but the river? I saw you sitting there, before the fire, with that look upon your face, and I knew what it was he had meant.”

“That is why you come to his defense now, is it not? You jumped into the river, and he went in after you. I am not surprised; it is something he would do. And those weeks he spent with you—he was trying to heal your mind, yes? I have not told anyone of this—nor do I plan to—and I would not have brought it up, but it has become relevant now. I must ask you, monsieur—are you going to use it in your testimonial?”

He was silent for a number of breaths. “I would,” he finally said, his voice hushed, his head hung in shame, “but they would think me mad, and then nothing I said would be of consequence to them.”

The old woman pondered over this before giving a slight nod. “Yes, I could see how that might affect things.” She gave a sigh. “In any case, I want to thank you for standing up for him, whatever your reasons may be. You do not understand what it means to me, or to Cosette.”

“I think I do.”

She looked up at him, scanning his expression. “Perhaps, yes. Perhaps you do,” she said. Then, “If there is anything I can do to further aid in the endeavor, I will gladly do it. I will testify in court, if you think that it would help. I’m sure Cosette would, too, but the poor girl does not deserve to face a jury like that, and I am not sure she has the strength for it just now.”

“That is good of you, madame,” he managed to say. “But I think it would be unnecessary. There are many reasons why a jury might find testimonials from an employee of his to be untrustworthy. I am the only person who can walk into that courtroom without being immediately doubted for
reasons of personal bias. And to be fair, I have known him longer than anyone else. We share a ... storied history. Though it is not a particularly pleasant one.”

She cocked her head at him. “Is that so? I hope that it will be enough.”

“As do I.”

She paused for a second, her mind apparently somewhere else. “Monsieur, before you go, will you tell me something?”

“What is it?”

“Whatever thoughts that drove you to the river that night ... Are you past them?”

He felt a fog of uncertainty fill his soul. “I was.”

“And now?”

Javert could not meet her gaze; he felt his face grow hot. “Goodnight, madame,” he said, and then he left without another word.

***

Javert stood upon the parapet.

The sky was black. Jean Valjean was dead.

The water coursed beneath him in the darkness, rushing, rushing, rushing in his ears.

*You failed,* a chorus of voices whispered.

*You failed.*

*You failed.*

*You failed.*

A flash of metal, a bloodied feather, a cry unheard.

There were no stars. The lamps glowed red. The world, and his chest, were hollow.

He stared into the void before him.

He fell.

***

The sound of his own gasp woke him up, bolting upright like a drowning man gulping down air. It was the middle of the night. Javert was covered in sweat. Tears coursed hot down his cheeks,
and his nightclothes clung uncomfortably to his skin.

He reached out in the darkness, and let out a low moan, then clutched at the sheets beneath him, twisting his fingers in the coarse white linen. His gasps turned to panting, and he shuddered, curling into a ball with his arms around his legs and his face buried in his knees. He could not think. He did not want to think. He did not want to consider any of it. Him. The world. Jean Valjean.

He just listened to the sound of the crickets outside his window and hoped to let them replace the sound of the Seine, and his own screaming nerves.

With a shaky breath, he laid back down, and wrapped the covers around him, and tried to blot out everything but himself and his bed, and those tiny chirps below his open window. He could not sleep. He had to sleep. He could not afford to lay awake.

Writhing under the sheets, he tossed his head this way and that on the pillow, until finally his face was pressed against it, with just barely enough room to breathe, his fingers clenched around the casing. This helped to calm him some, in a fitful sort of way.

The thought crossed his mind that if Valjean were there, by his bedside, as he had once been, Javert would not hesitate to take his hand. He would not jerk away from him, and face the wall, as he had then. He would not resent his presence, or his touch. Truly, he regretted those moments of insensitivity, and ungratefulness, and wished that he could take them back. Wished that he could tell him that.

But Jean Valjean was not there, and if he did not succeed in court tomorrow, the man’s company was a privilege he would never know again.

***

In the early morning he rose and drew a bath, and sat huddled in the washtub with his long dark hair draped past his eyes, letting the coolness seep into his soul.

He was not the man of a year ago: Inspector Javert, First Class, glacial and distant and perfectly sure of himself.

But if he had any chance of convincing a courtroom of anything, he needed to be that man again, for just a little while.

That’s right. Jean Valjean was just another defendant. And he, Javert was an officer of the law. His duty was, first and foremost, to justice. That is what he sought, and that is what he, as all other times, was going there to advocate. He could remove himself from this. It was not impossible. This was merely another aspect of his employment. That is what he must portray. That he was of the same cloth of them; that he stood for what they stood for. That what he believed in this matter, they should believe also.

Slowly he felt the tension leave his muscles, and his clarity return.

He towed himself off with a stoic indifference, and shaved. Dressed in his finest clothes, oiled and brushed his hair, and tied it back into a queue. With a strangely vacant air, he exited his apartment, not knowing what might come.
He left the case notes on his bed.

***

Jean Valjean had grown pale and somewhat gaunt; he had not eaten in a number of days. Coarse white stubble wreathed his mouth. He was still wearing the same clothes he had been arrested in, as he had little other choice, and the consequence of this—combined with his inner turmoil, and the summer heat—was not pleasant.

His mind had gone numb from grief and lack of food, and his eyes had taken on a permanently glassy stare. Like a monk he had fasted, and fell into a sort of trance; not for virtue’s sake, but for his own sense of crippling shame.

He gave not struggle nor protest when they came for him on the day of the trial, binding his wrists once more in chains and leading him in a grim procession through the Conciergerie towards the Palais. Two gendarmes flanked him as another led him by the his manacles into the courtroom.

He felt as though he were being led into the gaping maw of Hell. Resignation and apathy dulled his brain. And yet beneath this there was a terror that gripped him. He could do nothing for himself; any attempt he made at self-preservation would only serve to deepen his humiliation. There was but one thing he could preserve, and that was his dignity, which he kept by way of silence. It was all that he could do.

The gendarmes seated him on a heavy wooden bench before the stand, fixing the chain that ran between his shackles to an iron loop in the floor installed expressly for that purpose. Then they sat down on either side of him. He did not look at them as they did so. He did not look at anyone, not directly, and had not done so since his daughter. But the temporary clarity she had brought him—which had only heightened the agony of his soul—had fled, and he had returned to a husk of himself.

It was an old habit he had acquired in Toulon: the shutting up of his senses. It was the only defense he had against the unconquerable current of events which conspired against him. For when one denies oneself the luxury of feeling, one becomes impenetrable to pain.

Trance-like, in a sort of spiritual stupor, he sat there between the two gendarmes as the jury began to file in, and then the audience. He could feel their gazes boring into the back of his head. He gave a shudder and grew still again, a shadow falling over his face.

The Président arrived, followed by the District Attorney, and the special guests thereof, and they took their respective seats behind the bench, guarded by another set of gendarmes, and attended by clerks. Behind them, on the wall, loomed a massive wooden relief of the French coat of arms, and, above it, an iron crucifix.

Valjean listened to the proceedings like a man in a dream, head down, expression empty.

The whole of the world was surreal, and he no longer felt a part of it. They recounted the charges brought against him in Arras, and those he’d been accused of since, and he bore them with unflinching, beaten down stoicism.

Parole-break.
Theft.

Highway robbery.

Two counts of prison break.

Valjean could not deny any of these. Besides which, arguing on his own behalf would do nothing for him but draw out his misery. And, in any case, the thought to defend himself did not even properly occur to him. He was too lost already; all tears and protestations had long since dried up, having borne no fruit.

His eyes drifted to the silver flintlock that was tucked into the waistband of a gendarme by the bench. He stared dully at the pistol with the vague longing of a parched man considering the mirage of a distant oasis. His gaze fell back to the floorboards.

Half an hour passed.

With no one to argue in his defense, and keeping his silence, the trial flew swiftly.

“Do you not wish for a lawyer?” Someone had asked him back at the jailhouse.

He had thought, then, of Marius, simply at the mention of the word, but immediately vanquished the idea of it. He would not—could not—bring his children into this shameful matter any more than he already had. Especially on account of a cause he knew to be hopeless.

“No,” he’d told him.

“Then do you plead guilty to the charges brought against you?”

Valjean had not given a reply.

In Arras, there had been a sort of honor, a sort of glory in admitting his own guilt. Because it was an act of heroism, and while it was his ruin and damnation, so too was it another’s salvation, and he could feel pride in the act of laying down his life. Because it was the right thing to do. The courageous thing. The kind thing.

But now, admitting his guilt saved no one. An argument could be made for his immortal soul, perhaps, but given that his silence was more assent than dismissal, this was not really an issue.

He allowed the current to carry him where it may; he knew any struggle was in vain. Yet filled with fear was he, even still, as he was swept along its path, acutely aware of where it was taking him. He knew that at the end of this river waited an abyss, and he would be cast into it and forgotten. A soul dragged down by the Styx into the depths of Tartarus.

If only he could close his eyes now, and never wake again! It would be better, he thought. So much better. But he had to endure this, his final trial, his final humiliation, before being allowed the merciful reprieve of death. And even then, that reprieve terrified him beyond comprehension. He brimmed with mute horror, incredulous, unable to understand how any of this had happened to him, or what exactly was happening now.

The District Attorney gave his closing statements, tidying up the docket he had brought with him and readjusting his spectacles. His voice was cool and confident. “That about sums it up, I believe,” he sighed.

“If you are finished presenting your case,” said the Président, “and if there are no further
comments to be made, then the jury will be allowed a brief span of time to decide their verdicts and this court will reconvene when a consensus has been reached.”

Valjean’s vision began to dim. He felt as though the jaws of Cerberus were closing in on him.

And then, from out of that darkness, from out of the murmurs of the rising crowd, rose a voice, calm and clear: “Just a moment then.”

Still drowning in a cold and numbing dread, Valjean heard footsteps coming from the back of the courtroom. As they neared him, a flicker of recognition sputtered in his brain, the sound of them vaguely familiar.

He slowly lifted his head as they approached the well.

Before him stood a tall, dark-haired man in a weathered greatcoat, facing the magistrates with his head held high.

Valjean’s eyes widened.

“I wish to intercede on this man’s behalf,” said Javert.

***

Footnotes:

[1] At this point in time, there was no law mandating a council for the defense. You had the right to a lawyer if you wanted one, but if you didn’t wish to be represented, then it was possible to go through a trial without anyone speaking on your behalf. If you didn’t speak up for yourself, it would essentially be ensuring a guilty sentence without actually pleading guilty. This is what happened to Valjean the first time he was sentenced for theft and for breaking and entering.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: originally, when I first starting writing these particular court scenes more than half a year ago, Javert did not go to the Gillenormands' at all. The argument he presents was entirely his own, and, actually, something he pretty much made up on the spot. So, he deserves a lot of credit for that. But it felt impossible not to involve Marius in this, and so he kind of helps him better structure his argument (it was a tad disjointed before, being improvised). The reality remains, however, that what Javert is about to say is from his heart, not from some script. Which is why I made the point of him leaving the case notes at home. Because in the end it has to be his words.

Hilarious tidbit I found on Wikipedia: "It is extremely disrespectful to the court for persons who are not court employees to directly 'traverse the well' without permission—that is, to walk directly towards the bench across the well—and some courts have rules expressly forbidding this. (...) [They] are normally expected to approach the
court clerk or bailiff, who acts as an intermediary. " Imao, I guess Javert is just in that kind of "You know what; screw the status quo" mood.

Suggested listening:

Go to Rakuen - Yoko Kanno

Hope There's Someone - Antony and the Johnsons

I'd Come for You - Nickelback

If You Only Knew - Shinedown

Into the Ocean - Blue October

Just One Last Time - David Guetta ft. Taped Rai

My Number is 47 - Geoff Zanelli

New Direction - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

Sowing the Seed - Ryuichi Sakamoto

Take Me With You - Morphine
Valjean was struck dumb with awe. He stared up at Javert with eyes that were, for the first time in days, completely focused.

The world had been plummeting, hurtling out of control, and now suddenly it had come to a screeching halt.

Slowly, Javert turned his head, gazing over his shoulder at him with one eye. It was the color of an ancient iceberg upon a frozen sea, and yet—and yet, for the first time Valjean could recall, there was nothing within it that was not warm.

He stared up at him from where he sat chained to the wooden bench, bewildered, shocked. Mere seconds ago he’d felt as though he were on the brink of death, as though the stress would suffocate him before they’d even reached a verdict. But his heart, pounding frantically, had just stopped.

There were many points in his life when someone had kept his safety by way of secrecy and silence. But never once had anyone risen to defend him. And that look in Javert’s eye—that fleeting look—was all at once a heartfelt apology, a declaration of thanks, and a promise of protection.

It took Valjean a moment to process the enormity of what had just happened. And when he did, he was overwhelmed beyond words. His once empty expression contorted into one of anguish the like of which comes from ineffable gratitude and relief in a time of desperation.

He had not thought he possessed the capacity for tears any longer. This was proven very, very wrong. They sprung forth anew and streamed hot down his cheeks.

Javert gazed at him only long enough to see this transition, then returned to face the magistrates.

Valjean, unable to express himself, and no longer able to withstand the sight of the court, or the magistrates, or Javert, put his face in his hands and wept.
Under the scrutiny of the magistrates, Javert stood his ground.

This was not the proper procedure for entering a trial and he knew it, but this certainly made a more lasting impression.

The jury, which had been in the process of leaving their seats, was beset with another murmuration, louder than before, pausing in their tracks. One by one, they began to sit back down.

The Président’s eyebrows rose. “Inspector Javert!” he said. “I have seen you come and go through this court a hundred times, and almost never have you come in defense of the accused. Why this man? Why now? What is it about him that you feel is worth your intercession?”

“I will clarify that in a moment. But beforehand, let me address the charges brought against him. Firstly, the sentence for the initial charge of theft and property damage was already carried out in penal servitude, along with the additional sentences for the subsequent escape attempts he made in Toulon, so let us consider those moot.”

“Yes, that is well. They are moot.”

“We then have the two remaining counts of theft, his broken parole, and final prison escape, during his second stint in the galleys.”

“Two counts of prison break, actually. Once before he was sent to Toulon.”

“Yes, I will grant you that; he did indeed escape from another prison also before his transfer. But if your honor will allow me to continue …”

“I’ll allow it.”

“Thank you. I wish to speak foremost on the theft of which he was charged and sentenced for in Arras.”

“Which one?”

“The former, your honor.”

“He stole an entire set of antique silver. From a Bishop, no less!”

“And if that Bishop were alive today he would tell you that he gave that silver willingly to the accused, as an act of charity, and that the gendarmes failed to take his word on it, despite releasing the man from custody at his behest.”

“The man confessed to the crime himself,” the District Attorney argued. “In court. ‘I robbed Monseigneur the Bishop,’ he said. Right here.” He poked at the docket before him for effect.

“I know,” Javert said. “But it remains that the Bishop chose not to press charges. The matter never made it into court at all; the only reason he was charged with it to begin with is because I had earlier remarked upon my suspicion of the theft, and then he admitted his own guilt in court.”

“But there you have it, Inspector; he admitted guilt. Charges can be pressed retroactively after
admission of a crime, in which case the defendant is automatically given a guilty sentence.”

“I ask for your patience, monsieur. Let me remind the court that in such a case wherein the victim does not press charges, and is not in any apparent need of protection—such as a case of stolen property—the decision to press charges falls squarely on the District Attorney.”

“Yes, and the District Attorney chose to press charges.”

Javert glanced to the side somewhat; the tone of his voice dropped. “Retroactively. He retroactively pressed charges. But his reasoning for doing so was inadequate.”

“And why do you say that?”

“The law, I feel, in this case, has little reason to circumvent the Bishop’s decision. The matter of such things is indeed a personal one first and foremost, and if the wronged party chooses not to bring the law into the affair, that is their business.”

“Whatever the truth is, whether Jean Valjean stole that silver at first or not, the fact remains that the Bishop insisted that he was innocent, demanded his release, and then bestowed the set of silver on him as an act of charity. This we can be sure of from the words of the gendarmes, whom I had questioned on the matter.”

“If Valjean did steal from him, then the Bishop chose to forgive him this, to lie on his behalf to the gendarmes, and to grant him in fairness that which he had tried to steal. It was an incredible act of clemency. A Christ-like act of compassion and mercy. Should we then ignore this act? Shall we deem the Bishop’s forgiveness of the trespass inconsequential? I see not why we should.”

“Furthermore, I believe the charges should have been dropped due to the fact that the crime occurred eight years prior to them. And during these eight years, there accrued a great deal of evidence suggesting the man’s subsequent reform.”

“You are speaking of his deeds as mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, I presume?”

“I am.”

“Mm.” The Président drew in a breath. “Javert,” he began, knitting his hands, “I shan’t dispute anything you’ve just said, as it is really a matter of personal opinion; however, I would remind you that the man was already tried and sentenced in Arras for the aforementioned charges of theft. If you wished to argue the fairness of that trial, you should have submitted an appeal.”

Javert gave a slow nod. “Your honor, again, I had not the time for such a thing before these proceedings. You see, my own opinion of that verdict has only just recently changed as well. I am aware he was already sentenced for those charges. But I hold now that the sentence was unjust, as the charges should have been dismissed. Still, it is not merely in the name of declaring a mistrial that I bring those charges up.”

“Then why have you?”

Javert lifted his chin, meeting the man’s eyes. “I feel that the nature of the accused’s former deeds as perceived by the people of the court will skew their opinion of him in such a way as to not be fair, and in such a way as to decidedly alter their verdict of this trial. Before I make my case for the charges at hand, I wanted to clarify those of the past, because I believe it relevant to the matters we’ve come here to settle today.”

The Président wet his lips. He searched Javert’s face. “I will permit it,” he said begrudgingly.
“Continue. You say ‘charges’. You feel the charges, plural, were unjust. You dispute the count of highway robbery as well, then? That is no small thing. He stole a forty-sou piece of white from a little Savoyard. A child!”

Javert lowered his head. “He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“What was that?”

“The crime was unintentional,” he muttered, somewhat louder than before. “The boy was tossing the coin and it rolled into the underbrush; he saw Valjean sitting there, he asked for it back, and Valjean did not have it on his person to give. The boy believed it stolen, he called him a thief, he cried insults at him; Valjean yelled at him to go away. Perhaps he threatened violence, perhaps not; the story was imparted to us by a frightened child, and we must take that into account. In any case, he did not actually harm the boy at all. Nor did he directly take his property. The most we can assuredly say of the matter was merely that Valjean spoke gruffly to him and warded him off.”

“This should not come as a surprise to anyone. The defendant was troubled. We must reflect that this happened almost immediately after his departure from the Bishop, who had just saved his life and bestowed upon him a small fortune. Such a monumental event does not lend itself to clarity of the mind. He was likely lost in thought at the time, and unaware of what all was going on around him. It was only after the child left that Valjean found the coin on the ground. It was not ... It was not an intentional theft. Your honor.”

“Moreover,” he said, “it is a fact that he attempted to find the boy and return it to him. He asked a passing priest, whom he donated to, if he had seen the child. He asked around the village up ahead. He tried to explain what had happened, tried to seek assistance in finding the little Savoyard, but no one in the village had seen the boy, or heard his name before. It is evident from these efforts that the man did not intend to steal; he made every attempt to restore the lost property, but the task proved impossible. That is a fact. That is a fact!”

The District Attorney threw up a questioning hand. “And how do you even know all that?”

“Because I was there!” he exclaimed, casting a glare at the man. “Because I investigated the matter! Because I asked around the area, and have a halfway decent memory! Because I’ve been hunting that man for decades and I know more about his past than anyone else on this earth!”

The Président pressed the tips of his fingers together atop the bench. “I would ask that you curb your tone, Inspector. Your considerable expertise on the matter is noted.” He gave a sigh. “Monsieur Girard, you may continue.”

The District Attorney glanced at him, then back at Javert, with a considerable frown. “Inspector,” he grumbled respectfully. “Even if both charges had been dropped, and he was never convicted of them, there remains the incontestable truth that he broke his parole—he failed to show his yellow passport upon entering the town of Montreuil-sur-Mer, he subsumed a false identity, upheld that he was someone he was not, and committed forgery on countless legal documents to that end.”

Javert’s fingers twitched at the edge of his sleeve. “Forgery is—that is not the definition of forgery. Forgery would be a factor if he was assuming someone else’s identity. But before he arrived in that town, the man known as ‘Jean Madeleine’ never existed. He was never charged with forgery; he was merely calling himself by another name. That’s not illegal.”

“It is when you’ve a parole to keep,” said the man. “And he deliberately failed to do so. That is a crime in of itself. And you know what the penalty for recidivism is.”
Javert growled under his breath. “Recidivism? Recidi—” He threw up his hand, gesticulating wildly. “So he broke parole. So he broke parole! What is that to you? What is the purpose of parole? To ensure the continued lawful behavior of released convicts. To forcibly persuade them to reform. That is the end of the matter, that is the reason such systems are in place. And what was he, in his time in Montreuil, if not lawful, if not the shining example of reform? Do you even know who he was, back then? What he did? The things that he accomplished? There was a reason the King appointed him mayor—not once, but twice!”

“His honorable majesty the King would not have appointed him such a position at all if he’d known the man was an ex-convict,” the District Attorney insisted.

“That is assuming he would not appoint him for fear he would behave in a criminal manner whilst in office, which he did not,” countered Javert. “I would know, because I was present for his entire term. He broke no laws during his stay and served his duty with more diligence and care than anyone could have rightly hoped for. And let me remind you that the reason the King was made aware of his upstanding nature, made to feel him worthy of appointing mayor, was because the then Prefect of Police of the Pas-de-Calais himself recommended him as a candidate. And the King had to appoint him twice because the first time, like Caesar, he refused it; he was too humble. But the public cried out for his acceptance of it, and he was forced to relent.”

“The man did not even think himself worthy of the job and yet he excelled at it infinitely more than his predecessors. There was a time I can remember, and I am sure even you can remember, that the mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer was the envy of every town in the Pas-de-Calais!” he said, throwing out a hand. “There was not a single one of the hundred and forty communes of the arrondissement which was not indebted to him for some charity or rendering of aid.”

“He revived the jet industry; the town prospered at his hand. He funded the building and maintenance of schools, and hospitals, and dispensaries. Funded reserves for the old and the infirm, who could no longer work. Out of pocket. Out of pocket! This was before he was even appointed the mayor. The man spent over a million francs of his own earnings from that factory on improving the town and the lives of the people therein. And he spent next to nothing on himself. He lived along the ramparts with the poor; he ate black bread. This from a man who had hitherto never possessed a considerable amount of money in his life, who had once resorted to selling everything he had in order to feed his sister’s family.”

“So you see,” he said, lowering his voice and touching his forehead, “he understood; he understood the hardships, the suffering of the less fortunate members of society—for he had been one. And he aspired to make it so that the circumstances which drove him to fall on the wrong side of law never befell anyone else to begin with. The amount of crime in the arrondissement from the time of his arrival to the time of his arrest dropped more than thirty percent; I can attest to that number. That’s more than a third of all kinds of arrests that never had to happen, on account of his influence.”

“The man was ...” Javert clutched his brow. “If I had not had reason to suspect him as a convict, I should have revered him. But I ... did not believe that such benevolence could possibly be true. Did not believe that any man could be so charitable without something, something he was hiding. And the man was a recluse, was quiet as a dormouse, was hardly to be seen at public events. He made every excuse to escape conversation, unless it entailed some noble cause for which his knowledge or his charity could benefit. Behind his goodliness there seemed to be nothing else, and I conceived of it a mask for darker deeds. But I am convinced now of its genuineness.”

“And what has wrought this change of heart in you, Inspector?” The Président asked, resting his chin in his hand. “Because, if I am recalling correctly, you were the one to implicate him as an ex-
convict, and you were the one who led to his arrest.”

Javert’s head drooped a little. “I cannot refute that; it is true. I am the cause of his downfall. I, and no one else.”

“Surely, then, at the time you believed him a danger to the public?” He glanced down at his docket once more, rifling through the pages. “It says here that you once ...” He cleared his throat. “You once testified that Jean Valjean was, and I quote, ‘very vicious, and much to be feared.’ And that it was only with ‘extreme regret’ that he was released from Toulon at the end of his sentence.” The man met his eyes with a look that demanded an explanation.

“That is ...” Javert’s words had dropped to a hush. “I told you, I believed, at the time, that his kindness was a merely a front.”

“Speak up, will you, so that the rest of the court can hear?”

Javert gave the slightest cringe, endeavoring to raise his voice, “I did not ... come into the situation without bias.” He was scratching at his coat sleeve again. Such a tiny, frenetic, betraying action. “I knew of Jean Valjean only what I had seen of him in the galleys, which was, at the time he came to Montreuil-sur-Mer, a considerable number of years earlier. And at the galleys he was ... frighteningly strong, and he made many escape attempts, and so he was labeled—and was, in my mind—a dangerous criminal.”

“But these fearsome aspects are things the galleys impart to many men,” he said, regaining his confidence and shaking his head. “It must be remembered that the reason he was sentenced to them in the first place was only because he had stolen a loaf of bread to feed his starving family in the midst of winter. He was a tree pruner, of the provinces, and as such his work was seasonal. His sister, whom he lived with, had numerous children, and her husband had recently died, leaving them nearly destitute.”

“Who here can say that they, in the same situation, would not do the same as he? Who here can say that they would rather watch their loved ones die than break a law? The man was never violent or vicious in anything more than his appearance, and his appearance was due to the harshness of the bagnes.”

“You have quoted many things said at that trial in Arras,” he continued. “That is the official transcript; it may omit details that particular clerk felt unimportant. I do not know. But I have with me here a written testimonial from a member of the jury that day, which was gathering dust in the archives, and which I doubt you have had the occasion to read.” At this he produced from the pocket of his coat a packet of papers, folded in two. “You may take it;” he said, approaching the bench and handing it to the Président before stepping back, “that is well. There is a police stamp on the front of it verifying its authenticity. Keep it; deliberate on it. I have read it so many times in the past few days that I can quote it from memory.”

“One such quote by the defendant, was ‘I have done my best,’ and ‘I have tried to reenter the ranks of the honest.’ If it is not already plain from what I have told of him, the man had strived to reform himself. He said, ‘The infamy from which I have tried to escape is an injurious thing; the galleys make the convict what he is.’ And then, ‘Later on, indulgence and kindness saved me, as severity had ruined me.’”

“He was speaking here, I believe, of the Bishop of Digne. Of how the man called for his release, and gave him mercy instead of condemning him. Of how he gave him, in the form of a pardon, and infinite wisdom, and a set of very valuable antique silver, the means with which to start a better, more honest life. And I think, your honor— It is my conviction that ever since that
Javert took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Now, I doubt that the jury has been made aware of what happened at the trial in Arras. I myself was only made aware of it less than a week ago. And it is one of the reasons I have had, as monsieur has so eloquently put it, ‘a change of heart.”

“While I had implicated M. Madeleine—the then mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer—as a wanted ex-convict living under a false identity, my assertions were quickly dismissed, and I was told by my superiors that I was obviously mad. For you see, the ‘real’ Jean Valjean had already been found, and was about to be put to trial in the court of Assizes. He was calling himself Champmathieu. There was a slew of evidence that he was really this convict, Jean Valjean. I myself traveled there to confirm this; I recognized the man immediately.”

“It was a case of mistaken identity. The man Champmathieu was not Jean Valjean. But he resembled him perfectly, and their histories shared a number of things. No one could rightly be blamed for confusing the two. So this innocent man was going to be put to death for crimes which he did not commit, and buried under a name that was not his, and remembered only with disgust.”

“I myself, having just seen in Arras what I believed the true offender, and having thought I had wrongly accused the mayor of being someone I did at that point think to be a ‘very vicious’ criminal, went home to Montreuil-sur-Mer with my tail between my legs. I reported to the mairie; I denounced myself to him immediately. I explained what I had done—evidently, as it were, in error—and requested that he dismiss me for my impudence and my egregious show of disrespect.”

“The man refused. He insisted that I was an upstanding officer, whom he esteemed, and that my honesty on the matter ought to be commended. He told me that I deserved to be promoted rather than degraded. All of this came from the man who, as we know today, was the real Jean Valjean.” He paused, clasping his hands behind his back and wetting his lips. “Let me rephrase that. I had just walked into this mayor’s office, told him I’d tried to have him arrested and subsequently guillotined, explained my utter contempt for his true identity, unwittingly told him another man was to be put to death in his stead, and then asked him to expel me from the police.”

“And he complimented me, and he thanked me for my honesty, and he tried to convince me to retain my position. Tried to convince me I deserved better than my position! And in the midst of all this, without expressing any particular concern, he inquired as to when the man’s trial was to be. Thinking nothing of this, I told him it was the following day.”

“The next morning, completely unbeknownst to me or anyone else in the town, he rose before the sun, hired a driver, and set out for Arras. He arrived in the middle of the trial and sat behind the magistrates, who had welcomed him into the court as a person of honor. Then he waited until his old chain-mates from Toulon had been brought out to reaffirm their recognition of this Champmathieu—this man who had been mistaken for him—and then rose from his seat, and declared himself the real Jean Valjean.”

“The entire court was in disbelief. They thought he’d gone mad. They called for a doctor. He dismissed them; he begged them to listen to him, to let the other man go. Then he recounted various personal details of those old galley slaves who had been brought in, which only a former acquaintance could have known. Methodically, without raising his voice or losing his composure, M. Madeleine proved himself to be the real Jean Valjean, effectively dooming himself to execution for the sake of saving an innocent man, who was a complete and total stranger to him.”

Javert bit his lip, struggling to articulate himself in a professional manner. He swiveled on his heels, facing in turn the jury and the magistrates, and throwing up a hand. “Does that kind of honesty, that humility, that self-sacrifice even unto pain of death in the name of justice, true
He let out a breath and shook his head, composing himself. “The magistrates of that court were so struck by this display that they allowed him to go free—which I would emphasize to those presiding over this trial today.”

Here the District Attorney, who had not spoken in some time, voiced himself. “They later called for his arrest,” he muttered.

“Yes,” said Javert, “but their hesitation in doing so ought not to go unremarked. And furthermore, though as a recidivist he was facing the death penalty, I would remind the court that the King himself once more stepped in and granted him a lesser sentence, which was that of hard labor for life instead of execution.”

“Also, to his credit, when the defendant left the courtroom, it was with the open invitation, and honest expectation, of his own impending arrest. He said that they would know where he was going—which was back to Montreuil-sur-Mer—and that they could have him arrested when they liked. And the reason he left was to complete a pressing business in the town while he still had the time and life to be of use to it.”

“When the order came that night for his arrest, it was sent to me, as I had implicated him to begin with, and was the acting officer of the arrondissement. And when I went to retrieve him, he did not resist me; he went willingly, of his own accord, and allowed me to conduct him to the nearest prison.”

“From which he immediately escaped, by bending the iron bars and climbing out the window!” The District Attorney exclaimed. “That was a mere decade ago. If he had the strength and the cunning to do that then, do you honestly expect us to believe the man is no longer dangerous?”

“I am not—” Javert drew in a deep breath. The man was grating on his nerves. “I am not saying he no longer possesses the ability, or the capacity, to commit harm. I am saying that ... it is no longer in his nature to do so. Nor has it been in a very, very long time.”

“Javert,” sighed the Président, “if what you are saying is to be considered—those charges of theft and robbery dropped, and his broken parole ... shall we say, overlooked—it still leaves the fact that he twice broke out of prison. Which is, actually, the main reason we are here today. In fact, as I hear it, he faked his own death to get out of Toulon the second time.”

Javert gave the man a curt nod. “This is true. But if we were to agree based upon my testimony that he should not have been charged for the crimes for which he was sentenced in Arras, then he should not have been put in the galleys to begin with, and so he would not have had to escape.”

“He did not have to escape at all.”

Javert bit the inside of his cheek. “If a sentence is unjust, I think—I think that prison-break at least becomes a little more understandable, no? Even if it is against the law. Because, monsieur, your honor—and I hate to say this, but—sometimes, at least in my experience, the law is ... mistaken.”

“That is a bold statement to make, Inspector.”

“But I hold that it retains a kernel of truth. For if the judicial system was always, in every possible case throughout time, completely just, then why should we have reformed it so many times?”
“You make a point,” the man conceded.

“I should hope so. It was not an easy revelation for me to have myself. The law has been the whole of my life; that, and nothing more. I have devoted myself to the pursuit of justice. I once thought that justice and rigid application of the law were one in the same. But I have found that there are, at times, discrepancies between the two. And it was ... it was this man who compelled me to this revelation. Not by his own words, no; he never tried to sway me. But his actions, messieurs—his actions spoke volumes.”

He let out an exasperated breath. “You say ... he faked his own death to escape the bagne of Toulon. That is correct. But do you know the particulars of it?”

The Président pressed his hands together against his lips, his chin resting on his thumbs. “Enlighten me, Inspector,” he sighed.

“Valjean’s chain gang was working on the deck of a battered ship, the *Orion*, which had stopped in the port for repairs. There was a terrible storm brewing. The winds were fierce. A sailor, who had been up in the rigging, slipped and fell from the mast, only managing to grab hold of a rope halfway down. However, he had much difficulty climbing it, and the storm was growing worse, and he was losing his strength. The defendant, observing this from the deck below, begged his supervisor to break his chain, so that he might attempt to rescue this man.”

“The supervisor agreed; Valjean was set loose, and he scrambled up the rigging in the rain, dropping down on a rope beside the exhausted sailor, grabbing him, and climbing back up to the mast. It was only after he saw the man safe that he slipped from the rigging himself and fell into the sea.”

“He was waiting for an opportunity to escape,” the District attorney pointed out.

“Possibly, but that is beside the point.” Javert told him. “He rescued the man either way. Besides which, this is not the first time he has risked his life to save that of another’s. For example, in Montreuil-sur-Mer, there was an old carter that disliked Valjean, then known as Madeleine, for political reasons, and was not at all hesitant to voice this. One day his cart overturned on him, a heavy, monstrous thing, and it was slowly both crushing and suffocating him under its weight as it sunk into the mud. A large crowd gathered around, but none could lift the thing; the man was struggling to breathe and begging for help. It was then that Madeleine appeared.”

“I was there already—I had been summoned by the townsfolk—but I could do little more than anyone else, which was to wait for someone from the other town to arrive with a jack. Madeleine implored the people to try lifting the cart again, even offered a reward for it, a ludicrous amount of money, in the hope of inspiring their courage. I told him it was pointless. I told him that there was only one man I knew capable of lifting such a burden, and that had been a galley slave I’d known in the South. I was referring of course, to him—rather, to Jean Valjean, or as he was known then in the bagne for his remarkable strength, ‘Jean le Cric’.”

“Madeleine already knew I suspected him, I would guess. He must have known I had been prowling about the town for ages, asking about his background. And he must have known that if he used his incredible strength to lift that cart, that it would only damn him further in my eyes. But no one else would step up, and the jack-screw was yet far away, and so he did the unthinkable; he slid into the mud beneath the cart and began hoisting it on his back.”

“Even for a Hercules or an Atlas such as himself that cart was far too much to bear. I think it would have crushed him too, had his display not inspired the other people in the crowd to rally behind him and try to lift it all together. It paid off; the cart was lifted just long enough for both
men to escape, and though the man’s leg and probably a number of his ribs were broken, he survived. And so Madeleine risked his own safety, in more ways than one, to save a man who very openly despised him. After this, of course, the old man had not a lick of spite in his heart for him; he rather worshipped him like a saint.”

“And perhaps he was not wrong to do so. Truly, the acts of selflessness Jean Valjean has displayed in these past few decades are innumerable. The very first night he arrived in the town, for instance, there was large fire that had broken out in the town-hall, trapping the children of the captain of the gendarmerie inside. The defendant, having only just crossed the border, saw this and without a word to anybody ran into the burning building, pulling the captain’s two little boys from the flames. They both survived, thanks to him. That was the beginning of his legacy in Montreuil-sur-Mur.”

“As another example, when he was mayor, there occurred an incident in the town where a woman was wrongly accused of assault, when the truth of the matter was that she was only acting in her own defense. She was dragged to the station-house; she was about to be shipped off to prison. She begged for her freedom, insisted she had not spurred the attack, but none would listen. She said she had a young child, who would be turned out on the streets without her support. But again, no one cared. Perhaps they thought she did not even have a child.”

“During this scene in the station-house, Madeleine had been outside, questioning the onlookers who had witnessed this attack. Divining the truth of the situation, he betook himself to the station and demanded her release. Mayors do, in these matters, have authority; and so she was relinquished to him. The woman was poor, and starving, and very sick. He took her to the local hospital. He paid for every treatment they could provide.”

“It was not enough. The woman had been stricken with the White Death. She died a number of weeks later, but not before he had promised to fetch her child, and make sure that the girl was properly cared for. And that, you see, is why he broke out of prison those times. He was trying to fulfill his oath. The girl was in jeopardy without him; it was true that she would have likely become destitute or died had not someone come to her aid.”

“And this child, messieurs, is still with him today. For as her mother had died, and she had no remaining family, there was no one for him to bring her to, and so he adopted her, and has been a father to her all these years since. He moved to Paris with her. They lived in a convent for a time, with that old carter he’d saved, who had become its resident gardener, and was happy to assist them.”

“During their time in this city, I have found no evidence of any wrongdoing, besides that of keeping his peace, which, in his situation, I do not think can be called a crime at all. I would also like to point out that Jean Valjean, under the name Ultime Fauchelevent, was remarked upon by the census of 1831 as being a citizen in good standing of the city of Paris, and was in result drafted into the National Guard two years ago.”

“Now, I would remind the people of the court that at the time of his draft, he was in fact already over the age of sixty, which is, as you all may know, the cut-off age for compulsory service. This considering, he could have opted out of service, had he wished. However, he did not, and he has performed his duties in the Guard faithfully for those two years—which, I think, reflects well on his character.”

“Inspector, nearly anyone can be in the Guard, it is after all a mandatory affair,” the District Attorney pointed out. “Besides which, you have been given to pontificating on a number of rambling tales and stories of heroism, but I fail to see why—”
“You admit that the man is a hero, then?”

“I— What?”

“You just called his deeds ‘stories of heroism,’ monsieur. Does that not make him a hero?”

The man went red in the face. “That is not what I ... Look here, I never said that. I only meant that you keep regaling us with all of these stories that have your own personal bias injected into the narrative, and that in and of itself is a strange thing, because I am still not sure what has caused you to care about this man whom you so gleefully condemned a short number of years ago.”

A frown twitched on the edge of Javert’s lips. “It was over a decade ago, and more like two or three since my original misconception of him first emerged—which, unfortunately, colored much of my perception of him thereafter. And I have already given you a thousand reasons why I ought to have upheld him as a righteous man, but failed to do so on account of my own blind assumptions.”

“Earlier I recounted how the man denounced himself to save another in Arras, and that is one of the reasons I have reexamined my beliefs of him. But it was not, I confess, what first led me to these newfound convictions, no. There was something else; something which left a profound impression on me. I believe you wished to know why I, personally, felt this man worth defending?”

“I did.”

Javert glanced over at the Président. “I know I have taken a great deal of this court’s time already, but if your honor will permit me explain one last time…”

“Speak.”

“During the June rebellion, I had been assigned to spy on one of the barricades. A boy recognized me there, however, and I was forced to admit my rank. They bound me to a post in the café they were operating out of, perhaps thinking to use me in a negotiation with the Guard. In any case, when I asked why they did not kill me immediately, they said they could not spare the powder. Later on, when they realized the hopelessness of their situation, and that negotiations were no longer an option, they finally saw fit to execute me.”

“Yet here you stand,” said the District Attorney, with a grain of salt.

“Yet here I stand. Because, of all present on that afternoon, that man—” He gestured back to Valjean. “—stepped forward and requested that he personally be allowed to blow my brains out.”

The Président’s eyebrows shot up. “What! This man was part of the rebellion?”

“No. He was not part of the rebellion, your honor. He did not go there to fight on part of the revolutionaries, but rather, to attempt to retrieve one of the schoolboys there with whom he was acquainted.”

“But he contributed to their cause!” The District Attorney exclaimed, rising some in his seat and throwing up his palm. “You say he was a member of the Guard, and yet he failed to uphold his orders! He goes to rescue one of them instead of helping his fellow Guardsmen quell their uprising! Why should we not commit him on the spot for treason?”

“Firstly, it is likely that he never received any orders. You see, the man has three separate residences within the city, and frequently moves between them. He had only just moved from his main address to one of his apartments at the time of the rebellion. This information likely had not
reached the proper authorities yet. And so his orders, if he received any, were likely sent to the wrong address, and there was no one there to answer the door. So it is not his fault if he was not out patrolling the streets.”

“Furthermore, it was not his intent to bring harm to any of the combatants, be they royalists or revolutionaries. While it is true that he acted as a sniper at the barricade, and kept watch with a musket, there was an ulterior motive to this act. For where they would have had another in his place shooting to kill, he merely gave warning shots. This directly prevented the deaths of both a soldier and an officer of the Guard, who had been watching them from the rooftops. He placed his aim carefully, so as to only scare them away, and made a point of saving bullets. It is a fact I was witness to that when one of the schoolboys offered him some cartridges, he declined to take them.”

“Moreover,” Javert continued, “the most of his time was spent in tending to the wounded, which he carried off to the tap-room I was held in, and bandaged. He was the only one I saw doing anything of the sort; if not for him, I do not think they would have given any consideration to their injured. Jean Valjean shed no blood at the barricade, nor did he come there with the intent to. But his efforts did keep them safe for a little while longer, and so their leader voiced that he should be rewarded. So, having recognized me, he asked that he should be the one to kill me. Their leader granted this request, and ordered that he take me out behind the barricade and shoot me, past their own dead, so as to not mingle our blood.”

“When we had surmounted the little barricade of Mondetour lane, and were past their line of sight, he put away the pistol they had given him and withdrew a clasp-knife. I thought that he intended to give me a more painful death in the name of spite—as I had been the cause of all his troubles—and I merely laughed at the appropriateness of it. I was not afraid of death. When he put the blade to my throat, I was resigned that it should be slit—but instead of my flesh, it was the rope around my neck he cut. And then the one binding my wrists, and the one around my ankles. ‘You are free,’ he told me. And he fired a shot into the air. I have never been more astonished.”

“In short, he specifically tasked himself with executing me, so that he might draw me away from the rebels without suspicion and save my life instead. This he did knowing full well that I recognized him. That if he should make it out of the barricades alive, I would arrest him. Make no mistake; at the time, I assured him of this. Given our personal history, and his vulnerable position, he had no reason to let me go. Yet he went out of his way to save the life of a police agent—the very police agent, in fact, responsible for his ruin—despite knowing it posed an inevitable threat to his security, and even his very life.”

He collected himself and stood rigid, squaring his shoulders. “The sum of my argument amounts to this: should not such actions be worthy of granting pardon for the comparatively minor charges left to his name? It is evident, based upon his history, that the man has been reformed for decades. Yet still the law pursues him. But what good does it do to condemn a man who has already changed his ways? Nothing; in fact, it does harm. He is a benefactor and a honest man—more than a honest man; rather, an admirable example of virtue—and the law would have him put to death! I have been serving this country for nearly forty years now, and in that time, not once did I waver in my convictions about the justness of the law—until he came along.”

“People of the jury, monsieur le Président, monsieur le Procureur de District—if you were to condemn this man, after all that he has done in good will for the people of France … then you might as well shoot me where I stand, because I would not be alive without him.” He paused for a moment, bowing his head. “I rest my case.”

He was in the process of stepping down from the well when the usher approached the bench, holding out a scrap of paper.
“What’s this then?” the Président said to himself, unfolding it. His brow furrowed for a split second, and then his eyebrows raised, both at once, and then just one. He mumbled something to the usher, who bowed his head and returned from whence he’d come.

The Président cleared his throat. “Ah, messieurs, the bench recognizes Monsieur le Préfet de police, Henri Gisquet.”

Javert gave a terrible start. The blood froze in his veins. Slowly turning his head, he found the Prefect of Police standing amidst the audience in the gallery, staring at him.

And just like that, as it had at the river, his carefully constructed world shattered like a pane of glass.

***

Chapter End Notes

Mmm ... this could be either a blessing or a curse.

GET REKT, JAVERT

Fun things about this chapter:

- Javert got some of those facts about Valjean at the barricades from Marius (seeing as he was tied up in a tap-room, and couldn't see much of anything).

- Super rad parallel between Javert and the Bishop (literally did not even notice it until I was rereading this thing).

- Gisquet now totally knows that Javert knew about Valjean for over a year and did absolutely nothing about it.

If you're wondering what Valjean's been doing during all of this, IDK what to tell you; he's literally just been sitting there crying the entire time.

Suggested listening:

Devil's Backbone - The Civil Wars
Dust - M.O.O.N.
Lasse Pour Quoi - Azam Ali
Let Me Hear (Piano Cover) - Tehishter
Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence - The California Guitar Trio
To Build a Home - The Cinematic Orchestra
Okay, about "Lasse Pour Quoi" being on here but not *sounding* like it should be on here; it's all in the lyrics. Also it's in Provençal, which is an antiquated form of French.

There's a good post on the language/it's use during the time of Les Mis on Prudencepaccard's blog.

And here is a link to it with the lyrics on my blog.
“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

-Plutarch

***

“Monsieur le Président,” Gisquet said, turning his gaze to the magistrates, “It would please me to say a few words on this matter.”

_Mon Dieu_, Javert thought in a panic, how long had he been sitting there? How much of his testimony had he heard?

_No, no—_

If Gisquet was to mention his previous state—his mental duress, his desperate bid to be dismissed those months ago, the way he’d shown up unannounced at his doorstep in the middle of the night—if he were to call Javert’s sanity into question, even for a brief period …

And then, then was the matter of that note he’d left the night he’d tried to—

He blanched all at once.

My god, the note! How could he have forgotten? The note he’d written “for the betterment of the service”, with all sorts of radical sentiments! Surely the Prefect had gotten it long ago—why hadn’t he brought it up?

Had he been waiting for Javert to further damn himself, to falter in his service, to confirm the kinds of liberal positions he took and prove himself without a doubt unfit for duty? Had he been biding his time until a situation arose in which he could drag Javert’s name through the mud for his beliefs like he deserved? Denounce him as a turncoat to the public eye?

And what better a time to do that than this!

Javert’s stomach twisted. Sweat slid down between his shoulder-blades as a chill shot up his spine. It felt as though he was going to retch.

He shuddered as the man approached them, hiding his face away and stepping back. Truly, he should have returned to the gallery, or to the side of the defense, as was proper procedure, but he
found he could no more remove himself from the well of the courtroom than he could turn his back on a crime in progress.

Gisquet regarded him as he passed with something like a nod, saying “Inspector,” in a knowing tone that made Javert want to curl up and die. He finally understood what Valjean had meant when he’d said that given the opportunity he’d have rather blown his brains out than suffer such shame.

“Monsieur,” Gisquet nodded to the Président familiarly, “Some time ago—about a year, if I’m not mistaken—I witnessed something which I believe has relevance to this case.”

No, no; he was going to—

“It was very late at night, and I happened to be passing by the river, when I noticed a man standing upon the parapet. It was clear that he was preparing to fling himself into the Seine and commit suicide by drowning.”

Wait, wait— Oh god! That night!

He had followed!

He had seen!

Then he knew—

“I was some distance away, you see, and so I do not think I would have had time to reach him had I tried—but ere I could do anything, this man—” He motioned back towards Valjean. “—came running out of nowhere and grappled him before he could jump. I watched as he talked him down, as he held him there struggling against him until he’d calmed. And afterwards, he led the man away to what I believe was his own home for the night.”

He turned to glance back at Valjean. “Was that not the case?”

Valjean stared up at the Prefect uncomprehendingly for a moment before finally realizing he was obliged to give a response.

“I ….” His voice was hoarse and untempered, small and broken, as though he had not used it in some time, and found difficulty in remembering how to. “Y-yes, monsieur,” he said, a hint of fearful bewilderment in his tone. He had taken on the demeanor of a whipped cur, doing as it was bid and not knowing the meaning behind its actions other than if it failed in them it would get the lash again. “That is true. But, I do not understand why you …?”

Gisquet ignored the man’s confusion, turning back to address the District Attorney as Valjean trailed off into silence. “Now,” he said, “is such a selfless act of compassion—towards a perfect stranger, no less—not something that ought to be taken into account when judging the character of this man?”

Javert stood staring at him in shock, barely able to refrain from gaping. His wide, ice-blue eyes probed the Prefect with a gaze inappropriately sharp for such a professional setting.

But the man didn’t seem to notice, didn’t turn to look at him once. He didn’t even consider him, as though his presence had no relation to the words he’d uttered.

“On that note,” Gisquet continued, “I would like to explore something for a moment with you if I may. Now, we have all heard the inspector’s testimony. And I will vouch for his character, and his excellent reputation in the Police. Truly, he has never done it wrong, and his record is
impressive. He has never been known to take bribes, and has been nothing but honest. So I doubt that he would suddenly relinquish those principles.”

“Moreover, I can verify the fact of his involvement at the barricades, and the story which he has just told you of it. He was indeed a spy there, where he was, unfortunately, recognized. Immediately after his release, he gave a verbal report to me, explaining how a man had infiltrated the ranks of the insurgents and freed him rather than executing him—after which I sent him out to patrol the banks and the sewers with the rest of the men.”

“So, that he owes his life to this man, this Jean Valjean, is indisputable. Of the rest, I know only what he has said here today; even so, I feel that surely I ought not be the only one compelled by it. Now, if we put aside the matter of his escapes from prison, which did not, I believe, involve any violence, and are secondary offences, it has been nearly two decades since this man has committed a crime, and he has bent his head willingly to the arm of the law during that time.”

“There may not be any rulings in effect that limit the number of years since a crime took place during which the perpetrator can be charged with it, but ... I think, perhaps, we should pause to reflect on what purpose we would be serving by convicting this man for things he may or may not have done nearly two decades ago. Are we avenging the victims of these crimes? How so? For our own sense of satisfaction, or for their wellbeing?”

“The Bishop of Digne, I believe, died a great many years ago. So this would certainly not do him any good. And seeing as he clearly did not wish to see this man punished for the theft, he would likely not be pleased with us.”

“And this little Savoyard, this Petit Gervais—I am sure he is no longer ‘petit’. I doubt there is any way to contact him, but by now he would be a grown man, and this loss of a forty-sou piece may well be all but forgotten by him. Can we really be sure that, if he were here today to hear the tale of the man this Jean Valjean had become since that day, he would still wish to press charges? Do we really think that this Gervais would think it just that this man—whom as the inspector has said, has donated over a million francs to the poor and the needy, and to improving the infrastructure of the state—should be put to death over the purported theft of a single coin? Of forty sous?”

“Is that all the man’s life is worth to us, as magistrates, as fellow men?—forty sous? A set of silver? Can life be measured in such a way? Can all the acts of kindness, and of selflessness, the man has done in these past decades, be lesser in worth than the value of these material goods? Do the state functionaries truly serve their purpose of ensuring justice when they choose to press and to convict upon these charges?”

“Furthermore, as the inspector has said, the defendant has been in the habit of saving people’s lives. Firstly, the two children in Montreuil-sur-Mur, risking his life twice—and then, the old carter, and that sickly woman, wrongly accused, and later her daughter; also—with his assistance and charity—doubtless many other lives in that town, that would have otherwise fallen prey to hunger or cold, poverty and illness, destitution and perversity. Then, on top of all that, there is the sailor whom he rescued on the Orion, and the National Guardsmen who may have otherwise been dealt killing blows by the insurgents at the barricades. And finally, the inspector himself, whose life the man has saved at a very real and very grave personal detriment.”

“If such a lengthy list of virtuous deeds does not speak volumes about the righteousness of his character, then I do not know what shall. And is that not the point of the judicial system? To reform the miserable wretches put through its bowels? To make them good and decent folk once more? And if this is not the case—if we do not mete out these sentences in the hopes of reforming
them—then what good is the punishment? Why do we do it? Why do we let them walk free again after their sentence is served; why not lock them all away for the rest of their lives, or execute them, even?"

“The answer, I believe, is because we have faith that there may yet be a divine spark of goodness in each man, and that, shown the correct path, they might follow it and become good once more. And is that not what this man has done? Proven time and time again that he is good? Would you so soon extinguish that spark in him, and take away from the world a man that goes about giving alms and helping strangers? Again I say, the point of the law’s institutions is not to punish merely for the sake of punishment, but rather, for the sake of reform. What use is punishing him if his reform has already occurred? Who benefits from his further suffering? Not the people. Not the state. And certainly not he himself."

“To judge him now, after all this time, for mistakes he made so many years ago—to not take into consideration his actions since then—is to deny that men are capable of change. To suggest that once one has strayed from the path of righteousness they can never return to it, and will be forever denied it despite their own actions, their own desires. And I simply do not believe that is true.” He paused in thought, his eyes scanning the floor before rising to look at the crucifix on the wall behind the Président, letting them linger there almost, Javert thought, intentionally.

“Besides that,” he said, tilting his head a little, “it is the nineteenth century, and the judicial system has undergone a great deal of reform in the past few decades. Does this man’s quandary not bear reexamining with fresh eyes? The law has been crafted of late to recognize reform; what better an opportunity to do so than this? Your honor, messieurs of the jury, in light of all that he has done in the past eighteen years, I believe this man ought to be pardoned. And that is all I have to say about that.”

After a moment, the Prefect let out a sigh. “I regret I cannot remain to see the verdict,” he said, “but I have pressing business elsewhere, for which I have already made myself late. I trust that, in my absence, you will make the right choice.”

His gaze drifted to Javert—who had been staring at him for the duration of this speech—and he gave him an almost imperceptible nod. Then he turned about face and slowly walked away down the aisle and out the doors.

Complete silence followed in his wake.

It lasted for a number of moments before the Président cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter in his seat. He looked vaguely disquieted.

The District Attorney, on the other hand, was clearly both fuming and horrified.

The Président wet his lips. “Well, then,” he said. “If that is the last of the counsel for the defense—” Here he paused for a moment, his eyes scanning the rest of the crowd with nervous caution. “I will give the opposition one last chance to make a rebuttal before we adjourn.” He glanced at the District Attorney. “Monsieur Girard, have you anything to say?”

The District Attorney swallowed and stood up, surveying the room with a frantic air. “Well, I have stated my opinions on the matter, and my position stands—in the name of the good of the state. The inspector’s testimony changes nothing of what I have said; truly, he has not refuted any of it. The man committed theft, and highway robbery. The man broke parole, and broke out of two different prisons.”

“Jean Valjean is a recidivist—twice, thrice, countless times over—and would have been
sentenced to death if not for the graces of the King. That was the mercy there: that he was sent to the galleys instead of being executed. And he was supposed to be there for the rest of his natural life. Yet he has shown that even being granted mercy, he will continue down a path of crime. The Bishop gives him a set of silver, and forgives him, and what does he do? He immediately commits another theft. He breaks parole. The King stays his execution, and the man can’t even bring himself to serve the lesser sentence.”

“The man has no respect for the law. He does as he pleases—and you, Inspector, you defend his actions by saying that others outweigh them. Shall we excuse anyone of anything, then, if they have a long enough list of virtues? And good Lord! The idea that he should be pardoned? At the very least, he should be serving life back down in Toulon, as he was meant to! That alone would be a lenient sentence. The idea that we should just turn him loose in the city, to do God knows what—it’s simply preposterous!”

“The man has trespassed time and time again, for his entire life, and you are telling me I ought to trust that he will suddenly stop? The world has shown him enough forgiveness already; I say he be shown the unflinching hand of authority. You cannot go around defying the law at every turn and not be put in your place for it. It would be anarchy! If you give this man a pardon it would be telling every low-life and scum in the belly of Paris that they could commit whatever crime they liked and get away with it so long as they toss enough of their earnings to the poor.”

“Is that what you want? Is that really the message that we wish to send? That the law can be bartered with? That the state can be bribed? He must be made an example of. He ought to pay for what he’s done—as is right, as is only just. Are we not here to serve justice? She is not called ‘Lady Mercy’. If you are set on this idea of leniency, well, then, send him back to the bagne, but I will tell you now, it won’t be long before he makes his escape once again. And then who knows how long it will be until we have him in our grasp again, if ever!”

“My parting sentiments are these, messieurs. At every turn, Jean Valjean has snubbed the judicial system. At literally every turn! He breaks into a bakery and steals a loaf of bread, and is fairly caught for it. He’s given a sentence of four years, and he fails to serve it out. He tries to escape over and over, until due to his own stubbornness and his own refusal to follow the path of reform the law has set out for him, he finds himself in the galley for nearly two decades! And when he finally, finally gets out, the first thing he does is steal from an honored member of the clergy!”

“And when he is miraculously forgiven for that, and even given a whole set of silver, he sets out onto the road and not even a day later steals a week or two’s earnings from a child. The inspector can claim it was an accident all he likes; it remains that the child reported it as robbery. And if the defendant truly wished to reform himself, he would not have broken his parole! Come now, honestly, what good do you suppose he was intending to do by falsifying his own history? A decade ago, the inspector himself questioned the man’s true intentions, and it is only because he now owes him his life that he’s reconsidered any of it! Surely that is plain to see.”

“And have you stopped to consider that perhaps the reason the defendant continues to do these outlandish acts of charity is for this very purpose? So that, were he to be discovered, it would render sympathy for him, and ensure a lesser sentence? Well! It worked in Arras, didn’t it? And I would bet you he’s counting on it to work again today! Look at this false humility he cultivates; why, the man hasn’t even risen to his own defense! He’s counting on this heartwarming testimony of the inspector’s—which he no doubt feels he owes him—to save his skin, when the fact of the matter is that he shouldn’t even be ali—”

“That is enough!” Javert’s voice pierced the air, louder than it had risen in all the time that he’d been there. His eyes were cold with fury; his hand balled into a quivering fist at his side. “You!
You, you monsieur ...” It took all the strength he had to keep himself from exploding in a fit of rage. The most he could do was lower his volume, but he could not keep the disdain from his tone. “It is men like you that pervert the purpose of the la—”

“You are speaking out of turn, Inspecto—”

“You’ve had your say! I think it’s very clear what your position is, monsieur; you only care that rules are followed to the letter, no matter the cost. That you yourself aren’t made to look the a—”

“Monsieur Inspector! I was not through speaking; you have not been recognized.” He turned to the Président with a look of disbelief. “Nearly everything he’s said today is hearsay, speculation, colored by his own personal opinion! Now he attacks me directly and questions my principles! I am only acting on behalf of the state. He is a functionary of the state as well, and yet look how he disregards it! He has no care for the law save his own interpretation of i—”

“I have been serving the law for forty years, monsieur; I have no purpose in life but the pursuit of justice. And it is in the name of justice that I have come today. If you are a man of justice as well, and not merely a man of the law, then you will—”

“Justice is the law!”

“It ought to be! But you are blind if you cannot see that has not always been the—”

“We are here to interpret and act on behalf of the law, not to question its very existence! What you’re asking is a matter for the Court of Cassation, not an inferior cou—”

“Order!” The Président banged his gavel and stood up in his seat, raising his voice over the two bickering men. “I will have order in this court! Stand down, the both of you!” He waiting until they had stopped before continuing. “Inspector,” he said, gripping the edge of the bench, “I understand your personal investment in this case. And monsieur Girard, I understand your complaint. The both of you are decent men. While you are in this hall I would like for you at least to act like it. Now. Girard, you were last to be recognized. So long as you remain sufficiently calm, have you any other remarks you’d like to make that support your position?”

The District Attorney stood for a moment, his expression rigid, before slowly taking his seat. “No,” he said, rubbing his mouth and fixing his eyes on Javert with a damning look, “No, I don’t think there’s anything further I need to say.”

“Then, Inspector, you may have the floor one last time,” the Président sighed.

Javert cast a lingering, scathing glance at the District Attorney before turning his face away. He gave a long and shaky sigh, covering his eyes for a moment, then rubbing his temples. When he looked up again, he was calmer, but not by much. The dread which had been brewing in his gut had returned with the Attorney’s callous and perfectly lawful remarks.

He was reminded again of the man he might have been—must have been—before the river. He had cared little for people’s intentions at the time of a crime, or of their history; such things had not been relevant to him. He’d seen them only as excuses, petty and pathetic, and he’d seen the law as the unswerving road to justice, to order, to peace.

Surely, at that time, in the hospital with that woman, and with Madeleine—no, with ... Fantine, and Valjean—he had been like this man. And the thought of how he must have appeared, from their perspectives, was upsetting.

Even now, after everything, there was some part of him, some shadow in the back of his soul,
that agreed with the District Attorney. It was the guard in him, the soldier and the slave. It was the law itself, faceless. The phantom of his old self, the part of him that had drowned. He saw so much of it in this man before him at the bench, and he knew that they were not wrong—on technicality, at least—but they were ... inconsiderate. Unfeeling. And he had not believed that to matter in the pursuit of justice before, but now he knew better.

And just as he had wrestled with himself for so long, now must he wrestle this man, in public, in court, for the fate of Jean Valjean. For the very principles he lived by. He must recompose the argument which had driven him to cause his own demise. And he must win.

“There are many things that I would like to say to you, monsieur,” he began, “and to the court. But I fear they would not make any sense. Rather, I will say that which might be understood. Foremost, I came here of my own accord. The defendant did not know that I would come. I have not spoken with him. He is likely as surprised at my intercession as yourself. So you cannot accuse him of saving me only to make some sort of bargain. Rather, the both of us expected it would only end some day with me arresting him.”

“But I have had time to think on things. To reevaluate myself, and my positions. And I think that ... he is right. The galleys are indeed injurious. They transform the unfortunate into the reprehensible, the degenerates into the wicked. They are stripped of their names and given numbers, they are forced to endure backbreaking work, and receive next to nothing in return. They are collared and chained to one another like beasts, and treated little better.”

“The punishment they endure there is supposed to end with their sentence, but it lingers on in the form of terrible discrimination. I was a guard there, you may recall, so I am duly aware of the regard in which they are held. Upon their release, they are thrust back into society and abandoned. Some of them—many of them—have nowhere to go, and no one to return to. And their earnings are a pittance; they must find employment immediately, or starve. But few employers will have them, and even then, they pay them less than proper wages.”

“Ex-convicts carry the weight of the bagnes wherever they go. They are given a passport marking them as a criminal; they must present this at every town. They must remind everyone around them of their past and the shame they are trying to escape. And, having no choice but to present themselves as evil men, they are seen as evil men, despite their parole, despite serving their sentence. Truly society makes every effort to condemn them.”

“Should we be amazed, then, if they, stripped of the ability to be honest, resort to dishonesty to survive? Should we further punish those who have already suffered the price of their crimes, and are only trying to start their lives again? Should we condemn a man to death because he abandoned a name that marked him as a malefactor? Because he tried to become someone else—become, in fact, the kind of man the judicial system wanted him to be?”

“The defendant spent nineteen years of his life in the galleys, and faced the hardship and adversity that entailed. In the eyes of the many he was worth less than a dog. He had no friends and no remaining family. No home to return to, nor even anyone that could remember him. From the world he faced nothing but contempt. That the man has ... come out of that, and managed to become what he is today, is admirable, I think. It was certainly something I never expected possible.”

“But reflecting on his deeds, and our previous encounters, perhaps I should not have been so surprised. Despite my being his adversary all these years, and hunting him, and treating him like a corrupt and vile man, he has been nothing but respectful to me. And he has done nothing in the course of these eighteen years which has not, as far as I can see, been done in the name of good.
What he has risked, and given up, on behalf of others, is no small thing."

“If you sentence him to death—or to the galleys, which is another form of death—then you
would be saying that ... that reform was never the point of the system. That it only exists to crush
those who have fallen astray. You would be saying that no matter how much you work to, and
want to, be an honest man, and no matter how much of yourself you devote to the path of
righteousness, you can never be redeemed.”

“If you condemn him now, it would be telling every hapless man and woman in France that it
doesn’t even matter what they do, society will never accept them back into its ranks. So why
should they try to reform their ways at all, if the country does not recognize reform? If the law only
serves to punish, and not to guide?”

“You go to your churches every week, and you pray to your god to forgive you your sins. But
can you forgive another’s? You pray for enlightenment, but do you seek understanding? You see
honesty, and humility, and self-sacrifice as virtues, but do you recognize them in others? Or do you
see only what you wish to see, and, seeking godliness, turn your backs on your fellow men?”

“A magistrate’s and a jury’s duty is to interpret the law, and sentence accordingly. My
interpretation is that ... the law was created to bring order, and fairness. If the law is only a tool to
be used as a sword, and not a shield, then how can we say it was forged to protect? It is our own
citizens we wield it for, and against. Perhaps a little more thought should be put into its
application. That is what I think, messieurs; that is what I have come to understand. And it is my
hope that you can understand it also. Because if you can’t, then ...” He withdrew the little round
glass piece that was his badge from his pocket, clutching it tightly in his hand and staring sadly at
the lettering. “—then I don’t know what it was that I’ve lived for.”

His eyes lingered on his name, and his rank, and the signature of the Prefect below them, and he
thought of himself, and Jean Valjean. Of their lives, and their deaths. And he wondered if there was
any point to them at all. And he hoped, against hope, that there was.

He bowed his head, and put the badge away. “The defense rests,” he said.

The room was quiet for a moment. There seemed a certain gravity in the air.

Then someone shifted in creaking seat, and the spell was broken.

The Président, who had leaned back in his chair, and had been gazing at him solemnly, sat up.
“Well, then,” he sighed, “If no one has anything further to add, the court will now adjourn to
discuss what has been said, and decide upon a final verdict.” With this he banged his gavel once,
twice, upon the sound block. “The session will recommence when a majority agreement has been
made. Monsieur Girard,” he added in an aside, “you will join me in the antechamber.”

The District Attorney glanced at him with uneasy agitation, rising from his seat, and the two of
them disappeared through the door behind the bench.

Javert watched them go, his gut twisting itself into knots.

***

It took three hours for the court to reconvene.
In the interim, Javert sat—beside one of the gendarmes, as it were—on the wooden bench with Valjean. It was against the law for him to interact with members of the jury, and he had nothing else to do, so he remained in the courtroom, waiting.

Both men stared fixedly at the floorboards beneath their feet, neither speaking, neither daring to look at one another, too full of dread to interact. And then, there was something of the ever-present gendarmes which divided them, both literally and otherwise.

There was no way to tell the hour but for the distant sound of church bells tolling outside the windows, and between their rings, time seemed to have no meaning. Hours felt like years. The shadows cast from the evening sun shifted position, creeping ever further across the floor.

At one point, the gendarme sitting to the right of Valjean, without turning to look at him, his eyes obscured by the brim of his shako, murmured “I will pray for your soul, monsieur.”

***

When the jury and the audience began to file back into the courtroom, Javert broke out in a nervous sweat.

A few minutes later the usher gave the “All rise,” and they stood as the magistrates entered and took their seats.

The Président cleared his throat. Touching the tips of his fingers together, he leaned forward on the bench, inclining his head. He closed his eyes for a moment in deep consternation before opening them upon the whole of the courtroom.

There was nothing but silence and an anxious anticipation in the air.

The Président let out a short, frustrated breath. The expression on his face was that of a man who was about to do something regrettable. His voice was loud and clear. “A majority verdict has been reached, and I have made my decision. For services rendered to the people of France, and in light of apparent reform, and encroaching age, this court hereby pardons Jean Valjean of Faverolles for the crimes with which he was charged in today’s proceedings, and also those for which he was sentenced guilty in Arras. Provided that he remains on the right side of the law henceforth, and continues to perform exemplary behavior, he is free to go.”

Javert let slip an awestruck breath. He stood frozen in shock for a moment before whipping his head around to face Valjean.

The look in the man’s eyes was equally shocked, but it was not directed at him, nor anybody in particular, and it was glassy and far away, as though he were not entirely there.

“I trust, monsieur,” the Président said to him, “that you will use this opportunity wisely, and prove us all correct.”

The crack of the gavel resounded through the room like a shot.

“Court dismissed.”

On cue, the jury and the audience rose, speaking energetically amongst themselves. They cast
furtive, wondering glances at Valjean.

“Remove his chains,” the Président ordered the gendarmes with a sigh and a sweeping gesture. “Set him loose.”

The men complied, standing the bewildered man up and opening his shackles. The gendarme who had spoken to him earlier bent and said something quietly to him, which Javert could not make out.

As he and his fellow guard, and the rest of the court, were leaving, a member of the jury, some nameless but no doubt well-to-do person, approached Valjean, who had not taken his eyes from the gendarmes, and reached out to shake his hand.

Valjean, having apparently only just noticed his presence, and this action, at the last possible moment, gave a jolt and stepped back, trembling in apprehension of what was surely just a harmless gesture of congratulations. It was the instinctual reflex of a man who was used to being beaten, and Javert recognized it well.

The jury member, noting the man’s fright with some surprise—and, perhaps, pity—withdraw his hand and merely bowed to him before walking away, casting one worried glance back at him over his shoulder before he got to the door.

Javert turned to him, studying him quizzically. “Valjean,” he said softly.

The man seemed to be in a sort of stupor. He stood there in silence, staring off as the jury filed out of the courtroom.

And then they were the only two left therein.

“Valjean.”

Falteringly, Valjean looked up at him. His expression was devoid of emotion, save perhaps for a vague fear.

“Are you … all right?”

“W-what?”

Javert knit his brow. “Valjean. Do you understand what’s just occurred?”

The man gave no reply, his face unchanging.

“You have been pardoned. You are a free man.”

“A free …?”

“Yes.”

Dumbstruck, Valjean appeared to regain his wits. His eyes cleared. Focused. Javert could see him gradually comprehend the reality of situation. For the first time he seemed to take notice of the courtroom around them, his eyes sweeping the benches in wonder before landing back on him. He stared at him for a long, long time, with a look of wary awe.

Finally, the man’s features contorted into a sort of ecstatic anguish. “Javert,” he said, his voice breaking as his eyes grew wet. “Javert …”
It was as though all the emotion he had been holding back for the duration of the trial now burst forthfrom its dam and flooded through him.

Javert gave a start as Valjean threw his arms around him, squeezing him fiercely, as if his life depended on it, and burying his face in his shoulder.

“My friend,” the man squeaked, “My only friend.” He stood on his toes and, cupping a hand to his face, pressed his lips to Javert’s cheek.

Javert felt a surge of heat rise to the surface of his skin.

Valjean shuddered against him. “Javert …”

Javert stood rigid in his grasp, the corners of his mouth drawn back. Never in his life had he been clutched at with such desperation and such ferocity. He had no idea how to react.

Valjean choked back a sob and slid down his chest, crumpling to the floor at his feet. On his knees, he wept into Javert’s coattail, reverent, like the recipient of a miracle clutching at the robes of Christ—filled with a fearful devotion at the act of mercy that had been bestowed upon him.

Javert felt extremely uncomfortable at this. His humility did not allow him to take pride in such praise, or even feel it due. And he derived no pleasure from seeing the man brought so low. Could not bear to see anyone prostrate themselves thusly before him. Especially not Valjean. It was wrong, all wrong.

Flushed, he turned his face from the sight. “Come now,” he muttered, “pick yourself up off the floor. There is no need for that. It doesn’t suit you.”

Valjean paused, looking up at him from beneath his mess of untidy white curls.

Javert cast a furtive glance at him, mumbling, “I did nothing; it was nothing.”

Valjean stared at him, his face going blank. He blinked. And then he did a strange thing: he laughed. He laughed at him like he’d just said the most ridiculous thing in the world, and he broke out into a helpless smile as the tears ran down his face.

Javert was dumbstruck by this sudden change. Valjean was laughing because of him. The man was happy. And he, Javert, had made him so. An odd feeling brewed in his gut—a strange lightness, a fluttering, a clenching in his muscles.

And then the laughter was gone, and dissolved back into sobs, issuing through clenched teeth as Valjean hung his head once more.

Javert watched this solemnly. His shoulders sagged. “Valjean …” He bent down on one knee, putting his hands on the man’s upper arms in an attempt at comfort. “You …” He glanced away. “You shouldn’t—”

He grew silent as Valjean leaned into him, his head drooping to rest against his breast. The man gave a hiccough, sniffling and trying to quiet himself.

Javert gazed down at him considerately. He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh that reverberated through his chest. The discomfort that had plagued him only moments ago had melted away.

He did not like to see Valjean like this. But perhaps in this moment, it was what the man
needed. He stared at the trembling figure beneath him, overly aware of just how vast a space they were in.

Valjean seemed, to him, naked and vulnerable in this place, brought to his knees, sobbing on the floor of the courtroom. It was as though the ghost of the judicial system itself was peering down at him from every wall and empty seat, judging him silently in this, his greatest moment of weakness.

Javert shrugged off his heavy wool greatcoat and draped it over Valjean’s shoulders, hoping the sheltering weight of it would impart to him some measure of security.

Valjean’s head lifted a little at that, his sobs ceasing for a second, before he bent back to his breast and fell further against him, devolving back into soft cries.

Javert felt every shudder that wracked the man’s frame. Unsure of quite what he was doing, he clasped his hands first around the small of Valjean’s waist, then trailed one up to cradle the back of Valjean’s head.

Valjean, in turn, bent into the crook of his neck, white curls brushing against Javert’s lips.

Had anyone entered the room in that moment, Javert would have cast a fiery glare at them, daring them to interrupt. But as it was, they remained alone with each other.

He did not know how long they sat there like that, silent but for the muffled sounds of anguish Valjean tried to suppress.

Finally he seemed to settle some, and what were once sobs became little more than tiny, gasping breaths.

“Listen,” Javert murmured, grasping the man’s shoulders, “We ought to get out of here. There will be another hearing soon.” He slid his arm under Valjean’s and helped him to his feet.

Valjean leaned against him, as though he had no sense of balance anymore, and Javert wrapped an arm around his waist for support as he shepherded him towards the door.

“Come along, then,” he said softly, “Let’s get you home.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Okay honestly the chapter summary is a grammar joke because "end" can mean "result" and "beginning" can mean "undertaking" but it just sounds so fabulously ominous this way.

At this point Gisquet is probably like "Look, everybody already hates me; what's one more tiny political scandal to involve myself in lmao. At least it's not as bad as that guns thing."
rouge--a-levres made art for this chapter!

**AROS by rouge--a-levres**

Suggested Listening:

After the Storm - Mumford & Sons

C'mon - Panic! At the Disco

Hoshi Boshi no Hara - Masakatsu Takagi

One Summer's Day (classical orchestra cover) - Joe Hisaishi

Respite (lyrics cover) - Toby Fox ([IDK where else you would find this so here.](#))

Stand By You - Rachel Platten

To the Moon - Piano (ending version) - Kan Gao

Ubugoe - Masakatsu Takagi
Javert escorted him out of the Palais as discreetly as possible; he made use of lesser known pathways and exits, and thereby managed to spare them any interruption by curious onlookers or members of the court.

As soon as they were out on the street, he hired the first vehicle he could find: a little black fiacre.

Barely a few minutes into the ride, Valjean appeared to have fallen asleep, his eyes drooping closed, his head drooping on his breast.

Javert only noticed this, with some surprise, as he turned from the window. He wondered just what exactly had happened to Valjean in the past five days he’d been detained. The man looked exhausted. There were dark circles under his eyes, a pallor to his skin, and a gauntness to his cheeks. His beard had grown in quite a bit, and his mouth was flecked with thick, coarse white stubble. The whole of his countenance was miserable and disheveled. The greatcoat, with its three half-capes, hung over his broad shoulders like a blanket.

Javert studied him and then, sighing, looked away again. He stared out at the city, not knowing what he was feeling. Everything around him, everything within him, was ... unprecedented.

The fiacre gave a jolt, and he felt the man jostle in his seat and slump over against him.

With a start, Javert turned to look at the head of curly white hair that now rested on his shoulder.

He began to reach out, intending to give the man a shove and wake him, but then paused, thought better of it, and lowered his hand.

It was awkward, the proximity and the warmth of another person pressed against him, but he would feel guilty for depriving the man of his rest after everything he had just been through.
Faintly embarrassed, Javert thrust his face back towards the window, but he found he could not focus on the scenery beyond.

After awhile the silence grew so pervasive as to heighten perception of the background noise: the rattle of the carriage wheels; the clip-clop of the horse’s hooves on the paving stones, the faint murmur of passing conversations on the street.

His attention was caught by a movement in his peripheral vision. He turned his head.

Valjean’s hands were twitching, as though in a dream; they clawed at his wrists like there was something there that irritated him.

He was saying something in his sleep. “Non,” he whimpered, barely intelligible. “Non, s’il vous plaît …” Quivering, his head shook, burying itself against Javert’s shoulder. “Je préfère mourir.”

Javert knit his brow.

Just as he was considering elbowing him back into consciousness, the man convulsed and awoke with a panicked cry.

He seemed to have forgotten himself, fearful eyes darting around the inside of the carriage without recognition. When they landed on the dark figure of Javert at his side, they filled with abject terror. He scrambled backwards as far as he could, pinning himself up against the opposite wall of the fiacre, his knuckles taking a death grip on the velvet seat cushion.

“What year do you think this is?”

He faltered, his brow furrowing. “Quoi?”

“You are free; you have been pardoned. Come to your senses.”

The man stared at him, panting, blinking in confusion. “Par …?” He hung his head, running his hands through his hair. “N-no, that can’t …” He laughed to himself dejectedly. “This isn’t— Ce n’est pas réel …”

“It is real. I didn’t argue with the District Attorney just for you to forget it ever happened.”

“N-no,” he mumbled, glancing up at him incredulously, “that would never …” He chuckled weakly. “Not you, not—not …”

Javert only stared at him, his expression stony.

Valjean’s ill-humored, fearful grin slowly faded as he searched the man’s face. He shuddered. “N-no,” he said again, his eyes growing wet, “None of this is real; none of this is—”

Javert sighed, crossing his arms and leaning back against the carriage seat and shutting his eyes. “You are not going to the galleys; you are going home to your daughter.”
Valjean faltered. “Stop this,” he breathed desperately. “Javert, it is cruel to play with a man’s mind like—like …”

Javert gave a frustrated puff of air and gazed at him steadily, his face a stoic mask.

Unnerved, Valjean bent his head to him, eyes fixed on his. They flicked downwards, and then back at him, and then down again, lingering there.

For the first time, he seemed to take note of the coat he wore, and he stared at it, frozen. The iron-grey wool, faded with sun and use. The silver buttons. The hanging capelets.

His expression filled with fright. He fingered the edge of a fold.

He trembled.

Glancing back up at Javert, who still had not moved or taken his eyes off him, Valjean turned to sit back properly on the seat, his frame shivering beneath the heavy greatcoat. His eyes stared off, unfocused, his lips parted. The whole of his countenance bespoke a fearful awe.

“Is it true, then?” he whispered to no one in particular.

“You are safe.”

Valjean glanced back at him for a moment before directing his gaze to the floorboards. A shadow fell over his face. “Je ne comprends pas,” he murmured. “But you hate me.”

Javert considered the confusion in the man’s expression.

This was not the Valjean of 1833 he was speaking to, but the Valjean of perhaps 1823, the Valjean of Montreuil-sur-Mer. The Valjean that had little reason to expect anything from him but a hand around his neck in return for his respect.

It was as though he had reached through time, and been given a chance to speak to Madeleine again, and tell him what he wished now that he could have told him long ago.

“Valjean,” he said. “I don’t hate you.”

Valjean could only hold his gaze for a few seconds before his eyes slid away again. He was quiet for a long while.

“Am I truly free?” he finally asked.

“As a bird.”

“Really …”

Everything about him seemed to say ‘This is a strange dream I’m having.’ He let his eyes roam aimlessly around the carriage, filled with a cautious wonder, as though he had never seen such a thing before. Eventually, they wandered towards the passing scenery of the streets. He watched them go by with the apathetic curiosity of a child.

“We are in Paris?” The tone of his voice made it sound as though this came as a surprise to him.

“Yes,” said Javert.

A pause.
“Whither are we going?”

“Home.”

“Oh.” He posed no further questions, and seemed to accept this. Still, he kept casting his gaze about himself uncertainly, as if his freedom might slip from his fingers at any moment, propelling him back into a waking world of toil and chains.

A number of minutes went by. Valjean stared out the window. Slowly the strange expression he’d had—like a babe in the woods—faded away. He grew pensive. And then, downcast. “I am sorry,” he said quietly, shadow falling over his face again. “Sometimes I just … lose my bearings.”

Javert studied him solemnly. “You have nothing to apologize for,” he said. And he meant it.

“Thanks.”

***

The sun was setting by the time they arrived.

When they exited the fiacre, Valjean visibly withdrew at the sight of the Gillenormand estate.

“N-no;” he said, “this is— I thought we were— I cannot go in there!”

“No, truly, I—I can’t. I can’t … face them after—” Valjean turned to look up at him in supplication. “Take me back to Rue Plumet, je t’en supplie—”

“You are being ridiculous,” Javert interrupted. “Your daughter and son-in-law live here; I am delivering you to them. I will not have you going back to your old house by yourself after all of this. Now come.” He gripped the back of Valjean’s (his) coat and gave him a shove forward.

Valjean followed his lead unhappily, his head hung like a whipped dog.

Javert rapped on the door with the ornate iron knocker in the shape of a ram’s head.

As they were waiting, he looked over and found Valjean shivering.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

The man gave a start, looked back at him. “What? No; I …” He held up his hand and observed the tremors running through it with some surprise. “Ah.” Taking a wider stance, he folded his arms behind his back and held himself a little more upright, eyes downcast.

Presently the great doors opened, and the impeccably dressed porter appeared. He seemed to be trying to hide the grin that had broken out over his face at the sight of Valjean. “Messieurs,” he greeted them, bowing his head. “The young master has been awaiting you; I’ll fetch him straightaway.”

They stood on the doorstep awkwardly until the sound of footsteps came from the stairwell to their left.
Marius came into view, nearly tripping over himself in his haste, and caught his balance at the door. He stood breathless, turning first to look at Valjean, and then Javert, full of desperate inquiry.

“Is he—?”

Javert gave a grave nod. “He has been pardoned.”

The boy’s face flooded with joy, his eyes sparkling with admiration and gratitude as he gazed up at him. Then in one fell swoop he pivoted and flung his arms around Valjean, crying “Father!” and crushing him to his chest.

Valjean gave a start, apparently unprepared for such an outburst of emotion on his behalf. Briefly stunned, he eventually managed to wrap his arms around Marius’ back and reciprocate the embrace. His expression slowly contorted in a rush of anguish and relief.

As Javert was watching this, he heard another set of footsteps rushing down the stairs, and Cosette darted to them, just as anxious as her husband had been.

Her dress billowed out in front of her as she ground her heels to a halt, looking first at her father, and then, finding him preoccupied, at Javert.

“Is it true?” she breathed. “Is he free? Pray tell me it is so!”

“It is so.”

“Ah! Praise God!” Her face lit up like a firecracker, and she threw herself at him, enveloping him in a cloud of blue satin ruffles as she squeezed him close. “Thank you; thank you monsieur! You are a saint! How can we ever repay you? Oh! That he is safe, that he need not run anymore, need not hide his true name—that is worth more than all the gold in the world. Ah,” she cried, her tears dampening his waistcoat, “I was so afraid! I thought I might never see him again. That he might be taken from me. That he—he might be—” She shook her head. “It would not have been fair; my heart would have broken. Bless you, Inspector! Bless you for what you’ve done.”

The entire time she had been saying this he’d been standing stiffly in her grip, leaning back awkwardly, his face flushing. “I am not— I was only …” He trailed off, glancing away with narrowed eyes. He let out a puff of breath in frustrated resignation.

To his relief, she finally released him and turned her attention back to her father, hugging him in much the same fashion and smothering him with tears and kisses, giggling among sobs. Marius rejoined in her efforts, and, both touched and embarrassed, Valjean opened his arms wide to encompass his two children.

Javert’s coat, which had been hanging loosely over his shoulders, fell to the ground unnoticed.

Equally unnoticed, Javert stooped to pick it up, and stood off to the side. He watched them, the overwhelmed father, the relieved daughter, the jubilant son. He felt, distinctly, that he had accomplished something—perhaps something of which he ought to be proud (although it was not pride, in particular, that affected him, so much as a sense of right). Here was a family, reunited, happy, and justly so—because of him. Satisfaction swelled in his breast.

As he took their gaiety into account, however—watched them talk and laugh, and cry amongst themselves—he began to feel out of place. There was the impression of something having been completed, and he—it’s completer—was now removed from the final product, no longer necessary.
Sliding his arms through the sleeves of his coat, he gave a nod to no one in particular and turned to leave.

A dim, fiery light was streaming through the garden, just barely illuminating the roses that lined the path, their blooms halfway open. There was the hint of sweet scent in the air.

The fiacre was still waiting for him outside the gate, its driver sprawled out across the front seat with his feet up and his hat covering his brow, arms folded over his chest, the picture of repose.

As Javert crossed through the threshold of the estate, he found himself suddenly caught. A pair of strong arms had wrapped around his torso.

He gave a start, heat surging through his cheeks, his skin.

A head buried itself between his shoulder blades.

“Thank you,” said Valjean. His voice was hushed and raw. His fingers clutched at the fabric of his greatcoat, their grip tightening. “Thank you.”

Javert, to his own surprise, found himself reaching up and placing his hand over Valjean’s. “It was nothing,” he heard himself say. Then he drew the man’s arm gently off of him, stepping forwards towards the fiacre.

“Javert,—”

He stopped in his tracks, head down.

“You will … visit, won’t you?”

Javert was quiet for a moment. He turned his head back a few degrees. “You would wish for that?” he murmured.

“Yes! I—” Valjean hesitated here; it was although he had more he wanted to say—to let a fount of words pour from his breast—but confined himself to saying merely “I would like that very much.”

Slowly, Javert bowed his head. “Then I shall endeavor to do so.” With a deep breath, he started off again. “Fare thee well, Jean Valjean.”

The voice was almost timorous as it called after him from behind. “And thee, also.” Then, more softly, as though to himself: “Javert.”

***

Marius watched Javert’s departure from the porch.

After a moment he turned to the porter. “Where is grandfather?” he asked. “Have you seen him?”

“I think he went out to the garden to pray, monsieur.”

“Pray? But he doesn’t even believe in God.”
The man only looked at him and shrugged.

***

Valjean’s eyes remained fixed to the fiacre until it disappeared into the night.

He heard light footsteps approach him on the gravel from behind. Without having to turn, he sensed it was Cosette.

“Why did he leave so abruptly?” the girl wondered aloud.

Valjean only gazed out at the street with a wistful look. He gave a sad little smirk. “It is his way.”

“Well,” she huffed, crossing her arms, “his way is rude. What did he say to you?”

“It was nothing, Cosette.”

She pursed his lips for a moment, then linked her arm around his. “Come along, then; come into the house.”

He reluctantly obliged her, and as she walked she shook her head, saying “Ah, they’ve treated you so terribly. You look ill! When was the last time they gave you anything to eat? Did they starve you? You’re so pale. But don’t fret; we’ll get you inside and you can take a nice hot bath and we’ll heat up some food for you. And I’ll get you a fresh change of clothes and fetch your shaving kit for you, and then you can— Oh; I think that’s grandfather just now.”

Indeed, as they reached the doorstep, the sound of a cane tapping on the wooden floor echoed down the hall.

Gillenormand appeared around the corner, escorted by Nicolette, and he hurried out to meet them. “Fauchelevent!” he cried as he threw his arms around him. “Or, no; that’s not your name, is it? Valjean!”

Valjean stood in his oddly vivacious grasp with a bewildered look.

The old man took him by the shoulders and drew back, inspecting him. “Good lord, you look like shit. What is the state of the jailhouses these days? Oh! You’ve been returned. You’ve been pardoned, they say! Praise god. I did not think that it could be. But they’ve done it, that inspector and my Marius. They’ve set you free. And now you return to me, and I can give you my thanks.”

“I—” Valjean was not sure what he had expected from the Gillenormands, but it was certainly not this. “What?”

“Fauchelevent! Valjean! You have saved my child; you went to those dreadful barricades and through those wretched sewers and you brought my little Marius back home to me! And you said nothing! And you wanted no reward! And you swore them all to silence; how dare you!” he accused him joyously, giving him another squeeze. “I shall never let you hear the end of it. And you, an entrepreneur! A manufacturer! A mayor, for god’s sake! They nearly gave you the cross. Rather, they did, but you refused it. Why would you refuse it? You make so little sense.”
Valjean staggered back, bending his head to him with a fearful sort of look. “M-monsieur...”

“Call me Luc,” said the old man. “No more of this formality. Why, your daughter is married to my grandson. Do you know what that makes you? You are my son-in-law, by god! You are my son-in-law, and you saved my Marius, and you gave us your adorable Cosette, and your six hundred thousand francs, and you are a great man, and I owe you everything I have! Now come inside and take a bath; you smell like death.”

“Grandfather!” Marius exclaimed with a note of disdaining disbelief.

All of these sentiments had tumbled out so quickly from M. Gillenormand that it was impossible for Valjean to form a coherent response. He stood staring at him stupidly.

“Look now,” Marius continued, “you’ve overwhelmed the poor man. I told you to hold your tongue for a day or two. He’s been through enough tonight; don’t smother him. Honestly! Cosette, take your father and go upstairs. I’m going to go and fetch Toussaint from the chapel and tell her the good news. And Nicolette—”

“I can start heating some bath water, monsieur. If it pleases you.”

“Yes, perfect. Good woman. When you’ve finished with that you can make him something to eat.” He turned to Cosette. “I leave the rest to you, ma chère.”

He looked like he was going to start off towards the carriage house, but seemed to think better of it. “Grandfather, perhaps it would be best if you accompany me.”

“Oh, impossible,” the old man smiled, hoisting himself up tall on his cane with a mischievous air. “I am going to ferret out where my daughter’s escaped to and rub the trial’s verdict in her faithless, powdered little face.”

Marius blinked. “Very well. As long as you give the man space.”

Gillenormand turned to Valjean, his chin still stuck proudly in the air. “Did you know, monsieur, she did not think you could be redeemed in the eyes of the law? She was completely in doubt. And worse, indifferent. But then, she never did trust you much. Still! How impertinent of her, eh? After all you have done for us.”

“Er, grandfather,” Marius cut in, “Has anyone actually bothered to tell her anything he’s done?”

The old man’s face went blank. “Oh. Yes, that might help her attitude, wouldn’t it?”

Cosette stifled a chuckle.

Marius looked as though he continued to regret being affiliated with this family.

“Right!” said Gillenormand. “Well, I have a long conversation to have with her, then. I don’t suppose you know where she’s run off to?”

Marius scratched his head. “I think she said was going to Mademoiselle Vaubois’ house.”

“Ah! Splendid. I’ll drag her home by the ears.”

“Please don’t.”

“Do you care to join me in it? It’s liable to be quite amusing.”
“I—” The boy sighed. “Oh, very well. It’s probably for the better.”

“Famous. Come along; we’ll pick up that old provincial on our way back.”

As all the parties dispersed to attend to their given tasks, Jean Valjean was left on the doorstep with only his daughter remaining by his side. He had not moved an inch.

“Alas, they’ve startled you,” she cooed in sympathy, taking his arm once more and leading him into the house and up the stairs to his room. “You’ll have to forgive them. They mean well. But they are easily excited, and they don’t understand you like I do. You prefer the quiet, I know. Worry not. I’ll make sure that no one disturbs you any further tonight. I’m sure you are utterly exhausted.”

Valjean only managed to give her a grateful glance and squeeze her arm.

She squeezed his arm in return and placed a kiss on his cheek, then let out a little laugh. “Ah,” she said, “you need a shave.”

***

Javert’s eyes trailed the darkened streets from where he sat in the fiacre, lost in thought.

It occurred to him, suddenly, that there had been a radical shift in his perception.

For the first time in a year, the world made sense.

The world made sense.

The law was not blind. It was capable of recognizing its own shortcomings, of taking the larger situation into account and judging accordingly. The law, then, and justice, were still one in the same, so long as the law strove for it, despite itself.

If one spoke up against injustice, it was possible for one to be heard. It was possible for people to change, for society to change, so long as they retained awareness of themselves and their potential flaws.

The world, then, could be forgiving, when sufficient need arose; it could be made to see its own spectrum of greys, and differentiate between the shades.

The court, and therefore the law, had recognized his opinions, his newfound beliefs, as worth remark. As worth regard, as meaningful.

And so he was not wrong, and he had not failed in his duty by taking all factors into consideration in his application of authority—nay, perhaps, that was his duty: the pursuit of justice, and the examination, and tailoring, of the law to that end. Then, his purpose, his duty to the law, was not misguided, was still valuable, and he had chosen well to continue with it.

He had thought he may have made a mistake, had sullied himself, and betrayed his cause when he had let Valjean go instead of arresting him. But he had explained his reasoning behind this action, or lack thereof, and the court had found it compelling rather than ludicrous. And so he had not gone against the will of his superiors, for his superiors agreed with his judgment now that he
had brought the matter to light. He was not reproachable. He was not mad. He had not committed error.

He had looked beyond the law to his conscience in order to determine the right course of action, and the law had, in turn, proved that it could do the same—proved that it in fact had built within itself systems that allowed for it to do the same. And so to serve the law was not to go against his conscience; these two things could work—were meant to work—in tandem.

With a start, Javert found that there was no longer any conflict within his soul. The world was not at war with itself; there was sufficient enough solidarity to reach compromise. All boundaries were conventions, and there was no divide which could not be bridged, so long as enough effort was expended towards that goal.

A strange feeling entered his breast. Something he had not felt in a long time. He knit his brow. It was … contentment. It was clarity. It was pride. Pride in a job well done, in knowing justice—true justice—had been served, and he the one who’d served it.

God, he had almost forgotten what that felt like! He reveled in the sensation with wonder.

Almost amazed at himself, he reached into the breast pocket of his coat and withdrew his snuffbox.

To his surprise, a little vellum card, folded in half, came out of the pocket with it, tumbling onto his lap.

Blinking, he picked it up and unfolded it. It was too dark to read, and he had to wait until they passed a streetlamp before he could make out the text. He squinted, and found it just barely legible.

‘Thank you,’ it said. In Valjean’s handwriting.

Javert stared at the words dumbly.

It took him a moment to remember where the note had come from. Then all at once his lips split into a grin, wide and devilish and helpless, and he chuckled noiselessly, hanging his head and touching the piece of vellum to his brow.

After he finally managed to recompose himself, he took one last look at the note before folding it back up and pocketing it once more. Then he popped the lid off the little silver box that Valjean had given him so long ago.

He had taken the box out many times, and considered it, but he had not once opened it. Not since the day he’d received it. He had only gazed pensively at the design on its lid—the delicate and precisely engraved compass. He would gaze at it, and run his thumb along the etched grooves, and then he would shove it back into his pocket, unused.

But today he opened it.

And, for the first time in a year, he took a pinch of snuff.

Hanging his arm out the fiacre’s window, and gazing out into the passing street, with its glowing golden streetlamps, he felt—what was this, exactly?

Peace.

He did not know if he had ever felt this before. The feeling was … unprecedented.
The night was cool, and the air, and the world, was full of glorious possibility.

And for what was perhaps the first time in his life, Javert was deeply, truly, happy.

He rapped on the glass with the back of his hand.

“Driver,” he said, “change of plans. Take me to the Seine.”

***

The moon was rising full above the water. It had not rained in some time, and the river’s current was slow, allowing for a softly dazzling reflection of the moon across its surface.

Javert dismissed the fiacre, and walked slowly towards the bank. He considered the water thoughtfully. Ran his hand over the smooth concrete of the parapet—still warm from the summer’s sun—with a lingering sense of nostalgia, as though the river was an old friend, or a childhood home.

He thought of the nights he’d believed the world would never make sense again. That there were too many conflicts, too many uncertainties, and it was impossible for him to move forward. That there was no path left for him in this life that held any meaning. He thought of the nights Valjean had held him close, and murmured comfort to him, and taken his hand in his, and convinced him, despite everything, that there was still something, something in this world worth living for. Even if he hadn’t known what it was.

But this! This was what it was. This was what it had always, always been. The pursuit of justice.

He had been terrified that he no longer knew what it was, or how to reach it. Because certainly, there was a time when he thought justice was the law. And then, as he had found, that was not always the case. But now, it had just been proven to him that it could be, so long as one did not lose oneself in that quest, and become blinded by technicalities and traditions.

So he could still serve justice by serving the law. The relief this imparted to him was vast.

He gazed out over the river and began to chuckle, hanging his head in both amusement and dejection.

They were probably going to throw him out of the police.

He had been lucky, honestly, that they had not already thrown him in an asylum, as Toussaint had mentioned before. The fact that Gisquet had known of his suicide attempt—or, at least, one of them, anyway—and said nothing—that was a miracle in itself.

But he doubted that, after what he had just done, after the instability he had displayed earlier, and the note he had written that June, that they would still deign him fit to be a police agent. Perhaps they held him, on account of his spotless record, in a high enough regard that they would seriously consider his opinion on such a matter as Jean Valjean’s case—expert on it as he was—but it was unlikely that they would think someone so apt to disregarding rules, and switching beliefs at the drop of a hat, was really the sort of material they wanted in the Police.

Still.
They had shown that it was not impossible to change. That it was not inconceivable to forgive. That justice, in the end, was still their true goal, and that they might falter along the way to it on occasion, but they could be made to recognize this, and strive to correct their path. And with or without him, they would continue on towards it. And so long as there were men who still sought understanding, and truth, and fairness, despite the world, or themselves, then there would always remain the hope of a better tomorrow.

Even if they cast him out, he found, to his surprise, that as long as he had that knowledge, he would be content. Perhaps he would have to find another occupation, perhaps he would have to resort to some menial labor, or situation less befitting a man of his convictions, but this mattered but little to him.

Indeed, had he not requested, and been accepting of his dismissal, in Montreuil-sur-Mer? Had he not been contented with the idea of it, so long as justice had been served? Had he not been willing to seek employment elsewhere, even if he knew not what awaited him? He had done it once—or, at least been ready to—and he could do it again. There would always be a way forward, so long as he looked for it. His time with Valjean had taught him that.

For so long he had been questioning his purpose. Questioning why, in the greater scheme of things—if there was one—he had been pulled from this river. Questioning what good his life did, or had done, or could yet do.

But even if the ground beneath him had been broken, and they turned him out of the police, and he had nothing left to his name—even if there had been no point to his existence but to save the life of one good man, and turn a mirror to society—he could say that he was satisfied with himself. It was enough. He had done good.

And in this newly revealed world, where anyone could be anything, surely, somewhere, there was still a place for him.

Javert withdrew the badge from his pocket, and turned it over in the moonlight. He thought about his likely impending dismissal, and he considered throwing the little glass plate into the river. But he only stared at the words upon it, and let out a scoff. Whatever happened to him, whatever came next, he was done with throwing things into bodies of water. With a smirk, he stuck the badge back into his coat pocket.

He did not regret a thing at all.

Turning his back on the Seine, he started home.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

All Boundaries Are Conventions. - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

Ameagari no Ie - Masakatsu Takagi
Anata ga Amu Sekai - Masakatsu Takagi

Epilogue (Farewells) - The Lord Of The Rings: Original London Production cast

First Light - The Cinematic Orchestra

Hatching - The Cinematic Orchestra

Life of the Bird - The Cinematic Orchestra
Where We Go From Here

Chapter Summary

Valjean tries to come to terms with his sudden freedom; Javert is called into the Prefect's office.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever.”

-Eugene O'Neill

***

What began as a simple ritual of refreshment became seemingly one of purification—not just of the body, but of the spirit.

Valjean scrubbed away the dirt and grime of imprisonment from his soul as much as his skin. The motions grew frenzied as he went on, and he did not know why. He scrubbed himself raw, red lines like scratch marks arching over his chest, his arms. For a moment it seemed possible that he might scrub away even the scars that marred his flesh, though that was not be, and he knew it.

Something that had been building in his chest finally boiled in his blood and surged up from inside of him and out of his mouth. He held his head beneath the water and screamed. Bubbles trailed up his cheeks to the surface, the water churning. There was something of a release in it, release of things that had been clawing at his innards for years, decades. And when all the breath in his lungs had been expelled, he remained beneath the surface, shaking and clenching his teeth, tears mingling with the bathwater.

Finally unable to stand it any longer, he threw back his head and sucked in a lungful of cool air, sitting back and panting. The panting turned to choking. The choking turned to stunted sobs.

His hand found the washcloth once more and scrubbed it convulsively against himself, just as riled by the action as relieved. Finally he ended with his face pressed against the wet cloth, his ragged breathing evening slowly out as the heat settled within him.

He filled his lungs with as much as they could hold, letting it out in shaky sighs as he rinsed the soap from his hair. Half submerged in the warm water, he sat with his head in his hands, fingers tangled up in white curls as he reveled in the sensation of breath.

The rising stream, filling the room with the scent of flowers, made it feel as though he were coming back to life. As though he had been lost for a time, at the edge of the abyss, and had just
drawn his gaze up and turned from it. As though his very being had all but been extinguished, and had lain dormant, smoldering as it was slowly suffocated by ash, and all of a sudden a breeze had blown away that choking soot and allowed that flame to breathe and rise, taking once more to the sky.

Valjean did not know how long he sat there, motionless, letting the steam seep into his skin.

He found himself thinking of Javert. How he had placed himself between him and the Président, like some grand archangel, unfurling its black wings to obscure him from view. Those cold blue eyes as they had gazed back at him. How could such piercing eyes be so soft? He had never seen such a look in them before, and it made his heart throb to recall it. No one had ever looked at him like that. He did not even know what that look entailed, but he felt it deep within his soul, and he was both frightened and allured by it.

That the man had stood up for him, placed his career and reputation on the line for him, risked everything for him … And the things he’d said! Good god. Valjean shuddered at the enormity of it all.

Finally he let out a long sigh and leaned back, resting his head against the edge of the washtub and letting his arms drape over the sides.

Running his hands over his face, he felt how thick the stubble was that had grown there. He reached over for the straight razor on the nearby stool.

As a young man, Jean Valjean had been clean shaven, with long hair. In the galleys, it was his head which was bare—unevenly shorn beneath his cap—and his face which was full of hair, and this only added to his fearsome appearance. When the Bishop had saved him, and he’d decided to forsake his old life, he shaved it all off again, in order to better conceal his identity, and leave the memory of the bagne behind. Later, as Fauchelevent, he had grown only some of it back out—and even then, kept it neatly trimmed—to confuse anyone looking for either a clean shaven man or a man with a full beard. His face had been itself its own mask.

There was something in the remark of his daughter, and in the confinement of the past few days, which made now a subconscious impression on him. Suddenly he felt the shame of the galleys upon his face. His growing beard recalled to him his time in Toulon, and he shuddered at it. He was not that man, he was not, he was not— that man, he was someone else, he was someone, he—

The razor nicked his chin in his haste, fingers too frenetic to keep an even pressure.

Short white hairs filled the washtub, clinging just barely to the surface among the suds.

Valjean splashed water over his face and ran his hands over it again, feeling the smoothness of his skin.

He was not that wretch from Toulon so long ago. He was not that man, that brute, that cold-hearted firebrand; rather, he was—

He was about to put the razor away when he caught his reflection in the flat of the blade. It was almost unfamiliar to him; he hardly recognized himself.

No more was he a wanted criminal. No more did he have to hide his face.

For twenty years of his life he’d been called either a number or a nickname, for another twenty he’d gone so long without hearing his true name that the sound of it became almost foreign to his
ears, out of place on his tongue. To recall it in his mind was melancholy; to hear it from another’s lips a death sentence.

So many decades had passed without him being able to embrace his own identity that he had become a stranger to himself.

Yet now, for the first time in forty years, he was not wanted by the Police. He did not have the threat of iron bars or a blade hanging above his neck. No longer did such things loom in the background of his life like a dark cloud.

He was free.

It had been so long, he had forgotten what freedom felt like. What it was like to live without the fear of being hunted.

Suddenly everything was behind him. There was a path forward, and he did not have to skirt it in the shadows. Jean Valjean was no longer a convict; he had been recognized as a good and decent man. He had been allowed to return to society.

It was hard for him to fully comprehend this. It felt nothing like when he’d been given his yellow papers at Toulon. He had no passport he must show to damn himself. He was not going to be scorned for who he was, or what he’d done. He was not going to be turned away and spat upon.

And most markedly different of all: he was not alone. There were people who loved him now, and—wonder of wonders!—knew exactly what he was and did not shudder at it. Cosette. Marius. Javert.

He closed his eyes.

For as long as he could remember he had been caged up in a prison of his own making. Now a key had been tossed to him. But it was upon him to open the door. And he had been locked away so long that he no longer knew what it was that lay outside those bars. It quite nearly terrified him. To allow himself the freedom of honesty, to allow himself to be known, to be vulnerable—it was a hard thing to imagine doing, now. For decades he had worn his secrecy like a shield.

Finally, the law said to him ‘You may be as you are.’ And he replied, in stupefaction, ‘But, how am I?’

He was finally permitted to be once more Jean Valjean of Faverolles, but he no longer knew who that was. If not a man on the run from the law, if not an ex-convict, what was he? Madeleine? Fauchelevent? No. All these names he had lived under, all these people he had been—they were him, but they were also not him at all. He had worn a mask for so many years that he did not recall his own face.

In a world where he could suddenly be anyone, and do anything, he was at a complete loss.

Who was the man who wore this scarred and weathered skin? What sort of person was he who had entered the galleys so long ago? A tree pruner? A brother? An uncle? These things felt foreign to him. What had that man been like? What were his hopes, his dreams? His passions? Valjean had no idea. All this time, he had only survived, and never lived. He had never entertained any ideals for his future; to do so would only have invited despair into his soul, as they would have been unattainable.

And so, turning to study himself, he found himself devoid of any identity that had not been slapped and branded upon him by society and fate, and he did not know himself.
He opened his eyes and gazed at his reflection in the blade of the razor. At the man staring back at him, tan of skin and white of hair. An old man with cognac-brown eyes, and a mess of white curls atop his head.

Who was this man? He stared and stared and stared.

*Your name is Jean Valjean,* he told himself.

And in that name there was a freedom he had never tasted before. It was sweet upon his lips and he savored it with wondering reverie.

*Your name is Jean Valjean.*

***

When he dried his hair and dressed himself, he went to the door, but, his fingers pausing on the knob, realized he did not know how to face them. How to face any of them, after this. After what they now knew of him. He imagined that they were waiting to hear from him, but he simply did not have it in him for any further interaction with anyone, least of all them.

He turned around and slid down the wall beside his bed into a sitting position, his head buried in his knees.

After awhile there was a knock at the door. He did not give an answer the first time; the second, he let out a weary “Come in.”

Cosette stepped carefully into the room, shutting the door behind her and waiting at the threshold with her hands clasped behind her back around the handle of a basket. “Papa?”

“I’m here.”

“Are you ... all right?”

Valjean lifted his head a little, opening his mouth to reply, but stopped himself, and, for once, allowed himself the relief of honesty. “No.”

Her gaze fell to the floor. “I brought you supper,” she said quietly. “You must be famished.” When he did not respond, she continued on to say, approaching him and putting the basket down, “Marius and grandpère haven’t come back yet. I imagine they’re talking mademoiselle the elder’s ear off. Toussaint is back, though. But she said that she would wait to see you until you were ready. And everyone else, I told them to let you be. So you shouldn’t be bothered anymore tonight.”

Observing him with a sympathetic frown, she drew a little closer and knelt before him, folding her hands in her lap.

Valjean remained sitting curled as he had been, his hair obscuring his eyes, but raised his face to look at her with an exhausted and troubled expression.

“Oh,” she stammered, putting a hand to her mouth. “You shaved it all off. I’ve ... never seen you like that, before. You look so much younger.”

It was evident in the tone of her voice that this change had unsettled her, and he immediately
grew embarrassed of it, letting his head droop once more.

“How much have they told you?” he finally asked. “—of me.”

“Of you? No one’s told me anything, but that you stole something a very long time ago, and that you broke out of prison.”

“I see.”

“But papa, I don’t care about that. It was long before you met me, ne c’est pas? And I know that you’re a good man. I only wish you wouldn’t have kept secrets from me,” she sighed. “I know why you did it, but—but I think it would have been easier, if I’d known. For the both of us. You ... must have been so scared. And you should have had someone to comfort you. And then, you always left me in the dark, not knowing why we did the things we did.”

“I wouldn’t have been afraid of you,” she told him. “I have never been afraid of you, not for a moment. Not even when you stepped out of the shadows of the forest and took my hand, without me knowing anything of you.” She let out a scoff. “You know, I—I had been terrified, that night. I thought surely there must have been monsters in that wood. The air was so cold, and quiet, and I felt like I was being hunted by some beast. I was about ready to cry. But then you appeared, and I felt suddenly—inexplicably—safe.”

“I had almost forgotten that time,” she admitted. “I think that I had wanted to forget. But, the other day, it came back. The Inn. The forest. Montfermeil. I had been so frightened, all my life, it seemed. And sad, and lonely. When you came, it was like magic. No one had ever stood up for me before. Nobody had ever been so kind to me.” A laugh escaped her pink lips. “You paid for the stockings I was knitting. So they wouldn’t make me work anymore. And you bought me that magnificent doll. And the next morning there was a Louis d’or in my shoe. I knew it was from you. I didn’t believe much of Papa Noël. But oh, you made me want to; you were so like what I imagined him to be. And like a fairy tale you whisked me away to another world, and everything changed for the better.”

“So, what I am trying to say is ... even if you had told me who you were—that you had done bad things in the past; that you were on the run from the police—I do not think I would have feared you. You remain, truly, the best thing that ever happened to me. Before you, I—” She paused, blue eyes scanning the floorboards for a moment before meeting his gaze. “You said, earlier, that I taught you how to love. But, you see, I didn’t teach you anything. How could I have taught you love, when, until you came, I did not even know what it felt like?”

Valjean looked up at her, then let his gaze drift down, somber. “Your mother loved you.”

“I know. But I don’t remember. Yours is the first affection I can recall.”

He gave a slow nod, and they sat in silence for awhile, not looking at each other.

“So,” said Cosette. “That’s your real name, then? Jean Valjean?”

Another nod.

“It’s a little silly sounding.”

A lopsided grin tugged at his lips, and he lifted his face, giving a scoff and gazing off wistfully. “It was my father’s name,” he told her. “A sobriquet, I think. ‘Voilà Jean.’”

She smiled at him, holding back a laugh. “Ah.” Pursing her lips, she seemed to come upon a
thought. “So, when you told me to call you ‘Monsieur Jean ...’”

Valjean’s eyebrows rose. “I ... Yes.”

“I did wonder why you asked that of me. Like you’d picked the name out of a hat.”

“I am very sorry for it,” he admitted. “For trying to distance you so. For always being so curt. I have never explained myself well to you. It was ... something of a precaution for us both.”

Her expression grew solemn again. “You know, you can talk about it now. Your family. Your past. Everything you were afraid to tell me. Surely it has been hard, to keep so many secrets these long years.”

Valjean drew in a breath and gave a shaky sigh, a shadow falling over his eyes. “I can’t believe you know. I had meant to keep it from you, all your life—it was so terrible a thing. So I ... never thought about how to tell you. Or what it would be like if you knew, and did not tremble at it. I always assumed you would ...”

“That I would what?”

“I don’t know. I never entertained the notion for long. I did not think that anything good could ever come of it. That you ... accept it, now—I did not expect that. I never considered such an outcome. And certainly not—” He studied the palm of his hand. “—not one like this. Where I remained. So it is strange. And I feel I don’t know anything, anymore. None of this was ever supposed to happen.”

Cosette considered him very seriously for second. “But are you not glad that it has?”

“I—” He squeezed his eyes shut, turned away, breathing “God, yes.” A knot began to form in his throat, and he tried to swallow it, to no avail. “I just don’t—I don’t know how to ... I don’t know where to go from here.”

She chewed her bottom lip, then put her arms around him, hugging him tight to her chest. “We will figure that out together,” she promised. “We have all the time in the world, now, and you don’t have to worry anymore.”

Valjean wrapped his arms around her in turn, her frame so small and so light in his grasp. “You still love me?” he choked out, as much a statement as a question.

“Always.”

In lieu of words he could not find, he clutched her close and laid his brow on her shoulder.

***

The day after the trial, when Javert had returned to his station-house, he found, unsurprisingly, that the Prefect had asked to meet with him. With a sigh, and a growing dread, he crossed over onto the Isle. As he headed down Rue de Jerusalem, beneath the looming stone archway and into the hidden plaza of the Prefecture, he began to feel well and truly small.

He had to steel his nerves before he could bring himself to open the door to the office, and even
then, he did not feel prepared.

What would the man say? What would he do to him? What was his fate?

How many people knew what he had done?

“Monsieur le Préfet,” he said lowly, casting his eyes upon the floor as he doffed his hat, “you asked to see me?”

“Ah, Javert; there you are.” Gisquet stood up from his desk, sauntering around it to stand in the middle of the room. He beckoned him closer with a finger.

Javert took a few steps forward.

The man gestured further.

Javert complied, although uncomfortably. The distance between them was inappropriately short for such a formal relationship. Certainly a stormy exchange of words was about to occur, and the man wished it to be hushed and hidden from listening ears.

His mouth worked to form the words. “Are you … going to dismiss me?”

The man’s face went blank. “What?” He cocked his head to the side, his brow knitting. “No! Why would you think …?” He chuckled to himself, shaking his head. “No, never mind; I can see how you may have told yourself that. Honestly, Javert, your humility is almost insufferable.”

Javert was struck by the suspicion he himself had uttered similar words to Valjean quite some time ago, and he was dumbfounded to hear them directed back at him, especially by the Prefect of Police.

“No,” the man continued, “I wanted to discuss with you what happened earlier. I left quickly—I had a meeting to attend—and you were not in the position to talk. But you are free now, so. I am sure you have questions.”

Javert opened his mouth preemptively, staring at him for a moment before finding his voice. “I — You—” He clutched his head, eyes darting about frantically. “That night— You saw! And then, the note! Why did you not—? I don’t understand; why would you think me fit for service when I …!”

“I believe I’ve already expressed my sentiments regarding that issue multiple times to you,” Gisquet countered calmly. “And I really did mean the things I said.”

Javert gaped at him. “But …”

“That is enough of that,” the Prefect said. “We will not talk of dismissal again. Now, about the trial—and your note.”

“The note!” he echoed. “Mon dieu! I had forgotten. Why did you not speak of it?”

“I was going to speak of it, but then you appeared in my office, demanding your own discharge,” Gisquet sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “—and that changed things. It did not seem opportune to bring it up, and then, some time had passed, and …”

He shook his head. “Ah, it doesn’t matter anyway; I wasn’t going to reprimand you for it. I was merely surprised that you would express such opinions, let alone harbor them. Your concerns were
unexpected. But not reprehensible, per se. I was almost glad to see you putting some thought into the workings of the justice system outside of your own responsibilities.”

“The fact that it came seemingly from nowhere, and for no discernible reason, however, made me approach the subject with some hesitation. That note did read a bit like a resignational confession—and it was meant to be, I supposed, after you had spoken with me. But I did not want you to resign; I wanted you to stay. And so I left it unmentioned.”

“I do not understand why you— When I have so disgraced myself in front of you! Why would you even consider letting me—”

“Javert—”

“—back into the police, let alone in the same—”

“Javert.”

There was a hand on his shoulder now and it prevented him from speaking.

“You are not—” The Prefect ran his hand over his face, sighing wearily. “You have not disgraced yourself. That kind of thing is … When a man finds himself desperate enough that he— When his situation is so dire that he finds he has no recourse but to … I— Javert, that man is to be pitied, not condemned. Do you understand that?”

Javert’s face was a shadow. “You mean to say that you permitted me my post out of pity.”

“No; that’s not—” The man pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. “I kept you on because I wanted you, because you are good at the job, better than most. There was no reason I should have found you unworthy of it except your own insistence of the matter. And it was baseless. Baseless, Javert. You doubt yourself too much. You find fault with things which are not faults. You are useful and well-intentioned and so I have fought to keep you. That is why.”

“I understand I may have been useful to you,” Javert said sadly. “But I do not understand why you would still consider me so, after—after witnessing what was so clearly evidence of mental aberration.”

Gisquet let out a sigh. “Javert, if you think you are the only man in the history of the prefecture to have ever experienced such a crisis, then you must live in a truly lonely world. One moment of uncertainty is not grounds for turning a man out on the street, especially when the only victim of it was himself. I am just happy to see you come back from that place. And maybe—maybe I thought that leaving it unmentioned would help.”

Javert had calmed some, considering his words carefully. He gave a slight nod, eyes on the floor.

Gisquet studied him, and his silence. “Alas,” he sighed, his voice growing softer, “you are troubled that I saw you that night, no?”

Javert frowned, glancing away in shame.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to spy on you. That was not meant for me to see; I know that. But you cannot come to a man’s door in the middle of the night disheveled and sickly-looking, demanding your own damnation, and then run away wordlessly, without expecting to arouse some concern. Honestly, man; I was worried for you! Of course I followed.”
“I suppose I should have turned away when you were safe, but how could I even be sure of that?” He gave a deep sigh. “Anyway; you should not be ashamed about what happened that night. I don’t think any less of you for it. We are all human; these things happen. And as far as discretion is concerned, you need not worry on it; I have not told a soul, nor do I intend to. But for the love of God, Javert, should you fall into such a state again …”

“No, I know;” Javert said quietly. “I should leave the police if that were to happen. I wouldn’t trouble you any further by—”

Gisquet grabbed him by the collar, forcing him to look at his face.

Javert gave a start, mortified.

“That is not,” Gisquet said emphatically, “what I meant.”

“Bon Dieu, man,” he continued as he released him, pacing about the room, “do you hear yourself speak? Did you not register anything I just said to you? Why do you automatically condemn yourself thusly? No; what I was going to say was that you ought to be open about what troubles you, not languish away in your personal agonies until the world becomes so black you feel you have no other respite but to end your own suffering!”

He threw his hand up, gesticulating wildly. “Damn your humility; damn your pride—do you not see you have friends in the prefecture? Speak to another human being about your life, you fool! I don’t want to ever hear about this business of suicide again. Do I make myself clear?”

Slowly, Javert turned red, and he bowed his head—very, very low indeed.

“Good!” Gisquet said, hand on his hip. “I am glad we agree upon something.” He let out an exasperated breath, taking in his countenance. “Oh; don’t look so contrite. Come now. I didn’t mean any dishonor. It’s just that … Ugh; you can be so damnably hard-headed at times, you know that? But it doesn’t matter. Just—just take care of yourself.” He gave pause, waiting until Javert looked a little less crestfallen.

“Let us speak of the trial,” he said, regaining the professional air that he’d had when Javert had first arrived. “You did well in defending that man. I was very surprised at first, to see you testify like that. I’d assumed you were there on a last moment’s notice, to condemn him. But then, when you spoke …”

His eyes drifted off. “His case seemed quite hopeless, in earnest. I did not think there could be any question of the verdict. But you presented your argument with such skill, and such tact—it was admirable; I was impressed. I would have liked to know if, even without my remarks, they would have been swayed by it. I think they would have. I would like to think that, anyway.”

“But whatever the outcome might have been, I really must applaud you. To have stood there in front of all those people, knowing they were full of opposition, knowing how crucial your every word would be, and to retain your composure like that … It was quite a feat. And then, your choice of wording was—” He smirked. “—quite cunning.”

“That man, that Jean Valjean—I thought I recognized him from somewhere when I entered the courtroom,” he explained, “but then, he was a convict, and I have toured my fair share of prisons. It was only when you testified in his defense did I realize where exactly it was I had seen him before. Had you not appeared, I would not have spoken on his behalf. And,” he said, his voice lowering, “I suspect they would have sent him to the guillotine.”
Javert froze once more at the thought.

That such a thing had almost been allowed to occur!

He could picture the bright flash of metal as the blade came down, a spurt of blood on snow white curls—the crowd jeering, ridiculing his death. He would be just another convict to them, some dirty old criminal, undeserving of kindness or mercy, not worthy of a second thought.

He shuddered, driving the image from his mind as a nausea gripped him.

No, no; god, that could never be.

He tried to swallow but found his throat dry. “I know,” he murmured.

“As you said, he had already been sentenced to death the first time around in Arras,” the Prefect continued. “I’m sure the only reason he was spared was because he’d confessed to the crimes voluntarily, and sacrificed so much on another’s behalf. And, probably, it had also to do with the fact that the King himself had twice appointed him mayor. It would have looked very bad for him if a man he’d recommended as a leader turned out to be so vile a criminal as deserving the blade. You understand. The papers would have had a ball with it.”

“But that was Louis XVIII, and this is Louis-Philippe. Besides that, one pardon is mercy, but two—two is conspiracy. Even if it was his cousin, and not he himself, that ordered the previous one. So you see, it was very fortunate that you arrived. Otherwise …” He shook his head. “Well, let us not dwell on it. Anyway. I trust our intercession will be proven worthwhile in the future.”

Javert nodded. “I am sure that it will. But, monsieur, there is something I still don’t understand.”

“Hm?”

“If you didn’t come there for him, then ... why were you in that courtroom at all?”

“Oh!” The man flashed him a grin. “Ah, well; you see—I’d been sitting in on a previous session in another hall, which had just let out. I happened to see you pass by, and I noticed you enter the gallery, with a sullen look about you, and wondered what on earth you were doing if you weren’t there to give a deposition. I don’t think I’ve ever known you to sit in on a trial as part of the audience. I was curious, that’s all. And, I suppose I have been taken to checking in on you, since last year—just a little bit. So I sat a few rows behind you.”

Javert drew back. “You mean to tell me the only reason you were there was—by chance?”

“Bonne chance as it were,” he said with a shrug and a little smirk.

“Good god.”

Gisquet let out a chuckle. “Life is a funny thing.”

“You will forgive me if I don’t find it as amusing as you, monsieur.” Javert let out a sigh and shook his head. “I—I still can’t believe that you ... I mean, monsieur, you’d never even met the man. Why did you choose to stand for him, to risk yourself thusly, for something you had no way to be sure of? My words may have been compelling, but I am just one person, and he was a stranger to you.”

Gisquet pondered this for a second, his eyes trailing the floor. He gave a shrug. “It is not
entirely true that I knew nothing of him. I knew what I saw at the river. A man may have his falsehoods, but his nature can be well discerned by what he does when he thinks no one’s looking, and I doubt either of you suspected you had an audience that night.”

“He may have committed misdeeds once—even grave ones, but ... that was a long time ago. And I don't believe any man capable of that level of empathy could ever be truly dangerous to society. Nor did it seem to me that he was lacking in reform. What could be gained by his further punishment? I understood why you felt the way you did about him.”

“Besides,” he said, giving a sudden laugh, “it’s not like this sort of thing is completely unheard of. Hell, we had a wanted convict heading our national security for twenty years!”

Javert gave a start.

“If reform were merely a fantasy we should all have been burgled and stabbed in our sleep by now,” said Gisquet. “And if anyone’s going to put up a fuss about the law granting exceptions to certain cases, there are many that would rank higher on the list of public outrage than your Valjean fellow, storied though his history may be. So I would not trouble yourself particularly over that.”

“And anyway,” he added, a mischievous grin on his face, “is it truly so strange I would advocate mercy on the man’s behalf? He did save one of my top agents for me. More than once, it would seem.”

Javert felt his cheeks grow warm. He bent his head. “Still, it— That you took it upon yourself to intercede ...”

“I did only what I felt I ought to.”

After a moment Javert gave a clumsy nod. “Yes, well, it was yet unbidden, and entirely unexpected. So—thank you,” he said, looking back up to meet his eyes for a split-second. “I had almost forgotten to say that. Thank you—truly.”

“You are very welcome. And tell that man the next time you see him that I hope he’s doing well.”

“I will.”

“Now, go get me some arrests,” the Prefect said, waving a dismissive hand at him. “I’ve heard your pay’s been a pittance of late.”

Javert bowed to him. “Monsieur.”

***

Jean Valjean slept, without realizing it, for an entire day.

Cosette had come in to check on him and found him fast asleep atop the bed sheets, still in his trousers and waistcoat, breathing softly, but looking like a man who had run a hundred leagues. She’d examined his face, made sure of him, and patted his hair before pulling the side of the covers up over him and quietly shutting the door.
When he finally awoke, it was the early morning on the second day of his freedom. He thought it to be the first; he had not woken once since crawling into the bed two nights prior, and knew nothing of the passage of time.

The dawn had not quite arrived when his eyes fluttered open. There was the faintest promise of light seeping in from beyond the long curtains of his chamber, but the sun had not yet crept over the horizon.

Valjean thought nothing. He was in that great empty-headed reverie one enters after a long rest, when the body is awake but the senses still slumber.

He was vaguely aware that something monumental had occurred, and at a length he realized what it was, but his numb brain knew little further than the satisfaction of recollection. He should have been shocked, amazed, but drowsy as he was he felt only the placid wonder of a child.

He lay beneath the covers for some time, reveling in the comfort: the softness of the bed, the fine fabric of the sheets, the warmth of his own body having been cocooned in them. Drawing in a breath, he curled up, placed his hands beneath him and rose to a sitting position, rubbing his eyes blearily and letting out a long and lethargic sigh.

Contemplating the growing light, and the transition of his chamber from blue to orange, he got to his feet and parted the curtains, gazing out at the garden beneath.

***

Toussaint had drawn up fresh water from the well and placed a pot of it on to boil. She’d just finished stacking wood inside the belly of the stove, and was reaching for the box of matches in the cupboard when a movement outside caught her eye.

Pausing curiously, she peered out the window to find, in the distance, the white-haired figure of M. Fauchelevent in the garden, painted pink and gold in the early light.

The man walked as though in a dream—as though he meandered through a patch of clouds instead of flowers. Halfway down the path, he slowed to a stop and sank to his knees, staring out at nothing with his hands in his lap.

***

The air was still and warm, and the sky clear.

Valjean sat kneeling on the garden path, his face upturned slightly, gazing off with the air of a monk in meditation.

Such calm! The world had not yet begun its daily cycles.

A small white moth fluttered past him and settled on a rock, slowly opening and closing its wings.
In the trees above, birds sang the first, tentative notes of their songs, few and far apart: the sweet, two note song of a lark; the quick peeps and twittering warbles of a robin red-breast; the call of a nuthatch; the trills and whistles of a nightingale; the low cooing of a turtle dove.

Valjean closed his eyes and listened to them intently, letting every sensory detail seep into his skin like golden honey in a comb.

He could smell the lilies, and the honeysuckle, and the thousand other perfumed plants that grew around him.

So much life! So much green.

It was as though that angel, with its flaming sword, had bowed to him and stepped aside, allowing him entrance into a paradise he had long been denied.

Freedom! He knew not what to do with it. He was a child set loose in a meadow; the world opened before him, vast and glorious, and he stood at the gates in wonder.

He took nothing for granted. The sun, the sky, the warm sand and river rocks beneath him.

To the common man it was nothing—a perfectly ordinary thing. To Jean Valjean it was a curious rapture.

It all seemed so impossible, so beautiful. It was a mad and lovely dream. And he clung to each thread of this glorious tapestry as though it might be pulled out from under him—and continued to marvel that it was not.

To be free, to not be hunted, to not have to run! To be allowed these things, these pleasures, simple as they may be. To be able to sit in the sun and not have to toil in chains, not have to worry about watching eyes, or sudden blows. To belong to no one, and nowhere—to simply exist! He had no memory of this, of these feelings—of such liberty. When was the last time he did not have to worry about anything? Never. He had always been plagued by some trouble, by some fear, for every step of his life.

Yet now, this. Here he sat, safe, secure, accepted. Respected, even! And he no longer had to fear for anything.

He lost himself in the comprehension of this, and in the sounds of the birds and the scent of the flowers, and the warmth of the sun on his skin. He became, for a moment, almost a part of the garden itself, as much as the soil, or the leaves were a part of it.

And then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked up.

Toussaint stood above him, her expression soft. Wordlessly, she bent down and knelt beside him.

He gazed at her, not knowing what to say.

She was such a familiar sight—comforting, in a way—and yet everything had been turned on its head, and nothing remained the same as it used to be. He did not even know in what regard she held him, or what she had been told about any of this. She used to quite nearly revere him—thought he was a saint, thought he could do no wrong. But who did she think he was, now? What kind of man was he in her mind? What, if anything, did she understand about any of this?
And yet, the way she looked at him, without needing to say anything, seemed to suggest she understood everything.

The old woman turned her face towards the rest of the garden. “It’s a long time to be running,” she murmured.

Valjean could think of no response but to stare at the rocks beneath him.

“A lot of things about you make sense, now.”

A stray breeze rustled through the trees.

“I’ll understand if you want to leave,” Valjean managed to say, unable to look at her.

“And why on earth would I do a thing like that?”

“I am not exactly what you expected when you agreed to work for me.”

She studied him for a moment, then shut her eyes with a dismissive shrug. “You seem the same to me.” With a sigh, she brushed herself off and rose to her feet. “Well, come along and I’ll cook you something,” she said, giving his shoulder a pat. “You must be famished.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Jean Valjean: "WHO AM I??"

*pit orchestra starts playing*

Next chapter things will start veering down the "not-just-friends" road. ;) *wiggles eyebrows seductively*

Suggested Listening:

Aqua - Ryuichi Sakamoto

Solitude - Ryuichi Sakamoto

Yesterday Was Hard On All of Us - Fink
Valjean revels in his freedom; Marius decides to hold a soirée on his behalf.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Silence makes the real conversations between friends. Not the saying, but the never needing to say that counts.”
-Margaret Lee Runbeck

***

Two weeks passed.

Valjean lived each day as though in a waking dream.

Cosette and he resumed working in the garden.

Marius and her smothered him with affection, and made sure his every need was attended to. They were always inquiring as to his well-being, and if he would like this or that.

Mlle. Gillenormand, who had hitherto been indifferent to him, began suddenly to make efforts at socializing with him.

Her father, who had prior been amiable, now showered him with admiration. Many times he tried to get Valjean to elaborate on his former lives over a glass of wine or a snifter of brandy. He was quite set on trying to teach him how to play whist, but Valjean was no good at cards, and had little desire for it.

He had to step back from it all. For all the years he had lived in relative solitude, Valjean was not used to such attention. Often he escaped to the garden, or to his books. He continued to forget himself—and, when he remembered his newfound freedom, experienced rapturous disbelief all over again.

And in the nights, when the moon was in the sky, he would look up at the stars, and think of Javert, and tremble.

***
He began the first lines of the letter over and over in his head, unsatisfied with them each time, unsure how to express himself. Valjean had opened the bottle of ink perhaps five minutes ago, and had not yet written a single word. His pen hovered above the paper hesitantly, its nib dry.

‘Inspector, I hope this missive finds you well. If you would perhaps consider …’

He shook his head.

‘Javert, I cannot express how much I …’

‘I have not had a chance to properly show my gratitude for what you …’

Valjean let out a sigh. He closed his eyes.

How many times had he written, or thought to write this man before? Yet suddenly he had forgotten how.

Why this trepidation? He had always been a little trepid in penning correspondences to him, but now …

He put his head in his hands.

Were there even any words immense enough to describe the emotion he felt?

He rubbed his face and stared off though the window.

‘Javert, I should very much like if you would …’

What he really wished to say was “I want to see you again.” What he felt was less a want and more a need. But he could not convey this. He was not sure he ought to. It seemed vaguely improper. Though he was not entirely sure why. Perhaps it was simply too strong a thing to put out in the open.

Javert was inherently stoic, and Valjean suspected that such an outpouring of emotion would not serve any purpose but to make the man uncomfortable.

He narrowed his eyes, drawing in a breath and letting it out slowly.

Then he dipped his pen in the inkwell and set to work.

***

Javert furrowed his brow at the piece of paper he held.

“Javert,” it read, “Firstly, I must admit that I do not know quite what to say here. May you forgive me. I cannot find the words to express my sentiments as to what has occurred; I find myself a little overwhelmed. Struck mute on the matter, if you will.

But in any case, I write to you now because Cosette and Marius—and yes, even his grandfather (the man somehow manages to have more energy than I at his age)—have been planning to hold a soirée on account of the trial’s verdict, and they would very much like for you to attend. I know I would. Frankly, in a way, it is really you that they are celebrating.
I will understand if you find it not to be to your tastes, though it’s not supposed to be anything particularly extravagant. M. Gillenormand has invited a few of his friends; I think some of Marius’ colleagues from the law firm will be there as well. By any standards, it is not going to be a large or lavish event.

Despite this, even I feel odd at the idea of attending it. I must confess that these sorts of things are not really my forte. I am probably just going to sit there in awkward silence, not knowing what to do with myself, while everyone else does the talking.

But perhaps we could sit in awkward silence together?

We have not had a proper chance to talk since that day, and I have a great many things I should like to say to you, if I ever find the words.

And … I would like very much to see you again. If you will permit it.

It’s to be held at the Gillenormands’ (my?) house on Friday the twenty-eighth. Marius is asking everyone to come at six o’clock; dinner later on.

I hope you will be able to attend.

Yours with eternal gratitude,

-Jean Valjean”

Post Script: This is the first time I’ve written my name in decades, would you believe it? I cannot help but wonder a little at the freedom of it.”

Javert’s eyes wandered over the writing for a moment, wistful. He brushed his thumb over the man’s signature before folding the letter up and putting it in the inside breast-pocket of his greatcoat.

Valjean stopped short at the sight of him.

Javert stood at the doorstep, surveying the gathering with a mixture of vigilance and humility. He removed his hat and held it at his side.

The man wore a ruffled blouse with a double-breasted waistcoat of grey silk damask, bearing an attractive floral pattern. This was topped by his usual dark blue tailcoat, which matched his trousers. It seemed to Valjean also that the man’s boots had been polished, and his whiskers were slightly more trimmed.

His black cravat had been pressed and neatly adorned by a small silver pin in the shape of a thin star-like cross with a blue pearl at the center of it. It looked to Valjean vaguely like the star of Bethlehem, though he was not entirely sure it was meant to be.

The man’s hair, as neatly brushed as ever, was tied back in the simple ponytail that was his norm, but fixed in place with a blue satin bow, whose ends trailed down the back of his neck. It was quite possibly comprised of the same ribbon that he had once borrowed from Toussaint’s room
at the Rue Plumet.

In light of this attire, Javert looked much more like a proper attendee of a soirée than someone employed to guard it—though he stood and he watched like a guard, and Valjean wondered if he had ever been anything but at such events.

Javert, he realized, was staring at him as well, and with a start Valjean realized his own impertinence.

Javert wet his lips and glanced away uncomfortably. “I do not happen to own all that many clothes, and I am not in the habit of attending these sorts of things, so … I hope this attire will suffice.”

“Suffice!” he echoed. “Parbleu; it is more than sufficient. No, Javert, you look—” Here he cut himself off, unsure what he’d been about to say. He blinked, cleared his throat. “You look very nice.”

The man peered down at his waistcoat, tugging the fabric with an apathetic curiosity. “Do I?”

Valjean was unclear as to whether Javert was addressing this to him or himself. “You do.”

“Mm.” The man’s eyes trailed up and down his attire. “You don’t look half bad yourself. Monsieur.”

Valjean’s eyebrows shot up. He recalled with a start the National Guard uniform he was wearing, and his cheeks flushed with heat. “It was, ah, not my idea to wear this. I told Cosette it would be wildly inappropriate, considering the circumstances, but …”

“But?”

He dropped his gaze to the floor with a froggish look. “She hid all my other clothes.”

Javert stared at him blankly for a second before trying to stifle something between a scoff and a wheeze, his teeth bared in a foul grin. “You’ve raised a firebrand.”

“I don’t know where she gets it,” he said to himself.

“Oh! Sure. It’s a right mystery, that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

Valjean frowned at him.

They were quiet for a moment.

“It does look good on you, though,” Javert mumbled, glancing at the door frame as though it held something of particular interest to him. “You look … respectable.”

He gave a scoff. “Thanks. But—to be honest, I am not even sure I’m supposed to be wearing it any longer. I half expect them to throw me out any day now.”

“That would be their mistake. They would be losing a good man. Though …” He cocked his head at him, with the barest trace of a smirk on his lips. “—you never were much one for following orders.”
“That I cannot argue with, I fear.”

Javert’s smirk deepened. Then disappeared once more into the solemn mask that was his usual expression. “Was I right, before?” he asked.

“Oh? About what?”

“That you never received any orders that night.”

“From the Guard? No. Well—yes and no. They did send a summons to the box at Rue Plumet, but there was no one there to open it. The first I knew of the conflict was Toussaint muttering about fighting in the streets.”

“That’s a relief,” he sighed. “I’d hate to think you willfully disobeyed them.”

Valjean’s furrowed his brow, conflicted. “Yes, but—even if I had received them—to open fire on a bunch of children ... I don’t know if I ...”

“Then it is a good thing you were not put in a position that necessitated that decision.”

He dipped his head. “Indeed. I’ve never had to shoot a man, and I hope I never will.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

Valjean tossed him a weak grin.

“So,” Javert grunted, rocking back and forth on the heel of his boots, “How have you been faring? Since the ruling.”

“Ah—well, considering the alternative …” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I am doing quite well; thank you. If you had not been there, I—” He gave a sigh. “You know the law.”

They stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“I do apologize for my surely strange behavior last we met,” Valjean mumbled. “I was half out of my mind, at that point—first from fear of what seemed the inevitable, and then, from disbelief. My thoughts were clouded; I was not myself.”

“You need not explain yourself to me,” Javert told him solemnly. “God knows, I cannot comprehend what you must have suffered through that week.”

Valjean bowed his head. With a forced smile he gave a sweeping gesture back towards the interior of the house. “Will you not come in?”

“Oh. I suppose I am keeping your door open.”

This time Valjean’s smile was genuine. “Cosette and Marius will be glad to see you. And, really, I am— I am very happy that you came.”

“Well. I did promise to visit, didn’t I? And I am nothing if not a man of my word.”

***
Marius and Cosette were indeed overjoyed to find Javert there. Dressed in their best attire, they offered him all gratitude and hospitalities. Cosette, for her part, and to Valjean’s dismay, chided him for ‘running away’ the night of the trial without letting them thank him properly. But her dissatisfaction was soon forgotten in the midst of current pleasures, and eventually she sauntered away so that Marius could introduce her to some of his colleagues.

Multiple times Valjean tried to start a conversation with Javert, but they kept being interrupted by guests wishing to express their excitement and extend them their hand. There were the elderly, who were friends of M. Gillenormand, and the young, who were friends of Marius, and then some middle aged, who could be acquaintances of either of them, or perhaps of Mlle. Gillenormand—honestly, Valjean had no idea, and was too afraid to ask.

“Congratulations, monsieur; I am so happy for you!” said one young man. “Your case will surely spark many a forthcoming debate in the judicial world. It has set a momentous precedent! I hope that you enjoy yourself to the fullest.”

“M-merci beaucoup.” Valjean returned as the youth shook his hand with zeal. He blinked stupidly as the man walked away. “I have absolutely no idea who that was.”

Javert gave a snort. “I find it rather amusing that you seem to be an outlier at your own celebration.”

“I think this sort of thing is more suited for the younger generation,” Valjean remarked sheepishly.

“Oh, I’m not so sure of that. Look at Gillenormand there;” he said with a wave of his hand, “he seems to be enjoying himself.”

Gillenormand was, at this very moment, threatening one of the lawyers with his cane in response to a heated political debate.

“He’s in his element,” said Valjean. “I’ve heard he was something of a reckless reveler in his youth.”

“That I would not doubt.”

***

Things continued in this fashion for some time as guests arrived. People continued to approach them and offer their congratulations, or remark on some deed, and it left both Valjean and Javert in a rather awkward position. They could do little but give their thanks and attempt pleasantries and polite conversation.

Servers floated across the floor to hand out drinks and hors d'oeuvres, which everyone happily busied themselves with.

At last, it seemed, most of the guests had arrived, and Marius, who was the host of the event, signaled the band.

The small group of musicians they had hired for the event began to play, and, first to dance, he led Cosette out onto the floor, twirling and leading her gracefully. Along with cascades of violin
and harpsichord, in echoes of Boccherini, they gazed at one another with demure and adoring eyes, as though the world had dropped out from under them, and they remained the only two alive.

Valjean and Javert watched this from a distance, sipping champagne.

When the dance was finished, husband bowed and wife curtsied, amid a round of thunderous applause.

Valjean clapped hardest of all, his face filled with adoration.

Then the floor was opened to everyone, and the band struck up a faster, merrier tune.

Eventually, Valjean’s gaze strayed from the guests to Javert, curiosity getting the better of him. “I don’t suppose you dance.”

The man turned to him, raising one quizzical eyebrow with a frown. “No,” he replied curtly, with a tone that suggested he was not quite sure what he was answering.

“Ah.” Valjean rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t either. Never learned.”

“That would explain why you always stood off in a corner at them in Montreuil.”

He blinked. “You went to those?”

“Oh, I was paid to go to those.”

“I see,” said Valjean, cracking a smile. “To keep the peace, I presume?”

“Once a guard, always a guard,” Javert stated matter-of-factly, sticking his chin up.

“Mm. Well. I don’t think anyone requires that service of you tonight. And, seeing as neither of us have anything to do for the next hour or so, would you ... accompany me on a stroll through the garden?”

“Now that I am through being accosted by every lawyer and elderly bourgeois in Paris, yes.”

***

They walked for a time among the flowers and trees in silence before, as though in some unspoken agreement, they took a seat on a low stone wall around one of the larger beds, with tall, neatly trimmed hedges at their backs.

It was enough of a distance away that they could no longer hear the music of the soirée. The cellos were replaced by crickets.

“Ah.” Valjean breathed, taking in the summer air, “I should have liked to have some time alone with you before all this, er …” He gestured dismissively towards the elegant house behind them.

“Frippery?” Javert offered.

Valjean bit back a scoff. “Frippery, yes. It is all a little too ostentatious for my tastes. And it did not provide us the leisure of privacy.” He let out a sigh. “I still have not gotten a chance to really
speak with you about everything that happened.”

“Well, speak, then. We are alone now.” The man was staring off at the ground, his head cocked ever so slightly.

Valjean opened his mouth, but could not put together anything to say. There was too much. Mere words could never adequately convey the breadth of his feelings. He wanted to reach out, to put his arms around him and embrace him, but there seemed to him even now some invisible divide between them.

In the beginning it had been the rift and rivalry of police officer and criminal. Now it was the awkward gap between a civilian and a civil servant.

Did he dare touch the man? Was it wrong that he should wish to do that? Inappropriate? He didn’t know. He had only ever been a convict on the run, and anything more than the obligatory formalities with officers of the law would have spelled his doom. Now he was free to act as a regular citizen, but he did not know how it was a regular citizen ought to act. The police were not exactly held in high regard by the general populace, but they were necessary and feared.

Valjean was not sure of the proper way to voice his sentiments.

“I …” He cleared his throat. “I don’t quite know how to …” Trailing off, he glanced back at Javert, and then away, and then back again, his eyes falling to where the man’s hand rested on the wall just beside him.

Slowly, hesitantly, he reached out and put his own over it.

Javert gave a small start. He looked up at him.

Valjean’s face grew hot. He quickly thrust it in another direction. But still his hand remained on Javert’s, and Javert did not withdraw from his touch. Valjean wondered what the man’s expression looked like—what it was that he was thinking—but could not bring himself to turn around.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Squeezed Javert’s hand, lacing his fingers around his.

After a moment, the hand squeezed back.

Valjean’s eyes popped open. Closed again, relieved, fulfilled.

They sat in silence for some time, breathing in the sweet scent of roses and wet grass, not daring to speak, for fear that it should end the moment, or cheapen it somehow.

Finally, it was Javert who broke the silence. “I understand,” he said quietly, withdrawing and clasping his hands between his legs.

Valjean looked up at the rose bushes, their pink blooms half open in the setting sun. “Do you?”

“I think so.”

Valjean furrowed his brow. “I am not sure you will ever be able to, fully. Though I hope that you may. It is not in my power to convey the enormity of gratitude I feel for what you’ve done.” He withdrew, slouching over with his elbows resting on his knees, wringing his hands. “The things you said about me— I didn’t think anyone ever …” He shook his head, his expression twitching, frustrated at himself at his lack of clarity. “I never expected to hear those kinds of things from anyone, let alone from you.”
He face fell. He hung his head. “When they took me away, it was like everything had come crashing down around me. I don’t know how to put it. I lost my senses. I became numb.” His voice dropped to barely more than a whisper. “I wanted to die. I would have preferred to die. Anything would have been better than—than having to … Ah,” he breathed, wiping a half-formed tear from his eye, “you understand, perhaps. Surely you have seen those men, in the galleys—the ones who’ve lost themselves. Who trudge onward with dulled eyes, unseeing, unfeeling. Silent. Waiting for the day death claims them.”

“I became like that. It was not the first time. But it was the worst. Because of what I had lost. Because I had been through it all before, and I knew what was coming. Knew the hell that awaited me. And I was tired. Too tired to fight anymore. To lash out. To break down. I just sat there. I let them do what they pleased with me, and I watched it all go by as though through a windowpane. Like I wasn’t really there.”

“I had given up. Already I had become a walking corpse—a husk, dead inside. There was no future, no light. Everything was bleak and cold and desolate. I was so far beyond any shred of hope. And then—and then you appeared, and you stood before me, and looked back at me with those eyes, and I …” He shivered. “God has sent you to me,” he breathed to himself. “You come to me from God himself, and I do not deserve you.”

He was acutely aware of how quiet it had become. How still the air was. Even the crickets had stopped chirping. His eyes squeezed shut, all Valjean could hear was the sound of his own ragged breath. “I don’t deserve you,” he repeated. “You saved me; you brought me back from the dead. You returned to me that which was most precious in this world. You gave me back my life. I will never be able to repay that.” He let out a weary scoff. “You—you earned me my freedom.”

“No,” the man said. “You earned that yourself. You owe me nothing. So I said a few words in front of a court. What of it? I was only doing my duty. Protecting the people of France. Is that not what you told me I was meant to do? Besides,” he said more softly, “it was I that had a debt to repay.”

Valjean risked a glance at him, lifting his face.

That look, in his eyes! It was the same look he had given him in court.

Valjean trembled, profoundly touched by the man's sincerity. Twice now he had been blessed to receive so kindly a glance from those cold blue eyes. A breath escaped his throat in a sort of whimper, and he turned once more from him as the tears rolled down his cheeks. What issued from his lips, cracking a broken smile, was something between sobbing and laughter.

After awhile, he sniffled, wiping his eyes and grinning sheepishly. He turned back to Javert, giving him a helpless, grateful smile.

The man could not hold his gaze for very long before he looked away, staring unfocused out at the flowers and knitting his hands in his lap.

Valjean studied him for a second. With another sniff, in a flash of whimsy he plucked one of the half-open blooms from the rosebush beside him, snapping its stem near the hip. “Here,” he chuckled tearfully—mostly at his own silliness—as he reached over and tucked it into the second buttonhole of Javert’s waistcoat, “It looks better on you.”

Javert looked up at him dumbly, blinking in surprise. He stared down at the pink blossom now adorning his chest in stupefaction. Clearing his throat, he looked away.
They were quiet for awhile.

“We should probably go back inside,” Valjean admitted. “They will be wondering where we’ve gone.”

“Let them,” Javert said.

Valjean’s face went blank.

“We should wait awhile longer,” Javert continued. “The air is nice tonight, and I am sick of answering questions from a thousand people I don’t know. Besides,” he added, “You would not want your daughter to see you like that.”

Valjean paused, considering the warmth he felt in his face, and the wetness of his cheeks. He must be red from crying. “No, I suppose you are right.”

Somewhere in the distance a robin red-breast called, its voice sweet in the dying light. A solitary breeze rustled the leaves, and then all was silent again.

“I didn’t know,” Javert finally said, a shadow falling over his face.

Valjean looked up at him, knitting his brow. “What?”

The man cocked his head, frowning in a self-deprecating sort of way, his eyes closed. “What you did in Arras. Revealing yourself to save that man. Champmathieu. I didn’t know.” He drew in a breath, cringing. “In the papers it said … something very different. They never mentioned what you did. It was flat out lies, what was published in the press. But I had no reason to question any of it. All I knew was that I had been right, that you had been proven guilty. That I was to arrest you. I did not think any more on it. I did not see why I should.”

“It was not until you were arrested those weeks ago, until I asked to see your case files, that I was made aware of the truth. There was a witness’s testimony, from one of the jurors—written after the incident, of course, but close enough for them to recall the words spoken therein, and—and—Oh, it doesn’t matter. What matters is, I knew it was the truth.”

“To do that … It was so terribly like you. I felt a fool. An ass. Behaving the way I had that night, without ever suspecting.” He shook his head. “When I read that testimony, I …” Gritting his teeth, he scowled at himself before drawing a breath and regaining his composure. He put his head in his hands. “Merde,” he swore. “I—I could not believe that you would—that you had——” He shuddered. “It caused me agony, to read that.”

Valjean had been staring at him for quite some time with a sort of wonder. “Agony?” he echoed in bewilderment.

“Agony,” Javert said. “That you would throw your life away, for a stranger no less—that you would give up everything you had worked so hard for … To forsake yourself, to submit without resistance, to willingly——” He grunted, shaking his head again violently. “Damnit, man, you know what you did. The enormity of it. You know far better than I. It was an act of martyrdom, and a thankless one at that. No one knew what you did, outside of that courtroom, and even those inside soon forgot it.”

“They conspired against you, to put themselves on a pedestal. The magistrates—they lied! They made out as though they had been the ones to reveal you, as if you made no sacrifice at all. As if you were some common thief that they had dragged to court in chains. And you——” His voice broke. “You did not even complain. You just offered yourself up to them, knowing you would be
cut down. Knowing it was the end of everything. Knowing that parole-breakers were to be executed! All for the sake of some man that you did not even know."

“And then, you asked mercy of me—just the smallest bit of forbearance, so you could use your last time on this earth to save yet two more unfortunate souls, and I …! I killed that woman, with my words, and robbed you of that chance. I spat in your face! After all you had been through.”

Valjean gave a start.

The tremors in his voice …

Was Javert crying?

“I took pleasure in your downfall. I did. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it! God help me. I did not even know. And when I read of your death in the paper, I said to myself, ‘That’s a good entry,’ and I spared not a single thought more on it. All these years, I have just been …” He ran his hands over his face and left them there, covering his eyes. “I have been so blind.”

Valjean was struck mute. There was so much he wanted to say, ought to say, and yet nothing made it past his lips. Brow furrowing, he reached out with trembling fingers and touched his arm.

Javert jerked away from him, his head whipping up with a pained and horrified look.

It reminded Valjean of when he’d offered him his hand before, in Montreuil, and the man had recoiled. ‘Excuse me, Monsieur le Maire, but this must not be. A mayor does not shake the hand of a police spy.’

With a look of remorseful consternation, Valjean withdrew his hand.

Javert stared at him, the corners of his mouth drawn down, his forehead creased. “You should hate me, you know,” he finally breathed. “You have every right. Any other man would hate me, given your position.”

“I have never hated you in my life!” Valjean exclaimed.

“I know. But you should have. I am not well liked by people to begin with. I’m aware of it; it doesn’t bother me. But the things I did to you, the way I treated you … Anyone—anyone else would have despised me. Maybe not justly so, in the respect that I was doing my duty—but I went far beyond what duty called on me to do. I was relentless; I was cold.”

“Other men, other criminals—I deal with them properly, orderly. Fairly. I am perfectly willing to negotiate terms with them to achieve a more peaceable outcome. I am practiced in that. I remove myself. I will always seek the less violent path. But you … You, I do not know what to do with.”

“All those years, all those times I caught a whiff of you, hunted you down, only to find myself outmaneuvered, outsped, with nothing more than my tail in my mouth … I should not have let it affect me. But it did. The frustration, the near-misses, the humiliation of being duped—it caused me to resent you. And when I finally had you in my claws, I did not act as an officer of the law should act. I did not afford you the same patience I would have afforded others.”

“I had harbored a petty vengeance towards you in my heart, and that should never have come to be. You see how it made me act. How I had grown cruel towards you without proper warrant. It was true you had never harmed me, or intended me ill, but you vexed me with your escapes, your constant reminders of how I was never quite good enough, never quite clever enough to catch you.”
“And so here is the way things stood: I was overly callous in regards to you, and you see the misfortune it caused. You have had every right to hate me, and yet you have not, and I refused to recognize the significance of that. Any other ruffian or brigand, or thief—had they been as peaceable and supplicating as you, I should have granted them exception, I would have praised them as good fellows and allowed them their requests. Offered up a little respect.”

“That is how one keeps the peace, you know. Encouraging mutual respect. So many officers forget that. I don’t. But I did with you. And yet you held me in high regard despite this, and submitted to me anyway. That is an admirable thing in itself, and I did not even note it. I did not even note it, and yet you persisted in it.”

“I have never had just cause to resent you. You were only trying to survive, in the most passive way possible; I understand that now. But you—you have had every reason to resent me. I have given you a thousand reasons. To this day I do not understand why you saved me. Why you treated me with kindness, when it was so undue. At the barricades. The river. I only comprehend as much as it is simply a thing that you would do. But the intricacies of it, the motivation—that is still beyond me.”

“I understand that it was a good thing to do. A kind thing. Mercy. Yes. I understand that. But coming from you, and directed at me, of all people …” He let out a puff of air and shook his head. “You are still so much a mystery to me,” he said. “How you can be so—so …” He threw out his palms as if waiting for the right word to fall from the sky. “—compassionate. Yes, compassionate—when it is totally and utterly unbidden. When it even comes at your own personal detriment.”

“You have always been like that—since Montreuil—and it has baffled me, even to the point of vexation. Bewildered, I have been. Disgusted, almost. But never grateful. I told you at the barricades that I would rather die than have you hand me back my life, and even I do not know if I meant it. But it is high time I admit to myself what has happened and put away my pride.”

He gave a sigh. “I did not believe myself to be prideful, you know. I thought myself as humble as a priest. But you have taught me a few things about humility, Jean Valjean. And I have come to realize that I am perhaps not so humble as I once thought. You are right; I am prideful. It is hard for me to admit that to myself. I thought that in order to have pride one must think particularly highly of oneself. I see now that this is not the case. And for a long time I was in denial of a great many things, but I think now I am beginning to let go of it and accept them.”

He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long, long sigh, rubbing his face. “You say you do not deserve me?” he said wondrously, gazing out at the rosebushes. “Au contraire. It is I who does not deserve what you have done for me.” He closed his eyes. “A show of gratitude is long past due, I know that very well. And I am not-versed in it. But … perhaps what happened in that courtroom was a start.”

Valjean regarded him with wide eyes, having sat motionless for the duration of this speech, staring at him in awe.

The man before him had grown leaps and bounds from the man he had pulled out of the Seine. Valjean had never really expected to have received thanks for his deeds, and certainly not from Javert. But the man had changed so much over the course of a year. Valjean had not seen him frequently, and so this had not been terribly apparent to him, but now, looking at Javert, hearing those words from his mouth … It was suddenly evident just how much he had changed as a person.

Valjean was overcome with a myriad of emotions as he gazed upon him: surprise, wonder, pride, admiration, and an overarching feeling of fondness. There was a nervous clenching in his gut, and fuzzy warmth in his skin, his head. His fingers ached to clutch at something, staring into
those pale blue eyes.

He suddenly wanted to—to … what, exactly? He didn’t know. To be closer to him, somehow. Even though they were sitting right beside one another. For some reason, the few feet between them felt to him like miles.

His face burned. His stomach fluttered. He wet his lips. “You … you— Ah,” he thought aloud, “I do not know what to say.”

“Then say nothing.”

Valjean blinked, regarding him in silence. “No,” he said suddenly, “I do know what to say.” And he shuffled over towards him on the wall and wrapped his arms about him, squeezing him tightly to his chest and burying his head in his shoulder. “Thank you,” he said. The white linen of his blouse was smooth against his face. “Thank you. Thank you.”

The man stiffened in his grasp for a moment, no doubt taken aback. But then he relaxed some, and spoke not a word of protest.

Valjean felt an arm reach around and pat him slowly, awkwardly on the back. A tiny smile flashed across his lips as he gave the man another squeeze.

Again a robin called in the distance, and Valjean grew aware of how dark it was getting. He breathed in the scent of the freshly washed fabric of the man’s shirt, and knew he ought to be pulling away now, but found he did not want to. He would prefer to hold him like this for a moment longer. Convention and modesty, however, would not permit him this, and so he forced himself to withdraw.

“Ah,” he breathed, “We really should be getting back, now. Cosette will be worried.”

“That is probable.”

To be honest, Valjean would have liked to stay in the garden longer, but he found himself suddenly embarrassed by his desires, and so he got to his feet and dusted himself off anyway, his thighs aching from sitting against the hard stone for so long. “Come on, then,” he said, “Let’s go.”

With a grunt and a painful groan, stretching out his spine and popping his vertebrae back into place, Javert followed him.

As they drew near the house once more a cascade of piano music drifted out to meet them: Mozart’s Sonata No. 16 in C Major.

Pausing, Javert looked curiously in through the bay windows nestled in the stonework. His eyebrows rose. “Your daughter?”

Following his gaze to find Cosette perched on the piano stool, with a throng of guests around her, Valjean smiled proudly. “They taught her music in the convent. She used to play the pipe organ for mass.”

“She’s quite good.”

“Yes, the nuns were very pleased with her.”

Javert furrowed his brow. “Why did you ever leave that place?” he asked. “—the convent. You were so safe there. No one would have ever come looking for you. Certainly I never thought to.”
Valjean grinned and gave a helpless shrug as he watched his daughter play. “It would not have been fair to her.”

“Whatsoever do you mean?”

“She had seen nothing of the world. The convent was so secluded. It was peaceful, and beautiful, yes, but only inasmuch as a cave or a grotto can be beautiful once one has found oneself trapped inside. For her to take her vows, to pledge herself to that life, without knowing any other, would have been ... It would have been selfish of me. To deny her freedom, merely for the sake of my own.”

“So what if I was secure there? She would never have experienced the full range of pleasures life has to offer, living in that place. Never would have fallen in love, or gotten married, or had the chance to bear children and know the happiness they bring. The convent would have become for her like another prison, and she unaware that she was a prisoner. She would not have known what she was missing. But I would have. And I had promised to give her a better life. How could I live with the guilt of knowing I had denied her so much of it?”

He let out a snicker, adding “Besides, the sisters may have been good, and virtuous, but I must confess they were all rather ... strange. They slept in coffins, for God’s sake. I mean, literally—for God’s sake. It was odd.”

“Surely you jest.”

“Not in the least.”

Javert raised his eyebrows. “Pardieu.”

“Mm. So, even if endangered things, I am glad that we left, in the end.”

Javert had a thoughtful expression on his face, still gazing at Cosette. “Yes. She seems ... Well. I doubt she would be this happy as a nun, holed up in a convent all her life.” He raised up an open palm, with a factual air. “And then, of course, I would have died at the barricades had you stayed there, so this worked out rather well for the both of us, really.”

Valjean burst out laughing, and Javert turned to him with a devious smirk, chuckling noiselessly.

Valjean clapped him on the back of the shoulder, trying to restrain himself. “Come on. Let’s get back inside before the insects come out.”

Javert dipped his head and trailed after him.

No one commented on the rose that had mysteriously appeared on his waistcoat.

***

Chapter End Notes

Valjean: *feels romantic attraction for the first time ever in his life* ???
"No, I do know what to say." — I feel like this is the part where Valjean would have kissed him, but the thing is that Valjean doesn't realize that what he's feeling for him is no longer strictly platonic. He's never experienced romantic love at any prior point in his life, so he has no way to recognize the divide between that and other kinds of affection.

Funny story: when I was writing this line—

“So,” Javert grunted, rocking back and forth on the heel of his boots, “How have you... been faring? Since the ruling.”

“Ah—well, considering the alternative…” He rubbed the back of his neck.

—I did not even realize it was a guillotine joke but IT WAS A GUILLOTINE JOKE, OMG

prisoner11111 made some absolutely GORGEOUS fanart for this chapter.

Which I then made into a phone wallpaper.

And KolorfulDreams made some fantastic art for this chapter as well:

Thank You by KolorfulDreams

IDK where to put this in the text right now but Valjean started growing his beard out again lol

Suggested Listening:

Any Other Name - Thomas Newman

Op. 5 n. 4 / Sonata for harpsichord and violin - Boccherini

Orchestral Suite #3 In D, BWV 1068: Air - Bach

Piano Sonata No 16 C major - Mozart

Polonia - Christopher Beck

The Most Important Thing - Christopher Beck

Violin Concerto No. 3 Strassburg K. 216; 3rd Movement - Mozart
The Oak and the Reed

Chapter Summary

Time to wine and dine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Tragedy blows through your life like a tornado, uprooting everything, creating chaos. You wait for the dust to settle, and then you choose. You can live in the wreckage and pretend it's still the mansion you remember. Or you can crawl from the rubble and slowly rebuild.”

-Kristen Bell

***

“Papa! I was wondering where you went off to. Did you hear me play?”

“Yes, ma chère; it was very beautiful.”

The girl brimmed with joy at this compliment. “I was just about to call someone to fetch you. They’re setting the tables for dinner now. Ah! I’m ravenous. I’ve been smelling it cooking all day.”

“ Didn’t you eat some hors d'oeuvres?” asked Valjean.

“No; then I wouldn’t have room for dessert.”

He chuckled softly.

“These dresses are very tight, you know,” she pouted.

“I see.”

“Monsieur!” she said to Javert, with a sudden vigor. “Monsieur, do you know what we’re serving for dessert?”

“No?”

“Tarte conversations and croquembouches dipped in chocolate and topped with strawberries.”

The man raised an eyebrow at her as though unsure of why he should care.

“And do you know who grew the strawberries?” the girl asked proudly.

Javert simply pointed to her with an unaffected look.
“Moi,” she proclaimed, sticking her chin up with her hands on her hips. “That’s right. I picked them just yesterday. Papa helped.” She bounced on her heels and gave a clap of her hands. “Oh! I’m so excited. My first ever crop. And so many people to taste it.”

“I am sure they’ll be delicious,” said Javert.

“Come, come then;” she said, waving them over, “pull up a chair.”

They approached the long chestnut dining table, which usually served them in another, smaller room, but which had been carried out into the formal dining room to accommodate surrounding the guests, who had their own little circular tables opposite.

Javert, noting this arrangement, cast a stifled and reddening glance at Valjean. “I didn’t know we were going to be at the center of it all,” he spoke through his teeth.

Valjean gazed out at the crowd with a disaffected look. “If I have to suffer through it, you have to suffer through it too.”

“You really did invite me here just to share in your suffering, didn’t you?”

Valjean pulled out a chair for him with an air of unconcern. He waved a beckoning hand at its upholstery. “Not at all.”

Trying to scowl at him and yet simultaneously hide it from the gathering of onlookers, Javert took his seat. “This is a larger event than I was led to believe,” he muttered.

Valjean feigned a note of innocence in his tone. “I was not made privy to the whole of the guest list,” he said, sitting to his right.

To the right of Valjean sat Cosette, and then Marius, and his grandfather, and Mlle. Gillenormand the elder, and finally Theodule, so that all the family was on one side of the table, facing the rest of the room.

The servants they’d rented for the evening bustled about the tables setting the last of the silverware and the napkins, and lighting the candles in the centerpieces.

Javert leaned over towards Valjean in his chair. “If your son-in-law makes a speech about us I shan’t speak to you for a week,” he threatened him coolly, eyes on the crowd.

Valjean rested his chin in his hand. “Only a week?”

“A month, then.”

“That’s cold.”

Dinner was served in two courses. The first was faisan forestière[1], the second, canard et jardinière[2], with wine from Jurançon.[3]

Knives and forks clinked on the china, and the guests fell to chattering.

It was the sort of din that creates spaces of silence.

Valjean turned to study Javert.

Even as he was eating, the man’s eyes were flicking about the room, lingering sharply here and there, like a sheepdog looking for weak points in a flock.
Valjean gave him a lopsided grin. “Javert, you are a guest, not a guard.”

Javert blinked, blue eyes sliding over to him beneath a knitting brow.

“You don’t have to be so on edge,” Valjean told him.

“I’m not.”

“You look it, though.”

Javert paused a moment in thought. “Habit,” he remarked coolly, before stabbing another forkful of food. “Not that you look particularly at ease yourself,” he added beneath his breath. “Monsieur.”

Valjean’s mouth twisted into a frown. He lowered his voice. “I cannot help myself in that regard. You know why.”

“Oh, let me guess—”

“Habit,” they both said.

Javert smirked. “Yes, I’m aware. You were always the type that preferred isolation. A veritable hermit.”

“Says the monk.”

The man tried to hold back a snort. “I take my duties seriously; that’s all.”

“I don’t understand why you think that means excluding yourself from the rest of the world. I didn’t feel I had a choice in the matter; but you—you’ve had ample opportunity to branch out. I truly do not understand why you haven’t other friends. You’re a good man. People might not always take kindly to the police, but it’s not like that prevents you from being a part of society.”

The vague look of amusement on Javert’s face dropped entirely. He stared at his plate for a moment. “You humor yourself,” he said quietly.

Valjean cocked his head. “I don’t catch your meaning.”

“I was always ...” He trailed off. Shaking his head, he let out a frustrated puff of air. “You wouldn’t understand,” he said. And then, under his breath, “You were born free.”

Valjean opened his mouth to ask him what he meant by that, but was interrupted by the sound of Marius clinking a knife against his wine glass.

One by one the chattering voices fell away, until the attention of the room was focused on him.

“Everyone! Everyone—thank you,” Marius said, rising up in his chair. “I want to thank you all for coming here today. Especially, I would like to thank my grandfather for allowing us to host it here.”

M. Gillenormand stuck out his chin. “You are the master of the house,” he said with a smile, taking a sip of his wine.

“Not quite yet.”

The old man gave an affable shrug. “I have to die some time.”
A number of the guests chuckled at that.

“Grandfather!”

“What? It’s true.”

“Grandfather.”

“Go, go, get on with it,” the man said, waving a hand at him. “You’re making them all wait.”

“Ah.” The boy cleared his throat and stood up a little taller, facing the crowd once more.

“Gentlemen—” He tried for a serious expression, but it faltered after a split second as he gave a laugh at his own expense. “Gentlemen. And, er, ladies,” he added, glancing back at his wife and aunt. “We gather here today to mark with celebration the momentous event which has taken place. To celebrate the ruling of the state, and the freedom it has granted my father, who, as I hope you all should know by now, is a great man, as is the man who won him a pardon, monsieur l’Inspecteur Javert.”

Valjean felt the beginnings of a blush creeping into his cheeks. His eyes strayed from Marius over to his left, where Javert was slowly, slowly turning his face to look at him with a blame-laden expression, his eyebrows creeping steadily towards his widow’s peak.

Valjean gave him something between an uneasy smirk and a grimace.

“Now, here is where I would ask the inspector to perhaps give us a little speech—”

Javert’s eyes shot up to the boy with a look of mortification.

“—but, seeing as I haven’t broached the idea of it to him prior to this, that would be rather cruel.”

Though silent, or perhaps merely drowned out, Valjean could read on Javert’s lips the words “Oh, thank god,” as the other guests laughed.

“Though,” Marius added, “he has certainly proved himself a worthy orator. Now, I shall not go into too much detail—such things should be saved for court—but I must make sure everyone knows a few simple facts about these two.”

Javert did not look particularly pleased with this turn of discourse.

“My father, Jean Valjean—well, he is the best sort of father anyone could wish for. And I must confess, I was not particularly pleasant to him at the start. It was my own fault; I had certain notions about him which were thankfully dispelled at a later date thanks to the inspector here.”

“Before that blessed happenstance, when I still thought poorly of him, it just so happens that he saved my life. And this was hidden from me for quite some time; for I was unconscious, you see. Yes, he is quite terrible in that regard,” he said with a wink at Valjean, “—keeping such a secret from me.”

It was certainly a full flush now on his face, Valjean thought.

“But the truth came out eventually, and I was made to understand in a myriad of ways just what a benevolent and irreproachable soul he was. So, of course, knowing all of this, I immediately forced him to live with us.”
More laughs from the crowd.

“Prior to that, I have to add that he allowed me the hand of his beautiful daughter—my beloved Euphrasie—in marriage, and gave us his blessing. He also bestowed upon us the whole of his savings: a fortune none but he knew he had. It was ... not a small sum, as evidenced in part by—” He took a look around the room and made a sweeping gesture. “—well. You understand.”

“Really, he has given the two of us everything he had. There is so much he has sacrificed that you do not even know of. And I could spend my life trying to repay him, but I doubt that it would ever amount to anywhere near enough. Alas! I am in a bind of eternal debt. And I could not be happier. So, I would just like to say that I hope he finds what meager comforts I can provide him on this earth to be satisfying, and lets himself take, for the first time in quite possibly ever, a little enjoyment out of life.”

The boy bowed his head to a hearty bout of laughter and a round of applause.

No sooner had he sat down than Cosette had risen up. “I would just like to add,” she proclaimed over the dying claps, “That we owe an eternal debt also to monsieur l’Inspecteur, and that this could all have ended horribly without his assistance. I wish I could have been there to hear his testimonies; I’m sure that they were splendid, and my father does, indeed, deserve every inch of praise he has been given.”

She looked down at her plate for a moment, as though deliberating on something grave, then raised her head again. “I was very unhappy in my early childhood,” she said.

Valjean gave a start. Was she—?

“For I knew not my mother, or my father, and the people I lived with were terribly cruel to me. For years—as long as I could remember at the time—I had lived in darkness, without knowing love. But then one day a man arrived, and his name was Jean Valjean, and he took me away from all of that, and he made me in the course of a single day the happiest child alive.”

“It was not blood that bound us, but something stronger, and he raised me with all the kindness and gentleness I could have ever asked for, and more. And I am very, very proud to call him my father.”

She glanced over him, and surely, he thought, she could see the tears welling in his eyes.

With a grin, first sweet, and then mischievous, she lifted her face proudly. “Also he looks very dashing in his uniform.”

Valjean stifled a scoff.

There was a sputtering noise, and Valjean turned to find Javert quite nearly choking on his drink. The man hid his face from him, a hand over his mouth as he tried to restrain his laughter amid the other guests’. It was given away, however, by the wracking of his frame.

After the most of the meal had been devoured, the servants reappeared to take the dishes and serve dessert.

First came plates of conversation tarts, topped with royal icing, and then, the second dish, which was truly magnificent.

Small, rounded balls of fried dough, made of puff pastry and dipped in chocolate, had been dusted in cocoa powder and stacked in the shape of a cone, held together by drizzled caramel and
interspersed with hulled strawberries in an elaborate presentation.

   One of these was brought to each table on a silver platter topped with a doily, seven in total, with two being placed at either end of the host’s table.

   Javert raised his eyebrows at the one nearest to them, waiting until Valjean had taken some before plucking one off himself and taking a bite of it.

   They were indeed delicious—both the pastries and the strawberries—and Valjean found himself, without a shred of remorse, losing count of how many he’d had.

   Perhaps it was because of how good they tasted. But, perhaps, it had also to do with how Cosette beamed at him as he ate.

   

   ***

   After dinner, as soon as it was permissible, and after Valjean had placed a kiss on his daughter’s head, they escaped to the quiet sanctuary of the library on the second floor, where they would no longer have to bear the gazes of strangers. As an afterthought, they made off with a bottle of wine, a couple glasses, and few more of Cosette’s strawberries.

   It was a warm night, and the servants had kept the windows open. Valjean lit a few candles, and pulled up two of the armchairs around a small table, and that sufficed.

   Javert sat, crossing his legs and leaning back with a sigh.

   They lounged for awhile in relative silence—except for the hint of music that drifted up to them from below—nursing their wine in the candlelight.

   “Did you ever think it would be like this?” Valjean found himself saying all of a sudden.

   Javert swallowed and set his glass down. “That what would be like this?”

   He waved a hand through the air. “Us.”

   Javert just leaned towards him, propping his chin up on the arm of the chair, and gave him a look that suggested he was entirely idiotic for asking such a thing.

   “I’ll take that as a no,” he laughed.

   Javert shook his head at him, expression unfaltering.

   “It’s nice, though, isn’t it?” Valjean mused, glancing down at the glass he was rolling between his thumb and forefinger.

   “Mm.”

   Valjean smiled sheepishly at him.

   Javert studied at him for a moment, then, seemingly disarmed, let his eyes drift to the flame of one of the candles. After a moment he sat back with an air of frustration. “I suppose you know we’ve made the papers,” he mumbled, twining his fingers in his greying whiskers.
Valjean’s expression quickly turned to one of embarrassment. “I was made aware of it.”

Javert let out a sigh. “It couldn’t be helped. At least this time they told the truth, anyway. Or as close as they could get to it, word count permitting. Still. They left a lot of things out.”

“I would have preferred they left everything out,” Valjean admitted.

“I don’t doubt it. But it’s news, and it’s something they can peddle.”

Valjean failed to conceal the bitterness in his tone. “People do so enjoy making a sensation out of me.”

“Perhaps they’re not entirely to blame this time around,” Javert said. “You are something of a miracle.”

Valjean flushed. “The only miracle is the fact that they pardoned me. Even now I cannot truly believe it. It feels like this is just some strange, strange dream. And the fact that you—” He cut himself off, a queer half-smile on his lips. Then the smile melted into gloom. “It doesn’t seem real. After everything that’s happened, and everything I expected to happen, this doesn’t seem the least bit probable. Sometimes I wake up and I forget, for a moment, and when I do remember it takes more than fair bit of convincing for me to get myself to accept it as the truth.”

“But, when I do, I feel ...” He gazed off, pensive, and then let out a soft little laugh. “I can only assume it’s comparable to that state one enters at a particularly grand level of inebriation.”

“Yes, well,” Javert scoffed. “Drink your fill of freedom. You have earned it.”

Those words sounded so strange, coming from the mouth of that particular man. Valjean looked up at him. “Do you really feel that way?” he wondered aloud.

Javert’s only response was to raise one bushy eyebrow at him.

“S-sorry,” Valjean mumbled. “It’s just that, I can still feel the weight of your gaze in Montreuil, and—the way things were then, it’s hard to reconcile them with the present. Though better by far it may be, it is no easy feat to adjust.”

“I am sure. I have not quite adjusted to it myself,” Javert admitted. “There are still times that I ...” He shook his head, his throat bobbing like he’d just swallowed back some inner turmoil. “It’s no matter. Things are different now, and there is no going back. I trust that will be easier to accept in time.”

Valjean gave a slow nod.

“Oh,” Javert said after a moment, raising his head. “I had almost forgotten. Gisquet bids you well.”

Valjean gave a start. “The Prefect of Police?”

“Who else would I be talking about? Surely you haven’t forgotten what he did for you.”

“N-no, it’s just that—I don’t understand why he ... What was he doing there? And why did he advocate pardon?”

“For the same reasons I did, it seems.”

“Yes, but— A man of his stature ... To put faith in someone like me, to argue on my behalf ... I
Javert let out a breath, dropping his gaze to the floor. “Listen. I had the same questions, the same disbelief. But he called me into his office the other day. Explained some things. He was swayed by the same reasons I was. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise. You saved my life—twice, now, that he knows of. And he knew the risk you took in doing so. He is ... grateful to you, I think. And he said, from what he saw of you, he did not believe that you presented a danger to anyone, anymore.”

“I don’t know if you comprehend just what he’s done for us,” he continued. “I gave him a verbal report that night, of how you saved my life at the barricades. I didn’t give him your name; I called you an insurgent. I don’t know if I did it because I thought you dead, or because I wanted your arrest to myself, or if, somewhere, I had already made up my mind about you. But the point is, once he heard me testify in court, he knew I’d known about your presence in the city for over a year and done absolutely nothing about it. That alone is a gross derelict of duty; it could be said, in a way, that I was harboring a fugitive. He could’ve had me thrown out of the police. He could have put me in prison for that, Valjean.”

“But he didn’t. And furthermore—” He put his head in his hands, raking his fingers through his hair. “Furthermore, what he saw me try to do, he—he should have thought me mad, should have thought me unhinged, off the rails—unfit for service in any capacity; possibly warranting asylum, you know, but he—” Clawing at his scalp, he shook his head again. “He said nothing of it. To anyone! He refused to dismiss me. And in court, if he had wanted to destroy everything I’d just said, to have you dealt with for good, all he had to do was mention I was a thwarted suicide—on your account, no less—and my competency would have fallen to shambles. My argument would have meant nothing after that.”

“Yet though he felt your compassion worthy of note, he pretended it was someone else on that quay, and not me. ‘A stranger’, he said. To protect me. Not only to preserve the appearance of my sanity, but also, to make it seem as though I had not seen or heard from you since the barricades. God knows, that was what I was trying to insinuate. If only to cover my own neck. And he saw that; he knew I was lying—or, at least, not telling the whole of the truth—and he could have had me arrested on the spot for being an accessory to your crimes. Aiding and abetting, Valjean—that’s what I did! I committed a damned félonie in keeping you safe! He could have ended us both on a whim if he’d liked.”

“But he chose to keep our secrets, to safeguard my dignity. To put his faith in us both. It may not have come at any particular price for him, so to speak, but—mon dieu! To do such a thing, at the drop of a hat.”

Valjean let out a shaky sigh, nodding his head. “It is a little ... overwhelming.”

“I mean, how can—” Javert threw up a hand, clutching his head with the other. “How can I express my gratitude for the kind of ...?” He trailed off, rubbing his face.

“I don’t know,” Valjean said. “But—” Here he turned to him and let out a laugh. “—at least now you know how I feel.”

Javert blinked. “Well of course you’d be grateful he—Oh,” he said flatly, dipping his chin. “Oh, I see. You meant ...”

Valjean just grinned at him.

“Ah.” Knitting his hands in his lap, Javert let his eyes wander towards the ceiling. “You know,
you really ... You don’t have to feel that way about it.”

Valjean chuckled to himself, thinking of the man’s words in the empty courtroom. “You act like you did nothing. You saved my life, Javert. You didn’t have to.”

Javert pointed an accusing finger at him. “That is where you’re wrong.”

Valjean only smirked, helplessly fond.

They looked away from each other, and then at the floor.

Faintly they could hear the violin music from downstairs, the melody slow and sweet now that the stars were out.

“So,” Valjean murmured, “that man you were talking to through the fence by the Prefecture building ... That was Gisquet?”

“Yes.”

“I was beginning to suspect as much. What were you doing there in the middle of the night, though?”

“I was trying to get myself dismissed. What else would I have been doing?”

“I never thought about it, honestly.”

Javert knit his brow at him. “What, did you think I …?” He trailed off, staring at him for a moment before shaking his head. “That’s what you thought, wasn’t it?” he muttered to himself. “Of course that’s what you must have thought.”

“Thought what?”

“That I had gone to kill myself.”

Valjean searched his face morosely. His head drooped, eyes scanning the floor.

“That was never my intention, Valjean.” Javert’s lips tightened into a frown. He turned his face away. “I would never … betray you, like that.”

“But then—why …?”

Javert ran a hand through his hair in frustration, throwing it up in a frantic gesture. “What was I supposed to do? You followed me right to his doorstep. To the Prefect of the damned police! You, a wanted criminal—a man of infamy!”

Valjean’s puzzled expression filled with sudden revelation. “That was why you ran?” he breathed in wonder. “To protect me?”

“God, yes.”

“But if you were only there to dismiss yourself, then why—”

“Look,” he said, rising to his feet and beginning to pace, “I had never intended to do what I did that night. But then—then I had just made a fool of myself in front of the head of police, and I didn’t know what to do. I needed an escape from duty, and he wouldn’t give it to me. You were chasing me, and I could not bear to face you, and I could not reconcile with the world, and I—” He
stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head again. “I was just … desperate. I hadn’t meant to do it, I swear to you. But in that moment …”

Valjean, who had also risen from his seat, stood gazing at him considerately.

There was such pain on the man’s face.

Javert rubbed the bridge of his nose and drew in a long breath, then let it out in a sigh, his tone dropping. “It was a good thing,” he murmured. “—that you pulled me back. I was miserable, and in agony, and I did not want to thank you. But it … was a good thing.” He covered his eyes with his hand. “So … thank you.”

Carefully, Valjean reached out and touched his arm in a gentle, reassuring way.

“Thank you,” Javert murmured, his tone dropping. “You do not have to trouble yourself on that account, anymore. I am long past those thoughts. Ever since the trial, I …” He had a wistful look on his face.

Slowly, he meandered towards the open window, and leaned out over the sill, his arms draped over one another, his face to the sky. “The world is more complicated than I led myself to believe,” he said. “It is not clear cut. There are a million different aspects, now. That once terrified me—the idea that nothing was concrete. But I think, now … it is actually better this way.”

“There was an old story … about an oak tree, and a reed. The oak stands firm and rigid; its branches touch the heavens; its roots touch the empire of the dead. Beside it grows a reed. A great storm comes, and raging wind buffets the tree. Against such a powerful force, its mighty trunk finally snaps. But the reed, it merely bows with the current. And it survives the storm. The moral was, I suppose, ‘that which does not bend will break.’”

He chuckled noiselessly for a second. “I used to think it was stupid. Who cares about a damned reed, when the oak was so much grander? The tree was not at fault for growing strong, nor standing tall; it was the storm that was to blame. But …” Here he sobered. “I understand it, now.” Picking at the whorls in the wooden sill, he let out a quiet scoff. “I am the oak. You are the reed.”

Valjean studied him—the way the half-moon lit his face, with the barest trace of illumination, as he gazed up at the sky. He felt something tug at his breast.

“You know, Javert,” he said softly, drawing near, “a broken tree doesn’t always die. So long as the roots are intact, it can always regrow.”

Javert was quiet for a moment. “It will never be as it was.”

“No, but … sometimes,” he sighed, placing his hand on his shoulder, “that is a good thing.”

If Javert noticed this touch, he did not make any indication of it. He merely cocked his head, and put his chin in his hand, his eyes wandering to the garden below.

Neither spoke for a long time, and Valjean did not understand why, but he had not removed his hand from Javert’s shoulder, nor did Javert attempt to do so himself.

“When I was a child,” the man remarked, “I told myself …” There was a flicker of pain in his expression, but then it was gone.

“You … told yourself …?”
The man narrowed his eyes. “It doesn’t matter, anymore.”

Valjean furrowed his brow, but did not press for answers. He folded his arms over his breast and leaned with his back against the wall, pensive.

He wanted to say something—something along the lines of ‘the world is not as we once thought it to be; however, that is not necessarily a bad thing’—but he could not find the words to properly express the whole of his sentiment. He only hoped that, whatever world Javert now found himself in, it was one he could make peace with.

He did not know how long he stood there, but when he looked back at Javert, the man’s face had sunken some against his palm, and his eyes had drooped shut.

Valjean smiled secretly at him. “You should head home,” he said, lightly touching the man’s back. “You have patrol in the morning, non?”

Javert drew in a breath and let it out in a sigh. “Mm.” His face wrinkled for a moment as he ran a hand over it. “What time is it?”

“I haven’t the faintest.”

He gave a groan and, though begrudgingly, sufficiently roused and straightened himself. “Do you suppose everyone’s gone home?”

“I don’t hear any music anymore.”

“Hm.”

“Hopefully if there’s anyone left, they’ll let us leave without fanfare.”

Javert picked up his half-empty glass from the table and downed the remaining wine in a single shot, then brushed his tailcoat off.

Casting wary glances down the darkened hall, Valjean led him down the stairs.

As he was peering into the formal dining room across the way, a voice came from behind him and made him jump.

“Father!”

It was Marius, who had just rounded the opposite corner.

“Oh, dear God,” Valjean said, giving a shaky sigh as he released the front of his uniform. “C’est toi.”

“I wondered where you’d went,” the boy remarked.

“We were in the library,” Javert explained.

“I see.” He gave a chuckle. “A couple people were asking after you. But everyone’s cleared out, now.”

“Good.”

“Ah, Inspector, I was wondering ...” Marius clutched his shoulder. “Could I have a word with you?”
Javert knit his brow.

“—alone,” Marius added.

“Ah,” Valjean said, “I’ll step outside for a moment then.”

***

“What’s this about?” Javert asked when they were alone.

“It’s about ... what caused all of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I still haven’t told him what led to his arrest. He doesn’t know. I’d prefer to keep it that way. Until, at least—until we’ve apprehended the culprit. Then he won’t have to live in fear, or deal with the burning anger I myself have felt towards him.”

“You speak of Thénardier?”

“Yes,” the boy said, his eyes hard and glinting in the light of the candle he held. “I want you to find him. And I want you to bring him to justice.”

“Oh,” said Javert, with a voice of cool vengeance, “I intend to.”

***

“What did Marius want?”

“Nothing of consequence,” Javert replied, donning his hat. “Are you going to bed?”

“In a while. Hopefully by tomorrow I shall find my clothes have mysteriously reappeared in my armoire,” he said with an off-put smirk.

“Yes, funny how those things seem to happen.”

“Goblins, clearly,” said Valjean. “Shall you be taking a cab? I could have our driver take you home, if you like. We have a carriage, now.”

“No, I think I’ll walk,” Javert mused. “But I appreciate the offer.”

They stood for a moment, the silence punctuated by crickets.

“It was good to see you,” said Valjean. “Truly, I— Tonight was nice.”

“It was.”

Valjean drew in a nervous breath, rubbing the back of his neck. “Perhaps we could ... do this again?”
“If you leave out all the lawyers, and bourgeois, and the extravagance, I might be persuaded,”
the man said, throwing up an open palm as he began to walk away.

He could not tell if he was being teased or not, but he felt the blood rise beneath his cheeks
either way. “Javert, wait—”

The man looked over his shoulder at him questioningly.

Valjean gave a lopsided grin. “Will you give me a date this time?”

Javert just stared at him.

So often had he left without the promise of return, frustration plain to see in his eyes. But his
gaze was full of thought tonight, considerate and soft. “I have Sundays off,” he said. Then he
started back down the path.

When he got to the gate, bowing his head without turning around, he raised his hand in gesture
of farewell.

And though Javert could not see it, Valjean raised his hand as well, and watched him disappear
around the fence.

***

Footnotes:

[1] Pheasant (faisan) served with a garnish of wild mushrooms, bacon, and potatoes.


[4] Originally a fable by Aesop, “The Oak and the Reed” was retold during the time of Louis XIV
in La Fontaine's Fables, as “Le Chêne et le Roseau”. It was taken by many at the time to be a sly
suggestion that rulers were not as powerful as they seemed. Javert may have thought it stupid
because he agreed more with the interpretation that the oak is noble, standing proudly for itself
despite losing the battle, while the reed is cowardly, bending to the wind.

Chapter End Notes

I found this terribly interesting in the context of Valjean and Javert, so here's a link to
the Wikipedia article about The Oak and the Reed.

Also I'm probably going to bring it back up in ironic reference to Javert's childhood at
some point so there's that.

Also, has anybody noticed that AO3 seems to now have issues with keeping the
formatting of text from MS Word? Like, it keeps unitalicizing things, which is really annoying, because then I have to reread it all again ... It also likes doing things such as randomly putting a single paragraph as the start of a numbered list??

Oh! I keep forgetting. Here are some drawings I did for this fic. They're not really illustrations, just, like, me trying to get a grip on the characters' designs. Also some crappy poems. (Click on the thumbnails to get the full size images, obviously.) Top left is the newest one, which is the only one I'm really satisfied with design-wise (also the Toulon Javerts are okay I guess). Also funtimes rants with KolorfulDreams and LuneandBarbecue in the comments sections, lol.

Aaaaaaaand suddenly it's 4:30am and I spent all night on this (again) ... Hello again, Sun, my arch-enemy ...

Happy Summer Solstice though?

Hahahaha I just realized it was father's day when I wrote most of this.

Suggested Listening:

Dream - Satoshi Takebe

Nocturne in E Flat Major, Op. 9 No. 2 - Chopin

Resolution - Jon Brion
Hidden Burrows

Chapter Summary

Javert tracks Thénardier; Valjean invites Javert to Rue Plumet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“A friend is someone who gives you total freedom to be yourself—and especially to feel, or not feel. Whatever you happen to be feeling at any moment is fine with them. That's what real love amounts to—letting a person be what he really is.”

-Jim Morrison

***

It was Wednesday, and Javert was on the hunt.

He had, in fact, been tracking Thénardier since the trial, but he had not as of yet had any luck.

He could not mention the count of blackmail to his fellows in the police, on account of two things: the first of which being that it was not expressly illegal, the second, that it would imply Marius had prior knowledge that his father-in-law was a wanted recidivist, and had willfully harbored him under his roof—which would get the boy in a whole slew of legal trouble even now, despite Valjean’s pardon. Not something one wants, especially when one happens to be a lawyer.

However, this issue raised little difficulty in pursuit of the culprit, because Thénardier was already on the run from the law. The incident at the Gorbeau house a year and a half ago had landed him a death sentence, which he had only avoided by prison-break. Thénardier had tried to shoot him—Javert, a police officer—and that alone would have earned the sentence, but on top of that there were multiple other offences to be considered, including extortion and resisting arrest. His ties to Patron-Minette only further damned him.

In light of this, it was not hard to get special permission from the commissaire of the Hôtel-de-Ville[1] for him to put a focus on this particular investigation, especially considering he had been the one to apprehend them before.

Marius had been also some help in this regard, having given Javert, the night of the soirée, a list of everything he knew about the man.

As Javert expected, the address Thénardier had used to correspond with the boy was a false one. But the list of his aliases was still useful, as were the descriptions of his disguises.

Still, Javert had been stalking all the gutters and back alleys in the area and had not yet heard or seen anything of the man. In all likelihood, given his recent failure with the blackmail, and the
trial’s verdict, he had gone into temporary hiding. And, in all likelihood, he was holed up
somewhere with his daughter, who had served her rightful time in Les Madelonettes, but had
recently broken parole.

Why would she break parole? Because she had something to hide, of course. And that
something was, almost assuredly, her father. Javert suspected the two of them were still in the city
—as with Rome, all roads in France, for the criminal, led to Paris—but the where of it was
anyone’s guess.

In any case, they were certainly not back at the Gorbeau house. Javert had inquired of the
landlady thereof, and come up with exactly the amount of information he suspected he’d glean,
which was nothing.

The Thénardier family had once been larger, he knew. But the wife had died in prison, and the
elder daughter—as Javert had seen himself on Mondetour lane—had been shot dead during the
rebellion.

Their former landlady had mentioned there also being a son, Gavroche, who had come by the
house on occasion to visit, despite apparently being unwelcome by his parents. At hearing the
child’s name, Javert had thought of the gamin boy who’d recognized him—who’d demanded his
musket after he was bound in the tap-house. Javert had smirked to himself at the time, internally,
because the gun was not loaded, and the urchin had failed to perceive this.

Whether it had been that, or some other factor that led to it, the boy had ultimately met his
demise.

Upon asking the age and description of this, the Thénardiers’ unwanted child, Javert’s suspicion
was confirmed. Brother and sister had shared the same fate.

To his knowledge that left only the younger daughter, and the father, both of whom, he
suspected, he could recognize on sight. He had already given their description to several informants
around the city. But it was not a sure thing. The pair would likely be disguised in some way. Hair,
clothes, accents—even the shape of the face could be changed, if one knew their way around a
cosmetics kit. It was hard to know exactly what they ought to be looking for. And he doubted the
two of them would risk being seen together in public; more likely, they would split up, and only go
out at night.

He checked in once more with the girl’s former employer, one M. Lavoie. A humble forty-
something, with a trim but scruffy beard, he ran a small print shop. The man had still heard no
word from her; she had merely stopped coming to work one day, and when he had finally inquired
at her address, thinking her ill, he found she had vanished.

Javert had, in the midst of conversation, made some offhand remark about her brother, and
Lavoie had given a start. Apparently, the gamin had been apprenticed to him for around three
months at some point, and it was likely why Azelma had sought the print shop out. The man did
not know the boy’s fate, and when Javert relayed it to him, he fell into a melancholy. Nothing
further to be gained, Javert left.

The idea of Thénardier still loose in the city vexed him, but Javert retained certainty that he
would catch wind of him sooner or later. It all boiled down to a waiting game, and when it came to
cat and mouse, Javert was a very patient man.
On Friday Javert received a letter. Nothing fancy, no marking on the envelope. It had likely been dropped off by hand.

Inside, it read, simply,

‘Rue Plumet?’

And that sufficed.

Three o’clock Sunday evening found Javert standing outside the gate of the Rue Plumet #55, peering through the iron bars, all overgrown with vines, at the garden within.

A little ways off, he could see Valjean. His sleeves were rolled up past the elbow, and he knelt in the grass with his face to the ground, unaware of his visitor. A wide brimmed hat of woven straw shaded his eyes. He was carefully inspecting the smaller plants, uprooting some here and there, with a thoughtful look.

Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees and shone gold on his back, and the greenery around him. Now and then a bird called from the branches above, or an insect flew lazily past.

Javert was content to watch, without making his presence known. It gave him an odd sense of peace, to see the man so absorbed in his work, so relaxed. No one hunting him, no threat of prison or death. Just a gentle soul at ease in his element, surrounded by nature. Harmless. Benevolent. Happy.

Javert felt satisfied at this. Felt ... something else as well, but he could not be sure exactly what it was, other than a sort of wistfulness.

Maybe it was the hat, or maybe it was Valjean’s demeanor, but it reminded him of Madeleine—the way the man used to stop to give laborers agricultural advice. Hang orviot blooms to keep out the weevils. Dust the granary floors with salt to protect from scurf. Rid the fields of corn-cockle and foxtail with this or that solution. Put a barbary pig in the warrens.

How many times he’d grown frustrated with his inquiries about the man, when they were only met with such tales! ‘He saved my wheat crop,’ and ‘I’ve no problem with slugs anymore thanks to him.’ Or that he’d woven some child a doll out of coir or dried grain.[21] Because of these things, everyone had always assumed he’d been involved in horticulture at some point in his youth. They were not exactly wrong.

And still, after how many decades, he retained those attributes, those little quirks.

The man really was a peasant at heart, Javert thought.

He could have stood there for hours if unnoticed, placidly observing a placid scene, but Valjean must have felt someone’s gaze on him, finally, because he looked up.
“Oh! Javert. I wasn’t expecting you quite so early.”

“I can come back later if you’d li—”

“No, no,” he laughed. “It’s just that I, ah ...” He held up his dirt covered hands. “I need a wash.”

“Oh.”

“Come in, though.”

With a rusty squeal of the hinges, Javert pushed the gate open and slipped inside.

Valjean brushed the debris off his lap and rose to his feet, trying in vain to wipe his hands clean with an already soiled rag. “I was out here pulling weeds,” he explained. “Most plants I let do as they please, but some of them can’t be abided by. Trees sprouting next to the foundation, you know. That sort of thing. There were a lot of dead branches to prune, too. They’ll make good kindling in a month or so.”

“I can’t believe you’ve actually been putting maintenance into this place,” Javert remarked. He crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow at the tangle of foliage around them. “It certainly doesn’t look it.”

Valjean let out a soft laugh. “That’s true enough. But there was a reason I kept it wild.”

“And what would that be?”

“It kept the house hidden from view.”

The implication behind those words took a moment to dawn on him. “Ah. A rabbit covering its burrow to keep the fox at bay. I see.”

“Something like that. And Cosette rather liked it this way.”

“Mm.”

“Recently, though, I’ve been thinking of trimming it some,” Valjean mused, staring up at the branches above. “There’s no need to use it for cover, anymore. And who knows—we might end up selling the place one day. Certainly no one’s living in it now. It would be a waste to let it sit empty.”

“I heard this house once belonged to a chief justice of Parliament,” he went on after a moment. “That he built it for a mistress of his. Supposedly, this used to be the most magnificent pleasure garden. It overgrew and fell to ruin of course, and it was wild long before I got here. But ... lately I’ve considered trying to restore at least a little of its former glory. Put in some plants with less leaf and more flower. Separate the beds again.” He turned to look at him. “What do you think?”

Javert scoffed. “What do I think? As if I’d any sense for that sort of thing.”

Valjean tossed him a lopsided grin. “You don’t have to know gardening to have opinions on it.”

“Well—” He put a hand to his mouth, scrutinizing the flora. “It is a bit ... unkempt.”

The man let out a laugh at that. “Tell me something less obvious.”

“You should cut down the brambles. No self-respecting garden should have anything fitting that description. The bracken, too.”
“And?”

“And ...” His gaze wandered upward. “—vines don’t belong in the trees.”

“Yes, I’d wager I you have a point, there. I think I’m done for today, though,” he said, wiping
his brow. He truly did sound out of breath. “I just need to draw some more water. Care to
accompany me?”

Javert gave a shrug.

Instead of heading towards the gate, as he was expecting him to, Valjean headed back towards
the house.

“Wait, where are you going?” Javert asked.

“To the well on Rue de Babylone, of course.”

“But that’s ...” Javert stood in a stupor, one finger pointing weakly in the direction of the gate
leading to the Rue Plumet, which, by all accounts, Valjean ought to need to exit onto. From there
he would either hang a right onto Rue de Brodeurs, or a left onto Rue de Monsieur, in order to
Reach the Rue Babylone, which lay some distance directly behind the Rue Plumet.

However, the man just stared at him. Slowly, a mischievous grin tugged at the corners of his
mouth. “You’ll see.”

Perplexed, Javert followed him, skirting the house in the space between its wall and the fence.
It was not a proper path, per se, but a sparsity of plants and a dip in level which had been worn into
the ground through continued use. A desire path.

They found themselves at the back of the house, in a small courtyard paved with brown stone,
and kept neatly swept. Situated up against the posterior fence, which was of old wood, and covered
in ivy, sat a small one-room building the like of a servant’s house. A porter’s lodge, Javert
supposed. He had little time to puzzle over it before Valjean had crossed the courtyard.

The man reached into his shirt and withdrew a string of keys which had been hung about his
neck, concealed beneath his clothes. He flipped through them to one in particular, and thrust it into,
seemingly, nothing but a clump of ivy.

And then with a click, to Javert’s bewilderment, a door swung into existence, and suddenly
there was an opening in the fence. He stood marveling at it for a moment, caught by surprise at it
in part because the ivy had been so perfectly overgrown that it had seemed to cover the fence in an
impenetrable coat. However, the vines had, apparently, been carefully cultivated so as not to breach
the crack between door and fence, yet remain so all-encompassing that one could not observe there
was a door at all. Its leaves fit together perfectly on each side, like pieces of a puzzle, and when the
door was closed, they appeared to make a seamless growth.

Valjean took in the look on his face, let out a silent chuckle, and, smirking, gave him a wink.
Then he picked up the wooden pole and rope-handled buckets by the side of the little porter’s
lodge and balanced them on one shoulder.

Javert followed him through the gate.

It was a narrow path they walked, unpaved, and situated between high walls and fences of all
different materials. A secret corridor. Javert’s gaze darted every which way. “I— Where on earth
—?” He stood on his toes, trying to peer over the walls, but they were too high, and the properties
beyond were just out of his line of sight. “What is this?”

“I told you,” Valjean said, beaming with humor, “this place was built for someone’s mistress. The man had to have some way of coming and going without being seen.”

“So then—”

“As far as I can tell, he bought up all the adjacent properties, built a path between their dividing walls, then resold them as separate parcels. A man walks down Rue de Babylone, he enters through a gate somewhere; he disappears. He is seen nowhere near his mistress’ address. The letter-box by the gate through which he enters is not affiliated with that house, nor any house on Babylone.” He let out a laugh. “To be honest, we never even used the front gate.”

“So, then, the garden, and the house on Rue Plumet—”

“No one even knows I lived there,” he said proudly.

“Well no wonder I never caught wind of you, holing up in a place like this!” Javert exclaimed, failing to conceal the frustration in his voice.

“And that’s precisely why I chose it.”

“You vex me,” he muttered, only half-serious.

Valjean only let out another laugh. “Come, now, if you’d caught me back then, we wouldn’t have any of this.”

“No,” Javert sighed, “I suppose we wouldn’t.”

“And you very well might be dead,” Valjean added thoughtfully.

“Still!”

“You really do hate to be outfoxed, don’t you?”

“Am I supposed to applaud your cleverness?”

“Maybe.”

When they finally reached the other gate, Javert estimated they must have crossed past seven or eight different houses on one side of the path alone.

Just inside the entrance to the path was a little overhang, with a small bench and a trellis on one side, and a postal box tacked to the wall. Valjean paused to lift its lid, and withdrew a handful of letters with some amount of surprise on his face. “Ah, I really have been away for some time,” he said to himself. Riffling through them with a stray and disinterested glance, he tucked them in his waistband and continued out onto the street.

“I could’ve taken one for you,” Javert mumbled as they headed back, Valjean shouldering the sloshing buckets on the pole.

“Nonsense. I do this all the time.”

“So?”

“So.”
“Stubborn old mule.”

Valjean scoffed. “I can’t help it.”

“That’s true,” Javert mused. “You are a provincial, after all.”

“Oh, we both know I left that life a long time ago,” he sighed. “—whether I wanted to or not. I’m just used to doing things on my own.”

“So it’s a matter of pride, then.”

“Javert,” he laughed.

“Oh, look at me!” Javert mocked, changing the intonation of his voice and throwing up his hands, “I’m Jean le Cric, and I do everything by myself all the time because I’m incapable of accepting other people’s assistance!”

“Javert!”

“What? It’s true.”

“Javert.”

They had reached the courtyard.

Valjean set the buckets down and unlocked the door to the porter’s lodge. As he was retrieving a fresh wash cloth, Javert took a peek inside.

It was a tiny place, one room, without room for much of anything. A bed, some wicker chairs, a small table. A fireplace. The only decoration was a rug, and a wooden crucifix that hung on the wall. An area for sleeping, in his opinion, and little else.

“Bon dieu, don’t tell me you actually lived back here,” he muttered. “In this ramshackle old hut.”

“And what exactly is wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong with it is that you have a perfectly good house a grand ten paces away and yet you confined yourself like a dog to the yard. Not only that, but for god’s sake, my apartment is twice the size of this place, at least!”

“Size really doesn’t matter to me,” the man sighed.

“Look, you should have had your servant living back here, not you. I can’t believe you went so far as to separate yourself from your daughter, even when you lived at the same address. I know that’s why you did it—out of humility. I know it wasn’t for the peace and quiet. Don’t try to tell me otherwise.”

“I bought the house for her, not me,” Valjean defended, though he wore a guilty look.

“This kind of martyrdom you put yourself through is ridiculous; I hope you know that,” he exclaimed, throwing up a hand. “May as well flog yourself, while you’re at it.”

It was a careless remark, and he did not realize what he had said until he saw how Valjean’s shoulders tensed.
“I don’t go quite that far, Javert.”

Dreading his choice of words, but not wanting to press the issue, Javert fumbled momentarily for a response, his eyes sliding away. “Still. I’m glad your children force you out of your shell,” he said. “I can’t be around to do it all the time.”

To his relief, he saw a little bit of humor poke through the man’s demeanor at that.

“No, but it might be nice.”

Javert’s face went blank for a second. He smirked, crossing his arms and leaning back against the door frame. “You’d quickly tire of me, I assure you.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” The man shot him a smirk in turn. “Give me a moment before we go in,” he told him as they left the lodge. “I need to, ah, tidy the yard a bit.”

“What doesn’t need to be tidied in that yard?”

Valjean laughed.

***

Javert sat on a nearby bench and watched as the man gathered up the branches he’d pruned and the weeds that he’d pulled, and dumped them in a lumber and a compost pile, respectively. Put away the gardening tools one by one. He watched as the man knelt and wiped his face—washed the dirt from his hands, his arms. And, as always, with that thoughtful look, that vaguely lost and pensive gaze. He had all the airs of a priest making ablutions.

When Valjean was done, he took the bucket and watered the plants.

He must have noticed him staring, because he turned to him with a concerned expression. “What is it?” he asked.

A frown twitched at the edge of Javert’s lips as he glanced away. “Nothing. It’s just ...”

_I was so worried this was just a dream. That you would never see this, that they would steal the breath from your lungs, and the sight from your eyes, and deny you this world._

He thought again of the torment he had endured, not knowing if Valjean would live or die. Not knowing if he had the authority to save him. It had been a living hell. And if this had not been the outcome—if they had sentenced Valjean to death ...

It was such a beautiful thing that had happened, but he could not help from thinking of those ‘what ifs’—even if they had never come to pass. And he was still in tatters, oscillating between what could’ve been and what was—torn between dread and relief.

He could still feel it. See Valjean in that cell. See the visions of guillotine blades and of blood. He could still feel that terror that had wracked his soul. Even dreamt of it, sometimes.

To see this now, to see him in this garden, free, and content—he was so thankful for it, and so relieved, and yet still it brought forth the memories of those dreadful possibilities. Reminded him of just how close they had been to losing everything. Of just how close he had been to not doing
anything at all.

Good god, that he had even considered it! That he had almost left him to his fate, resigned to his powerlessness, without ever knowing what had happened in Arras. The thought sickened him, and every time he saw Valjean happy, he was reminded of what he’d almost let happen to him. And then, of what had almost happened anyway, despite his final choice.

He had felt so weak, in those moments. A cog in a machine, easily replaced.

“If they hadn’t pardoned you,” he finally said, “I don’t know what I would have done.”

Valjean studied him considerately, his brow furrowed. He came over and sat down beside him. He had a coaxing look in his eyes.

Javert looked away from him, staring instead at the grass.

A minute or two passed in this fashion.

“If you speak your mind, you will feel better,” Valjean said, his voice soft.

Javert was lost in thought. He picked at his lip. “I don’t think you understand just how desperate I was,” he finally said. “Perhaps I looked calm and composed in court—distant from what was occurring—but on the inside, I was terrified. It was like that night, the first time. At the river. Only now I understood the world, and knew what needed to be done, but I didn’t know if I had enough influence to do it.”

“If they were to reject you, and show that they were incapable of change, as I had once thought them to be, then it would be a rejection of myself also. You showed me the truth of things, and if they denied that truth, then there was no way I could go on serving them. It simply would not have been possible for me any longer, knowing what I knew. Knowing that they could do such a thing to you, and to others like you.”

“I used to think rigidity and inflexibility were markers of greatness, of strength—standards to be upheld. I used to think it was right that Justice was blind. But now I knew better. Saw what lay beyond. And if there was no way to peel back the cloth from their eyes, I would have resigned. On the spot.”

“If I could not convince them, if they had decided to execute you, I—” He faltered. “The day they took your life would be the day they took mine as well. I told them that in court. I do not know if you recall. I said ‘you may as well shoot me where I stand.’ And they likely thought it for effect, but truly, I was serious. To live in a world where nothing could be changed, where goodness was not recognized, and people died in vain with no hope of understanding, or a better future … What would have been the point?”

Valjean was gazing up at him with fear in his eyes. “You—you really …?”

“Yes.” Javert’s eyes slide away, unfocusing. “And this time, you would not have been there to stop me.”

Valjean was silent for a moment, his mouth halfway open. His brow knit, voice trembling. “But—to throw away your life like that, just for the sake of …” He trailed off, too fearful of the picture his words were painting to continue, it seemed.

Javert let out an anguished scoff. “Jean Valjean, you are the biggest hypocrite alive. You recoil at the idea that anyone should lay down their life for you, when you yourself did the very same for
some old man you had never even met.”

Valjean had been about to say something, but this stopped him short. He shut his mouth, withdrawing. “But that was me,” he whispered, “and you are you.”

“So what?”

“I don’t … understand what I could have possibly done to deserve such devotion.”

Javert turned to look at him.

Such confusion, such fear in the man’s eyes!

“You really cannot see yourself, can you?” he murmured thoughtfully.

Valjean only shrank beneath his gaze.

Javert shook his head. “You told me once that you would follow me into the mouth of Hell,” he said. “Did you ever consider I might do the same for you?”

It took him a moment to respond. “I don’t see why you should.”

“Then you are blind.”

The man gave a start. His cheeks grew red; his throat bobbed. He thrust his face away, wringing his hands feverishly. “I—ah— You …”

The shudders that ran through Valjean’s broad shoulders disquieted him. He wanted to stop them, to ease those clenched muscles and draw the tension from his face. An ache pulled at his gut, told him to do something, but he didn’t know what. His lips buzzed, his fingertips itched.

He reached out and placed a hand over Valjean’s.

The man went still.

Javert studied him. “You truly did not think I would come for you,” he realized aloud.

Slowly, Valjean shook his head.

“You are a fool,” Javert murmured.

A singular, half-hearted scoff escaped his mouth. “Well,” Valjean said, giving Javert’s hand a squeeze, “there are worse things to be.”

***

“How is your work going?”

Valjean had just made tea, and was carrying it out into the parlor, where Javert sat at a small table by the window.

“It could be better,” the man admitted, taking the cup from his outstretched hand. “There are some loose ends I would like very much to tie up. Certain things that have been weighing on my
mind. And ... it would be nice if I didn’t have to deal with the nagging doubts you instilled in my head.”

Valjean blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Sighing, Javert ran a hand through his hair. “Not that it’s your fault, exactly, but you still ...” In lieu of further explaining himself, he threw back some tea and stuffed a biscuit in his mouth, staring out the window with a frustrated look as he chewed.

Valjean sat down and took a sip of tea himself, eyebrow raised as he waited for the man to come around.

Finally Javert let out a puff of air. “I am sure it was easier for you to pass judgments, when there was no one around who outranked you.”

Valjean had to take a moment to comprehend just what he’d meant by that. “You worry you will make a mistake, is that it? And face consequences from your superiors?”

“It’s—” The man rubbed his temples, squeezing his eyes shut with a frown. “—not that, exactly. Of course I worry what my superiors think. I have always hesitated on that account. But that is not really the issue. I know that if I follow procedure, follow my old instincts, it will be met with little criticism. The law, and my superiors, would deem it right. Evidently, however, my old instincts were ... not always properly tuned. And evidently, there are times when the law is not adequate.”

“I used to follow procedure to the letter, obey every order unquestioningly, because I had unceasing faith in the judicial system.” There was a note of despair in his voice. “But you broke that faith, and now ... I find myself questioning. I know what the law tells me to do, and most times —most times I am sure it is right, but there are others when I just ...” he rested his brow in his hand. “How do I know with certainty the justice of my actions, when the authorities I serve are not without flaw? How do I know if what I do is really for the better—is really helping people?”

Valjean leaned in across the table, throwing out a hand. “But Javert, you do so much good in this world! Your work is necessary. The law may not be perfect all the time, but, on the whole, it is resoundingly beneficial. For example, last year you arrested the Patron-Minette gang. Think how many people that has done justice for, how many innocents have been spared their cruelty! Why, if you hadn’t come along when you did, I don’t know what would have happened to me!”

Javert looked up at him, his brow furrowing. “What?”

Valjean went rigid, a nervous tension in his gut as he realized what he had just said. “Oh. I had forgotten. You didn’t know.”

“What—what are you saying?”

He clenched his teeth with a guilty look.

Javert’s eyes widened. “You?” he said mostly to himself, “You were the rich man they were planning to extort?”

“Yes! And see, this mark here—” He rolled up his sleeve, revealing the nasty burn on his forearm. “They meant to use a hot poker on me, when I would not cooperate with them—and so, without your intervention, things could have been much worse.” An apologetic expression flashed across his face. “I would have stayed to thank you, would you not have recognized me.”
Javert stared at him incredulously. He put his head in his hand. “I cannot believe …”

“I know,” Valjean laughed. “We seem fated to keep running into each other.”

“This is ridiculous.”

Valjean took up his cup of tea with a good-natured smirk. “It is.”

“Tell me,” Javert growled, “how many other times has this happened without my knowledge?”

“Hm. Well, let me think.” He rubbed his beard pensively. “No, no; I think that was the only time you didn’t know abou— Oh. Ah, yes,” he said, rolling his eyes to the side and making a face, “there was … that.”

“There was what?”

“That night in Montreuil-sur-Mer, after you had conducted me to prison. When you ran up the stairs into my chamber—”

“I knew it!” he cried, banging his fist on the table and rattling the place settings, “I knew you were there! But wait, that means—” He clutched his head, an incredulous look in his eyes. “—a nun lied to me?” He whipped his face up at Valjean accusingly. “You made a nun lie to me?”

The man drew back in his seat with an uneasy grin. “I didn’t make her lie to you; I didn’t even ask her to. She did that of her own accord!”

“But that was Sister Simplice! She’s never told a lie in her life!”

“Well …” His eyes drifted off towards the ceiling. “I’m sure her loyalty will be rewarded in Heaven.”

Javert stared at him with that strangely stony face of disbelief that only he seemed capable of. He put his head down once more in begrudging, angry defeat.

“I cannot believe a nun lied to me.”

“If you were so sure I was there, why did you not conduct a more thorough inspection of the room?”

“Because I—!” The words seemed to catch in his throat. He lowered his volume. “Because she was a nun.”

Valjean studied his forlorn expression. “Ah.”

After a brief pause Javert looked back up at him. “But what the devil were you doing back there to begin with? Your first thought after you break out of jail is to return to the very town you were arrested in? The town where you held a position as a magistrate, and were therefore recognizable to every citizen and lawman therein?”

“I had to go back there, you see. I had to recover what provisions I could.”

“Recov—?”

“The Bishop’s candlesticks, and Fantine’s note bequeathing me custody of Cosette, among other things.”
“You risked your neck for a couple of candlesticks and a letter?”

“When you put it like that it sounds stupid, but yes. They ... meant a lot to me. I needed them. And afterwards, I recovered the fortune I had made in the manufacture of those jet goods. I withdrew it from M. Laffitte in Paris—news of my infamy had not reached them there yet. I wanted to make sure the money was put to good use—before it was seized by the state and spent on God knows what. And then, I needed something, some insurance for the future. I buried it in the woods of Montfermeil, six hundred thirty thousand francs in all—”

The man nearly choked on his tea. “Six hundred thirty thousand? Pardieu, you’re rich!”

“Not as rich as I had been, I assure you. The most of my fortune I had spent along the way, to fund the schools and the hospital, and allocate for the poor and the infirm. Oh! And that was another thing I had to go back there for as well—to pay for the expense of Fantine’s burial. That poor woman. I wish I could have been there for the funeral, but—”

“Six hundred thirty thousand francs? You have—?” Javert could not seem to regain control of his features, his words sticking in his throat.

“I know, I know; I should have given more of it to the poor than I have,” Valjean admitted regretfully. “But if I spent that much money on charity, while myself still living on so little, it would have become very suspicious. I could not afford to make myself any more conspicuous. God knows, you already tracked me down once on account of it, and I barely escaped you. Yet still I feel guilty. All this time with Cosette, and all I’ve paid on my properties, and I’ve only used up forty-five or forty-six thousand of it.”

Javert’s mouth open and closed silently, perhaps forming numbers; he seemed to be trying to calculate this. “You mean to tell me that after all these years you’ve managed to retain five hundred and eighty-four thousand francs?”

“Well …” Valjean turned a bit red. “Yes. But you see, it really belongs to Cosette; she ought to be the one that profits from that town which did her mother wrong, not me.”

“Cosette! The girl has already married rich! Why, the Gillenormands are one of the wealthiest families in Paris!—and with only a few members left to the name! She will be lavished with money. What need has she for yours?”

“Ah, but …” His face fell, coloring. “We two, we were born unto the lowest of the low. We do not have a decent class, or the name of a good family. I thought, at least with the money, her status might be worthy of—”

“Status! You think they care for that? Have you seen those two? They would be happy with nothing, they’re so enamored with each other! He fell in love with your daughter without knowing she had money, so that was never an issue to begin with. And then, even she did not know her father had a fortune—you never spent very much of it, if this house is any indicator,” he said, gesturing around himself and rolling his eyes.

“I had two other apartments!” Valjean protested.

“And they were even smaller and simpler than this place, weren’t they! And I know very well that the only reason you even had them was for the purpose of fleeing to should you be discovered. Why do you believe she will have want of coin if she has already grown up without it and yet found happiness?”
Valjean blinked. He sat back in his seat, motionless, pensive. “I had not considered that,” he finally said. “But, the more she has, the better, non? There is nothing wrong with having an overabundance of money.”

“There is when it’s just going to sit there untouched!” Javert countered. “Nearly six hundred thousand francs, mon dieu! Think what could be done with that!”

“Well what are you suggesting be done with it, then?”

Javert muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like “You are an idiot.” He did not look up at him.

Valjean contemplated the state in which the inspector found himself: hunched over, his head in his hand, eyes darting about to focus on nothing, muttering to himself incoherently.

“You seem to be overly troubled by this,” he said. “Have I offended you in some way?”

The man gave no reply.

“Javert, are you … in want of mon—”

“I don’t need your damn charity!”

The tone and volume of his voice made Valjean nearly upset his chair. He gazed back at him, mildly aghast.

“Javert,” he began again, carefully, “you—”

“I’m not the one you ought to be helping, you old fool,” the man mumbled. “You need not concern yourself with me. I was only thinking that …”

“That what, Javert?”

He gave an exasperated sigh, his habitual semi-scowl returning. He seemed to want to say something, but refrained from it. “It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“Surely it is something. You are unsettled by what I have said; why will you not—”

“Laisse tomber,” he growled back at him. “We will speak of this later.” Then he rose from his seat and brushed himself off, unceremoniously gulping down the rest of his tea. “Je me barre.”

“You are going?”

“I have a report I need to write.”

Valjean drew up in his chair, embarrassed, a little wounded. “Oh. I see.” As Javert was heading for the door he added: “Ah— Wait; Javert, the cab fee—”

The man turned one ice-blue eye back upon him with a glare that could have frozen over hell.

With a start, Valjean bowed his head to him. Concerned, he watched the man stalk off with a deepening wonder.

“À plus tard,” he heard him say curtly.
Footnotes:

[1] The arrondissement de l’Hôtel-de-Ville is the 3rd smallest of the 20 arrondissements (administrative districts) of Paris. It includes the eastern part of the Île de la Cité, all of the Île Saint-Louis, and a chunk of the right bank of the Seine, which is in the Marias. This is Javert’s assigned district because he lives in the middle of it, though his assignments often take him elsewhere in the city.

[2] This may have actually been a skill that he picked up in prison rather than Faverolles. Prisoners often made little crafts out of coconut fiber (coir) or straw and sold them to tourists. Prisons, like morgues and other morbid curiosities, were often considered spectacles at the time, so they drew a crowd.

Chapter End Notes

master-of-the-lackadaisical made a hilarious comic for this chapter

Suggested Listening:
First Love - Joe Hisaishi
Katy’s Tune - Kila
Signal Flag - Satoshi Takebe
Le Maire

Chapter Summary

Javert reveals the real reason behind his consternation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.”

-George Washington

***

Valjean sat staring out the window of his room, but his thoughts were not on the garden below. Clouded by guilt, they pored over past conversations.

How many subtle hints had there been of the man’s financial situation?

‘I thought you preferred sweet things to bitter?’

‘I also prefer ... the prudence of frugality.’

‘I dislike philanthropy.’

‘He hardly ever eats anything. Big man like that ... You'd assume he'd have an appetite to match.’

Valjean’s eyes flicked back and forth, frowning despairingly.

‘This ought to have been examined by a doctor.’

‘Doctors cost money.’

‘You summoned a doctor for me.’
‘That was different.’

‘How?’

‘Why pay for something I can fix myself?’

‘This is not the sort of thing to be stingy about, Javert.’

‘I’m an old hand at this.’

‘You are surely in great deal of pain from that, and yet you take nothing for it.’

‘So?’

‘So, why? Why torture yourself?’

‘I don’t need it, that’s why. It is an unnecessary expense.’

Maybe some of it was simply stubbornness, or frugality for prudence’s sake alone, but it was possible that Javert hadn’t even the funds for food, or healthcare, beyond what was strictly necessary for his own survival.

Valjean knew that the man did not have that much money. For how long he’d known, he could not say. But police salaries were not very high, even in cities such as this. Besides that, the man had no family or friends to speak of, only himself to rely on.

Of course Javert was prideful about it. Why would he not be? To be able to support oneself, fully and truly, is something anyone should be proud of. And it was not hard to understand why he would refuse assistance, for all his talk of “self-respect” and “dignity” and “debts”. It was not hard to see why he would rather scrape by on what he could earn by honest means than accept another’s help.

If the man would have allowed it—would have been relieved by it—Valjean would have given him thousands. But Javert abhorred all charity, all pity.

And yet! How could Javert not resent a man who had a fortune, and spent none of it, hoarding it away all his life? Who had the ability to live a life of luxury, but whose humility would not permit him to?

To have riches incomprehensible, and to bestow them on someone who had no need of them, and never knew that they existed? When there were so many others that were truly in need? Of course the man was frustrated with him.

And Valjean understood it! Perfectly! And it agonized him to his core.

He had felt guilt over having the money ever since he’d withdrawn it. Sure he needed something to live off of, and to provide for Cosette, and any possible needs that might arise—but the amount he had far surpassed any conceivable need. He knew that. And he had withdrawn it anyway. Because otherwise, it would have been seized by the state following his arrest, and then it would never help anyone. At least, not in the ways that he felt it should.
Could he have donated anonymously to charitable organizations? School, hospitals, churches? Possibly. And yet he hadn’t. And he had always felt troubled by that. But even anonymous, there was this fear in him of discovery, of suspicion, questions. Sure he gave alms to every beggar he met, sure he bestowed coins of silver and gold upon gamins, and yet—yet he could have done more. But something compelled him, some secret dread, to hold on to what money he could—even if it was a ludicrous sum—and distribute it only in small amounts. There was safety in financial security, a safety that he knew was very, very hard to come by. The memory of his family’s plight in Faverolles had never left him.

Was he a hypocrite, then? Was it selfish of him to hold onto that money, even if he’d done it in part for the sake of his daughter? He didn’t know, but he felt certain that Javert thought so. And he could not bring himself to blame him. Christ himself had asked his followers to give up all their earthly treasures, and deliver them to those less fortunate.

How could Valjean repair this rent between them? He suspected it was not envy that compelled Javert, but anger. And such a delicate problem it was.

Valjean could not give him money; could not even offer to. He knew it would only aggravate the man further. Yet he wanted so badly to help him, if Javert was truly struggling to make ends meet. And as long as the man struggled, and Valjean did not, there would always be this divide. But the man did not want his help. The man had never wanted his help.

On top of everything, Valjean felt a crushing shame that he often tried to solve problems by simply throwing money at them. So many things could not be fixed that way, he knew. He had once had power to make legislation and reforms that truly made a difference—to build things—but ever since he’d been stripped of that, he was powerless to do anything more than offer up condolences and banknotes.

How it all must look to Javert! Conceited. Arrogant. What kind of man did Javert think he was?

‘Look at this false humility he cultivates!’ he could hear the district attorney saying.

Acting so humble, when his means were in no way meager ... Handing out a few coins here and there as if that would somehow change the way things were ...

Javert had been diligently slaving away all his life for mere change, and here he was, not having worked a single day in years, and sitting atop a treasure he had barely touched.

It was no wonder the man had stormed out on him.

Valjean put his head in his hand.

***

Near the end of the week, a red-haired little gamin dropped off a note.

Giving the boy a few coins and sending him on his way, Valjean unfolded it.

Upon the rag paper was merely ‘#55?’

The first thing Javert had ever written him in all this time, and, of course, it was nothing more
than a number with a question mark attached to it. No signature, either—though he supposed that there wasn’t a need. Javert was the only person who would ever send such an informal correspondence.

More surprising than this, however, was the fact that Javert had sent him anything at all—let alone now, when he seemed to be so frustrated with him. Valjean hadn’t been sure the man had wanted to see him again this week. But then, perhaps that was why Javert had sent a note.

Confused, but slightly encouraged, Valjean stuck the paper in his pocket.

***

The light was fading in the garden.

Valjean had been waiting anxiously for hours, and he was beginning to worry the man would not show. He had cleaned the whole house, if for nothing else than to give him something to do, and still there was no sign of him.

But, at half past eight, just as the sun was slipping beneath the horizon, he heard a knock at the door.

Javert stood on the step with a shadow on his face.

Hastily, as though it had been waiting to burst out of him the whole week (which it likely had), Valjean apologized. “Javert, if I have offended you somehow, I am sor—”

“You have not offended me,” the man cut him off, walking past him into the house.

Utterly perplexed, Valjean followed him inside.

***

Javert remained silent as Valjean built a fire in the hearth, sitting hunched over on one of the armchairs before it. When offered something to drink, the man shook his head.

With a worried sigh, Valjean sat down in the chair opposite him.

The house had turned dark, the only light coming from the flickering flames that were inching their way up the logs. They cast an orange glow on their faces.

Both of them seemed to be waiting for something, and Valjean did not know what.

“I should not have walked out on you like that,” Javert finally said. He had not turned to look at him, rather, he was gazing solemnly at the fire. The corner of his mouth twitched into a frown for a split-second. “It was rude of me, and I apologize. You have not ... done anything to warrant my anger.”

“It’s all right,” Valjean told him. “I understand why you—”
“No. You don’t.”

A wave of mortification hit him.

Amid the pops and crackles of the fire, he waited for an explanation—or further rebuke.

“It’s true that my salary is low,” the man went on. It was clear, from the way he spoke, that this was not an easy thing to say. “And it’s true that I cannot fathom what it would be like to have as much money as you. But that’s not what was troubling me.”

Puzzled, and deeply concerned, Valjean cocked his head.

Javert fell quiet for a long time, his eyes losing focus in the firelight. He seemed to be struggling to put words to his unrest. Fidgeting, as he was wont to do, he reached up and undid the cord from his ponytail, running his hands restlessly through strands of grey and black.

After awhile, his head drooped, dark hair slipping past his shoulders to shroud his face in a veil of shadow. His hushed voice, in the silence of the room, only served to make his words feel more profound.

“The town failed, after you left.”

Struck by this, Valjean sat back in his chair, his gaze drifting off. It was not a recent wound, but it was a deep one, and had never been properly treated. He had tried his best not to think on it, and so, to have it brought back up all of a sudden made it seem fresher in his mind than it ought to be. “I had heard,” he said, an ache in his gut.

Javert wrung his hands feverishly. “It has been weighing on me, of late.” He thrust his eyes away. “It did not mean anything to me, then. It was simply how things were. That the factory closed, and the schools—that the poor fell back into degeneration—these things did not matter to me. I could not see any correlation between the town’s hardship and its loss of you. Or, rather, I could not see a reason to feel remorse for it.”

“The means justified the ends. It was wrong for a convict to be a mayor, and so any ill that came from removing him from office paled in light of the righteousness of doing so. I gave no consideration of the outcome of my actions beyond putting a criminal behind bars. To me, there was nothing else to consider—nothing else more important than carrying out proper judgment in accordance with the law.” He paused. “I thought I was doing what was right.”

Valjean drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, his face falling. “I know.” He closed his eyes. “I know.”

“After the barricade, after … everything else, I began to think on it, and—” Javert scratched at his sleeve, clearly uncomfortable. “You … I always thought it didn’t matter; it didn’t matter what you did, what any man did, in the face of their past.” He thrust a palm up in gesticulation. “So a criminal gives alms, so a degenerate is kind, so what? These actions could not possibly be sincere, in my mind. Not truly. And even if they were, why should that be cause for reconsideration of judgment? It did not change who they were—what they’d done.”

“So a thief saves lives, so a convict becomes an upstanding citizen—well, so? They have still stolen, they have still broken parole; the law calls for their arrest, and justly so!” His words began tumbling over themselves, his voice beginning to strain. “What matter is it to the police if they have improved the lives of those around them? If they’ve brought opportunities and hope where there were none? If they provided for those in need—the children and the infirm, the wretched, the
poor—funded public services out-of-pocket, given freely what they had to others—grown the town up from the roots in their wake? If they—"

"Javert," Valjean interrupted him, raising a hand to silence him. "Please," he breathed, as though he were in pain, "You don’t … You don’t have to." His eyes fell. "You don’t have to."

The man stared glassily at the floor. "I do."

Valjean rose from his seat, placing his hand over Javert’s shoulder. "What happened was not your fault. You were only doing your duty."

Javert jerked his shoulder back. "And nothing more."

"Stop this," Valjean breathed, his face scrunching up. "You cannot blame yourself, Javert. You were only doing what you thought best at the time. The past is behind us; we cannot change it. Do not torture yourself by reliving it. That would serve no purpose. What happened to the town was regrettable, but there is nothing to be done about it now. Its people … They have forgotten it, for better or for worse. So should you. I cannot bear to see you torment yourself thusly, mon ami."

The man looked up at him as though wounded. "You would call me that? Even so?"

Valjean was bewildered—then, perturbed. "Of course!" he said, clasping both the man’s shoulders, "Yes; mon Dieu, yes! You are my friend, Javert! What you have done for me … How could you think otherwise? I have never held a grudge against you; not for anything!"

Javert scrutinized him. "I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised," he muttered. "You are a philanthropist, after all."

"That has nothing to do with it; you know that."

There was a bitter tone to the man’s words. "I am only here because you pitied me."

Valjean pushed him back into his seat, forcing him meet his gaze. "I am not friends with you because I pity you."

The man’s eyes had been wide whilst he was speaking, and when Valjean finished and stepped back, they stared incredulously at him a second longer before squeezing shut, as though the words had stung them. He turned his face away, grimacing.

Valjean frowned. "You undervalue yourself, Javert. And I am lucky to have you. I wish I could make you see that."

Javert was silent for a long time, unable to look at him. "You are a sentimental fool," he finally breathed. "Any other man in your position should be happy to be rid of me. It is only that ridiculous altruism you cultivate that keeps me in your graces."

Valjean sighed, leaning against his chair with a hand on his hip. "Frankly, Javert, it is you who is the fool. And furthermore, you are as stubborn as an ass."

Javert scoffed, a miserable smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

"You may think my inclinations ridiculous, but I assure you they are not some passing fancy
borne of charity,” he continued. “My soul might have been bought for God, but that is not the reason I act the way I do. Perhaps it was, once—but only briefly. I couldn’t do things any other way if I tried, now.” His face fell. “And there were times when I tried.”

“I cannot help the way I am. The way I feel. I can’t deny what’s in my heart, even if it might save my skin. You may laugh at it, if you wish, but do not dare believe I do things out of mere obligation alone. Do not dare believe my actions are not also in my heart.”

Javert held his gaze reluctantly, was forced to bow beneath it.

“You are my friend, Javert. And I am yours. Never doubt that. Never.”

The air was filled with the popping and crackling of the fire, the shadows dancing on the walls. A creak came from the walls as the house settled.

Javert wrung his hands. “You feel too strongly for me,” he said.

Valjean turned indignant, thrust his chin up, jaw clenched. “Javert!”

The man looked up at him with a start. “N-no, I mean …” He hid his face again, mumbling, “I do not know what to say to you, when you speak of such things.”

Valjean’s lips parted, he tilted his head a little.

It was not a great revelation that Javert should be at a loss when it came to topics involving expression of one’s emotions or the intricacies of personal relationships, but Valjean had never quite thought about how foreign it might be to him—how little experience he might have in dealing with these sorts of conversations.

Actually, he wasn’t sure why he himself was any good at them, considering—but then, he had fought with his own conscience on many a moral debate over the years, and too, what little experience he had with interpersonal relationships certainly made him an expert when compared to Javert, who had never even entertained the ideas of such things until now, apparently.

“Well,—” Valjean cut himself off for a moment, studying him. “You do not have to say anything at all, really.”

“Mm. Then let us talk of something else.”

“Dieu, yes,” he said, settling back into his chair. “Let’s.”

Javert stared into the dancing flames. “The money,” he said after a moment, as though suddenly remembering something.

Valjean blinked. “What?”

“The money you’d saved—the six-hundred thousand francs that you bequeathed to Cosette. You asked me why the mention of it upset me so, earlier.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That was the reason. Montreuil. It … You did so much good there. With your money. You did so much good. And it all fell apart after you left. Vanished—because of me. All your work, all you’d done—it was like it had never happened. Like I’d extinguished the life-force of that town. Ripped out its heart.” His head drooped. “If it wasn’t for me—if you had just been allowed to continue … who knows how much you might have done. How much suffering I have caused, in implicating you.”
“Javert …”

“No; it is true. That is what happened. I made those people suffer. I made you suffer. It was all because of me; because I couldn’t look past my own prejudices to see the good you were doing there, the value of your presence. It is my fault. Had you been allowed to continue … Ah, but that is the point—you were not. And yet—” He closed his eyes. “Yet you have money, still—a fortune you amassed, and barely touched. And all the good in that town, it came from your money.”

“Cosette and Marius, they will not use that money. They do not need it; they do not care for it. It will sit untouched. And, really, it belongs to you. It does.” He wet his lips, narrowing his eyes in consternation. “Could you not—could you not use it to …?”

Valjean knit his brow. “What are you saying, Javert?”

“Could you not use it to … fix things?” There was a sort of trepidation in his voice, as though he feared rebuke. “To start over. Not in Montreuil-sur-Mer,” he added hastily, “—that place is lost, now—but here, in Paris.”

Valjean stared at him, scrutinizing his face, turning his words over in his head and trying to make sense of them. “In Paris …” he repeated dumbly.

“Yes,” Javert said, shutting his eyes, “I know; perhaps this is—perhaps I am being a fool. Perhaps it is selfish, to even suggest such a thing. But I …” He sighed, his expression flickering between deliberation and guilt. “Could you not, conceivably, with all the money you have left, start over? Make a difference? And this time you would not have to hide behind a mask. You would garner all the credit and respect that you deserve. And you would do so much good; I know you would. Do you not … find that idea appealing?” He turned to look Valjean in the eye, a pained smile on his lips. “—Monsieur le Maire?”

A chill shot up Valjean’s spine, tingling at the base of his neck. He shivered, goose pimples breaking out along his skin even as his face grew hot.

“Don’t call me that,” he breathed, his face falling into shadow as he withdrew into his chair. “Please.”

Javert turned away, head down. “I am sorry;” he mumbled, “I should not ha—”

“No; it’s just— I’m—” Valjean managed to calm himself, to slow his pounding heart. “It has been a long time.”

“I know.”

They listened to the sounds of the fire for awhile, each in his own personal agony.

“It is not a bad idea, using the money,” Valjean finally admitted. “I had not thought of it, that way. Of course, I have always given what I could, here and there—”

“The mendicant who gives alms,” Javert huffed.

“Yes. But never like that. So openly. Not in a way that could make a real difference.”

“But you can, now. If you wish. You can; you have been pardoned, you are free to do as you please, as yourself—as Jean Valjean. You may do whatever you want, and no one would have the right to say anything.”
Valjean paused, lost in thought. His hands were folded in his lap, clasped tightly as he gazed into the flames. “You are not … asking this for the people of Paris,” he said slowly, “—are you.”

“No.”

Valjean’s head dipped in a grave nod.

They sat in silence.

“Perhaps …” Valjean said thoughtfully, “Perhaps, now that Cosette knows of my past, it would not be wrong to bring the idea up with her—to see what she thinks of it.”

Javert nodded slowly. “That would be good.”

Valjean opened his mouth to say something further, but he shut it again after a moment.

His chest ached, muscles clenching, painful. It was bitter, and it was sweet. He turned his head, tilting it to the side.

“It is kind of you, to think of me in that way,” he began carefully. “I didn’t— No one else has ever …” He shook his head, his eyes wet. A sad scoff escaped his lips—it was either that, or the precursor to a sob; he did not know which. “It is nice to have a friend.”

“You deserved one earlier,” Javert murmured.

“It was worth the wait.”

***

It was late at night, and Mme. Mercier was sweeping the entryway of the house when her tenant arrived back home.

She eyed him curiously as he hung up his top hat and coat. “And where were you?”

“Out. Here,” he said, shoving a heavy-laden basket at her, “put these in the larder.”

“Eh?” She stared stupidly down at its contents.

It was filled to the brim with different varieties of squash.

“Where on earth did you get these at this hour?”

Without bothering to look back at her, Javert started up the stairs. “A friend.”

***

Chapter End Notes
Realized I never gave Javert's portress a name so here's that, anyway.

I imagine she feels pretty smug right about now, considering how much denial Javert was in before.

Also, I feel like I have to say that I'm not chickening out a class debate here. These scenes were plotted out long ago and this really was the actual reason Javert was so frustrated (also that Valjean just ... never spent any of his freaking money on himself, despite showering it on others). That's not to say that the socio-political divide between them doesn't exist, though. And that *will* be addressed more later in the coming arc. It's just that, in this particular matter, Javert doesn't really think like that. Yes, he feels the divide there, monetally, but Valjean knows what it's like to be impoverished too, and he made that money fairly. Plus, Valjean's not some greedy miser either; there's nothing Javert can be mad at him for. He's always out giving charity, always acting kindly. If anything, the money issue makes Javert feel embarrassed for his own part, not envious of Valjean. And it's also a bit due to Valjean getting into the Gillenormand family, which is sort of well-to-do (on the Aunt's side, anyway). It put Valjean a rung up on the social ladder.

Anyway, ever since he read about what happened in Arras, the whole Montreuil situation has been bothering him, and when he found out that like, part of that legacy still sort of existed ... the matter reared its head. Basically, he saw what he'd torn down, and he wants to rebuild it, even if it can't be what it was before. ("A broken tree doesn't always die ... so long as the roots are intact")

Suggested Listening:

Back to You - WILD

Heart of a Mother - Satoshi Takebe

Home - Jack Savoretti

Reminiscence - Satoshi Takebe

Thoughts - Michael Schulte
The Covenant

Chapter Summary

Valjean and Javert make a deal; Valjean discovers something he was not meant to find.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There is a strength in the union even of very sorry men.”

-Homer

***

One day, while they were gardening, Cosette looked up with a far off gaze, as though she had just thought of something.

“Papa?” she asked.

“What is it?”

She glanced over at the melon patch. “The man you stayed with at the convent ... He was not really your brother, was he?”

Valjean raised his eyebrows. He had, for the most part, forgotten about that lie. “No,” he admitted, “he was not.”

“Then who was he? Why did he know you?”

“He was someone that I helped a very long time ago,” he said softly. “It was only by chance that we happened to find him. He aided us out of gratitude, and gave me his dead brother’s name, because he knew I was in some kind of trouble.”

She stared down at the dirt with a pensive expression. “I see. So ... What am I supposed to be called?”

Jean Valjean blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I thought my name was Fauchelevent. But that was not your real name, so that is not my real name, either. Shouldn’t my name be Valjean?”

No one had ever expressed the desire to take his name before, and Valjean could not say if there was anyone besides him who bore it. He gazed thoughtfully at her. “Do you ... want it to be?”

“Doesn’t it need to be?”
“Well—only if you’d wish for that.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean ...”

“Oh. That’s right— You ...” She glanced away from him, head drooping, voice lowering. “You’re not really ...”

Valjean bit his lip. Guilt welled in him at the sight of the disappointment on her face. He wanted to be her father, and yet, at the same time, he had been glad in a way that he was not, because the stain of his past could not transfer to her. Still, the girl had thought of him for over a decade as her father, and he could recall with great clarity and unease the sadness and surprise that had come over her when he’d told her the truth. It had been half a year since then, but surely, such a thing was not easy to accept.

All of a sudden Cosette looked back up at him, her eager curiosity returned. “Then who was my real father?”

It hit him like a blow, full on, to the chest. Staggered for a moment, he had to fight to regain his words. “I—truly, Cosette, I know not.”

She looked genuinely surprised. “You don’t?”

Tense, he slowly shook his head. “I only knew your mother for a short time, and not once did she speak of him. I must assume that he was either absent, or dead. Since the beginning, in all likelihood.”

“Then what was my mother’s name?”

“She—she didn’t have a surname, Cosette.”

The girl’s shoulders sagged. She stared at him as though this were incomprehensible to her.

“Your mother, she didn’t have a family. Not that I know of. She never spoke of anyone but you. I don’t even know where she came from, to be honest. I don’t even know if she knew.”

Cosette pondered this for a moment with a sigh, her brow furrowed. “Then it will just have to be Valjean, won’t it?” she finally said.

Valjean gave her a lopsided smile. “Ma chère, either way, you are Madame Pontmercy, now.”

“True. But it will have to say something on my papers, non?”

“Yes,” he smirked, “I suppose you are right.”

***

The air smelt of smoke long before Javert got to the street in question.

This time had been bad. They’d managed to take out a number of buildings, whether that had been their intention or not. The way the houses were, flush up against one another, it was impossible to tell.

He stopped as he turned the corner, to survey the damage with a frustrated sigh.
The first building had been utterly destroyed, that much was clear. It lay in a smoldering ruin. The two adjacent to it were unsalvageable: charred, broken skeletons of their former selves. The buildings next to those were damaged, but not impossible to repair. And, unsurprisingly, the shops across from them had been looted. Not everything, but the most valuable items, anyway. Or so he’d been told.

National Guardsmen had been called in to deal with the aftermath. Men in blue and red uniforms flooded the narrow street, dousing the remains and clearing debris from the cobblestone. Ash floated lazily like snow on the rising currents.

Frowning, he set off towards the wreckage.

Halfway down the street he stopped in his tracks, for who should be there but a familiar, white-headed face.

Jean Valjean, in full uniform minus the shako, was amid the throngs of guardsmen crowding the site. He carried two buckets of water and tossed them on a still smoking section of the ravaged heap, then stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow, replacing it with a stripe of smudged soot to which he was completely oblivious.

Javert watched him with a measure of intrigue, caught off guard at seeing him in such an element as this. He could not remember a time when he had seen Valjean as simply one in a crowd, unremarkable, another member of society merely doing as the service required of him. Not a criminal, not hunted, not wary and watched. No secrets to hide, anymore. Just an honest man with a job to do, and orders to follow. Like him.

After a moment Valjean turned his head, and found Javert. He stared at him with a similar look of surprise, then cracked a grin at him. It seemed like he was about to call him over, but then another, higher-ranking guardsman approached him and began giving him directions, pointing this way and that. Valjean nodded dutifully to him, shot an embarrassed smile back at Javert, and then headed further into the heap of rubble.

Stooping down, he grabbed a hold of something, and, to the astonishment of everyone around him, picked up a blackened support beam that should have taken at least three or four men to lift. Hefting it over his shoulder, he got to his feet and headed off down the road with it towards a mill of carts that were there to haul the rubble away.

On his way he passed by the officer who’d just given him the order. The man had clearly meant for him to have assistance, because he was holding a finger up in the air with his mouth open as though to make some protest. But the protest died in his throat, and he watched him walk on with a look of utter bewilderment.

Knowing what he knew of the man’s past, Javert should not have been amazed by this, but it is hard to watch a man one-arm a tree trunk without being at least slightly impressed.

Javert waited with his back up against the wall of a nearby building until Valjean crossed by again. He had tucked himself in the mouth of an alley, and so Valjean’s back was to him when he called his name, and the man gave a start.
At least, though, Valjean laughed a little when he turned around to find him there. There was soot all over him, now—on his uniform, his face. Even his hair was no longer wholly white. It was rather amusing.

Javert slid his eyes toward him, eyebrows raised. He remained where he stood, arms crossed, laid back. “Officer,” he addressed him flatly.

A small smirk lit Valjean’s face. “Officer.”

“I see they haven’t turned you out.”

The man scoffed. “At least not yet.”

“I don’t suppose you happened to see anything of note whilst you were here?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“No man with a crescent scar above his eye?”

“Are you looking for such a man?”

“It would fit the description.”

“Sorry,” Valjean said, “but you seem to be out of luck.”

“Mm.” Javert gave a sigh. “Aren’t I always.” With a frown, he cast his gaze out over the street. “Damn fools,” he muttered, “lighting up buildings like this when they’re pressed so closely together. They could set the whole city ablaze. Just like London.”

Valjean looked as though the idea truly horrified him, as well it should. “Good God, I should hope not.”

“Well. If you do happen to see anything, anything even vaguely suspicious, do give us a shout, eh?”

The man dipped his head. “Post-haste.”

***

The porter made a fuss over him when Valjean returned home.

He could not say he blamed him, as he looked a bit like a smoked ham at this point, but other than being exhausted, he was unharmed.

Still, the man fretted, asking his health.

Smiling wearily, Valjean waved a dismissing hand at him. “A little scorched, mayhap, but otherwise, I’m fine. I could use a drink, though.”

“I’ll fetch you something immediately. Wine? Brandy?”

“Of course,” the man said, giving a bow. “A thousand apologies.” He turned towards the kitchen, but paused, and glanced back over his shoulder.

“Oh,” he remarked, “A package came for you while you away, monsieur.”

“Hm? From whom?”

The porter shrugged. “Je ne sais. The carrier wouldn’t say.”

Valjean cocked his head.

“Odd, right? I can bring it up to you later.”

“I can take a look at it now.”

“Really? Very well.”

After the man had retrieved it for him, along with a glass of water, Valjean took the package out on the doorstep, where the light was better, and sat down.

It was a large, oblong envelope, unaddressed, and holding something hard and rectangular, about two inches wide.

Curious, Valjean took out his clasp knife and cut through the paper of the top fold, sliding out the contents.

It was a red velvet box—something like a jewelry box, he thought—with an accompanying note.

‘I believe my cousin wanted you to have this,’ it said. ‘If accounts hold true, you may well be more deserving of it than he knew.’

There was no signature, and Valjean did not recognize the handwriting. He had half expected it to be from Javert, but clearly it was not, as the man had no family to speak of.

Brow furrowing, he took a sip of water and opened the case.

He was greeted with the sight of a white, five armed Maltese cross on a green wreath of oak and laurel leaves. In the central gilt disk was the head of the Bourbon king Henry IV, encircled by the words “HENRY IV ROI DE FRANCE ET DE NAVARRE” on a blue ring. It was made all in gleaming gold and silver, and colored enamel, and suspended on a short red ribbon.

Upon seeing it, he spat his drink out on the pavement, coughing with wide eyes.

It was la croix de Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur.[1]

He stared at it in disbelief, struck utterly dumb. Whipping the note back out, he read the lines again, his sudden understanding of them only adding to his shock. He sat with a stupid air on the concrete step, eyes fixed on the glinting medal.

“Monsieur,” called the porter from the other side of the door, “are you well? What is it?”

“Nothing,” he heard himself say, eyes wide as he snapped shut the lid of the box. “It’s nothing. Just—got some water in my lungs.”

He hastily downed the rest of the glass and retreated to his room before he could be further
questioned.

***

On Thursday Javert made a stop by the Rue des Filles du Calvaire.

“Pardon the intrusion,” he asked the porter, “but, by chance, is Jean Valjean at home?”

“Sorry, but you’ve just missed him.”

“Excellent.”

“What?”

“Is Pontmercy in?”

“Monsieur le Baron is in the library; I can tell him you’ve come.”

“Oh, please do,” Javert crooned, tucking his hat beneath his arm with a smugly serpentine look. “I have words for him.”

***

Marius had gone into the drawing room with the inspector and shut the doors. Even so, Nicolette could hear them conversing.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was him?” That was the inspector’s voice, full of fury.

“What are you talking about?”

“At the house! The Gorbeau house! Valjean!”

Here Marius took on a terrified tone. “I— I’m sorry; I didn’t think— It didn’t seem relevant at the time, and I—”

“Didn’t seem relevant? Didn’t seem relevant? Who cares if it was relevant, you insipid little twit; how dare you withhold information from me! I swear on every saint on the cathedral you’ll never hear the end of this. Now sit your scrawny ass in that chair and tell me everything that happened that night; and I mean everythi—”

At this point Nicolette decided it might be best to sweep somewhere else.

***

On Sunday, Valjean opened the door of #55 to find Javert staring at him with an flat expression
that was something between tired disappointment and agitation.

Before he had the chance to offer him a greeting, or ask what the matter was, Javert whapped him on the side of his head.

Valjean gave a stunted cry, more surprised than pained. “What was that for?” he exclaimed, rubbing the wound.

“Your son-in-law told me how you really got that burn on your arm.”


Javert blinked. Craned his head back. “Mon dieu, do I actually know something you don’t?”

“Eh? What are you talking about? Marius— The Gorbeau house ... That night?”

Javert began to chuckle to himself in that deep and nearly noiseless fashion he seemed so accustomed to.

“Javert, tell me what you speak of!”

“Wait;” he said, holding up a hand, “I need to savor this moment.”

“Javert! You ca—”

“Ah-ah-ah,” the man shushed him. He took in a deep breath and exhaled sharply, a self-satisfied grin on his lips. “All right. I’m done.”

“What the devil are you on about?”

“I never told you how that boy ended up with my pistols, did I?”

“Your pistols?”

“At the barricade.”

“How was I to know those were yours?”

“I don’t know! But they were.”

“Didn’t he just … take them off you after you were captured?”

“You think wrongly. I was captured before he arrived. And besides that, I brought a musket to the barricade, not my pistols. No; he had them for quite some time prior to that, the little devil. I had given them to him.”

“Given them? For what purpose?”

“To signal the police.”

“What?”

“He came to me one winter’s night with talk of a blackmail scheme that he had overheard his neighbors plotting against a kindly old man.”

As he realized the implication behind those words, Valjean became mortified. “Wait, you mean
to say he was— The Jondrettes were—"

“Yes. He had the unhappy lot of living in the room beside theirs in that ramshackle old house. They shared walls, you see, and one of them had a hole through which he watched their misdoings.”

Valjean swallowed. “You—you’re telling me …”

“He saw the entire affair, from start to finish. And he was supposed to use my pistols to signal the officers I had standing in wait outside, so as to catch the ruffians in the most incriminating situation possible—but that great booby, he failed to signal because he realized Thénardier was the man who’d saved the life of his father at Waterloo. He owed a debt to him, and that stayed his hand.”

“But you came all the same!”

“Yes,” he snarked, “because I foresaw his lack of courage. ‘If one wants a job done correctly’ and all that. He was taking far too long, the coward. All the better for you at the time, I suppose —monsieur Fauchelevent.”

“Lord above, I cannot believe …” Valjean clutched his forehead. “You all knew what was going on the entire time!”

“Except none of us knew who you were. It is lucky Thénardier had saved that boy’s father—that Pontmercy owed him a debt, and waited—because it allowed you enough time to free yourself. Otherwise, if he had signaled, I would have arrived earlier, and recognized you, and then you would have been sent to prison again—or no, worse: the guillotine.”

Valjean’s eyes had grown wide. His Adam’s apple bobbed. “This is too much,” he said to himself. “I need to sit down.”

***

Resigned, Valjean listened to Javert berate him as he made them a pot of tea.

“Laid up for a month on account of infection!” the man exclaimed. “Call a dog-doctor to treat it, you said! I can't believe you did that to yourself. It was completely unnecessary. And the pain, it—how on earth was that worth it to you?”

“Don’t trouble yourself on that account,” said Valjean, putting the tea tray together. “It wasn’t the first time I’ve been burned by a fer rouge. And at least this time it was by choice.” His gaze fell to the bowl of sugar, his voice lowering. “Besides, it only hurts for a second or two. It’s the anticipation that’s the worst of it. But once it’s over you don’t feel anything at all.”

“That's not— You injured yourself without cause.”

He shrugged, retrieving the kettle and cups. “Was intimidation not a good enough object?”

Javert rolled his eyes. “You could have done literally anything else.”

“But nothing nearly so profound,” he countered, carrying the tray towards the table. “I daresay
the looks on their faces alone were quite worth it.”

The man could not help but give a snort at that. “Well, you impressed the Pontmercy boy, anyway.”

“Oh, Lord. That's right. He was there to see that too.”

Javert took a seat in one of the armchairs that was pulled up around the fireplace.

“You are an idiot,” he sighed, rubbing his temples with a poorly hidden smirk. “But, at least, no one is going to be calling you a coward any time soon.”

Valjean flashed him a toothy grin as he set down the tray between them and poured out their cups. Settling into the opposite chair, he stirred some honey into his tea before taking a sip. “What else did he tell you?” he asked.

“That he didn’t know your names at the time, and he’d taken to calling you ‘Leblanc’ on account of your hair.”

Valjean’s face went blank. Another second saw him chuckling.

“Also, he thought your daughter’s name was Ursule.”

“Ursule!” Valjean could not quite remember ever cackling before. The sound of it caused Javert to laugh in turn. “Why on earth did he think that?”

“I don’t know. Seems someone gave him faulty information.”

Valjean wiped a tear from is eye, still trying to rein himself in. “Ursule ...”

“At least ‘Leblanc’ made a modicum of sense.”

Smirking, Valjean said, “If I am ‘Leblanc’ then you are ‘Lenoir’.”

Inspecting a strand of his own greying hair, Javert quirked an eyebrow. “More like ‘Legris’, but I’ll concede on that point.”

A minute later Valjean began to chuckle to himself.

“What?” Javert asked.

“I just realized ... All of us lived in the Gorbeau House at one point or another.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” he recalled, with a wistful air. “I tracked you down there, once.”

“I suppose you didn’t happen to live there as well?”

Javert shook his head with a grin. “No, no; I’m afraid that’s where the coincidence ends.”

***

Later into the night saw them sunken into their chairs, warm from the drinks and the fire, and comfortable in their company.
With a groan, Valjean stretched out his limbs and rearranged himself in his seat, propping his chin up on the arm rest and gazing into the dying fire with a quizzical air. They had been quiet for quite some time, and his mind had wandered back into the past.

“I meant to ask before,” he said, “but what exactly were you doing at the barricades that night? I know they called you a spy, but what was your purpose there?”

Javert took a moment to reply, as though the question had taken him unprepared. “I was supposed to feed them false information,” he finally explained. “—about the other barricades, and the Guard, in order to dishearten them and dissuade them from further action. Presumably the hope was that they would disband or surrender, but, in lieu of this, that they would let their guard down at the wrong moment and open themselves up to attack.”

One side of Valjean’s mouth drew down. “That is a dangerous job.”

“Oh, certainly.”

“Detection could have cost you your life.”

“And it would have. I suppose I should count myself lucky you happened to be there, whatever aggravation you caused me that night.”

Valjean licked his lips, glancing in another direction. He could not help himself from fixating on something, something which had been, without his being conscious of it, bothering him for some time. “Javert, does it ... I do not mean this to sound badly, but, you are one of the most recognizable officers in Paris, and not for lack of trying. You just—you have a very memorable face.”

What Valjean was really saying was, ‘You are a dark-skinned officer in a sea of white ones, and it does not go unremarked’. And, from his expression, Javert understood what he meant.

“I am aware of it,” the man said. He sounded like he had bitten back some sour comment.

“Does it not perturb you that they gave this assignment to you, when the risk, and the price of detection, was so great?”

“No.”

Valjean’s eyebrow rose. “Why?”

“Because I volunteered.”

Disbelief flashed across his face. “Volunteered!”

Javert seemed grim, a grain of salt in his voice. “Volunteered!”

“But Javert, you were going to your death!”

“That was a possibility that I considered, yes. But I risk my life every day on this job, and that is nothing new. It is my decision. Besides, to fall in the line of duty is respectable. If I had died, at least I would have died with honor.”

“Honor!” Valjean exclaimed. “To have your skull smashed in as a spy, by a bunch of schoolboys, tied to a table in a tap-house—you think that’s honorable?”

Javert stared off at the floor beneath his boots. “Sometimes, it is better to spend a single life in
the pursuit of peace than to waste the lives of many by inaction. Risks must be taken in the name of justice. Sacrifices must be made. That is the way of things, Valjean.”

Valjean remained silent for a long time, studying his face with a furrowed brow. “You didn’t … You didn’t even fight back,” he murmured.

Javert's eyes flicked to him questioningly. “Would it have done me any good?”

Valjean opened his mouth. Shut it again. “That’s not the point,” he said.

“Isn’t it, though?”

“They left you alone with me. We were out of their sight. You thought I was going to kill you, Javert! You could have at least tried to resist.”

“What’s the use of trying when you already know the struggle is in vain? I would rather suffer in silence and retain my dignity than make a fool of myself by starting a fight I know I can’t win.”

“To resign thusly for the sake of dignity …” Valjean thought aloud. “What good is dignity in the face of certain doom?”

Javert’s nose wrinkled. “You wouldn’t understand,” he muttered. “It’s not worth it.”

“It is if there’s a chance. If there’s any chance at all.”

The man turned to regard him with one cold blue eye. “And if there’s not?”

Jean Valjean clenched his jaw, unflinching. “There is always a chance.”

Javert scrutinized him. “You are a dreamer,” he said.

“You are a coward.”

They narrowed their eyes at one another, leaning in.

“What are we really talking about here?” Javert asked.

“You tell me.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t.”

Javert paused at that, the creases around his wrinkled nose deepening. “Why did you give me your address?” he finally said.

“What?” Valjean’s tense expression dissolved.

“Your address. At the barricades. Why did you give it to me?”

“What does that … have to do with …?”

“I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t mention it at all. I vouchsafe to arrest you, and instead of fleeing into the night to retain your freedom for however long you could, you give me your goddamn address. Why?”

Valjean faltered. His shoulders drooped; he hung his head. “Because you’d won.”
“You could have killed me!” Javert exclaimed, no meager hint of anger in his thunderous voice. “I was at your mercy; my life was in your hands! What the hell do you mean ‘I’d won’?”

Valjean stared off in silence. A shadow had fallen over his face. “Did you ever get to a point in your life when you just couldn’t run anymore? When you could no longer find the strength?” His voice fell to a hush. “I wanted it to be you.”

“What?”

“If I was going to be arrested, I wanted you to be the one to do it. It was ... right, somehow.”

Javert drew back with a look of horror. “You—”

“I could not kill you, Javert. I could not let you die. There was never a moment in which I considered it. I had to let you live, and, with you, the knowledge of my presence in the city. The knowledge that I was going to be hunted. That, sooner or later, someone was going to knock at my door with a pair of manacles in hand.”

“I’ve had to live with that dread for far too long. I may be strong, but that is not an easy thing to bear. Even when I was thought dead, still, my heart leapt at every shadow, every noise. I checked the locks obsessively. I never went out without some tool, some means of escape hidden on my person.”

“It takes its toll on you. That worry, that anxiety. The not-knowing. To a point, almost, where you would rather face the storm and have it over with than cower forever in the shadows, shuddering in ignorance and uncertainty. You understand? I was tired of living in fear, Javert. And if it were anybody else, I might have fled—but you ... I could accept it, if it was you.”

“Val—” The man let out a harried breath. “You damned—” He grabbed a fistful of Valjean’s hair and tugged his face up to meet his. “You lily-livered coward!” he cried. “You have no will to live! You could have killed me! You could have run! There was no need for you to surrender! You know you could have overpowered me—or anyone! Why do you give in so quickly? Why don’t you fight?” There were tears in his eyes as his voice pierced the air. “Why don’t you fight?”

What Javert displayed in intensity, Valjean matched in humility. “Because I can’t.”

Hand trembling, Javert gazed into his eyes with a look of furious anguish, and slowly, slowly let him go.

Valjean let his head hang.

Javert put his face in his hands. “You damn fool,” he breathed.

After a minute, Valjean found the strength to speak. “When you confronted me that day in the hospital, I really had meant what I’d said. I’d only wished to retrieve Fantine’s child, and see them reunited and cared for properly—and then I would have submitted to you. But you did not trust me enough to let me go alone, and you refused to accompany me, or send anyone else in my stead.”

“When she died, I could no longer reunite them, and I thought, almost, of giving myself up—but then I realized the child would have no one. And she was still in the hands of those wicked innkeepers. I had no choice but to escape—to go to her. I’d intended to take her to a convent, where she would be safe, but when I saw her—when I held her in my arms, and saw her sleeping face, I just ...”

“The entire reason I had evaded you—and the rest of the law—was because I felt that I needed
to care for her, to protect her, to raise her with all the kindesses neither of us had known—as much for her sake as her mother’s.”

“When I discovered she’d fallen in love, I felt—jealousy,” he admitted. “And fear, and even hatred. Some stranger was going to marry her, and take her away from me. I may have amassed a fortune, but in truth—in my heart—she was all that I had. To lose her would be unbearable.” He gave a sigh. “Yet still, even granted an easy and blameless opportunity to amend all that, and let her paramour die at the barricades, I could not stand to grieve her so, and I could not stand to live with myself, knowing I’d let him be killed. So I went there to fetch him for her.”

“Either I would die trying to save him, or we would live, and they would marry, and I would lose her to him—lose the one thing I cherished in life. What would be the point of it all, after that? She would no longer need me; she had another to protect her now. What would I do with myself? I knew not. Whatever the outcome, I felt that my life would be ended that night. And then I saw you, tied up on that table, and I—” He let out a miserable laugh. “It was so terribly perfect. Like a poem, or a play. Of course it would be you, at the end of it all. It was written in the stars.”

His face fell to the floorboards. “I knew that you’d arrest me. Or at least, that you’d hunt me as long I lived. And I would ... face the consequences of my past. But what did that matter anymore? Without Cosette, I had no reason to go on. And I was tired of running, Javert. It was only fate that you should be there that night, and that I should surrender to you, after all these years. And then, I once made you a promise as well.”

Javert had sat back in his seat with a look of—of something rather resembling fear, Valjean thought. Or maybe anger. “What—promise?” he managed to say.

“I told you, once: I was at your disposal.”

Javert’s expression twitched at that, contorting into clenched teeth and a grimace, as though the words seared him. He remained trembling in his seat for a moment before rising to his feet and stalking decidedly to the open window, leaning out over the sill and clutching his head.

Concerned, Valjean got up as quietly as he could and approached.

The man was the tugging at the roots of his hair, running his hands across his face, like one possessed. “Damnit,” he was muttering, his words squeaking out in exasperated breaths, “God—damnit ...”

Valjean watched him solemnly, unsure of what to say. He could hear Javert growling insults and oaths at him under his breath. And yet, cracked and broken as they were, they did not feel like insults at all. ‘Coward’, ‘fool’, ‘idiot’—spoken thusly, they could just as easily have been declarations of care.

He did not know how long he stood there before he spoke. “Javert, I ...”

The man went still.

“Everything that you’re feeling right now, I want you to understand, I feel the same about you,” Valjean told him. “The same distress, the same worry, the same—well, I don’t know quite what it is, to be honest, but I’ll be damned if it’s not compelling.”

He let his volume drop a little. “You don’t ...” He clutched his arm, gaze skirting the floor. “You never seem to hold yourself in high regard—if any, really. You are terribly hard on yourself, and you fail to come to your own defense. You refuse praise, or assistance. You leave without
thinking anyone will notice. You act as though you were worth nothing at all. But in reality—and, especially to me, you are ... important.”

He bit his lip, his face hot. It was arduous to make his mouth form the words, and yet when they escaped they felt freer than anything. “It would ... hurt me, to lose you. The way you’ve behaved in the past, you don’t seem to think your death would matter to anyone. But that’s so untrue. You have people that love you, Javert. And I—I don’t know what I’d do, if I lost you. So when you act as though your life means nothing, as though it’s not worth fighting for, I just—I can’t stand it.”

Letting out a sigh, Valjean looked up at him. “All the frustration, and worry, and consideration you put towards me—I do wish that you would take even half as much of that and direct it at yourself.”

Javert stood staring out towards the garden at nothing, lips parted, his face bathed in shadow. He looked as though his mind were some place far away, and Valjean wondered just how much he had actually been listening.

After a long, long time, the man spoke. “I will make you a deal,” he said softly.

Valjean was caught by surprise by his frank tone.

“It may not change the way things are, but ... I will do what you ask of me, if you promise to do the same.”

Valjean was struck by this, and though a little embarrassed, he was—relieved, some. He might not think terribly well of himself, but if it would do well by Javert ... if it could in any way help him, to see the good in himself—

Drawing nearer, he extended his hand to him.

Javert turned, looked at it for a moment, then glanced up him. “Really?” he said. “Now you’re just making things awkward.”

Valjean froze for a moment before chuckling sheepishly.

***

It was mid-afternoon, about halfway through the week, and Valjean had just finished rereading his copy of Gulliver’s Travels, and was replacing it on the bookshelf which Cosette had set aside for him in the library, when he noticed something amiss.

Likely returned by Nicolette whilst she was cleaning the room, without any particular regard for which shelf it was placed on, there was a small stack of books lying horizontally across the others, jutting out over the edge of their spines.

Valjean cocked his head and withdrew them. By their titles, it became clear to him that they were law books. Marius had probably left them lying around one day while studying for one of his cases, and forgotten to put them back.

Valjean was about to replace them on their proper shelf when he noticed a piece of paper
sticking up out of one of them. Unthinking, he withdrew it. It was an envelope, he found, shoved between the pages to keep their place. Its seal had already been broken. Given to curiosity, Valjean opened its contents.

“Monsieur le Baron,” the letter read,

“You turned me out the other day. It is understandable that a man should not take kindly to being told such information, but this is disagreeable. I see now that you were already aware of the matter which I brought to you. But it remains that I did you a service. I did not know that you knew of it; I worried for your reputation, and of course, above all else, the safety of you and your kin.

To harbor such a man under your roof, in ignorance—knowing what I knew of him, and only that—ill-advisable, dangerous! A scandal, to be sure. This is what I thought to myself. And in my concern I reached out to you so as to inform you of your situation, that you might use the knowledge wisely. That you might protect yourself. I did it out of responsibility: a duty to my conscience. You must understand; that I wanted recompense was only on account of the trouble I went through to procure the information itself—one needs connections, to access such things! Newspapers, stories, documents—from so many years past!—they are no easy thing to produce.

That you are bitter about our encounters is perhaps unsurprising given their context. But surely you must admit that I had only your best interests at heart, and deserve at least a little gratitude. And then, of course, there is the matter of my silence, of which I’ve no doubt is some interest to you. You do understand that there is always a price for such information, and always a willing buyer. And I am in a certain financial strait at the moment.

Let us come to a civil arrangement then, shall we? No one needs be harmed by all this.

I eagerly await your reply.

*Your humble servant,*

*-Sergeant Thénardier*

Valjean stared at this note. He stared and stared and stared, with a face as blank and white as a sheet. To the layman he would look as though he did not comprehend a thing. But he understood everything, completely and wholly.

The words stained the page like venom, black and insidious, the mark of an adder, concealing itself behind pretty pleasantries and coaxing croons.

Valjean grit his teeth.

The letter crinkled in his trembling hand.

***

Jean Valjean did not usually drink.
Jean Valjean did not usually sit up in dark rooms late at night, after everyone had gone to bed, staring out the window at nothing with a snifter of brandy in one hand and the arm rest gripped tightly in the other, trying to quell the rage inside of him.

Jean Valjean did not know what he was doing.

The air was perfectly still, and perfectly quiet, not even a breeze to blow the sheer curtains. It was the hour when not even the crickets dare disturb the silence.

Without thinking anything at all, he stood up, dug a match from its box, and lit a candle.

He sat down at the desk, and uncapped the inkwell. Pulled the pen from its holder and wet its nib.

He began to write.

***

Footnotes:

[1] The Knight’s cross of the Legion of Honor. Being appointed a member of the National Order of the Legion of Honor is one of the highest honors one can receive in France for both military and civilians alike. A Chevalier (knight) is the entry (lowest) rank; nevertheless, it is an important recognition of merit. Valjean was supposed to be appointed a Knight of the Order for his achievements in Montreuil-sur-Mer—specifically, his advancements in the jet industry and the subsequent enrichment of the town—but he refused the honor out of humility.

Normally, a member would be sworn into the Order in a public ceremony. However, the fact that Valjean has been convicted of crimes would also normally have seen him expelled from the Order. Given that he was convicted (and served his time) before being considered for knighthood, though, and also that the later convictions against him were dropped due to the pardon, it is (probably?) permissible for him to be knighted, but likely a little too sketchy for an official ceremony.

At the time, Louie-Philippe (the King of France, crowned in 1830) was the highest rank in the Order—the Grand Cross—and also the Grand Master of the Order (the person that appoints all other members). His cousin, Louis XVIII of France, was ruling monarch from 1814 until his death in 1824, and was the Grand Master of the Order at the time that Valjean was supposed to have been appointed a Knight.


Chapter End Notes

Valjean, what r u doin there, bro?
Did Valjean pick that giant beam up by himself specifically because he knew Javert was watching, or just because he knew he could do it alone and it literally didn't occur to him to ask for help? The world may never know.

I guess we know who that officer is gonna ask to do all the heavy lifting in the future though lol

Annnnnnd yes. Yes I am a piece of shit and gave Valjean his medal (which he RIGHTLY DESERVED, DAMNIT). Unfortunately due to A) the fact that it would have been revoked even if he had originally accepted it, due to his being convicted of a felony, and B) You could only get admitted to the Legion at the starting rank at the time (not so today), Valjean is still just a Chevalier right now instead of, say, a Commandeur. But it's possible for him to work his way up the ranks. :)

Here's a picture of what the front of the medal looked like.

And what the rear of the medal would have looked like. It's really old (1830) and dinged up but you get the idea.

You can find the history of the Legion here.

Fun fact: Marius' father Georges was made a member of the Legion of Honor by Napoleon, on the battlefield.

Oh shit there's no suggested listening again
“—driving him up the wall for weeks. And that’s why you always wear gloves to the brothels.”

Leroux let out a laugh. “That’s terrible!”

“At least it was one of the ones you can get rid of,” Javert remarked.

They were out on patrol together, surveying the marketplace in the plaza for any thievery or misdoings. Their eyes were constantly scrutinizing their surroundings, but they had yet to perceive anything criminal.

“God, I hope they never assign me to inspect those sorts of places,” Leroux admitted, feeling the blood rush to his face. “It’s so—improper!”

“You get used to it,” said Javert.

“I could never get used to a thing like that!”

“Plenty of inspectors get used to it. Some even get a little too familiar with the assignment. But those are the ones you don’t want working it.”

“Is that why they always send you?”

Javert swiveled his head around to look at him, furrowing his brow. “What?”

Leroux immediately regretted having ever opened his mouth. “I, uh—I mean— The other
officers at the station ... Er, never mind; it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, do go on,” the man crooned. “I would love to hear what everyone at the station says behind my back.”

Leroux tried to swallow the lump in his throat. “It—it’s just that they—they say you’ve never ... been with anyone.”

The inspector’s expression went slack. “Oh,” he said flatly, his eyes flicking to the side. “I was expecting it to be something far more insidious.”

“So—so then it’s true?”

“What, that I don’t sleep around?”

“That you—” This conversation was quickly veering down the road of something entirely inappropriate for work, but now that the topic had been opened, Leroux could not refrain from delving into it. He was sure his face resembled a beet just about now. “That you haven’t slept with anyone at all, I mean, sir.”

“And what the hell does that matter?”

If it were anyone else, Leroux was sure they would have spoken those words with anger, and insecurity—but the man before him sounded genuinely apathetic.

And he had no idea how to respond to that.

“Um ...”

“Let me ask you something, Leroux.” Javert folded his hand behind his back and leaned in towards him like a looming shadow. “Have you ever slept with anyone?”

Leroux stared at him, open mouthed. “W-well—the opportunity has never really presented itself, ye—”

“So you haven’t.”

“No.”

“And are you any less of a man for it?”

Leroux froze for a moment. “I mean, I don’t know,” he finally said, throwing out his palms, “I’ve never— I haven’t— How would I even know what I’m—? It’s just something you’re supposed to do, you know?”

The man straightened up, craning his head back and narrowing his eyes at him. “Is it?”

Unable to find an answer to that question, he watched Javert resume his pace.

After a fretful moment he caught up to him.

“But aren’t you curious about it all?”

“Not really.”

Leroux was flabbergasted. “Don’t you— I mean, in the morning— Don’t you sometimes think
He didn’t finish the sentence.

Javert had stopped in his tracks, his eyes widening, looking at something across the plaza.

“Inspecto—?”

Javert put up his hand, still staring. Fixated. He looked like a cat which had caught sight of a mouse. Mechanically, and without looking, he patted the pocket of his coat in which he kept his manacles.

He had spotted someone he knew, Leroux realized. Someone with a warrant on his head.

It was not the first time he’d been with the inspector when the man had recognized some wayward quarry, but this was different. There was something almost frenetic in his expression.

“Which one?” he asked quietly.

“By the fruit stand,” Javert murmured. “With the workman’s cap. Black hair.”

Leroux squinted. “I can’t—”

“Stay here,” the man interrupted.

“But—”

“I said stay here!”

Leroux watched him go, shoulders sagging. This was obviously something important to him. Maybe even someone with a bounty. He wanted to help.

After following the inspector’s line of sight, he thought he spotted the man’s intended target.

Up ahead, said target, having tucked something into his pocket, glanced around himself and headed away from the market.

Javert followed, careful to press himself up against the wall and wait for a moment before pursuing him into the narrow street and disappeared around the bend.

Frowning, Leroux’s eyes wandered the crowd, a feeling of restlessness swelling in his breast.

What good did he do just standing here? Why was Javert making him wait? Did he not think him ready for something like this? It wasn’t like he hadn’t made prior arrests.

This was stupid. Stupid. He should be circling around and cutting off the man’s escape routes, like they’d been taught. He was useless here.

Making up his mind, he headed in their direction.

***

Thénardier could not say what had tipped him off to the fact that he was being followed, but its
awareness came with a prickling sensation, and the rising of the hairs on the back of his neck. Perhaps it had been the slight scuffing of a boot, perhaps the unrelated scuttling of a mouse. Maybe it had even been that sense foreign to the other five, which makes itself known only on rare occasions. Whatever it was, it caused his pulse to quicken, and he became quite sure he was being watched, or even hunted.

Then again, it could just be his nerves acting up. Things had been so hectic of late—many times already had he narrowly evaded the police, owing more to luck than he would care to admit. But he would not put himself in danger by dismissal of his instincts.

His ears strained to discern footsteps, but he knew it was no use. Proper spies made themselves silent and scarce, anyway. And there was no possibility of him looking over his shoulder; the clear advantage of one who knows they are being followed is to keep this discovery from their pursuer.

Pace normal, he tried to make himself appear at ease. Loosen the muscles, let the gaze wander, keep moving.

He walked for some time in this fashion, careful to look oblivious, and to take a different route than he was accustomed to. Then, as he rounded a corner as casually as he could, he bolted for it, taking two rights so that he fled to the street parallel, and in the opposite direction. Some ways down, another right put him on a connecting alley between the streets he had just traversed, where he hid himself behind the stack of a protruding chimney, pressed up against the plaster with the sweat dripping down between his shoulder blades.

If there is one thing a hunter rarely expects, it is for their quarry to double back upon themselves and run headlong into the direction of the danger. Thénardier was counting on this.

Slowly, reluctantly, he peered out from behind his cover and surveyed the street.

Finding it empty, his shadow likely up somewhere ahead, he let out a breath of relief.

Then he heard a click, and something cold and hard snapped around his wrist.

Bewildered, he turned to find a young red-haired man standing behind him, looking straight into his eyes with the calm of one who knows he is justified. A short chain linked the pair of manacles between their wrists.

“Monsieur,” he said, “you are under arrest.”

***

Javert was at his wit’s end. If the man managed to elude him now, if he understood he was being actively hunted, who knew how long it would be until he turned up again? He was a crafty lot, certainly no fool, and if he got wind of danger he’d stay holed up for months, or even move.

With each empty alley and intersection he passed, Javert grew more and more incensed.

How could he have lost sight of him? Where had he gone?

Javert grit his teeth.
Damn the man! Damn him, damn him ...

The sound of scuffling broke him from his thoughts, and he whipped his head around to face the alley it had come from.

Muscles tensed, he took a firmer stance and gripped his bludgeon tightly, the short leaden cane trembling in his hand.

All of a sudden Leroux came stumbling out of the alley up ahead, nearly losing his balance, as though he’d been shoved forcefully from behind. He managed to catch himself, however, and rose, quivering, to his feet.

Javert was overcome with horror at the sight of him.

The boy was clutching his abdomen with a look of shock, blood pouring between his fingers. His eyes were wide, wide, as he looked up and shambled towards him.

“Inspe ...?”

He didn’t even finish the word before he lost his footing and fell to his hands and knees.

Javert felt again that sensation of crashing, plummeting, as the ground beneath him collapsed. Of disbelief, and dread. For a moment this paralyzed him—but the boy’s fall snapped him out of it.

He rushed to his side, making sure to check their surroundings and assure himself of their safety before turning his full attention to Leroux.

“You— You should go after him,” the boy breathed, even as he was staring off at the cobblestones with incomprehensible horror. “He’s getting away.”

“Are you kidding me?” Javert exclaimed, his thoughts a panicked flurry as he grabbed the boy by the shoulders. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

He shoved him backwards onto the stones, so that he lay flat on his back, and began fumbling with his waistcoat and shirt. Already they were slick with blood, and his fingers slipped a few times on the buttons before he could get them open.

When he did, and Leroux’s abdomen was exposed, Javert froze.

One.

Two.

Three.

Three gaping red slits in his stomach.

He stared down at them for a second, hand wavering in the air, before tearing the already ruined waistcoat off the boy and pressing it to the wounds.

Leroux gave an agonized grunt at that, grimacing and tilting his head back on the pavement. “I’m sorry,” he choked out. “I’m sorry. I should have waited. I disobeyed you. I just— I wanted to block his escape routes for you, I wanted—”

“I know; I know. You were trying to help. I can’t fault you for being overzealous.”
“But he— Now you’ve lost him.”

“I’ll find him again just as soon, don’t you worry on that.” He tried to sound calm, and collected, but truth be told, panic was setting his heart aflame. “Now stop talking,” he said, “You’ll make it worse.”

“Inspecto—” A grunt of pain cut his words short. “You—”

“Quiet, now. I have to stop the bleeding.”

The boy writhed beneath him, head tossing side to side on the pavement. Clutched at Javert’s hands over the wound, muscles tensed and shaking.

Javert could not help but fixate on the crimson stain that was steadily seeping its way through the fabric. The hot, sticky mess on his leather gloves. He breathed, and he could taste the sharp tang of iron in the back of his mouth.

How long was it supposed to take to stop? How deep were these wounds? What had they hit? Javert did not know, but he felt dread like a stone in his stomach.

“Inspe— Inspector,” the boy breathed, his voice strained. Tears fell down the sides of his face.

“You’re going to be fine,” he told him, much too quickly. “I’ll fetch a doctor. As soon as this bleeding slows.”

As soon as this ... damned ... bleeding ... 

He glanced down again and was not reassured by what he saw.

Leroux let out a pathetic laugh that bordered on the deranged. “I don’t ... think that will be necessary, sir ...”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

“You don’t have to pretend, Inspector. I know ... how this looks. I know I’m not going to ... be making it home for supper, tonight.”

Javert’s expression tightened. “Stop,” he breathed, “Stop this.”

“Y-you know,” Leroux started, knitting his brow, “I’ve always ... looked up to you.” His eyes shone with admiration. “I wanted ... to be like you. To be ... as good as you, one day. But ...” He gave a half-hearted grin. His face—god, his face was so pale. “I don’t ... think that’s going to happen, anymore.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Javert insisted. Frantic now, yet still trying for composure, he began unbuckling their belts and fastening them around the boy’s abdomen, as tight as he could. “You have always excelled at your post. Far better than Bisset or Lefèvre. The most eager to help, the most willing to learn. You could not do your duty any better. And I ... am honored to serve beside you.”

The boy’s expression lit up, even as he began choking on his pain. “Th-thank you, sir. You make me happy with your words.” He shuddered, clutching instinctively at the holes in his abdomen. “Ah, I think I’m—” He fought back the agony that was no doubt overwhelming him. “This is ...”
Javert grit his teeth. “Leroux …”

“No—tell my mother—there’s some banknotes under my mattress. I was saving them for something, but it doesn’t matter, anymo— Nngh.”

“She won’t need them,” he heard himself say. “She won’t need them, damnit, not when she still has you.”

Leroux let out another shaky laugh. “I’m a bad son, aren’t I? To leave like this. Tell her it’s my fault; tell her I was stupid. Tell her—”

“Goddamnit,” Javert choked out, “—will you just—stop … bloody talking.”

He felt the grip on his hands began to weaken.

“Don’t worry. It doesn’t … hurt so much, anymore.” The boy turned to look back up at him, his throat bobbing. “Inspector … D-don’t listen to … the things they say about you at the station.” His green eyes began to cloud over, the pain in his face slowly fading as his eyelids drooped. “You are … so much better than them.”

“Leroux—” He tapped the boy’s cheek; jostled him. “Leroux—”

If the child’s eyes still saw, if was not an earthly vision they beheld.

“Don’t feel … bad about this,” he heard Leroux murmur. Just barely. “It’s not … your fault.”

And then it seemed as though something lifted from him, and his body settled on the cobblestones.

“Leroux—”

For a moment, Javert hung over him, motionless, helpless, his hands still trembling over the boy’s wounds, still clutching at his flesh as though if he tried hard enough he could knit it back together with his fingers alone.

A gasping breath, something almost akin to a sob—that was all he permitted himself.

And then the anger set in.

“I’ll see him hang for this,” he swore beneath his breath. “I’ll see him hang.”

He slid his arms beneath the boy and picked him up, struggling to his feet.

Leroux hung limply in his arms as he ran.

***

The gamin surveyed the man sitting on the edge of the sidewalk with both caution and curiosity. He’d observed him skulking about the street for some time, glancing this way and that. Now he seemed to be waiting for something.

The man wore the clothes of an ordinary laborer, a flat cap obscuring his eyes and the tufts of
his curly white hair. He certainly did not seem like a Bourgeois, and so, his appearance was less intimidating.

The boy crept up behind him from the mouth of an alley, as quietly as he could. “And what are you up to, then?” he asked. “—perusing my street thusly.”

The man did not startle, nor look at him. “It’s your street, is it?”

“In a manner of speaking. What’s it to you?”

“Convenient, possibly.”

“Eh?”

The man drew in a deep breath, lowering his voice. “What would I do if I wanted to get a letter to someone?”

“You would go and find a mail-carrier.”

“And if I wanted to do it discreetly?”

This was spoken with the air of someone who has been on the wrong side of the law, and does not plan to be caught there again. Such an air, to the gamin of the streets, is almost as familiar as bread, and smacks of opportunity.

The boy studied him. Put his hands on his hips and walked around to face him. “I could be persuaded to help with that. But what do I get in return?”

“The contents of my purse, mayhap?”

“For all I know that could be naught but air. You’ll show me it’s not empty if you want me to work.”

Finally the man looked up at him, the shadow rising from his brow to reveal eyes that were somehow soft and sharp at the same time. Slowly, he reached into his jacket and withdrew a coin.

At the glint of metal the boy reached for it, but the man snatched it back before he could tell what it was, leaning towards him and raising his eyebrows.

The boy crossed his arms with a huff. “Fine. I’ll listen.”

“There’s a man who’s received letters around here before. I don’t know where he lives, or what name he’s going under, or what he even looks like at present—”

The gamin let out a laugh. “And you want me to find this person? An enigma! How am I to know what I’m looking for?”

“It’s not what you know, per se. More like, what your friends might know.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“The man I’m looking for used to be an innkeeper in Montfermeil. Lived at the Gorbeau house, for awhile. Likes to talk about his time in the army. He goes by many names. Fabantou, Jondrette. But his real name is Thénardier.”

The boy’s ears perked up. “Thénardier?”
Javert stood inside the darkened courtyard of the Hôtel-Dieu, pacing back and forth.

Stopping, he clenched his teeth and slammed his fist against the wall with an audible growl, hanging his head. Then, leaning back upon the concrete, he stood staring out into the darkness.

A tremulous breath escaped his lips as he slid to the ground. He sat dejectedly, arms resting on his knees, hair drooping over his face, head in his hand.

“*Damnit,*” he choked out. “*Goddamnit …*”

***

“Where were you off to so late last night, papa?”

Valjean nearly choked on his breakfast. “I didn’t realize anyone had seen me leave.”
“Trying to sneak off, were you?” Cosette laughed.

“Mm.”

“Where to?”

“The river.”

“Ah. But you know, you really shouldn’t be going out at such an hour; you’re liable to run into some kind of danger.”

Valjean only let out a scoff and resumed eating.

“Are you listening to me? You’ve no need for running about in the dark anymore. You’re not a criminal now; it doesn’t matter if anyone recognizes you. Why can’t you go down to the river during the day instead?”

He paused in thought, propping his chin up with a wistful look, eyes wandering. “I find the night more compelling.”

***

Thénardier looked up from the letter with wide eyes, unable to believe its contents.

“You saw the man that wrote this?” he asked.

The carrot-topped gamin that had delivered it to him pursed his lips, cocking his head. “I saw the man that gave it to me.”

“Was he the one that wrote it, though?”

“Don’t know. Could be.”

“Well what did he look like?”

The boy took a deep breath and let out a sigh, glancing up at the ceiling. “Mm ... I’d say he was around fifty-something. White hair.”

“He’d fit the bill,” he muttered under his breath. “Did he look like he had money?”

“Oh, he didn’t look it, but he had money all right. Lots.”

“How do you know that?”

“Gave me this.” He held up the silver écule.

Thénardier let out an awestruck breath. No policeman or informant in their right mind would give such a coin in return for a simple messenger’s delivery. The man was certainly no spy, and, furthermore, he had to be rich. Perhaps the letter was genuine after all.

“Well, I thank you for your services,” he said, a nervous elation brewing in his gut. “Be on your way, now.”
“Just one thing before I leave,” said the gamin.

“And what’s that?”

The child paused. Looked up at him with a suddenly serious air. “Do you know what happened to Gavroche?"

Thénardier went cold. “Gavroche?”

“Your son.”

He stared down at the little urchin in a stupor. “He’s dead,” he said flatly. “He died at a barricade.”

After a second’s scrutiny the boy lowered his face and nodded slowly. “Right,” he said to himself. And then, more softly, “Right. I thought so.” He stood solemnly, his eyes on the floor, before tipping his cap and heading off.

Thénardier watched him go with a perplexing amount of agitation, his mouth twitching. “Who’s asking after him?” he called from the doorstep.

“Don’t pretend that you care,” the boy called back. Then he vanished into the night.

***

It was no small feat, but Javert managed to pick up the trail.

Dressed in beggar’s rags, his long hair done up in braids under a cap, and a ragged scarf around his chin, he’d loitered around the corners of every slum within walking distance of the market plaza, eyes and ears attentive to the slightest detail.

One evening, just as the sun was setting, he’d spotted him, and managed to follow him unperceived. He could have arrested him right then and there—and lord, how he wanted to. But there was something which, even zealous and enraged as he was, stayed his hand. In the hours upon hours he’d spent laying in wait, a troubling thought had occurred to him.

Thénardier had ties to Patron Minette.

Not thin ties, either. It was likely that they’d worked multiple jobs together.

And though Javert had arrested the most of that gang two winters prior, one of them had managed to elude capture, by virtue of his absence during the police raid: Montparnasse.

And then, during transport, another—Claquesous—had gone missing. So miraculous was his disappearance that it had been no surprise to Javert when he’d found out the man had been later killed working as an agent for the police during the June Rebellion. At the very same barricade Javert had been sent to spy on, nonetheless. Not that they’d had a chance to catch sight of one another before the former had met his end.

In any case, whatever side he had been on, Claquesous was dead, and that head of Patron Minette was long gone.
But, like a hydra, it had been replaced—or so Javert had heard.

Likely with the help of Montparnasse, Thénardier had managed to escape prison, along with leaders of the gang: Brevet and Gueulemer. Another convict, who had previous ties to the Patron Minette, had escaped with them as well. The man’s name was Brujon, and it was suspected that he had taken Claquesous’ place as one of the four heads.

That had been more than a year and a half ago, and the gang had been given plenty of time to regroup.

At the same time, there were no crimes at this point which could be directly attributed to them, so either they’d kept themselves scarce, or they’d just been very, very good at secrecy.

More than anything, Javert would like to recapture these men, and disband this group for good—as he’d tried, and failed to, before. Crime was one thing, but organized crime was quite another. There would inevitably remain a smoldering evil in the world, flaring up now and again; this was a constant, and could not be helped but to be dealt with as needed. But to allow a true blaze of it to break out was deadly, and inexcusable.

Javert would have liked to see Thénardier’s head on a chopping block as soon as possible, but right now, there were bigger things at stake. The matter of his vengeance paled in comparison to the oaths he had sworn to protect the city.

Javert had managed to find where Thénardier was holed up, but the rat was worth more to him as bait than he was in chains.

At the moment, he seemed to be preparing for something. The man looked antsy. Anxious. He went multiple times to the market; had bought a lamp, and oil for it—but the windows of his poor domicile remained black at night.

More than this, however, Javert had seen him receive more than a few notes.

If he was preparing for a criminal undertaking, Thénardier was poorly staffed. He had no one left but his daughter, and so, he likely needed hired help to complete any substantial job. This, possibly—hopefully—explained the letters.

Lingering around corners, and hoping his presence was dismissed, Javert spied on tirelessly, waiting.

*Lead me to Patron Minette.*

***

Late Saturday evening a note was dropped off for Valjean.

‘Can’t make it this week,’ it read. ‘There’s something I need to take care of. –J’

Valjean ran his thumb over the initial before sighing and shoving the paper in his pocket.

It was just as well, he supposed. He, too, had business to attend to.
It took three days, but eventually Javert’s patience was rewarded.

Thénardier had, late one night, gone to scope out a building. Or at least, that was what Javert assumed he was doing, because there didn’t seem to be anyone else there.

It was a large warehouse for a nearby distillery, nestled in a manufacturing district. With a two story tall ceiling, it was where they sent casks and barrels of liquor to age until properly fermented.

Perplexingly enough, Thénardier possessed a key to the place, and simply walked right in. Javert, unnoticed, circled the building, keeping to the shadows and peering through the barred windows.

Inside, rows of huge casks lined the walls, each bigger than five men put together. Alongside these were groups of smaller barrels. These were branded with marks of their contents.

By the door stood an enormous mahogany bottle rack. The distillery must have recently collected some stock, because for the moment it sat mostly empty. Behind the rack, a wall partitioned off a flight of stairs that led down to the subterranean storage.

A catwalk ran on three sides of the building’s interior, over the casks, behind the rack, and out to a balcony on the second story. It was accessed with a removable ladder.

Thénardier wandered around inside, eyes drifting this way and that, hands on his hips. Looked at the catwalk. The casks. The rack on the wall. All the while, rubbing his chin and murmuring things to himself.

To Javert’s surprise, the man did nothing further, and, after seemingly assessing the place, nodded to himself and left, even relocking the door. From there, he went straight home, and moments later sent out another letter with a gamin that looked like he could use some sleep.

The only logical thing to be discerned from all of this was that the warehouse must have been agreed upon as a meeting place for some other nefarious deed. Which meant, of course, that there was to be a meeting, and soon.

His hopes soared.

When Thénardier set off to the warehouse again a few days later, Javert managed to slip into the building after him unseen. This was managed by the use of his lock-pick’s kit, and the fact that he had taken the opportunity earlier to grease the hinges of the warehouse door, so that it could be opened without being perceived. (He kept the door to his own chambers poorly—which, in this case, is to say carefully—so that the opposite effect was achieved.)

Upon his stealthy arrival he placed himself behind the row of larger casks, flush with the wall. This obscured him both with cover and shadow, for the warehouse was very dark, illuminated only by the oil lamp Thénardier had brought with him, and the few candles he had lit with it.
Javert had watched the man climb up the ladder to what would typically be the foreman’s place, and then draw the ladder up so that the catwalk could no longer be accessed. And, of course, Thénardier had been sure to raid what few bottles of spirits remained in the massive rack before ascending to his perch, and he now sat nursing one up above, with the rest in an open crate behind him.

After these things, it seemed the preparations had been completed, for the man no longer moved; only watched the door and windows carefully.

For hours, it seemed, both men lay in wait.

Then, nearing midnight, the door opened; a silhouette entered the gloom.

Thénardier got to his feet.

Footsteps sounded slow and sure from the darkness, and echoed in the vast chamber of the warehouse. From out of the shadows, and into the circle of lamplight, stepped a lone figure.

Javert gave a start.

It was, to his complete astonishment, Jean Valjean.

***

Footnotes:

[1] Silver coins, or other silver objects, were sometimes called ‘pieces of white’, likely due to the way the particular metal reflected light. A five-franc coin, also known as a one-écu coin, was worth about a hundred sous at the time. Seeing that one sou is about the price of a loaf of bread at the time, this is a huge sum of money for a homeless child. Écus largely disappeared during the French Revolution but the five-franc type remained in mint throughout the nineteenth century.

[2] The Hôtel-Dieu is the oldest hospital in Paris, and still in use today—one of the oldest operating hospitals in the world. It lies on the Île de la Cité, next to the Notre Dame cathedral. Its two parts were built in the 7th, and the 17th centuries, and it was the only hospital in Paris until the Renaissance. It was founded by Saint Landry in 651CE. At the time, as it had been since its inception, the hospital was run in part by Augustinian nuns, and was a charity. It was also one of the biggest and most important hospitals in Paris, and is still one of the main centers for emergency care.

Chapter End Notes

I DID IT; I STABBED THE CINNAMON ROLL
**Leroux:** So word around the office is that ur a virgin??

**Javert:** Leroux. I want you to look at me. Look deep into my eyes

**Javert:** Does this look like the face of someone who cares

**Leroux:** "The risk I took was calculated, but man, am I bad at math."

The chapter title means "The Wheel of Fortune", which is the name of a particular tarot card.

Oh, hey, remember how Navet exists?

Thénardier stabbed Leroux so he could filch the keys to the manacles off of him, if that wasn't clear. Since Leroux decided to be a genius and handcuff himself TO a criminal already wanted for the attempted murder of a police officer ... (Not that he knew who he was). Also, he actually surrendered to Leroux momentarily, until they got close to Javert, so that he could shove Leroux out where Javert would see him, and be distracted.

Valjean be like: "I AM the danger! I Am! The One Who Knocks!"

Suggested Listening:

Best Laid Plans - Geoff Zanelli

Castle in The Mist (Main Theme) - Michiru Ōshima

Leonardo's Inventions Pt 1 - Jesper Kyd

Streets of Nassau - Bear McCreary

The Banner of Captain Flint - Bear McCreary
He strode into the lamplight like an actor onto a stage, like a boxer into the ring, like a king into his kingdom. It was from the underworld whence he had sprung, and by his gait, and the look in his eyes, it remained as familiar to him as the first day. Perhaps, in a way, he had never left it.

Arms folded behind his back, Valjean stood and stared fixedly up at Thénardier.

Their meeting had been arranged; this much was evident. The sight of two criminals making a secret rendezvous in some unseemly place, to discuss unseemly business, was commonplace for Javert—and yet, the scene before him, with the players therein, was entirely unprecedented.

What on earth was Valjean doing here? And what was that expression he had?

Thénardier looked just as surprised as Javert felt. A nervous sounding laugh escaped the man’s throat. “Monsieur! You are … not who I was expecting.”

“No,” said Valjean. “I suppose I’m not.”

Then—then it was Valjean who’d arranged this, Javert realized. And through means of deception, no less!

Thénardier cracked a wry and wary grin. A breath of perturbation issued from his nostrils. “You are not the brother of Georges Pontmercy.”

“Technically, by law of marriage, I am. So you can leave any claims of forgery you may be
entertaining at the door.”

The man paused at that, as though he truly had been considering such claims. “Why have you come, precisely?” he finally asked. “I suspect it’s not because of what happened at Waterloo.”

“Oh, we will be speaking of Waterloo, to be sure,” Valjean promised coolly. “But I think we both know why I’m here.”

With a glint in his eye, he produced a letter from the breast pocket of his coat and drew it across his lips.

“This,” he said, “is blackmail.”

Javert felt, oddly, a surge of pride at the utter calm, and detestation, in the man’s voice.

There was, within Valjean at that moment, the resolution and gravity of the mayor, and the cunning strength of the convict, combined in a singular and profound aspect.

Thénardier stared down at the letter in silence. The corner of his mouth drew down, for a moment, into a frown. Then a lackadaisical grin plastered itself across his face, and he gave a shrug, palms in the air. “Well,” he scoffed, “I got nothing for it. And it cannot possibly harm you any further. They let you off the hook. It is all in the past; I have no leverage against you now. Why so cross, old man?”

There was a darkness in Valjean’s tone that Javert had not heard in a long time. “Don’t think I don’t comprehend how I came into the hands of the police.”

The last time Javert had heard such forewarning in the man’s voice was by the side of a deathbed.

Thénardier paused for a moment. “Now, why would I spoil a perfectly good blackmail by letting the secret slip?”

“Because you are a petty, spiteful little man.”

Again, Javert swelled with pride at this, the dangerous part of Valjean, hardened and steadfast, like the dark side of the moon. There was within it the menacing air he had always suspected the man of having—back when he thought that men could not change—but perfectly constrained in the placid serenity of authority.

Valjean reminded him suddenly of—of himself, he realized. This was exactly the air that he took in negotiating with malefactors—at least, when his humor dried up.

“Come, why do you believe it was me who ratted you out?” asked Thénardier. He maintained an amiable tone, but could not hide his unease from Javert, who, master of subtle expression himself, perceived everything in the countenance of men.

“Do you refute it?” said Valjean.

“Again, I ask you, sir, what had I to gain in the act?”

“Satisfaction, chiefly.”

“Damn a man for satisfaction alone?” the man said, as though truly insulted. “Never.”

“Your lies are not going to save you, this time.”
Thénardier gazed down at him considerately. With an affable, lopsided grin, he draped himself across the balcony railing and propped his chin up in his hand. Whatever facade he had been maintaining before, he seemed to drop it. “Well, you certainly proved yourself gullible enough in the past,” he said. “But no longer, eh? Can’t fool you twice. Jean Valjean.”

He gave a wistful sigh. “A mayor, hm? And an inventor. A manufacturer! Rich, powerful, dearly beloved by his townspeople ... It’s a pity you got caught. You really did have everything, didn’t you? A king among peasants in the criminal world. How far the mighty have fallen. Ah, but that money you made there, you still managed to secure it. Isn’t that right?”

“And you’re doing quite well for yourself these days, it seems. An honest-to-god pardon, arm-in-arm with a well-respected family ... your daughter married to a handsome young man—a baron, no less! Good for her.” The man narrowed his eyes. “How is she doing, anyway, monsieur? That girl you stole from me. What was her name again?” he said, with the tone of one who has forgotten nothing. “‘Clochette’?[1] Or was it ‘Coquette’?[2] Ah! No, I recall; it was ‘Couchette’. [3]”

That had hit a nerve. Expression twitching, Valjean bared his teeth. “You will leave her out of this,” he growled.

“I would be perfectly happy to leave her out of this,” the man exclaimed. “In fact, I would be perfectly happy to leave the whole country! I hear America is nice this time of year. But I haven’t the funds to go. Why do you think I resorted to blackmail in the first place?” He rolled over so that his back rested on the railing, his face to the ceiling with a dreamy expression. “Word is, there’s this young couple who’ve come into possession of a fortune made off the entire jet industry of this pretty little seaside town.[4] Hundreds of thousands of francs!” He shot a sideways sneer at Valjean. “Can you imagine it? I can’t.”

“You will leave. My family. Alone.”

“Pardi, all that money, and it’s just sitting there. A right waste, if you ask me. I could think of a million better things to do with it. In fact, I’m thinking of a few right now.” He gave a huff. “I’ll tell you what, Jean,” he said, throwing up a hand, “You don’t like me being here. I don’t want to stay here. Things have gotten too hot for me in France these days. You pay me, and I’ll get out of your hair. For good, this time. How does, say, thirty thousand francs sound?”

Valjean was silent.

“You know what? I like you. Twenty thousand.”

“You shall not receive a single centime from me.”

The man’s lighthearted tone dropped into something bitter and strained. “And why is that?”

“It is no longer my money to give.”

Thénardier let out an overdramatic sigh. “Valjean, Valjean, Valjean ... I don’t think you comprehend the deal you’re getting here. A little money, and I’m gone forever. Overseas. Never to return. You have six hundred thousand francs, by some accounts. What is twenty thousand compared to that? A trifle!”

“The money belongs to Cosette.”

“Then perhaps you can convince her.”

“I have this sneaking suspicion she would not feel particularly charitable towards you,” Valjean
snarked.

“No, I’m sure she does not remember me fondly. All the more reason to make me disappear from your lives.”

Valjean only narrowed his eyes.

“So stubborn, you are!” Thénardier remarked with a laugh. “I thought you wanted me to leave?”

No reply.

The man clicked his tongue. “Hey! I’ve a question for you, Jean. Why haven’t you had me arrested?”

Javert knit his brow. Why hadn’t Valjean brought the authorities into this?

“Leverage,” said Valjean.

Thénardier raised his eyebrows. “Leverage? Really. But, in having me arrested, would it not get me out of your lives?”

“You’ve escaped sentencing before.”

“Ah, that’s true. You want a more personal assurance of my departure, is that it?”

“It would be better for everyone involved.”

“Then why do you not pay me to leave?”

Valjean seemed to think on this seriously. “I offered you money once,” he finally said. “It was not enough. You could have taken it, but your heart was full of avarice. You wanted as much as you could get. Say I pay you to leave. Today. Tomorrow. It doesn’t matter. What assurance do I have that you would actually go? Why should I not expect you on my doorstep, dredging up more of my past and demanding more, if only because you can?”

Thénardier rubbed his chin. “So you’ve come here to threaten me instead.” He furrowed his brow. “But your threat is my arrest? That’s contradictory, m’sieur. You said yourself I might escape.”

“You might not.”

“I might yet.”

“I don’t think you want to take that risk.”

Thénardier just frowned at him.

“You don’t have to leave the country,” said Valjean. “The city would be enough. That doesn’t cost you much of anything. Take your family and go. Before I change my mind.”

“Before you change your ...?” The man cocked his head. “You really do hesitate to have me arrested,” he realized aloud. “But why?“ He looked dumbfounded. Then slowly, a disbelieving grin spread across his face. He began to chuckle. The chuckles turned into cackling laughter, his hands on his hips, his head thrown back.

“It’s because I have children, isn’t it?” he laughed. “My god; you really are as soft as they all
say!” He stood with the spitefully triumphant air of a man who had just found his bargaining chip.

In that moment, Javert wanted to tear him apart.

Valjean remained quiet, neither confirming nor denying this accusation.

Javert knew it was true.

Thénardier’s humor hardened into anger. He went rigid all at once, leaning out towards him and grabbing the balcony rail like a hawk digging its talons into its prey. “If you’re so damn concerned for us then pay up, you old fool!”

Valjean’s voice rose to match his, filling the warehouse. “You’ll get nothing from me, do you hear? You don’t deserve a denier! Now get out of Paris, while I still let you go!”

“Or what?” the man scoffed. “You’ll summon that inspector of yours? That ugly old guard dog? That darkie?”

Javert clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes. Hands on his knees, he rose to his feet. “Oh come now,” he sighed, stepping out of the shadows with a disappointed look on his face. “Is that really the best you could do? ‘Darkie’? Surely you can think of more creative derisions than that.”

Both men turned to look at him in total shock.

Valjean’s authoritative visage vanished instantly. He stood wearing the same stupefied expression he’d worn the other times Javert had come calling unannounced—only amplified threefold.

Thénardier, clearly, was horrified. He turned his attention back to Valjean. “You!” he accused, jabbing a finger at him. “You brought him here!”

“Honestly,” Valjean said, “I’m just as surprised to see him here as you are, but that’s beside the point.”

Javert glanced over at him. “Back to our old habits, are we?”

“Only when the need arises,” Valjean mumbled.

“I see.”

They both turned a steady eye on Thénardier.

“You do realize you’ve ruined my entire plan, yes?” he heard Valjean say.

“Your entire plan was to let him escape conviction! You know I can’t abide by that. I don’t even know why you can abide by it—except that I do,” he muttered. “But you’re a damned fool for it.”

Valjean sighed. “I know.” After a moment he added, “How do you plan to get up there?” — referring to the catwalk, Javert surmised.

“You’re going to help me with that.”

“Ah.”

“Oh, will you quit mumbling to yourselves down there!” Thénardier exclaimed. His face was
red with either rage or embarrassment. Likely a mixture of the two.

“You’re right, of course;” Javert said, “—you’re right. We should get down to business. Now then—” A wild, crazed sort of thrill overcame him. “You’re under arrest, Thénardier, for prison-break and multiple accounts of attempted murder. You’ve been a thorn in France’s side for far too long. And in ours, in particular. Now come quietly,” he sneered, “and we won’t be forced to manhandle you.”

Thénardier stared at them with a scowl. Clicked his tongue. “The blazes with you.”

The next thing Javert knew there was a lantern being flung at them.

Instinctively, he leapt away, extending a shielding arm and putting himself between the projectile and Valjean.

This effort was in vain, however. Not because it failed; rather, because it proved unnecessary. The lantern hit the floorboards with a loud clang and a tinkling, the glass of its globe shattering upon impact—but, aside from this, nothing came of it.

“Oh,” Javert said flatly. “That was ... much less explosive than I’d anticipa—”

He was cut off by Thénardier hurling a bottle of liquor at the floor, which promptly shattered as well, and, ignited by the still-burning wick of the lantern, flumed into an alcohol-fueled flash fire.

Javert jumped back with a start, pushing Valjean out of the way as he did.

Taking in the swath of flames, and how close they had been, he looked up at Thénardier and scowled.

Next thing he knew, there was an ominous creaking noise behind them, and Valjean was yelling his name and shoving him forwards.

He barely managed to turn around before he hit the floor, striking the hard wooden boards flat on his back.

And then he found himself gazing up at Valjean, who loomed not six inches from his face, bearing the weight of the enormous mahogany bottle rack on his back.

They stared at one another in mutual shock for a moment, frozen.

All around them were the sounds of bottles shattering. Of ignition.

Orange light spilled beneath the rack, lighting up their faces.

There were multiple pairs of footsteps up above, running, and then a door slamming shut. And after, nothing but the sounds of the flames.

Then the gravity of the situation sunk in.

That rack was half the size of the wall; it had to weigh upwards of eight hundred pounds. Some of its weight was distributed on the floor, but that still left somewhere around four or five hundred pounds of it squarely on Valjean’s back.

Valjean was strong, but he wasn’t that strong. Even he had finally buckled under the weight of Fauchelevent’s cart, saved only by the last second cooperation of the onlookers.
Already, Javert could see the man’s muscles trembling as he fought to keep it up, his expression strained.

There was a frantic resolve in his eyes. “Javert,” he hissed between clenched teeth, “get out.”

“But—”

“Get out, while I can still hold it.”

Javert began trying to turn himself over onto his stomach. “Let me—let me at least try to—” He managed to slide out from under Valjean, and rise on his hands, pushing up against the rack along with him. It lifted a little, but not much.

“You can’t lift this yourself!” Valjean barked.

“Neither can you!”

“Damnit, Javert! Get out and get help! Or so help me God, I’ll drop this on the both of us!”

The blood drained from Javert’s face at that remark.

“I—I’ll find something to prop it up!” he said, scrambling out from beneath.

A terrible sight met his eyes as he rose to his feet. He imagined it was something like being in Hell. All around them, in wide swaths, the floor was burning. The whole warehouse was lit with dancing glows and shadows. And, steadily, the flames were creeping towards the walls.

“Javert, that’s not what I—”

“It’ll only take a second!”

Of that, he wasn’t so sure. There wasn’t much actually in this place. He thought of the crate Thénardier had left up on the catwalk, despairing that it was out of reach. Perhaps there were more in the cellar?

“Javert!” Valjean sounded like he reaching the end of his wits.

The warehouse was filling up with thick, acrid smoke. How much longer could either of them stay in here? His lungs were starting to get irritated.

“Just hold on;” he shouted back, “I’ll find something!”

“Javert,—”

He turned around to find Valjean staring up at him with a plaintive, guilty look in his eyes.

“Javert, I—” The man cast a glance backwards, as though reluctant. “I can’t,” he finally admitted. “My leg is caught. You have to go.”

A fresh bout of fear struck his heart.

“No,” he said gruffly. “No! I’m not leaving without you!”

“Goddamnit, Javert! Clear out of here!”

Javert’s eyes darted around frantically in the flickering light, searching desperately, desperately
for something with which to prop it up. “Not without—!”

He glanced back to him for a split second, and in that second he could see the man falter, see his strength reach its breaking point.

Valjean looked up at him in that moment, as though he could feel himself slipping, and he met his eyes with a helpless smile, full of celestial suffering—that same smile he had given him after he’d crawled out from under Fauchelevent’s cart, knowing himself damned, but for goodness’s sake.

Javert bore that smile with mute horror, and watched powerless as the man’s muscles gave out and the rack came down on him with an audible crack.

He stood paralyzed, unable to stave off the surge of utter helplessness he felt.

“Damnit,” he squeaked, his voice cracking as he clawed at his scalp. When next his mouth opened it was in a desperate, mournful roar. “Jean!” (In truth, he had meant to say ‘Valjean’, but the ‘Val’ had caught in his throat.)

He darted to the rack, and tried to deadlift it, but it was no use that way. Not even Valjean could lift it at that angle.

Even if he managed to lift it, how was he going to get under it and pull Valjean out? He needed something not just to prop it up, but to slide underneath it and expand the angle even more.

But what the hell was he supposed to use for that? The only things in here were barrels and casks, filled to the brim! There was no way he was managing any of those.

Coughing, he took the tattered blue scarf around his neck and fastened it around his nose and mouth like a mask. This helped his breathing some, but did nothing to soothe the burning in his eyes.

It was getting insufferably hot in here. That, combined with the smoke, was starting to make his instincts kick in. Everything in his body began screaming for escape.

Maybe Valjean was right. Maybe he needed to go get help.

But how long would that take? How long did they have?

*Damnit* ...

First thing first: he needed to get some ventilation in here, get some fresh air in his lungs. He could barely breathe.

Darting to the doors, he found they wouldn’t open.

He set to kicking them, but after a few moments it became clear that would not be enough.

Feeling a twinge of fear, he rammed them with the full weight of his body.

Yet still!

He threw himself against the doors again and again, but they held fast. For a split-second, through the crack, he caught sight of something dark and thin between them. Panic hit him full force as he realized it was a chain. Someone had chained the doors closed after they’d entered.
His gaze darted frantically around the warehouse, looking for some means of escape. It was as he took in the catwalk, and the barred windows, the rack, and the huge casks of alcohol, that it dawned on him:

This had been the plan from the start.

It had been a risky meeting for Thénardier for sure, and this had been his strategy: exact a large sum of money from his guest, or—if things went south, and it turned out to be trap set by the police—burn them to a cinder.

They had planned for this; *they had planned for this.*

No witnesses if no one gets out.

A shudder ran through him.

Javert had rarely felt fear—true fear. But what he was experiencing now could only be described as terror.

He swore he could see his life flashing before his eyes, but he hadn’t the time to entertain it. Instead, he fixed his mind on one thing and one thing only: escape.

There was little to no chance he was getting up on the catwalk, and besides that, it was likely they’d chained the door up there, too. And he knew for a fact that there was no exit from the basement. On top of that, even if he broke the glass in the windows, the iron bars cemented into their frames were too close together to squeeze through, and far too fat for him to bend.

What then, could he do?

He started off again but slipped on some shards of glass, and hit the floor, just barely refraining from hitting his head.

Looking up at his surroundings—nothing but roaring fire and clouds of smoke—he felt true helplessness set in.

A vision of himself passing out and being consumed by the flames danced before him. Trapped, unable to get out.

How ridiculous, that only a few days ago he had been sneaking in here to make sure he could get *in*, oiling the hinges of those blasted doors without the slightest idea that—

His eyes bulged.

*The hinges!*

Scrambling to his feet, he ran to the door and began pulling out the rods that held the hinges together. Greased so recently, they came out like a hot knife through butter, and rang as they dropped to the floor. When all four were out, he grabbed hold of the doors’ handles and tugged. The metal of the hinges shrieked as it grinded against itself, but still the doors remained in place. Gritting his teeth, he jiggled them furiously, then braced himself, pushing away with his leg against the doorframe. With one last tug, the weight of his whole body behind it, the doors pried loose.

Javert staggered back as they crashed down before him, still chained together, a rush of smoke blowing past his head and out into the open air.
He ran out into the open, falling to his hands and knees, tearing the scarf from his face, and sucking in the fresh air. He gasped like a drowning man, still coughing from the smoke.

Reinvigorated, he rose to his feet and ran off towards the nearest street crossing.

The longer he took to get help, the longer Valjean was under there. The terrible thought of ‘Is he even still alive?’ crossed his mind, but he reviled at it immediately.

He had to be.

He had to be.

That was what Javert chose to believe. And, no matter what, he was not leaving him in there, in that smoke, in those flames. Not while there was any chance of saving him, however slim it might be.

But how was he going to lift that damned rack? It would take at least two or three able-bodied men. And then, there needed to be someone else to crawl beneath it and pull him out!

This was the manufacturing district, though, and how many buildings around here were still occupied? It had to be one in the morning! If only they were somewhere with houses all around; he could have roused enough people in no time. But Thénardier had picked this place well. If someone screamed, now, was there anyone around to hear it?

God, he thought frantically, there had to be a guard posted around here, somewhere. A gendarme keeping watch on the streets. Someone.

But there was still no one in sight, and no houses. Not even a street lamp. Just factories, and warehouses, as far as the eye could see.

Javert trembled, turning this way and that.

What should he do?

What should he do?

What should he do?

Seized with a fit of desperation, he clenched his teeth and tossed his head like a furious stallion, making up his mind.

He turned around.

It was madness to go back inside by himself. The blaze was getting worse every second. But he could not bring himself to leave while Valjean was still trapped in there.

What was he even going to do to get him out? He didn’t know. But he rushed back in anyway, taking one last gulp of air before diving back into the smoke.

Frantic, and without even quite understanding what he was doing, he climbed up the racks of whiskey barrels.

Which proof was low enough that it wouldn’t light on fire? He had no idea. No time to think on that. He just pulled the stopper out of the one closest to him.

Liquor began pouring onto the floor. To Javert’s dismay, it ignited with an angry hiss. But the
flames couldn’t travel fast enough to compensate for the rush of liquid, and stayed in the growing pool beneath.

It was just as well. Let the place burn, he thought. There was no saving it now.

Having thus lightened the barrel, Javert grabbed hold of it, braced both his legs against the rack, and pulled it off. It tumbled down and hit the floor with a thud. Leaping after it through the flames, he rolled it over to the bottle rack.

His head was empty of thought, now; his body moved as though possessed, with no deliberation or hesitation.

Dropping to his knees, he slid beneath the rack and began hoisting it up on his back. It proved easier to do at this end than it had been when he’d been under the middle of it, and he managed to tug the barrel with one hand and wedge it into place.

He crawled out from beneath the rack, turned his back to it, and began pushing the barrel farther underneath as he lifted it from the edge. After a moment he shifted to a crouching position, ducking beneath the rack and continuing to step, slowly, backwards, the barrel behind him.

About four feet in, Javert let go and turned around again, dropping to his hands and knees, and then, his belly, dragging himself towards Valjean.

He jostled his shoulder, first gently, then rough.

“Valjean. Valjean!”

The man was unresponsive.

With shaking hands he grabbed Valjean’s shoulders and tugged.

His foot was caught.

Javert crawled further back and grabbed hold of his lower calf, twisting and tugging until the ankle pried loose.

Wrapping Valjean’s arm and upper torso over his shoulders, he dragged him out from under the rack.

All around them, everything was made of fire.

Choking on hot soot, Javert hefted him over his shoulders and carried him out as fast as he could.

By the time he got back onto the street, the lower part of Javert’s trousers had caught fire, and he smacked his gloved hands against them furiously until they’d gone out, coughing all the while.

When he’d finally gulped down enough air to sate his screaming lungs, he directed his attention to Valjean.

There was enough light from the blazing warehouse that the street before it was illuminated.

The man’s pale, soft face remained expressionless beneath him, lit by a fiery orange glow. His white hair looked gold in the light.

Was his chest rising? Javert could not tell.
“Valjean,” he breathed, jostling his head. “Valjean—”

Valjean only lay limp on the cobblestones.

Fumbling on account of his nerves, Javert pulled his glass-plated badge from his pocket and held it up to Valjean’s mouth and nose, looking—hoping—to see it fog up with the humid puffs of breath.

It stayed clear.

“No,” he said to himself. “No no-no-no-no—”

Again, he looked frantically around for help. Perhaps someone had seen the fire, or smelled the smoke; perhaps someone had come to investigate—but the streets were empty.

Grimacing, he resorted to the one thing left he could think to do.

Tilting Valjean’s head to the side, and lifting his chin, he began trying to breathe for him.

It had worked for the half-drowned sailors in Toulon—who’s to say it couldn’t work for someone half dead from smoke inhalation?

At least, Javert prayed that was all it was.

He did not let himself think about the crushing weight of that bottle rack, or what it could have done to the man. He could not afford to.

Nor did he allow himself to consider the fact that Thénardier or his cronies could still be lurking around any corner, waiting to see if they’d properly finished the job.

All he focused on was the repetitive, life-saving movements he had been taught so long ago in the South.

Ten thrusts to the chest, hard and fast; pinch the nose and exhale forcefully into the mouth.

He remembered, vaguely, his fellows’ disgust at the idea that they should ever press their lips to a convict’s—even if it might resuscitate them. ‘You couldn’t pay me to,’ one of them had said—and he had silently agreed.

How tides had turned! He would gladly press his lips to his a thousand times if it meant Valjean would live.

There was still so much he hadn’t given him. So much more that he deserved.

How many times had he turned his back on him—spat insults at him, mocked him?

Christ, he’d refused to even give him his name!

Why was he always so cold? Even when he didn’t mean to be.

Was Valjean going to die, now, without having been shown the true gratitude, the true kindness he deserved?

They’d known each other so long, and yet, they’d had so little time together.

He’d thought this was the beginning of something new, something good—a different chapter in
their lives. This couldn’t be the end of it all. Not right now. Not like this.

*It’s all your fault, you know,* a voice said in the back of his head. *Everything bad that’s ever happened to him. And now, this. This is your fault, too.*

*If you weren’t there, if you hadn’t been trying to arrest him, maybe—maybe the man wouldn’t have—*

Javert grit his teeth, driving the thoughts out of his head.

Like an automaton, he bent over and over, repeating the same two actions as though they were the only thing he knew how to do. But unlike those mechanical contraptions, each motion he made was imbued with fearful desperation.

At some point, either due to the smoke or his own terror, tears had begun to etch glimmering lines on Javert’s soot-covered face. He was oblivious to this. But, with each breath he gave the man, he tasted salt, and ash, on his lips.

*Breathe, goddamnit.*

*Please. Please. Please.*

*If you died now—*

*I don’t—*

*I couldn’t—*

*God, please.*

*Valjean.*

*Live!*

*Please, please live.*

All of a sudden Valjean shuddered beneath him, and a horrible, rasping wheeze the like of a death rattle escaped his lips.

Javert’s head shot up, heart leaping in his chest. His eyes fixed upon his face. Searched it frantically.

“Valjean,” he said, clasping his cheeks. “Valjean. Can you hear me?”

If the man was aware of anything going on around him, he made no indication of it.

He wasn’t conscious, but he was—with some difficulty—breathing again. And though he was probably injured, he was alive. At least, for now.
Sliding his arm beneath his back, Javert held him, cradling his head against his chest. He gazed down at Valjean, and the vaguely pained expression on his face.

“It was ‘Ferkó’,” he whispered pleadingly, squeezing his eyes shut and pressing his brow to his. “My mother called me ‘Ferkó’.”

In the speaking of these words there was the foolish, desperate hope that, in giving something of himself to him, it would somehow be enough to draw him back through the veil, enough to carry him through whatever wound he had sustained.

***

Footnotes:

[1] A clochette is an ornament in the shape of a bell; this is a joke about the shape of her dress, and possibly a dig at her status and/or their relationship, as in, she is merely a pretty bauble. A clochette can also be a cowbell, which would be a jab at her intelligence.

[2] Coquette: as in, a flirtatious girl, stylish and pretty; uses her beauty to get what she wants.

[3] A couchette is a little bed. Something to lie down on. ‘Coucher’ means ‘to sleep’ but also ‘to have sex with’. Combined with the previous ‘coquette’ Thénardier is blatantly implying a threat.

[4] Montreuil-sur-Mur, at the time Valjean was Mayor, was no longer near the sea; it was originally a port town, but the water receded about ten miles inland during the middle ages, and so the ports closed, and the town fell to ruin. The name still stuck, however, and travelers even today are surprised that the town is not actually by the sea. Thénardier, who has never visited the place, would have no way of knowing this.


[6] At this point in time, the term ‘darkie’ (or darky/darkey) was more patronizing than insulting.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe Francu guessed it. Like, holy shit. I just started squealing and squirming in my seat when I read their comment. I honestly did not expect anyone to figure that one out so quick. I'm so mad but also impressed and proud??

~

I STARTED WRITING THE SUMMARY AND IN THE MIDDLE OF TYPING THE WORD "HEATED" I STOPPED AND NEARLY LAUGHED MYSELF TO DEATH

~
Valjean was claiming to be Georges brother, and offering a reward to his brother's "savior", if that wasn't clear enough.

Whether or not Thénarder saw through this ruse beforehand, I'm still not entirely sure myself, lol. Certainly he was aware of it possibly being a trap fashioned by the police, which is why he took such precautions to ensure he could get away safely. But those precautions may also have had something to due with him suspecting it was really Valjean (who may or may not also have been working with the police). IDK.

~

For CPR, everything Javert does is correct procedure, except it should be thirty thrusts at a time, not ten. I figured they wouldn't have had quite as precise a regimen as modern procedures call for. Either that, or Javert is just remembering it wrong. Thirty thrusts in a row does seem excessive to me.

~

If you think this is the end of this arc, um ... I don't know what to tell you ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

~

Yo hey every time I make these lists I post all these songs in alphabetical order but there's probably a better way to order them because some are obviously just for one specific scene. IDK I trust you're all smart enough to decide which goes to what.

Suggested Listening:

Detroit - Disasterpeace

Eyes On Fire - Blue Foundation

Levi vs Female Titan - Shirō Sagisu

Table 26 - Geoff Zanelli

Train Station Bite Your Tongue - Geoff Zanelli
Echoes

Chapter Summary

A visit to a doctor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It's strange, isn't it, how you don't know how big a part of you someone is until they're threatened? And then you think you can't possibly go on if something happens to them, but the most frightening part is that, actually, you will go on, you'll have to go on, with them or without them. There's just no telling what you'll become.”

-Robin Hobb

***

“Crushed, you say?”

“Yes.”

Valjean lay on the bed, breathing weakly, his face pale and drawn in the candlelight. He had not stirred on the way to the doctor’s save to make a few pitiful noises in his sleep. Even the fiacre driver had not looked terribly hopeful of the situation.

The doctor was younger than the last they’d dealt with—perhaps in his forties or early fifties, black haired, and with a slightly haggard look, as though he rarely got enough rest in his chosen profession. That fact that it was nearing two in the morning did not help. Still, he seemed used to these kind of untimely intrusions, and had roused himself quickly enough.

“He smells like smoke,” the man said.

“There was a fire,” Javert explained, hat in his hands. “He was trapped inside.”

“That’s no good. Let’s take a look, then.” He began removing Valjean’s waistcoat.

Javert faltered for a split-second, protective instincts flaring up again, but he backed down. This was the only way to make sure Valjean was all right.

To get at the blouse, the doctor had to undo Valjean’s cravat. When the strip of starched linen fell away, and the top two buttons of the collar were undone, the scars wreathing his neck were revealed.

Javert tensed at the sight of them, those imprints of the double iron collar that had once been bolted around the man’s neck.
But the doctor did not seem to notice them. That, or he did not understand their significance.

When he unbuttoned further, however, he gave a start.

A grim look flashed across the man’s face, and Javert’s stomach dropped like a stone.

Beneath the curls of white hair, Valjean’s breast was a landscape of red, mottled bruises.

Javert had little experience with these kinds of injuries, but all he could feel was dread. That word, “crushed”, kept repeating itself over and over in his mind.

The doctor ran his fingers over the worst of the bruises, pressing lightly and cocking his head. He made no comment on them, but there seemed a great deal of calculation in his face. “Let us check the other side,” he finally said.

The doctor began peeling Valjean’s shirtsleeves off, and, in doing so, revealed the nasty scars Valjean bore beneath.

Javert froze, having almost forgotten they were there.

“TP” had been branded into Valjean’s right shoulder, for his prison sentence: “travaux (forcés) perpétuité.”[1]

“Ah—this man is …” The doctor hesitated, drawing back for a second. His eyes first bulged, then narrowed, expression stern in the candlelight. Was he trying to discern what kind of person his patient was?

Would that affect the way he treated him?

Javert was compelled to argue on Valjean’s behalf, but the doctor surprised him by pulling the shirt off without further remark.

The long and nasty burn on the inside of Valjean’s left forearm was also revealed—from the affair at the Gorbeau House, Javert surmised.

Carefully, the doctor turned Valjean onto his side.

Long, thick white lines crisscrossed in arcs over his back, the faded impressions of lashings.

Javert took a step back, his throat drying up.

He’d known—must’ve known—that there would be some there, given the man’s time and disobedience in Toulon, but ... to be aware of their possibility, and to see them in actuality, were two very different things. It was raw, and visceral. More real; more terrible. To see such cruelly inflicted marks was to fully admit to himself the brutality that had been and still was employed in the bagnes—and his former indifference to it.

On top of it all, there was something about Valjean’s being unaware of this breach of his privacy which rendered the whole experience far more uncomfortable—almost voyeuristic—and Javert felt a twinge of guilt that he had seen these things without the man’s permission.

Besides a few lighter bruises on his shoulder blades, there did not appear to be any injury to Valjean’s back. Any recent injury, anyway.

The doctor stared at the lash-marks that dug deep into the man’s skin, silent but for the unease in his eyes and the curve of his mouth. After a moment he turned him back over.
He looked like he was about to say something, but a sudden knocking came from downstairs. Giving a weary sigh, he held up a finger to Javert and descended to the lower floor.

Javert watched him from the top of the staircase as he talked to a young man, who held his cap in his hands, eyes low.

“I was told there was a doctor here?”

“Yes; I would be he. What do you need?”

He bent to say something into the doctor’s ear.

“I see. And when did they start?”

“About half an hour ago.”

“Then it can wait a little while. Let me finish up here; I’m almost done.”

The man dipped his head—respectful, although perhaps disheartened and a little worried—before giving his address and taking his leave.

“Sorry about that,” the doctor said as he returned. “The man’s wife has just gone into labor.”

“It’s all right,” Javert heard himself mumble, although nothing felt right at all.

The man went back to examining Valjean, rubbing his brow all the while with a look that did not in any way inspire confidence.

Javert tightened the grip he had on his hat, his knuckles turning white.

“Will he live?”

“It’s hard to say at present,” the doctor admitted. “There’s no way for me to see what’s going on internally without making matters worse. He licked his lips, gazing sternly at Valjean’s chest. “Now, these bruises on his breast—”

“He wasn’t breathing,” Javert explained. “I had to ...”

“Ah,” the man sighed. “That complicates things, some. Because, I can’t tell the contusions apart. But, his ribs, here ...” He ran a finger over the left side of Valjean’s chest, towards the middle, where the worst of the bruises were. “I think they may have been broken.”

“Broken?”

“Well. When we doctors say ‘broken’ in reference to a rib, what we really mean is, it’s probably fractured. It’s very rare for a rib to break all the way through. But a wound to the chest like this, especially where it is in relation to the sternum, is a dangerous matter indeed. It needs to be treated every bit as seriously as a broken bone, because it could become one, with a little carelessness.”

“Now, the true problem here is ...” He leaned against the bedpost, scratching the back of his head. “You say he was crushed. Clearly his chest was very badly compressed, so ... I’m sorry, but there’s no way for me to tell what shape he’s really in. Not when he’s unconscious like this, and he’s already got so much bruising around the injury. It could merely be surface trauma. Or ...”

“Or?”
The man bit his lip. “Or, he could be bleeding internally.”

A chill shot through Javert’s spine and spread throughout his limbs.

“There’s no way to be sure?”

“Not immediately, no. He doesn’t seem to have blood in the lungs, so that’s good, but as to whether or not he ruptured anything else, only time will tell. You’ll have to keep a close eye on him.”

Javert gave a grave nod.

“And what if … What if he is?—bleeding internally.”

The doctor gave a shrug. “I can try to operate. Such a procedure would largely be exploratory, I’m afraid. It may save him—or it may only make things worse. I wish I had more to offer you. But these kinds of injuries … they are the way they are. There is nothing more I can do for him at the moment.”

“Watch over him, for now. See if the bruising spreads. If it happens too quickly, and gets too dark—a deep red, or a purple—that’s a bad sign, and I want you to come and fetch me. I’ll see what I can do, depending on how he looks. All right?”

He gave another nod. “Merci.”

The doctor shook his head. “You know, ironically, it may have been being crushed that kept him alive. Smoke rises, and it sears the lungs when it enters, choking the victim to death well before the flames can do any real damage. Had he been standing, gasping for air in a panic, the smoke probably would have killed him. But because he was so low to the ground, and his breathing so shallow and slow …” He scoffed. “Lady Fortune can be funny, sometimes. Let us hope she remains kind.”

“You shall find me at Rue ******, number thirty-five. In the meantime,” he said, digging a small glass bottle out of his pocket and handing it to him, “here’s some laudanum for his pain, should he wake up. Twenty drops at a time, once about every six hours. With water, if possible. He’ll need it, if he’s going to be able to breathe. Otherwise, his respiration will be stunted, and he’ll wind up with pneumonia, or worse. And—it seems obvious, but—don’t let him try to move too much on his own.”

“Also, while I’m away, clean yourself up, will you? There’s a washroom downstairs, and I’d like you to get all the soot off before I treat you.”

Javert blinked. “Treat me?”

“You’ve a burn on your leg there,” the man said, pointing at his right thigh.

He glanced down at the offending hole in his trousers. “Oh.”

“Some ointment and a bandage should do the trick.”

“It’s—it’s really nothing. You don’t need to—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Anyone under this roof gets treated properly. I’ll not have you going about refusing help and making it worse for no reason.”
“Look, I—”

“No buts. Now do as I say, and wait with him here until I get back.” He tipped his hat to him. “Bonne chance.”

Halfway to the door, the man paused, as though he’d forgotten something. Slowly, he turned his head back to look at Valjean. He was silent for a moment, considering him with solemn eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was low.

“Tell me something, Inspector …”

“What?”

“That man … The brand upon his skin indicates he is a convict for life. Has he been spared death only for him to be returned to the galleys?”

“No; he has been pardoned.”

“Oh? Truly.” He gave a nod. “I am glad to hear that. I hope he lives.”

***

Javert had retrieved a wash basin and a cloth from downstairs, and cleaned himself up best he could, given the circumstances. Had rolled the leg of his trousers up and surveyed the damage. Undid the tight yet now disheveled braids of his hair and ran his fingers through it until the tangles came out.

Then he was left to the waiting.

He’d pulled up a chair next to the bed on which Valjean lay, and he now sat with his arms dangling between his legs, his head hung, with his long hair dripping past his face.

He felt powerless.

Valjean could be dying just beside him, and there was no way for him to know, and nothing he could do about it even if he did.

What he would give for the man to wake up again!

For hours he waited in silent turmoil, glancing over at the bruises on Valjean’s chest every so often and trying to assure himself they had not gotten any worse than to be expected. But he was not very good at convincing himself.

He remembered all of a sudden the force with which he’d compressed the man’s ribcage—over and over again in an attempt to resuscitate him, to get him to breathe once more—and a horror overcame him.

What if it was not the bottle rack, but himself, who had caused Valjean’s injury? What if it was he who had put too much pressure on his chest, straining the ribs until they cracked? What if it was he who dealt the killing blow?

No, Valjean was still alive, he told himself, shaking his head fervently. Valjean was still alive,
right now, in this moment, and there was yet hope.

But still, what if— *What if he’d …?*

He moaned and ran his hands over his face, through his hair, agonized by uncertainty. Javert was not a religious man, but he found himself pleading with some unknown force.

*Please, please, let him live … Please.*

He closed his eyes and clasped his hands before his brow in supplication.

*Please …*

A quick intake of breath came from his left, strained and painful sounding.

In a flash Javert sprang to the man’s side, cupping his cheek in his hand. “Jean,” he exclaimed, unaware of himself even speaking.

The man trembled beneath him, his eyes squeezing themselves further shut as a low groan escaped his lips.

“Valjean—”

Slowly the man’s eyes fluttered open. They were unfocused, almost rolling back into his head for a few moments before drifting towards his face.

“Javert …?” The way he rolled the first syllable, buzzing on his tongue, it sounded like he was still half asleep.

“Valjean,” he breathed. His gut was roiling with anxiety and nervous elation.

“*Nnngh …*” Valjean turned his head some towards the hand that still rested on his cheek, as though there was some shelter to be found there. He stared half-lidded out at nothing. Then, as though coming upon a realization, his eyes strained to focus, and he looked up at him. “Javert.” The man’s brow furrowed deeper than the pain had already caused it to. “You—” His hand sought his reflexively, their fingers entwining. “You are … all right?”

Javert’s face went blank, his shoulders drooping. “Am I—?” He clutched his brow. “*You stupid old man,*” he breathed tearfully, his lips curling into a smile. “You almost …!”

“Ah, but you are …?”

“I’m *fine,* you fool.”

Valjean let out what might have been a relieved sigh, had it not been so shallow. “*Bien.*” He drew in a stunted breath, then began to cough, violently.

Without even thinking Javert clamped his hand over Valjean’s mouth to stifle him.

If, after everything else, the man should worsen his injuries because a little smoke got in his lungs! He certainly wasn’t going to let *that* happen.

Valjean faltered in confusion for a moment before he seemed to realize what Javert was doing, and he gripped Javert’s hand tightly as he tried to suppress the spasms in his diaphragm.
Finally the fit subsided, and Javert let his hand fall away, looking over him with worry.

“It is … all right,” Valjean rasped, clutching the side of the bed. “I will be all right.”

“The laudanum;” Javert remembered suddenly, groping about his pockets, “you need— Where is—?” He whipped his head around to find the little bottle sitting on the side table, and grabbed it up, fumbling about the cork with his shaking fingers. Cursing under his breath, he took it between his teeth and carefully pulled out the stopper with a tiny popping noise.

“What was it he said; twenty drops?” He poured a little water out into the empty glass on the table, retrieved the small syringe the doctor had left them, and measured out the dosage best he could. “Here,” he said, handing the glass to Valjean. “Drink this down, all of it.”

Valjean sipped at it tentatively, making a face at the taste. Squeezing his eyes shut, he forced himself to gulp down the rest of the glass in a couple swigs. “Ugh;” he said, smacking his lips in disgust, “remind me never to … get myself injured again.”

“I will,” Javert assured him with a growl. “Often, and with force.”

This coaxed an amused smile out of Valjean, but the chuckle that came with it did him more harm than good, and he screwed his mouth up in pain.

“Now—now tell me,” Javert said, sitting back down on the chair, “how are you feeling?”

Valjean opened his eyes for a moment and raised his eyebrows. “Bad.”

There was a hint of humor in that understatement, and although it made Javert feel slightly more hopeful for the man’s condition, the actual implication of the word did the opposite. “Like what?”

“Like I died,” he said flatly.

“Well—” His eyes flicked away uneasily. “—you did. For a moment there, anyway.”

“Oh,” Valjean remarked, with a slightly higher pitch, “that’s comforting.”

“You came back, though.”

“Are you sure?”

Javert stared at him for a second. “I assume if you’re well enough to be sarcastic, you’re not going to die.”

“One can hope.”

He let out a scoff. “You’re insufferable.” By which he meant, ‘I could not live without you.’

***

The sun had risen before the doctor finally returned.

“Aha, you’re awake!” he exclaimed upon seeing Valjean. Then he set to fussing and fretting about him as any man halfway decent at the profession ought to, while Javert watched on.
The assessment was that, based on Valjean’s descriptions of his ailments, he was not in much danger of dying, but he would need to be looked after for a long while and treated carefully. The doctor advised him not to be doing much of any physical activity for quite some time. His ribs were probably fractured, but with enough rest there was no reason they shouldn’t heal up just fine.

Javert thanked the man profusely and gave him every last coin in his pocket.

He did not manage to escape getting his leg treated, however, before the doctor finally bid them farewell, saying that they could stay for however long they liked that day, but he was going back to bed for as long as he could.

Afterwards, the two of them were left alone to decide what to do next.

Valjean was in a bad way, but they couldn’t sit around and wait for him to heal.

Someone might have seen them enter this house—or, if not, it wouldn’t take much prying to figure out where they’d gone.

Even if they were lucky, and their enemies thought them both dead at the moment, they would soon realize their mistake and redouble their efforts.

They needed to use this time to escape, while they still might avoid detection.

He could bring Valjean to Filles du Calvaire, but that was no good; they knew he lived there, or was related to its current occupants, at least—and Thénardier had already paid a visit there once before.

It would be all too easy to scale the walls, climb in through a window, and slit Valjean’s throat as he slept. The Gillenormand estate was too expansive to keep adequately monitored, even if they posted guards.

He supposed they could go to his apartment … but there was a chance they might know where he lived.

No, he had to think of something else.

“You said you had two flats,” Javert remarked. “Where is the second?”

“Rue de l’Ouest,” Valjean breathed, “By Le Jardin …”

“And it is not used often? You would not be known to live there?”

“No.”

“Then it will do.”

“But, the key for it—I don’t … If the portress is not there—”

“Don’t trouble yourself with such trivialities. We both know there is more than one way to open a lock. And should anyone come inquiring about it, well, you are the rightful owner, so there is no harm done if we have to use a bit of force.”

“It hath not … been used in some time.”

“That is even better,” Javert said. “We should head there before evening. It is regrettable, but you’re going to have to endure a ride in a fiacre. I will try to be gentle with you. And I will make
them drive slowly.”

Valjean turned towards him on the pillow with a helpless, grateful grin. It lingered there for but a second before being eclipsed by another wince of pain.

Javert frowned. “Is the medicine helping any?”

“A little,” he breathed.

“You should probably stop trying to talk.”

“Then stop … asking me questions.”

He could not help but smirk at that. Shaking his head, he looked away. “Fair enough.”

He sat in silence for some time, pondering the workings and intentions of the men plotting against them.

When he looked back, he found Valjean gazing at him with glassy eyes, lost in thought, it seemed.

“What?” Javert finally asked.

“It is nothing; I was only … Never mind.”

“What is it?”

“I was only thinking that … I am lucky to know you.”

Javert’s face went blank. He blinked once, twice, his cheeks flushing. He cleared his throat. “Yes, well,” he said, turning to look at the wall, “our … relationship has proven … mutually beneficial.”

“That is … not really what I meant,” Valjean admitted.

The early morning birds were chirping energetically outside the window.

“How’s the pain?” Javert asked.


“Do you think you can walk?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Valjean struggled to sit up in bed, and turned to put his feet on the floor.

Javert offered him a hand.

As Valjean attempted to stand, however, he let out a hiss of pain and fell back to the bed, clutching at his left leg.

“What is it?”

Clenching his teeth, Valjean rubbed his lower calf muscle. “It’s nothing, it’s just— I wasn’t expecting ...” He shook his head. “My ankle got a bit twisted, that’s all.”
“Is it broken?”

“What? No, no; trust me, if it was broken, I would know.”

“You are under the effects of an opiate at the moment,” Javert pointed out.

“Still. It’s not as bad as all that. It’s just ... some muscular damage, I think. I can probably still walk on it.”

“Not down a flight of stairs, you can’t.”

“Well,” Valjean said, pushing off the mattress and rising shakily to his feet, “let us see.”

“I’ll not risk it,” Javert said, taking a hold of his arm. “Opiates make you unsteady, and the last thing we need is you tripping yourself. If you end up getting yourself killed because of a little carelessness, I shan’t forgive myself. Besides, I’m under explicit orders to not let you over-exert yourself. So swallow your pride for a moment, will you?”

“My pride?” Valjean nearly laughed. “Do you—do you even recall what you were like when I dragged you to my house, befo—”

“Yes, yes, I tried to throw the doctor out the window; I recall. Well, not literally. But people keep reminding me of it.”

“It was actually rather comical, when it wasn’t frightening.”

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re not prideful in your own way.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Javert huffed. “Please.” He slid his arm under Valjean’s shoulder and around his back, taking some of the weight off his injured leg.

Valjean turned red. “You don’t have to—”

“Yes I do. Now hush.”

He led him to the stairs, holding onto him carefully. It was a relatively narrow staircase, and Javert took the steps slowly, making sure his charge had a good foothold on each stair before stepping down to the next.

Arm around him, hand resting on his shoulder just beside his neck, Valjean let himself lean on him.

“We should get you a crutch,” Javert muttered as they got to the door. “Otherwise you’re going to be an invalid.”

“Javert, really, I—I think I can walk on my own.”

“Perhaps, but there’s utterly no need for it, and it’s going to pain you,” he growled softly. “So humor me just this once, you stubborn old ox.”

Valjean opened his mouth to make a rebuttal, but he truly could not seem to think of a response to that.
“Perhaps you should lie down,” Javert said as he helped him into the fiacre.

“N-no; it’s fine, truly,” Valjean assured him, scooting over on the seat. He pictured himself with his head on Javert’s lap and immediately blocked out the image for its sheer absurdity, the blood rushing to his cheeks. “I’ll be all right.”

“You’ll forgive me when I say I’ve learned better than to trust your word when it comes to your own wellbeing.”

“Well— Well, you’re a terrible liar when it comes to yourself as well,” Valjean blurted out.

“Oh, I’m a hypocrite for sure,” the man exclaimed, throwing up his palms, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t chastise you for it.”

He could not help but scoff at that. “You admit it, then? That you’re far too stubborn for your own good?”

“I am the perfect amount of stubborn for someone in my position, I’ll have you know.”

Valjean’s mouth curled up into a helpless smirk.

“Now, you, on the other hand,” the man carried on, “have no right to be stubborn.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm. Yes, you see, because you actually have people who care about you—grateful throngs perfectly happy to throw themselves at your feet—and it’s quite callous of you to refuse their hospitality. Exacerbating, really.”

Valjean felt a pang of guilt at that, despite the man’s humorous tone. He was indeed aware of the frustration his humility caused. Yet, he could never bring himself to break the habit. Vanity and pride tasted sour on his tongue. Even though he knew things like eating white bread instead of black could hardly be called “prideful” at all.

“Forgive me,” he finally murmured, glancing away for a second. “But, you know, Javert—”

The man turned to look at him.

Valjean cracked a feeble grin. “—you have people who care about you, too.”

Javert’s expression went rigid at that, a hint of red creeping into his complexion. He stared at him incredulously before thrusting his gaze out the carriage window.

“One, perhaps,” he mumbled, crossing his arms. “Though I never asked for it.”

Valjean was quiet for a moment. “You didn’t have to.”
The portress was not there when they arrived at the apartment on Rue de l’Ouest.

Javert had to pick the lock while Valjean leaned on the brick wall.

“Do you always carry a kit like that around?” the man asked.

“Nowadays, yes. I find they come in handy.”

“Huh.” A pause. “I never quite figured you for a man who would have that kind of skill, to be honest.”

“Police work often requires skills that are not necessarily considered becoming of honest men,” Javert sighed.

“Such as what? Other than this, I mean.”

“Oh, you know—the entire profession of spying, for example. Being able to forge paperwork, signatures. Knowing the ins and outs of counterfeiting, the ways one can render simple objects into tools for escape, the apprehension of Argot, the kinds of codes one can beat out on a prison wall to call for aid ... I could go on.”

“Oh, do. I find this infinitely fascinating.”

Javert looked up from the lock for a second, raising his eyebrows, before resuming his work.

“Let’s see ... symbolism of the criminal underground, how to properly conceal a weapon—all the places one can conceal a weapon—”

He heard a snorting noise as Valjean choked back a laugh.

“—find that funny, do you?”

“Not really, no.”

“Neither do I. Now, then ... All the drugs available at the common apothecary, and their effects; the quickest ways to incapacitate a man, how to cheat at cards—”

“How to cheat at cards?” There was amusement in the man’s voice.

“I assure you, it was for the sake of police work.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You’d best. –Ah; here we are.”

The lock produced a small clicking noise, and with a turn of the handle the door swung open.

With a grand, sweeping gesture Javert bid him enter. “Monsieur,” he said, “your abode.”

Valjean shot him a grin and stepped inside with an equally silly sounding “Merci beaucoup.”

“Upstairs, is it?”

“Yes.”

Javert offered him his shoulder again, but the man shied away.

“Permit me to do it on my own this time, will you?”
Javert gave him a disapproving look.

“At least let me see if I can,” the man pleaded.

Sighing, Javert crossed his arms, his mouth twitching into a frown as he glanced away. “If you stumble and fall,—”

“You’ll catch me.”

The weary smile on the man’s face, and his trusting tone, disarmed him. He felt himself turn red. Clicked his tongue. “Fine. But I’m holding onto you.”

They made their way up the stairs, and Javert could not be sure whether it was the pain or the opiates which caused Valjean’s footing to falter so. Likely both.

“In sooth, I am—glad I managed to spare you this kind of injury,” the man admitted as he climbed. “This is really quite … unpleasant.”

“That I do not doubt.”

***

Footnotes:

[1] “Hard labor for life”, or, more closely, “Perpetual (hard) labor” (the “hard”, or “forcés”, here being implied but omitted. There were other brands that did read “TFP”, but those were specific only to convicted forgers).

Chapter End Notes

Why do I not have suggested listening for this chp? idk ask god I guess
Valjean asks Javert a simple question and gets more than he bargained for; Thénardier realizes his plan has gone amiss.

***Content warning for use of racial slurs***

“Condemnant quod non intellegunt.”

(They condemn because they do not understand.)

-Unknown

“Here,” Javert said as he returned upstairs, “I managed to scrounge some things up for us.”

He put down the tray he’d been carrying on the end of Valjean’s bed. His finds included a half-loaf of bread, a cut of smoked ham, and some cheese, along with a pitcher of water.

“Thanks,” Valjean murmured.

Javert poured him a cup and set to slicing everything up and making sandwiches. “I figured you might prefer brandy or something, given your condition, but there wasn’t a drop of alcohol to be found down there. And besides that, the cupboards were nearly bare.”

He’d pulled a beat-up old bergère to the right of the headboard, turned slightly inwards, and he sat back in it and stretched his long legs out. “I hope she doesn’t mind us showing up unannounced and taking her food,” he mused to himself as he took a bite.

“She won’t. She’ll just be surprised, is all. Besides, I can reimburse her later.”

Javert could not speak for Valjean, but he himself had not eaten anything for nearly a day, and after the previous night, he was famished.

He hadn’t slept in even longer, and as the residual panic wore off, and he put some food in his belly, this fact started to make itself apparent to him.

“Ugh, god; I’m exhausted,” he groaned, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes.

“There’s another bedroom down the hall, if you’d like,” Valjean offered.
“No. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer a bed?”

“I’d prefer not having to get up.”

He heard Valjean scoff at that. “You could just pull the mattress in here.”

“Too tired,” he yawned. “The chair suits me fine.”

“Well. Get some rest, then.”

“Mm.” He let his eyelids droop shut, and let some of the tension leave his aching muscles. “Do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Don’t die on me while I’m out.”

“I’ll try my best.”

***

Javert’s eyes fluttered open.

He must have slept a long time, because the sun was gone, and the streets were quiet. His brain was muddied, and he rubbed his eyes with a drowsy grunt, trying to remember the situation.

Turning his head, he found Valjean still asleep at his side.

What had woken him, then? He furrowed his brow.

Then a creak sounded on the stairs outside the door, and a chill shot up his spine.

A few seconds later, another creak—then another, and another, slow and cautious.

His heart raced.

By the time the door handle began to turn, he had his pistol ready in his hand, his eyes wide in the darkness.

All at once the door was flung open. A dark silhouette stood there, with an arm protruding from the shadows. The barrel of a rifle glinted in the moonlight.

They gave a cry; Javert gave a cry. They aimed their guns at one another.

Valjean bolted up in bed beside him with a gasp, starting back against the headboard. “Don’t shoot!” he exclaimed, throwing up his hands.

The rifle barrel dipped. “Sweet Christ,” the shadow breathed, “is that you?” It was a woman’s voice, Javert realized. “Monsieur Fauchelevent?”

“For the love of God, madam; put that down!” the man pleaded. “And—” Here he grew
embarrassed. “—it’s Valjean, actually, but yes.”

The woman stepped out of the doorway and into the light, dropping the muzzle of the rifle to the floor. “What do you mean ‘it’s Valjean’?” she hissed. “And who the devil is this?”

“He’s a police inspector; he’s my friend. His name is Javert. Please, will you just—Javert, will you put that away?”

Javert blinked. He had not realized he was still pointing the pistol at her, nor that his hand was trembling so badly. Letting out a shaky breath, he lowered his arm and tucked the gun back into his waistband.

“You scared the daylights out of me!” the woman accused them. “Nearly a year I’ve not seen you, and now you show up like this! Why did you not send word?”

“I beg your pardon, madam, but—”

“It was something of an emergency,” Javert interrupted.

“What kind of emergency?”

“The kind where people are trying to kill you.”

There was a pause. “Oh.” Then, “Pardi; are you quite serious?”

“Quite.”

“Good lord.”

“No one knows we’re here, though,” Valjean interjected, his voice strained now that the panic had left it. “That was rather why we came.”

“Are you well? You sound ill.”

“He’s broken some ribs.”

“Ah! What happened?”

“Trust me when I say that it’s something you’re better off not knowing,” Valjean said.

“And what of your daughter? Where is she?”

“She is at home with her husband, and knows nothing of this. I’d prefer to keep it that way. I do not ... know how to explain myself to them.”

“Got yourself into this trouble, did you?”

“I—” He let out a sigh. “In a way.”

“It’s not entirely his fault,” Javert muttered, crossing his arms and sinking back into the chair. “Though it would help if he didn’t go sneaking about behind people’s backs.”

“Javert, I only meant to—”

“Oh, hush.”

The portress put her hand on her hip and surveyed the two of them. “Well, you’re welcome to
“Trust me,” said Javert, “neither do we.”

The woman brandished her rifle. “Guess I should keep this out then, eh?”

“That would be advisable.”

“I am sorry for troubling you in this way,” Valjean breathed. “It was all we could think of on short notice.”

“It’s all right,” the woman sighed, resting the butt of her gun on the floor. “I’m just glad I waited before pulling the trigger.” She cocked her head at him. “Say, is there anything you need? You seem like you’re in quite a bit of pain from that.”

“The laudanum’s probably worn off,” Javert said. “I’ll have to measure out another dose. Will you go and fetch us some candles?”

“Of course.” She turned around and headed for the door, then paused, and looked back over her shoulder. “By the way, monsieur, why on earth do you want me to call you ‘Valjean’?”

“Er ... That is a story for another day, perhaps.”

After she’d left, Valjean turned to him and threw up an open palm. “You had a gun on you this whole time?”

“Course I had a gun on me; I always have a gun.”

“Then why didn’t you use it before?”

“Wh—? Because it’s—” He gave an exasperated breath and threw up a palm of his own. “It’s not for shooting people!”

“Then why were you pointing it at her?”

“What the hell else was I supposed to do, throw my boots at her?”

***

The second time Javert woke up at the flat, it was under much calmer circumstances. It was the sunlight streaming through the curtains, and the chirping of birds that prodded him from his sleep.

Much of his tension had worn off after getting a decent amount of rest. However, his body only ached all the more for it, as though it had been waiting for the right moment to voice its displeasure. And he had sunken so far into the armchair that it seemed a miracle he hadn’t slipped through the cracks in the cushions and disappeared entirely.

Groaning, he leaned forward and ran his hands over his face, noting that he still smelled of smoke.

“You awake?” he heard Valjean ask.
“Mm.”

“You slept even longer than I did.”

“In my defense, pain isn’t conducive to sleep.”

“No, but opiates are. How are you feeling?”

Javert raised an eyebrow at him. “How am I feeling? How are you feeling?”

“My chest aches, but I could be worse.”

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one.”

“I’m not dead, anyway.”

“Yes,” Javert said with a smirk, “at least there’s that.” He drew in a breath and let out a long, weary sigh, stretching out his limbs. Cracking out some kinks in his neck, he settled back down into the chair and resumed rubbing his face. “Why were you still paying rent on this apartment?”

“Honestly? For situations exactly like this.”

“Even after you were pardoned?”

“Old habits die hard, I suppose.”

“I’d curse you for all the money you’ve wasted if it hadn’t been so convenient.”

“Well, I did pay a number of months in advance.”

***

The portress made sure they’d been fed a proper meal before she left for the day to work as a cook at a nearby restaurant.

When she’d gone, they debated for some time on what to do.

Valjean did not want to go home in his condition, for the fact that it would upset Cosette, if not also because he had no idea what to say to her. She still knew nothing of Thénardier’s recent doings, and was not even aware of his presence in the city. Given her past, no one wanted to alert her to this.

As for the police, as far as they knew, Javert was still out spying on the streets and trying to hunt the man down. He intended to submit a report to them, of course, but he also intended to stay by Valjean’s side until he saw the man safe—safe meaning, in this context, heavily guarded.

It would be easy enough to procure some guards, but the matter Javert was concerned with was catching Thénardier. If the man was greedy, or vengeful enough, there was a chance that they could use their own unfortunate situation to create a trap for him. But Javert was not sure it would work, or even how it should be set. He was also undecided as to how long they should or could lay low.
He sat in silence, working these issues over and over in his mind.

Valjean finally broke him out of his thoughts with a sigh. “It’s a fine mess we have managed to land ourselves in, you and I. Isn’t it?”

Javert looked over at him, where he lay still on the bed, propped up with a pile of pillows. He looked haggard, and Javert did not blame him. “To be fair, the most of our history consists of fine messes. This is hardly out of the ordinary.”

Valjean shot him a lopsided grin. After a moment it faded away, and his brown eyes grew somber once more. “Still. I am sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“This is entirely my fault. If I had just—” He swallowed, glancing away. “I should have gone to the police when I found that letter. But, to be honest …” He spoke with some difficulty, as though it pained him to admit this. “—the police have never really presented themselves as a solution in my mind. You know?”

These words came as an unexpected blow to Javert. The idea that a good person should be afraid of the police, to the point of not seeking their aid when they needed it—that was terrible! The idea that the police should be seen as brutes who doled out punishment, rather than guardians of all that was right—it made Javert shudder inside.

Criminals, evil-doers, marauders—all of these had a right to fear the police. They ought to! But Valjean was no longer a criminal, no longer a man with malice in his heart. (Had he ever been?) And yet still he had been conditioned in such a way as to expect repercussions when dealing with enforcers of the law. And this belief, Javert realized with a start, had never been corrected. Had never stood to be corrected.

How many other people felt this way? How many crimes went unreported because of this instinctual fear? Images of faces danced in his mind. Javert could remember so many of them. Enough to fill up a sea. Faces of the unfortunate, the poor, the mistreated. They gazed at him, and his fellow officers, with the bulging eyes of animals faced with their predators. They were careful to avoid the police when they could. They trembled when cornered, broke out in a sweat. Stammered and backed against walls.

Javert had always assumed this to be an indication of guilt, of hidden criminal behavior. But now, he worried, was it always? Or was it simply because they had experienced nothing in their life indicating the police were people who were there to help?

Perhaps these people had not done anything. But, say they had seen their family members, or their friends, dragged off by the police, or brutalized, or intimidated in some way? Say they had seen the consequences of crime up close and personal, and it had left a lasting impression on them?

Reasonably, Javert would have said that this only served to do them well, by reminding them not to stray from the path of lawfulness and righteousness. But it was possible that it incurred other effects as well. And it was possible that someone who had never committed a crime, or intended to commit one, could grow to be terrified of the police, and wrongly so. Or rightly so. He knew not which.

And this was only the innocent! Say, perhaps, an actual criminal witnessed someone else’s crime. Even if they felt it to be wrong, would they report it? Likely not, Javert admitted to himself.
Because the police did not present themselves as a solution.

This was a problem. This was not something he had expected.

How was this to be addressed?

Javert almost lost himself in these revelations when he heard Valjean’s voice again, and realized the man was still talking, and he had stopped paying attention.

“It was a foolish thing to confront him alone,” the man was saying. “I know. But I was just so … angry. To use a man’s past to bring harm to his children—to blackmail them with their own family’s mistakes—how could I abide by that? To use me against them! To threaten them! I would rather tear my own arm off than let such a thing come to pass. And besides that, the man had a history with me. Things had become far too personal.”

“I wanted to make him understand that I was not someone to be trifled with. I wanted to instill the fear of God in his heart. So I took matters into my own hands.” He shook his head weakly on the pillow. “That was a mistake. And now I’ve only put everyone in even more danger. Why …” He turned a pain-filled eye towards Javert. “Why does that seem like the only thing I’m good at, sometimes?”

Javert frowned sympathetically at him.

“It is true that I made poor decisions in my past,” Valjean continued, speaking now as though to himself, “and have done people wrong. But I have tried everything I could to repent for those things, and I gave up those thoughts long ago. Why will the world not let me live in peace?”

“I don’t know,” was all Javert could say.

“Because it has forgotten how to forgive. Because Justice is blind.”

“But, Valjean—it would not have mattered even if you had gone to the police. There is not a thing that they could do. Blackmail is not technically illegal. Besides, it’s better that you didn’t, considering the trouble it would bring your son-in-law. What you should have done was to let them in on your plot to root him out. He’s already a wanted man, who earned himself the death sentence. They would have arrested him for that if nothing else.”

“Ah, yes … That’s true. I did not think of that.”

“It’s because you’re used to running in the shadows,” Javert said. “I know. But you don’t have to do that anymore. You ought to try and remember that.”

The man gave a considerate nod.

“You know you can come to me with these kinds of things. If you couldn’t bring it to the police, you should have at least brought it to me. I could have dealt with it discreetly. I was trying to deal with it discreetly. And I don’t—I don’t like you keeping secrets from me. Doing stupid things like this behind everyone’s back.”

“I’m sorry,” said Valjean. “But—” He turned to him with a strange sort of look. “You kept secrets from me too. You were hunting Thénardier at the same time I was.”

“Because it’s my damn job, you fool,” Javert chided him. “And I didn’t bring you into the matter because—well, what good would it have done? Other than trouble you. I didn’t even know you knew about it.”
“And I thought Marius had kept it from you,” Valjean admitted. “I knew you would be incensed if you discovered it. And I knew that Marius had tried to hide it from me. So I wanted to handle it personally.”

Javert let out a long and weary sigh. “We both had the same inclinations, it seems. Sometimes we are more alike than we would care to be.” He shook his head. “How did you even find out about the blackmail?”

“I found a letter tucked in a law book in the library.”

“That idiot,” Javert grunted. “I told him to burn them.”

“I don’t think he realized where it was.”

“Still! He was careless. It’s his fault we’re in this mess.”

“No,” Valjean countered. “It’s mine. I could have left well enough alone. But my pride and my anger got the better of me.”

“No, no; it’s not your damn fault. It’s not any of our faults. The blame for our misfortunes rests solely on the shoulders of that vile, black-hearted, scheming little scoundrel of a man Thénardier, and no one else.”

Valjean gave him a queer look, then glanced off guiltily at the wall. “I suppose, in the end, you are right.”

“Mm. No more talk of blames and faults; let us put it behind us. I do not even wish to spare that rat another word until I have him in chains.”

***

Valjean did not know how long it was before he remembered it. Those voices, like a distant echo in the back of his brain. They were all tangled up in each other, and unintelligible, but one in particular kept drawing him back.

It was Javert’s, breathy and frightened, and worried in a way he had never heard it before. And it was whispering something ...  

“What does it mean?” he finally asked.

Javert glanced back at him. “What does what mean?”

“‘Ferkó,’” he said. “What does it mean?”

The man gave a start, glancing away. “I did not think you heard that,” he muttered.

“So?”

“It means …” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Ugh, damnit. I didn’t really mean to—Listen, I hate that name. I don’t want to be called by it. I’m only telling you this because you asked, understand?”
“That’s all right.”

Javert growled under his breath. When he spoke, the words were hesitant, and sounded awkward on his tongue. “Well, it means ‘French’, basically. The, er, written version is ‘Ferenc’, but I was never called that.” He paused, expression darkening. “There is one other meaning,” he said. “‘One who is free’.”

One who is free ...

“That is not a bad name,” Valjean thought aloud. “Why do you hate it so?”

“Why do I—?” He cut himself off. “No, I suppose you would not understand.”

“What is it?”

“Well. It is not exactly a French name, is it? Think on that.”

“What are you saying? I’m in too much pain for riddles at present. Are you not French?”

“I am French, and I am not. Therein lies the problem.” It was then that his accent shifted into something entirely different. “I am a manouche, and I am a gadjo. Embraced neither by the manouches or the gadjés.” He spoke bitterly, as though he had told himself this many times before. “It has never helped things.”

With that, his French accent returned, and it was so smooth and flawless that it was hard to conceive of it ever having been interrupted with something else.

Valjean’s brow knit as he turned his head to look at him. “I don’t … what are you saying?”

Javert was staring at the floor—through it, rather, as though he were looking at something else altogether. He refused to meet his gaze.

“My birth was just as low as yours. No; lower.” He clenched his teeth. “My mother—she was a tzigane. My father … he was a galley-slave.” He let those words hang heavy in the air, thick and poisonous. “A criminal, since before I was born.”

Valjean opened his mouth to say something, but confined himself to “Ah.”

“My mother, too—she was a criminal. They sentenced her to penal servitude, for telling fortunes. She gave birth to me in prison. That’s where I spent the first four years of my life, until she’d served her sentence. Much worse than being born into a family of poor woodcutters,” he sneered. “But, where you chose to fall deeper into the depths of society, I rose. As one who was born honest became a criminal, so one born a criminal became honest. And now we are here.”

“You were not—” Valjean fumbled for words. “Why do you say that? You were not born a criminal.”

Javert raised his head to look at him. In his eyes—cold, bright blue against brown, brown skin—there was both a sad resignation and a challenge. “Was I not?”

He held his gaze, unblinking. “No;” he said, “you were not.”

Javert stared at him a moment longer before turning away and letting his head droop once more.

“The circumstances of one’s birth are irrelevant,” Valjean insisted. “Just … just because your parents made mistakes doesn’t mean that they transfer to you. That any of you are inherently bad
people. And just because society would treat your mother’s race badly does not mean that treatment is deserved. You cannot choose your ancestry, or the way it is viewed. How can you be blamed for it? We are only who we make ourselves. And you have made yourself a good and decent man; better, even—an upstanding citizen, a protector of the people!”

“And how am I supposed to believe that, with a name like Ferenc? It only serves to remind me of things I would wish to forget. ‘You are free.’ This is significant, because your father is not. Because, for the first few years of your life, your mother was not. Even you were not. ‘You are French’—only remarked upon because your mother is not. Because, if you were to look in a mirror, you would not know that you were.”

“How can you give a child that name and expect it to make them believe those things about themselves? Why would they need to be reminded of it if it were truly the case? No,” he growled, “I cannot forgive her for giving me that name—for branding me as something other, someone whose identity was reliant on what they were not just as much as what they were.”

“Do not try to convince me I wasn’t born as low as they come—a product of sin, between sinners. A child of the gutters. I rose above it because I had no choice; there were only the bars of that cage or the freedom of honest work. You were either the one who received the lashings or the one who held the whip. Which do you think I decided to be? A man like me is only good when he is just. When he is better than just. When he is justice itself.”

Valjean’s brow knit. “A man like …?”

“You see what I am,” Javert muttered. “What I was born into. There is no middle ground for such people. You are either inherently wicked or irrefutably virtuous. That is the way of things.”

“That is not true!”

“Isn’t it just!” he exclaimed, facing him with steely eyes. “Had I decided to become anything other than what I am, how do you think society would have perceived me, looking the way I do?”

Valjean had no answer for that.

“Even now, at the station houses, do you think I don’t hear them whispering behind my back? Deriding me, mocking me? ‘That old fellow, Javert—that scoundrel, that gypsy,’ he spat, ‘—you can only trust him as far as you can throw him; there’s a reason he loves to play the spy.’” He let out a foul sort of laugh. “Did you know? Do you remember? Back in Toulon they all called me ‘The Pharaoh’. [1]

His glare turned to righteous indignation, thrusting his chin up. “But there is a reason they cannot say those things to my face; there’s a reason I’m treated with respect. And it’s because I’ve never given them anything—anything, do you understand?—not a single thing they could ever use against me.” His eyes were terrible. “I was irreproachable. Irreproachable! Until you came along.”

Still, Valjean could not find the proper response.

Javert glared dully at the floorboards. “All my life, that was what I sought to be. Exemplary. Blameless. I became what I needed to be to achieve that. So that no one could ever look upon me with disdain. I thought in a fair way that I succeeded. And yet …” His eyes narrowed. “And yet.”

“You can learn the language of the others, mimic it so perfectly that your heritage cannot be discerned from the way you speak—ingrain it so fully into your mind that you even think in it … but you never forget your mother tongue. You will never forget the first words you put to comforts,
to fears; it will rear its ugly head in you at the worst of times. And you will never be allowed to forget what you are.”

“You will revile at yourself, knowing that no matter how fully you have transformed, you cannot escape your origins. You cannot escape the color of your skin. –The fact that you are and forever will be an outcast, from the dregs of society. Living with that knowledge … it is a special kind of Hell. You do not know what that is like.”

Valjean looked from him to stare at his own weathered hands, turning over a scarred palm. “I think in a fair way I do,” he mumbled.

Javert shot a baneful glance at him. He let out a scoff. “You? You could never understand a thing like that. You were born into a different walk of life,” he snarled. “Do not pretend to know what I know, to feel as I feel. Because you can’t.”

Valjean bore his rancor with admirable forbearance.

He struggled to sit up in bed. “I will not claim it is the same,” he began, “but I know what it is like to try to escape one’s past, knowing full well that it is never entirely possible. I know what it is to be judged by one’s appearance rather than one’s inner self. To be cast out from society, to be made ‘other’ …” He clawed at his right shoulder. “To be branded.”

Javert had looked confrontational at first, but at that his countenance faltered; he drew back in his seat as if singed.

“I know how it feels to be born into circumstances beyond one’s control,” Valjean continued. “To do what one must to survive in a world that is lacking in mercy. To be condemned, written off as irredeemable and tossed away as though the universe were trying to forget you. I know what it is to be doomed to failure in the eyes of others, despite one’s best efforts.”

His voice tightened. “To give everything that you have, time and time again, to make something of yourself—and to have those efforts thrown at your feet and trampled to dust before your eyes by an uncaring authority that sees only what it wishes to and ignores that which does not conform to its beliefs. To go the lengths of your life and feel you’ve gained nothing in spite of it all! A prisoner to your past, unfairly abandoned!” He bristled, vehement, his eyes alight. “Do not tell me I know nothing of those pains, Javert. They are the only things I have ever truly known.”

Javert had been struck mute. Slowly, he bowed his head. “I was mistaken,” he said, his voice a husk. “It was wrong of me to say that.”

Valjean touched his brow, his eyes flicking to and fro. “No,” he finally said, “It was wrong of me to use the tone which I did. I did not mean to belittle your experiences. I merely meant to say I can relate to them. It is not the same, what I went through. But it is similar enough, I think—that pain. That … prejudice. Only, most times, I can hide what I am. But you …” He sighed. “I’m sorry. It is not a contest. We have both suffered.”

Javert was scrunching and unscrunching the fabric of his trousers between his fists. He gave a subtle nod.

“I did choose to commit a crime,” Valjean added, after a moment. “To steal. I made that conscious decision. That is on my head. Although, I feel I was driven to it against my own will, by outside forces. I never would have broken the law, had we merely had enough to subsist on. But I could not stand idly by while my family starved.”
The room was quiet for a moment.

“You never found what happened to your sister and her children?”

“No.”

“How many did she have, again?”

“Seven,” he said quietly, “there were seven of them.”

“Seven,” Javert repeated to himself. “I will remember that.”

Valjean stared down at the weave of the bed sheets, twisting them mindlessly between his fingers, his eyes far off. He tried not to think on it. Tried to push it back down, and keep the tears from welling in his eyes.

He could not even remember their faces. It was like trying to grab pieces of paper blown out of one’s grasp by the wind.

He put his head in his hand. “I am sorry you have been treated badly,” he said. “It is not something you deserve.”

Javert was silent for a long, long time. “I am sorry for what happened to your family,” he mumbled in return. “It was not something you deserved, either.”

“Thanks.”

***

It cost him the last two coins he had in his pocket, but eventually Thénardier managed to convince the barkeep to allow him downstairs.

The cellar was filled with barrels, crates, and shelves, all home to either spirits or dry foodstuffs. There was no light but for a solitary, flickering candle at the back, which sat at the center of a circular table. Upon this table was a white tablecloth, a few plates of food, and a scattering of playing cards, surrounding a pile of coins and various small objects of value. A group of men lingered around it, some sitting, some leaning back against a shelf or a stack of wooden boxes. Slowly, Thénardier approached.

Most of the men were in their late thirties or forties, in clothes of shabby cuts, or laborer’s outfits. Thénardier recognized two of them; the others he had not seen before. They had a gruff air all around, with some brutish, and some calculating.

But there was one among them who was oddly singular. Of all present, his appearance was the most comely, commanded the most charm, and he had the air of a bourgeois. Barely having breached the cusp of manhood, he wore clothes of recent fashion, finely tailored, but faded with use. He had on his head a fine black top hat, the brim of which obscured half his face and was curled up at the other. His white silk jacquard waistcoat sat atop a secondary crimson one. A black tailcoat hung over this, matching his trousers, and shoes that were heavily blacked, but had thoroughly worn heels. From out of his button-hole poked a chrysanthemum, red as a spot of blood.
He was leaning back in his chair at the table and sipping a glass of port, studying the cards. “This was a private occasion, you know,” he said without looking up.

Thénardier doffed his hat as he stood before him. He licked his lips. “Look here,” he said, “you know I wouldn’t come to you if it wasn’t a good opportunity to turn a profit.”

“I should hope not.”

“Yes, well. As things stand, I need your help pulling something off.”

The young man was silent for a moment. He had been rolling his drinking glass between his forefingers to aerate the wine. Now, letting out a pensive sigh, he set it back on the table. Slowly, he brought his hand to his brow and flicked the brim of his hat up, cocking his head to reveal one black, draconian eye. “And what’s in it for me?”

“Conceivably, a hundred thousand francs.”

The boy’s ruby lips twisted into a toothy smirk.

***

Footnotes:

[1] This comes from the mistaken belief at the time that Romani people were descended from Egyptians, hence the slur “Gypsy”. (Modern genetic tests suggest they actually originated in ancient India, departing around 500 CE.)

Chapter End Notes

Valjean: *reaches level 10 friendship*
Javert: Congratulations. You have unlocked my tragic backstory.
Valjean: What?
Javert: I WAS BORN WITH SCUM LIKE YOU; I AM FROM THE GUTTER TOO

Uh, the topics in this chapter were really heavy, so I just gotta say that like, the views expressed here are not necessarily my views, but the characters'. And Javert is pretty complicated, because he's got this stubborn pride and anti-racist attitude when it comes to himself, but then he also has a lot of learned/internalized racism, and is perfectly fine condemning other members of his race? He's kind of just ... making an exception of himself because he's worked so hard to set himself apart from that learned racial stereotype? It's like those people who are like "All [members of specific race] are [harmful stereotype] but [specific person] is okay because they're not like "the rest" of them (and then it's like, every successive "okay" person just becomes another
exception to them and they never stop to question their beliefs on the race as a whole). And it's really fucked up and not okay and I don't want you thinking that I think it's okay because it's not.

Anyways. There will be more discourse about this later on, but I'm also trying to ease off it as much as I can because it's just ? not my place?? Because despite not asking for it I'm still a white person who reaps the benefits of social privilege, and I can't claim to fully understand these issues as someone who has never experienced them??? But I'm also trying to have representation in this story and I just????? Can only try my best on the topic but it also might be crap and if it is I apologize and welcome recommendations?

Yes, that is me referencing a goddamn Pokemon movie. Sue me.

When Javert is apologizing here it's more of a "Sorry your family all starved to death because of being born into poor societal conditions" than a "Sorry prison really sucked and everyone is an asshole to you about it" kind of thing. :/

Oh!!! I almost forgot! I drew a younger version of Guard!Javert. I have since learned that the uniform is the wrong type of guard uniform but oh well fuck me I guess

Suggested Listening:

Maybe this one's a bit weird, but,

Deliver Us - Hans Zimmer

Less in the context of what happens in this specific scene and more in the context of what this scene references in the past. Ever since I rediscovered that soundtrack I couldn't stop picturing the opening scenes to the 2012 Les Miserables movie with all the bagnards toiling in the rain under threat of the lash (because, I dunno, they're both the working songs of slaves who are outcasts from society, praying for god to have mercy on them?). Also, shit, re-listening to it tonight I realized that if the first half of that song is about Valjean, then, inevitably, the second half ... And man, it even mentions a river ...
**Blackout**

Chapter Summary

A night with no stars.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I guess what scares me the most now is the thought that I won’t be able to protect you.”

-Julia Hoban

***

“And he didn’t say anything to you?”

Cosette pursed her lips. “For the last time, he did not.”

“And you are not perturbed by that?”

“I am sure he has simply forgotten to. Marius, you need not worry so,” she sighed. “I would bet anything that he got up early yesterday morning to go to church at St. Jacques, and then went off to visit monsieur Javert. He will probably be back later tonight.”

“And if he’s not?”

“If he is not, then he will likely send word of it, and apologize. You know how he is. He gets caught up in his secret plans, and explains himself after the fact.”

“It has been nearly two days,” Marius muttered.

“He has often gone two or three days before coming home again. I would not trouble yourself with it. After all, he’s no longer in any danger from the law. And he always comes home safe eventually.”

“If he is not back by tomorrow evening, and we still have not heard from him, I am going to the police.”

“Suit yourself,” she told him, returning to her embroidery. “But he will likely be embarrassed by it when he returns.”

***
“Are you still awake?” Javert murmured.

He received no answer, and satisfied himself with the knowledge that Valjean was at least able to fall asleep. Of course, the opiates helped with that. But he would not have been the least surprised if the man had been kept awake by fear.

He thought back to the times when Valjean had suffered from nightmares in front of him. How shaken the man was. How he had lost his senses, quaking in terror.

Javert was glad that, even though it was likely thanks to the drug, Valjean had not suffered from such dreams these past two nights. Considering everything that had happened to him of late, he was more liable than ever to have one.

Perhaps drugs were good for some things.

He rearranged his position and settled back into the armchair with a comfortable sigh, burying his head in the corner of the backrest. He had shoved his pistol muzzle-down into the crack between the arm and the seat cushion. He reached out to make sure of it, felt the cool metal of its butt, and contented himself with the knowledge that, should anything happen, it was close at hand.

Thus comforted, he let his eyes fall shut.

***

It was the feeling of a draft against his skin that brought Javert blinking back into consciousness. Letting out a frustrated breath, he furrowed his brow. He was certain he had not left the window open.

Suddenly a creak sounded just behind him.

With a start, he whipped the pistol out and jolted up off the chair, its feet scraping loudly against the floorboards as he faced the back end of the room.

He heard more than saw Valjean throw back the covers and dart out of bed to his side. “Javert, —” he breathed.

Extending a shielding arm, Javert stepped in front of him. He narrowed his eyes.

A figure emerged from the shadows, pointing a pistol of its own at them.

It was Thénardier, and there was a cold, steely gleam in his eyes.

Javert let out a puff of breath, his lips twisting into a smirk. He brandished his own gun at him. “Oh, look. We have the same one. Where did you get yours, I wonder? The sewers? A barricade?”

“Step aside if you don’t want to die.”

Javert’s smirk pulled back into a wolfish grin. He began to laugh noiselessly. “This again. We all remember what happened last time.”

“I don’t need you. I only need him. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”
“Put the gun down, Thénardier.”

“I think not.”

“Come now,” Javert said. He was trying to sound coy, but the truth was that he was shaking. “—don’t fire. You’ll misfi—”

A shot rang out in the room, muzzle flash lighting it up like a thunderbolt.

Javert stared at the man in shock.

He looked down. Put a hand to the left side of his breast, just below the fifth rib, and drew it up, gazing at the dark stain on his palm.

He looked back up at Thénardier.

He scowled.

With a growl that grew to a roar, he lunged at him before the man could load another round.

Valjean shouted his name too late to be of use.

Just as he’d gotten his hands on him, shoving him against the wall, something wrapped around Javert’s neck and jerked him backwards.

His pistol, poorly gripped, as he’d been reaching for his manacles, dropped to the floor with a clatter.

“Easy there, Inspector,” Montparnasse crooned in his ear. “Someone might get hurt.”

Stumbling, Javert’s hands wrapped instinctively around the thin metal wire constricting his airflow, but there was little he could do to remove it. The leather backing of his stock collar prevented it from successfully garroting him, but it didn’t much help his ability to breathe.

Choking, he staggered back. Tried to elbow the boy in the face, kick him off. But the wretch was persistent, and agile.

To his left, Valjean was struggling against a large, imposing figure. Javert needed only the silhouette to tell him it was that herculean Creole, Gueulemer. There was another man, too, but Javert did not know him.

Javert tried to call out to Valjean, but his airway was too constricted to produce anything more than a sputter.

With little recourse, he slammed his back up against the wall, trying to stun his attacker.

Montparnasse was unfazed. The boy clung to him like an ermine to the throat of a hare, relentless, undeterred.

Javert tried it again and again, and he could hear the boy coughing, but the chokehold on his neck did not falter.

Before him, Valjean was putting up a decent fight, considering his injuries. But he was obviously straining himself.

Desperate, Javert attempted to do something he’d only ever seen done once before, which was
to reach back, grab hold of his assailant’s shoulders, and pitch himself forwards like a tumbler, heaving the boy up into the air and onto the ground.

It worked, in a fashion, but the move had been meant for someone using their hands to choke from behind, and Javert had not taken the garroting wire into account. Because of this, and the fact that Montparnasse refused to relinquish his grasp on the wire, it only dug further into his neck, quite nearly embedding itself in the leather of his stock collar. They splayed out onto the floor for a moment, Javert on his knees, with his head jerked down, Montparnasse having been flipped flat on his back.

It had knocked the wind out of him, but the boy twisted himself around and scrambled to his feet, clambering up on top of Javert.

Javert reared back, trying to throw him, but he must have been expecting it, as he only used it to his advantage, standing up and pulling Javert with him by the neck, so that they arrived back in precisely the same positions they’d been in to begin with.

“If you would just—be so kind—as to relax,” the boy growled, tugging the wire back ever more, “this would go—much more smoothly.”

Javert’s attention darted back across the room just in time to see Valjean land a blow straight to Gueulemer’s jaw.

The man faltered, clutching at it for a second, then, as Valjean tried to dodge a swipe from the other man, ducked his head and butted it into Valjean’s chest.

Valjean staggered back. He clawed at the fabric of his shirt, his eyes wide, coughing and gasping for air.

Javert tried to warn him, to cry out, but he couldn’t speak; it came out as a helpless grunt, saliva frothing in his mouth.

Gueulemer back-handed Valjean with a fist of his own, right to his temple, sending him reeling around. Then the brute grabbed hold of him by the hair, pulled him back, and put him in a choke hold.

Valjean tried to struggle, but the agony was plain to see on his face, and the man lifted him by his neck off his feet. Kicking helplessly, he cast one frantic look up at Javert. Tried to say something. But, like him, he had no air with which to speak, and it only made a gurgling noise in his throat.

Gueulemer began dragging him towards the stairs.

Javert thrashed furiously against his attacker, desperate to follow, but the boy held him down, held him still, the wire cutting into him.

The walls of the room began to melt like candle wax. This could not possibly be, he knew; it was some trick of the eye—but it meant he was losing the fight.

He could feel the strength start to drain from his muscles. And that fire, in his chest—it wasn’t helping.

Valjean still struggled, unseen, but made known through the thumping and knocking on the walls, and the clattering of steps.
“We just—need you out—of the way,” Montparnasse said from above.

And then everything went black, and he could no longer feel anything.

Only moments later, it seemed, he awoke on the floor, sucking in a breath of air and clutching his throat as his senses slowly flooded back. Then his diaphragm spasmed and he fell into a coughing fit, gasping and writhing on the hard wood, the hole in his chest burning, burning.

When the coughing began to die down, he managed to put his hands and knees beneath him, and crawl over to retrieve his pistol. Then he rose, swaying, to his feet. The first few steps he stumbled, still dizzy and disoriented. But the next saw him flying down the staircase, nearly tripping over himself. He veered towards the door.

For a split second, he caught sight of the portress, lying face down in the hallway, motionless, her rifle before her on the floor, as though knocked from her hands.

Javert only spared her a second’s glance.

Whatever fate she’d met, she was not in danger anymore, and he dared not lose any more time by examining her.

Clutching his throbbing chest, he staggered out into the street and broke into a run.

It was the middle of the night, and not a soul was about. There was no one to call out to; no one to see what was happening.

Up ahead, he could see them.

Valjean was still struggling against his captors, but his efforts grew rapidly weaker, and he stumbled, pushed and pulled against his will, glancing back at him in terror every now and again.

“Jean!”

The strength slowly being sapped from him, Javert tried to keep pace with them, but found himself slipping farther and farther behind. His lungs heaved, causing searing flashes of pain through his ribs.

He clawed at the fabric of his shirt, could feel it dampening gradually around the bullet hole. But this meant nothing to him, besides the inconvenience of its implications. Panic, shock, fear, and anger had flooded his veins with an inhuman energy, and it drowned out the screaming of his nerves.

Ahead of him, Valjean sagged in their arms, his head drooping. The group pressed onwards, half dragging and half carrying him.

“Jean!” Javert cried.

Valjean no longer seemed to hear him. The huge figure of Gueulemer hoisted him up and slung him over his shoulders, where he dangled limply.

God, no; not his chest—

Breath catching in his throat, Javert forced himself to keep going. One foot in front of the other. But his legs wobbled beneath him, and the world started to spin. His balance began to shift, and he slumped against a wall, still trying to move forwards as he leaned against it for support.
Head swimming, his heart pounded in its cage. Soon he had no sense of where he was putting his feet at all. His vision ebbed in and out, the black night growing blacker.

Far in the distance, he could see the group, now mere silhouettes, come to an intersection. And from around the corners of this intersection came another man—and with him, a horse-drawn cart.

Javert tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry.

Shaking, and still inching forwards, he pulled the pistol from his belt. It wavered in his trembling hand as he cocked back the hammer with a faint clicking noise.

As he felt his legs give way beneath him, he aimed it up at the sky and pulled the trigger.

A deafening crack of gunfire split the air.

He didn’t even feel himself hit the ground.

***

They lounged against the sides of the cart as it rattled down the road northeast towards the Rue de l’Arche-Marion.

Thénardier, Montparnasse, Gueulemer, and a few newly hired hands of the Patron Minette, sat facing one another in back, with Babet at the reins.

Thénardier had himself an accomplice, with whom he had worked to arrange the meeting in the distillery warehouse, and whose name was Anton, but whom he continually referred to as “Antoinne” to the man’s chagrin. This ruffian sat to his right, with his legs crossed and his cap pulled down over his eyes. Like any other man of his trade, he was in it for the money, and harbored little to no genuine affection for his partner; the promise of thousands of francs, however, was more than enough to buy his loyalty.

Jean Valjean had gone unconscious, and, to dispel suspicion, they had stuffed him beneath a tattered blanket, which in turn had been covered all over with straw. In this way, the cart had the appearance of transporting field-laborers rather than kidnappers. This illusion was furthered by the simple clothes they wore. However, Montparnasse, in typical fashion, had refused to change his attire, citing that the clothes they provided were all ill-tailored for him anyway, and would look strange upon his comparatively thin physique.

Babet had earlier pointed out that it mattered little, as a field-laborer could likely not afford perfectly tailored clothes, and would not bother with such things to begin with. But the boy would have none of it, and sat in the straw in his blacks and his reds, with his top hat resting on his stomach, looking perfectly contented and very out of place.

Thénardier, feeling at ease for once after this success, and being relieved at his disposal of the police agent who had so hounded him, took out a pouch of tobacco and set to stuffing some in his pipe.

“How long do you suppose it will take for us to get there?” Babet wondered aloud. “All the way, I mean.”
Thénardier shrugged, biting down on the mouthpiece and striking a match. “What would you say, Hercules—an hour or so?”

“’Round about,” said Gueulemer. “With him, maybe more towards two.”

Thénardier waved the match out and tossed it over his shoulder into the street, taking a breath and puffing out smoke.

They sat in silence for a moment, Montparnasse twirling straw between his gloved fingers, Thénardier taking puffs of his pipe.

“It is a pity Claquesous is not here,” Gueulemer mused. “He would have liked this.”

“Yes,” said Babet. “But we get his share.”

“How much are the shares, anyway?” Anton remarked.

“That will be decided when we actually have something to divide,” said Montparnasse.

“Well, I think it should be decided now.”

“We don’t know how much we can get,” Babet muttered.

“How much do they have?”

“Look, perhaps you are new to this business, but one doesn’t go about asking shares on the first ...

They continued arguing amongst themselves as Montparnasse and Thénardier shared a glance.

After a moment, Montparnasse lifted one end of the blanket to look at their prize.

They passed a streetlamp, and Valjean’s face was illumined.

“Why, I recognize this fellow.”

“Hm?” Thénardier raised an eyebrow at him. “You should. We tried to extort him a few winters ago, reppeles-toi?”

“What?”

“He was calling himself ‘Fauchelevent’, then.”

“Oh-ho! You don’t mean to tell me he was the old cove we tied up? ‘The mendicant who gives alms’? The charitable gentleman of Saint Jacques-du-Haut-Pas? Ah! That’s rich! Bon Dieu. Jondrette!” he said, with the laughter of a schoolboy. “You didn’t tell me that at all!”

“I didn’t think to. I forgot you weren’t there.”

“The deuce! And then I happen upon him in the street, not knowing who he was.”

“Eh?”

“Never mind. It’s just that I once tried to relieve him of his purse.”

The man let out a scoff. “You what? And how did that go?”
“Not how I expected, I’ll tell you that.”

“A little too strong for you, eh?”

“Something to that effect,” he muttered, glancing away for a second. “Say, didn’t he give you a run for your money back then?”

“Certainly. More a brute than even Gueulemer, this one.”

“No,” the boy laughed disbelievingly.

“I’m not joking! We had to pile on him all at once like dogs to keep him down!”

“Well I hope you’ve got something better to hold him with this time.”

“Oh,” Thénardier scoffed, “you mean something like this?” He fished around in the pocket of his coat and withdrew a set of manacles, holding them up proudly for him to see.

Montparnasse’s mouth curved up into a wondering smirk. “Where on earth did you get those?”

“From a very foolish little boy about your age who thought he could play policeman.”

“I assume that you taught him a lesson?”

“I did,” the man crooned, toying with the chains, “but I doubt it can do him much good anymore.”

“Mm, yes ... I do recall your methods of teaching to be rather harsh.”

Thénardier shot him a coy grin as he leaned back. “But then, you see, it’s the only way they ever learn.”

***

The first thing Madam Bernard became aware of was the throbbing in her right temple. And then, the swelling there, as she touched her fingers to it.

Struggling onto her hands and knees, she tried to recall what had happened.

Monsieur Fauchelevent had come, along with his friend, and she had nearly put a bullet in them. She remembered that, at least. She’d fetched them some candles, and gone to sleep.

And then what? It was all a haze. She could not recall having gotten out of bed.

Groaning, she ran a hand through her hair, still in its sleeping braid.

They had said ... someone was after them. That they were in some sort of trouble. That someone wanted them dead.

She sat back, rubbing her face. She looked up.

The front door was ajar. Faint illumination spilled through it into the hall.
Before her, lying on the floor, her rifle gleamed in the light.

As she stared at it, her memories came flooding back. The men breaking into her house. Herself, grabbing the gun and slinking out of her chamber and down the hall. She had threatened them with it. One of them had laughed. And then another must have snuck up behind her, because the last thing she knew she’d turned around and been bludgeoned over the head with something.

Reaching for her rifle, she staggered to her feet, creeping up the stairs.

No one was in the house. But the furniture in the upstairs bedroom was in disarray, and a struggle had clearly happened there.

It was as she stood there surveying the scene that she heard it: a gunshot, far off in the distance.

She froze. Then she bolted down the stairs.

Her vision was still blurry, and there were not any stars in the sky, so it was hard to see where she was going, but she ran half blind down the street, her weapon drawn against her waist.

Towards the intersection she found him.

Fauchelevent’s friend, the police inspector—she could not remember his name.

He was lying face down on the cobblestone, his pistol still clutched in his hand. A motionless heap, his hair spilling from his head in black rivulets. Between the paving stones, a dark stream spread beneath his breast, glinting in the night.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

Bunsen Burner - CUTS

Dragon Boy (The Bottomless Pit) - Joe Hisaishi

Kat's Sacrifice - Bear McCreary

Kesselring - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

Songs from "Friday Afternoons", Op.7 - Old Abram Brown - Choir of Downside School, Purley

Won't Let Go - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil
To Hold a Grudge

Chapter Summary

Valjean wakes up to an even more unpleasant situation. Marius goes to the police.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I'd rather be in danger with you than be safe without you.”

-Fuyumi Ono

***

“And you haven’t seen him?” Marius asked.

Nicolette shrugged. “Not since supper on Saturday.”

He let out a breath and touched his brow. “Where on earth would he have gone, then?”

“Did Madame la Baronne not say he often went on short journeys alone?”

“That’s true, but I assume he’d have the decency to tell her he was leaving, first.”

“A man like that can take care of himself,” the old woman said. “Was he not a convict in another life?”

Marius bit his lip. “Yes. However ... to be frank, that is precisely what worries me.”

***

When Valjean came to, he found himself on his knees, shackled by his wrists to a thick concrete pillar.

For a moment he only sat dumbly, his limp weight pulling against his arms, and listened to the sound of his own ragged breathing. He was sore all over. His ankle ached. There was a line of fire through his right bicep, and his shirt was sticking uncomfortably to his skin around it. But more than that, his ribs throbbed with a dull stab of pain each time he took a breath, and he found it hard not to cough.

He did not want to look up. But he forced himself to, and was rewarded with the vision of a dark, dusty cavern, lit only dimly with a few lanterns. In one side of the bedrock wall a doorway
had been cut; past it was but more darkness. Four columns stood equidistant from one another in the room, support beams, no doubt, one of which they had bound him to.

To his horror, sections of the wall had been hollowed out and filled with human bones. Skeletal limbs lay stacked neatly on top of each other on one side of the cavern. On another, the dark hollows of eye sockets peered out hauntingly from rows upon rows of skulls. Even the pillars had bones built into them in places.

He shivered. Once out of fright, and again out of a terrible realization.

Back in Toulon, he’d heard tell of this place. A vast underground city beneath the streets of Paris, filled with the bones of the dead. It had originally been a system of quarries and mines, but had been expanded to accommodate what the cemeteries above no longer had room to hold. For years, it was like a parade of the dead: human remains dug up out of their graves and carried through the streets in a grim procession, interred in the chambers below.

And now he was trapped down here with them.

With them, and with the ruffians that surrounded him. It was the men who had taken him before, joined now by a few more faces which he did not recognize. They were a raggedy band, but all looked perfectly capable of violence, whether with weapons or brute strength—or both.

“Oh!” came a voice. “Look who’s finally awake.”

Valjean’s attention flashed to the youngest of the group.

That boy ...

He squinted.

That boy! It was the boy who had tried to rob him on the street—the boy whom he had given a stern talking to about the dangers of his chosen “profession”. What was he doing here? Why was he helping Thénardier? Valjean’s heart sank at the sight of him, not only due to his own predicament, but also because the boy had clearly failed to take his advice to heart.

In another situation he might have pitied him; as it was, Valjean could only feel fear.

The boy sauntered towards him, pulling a dagger from his waistband and waving it lazily in the air at his side. He stopped but a hair’s breadth away from him, crouching down and leaning in towards his face, blade pointed at his throat.

Valjean looked down. He swallowed reflexively.

“I want you to understand something,” the boy murmured. He tilted his head ever so slowly, and put the dagger up against Valjean’s chin, lifting his face to his. “Even if you managed to break free, which I doubt very much, there is nowhere in these tunnels you can go. This place is a labyrinth, black as pitch, and you will never manage to find your way out. Down here, no one can hear you scream. And no one will find you until your body has rotted to dust.”

“If you run from us now, you will die a very slow, and very agonizing death. But if you submit to us, and stay put, no harm will come to you. I promise you that. We will lead you to the surface, and you will see your daughter again. So believe me when I say that it is in your best interest to behave yourself. Otherwise, the end of this predicament ... will not be pretty. Comprenez?”

He rose and stepped back, gazing at him all the while with a challenging look.
“I believe what my associate is trying to say is that the only way you’re getting out of here alive is with us,” Thénardier said, getting to his feet. “So you might as well stay.”

The boy glanced over at him and rolled his eyes. “Yes, thank you.”

Letting out a lighthearted sigh, Thénardier approached. Leaned over him, hands on his knees. “You know, Valjean, you really should have taken my deal.”

Face to the ground again, Valjean could not help but scowl at the condescension in his voice. “Now we’ve had to go and get your whole family involved.” The man clicked his tongue disapprovingly. “You’re a terrible father, pardi.”

Valjean gave a twitch at that. He shook his head violently, but it failed to calm him. “Why; why do you do these things?” he said, thrusting his gaze at him. “You’ll get the guillotine for this. You know that! Do you care nothing of it?”

The man’s eyebrows rose. He looked unimpressed. “Perhaps once. But that doesn’t concern me any longer.”

“Why?”

Thénardier paused. Licked his lips. His eyes turned hard. “This past year has not been kind to me,” he muttered. “All around, my family’s been dropping like flies. I have one daughter left to my name, and she is like to die soon as well. And then, I am already wanted by the police. Living like that … It is not an easy thing, especially not when one is poor. You understand.”

“If I manage to retain my freedom, that is good. If I score a nice sum of money off your suffering, that is even better. If not, and they come for me … well, let’s see how many of them I can kill before I die, eh?”

“Are things really so desperate for you? That you would risk your very life?”

“A man has bills to pay, and not so many friends to help pay them as he used to,” he sneered.

“I would have helped you,” Valjean breathed. “I would have helped you, then. Why did you not accept my help? Why did you have to do what you did, and demand a ridiculous amount? To resort to hostages, and blackmail?”

“Because a man can’t live his life on scraps, groveling at the feet of strangers and wondering where his next meal is going to come from! There’s no dignity in that! Why, if every man could stoop that low, could put away his pride indefinitely and content himself with crumbs, there’d be not thieves in the world at all!” He glared down at him. “You would know that, wouldn’t you. You would know that very well.”

Valjean faltered, turning his face away. “But this … This is too much. This is too far.”

“Don’t fool yourself; I didn’t ask for any of this either. Yet here we are. You got lucky,” he accused. “I did not. You rose as we fell. And you made a mockery of us. I don’t care if you offered me help. I didn’t want it. Not from you. Not from anyone! If there was one thing I wanted in life it was freedom. I dislike debts, you see. And charity—that I cannot stand. I would rather trick and steal to keep my family fed, if I could say honestly that it was I who’d put bread on their table. So you won’t begrudge me when I use you as a means to an end, my dear, beloved convict.”

“Ex-convict,” Valjean could not help but mutter under his breath.
Thénardier chuckled. “Ex-convict. That is well. A fat lot of good it does you now.”

Valjean turned then to the younger man.

“You … Boy. I recognize you,” he said, sitting up a little. “Why are you mixed up in this? Why do you do these terrible things?”

The boy looked at him as though he were very silly for not understanding. “What, me?” he said, with a smile that held all the innocence and all the cruelty in the world. “Because it’s fun, of course. And I don’t mind that I should walk away from this with a few extra coins in my pocket.”

Valjean stared at him for a second, trying to discern—what? He did not know. But sorrow and helplessness washed over him, and he shook his head and sank back down.

He was quiet for a long time. Finally, he spoke. “Where is Javert?”

Thénardier’s head swiveled around. “What?”

“Javert. What have you done with him?”

The man blinked. Slowly, a toothy grin spread across his face.

A shudder of dread shot down Valjean’s spine.

“Do you really think we would’ve gone to the trouble of dragging him all the way down here with you?” Thénardier said.

“Monsieur,” Babet added, “the last we saw of your friend, he was lying face-down in a pool of his own blood.”

Valjean froze.

He could not bring himself to examine the implications of those words, much less entertain their veracity—but he could also not move himself past the image they conjured.

As cold fear sliced through him, the back of his eyes began to burn.

“No,” he mumbled. A shadow fell over his face as he turned it to the ground. “No.”

He could not … process what it would mean if that were—if Javert was—

He clenched his teeth. “No,” he repeated, voice raising. “I won’t believe it.”

Even as he spoke, he saw again the room light up, that burst of flame from the pistol’s muzzle, and the crack that split the air. Could feel the bullet sear through his shoulder like the fer rouge. The ringing in his ears, and that shock—the shock of the man in front of him being shot. The hole in the man’s back; that—that hole in his—

“I won’t believe it; I won’t.”

Someone chuckled to themselves. Footsteps sounded in the dust, until they were just before him. The man crouched down.

Valjean would not look at him. He would not.

He remained rigid as Thénardier leaned in close, until he could smell the tobacco on his breath.
“Your friend is very dead, monsieur.”

The whisper cut him to his core. That mocking voice, and that terrible, terrible word ...

The blood drained from his face.

And the man sat back, and laughed, and the laughter turned to knives in Valjean’s gut, and then to fire, and it roiled inside him and clawed its way up to his brain.

And in that moment, Valjean felt true hate.

He had once lived his life on hate—for the world, and himself—for his fellow men, and god. But this was nothing compared to that old, dull grudge. This was sharp, like a blade, and hot as the fires of hell.

And for that moment—that singular moment—he was that man again, made of spite and rebellion and vengeance. And he reared up and spat in his face.

Thénardier jolted back with a look of disgust. He wiped the saliva from his cheek with the cuff of his sleeve. Then, scowling, he backhanded him.

The strike sent Valjean reeling, face to the floor again—and there it stayed, quivering with rage and indignation.

Thénardier stood. Hovered over him. Kicked up the dust in his face and stalked off.

With no further outlet, Valjean’s anger settled, uncomfortable in his stomach, like a geyser in the aftermath of eruption. The fight in him died down until the soreness, and the pain of his wounds, seeped back in. He fell into exhaustion, helpless, and lost.

The tears which he had been so admirably holding back came pouring down his cheeks, dripping off his chin into the dust. His vision clouded over, tunneled. And the grisly cavern, and its occupants, faded into gloom, until all that was left in the world was the pillar he was shackled to, and the hole in his heart.

***

Something cool and damp dabbed roughly at his face.

Javert knit his brow.

Slowly, his eyes fluttered open. He remained senseless for a minute, half in one world and half in the other, gradually taking his surroundings into account.

He was lying in a bed, in an unfamiliar room. Light was pouring in from behind the thin white curtains of the windows.

Someone was standing over the bed—a woman, heavyset, forty or fifty perhaps. It was a nun. She straightened herself, peering down at him, a wet cloth in her hand. “Are you awake?”

His head buzzed, and he could barely process the situation. His chest stung something terrible.
“Where am I?” he slurred.

“You are at the Hôtel Dieu, monsieur. You are safe.”

“What happened?”

“Someone shot you, by the looks of it.”

It took a moment to register those words, and connect them to the pain between his ribs—and then, to recall it all.

It seemed like a bad dream, hazy and far away. But he knew that it was not, and the terror swelled once more in his breast.

Unthinkingly, he grasped for her wrist. The panic steadied his voice some. “What—what day is it?”

“Why, it is Wednesday, monsieur.”

“Wednesday ...”

“About five o’clock.”

He had missed two whole days.

Two whole days they’d had to do with Valjean whatever they wished! And he had spent them sleeping.

“I’m sure you must be hungry by now,” the woman was saying. “Let me fetch you some broth. If you manage to keep that down, then perhaps we can move on to—”

“I don’t have time for that,” he breathed, trying to sit up.

“Don’t have time!” She echoed, grabbing hold of his arm. “And where do you think you’re off to? You’ve been shot, monsieur! Have you any idea how much blood you’ve lost?”

“You don’t understand,” he said, brushing her hand away, “I need to—”

“No, monsieur, it is you who does not understand. You try to walk out of here, you’ll fall flat on your face. You need rest. And food. Now lay down.”

He bared his teeth at her, but when she pushed him back against the pillows, he could not find the strength to rise again.

***

“Yes, for over three days, now.”

Across the desk, Marius watched the desk sergeant fill out the missing person report.

“And is there anywhere you know him to frequent?”

“Sir, I have checked at the places he frequents. The churches, the gardens, the market—what
have you. No one has seen him.”

“Mm.”

“I do not think he would have gone to any of those places, besides. It was Sunday he was first missing. He should have been at church. He was not. I am afraid something terrible has happened to him.”

“Calm yourself, now. We don’t know anything yet. Working oneself up with grief and worry will not do him any good.”

“I know;” Marius said, “I cannot help it. He has had a past filled with all sorts of dangerous adventures, and I fear now that something has come back to haunt him because of it. He was recently in the papers; people will have heard of him, by now. And I worry that—there is this particularly unscrupulous fellow who may hold a grudge against us, and ...” He huffed and rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease his nerves. “Is—is Inspector Javert around anywhere? I would like to talk to him specifically if possible.”

“Inspector Javert has been out on a stakeout this past week and has not yet returned. He is disguised and undercover, so it is likely no use seeking him out. He will come back whenever he has got what he’s looking for.”

Marius bit the inside of his cheek. He recalled whom it was that he had asked Javert to seek out, and the dread in his heart only grew. “I see.”

“Now, if you could give me a description of your father, monsieur ...”

“Yes, of course. Of course.”

***

On the way to the catacombs, Thénardier had amused himself by explaining to the group all the particulars of Jean Valjean’s past, which, as he so pridefully observed, had taken him a very long time to piece together.

Gueulemer found the story pitiable in that Valjean could have become a truly great rascal if he had so desired it, but had squandered his talents.

Babet had laughed and called him an escape artist. He proclaimed the man was simultaneously both the luckiest and unluckiest soul he had ever laid eyes upon.

Montparnasse, for his part, was astonished.

He had heard of the strange case reported in Le Moniteur, of a long-harrowed convict who had been appointed mayor somewhere, and been exposed, and hunted, and had somehow managed to accrue the sympathy of not only the fiendishly strict Inspector Javert, but the entire jury as well.

How queer it was, that this unassuming, white-haired old bourgeois, was in fact this Jean Valjean fellow! Had in fact, spent as many years in prison as he, Montparnasse, had been alive!

The strange and passionate lecture the man had given him earlier made sense to him now.
However, little else did.

In finding that Valjean was a criminal, or, at least a former one, a common thread had been woven between them. No longer was the man a haughty, wealthy old cove, but a fellow thief. This shared element ought to have begot an understanding between them.

But there was nothing about Jean Valjean which he understood at all.

The man did not beg and plead and blubber like the common man, or the rich man. Nor did he holler and curse like a gutter rat. He did not cower, and he did not fight. Montparnasse was intrigued.

Here was a proud man who was humble. Here was a humble man who was proud. Here was an ex-convict, and an ex-mayor. A philanthropist, and a thief. A law-abiding citizen who committed crimes, and a criminal who abided by the law. He was a man made up of contradictions.

Montparnasse found himself taken by surprise at the amount of grief Valjean was now displaying. It was, of course, expected that one should be disheartened over the loss of a comrade—but this resided in some different vein.

It was the strangeness of the man’s story, and its relation to their current state, which gave Montparnasse pause. Because, if he understood correctly, Javert had been, until very recently, the man’s antagonist. He was the one who had sent him back to prison, and tracked him down when he escaped. Many things about their intertwining paths simply did not add up in any rational way.

Why had Jean Valjean chosen to spare Javert’s life during the Rebellion? And why had Javert, whom everybody knew did not show mercy towards anyone, advocate for Jean Valjean’s pardon? It seemed impossible that Javert should be a friend to anybody, least of all a convict whom he had condemned. And it seemed equally impossible that anyone could be a friend to Javert in turn—least of all a convict, whom he had condemned!

And yet the way Valjean sat now in silence, with the tears pouring down his face, was as though he had been robbed not just of a friend, but of one dearly beloved.

There was no one whose loss would have moved Montparnasse thusly.

So, the depth of the man’s reaction, and its genuineness, was foreign, and sobered him. He felt an unease at the sight of this display.

Earlier, they had gone to a source of fresh water deeper down in the caverns, and drawn a bucket of it for their use. Montparnasse strode over and filled up the little tin cup beside it. He approached Jean Valjean.

“Come, old fellow,” he said, bending down and holding it out to him, “You must be thirsty by now.”

The man turned his face away.

Montparnasse let out a sigh. “You’re not helping yourself, you know.”

Still, the man refused to look at him.

“Fine. Suit yourself,” he said, getting to his feet. “You’ll be asking for it sooner or later.”

Valjean remained silent.
As Marius returned from the police station, one of the servants met him in the hall and called out to him.

“Monsieur le Baron, I was instructed to give this to you.” The man held out a letter, unmarked and sealed with plain white wax.

Marius took it from him, cocking his head. “By whom?”

“A young lady. She requested that you read it in private.”

The boy frowned.

He went into the drawing room and shut the doors before breaking the seal on the envelope.

Inside was a piece of parchment doubled over on itself. He unfolded it. As he did so, a curl of something fell free and drifted to the wooden boards at his feet.

Marius knit his brow, crouched, and picked it up. He turned it over in the light and inspected it. His confusion turned to horror.

It was a lock of snow-white hair.

He froze, the color draining from his face. Filled with dread, he turned back to the note with wide eyes.

“Two hundred thousand francs,” it read, “or more of him shall follow.”

Below, “Leave it in the water barrel at the corner of Ornes and Marie. If the payment is not received, or the police become involved, you will be made to regret it. You have two days.”

Marius stared at the perfect, looping handwriting, paralyzed. A shudder ran through him. He rose to his feet as if in a dream.

As he floated back into the hall, he tried to swallow, but found his throat had gone dry.

“Basque,” he said. He knew it was he who’d spoken, but what met his ears did not sound like his voice. It was husky and dry, and he could scarcely believe it came from his own two lips. “Who was the girl that brought this letter?”

The servant cocked his head at him. “She did not give her name.”

Marius did not feel any of the icy calm that permeated his tone. “Then what did she look like? Whither has she gone?”

“She was about your age, I would say. Pale of face, with yellow hair. White dress. No bonnet. I do not know where she has gone. But sir, she only left a few minutes ago.”

“A few minutes! Then she is not far. Did you see which way she took as she left?”
“The lady headed towards the Boulevard,” he said, pointing the way.

“The Boulevard ...”

He must have had a strange look upon his face, because the man furrowed his brow at him.

“Monsieur?”

“It is nothing,” he heard himself say, turning to leave. “Guard the door, Basque.”

***

Javert stared down at his chest from where he lay propped up against a pile of pillows. His shirt and coats had been undone so that it laid him bare, bloodied bandages exposed for all to see.

The bullet holes had closed up—but only just so. Any move he made was liable to open them back up again. It was his hope, however, that the sutures would prevent the wounds from worsening to a mortal degree, even if they did start bleeding a bit.

He assessed his health sullenly, a shadow over his face. And he thought of Valjean.

They would not have killed him. Of this Javert assured himself. If they’d wanted to, they could have shot him in bed when they’d had the chance. But they were careful to have taken him alive; therefore, alive he would remain, so long as his life was valuable. And if it was valuable to his children, it was valuable to Patron Minette as well. Worth, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of francs. To Javert, of course, it was not something one could put a price on—but these cockroaches would be perfectly happy to name one.

A ransom letter would soon find its way to the Pontmercys. Perhaps it had already arrived. What happened from there was anyone’s guess.

The gang could be holed up anywhere in the city; they all had their preferred nooks and crannies in which to conceal themselves. There was simply no way to know where they were keeping Valjean.

But if he could trace the ransom letter, perhaps ...

*Perhaps* ...

“Here you are, monsieur,” the nun said as she pushed open the door. She carried a tray of food, setting it down on the table beside the bed. “Broth and bread, fresh from the ovens.” Placing a cloth beneath the bowl to stifle the heat, she offered it to him, and he reluctantly took it, mumbling his gratitude.

He did not feel in the least bit hungry. He actually felt quite sick to his stomach. But if he was going to regain any semblance of health, he needed sustenance, and to that end he would force himself to swallow as much as he could.

His reflection stared back up at him from the surface of the broth. He looked well and truly disheveled. Frowning, he plunged a piece of bread into it and thus sent the phantom rippling away.

Chewing slowly, he tried to suppress his gag reflex. It was like his body had forgotten what
food was. But his stomach was hollow, and he knew he must, must be hungry, even if the food felt foreign in his mouth.

After a few minutes, his nausea began to ebb, and the smell and taste of bread and beef bouillon became palatable. He managed to finish the most of it.

When he tilted the bowl to drink the last of the broth, the nun, who had been observing him thoughtfully, stopped him. “Now that you’ve gotten some food in you, you can take something for the pain,” she said. From her pocket she produced a small glass vial.

Javert eyed the label. It was laudanum. The sight of it reminded him sharply of what the doctor had prescribed for Valjean. A dose every six hours, or else the man’s injuries would make it difficult for him to breathe. Without relief, if could cause him to succumb to pneumonia—or worse.

How long had Valjean been without medicine now? A day and a half. More towards two, now.

Javert watched the nun measure out the laudanum with disdain.

He was in terrible pain, to be sure, but opiates muddied the mind, and slowed the muscles, making one clumsy and stupid, and putting them to sleep. He could not afford to deal with any of those things at the moment.

“Madam,” he inquired, as she mixed the medicine with his broth, “I wonder, perhaps, if you might leave me the bottle? I know the proper measurements, and this way I would not have to get up to disturb anyone when I require another dose.”

The woman turned to him with a blank face. It was evident this was not customary procedure here. He could not say he blamed them.

Still, his suddenly cordial nature must have taken her off guard, because she bit her lip, and said “I’m not supposed to, but ... if you’re already familiar with it ... Tell me quick—what’s the proper dosage?”

“Twenty drops, four times a day.”

This seemed to impress her. “Very well; you may have it. But do be careful, and keep track of the time.” Setting the bottle on the table for him, she held out the bowl once more.

He sipped the last of the broth under her steady supervision, and when he had finished it, she gathered up the dishes, bade him farewell, and head for the door.

As soon as she had left, he spat it onto the floor, grabbed the vial of laudanum, shoved it in his pocket, and promptly climbed out the window.

***
Javert, wtf do u think ur doin

Suggested Listing:

Bolero (Closing Credits) - Craig Armstrong
Kells Destroyed - Bruno Coulais
Papa - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein
Premonition - Toby Fox
Requiem for a Dream - Clint Mansell
Something Dark is Coming - Bear McCreary
What Else is There to Do - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein
**Familiar Faces**

Chapter Summary

Family dilemmas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Revenge is a business of calculation, best served cold. Rescue holds more of sacrifice, suicidal danger, and all manner of other madness that should have me running in the opposite direction.”

-Mark Lawrence

***

Marius spotted her halfway to Place Royale, slipping through the street with her head down, frizzy, unkempt yellow hair out of place amidst the crowd. Her dress was frayed at the bottom edge of the skirt, and dingy with dust or soot, as were her stockings and shoes.

He had not seen Azelma Thénardier in nearly two years, but as soon as he laid his eyes on her, he was sure. Who else could it be? A girl that age, running errands for that wicked man.

By the look of her, one might almost be inclined to dismiss her as a lady of the night, but the fearful air she had about her, and the way she turned her face from passersby, said otherwise.

Transfixed, he followed her some distance behind, waiting until she rounded a corner to draw close.

By the time she heard his footsteps, it was too late for her to run. As she turned to him, he snatched her arm with his free hand, his fingers digging into the sallow flesh of her shoulder like talons.

Her amber eyes stared up at him like he was the devil himself. She began to open her mouth.

“Scream and it will summon every officer in Paris,” he warned.

A shudder ran down her spine. Her expression was frightful, but, to his surprise, she retained a strange sense of composure. “You—you want ...?” She began to slide the sleeve of her dress and her fichu down her arm, revealing the bare skin of her shoulder.

The blood rushed to his face. “W-what? No; what are you—? Stop that!”

She gave a start. Slowly slid the fabric back into place.

“Who do you take me for?” he cried, flustered.
“I don’t know, m’sieur.”

“Don’t you recognize me?”

“Should I?”

“I daresay you ought. You’ve just sent me a ransom note!”

Her face lit up with horror. She turned to run, but he caught her from behind, pinning her arms behind her back and clamping his hand over her mouth.

“No, no, we’ll have none of that. You’re coming with me. And don’t you dare make a scene, or it’s the jailhouse all the quicker for thee. Nod if you understand.”

She gave a fearful nod.

“Good. Now don’t fight.” Taking her by the arm, he dragged her back onto the Boulevard, heading north.

***

Javert had no money to hire a cab, so he walked.

His blouse was torn at the collar; his waistcoat was missing the top button, and there were scorch marks on his trousers. Most prominently, there was a hole and a huge, bloody stain on both his front and backside, which cost him many a frightful glance. He wished desperately for his habitual topcoat, with which he might have shrouded himself, but it was not to be. He had put on this outfit a week ago to disguise himself as a beggar, and it was now more convincing than ever—though, it did in a fair way smack more of a corpse.

All this considered, it was no great shock to him that his portress prodded him with every question under the sun upon his return, worrying over him like a frantic mother.

Wordlessly, he pushed her aside and headed upstairs to his apartment, slamming the door and locking it behind him.

The first thing he did was take the pistol from his waistband and tear open the drawer of his side-table, revealing the powder and shot within.

He poured the powder into the gun’s bore, pushed a square of linen into the muzzle with the pad of his thumb, set an iron ball in it, withdrew the ramrod from its slot beneath, and rammed it down the barrel until the bullet and the powder were wedged in place. Adding the priming powder, he set the pistol down on the table top.

On the edge of his health, and mad with vengeance, he tore what remained of his clothes off and tossed them away, washing the sweat and the blood from his skin—careful to avoid the bandages. He ran the brush through his long greying hair until it gleamed smooth and even again, tying it back in its queue.

With his uniform back on (or what he thought of as his uniform, for they were not regulated at his rank), he regained a semblance of authority, and quite nearly composure. All but for the glint in
his eye, which cried for blood.

On one side of his belt he fastened his thin officer’s sword, with its gleaming silver basket handle; on the other, his stout lead-tipped cudgel, lacquered black. In the band of his trousers he tucked the pistol. And he made sure, of course, that he retrieved his spare set of manacles and put them snugly in his pocket, lamenting that he did not have more.

It was no matter, he thought; for soon he should be attended with a greater security.

***

The Commissaire of the fourth arrondissement was in the middle of tallying the weekly arrest records for the distribution of his officers’ pay, when his door swung open quite without his bidding, jarring him from his work.

“Javert!” he said, glancing up from his desk.

The man looked positively infirm. Yet, he had a brutal ferocity about him.

“Bon Dieu;” the Commissaire exclaimed, “what happened to yo——”

Before he could finish, the inspector had slammed an open hand down on his paperwork, gazing at him with fixed intent in those prodigiously, eerily pale blue eyes.

“How many men can you spare me?”

***

“Marius? What are you doing?”

Marius whipped his head over his shoulder to find Cosette standing in the doorway of the drawing room, hands wrung, looking at him with worry.

“Why are you shouting?” she asked. “Who is that woman?”

“Mon amour, this does not concern you.”

“I am tired of things not concerning me! And I think very much that it does.” She turned her gaze to the girl cowering in the corner. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“She is merely a girl that I know,” Marius growled, glaring at the person in question.

Her voice quavered beneath him. “You don’t know me, m’seur.”

“Don’t lie to me! I know who you are! You are Azelma Thénardier!”

“Thénardier …” There was such an odd, fearful tone in his wife’s voice that Marius turned back around.
He found that her eyes had grown wide.

“No, that could not … I remember you,” she said. “I remember—from the inn! The littler girl, the younger sister. Zelma,” she breathed.

The young woman shuddered. “You …” She began a slow retreat towards the wall, shaking her head. “You could not possibly be … N-no, you couldn’t be she, that poor wretch of a creature that we—”

“I was!”

Again she quivered. “They … They used to call you ‘the Lark’.”

“I remember.”

“Remember what?” Marius exclaimed.

Azelma continued, unnoticing of his confusion. “You— No, but— H-how …? How have you come to be—”

“Madame la Baronne,” interrupted Nicolette from the doorway, “is everything all right?”

“It is well, Olympie,” Cosette breathed. “Let us be.”

“‘Madame la Baronne!’” Azelma echoed in horrified disbelief when the old servant had gone. “I— You are—! But how is this possible? How have you …?”

“Mon amour, what is going on? You two know one another?”

“We grew up together, for a time.”

“What! Can it be so?”

“It is so. We were very young.”

“Wait—” Marius put a hand to his brow. “Then the—”

Cosette and Azelma knew each other. Had lived with each other. So Cosette must have known Thénardier.

Valjean had taken Cosette from an inn—from, as she had recalled it to him, “some very wicked people.”

All at once he could hear the man’s booming voice in his memory:

‘My name is not Fabantou, my name is not Jondrette, my name is Thénardier. I am the inn-keeper of Montfermeil!’

The inn-keeper. Valjean had taken Cosette from his inn. Of course, of course he had, because in fact, Thénardier had recognized him when they had met at the Gorbeau House. And Thénardier had recognized Cosette, as well—had referred to her as “the Lark”. And what had Azelma just called her?

Marius reeled. “He was ... your caretaker?” he thought aloud. “That man? That horrible ...?” He could not bear to picture his love at the hands of that vile charlatan, that raving, scheming dog, and yet! He pictured it! And it was terrible. And it fit perfectly within the complicated jigsaw puzzle of
their histories. “Mon Dieu.”

He remained stupefied by this revelation for a moment, then shook his head and cleared away the thoughts, which were no use to him at present. Focusing on the current threat, he balled his fist and closed back in on Azelma.

“Our fathers. Do you know where they are?”

She stared up at him, mute.

“Tell me!”

“No.”

“No, you do not know where they are’, or ‘No, you will not tell me’?”

“I will not tell you, monsieur.”

“Then you do know where they are!” he exclaimed, full of righteous rigidity. “And you will lead us there!”

“I cannot.”

“You shall.”

“It was forbidden.” Her eyes were wide now, full of distant terrors.

“Woman, you do not have a choice!”

“That is where you are wrong, monsieur;” she laughed dejectedly, “I do. You may follow me, but I will lose you in the tunnels, and you will never find your way out. It is too dark.”

His face had gone blank. “Tunnels?” he repeated. “They’re underground?”

She paled, withdrawing into the corner. “I’ve said too much,” she mumbled to herself.

“Marius!” Cosette exclaimed. She had crept up behind him, and the sound of it nearly caused him to jump.

“What?” he cried, upstarting. “Can you not see I am busy?”

She slapped him flat against his cheek.

He blinked. Drew his hand to his face. Looked up at her.

She glanced down at her shaking hand, now red. “I am sorry for that,” she said, clasping it behind her back, “but you were being intolerable.”

“I—”

“Father is missing, and clearly you have found something out about it, but you have not told me a word, nor does it seem you were planning to. We agreed, Marius! We agreed that there should be no more secrets between us. And here I find you accosting this girl in our house!”

He felt his face grow hot, and it was not from the slap. He tried to swallow. “Cosette—”

“You are going to give me an excuse, and I do not want to hear it! Now tell me what is going
on, or I shall hear it from her!"

“She will lie to you, ma chère.”

“Then you shall have to tell me instead.”

“Truly, I would prefer not to involve you. It would upset you greatly, and—”

“Good! I wish to be upset. I am already upset. Tell me what’s happened. Why is she here?”

“I gave him a letter, that’s all,” Azelma said.

“That’s all? That’s all?” Marius raged.

“You were meant to give it to her, anyway!” the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms up in front of her, as though to deflect an expected blow. “She’s the one with the money.”

“The money?” Cosette echoed.

“Oh, God. Cosette, they have—” He put his face in his hand. It was clear this could no longer be avoided. “Thénardier is blackmailing us,” he said, his voice muffled by his palm. “He is using Valjean. It is not the first time. But I fear he intends to make it the last.”

“Blackmailing—? With father? Do you mean to say he has taken him?”

“I’m afraid so. And I don’t know where they’ve gone.” His reluctance, and his desire to keep her ignorant of the situation, had just been made fruitless, and now that it was unavoidable, now that he could tell her—had to tell her—he was beset with fury and disgust at the situation. “But this wretch, this insufferable little creature,” he said, gesturing to Azelma, “came herself to deliver the ransom note, and did not manage to elude me. And God help me, I will use her to find them!”

He was shaking, now, trembling with anger. He wanted her to know, suddenly—wanted her to understand—to hate that man as much as he did. God knew he deserved it. “Just look—look at what they’ve done!” He withdrew the crumpled letter from the breast pocket of his coat and shoved it at her.

She opened it, and within seconds, he could see the horror light up her eyes. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. “This is— Oh, my God. My God! Marius!”

“I know.”

“What do we do?”

“I’ll tell you what we do,” he growled, turning back to Azelma. “And it starts with her.” He gripped the girl by the collar of her dress, hoisting her to his face. “Where are they? Where are they keeping him? You will take us to them!”

“I cannot!” she protested, her eyes growing wet. And then, to herself she spoke thusly: “No, no. He would not forgive me.”

“I don’t give a fig what your father thi—”

“Marius!” exclaimed Cosette, taking him by the arm. “You’re not helping. Let me speak with her. Azelma, please,” she entreated, brushing past him and approaching her carefully. “My father—he is the most important thing in the world to me. If something were to happen to him my heart should break; I would die of grief.”
She knelt down so as to be on level with her. “I beg of you, please—help us. I know you were never kind to me, but we were children then, and you did not know any better. I don’t begrudge you for it. And now—now our roles are reversed. I … If you need money, I can help you! But please, you must stop this. You know this is wrong!”

“It’s not— You don’t understand.”

“Azelma. Listen. I remember how he is, your father. I remember how cruel he could be. You don’t have to do his bidding; you don’t belong to him anymore. You can choose your own path. Please, help us. You know my father doesn’t deserve this. You know this isn’t right!”

The girl trembled beneath them.

“No, no,” she mumbled as the tears slid down her cheeks, “I don’t need your help. I don’t need anything from you. I don’t—” She choked back a sob. “You don’t understand; I can’t.”

Slowly Cosette put her arms around her.

“It’s all right,” she soothed, smoothing back a stray lock of hair from the girl’s face. “You don’t need to go back to him. You don’t need to live like this. It’s all right to ask for help.” She cupped her face in her hands. “We can make it so he never lays a finger on you again. We can make him go away forever, if that is what you wish. But you need to help us, Azelma. Please. *Sister, please.*”

All of this had overwhelmed the girl, but it was the word ‘sister’ which seemed to affect her the most deeply. She broke into a sob and hid her face in her hands.

“Why would you help me?” she wept. “I don’t understand.”

“Because you are in need of help,” Cosette replied, placing her hands on her shoulders, “and because I can provide it now! Should that not be reason enough?”

The girl grimaced, as though pained, the tears dripping off her chin onto her tattered white dress. “*We were so cruel to you,*” she breathed.

“We were but children.”

She shook her head. “N-no, this is— This is a trick; you are going to send me away to the station-house with him. You are going to put me back in prison. You are—”

“I would never lie to you,” Cosette insisted. “Truly! This is not a trick.”

“It is only fair,” Marius said, drawing closer. “It is only fair that one kindness be repaid with another. You help us, and we shall help you in turn. We will not let them arrest you. I am a man of my word—and a lawyer, at that!” His voice grew hushed. “And besides, your—” His eyes flicked away; he grew distant. He wet his lips. “Your sister … I owe her a debt.”

Azelma looked up at him in confusion. “What? Owe her a— But why?”

“You sister, Éponine—she …” He swallowed, his face downcast. “She followed me to the barricades. I know not why, only—that she said she had fallen in love with me. I didn’t know she was even there; she had dressed in boy’s clothing, and not spoken to me. I think that she was watching me, that whole time—protecting me from harm. When a guardsman pointed his gun at me, she stepped between us and took the bullet in my stead. I would be dead if not for her; she gave her life for me! And I barely knew her, had hardly noticed her. She did not owe me that!”
“And then, your brother—Gavroche. He was there too. We had tried to stop his coming, and then, to send him away on errands, but he would not listen to us; he came back anyway. He wanted to be a part of it—the revolution. Ah, that poor child, that good and loyal little fool. It was he who recognized the spy in our midst, he who saved the barricade from I-don’t-know-what kind of police incursion.”

“And it was he who fetched us ammunition when we began to run low, and all looked lost. That was how he lost his life. They shot at him, as he was foraging for cartridges among their dead. And he sang as he worked, and he laughed as the bullets whizzed past his head. He sang even as he died, Azelma—he was so brave; I wish you could have seen it.”

He stared off for a moment longer before shaking his head and returning his gaze to her. “So you see, I owe your family a debt. A multitude of debts. Allow me to repay them. Please, help us. Save our father. I will be forever grateful to you; I will give you all you could ask and more. But you must decide. We’re running out of time. Your father holds a grudge against mine—more than one. Who knows what he might be doing to him at this very second? I am afraid to think on it. Azelma, please. You must help us! The both of us, we are begging you!”

Her face blotched with red from crying, Azelma looked from one to the other, trembling as another wave of tears welled in her eyes.

“Yes,” she finally sobbed, hanging her head as the tears poured down her cheeks afresh. “I will do it, monsieur. I will do it; I will take you to him. Only …” She choked. “Only, I am so afraid.” Sniffling, she looked back up as Cosette stroked her arms in sympathy. “Ah— What is your name?” she asked. “I can’t remember.”

“I? Cosette.”

“Cosette,” she repeated to herself, giving a little nod. “I will help you, Cosette. I will try.”

“Thank you,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around her and crushing her to her breast. “Ah! Thank you!”

Azelma allowed her to embrace her for a moment before she drew back, straightening herself as she rose to her feet.

“Come,” she said. “They’re in the catacombs.”

***

Jean Valjean’s sobs had long faded into silence. He sat listlessly, shoulders drooped, a dull smoldering of something in his eyes. Every now and again, almost absentmindedly, or perhaps spitefully, he would test the manacles that bound him, pulling the links taught.

Thénardier grit his teeth and whipped his head around. “You keep rattling those chains like some damned ghost, and I’ll turn you into one!”

The man only looked up at him with the cold apathy of one who bears a deep grudge. He seemed to be challenging him to make good on the promise.

Montparnasse considered him. Then, as if to himself, he murmured, “He’s gotten there quick.”
“Gotten where?” Thénardier asked.

The boy leaned back and crossed his arms. Gave a pensive sigh. “Sometimes, after a little interrogation, there is a place certain men go where they can no longer be reached by means of violence or of threat. It appears to me as though he were in that place now.”

“Bah. And what does one do to put a man in such a place?”

He looked back to Valjean with an air of sepulchral wistfulness. “You take something precious from him.”

***

“And you know how to get there?” Marius asked.

“I think so,” said Azelma.

“You’re sure?”

They were interrupted by a loud knocking from the front doors.

“Who the devil could that be at a time like this?” Marius hissed. “Merde ...” Striding down the hall, he threw open the door without waiting for the porter.

He was abruptly taken aback by the sight of three policemen, six gendarmes, and one very large and very unhappy looking inspector.

“Javert!” he exclaimed.

“You have received a letter,” said Javert.

“Y—yes, but how on earth did you—?”

“Let me see it.”

“Are you well? You look ashen.”

“I’m fine,” he growled. “Now where is it?”

“Well, it’s in the drawing room, but—”

Javert brushed past him into the house, Marius stepping back more to avoid him than to invite him in. “Stay here,” he said to his officers, waving a dismissive hand back at them.

“Wait,” Marius called after him, “Inspe—blast it all—Inspector!”

Marius caught up to him as he arrived at the drawing room—just in time to find Azelma and he staring at one another with mutual shock.

Javert’s turned to fury. Azelma’s, to horror. “You!” they both exclaimed.

“I should’ve known you’d be involved,” the man growled, pulling the manacles from his pocket and starting towards her.
Azelma turned to Marius with a look of betrayal. “But you promised!”

Javert grabbed her arm.

Marius grabbed the back of Javert’s coat. “Javert! Javert, wait. She’s agreed to help us. Don’t arrest her!”

“What? Agreed to—”

“Then you—you didn’t send for him?” Azelma stammered.

“No, no,” Marius said, throwing up his hands. “In fact, I don’t even know how he—”

“Is it true?” Javert cut him off, Azelma’s wrist still firmly caught in his grasp.

“Yes, monsieur, I swear it!” She tried to pull away from him. “Please.”

He held tight, drawing in to examine her face with fiery eyes, like a wolf bearing down on a cowering hare. “I don’t. Trust you.”

“You wouldn’t,” she said.

His scowl only deepened. He turned back to Marius. “Then she was not the one who delivered the letter?”

“She was,” Marius admitted, “but—”

“Then why in God’s name do you trust her?”

“Because I do! Because she has convinced me! Because I have no other choice. What would you have me do, Inspector? Throw away our only lead?”

“No, but ...” He glanced back at Azelma. “Whether or not your intentions are genuine, girl, pray tell: exactly why have you agreed to help them?”

Azelma turned red. “Because—because—” Her voice dipped to a mumble. “I don’t ... want to—”

“What was that?”

A little louder, now: “I don’t—” She hung her head, blurring it out like some secret shame. “I know what he does is wrong.”

Javert scrutinized her. “What you’re telling me, then, is that your father still thinks you loyal to him—and you are not?”

Marius could see the girl’s eyes growing wet again. The hands she wrung were trembling—and, the shadow of that dark and mountainous figure looming over her, it was not hard to see why.

She opened her mouth to make a reply, but promptly shut it again, averting her gaze.

“Well? Are you loyal to him, or not?”

Her lips quivered.

“How do you expect us to trust you if you can’t even—”
“Javert, that’s enough!” Marius shot him a frown. “She has already been though our questions; there is no need to interrogate her a second time. And you—you can’t just expect someone to betray their own family without at least some reservation. Besides, the fact that she displays reservations at all should be a testament to her honesty! Don’t you think?”

Javert faltered at that. Wrinkled his nose. “Yes, well.”

“She has promised to lead us to them, in return for our protection—and our word of honor that we shall not charge her with anything.”

“She has broken parole,” the man said.

“Inspector! If we want to get anywhere right now we must set such things aside.”

“One does not simply ‘set aside’ the law, Pontmercy.”

“Oh, I think very much that one can. And one will, if one wants to see one’s friends again.”

Javert bared his teeth at him.

“Do you want her assistance or not?”

The man let out a begrudging growl.

“Then you have to agree to her terms!”

“This is all beside the point!” Javert exclaimed. “Listen, either she is telling the truth, and we get Valjean back, or she’s lying, and we’re walking straight into a trap.”

“A trap! What kind of trap? They need us for the money!”

“No, they need your wife. They do not need you in the slightest. Or me. And may I remind you, boy, that there are a good many reasons why her father, in particular, would like to see us punished?—to say nothing of Patron Minette. And don’t you think, just maybe, that adding two more near and dear compatriots of one Madame Pontmercy might increase her willingness to pay? Might increase it, say, a hundred, two hundred thousand francs?”

Marius grew tight-lipped at that. “They cannot hope to outnumber us,” he finally said. “They must realize that.”

“And you must realize that one of us, indeed a number of us, might die.”

“So what are you saying then?”

Javert pointed a finger at him. “I am saying: be hopeful, but be prepared. We keep her in chains, and we don’t let her out of our sight. Worst comes to worst, we can use her as a hostage. Then it’s a matter of exchange, and it gives us insurance.”

Marius mulled this over uneasily, letting his eyes drift to Azelma’s over Javert’s shoulder. “Is that acceptable to you?” he asked her.

She held his gaze for a moment, clearly belittled, then dropped hers to the floor, giving a solemn nod.

“Good,” said Javert. “Now give me your hands.”
Reluctant, she held out her wrists and let him clap the irons on, pulling her hands and fastening them in front of her.

This done, he looked her up and down. “So. Where is he, then? Where are they holding him?”

“The catacombs,” she murmured.

“The catacombs?” Marius heard him swear beneath his breath. “Of course. Of course it would be the damn catacombs. And let me guess: they entered them through the sewer grate by l’Arche Marion.”

She nodded.

“Well,” he said, “I know whose idea that was. I assume you know the way?”

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“They drew me a map.”

“A map! Then we don’t need you at all!” He paused for a moment, his blue eyes flicking away. “No, no ... perhaps we should still drag you along for negotiations. And then, there is no telling whether or not the map is correct, or what we will meet at its end.”

“I hate that place,” she whispered with a shudder.

“I am sure that you do. Now come, come ...” The man seemed to withdraw into himself, mind restless, eyes darting. “Here; take this,” he said after a moment, thrusting a pistol into Marius’ hand, “—in the event that we find ourselves separated. You may use it to signal your location. I trust that you will actually commit to it, this time.”

Marius stared down at the gun with surprise. “Y-yes, of course. Merci. It is kind of you, Inspector,” he said, sliding it into his waistband. “Now that I think on it, I do owe you a pair of these.”

“You can worry about your infractions later. We have work to do.”

“Indeed. But …”

“But what?”

Marius licked his lips. “Are you truly well? You’ve lost your color.”

Javert gave a snort. “That’s ironic, coming from your pasty hide.”

The corner of Marius’ mouth drew back. “That is another matter entirely. I know how you look in health, and this is a considerable leap from that.”

“You think I don’t know how I look? It means nothing. I just need some sleep; that’s all. I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t doubt that; but—”

“I will see this thing done,” Javert proclaimed. “I will see it done with my own two eyes, and by my own two hands. I will not sit idly by while some vile band of brigands makes a mockery of the
law and threatens innocent lives. Do you understand, boy? I will see it done. I will see him safe.”

Slowly, Marius bowed his head. “I understand.”

“Monsieur Javert, est-ce vous?” It was voice of Cosette.

She appeared around the corner, dressed in an uncharacteristically plain and close-fitting dress. Her hair was combed into a neat braid and looped into a bun on the back of her head. This was held together by hair pins and white netting embellished with pearls. Save for this functional adornment, she wore no other jewelry.

“It is you! And we were just about to go to the station-house! But how did you know to—” She stopped, eyeing him with surprise. “Good gracious, but you look ill.”

“I am perfectly well, I assure you,” he muttered between his teeth. “Madame.”

She pursed her lips. “Did something happen to you?”

“Nothing happened! You are wasting my time.”

“I suppose that is true. We must make haste. Has everything been explained to you?”

“Everything that needs knowing.”

“Bien. Marius,” she said, “are we ready to go?”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Javert asked gruffly, eyeing her appearance with suspicion.

“Whatever do you think I mean?” she retorted.

“You don’t mean to tell me you plan to bring your wife on this excursion,” he exclaimed, turning a baneful eye towards Marius.

“She would not be dissuaded from accompanying us,” he said sheepishly, “though I did try, trust me. And really, when I thought about it, he is her father even more than he is mine, and I have no right to try to prevent her from coming to his aid.”

“No! Absolutely not,” Javert barked. “It’s preposterous! She’ll not be going anywhere tonight; least of all with us. It would only slow us down, and provide our adversaries with means to use against us. I won’t have it. I won’t!”

“Monsieur Inspector,” Cosette began, “You will forgive me if I say that it is not your decision to make.”

“Oh?” He gave a terrible laugh that sounded like the cry of an animal more than a man. “Not my decision! Not my decision, you say? I’m the head of this operation! And I say to you that you cannot go, madame.”

“And I say to you, monsieur, that I am coming with you whether you permit it or not, and that you have no choice but to allow me to do so.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it is absolutely necessary that this operation be carried out at once, and it’s too important for you to delay in performing it simply to make certain I do not accompany you. Besides which, it is not true that I should slow you down, not in the least; I have dressed myself to
that end, as you can surely see.”

“And furthermore, an extra set of eyes and ears, and even hands should it come to that, is never unwelcome in situations such as these, and I do in fact know how to defend myself against attack. I may be ‘Madame la Baronne’ now, but I was once a child of the streets as well. If Azelma is permitted to join you, then there is no reason I cannot do so too.”

“You were a child on the streets and only a child! Never a woman. That was far too long ago to be of any relevance now. And the only reason that wretch of a girl is allowed to accompany us is because we can use her against them.”

He leaned in close, jabbing a finger at her face and lowering his voice. “If your father was here, he would never let you go with us; you know that! And if I let you come, he’d have my hide. What if you should get yourself injured? You are the most precious thing in the world, to him, if that were not already clear. It will not do for you to risk yourself thusly, even for his sake. Certainly, he would tell you that. Do you wish to grieve him so?”

“Inspector, you have no grounds on which to scorn me. The reason I insist on coming with you is precisely the same reason you’re here! And if you obstruct me from going, I shall—I shall ... I shall charge you with something! And you shall never hear the end of it. I shall go to every one of your superiors and complain!”

Javert opened his mouth to protest, but not a single word passed his lips, and he promptly shut it with a growl. “You ...” He shook his head furiously. “You! I have no time to waste on you. We do not have the luxury of arguing with one another until a resolution is agreed upon. Come if you must, but do not blame me if you find yourself bleeding out in some pitch-black tunnel, or worse.”

“No, I shall not have anyone to blame for that but myself,” she concurred.

“That is well. But do us all a favor and stick to your husband’s side. Or better yet, one of ours. Now let us be off.”

Jamming his arm in the fold of his coat, he stalked off down the hall, dragging Azelma behind him.

“Ridiculous children, all of you,” he muttered under his breath.

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

Railroad Track - Willy Moon

Regain Control - Shirobon

Too Old to Die Young Now - Brother Dege

Who Did That to You - John Legend
The group enters the catacombs.

“It gives me strength to have somebody to fight for; I can never fight for myself, but, for others, I can kill.”

-Emilie Autumn

***

“Is there literally no other way to do this?” Bisset complained, wrinkling his nose and edging away from a puddle.

“Do you want to get lost?” Javert asked.

“Not particularly, but—”

“Then no.”

The boy was defeated for a moment. “But sir,” he resumed, “there is an entrance by the avenue for example, which would not require half so unhealthy a route, and—” He was cut off as Beaufort, an officer of the peace[1] much his senior, elbowed him in the ribs, casting him a nasty glare.

“Behave yourself, lieutenant,” he growled, “or I’m writing you up. You’re lucky to even be on this assignment.”

“Oh, yes,” the boy said, glancing disdainfully at the river of sewage to their right, “—very lucky indeed.”

As if on cue, a large rat appeared around the bend, and, startled by their lamplight, ran between their feet, its claws scrabbling on the limestone as the gendarmes stepped out of the way.

“I do wish degenerates were not so overly fond of squalor and filth,” sighed one of them, watching the rodent disappear.

“Well, you know how it is,” Beaufort said. “Vermin feel at home in the dark.”

Azelma winced.

Beside her, Javert held out his lantern, pace slowing. “Is this it?”
She nodded at the tunnel entrance to their left.

They continued on.

All around them there was damp, moldering stonework, and an oppressive stench. Some of the men held their handkerchiefs or cravats over their nose and mouth, to no avail.

Cosette held the edge of her skirts up, mindful of each step. Despite the fearful glances she cast about herself, she gave them no complaint.

Mercifully, the further they went, the more divided the streams were, and the less sewage there was. Finally they took a turn down a route with no channel cut into the floor at all, and from there the smell began to fade.

The laid brickwork that comprised the sewers turned to pure, chiseled slabs of stone.

“We’re in the old quarries, now,” remarked Inspector Segal, gazing appreciatively at the handiwork.

Though the air was musty, and tense, it was freer than where’d they’d just been, and they all let out a sigh of relief.

Where before there had been plaques showing the way and indicating which streets they were under, there were now only vague markers, carved into the walls themselves, half of which might only be recognizable to miners.

It was odd to see the expanse of the place. As half the city above had been made from the limestone herein, so was there now an imprint below, a dark reflection.

“I never knew this place was down here,” Cosette remarked.

“A lot of people don’t know about it,” said Savoy. “They were only reminded of it when the ground started caving in.”

“Caving in?”

“Oh, don’t worry yourself. They put in extra support beams years ago.”

They continued down through the quarries for some time, descending staircase upon staircase, roughly hewn, before Azelma pointed to a crag in the rock face. “There,” she said, “That’s what they use.”

“That’s the entrance?” Javert asked.

She gave a nod, and he stuck his lantern through the hole, glancing around cautiously before beckoning them through. “Quiet, now,” he warned. “We don’t know who else is lurking down here.”

As they crossed the threshold, an unnatural silence took hold. The only thing that broke it was the clinking of the gendarmes' rifles against their buttons or buckles, and the uneasy shuffle of their feet.

Azelma seemed most scared of all, and Javert did not know whether that boded well for them or not. He kept her close, a firm grip on the chain between her manacles, occasionally holding out the map for her when needed.
The way she furrowed her brow at it sometimes, he was not even sure she knew where she was taking them, but she continued on wordlessly.

“Now, Cosette,” he heard Marius saying behind him, “I don’t wish you to startle, so I must ask—you know what an ossuary is, yes?”

“An ossuary?”

“A bone depository. That’s what the catacombs are, you see.”

“Pah; I very well know what a catacomb is.”

“Perhaps, but this one is ... The, er, remains are not interred the way one might thi—”

“Oh,” the girl exclaimed.

They had entered the first of the repositories.

The walls on either side of them were composed of poured concrete and human bones, arranged in changing, decorative patterns. Femurs were stacked like bricks, skulls sticking out, half the faceplates broken, some missing orbitals and teeth, nearly all missing the lower jaw—all placed like tiles of a mosaic, an ugly brown.

“Oh,” Cosette said again, softer this time. “This is ...”

“Dreadful, I know,” Marius cut in.

“I thought—I thought they’d be in coffins. Or at least covered, somehow.”

They walked on, the hair on the back of Javert’s neck standing up. It was not the first time he’d set foot in the catacombs, but even a stoic such as himself found it hard to find comfort down here.

Unsettling. Damned unsettling. He didn’t know why they’d had to go and arrange the bones like this. Well, he did—Board of Tourism trying to spruce the place up, make it a little more decent, a little more Christian—but honestly, it would have been better in his opinion if they’d just left them in piles.

Crosses, pillars, symmetrical designs covering the walls, all made up of bits and pieces of fellow Frenchmen, now broken, nameless. Christ, there was even one wall where the skulls had been placed to resemble the outline of a heart (that one he thought utterly ridiculous, given the context). It was all so unnecessary. So ... ostentatious. It resembled heathen temples of old, and he found it grim and barbaric. Certainly not befitting a bastion of civilization such as Paris.

On top of the distress of his surroundings, Javert also suffered greatly from the wound in his chest. He felt lightheaded, weary, but he refused to display any outward sign of weakness. Not right now; not until Valjean was safe. Still, the stinging between his ribs was extremely disruptive of his focus, and drove him more than once to bite his tongue. At times, he would even feel his knees begin to wobble beneath his weight.

Despite this, no one seemed to take notice of his condition, and he was glad of it. The last thing he needed right now was pity, and especially not the disruptive bickering that would result from their learning just what shape he was really in. Perhaps it was the eerie quality of the catacombs that distracted them; perhaps the situation. But whatever it was, he was grateful for it.

“But Marius,” Cosette was saying, “there aren’t any markers. How do they tell who from
whom?”

“They do not.”

“What?”

“They just tossed them in pell-mell, at first,” a gendarme chimed in. “Threw them down the wells. They were all from mass graves anyway, and there was nothing left to hold the bones together at that point, so they just—”

“Monsieur,” said Marius.

The gendarme paused. “Beg your pardon, sir. I did not mean to upset the lady.”

“It’s frightful,” Cosette said.

“I dare say. To think that people actually paid to come down here,” remarked Savoy.

“To be fair,” said another gendarme, “There are some for whom morbid curiosity—”

He was cut off as the sound of rock against rock came from behind them, somewhere off in the distance.

The group tensed, the gendarmes drawing their guns to the ready, bayonets pointing into the blackness.

Javert shoved the chain of Azelma’s manacles into Marius’ hands with a gruff “Stay,” and passed through, venturing some ways out into the distance, all his senses on edge.

But a careful inspection of the tunnels behind them revealed nothing. Both relieved and disappointed, he rejoined the group, shaking his head and giving them a shrug. “Keep on,” he said.

Not trusting his own powers of observation, however, he trailed behind them, glancing every so often over his shoulder.

***

He was laying on his stomach.

Javert blinked once, twice. The light was dim, his vision blurry. After a few moments he was able to focus again, but what he saw only confused him further.

Stone walls, stone ceiling, stone floor. No seams. Underground?

Where was he? How had he gotten here? He put his hands beneath him and tried to stand.

Immediately, he was hit with a searing wave of pain in his chest. Surprised, he flinched, dropping back to the ground and clutching instinctively at the wound. There was no hole in his shirt, nor was the fabric damp—but this sensation in his chest, it felt like …

He remembered suddenly: Thénardier, and Montparnasse, and—
The blood drained from his face.

Valjean.

Marius, Azelma, the ransom note. Cosette, and the other officers. Where were they? What had happened to them? What had happened to him? He clutched his head, trying to remember.

They had been walking through the catacombs. He had followed at their rear. He had … been bludgeoned from behind? No, he realized, if that were the case his head would be throbbing right now, and he’d have a lump on the back of it. But he only felt the pain of the gunshot wound.

The gunshot wound …

Marius’ worried face appeared in his mind. ‘Are you well? You look ashen.’

‘Good gracious, but you look ill.’

‘Have you any idea how much blood you’ve lost?’ You try to walk out of here, you’ll fall flat on your face.’

Javert clenched his teeth. He had … passed out?

Damnit, he thought as he got to his feet. He picked up the lantern that lay on its side where he'd dropped it, and sidled up against a nearby wall. Damnit …

How long had he been out? Where was everyone? What had happened to Valjean?

Javert had been lightheaded and slightly off balance, but the bolt of panic that now struck him cleared the fog from his brain and sent a surge of newfound energy through his veins. He forced himself forwards, leaning on the wall for support, but slowly gaining strength as his fear heightened.

Valjean …

The silence unnerved him. It was like the air, the very walls, were vibrating. All he could hear was the sound of his own footfalls, and his own ragged breath.

Paths yawned before him endlessly, all equally black, all equally deserted. He had no idea where he was, or where he was going. As far as he knew, these tunnels stretched for miles and miles beneath the city, twisting and turning about themselves, some passages leading to dead ends, others in circles.

The most recent additions had been added just after he was born, yet the place felt more like some ancient tomb built hundreds if not thousands of years ago, forgotten by time. To go down here without a map or source of light was a death sentence. It was the province of thieves and murderers—and, of course, the dead. Javert was reminded of this as a set of teeth brushed against his cheek.

Letting out a string of curses, his skin prickling, he decided to stop leaning on the walls.
“Where has Javert gotten off to?”

Cosette looked at her husband in surprise. “Eh? I thought he was just behind us.”

“He was,” Marius grumbled, “but take a look over your shoulder.”

She and half a dozen officers turned their heads. They stood stupefied for a moment.

“Well?” Beaufort barked incredulously, “Where is he, then? Did none of you see him go?”

Some of the men glanced at one another and shrugged.

“He fell off,” one of them said.

“I can see that. But when?”

“We must go back,” Savoy said.

“When was the last time any of us saw him?” Marius asked.

“Don’t know,” someone replied. “Weren’t keeping time.”

“It can’t have been more than ten or fifteen minutes,” another piped up.

“More like twenty, I say.”

Marius rubbed his temples, nervous. “That’s far too long.”

“Why don’t we just call for him?” suggested Bisset.

“Would you like us to bang some pots and pans together as well?” Beaufort asked. “Don’t be daft.”

Cosette turned to face Azelma. “You have to take us the other way around,” she said, trying for a comforting tone.

“R-right,” Azelma mumbled, “I just, um ...” She squinted at the parchment in the dim, flickering light. Raising her head, she glanced about them. Furrowed her brow.

“Come on, then,” said Beaufort.

“Uh—just ... give me a moment.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know how.”

“It’s just that I—I never had to double back before. We always just went straight, in case anyone was—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” The man stomped over to her and ripped the map from her hands. He stared at it for a moment, his nose nearly touching its surface, before making a face. “*Bon dieu,* what the hell kind of chicken-scratch is this? This hardly constitutes a map at all! Where are the directions? The measurements? It’s just a bunch of lines!”

“It was all that they gave me,” she tried to defend.

“Well they clearly did not give you enough!”
“So you can’t take us back?” Marius asked.

“I can try, but I don’t ... It looks different the other way around. We might end up lost.”

“But what about Javert?” Cosette exclaimed. “We can’t just leave him behind! She looked pleadingly from face to face.

The gendarmes exchanged uneasy looks.

“I think Bisset’s right,” said Savoy. “We should call for him.”

“It won’t carry,” Beaufort muttered. “Besides, it could get us all killed.”

“What do you propose we do, then?”

“We go forward.”

***

All around, empty sockets of skulls were staring at him from the shadows. They were dead—they were all dead—and yet, Javert felt watched. Watched, and at the same time, hopelessly alone. Javert was not a superstitious man, nor did he truly entertain the idea of ghosts, but this place was haunted by anyone’s estimate.

A chunk of stone fell to the floor somewhere, and he nearly jumped. Anxious and full of dread, he tried to find the source of the noise. All his instincts screamed at him that there was someone else down here, hiding in the darkness, using it to their advantage, hunting him. That any moment, the flash of a knife would slit his stomach open, or a blow to the head would strike him down for good.

Just in case, he drew his cudgel and held it at the ready.

However, his search for the source of the noise proved fruitless, and he had to give up. It had probably just been loose debris falling from the ceiling, and nothing more. The caverns were playing tricks on him.

Shaken, he kept moving.

The catacombs themselves comprised only a small amount of the tunnel networks, but that was only comparatively, and he was not well acquainted with any of it. As much as he hated to admit it, he was lost. Even if he found his way out of the catacombs, he would just end up in the quarries, which was to say, he would still be lost, just in a different place.

Sometimes he would see placards on the walls, cemented between the bones, but they did not help him in the slightest; they were only indicators of which cemetery the remains had been unearthed from—or worse, some grim poem or quote.

“Insensé que vous êtes,” read one of them, “pourquoi

Vous promettez vous de vivre
longtemps, vous qui ne pouvez

Compter sur un seul jour."

“Crazy that you are, why

Do you promise yourself to live

A long time, you who cannot

count on a single day."

Ah, yes, he thought bitterly, That is so helpful to me right now. Thank you for that.

Silently, he cursed the Board of Tourism.

Here and there, the pockets of air changed temperature, and scent. Some areas were damp, filled with puddles—ground water seeping through cracks in the rock, he imagined. He considered drinking from them, if only to lengthen the prospects of his own survival, but they were very shallow, and no doubt dirty, and he was not that desperate yet.

He continued on. The ground grew dry again, and once more dusty. There was the faint odor of decay in the air, sometimes—or else nothing at all.

Then suddenly, inexplicably, he caught a whiff of tobacco.

He stopped in his tracks, knitting his brow. Sniffing the air like a hound that had picked up on the scent of its quarry, he crept forward, senses keening, skin prickling.

A few times, he lost the trail, and had to double back along a corridor, or take the other fork in the tunnels, but gradually, the smell grew stronger.

As he rounded a corner, he was almost caught off guard by the dimmest trace of lamplight.

His heart leapt. Both hope and terror overwhelmed him. He crossed the tunnel and peered around the corner.

Further down, he perceived a doorway cut into the rock, from which the light spilled out. He stared at it for a moment, tense. Swallowing, and setting his lantern down so as not to be perceived, he pressed himself against the wall and slid along it towards the opening.

He heard a man’s voice, but could not discern the words, nor the speaker. Only that there was a mild aggravation in their tone.

Then silence descended once more.

Javert crept on.

Finally, he was beside the door. He forgot to breathe. Slowly, carefully, he craned his neck, turning his head to peer into the room.

His pale blue eyes went wide.
It was a large cavern, supported by four massive columns. At the bottom of one of them, Valjean half stood and half hung, held up by his arms, which had been bound behind his back.

A little ways to the right stood Montparnasse, and a few feet further, Thénardier, who was sitting on an upturned crate and smoking a pipe, blowing smoke rings with an air of boredom.

A couple lanterns sat at his feet, unlit, beside canisters of oil. Candles had been lit around the room instead to preserve fuel.

Off in the corner, where the light was dimmer, Gueulemer, and some man he did not recognize, were sitting cross-legged, playing a game of dice.

Montparnasse was muttering something to himself under his breath. In his shirtwaist was tucked a dagger, silvery steel glinting in the flickering light. On his belt hung a bludgeon, much the same as Javert’s. He surely also had, shoved in some pocket or other, his garroting wire.

In Thénardier’s belt there hung a knife—small, and poorly cleaned.

Somewhere, there was a gun.

Thénardier puffed another ring of smoke, staring up at the ceiling.

Javert observed all this in a matter of seconds; such were his instincts that he immediately assessed the possible dangers of every situation.

But on this occasion, he was not thinking about the danger. Rather, he was aware of it, but it was not his main concern. No, the only thing he could focus on was Valjean. And the sight of him paralyzed him.

Bound to the column, the man’s head hung in such a way that Javert could not see his eyes. But by the way his body hung slack, there was no doubt in Javert’s mind that Valjean was unconscious.

Blood had seeped into Valjean’s white linen shirt, trailing down the side of his right shoulder. Javert conceived a horror of it. Had they hurt him as he’d struggled? Slashed him with a knife? But the blood was discolored, he realized. Dry. And above the stain was a fine spray, the like of spatter from a gunshot wound. But in order for the spatter to be on the front of his shirt, that would have meant …

With a start Javert realized that the blood had come from him. They had shot him in his chest, and the bullet had exited through his back. And who had been standing behind him? Javert had put himself between them in order to protect him, but by doing so, he’d gotten Valjean shot along with him. The bullet had gone straight through his ribs and caught the man’s arm.

He had not even thought about it. Had not considered that the bullet must have hit something else in the end.

But the blood was dried. So the wound had closed. It was not life-threatening—for now. Had they bandaged him, Javert wondered? Or had the blood merely coagulated? He supposed it didn’t matter at this point, as long as Valjean stayed still.

There was also a thin line of blood striping the man’s chin, running down from his lips, and this was relatively fresh. The result of another struggle, perhaps?

He squinted, trying to gauge the man’s breathing.
All of a sudden there was a loud *smack* as a debilitating blow was dealt to the left side of Javert’s temple.

The force of the strike nearly caused him to black out, and he staggered to the side, trying in vain to catch his balance in a world that was spinning and wavering like a child’s top. He was too startled to give a cry.

Hands like huge claws grabbed him by the arm and the back of his collar, dragging him into the room.

He could hear a vaguely familiar voice say “’Parnasse, you’ll not believe who I just caught sneaking about.” It must have come from just behind him, but it sounded muffled, as though it had traveled a great distance to meet him. His ears were ringing as he was shoved forwards, stumbling and tripping over himself until he fell to his hands and knees on the cavern floor.

“Well, well, well,” Montparnasse crooned. “Look what we have here.”

He felt someone grab him by the hair, jerking his head up.

“Seems he survived after all. You’re a terrible shot, Jondrette; you know that? Point blank, even; I say. Absolute rubbish marksmanship.”

Javert gave a weak thrash, growling and trying to free himself from the boy’s grip. However, it only produced the effect of amusement.

“Ah-ah-ah,” Montparnasse chastised, gripping him tighter and thrusting his face into the bone-dry dirt, “we’ll have none of that. Hercules, come over here, will you? Hold him down while I—”

He was stopped short as Javert rammed an elbow into his ribs, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to flinch.

During the momentary pause this created, Javert broke free of him, twisting and rolling over onto his back, delivering a kick to Montparnasse’s stomach before scrambling to his feet.

The boy staggered back.

Just as Javert lunged at him, he was caught by the scruff of his neck and jerked backwards, thrown off balance. He righted himself and darted back, past the assailant—whom he now recognized as Babet—and into the recesses of the cavern.

Reaching for his cudgel, he found its holster on his belt empty; he had dropped it when first struck by the doorway. He went next for his sword, which, under the folds of his topcoat, had gone unnoticed.

But he was too late, and had to dodge a blow while fumbling at the hilt. Withdrawing the blade from its sheath with a keening of metal on metal, he got two good thrusts in short order—the first just barely piercing the man’s abdomen as he leapt back, the second missing only by a fraction of an inch.

The man railed at him, throwing a punch, and Javert ducked back out of its range and twirled on his heel, lashing out with a radial swipe of his sword and managing to slash the man’s right shoulder quite deeply.

With a hiss of pain the man withdrew, clutching his arm with a furious look. He struck out at Javert again, but there was less force behind it, and he soon stepped back, scowling and minding
his wounds.

As he made his retreat, another man stepped up; this one unfamiliar to him. His dark hair was close shaved, and he had a long, arching scar around his right eye, the shape of a crescent moon. In his hand, he held a long, serrated knife.

He was upon him before Javert could catch his breath, swiping this way, that way, and with his sword Javert would not have had such a bad time of it, but now Thénardier was joining in as well, two knives flashing in the candlelight.

Javert was harried, the air catching in his throat, his footwork clumsy; he tried to keep them both at bay, edging towards the wall, but they were both dogging him relentlessly.

Thénardier made a swipe at his face, and Javert ducked to the side, lashing out to his left at him and forcing him back. As he did so, the glint of metal flashed above him, a shadow loomed, and before he knew what he was doing he’d reared up and driven his sword clean through the man’s torso.

The knife, aimed for his back, faltered mid-strike. Slipped from his grasp and clattered on the stone below.

The man gaped.

Javert held him there, the weight of him bearing down on the hilt, almost shocked himself.

They were frozen there for a moment in time, the fate and the fated, before the world sped up again, and Javert jerked the blade back out of him, blood spattering on the cavern floor.

The man staggered back, eyes wide, clutching his stomach, his chest. He fell to his knees. Doubled over, gasping.

Javert could not afford to spare him regard.

Thénardier had stepped back, for a moment—out of fear, or surprise—but he clenched his teeth and let out a growl, lunging at him with renewed vigor.

Vaulting away from him at the last possible second, Javert found himself skirting the wall deeper and deeper into the darkness, where there was surely a corner, and security.

Thénardier seemed reluctant to follow him there, perhaps warded off by poor light, and the inability to see his opponent’s attacks, or perhaps growing wary of pitting so short a blade against a sword that already had claimed a fatality.

The distance between them grew, and Javert drew a deep breath.

Then a voice—Valjean’s voice!—cried his name with an urgent tone.

In the second Javert turned towards it, he caught a figure in his peripheral vision emerging from the shadows. He whipped around to face it, but it was late, too late. A massive hand shot out at him, grabbed him by the roots of his hair, jerked his head backwards and slammed it against the wall.

The blow sent Javert reeling, and he thought he heard a crack issue from, seemingly, himself. Stumbling back, he fell helpless to the floor, limp as a rag doll and paralyzed, his head screaming at him in searing pain.
He clawed the arid ground; he tried to process the situation, the extent of the injury—but all he was aware of was the ringing, ringing, ringing.

Solid stone was beneath him, and yet he felt tossed about like a ship on an angry sea, everything churning, foaming, spinning.

Someone was speaking. Two different voices. Three. The words did not make sense to him; or rather, he registered them, but they didn’t string together right, didn’t make a whole.

He tried to get to his hands and knees. The floor seemed like it changed position, pitching violently this way or that, and he himself pitched with it, scrabbling out with his hands for purchase and finding none, listing to the side until he found himself on his stomach again.

The hole in his chest burned, burned.

Voices. Footsteps.

Before he could make sense of what was happening, he was dragged to his feet. Someone was yanking him away by his coat, his hair.

He couldn’t focus. All was a nonsensical blur. His vision blinked in and out, flashes of movement one moment, darkness the next.

He tried to pull away, to fight back the hands that grabbed at him, but there was no strength to his movements. They dug into the pockets of his coat, clawing and snatching.

He was thrown about, and found himself shoved against a pillar of cement, one of the load-bearing columns that supported the cavern’s ceiling. Despite his thrashing, they managed to take hold of his arms and jerk them back around this pillar. He felt the cold, rough iron and the telltale click of his own manacles being closed around his wrists, and he knew that all was over.

They had shackled him to the post, and there was no way for him worm his way out of the binds, for they were cold-forged and quite unforgiving. He let out a ragged breath, his vision tunneling. He slumped forwards, until the only thing holding him upright was his own dead weight pulling against his arms.

Something wet trickled down his forehead, down the bridge of his nose.

His eyes rolled back in his head as it lolled; his long, dark hair fell past his face like a closing curtain.

***

Footnotes:

[1] Officers of the peace (officiers de la paix) held the same rank as inspectors, but were uniformed. Both ranks now fall under the title of lieutenant. There are three ranks of lieutenants, this being the third (today); the first rank being “lieutenant student”, the second rank “lieutenant intern”. Bisset, Lefèvre, and Leroux are all lower ranking lieutenants.
That inscription is a real thing, by the way. You can read other inscriptions in the Paris catacombs here.

Suggested Listening:

Ancient Sorrow - Jeremy Soule

Breaking and Entering - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein

I Am Beowulf - Alan Silvestri

New Suit - Geoff Zanelli

The Plague - Jesper Kyd

Sonmi’s Discovery - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

Sonmi-451 Meets Change - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

Veridis Quo - Daft Punk
In the Pit of Despair

Chapter Summary

Javert joins Valjean in the eye of the storm.

Chapter Notes

I'm apparently really bad at accidentally leaving people on giant cliffhangers. First it was Valjean getting arrested for no discernible reason, and then I left you guys with Javert getting his face smashed in. Whoops.

Let's see, where were we ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So it is more useful to watch a man in times of peril, and in adversity to discern what kind of man he is; for then at last words of truth are drawn from the depths of his heart, and the mask is torn off, reality remains.”

-Titus Lucretius Carus

***

When Valjean awoke it was to the keening of metal on metal. He blinked blearily—his consciousness, and his exhausted body, just barely roused by the sound.

Straining to focus, he looked up.

It took him a moment to process what he was seeing, and then, another to fully comprehend its significance.

Some ways back in the cavern, two men were exchanging blows, swiping rapidly at one another amidst the flurry of sparks that shot from their blades at each contact. One was the Russian Thénardier had brought with him, and the other—to his utter bewilderment—was Javert.

Javert!

Valjean thought, for a moment, that he must be going mad. But, solid and sure as the pillar he was bound to, and the dust beneath his feet, it was Javert—not only alive, but putting up a raring fight as well.

They had lied. They had lied, and Javert was still here. Javert was still here.
Upon realizing this, Valjean was filled with two poignant emotions in almost immediate succession: firstly, an overwhelming joy, and, secondly, an overwhelming terror.

Javert was alive. That singular fact was enough to give back the world half its meaning; enough to restore faith, and hope, and all those little things to which we ascribe the ability to persevere.

Javert was alive, but he was also in horrible danger, and Valjean could do nothing to help him.

The man had been shot—that had been no illusion—and Valjean did not understand how he’d managed to make his way down here at all. Certainly he had lost a great deal of blood, and certainly he should be confined to a bed at the moment. Yet somehow he had mustered the strength and followed him right through the mouth of Hell, just as he’d said he would.

But why had he come here alone? Surely he knew the odds, knew his condition—knew it was suicide. Javert was no fool; he would never have come without backup. Yet here he was, all by himself, fending off too many men at once. How had this come to be? The only thing that made sense was that Javert had indeed summoned help, but that something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Valjean was flooded with dread. He watched, powerless, as Javert was pushed further and further back, trading blows now with two men at once, and barely managing to keep them at bay.

He dared not call out to him. To break his concentration in a fight like this would get him killed. All he could do was strain against his manacles, a helpless spectator.

Javert stepped into the shadows, and Thénardier began to draw back.

That was when Valjean saw it: a hulking figure moving in the blackness, stealing up behind while Javert caught his breath unaware.

"Javert!" he cried, and the man turned to him with a start.

Javert seemed to register, for a split second, the presence lurking behind him, but there was not enough warning to react, and by the time he saw his attacker it was too late.

Gueulemer grabbed him by the roots of his hair and dashed his head against the rocks like he was splitting a coconut.

Jean Valjean was too in shock to speak a word. He stared open-mouthed as Javert stumbled back. The blow seemed to him enough to split a man’s skull, and that Javert had not been knocked unconscious immediately by it seemed impossible.

Javert lost his balance and fell to the ground. He scrabbled in the dust, trying to right himself, but he could not seem to find his footing again, for each time he attempted to stand he pitched sideways and fell.

The others watched this for a little while, perhaps judging his recovery, before closing in on him.

Here Valjean found his voice. "Javert— Javert!"

When the man did not respond to this, he turned to his attackers. "Leave him be!" he cried out, unable to belay the panic in his tone. "You’ve done enough; he can’t hinder you now. There’s no need to further this violence!"
No one was paying him any mind. They were muttering amongst themselves and surrounding Javert, stepping carefully out of his reach as he still tried, feebly, to right himself.

Valjean’s throat was so dry that he began to go hoarse. “Please, you don’t— You don’t have to kill him, you don’t—”

They grabbed Javert by the roots of his hair, dragging him to his feet.

“Please! For God’s sake—”

“Oh, shut up, will you!” Thénardier shot back.

They shoved Javert against the pillar opposite him, digging in his pockets and pulling out a pair of manacles that were no doubt intended for them, and then cuffing his wrists around the concrete, so that he stood helpless, chained into place, just like Valjean.

As they stepped away it became apparent just how badly Javert had been hit. The man could barely hold his head up. His eyes were wide, but unfocused, and a drop of blood trickled slowly down his brow.

“Javert,” he called to him again, the name nearly a sob. “Javert …”

Within moments, Javert seemed to black out, his body going limp, the full weight of it tugging against his bound arms. With that, his head lolled, and his dark hair fell over his face like a veil.

Valjean strained against his manacles, trying to better see him. Looking for any sign of life.

When he found, at last, that the man still breathed, he felt a little warmth return to him. What the group planned to do with him, however, he did not know, and so his heart beat in terror as he watched their every move.

***

“That was entirely unnecessary,” Montparnasse sighed. He stood with a disapproving look, hand on his hip, eyes flicking from Gueulemer to Javert.

“I didn’t see you trying to help,” Gueulemer retorted.

“What was I supposed to do? He had a sword!”

The man made a puffing sound at him and rolled his eyes.

Montparnasse turned to Babet, who was clutching at the wounds to his shoulder and abdomen. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll live. Though I might be making use of that kit you’re always carrying around, depending.”

“Mm.” The boy tossed him a small silver box. “It’s not the right kind of needle, but here.”

“Why do we not simply kill him?” Babet growled, nodding towards Javert.
“I’ll admit it is a tempting idea,” Thénardier chimed in. He scowled briefly at Javert, then looked over his shoulder at his hired hand.

Anton, who had taken the brunt of Javert’s blade, had managed to crawl his way over to the cavern wall opposite them. He sat with his fingers all twisted up in his shirt, slick with red. A thousand yard stare in his eyes, he gasped for air, half choked on his own blood, which frothed at his mouth and made its way into the hairs of his beard.

Babet grew hushed. “We should put him out of his misery.”

The cavern was silent, save for the stunted gasps.

Finally, Montparnasse cast an expectant glance at Thénardier. “Well? He’s your man.”

Thénardier shot him a repugnant look. “So? He’ll die quick enough.”

“That’s cold,” Babet returned. His eyes fell to Thénardier’s waist. “Give him my gun, at the least.”

“Fine, but it has to be loaded first.” Thénardier took the pistol from his belt and was halfway to handing it to him when he stopped. “Oh, wait, I still have all your cartridges. Just, ah—hm.” He began to forage around in his pockets.

“It’s no good.” Montparnasse muttered as the man set to pouring in primer. “They’ll hear the shot.”

“Who?” asked Babet.

“The friends the inspector has no doubt brought with him, that’s who.”

“Then use something else.”

Montparnasse clicked his tongue and, after a pensive pause, withdrew the dagger from his waistband. “I’d hoped to keep this clean,” he said.

In his pain, Anton did not seem to have heard their conversation—or, at least, had not been able to process its implications—for he did not appear to register the boy’s approach.

“Hey, there,” Montparnasse soothed, tucking the surin into the back of his waistband. “You’ve gotten yourself into a bad way, haven’t you, fellow?” He knelt down, the man looking up at him with half-focused, pleading eyes. “Let me take a look at you, then.”

Montparnasse took him in his arms, and the man folded helplessly, still clawing at his wound. It was unclear whether it was intentional, or if his strength had merely begun to fail him, but his face became buried in Montparnasse’s shoulder, a hand moving to clutch at his waistcoat in what was perhaps supplication.

“There, now;” the boy said, patting the man’s back as he reached behind his own, “it’s all right. It’s all right.” Montparnasse was well-versed enough that he did not need to feel for his mark, and so, when his blade found its home between the man’s fourth and fifth rib, it was mercifully clean and quick.

Anton seized up for a moment—a shudder running through him—and then the shock faded from his face, leaving an almost drowsy expression, and his eyelids drooped shut. He slumped forwards.
Montparnasse shouldered his weight for a moment, giving the dagger a final, twisted thrust for good measure, before withdrawing it from his back. He allowed the man’s body to fall back against the cavern wall, where it sat, head hung, as though the man was merely napping.

Wiping the blade on a section of Anton’s tailcoat, Montparnasse got to his feet, casting a poignant glare at Thénardier as he returned. “We take care of our own,” he said.

Thénardier narrowed his eyes at him and wet his lips.

“You really think he brought officers with him?” Gueulemer wondered aloud.

“Course he brought officers with him,” grumbled Montparnasse.

“Well where are they, then?” said Babet.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they split up, or were separated somehow. Either way, there’s no chance he would come here alone, half-dead as he is. He’s clearly a little lacking in sense, but I doubt he’s that much of a fool.”

“What do you propose we do?”

The boy let out a sigh. “We’ve sentries out, anyway, and they haven’t spotted anyone else yet. We might be in the clear. These tunnels are vast. Perhaps they’ve made a wrong turn, or the tipoff was bad … In any case they’re not likely to stay here for long. That’s the charm of this place.”

“Mm. We just wait it out, then?”

“If there’s no further disturbances, I don’t see why not. To be perfectly honest I think it was an accident this one found us at all. And he’s not calling for help any time soon.”

***

Valjean trembled. He felt paralyzed. Sick. All that was happening felt like a something from another world—some horrible dream unfolding around him. It could not possibly be real. And yet it was, and he was here in the middle of it.

He had just watched a man die, and be afforded the same consideration as would be given to a dog that had outlived its use. Now a corpse sat opposite them, and they acted as though it were not even there. As if it were merely another collection of bones amongst those already lining the walls.

And this was only what compassion they afforded their own! How then might they treat those regarded as enemies? They could never kill him, he thought—not if they wanted their money—but Javert, Javert meant nothing to them.

He looked back towards him, panic building ever higher.

Javert still hung where he was chained against the pillar, head drooped. Every now and again, a drop of blood fell from his face and hit the floor. Considering the man had been shot, Valjean wondered just how much of it he had left to lose.

He wanted in the worst, most desperate way to bandage him, to cradle him in his arms. And that he was just as helpless as him was infuriating.
No, he realized—not quite as helpless. Not quite.

He had thought before of escape, but the others were right: even if he managed to break free and somehow evade them, he’d be lost in the dark, trapped in miles and miles of tunnels. It was worse than the sewers by far. At least, in the sewers, there was some semblance of light. Some semblance of direction. All he’d had to do then was follow the flow. Down here? There was nothing to go by. Furthermore, he was injured, and he did not doubt it when they said he would die before finding his way out.

So, escape had been pointless for him then.

But now there was more than just himself to consider. Now Javert was trapped down here, entirely at their mercy. Who knew what they would do with him?

Perhaps, if he could break free—even if he couldn’t find a way out—he could still fight them, still stop them, at least, from hurting Javert.

If he tried to fight them all at once, in his condition, Valjean had a sinking feeling that the outcome would be grim. But then, if they decided they’d had enough of dealing with Javert, he knew he could not just stand by and watch them—watch them—

No. He would rather die fighting. He would rather risk it all on a fleeting chance. He would rather give his life than watch Javert die—a thousand, thousand times over.

After everything they had been through, Valjean refused to believe this was how it all came to an end. There had to be more. There had to be hope. There had to be.

If he could just—

He reached up into his right shirt-cuff, numbed fingers straining. Felt for the loose string that should be dangling there, attached to the hidden pocket which was just barely sewn together.

Where was it? Surely—Surely they couldn’t have ...

Valjean froze.

He must have had a strange look upon his face, for he had drawn their attention, and Thénardier sauntered up to him.

The man stood there, staring at him. Cocked his head. Slowly, a sly grin spread across his face. "Oh, I bet you’d give anything for that hollowed-out sou of yours, just now. Wouldn’t you?"

He broke out in a cold sweat.

“That’s right;” Thénardier went on, “I know how you managed that trick. That escape act you pulled a few winters ago. Why, you told Monty here yourself! And I took care that you wouldn’t manage it again, either.” He pulled a coin from his pocket and held the lantern up to it.

Valjean’s heart sank.

“Recognize this? I’m sure you do. It’s unfortunate you like to talk so very much, or else you might still have it on you. Alas! That’s what you get for your lectures.” He tossed the coin back at Montparnasse with a scoff. “Though, at least, I will applaud you for your cleverness. Still... you should have learnt some new tricks, mon ami. But you know what they say about old dogs.”
“Speaking of dogs,” said Babet, who was in the process of mending his wounds, “I would like to put this one down.” He jerked his head towards Javert.

“Now, now,” said Montparnasse. “You mustn’t let—”

“Don’t you go tutting at me! He nearly took my arm off!”

“He has a fair point,” said Thénardier. “And Monty, I fail to see why you defend him. Perhaps you don’t recall, but he did lock the rest of us up.”

“Yes,” Babet growled, “but then, Montparnasse wouldn’t know what that’s like. Would you?”

Montparnasse gave a dismissive huff. “I’m just saying, that I’m not entirely sure why you’d wish to give the police another incentive to hate you. At least, not when you don’t get anything out of it.”

“Don’t get anything out of it!” Babet exclaimed. “How about revenge? How about satisfaction? How about a little peace? He’s caused us all enough trouble as it is. I say we kill him.”

“I don’t see why not,” Thénardier added.

Gueulemer flicked his eyes from one face to another, lips pursed.

Montparnasse bared his teeth. “You are all being intolerably narrow minded. If the police show up—”

“If the police show up!”

“When has it ever hurt to have another hostage?”

“Hostages?” Babet cried. “I don’t give a damn about hostages! This is personal! Besides, what would you have us do with him if the police don’t show their faces? Just let him go? Christ’s sake, Montparnasse! You’re an assassin yourself, are you not? So what the hell do you have against a good old fashioned murder—”

“Don’t you dare touch him.”

They all raised their eyebrows and turned around.

Jean Valjean was seething. Were it not for the restraints, he would have lunged at them and started a fight right then and there.

How dare they talk about Javert like that—as though he were just some—some thing! Some animal awaiting slaughter. As if his life was just some toy to them, and death a game!

They had no idea. No idea at all.

Thénardier looked surprised for a moment, as though he had already forgotten Valjean was there. “Well, well, well,” he crooned, sidling up to him. “There’s the dangerous man. There’s the criminal. Leave it to panic to bring out your true colors, hm?”

“I swear, if you lay your hands on him—”

“Oh! You swear! To do what, exactly? Rattle your chains and holler at us? You’re in no position to make threats.”
Valjean glared at him, and gave a useless thrash. Slowly, the fire in his eyes died out, and he hung his head. His voice grew low. “Please,” he said.

Thénardier let out a bark of laughter. “Look,” he called, “He’s lowered to begging now.”


“Anything?”

Valjean knew that, were Javert awake, he would be raging at him. Telling him not to give into them, no matter what—especially not on his account. But Javert was not awake, right now. The man’s life was in their hands.

“Please.”

“Well,” Thénardier scoffed. “That’s too bad, isn’t it? Because we don’t need anything from you, anymo—”

“Do I have your word on that?” Montparnasse interrupted.

Thénardier shot the boy a disbelieving look, frustration plain to see on his face.

Montparnasse stepped up to Valjean with a suddenly serious air.

Valjean swallowed, begrudgingly returning his gaze.

“If we agree not to hurt him, do you promise to behave yourself? No more outbursts? No more struggling?”

Valjean wrinkled his nose. Dropped his face to the floor. “Yes.”

As Montparnasse passed by Thénardier, he gave a snort. “See?” he said, nodding his head towards Javert. “He was worth something after all.”

Thénardier made a spitting noise. “I liked it better when he was dead.”

***

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?”

Azelma twitched. She had lost count of how many times she had been asked that today. “Yes.”

“It’s an awful long way,” said one of the policeman.

“That’s the point,” she returned.

Now the other, gruffer policeman spoke. “What do you mean that’s the point?”

“I mean, the point was that, should anybody follow me down here, they should get lost before they found out where we were.”

“I see. And the probability of you yourself getting lost on the way there is ...?”
“I’m doing my best!” she exclaimed over her shoulder. “I don’t know what more you want of me. I know it’s long. I know it’s dark, and it’s terrible. But I didn’t have to help you, you know!”

“I know.” Cosette placed a soothing hand on her shoulder. “I know. And we are very grateful you have.”

Marius let out a sigh and glanced around nervously. “I would feel much better about this if Javert were here. I don’t like that he’s gone. I don’t like it one bit.”

Cosette’s eyes fell to the floor. “Azelma, what ... what exactly was your plan supposed to be, if you hadn’t helped us?”

Azelma continued scanning her map, and the corridors. A nervous feeling was bubbling up in her stomach. “I was supposed to deliver the note to you,” she began. “And then I was to wait for the money at the Rue Ornes. You would have had three days to drop it off. After, I was supposed to take it here.”

“This is where you were supposed to bring the money?” Marius asked, suddenly wide-eyed.

“Yes, monsieur. This is the rendezvous place we all agreed upon.”

“But ... but then, Valjean might not be here at all!”

Azelma gave a start. She had not considered this. “I ... I don’t know why he wouldn’t be, m’sieur.”

“But you said this was just where you were bringing the money! They could have him anywhere.”

Azelma licked her chapped lips. “That—I mean ...” They would have told me if that were the case. Wouldn’t they? Wouldn’t they?

Unless they didn’t trust me. Unless they thought I might lead the police here. In which case ...

In which case, she was leading them all into a trap.

“I am sure he will be there, monsieur,” she said. “I am sure of it.”

***

It took a long time for Javert to work his way to anything even resembling consciousness, and when he did, it was to the constant buzz of pain.

Where his scalp met his brow, there was a fierce, searing sting. Blood matted his dark hair, and had trickled down the left side of his face, over his closed eye, and had partially dried, so that now, when he blinked, he felt the stickiness of it on his skin.

Both the front and the back of his skull throbbed. And, on top of everything else, he had at some point split his bottom lip; likely, he had bitten down on it when his head had been so cruelly bashed against the rock.
The hole in his chest was nearly forgotten amid this onslaught of fresh pain.

He had been mumbling longer than he could recall: low, senseless things, as much words as groans. He only became aware of them as his senses filtered back in: first, his hearing, like a ringing that grew louder and louder, and then, his sight, returning like a growing light at the end of a tunnel.

He blinked stupidly, painfully, until his situation presented itself to him once more in the form of a hand grabbing a fistful of his hair and jerking his face up.

“Well, you’re a sight, aren’t you?” said Thénardier. The man pulled at his roots to a painful effect.

Javert could find neither the words nor the means to answer him with anything more than a grunt. He knew only enough to feel fear.

“Should’ve stayed dead, you. Saved us all a load of trouble. But now you’re here, in the belly of the beast,” he sighed. “Are you quite proud of yourself?”

Javert stared at him numbly, unable to focus.

“Hey, listen now. Who else did you bring with you? Eh?”

He received no response, save a flashing of Javert’s pale blue eyes.

“How many men did you come with?” He gave him a shake. “How many?”

A sudden throb sent another wave of pain through his skull, and Javert grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut and letting out a whimpering groan.

Thénardier shrugged. He let Javert’s head drop with a disappointed look. “Feh. He’s no use at all. You’ve scrambled his brains.”

Javert let himself hang limply for awhile, just listening to the sound of his own breathing and trying, fervently, to regain his clarity.

“Javert,” came a breathy voice. “Javert ...”

He lifted his face just enough to look at him.

Valjean was shackled to the pillar about five or six yards to his right. He looked battered, and exhausted, but he was perfectly conscious, and still able to breathe, it seemed, without too much pain. “Javert,” he called weakly. He exuded that fearful compassion that Javert had grown to know so well.

Javert felt like an utter failure. Not only had Valjean suffered all of this, but now, he had to be frightened for Javert’s sake as well as his own. Here Javert had come to rescue him—and all he’d managed to do was somehow make everything worse.

He had no one to blame for this but himself. He knew he was in no condition to conduct an operation. The nun at the hospital had told him as much, and he’d known she was right. But he hadn’t cared. He’d wanted to give everything he had, even if was stupid, even if it was risky beyond belief. And what had happened? He’d fallen flat on his face, just as foreseen, and gotten himself caught.
And he had been lecturing Cosette about becoming a liability! Now they all knew the police were here. He had destroyed their only advantage. Not only that, but he had let Valjean down. Had gotten him, like always, into an ever worsening mess.

I’m sorry, he thought. I’m an idiot. He had always thrown precaution to the wind when it came to his work. That hadn’t been so much of a problem when it was just his own life he was putting at risk. But now there were so many others involved—and not just innocent civilians, but people he cared about.

He did not know what to say. He did not know what to do to get them out of this.

Valjean and he exchanged a wordless, knowing glance, filled with worry and affection.

“Javert ...”

“Good grief, but you’re pathetic,” Thénardier interjected. He walked over and took Valjean by the hair. “What is it with you two, anyway? Why didn’t you just shoot him when you had the chance, and bought yourself your freedom?”

“You know why,” Valjean grunted.

“Oh,” the man laughed. “Oh, no. Enlighten me.”

Valjean gave him an incredulous glare.

“Tch. You really want me to believe it?” Thénardier said. “That act? You really think I’ll believe you saved him out of the goodness of your heart?”

Here the man growled and thrust Valjean’s head down, stalking off so that he stood equidistant between the two hostages. “You two—you madden me. Pride and gullibility at their worst.” He shook his head. Tossed a scowl at Valjean. “You think you’re a paragon of holy virtue, don’t you? ‘Oh, I’ve been pardoned,’ you say. ‘I’ve chucked the tools. I’m a changed man.’ Well, have I got news for you. People never change. Not really. Not at heart. Put together the right circumstances and you’ll fall back to your old habits. You’ll see.”

“You’re wrong,” Valjean said.

“But I know what the truth is. We both know. Inside, you’re just a felon on the run, always wary, always watching—and all your good deeds are for show. A mask, a disguise, like any other. You’ve been wearing it so long, you’ve almost managed to fool yourself! But you know what it is, deep down. I can see it in your eyes. You’re not the man you claim to be, monsieur. You’re not anything, anymore. You’re just a fraud.”

Don’t tell me I’m wrong!” the man burst, grabbing him by the collar and shoving his face in his. “You don’t get to leave this life! That’s not how it works! Even you know that!” He stepped back, his voice falling to a venomous hush. “And that’s why you’re so desperate, so damn desperate, to make yourself out like some martyr, some benevolent, bleeding heart.”

“But I know what the truth is. We both know. Inside, you’re just a felon on the run, always wary, always watching—and all your good deeds are for show. A mask, a disguise, like any other. You’ve been wearing it so long, you’ve almost managed to fool yourself! But you know what it is, deep down. I can see it in your eyes. You’re not the man you claim to be, monsieur. You’re not anything, anymore. You’re just a fraud.”

“Don’t speak to him of fraudulence, you filth.”

Thénardier whipped his head around.

“You’re the one who’s fraudulent,” Javert went on. “You charlatan. Everything about you is a lie. You pretend at honesty, at decency, because it makes you feel good. But that’s all it will ever be—pretend. And you know it. So when you’re faced with a real man—an honest, changed man—
it riles everything in your being to hatred.”

The look Thénardier was giving him was terrible, but Javert could not have cared less.

“You’re just a cowardly, angry little thief,” he said as Thénardier stormed towards him. “Envious of everything around you. Bitter and cold, because you know you’ll never be enough.”

“Javert—” Valjean pleaded.

“And you look at him, and you know he’s more than you will ever be. And you hate him for that. You hate him because he succeeded. He got out. And you’re still stuck here, in the mud, with your blackened, shriveled up little—”

He was already expecting it, and so when the blow came it did not catch him off guard, and he took it with a stubborn validation.

“Stop it!” Valjean cried, “Leave him alone! We made a deal!”

“Yes,” Thénardier sighed, “and you would not believe how tired of it I have already grown.”

“Jondrette,” cautioned Montparnasse.

“Do be quiet, will you?” the man shot back. “It’s not your place to talk. I’m the one who came up with all this; I should be calling the shots. And I say we kill him! I’d kill him,” he vowed, turning back to Valjean, “just to spite you. I would. I’ve had more than enough of the two of you always getting in my way, always—”

“You hit him one more time and I swear to you, I will make your life a living—”

“Threaten me all you like, you great buffoon! You’re still the one in chains. I should strangle him just to spite you—or no, no, I should torture him first, to see the look on your face. Start with a branding iron, I should think, and then—”

“You truly are the worst kind of depravity,” said Valjean, “the blackest heart. It’s men like you that make the world so distrustful. You have the audacity to complain that society is cruel, when you yourself make it so. I used to think that every man could be redeemed, but you—you—”

“Yes!” Thénardier roared, “Tell me again how you’re so much better than me! How you’re so much more caring, and pure. Tell me again how the world would just fall at my feet, if I only allowed it to trample me first!”

Valjean scowled. “Don’t pin your unhappiness on us! You could have become anyone you wished, but you became vicious, and cruel, and you act surprised when people don’t—”

“Oh, will you shut him up for me, Hercules!”

Valjean’s tirade was abruptly silenced as an enormous fist collided with the top of his head. He went slack, the weight of his body pulling once more against the shackles.

Javert gave a start.

Montparnasse grimaced. “Look what you’ve gone and done!” he said, waving a hand towards Valjean. “He’s out cold, now.”

“That was rather the point,” Thénardier grumbled.
Gueulemer stared down at Valjean with something like stupefaction on his face. “I didn’t mean to knock him out.”

“Well, you have, you sodding idiot,” said Montparnasse. “And what if you’ve given him a brain-bleed, eh? He’s no good to us dead. This isn’t that kind of job. Honestly! Be a little more careful with your charge.”

“Really, ’Parnasse. I swear I didn’t hit him that hard.”

“Brutes like you don’t know your own strength.”

“Come on, now …” the man protested.

“Oh, go and fetch us some water, will you?”

Gueulemer glared at him for a second before angrily grabbing the near-empty wooden bucket, stalking off into the dark and muttering snide remarks beneath his breath.

Montparnasse watched him go with a frustrated sigh. He leaned back against one of the pillars. After awhile, he withdrew his surin and began to clean his fingernails with the tip of the blade. While doing thus, he started to hum, and sung softly to himself, like one beset by boredom:

“Alouette, gentille alouette;
Alouette, je te plumerai."

“Je te plumerai la tête,
Je te plumerai la tête.
Et la tête! Et la tête!
Alouette! Alouette!
Ahh …”

“Alouette, gentille alouette;
Alouette, je te plumerai.”

His quiet voice was the only thing to be heard in the silent void of the cavern.

Javert grit his teeth.

“Je te plumerai le bec,
Je te plumerai le bec.”
“Alouette, gentille alouette;  
Alouette, je te plumerai.”

“Je te plumerai les yeux,  
Je te plumerai les yeux.  
Et les yeux! Et les yeux!  
Et le bec! Et le bec!  
Et la tête! Et la tête!  
Alouette! Aloue—”

“Ta gueule,” Javert breathed between his teeth. Shut up.

The boy looked up at him, his eyebrows raising. Lazily, he bent forwards and stood, sauntering over to him.

Javert shivered.

Montparnasse peered down at him studiously. He brought the tip of his dagger to Javert’s throat, just beneath his Adam’s apple. His voice was nearly a whisper as he drew the blade across his flesh in slow, looping circles.

“Alouette, gentille alouette …  
Alouette, je te plumerai.”

The boy gazed into his eyes fixedly as he sang, a cruelly seductive demeanor hanging about him like a cloak.

Javert’s skin prickled, his hair standing on end. A chill ran up his spine as the cool steel traced his throat.
“Je te plumerai le cou, [2]

Je te plumerai le cou.

Et le cou; et le cou …”

The dagger made its way to the soft spot of flesh beneath his jaw, forcing his chin up.

The boy drew so close that their lips nearly met.

“Et.

Les.

Ailes.” [3]

Abruptly, Montparnasse drew away, the flick of his blade leaving the tiniest cut on the bottom of Javert’s chin—a little flash of fire that died to a sting.

Javert’s throat bobbed. He let out a ragged breath. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, and he shuddered in repulsion.

His pride pricked at him; he could not restrain himself. “You little brat.” He glowered, his voice dark, breathy. “You think I fear you?”

Montparnasse stopped in his tracks. Turned around. He took Javert’s chin in his hand and raised it to his face. “No,” he said quietly, “But you should.”

Javert grimaced. Sucked the blood from his split lip and spat it onto the boy’s polished shoe. “I fear nothing.”

The boy eyed the spit with disdain—then eyed him, knowingly. “You fear for him.”

It was more of a threat than a statement, and it drained the blood from Javert’s face.

Montparnasse turned from him once more and began to walk away—to walk, as it happened, in the direction of Jean Valjean.

Javert’s nerves flared to life. “You touch him,” he seethed, “I’ll meet you in Hell.”

“Oh, but monsieur!” The boy flashed him a grin and gestured outwards. “We are already here.”

***

Footnotes:

[1] The French folksong by the same name (Alouette, Gentille Alouette—or, in English, “Lark,
Gentle Lark”). It is about the plucking (and implied killing) of a lark. Each compounding verse adds a new body part to be plucked: head, beak, eyes, neck, wings, feet, tail, and back, in that order. Larks are a small, harmless songbird, but were actually hunted eaten as a delicacy in most parts of Europe—though cooking dishes with them generally required killing them en masse. At the same time, larks are valued highly for their singing, and are associated with daybreak, lovers, and church services—so, essentially, they personified hope. In fact, some Renaissance painters used them as an allusion to Christ.

[2] “Cou” means “neck”, so Montparnasse probably thought it amusing to put a dagger to Javert’s throat here, seeing as he already happened to have gotten to this verse.

[3] There are far more verses to this song but Montparnasse chooses to end on “et les ailes”, thereby threatening to pluck Javert or Valjean’s metaphorical “wings”.

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:

All Along the Watchtower - Alexei Aigui & Dietmar Bonnen
At the loss of his hollowed-out sou, Valjean had reached perhaps the furthest levels of distress. He had not known whether or not he’d be able to implement it, and so it had remained a vague fallback measure in his mind—the last, tiny piece of security he had.

But when it became clear that, no matter the end result, he would likely be forced to use it—and that, upon searching for it, it had been stripped from him—he began to feel well and truly afraid. Before, his complacency had been his unfortunate choice. No longer able to remain complacent, however—lest Javert come to harm—he’d sought desperately for a means to free himself.

Without the hollow sou, he floundered. Valjean was strong, to be sure, but even he was no match for iron chains, if brute force was all he had to work with.

The shackles were tight around his wrists, and his hands were large. Perhaps, he reflected, if he were to break the bones in one of them he might be able to slip it through the metal cuff—but, pinioned thusly, he had no way to do it.

Javert was mere yards away from him, but Valjean was helpless to defend him. He could not even attend to Javert’s wounds, which were grievous, and worried him terribly. At the end of his rope, he thought that, given the chance, he would have traded all his belongings for the most meager length of saw blade.

The loss of one coin had left him stricken.

It was here, however, that providence saw fit to bestow another:

In the service, oftentimes one finds oneself without proper resources to mend a wound. In the Navy, for example, a surgeon may, for lack of a metal plate with which to fix a hole in the head, use a flattened out coin instead. The patient of such a procedure, therefore, would go all his life...
with this affixed to his skull, die, and be laid presumably to rest with it still grafted to the bone.

It will be recalled that the Paris catacombs were filled with bones. The skulls of thousands had been cemented into the walls. And, in some cases, into the concrete pillars that provided structural support.

Jean Valjean was chained to one such pillar.

He had, in his prior groping, and testing of his binds, found a number of skulls adorned the backside of the pillar. This was not a comforting discovery. He tried his best to put it out of his mind.

But later, in his desperation, he had felt around for anything, anything with which he could use to wear down his chains.

What he’d hoped for was, perhaps, an iron hook or sconce. What he found was a beaten old écu embedded in bone. It was nailed through and half covered up by concrete, but for what it was worth to him in that moment, it was priceless.

Though hammered down, the coin retained its grooved edge, and as the men before him argued amongst themselves, Valjean began to grind the middle link of his manacles against it.

It produced little noise, but he feared that his arms must be visibly moving, however slightly. He could in no way afford to be caught. However, his captors kept glancing back at him every so often—and even, to his chagrin, walking behind him—perhaps checking his binds. He could not safely proceed in this fashion.

And so, when an opportunity to divert their attention from him came, he took it gladly:

He played dead.

***

“‘It is just here,’” whispered Azelma. “‘Around the bend.’ She paused in her step, pointing down the tunnel to the right. ‘You must make ready, messieurs. I do not know how many wait within.”

Inspectors Beaufort and Savoy exchanged a glance. They withdrew a pistol and a poignard, respectively, and nodded over their shoulders at the gendarmes.

Bisset fumbled at his waistband and pulled out a pen knife.

Beaufort stared at him. “Really?”

Bisset made an apologetic face and shrugged.

“Remind me to better equip you next time.”

Javert’s gun at the ready, Marius advanced, taking hold of Azelma, whose wrists were still bound before her. “Cosette,” he said, “Stay back.”

Frowning, Cosette complied. She hung back with the last of the gendarmes as the rest of them crept to the door, weapons raised.
Azelma held the lantern up. Her hands shook. She peered around the rock, and went cold.

There was nobody there.

***

“Bobbies!” cried a voice.

The Patron-Minette whipped their heads around as a man came running into the room, doubling over and catching his breath.

Javert lifted his head, and recognized the man as Glorieux, an ex-convict with known ties to the group.

“In the tunnels,” Glorieux panted. “A good number of them.”

“Did they see you?” Thénardier demanded.

“No, no.”

“Good.”

Still winded, the man’s eyes traced the blood on the floor, until they met Anton’s body. “Christ,” he exclaimed, “What happened?”

“What do you think?” Thénardier returned. “We caught us a stray.” He turned a baneful eye to Javert.

“How far do you suppose you ran to get here?” Babet asked Glorieux.

“Quite a distance. At least a lieue if you count all the twists and turns.”

“Have they a map?” asked Thénardier.

“They have your daughter.”

The color drained from his face. “What? Azelma—you’re sure?”

“No mistaking that hair of hers.”

Thénardier became livid. He muttered obscenities under his breath, eyes darting around the cavern floor. “I told her, I told her …” His mouth drew back; his trembling ceased for a moment. “But she won’t have shown them where we are, no—she doesn’t know that.” He began wringing his hands feverishly. “Right, right. It’s not a ruin yet.”

“Still,” said Babet, “we shouldn’t risk staying here. Don’t want a repeat of last time, do we? We should move.”

“I know a place,” Glorieux suggested. “Deeper down.”

Babet nodded towards Valjean, who still hung limply from his post. “He shouldn’t put up much of a fight, at the moment.”
“No, I daresay not,” Thénardier agreed. He glanced back at Javert. “But you, on the other hand—you’ll cause us nothing but grief. Not that I was harboring a particular desire to keep you alive. It’s a shame, you know,” he sighed, “If you’d just stayed at wherever they patched you up, you could have avoided all this. But you couldn’t, could you? No, that’s your fatal flaw: your determination outweights your common sense.”

“Now, I could just leave you here, screaming your lungs out in the dark,” he mused. “And maybe, just maybe, your friends from the Prefecture will find you. Or maybe they won’t. Maybe you’ll die of thirst, and in a hundred years someone will find your skeleton still shackled to that post. Why should I care? You’ve caused us enough trouble.”

Javert swallowed. He did not know what to say to that. It was, after all, a perfectly rational argument. And there was, after all, nothing he could really do to stop them. Perhaps he could have bargained with them, somehow—offer lighter sentences should they be caught—but even desperate, the thought did not cross his mind.

There was something to be said for honor. Javert had not bargained with the rebels for his life; he would not bargain for it now. Begging was not, nor would it ever be, his way.

He remained silent.

Montparnasse’s gaze had strayed from them and drifted across the cavern, coming to rest on Valjean. He stared at him solemnly. Something shifted in his expression. Javert could not tell what exactly it was. He seemed … considerate? Of what?

“Jondrette,” the boy said.

Thénardier looked back at him curiously.

“They have Azelma, do they not?”

A corner of the man’s mouth drew down. “So it seems.”

“Keep him, then. We can use him for prisoner exchange.”

This did not seem to have occurred to Thénardier, for his eyebrows shot up, and he rubbed his chin. “Yes, there’s a thought. Clever, very clever. Forget that I called you incompetent. However, it follows that we need to incapacitate him, so, if you would be so kind as to lend me your bludgeon?”

Montparnasse sighed and held it out to him. “Not so hard, now;” he cautioned, “we don’t want —”

He was cut off as a figure burst from the shadows and threw itself against Thénardier.

Beneath the blood and grime, Javert’s eyes lit up with terror and with wonder.

Jean Valjean had rammed his shoulder straight into the man’s chest.

He hadn’t been unconscious at all, Javert realized. He’d been pretending he wasn’t a threat so they’d divert their attention elsewhere. He’d probably made all that fuss just so they’d hit him, and he could play dead. The blessed rogue. He’d never lost one lick of his cunning.

It all happened in a matter of seconds, but, as Javert perceived it, the world seemed to slow.
Thénardier was knocked off his feet by the impact. The bludgeon fell from his grasp. In the same instant, Valjean withdrew the pistol from Thénardier’s waistband, pivoted on his heel, and spun around to face Babet, eyeing him vehemently down the barrel.

Babet jolted back.

Montparnasse had darted away as well, and stood staring at them, too stunned, it seemed, to form a plan.

Thénardier, however, staggered to his feet and lost no time in grappling Valjean. He seized him by the waist and pulled him backwards, twisting his arm as he did, so that the pistol dropped from his hand.

Valjean did not hesitate—did not even seem surprised. He snarled, teeth bared, the broken chain of the manacles trailing behind his bloodied wrist as he drove his elbow back into the man’s face.

His eyes shone like fire. He looked, in that moment, like a lion, beaten and bruised by its masters and finally turned against them.

Javert had nearly forgotten that he had once been afraid of that strength. That Valjean was more than capable of violence.

_I had almost forgotten what you are._

A paradox, a duality—a good man capable of being terrifying. A heart that was both soft and iron hard. Like the angels of old: luminous and horrible.

Javert saw, then—could not help but see—in his features, the man Valjean had been in his youth. The man whose strength and brute will caused guard and fellow convict alike to prickle with dread. Javert had thought that hellfire in the man’s soul long quenched. But here he glimpsed the reality. And the reality of it was, that blaze had never been extinguished—only tempered, smoldering beneath the surface. Given proper circumstance, it raged again like wildfire.

As soon as the pistol had hit the ground, Babet lunged at Valjean, meaning to take him by the shoulders.

But Valjean, having partially freed himself from Thénardier, threw himself forward and headbutted him. Then he grabbed him by his ears, shoved him down, and drove his knee into the man’s face.

Tossed to the ground, Babet lay limply, nose in the dirt.

Thénardier tried to grapple Valjean from behind, going in for a choke hold.

Valjean stomped down on the man’s foot, turned, and gripped him by the collar.

_“I told you not to touch him,”_ he seethed.

Javert had seen many things in his life, but he had never seen the kind of cold fury burning in Valjean’s eyes. Nor had he ever seen Thénardier so terrified.

Valjean held him there a moment more, their gazes locked—and then fist collided with face, and Thénardier was thrown off kilter.

As the man tried to right himself, Glorieux stepped in, grabbing the fallen bludgeon and going
after Valjean, who ducked the blow and ran.

As he passed behind the pillar to which Javert was bound, Javert felt him press something into his hand—something small and metallic.

His eyes shot open.

The key! He must have filched it from Thénardier. God bless him.

Javert sprung to life, half watching Valjean fight, half trying to fit the key into the hole in his manacles. His fingers were shaking badly, but on top of that, it was nigh impossible, with his wrists twisted thusly, to maneuver the key into the proper angle.

Thénardier was up again. It was two against one. Montparnasse still stood in a daze.

Metal scraped against metal. The key was so small, and Javert’s hands were so large.

Glorieux was knocked out.

Sweat trickled down Javert’s spine. His arms strained.

Valjean and Thénardier squared off. The skin on Valjean’s knuckles had been broken. Thénardier brandished his knife with a growl. They went at each other.

A badly placed jab, a twisted arm, and the knife was on the ground. One haymaker later, and so was Thénardier.

Valjean stood over him, catching his breath, and checking that the man did not rise. His arm and chest were bleeding where he’d taken some cuts, but he did not seem to notice. His eyes flicked to Montparnasse.

Montparnasse took a step back. For the first time, his air was that of genuine fear.

Each seemed to be waiting for the other to make a move.

Montparnasse neither fled nor advanced.

Expression still alight with unspeakable rage, Valjean started towards him.

The boy gave a start. He pulled out his dagger and widened his stance.

Still, Javert could not get the key to align.

Valjean went for Montparnasse, and Montparnasse ducked and made a swipe at him. But Valjean was surprisingly agile for a man so stocky, and they darted in and out in a manner so nearly coordinated it seemed like a dance.

Montparnasse was too lithe for Valjean to land a solid hit, and Valjean was too strong for Montparnasse to risk a full-on charge. They circled each other, trading blows lightning quick: a jab here, a slash there.

Montparnasse should have been going for a killing blow, should have been gripping the dagger with the point angled down, but he wasn’t. He was making swipes at him, not thrusts, and holding the blade like a child who’d never learned how to fight.

Did Valjean really frighten him so?
Keeping Valjean at bay, but unable to advance himself, the boy was backing away, and liable to get himself cornered. Stance faltering, he seemed to realize this.

Valjean was not going to back down. It was now or never.

Montparnasse gave a start as Valjean made another lunge for him, more brutish and reckless than the last. There was a split second where the boy seemed to falter, purely out of fear—and then he turned and landed a kick to Valjean’s chest as though he were trying to bust down a door.

A loud, unmistakable cracking noise issued from his ribs.

Javert went rigid. The key fell from his grasp.

Valjean stumbled back in shock, mouth open. A shudder ran through him. He fell to his knees.

Javert stared at him in horror, frozen to the spot.

The blood draining from his face, Valjean clutched at his chest, unfocused. He made a noise like a cough, and then another, louder and more violent. His breath turned to gasps. Shaking and doubling over, he choked.

Montparnasse watched him with a similar amount of shock. Doubtless none of them had known what they’d done to his chest in that fire. Doubtless he had not expected his opponent to go down with a single kick, however swift.

There was a moment where Javert and he just stared, motionless, while Valjean quivered on the ground.

And then Montparnasse took a step forward.

Javert tried to get up to stop him, but was pulled back by the shackles. He realized he’d dropped the key—and was hit by a bolt of sheer panic. Shaking now himself, he slid down the pillar, fingers fumbling desperately in the dust, unable to take his eyes off Valjean, and the figure of Montparnasse edging slowly towards him, dagger in hand.

His heart was pounding so hard it felt as though it might burst or give out altogether. And then the tip of one finger touched it, and nearly pushed it away—but he reached, and pinched his middle and forefinger together, and had the key once more.

He was trembling so badly he did not know how he managed it, but he felt the key turn in the lock, and the shackle click open. No sooner had he freed his hand than he sprung to his feet.

Montparnasse had bent down over Valjean, and was in the process of reaching out for his collar, when Javert grabbed him by the back of the coat, spun him around and flung him away like a Scot in a stone throwing contest. The boy’s top hat went flying off his head. His surin went flying out of his hand.

Montparnasse lost his footing and tumbled to the ground, rolling over a few times before he managed to pick himself up. Dizzy and utterly bewildered, he turned.

Their eyes had barely locked before Javert was throwing a punch at him.

The boy leaned back and tried to dodge, but it wasn’t fast enough to spare his face. The fist connected with his left eye socket and sent him stumbling back. As Javert went for him again, Montparnasse made a dive for his dagger. He got it, but as he rose Javert tackled him.
With a cry Montparnasse was pinned to the ground, his blade lost once more. He tried to reach for it just as Javert’s boot kicked it away.

Before Javert even knew what he was doing, his hands were crushing the boy’s throat.

Without his toys the assassin was nothing. Compared to Javert he was a twig, and was, probably, just as easily snapped.

Gurgling, Montparnasse writhed beneath him, groping wildly at the rock. He gaped like a fish, and tried to pry Javert’s hands off his neck.

Javert’s muscles shook. He was empty of thought. His jaw was set tight with the blank and terrible frown of intense concentration.

The boy began to kick at him. First his foreleg, than his thigh, and then he managed to pull a leg through his and kick him in the stomach.

It was the blow to his chest that finally stunned Javert into releasing him; it had hit too near to the bullet hole and caused a searing pain to shoot through his breast. He fell back with a grunt.

Montparnasse scrambled to his feet, backing away and sucking in air. He tried to go for the dagger again, but Javert caught him by the leg of his trousers and pulled him back down. They wrestled with one another for a split second—the boy trying to break free and Javert trying to hold him down—before Montparnasse kicked him in the face and wriggled out of his grasp.

Apparently having had enough, the boy bolted for the door. His harried footsteps echoed away into the tunnels, until the only sound left in the cavern was Valjean’s pitiful gasps.

Winded, Javert crawled over to him.

Valjean gave a frenzied start, whipping his head up as Javert touched his shoulder.

“It’s me,” Javert assured, “It’s me.”

Valjean gazed up at him helplessly, lovingly. Fearfully. “Javert,” he choked out. “Javert.” He touched his shoulder in turn, as though to make sure Javert was truly real, before allowing himself to uncurl his defensive posture and splay onto his back on the floor. There were tears in his eyes. “I can’t breathe,” he said, squeezing them shut in what must have been horrendous pain. “I can’t—”

Javert hung over him protectively, mindless with worry, fingers hovering near Valjean’s face. He watched the man struggle beneath him, and felt more powerless than ever. “Valjean ...”

It was here, at the sight of him gasping, Javert recalled the laudanum. He had stolen it, in fact, expressly for Valjean’s benefit. “Just hold on,” he begged him, digging through the pockets of his greatcoat. Amazingly, the little bottle was still there. He pulled the stopper out with his teeth and held it carefully to Valjean’s lips, tilting ever so slightly. “Here, here—drink,” he urged. “It will take the pain away.” And let you breathe, he prayed.

Valjean took a few meager sips of it. By the taste, and the look on his face, he surely knew what it was. “Save some for yourself,” he managed to say.

“Not yet,” Javert said. They were not out of this yet.

Plugging the bottle once more, he shoved it back into his coat.
He stared forlornly down at Valjean, and Valjean up at he, both of them panting, both of them teary-eyed and nearly at their breaking point.

His hand unsteady, Valjean reached up and cupped Javert’s cheek.

There was more affection between them in that moment than was possible to express with mere words, and they each seemed to know it.

Haggard, Javert leaned down and pressed his brow to his. He shut his eyes.

Excluding his mother, this was closer to another human being, both physically and emotionally, than Javert had ever been in his life—and, his wits frayed by stress, he was completely unaware.

All he knew was that he would give anything, including and especially himself, to see that the man never knew such suffering again. And that, suddenly, he understood what all those people had meant when they’d said they would die for their loved ones. It was never about duty at all. It was about this pain, this agony—so acute, and all-consuming, that it blotted out everything else. This connection so deep that each and every wound was mutual. This wailing, burning need to see them safe. That was what it was.

And if a change had taken place in his soul at that moment—if that understanding altered some fundamental aspect of his being—Javert was too stricken to notice.

He only felt the man’s breath hot upon his face, and his pain as deeply as though it were his own.

“You’re pathetic,” someone said.

Little else had ever caused Javert to startle so completely as that voice, or the sight of Thénardier pointing a pistol at them.

Javert seized up. It felt as though the floor had dropped out from under him, and he’d been pitched into a glacial, hellish void.

Thénardier scowled, his lips striped with blood. “I’m through with you,” he said.

Instinctively, Javert threw himself over Valjean, holding him tight, trying to make a shield of himself.

Click.

Javert opened one eye.

Click.

He raised his head.

Thénardier was standing there with a dumbfounded look on his face. He pulled the trigger again, eyes widening.

Click. Click. Click.

The lock failed to spark.

As he turned the gun over in his hand, the reason for the malfunction became clear: the jaw screw had come loose and the flint had fallen out of the jaws. The hammer produced nothing more
than a scraping sound as it struck the frizzen.

A spiteful expression lit the man’s face. “Goddamnit!” he cried, and he threw the gun at the floor.

It was then that Thénardier, glaring at it some ways away, seemed to notice something.

Javert followed his gaze.

There, just beside where the pistol had landed, sat a little rock, glinting and dark against the dull, trademark white dirt of the catacombs. It was, he realized, the piece of flint.

Thénardier looked to Javert. He looked back to the flint. They exchanged a glance.

In a flash they were both scrambling for it, kicking up dust.

Thénardier got there first, but just barely avoided Javert’s grasp, darting away and trying desperately to secure the flint back in place with the screw. Javert chased him across the cavern, weaving around the pillars, both of them hasty to the point of clumsiness. Javert made a pass at him. Thénardier ducked, fumbling with the flintlock.

As they neared the far left side of the cavern, Javert made another lunge and managed to grapple him about the waist. They went down, wrestling and writhing, grunting like wild beasts, each trying to get a solid hold on the gun. Tumbling, shoving, kicking. The flurry of limbs moved so quickly it was hard to make sense of it.

But all of a sudden Thénardier was backed up into the corner, and Javert was pointing the pistol at his head.

Javert panted, eyes wild. He shook with furor.

Thénardier was frozen beneath him, their gazes locked.

It was like they were trapped in the singular moment in time, unable to move forward.

Everything inside of Javert screamed at him to pull the trigger. But his finger remained, twitching in place. What held it back? He did not know, for he himself teemed with rage. It would be so easy.

*It would be so easy.*

He felt a hand take hold of the back of his greatcoat. He went still.

“Why?” he thought aloud, his heart wrenching in his chest. “Why is it always you?”

“Javert,” Valjean breathed hoarsely. “He has a daughter.”

Javert grit his teeth.

The pistol trembled in his hand. Grimacing, he squeezed his eyes shut.

Like a lash, a crack of gunfire lit the air.

***
Azelmstrode into the empty room trance-like, beset by a cold fear.

The men filed in behind her, tense. They began to lower their guns as they realized that what they were looking for was not here.

Azelmacould feel their eyes on her back, feel the accusations beginning to form in their throats before they were even voiced.

“This is a trap, isn’t it?” one of them said. “You led us down here just to get us lost, so you could pick us off one by one in the dark!”

Azelmadrew back, tensing up. “W-what? No, that’s not—”

“They already got the inspector for all we know!”

“It’s true, isn’t it? This was all just a ruse! The rest of her gang’s probably back at their house this very minute, robbing them blind, while we grope around fruitlessly. Hell,” the man said to Marius, “I bet your father was never here to begin with!”

“Is this true?” Marius demanded, confronting her. “Did you trick us, you wretch?”

Her eyes grew wide. She began backing away, shaking her head. “No, I didn’t! That’s not true! I never—”

“You conniving little louse,” accused a gendarme. “She played the lot of us like a damn fiddle!”

She gave a terrible start, falling back against the wall.

“Stop it!” cried a voice. Cosette pushed through the group of men and stood between them and Azelma, throwing out her arms like a shield. “She hasn’t done anything! She’s only trying to help us. Can’t you see how scared she is?”

Azelmatrembled, looking up at her in disbelief.

“She wants to save our father too. She’s knows what they’re doing is wrong. But she’s just a pawn in their game, don’t you understand? They didn’t tell her everything. You cannot blame her for that. It’s not her fault.”

“Madame,” said Savoy, approaching them, “with all due respect, we don’t have any proof of that whatsoever. We must take other scenarios into consideration. We must take precautions. What if your trust is a part of their plan? Come away from there, and let us have her. Trickster or not, we shall all be a measure safer with her restrained. We can search down here for awhile longer, but if we don’t find anything soon, I suggest we head back to the surface before we get any more lost. From there, we shall have her arrested and interrogated, and then perhaps—”

“No!” Azelma sobbed. “Please, I can’t go back there; I can’t. I beg of you. I’m telling the truth! I thought they would be down here, really! Je te jure que c’est vrai! I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Don’t let them take me back there. Oh, God! Don’t let them put me back in prison.”

“What,” scoffed a gendarme, “Les Madelonettes? That can hardly be called a prison at all! Why, it’s got a courtyard with a garden, and enormous glass casements, and spacious rooms. You should be so lucky!”
“You don’t understand. You don’t know how it is. Mercy! Please. I’m not lying!”

“And what evidence do we have of that? What evidence do we have that there’s anything down here other than darkness and bones and our own stupid—”

A muffled shot rang out through the tunnels, and all their faces turned back to the door, and the black expanse beyond.

“Was that ... gunfire?” Bisset wondered aloud.

“Must be Javert,” Marius said, a desperate hope flickering once more into his eyes.

The men all looked at one another; some began to filter back out of the room, casting their eyes about, holding their lanterns out.

“Which direction did it come from?” asked one.

“I don’t know. It was like it came from all of them at once.”

“It sounded so far away ...”

“It’s just the tunnels making a mess of the sound. It can’t have been that far off.”

“Well which way are we supposed to start—”

It was at this point—as half the men had left the room, and the remainder’s attention was directed elsewhere—that the man who’d been hiding behind the right-hand pillar chose to dart up behind Cosette.

By the time either Cosette or Azelma knew what was happening, there was a knife pressed against Cosette’s throat, and an arm fiercely gripping her chest. “Hold tight there, love,” he warned.

It was, Azelma realized, one of the men her father worked with sometimes. Dépêche, he was called. She knew little of him other than that he had a shaky temper, and he’d once had a wife—and that his temper had gotten the better of both of them.

Cosette had let out a startled cry as he’d grabbed her, and now everyone’s attention was back on them—the gendarmes’ rifles poised to fire, Javert’s pistol held high in her husband’s shaking hand.

“Well, now,” her captor said, taking a step back. His voice wavered nervously. “I don’t want any trouble. I’d just like to leave, that’s all.”

“Let her go!” Marius shrieked.

“Come, don’t you know it makes a man jittery with so many guns pointed about? You don’t want me to do anything rash. Do you?”

The officers and he were all hopelessly conflicted: they could not shoot at the man without hitting Cosette; they could not allow him to leave without abandoning her to his mercy.

“I’m going to head to the door now, and you’re going to let me pass,” the man breathed. His eyes were wild.

Cosette writhed uselessly in his grasp, teeth clenched, a grunt or a whimper choked off in her throat as the blade pressed against its soft flesh. “Marius,” she managed to say, “Marius, I’m sorry!”
This only served to frighten her husband more.

“It really was a trap,” someone murmured.

Beaufort slid his way to the front of the group and glared at Dépêche. “You will let the lady go, and then we will let you leave.”

“Oh, we both know that’s not true,” he replied.

“We can always work something out.”

“Sure, sure ... It’s a pretty thought. Not a very honest one. But pretty.” Here he turned his face slightly over his shoulder. “Come, Azelma. On your feet. We must be going, now.”

Azelma had been cowering against the wall for the duration of this exchange, staring up at him in shock. This address snapped her out of it, but only partially. Her eyes flicked to his face, and then the faces of the gendarmes, and the officers, and Marius, in turn.

“Azelma,” Dépêche repeated, pitch raising with tension, “we must be going ...”

Still, her gaze swept the room, from him, to them—him, to them again. Slowly she pushed herself back up the wall, her frame trembling. Watched as their expression morphed from disbelief to betrayal; betrayal to hostility.

Dépêche began to skirt the cavern edge, his footwork clumsy. Gun barrels followed him.

Azelma trailed behind him. Her body seemed to move of its own accord. She was empty of thought. Instinct propelled her onward: away from those men, and their guns, and their hatred. Back to her father and some kind of freedom. Instinct told her to run, to embrace the familiar. Instinct, like the flames of Hell, licked at her heels.

The world fell apart all around her. Why had she ever believed she could escape this life? Why had she ever thought things would work out for her? This wouldn’t be happening if she hadn’t deviated from the plan.

They were halfway across the cavern now. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. She could feel the precious seconds slip away. With each one, her gut felt tighter and tighter, until it nearly tore itself to shreds. The breath caught in her throat.

She could still do something. She could still do something.

What could she do? She didn’t have a weapon. Her hands were still shackled. What other options did she have at this point?

Nothing ever mattered, anyway. Not her thoughts, or her feelings, or even her actions. She was always swept up in the tide. Of course this was not any different.

Her heart’s compass spun violently. She oscillated between a position of power, and helplessness. Between bravery and cowardice.

Time was running out. She felt like she was choking.

*Choking.*

Eyes wide, she raised her shaking hands, and stared at the chain that ran between them.
What came over her in that instant, she did not know. It was anger and terror and panic more than anything else—and it coursed through her veins like fire.

She closed the distance between her and Dépêche and flung the chain of her manacles up over his head, pulling it taut against his throat and yanking him backwards.

Dépêche yelped in surprise, but it turned to a gurgle. The knife dropped to the ground as he reached instinctively for his neck.

Cosette wrest herself out of his grasp as he stumbled back, his eyes bulging as the metal closed off his windpipe. His hands flailed, he railed out at the foe behind him. But Azelma was still tugging him backwards, even as he kicked and elbowed her in the ribs.

The gendarmes, and the police officers, and even Marius seemed to have been taken by so great a surprise by this turn of events that they stood motionless for a second, staring. But as Cosette bolted for them, they snapped into action. The nearest gendarmes tackled Dépêche, piling on top of him like particularly vengeful rugby players as Azelma darted back. He squirmed and cursed loudly beneath them, until Savoy had shackled his hands behind his back.

Marius lowered his gun as Cosette ran into his waiting arms and buried her face in the crook of his neck, holding back a sob. He held her tightly, smoothing her hair. After a moment, his face rose, and he gazed at Azelma with wonder.

She thought, perhaps, that what she saw in his eyes was the dawning of a newfound respect—even an understanding.

Before she could contemplate this, however, the senior officer—was it Beaufort?—clapped her on the shoulder, making her start.

“Well done, girl,” he said.

“M-merci.”

“That was a good little trick, by the way, but should you need to perform it again, you must cross your arms before you loop it over their head; that way, one does not strain to keep the pressure on their neck. Like so.” He made a gesture resembling garroting. “You see?”

Azelma did not see at all, but she nodded vigorously.

“Splendid,” said he. “Now let us find our marks. I have a feeling he knows where they are.” He cast a volatile little smile at the man on the ground. “Don’t you?”

Dépêche, pinioned by several gendarmes, and with a boot on his head, growled audibly.

***

Panting, Javert let his arm drift to the ground. A shadow had fallen over his face. His shoulders sagged.

Thénardier stared up at him, mute.

That Javert had fired the round into the ceiling, and not between his eyes, was, apparently,
impossible to believe.

Slowly, Valjean’s hand released the capes of Javert’s coat.

“You owe him your life,” Javert said. The words were bitter on his tongue, but they held a sense of poetic irony, and so did not disgust him as much as they might have.

Falteringly, and still in shock, Thénardier’s eyes shifted to Valjean. His expression was unreadable.

As the man was staring, Javert unlocked the left cuff of his manacles, which was still attached to his wrist, and fastened it to Thénardier’s instead. He dragged the man to his feet, and shackled him to the nearest pillar, which just so happened to be the one Valjean had been bound to before.

It was not the same as killing him, but cuffing him thusly provided at least a small amount of satisfaction.

This done, he nudge Babet and Glorieux with the toe of his boot and found them both still solidly out. He would have chained them up, too, but he’d run out of chains. So he settled for their cravats instead, and tied their wrists behind their backs, binding each to a separate column. This time, he was done taking chances.

Drained, he returned to Valjean.

***

Sweat beading on his neck, Montparnasse peered around the cavern door.

His accomplices were strung up like meat on spits. They were not dead; they couldn’t be—their former captives were too passive for a thing like murder. And Thénardier, at least, was awake.

If Montparnasse could manage to untie them, perhaps the situation could be remedied. But he would have to actually get to them first—and that was where he hesitated.

In the middle of the cavern lay Jean Valjean, flat on his back, struggling to breathe. His eyes were shut, his face pained. Above him, Inspector Javert, battered but unbroken, kept guard.

Perhaps the man sensed his eyes on him, for Javert looked up. His face became terrible.

Montparnasse gave a jolt.

He fancied he saw something not quite a wolf and not quite a dog, fangs bared through a blood-spattered muzzle, a brilliant fury in its ice blue eyes. Its hackles rose, fur bristling, growling at him menacingly. A second later, it lunged.

Montparnasse ran, but it followed him into the dark.

They exchanged blows. Something made a crunching noise, and the tunnel filled with an inhuman yelp.
Javert shambled back into the cavern, lungs heaving in his chest. He barely made it to Valjean’s side before collapsing, a wounded dog crawling back to its master. On hands and knees, he found he could barely support his own weight. He strained forwards, and fell to the hard, dusty rock, his head cushioned by Valjean’s thigh.

He listened to his own ragged breath, and felt his heartbeat wrack his aching body as he lay. He was so very, very tired. It would be so easy to drift off to sleep.

Javert was already slipping from consciousness when a clamoring of footsteps echoed down the tunnels.

He felt another wave of panic. How and where he found the energy, he did not know. But he took a deep breath and forced himself to sit up, aiming the gun at the door. Dread welled in his stomach, along with an exhaustion that almost gave into resignation.

There was no bullet in the gun, and he did not have the time or the strength to search for cartridges—nor could he bring himself to leave Valjean’s side.

He would have to bluff. What would happen if that bluff was called, however, he refused to consider. And so he lay in wait, with the sweat dripping down his back, and his mind blank with fear.

A figure appeared in the doorway, and the pistol snapped to attention in Javert’s trembling hand.

For a moment, he ceased to breathe, and then the figure stepped into the lamplight.

Never would Javert have believed he could feel such relief at the sight of Marius Pontmercy. With a heavy sigh, he let the gun’s barrel sink towards the cavern floor. And then, as the group rushed into the room, let himself sink as well, exhausted beyond measure.

Cosette cast a brief glance at him before rushing past to her father’s side, where she knelt, clasping his hand to her chest. “Papa!” she cried.

Valjean cracked his eyes open. “Cosette?” he breathed hoarsely. “Cosette, I— What are you doing down he—” His abdomen clenched, his face contorting in pain as his words became a whimper. He curled into himself, trembling and clutching his shirt.

“Oh, my God. Don’t try to speak,” she pleaded. “We’ll get you out of here. We’ll get you to a doctor, I promise. Just hold on.”

“His chest,” Javert said, his hand fumbling out towards them in the dust, “don’t touch his chest. His ribs—broken. You have to … He can’t walk. You have to carry him out on something.”

“Inspector!” exclaimed Bisset. “Christ, what happened to you?”

“Nothing. I’ll be fine. Where’s Beaufort?”

“Just here,” said Beaufort, edging his way through the throng.

“Here,” Javert breathed, fishing the key to his manacles out of his coat pocket and holding it out
to the man. “Take this. Use Thénardier. He ought to know the way out. Go quickly. You have to get ... to a doctor. A surgeon.”

The man nodded dutifully, taking the key from him.

Javert felt more than saw Marius kneel at his side.

“Javert,” the boy said. His face was one of horror. “Javert, what happened? You fell behind us in the tunnels, you disappeared, and we didn’t”—”

Here the boy stopped short. He withdrew his hand, which he had placed unthinkingly on Javert’s chest—perhaps in some measure of consolation—and stared at the blood on his shaking palm. He was struck mute for a moment. “Oh, God.”

Javert knit his brow. His eyes trailed down until they found his own breast. The black of his waistcoat, he realized, had obscured the spreading stain. “Oh.”

When had the stitches torn out? He hadn’t felt a damn thing.

In fact, he realized, he couldn’t feel a thing at all.

It seemed like the whole world was receding somewhere, and he was staying behind.

That didn’t matter, though. Valjean was safe.

He turned his head to see Cosette and a couple officers positioning Valjean on one of their coats, and, behind them, Beaufort taking hold of a snarling Thénardier as Azelma looked on, clearly conflicted.

“Javert?” Marius’ voice seemed far away, now. “Javert!”

Something was pressing on his chest. Hands? Yes, surely. Were they Marius’?

He watched the officers take the ends of the coat and hoist Valjean into the air.

“Take him,” Javert mumbled.

_Were the lanterns dimming?_ he thought dumbly.

“Javert! Look at me!”

“It’s so dark down here,” he heard himself say. Even his own voice sounded like it came from some distant shore. Strange. “Why do you not … roll up the wicks?”

His limbs were cold and heavy. Each breath was a struggle. The world crashed over him like the waves rolling in on the banks of Toulon. His vision flooded as the air burned in his lungs, the undercurrent sweeping him gently, gently under. Shafts of sunlight glimmered through the water.

_The tide, the tide …_

He sank.
MUST BE JAVERT

Jav, buddy, u okay?

Shit, is anyone in this story really okay??

Does anyone know what Montparnasse is thinking? Do I, the author, know what Montparnasse is thinking? Does Montparnasse know what Montparnasse is thinking? Fuck, man, I dunno.

I feel like this was a very affirming day for Azelma.

Why do I picture Inspector Beaufort as literally another Javert but just white with short hair and less of an obsessive personality complex?

Hey, Lune, u remember how u wanted me to give the poor old men a break? Remember how I said you'd regret that choice of words. I feel like one of those evil genies that grants your wish but only ironically.

~~~

Okay, so, this time I actually made a rough chapter-correlating order to the songs instead of just alphabetizing them. Maybe one day I'll do this to the other playlists as well. The only reason I didn't before was that sometimes songs wouldn't really fit any particular scene, but would fit the theme of the chapter as a whole, and that was kind of weird to try and place in a list. For example, "Rise" doesn't really fit a particular scene, just overall ... so I shoved it in the middle? IDK lol.

Suggested Listening:

Kaishou - Kasamatsu Kouji

New Direction - Tom Tykwer/Johnny Klimek/Reinhold Heil

She'll Kill You - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein

All Along the Watchtower (Kara's Coordinates) - Bear McCreary

Everybody Wants to Rule the World - Lorde

Brothers in Arms (Extended Version) - Tom Holkenborg and Junkie XL

No Time For Caution - Hans Zimmer

Rise - Katy Perry

Stand My Ground - Within Temptation

All Along the Watchtower (piano) - Bear McCreary

Imagine the Fire - Hans Zimmer

Scorponok - Steve Jablonsky
Breaking and Entering - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein
Run Rabbit Junk - Yoko Kanno
We'll Protect You - Epic Score
Resolution - Jon Brion
When it's Cold I'd Like to Die - Moby
Knocking on Heaven's Door - Antony and the Johnsons
Afloat

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the incident in the catacombs, everyone scrambles to rectify the situation. Lives hang in the balance, and Javert finds himself once more in an abyss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He’d read once that in everyone's life there was somebody who touched a spot so deep, so precious, that the mind always retreated, in time of need, to that cherished place, seeking comfort within memories that never seemed to disappoint.”

-Steve Berry

***

“Javert—”

Marius fumbled at the buttons on Javert’s waistcoat. When he undid the man’s shirt, he gave another start.

Javert’s chest had already been wrapped in bandages. They were now bleeding through.

“Mon Dieu; he was injured,” Marius realized aloud. “He came here like this!” He scrambled to tear the blood-soaked strips of linen away, revealing a wound he was all too familiar with. The man had been shot.

He froze. “It can’t have hit anything vital, elsewise he never would’ve made it down here. It’s just the blood. We just need to stop the blood. We just—” Panicked now, his fingers hovered over Javert’s chest, eyes darting around. When he could find nothing else to use, he tore the handkerchief from his own pocket and pressed it to the wound, using the weight of his body to clamp it down. “Please,” he muttered, watching the red seep through the cloth, “please ...”

“Marius,” Cosette called, her voice tight with worry.

“Go with your father!” he exclaimed, casting a glance back at where she stood clinging to the doorway. “Go! Be safe.”

Her mouth scrunched. She seemed worried to leave him, or perhaps to be left by him, but she gave a curt nod, picked up the skirts of her dress, and disappeared into the tunnel.

Marius turned his attention back to the man beneath him. “Come on, Inspector, come on. Don’t die on us now.”
Why did you come here like this?

Why didn’t you say something?

Why?

“Hold it tight like that, boy,” Savoy said, clasping his shoulder and crouching down with him. “Hold it tight for a good long while and don’t let go.”

“He—someone shot him,” Marius told him. “Before. Before he came here. There were bandages. It was an old wound. Why would he come here like that? I asked of his health and he lied. Why would he do that? He knew how dangerous this was.”

Savoy gave a shaky sigh. “Javert has a reputation for two things in the police: ruthlessness, and recklessness. I’d be surprised if he didn’t feel it was well worth the risk. But there’s a limit to strength, and it’s foolish to push it. Tch,” he clicked, touching the man’s bloodied brow, “what did they do to him? Christ.” Reaching into his coat he produced a flask and unscrewed the lid, wetting a handkerchief of his own. He began to mop up the mess on Javert’s face, dabbing gingerly at the cut near his scalp and making a face that in no means inspired confidence.

Marius looked away, only to stare down at the cloth below him and the red, seeping stain that slowly spread across it. Please, he thought. His hands shook. He blinked. Images flashed before his eyes—blood, blood ... so much blood. The street was a river of red. The gutters, the cracks between the paving stones. The floorboards, the walls—

He squeezed his eyes shut.

A girl, skinny and frail and yet so heavy in his lap, her breast red as a robin, her head in the crook of his arm. Her lips curved into a smile. She reached up at him, a hole in her ha—

No, he thought, trying to block it back out. Tears stung the back of his eyes.

Mabeuf lying there on the table, a black shawl draped over him. Blood pooling beneath his chest, seeping into the wood, trickling down the edge—

“No.”

The gamin on his knees, his childish voice a rasp, still singing, so much like a laugh, his arms outstretched. The fiery report of a rifle, blinding in the dusky twilight. Crimson mist settling in the air. The boy face down in the street, his basket overturned, the cartridges spilled before him on the cobblestones.

The child’s body limp in his arms, face streaked with blood. His eyes were—still open, they were still—

“No ...”

The breath hitched in his lungs.


Courfeyrac—

“No!” Marius shuddered head to toe. “Not again,” he blurted out, “Not again! I’m not losing anyone else. I’m not. I’m not! God damn it!” He broke into a sob. “God damn it ...”
“Easy, there,” he heard Savoy say. The hand was replaced on his shoulder. “Easy. Look.” Carefully, he took Marius’ hands in his and withdrew them to reveal the cloth of the makeshift bandage.

Shaking, Marius stared at the fabric, and the splotch of red where his fingers had been, until it’s significance finally dawned on him. The stain no longer spread. “It ... stopped.”

“See? No one’s dying on us just yet.

Marius sat back, sagging. His palms lay, sticky, on his lap. His tremors ceased.

“Now, then ...” murmured Savoy, sliding off Javert’s belt and repositioning it over the man’s chest. He re buckled it, pulling it tight over wound and cloth. “There. That should hold.”

“We—we need to get him to a doctor,” Marius mumbled. “Where are they taking Valjean?”

“There’s a man I know in the Marais,” Savoy assured him. “If anyone knows how to treat them it’s him.”[1]

***

The lantern squeaked softly in his grasp as he made his way through the tunnels. In his other hand, water sloshed in the wooden bucket.

Upon turning the last corner, Gueulemer found, to his utter astonishment, a group of gendarmes and police officers milling about at the entrance of their hideout.

In their custody, with his hands pinioned behind him, stood Montparnasse. His face was a mess of blood; his nose had been broken.

Gueulemer’s arrival did not go unnoticed.

For a long moment, they all stared dumbly at each other across the tunnel.

“Well don’t just stand there, you idiot,” Montparnasse snapped.

Gueulemer did the only sensible thing there was to do in this situation: he flung the bucket at them and ran.

Faced with the threat of rifles, he did not get very far.

***

Flashes. Everything was flashes. Light. Sound. The texture of a shirt. The tumult of footfalls on stone. Words, frantic and incomprehensible.

Someone was carrying him—perhaps many someones—and they were trying to make haste. This was all Javert knew.
His consciousness sputtered like a dying ember, propelling him in and out of shadow, of sense. He had no strength to move; his limbs were numb. His body weighed him down like a sack of grain. Strands of his hair obscured his vision—when it filtered into anything resembling clarity—and no one bothered to remove them. He was somewhere between ambivalence and terror, for he was so exhausted that he had trouble feeling fear.

Darkness, again, and the clatter of carriage wheels and hooves. His head on someone’s lap.

It was night now, it seemed, but he could not tell how much time had passed.

When he next found himself waking—here, in the most meager sense of the word—he was being carried up a flight of stairs.

“These two again? The both of them?” a vaguely familiar voice was saying. “Oh, Lord. This is … Ah.”

Someone had deposited him on a bed. Its softness seemed almost to envelop him. That, or he was sinking through it—everything felt like he was sinking, sinking. He struggled to breathe. His head was killing him, his skull pressing in on his brain. It was a searing, throbbing sort of pain now; it had been steadily growing for hours.

His sight blinked in and out. He strained to focus his eyes in the candlelight.

People had been rushing in and out of the room he was in, talking over themselves. Most had been herded away now.

A small, grey-haired man was standing over a bed, young women darting this way and that at his side. Javert knew him. His name was—what was his name? It would not come to him. The man was—a doctor, yes. A doctor ...

“No, no,” he was saying, “they’ve completely broken away. We need to operate. There’s no helping it.”

One of girls looked up at him with worry.

“It will only worsen if we wait,” the man said, as though reading her thoughts. “We have to do this now.”

There was muffled whimpering.

It was then that Javert realized that the man in the bed was Valjean.

A flood of fear washed through him. He recalled their situation. Valjean’s wounds. The man needed— His ribs ...

“They’ve completely broken away.’

A cold dread shot through him.

“I know, I know,” the doctor said to Valjean, who was still making pitiful noises. “Try to hold still. Are you quite conscious? That’s no good. Chaya, will you fetch me some opiates? I’m sorry about this.”

“Opiates?” echoed another girl. “But, in his state—”

“I’m aware. But if he thrashes while I’m working on him—”
“—’ready gave him …”

The doctor started at the sound of Javert’s voice. He seemed surprised Javert was even awake, and Javert could not blame him. He himself was surprised the words had made it past his lips. “What was that?” the man asked.

“I already gave him … laudanum,” he managed to say.

For a moment the man only stared at him, blinking. “Oh—oh I see. You did, did you? That’s good. That’s … precisely what he needed, actually, so— It’s just that any more could kill him. So, thank you for that.” He turned back to his charges with renewed vigor. “Aliza, get me the auger and some screws. Yes. The short ones. And a length of steel plate. The hole-punch, too.”

Javert watched, barely conscious, his vision failing him—blurring, blacking out at times.

“Bite down on this.”

A wooden dowel was put between Valjean’s teeth.

“This is going to hurt. But it will hurt a great deal more if you move.” And then, “Hold him down.”

Valjean’s jaw, a moment later, clenching tightly as a whimper passed feebly through his lips.

The fright in his eyes!

The doctor’s hand on Valjean’s chest, scalpel guided carefully under his forefinger.

Valjean’s whimpers more pleading, more visceral, as the tears streamed down his cheeks. Straining, straining, the sheets clenched in his fist.

And the then air seemed to catch in his throat, and his eyes rolled back in his head, dulling, as the life fled from his face. The bit drooped in his slackening jaw as he stared unseeing, half-lidded, at the ceiling.

His head lay sunken on the pillow, before a woman’s hand took the bit from his mouth and swept his eyes closed, turning his face away so it lay on its side.

Then all Javert could see was the dirtied white locks of his hair, and his hand, the sheets still twisted up in its now powerless grasp.

The surgeon’s blade flashed in the lamplight, nimble fingers wet with blood.

Javert could not look.

Yet still he watched the man’s hands as they worked, for it was all he could do. He watched, and he prayed.

The man kept muttering medical terms to himself—“Blunt force trauma” and “Pulmonary contusion” and “Flail chest”—along with words that ought not to be coming out of a gentleman’s mouth, giving now and then an order to the girls at his side.

Their conversation kept fading in and out, like the tide, receding and rising rhythmically.

“—you pass me a retractor?”
“I’ve never heard of ...”
“—you see, because otherwise ...”
“—a whole segment could just break off like that. How do you even ...?”
“—could puncture the lungs, resulting in ...”
“But in this case he would suffocate first.”
“Cut me off a little strip. Just there. Now pass it through the flame?”
“I need you to ... grip the piece of rib from underneath and keep it steady while I—”
“Yes, that’s it. Hold fast, now ...”

As the man operated, a little golden star of David had escaped his blouse, and dangled from his neck without notice, glinting in the candlelight as he moved.

Javert did not know why, but he fixated on that.

*Please,* he pleaded, *please, let him live. He has to live, He has to. If he were to die, after all of this—because of me ... Please, god, no. Please. I would give anything.*

“Abba, the other one—he’s slipping under ...”

“Has the wound on his chest reopened?”

“No, but he was hit over the head. If he has a contusion, the pressure ...”[2]

*Please ...*

“I have to finish this; I’m sorry. I can’t look at him right now.”

“Abba, I think he’s—”

*Anything.*

***

Two young women, around her own age, had taken notice of Azelma, who sat against the wall in the corner, her arms drawn up around her knees, her face hidden by strands of dirty yellow hair.

She could hear them murmuring to themselves curiously. After a moment they approached, and she looked up.

*Bonsoir, mademoiselle,*” the shorter greeted.

*Bonsoir,*” she repeated mechanically.

“When did you arrive?”

“I came with those other people. They went upstairs.”
“You are not in need of assistance, then?” asked the taller.

“No, no, I’m just—waiting.”

“But you look not so well yourself.”

The blood drained from her face. She knew she was not a pretty sight, or in good health, but to hear it so bluntly stated caught her off guard. “I...”

“May we examine you?”

Azelma leapt to her feet, pressing herself further into the corner. “I have no money for doctors,” she said, shaking her head.

“Oh, but we’re not doctors. Besides, father wouldn’t charge you anyway.”

“No if you didn’t have money, that is.”

She swallowed, eyes darting between their two faces. “Really?”

“Truly! Will you let us take a look at you, then?”

Azelma deliberated on this, then gave them a hesitant nod.

They began examining her in earnest, checking her temperature, feeling her pulse, craning their necks and leaning in to stare at what Azelma could only guess.

“Her color bespeaks of the liver, perhaps,” one said absentmindedly.

“At her age it would be a curious thing.”

“Ah, yes, but then— Do you drink often, mademoiselle? Besides the customary amount at mealtimes, I mean.”


“Hm.”

They babbled on between themselves, almost as though she were not there.

“Of course, there is the possibility of a nutritional deficit...”

“Dear sister—the possibility? Surely you are not so obtuse. Look how her collarbone protrudes.”

“And her cheekbones; I saw. I was merely stating a fact.”

“Mademoiselle, when was the last time you ate anything?” the taller asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered sheepishly.

“Don’t know! Well, that certainly won’t do. Come with us; we’ll get you some bread and cheese, for a start.”

Azelma’s mouth watered at the prospect of food. “And I—I don’t have to pay for it?”

“No, no. We wouldn’t have it. Now, let us see about a blanket...”
Happily, and rather dumbstruck, Azelma let the girls lead her down the hallway.

“I’m Tivka, by the way. And this is Aliza. And you are …?”

“Azelma.”

“Azelma! What a pretty name. What does it mean?”

“I …” She furrowed her brow. “I don’t rightly know.”

***

“Cosette.”

She looked up at him from where she sat at her father’s bedside.

“It’s getting very late. Do you not grow tired?” Marius asked quietly, as though the two men they watched over were merely sleeping, and he feared to wake them.

Cosette frowned wearily. “Yes, but …” Her gaze flicked to Valjean. “I have to be here for him when he wakes.”

“He may not wake for some time,” Marius said. He placed his hand on hers, rubbing it sympathetically. “For—days, perhaps. And us being here, it will not change anything. They will look after him well. There is nothing we can do for him but wait, and we can do that elsewhere. He would not want you exhausting yourself out of grief. You should rest.”

She did not answer him, staring instead at her lap, and their hands.

Marius cupped her cheek. “You look weary, mon amour. Let’s go home.”

He wasn’t wrong. Cosette did feel exhausted. It had been a terribly long day, one of the longest she could recall. The memory of their bed, and the prior morning, felt like years ago.

She looked back to her father. Cast her face down. Slowly, she nodded her head.

Marius placed a gentle kiss on her brow, and helped her from her chair.

They gave the men one last regard, Cosette whispering a promise in her father’s ear, and then they turned to depart.

When they exited the room, they stopped short.

Azelma was sleeping to the left of the doorway, sitting up back against the wall, head drooped. A wool blanket hung about her like a hooded cloak.

“Oh,” Marius said. “I had quite forgotten about her, with everything that happened. Did she follow us here?”

“She came with us!” Cosette chided under her breath. “Did you not notice?”

“No,” he admitted sheepishly. “My mind was … preoccupied. Why did she stay, though?”
“Why did we?”

“Ah. You really think she—”

Azelmia’s head rose. She looked at them, rubbing her eyes blearily. “Is the doctor done?” she mumbled.

“For a number of hours now, yes,” said Cosette. “They have not yet awoken. I don’t know when they shall. I’m afraid for them.”

“We’re taking our leave,” Marius informed her. “It was kind of you to wait, but you don’t have to stay here any longer. Don’t you have somewhere you need to get back to?”

Azelmia blinked. Her eyes became glassy. She stared off, silent for a moment. “I …” It appeared this was the first time she had contemplated this. When she spoke, her voice was very small. “The rent was due,” she said, almost as though to herself.

Cosette put a hand to her mouth. “Oh—that’s right—your father …” She glanced away, and then back again. “Do you … have anyone to return to? Any family? Friends?”

Azelmia made no reply, only stared off at nothing, clutching her knees. Finally, she shook her head.

Marius and Cosette exchanged a glance.

Sometimes, entire conversations can take place between two people without the use of words. Such was this.

Marius cleared his throat. “Er, Azelmia—”

The girl looked up at him, expression slack.

“If you need a place to stay, you could always come back to our house for awhile.”

Her lips parted. “You— Surely you don’t mean that.”

“Oh, but we do!” said Cosette.

“We owe you a debt,” he reminded. “And I must make amends for being so cruel and distrustful towards you.”

Azelmia’s face scrunched up, the beginnings of tears in her eyes. “Really? But it would be so improper.”

“Nonsense,” said Cosette, with an encouraging smile. “Did I not say we were sisters?”

“You meant that in earnest?”

“Of course! You stood up to your father for us. You helped us save papa. You are more than welcome in our home. Right, Marius?”

“Certainly.”

Azelmia’s expression contorted into a sort of joyful grimace. “Thank you,” she breathed. “Thank you.”
“It’s the least we can do,” Marius said, bowing his head.

***

The three of them retreated to the house on Filles du Calvaire, utterly spent, their eyes bleary and their shoes still covered in dust from the catacombs.

Azelma was shown to the guestroom, where she—too exhausted to be properly overwhelmed by either the grandeur of the house or the magnitude of recent events—promptly sank into the bed and lost consciousness.

Cosette and Marius, clinging to one another wearily, washed themselves, changed into their nightclothes, and immediately followed suit.

***

“Jean.” It was his voice, Javert realized, calling out. Out into the blackness.

There was a small, thin hand, a woman’s hand, and he was grasping it. He knew not to whom it belonged. Was it one of the girls from before? Was it Cosette? It didn’t matter.

“Jean,” he pleaded again, his voice strained, hard to work the words past his lips. “Where is —?” His mind was in a haze. He could not tell if his eyes were open or closed. His head swam. Though he could see nothing, everything was spinning.

“The man you came in with?” asked a voice.

“Yes. Please.”

“He is right next to you, monsieur.”

“Is … is he—?”

“He’s still alive, yes.”

“Ah.” Thank god.

The woman drew his hand away and placed another in it—a man’s hand, large and weathered. He did not need to be told whose it was.

“There, you see?” said the woman. “He’s just beside you.”

Valjean’s hand hung limply in his, but it was warm. Javert wove his fingers between his and squeezed it tightly.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

And then he fell back into the void.
Moonlight filtered in through the iron bars and cast a bluish glow upon the straw-lined floor.

Hands shackled behind his back, Montparnasse was sat on a bench in the bottom of the jailhouse, awaiting trial. A strip of metal had been fastened about his broken nose.

They had transferred Thénardier and the others that had been captured alongside him to different holding facilities, so as not to repeat the mistake of allowing them to scheme together.

For the better part of a day Montparnasse had been sulking. Now that the stars were out, and the forgiving cloak of darkness once more upon him, he grew pensive.

He was thinking. Not of his fellow accomplices, or their crime, but on what sentence might befall him—and, curiously, of Jean Valjean.

Montparnasse had committed many unpardonable crimes in his days, but none which could be conclusively tied to him. Still, he had a reputation amongst the civil servants of Paris, and with him finally in custody for something tangible, there would be a clamoring for as harsh a sentence as could be excused. This either meant prison or death.

Death was more disagreeable, of course, but at least it was swift and relatively painless. Prison, on the other hand, meant endless work. Meant humiliation, and shame, and ugliness in all its forms.

Here was where he began to think on Valjean—on all the terrible things the man described.

‘You do not wish to be a workingman, you will be a slave.’

‘You shall have the sweat of the damned. Where others sing, you will rattle in your throat.’

‘Drag your halter. You are a beast of burden in the team of hell!’

The images the man had described were conjured before him. Montparnasse had, trusting in his fortune, never truly paid them mind. People had spoken often of prison to him—in fact, most of his acquaintances had been in and out of chains on multiple occasions—but these had always been mere tales: the misfortunes of someone else. They had never been, to him, possibilities. They had never been able to touch him.

What he’d heard from others had been told to him as entertainment, or for the sake of passing time, or to express their grievances. But what Valjean had said was told to him as a warning, a threat—and, worst of all, a promise. It was not the words the man had spoken that so disquieted him at the time, but the tone of his voice, and the look in his eyes. That pointed intent had been what pressed the incident into his memory more than anything else.

It was not amusing. It was not a game. And Montparnasse was only now coming to grips with that. What the man had described to him was bleak. Between that and the death sentence, Montparnasse was not entirely sure which was worse.

He had no intention of suffering either of them. And, possibly, in his situation he might have laughed, counted on flight to save his skin, and thought no more of it—but the inclusion of Jean Valjean in it all sent a shudder through him, and a sobering gravity. He could not put his finger on
what about it unnerved him thusly, but it had to do with the foreboding air of fate. That they had continually become tangled up with one another, purely by coincidence, was unsettling. That Valjean had warned him of these exact consequences, even more so. These things lent a fatal aspect to all the man had said, and to his current predicament.

Montparnasse was, like so many others of his kind, begrudgingly superstitious. And so the culmination of these recent events brewed a familiar, nervous dread in his gut.

He felt as though he stood upon a precipice, staring down into an abyss whose gaping maw stretched its arms towards him. Cold mist sprayed his face. A shiver rippled down his spine. He took a step back.

From the looming threat of the galleys, and an eternity of toil, Jean Valjean emerged, gazing into his soul with a pair of frightfully stern and knowing eyes from which he could not escape.

It was almost as though he could feel it: the sweat trickling down his skin, the sting of the lash on his back. His locks shorn, his muscles straining, straining. The weight of an iron collar bolted around his neck.

Without being conscious of it, he touched his fingers to his throat. He swallowed.

For a moment he remained motionless in the gloom, his eyes somber slits, his form a marble bust.

And then slowly, he reached into his waistband, and withdrew the hollowed-out-sou.

***

Javert remained swaddled in darkness. His head throbbed. His chest throbbed. His bones were weary to their core. Like a starving street dog on the verge of death, he oscillated between a bleak, numb resignation, and a desperate, anguished fervor.

At first there was only the dull stab of his wounds, and the forgiving void of sleep. He was almost able to rest. But slowly a heat began to spread through him, starting in his ribs and creeping into his limbs. It began as the warmth of a relentless beam of sun, but ended as a smoldering bed of coals, or the sharp, searing flash of a hot stove.

The heat settled in his head and drove him mad, his fingers twisting in the sheets. He writhed weakly in his bed, muttering nonsense. In time, the mutters turned to mere whimpers.

The doctor’s daughters attended him faithfully, forcing liquid down his throat as often as they could manage, and trying to keep him cool. Whether it was them, or Cosette, someone was always keeping watch at his side. Checking his temperature, replacing the cool, damp cloth on his brow. Smoothing the hair from his face. Taking his hand and murmuring softly to him.

Of these things Javert was only half aware. He felt them happening but vaguely, and he could fully grasp neither their source nor his situation. He was adrift in an endless abyss. Caught fast in a fever-dream from which he could not awake.

Please, he thought, please. It was the one thing he could still articulate. He had long forgotten what it was he was even pleading for. His own relief, in part, but there was something else,
something he could not quite recall. A danger. Something was wrong. Urgently, desperately wrong, and he had not the strength to resolve it. If left undone, something terrible would happen. Something he could not bear. He knew not what it was, but his soul was tied up with it, and he could feel its agonies as well as his own.

*Please*, he tried to say.

But the darkness only tended him with ghostly hands, and murmured words he could not understand.

***

Pascal stood at Javert’s bedside, leaning over him with a grim expression, the corners of his mouth drawn back.

“He’s gone septic.”

Cosette raised her hand to her mouth at that declaration, so gravely spoken. She glanced up at Marius in grief.

It had been three days since they’d deposited Javert and Valjean at the doctor’s doorstep, and neither of them had come close to waking since.

They kept Valjean in a drugged stupor to facilitate his breathing, but even without the opiates, he likely would not have been conscious for long. For Javert, they suspected it was his head injury that kept him asleep. Both men appeared corpse-like, their cheeks and eye sockets cavernous. Their breath was shallow. They hardly moved.

While Valjean remained silent, Javert had grown delirious. A fever had taken him soon after his arrival and it had only worsened since. Valjean was cold and clammy; Javert was burning up. He made pitiful noises in his sleep, tossing in bed and clenching his fists in the sheets.

They had stripped him down to his lower underclothes alone, and still he sweated through his bandages, a sickly sheen to his brow. Cold compresses and sponge-baths had not been enough to alleviate the condition.

“What can be done?” Cosette asked.

The doctor appraised the wound in silence for a moment more. He ran a hand through his wispy grey hair. “It is not at the worst stage of sepsis,” he muttered. “There may yet be time to reverse it. It is only ... I wish I could have seen the initial treatment. Someone else patched him up first, but I know not what precautions they took. For instance, there is an exit wound, but did they check to see if the bullet fragmented inside of him? Was it recovered?”

Marius shook his head. “I’m sorry; I have no idea. I don’t even know when this happened, or where.”

The man gave a disapproving hum. “Unfortunate. With this trajectory, it would be unwise to go prodding about in his ribcage. For the life of me I don’t know how it didn’t catch his lungs. Perhaps ...” He let out a long, ponderous sigh. “If I flush it first, and then ... Yes, and make a poultice ...” The man continued mumbling to himself, crossing the room as his eyes darted to and
fro. A frown tugged once more at his lips.

“What is it?” Marius asked.

“Nothing,” the man sighed, pulling a number of small bottles and wads of cloth from the cupboard shelves, “it’s just, I’m glad that he’s unconscious for this.”

***

Javert floated in dark waters, his body heavy, his flesh aflame.

In its torment, his muddied mind lost sense of time, memories blurring into one another or disappearing completely. He was thrust back into those days after the Seine, when he’d been gripped by the same burning, miserable delirium. When the only person by his side was Valjean.

All the hands that tended him, all the reassuring voices in his ear—they all belonged to Valjean. Each gentle touch, each word of comfort. It was all Valjean. He was the only thing Javert knew besides this hellish pain. This unbearable wretchedness.

All around him was a black expanse. No light, no light. He had been treading water for ages, it seemed—or had he been drowning? Either way, his strength had deserted him a long, long time ago, and he found that even breathing—even the pumping of his own heart—taxed him greatly. He would have sunk beneath the tide, if not for the strong arms which held him afloat, and the chest against which he rested his weary head.

In the gloom, ripples spread out along the water’s surface, glowing a faint, soothing green.

Safe in the man’s embrace, Javert could allow himself to rest.

If rest were indeed attainable, right now.

The heat coursing through him drove him mad. It crawled beneath his skin, made him itch and writhe.

The water was cool, his hair and underclothes soaked with it, clinging to his skin. Too cold, sometimes—almost like ice. He oscillated between burning and freezing, never finding that happy medium for long. He was half asleep, yet sleep eluded him.

The throbbing in his head, and the stinging of his chest, continued to grow. He was not sure he could recall a worse pain in his life. He made halfhearted attempts to claw at the source of it—wanted to dig it out of his ribs, his skull—but it was not a tangible thing, and he could not excise it no matter how much he wished.

All throughout his suffering, one thing remained constant: Valjean held his head above the water, keeping him steady, and murmuring softly to him from above.

‘I know,’ he said, ‘I know ...’

‘Just lay still; it will get better.’

Javert trusted him, trusted in those soothing words. He was in hell, but Valjean made it bearable. Just barely so.
Then out of nowhere, a white-hot pain seared through his chest. It was like a lance had impaled him. His eyes shot open, and he promptly squeezed them shut, clenching his teeth and biting back a cry. But try as he might he could not contain his agony, and it erupted in a scream as he frantically clawed at his chest, and the beam of blood-red light that still skewered him.

Someone’s hands grabbed at his own; he kept trying to pull the lance out, to tear at his shrieking flesh, but they would not let him. Still he clutched and he clawed at the wound, thrashing and shaking uncontrollably. Valjean squeezed him tightly, trying to calm him, restrain him, reassure him.

They were both on fire? No—that was a long time ago.

What was happening?

*Valjean*

He gasped for air as the man held him down, sobbing in between his breaths.

‘*It’s all right. It’s all right …’*

Javert choked on his tears.

‘*I’ve got you,*’ Valjean told him, cradling him close. ‘*I’ve got you. Shh.*’

‘*Shhh …*’

Trembling, Javert felt the pain begin to fade. It died down to a weak glow in his chest, and soon the tension began to leave his limbs. The agony had been so all-consuming that by the time it burnt itself out, it had burnt all of him up as well. His energy sapped, he lay exhausted in the man’s arms, unmoving. Streaked with tears, the expression on his face shifted slowly to one of weary surrender.

Even as he went limp, Valjean kept him afloat, kept him from sinking forever beneath the waves.

‘*I’m right here beside you,*’ he promised. ‘*D’accord? I won’t let you go …’*

Drained, Javert let the voice lull him to sleep.

***

Footnotes:

[1] Hospitals in this era of Paris apparently closed to new patients as well as visitors come nightfall, so at this hour their best bet is to take them to a for-hire physician.

[2] Javert has likely sustained a cerebral contusion (bruising of the brain), having been bludgeoned from behind and having had his head dashed against a rock-face (blunt-force trauma which could easily cause a coup or contrecoup injury in which the brain rebounds off the inside of the skull). While a contusion alone would likely heal without medical assistance, these kinds of wounds also have a high risk of diffuse axonal injury in which extensive lesions form in the white matter of the
brain and can cause unconsciousness and vegetative states. Diffuse axonal injuries occur in roughly half of all severe head trauma cases, and nine out of ten victims of them never regain consciousness. The doctor’s dismissal of Javert may seem blunt and harsh here, but period doctors could do little for brain injuries, and given the odds, either Javert is going to be alright or he isn’t, help aside.

Chapter End Notes

Do u ever feel like u wrote so much of a whump!fic that even the people that wanted a whump!fic are like "bro"

I didn't want to specify exactly what because there were many things he could have used for this and I'm not sure which one doctors would have preferred for it, but basically the doctor flushed out Javert's gunshot wound with an antiseptic of some kind (possibly wine or some other alcoholic substance, or maybe an iodide, or even bromide?) which BURNED LIKE A MOTHERF***ER.

Next chapter will be really fun. (Although I'm mad because I had this great rug-pull moment but I had to rewrite it and it doesn't feel as great as before but like historical accuracy problems??? Basically I did all this medical research and turns out most period doctors recommended having their patients be treated from their own homes instead of in a hospital, and I had all these hospital scenes, and ... yeah ... It's okay though because I'm like 90% sure the hospitals were less cushy and private than I was imagining for those scenes anyway)

Suggested Listening:

Mountains - Hans Zimmer

Adagio in D Minor (from "Sunshine") - The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

Human Step (Aramaki's Theme) - Yoko Kanno

Torukia - Ilaria Graziano (Yoko Kanno)

Don't Give Up - Toby Fox

Jolene (33rpm) - Dolly Parton // Okay so this might seem REALLY WEIRD lmao but hear me out: Jolene as the feminine aspect of death. (Certain depictions of Death/"The Reaper" are gentle, vaguely motherly figures, that simply shepherd the departed away.) I was listening to this song a long time ago whilst brainstorming that surgery scene and I started picturing "Jolene" as like an almost Celtic version of Death with a green knotwork robe and a sickle instead of a scythe. I know. It's weird. I like re-imagining song meanings. (Also this makes the line "He talks about you in his sleep, and there's nothing I can do to keep from crying" like waaaaay worse.) Anyway please picture Javert begging Death not to take Valjean. (And listen to the 33rpm version specifically because it's slowed down and it A) changes the tone of the song completely and B) makes Dolly Parton sound like a dude which is great)

Tribulations - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein
Beneath With Me - Kaskade & Deadmou5 ft. Skylar Grey
Glashtyn Shanty - S.J. Tucker
Jacob Sees Marlena - James Newton Howard
Sanctuary - James Newton Howard
The Choice - Toby Fox
Quiet Water Requiem - EidolonOrpheus

(Oh hey if u like the feminine aspect of Death you should check out the animated short "Coda" on Youtube)

Also god bless u @smaller, why do u love me so much holy shit
Life in the Gillenormand household became riddled with a silent anxiety. Sometimes, it was so subtle it almost passed for peace, but it was always tentative at best, and could be broken with a word or a glance.

Everyone in the house, even Aunt Gillenormand herself, was permeated by the worry over Jean Valjean’s health, for it was not clear whether he should survive after so brutal a wound, and so invasive a surgery. Cosette and Marius grieved for Javert as well, as did their grandfather, for he felt that they owed him much.

Azelma did not know what to do with herself. She was extremely awkward and shy, hiding away in the solitary nooks of the house like a frightened cat. She spoke little, and when she did, she stammered, apologizing for any and every imagined shortcoming. Cosette tried to coax her out with offers of companionship, and baked goods. It was generally the latter that sealed the deal.

The day after the catacombs, Cosette had set to cleaning the girl up—helping her manage her unruly hair and lending her some of her dresses and bonnets. Thus preened, Azelma could almost be mistaken for any bourgeois, save for her unhealthy color, and the way her skin clung to her bones. Despite Cosette’s efforts, Azelma ate little, and tired quickly. Still, she insisted that she felt better than she had in a long time, and that gave Cosette hope.

“I had a fever a while ago, but father bought me medicine for it, and it subsided. I’m sure that I’m recovering,” she insisted.

They spent their time together making lint for Valjean and Javert, although the doctor’s daughters insisted they had enough of it on hand. And, too, they roamed the extensive garden of Filles du Calvaire, and sat in the sunshine. When Cosette found out that Azelma could not read, after the girl had bashfully declined a book of poetry, she insisted on reading aloud to her.

Amidst all the commotion, it had hardly been noticed that the apples were beginning to ripen. When the two girls discovered it one day, after reading beneath the sanctuary of its branches, they set to collecting the darkest colored ones immediately. Azelma confessed she knew nothing of
plants, but picking them was easy enough, and she was perfectly happy to make herself useful in any capacity. They filled a whole bushel basket this way.

The look on Azelma’s face as she chewed the first bite of one, sitting on the blanket in the shade, made Cosette’s heart wrench with pity. She still remembered that hunger.

Every day, around noon, Marius and Cosette went to visit the doctor’s. They would drop off supplies the girls had made, and sit with the men as they slept, wondering when, or if, they would ever wake up.

Javert took well to the treatments. They’d flushed his gunshot wound with strong liquor, smeared honey over the sutures, and kept a poultice of mugwort, chickweed, and various other medicinal herbs upon it. When possible, they nursed him on a cold tea brewed with willow bark. Three days after he’d been pronounced gangrenous, his fever finally broke. He had not regained consciousness, but he slept more peacefully now, free from his prior torments.

Valjean they were not so sure about. Amazingly, he had not fallen victim to sepsis, but his breathing remained so labored and shallow that sometimes Cosette feared it would simply cease in the night. The opiates were a mixed blessing; they subdued his pain so that he might breathe more freely, but at the same time they deepened his slumber, and thus also weakened his lungs. Still, the doctor insisted upon them, for otherwise the pain could become so unbearable he might suffocate. All they could do for him was to keep changing his bandages, and force enough liquid into him to keep him alive.

Every night, before she slept, Cosette would kneel at her bed and pray.

***

It was quiet, now.

All Javert could hear were the faint, occasional sounds of lapping water, and the soft puffs of his own breath. Sometimes, a droplet would fall from the cavern ceiling into the lagoon, and its ripples would bioluminesce a beautiful, muted emerald green, echoing out across the surface until they faded away. It reminded him of the strumming of a harp.

The same glow ebbed in and out around where he floated, his head resting back on Valjean’s chest, the man’s arms twined over his breast, supporting, mooring him. The water was warm, now; not too hot or too cold, and it eased his aching muscles. All was dark, and warm, and calm.

Now and then Valjean would prop him up a little and help him drink a cup of broth, for which Javert was grateful. But mostly, he slept, and dreamed of nothing.

***

No one had brushed Azelma’s hair since her mother and sister had died, and even then, Éponine had seldom done it, and even her mother had sometimes lost patience with it. But, even if she joked about it some, Cosette pressed on diligently, brushing so carefully that it did not even hurt. She
kept on smiling, too—God, why did she smile so much? It was annoyingly, impossibly infectious. And there was something so genuine about it, more genuine than anyone in Azelma’s family had been.

Stealing a glance at her now and again in the vanity’s mirror, Azelma wondered how that wretched, ugly little girl they had kept as a servant had ever turned into such a pretty, carefree creature. Again Azelma remembered their cruelty towards her, and again she failed to understand how Cosette could forgive it, or why she had offered such kindness.

Azelma closed her eyes, listening to the birds outside the open window, and Cosette’s voice as the girl hummed softly to herself. Felt the warmth of the sun on her freshly scrubbed skin. Smelled the scent of flowers in the air, the curtains blowing slightly in the breeze. And there was Cosette, gently, gently brushing her hair.

Azelma found tears slipping down her face before she even knew why. Face contorted, she tried vainly to hold back her sobs.

“Oh, no,” Cosette fretted nervously, pulling back, “Did I tug too hard? I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean …” She trailed off as Azelma hung her head, putting her face in her hands.

A moment later Azelma felt a light touch on her shoulder, and Cosette was sitting down beside her on the cushioned bench stool and wrapping her arms around her, drawing her close.

Azelma did not know how to explain herself, and Cosette did not ask. She only cried into her shoulder as the girl rubbed slow, soft circles on her back, shushing her quietly.

***

“Oh, Christ …”

The voice was familiar to Javert, but he could not place it. Nor, it seemed, did he possess the strength to open his eyes. They were sealed shut, like a rusted grate, and no matter how he tried to pry them open, or rouse himself to consciousness, he failed.

“They told me you were in rough shape, but I had not expected …”

Javert thought, perhaps, that he was moving his arm—but as in a dream, he could not tell the difference between his own imagination and reality.

“Javert,” the man murmured, closer now, “can you hear me? It is I.”

The ‘I’ here in question was, Javert’s brain finally supplied, his patron, M. Chabouillet. They had not been in contact for some time, but Javert was not surprised to find him here at his bedside. The man still had ties to the police. No doubt someone had mentioned the situation to him.

“Are you awake?” Chabouillet whispered.

Javert tried to make his mouth work. His lips struggled to form anything intelligible. “Sir,” he managed to say.

“Javert.” The man sounded a little relieved. A hand rested itself on his shoulder. “Can you open
All Javert succeeded in doing was making a strained expression, and making his headache worse. In frustration, he let out a groan, sinking back limply into the pillows.

“That’s all right,” Chabouillet said to him, “that’s all right. I am sure ...”

The sound of the man taking a seat in the chair to his right, and resting his cane against the wall.

“I am sure it will come back to you, in time.”

With the hesitation in his voice, Javert was not so sure of anything. “Mon ... sieur,” he breathed, turning his face towards him, though blind.

“I’m here,” Chabouillet assured, clasping his hand. “I’m here.”

Javert could not keep himself present.

*Forgive ... me ...*

***

There was the issue of Thénardier.

As much as they tried not to talk about it, Cosette, Marius, and Azelma all knew what his fate would be, even before the courts gave their verdict. Too many crimes hung upon his neck.

Azelma had understood what would happen when she made her choice to disobey him. Perhaps she had not thought, outright, that she was sentencing him to death—for in truth he had sentenced himself—but she’d known he would not be able to worm his way out of this.

Even so, she was clearly upset by it, and they did not blame her. It was an upheaval of all she had known. She was penniless, and soon she would be an orphan as well. What would she do with herself? Guilt plagued her for taking advantage of the Pontmercys’ hospitality, but she had few other options. The tenement in which she’d lived had been foreclosed on them due to their debt.

She promised to find a job as soon as she was able, rent out whatever she could afford, and repay them for their kindness. At their insistence that she did not owe them, she merely turned red and hid her face.

Sometimes, Cosette would find her weeping.

***

Javert drew in a sharp breath, hissing in pain.

Someone was pressing a wet cloth to the cut on his swollen lip, and it stung, burning with the scent of harsh chemicals. Iodine.
The stinging dragged him back out of the dark, numb abyss he’d been drifting in. His eyes fluttered open.

Vision blurry, and slowly spinning, he made out the form of a young woman sitting on the edge of his bed.

“Monsieur Javert,” Cosette said softly.

He only groaned in response, squeezing his eyes shut and tossing his head where it lay heavy on the pillow like a sack of flour.

A smooth hand stroked his cheek, brushing the hair out of his face.

He opened one eye to glance at her again. He still couldn’t seem to focus. Everything was made of poorly defined, colored blobs. Cosette was white with a dash of peach, and a stripe of brown at her brow.

“Val … jean,” he breathed.

“Papa is all right,” Cosette assured him. “He is only sleeping. You see?”

He turned his head to his right, but all was blurry. He strained his eyes, but they continued to fail him, and his head began to ache from the effort. Burning, he squeezed them shut.

“Brave, sweet man,” she said, giving his hand a squeeze. “You don’t have to worry any longer,” he heard her say as he slipped back into the darkness. “All is well. Rest.”

***

When next he woke, Javert’s head did not pain him as greatly, but his mind was no less fuzzy. The hole in his chest where the bullet had passed between his ribs was only a dull ache, and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. They must have drugged him with something, he thought, but for the first time in a long while he was not ungrateful for it.

His vision was a little clearer, though not by much. He turned his head to his right, where he knew Valjean lay just beside him in the other bed.

Cosette was still there, devoted child that she was. She sat in a wicker chair with her elbows resting on the edge of the mattress, her hands clasped in prayer, her head bent.

He tried to say her name, but it came out as nothing more than a groggy mumble.

Still, she opened her eyes. “Javert,” she said, shifting to face him in her chair, “how are you feeling?” Her voice was very quiet and gentle, as though she feared her words might cause him pain if any louder.

Given the way his cranium was throbbing, he wasn’t sure that concern was entirely unfounded. He grunted in response to her question, because it seemed the most appropriate and accurate answer.

“Do you need anything?” she asked. “Are you hungry? Are you cold?”
“Water,” he managed to say, despite his dry throat and cracked lips.

With admirable haste, a cup was held to his mouth, and a hand steadied the back of his head and tilted it forwards.

The cool liquid felt like a godsend. He drank the cup dry.

“There,” Cosette said, placing it on the side table. “Better?”

“Mm.”

“Do you want something to eat?”

He suspected it was on account of whatever medicine they had forced down his throat, but he felt vaguely nauseous. “Later,” he mumbled, closing his eyes. “Too tired.”

“Very well.”

He fell back asleep for a little while, and when he again found himself awake, his vision seemed to have improved a little. The rays of sunlight had shifted on the wall, and Cosette was still there. Her head rested in her arms on the thin mattress, her hair draped over her face. She appeared to have fallen asleep.

Javert gazed at her thoughtfully.

She was such a good girl. Kind, and loyal, and considerate—like her father. And, miracle of miracles, she was pure and sweet, despite never being granted the freedom of innocence.

Javert wondered what it would be like to have a daughter. A son, he did not think he could stand. But a daughter … It might be nice, he mused, to be greeted with a smile upon one’s return. To be looked at with warmth and admiration, the way Cosette looked at Valjean.

It was well, he thought, that the man had her. Valjean deserved that happiness—to have such a lovely creature in his life. To be called ‘father’ and be cared for in his old age.

Where would Valjean be, without the girl? Where would any of them be? Javert did not know. Perhaps Valjean would still be in prison, and be called ‘9430’ instead of ‘papa’. Perhaps he, Javert, would be dead. Perhaps he would have been shot at the barricades, along with Marius.

Cosette was the string that tied them all together. Without her, their story fell apart.

Javert did not care for children. But he could not help but feel a sort of fondness as he looked at her. And something akin to pride.

It was easy to forget, but she was from the gutter too. And look now how she shone! She was a perfect angel. Besides her stubbornness, anyway. But, who knew? Perhaps it was not so bad a trait after all.

Yes, he thought, it would be hell to have a son. But a daughter … that might not be so bad.
The inmates jeered at them as they made their way through the jailhouse.

“My, but you’re pretty, mam’selle,” remarked one to Cosette.

“Shut thy mouth,” Marius shot back at him.

Azelma held her tongue. She felt like she was holding her breath as well, all the way to her father’s cell.

He was sitting on the wooden bench, slumped against the wall, legs and arms crossed. As they came into view, he lifted his head a little. “Well, look who it is,” he said disdainfully. His gaze shot to Azelma. “Bitch. I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

Azelma’s mouth drew back into a thin frown.


The involuntary reply barely made it past her lips.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “What was that?”

“I said,” she repeated, balling her hands into fists, “You sold me first.”

The other brow joined the first on his forehead. He was silent for a second. “Not to the police.”

A bitter laugh escaped her throat. “No; well, you couldn’t, could you? Not unless you could get away with it.”

Thénardier chewed the inside of his cheek.

Marius glanced back and forth between them, going white. A bewildered, indignant expression wrote itself across his features. No doubt he was recounting their previous meeting, and how Azelma had thought he’d wanted something very different of her. “Wait, do you mean to say—you mean to tell me that he—” His Adam’s apple bobbed. He turned to Thénardier with rage. “You own daughter? How could you? Of all the vile, self-serving—”

“Marius,” Cosette interrupted, “what do they mean?”

The boy looked back at her. Splotches of red began to bloom on his cheeks. “Cosette, we can speak on that later.”

Her brow bunched in confusion as he returned to Thénardier with fresh hatred. “I mean, I knew you were deplorable, but this—oh, this really takes the cake.”

The man blew a puff of air through his lips, apparently unimpressed by his display. “You would have done the same in my position.”

Marius became furious. “Your position? Your position? I was in your position! I lived in the Gorbeau house, same as you! I was penniless, and poor, and destitute as well! Just as much as you, or more! I went days without eating so much as a morsel; I had one pair of clothes to my name. And yet even in my most desperate, hopeless state of poverty I never would have sunk as low as you! You scum! You rat! That your daughter turned you in is only just. You deserve far worse than this fate.”

“Worse than beheading?” Thénardier remarked. “I don’t know what’s worse than that.”
“Getting eaten by cannibals!” Marius exclaimed. “Getting sold into slavery! Having your entrails ripped out with a hook! That’s what you deserve.”

The man only raised his eyebrows again, otherwise unaffected. “My, but you’re testy today. What exactly did you come here for, hm? To yell at me? To gloat?”

Shaking, Marius gestured back at Azelma. “We came here so that she could say goodbye!”

Azelma felt her face grow hot.

Her father smacked his lips as he looked at her. “Well,” he said flatly, “goodbye.”

They all stood in a mutual stupor at his casual abrasiveness.

And then Marius looked like he was going to rip apart the bars and throttle him. “You louse!” he ejaculated. “You, you—you ingratitude! They’re going to kill you in two days’ time and this is how you choose to spend it? Being spiteful—being snide? This is how you want to go out: spitting and kicking and cursing the world? Well, so be it! It would be just like you, you swine. You evil, pompous, prideful pig! Lord knows you deserve as much peace.” Temper having burned itself out, he stood rigid, his nostrils flaring. Staring him down, he took the girls’ hands in his as if forming a naval blockade.

Thénardier regarded this solemnly. “It was you two, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“What?”

“It was you two that convinced her to sell me out. Right?”

“You’re not wrong,” Marius muttered.

“Mm. What is it with you both, consistently ruining my life?”

“You are just lucky, I suppose,” Cosette said.

Marius scoffed and grinned proudly at her. “Oh,” he exclaimed, “And that’s another thing! All this business about blackmail and ransom, and then, I find out that you were the one who abused my wife in her youth! The things she’s told me—” He grit his teeth. “So help me God, if there weren’t bars between us …” Shaking his head, he lunged forward, grasping the iron door, his knuckles white. “You miserable, heartless …! The things I would call you were there not women present!”

“Oh,” Cosette remarked, “I don’t mind.”

“Nor I.”

Marius looked blankly at each of them in turn. “N-no,” he stammered, blushing. “It’s not decent.”

“Well, then, let us go and try,” said Cosette.

“What—?”

“You, sir,” she said, puffing up her chest and inhaling sharply. “Are a lying, scheming, no good bastard. And your breath has always been foul.”

Thénardier pursed his lips. Flicked his eyes to Azelma.
“It’s true,” she said.

“And his clothes, too,” Cosette added helpfully. “Like liquor, and tobacco smoke. And sweat.”

Marius kept looking between them, dumbfounded.

“You treated me horribly,” his wife went on, “and now I find you have treated her horribly as well. For shame! You would think that you would at least have the decency to care for your own kin. But no. You truly have no heart.”

“I am not even the first one he sold,” Azelma murmured to herself.

“You know,” Marius began, “I would bet—I would bet, you snake, that you never even knew my father. That you just used him for glory and gain. Calling him a general when he was a colonel … putting that sign on your inn. In fact, I bet you only saved him because of his rank!”

Thénardier stared at him emotionlessly for a moment. He began to laugh. Quiet, at first, then louder and louder, until his head was thrown back and he was slapping his leg, cackling like a hyena. And then, abruptly, he stopped. Fixing his glinting eyes on Marius, a toothy grin began to spread from ear to ear.

Marius took a step back.

“Do you know,” the man asked, “how I came to find your father?” He was holding back chuckles, biting his lower lip with a crooked smile. He looked and sounded like a lunatic. A wild laugh ripped through his scratchy gullet. “I was picking through corpses!”

Marius’ expression was drawn. Azelma thought she saw him shudder.

“There was this ring, this beautiful gold signet ring, fixed to this hand sticking up from a pile of bodies. I go to pry it off, and then, just as I’ve turned, and get up to leave, the hand grabs my coattail! Imagine my terror! I pull this hand, and discover it’s attached to an officer, buried alive by the dead, with blood streaming down his face. Oh, that sword cut was very ugly indeed. You should have seen it.”

“When the air finally brings him ’round he thanks me, says I saved his life. ‘That’s all very nice of me,’ I’m thinking, but now there’s some English coming, and I need to turn tail. He asks me my rank and my name and I say I’m a Sergeant. Well! I had been robbing corpses, but if the man wanted to pin a few medals to me for it, who was I to stop him? Besides, I had already stolen his ring!” The man fell back into raucous laughter.

“And—and you know what? After I pulled him out, I stole his silver Legion cross too! Ha! Haha! Oh! You want to know the best part? He tried to offer me his watch, and his coin purse, as a token of thanks, but—but—I had already stolen them!”

Marius was grinding his teeth, eyes alight with hatred. “You bastard,” he muttered, “You bastard! I’ll kill you …”

“You’ll kill me, eh?” the man japed. “But you don’t have to worry about that, little boy. That state will kill me for you! All thanks to you,” he said to Azelma, “my darling daughter. And what a grateful child you’ve turned out to be. I bet you’re just so proud of yourself. Sticking up for the law. Look at you, a model citizen!”

“Ta gueule!” Marius shouted, rattling the door in its frame. “Shut up! No one wants to hear any more from you, you lousy brute! Now crawl back into the shadows where you belong!” He kicked
the door, and once more for good measure, then turned to stalk off.

The man’s voice stopped him in his tracks. “Tell me, Pontmercy, is your father well?”

“He lives,” Marius managed, “no thanks to you.”

“Oh. I see. And that inspector?”

“He lives, too.”

“Really … Uncommon. Give them my regards, will you?”

“I would sooner give them poison,” Marius growled.

“Ha!”

Cosette shot the man a glare, before taking her husband’s hand and turning away. She cast a meaningful glance at Azelma before walking away, leaving her there in front of the cell.

She and her father stared at one another, the corners of their mouth tugged down.

She felt she should say something, but she could think of nothing, so only widened her frown, and tightened her fists.

“Well,” she heard him yell after her as she left, “have a good life! Enjoy not being dead. And try to keep your head on your shoulders!”

There was a certain satisfaction in not giving him a reply. She did not owe him anything.

***

Once, when Javert awoke, he found the Prefect standing over him.

He thought for a moment he must be hallucinating, until the man craned his neck at him and said “Ah, there you are.”

“Monsieur,” Javert breathed. “What are you doing here?”

“Why, I have come to visit you, of course. Is that so inconceivable? They tell me you got yourself solidly walloped over the head. And shot, too! Pardieu. You poor man.” He cracked a grin. “You look terrible, do you know that? You should have stayed in the hospital. But ah—you cannot help yourself, can you? Honestly, sometimes you seem to take an almost savage glee in further embroiling yourself in trouble. I’ve only so many sick days to spare you, you know.”

The man chuckled. “Je plaisante, je plaisante. You’ve done well. The heads of Patron Minette behind bars, and a few of their henchmen to boot. Not bad! Plus, that Thénardier fellow. He’s to be guillotined, by the way. Thought you’d like to know.”

“Overdue,” Javert managed to say.

Gisquet snorted at that. “I’m glad to see your sense of humor is intact. Lord,” he sighed, glancing between Javert and Valjean, “look what they’ve done to the two of you. You’re in rough shape—especially him. But he’s still here, and that’s thanks to you. That’s twice now you’ve saved his life. Or is it thrice now?” He shrugged. “I’m not privy to your lives. Suffice to say he owes you a great deal.”
“No,” Javert rasped, swallowing and closing his eyes. “It’s not—” He licked his cracked lips. “I was only doing my duty.”

“Oh, you’ve gone far beyond the call of duty, Javert,” he said softly. “Do you not see that? Your humility is admirable, but no one would have gone to the lengths that you have—not with the risks they entailed, and certainly not in your shape. Truly, this man owes you his life many times over. Take credit for something, this once. You have saved him.”

“No,” Javert repeated, weakly protesting despite the dryness of his throat and the ever encroaching darkness that threatened to overtake his vision. “I have done nothing more than what I should. And I nearly—I nearly got him killed. It’s my fault. My fault. He fought against them to buy me time. I am the one who owes him. He has saved me so, so many times.” He was rapidly losing his fight with the sense-stealing jaws of sleep. “So many.”

“Javert …”

The inky, undulating blackness that had skirted the edge of his eyesight began closing in on him, like a spreading stain. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blot out the dull, throbbing ache in his cranium. “Nngh … Forgive me—”

The back of a hand pressed against his forehead, cool to the touch.

“Ah, you’re rather warm,” Gisquet murmured. “I was hoping to get a report out of you, but you’re clearly in no condition for it. You should rest. I want to see you well again, mon inspecteur.”

“Mon … sieur …” Javert fought to open his eyes, to drive out the darkness, but he only succeeded in gaining brief flashes, hazy and incoherent:

Gisquet rising from the bed, giving his hand a squeeze, and turning to leave. Gisquet pausing, looking back at Valjean.

The flickering of a candle, the scratching of a pen. A note tucked beneath Valjean’s hand.

A girl, dabbing a wet cloth at his head, the coolness quieting the buzzing in his brain.

A cup of water held to his lips. The quenching of his parched throat.

Darkness.

***

After helping the police with their reports, Marius had returned to his work at the law firm, and life had almost returned to normal at the house in which he resided. However, his father’s room remained vacant, and the guest room remained occupied.

He could not begrudge Azelma for staying with them. She made herself useful where she could, and where they let her, often accompanying Cosette, or helping Toussaint with the cleaning and laundry. In this way she earned her stay, though they told her she did not have to for the time being. Still, the girl was unaccustomed to freedom, and seemed to work purely to satisfy routine, in which there is comfort.
Her health continued to improve, as did her appetite, and each day she looked more and more the part. But she remained, almost always, vaguely uncomfortable looking. It was clear that she felt amiss in their home, and their hospitality, like a rag doll in a china doll’s clothes. Sometimes, however, though rarely, she would look at peace, and it was usually when she was working alongside Cosette, in either the kitchen or the garden out back.

The two girls tended to the small crops Valjean had planted, and watered the flowers when the sun grew too hot. Sometimes they would do needlework or read beneath the shade of a tree, and Cosette tried a little to teach Azelma her letters. Azelma was not good at either needlework or letters, and grew easily flustered, but Cosette had infinite patience.

The summer was winding down, now, and nights were getting cool. On the outskirts of Paris, the grain was being harvested, and Cosette showed Azelma how to make little dolls and ornaments out of straw, as Valjean had once shown her. Kneading and rolling out dough, they made tarts and pies from the apples they picked, and brought some for the doctor and his family as a token of thanks.

***

Soon Javert remained awake enough to get down solid food, and everyone was shoving soups and bread and apple tarts at him. He barely had the stomach for it, but he managed a good deal of mouthfuls before the medicine drove him to sleep again.

Valjean had it even worse. The few times he did wake, that Javert saw, he noticed little, and knew even less. He recognized Cosette, but always seemed to be surprised to see her. Javert suspected the man had forgotten that he now lived with her, or that he had even seen her since his long illness that spring. When he spoke, he sounded drunk, or senile, and his breathing was always labored.

“Cosette,” he would say, touching her cheek in wonder, “Cosette … Mon chosette, ma petite fille …”

Hushing him, Cosette would try desperately to get him to eat.

If he noticed Javert while he was conscious, or remembered anything of what had happened to them, he gave little indication of it, for he was delirious.

“They keep him drugged out of his mind,” Cosette explained one day, smiling sadly. “Otherwise, he would not be able to breathe properly.” She gave a sigh, staring off without focus. “He calls out for you in his sleep, you know. I do not think he has any idea where he is.”

Javert gazed over at Valjean considerately.

The man’s face was drawn and pale, and his breathing was slow and shallow. There was a bandage wrapped around his breast, a spot of blood soaked through. Even sleeping, he seemed to have been carried away to some distant shore by the pain. He did not toss in the sheets, he did not even stir; he only lay there, still as a corpse.

But the corpse yet breathed, and that gave Javert hope.

His eyes shifted back to Cosette, who was still gazing solemnly down at her father’s face.
“You’re a good girl,” he mumbled, his speech slurred somewhat by the medicine and his weariness.

She turned to look back at him. “Eh?”

“A good daughter.”

She blinked, her lips parting. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

*For causing you pain. For your mother.*

“I have been coarse with you, in the past.”

She broke out into a bashful smile. “Ah, monsieur, I never minded that. Do not trouble yourself over it.”

“It bothers me,” he said.

Cosette made a clicking noise with her tongue and chuckled softly. “Hush, silly man,” she told him, taking his hand and giving it a pat. “You are forgiven.”

*No,* he thought woefully as she sat back in her chair, smiling serenely at him before turning back to her father, *I am not. You can’t forgive me, because you don’t know what I’ve done.*

He let his eyelids droop closed as a wave of guilt washed over him.

*You don’t know what I’ve done.*

***

Chapter End Notes

[At the jail]

**Thenardier:** "Excuse me, I lost my daughter. Can I make an announcement?"

**Gendarme:** "Yeah, sure"

**Thenardier:** *leans into mic*

**Thenardier:** "Goodbye you little shit."

~~~

AHHHHHHHH I HIT 1000 COMMENTS

Thank you so much to everyone who reads and participates in this fic!!

~~~

As it turns out, my dad doesn’t understand what this fic is about, and he recommended it to his coworker for some reason, who is apparently actually reading it, to my great
confusion and terror. So, uh, Phil, if you've somehow made it this far, kudos, but like, I'm concerned that you may not have realized where this story is actually going.

~~~

Suggested Listening:

Quiet Water Requiem - EidolonOrpheus

Show Me - Michael Andrews

Silver Overboard - Bear McCreary
Resolution (End of Book Two)

Chapter Summary

The unfortunate situation caused by Thénardier draws to a conclusion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It was such a relief to be able to sob and have someone know all the reasons why.”

-Rachel Hawkins

***

It is a well known fact that familiar territory, and familiar faces, will do wonders for one’s health, and often speed the healing process. On this most men of medicine agree. If possible, as soon as possible, depending on the patient’s frailty or condition, they will be sent home by their caretakers, not only to swaddle them in the comfort of relatives and routine, but also to free up space for new patients.

Therefore, shortly after Javert had regained his faculties, and Valjean had regained at least occasional consciousness, they were both deemed fit to be transferred to the house on Rue Filles du Calvaire for the remainder of their recuperation.

Javert threw a fit. He insisted he be sent back to his own personal lodgings, and that there was absolutely no reason to coddle him thusly. That he would be perfectly fine on his own, and besides, he was not really on his own at all, for there was his portress, and she would likely dote on him just the same, being a worrisome creature herself.

Cosette would have none of it. “Even if she looks in on you from time to time, you shall be all alone up there, and miserable, and bored,” she insisted. “You are coming with us, where you will be looked after properly.”

Javert argued as much as his meager strength would permit him. However, when it was pointed out that his presence would greatly aid Valjean’s recovery, and ease the poor man’s mind, Javert relented. Valjean was still senseless from the pain and the drugs, and he would need a much longer time to fully heal. Javert wanted to soothe him as much as he could.

There was also the fact that he knew—although he refused to admit it—that he was far from perfect health himself, and that if left unattended in his apartment he would surely go out of his skull with restlessness. At least at Rue Filles du Calvaire he could, with Valjean, make himself useful.

And so, begrudgingly, he went.
Azelma gave up the guest room for him. Javert was shocked she’d been allowed to use it in the first place, or that she had been there so long. He was further shocked to discover that, for whatever reason, despite his opinions of her, he felt actual guilt over taking her bed, even if it wasn’t really her bed at all.

The girl was perfectly happy to sleep on the canapé in one of the rooms below, which had a little fireplace and two windows facing the garden, and which functioned as a smaller sitting room, rarely used. She had slept on far less luxurious things, she assured them.

Why the girl was permitted to stay here, continually, Javert did not understand, but he was polite enough—or sickly enough—not to ask.

Valjean, of course, was returned to his bedroom at the end of the hall to the left, which was separated from the guest room by the library. To the right of the guest room lay the servants’ quarters, Marius’ bedchamber, and the stairway to the attic, respectively. Opposite, a linen closet and the master bedroom, which belonged to M. Gillenormand. Mlle. Gillenormand slept in the room across from Valjean’s.

Javert was surrounded. He had not been a part of such bustle since his days as a guard at Toulon, when he’d slept in what was essentially a barracks, with fellows not only beside him but also above him. However, everyone made an effort to tiptoe around Valjean and he, and lower their voices. This helped tremendously, as his head was still prone to aching acutely now and then.

Often he spent his time trying vainly to sleep off his migraines. But when his head was clear, and he found the energy for it, he went down the hall to sit at Valjean’s bedside.

The first time Valjean had really registered his presence there, the man nearly broke his heart. His glassy eyes had drifted to his right and settled on Javert’s face. He’d stared at him dumbly for awhile before something flickered in his expression, and his eyes focused. Slow and breathy, his voice barely passed his lips. “It is thee,” he murmured. “Thou art here. You came back.” A smile broke weakly over his face, and warmth emanated from his gaze.

“Of course,” Javert said softly. “I couldn’t just leave you like that, could I?”

The man’s eyelids began to droop shut again. He turned his head further into the pillow. “I was so afraid for you.” He let out a little sigh. “But I thought you hated me.”

Javert paused at this. Oh.

The man was not lucid after all. He wasn’t talking about the attempts on their lives, or the ransom scheme; he was still back in 1832.


But it was no use; the man had already fallen back asleep.
About three days into his stay at Rue Filles du Calvaire, Cosette popped her head into Javert’s room with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. Javert did not like the look of it one bit. The corner of his mouth was already tugging itself down in apprehension when she spoke.

“Javert,” she said, “there’s a woman come calling for you.”

“What?” As the implications of her words set in he sat up in bed with a start, rubbing away the last of his headache. “For me?”

“Yes!”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes?”

“Is it Madam Mercier?”

“Madam who?”

“My portress.”

She gave him an affable shrug. “I don’t think so. But she brought you flowers. Oh, they are so pretty! I will have to fetch you a vase so you may put them at your bedside.”

“But—who is she?”

“I know not. She says you know her son. Shall I send her up?”

“I—suppose,” he grumbled, fumbling for the clothes that sat folded on the night table. “If you will but give me a minute.”

She closed his door with a giggle as he slowly turned red.

What woman on earth would come calling on him if not his portress? He tried to think of who the son might be, but he knew lots of people’s sons. Had arrested lots of people's sons. God, he prayed it wasn’t about Montparnasse. He wasn’t aware of that brat having any family at all, but he wouldn’t be surprised if an angry, long-estranged mother came crawling out of the woodwork at the mention of his sentence.

Then again, if he had arrested this person’s son, he doubted heavily they would be bringing him a bouquet.

Just as he finished buttoning the top of his waistcoat he heard a knock. He shoved his arms through the sleeves of his tailcoat, fiddling helplessly with a poorly tied cravat. “Come in,” he called, clearing his throat.

The door opened a crack.

“Monsieur l’Inspecteur?” a woman inquired, peering around it with the cautious but curious air of a fawn. She was young—but not too young to be a mother, he conceded, noting the grey in her wispy brown hair.
“Madame?”

She slipped into the room, cradling a bundle of pale, frilly pink flowers at her breast. Javert did not know what they were. It struck him that Valjean probably would.

“I heard you were well enough to take visitors,” she began, “so I thought …”

“Forgive me,” said Javert, “but have we met?”

She shook her head. “No, no. Never in person. But I’ve heard a lot about you from my son.”

He frowned at her quizzically.

After a moment she seemed to realize her error. “Leroux,” she explained. “I’m his mother.”

Javert started. “Oh— Oh—” He felt his chest grow tight. “I— I am so sorry, madame.”

“It is well. We were never introduced; I can hardly expect you to recognize me.”

“N-no, I meant …”

“For what happened?” she ventured, setting the flowers down on the foot of his bed. “No, it is not your fault. Please don’t blame yourself for it. Besides, I had come here to thank you.”

“Thank me?” he echoed in bewilderment.

“For what you did for him. And for apprehending the culprit, and seeing that justice was done. The men at the station, they said that you went off on your own, that you refused to rest until the man was found. They said you nearly got yourself killed as well. Beaten, and shot, and held captive! I cannot imagine it.”

“It—” His face began to warm again. He looked away. “It was not … really …”

“Oh, Inspector—don’t downplay your role in this. You’ve been so brave, and I owe you so much. They said the tourniquet you made saved his life.”

“Mm. Still, it was not enough to … Wait,” he said, furrowing his brow, “when you say ‘saved his life’—”

The woman’s face went blank. “Did no one tell you?”

Javert stared at her. Gaped. “I— I have not been in contact with—”

“Oh!” She exclaimed, putting a hand to her mouth. “I just thought— I assumed someone would have—”

“He pulled through?” he wondered aloud, straining to sit up.

“Yes!” A warm smile flooded her face with relief. “It took awhile, and they were uncertain at first, but—oh, I’m so grateful to you, monsieur.”

Stunned, Javert let out a ragged breath and sank slowly back against the mound of pillows. He clutched at his aching chest, eyes falling, scanning the sheets. “I—I was so sure that … When I left him, I thought— They were saying …”

“I know. He was in terrible shape. But he stabilized, and early last week he woke up. He was
asking for you. He was—afraid for you, over what had occurred. He blamed himself for it.”

Javert was so astounded, he did not know what to feel. He’d thought the boy long dead. That pale body he’d left at the hospital seemed so drained of life. He had left late that night in a fit of grief, convinced the boy would die.

“So he—he lives? He is conscious?”

“He’s still white as a sheet, but he’s eating, and talking. Although, most of the time ... Well, they’re giving him morphine for the pain, and he, ah—he mostly sleeps, right now. But that is well. I think they shall send him to recover at home very soon.”

“*Je vois,*” Javert murmured. He laid his head back and sighed, closing his eyes. “*Ça c’est bien.*”

“Oh,” she thought aloud, “but you yourself have not recovered yet. Forgive me. I do not mean to interrupt your rest.”

“No,” he breathed, “it was a good interruption. Thank you.”

“Well. I shall leave you to your peace and quiet then, Inspector,” she said, dipping her head and turning to leave.

“Wait, madame—”

She glanced back over her shoulder at him.

“Could you, perhaps, er ... Would you give him my regards? Tell him—tell him I would have been there, I would have visited him, if I’d known. Or ... No, it might be best to merely say I was unable to attend him on account of my injuries. But tell him I am sorry for it, will you?”

With a warm grin, she gave a nod. “Of course.”

***

The days crept on. Each hour seemed elongated by the heat and the misery, like molasses oozing from a spoon. Yet, when Javert did manage to sleep, they slipped by without notice. Slowly, his wounds healed. The headaches began to grow weaker, and subside more quickly than before.

More and more he was able to amble about the house, ducking through the halls unseen to the water closet or the kitchen, too embarrassed by his own presence there to make himself known. He was not good with pleasantries or banter, and so he made every effort possible to escape conversation. Unless, that is, it was with Valjean.

He kept trying to get the man to speak sense, but every time he visited him, it was like Valjean had forgotten every visit prior.

“Javert,” he would murmur when he opened his eyes, “You are here ...”

“*Oui,*” Javert would return somberly, patting his hand. “*Je suis là.*”

The past few days, however, they had been tapering down his doses of laudanum, and Valjean
was beginning to regain some clarity. Not enough to carry conversation in the truest meaning of the word, but enough to exchange a few words here and there. He no longer acted surprised by Javert’s presence. Still, he did not seem to fully recall what had happened to them, for he spoke almost entirely on trivial nonsense. Javert humored him because he knew not what else to do, and because it was, on occasion, rather humorous.

“Did you know I can’t sing?” he asked one day.

Javert raised an eyebrow at him from where he sat in the chair by his bed.

“It’s true,” said Valjean, grinning like a drunkard. “The other men, they used to sing, sometimes. But I never sang a word.”

Was he talking about the men on his old chain gang?

Valjean chuckled quietly, a hint of lunacy in his voice. He looked like he was going to laugh, or perhaps cry, but hadn’t the energy for either. Turning his head on the pillows, he looked up at him with the wonder of a child in his soft brown eyes, and a serene smile on his face. “You are very handsome,” he slurred.

Javert stared at him blankly. Lord, the man really was drugged out of his mind.

“I would sing about that,” Valjean mumbled to himself, eyelids drooping.

Javert thought he’d fallen asleep, until the man resumed talking, his eyes still closed.

“Have you ever seen the sky when the stars are falling?” he said. “They’re like little silver threads, flashing in the dark. Like the ones on your tailcoat.” His voice was slowed by the haze of sleep. “I saw a meteor shower, once. I was on a hill. The snow was sparkling. It was very cold.” His brow knit on his otherwise placid face. “Are you cold? You don’t have your coat.” He was quiet for a moment. “My chest hurts.”

Javert began to snicker noiselessly.

“You have very large hands,” the man remarked, taking the hand in his and inspecting it with a furrowed brow, as though he had only just noticed it there. Then, as he let out a sigh and closed his eyes once more, “I like your hair.”

Javert’s ribs ached, but he could not restrain his laughter. He put his head in his hand.

“The stars are pretty,” Valjean continued obliviously. “I like to look at them, sometimes. There weren’t any stars that night. The sky was black. I thought I saw my brother,[1] but he was dead. I was talking to him, and then he was gone. We passed a rider on a white horse. He wasn’t wearing any clothes. And all the people were made of ash.” He frowned. “I didn’t like that place. Tell me we’ll never go to Romainville.”

Javert had to bite his lip to reign himself in, and even so, it barely worked. “We shall never go to Romainville,” he promised dutifully.

“Ah, good. They told me I was dead, there,” he complained, rolling over and drawing up the sheets, “but I don’t believe them. Even so, it was very frightening.”

“I am sure that it was,” Javert said.

“Mm.” And then the man had fallen asleep.
Javert gazed at him with a lopsided grin.

“What were you and papa talking about?” Cosette asked, craning her neck to peer around the doorway.

Javert raised his eyebrows. “I have absolutely no idea.”

***

Due to his prolonged absence, Javert had not been kept abreast of the latest news in the prefecture, or the goings on at his station. Mullins had been dispatched to remedy this.

Being a proud man when it came to his work, Javert refused to admit him until he’d properly dressed himself, and made every attempt at pretending he had not been lying in bed ten minutes prior.

Toussaint had made them tea in the interval, and they now sat in the two comfortable armchairs that faced the hearth in the drawing room.

“Two weeks from now the Commissaire is going on trip with his wife,” Mullins was saying, “and he’ll be gone for some time. They would like you to take his place, if you are feeling well enough. Thought it would be a good way to ease you back in.”

“I will be back far before that,” said Javert.

“In your state? Truly.”

“What else have I to do?”

“It is not a matter of your schedule, Javert; it is a matter of your health.”

“I’m sure I shall be perfectly well by then, thank you.”

The man gave a hearty sigh. “You push yourself, Inspector.”

“I should hope so. God knows we can’t afford to laze about on our pay.”

A frown tugged at Mullins’ lip. “Mm.” He gave a start. “Oh! And that case you were working on—I had almost forgotten. There’s been another case of arson in the—”

“Was it a distillery warehouse?”

The man’s face went blank. “How did you—?”

“I’ll make a report,” Javert sighed, bringing another steaming cup to his lips. “Don’t trouble yourself over it. Besides, I have reason to suspect you shall not be bothered by those arsonists for quite awhile.”

“How do you mean, Inspector?”

“That group in the catacombs ... there was a man with a half-moon scar on the side of his face. He had access to a warehouse full of liquor. I killed him.”
"You ...? Oh. So you think—"
"Yes."
"And the liquor?"
"Incendiary."
"Ah."

"I should think if you check the staffing records of that distillery, and their families, you shall find one of them in mourning. The rest can be discerned from there."

"You are an asset to us all, Javert."
"Most would agree that I’m merely an ass."
"Well, then they are very unobservant, and they all should be sacked."

***

It was the beginning of autumn, and the trees in the square were starting to change their colors. The midafternoon sun shone bright, keeping the air warm, and the paving stones warmer.

In other circumstances, it might have been the perfect day for an excursion. As it was, Thénardier stood in line awaiting the guillotine. Around him, throngs of spectators jeered as the contraption’s current occupant lost his head. It fell to the bloodied basket below, and two men set to removing the body.

Thénardier grimaced. Having had ample time to consider his fate from within his cramped cell, he had already experienced various stages of grief, and was long past panic and fear. And then, the five men proceeding him on the chopping block had forced him to come to final terms with it. There was no escape for him now.

What he felt now was anger, dulled by the heavy stone of resignation. He watched the last convict before him be put to death, his body carted away as carelessly as the others. Another feeble jolt of terror squeezed his heart, but there was nothing he could do to prevent the inevitable.

In the jailhouse, he had languished in disdain, reflecting more on his captors than his crimes. In particular, he harbored a burning hatred of that police inspector, Javert—and, too, for Jean Valjean. Only, he drew back at the thought of Valjean, as shadows always draw back from illumination. Even knowing it was destined for the blade, Valjean had made a point of sparing his life. Thénardier had tried long and hard to conceive of a reason for this, but could not fathom one that didn’t vindicate the man.

Valjean had been nothing but a pebble in his shoe from the moment they’d met. Thénardier had always held him in contempt. He could never tell whether or not he believed in the man’s redemption—nor whether he hated him because of it, or in spite of it. He was inclined now, upon reviewing past events, to admit that Valjean’s righteousness was something more than mere facade. However, this was as far as he permitted his revelations to go.
Whether or not people were truly capable of change, and whether or not he truly should have 
tried for an honest path in life, mattered little to him when he was about to lose it. And if he 
harbored any regret for his decisions, he certainly did not allow himself to feel any.

A gendarme reached out to take hold of his arm, and Thénardier scowled at him. He tried to jerk 
away, intent on whatever minute and stubborn independence he could retain—but the officer 
simply caught him by the back of his shirt collar and gave him a shove.

As he was being led up the stairs, Thénardier’s gaze swept over the unruly crowd. A figure in 
black caught his eye.

Among the massive throng of onlookers, somewhat removed from the center of attention, stood 
Montparnasse.

Thénardier was startled to see him here. Montparnasse was, after all, supposed to be 
icarcerated. That he was now on the streets meant he had broken out.

The boy held his gaze solemnly.

Why had he come? Surely he risked himself in doing so.

But, he thought, at least the boy was free. A part of him wanted to cry out for his arrest, purely 
out of spite—for Montparnasse had escaped his fate, and something screamed in him for fairness—
but it would have been petty, and pointless. And he found, to his surprise, more tenderness for the 
boy in him than he’d expected.

A gruff voice broke him from his thoughts.

“Have you any last words?” asked the executioner.

Truth be told, Thénardier was quite tempted to spit in the man’s face. However, he was 
conscious that this would reflect poorly upon him. Furthermore, these were his last moments on 
earth, and he had the singular chance to say anything, anything he liked, to the open public, without 
consequence.

Gritting his teeth, he turned to the audience and gave them a poignant glare.

“We are only the product of our circumstances,” he sneered. “A cruel world begets cruel men. 
You look down on the prolétariat for using the only means they have to survive. You ask that we 
should all bow at your feet and beg for charity, when time and time again you make clear that 
doing so will not move your hearts. Society turns its back to us. It should not be surprised when we 
do the same! Look upon me and know you have allowed for this. Do it, then! Be rid of me,” he 
spat. “Unburden yourselves. Pretend it has nothing to do with you. After all, you’re only here for 
the entertainment, right?”

There was a murmur from the onlookers. A couple jeers.

He scanned their faces with contempt. “That’s right,” he huffed. Then, more quietly, as he was 
shoved forwards, “That’s right.”

His head was thrust down, and he was made to lay flat on the bed of that diabolical machine.

The wood beneath the blade was wet with the blood of the men who had gone before him. He 
wondered, as they forced his neck into the depression, what exactly it felt like. Could one still 
think, and feel, and see, after it happened? For how long? He supposed he would find out. An axe
to the brain would be kinder, he felt. He did not much like the idea of being a head in a basket.

These were the things that flit through his mind as he felt the crushing walls of fate pressing in on him.

But then, his attention was drawn by something else.

The people in the audience were jostled, brushed aside like stalks of grain, and a girl burst forth from them.

“Father!” she exclaimed.

Beneath the heavy hand of the executioner, Thénardier looked up.

Yes, he thought, he had wondered if she would come.

“You are wrong,” she cried out. “We may not be able to choose our lot in life, but what kind of people we become is our decision. There is a seed of good in everyone. So long as we wish to, we can change ourselves. We can rise above our circumstances. Become decent, honest folk! And I will be the proof of it. I promise you that.” Her voice shrunk. “I promise you.”

From behind her, two more approached: it was Pontmercy and Cosette. They stood on either side of her, like guards.

Marius glared steadily at him. Azelma was trembling.

Cosette took her hand, and with a sob, Azelma buried her head in the girl’s shoulder and wept. Their arms wrapped around one another. Cosette rubbed her back, as though soothing an infant.

Unseen some ways away, Montparnasse observed this pensively. Then, sparing Thénardier one last glance, as the stock was positioned around his neck, he dipped his head and slipped away.

Thénardier looked, once more, and for the last time, at his daughter.

In that fine black dress, and with her hair done so prettily under the bonnet, she appeared more beautiful than she had been in a long time. Since, perhaps, she had been a child in Montfermeil.

He thought of her then, rosy-cheeked and dressed in lace, sat upon the floor of the inn and laughing with her sister as they played with their dolls.

He closed his eyes.

***

Javert had been watching him for some time already when Valjean’s eyes fluttered open. It took awhile before the haze of sleep dissipated from them. “Javert,” he mumbled, turning his head on the pillow to find him there.

“Bonsoir,” Javert greeted softly, folding his newspaper. “How is your chest?”

Valjean took a few labored breaths as if to test. “Hurts,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut.
“I’d suspect as much,” he remarked. “They’re tapering you off that damn poppy-milk.”

Valjean only grunted in return.

“Is your head any clearer today?”

“My head …?” the man echoed dumbly. “I don’t know. But my chest—” He twisted his fingers in the fabric of his nightshirt, just over his mending ribs. “Nngh … Feels like I’ve been—” He stopped mid-sentence, forehead creasing. The muscles of his face made a number of perplexed contortions as his breath puffed out uneven. He went rigid.

All of a sudden his eyes popped open. “They shot you,” he exclaimed, as though only just remembering.

Javert was flooded with relief at the return of the man’s cognition.

Valjean, however, turned to him with a frantic look, struggling to sit up with newfound fervor. “You—you are—” He groped at Javert’s waistcoat. “Are you—?”

“Hush, now,” Javert soothed, taking his hand in both of his. He gave it a squeeze and gently lowered it to rest on his knee. “I’m still here, aren’t I? It’s bandaged up and closed, now; don’t fret about it.”

The man’s panicked expression slowly melted to a wondering, hesitant relief. “Ah. But—but your head; they bashed your head against—”

“I know. And I’ve got some ugly bruises to show for it, too. But again, I am obviously not dead, nor am I dying, so—peace.”

Valjean stared up at him for a moment, digesting this. “I thought they were going to kill you,” he breathed, “or leave you to die, in the tunnels.” He voice cracked as he spoke, and tears welled in his eyes. “I thought—I thought that you—”

“I know. I know. But you didn’t let them, did you? They’ve been arrested, now, and the courts will see to it that they aren’t given the chance to harm anyone ever again. Not you, not your daughter. Not even me. So you can let yourself rest. It’s all right.”

“So, then—you are well?”

“I am well,” he assured.

Breath ragged, Valjean’s eyes remained fixed on his. His expression scrunched, trembling as the tears poured down his face. “I was so afraid for you,” he rasped. “I was so afraid.”

“As was I.” With his free hand, Javert lightly cupped Valjean’s cheek as the man hesitantly settled back into the pillows.

Valjean put his hand over Javert’s immediately. He gazed at him for a moment with inexpressible emotion, threading his fingers through his, before squeezing his eyes shut. He choked back a sob.

Clasping Javert’s hand between both of his, Valjean turned and pressed it to his lips, like a man in fervent prayer.

Javert made no move to resist. He flushed, slightly, but he did not withdraw, nor did he feel
embarrassed by it. Rather, he only felt another surge of pity.

“Oh, God,” the man mumbled. “Oh, God ...” He tried to contain himself, but his sobs soon outgrew him. Within moments they began to suffocate him, the pain in his chest spurred by the spasming muscles.

As he devolved into a fit of coughing, Javert sidled onto the edge of the bed and gathered him up in his arms, squeezing him tight. “Shh shh-shh, hush now,” he told him, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Valjean shuddered convulsively against him, trying to suppress his coughs. One hand clutched at his own chest, the other at Javert’s. He struggled for air.

Javert tried his best to absorb the jerky tremors caused by the fit, and after awhile, the coughing began to subside.

He closed his eyes, rubbing circles into Valjean’s back as he listened to his ragged breathing even out again.

Yet just as it steadied, and Valjean seemed to relax, he began to sob once more: smaller, gasping little things. He buried his head in Javert’s shoulder. “I thought you were dead,” he cried. “I thought you were dead. Javert! Javert ...” He breathed his name over and over on the edge of his sobs, like a prayer.

“I’m here,” Javert murmured. “I’m here.”

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Valjean is referring here to his brother-in-law, Jeanne’s husband.

Chapter End Notes

THIS IS THE END OF BOOK TWO

Yes, yes, I was fucking with you the entire time. Leroux was not actually dead. And the reason I was so miffed about not being able to have Javert in the hospital (vs a doctor's) was because I had already written a rug-pull scene where he wakes up to Leroux standing over him because SAME HOSPITAL. Buuuuut then historical accuracy and freaking hospital hours, so yeah. Oh well. This meant they got to chill at Valjean’s place instead, which allows for some other nice things. Still sad I had to have Leroux's mom show up instead of he himself but oh well.
Regarding Valjean's loopy monologue, uhhHHHHH

"A drunk mind speaks a sober heart."
-Jean-Jaques Rousseau

A million thanks to smaller for their proofing help ~ <333

Oh, I'm thinking of compiling all the quotes I used (and didn't use) for AROS together in like a pdf and putting it on my website. But I might wait on that until I'm done with the third book.

I promise to get on replying to comments soon! Every time I think about it I'm like "no no no interacting with people is ur reward, u have to go write the latest thing before u do that"

Anyway, hype train for book three because EVERYTHING COMES FULL CIRCLE, OH BOY. Oh and also it's gay. Like really gay.

~~~

Suggested Listening:

Bridge Over Troubled Water - Simon and Garfunkel

Eleven - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein

Hatching - The Cinematic Orchestra

Hidamari no Mori Uta - Masakatsu Takagi

Heart of a Mother - Satoshi Takebe

Hoshi Boshi no Hara - Masakatsu Takagi

The Choice - Toby Fox

The Most Important Thing - Christopher Beck

~~~~~~~~~~~

AROS (Book Two) Suggested Listening: Main Themes:

Back to You - WILD

Bridge Over Troubled Water - Simon & Garfunkel

C'mon - Panic! At the Disco

Colors - Will.i.am

Devil's Backbone - The Civil Wars

Follow Me - Muse

Forbiddan Colors - David Sylvian

Hey Brother - Avicii
Home - Jack Savoretti
Hypnotized - Fever Fever
I Don't Deserve You (Seven Lions remix) - Paul van Dyk
I Need Your Love - Calvin Harris
Right Here (Departed) - Brandy
Rise - Katy Perry
Run to You - Pentatonix
Soul Meets Body - Death Cab for Cutie
Stand by You - Rachel Platten
Stay Close - Fireflight
Stray - Steve Conte
Who Did That to You? - John Legend
Wonder (feat. The Kite String Tangle) - Adventure Club
Worry - RHODES
Your Soul - RHODES
Chapter Summary

Javert reflects on himself, and on Valjean. Some things have changed, and some haven't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.”

- John Joseph Powell

***

The opium withdrawal did not fail to seize Valjean in its maddening grip. The pain of his wounds was a constant, dull throb. Though exhausted, he could not sleep. He lay awake, unthinking, unable to move, or find peace. His stomach was constantly twisting and turning. He found himself stumbling at odd hours to the water closet nearby, where half the time he only ended up sitting there, staring off into space and struggling to breathe.

Restlessness plagued him in that he desired rest, but it continued to elude him, like a frightened cat. Perhaps worst of all, he was beset by both fever and chills, sometimes in rapid succession. He would huddle under a blanket, shivering, only to throw it off a mere five minutes later. Freezing, he feared to have the servants light a fire, knowing he would be asking them to throw the windows open soon after.

Jean Valjean became irritable; that is to say, he became easily bothered by minute irritants (he was, as a principle, seldom ever irate). The softest sounds stabbed at his ears. The dimmest light pierced his eyes. Everything gave him a headache. He wanted to be left alone for tranquility’s sake, but his body would not permit itself ease, and so, sleepless and helpless, he yearned for company.

Company came to him in the form of Javert, and Cosette. He was often too pained to carry on a conversation, but Cosette would sit quietly next to him and do needlework, and Javert would read over the casework that Mullins’ had brought him. If Cosette was not in the room Javert was, and vice versa, so that the man rarely lay there alone.

These little slices of space consisted mainly of companionable silence, but on the occasion, Valjean would find either enough energy, or intolerable monotony, to talk.

Having heard some details from Marius and Cosette about Javert’s escapades without him while he was trapped in the catacombs, Valjean had apparently come to the conclusion that Javert
had been out of his mind. At least, going by the tone of his voice.

“—a gaping hole in your chest, and you thought it was a good idea to lead a squad of men into a pitch-black labyrinth filled with robbers and assassins?”

“Valjean, I told you—”

“I know you feared for my life, but bon Dieu—have some consideration for your own! Did we not agree to that? Did we not make a pact?”

Valjean had not fully regained his strength, but he was, Javert lamented, strong enough to argue his point with vigor.

“Valjean,” he groaned.

“You could have torn your wounds open! I thought—I thought you were dead, and then you came down there, and I had to watch them slam your head against the wall! And you—you do not know how bad it …” The man shook his head at him, tears welling in his eyes. “It was like losing you all over again.”

“You were so close to bleeding out,” he went on. “You were barely conscious, and yet even bound, you were snarling and spitting in their face. They could have so easily killed you,” he breathed. “I would have had to watch you die. Do you—even realize what that—”

Javert tried to swallow the knot in his throat.

“If they’d been a little less patient with you … If your men hadn’t arrived when they had … you could have died! And for what? My freedom? What good is that to me if you are dead? I don’t want it if it means you had to pay your life for it. I would much rather still have you.”

“Valjean—”

“You should have stayed in the hospital. The police could have found me without you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“What does it matter? Even if something terrible had happened to me …”

“I could not abide by that!” Javert snapped. “That is why I went. You know as well as I. If it were you in my position you’d have done the same, and we both know it.”

Valjean frowned at him.

Javert gave him a knowing look.

“I’m allowed to be a hypocrite,” the man muttered.

“That’s what I thought.”

The man gave a huff, staring at him disapprovingly. Then the frustration on his face rewrote itself as worry. “You are so careless with your life, Javert.”

Javert let out a pensive sigh. “We have had this discussion, Valjean.”

“We have had it, but you’ve never given me a reason for your recklessness. Do not tell me it is bravery; that is something different. The way you handle your own life—it’s as if you could not
Javert paused. Dropped his eyes to the floor. “There are a great many things in the world that are more important than my survival, Valjean.” Like you. “I am insignificant in the greater scheme of things. Men are but small, short-lived creatures.”

“But they can become great,” said Valjean, fixing his eyes on his. “You have.”

A chill ran up Javert’s spine. He opened his mouth, flushing. He looked away. “I? Ah, no. I have only done what I ought to,” he mumbled. “It was nothing. It means nothing.”

“You are wrong,” Valjean said softly. “You are a good man. Not merely that—you are a great man.”

Javert shuddered, scrunching his hands up in his lap, his head drooping so that his hair fell past his eyes. “Valjean,” he murmured solemnly, “if I am a great man, you are a god.”

Valjean gave a start, his eyes bulging. “Lord, no; never say that!” he whispered. “I—I am not anything particularly grand or praiseworthy. I never had any real ambitions, or lofty aspirations. I just … did what I could. But you—Javert, you …” He gazed at him reverently for a moment. “You have always been the best of men.”

Javert let out a helpless, self-deprecating scoff. “Me, the best of men? How can you say such a thing? After the things that I’ve—” He shook his head with a sad smile. “I never understand you. Ah, but you are an infirm yet; you are not in your right mind.”

“I am lucid enough,” Valjean insisted. “I speak the truth, and you are a silly man who does not know how to take praise.”

He smirked. “Speak for yourself.”

“Stop,” Valjean chuckled. He must have immediately regretted this, because he started coughing.

Javert clamped his hand over the man’s shoulder and steadied him with a look of mute fear. “There, there, now. We don’t want that. Settle down.”

Valjean’s eyes squeezed shut, and he managed to get a handle on his breathing, his fist clenched tight around the sheets.

Javert allowed his hand to fall away. “You talk too much,” he said. “It causes you pain. I forget myself; I should not be conversing with you so lengthily.”

Valjean had not the breath to argue with him.

Javert took hold of his hand, clasping it as he sat back down. “Lord, let it be not me who does thee harm. You have had enough of that already. Now take another sip of that brandy and go to sleep.” He made to rise, but the hand in his tugged him back down.

“—vert,” Valjean breathed, “Wait.”

Javert looked at him considerately.

“You—you are a good man, truly. A great man. Don’t deny yourself that.”

Javert bit back a scoff. “You are a fool,” he said, squeezing the man’s hand as he rose to his
feet, “and I am going for a walk.”

***

The Gillenormand’s garden was quite beautiful, to Javert’s thinking. He himself lived on a street filled with shops, and buildings that bled into one another, and so the most he got of nature was either a flowerbox on a window or the stray weed that dared to grow between the paving stones.

This was perhaps the first time he had ever been left to wander a space such as this at his leisure, besides the occasional patrol or incident in the Luxembourg. But this place was far more intimate than that public attraction, and it gave one the privacy to think.

He wondered, briefly, what it was even like to have enough money to afford such things. To have a pleasure garden all to oneself. To be eating off silver, three meals a day. It must be nice, he thought. To not have to tally up all that you’d earned, and make it stretch long enough to sustain you until the next week’s pay came in.

He had lived on the poverty line all his life, and he did not expect that to change. Never had, really. He knew what his lot in life was. He had far more desired honesty than riches, anyway. So it worked out in the end, even if he barely scraped by.

Still, sometimes the world would present him with visions like these, as though it were testing him. Are you sure you don’t hunger for this?

Javert’s answer was always the same: he appreciated it, but he did not need it. It was fine to marvel at things, but pointless to envy them, if they could not be attained. And for him, such things had always been out of his grasp. He had known it since … Well. He had known it for a long time. And just as there was no changing it, there was no point in dwelling on it. That was that.

As he was carefully laying these thoughts back to rest, the flutter of wings close to his head startled him.

On top of the wall above, a bird had lighted, black as night. It glanced about itself, found Javert, and failed to be troubled by his presence. Merely cocking its head at him, it began to peck at the stone.

Javert stared up at it, transfixed. Unnerved.

One of the earliest memories he had was of a bird.

It was a blackbird, on the paving stones just outside the window.

He watched it through the bars with wide, wondering eyes. He had been perhaps two or three years of age.

The sun was shining brightly. It cast a blue and green and purple sheen on the bird’s black plumes, so silky smooth that it was impossible to tell where one ended and another began. He remembered being mesmerized by that—how there could be a rainbow within something so black.

The bird was picking at something on the ground. It had craned its neck up, cocking its head.
Then something startled it, and it disappeared with nothing but a flutter of wings, gone in an instant.

Was it the first time he had seen a bird? He did not know.

But it was the first time, he felt, that he had become aware of being caged. Aware that there was a place beyond, and that the bird belonged to it, and he could not follow it there. That he was not a part of that world. That he was something … other.

He did not know what that world was, or what he was, or why things were the way they were. But he sensed there was a divide, and that this bird had something he did not.

***

A few days later, Valjean found enough strength to accompany him on his walks. Javert argued that exercise was imperative to a full recovery, doctors be damned, and Valjean was inclined to agree with him.

So they went out and they toured the garden, Javert with his hair undone and Valjean with a blanket over his shoulders, for it was beginning to get cooler out, and no one wished him catch a chill, which his condition rendered him susceptible to.

When he grew out of breath they retired to one of the wooden benches therein, and sat there peaceably together, regaining their wind.

“I’m so sorry,” Valjean suddenly said.

“For what?” Javert asked, genuinely bemused.

“All that time you were in such terrible pain, and I was absolutely no use to you.”

Javert raised his eyebrows. “Don’t talk nonsense,” he scoffed. “You were right where I needed you.”

He wanted to say he had dreamt of him. That he had been there for him when no one else could be: when his very body had betrayed him, when his mind had threatened to swallow him whole. But it was too embarrassing a thing to say aloud.

Valjean cast a ponderous glance at him. Turned slightly pink, but seemed to accept his words. After a moment, his shoulders sagged, and the glassy look returned to his eyes. Sighing wearily, he turned and rested his head on Javert’s shoulder. “I’m so tired, Javert,” he breathed.

He, too, was still exhausted by the littlest exertion. Humming contemplatively, he let his eyes droop closed, and listened to the birds.

They sat in silence like this for some time.

“You know,” Javert murmured, “it occurred to me that I never really thanked you for how you took care of me, before.”

“Hm?”
“After ... the river,” he clarified.

“You have thanked me in many ways,” Valjean assured him.

“No, what I mean to say is, I—” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I’ve displayed gratitude for you saving my life, yes, but I never really ... understood the way you felt back then. I couldn’t comprehend it. It was only down there in those caverns that I realized ...”

“Realized what?”

“How much you cared. Or what it meant to you—what I meant to you. I was so afraid for you, in that moment—and suddenly, I knew. I knew what you had felt for me back then. I think, perhaps, I always knew, but I did not understand. The way it ... tugs at you. Like it’s—like it’s clawing out your innards. Like it’s ripping out your heart.”

“Javert,” the man said slowly, “are you ... talking about compassion?”

“Yes!” Javert exclaimed, glad to have a proper word for it. “That, or—or empathy, or whatever you’d call it. That actual, physical pain that you feel, even when it’s not your wound.”

“Yes,” Valjean mumbled, looking at him strangely. “Empathy ...”

“You felt that for me, then. You cried, because I was crying.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I did not understand it.”

“You did not understand it?”

“No,”

“Do you mean ...” Valjean furrowed his brow. “Do you mean to say you have never felt compassion before?”

“Well, I don’t—” Javert faltered, feeling his face go warm. “No,” he admitted. “Not like that.”

Valjean stared at him for what seemed like ages. “I would like to say I am surprised,” he finally said, “but I’m not entirely sure that I am.”

Though that sounded like an insult, Javert could not fault the man for it.

“But Javert,” he started again, “when you argued for my pardon, was that not what you felt? Compassion?”

Javert thought on this. “Perhaps.”

“I do not know what else could have possibly motivated you,” said Valjean.

Javert frowned. Injustice, for one, he nearly said. But he thought of that visceral sense of wrong he had felt at the sight of Valjean behind bars. Of the nightmares he’d had, waking up sweating, in tears. Of how reading that witness’s testimonial, and picturing Valjean in that courtroom, had ripped him apart. It was more than just a sense of injustice. Was it compassion?

“Yes,” he said, “I suppose it was. But you! You felt it for me, since the very beginning. How? Why? You did not understand me. You did not know enough to understand.”
Valjean considered this, dipping his head. “No, but …” He gave a puff of air. “I may not have understood you. But I understood your pain. Sometimes, that is enough.”

“But how could you have understood my pain if you did not … know what …?” Javert trailed off helplessly. He felt like a schoolboy that had been absent for a lesson and failed a great examination on account of it.

Valjean gazed off at the grass, his haggard face adding meaning to his words. “Agony recognizes agony, Javert.”

Javert mulled this over. He thought of how Valjean had treated him. And then, he thought of how Valjean had treated that woman, Fantine. Of how he treated those beggars, or savoyards, or grimy little gamins. People had always flocked to him—the poor, and the wretched. Javert had thought his charity to be an act. That, or pure foolishness combined with blind optimism. But perhaps it had never been any of those things. Perhaps it had been some deep and visceral connection—one he could not understand. “Do—you feel that for everyone?” he wondered aloud, mildly horrified at the idea.


“Why so deep, for me?” Javert asked. “Why, when I have caused you so much pain?”

“Because—” The man’s expression twitched, his mouth half open. “Because … you were so alone,” he breathed. “As I, too, had been alone. And I could not bear to see thee suffer.”

Javert contemplated this, staring at the grass beneath his feet.

Could he ever learn to love like that? So deeply, for anyone? He did not know. He was not even sure that he wanted to. But then, was that not what had saved his life? That deep and unconditional love? Was that not why Valjean was so singular? That he had, even after everything, taught himself to love like that?

Javert bit his lip.

A gentle breeze rustled through the changing leaves.

“How are your wounds?” Valjean finally asked. “Do they pain you?”

“Only a little. It is not so bad.”

“Mm. Did they ever give you medicine for it?”

“In the beginning, yes. But I hate the stuff. So I stopped it as soon as I could.”

“Perhaps that was wise of you,” Valjean sighed, “given my state.”

“Yes,” Javert remarked. “I have no envy for your situation.” He stretched himself out some and slid down the bench, folding his hands over his stomach. Still, with his eyes shut. “You know,” he said, “they were so worried in the beginning that you would stop breathing, they posted someone day and night to watch over you. Said the drugs were the only thing keeping you from coughing yourself to death, but that they also made the breath so shallow it could kill you either way. Truly, you looked like a dead man.”

“I myself was little better at the time, but the idea that you might simply pass in the night wracked me with dread. I think I might have even been driven to prayer. And I do not, as a rule,
converse with god. So you can imagine my fright. But then, slowly, you showed signs of improvement—and I swear the relief was palpable. It’s funny,” he mused, raising his eyebrows, “the idea of you used to cause me such unrest ... Now it imparts relief.”

“I could say the same of thee,” said Valjean.

Javert opened his eyes. Pondered this. “I should think your relief is much greater than mine,” he finally said. “You may have been a thorn in my side, but I was a nightmare for you.”

“That ... is not really what I meant.”

“Hm?”

“It is not my own safety for which I am relieved.”

Javert furrowed his brow. “Then for what?”

He heard Valjean stifle a scoff. Felt a hand clasp his shoulder.

“A better question would be ‘for whose’.”

Javert was confused at first, but as he parsed the man’s words, he suddenly understood, and felt a wave of heat wash over him. “Ah.”

“You know, for all your scrutiny, Javert, sometimes you are very unobservant.”

***

Their ordeal had caused them to lose a significant amount of weight, but Cosette and the rest of the women were always spoiling Javert and Valjean with the heartiest and most sugary foods, so they did not remain gaunt for long.

Besides food, Cosette was intent on plying them with other things as well, to stave off boredom—mainly gossip, or news, the two of which were inexorably entwined. Today, she plied them with books.

“Let us see,” she said, dipping her hand into the basket of newly-bought goods, “This one is *Scènes du La Vie Privée*, this one is *Le Prométhée Moderne* ... and this one—oh, you shall like this one; I have read it myself already and it is very good—*Orgueil et Préjugés*. It is rather long, but I can read it to you if you like. And of course, monsieur Javert, you are welcome to borrow them.”

Javert directed an apathetic glance towards the bundle. “They are novels, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. I don’t ... particularly care for those sorts of books.”

The girl scrunched up her face as though trying to make sense of that. “Oh,” she said, “I see. Would you like for me to bring you something else?”

He thought. “The latest edition of a newspaper, perhaps. If it is not too much trouble.”
She beamed. “No trouble at all! I shall fetch one right away.”

When the girl had left Valjean turned to him and gave him a sad grin. “You still don’t understand the appeal of these things, do you?”

“Of what?” Javert asked.

“Books.”

“Not particularly, no. Reading the paper is more useful in my opinion. Unless it’s an informative text, like a history book.”

Valjean shook his head. “Reading is so much more than gleaning information, Javert. But you wouldn’t apprehend that, with the kinds of things you read.”

“Explain it to me, then,” he sighed.

Valjean gazed off with a melancholy air. “Ever since I learned to read, books were the only friends I could afford to keep.”

“I don’t really catch your meaning.”

“Even when you’re trapped, and alone, books can take you places you’ve never been before, introduce you to people you’ve never met. They lead you on adventures you otherwise couldn’t have. And they do teach you things, as well. Though … maybe the appeal is more what they teach you about yourself.”

Javert raised an eyebrow. “About yourself,” he repeated incredulously.

“Javert, how do you think I was able to become the man I was in Montreuil-sur-Mer? Nineteen years in the galleys, and a man does not come out refined, or terribly learned, I’ll tell you that much. You know how things were. I was a brute. Sure the monks taught me to read and write, and do simple arithmetic, but I knew little else. It was a miracle I came out of that place still speaking proper French.”

“The Bishop may have raised me from perdition, and saved my soul, but my mind was still untempered, like an unworked hunk of steel. It took the shaping of literature to make me anywhere near who I am today. I had no one to talk to, to share my true feelings with—rather, I could not permit myself to, for fear of discovery. But I did have books, and I lived through those stories. Grew from them.”

“Sure, I read some of the same things you do—history, philosophy, various studies—but I didn’t go about reading as though it were a chore. I hungered for knowledge, for stories of travel. Not because I felt myself stupid, but because I never before had the opportunity to live, and I wanted to.”

“You lived … through books.”

“Yes!”

Javert put his chin in his hand and stared off at the window, pondering to himself.

The idea of books as entertainment had always seemed frivolous to him. Something people with money and time did for their own vain pleasure. He never understood what people got out of them—reading about people that never existed, and things that never happened. It was like going to an
opera where all the singers were mute and you had to imagine the costumes and stage sets. Having a poor imagination himself, the pursuit appeared to him little more than a show of status and intellect.

But the idea of literature as a catalyst for the transformation of the soul intrigued him. Specifically, for the transformation of Valjean’s.

He thought of the wretched man Valjean must have been when he first arrived at the town, having spent nearly half his life imprisoned, stifled. And he thought of Madeleine as he knew him properly, when he had been an entrepreneur, and then, the mayor. There was a gulf between these two men. And it was well known that Madeleine was a recluse, without any real relationships to speak of. So, it must be true in a fashion that he’d gotten a great deal of his refinement from books. Not just knowledge, but manners as well.

He pictured Valjean as the recently released convict—having just had so great an alteration in his soul thanks to the Bishop of Digne—sitting in his newly purchased house along the ramparts and devouring newly purchased books voraciously. Pictured him with a patch of sunlight on his face, completely lost to the world, eating a meager meal without even looking at it, his eyes fixated on the text the way they fixated on the plants and trees when he worked in the gardens. Perhaps he’d still had brown hair, then; perhaps he was still scruffy, bearded, with his hair in messy, uneven curls.

Javert pictured, without meaning to, the way the light reflected in the man’s eyes, setting what once seemed a dull brown aflame, to honey, and amber, and cognac.

If they could breathe such life into that weary, worn-out soul, then perhaps, Javert thought, perhaps books were not so bad after all.

“Well,” he said softly, taking the topmost off the stack, “shall I read to you, then?”

Valjean gazed at him in surprise. Slowly, a smile curled over his lips. “I would like that.”

***

Chapter End Notes

This book is gonna have some heavy stuff in it my guys. Stay tuned.

Anyway, god fucking bless Seinano, who knows why. <3

Suggested Listening:

Flower Garden - Joe Hisaishi

Goodnight - Arata Iiyoshi

Love Like You - Rebecca Sugar

Walt - Yoko Kanno
Zelda's Lullaby (Orchestrated) - The Synthetic Orchestra
**A Way Out**

Chapter Summary

Azelma's avoidance of Javert begins to unnerve him; Cosette follows in her father's footsteps.

Chapter Notes

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT IN THE END NOTES [insert "bottom text" meme joke here]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is how it works. I love the people in my life, and I do for my friends whatever they need me to do for them, again and again, as many times as is necessary. For example, in your case you always forgot who you are and how much you're loved. So what I do for you as your friend is remind you who you are and tell you how much I love you. And this isn't any kind of burden for me, because I love who you are very much. Every time I remind you, I get to remember with you, which is my pleasure.”

-James Lecesne

***

They had chosen to start with *Scènes du La Vie Privée*, because it was written by a fellow Frenchman, and also because it was a collection of short stories which could be read in bursts, and thus suited the sporadic and impromptu nature of their reading sessions. And then, Valjean had thought it would be a good start for someone more used to reading newspaper articles and case files rather than novels.

As evidenced by the title, the stories were snippets, glimpses into the ordinary lives of Parisians. Javert expected that were he to read them on his own, he would have trouble keeping interest. But reading them aloud to Valjean was somehow different. In being shared, the intrigue became more intriguing; the humor more humorous. Even the pedantic, he found, became more interesting merely by have having multiple listeners.

Javert had never read to anyone before. It was rather like acting out all the parts of a play, or gossiping at the station-house. Having an audience made him slightly nervous that he should somehow do it wrong—but Valjean only smiled serenely, as though listening to a strain of sweet, distant music. Javert decided he liked that look on him. Normally Valjean’s smiles just made him flustered or annoyed, but this one was preoccupied, and not directed at him, and so, was quite nearly charming.
Thus, all things considered, although Javert hated reading, and hated novels especially, he found that dictating them to a friend was not half so disagreeable.

“Eight days passed thus, during which the feelings of the painter and those of Adelaide underwent those delicious and slow transformations which bring the souls to a perfect understanding. Thus, day by day, the gaze with which Adelaide welcomed her friend had become more intimate, more confident, more gay, more frank; his voice, his manners, had something more unctuous, more familiar. Both laughed, talked, communicated their thoughts— Are you awake?”

Valjean’s lips twitched into a faint, lopsided grin. “Yes.”

Javert peered over the book at him. “Your eyes are closed.”

“I know. I’m picturing the story.”

Javert studied the placid expression on the man’s face. “Hm.”

“I am thinking,” Valjean went on, “that Hippolyte rather reminds me of Marius, if Marius had been a painter. But continue.”

“Very well,” Javert sighed.

“Both laughed, talked, communicated their thoughts, spoke of themselves with the naivety of two children who, in the course of a day, had met each other, as if they had been three years together …”

***

Azelma was not particularly proficient at cooking, but with enough direction and patience, she managed to make herself useful. The mechanical motions and pleasant aromas helped to ease her mind. And then, having Cosette nearby contributed to her sense of security greatly.

“Azelma,” said Cosette, portioning out a number of tarts and fresh fruit on a plate, “Will you help me bring this up to papa?”

In the middle of steeping the tea, Azelma faltered. She stared overly hard at the flowers that wreathed the kettle lid as she replaced it. “Will … Will the inspector be with him?”

“Come, you cannot shy away for him forever,” Cosette sighed. “He is a good man. He doesn’t bite.”

Azelma felt herself flush. She did not know how to voice her discomfort without sounding like a fool. “I just …” She bit her lip.

“You don’t need to make conversation with him,” said Cosette. “All you need to do is say ‘Bonjour’. Besides, we do not even know if he’s up there right now.”

Her shoulders sagging, Azelma gave her a pitiful nod.

Cosette’s face brightened. “Thanks!”

She took up the food up the stairs, while Azelma carried the tea tray.

“Good day, papa,” Cosette greeted Valjean, setting down the plates on the side table. “Are you
hungry?"

“For your cooking? Always.” His gaze found Azelma, still tarrying in the doorway, and he smiled welcomingly at her.

Embarrassed, Azelma bowed her head.

They had been introduced almost as soon as he’d regained his senses, and though Azelma still felt awkward around him—as her family had done him such wrong—he was a gentle man, and she was not afraid of him. Not like she was of Javert.

Humbly, she ducked into the room, placed the tray on the bench at the foot of his bed, and began to pour him out a cup.

“Thank you, my dear,” said Valjean.

Blushing, she approached.

“Oh,” the man said, looking towards the door as she held it out to him. “Could you pour the inspector a cup?”

“Eh?” At that very moment, she felt a prickling on the back of her neck, and turned.

Javert was standing not five feet from her, having just entered the room.

A jolt of shock ran through her; she gasped, fumbling the saucer, and before she realized what was happening, both saucer and cup had slipped from her grasp. They hit the floorboards and exploded, tea and shards of porcelain going everywhere.

She froze, staring down at the mess in horror as the blood drained from her face. A chill of dread shot up her spine. She became acutely aware of all the eyes on her. It had only been a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Her breath quickened; she took a step back. All the world was closing in on her.

Panicking, she looked from face to face, expecting at any moment a torrent of rage to rain down upon her. Her body knew all too well what happened when she broke something, and it had learned to prepare itself for the consequences.

Shaking, she fled the room.

She did not hear Jean Valjean or Cosette calling after her.

***

Half an hour went by before Cosette finally found her hiding in the broom closet, with her arms wrapped around her knees.

She was pale as a sheet, and the look in her eyes when Cosette had opened the door bespoke of sheer terror.

Cosette understood it all too well. It was like gazing into a mirror that reflected her childhood self.
God help her if she had ever broken anything around Thénardier. The man would have beaten her senseless, and she knew it. How many times had she done precisely the same thing Azelma was doing now?—running, hiding, wracked with dread.

Back then, the man had never touched his own daughters. But it was clear that something had changed since she’d left, and that Azelma, and likely Éponine as well, had come to face their father’s wrath the same as she had.

She gazed down at Azelma with a weary heart.

No one had ever come to comfort Cosette when she had fled and hid like this, so she was not sure how to proceed. But she thought of how she’d felt back then, and what she would have wanted someone to do. What Valjean would have done, if he’d been there.

Carefully, she knelt down on the floor and extended her hand.

Azelma stared at it warily, her lips sealed shut.

After a moment, Cosette touched the girl’s knee. “It was only a cup,” she murmured. “No one is mad at you. It can easily be replaced.”

Azelma’s throat bobbed. Tears welled in her eyes. Yet still she said nothing.

Cosette sighed, surveying the broom closet. “We didn’t have a closet like this in the inn,” she said softly. “I would go and hide in the stable.”

Azelma was studying her face, now. Her fear seemed to diminish beneath some other emotion.

“But papa is nothing like him,” Cosette told her. “He would never lay a hand on us. Truth be told, sometimes I don’t even know if that man is capable of anger at all. He would rather hurt himself before someone else. And Javert—” She scoffed “Well. Javert may be gruff, but once you get to know him, he’s not half so fearsome as he might appear. You know? Like one of those dogs with the smushed-in faces. They may look scary, but all they really want is to be pet.”

A weak snort escaped Azelma’s nose, congested though it was. A lopsided grin tugged begrudgingly at her lip. She sniffed.

“Yes,” Cosette said, sensing she was headed in the right direction, “and he even has a tail, doesn’t he?”

Azelma let out a wet sort of laugh, and Cosette laughed with her, prompting her to keep going.

They giggled as Azelma wiped her eyes. “I do not think those dogs with the smushed-in faces actually have tails,” she remarked.

“Oh—you might be right.”

***

Perhaps it was nothing, but ever since he had caught sight of Azelma peering around the doorway at him, only for her to startle and flee as she caught his eye, Javert had been having strange dreams.
The look on her face had perturbed him. And the incident earlier this evening had only added to his unease.

Azelma had been staying in the house the whole time, but she was clearly avoiding him, and he could not say he was surprised. He had, after all, sent her and her whole family to prison. Why should her skittishness bother him so? He did not know. But at night he saw that face in his dreams, staring at him with wide and wary eyes.

***

One day, Javert caught Azelma checking in on him again. This was the third or fourth time this had happened, and now he was determined to detain her.

Again, as she realized she had been seen, she gave a start and turned to flee, but this time, he was prepared for it, and leapt out of his chair to pursue.

Halfway down the hall he caught her wrist, and she reeled about, aghast.

“Girl,” he implored, “wait. Why do you run from me thusly?”

Azelma stared up at him froggishly, her mouth drawn tight. She tried to take a step back. “I don’t know,” she mumbled, “I just— I don’t know. I suppose you frighten me.”

He was about to ask why, when he realized he was still tightly gripping her wrist, the way he might a wanted man’s. As soon as he released it, her hand shot back to her breast, where she held it like a broken bird.

At least, he thought, she did not flee.

“What about me frightens you so?”

She appeared to hesitate. “You are … a very imposing man, monsieur. And yours is not a happy memory for me. Surely that you can understand.”

He let out a puff of air, glancing away. “I understand it well enough. But I’m not posing any threat to you now. So why do you act like I am?”

“I don’t … know what you expect of me, sir.”

Javert rubbed his temples in frustration. “I suppose I’m just—a little confused by you, girl, because I’ve seen you checking in on me as if to make sure of my health, and yet, as soon as I meet your eyes, you dart off like a mouse from a cat.”

Javert was, in fact, hurt by this display, but, novice at introspection as he was, he only knew so far as that it bothered him. He mistook this discomfort for offense.

Azelma frowned helplessly at him, still shrunken under his gaze. “What do you want from me?” she said meekly.

“I want answers!” he exclaimed, throwing up a palm. “And I want—” Clicking his tongue, he made an effort to soften his voice. His air became wounded. “And you have not let me thank you.”
Azelma’s face went blank. “Thank me?”

“For aiding us, obviously. We wouldn’t have known where to look if not for you.”

“O-oh,” she stammered, wearing a strange expression now. “I— Well. I did not really have much of a choice.”

“Bah. You had plenty of choices. You could have clammed up for a week and wasted everyone’s time.”

They considered one another awkwardly for a moment, fumbling each other’s gaze.

Javert cleared his throat. “Anyway. So long as you don’t go looking for trouble, you have nothing further to fear from me, or the rest of the police for that matter. Pontmercy made it clear to them that we struck a deal with you in exchange for your freedom. No one’s going to be arresting you for this. I certainly won’t be,” he muttered. “So I would appreciate it if you’d stop making out like I shall.”

Azelma studied him, her emotions unreadable. Slowly, she gave him a nod.

“Good,” said Javert.

“Can I go now?”

Javert’s mouth twitched. He let out a sigh. “Yes, you may be on your way.”

As he watched her disappear down the stairs, a vague feeling of dissatisfaction arose in his gut. He chewed the inside of his cheek, and frowned.

***

Cosette drew back the drapes and pushed open the windows with a contented sigh, leaning over the sill and breathing in the fresh air. “It is such a pretty day today, papa,” she said. “I do wish you could join me down in the garden.”

“I am sure you are doing a wonderful job of it, ma chère,” Valjean told her.

Cosette put her hand on her hip and turned to face him with a huff. “That is not what I meant at all.”

“I know what you meant,” he said, smiling warmly at her.

“You do not know just how worried I was for you,” she complained, approaching his bed. “You were so pale, like a ghost … and you did not wake up for days.”

“I am much better now,” he assured her. “You need not worry any longer.”

She made a face at him. “But does your chest not pain you still?”

“It does, but not nearly so much. I am well.”

“Papa,” she chided.
“Be at peace,” he said.

Secretly, he loved being fawned over by her—it was his guilty pleasure, though it also embarrassed him some.

She worried her lip, her gaze trailing him up and down, eventually coming to rest on his breast. “Those bandages ought to be changed again,” she thought aloud.

Valjean glanced down at his chest, instinctively clutching the fabric of his shirt as if to shield himself from further scrutiny. “Perhaps.”

“I could help you,” she offered.

Valjean recoiled at the very idea. “N-no, we should—we should call in the doctor for that.”

“We don’t have to call on him for such a simple thing,” she said. “He is a busy man, you know. Besides, he left us some bandages that we might do it ourselves.”

“Ah. Well … I can apply them unassisted, I assure you.”

“Pah! And how are you to do that, when you must wrap them all the way around, and even the littlest movements pain you?”

Valjean faltered.

“Would you prefer Marius help you?”

“No,” he laughed nervously, feeling his face begin to warm.

“What about Toussaint?”

“N-no, I would rather …”

“You would rather it be a man, hm?”

“Yes,” he breathed, relieved a little that she was guessing in the right direction.

“What about Javert?”

If he had been drinking something at that moment he would have choked on it. “Good God, no!”

Cosette made a frustrated noise. “All right. How about Basque, then?”

Valjean mulled this over. Drew his lips back in a frown. “Hm.”

Cosette let out a sigh. She eyed him knowingly for a moment, seeming to deliberate on something. “Is it because of your scars?” she asked.

The blood froze in his veins, and his eyes went wide. “You—you know about …?”

Cosette nodded gravely, an apologetic look on her face. “They opened your shirt up to examine the wound. They didn’t know that—” Her mouth buttoned up for a second. She lowered her voice. “We didn’t know those would be there. Marius knew what they were.”

Valjean gaped, at a loss for words. “So you—you saw?”
“Yes.”

“Even—even the …?”

*Lash-marks*, he wanted to say, but the words would not make it past his lips.

Another nod from Cosette.

Shivering, he dropped his gaze. “I see.” His whole body felt numb—and yet, extremely sensitive and vulnerable at the same time. “I see …”

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and he jolted backwards instinctively. When he looked up, Cosette’s hand hung in the air before him, drawn back as though singed. “S-sorry,” he mumbled. “I, ah—I just …”

“It’s all right,” she told him, “I understand.”

Valjean could not fathom how to respond.

“It was horrible what they did to you,” Cosette went on, hushed. “But all of that is in the past now. You have to fear for nothing. Please don’t be ashamed of what you went through. It is bad enough on its own. You shouldn’t have to fear judgement on account of it. And besides—what happened … those marks … they only serve to prove how tremendously strong you are.”

Valjean digested this. He tried to swallow, to give a feeble nod, but there was a knot in his throat, and his muscles were rigid. “I … I never meant for you— I never meant for *any of this,*” he confessed. “I’m sorry. I don’t—know how to … deal with— I don’t know how to talk about it; I just—can’t. I’m not … strong enough.”

Cosette’s brow creased, her blue eyes darting about. “Marius said you thought I would hate you, but you know I could never do that. You don’t have to be afraid to talk about it, papa. Nothing bad can come of it now.”

He clenched his teeth. “It was never about what you thought of me,” he said. “It was … I was afraid I would hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” she echoed. “How could that hurt me?”

“I did not want you to worry about your security,” he told her. “I did not want you to know just how fragile our happiness was. At any moment, everything could’ve been ripped away from you. How could I tell you such things? And I … did not want you to think less of yourself, because of me.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Why would you make me think less of myself?”

He was shaking quite thoroughly now, and his breathing had grown erratic. “Because you … were taken in by …”

“By whom? A selfless, loving man, who devoted himself to me as if I were his own? Why should I think myself lowly because of that? Why, I should think myself the luckiest girl in all of France!”

Valjean was only half aware of it, but he had been digging his nails into his chest.

Cosette took note of this, and now reached down, clasping his hand between hers and rubbing
the bone-white knuckles until they relented. Slowly, she unfurled his fingers, prizing the sheets, and his shirt, from their grasp. As she did, she spoke thus:

“You know, other little children, they have fathers who might curse at them, and beat them, or work them to death. They might be born to any sort of man. Sometimes their fathers do not even want them. What an unthinkable act—to have a child, and to throw them away! To abandon your own flesh and blood, when you are all that they have.”

“But you—I never once doubted you. I have never been afraid of you, or resented you. You have never touched me unkindly, and I need not worry you ever shall. I know you love me, because you chose me. I did not fall into your lap. You searched for me, and took me in, because you wanted me. Do you know what a marvelous thing that is? To be wanted? It makes the whole world worth living in.”

She sat down before him on the bed, holding his hands in her own. “Remember what it was like, papa? When you first came to me? I knew nothing then. I kept asking you over and over —’May I play?’ ’Mustn’t I sweep, or knit, or fetch water?’ ’Are you really my father now?’ ’Can I truly stay with you?’” She let out a sad little laugh. “I was incessant, wasn’t I? But you reassured me every time, and you never grew cross with me for it.”

“I was in such disbelief that I could ever be wanted. That anyone could ever think of me as beautiful, or worthwhile. But you made sure I knew that I was, even if I did not understand it. Even if it took a long time. You were so patient and gentle with me. Because of that, one day, I stopped doubting. I learned to have faith, and to love myself. You did that for me—you showed me my worth. And so, that is what I shall do for you, for however long it takes.”

It only took a moment’s glance at her to drive Valjean to tears. He grit his teeth as they poured down his face. He hung his head, crushed beneath the weight of shame. “I do not think I could ever learn to love myself,” he breathed.

He felt his daughter give his hands a squeeze. “I think you might yet,” she said softly. “But until then, I shall love thee enough for the both of us.”

He choked back a sob as she wrapped her arms around him, mussing the hair on the back of his head.

He tried to reign in his breathing, but it was hard, and his chest ached. He was humbled, and hurting, and filled with an immense amount of guilt. Cosette should not have to shoulder his burdens for him—she, who had already been through so much.

“Children were not meant to hold their fathers this way,” he choked out.

“Well then it is lucky I’m no longer a child.”

They sat that way for some time, until the shoulder of her dress was damp with his tears.

When she spoke again, it was careful and hesitant. “Will you let me change your bandages now?”

He took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “I would prefer that you not,” he admitted.

“That’s all right,” she sighed, sitting back. “I will go and call the doctor for you.”

He smiled weakly at her. “Merci.”
For the third time, Javert woke from an unsettling dream which he could only half recall. He lay there in the dark, listening to the rain patter softly against the windowpanes.

What he felt was guilt, and embarrassment, and he did not know why.

Azelma’s frightened eyes kept reemerging in his mind, and with them, other faces, vaguely familiar, but whose names he could not remember. Some were children, some young adults. He had the impression that they were people he had seen during the course of his work—witnesses he had interviewed, perhaps, or bystanders. The children that stood off in the corner while he questioned their parents, or people he’d passed on the street. They were not the perpetrators of the crimes he was concerned with, nor were they guilty of aiding and abetting, and yet—yet they all seemed absolutely terrified of him. Why?

It was only in asking this question of himself that he understood the source of his unease.

The conversation he’d had with Valjean resurfaced in his mind. About how Valjean had never thought to turn to the police, even when he had the right to. About how an instinctual fear of them still clung to him, keeping him back in the shadows. It had not sat well with Javert. He knew that the Valjean’s mistrust of law enforcement was only to be expected, given his past, but that a genuinely good-hearted man had been frightened away by the very people who were supposed to give aid was not right.

Javert had wondered, then, just how many others had been driven away with misplaced intimidation. How many others had failed to make a report that could have saved lives, because they’d been conditioned to fear the police?

Even now, having tried to set things right, Azelma was still too afraid of Javert, and what he represented, to bear his gaze.

What could be done about it? The question haunted him.

“May I ask you something?”

Azelma nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of Javert’s voice. She had clearly not seen him sitting there, hidden by the shrubbery as he was.

He had in fact been sitting here in the garden for quite some time already, ruminating, and that Azelma should happen to appear had seemed only natural.

She made a variety of facial expressions, seemingly deliberating on whether or not to make her escape, before settling on an uncertain frown and a furrowed brow. “Like what?” she asked.

Fearing his gaze too direct, as he was often told it was, Javert dropped it to the ground, trying to
soften his voice. “You did not approve of your father’s actions. That is clear. So what stopped you from taking it to the police?”

“What … stopped me? I don’t understand. How can you …. How can you just expect me to have turned my own father into the police?”

“But you don’t—” He let out a small noise of confusion, and hesitated. “You did not … love him. You were afraid of him. Weren’t you?”

She grew crestfallen. “He … I was afraid of him sometimes, yes. Many times. But he was my father, and he was all that we had to rely upon. Without him, what would we have done? How would we have lived? I didn’t agree with the things he did, but he was all I’d ever known, monsieur.”

Javert narrowed his eyes. “So, what would it have taken for you to go to the police?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What I mean to say is, what would have given you the courage to do what was necessary, and break away from him? All your life you have abided by him, even though you did not want to. Yet in this instance, you forsook him. You went against his orders, and aided the police in his capture. What changed?”

She opened her mouth, looking away and clutching her arm. Her eyes darted to and fro. When she finally spoke, her voice was small. “They said … They said that they would help me. That they would protect me from him. Give me money if I needed it. They gave me a way out. And they weren’t even mad at me. So I wasn’t as afraid, anymore.”

Javert considered this.

A way out …

“I see,” he murmured. “So, if someone had come to you in your childhood, and offered some other means of support—escape—then you would have been able to turn your father in?”

“I …” Azelma looked somewhat distraught. “I don’t know. It would have depended on when, I suppose. For a long time, we … we did not even understand what he was doing—or that it was so wrong. It was just the way things were. We did not think ourselves bad people. But I suppose, as we grew older, and saw more of the world—and of him—we began to realize what he was. That it was not normal, or … right.”

“If someone had offered me some other way of living, then, I would have gladly taken it. Only, I would have been afraid, monsieur—of the unknown. Of betraying him, or mother. I don’t know. It would have taken a lot more courage than you seem to believe. After we were older, and his patience with us began to wear thin … perhaps then. But still! The ties of blood … they are a hard bond to break. Even when they are a chain.” Here she gave a great sigh. “Yet, even as children, some part of us—”

She turned her face from him, and spoke partly as though to herself. “That man … He came and took her away. We were so bothered by it—that he came along and gave her such nice things. That he treated her so kindly, having never met her in his life. What made her deserving of it? We didn’t understand, and it left us feeling frustrated. For years, even. It took us so long to realize why it riled us. We were envious. She got out of that place, and we didn’t. She got a father who truly loved her, and we … we were stuck with him.”
“Mama loved us more than anything, but it wasn’t enough to make up for the things he did to us. Cosette got the chance to live another life. To become a different person. But no one came and carried us away. No one stepped in front of father and made him put down the belt. No one gave us any options. So we lived with it.”

“What else could we have done? We had no money. No authority. No one else to turn to. That is why we never went to the police. Because without him we would be destitute. We would starve. But if only someone had cared … if only someone had given us a way out … it could have been different. We could have been honest. Happy. But nobody cares about people like us. And that’s why we end up like this. That’s why they lock us up, and forget about us.”

“You ask me what it would take for us to change? That’s what it would have taken. Someone who cared. Even just one. That’s all it takes, sometimes, to change a person’s life around. She is proof enough of that.”

They both stared at the ground in silence.

“Does that answer your question, monsieur?” she finally said, with a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“I …” Javert felt a pang of humility. “Yes.”

***

Javert remained in the garden long after Azelma had left, sitting motionless on the wall, ruminating. His gaze had fixed itself blindly to the blades of grass beneath his boots. Every now and again he gave a sigh.

He had sought answers from the girl to clear his mind, but all her words had done was further cloud it.

*A way out.* Yes, of course. It was so stupidly simple.

Javert was not a fool. He knew very well that a great deal of crime was committed out of necessity, or what was thought to be. That, given different circumstances, many would not have turned to it at all.

If Jean Valjean’s parents and brother-in-law had not died—if his sister and he had found enough work to feed their family—if they had not been so alone in the world, or been born to a different class—he would have never wound up imprisoned to begin with. So much pain, and death, and strife could have been avoided.

But such had been their lot in life. That was Javert’s position on things—back before he had come to know doubt. He used to feel that crimes could be avoided if only the person was moral enough, determined enough. He himself had been able to climb his way out of the gutter, so why could others not do so? They were lazy. Immoral. That was what he’d thought. Choosing to commit a crime only showed their true colors.

What he had expected truly honest people who could not sustain themselves to do, he did not know. The sick, the elderly, the disabled—he knew they were not physically capable of supporting themselves. It was not a flaw in their character. But still he felt that if they broke a law to feed or
clothe themselves, it was a black spot on their soul. He expected them to get by somehow, and the truth was that he did not care how, so long as it was legal, because their issues did not fall within his realm of jurisdiction.

He existed to put criminals in their place. It was not his job to bother with anything else—for what power had he to remedy it? None. And so, he put the matters out of his mind. Those things were for others to deal with.

Still, now the issues plagued him. His occupation was the prevention of crime. And if it could be prevented before it even began, should the system not seek to do so? Most officers made a point of intimidation—putting the fear of god, or the law, into people’s hearts. But that did nothing to solve the core issue of why they committed the crime to begin with. Not if it was one born of necessity.

The voices of the insurgents came back to him, crying for revolution—for the government to attend to the starving masses, the poor, and the destitute. Javert had never taken one sou from the government that he had not earned with honest toil. And he always managed to get by one way or another. So he had always felt that the government did not owe its citizens anything, save for veterans or pensioners.

But, he reflected, if it had given some kind of aid to people like Fantine, or Jean Valjean, then they would not have been forced into doing what they had. It was unreasonable to expect someone to follow a law if it meant their own deaths, or the deaths of their loved ones. Javert had touched upon this in his statement in court.

Then, if such things were unreasonable, was someone not obligated to do something about them? To make it so no one was driven to that point to begin with? Provide food, or shelter, or money to those who had no other means of attaining it? Perhaps. But upon whom did that obligation fall? From whence would the funding come? And who had the right to demand such reform? Besides that, would anyone listen?

It seemed pointless to try and effect political change when one had no political influence to speak of—and those that did seldom thought of the issues, as they themselves did not face them. Why should the monarchy care if some poor peasant went without bread? At what point did it become their concern?

They should be concerned with it, Javert thought, because eradicating the causes of crime meant that fewer resources had to be allocated to deal with it. All the people in prison ate off the government’s bill. Lived in shelter maintained by the government. Why did it wait until they had broken the law to give them such things? Why could it not provide them earlier, before the person had needed to steal for them? Why did it wait to care until their lives had been ruined?

People were simply not the government’s problem until they committed a crime. That was how it was. And the way that it dealt with them afterwards—

Javert groaned and put his face in his hands, reeling from too many thoughts at once.

What could be done about any of it? Things were the way that they were. Reform was an impossible dream, too big for one person alone. It was easier to submit, and to follow the rules. Easier to fight for oneself than for everyone else. Especially when one had already been stripped of a voice.

Javert had the vague notion that he had once had these thoughts before. And with that, a feeling of dread began welling up in his stomach. He shuddered, and pushed it back down, clawing the
base of his scalp. He would not let that chaos consume him again. It was a quagmire of anxiety, and he refused to drown in its depths.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly lowered his hands.

Valjean would be waiting for him, he thought as he rose. He should get back.

***

Chapter End Notes

[Javert contemplates the merits of socialism.jpg]

The story Javert's reading is La Bourse which I found out was only published as part of collection so I had to do a slight edit of that other scene. Anyway I imagine that story kind of fucks with his perception of things as well. Might go back and insert a little scene about it at some point, but I felt like I was already sort of beating the reader/Javert over the head with all these scenes ...

I'M SORRY TO ALL THE PEOPLE WHO WANTED THEM TO READ PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

I kinda felt like they wouldn't really be able to get into it?? Like I'm sure it's Cosette's fav but idk about them. Plus there was a reason I wanted them to Read La Bourse and it wasn't just to make gay jokes lmao like it's actually got some nice social commentary meta and also it hardcore reminded me of Marius and Eponine

Honestly, bless Cosette. Like only she would have thought to look in the broom closet :( :( :(

[insert "coming out of the closet" joke here since that's basically this entire fic]

Okay, SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT TIME (Ack, I meant to post this sooner but I had to finish the chapteeeeer)!

SO, Seinano, who is a beautiful and wonderful person, came to me asking if they could do a translation of AROS into Chinese, and I was like ????? Holy shit??????? Of course??? I can't believe u would even want to?????? So they have been working very hard on it, and it's here on AO3 with seven chapters already posted. It can be found here.

Suggested Listening:

Dance with the Fish - Bruno Coulais

Eleven - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein

Follow You Down to the Red Oak Tree - James Vincent McMorrow
Foxglove - William Bloomfield

The Growing Recognition of the Genius of Birds - The Tumbled Sea

Iguazu - Gustavo Santaolalla & Ryuichi Sakamoto

Signal Flag - Satoshi Takebe
Even a Wooden Heart May Still Sprout

Chapter Summary

Valjean and Javert receive letters from their friends in the police.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain."

-Kahlil Gibran

***

It was not long before Valjean was able to walk about on his own without trouble. To Cosette’s joy, he rejoined her in the garden, although it was autumn now, and there was not so much work to do. Only the last of the apples, and the winter squash remained. The leaves had all changed color, and had only just begun to fall.

The year was coming to a close.

***

—was lucky that he paid those months’ rent in advance, really, because I never would have been able to afford it, being away from work for so long.”

Javert’s portress grinned at him from across the tray of coffee. “And to think you were so put out over it,” she said. “What an ungrateful thing you can be! But you are happy for it now, aren’t you?”

“There’s no need to rub salt in my wounds,” Javert grumbled, raising his cup to his lips and taking another sip, if only to have something to hide his face behind.

Madam Mercier had taken to staring at the gold leaf on the crown molding. “Such a beautiful house this is!” she remarked. “It was so kind of him to let you recover here.”

“I would not doubt that he would, but he was barely conscious at the time,” Javert corrected. “It was his daughter who insisted I stay.”
“How very thoughtful of her.”

Javert scoffed. “It was more of an order than an offer.”

The woman laughed. “She must have been grateful to you, that is all. You’ve helped her father twice now.”

“Thrice,” Javert said under his breath.

“Oh, that’s right. I had forgotten. Now you’ve both taken each other in, haven’t you? Tit for tat.”

“No,” Javert sighed, morose. “Now I am in his debt again.”

Madam Mercier frowned at him for a second. “Bon Dieu, but you’re grave. There is no debt between friends.”

Javert gave a disagreeing groan. “You say that. He says that. But it’s not proper, I tell you…”

She just shook her head at him with a knowing smile.

“In any case,” he huffed, “I am coming home tomorrow, and going back to work the next day, and that will be the end of it.”

“But you will come and visit him, won’t you?”

“When I find the time,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “What is it to you?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. I am just glad to see you getting out of the house.”

Javert furrowed his brow at her. “I go out of the house every day.”

A crooked grin flashed across her lips and was gone. “So you do. So you do.”

“Mm.”

She tried very poorly to hold in a laugh.

“What is it?” Javert demanded.

“Nothing!” she repeated, collecting her bag and rising to her feet, “You are just so incredibly dense for a man of your profession.”

“What?” Javert exclaimed as she headed for the door. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

Halfway down the hall she burst into laughter.

“Madam! Explain yourself!”

“Bonne soirée, Javert,” she called, “I shall see you tomorrow.”

Javert let out a growl as she left. “Women,” he muttered helplessly. “I shall never understand them.”

***
Cosette insisted upon them all dining together before Javert left. He had, out of sickness or embarrassment, been taking his meals upstairs, which was not as rude as it would have been, had Valjean not been doing the same thing.

Javert felt distinctly out of place at the table. Especially on account of Azelma being there, and the Gillenormands, with whom he was not terribly well-acquainted. He tried his best to avoid attention, but he felt like everyone, even the portraits on the wall, was staring at him.

How much money these people had! He certainly did not belong. Valjean would not have belonged here either, back in the day, but he had more than earned his place (though, if Javert’s observations were correct, the man still did not feel the part).

It was a lovely dinner, and it only served to remind Javert how much he had overstayed his welcome.

That night, he took a bath and packed his things.

***

“I wish you could stay longer,” Valjean confessed to him at the door.

Javert shook his head. “I have been here far too long already. I must return to work.”

“Ah, yes. You can never pull yourself away from it for long, can you?”

“No. And even if I wanted to, I could not afford it.”

Valjean studied the floor for a moment. “Javert,” he began curiously, “how long have you been with the police?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, you will soon be able to get a pension from your service, will you not?”

“Yes.”

“Then, when do you suppose you will retire?”

“Retire!” Javert let out a barking laugh. “Why the hell would I do that?”

Valjean faltered for a moment, likely disconcerted by the look on his face. “Well, with a pension, money would no longer be an object, and … let us be honest with ourselves, Javert; we are no longer young men.”

“Speak for yourself,” Javert snorted. “I’ve got a good eleven years before I catch up to you, and I doubt that will slow me down either.”

Valjean just gave a half-hearted laugh and rolled his eyes.

“Why do you even ask?” Javert said.
“Oh, it’s just …” The man turned a shade of pink as a lopsided grin frowned on his lips. “You are so busy. I fear the stress will take its toll on you one day.”

“Pfft. Please. The work is what keeps me from losing my mind from boredom.”

“If you insist.”

“Well,” Javert remarked, turning back towards the door, “I should be going. It was … kind of you to have me here. I fear I cannot truly repay the favor.”

“You need repay nothing,” Valjean said, smiling warmly.

Javert let out a sigh. Well, let me go and try, will you, he wanted to quip, but he held his tongue. “Anyway, it— The company was nice.”

“I could say the same.”

“Mm. I am sorry to leave you before you are fully hale again, but I can’t let myself fall any further into your debt, or my own. I shall come and see you, if you like, though.”

“Come and see me whenever you wish,” said Valjean. “You will always be welcome here.”

Javert’s face grew warm. He chose not to make a reply because he could not think of one. Instead, he asked, “When you are feeling better, do you want to resume our Sunday arrangement at the Rue Plumet?”

Valjean gave a start. “Oh! Ah, actually … Actually,” he said in an apologetic tone, “I have offered the Rue Plumet to Azelma.”

“You what?” Javert’s voice came out much louder than he had meant it to be.

“Well, she—she had no place to stay,” Valjean mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “No money, or family … Even if she finds work it would take some time before she had enough to rent a flat. And besides, I had already been meaning to sell the house. Not for the money, of course, but now that I live here, it’s just been sitting there, empty … I thought it better to put it to use. Especially if it means helping someone in need—and one to whom we owe thanks.”

Javert bit the inside of his lip. He was already damning the man for his ludicrous charity, but he could not say he was surprised in the least. “You don’t mean to give it to her outright, do you?”

“She seemed uncomfortable with that idea, so perhaps we will work out some sort of rental agreement … at a very low cost, of course.”

“Hm.” Javert deliberated on this. He was not happy with the idea of the house being given away. Having it rented was slightly more agreeable, but still something about the arrangement irked him. Was it because the house was far too good for someone like Azelma, who could never otherwise afford it? Was it because Valjean had put so much work into it? Had he, Javert, become attached to the place? Either way he felt a vague annoyance at the idea of it going to Azelma.

“Still,” he thought aloud, “It is better than her loafing around here.”

“Those are not the words I would choose, but you aren’t wrong,” Valjean said.

They stood in awkward silence.

Javert cleared his throat. “Well. I wish you a full and hastened recovery, mon ami.”
Valjean’s eyebrows shot up. He looked at him as though he’d just performed some amazing feat of strength.

“What?” said Javert.

“That’s the first time you’ve ever called me that,” Valjean said, a bashful smile of admiration on his lips.

Javert knit his brow, trying to recall whether or not this was true. “Is it?”

“I should think so,” he said. “I would have remembered it, otherwise.”

“Hm,” Javert hummed. That was indeed rather terrible of him.

‘What an ungrateful thing you can be!’ Madam Mercier’s voice echoed in his mind.

A wave of humility washed over him. “Well, then,” he said softly, “I suppose it’s about time, isn’t it? You have been a friend to me for quite a while now. Longer than I would have liked to admit. I suspect you would have been a friend to me even earlier, if I had only been open to the idea. But I did not want your companionship, then.”

“And you do now?”

Javert turned his face from him, plucking frantically at the sleeve of his coat. “Yes,” he finally admitted. His eyes flicked this way and that, his shoulders drawn up, his head down. He felt distinctly as though something were crushing him. But he could not put a name to it. Guilt? No, something less. Embarrassment? No, something more.

“Well,” he heard Valjean say as the man touched his arm. “You have it.”

Javert flushed. He gave a curt nod. “À plus tard,” he mumbled.

“À bientôt.”

***

Just after Javert left, Marius sought out Valjean and handed him a note.

“Oh, father! I found this in my desk,” he said. “It was from when you were ill. I had meant to give it to you some time ago, but you were not well enough to read it, then.”

“Who is it from?”

“You shall see,” he assured. “It was tucked under your hand while you were asleep.”

Furrowing his brow, Valjean took the slip of paper from him and unfolded it.

‘Honorable sir,’ it read, ‘thank you for always taking care of my inspector.

–Henri Gisquet.’

Dumbstruck, a grin broke out of his face.
Javert returned to his work. It did not tax him; he had in fact been beginning to grow anxious from the time he’d spent away. Valjean was good company, but he could not help but think guiltily on how many duties he’d been shirking while he waited for his body to heal.

He received a bigger welcome than he’d expected, mainly due to the fact that he had disbanded Patron Minette. Although, when one of the younger officers mentioned that Montparnasse managed to break out of jail, Javert nearly threw a chair against the wall. (Why did they not do more thorough searches on prisoners? Next thing you know they will have smuggled a gun in their cell and killed the warden!)

Aside from that, getting back into his old routine brought Javert great relief. He felt terrible if he was not making himself useful in some capacity.

He wanted to be back out patrolling the streets, but he had to take the place of his Commissaire, and that meant desk duty, and receiving anyone who came into the station-house looking for help. It was just as well, they told him—he was surely not entirely healed. Javert begged to differ, but he could not escape the situation.

Every few days, he would make a trip to Leroux’s house. The boy still looked awful, and had trouble keeping his food down, but he was alive, and getting better, and that was all that mattered. Javert sat on the edge of his bed and filled him in on all the news from the station, and what had occurred in the catacombs. He tried to decline it, but each time he left, Leroux’s mother insisted on giving him baked goods.

Overall, things had gone back to normal. It was almost odd, truth be told. Things had not felt this normal since June of last year. No longer was he plagued with disquiet and doubt. No longer did he constantly question the world around him, or fear retribution for some secret thought. He did not even have to worry over his security, for netting Patron Minette had put a feather in his cap that would not soon be forgotten.

Still, every now and again he would suffer from the same strange dreams.

He saw their faces in the space between sleep and waking, blurring into one another, undulating nauseatingly like ripples on the sea.

Convicts. Prostitutes. Thieves. The wretched. The miserable. The people he had put behind bars, and the people he yet would.

Their voices rose in supplication, in angry, pleading whispers.

“Give us a way out,” they said.

And each time he awoke, the question haunted him:

How?
A week after he’d returned to service, Javert found a letter from his patron in the mail-box. It read thusly:

“Javert,

It has been some time since we last saw each other properly, and I was told that your health has returned and you’ve resumed your work. I was very relieved to hear of it. How have you fared of late? I regret to say I’ve been terribly busy—elsewise I would have contacted you sooner. (Though, it would not kill you to write now and then.) But, perhaps you will be available this week-end? My house, of course—at the customary time. It has been far too long.

Meilleurs vœux,

-Chabouillet”

***

The sun was setting on Saturday evening when Javert finally got off shift and headed to his patron’s house at #226 of S.-Martin in Les Marais. He had to take a cab to get there, whose fee Chabouillet would no doubt insist upon paying. The man was rather like Valjean in that regard.

Chabouillet’s house was not as grand as the one on Rue Filles du Calvaire, but it was large enough, and, better yet, comfortably lived-in. The leather armchairs were worn smooth from use, the tabletops and floorboard faded and scuffed. Books and files sat forgotten here and there, and plants spilled out of their windowsill pots. Yet all was impeccably clean, and somehow still organized. It was as though the man’s office habits extended to his entire house. It had always set Javert at ease.

Chabouillet greeted him warmly at the door, beckoning him into his drawing room as usual while his old servant brought a tray full of coffee and croustades aux pommes et au fromage. (Javert appreciated people inclined towards coffee in the evenings.)

They sat and sipped in silence for awhile, letting the mugs warm their hands as they ate. A small fire crackled in the nearby hearth.

“The days are getting chilly,” Chabouillet remarked, glancing briefly at the flames.

“Mm,” Javert hummed.

With a sharp exhalation, Chabouillet set down his coffee and pressed his hands together in front of his mouth in the aspect of prayer, gazing intently at him. “So,” he began, raising his eyebrows. “Jean Valjean.”

Javert tensed.

The man seemed to be waiting for an explanation, but Javert could think of none to give. He was struck mute by the look on his superior’s face.

“He was the man that lay in the other bed when I visited, was he not?”
Javert gave an uneasy nod, turning to stare at his lap.

“I suspected as much, from the reports.”

Chabouillet, who had been for over twenty years the head of the First Bureau of the First Division of the Paris Prefecture of Police, and who, at the time, had performed secretarial duties for Prefect Angeles, had been the driving force for Javert being stationed at Montreuil-sur-Mer. Surely he still remembered the man they’d condemned—just as Javert still poignantly recalled Chabouillet’s wild incredulity when he’d insisted the mayor of the small town was in fact a violent and wanted criminal in disguise (and also, the man’s prideful awe when it turned out he’d been correct).

What did Chabouillet think of him now? He’d been the reason Javert was transferred to Paris as well—and it was all to hunt Valjean.

Javert had spoken only briefly with his patron since last summer, and never about what had occurred that June. Never about Jean Valjean. So, the first thing Chabouillet would have heard about the whole affair was either from their colleagues or the paper.

Javert, his steadfast and determined patronee, relenting! His loyal dog, having finally grasped the fox’s neck—letting go! Not only that, but protecting what once had been his prey from his fellow hunters! Surely it could not have been believed.

One of the logs shifted in the fireplace, settling with a flurry of sparks.

“Well,” said Chabouillet, sitting back with a sigh, “I don’t really know what to say about it, other than that I never would have expected it from you.”

Javert swallowed. His voice sounded feebly. “He saved my life, sir.”

“I heard.”

“He is a good man, sir.”

Chabouillet studied him. “Mm.”

Javert felt his cheeks burn.

“I am sure the irony of it all is not lost on you,” the man commented. “Things having turned out the way they have.”

“Trust me,” Javert said, a shadow falling over his face. “I am more aware of it than anyone.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“Alas,” said Chabouillet, returning to his coffee, “I confess I do not know enough about the situation to form opinions on it. But I trust in your judgement, as you have always proven yourself shrewd—even when no one would listen to you. Therefore, I have no choice but to assume you must be correct in this—as strange a thing as it may seem. Besides which . . . I have never known you to falter in your convictions. So, if this man managed to change your mind, his must be a powerful truth indeed.”

Javert gave another nod, pensive.

“I find it amazing—” Chabouillet cut himself off for a second in thought, his eyes darting away
as he laid back and folded his hands on his chest. “I find it amazing, honestly, that the man would go out of his way to save your life, considering what happened in Montreuil-sur-Mer.”

“You do not know the half of it. He is … He is more caring and gentle a man than I have ever known. I did not expect that.”

“No one did, given his history,” Chabouillet said with a shrug. “He robbed a bishop, did he not?”

Javert grimaced. “That … is true,” he admitted. “But—it was the Bishop’s mercy that changed him. He could not believe the man had spared him, and so—”

Here Javert had, quite suddenly, an internal revelation: Jean Valjean had wanted to emulate the Bishop, and so he had. In saving his life, Valjean had, in fact, produced the exact same effect upon Javert as the Bishop had once produced upon him. A total transformation of the soul.

“Javert?” came Chabouillet’s voice.

Javert gave a start. He had been staring off in silence for some time, now, lips parted. “Sorry,” he apologized. “I just … Something occurred to me.”

“Oh?”

“It—it’s nothing.”

“Hm. You were saying?”

“Ah—um … The Bishop saved his life, and so … Valjean resolved to make himself deserving of it.”

“I see,” murmured Chabouillet. “And that is how he came to be what he was in Montreuil-sur-Mer?”

“Yes.”

“And his charity—his constant philanthropy, his interest in social issues—it was not an act after all?”

“No.”

The man’s eyes fell to the floor.

“And—and when that man had been mistaken for him—that Champmathieu—it was not as we thought at all,” Javert explained. “Madeleine was perfectly secure. They did not apprehend him; they did not drag him to court. They all still thought me mad! No one gave any heed to my suspicions. It was Valjean who did it, sir—he traveled to Arras and turned himself in to spare that unfortunate man his fate!”

Chabouillet looked up at him, brow bunching. “What?”

“It is true, sir. He ruined himself to save a man he’d never met. He threw away everything he had, gave his very life, to prevent an injustice. They did not even believe him at first. He had to argue for his own damnation!”

Chabouillet’s expression had turned grave. “But the reports … Javert, how do you know these things?”
"There was a juror’s testimonial I found in the Archives, when I requested his files earlier this year. It was official, sir. It had been stamped."

"There was no mention of this in the reports," Chabouillet said to himself.

"I know!" Javert exclaimed. "But neither did they provide another explanation. It was the papers that spread misinformation about it. You know how dearly they hold sensationalism, and how little they care for the truth. There was no one there to refute their lies. All the things they said about him—none of it was true. He was not taken against his will. That woman was never his lover. He was not part of that band of robbers from the South. How could he be? Good god, he’d only been out for four days!"

Chabouillet was deep in thought, staring into his coffee with a frown.

"I was so wrong about him," Javert lamented. "Christ. You do not know how wrong I was. He should have never been put back in prison."

"He broke parole, Javert."

"What does that matter? What does that matter, if he was reformed? Is that not the point of parole to begin with?"

"In all fairness, he did rob—"

"I know what he did. But one was an accident, and the other forgiven. Neither victims pressed charges."

Chabouillet chewed his lip. Javert knew those words had earned him some disapproval, but his patron did not have all the facts.

"Javert," the man began, "it is clear you feel you have made a mistake, but—"

"A mistake! I forsook that whole town!"

"Javert." A calming authority entered Chabouillet’s tone. "There was no way for you to know what you know now, or what would happen in the wake of things. You were only doing your duty. Nothing that happened in that town was your fault."

"Isn’t it? Is it not a direct consequence of my actions?"

"There is nothing to be done about it now, Javert. Don’t plague yourself with grief over what you might have done differently more than a decade ago. It helps no one. You must live in the present."

He told me that too, Javert wanted to say. But it doesn’t change the way I feel.

Chabouillet gave a sigh. "You may perceive you’ve committed an error," he told him, "and perhaps it is so, though I do not see it that way. But it seems to me that you have done everything in your power to correct it. You put yourself and your career in jeopardy to save this man’s life, and so you have. What more can be asked of you? Let your conscience be at ease, Javert. You have only ever done what you thought right."

Javert only gazed sadly at the rug. "It is not enough."

"Come, now," his patron chided. "Is the man not grateful to you?"
“He treats me better than he should,” Javert confessed.

“So you maintain contact with him?”

“He, ah—he considers us friends.”

“Are you?”

Javert’s face went hot again. He was afraid of legal ramifications, or his colleagues’ disapproval, if he agreed. “Are we allowed to be?”

Chabouillet blinked. “Well, he has been pardoned, so … I don’t see why not.”

“Then … yes. I suppose that we are.”

Humming thoughtfully, Chabouillet studied him, his chin propped up on the arm of his chair.

Javert bowed his head, unsettled. “It does not reflect well upon me,” he mumbled. “I know that. But—people are wrong about him.”

“So it would seem,” the man said.

Outside, the bells began to chime the hour.

Chabouillet drummed his fingers on the armrest. “So!” he exclaimed. “Tell me about this Patron Minette fiasco. Your Valjean was involved in it, n’est-ce pas?”

Javert gave a start.

That was it? That was the end of the matter? No talk of disgracing himself, or growing too lenient? No questioning his obedience?

It seemed so.

Javert sat up in his chair, threading his fingers together on his knees. “Yes, well—it all began with this villain Thénardier, you see …”

***

A few weeks after Javert had left, Valjean received an unusual letter in the post.

The envelope was sealed with red wax that bore the official stamp of the Police, and he was taken aback purely by instinct at that, until he remembered once more his own security. He thought, perhaps, it was more paperwork pertaining to his pardon, or some other legal technicality, delayed accidentally. But when he opened it, it contained only two slips of paper, and neither looked terribly official.

The first read thusly:

“Monsieur, I hope you are recovering from your injuries without too much complication. I heard they were rather severe.
You crossed my mind the other day, and it occurred to me that I ought to send you something. It is not in regards to your health, no; it has been in my keeping for some time. I do not really know what to do with it other than give it to you, as you were almost certainly involved in its inception. You will understand, I think, when you read it.”

The letter was unsigned. Curious, Valjean flipped to the second sheet of paper that had been enclosed.

This letter was older—the paper a little more yellowed, more wrinkled. At the top, it read, “A FEW OBSERVATIONS FOR THE GOOD OF THE SERVICE”.

Valjean cocked his head.

“In the first place,” it began, “I beg Monsieur le Préfet to cast his eyes on this.”

Ah, Valjean thought. That explained the sender, anyway.

What followed was a very neat and orderly list of commentary on certain issues in the prisons and with general procedures therein.

As he read it through, Valjean did not understand how this pertained to him at all, save perhaps that someone at the prefecture had seen the article on him in the paper, and been set to pondering over the state of penitentiaries. Still, there was no mention of him anywhere. It was a clerical note, a collection of seemingly random commentary, and little else. He had no idea how he factored into this—until he got to the bottom.

“JAVERT,” it had been signed,

“Inspector of the 1st class.

The Post of the Place du Châtelet.

June 7th, 1832, about one o’clock in the morning.”

It shocked Valjean to see the man’s signature; it shocked him more to see the date. At first, he was merely bewildered that Javert should have written such a thing—especially that he had written it over a year ago. And then the significance of the timestamp sunk in.

June seventh.

June fifth was when he had set off to the barricades to find Marius. The sixth, the death of the revolutionaries, and his own perilous, sordid journey with the boy on his back. That evening, then, was when he had encountered Javert at the mouth of the sewer. And that night ...

The blood drained from his face.

Again he saw Javert walk to the river, staring out at the water for ages, unmoving. Saw him walk, finally, to the station house.

Valjean had thought he’d been going there to make a report.

Evidently, he’d been writing this letter.

And when he had finished, he’d returned to the quay and tried to drown himself.

So, then. He had meant this letter to be his final act on earth: the last thing anyone would hear
from him.

Trembling, Valjean reread it—once, twice—each word meaning something so different now for their context.

“Prisoners, on arriving after examination, take off their shoes and stand barefoot on the flagstones ... Many of them cough on their return to prison. This entails hospital expenses.”

“It is inexplicable why the special regulation of the prison of the Madelonettes interdicts the prisoner from having a chair, even by paying for it ...”

“The prisoners called barkers, who summon the other prisoners to the parlor, force the prisoner to pay them two sous to call his name distinctly. This is a theft.”

“For a broken thread ten sous are withheld in the weaving shop; this is an abuse of the contractor ...”

Javert had never, to Valjean’s knowledge, shown mercy or consideration for the less fortunate, and especially the criminal. It was still fresh in his mind how Javert had been so intent on seeing a sickly, destitute mother put in prison for her own self-defense, even at the potential expense of her child’s life. How little he’d cared for earnest pleas and desperation, or remorse!

Javert put criminals behind bars, and he forgot about them. It was his occupation, and it was all he’d ever seemed to care about. What happened to those people afterward, he likely could not have cared less.

But now … this. This list of things, overlooked little things, that affected prisoners’ lives. No one ever gave a damn about these things. To every level of office involved, they were less than unimportant. But Javert had noticed them. Javert questioned them. Not at first observation, but later, and all at once, as though he had been combing through his judicial memories, and only now had found injustice in them.

It meant that he’d held onto those memories, all that time. Long enough for them to resurface. Why would he have recalled them, especially in that time of turmoil and finality, if they had not, on some deep and hidden level, disquieted him?

Javert ...

That he had found the composure and clarity to write this—that he had felt the need to write this … The way he’d worded it, the observations were a trivial thing, only casually mentioned. But for Javert to make them known in his final hour, in lieu of a suicide note—no, as his suicide note—they must have meant the world to him.

Yet, such small things … Why choose them? Why such little injustices, when far greater ones must have been bothering him?

Casual cruelty.

It was all Valjean could think of. Those little things, they represented the apathy and the injustice of society on the most basic and fundamental level. They hinted at ubiquitous indifference, and the darker things that lay beneath. It was the injustices that went unrecognized that grew to be the most dangerous in time. Valjean knew it well. How a series of unfortunate events could ruin one’s entire life, merely because of a million little occasions of other people’s thoughtlessness. The lesser evils multiplied, until they overwhelmed. And because they were made up of trivial things, society did not recognize their dangers.
Had Javert, who’d never shed a tear for another human soul in his life, suddenly understood this? Likely not. Likely, he had touched upon the idea subconsciously. But what had stirred it? Only Valjean’s actions towards him could have done it. What else?

Javert had insisted Valjean had upended his entire life that night, but Valjean had never realized the extent of it until now. He had thought Javert’s dilemma a simple moral one, a conflict of duty—and, perhaps, of understanding—but this note proved it something so much more.

Javert had suddenly seen convicts as *people*. Cared about their treatment, their welfare, where before he had thought of them only as dogs. What kind of reflection could bring about such revelations? Only an earth-shattering one. And Valjean must have been the one to cause it, even unknowingly.

He had not expected Javert to change when he’d cut the ropes from him that night. Had not done it in exchange for mercy, or special treatment. Yet still, it had caused this uproar in the man’s soul. Caused him to reexamine not only his own ways, but others’ as well.

Javert had, all at once, perceived the great and terrible machine of society—in which he was a cog—and how it ground people up and spat them out as wretched, hateful things. He had seen it, like a brilliant flash of starlight—and been blinded. Thus shaken, he had found himself unmoored in a vast and foreign sea. Alone with his revelation, in a world that would punish him for it.

Where could he turn, in such a world, aware now of himself? Aware of the misery inherent in the very system he’d sworn fealty to? His beliefs must have been rent to piecemeal. His instincts must have warred. To whom could he run, in such a bleak and desperate hour? Who was there to shine a light upon his path?

No one. He had no one.

Valjean felt a chill pass through him, as the tears streamed down his face.

He tried to understand what Javert had felt, in that moment, and found it too enormous to grasp. He knew only that it must have been terrible—a great rending of the soul.

And then it all clicked into place.

He had been there. He had felt that pain of revelation before. He had turned once, and found himself a cruel, regardless man, and startled. Drawn back in horror at himself. The things he’d done! The world had shaped him into something monstrous. He had never intended for it, never desired to harden his heart, but the misery and anger had compounded all around him, molding his helplessness into spite. Before he had known it, those small, insignificant injustices had torn down not only his entire life, but his entire sense of self.

To be iron, and to melt with a single gentle touch! The strife was indescribable. That was what Javert had felt; he was sure of it. That feeling of one’s identity being torn to ribbons. Of being stranded in the dark, and filled with terror at oneself, no longer sure of anything, or worse—sure that you had been wrong. For so, so many years.

That panic, back then—that mind-rendering fear—how had he himself managed to go on? How had he moved past that initial shock? Valjean did not know. Because, he supposed, the Bishop had sworn him to redemption, and he felt that he must follow through.

But Javert had no such promises to keep, or people looking out for him. He had no words on God or reclamation to carry him through the night, nor anyone’s doorstep to pray upon. He had
only the river before him, and the mistakes of his past.

So. He had made a decision.

But before he gave himself up to the void, he took one last action. He wrote a letter. It would never be fully understood, for the sentiments were too convoluted, and the words so very simple—but if it could make an impact on the way things were … If he could, with his last breath, manage to change something for the better in this miserable, desolate world—even if it was just a small thing—perhaps …

Perhaps it would be enough.

***

When Javert opened his door he found Jean Valjean two steps down on the stairwell. Before he could even prompt a question, the man threw his arms around him like a child who’d found their lost dog, and buried his head in his waistcoat.

“You truly are a good man,” Valjean murmured, as though half to himself.

Javert felt all the blood in his body rush to his face. “Valjean, what—” He cleared his throat. “What are you doing?”

“Ah—” The man withdrew with a sudden start, as though he’d only just then realized his impropriety. “N-nothing. Forgive me. Um—” He let out a nervous laugh, rubbing the back of his neck and letting his eyes drift away. He looked like he was desperately searching for a distraction. “Would you, perhaps … Would you like to take a walk along the Seine with me? The leaves are beautiful this time of year.”

Javert raised an eyebrow at him. “You are a strange person, sometimes, do you know that?”

“I am reminded of it very often.”

“Mm.”

“So … will you accompany me?”

Javert gave an intentionally overdramatic sigh and crossed his arms. “I suppose, since I’ve nothing better to do.”

“Ah! Splendid.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Valjean: “WAIT SHIT I FORGOT TO MAKE UP AN EXCUSE FOR COMING
Valjean in NO way intends to ever tell him he read that letter lmao.

An interesting post about Chabouillet and his actual position/historical personage can be found here.

Suggested Listening:

Hoshi Boshi no Hara - Masakatsu Takagi
Jacob Sees Marlena - James Newton Howard
Laura Palmer - Bastille
Life of the Bird - Cinematic Orchestra
Reclamation - Austin Wintory
Wake Your Soul - The Hope Arsenal
**Gifts that Continue to Give**

Chapter Summary

Everyone finds that Christmas is a much more meaningful affair than in years past.

Chapter Notes

Somehow this got a lot longer than I intended it to be, but oh well. Here, have 23 pages of shameless self-indulgent Christmas fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It takes a long time to grow an old friend.”

- John Leonard

***

As the daylight waned from the warmth of early autumn to the brisk, crisp days of late fall, the two men saw each other often. Every Sunday Javert would visit the house on Rue Filles du Calvaire, and Valjean and he would take coffee or tea in some quiet room, and recount the events of the week. Sometimes they read to one another; sometimes they went for a walk. It was pleasantly, blessedly mundane, and they cherished it dearly.

With the Pontmercys’ help, and Valjean’s, Azelma moved into the house on Rue Plumet, where she found herself dwarfed by the size of it all. It was not a particularly large house, but she was its sole occupant, and it felt strange. Reluctantly, she sought out her former employer—the printer M. Lavoie—and pleaded to be allowed to resume her work at his shop. He was quite astounded at her return, and, in fact, somewhat relieved, for he had worried over her safety these past months.

A friend was teaching her how to read, she explained, and so surely he would find her more useful in the days to come. And he did, for Cosette visited Azelma every week, and instructed her in the same manner that Valjean had once done. And so, one education became two, became three, in the way that candles pass their flames to one another.

Valjean came by every so often to care for the garden there, vast as it was for one girl to look after. He would always ask after her health, and she would always bring him something to drink. They grew to feel a sort of fondness for one another—his plain and hers timid. He strove to coax her out of her shell in the same way he tried to coax the neighborhood cat to come near him. (Though he found much more success with the girl than the cat, for the cat still avoided him, and made a point of ignoring his calls.)
October turned to November, and the wind snapped the leaves off the trees one by one, until their branches clawed the cloudy skies like skeletal hands. The ground shimmered with frost in the morning, and people’s breath turned to clouds.

The harvest season was nearing its end.

***

“Papa,” Cosette began as she was helping peel apples one day, “Marius has brought something to my attention.”

Valjean looked up from his pile of perfect, unbroken shavings. “Hm?”

“You are in desperate need of new clothes.”

His eyes strayed for a moment down to his waistcoat. They quickly wandered away. “And why is that?”

“Because the ones you wear are faded, and old.”

Valjean stared at her for a second before returning to his work, raising his eyebrows dismissively. “They are perfectly serviceable,” he said.

“They are perfectly hideous is what they are, and you know it. Why do you think that I hid them all the day of that party?”

“You admit to that, then?”

“Proudly,” she said, putting a hand on her hip. “There is not a scrap of fabric you own that has not been stitched back together three times or more. And their colors don’t suit you at all.”

A frown tugged at the edge of his mouth. “I do not remember teaching you to be so very blunt,” he said.

“La! You made the mistake when you started buying me pretty clothes, and none for yourself. Now I am a baroness, and we are rich, and you do not look the part at all.”

He went quiet. “Cosette,” he began carefully, “has it ever crossed your mind that I may have purposefully dressed to be inconspicuous?”

She pursed her lips. “I suppose that would explain it well enough. But now you’ve foiled your argument, monsieur. You are no longer a wanted man, so what does it matter if you stand out?”

“Mm,” he hummed. “I see. You are going to play that card, are you?”

“Do you have a better hand?”

He let out a low, extended, groan. “Cosette,” he tried again, “You know very well I would not waste money on such frivolous things for myself.”

“Oh, yes! I do indeed. So it’s a pity for you that you’ve given me all that you own, isn’t it? For now I can spoil you as much as I like, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”
Valjean opened his mouth, and promptly clamped it shut again, defeated. “Ah.”

***

Wednesday afternoon saw Cosette dragging her father to a tailor’s shop, and since Marius was in need of a new tailcoat, he ended up joining them as well, sneaking a peek every now and again at some case notes he’d shoved in his breast pocket.

Valjean was deeply unhappy. The poor man suffered bouts of self-consciousness all too often, but holding still while Cosette and the tailor held up samples of fabric to him, and twittered over patterns and thread-count, was a particular sort of torture. He had never stood out in his life; he hated the very idea of it; he wanted no part in the opulent wardrobes the rest of the house cultivated. But Cosette insisted he was a gentlemen of class now, and a wealthy one at that, and he ought to dress like it.

Marius took a less badgering path of persuasion. Valjean was pardoned, now, he pointed out. There was no need for shabby disguises, or purposefully unremarkable attire. He should celebrate his newfound freedom. He should allow himself to use a little of that money he had earned and kept safe for so long. Why should he not? It was only logical.

None of these arguments made any particular effect upon Jean Valjean. He was still just as uncomfortable with the idea of flashy clothes as he’d been before. Some proclivities were hard-pressed to change.

“This one?”

“No.”

“This one.”

“I should think not.”

“Well, what about this?”

“Cosette, it is all rather—too much. Do you—” Here he turned pleadingly to the tailor. “Do you not have anything a little more . . .”

“Drab?” Cosette offered. “Dull? Perhaps something a little more threadbare. Is that what you’re going to ask?”

Valjean went red; his collar became distinctly irritating. “That is not what I—”

“Papa, I am not letting you walk about in the same two ancient waistcoats and the same three pairs of trousers any longer. Don’t think I’m about to buy you clothes to match them. You shall wear bright colors for once, you silly man. I simply demand it.”

“I would prefer . . . something more subdued,” he mumbled as she held up a swatch of vibrant blue to his chest.

“No,” she remarked to herself, paying him no heed as she turned back to the pile of fabric, “that’s definitely not your color. Hm. What about . . . Ah!”
With a prideful grin she pulled another section of cloth out and shoved it against him. “Here! This one definitely suits you.”

Valjean looked down. He felt his heart strangle itself.

The dye was a deep, crimson red. Not quite the orange-red hue of the forçat’s infamous *casque*, but rather, the color it turned when soaked with sweat, or saltwater.[1] Seeing it there upon his breast, terrible visions flashed through his mind. He was seized with a powerful dread.

“You do not like it?” Cosette said innocently.

“Take it off,” he ordered, his voice a husk.

He did not see Marius eyeing him knowingly from the corner.

***

In the end, Valjean got three new waistcoats, four pairs of trousers, two tailcoats, three blouses, and five pairs of stockings, none of which he personally wanted or paid for. (The tailor threw in his choice of three cravats for free, he was so grateful for their patronage.)

Cosette, for her part, got two silk sashes, a pair of beaded slippers, and a lecture from her husband on why their father might have an aversion to the color red.

***

Two weeks into November, Cosette approached her father with timid demeanor that he had not seen in some time. He expected her to ask something of him—permission for something, perhaps, though she was no longer under his roof. However, she only drew a bundle from behind her back, wrapped in burlap.

“It is getting cold outside,” she began, “so I knit you something to keep you warm.”

He gave a start, humbled. “Oh, Cosette, you didn’t—”

“I would have waited to give it to you on Christmas, but there is a lot of bad weather between now and then. And also, I was not sure you would be happy with it.”

“Be happy with it?” he laughed. “My dear—”

“Take it,” she said, bowing her head and pressing him a bundle of sackcloth into his arms.

He cocked her head at her. She was acting very queerly. He didn’t know what she could possibly think she’d done wrong. Perplexed, he unwrapped the cloth.

“Ah—”

“Please don’t be mad,” she murmured.
Inside was a bright red scarf, carefully knitted from thick, soft wool yarn.

“Before you say anything—”

He looked up at her curiously.

“Before you say anything, I know that you do not like the color red. Marius explained it to me.”

He blinked, taken aback.

“But you see,” she explained, her face downcast, “that is why I made it this way. Because—because you should not be made to hate a color. It is ridiculous. And it is cruel. You should not be made to think of such terrible things whenever you see something so common. And besides that, red has many attributes, not just one. It can be a very good color! It can stand for love, and warmth and strength …”

“That is what I want you to think of when you see that color—how much you are loved. So …” Her throat bobbed. “So I thought that I would make you this, and then, when you looked at it, you could think of me, and my love for you, instead of all those horrible things.”

Valjean stared at her as she bit her lip. His gaze fell to the scarf. Slowly, his eyes filled with tears as he examined it. “You are a very thoughtful child, do you know that?” he said, trying not to let his voice break. “Come here.” He leaned forward and embraced her, squeezing her tightly.

“So, then, it is acceptable?” she asked as he pulled away.

“It is wonderful,” he told her. “When I wear it I shall think of you always.”

***

December came to Paris, and with it, the snow. Soon every rooftop was dusted with white, like spilt confectioner’s sugar, and every chimney puffed clouds of smoke into the starry sky. Icicles hung from the gables and gutters, and the gargoyles and saints of Notre Dame grew frozen beards. Halfway through the month, holly sprigs and evergreen boughs began to appear: the only greenery left in the city besides the occasional shrub or clump of ivy.

Birds and children huddled together for heat. The smell of cooking geese, and sweetbreads, and roasting chestnuts filled the streets. Bakers hung gingerbread ornaments in their windows in various festive shapes, and gingerbread crèches sat on their sills between piles of pastries and fruits, tempting in customers from the cold. Every man, woman, and child was bundled up in four layers or more, and their cheeks glowed pink.

December came to Paris, and brought with it winter, but the heart of the city had never been warmer.

***

Javert looped the navy blue scarf around his neck and tugged down the brim of his hat to guard
against the winter chill before reaching for the door.

When he opened it, however, he stopped dead in his tracks, drawing back with a start.

Standing on the doorstep amid softly falling flakes of snow was Jean Valjean, his hand caught mid-air, poised to knock. He was wearing a new coat, Javert noticed, and a bright red scarf was bundled around him, dusted with snow. His hair nearly disappeared against the backdrop of white, and his cheeks were ruddy from the chill. “Oh,” he said. He looked just as surprised as Javert was, and blinked, frozen in place for a moment before letting out a chuckle. Straightening himself, he rubbed the back of his neck with a lopsided grin. “S-sorry,” he apologized, “I thought I’d drop by to see if you were in. But, evidently, you are going out.”

“I can spare a moment,” Javert told him. “I was only going out to buy a few things; it can wait. What’s troubling you?”

“Troubling? Nothing. Do you think I’d only visit if I wanted something from you?”

“No,” Javert sighed, “I suppose not. Come in, then, why don’t you. It’s cold, and you’re letting all the heat out.”

“No, no—” Valjean put up his hands as though surrendering. “It was— I did not wish to bother you. It was a quick thing. I don’t really need to—”

“Oh, hush now.” He held the door open for him. “Get in.”

“If you insist.”

“I harbor an intense dislike for the cold,” Javert informed him, shutting the door behind them, “—and prefer to avoid it whenever possible, even only briefly.”

“Hm.”

“Well then?” Javert turned to him and crossed his arms. “What is it? You weren’t trying to pay my rent again, were you?”

Valjean stiffened. “What? No. Do—do you need me to?”

“I like to pay my debts with my own money, thank you. I have no need of yours. Now tell me, what brings you to my doorstep?”

“Ah.” Valjean’s eyes darted away. “I just …” Clearing his throat, he clasped his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels. “It occurred to me that you might like to, er … Javert, would you join us for Christmas dinner?”

Javert stared at him mutely, struck by surprise.

“I know you are not much one for socializing,” Valjean added, “but when I think that you might not have anyone to spend the holiday with, I— Well, that’s terrible! Nobody should have to be alone on Christmas. Even if you had your portress—which I doubt, seeing as she probably has relatives to visit—it would not be the same. One ought to be with one’s family this time of year. Or at least some friends.”

“But, ah, I am overstepping myself; I did not mean to make it sound like there was anything lacking with the way in which you live, or that I felt obliged to ask you out of pity. I know how you hate charity. No, it was not meant to imply anything at all. Only it doesn’t quite matter; because,
you see, I wasn’t asking this for you. I mean, I am, but that’s not—I want you to be there. It would not feel right if you were not. It wouldn’t … feel complete, so to speak. I don’t know if that makes any sense to you. But I feel that you belong there, at the table with us. Perhaps that is selfish or presumptuous of me, but— Oh, why are you doing that?”

He was referring to the fact that Javert had been beset with a fit of snickering.

Valjean’s complexion now seemed intent on trying to match the color of his scarf. “Ah, God, I should have sent a letter or something. I was thinking about it, but you live so close, and I was passing through and got a bit whimsical. Fictre, I always mince my words around you. I don’t know why. I should have written to you instead, because then I would have actually sounded composed instead of—”

“Stop,” Javert laughing, putting up a hand and hanging his head. “Just stop. You make a fool of yourself the more you talk. You always do. Lord’s sake, Valjean. Of course I’ll go to dinner with you, you idiot.”

Valjean gave a start, his eyes brightening. “You will?”

“If you’re asking, then yes. Where else did you expect I had to be?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think I had prior engagements some place?” He scoffed. “Please. Nobody in their right mind invites a police officer to their dinner table. Especially not one who happens to be me. I know how I come off, trust me. Only a very silly sort of person would invite me anywhere. And you happen to be a very silly sort of man. So I will oblige you—you and your sentiments.”

Valjean’s face went blank. Slowly he narrowed his eyes, cocking his head. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” he said carefully.

Javert let out a sigh, rolling his eyes. He put a hand over his face, rubbing his temples and then pinching the bridge of his nose. “I—” His voice petered off into an incoherent mutter. “Perhaps I have not made myself clear. I would like to go with you to dinner, yes. For personal reasons, and not because I want to make you feel better. I am not good at expressing myself in these matters; forgive me. I did not expect you to ask such a thing. It is … kind of you. So, thank you for that. It would be my—” He gave a puff of air and bowed his head to him a little. “I would be honored to spend the day with you.”

Valjean gazed at him silently for a moment before a grin broke out on his face. “Really? Thank you! I’m glad.”

Before Javert knew what was happening Valjean had embraced him.

Sure that most of his blood was now situated in his face, he let himself, though flustered, relax in the man’s grip. “Do you, ah … Do you want to accompany me to the market?” he muttered.

“I would be delighted.”

***
Ten days later saw Javert gazing out at the snow-capped hedgerow in the entryway of the Gillenormand estate, his breath puffing out in little misted clouds. He did not notice the man creeping up on him.

All of a sudden he was grabbed from behind and twirled about by his waist. He gave a yelp of surprise and tried to push the offender away, but, laughing, Valjean only fought to reclaim him.

Grappling with one another in dizzying revolutions, they lost their balance and toppled unceremoniously into the snow.

Javert sat up with a start, a scowl on his face. “What the hell was that for?” he demanded.

“Calme-toi,” Valjean chuckled, brushing the snow off himself as he grinned at him. “I was only teasing.”

“Teasing? What are you, an infant? You’re a grown man, Valjean!”

The man paid him little mind. “Ah,” he sighed to himself satisfactorily, “I’m not cold anymore now.”

Javert’s eyes lit up with fury. He whipped his head around to glare at him. “Do you mean to tell me you did that just to warm yourself up?”

Valjean looked taken off guard by his anger for a second. Then a lopsided grin tugged at the edge of his lips, and he tried to suppress a laugh.

“You ass!” Javert raged, pushing him back into the snow and looming over him threateningly. “I take it back; you really are a child!”

Under the weight of his piercing stare Valjean only laughed mirthfully to himself. He gazed up at him with a serene and mischievous smile, his cognac eyes bright. He was the picture of jubilance, and all of it was directed at Javert.

Javert felt his face grow hot. Seeing Valjean looking like that—looking at him like that—made something in his stomach flutter and filled him with a sort of passionate rage. Clenching his teeth and growling, he started shoving snow in the man’s face, rubbing it into his hair in a fury.

Valjean laughed harder at this, twisting beneath him and putting his arms up in front of his face in a half-hearted attempt to defend himself.

The man’s amusement only served to further enrage him.

It sounded like Valjean was trying to protest, but was laughing too hard to be coherent. His legs kicked out aimlessly in the snow as he rolled onto his side, curling into a ball.

“Javert!” cried a voice from the doorway.

They both looked up to find Cosette staring at them indignantly.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “Stop that!”

Javert returned her gaze blankly before reverting to his anger. “He started it!” he accused, pointing at her father.

“I don’t give a fig who started it! You two get in here this instant. It’s freezing!”
“Cosette,” Valjean managed to say, “We were only—”

“Don’t make me come out there!”

The two men exchanged a glance, Valjean grinning, Javert scowling.

“Ah,” said Valjean sheepishly, “I think we’d best obey.”

Javert narrowed his eyes at him. “I am not through with you, monsieur,” he growled as they rose.

***

When they went to hang up their coats, Javert faltered. He was not sure of the proper order of things, but he knew that if he left his coat there with the presents still inside of it then he’d have to excuse himself at some point to retrieve them, and it would all be rather awkward. “Ah, um, before we go …” He fumbled about his inner pockets and pulled forth the two small books he had bought, tied together with string. “Here,” he said, not sure why he felt so embarrassed as he shoved them at him.

Valjean took them with a surprised expression. “Oh—Javert! You didn’t have to get me anything,” he said as a bashful smile broke out on his face. “You’ve given me so much this past year.”

“Like what?” Javert said, genuinely confused.

“My freedom, for one thing. But …” He trailed off as he untied the string and appraised the books. He cocked his head, eyes wandering the covers.

“I tried to find something to suit your taste,” Javert told him. “I haven’t read them myself. I was, ah, told that they were good. Of course, then again, the proprietor has reason to lie on that account, but Lavoie seems a decent man, and hopefully you shall find them to your—”

He stopped himself, for Valjean was snickering.

“What?”

“It is nothing,” Valjean said, “It is just—you are so very full of doubt. I shall like them whatever they are.”

“Why so? That would be undiscerning.”

“I shall like them because you have given them to me,” Valjean said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, and Javert was childishly naive for not seeing it.

“Well—you are too sentimental in many regards. But I digress. I got these for you as well.” He fished in his coat and clumsily withdrew a small, dirty burlap sack. “Here. Flower bulbs,” he said, handing it to Valjean.

The man brightened. “Ah! What kind?”

“I ... do not know very much about flowers, so I picked the most recognizable,” he admitted,
rubbing the back of his neck and glancing away.

Valjean cocked his head and gave him a questioning, lopsided grin.

Javert let out a cough. “They are irises,” he muttered.

Valjean erupted into laughter.[2]

Javert felt himself flush.

It took a good while for Valjean to reign himself in. “Ah,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye, “Of course they are irises. Of course they are. Do you know what color?”

“Um—no. I didn’t think to ask, to be honest.”

“Then we shall have to wait and see,” Valjean said with an affable shrug. He paused, look around himself, and went to rub his neck. “Er, I would give you your gifts now as well, but, actually, we usually exchange them after we eat.”

“Oh— Sorry.”

“No, not at all,” he assured. “It is well. Come, take off your coat, and let us see how supper is coming along.”

***

The Gillenormands’ house was decked with holly and evergreen boughs, upon which hung red and gold ribbons tied into bows. Little ornaments had been pinned to them throughout. The banister was wrapped with such decorations, and smaller ones adorned the sconces and portraiture.

Valjean caught Javert staring at the greenery as he led him down the hall. “They decorate the place beautifully, do they not?”

“They can afford to,” Javert remarked absentmindedly.

Valjean’s lips twitched back, but he hid it from him.

Still, the man seemed to realize what he’d said. “I mean, yes; it is very beautiful.”

It was a private occasion, so the family was setting up their usual, smaller dining room. The table had been made up just as prettily as the rest of the house, with evergreen boughs in the center and brass candlesticks, all dressed with dried orange slices and berries. Here and there a few cinnamon sticks poked out, and the air smelled strongly of them—as well as baked goods, and cooking meat. Combined with the scent of pine, the aroma was heavenly.

“Dinner should be ready shortly, monsieur,” Nicolette said as she entered the room. “But in the meantime, you may help yourselves to this.” She set a large silver serving bowl down on the table and removed the lid from it before disappearing back into the kitchen. A rich, fruity smell wafted up from it. Cloves, berries, cinnamon sticks, orange slices, and various other things floated on top of the golden-brown beverage within.

“Would you like some mulled cider, Javert?” Valjean asked.
Javert dipped his head.

“It was made with apples from the tree out back,” Valjean told him as he ladled out a mug.
“Careful; it’s hot.”

Javert ignored him and took a long sip, humming in appreciation. “Oh, that is good,” he said, as though surprised. “What are the little—the little …?”

Valjean followed the wave of his finger to one of the spices in the bowl. “Oh!” he laughed, “That’s star anise. It tastes a little like liquorice.”

“What the hell is liquorice?”

“Ah—rather like … fennel, perhaps?”

“I’m not sure that I know what that tastes like.”

“It’s no matter,” Valjean chuckled. “So long as you like it.”

“It is good,” he repeated,shrugging and taking another sip.

“Good. Would you like to join me up on the balcony?” Valjean asked him, pouring out himself a mug as well.

“Sure.”

***

They leaned out over the balcony, gazing wistfully at the snow-capped garden below, their elbows resting on the rail. Steam rose from their mugs and wreathed their faces, the heat of the stoneware warming their hands against the frigid air.

In the distance, the setting sun shone orange-gold, turning gradually more pink.

Valjean let out a sigh. His breath puffed out before him like a dissipating cloud. “You know,” he said softly, “I would not have lived to see another Christmas. I would not have lived to see any of this.” Here he turned to look up at Javert, solemn. “I owe you everything I have.”

Javert considered him. “Nonsense,” he said, looking back at the view. “There is no debt between friends. Besides which, I am still … I still regret the way I treated you, last year.”

“Do not trouble yourself over that,” Valjean told him. “I did not expect you to be grateful. And I never expected us to be friends.”

“But you … wanted that, did you not?”

Valjean gave a start, glancing at him in surprise.

“You treated me amicably long before I ever returned the sentiment,” Javert went on. “And you said—you once asked if, had we not quarreled in Montreuil, had I not suspected you … we might have become friends. Well—you cut yourself off, then. But that is what you meant to say, was it not? That we might have been friends?”
“Er—” Valjean slowly turned pink. “Perhaps, yes. But I knew it was not to be.”

“And yet,” said Javert, “here we are.”

A timid smile crept over the man’s lips. “Yes … so we are.” Then more quietly, to himself, “So we are.” His gaze lost focus as it drifted out over the garden. He was quiet for a long time. “I think … I have more to be grateful for this year than any other year I’ve been alive,” he finally mused. “Isn’t that strange? And just this last spring I thought my life was ending. So much has changed that I can barely comprehend it. The world is entirely different for me.”

“I suppose I could say the same,” Javert remarked.

“Oh?” Valjean studied him ponderously.

Javert gave the slightest indication of a nod, crossing his arms over the railing. He narrowed his eyes in the slow, contented manner of cats that feel at peace.

“You do … seem very different from the man I knew a year ago,” Valjean confessed.

Javert furrowed his brow. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, you are still the man I have always known, only … kinder. More considerate. Softer, in a way—a good way, that is.”

“How can I be the same if I am changed?”

“Well—” Valjean hesitated. “What I mean to say is, I think you always had those things within you. The potential for them, anyway. You just … hadn’t realized it yet.”

Javert made a humming noise. “That is … an interesting turn of phrase. I am not so sure of it myself.”

“I am,” said Valjean.

“Mm.”

Valjean gazed at him thoughtfully. At the soft, pensive look on his face as he took in the view, his mind somewhere else. The light caught the strands of silver in his hair, and made them shine.

They were so changed, Valjean thought. So very different from the men they used to be. And it should have been impossible, but here they were, together—sharing Christmas. Sharing silence. Companions. How had it come to be? It seemed that God had a strange sense of humor.

And yet, Valjean felt, it was right. That they shared such a turbulent history—that they had once been such adversaries—it made what they had now so much more valuable. So much richer, and deep. There was no one on earth that meant the same to them as they did to each other. And every little thing—every gesture, every word—was so important. Was to be treasured, in light of their past. Because they had come so far. So, so far.

Carefully, Valjean reached out, and placed his hand over Javert’s, where it rested on the rail. Gave it a meaningful squeeze, and felt its warmth. “Thank you,” he murmured, “for being my friend.”

Javert paused, still looking out at the dying sun. Slowly, he squeezed back. Drooped his head. “And … thank you for being mine,” he returned. “It is a better gift than I deserve.” He withdrew
his hand, glancing away as he put the mug of cider to his lips, as though to hide behind it. “I know I am not … the most easy man to befriend. So, that you put up with me—given our history, especially—is kind of you.”

“Put up with you!” Valjean laughed. “As though I didn’t cherish you.”

Javert’s expression dropped to that of a frog’s as he turned to look over at him. “Well,” he muttered helplessly, “you are—a fool, so …”

Valjean only chuckled at him. “You are too hard on yourself.”

Javert made to reply, but thought better of it. Instead, he drowned his grumbles in cider and averted his eyes.

***

When they returned downstairs they found dinner being brought out from the kitchens, and everyone taking their seats.

Azelma was there along with the rest of the family, including cousin Theodule, who was wearing a regular outfit of formalwear for once instead of his uniform. He sat beside his aunt, who in turn sat beside her father.

A massive roast turkey sat on the main platter, filled with stuffing and wreathed with cranberries and glazed carrots. Beside it was a large bowl of mashed potatoes and a gravy boat. There was also a tray of freshly baked bread made with rosemary and thyme, another of roasted winter squash, and two dishes of butter.

Javert rarely ate so well, and he savored every bite of it, but was loathe to let it be known besides what was polite. “It is very good,” was all he would say about it, and then quickly busy himself with his drink. In this manner he kept himself occupied enough to avoid nearly all conversation, for he was not the best at idle chatter, and he still felt out of place in the house, despite the fact that he’d been coming there for over half a year. This feeling was particularly enhanced by the presence of Azelma, with whom he had exchanged no words, but many an accidental glance.

Besides these things, the dinner was delightful—right up until M. Gillenormand decided to start a new subject of conversation.

“You are a man of few words, Inspector,” he observed, giddy and perhaps slightly drunken. “I like that about you. How do you usually celebrate the day?”

“What?” Javert asked.

“Christmas, man; Christmas! How do you normally celebrate it?”

“I …” Everyone’s attention was suddenly on him, and he had no idea what to say. “—don’t, er …”

“You don’t what?”
“I don’t … really … do anything particular for it,” he admitted.

God, why couldn’t he just lie this once? Why couldn’t he just say he went to mass or something?

“Don’t do anything for it!” the old man exclaimed. “Why on earth not?”

Javert felt his throat close up. What explanation could he give? That he wasn’t technically a Christian? That he had never been baptized? That where he came from, talk of god was more a passing thing that owed no real allegiance to the books of men? He could not bring himself to be dishonest, but nor could he bear to bring his history into the light of day. “I don’t … have anyone to celebrate it with,” he finally said.

Everyone stared at him.

“Well that’s a rubbish reason,” Gillenormand remarked, making a sweeping gesture. “Look at all the people you have here!”

“Ah—” Javert cast a furtive glance around the table, his face hot. His eyes landed on Valjean, who was sitting next to him with a look of nervous worry.

Their eyes met, and for a second he swore Valjean understood the social peril he was in. Then the man smiled reassuringly at him, and the tension dissolved.

“He is quite right, you know,” Valjean said. “You are not so alone in this world, anymore.”

The other guests nodded their heads satisfactorily, pleased at this quick resolution, but Javert knew they did not understand the significance of those words.

That was something only Valjean and he knew.

***

After a dessert of fig pudding and tarts, they retired to the great room, where two divans and a number of armchairs had been set up in front of the fireplace. Piles of presents sat on tables to either side, along with bowls of roast chestnuts and various sweets.

Good lord, Javert thought—these people had so much food.

“Who shall we start with?” Cosette wondered aloud as she took her seat.

“Let us start with father,” Marius said, nodding sagely to himself.

Valjean hesitated. “Ah, actually, I’ve already gotten some presents today, so—I should like to repay the favor, first.”

“Oh, I see—go on then.”

Valjean dug through one of the piles and withdrew a small package, holding it out to Javert with an affectionate grin. “This is for you.”

Javert took it self-consciously, settling back on the divan as Valjean sat down next to him. He
sensed everyone’s eyes on him again, and though he was aware that was how it was supposed to be, he still felt abashed at it.

When he drew back the lid of the paper box he found three squares of silk cravats neatly folded inside. One was a pale blue, with a dark blue pattern of star-like crosses; another was the reverse, and the last was a silvery grey with white.

Javert’s lips parted unconsciously as he felt the smoothness of them. He only owned two cravats and both were plain linen, so these ones were finer and more beautiful than he had ever had.

“Look under them,” Valjean told him.

Javert obeyed, and discovered a pair of leather gloves underneath.

“They’re lined with rabbit fur,” Valjean said, “so they should be much warmer than your usual pair.”

“Thank you,” Javert murmured in wonder, oblivious now to the family’s attention.

“They may need to be tailored, so I bought the larger size just in case,” the man added. “But if they do need resizing, I’ll pay for that too.”

Javert dipped his head, trying them on. “That is thoughtful of you, but it appears that they fit me just fine.”

Valjean gave him a relieved grin. “Oh, good.”

The Gillenormands and Theodule had their turns next—they truly meant to be methodical about it, Javert observed—then Cosette, and Azelma, and Marius; and then everyone had received a gift.

He expected them to start again with Valjean, but this was not the case.

“Javert!” Marius exclaimed. “I’ve got something for you.” He held out a moderately sized oblong box, wrapped in pale blue gift-dressing paper.


“What do you mean ‘why’? It is Christmas.”

“I know very well what day it is, but I don’t see why you—”

“Javert,” Valjean chastised under his breath, elbowing him in the rib. “Take it, don’t question it. For goodness’ sake.”

Grumbling, Javert frowned at him and begrudgingly complied, letting Marius shove the box into his arms. He nearly dropped it for surprise of its weight. “What in—?”

Setting it down on the table, he meticulously unwrapped it, pulling apart the ribbon and carefully unfolding the paper, putting them off to the side. A thick wooden box was revealed, the contents of which he could not discern. He narrowed his eyes. It already reeked of expense, if the dove-tailed joints and lacquer were any indication.

“What on earth did you …?”

“Open it!” the boy insisted.
Javert felt uneasy at the sight of his grin. Slowly, he lifted the lid. His eyes bulged.

Inside, couched in wine-colored velvet among various accessories, lay a pair of silver dueling pistols, masterfully engraved. Flowers and foliage wreathed the grip and barrel, in the Turkish style. The guns had some history of use, for the engravings were worn smooth here and there on the grip, and their crevices bore tarnish—but it hardly mattered. They were one of the most beautiful things Javert had ever seen. He picked one up and studied it in amaze.

“Do you like them?” Marius ventured.

Javert failed to respond. The look in his eyes as he appraised them, however, was answer enough.

“I found them at an arms dealer,” the boy told him. “They are not the most recent design, but I thought them very handsome. The salesman said they have scratch-rifling, though it may be hard to tell.”

Still, Javert was silent. He spared no glance at him, testing the weight of the guns, and their firing mechanisms, in rapt fixation. Nearly every inch of them was covered in ornate scrollwork. The silver and steel had been polished to a brilliant shine, and the wooden stocks were richly stained. They were purpose-built guns, made with special care to be more reliable and accurate than the simple holster pistol, with spurs on the trigger guards, saw handles, and platinum-lined touch holes.

“You may think it excessive,” Marius began after a moment, “but really it is nothing. I have owed you a pair of pistols for ages, now. And you have been so very good to us.”

Finally Javert turned to look at him—and promptly dropped his gaze to the floor. “This is, ah …” He waved the pistol lackadaisically at the floorboards, deliberating on his choice of words. “This is very considerate of you.”

“Not at all,” the boy returned.

Javert inspected the gun one last time, and then carefully laid it back with its twin and closed the lid of the box, still awestruck.

“It is papa’s turn now,” Cosette proclaimed as they sat down, already sifting through the pile of gifts closest to her and drawing one out.

“Ah? For me? But my dear,” Valjean said as she passed it to him, “you already knit me a scarf.”

“Bah!” she laughed. “Do you think I would only give you one present? And have nothing for you on Christmas day? Silly man.”

He unwrapped the package to reveal a set of handkerchiefs, each embroidered with his initials in one corner—‘JV’—and an intricate border of flowers in various colors. There were four altogether, all different.

“Oh,” he breathed, “These are beautiful, Cosette …”

“I wanted to make you new ones, because all your old ones had the wrong name,” she explained. “And now you have new kerchiefs to match your new wardrobe! You shall look very proper and handsome.”

“Merci,” he chuckled softly, running his thumb over the stitch-work. “You have done a
marvelous job of it.”

“Do you recognize the flowers?”

“Well, let us see … This is thistle, obviously, and this one is … foxtail?”

She nodded happily.

“And these are …” He cocked his head. “Are these bindweed, or …?”

“They’re morning glories.”

“Oh! I see. And these are wild roses, yes?”

“Very good!” she said, turning to grin at her husband. “He is so very good with plants, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” the boy agreed, smiling slightly into his drink.

“And Javert!” Cosette exclaimed, reaching for another, similarly sized package, “I made you something as well!” She handed it to him with all the jubilance of Father Christmas.

“You are breaking the order,” Marius observed.

Cosette shot him a frown. “Oh, pish,” she said, pursing her lips.

“Ah—” Javert took the package with a measure of embarrassment, surprised. “Th-thank you.” A faint warmth spread through his cheeks as he stared down at it.

“Go on, then!” she coaxed. “Papa said you liked blue, so I made them all blue. I hope that’s all right?”

All right …? he thought dumbly as he opened the gift.

There were three handkerchiefs inside, all embroidered like Valjean’s—only, with patterns of stylized leaves instead of flowers. He recognized oak and laurel, but could not place the other one—perhaps elm, or birch.

A knot formed in his throat as he gazed at them, the letter ‘J’ in their corners so carefully stitched.

It was such a personal thing. The girl must have spent hours upon hours sewing them. Planning out the design, threading and knotting the string, over and over … Perhaps pricking her fingers. And all the while—possibly—thinking of him. He did not know what to do with that level of thoughtfulness.

“These are, um … You are very talented,” he mumbled.

She beamed. “Thanks! You like them, then?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad.”

“Well,” sighed Marius, “How about we do father again and then skip them the next round, eh? Then it will be slightly more fair.”
Valjean let out a laugh. “All right.”

“Here, this is from me.” Marius reached behind his chair and took a large rectangular gift off the table, handing it over to him.

It looked to be very heavy. Valjean’s eyebrows rose as he tore off the gift paper.

It was some thick tome, a pale beige, with colored depictions of flowers embossed into the leather cover. *The Flora of the Environs of Cauteretz*, it read on the spine in gilt lettering.

Valjean loosed a wondering breath, flipping through the pages eagerly. “Oh, the illustrations are so detailed,” he murmured.

“Yes, it cost quite a bit of money to make,” Marius said. His eyes wandered to the floor. “Nearly bankrupted him, really.”

“Hm?” Valjean looked up at him curiously.

“Not that many were printed, and it is no longer on the market, so it took me awhile to find one. But I wanted you to have a copy. It was Mabeuf’s.”

“Mabeuf’s?” Valjean echoed.

“Yes, it was his life’s work. He poured nearly all his assets into making it. It was somewhat popular for a time, but that died down after the July Revolution, and the profits he reaped were terribly meager in the end. He ended up having to sell the illustration plates for the copper, just to get by.”

The boy let out a sad scoff. “I would have bought a copy from him, but I was so poor back then I could barely afford to eat. His sales were so sporadic and pitiful that he once tried to give me a copy for free, just because I was his friend—but I couldn’t bear to take it without paying, when he was starving too.” He paused, and then spoke, seemingly to himself: “Well, I have paid for one now.”

Valjean looked down at *The Flora*. Back to him. Back to the book. He looked like he was about to say something, but Marius cut him off.

“He was a gentle man, who loved gardening and books with all his soul, much like yourself. It seemed only right that you should have this. I think … I think you would have been very good friends, if you had only been given the chance.”

Valjean furrowed his brow, contemplating the tome in his hands. He ran his thumb over the cover. “Marius, I—I am humbled, truly. Thank you. I will treat it with the greatest of care.”

The room fell silent.

“Well!” M. Gillenormand exclaimed, “let us not be so damn glum, eh? It is Christmas.”

Azelma glanced over at him with an awkward sounding laugh.

Mlle. Gillenormand elbowed him discreetly in the ribs.

“No,” Marius sighed, “he is right. I have dampened the mood. Let us return to our merriment.” His eyes strayed to the remaining gifts. “Whose turn is it?”

“I’ve lost track,” said Cosette. “How about yours?”
“Yes, wipe the frown from his face,” Gillenormand agreed, popping a chestnut into his mouth.

“Here, this is from me,” Cosette said as she handed her husband a gift.

Inside was an amber brown waistcoat embroidered all over with laurel leaves in golden thread.

“Oh, it’s lovely!” he remarked, holding it up in the light.

“I had the tailor consult your previous measurements, so it would be ready to wear,” Cosette explained. “That way, I could work on it with certainty.”

“What!” Marius exclaimed. “You did all this?”

She grinned proudly at him. “Every stitch. Besides the tailoring, of course.”

“Magnificent,” he praised. And just like that he’d forgotten his gloom. “Your poor little fingers; you’ve worked so hard for us all.”

She laughed as he kissed her hands.

Their revelry lasted the rest of the evening, all of them at ease, filled with pleasant thoughts and hearty food. They all drank, and indulged in sweets, and chattered happily to themselves, lounging around the hearth and exchanging presents and stories long into the night.

Valjean and Javert remained relatively quiet, content to listen and watch everyone else. Now and again they shared a satisfied, reassuring glance, the light flickering on their faces, expressions soft.

By the time the hearth was filled with the glowing embers of all the logs they’d burnt through, everyone was half asleep in their seats.

After a long period of nothingness, Javert checked his watch. It was ten thirty-five. “I should be going,” he mumbled, not wishing to rouse himself in the slightest.

Valjean looked over at him. “No,” he begged drowsily, “stay. You’ll never be able to find a cab at this hour on Christmas.”

Javert groaned his displeasure and conflict. “But—”

“It is freezing out there, Javert,” Valjean interjected. “And it’s been snowing all night. You don’t want to go out in this. Besides, it—it is Christmas. No one wants you to leave.”

Javert only grumbled to himself despairingly, glancing around.

“Don’t be rash,” said Valjean. “It’s no trouble. You can sleep in the guest room.”

Drawing in a breath, Javert let out a long, begrudging sigh. “If you insist.”

***

Most of the house had already retired when Valjean led Javert to the guest room. The servants had gone to sleep—worn out from the day’s preparations, no doubt—so Valjean changed the sheets
on the guest bed himself, tucking them under the end of the mattress and fluffing the goose feather pillow dutifully.

“I enjoyed myself immensely tonight,” he remarked with a far-off grin as they stood before the door in the hall. “Did you?”

Javert gave him a hesitant nod. “It was a little—a little too much, perhaps. For me. I am not used to it. But—nevertheless, I am happy. It was good of you to invite me here.”

“I could hardly do otherwise,” said Valjean. “The day would not have been complete without you.” He looked up at him fondly for a moment. Without warning, he clasped the front of Javert’s shirt, stood on his toes, and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Merry Christmas, Javert.”

“Ah—” Javert’s face warmed. “M—Merry Christmas,” he mumbled.

Valjean smiled softly at him, giving his hand a squeeze before turning to go. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Javert returned. And he did not know why, but he felt absolutely frazzled.

Perhaps it was the wine.

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Prisoners of the bagnes during this period wore loosely fitting red shirts, known as *casaques rouges*, whose color, reminiscent of fire and blood, served to mark them as convicts, much the same way the black and white-striped or bright orange uniforms are associated with prisoners today. They were made of coarse and uncomfortable wool, but it was the color that was the most punishing aspect of them.

[2] Irises are the national flower of France, and have represented French royalty since the 13th century. A stylized version of them (fleur-de-lis) is used as the country’s insignia and national emblem. It is the one flower that would be literally impossible for Javert not to recognize.

Chapter End Notes

**Javert, externally:** "Uhhh ... these are like ... pretty cool I guess"

**Javert, internally:** I’VE NEVER OWNED SOMETHING THIS NICE IN MY WHOLE LIFE
KolorfulDreams (aka randomart-lostartist made fanart of Javert.

Piierogis drew art for this chapter!!

Quick historical note: Christmas trees were not a thing yet so yeah

If you're a history buff I would encourage you to read PrudencePaccard's informative post about the uniforms of the bagnes here.

Conversely, here's a post about the guard's uniforms.

Suggested Listening: (AKA, lemme just dump a bunch of Christmas songs on you)

Bramasole - Christopher Beck

Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248 - Sinfonia in G - Gargia Navarro: Stuttgart Radio Syphony Orchestra (Bach)

Christmas Sweet: I Saw Three Ships - Mannheim Steamroller

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen (Traditional) - California Guitar Trio

Good Kind Wenceslas - Loreena McKennitt

In the Bleak Midwinter - Loreena McKennitt

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring - Kitaro

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence - California Guitar Trio

Midnight Clear - The Trans-Siberian Orchestra

Pure Imagination - Anthony Newley & Leslie Bricusse

Reminiscence - Satoshi Takebe

The First Noel - The Trans-Siberian Orchestra

The Seasons - Loreena McKennitt

Snow - Loreena McKennitt

The Stockford Carol - Loreena McKennitt

We Three Kings - Mannheim Steamroller

What Child is This (Greensleeves) - Schawkie Roth & Deborah Henson-Conant

Winter - Vivaldi
The Town the Sea Forsook

Chapter Summary

Valjean and Javert go on a trip with Cosette for Easter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery.”

-J.K. Rowling

***

Springtime is notorious for its rainstorms, and even though it was barely a week into March, it was pouring like nobody’s business. Everyone that could help it was staying indoors, safe and dry, with a fire in the hearth. Cosette’s robin was tucked up in its hole in the garden wall, backed as far into the nest as it could go, with its feathers fluffed.

In a much similar fashion, not too far away, Jean Valjean was reading a book, curled up in the window seat with a cup of tea at his side. It was getting late into the evening, but there was still sufficient light to read by, if one pressed themselves against the glass—and so he did, holding the pages close to his face.

He was so absorbed in the story that he did not hear the porter come in, and so, when the man tapped him on the shoulder, he gave a start.

“Monsieur, you have a visitor at the door.”

Valjean blinked, putting the book down on the cushion. “Oh? In this weather?”

“Yes—at the back door.”

Bewildered, Valjean headed downstairs and took a left towards the door that opened into the garden, not understanding why anyone would have taken the trouble to walk around the house instead of going in through the front.

When he opened the door, he found Javert standing on the flagstones, sopping wet and absolutely miserable. He looked like a drowned cat.

There was no substantial canopy over the back door, so the rain continued to soak him undeterred. He bore it helplessly, a forlorn expression on his face.

“May I come in?” he pleaded.

“My parapluie blew out,” the man lamented, slipping into the room as Valjean stepped aside and shut the door behind him.

“Ah! The wind broke it?”

“Snapped the ribs off the shaft,” Javert said. “It was beyond repair.” He hesitated by the door, seemingly afraid to trail water through the house, lest it warp the floorboards. A puddle began to form at his feet. “I would not—” He put his head in his hand. “I would not have done this, only … my portress is absent this week, and it is late, and I …”

“There is no need for such modesty,” Valjean assured him. “Did I not say that you were welcome here at any time?”

“Still, this is … I could not give you notice—”

“It is perfectly well. Now take off your coat, poor man. You are drenched. We shall have the servants heat you a bath, and I’ll get you some dry clothes.”

“Thank you,” Javert mumbled, hanging his head.

“But why did you not go in through the front?” Valjean wondered aloud.

Javert frowned sheepishly at the floor. “I—did not wish to be seen.”

***

Rain continued to spatter against the windowpanes as Javert sank back into the bathwater. The day’s light was nearly gone; the room was lit with a few candles, flickering dimly. Outside, thunder rumbled in the distance.

He closed his eyes, letting the warmth seep into his limbs, his long hair billowing out around his shoulder blades as the goose pimples faded from his flesh.

They had a proper tub at this house—long, and made of brightly polished copper—and Javert had rarely ever had the pleasure of being able to lie back in one like this. It had been a long day, and he was tired. He could almost fall asleep here. Just like this, with the heat driving out the cold from his bones …

He realized, after a moment, that his mind had drifted back to when he’d fallen asleep in Valjean’s arms, in much the same state of weariness as this. Fallen asleep in a washtub, soaking wet, but finally able to rest.

At least, he reflected, he could recall enough to know that Valjean had not stripped him naked for that. The idea of it all was embarrassing enough to begin with.

Still, he could not help but admit that the memory comforted him—loathe though he was at the prospect. No one had ever shown him such compassion before in his life. Nor, perhaps, patience.

In the beginning, he’d been terrified of it—repulsed, confused. He’d told himself he hated it, because he believed that he must—but in reality, he’d only been afraid of it—of the foreignness of it, and his own powerlessness. He had let pride, and fear, cloud his mind. That was why every little
thing the man did had infuriated him. Why Javert had swatted his hand away, and turned his back on him, trying to hide his pain.

But he had long ago learned to let go of such things. To be honest with himself.

And the truth was, he appreciated it more than anything. Those kindnesses, that thoughtfulness—they humbled him greatly. And made him feel … valued. Cared for.

Loved.

He supposed that was the appeal in having friends. They made you feel worthy of such things, even if you didn’t quite believe it. Convinced you of your own potential. Gave you a sense of security.

He had never really understood that, before. But he had never really had a friend before, or trusted anyone enough to let them get so close. It was frightening, to allow someone to know him so intimately—but, in a way, relieving.

That was what Valjean did to him, he thought. The man brought him relief—like a hot bath on a cold night.

Sighing, he sat up and started scrubbing himself clean.

He realized, after awhile, why the smell of the soap was so familiar—it was the same scent of lavender he occasionally caught a whiff of on Valjean. It smelled like summer, and the promise of warmth.

He paused, staring at the bar of it he held in his hand. A thought occurred to him, then, about the soap, and the tub, and the room as a whole—and he could swear the bathwater had suddenly grown hotter.

***

When he returned, his hair towelled off, and wearing clothes which were slightly too short for him, Javert found Valjean kindling the fire in the guest room, with a freshly made pot of tea on a tray by the chairs.

“Do you feel better?” the man asked, looking up at him as he tossed in a log.

Javert bowed his head. “Much; thank you.”

Valjean nodded and began to pour out a cup of tea. “I hope you shall not catch a cold from this,” he remarked, handing it to him. “Have you eaten?”

“Well—” Javert hesitated. “I had a late lunch.”

“You ought to eat something more,” Valjean told him, making a cup for himself and stirring in a spoonful sugar. “The cold saps your strength. I can fetch you something from the kitchen, if you wish. I’m sure there are still things left over from dinner down there.”

“I would not be averse to it, if it does not trouble you.”
The man scoffed and cast him a quizzical grin. “You know very well it shall not.”

After Valjean had brought him a bowl of reheated stew, and Javert had finished the most of it, Valjean began to take on a melancholy, pensive air.

He did not notice Javert studying him—the way he watched the flames, eyes distant, expression shifting anxiously now and again.

Javert was almost unable to bear the silence any longer when the man finally spoke.

“Javert,” he said slowly, “What are you doing, these next few weeks?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Why?”

The man seemed hesitant, unable to meet his gaze. “If you would permit it, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Oh? What?”

“Would you … accompany me to Montreuil?”

“Montreuil!” he exclaimed with a start. “Montreuil-sur-Mer? Are you serious?”

“Gravely so, I fear.”

Javert fumbled for words. “What— Why would you—? I thought you would never wish to set foot in that place again, after all that happened there!”

“Yes, well, that may be true,” Valjean sighed. “It will not be easy for me. But Cosette …” He stared fixedly at the flames as they licked the air. “I never told her of her mother before I was arrested,” he explained. “In the jailhouse, I—thought I was going to die, so I let some things slip. Now that Cosette knows about her, she keeps asking me questions. And I don’t know how much longer I can keep the answers from her. She is a woman, now; she has been through enough to understand. I feel it is only right that we visit her mother’s grave, and pay our respects. It will give them both closure.”

“I want to do this thing to make peace, you understand. But, I am not strong enough on my own. That town … For me, it’s—” He bit his lip. “Well. To go back there would be hard. So— So, would you accompany me? I think I could manage to do it, if you were by my side.” He paused, and when Javert did not reply, said “I know it is not an insignificant thing to ask, what with the events that occurred between us there—”

“I’ll do it.”

Valjean’s head shot up to look at him in wonder. “You will? Truly?”

“Yes.”

A weak, relieved smile broke out on his face. “Thank you. Thank you, mon ami. I am very grateful for it.”

“Mm,” Javert grunted, scratching at the edge of the armrest with newfound unease. “It is not going to be a pleasant affair.”

“No, it will likely not be. But it seems the right thing to do.”
Javert paused, furrowing his brow at the fire and thinking of all the terrible possibilities the trip might present. “What will you do if someone recognizes you?”

“Nothing, I suppose,” Valjean sighed, looking just as uncomfortable as he. “No harm can come of it, now.”

“But you do not wish to be recognized, of course.”

“No. It would be … I would not wish to cause a scene there. I shall keep as low a profile as I can.”

Cause a scene? Javert thought. As if that’s what really plagued you. It was the shame of it all, and the fear, that would be keeping Valjean up at night. Of this he was sure.

“Do you think anyone knows what became of you?” he asked.

Valjean frowned. “I don’t know. It was in the papers, but …” Squeezing his eyes shut, he shook his head despairingly. “With any luck, it won’t matter. It’s been over a decade, and my hair has changed color—and I shall be with Cosette.”

“I fear you underestimate the fame you once held,” Javert said. “Or the infamy.”

The logs crackled in the hearth, the only noise within the long silence that filled the room, the two of them wringing their hands in their laps, expressions drawn tight.

Valjean’s Adam’s apple bobbed. He narrowed his eyes. “Javert, if I— If I don’t do this, that town will forever haunt me. As will Fantine.”

Javert turned to study him. Dropped his eyes. Giving a pensive sigh, he nodded and sank back in his seat, folding his arms over his breast. “When did you want to go?” he asked.

“I was thinking we could start on Good Friday,” said Valjean. “You know—resurrection, and all that.”

“Then, I will put in for leave.”

***

After Javert had left the station, the Commissaire relayed his request—for the purposes of rescheduling shifts—to the Desk Sergeant on duty.

“Javert taking time off?” the Sergeant exclaimed. “Whatever for? He’s never taken a day off in his life!”

The Commissaire shrugged. “Says he’s going on a pilgrimage.”

“A pilgrimage? Javert? Bon Dieu. Has he suddenly found religion?”

“It would be a pleasant surprise,” the Commissaire said, raising an eyebrow, “but I’d question which one.”

“Well, which site is he going to, then?”
“I don’t know,” he replied with a shrug. “He said it was some town by the sea.”

“Do you suppose he meant Jerusalem, sir?”

“Couldn’t be! He didn’t ask off long enough for that.”

***

When Valjean told Cosette of his plans to visit Montreuil-sur-Mer, and the reason behind them, she grew excited, despite knowing it was supposed to be a somber occasion. Valjean could not blame the poor girl. He’d been holding out on her so long she must have thought he’d never tell her anything about her mother.

Her excitement made him feel terribly guilty. She had no idea what was in store for her. He’d made it clear her mother’s past was tragic, but there was no way for her to know the kind of abuse she’d endured. Nor was there any way for her to understand why visiting that town would pain him so, besides the connection to Fantine.

“But why is Javert coming?” she asked him, confused.

“Because I asked him to, Cosette. And because … he once lived there, also.”

Her eyebrows jumped at that remark. “Really? So, then, you do share a history? Oh, oh,” she said, putting a finger to her chin, “that is right; he said—he said something about Montreuil to me once, didn’t he!”

Valjean frowned uneasily. “Yes. We … knew one another, back then.”

It could not have been further from the truth, but it was all he could think to say at the moment without going into detail.

He planned to omit Javert’s part from the story, for he could not bear to have her know what he had done. His role would be filled by nameless, faceless men. Cosette should not be made to hate him, now—after he was so changed.

He admitted only that he’d asked Javert to come with him for support, for Montreuil held heavy memories for him, which he could not bear alone.

***

A few weeks later, they packed their things and left on a diligence together, headed north.

It was a full day’s travel to Montreuil-sur-Mer from Paris by coach, so they split the journey into two parts, renting an inn near Amiens for the night. Valjean and Cosette shared a room, and Javert had a smaller one to himself down the hall.

“Will you tell me about my mother now?” Cosette pleaded when they were alone.
Valjean let out a heavy sigh, weary for multiple reasons. “Not tonight,” he said.

Cosette made a frustrated noise and crossed her arms, frowning at him from where she sat on the edge of the bed.

“Tomorrow,” he promised. “When we get to the town. I want you to see it before you …”

“Before I what?”

*Form opinions about it,* he thought to himself, though he did not explain it as such. “Before you … learn how your mother passed.”

The girl slowly furrowed her brow at him, wary and wondering. “Was it truly so terrible?”

*Yes.*

“It was unpleasant at best. But the town is not to blame, for that. So do not go there with hate in your heart. Your mother was happy there, for a time.”

Cosette stared at him for a moment before giving a nod.

“You ought to go to sleep now, Cosette,” he said softly. “We have a long day ahead of us, tomorrow, and you shall not be able to sleep on the coach.”

“All right,” she sighed begrudgingly. “But only if you go to sleep as well.”

“Just give me a moment to get ready.”

As he was digging a nightshirt out of his luggage, there was a knock at the door.

“Must be Javert,” Cosette remarked, looking over her shoulder as she brushed her hair.

“I will bet that you’re right,” said Valjean.

When he opened the door he was met by the sight of Javert standing awkwardly in the hall, his hair and his collar undone.

The man peered slightly past him into the room, frowned, and hung his head, glancing in another direction. When he spoke, his voice was flat.

“May I speak with you a moment?”

***

It was late, and all the other occupants of the inn had gone to bed. The view beyond the windows was black.

Javert and Valjean sat on the edge of a divan in the parlor downstairs, facing the fireplace and the dying embers therein. A single candle, which Valjean had brought, provided most of the light.

Both men had been quiet for some time, staring off with their hands between their legs. Each knew what they were going to face the coming day, and neither was fully prepared.
“She ought to know,” Javert finally said.

Valjean glanced up at him. “Know what?”

“That the blame for her mother’s death rests on my shoulders. I am responsible for it. I ought to be held accountable.”

“Javert!” he exclaimed, eyes wide. “You want— No, to tell her the way in which her mother passed … That is too much. Too horrible. Let the poor woman have her dignity in death. Cosette does not need to know about that. We cannot possibly tell her. To think, what it might do to her!”

“She will take it badly,” Javert conceded. “I know that. She may even grow to hate me. But it is right that she should know. All her life you’ve been keeping secrets from her, Valjean. Did you ever once pause to wonder if that’s caused her more harm than good? Not knowing anything—aware that you had all the answers she sought, and yet withheld them from her … Think of how that must feel. She has expressed before that she wishes you would be more open with her about the past. That your secrecy causes her grief and worry. That she would prefer the truth to silence, even if it were terrible.”

“She does not know just how terrible,” said Valjean.

“No, but she wants to,” Javert countered. “Answers will give her peace. Isn’t that what you sought to do by bringing her here? Give her peace?”

Valjean drew in a deep breath, letting it out in a pensive sigh. “Yes, but … Dieu, this is an awful thing to unbury, Javert. And what if you are right? What if it causes her to hate you? I could not bear that.”

Javert frowned at the pattern in the floorboards beneath his feet. “I would rather she hate me for the right reasons, than like me purely out of ignorance.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “To be honest, it weighs on my soul, of late. To see her smiling, to hear her praising me, when unbeknownst to her I was the cause of so much of her suffering …”

“But you didn’t mean to be! That was never your intention.”

“What my intentions were is of no matter. Only the outcome of my actions. And I should be held accountable for them.”

“Javert,” he murmured, gazing at him pitifully. “It was not your fault that Fantine died. It was the White Death. It would have killed her anyway.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You didn’t cause her to become sick, Javert. She died from consumption, not because of you. If she had not been ill during our exchange, she would have lived.”

“But she was ill.”

“And that’s not your fault!”

Javert shot him a glare. “Just because circumstances were grave, and out of my control, does not mean I can absolve myself from blame over what happened. That is not my way. That is not justice. The girl needs to know.”

Valjean’s forehead creased deeply. He wrung his hands in his lap, quiet. “I do not think it wise,”
he finally said.

“If you don’t tell her, I shall,” Javert asserted. “Though I would prefer she hear it from your lips. It would soften it, some. And I am not as good with words as you.”

Valjean studied him, conflicted. “This is truly what you wish?”

“Yes.”

“Then …” He let out a long, weary sigh, putting his head in his hand. “Dieu. Very well.”

***

In the morning they sat her down in the parlor and began what would be a lengthy discourse on the events of years prior.

Across a low table from them on a canapé, Cosette listened with baited breath. She had become rapt in attention as soon as it was made clear that her family’s history was the subject of this discussion.

Valjean did all of the talking. He related things in the simplest and least painful way possible, but still, even as he spoke, Cosette grew more and more pale.

In order to make sensible the events involving Fantine, Valjean had to explain the whole of his history—starting with Faverolles, and his original crime.

Already, the girl had tears in her eyes. She apologized repeatedly for the fate of his family, hand over her mouth, her voice drenched with pity.

Valjean was loathe to continue, for it only got worse from there, but he pressed on.

While the reason for his sentence upset her, in that she found it unjust, it was the ultimate length of his imprisonment that seemed to truly horrify her, even though he explained that it was in part his own fault.

“Nineteen years!” the girl exclaimed, aghast. It was as long as she had been alive. She had once seen a chain-gang, and while she must have been vaguely aware of the conditions those unhappy men faced, to have endured them for nearly twenty years was clearly incomprehensible to her.

“But—but—how did you survive it? How did you manage?”

“I do not know,” he admitted hoarsely.

He could sense Javert’s tension at his side. Not only was this supremely uncomfortable for himself and Cosette, but for him as well. Javert and he did not speak of the galleys. They knew far better than that. But its horrors were still fresh in their minds regardless, and even at the mere mention of them, Javert could be seen to shudder. It must be hard for him now, to think on those years, guilt-ridden soul that he was.

Valjean tried to omit as much detail as possible, and led quickly—embarrassedly—into his parole, and the bishop. He had never envisioned himself telling her this, but now that he’d started, he could not bring himself to stop, or to skip over what was arguably the most important day of his
lif e.

“You stole from him?” Cosette echoed. She sat frozen on the canapé, her eyes wide.

Valjean could not bear her gaze. Trembling, he bowed his head to it, staring blindly at the floorboards. He tried to articulate himself, to recount the story properly, yet it did not come to him as easily as it had when he’d told Javert. It was, perhaps, because Javert had already thought so poorly of him for so long that to add to his convictions did not seem terribly influential. But Cosette had always thought highly of him. Even, it seemed, after he’d been revealed as a convict. To explain to her now the true depth of his depravity, his humiliation and shame, was far harder a thing than he’d ever conceived—despite being as brief as was rational.

Whenever she interrupted him with a question, he answered her best he could, but he fumbled his words, and felt clarity slip through his hands.

Eventually he got to Montreuil-sur-Mer. How he had taken over a jet-manufacturing factory. How he had been appointed mayor by the King.

At the beginning, Cosette was amazed by this. Starstruck, even. As much as she’d been horrified before, she was now mystified. One could see in her eyes the admiration for her father increasing tenfold.

Valjean took note of this with a sheepish unease, in part because self-praise did not come easily to him, and in part because he knew what came next, and that it would devastate her.

When he told her of how Fantine had been unfairly fired from her job at the factory, and how she’d resorted to less dignified means of acquiring money to support her child, Cosette quieted, her face solemn.

He spoke of how the Thénardiers had lied to Fantine and abused her trust, had used the money she’d sent them not for her daughter, but for themselves. How Fantine had never been aware of the wicked way they had treated her child, and the squalor in which she lived. How the poor woman had worked herself to the bone for Cosette’s happiness, to no effect.

All of this greatly perturbed Cosette, and she sat in gloom, nodding sadly as the tears slipped down her cheeks.

Valjean had come to a point where he could no longer exclude Javert from the narrative, as much as he wished that he might. With great hesitation, and a seeping dread, he swallowed the knot in his throat and began.

As he explained how Javert had been a guard in Toulon—how he had become suspicious of him in Montreuil—how he had argued with him over the fate of Fantine—Cosette grew frightful. She sat frozen, with her eyes fixed on Javert like a shepherdess that had pulled back the fleece to find a wolf in her flock.

The Champmathieu trial drained the last of the color from her cheeks.

By the time Valjean got to that morning at the hospital—the callousness of the inspector, his own pleading, and the death of her mother, spurred on by shock—the girl had turned as white as her dress. If one observed her closely, they would find that she was trembling. She looked as though she might faint. That, or fly into a rage.

Valjean gave her a moment to process it all, and to ask whatever it was she would like. Her questions were hushed now, breathy and fearful, and it pained him to hear her speak so.
He recounted how he’d tried to retrieve her as soon as possible, but that a few days into his journey, he was stopped by the police and carted off to prison, where he spent time in Brest, and then Toulon, before finally faking his own death to escape.

From thereon, she had some recollection of the events.

“You remember, perhaps, when I told you we were being chased by Madame Thénardier?” Valjean asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, it was not Madame Thénardier. It was Javert.”

Again, the girl shot the man in question a look both petrified and petrifying.

Throughout all this discourse, Javert had sat nearly motionless beside Valjean, his head hung, a shadow over his face as he wrung his hands between his legs. The whole of his countenance was low, low, like a beaten dog. He had not spoken a word the entire time, nor had he dared to meet Cosette’s gaze.

Now that Valjean had fallen quiet, the girl’s eyes drifted slowly back and forth between them. Her hands sat in her lap, clenching the fabric of her dress, scrunching and unscrunching it mechanically.

“Cosette,” Valjean said, “You should take into consideration—Javert was the one who insisted on telling you this. I thought it was too horrible a thing to burden you with, but he persuaded me to reveal it. Said you ought to know. He feels badly about it, Cosette. So—so do not be too harsh with him.”

“Don’t tell her how to feel about me,” Javert muttered, his face still downcast. “She has the right to hate me for it if she wants.”

Cosette studied him for a long time without speaking. Finally she lowered her head, so that she, too, was veiled by shadow. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur,” she said.

Javert cast his eyes up at her. She had not called him that in a long time, and the distance of it surely stung.

“You did not mean for it, n’est-ce pas? You did not mean for her to die.”

The man hesitated. “No,” he admitted. “But, at the time, I didn’t care.”

“But you care now?”

The corners of his mouth drew down, his expression tightening. “Yes.”

“I see.” She was quiet a moment more. “And papa, you forgive him this?”

“He did not mean for it, Cosette. He was … understandably incensed. He did not know what it was that he did. [1] And—and to be fair, your mother—she was very sick. It was likely that she would not have lived much longer, anyway.”

The girl sat motionless, chewing her lip. She stared at the polished wooden floor. “Papa,” she finally said, in a tone so solemn and hushed that it seemed to draw the whole room up in it, “you were the only one who truly knew my mother—who knows what happened that day. And you are
also the only one who truly knows Javert. Who he was, and what he did. What kind of person he is."

“You have clearly ... I do not understand it, with what happened—but you have clearly made
amends with one another,” she observed. “And I trust in your judgment, papa. Because you are the
only one who has all the facts, and because you are a good man; the best man. If you can forgive
him, after everything he’s done—to us, and to you—then I can forgive him too.”

Javert’s head snapped up, a pained, desperate look in his eyes as they searched her face. He
opened his mouth to speak, but faltered, and closed it some.

Cosette drew in a deep breath and held it for a moment. She let it out in a long, quiet sigh, as
though expelling all her anger into the air. “Inspector,” she said, glaring at the floor through teary
eyes, “I want to be angry at you, for what you’ve done. I—I _am_ angry with you. But ... it is not
right that I should hate you for it now, only after you regret it. Anger cannot bring my mother back.
Nor, I think, would it give her peace. There is nothing I can do for her now. And I would be mad at
you for father’s sake, but I cannot hold a grudge he does not have. Lord, I want to, but I can’t. All it
would do is cause more pain. And we have had enough of that for a lifetime.”

else can I do now but that? I forgive you, for I must forgive you. I cannot know if you deserve it. I
can only trust.”

He stared at her, seemingly reluctant to accept, or perhaps unsure he should, before bowing his
head in a grave and reverent sort of nod.

“It is not that I take what happened lightly,” she went on. “But, I think you are a different
person now than when you did those things. I have only known you for a little while. Yet it seems
to me that you must have changed. You may speak harshly, and carry a sword, but on the inside, I
think you are a good man, who wishes to do good. I think you maybe made some mistakes in your
past. Some very terrible mistakes.” Here her voice drew to a murmur. “But papa made mistakes,
too, and if—if he was able to become the man he is today, then ... I have to believe that you can
change, too.”

“Javert. These past few years, you have done us all a number of kindnesses. Papa, and Marius
and I, we all owe you dearly. If you had not relented, and helped us when we needed your aid,
one of us would be here today. Marius and papa would be dead. And I would be adrift. We are
indebted to you many times over.” Her mouth scrunched up, her brow creasing. “I think any man
who’s done the things that you have these last two years must be a good person at heart.”

“Do you understand?” she asked. “It is not that I’m not grieved by what you did, or for keeping
it from me for so long. But the gratitude I feel towards you for other things outweighs it. Even
knowing what I know now. In fact ... knowing what happened before—the kind of man you used
to be—what you’ve done for us recently means infinitely more.”

“So ...” She fumbled with the ruffles of her dress. “So. I don’t hate you, Inspecteur. And—” Her
hands clenched into a fist around the fabric. “Thank you.”

Javert’s throat bobbed. “Madame,” was all he managed to say.

They all sat in silence.

“Papa. Javert. I have only one question. If everything you have told me is true,” she said,
looking up at them with piercing eyes, “then how is it the two of you became friends?”
Both Valjean and Javert gave a start. They slowly turned to look at one another, sharing an awkward grimace and clenching their teeth.

“W—well,” Javert began, scrunching the brim of his hat, “he saved my life, at the barricade, so —”

“And he saved mine,” Valjean cut in. “By way of secrecy and silence. So, you see, it is all rather simple.”

Cosette stared at them, unblinking. “I think that there is more to it than that,” she said.

A chill shot down Valjean’s spine.

“I don’t believe that two men who were so opposed to each other for so long could become friends so fast,” she stated. “True, papa saved your life at the barricade. And then you saved his life by not arresting him. But then your debt was paid, and you could have parted ways. There was no reason to be amicable to one another—not considering your past. There was no reason to see each other ever again.”

Javert and Valjean remained silent.

“You are not telling me something. And it has to do with why you were at our apartment that night after the rebellion, Inspector. Why were you? All you had to do was let him go. There was no need to follow him home. Not if you weren’t going to arrest him.”

Valjean let out a troubled sigh. “I had hoped you’d never ask about that,” he admitted.

“You are keeping secrets again,” Cosette said. “And I do not like it. Was not the point of this discussion to be honest with me?”

“Because the issue of your mother was a matter which concerned you,” Valjean protested. “And this—well, this does not.”

“But it does,” she countered. “It does concern me. I am concerned by it. And I want you to tell me what happened that night.”

Valjean’s shoulders sagged. “My dear, we have already told you what happened that night.”

“Yes, that is well. Now tell me the rest of it.”

He frowned at her helplessly. “Cosette,” he said, hanging his head, “please.”

“That you plead for me not to pry only confirms that there’s more to the story. You may as well just admit what it is.”

“Cosette—”

“He was wearing your clothes,” she accused. “Because something had happened to his. They were spread out on the floor in front of the hearth. They were wet.”

Valjean paled.

From where he sat hunched over, with his hair veiling his face, Javert shuddered.

Cosette’s gaze did not soften. “You said that he needed a place to stay for the night. You told Toussaint he was out of his mind. I want to know what you meant by that.”
Valjean tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry. “That—that was not what I said. I said that he ... he was not— Cosette,” he said, frantically shaking his head, “for the love of God, this doesn’t __

“I tried to kill myself.”

Both pairs of eyes flashed to the source of those words, so deep and flatly spoken.

Valjean was overcome with a horrified disbelief that the man would admit such a thing to anyone, let alone to her.

The tight set frown that had been on Cosette’s lips receded. She stared at the inspector, expression blank with shock.

Javert remained motionless, downcast. “I threw myself into the Seine.”

Valjean’s voice was little more than a whisper. “Javert, you don’t have to—”

“Why?” asked Cosette. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because he proved me wrong about the world, and I had no idea how to function in it any longer,” Javert breathed slowly. “Because any other act that I could make would have been a betrayal. Betrayal of him, or the police. Either way, of myself. I could not bring myself to arrest him. And I could not live with disregarding my duties. There was no recourse left but that.”

Cosette studied him. “And so you jumped.”

“And so I jumped.”

“And then what happened?”

“And then the world went black, and cold. And I woke up in an alleyway, with your father by my side, and the both of us were sopping wet. We argued. I tried to run. He forced me to go home with him, because he knew what I would do in his absence.”

Cosette nodded slowly. “Then, that week you spent with him, at the house … Were you really ill, or …?”

“Yes. In both senses of the word.”

“It was the water in his lungs,” Valjean murmured. “It made him sick.”

“I would have left, had I been able. But the fever gave him enough time to coax some sense back into me.”

Cosette’s gaze drifted between the two men opposite her, contemplative. “I see,” she said. And then, a bit softer, lowering her face, “I see.”

They sat in terrible, wordless discomfort.

Cosette rose from her seat. Approached them.

At her presence, Javert only further hung his head, turning away a little.

Cosette looked at them each in turn. “Papa,” she said earnestly, placing a tender hand on their shoulders as she spoke their names, “Javert. I thank you for your honesty.” She withdrew, letting
out a shaky breath. “I ... need to think, for awhile. I think I shall go for a walk.”

With this, she bowed her head to them and left the room.

Valjean said nothing. Normally, he would have argued that she shouldn’t be alone on the streets, but it wasn’t in him to. Not now.

He turned his focus to the man beside him.

“Javert,—”

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“You are going to chide me for telling her,” he said stoically. “Don’t.”

Valjean frowned, his emotions in turmoil. Not knowing what else to do, he put his hand on the man’s back, slowly rubbing the tense muscles between his shoulder-blades and drawing him a little closer. They both continued to stare at the floor.

“Well,” Valjean said softly, in a tone that he tried to make consolatory but suspected was no consolation at all, “you got what you wanted.”

“Yes.”

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] This is, without Valjean consciously intending it to be, a reference to Luke 23:34 - “But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.”

Chapter End Notes

Y U NO HAVE SUGGESTED LISTENING??
The Blue of Cornflowers

Chapter Summary

Their trip to Montreuil takes some unexpected turns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If we can forgive what’s been done to us . . . If we can forgive what we’ve done to others . . . If we can leave all of our stories behind. Our being villains or victims. Only then can we maybe rescue the world.”

-Chuck Palahniuk

***

It was perhaps an oversight that they would be spending another six hours crammed together in the back of a diligence later that day.

Cosette took the last remaining window seat in the carriage, where she sat, brooding silently as she gazed at the passing fields, chin propped up in her hand.

Javert, for his part, probably would have preferred to sit elsewhere, but there were no other seats available, for they had gotten off late. Thus, he was doomed to the same bench seat as her, with Valjean acting as a buffer between them.

It was the very back of the carriage, an undesirable spot for most, but it had the advantage of being slightly more quiet. And were it not for the chatter of the other passengers, quiet it would have remained, for neither three of them had anything to say to one another. Rather, they had far too much to say, and the words caught in their throats, and danced dizzily across their tongues, never making it past their lips.

At one of the stops along the way, while a wheel was being switched out, Valjean had the forethought to purchase a newspaper outright for Javert, that he might be provided some meager escape.

Javert, however, found it hard to focus on; his thoughts were brewing with anxiety over their destination. Many times his eyes traced the lines of print, scanning the text only to find at the end of the article that he’d comprehended none of it.

He was sure something ill would come of this trip, their conversation aside. Sure someone would recognize Valjean, or him, or worse: the both of them. It would do far more than cause a scene. If worst came to worst, it would spread through the town like wildfire—and who knew what the townsfolk would do.
“Are you truly sure you wish to go?” Javert asked him at another stop, while Cosette was freshening up. “You do not have to come. I could take the girl inside myself.”

Valjean only looked at him sadly, feigning a smile. “Do you really want to go alone with her there, after everything that happened this morning?”

Javert bit the inside of his cheek. “No. But … this is a risk, Valjean. You know that.”

“I know,” the man breathed, shutting his eyes. “I know. But I feel that I must be there for her. It cannot be you. It cannot be you alone.”

Solemnly, Javert bent his head.

***

They had rented another room at the inn of a nearby town, that they might draw less attention to themselves. After switching carriages to get there (for the diligence did not go any further into the provinces) they dropped off their belongings, took lunch, and set out for Montreuil.

The closer they got to the town, the deeper the dread welled in Valjean’s stomach. When the landscape became recognizable, his skin began to prickle. He had walked those fields once—and those woods—with a rifle over his shoulder and a wide-brimmed hat shading his face from the sun. If he looked hard enough, he could almost see himself there. See the faint, lingering ghosts of the past, glimmering in the sun like spider silk—there one moment and gone the next. Could Javert see them too, he wondered?

As the ramparts came into view—all dust-grey stone and faded red brick—a strange, surreal feeling began to take root in him. He felt like he was entering a dream. The carriage passed through the main gate of Montreuil, beneath the portcullis and thick, medieval walls, and it was as though they had crossed a threshold into another world, another time. Everything was as he remembered it—and yet so different.

Children playing in the street, guards keeping watch at the walls—but these were different children, different guards. The same buildings lining the streets: houses, shops, offices, churches—yet they looked older, now, plaster cracking, paint chipping, wood warping. Shops that had once thrived in his time now sat vacant, their windows boarded.

The town had not failed entirely, but it had obviously declined in his absence. Gone were the schools, and the hospitals, and the jet factory. Gone were the provisions for the poor and the elderly, the sick and the destitute. Again, Valjean felt the heavy weight of guilt bear down on him. You did this, it hissed in his ear. Your selfishness made them suffer.

I did what I had to, he told it.

You could have saved them, it said. They could have prospered beyond their wildest dreams. But you chose to save one life in place of thousands. How many have lost their livelihoods because of you? How many have starved, and sickened, and turned down darker paths? How many Fantines have you made for the sake of one soul?

Valjean shuddered in his seat at the thought.
Beside him, Cosette stared silently out at the streets.

_How many children like her have you forsaken?_ the voice rasped. _Fantine was not the only person struggling in Montreuil._

Valjean squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing and wringing his hands in his lap. Again he saw the faces of the gamins and savoyards that used to flock to him, and the coins he had pressed in their hands. Their eager, grateful grins. The clothes hanging loosely on their thin frames, like rags on scarecrows. What had become of them all?

What had become of Petit Gervais?

Had that child starved because of him, because of one cruel, senseless act that he’d—

A sudden movement broke him out of his thoughts: Javert had taken his hand in his, clasping it firmly, but gently.

Blinking away tears, Valjean glanced up to find Javert gazing down at him with a solemn, knowing look. The man gave his hand a squeeze as if to reassure him.

Taking solace in the warmth from those once cold eyes, Valjean bowed his head, and clasped his hand in turn.

***

They stopped the cab just before a small marketplace, and Valjean paid the man his due before turning to look at the plaza.

He found Cosette staring at the buildings as though she were in a trance.

“Cosette,” he said softly, “go and pick some flowers for your mother.”

Looking back at him for a moment, she gave him a solemn nod.

He watched her go, then let his gaze drift across the market, and the people therein.

It felt so wrong, to be there, and to not be a part of it anymore. To not be recognized. To not be helping.

Slowly, he made his way to one of the flower stands, tugging down the brim of his hat and surveying the goods.

The young woman behind it stood up straighter, greeting him with a smile that soon faded at the look on his face. “Is everything all right, monsieur?” she ventured.

“Yes,” he said, with a brief and feeble smile. “I am just—it is the anniversary of something today … Something it pains me to recall.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, glancing down at her wares with a start. “I see. I am sorry for it, sir.”

“Could I get, perhaps, those oriental lilies, with the pink carnations, and some chrysanthemums?” he asked, pointing to each in turn. “With one of those roses.”
“Only one?” she inquired.

“Just the one, thank you. Wrapped in whatever you please.”

She counted out the flowers on her fingers, mouthing the numbers silently. “That will be … five sous, monsieur.”

He nodded as she set to putting the bouquet together.

Brushing his tailcoat aside, he reached into his purse and withdrew a handful of coins. As he did so, a ray of sun glinted off the copper and silver, drawing his gaze. His hand froze midair.

He stared at the money in his palm, eyes wide, expression blank, his muscles gone rigid. It had suddenly occurred to him whenceforth that money had come. He had earned it from the labor of this very town. All of it, everything he owned—made off the backs of these people. Montreuil had suffered for want of funds, and he’d sat on his hoard like a dragon, ferreting his fortune away where it never saw the light of day.

Why had he kept so much of it? Why had he not invested more into the town? Here he was, still wealthy beyond reason, while Montreuil had bled for years. And now he came here, and he spent a few francs on paltry goods, as if to spit in their faces and laugh!

Jean Valjean had, in fact, invested millions in Montreuil-sur-Mer, even before he’d become its mayor—and he knew this, but it made no difference in his mind. To him, in keeping the six hundred thousand, he had robbed its citizens of their proper due. And that he had given all that he’d owned to Cosette, and now had a meager ten thousand or so to his name, did not dissuade him from feeling like a miser.

Since the moment he had conceived of abandoning it, his guilt over Montreuil had run deep. And, like a river over the course of many years, it had worn grooves into his soul.

How could he come here now, like some entitled tourist, when he had escaped his misfortune, and they still languished in misery?

A great tremor seized him, and ran through his wrist, making the coins rattle and gleam.

“Monsieur?”

Valjean started, jerking his head up.

The young woman was staring at him. “Are you well?”

He opened his mouth, unable to produce a response. “I—I am only—a little tired,” he lied, fumbling his words. “It was a long journey. Here—please,” he said, taking her hand and pressing the money into it, “take it. All of it.”

The girl recoiled, gaping at the amount. “But sir, this is—I could not possibly take this much mon—”

“Please,” he repeated, struggling for air. “Buy yourself something to eat. A new dress. Something. You will use it far better than I.”

Before she had any further chance to respond, he backed away, crushing the flowers to his chest and leaving her bewildered as he slid back into the crowd.
As he was catching his breath, he found Javert gazing sidelong at him.

“We should not have come here,” the man said.

A shadow fell over Valjean’s face. “Let me be,” he breathed.

Javert gazed a second longer, than looked away.

***

It was a long walk to the cemetery, but Montreuil was a small town, and cabs were nowhere near as easy to come by as in Paris—nor nearly as inconspicuous.

Valjean kept the brim of his hat tucked low. He walked close between Javert and Cosette, with his daughter’s hand on his arm, which he had offered in the gentlemanly fashion.

Javert refrained from saying anything. He focused on the dirt beneath his boots. It always smelled like dirt here, in the spring. Not like the dirt of Paris, though, which could often be foul. This was a clean, earthy scent, like the way the air smelled before rain. That was perhaps the one thing about the provinces he missed. That, and the clearer night sky.

He heard Cosette sigh to his left. She seemed determined not to look at him, and she hardly looked at Valjean, either, instead directing her attention at the scenery opposite. In her arms, she cradled her bouquet like a babe.

As they passed the cemetery gate, she paused, casting her gaze over the expanse of headstones, old and new.

A few statues dotted the land here and there, pale limestone stained and worn by countless rains. Some clusters of stones—family graves, by the look of them—bore a withered flower or two. But for the most part, the plots were undecorated.

Cosette turned to look up at Valjean. “Which one is hers?”

Valjean faltered for a moment, tensing. “I … don’t, er—”

“None of them,” Javert cut in.

“What!” she exclaimed. “What do you mean, ‘none of them’?”

“She does not have a stone,” he told her. “She was buried in a pauper’s grave.”

Valjean turned to him with a start. “What? That can’t be.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I paid for her burial!”

Javert blinked. “You …?”

“Are you telling me they ignored my request?” he said, aghast.
Cosette looked from one man to the other in fright.

Javert’s mouth pulled to the side. “It … would seem that way, yes.”

“You’re sure of it?”

Javert dipped his head.

Valjean’s jaw twitched; Javert thought he read a curse on his lips.

“How do you know?” Valjean managed to say. “Did you see the grave?”

“I thought you might be foolish enough to visit it,” Javert confessed, glancing away. Extending a finger, he pointed towards the corner of the field. “It’s towards the back. In the shade. I can show you there, if you wish.”

Cosette nodded slowly at him.

Dipping his head, Javert led them out into the field. He stopped, pointing down to a particular patch of grass a few yards away.

They all stared at it, uncomfortable.

“It is wrong to not have a stone there,” Cosette murmured, seemingly to herself.

“You might put one there yourself if it pleases you,” Javert told her. He did not tell her there would be no guarantee it would remain.

Cosette considered this, then took a few steps and knelt down, placing her bouquet carefully on the ground.

Valjean lay his beside hers, and stood at her side as she sat back and folded her hands in her lap. He frowned remorsefully. “I feel I am supposed to say something,” he admitted after a moment, “but I know not what it is.”

In the distance, a faint breeze sounded through the budding branches. The high, lilting song of a wren filled the air, twittering intermittently before fading away into silence.

Valjean let out a long, pensive sigh, and wet his lips. “O God,” he murmured, closing his eyes, “by Your mercy rest is given to the souls of the faithful, be please to bless this grave.”

Cosette, apparently recognizing the prayer, joined him. Their voices sounded in tandem over the field, as Javert looked on in silence.

“Appoint Your holy angels to guard it and set free from all the chains of sin and the soul of her whose body is buried here, so that with all Thy saints she may rejoice in Thee for ever. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

They did not see Javert mouth the word ‘Amen’ in turn.

Silence fell upon the grave once more.

“May I have a moment alone with her?” Cosette asked.

“Of course,” said Valjean. Turning to go, he touched Javert’s shoulder, and the two left her to her privacy.
Cosette waited until they were gone before she permitted herself to think.

With her finger, she traced circles through the grass.

“I used to talk to you at night, when I was a little girl,” she murmured. “I didn’t know if you could hear me. But I’m sure you must be able to now.” Furrowing her brow, she let out a sigh, playing with the petals of a clover flower by her lap.

“You would be happy, I think.” She bit her lip. “I know that Javert … ruined things for us, but … papa—” Here she faltered, for her mother would not know who she referred to. Who would Fantine have known him as? “—the mayor, I mean—Monsieur Madeleine—he found a way to save me, anyway. He kept his promise to you. He did even better than that—he took care of me this whole time, like a father! So much like a father I thought that he was. And he is, to be honest—he is.”

“But Madeleine is not his real name, mama; his name is Valjean. Jean Valjean. And he really was an ex-convict, but it doesn’t matter. Nothing about him was false but his name. He truly was as good as he seemed. And—and they put him back in prison for breaking parole, but he escaped, and he came and got me from that inn just like he said he would. And then we went to Paris, and lived in a convent, and I went to school there. And I almost became a nun, mama, but that seems so silly and far away to me now. We went and lived in three separate houses in Paris, and moved back and forth all the time. Not because we had to; just because we could.”

“And you know, I never knew the truth about you until this morning. I asked about you all the time, but papa wouldn’t tell me. And papa—I didn’t know the truth about him, either—until he was arrested last year. It was so terrible, and I was so scared! I thought I might never see him again. But, a few years ago, papa met Javert in Paris, and saved his life. And so, when he was arrested, Javert went to court and won him a pardon. And they are friends now, mama, and Javert regrets what he did. To papa, and to you. He is very sorry about it. He made papa tell me everything. And he—he has tried to be kind, in his way.”

“So you see, you do not have to worry for me anymore. For me, or anyone. Because everything worked out all right in the end. And everyone is happy, now. Papa is free, and I am married, and we have so much money we shall never want for anything again!” Her mouth twitched into a frown. “I wish you could have shared it with us. I wish I could have gotten to know you, and spend time with you. But … I know you wouldn’t want me to be sad about that. Right? You would want me to be happy. Well, we shall be happy enough to make up for the past. To spill over all of that suffering until it is naught but a fading memory—like the sunlight after it rains. I promise you that. I promise you.”

She paused, twining a blade of grass between her fingers. A sad smile graced her lips. “Would you like to hear about my Marius? I shall tell you all about him. Oh! If only you could see how handsome he is! And so good with words. Did you know, he wrote me all of these poems, and tucked them under a rock in the garden …”
Across the cemetery, Valjean and Javert stood side by side, watching like silent sentinels amongst the stone angels and saints. For all their melancholy, they might have been statues themselves.

Valjean, in particular, was deep in rumination. His eyes barely saw the scene before him, so focused on the past were they. “It is hard to return here,” he murmured. “But I’m glad we could do so as friends.”

Javert glanced over at him. Studied the way he gazed out over the graves. At the child finally reunited with her mother.

Was this the end of it for them, Javert wondered? Was this where they came to terms with what had happened in this town? When that chapter in their lives came to a close?

After awhile, Valjean turned to look up at him. They gazed solemnly at one another. Javert offered him his hand.

Valjean regarded it. Took it between his own and gave it a gentle squeeze.

They turned their gazes back to the field, and the girl kneeling there, their hands clasped, their fingers intertwined. And Javert felt, for a moment, that something between them began to mend.

He did not know how long it was they stood before they heard a gasp. Whirling around, they found a nun a little ways off. A basket sat overturned at her feet, pink and blue flowers spilling onto the ground. She stared at them with eyes as wide as saucers. They were fixed upon Valjean’s face.

At the sight of her, Valjean’s expression turned to match. “Sister,” he exclaimed. The woman’s hand moved to clutch at her breast, aghast. “You—” Her gaze found Javert. “And you!” Turning, she found the figure of Cosette in the potter’s field. Her eyes darted back to Valjean. A tremble passed through her. She produced a singular, terrified laugh—then her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed.

Javert stared at her crumpled form, frozen. “Merde,” he swore.

***

It will be recalled that Sister Simplice had grown fond of Fantine. She had also grown fond of Madeleine—that is to say, she admired him for his uncommon virtue. So to have both of them so cruelly and suddenly ripped away, in so short a time, had devastated her—as much as a woman of her character could be devastated. At the same time she was mourning Fantine, she had also endured, in bewildered disbelief, the townspeople’s utter rejection and defamation of Father Madeleine.
Everyone had insisted he had always been too good to be true—a farce, a disguise, hiding but a lowlife degenerate on the run from the law. They were all so haughty and proud on the subject—so sure that they’d ‘always known’ he had some terrible secret. Some ugly, hidden past. Even as the town fell down around them, and the factory closed, and the schools and hospitals lost their funding—even as the infrastructure, sanitation, and morality of Montreuil degraded—still, its citizens cursed the name of the man who had once brought them fortune. They gave him no credit for his accomplishments, but hung all their blame on him for the town’s plight in his absence.

Even Fantine, it is sad to say, did not escape their slander. For, due to certain articles in the local newspapers, the poor woman had been painted as his personal concubine—a mistress, as it were. Some even believed that her rumored, illegitimate child, had been none other than Madeleine’s daughter, conceived out of wedlock. This was how she found work in his factory, they said; that is why he doted on her, prostitute though she was, when she fell ill. That is why the child was kept in some other town, and why he had tried to fetch her when her mother lay on her deathbed.

Needless to say, Sister Simplice did not believe any of this for a minute. She would not think ill of Madeleine, and she knew better of Fantine, for Fantine had spoken often to her of her past. And the dying, in her experience, seldom had reason to lie.

Simplice had tried to explain these things to people, to make good their memory once more. Still, even her reputation for honesty meant nothing in the face of such certainty. To the townsfolk, Madeleine was a criminal, and Fantine a whore. Nothing further. Only Sister Perpétue, Madeleine’s former portress, and a precious few others believed her.

It had been eleven years since then. No more was the story spoken of in the town; most had been forgotten with the passage of time—willfully, as it were. But Simplice remembered. And part of that granite soul still grieved.

Thus, every year, on the anniversary of her death, she would bring Fantine flowers. Pink roses and cornflowers, so that way, even buried in a paupers grave, Fantine would know they were for her. And each year, as Simplice ruminated on the fate of Fantine, so she also ruminated on Madeleine’s, for their fates were intertwined.

Therefore, when she went to Fantine’s grave, only to find Madeleine there, standing beside the man who had ruined their lives, it was like glimpsing a multitude of ghosts, and the scene became utterly incomprehensible to her. Her mind searched for an explanation; there was none. Madeleine was dead; he had died in prison, drowned, and everyone knew it. As for Javert, a man of his convictions would never visit a pauper’s grave, especially for the sake of a prostitute he had condemned and helped into it.

Furthermore, there was no reason—not a single rational reason at all, veil of death aside—for the two of them to be in the same place at the same time and act peaceably.

This alone would be enough to overwhelm Sister Simplice, but there was also the woman in white, kneeling in the grass some ways away, her back turned. Who could this phantom be but Fantine? For it was kneeling on her grave. And if Madeleine was here, why, then, could she not be as well?

These two apparitions together would almost have made sense, but then there was Javert, and he was not dead—at least, that anyone knew of—and even if he was, why would he be here? And why would he be standing next to Madeleine?

All this considered, what Sister Simplice saw before her was a gathering of ghosts, and an impossible one at that, seemingly sprung forth directly from her own ruminations.
Perhaps, then, under this immense amount of shock, it is understandable that her faculties deserted her.

***

It took Valjean a moment to recover from the initial surprise before he realized what had happened. “Oh,” he exclaimed, hand shooting to cover his mouth, “my God.” He rushed to Simplice’s side and knelt down beside her, turning her onto her back.

Her habit was askew; a lock of silvery hair had escaped it, falling across her face. Brushing it back, he took her head in his hand, cushioning it on his lap as he tried to resuscitate her. “Sister,” he called, jostling her carefully, “Sister—”

“She only fainted,” said Javert as he approached. “She’ll be all right.”

Valjean shot him a glare. “You don’t know that!”

“She’s still breathing?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

“And she has a pulse?”

Valjean checked her wrist, just to be sure. “Yes.”

“Then she will be all right.”

“She might have hit her head,” Valjean countered.

“On what? The dirt?”

Valjean took the time to frown at him before returning his attention to the woman in his lap.

Simplice’s face was drawn, but for what little pain it expressed, she might as well have been sleeping.

“Lord,” Valjean murmured. “It had to be you ... I’m so sorry.”

They fell silent, Valjean worrying over Simplice, Javert watching from above.

Javert cast his eyes about the cemetery, and the ramparts, and the town in the distance, his face uncertain. “Maybe ...” He bit his lip. “Maybe it would be best to leave her here, Valjean. She’ll think it was a dream.”

“Good God, man, what’s got into you?” Valjean exclaimed. “Of course we can’t just leave her like this. You want to torture the poor woman? Think what that could do to her, not knowing. And where is the policeman in you? You want to leave a fainted woman out in the open, unguarded like this, where anyone could come along and do what they like with her?”

“What do you propose we do with her, then?”

“Take her back to the infirmary until she wakes up, of course. What else is there to do?”
“And if she tells the whole town about you?”

Valjean paused, staring morosely at the dirt. “Then that is her choice.”

“Well we cannot just go and carry her,” Javert observed. “It won’t do. We shall have to wait.”

“And why do you say that?” Valjean asked.

“Why do I—? Think of what it would look like! Bon Dieu, Valjean. You really want to make a spectacle of ourselves, here, of all places?”

Valjean faltered.

“It is a long walk to the infirmary,” Javert added. “Through a busy part of town. Please consider the situation in its entirety.”

Begrudgingly, Valjean let out a sigh. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “Perhaps I should stay here with her, and you should take Cosette and alert someone.”

“I am not leaving you alone in this town,” Javert said matter-of-factly. “And we are not alerting anyone.”

Valjean looked at him with disagreement in his eyes, but before he could say anything they heard Cosette’s voice from behind.

“Papa?” she called. “Papa! What’s happened?” Lifting the skirts of her dress, she hastened to their side. “Who is that? Is she well?”

“I—I think we gave her a fright,” Valjean told her.

“She used to know us,” Javert explained. “From before.”

“Ah! You mean, from when papa was …?”

“Yes. In fact, she was the one who—”

Javert was interrupted by a groan from Sister Simplice.

The woman’s forehead bunched; her hand moved to clutch at her head.

Valjean hovered over her anxiously. He motioned for them to give her some space.

“Come,” Javert said to Cosette, nodding in another direction, “She will be needing a moment.”

***

“Sister?” Valjean said.

Simplice grunted, her hand over her eyes. She tried to sit up some, unsuccessfally. Valjean cradled her in the crook of his arm, shifting her so that she was supported against his chest instead of his lap.

Squinting blearily, her eyes fluttered open. She raised her face and beheld Valjean. Bewildered,
she stared up at him for a moment, mute with shock. A single word escaped her lips, on harried breath: “Monsieur!”

A weak, guilty smile tugged at the edge of his mouth. “Good day.”

Simplice merely lay rigid in his arms. “Are you an apparition?”

Valjean blinked. “Ah— No?”

“But—you were drowned!” she said, backing away from him onto the grass.

Flushing, Valjean rubbed the back of his neck. “I have been a great many things, but drowned was never one of them.”

“Then—it’s really you? You’re still alive?”

“After everything, I myself find it hard to believe,” he admitted. “I cannot blame you for doubting it. Though, I am sorry for frightening you so.”

“But what are you doing here?” she exclaimed, her voice now rife with worry. “If someone sees —”

“It is well,” he told her. “I am not in any danger from the law. I was pardoned last year.”

“Pardoned!”

“Yes. It was in the papers. But it was probably not widely remarked upon.”

She studied him in disbelief. “How—?”

“It is a long story,” he sighed, shaking his head.

“So, then, you are safe now?” Simplice asked, “You are not—a wanted man?”

“No. No longer.”

She was silent for a space, and then her lip trembled, and her eyes shone with tears. “Where have you been all this time?”


The woman’s eyes bulged. “Cosette?” she repeated. “Fantine’s child? You fetched her?”

Valjean nodded. “She is just over there,” he said, pointing across the cemetery. “That is she.”

Simplice followed his gaze and found Cosette. That cold, austere composition she was so accustomed to broke. “That—that’s really …?” She clamped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, my God. You looked after her all these years?” Expression quivering, the tears slipped down her cheeks. She looked back at him with indescribable emotion.

Valjean could do little but bow before so laden a gaze.

“I don’t care what people say of you,” she said, “You are a good man!”

“I have only done what God required me to do.”
Her lips thinned at that, but she gave no rebuttal, instead wiping her eyes and looking back at Cosette. “Merciful Heaven, is that really Inspector Javert standing next to her?”

“It is.”

She seemed to be at a loss for words. “You and he—came here together?”

“We did.”

“But how? Why? After everything that happened—”

“It is confusing, I know. I can explain. But, perhaps, elsewhere?” he suggested, glancing around. “As I said, it is a long story. Very long.”

Simplice straightened herself and took on a determined expression. “Patience is a virtue, monsieur.”

***

When she saw her father approaching with the nun, Cosette stepped out to meet them. “Sister,” she asked, “are you feeling better?”

“Much better, mademoiselle. Much.”

“I am glad.” Cosette looked away for a second, wringing her hands. “Um, if I may— Inspector Javert says you knew my mother?”

Beneath her habit, Simplice’s eyes lit up. She took Cosette’s hands in hers eagerly. “Oh, yes. I knew her.”

“Would you—would you tell me …?”

“My dear child, you do not know the joy it would give me.”

***

Sister Simplice led them back to where she lived, close by to the infirmary. Though not small—being shared by a number of nuns—it was a humble house, with little décor save for a cross on the wall here and there, and some baskets and wreaths. Sparsely furnished with simple wood and wicker pieces, the most ornate features of the rooms were the iron candelabras and sconces. It was all kept impeccably clean, though clearly worn from use.

Simplice had been on edge all the way there, checking surreptitiously over her shoulder now and again at the people they passed. She was careful to check the house for other occupants before letting them in. Once she found they were alone, however, her tension seemed to ebb. Leaving the men in the sitting room, she took Cosette into the kitchen and put a kettle on their beaten old stove for tea, offering what little food they kept in the pantry: some bread; a little cheese.
“May I have a moment to speak with M. Madeleine alone?” she asked Cosette as the water boiled. “I have not seen him in years.”

“Of course,” said Cosette. “But, Sister … I do not think you should call him ‘Madeleine’ anymore. I think it will make him sad.”

The nun was quiet for a moment, her eyes flicking to the ground. “Then, what would he prefer?”

She bit her lip. “Well—his name is Valjean. But, perhaps, in this case … simply ‘Monsieur’ would be best.”

Simplice nodded slowly to herself. “Yes … perhaps so. Please,” she said, gesturing towards the kitchen table, “make yourself comfortable. We do not have much, of course, but hospitality is a priority of ours.”

***

Simplice led Valjean down the hall to another room, quietly shutting the door and bidding him take a seat. She offered him a cup of tea from the tray she had brought.

“To be honest,” Valjean murmured, staring into his cup, “I am surprised you still feel favorably towards me. I know that most of this town … probably resents my involvement here.”

“How can you say that?” Simplice asked. “You, who did so much for these people …” Her face fell. “They are ungrateful now, it’s true—but you did not deserve their condemnation, after everything you did.”

“It is … kind of you, to say that.”

“Not at all, monsieur.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling his throat tightening. His fingers clenched around the warm porcelain. “I am so sorry for leaving you,” he breathed.

“Leaving! You did not leave; you were dragged out by the neck.”

Valjean huffed and glanced away, conflicted. I could have stayed, he wanted to say. I chose to forfeit this town. But he could not bring himself to tell her that. Especially when she might praise the decision.

“What happened to you?” she asked. “The last I knew you were in Brest. And then—then an article said you had drowned in Toulon.”

He lowered his gaze to the floor. “Yes. I made it appear thusly. They had apprehended me on my way to Cosette, and I did not intend to leave her with those wicked people. I made a promise to Fantine that I’d ensure her child was taken care of. And I am a man of my word.”

“So you escaped to retrieve her?”

He gave her a nod. “We fled to Paris, after that. I had meant to place her in a convent, actually, where I knew she’d be looked after no matter what. Where she would be raised by good and righteous women—and be protected from my past. But … I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let her go.
Once she was in my keeping, she grew attached to me. And I grew to love her too much. But we ended up in a convent anyway, as fate would have it. The police had caught wind of our presence, and we stumbled into refuge at Petit Picpus purely by luck. Fauchelevent convinced the nuns to let us stay, and I tended the gardens with him while Cosette went to classes there.”


“Quite so. And we were very happy there. When she came of age, she almost took the vows herself. But by then, old Fauchelevent had died, and I felt—I felt it unfair, that she had not been allowed to experience the world for herself before making such an important decision. I do not mean to besmirch the calling, of course,” he clarified. “It is just that, knowing only what life there lay within those convent walls, how could she ever know if staying was truly what she wanted?”

“I wished to give her a choice. To let her be master of her own fate. Up to that point, everything had always been decided for her by others. She deserved to regain some control of her life. So we moved to a house in the city. And, for the most part, we have been there ever since.”

“You raised her like a daughter, then?”

“She is, to me. She is.”

Another smile from the typically stoic nun. “Do you think, perhaps, she will ever come back to the Faith?”

“Take up the veil, you mean? I doubt it,” he laughed. “She has married.”

“Ah! A blessing,” Simplice said. “Even though we would have loved to have her, I am sure.”

Valjean chuckled to himself at the idea. Cosette was such a carefree spirit; he could not picture her leading such a rigid, modest life. Especially not once she had discovered Parisian fashion.

“It is nice to hear you laugh,” Simplice mused, studying him fondly. “I do not know that I have ever heard it before.”

Valjean sombered. “I afford myself some liberties, these days. I was so stifled by my secrecy, before. And constantly afraid.”

Simplice thought for a moment. “You took the mayor’s chain, despite the danger it put you in. Because you knew it would allow you to help people in a way you could not otherwise do. I will always respect you for that.”

“But how did you come to be pardoned?” she asked. “And why—why did you come here with him? He, who so humiliated you, persecuted you—He, who so wanted to see you in chains! His cruelty to you that day—it is still fresh in my mind. Fresher in yours, I should think. And yet today you act peaceably!”

Valjean felt his cheeks warm. Sighing, he rubbed the back of his neck. “It is … surprising, I’m sure. Hard to fathom. I myself am still amazed by it, sometimes. But actually … Javert was the one who won me that pardon.”

It is likely that Sister Simplice had never gaped at anything before; it is equally likely that no one could have imagined her doing so. But she did indeed gape, and stare at Valjean in utter disbelief. “J—Javert,” she stammered. “Javert was the one who—”
“I know,” he conceded, putting up his hands. “I know. Trust me, I know. But it’s true.”

Sister Simplice fumbled for words. “What— How could—? I thought that he—”

“Hated me?” Valjean supplied. “Yes. And perhaps it was nearly so. I did vex him greatly, for many years. But … chance saw that I was able to save his life, a few times. And he learned to see the good in me.” Wetting his lips, he added, in a lower tone of voice: “Sometimes I think he sees more good in me than actually exists.”

It took Simplice a long time to respond. “So he is … indebted to you.”

“Don’t misunderstand—I am indebted to him also, for a number of things. He’s saved my life too. And I would never consider anyone in my debt; least of all him.”

“But you mean to tell me that fanatic has come to see you as the town once saw you? That he sees your virtues, your merits?”

Valjean nodded at her, vaguely uncomfortable. “We … It has been a long road, and a rocky one, but—we consider ourselves friends, now.”

“Friends!” she exclaimed.

“Yes. I know it’s difficult to imagine. But understand that … the only reason we are still here today is because of one another. That kind of bond is powerful.”

Simplice’s eyes drifted off. “Truly, the Lord works in mysterious ways,” she murmured. “I never expected a man like him to change.”

“He was, ah—” Valjean let out a scoff. “He was somewhat resistant, at first. But it is not true what they say of old dogs. One can learn, and grow, at any age. It just takes a certain set of circumstances.”

“And perhaps, in this case, a small miracle.”

“I do not profess to know much about God,” scoffed Valjean. “But I do know we’ve been dealt a strange hand.”

“Friends,” Simplice murmured, shaking her head. “It can scarce be believed.”

“Je sais. But I think, if you speak with him some, you shall find him much changed. He has softened, these past few years.”

“I suppose he must have.”

Valjean took a long sip, finishing the last of his tea, and set the cup back in its saucer on the tray. “Just this morning, we told Cosette of her mother. Of me, and this place—and Javert’s hand in it all. I was going to leave Javert out of it, but he insisted she be told the whole truth. Above everything, he is an honest man. And sometimes a humble one, too. Do not begrudge him what he did here. I try not to. He was only doing his duty. What happened in consequence cannot be laid on his shoulders alone. He wishes he could have done better by Montreuil. We both do. But I fear there is little helping it now.”

Simplice gazed at him earnestly. “You owe this town nothing, monsieur.”

“I wish that I felt that were true.”
“It is true!” she said. “It is the town that owes you. But they cannot see it.”

“Please,” he breathed, “let us not speak of the town.”

“Forgive me.”

Outside, the sound of church bells tolled the hour.

“Will you tell me, then, what happened between you and Javert in Paris?”

Jean Valjean smirked to himself. “It is a little complex. But I will try to be brief.”

***

Cosette wrapped her thin fingers around the cup of tea in her lap. She sat in one of the wicker chairs in the front room, across the room from Javert, who was trying desperately to find interest in the newspaper he had brought. It was too quiet, however, and he couldn’t focus.

“It has been a long day,” she remarked.

Javert hummed flatly in agreement. He did not meet her eyes.

“It is a lot to come to terms with,” she added.

“I am sure.”

Both of them seemed to be in a similar frame of mind, he thought—weary, afraid to mince their words. The air between them had grown heavy. And yet, there was a strange ease to their speech.

“Did you really mean to take your own life, just to let papa go free?”

In any other situation, Javert would have started at that question. As things were, he did not bat an eye. “That was … not really my line of thinking at the time,” he admitted. “But your father did play into it, yes.”

“You could have let him go without doing that.”

“No,” he murmured. “My conscience would not have permitted me. My conscience would not … permit me do anything, that night. Except fall.”

“Why?”

Javert thought. “It is—hard, to explain. I lived my life … believing in certain absolutes. Your father—without intending to—quite abruptly shattered those beliefs. Upended everything I knew. That, coupled with my indecision … my fear of sullying the police, or doing wrong … Conviction, mixed with uncertainty … Pride, and shame. There were a lot of factors. I myself had trouble making sense of my thoughts that night.”

Cosette pondered this. “None of those things were worth your life,” she observed.

“Mayhap not. But that is hard to see, when you are in the eye of it all.”
“Papa would not have wanted you to die on his account,” Cosette told him.

“I surmised as much when he dragged me out of the river, yes.”

“So—what, did you jump right in front of him?” she exclaimed.

“No, I wasn’t aware of that,” he said, biting back a growl. “God knows, I left him at his house. I told him I would wait there, and then I walked away. And, I suppose, he followed. The damn fool,” he muttered under his breath. “He was too honest to save his own skin.”

“He sought you out even though he thought you meant to arrest him?”

“Evidently. And what’s worse is, I can’t even think of a reason why, if not to turn himself in. He could have run if he’d liked. I gave him ample opportunity for that. He chose not to. He could have killed me at the barricade, and thereby lived a free man the rest of his life. He chose not to. He could have let me drown, with none the wiser. Could have let that man Champmathieu be sentenced in his stead. He chose not to.”

“What you have to understand about your father is … he has had a million opportunities to walk away—to do nothing, without fear of blame—but every time, without fail, he puts himself in harm’s way to help others. Without reward, or remark. Without expecting a return. He does it because … he cannot help but do it. He has tried to explain it to me; I find it hard to understand—save that he feels it is some kind of duty.”

“Compassion compels him to act, perhaps in the same way that I am compelled by the law. He does stupid, selfless things, for no other reason than he feels it is right. Just as he saved my life, just as he became mayor of this town—even though it risked his security. He is … one of the noblest men I’ve ever known. And I wish I’d known it sooner.”

Letting out a deep sigh, he drifted towards the window, gripping the edge of the sill as he looked out. “This town … you should have seen it. They used to worship him, here. Used to speak his name like a saint’s. Now they just … spit it out like a curse. He did so much for them—so much for everyone in the Pas-de-Calais—but all of it has been forgotten. All the good he did … it just blew away like dust in the wind. And all they feel for him now is resentment.”

Here he grew quiet. “He was so beloved, once. Misunderstood—but loved. And he was able to help so many. To make a lasting difference in this world. I stole that from him. And I blighted this town, in condemning him. Razed his works to ruin in one fell swoop. But I was blind, then, and sure of my convictions. I truly thought I was doing the right thing. And do you know what the most terrible part is? Everyone agreed with me. Even after all these years … after his regard was so tainted … no amount of evidence will change their minds. Madeleine is dead to this town. And perhaps it is best for everyone to let his ghost rest.”

“I may have gotten him a pardon, but I cannot return what I took from him. Nor can I repair the damage I did to Montreuil. I can’t—” Here he narrowed his eyes. “I can’t even restore the respect he deserves. And I cannot give you back your mother.”

He could feel the girl’s eyes on his back. Her silence deafened him. Her cold forgiveness, especially, stung. Better that she had been angry with him—had yelled, and cried—than to bottle herself up like this. It was something Valjean would have done. But Valjean did not resent him,
and she did. He was certain of that.

Balling his fists on the wooden sill, he let out a dejected scoff. “Hindsight is a curse. All it’s good for some days is reminding you of all the things you cannot fix.” He let his shoulders sag. His voice dropped to a hush. “Sometimes I wish I had stayed in that river. But then, if I had … I do not think he would be here today. So—” He stared at the palm of his hand. “So.”

All of a sudden Cosette was at his side, her voice startling him. “You mustn’t ever say things like that!” she exclaimed.

He considered her for a second before dropping his gaze. “No,” he said quietly, “I suppose it isn’t proper.”

“It’s not about whether it’s proper or not!” she said, grabbing the sleeve of his coat. “That is a horrible thing to think!”

Javert was taken aback at this twig of a child manhandling him, but did not attempt to pry her fingers loose.

“Why would you want to be dead? Even if you were my worst enemy I would not wish that upon you!” Her expression shifted abruptly from anger to concern. “Are you truly so unhappy with life?”

He turned his face away.

“Are you?”

Javert let out a sigh. “No,” he murmured begrudgingly.

“Then why would you think such a thing?”

His thin lips twitched back into a frown, but he gave no further reply.

Cosette grimaced at him. “You listen here, you great brute!” she said, tugging his arm and stamping her foot. “My father did not save your life to make himself look good. He saved it because it is worth something! And if you don’t believe that then you are an idiot. Don’t you see the way he looks at you? You mean the world to him, even after all the things you did! You are his only friend. And if you really think so well of him now, don’t you think that matters? He has never had another friend! So you must be something special. You ought to take that into account before you speak of throwing your life away!”

“And besides that, how dare you! How dare you jump into the river after he went to the trouble of rescuing you! How dare you brush aside his sacrifice as though it meant nothing! You ingrate! You did not have to jump at all. You only did it because you were too cowardly to face the truth! That he is a good man, and what you did to him was wrong. That people like him don’t deserve to be behind bars. You are lucky he pulled you out in time! You could be dead right now just like my mother.”

“But you’re not, and you ought to be thankful for that. You ought to be thankful you got to have hindsight at all! Because of that, you were able to better yourself. Because of that, my father is free. You took all the bad between you and made it right, and now you get to have someone that really, truly cares about you. That would lay down his very life for you. That kind of thing does not come along more than once in a person’s life. Would you so quickly abandon it all?”

“It would break his heart if you died, and you know it! So how dare you speak of suicide so
lightly!” Here a ray of sun glinted off her eyes, and Javert realized she was crying. “You stupid man,” she told him, “if I saw you try to drown yourself I’d jump in after you as well!”

He stared down at her, stunned into silence like one who’d received a blow to the head.

In turn, Cosette glared up at him with the closest thing to scowl a face like hers could muster, he supposed—fists clenched.

Before he knew what was happening, she’d seized him in a tight embrace. “You infuriate me,” she said into his coat. Javert could swear he felt her tremble. And then she shoved him back, and resumed glaring at him, her blue eyes hard despite her tears. “Now don’t you ever hurt my papa like that again.”

Javert was at a severe loss for words. “I—” He took a step back, a shadow falling over his face. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, not knowing what else to say. “I am sorry, Mada—”

“Javert?”

Both their heads snapped around at the voice.

Valjean was standing in the doorway with a look of concern, Simplice by his side. His gaze flicked to Cosette, then back to Javert. “Did something happen?”

Clearing his throat, Javert stood a little straighter. “No.”

Valjean studied him for a moment, then turned a questioning eyes towards his daughter.

“Nothing happened, papa,” she said. “We were just talking.”

Valjean raised an eyebrow at them. “If you say so.”

“Madame,” Simplice called, gesturing back down the hallway. “Come with me, and we shall speak of your mother.”

Giving Javert one last, poignant look, Cosette headed off with her.

Once they’d left, Valjean approached, and lightly touched Javert’s shoulder. “Are you all right?” he asked. “What did she say to you?”

Javert shook his head. “It was nothing,” he repeated, swallowing the knot in his throat. “Truly.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

***

“You do not know how good it is to meet you after all these years, and know that you are well,” Simplice told her as they sat.

“I did not know anyone worried for me,” admitted Cosette.
“Ah! So many make that mistake, it seems. I have wondered what happened to you for long, long time now. But what a beautiful woman you’ve grown to be. I do think I see her face in yours.”

“You do? What did she look like?”

“She had fair hair, and blue eyes just like yours. Very similar to you in stature, with a charming personality. She was the humblest sort of soul. So grateful, and full of hope. Even weak and ailing, she had such light in her eyes—when she spoke of you, especially. You were the most important thing to her in all the world. It is a pity you could not be reunited before she passed.”

Cosette’s face fell.

“Still,” Simplice consoled her, “out of all the possible outcomes, I believe she would be glad of this one. She revered M. Madeleine. It would comfort her to know he took you in.”

With a small nod, Cosette looked back up. “Do you— Do you know anything about her family? Her past? Papa said she was all alone when she came here.”

“Well,” Simplice said, looking thoughtful, “I don’t think she had any relatives. If she had, she would have likely relied on them for aid. I do recall she said that she’d once lived in Paris, and kept a number of friends there … but some misfortune must have befell them, for she had to leave in search of work. That is why she came here.”

“But why did she not take me with her?” said Cosette.

Simplice frowned sympathetically at her. “My child, I’m certain she felt she would not have been able to look after you by herself. You were only a babe, and she would have had to work long hours to support you. Most employers will not allow a child in the workplace, and she could not leave you at home all day by yourself. Someone would have had to take care of you, one place or another. She likely thought you better off with those innkeepers.”

Cosette’s expression soured. “They must have lied to make her think that,” she muttered. “It is something they would do.”

“You were treated badly by them?”

She nodded darkly. “That is the mildest way of putting it.”

“I am sorry,” said Simplice. “I know that they extorted her, towards the end. But at the beginning, she could not have known what kind of people there were. All that she did, she did it believing it was for your benefit.”

Cosette’s mouth drew back, eyes wet. “I know,” she whispered to herself. “I know. And I ought not ask for more. But I still wish— There are times, Sister, when I think of how different things could have been, and I—” She cut herself off as Simplice took her hands.

“I know how easy it is to become lost in thoughts of what could have been,” said the nun. “But trust me when I say it will do nothing but further your grief. Surely, in your schooling, they taught you to be mindful of your blessings? That is one of the most important lessons of all. If we forget to be grateful for what we have, we forget to cherish it.”

“Things could have ended very differently for you. For you, and for Madeleine. Even for that police inspector. But it seems like you have all found each other. Been able to help one another, despite it all. And if things had been different … who is to say that they would have turned out as favorable? Who is to say what would have become of you three?”
“You have found love, I hear. And Madeleine has found refuge. In him, you got a father you otherwise would not have had … and in you, he got daughter. The two of you have become family. And somehow … the two of them have become friends. I know what happened to you in the past was terrible, and undeserved … but, what has happened since, I think, is actually very fortunate. And perhaps now you have a better life than you ever would have had another way.”

Cosette’s eyes drifted aimlessly as she mulled this over.

She had always thought of the things which could have been better—but she became aware suddenly of all the things which could have been worse, too. Knowing Valjean’s past—all the dangers he had narrowly avoided, and all the things he had gone through to protect her … Knowing what had happened between Javert and he, and all that could have been ruined by the slightest change of happenstance … Knowing how far all of them had come compared to little over a decade ago—it changed things.

Even if Fantine had lived, what would have happened to her? Without Madeleine to protect her from the law, to give her aid, and fetch her child … where would her story have led? Would she have been thrown in prison? Would she have died some other way soon after? Would she even have gotten Cosette back at all?

And what of Valjean? Would he have remained in Toulon for the rest of his life? Would he have managed to get out and return Fantine’s child to her, only to be put back in prison, or worse?

And of course, she never would have met Marius. Or gone to school, or seen the city. If things were different, who would she have grown up to be? Certainly not the woman she was now. Good God, she might have been trapped with the Thénardiers for years.

It was a strange and winding path, with regrettable things here and there … but it could have been so, so much worse.

“Are you all right?” Simplice said, interrupting her thoughts.

Cosette looked up at her. Slowly gave a nod. “Yes,” she said. “I think … even after all we’ve been through … everything turned out all right.”

***

“I’m afraid we cannot stay,” Valjean confessed when they returned. “We made plans to be back in Paris for mass on Easter Sunday. And besides that, this town …”

“I understand, monsieur,” Simplice assured. “If I were you, I would not wish to stay any longer than necessary, either.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “But, before we go, Sister—I wanted to thank you,” he said, stepping forward and taking her hands in his.

She blinked at him, astonished. “For what?”

“For keeping my presence that night a secret, even against your vows.”

“But monsieur, you were captured anyway, just a few days later.”
“That means nothing. I am honored, and humbled, that even after my past was revealed to you, you still—” Here he choked up a little. “—you still saw something in me worth protecting.” He held her thin white hand to his lips and placed a kiss on its knuckles, bowing solemnly. “I am in your debt.”

She drew back some at this, placing her hand upon her breast, seemingly taken off guard at the display of such emotion on her behalf. “I— Monsieur …” Her eyes flicked over him, up and down. She cleared her throat, glancing away with a hand over her mouth before daring to meet his gaze once more. “Monsieur,” she began again, hanging her head, “despite what they said of you, and despite your past … I saw nothing in you which was not the mark of a great man.”

“The Lord teacheth faith, and kindness towards one’s fellow men. To look past appearances and into people’s hearts. And you—there was no evidence that your heart was anything but good. Can a man not change if he truly seeks to? Does the gospel not tell us that? That if man seeks redemption, and repents honestly, that he should be forgiven? All people are deserving of a second chance, and the opportunity to walk the path of righteousness. That is what Christ Jesus teaches; that is what I believe. And that, monsieur … that is what you have proven to me. So—so what I am trying to say is, I only did what I felt it was my duty to do. To God, and to you.”

Valjean searched her face, his eyes sparkling with tears. Expression trembling, he clasped her hands and bowed deeply to her. “Thank you, Sister.”

“Yes,” Cosette echoed, “Thank you. For all that you’ve done for us.”

“It was my pleasure,” Simplice said. “God be with you.”

“And also with you,” said Valjean, smiling at her in that particularly melancholy way that was his habit before moving to retrieve his coat.

As he was doing this, Cosette approached Javert, who was still sitting, head hung.

He looked up at her.

She offered him her hand.

He stared at it for a moment, as though unsure what it was. Carefully, he took it, and she pulled him to his feet.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he murmured.

She studied him, cocking her head. “I think so.”

“Good.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Suggested Listening:
Carrying You (Main Theme) (Cello & violin version) - Joe Hisaishi

Day of the River - Joe Hisaishi

Kaze no Toori Michi - Joe Hisaishi

Legend of the Wind (Opening Theme) (Piano & cello version) - Joe Hisaishi

Mononoke Hime (Piano version) - Joe Hisaishi

One Summer's Day (Opening Theme) (Cello & piano version) - Joe Hisaishi

Princess Mononoke (Main Theme) (Cello, guitar and piano version) - Joe Hisaishi

Shooting Star - James Newton Howard

The Wedding - Bear McCreary

The ones that are cello versions are performed by Kaoru Kukita + Dolce de Musica. They can be found on this playlist.
After that, things were different between Javert and Cosette.

She acted less the child around him, and more the woman. Smiles did not come to her as easily, but then, neither did timidity. She treated him like an old colleague rather than a curiosity, now—and he much preferred it. He still felt guilt around her, but it was no longer that of secrecy. An understanding had formed between them, and for that he was grateful. In addition, there was the added benefit of not having to worry what she did or did not hear being said between Valjean and he. A great burden had been lifted off their chests in that regard. He hardly noticed it, but no more did Javert go about on his toes in that house.

As for Valjean, it was the first time in nearly two decades he was able to be, simply and unfearfully, himself. Javert had freed him from the confinement of the state, but, in revealing his history, Valjean had freed himself from the confinement of his mind. The past still troubled him, of course, but it could not bring him further harm. Nor need he worry it would bring Cosette shame.

On the contrary; she quite adored him for it, fussing and fawning over him far more than she ever had before. Now that she knew the true nature of his griefs, she was able to address them much better. It gave her peace of mind, as well—for, all the years prior, her father’s moods and quirks had been a mystery, and she had always worried on account of them, not knowing what plagued him, or how to fix it. These days, however, all she had to do was give a knowing look, or touch his arm, to bring him comfort. He knew that she knew, and that was enough.
Once, her affections had frightened him—partly because he felt them undeserved, and partly because they made him feel shame. But now, her love warmed him as it was always meant to, unhindered by the shroud of duplicity he had worn for so long.

The part of himself he’d kept caged was allowed to roam free, and it wandered the halls in wonder, tentative and shy. To reveal one’s true nature, and to find after everything one’s fears of rejection unfounded—that is the ultimate relief. It would likely take him years to adjust—to feel fully comfortable with this unguardedness—but already, he felt something wondrous happening in the depths of his soul.

***

March turned to April, and the streets were filled with puddles, seeping their way in between the cobblestones in places, and flooding them entirely in others. But the air began to warm, and the plants began to blossom, and people swarmed the streets regardless, happy to be out of the house.

It became customary for Javert to find himself wandering towards Rue Filles du Calvaire whenever he had a significant amount of free time, regardless of what day of the week it was. These visits rarely had a purpose; entirely unlike his former scheduling habits—but he did not notice, nor would he have cared. He’d found friendship, and all the pleasures and comforts it offered—and he relished it. Secretly, bashfully perhaps—but deeply, and truly.

Though he never showed it, and oftentimes was not conscious of the fact, a nervous elation filled his breast whenever he spent time with Valjean. Seeing his smiling face at the door immediately relieved whatever stress the day had wrought.

Sometimes they read to one another, sometimes they walked. Sometimes Javert just sat and talked at Valjean while the man worked the soil out back. Other times, like today, they merely sat and took coffee or tea, content to share peaceable silence.

It had rained earlier in the day, but the sun had come out, so they’d sat at the little table on the patio out back to enjoy the fresh air.

Javert was in the middle of browsing the administrative correspondences of the police in Le Moniteur when he spotted Cosette and Marius heading towards them.

“Oh,” said Valjean, glancing up from his book, “Hello, ma chère.”

She sidled up to the table with a very serious air, folding her arms behind her back and holding her chin up. “Papa,” she began, “Marius and I have been doing some thinking.”

“On what?”

“We know you are not really related to us, and that you volunteered to be our father, but you have been doing such a good job of it that we’ve decided to promote you.”

Valjean blinked at her stupidly.

“Now you are a grandfather,” she said.

“Eh?”
Javert snorted, and narrowly avoided getting coffee up his nose.

Glancing at him for a second, Valjean returned to staring at Cosette.

“You are going to be a grandfather,” Marius repeated with a smirk.

Valjean’s mouth fell open. “R—really?”

Breaking into a jubilant grin, Cosette nodded at him.

The old man began to tear up.

Javert swore, in that moment, he could see entire galaxies form in those eyes.

Valjean let out a breathy, disbelieving laugh. It turned to giggles, like a schoolboy’s, as his face brightened tenfold. All at once he sprang from his chair and took Cosette’s hands in his, squeezing them as they smiled at each other, their laughter standing in for words.

He threw his arms around her, sweeping her off her feet and twirling her about as she squealed with delight like a girl of five. They whirled about the garden, giggling and dancing around one another in a sort of foolish ecstasy.

Javert raised his eyebrows at them, stoically taking another sip of his drink as Marius snickered to himself at his side.

Father and daughter were utterly oblivious to this. They continued romping in the muddy grass, careless and jubilant, and somewhat resembling a pair of pixies, until they lost their breath and doubled over, still laughing as they panted.

As Valjean straightened himself, wiping a tear from his eye with the heel of his hand, his gaze happened to fall on Javert. He stared across the garden at him for a moment, with a wondering sort of look. And then, the most contented, peaceful, beatific expression broke across his face, like a beam of sun, or a strain of violin. Valjean smiled gently, warmly at him, and Javert felt a tug on his heartstrings.

He saw within that gaze a million professions of gratitude, and utter adoration.

Because of you, it seemed to say, I have lived to see this day.

Because of you, I’ve found happiness.

Because of you.

Because of you.

As he bore that gaze, Javert felt his cheeks begin to flush. Slowly, he lowered his head and hid his face behind the newspaper.

“So?” he asked surreptitiously, still fixing his eyes on the pages when Valjean returned, “How does it feel to a gran-père, then?”

“Delightful. You should try it, some time.”

“I think it is a little too late for that,” Javert observed.

Valjean chuckled and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Sometimes
family crops up very unexpectedly.”

Javert raised his eyebrows, taking a sip of his drink. “I suppose you would know.”

***

When Javert arrived at the house the first Sunday in May, he seemed preoccupied by something. As soon as they sat down to tea in the drawing room, the man began to scratch at the armrest of his chair, casting his eyes about anxiously.

“Does something trouble you?” asked Valjean.

Javert clicked his tongue, his lips pulling back into a frown. “No, I— I am not troubled, per-say. It is merely …” Sighing, he touched his brow. “Forgive me.” He rose from his seat and started towards the back of the room, looking much like a man about start pacing.

Valjean stood, watching as the man paused by the window, staring out at the yard and rapping his fingers on the sill for some time before whirling to face him once more.

“There is something I have been meaning to speak to you about.”

“What is it?” asked Valjean.

Javert pulled a folded stack of papers from his breast pocket, holding them up for him to see. “You recall this?”

Valjean approached, and took them from his outstretched hand. He flipped through the pages with a jolt of recognition. The look on his face grew gradually incredulous.

It was, to his bewilderment, the letter which he had begun to write Cosette last year, when his health had declined, and he thought he should never see her again. “Where did you get—”

“These are trade secrets, yes?”

Valjean blinked at him. Regarded the mess of writing and poorly made technical drawings below.

He had tried, in his dying fervor, to articulate parts of his past to Cosette in that letter. A foremost concern of his was that she should think the money he’d given her stolen somehow, especially considering what Marius thought of him, then. He’d explained where the fortune had come from, that it was honest—that it had been made through simple means of innovation in the manufacture of jet goods. At the time, he’d felt compelled to prove this to her, so much so that, despite the lack of any training in the arts, he’d tried to illustrate the process best he could.

It was here that the letter had begun to devolve into a sort of desperate rambling, which he recalled now with a shudder. He had detailed the advancements he’d made in the industry, the little changes that had allowed the small-town factory to become one of the top competitors in the industry, enriching everyone’s lives: casts made from gum shellac and turpentine rather than resin and lampblack; slides made of iron laid together rather than soldered; buckles made without tongues; other minor but vastly more efficient alterations to production.
Perhaps a part of him had wanted her not only to know that it was honest money, but to know how to make it again for herself, if she wished. He could not say now what had been going through his mind in those days.

He furrowed his brow at the pages. It was list of profitable techniques, surely, but … trade secrets?

“Well, I suppose so,” he finally said. “I don’t know of anyone else that’s employed them. But, Javert—I’ve been out of that business for over a decade now, and—and where on earth did you get this?”

“From your valise,” the man explained. “It was necessary that I go through your personal effects while you were in jail, in order to find anything I might use in your defense. But this—this I was not expecting. I kept it on a whim; I did not return it to you. May you forgive me. Considering the sentiments and the history contained therein, I did not think you wanted your daughter to see it. I also found myself intrigued by its contents, after a couple rereadings.”

“After a couple— You mean to tell me you’ve been holding onto that all this time?”

“Yes.”

“But why? For what purpose?”

“I am an inspector,” said Javert.

Valjean stared at him, uncomprehending.

“I inspect things,” the man continued. “Businesses.”

“I don’t see why—”

“You will, if you allow me my words. Écoute. I inspect businesses—manufacturers, factories—make sure they’re up to code. Make sure there’s no … illicit dealings going on. I get to see firsthand their manufacturing process, do you understand? And there is not one business in Paris I’ve seen employ these techniques.”

A nervous feeling began to grow in Valjean’s stomach. “What are you saying, exactly? Where are you going with this?”

“There is a silver manufacturer’s on the Southeast bank that is in the business of buckles and clasps and other such goods. Common things, for which there is always demand. Jewelry, too. I have been inside it before; it is a decent place, not a small place, and there were many little nuances in the manufacturing process that could possibly be made more efficient if someone of considerable ingenuity put their mind to it.”

Here Valjean opened his mouth, but Javert spoke over him.

“You ask me why I bring this to your attention. Well. The factory has recently closed. One of its owners is doing time in prison for embezzlement and fraud. My deposition helped to put him there. He was in charge of their accounting, and was trusted to manage their finances accordingly. Instead, he was forging documents so that he might pocket the money himself, while cheapening the quality of production and endangering his workers. On top of this, he was found guilty of tax evasion. His business partner is, understandably, displeased with him.”

“This partner—the honorable one, I mean; one M. Girard—was the one whose assets built the
company to begin with. But the man has no sense for numbers; that is why his colleague’s questionable bookkeeping escaped his notice for so long. He is an older man; he does not possess the faculties or means to run a factory like that on his own.”

“Little money is left to his name; the partner embezzled a great deal of it and wasted it on things which cannot be reimbursed. So the honorable partner hath not enough coin in his coffers to pay for both the necessary materials and his laborers’ salaries. He has shut up the factory doors. He has sent the workers away.”

“This is a problem for more than just him. You know better than I that the livelihood of such laborers and their families depend on occupations like that, and it is not always easy for them to find comparable work elsewhere. Some may turn to immoral and illegal methods to survive. I, of course, do not wish to see that happen. It would be a boon to them if their jobs could be returned. And it would be a boon to M. Girard if someone were to offer him a great deal of money for what is now only a piece of property on which he has to pay tax.”

Valjean regarded him in silence, his face scrunched. “You … want me to buy the deed to a silver manufacturer’s,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” said Javert. “You have more than enough money to place a reasonable offer for it with the remaining fortune from Montreuil-sur-Mer, and pay for a number of months’ worth of materials and salaries. Enough to turn over some profit which will lay capital for future costs of operation.”

“This is not at all taking a risk;” he continued, “it is making an investment. If you employ some of these tricks you used to save on costs in the past, it is not a fantasy to expect you will make back the amount you paid for the place in only a year or two. Silver is much more expensive than jet and iron. If you manage to increase efficiency at anywhere near the percentage you did before, you will make your profits back at three times the rate you did in Montreuil. That is nothing to scoff at. Do you comprehend how much good you could do with that kind of money?”

At once, Valjean understood. Slowly, he set the letter down on the nearby table as a shadow fell over his face. “You have been thinking about this for some time, now. Haven’t you.”

“A while, yes.”

Valjean turned, frowning wearily at him. “I know why you are doing this.”

“I know you do.”

They stared at one another, unrelenting.

“You cannot fix the past,” Valjean told him.

“I am not trying to fix the past,” said Javert. “I am trying to make a future for you here. I am trying to give you a way to help people.”

“You are trying to restore what once was,” Valjean murmured. “You—you’re trying to place me on a pedestal.”

Javert gazed sadly back at him. “Would that be so very terrible?”

Valjean shuddered. Clenched his teeth. “I—I can’t,” he managed to say, hanging his head. “I can’t do it, Javert. It’s been too long. It’s been too much. I just—can’t.”
The man scrutinized him. “What is there to hold you back?” he asked. “What is it you fear?”

Valjean swallowed reflexively. Those words pricked at him; made him start, and shy away. “I can’t—handle that kind of responsibility, anymore. I can’t … be in charge of people’s fates.”

“You only say that because you’re afraid you might fail.”

“And what if I do?” Valjean shot back. “What if I do, Javert?”

“You won’t,” said Javert. “I know you won’t.”

Valjean grimaced and turned his back to him. “We aren’t talking about this. It’s not an option. And besides which—besides which, that money does not even belong to me anymore. It belongs to Cosette.”

“Did you not say you had spoken with her about using it?” Javert asked. “About using it for this very thing, for public works, for bettering the lives of others? And did she not agree to it?”

Valjean felt himself flush. “This is not … I meant it for charity. For schools, or hospitals, or—”

“I know exactly what you meant it for. And I tell you that if you invest it in business this way, you will be able to provide funds for those causes indefinitely, and in a far greater capacity than you ever could by merely making donations alone.”

“Giving it succeeds—”

“It will succeed. You will make it so. You have a good head for these things. God knows how you acquired it, but you’ve a good head for them.”

Valjean got the distinct and unpleasant feeling that the conversation had, without his consent, shifted from the hypothetical to the inevitable. He gave an exasperated, anxious sigh. “Javert, I—I’m just a man,” he pleaded. “Not a genius. Not a … captain of industry. And I am not a young man. I may not look it, but I’m sixty-five! Have you forgotten that?”

“What is that to me?” Javert scoffed. “You entered the industry in your late forties; you were not a young man then, either. And look at Gillenormand, for god’s sake! The man’s ninety-four and he’s still out and about, getting into heated arguments and beating people with his cane. Lord, if only we all were blessed with such vivacity!”

“You say you are sixty-five as if it concerns you, as if your health is failing—but you look not a day over fifty-five, and you are still as strong as an ox! The only time your health became any kind of issue was when you were willfully starving yourself. As long as you keep yourself well, I do not see it failing you any time soon.”

“Age is no excuse for cowardice, anyway. What was the name of that man at the barricades? Mabeuf—that was it. He was eighty-something, I would wager, and he died fighting. He did not lay down in defeat because a few too many years had softened his bones. I may not have agreed with their cause, but I can respect that kind of resilience. And you are exactly the sort of man who is capable of such things.”

“Do not come to me and say ‘I am too old’, when just under two years ago you donned a National Guard uniform and went out to risk your life amidst a rebellion. When you kept watch with a musket all night and dragged a boy through the bowels of the entire Parisian sewer system. When you jumped into a point of the river where no one comes out alive, and made it safely back to dry land with a full-grown man on your back. When you tried twice to take on a band of thieves
and brigands all by your lonesome, and managed to incapacitate half of them despite the odds.”

“I know the kind of man you are, Jean Valjean. You play at weakness until the situation calls upon you for aid, and then you become Atlas himself. So don’t tell me you’re not up to a little busywork. You, who spends hours digging in the dirt and pruning trees. You, who still seeks to lend a helping hand to everyone you meet. ‘Oh, I am sixty-five,’ you say! Who cares? I am fifty-four, and you are stronger and more resilient than me! Do not presume to tell me you are some doddering old cove too frail to labor. Age to you is nothing; age to you is what it is to wine! You become more seasoned, that is all.”

Valjean stood dumbstruck at this exclamation.

Javert smirked toothily at him. “You’ve gone very red just now, monsieur. Could it be you cannot deny my argument?”

Valjean’s cheeks grew hotter. He floundered for some counterpoint, some denial he could make. “You—you cannot just come to me with this all of a sudden and expect me to agree to it,” he exclaimed, throwing out his hands. “To undertake such a thing, when you know that I—” His fingers clawed at the empty air before him. “That I …”

“That you what?”

Valjean tried to verbalize his turmoil, but found he could articulate it no further. He cursed beneath his breath. His shoulders sagged. “I don’t … have the words for it. I’m sorry. But I cannot do this thing you ask of me, Javert. It requires qualities I no longer possess. Qualities which I might never have had to begin with.”

Javert softened some at that. “I know it is not a simple proposition,” he finally said, glancing away. “I know it would be hard. And I respect your right to refuse it. But I think that … it would help you. I think that you could stand to make a great deal of change in people’s lives. And I think that if you let this opportunity pass, you will grow to regret it someday.”

“I know how it must seem, me bringing this to you,” he went on. “And I know the reservations you must have. That you … feel the time has passed, for such things. And maybe you are right; maybe you are right to ask for peace and quiet the rest of your days. To demand a reprieve. Maybe it is cruel of me to suggest this to you.”

“But maybe—just maybe—you are wrong. Maybe there is more left in you than you think. More courage. More strength. And maybe if you applied it to this … if you took a chance, and managed to make a difference … it would bring you peace.”

Valjean wanted to be angry with him, to grit his teeth and stand his ground. But the look in the man’s eyes disarmed him. He turned his face away and fought back tears instead.

What protest could he make? How could he defend himself against that kind of thinking? Already he felt it creeping up on him: the guilt, the resignation. A nagging whisper in the back of his brain.

*It’s not fair,* he longed to say. *You have no right to ask me this. No right to snare my conscience thusly, when you know I am its slave.*

But at the same time, he saw—he knew!—what deeds he could accomplish if this risk paid off. And it would; he knew it would. That was what terrified him. Not all that could go wrong, but all that could go right. All the good he might yet do.
And all that he would squander if he did not make this deal.

It was true: those hundreds of thousands of francs still sat in a bank, unused. They brought no succor, no relief to anyone. How many could they have fed, have clothed, have saved, in all this time? How many had he forsaken by keeping them untouched? And how many still could he aid, if he invested them this way? If he turned a stagnant sum of coin into a self-replenishing fund, which he could grant to anyone for anything, at any given time?

It ate away at him—just, he supposed, as intended.

“I do not want to do this,” he breathed helplessly.

“I know,” said Javert.

“Then why do you tell me to?” Valjean burst, whipping his head up indignantly.

Javert seemed slightly taken aback at this display, but his composure swiftly returned. “Because in time you will be grateful you did.”

Valjean just stared at him, biting his lip.

“Do here what you once did for those in Montreuil-sur-Mer,” said Javert, retrieving the papers from the table. “Give them work, and education. Opportunities, and hope. Provide for them what I cannot.” His gaze trailed slowly to the floor. “The law is only good for keeping things the way they are. For putting people in their place. It cannot help them rise. It cannot put bread on their table, or love in their hearts. It does not concern itself with poverty, or hunger, or sickness.”

“Men like me maintain order; nothing more. But men like you—Men like you have the power to change. Men like you can take what they are given and weave it into gold. Can raise up everyone around them. The law can only punish crime. But you—you can expunge the very need for it. Men like you are worth a thousand men like me. And there are not many men like you in this world, Jean Valjean. In fact,” he said, raising his eyes to his, “there may be only one.”

“Don’t let your potential go to waste. It pains me that I’ve already hindered it so. But there is time left, and means to rebuild. There is so much you might do. So many you might benefit. I want that for you. I want to see that vision realized. I don’t want you to die regretting that you could not do more. And I cannot live with the knowledge that it was I who prevented you from it. So this—” He crumpled the letter he held in his hand, glancing down at its contents with a heart-wrenching expression. “This is my way of making things right. This is how I make amends.”

“I have no money, and few connections. I have little to offer you but my companionship. Which is likely subpar,” he admitted. “But if I could give you this—if I could give you back even a fraction of the influence I stole from you … I would sleep much better at night. And it is my hope that you might, too.”

Valjean gazed helplessly up at him. He tried to swallow, but there was a knot in his throat. “Javert, I—” He turned his face away, wringing his hands. “I know what this means to you—indeed, what this might mean to many people—but …” He felt his lips form the words, and already knew himself damned. “I shall need some time to think on this.”

“Of course,” Javert returned.
Valjean did not speak to him for a week.

Nor, in turn, did Javert attempt to contact him.

The night of their discussion, Valjean had lain awake in bed, refusing to seriously contemplate the idea. He knew which decision he would make if pressed to make one, and he did not want to make it. He tried to blot out his thoughts. But he knew the matter required a resolution—and furthermore, Javert had unnerved him with his talk of wasted potential.

Jean Valjean did not like to consider his potential. He never had. This was due in part to his bitterness at not being able to achieve it, and in part to the fear of making himself conspicuous, which had plagued him since the bagne, and continued to plague him even now. These two predilections mixed badly, like oil and water. They set him at war with himself.

On the one hand, he hated being in the public eye. Or, rather, was terrified of it. He wished to remain humble—unseen and unheard, where nothing could harm him. He did not particularly care whether or not he achieved anything worthy of note.

On the other hand, if those achievements could provide significant aid to those around him, he very much cared indeed. And—though it might be averse to attention—as a virtue, his humility did tend towards self-sacrifice.

He tossed and turned beneath the sheets for hours.

What can be said of his internal tribulations? Of his strife, and indecision?

There was no choice. There was only selfishness, and fear. He knew it, and he was trapped by it, just as he had been trapped in Montreuil-sur-Mer.

Javert’s words came back to haunt him, an echo of years past.

‘Do you comprehend how much good you could do?’

An old woman had once said much the same thing to him, and it had ended with him taking the mayor’s chain, against all reservations.

‘What is there to hold you back?’

He could not give an answer to it then, and he could not give an answer to it now.

Friday night saw him kneeling at the edge of his bed in fervent prayer, his knuckles bone-white against his brow as he wept.

For how could he excuse himself without blackening his soul?

***

His portress had gone to market after church, and so, when he heard a knock on the front door, Javert descended the stairs to answer it himself.
What he found, to his surprise, was Jean Valjean standing very stiffly on the doorstep, with his hands folded behind his back.

This was unprecedented. They never met at Javert’s apartment for their Sunday visit. Indeed, they seldom met there at all. It was cramped in comparison to the Gillenormands’ house, and offered few luxuries besides privacy.

Thus, to see Valjean here, and with such a strange air, was cause for concern.

The man glanced down at the floorboards, avoiding his gaze. “How long do you suppose it would take to summon back an operational workforce?”

Javert blinked, cleared his throat, and quickly composed himself. “I should think it would take at least a few weeks even in the best of circumstances … but it will likely be twice that or more, depending on how many are willing to resume their former occupation. Then there is the time it will take to train any new employees. So, I would say … a month or so, in all likelihood.”

Valjean was silent for a moment, still staring at the floor. “Bien,” he said with a flat, preoccupied tone as he stepped over the threshold, “Then that affords us plenty of time to buy supplies.”

***

Bewildered—not by the topic of discussion, but by the man’s demeanor—Javert made them coffee before daring to converse. Despite the mild spring air, he had, either out of habit or unease, lit a small fire in the hearth. Pulling his bergère before it for Valjean, he claimed its padded footstool as his own seat, for he was sorely lacking in other chairs, besides the hard wooden stools in the kitchen.

They sat and sipped their drinks in silence for longer than Javert felt comfortable with, neither making eye contact with each other.

Cautious, Javert finally looked over at him. He had been sneaking glances for awhile, but this was the first that did not shy away when the man glanced at him in turn.

Valjean’s face seemed haggard, his expression numb.

“You … do not look as though you have been sleeping well,” Javert remarked.

“No,” the man murmured into his drink. There was a look of utter defeat, and resignation, in his eyes.

Javert studied him. “No one is forcing your hand in this,” he said carefully. “You do not have to do it, if you do not wish to.”

Slowly, Valjean turned his face to him, expression unchanging save to gain a slightly irritated, knowing look.

Javert felt the stab of accusation. “I am not making you do anything,” he asserted.

“No,” the man said, “But you knew I would feel compelled all the same.”
Javert’s mouth twitched back. “Do you want to do this or not?”

“It was never really a question of what I wanted, though,” said Valjean, staring down at his near-empty mug. “Was it?”

The room fell quiet for a moment.

Javert gripped the knees of his trousers. In an abrupt motion, he pushed off them and rose to his feet, stalking across the room. “We will do nothing you do not wish to,” he proclaimed. “I hold no authority over your life, Jean Valjean. And neither does anyone else.”

“If you think I was intending to play upon your conscience for personal gain, then I am sorry; but you are wrong. I knew you would feel inclined towards accepting the offer out of a sense of obligation, true—but that is precisely why I hesitated to bring it to you. I knew you would find the idea of it too familiar, and I knew you would see it as something I did more for myself than for you. I brought it to you anyway. Because it is a worthy pursuit. Because the success of it far outweighs the risks, or the discomforts.”

“Perhaps you feel bound by a sense of duty, yes. But you and I are no longer men bound by duty, are we?” he asked. “It is something far greater, far grander than that which motivates us now. Not debt. Not shame, or fear. Not obligation to anything—be it a law, or an ideal, or a person. No. There is something larger we must heed. And it is our own potential. Our potential for good. Our potential to help those around us; to ease the suffering in this world—to give hope, and comfort, and opportunity where there is none.”

“If you must do this for anyone, Valjean, do it for yourself. Not because you think that you should—but because you know that you can. Because you know yourself capable of great things, and you owe it to yourself to achieve them. After everything you have been through, you deserve that kind of fulfillment. You deserve to know your works will survive you. To know you have done lastling good on this earth.”

“If you do not want to do this, then you need not make an attempt. Either say yes, or say no. But do not come to my house and accuse me of manipulation, Valjean. You know that was not my intent. If I had wanted to manipulate you, if I had wanted to take the choice from your hands, I would have gone to your children with this. They are the ones with your money now, and I doubt they would hesitate on the offer. They do not know you quite like I do. They would think it a marvelous thing, and badger you until you relented. You know that they would. Because they too see the potential in you, and seek to reveal it.”

“I could have gone to them,” he said, “but I did not. I left the matter up to you. And I will not have you assent to it purely because you feel that you must. If you do this, I will not have you do it half-heartedly. What would be the point of that? Better that some other businessman should take it over if you won’t commit. Better you spend your time and your money elsewhere.”

“If you cannot give me an earnest answer to this, then go home. Go back to your children, and your garden, and your books. Forget that I told you of this. Forget I was the one that brought it to you; pretend that you read it somewhere. Put it aside for awhile, and come back to it when your mind is not clouded by stress. I want you to agree it, I do; but only if you really mean it. If you do not, it means nothing.”

“Now tell me honestly,” he said, turning back to him with a vehement look in his eyes, “are you really, truly sure you want to do this?”

Valjean stared up at him from where he still sat in the armchair. He stared and stared, with a
weary, sullen look. Carefully, he set down his mug on the side table. Then, very deliberately, he rose from the chair, turned, and exited the room.

Javert was left standing alone in his empty apartment. He quite nearly scowled at the man’s nerve. Rubbing his temples, he let out a frustrated sigh. “Quel bordel…” he muttered.

***

Every consecutive day that Valjean did not return, Javert grew increasingly glum, stirring his evening coffee with his chin propped up in his hand, and sighing every now and again, a far-off look in his eyes. He worried he had pushed Valjean too far, or been too stern with him, or both. He grew less and less hopeful of the situation, and more and more concerned for the state of their friendship. He knew that he was not wrong in his pursuit—but he also knew that given the circumstances, it didn’t really matter.

Meanwhile, Valjean had tried to take the man’s advice, and put it out of his head. He had tried to pretend it was not Javert who had told him about the factory; tried to understand what he would have felt about it all if he had overheard it somewhere. If guilt and duty did not factor into the equation. This helped his opinion of it some, but he still found he could not make a clear decision.

He read his books, and tended to the garden, and went on walks with his daughter, as he always had, but could never quite escape the thought of it.

The shift in his demeanor, and his apparent preoccupation, did not go unnoticed by Cosette. “You are so somber of late,” she remarked.

“It is nothing,” he told her, and she did not press the issue. For she herself was preoccupied these days, in thoughts of motherhood, and all the considerations that came with it. She had begun to knit and sew in preparation for the child; she planned to make all sorts of things, from blankets to gowns, and tiny, infant-sized socks. It was a particular point of pride for her, to be able to clothe her child with her love. She could be caught pausing in her work to gaze off with a fond, dreamy expression on her face—and Marius was often observed to become exceptionally giddy at times, for no other discernible reason.

It was as Valjean watched them from afar one day, as they chattered excitedly over what names they might choose, that he realized just how much things were going to change. They were moving on to an entirely different chapter in their lives, building a family and a home for themselves.

And he was … what, exactly? He was getting old. That was all. There was no longer a direction to his life. For so long he had strived, had run from one thing to another, never stopping. For so long he’d been driven by a set of goals—Make a name for himself. Become the man the Bishop believed he could be. Help the people around him. Retrieve Cosette. Raise her, protect her.

All that was over now. He had achieved the things he had set out to do—sometimes in the most unexpected ways. And there was nothing he could say for which he wanted.

Yet still, he felt, he wanted … more. He wanted something more than growing old in this house—than gardening, and books, and even being a grandfather. It was a strange feeling, and one he found hard to define. But as he watched the other occupants go about their daily routines, and busy themselves, what he finally realized he wanted was purpose.
Marius had a job; Javert had a job. Cosette would soon be a mother, which is perhaps the most consuming job of all. The servants all had their duties, and went to bed with the satisfaction of having accomplished their tasks for the day. Even the Gillenormands had their friends, their family, their hobbies and their estate to keep them occupied.

Valjean had once had many more responsibilities, but he lived in another household now, and nearly everything was done for him. He had hobbies, which were rewarding, but which he suspected he may grow tired of in too much excess. And he had family, now, and friends (for him, they were mostly one in the same), but they all had their own business to attend to.

Valjean did not have his own business. Valjean was merely there.

And it was in the moments of solitude—when he was left alone to his devices, with no necessary work to be had—that he began to feel to itch of discontent.

A few days more was all it took to turn that discontent into a nagging dread.

One night, reading a book by the light of a candle, he found it so overwhelmingly dull that he set it down. This had never occurred before. (In all likelihood, it was not the book which was dull, but his focus; for he had been repeating much the same schedule for ages now, and the days were beginning to blur.)

He sat there, aware of the long years that stretched before him. Aware of his age, and the thinning anchor of responsibility he had. He sat, aware of all the things he might have done, had things gone another way. And aware of all the things he might yet do, because things had, in fact, gone quite another way again.

He had been given his freedom; granted mercy where he least expected it.

Another man had done that for him once. A long, long time ago. And he had dedicated himself to being worthy of it. Had considered that his duty.

‘But you and I are no longer men bound by duty, are we? It is something far greater, far grander than that which motivates us now. Not debt. Not shame, or fear. Not obligation to anything—be it a law, or an ideal, or a person. No. There is something larger we must heed. And it is our own potential. Our potential for good.’

Jean Valjean felt himself back in that field, on his knees, contemplating his reflection. Contemplating where he could possibly go from here.

He studied the scarred palm of his hand, as he had that night, and felt, as he had then, that irresistible, burgeoning sense of his own capacity for beneficence.

A burning question formed in the back of his mind:

He had been gifted another chance at his life. What was he going to use it for?

At breakfast, the next morning, he turned to his daughter and said, very casually, “Cosette, how do you feel about the manufacturing business?”
“We’re doing it.”

Standing on the other side of the door, Javert stared at him with a blank, stupefied expression. “Do you— Do you really mean it?” he finally managed to say.

“I have already asked Cosette about it,” said Valjean.

Javert paused. “Well,” he said, stepping aside with a sweeping gesture, “Come in, then.”

***

“If we are to do this—”

“You,” Javert corrected, passing him the sugar bowl.

“What?”

“If you are to do this.”

“No,” Valjean corrected, stirring a spoonful into his coffee, “if we are to do this. You are the one who convinced me to do it. You have a hand in what occurs. You are giving me counsel on things. Now, if we are to do this, I have some stipulations.”

“Oh?”

“Firstly, the men and women will be separated into different divisions of labor. This is how I did things in Montreuil-sur-Mer. It keeps things modest and secure. You understand,” he said, taking a swig of his drink. “They would be distracting to each other. It would be uncomfortable.”

“It will keep trouble at bay; I agree.”

“Secondly, I have certain standards for the people I employ. They must be good people, moral people. I will not tolerate ruffians in my workplace. I would like to meet with each man and woman individually. We will allow those who were working there prior to return to their tasks, but I will be keeping a close eye on them, and if they do not prove to be honest folk, they shall be expelled.”

“That is fair.”

“Thirdly, the supervisors will all report directly to me, on a regular basis—but only during working hours, and only before the workers they oversee.”

Javert furrowed his brow at that. “Why so?”

“Because I cannot bring myself to trust them any longer. Not after what happened before.”

“Before?”

Valjean closed his eyes, scrunching up his face. “There was a reason Fantine was put out on the streets as she was. I do not know if you recall this, but before she turned to … before she fell on hard times, she was one of the workers in my factory. Apparently, the other women there gossiped about her. Someone, somehow, found out about her child, born out of wedlock. There was no husband, no father. They believed her morals to be of a … questionable nature. And one day,
without warning, the superintendent terminated her employment.”

“Fantine said that it had been done at my behest—at least, that is what she’d been told. But I knew nothing of this! I did not know of her dismissal, or even the rumors about her. I did not know she had a child she needed to provide for, or that she lacked family.” He let out a shaky sigh, turning his face away and hanging his head a little. “I didn’t even notice she was gone,” he admitted. “I did not visit the factory as often as I had before I’d been appointed mayor. That job took prevalence over it, and I could not keep as close an eye on the place as I should have liked to. And so … this injustice was allowed to occur. It is my fault, for not paying closer attention.”

Here Javert tried to interrupt him with something, but Valjean raised his hand to him, cutting him off. “That must change. I will stop by often, and at random, and oversee the workers there. That is the way things need to be.”

Javert’s eyes flicked about, a melancholy expression on his face. “I see,” he said.

Valjean gave a small nod. “It is my hope that, perhaps, in undertaking this venture, I might be able to help many more in situations such as hers. Those who have few places left to turn. Those that may be shunned for reasons out of their control, or some foolish mistake of their past. God knows I am not one to judge a person based on their papers.”

“It is good of you,” said Javert. “Two years ago I would not have thought that. I would have thought it misguided kindness; foolish, and bound to cause trouble. But I think differently, these days. I think about what you told me—about how you were treated upon your release. I think about how you would likely have not been driven to what you did, if only you had been treated better.”

Valjean gazed off in silence, his mind someplace else. Eventually, closing his eyes for a space, he let out a sigh, and cleared the tension from the air. “Do you think it shall be difficult to hire a full workforce back?” he asked.

“Oh, it will be easy enough to seek out the former employees,” Javert said. “I suspect a great many shall return. It has not been overly long since their dismissal, and it is a good occupation. With any luck, we’ll get enough of them to educate the newcomers. Without us having to read up on silver-smithing, that is. Although, of course, I do expect you to attempt some refinements in the manufacturing process. I think, in particular, your recipe for casts may be of benefit.”

“Mm,” Valjean hummed. “Perhaps. The materials we can purchase through the former distributors, can we not?”

“Yes, although some of them may not be reputable, given that their dealings were set up by someone meaning to embezzle the most of their funds.”

“But you have connections with businesses all over Paris,” Valjean recalled. “Will they not know the reputation of these kinds of distributors?”

Javert shrugged. “I can inquire with them if you wish. Though we must not make out like competitors.” He let out a sigh and ran a hand over his face, leaning back in his chair. “There is just one problem with all of this,” he said. “The dishonorable partner, as I have mentioned, still owns half the deed to the factory.”

“It was not seized from him by the state?”

“No. It is not the state which he owes. The matter of his finances are … rather complicated, at this point. And the honorable partner does not have the legal authority to just go and sell the place.
So in order to finalize the transfer of ownership, we need to procure his signature on the proper paperwork, stating that he is transferring his half of the deed to you. Otherwise, it will not hold up in court.”

“It is hardly an insurmountable problem,” Valjean remarked. “He is in prison, is he not? Convincing him to sell the place should not take much, considering it cannot do him any good in his current position.”

“True,” said Javert. “And it will help him to pay off his debts, which I suspect will be very enticing to him. But, it necessitates we pay a visit to the man.”

“We cannot send a letter?”

“We might, but that would confound the situation greatly. It would make it easier for him to refuse the deal, and then, he might also demand some kind of intermediary, and then we would have to be dealing with scheduling issues, and delays in communication, and so on and so forth … It is far easier to simply meet with him face to face. Besides which, the both of you have to be present to sign the transfer before a notary. And the financial paperwork must be drawn up thusly as well.”

“Ah. That’s right. I had forgotten such formalities.”

“We will need to go and see him in person.”

“I suppose it cannot be helped,” Valjean sighed. “Where is he being held, then?”

Javert grimaced, glancing away with a sort of groan. He chewed his lower lip. “You are not going to like this.”

Valjean narrowed his eyes. “Don’t tell me …”

“He is in Toulon.”

***

Chapter End Notes

**Javert:** *kicking down Valjean's door* DO SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE WITH YOUR LIFE YOU PIECE OF SHIT

**Valjean:** *crying and keeping the door up by brute strength alone* LEAVE ME ALONE WITH MY PLANTS AND MY BOOKS!!

~~~

Boy oh boy we're finally onto THE BEST FUCKING ARC

~~~

Suggested Listening:
Hoshi Boshi No Hara - Masakatsu Takagi

Rain - Ryuichi Sakamoto

Bicameral Mind - Ramin Djawadi

Dr. Ford - Ramin Djawadi
The Sea

Chapter Summary

Valjean and Javert go to Toulon.

Chapter Notes

So, yes, this is the actual layout of Toulon, with everything as closely accurate as I could find for that particular period, down to where the hulks were moored and what number the salles were, probably, at the time. There's even more details about general things that I didn't put in, but maybe one day. Didn't want to go TOO overboard with the descriptions (although, somewhere, Victor Hugo's ghost is demanding I put in as many as humanly possible).

I might end up adding some footnotes to this later on, but there's a ton of stuff here, and I try to make it sensible with context, so idk, maybe tell me in the comments if you think something needs further explaining?

Anyway, here's 23 straight pages of angst for you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There is only one way in which one can endure man's inhumanity to man, and that is to try, in one's own life, to exemplify man's humanity to man.”

-Alan Paton

***

“Of course,” Valjean muttered, a disdainful grin on his lips, “Of course he would be in Toulon. Because I have not yet had my fill of bad luck already, n’est-ce pas?”

“It would seem not.”

“Ah.” And then, under his breath, “Damn.” He grit his teeth, shaking his head. “And you could not, I imagine, go in my stead?”

“No. I cannot legally represent you in a manner such as that. It is you he would be making a contract with, not me.”

There was a sardonic edge to the man’s voice. “Obviously.”

“I will, of course, accompany you,” Javert assured him. “I do not expect you to make the trip by
“I would certainly not be capable of it, no.” He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long, exasperated sigh. “There is no circumventing it, then?”

The edge of Javert’s mouth twitched back. “I’m afraid not.”

“I see.”

***

It was a warm spring day when they met with M. Girard to discuss terms.

He was a lithe, eager little gentleman, with long and thinning white hair, and a slight hunch to his back. A younger reflection of M. Gillenormand, perhaps, if one studied him in the right light. But he carried a vague anxiety about him that Gillenormand would have found foreign, and he was not nearly so volatile.

“So! You’re the man the inspector has told me about?” he exclaimed as he bid them entrance to his parlor.

Doffing his hat, Valjean’s eyes flicked to Javert for a split second, as he wondered just how long Javert had been planning this behind his back. “Je suis.”

Girard set the servants to making them tea as they sat. “He tells me you have run a factory before.”

Valjean hesitated. “It was … a long time ago, but yes. I was not in charge of it for all that many years, but the general business is not unfamiliar to me.”

“He said you manufactured jet goods there. Très bien. I think you shall find it much the same kind of work. If you should decide to purchase it, that is.”

“I intend for it, sir,” said Valjean, “if I can only convince your partner to sell.”

Girard let out a sigh. “I wish he had no bearing on the matter, but it is an issue that must be dealt with before you risk an investment; I understand. There is no use buying only half the rights to something, is there? You will have to secure his approval as well.”

They spoke for some time on dishonorable partner, M. Perrot, as they took their tea, and of the former employees as well. The factory in M-sur-M was mentioned in some detail, but only briefly, for it pained Valjean to recall it—and it also pained Javert. They ended their meeting on the topic of Perrot again, for he was the obstacle they had to surmount if they wished to proceed.

“You might deliver a letter to him from me, imploring him to sell,” Girard suggested. “I confess that I do not know his heart as well as I once thought I did, but it may sway him some. I believe that … at least some part of him regrets what he’s done. I would like to believe that, anyway.”

“Monsieur,” said Javert, “If you would but write one, we will more than happily deliver a letter for you.”

“Ah! Then, I shall have one to you by the morrow.”
For a number of days they met at Filles du Calvaire and discussed how best to go about the situation—how they might convince M. Perrot to sell to them, and how they might rebuild the factory’s supplies.

“I have been thinking,” said Valjean, during one of their meetings. “If we are to make this journey to the South … The destination may be regrettable, but perhaps the trip could be redeemed by a secondary excursion. There is a place I’ve longed to visit for some time. I didn’t dare do so before, with the way things were for me—legally, I mean. Now, however, I need not fear for my security. And we will be in the area, so …”

“Where is it you’re wanting to go?” asked Javert.

Valjean clasped his hands behind his back, lowering his voice reverently as he looked out the window. “Digne,” he murmured.

Arrangements were made for their travel. The journey was excessively long; depending on the weather, and even if they changed out the horses, it might take anywhere from ten to fourteen days for them to merely reach Toulon. They would have to spend a number of days there before leaving again, and then, visiting Digne on the return trip would take them slightly out of their way. In total, they would be gone for nearly a month.

This was not an issue for Valjean, but for Javert, it was a great deal to ask of the Prefecture. Unpaid leave was one thing, but nearly thirty days of it was quite another, especially since he had already taken a few earlier in the year. He could not conceive of making Valjean go alone; on the contrary, he very much wished to accompany him—but Javert drew back at the thought of his superiors, and how he could ever ask it of them.

They knew he often took off-duty jobs as a guard to pay his bills, and frequently they outsourced him themselves as such. And so, when Valjean implored the Commissaire to allow Javert to escort him, and the gist of the situation was explained, he was not as reluctant to grant the man leave as he might have been. (A small donation for the benefit of the station houses may have also helped in this regard, though it was agreed it should never be spoken of.)

Valjean had refused to take lodgings in Toulon, but Javert insisted upon it. It would make affairs simpler, he said; it would shorten both the time and the distance the journey required. Valjean finally relented upon this point, but only on the condition that they rent the furthest accommodations from the bagne as possible, which they did.
They rested up for the night, exhausted after so long a trip, and rented a fiacre the next day to take them to the harbor.

Toulon was just as Valjean remembered it. He had been hauled out in chains to do manual labor there so often that nearly every street held some unpleasant memory for him. There they had laid the foundation of a house; there they had repaired a crumbling wall, or paved a street. Each stone and brick in the city was imbued with the sweat and blood of galley slaves.

They were not halfway through it before they came upon a chain gang, working on the façade of a building. Valjean tensed, instinctively hiding behind the fiacre’s curtain as they passed—unable, however to draw his eyes away.

***

When they finally arrived at the bagne, Valjean had completely withdrawn.

He had gotten progressively quieter the past few days, Javert thought, but now the man refused to even look at him.

Javert exited the fiacre and came around the other side to pay the driver and open the door for Valjean.

When he did so, however, Valjean remained motionless on the seat, staring down at the floor of the carriage.

Javert studied him—the creases in his face. The disquiet.

“Come,” he said, stepping up and touching his arm. “It is not so bad. I will be at your side the whole time.”

He saw Valjean’s hands twitch in his lap, wring themselves for a split second before they clenched. Reluctantly, Valjean rose, taking his hand and exiting the fiacre. He did not let go as they started towards the entrance. He kept his eyes on the paving stones beneath their feet.

Javert had noticed that as soon as they had entered the city, the limp in Valjean’s right leg had grown more apparent. It was hardly noticeable most times, and would take a trained eye like his to observe—but now, as they approached the bagne, one could have easily mistaken Valjean for a man who had suffered a grievous injury in his youth.

Javert supposed, in a way, that he had.

***

The bagne of Toulon was located in the western side of the harbor, a part of the Navy’s arsenal. It sat on a man-made island, which could only be entered by way of the small land bridge that formed the marina.

Valjean had not intended to look up, but as they passed the slipways, he found himself drawn to
the sight before him.

He had not seen the sea in eleven years. Even here, encircled by battlements and rows upon rows of small fishing vessels, it held a power over him.

Far off in the distance, over the water, he could see the hills of La Seyne-sur-Mer—greenish black shapes protruding from the horizon.

To another man, it would have likely been a pretty sight. But to Valjean, the beauty of that vast, ship-studded cove, was a sort of veneer. To him, its beauty was dishonest. Oh, it was scenic—picturesque, he knew—but the things that went on there! The ceaseless horrors which lurked within the harbor walls! All one had to do was cross a little causeway, and one found oneself in Hell.

Yet people lived there, just beside it, and went about their daily lives. Moored their little boats beside the prison, and thought nothing of it. That had always seemed strange to Valjean.

As they crossed the bridge onto the Île du Bagne, he tightened his grip on Javert’s hand.

*The last time he had been here ...*

The mere thought of it made him cringe. God, he could still hear their voices.

Unthinkingly, he clutched his chest.

The chapel—the first building one encountered on the island—loomed above them, the battlements to its left. He stared up at it as they passed, with its faded yellow stone and orange roof, like all the other buildings in the bagne.

How many times had he been forced to go there for Sunday mass? He did not know. But he knew he had never felt God within its walls. Only the pressure to obey.

To their right extended the massive Darse Neuve, or New Dock, a huge basin inside the walls of the island itself. Here, at the back of the dock before the salles, and moored in what was called the Groignard basin, sat a number of hulks—decommissioned ships of the line, stripped of their masts and anchored down to gather barnacles. These so-called *bagnes flottants*, or floating bagne, provided extra sleeping quarters for convicts.

Valjean had spent a great deal of time on such ships. During his first sentence, it had been the Robert, the Frontin, the Saint Pierre, and the Incorruptible. But those had long since rotted away.

The last time he’d been here, for those brief yet impossibly long four months in 1823, it had been the Magnanime, the Ajax, the Moscou, the Annibal, and the Suffren. Some of those ships still remained—chained up until they’d outlived their usefulness and the sea finally claimed them, like so many others sent there.

The sight of them shot a chill down his spine, so emblematic of Toulon were they.

On their way across the isle, they passed the bagne’s hospital—whose ground floor housed the guard’s barracks—and the area where public executions took place, whose ominous aura made Valjean tense. When they came to the Angle Robert, they took a left through the Commissaire’s office and headed for the salles by the Grand Rang.

Javert had sent word of their visit the day prior, so that they could forego the normal formalities of asking permission from the Commissaire, and so that they could have M. Perrot at their
immediate disposal. Perrot was in the number five salle, and they were to speak with him at the adjacent guard post.

A garde chiourme was waiting for them there. He greeted them with a curt bow and showed them into what was essentially an interrogation room. It housed but a table and a few chairs, with an iron bar in the floor. Chained to this bar by the leg was M. Perrot.

Perrot was a man of average build, in his late thirties, with a sharp nose, wispy black whiskers, and a slightly sickly appearance. He wore a red cap, denoting that he had not been sentenced to life. The red casque of the bagne, and baggy yellow trousers lined with buttons on their side, hung loose upon his frame. He gave a start as they entered.

“You!” he exclaimed, sitting up with indignation.

Javert smirked at him. “Me.”

“What are you doing here? Did you come here to torment me?”

“Clearly,” said Javert. Fiddling with his bludgeon behind his back, he leaned upon the wall by the door. “Actually, I’ve come to help you pay off your debts. If you’re willing to cooperate, that is.”

Perrot growled at him. “I told you, they already took all I had. I never made any secret stashes; I don’t have any treasure buried someplace. There is nothing left for you.”

“Oh, you misunderstand me,” Javert corrected. “The man you should be making bargains with is over there.” Here he waved a finger at Valjean.

Perrot’s gaze switched accordingly—and took on, strange to say, an even more agitated air. “And who the hell are you?”

Valjean considered the ire in his tone. Sighing, he turned to frown over his shoulder at Javert. “Must you antagonize people so? The man is clearly under duress.”

“As well he deserves, after what he did.”

“We did not come here to make him irate,” Valjean chided. Returning his focus to Perrot, he pulled up the chair and sat before him. “I apologize for my … associate’s attitude. I know this place takes its toll on you.” He bit his lip, and sat in ponderous silence for some time. “How, er—how are they healing?” he finally asked. “The brands, I mean. You … do not look entirely well.”

The man raised an eyebrow at him. His eyes flashed between Javert and he a number of times. Then his expression, and his tone, dropped. “I’ve seen this routine before, you know.”

“What do you mean?” said Valjean.

“The routine. One of you plays dirty and the other acts nice. And I’m supposed to agree with the nice one because it’s a better deal in comparison. But it’s still making a deal. Well,” he said, rolling his eyes, “I don’t know what you possibly think I can do for you.”

Javert dragged a hand down his face. “Ugh,” he grunted, “This isn’t a judicial matter, you idiot. This is a business proposal. I only happen to be here.”

“Business proposal?” the man echoed.
“He is telling the truth,” said Valjean. “This has nothing to do with the law. We are here on account of the factory.”

“Everyone’s here on account of the factory. What about the damn place?”

Huffing, Valjean sat back in the chair. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “It was very wrong, what you did,” he told him, trying to soften his voice. “You have harmed a great many people by it. Surely you understand that?”

“I never docked one centime from their pay, I’ll have you know.”

“No? And yet, they have lost their situations on account of you.”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you not feel badly about it?”

The man just narrowed his eyes and looked away.

“Surely, if there was something you could do to give them back their jobs, you would do it, no?”

Perrot did not respond.

“What good does half a deed do you here?” Javert spoke up from the door.

The man’s eyes flicked to him angrily. “That is the only thing of value I have left, and the only thing which the state cannot take from me. Would you ask that I give it up to you now, when they’ll immediately seize the payment for it?”

“To repay what you rightly owed them,” Javert pointed out.

The man glared at him and spat at the floor.

Javert clicked his tongue. “It might lesson the length of your sentence.”

“You know damn well that it won’t. It’s for more than just debt that I’m here.”

The room fell silent, all of them staring uncomfortably at each other.

Javert spoke up first. “I don’t see what you think your stubbornness could possibly gain you in your situa—”

“Ta gueule, chien policier,” he snapped.

Javert twitched, going rigid as he gripped his bludgeon.

“Javert!” Valjean exclaimed.

He looked like he wanted to smite the man, but at that, Javert merely scowled to himself and leant back against the wall, muttering.

Sighing, Valjean ran a hand through his hair. “Look,” he said to Perrot, “I—I know what’s it’s like, to be here. I know how it shortens your temper.”

Perrot only scoffed at him.
“I am serious,” Valjean asserted. And then, in a lower voice, “I endured this place for twenty years.”

The man cast a cynical glance at him—but then, seeing the look on his face, staggered. “You mean—” He fumbled for words, a variety of expressions passing over his face. “Twenty years?”

“I was supposed to die here,” Valjean said beneath his breath. “But … things transpired in a different direction. Now I am free. And I seek to do as much benefit as I can with the rest of my days. To repay what good has been done by me, and to aid those who struggle to find honest livelihoods, as I once did.”

Perrot studied him. There was something desperate behind his eyes. “Prove it,” he said.

Valjean stared at him sternly. His throat tightened. Slowly, and without speaking, he loosened the knot of his cravat and tugged the fabric down on one side, revealing the scars on his neck. He maintained eye contact throughout, watching as Perrot seemed to apprehend their meaning. Then he replaced the fabric and tightened it up. When he spoke, his words were hard. “Will you help me to fix what you’ve done?”

It took Perrot a moment to reply. “Let me think on it for a day.”

***

They gave Perrot his partner's letter and bid him farewell for the evening, telling him they would return for his answer the following day.

On their way back, they passed by salles five and four. As they walked along the corridor, a voice called out to them.

“Le Maire!” it said in a wondering tone.

Valjean froze in his tracks, his eyes bulging.

Javert, too, halted in surprise.

Valjean squeezed his eyes shut, his hand balling into a fist at his side as his head drooped.

The voice had come from within the salle, Javert realized. From a prisoner.

Was it someone from Montreuil-sur-Mer who had ended up in Toulon by chance? But no, he realized, that would be unlikely. For them to still address him as the mayor would have meant that they’d not heard what had occurred over a decade ago—which would be well-nigh impossible, considering Valjean had been sent back to Toulon after—

The blood drained from Javert’s face.

Anyone and everyone in Toulon would have known about the downfall of the convict-turned-mayor. Every guard and galley-slave would have heard about it sooner or later. Gossip in the bagnes was an infamous thing; the men had few other pastimes available to them.

Nicknames, too—nearly every man had a nickname as well as a number, whether they wanted one or not. The other convicts made sure of that. And what would have been the first thing on their
minds when they looked at Valjean? Mockery. A returned horse who’d tried to make a name for himself, and nearly succeeded, only to be stripped of his title and thrown back to the wolves.

This man in the salle was not calling him “Le Maire” out of respect. He was calling him that because it had been his prison name.

Javert shuddered.

‘Do you not … find that idea appealing?—Monsieur le Maire?’

‘Don’t call me that,’ Valjean’s voice echoed in his mind. ‘Please.’

Oh, god, he thought. Valjean.

He turned to look back at him.

Valjean had been trembling. But, after a moment, he let his shoulders sag, and went still, a defeated expression on his face. When he opened his eyes, there was an ocean of melancholy behind them. Resignation. He turned and walked past Javert, back to the barred door from which they had passed, and from which he’d been called.

A scruffy thirty-something was staring at him from behind the bars. A red cap partially hid the brown curls of his hair. He was looking up at Valjean in amazement.

“Lemaire,” he murmured again, eyes wide.

“Ah, so it is you,” said Valjean.

“But—but how is this possible? You fell from the rigging, into the sea! I saw! You did not emerge. We all thought you dead! Did you swim to your freedom, then?”

Valjean gave a solemn nod.

“Pardieu,” the man murmured. “All these years I’d believed … But here you stand. You saved my life, when that mast nearly crushed me. It has been a long time, but I have not forgotten that. And now—ah!” He appeared to come upon some frightening thought.

Javert realized the man was looking at him.

“Have they caught you again?” the convict asked, turning back to Valjean. “Have you been dragged back to serve the rest of your sentence?”

“No,” Javert growled, finally grabbing hold of his wits. He took a few decisive steps towards the door, glowering. “He is not a convict, and I am not here to return him. He is a free man. And a man of some means, I might add. So watch thy tongue around him, bagnard.”

Valjean glanced over his shoulder at him for a split second. There was a strange look in his eyes, and Javert did not have enough time to decipher it before he turned back around.

“Is it true?” the convict asked. “Are you a free man, now?”

“He has been pardoned,” Javert informed him.

“Pardoned!” the man repeated. “Did you hear that?” He turned to his chain mate, who stood some ways back. “Lemaire has been pardoned!”

He must have been a terrifying sight, for Valjean turned to him and placed his hand on his arm with a sad, pleading look. “Javert,” he said softly. “It’s all right.”

But it wasn’t! He could see it in his eyes. Every mocking jeer of that name cut Valjean deeper than the lash; of that Javert was sure. How could it not? Valjean had borne that derision for four months before he escaped. And he may have resigned himself to it, but that in no way made it any less wrong.

“It’s not all right!” Javert snarled back at him. “It’s not!” His voice dropped, shaking with anger and pain. “Don’t pretend it doesn’t hurt you.”

Valjean’s brow furrowed further. “Javert,” he said again, and his tone was so softly entreating that Javert could not help but submit to it.

He bared his teeth, hanging his head as Valjean turned back to the cell.

To Javert’s amazement, Valjean knelt down and reached through the bars to take hold of the man’s shoulders. “Listen to me,” he said quietly, looking him in the eyes. “This place will suck your soul dry, but only if you let it. I know it is easier to harbor resentment and hatred in your heart, to give into the dreadful mire of your circumstances and turn your back on your fellow man, but you can’t. You mustn’t, do you hear?”

“If you allow yourself to do that—to resign, to become numb to the world—then everything you have lived for, everything you have fought for, and cared for, will be as nothing. It will be as though you died in this place. You might one day leave, but the man that walks away from here will not be you. He will be a husk, an empty shell, filled with envy and spite. He may retain some semblance of life—but never again will he truly live.”

“If you ever hope to escape this place with your soul intact, you must remember all that you cherish, and hold it in your heart, like a burning coal. Your passion, your hope, your humanity—you must guard it all costs. Do not forget that there is a life outside this place. That there is still goodness in the world. I know it seems impossible when you are trapped inside a cage like this, but it is true.”

“And you, too—there is still goodness in you. Whatever else they may tell you, whatever you are made to think, you must remember that. Do not let them stamp it out. For if they do, then you will be forever lost. I let myself make that mistake; I let them kill a part of me here. And I would have been damned, if not for the kindness of a stranger, and the revelations that it brought.”

“I was once like you—imprisoned for what felt like an eternity, sure that I would go mad from it, or else die. Sure that I had been abandoned, and no one cared what happened to me. But someone proved me wrong. Someone placed their faith in me, and rescued me, at the very brink of my despair.”

“From that moment on I strove to be worthy of it, to unearth the humanity they had tried to bury in me. And I found it still intact—pardieu, still intact after all those dreadful years!—and no matter what the world threw at me, no matter how deeply I ached, I never let them take it from me again. I saw what good I could I do in the world and I did it. It was the greatest act of rebellion I was capable of. And what it sowed has made me happier than I ever thought possible.”

“So when you think of your misery, think on that also—all the ways you might chase it away. Think of what I have told you. Think of your future. And do all in your power not to jeopardize it.
Will you do that for me?"

Tentatively, the man gave him a nod, searching his eyes.

"Bien," said Valjean. "Then there is hope for you. Take care of yourself, until then."

"But what are you doing here?" the man asked as he stood.

"Ah? I'm trying to buy a factory."

"A factory?"

Valjean and Javert both replied to him in unison. "It's complicated," they sighed.

***

When they returned the following evening, Perrot seemed much changed. His voice was lower than before; indeed, his whole demeanor was lower. He agreed to sell the deed to them, but only if Valjean agreed to one condition, which he refused to divulge until Javert had left the room.

As it happened, there was a woman back in Paris he’d been seeing before he was arrested. A sort of mistress as it were—it was not a soul-rending kind of love, and it had not been steady. But he was sweet on her, and despite his imprisonment, they had kept in contact through letters. He had just found out she was with child.

His debt was still greatly outstanding, and when Valjean bought the deed from him, the money would be seized by the government. But, he explained, the deed was worth however much he decided it was worth, and the government had no say in that. And if Valjean were to give some of the money that would have gone to that deed to another person instead—well, then, it would not be part of their transaction, it would never have belonged to Perrot, and therefore it could not be repossessed.

He estimated that in honesty, the deed was worth about 150,000 francs, but he was willing to offer it for 75,000, giving that Valjean gave another 75,000 (purely out of unrelated charity) to a Mlle. Lisette Lapointe. Valjean quite happily agreed to this; in fact he promised to look after her for however many years Perrot was there. Perrot was taken off guard by this, and did not know what to say. He mumbled his gratitude. Valjean thought he saw a tear in his eye.

"Before you go," the man said, as Valjean began to leave, "may I ask something of you?"

Valjean turned around.

Perrot was staring at the weathered floor. "You really spent twenty years of your life here?" he murmured.

Grave, Valjean slowly nodded.

"How … How does one manage through that?"

Studying him, Valjean sat back down, shoulders hunched. He thought for moment. "This will sound like it came from the mouth of a guard," he began, "and so you will not be inclined to believe it, but you must trust me when I say it is the soundest advice I can give."
Perrot looked up at him questioningly.

“Keep your head down,” said Valjean. “Do not try to escape. They will catch you and make you rue the day you were born. My original sentence was only five years, but I tried to flee, and each time I did so, they added more years to my sentence—five years for the second time, and three years for each of the others. I ended up staying for nineteen years straight.” Here he paused, his eyes glazed. “Do you want to know what my crime was?”

The man remained silent.

“I stole a single loaf of bread. Five years hard labor because I tried to feed my family. Fourteen years because I tried to run. By the time I got out, everyone I knew had either died, left, or forgotten me. If it had only been five, things would have been different. If it had only been five, perhaps I would have found my sister again. But I was young, and foolish, and angry at the world. And I was far too desperate for patience.”

“The lengthening of your sentence is not the only thing you should fear,” he told him. “They will punish you in other ways as well. I do not wish to speak of it; you may ask the other convicts here. But it will change you. And you will never really come back from it. So even though you hate this place, and you hate the guards, heed them when they tell you not to disobey. You will get bludgeoned and flogged and starved for it. There is nothing for you to gain. Except, perhaps, a reputation which will only make them hate you more.”

“I do not say you should follow them blindly. There are those who are truly unjust. But it is best to remain neutral in most situations. To make as few enemies as you can, of both guard and convict alike. They do not bother the quiet ones much.” He gave a sigh. “Remember none of this is permanent, as much as it may seem. One day you will be free, and you must make plans for that day, and not wallow in your bitterness. The suffering you face is real, and terrible, but dwelling on it cannot help you here. Find something useful and good to occupy your mind. That is all that you can do.”

“I fear that even after twenty years that is the best council I can give,” he said. “Hold out hope, and wait. A future will be waiting for you, if only you believe in it.”

Perrot was quiet for a long time. Then, almost imperceptibly, he bowed his head.

Rising to his feet, Valjean placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “We will be back tomorrow with a notary,” he said. “Thank you for doing this, truly. It is a step in the right direction, and you should take pride in that.”

***

They returned on the morrow as promised, with an official they’d found in the city, who had drawn up the paperwork for them.

At the bagne, Valjean produced the banknotes he had hidden in his coat, and Perrot was satisfied. They shook hands, and Perrot put his signature down on the transfer paper, passing the pen to Valjean.

Something occurred to Valjean as he finished signing it—he did not know what. He took notice of what he’d just written and froze. On the signature line he’d put “Madeleine” instead of
“Valjean”.

He stared down at it wide-eyed and empty of thought. The muscles in his hand seized; the nib tore at the parchment. A blot of ink obscured the signature.

As he watched it disappear beneath the spreading stain, he gave a start, becoming once more conscious of himself.

“I— I am so sorry,” he stammered, jolting the pen away and taking a step back. “My hand trembled. I did not mean to—”

“It is perfectly well, monsieur,” the notary assured him. “It is for these reasons exactly that I carry a spare. Here,” he said, withdrawing a copy from his breast pocket and setting it down, “you may begin anew.”

“M-merci.”

Pretending not to see the odd look Perrot was giving him, he rewrote his name, scratching down the “V” quite sharply, and putting an oddly long tail on the “n”.

It was only after he’d finished that he realized he had never written his real name on any formal document before. Strange that he should do so only now, in the very place he had first learned to write.

It had taken over forty years for the government to recognize him.

He stood, contemplating this dumbly as the notary signed off on the deed and rolled it up.

“Here you are, sir,” the man said, holding it out to him. “I shall submit the record of it for you to the state.”

“Thank you,” Valjean returned, bowing his head and eyeing it for a moment before tucking it into his coat. “And—and thank you, also,” he said to Perrot.

The convict dipped his head.

Valjean would have tipped his hat to him, but he was not wearing one, so he merely said “Bonne chance,” and headed for the door.

As soon as they had exited the room, Javert turned to him. “Are you well?” he asked quietly.

Valjean nodded, perhaps too quickly.

Javert studied him.

Valjean got the feeling the man had seen what he’d written. But neither spoke of it, and after a moment, Javert nodded back.

“How does it feel?” he asked. “To do this again.”

“I don’t know,” Valjean said. “It doesn’t seem real yet.”

“Give it time.”

They began their departure, but on their way through the guard post, to Valjean’s surprise, Javert appeared to get distracted by something, and approached another garde chiourme.
“You, there,” said Javert, “I was wondering—before we go—I was wondering, perhaps, if you knew of a certain convict.”

“Which one?” asked the guard.

“The one they call Chenildieu. Is he still around?”

“Chenildieu? It’s not familiar to me, sir.”

“Ah. And how long have you worked here?”

“About six years now. Why?”

“I was just wondering. I had wished to speak to that Chenildieu … But I suppose he must have died.”

“My apologies, sir.”

“Hm.” Javert paused for a moment. His eyes traced the man’s uniform. “You know, I used to have your job, once.”

“Did you?”

“It was a long, long time ago. Around the turn of the century. Eventually I ended up in the police. But I wonder, though, if there is anyone here who still remembers me …”

“I am sure that there must be a few. What was your name again?”

“Javert. It is inspector, now.”

“Ah. I cannot say that I’ve heard of you.”

“Well. I’m not surprised. It’s been over twenty years since I was here. Coming back, though, I must remark—it seems like nothing has changed since those days.”

“Little ever seems to change here, sir.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Javert sighed. “I don’t suppose Thierry is still around?”

“Thierry? The old captain of the chaîne? Lord, no. He retired years ago. Before I even started here, actually—but I’ve heard tales of him here and there.”

“Do you know if he’s still alive?”

“Ah, I’m not sure, to be honest. You could ask around with the older officers; perhaps one of them would know.”

“Damn,” said Javert. “I had thought the other day to write him a letter. There are a number of things I should like to discuss with him. But no matter. What of Christy-Pallière?”

“Oh, you did not hear? He has been dead these past … why, it shall be five years next month.”

“Sérieusement? I have not been keeping up with the news from this region, it seems. A shame. He was a fine Commander.”

“They made him a Counter Admiral upon his death, you know.”
“Did they? I am glad of it. I always felt that he deserved …”

Listening to them go back and forth, Valjean’s focus began to wane. He knew the men they spoke of, but to him, all of it was part of a past he would like to forget.

To Javert, however, these memories were pleasant. They were part of a gainful youth, a past occupation he recalled now with fondness. To him the guards had not been the stuff of nightmares, but rather, his fellows. Men he had shared drinks, and banter, and jokes with. People he might have called friends. And to him, Toulon was not a cage, but a proving ground, where he had made a good name for himself.

As much as he professed to know its horrors, at the end of the day, to Javert, Toulon was just a place, and not a living hell. He would never understand what it was like. Not really, anyway. He had only been given the illusion of understanding—and in some ways that was worse.

To hear him talk like this—reminiscing with a fellow guard, expressing actual nostalgia for this place—it reminded Valjean of just how big a gulf there was between them. Of just how different the two of them were. And it reminded him how, despite everything that had happened in the past two years … no one would ever truly know him.

Quietly, and without notice, he withdrew, leaving them to their chatter.

A door stood some ways to their left, fresh air wafting in from outdoors. He drifted towards it idly. Crossing the threshold, he found himself presented with the sea.

The smell of brine hit him like a wave, crashing against the rocks as the gulls cried overhead. Listless, he strode to the edge of the quay.

Before him, the water stretched endlessly. It stole into his soul and dredged up long-forgotten ghosts. The shambling red corpses. The blue phantoms that haunted them.

In the distance, he thought he heard the sound of a whip. A prisoner, perhaps, being flogged for their disobedience. Every few moments, a far off *crack* as the lash bit the air, almost imperceivable.

Was it really there, or was it only in his mind? He didn’t know. His shoulders tensed. A tingle shot up his spine.

Standing out there, the years began to bleed.

Everything looked so much the same. The sun faded it, the sea eroded it, and yet it never seemed to change.

How long had he been here? It felt like an eternity.

All context for his situation dropped out from beneath him, like rotten floorboards, plunging him into a temporal abyss. The only thing he was aware of was the lapping of the waves, the sound of the lash, and the cries of the birds.

Those damn birds. Always squawking, always gliding overhead, oblivious to the suffering below. Above, the indifferent sky, and the merciless sun.

The salt on his skin, stinging in his wounds, and the shackles biting into his flesh. Blows for a mere glance. The double chain, for nothing! The cell for one word! The intolerable drudgery of it all, and the senseless cruelty they always—
“Valjean?”

He whipped around to find a tall, dark figure approaching him, their head cocked.

“What are you doing out here?” the man said.

Valjean stared at him, frozen to the spot as he drew near.

“Valjean,” the man repeated.

Valjean seized up, his face filling with terror.

The black of the man’s top hat became the black of a shako, eyes obscured under the brim. The blue of his tailcoat became the blue of a prison guard’s uniform.

“No,” Valjean squeaked under his breath, taking a step back.

The man was eyeing him strangely. “Valjean?”

“No, no …” He began backing towards the wall. He shook his head, trembling head to toe. “I haven’t—I haven’t done anything, do you hear?”

“What?”

‘What was that, you backbiter?’

There was a cudgel strapped to the man’s belt. Valjean imagined him to be gripping it. The sight made him shudder with dread.

The man frowned. He took a few steps towards him.

“No,” Valjean pleaded, pressing himself flat against the wall, as though if he tried hard enough he might slip through it to the other side, and be safe. A desperate terror overwhelmed him as the man drew close. His voice rose to a sharp cry. “I haven’t done anything!”

He slid down the wall, helpless as the man cornered him. Burning tears welled in his eyes. “No. Why am I— Why am I still—?” He shook his head again, violently this time. “I don’t belong here,” he breathed out, his voice breaking, “I don’t belong here. I am tree pruner. A tree pruner! From Faverolles.” He drew his arms about himself like a shield. “I haven’t done anything. It was just a loaf of bread! We had nothing to eat, the nine of us—and the little children, they— Holy God, is there no mercy?” he pleaded, squeezing his eyes shut. “If I don’t go back they’ll star—”

“Valjean!” A large and powerful pair of hands gripped him by his shoulders.

“No!” he burst, trying to scramble back. But there was only wall behind him, and the man grasped him firmly. Valjean stared up in horror at those piercing blue eyes.

Those eyes …

*Those eyes!*

Bright and fierce beneath the shako brim. Bright, and fierce, and full of hate.

The lash unfurling in his white-gloved hand as he widened his stance.
Did you think you were free?

You will never get out until your sentence is served.

Bagnard!

This is what you get for prison break!

His words sounded in tandem with the crack of the lash, slicing him inch by inch with searing pain, lines of fire crisscrossing through his back.

This! Is! What! You! Get!

“No!” he heard himself shriek. “Not you. Not you!”

“Valjean, I— Just hold still for a moment, for god’s—”

Valjean tore away from him. Was thrust back against the wall with a forceful thrash, the two hands on his shoulders like vices.

“I said hold still, dammit!”

That command, barked in the steady and threatening tone of the guards, cut him to the bone. He froze, petrified.
‘Disobey any further and it’s the firing squad for you, do you hear?’

He wanted to throw the man off of him, to scramble away, and he knew that he had the strength to do so, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. They would only catch him again. Punish him again. He cowered against the wall, seized with a fit of tremors, yet frozen in place as the man held him down.

“Valjean,” the man said again. “Valjean.”

Valjean could barely breathe. Any moment now, the cudgel strikes would rain down upon him, until he was battered and bruised, until he could no longer lift himself up off the ground. And then they would drag him into a cell and leave him to suffer in silence.

He kept as still as he could, but the shivers were wracking his body, and he knew that it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter; his submission wouldn’t quell their rage now. No, they were going to—

“Valjean, look at me.”

Hands cupped his face, forcing it upwards, forcing him to meet the man’s eyes.

Those cold, ice-blue eyes …

He let out a fearful whimper. “No,” he mumbled, shaking his head. It was barely a word anymore; more the low groan of an animal. “No …”

“Look at me,” said the man. “No one is going to hurt you. You are safe, do you hear? You are a free man; you have been pardoned. The year is 1834. Come back to your senses.”

Valjean heard these words, but they meant nothing to him. They did not register in his brain. They may as well have been a foreign tongue, for what little sense they made.

“Please … Valjean. Please.”

There was a shuffling noise, and then something like a heavy wool blanket draped over him, blotting out the edge of his vision. It was a coat, he realized in confusion. The folds hung past his face like a hood, or a shroud. Its placement on him made him falter, but did nothing to calm the frenzy in his heart.

There were hands on his shoulders. A hand on his cheek. These things, these points of human contact, terrified him beyond reason.

He did not know what was happening, nor did he wish to.

A voice carried on in the background, muted by the rest of his senses. He did not understand it was saying his name. It was only a noise; a frightful noise, despite its softness—for it was directed at him, and that was frightening enough.

He found himself seized in a strong pair of arms, pressing in on him like tightening chains. In a last, fleeting attempt, he tried to jerk away—but they caught him, yanked him back—and then everything went dark, and he could hardly breathe.

The world, and his senses, were muffled. He was bound up tight, and blind—crushed to another man’s chest. Too pinioned to move, and unable to fight, he surrendered. His desperation fled, robbing him of strength. He went limp.
Never before in his life had he been so thoroughly, utterly trapped. He began to sob. Curling up, he clutched at the fabric before him—more out of shame, and despair, and the simple need to clutch something than anything else.

He wanted to disappear.

For a brief moment, it seemed that unrelenting grasp might crush him from existence—but, woefully, he remained. Remained, and wept.

It was some time before he became fully aware of the hand rubbing slow, rhythmic circles into his back—or the other, barely mussing the top of his coat-covered head. It was even longer before it occurred to him that these actions were meant to be soothing.

He could not reconcile this intent to comfort him with what he’d thought was happening.

Had he not been caught, was he not being restrained, in order that he might be dragged off somewhere and punished for his crimes?

But there was no ill will behind these gestures; no maliciousness in this embrace. And that was what it was, he realized: an embrace. It was not trying to restrain him. Now that he’d stopped fighting, it only held him close—there was no rigidity to its grasp. Only warmth.

He sat there, dazed and confounded, too afraid to move or speak a word. Sat there swaddled in that thick wool coat, with the man rubbing circles into his back. Slowly, his tension ebbed. And he was still afraid, but it wasn’t terror anymore.

At a certain point he found himself leaning against him, his face buried in his waistcoat. It smelled of soap, and wood smoke, and something almost sweet.

That smell— It was familiar, somehow. Why was …?

A flood of sensory details washed over him:

An embrace, in a garden. A hand—his own hand, over another, clad in a black leather glove. Arms around him, just like this. Someone …

A coat, over his shoulders. A courtroom. That voice, murmuring—the same voice. The same coat?

His chest ached. He was sobbing into someone’s shirt. And they were holding him close, just like this …

Who …?

This person, holding him— They were …?

“—vert,” he breathed, tremulous. He drew back a little, scared that he might find an unfamiliar face.

But the face he saw was one he knew all too well. It haunted both his nightmares and his dreams.

The man released him some, sliding a hand to his cheek as their eyes met. “You see?” he assured. “It’s just me.”

Valjean stared at him.
How was it possible? He looked at this man, and saw two different things at the very same
time. That which comforted him, and that which terrified him.

He tried to swallow and nearly choked.

The man’s eyes were still that piercing pale blue, but they looked at him with warmth, and
concern. “It’s just me,” he repeated.

With those words, that frightful duality began to merge. The good and the bad of him came
together until they formed an inseparable whole; formed the present man before him, whom he
could not help but love despite it all.

“Javert,” Valjean mumbled. His voice was meek, and broken. “Javert …”


Valjean clutched at his own breast, his heart pounding, his breath ragged. His chest felt
constricted. “I can’t—breathe,” he gasped, “I can’t—” He doubled over, folding against him like a
ragdoll as he struggled for air, his lungs burning.

He stayed there for what felt like ages, drowning in another man’s arms.

When the terror finally fled, and the panic died away, he was overcome with a deep, sudden
anguish. Tears ran hot down his face, and he sobbed violently into Javert’s shoulder, clutching him
fiercely.

The man held him just as tight, sheltering him from their surroundings. “I’m so sorry,” he said.
“I should never have made you come here.”

After he’d calmed a little, they leaned back against the wall, staring out at the setting sun with
Valjean’s head resting on Javert’s shoulder, and Javert’s arm around his waist.

Breath still labored, and weary beyond words, Valjean sunk against him, still wrapped in his
coat. “I didn’t think I remembered you,” he murmured.

As they stared out at the blazing horizon, Javert placed his hand on his head.

“It’s just the sea, Valjean. And that was a lifetime ago.”

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] “Lemaire” is an actual given name in itself, meaning exactly what its root words entail, so the
opportunity was too good for Valjean’s fellow convicts to pass up.
Ferko "I will be at your side the whole time" Javert: *just fucking forgets about Valjean to go talk to a guard because nostalgia*

No but actually he wanted to see if Valjean's old chainmate was still there (the one who was a lifer at Toulon, and who SAW HIM give himself up in court at Arras). I think he partly wanted to show off how great Valjean was to someone who could actually appreciate it, and partly wanted to ... idk do some misguided attempt at catharsis with reuniting them or something (Valjean probably would not have wanted to, for the memories it would dredge up). Buuuuuut ... he got sidetracked.

And yes, that is, in part, Valjean reliving a traumatic memory at the end. I'm not sure if it was the sight of the bagne/sea + being by himself that triggered him, or the sound of the lash. I'm actually not sure if what he was hearing was real, or if he was already hallucinating by that point. Definitely the smell of the sea played a part in it (and also the smell of the bagne, whose air quality was terrible due to lack of airflow, as there no windows on the side of the buildings that lay against the battlements. I am also not sure if the related dialogue he's hearing in his head was actually something that was said to him or not, or which flogging session it was from - I'm sure he had at least four, for each time he escaped, but possibly more for other kinds of disobedience.

Theiriry and Christy-Pallière were real people ... I should probably add a footnote on them ...

This post should help you to get a better understanding of the layout of the bagne.

This post explains how prisoners were kept.

For more detailed information about Toulon and/or general French prison life, I would recommend checking out the Tumblrs of PilferingApples, PrudencePaccard, Esteliel and Trompe-la-Morte, (to name a few) and searching for "Toulon" or something of the like. They have a HUGE wealth of information.

And yeah so Javert *was* actually a garde chiourme and had a shako and a gun and shit, unlike my previous drawings, so thanks to a-french-guardsman for clearing that up. IF ONLY I KNEW FRENCH THIS RESEARCH WOULD BE A LOT EASIER

I'M SO EXCITED FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER LIKE OMG YOU HAVE NO IDEA. IT'S LIKE ... THE 3RD-MOST GAYEST CHAPTER. And they just get increasingly gay from here my dudes. It's fucking GREAT

Oh god I need to reply to so many comments on here I'm so sorry (I already read them all tho. Multiple times. As motivational dopamine rushes)

Also this particular playlist is pretty bomb imo like it fits together really well and it's all instrumental stuff from soundtracks
Suggested Listening:

Silver Overboard - Bear McCreary
Streets of Nassau - Bear McCreary
Jacob Returns - James Newton Howard
Shooting Star - James Newton Howard
Memories - Ramin Djawadi
Someday - Ramin Djawadi
Reveries - Ramin Djawadi
The Veil of Time - Bear McCreary
Chapter Summary

Valjean suffers from nightmares, and Javert finds that some of them are not merely dreams at all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob.”

-Virginia Woolf, The Waves

***

When Javert finally helped Valjean back inside, he took note of the guard that was staring at them—the one he had spoken to earlier.

“Is he well?” the man asked. He was, perhaps, referring to the fact that Valjean was now wearing Javert’s coat.

Javert stiffened. He did not know how much this man had seen, or heard. In a very particular tone, and locking eyes with him, he said, “Monsieur has caught a chill from the sea-breeze.”

The man considered this. “I see.”

Javert proceeded to escort Valjean out of the bagne, and did not care that the man held tight to his arm the whole way, or who saw it.

***

Later that night, Javert awoke from his slumber to the sound of whimpering. Taking a deep breath, he ran a hand over his face and sighed, curling into a ball.

Again?

Well, he supposed, it was no wonder. Today had been especially bad.

Valjean had been struggling with nightmares throughout the trip, but Javert had been too afraid to wake him. Afraid to embarrass the man. Valjean was a guilty sort, and Javert knew he would feel ashamed at it, even though it was not something he could help.
But tonight was worse than all the others. Valjean was thrashing, gasping for air. His cries were louder, more terrified. More desperate.

From underneath the covers, Javert squeezed his pillow, the noises wrenching his heart. Finally, he could no longer stand it. He could not stand to let him suffer like this.

Slipping out as carefully as he could, Javert crossed the few feet between their beds and leaned over, touching the man’s shoulder. “Jean,” he murmured.

Valjean gave a jolt, bolting upright with a gasp, only steadied by Javert’s hand.

“Peace,” Javert told him. “It is only me.”

“Javert?” came a tremulous voice.

“Oui. You were having a nightmare.”

The man paused. “A nightmare,” he mumbled, still catching his breath. “Yes. Just a nightmare…”

“You are safe.”

“Yes,” Valjean breathed. Still, he continued panting, as though greatly taxed, and remained in a sitting position, clutching his chest and nearly doubled over.

Javert stood there for some time, waiting for Valjean to calm—but he did not. With a sigh, he sat on the edge of the mattress with his back to him and his head hung low. He stared at the floor in the darkness, hands dangling over his thighs. “How often does this happen?” he asked.

Valjean was quiet. “Too often,” he finally said.

“And how long … has it been?”

“Ever since I broke parole,” he murmured reluctantly. “It’s only gotten worse with time.”

“I see.”

Javert remembered the first time he’d seen this happen—when Valjean had been lying sick in his bed, close to death. How the man had seized up, shuddering uncontrollably under the covers. Javert had wondered even then just how frequently such attacks occurred.

He tried to picture what it would be like, to wake up terrified and alone night after night from visions of the past, crying out in the dark. Twenty years, with no one to talk to, no one to comfort him. What kind of crime could possibly be deserving of that? Surely not stealing a loaf of bread, to feed one’s starving family. Surely not breaking parole.

He thought of that night at the Seine, when his world broke to pieces, and the swirling chaos of his mind threatened to swallow him up. How afraid he had been! And yet it seemed almost nothing compared to the terror Valjean faced in his dreams. The fear of discovery, of being hunted, of being dragged back to hell for his crimes, and losing all that he loved, day after day. Nightmare after nightmare.

How did the man do it? How did one survive that for so long, in total silence?

Javert could not fathom it. One night of it alone had brought his soul to shambles, pushed him over the brink.
But twenty years? He knew Valjean was strong, but that was a different kind of strength entirely.

“You’re the only one that knows,” Valjean confessed. “I can’t bear to talk about it. And besides that, I—I couldn’t. You know? I had no one.”

Javert sidled up next to him on the mattress and leaned back against the headboard. “You can talk to me,” he said. It was both an offer and an assurance.

Valjean paused.

Javert felt him grip his arm, as though searching for something with which to steady himself.

“I feel so weak,” Valjean breathed. There was the sound of tears in his voice. “At the very least, a man should have control over his own mind. But I can’t even do that. I fail at everything I do; and not for lack of trying. Every time I think the world has stolen everything it could from me, it comes and takes something else. It even stole my senses.”

He shook his head. “I thought that after they pardoned me—after things were finally safe, and I didn’t have to worry about myself, or Cosette—that it would go away. But it didn’t. It just …” Here his voice broke. “It just got worse. Now I wake up and I think, ‘Is any of this real? Was I really pardoned, or was that something I dreamt?’ And I—I get so sure that it was all some illusion, just some cruel joke the universe played on me, pretending to give me these things and then ripping them away. Sometimes I even wonder if I didn’t die last year, and all of this is just a death-dream.”

“The voices in my mind, they say, ‘Of course that would never happen. Of course your daughter would never forgive you. Of course Javert could never show mercy, never let you go. Don’t be ridiculous! Of course you’re still in danger. Still being hunted. Do you think that will ever change? The law will never stop until it sees you brought to your knees. That is simply the way of things. You’re just some stupid old man, making up stories in his sleep that could never come true. And you’re so desperately naive that you convince yourself they’re real.’”

“That is what I say to myself. Or at least, that’s what I hear in my mind. And I grow so afraid that it feels like my heart is going to burst. That, or I’ll go mad. I don’t even know what to do about it. I just lay awake wondering, terrified, until finally I realize where I am, and what it means. Even so, there is still this fear in me! And it takes forever to get back to sleep.”

“People keep telling me that I’m some great man—that I’m so brave. They have no idea what a coward I am. I’m crippled by fear even when there’s nothing to be afraid of anymore. What would they think of me, if they knew that sometimes I don’t even know what year it is, or who I am anymore? That I hear things that aren’t there, and see shadows move in the corner of my eyes?”

“Good God! And people tell me I’m strong. I feel that I’ve misled them, somehow. They all think I’m some paragon of virtue—some hero. But I’m just this wretched old convict who’s been running so long that he doesn’t know how to stand still.” He let out a sob. “There’s something wrong with me, Javert. And I don’t know how to fix it. What if it’s like this forever?”

Javert’s eyes burned in the dark.

Jean Valjean, it seemed, was the only person who had ever been capable of moving him to tears.

Javert tried to swallow the knot that had formed in his throat. He wanted to say something, to
give some word of comfort, but he had none; for what answer could he give to that? In that instant he almost wished that he could lie, that he could tell him everything would ease in time, and the nightmares would fade away—but he had no knowledge of the subject, and no promises he could vouchsafe.

And how could he give comfort to this man, when half his nightmares were surely owed to him and him alone?

With no verbal recourse, it was all Javert could do to put an arm around him and crush him to his chest.

God, the man’s heart was pounding so hard he could feel it through both of their shirts.

Valjean choked on a gasp and bent his head to him, burying his face against his shoulder. “Other people—that have been to the bagnes, that have been on the run—they don’t have this,” he mumbled into his sleeve. “I’ve been chained to one person or another for twenty years, and none of them ever acted like this. I mean, is it … is it my fault, somehow? For not being strong enough?”

For the first time Javert had a definite answer to give, and it slipped from his lips without a single thought at all. “No,” he said. “It’s not. It’s not your fault. None of it ever was.”

You tried so hard.

The burning at the back of his eyes grew hotter. “Sometimes the world leaves us with scars, Valjean. And that’s all right. Everybody has some. Even me. You can only blame yourself for this as much as I could blame myself for getting cut by some pickpocket’s knife, or shot by some murderer’s gun. Tu comprends?”

He felt a hand clutch at the inner fabric of his sleeve, and give a desperate squeeze.

“I just—I feel like I’m broken,” Valjean said.

“You’re not broken. You’re not.”

“But what if I am?”

Javert thought for a moment. “Then you have more courage than any of us.”

Valjean fell silent at that.

Javert hoped he believed it.

With nothing more to say, and nothing else he could do, Javert simply held him there, rubbing his shoulder.

Gradually, Valjean’s breathing evened out, and his heartbeat slowed. The tremors left him, and he seemed to calm.

“You are a good friend to me, Javert,” he mumbled drowsily.

Javert only mussed the man’s hair.

He did not know how long they sat there for, in mutual, comforting silence. It could have been hours. And to be truthful, Javert did not particularly care. But Valjean had slowly sagged against him—and, eventually, Javert was sure he was the only thing holding him up.
“Valjean,” he murmured.

The man did not respond.

He realized Valjean had fallen asleep.

Still, Javert remained there for some time, listening to the sound of the man’s breath, feeling his pulse. There was something comforting about it.

He could not recall at what point he had entwined his fingers in the man’s hair, cradling his head. Nor how long he had been sitting there.

Eventually he began to grow sore from leaning against the headboard, the muscles in his back and neck stiff and uncomfortable.

Turning his face towards Valjean’s, which still rested on his shoulder, Javert paused in the darkness, pensive. He did not know what he was thinking of, only that he was very lost in it.

Slowly, and with a graceful sort of clumsiness, he pressed his lips to the top of the man’s head, soft white curls brushing his mouth.

Then he slid out from beneath him, carefully lowering Valjean to the pillow and rearranging the covers over him.

As he rose from the bed and started towards his own, he heard a faint voice.

“—vert …”

Javert looked back over his shoulder at him.

Valjean, however, had not stirred, and said nothing further. After a moment he let out a gentle sigh and shifted some under the blanket, grasping weakly at his pillow.

No, he hadn’t woken him up, Javert thought. The man was just mumbling things in his sleep.

He gazed down at him in the dim moonlight, watching his chest rise and fall, and studying the placid expression on his face. Then quietly, he returned to the other bed and slipped beneath the sheets, turning to face the wall.

He could not help but notice how, suddenly, the mattress seemed too large for him—and disconcertingly empty.

***

The next day, Valjean professed that he was too weary to travel. He wanted a day to themselves, where he would not have to endure eight hours in a rattling carriage.

Javert felt the idea a sound one. He too was sick of endless travel. But more than that, he wanted to give Valjean time to recover from what had happened at the bagne.

He claimed to be over it, but Javert did not believe him. Had he not just told him the night before that he had never truly gotten over anything?
But Valjean would not speak of it; did not want to speak of it. Some things that were said during the night could not be faced in the day. Javert knew that.

So instead, they were quiet, and stayed inside their room, ordering breakfast and lunch from the innkeepers. Valjean read a book he had brought with him, and Javert read some of the local papers.

Later in the day, they went for a walk in the countryside to stretch their legs, and get away from the city for a while. Javert thought the fresh air served to perk Valjean up.

When they returned, Javert managed to convince him to go a tavern he had once frequented in his youth.

“I thought you did not drink much,” Valjean remarked.

“No, but there are other reasons for drinking than intoxication,” Javert said.

He went on to explain that the diet they offered to guards was not particularly balanced, and that, after some discussion with the sailors that frequented Toulon, he had taken to drinking grog now and then to ward off scurvy. It was one of the only drinks besides wine he could stomach, he said, and he had grown rather fond of it.

They simply did not have it in Paris, he told him—or if they did, they did not make it right. So, for old time’s sake, and because they needed some dinner, he coerced Valjean into getting a drink with him.

Valjean was a little hesitant, but Javert thought that his mood seemed greatly improved from the morning. Javert also thought that the jovial nature of the tavern, and the music playing there, improved it as well.

They both ordered the Bream and the Mediterranean Bass, with a glass of white wine and some grog—which, as it happened, Valjean found he liked. Normally he would never have touched rum, he said, watered down or not, but with the addition of lemon and honey, as well as black tea, it was actually rather refreshing. The fact that it was heated up helped to bring out the flavors, and because there was so little alcohol in it, the drink did not affect him at all.

Javert entertained him with stories of the more interesting naval officers he had met, as well as various misadventures he’d had in the city—though he stayed well away from the topic of the bagne, or at least as best he could. To his relief, he managed to coax a number of laughs from the man.

They returned to their lodgings in pleasant spirits, and when they went to bed, thoughts of the galleys seemed far away.

***

That night, however, Javert awoke once again to the sounds of Valjean having a nightmare. But, this time, he was not merely crying or whimpering—he was screaming in his sleep. It gave Javert a fright, and woke him in a panic.

Against the bluish-black of the room, he could see the white halo of Valjean’s curls, and the white linen sheets he was twisting himself up in. He was tossing and turning, flailing about and
clawing at the covers. A number of pillows had been knocked to the floor.

Gathering his wits, Javert planted his feet on the cool hardwood and stumbled over. He knelt with one knee on the side of his bed. “Valjean,” he said, giving his shoulder a shake as the man writhed beneath him. “Wake up.”

Valjean gasped and sat up with a start. This time, however, he took one look at Javert and froze. Let out a terrified noise and tried to back away, but only hit the headboard.

“Valjean,” Javert coaxed, reaching out. But Valjean only seemed to seize up.

“Not you,” the man said to himself, his eyes wide. “Not you …”

Javert frowned at him, placing his hands on his shoulders. “It’s just me, Valjean—”

“No!” Valjean cried, his voice sharp now with terror. “Not you!” He thrashed and tried to fight him off, swatting his hands away.

“Valjean, please, will you listen to me? I only—”

“No!”

“Valjean, you’re just—you’re just having another nightmare,” he said. “You’re all right! It’s all right. Understand? It’s not real.” He cupped his face and leaned in so that their foreheads touched, softening his voice. “It’s not real,” he said, closing his eyes. “All of that was in the past. Long, long ago. It cannot touch you now.”

The man panted heavily beneath him, rigid in his grasp.

“It was just a bad dream, Valjean.”

“A bad dream,” the man repeated, trance-like.

“Yes.”

Valjean paused. “No,” he breathed.

“Yes, Valjean. Listen to me,” he said, taking hold of his collar, “It was only a dre—”

“No!”

Javert gave a start as a hand seized his wrist in vice-like grip, as though to break it.

Valjean was looking up at him with wild eyes. The eyes of a cornered animal.

Javert swallowed. “Valjean?”

The man blinked. Stared at him for a second. He looked down at his hand, and seemed to become cognizant of his crushing grasp. “I—I’m sorry,” he managed, letting go. “I, ah—” He balled his hand and clutched it in the other, like a mortified owner pulling back their angry dog. He gave a shudder.

Javert studied him, slowly releasing his hold on the shirt. His brow creased in consternation. He took a step back. “I did something to you,” he realized aloud. “Didn’t I? In the bagne.”

Valjean stifled a noise in his throat, his eyes wide and unfocused.
“Did I do something to you, Valjean?”

The man did not respond.

Javert could only guess what that meant. Taking a deep breath, he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms dangling between his legs, staring off into the darkness. He was quiet for a long time. “Tell me about it,” he finally said. “—if it will help. Tell me about it.”

“No,” he heard Valjean mumble. “I can’t.”

Javert let out a sigh. “I can’t remember it, Valjean. Whatever it is. It’s not right that ... You shouldn’t have to bear it alone. So, tell me.”

_Tell me what it is that I did to you._

“I ca—” Valjean’s breath hitched. “Oh, God.”

Javert turned to find him shuddering beneath the covers, his legs drawn up, face buried in his knees. All of a sudden the shuddering stopped, and the man went still and silent, like a stone. His voice sounded hushed, as though it came from somewhere else. “‘Would you like ... to do the honors, mon adjutant?’”

At those words, a rush of images flashed through Javert’s mind. The voice was no longer Valjean’s; it was his First Sergeant’s, spoken casually, humorously.

The sun was setting over the sea, casting a strange sheen across the harbor.

The shadow of the whipping post, and the _forçat_ shackled to it—stripped shirtless, his chest to the wood—spread long upon the concrete. A red stripe stained his face. He had a cut on his head, and the blood had congealed in the tufts of his poorly shaven hair, turning the russet brown into black.

The man had been caught escaping. He had broken the links of his chain and been two days on the run in the fields before a dispatch of guards had finally brought him down.

Javert had been at the job not three weeks. At twenty years of age, he was somewhat young to be a guard, but there was no official age requirement, and he’d been given special recommendation by the gendarmes and the police force of Toulon.

‘Give the boy some steady work and a place to rest his head,’ they’d said. ‘He won’t let you down.’

Javert, for his part, was determined, as always, to outshine even their expectations. And already, what he had seen of his newly-tasked charges only served to reaffirm that these men were truly irredeemable—the dregs of society, base and low. Beastly.

This man before him, with his shorn head, his coarse, untidy beard, and the formidable, rippling muscles that spanned his broad shoulders, was no different in his mind from the rest of them; in fact, he may as well embody them. Trying to escape—and nearly succeeding! The dog. How pathetic he’d looked as they bound him to the post—as though he didn’t understand why this was happening. As though he could not comprehend what he had done to warrant this.

What farce. The man knew perfectly well what he’d done. That he was not dignified enough to accept the consequences only served to prove his wretchedness.
Javert’s superior turned to look at him. “Would you like to do the honors, mon adjutant?”

Javert sensed something of a rite of passage within his voice. Dipping his head in solemn respect, he took the wound-up whip from the Sergeant’s outstretched hand.

Turning to face the convict with righteous indignation, he widened his stance, letting the lash unfurl in his grasp. He locked gazes with him.

An unmistakable look of terror entered the man’s wide brown eyes.

“That’s right, Javert thought. You should be afraid. You should learn to fear the law.

Before him, the muscles tensed beneath the flesh of the man’s suntanned but otherwise bare back. He hadn’t had a taste of corporal punishment yet, it seemed. Well. Let this be a first, then. A lesson he would not soon forget.

“I want you to understand,” Javert told him carefully, “that you deserve this.”

He drew the whip back in a long, dramatic arc.

He stru—

Javert squeezed his eyes shut with a harried breath, blotting the image from his mind as an echo of the snapping crack split his ears.

“Oh, god,” he breathed, putting his head in his hand. “That was you. I didn’t—”

What was he to say? That he didn’t know who the man would become? That what was surely one of Valjean’s most traumatic experiences had been nothing but a blink to him, another day at work, and had faded into the recesses of his mind without consequence?

How lucky he was that such things had not mattered to him—that he could forget!

Valjean had to live with them.

Javert hadn’t even known his name. Hadn’t even known his prison number, then. The man’s red cap, to which the number should have been affixed, had evidently been lost, or thrown away during his escape.

To him, Valjean had only been one of thousands, an unremarkable face amidst a sea of them, all clothed in red and yellow and bound in chains. He was nothing. He was no one. There was no reason for Javert to remember him. Not until he became infamous for his escape attempts, and his prodigious strength. And by then Javert had long forgotten that nameless man bound to the whipping post.

Surely Valjean … Surely Valjean could never forgive that. And he shouldn’t have to. Not when it haunted him so.

Javert stood rooted to the spot at the side of the bed, his head down, his face in shadow. Finally he found his voice, trepid as it was. “Do you want me to leave?”

The silence was overbearing.

“No.”

That word caught Javert off guard. It took him a moment to process what sentiment it entailed,
and even then, he felt unsure of it. Slowly he approached Valjean, sitting on the edge of his bed with his back to him.

He was silent for a long time, afraid to come any closer. He could not think of what to say. He thought, perhaps, there was nothing he could say. That, perhaps, anything he said would make it worse. He just sat there and listened to the quiet sobs, the stifled gasps beside him, not knowing what to do.

Finally, feeling badly that he should have his back to him, Javert worked up the courage and turned to sit properly on the bed, with his legs crossed and his back to the headboard, almost touching shoulders with Valjean, but not quite. He wanted terribly to comfort him somehow, to put his arm around his back—but there was no possible way he could bring himself to lay a hand upon him, even for pity’s sake. For, surely, there was no possible way Valjean could bear it, after this.

And so Javert was quite surprised when, having only just sat near him, Valjean turned, took hold of him tightly, and buried his head against him. After a moment the man shifted a little, so that he sat directly before him, and wrapped his arms around his chest, sobbing openly.

Javert stared down at him in the darkness, caught off guard. His hands trembled in the air, stuck between wanting to embrace him, and fearing to. “How— How can you … bear to let me touch you, after ...?”

Valjean only squeezed him tighter, head tucked beneath his chin. “The way you are now ... reminds me it’s not real, anymore,” he said. “The way you are now makes me feel safe.”

Javert tried to swallow. He felt tears begin to burn his eyes. Shaking, he grabbed the nearby blanket—rumpled by Valjean’s tossing—and wrapped it around the man’s shoulders. Put a barrier between himself and the parts of Valjean he had cut. Only then did he allow himself to hug him, to gather him up and clutch him tightly to his chest. To bend his brow to him and put a hand on the back of his head.

Valjean let out a sort of choking noise. He tangled his fingers in the back of his shirt.

They remained entwined like that long into the night, until Valjean had fallen asleep against him, and Javert had put a pillow between his back and the headboard, so he would not have to move.

He sat awake in the moonlight, gazing at the man he still held in his arms, lost in thought.

He remembered thinking, after it was all over, how much blood there was. He hadn’t known the lash could cut so deep.

He remembered the sight of the guards unshackling the man—how he’d slumped to the ground, shaking and gasping for breath, his voice broken, his back a myriad of dripping red lines.

Javert had never seen anyone so badly bloodied by his own hand. It was ... strange. Everything in him said he should feel victorious, vindicated—that he should take pride in his work. And he wanted to, and he felt that it was just. And yet, something in that oozing blood, so bright and red—something in those shudders, those gasps of pain ...

He felt, in that moment, a vague apprehension. A silent reservation in the back of his mind. Uncertainty.

And then he brushed it away, as he must, as he always had, and reassured himself with the tones of his superior, who was impressed with his resolve.
They would have dragged Valjean down to the *cachot* after that, Javert thought. To spend his days in solitary, shrouded in blackness until his wounds healed enough for him to work. They would have fed him on moldy black bread, or meat already crawling with maggots, and busied him untwisting old ropes into strands of oakum. He would have slept on a hard wooden plank, too narrow to lay on one's back, if one was as broad-shouldered as he. All without a single light to illuminate his suffering.

For months.

How could a man live like that? How could a man, granting he survived, become anything other than a vicious, vengeful beast because of that?

Javert had never asked himself these things before. Had never allowed himself to ask.

They threw the convicts down there until they very nearly lost their minds—until they would do anything—obey any order, work fatigue duty, double shifts—if only to see the sun again, and breathe the open air. In this way they broke their spirits, so they had not the vigor, or the courage, to attempt again whatever had landed them there.

That was all that mattered in the end—whether or not they obeyed. Whatever else the punishments did to them, the law was not concerned with. That was its folly.

Yes, the bagne served to discipline the black of heart—the robbers, assassins, and rapists in its hold, who truly deserved recompense. But what it also did was take people who had committed minor infractions—sometimes purely out of necessity—and turn them into monsters. It did not discriminate. Once you were thrown into its depths, you were scum. If you had not been scum before, it would make you so, by ripping out your dignity.

It is the great pity that, in most cases, people treated inhumanly will cease to feel human, and will often cease to act humanely on account of it. This perpetuates a cycle of violent degradation, responsible for many evils in this world.

A part of Javert knew this—had always known this—but another part, far greater, had ignored it, for he could not function otherwise. He had believed in the System, because despite its flaws, it was the most effective means of order in the world. He had also believed in the System because, quite simply, he could not change it, and he could not bring himself to start a useless fight.

But the truth was, as he had found, that it could be changed—and oftentimes it should be changed. Because people like Valjean did not deserve what they had been through. Because people like Valjean did not deserve to be corrupted by intolerance and cruelty. To be cast away for nothing—for trying to survive.

It was a miracle that some of them—any of them—could still come out of that. It was a miracle that their humanity had not been crushed. That they could still be gentle, and kind, and loving, when mankind had spurned them so.

*You are a miracle,* Javert thought, studying the man who slept upon his breast. He ran his hand through the mop of white curls on his head. *You are a miracle, Valjean.*

*Do you know it?*
CHAPTER SIXTY!!! We made it, folks! This is where the gay shit starts.

Oh boy, I have been sitting on this chapter for over a YEAR. That's why I could get it out so fast - most of it was already written. But yeah, no, all of this, and all the other major things plot-wise for this fic, I've known since like ... forever, and just been sitting on, and it KILLS ME with the dramatic irony sometimes because of all the things you DON'T KNOW YET, UGH (one in particular is coming up in the next few chapters that like ... oh boy, Javert. Oh jeez. Why would you do that)

A lot of you have been trolling through the AROS tags on my tumblr, but it doesn't seem like many of you found the one post from ages ago where I remarked that, technically, given the timeline, it would be entirely possible for Javert to be there at Toulon for Valjean's first escape attempt - and that, technically, he very well could have been involved with his punishment for it. At the time I had written that, I was fiddling with the idea, unsure of whether to use it or not, but I decided shortly after to go ahead with it, because, uh, it's absolutely horrible, and why not, basically. Sometimes the things that are the worst possible thing you can think of are the BEST when it comes to plots.

If I'm remembering correctly, the suggested minimum age for Bagne guards was twenty-three, but it wasn't strictly enforced. And Javert probably comes off as intimidating enough to compensate for his youth, anyways ...

Here seems like a good place to show off KolorfulDreams' (aka randomart-lostartist's) fanart.

Okay, well, see y'all later my dudes. Get ready for some cliche "Javert loves stars" bullshit in the next chp I guess

Suggested Listening:

White Roses of Scotland - Bear McCreary
The Storm - Bruno Coulais
Something is Wrong - Bruno Coulais
Jacob Sees Marlena - James Newton Howard
Trompe L'Oeil - Ramin Djawadi
This World - Ramin Djawadi
A Nation of Thieves - Bear McCreary
Faith - Bear McCreary

Never an Absolution - James Horner

Everything's Alright - Laura Shigihara

Sanctuary ("After the Battle" slow English version) - Utada Hikaru
Chapter Summary

Javert takes Valjean stargazing in a favorite place from his youth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, it seems to me that the best relationships—the ones that last—are frequently the ones that are rooted in friendship. You know, one day you look at the person and you see something more than you did the night before. Like a switch has been flicked somewhere. And the person who was just a friend is... suddenly the only person you can ever imagine yourself with.”

-Gillian Anderson

***

The dawn was filtering through the curtains when Valjean awoke, casting a pinkish, golden hue across the sheets. He was scarcely aware of his waking, and did not recall where he was. Slumber had cloaked him in warmth, and made a pleasant fog of his thoughts. He only knew that he was safe, and comfortable, and that under absolutely no circumstances did he wish to rise.

For some time he drifted in and out of consciousness, content to lay there. But, eventually, he trailed his gaze over the covers, and they came to rest on a hand which was not his own. The strangeness of this took him a moment to perceive, so dulled were his senses—but he indeed came to recognize the oddity of waking to such a sight. His mind fumbled for an explanation.

It was at this point that he became aware that the surface on which he was laying was gradually rising and falling beneath him. At once, he understood the implications.

Turning his head to look up, already knowing what he would see, and yet surprised at it all the same, he found himself to be laying against Javert’s chest.

The man was sat back against the headboard, asleep, one arm still draped around Valjean’s back, and the blanket that covered him.

Before he even realized it, Valjean was sitting up, spurred by an instinctual sense of propriety. Somehow, he managed to untangle himself without waking Javert. He almost startled—almost gave into embarrassment—but then, likely because Javert had not woken, the brief panic he’d felt subsided. He was left sitting on the mattress, contemplating the man before him, and their situation.

The terrors of the prior night came back to him: his nightmares, and the memories contained within. So too did he recall the comforts, however—the way Javert had put the blanket over him, clutching him fiercely, protectively, as he cried. The hand lovingly mussing his hair. The fact that
Javert had let him fall asleep there, with his head upon his breast, and spoke no word on it. Had simply held him in his arms.

It was strange, Valjean thought. So damnably strange. There were parts of Javert—parts of their history—that embodied everything he feared. And yet, that self-same man was also that which brought him solace from those very fears!

For so long he’d repressed those memories of Toulon. Of that memory, in particular. He had nearly succeeded in driving it from his mind entirely. In Montreuil, he could have sworn, quite honestly, that he did not recognize Javert. Could have justly attributed the unease he felt in his presence to the fact that Javert had been lurking in shadows and spying on him for years, always waiting for him to slip up, to expose some vile truth about his past. It was an easy thing to explain, and perhaps that was why Valjean had never questioned it. Had never wanted to question it.

But it had been impossible to erase the whole of those nineteen years; to forget completely the torments he’d suffered through in Toulon. And returning there, with Javert at his side, had managed to dredge up things he’d thought long past recall. Worst of all, because he had not touched them in so long, when they resurfaced, they were almost as fresh as the day they were made, and stung him just as sharply. Perhaps even sharper, for what they meant to him now—and for what they must mean to Javert.

What did the man think of all this? What did he feel about it now—and what had he felt about it then?

Valjean did not want to know how Javert’s mind had worked in those days. Did not want to picture those things through his eyes. To see himself the way they must have seen him. For he knew; he already knew what they’d thought of men like him. They had made that abundantly clear—and he did not wish to see from their perspective.

It was strange, then, to think that the man before him, who’d consoled him until he’d fallen asleep, and held him so tightly, had once been filled with such prejudice. Had once held disgust for him so deep that it bordered on hate. Looking at him now, it was hard to believe that shadow from his nightmares and he could be the same person at all.

And yet, undeniably, they shared the same face; the same eyes. Two different men in one body, like Janus. But then, Valjean thought, Janus had always been a god of transition.

And by god, Javert had changed.

These were the thoughts that crossed Valjean’s mind as he sat there, watching him sleep.

Its queue undone, Javert’s hair had fallen past his eyes, partially obscuring his face.

Without thinking, Valjean reached out, gently, and swept the hair aside as one might draw back a curtain, tucking it behind the man’s ear. In doing so, his knuckles brushed Javert’s whiskers, and he let his hand linger there at his cheek for a moment more, wistful.

He did not know what it was he contemplated. He thought perhaps to kiss the man’s brow. But he only sat there, eyes tracing the curves of Javert’s sleeping face. Studying the placid yet solemn expression there. How the morning light softened his features, bringing out the bronze undertones of his chestnut skin.

Valjean could still see the ghost of his youth in that face—that boy-guard, too young to hold a whip. Too young to know that you weren’t supposed to make them bleed.
He knew better now, Valjean thought.

But parts of him had surely stayed the same. The things for which Valjean admired him—his honesty, his humility, his tendency for self-sacrifice—must have also existed in him even then, in those early years. Valjean could see it plain. They were innate facets of his character, there far before that night at the river, or Montreuil.

And so, as he studied Javert, Valjean found himself searching for both the boy in the man, and the man in the boy. For where present and past bled into each other. For the place where he could understand Javert as a whole, and accept it.

Where did that point lie?

He did not know. But the thought that there was a part of that which he loved, even within that which he feared, brought him a strange sort of solace.

Carefully, he reached down, took hold of the blanket, and draped it over Javert’s shoulders, easing his way off the bed. He thought twice about it, fearing he should wake him, but in the end Valjean could not resist, and leant in, pressing a kiss to his brow before rising to wash and dress himself.

***

“I think,” said Javert over breakfast, “I should like to see the sea once more before we go. If that is all right by you, of course.”

Valjean gave him a subtle nod, sipping his coffee. “Of course. So long as we—”

“I know,” Javert cut in. “We will keep well away from it. I promise.”

***

Javert took him down by the docks on the farthest southwestern side of Toulon, from which the bagne could not be seen.

“I grew up here, you know,” the man said, stepping down onto the shore. “Well. I came here, anyway. Later.”

“Why Toulon?”

Javert shrugged. “It was a city. A port city. I knew it would always have work for someone like me. A large population, a bustling industry—a prison, even! An over-abundance of crime. Sailors. Gendarmes. Police. They would always need runners, and spies, and eyes on the street. And they would always have a coin or two in their pocket.”

“And also ...” He raised his face to the horizon with a wistful look. “I wanted to see the sea.” Inhaling sharply he let out a sigh. “The nighttime is beautiful, here. All the stars, and the Milky Way, above the water. You can’t see them half so well in Paris. I used to gaze up at the sky after a
long day’s work, and try to make out the constellations. Ah,” he remarked to himself, “How I wish that it were night, that I might show them to you.”

Valjean considered this. “You know,” he said, “it’s funny, but—in all the years I was here, I never saw the stars.”

Javert turned to him, raising his eyebrows. “You’ve never seen the stars over the sea?”

“No. By the time they came out, we were all in the salles, and ... the windows there weren’t really ...”[1]

Javert’s head drooped, a shadow falling over his face. He stood quietly for some time. “We must remedy that,” he finally said. Looking up with a sudden vigor, and a sort of pleading in his eyes, he added, “Would you hate very much to spend one last night here?”

Valjean blinked. “I— I suppose not.” The truth was that he desperately wished to escape Toulon, but Javert had never proposed something like this to him before, and his intrigue overrode his other thoughts. “Do you mean to take me stargazing?”

“If you are not averse to the idea. There is a cove I might show you on the Point, by La Tour Royale … One has a marvelous view from there. It is only about a half hour walk from the—” Here he stopped himself and cleared his throat. “—from Sainte-Marie.”[2]

“I see.”

“I was thinking we could bring some wine; a little food,” Javert said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Watch the sun set …” His eyes darted back to Valjean. “If it sounds foolish we can just leave,” he mumbled.

“No, I—” Valjean studied the bashfulness in the man’s expression. “I don’t think it sounds foolish at all.”

Javert’s eyes brightened. “Really? You’ll go with me?”

Valjean gave a little scoff, a curious grin tugging one corner of his lips. He had seldom seen Javert enthused about anything before. “I would be happy to,” he said.

The man stared at him for a second. And then a small but genuine smile broke out on his face, and Valjean felt himself smile back.

***

For the remainder of the day they strolled the country, and visited a local vineyard, where they bought a few bottles of wine and had a light lunch.

Just as the daylight began to wane, they headed into the city and went to market, filling up a small sack with numerous foodstuffs. Javert instinctively went to pay for it, but Valjean swatted his hand away from his purse at the very first stall, and refused to let him touch it for the duration of the outing, much to his chagrin. He happily ignored Javert’s promises that he would one day stuff his charity right down his throat, and that he would be glad to see him choke on it.
They headed southeast towards the famous old fort on the Point, taking the coastal path that extended from it out along the rocky cape.

Soon after setting out, Valjean cast a dubious glance at the overcast sky. “How are we to see the stars if it is cloudy out?” he asked.

“It may be cloudy now, but there is a strong breeze blowing from the South, and soon the skies will clear,” Javert promised. “You can see, far off in the distance, there is a bright patch, coming closer.”

Making a humming noise, Valjean shifted the sack over his other shoulder and continued on without protest.

As they neared the bay, he spotted an old wooden signpost. It declared in fading blue and white paint that this section of the coast—La Plage de Pipady, as it was called—was for the express use of the Navy, and that trespassing was prohibited. This he considered with raised eyebrows. “Are we … allowed to be here?” he ventured.

“Me? Yes. You? Not so much,” Javert laughed, taking off his hat and carrying it under his arm. “But I doubt they shall give us any trouble for it. Unless they’ve moored a ship here they won’t be using it for anything at night. And it seems to be clear at the present.”

“Why is it all right for you to be here, though?”

The man paused at that. “Well. I suppose I don’t know that it’s permissible now. But back in the day they considered us Naval functionaries, of a sort. A title left over from bygone days—just as they still call them ‘galleys’, though that age is long passed. Alas; I know little of ships—scarcely more than the layman. But it would not have been seen as strange for me to fraternize with Naval officers, or to frequent restricted areas like this.”

Valjean pictured this with intrigue. “Did you spend a lot time around Navy men?”

Javert glanced back at him. Shrugged. “The officers, anyway. I often found their character to be more respectable than that of my fellows. Their stories were better, too. But they were always coming and going, and I did not have much time to socialize. You remain the only man that I could ever truly call a friend.”

Javert was only stating a fact—and his tone conveyed nothing further—but that admission, so bluntly stated, still made Valjean’s heart skip a beat.

They got to the top of the incline, and Javert motioned for Valjean to follow him through a trail that had been worn through the underbrush.

Soon the air grew warmer, more humid—and then, as they rounded a thicket, quite suddenly the path opened up, and they found themselves at the shore.

“I used to come here all the time when I was young,” he said, stepping down into the smooth grey pebbles of the beach. “Gaze off at that horizon …” Growing quiet, he slowed to a standstill, facing the sea.

Valjean, some ways away, studied him thoughtfully.

There was something particularly striking about the scene—Javert standing there amidst the stones, watching the waves wash in and out. The mottled grey of the clouds above, and the darkened blue-green of the water below. The air coming in off the Mediterranean, carrying the
scent of salt and moist earth. Javert’s hair, long and undone, rippling behind him in the breeze. The sinking sun, far in the distance, casting harsh light and long shadows, and flashing silver off his greying locks.

They both stood there, transfixed by different sights, with only the lapping of the waves, and the sound of the wind, to fill the silence.

Valjean could not describe what he felt in that moment. What emotion, in particular, had overcome him. He knew only that he had been seized by a deep wistfulness, vast as the water that stretched out before them.

Of what was he thinking? It was hard to discern.

Perhaps, he was thinking on the young man Javert had once been. Of how little he had seen of that man. Of what that man might have been like, have looked like, when no one else was watching. Perhaps Valjean was wondering what it was that went through that young man’s mind as he gazed at the sea. And if there was not, perhaps, some common thread that might have been woven between them, in a different place, a different life.

Perhaps, as he studied him, Jean Valjean was thinking on Toulon. On what it meant to them, and how disparate their lives had been. How strange their separate paths, to cross again and again in strife, only to lead them both here in the end.

Or perhaps it was on Javert’s character he thought—on how it used to be, and how it had changed. On how, whether he liked it or not, there would always be parts of Javert he did not know—would not wish to know—and that, even harsh or unfathomable, they were a part of who he was; a part of his past, fixed and inseparable from all the rest of him.

Perhaps, looking at the man before him, Valjean was wondering whether he could come to accept even those unconscionable pieces of Javert—to see them as only one side of a man that was surely just human. Who had surely believed himself to be doing what was best, what was proper. Who was surely more than just the error of his ways—even then, before he knew that he’d erred.

Could it even be said that he’d been in the wrong? After all, he had only been following orders, been doing his job. And if he was over-zealous in his convictions, who was to say that it was not merely the desperate self-assurance of a man who’d chosen his options and had to make peace with them?

Perhaps, as he stood there, taking in the view, Valjean was thinking on what Toulon meant to him, personally. On how much he had suffered there. Perhaps also, he was wondering if, despite these things, it was still possible to forge new memories, new meanings there. To replace those nightmares with something else—something good.

Perhaps, just perhaps, Valjean thought on all of these things, at the very same time, without consciousness of them—and perhaps this was what affected him so.

In any case, he found himself lost at the sight of Javert, standing there at the foot of the sea. He lost all sense of how much time had passed.

When Javert finally spoke, it almost caused him to startle.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he said. “You get a great view of all the ships coming into port. The sea, and the sky. And on a warm night, when I could afford to lose a little sleep, I would come here to think, and to look at the stars.” Then, as though to himself, he added, “They’re so much clearer
here than Paris.”

There was a moment—one more fleeting moment—of *something*, in which Valjean was held captive by some sort of charm. And then Javert glanced back at him, and the spell was broken.

Valjean blinked. Shaking off his trance, he joined the man at his side.

“Shall we pick a spot?” Javert asked. “I can tell you the one over there is comfortable enough.”

Chuckling, Valjean smiled softly. “I defer to your judgement, *mon ami*.”

And he did not know why, but the words ‘*mon ami*’ tasted strange on his lips.

***

They rolled out the blanket on a less stony spot beside a large rock, with wispy grasses at their backs, whispering in the dying wind.

Valjean unpacked the bundle they’d brought, laying the food out between them, and they contented themselves with crab cakes and smoked hake, bread, and various cheeses of goat’s milk, finishing the meal with strawberries and gooseberries—all the while sharing a bottle of white wine, for they had not brought any glasses.

Overhead, the clouds rolled past, and they watched the sun disappear beneath the horizon, casting rich, fleeting colors across the sea as they ate. By the time they had finished the last of the berries, the sky had grown dark, and the air had grown still.

Laying back on the blanket, they turned their faces to the heavens, and watched as the stars emerged from the gloom.

Javert pointed out, one by one, all the constellations that he knew, and what they represented. *Grande Ourse* and *Petite Ourse*, *Cygne*, *Lyre*, *Hercule*, *Persée*, *Sagittaire*, *Capricorne*, *Verseau*, *Baleine*, *Poissons*, *Bélier*, *Taureau*, and on and on, while Valjean listened, enraptured.

He had seldom heard Javert talk thusly before—rambling, almost oneiric, as though he were telling a story he knew by heart, and one which he’d learned long ago.

“Javert,” Valjean wondered aloud, “Who taught you about the constellations?”

The man paused, seemingly taken off guard. “My mother,” he finally replied.

Valjean wanted to ask him ‘What was she like?’ but Javert had never been very open about his past, and Valjean did not wish to sour the mood. Instead, he thought on his own mother, or lack thereof. “I wish my mother had been around to teach me such things.”

Javert hummed sympathetically. “She died when you were young.”

“I never knew her.”

“I am sorry for it.”

“When I was little, I often wondered what she’d been like,” said Valjean. “I haven’t thought on
her in a long, long time.”

“At least,” Javert consoled him, “you had a father.”

“For a short while, yes. I cannot really remember him now. But you remember your mother?”

“Yes.”

“That is well.”

A night bird called far in the distance—a long, twittering song—perhaps a nightjar. Behind them, the grasses rustled softly with a passing breeze. And before them, the steady sound of the waves.

Valjean closed his eyes for a moment, letting the noises wash over him. Breathed in and out, aware of all around him. Of the calm of nature, and the comforting presence of a friend. He drank it in, and was filled with a deep, cleansing sense of peace.

Opening his eyes, he gazed reverently at the glittering expanse above. “They really are much clearer here,” he murmured.

“It is all the gas lamps in Paris,” Javert huffed. “They muddy the sky.”

“There are gas lamps in Toulon.”

Javert gave a scoff. “Not in the sea there aren’t.”

“I don’t think it very much matters.”

“Well. Toulon is smaller than Paris by far.”

“That’s true.”

They were quiet a moment.

“You know, I have seen them brighter before,” Valjean said.

“Where?”

“Faverolles.”

“Oh,” said Javert. “Well. It is a sparsely populated place. Of course they should be brighter there.” Rolling onto his side, he propped up his chin in his hand. “Perhaps,” he said softly, “one day you could take me to see them.”

Valjean started internally. He turned to judge the man’s expression, though he could hardly see his face now. He did not perceive Javert as looking at him. Nevertheless, a spreading warmth filled his cheeks. Uncomfortable, he shook his head, as though to clear his thoughts. “I don’t believe I shall ever return to Faverolles,” he managed to say.

Javert was quiet for a moment. “Truly?” he asked.

“Truly.” Valjean let out a sigh. “It would … It would be worse than Toulon, for me.”

“How could anything be worse than Toulon?”
Valjean frowned. “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s just … I’ve never been back there since that day. And I honestly don’t think I could bear it.” He bit the tip of his tongue, trying to block out the thoughts that were creeping in on him. “There is— There is nothing left for me there, anyway,” he finished. “Not anymore. And going there would only remind me of that.”

“I see,” said Javert.

They did not speak again for a few minutes.

“Did you do much stargazing back then?” Javert ventured. “In your youth?”

A curt laugh passed Valjean’s lips. “Hardly. It was nothing special to me then. And also, I was always exhausted by nightfall. I don’t know why I would think to stare up at the sky for pleasure’s sake in those days.”

He heard Javert give a pensive hum. “The stars were always special to me,” the man said, turning onto his back and crossing his arms over his chest. “I never even got to see them until I was four.”

“What happened when you were four?”

Javert was silent for a moment. When he spoke there was a slight gruffness to his voice—agitation, perhaps. “They let me out of prison,” he said.

A chill shot down Valjean’s spine. “Ah. Yes.”

“Had you forgotten?”

“Of course not,” said Valjean. It had merely slipped his mind.

“Mm.”

The balmy air drifted over them, as the sound of waves caressed the shore.

“You see,” Javert began suddenly, “Much like you, I was deprived the sight of the sky. But, unlike Toulon, the prison I grew up in did not have an open view from anywhere. It was closely surrounded by buildings on all sides, and the windows were not such that one could look upward. So all I saw, from the day I was born until I was four years old, was stone, and brick, and mortar. I do not know if I even saw a single tree.”

“In the galleys, they take the men outside to labor every day. But in the women’s prisons, there is no such work to be done outdoors. Just massive workshops, where they’re put to weaving and the like. So you truly never see the sun.”

“That’s horrible,” said Valjean.

“I know. But I did not know it at the time. I did not know anything outside those prison walls. Imagine my surprise, then, when I first saw the sky at night.”

“You must have thought the stars very beautiful,” Valjean observed.

“I did not even know what they were, Valjean. I had to ask my mother.”

“You …?”

“I knew nothing, Valjean. I knew absolutely nothing.”
Valjean could not fathom what to say.

“I was a traveler in a foreign land, with foreign customs,” said Javert. “Everything was new to me. I had only ever seen in two dimensions. Drawings, or needlework—those were my windows to the world. You think you understand something, and then you see it before you, and it is something entirely different. Most people have rubbish memories of that age. But mine are very clear. Because everything was new.”

“So, when I looked up at the stars, I felt a sense of wonder. A sense of … some kind of destiny, I suppose. I still feel it, sometimes.” The man went silent for awhile. When he spoke again, his voice was smaller. “But, as I grew older … as I grew to understand my place in the world … much of that wonder turned to resentment.”

Valjean turned his head to look at him, though he could not see him through the blackness. “Resentment?” he echoed.

The man gave an affirmative hum. “When I was small, knowing nothing, I did not know what kind of hand I had been dealt. I had no concept of circumstance at all. But as I came to understand the way the world worked, so too did I come to understand that the hand I had been dealt in it … was not a favorable one.”

“Astrology is inherently tied to the idea of fate—and so the stars, which had once seemed to me a sign of infinite possibilities, began to seem … I don’t know. Restrictive, in a way. I don’t believe in astrology, of course,” he clarified. “Nor do I believe in most superstitious things. But it was just the feeling that one gets looking up at them … That speculation of the unknown, that even the earliest man must have felt when he gazed at the sky. That at least is very real.”

“For me, the stars … they came to represent uncertainty,” he continued. “To represent my own lack of control. At the same time, however, I knew that one’s destiny is in part what one makes it, and so, they also represented the idea that … if I fought hard enough, perhaps I could rise above my circumstances.”

“You can understand, then, why I am set to pondering when I look at them. The strange mix of things they make me feel.” He let out a long breath.

“Yes,” Valjean murmured, looking back up at them thoughtfully. “I could see that.”

Javert was quiet for a moment. “What do you see, when you look at them? What do they make you think about?”


“Hm. And when you say nature—”

“Just—you know. The wilds. The parts of the world that man has not tamed. And … the part of men’s hearts that will always be called by them.”

“Interesting.” Javert let a drowsy little noise, and Valjean suspected they might be heading back soon. “I never thought much on god, to be honest,” the man remarked.

“When you looked at the stars?”

“Or in general, really.”
Valjean bit his lip. “I don’t think most people do,” he said. “They think they do, but they don’t. They get caught up in doctrines and forget to think for themselves. Or take note of how their actions might affect people.”

There was a silence in which Valjean perceived that he had made Javert uncomfortable.

“I’d agree with that, I suppose,” the man mumbled.

“It is not a true sin,” Valjean said. “A lack of thought does not denote maliciousness.”

“No; just thoughtlessness,” Javert grumbled under his breath. “But I digress. I think on God more oft of late.”

“Do you?”

“Mm. And I hope you know you’re entirely to blame.”

A bark of laughter escaped Valjean’s throat. “Forgive me,” he managed.

“No.”

Another laugh.

“But seriously, you’ve ruined stars for me forever,” said Javert, in a very frank but not quite convincing voice. “I used to think about all sorts of things, but now when I look up at them, all I think of is either you, or god, or how utterly ridiculous our lives are.”

Chuckling, Valjean rolled onto his side and clutched his stomach, momentarily helpless. “I am — I am so sorry,” he lied. “So very sorry.”

“Mm. Somehow I doubt this.”

Valjean choked back a giggle.

“You know,” Javert mused flatly, “if there is a god, he has a very foul sense of humor.”

“Yes,” said Valjean, smiling up at the stars. “The foulest.”

Javert sighed. “But, I suppose, I would not have it any other way.”

“Nor I.”

Valjean wet his lips, dry from the salted air. “I am grateful,” he said softly, “to have you as a friend, after everything.”

Javert did not respond for some time.

Valjean wondered if the sentiment had been too complex. Just as he was beginning to suspect Javert would not risk a reply, he gave a start, for the man had clasped his hand.

Weaving his fingers through his, Javert gave Valjean’s hand a squeeze that began gently and grew fierce.

With tears pricking the back of his eyes, Valjean swallowed the knot in his throat and squeezed back, his cheeks burning.
They stared up at the stars in silence.

“And,” Javert breathed, his voice barely audible, “I am privileged that you should want me.”

Valjean was overcome. Instinctively, he drew Javert’s hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to its knuckles, holding it there for a moment before setting it down on his breast, just above his heart. Their fingers still woven together, he clutched the hand dearly against him, exhaling a tense sigh.

He got the impression that Javert had gone rigid beside him. Perhaps, Valjean reflected, he should not have done that. But it was too late for that now. Javert was not taking back his hand, however—and Valjean did not wish to release it. So he lay there on the blanket unmoving, holding the man’s hand and gazing up at the sparkling sky, a nervous warmth spreading through him, and a fluttering in his chest, like a moth beating its wings against a windowpane, the glass cool in the dark of the night.

A thousand, thousand words brimmed within him, never quite making it past his lips. “Thank you for this,” he finally said. It was not what he wanted to say. But it was a start.

“For what?” Javert asked, just as quiet.

“Tonight,” said Valjean. And then, a heartbeat later, added, “Everything.”

Javert paused. “De rien,” he returned. It was nothing.

“It is far more than nothing, to me,” Valjean told him.

Nearby, the waves lapped softly at the shore.

When Javert finally spoke, it was scarcely more than a whisper. “I know.”

***

It was late into the night, and the moon shone softly through the billowing white curtains. A thin ray of it peeked between the linen panels, and settled on the sheets like a cat, striping the legs of the figure beneath. Though his companion slept, this bed’s occupant remained awake, staring into shadow.

Javert could not remember the last time he had thought of his mother.

He could not remember her face.

But he could remember the way her deep brown eyes sparkled with secrets, the way she could speak without using her lips. He could remember the clothes she wore—bright, warm colors, embroidered with stars and moons, flowers and birds, all beaded and bedecked with intricate designs. Her hair was the same brown-black as his, smooth and shining, combed neatly away beneath her scarves.

He remembered the sound of her voice, low and even, never rising even when she was upset. Her smiles were saved for humor, for bitterness and salted words—and even then they were rare. But she was not unhappy. Nor, however, was she jubilant. She merely drifted through life, ebbing and flowing with the tide as though there were nothing in the world that could truly affect her.
That stoicism—that solemn ambivalence—he knew he must have inherited from her, and he did not feel any qualms about that. He respected her for certain things. But there was a sharpness to him, a wariness and a hunger in him that she did not possess. Where her eyes held wisdom, his held cunning. Where she was subtle, he was fierce.

He could still remember the way she looked at him when he’d told her he was leaving—that he was going to make a name for himself and rise from those gutters, never to return. It was that knowing expression she had worn countless times, her face like the statues of saints on cathedrals, infinite understanding within.

‘Go,’ she had said simply. ‘It is right for you to seek all you desire in life. I will not stand in the way. You are Ferenc;’ she told him, ‘you are free. You have always been free. Journey into the world and seize all that is available to you. This is as it should be.’

And with that exoneration as her parting gift—the greatest thing she could ever give him, and that which was not hers to give—he left, and not once did he look back.

He began by becoming a courier for the police and the gendarmes, running messages back and forth when the men were too busy to be bothered to. It cannot be said that he befriended them so much as gained their trust.

The dark-skinned, stern little street urchin soon became a favorite among the officers. ‘Ah, there goes petit Javert,’ they would say fondly. ‘Boy, would you …?’

Perhaps they recognized something in his cold blue eyes—determination, fearlessness. Shrewdness. Beasts of prey can often tell one another apart in this manner.

Soon he became their informant, a young spy—no one suspected a child to be working for the police, least of all one with his appearance. He hung around the alleyways and dark corners like a wraith, always watching, always listening for another scrap of information he could feed to them. He eagerly snapped up any opportunity they gave him, and they pressed coins into his hand and rewarded him with gossip from the local stations.

He did not do these things with the intention of impressing anyone. He did them to prove his worth—perhaps not so much to them as to himself. With the successful completion of each task he found vindication—a reason for his existence.

When he came of age, it was easy to get recommendations. Already he had found a patron in M. Chabouillet, who had seen something in him worth his consideration—worth putting to the test. And so it was that he found himself working at the prisons in the South.

His heart was already hard when he arrived there. He had always viewed people as others. Never could relate. They existed either to lose or be gained from. He saw the men in that prison caged like beasts—and sometimes acting like them—and if he fancied himself their captor, protecting the outside world from their corruption, could he truly be blamed? They were all evil—irredeemable—and he was good.

That was what he told himself. In certain ways, he was not wrong. But it was the fact that he’d never been proven incorrect that cemented these conceptions into a worldview that only dealt in absolutes.

Eventually, his calculating mind, and his talents for observation and strategy, were seen as being more useful elsewhere, and so—with help from Chabouillet—he was shifted from the prison to the police, and soon appointed the position of inspector, which suited him nicely. He excelled at
the tasks he was assigned, completing them swiftly and with the vigor and conviction of a fanatic, doubtless of the righteousness and necessity of their cause, unwavering in their judgment.

Criminals and lawmen alike grew to view him with a measure of both fear and respect, and Chabouillet’s high opinions of him were justified.

The job did not pay much, but he had never been a man for vanity or opulence—never had the chance to be—so he did not consider this an issue, so long as he managed to make ends meet, which he did—barely. Despite his solitude, and his poverty, as long as he believed himself to be useful to society—to seek out villainy where it hid and mete out justice accordingly, he was pleased with himself.

Sometimes, very late at night, he would wonder whether or not his mother knew what had become of her son.

He did not find himself missing her. Nor would he ever wish to go back to that life.

But, for some reason, he wanted her to know what he’d achieved. Whether this was stubborn pride on his part or genuine hope that the woman who’d raised him would find comfort in his success was unclear, even to him.

***

The next morning, as the sun was still cresting over the horizon, they rose and packed their things, and set off for their carriage.

Javert was filled with a strange emotion, hard to define.

He had hoped returning to Toulon would dispel some of the terrors of the bagne that so haunted Valjean. Instead, it had only uncovered more of them. –And, to his horror, ones with which he was directly involved. When he gazed now at the stones beneath his feet, he still felt his old nostalgia for the city—for his youth, and prior occupation—but now that nostalgia was tinged with grief, and remorse, like a seeping stain.

Had he helped to ease Valjean’s mind some by coming here? Or had he only further troubled it? Javert truly could not tell. He only sensed, with great poignancy, the bonds that tied them to this place, and to each other—for better or for worse.

As Valjean was securing their luggage, Javert stared off one last time at the city behind them, shadowed and pale in the morning light. With a long sigh, he heard himself call Valjean’s name.

“The man looked over his shoulder at him, halfway to boarding the carriage.

“Do you think you’ll ever make peace with it?” Javert asked.

“With what?”

“This place,” said Javert. “The past.”

Valjean thought for a moment, his face somber as he gazed towards the sea. “No,” he said, turning away and hoisting himself up. “—but it’s a part of us, now, and we have to learn to live
with that.”

***

FOOTNOTES

[1] The salles, the shared dormitory of convicts, had high ceilings, and narrow windows towards the top of the room, out of the prisoners’ reach. Due to the resulting angle of the convicts’ view through them, they would only have been able to see a small portion of the sky, and none of the landscape beneath. It provided light, but little to no view.

[2] Sainte-Marie-de-la-Seds is an ancient Cathedral with a large clock tower, just outside of the Île du Bagne. Having worked and lived there, Javert is used to measuring distances in relation to the Bagne, and only just catches himself before he mentions it, referencing the nearby Cathedral instead.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway look at these two absolutely USELESS old gays. Good lord. They're literally dating and they don't even realize it. Valjean just had a classic pining romantic moment and he doesn't even know what it was. Like. My dude. That's ur heart tellin u ur gay af

The beach of Pipady used to be a shingle cove, or gravel beach, up until 1970 when they filled it with sand. It only opened to the public in 2004, and before that it was purely for military use.

I figure here is a good place to leave this cute fanart LuneandBarbeque made. Annnnnd this one.

*Basically just throws the entire "A Scene at the Sea" soundtrack at you*

Dude there's like so many coincidences in the song titles for this chp and like they weren't even intentional it's great

Suggested Listening:

The Sea Scene - Bruno Coulais

Island Song - Joe Hisaishi

Alone - Joe Hisaishi

Sea of Blue - Joe Hisaishi
Silent Love (In Search of Something) - Joe Hisaishi
Painters - Joe Hisaishi
Cliffside Waltz, Pt. 3 - Joe Hisaishi
Wondrous Love - Bear McCreary
La Chanson de la Mer (Berceuse) - Nolwenn Leroy

Okay so like I know nothing about Hana-bi but the soundtrack is so pretty and beautiful and romantic except for the LAST FEW SECONDS OF THE FINAL SONG WHICH ENDS ABRUPTLY IN GUNSHOTS AND LEMME TELL Y'ALL WHEN I GOT THERE I WAS THROWN FOR A FUCKIN LOOP MY GUYS

Next time on the Useless Gays show, watch our protagonists cry over a dude that's been dead for like 20 years, and then leave!
To Rekindle a Flame

Chapter Summary

Valjean and Javert pay their respects to the Bishop. Javert has some time to contemplate their relationship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Redemption was asking too much, but he could hope. Something told him he’d still be seeking absolution when he took his last breath on some distant day.”

-Kelly Moran

***

They arrived in Digne just as the daylight was beginning to wane, casting a warm, golden hue to the tan stone and terracotta roof tiles of the buildings.

Dropping off their luggage at a local inn they had booked for the night, a number of workers inquired as to their travel plans, trying to entice them to visit the thermal springs, or mountain trails.

Valjean shook his head at them, smiling sadly, dismissively. It reminded Javert of how he had been in Montreuil—always backing politely away from conversation, offering melancholy grins instead of words.

When they found themselves alone again, Valjean remarked, with a dejected, ill-humored laugh, “The last time I was here … the townsfolk showed me a very different sort of hospitality. I wonder, if they knew who I was—how do you think they would treat me? A convict of twenty years; the marauder who robbed their beloved Bishop—who stole from a child … Do you think they would run me out of town? Perhaps they’d come after me with pitchforks and torches.”

“If they did anything of the sort, I should be compelled to have quite the dispute with them,” Javert said.

Valjean only scoffed at that. But, Javert noted with relief, there was a faint smirk on his lips.

Heading back out, they inquired at the town hall as to the Bishop’s final resting place.

“Do you not wish to visit his home?” Javert asked.

“No,” said Valjean. “It is only a building, without him.” Under his breath he added, “And I would bet you anything it is a hospital again.”

Javert would not have been surprised if that were the case; nevertheless, he hoped otherwise, as
Valjean surely did.

***

They stood on the edge of the cemetery by Notre Dame du Bourg, on the outskirts of town. Around them rose verdant hills and mountains, stretching up to the sky.

It was a simple headstone—just how the man would have probably wanted it, Javert thought. Inexpensive; humble. Despite the burial date, a number of fairly recent flowers had been left at the base of the grave.

Carved into the stone slab was this epitaph:

“CHARLES FRANÇOIS MYRIEL
‘MONSEIGNEUR BIENVENU’
ÉVÊQUE de DIGNE
Né le 12 Févr 1739
Décédé le 3 Mars 1821
Un ami à tous”

Valjean gazed down at it for some time, silent. After awhile he let out a deep, pensive sigh. Reaching into the inner breast pocket of his tailcoat, he withdrew something black and shining, opening his hand to stare sadly at it.

It was a rosary, modest in construction but charming nonetheless, made with iron links and beads of jet.

Javert felt a surge of gravity pass through him as he realized where it was from. He stood frozen until Valjean spoke.

“It was the last one they would ever make,” he said softly. “No one else knew it, at the time.” He gave a pause, the corner of his lip drawing back. “I don’t even know why I took it. I only went there to borrow some clothes. But then it was just sitting there, on the work station. And I … didn’t put it back down.”

He furrowed his brow at it for a moment more, warring emotions plain to see on his face, before crouching down and placing it on the stone.

They both reflected on it, solemn.

Javert could not say what it meant to Valjean, but, to him, the sight of that simple rosary, laid upon a simple grave, represented the repayment of a debt. Represented unfathomable gratitude, and understanding, and all the things that Valjean must have wished had been said long ago, but could not be. Such a humble offering! And yet, within it was the world.

“I never had the chance to thank him,” Valjean murmured. “All that time, all the change he had wrought in my heart … and yet he knew none of it. He knew nothing of what I became.”
“I had wanted so much to see him again, to give him my gratitude ... But how could I? For the very night I had seen the light of revelation was the also the night I became once more wanted by the police. To return to that area would have been suicide. I had to leave, and never look back. I thought of writing him, sometimes, but—I was too afraid. And I did not know what to say.”

“I admired him more than anyone, but it was also a fearful admiration, he was so grand in my mind. Or perhaps it was because I felt myself so inferior. The only thing that I could do for him was to become the man he believed I could be. And while I think—I hope—he would be pleased with me ... it’s not enough. I still wish that, somehow, he could have known. Just—just so that he’d know his sacrifice was not in vain.”

Javert’s eyes fell. “A man like that—to do what he did for you ... I think he already knew.”

Valjean glanced up at him for a moment, his brow knit. He let his head droop again, eyes far off. “When I realized what he had done—when I came to understand it, and myself—I went back.”

Javert turned to him with a start. “To Digne?”

“After it was clear I would not be able to find that little Savoyard, yes. I went back. I wasn’t thinking about the police, then. It was the middle of the night; there was no one about to see me. I knelt on his doorstep and wept. And, my head to the paving stones before his house, I prayed. But ...” He let out a quiet scoff. “—do you know something? It was not God I was praying to. It was him.”

“I didn’t much believe in God, you see,” he continued. “Rather, I believed, but I cursed his name, and I cursed my fellow men. I had never received anything from them that resembled mercy. Never saw the merit in those spiels of divine providence. How could a just and loving god allow such misery, and tragedy, and indifference as what befell my family and I? What kind of god was worthy of praise, that would turn a blind eye to the suffering of his people?”

“No, I had lost all faith in that kind of thing long ago. But the Bishop—he was somehow ...” He cocked his head. “He did not preach to me. He did not even ask of my faith. He did not care who I was, or what I believed; it didn’t matter to him. It only mattered that I was someone in need of his help. And before he even gave me the silver—before he spared my life—I received more kindness from him than from anyone else on this earth.”

“I did not believe in God. But I believed in him. And it was my belief in him, and, in turn, what he believed in, that brought me back to the faith. It was not so much that he made me put faith in the scriptures, per se. Rather, he made me believe what they stood for.”

He gave a small sigh. “God is not in the churches, Javert. Nor the cathedrals, or the temples, or the even the Vatican. He is not in Jerusalem, or Rome, or any other holy place. God is in what we give of ourselves to others. He is in every act of kindness and gift of charity. God is in the way we treat each other, and nowhere else.”

“You can spend your life holed up in a convent, or a monastery, but if you do not act with love towards your fellow man, you are no closer to God than the day you were born. People try to show their piety through worship, through prayer and offerings and self-denial. But Christ never asked to be worshipped. He only asked that we do God’s bidding, which is to care for one another with all our hearts.”

“The Bishop embodied this. He understood. There is preaching, and then there is practice. It is better to lead by example. I tried to follow his as best I could. I walked to the other side of France, tried to start another life. To act in turn, to pass on to others what he gave me. I do not know if I
“You have,” Javert murmured. “Trust me.”

They were quiet for a moment, lost in thought.

“When did you decide it?” Javert asked absentmindedly.

Valjean blinked, looking over at him in confusion. “Decide what?”

“To break parole. To tear up your yellow papers. Destroy them, I mean—whatever it was that you did.”

“I … didn’t do anything with them, actually.”

“How do you mean?”

“They burned up,” Valjean explained. “You were made aware, I think, that when I first arrived at Montreuil-sur-Mer, a fire had broken out in the town hall.”

“The incident with the two little children,” Javert recalled. “And the captain of the gendarmerie.”

“Mm,” Valjean hummed. “When I saw the blaze, it had already consumed most of the hall, and a large crowd had formed around it. A man ran up—the captain, as I later found—and he was screaming that his sons were still inside. He tried to run into the burning building, but the other people in the crowd held him back, thinking it hopeless, thinking it better to keep him from certain death than to risk yet another loss of life in the name of what I’m sure in their minds was a hopeless cause at that point.”

“When I saw this, I—” His brow knitted. He stared down pensively at the gravestone by his feet. “It was just after the Bishop had effected this change in me, just after I’d resolved to become another man and dedicate my life to doing good—to being worthy of the mercy he had shown me. So—I saw this great fire, and this father pleading for the lives of his children, and I just … I had nothing to lose. Absolutely nothing at all.”

“Without even really thinking about it, I rushed past the crowd into the hall before anyone could stop me. I held my breath, and darted into all the rooms. I found the boys hiding under a table. They had already fainted from the smoke. I bent down and slung them both over my shoulders like sacks of grain and carried them out as fast as I could. I very narrowly escaped being burned to death myself; my hair and clothes were singed, and I smelt of smoke for days. But I made it out alive, and, after a few minutes of breathing the fresh air, the children came back to their senses as well, coughing their little lungs out.”

“Their father was so overjoyed to see them safe he wept, clutching them both to his breast. I turned to leave, but he called out to me. ‘Wait; who are you?’ he says. I give a start, say I’m a traveler, that I was only passing by. I’m already dreading having to show my passport to someone, and in front of the whole town, no less.”

“I reach into my breast pocket for my papers, but find them missing. They must have fallen out onto the floor when I bent down to grab the children. ‘Ah; they’ve burned up,’ I think, and I was very afraid in that moment. Of being discovered, of being sent away, of being called a parole breaker, even; I know not what else. But no one asks for my papers. They only ask me my name.”

“And I falter, and I realize that maybe—maybe that passport burning up was a sort of divine
providence. Maybe God was giving me a way to start over, to become the man the Bishop believed I could be. Erase my ugly past and start fresh, with a new identity. Like Mary Magdalene, when Jesus called her to the Faith. ‘My name is Madeleine,’ I tell him. And everyone in the town was so grateful for what I’d done that they never once thought to question me.”

Javert shut his eyes, bowing his head. “Magdalene,” he echoed woefully.

Of course.

He felt again the burning guilt for not understanding before, for being so blind. Had he not believed in the man’s reform, or had he simply not cared? Even now, he found he could not tell.

“When he learned I had no place to go, the captain paid for a number of weeks lodging for me at one of the inns,” Valjean said. “During that time, I sold most of the silver the Bishop had given me. I saved only the candlesticks for myself, because they meant a great deal to me, and I could not bear to part with them. With the money I got, I bought a little house in the lower part of the town. Eventually I took over the jet factory that had been struggling to stay open, and made a number of improvements in the manufacturing process. This turned out to be very lucrative. I made a name for myself, in more ways than one—in some ways, even, that I did not wish to. But that you know.”

“I broke parole, yes. But it had never been my original intent. I did it not only because I thought I might already be hunted for what happened in Digne, but, because it seemed to me the only way to truly be free. To become the person I wanted to be—the person I ought to be. You must understand, Javert, when you force a man to show his papers everywhere he goes, you force him to wear his sins upon his brow, and people can only see the worst of him, no matter how long it’s been since his crime. You cannot be a better man, crushed under the weight of that judgment. They will not let you. Nothing you do or say means anything to them, no matter how heartfelt it is. The bagne made my heart hard, but they made it harder.”

“My past cast a dark shadow over me, and all that I did. And it didn’t quite seem fair—for I did not feel I belonged to it anymore. Truly, I was not the same man that had emerged from the galleys. Jean Valjean was dead. I wanted him dead. And I did not want his specter hanging over me, tainting these precious things which I had found. My identity had burned up in that fire, and I was more than content to let its ashes lie. You understand.”

Javert mumbled something under his breath.

Valjean looked back up at him. “Hm?”

“Phoenix,” Javert repeated, his shadow-veiled gaze fixed on the Bishop’s stone, and the rosary beneath. “You are like a phoenix.”

“No,” Valjean said quietly. “Nothing nearly so grand. If anything, I am merely … like a snuffed candle, relit from its own smoke.”

“I see no difference,” said Javert.

Valjean cracked a weary grin.

They stood in silence for a while.

“Do you wish to have a moment alone with him?” Javert offered.

Valjean looked up at him, shaken from his reverie. He blinked. “No, I—” Here he glanced back
humbly at the grave, another sad smile curling the edge of his mouth. “I have been alone with him for many years.”

Javert contemplated the meaning behind those words, slowly bowing his head.

Expression warm now, Valjean turned and touched his arm in a companionable way. The look in his eyes was one of a man who was at peace. “Come,” he said, “let us return to the inn.”

Javert faltered. “I … would actually like a moment alone with him myself, if that is all right.”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “Oh,” he remarked, stepping away. “Of course. I’ll wait for you at the gate, then.”

They nodded to each other awkwardly.

When Valjean was safely out of earshot, Javert’s attention returned to the Bishop. He stood there for a long while, not thinking anything in particular—just gazing at the stone, and the rosary atop it, allowing himself to feel. Letting his gaze trace the engraving.

Perhaps, he thought,

you are the true hero of this story,

Monseigneur.

For seeing what I could not see;

for doing what I could not do.

You have done more good for this world in a single act

than I have done in my entire life.

Without you,

would there be him?

Would there be me?

Would there be us?

A soft word,
a kind deed,

an act of mercy—

I did not think these things could change a heart.

I have never been

so glad

to be proven wrong.

With a gentle sigh, he crouched down. He remained still for a number of minutes, lost in contemplation. Then, struck by a sudden whimsy, he reached into his inner coat pocket, and produced a silver pocket watch.

The inside of its face still speckled with condensate, its tiny black hands remained stuck at 1:02, an eternal reminder. The watch, which he’d carried close to his heart, had been broken since he’d jumped in the Seine. He did not know why he had kept it, even after procuring a new one. Nor did he understand why he still carried it on his person, despite its uselessness. Or what it was that went through his mind when he looked at it, sometimes. He only knew that he had felt compelled to do it.

But now, suddenly, he understood why.

And with an equal certainty, he sensed what he ought to do with it.

He gazed down at it for a moment longer, thinking on the past, and what Valjean had done for him. On the selfless compassion that had saved his life—and where it had been learned.

Then, tenderly, he placed the watch upon the grave beside the rosary, and stood.

***

Deep into the night, Javert was roused to consciousness by a dream he could not recall. He tried, in vain, to resume his slumber, but found that he could not. A restlessness, a vaguely unsettling feeling, had taken hold of him, and set his mind to pondering. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up, shifting so that his legs dangled off the side of the bed. A deep sigh escaped him. He put his head in his hand.

When he finally looked up, his gaze fell upon Valjean, sleeping soundly in the other bed, cloaked in the soft silver-blue of the moon. Beneath the linen sheets, his chest rose and fell, slow and reassuring.

Javert watched him thusly for a long while, as one might watch the waves roll in and out, pensive and thoughtless at the same time. The sight of the man’s sleeping face contented him;
Valjean was not plagued by nightmares tonight. The deep, restful expression he had was proof enough of that.

Javert wondered briefly what the man did dream of—when his dreams did not fill him with terror. Was it his childhood? His days in the fields, in the orchards? Did he dream, perhaps, of his family, before things went to ruin? Who was to say? Perhaps, even the happiest of memories he had were tinged with sadness, simply for the fact that they had all gone sour, in the end. Had all been ripped away from him, suddenly and without resolution.

What happiness remained to Jean Valjean? Only his daughter, perhaps. His books, and his love of nature and his fellow man. Few things in his life had ever ended well. And even now, when at last he could take solace in his safety, and his newfound family, still he was beset by visions of the past, terrible and cruel. And as much as Javert hoped it wasn’t so, it seemed likely that the man might always suffer from them.

Kind words could not expunge a violent history.

How many things Javert wished had gone differently! And yet here they were. If only he had not exposed him in Montreuil; if only he had put more faith in him, been gentler, calmer. If only his pride did not prick at him so, and lead him to disastrous deeds! Perhaps the world would be better for it.

But all that had gone wrong had led them here. Led them to each other—to an understanding, both of themselves and all around them. Where might they be if things had gone differently? Only God knew such things. Surely, however, they would not have come to this conclusion. They would not have come to know one another this way.

Still—

Still.

There were things Javert regretted. Things he could never give back, no matter how hard he tried.

So many wasted years! So much hate, and misery, and toil—all for naught. For so long they might have been friends. Have helped people, together. But fate was bitter, and they had remained alone, and unhappy. Isolated.

Valjean would never fulfill his true potential. Would never truly recover what had been seized from him. That was Javert’s fault, and no one else’s. And even now, when he sought to make reparations for it, he knew it would not be enough. It would never, ever be enough.

All the shame he had put him through—the fear, and loneliness, and self-loathing … Attempts might be made to give him back authority, and respect, but for those other things, Javert had no remedy.

He ruminated on this as he watched the man sleep, remorse welling in his breast.

He did not understand how, after everything, Valjean could still hold such fondness for him. Especially in light of what he’d done in Toulon. Good god! Javert had brutalized him. Had laid him so low. Had stripped him of everything that made him human, right down to his very flesh. With what passion he’d scorned him!

And yet— And yet, even now, the man clung to him, cherished him, looked to him for comfort. Even now, the man said Javert made him feel safe.
Safe! How on earth was that possible? After all Javert had done to him—after all he had wanted to do to him—how could Valjean feel secure in his presence? It seemed absurd.

All the torments he’d caused him were so fresh in Javert’s mind. Surely even fresher in Valjean’s—like a stinging wound that would not close. Yet still the man gazed at him with such tenderness, such affection! Sometimes Javert could hardly bear it.

He ran tense fingers through his hair, fretful with grief. Hung his head with his face in his hands.

What could he do? There was nothing.

If only Valjean did not love him so!

There were so many things he should hate him for. Some, Javert reflected, that Valjean was not even aware of. Things that would surely strike doubt in his heart.

But how could Javert tell him those things? How could he bring himself to cause such a rift between them, to rend the man’s trust in that way?

And, most important of all—how could Javert deprive him of his only friend? Of the only person who truly knew him, understood him? That would perhaps be the worst blow of all, and Javert could not bear to deal it.

But, Javert lamented, things were getting ever closer between them, and their intimacy filled him with fear.

For, being so laden with guilt, how much longer could he endure the man’s esteem?

***

Chapter End Notes

Valjean, staring at a bigass fire that will probably kill him: Welp. I have nothing to lose but my life, and that’s not really worth all that much at this point

Me: *Writes Valjean as constantly smelling like lavender because of the soap he uses, for no particular reason other than it has very gentle and calming properties*

Me: Finds out Digne is absolutely fucking SURROUNDED by lavender fields and is considered "the capital of lavender"

Me: *trying not to cry* Oh ...

Yo I'm so happy I thought about that watch like it just occurred to me suddenly and I was like AHHHHHHHH
*EDIT* This has been here the whole time but I figured I may as well just explain it. Javert's watch being stuck at 1:02 (when he jumped in the Seine) is a reference to Psalm 102, which is "A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the Lord," and which reads:

Hear my prayer, Lord;  
let my cry for help come to you.  
Do not hide your face from me  
when I am in distress.  
Turn your ear to me;  
when I call, answer me quickly.

For my days vanish like smoke;  
my bones burn like glowing embers.  
My heart is blighted and withered like grass;  
I forget to eat my food.  
In my distress I groan aloud  
and am reduced to skin and bones.  
I am like a desert owl,  
like an owl among the ruins.  
I lie awake; I have become  
like a bird alone on a roof.

Okay for real tho, next chapter officially starts The Gay™. Place ur bets on which one of these idiots realizes it first I guess. Either way it's gonna hit both of 'em like a brick to the head. GET IT? BRICK? BRICK???? *kicks Vicky Hughes in the shin for obligating me to make that pun*

Dude yo the end of that Digne scene, like having them walk away from the grave together, and the offerings left there, and combining it with the music recs and all the ridiculous plot buildup, like ... that is some anime final ending credits sequence type shit amirite??

(Yeah ... there's a few Japanese songs in this chapter's list. THEY MAKE SENSE IF YOU LOOK UP THE LYRICS I SWEAR. Also they're from some of my very favorite anime features - Parasyte, and Colorful - which I would totally recommend if you're into that stuff)

Suggested Listening:

The Maiden - Robert Euvino
Sanctuary - Jesper Kyd
The Losing Side of History - Bear McCreary
Resolution - Jon Brion
Epilogue (Farewells) - Howard Shore
See You Again - Wiz Khalifa
It's the Right Time - Daichi Mura
Tegami Haikei Juugo no Kimi e - Angela Aki

Nobody Knows Your Heart (French/Japanese cover) - Mioune
### Chapter Summary

Javert and Valjean grow closer even as they grow apart, and one of them wakes to a frightening realization.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"God is such a cruel god

_for making you so wonderful,

_and for making me so weak."

-Sade Andria Zabala

***

It was a balmy morning in Paris, and Valjean was out looking for someone to hire when he spotted a familiar carrot-top gamin devouring an apple on a nearby stoop.

“You, there,” he called, drawing the stack of envelopes from under his arm. “Boy! You’ve delivered messages for me in the past, have you not?”

A sudden gleam lit the urchin’s eye at the mention of work. Then, pausing to regard him, he gave a start. “You’re the man what gave me a piece of white last year!” he exclaimed. “I hardly recognized you for your clothes.”

Valjean chuckled fondly at him. “Yes—they are new. Would you be willing to make more deliveries for me?”

The boy took the letters from his outstretched hand, sifting through them with a considerate hum. He seemed to be appraising the addresses.

“You can read those, yes?” Valjean ventured.

“‘Course I can read ‘em!” he cried with hand on his hip. “Who do you take me for, sir? I should not be delivering letters if I did not know them first.”

Valjean bit back a laugh at the boy’s wounded pride. Both of them knew that literacy among gamins was at best a haphazard guess. “Quite so,” he returned.

“M. Marchand … M. Dupont … Mlle. Robert,” the boy read aloud, as if to demonstrate his skill. “Are these more ‘friends’ of yours, m’sieur?”
“Friends? No. Alas, they are strangers to me. Nevertheless, I hope to employ them.”

Here the child eyed him queerly. “Ehh? What are you up to, old man?”

“These are job offers,” he explained, “—for factory work. I’m inquiring as to whether they should like to resume their former occupations, from which they were so unjustly let go.”

“Factory work, is it? That sounds honest enough.”

“And why should it not be?”

“No reason. ’Cept, last man I sent your messages to got his head chopped off a week later, that’s all.”

Valjean stiffened. “Ah,” he said.

“When I heard what happened I figured you for either a very poor criminal or a halfway decent police agent,” the boy said to himself. “Though, I’m not sure which I’d trust more. Today, however, you look like a bourgeois.”

“Do I?” Valjean remarked, tugging experimentally at his waistcoat. “Ah. Well. My daughter is to blame for that.”

Here the urchin laughed. “I like you, m’seur. Even if you are a police agent. That Thénardier surely deserved it, besides. All right! I’ll deliver your papers. For a small fee, of course.”

“Of course,” said Valjean, reaching into his purse. He knelt down and took the boy’s hand, placing a tidy sum of coin in his palm, at which the boy gaped.

“You’d really give me this much?” he wondered aloud.

“Why, certainly,” Valjean replied. “There are nearly twenty letters there! It shall take you all day, I should think. Honest pay for honest work.”

The boy bit his lip in deliberation. “This is slightly more than honest,” he admitted.

“Not to me.”

“I shall split it with my children, then.”

“Your—?” Valjean nearly blanched, and they boy laughed again at the look on his face.

“The two little ’uns I look after,” he clarified. “That should get the job done twice as fast.”

“Oh— Je vois,” Valjean breathed in relief, feeling himself a fool. The child could not be more than thirteen or fourteen years old. “You look after them, do you?”

“As much as one might.”

“And pray, what is your name?”

The gamin stuck out his chin, feigning a haughty air. “You may call me Navet.”

Valjean smiled. “Well, Navet. I shall be needing more letters delivered tomorrow. And perhaps something soon after that. Ça vous dit? Shall I find you here again at this time?”
Navet stood straight and saluted him. “You can count on me to dispatch your chickens, m’sieur. Me and the boys shall do the Prefecture proud.”

Valjean scoffed. “You know—I can swear to you quite honestly I am not a police agent,” he said.

But it was no use, for the boy was already running off with a grin. “That’s what a police agent would say!” he called back.

***

Lefèvre was sitting on a stack of overturned crates by a market stand, enjoying the sun and the bustle as he drew in a small pad of paper he’d brought. Now and then he would pause to pull a pen knife out of his pocket and sharpen his pencil, brushing the shavings off onto the ground.

He was just putting the finishing touches on the whiskers when a looming shadow fell across the paper, and a dark, deeply familiar voice exclaimed, “What are you about there, Lieutenant?”

Lefèvre seized up, his hand twitching as his eyes bulged. “N-nothing, sir,” he stammered, trying desperately to flip the other pages down over the drawing before it was seen.

The attempt was in vain, however; the inspector wrenched the pad from his hands and flipped back to it, saying, “No, no, let us see what you have here.” He stood silently as he studied it, with that perpetually glowering look of his, and Lefèvre could have sworn he felt his heart stop. “This is supposed to be me, is it?” the man finally said.

“No, sir— Not at all, sir.”

“I see. Then why have you written ‘Inspecteur Ja-fe[r’ at the bottom?”

Lefèvre wondered if they would ship his remains home in a casket, or if they would settle on dumping them into the Seine.

The inspector drew in a deep breath, and Lefèvre bid farewell to the world. “I tell you what it is, Lefèvre;” the man said, “they shall never let you be a dessinateur de la police based on caricatures.” Humming critically, he cast a dismissive glance at the previous pages, flipping through them as though he were skimming the contents of a report. “The other studies are tolerable,” he remarked. After a moment he returned to the most recent of drawings and tore it from the pad, stuffing it into his coat with a gruff, “I’m taking this.”

Tossing the pad back to him, Javert straightened himself and brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve. Then he turned, and for a second seemed to leave; but he quickly turned back as though having forgotten something, and clamped his massive hand down on the boy’s tawny head. “Oh, and Lefèvre,” he said, lowering his face to his, and piercing him with those unnaturally pale eyes.

“Oui?” the boy squeaked.

The man stared at him, agonizingly quiet. “Your shading needs work.”

And then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd, and Lefèvre felt as though the shadow of death had passed over him.
Valjean laughed himself senseless over the drawing.

From a nearby chair, Javert watched as the man doubled over, clutching his stomach with his face to the desk. Javert’s lips curled into a grim, self-satisfied smirk.

Collecting himself, Valjean sat up a little, wiping a tear from his eye. He looked once more at the drawing he held and choked back another laugh.

It was a cartoonish thing: the type of image a young ship’s boy might produce in the likeness of a particularly surly superior whilst they were away. Angry whiskers shot out from the drawing’s face, bristly and wild; gleaming eyes were nearly hidden beneath the brim of a comically two-dimensional top hat; a huge mouth growled wide with what appeared to be fangs. Upon the whole it was a charming piece of satire, and it gave one the impression of a hideous tiger baring it teeth.

“Not much in the way of realism,” Javert commented, “but I thought it a decent caricature.”

This remark elicited another string of chuckles from Valjean. “May I keep this?” he laughed.

Javert shrugged. “If you so desire.”

“I wish to show it to Marius,” the man said. “It is the best thing I’ve ever seen.” Red in the face, he put the drawing away in a drawer, his smile still dangerously unhinged.

Javert sat back, shaking his head at him and returning to his coffee. “So,” he began when the man had calmed, “How goes it with the factory?”

“Ah—At the moment, twenty two—no, twenty three workers have signed back on, with more being tentatively for it.”

“That is less than half the original force,” Javert said, raising an eyebrow. “Far less.”

“Yes, but Javert, these represent the most skilled of the workers, do you see? The positions that require the most training. They were so specialized it was hard for them to find worthy work elsewhere.”

Javert twined his fingers through his whiskers in thought.

“The others will be more difficult to convince, have they new occupations—but easier to replace,” the man went on. “It is those twenty-some I am most concerned with. They are the ones that will train all the rest; they are the ones who possess the critical knowledge of the trade. As for the others, there are still some we have yet to track down; a number seem to have moved, perhaps in search of other work, or on account of rent costs. God forbid they are out on the streets. We shall have to inquire further upon them to know.”

Propping his chin up, Valjean sifted through the papers on his desk with vague interest. “The materials … We have gotten the ingots in, which I have here for the moment; I fear to order any large number of them before we’ve secured a functional workforce, but there are ten of them waiting for use now—enough to experiment with, in any case. And then a number of iron and steel ones as well. I have most of what we shall need for the casts, I believe, though I would like to
consult with them on the proper recipes—it is so unlike jet; iron I am familiar enough with, but silver … The coal I have put in the building itself—Have you been by the building of late?”

“I have passed by it numerous times. I have not gone inside it, of course.”

Javert did not tell him that he had, on the most recent occasion, seen him through the window. That he had stood there for quite some time, watching him carefully, carefully repaint the trim and molding of the office, perched upon a ladder, with a heap of ugly green shavings at his feet. The new color was a light and placid blue, and the man was so absorbed in his work, so mindful not to get paint on the panes of glass, or put it on too thick. He wore much the same expression as when he planted seedlings in the garden, or read a book—a look Javert found comforting.

“I shall have to make you a key,” Valjean said, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“I do not see why you should feel the need,” Javert remarked, his cheeks warming slightly as he reached for a croissant.

Valjean looked at him strangely. “Why not?”

Pausing with the pastry halfway to his mouth, Javert glanced away. “It is not my place,” he finally said. “And it should be open during operation, anyway—yes?”

“And what if you wish to visit me there at some later hour?”

“Why would I wish to visit you there at a later hour?” Javert asked, earnestly confounded.

Valjean frowned at him helplessly. “You do not view this much as a partnership, do you?”

“I have already expressed that we are not partners. I hold literally no financial stake in this. I am literally incapable of holding a financial stake in this. And I know nothing of use to you here.”

“Those things don’t matter to me,” the man exclaimed, as though Javert was exceedingly stupid for thinking they did. “Besides which, you are the one who convinced me to—”

“Valjean, a man who convinces his friend to buy a horse does not then own half the horse. You are thinking fancifully.”

“I am not thinking fancifully,” Valjean defended, turning pink. “I am— I just … want you to have a hand in things, is all.”

“I do not understand you. I am no use to you at all.”

“It is not about your use!” the man rebuffed him. Then, looking quite pitiful, he slouched over, hanging his head and tempering his voice. “It is only that … this being such a large endeavor—such a large expenditure of my time—I do not wish for it to divide us.”

Javert stared at him, trying to comprehend the man’s sentiment. Abashed, he turned his face away, mumbling, “It is a much better use of your time.”

Valjean was silent for a moment; Javert did not wish to know what expression he wore on account of those words.

“But why—why do you not wish to be a part of it?” the man asked. “I wish for you to have a part in all things. Why do you shy away from this thusly?” A pause—a slight change in the air. “Tell me it is not on account of Montreuil.”
Javert stiffened.

“Oh, Javert—tell me it is not on account of that,” he pleaded. “This was supposed to mend things between us. You said it would help you sleep easier!”

Javert hid behind his mug of coffee. Took a tediously long sip. “It is not about Montreuil,” he told him finally. “It is only that you have much better things to do with your time now than waste it on me. I cannot go and interrupt you every other day. Especially not at the factory. What reason have I to be there? Much less have a key.”

Valjean cast him a heart-wrenching gaze. “But we are still friends, are we not?”

“Of course we are friends,” Javert replied. He did not say how uncomfortable it made him feel to say that, or even think of it these days.

“Then will you not come and visit me as you do now?”

“With such frequency, you mean?”

“Just so.”

Javert hesitated. Gave a huff, scratching at the armrest. “If you truly feel I must,” he begrudged. “If you—think it shall not disrupt your work.”

“Javert,” the man said, “You disrupt nothing but my loneliness.”

Javert gave a tremulous sigh. “I must visit you, then?”

“I should like for it dearly.”

“Very well.”

Valjean smiled, relieved. “Then I shall make you a key.”

***

The days wore on, and Valjean, helped by Cosette and Marius, continued to make progress towards the factory’s opening.

The man looked better than he had looked in years, Javert thought. Perhaps decades. Perhaps ever. He wore newer, more fashionable, more colorful clothes, and sometimes—when he was out on business—a top hat, the sight of which tied a knot in Javert’s throat.

But it was not the clothes that gave Valjean a semblance of vivacity; there was a spark in his eye now, an intelligent, pondering glint. Gone was the fear that had always shackled him, weighing him down. And gone too was the veil of dishonesty, of half-truths and guardedness that had always built walls between him and the rest of the world. True, he retained much of his bashfulness, his humility—but there was an openness to him these days Javert had never seen before.

Valjean spoke more often, more freely—even approaching people himself, which he had rarely ever done. Some days Javert would come to Rue Filles du Calvaire and catch Valjean in conversation with one of the Gillenormands, or their servants, or Pontmercy, eagerly detailing his
plans, or asking for advice. Occasionally he would enter a room to find a desk or table strewn with papers in Valjean’s hand: lists or drawings; blueprints and finance books.

Seeing Valjean enlivened thusly caused Javert to feel an immense amount of pride. And, conversely, it also made him feel completely unnecessary.

Valjean reminded him more and more of Madeleine—only, a Madeleine that did not have to live in terror of discovery; a Madeleine who had not been brought to his knees and stripped bare. Valjean reminded him of Madeleine, only, Madeleine had never been real—and this was. This Valjean was very real.

This was a Valjean that was allowed to be himself. Who was independent, and talented; wealthy, and beloved. This was a Valjean whose charity was no longer hindered, whose merits were known and not taken for granted. A Valjean who was building, branching out, making a name for himself once more.

Yes, thought Javert, this was a Valjean who had finally gotten what he deserved. And who absolutely positively, did not need him whatsoever.

Javert adored his company, but the truth was that he felt every minute Valjean spent on him a waste. The man had so many better things to be doing. So much better company to keep.

Javert had held him back. He had only ever held him back, all his life—and he knew it, and Valjean knew it; but only one of them would admit it to themselves.

Still, Javert could not bring himself to disappoint the man. He came when he was called, and then some, checking in on him from time to time if only because he knew Valjean delighted in it. If only because he knew it made the man happy.

But it shouldn’t, Javert told himself. It really shouldn’t. There was far too much between them. Far too many reasons why his presence should be a discomfort.

Yet Javert was weak, and as he cherished Valjean’s regard—cherished the look on his face when he opened the door to find him standing there—so he continued to come, like a moth to a flame. Continued to indulge himself, to grow more devoted, more slavishly attached, even as he took note of each link he was forging, and regarded the chain with remorse.

Valjean was inescapable. Each look, each laugh, each smile, made Javert’s heart flutter with a boyish glee—followed immediately by a grumbling self-reproach. He had seen men grow addicted to tobacco, or gambling, or drink, even though they knew it would ruin them—and so it was with extreme embarrassment that he found he’d grown addicted to Valjean.

But, far worse than that, Valjean had grown addicted to him.

And how could he break him of that habit without breaking his heart?

***

All throughout the rest of June, Valjean hurried about like bee in a newly-bloomed garden—buzzing from place to place with purpose.
The furnace in the factory glowed hot with small experiments and demonstrations the former employees indulged him in, and he would watch them go about the work with rapt attention. He took notes in pencil as they spoke, detailing this or that—melting points and breaking points and which tool was best suited for what. The sound of jeweler’s hammers rang off the walls and the high vaulted ceiling in a way which some might have called cheerful.

With each passing day he fell back into an old familiarity he’d not felt in years. A part of his mind which had tarnished was put into regular service again, and bit by bit it shone brighter, like the well-beloved candlesticks he kept on his mantle, which he dutifully polished whenever they dulled. After some weeks he grew aware of this keening, this mental sharpness, with some surprise. He had not expected the pursuit to change him as it did; to bring back not only the mindset of twenty years prior, but the vigor as well.

He was seldom idle, now. His free hours were spent in all sorts of pursuits, which he had worked at before, but never with such zeal. At the end of the day he’d be properly tired, and slept all the better for it.

The anxieties which had plagued him for so much of his life were fading now, and this allowed him a great many things. No longer chained by fear and self-loathing, his actions were freer, more heartfelt, and even sometimes indulgent—inasmuch as buying oneself flavored coffees and sugared pastries on a whim can be called indulgent. It was in these small ways he permitted himself to expand, to take pleasure in life and his newfound liberty: conversations, leisure walks, good food and drink, an extra candle at night to read books by—all the little things which lift the spirit.

He was more open in speaking by far; even Cosette remarked that he had never in memory been so verbose. She was very happy for it; often she had dismayed at his silence, his soft but clipped responses and general detachment from people. Having been told this quite bluntly one night, Valjean was struck by a pang of guilt. But it was soon forgotten beneath the warmth that the sight of her smile instilled in his breast.

She smiled at him even more frequently now, clearly pleased with the strides he was taking. Numerous times when he was lost in his work, or when he allowed himself to partake in something he not so long ago would have thought lavish, he would catch a smug look on her face. No doubt all the efforts she had made upon him in the past were coming to fruition, though not necessarily all by her hand.

Occasionally, at the crossroads of a decision—such as whether or not to buy the slightly more expensive but better-made version of a product, or whether he really ought to order the more flavorful dish over the cheaper—Valjean was beset by a tightness in his chest, a nervous warning left over from years of self-preservation and slavish humility. But then a flicker of what he presumed to be indignation arose in him, saying ‘well, why shouldn’t I?’ (It was in fact self-respect, but he had so rarely felt it that he presumed it to be something selfish.) He would also picture his children chiding him for his hesitation, and his insufferable modesty—and that would seal the deal.

In almost every way Jean Valjean was learning to be at ease with himself—

However, as it had been for decades—and especially when things were beginning to go well for him—he found himself sometimes plagued by sinister dreams in the dead of the night.

***
The long grass, partly dried in places, brushed audibly against his legs, crackling underfoot. His feet ached; he paid them no attention—and his stomach, shrunken with hunger, growled pitifully.

Jean Valjean had not slept in days. The passage of time had blurred into nothing but endless walking, looking, listening. He jumped at every sound, every flash of distant movement. His heart pounded frantically within his hollow chest.

On his ankle, a heavy shackle, with a broken, trailing chain. His clothes hung loose upon his frame, dirty and torn in places where they had caught on a bramble or thorn.

He kept away from every path, from every road, heading North without a destination, and without a pause to rest. The certainty that he was being hunted drove him onwards, nipping at his heels. And though his muscles protested, he kept walking, his mind blank with fear.

In the distance, the bark of a dog.

He froze in place, shoulders hunched. Looked back with wide eyes.

He strained; no further noise met his ears. He kept moving.

No concept of the hours did he have but for the sun, sinking now towards the West. Some dim awareness crept over him that he could not continue in this fashion much longer—that hunger and exhaustion would soon take their toll—but the thought occurred on some other level of his brain, some far-off place, and still his feet trudged forward.

By the time he heard them, the sun had cast an eerie glow about the field. He mistook the noises many times, the grass rustling in a soft, unsteady breeze. But at last came the cry of a man—a loud shout, which set him to panic.

He ran. There was nothing else that he could do.

It could not be helped that he was weak, and tired, or that the hobnail shoes had blistered his feet.

And it could not be helped that the guards had brought a dog—a stout bloodhound, that had no doubt tracked his scent across the fields.

It was the dog that got him first. They had let it off the leash, baying like a demon, and it had charged through the grasses impossibly fast.

Valjean was clumsy in his footfalls, too focused on his pursuers and on speed to gauge his ground, and many times he stumbled, nearly tripping on some root or stone, until finally the bloodhound brought him down, tearing at his ragged clothes, his flesh.

He tried in vain to fight it off, tears streaming down his face—but it was steadfast and determined, like its masters. Each time he managed to free himself and scramble away it caught his leg again.

When the guards reached him he knew all was lost. Yet still he fought, he struck, instinctually, elbowning and kicking in the hopes that he might stun—but all he got for it was a bludgeon to the head, the chest, the arm, until his face was in the dirt and there were boots upon his back.

He sobbed as they beat him, grabbed at him. Sobbed into his hands, curled against the ground on his knees, as a turtle withdraws into its shell, even as its shell is being split.
I want to die, was all he thought.

I want to die.

I want to die.

It would be better than going back. Than being punished, than having to endure a lengthened sentence. Than being forced to face his shame.

Even Hell was better than Toulon.

He felt a hand grab his collar, and he choked.


The hand moved to his shoulder, jostling him awake even as he sobbed out in fear.

It was Javert, standing at his bedside, a hazy blue shadow in the night, hair undone. “Come here,” he murmured, drawing him up. “It’s all right. You’re all right. I’ve got you.”

A dream, Valjean realized—it was only a dream. Just the ghost of his past come to haunt him again; nothing more.

Valjean wrapped his arms around the man instinctively, burying his face in the crook of his neck, and clutching him dearly.

Javert cradled him to his chest like one might a frightened child. “I’ve got you,” he repeated. “You’re safe.” It was the most gentle, reassuring thing Valjean had ever heard.

He had suffered bad dreams for a lifetime, and no one had held him like this since his father had died, almost too long ago to recall. He remembered only fleeting things: a strong embrace; a quiet voice, murmuring love. So many long nights since had he woken alone, and in terror, his heart beating out of his breast! With no one to comfort him; no one to care. And he had lived in isolation, resigned that he should never again be understood, or watched over.

But suddenly, after everything, Javert was there, and held him in his darkest moments. Knew the horrors that haunted his soul. And—more than that—knew how to vanquish them. Like Saint Michael he came, drawing his sword and slaying his dragons. No one else had been able to do that. Very few had even tried. But then, at the last possible moment, he’d appeared—as though it was always meant to be—and rescued him, helped him rebuild.

Through the blackest of times he rose, like the North Star—even reliable, ever true. A shining beacon in the night. ‘You are not lost,’ it said. ‘Your path has always been right here. And I am come to guide you home.’ And home he felt, within his arms. For nowhere else had he found peace.

Half asleep, he sighed contentedly, reaching out to draw him closer. But his arms did not meet him. Slowly, his eyes fluttered open. He swallowed, blinked. Gazed off into the dark. “Javert?” he called softly.

Silence followed in his wake. The room was empty.

Valjean sat up, brow knitting, glancing about himself before he realized: he was alone. This was his bedroom. What he’d been clutching was a pillow.
Disheartened, he sank back down, feeling foolish, and lonesome—and oddly homesick, despite the fact he was already home. He stared out at nothing, eyelids drooping, as a vague, sweet sort of sadness overtook him. Made him restless, discontent.

He longed deeply for Javert’s soothing presence. To hold him, or be held by him—either way; it did not matter. He had grown so accustomed to him, those weeks they had spent on the road—and to wake now without him was strange. It made him feel small, and forgotten. And worse than that: exposed.

Wearily he sought to slumber, but his thoughts buzzed with phantoms, overly aware of Javert’s absence, and his own vulnerability. Unhappy, he let his mind drift off.

Soon he forgot his discontent; Javert returned to him in sleep.

They held each other close. Valjean cupped the man’s face in his hands, brushed the hair from his eyes. He leaned in, kissing his brow—his cheek—his mouth—leaning into the warmth of him, breath puffing hot against skin, hands moving to the back of his head, the small of his waist—as close as he could get him; fingers tangling in each other’s shirts, each other’s hair, their limbs entwined.

There was no longer any space between their souls. Nothing else existed in the universe but they: two perfect halves of an imperfect whole. Around them was but darkness—cold, meaningless. Empty. A truly frightful place to be. But between them there was such security it softened all, smoothing the jagged edges of the world, the way that sand and sea smooth shards of glass. Slowly, steadily, until the night held no more terrors. Until the shadows grew forgiving, and cloaked them in a sheltering sky, embroidered all with stars and moons.

Enveloped in this warm embrace, Valjean sank against him, content that this should be the final harbor of his heart.

And there he slept for some time, wholly fulfilled—until he woke once more in his bed, the ghost of a kiss still lingering on his lips. He touched them in a haze, half-conscious, yearning for a presence which faded away.

After a moment, he found the bed empty, and wondered where the man had gone, and why he had left him again. Sighing, he resigned himself and closed his eyes.

And then Jean Valjean snapped awake. He lay paralyzed beneath the sheets, eyes wide, as though a pail of ice water had been thrown on him. His skin prickled with gooseflesh; his hair stood on end.

This was not how friends thought of each other.

Friends did not long to wake to each other in bed. Friends did not ache with the need of each other so deep that it kept them from sleep. Friends did not picture each other’s faces in the moonlight—wish to run their fingers through each other’s hair. Friends did not dream of the sanctuary in each other’s arms, each other’s eyes.

Beyond all this, if there was one thing Jean Valjean knew with certainty, it was that friends most definitely, positively, did not yearn to kiss each other on the mouth.

That was something more than friendship.

That was something else.
Valjean’s heart skipped a beat as he named it.

In that moment, he was more afraid than he had ever been. Sitting up in bed, he put his head in his hands, clawing his scalp. He began to tremble uncontrollably.

His turmoil—that dread, and uncertainty—was as strong as what he’d once felt in Digne, so many decades ago. It was like taking a step, certain of one’s footing, only to find nothing underfoot, and to be pitched into a sudden void, deep and dark and foreign. To be blind, and then, to see quite suddenly, and be nearly blinded again by the light. Then finally—when all came into focus—to find oneself in a vast and terrifying land.

Alas! Great revelations seldom come without such pain.

Valjean sat gasping pitifully in the dark and silent room—afraid of his thoughts, and afraid of the depths of his heart. For it had never yearned for anything like this—and he had thought it never would.

He had been through so much over the years that he’d never had the chance to even properly consider such a thing. Yet here it was! It had caught him unawares, like a thief in the night. Like some fearsome, mythic beast which one has heard of, but scarce believed in, until found face to face with it within some deep dark wood. In short, Valjean was paralyzed. Incapacitated by this sudden understanding of himself—of his affections.

Why did this come to him now, when he was old and scarred and broken? Why now, when the most of his life was behind him; when he had long put aside any notions of it, any feeble hope which he might once have entertained?

And why— God almighty! Why did it have to be for Javert?

He asked himself this as a guilty man questions his sentence: already knowing the reasons. Already knowing, deep down, why this was happening to him—but deathly afraid of the truth.

And the truth was, that there was no one else it could have ever been.

Javert was the only one who knew him, inside and out. Who saw him, understood him, and everything his past entailed. Javert was the only person he had ever let so close. The only person who made him feel safe. Javert and he had shared things no one else could ever hope to comprehend—things that could not be explained with words. They had rescued one another, guided one another, in each other’s time of need.

Since the beginning there had been between them some unfathomable bond, some thread of fate, crossing their paths and weaving their destinies in such a way that they could not escape one another, no matter how they might have tried.

And as mad, and unlikely, and overwhelmingly ridiculous as it was, Valjean could not help but admit to himself that what he felt made perfect sense.

That was the scariest part. That it was not irrational. That he could not dismiss it as some flight of fancy, borne by dreams—some foolish thought not quite his own. It was there, and it was real. And it had been real for some time.

As soon as he had named it, he had known that it was real. Had known it like he had swallowed a stone, and felt the weight of it in his gut. If he tried to deny what it was, it would be inside him still, and it would make him sick. Slowly, but surely. And perhaps, if not attended to, it would end by tearing him apart.
But what was he to do?

Unable to sit still, he rose from bed, pacing back and forth in the darkness of his room, and running his hands through his hair. His tears dripped from his chin and fell the floorboards below.

This could—this could not be happening; this could all be explained—Surely there was some other means of interpreting these feelings. One which did not paint things in this light. Surely—

With a sob he fell to his knees. Made an empty gesture of prayer, his mind blank. He could think of no plea that would save him. No psalm or sermon from which to draw wisdom. He could think of nothing but the way the man looked at him; the way the light flashed off his silver hairs. The way he held him tight until the nightmares vanished, cradling his head. He could think of nothing but how complete he felt with Javert beside him—how content. And how desperately he yearned to have him in his arms.

He scrunched his hands and pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, sobbing uncontrollably.

Good god! Was this what passion felt like? He scarcely wanted it for how it burned. He’d thought it was supposed to feel good—like some sort of rapture—but this hurt. This stung, this clawed at his innards and turned his soul inside-out. It felt more akin to grief than anything else he had known. And how he grieved! For he felt that he had somehow wronged Javert by this. Surely it was wrong. Surely Javert would be horrified by it. Surely it was ungrateful, ungentlemanly, unheard of. And surely it would ruin them.

Valjean drew back at himself. What kind of man was he that he would think these things? Would crave such things, would feel this way about another man—least of all his dearest, more cherished friend? It was abhorrent, it was cruel; how could he do this to the man? Why was he not satisfied with mere companionship? What even was it that he truly yearned for here?

Panicked, he tried to examine himself.

It was not lust; that was the only thing he was entirely sure of. It was not some carnal thing, some pleasure of the flesh—the mere thought of that horrified him—it was something far more tame. Far more simple, and at the same time more complex.

How unversed he was in such things! He struggled to articulate his feelings, even now. What he felt for Javert seemed no different at its core than what he had always felt for him—only deeper. Those moments when Valjean had saved him from himself, had held him sobbing in his arms—this felt akin to that. This intense … almost protectiveness; this desperate need to see him safe—coupled with a fierce and piercing empathy. But then there was also a softness to it: a patient, gentle warmth, like a hand on one’s cheek, or a kiss on one’s brow—Everything was so confusing.

Nothing felt complete unless Javert was there. Valjean did not know what that meant. He only knew that he felt a deep-seeded longing—and he’d felt it before, but this was stronger, more visceral, and it devoured him.

He had missed Javert before, when he had left. Worried for him in his absence. But in comparison those things were vague and undefined, and this was not. In comparison those things were like the background of a painting, and what he felt now was the foreground—the focus, where everything came to light. And in this vision, this frightening scene, he could identify that what he felt was not selfless, anymore. What he felt was no longer completely on the man’s behalf. There was something in it of his own needs, too.

He needed Javert. He could not explain this to himself. He had never needed anyone in this
way. But then, he could not have afforded to, back then. And besides that, he’d had no one to turn to.

That was it, he supposed. Javert was his person to turn to. He had never had one before, and now that he did … it was like all the things he had bottled up his whole life—all the fears, and the pain, and the loneliness—came pouring out, and sought solace in him. Not that he would ever deliberately burden Javert with such things, but—Javert was there for him like no one else could be, and perhaps—perhaps Valjean had grown dependent on him.

Was that fair to the man? Valjean did not know. But Javert came to him, too, and Valjean would always be there for him, would always listen to whatever he had to say, and—

But what was he thinking? Javert did not feel the same way about him! Sure the man might think him his confidant, his companion, but it was not like this. No; surely it was not like this at all. Javert would not be dreaming of him, would not be calling his name in the night, reaching out for him in the darkness. Surely Javert did not yearn for his company with such desperation, and surely—surely Javert would never, ever think to kiss him on the mouth. What an impossible notion! Javert was a stoic, through and through. And furthermore, he was not of that … persuasion.

Was Valjean of that persuasion? No, he thought, he had never been of any persuasion at all, if he was honest with himself.

So what was this thing that he felt for Javert? This terrible, tender, incomprehensible thing?

Shaking his head frantically, he opened his eyes, trailing his hands down his face.

A thin blue ray of light stretched from the distant window across the floor, nearly meeting his knees. He was unsure why he focused on it; indeed it may only have been because it had not been there when he’d knelt. His eyes followed it across the floorboards, to the crack between the heavy curtains. Trancelike, he rose, following it to its source. And then, as though he might find some answer there, he drew back the curtains.

Silver moonlight spilled onto his face, setting his hair and eyes aglow. Above, glorious and full, hung the moon, surrounded by parting clouds. That brilliant white disk, pocked by craters, gazed down at him serenely from the stars—so peaceful, so certain. And in its wan, unwarming beam, something in him broke apart.

He clenched his teeth; his face contorted. A hand flew to his mouth as he choked back a sob. The tears came streaming down his cheeks.

Oh, god.

Oh, god!

What was he to do? For he had never before been in love.

And of everyone on earth, his heart had chosen the one person it should not have.

***

FOOTNOTES:
“Chicken” was another term for a love note. Navet is teasing him here.

Lefèvre has switched the “vert” at the end of Javert for the similar sounding word “fer” (which means “iron”)—the joke here being that Javert is excessively rigid and hard. Possibly it might also have to do with his greying hair, his ever gloomy countenance, or the fact that his habitual topcoat is iron-grey.

Chapter End Notes

Javert, staring dramatically into the distance: I WISH I KNEW HOW TO QUIT YOU

Javert, two books ago: I don't know how anybody could just hate themselves so much they cut themselves off from the only person who gives their life meaning

Javert now: *does the exact same stupid shit Valjean did to Cosette*

MEANWHILE ...

Valjean, fantasizing about kissing a guy: Wait a second; this isn't what friends feel for each other

Valjean: But what's deeper than friendship? Best friendship? No. We're already best friends. Shit. What could possibly be more intimate than friendshi—

Valjean: Oh.

Valjean: OH.

Valjean: OH NO

Fun Fact: in the Tarot, one of the the possible representations of "The Moon" is a truth that you cannot admit to yourself. :) :) :) Which I apparently just intuitively knew, because I only looked that up about 0.2 seconds ago and not while I was writing that scene.

The chapter title is a reference to the well known French quote "Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point," by Blaise Pascal, which means "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."
Suggested Listening:

The Revenant (Main Theme) - Ryuichi Sakamoto

The Destruction of Laputa (Choral Version) - Joe Hisaishi

Ave Maria - Inessa Galante (composed by Vladimir Vavilov)

Silent Love - Joe Hisaishi

Madness - Muse

Mister Jackson - Martin Todsharow

Rose - James Horner

The River - Ghosts of Paraguay

Lilium - (Ron's Mix) - Konishi Kayo & Kondoo Yukio ft. Kumiko Noma

Full of Fine Promises - Alan Silvestri

The Sheltering Sky (Piano) - Ryuichi Sakamoto

Final Confluence - Austin Wintory

The Lonely Man Theme - Joe Harnell

Solitude - Joe Hisaishi

Oh boy so lemme tell y'all how happy I am that I found that version of Ave Maria because I actually had it for years without being able to find who the singer/composer was and could NOT find it anywhere for ages until I just looked up "Ave Maria" music posts on Tumblr in desperation and holy shit there it was! That was basically the main song I was playing while coming up with the Valjean end scene there. But "Destruction of Laputa" also had a fair bit of play while I wrote it.
The Heavy Burden of the Heart

Chapter Summary

Javert and Valjean's growing unease around each other comes to a head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I want to hold his hand, but I know he will shake it free. His eyes are too full of guilt to really see me, to see his reflection in my eyes, the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could. He will never think that he did enough, and he will never understand that I do not think he should have done more.”

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

***

When her father did not come down for breakfast, Cosette volunteered to go rouse him. It was unlike him to sleep in so late, and strange, too—for he had many things to attend to these days. Had he fallen ill, she wondered? She hoped that was not the case.

Still, when she knocked on his door, and he bid her entrance, she found him looking haggard, like he had not slept a wink. Tired shadows wreathed his eyes, and he wore a troubled expression. He smiled at her weakly from his chair, where he sat disheveled, though fully dressed.

“Are you well?” she asked him.

Usually he was all too quick to answer such questions in the affirmative, even if he was clearly lying—but today, he only stared at her, and then glanced away with a sad little sigh, looking as though he were truly unsure.

Cosette came closer, cocking her head with concern. “What is it?”

“It—it is nothing,” he mumbled. “I just … had an unsettling dream last night.”

She frowned piteously at him. She knew he suffered nightmares, sometimes—although it was only recently that she had come to understand their true nature. Still, he had been pardoned, and no one was hunting him now.

“Do not let such dreams torment you, papa,” she told him, patting his hand. “It’s not as though they could come true.”

He looked up at her, blinking in surprise. Then he seemed to register her words, and lowered his head. “No,” he said quietly. “I suppose not.”
Cosette flashed him a grin. “See? There is no point on dwelling on it. Now will you come down to breakfast? The coffee will surely go cold.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, bowing his head as she took his arm. “Forgive me.”

***

Javert and Valjean continued to visit one another multiple times a week, sometimes three or four, Javert’s work schedule permitting. It was only perhaps for a few hours at a time, but the thought of those few hours would consume them for much of the day.

Their interactions remained much the same, but over a number of weeks, each began to notice a sort of trepidation in the other—poorly concealed, only revealing itself in odd looks or uncomfortable silences. It was a troubling, anxious, melancholic sort of thing they both saw in each other. And saw, too, in themselves, though they each tried their best not to show it. They refrained from mentioning it; in fact, each seemed determined to ignore it and continue with a cheerful, cordial attitude, as if their very life depended on it.

However, it was not to be ignored. With every passing visit, they both ruminated on themselves, and their words, and their actions, wondering where they’d gone wrong, and if the other man had noticed their unease. Both of them wished to bring the issue to light—and yet, that was the last thing they wanted to do; for it would only make things even worse.

They tried asking politely of one another’s wellbeing, but each time they did so, it was met with assurances that they were perfectly well, that there was nothing to worry over, that it had only been some trick of the eye, some fleeting expression misread, or some other such thing.

Perhaps if they feigned this happiness long enough it would become real. Perhaps their discomfort would vanish, and with it, their companion’s as well. This is what they told themselves. But it was all too obvious that it was not to be. Things were only going to get more awkward the longer they denied the situation, and one of them was going to have to bring the issue to a head eventually. It was only a matter of who would break first.

***

As it, happened, the one who broke first was Valjean.

It was the first Saturday of August, and they had just sat down to coffee together in the lesser used, smaller drawing room, somewhat apart from one another on the dark blue canapé. They had entered into a short discussion on the factory, and the soirée which was to be held for its opening—but the mention of it, and of his attendance, had made Javert uncomfortable. Visibly so, he feared, for Valjean had eventually trailed off.
They were sipping at their mugs in silence for far too long, and the air had begun to grow tense. It was this tension that finally seemed to force Valjean’s tongue.

“Javert,” he began carefully, sighing as he put down his drink. “Are you … all right? Truly all right? You seem worried of late.”


“No? There is nothing that troubles you?”

“Nothing at all,” he insisted.

Valjean was quiet for a moment, studying his face, and then looking away. “But you cannot deny that a change has come over you.”

“Of what change do you speak?” said Javert, growing hot. “There is nothing the matter with me.”

“You are a terrible liar, Javert. Surely even you can see that. You act preoccupied, withdrawn—you rarely meet my gaze. You look so very low, sometimes, but you never admit to it. And when we meet it always seems like you are searching for the proper time to leave. I almost fear that I cause you unease.”

“You do not cause me unease,” Javert told him.

“Yet even now you say those words with such a tone, and such a look in thine eyes!” Valjean countered.

Javert frowned uncomfortably, conscious that it was only damning him further. “I don’t—” He broke himself off with a huff. Ran a hand through his hair. “It is only that … you have much better things to be doing,” he said miserably. “You have much better company to keep.”

Valjean’s eyebrow rose. “Better company!” he exclaimed.

“I do not see why you waste so much of your time and affection on me.”

“Waste? You are talking nonsense,” the man cried, a heartfelt distress plain to see on his face. Javert shied away from it instantly, deeply regretting the path this conversation was taking.

There was Valjean’s compassion, Valjean’s consideration and worry directed at him again—and for what? Valjean was not the one who was supposed to feel guilt over this. Javert was the one who was full of remorse, and yet everything he did to set things aright only cut the man deeper! Being close to him hurt—keeping far from him hurt—What on earth was he meant to do?

If only Valjean was not so sentimental—

If only Valjean could let go; could simply forget him—Pardieu! Then maybe he would not be so haunted by ghosts of the pa—

“Javert!” the man said.

Javert became cognizant that Valjean had been saying a great many things to him and he had not heard them. Looking back, sheepishly, he found the man’s eyes had grown wet.

“Why do you turn from me so?” Valjean breathed.
“I—I’m sorry,” Javert said, meek and quick. “I did not mean to ignore you, I only—” He let out a fearful, conflicted noise and clutched his brow. “Goddamnit, Valjean, you shou— You shouldn’t care for me the way you do.”


“I mean ... You do not— You hold me in such regard, and I—” Javert bit his lip, trembling. “I don’t live up to it,” he said. “I don’t. I am not a righteous man. I may try to be, but I fall short. So very— You do not know how short.”

“Oh, oh,” Valjean said, looking flustered. “I—” His expression shifted as he seemed to comprehend the words. “Oh.” Almost instantly, that worried air which was so typical of him returned. “But what are you saying, Javert? That’s not true.”

“You don’t—” Javert shook his head, frantic. “You don’t know. You don’t understand. I almost abandoned you,” he burst, the confession opening the gates to a long forthcoming torrent of guilt. “—when you were arrested. I almost let them have you; I almost stood by and did nothing! You don’t understand how close I was to giving up. I thought that there was nothing I could do—that they wouldn’t listen to a thing I had to say. And why would they? I’m nothing. I’m no one. Why would they take my word over the law?”

“And I thought that maybe ... maybe I was wrong; maybe it was selfish, foolish, impertinent of me to have let you go. That I had overstepped my own authority in making that decision, behind the backs of my superiors. That I had made a mistake I had no right to even make. That this was the universe righting my wrong, correcting that error and teaching me a lesson for my hubris. That was what I thought!”

“And I knew that if I stood for you, it would be standing against the whole of the judicial system, and they would cast me out—if I won, if I failed; it didn’t matter. I did not think that they would take me back. And I ... I almost abandoned you,” he cried, the tears burning at his eyes. He tangled his hands in his hair. “I almost let you die.”

Valjean was gazing at him intently. He had looked, for the briefest of moments, as though he’d been struck a great blow—but that had quickly faded, and now there was a firm resolve in his eyes, and a sort of pleading. “But you didn’t,” he said.

“Because I couldn’t!” Javert exclaimed. “But that’s not the point! I almost did. I almost did! I thought about it!” The tears poured hot down his cheeks, his voice broken now. “Is that not enough?”

“Javert, I don’t— Enough to what?”

Javert paused, trying to articulate the deluge of the emotions that engulfed him. “To prove that I —” He shook his head violently, gritting his teeth and putting his face in his hands. “That I’m weak! That I’m a coward! That I’m a cold, unfeeling man, and I’m selfish and petty and I don’t deserve you, dammit; I don’t deserve the regard in which you hold me!” Here he took a gasping breath. “I cannot bear it. You are too kind to me. I have done nothing to warrant this.”

“Javert, you—”

“Please,” he interrupted. “Please. You shouldn’t care for me like this. I have only ever been cruel to you, and misjudged you, and cast you down. And you have only ever been patient, and good, and considerate to me, despite it. I have hunted you, and condemned you, and spat in your face year after year after year. Why should I now be allowed a place at your side? Just because I
did a couple things I could not help but do? To ease my own conscience as much as do right by you? It’s not enough. It’s not enough!"

He heard Valjean murmur his name in a wondering tone. Warm hands cupped his face. “How—how can you say you don’t deserve my regard?” the man asked. “You saved my life! So many times. You had every opportunity to walk away, and you may have considered doing just that, but you didn’t—and that’s all that matters, in the end. Can you not see that? The only reason I’m still here is because of you.”

“But I—”

“Listen to me, Javert,” he said, letting his hands fall away. “You think so well of me. But I am not without my faults. When you told me another man had been condemned in my stead, my conscience pricked at me, of course, but I did what any other man would have done: I hesitated. I entertained ideas of which I am ashamed. I almost did not go. I almost melted the Bishop’s candlesticks in the fireplace and forsook the name of Jean Valjean. I was so close to it! I threw them in the fire, and burnt my hands pulling them out again. The internal terrors, and tribulations, which nearly crippled me ... You do not know the torments I suffered.”

“I almost did nothing—and it would have been so easy. It would have safeguarded the town’s future, it would have brought Cosette to her mother’s side. And then, I even thought—God damn my pride—I even thought, perhaps, that I deserved a reprieve, an escape, after all I had done to better myself, and all around me. That my reformation could outweigh the blackness of that sin. But no matter what I told myself, in the end, I could not justify inaction, could not absolve myself of blame.”

“So I withdrew my savings from Lafitte’s and set out for Arras. Even then, God tempted me with opportunities to quit that path and turn around—the wagon wheel broke, they said it could not be fixed until the next day, that there were no vehicles for rent in the village ... It was like my freedom was being dangled in front of me. I couldn’t tell if it was divine providence that threatened to interrupt my journey, or a lure from the pits of Hell.”

“Yet against my own wishes I pressed on, I seized whatever possibility was still available. Because if I did not try to save that man, I would not have been able to live with myself. And so you see, I am weak, I am cowardly, too. I have had my fair share of black thoughts. But I did not heed them, in the end. And neither have you.”

“Think of when you denounced me to the prefecture, Javert. They said you were mad, they convinced you you’d made an egregious mistake. As far as you knew, it was a misunderstanding of which I had no knowledge, and no need to know. You could have pretended you’d said nothing. But you found yourself at fault, Javert, and you came to me and asked to be reprimanded. You took responsibility.”

“These acts are admirable not for what they are, but what they risked. What they sacrificed. There is no achievement without struggle. That we wrestled with our demons, and won, despite it all—that is the true victory. What I am trying to say is, the fact that you felt conflicted over what should be done, and held reservations in your heart, but came to the conclusion that you did anyway—even amidst fear, and doubt—that only makes what you did for me even more meaningful.”

He let out a somber laugh. “When you ... When they took me away, I saw you on the quay. And my first thought was: you had taken off your hat. You had placed it on the parapet. And you were staring at the river. I saw the conflict on your face, and I could not help but think back to that night. I was so afraid that you—that those wounds had reopened, and there was nothing I could do to
prevent you from making a terrible, terrible mistake.”

“But then you picked the hat back up, and turned around, and walked away without looking back—and I thought ... I thought that you’d decided there was nothing you could do, and that you’d given up on me. That nothing between us mattered in the face of authority. And I was heartbroken, truly; I was. But if that was the only way you could bear to go on—complete denial of all that had come to pass between us—I still preferred it to the alternative. If it meant you would live, I could accept it.”

“So I did. And no, I didn’t think that you would come for me. I didn’t think that I would see you, ever again. So when you stood before me in that courtroom, I was in disbelief. And I wept. Not because I thought I had a chance at freedom, or even a lesser sentence, but because ...” Here his eyes welled with tears. “—you came back for me.” With a sniffle, he flashed a pathetic grin at him.

Javert stared at him, utterly broken.

Good god! And here he thought it could not be possible for Valjean to be any more selfless. To be any more patient, and loving, and good— And now he was taken off guard yet again!

That Valjean would place Javert’s life above his—

That Valjean could prize Javert’s affection more than his own salvation—

Javert shuddered at the very idea of it.

Just how much more undeserving of the man could he be? Just what did he have to do to convince him he wasn’t worth keeping?

He hung his head, unable to hold back the truth any longer. “We didn’t have to go to Toulon,” he confessed.

Valjean was silent for a moment, a blank expression on his face. “What?”

“We didn’t have to go,” he repeated. “You could have granted me the power to represent you, to sign those documents at your behest. We could have had Marius draw up the paperwork; it would have been very simple. You didn’t have to be there.”

As the meaning of this seemed to sink in, Valjean sat back slowly, sagging as though all the air had gone out of him. His gaze drifted out of focus, face growing haggard. He fumbled for words. “You—you mean to say that ...?”

“I made you go,” Javert told him. “I made it seem as though you had no other choice. I wanted you to go, because I—I thought that it—” He clawed at the air in his lap, like he was trying to grasp something intangible. “I thought that if you went, maybe it would help you. I knew the risks, knew what it could do to you, and I made you go anyway, because I wanted you to have to confront it again; I wanted you to be able to look at it and hold your head high. I wanted you to see it didn’t have a claim to you anymore, that you weren’t a part of it, that you were better than them, because you are—”

“But I forget that you were once one of them,” he said, cutting himself off. “I forget because it seems like a mistake. Like everyone else deserved it, and you were not supposed to be there. But I cannot hide behind the lie that you are a solitary miracle; I cannot pretend that there are not possibly a thousand other men like you in the galleys who were simply never given a chance.”
“I cannot tell myself that you were somehow innately better than them, just to justify the rest of it. I did not think. It’s so much easier to believe they all deserve it than to question the things that we—” Here he swallowed the lump that had been growing in his throat, and tried to compose himself, for he was very nearly on the point of lunacy.

“I thought that ... if you went back, if you walked those corridors as a free man, the extent of your liberty, and your virtue, would become clear to you. You speak so much on how it seems false—your freedom, your pardon, the acceptance of you—how it all seems like some impossible dream. I wanted it to be real to you. I wanted you to see how far you’ve come since those days. Not because of me, but because of everything you’ve done—all the change you have wrought in yourself.”

“I also thought, if I could make you see it from the outside, those institutions—as just a place, and not a living hell—that it would lose its power over you. That it would cement itself firmly in your past, and stop feeling like an ever-present threat. I knew taking you there would be dreadful for you, would open old wounds—but I did it because I wanted to flush them out, not throw salt in them. I underestimated how visceral your reaction would be. And honestly, I—I did not recall what I had done to you there. I did not know that it was you. I was so young.”

“It is my fault for putting you there, for taking risks I did not fully comprehend. I swore to myself I would never harm you again, and I have utterly broken that vow. I did not intend to, but that means nothing in the face of your pain. I was selfish. I destroyed your life, and harried you for decades, because I thought ill of you. And now that I find myself wrong, and you undeserving, I seek restitution. Do I do it for your sake, or do I do it to redeem myself? I don’t know. I’m afraid to explore the depths of that inquiry.”

“I knocked you down, so I seek to build you back up, even against your own will. I force you into things. I do not attend to you. I tell myself it’s because you’re too humble, that you don’t know what’s best for you. But it could also be that I’m merely trying to relieve my own guilt. Is that not selfish? Is that not monstrous? I did not give you a choice because I knew you would refuse. I manipulated you into revisiting the worst part of your past. Because I thought it would help! How could I think it would help?”

“And then you tell me I make you feel safe, as though I have not abused you, as though I’ve not beaten you down and made you bleed! As though it was nothing personal, and all can be forgiven. Well, I tell you something, Valjean: there are some things you should not forgive! It’s not something you can forget, something a few apologies can resolve.”

“I swear you are willing to overlook anything so long as the person is sorry. But I wasn’t sorry! I wasn’t sorry for what I did to you, when I thought you another man. I wasn’t sorry for taking everything you had. I enjoyed laying you low. I enjoyed humiliating you, when I thought it was justified. And that I am sorry for it now should mean nothing. Nothing! It has been far too long.”

“Javert ...” There was that look again, that damnable look. Those long-etched lines of worry and compassion creasing his face.

“No!” Javert said. “Don’t you dare try to tell me it’s all right! I am so sick of your compassion,” he said through his teeth. “Don’t direct it at me.”

“Why?”

“Because you deserve to have someone to blame!” he cried. “You deserve to be able to grieve, to hold a grudge. You’re not some damn martyr! You don’t have to forgive everyone. Especially not me, and especially not what I’ve done. You’ve been through too much to just put it behind us
and call ourselves even. You deserve the freedom to hate me. You deserve the freedom of honesty. Will you not just say it? Will you not just say that I ruined your life?"

Valjean stared at him in horror.

"Say it!" Javert shrieked. "Say that I ruined your life!"

When Valjean finally spoke, his voice was tinged with fear, and anguish. It was small, and delicate, like porcelain about to crack. "Why do you want me to hate thee?"

Javert heard it come out of him louder and more accusatory than it ought to be, but he could not restrain himself, for his soul was full of vitriol. "Because it is just!"

Valjean gaped at this declaration. Slowly, his alarm melted. Softened to grief. "Oh, but Javert," he said mournfully, cupping his cheeks, "we both know sometimes justice is blind."

Javert clenched his teeth at that. Hung his head lower. His words were hoarse, tempered now by the force of his prior outburst, and by the surge of weariness that the man’s gentle touch now sent through him. "Love, too, can be blind," he lamented.

Valjean gazed down at him softly. "I have far fewer reservations about that." And then he was lifting Javert’s face and pressing a kiss to his brow, to his temple, to the top of his head, slow and deliberate as he twined his fingers through his hair.

Cheeks hot with blood, Javert swallowed back his protests and let the man do as he pleased, even though each touch, each kiss, made him burn with the shame of unworthiness.

Who was he to tell Valjean how to feel? He supposed he had no right. And it was not as though he despised the man’s affections. It was only that he felt them undeserved, and they often filled him with a deep and terrible guilt. But that was his problem, not Valjean’s. And if the man chose to overlook the past, to cherish him, did Javert really have it in him to object? Could he chastise him, arraign him for it? Could he complain?

Valjean was cradling him now. Javert only sagged dejectedly in his arms, head resting on the man’s broad shoulder, eyes closed. He did not feel this tenderness justified, but he could not bring himself to argue against it any further.

Let the man be stupid if he wished. Let him be stupid, and selfless, and saintly as he always was. Were those not the very qualities Javert admired him for?

Valjean let out a shaky sigh, rubbing circles on Javert’s back, slowly easing the tension from his muscles.

“You’re a fool,” Javert breathed miserably. “You’re such a fool, Jean Valjean.”

“There are far, far worse things to be in this world.”

With that Javert fell silent, and remained thus for a long while.

He could bring himself, for Valjean’s sake, to accept the man’s affections, over-generous though they were—but this did nothing to change the price Valjean paid for his company.

“How can you stand it?” he murmured, the words almost lost in the other man’s coat.

“Stand what?” Valjean asked.
“To look at me, when there are so many years of your pain in my face.”

Gently, Valjean grasped his shoulders and drew him back, knitting his brow at him helplessly. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“When you see me, you surely cannot help but be reminded of the past,” Javert said, swallowing the knot in his throat. “Of all the things that I’ve done to you, all the times that I’ve laughed at you, spat in your face. You cannot help but recall all those years you spent running, afraid of my very visage.”

“Javert!” Valjean exclaimed in distress. “That is not at all how it is.”

“Is it not?”

“No! Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because I see it in your eyes!” Javert cried. “I see how you look when you think my gaze elsewhere! The pain you try to conceal, the secret shame. For all you’ve been through, you are horrible at keeping secrets. I know I remind you of things you would wish to forget!”

Valjean staggered at this. He released Javert from his grip, hands shaking as they drew back, as though he had touched by accident something particularly frightful. “That—that is not why I—”

“Then why? What other cause have you to look at me so?” Javert demanded.

The man faltered. “I—” He appeared to panic, mouth open, as though caught in a lie. Seemingly unable to find verbal recourse, he merely turned away, wringing his hands with a look of guilt on his face.

“You see?” Javert said, almost laughing. “You cannot even deny it.”

“That is not why I look at you so,” Valjean breathed, a veil of shadow still over his face. It was the weakest, most pathetic attempt at protest Javert had ever heard.

“Spare me your excuses,” Javert spat. “We both know we will never escape it. We both know there is too much between us to ever surmount. We both know that I haunt your deepest dreams. You have suffered horrors at my hand and you will never be able to look at me without being reminded of every time I’ve ever done you wro—”

“I don’t care!” Valjean cried, grabbing his shoulders once more and shaking him, tears in his eyes. “I don’t care about the rest of it! I know we can’t erase the past, but goddamn you, Javert—goddamn you for always driving it between us like this! When you know very well that I’ve never once held it against you!”

Javert stared at him, taken aback by the sudden force in his grasp, the sudden strength in his voice.

“You put words in my mouth, you rail against me— You try to force me away as though you thought yourself made of thorns,” Valjean continued. “But nothing could be further from the truth. Can you not see what you’re doing, Javert? These things you keep telling yourself I should say—all these awful, terrible things—those do not come from me at all! It is only your self-loathing, stealing my voice. And you allow it to drown me out. You cannot hear a word I say over the roaring of your guilty conscience.”

“You think I should hate you; you think the very sight of you causes me pain— You are mad! I
don’t care what you did in the past; I don’t care if it can’t be undone— It does not negate all the
good you have done for me since! It does not stop me from cherishing you! It holds no power over
the way that I feel. Do you not understand that? *You are far too important to me.*"

Javert clenched his teeth, every word the man said like a knife in his heart. “Why?” he choked
out.

“Because I—!” Valjean stopped, as though the thought had gotten stuck in his throat. He
trembled. Looked away. “Because … you are the only person who makes me feel whole. The only
person who could ever understand me. You are there for me in ways that no one else can be, and
when I’m with you I— I feel safe, no matter how absurd you may think it sounds; truly. I am
grateful for every moment of your companionship.”

Here the man shook his head. “I know what you did in the past, but that’s not what I see when I
look at you. That’s not what you are to me now. It’s not as though I could forget all that happened
between us, but—there is no reason to dwell on it further. You have made up for it time and again.
And when I look at you now …” He laid a gentle hand on his cheek. “When I look at you now, I
see nothing less than my closest, dearest friend, from whom I cannot bear to be parted. I see the
man who has saved me over and over, because he thinks me worth saving. And if you think I am
wasting my time, my affections on you—well, then, there is nothing which gives me more joy.”

Javert’s expression quivered. He felt hot tears spill over his cheeks. “Am I really so important to
you?”

Valjean held his gaze firmly, a sentimental yet stern look on his face. “Javert,” he said quietly,
“you are more important to me than you could ever understand.”

Javert squeezed his burning eyes shut. Hung his head.

A moment later he felt Valjean cup his face with both hands, and press a slow, tender kiss to the
top of his head.

“What do you say?” came his voice. “Will you humor an old man with your company?”

Working up the courage, Javert nodded slowly.

“Even if he’s a sentimental old fool who knows not what is good for him?”

A wet laugh escaped Javert’s mouth at that. And then there were arms pulling him into an
embrace, and he was crying into Valjean’s shoulder, clutching the back of his tailcoat with
desperate hands as the man held him tightly, unable to tell whether the noises escaping his throat
were laughs or sobs.

“You are so damnably incapable of blame,” Javert managed to say.

Valjean took a deep breath, and Javert felt the air move through his chest—released in a long
and weary sigh. “There is already too much hatred in the world.”

“You cannot fix the whole world with forgiveness.”

“No,” Valjean murmured. “But I can try.”

Unseen, a wretched smile stretched across Javert’s face.

They held each other for a long time, unspeaking.
Finally, giving Javert’s hair one last stroke, Valjean sat back, and took his hands in his, bending his head so that their brows touched.

“I am not angry with you for Toulon,” he said slowly. “I am … wounded. Wounded that you did not trust me enough to speak plainly. I wish that you had discussed the matter with me, so I could understand the intent. So that it could be my choice. But you took the decision out of my hands. You stripped me of my agency, and left me in the dark, and that … does not help. If I had been made to understand the situation, perhaps I could have better steeled myself for it. I know that you meant well,” he finished, “but please do not keep things from me. I have dealt in enough deception for a lifetime.”

Javert gave his hands an apologetic squeeze. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Valjean squeezed his hands in return. “Thank you.” After a moment he added, “I am glad that you come to me, with these things. That you do not … shy away from responsibility. I have always admired you for that. Your humility. Your honesty. Ever since that day in Montreuil. But you go too far with it, Javert,” he lamented, stroking his hair. “You judge yourself too harshly; you cage yourself for crimes you don’t even commit. You imagine the worst of yourself, and you punish yourself with no regard for the truth.”

A hint of hesitation crept into his voice. “If— If I had not stopped you, that night, your judgement would have been the death of you. And you must be aware it was wrong—that you leapt too quickly to conclusions—but even so, still you repeat that mistake in little ways. Still you condemn yourself based on conjecture alone, and—” Here he gave a sad laugh. “And as a lawman you know that is hardly due process.”

Even Javert could not help but laugh at that remark.

“If you can manage to judge me by more than my past,” Valjean continued, “then why too can you not do the same for yourself? People are more than their mistakes. You know that now. What you’ve done to me in the past I’ve forgiven—and if you’ve hurt me in the present, it is not because you meant to. I know that. And that is why I could never be angry with you. Even when you try to discredit yourself—when you make yourself out like some monster … it only makes me more determined to show you the good in yourself. Because you are good, Javert. You just cannot see it sometimes.”

Javert tensed. “I would like to believe that,” he breathed.

“I wish that you would,” Valjean told him. “But, it is true whether or not you believe it. And if you cannot believe it, at least believe that, to me, you are good, and more than worthy of all the affection my poor heart is capable of.”

Javert considered this thoughtfully. “That is a great deal of affection,” he said.

“Quite so,” the man scoffed.

“Perhaps too much,” Javert said, a slight smirk on his lips as he straightened himself.

A strange expression flashed across Valjean’s face for a moment—some queer look in his eye—but then it was gone, and he gave him a lopsided grin. “Perhaps.”
Jean Valjean stared up at the ceiling from his bed, unable to sleep.

There was no moonlight that night, so he could make out nothing of the Tudor roses carved into the wood above, but it hardly mattered. His mind was so full of other things that he saw nothing else. Agony had made him blind. His heart writhed in his chest, and he clutched the fabric of his nightshirt over it as though that might strangle it into silence.

It did not.

His thoughts raced, turning the events of that day over and over until his stomach tied itself into knots, and he shivered with dread.

To see Javert in that state again, with the tears rolling down his face, his voice cracking as he berated himself—it had brought back everything Valjean had felt for him in those early days, and more. Far more.

That whole argument had been torture—sheer, excruciating torture. To have the man in his arms like that again, so close, and yet off limits— To tell him he cared for him, without being able to tell him he cared for him— It was unbearable.

With a pitiful sigh, he turned onto his side and curled up on the mattress, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes, fingers clenched. He shuddered.

How close he had come to losing composure! How close he had come to blurting it all out like a fool! To kissing the man on the mouth, if only to drive his tears away, if only to make him see the worth in himself— Please, please, I love you, he wanted to say—

But he couldn’t!

And he had barely restrained himself. He did not even know how he’d managed it. Everything had roiled inside of him, desperate to get out—and still it clawed at his innards in anguish, as though at any moment it might burst out of him, and ruin everything.

How long could he go on like this? How long could he conceal it? Already Javert had seen it in him—or at least, the stress of its restraint—and known something was wrong. The man had completely mistaken what it was—mistaken it for the exact opposite thing, in fact—but it had still affected him all the same. It had made him uneasy. It had made him feel as though he had done something wrong, and it had rent the fabric of their relationship.

What would happen if he found out what it really was? That would end things between them for good. Javert would never feel safe in his presence again! He would think terribly of him, he would shy away in fear or disgust— Surely there was no other outcome.

At the same time, Valjean knew from this one instance alone how impossible it would be to keep his feelings hidden forever. If a single day could be that hard, why, think what a year of it would do to him! What a lifetime would do to him! It would tear his very soul apart.

Valjean grit his teeth and let out a sob. And once one had escaped, he was powerless to stop the rest.

For he had borne many burdens in his life, and suffered in admirable silence—but this was burden he knew without doubt that he could not bear for much longer.
**Javert**: You really love me that much??

**Valjean**: #screaming internally* yES

So, uh, I realized I forgot to post about the [Bread & Barricades podcast I was interviewed on](#) last chapter. It came out a few weeks ago but the recording was from just after I had posted chapter 60, so it talks a bit about Valjean's not-so-fun-times in Toulon, but the main focus is his origin story (the, like, one page of it we get in the brick) and his family and Valvert fic in general.

Yooooo my dudes check out [these awesome AROS illustrations by hellenhighwater](#)

Suggested Listening:

- Natsuiro no Fuku - Ryuichi Sakamoto
- Mizu No Naka No Bagatelle - Ryuichi Sakamoto
- Lord Knows - Dum Dum Girls
- Javert - Penny & Sparrow
- Crush - David Archuleta
- Nights in White Satin - Moody Blues
- Mes Rêves De Satin - Patricia Kaas
Per Ardua ad Astra

Chapter Summary

Valjean hosts a soirée for the factory's opening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You're a hero and a gentleman, you're kind and honest, but more than that, you're the first man I ever truly loved. And no matter what the future brings, you always will be, and I know that my life is better for it.”

-Nicholas Sparks

***

“Listen up,” Javert announced, pulling a stack of cards from his coat with a dramatic intonation as he entered the station house, “I’ve been requested to distribute these at my leisure. Which means I’m going to leave them on the writing desk. They’re invitations to a soirée. Take one if you want. I don’t really care.” With this said, he unceremoniously dumped them next to the leaden inkstand thereon.

Most everyone in the station—which was two lieutenants, a fellow inspector, an officer of the peace, and a sergeant—blinked at him stupidly.

Javert had never made any such invitation before, nor even remarked in passing about such things, and all of them knew it, including Javert, which was why he was trying to present it as the most unremarkable affair possible. A long silence fell over the station as the officers exchanged glances.

“What, ah—” Lefèvre cleared his throat. “What it is for? The soirée.”

Javert shrugged and rolled his eyes. “It’s being hosted at a friend’s house. He’s opening a business.”

“You have a friend?” said Bisset.

Lefèvre elbowed his fellow lieutenant so hard the man choked.

Javert merely shrugged again in reply, with the most apathetic expression he could muster. “It’s Saturday the twenty-third, if your schedules permit. Knowing the man’s family it’s likely to be both large and lavish, so if you desire to go, factor that into your wardrobe. You may each bring a guest, if you please.”

“Well, why is he inviting us?” asked Bisset.
“I suppose he thinks I must be fond of you,” Javert sighed, heading upstairs. “I’ve no idea how he got that impression.”

No one made any further remark, but by the time Javert left for the day, a number of cards had been taken.

***

It was always a bother deciding what to do with his hair for such events; Javert’s choice of length was extremely unorthodox, and as such, there were no style guides or fashion plates for him to consult—indeed, anything he did with it would still be considered absurd, and he feared the more effort he applied to it the more absurd it would become.

Still, he refused to cut it, for he had grown it long as a child, and he had worn it long in Toulon, where it had been mandated by Naval code to be tied back in a neat tail with a black woolen ribbon. It was not exactly the height of fashion then, either, but he had kept it that way ever since, according to habit; for Javert was a creature of habit, and to change his appearance so drastically now was unthinkable.

He was slave to his conscience; not to fashion. He entertained no delusions of handsomeness at this point in his life, nor the desire to strive for it. For he was not a dandy, and he was certainly no spring chicken. Furthermore, it was not his intention to go about putting on airs to begin with. There was no one he’d wished to impress save his superiors, and at the end of the day they could not have cared less how he wore his hair, so long as he kept himself properly dressed.

Besides which, he was already considered an eccentric by many—if not for his demeanor, then for other things, like his lack of religion (or manners). And then, there were the things he could not help: the things people said behind his back about his heritage, or his dark skin, or his frightfully pale eyes—and the unnerving combination therein. As such, Javert was disinclined to seek their approval—and if he could not change his background to suit them, he saw little use in changing his hairstyle, either. It was his own little rebellion against them: a silent protest, a little choice that said, decidedly, that he did not care for their opinion of him, and they may well keep it to themselves.

Nevertheless, on these rare formal occasions, when he was required to at least pretend at fashion, he often found himself fretting.

On police business—work related events that he could not decline to attend—he only dressed to garner approval. This, however, was another matter entirely. This involved the bourgeoisie, and, more importantly, Jean Valjean—and here Javert found that he sought something more than approval.

The scant number of fashionable clothes that hung in his armoire dissatisfied him. They were only tolerable, and besides which, Valjean had already seen them a hundred times, and they simply would not do. In the end he had gone out and bought new clothes. Not an entire ensemble, of course, for he could never afford it—but he needed something, anyway. Lord knew most garments he owned were already five years old at best—some around ten or fifteen, with his greatcoat being the oldest: a good twenty years or more. Luckily, at least, the top hat Valjean had given him money for the year before last still shone a deep black, and went with anything.
At the tailor's, he had picked out a pale blue silk damask waistcoat, with oak leaves and acorns in silver thread, and a double breast of buttons. The back and lining was a light grey cotton, with a buckled adjustment strap on the back of the waist. It was a high cut coat, like all his others (low cut coats were shamelessly indecent, in his opinion), but not high enough to reach his neckline. A plain but neatly starched white blouse with a ruffled chest and sleeves showed beneath, its collar done up tightly with one of the silk cravats Valjean had given him at Christmas: the dark blue one, fixed down with his little silver pin. These neatly complimented the navy blue of his habitual tailcoat, which he cleaned meticulously.

He had been able to purchase some decent new trousers, of a pale blue-grey cotton, whose straps were offset sharply by his black Blucher boots. He did not often wear ankle boots, finding it easier to keep one's trousers clean beneath the knee-high kind instead; however, he would not be encountering mud or refuse tonight; of that he was sure—and, as style went, his usual Wellington’s were not anywhere near as new looking.

Finally, after a great deal of embarrassed deliberation, he had chosen to wear his hair not in its customary tail, but in a twisted braid style, so that it hung down the back of his neck like a thick black rope, with a pale blue ribbon tied in a bow at the start.

He was still wondering whether or not it looked like he was trying too hard when the porter admitted him into the house on Rue Filles du Calvaire, which was already buzzing with guests. Ducking inside with a bow of his head, he hung his hat up, tucked his leather gloves in his pockets, and proceeded to the back hall, pausing by the door and letting his gaze wash over the crowd.

There were people milling about from all levels of society—something he had rarely seen at a private event. Middle and lower class men and women—Valjean’s new workforce, no doubt, along with Marius’ colleagues—intermingled with older bourgeois of the Gillenormands’ acquaintance. They were all wearing the best of what they could afford, and chatting amiably in small groups while soft string music played in the background. Violin and cello—variations on Handel or Hadyn, perhaps. Rented servants darted to and fro with the customary offerings: hors d’oeuvres and glasses of wine or champagne.

Along one of the walls, beneath the windows, stood a row of small tables covered in various swatches of fabric, and lined with examples of silversmithing: bracelets, buckles, brooches and more—a showcase of what was to come. Each piece was to be auctioned off at the end of the night. This was the function of the Gillenormands’ higher society friends. It would hopefully serve to remind them where to go when they had need of such goods in the future: an idea of Valjean’s.

In the corner Javert spotted his three closest lieutenants, making the most of the refreshments and talking up a storm. He also thought he saw Mullins, perhaps, in the crowd, though the man’s back was turned to him. And there was Savoy, plucking pastries off the buffet table, and looking distinctly as though he worried he was committing a crime in doing so.

Finally Javert found what he was looking for: Valjean, standing off to the side, engaged in discussion with what were likely more of his workers, and wearing a dark green tailcoat Javert had not seen before.

When the man looked up and found him there across the room, he paused a moment, eyebrows raising, before smiling warmly and navigating through the sea of guests to meet him. As he got closer, Javert noted the gold thread in his cognac colored waistcoat with some surprise. Valjean had never worn coats with metallic thread before, nor anything as particularly handsome as this. The colors suited him, Javert thought: the green and the brown—like the vines that grew on the fence out back, or the gnarled old apple tree.
Just as he was reminiscing on the notion of tree pruners, Valjean approached, and met his gaze with a grin. “You cut a striking figure in that,” the man told him.

Javert was taken off guard. “It is only my usual coat,” he mumbled, glancing away.

“Yes, but …” Valjean reached out and gingerly traced one of the leaves on Javert’s waistcoat. “This is new, is it not?”

The light touch only served to accentuate Javert’s distress, his cheeks warming uncomfortably. “Perhaps,” he replied.

Valjean drew his hand away with a scoff.

“I was going to say,” Javert remarked, clearing his throat, “that you look particularly refined yourself in those clothes.

“Do I?”

Javert dipped his head, and then smirked. “I still remember that horrible yellow coat of yours,” he said. “This is a far cry from that monstrosity.”

“You hated it too?” the man exclaimed, a fretful look in his eyes. “Cosette made me give it to charity.”

“God bless her;” Javert laughed, “it should have been burned.”

“I know dark colors are more popular, but yellow is nowhere near the worst color for a tailcoat,” Valjean pouted. “I have seen men do far worse than that.”

“Oh?” Javert scoffed. “Like what?”

“Pink.”

“Pink?” Javert echoed. “For a tailcoat?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve … you’ve actually seen someone wearing a pink tailcoat.”

“Yes! And it was a vibrant pink, too. The whole thing.”

“That’s horrifying,” Javert wheezed.

“Isn’t it?”

Chuckling, Javert cut his eyes back to Valjean. “Yellow is still a terrible color, though.”

Valjean’s mouth twitched. “But not as bad as pink.”

“No, but the fact that your only defense is that you had not yet gone completely insane is concerning. You’re lucky your daughter keeps you at least somewhat presentable.”

“Oh,” said Valjean, “is that what I am?”

Javert tossed him a wolfish grin. “You did dress shabbily, back in the day. But tonight you look …” He dropped into a wistful air, trailing a thumb absentmindedly down the rolled collar of the
man’s tailcoat. “—nice.”

For a split second, a panicked look entered Valjean’s face, but in a flash it was gone and he let out a cough, turning aside. “Yes—well. Cosette does have a good eye for these things,” he said quickly. “Er, would you like to—” He motioned towards the empty corridor. “—accompany me elsewhere for a moment?”

Javert dipped his head respectfully and followed him down the hall.

***

Valjean closed the door of the smaller drawing room behind them, blocking out the noise across the house. Thus barricaded, the man turned and regarded Javert with a strangely bashful expression, before leaning back against the door with a sigh, his head hung. He let out an awkward laugh. “It is so loud in there,” he said.

Javert eyed him with concern. “Too much for you?” he guessed.

The man gave an empty wave. “It’s … still somewhat nerve-wracking, I suppose. Being the center of attention. And there’s so many people tonight.”

“They mean you nothing but well,” Javert assured him.

“I know that, it is only … I don’t know if I’ll ever get past that anxiety.” He dropped his eyes to the floor. “I was never meant to be seen.”

Javert’s frowned. “Don’t say that,” he murmured, touching the man’s shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting way.

Valjean smiled weakly, but gratefully up at him. “You are good at that,” he remarked.

“At what?”

“Calming my nerves,” the man said. “It is ironic.”

“Quite,” said Javert.

Valjean closed his eyes and took a long breath, letting it out in a sigh. When he looked back up he had a little more vigor, and he gazed at him fondly. “Thank you for coming, Javert.”

“How could I not?”

Valjean’s smile widened. “Still.”

“Well. I was informed by an anonymous source that I was particularly desirable company, for some reason,” he said coyly. “Why that would be, I’ve yet to discern.”

Valjean laughed. “Your source did not make it plain to you? Well, I could always explain the matter in detail, if you find the ti—”

“No,” Javert interjected, putting a hand to the man’s lips with a grin. “No, I’ve had quite enough of that, thank you. We shall not be discussing it again. If I wanted more comments of that nature, I
could easily go to the nearest brothel. And I am not inclined towards such things, as you know.”

A bemused look crossed Valjean’s face as Javert withdrew his hand.

“Anyway,” Javert continued, putting a hand on his hip, “did you have a purpose in bringing me here, or did you just need to catch your breath?”

The man blinked. “I just … wanted a moment to speak privately with you.”

Javert regarded his helpless expression and shrugged. “Fair enough. You could have at least let me procure a drink first, however.”

“Oh! I beg your pardon— I did not think. I could— We could go get something now, if you prefer—”

Javert waved a dismissive hand at him, shaking his head in amusement. “It is well,” he told him. “I was only being troublesome. But come, what did you wish to speak with me on?”

Valjean seemed to falter. “Actually,” he said, glancing away, “I was … wondering if you would help me with something.”

“With what?”

Growing somber, the man reached into his tailcoat pocket and produced a small box of red velvet. “This.” He held it out hesitantly—and, curious, Javert took it and opened the lid.

He nearly gasped at the contents.

Inside shone a Knight’s cross of the Legion of Honor.

Javert stared at it, his mouth falling open. He looked up at Valjean.

“If there was ever a time to wear this, I figure it would be now,” the man said, avoiding his gaze. “But … it felt wrong to put it on myself.”

Javert’s eyes flicked between him and the medal in disbelief. “Wh—where did you …?”

An uncomfortable chuckle escaped Valjean’s throat. “Would you believe me if I said I received it by post?”

“By— You mean to tell me …?” Javert was at a loss for words. “You mean to tell me the King —”

“Yes.”

“Louie-Phillipe—”

“That’s him.”

“Sent you a—”

“Yes.”

“In the post?”

Valjean gave a strained hum in agreement that seemed to indicate he understood the absurdity
Javert turned the box in his hand, light glinting off the silver as he scrutinized it, eyes wide. “So this is real?” he thought aloud. “You’re in the Legion?”

“I believe that was what the man meant by it, yes.”

Javert stood there, amazed. “How— How did he even know to …?”

“I assume someone read a newspaper, at some point,” Valjean said through his teeth. “And he found it intriguing.”

The mere idea of it overwhelmed him. By the time he was able to process it, he’d been standing silent for quite awhile.

“Javert?” Valjean ventured with a note of concern. “Are you—”

He was cut off as Javert swept him off his feet in a tight embrace.

It was not that he had meant to lift the man up, but Valjean was so much shorter than him in comparison, and before Javert had realized it, he had, in his giddiness, hoisted Valjean some ways off the floor.

Upon his release, it became clear that Valjean had been caught very off guard by this, for he wore an expression both starstruck and flustered, and Javert almost laughed at him for it.

“I am very happy for you, mon ami.”

Valjean stared at him, turning pink before finally recomposing himself. “Th-thank you,” he said, clearing his throat. “I did not expect the honor myself. It feels … surreal, to be receiving it now. And so out of the blue.”

“When did this happen?” Javert asked.

Valjean glanced away with a sheepish, guilty grin. “Last year.”

“Last year!” Javert exclaimed. “And you did not tell me until now!”

“I did not tell anyone until now,” Valjean admitted. “It didn’t feel right.”

Javert gave a disgusted grunt. “Unbelievable. I could box your ears for your humility, you fool. You should have said something! By god, if this had happened to literally any other man …”

“It took me this long to work up the courage!” Valjean defended. “And I am still not quite comfortable with the idea. But I thought, if I was ever to make it known, it may as well be on this occasion in particular.”

“You are damned right about that,” Javert huffed.

Valjean chuckled helplessly, and then they both looked at the medal and sobered.

“So,” Javert began, “you, ah, wanted me to …?”

Valjean bowed his head, a self-conscious look on his face. “If you would. I told you, I—hadn’t been quite brave enough to pin it on myself. It seemed … inordinately vain.”
“Vain—? Oh, for god’s sake,” Javert grumbled, “Here—” And then he was digging the Legion cross from its box and taking hold of Valjean’s lapel, and there was very little space between them.

Javert faltered as he held the medal up to the man’s chest to gauge its placement, suddenly aware of the gravity of the situation—of all the things the medal represented, and all the years behind it. Of all the things they had overcome to get here.

He paused, took a breath—became overly cognizant of Valjean’s gaze on him, and his own clumsiness as he poked the pin through the wool. Javert glanced up at him for a split-second, saw the look in Valjean’s eye, and started internally, returning his attention to the medal with a timid, nervous wrenching in his gut. The clasp was small, and his hands were very much the opposite; his fingers fumbled at it. He leaned in closer to better see what he was doing, unsure why his cheeks were warming so, or why it should take him so long to work a pin.

But finally he managed to fasten it in place on the man’s left breast, and let his shoulders sag. He ought to have been stepping back by now, but he remained, carefully straightening Valjean’s fine green tailcoat, though it had hardly been displaced. He felt his heart pound in his chest. Passing his thumb over the gleaming silver cross, as though to remark on its beauty, Javert forced himself to draw away. And when he finally allowed himself to meet the man’s gaze, he nearly trembled at the tenderness therein.

A long silence ensued.

“Well,” Javert remarked softly. “This has been a long time coming. Hasn’t it.”

Valjean regarded him a moment more. “I suppose so.”

Javert let his gaze drift to the floorboards. “I am … proud of you, for doing this. The factory, I mean. I hesitate to use that word—‘proud’—because it sounds condescending somehow, and that’s not my intent. But I cannot think of a better word at present. I know this was not an easy decision for you. And that it was a frightful amount to ask of a man. I know that it recalled a number of things you would wish to forget. But, I have watched you come out of your shell these past months, and remember what it is to be respected, and … it has heartened me greatly. I have wanted that for you for a long time. And to watch you rise and branch out after everything is not only a pleasure, but an honor for which I am grateful.”

“I have no doubt of your success in this endeavor,” he went on. “Just as I do not doubt that you will accomplish much good by it. So you’ve no need to be nervous, you hear? You will do magnificently.”

Valjean gazed up at him as though he hung on every word he said. He had a slightly glassy, reverent look in his eyes, and Javert wondered what on earth was going through his head.

Slowly, the man reached up and took a gentle hold on his collar.

Javert’s throat bobbed. He gave him a bewildered, questioning look.

A lopsided smile tugged the man’s lips, though there was something distinctly melancholy about it—almost apologetic, perhaps. Then he patted the ruffles at Javert’s neck and withdrew, saying, “That cravat looks very handsome on you.”

Javert blinked. Let out a scoff. Was that what it had been? The sentimental fool. “Of course you should think so, having bought it for me.”

“The color suits you,” said Valjean.
Javert wore that color almost every day, so he could not help but be pleased at this remark. “You know,” he thought aloud, “I should think that after everything you have been through, you would have grown to resent the color blue, given its associations.”

“I had,” the man murmured. “But, do you know, I have grown fond of it of late.”

“Oh?”

Without replying, Valjean reached up and touched the pearl on Javert’s silver cravat pin. “It was fortuitous that you should wear this piece today,” he said. “I was thinking on it just the other night.”

“And why is that?”

A mischievous glint entered the man’s eye. “You shall see. Now, why do you not go and get yourself a drink? I’ll only be a moment.”

“Are you sure?”

Valjean smiled and gave him a nod.

***

When Javert had gone Valjean closed the door and fell back against it with a sigh. “Lord,” he breathed, “give me strength.”

***

After recomposing himself, Valjean ventured back out into the throngs of guests, finding Javert over by the refreshment tables, speaking with a man he did not recognize.

“Oh, that’s him now,” Javert said, nodding towards Valjean as he approached. “This is Inspector Savoy, from my station.”

“Bonsoir, monsieur,” Savoy said, offering his hand.

“Bonsoir,” Valjean returned as they shook.

“It is a wonderful soirée you’ve prepared,” the man said. “And a beautiful house, I might add.” Valjean smiled. “Merci.”

“Javert does not speak of you much, but I daresay you do look familiar. What was your name again?”

“Valjean.”

“Ah—” He gave a start. “You are the man Javert—”
“Yes,” Javert growled, clamping a threatening hand on his shoulder.

The man considered this and stifled. “I see,” he remarked. “Well. You look … better than I saw you last.”

“Of that I’ve no doubt,” Valjean said.

At that Savoy seemed to have run out of things to say.

“Perhaps you should like to mingle a bit?” Javert suggested, with a particular look in his eye. “I’m sure I can handle their questions for you.”

Valjean grinned feebly at him, aware that Javert was going to be very curt with this man in his absence. It was likely not something he needed to see.

“Yes,” Savoy agreed, glancing warily back at Javert. “Certainly you have many more prominent guests to attend.”

And indeed Valjean did, for even more people had arrived in his short absence, and the room was quite packed.

He was glad for once to see as many of M. Gillenormand’s friends as he did—they would prove to be excellent clientele, if all went smoothly. He greeted a number of them, warmly shaking their hands, for they had little knowledge of his background, and he had little fear of them. They were all in jovial spirits, as one would expect of them on such an occasion, and they all acted eager to meet him.

After some time had passed, he was found by M. Girard, who looked to have been much uplifted by recent events, and stood straighter.

“Monsieur,” he said gaily, “I do not believe you have had the pleasure of making my cousin’s acquaintance. Pray, let me introduce you to him.”

“I would be delighted,” Valjean returned.

Girard led him through the crowd a ways until he spotted a particular figure, tapping the man on the shoulder and drawing him away.

He was a much younger man, perhaps in his fifties, with black hair still dark, and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose.

“Bernard,” the eldest said, motioning back towards Valjean. “This is the monsieur Jean I have spoken of, to whom we owe all credit for the factory’s restoration.”

“Ah!” said the cousin, turning to Valjean, “How do you—”

As his gaze met Valjean’s face, he stopped dead, the color draining from his cheeks as though he’d seen a ghost. The slender glass of champagne slipped from his grasp and shattered on the floor.

“You!” he breathed, aghast.

“Bernard,” the elder fretted. “you have dropped your gla—”

“You are the one who—?”
Valjean’s skin pricked as the man’s gaze turned to something between horror and disgust. “I—I am sorry, monsieur; have we met? I do not recall your na—”

“You!” came Javert’s thunderous voice.

Valjean looked over his shoulder to find the man pushing his way through the crowd towards them, focusing a murderous glare on Bernard.

Javert planted himself firmly between them, with an arm extended outward as though to shield Valjean from some imagined danger, and looking as though he could barely refrain from taking Bernard by the collar. “What are you doing here?” he seethed.

Bernard looked up at him with fright, and the air of a boy who had just been caught doing something he only now realized was improper.

Valjean was baffled. “Javert, what on earth—?”

“Get out,” Javert commanded, fixing wild eyes on Bernard. “Now.”

“Javert!” Valjean exclaimed. “What on earth is the matter with you?”

“Do you not recognize this man?” Javert shot back, gesturing in disbelief at the younger M. Girard.

Valjean cringed at his tone. “I take it I should?”

“This is the District Attorney who prosecuted your case!” Javert cried. “This is the man who tried to have you guillotined!”

“You did what?” the elder cousin asked, clearly taken aback.

A hush fell over the nearby guests, and many turned a curious glance at them.

Bernard—District Attorney M. Girard, evidently—seemed to grow painfully aware of their attention.

Well, Valjean thought after his initial shock, there was something vaguely familiar about the man’s face.

They both stared at one another, frightfully at a loss.

Bernard appeared more afraid now than accusing, cognizant of the crowd and the growing tension in the air as he was. He looked as though he wished to escape.

Still, they spoke not, and more and more people took note of them.

M. Girard the elder appeared to be waiting for someone to explain the situation to him, while Javert, on the other hand, was clearly waiting for Valjean to condemn the District Attorney.

One of them was going to have to say something soon, before the entire gathering was disrupted.

Valjean cleared his throat. “Well,” he said, carefully extending his still-trembling hand, “it is good to make your acquaintance under more pleasant circumstances.”

Bernard staggered.
Javert gaped. “Have you lost your wits?” he exclaimed, swatting Valjean’s hand back down. “The man argues for your death and you offer him your hand?”

Valjean’s shoulders tensed. “He was only doing his duty, Javert. He was only doing what he thought best.”

The look on Javert’s face was wretched. “Doing his duty! If I had not intervened—”

“I know.”

“The things he said about you!” Javert breathed.

“You yourself were of much the same opinion of me until a short while ago,” said Valjean. “It does not mean you were not a good man.”

“Valjean!” Javert pleaded.

“There is no use in anger now.”

“For god’s sake, have you no shred of self respe—”

“Will you let it be, Javert!” Valjean burst. An apologetic look followed, and he lowered his volume until it was merely a hush, a shadow falling over his face. “Please. He is a guest in our home. And you are making a scene.”

Javert faltered at that, glancing furtively about. Biting his lip, he returned to glaring at Bernard. “Why are you here?” he demanded, in a quieter but no less furious voice.

Bernard gestured helplessly at his cousin.

Javert noted M. Girard the elder, whom he had ignored up to this point, and then, after a series of bewildered, calculating facial expressions, seemed to realize the common surname with some amount of surprise. “Oh,” he thought aloud, frowning. Girard the elder assumed a froggish look, putting a hand to his mouth. “Mon Dieu, monsieur, I did not know,” he told Valjean. “I beg your pardon—”

A servant appeared to clean up the mess of glass shards and champagne on the floor, and they moved to avoid her with a great deal of awkwardness.

Slowly—mercifully—the nearby guests began to deliberately direct their attention elsewhere, possibly sensing the topic of this conversation was far out of their depth.

“I am so sorry,” the elder Girard resumed, “If I had known—”

“You have done nothing wrong,” Valjean assured him, growing more composed. “I did invite you to bring guests, after all.”

“Tell me you will at least have him turned out,” Javert growled, waving a hand at Bernard. “Do not tell me you intend to let him stay.”

Valjean gave no immediate answer, and Javert fumed. “Valjean! He said you should not even be alive!”

Again Valjean cringed, and fell silent. That old, dissociating fear bubbled just below his surface, and he had to fight to suppress it once more. An outburst, a show of panic, would do him no good
here. He stilled his nerves. After a second, a sad smirk curled his mouth, and he turned his face to
the floor. “It is charming, you know, how you come to my defense. Your protectiveness in these
matters, after so many bitter years, is especially endearing. But I am not in any danger here. And
the gentleman may stay or go at his leisure.”

Javert grunted, clenching his teeth in anguish. “There are things on this earth that you should
not forgive—”

He was interrupted as Valjean touched his arm. “That is for me to decide.”

Then, locking gazes with his former prosecutor, who had stood speechless for the duration of
this argument, he again extended his hand.

The man stared at him. His expression was filled with so many conflicting emotions that it was
difficult to read. It seemed at once affronted, bewildered, perturbed, and embarrassed. In sum, he
stood astonished.

The tension in the air at that moment was palpable.

After a lengthy deliberation—which was, perhaps, the sign of great internal struggle—the man
reached out and took Valjean’s hand.

They gave a loose, single shake, quite clumsy—but an entire conversation’s worth of meaning
passed between their eyes before they broke contact, after which Bernard glanced away, visibly
stressed.

Javert had looked like he was on the verge of strangling the man, but after this display of
solidarity, his scowl softened a fraction. He confined his residual anger to the words, “Begone with
you, then,” as he stepped once more protectively in front of Valjean.

“Yes, perhaps it would be best if we … retired, for a while,” said Girard the elder, coughing
and shooting a very specific look at his cousin, which suggested that he had a great many questions
to answer before the night was through.

Bernard seemed hopelessly resigned to this unhappy fate as his relative led him away, casting
but a single, overwhelmed glance back at Valjean before disappearing back into the crowd.

“Well,” Valjean remarked when they had gone. “That certainly dampened the mood.”


“Perhaps we should make ourselves scare for awhile as well.”

“I think I shall go and have a little chat with that man,” said Javert, clenching his fist. “In
private.”

“I think it would be best if you did literally anything but.”

Javert only growled at him in return.

“How about we get some hors d’oeurves?” Valjean offered, patting his arm. “I think it is a fine
time for hors d’oeurves.”

“Do you know that I hate you sometimes?” the man sighed.

“You make it quite plain to me, yes.”
Much later, after both of them had calmed themselves over numerous plates of steak tartare and onion tarts, Valjean rose to make a speech.

Javert had not seen Valjean speak publicly since Montreuil, and the sight warmed his heart.

There was still a little shyness left in him, but the man was more confident now than he had ever been, and his smiles no longer hid fear. He had yet to embody the role of a true orator, perhaps—but the wine was certainly smoothing things out in that regard.

Valjean gave the customary remarks and announcements—welcoming the guests; the date of the factory’s first official day of operation; congratulations and thanks to the employees, old and new; acknowledgement of the previous owner and his help in matters; invitations to peruse the samples of their wares on display along the wall before they were auctioned off later that night, and other such comments. He also made some vaguely cutting remarks about Javert guilting him into purchasing the business, which Javert merely chuckled noiselessly at, though he felt hot under the collar at the attention directed at him.

“Soon we will clear the floor for dancing, and dinner will be served shortly thereafter, but before that …” Valjean cleared his throat, standing aside as two servants carried out a large rectangular object covered by a sheet, setting it up on a stand beside him.

“It was brought to my attention some time ago that the factory would need to be renamed,” he began.

Javert, in fact, had been the one to bring this matter to his attention. The factory had been named after both of its previous owners, and in light of what had happened, the moniker had become distasteful to everyone involved.

“I thought long and hard about it for a number of weeks,” said Valjean. “It would, after all, be stamped on many of the goods, and feature prominently on the building’s façade. Not to mention, a name is a powerful thing, and one should choose it wisely lest it bring misfortune. Alas, there has been a great deal of misfortune in our pasts. But no more. We are setting out on a brighter path. And it is interesting to note, I might say, that silver has played a particularly fortunate role in my own past as well, and therefore, this trade seems exceptionally fortuitous.”

“I pondered over what emblems of fortune I might incorporate into the branding, and ended up fixating on one in particular. And so, it is with great faith in our future that I would like to officially rename the company to …”

With a grand motion he swept off the sheet to reveal a large wooden signboard painted in blue, and inlaid with letters in silvery paint that read:

“STELLA MARIS SMITHING CO.”

To the left of this was carved the shape of a star, like that of Bethlehem, with a circle in the middle.

Javert’s eyebrows rose, his lips parting.
His surprise only intensified when Valjean sought him out in the crowd and held his gaze for a moment before continuing.

“For those of you who may not know,” he said, “‘Stella Maris’ is another name for the North Star, or L’Étoile Polaire, which is the brightest star in the sky and has been used for navigation since the dawn of time. This particular name for it is also closely associated with, of course, the sea, but also the Virgin Mary, whom I pray will give her blessing to this endeavor, especially considering the fortuitous role of a certain star in her own life.” He folded his arms behind his back and gave a quick, humble bow, saying “I hope the name is agreeable to you.”

This was met with cheerful applause, which he seemed not to have anticipated, for he grew slightly pink before flashing the guests a nervous grin. Then he turned the grin upon Javert, and it became a much deeper, fonder expression—though it also seemed to seek his approval.

Javert was still too surprised to make any kind of reply. Thoughtlessly, as he looked back at the sign in wonder, he touched the silver pin at his throat.

***

“You did well up there,” Javert commented upon Valjean’s return.

“Thank you,” Valjean said, a little out of breath. “I was anxious the whole time. Was it obvious?”

“Not at all.”

Behind them, the hired band began to play a livelier tune, and people rushed about.

“Ah,” Valjean noted. “It seems we shall have to clear out.” Here he hesitated. “Unless you …”

Javert raised an eyebrow at him. “Unless I what?”

Valjean gave a strange sounding laugh. “Nothing. You do not dance, of course.”

“Certainly not.”

“Well, then. Let us go and make ourselves merry some other way.”

***

Valjean’s way of making merry was to chat with those similarly disinclined to dance, or otherwise preoccupied.

Javert received a passing introduction to Theodule’s new sweetheart, a mademoiselle Amélie Leclair, before she swept her beau away to join the others on the dancefloor. Similarly, he met some of Mlle. Gillenormand’s friends, and the much older friends of Marius’ Grandfather—though what Valjean expected him to say to these people Javert did not know.
Despite being introduced as Valjean’s “particular friend”, he still felt out of place at such events, as though someone had let him in by accident. Which seemed to be, coincidentally, how his fellows from the station felt, going by the glimpses he got of them. (Though Bisset and Lefèvre were clearly enjoying themselves, taking some of Valjean’s younger factory girls for a spin, which he mentally noted he must chastise them for at a later date.)

One person who seemed to feel completely at home, however—and the one person he would not have expected to see there (the District Attorney besides)—was Chabouillet.

The man appeared quite suddenly out of the throngs of guests, and Javert nearly jumped from surprise.

“Bonsoir, Javert,” the man said with a grin.

“Monsieur!” he exclaimed, growing warm beneath his collar. “What are you— How did you know about—”

“Forgive me,” said Chabouillet. “Mullins made me aware of it. I hope I do not spoil things by coming here. I only meant to drop by to congratulate you both.”

“I beg your pardon,” Valjean asked, “You are a colleague of Javert’s, I presume?”

The man laughed. “In a way. He might go so far as to introduce me as his patron. But you may just as well say I am merely his oldest contact in the police.”

“Oh, I see!” Valjean said, shaking hands with him. “A pleasure, I’m sure.” He then glanced over at Javert, saying, “Javert has never spoken of a patron to me,” in a very specific tone of voice.

“Well, he hardly speaks much on private matters to anyone, really,” the man said with a smirk, though Javert knew Valjean would be chiding him later tonight for this lack of transparency. “I cannot say I am surprised. Though, he may have avoided mentioning me for other reasons.”

“You see,” he went on, to Javert’s horror, “I was … vaguely involved with the events surrounding you in Montreuil-sur-Mer.”

Valjean blanched.

“To your credit, I did tell him he was mad when he first denounced you. Especially considering that he sent the letter all the way to me specifically instead of going through the proper legal channels for such matters—I believe he must have thought the local officials too charmed by you to take him seriously.”

“I gave his letter the consideration it merited, but there was no tangible evidence for his case, and I sent it back to him without taking any action against you. But then it turned out his suspicions were correct—because, as he tells me now, you actually denounced yourself in court to save another—and in consequence, all that unfortunate business happened with you and the town.”

“After that, you drop off the face of the earth for some time, presumed dead, and the next thing I know I’m being handed a newspaper with an article saying Javert has won you a pardon in court! —Which, as you may imagine, was slightly jarring to me. But I digress. The in-betweens have been explained to me in detail by various parties, and Javert has argued your merits to me personally many a time. And it appears to me now that his opinions of you are correct.”

“He failed to relate this to me at the time, but I hear he would have been shot dead at the barricades if not for your help—and considering your histories, that was a remarkable act of
clemency on your part, and I do wish to thank you. I hear you have been a friend to him since then as well. I was not really sure what to think of you at first, given all I did or didn’t know, but this past year you’ve shown yourself to be truly exemplary, to say nothing of this current endeavor you pursue, which will no doubt enrich the city in multiple ways.”

“Indeed, it seems now regrettable what happened to you in the past, and I am glad for your current relief. Furthermore, Javert has seldom if ever been close to anyone, but he seems to have grown quite fond of you—”

“Sir!” Javert squeaked, fully abashed.

“—though he would never admit it, I see—”

“Sir—”

“Still, it is nice to see him form a meaningful connection with someone outside of the force, as unlikely a pair as you might be.”

“Sir!” Javert pleaded.

Chabouillet laughed. “But forgive me; I think I embarrass him. I only came to wish you well, and to say that I am happy for you, sir.”

Valjean looked stunned, and Javert knew neither what he could possibly say to his patron, nor how he would ever manage to live this down.

“I … thank you, monsieur,” Valjean finally managed to say. “That— That means a great deal.”

Chabouillet bowed his head to him. “I suppose I shall take my leave then,” he said. “Before I humiliate my patronee any further. Bonne chance to you, in your work.”

“Ah, you don’t—have to go,” Valjean told him bashfully. “Unless you have obligations elsewhere.”

The man shrugged affably. “That is kind of you. But alas, I find myself out of place at these gatherings. And I think the look in Javert’s eye is begging me for mercy.”

“Monsieur,” Javert mumbled, hanging his head.

“I shall see you around, then,” Chabouillet told him with a wink. “And by the way,” he said, gesturing at Valjean as he slipped back into the throngs of guests, “That cross looks rather good on you.”

***

A lavish meal was served, composed of *coq au vin* and *Basque pipérade* with hake and green peppers, as well as mussels, *tomates farcies*, various tarts, and copious amounts of bread and cheese paired with grapes.

After dinner, the music grew slower, and the atmosphere grew more relaxed. They conducted the auction of the silver goods while everyone was still warm with wine, and many thousands of francs passed through their hands. The money was to be used to set up a compensation fund for the
workers, the announcement of which had spurred on both higher bids and a higher measure of cheer.

After these proceedings were over, everyone retired back into general conversation, partaking in an array of desserts and a fresh flow of spirits, both liquid and otherwise.

Javert and Valjean made themselves comfortable on the divan by the unlit hearth, somewhat away from the center of things, and reposed in a placid murmur. About an hour into this, Javert had taken to people watching as Valjean droned on about manufacturing methods beside him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Javert noticed Leroux against the opposite wall, chatting with none other than Azelma Thénardier, in a fine white dress that no doubt Cosette or Valjean had bought for her. No longer frail or sickly, and no longer dressed in rags, it was impossible to tell her from any other pretty young bourgeois. The two of them stood apart from the crowd against the wall, both laughing over their drinks, and both unmistakably blushing and making eyes at one another.

Javert almost passed over the scene without remark, before being sharply drawn back as he realized the irony of it.

Eyes bulging, he gave a start and choked on his champagne, erupting into a fit of coughing.

“Are you all right?” Valjean fretted.

Ignoring him, Javert reached out, grabbed the half empty champagne bottle, and—to Valjean’s surprise—began chugging it desperately.

The children clearly did not know their own connection, and he was not going to be the one to tell them.

***

They moved to the lesser used drawing room again, this time at Javert’s behest, for he could not stand to see the two flirting, and he was, after a fashion, growing sick of the crowd, even dwindling as it was.

Sitting on the canapé, they chatted comfortably over a dish of tarte aux mirabelles and another bottle white wine: one of the last survivors out of many.

“It is a good name,” Javert told him after awhile. “‘Stella Maris’.”

“Yes,” Valjean said wistfully. “I did hope you might think so.”

“Did you, now?”

“Mm. In fact,” he murmured, “one might say I had rather chosen it to suit you.”

Javert felt his face warm, and it was not from the wine. “And why, pray tell, would you have done a thing like that?”

Valjean stifled a scoff and looked away. “Why indeed?” Then, with a sad smile, he said, “Perhaps it is because I would never have done this without you. Or perhaps it is because … without you, I would not even be here to do so. I would be lost. You have, in that way, been my
own guiding light these past years. And this business is in some truth the culmination of your efforts, and the progress we have made thereby. So to name it in recognition of that seemed only natural.”

This admission had left Javert speechless. He stared at him with wide eyes, his cheeks hot with blood. Several times he opened his mouth and tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Valjean laughed noiselessly at him, still with a vaguely melancholy look in his eyes. “You will say that I am too sentimental, I know.”

Javert attempted to swallow the knot in his throat. He failed to succeed at the endeavor and settled for drinking the rest of the wine from his glass instead, while frantically thinking of what he could possibly say.

Valjean laughed at him further for this, wetting his lips and smiling in a way that only flustered him more.

“You—” Javert coughed. “You did not … have to do that,” he said.

“No. But I wanted to.”

Javert gave a nervous laugh, losing his composure entirely. “Good god, but you embarrass me so.”

“Sorry,” the man said.

But he did not look like he was sorry at all.

***

Chapter End Notes

**Javert:** *sees his lieutenant flirting with the daughter of the guy who tried to stab him to death*

**Javert, internally:** *repeating a mantra in his head as he chugs copious amounts of alcohol* If you see something, say nothing, and drink to forget

**Javert:** I’M GONNA CHOKER THATCH GUY TO DEATH FOR YOUR HONOR

**Valjean:** Jesus christ, honey, calm down and have a baguette

Tons of people made fanart for AROS since last chapter!

*This art by jesuisuninny*
This art by crispyclouddragon

This drawing by sarcastic-fandomtastic-dragon

And also this one

Did I post this art by hellenhighwater yet?

And also I made this shitty meme awhile back

Also someone else made a great comic making fun of Valjean's gay panic attacks but THEY DIDN'T POST IT ANYWHERE SO I CAN'T LINK IT HNNNNNGGG >___>

Suggested Listening:

July Flame - Laura Veirs
Eleven - Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein
If You're Not the One - Daniel Beddingfield
Do I Wanna Know - Hozier
As Cosette approached the drawing room she could hear voices, loud and vaguely inebriated, conversing amid bouts of laughter.

Slowly, she turned the handle and opened the door, just a crack. Through this crack she perceived Javert and Jean Valjean sitting beside each other on the blue-velvet canapé, their faces red with drink and humor. Their backs were to her, and she had opened the door quietly so as to not bring their attention to it.

Valjean was telling some story, and his eyes were sparkling, and he was leaning against Javert and having a hard time of it trying to talk through his laughter.

“And so—and so I open my eyes and the first thing I see is this poor old sod sobbing his eyes out, rambling mindlessly on his knees. ‘Father Madeleine!’ he’s saying, ‘Father Madeleine! Madeleine! Monsieur Madeleine! Monsieur le Maire!’ and I’m just staring at him, because my senses are dulled, and, honestly, this is a very strange sight to wake up to. And he looks up at me, and he—he quite nearly jumps out of his skin, and he scrambles back as far as the grave will permit him and he’s just— Oh, my God! The horror on his face! You should have seen it.”

Javert was helpless with laughter, his head hung, his frame trembling.

“To this day, I think it was the most hilarious thing I’ve ever seen,” Valjean continued. “I mean,
I feel bad about it, but I just—in hindsight—” He squeezed his eyes shut and giggled against the man’s shoulder. “It was so funny.”

Cosette had no idea what they were talking about, but she smirked at the sight of them falling over each other. She could not recall a time when either had smiled so freely before. Listening contentedly, she waited for their chuckles to peter off a bit before making her presence known.

The floor creaked slightly as she slipped through the door. Clearing her throat, she approached them with a feigned amount of composure, as though she had not been spying on them for the past few minutes. “Papa,” she said. “Javert.”

Valjean turned his head to look back at her in surprise. “Oh! Cosette.” Another grin flashed across his lips. “I was just—I was just telling the inspector here about the time I was almost buried ali— Ah,” he said, his face going blank, “actually … perhaps it’s best if you don’t know about that.”

“Know about what?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly, straightening himself and folding his hands in his lap. “Nothing at all.”

“Oh, I think it was something,” she crooned, draping her arms over the top of the canapé. “And I’ll coax it out of you in time, to be sure—one way or another. But for now I came to say that it is getting very late, and I going to bed.”

“Hm? What time is it?”

“It’s nearly midnight, papa.”

“Midnight!” He turned to Javert with a startled look. “How long have we been talking for?”

Javert smirked wolfishly, his head still down. “Hell if I know,” he scoffed.

“Ah, the deuce.”

“You two ought to go to sleep, too,” yawned Cosette. “Or you’re going to have terrible headaches in the morning.”

“Midnight,” Valjean repeated to himself, rubbing his temples.

“Going on one o’ clock.”

“Well, then,” he said to Javert, “I suppose I ought to walk you home.”

Javert stretched and popped a few vertebrae back into place in his neck before sagging in his seat. “I suppose.”

“Do yourselves a favor and take the carriage, won’t you?” said Cosette.

“But the air is so nice tonight,” Valjean remarked. “And it would be cruel to wake the driver now.”

“Do what you wish, but don’t strain yourselves, do you hear? I’ve had enough trouble from you two for a lifetime.”

Valjean smiled up at her. “Of course, ma chère.”
“Goodnight, then.” She placed a kiss on the top of her father’s head and left the room. “Pleasant dreams to you both.”

***

The air had cooled down some by the time they went outside, but it was still warm, and it proved for an enjoyable walk. Paris was lit up all over with gas lamps, and aside from a passing figure or two, was peacefully quiet and still. Here and there an insect chirped.

“It is a full moon tonight,” Valjean observed, lifting his face to the sky.

“So it is,” said Javert.

“Do you not find it comforting? The sight of the moon,” Valjean asked.

“Comforting?” the man echoed. “Perhaps. It lessens the darkness, to be sure. But nights like these are when all the madmen come out. I believe the English call them ‘lunatics’.”

Valjean chuckled to himself. “Are we lunatics, then?”

“No, I should think we are not quite that inebriated,” Javert said with a grin.

Valjean grinned back, and returned to gazing at the heavens. “Ah,” he said, pointing upwards, “there it is—the North Star.”

“Yes. It’s just about the only one you can see tonight, with the moon being so bright,” Javert remarked.

Valjean hummed in agreement, pleasurably amused at this for reasons he was only vaguely aware of.

They fell silent for a time, their footfalls sounding on the cobblestone as they glanced now and then at the sky.

All of a sudden Valjean stopped, his face still upturned with a wistful expression for a moment before it turned to Javert. “Does it make you happy?” he asked.

Javert looked back in surprise. “Does what make me happy?”


“Do you mean it?”

“Why on earth should I not?”

Valjean stared at him, quiet. “You are happy with me?” he murmured.

Javert took a step closer, a sort of concerned, candid honesty in his eyes. “I am very happy with you.”
Valjean studied his face. Smiled sadly. Gave a sigh. “Then I am happy, too.”

But this sentiment was not entirely truthful. For he got the feeling that Javert had no idea whatsoever what he’d meant.

***

The bells of Notre Dame sounded one in the morning as they returned to Javert’s apartment, his portress already long asleep in her bedroom downstairs.

Javert unlocked the door to his flat, ambled in, and shrugged off his tailcoat with a tired groan, draping it over the armchair and placing his hat on its seat. He then set to loosening his cravat, taking awhile to unfasten the pin at his throat.

Valjean regarded him with a strange expression. “You don’t mind?”

“Hm?”

“The … coat,” Valjean said, nodding to where Javert had left it.

“Oh, that? Why should I? Take it off, if you like. It is hot.”

With some amount of hesitation, Valjean followed suit, and undid his cravat as well, while he was at it.

“Ugh,” Javert muttered, letting his head fall back. “I should not have drunk so much. I’m not used to it. And the stuff makes you damnably warm.”

“I am not used to it either, truth be told,” said Valjean. “How much did you have? I lost track.”

“I don’t know,” Javert scoffed. “But far more than I should have. And you drank a lot more than your usual as well. Are you sure you’re going to be able to make it back to Filles du Calvaire without falling asleep in some ditch?”

Valjean laughed. “Ah, yes; that would be bad.”

“I’d worry that someone should rob you,” Javert said, sitting down on at the foot of his bed and removing his boots, “but knowing you, you’d probably give them the contents of your purse happily if they asked.”

A sheepish grin spread across Valjean’s face, and Javert eyed it with a frown.

“Dieu, you and your boundless charity—you disgust me,” he told him, flopping back on the mattress with an exasperated breath.

“Come,” Valjean chided, “you exaggerate.”

Javert opened one eye and sat back up, jabbing an accusatory finger in his direction. “You do! Pardieu, it’s a miracle you haven’t been knifed in an alleyway with all the coin you drag around in your purse.”

Valjean turned to look at him curiously. “Do you really worry about that?”
“Of course I worry about that. You could easily snap them in two if you liked—but the problem is, I know you wouldn’t. Not until it was too late, anyway.”

“You need not worry about me,” Valjean assured.

“Oh? And who else is going to, then? Not you, evidently.”

Valjean reddened at that. “I can take care of myself.”

“Ha! Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

“It’s true,” the man said.

Javert only snorted.

“Mm,” Valjean groaned after a minute, casting a glance out the small window by his desk. “I suppose I should head back,” he admitted, rubbing his temples, “but—ugh, my head …”

“Are you well?”

“I will be,” he sighed, closing his eyes and slouching over to lean against the windowsill. “I just … need a few minutes.” He rubbed his face, holding his head in his hand with a diminishing trail of grumbles.

“Take your time,” Javert yawned, running a hand through his hair.

He didn’t know how long it was until he looked back up, but when he did, he found Valjean staring at him. He blinked, returning the stare blearily. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Valjean said quietly, turning to look out the window.

“Hm.” He let his head droop again, his eyelids heavy.

This time he drifted off to sleep without meaning to, despite sitting up.

He dreamt, but he could not recall what about when he awoke. And when he awoke, it was because he felt he had forgotten something.

After a moment, he realized that something was Valjean.

He raised his head, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and wondering whether or not the man had made it home safely. He glanced up.

The man had not made it home.

The man was still standing at his window—his curly white hair illuminated by starlight, a stark contrast against the bluish shadows of his room—almost giving one the impression of a halo. And he was gazing at him, a strange look on his face, his cravat undone and hanging loose at his collar.

Javert gave an imperceptible start, stiffening, a little unnerved.

Surely a good deal of time had passed, and yet it looked as though the man had not moved an inch. How long had he been staring at him like that? And why did he not seem perturbed that Javert had caught him doing so?

Unsure what to say, Javert only stared back at him, furrowing his brow.
“Javert …” Valjean murmured, his gaze unbreaking.

Something about the man’s voice—something in the air—made Javert tense, made his face grow warm.

“Do you …?” Valjean trailed off.

Wistfulness—that was the look on his face, Javert thought.

Why did that look fluster him so?

He didn’t know.

“Do I … what?”

Valjean did not answer. Slowly, he approached.

Javert couldn’t say why, but he was suddenly afraid—afraid of the intensity in the man’s gaze, afraid of how quiet the room had become. He shuffled backwards towards the headboard.

The man knelt on the edge of the bed where he’d just been.

“Valjean,” he said, narrowing his eyes, “what are you doing?”

The man let out a nervous, self-deprecating chuckle. “I don’t know.”

“You are drunk,” said Javert.

Valjean looked sad for a moment, his eyes flicking away. “Yes. Probably.”

“What are you doing?” Javert repeated, backing up further, beginning to feel cornered.

“I don’t know,” said Valjean.

It was most definitely sadness in his eyes now; sadness and something else—perhaps fear?

Why would there be fear in his eyes?

If anyone, it was Javert who was unsettled.

The man crept towards him on the sheets, an indecipherable expression on his face.

Javert did not know what to do when he found he could recede no further—a heap of pillows and a headboard at his back, preventing his retreat.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Valjean,” he implored.

The man did not move. He sat there in the middle if the bed, undeterred.

“Valjean, what the devil are you—”

“I—” Valjean cut him off, knitting his brow regretfully, “I shouldn’t be doing this.” His words were mere mumbles under his breath, and Javert could not tell if they were meant for him to hear, or only for himself. “This could ruin things; I shouldn’t be … Ah, but—” He shook his head, a small, guilty smile on his lips. “I cannot help myself, it seems.” The smile fled. “God, I am a fool.”

“What are you talking about?”
“It was always you,” Valjean breathed, looking back at him. He cocked his head. "Why has it always been you?"

“I—I don’t know what you’re saying,” Javert told him.

“At the barricades, the riverbank … Montreuil, Paris, the Gorbeau house—You always seem to show up out of nowhere,” said Valjean. “Everywhere I go, there you are. Why is that? Why do we keep finding our way back to one another?”

Javert didn’t know what to make of the man’s expression: melancholy, wondering, fixated on him. No one had ever looked at him like that.

“You have been the only constant in my life,” Valjean said. “I don’t know what it is that you do to me. But ever since that night—ever since the barricade, I just … Something—when I look at you …”

The man glanced down for a moment, his eyes flicking this way and that as he seemed to collect his thoughts. When he looked back up, he seemed a little surer of himself.

“When I saw you, in the tap-house—what they had done with you, what they were going to do to you, I just— I knew that I needed to save you.” Hand shaking, he reached out towards Javert’s collar as though to grasp a phantom martingale. After a moment he withdrew again, clenching his fist instead around the sheets, fingers tangling themselves in the linen. “There was never any question in my mind of what to do. It didn’t matter to me what might happen later on account of it; I had to get you out of that place. I would have done anything—anything, so long as you might be spared. I was so afraid for you, Javert. I was so afraid.”

Why did his tone sound so apologetic?

“And then, when I saw you at the river … When you— I thought—” He squeezed his eyes shut, and shivered, as though a cold breeze had met his skin. “I thought that you’d— That it was too late. That I had failed, and you were lost. That it was somehow all my fault.” He shook his head, grimacing. “If you had died, I don’t— I don’t know what I would’ve done; I don’t know how I could’ve— Dieu! Javert,” he breathed, lifting his face to him, “I have never been more terrified in my life! And when I look at you, still, I …!”

The man cringed at his own words, lowering his gaze with guiltily. “I think about it all the time. And sometimes I walk down to the river in the middle of the night, just because—because some part of me still fears you’ll be there. I know, I know,” he said, frantically shaking his head, “I’m a damn fool. But I can’t help myself. And I’ll stand there at the water’s edge, praying. God, I’m so stupid. I know I should trust you. And I do! And yet—yet there is still this fear, in the bottom of my chest.” He squeezed his eyes shut, biting his lip.

When he reopened them, they were wet. “I …” Valjean faltered. He was quaking, Javert realized. “I don’t know what it is I feel for you, anymore.” His voice strained. “I—I think I might be …” The words caught in his throat; he let out a tremulous breath. He reached out towards him. Stopped himself. Put his face in his hands.

His tone—the same as when he’d spoken of his theft from the Bishop—sounded like he was confessing some egregious sin. “I think I might have fallen a little bit in love with you.”

Javert froze. “Wh—what?”

“Ah,” Valjean chuckled to himself dejectedly, “You do not understand. Bless you. Must I show
it to you, then?” And then, on the verge of tears, “I’m sorry. Forgive me. Just this once.”

He drew closer to him, leaning in cautiously, as though afraid he might burn himself. He swallowed, casting his face down—trying to work up courage, it seemed.

After a moment his expression softened. He looked back up, the fear leaving his eyes. He cocked his head, nearly above him.

“Ferkó,” he breathed longingly.

Javert trembled at the sound of it, withdrawing into the pillows piled up against the headboard. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he felt blood rush to his face, a sudden clenching in his chest. A whimper escaped his throat.

Valjean studied his reaction, a thoughtful look upon his face. Gradually, he leaned in, his eyes flicking to Javert’s and then drifting closed.

And then he pressed his lips to Javert’s neck, and the world came to a screeching halt.

Javert’s skin prickled. It was like a jolt of electricity had passed through him, sending tingles up his spine, and he loosed a shaky breath. His heart was pounding in his chest.

Valjean drew back from him slowly, searching his face. “Non?”

Javert gave no response; indeed, he was paralyzed. He had barely heard him, he was so stunned.

Valjean had always bewildered him, but this—this admission, this display—had blindsided him entirely.

And yet, as his thoughts staggered over the implications, he began to feel as though there’d been a million signs of this that he had simply not attended.

All the times Valjean had taken his hand, weaving his fingers between his in that slow, endearing way—not with the easy confidence of fellowship, but rather, the bashful depth of one enamored …

All the times Valjean had embraced him tight, as if his soul depended on it—and had lingered just a little longer than was proper …

All the times Valjean had kissed his cheek, his brow, his hand …

And that warmth—that sad sort of fondness in the man’s gaze, whenever it turned to him in a moment of silence …

‘Don’t you see the way he looks at you?’ came Cosette’s voice. ‘You mean the world to him!’

Javert reeled.

Was this what it had always been? Had the man’s feelings been plain to see from the beginning, and Javert merely too oblivious to notice? Could he really have been so blind to such a thing for so long?

‘You know,’ Valjean chuckled in the back of his mind, ‘for all your scrutiny, Javert, sometimes you are very unobservant.’

Javert sat astonished beyond coherent thought.
Valjean must have taken his silence as a lack of consent, for a measure of fear had arisen in his eyes. He appeared to believe he’d just made a terrible mistake. Humiliation, guilt, and terror wrote themselves across his face as he began to retreat.

He had one foot on the floor when a hand reached out and gripped his wrist.

The man stopped, frozen in place for a number of breaths. Looked back.

Javert’s eyes were wide, unfocused in his cogitation—perplexed, almost afraid. But his grasp on the man’s wrist was unwavering—imploring, even.

Slowly, Valjean turned back around and considered him. He stood there, silent, unmoving, gauging Javert in the darkness—perhaps waiting for him to speak.

But Javert said nothing, thought nothing, did nothing, but to soften his grip and let his hand trail down the man’s wrist until it met his hand in turn; until their fingers brushed. Then it drifted back to the sheets, and Javert swallowed hard—unsure what he was doing, what he was asking, or what either of them should take it to mean.

Valjean seemed to be wondering just the same thing.

Slowly, the man shifted his weight back onto the bed and drew close. He gazed at him. Hesitated. Then, tentative, he leaned in, sweeping back a stray lock of Javert’s hair and cupping the side of his cheek. His lips hovered ponderously near Javert’s for a moment before moving to place a gentle, lasting kiss upon his brow.

Javert loosed a stunted breath, quivering.

What was this? This nervous clenching in his gut?

He understood little of Valjean’s feelings, and nothing at all of his own.

Yet he remained upon the bed, and allowed the man to touch him as he pleased—to shyly smooth his hair with shaking hand; to trace the curves of his face; to press his lips once more to his brow.

Javert could not explain himself. Could not give reason for why he did not withdraw, did not revile at the man’s touch—or why it thrilled him so. The skin on the back of his neck, his scalp, his arms, turned to gooseflesh; his mouth hung parted as though in a daze.

Still unable to look at him, Javert found his hand trailing up to rest on Valjean’s cheek in turn.

The man’s skin was hot beneath his palm, course white hairs and flecks of stubble scratching against the stroke of his thumb. He smelled of soap, and lavender.

Javert closed his eyes.

Valjean stayed suspended over him. Javert could feel the puff of his breath against his scalp, the softness of his mouth as he slowly placed kiss after kiss on his forehead.

A strange, comforting warmth began to bloom in his chest, and traveled the length of his limbs, rising to pour off his skin.

Brow knit, hand still on his cheek, Javert could feel Valjean move, feel the drifting, tilting of his head as he drew closer. So he could not say he was surprised when he felt the man’s lips press,
Somehow, it came as a relief. He did not know what to make of this—could not comprehend what on earth was occurring—save for that he suddenly found himself pining for it, whatever it was. He shivered beneath him, his heart fluttering like a bird in his breast.

And so it was that Javert was overwhelmed by a host of sensations, the like of which he had never experienced before, or even thought himself capable of. He felt dizzy, and oddly euphoric, like a drunkard, or a man in a dream. All that existed in the darkness of his mind, in the limits of his senses, was Valjean—and it seemed almost as though he was the only thing that had ever truly existed at all.

The man’s lips remained close to his long after the kiss was over, nearly upon them, a lingering trace. Valjean bent his head to him so that their brows were touching, and he caressed the side of his face.

These intimate gestures recalled those days Javert had spent in feverish agony, aware only of the man’s touch, and nothing else—reliant upon it, for it had brought him a soothing relief.

When had those work-worn hands become so familiar?

Had Javert yearned for this then, in that blackness, in the depths of his dreams? He could not say.

And what was this, that he was feeling now? Javert shuddered to put a name to it, conscious on some level of what it must be.

How long had he felt this way?

In the catacombs, he had thought to kiss Valjean’s brow, yet he’d refrained, and he knew not why. Had he been aware of this then, on some level? Of this feeling? He had thought it was merely relief—and affection, perhaps, or the need to protect him from further harm—but … this?

This sudden outpouring of intimate sentiment had surprised him. But not shocked him, no. Why was he was not repelled? Why did all of this seem so strangely sensible?

He felt like he had been given the answer to a question he had never before thought to ask.

Again Valjean pressed his mouth to his—just briefly, before wrapping his arms around him, draping them over his shoulders, one hand on the back of his neck.

Unaware of what he was even doing, Javert leaned into him, letting his head rest upon his shoulder.

Valjean’s hand moved to his head, smoothing his hair, running his fingers through its long, dark strands. Again his lips were on his brow, on the top of his head. “Ferkó,” he murmured against his scalp. “Ferkó.”

Javert had hated that name; he had hated it from the depths of his heart—but to hear it spoken thus, from Valjean’s lips, it seemed the sweetest thing he’d ever heard.

The last of his hesitation gone—and knowing what it was he was doing, now—he grasped the front of the man’s blouse, twisting his fingers in it as Valjean nuzzled the top of his head. Javert’s hands trailed along the man’s broad chest, reaching around to the small of his waist and clutching the fabric there.
Valjean laid his head against his, and his breath ghosted over his skin. “Je t’aime,” he breathed. 
I love you.

A shudder of passionate joy ran through Javert at that utterance. “Je ...” He tried to swallow the knot that had formed in his throat, and gripped the man tightly, squeezing him to his chest. “Je t’aime aussi,” he managed to choke out, “Je t’aime aussi, Valjean.”

He could feel the man let out a stunted breath at that—could sense the disbelieving, relieved smile on his face as Valjean nearly sobbed with elation. “Merci,” the man cried quietly, his voice breaking, squeezing him in turn and burying his face in his shoulder, “Merci.”

They held each other as they wept, trembling and daring to love, to outpour the whole of their being, the whole of their heart to another soul for the first time since they’d been born.

“J’ai peur,” Javert squeaked into the fabric of his shirt. I am afraid.

“So am I,” Valjean admitted.

They gripped each other tightly.

Javert shuddered, the tears wet on his face. Wet on Valjean’s shirt.

Valjean drew back, one hand on his shoulder, the other wiping a tear from Javert’s cheek, his eyes brimming with worry.

Javert forced himself to meet those eyes, wishing for the first time to fully ascertain their depths, instinctively grasping his hand. He held it there against his cheek for a moment, clasping it gently, before drawing it to his lips and placing a kiss on the man’s knuckles.

Valjean let out a little breath, shivering.

Javert’s hands trailed up his, and felt the roughness of his skin, weathered and creased like old leather from so many years of imprisonment and hard, unforgiving labor. He bent his head and pressed a lasting kiss to the back of his hand, and then another, and another, a fresh well of tears burning at the back of his eyes.

The hand he held turned to tilt his chin, to raise his head up, to rest on his cheek.

Valjean was looking at him with eyes made almost fiery by emotion, his brow knit, his mouth in a tight-set frown. He leaned in, trailing one arm down to wrap around his waist as he kissed him, tilting his head. He held him close for a moment, their foreheads touching as he stroked his hair, before withdrawing again. Cupping his face, he gazed into his eyes as if trying to prove a point.

Javert only gazed back at him sadly.

In the moonlight, half-hidden beneath his blouse, Javert could see on Valjean’s neck the pale scar tissue left behind by an iron collar. And he thought, then, of what he could not see, what lay beneath: the lash marks on his back, and the ugly prison brand upon the man’s shoulder.

Prisoners had not been branded during Valjean’s original sentence of nineteen years. Javert had been spared the sight of such things. It was only with the Code Civil des Français that the practice was reinstated.

And so, these scars had been seared into his flesh a mere decade ago. Scorched into the body of a man who had already grown old, who had already changed his ways—condemning him forever
for crimes he had committed too many years ago, crimes he had already atoned for, time and time again. The mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer had been tied to a post and publicly humiliated—had watched them take the irons from their bed of coals, blazing red. Had the burning letters pressed against his skin.

It was as though the mighty hand of society had reached down and crushed him, saying ‘Your efforts at reform are meaningless; you are a criminal, you shall always be a criminal, and you cannot escape that, no matter how hard you try.’ And he, Javert, had been that very hand! It was he who had condemned him back to prison, back to Hell.

Had Valjean cried out as they’d pressed the red-hot metal to his shoulder? Or had he borne that agony in silence, unmoving, resigned? Had he wept? Or had his tears long since dried up, unable to feel anything but numbness anymore—the melancholy apathy of one who has been beaten and laid low time and time again, and has grown accustomed to it?

Javert had never thought about it before—had never let himself think about it. And the idea of Valjean bound, helpless, bearing his suffering in silence because he had no one to turn to—no one to care—it cut Javert to his core.

He had seen men being branded, once. Observed it with disgusted fascination. An ugly business, it was. The air smelling of cooked meat. The sizzling, sickly yellow and black marks the iron left in its wake. The pallor of the victims, the cold sweat and tremors that wracked their bodies, shivering as though they had been prodded with ice instead of fire. It had left a lasting impression on him (however, he reflected, not nearly as long-lasting as the ones it left on them).

Some of them retched after being branded. Some of the spectators retched. Javert had not meant to understand why, but he did.

He’d found himself happy they had not branded prisoners in his days as a guard.

To picture Valjean enduring that, trembling in agony, crushed by shame upon shame—tied to a scaffold in a public square, the object of some crowd’s entertainment, no less! To think of the men jeering at him upon his return to the bagne, welcoming him back to hell, spitting at his attempts at redemption and mocking him with all he’d been stripped of. Calling him ‘Monsieur l’Maire’ to rub salt in his already gaping wounds … It was too much to bear.

How could a man go through all that and not seek the solace of death?

Shaking, Javert reached out to the scars on Valjean’s neck unthinkingly, unfurling his fingers, their tips just barely brushing against them.

*I did this,* he thought. *I did this to you.*

At the feel of them, he drew back, as if he had touched not flesh but burning coals.

Valjean had flinched back at the contact, gasping beneath his breath.

Clenching his teeth, Javert forced himself to place his hand over the scars on Valjean’s shoulder—over those letters he had caused to be branded with searing irons into the man’s skin, his fingers curling back into his palm. He wished there was some way to scrub those horrible marks away, to make once more pristine that disfigured flesh. But no balm or salve could heal wounds like these. They had been made to mar.

“You should never have been made to go back there,” he breathed. “I should never have made you go back.” And then his expression was trembling, and tears were burning the back of his eyes.
“I’m sorry,” he cried mournfully, bending his head to him. “I’m sorry.”

Valjean embraced him, clutching him fiercely.

“I’m so sorry!” Javert sobbed into his shirt.

Valjean could only hold him close, mussing the hair on the top of Javert’s head and kissing it intermittently. His shoulder a pillow, he absorbed his sobs as Javert sunk against him. “I know,” he said softly. “I know.”

And in his arms Javert found absolution.

It was long before he drew away, his voice raw. “You have always strived so hard, all your life, to be good man,” he thought aloud. “And you have never gotten any recompense for it.”

Valjean gazed sorrowfully into his eyes. “That’s not true,” he told him.

Javert grimaced, shaking his head. “It’s not enough,” he lamented. “It will never be enough.”

“Javert,” the man told him, drawing in to cup his cheek, “your affection is reward enough for a lifetime. It is a better recompense than I ever knew to imagine.”

A fresh bout of tears welled in Javert’s eyes. “You deserve more,” he said hoarsely.

“I don’t want it.”

And then Valjean was kissing him, and Javert had run out of ways to protest, and the salt of his tears wet their lips.

They clutched at each other’s hair, each other’s waistcoats, and all the while Javert thought of all the scars beneath Valjean’s shirt—so many of which he himself had put there—and could not fathom how the man could love him so.

“It stabs my heart, to see thee cry,” Valjean finally said, clasping his cheek as they touched brows. “Do not weep on my account. I cannot bear to see you torture yourself so.”

Javert hung his head. “How can I live with myself, knowing what I’ve done to you?”

Valjean was quiet for awhile. “You are not the man who did those things,” he told him. “You haven’t been that man for years. It is unjust to punish a man for what he did in another life. There is no use in it, if he has changed. It will only bring misery.”

Javert squeezed his eyes shut as Valjean spoke, his voice gentle.

“You must forgive yourself, as I have been forgiven. You must learn to let go of the past. That is the only way to move forward. It does not mean that you forget. It only means that you stop hating yourself.”

“And what if I don’t know how?” Javert asked.

“Then we will figure it out together,” the man promised. “I am still learning, myself. But I think that we both want peace for each other. And I think that … perhaps the only way to achieve that is to allow ourselves to have it.” Here he paused for moment, stroking Javert’s temple in thought. “I cannot force you to forgive yourself,” he finally said. “But I can forgive myself, on your account, because I know you wish me to. And you can do the same for me. Because that is all I have wanted for you, these many years—that you might be at peace with yourself. And I have worried on that
“More than anything?”

“Javert, I— I have not stopped worrying for you since I pulled you from the river! You lay there lifeless on the cobblestone, not breathing, and I did not know if I could save you, and I—I was so terrified! And when you finally coughed the water out, it was like—I cannot explain the relief. But I was still so scared for you, and I held you in my arms, and prayed for you as though my life depended on it—and I’ve been praying ever since.”

“I could tell that you never made peace with it, that you never quite moved past what had driven you there, and I’ve been fearful for you all this time. Just—I’ve just been trapped in that moment, in that night, when you—” With a sudden sob, Valjean closed his arms around him and buried his head in the crook of his neck. “Javert,” he pleaded torturously, “Don’t do it; God, don’t do it—please. Don’t hurt yourself. Don’t hate yourself. Don’t punish yourself like that, ever again!—not for my sake, or anyone else’s. You don’t deserve it. You don’t.”

Javert was taken aback at the way the man clutched at him—as though he were still back there, at the parapet, trying to take his own life.

Was this how Valjean saw his self-loathing? Was this what the man thought of every time Javert berated himself? Was this why he was so desperate for Javert to forgive himself, even though he had every right to a grudge? Because he feared he would try it again?

Javert sagged in his arms.

How many nights did Valjean go back to that river, in his mind or otherwise? How many nights did he lay awake, wondering, helpless, afraid to lose him to his own remorse?


And he meant it. Because, for the first time in his life, he had found something worth living for.

***

Much later, when their tears had dried, and they had laughed and cried themselves into exhaustion, Javert and Valjean had removed each others waistcoats and lain down together, their heads heavy on the pillows. They clutched at each other now and then, struggling to keep their eyes open, and eventually giving up. The hour was late, and their voices soft as they murmured to one another in the darkness.

“How long have you loved me like this?” Javert wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” said Valjean. “It was so gradual, I cannot say where it began. I only realized what it was about a month ago.”

Javert grew pensive for a time. “I think perhaps I have loved you for years,” he finally said. “I just never knew the depth of it.”

“You know,” Valjean told him, “I believe I feel the very same.”
“Do you, now?”

“Mm,” Valjean hummed.

“Then,” said Javert, “we are both fools.”

Valjean laughed quietly at that. “Well. I suppose there are worse things to be.”

That night, were one to look through the window of a certain apartment in the old Jewish quarter of the city, they would have found two very weary, but contented looking gentlemen comfortably sharing a single cramped bed, sprawled out beneath the sheets and entangled in each other’s embrace, sleeping soundly.

***

When Javert came to, he found himself standing on the bank of a deep, black lagoon. The water stretched out all around, pierced here and there by stalagmites. Every now and again, a drop would fall from the cavern ceiling, and send glowing green ripples over the surface of the pool.

In the distance, submerged up to his waist, and surrounded by the same ethereal, emerald glow was Jean Valjean. He was turned away from him, staring out into the darkness like he was in the midst of a melancholy dream.

How long had the man been here, alone in this place no one saw? And why, Javert thought, had he only now noticed?

Silent, Javert started towards him, uncaring as the water rose around his legs. Behind him, a luminous green trailed like the wake of a ship in an ocean of absinthe.

Valjean turned to him. They gazed at one another with the same soft, wistful expression on their faces. And within that gaze was everything that could be said. Every apology, every declaration, every possible sentiment, all without words.

And then Javert was brushing his cheek, and Valjean was standing on his toes, and they reached for each other in tandem. Their lips pressed, their arms found each other’s waists, and they stood engulfed in light and shadow, locked in a passionate embrace.

What truer fulfillment exists in this world than two souls thus twined? Javert had not even known such repletion was possible. But now that he’d found it, he could have cried for the joy of it all. And he did. There was nothing in life he was more happy, more humbled, more grateful to discover than the exquisite, overwhelming force of love.

All his life he had thought love a farce—a foreign, distant thing, not meant for him. Exaggerated, overvalued. He had never expected to find merit in those tales of forevers, and âmes sœurs, and other halves. The idea that there was something missing from him seemed absurd.

But how little he had known! He felt as though someone had woken him from a long, lonely dream.

They parted for a breath, and Javert held him close, a hand on the back of his head, his chin lost in white curls.
Valjean sank against him, content.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” Javert murmured.

“It was worth the wait.”

***

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Shortly after being sentenced, convicted prisoners endured a public humiliation ritual known as “exposition”, where they would be taken to a public square (usually in the town in which they’d been sentenced—in Valjean’s case it would have been Var) and bound to a post by an iron collar and rope. Nailed to the post would have been a sign bearing their name, address, trade, crime, and sentence. They would have usually been bound with their hands behind their backs to prevent them from covering their face. Exposition lasted anywhere from 1-6 hours, and multiple criminals could be displayed together. Exposition was considered such a crucial stripping of their identities that it counted as the day their sentenced started—instead of the day they entered their assigned prison, which could be weeks later.

Chapter End Notes

*Romantic bagpipes start playing*

TFW ur dumb old virgin ass suddenly discovers love at the tender age of 54 and 65 respectively ...

Valjean: *finally smooches the boy*

Me, trying to fucking articulate what the hell Javert is feeling here: Propriety has gone bye bye, Javert ... What’ve you got left?

Javert: Sorry, guys. I’m terrified beyond the capacity for rational thought

You can read more about exposition here.

And here.
Again I recommend Prudencepaccard's Toulon Masterpost, which includes most everything you could wish to know about bagnes and sentencing during the Les Mis era.

Some appropriately adorable art by mistysblueboxstuff

And some sad Javert by crispyclouddragon

And these epic FANCY BOY illustrations for last chp + this one by hellenhighwater

Suggested Listening:
Clarity - Zedd
Confessions in the Moonlight - Joe Hisaishi
I Can't Make You Love Me - Tank
Rose - James Horner
Speakeasy Kiss - James Newton Howard
So Much Life - Bear McCreary
Reminiscence - Satoshi Takebe
Wondrous Love - Bear McCreary
The Secret Wedding - James Horner
The Wedding - Bear McCreary
For the Love of a Princess - James Horner
Dearly Beloved (χ Back Cover Arrangement) - Kaoru Wada
For River - Kan Gao
The Words - Christina Perri
Snow Moon - S.J. Tucker
A Year Ago Today - Bear's Den
Down (cover) - Our Symphonic Life
Will You Still Love Me - Norah Jones
Everything's Alright - Laura Shigihara
Hidden Away - Josh Groban

In the Rain - Joe Hisaishi
**An Officer and a Gentleman**

**Chapter Summary**

Javert and Valjean come to grips with their newfound situation.

**Chapter Notes**

ohhhhhhhHHHHHHHHH my god I am SO sorry for how long this has taken me like what the fuck. I know. I know. It's ridiculous. I've been struggling with depression and OCD and existentialism lately on account of various life factors, and my job wears me out a lot, which is partly why this took so long to finish. But also because I had to like, make a big decision about the plot that rearranged a lot of events and kind of jumbled my whole timeline up, so that some things had to be tweaked ... Basically I had taken what was originally planned to be a few months of in-story-time and stretched it into an entire year because there were too many things that hadn't gotten wrapped up yet, and it would have rushed the relationship (and events) horribly, and ... yeah. Lots of re-figuring out my own story :P

ANYWAY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You have made a place in my heart where I thought there was no room for anything else. You have made flowers grow where I cultivated dust and stones."

-Robert Jordan

***

Javert had never woken up with someone by his side—not since he was a child, curled against his mother for warmth, almost too young to remember. It was a strange and novel sensation.

Valjean had fallen asleep with his arm draped over Javert’s chest, and there it remained. The man still slept, curled under the sheets, his head bent toward him on the pillow. Early morning light poured in from the window to their right, illuminating his somber, peaceful expression in a soft golden hue, and making his hair look like clouds.

Javert studied him for a long time, watching his chest rise and fall. Pondered over the subtle lines etched into his face by long years of hardship and worry. The creases on his brow, and in the corners of his eyes. The tan from laboring under the hot sun, season after season, which had never entirely faded—and the faint dusting of freckles across the man’s nose.
Javert had seen Valjean a thousand times, but he felt as though he’d never really looked at him before.

It was so odd that they should find themselves like this. Not only because of their pasts, but because neither of them, it seemed, had ever experienced—nor expected—this kind of a bond with anyone. Javert had certainly never seen such a thing in his future, or given any thought to it. And Valjean … Well, perhaps Valjean had never really been given the chance.

They had been slightly intoxicated earlier, and this was why Javert had been somewhat surprised at the situation he woke to. But, though all the effects of it were gone now, his certainty remained. He did not regret what had happened. He had simply never seen it coming. Everything was new to him—this intimacy, these feelings—and yet, it seemed he’d felt this way for a long time, and had merely never known what it was.

Having never had either, Javert had not noticed, nor understood, when this friendship had grown into romance. He did not know where the line between them lay, and he did not know when or where they had crossed it. Did it even matter? He supposed not. He would not forswear the things between them now.

Javert found himself overcome with the irresistible urge to run his fingers though the man’s hair. He indulged it as gently as he could, loathe to wake him from his slumber.

There were scars beneath Valjean’s hair, Javert discovered—long, and slightly depressed. His fingers traced them gingerly. He wanted to believe they might have been from blunted shaving razors, the like of which were common among prison barbers—but they were too deep, and too long, and he could not bring himself to pretend at their origins.

The guards truly had been brutal in Toulon.

After awhile Valjean opened his eyes, glassy and half-lidded, with Javert’s hand still on his head. Their gazes gradually met. “Is this a dream?” he mumbled.

Javert considered him. Then, leaning in, he planted a kiss on his brow. “No.”

“How long had Valjean wanted this, and never told a soul?”

Javert sidled closer to him, until Valjean’s head was tucked securely under his chin. He slid his arm around him, hand resting between Valjean’s shoulder blades, and drew him in, until he could feel the puff of the man’s breath through his shirt, and sense every beat of his heart.

Pensive, Javert regarded him. A long sigh issued from his nostrils, curls of white brushing his lips. He lay there thoughtfully, marveling at the warmth of the man against him, and the precious novelty therein. A protective urge welled in his breast.

He thought of all the things Valjean had sacrificed over the years to help others. To help him. Thought of all the times the man had given himself up, had stood passive as the world sought to punish him, rather than harm those who would gladly see him in chains.

He was such a good man, Javert thought. Almost incomprehensively good.
Why had no one ever seen that before? Why had it taken so long for anyone to recognize him for what he truly was? A gentle, selfless soul, who had never ceased to be kind, even when all he ever received in return for it were bruises. A man who had undergone unimaginable suffering, all alone in the world, and misunderstood—and who, despite this, had time and time again undertaken herculean efforts to aid those around him, even though they had seldom been grateful.

How ironic, Javert mused, that he himself should be the first to realize the true depths of Valjean’s virtue. After all Javert had put him through—after decades of persecution, and torment, convinced of his malevolence—now he kissed Valjean’s brow and held him in his arms. Now he would give anything to see him safe. To comfort him, console him. And to persuade him—and the world—of his merits.

He stroked his thumb across the man’s temple, and Valjean made a small noise of contentment, nestling against him, still asleep.

Javert gazed down at him serenely, a sense of fulfillment in his bones. He felt like he held the whole world in his hands. Letting his eyes fall shut, he pressed his lips to the top of his head. Smoothed his hair, and kissed him again, and again, and again, so softly that they blended into one unending kiss.

Valjean drew in a deep breath and sighed drowsily. Slowly his eyes fluttered open. They drifted up to Javert, half awake, uncomprehending.

“Good morning,” Javert murmured.

The man gazed blearily at him. A moment later he snapped awake, his eyes popping open, his face flushing as he stared up at him in awe.

“Oh—” Valjean said, looking struck beyond reason, “my God—”

“Is that all you have to say about it?”

The man gaped at him, red as a beet. “Oh, my God,” he repeated, scrambling into a sitting position and frantically trying to divest himself of the sheets. “You— I— Last night really—”

Javert groaned and sat up like corpse from a slab. “One would think, given the chain of events, that I should be the surprised one,” he said.

Valjean continued to stare at him, helpless, a look of horror in his eyes. “So we actually—”

“Yes.”

“And I told you—”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t—?”

“No.”

Valjean seemed to be at a loss. His gaze drifted off and lost focus, his mouth still hanging slightly ajar as he processed this. “Dear God,” he said under his breath. And then he let himself fall back onto the mattress, rigid as a board, staring up at the ceiling with his hands on his chest.

Valjean was still too overwhelmed to respond.

They both stared at the ceiling in silence, one the perfect aspect of shock, and the other, that of acceptance.

A number of minutes passed.

Finally he heard Valjean’s voice beside him, small and strained. “You really love me?” it asked.

“Well. I haven’t thrown you off the bed yet, have I?”

Receiving no response, Javert turned his head to find Valjean staring at him with tears, and desperation, in his eyes. “Oh,” said Javert. The man evidently had trouble trusting his sincerity—or, perhaps, in the reality of the situation altogether.

“Come, now,” Javert murmured. He reached out and clasped Valjean’s face, brushing his hair back as he leaned in and laid a slow, solemn kiss upon his brow.

Valjean closed his eyes and drew a shaky breath.

Javert, inspired by this, redoubled his efforts, placing a kiss here, a kiss there, until at last he came to Valjean’s lips.

Valjean was, by this point, transfixed past his tears, and assented readily to it. A small, whimpering sort of noise escaped his throat, the sound of which set Javert’s heart aflame.

“Were you really—so drunk last night,” Javert asked between kisses, “—as to forget this?”

“No,” Valjean defended, “It’s only, I dared not hope that it was real! I thought it must have been a dream—that you could never possibly return my feelings—”

“Well you see,” said Javert, “you have made an egregious misjudgment.”

Valjean blinked up at him for a moment before letting out a laugh, and then several more. “It’s not a dream,” he laughed to himself, burying his face in Javert’s shirt and clutching his waist. “It’s not a dream …”

“No,” Javert murmured. “Je suis là.”

Tears welled in the man’s eyes as he laughed. And then all at once the laughter was gone, and Valjean was squeezing him tightly, his brow pressed against him with a sob. His fingers twisted themselves in the back of Javert’s shirt, arms wrapped around him as though his life depended on it. As though if Valjean didn’t hold him close enough he might disappear.

Perhaps, Javert reflected, at one point that had truly been the case.

Javert sagged in this fierce, loving grasp, regarding the head of white beneath his chin with a pitying gaze. He could feel Valjean trembling against him, rigid, suppressing now and then a ragged, tearful gasp.

Slowly Javert moved to muss the man’s hair. He curled around him and laid his head against the top of Valjean’s, inhaling the faint scent of lavender there with a deep and weary sigh. They both clutched each other closer.

“I’m here,” Javert repeated softly.
“You’re here,” the man breathed to himself.

They lay caught up in each other’s arms for a long time, as the sun filtered in through the curtains and the dust motes danced above their heads.

There was a sense of gratification between them that Javert drank in greedily. If there was a world outside of that bed, outside of that embrace, which demanded his attention, Javert did not want to hear about it. If possible, he would have been quite happy to have lain there forever.

But eventually, to his surprise, Valjean began to laugh beneath his breath.

“What is it?” Javert mumbled.

“I love you,” the man exclaimed. There was a slight giddiness to his voice, a tone of disbelief.

“Mm,” hummed Javert.

“And you love me!”

“Yes.”

Valjean’s eyes shot open. “Oh,” he said, “My God. What are we going to do?”

Javert paused to consider this. “Breakfast seems like the next logical step.”

***

In the privacy of the water closet, Jean Valjean went about his daily ablutions. It was a familiar, calming ritual; and yet he had never in doing so felt more odd. He had not been without Javert since before the soirée. He hadn’t the chance to process what had happened at all. And now, for the first time since then, he was alone.

He contemplated his situation as he scrubbed his face, pressing the cloth to his eyes for a moment and inhaling deeply before letting his breath out in a pensive sigh. When he reopened his eyes, they met his reflection in the small, ornate mirror above the wash basin.

He stared.

Here stood a man that was almost familiar to him. And yet, it was strange to think the figure was he. For this was a man who had everything. This was a man who was happy.

The man in the glass, with his snow-white hair and his wrinkles—his tan skin and his cognac eyes—was a well-respected man. A beloved father, soon to be grandfather. A business man, a bourgeois—a Guardsman, and a Knight in the Legion of Honor.

How could this man in the mirror and he be one in the same? Jean Valjean was a peasant. Jean Valjean was a convict. Jean Valjean had spent twenty years in the bagne. Jean Valjean—the orphan, the wretch—had never been a lover, husband, or even a friend.

And yet he stood here, and the man reflected back at him … did not even remotely resemble a man with such a sordid history.
Valjean regarded his image fixedly, searching it for he knew not what.

Last night, he thought, touching the glass, Javert had brushed this man’s cheek. Javert had kissed this man. Javert had held him in his arms.

What was it Javert saw in him? What was it Javert felt, when he looked in his eyes?

Was it possible, he wondered, that Javert felt the same as he? Could that stoic man, who once seemed so cold and unfeeling, be truly capable of such a deep, unfathomable love? And could it really be that Jean Valjean—as incredible, and ironic, and absurd as it might seem—could be the object of it?

The mere idea of this made him shudder with something indescribable.

Valjean had never been loved like that in his life. Had never expected to be loved like that. Had never even known that such a love existed until now. And, knowing what he felt for Javert, he found it well nigh inconceivable that such a thing—such a bottomless, desperate ocean of need—could ever be requited.

And yet, Javert had kissed him. Javert had not cast him out. Javert had allowed him to sleep at his side.

And even now, Javert was in the other room, awaiting his return.

Was it real, then? Could it be true?

A shiver shot through his spine; his hand shot to his mouth. His eyes began to burn with tears. He clamped his fingers tightly over his lips, so as to stifle the sound of the few, stunted sobs that shook his frame.

That someone would love him! That it was not a mere fantasy borne of his loneliness! That he should find such a thing after all these years—after all of those dismal nights he was convinced he’d die an outcast! It overwhelmed him.

How was it that he’d not only become beloved, but beloved by the one person he would have least expected—and whose life, against all odds, had been entwined with his from the start? How was it that they could have been so disparate for so long, and yet now fill the empty places in each other as though they’d always been meant to? It was impossible; it could not be real—and yet it was! And that was what broke him.

He had spent so long—so long alone, and now …

A muffled sob escaped his lips. A second, caught in his throat, choked him. It became a laugh. He laughed in disbelief, as the tears slid down his cheeks, and wiped them away with the back of his hand, his reflection before him like a stranger he was pleased to make acquaintances with.

***

Javert was adding wood to the fire when Valjean returned. He knelt on one leg beside the hot stove, his sleeves rolled up and his hair tied in a messy braid. Small beads of perspiration glistened on his brow, and the flames glittered in his eyes.
Pausing at the doorway, Valjean watched him, dazzled. By what, he was unsure of. That Javert was in his shirtsleeves, perhaps. That Javert was heating coffee for him. That Javert looked exceptionally beautiful somehow, despite his dishevelment. Valjean felt his face warm at the sight of him.

It felt special, to watch him perform this most basic of tasks—to be privy to his morning habits, his little idiosyncrasies—the solemn, peaceful expressions he made as he focused, unaware he was being observed. Valjean was humbled to consider that he alone had been granted this intimacy.

Shutting the grate of the stove, Javert stood and looked over his shoulder, noting him with a start. “Ah—” His eyes flicked down for a second before darting away, drawing a hand to his mouth as though to cover a cough.

Could it be, he realized, that Javert was blushing?

Was the man embarrassed by the prior night’s events? Or was it possible, Valjean asked himself, that Javert, too, was now flustered by the sight of him?

Before anything could be remarked on this, Javert cleared his throat and turned back to the stove, removing the pot and busying himself with coffee fixtures. “Would you, er, like for me to toast some bread? I can filch some from the kitchen downstairs if it pleases you. And there is often jam or butter in the larder.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

It was far from the first time Javert had cooked him breakfast, but something about its domesticity embarrassed him.

“I’ll just be a moment, then,” Javert said, and he was out the door before Valjean could get a word in.

Adrift, Valjean paced aimlessly about the empty apartment. He spied his cravat and fastened it about his neck, fumbling at the knot. He felt suddenly vulnerable, and very underdressed. His tailcoat hung on a hook beside the door, and he reached out to grasp it—but then, he thought, if he put it on, Javert would feel as though he ought to put his on, too, and for some reason that stayed Valjean’s hand.

Javert returned swiftly with a plate of bread slices and a few small jars tucked under his arm. He was so preoccupied, however, that when he arrived he nearly opened the door into Valjean’s face, lurching back with a start as he discovered their proximity.

My god, Valjean realized, the man really was blushing! It was hard to tell from a distance, for the darkness of his skin, but there it was, a faintly reddish hue to the brown of his cheeks, and the tip of his nose.

With a mumbled apology, Javert skirted him and fled back to the kitchen, putting the food down on the counter and pouring out coffee into two identical mugs. “Sugar?” he asked mechanically.

“S’il vous plaît.”

There was a frenetic energy to the man as he spooned and stirred it in, thrusting it across the counter without looking up. Immediately, he set to procuring a frying pan from a cupboard, laying in the bread. His appearance was almost frantic.

“Javert,” Valjean began, sidling up to him, “Are you all right?”
“What? Yes,” Javert said, trying to stuff a third slice into the pan which did not quite fit. Only he said it far too quickly, so that the syllables bled into one another, and it sounded more like ‘whadyez,’ than anything intelligible. “I’m quite well,” he added, just as quick.

“It’s just that you seem … a little tense,” Valjean said.

“Tense? I’m not tense. I’m just exceedingly b—” Here he jumped, for Valjean had touched his arm. The arm jerked back; the whole body recoiled; Javert stared at him, frozen in place.

Valjean frowned at him imploringly.

Slowly, Javert pinched the bridge of his nose, stepping back from the stove and taking a deep, shaky breath. He let it out in a sigh, shoulders sagging. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve never done this before. I’ve never … been with anyone, before.”

Valjean took a step towards him, knitting his brow. “I’ve been alone all my life as well,” he said softly. “I don’t know what I’m doing either.”

Something sad passed behind Javert’s eyes, and was gone. “What,” he scoffed, “are we supposed to make it all up as we go along, then?”

“Perhaps so,” Valjean returned.

Javert huffed. “I thought—I thought at least you would have some notion of what you were doing, but no. You haven’t the slightest idea how to proceed from here, have you?”

Valjean pursed his lips and glanced away. “I rather doubted I would get this far, honestly, so … I never quite considered what would happen if I did. I’m still having trouble believing this is happening at all. But—” He gently took Javert’s hands in his own. “I think … this is whatever we choose to make it. And where we go from here is up to you.”

Javert stared at him froggishly. “Um— Ah.” He stood speechless for a moment and then withdrew, wringing his hands, his eyes wide. “I don’t—know what I want. I’ve never wanted things before. I’ve never—” He put his head in his hands and bent over the counter. “You see what I mean? I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“In matters such as these, it may be that no one knows what they’re doing,” Valjean mused. “I certainly don’t. But, I don’t think that’s anything to be ashamed of. I think that it’s simply the way of things. And perhaps we are well-matched in our ignorance.”

Javert shot him an incredulous look. “Yes,” he said to himself, “What a magnificent pair of fools we are.”

“We may be fools,” Valjean said, reaching out to clasp Javert’s hand where it rested on the countertop, “—but, at least, we are a pair.”

Javert lowered his other hand to look at him.

“Non?” Valjean murmured.

The man’s gaze drifted to the weathered hand atop his own. He furrowed his brow at it. Then, tenderly, he took and squeezed it back. “Yes,” he finally breathed. And it sounded like a promise.
The toast almost burned after that, but with a little maneuvering and a few curses Javert managed to save it. Valjean wanted to help, but there was little to do, and Javert chided him for trying, so the man meandered about the apartment instead. He looked somewhat lost, and Javert did not blame him. Javert felt somewhat lost himself.

Javert was about to ask Valjean what jam he preferred when he heard the man’s voice around the corner.

“Do you want to see something?” he said.

Javert paused in the doorway, eyeing him warily. “Um …”

He found Valjean staring in the mirror that hung on the wall between the hearth and the kitchen door, a melancholy, trance-like look in his eyes.

“Do you remember the night you were shot?” the man asked.

Javert blinked. “I should think I’d remember something like that, yes.”

“You remember how you stepped in front of me to shield me from the gun?”

“Of course.”

“The bullet pierced your breast and struck me in the arm,” Valjean told him. “And I would not remark upon it, except that, well—look.” Unbuttoning his waistcoat, he pulled down the sleeve of his blouse to reveal his right shoulder, and Javert gave a start.

The ugly prison brand, which had marked Valjean as a galley-slave for life, had been shot straight through, bisected perfectly now by a pale white scar, as though the letters, “TP”, had been crossed out by some invisible hand—his sentence rescinded.

Javert regarded it with wonder. Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached out, his fingertips brushing the mark with a sort of reverence.

Surprisingly, Valjean did not flinch at the contact. He remained stoic, a pensive look in his eyes as they met Javert’s. “I am here today because you protected me,” he said. “I am free because you came to my defense.”

Javert deliberated on this, lost in thought. He noted the intensity in the man’s gaze, and felt blood warm his face. Without thinking, he watched Valjean take his collar, and lean into him, and kiss his lips. And, without thinking, he kissed him back. His eyes had closed before he knew it, and he craned his neck to get a better angle, reaching around the man’s waist to pull him closer. The breath trembled in his chest, and a sigh passed through him.

Finally Valjean drew away, laughing beneath his breath.

“What?” said Javert.

“You are so tall I have to stand on my toes.”

“Oh,” Javert mumbled, glancing at the floor. “I’ve poor news for you, then.”
“Eh?”

“I’ve not yet put on my boots.”

Valjean looked at him blankly for a second before bursting into a peal of mirthful laughter, and god be damned if it wasn’t one of the most beautiful things Javert had ever seen.

And he knew, in that moment, that they were going to be all right.

Everything was strange, and new, and embarrassing, but—if they could still laugh like this—talk like this—then he had nothing to fear. And if things between them had changed—well, it had not changed them, and he was contented with that.

***

They sat down to breakfast together in the little kitchen, the room warm from the heat of the stove, munching peaceably in silence.

By the time Valjean had nearly finished the meal, his bashfulness had begun to return, as he postulated how he might present the question that had begun to burn at him.

“So, er, I was wondering ... Javert, if—if you were amenable to the idea, do you think we could perhaps ... spend another evening like this, some time? When your schedule permits it, of course.”

Javert’s eyebrows shot up. He stared at the coffee in his mug as though it held some newfound interest. “Another evening ... like this?”

“You know—together.”

Setting the mug down, Javert laced his fingers and glanced away. “Ah, yes. That—um ... I suppose I would not find that objectionable,” he mumbled.

Valjean sat up a little on his stool. “Really? You would like for it?”

“It would not ... be unwelcome, if that’s what you’re asking. In any case, I do not think I could resist you, should you press the issue.”

Valjean flushed. “But you—you would like for it?”

A panicked look entered the man’s eyes, and he hid his face behind his mug. “Yes,” he finally said.

At this admission Valjean’s very soul was set to sparkling, though he could not find the words to express himself, and so confined the emotion to a single “Ah!” and a gladsome grin. He turned his gaze to his drink as well, bubbling with joy like a spring colt, yet tempered by his nerves and sense of decency. A tiny laugh escaped his lips. “For so long I— Well. That is to say, I have felt your absence strongly these past months. At night, especially. I would wake from some nightmare and be more upset at your not being there than anything I’d dreamt. It began to feel like a piece of me was missing. Like I wasn’t whole without you.”

Here he hung his head, afraid he had been too direct. “Forgive me; I speak too bluntly. I merely —”
“No,” Javert interrupted. “I—I feel the same. When they arrested you—when they took you away—it was like … like they were taking my raison d’être.”

Valjean gaped at this declaration. For a moment he could not work his mouth, and then he let out a nervous laugh. “I thought you said I had stolen your raison d’être?”

“I rather think you became it.”

Both of them stared wide-eyed at each other, a frightening gravity in the air, terrified of their own solemnity. In unison, they broke their gaze, eyes darting to opposite side of the room as they hoisted their mugs to their face and began sipping frantically from them. This diversion only lasted as long as their coffee, however, and soon they had drunk the last dregs, and sat in awkward silence.

“We are … not very practiced at this,” Javert remarked.

Valjean gave a smirk. “No, we are not.”

Then they were chuckling softly to themselves, and clutching their heads at their foolishness.

Javert’s chuckles petered off in an exasperated sigh. “Just when I think you cannot possibly surprise me any further … Just when I think you cannot possibly make my life any more complicated … you do this, and now I am eating breakfast with you, and I have no idea what we’re doing, and—and I can barely toast bread without burning it!”

Valjean smiled wryly at him. “I am sorry I complicate matters so,” he apologized. “It seems nothing is ever simple in regards to we two.”

“God help us,” said Javert.

“Perhaps,” Valjean offered, “next time, I could make breakfast for you?”

The man looked up at him, considerate.

“I am told I make a halfway decent sweet bread,” Valjean added.

Javert’s gaze drifted to the floorboards, one corner of his mouth turning up, just slightly, as he tried to hide it. “That sounds nice.”

***

Chapter End Notes

**Javert:** So, uh, I guess we're like ... in some sort of relationship with each other. What are we supposed to do now?

**Valjean:** I don't know. I didn't think I'd get this far ...

Fun thing about the chapter title: when I was younger, having no knowledge on it, I thought that the movie "An Officer and a Gentleman" was, like, a gay romance or something
Ugh I know this chapter was a little short comparatively but I wanted to get something out ... Also it was going to be longer with some time skip stuff but I decided to add more before that and split it on account of, like, tonal differences ... so those spoilers I put on Discord are actually for next chapter now >_<;;

Sooooooo many people made fanart and stuff since the last chapter holy shit it took me forever to link them all!! Thanks you guys so much you're so wonderful and I'm so sorry I took so long to update this stupid thing omg

hellenhighwater painted these fabulous swooshy starry boys

I basically ascended when I saw this lovely piece by dove564, omg

deez-art created this hilarious comic of an earlier scene

I don't remember if I officially announced marquise-de-clarabas was working with people to make a French translation of AROS???

Look at this awesome art by deez-art!!

marquise-de-clarabas drew a bunch of AROS characters!

voidify made this cute cover art for the whole-ass song bricktor-i-guess wrote and SUNG???

hellenhighwater made this ridiculously stylish cover type thing for AROS

Here is a cute thing by elli-s-art, and another version here

mistysblueboxstuff made this gorgeous painting

shenno-r drew this amazing thing (not for this fic specifically but they mentioned it anyway and uhhhh it's adorable)

~

Suggested Listening:

Songs from “Friday Afternoons”, Op.7 - Cuckoo! - Choir of Downside School, Purley

Dearly Beloved (Piano) - Kaoru

Memories of Gondoa - Joe Hisaishi

It's Love, Isn't It (cover) - Vini Silviera

First Love - Joe Hisaishi

End Notes

I love you all and I hoard your comments like a sad dragon hoarding anti-depressants.
Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!