The Icarus Experiment

by stvrkey

Summary

Grantaire's family is the largest collection of idiots he's ever seen exist in one place without succumbing to death by natural selection. They're ridiculous, chaotic, sad, furious, utterly codependent, and, er, they have wings. They're also imprisoned in a secret government facility that experiments on them for unknown (but Grantaire's gonna go ahead and say sinister) reasons. The revolution will not be civilised.

Notes

You don't need to have read Maximum Ride, or Les Mis come to think of it. Which is good because this bastard is long.

CW for things you'd expect re: child imprisonment, torture and experimentation. Nothing too graphic, just a heads up. Honestly, the worst part is probably like the emotional / mental illness stuff, so if major depression etc freaks you maybe this isn't for you? Take care of yourselves my kiddlings.
Chapter 1

“I notice you’ve been reading Homer recently, Grantaire.”

“Sure. The Iliad, The Odyssey, they’re okay.”

“They’re unusual choices, don’t you think?”

“Not really.”

“Enjolras focuses his reading time on more current works, on non-fiction, doesn’t he?”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“What is it you like specifically about the Greek myths?”

“The happy endings,” Grantaire says with an awful smile.

Grantaire’s front baby tooth is loose. He wiggles it with his tongue, in time with his dangling, swinging feet.

“I’d like you to fill this questionnaire out, please. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Grantaire scribbles black marks down the left-hand column. He gives the sad faces hats and monocles and wings. He hands it back for the man to inspect and file.

“Can I go now?”

The therapist smiles dispassionately and says, “Of course.”

Grantaire jumps off the chair and runs out the room.

"'Taire," Enjolras half-whispers in his ear, "'Taire, wake up."

Grantaire makes an indistinct noise that sounds something like, "Enj," and cracks his eyes. Enjolras's hair is stuck on end in a way that rivals Grantaire's own post-sleep fluff, and his eyes are rimmed red. Grantaire doesn't bother asking any questions, just closes his eyes and catches Enjolras's hand to pull him under the covers. Once there, he smooshes Enjolras into the bed and lies half on top of him, falling asleep with a face full of blonde curls only moments later.

Enjolras doesn't sleep well, is the thing. He tosses and turns and fidgets. He has nightmares that he doesn't talk about and wakes up out of breath, like he's been running, or else crying. Somehow having Grantaire nearly flatten him is the only thing that lets him get a full night's sleep. Grantaire doesn't really know why someone who needs freedom like most people need to breathe air would be comforted by dead weight, but he's not going to ask either.

“'Taire," Enjolras half-whispers in his ear, "'Taire, wake up."
“I can’t do it right.”

“Sure you can, you just got to do it lots. Your hand learns slower than you.”

“How’d you do the circle so well?” Enjolras is pouting, jaw stuck out, eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s just like a tiny sun. Draw it faster, don’t worry about wiggling and you won’t.”

Enjolras scowls and leans further over the table, pencil clutched awkwardly between four finger tips and writes a a a a a.

He wakes up before Enjolras in the morning, as usual, and carefully disentangles himself from the other's octopus limbs. Then he retrieves his sketchpad from under the pillow that Enjolras has appropriated.

He sits back against the dorm wall, crosses his legs and considers how the dawn light from the windows falls across the shapes of Enjolras. His wings are soft curves tucked loosely against his back, the same colour as the sun when it hits the lake in the evening. It’s the kind of gold that looks liquid in its hundred hues of caramel and honey and ochre, and it throws off a trembling, dancing brightness that Grantaire never tires of. Enjolras’s hair has the same uncanny gold-leaf beauty. His skin is warm bronze and his eyes, when they're open, are like amber stuck in glass. Grantaire loves him. He loves him in that same overwhelming, all-encompassing way that he loves flying: the smell of the air and the whistling, biting wind and the wet of the clouds, the way the trees and hills look like fluffy rumpled blankets and the hard, shining blue of the lake. It’s the same with Enjolras, every single one of his senses is in love. Maybe sometimes he finds himself staring too long at Enjolras, with too much fascination. He doesn't worry that Enjolras will notice - Enjolras hardly notices anything - but he's wary of how far the scientists can see into his heart. He’s only little, he’s all too aware of how easy it would be to destroy him.

“Why have you got us both in here?” Enjolras demands, “We’ve both already talked to you this week. What more do you want?”

“Careful, Enjolras, I’ll start to think you don’t enjoy our little chats.”

“I don’t,” he replies bluntly. Grantaire winces and makes a half-suppressive gesture. Enjolras quietens instantly and the man’s eyes follow the exchange, unblinking.

He smiles, snakelike. “In answer to your question, Enjolras, I thought it would be valuable to do a joint interview. That way, if one of you is feeling uncommunicative, I can focus my attentions on the other.”

There are cuffs on their arms and round their chests and little tabs on their finger tips. They know a polygraph when they see it, but the metal bars under their palms are new.

“The only unacceptable answer is a lie, I just want to know the truth, okay?”

“Not okay, I don’t consent.” Enjolras found the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a book about the United Nations when he was seven. Since then, he’s precluded every single interview and test and experiment with those words. He’s spat them in the face of every doctor and therapist and scientist in the institute. Today though, he’s being especially vitriolic. “Why should we tell you the truth? You’re worthless, sitting torturing kids to see what happens. Is your mother proud?
Go ahead and hurt me, I don’t care.” Grantaire stiffens and shoots Enjolras a look that he promptly ignores.

“Oh no,” said the man, with a polite frown, “I’m afraid we know you a lot better than that, Enjolras.”

Grantaire’s body understands the pain before he does. He doubles over with a choked-off groan and the pain soaks into every part of his body. It’s shocking, unbearable, and he’s nearly unaware of Enjolras’s desperate, “No, no, don’t. Stop it, please stop it.”

The pain lifts and Grantaire slides down his chair, numbed with the active pleasure of relief. Enjolras is stretched as close to him as possible within the confines of his bindings. His face is full of remorse.

“Now,” says the man, with a cold smile, “I just want to know the truth, that’s all. Nothing harmful. I’m going to say a series of words to you, and I want you to reply with the first word that comes to mind.”

“Word association test. Really?” mutters Enjolras, then glances nervously at the button under the man’s thoughtful fingers.

“Really, Enjolras,” says the man, “We’ll start now. Grantaire, I think you’ll go first:

“Reward.”

Grantaire knows that he can’t answer honestly. He doesn’t quite understand his reasoning but he’s sure that sincerity is the worst thing he can give these people. Thankfully his own mind isn’t as much a mystery to him as it is to others.

“Midas.”

The man blinks but continues, “Punishment?”

“Eagle.”

“Leader?” - “Lightning.”

“Anger?” - “Stone.”

“Obedient?” - “Pandora.”

“Puzzle?” - “Labyrinth.”

“Dream?” - “Morpheus.”

“Limitation?” - “Pomegranate.”

“Flying?” - “Hermes.”

“Falling?” - “Icarus.”

“Enjolras,”

Grantaire raises his eyebrows and looks from the man to Enjolras and back again. The man’s fingers hover over the switch and Grantaire blurts out, “UhhApollo.”
The man barely contains his expression of irritation, but the polygraph hasn’t beeped once. “What a metaphorical mind you have, Grantaire.”

Grantaire shrugs, but doesn’t say anything. The man turns his eyes on Enjolras, whose expression is, as always, challenging. His answers are quickfire, aggressive in contrast to Grantaire’s hoarse drawl.

“Reward?” - “Biased.”

“Punishment?” - “Cruel.”

“Leader?” - “Dictator.”

“Anger?” - “Righteous.”

“Obedient?” - “Slave.”

“Puzzle?” - “Distraction.”

“Encourage?” - “Manipulate.”

“Dream?” - “Sleep.”

“Limitation?” - “Cage.”

“Flying?” - “Mine.”

“Grantaire,”

Grantaire starts, but the man’s still looking at Enjolras. Enjolras bares his teeth and leans forward, the way he does when he knows he’s going to win the argument. “Mine,” he says, with finality, and the man actually looks disquieted, for a moment.

The worst of them, the very very worst, is Phillips. He has a way of looking that’s less detached that the others, less clinical. His smile makes Grantaire’s stomach twist and leaves him feeling shuddery and miserable. Enjolras hates him. He comes out of his individual sessions spitting fury and hate in a way that makes Grantaire worry. Today, Enjolras marches the two of them out to the flying field, utterly wordless, and somehow Grantaire worries even more.

Grantaire suggests the dancing game, because that always makes Enjolras smile. He starts humming a tune, something snatched and scrambled from one of the scientists’ radios or break-room tv shows, he’s not sure what. After a moment Enjolras smiles and lies back, holding out his hand for Grantaire. Grantaire follows him, wings unfolding over their heads, and then he tips them, pushing forwards so they were both swooping downwards headfirst, and then Enjolras folds one wing in, brushing Grantaire’s face, and they keel off at another angle altogether. They arc and twist and spin through the air, hands clasped, whooping and laughing when one of them gets the wing-tilt off or the speed wrong, causing them to crash together or spin apart.

By the time they’re exhausted, Grantaire doesn’t remember why they started. They lounge back on the updrafts, savouring the quiet security of the sky. Then Enjolras says, “The laundry shoots aren’t always locked.”

Grantaire has never had the pleasure of not understanding Enjolras’s mind. “You don’t think
they’ve thought of that?” His voice is hoarser that usual; the air is dry up here.

“If they’d thought of it, they’d be locked.” Enjolras’s face is lit up with the terrible, joyous ferocity that Grantaire loves more than anything in the world. He’s not convinced, but he’s never going to be the one to make that smile go away

When they’re next playing with their basketball in the corridor leading up to their dorm, the ball knocks one of the security cameras slightly askew.

They keep playing without seeming to notice, Grantaire cackling as the ball slips from Enjolrass’s fingers and finds its way into his arms. They skitter off in the direction of the play room.

Just before curfew Grantaire sticks a bit of gum into the lintel of the door, where the lock clicks into the wall.

The next day, they build a blanket fort close to the camera blindspot and play in it all day before falling asleep, exhausted, under the sheets.

At 3.07am they leave the dorm by way of the unlocked door, hug the wall as they make their way down the corridor, and stop by one of the laundry shoots. Enjolras opens it and they both peer down into the black space.

“You go first, if an alarm goes off, just make sure you get out,” Enjolras says, because when it gets right down to it, his hero complex reduces his IQ by about a quartile. Grantaire’s already shaking his head.

“I won’t leave without you.” Grantaire can count the times he’s said no to Enjolras on one hand, but when he does, Enjolras always listens. He’s big on consent.

Enjolras nods, and it takes a few minutes but eventually the two of them are lodged together at the opening of the shoot, heads tucked in, wings folded back, arms clasped tight around each other.

“One,” Enjolras whispers into Grantaire’s hair, “Two. Three.”

Then they’re flying through the dark cramped space of the shoot, banging off the walls. They spend so much time flying in their day-to-day lives that neither of them is as scared as they should be, but really, there’s no way their wings will be of any help in this tight a space. Grantaire realises this belatedly, with a lurching in his stomach, and then they’re flying out into the light, onto a pile of laundry bags.

It’s a struggle to sit up, to disentangle themselves and work out which way is up. When they do, Grantaire is the first one to spot Phillips, sitting on a fold-out chair with a tablet on his lap, smiling at them. His whole body washes cold.

Enjolras hits the ground with a thump and Grantaire blinks down at him.

“How are you so good at this?” Enjolras groans into the grass.

“High levels of kinesthetic intelligence,” says Grantaire, drifting to the ground.

“What?”
“Nothing, sunshine.”

Enjolras clambers to his feet and eyes the nearby oak tree with intense dislike. Then, up he climbs again, foot braced on the knot, four fingers white on a broken branch stump.

Enjolras is nothing if not determind.

“You don’t need to get your primaries out fast, it’s more important that they’re out together. Stop trying to pick a fight with the air.”

The next time Enjolras manages to get his wings synchronised enough to slow his descent. He lands a little further away in a rose bush with a high pitched yelp.

Grantaire winces and scrambles over to help extract him.

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“Whose idea was this?” Phillips asks, mildly.

“What?” says Enjolras at the same moment Grantaire says, “Mine.”

Enjolras makes and effort to stand up and face Phillips, “No, no it wasn’t, it was mine, I thought of it.”

Phillips looks at Grantaire, who meets his eye stone-faced and says, “He’s lying.”

Phillips nods thoughtfully and says, “Alright, follow me please.”

They pin him down, flat out on his belly on a surgical table and he knows he's breathing too fast but he can't seem to get enough air. They ask him again, and again, and again. “Whose idea was it, Grantaire?”

Except for the ragged, tearing, inhale-exhale pattern of his breathing, "mine" is the only sound he makes. Enjolras is screaming words Grantaire doesn't want to or can't understand, crying in a heaving, rolling noise that makes Grantaire feel physically ill because he can count on one hand the number of times that Enjolras has been incapable of making himself understood.

Then the unbearable grinding of a buzz-saw starts up and his wings are pinned. They ask him, one last time, whose fault it is and for some reason the definitiveness of the moment, the stark ultimatum, lets him breathe again. He laughs into the surgical bed, tears leaking from his eyes, and remembers the words that Enjolras mouths to himself at night, when he thinks Grantaire's asleep.

"All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights," he says as they lower the buzz saw to his wings.

"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude. No one shall be subjected to torture..." he's forgetting them now, words slipping out of his memory like ink down the sink. "No one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest. Everyone has the right to a nationality..."

"Whose idea was it, Grantaire?"

"Mine."
The pain is *indescribable*.

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It's not until later they find out that their clothes have button-microphones in them, and that any conversations they've had under the cover of clouds have been recorded and planned for accordingly. But if their plan had been to punish Enjolras into obedience - because it was never about *Grantaire*, he will eternally be collateral damage - they couldn't have failed any more spectacularly. Sure, Enjolras didn't go around openly plotting escape now, but his movements had adopted a kind of stilted, barely-contained fury. He was no longer interested in escaping; he wanted war.

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The stars are sharp and close in the blue-black sky. They fill Grantaire with silent wonder. Enjolras is staring at his knees, folded down and in, arms wrapped around, bottom lip quivering. “What if we’re here forever?” he whispers.

They’re not touching but Grantaire feels the weight of Enjolras’s trust all along his left hand side, down his cheek and jaw and neck, pressed to his chest, his thigh, his knee.

“Forever is a stupid word, Enjolras, it isn’t real.”

“What?”

“Forever doesn’t exist. Nothing is forever. People get born and die, stars go out, even the darkest night ends, Enjolras.”

“So we won’t be here forever?”

“I swear to God, Enjolras. I swear to God and Zeus and I swear on my life and yours. We won’t be here forever.”

“So you think we’ll be free? That we’ll be happy?”

“I’m promising you that forever doesn’t exist, Enjolras, I can’t give you any more than that.”

Enjolras is quiet for two beats, three. “I want to be your friend forever.”

“Well, there’s nothing to stop us trying, sunshine.”

Enjolras tips side-ways and then he’s all along Grantaire’s side, warm and soft and sad, and Grantaire hugs him tight.

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Phillips takes a special interest in Grantaire, afterwards. He sits in a single chair in one of the many plain white rooms, and focuses his gaze on Grantaire.

"Do you know that you're worthless, Grantaire?"

Grantaire nods wearily into the wall. There’s a mirror bolted to the wall opposite him. He staunchly avoids making eye contact with his own reflection.
"Tell me that you're worthless."

"I'm worthless."

"Tell me why you're worthless."

Grantaire shakes his head like he's been called to answer in maths class. Pick a number from one to infinity.

"Start at the top, work your way down. Surely you have lots to work with." Phillips gestures to the mirror with a broad, generous sweep of his arm.

The man openly enjoys these sessions. There's no bustling background of scientists or tests being run. It's just him, Grantaire, and the white room. Between the two of them, they do damage enough.

"Uh, my, uh," Grantaire closes his eyes, "My hair."

"Your hair?" Phillips prompts.

"It's, it's messy, it's tangled and, and."

"It's disgusting, Grantaire."

"Yeah."

"Can you even brush it?"

Grantaire shakes his head tiredly.

"What's next?"

Grantaire's wings are black, with a purple-green sheen that looks like oil, and they are destroyed. His coverts are the only feathers left intact - his primary and secondary feathers are a mangled mess of roadkill-proportions. His skin is wall-white, with shadows pooling in his eyes and his cheeks. He's too short for his ten years, too stocky.

And so it goes on.

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Combeferre and Courfeyrac arrive at some point in the following winter when the snow has started to form a thin film of soft white. Enjolras is instantly enthralled because here, finally, are two people who believe in the world he lays out for them - broad sweeping strokes that Grantaire finds all too easy to see the gaps in. The three of them sit together, cross-legged, and plan for the downfall of the institute, plan for the future, plan for freedom. Grantaire swallows the warm lump in his throat and tries in vain to shake off the feeling that he's missing some crucial part of an optical illusion. Look, there's the amorality and injustice, right there. That bit that you think is "just the way it is" is actually systematic cruelty and oppression when you look at it with your head tilted. Grantaire tries his best not to resent Enjolras's two new friends, he honestly does, but when he's sitting in the snow of the flying field, the cold seeping up through his whole body in theatrical little shivers, they are diving and flipping and flying, up there above him, and he feels so appallingly lonely that he wants to dissolve into the snow at his feet.

Grantaire's words now leave his mouth in a slow drawl, like he can't quite work out how to form
sentences until they're already gone. His movements are slow and his facial expressions are eerily blank, flat in a way that makes Courfeyrac and Combeferre look unnerved, sometimes. He's not one half of a whole anymore - to his pained surprise Enjolras can cope quite well without his constant presence. Not belonging, it turns out, hurts more than anything Phillips can do.

It's not fair to say that they don't make an effort. Courfeyrac is wiry, with a mess of dark hair and olive skin and a thin, smiling mouth that never stops talking. He seems to assume that Grantaire comes ready-included in the whole friendship-with-Enjolras deal, because he's just as talkative when it's only the two of them. Combeferre, with his mousy brown hair, thick eyebrows and even thicker glasses, might not be brimming with social enthusiasm, but he demonstrates the polite, wordless kindness of naturally shy people that Grantaire can hardly find fault with. Still, he avoids their company, never lets himself get dragged into their coded breakfast-table conversations. He's jealous, he knows, and it lowers his own opinion of himself even further. And if sometimes he walks into rooms and they don’t see him, well, all the better for them.

They're sitting in the lunch room when a small, painfully thin boy is lead to their table and left to stand awkwardly beside them, staring at the floor.

"Hello!" says Courfeyrac, and the boy visibly jumps.

"Hi" he mouths, then clears his throat, licks his lips and says again, "Hi."

"You can sit down, you know," says Enjolras.

The boy nods jerkily and nudges the chair next to Grantaire with his foot, grips the back in a hesitant curl of fingers, pulls it out, slowly, and sits down.

"So," says Courfeyrac, "What's your name?"

The boy has long, long auburn hair and he tilts his head forwards so that it falls in a curtain in front of his freckled flick of a nose, "Jean Prouvaire," he says, without looking at any of them.

He's still staring at the table, eyes red rimmed, and something about the way his body is fixed in space sits oddly with Grantaire, an experienced practitioner at avoiding eye contact. Jean isn't shy, he's...

"You can't see," blurs Grantaire and a half-curl smile edges up Jean's face.

"No," he says.

"What?" demands Enjolras, and Grantaire sympathy-cringes as Jean shrinks back. Enjolras's voice is strident at the best of times. "Did they do that to you?"

Jean shrugs, "They were trying to get night vision right, post-embryo. Eyes are tricky, they say."

"See!" Enjolras turns to Courfeyrac and Combeferre in indignation, "This is exactly what I'm talking about! This kind of behaviour is expressly outlawed in the Geneva convention, for a start."

Grantaire snorts and rests his hand on Jehan's small, pale one. Clearly, this meeting needs an intervention if Jean's ever going to speak to them again. "Don't mind him - that's Enjolras. He lacks emotional intelligence, if you couldn't tell. But he's pretty so everyone lets him away with it." Enjolras is staring at Grantaire's hand with a baffled horror that would make more sense if Grantaire had grabbed a live scorpion. Grantaire doubts he heard a word, otherwise he would be
profusely negating any importance of his looks re: his political ideology.

"Courfeyrac is across from you" Grantaire says.

Courfeyrac gets with the program and trills, "That's meeeweeewee.""...He talks all the time. If you don't recognise his voice now, don't worry, you will soon." Jehan laughs quietly, turning his palm up to fit his fingers into Grantaire's. Courfeyrac laughs as well, if only because all he normally sees Grantaire display is stony silence and this departure into the land of communication delights him.

"And Combeferre's across from Enjolras."

"Hello," says Combeferre quietly, "Nice to meet you, Jean."

Jean smiles into his hair and murmurs to Grantaire, "Who are you?"

"I'm Grantaire. No one important, I promise." Grantaire says, smiling. Jean smiles back without looking at him and rocks his arm into Grantaire's, bringing his mouth level to Grantaire's ear. "I don't believe you," he whispers. And Grantaire laughs.

Jean’s hearing is uncannily good. He can place asleep or not asleep by the sound of the quiet, breathing dorm, he can differentiate the numbers being typed into a keypad by the distance between the beeps (Enjolras nearly explodes when he lets that slip, but most of the main doors are opened with a biometric/keycard/pin code combination, so unless he’s intent on getting into the kitchens Grantaire can’t see much use in the skill besides sheer awesomeness). Jehan sits with his ear pressed to the dorm window, listening to the wind when it’s howling at night and he prefers the sound of Jehan, to Jean, when Grantaire says it by accident.

One day he says conversationally, “Enjolras hates me.”

“He what?” sputters Grantaire, before instantly negating, “No he doesn’t.”

“He does,” says Jehan serenely. They’re sitting under a tree in the flying yard, while the others swoop and swirl above them. Jehan is threading flower stems together, forming a long string, although just how he’s doing it is entirely beyond Grantaire. Every time he tries he ends up tearing the tiny stems, and he can see them. His quiet suspicion that Jehan might actually be capable of sorcery keeps him from pressing.

“I can hear it,” continues Jehan, threading one more flower onto the chain, “In his voice, when he talks to me, or when I’m around.”

Grantaire sputters, completely at a loss, “Have you heard him speak to the people he hates? The theme of non-consensual experimentation tends to come up, just a bit.”

Jehan laughs in the quiet, pretty way he has.

“Maybe he doesn’t hate me,” he allows, “But he really doesn’t like me.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Grantaire, “If there’s anyone he doesn’t like, it’s me.”

Jehan looks him dead in the eye and quite thoroughly implies exactly how much of an idiot he thinks Grantaire is.
Grantaire’s sure of it now. How does a blind kid look you in the eye? Sorcery.

“I annoy him recently, I can tell.” Grantaire dumps his chin in the peak of his folded knees and hugs his shins, “He wants me to be more dedicated to getting out.”

“You can’t feel what you don’t feel,” says Jehan sagely, dropping his completed flower ring on Grantaire’s head with eerie accuracy.

“If we ever get out of here you have a big future ahead of you in fortune-cookie writing,” says Grantaire and Jehan beams at him.

“Now that’s the kind of optimism Enjolras wants!”

“Why doesn’t he like you?” Grantaire asks, after a pause. He’s secretly, very secretly, not that upset. He likes having Jehan all to himself.

Jehan just smiles and starts another flower crown, humming quietly.

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It starts with a weighted feeling in his limbs, an unwillingness to stand up from the breakfast table, a strange, sleepy draining of concentration that stops him from reading even his favourite books. And then some days Grantaire can’t make himself leave his bed. It’s a weird feeling, he reflects from his cocoon of starchy white bedsheets, and he can’t quite put his finger on it. It’s a kind of numb, horrified paralysis that clicks into place in his brain and jams up all the gears, stopping them dead. He doesn’t feel bad per say, at least not in any other way that he’s ever felt bad: upset or worthless or scared or bitter. It resembles the feeling he had the morning after they took his wings, if he had to compare it to anything: waking up, remembering, and feeling a cold heaviness settle in his stomach - the emotional antithesis of gulping tea on a hot day. But now when he wakes up there’s no remembering, the feeling’s just there, waiting for him in a fist-sized lump below his ribcage. The feeling horrifies Grantaire to the point that he doesn’t even want to look at it, even if he can’t always help the wobbly-tooth instinct to flick.

Enjolras, for the first time in their ten years living the same life, gets up before him and stands over the bed. At first he is bemused, then concern rapidly free-falls into anxiety, something Grantaire rarely sees Enjolras display. A nurse is brought in to look at him after several imperious, monologueing demands from Enjolras to the security cameras, and the child-lab-rat equivalent of a union strike taking place in their dorm. The nurse looks him over, takes his temperature, checks his pupils, takes some blood. She sighs, glances at her folder, then at the security camera, and then at the miserable huddle of Grantaire.

“There’s nothing physically wrong with him,” she says, in a strange kind of way that seems to induce a reaction in the Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Jehan.

Enjolras just scowls, “Of course there is, look at him.”

The nurse shakes her head and leaves and Enjolras rails for hours until Courfeyrac says quietly, “Enjolras, we’re valuable to them. If Grantaire was sick, they’d treat him.”

Grantaire ignores them and curls tighter.

So from then on Enjolras directs at least part of his furious anxiety at Grantaire. “Get up,” he orders and sometimes Grantaire will, shakily, as if expecting the floor to disappear from under his feet.
Sometimes Grantaire just looks at him with a kind of incredulous humour, eyes big and dark and agonised. At these moments, Grantaire feels Enjolras might as well order him to fly for all the obedience he’d get. He’s not Houdini, he can’t escape the impossible.

Eventually, after countless entreaties, demands and actual physical *tugging*, Enjolras screams at him, bursts into tears, and storms out. Grantaire, with an unfamiliar sensation of determination, gives the cold lump under his diaphragm a shove. "What," he screams at it, and it feels like it echoes through his empty body, "What do you want?" It teeters, like a tooth on its last bloody string, and Grantaire realises with a tiny *ah hah* moment what he wants. Quite simply, he wants to die.

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The glass bulbs in the bedside lamp are easily broken into shards and if Grantaire stares at them for a little too long sometimes, his only excuse is that pain would be a nice break from nothing.

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At this point Jehan proves himself not just unnaturally perceptive for a kid with no functioning optical nerves, but potentially mildly psychic. He climbs into Grantaire’s cocoon with him and hugs him tight and Grantaire feels something loosen from around his ribs. He dissolves into violent, silent sobbing, and Jehan just cuddles closer. They stay like that for most of the day, with Jehan occasionally venturing out for food. He doesn’t say anything, just plays with Grantaire’s curls and stares off into space.

Come the evening Enjolras is standing over them with grim determination on his face and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in his hands. “Get up,” he says, to Jehan this time, and Jehan clambers out of the bed with that mild, *I’m not saying anything* look he gets when he’s annoyed. Enjolras ignores him and lies down in the warm space left behind, moving Grantaire, floppy and doll-like onto his chest. Grantaire abandons the foetal position and octopuses himself to Enjolras, arms round his chest, legs tangled with his, head in the cradle of Enjolras’s neck.

Enjolras clears his throat, ignores the audience of Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Jehan with the dismissiveness of a true leader and says into Grantaire’s curls, “God reduces Chaos into order. He separates the four elements, and disposes the several bodies, of which the universe is formed, into their proper situations. At first, the sea, the earth, and the heaven, which covers all things, were the only face of nature throughout the whole universe, which men have named Chaos; a rude and undigested mass, and nothing more than an inert weight, and the discordant atoms of things not harmonizing, heaped together in the same spot. No Sun as yet gave light to the world; nor did the Moon, by increasing, recover her horns anew. The Earth did not as yet hang in the surrounding air, balanced by its own weight, nor had Amphitrite stretched out her arms along the lengthened margin of the coasts. Wherever, too, was the land, there also was the sea and the air; and thus was the earth without firmness, the sea unnavigable, the air void of light; in no one of them did its present form exist. And one was ever obstructing the other; because in the same body the cold was striving with the hot, the moist with the dry, the soft with the hard, things having weight with those devoid of weight.”

Grantaire falls asleep somewhere around Juno putting Argus’s eyes in the peacock’s tail and the next morning, he gets up with the first rays of light. He shuffles into the bathroom to wash his face, studiously avoiding his own reflection in the mirror. Instead, he watches the water swirl endlessly down the drain and brushes his teeth.

Enjolras bends over his shoulder and spits toothpaste foam into the sink and Grantaire wonders when he got up, and how slow, exactly, his brain is working that he can’t keep up with Enjolras,
whose activity levels more closely resemble a tree sloth than a human in the morning.

“I think your teeth are clean enough,” Enjolras says imperiously, removing Grantaire’s toothbrush from his mouth and sticking it, along with his own, in the glass by the sink.

“Probably,” Grantaire mumbles.

Enjolras turns him, so they’re facing, and Grantaire curls forward against his chest because he can’t bare Enjolras looking at him right now.

Enjolras pulls away, takes Grantaire’s face in his hands and stares him down. Eventually Grantaire looks up, if only because he can’t bear the implicit disappointment.

“I can’t do this without you,” Enjolras says quietly, “Please don’t leave me here.”

Grantaire startles, nearly pulling away, “I would never leave you!” he says, mildly offended, because there’s not much he wouldn’t do in the world but Enjolras is right up there with oxygen, his five senses and clean water in terms of necessity.

Enjolras just looks at him with those big, anxious eyes, like he’s fresh from a nightmare and crawling into Grantaire’s bed, and Grantaire can’t do anything but nod. “I won’t leave you, Enjolras. I promise, I’ll never leave.”

Enjolras accepts this without hesitation because there’s nothing and no one in the world that he trusts like Grantaire. “I won’t leave either you, you know,” Enjolras says firmly, “Never ever ever. I’d die first.”

A solitary chill run down Grantaire’s back, like a drip of water, and he crumbles forwards into Enjolras’s chest. Enjolras grabs Grantaire close and hugs him, like he can keep the outside world from existing if he just holds on tight enough.

Combeferre and Coufeyrac have always been easily startled by him, always half as likely to see him as not in the canteen, in the playroom or the dorm. Grantaire puts this down to them not really liking him all that much. He knows as well as anyone: horrible things that won’t go away are best ignored. At least he’s learned to conceal the worst of the poison in his head, at least he can leave his bed now, if only because he doesn’t care enough to stay in it. Pity is infinitely worse than being ignored.

Four months later, Cossette, Eponine and Gavroche arrive. The girls are a study in opposites, Eponine with her choppy, shiny-black hair, dark almond eyes and little kiss of a mouth (that’s almost always turned down in a tiny, ferocious pout) and Cosette, with her flyaway golden ringlets and tall, willowy child-grace. Gavroche is a one-child wrecking ball, with soft baby cheeks and Eponine's hair and eyes and spirit.

And here’s the thing: they can’t see him. He doesn’t notice, not really, but when he speaks - some half-hearted drawl of welcome - they jump and stare. And then Gavroche opens his mouth and out spills, “What’s wrong with you?”

Grantaire hunches, dark, wild eyes behind an even darker, wilder fringe, and looks down at himself.

“What are you talking about?” Enjolras asks, offended as if he’s the one who’s being stared at. He’s holding tightly onto Grantaire’s elbow.
“You’re all…” Gavroche waves his hand in Grantaire’s general direction, “You’re dark, you’re…” He stops and looks at the girls in frustration.

“That’s so weird,” says Eponine, moving her head back and forth like he’s an optical illusion, “What is wrong with you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him!” Enjolras exclaims at the same time as Coufeyrac bounds into the conversation with,

“Oh, it’s fine, he always looks like that.”

Enjolras and Grantaire turn to look at him with equal bafflement.

“Like he’s on a bad radio reception,” says Combeferre quietly.

Coufeyrac nods enthusiastically as Eponine says,

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

“I’m what, I’m invisible?” Grantaire asks, because he’s not usually this oblivious and he didn’t realise that Combeferre and Coufeyrac had an actual metaphysical problem with him, rather than a conversational one.

“No,” Cosette muses, “It’s more like my eyes don’t want to focus on you, they just kind of—”

“Skip over you,” Eponine finishes, “I can see you when I concentrate.”

Grantaire is speechless. As usual, Enjolras fills the space, “You’re all being ridiculous. I can see him just fine.”

“Me too,” says Jehan quietly, then blushes to his roots when people give him incredulous looks. “I mean, I can’t see him. But I know when he’s in the room.”

“I always tap you,” says Grantaire, comprehension dawning. “I touch your arm or back. So I don’t spook you. First thing I do when I come in a room. Otherwise you do jump.”

Jehan smiles shyly and Enjolras scowls a little.

Combeferre looks fascinated, “I can’t believe you didn’t know. We thought you just didn’t want to talk about it.”

The look Grantaire gives him is more than a little wide-eyed. “No, I didn’t know I was invisible.”

“No invisible!” Coufeyrac objects, “Just—”

“Semi-transparent, right, I get it,” Grantaire mutters.

“If I had to describe it as anything, I’d say it was the exact opposite of whatever Enjolras is.” Combeferre said thoughtfully.

Grantaire and Enjolras look at each other again.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Grantaire says blankly.

He’s met with five identical looks of incredulity.
“You have to be joking,” Eponine sneers, “He’s practically got sparkle, sparkle, look at me written across his forehead. It’s like ignoring a really bright light.”

Eponine is officially Grantaire’s favourite, after that. After Enjolras. And Jehan.

But they don’t get any closer to solving the mystery of Grantaire’s ghostliness.

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The Flock are not the only experiments at the Institute. There is another cohort, an experimental group of ten children who got the decidedly shorter end of the genetic-splicing stick. Instead of wings, they have teeth, instead of careful observation and opportunity for self-education, their development was marked by obedience training and brutal, indiscriminate violence. The Flock call them Les Minettes, a name Grantaire had coined when he and Enjolras were much younger and Enjolras’s fear was still an awful, trembling thing. “Don’t think of them as wolves, Enjolras. They’ve got fur. They hiss when it rains. They’re basically kittens.”

The existence of Les Minettes is a constant source of fury for Enjolras because he truly cannot understand why they obey the Invigilators, the people directly responsible for their awful, terrible, fucked up lives. Why they fall into line for the Institute, perfectly behaved guard dogs, but terrorise each other for entertainment and take genuine pleasure in being the constant hammer-fall threat that keeps the Flock from getting too unruly. They’re supposed to be on the same side, Enjolras shouts. Grantaire’s answer, that after a certain degree of brutalisation, disobedience would quite reasonably just stop occurring to people, goes on deaf ears. That doesn’t mean he particularly likes Les Minettes, but he can see where they’re coming from.

One overcast Thursday the Flock are let into the yard adjacent to their usual one. In this enclosure, the caged roof is too low for flight, just higher than the height of a normal ceiling. It limits their movements drastically, Gavroche most of all who is a frenetic tangle of energy when he has the space to move, and resembles a human-sized pinpong ball when he doesn’t. Eponine and Jehan entertain him with a racing game. Cosette, Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Enjolras sit around discussing who knows what. Grantaire naps in the sun. A few hours later Les Minettes stroll in leisurely and the gate relocks behind them with an electric buzz. Three of them circle Enjolras - the biggest, brightest target in any given area – but slowly, and from a distance. Grantaire eyes them lazily; he’s faster, let them fucking try.

Montparnasse trundles over to Grantaire and, on getting no reaction whatsoever, gives him a half-hearted kick. Grantaire turns slowly to his friend and says drily, “Sup ‘Parnasse.”

Montparnasse sniffs dismissively and crouches down at Grantaire’s side. Les Minettes have weird anatomy, short powerful limbs that bend strangely. “You look like shit.”

“I am glowing,” says Grantaire, without taking his eyes off of Enjolras, who is talking to Cosette but looking tense, aware of his circling audience.

Grantaire can always be abrupt with Montparnasse, can tell him the honest, no-bullshit truth. He doesn’t have to bite his tongue or measure out his poison.

“Uhuh,” says Montparnasse, fishing a half-eaten Twizzler out of his pocket and handing it off to him.

Grantaire crams the whole thing in his mouth. They don’t let the Flock have sweets.

Whatever the experiment was about (integration, the potential for semi-humanoid cannibalism on
the part of Les Minettes, Grantaire just killing everyone) the Invigilators were probably disappointed. The most dramatic thing to happen was Cosette kicking one of Les Minettes who got too close to Gavroche, Montparnasse snarling in suppressive anger – to prevent retaliation, not that Cosette knew that – and Grantaire continuing his nap on the ground, one eye always half open.

Enjolras and Grantaire are six years old. They are lead up a ramp into a small room with four gridded walls and a ceiling and left there. Squares of colour scatter out into rows along the walls, some dull, others bright, iridescent. They’ve both been in there before - individually and together – and they won’t get out until they solve the puzzle. Grantaire sits and scowls at the wall, chewing his lip. Enjolras jumps about, touches one square only for it to multiply into a cross, as across the room another two squares edge into existence. The aim is to get rid of the squares, but they keep dividing until the wall is a blur of colour. Enjolras grits his teeth and keeps going until there’s only four squares left, ones he’s wary to touch, lest they spawn more. Grantaire’s eyes have by this point narrowed to slits.

Enjolras has tears of anger in his eyes when he says, “You could help you know!”

Grantaire gets to his feet and tilts his head to one side, then the other. After a moment he shakes his head, “You can’t solve it, it’s a game.”

“What?” Enjolras sputters, before rolling right over himself, “Of course you can win it, it’s a game, that’s the point, games are for winning. I just have to work it out!” He spins on his heel, back to the wall, and knocks one of the squares hard. It bounces twice and splits into five more squares, one of which goes rolling off to be pink and square in the uppermost corner of the room.

Grantaire shakes his head again, follows Enjolras with his eyes, “No, Enj- don’t, listen.”

Enjolras kicks another square and the walls are starting to hurt Grantaire’s eyes they’re so bright.

“You’re not the one playing the game,” Grantaire says with a sigh, slumping back down to sit against the wall.

Enjolras ignores him and hunts down the pink square.

When they’re eventually allowed out, Enjolras has fallen asleep in Grantaire’s lap, his legs tucked up awkwardly to his chest. Grantaire looks at the scientist who’s there to escort them, who’s been recording, if not personally watching them for the last six hours, and 

Before Enjolras, before Courfeyrac and Combeferre and Jehan, Grantaire is alone. He’s snarling, and tiny, and wild-haired and so very alone. He’s lead inside the gates of the Institute, and the gates close behind him with a rattling bang, and he’s alone but for the children pressed against the wire fences on either side of the walkway.

At least, Grantaire assumes they’re children. Their faces have too much bone, too many teeth. Their eyes are yellow, slitted. Most importantly, they are trying to claw him to death through the wire. That’s fine. Grantaire isn’t exactly domesticated himself.

He runs his eyes over the crowd, finds the one he’s looking for out of some half-feral instinct: blond, controlled, dangerous. Grantaire springs forwards, crosses the walkway in four steps and presses himself against the mesh: teeth bared, eyes black, fingers claws.
The boy assesses him for one long moment before grinning - too many teeth - and turning away.

Grantaire doesn’t have any problem with Les Minettes after that.

Montparnasse, the boy in question, is also the first thing he ever has resembling a friend. He’s cruel sometimes and annoying always, a ferocious combination of playfulness and amorality. Grantaire only seeks him out when he’s in desperate need of company, which, honestly is more often than he’d like.

The two of them are there, in the yard, when Enjolras is brought in.

The rain cascades out of the cloudy evening skies, drenching everyone and Grantaire would really rather be anywhere else. He hates the cold, hates the way the rain soaks his feathers, making them drag. A boy is pushed into the walkway, the door is shut, Les Minettes prowl to the edges of the yard, up against the wire fence. They growl, throats revving like some awful engine from hell. It’s the same play for dominance that Grantaire had been subjected to, some year ago, and he’s curious to see how this new wolf cub reacts. It always bodes badly if they’re too jumpy, too submissive. Les Minettes are not a pack, and they destroy the weak for entertainment. The boy stutters to a stop, face blanched of colour in the floodlights. He’s small too, blond hair plastered to his head in thick, miserable curls. Then he turns and Grantaire sees the golden arcs of his wings, just like his but so much more beautiful. Like something from a dream. All the floodlights go out with a pop.

By the time Grantaire has recovered from his surprise, Enjolras is a blur of gold disappearing into the doors of the institute.

Grantaire doesn't like feelings, is the thing. Somewhere in his tiny, emotionally detached psyche, he understands on a fundamental level that other people hurt you and cannot be trusted. But now he's lingering in the doorway of the playroom (which Grantaire knows is the playroom because of the sign on the door, not as evidenced by any fun he's ever had there) listening to Enjolras cry like the world is ending, and he's having feelings. He's appalled and utterly confused by this development.

He doesn't want to go in, but the idea of walking away makes him feel like someone is twisting something important inside him, and it’s such a horrible feeling that he’s three steps inside the door before he notices he’s moving.

“Hey,” he says, then, “hey,” again, because he can’t think of anything at all that’ll pacify those tears. He kneels to Enjolras-level instead, hands drifting uselessly.

Enjolras looks up, and Grantaire’s heart breaks more than a little. “Hey. Everything will be okay, you know.”

“Really?” Enjolras asks with a sniff.

“Uh…” No, Grantaire wants to say, nothing will ever be okay, what planet are you from, exactly. Instead he says, “Sure. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“I’m Enjolras.” His eyes are big and sweet and earnest and Grantaire’s getting that sinking feeling he gets when he knows he’s in trouble.

“I’m Grantaire.”

Enjolras nods solemnly and then launches himself into Grantaire’s lap. He has an arm locked
around Grantaire’s neck and his face buried in the warm slope of his neck before Grantaire can properly react to his fight-or-flight options.

“You won’t leave me, will you?” Enjolras mumbles into Grantaire’s skin.

And Grantaire says no, because he’s an idiot, apparently.

Enjolras turns up subdued in the playroom with grit-burns on his face and a split lip and Grantaire feels something dark and cool and awful sweep up inside him.

Later he presses the boy responsible into the wire fence, stubby nails dug into his neck, and lets a little bit of the chaos in his head slip out.

The boy screams so loudly he tears his vocal cords and subsides into hoarse, hysterical sobbing. Grantaire flinches like he's been scalded and backs away.

He ignores how incredibly, mind-blowingly good it feels to take just the smallest edge off the pain that he had up till now assumed was just a normal deficit to having a soul.

Grantaire doesn't know what is done to the others in their individual sessions, but he doesn't think it's this.

They won't stop hurting him.

It drives him crazy, for the first while. He can feel his thoughts warping under the pressure: why are they doing this? Does he deserve it, truly? Is Phillips right, is there something about Grantaire that people just want to hurt.

Then he works out that they're testing his pain threshold, and he feels better after that.

They always give him the option to swap out with someone else, just say the word and we'll hurt Jehan instead, we'll hurt Enjolras. Grantaire thinks that for people who watch him all day, every day, they're pretty clueless about what's going on inside his skull. They actually seem to think he's a stranger to pain.

Eventually they work it out.

"Grantaire, are you in pain?" She's a woman, faceless and white-coated, the same as the rest of them, Grantaire thinks maybe she's aiming for trustworthy, understanding.

"You're not doing anything to me yet," Grantaire drawls.

"No, I mean right now, with nothing else going on. Are you in pain?"

Grantaire laughs, more than a little hysterically, and when he stops she's still waiting patiently. "Just a bit," he says.

"I see."
He shouldn't have told them. They start giving him codeine, tramadol, morphine and he fights like a feral cat every time because he can’t stand them alleviating his misery only to bring it crashing back down on top of him. He’s got an addictive personality, he knows, he can feel the potential for unbounded obsessiveness inside himself. He just has to look at Enjolras to know he shouldn’t be trusted with good things.

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"How long do you think it would take you to leave the compound?"

All the hairs on the back of Grantaire neck stand up.

"The locked and barred compound I've been imprisoned in my whole life, that compound?" Grantaire asks.

Phillips smiles in that way he does that makes Grantaire want to commit acts of violence upon his person. "Well we both know that's not quite true, don't we Grantaire?"

Grantaire doesn't answer but that's okay. Phillips loves monologuing.

"I think you could get out of here, Grantaire. I’ve seen your IQ scores. I think you could have left years ago."

"I don't agree," says Grantaire politely.

Phillips nods thoughtfully like they're having a conversation about nothing over a bar.

"How about I give you some incentive, would that help?"

Grantaire swallows, shakes his head.

Phillips nods decisively, "No, I think it would. You're very intelligent Grantaire, but you're lazy, you lack motivation."

"I have plenty of-"

"Alright, I'll give you half an hour to get out of the compound, and for every minute after that, I'll show Enjolras that game with the electricity that you and I enjoyed so much."

"Thirty minutes," says Grantaire hollowly. "That's"

"A perfectly acceptable starting point."

"-impossible."

"Well I hope not," Phillips says, insincerity pouring from his lips, his eyes, “We wouldn’t want Enjolras to get hurt.”

Grantaire feels a sudden and urgent desire to cry wash over him.

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When Phillips starts the timer, Grantaire darts from the room.

He hums one of the songs that falls to the bottom of his head and blows around like a dust ball. 30 minutes. Nearly ten loops of the song.
Why did you throw the Jack of Hearts away? Why did you throw the Jack of Hearts away? It was the only card in the deck that I had left to play

He thinks about how dark the world is, how much the pain in his head tastes like blood on his tongue, thinks about staring into the mirror and saying over and over again, “I’m worthless, I’m worthless, I’m worthless.”

He walks right past a set of guards heading in the other direction.

For the first time, Grantaire wonders if Phillips had had other motivations than mindless sadism in that particular exercise.

He runs once he’s round the corner, down an echoing white corridor, left, left, right. He knows this place almost as well as he knows Enjolras’s profile in the sun, knows it far better than the exact shade of his own eyes.

He ducks into a staff bathroom - left unlocked, because why wouldn’t it be - and levers himself up onto the sink, then pushes a ceiling tile up and in, following it into the dusty spine of the ceiling. He crawls along the girders, skitters down an empty elevator shaft with his heart in his throat, mouthing to please the lions this day. He finds himself in the staff quarters, follows some intuitive baseline to the door that leads to the parking garage, then out into the bright, clear light of day. He’s reaching the ninth repetition of the song as he walks calmly across the empty open expanse of concrete between the institute and the outside gate.

He reaches the gate on and I’ll say it again, I need a brand new friend.

Phillips is waiting.

“Twenty nine minutes, forty seconds,” says Grantaire, feeling something victorious and golden spark in his chest.

Phillips douses him with his cold, pleased smile, “Excellent, Grantaire, excellent. We shall have to try a shorter time limit.”

Enjolras can never know, Grantaire thinks.

Never ever ever.

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Feuilly and Bahorel arrive in a tumble of bickering and disaster. They snipe and snicker at each other in a near-constant rush, all grins and shoves. They prefer Grantaire’s custom brand of distraction and prevarication over Enjolras’s make-war-with-the-problem style of coping. Feuilly has orange hair and freckles over every square inch of his body. Bahorel has a floppy dark fringe that never stops getting into his sleepy Spanish eyes. They both have endlessly scraped knees - trademarks of their favourite, nameless game of divebombing Grantaire as fast as possible without hitting him or the ground, a feat they say is made harder by how difficult it is to see Grantaire in direct sunlight.

They stop when Feuilly kicks Grantaire in the head - trying to avoid a wandering Jehan - and Enjolras dives out of the sky like an avenging angel, pulls up in a perfectly executed flick of wings and screeches at them with enough fury to flay skin.

Grantaire blames it on Enjolras, then, when Feuilly and Bahorel go off in search of trouble and come across Les Minettes. They honestly haven’t got a chance in hell but that doesn’t stop them
from trying. Grantaire thinks that anyone stupid enough to fight humans with actual claws isn't exactly the pinnacle of evolution but he likes Feuilly and Bahorel, likes their humour and warmth and how they make even Eponine smile. So he charges in after them, finds the ring-leader and makes him scream until no one is focused on hitting anyone, they're all too busy staring at him in horror. Grantaire loosens his hold on the boy’s upper arm and he drops to the ground like a doll.

Grantaire doesn't notice when the rest of them scatter or when Feuilly uncurls from his ball on the ground. He's too busy sucking in air, staring at the spinning clouds above him as the dizzy high rushes through him, so much better than morphine.

Feuilly gives him a shaky smile and Bahorel pats his back and they don't talk about it. It's for the best.

That night Enjolras curls into his neck and whispers, "Could you do that to anyone?" and Grantaire pretends to be asleep because he knows how ruthless Enjolras could be, if he was given half the chance.

No more than a fortnight afterwards, Enjolras and Grantaire get into what counts as a fight between them. That is, Grantaire says something glib and lighthearted at the wrong moment and Enjolras bursts into tears and storms off to hide in Grantaire's bed. He's pretty sure the others think he's the devil when this happens. Enjolras is not a crier, not unless Grantaire disagrees with him. He takes that badly.

In this case, Grantaire has reminded Enjolras that escape is impossible if your captors listen to your every word, and that the mikes are probably definitely whisper-sensitive because if the people running this place are intelligent enough to create genetically spliced bird-children then they are smart enough to ensure their careers aren’t ruined by said children lowering their voices.

Normally Grantaire lets Enjolras have his plans, but he's tired and frustrated and he can't stand to see Enjolras rave on and on in the face of such hopelessness. And now Enjolras is quiet and moody and tearful and somehow Grantaire feels even worse. The next day when Enjolras, Combeferre and Courfeyrac are sitting in a circle of crossed legs, Grantaire drops a heavy textbook into the middle of their hexagon of limbs. It lands with a bam, and they all lean forwards to squint at it curiously.

"What percentage of US scientists do you think speak a foreign language?" Grantaire asks them casually. On the other side of the room, Eponine and Cossette look up in interest: Grantaire does not contribute to constructive conversation, as a rule. He answers his own question, "It's not high."

Enjolras looks up at him like Grantaire's just given him the best present in the whole wide world, not an old book of French verbs.

Combeferre adjusts his glasses and says, "Even if they don't have someone who speaks it, they could bring in a, a-

Eponine cuts in with, "-There's hardly any staff, and they hardly ever change."

And Cossette continues, "They haven't, not the whole time we've been here."

Grantaire bends low and looks into Enjolras's wide gold eyes, "Trust me, Enj. They don't have a lot of people here, and I'd put money on none of them knowing 17th Century French. You know, if I had any."
"They can still learn," Courfeyrac says and Grantaire grins the same way he does to Les Minettes, when they pass in the corridors.

"We can learn faster."

They rip the book into pieces; everyone gets a certain number of pages. It takes the staff three months to find all of them (Grantaire sticks his beneath Phillips's desk) and by that time they're all speaking in nothing but Middle French. Grantaire, Jehan and Gavroche pick it up fastest, followed by Cosette and together they develop a fast-evolving dialect mixed in with made up words and other phrases they find in German and Spanish and Italian textbooks. In a few weeks the library is emptied of every book on language and by the end of the month anything with a glossary is gone. Bahorel and Feuilly's fluency trails in behind Enjolras, Courfeyrac and Combeferre, who spend every spare minute diligently writing verb tables out, and Eponine, whose instructions Gavroche has hitherto been ignoring on the grounds that, "Je ne sais pas Anglais, Eponine!"

Someone up top has obviously given the order to stop fretting about a bunch of captive children learning archaic languages because the staff stop trying to discipline them back into English. Grantaire is willing to bet the higher up has never seen footage of Enjolras monologuing because there's goal oriented and then there's Enjolras, whose determination is an ungodly and destructive force that's actually slightly supernatural, if the rest of the Flock are to be believed.

Nevertheless, Phillips is pissed. He's vicious with the pain tolerance tests and he makes Grantaire sit with his hand wrapped around the wrist of some girl from Les Minettes for more than half an hour. Hours later her screams are still spiralling in his head like waves in a sea shell. The tests get stranger and stranger, hallucinogenics and interrogations about meaningless data - "What fruit was on the desk in the other room?" Fitness tests, repeatedly, till Grantaire can sprint from one end of the flying field to the other in minutes. Strategy and puzzles and memory games. A silent man with a straight back and cold, disinterested eyes teaches him how to fight.

Grantaire is very concerned.

Montparnasse is lounging in a long line against the wall of the examination room, his eyes sharp and glinting, when Grantaire is led in. The tester leaves, the door clicks behind her, and Grantaire asks, "What's all this about?"

"You tell me, boy genius," Montparnasse drawls, "I never know what the fuck's going on around here."

Grantaire joins Montparnasse against the wall, "Hows tricks?"

"They've started starving the weaker ones to see what happens. Social experiment or whatever."

Grantaire doesn't ask what happens. Montparnasse spits and says, "Why does every little bird around here suddenly not speak any English?"

"It's a cunning plan," says Grantaire, "To keep our hopes and dreams secret from the examiners."

"What, a diary isn't lame enough for you idiots?"

"No, we have unlimited supplies on lame."
Montparnasse snickers and Grantaire grins back. As much as he loves his friends, he finds their boundless delusional optimism grating and, frankly, offensive. If getting out was that easy, he'd have got them out already, no matter how much Enjolras sparkled.

A speaker in the wall crackles to life. "Through the doors there is a maze. The quicker you navigate it, the quicker you get dinner."

A wall panel slides back and Grantaire and Montparnasse are confronted by a huge warehouse-like space, filled with towering white walls. The morass of halogen and plaster-white makes them both flinch.

"A maze," says Montparnasse, successfully fitting an eternity of contempt into one bitten off sentence.

Grantaire rivals him with a sigh. "Left or right?"

"What?"

"Nevermind, left is better, keeps our dominant hands free."

Montparnasse gives him a dry, "Whatever."

"Keep your left hand on the wall. If it's a static maze, we'll eventually come to an exit."

"How do you know? What if we miss it?"

"We can't miss it, mazes are circuits, idiot."

"You're an idiot." Montparnasse shoves him and they descend into a brief kicking fight before they agree that neither of them is an idiot, the Invigilators are idiots, and face the entrance to the maze again.

They’re reaching the fourth corner in the left hand side wall when Montparnasse puts a foot down and gets 30 milliamps of electrical current poured through his body. He freezes, mouth open in a silent cry of pain, and Grantaire hooks his leg round Montparnasse’s and knocks him off balance backwards, onto the floor behind them. The charged ground looks exactly the same as the rest of the ground they’ve been walking on.

“Fucking, cunts,” is the first thing Montparnasse manages to say, hissing through gritted teeth, “I fucking hate these people, I swear to God ‘Taire, I want them to die so fucking slow.”

Grantaire says, “I know,” but his attention is with the rest of his face, an inch from the wall. “It’s not humming,” he mumbles, then gingerly touches the plaster. He pulls his fingers back unscathed.

“What are you doing?” Montparnasse drawls, composure dragged back together.

“We’re going up and along,” Grantaire says decisively, “The wall’s broad enough to balance on.”

“Or we could just… Go another way?” Montparnasse suggests, looking queasy, “Any other way? Backwards? Hell, I’ll start digging.”

“It’s not even twice your height you loser,” Grantaire laughs, “Give me a boost and I’ll help you up.”

“You’re wings haven’t magically started working again, have they?” Montparnasse asks with just a bit of desperation.
“No but if we fall I’m sure they could glide us to safety.”

“Really?”

“No, ‘Parnasse. The wall isn’t even seven feet, you don’t glide from seven feet, you fall. Quickly. With minimal bodily harm.”

Montparnasse narrows his eyes, “Fine. After you, Birdy.”

Grantaire springs from Montparnasse’s interlinked fingers and gets his elbows on the lip of the wall before pulling himself up. He has to straddle the wall and pull Montparnasse’s dead weight up with two hands, because wolf-human hybrids are, it turns not, not especially upwardly mobile. He tells Montparnasse as much when he’s finally managed to flop him, ragdoll-like, across the width of the wall. “Honestly do your people, like, eat rocks? What the fuck, Montparnasse?”

“Whatever, loser,” Montparnasse says sourly, “We can’t all be fucking Legolas.”

“What?”

“Ugh, you are wasted in a world without pop culture. Why don’t they let you lot watch TV, we would have so much fun together.”

“Control experiments, nature vs nurture, they hate us, I don’t know, pick one.”

They scootch along the walls, pulling with their arms, legs dangling. After a bit Grantaire says, “Well tell me, then. Who’s Legolas?”

Montparnasse’s resulting attempt at explaining The Lord of the Rings trilogy gets them another 10 bends further along the wall. Grantaire’s in the middle of saying, “So wait, wait, the creepy things have wings now?” When he’s abruptly out of breath and dizzy and tipping off the wall to the ground. His stomach barely has time to lurch before his head cracks off the ground.

Well they didn’t mean to do that. Is all that can swim through the sudden fog of Grantaire’s thoughts because hello, head injury. And actually, on reflection, he thinks, I don’t think that fog’s in my head.

“Stay up there!” he manages to half-slur, half-shout at Montparnasse, who looks like he’s about to have a stroke, scrabbling around trying to find a way to get down without actually dropping from any heights. “Stay up there,” he says again, “I think there’s oh shit.”

Grantaire’s eyes aren’t blurry, they’re streaming with tears and the back of his throat is on fire and his heart is beating out of his chest. He tries to sit up and slides right back down again, all the while thinking oh my god I’m going to die and Enjolras won’t be able to sleep again ever and this really isn’t as peaceful as I would have imagined it.

He hears a hissed, “For the love of fuck,” and a thump and then someone, Montparnasse is dragging him along the floor. Eventually, the awful pressing burning sensation diminishes and Grantaire can look up and wipe his stinging eyes.

Montparnasse is sitting glowering at him with dark green eyes.

“Why didn’t you-” Grantaire starts.

“It’s in the air, dum-dum, you have to breathe it. I held my breath like a not-stupid person.”
“Like a not-stupid pers-”

“Shut up, my words are just fine.”

“Sure,” Grantaire says agreeably, standing back up. He doesn’t thank him. Doesn’t want to draw attention to Montparnasse doing a selfless thing for the benefit of another person in case Montparnasse has a breakdown and tries to kill him to reset the balance. “Anyway,” continues Grantaire, “That means we can run through it, as long as we hold our breaths.”

Montparnasse looks at him with utter disgust, “And we know when we no longer have to hold our breaths… How?”

“Well, I can hold mine for like, what, a minute? That’s a few hundred metres at least.”

“And what happens if the gas goes on for a thousand metres, but you’re 300 in and you can’t move, genius, how do we fix that?”

“Leave me to die?” Grantaire suggests, “It’s not like they’re going to do any permanent damage to us.”

“To you maybe,” Montparnasse mutters, which… Is actually a good point.

“Fine, we’ll count it as a dead end, take the other route from the left turn.”

Montparnasse’s hair hasn’t returned to his scalp since the last time he got electrocuted but somehow he still finds that preferable to getting abandoned on top of the wall again, so they walk. Carefully.

“So how’s things in the land of winged experimentation?” Montparnasse asks as they shuffle along. “Enjolras any less of an idiot?”

Grantaire gives him a resigned, suppressive look.

“I’m taking that as a no,” Montparnasse informs him.

“Take it as whatever you want,” says Grantaire, “Oh, hello.”

Set into the wall are three large cylinders, on their sides, with three numbers each. It reminds Grantaire most strongly of a giant padlock. Beside them is a metal lever.

Gingerly he pulls the lever down and, unsurprisingly, his body washes first cold then hot with the pain of a shock. He lets go and the lever lights up red and resets itself.

“How do you feel about potentially getting shocked nine hundred and ninety-nine times?” asks Grantaire, shaking his hand out.

“Unfavourably,” says Montparnasse shortly.

“Next turn it is,” says Grantaire.

When they stagger out of the maze, four hours later, Grantaire is half-dragging Montparnasse. &

Montparnasse and Grantaire are in a shooting range, firing fake bullets from realistically heavy guns. Grantaire’s arms are unbelievably sore, weaving up and down as he tries to still his muscles
through sheer force of will.

Montparnasse is much better, he’s been hitting the target for the last hour now. They’ve said they won’t let them out till they’re consistently getting bullseyes, and Grantaire believes them.

Montparnasse is sullen and miserable, “Three days, the headache from that gas lasted. This is your fault.”

“How,” Grantaire asks through gritted teeth, “Is this in any way my fault?” He fires three bullets, all of which go wide.

“They left me alone all this time, and suddenly they take an interest in sticking me in weird, painful situations with you? Your fault.”

“I’m sorry the shit-hole of my life is making you sad, ‘Parnasse, is that what you want me to say? I’m sorry.”

“That is not an apologetic tone, Grantaire,” says Montparnasse, “And you’re doing that all wrong, look.”

Montparnasse grabs his arm then pauses. “What the fuck?” He jiggles Grantaire’s arm up and down, “Seriously, what the fuck? How are you so light?”

“Hollow bones?” Grantaire says, “I don’t know, they haven’t given me a primer on bird-kid physiology yet.”

“Well no wonder you can’t lift anything,” Montparnasse says indignantly, “That’d be like me lifting a bazooka.”

He turns sharply and hammers on the observation window moonlighting as a mirror, “Hey! If you want him to hit anything solid, you’re going to have to give him a gun he can lift!”

There’s silence and then a smaller, thinner gun gets delivered through a metal drawer in the wall. “Much obliged,” says Grantaire drily.

It takes another two hours but finally Montparnasse gets Grantaire to the point where he can hit the target nine times out of ten. They drop the guns back in the drawer and wait for the doors to unlock.

“Sorry,” says Grantaire, “You’d have been out a lot faster if not for me.”

Montparnasse sneers, “It’s not your fault. It’s theirs.” The face he makes at the nearby invigilator is just a bit toothy.

They’re taught how to fight, using each other as punching bags. Montparnasse isn’t particularly strong, but he’s considerably stronger than Grantaire. On more than one occasion Montparnasse has sent Grantaire flying across the room, something he blames on Grantaire’s intrinsic aerodynamicness and something Grantaire attributes to Montparnasse being an idiot. To balance out the strength differential, Grantaire is incredibly fast and - much to Montparnasse’s eternal
disgust - not entirely visible.

They’re trained in what feels like an endless array of fighting styles: Krav Maga, Karate, Judo, Boxing. Grantaire returns to Enjolras at the end of most days with bruises and cuts and a whole-body ache.

They ask him what’s going on, why he’s gone for so long during the day, why he misses lunch when the rest of them only have short sessions. He ignores them or distracts them or tells them some vaguery and Enjolras looks as worried and angry as he ever does.

Eponine sits down next to him, one day when he’s so sore from training that even his hair hurts. “Did you know that in a ten minute conversation with a stranger the average person tells three lies?” she asks abruptly. Grantaire starts, winces, and looks at her.

“No, Eponine, I did not know that. I don’t meet many strangers though. My circle of acquaintances is actually pretty small.”

“I read it somewhere. But I’d have known it anyway. You watch Invigilators who don’t know each other talk. They lie about stupid things. What they did at the weekend. What they thought about a movie. I guess it just makes the conversation flow better or something.”

“Okay?” Grantaire says.

“Invigilators lie to us all the time, obviously. This won’t hurt, I don’t know what this test is for, expect a sharp scratch, this is just procedure. Whatever. It’s just easier for them to lie than to us that tell the truth. Maybe they lie to themselves too.”

“Sure…” Grantaire doesn’t much like where this is going.

“And we lie to each other. Not as much, but, like. Everything’s going to be okay. We’ll get out of here soon. Maybe they’re not 100% lies, but they’re not the truth, are they?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“No? Not really. I guess my default is disbelief so when it turns out something’s a lie, I’m not cut up about it.”

“So I say something to you right now, you won’t believe it?”

“Well I won’t not believe it, I just don’t, like, discount the idea that it might be a lie.”

“But you can’t tell, for sure, when something’s a lie or when it’s not, right?”

“No…” Grantaire says.

“Right, so. I can.”

“You can what?”

“I know when people are lying. It’s like… Pebbles in my shoes. I feel it. I can’t ignore it.”

“You know when people lie?”

“Yes.”
“Like, guaranteed, 100% of the time, human-lie-detector-style?”

“I mean, yeah. I just think it’s really obvious. It’s like, the way people blink, the way their mouths move, where they take their breaths. It’s like… Out of key music.”

“Huh,” says Grantaire, “That’s cool, I guess?”

“It’s horrible. I’ve never told anyone but Cossette and Gav.”

“Really, why?”

“People trying not to lie is even more painful to watch than people actually lying.”

“Sure, I could see that,” Grantaire says, “So you know when anyone’s hiding anything?”

“Yep,” says Eponine, “Like you.”

Grantaire looks at her out the corner of his eye, “I thought you said everyone hides stuff?”

“They do. But you hide a lot more than anyone else. What’s that about?”

“Are you telling me that the way I talk makes your head hurt?” asks Grantaire, amused.

“No, what I’m saying is, everything that you say is prevarication. Even just there, that was a distraction. You change the subject, you don’t answer questions, you make jokes. What I’m asking is why?”

Grantaire digs the toe of his shoe into the dirt. “I’ve got a whole lot of stuff inside my head that I don’t want getting out.”

“Why not?” Eponine asks, her eyes dark and steady on the side of his face.

“It’s not nice, I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Like that thing you do, where you hurt people?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“So, you’re scared,” she says after reflection.

Grantaire nods slowly.

“Well, that makes more sense,” Eponine says with a sharp nod. She springs to her feet, “I was wondering.”

“Well, now you know.”

His tone seems to give her pause and she turns back, “If it helps any, I don’t think you’re scary at all.”

He smiles a small, crooked little thing, “Sure, it helps a bit.”

“Good,” she says, before running off to join Cosette.

Grantaire has set foot outside the Institute a sum total of five times, which was the number of times
it took for him to escape under close supervision before his timing plateaued to the a level that even threats to Enjolras couldn’t dip.

He’s seen real people though: people from outside the Institute. These people don’t wear blue coat, but they look normal, no genetic mutations to be seen. Grantaire is told to extract information from them sometimes: “Where’s Amelia?” over and over again, until his voice is hoarse, fingers tremulous, feather-light on the arcs of their wrists. They always break eventually, “She’s at her Aunt’s, please don’t hurt her, she’s six, she’s my daughter, she’s not done anything wrong.”

Grantaire has heard the invigilators talk about him: “Capable of inducing intolerable neuropathic-like pain,” and, “Creating the perception of negative stimuli in test subjects, without any evidence of cellular or tissue damage.”

All Grantaire knows is the people he hurts would rather their children die than feel the pain he gives them. He knows that they’re living the last, worst hours of their lives… He knows that their brains are sawn out and sliced up and stared at. He knows he’d rather be dead than live like this, all things considered.

One grissly Thursday evening, he and Montparnasse are loaded into a van and taken out of the Institute. Grantaire is a complete mess, “Where are we going?” he asks the driver, again and again. “Hey! You! Where are we going? I won’t stop shouting till you tell me, fair warning.”

Eventually they tell him they don’t know, and to shut up. He sinks onto the rattling floor and meets Montparnasse’s eyes, glinting with unfamiliar life.

“Don’t worry Birdy, they’re not going to separate you from your beloved.” Montparnasse stretches out on his back, arms thrown up behind his head, “It’s the only way they’ve got of keeping you in line. They don’t want you out of line, believe me.”

They’re in the van three hours before it rattles to a stop. Golden light from the street outside filters through from the front windscreen in strange triangles and stripes. The door clicks open and a sweep of cool night air rushes in. A broad man follows, the climb audibly exerting him. His button-like eyes are hidden behind small, squint glasses. He sits down on a narrow bench built into the side of the van and eyes them.

“I’m here to deliver your objective,” he says matter-of-factly.

“What.” Grantaire says, Montparnasse just laughs humourlessly.

“You are to retrieve the contents of the safe in the sitting room and dispose of the inhabitants.”

Grantaire freezes.

The man looks, for one fraction of a moment, unnerved. His eyes skirt around Grantaire without being seemingly able to focus.

“What if we say no?” Montparnasse asks casually not so much a threat as an idle question.

The man clears his throat and reaches into a pocket, his rattling breath implying that every moment is a great effort. He squints down at a piece of paper. Grantaire wants to hit him in his squishy, horrible face. “The information I have, is that if you,” he nods his head at Grantaire, “do not comply, then ah-Enjolras will be used in an upcoming experiment. Its aim is to determine whether your powers are inducible when you are unconscious. If you do comply, the other participant will be a stranger.”
Montparnasse rolls his eyes, “The Enjolras card, I’m shocked. Grantaire, aren’t you just, like, astonished?”

Grantaire is too locked down in terror to process the words but he flashes Montparnasse a smile for the rallying call anyway.

“And, uh, you,” the man says to Montparnasse, “I’ve been told that if you refuse to comply, you will be deprived of food for two weeks.”

“Oh fuck you,” Montparnasse spits, suddenly wielding a mouthful of exposed teeth, “Fuck every single one of you. That’s a fucking death sentence in that place.” He goes silent for a few moments, collecting himself. Then. “Fine,” he says emotionlessly. “Fine. Dispose of the inhabitants, how exactly??”

The man presents him with two guns, one smaller and lighter than the other. Grantaire chokes back a sudden, shocking sob.

“You will arrive at the target location in 47 minutes, at which point you will find the doors unlocked. If you fail to complete your tasks, the stated punishments will be carried out. If you are caught, you will be retrieved by the Institute and the punishments will be carried out.”

The man heaves himself to his feet and slams the door of the van behind him. The silence for the next 45 minutes is deafening.

The van stops outside a house on a quiet suburban road. Trees line the wide street, cars sit snug in their drive-ways. Every so often there is a quiet hiss of a sprinkler jumping to life. The street lights are amber and steady, casting strange shadows. When Grantaire exits the van, shaking out the sleep from his legs, a monstrous shadow sprawls out in front of him, limbs frighteningly long and sinister. Montparnasse alights from the van behind him like a big wary cat.

“This the one?” Montparnasse murmurs, nodding at the house.

“Guess so,” mumbles Grantaire.

They walk up to a huge, spreading white gate. Its ornate swirls provide perfect foot holds and within 30 seconds Grantaire is dropping silently to the ground on the other side. Montparnasse takes slightly longer, and swears the whole time.

They both creep up the dark driveway and the brash surrealism of the situation bursts suddenly onto Grantaire. He has to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the giggles that creep up his throat from the nausea in his gut. Montparnasse spins on the spot to demand, silently, disbelievingly, just what the fuck Grantaire thinks he’s doing. This makes Grantaire laugh even harder, bent double, a horrible high-pitched whine escaping through his clenched teeth. Montparnasse scowls, hesitates, and then smacks Grantaire hard across the face. The sound rings out in the quiet. “Get it the fuck together, Grantaire,” he hisses, “We do the job, we get out, we have an existential fucking breakdown about it later.”

Grantaire nods shakily, sucks in deep breaths, and stands up. “Okay,” he says, “okay.”

Montparnasse eyes him warily but seems to take his word for it.

Halfway up the drive, the area floods with awful light. Grantaire pulls Montparnasse into his arms, envelops him in his shroud of opacity, and they slip up the edge of the driveway, their combined shadow a strange, many-limbed monster looming behind them.
They arrive at the big white front door and find it helpfully unlocked. A glance at the inside wall determines that the whole house uses an electronic locking system which has now been disarmed.

Grantaire heads for what he assumes is the sitting room - that is, the room with the most furniture for sitting - and starts scouring it for a safe. Montparnasse slinks off in the direction of the kitchen. Montparnasse has ever-present priorities that aren’t at all swayed by the prospect of murder in his imminent future. And all of them involve food.

Grantaire abruptly realises that he has never been in a real house, a real home before. Looking around at the soft, worn couches, the bright red rug with its corner turned up, the family photos, he feels like he is in an alien landscape, stranger than any maze or mirror room the Institute has locked him in. Grantaire avoids the photos lining the walls with the same studiousness that he avoids his reflection in the mirror. Unfortunately, like his reflection, they’re unshakeable from his peripheral vision as he searches for a safe. He finds one tucked under a low coffee table, gets down on his belly and pulls it out. It’s been electrically disabled too, four zeros blinking stupidly at him.

The door swings open silently to reveal a small pile of passports and a stack of loose cash. Montparnasse reappears, crunching on an apple, and between the two of them they manage to stuff the contents of the safe into their pockets and the waistbands of their regulation institute pants.

Once that’s done they don’t move. Grantaire stares at the floor and Montparnasse gazes out the window, expression strangely thoughtful. Eventually Montparnasse blinks and starts to life, picks up Grantaire’s gun from where he’s left it on the coffee table, and hands it back to him. Then he leads the way up the stairs on tiptoes, stilling at every stray creak before moving on. When they reach the top landing, they’re confronted with a hallway of identical white doors. Their soft, curving door-handles gleam in the dull light. Montparnasse tries the first door on the right - a storage cupboard - and Grantaire cracks open the first on the left. Two twin-sized beds are tucked into opposite corners of the room. One is covered in pink flowers that appear grey in the darkness. The other has black and blue zig-sag patterns. There are two tiny breathing lumps under the covers. Grantaire’s blood runs cold in his veins, freezing his fingers and the tip of his nose and his lungs. He looks at his hands and feels like he barely exists. The tip of his shoe stutters on something and it’s a door stopper with a big cartoon flower at the end. He snatches it off the floor, closes the door, takes a moment to thank whatever God might be listening that the door opens outwards, and kicks the stopper under the door crack. Montparnasse, creeping back out into the hall from what Grantaire can see is a bathroom, gives him a slitted, suspicious look that he ignores.

There’s only one door left in the hallway. They approach it together and Montparnasse opens it. There’s a man asleep in a big double bed, chest bare, arm thrown up over his head, mouth open in a snore. Grantaire backs down the corridor, away from the room, and slumps down against the wall. He can’t get his breathing under control, he feels like he’s about to die, just reach the end of everything in this strange, perfect home, finally get to sleep without being scared. Montparnasse is above him looking down, face mostly expressionless. Then he sighs and walks away, down the hall towards the master bedroom. Three long, stretched out moments later there’s a bang like a door slamming, and Montparnasse walks back out. He grabs Grantaire by the arm and pulls him up and along. He gives Grantaire’s hand - loose on its own cold metal gun - a quick, assessing look before pulling the gun free, clicking the safety on, and transferring it to his pocket. They stagger out into the driveway, past the entrance to the sitting room, and the blinking, useless security light. This time the darkness presses in on them tightly, oppressive, and the floodlight doesn’t seem to turn on.

The van is still idling by the curb and they open the doors and climb in. Almost instantly, they’re on the move again. Grantaire curls up into a ball and stays there for some long, indeterminate amount of time. Eventually he looks up. Montparnasse is sitting on the bench, head tilted back,
eyes closed, possibly asleep.

“What was it like?” Grantaire asks, finding his voice surprisingly steady.

“Easy,” says Montparnasse shortly, “I don’t give a fuck about that guy. I give a fuck about myself.”

Grantaire feels his face crumple with the urge to cry, feels grief swell in the back of his throat, “I’m sorry,” he chokes.

Montparnasse sighs, “Go to sleep, Birdy,” and pulls Grantaire’s head down into his lap, not without force.

Grantaire drops immediately into a restless, nauseous sleep.

&

Grantaire doesn’t get punished for letting the children live. He has a feeling that the whole thing was a test to see how far they could push him and Montparnasse. He has a horrible feeling they passed with flying colours.

Phillips has him in their little mirrored room and Grantaire feels sick and like he wants to crawl out of his own skin.

“Do you feel like a pessimist, Grantaire? A cynic?”

Grantaire scowls at him from under his eyebrows.

“You think you are. Enjolras thinks you are. He thinks you see the worst in everything, but you don’t, do you?” Phillips coos. Grantaire makes no attempt to hide his recoil as Phillips approaches, skirting the table between them. “You’re a realist, aren’t you? You see everything exactly like it is.”

Grantaire follows him with his eyes until he can’t any more, until Phillips is directly behind him, breathing on his neck.

“And isn’t this just the worst place in the world, to be a realist,” Phillips laughs.

The hairs on Grantaire’s neck shoot up, his back hunches, bile rises unpleasantly in his throat.

Phillips makes his way around the table again and Grantaire’s back aches as the muscles relax from their collective spasm.

“How did you feel?” Phillips asks, “When you were standing in that doorway, trying to convince yourself to kill an innocent man? How did you feel?”

Grantaire levels him with a dull stare, “Peachy keen, sir.”

“I saw the tape, it looks to me like you had a panic attack. Tell me, Grantaire, did it feel like you were going to die? Did you think your heart was going to stop?”

Grantaire pushes down on the unexpected wave of nausea that comes sweeping up from his gut. “Sure, why not, whatever gets you off, sir.”
Phillips raises his eyebrows but says nothing, smile firmly in place.

Grantaire *hates* this man. “So, what’s the plan?” he derails, trying for flippant, hitting panicked.

“What plan?”

“The plan that involves me and Montparnasse being taught how to kill people, what’s that about? Are you selling us off or something?” Grantaire’s brain catches up faster than Phillips can reply, “Oh *fuck*, you are selling us off. To who?”

“I imagine it will be to whomever bids the highest. And after that demonstration, there will be plenty of bids.”

“I thought the aim was to experiment on us until we all died from genetic defects or old age,” Grantaire says, to mask his building panic.

“Mmm,” Phillips smiles, amused, “That’s broadly the aim. But it was decided that you and Montparnasse would present an incredible set of resources to the right bidder. Resources that could yield exactly the kind of capital gain that the Institute requires to fund more projects.” Grantaire can’t dwell on how angry, how disgusted, how *guilty* that makes him feel. He doesn’t want to be sold off to fund the ruination of more children’s lives. He’d rather kill himself. It would be the decent thing to do, the only *right* thing left to him.

He aims some of that disgust at Phillips, “So what will you do, once some rich fucker buys me? I thought torturing me was your life’s work. How will you cope?”

“Oh, don’t worry Grantaire,” says Phillips, “Whoever wins the bid for you will doubtless employ me as your handler. After all, I’m the only one who understands you. I’m the only one knows how to make you do as your *told*.” Phillips’s eyes are that horrible gleaming way they get when Grantaire’s a weeping mess.

“Excellent,” Grantaire says with enough disgust to qualify for a Montparnasse-sentence, “I am *so* looking forwards to being a teenager near you, whenever your sadism beats out whatever lingering morals you have about paedophilia.”

Phillips’s eyes glitter, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

&

They’re in another maze. The walls are covered in electrified netting so they’re walking slowly. And carefully. So far Grantaire has accidently burned his fingers and Montparnasse has nearly lost one.

“Why didn’t you run?” Grantaire asks Montparnasse. “That night at the house. You had money, I wouldn’t have stopped you. You even had a passport. Even if they could find you they’d have difficulty actually *catching* you. I mean, you’re basically an alpha, none of Les Minettes would be able to bring you back in. Why didn’t you run?”

Montparnasse looks at Grantaire with every single ounce of his derision.

“Fine, Birdy, let’s walk that one through,” Montparnasse snarls. “I run away. You go back because *golly*, what is life without dearest Enjolras. They tell you, this is where Montparnasse is, you know, that guy who used to be your only friend. Be a doll and go get him for us or we’ll give Enjy a hangnail. You can’t even argue with me, I can see it in your face, I know exactly what you’d do.”
Montparnasse doesn’t look very bothered but Grantaire feels awful, and guilty, because he knows exactly what he’d do, too.

Montparnasse continues, “And you know what, I’m not even angry. I just feel sad for you. That kid is going to be the death of you, and you’re not going to fight it or complain, you’re just going to let it happen. But you know what I really don’t get? Why the fuck you think he’s so much more important than you are. Like, me? I’m the centre of my own god-damn universe. There’s no one looking out for me but me. That’s how we survive in this world, Birdy, we fight for ourselves. God knows no one else is going to do it. So why does Enjolras deserve to be the most important person in your world? He’s just a kid, just like the rest of us, he’s nothing special, you don’t need him.”

“I do need him,” says Grantaire, “He’s my friend.”

“No he’s not,” says Montparnasse. “I’m your friend. See we banter, we have a laugh, we look out for each other. I don’t need to hold your fucking hand to fall asleep at night. I don’t need you. I need, like, air. And food. And water. And I need to sleep sometimes. I don’t need any person but myself to live.”

Grantaire shrugs his shoulders and for some awful reason feels his eyes fill with tears. “How could I possibly rely on myself, ‘Parnasse? Have you seen me? You know sometimes when I close my eyes at night I feel like I don’t exist? I feel like I’ve dropped out of the world, like I’m made of nothing, like smoke or a shadow or something. I feel like I can just slide away.”

Montparnasse’s face starts out annoyed and twists into incredulity, “You feel like you don’t exist? Jesus Christ on a bicycle, Grantaire, this is why we don’t talk about feelings. What’s wrong with just feeling sad? Why’d you have to make it weird?”

Grantaire laughs and they make their way round another corner, poking their heads round first, then their feet, tentatively.

“Anyway,” Montparnasse says shrugging, “I’m not running away from here if there’s any chance of them dragging me back. Which means I’m not going while you’re still here.” He pauses, then directs the next shout at the ceiling, “You hear that? Not a threat! So give me a fucking break already!”

Montparnasse catches Grantaire amused gaze and wrinkles his nose, “And don’t get me wrong. I don’t give a fuck about you. But I won’t get away from here if you’re still here to drag me back. And as we’ve already established, you’re not leaving without your lame little winged posse. And that’s definitely not happening.”

Grantaire closes his eyes, “Believe me, I know. If I have to hear one more escape plan that involves disguises I’m going to start screaming.”

“So they’ve never come up with a good escape plan?” Montparnasse asks, idly sliding his foot out in widening circles in front of them, testing carefully for electric charges. “You think they’d come up with a few workable ways out, just out of pure chance.”

“Well the real problem is the numbers. Enjolras would never consider splitting up to get out, leave no man behind and all that. And as a strategy that’s… Well it’s useless. It makes escape impossible. We’re under supervision 24/7. You would literally need to blow up the building to create a distraction big enough for that to be feasible. But, I’m not going to be the one to break it to them.”

Montparnasse shrugs, amused, “Seems to me there’s lots of things you don’t tell them. Maybe
they’re not as stupid as you think.”

“They’re not stupid,” Grantaire says, defensively, “That doesn’t mean I want them to know how
fucked we are.”

“Maybe they’re not as weak as you think either.”

“If they weren’t weak they’d have worked it out already,” Grantaire snaps, “Because they’re not stupid.” Grantaire regrets saying the words before they’ve even left his mouth, not because he
doesn’t think they’re true, but because they seem even truer once they’ve been said aloud.

Montparnasse just raises an eyebrow into his customary mocking arc, “Whatever you say, Birdy.
Must be lonely all the way up there in your tower.”

Grantaire ignores him until they find the exit.

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The sun is warm and huge in the sky the day that Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta arrive. Musichetta is, besides Enjolras, the most beautiful person Grantaire has ever seen. Her skin is a warm, smooth sepia, her eyes a sweet ochre. Everything about her reminds Grantaire of the warm summer evenings that have started to fold in. Bossuet is taller than any of them, even some of the
Invigilators, and his dark hair is shorn so close you can see the delicate shape of his skull. As far as Grantaire can see he doesn’t speak a word, but he has a huge, dazzling smile, rich dark brown skin, and eyes that mimic the smooth ochre of the acorns Jehan collects. He has gentleness in every
movement. Beside them, Joly looks small and shaky and pale. His mussy, bark-brown hair falls heedlessly into his eyes and he shakes his head vigorously in the middle of conversation. He has a gap between his front teeth and big, startled blue eyes and he’s absolutely terrified of something. Grantaire doesn’t know what.

They are friendly and warm, and completely inseparable in the needy, desperate way that Grantaire recognises from himself and Enjolras. They push their bunks together and sleep in a tangled pile, they keep crashing into each other in the flying grounds because Joly doesn’t seem to have the most accurate grasp on his wing span and Bossuet somehow manages to fall over while in the air.

Grantaire, Jehan, Feuilly, Bahorel and Eponine are lying on the ground underneath the acorn tree. Enjolras, Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Cossette are standing a bit away, talking enthusiastically. Grantaire watches Enjolras sweep his arms around in huge, hopeful arcs, and he can’t stop the smile that springs onto his face. Feuilly and Eponine are engaging in a thumb war of such epic proportions that Bahorel has been elbowed in the ribs seven times and counting. Jehan is dodging every stray limb that comes his way, which Grantaire isn’t thinking too hard about, because thinking about Jehan’s spatial awareness makes his head hurt.

Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta are attempting to fly in a tumbling mess of wings and limbs above them. “How are they doing?” Jehan asks, tilting his face up to the warm sky.

“Well,” Eponine says, without looking up, “They’re not falling.”

“Yet,” adds Feuilly.

Grantaire snorts, “Someone needs to explain primaries and secondaries to those guys. Pronto. Also, gliding.”

Eponine rolls her eyes and struggles to pin Feuilly’s wiggling thumb down, “Whatever, penguin.”

“I’m very sensitive,” Eponine says.

“No, you’re not,” Bahorel and Feuilly say in chorus.

“That being said,” Bahorel muses, “I disagree with the premise that Grantaire is a cute, cuddly penguin.”

Feuilly nods and nearly breaks his wrist trying to launch an attack on Eponine, “Maybe, like, a chicken.”

Bahorel points his finger at Feuilly, “Definitely a chicken.”

“Jehan,” appeals Grantaire, “They’re calling me poultry, Jehan.”

“You’re a beautiful swan, dear,” says Jehan distractedly. He’s sorting his acorns by colour. Somehow. Then he looks up, distracted, “Here’s a question. What’s up with the boy who talks?”

Bahorel frowns and looks at Feuilly, who clarifies, “Is that a philosophical question or…”

“No. Joly, right? The one who talks.”

“Ah,” says Grantaire, “Yeah, he’s freaked out. I don’t know what that’s about.”

“Definitely hiding something,” Eponine says.

“Wait what?” Bahorel asks, “You guys are so weird. Is anyone not a bit freaked out, like, all the time? Because that’s pretty much my baseline.”

“He’s more freaked out, idiot,” says Eponine, “That kid flinches every time Gavroche moves and you can tell that most of what he says isn’t what he’s thinking.”

“I mean, I agree with you,” muses Grantaire, looking up at the sky to where Gavroche is darting back and forwards in a zig-zag pattern, “But I’m not sure that flinching when Gavroche moves isn’t actually the soundest option available to us all.”

Jehan nods enthusiastically.

“What are we talking about?” chirps Cossette, sliding gracefully onto the grass next to Eponine, who wins the thumb war at that moment and lets out a crow of glee into Feuilly’s disgruntled face.


“Which model for revolutionary change do you support, ‘Taire?” asks Courfeyrac with a wicked smile.

“I didn’t know there was going to be a quiz,” says Grantaire blankly, “Enjolras, help.”

“No,” says Enjolras, lying back so his head rests on Grantaire’s lap and closing his eyes.

“What is even the use of you?” Grantaire asks Enjolras seriously, running his fingers through Enjolras’s mane of blonde curls.

“We have a problem,” says Combeferre as he cleans his glasses, “How are we going to teach Joly,
Bossuet and Musichetta our language, without also teaching the Invigilators?"

“Well Bossuet doesn’t seem to speak so that’s a third of the problem gone,” says Eponine matter-of-factly from where she’s pulling Cossette’s hair into a pleat.

Cossette turns to look at her reprovingly, “He still has to understand us, Ep.”

“Otherwise how will we effectively plan our escape?” asks Grantaire earnestly and receives a sightless swat to the head from Enjolras.

Courfeyrac grins at Grantaire, “Bet you can’t think of a solution.”

“I can too,” Grantaire says, appalled, “You just have to strip down to your underwear and teach them in the air.”


“There are microphones in our buttons,” says Grantaire to Feuilly, ignoring Enjolras.

Feuilly looks down at his regulation coat, evidently deeply offended.

“That’ll work,” says Combeferre with a smile, “Thank you, Grantaire.”

“Where’s my thanks?” yelps Courfeyrac.

“Combeferre loves me more than you,” says Grantaire seriously, “That’s his way of telling you.”

“‘Ferre!” whines Courfeyrac, “Tell him you love me best.”

“Yes dear,” says Combeferre absently, looking at Enjolras and Cossette, “How do you think we should structure our teaching? Teach them grammar and rely on immersion for the rest?”

“And verb tenses,” Enjolras says, opening his eyes and sitting up because Combeferre obviously deserves his complete attention, “I still have difficulty with tenses.”

“Oh I know you will,” quips Grantaire.

“Oh, do we tutoyer now?” Enjolras asks, quirking an eyebrow and Grantaire laughs in delight.

“I found immersion to be the most useful,” says Cossette, “But then we were all learning together, maybe it’ll be different for them.”

“Maybe they don’t want to learn French,” mutters Feuilly, “I hate French.”

“Everyone in the world knows that, Feuilly,” says Bahorel, rolling his eyes.

“Well everyone can stand to hear it again.”

“Shit!” Eponine shouts, jumping to her feet, nearly ripping Cossette’s hair out by the roots. The rest of them follow her wide stare upwards to see Bossuet plummeting headfirst towards the ground. Courfeyrac and Bahorel are the fastest to react, taking off from the ground with such force that Eponine is knocked back to the ground by the force of their wings. Gavroche has rocketed to Bossuet’s side and is nearly tearing his own wings apart trying to slow their descent. Musichetta and Joly are frantically trying to work out how to dive, it’s a different technique from the slow decline and no one’s bothered to teach them yet.
Courfeyrac and Bahorel nearly collide with the Gavroche-Bossuet tangle and Gavroche instantly spins off towards the ground, into Cossette’s open arms. Feuilly catches up with Courfeyrac and Bahorel but can’t safely get near Bossuet, what with their collective wingspans. Instead he stays beneath them because Bossuet seems to be struggling and he could easily jerk his way out of their grip. When they get to within three metres of the ground they’re able to drop Bossuet into Enjolras and Grantaire’s arms. They lower Bossuet, arms twitching, wings trembling, onto the ground. His eyes are rolled back into this head and there’s a string of saliva down the side of his face. Feuilly, Bahorel and Courfeyrac thump to the ground at a reasonable distance from each other and speed back over to the group.

Grantaire makes a move to grab his head and Combeferre stops him with a hand to the elbow, “Don’t. He’s, ah, I think he’s having a seizure. We shouldn’t hold him down. I read it somewhere.”

“Is he dead?” asks Gavroche, who’s being fussed over by Eponine and Cossette because he’s torn both supracoracoideus muscles in his chest and can barely stand up.

Joly and Musichetta land painfully hard nearby and run towards him. “Don’t touch him!” Musichetta snaps and Grantaire holds his hands up in surrender. Joly has tears pouring down his face and over the bridge of his freckled nose. They both kneel down next to Bossuet in protective hunches, Joly sobbing and Musichetta saying over and over again, “It’s okay, it’ll be okay, it’s okay Sweet.”

“Has this happened before?” Combeferre asks, his voice a steady comforting weight. Grantaire is convinced Combeferre’s a little magic. Somehow he makes you feel better through sheer proximity.

“Yes,” says Musichetta, “But obviously we’ve never been flying before when it happens. This was our first time going to any kind of height, the last place we were in was- Oh this was so stupid I should never have let him go up there, of course this would happen.”

“You weren’t to know,” Combeferre says gently, “And we caught him, he’s fine. How long does it normally take him to recover?”

“A few minutes,” says Joly, “See, the tremors are gone now, he’s fine. It’ll just take him a few moments to stop being groggy.”

“Heads up,” says Feuilly. Everyone except Joly, Musichetta and Bossuet look up sharply. A group Invigilators are making their way across the flying field.

“Shit,” says Courfeyrac emphatically.

Musichetta looks up at that and her big amber eyes go round with horror. “No,” she says blankly, “No.”

“It’s okay,” Cossette says soothingly, kneeling down next to them, “They’ll just take him to medical to make sure he’s alright.”

Joly jerks and looks up at her. His entire face has gone patchy white except for his eyes which are rimmed red. He blinks frantically. “No. He can’t go to medical. He can’t. Musichetta, they can’t.”

“I know, Joly!” Musichetta replies, a little shrilly.

“What are you afraid is going to happen?” asks Enjolras, steadily meeting first Musichetta, then Joly’s eyes.
Musichetta just shakes her head, bends double over Bossuet’s chest. Joly folds in on himself, trembling all over.

The Invigilators are five metres or so away and Enjolras strides over to meet them, followed by Courfeyrac and Combeferre. “Stop,” he says, and they look at him with amusement and annoyance and disbelief, which is pretty much the set of responses that people give Enjolras. “Where are you taking him?”

“We’re taking him to the hospital room to recover,” says the Invigilator who is marginally more tolerant of Enjolras, “It’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“Lie,” says Eponine.

“He just had a fit or something, they said it happens all the time,” says Courfeyrac, “Nothing to worry about!”

“They’re very distressed already,” says Combeferre reasonably, “We know you’ve not got anything sinister planned but they’ve obviously experienced some trauma already. Wouldn’t it be better to leave this for another day?”

“No, it wouldn’t–” starts one of the Invigilators and Enjolras talks right over him with certainty, “Well you’re not taking him. You’ll have to go through us first.”

The Invigilators look behind Enjolras and see that Jehan, Grantaire, Feuilly, Bahorel, Cossette, Eponine and Gavroche have formed a line blocking Bahorel, Musichetta and Joly from view.

Grantaire sees the authoritarian certainty slide from the Invigilator’s faces along with, presumably, their desire to engage in a brawl with thirteen winged children of various temperaments, including one who can initiate neuropathic pain on a whim.

Yeah, he thinks that last part is pretty important actually. Most of the Invigilators’ eyes fall on him in a way that makes him feel gross, like a monster or a really nasty, insectile bug. Like they’re scared of him.

Grantaire meets the eyes of every single one, face carefully blank and maybe being scared of isn’t the worst thing in the world.

One of the Invigilators turns to Combeferre, that eternal voice of reason, and says decisively, “If the situation is as you say, we will leave our medical examination of Bossuet to another day.” The others are still looking at Grantaire as if they’re afraid to break eye contact. Grantaire does his best to creep them out further by smiling cheerfully. They don’t like that.

They shuffle off, and Grantaire swings an arm around Enjolras’s neck, heart swelling with relief. “Will there ever be a fight you won’t charge into without looking back?” he asks, nose and mouth full of blonde curls.

“You were behind me, weren’t you?” Enjolras asks, “Why would I need to look back?”

Grantaire isn’t sure whether it’s to do with them literally catching Bossuet out of the sky, or their stance with the Invigilators, but Musichetta, Joly and Bossuet seem much more trusting of the rest
from that point on. To the point that they let Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Combeferre and Cossette teach
them French, sotto-shouting lists of verbs back and forth over the wind, dressed in nothing but their
standard-issue underwear. When they come down they’re frozen from the wind chill and breathless
from shouting. Everyone helps them practice, speaks slower and corrects tenses, and very quickly
Musichetta and Joly are at a communicable level of fluency. Bossuet still hasn’t said a word to any
of them, but he seems to understand them fine, so they don’t worry too much about it.

They save their concern for Joly.

Monday to Thursday are the experimental days. A timetable is posted at the beginning of the week
that determines where they each spend their morning and afternoon sessions. For most of them it’s
a case of testing flight capacity, psychological evaluation and health check ups. Grantaire knows
that Jehan has to take part in strange, obscure experiments that involve navigating rooms with
obstacles and estimating the width of corridors without touching them. Combeferre and Courfeyrac
are the darlings of the sociology department and come pack pale and hoarse: “They just want us to
talk to people,” Courfeyrac says, with utter bewilderment, “But for hours. And then answer
questions about them. It’s so weird.” Grantaire, well, he doesn’t talk about the experiments
responsible for his day-long absences.

Most of the Invigilators have their own personal research projects. Some of them are relatively
innocuous, like the tests they make Eponine do: flat, inflectionless voices sound out over a
loudspeaker, and she responds with truth or lie to every statement she’s given. Others are not.
When they were ten, an Invigilator used Feuilly to test regenerative skin capacity by repeatedly
burning the soft skin of his forearms, then covering the wounds with foul-smelling clay masks. But
sessions are almost always timetabled and confined to the hours of the Invigilators’ working days.

Joly is taken in on a Tuesday morning and by Wednesday hasn’t returned. Musichetta scuffs long
black polish lines into the floor of the dorm, her pacing a relentless, monotonous movement, and
her nails are bitten and bleeding. Bossuet, if possible, is even quieter, his movements tiny and
stifled. Jehan nearly sits on him twice.

“Where is he?!” Musichetta demands of a helpless Courfeyrac, “Is it normal for him to be gone
this long?”

“Grantaire sometimes is,” Courfeyrac says weakly, “and he’s always okay.”

Musichetta darts a look at Grantaire, who does his best to nod reassuringly. She does not look
reassured. Combeferre halts her mid-pace with gentle hands on her shoulders, “Worrying about him
won’t make him any safer. It’s not productive. Be ready to look after him as best you can, don’t
waste your energy on the worst case scenario - it hardly ever happens - and keep yourself busy.
We’re brainstorming escape plans right now, join us.”

Grantaire swallows and tucks his chin into his chest, because those words are just a little too quick
to roll off of Combeferre’s tongue and, come to think of it, Enjolras has been practically on top of
him for the last 24 hours.

Joly doesn’t reappear until late Wednesday evening and when he does, he is accompanied by a
heavy limp.

Musichetta and Bossuet are beside him immediately, but seem strangely afraid to touch him, their
hands hovering. Joly is the one who throws himself into their arms, chest heaving with sobs. The
three of them drop to the ground in a barely controlled fall. Under his trousers, Joly’s legs are
plastered with bloody bandages.
The next day they come to take Joly away again and Musichetta absolutely loses it. She claws one Invigilator across the face, kicks another and comes away with a chunk of one woman’s hair.

“Sedate her,” the now-partially-bald Invigilator snaps, and they push a long cold needle into Musichetta’s thin, brown, thrashing arm. She drops liquidly to her bunk.

Bossuet is towering protectively over Joly, looking about as threatening as a long blade of grass. “You want jabbed too?” demands the Invigilator and Joly scrambles out from behind him.

“No,” he says tearfully, “No, I’m fine, Bossuet, I’ll be fine. Look after Musichetta, I’ll be back soon.”

Bossuet doesn’t let go of Joly’s hand, just gives him a wide, pleading look.

Enjolras looks like he wants to stride right into the fray and get himself sedated. At some point Grantaire has secured a firm grip on his elbow.

Joly mouths something at Bossuet and he reluctantly lets go. Joly is ushered out and Bossuet crumbles next to Musichetta’s prone body.

The rest exchange glances and Combeferre is the first to volunteer himself as counsellor. “The sedation will knock her out for a few hours,” he says gently, “To her, it’ll just be like she’s asleep.”

Bossuet nods jerkily in reply, not taking his eyes of Muischetta.

“And Joly will be fine,” says Courfeyrac, prompting Eponine to squirm in her shoes and wander away.

“Would you like to come out to the flying grounds?” asks Cossette, intense niceness overcoming her awkward, coltish shyness. Her eyes hold the open kind of sympathy that makes Grantaire cringe whenever it’s directed his way.

Bossuet shakes his head and Cossette smiles understandingly. Her, Enjolras, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac wander on outside.

Bahorel, showing his customary lack of emotional sensitivity, flops onto his bed in disgust, “I hate drama.”

Feuilly scowls at him and says, “Emote better, freak,” then worms his way between Bahorel’s legs to find a spare space to sit. (My shins, Feuilly!). Eponine pulls Grantaire’s pillow off his bed and settles on the floor with her back against Bahorel’s bunk.

Jehan says, “Grantaire, tell a story,” and curls up on the bed above Bahorel’s head in a way that can’t possibly be comfortable.

Grantaire sits down next to Bossuet, because if Enjolras were unconscious or taken by Invigilators for ominous, unknown reasons, the very least he would want is a hug. More realistically, a blow torch so he could just burn everything in the whole world down but a hug wouldn’t be unwelcome. He doesn’t know Bossuet’s feelings re: human contact with strangers, though, so he makes do with leaning in so their arms are touching. Bossuet leans back helplessly.

So our man Odysseus is still trying to get home from the war, which, honestly, I would have just given up by this point, but I guess the moral here is, if you give up, Western cannon doesn’t happen, make of that what you will. Anyway, he’s already chilled with the Cyclops – that’s the one eyed thing that you like, Rel – and a lot of his friends got eaten, which was sad. Now Poseidon is
pissed off with him for some reason, I can’t remember why, Greek gods are such divas, but anyway he destroys all the ships except the one Odysseus is sailing in. Which, good aiming, Poseidon, ten out of fucking ten. And then so they’re on this wine dark sea, which is interesting because, like, was the sea red in Greek times? Was wine blue? Was Odysseus colour blind? Literally no one knows. And then they found an island. Let’s all place our bets about the nature of the island. Is it a delightful haven of flowers and food and pretty ladies and purring, kitty leopards? Odysseus thought so. Unfortunately for him, it was actually an island where a witch turned everyone into pigs. But it’s nice that Odysseus is still optimistic about these things, right?

Grantaire rambles about the Iliad, interjecting and backtracking, adding commentary and sound effects. Musichetta’s eyes open a few hours later but she stays still, tears drizzling down her cheeks, and listens to Grantaire recite myth after myth.

Joly doesn’t return until the next day and when he does, he can’t walk.

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Joly is given a wheelchair that he refuses to use. Instead, Bossuet and Musichetta give him piggybacks everywhere. Grantaire is half convinced Joly’s insisting on it just to keep them busy, because Bossuet and Musichetta have paled and thinned since they arrived, dark shadows pooling under their eyes. Joly actually looks better than Grantaire has ever seen him.

“Stop fretting love,” Grantaire hears him say to Bossuet, “They’ve already done the worst they could possibly do. This is what we were afraid of, wasn’t it? Well they’ve done it now. See, it’s not as bad as we thought… Well, maybe for your back,” he laughs and it’s a strange, ringing thing to hear in the flatness of the dorm, “really, sweet, it’s all going to be alright.”

Musichetta is folded at the bottom of the bed, head in her arms, “They can always do worse,” she says blankly. He arm is stained a horrible blackish-blue colour from the needle.

“That is not the spirit, Chetta,” Joly says disapprovingly.

“If they take you again I don’t know what I’ll do,” Musichetta says seriously, “I think I’ll go mad, I can’t stand it Joly.”

“I know love,” Joly says with a sigh, “But there’s nothing we can do about it, is there? Come up here and give me a hug, I seem to have recently lost the use of my lower body.”

Musichetta lets out a smothered sob and flings her skinny body over Joly’s. He runs his finger down the individual strands of her cornrows, plays with the ends of her hair.

“I can’t,” she says into Joly’s knees, “I can’t, I can’t, I won’t.” Abruptly she switches to stilted French, “We have to leave. We have to get out.”

Joly’s brow crumples, “I can’t, Chetta, I can’t walk, how am I supposed to run away?” Grantaire is quietly impressed at Joly’s grasp of complicated sentence structure and a small huff from where he knows Eponine is, indicates that she is too.

Enjolras, of course, has other things on his mind, “You could fly.”

Musichetta, Joly and Bossuet look up sharply. Grantaire, conversely, flops down onto Jehan’s bed, next to where Feuilly is sprawled, and groans into the pillow.
Musichetta stares Enjolras down with red-rimmed eyes. “How?”

“We have some ideas,” says Enjolras, nodding back to Combeferre, Courfeyrac and Cossette. They’ve been doing their pow-wow thing on the floor by the window. “We’ve been thinking about this for a long time. No plan is guaranteed, obviously. In fact, most of them have very low chances of success—”

“They have no chances of success,” mutters Grantaire into the pillow, only to be summarily ignored.

“—What we have lacked, all this time,” continues Enjolras, “Is a sense of urgency. Humans will always avoid short term pain in favour of long term detriment. It’s basic behavioural psychology. Try and escape, get punished. Try it enough times and eventually the threat of pain gets too much, you stop trying. But in this case, the short term repercussions of staying are direr than that of escape. Joly could lose his arms, they could make him paraplegic. The Invigilator in charge of his particular case might not stop until he is dead.”

“They haven’t killed anyone yet,” says Eponine, because she’s Grantaire’s forever girl.

“Not yet,” Enjolras concedes, “But what’s the point of living in a cage? Where is the life in having your body taken away from you piece by piece, where is the life in Grantaire’s wings or Jehan not being able to see?”

Grantaire flips onto his back and sits up, mock outrage on his face, “Thank you, sunshine, for summarising to the group how little you think my life is worth.”

“Not your life,” Enjolras argues, “All our lives. This isn’t living!”

“Maybe my standards for living are lower than yours,” Grantaire muses, “I literally need like, food and water. And air. I arguably have six limbs, losing a few didn’t make my life a worthless hole of nothing. It’s still a life. I can break out the French dictionary if you need me to.” Next to him he feels Jehan suppress a laugh, the humour of which is easily diffused by the could have fooled me look Enjolras gives him.

“This is a stupid argument,” Courfeyrac says, and Combeferre, right on his tail says,

“Without delving too deeply into the nature of life, it’s inarguable that our quality of life would be vastly improved by freedom from the Institute.”

“Would it though?” Feuilly says, “Like ‘Taire says, we only need water and food and whatnot. Who says we’ll have that if we get out?”

Grantaire points at him, “Yes, important, sustainable life;”

“Better to live a day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep,” says Courfeyrac and Grantaire boggles at him.

“Did you just misquote an Italian fascist at me, Courf? The man’s last words were ‘shoot me in the chest’, Jesus weeping Christ, let’s not pay too close attention to his inspirational proverbs!”

Bahorel, Feuilly, Jehan and Eponine all howl with laughter as Courfeyrac digs out the book on quotes he no doubt acquired this sparkling gem of wisdom from. “Benito Mussolini,” he allows sheepishly, “Well who knew he was a fascist? Not everyone’s read the whole library, ‘Taire.”

Enjolras is ignoring them all with profound disdain and Grantaire isn’t sure how much of the
rabble Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta are catching. They’re looking at each other with wary hope. “What he said,” Musichetta asks of Enjolras, nodding at Grantaire, “About there being no chance. Is it true?”

“His name is Grantaire,” Enjolras says reprovingly and Jehan laughs into Grantaire’s shoulder only to receive a flashed scowl he is either unaware of, or more likely, ignores, “And no, there’s no such thing as no chance.”

“Opinion,” pronounces Grantaire, “Similar to a belief in unicorns or benign and just monotheistic gods. Not necessarily fact.”

“Do you want me to prelude every statement with, in my opinion?” Enjolras demands, “It’s coming out of my mouth isn’t it, that’s generally considered to be shorthand for in my opinion, it’s what most people assume!”

“You say things very assuredly, sunshine, I’m providing a post note for the as yet unenlightened.”

Enjolras tries to argue with that and Combeferre speaks over him, “To be fair, Grantaire, saying that there’s no such thing as a certainty-”

“-Apart from being excellent irony-” Courfeyrac cuts in-

“-Is about as close to certainty as we are likely to reach. Are you honestly saying there’s absolutely no chance of us ever leaving the institute?” Combeferre continues, looking a little fearful of the answer.

“I didn’t say anything like that!” Grantaire exclaims, “Jehan did I say anything like that?”

“You did not,” Jehan confirms.

“See,” Grantaire says, “I just said that it was Enjolras’s opinion. I didn’t say that it wasn’t also mine.”

“So… You do think we’ll get out?” asks Cossette, looking bemused.

Bahorel mutters to Feuilly, Eponine and Jehan, sotto voice, “It’s amazing to me that they still try and have debates with him.”

“It’s like trying to catch one of those tiny bouncy balls,” Jehan says philosophically, to collected snorts.

“Enough,” Enjolras snaps, and everyone quietens, “This isn’t a joke. Joly lost his legs yesterday. He can’t walk. We only have one option left: we have to get out of here. Even if it kills us.”

Enjolras is staring at Grantaire the whole time, beautiful big eyes filled with fire that Grantaire doesn’t ever think he’ll be able to say no to. He sighs quietly and says with near seriousness, “Sure, fine, whatever. Just call me Cassandra.” He folds back to the bed, tuning them out.

Distantly he hears Eponine say, “It’d be more entertaining if he could maintain eye contact with his debating partner without folding.”

Grantaire gives her the middle finger without opening his eyes.

The plan is so stupid it makes Grantaire angry which is a novel and not entirely pleasant
experience. They’ve stopped doing *whatever the fuck* to Joly, and it’s not like there’s any way he could lose *more* function in his legs. This plan is asking for more trouble, and it puts everyone else in danger. But he’s outvoted along with Eponine, Joly, Feuilly and Combeferre. He tries not to be too annoyed by the fact that Enjolras looks significantly more disconcerted by Combeferre’s nay than his own.

At 2pm there is series of echoing booms from the medical bay. This, Grantaire knows, is the noise of Bahorel, Feuilly and Gavroche causing as much chaos as is physically possible within the confines of one small hospital bay. Last Grantaire heard, they’d been talking about defibrillators with the kind of glee that spelled possible accidental homicide for any Invigilators that happened to get in the way.

The *plan* is for them all to split up and investigate possible ways out of the Institute. Grantaire thinks seriously about wandering down to the staff kitchens and chowing down on as much high fructose corn syrup as he can get his hands on, but Enjolras’s earnest, crestfallen face is a constant annoyance in the back of his head. Grantaire is aware that the Invigilators will react to today’s mutiny with a drastic display of force, particularly towards Feuilly, Bahorel and Gavroche, and if he can avoid breaking Enjolras’s heart just a bit more, it’s probably worth it. Even if he has to, like, *try*.

He walks past three running Invigilators, including the chief of security, and muses on where in the Institute he hasn’t fully explored before. Then he stops dead, looks back at the running staff members, and breaks into a run.

The administration area is deserted Marie-Celeste-style, computers left unlocked, half-drunk coffees leaving circle-stains on the desks, and Grantaire is fucking *gleeful*. He picks the head of security’s desk because if Feuilly and Bahorel have taught him anything, it’s go big or go home, and settles into the plush office chair.

Grantaire has used the computer in the library maybe four times in his life; it’s disconnected from even the intranet and the most useful programmes on it are paint and solitaire. So it takes him a while to work out how to navigate the operating system. Even the dash, square, cross system at the top right of every window takes him a while to work out. Eventually he orients himself enough to find a file directory. He knows his own Institute ID code so he types that into the search bar. A whole database of information about Grantaire scrolls onto the screen, headed by the name of the scientist in charge of his genetic coding and artificial insemination, one Ruben Grantaire.

Grantaire reads through his own file, then minimises it and uses the linked series of ID numbers at the bottom to open the rest of the Flock’s profiles. He spins through Enjolras’s, then Combeferre’s, then Courfeyrac’s. When he reaches Cossette’s, he freezes like a goddamn idiot on a gorgon island.

#024-06-001

Head Researcher: Marie Cossette

Birth Name of Subject: Euphrasie Fauchelevent

Egg Donor: Fantine Fauchelevent, dec.

Sperm Donor: Felix Thylomes, dec.

PINNED ALERT:
Mlle. Fantine Fauchelevent was dispatched after foetal donation with minimal difficulty as per the Waterloo Institute directive. When selected for this programme, Fauchelevent fulfilled the criteria necessary for donorship. Namely, she was without familial or community ties, living in monthly rented accommodation, and without a steady employer. Evidently, these are features that are favourable to the Waterloo Institute, as it allows for straightforward termination of the donor after use. Unfortunately, Fauchelevent had not disclosed her true work status to us, and in actuality she was an off-the-books employee of a Mr Madeline, the reputed business mogul, entrepreneur and CEO of Fabre Industries. This was not something discovered during the initial investigation, nor was it something suggested by Mlle Fauchelevent’s credit history or financial status. After the foetal harvesting of subject #024-006-001 and termination of Mlle Fauchelevent, Mr Madeline reached out to several of the Waterloo Institute’s shell corporations, querying the subject of Fauchelevent’s disappearance. Over the years he has initiated several investigations and prompted several of his associates in the business, political and print industries to further inquire into the existence of the Waterloo Institute. It is believed that Mlle Fauchelevent breached her disclosure agreement to Mr Madeline prior to her admission to the Institute’s secure unit. This is a issue that any subsequent researcher’s in charge of #024-006-001’s case should bear in mind, as it requires careful handling.

More detailed reports of Mr Valjean’s correspondence with the Institute’s various shell companies and his known inquiries into the subject are detailed in document [#024-006-001/55].

Sincerely,

Marie Cossette.

Grantaire sits in the spinny desk chair, nose nearly touching the desk monitor. His right hand is clenched, ice-cold on the computer mouse. He doesn’t think he’s breathed in the last minute. He clicks on the link and scans down the documents, finding the details he needs. Steadily, he reaches out for the mouse and moves the tiny arrow to the web browser. Google comes up as the homepage so he navigates to the “Gmail” link on the top right and clicks. He sets up an account, filling in a form with the only accurate information being his newly-discovered date of birth. As it turns out, he turned twelve last month.

First Name: Judas
Second Name: Iscariot
Username: apolloetdionysus
Password: EnjolrasIsAnIdiot

He gets a kick out of the Welcome, Judas banner that comes up and then clicks continue to mail.

There are already three emails in the inbox from the Gmail Team, whoever they are, which he ignores. Instead he clicks on “compose” and begins writing an email.

It starts,

To: Valjean@fabre.com

Subject: Urgent and Confidential re: Fantine Fauchelevent & Her Daughter Euphrasie

Grataire becomes aware of people filtering back into the office: evidently the immediate panic
initiated by Bahorel, Feuilly and Gavroche has subsided somewhat. Thankfully, they don’t seem to become aware of him. Their eyes slide off him and onto their neighbours, or their cold coffee, or how much work they have left to do before home time.

He keeps working, sending the email to Valjean and to his secretary, for backup. Then he finds and compresses the files for all thirteen of the flock and sends them, barely daring to hope that they’ll find their desired recipient, that they’ll find someone who can help.

It’s getting later, the sun has set behind the office blinds, and he’s starting to hear people saying his ID number in phones nearby. He guesses he’s the last one to be caught.

Phillips is not going to pleased.

Before he leaves, he follows the last bursts of optimism to an online store, where he makes an account and several purchases available for pay on delivery. It won’t work, he tells himself, it really really won’t work. It’s just for fun.

It might work.

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Courfeyrac once tried to explain to Grantaire what he looked like to other people. “It’s not that you’re invisible. There’s just something about you that makes my brain want to not pay attention.” Grantaire has come to understand that he is the human equivalent of keys on your desk or glasses on your head. People just… Miss him. Some people are less sensitive to the affect than others; Enjolras, of course, is completely immune. But Phillips doesn’t seem bothered by his semi-ephemeral existence either.

Grantaire doesn’t know how to hide his footprints on a computer. Could they see everything he had done? He didn’t know. On his way out of the office he finds a tiny novelty magnet attached to the staff fridge and doubles back. He is swiping it back and forwards across the hard-drive when Phillips lays a heavy, dangerous hand on his shoulder.

He is, for all intents and purposes, thrown into the dorm. Twelve pairs of eyes look up at him with varying degrees of alarm and relief. Enjolras grabs him by the arms and hisses, “Where have you been?”

At which point all the long halogen lights in the dorm flare to an excruciatingly bright white and pop out, one by one.

“I’m so glad they’re hitting us where it hurts,” says Feuilly drily.

“Oh no, not the light fixtures!” Bahorel gasps, clutching his hand to his chest.

Grantaire is still looking up at the ceiling, eyes narrowed, when Enjolras gives him a little shake.

“Why were you gone so long?” he asks desperately.

“Time is variable continuum,” Grantaire says musingly, aware that literally every ear in the institute is on this room right now. Now would not be a good time for one of the Invigilator’s to spontaneously develop an understanding of medieval French. “Literally, it’s different in one place from another. How weird is physics, are they all just high, all the time, or do you actually get to a level of cognitive understanding where time being a variable quantity actually makes sense to your
brain. Cause let me tell you, I read all one and a half books they have on astrophysics and I still
don’t get it.”

Enjolras closes his eyes as if he is in deep pain, opens his mouth, closes it again, then pulls
Grantaire into a hug so tight his airway is in real and pressing danger from Enjolras’s shoulder. He
shifts and manages to coordinate a controlled two-person fall onto the nearest bed. “He’ll probably
be like this for a while,” he says to a baffled Joly, Musichetta and Bossuet, “Mind if we use the
bed?”

“By all means,” says Joly, natural politeness covering his confusion at Enjolras and Grantaire’s
abrupt 360 from arguing to intense cuddling.

One of the three must look around for understanding because Courfeyrac says, “I’d like to say that
you’ll understand with time but…”

“Nah man, they’re just complete weirdos,” Bahorel finishes, “Don’t look too hard at crazy.”

“I can hear you,” Grantaire says, his words muffled by Enjolras’s enthusiastic hair.

“We don’t care,” Eponine informs him.

Grantaire is once again in his favourite room, slouched in his chair, staring at a metal desk he is
brutally familiar with. To say Phillips is unhappy with him would be an understatement on par with
saying that Enjolras is by nature determined.

“What did you do?” he asks for possibly the one hundred millionth time, Grantaire has by this
point lost count.

“I couldn’t work out how to use it, I played solitaire,” Grantaire drones faithfully. The lie had had a
ring of truth the first time round - Grantaire really might just be that lazy - but after the fiftieth
repetition it had started to sound a bit forced.

“I don’t believe you,” Phillips says, “You didn’t sit in front of that computer for five hours and
play solitaire. You solve and grow bored of military grade puzzles on a regular basis, don’t you
dare lie to me, I know you better than you know yourself. What. Did. You. Do.”

“I couldn’t work out how to use it, I played solitaire.”

“You IQ is currently testing in the 150s, Grantaire, are you honestly trying to tell me that you
couldn’t work out how to turn WiFi on?” Phillips is spitting, Grantaire notes with interest. He
allows himself a quiet smile at that.

“I couldn’t work out how-”

Phillips slams around the table and has a fist in Grantaire’s curls before the back two legs of his
chair hit the ground. “Say it again,” he hisses into Grantaire’s ear, “Say it again and I promise you
that Enjolras will never see sunlight again.”

Grantaire’s fingers shake as he grips his knees, and stays silent. He spent most of his earliest
memorable years playing and fighting with Les Minettes, but Phillips is the predator he reacts to.
Phillips is the one who gives him the sensation of spiders crawling over his feathers.

“Answer. Me.” Phillips grits out. His breath is warm on his neck and smells like peppermint.
Grantaire finds himself growing slightly indignant on behalf of Imaginary, Truthful Grantaire. What if he was actually telling the truth? What kind of fucked up Catch 22 was that? He rides that illogic train right out of the station.

“What do you want me to say?” Grantaire says, “You want me to say I what, phoned the police? Can you even phone on a computer? And wouldn’t they be here by now if I had? You think I’ve come up with some kind of master plan? Seriously? You say you know me, okay. Have I run away? Have I ever given anyone any trouble? I could leave any time I want. I could literally walk out his door right now and not one of your guards would see me. But I won’t, because Enjolras can’t exist in a room without being the centre of it, and I know that’s not just me. So he engineers this big escape attempt because you spooked them all with Joly, and I wander about and I find a computer and I play with puzzles on it. What do you want from me? I like puzzles!”

Someone sticks their head in the door and motions for Phillips to go out. The door is left ajar and he hears a sharp muttered discussion on the other side. Phillips says, “No,” adamantly at one point. At another, the other Invigilator says, “Least useful from a testing stand point,” and, “already experienced trauma.”

Grantaire is starting to get a horrible, heavy, sinking sensation.

The two of them enter the room together and Phillips looks at Grantaire with something like pity. His arms are pinned across his stomach and his brow is heavy.

“Follow me please,” chirps the other Invigilator, and Grantaire follows shakily. At least whatever they’re going to do to him, they’re not planning on doing to Enjolras. Enjolras hasn’t already experienced trauma. Enjolras is useful.

They stick him in one of the Invigilator booths, looking into an examination room through what he knows appears to be a mirror from the other side. Phillips sits behind him, exuding a kind of spidery menace.

And they bring Joly in.

Grantaire’s sure he stops breathing. His pulse sounds thundering in his ears and his eyes blur with dark spotty shadows.

“Please don’t,” he’s saying, he’s looking at Phillips, when did he get on his knees, “Please. Please don’t.”

Phillips just looks at him impassively, like stone, and Grantaire wants to obliterate every contour and pore of his face.

“What did you do on the computer?” asks one of the Invigilators calmly, as if there isn’t a child screaming three feet away, separated only by mirrored glass.

Grantaire thinks they’ve given him something, psychotropic somethings, neuropathic somethings, because Joly isn’t even there behind the eyes any more, he’s just a writhing mass of terror and pain and fight or flight, except he can’t do either, can’t even stand up because they’ve taken away his chair. There is sharp, corrosive pain in Grantaire’s lungs and throat and behind his eyes. He shakes his head and keeps shaking it, “Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

“This is your fault,” says the Invigilator, “Tell us and we’ll stop.”

“It’s not,” Grantaire gasps, clawing at his own face, at his hair, “It’s not, I didn’t do anything. I swear to God, I swear to God. Please, please stop.”
They. Don’t. Stop.

Grantaire is pressed to the window, fingernails pressed white-tight into the glass, and his whole body is a whirl of horror and guilt and rage and he can’t take his eyes off of Joly’s huge white-rimmed ones.

Joly is mouthing incoherently, silent, choking sobs escaping from his lips and Grantaire can’t hold the trembling, flashing awfulness inside himself any more. “STOP IT!” he screams and all the lights in the building go out in breathless, squeezing silence. Everything goes quiet, like diving under water. Grantaire looks around and Phillips and the other Invigilator are groping, disoriented, as if through a thick fog. They’ve stopped hurting Joly, he’s curled into a ball on the floor, pulled his legs in tight against his chest with white-clenched hands. Grantaire can see his own reflection in the dark glass, over Joly’s figure like some kind of ghostly monster. He looks wild, hair standing straight up, eyes a solid shiny black. He can feel sweat trickling down the curve of his spine. A shaky breathlessness.

“Experiment terminated,” says Phillips coolly to the shaken Invigilator. “Get them back to the dorms. Now.”

“We are all of us machines, dearest sunshine, and in being so programmed, so determined from birth, so controlled, we are by our very definition non-free beings. We’re all Judas Iscariot, we’re all just fulfilling a function of a greater will, and whether that will is God or some scientist who didn’t have the moral compass to get into medical school is irrelevant! Everything has its own causality and not one of those causalities can be given to you, so-”

“No, but you’re wrong!” Enjolras shouts, “Everyone is morally responsible for their own actions, everyone has a choice to make-”

“And how, exactly, do you know that this is your choice, after all-”

“I thought we were talking about the new desert puddings,” whispers Cossette, eyes wide.

“We were definitely talking about the desert puddings,” says Feuilly, face smushed against the table, voice the verbal embodiment of weariness.

Eponine’s eyes are glazed and her face is nearly melting off her hand, “Really? I could have sworn that conversation happened years ago when we were all still young and had a will to live.”

Bahorel nods in dazed agreement as Grantaire says, with his most annoying smile, “Sunshine, you have been engineered right up to this moment to hate the taste of jelly mixed with pineapple chunks, by not liking it you are, in fact, playing the part that has been written for you.”

Jehan’s mouth is a bit slack with incredulity when he says, “Grantaire, what-”

Enjolras runs right over him with, “That’s absolutely ridiculous, by that logic we couldn’t have any likes or dislikes and-”

“You’re not understanding me at all, sunshine, I’m not denying the presence of preferences, I’m saying that you don’t have any free will over them.”

Combeferre groans loudly into his palms.
The vein in Enjolras’s temple seems to be throbbing, “You’re just wrong-”

“And you know,” continues Grantaire, “For someone who is so insistent on understanding his tyrannical overloads, you’re being quite short-sighted about the whole thing. They are responsible for your visceral dislike of gelatinous food textures. Tear them down from their golden thrones, Enjolras!”

“THAT’S SO STUPID, GRANTAIRE!” Enjolras shouts, and all three halogen lights above them flare brightly. Out of the corner of his eye, Grantaire sees a small commotion in the kitchens, involving a misbehaving stove.

Grantaire grins, “You’re absolutely right, Enjolras, your desert preferences are absolutely of your own devising, you are a magical snowflake of chance and self-determination.”

Enjolras’s mouth is open to shout more arguments into the sink-pool of Grantaire’s logic when that sentence catches up with him. He forgets to close it and just stares at Grantaire in utter bafflement.

“Is he brain damaged?” Musichetta asks Eponine seriously.

“It’s a viable theory,” she replies, eyes narrowed on Grantaire, who winks at her.

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“What in the name of everything holy are you trying to do to Enjolras?” asks Jehan, voice pitched slightly high.

“Shhhh,” hisses Feuilly, looking completely horrified, “Jehan don’t engage him in conversation, he might start talking again.”

“Me, talking?” asks Grantaire looking wide eyed at Feuilly.

Feuilly makes the sign of the cross with his fingers, “Bahorel…” he says with trepidation.

“If you start talking about determinism or what the fuck ever, I swear Grantaire, I’m going to put all of these leaves into your mouth,” says Bahorel seriously.

“All of them?” asks Grantaire.

“Every single one,” Bahorel says, without the slightest hint of amusement.

“Can I jump in on that?” Eponine says, “Also, just putting this out there, if he can’t breathe, he can’t talk anymore.”

“How to solve a problem, the Eponine way,” says Grantaire sagely.

“You can’t tell me it wouldn’t be effective,” she says grimly.

“Eponine I could call you many things, ineffective would not be one of them.”

“Seriously though,” says Jehan, “What’s the deal?”

“I’m trying to get Enjolras to light things on fire with his mind,” says Grantaire.

The silence that follows is the judging kind.
It’s Feuilly who takes the bait, “You’re what?”

“It’s relaxing,” says Grantaire.

“To you and literally no one else in the world,” says Bahorel.

“You’re all too sensitive,” says Grantaire, “If Enjolras didn’t have someone to argue with he’d go crazy.”

“Going, going,” mutters Feuilly.

“Gone,” finishes Bahorel.

Jehan puts a crown of leaves on Feuilly’s head, the brown and green-gold tangling with his red waves.

“Where’s my laurel wreath, Jehan?” asks Grantaire.

“You don’t get one,” says Jehan matter-of-factly, “Don’t be mean to Enjolras.”

Grantaire is hauled in again for questioning.

“Who did you contact?” they demand, “What did you say to them?”

“Nothing, nothing, no one,” says Grantaire in what feels like an invisible voice.

Eventually one of them blurts out in a tide of frustration, “We know it was Valjean, what did you say?”

Grantaire doesn’t know what reaction he has to that, but he knows he has one. Their expressions change.

“What did you say to him?” they ask.

“Nothing,” says Grantaire, but now his lips are pressed together to swallow the laugh that he can feel bubbling up from inside, because they’re panicked and it’s the best thing he’s ever seen. He holds his elbows and jiggles his knee and they don’t know what he said but they know who he said it to because, because, Valjean got his message? Because Valjean knows?

He says nothing over and over again, but they’re looking at him with open suspicion and they’re tracking his movements in a way that most people don’t normally manage.

Courfeyrac does a double-take when he sees him that evening, “You’re looking particularly observable today, Grantaire, oh my god you have freckles, Enjolras why didn’t you tell us Grantaire has freckles?”

“He has seventeen,” says Enjolras absently, not looking away from his conversation with Combeferre.

Grantaire makes a face at the back of Enjolras’s creepy head whilst simultaneously trying to duck around Courfeyrac’s flailing hands. Eventually he gives in and submits to, “Three, fourish, five, ‘Taire stop moving.”

Musichetta is hunched woodenly on her bunk, eyes fixed on the sleeping forms of Bossuet and
Joly. Joly hasn’t stopped trembling since they brought him back from the other side of the mirror. Grantaire can’t bring himself to look, but the constant quiver is a perceptible vibration just outside of his field of vision nonetheless. Cosette has her skinny pale arms wrapped around Musichetta like a quiet, determined vice and is rocking gently. Musichetta’s only allowance to this is to tip her head onto Cosette’s shoulder.

Grantaire takes a wander to the flying grounds on the other side of the Institute, the ones beside Les Minette’s enclosure.

He loiters for maybe thirty seconds before Montparnasse appears on the other side of the wire fence, eyes suspicious.

Grantaire winks and Montparnasse’s grin, before Grantaire turns back to go indoors, is feral.

“We’re leaving,” says Musichetta. Her voice wavers dangerously before keeling off pitch. She clears her throat but doesn’t look down. Bossuet is at her elbow, determination in his jaw. Joly is on the bed behind them, looking at his knees. His clasped hands are visibly trembling.

“How?” Enjolras asks, glancing from one to the other. To his credit, he isn’t using the same intonation Grantaire’s using in his head. Grantaire is lying face down on Jehan’s bunk; Jehan is twisting his wild hair into tiny curly plaits.

Musichetta shakes her head, “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care how many times we have to try. I don’t care if I get killed. We’re leaving, we have to.”

Enjolras nods his head, “Then we’ll come with you.”

It takes a second.

Then Courfeyrac, who’s half asleep and has his head nestled on Combeferre’s belly says, “Wait. What?” (Simultaneously Bahorel grunts, “Huh?” from the tangle of his and Feuilly’s limbs and Grantaire yelps, “Democracy!” and sits up so abruptly he nearly loses half his head of hair. Jehan gives him a dry look that he ignores.)

Enjolras looks sheepish for maybe half a second before he tries to justify himself, “The more of us try to escape, the higher the chances that one of us will manage it.”

“That’s not how you statistic, sunshine,” says Grantaire, probably more snarkily than he should, “Thirteen times zero is still zero.”

“If it were up to you, we’d rot here forever,” Enjolras fires back.

“You’re right,” says Grantaire, “I love torture and bodily mutilation. Seriously, Enj, my wings look so fab right now.”

Enjolras opens his mouth to argue back and Combeferre claps one of his big, gentle hands down onto Enjolras’s shoulder. “No one wants to stay here,” he says, giving Enjolras a reproving look, “And this isn’t something any one of us can decide on behalf of the others. We all have to come to a decision ourselves.”

“No, but-” Enjolras begins, and Combeferre raises an eyebrow at him. Enjolras’s voice shrinks to a
fifth of its normal size, “I can’t go if Grantaire doesn’t,” he finishes beseechingly.

“Then talk to Grantaire,” says Courfeyrac incredulously.

“Privately,” clarifies Combeferre.

Eponine and Cosette are currently embroiled in what counts as an argument between them. Cosette is mumbling in her own dulcet, persuasive way and Eponine is snapping back and trying not to listen too closely.

Bahorel and Feuilly are muttering together and Bahorel is frowning.

Courfeyrac and Combeferre sit beside each other on a bed and survey the room. Grantaire sometimes wonders what they see.

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras, standing over him.

Grantaire looks up at him from under his eyebrows and says back evenly, “Sunshine.”

A ripple of annoyance passes over Enjolras’s face. He’s much less tolerant of Grantaire’s teasing, of late, which might have something to do with how hard Grantaire’s been pushing him. But it’s for their own good; Enjolras started a small fire in the library the other day. He has none of Grantaire’s ability to manipulate or direct, doesn’t even seem to be aware that he’s doing it. But, baby steps. Grantaire had tiptoed down to the storage room the other day, and found something he hadn’t dared hope for. This, though. This new attempt at escape could ruin everything.

Right impulse, wrong time, terrible plan.

He doesn’t dare say anything about the right plan, though. He’s read about the Enigma. He’s not counting on those scientists not being able to pick up on their mangled French dialect.

“We need to leave,” Enjolras says, “Now’s as good a time as ever.”

“Now is not a good time, Enjolras. We don’t even have a plan.”

“We can get out by the roofs.”

“That’s not a plan, Enjolras, that’s a direction. You aren’t selling me on this with the word vertically.”

“Why won’t you at least try?” asks Enjolras desperately, “All I’m asking is that you try, that you act half as keen to get out of this place as the rest of us.”

“Enjolras, we live in an endless hellscape of misery, of course I want to get out of here. But our lives are more important. You can’t be free when you’re dead.”

“I’d rather be dead than spend any longer in this place,” Enjolras says seriously.

Grantaire scoffs at the dramatics, “Of course you would, but would you rather me be dead?”

Enjolras freezes and Grantaire rails on, “Would you rather Courfeyrac and Combeferre dead, that having to live here for a while longer? This is not the worst thing in the world, Enjolras. It’s not even close. Grow up.”

Enjolras shakes his head, “No. I’m going. And. And you’re going too. You promised you wouldn’t leave me, you promised.” He doesn’t sound half as sure by the end of the sentence as he did at the
Grantaire grits his teeth and breathes through the complete aggravation that is Enjolras, “Can’t you just trust me? Just this once? Can’t you give me the benefit of the doubt that I’ve got a better handle on what’s going on here than you do?”

“No,” says Enjolras simply, “If you can’t prove to me that not one of us will get out, that not one of us will find their way to a better life, then no. This is too important to just trust you on.”

“As opposed to all those other times when you’ve trusted me,” Grantaire says bitterly.

“I’ve always taken your advice!” Enjolras says, voice shrill.

“Sure, sunshine, sure. How about the laundry shoot? How about that as a way out? I’m sure they won’t have thought of that.”

Enjolras’s mouth opens but no words come out. He looks absolutely stricken. Grantaire glances up and everyone’s looking at them anyway, there wasn’t much point in giving this conversation even the veneer of privacy. Everything they do is public. Everything they do is on show.

“I won’t let them do that again,” says Enjolras, tears in his eyes, suddenly, which is never what Grantaire wants.

Grantaire rolls his eyes but softens his voice, “Enjolras. You don’t have any power here. You are a victim, isn’t it easier to come to terms with that, than to keep losing the same battle over and over again? You can’t do anything.”

“I can get us out,” Enjolras says, definitively.

Just as adamantly, Grantaire says, “No, you can’t.”

There’s a moment of dull silence and then Eponine says, “Then we’ll vote. Majority rules.”

“That’s not fair,” Combeferre says, “Then people will be taking a risk they aren’t willing to take.”

“Well apparently none of us can do anything alone,” says Feuilly, with just a touch of bitterness. Bahorel eyes him warily. “So it’s the only thing that makes sense, right? If the vote’s a no, then we leave it for now, if it’s not, hey we probably all end up in serious shit but at least it’s a democratic process right?”

“All in favour of trying to get out tonight,” says Enjolras. His eyes don’t leave Grantaire as he puts his hand up, so it’s up to Combeferre to count the yays: Enjolras, Combeferre, Courfeyrac. Musichetta and Bossuet. Bahorel. Gavroche, in spite of both his sisters, has his hand higher in the air than anyone. Grantaire’s surprised that Jehan hasn’t voted yes, he has a feeling that it might have something to do with him. Joly doesn’t look happy about the situation either.

Grantaire turns back to Enjolras and turns up the corner of his mouth in a tired smile, “The yays have it, sunshine. Your plan better be a good one.”

The plan is terrible.
They’ll get headed off by Les Minettes before they even get to the roof.

Once they get to the roof they won’t be able to get far enough fast enough without at least one of them getting shot.

Not one of them can outfly a helicopter; the Institute is equipped with four.

And none of them have the kind of survivor’s instinct required to save themselves, to fuck with everyone else. Musichetta might make it out with Bahorel and Joly, Granraire has a feeling that when it gets down to it, that girl knows how to prioritise. But the rest of them, they’ll fall back the second one of them goes down.

And Granraire can’t even fly.

“We’ll carry you,” says Enjolras and Granraire bites his tongue so that he doesn’t ask how Enjolras intends to carry him, fly faster than a helicopter and avoid bullets simultaneously.

If Granraire knew that he could get even Enjolras out, the entire venture would be worth it. But Enjolras will be the first one spotted running down the corridor, the first one picked out by binoculars in the woods, the first one mown down by tranq darts from a helicopter. His wings are the gold of the sun, and the strange optical illusion that Enjolras carries with him gives him less than no chance. His was not a body built for subterfuge.

But he’s doing this anyway. So Granraire needs to manufacture a chance.

Grantaire slips away fifteen minutes before they make their move. It’s not difficult, he just has to wait for Enjolras to look in a different direction.

He walks fast along corridor after corridor, the echoing white giving him vertigo and nausea all at once.

He’s almost in the East wing, where Les Minettes are held, when a buzzing alarm starts to hum through the walls and through his bones. Two guards run past him and nearly knock him over. Grantaire guesses the others have started their escape. There’s a screeching scream of metal ahead and Grantaire speeds round the corner, only to nearly collide with a wall of metal bars. They’ve come down in the middle of the corridor and Montparnasse is on the other side. His wide eyes meet Grantaire’s and his long cold fingers close around Grantaire’s wrists as Granraire reaches out impulsively.

“Is this it?” demands Montparnasse.

“No,” says Granraire, “Well, maybe. I don’t know. They’re trying, anyway. It’s not my plan.”

Montparnasse sags slightly, “I really wish you’d told me that before.”

“It was news to me too,” says Granraire, “Why, what’s happened?”

“Les Minettes are rioting,” says Montparnasse, “They won’t chase your feathered friends. They’re too busy tearing Invigilators’ throats out.”

“And that’s…”

“Nothing to do with me,” says Montparnasse briskly, “Officially.”
“Right.” Grantaire nods and pulls at the black steel separating them, “What the fuck are these?”

“New installations, I’d bet,” says Montparnasse, “After you went AWOL. Even you can’t walk through walls.”

“Shit,” Grantaire hissed. “Well, you have to get out.”

“Yeah, how.”

Grantaire looks closer at Montparnasse and sees that there’s fear there, around his eyes and mouth. There’s something really wrong here. Montparnasse doesn’t show fear.

“Well there has to be other ways between the west and east wings,” says Grantaire, “Try the roof tiles.”

“Already did, at a different barrier on the second floor. These things are welded into the cement.”

“The bathrooms?”

“All the ceiling space has been filled. It’s blocked off.”

“What about the windows on the fourth floor, there’s a ledge outside, you could slide along.”

“You used that on one of your weird pretend-escape runs, remember? They put bars on the window.”

“The rooftops.”

“Don’t join up any more, you used that one too.”

Somewhere inside the steeple of Grantaire’s ribs, something is twisting painfully. His mind is an awful barren blank.

“I…” he says, and trails off, “Shit.”

“You can’t think of anything?” Montparnasse says, his voice climbing a register, “Are you kidding me, boy genius? Think of something.”

Grantaire shakes his head, “I am,” he says, “I’m thinking.”

“Don’t leave me here,” snaps Montparnasse and Grantaire gives him an impatient look.

“I’m thinking, Parnasse.”

But nothing’s clicking into place. Grantaire pulls the building apart in his head, turns it over, twists it sideways like a Rubik’s cube. He’s staring at the white of Montparnasse’s knuckles but he can’t find an answer. A room filled with coloured squares jumps to mind and he pushes it back violently.

There’s a noise behind him, a slapping of rubber soles on the linoleum, and he twists around. It’s Gavroche, gulping air. He gives Grantaire and Montparnasse a sweeping look, visibly disregards the weirdness and says frantically, “Enjolras is hurt, Grantaire. You gotta come quick, he’s hurt real bad.”

Gavroche speeds off again down the corridor to find his sisters and Grantaire turns slowly. There’s a ringing noise in his ears. His brain has ground to a screeching halt. He feels heavy, like he’s being tied down on the earth by more than just gravity.
“Don’t you dare,” hisses Montparnasse, “Don’t you-”

“I have to-” Grantaire starts, his shakes his head and keeps shaking it, his hands are trembling violently, “I can’t-” A soft noise escapes him then, something between a sigh and a sob.

“You can’t!” says Montparnasse frantically, “You can’t leave me here!”

“You have to let go,” says Grantaire’s mouth. His lips feel numb. His whole body feels numb. “Let go.”

“No,” snarls Montparnasse, “No. You leave me now, you leave me here and you’re a fucking monster, don’t you fucking dare, you’re my friend.”

Grantaire’s head is still shaking. He tries to get it to halt but it feels like one of those perpetual motion machines. He’s not in control of his body right now.

“You have to let go,” he says again.

Montparnasse grips tighter and Grantaire’s bones grind and pop and a sharp burst of pain cascades up his arm. He barely notices, just pushes the pain back and down, and Montparnasse cries out and flinches back in the same moment, cradling his own hand to his chest.

“I have to,” says Grantaire again in no more than a whisper. “I can’t.”

“No.”

Grantaire turns around and runs, and doesn’t look back.

Montparnasse’s howl chases him up the corridor, “I hope he’s dead! I hope you both die!”

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Grantaire reaches the roof in a span of time that will forever go unmeasurable in his head. It is at once endless and the fastest he has ever moved.

He stops like he’s hit a wall when he sees Enjolras striding towards him. “There you are,” Enjolras says, sounding aggrieved, “for God’s sake, Grantaire.” He snatches Grantaire’s hand out of the air. Grantaire’s wrist spikes with futile pain.

“Gavroche-” says Grantaire, lungs on fire, throat a hoarse, metallic sting, “He said you were-”

Enjolras waves his other hand, dismissing the end of the sentence, “I lied, you disappeared, there was only one thing guaranteed to make you come fast,” Enjolras spins on his heel and opens his arms, et voila, “And look! You’re here.”

Grantaire feels like his lungs have caved in.

“You did. You. What?” he asks, his gaze is unfocused. The rest of the Flock are on the roof, ranged out. The Invigilator’s are too busy dealing with rioting Les Minettes in another part of the building, because, because. Because Montparnasse prepared for this, prepared for the Flock’s escape. Because he took Grantaire at his word.

The rage that swoops in to fill Grantaire’s lungs in place of oxygen is thick and cloying. Enjolras is pushing him backwards towards the edge of the roof, everyone’s in the process of taking off.
There’s gunfire from the roof of the East wing. Grantaire’s blood pounds in his ears but he doesn’t know how to be this angry at Enjolras, he doesn’t know how to deal with this thumping, twitching heart beat and this clouded vision.

“No,” he mutters, then shouts, “No!” Enjolras pushes him closer towards the edge of the roof.

Enjolras rolls his eyes, “Move, Grantaire.” The heels of Grantaire’s trainers nudge against the lip of the building.

“No!” Grantaire shouts over the thudding in his ears. “Let go of me. I do not consent.”

Enjolras’s furious, horrified expression is the last thing Grantaire sees as the building behind them explodes in a cacophony of fireworks.

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Grantaire’s wings howl with pain.

He drops several feet before he can beat hard enough to stay level. Muscles and tendons pull at his chest and back and neck, taught and ready to snap.

Enjolras has his arm in a vice-like grip and Feuilly’s shouting, “What the hell? What the actual fucking hell?”

“THAT was my plan!” Grantaire screams at Enjolras, because he has to scream something right now, he can’t keep this shrieking roar inside himself.

Enjolras looks at him in bewilderment. Which, alright, a building just blew up with him on it, he might not be in the most comprehending of places right now. The whole Flock is backing away towards the treeline as the entire North and East wings fall in on themselves in a rumbling groan of concrete and steel. The East wing.

Grantaire lunges out of Enjolras’s grasp, dips towards the rapidly disappearing building and is yanked back again by Enjolras and Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac looks a little singed and a lot confused.

“Let go!” Grantaire screams at them.

“Where are you going?” Enjolras shouts back, utterly unglued.

Grantaire’s eyes are blurred with tears. “There are people in there!” he screams into Enjolras’s face, “Les Minettes are still in there!”

Enjolras and Courfeyrac boggle at him.

“Grantaire,” says Enjolras soothingly. “Grantaire, they’re not our concern. They’re…”

“They deserve a chance to escape, as much as any of us!” says Grantaire.

“They’re monsters,” says Enjolras in complete disbelief.

Grantaire recoils from him, or tries to. His wings don’t have the strength to hold him up, let alone pull away from Enjolras’s grip.

“Let go of me!” Grantaire shouts, for what seems like the thousandth time this evening. Courfeyrac
lets go, eying him warily.

“No!” Enjolras snaps back. He’s pulling him along in their wake, towards the treeline.

“I don’t want you touching me!” Grantaire’s voice is hoarse and broken and he uses the last of his strength to wrestle out of Enjolras’s grasp. He concentrates on the beat of his wings. One, two, one, two, one, two, until he reaches the treeline where the rest of the Flock are, and can cling onto a tree branch.

Enjolras is opening and closing his fists uselessly, eyes huge in his face, just staring at Grantaire.

“What’s happening right now,” says Eponine, never one to shy away from the awkward question. Enjolras makes some gesture at Grantaire, who ignores him. There are fireworks still popping and whirling behind them. Jehan is looking particularly disoriented, face twisting in discomfort. The majority of his sensation is phonic and like the rest of them, his ears are probably ringing. Grantaire struggles towards him and taps his elbow. Jehan rests his head against Grantaire’s shoulder momentarily.

“So… We should go?” says Bahorel, eyes flitting from Grantaire, to Enjolras then back. “Before they work out how their guns work again?”

“Dead men can’t fire guns,” says Grantaire with all the poison of the last hour in his voice.

Bahorel looks startled but says nothing.

Combeferre says gently, “We should go anyway.”
Chapter Notes

I am so very very sorry for the wait. Two computers, one tablet and most of my soul died in the process of writing this, and more than one draft was lost. It was just a very painful experience all round.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They stay just above the tree line, spaced out in wingspans.

Sweat beads on Grantaire’s temple, down his nose and into his eyes. He can’t think past the whirling rage in his head and the pain that shoots from his shoulder blades to his wing tips. Enjolras is pulling ahead in spurts, like his wings can’t move fast enough, like he’s dragging the full weight of them all behind him. Combeferre is on Enjolras’s immediate right, steady, oriented like a compass needle. Courfeyrac is on the left, talking breathlessly, words spilling out in a way which sounds like nonsense to Grantaire.

“Do you feel that? It’s amazing, it’s like there’s invisible rails in the air, I can feel which way is north, I can feel how hot the air is, how fast it’s blowing, it’s like touching *electricity.*”

Somewhere, distantly, Grantaire recognises what Courfeyrac is saying. The sky’s smooth surface scatters away and Grantaire is aware of an underlying system - invisible lines, like white crayon on a blank page. On any other day he would wonder at it, delight in it, swoop down and then up to feel the tug of currents and air temperature, even with his wings howling at him. As it is, he hooks his wings into the white crayon rails and holds on grimly, teeth clenched, bile a burning presence at the back of his throat.

Jehan and Joly take the spaces immediately next to Grantaire at the very back of the formation. Every ragged breath Grantaire takes, he is aware of Jehan teasing the sound from the rushing air around them, Joly’s gentle eyes are on his wings, his clenched fists, his set face. He loosens his jaw to stop the whistling, hissing noise that’s started to come out, and ignores them both.

Their attention means that when Grantaire hits his breaking point like a wall, between one beat of his wings and the next, he only falls as far as the top branches of the trees before Joly and Jehan have their hands locked around his wrists. Grantaire’s arms stretch up over his head with a snap, he yelps, and pain tsunamis from some point between his scapula to the tips of his wings. He yanks his arms out from Joly and Jehan’s grip in a thoughtless retreat from the pain, and falls through the first canopy of trees below. He half-catches, half-collides with a thick branch about a metre down, and hunches there, the lump in his throat too big to swallow around.

“Grantaire?” Jehan’s voice calls down through the dappled green, then, quieter: “I heard him hit the branch, he isn’t far down.”

“Grantaire?!” shouts Enjolras, in a much less collected register that Jehan. His golden-haloed face is visible if Grantaire cranes his neck back. He stops doing it immediately.

“I’m fine,” calls Grantaire, his voice breaking on the second syllable.
Feuilly and Bahorel drop fast and startling through the foliage and grab hold of branches with the agility of monkeys. “On a scale of 1 to 10 that I’m fine was a solid 0,” Feuilly informs him.

“Told you all that dive-bombing practice was strategic,” says Bahorel, “We can find little miserable you in shadows now. Hoorah.”

Feuilly hangs one-handed out of his tree to give Bahorel a high-five.

“Is he dead?” Eponine’s voice drifts down.

Feuilly pulls a face and Bahorel says, “She cares really,” without much conviction.

Grantaire snorts and buries his face in his knees.

It’s decided, eventually, that they should continue on foot. The conversation is strained by pockets of Grantaire’s stony silence. He contents himself with the petty victory of climbing quickly down the tree and watching them all struggle to follow his lead, until Combeferre nearly tumbles backwards off a branch and Grantaire feels guilty enough to give them all instructions about foot placement.

“You ever notice,” muses Courfeyrac, finally on the ground, examining his armfuls of tiny scrapes, “That the first line is white, then the next one is red, then it goes all white around it?”

Everyone ignores him, except Combeferre, at his shoulder, who mumbles, “Wheal and flare response.” Combeferre got a branch to the face on his descent through the trees and now one of his eyes is a bloodshot mess, which he keeps rubbing absently.

The woods are soothing on their collective nerves, their footfalls soft on the pine-carpeted ground, the canopy of trees above a welcome shelter. There is absolute silence but for the whispering leaves and their muted voices. No shouts in the distance, no alarm bells or howls from Les Minettes. With the clamour of the exploding Institute still ringing in their ears, it’s a welcome peace.

They walk for an amount of time that will forever go unmeasured in Grantaire’s head. Bahorel has a sleeping Gavroche on his shoulders, his tiny pudgy face is buried in Bahorel’s dark hair. Next to them is Feuilly, whose face has fallen into its blank default of exhaustion. Eponine and Cosette are holding hands, tripping over their own feet. Courfeyrac, demonstrating some kind of previously-unheard-of quantum anomaly, is not talking, just sticking close to Combeferre’s side, one fist clenched around the hem of his shirt. Musichetta is at the front, plunging on into the half-sun, half-gloom of the woods with a ferocity of feeling none of the rest of them have left. Bossuet, with Joly on his back, are right behind her. Jehan is walking with his eyes closed, arms stretched out to brush the rough barks of the trees, expression serene. He mumbles, “There’s so much space, it goes on forever.”

Grantaire is watching clouds of light drift across the warm forest floor. Enjolras is watching Grantaire and Grantaire is steadfastly ignoring him.

Minutes or hours later, Jehan stops dead. Courfeyrac walks flat into him, Bahorel and Feuilly stumble to an ungraceful halt, and Musichetta ploughs straight on ahead until Joly calls her back. Jehan’s fingers are splayed across his ears, lips pressed white together, eyes over-bright. “I can hear a helicopter,” he says, ”It’s churning up the air.”

Courfeyrac bursts into tears.
The hopelessness descends on them all like a cloud passing on the forest floor and Grantaire thinks suddenly that they all seem intolerably young. Somehow it’s not at all strange to him that their fiery determination would carry them just past the gates of the Institute and no further. Enjolras looks at Grantaire helplessly and Grantaire drags his hands down his face to dislodge the lump from his throat and chest. He is twelve years old. The world should not feel this towering and terrible. But it does, so fuck it all to hell.

Grantaire uncurls his spine, pulls himself up straight and tall, and takes a deep breath. Then he says, “Which direction, Jehan?” with a resolve that seems to come from the very bottom of him, off-white trainers grinding into the dirt, traction built out of nothing except grim, vindictive stubbornness.

Jehan points wordlessly up and forwards, in the direction they have been walking. His finger drops, slowly, with the descent of the helicopter.

Grantaire nods, and says, “Okay.” He takes a breath, “So, I’m going to go over there and find out who it is. If it’s the Institute then we go around them, if it’s someone else-”

Eponine interrupts, “Uh, no-”

as Enjolras gathers enough latent fury to spit out, “Of course you’re not-”

and Bahorel says, “Who else would it be?”

“The police,” suggests Cosette.

“Grantaire did just explode a building,” says Courfeyrac.

“Somehow,” mutters Feuilly.

“-CaBOOM,” finishes Courfeyrac throwing his hands up in an explosiony kind of way.

“We’ll all go,” says Enjolras decisively.

“Erm-” Combeferre starts, “That might not be necessarily the wisest-”

“All those in favour of not bringing the human fog-horn-” Eponine says, looking pointedly at Enjolras, causing Feuilly and Bahorel throw up their arms in unison.

“Ah-” comes Joly’s timid voice, “I hate to interrupt but-”

They turn around to look at him in unison. Joly smiles sheepishly.

“Grantaire and Musichetta are gone already.”

“Shit,” says Bahorel.

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“How long before they notice, do you think?” asks Musichetta.

“At least ten minutes,” says Grantaire, “Debates take a lot longer when there are thirteen of you and everyone has to get their own one-liner in.”

Musichetta snorts and Grantaire decides that he likes her. Maybe the stress of the day is making him emotional, but she’s goal-oriented and practical, features that are shockingly lacking in the rest
They hear the helicopter within minutes, a thundering judder that gets louder as they creep towards it. They overshoot their mark and come out on the other side of the helicopter, on top of a huge ravine, overlooking a massive expanse of shrubby grass and grey dust. Grantaire is reminded forcefully of the bobbly green cushions in the play room. Keeping the fall to their right, they edge back along the slim margin between the forest and the drop. They help each other wordlessly over fallen tree trunks, eye the sharp drop below them with a kind of wistful fascination.

“What do you think it’d be like to fly with that much space?” Musichetta says, “It’d be good, huh?”

“Yeah, if I can get my wings to work again,” Grantaire says quietly.

“You will,” Musichetta says, and then, “He shouldn’t have pushed you.”

“Nope.”

“Did you really have a plan of your own?”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“They listen to our every word, I didn’t want to ruin our chances. I had it all worked out. No kid fatalities, someone on the outside. Now, I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Musichetta shrugged, “We’ll do what we have to, I guess.”

“Profound,” says Grantaire, softening it with a sideways grin, because the kind of utterly deadpan sarcasm that he, Feuilly, Bahorel, Eponine and Jehan have developed for their own entertainment sometimes makes them come across as assholes.

Musichetta smirks and doesn’t say anything more because at that moment they stumble across an open clearing that cuts into the forest and faces out over the vast expanse of desert. There is a gleaming silver helicopter in the middle of the glade, it’s blades still spinning idly. There are two men standing beside it. One is holding a large gun. He’s stocky, dark, scanning the perimeter from behind a pair of even darker sunglasses. The other is-

Grantaire lets out an undignified yelp and sprints forwards into the clearing, across the open space towards the men. He hears Musichetta swear viciously behind him, then a pause before he makes out the sound of her following, her trainers thudding on the dirty.

That’s a surprise – he thinks, absently - he would have bet on her staying in the tree-line.

Out of the corner of his eye Grantaire registers a blur of movement: the rest of the flock has caught up with them, thanks to Jehan's superior navigational skills, and in an utterly bizarre twist, Enjolras is winning the race towards the Grantaire and Musichetta. Grantaire slows to appreciate the fact that Enjolras - who resents getting out of bed before noon and whose favourite sport is rousing debate - is outstripping Feuilly and Cosette, the flock's all-time sprinting champions, solely for the purposes of shouting at Grantaire. Enjolras collides with Grantaire at speed, nearly topples them both to the ground, and throws his arms around Grantaire in a half hug, half full-body-shake.

"You -" Enjolras begins.
Grantaire eyes Enjolras's sweaty, scarlet face and tries unsuccessfully to get his broken wrist out of the crush zone.

“You—” Enjolras continues, into Grantaire's neck, with even greater venom.

Feuilly and Cosette reach them next, then Bahorel wheezes to a stop with a delighted Gavroche jiggling on his shoulders shouting ‘Giddy-up, Rel.”

Bahorel scowls, “I totally would have won if I wasn’t playing Pegasus.”

"Hey, Greek reference!” says Grantaire.

The others catch up and slow to a stop, Bossuet last with Joly wrapped around his back like a koala bear.

They’re still a good 200 metres away from the helicopter, but the two men have walked out to meet them half way. To Grantaire's relief, the threatening one has holstered his gun. They stop an easy distance away - unthreatening, safe.

“Hello,” says the other man, eyes bright like stars, “Now. Which one of you would be Grantaire?”

The fact that the flock wordlessly climbs on board an – objectively very threatening - strangers’ helicopter at nothing more than a mumbled grunt from Grantaire, would probably horrify him if he hadn’t just reached the very end of his capacity for thought and movement.

They all cram into the fancy leather seats, mostly on top of each other. Grantaire settles between (and mostly underneath) Cosette and Enjolras. The air is dark and tingly on his face, his lips are strangely numb and his wings are an agonised mess of pain that he’s stopped trying to look too closely at. He drops his head forwards and loses track of time for a moment or five. He wakes up to Enjolras shaking him, and a ringing silence in the helicopter. Cosette’s big eyes are so filled with worry she looks like a cartoon character.

Grantaire clears his throat. “Uh. Sorry?”

“What’s wrong with you?” demands Enjolras.

Grantaire gives him a dead stare and says slowly, “My wings hurt."

“May we take a look?” Madeline is standing in the doorway to the cockpit, his whole face gentle and leathery - brown eyes, brown hair, smile creases. The other man is standing just behind him. He has dark features, black swept-back hair, a hooked nose and startlingly grey-blue eyes that are examining all of them with open hostility.

“No,” says Enjolras shortly.

as Courfeyrac says simultaneously, “Excuse me but who are you? And how does Grantaire know you?"

and Eponine says, “So, what, are we supposed to trust this guy or something? Why, exactly?”

and Musichetta demands, “Who’s driving the helicopter?”

“Autopilot,” rumbles the man who isn’t Madeline, to what he obviously regards as the only
Grantaire shakes himself free of Enjolras and Cosette and stands up. The noise of the helicopter is loud and throbbing in his ears and there are tiny dark stars at the corner of his vision.

The man who isn’t Madeline steps forward and steadies him by the shoulders, sending a suppressive glance over Grantaire’s shoulder as he does. Grantaire can just imagine what Enjolras’s face looks like.

“I’m Javert,” he rumbles, index finger pressed between the tendons on Grantaire’s wrist, eyes on his watch.

“Pleasure,” says Grantaire, with only a little sarcasm. His lips feel numb.

Javert ignores him and looks back up after half a minute, his eyes sharp and accusatory. “One to ten, ten being the worst pain you’ve ever felt, how bad?”

Grantaire considers and says, “Seven. But you should bear in mind that I’ve been tortured a lot.”

The ringing silence returns. Javert’s lips thin.

“You never told us that,” says Feuilly inflectionlessly, from behind him.

Madeline gives Grantaire a look so full of sympathy and sorrow it makes him flinch. Madeline looks away, eyes clouded. “No one keeps a secret like a child,” he murmurs, seemingly to no one. Then he seems to shake himself, and meets Grantaire’s eyes once more, “We have some pain killers you could take,” he says gently, “They’re very strong… They might actually knock you out. I’d understand if you didn’t want them, given the circumstances, but it would stop the pain…”

Grantaire thrusts his arm out and says without hesitation, “Shoot me up.” He turns back to the rest of the flock as an afterthought. “Famous business tycoon billionaire, called Madeline, been trying to figure out the Institute for ages because he knew Cosette’s mum and she disappeared. I found his details that time when we all tried to find different ways out.”

The rest of the flock stare at him in stunned silence. Then Combeferre says carefully, “Uh, where?”

“In the administration building,” Grantaire turns abruptly back to Madeline as the whole world rocks under his feet. He taps urgently on his brachial pulse. “Seriously, shoot me up or I’m going to throw up all over your private helicopter.”

Javert sits him down, withdraws a large green box from an overhead cabinet, and ties a stretchy band around Grantaire’s upper arm. He does all this without smiling, or even looking remotely like he wants to be here, but his hands are gentle and his, “Sharp scratch,” is calming. The needle sinks in and Enjolras looks like he’s about to cry.

Grantaire opens his eyes and his first thought is, I thought I was meant to fall asleep. Then he stretches and realises he’s lying in the nicest, biggest cot he’s ever seen, wrapped in sheets that move like water over him, soft and cool. Beneath his head is something hard and lumpy.

“Explain me a thing, sunshine,” Grantaire says, wiggling his toes further into the bed, “I have access to pillows like clouds and I’m on your bony knees.”

Enjolras looks down and his eyes are red rimmed. His hands are still stroking idly through
Grantaire’s wild mane. Grantaire struggles up and sits next to Enjolras against the head of the cot. There’s a black-screened tablet, like the ones the Invigilators at the Institute have, lying on the sheets next to them.

“What time is it?” Grantaire asks.

“Six,” Enjolras answers.

“Wait, it’s tomorrow?” Grantaire feels like he closed his eyes a few seconds ago. He ignores how much the sensation of losing time thrills him.

“It’s tomorrow,” Enjolras confirms, “You woke up a couple of times. I suppose you don’t remember. How do your wings feel?”

Grantaire shifts. His wings are bound up in white material. It’s not uncomfortable but pretty much all movement is limited. “Fine, they’re not sore at all really. How did that happen?”

“They have a doctor; he was waiting for us when we arrived. He looked you over, and gave you some painkillers. He said it’s a mix of tendon, ligament and muscle damage. He said he’s surprised you were still conscious when they found us.” Enjolras’s voice has something in it like accusation. Grantaire fights down the dull impulse to hit him and searches for something neutral to say.

“So, you think we can guilt any food out of this lot?”

“Dinner is at seven, I was to wake you up if you weren’t awake by then.”

Grantaire is silent for a moment, then. “Dinner? Enjolras, I thought you meant six am, I was out for 18 hours?!”

“Oh, no,” Enjolras clarifies, “It’s ten am to us. But we’re in England.”

“We’re where?”

The walls of the living room are a light, warm wood that arches high above their heads. Wooden beams slope up to meet the ceiling and a narrow fireplace is set into the wall, running the length of the room. It crackles gently underneath their voices and through any silence. Big caramel-brown couches are set around low tables. The floor is a shiny chestnut colour and the windows along the left side of the room are floor-to-ceiling and pitch black with the night outside. Sitting nearly enveloped in the cushions of the couch, Grantaire is the safest he has ever felt.

The rest of the flock are not so relaxed. There’s an element of hysteria to their laughter and chatter, with nonsense coming out just as often as sense. They’re all crashing through sleep deprivation and jet lag, high on their escape, thrumming with anxiety at what to do next, and starving-hungry.

Madeline orders pizza for them all and it’s the best thing any of them have ever tasted. Compared to their normal meals - essentially nutritionally-approved dog food - stringy cheese and pizza sauce is an utter revelation. They clear the boxes of anything resembling food in a matter of minutes and when Joly politely asks, “Is there any more?” Javert looks frankly alarmed.

The doctor - Doctor Myriel, Grantaire learns from the smiling man himself - says cheerfully, “This lot probably have a very different metabolic system from us. It’s possible they need more food than the average teenager - which, incidentally, is more than adults need anyway.”

More pizzas are ordered and after munching his way through one with vegetables on it, and...
another with what tastes like ham and fruit, Grantaire finally feels full. He sips an icy cola out of a tall glass and closes his eyes. Beside him, Enjolras tucks his head in against Grantaire’s neck, soft, sweet-smelling curls tickling his collarbones.

They sit on top of each other, piled on the couches like puppies, and Madeline stands in front of them, the light of the fire behind him outlining his silhouette. He looks a little nervous with all their eyes on him. Dr Myriel is sitting by one of the big windows and Javert is lurking somewhere behind them, in the darker corners of the room.

“We haven’t really had a chance to talk yet, and I can imagine you’re all somewhat confused, in spite of Grantaire’s brief run-through in the helicopter. I’d like to fix that, if you’ll all hear me out.”

There’s a silence in which Joly nods encouragingly, Feuilly raises his eyebrows and Grantaire gives him a deadpan thumbs up.

Madeline takes a deep breath and says, as if he’s rehearsed it, “My real name is Jean Valjean. I am known to the world as Ultime Madeline and I am, as Grantaire has said, a businessman. Fourteen years ago a friend and employee of mine, Fantine Thylomes, went missing. I had been protecting her from her husband, an abusive and dangerous man, and had provided her with a false identity under the name Thylomes. She was pregnant, which was what had led her to seek help from me originally. She desperately wanted a better life for her child than she herself had led. When she disappeared, I was very concerned, and used all my resources to try and find her. There was absolutely no trace. It was as if Fantine had simply stopped existing. Her possessions were all gone, no one who knew her had heard from her, her ex-husband had also vanished overnight. The only lead we could find - and it was one that was hard-bought - was the Waterloo Institute.”

Valjean had been meeting their eyes individually but here he broke off and looked away. “No one had heard of it. Or, so they said. Some people seemed to know enough only to know it was a dangerous subject. And then there was the matter of the missing, abusive ex-husband. Logic said that he was responsible, not some shady agency inaccessible to even myself. Or so I… Allowed myself to be convinced.”

He looks mournfully back at them, “I gave up, stopped looking. And for that, I will never forgive myself.”

There is silence for a long few moments and then, again, he seems to pull himself out of his own reverie, a bemused smile curling his lips, “Then two months ago I received an email from someone claiming that he was imprisoned in a place called the Waterloo Institute with Fantine’s daughter and a number of other children. He sent details of the building and the practical difficulties of escape as he saw them, as well as full profiles of each child kept there.” His smile widens and he looks with Grantaire with a kind of abject admiration that makes Grantaire squirms in his seat.

“This was Grantaire, as you all know. And these,” here he withdraws a stack of report files from one of the low tables, “Are your profiles.”

He passes them out. Instantly, half of them start rifling through them.

“A moment more of your time, please,” asks Valjean politely, and they look up, “These files are your property and it is now absolutely your right to disclose or not disclose any of the information therein at your own discretion. However, I should inform you that in my efforts to understand the situation and prepare for your possible rescue, I have read over the files in some detail, as has Dr Myriel. I felt and still feel that this was necessary, but it was an invasion of your privacy regardless and I apologise for that.”
“You know,” drawls Bahorel, “I think my privacy will survive.”

“Ditto” says Eponine.

There’s a scattering of nodding and eye-rolling from the flock.

“I’m glad,” says Valjean gently. He shuffles his feet a little, looks at Dr Myriel, then at Javert, then back at all of them. “Unfortunately, although Grantaire was able to get out a huge amount of information, he wasn’t able to give any precise location as to the Institute. He knew the Institute was based in the USA, and could give some details about the seasonal weather and visible constellations, as well as what time he had sent the email at, which helped us narrow it down to the Southwest. With this information we renewed a more focused search and travelled to Las Vegas to find more information personally. We were flying back from visiting a colleague in Albuquerque who we hoped would be able to shed some light, when another friend forwarded us a police report on a huge explosion occurring in Southern New Mexico. The interesting thing was that the explosion had been immediately reassigned to an obscure three-letter agency with very little explanation. There was little reason to believe this had anything to do with the Waterloo Institute, but I had a feeling… Five hours later we picked you up in the Gila National Forest.”

“Then we smuggled thirteen government-owned children across the prickliest customs border outside of North Korea,” rattles Javert behind them, “Spending tens of thousands of pounds in the process, breaking more international laws than I would have believed possible in a twelve hour stretch and causing an ulcer the size of a small European country to grow in my stomach.”

“Thank God for capitalism,” says Dr Myriel drily, “Otherwise those tens of thousands might not have made for such a happy ending.”

“Capitalism is what is going to send the powerful billionaire’s accomplices to Guantanamo, let’s not start gushing pre-emptively Charles,” drawls Javert, “This is the most solid reasoning I’ve ever found for blocking your exes numbers.”

“Patrin…” starts Valjean reproachfully.

There is a sullen silence from the back of the room in reply.

“I won’t hold you all for much longer,” says Valjean, addressing the flock again, who all look about as bemused as Grantaire feels, “Then I’ll leave you to talk together, and decide what you want. This situation is a difficult one. Your biological parents are all dead and the normal means for finding guardians - foster care - would, I think, not be ideal in this situation. I don’t know how far up this Waterloo Institute goes, I don’t know how international the power structure is, but I have a suspicion that it will be impressive. I don’t think waging war with faceless government agencies is the best thing for any of you at this time. I have the financial means at my disposal to support you all comfortably. You would have the run of this house, be able to go to school, stay together, and live in comfort. And most importantly, you would be safe. In return for this you would allow me guardianship over you, I would be responsible for your health and wellbeing, and you would all be answerable to me. You don’t have to decide now. If you would rather go off on your own, I will give you financial aid and advise you as best I can. This is not an ultimatum, and your freedom is guaranteed. For tonight, there are bedrooms, showers, and spare clothes just down the hall. You are welcome to all of them.”

There’s silence for a long moment then Enjolras speaks into the space. He’s more hesitant than he’s ever been, his assurance displaced, and it hurts Grantaire’s heart. “What do you gain from all this? Why did you spend all that money, and risk everything and come and get us from halfway across the world just because of an email? Why do you care?”
Enjolras seems to hear himself a half-beat after everyone else and flinches a little.

“Alright, Grantaire,” mutters Eponine.

Valjean looks at them, one after the other: Bossuet, silent, eyes half-lidded; Joly, small and huddled, hair greasy; Musichetta, jaw set, tiny fists clenched; Jehan, eyes on the floor, fingers playing with his own hair; Eponine, shadows pooled beneath her wild eyes, in her prominent cheekbones; Gavroche, asleep, thumb tucked into his mouth; Cosette, hair frizzling, face soft and pale and exhausted; Feuilly, pizza sauce on his cheek, face still as pooled water; Bahorel, scowling, eyes too-bright; Combeferre, desperation creeping round the edges of his mouth; Courfeyrac, exposed like a live-wire; Enjolras, hesitant, unsure; Grantaire, visible, just and no more.

Valjean takes a visible breath. “You are children,” he says simply, sadly. “You’re just children. You won’t understand, perhaps, why that is a reason for protection to be offered freely, but it is a valid reason. You are alone in the world, and you have been treated abhorrently, and you are children. For me, there is no question. Here is a home, I have no use for it, please, take it. Be safe, be happy. You have been brought up by monsters and you’ve learned all the worst lessons about the world, so here is one that is a little happier: most people, whether good or bad, will go very far to stop a lonely child’s tears.”

Dr Myriel and Javert leave the room and Valjean goes to follow them, but falters, “Cosette,” he says, with a smile, “You look so much like your mother. If you like, I will tell you about her tomorrow.”

Tears plop down Cosette’s face onto her dirty clothes, “Yes please,” she whispers.

He smiles, “Goodnight, all of you. Sleep well.”

Valjean grimaces in the moment he turns to leave, as if he’s shouldering some unbearable pain. Then he is gone.

“Eponine,” says Enjolras sharply, rubbing his eyes furiously to keep sleep out.

Eponine looks at them all, abject confusion on her face and says simply, “Truth.”

&

Grantaire showers in the ensuite bathroom of his and Enjolras’s appropriated bedroom. He turns the heat right up, till his scalp and shoulders turn red under the hammering water. His wings droop heavily under the weight, his muscles unroll under his skin, and for the first time in what seems like forever, it feels like there’s air filling his lungs. He uses lemon and orange shower gel, coconut shampoo and strawberry conditioner, loves how soft his hair feels, chases bubbles down his arms.

The bathroom door is snibbed behind him and he’s enclosed in steamed-white glass. He swirls doodles on it and doesn’t try too hard to find words for how he feels. Warm, safe, happy, free. They’re small words for the bigness of the feeling inside him. Mostly, he just feels realer than he ever has before, shut inside a room with no one to not-see him.

He reluctantly turns the huge shower off after some wonderfully taffy-long stretch of time, towels himself dry, and climbs into clean, soft, dark clothes. He’s never worn clothes that weren’t bleached white and starched dry before. Cotton-polyester is a revelation.

Grantaire drags himself out of the stifling bathroom into the bedroom, only to find the whole flock bundled onto his and Enjolras’s bed.
Enjolras makes a face from where he’s wedged between a nonsensically-chattering Courfeyrac and half-asleep Combeferre. “They won’t leave,” he whines, and Eponine kicks him in the shin. She’s plaiting Jehan’s long wet hair down his back as he lolls against her.

“Shut up, Enjolras,” Bahorel says good-naturedly. Cosette is asleep on top of him. Feuilly is drooling on her knee but wakes up long enough to mutter,

“Shut up Bahorel,” sleepily defaulting to his conversational mean.

Bossuet, Musichetta and Joly are curled up asleep in a tumbleweed of limbs and what must be extreme discomfort.

“Where’s Gavroche?” Grantaire asks.

“In bed asleep,” Eponine says, “I had to fight to get his shoes off him.”

Grantaire nods and surveys the bed for any point of ingress. The sleepy pile of bodies doesn’t yield much space. He edges round and lies flat-out over Courfeyrac, Combeferre and Enjolras. Enjolras immediately starts playing with his hair.

“Couer,” says Grantaire tiredly into Combeferre’s knees

Courfeyrac loses track halfway through his latest tangent, “Yeaaah buddy?”

“I say this with all the love in the world, but please, for the love of all that is good and holy in this world. Stop talking.”

Courfeyrac audibly pouts somewhere above Grantaire’s head and Grantaire pointedly ignores him right up until he plunges into sleep.

“Someone get the lights,” he hears Eponine say, deep in his dreams of big warm lakes, filled with orange-smelling water.

And then he sleeps.

Grantaire eats two bowls of chocolate cereal, three slices of toast and a family-sized pot of yoghurt for breakfast. When he eventually - reluctantly - looks up from his plate, Enjolras is there. He’s sitting on the edge of his seat, staring at Grantaire unblinkingly. Grantaire raises an eyebrow and goes back to fishing out the last of the yoghurt with his spoon.

“I’m sorry,” Enjolras blurts out, apropos of nothing.

Grantaire continues in his pursuit of yogurt, licking it off his fingers. There is a long pause.

“All right then. I say this with all the love in the world, but please, for the love of all that is good and holy in this world. Stop talking.”

Grantaire looks up, both eyebrows making a bid for his hairline. He literally cannot recall the last time he heard Enjolras apologise.

“But I don’t think I was wrong,” Enjolras continues.

Grantaire rolls his eyes so hard he thinks he might actually sprain something, snorts, and throws his pot in the bin.
“I think I did the best I could with the information I had. And really, it all worked out fine, so…”

Enjolras stares hopefully at Grantaire’s face for several moments before his expression free falls into irritation.

“Will you say something, or,”

“I’m not sure,” Grantaire interrupts, channelling Combeferre at his most reasonable, “What it is you want me to say.”

“Well I,” Enjolras opens and closes his mouth several times. This conversation has clearly veered way off his agenda. “Maybe that it’s all okay? That you forgive me?” He’s half-grinning, like now that Grantaire’s caught on they can finally return to their regularly scheduled programming.

Grantaire doesn’t meet Enjolras’s eyes, but his voice is satisfyingly steady when he says, “But I don’t forgive you.”

He opens the dishwasher to load up his collection of breakfast utensils. Enjolras’s stunned silence is a palpable weight behind him.

&

“So apparently,” muses Feuilly, stretching back onto the hill of grass behind him, “I’m Polish. Huh.”

“Angola?” says Musichetta, “I don’t even know where that is.” She has become involved in the small daisy-chain chain-gang that Jehan is overseeing. Somehow.

“Africa,” says Combeferre absently.

“You’re making the stem cuts too big,” says Jehan to Eponine, who scowls at him. He smiles back serenely, “Also, France.”

“Lots of us are from France,” says Grantaire, hanging upside down from a tree branch. “Pretty sure I’m from Marseille.”

Combeferre has everyones’ profiles spread out around him. He hasn’t looked this excited since this morning when Grantaire caught him on all fours talking to a moth in the communal bathroom at the institute. “I think the original scientists in charge of our… Well, our insemination and subsequent kidnapping, I suppose, are all from France - that explains our names, at least. What interests me is that you picked French from every other language you could have chosen in the library, Grantaire. Could there be a genetic predisposition to languages? How did you decide which language to pick, when you first came up with the idea?”

Grantaire swings thoughtfully on his branch, stretching his memory back to that particular in-the-moment whim aimed at making Enjolras happier.

“It was the easiest except from Spanish and there was a higher chance that some of the scientists spoke Spanish.”

Combeferre looks a bit disappointed, “It wasn’t because the language sounded nicer or more natural to you?”

Grantaire gives him the win, “I mean, yeah, sure, that too probably.”
“Why didn’t you choose a more difficult language to learn, if you were so concerned about the Invigilators understanding.” Enjolras asks, speaking up from his relentless silence and sulky glances.

“I thought it would be nice if Bahorel and Feuilly understood us when we talked. I mean. It’s not exactly imperative, but it’s nice for them to feel included.”

“I resent that,” says Feuilly, eyes closed.

Bahorel swings down from his tree branch and shoves Grantaire, with probably a bit more force that intended. Grantaire loses his grip on the tree and flips down towards the ground. He lands with a satisfying ka-thup, crouched on all fours, like a ninja. He says as much, “Like a ninja, Bahorel, like a goddamn ninja.”

Bahorel crows in admiration only to look sheepish when Enjolras barks his name a half second later.

Grantaire looks at the others expectantly, waiting for applause, or at the very least some mild appreciation for his super-cool acrobat skills. Instead, everyone looks mostly uncomfortable. Jehan is staring decidedly at his flower chain and Enjolras looks like he’s about to start asking questions, which is a frankly terrible omen for Grantaire’s immediate future. He should have known that - now they were free from the institute - his family would start to expect answers re: his mysterious training at the institute.

Joly clears his throat, “I’m from France too, Combeferre. Somewhere called Normandy?”

Grantaire gives Joly an exaggerated salute for his conspicuous diversion and flops back on the grass.

Bossuet continues, “I’m from Niger.” His voice is quiet and sonorous and Courfeyrac nearly decapitates himself, he spins around so fast.

Musichetta and Joly both look profoundly unsurprised.

There’s an abrupt silence into which Bahorel tramples elegantly, “Wait, he can talk?”

“Ask him yourself,” says Musichetta acidly, the idiot going loudly unsaid.

Bahorel has the grace to look a little shame faced, “So…” he tries again, this time looking at Bossuet instead of wildly around himself, “You can talk.”

Bossuet’s eyes widen in amazement and he claps his hands over his mouth. He holds the expression for a moment before his lips tip into a wry grin. Grantaire, Eponine and Feuilly crack up, laughing in Bahorel’s pouting, chagrined face.

Bossuet seems to take pity on Bahorel and says, “I can talk,” with only a little amusement.

“He just doesn’t like to,” says Musichetta. Her expression makes it very clear that she sympathises with Bossuet’s choice re: talking to Bahorel.

“Cool, man,” says Bahorel, waving his hand vaguely, “You do you, or whatever.”

“You have a nice voice,” Jehan non-sequiturs.

“Thank you,” Bossuet replies, smiling.
“Valjean was telling me all about my mother. Apparently she was originally from Paris but she came to London to find work in Valjean’s company.”

“Looks like you got the best of a bad bunch,” says Eponine sourly, “My parents weren’t content with just selling me off, they sold off Gavroche five years later. What kind of shitty people do that?”

“Shitty ones,” Feuilly agrees.

“We’re staying with Valjean, right?” Cosette asks anxiously. “I mean he’s really nice, and he offered us the whole place to ourselves. And he came to rescue us.”

“Go straight from being owned by one set of people to another set?” asks Enjolras bitterly, “What an excellent idea.”

Cosette visibly crumples and Eponine snaps, “Could you stop being such an asshole for like ten seconds and actually act like a human person?”

“I’m just trying to think rationally,” Enjolras retorts.

“Grantaire,” Eponine calls imperiously, waving her arm in a kind of deal with this manner that Grantaire honestly resents.

“You’re being pedantic, Enjolras, not rational.”

“Hey,” interrupts Combeferre, before a nuclear-level crisis can erupt over Grantaire daring to question Enjolras’s reasonableness. “We can have a vote, and see where we stand afterwards. Who doesn’t want to stay?”

Enjolras thrusts his hand into the air. Bahorel raises his hand with a lot less enthusiasm straight after. No one else moves. There’s a ripple of surprise around the group. Normally Eponine can be counted on to be distrusting, Musichetta’s shown nothing but wariness in the face of adults, and Courfeyrac and Combeferre vote in line with Enjolras.

“He’s telling the truth,” Eponine says, “And not in an avoiding-the-lies kind of way. I trust him.”

“Me and Ferre like him,” Courfeyrac admits to Enjolras sheepishly, “We think he’s good people.”

“I think this is the right thing to do. And, also, I trust Grantaire,” Musichetta says bluntly, and everyone looks at her in surprise, not least Grantaire.

“You do?” Grantaire asks, with no small amount of judgement in his voice.

“Yes,” Musichetta says, without explaining herself or her strange life choices.

“Alright,” says Grantaire, doubtfully. Jehan is smiling secretly at his daisies.

Feuilly asks, “So we’re staying?”

“Yes,” says Eponine, “A majority without Enjolras is still a majority.”

Enjolras scowls at her but says nothing.

Cosette looks delighted and that in itself makes Grantaire smile. She’s a person constructed with
happiness in mind, just as much as he is designed for discontent.

“I honestly think we’re in the right place,” she says to Enjolras earnestly, “I think this is where we’re supposed to be.”

“So, much as I love ignoring things,” Courfeyrac says, “Are we going to talk about the fact that we have, like, superpowers?”

“I’m in favour of ignoring!” calls Grantaire, raising an arm straight up from where he’s lying flat out on the grass.

“We know,” drone Feuilly and Eponine in unison.

Combeferre’s low-level vibration of excitement bursts out into a torrent of words, “It’s so interesting, have you read it Grantaire?”

“I’ve read it ‘Ferre,” says Grantaire, “I was inspired.” The pages and pages of detailed case reports on experiments done to the flock were nothing short of horrifying, and Grantaire would really rather never think of them again.

“For those of us that haven’t?” says Eponine, raising an eyebrow.

“Basically, it says that lots of us have demonstrated characteristics that haven’t really been documented in humans before and are difficult to explain scientifically. Mostly the abnormalities are in the domain of information processing or altering other people’s perception of us.”

Combeferre looks around at this point, as if waiting for everyone to break into a chorus of amazement.

Cosette chimes in encouragingly, “So… Like Enjolras and Grantaire?”

“Yes!” he says, throwing his arms out, “So they’re the most obvious example, because they alter other people’s perception of them to such an extent that it’s actually noticeable as abnormal. But it’s purely a human illusion. Look, here’s photographs of them, look how different they look!”

Courfeyrac peers at them and then visibly recoils, “Whooaaaaah, that is the single freakiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Everyone gathers around with a kind of morbid fascination that Grantaire strongly disapproves off.

“I don’t approve of this gawking,” he says to the group at large, who unanimously ignore him and continue to gasp and go slack-jawed.

Courfeyrac is trying to explain the phenomenon to Jehan, “It’s difficult to describe. I mean, it’s kind of like Enjolras is super un-photogenic and Grantaire is super-photogenic? Sort of?”

“That’s awesome,” Joly says over Combeferre’s shoulder, “There’s no scientific explanation for the difference? No indication whether it’s behavioural or anatomical? Because that suggests that—”

“There’s an entire range of perception that we can’t account for,” finishes Combeferre with equal enthusiasm, “And that’s what’s altering how we see them. The notes suggest that a single codon repeat in a relatively un-researched gene are to blame, because that’s the only mutation that Enjolras and Grantaire share that the rest of us don’t have.”
“Is anyone else super disturbed by how good looking Grantaire is?” Feuilly mutters, “I thought he was the ugly one but now I’m thinking it might actually be me.”

“Gee,” says Grantaire, “Thanks.”

Enjolras gives Grantaire a look of bewilderment, “You’re not ugly.”

Feuilly looks briefly sheepish, like maybe he’s just realising that telling people they’re ugly might be construed as rude.

“Grantaire does have freckles!” Courfeyrac shouts gleefully. Grantaire covers his nose with a hand, keeping only his panicked eyes on show.

“They’re just looking at a picture of us?” Enjolras asks Grantaire, who gives a bewildered kind of shrug in response.

“Here,” demands Combeferre, thrusting the photos at the two of them, “Look.”

The photo is of Enjolras in one of the exam rooms. The walls are white, and so are his Institute-issued clothes. He looks exactly the same as he always does. Same pouty bottom lip, same pinkish tinge to his eyelids, same imperious scowl, same golden skin and soft, fluffy curls.

Enjolras is examining a photo of Grantaire in a similar situation, “He looks exactly the same,” Enjolras says decisively.

“That’s so interesting,” Joly enthuses, to Combeferre’s excited nodding, “They’re immune to the effects of their own mutations, but it’s not a visual thing, because Jehan’s said that he hears a difference.

“You know,” says Musichetta, “Just because there’s no Invigilators around doesn’t mean we have to immediately take over their jobs.”

Joly flinches like she’s slapped him.

“That’s not fair,” says Combeferre, “The institute took something from us. We’re taking it back. We’re trying to understand ourselves, I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

“You’re trying to understand Grantaire and Enjolras,” Eponine points out, “And they don’t look like they’re that interested.”

Enjolras shrugs and Grantaire ignores the whole situation in favour of throwing sticks and tiny pebbles at Bahorel.

“They’re not the only ones in this report,” says Cosette, “You’re in here too, Ep. Don’t you want to read it?”

“Lies give me heartburn,” says Eponine shortly, “It’s not exactly complicated.”

“Okay, but how about the fact that Cosette can kind of maybe see the future,” says Courfeyrac, “That’s not complicated?”

“She can what?” Joly exclaims, riffling through the report.

“Precognitive awareness,” says Combeferre, “That presents as statistically improbable good luck. It’s most obvious in things like coin tosses.”
Joly and Musichetta turn to look at Bossuet in unison. He smiles and twirls a daisy between his fingers.

“What about Jehan?” says Bahorel. “There’s nothing about him in the report, but he’s weird.”

“Thank you,” says Jehan seriously.

“You know what I mean,” Bahorel says, impatient, “In fact, you always know what we mean. That’s kind of what I mean.”

“Not your finest sentence, Bahorel,” says Grantaire, as Feuilly pats him on the back.

“What about you two,” says Cosette to Courfeyrac and Combeferre, “I don’t think I understand this bit about intra- and extra-personal intelligence.”

“Yeah, they did like a scored test somewhere…” Courfeyrac flips back through the pages.

Grantaire crawls over to Jehan and drops his head in his lap, lying flat out on his stomach. His nose smushes into Jehan’s bony knee. “Christ it’s not difficult, ‘Ferre knows how people feel and Courf knows how to get people to like him. They’re people persons.”

“That doesn’t sound like a superpower,” says Feuilly doubtfully.

“They’re not superpowers,” says Combeferre patiently, “We’re just improbably good at obscure, difficult-to-quantify traits. We’re statistical outliers, that’s all.”

“We have wings,” says Jehan quietly, “We are a statistical borderland into which men were never meant to step.”

There’s silence, which Bahorel breaks awkwardly by engaging Cosette in a reluctant game of rock paper scissors, which she wins five games of in fast succession.

“How did we never know about this,” Bahorel says in wonder, “I’m on your side on everything for ever, Cos.”

“Thank you dear,” she says, trying for dry and failing because she’s Cosette.

Cosette clambers out onto the rooftop through the insulating skylight and Grantaire recognises the expression on her face as one related to Serious Things.

He groans, “How did you even find me?” Grantaire has had enough of Serious Things. A lifetime’s supply. He would happily never think seriously about anything ever again.

“Can I tell you something?” Cosette sits down next to Grantaire on the sloped rooftop.

Grantaire looks at her ruefully, “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Cosette says, “I want to tell Eponine, but at the same time I don’t, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Did you find me by accident while you were looking for Combeferre?” Grantaire asks, “Because don’t stay here out of politeness, really, my advice is universally recognised as not great.”

“She hates lying but I don’t see the point in hurting her for no reason, you know? And then there’s Gavroche, and he’d just pretend to be fine but I know he’d be hurt.”
Cosette’s straggly curls are tucked behind her little round ears and there’s are spots scattered over her forehead. Her and Musichetta are a good head taller than the rest of them, and all three of the girls look older, less like kids and more like really lost, awkward teenagers.

“Cos, I love you, but I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. Also, I think you should talk to Ferre.”

“Ferre would tell me to tell the truth,” says Cosette, “And he doesn’t get Ep like we do. She likes being angry, she gets something out of it. If I could tell her stuff without knowing she’d hold on to in for the rest of forever, I’d be happier telling her the truth.”

“What do you not want to tell her?” Grantaire asks reluctantly.

“Well if I don’t tell her I really shouldn’t tell anyone else, should I?”

“Cosette.”

“Those people in the reports, the ones who were supposed to be her parents? They’re the people in charge of the facility me, Gavroche and Eponine were at originally, before Waterloo.”

Grantaire drops his head into his hands for a long moment.

“The scientists who experimented on you guys are Ep and Gav’s parents?”

Cosette nods, big eyes filling up with tears. “The last names are different - we called them the Jondrettes - but the first names are the same. I found them buried in some of the notes about my mother. And it makes sense. Everyone else’s parents were killed right after they were born, but Eponine’s parents had Gavroche years later.”

“Whaaaat the fuck,” Grantaire groans into his hands, “Is wrong with these people. Someone needs to write a How To manual for mentally and emotionally impaired parents-to-be. Like, don’t do science experiments on your children, don’t sell them to shady military agencies of questionable morality, don’t be a fucking asshole, you fucking assholes.”

Cosette drops her head onto Grantaire’s shoulder and curls up there. Grantaire pats her on the head absently.

“Don’t tell her,” says Grantaire decisively. “She’ll know you’re not telling her something, but she won’t ask, you know she thinks its rude. And this way she won’t convince Feuilly and Bahorel to go on a revenge mission with her, it’ll be better for everyone.”

“You’re sure?” Cosette’s voice is shaky.

“I’m sure. I’ll take 100% of the accountability for not providing Eponine with a super-villain origins story.”

“Thanks ‘Taire,” say Cosette with a little laugh, “I can always depend on you.”

“That is the least accurate thing you have ever said ever, I’m frankly embarrassed for you, get off my roof now.”

“Okay,” she says, still smiling.

She goes to slip back through the skylight into the house but pauses and seems to dither there for a moment, in the square of light. Grantaire groans, “What?”
“I used to… I used to get such an awful feeling about you, you know?”

Grantaire squints back at her. Her face is hidden, her hair, backlit, is a halo of frizzy gold. He doesn’t say anything.

“I’d sit next to you and I’d get that feeling, you know, when you miss a step going down the stairs. Or, like, when you wake up from a nightmare, and you’re convinced that some shape in the corner is a person, standing there. That feeling, just, pouring off you. All the time.” Her voice is kind of wet but Grantaire still can’t see her face.

“I know what you mean,” says Grantaire quietly, “About the feeling.”

Cosette shakes her head and her halo trembles, “I just thought you should know. It’s gone away now, the feeling. The foreboding or whatever. It’s stopped.”

Grantaire smiles at her because she can see him just fine. “Good,” he says quietly.


“You too, Cos.” Grantaire lies back on the roof, eyes wide open.

The stars and void above him make him want to believe that tomorrow will be better for them all.

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“You have allergies,” Dr Myriel tells Joly, who has been sneezing unceasingly for the past 48 hours.

“So he’s not dying?” asks Eponine, only a little regretfully.

Dr Myriel looks at her out of the corner of his eye.

“She gets testy when she’s tired,” says Bahorel cheerfully, “Ignore her.”

“Why are you tired?” Dr Myriel asks her, concerned, “Are you having trouble sleeping?”

“Joly’s allergies make him snore,” she says.

“I’d sowe Epondine,” says Joly sadly, then sneezes. His eyes are puffed red and bloodshot, and he’s pathetically phlegmy. Feuilly eyes him dubiously and shuffles further away.

“Are allergies infectious?” he asks.

“No,” says Combeferre.

Joly sneezes and says, “Doh.”

Dr Myriel confirms with a smiling shake of his head. “This is the first time you’ve ever suffered from them? Because they’re quite severe to be presenting this suddenly.”

“They give us medication at the Institute,” says Grantaire, who is currently opening all the cupboard doors one by one and looking inside. Dr Myriel is patiently ignoring him. “Every morning. And they were all different. Probably gave him anti-allergy stuff then, huh?”

Dr Myriel nods, “Ah yes, that’ll be it.”
He gives Joly a box of pills, eye-drops and a nasal spray.

Thus commences a standoff involving Musichetta, the eye-drops, and Joly’s inflamed eyeballs.

“I will sit on you,” she threatens, as Joly’s face remains a good two inches away from the bottle, in spite of his body being contorted backwards over his chair in backwards banana shape.

“I’ll sit on him,” Bahorel offers cheerfully.

“Bahorel will sit on you,” Musichetta affirms.

“Maybe it would be best to do the eye-drops later,” says Dr Myriel placatingly.

“Fine,” says Musichetta, narrowing her eyes at Joly, “But I will get you.”

“That’s terrifying,” Courfeyrac observes from where he and Combeferre are sitting on the examination table, “Also, doc, is it normal to have tiny hospitals in your house? Because I’m no expert on normal but it seems weird.”

Dr Myriel nods, “It’s unusual, yes. Valjean specifically had this installed when he realised you might be coming to stay with him for the same reason that he called me. Everyone needs a doctor, but none of us thought any of you would be comfortable with public hospitals just yet. Also, it’s not really so much a hospital as it is a small exam room.”

A ripple of unease goes around the group and Dr Myriel holds his hands up, palms out, “But tiny hospital is fine.”

He looks around bemusedly at them all. “Does anyone else have anything they want to ask? We can talk privately if you’d rather.”

“What would any of us talk privately about?” Courfeyrac asks, honestly bewildered.

“We’re not big on the privacy thing,” Grantaire clarifies, “We’re more into the codependence thing.”

“Really?” Dr Myriel asks, eyeing all thirteen of them crammed into the small room. “Well whatever you prefer. Joly, I’d like to look at your legs at some point, if that would be okay with you. Knowledge about your own body is power. If we know the extent of the damage, we will know how to deal with it. Same to you, Jehan. I’d like to know what the source of your visual impairment is.”

Jehan makes the small humming noise of assent that counts as his nod.

Dr Myriel frowns down at the box of anti-allergy medication he’s still holding in his hands, and takes a deep breath. “I just wanted to say,” he begins, “That you’ve all been treated abhorrently by people who had a responsibility to protect you. By doctors. That is the worst—” He breaks off, clears his throat, “To me, that is repulsive. As doctors we take an oath to do no harm, to protect our patients, and they broke that oath. I need you all to know that I will never touch any of you without your consent, unless you are unable to give it, in which case I will wait for the consent of your family. I will never hurt you, I will only ever try to help you. Your bodies are your own, always and forever. That’s my oath to you.”

Courfeyrac is crying openly into Combeferre’s shoulder, Eponine is angrily wiping tears away from her face.
“You’re really not going to hurt us?” Enjolras asks, eyes on Grantaire, voice horribly small.

Dr Myriel’s eyes are wet but his voice is steady and emphatic, “Never.”

“We’ve decided we’d like to stay,” says Enjolras to Valjean. All thirteen of them are sitting on the sofas in the huge wooden-beamed living room. Valjean looks both exhausted and delighted. Javert just looks exhausted. Behind them both the sun is setting over the huge green expanse of the gardens.

“I’m so relieved to hear you say that,” says Valjean, looking it.

“How will this work?” asks Combeferre.

Grantaire experiences the sudden feeling of foreboding he gets when Combeferre is about to list things. From the looks on Feuilly, Eponine and Bahorel’s faces, they’re feeling something similar.

“I mean, I assume it’s unusual for thirteen children to just appear out of nowhere. Will we need documentation? Are we to be officially adopted? How will we work schooling? I mean, we all read books to a greater or lesser extent, but I imagine there are some substantial gaps in our knowledge. Or health care? I suppose you have Dr Myriel for that, but our full medical records are still at the Institute and we have some complex medical issues. Jehan’s sight, Joly’s legs and Bossuet’s epilepsy are the obvious ones, but we don’t know what else could emerge. We may not even have had our vaccinations. Would Dr Myriel be employed full time? Discretion is obviously a top priority - is there any feasible way we can appear normal in public, so that we don’t attract attention? Otherwise we would be as trapped here as we were at the Institute.”

To Valjean’s everlasting credit, he doesn’t interrupt Combeferre, or try to slow his thought processes to a more comprehensible rate, or even seem particularly overwhelmed. Four down from Combeferre, Bahorel’s eyes are as round as saucers and Joly looks like he’s about to have a panic attack.


“Not at all,” says Valjean soothingly to Combeferre, “These are all excellent questions that we’ll need to think and talk about together to come to acceptable solutions. Documentation is the simple part - it’s easily bought if you have enough money. What we need is a backstory that will hold up to common-sense scrutiny and not set off any alarm bells.

“In terms of schooling, you could be home tutored by a vetted teacher, or go to one of London’s private international schools - they are used to more unorthodox situations and have more discretion than the UK ones. I would advise a combination of the two. The first to cover the basic curriculum and see if there are any gaps in your knowledge, which I would be shocked if there were not. The second with time, if you wanted to, as a way of meeting more people your age and making sure you don’t become, to use your term, trapped here.”

“Dr Myriel is a highly qualified medical doctor who I have asked to leave retirement to attend to you all full time. He assures me that although this is an unusual situation, blindness, paraplegia and epilepsy are all very common conditions that he is confident he can help you manage. While your chances of future medical problems may be higher than the rest of the population, you will have a personal family doctor, which probably resets the balance quite a bit. You’ll all get vaccinations if you want them. Dr Myriel has said to me - several times - that he will act from here as if you all have full adult competency and that I will not be given any say in your medical decisions. I fully
agree with his judgement on this.

“I have also reached out to several old and trusted staff members about coming to stay in the house with us. They will act with the utmost discretion and will help us all with the day-to-day running. As for appearing in public, I imagine there must be a relatively simple way to cover your wings. Apart from anything else, we are currently in England. Layers, in general, are encouraged here.”

Combeferre seems very impressed by the thoroughness of the answer and even Enjolras looks satisfied. Grantaire thinks Valjean’s calm, measured speech sounds like something he uses in a boardroom to talk down excitable shareholders, but from Eponine’s lack of comment, the man must be telling the truth.

Bahorel raises his hand, “I have a question. How rich are you exactly?”

Javert snorts in the corner. Valjean smiles, “I’m comfortable,” he says.

“That’s not, uh, strictly speaking, an answer,” says Combeferre politely, shuffling his glasses up his nose.

“Valjean is one of the top 300 richest people in the UK,” says Javert bluntly, “Money is not the problem.”

Courfeyrac narrows in on Javert like a heat-seeking missile. “What is the problem?”

“The problem,” says Javert, speaking over the sound of Valjean saying his name warningly, “Is that Valjean is a man whose last experience with children was when he was one, who is seriously suggesting that he is the best thing for thirteen probably traumatised, definitely abused children with completely unknown biologies and at least three major disabilities between them.”

“We can look after ourselves,” says Eponine acidly, “We just need money and a roof over our heads. And protection from the Institute. We’ll keep our trauma and our disabilities to ourselves.”

Valjean looks absolutely stricken, but before he can say anything Jehan speaks, looking Javert dead in the eye, “The thing is,” he says, “He’s not suggesting that he’s the best choice. He’s suggesting he’s the only choice. And he’s right.”

“We need someone we trust,” continues Enjolras. “Who has provably good intentions, who has the means and the will to support us, and who can protect us. That’s our list of requirements. And we don’t see anyone else lining up to fill that spot.” Grantaire shouldn’t be surprised, Enjolras will never stop going to war for his friends, even for the decisions he doesn’t approve of.

Valjean somehow manages to shoot a quelling look at Javert and a look of utter heartbreak at the rest of them simultaneously. “You think like strategists,” he half-murmurs to himself, “Like little soldiers, the whole lot of you.”

“That’s Grantaire’s influence,” says Bahorel lazily, “If it makes you feel any better Cosette just felt like we were in the right place and no one likes saying no to her.”

Cosette glances at Valjean through her eyelashes, embarrassed but smiling gently.

Valjean looks utterly charmed. The moment of defeat is interestingly visible on Javert’s face.

“You should know though,” begins Enjolras, with all his terrible steel.

Grantaire isn’t susceptible to Enjolras’s light, not in the way the rest of them are but he senses the
The flock sits up straighter, looks more determined, like fighters instead of survivors-by-chance. Valjean acknowledges them with open respect. Javert looks wary.

“There are things about us that you don’t know. We see the world differently, or make it different just by being in it. We’ll know if you lie to us, or if you sell us out. We know what you’re feeling and we’re pretty good at guessing what you’re thinking. We can kind of tell the future and if we need to, we can hurt you.”

The silence after that rings.

It is broken by Javert groaning loudly into his hands, scrubbing them roughly across his face. “Superpowered teenagers. With wings. Thirteen of them.” He pulls his face down till he looks like that scream painting that Grantaire saw in a book once, and turns blindly out the room.

Valjean gives them a frantically apologetic look and follows after Javert.

There’s a rumbling noise in the corridor and they all look at Jehan.

“He says…” here Jehan’s voice drops to a raspy growl, “You are the worst of the psycho exes, I should have gotten a fucking restraining order on you.”


“Now Valjean’s saying that he needs Javert to stay, that he needs his help.”

Javert’s next sentence is a clearly audible shout from down the corridor, “Well fucking obviously, Madeline!”

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When evening comes again, and they all start to droop with transatlantic fatigue, they try to arrange the furniture in a way that will accommodate thirteen people. Grantaire woke up this morning with every part of his body still asleep, and he isn’t keen to repeat the experience. They’re on their third tetris-ing of the mattresses when Valjean knocks, probably alerted to the problem by the combined noise of a loudly complaining Bahorel, the heavy thwumping of mattresses, and Eponine and Enjolras bickering.

“I don’t see why we all need to be in the same room,” Enjolras is sniping, “This seems excessive.”

“You can’t sleep unless you’re cuddling Grantaire, literally just shut up Enjolras.”

Valjean thankfully interrupts Enjolras’s inevitable counter-argument with his sweet, mellow voice. “Why don’t we take all the mattresses downstairs to the living room? There’s more space down there.”

Valjean doesn’t let them carry their mattresses (Bahorel groans gratefully and flops down on the floor) but he does consent to them sliding on the mattresses down the big set of polished wooden stairs at the front of the house.

It starts accidentally, with Bossuet tripping over nothing, landing on one of the mattresses and going flying down the stairs. He only narrowly avoids squashing Cosette at the bottom. His face, when he finally manages to upright himself, is one of the funnier things Grantaire has ever seen. From there, still bent double with laughter, Bahorel grabs his own mattress and surfs down the stairs, knocking Bossuet down once again. The next half hour is a chaos of laughing, falling, jumping, shrieking madness. Grantaire goes down once in a surfing duet with a cackling
Courfeyrac and a second time sitting, with a pale-ly determined Enjolras clutching his ribs. Cosette, Eponine and Combeferre go down like they’re in a bob sled, pulling the mattress up at the corners. Joly goes down head-first with Musichetta, shrieking the whole way. Jehan goes down in the Lotus position, giggling. Gavroche goes down four times, running start, backwards, sideways, and standing, and has to be physically stopped from dragging a mattress back up the stairs to do it again.

Valjean and Dr Myriel are watching them with open amusement, and even Javert looks like he’s smiling somewhere deep down.

Valjean tells them, “When winter comes, you can go sledging at the back of the gardens, there’s a huge hill there.”

After he’s explained to them all what, exactly, sledging is, they’re all pretty on board with the idea.

They shuffle their mattresses onto the floor of the living room and cover them with blankets, rugs, pillows and cushions till Valjean’s fancy living room resembles nothing more than a large nest. Valjean sets the fire on low and comes in with a tray of hot milky drinks that taste like chocolate. They have cream and something Valjean calls marshmallows on top.

(Enjolras plunges his fingers into the drink, scoops out the marshmallows and crams a handful into his mouth in one of those extreme lapses in decorum that only Grantaire ever seems to see. He then turns his woeful eyes on Grantaire’s intact mug.)

Sitting with Enjolras’s mangled hot chocolate warming his hands, watching Enjolras suck the remains of his marshmallow goo off his fingers, Grantaire knows, because he doesn’t exactly have a huge selection of memories to choose from, that he’s the happiest he’s ever been.

Grantaire should know better, really, than to go about feeling things like happiness. That’s the first thought through his mind when Eponine shakes him awake, mouth turned down in a grimace, eyes huge and wild and scared.

“You’ve got to come,” she whispers, her voice alarmingly raspy, “’Taire I think we’re dying.”

Grantaire shoots up so fast he smacks Enjolras in the face and doesn’t even really notice, he’s too busy staggering out of the nest and half-running after Eponine, who’s shuffling out of the living room at speed. He reaches the bathroom right behind her and blinks frantically in the bright white halogens.

Musichetta is hunched over the sink, water running. In the mirror her eyes are panicked. Cosette is sitting in the bath tub, face washed completely white by the light; bright, violent red on her white capri shorts.

Grantaire feels like his veins have frozen over.

“Where are you bleeding from?” he asks, urgently.

“We don’t know,” says Cosette. “We’re not hurt and I don’t feel bad, but…”

Musichetta wordlessly shows him her underwear, stained red.

“Shit,” he says, “Shit. Okay. It’s okay.” He puts his hands on Eponine’s skinny shoulders and squeezes, “I’m here, okay.”
“Promise?” says Eponine, sounding small.

“Cross my heart,” Grantaire answers.

“My tummy hurts,” she says, pushing herself against him. He enfolds her in a hug.

Over her shoulder, Enjolras is standing silently in the door, lips pressed white and eyes searching Grantaire’s for any sign of a clue. Grantaire doesn’t know what his face shows but Enjolras pales.

“What’s going on?” asks a sleepy Courfeyrac, running a hand through his wild tufts of hair. Then what he’s seeing catches up with him. “Oh shit.” He gesticulates wildly and leaves the bathroom in a whirl of limbs.

Moments later he reappears, physically tugging a bewildered, worried Combeferre by the hand (“Coeur tell me what’s wrong, why are you upset, what’s-”). Joly is right behind them, and his gaze only loses its frantic edge when he catches sight of Musichetta, now curled against the wall. Jehan is behind him, grasping the door lintel hard. (“Why is there blood,” he murmurs, nose flaring).

“It’s just the girls,” Combeferre reasons, “It could be a girl thing?”

“Yeah but is it a normal thing or a not normal thing, because it looks like a not normal thing,” says Courfeyrac. He climbs into the bathtub to sit with Cosette, too intent on cuddling her to notice he’s getting blood on his own t-shirt.

Feuilly, Bahorel and Bossuet appear in the hall and squint in. There’s no more room left in the bathroom but Bossuet slides in anyway, elbowing Enjolras in the side (“Bossuet, for the love of-”) to give him his second injury of the morning. He sits down beside Musichetta on the white tile floor and takes her hand.

“Should we, uh, get help?” asks Bahorel helplessly.

“No, I don’t want anyone,” says Eponine into Grantaire’s chest.

“Come on, Ep,” Grantaire tries to look her in the eyes but she squirms away, “You said yourself he’s trustworthy. He can help.”

“He’s just like them,” she says, voice thick with water.

“He’s not, you know he’s not,” he soothes.

“We’re going to get help,” says Feuilly decisively, “Oh crap, Gavroche, go back to bed.”

“Where’s my sisters,” comes a reply from down the corridor.

There’s a familiar pretend-roar, as Bahorel picks Gavroche up bodily. “They’re fine, chick, just feeling a bit sick. Nothing to worry about. Back to the nest with you.”

There’s a sound of a thump and giggling, as Gavroche is dropped heavily on the mattresses.

Feuilly disappears out of the doorway and less than three minutes later, a completely dishevelled Javert makes an appearance at the doorway. He looks inside, stares for a long few seconds, then hides his face in his hands with a long groan.

Grantaire sees Enjolras take a breath, a tirade on the tip of his tongue, but Javert regroups just in time.
“It’s fine,” Javert says abruptly, “You’re fine, this is normal. No one is dying.” He glances back at a thoroughly unrepentant Feuilly, “Except maybe you.”

Feuilly shrugs, “I had to wake you up.”

“You did not have to give me a stroke,” he snarls back.

He withdraws a phone from his pocket and makes a call.

“Charles,” he says, “Add the pill to the list of the things they’ve been giving the kids.”

There’s muffled talking at the end of the line then Javert replies, “Yes. And this is very much what you were hired for so please make an appearance in the downstairs bathroom ASAP.”

He ends the call and stares at them all mournfully. He seems to make up his mind about something.

“Right. All bird-children who are not Cosette, Eponine or Musichetta, please get out of the bathroom.”

Grantaire does not envy the looks he gets for that.

“We’re not leaving,” says Enjolras stubbornly.

“Yes, you are,” says Javert simply. He gets Enjolras by the collar of his t-shirt and drags him out of the room like a very irritated kitten. To the rest of them he says, “Valjean and Charles might be treating you like glass, but I won’t. I’m officially bad cop. Get out.”

Along with a truly impressive number of scowls in Javert’s direction, there’s a series of meaningful glances directed at Grantaire as the others leave. Grantaire steps into the corner, thinking be one with the wall but Javert turns around and gets him by the scruff. “You too,” he snaps, “Out.”

“Wait,” says Combeferre, pausing at the door, “You can see Grantaire?”

“I can count,” says Javert sardonically.

Combeferre looks for a moment like he’s going to question Javert further, so Grantaire gets him by the shoulders and pushes him out ahead, saying, “Not the time.” He looks back over his shoulder at Eponine, Cosette and Musichetta. Eponine gives him a nod that roughly translates to, “I’ll holler if we need you.” Musichetta sets her jaw hard.

They sit along the wall opposite the bathroom. Enjolras slips his hand into Grantaire’s.

Dr Myriel comes hurrying down the corridor not long after, holding boxes in his hands. He gives them all a reassuring smile, and says, “Everything’s fine, nothing to worry about,” and goes into the bathroom. Javert comes out, leans against the wall, and eyes them all narrowly. Enjolras scowls at him.

After that, there’s quiet except for the low sound of voices in the bathroom. Gavroche, who has stubbornly reappeared, is nodding off on Bahorel’s knee. Bossuet is cupping Joly’s small hands in his own. Jehan is on Grantaire’s other side, under Courfeyrac’s arm. In times of stress, Courfeyrac is a cuddler.

The silence is shattered after five minutes or so by the sound of Eponine shrieking, “Every month?!”
Valjean comes down and takes the rest of them into the big kitchen. They sit on stools at the breakfast bar and on the big kitchen table, legs swinging. He makes them more hot chocolates and then sets about, only a little bit awkwardly, trying to give them something Javert refers to as ‘The Talk’.

Halfway through, Combeferre gets very embarrassed, in the way he normally does when he’s forgotten a verb conjugation. “I really should have known, but it’s one thing to read about it in theory and another to see it. I panicked.”

“Blood is scary,” says Valjean, “It’s supposed to be. In any situation except this one it’s a warning sign.”

They all traipse back to bed. The sun has started brightening the sky outside, like a torch through dark blue tissue paper. They curl up and not long after that, Eponine, Cosette and Musichetta crawl back into the pile, wearing clean clothes. Musichetta is immediately enveloped by Joly and Bossuet. Cosette climbs in between Courfeyrac and Combeferre, and Feuilly and Bahorel sleepily make room for Eponine. Cosette mumbles, “Love you guys.”

They all sleep till the afternoon.

The next day, the house starts to fill with people. First to arrive is an old man with longish white-and-grey hair, who takes absolutely no notice of any of them. He nods to Valjean, picks up a set of keys to his own suite of rooms, and goes on his way. He is Mr Levent and the look he gives the huge green lawn outside makes Valjean spontaneously offer to raise his salary and Javert cackle.

Next is a thin, tremulous lady with a stutter called Louise, who bats around them like a giant, overly-concerned moth, but asks no questions whatsoever about Valjean’s sudden acquisition of a dozen children. She’s much more concerned by the state of the upstairs bedrooms, in which she finds several medium-sized spider colonies which she promptly goes to war with.

Then comes The Hauches. Mr Hauche is a big, angry-faced man with a bushy mustache and a huge, booming laugh. Mrs Hauche is smaller but still big, is inclined to scowl at the things her husband finds funny, wears an expression of almost constant irritation and a less-bushy but still significant mustache. They are both extremely Irish. They are, respectively, the cook and the nanny.

Not that Valjean admits to hiring the flock a nanny.

“She’s just coming to help out,” he says serenely, as the flock revolts. Grantaire has faint admiration for Valjean not only being able to process 13 children shouting simultaneously, but also being able to reply. It’s the best indication Grantaire has seen that Valjean might actually be able to do this.

Enjolras: “We don’t want another grown-up telling us what do do.”

Bahorel, with an optimism that even Feuilly rolls his eyes at: “We can look after ourselves.”

Grantaire: “Way to hari-kari your cause, Bahorel.”

Eponine: “We’ve been looking after Gav and ourselves our whole lives. We don’t need people to do it for us.”
Valjean: “You shouldn’t have to, Eponine. I know you’re all capable. But you shouldn’t have to be.”

Javert, shortly, cutting off at least four protests: “You’re getting a nanny, kids. Get over it.”

&

Myriel bandages Grantaire’s wings every other day and presses big squishy icepacks in sunbeams out from his shoulder blades.

The exam bench Grantaire is currently lying on face down on is covered in a hideous floral pattern. Grantaire gives Myriel credit for veering as far away from sterile as possible, even if it means a departure from all forms of tasteful aesthetic.

“So,” says Grantaire, casting around for something to say. He finds himself strangely quiet in the doctor’s presence. Myriel isn’t a foe but he’s not a for-sure friend yet, either. Unknown quantities make Grantaire quiet, watchful, and liable to be overlooked by wandering eyes.

“So?” prompts Myriel with a smile, turning from where he’s binning the old bandages.

“You’re doing your reading,” Grantaire says, nodding at the pile of books on ornithology, stacked on the corner of Myriel’s desk.

Myriel smiles, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Ah, yes. I’m trying to get up to speed on some of the eccentricities of your anatomy. Gavroche stood on those scales the day before last and almost gave me a heart attack. You’re all much lighter than you look. Lots of lean muscle, very little fat. But that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re starving. It might just mean what’s healthy for you is different from the mean.”

“You can say normal, you know,” says Grantaire, trailing his fingers through the air. His nose is pressed to the horrifically floral exam table. “We know we’re not normal. We’ve suffered enough for it, at any rate.”

Myriel sits in his desk chair and regards Grantaire thoughtfully. “Normal has unfortunate connotations, don’t you think? One could almost think that to be normal is a success, and to be not normal is a failing.”

“Isn’t it?” asks Grantaire, gesturing his hand vaguely at his whole person. “I’m pretty sure this is somebody’s failing. Maybe not ours. We couldn’t have helped being born.”

Myriel shakes his head sadly. “In a purely mathematical sense, to be normal is to be the mean, the average. It is nothing but the middle of the bell curve. To be less or to be more than the mean is simply another point on the curve. People can be of above-average weight, of below-average height. There are no intrinsic goods or bads, it’s just natural variation. And evolutionarily, variation helps us survive.”

Grantaire both likes what Myriel’s saying and can’t find any logical argument to it. This strikes him as immediately suspicious, so he disregards it entirely.

“No offence, but I think kids with wings is probably on a different bit of graph paper entirely from normal.”

Myriel smiles, “We’re all on the same line, Grantaire. We’re all human. Having wings doesn’t take that away from you.”
“I never said wings did,” Grantaire says sullenly, then, fidgeting irritably, “Who cares about lines anyway. It’s about how people treat you. It doesn’t matter if you’re small or a tall, no one’s going to stick you in a science facility and do experiments on you for being a weird height. You’re a freak if people think you’re a petri dish instead of a kid, like, by definition.”

“How other people treat you does not reflect what or who you are,” says Myriel, “It only indicates something about them.”

“I don’t think that’s right,” says Grantaire.

“Alright,” says Myriel, in the tone of someone about to have a philosophical debate, rather than an argument about the legitimacy of Grantaire hating himself. “Valjean treats you all well. He’s kind to you, he gives you access to all his resources, he loves you, though I’m sure you don’t quite realise that yet. How do you account for this, assuming he doesn’t have any kind of secret agenda?”

Grantaire sees the trap and walks into it anyway, “He’s a nice guy. He’s good.”

“So, the way he treats you is a reflection of who he is as a person. What is so different about him, compared to the people who hurt you?”

“There’s only one of him. He’s not the average. Even adding in you and Javert and the Hauches, the tutors and Levant and Louise. That’s still less than ten. A whole institution was built around the premise that we’re not human, that we don’t deserve to be treated like humans. They outvote you.”

Myriel nods slowly, “Well how about this. Do you think the way you were treated - the way your family was treated. Do you believe it was just or fair?”

“No,” says Grantaire, “Obviously, but-”

“Then that’s all that matters,” says Myriel. “People do not have the right to vote on whether or not to treat you well. It’s your right to be treated fairly. It is unassailable, it isn’t something that can be toppled by majority rule. Their actions reflect nothing about you, and everything about them.”

“You sound like Enjolras,” says Grantaire, “He’s obsessed with the unassailable rights of man. It doesn’t change how people treat us.”

“That’s not the point,” says Myriel gently, “People have treated you like you are less that human. What Enjolras’s unassailable rights mean, is that he doesn’t deserve it.”

Grantaire shrugs and looks away.

Myriel pauses, then smiles, “It means, to be clear: People can be, and frequently are, wrong, cruel and stupid. So who gives a fuck what they think?”

The two tutors that Valjean finds for them are called Mabeuf and Plutarch.

Mabeuf is a dreamy but kind man, a little rounded, dark haired, balding, bespectacled, who talks to them about books, history, art, geography, and British and French politics. He seems to regard American politics as something far too gauche to talk about, which equally frustrates and intrigues Enjolras. He keeps a collection of potted plants by the window, which he waters daily, and shows Combeferre and Cosette how to look at the leaves under his microscope.

Plutarch is tall and well dressed and blonde, an older lady with good taste and very little patience.
for stupidity. She teaches them maths, chemistry and physics.

Or at least, she tries to.

As it turns out, only Grantaire can do anything past basic arithmetic.

Ms Plutarch’s definition of stupid is as follows: Feuilly, who takes a whole fortnight to learn the three times table, but sits dutifully with a paper and pencil every night, is not stupid. Grantaire, who can rattle off every times-table up to twenty but ignores his Intro to Algebra textbook in favour of drawing the lost city of Atlantis, is a complete and utter moron.

People who don’t want to learn, in her book, are the very worst and strangest of people. People who try and make Grantaire do tests, he thinks, deserve the eternal disappointment that he will happily deliver them. It’s a bit of an impasse.

Mr Mabeuf escapes this awful catch 22 by appearing to let Grantaire learn whatever he likes under the banner of self-improvement, and leading informative but loosely-controlled class conversations around him. He seems happy with their overall grasp on spelling and grammar, renounces punctuation as a loser’s game, and tries to field out the worst of their knowledge gaps. These tend to loom up, unexpectedly large, in more recent topics. The Iraq war comes as a surprise to everyone. On the other hand, he is delighted by their half-invented French language, and has long conversations with Combeferre about the intricacies of the linguistic rules that have developed over the years.

It’s in Ms Plutarch’s class that problems start to arise. Grantaire would be the first to admit that Ms Plutarch is a fairly nice woman who’s been given the unenviable job of cramming six years’ worth of maths education into the brains of twelve thoroughly-disinterested pre-teens. That doesn’t mean he’s going to fill in all four hundred of the little answer boxes on his exercise sheet.

Mostly, the flock does fine. Joly even says that he finds maths relaxing, which earns him one of Feuilly’s very best incredulous expressions.

“Maths is about repetition,” Ms. Plutarch says for the fourth time that day. (“You don’t say,” mutters Bahorel.) “Maths is about practice. Some people are born with an innate grasp of how numbers fit together-” here she gives Grantaire a dirty look, which he misses because he’s making tiny people out of blutack, “-But for the rest of us, it’s about learning rules and practicing them. It’s about repetition.”

Unfortunately, it’s the rules and the repetition that are the sticking points. Eponine reacts to authority like Joly reacts to large pollinated flowers, Jehan is easily distracted by passing thought-butterflies, Bahorel has historically had a problem with any activity involving the application of thought, and Grantaire doesn’t like people testing him. He’s passed the point in his life, he decides, of doing things that he doesn’t want to do. Feuilly, whose default setting is imperturbable, has so much difficulty with anything involving numbers that he quickly develops a genuine loathing for the subject.

(“Taire, come quick!” Eponine snickers, “Feuilly’s having an emotion!” Bahorel’s head jerks up from where he’s been sleeping on the desk. “Where? Did I miss it?!”) 

Ms Plutarch suggests he has dyslexia and Feuilly gets given coloured glasses to wear that seem to help his maths a little, but don’t change the hatred.
All five of them start to conveniently forget about the existence of maths lessons in their lives and focus their energies on more important things, like exploring the huge, tangled gardens around the house.

Valjean corners them with hot chocolate and an apologetic expression a week and a half into this academic avoidance strategy.

Javert is, as usual, scowlingly present in the background.

“We’ve heard from Ms Plutarch that you’re having difficulty with maths,” Valjean says, gently. “She tells us you’ve not been going to her classes. I just wanted to ask if you were having problems and if there was anything we could do to help.”

His gentleness, so effective on Cosette, and reasonableness, which makes even Enjolras stop to consider, is mostly perceived as a sign of weakness by Grantaire and Eponine and an indication to not pay too much attention by Bahorel (he tends mostly to react to unavoidable things like loud noises and bright colours). While Jehan is by most accounts all-hearing, he listens selectively and his thoughts are an obscure and mysterious thing. Only Feuilly looks honestly conflicted by the direction of the current conversation.

“I’m shit at it,” says Feuilly bluntly. “I can’t do it, what’s even the point?”

Valjean looks sympathetic. “Maths is, admittedly, fairly useless in day to day life. You’ll see this the further along you get with it. Basic arithmetic has its uses, but the more advanced mathematics is basically just a series of thought exercises, which schools use to test your brain. It might make the whole ordeal of learning it less frustrating, if you remember that it’s mostly about getting your brain to work hard.”

“ Seems like my brain isn’t so good at that,” Feuilly grumbles.

“There are many different types of intelligence,” soothes Valjean, “Having difficulty with numbers does not make you stupid. Unfortunately, if might mean that you have to work harder, which can be a scary prospect.”

“I’m not scared to work hard,” Feuilly says. Eponine rolls her eyes and mouths to Grantaire: “gotcha”. The ghost of a smile is visible over Jehan’s mug of hot chocolate.

“Of course not,” Valjean says.

“Seems like a shit lot of work,” Bahorel chimes in, “Why does he have to play the game at a harder setting than everyone else. Why not just… Not play the game, if you don’t need maths all that much?”

Valjean gazes at him sorrowfully, “In the long term, because you will all eventually grow up and want your independence, and to get jobs or places at university or college you will need certificates that prove your brains can work hard. In the short term, because I genuinely think the best thing for you all would be to go to school with other children, and the schools you will go to require entrance exams to join.”

Bahorel opens him mouth, looks for an argument, then closes it again when he can’t find one.

“What if we don’t want to learn maths?” Eponine says. It sounds like an innocent question. It is not.
“Then I won’t make you,” says Valjean ruefully. “I couldn’t make you, even if I wanted to. You can’t make someone learn something.”

“Yes you can,” drawls Grantaire, “You just need the right incentive.”

Valjean looks at Grantaire, a full-eye-contact, I-see-you kind of look that makes Grantaire’s extremities go vaguely transparent.

“I suppose you’re right,” Valjean says quietly, “I apologise.” He turns back to Eponine and says with weary finality, “If you don’t want to learn maths, Eponine, you won’t learn maths.”

&

“We’re gonna go to class,” says Feuilly regretfully. Bahorel nods in agreement.

“I think I will too,” says Jehan thoughtfully. “Mr Mabeuf was talking to me about something called the golden ratio. He said that maths can speak poetry. That’s not too bad.”

Eponine and Grantaire exchange a look that reads clearly: amateurs.

They overhear Valjean and Javert talking in the kitchen, later.

“They’re children,” says Valjean, “Moreover children with a very clear reason to have an instinctive distrust of authority, rules, arbitrary measurements of their worth, and institutions in general. It’s completely understandable that they wouldn’t fully appreciate the consequences of their actions in the long term. And I won’t punish them. The question is how to protect their best interests without alienating them - how to communicate to them the concept of bad consequences without punishment.”

Javert, who looks for all the world like he hasn’t been listening, mutters, “Eponine and Grantaire aren’t going to sit and learn times tables without a fight. They’re the kind of people that fight like they breathe.”

Valjean looks sadly down at his own clasped hands, “I know, but they need to learn! They’re the ones that will want independence the second they can feasibly have it! They need to have grades!”

Javert scoffs, “I didn’t say you aren’t supposed to fight back! Win the fight Madeline! They weigh about a hundred pounds in total!”

“You’re suggesting I physically restrain children with wings?” Valjean says tiredly, “Children with a long history of imprisonment?”

Javert rolls his eyes at Valjean’s melodrama, “There’s such a thing as disinsentivisation. And you can do it without being cruel.”

Valjean gestures wearily, “Be my guest.”

&

The next day, Eponine and Grantaire are sitting on the hill outside the house, throwing grass cuttings at each other lazily and sucking on the candy-necklaces that Mr Hauche had delivered to them covertly, underneath Mrs Hauche’s watchful eye. Mrs Hauche didn’t approve of adding E-numbers to the garbage fire that was the flock.

Eponine has just thrown a clod of grass – which feels more like half-an-acre worth of plant-life
when it hits Grantaire in the face – when Javert sits down beside them. They eye him sidey-ways, waiting for an explanation, but he doesn’t give them one, just looks at them with raised eyebrows, like, what?

They get up and move, he follows. They ask him what he’s doing, he says things like, “Sitting,” or “Enjoying nature’s wonders,” in such a deadpan voice that it kind of kills any other questions.

Eventually Javert’s disinsentivisation strategy becomes clear: annoy them back into the classroom.

Grantaire and Eponine stick it out for two days, sitting in the awkward silence that Javert seems to be consciously generating, wandering around the garden with Javert as a long, constant shadow. When they try to take refuge in their newly-bought laptops the wifi suspiciously stops working. Javert inspects the ceiling as Eponine rhymes off every swear word she knows and some she’s just made up.

“A vicar is a man of God,” informs Javert, “Though I grant you it does sound like a swear word when you say it like that.”

After the two days, Eponine explodes with, “If we go to class will you stop following us everywhere?”

Javert looks over the top of his dark sunglasses at her and grins widely, like a shark.

Mrs Hauche takes one look at the pile of mattresses on the floor of the living room and says, “No,” with finality.

She then proceeds to make Valjean, Mr Hauche and a very grumpy Javert lug all thirteen mattresses back up the stairs.

“We’ll just put the mattresses together in a room upstairs,” says Enjolras imperiously, (“Changed his tune,” mutters Eponine), “You might as well let us stay down here.”

“No,” she says again, almost chirpily, like a woman who’s used to saying no to people. “Two to a room, max.”

Grantaire can feel without looking the panicked glances the unholy trinity of Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta must be giving off.

Sure enough. “Three,” says Musichetta, with the gravity of a hostage taker.

Mrs Hauche peers at Musichetta appraisingly, seems to sense in her a worthy foe, and agrees with a nod.

“How am I supposed to choose my favourite?” Courfeyrac exclaims at a supremely unimpressed Mrs Hauche, “That’s like asking me to choose one pizza topping to eat forever! What if I get bored? What if I want to sample the Feuilly-esque weirdness of pineapple on ham? What if I want little Joly fishes, what then? Have pity Mrs Hauche, I don’t have a favourite!”

“It’s Combeferre,” says Grantaire, Feuilly and Eponine simultaneously. (Bahorel looks supremely put out, “Did you plan that? You’re supposed to tell me when we’re going to do that.” They ignore him.)

“Can I have my own room?” asks Jehan politely. Only after a moment of silence in which
Courfeyrac stares at him in offended horror and Bahorel and Feuilly exchange well then glances does he tack on, “No offence.”

“Offence taken!” shouts Courfeyrac, only to be quietly shushed by Combeferre when Jehan winces minutely at the noise.

“Of course, dear,” says Mrs Hauche, looking approvingly at Jehan as if he’s the only beacon of sanity in this awful new world inhabited only by bratty children.

Javert collapses to the ground at the bottom of the stairs. His long black hair is pulled back in a bun; escaping whisps are plastered to his face by sweat.

“I hate every one of you,” he tells them seriously. Gavroche takes his prone body as an invitation to play, and begins to climb Javert’s knees, using his stomach as a footstool. “Especially you,” Javert clarifies to Gavroche, lying down in complete surrender.

Valjean drifts serenely past, asking, “Drinks anyone?” and Javert scowls disgustedly at his back.

&

“They need things,” says Mrs Hauche to Valjean one night, maybe a fortnight after they’ve arrived.

The flock is shhurping down spaghetti bolognaise as if, in Mrs Hauche’s words, they’d never seen food before. A huge pot sits on the table, waiting for refills to be needed.

Javert is looking at them all in abject disgust, “You don’t need to be taught table manners to know that’s disgusting,” he says to Feuilly, who is picking bits of mushroom out of his sauce and flicking them at Bahorel. Who is eating them.

Valjean gestures to Mrs Hauche to continue, which she does, after rapping Feuilly’s hands with a wooden spoon and snapping, “Use your cutlery you little cretin.”

(Bahorel jeers and Feuilly makes a threatening gesture with his reclaimed fork.)

“They need more clothes,” she continues, “Individual clothes, because right now they’re all wearing each others.” She looks pointedly at Bahorel, who is currently wearing one of Eponine’s pleated skirts.

“Not very liberal of you, Mrs Hauche,” muses Javert, contemplating a tomato on the end of his fork.

“Listen you,” she snaps, brandishing the wooden spoon in front of Javert’s nose. He goes cross-eyed to evaluate the threat. “He can wear all the skirts and dresses he likes, as long as they’re an appropriate length. There will be no bare backsides in my kitchen!”

Bahorel, Feuilly and Courfeyrac howl with laughter and she silences them all with a look.

“But also, something to keep the little one occupied. And phones for them all, or else I’ll be forced to keep them on leaches so they’ll come in for their dinner. And maybe some laptops? Or books? Anything, Valjean, I’m at my wits end. Five of them almost set fire to the garden yesterday, Mr Levent nearly murdered them with his rake!”

Javert takes the time to individually scowl at Eponine, Feuilly, Grantaire, Bahorel and Jehan. He doesn’t seem to mind that it’s entirely lost on Jehan, and mostly lost on the rest of them too.
Not Feuilly, though. His sense of moral justice encompasses everything, including facts. “I resent the accusation you’re making right now,” he says.

“You resemble the accusation I’m making,” Javert growls. Feuilly’s hair is still a bit singed at the ends.

Valjean breaks in to the ensuing people’s trial (Enjolras’s mouth is already open to incriminate at least Grantaire) and says to Mrs Hauche, “Absolutely. Clothes, books, games, phones. Those are wonderful ideas, Mrs Hauche, I’ll arrange it immediately.”

What Valjean arranges is thirteen kiddy bank accounts into which he deposits an amount that makes Javert’s eyes water, when he sees it.

First, though, they have to decide on a last name.

“You don’t want to take your original parents’ last names?” asks Valjean, curiously.

“Our parents were shit,” says Feuilly. Eponine nods in dark agreement.

“Well,” allows Joly, “All except Cosette’s.”

“We already have creepy human-rights exploiting scientists for our first names,” says Grantaire, “If you suggest taking our awful parents’ last names in homage, Enjolras will definitely explode.”

“We should all have the same surname anyway,” says Enjolras, “We’re the only family we’ve got. Why shouldn’t we share a family name?”

“We could use Madeline,” says Cosette brightly.

(“Mr Muffin,” mutters Feuilly to a snickering Bahorel.)

Valjean rubs his neck, “Ah, I wouldn’t recommend that, dear. It’s a fairly well known name. People might question where my sudden influx of heirs came from. Best to use one of your own, just for the flock.”

This, it turns out, is easier said than done.

In amongst the pastry puns from Bahorel, Joly and Feuilly (“Mr Croissant,” - “No, Mr Baguette, it’s also the word for wand. We could be like wizards!” - “Personally I’m a fan of Mr Cinnamon Bun.”) Courfeyrac goes down the route of naming parts of birds in French. Mr Plume, Mr Bec, Mr Coin-coin.

“The bird puns are even worse than the bread puns,” says Enjolras to Grantaire in a tone of muted horror. Louder, he says, “It does actually have to be something vaguely recogniseable as a name!”

Combeferre clears his throat and everyone goes quiet, “Jehan has an idea,” he says.

“How about Amis?” Jehan says quietly.

“Like friends?” says Courfeyrac, wrinkling his nose, “But Jehan! I thought we were family! Next you won’t even tutoyer me! Are we vous, Jehan?! Are we?!”

“Like the last name,” says Combeferre, with an eyeroll, as Eponine flicks Courfeyrac in the ear.
“And no one said you can’t also be friends with your family,” says Joly with a smile. “And Joly Amis sounds so happy! I like it, well done Jehan!”

"Amis comes from amicus, amare,” says Grantaire, "So it means love. The classics knowledge in this family is shocking, Jehan."

Valjean, who’s been quietly watching the whole ordeal unfold, smiles. “So, Amis, is it decided?”

“Vote,” declares Combeferre.

Twelve hands raise in unison. Gavroche, on the ground, is busy trying to stuff his entire fist into his mouth. Enjolras gives him a disapproving look for opting out of his democratic rights.

Combeferre smiles back at Valjean, “It’s decided.”

“You don’t give an unlimited amount of money to twelve years olds and tell them to ‘have fun’,” Javert is hissing at a completely unperturbed Valjean, “You don’t give them any money, at all, if you can help it.”

“Javert, if you would like to personally supervise every purchase this lot make throughout the next six years, you are my honoured guest,” says Valjean serenely. “I, however, have a healthy respect for my own mortal powers. I’m not even going to attempt to try.”

“If one of them tries to bring home an elephant,” threatens Javert, “It will be your own fault and you’ll be getting no help from me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Javert,” answers Valjean, “Where on earth would any of them get an elephant?”

“This is London,” he hisses, half-hysterically.

They’re divided into supervisable groups, for the purposes of visiting the shopping mall.

Grantaire, Feuilly, Bahorel, Eponine and Jehan - the group that Javert has taken to calling Category Five while in their hearing (and That Fucking Five when he’s only within range of the grownups and Jehan) - have been put with the man himself. He doesn’t look happy, but Grantaire is unsure if that’s because he’s with them, because Bahorel has stolen his sunglasses and is wearing them on the back of his head, or if it’s just because that’s who Javert is as a person.

The tetrarchy that is Enjolras, Cosette, Courfeyrac and Combeferre go with Valjean. Grantaire still isn’t sure how Courfeyrac ended up getting tarred with the same brush of innocence as the rest of them, seeing as he’s almost always the one with the worst ideas.

The unholy trinity of Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta, plus Gavroche, are accompanied by the Hauches. Gavroche has been persuaded to be responsible for Joly’s wheelchair-pushing, which cuts the enormous chances of loosing him in the massive building, only very slightly.

It’s the first time any of them have been out in public before. They’re wings are held down by tight-fitting tshirts, and covered up by baggier hoodies. Jehan is simultaneously spooked and fascinated. He holds Grantaire’s elbow tight, something he does almost never, but stops outside certain shops and underneath the domed roofs, head craned up. He halts them for a good five
minutes outside the food court with a bizarre expression on his face. “There’s so many people,” he says to Grantaire in amazement.

“Yep,” Grantaire agrees. He’s never seen this many people in his life. He’s never experienced a crowd before. He can’t imagine what it’s like for Jehan.

Javert herds them onwards and says, “No trying anything on. Go with the sizes Madeline gave you. I’m not having any awkward confrontations in changing rooms today. Keep your feathers to yourselves.”

He takes them to what feels like hundreds of clothes shops with a surprising degree of patience, for someone who is loco-en-parentis of the human hurricane that is Bahorel and Feuilly.

Feuilly likes checked shirts and khaki trousers, trainers and light neutral-coloured jackets. Grantaire gets the feeling that this is where the normal clothing choices end.

Bahorel finds a truly shocking selection of Hawaiian shirts, board shorts, thick neon trainers, and at least three pairs of flip flops. He also leads the charge towards the brightly-coloured underwear.

After a while, Javert eyes Eponine and Grantaire’s nearly-empty hands, and carts them off to a shop with much more black in it.

Here Eponine piles black t-shirts, shirts, skin-tight jeans, cargo pants, and jackets into both her own basket and Grantaire’s.

“We’re dressing Grantaire?” Bahorel says excitedly, “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“You are dressing no one,” says Feuilly.

“How bad is it?” Jehan asks gleefully.

“So bad,” says Grantaire.

Grantaire really doesn’t care much one way or the other. He’s in the uncomfortable situation of not really knowing enough to have an opinion. He errs for the safety of monochrome colours and simple designs.

Eponine, he guesses, is trying to get as far from starched white as is physically possible.

“Remember to get socks and pants,” says Javert, “Ah- Underwear. And you should all get a bag of some sort too.”

“What’s the bags for?” Eponine asks, frowning.

“To carry things,” says Javert, slowly and clearly. Eponine narrows her eyes and flounces off to find a black backpack.

Jehan is wandering the shop, running his fingers over everything. Javert, who’s been watching him too, catches him by the sleeve. “This way,” he says, and leads them all out across the mall to a shop that’s painted in magentas and golds. Inside, the customers are mostly youngish women, trying on floral dresses and pointy shoes.

Grantaire understands a bit better what’s going on when they actually go into the shop. There are silk shirts and cordeuy trousers, delicate ballet shoes tied with ribbons, crepe dresses and a velvet coat that Jehan comes to a dead stop when he touches. He pulls it off it’s hanger and nuzzles his
face into the soft material, then pulls it on. The sleeves come down over his fingers and the hem is below his knees.

“How does it look?” he asks, doing a twirl. The coat is a royal purple, with gold fastenings down the front.

“Awesome,” says Eponine, on behalf of everyone.

“You look like a wizard,” says Feuilly seriously.

The ensuing competition between Feuilly, Bahorel, Grantaire and Eponine, to find if not the nicest, then at least the strangest-feeling materials in the shop, earns them some very judgemental looks and at least two significant coughs in Javert’s direction. Javert thoroughly ignores them.

They leave the shop up four magenta bags and a beaming Jehan when Bahorel starts to make grumbling noises in defence of his poor under-nourished stomach.

Instead of making for the food court, Javert peels off towards a different shop. “Indulge me,” he says.

“What’s that smell?” asks Jehan, wrinkling his nose.

“Leather,” says Javert. “Have at, you little hooligans.”

Rows of leather jackets in hundreds of different colours and fits are laid out in front of them.

Hunger forgotten, Bahorel finds an aggressively pastel pink bomber jacker, puts in on and refuses to take it off, even for it to get rang up.

Feuilly chooses a soft, buttery brown jacket, and Eponine ends up buying three different black ones. Grantaire’s starting to see a pattern in the clothes Eponine’s buying. They have spikes and thick zippers and layers. They’re blocky and dark and thick. They’re as close to armour as you can get without involving chest plates and chainmail.

Jehan runs his fingers over the different jackets with a thoughtful look on his face. “Are there any that don’t come from animals?” he asks Javert.

The man at the counter shoots Jehan a very offended glance, to which Javert shoots back a scowl.

“Not here, but they’ll have vegan leather in the other shops, and it’s much cheaper too.”

Jehan smiles, “I think I’ll just stick with my wizard’s coat if that’s okay?”

Javert shrugs, then in one of those secondary gestures people always end up making around Jehan, claps him on the shoulder. “It’s your money, kid.”

Grantaire doesn’t hear any of this because he is, for the first time in his whole life, falling in love with an inanimate object. His jacket is thick, with padded elbows and a soft, quilted lining. It’s dark green and he buys it big, so that the cuffs hang over his fingertips.

They all meet back up in one of the cheap restaurants off of the food court for an all-you-can-eat pizza buffet.

“They are in no way prepared for you lot’s all-you-can-eat policy,” says Javert to them, “Have
mercy on their souls.”

Valjean takes one look at them and gives Javert a strange, entirely fond kind of smile. “I see you’ve been having fun.”

“Tiny motorcycle gang,” says Javert gleefully.

In between a volume of pizza that renders the waitress honestly speechless half-way-through her “is everything okay here?”, the flock exchange presents.

Joly has hats, scarves and gloves for all of them. “I knew none of you would remember,” he says brightly, “But we’re from California. The winters here are supposed to be much harsher!”

“It’s not winter already?” asks Bahorel, eyes wide.

“It’s May,” says Eponine scathingly.

“I thought maybe seasons were different here,” says Bahorel mournfully.

Somewhere in between her quest for all things black, Eponine has picked up dozens of tiny trinkets for Cosette, little rings and silver chains and delicate bracelets. In return, Cosette has bought her a pair of black thumpy boots that come up almost to her knees.

Bossuet slides a big box across the table towards Jehan. “They’re audio cds,” he says with a smile, “So you can listen to stories. The person in the shop told us to get Harry Potter.” Jehan hugs the box to his chest tightly.

Grantaire gives Enjolras the twin of his green jacket. It’s got gold zips instead of silver, and the jacket is a bright, blinding red. Enjolras beams at it and pulls it on immediately. He knocks knees with Grantaire under the table.

“Here, I have something for you too.” Enjolras pulls out a huge hard-backed book, with a soft, velvet cover, swirling patters and pages that look gold when it’s closed. It’s titled, *The Iliad and The Odyssey by Homer.*

“I know I made you lose your copy,” says Enjolras, “And I know I can’t make up for it, but-”

Grantaire rolls his eyes, throws his arm around Enjolras’s shoulder and kisses his temple in one smooth, well-practiced motion.

“Shut up, sunshine,” he says fondly.

“Er, Combeferre,” says Eponine, biting her lip. Along the table, all of what Javert calls Category Five start laughing, silently and hysterically. Combeferre regards them with a very serious kind of wariness. “We, er, have something for you.”

After the leather shop, Category Five plus Javert had headed to the book shop. They had wandered in on a whim when Jehan had said dreamily, “Combeferre will get all his answers now.”

It is possible, in retrospect, that they had underestimated the sheer volume of questions Combeferre had asked within the span of their living memories. The pile of books they place on the table comes up to over Combeferre’s head: *An Encyclopaedia of Moths, An Illustrated Guide to the Milky Way, The Human Body, The Railroads of Great Britain, The Art of Film, Illustrated Geology,*
Combeferre examines the titles, looks almost like he’s about to cry, says, “Thank you,” four times in quick succession, and then starts reading the book on moths over the remains of his pizza.

(“Told you,” mutters Bahorel to Feuilly, smugly.)

Musichetta gives Enjolras a poster with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on it (“Thank you for that,” says Grantaire, drier than dust) and Grantaire a tshirt with the word NO printed on it in big letters. “I thought you could just wear it instead of talking,” she says sweetly. Eponine cackles, Grantaire scowls, and Enjolras hides his smile in a cough.

Combeferre has three different types of rubiks cube for Feuilly.

Everyone has something-or-other for Gavroche. The winner is a toss-up between a giant purple cuddly-toy elephant, courtesy of Category Five (“Where did you hide it?!” Javert asks, bug-eyed with horror) and the Tetrarchy’s contribution of a pair of trainers with wheels on the bottom (something every adult at the table regards with mute despair).

“You kids do realise that you’ve all got your own money?” says Javert, bemused. “You’ve spent all day shopping for each other.”

Cosette rings her hands a little, like she does when she’s talking to grownups or the very tall. She looks from Valjean to Javert, and back. “We’re very, very grateful. And it is lovely to be able to buy things for just yourself. It’s just…” Here she breaks off and her hand-ringing steps up a notch into can’t-find-the-right-words territory.

“I imagine,” says Valjean kindly, “What is even more wonderful, is giving things to people you love, who you’ve watched your whole life go without anything.”

“Yes,” says Cosette, relieved. “It’s just that.”

The day after that, a huge pile of boxes appear in one of the empty rooms off the living room. No one except Mr Levant is around, and he’s still testy over his nearly-fried begonias, so all he says is, “They’re for you.”

The boxes, once unwrapped, reveal a terrifying amount of electronics. Thirteen phones and laptops, for starters. Four different games consoles with handsets, a box of games and a huge television. Assorted headphones and earphones. Tablet-sized devices that look opaque rather than lit-up, which on opening are filled with hundreds of books. A thousand different cables.

Feuilly’s latent organisational abilities kick in and he and Musichetta get everything mostly stacked into thirteen piles and a bigger, shared pile, for the things they have absolutely no idea how to work.

“This seems a little excessive,” says Cosette worriedly, looking around her at shiny silver and white.

“Excessive is Valjean’s modus operandi,” says Grantaire, “Anyway, it can’t hurt.”

“We have things Cos,” says Courfeyrac, “Actual things of our own. I counted this morning, and apart from clothes I have four things plus all this makes eight! I have enough things to put in a bag!”
“How do we work them?” asks Musichetta exasperatedly. The contents of the phone’s starter pack has exploded over her lap.

“How’s that working for you with Grantaire?” Bahorel asks Enjolras seriously. Grantaire throws his phone box and Bahorel’s head. It hits him with a satisfying smack.)

When Javert and Valjean look in on them that evening, they are ringed around the room at various plug outlets, with headphones on, bent over phones or tapping confidently at laptops.

“Praise be to God,” says Javert, with what looks suspiciously like tears in his eyes, “Silence! What a beautiful sound!”

The next day they discover the games consoles and Javert’s precious silence is shattered into a million beeping, cheering, midi-toned pieces.

“We’ve been thinking,” says Joly. “If we’re going to go to school and be with other kids, we need to learn how to be kids first.”

“Wait, we’re not kids?” asks Feuilly seriously.

“We’re weird kids,” says Musichetta over the sound of Bahorel’s wails (“No! No more learning!”). “Other kids have favourite movies,” she says, “And tv shows and books and music. They’ve done stuff like go to bowling and ice-skating.”

“You’re saying that the grownups’ll give us everything they can, but they can’t teach us how to be kids,” clarifies Combeferre.

“We’re not that weird,” says Courfeyrac, offended.

“Until last week your most treasured possession was a yellow bottle cap,” says Grantaire. “Which you liked because it was yellow. We’re a little bit weird, Coeur.”

Courfeyrac harumphs but doesn’t argue.

Joly wades bravely on, “We should do nights where we watch all of the most famous movies. Every night is someone else’s pick. And Mr Mabeuf gave us that list of the important kids books. We should all read them. When we were in that book shop, the lady looked really surprised that we hadn’t heard of Harry Potter.”

“Being normal sure seems to have a lot of shoulds in it,” mutters Feuilly - quietly to avoid the death-stare of Musichetta.

“How are we going to get all this stuff?” asks Cosette worriedly, “It seems like an awful lot to ask of Valjean.”

“You can buy things online, and then they send them to your door,” says Grantaire.
Everyone look at him in surprise.

“How do you know?” asks Eponine.

“I did it once with fireworks,” Grantaire snaps back, short enough that no one asks any follow-up questions.

“That could work,” muses Combeferre, smoothing the awkwardness out. “We just have to look up lists for the best - there must be ones on the internet - and then buy them, and get them delivered.”

Combeferre types up the lists carefully, hunched over his laptop, and Eponine uses the pile of debit cards they’ve surrendered to her to purchase everything from online shops.

The rest of them play Mario Kart, which is a demonstrable recipe for disaster, but they keep doing it anyway.

Cosette wins, consistently, with a slightly puzzled but cheery expression, like she doesn’t know why the rest of them are having so much difficulty.

Bossuet repeatedly plunges off the edge without getting any further along the track, to the amusement of everyone, especially himself. Courfeyrac swaps controllers with him; Bossuet does not get any better at staying on the road.

Courfeyrac, Bahorel, Musichetta and Feuilly are meanwhile engaged in a kind of shell-based civil war that Enjolras keeps getting sprinkled with friendly-fire from. (Enjolras, poutingly: “Courfeyrac, I’m on your team!” Courfeyrac, half-hysterically, shrieking, hurling shells: “There are no teams in Mario Kart, Enjolras! This! Is! War!”)

Grantaire is laughing too hard to steer effectively and has come to a kind of spinning stop. When Enjolras turns his ridiculously offended face in Grantaire’s direction, Grantaire hiccups, grinning, swaps their controllers, and takes Enjolras’s car to third place to unanimous howls of, “Not fair!”

Joly is in second place, expression wild, driving backwards, using his controller upside-down. Combeferre points this out to him, only to be told as the car careens narrowly around a bend, “No Combeferre, there’s no time to turn around, this is who I am now.”

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Literally hundreds of books, dvds and cds arrive the next day.

“We’re learning to be real kids,” chirps Cosette to an at-first bemused and then vaguely heartbroken Valjean.

Javert looks supremely amused until he spots the The Godfather, Pulp Fiction and The Matrix in the piles.

Enjolras talks loftily about ageism and how they’ve all already seen worse anyway as Javert goes through the piles systematically and removes anything higher than a fifteen.

“If I am going to be a parent,” says Javert disgustedly, “I refuse to be an abysmal one.”

The tetrarchy, plus Eponine - to Feuilly and Bahorel’s disgust - embark on a competition to see which one of them can get through the Harry Potter books fastest. This leads to long periods of silence followed by a the weirdest numerical trash-talk ever heard in the flock. (“Shut up, Coeur, you’re still on chapter 8, I’m on page 512.”)
Jehan, quietly, is learning Braille, making his way through chunky, thick-paged How To books faster than anyone reading Harry Potter

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At night, Grantaire lies awake under Enjolras’s dead weight.

That’s what he thinks it is, at first. Enjolras used to use Grantaire as a blanket. Now he rolls himself on top like a giant, many-limbed paperweight and Grantaire feels sometimes that he’s suffocating in the heavy heat. He tries to roll out, to disentangle himself, and Enjolras clings tighter, like he’s afraid Grantaire’s going to disappear.

But one night, when he manages to get Enjolras strangling the pillows instead of him, he lies out flat on the bed, stares up at the skylight and the stars that spin outside it, and he still can’t sleep.

Sometimes when he closes his eyes, Montparnasse looms out of the red-dark of his eyelids, expression awful and furious and betrayed.

So he keeps his eyes open, and watches the stars, and lets Enjolras sleep on his lungs.

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“It seemed like a good idea,” says Joly doubtfully as they all peer out over the expanse of ice. Valjean has booked the whole rink for the afternoon, which is good because it means only they will be witness the utter carnage about to ensue.

Valjean is busy running the huge, multi-national business empire that he had up till now abandoned to essentially make them all hot chocolate and bicker with Javert about parenting technique. It was only in answer to the increasingly strident calls from his investors that he had gone into work today (apparently China was doing something unpleasant to the market) but he’d been very explicit about the flock calling if they needed anything.

(“Anything, understand?” he’d said, as Mrs Hauche shooed him from the kitchen. He had looked different in shiny shoes and a black suit jacket, without his ever-present cardigan and slippers. “Even if you don’t think it’s important. If you’re worried at all, if you need a lift, I’ll be available right away!” Javert hadn’t even make fun of him, he was too busy heading off to his own mysterious Javert-ish business. He yanked on his now-familiar leather jacket, crunched toast, glugged coffee and said in their general direction: “Remember kids, if you can’t be good be smart. And if you can’t be smart-” here he had finished the coffee and dumped the empty mug in the sink. Feuilly and Bahorel had finished for him in chorus, ‘look innocent!’ Javert had shot them a thumbs up and disappeared out the door, brushing toast crumbs off his jacket.)

It’s currently looking more and more likely that they will be phoning their guardians from the emergency room. Grantaire can just imagine Javert’s expression when he receives that call.

“Are we supposed to stand on these?” asks Musichetta doubtfully, inspecting the bottom of her rented ice skates.

“It’s not so difficult,” says Courfeyrac, standing on the sponge-like flooring, wobbling frantically on the two thin blades.

Grantaire looks at the ice rink, his feet, and the ice rink again, then steps on to the shiny white surface before his brain can develop a neurone or two capable of good ideas.

Courfeyrac yelps, “’Taire!” and Combeferre murmurs, “Oh dear.”
Then Enjolras speaks up, sounding strangely serene for someone that’s watching Grantaire shuffle painfully-slow across the ice. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll be fine.”

Courfeyrac wildly vocalises for the entire group, “What, you’re an optimist now?!”

Grantaire hears - because the ice is strangely quiet and the big room make noise seem closer - Enjolras’s reply. “You never saw him fly.”

Grantaire reaches the edge of the rink across from the flock and turns, hands grasping the handrail. He thinks he understands the ice now, the way his feet move on it, the way his body has to sit in space, loose in some parts, tight in others. It is a lot like flying, he thinks. Then launches himself onto the ice again in a fast, low, swooping movement.

He hears Bahorel squawk loudly, and Eponine shout, “‘Taire!”, but only distantly. Because he’s flying again.

He streaks across the length of the ice, feeling cold air stroke his face and stream between his fingers. He spins and crouches and jumps, almost-falls, then rights himself. He swoops in huge arcs, arms outstretched, eyes closed. He speeds up, races from one end to the other, then skates back to Enjolras.

His teeth are cold and he realises he’s grinning hard enough to hurt. Enjolras’s answering smile is brilliant.

“Come on, sunshine,” says Grantaire, hands out.

Enjolras steps onto the ice without a second thought and takes Grantaire’s hands in his. Grantaire slides back once, twice, three times, until he’s swooshing backwards across the ice, dragging Enjolras with him. Enjolras, whose whole body is tense-tight and wrong, moving awkwardly and instinctively in all the wrong ways, but whose laughter rings across the whole rink like a bell.

“How is it,” Enjolras pants, “That your body always knows what to do?”

“It’s to make up for the rest of me that hasn’t got a fucking clue,” says Grantaire, spinning Enjolras out and away like a salsa dancer, then back in, flailing, to the circle of his bony arms. Enjolras hugs him, stills them, and pushes his nose into the curl of Grantaire’s neck.

“I miss you,” he mumbles, like he doesn’t really want Grantaire to hear.

“I’m right here,” says Grantaire.

Enjolras shakes his head and doesn’t look at him.

Grantaire is well aware that you can miss a person who’s still, technically, right there. He misses himself all the time. “Sorry,” he says helplessly.

Enjolras shrugs and hugs tighter, past the point of cuddling and into sleep-strangling territory. His fingerprints press pink ovals into Grantaire’s skin.

The rest of the flock make the transition on to the ice with varying degrees of success. Jehan grasps forwards and Cosette develops a method of continually nearly-falling that propels her across the ice. Bossuet has fallen down four times in the space of thirty seconds, nearly taking Joly’s chair with him on the last descent, and is now sitting cross legged on the ice, looking more puzzled that anything else. Eponine is carefully inching her way around the edge with Combeferre, hands tight together. “Sorry,” she says acidly, as the two of them make their way round near where Enjolras
and Grantaire are standing, “Are we interrupting a moment?” Feuilly, Courfeyrac and Bahorel, in spite of their complete inability to skate with anything approaching uprightness, are racing across the ice leaving a trail of destruction and a nearly-toppled Musichetta in their wake.

Gavroche hurtles past Grantaire and Enjolras on his knees, whooping and cawing like a bird. He spins onto his back and lies on the ice, giggling and exhausted. “I should go and get him,” says Grantaire, “Will you survive?”

“Please come back quickly,” Enjolras says seriously. “I don’t know how to get to the edge again.”

Grantaire salutes and whizzes off to haul Gavroche to his feet.

They watch every Disney movie that has ever been released for commercial entertainment, then work their way through Dreamworks and Studio Gibli.

Courfeyrac now exists in a permanent state of off-pitch song, to the horror of everyone.

They take turns picking films every night. Joly puts on Star Wars and then plunges them all into a never-ending hole of sci-fi films and Joss Whedon tv shows. Cosette, who won the Harry Potter book race and immediately opened the Lord of the Rings, puts on the film counterparts and watches them a little obsessively. Her hero-worship of Eowyn is endearingly fanatical. Grantaire likes Inception, Memento, the Sixth Sense, Fight Club, and Shutter Island. Grantaire is now banned from choosing films, after the fourth incident in which Combeferre is kept awake all night by Courfeyrac’s loud dissatisfaction with ambiguous endings. Combeferre likes David Attenborough documentaries a lot. Courfeyrac likes musicals to the surprise of no one. Bahorel likes romantic comedies, particularly anything with Tom Hanks or Meg Ryan in them. Eponine really likes Titanic (or making Joly cry, the jury is out). Musichetta is strangely invested in the Fast and Furious franchise. Enjolras really likes V for Vendetta, and Grantaire nearly sprains something rolling his eyes at that one. Bossuet likes weird comedies. Jehan mostly ignores films in favour of mastering braille, and his quiet tapping punctuates every tense, dramatic cliffhanger and romantic moment they watch.

Every evening, the rest of the staff gets time off from the effort-intensive task of corralling the thirteen of them into various meals, tasks and classes. Javert and Valjean sit in the back of the room and watch the films with them, first at opposite ends of the couch, but growing incrementally closer with each night.

They all have nightmares.

Joly's leave him screaming, the kind of screams that yank everyone else from their sleep in cold sweats, like they’ve tripped going down stairs. Grantaire doubts Musichetta and Bossuet are getting any sleep at all, the hollows of their eyes are swollen and bruised-dark every morning.

Courfeyrac looks sick-white, blanched. Combeferre’s lips bleed, he bites them so hard, Cosette jumps and skitters easily, Bahorel talks like he’s lost all ability to volume control, Eponine snaps faster and more angrily at less, Feuilly rubs his fingers over his skin, up and down, and paces the corridor outside the bedrooms at night, back and forth.

Jehan is imperturbable, as always. Whatever he feels, he feels it deeper than any of them can see.

Enjolras sleeps sounder than he ever has, to Grantaire’s endless amusement. Tone deaf till the last,
Enjolras would be the one to escape any kind of traumatic psychological consequence for a decade or so of imprisonment, if only out of pure stubbornness.

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It’s raining torrentially outside, battering Levant’s flower gardens and making the grass mushy and slippery. For Gavroche, this only enhances the fun of the gardens; he was last seen literally rolling in a mud puddle, yellow welly-boots up in the air, followed by an infinitely patient Valjean with a golf umbrella.

For the rest of them it’s an excuse to curl up under blankets in the room where all their “Normal-Kid” stuff is - the place Valjean calls the den and Javert calls their headquarters. They play video games, read books and, in Bossuet’s case, nap. Cosette woke up this morning not feeling well, so her request for a fifth screening of Lord of the Rings has gone un-disputed but much side-eyed. Jehan has taken to saying all of Gandalf’s lines in synch, complete with wise bass rumbling tone, and they’re not sure if he’s aware he’s doing it or not.

Grantaire is half asleep, head in Enjolras’s lap, feet in Courfeyrac’s, listening to the gentle rapping of the rain on the windows and Jehan’s keyboard and the quiet schtisht of Feuilly’s Rubik’s cube. Enjolras is reading a maths textbook over Grantaire’s face and very time Grantaire opens his eyes, the pages have inched closer to his nose.

The day slips away like that, without anyone really noticing. In the Institute, days had marked Beginnings and Endings. In London the days are an eternal white-grey, cool and soft and damp. Jehan thinks the air smells nicer. Joly thinks the dense, ever-present cloud is atmospheric, and Eponine says it’s the so depressing she wants to set herself on fire. The evening dimness slips into the room, and first Grantaire, then the rest become strangely difficult to see through the gloom. They turn on lamps and the walls turn gold.

Grantaire eventually grows restless and wanders off upstairs to find his laptop. He’s gets a weird kind of hypnotic kick out of clicking on Wikipedia articles at random. It makes the world seem a lot bigger, and weirder, something which Grantaire finds strangely comforting.

He gets distracted reading about the Ottoman empire, and then again by Acathoe bats and the Eta Carinae nebula, and by the time he zones back into the real world, the clock in the upper right corner of his laptop reads 21:42.

He stares at it.

It’s late, is all. And they haven’t seen an adult since about midday, when Javert went to work.

Grantaire checks his phone and there’s no signal, not even for emergency calls. He should have - does have, usually - great reception, especially here at the top of the house.

There is a wishing well in one of the corners of Valjean’s garden, and its dark circle of water makes stones disappear into nothing. Grantaire feels like someone has dropped a stone into him.

The silence of the house feels wrong suddenly, and his heart takes off at a run at the same time as he does, down the stairs in slippery socked feet.

There’s no one in the kitchen. It’s black as the inside of Grantaire’s eyelids, except for the blinking 21:44 above the cooker in neon blue, which, yeah, thanks, he gets it.

He goes to the door of the den, and finds it locked.
Grantaire is out the kitchen door in his socks, into a cold, drizzling wind that shakes him awake. He skirts the house, heads straight to the window of the den, feet sinking in the mud of the flower bed, rose thorns catching on his jeans. It’s lit up inside and the flock are standing with their backs to the window, facing something in the room. Grantaire knows that even if he were the kind of person people usually saw, he’d be invisible through the shiny black windows inside the house. He can see Cosette’s curls near the back, next to Jehan’s wizard’s coat.

Grantaire puts his nose right up to the glass, rubs a finger along it, and whispers Jehan onto the glass in a hush of warm air.

Jehan makes an abrupt move into Cosette’s shoulder, like he’s about to start crying hysterically. Behind her back, his fingers move with pale precision to the window latch, unlocking it silently. The second the window’s loose, Grantaire pulls it open, just barely, and slithers through. Jehan is wailing - convincing to strangers, probably, but absurd to his family, who’ve never so much as heard Jehan raise his voice. Cosette, in an even bigger departure from norm, is shouting, something about not giving him what he wants, and how their friends, who are powerful people, will make him pay if he does anything. No one turns around, but Grantaire notices stiff shoulders and head twitches, like now the whole flock knows something’s happening behind them. Something requiring some kind of noise cover.

Grantaire slips, quietly, into the shadows. Behind him, there’s an drop in the cool breeze; Jehan’s closed the window.

There’s a Razer standing between the flock and the door to the den. He’s one of the bigger ones, Grantaire can’t remember his name. He’s distinctive for having an unusually round face, for a Razer. Under the puppy fat the outlines of his sharp, protruding facial bones and the shape of his long teeth are uncomfortably visible. In his clawed, heavy-boned hands is a semi-automatic gun, safety off.

“Your friends aren’t coming back this evening,” Fat-Face is saying, with difficulty. Those teeth must make monologuing a bitch, Grantaire reckons. “Didn’t you get their texts?” he laughs, obnoxiously.

Grantaire sees Courfeyrac actually go to take his phone out his pocket before Combeferre stills him, and rolls his eyes. He’s creeping slowly, his wet socks soaking footsteps into the carpet as he inches round the room. Enjolras’s eyes have glanced off him and away, guiltily, trying not to give the game away. Grantaire keeps moving, slowly, back to the wall, thinking his very darkest thoughts, pulling shadows round him like blankets.

Grantaire nearly has his back to the barricaded door when Fat-Face’s monologue breaks off and his semi-automatic gun comes up facing - who else - Enjolras.

Grantaire has his small sharp kitchen knife to the Razer’s throat so fast he feels like he’s lost time. It’s the kind of speed he’s always attributed to hands and burning things, the kind of movement without any thought between action and reaction.

“I’ve done a lot worse for a lot less,” says Grantaire into Fat-Face’s ear with all the menace he’s got. It’s quite a substantial amount - what with the powers over pain and darkness, his menacing baseline is already pretty elevated. “Safety on, then drop the gun.”

The gun gets dropped, and then kicked, so it comes to rest at Combeferre’s feet. Combeferre looks at it the way most people would look at large bug-eyed spiders. Enjolras picks it up.
“On your knees,” says Grantaire, digging the knife into Fat-Faces’s neck.

“So who’re you then?” says Fat-Face, “Wait, is it Grantaire?”

The silence he gets in reply makes him crow, “It is Grantaire! Man, Montparnasse wants you dead.”

It’s a stupid and ridiculously amateur-hour impulse that makes Grantaire’s hand twitch away from it’s firm press, and he regrets it immediately. Fat-Face throws his improbably bony skull back and Grantaire sees dark sparkles for an important few seconds that have the Razer up and launching himself at Grantaire, claws and teeth first.

Grantaire hasn’t forgotten how to fight, is the thing, and this Razer has nothing on Montparnasse’s speed and agility, which is itself in a different dimension of reality from Grantaire’s. Grantaire spins and slices and his edges are kind of murkyly indefinable. Three times, Fat-Face smacks thin-air hard enough to throw himself off balance. Grantaire darts away and back in, to kick and dig his knife in superficially. He catches sight of the Flock, on a half-crouched whirl, just a snapshot of Cosette’s wide eyes and Joly nearly out of his chair, and Bahorel, looking like he’s about to throw himself into the fray, and groans, “Get ou-t-,” in complete disbelief. Because honestly, where the fuck is the evolutionary pressure to survive at with these idiots. When a hit does land, Grantaire’s forearm snaps with such ridiculously little resistance that Fat-Face is brought up short and Grantaire’s attention is brought sharply back to the fight at hand.

“Brittle bones,” Grantaire explains wryly, pushing the bone back into a shape more closely resembling an arm. Fat-Face, still offering Grantaire a slightly horrified hiatus, gives him a look of utter revulsion. Grantaire expands on this with, “High pain tolerance,” then throws himself forwards in a powerful roundhouse kick that jack-knifes Fat-Face backwards over the sofa. Grantaire, reluctantly, tries to get closer for some kind of disarmament procedure and Fat-Face kicks him across the room with such force that Grantaire’s wings briefly try to respond as if he’s airborne, before he lands on the coffee table with a crunching shatter.

His wings gently complain at this treatment but are mostly out-shouted by the thundering pulse of pain in Grantaire’s right forearm. His knife, he realises, has clattered to the smooth, golden wood between them. They both make for it, though short of it already being in Fat-Face’s claws Grantaire will get there first - Fat-Face has the aerodynamics of a wheelie-bin. Grantaire kicks it under the couch and uses the momentum from his sprint to punch Fat-Face in his gruesomely bony face. Grantaire hears his ring and pinkie finger pop painfully and gives Fat-Face’s facial structure the look of morbid disbelief it deserves for it.

They stop and look at each other. Grantaire notices, for the very first time, that Fat-Face is burned along his whole left arm. He stares at it for longer than is strategically wise and gets a claw across his forearm for his trouble.

“What I don’t get,” says Grantaire, crouching, dripping blood onto the pale wooden floor. “Is what the fuck this plan is supposed to be? You were sent by the Institute? To what, single-handedly retrieve thirteen kids against their will? Even if the Institute hadn’t personally been training one of those kids into weaponish effectiveness for like six years, that is one fucktruck of a plan. Are they really that low on personnel now, or did you piss someone off?”

“Well there’s not so many staff around since you set a few of them on fire, for sure,” says Fat-Face, eyes tracking every micro-flinch in Grantaire’s face. “But I was sent for recon.” Here Grantaire makes obvious with one eyebrow how suited he thinks Fat-Face is for covert reconnoissance. “Only once I got here, it seemed like you lot would be so pathetically easy to herd back, I might as well try it, see what they gave me for it.”
In reply to Grantaire’s other eyebrow, he mutters, “Well I didn’t know about you did I?”

“You said Montparnasse wants me dead,” Grantaire says, without actually giving the words permission to exit his mouth. “That means he’s alive?”

Fat-Face opens his mouth and Jehan shouts, “No!” and Enjolras fires the gun into Fat-Face’s skull.

“He was just going to go back to the Institute with our location, and then he’d come back with more of them and they’d take us back! And he broke your arm!” Enjolras is shouting. Valjean and Javert, silent, are sitting and standing respectively at the kitchen table. They haven’t offered any judgement on the whole thing yet because Grantaire has been occupying all sound waves with his verbal evisceration of Enjolras.

“Life isn’t game theory,” he screams at Enjolras, “You amoral sociopathic pedantic little shit! You do not kill people because it is convenient, am I coming through? Are you understanding? Would you like me to draw you a chart?!”

Enjolras is stonily unrepentant and Fat-Face is bleeding stickily from his skull all over Valjean’s floor and Grantaire still doesn’t know if Montparnasse is alive, god fucking damnit.

“I’d do it again,” says Enjolras simply, with a stubborn little head tilt.

Grantaire throws his hands up in the air in defeat because if he doesn’t he’s going to wrap them round Enjolras’s neck, and storms out of the kitchen with a bang so hard, Mr Hauche’s novelty “Seize the Hors D’Ouvres” magnet falls off the fringe. He stalks into the garden - down the hill with a ridiculous slipping and sliding that just makes him even angrier - to the back of the huge expanse of grass, where the garden grows wild and labyrinth. Grantaire stomps a wet path through the long grass, eventually coming to a stop at the place where two huge hedges meet perpendicularly, Alice-In-Wonderland style. He crouches down into the wet corner of foliage. Tiny twigs snatch at him and wet soil gets under his fingernails, and his jeans are soaked through in moments. Beyond his immediate metre radius, he can’t make out anything, and his favourite, eyes-closed kind of darkness collects in the details around him. He pulls it closer over his arms and head, as the cold ground pours miserable little shivers up his spine. His arm is still broken, pulsing painfully, swollen and red and violently warm against his chest.

He’s exhausted, flat out. He wants to leave, run away from everything in the whole world, but knows he won’t. He wants to sleep but he doesn’t want to wake up tomorrow. He crouches in the dark, mind empty of just about everything, tense down to his toes.

He thinks about how hiding makes time stretch out in front like a tight rope, always on the edge of his eventual discovery. He wishes that his family wouldn't always try to find him, that he could disappear without leaving a ripple in the world around him. He’s thinking about this when Eponine, Feuilly, Bahorel and Jehan appear beside him and settle down to join him on the ground. Eponine tosses Grantaire’s jacket at him and it lands on his head.

“How did you possibly find me?” Grantaire mutters into the smell of leather.

“This is literally the furthest you can get from the house without leaving the grounds,” says Feuilly
blandly.

“Also,” says Bahorel, “There’s such a thing as too dark. And you’re sitting in it.”

“Also too wet,” mutters Eponine.

“At least it’s stopped raining,” Jehan says, pulling his wizard’s coat tight around him. He throws a rug at Grantaire, which lands on his head again, and tucks the second one around himself and Feuilly. Eponine takes Grantaire’s off his head and spreads it over her own knees, leaving a small edge for Bahorel and Grantaire to share.

There’s silence for a little moment, in which Bahorel drops an arm around Grantaire’s shivering shoulders, and Eponine wordlessly tucks herself into Grantaire’s armpit. He loves them a lot, he remembers. Remembers because love is one of those feelings that Grantaire doesn’t really feel all the time, like how he doesn’t feel socks and shirts and jeans, after they’ve been on for a moment or two. He thinks it’s probably like that for everyone but he figures he’ll ask Jehan about it some time, just to be sure.

“Did you really teach Enjolras morals?” Bahorel asks, audibly entertained.

“I did,” says Grantaire bitterly, “I even found him the list of the Universal Human Rights, to prove that morals are not subjective preferences but are in fact necessary foundations for civilised societies to live in anything approaching peace.”

“I mean, you can’t say he didn’t take anything on board,” says Feuilly reasonably.

“Enjolras is self-interested to a fault,” says Grantaire, “He has a right to live. To hell with anyone else’s place on the mortal coil.” Then, hesitantly, “You think I’m right, right?”

There’s an incriminating silence into which Jehan says philosophically, “It doesn’t really matter what we think. It’s done.”

“You don’t think I’m right,” says Grantaire to Eponine. Eponine shrugs against Grantaire’s jaw.

“Cosette thinks you’re right. She seceded from the Tetrarchy in a huff along with the Unholy Trinity—”

“-who are mightily pissed. Chetta really has your back, Taire—” comments Bahorel.

“I didn’t think Joly or Bossuet could frown,” says Feuilly, “They were scowling.”

“I don’t even think Courfeyrac and Combeferre agree, they just can’t stay angry at Enjolras,” Eponine says.

“Combeferre definitely doesn’t,” Jehan confirms. “Courfeyrac empathises with all sides.”

“Shock,” drawls Feuilly, “Awe.”

“Courfeyrac would empathise with a bug,” agrees Eponine.

“That’s Combeferre,” says Grantaire.

“Combeferre would talk to a bug,” says Feuilly.

“So somehow,” says Grantaire, “It’s the ones that don’t agree that are out here. In the cold. And the wet.”
“I’m neutral on the subject,” says Jehan, “I don’t necessarily agree with the decision but I can agree with the impulse.”

“The impulse to kill?” Feuilly says, giving Jehan side-eye.

“The impulse to protect the family,” says Eponine.

“There were a million other ways-” starts Grantaire.

“We know,” interrupts Jehan soothingly. “We know. As a measured decision, it doesn’t hold water. As an impulse, though…”

“I’m sorry, Eponine, did you just refer to the flock as the family?” asks Feuilly.

“I hate the flock,” says Eponine for what could possibly be the hundredth time. “I get it, it’s a bird pun, I’m there. But it sounds like we’re over-enthusiastic Jehovah’s Witnesses or something. So lame.”

“And the family is better?” Feuilly says scathingly.

“It does lend our whole outfit a bit of a mafia-esque feel that I’m not hugely comfortable with,” says Jehan mildly.

“We had a vote, Eponine,” gasps Bahorel, “Are you trying to buck the democratic process?”

“Yes,” she says shortly.

They sit bickering for hours, until Grantaire starts chittering from a combination of adrenaline come-down, cold, and serious pain.

“We’re going inside,” Eponine informs him, hauling him up. “Valjean will be all pacey and Cosette will make our lives unpleasant.”

“And unpleasant life,” Feuilly muses, looking up at the sky, “What would that feel like, I wonder?”

The sky has started to lighten to a chalky pale pink, but details are still indistinguishable. Bahorel goes to take Grantaire’s arm and misses, has to feel out the limb, half-blind, to link his own arm with it.

“You make spur-of-the-moment physical affection awkward,” says Feuilly seriously.

“Always the goal,” agrees Grantaire.

They arrive at the house to find an asleep-in-his-chair Valjean, Javert, whose narrowed eyes imply a multitude of wrath to come, and a very relieved Myriel, who hustles Grantaire off to the Tiny Hospital without saying anything, but with enough physical agitation to communicate the volume of worry he’s barely withholding.

By the time it comes for them to go to school, the whole of the summer has flitted by, taking with it the only dregs of sun that Britain has to offer and leaving soggy piles of leaves over every available flat surface.

Valjean has been pulling strings and making calls all summer to find thirteen places in various private London schools with facilities for children with physical, visual and orational disabilities, as
well as International Curriculæ to - as Javert puts it - “disguise the weird”. The schools are independent, posh but liberal, and the ground zero for the children of every ambassador and dignitary in London. The places found for them are suspiciously divided in terms of flock loyalties, something Grantaire is sure Javert is behind.

Grantaire, Enjolras, Feuilly and Combeferre get places in the Corinthian Collegiate Academy, a large but weirdly delicate pink Victorian building on the edges of Kensington. Courfeyrac, Bahorel, Bossuet and Joly are to attend the St Anthony’s High School for Boys, which is a more standard white, just north of the city centre, with big rugby pitches spread out behind it. Gavroche is going to the equivalent all-boys primary school down the street. Eponine, Cosette, Musichetta and Jehan are going to the Musain International School, a small, old building on the Thames, with facilities for Jehan and enough heirs to various political empires to make any potential heist very lucrative indeed.

They are divided just about as far as they could be without full-scale insurrection taking place, and no further. Grantaire has to give Javert a reluctant kind of credit, for that. As it is, Courfeyrac pouts for a week in a quiet kind of way that’s somehow more obvious than his standard full-volume pouting; Musichetta gets grumpy and gives Joly and Bossuet the silent treatment; and Bahorel and Feuilly ramp up their quest to make things explode in expectation of a future shenanigan-cessation.

Grantaire tells Bahorel, multiple times, as they watch Feuilly pour mentos into a diet coke bottle from a safe-ish distance, that he will gladly switch out with him for St Anthony’s. He’s not looking forwards to spending his years in academia with Enjolras breathing down his neck, but it’s a bit too late to fix it now.

Joly and Bossuet are watching too, because they like explosions and Musichetta literally constitutes about 90% of their forward planning and common sense capacity. Without her, neither of them seem to see the problem with an empirically-proven human bad-luck magnet standing anywhere near things that are going bang. They’re both wearing the matching lost-puppy looks that they get when Musichetta is mad anywhere in their general vicinity.

“What,” says Javert, appearing behind them just as the the bottle starts to jiggle madly. “Are you doing now.” His timing for these sorts of things is really quite exceptional, Grantaire muses, as the Coke bottle just explodes upwards, a gyser-like tower of foam shooting up into the sky. Javert, without taking his narrowed eyes off of Feuilly and Bahorel, shoves Bossuet gently two steps to the right, so that he narrowly avoids the downward ark of the soda-powered bottle cap. It’s visually pretty impressive, even if it’s actually a fair assumption that if there’s a wrong place to stand, Bossuet will be standing in it. It’s the statistical equivalent of betting that somewhere in the world, Courfeyrac is talking.

“Ssssc-ience?” Bahorel says.

“Inside,” Javert hisses.

School itself is bearable for Grantaire only because he refuses to let something so utterly banal and normal be unbearable for him. He doesn’t mind the subjects, he picked them, after all - the Corinth is not the kind of school where you’re forced to do things like Home Economics if you don’t want to. Grantaire is a whiner by nature but even he can’t find a huge amount wrong in Language and Literature, Classical Greek, Philosophy, Design Technology and Visual Arts. He can’t even really complain about Mathematics, because if he does he gets a sullen, flat look from Feuilly.

 Mostly, it’s the whole thing of it, it’s the Going To School. Waking up at the same 0630 time every
day, getting the same train then subway line with a sleep-crusted Feuilly, a completely-unconscious Enjolras, and a book-faced Combeferre, waiting for bells to ring (more bells dictating his life, he thought he'd escaped that when Enjolras blew the Institute sky high). It’s queueing up for classes, sitting in classes, how skin-tight uncomfortable Grantaire feels, on his yellow plastic seat, hunched over his laminated-wood desk. Rules and repetition, don’t chew gum, fix your tie, tie back your hair if you’re going to wear it that long, and tie your laces, while you’re at it. Having to be silent while a teacher tells you the same thing you’ve already heard them say twenty times. Asking to go for a piss. Stupid worksheets with dopey cartoons which ask you the same thing again and again. Having to be on time, having to pay attention - or at least present a veneer of attention - timetables. Dragging himself home at the end of every day on those same sweaty, over-crowded tube and train lines, just to sit on the living room floor and do homework of all things. It drives Grantaire just about mad.

He responds the only way he knows how to, by being an asshole and doing exactly what he shouldn’t, spouting bullshit excuses and skipping classes and acing every test he turns up for and getting away with it because apparently Grantaire’s absence is just as noticeable as his presence, which is to say not at all and nine times out of ten if Feuilly mutters, “Here” at the start of class for him, not a single soul will notice.

Enjolras disagrees vocally with this tactic but the only class they actually share is Language and Literature, so he doesn’t have any proof to back up his suspicions re: Grantaire’s rampant truanting. Sometimes Grantaire gets the tube (or walks, so it’s not on his Javert-viewable Oyster card history) over to the Musain, and Jehan and Eponine will duck out of school (although not their respective Russian and Mandarin classes, which they inform him are too bitchingly hard to actually miss any of) and join him to investigate the tourist-filled coffee shops and museums along the Thames. If Eponine and Jehan don’t have the opportunity for escape, or else haven’t checked their phones, he’ll just hang out with some of the older Musain kids, who smoke and lounge round the back of the Academy.

Grantaire doesn’t find it easy to make friends, per se - he has to consciously ramp his invisibility thing right down to near zero for any kind of casual social interaction, and the vast majority of his charm consists of talking shit until people laugh - but he seems to be more comfortable with it than Enjolras, who’s surprisingly quiet and reserved outside of the flock. Some people - like Feuilly - are quiet and reserved in a way which comes across as shyness. Unfortunately Enjolras, with his glowing, preternatural air of untouchable confidence, is perceived by the other students as standoffish and arrogant, which even Grantaire - wildly familiar as he is with every one of Enjolras’s flaws - acknowledges as unfair. Similarly Combeferre, who isn’t shy so much as bewildered by the small talk and jabber of other teenagers, is considered a loner by most of his classmates, even though they have the raw data to prove that he’s more empathetic than should be humanly possible.

So somehow in their first year of high school, it’s Grantaire who makes friends. He gets the party invites and the high-fives and the little audiences in the lunch room when he goes on brightly-coloured rants. It’s general flock practice to fly under the radar as much as possible (Joly’s phrase, not Grantaire’s) so as to avoid anyone turning their focus on the bizarre setup of their lives. So Grantaire doesn’t make any moves to reciprocate any real offers of friendship, but he’s aware of the possibility, and bemused by the backwardness of it all.

“We should come out,” says Enjolras decisively.

Grantaire is grimy in a way that is singularly indicative of being at school all day. His hands and
left arm (and a bit of his chin) are smeared with blue biro. His dark hair is somehow both simultaneously frizzy and greasy, his tie is a tight, thin knot from absent tugging, his shirt is untucked and his left big toe is poking out from a hole in his sock. He’s lying on the living room sofa and he’s not moving any time soon, he’s decided.

He doesn’t even bother opening his eyes to look at Enjolras. Someone else will eventually prompt Enjolras into explaining or at least using subject nouns in his sentences.

“Anyone going to get that?” asks Feuilly wearily.

“It’s beneath you,” says Grantaire without opening his eyes.

“Low hanging fruit is still fruit right?”

“What do you mean, Enj?” asks Cosette patiently, because Combeferre apparently hasn’t deigned the conversation important enough to warrant putting down his book yet.

“We should reveal ourselves to the world as science experiments, tell the international community what the United States government has sanctioned against European children.”

There’s silence for a long moment. Grantaire mimes suffocating himself with a tasteful gold cushion. Joly pats his curls, then his fingers retreat quickly in understandable distaste.

“‘Taire use shampoo,” he whines.

Grantaire bats at Joly blindly, “Later,” he says unconvincingly.

“Back to the matter at hand,” says Enjolras impatiently.

“No,” says Musichetta, kind but matter-of-fact, “We’re not doing that.”

“You can’t just decide for everyone-” Enjolras starts.

“Ah, I think she can, Enjolras,” says Combeferre apologetically. “I think in this situation we all have veto power.”

“It’s everyone’s safety you would be endangering,” agrees Musichetta.

“And it’s everyone’s safety that will continue to be endangered, for as long as the world doesn’t know what’s happened to us, what could still be happening, as far as we know.”

“It’s definitely still happening,” drawls Grantaire, eyes closed, “You shot one of the kids it was still happening to.”

The awkward silence that follows is completely expected; not one of them wants to touch that issue and Grantaire sort of hates them all for it.

“So we should tell the relevant authorities, then,” says Enjolras, sidestepping the issue with all the grace of Bossuet, “It’s the right thing to do. Otherwise we’re responsible for all the others who never got out.”

“Who would the relevant authorities be?” asks Joly philosophically, to no one in particular. “Is there like a watchdog for evil scientists? Audits for spooky government agencies? And who would even want that job? Seems like in event of suspicious, evil conspiracies, you’d be the first one to disappear in like a boating accident or something.”
Everyone ignores him except for Bossuet who gives him a kind of seems legit to me nodding-shrug.

“Stop making us feel guilty for trying to protect ourselves,” snaps Eponine, significantly above her normal speaking volume. “We spent all our lives trying to get out of that fucking place, now you’re saying we should risk it all so we can feel good about ourselves? Gav’s only six, he deserves a normal goddamn life. He deserves to have pizza and toys and learn his times tables and all that shit. Fuck off, Enjolras. The answer’s no.”

Christmas in London is Grantaire’s favourite thing in the world. The mornings, when Grantaire is wandering through Kensington, are quiet and pink and pale. The evenings don’t so much arrive as linger from mid-afternoon onwards, cool and blue and sweet, and night is the best of all, the cold biting and fresh. The lights on the Thames blur and glow like the swirls behind his closed eyelids. Hyde park is a tourist cornucopia, loud and bright and sometimes literally spinning. There are actual chestnuts roasting, mulled wine, hot chocolates all round. The flock adores the Winter Wonderland, and go in at least twice a week, with greater glee than any of the little kids around. They run from stall to stall using Joly’s wheelchair as a kind of forced-politeness battering ram (Courfeyrac, cheerily: “Everyone gets out the way, because if they don’t, they’re terrible people!” Feuilly, alarmed: “Or they lose their shins.” ) They get wired on sugar mice, queue up for the huge chair-o-plane, and leave Javert looking like he’s got some kind of painful dental emergency coming on.

“Stop, moving,” he says, teeth gritted, gripping Gavroche by the shoulder of his little coat and Courfeyrac by his hood, even as Cosette sprints off towards a stall involving wire-frame angels. “Stop disappearing. This is like herding fish, Madeline I’m going to tag them.” Valjean gives him the look that roughly translates to, that is not a diplomatic thing to say to children who were previously imprisoned and used as science experiments, and Javert gives him that other look that says quite plainly, I do not give one flying fuck.

“If you’ll notice,” says Eponine smugly, “It is we, your problem children, who are standing still and behaving ourselves.”

Javert looks from Eponine to Bahorel, who is trying to put candyfloss up Feuilly’s nose without his noticing, then back again, face absolutely expressionless.

Jehan isn’t a huge fan of the strangely closed-in-noise, the massive jumble of smells and the jangle of different Christmas tunes playing over each other. He’s sheltering between Bahorel and Eponine, gnawing on a stick of rock, scowling at people who bump into him.

“I want a white stick,” he mutters.

“You don’t need a white stick?” says Feuilly, not absolutely confidently, because Jehan keeps his problems closer to his chest than even Grantaire, but he doesn’t seem to have any difficulty with navigating objects. It’s one of his more unsettling traits.

“I want a white stick so I can hit people with it,” Jehan clarifies.

“Oh, it must suck for you, people always bumping into you,” says Grantaire acidly, from his position deep in Enjolras’s personal space. Crowds, fairs and supermarkets always end up more like assault courses for Grantaire - he never leaves Camden or Greenwich without a few minor injuries - but he’s found if he sticks really really close to Enjolras he can kind of wander around in his aura of visibility.
This most recent snarking leads to Grantaire losing track of what he and Enjolras have been hitherto bickering about, without losing any of the associated irritation, an awkward position that Grantaire finds himself in all too often. Enjolras has that smug I’ve-won expression on his face like he knows exactly what Grantaire’s done. “I’m going to vote Tory,” Grantaire says, just to be incendiary. Grantaire’s hand is in Enjolras’s pocket along with Enjolras’s, ostensibly to keep warm.

Getting Christmas presents for all thirteen of his family stretches the very limits of Grantaire’s tolerance for crowded areas filled with frantic shoppers, so he orders in bulk online in November and gives everything to Javert to hide (because Javert treats Grantaire hiding things with extreme and understandable suspicion and Christmas presents are not worth the headache). But the rest of the flock are still picking up odds and ends from various stalls, or attempting to, at any rate. Enjolras and Musichetta have just plunged into an argument with a stall owner who has loud opinions on Britain’s immigration policy, which even Grantaire knows to be factually incorrect.

Grantaire wanders off out of Enjolras’s sphere of visibility and catches up with Bossuet and Joly, who’ve given up terrorising London’s tourist population and are watching Courfeyrac and Cosette hang off a merry-go-round at frankly alarming angles. Courfeyrac is shrieking with joy and Cosette’s hair is a frizzy golden mess in the wind and the glowing lights.

Grantaire finds himself smiling so wide it hurts.

Joly’s smiling too, but that’s not much of an indicator of anything. Grantaire looks at Bossuet, who’s frowning, sadly, at Joly.

“You want to go on?” Grantaire asks, over the sound of Courfeyrac whooping as he swings past.

“There’s no access,” says Joly, trying for cheerful and failing by a hair.

“What, a ramp?” asks Grantaire.

“Yeah. And insurance, he says.”

“Fuck that,” Grantaire says, honestly surprised that abiding by the rules would occur to someone in the same family as Bahorel.

“Don’t tell Chetta,” says Joly, suddenly urgent. “She’ll start an argument and I don’t want to make anyone unhappy. It’s Christmas.”

Grantaire scrunches his face in utter disdain, “Yeah, I’m going to get Enjolras over too, we’ll start a petition. You won’t get on the ride this year but we’ll be fighting for wheeled teens everywhere so it’ll be worth it - seriously Joly? We’ve met before, right?”

Bossuet says quietly, “You have a plan?”

Grantaire’s just whistles, shrilly, the first four notes of Beethoven’s fifth symphony. A few minutes later Bahorel and Feuilly materialise out of the crowd.

“Oooh, are we doing shenanigans?” asks Bahorel eagerly, “I love shenanigans.”

“We’re getting Jollllly on the ride,” says Grantaire cheerfully.

Bahorel crouches to let Joly clamp his arms around his neck, and hoists him onto his back. They wait in the queue and when they reach the front, the guy in the luminous yellow safety jacket shakes his head at Joly, makes no offence but no kind of gesture. Bahorel shrugs, grins a shit-eating grin, pushes through the crowd of kids and hops onto the emptying ride. The guy scowls, unlocks
the door to his little ticket booth, and follows him.

Grantaire lifts the guy’s keys right out of his back pocket, ensconces himself in the ticket booth, turns the key and presses the green button.

The ensuing madness (Feuilly, Cosette and Courfeyrac leaping from horse to horse, whooping wildly; Bahorel running backwards round the spinning merry-go-ride, tailed by the angered ride operator; Bossuet in fits of giggles, hanging off a plastic lion; Grantaire making polite "I’m sorry, can you speak up?" faces at the dozen or so park officials now hammering on the window of the security booth) is spectacular enough to get them banned from the Hyde Park Christmas Festival forever, grounded for an indeterminately long period of time, and very nearly gets Grantaire arrested until Javert turns up, forehead vein the size of a medium-sized tree branch, violently trailing a sullen Enjolras who apparently has just overturned the “racist bigot”’s stall with the help of Musichetta.

The only ones to escape the breathtaking spectacle of Javert’s ensuing wrath are Eponine, Gavroche and Jehan, who - everyone Is very aware - are innocent only through sheer lack of proximity to the rule-breaking, rather than moral superiority.

But even as Javert snarls about how, “Normal children can be left alone for three minutes in public spaces without being charged for reckless endangerment.” Grantaire’s mind rests on the image of Joly - belted onto a plastic pearly-white unicorn, leaning back, wide eyes reflecting coloured bulbs and stars, smile wider than he’s ever seen it - and can’t bring himself to even put in pretence of remorse.

Not-remorseful shifts to obnoxiously gleeful when it turns out that one of their entertained audience - and there were many - was a city copy editor. This is made apparent when Enjolras’s beloved Guardian runs a fluff piece on the Kids Christmas Hyde Park Hijack and the power of non-violent protest through disobedience.

With the help of the “Starter Origami Pack” Combeferre bought him for Christmas, Feuilly creates a zoo of colourful, insubstantial animals. These are left all over the house and garden in increasingly strange places - cereal boxes, underwear drawers and - bewilderingly and on more than one occasion - Cosette’s hair. Lying on his front, folding little squares of blue and red and yellow, Grantaire realises it’s the happiest he’s seen Feuilly for some time. Unlike Grantaire, Eponine and Jehan, Feuilly has never had a natural propensity towards melancholy, but somehow his mild, quiet unhappiness has slid under Grantaire’s radar all this time. Feuilly is normally Bahorel’s domain, as much as Enjolras is Grantaire’s, but if the problem is with Bahorel, then it’s likely Feuilly won’t have spoken to anyone. Grantaire decides with extreme reluctance that he probably should engage with the problem (he swears he sees Combeferre give him an approving look for that thought, which is a little unsettling). Two days after Christmas - when Bahorel is still warring with Musichetta for second place in his newest video game and Jehan’s fingers haven’t stopped moving over his Very Limited Edition braille e-reader even to eat meals - Grantaire drags Feuilly into the city to the Tate Modern.

“What’s wrong?” Grantaire asks him over seasonally inappropriate ice-cream, in the gallery cafe. He’s not great with subtle conversational segues.

Feuilly looks at him, then at his ice cream, and then around the cafe. “No-thing?” he says, “Should there be?” He glances at his ice cream again, warily. Since Bahorel has on more than one occasion, hidden peas in Feuilly’s ice cream, Grantaire can see the reasoning.
He rolls his eyes, “This is the first time I’ve seen you smile in months. What’s up with you?”

Feuilly’s cheer slides away like the London sun under clouds. “Nothing,” he mutters, much less convincingly this time.

Grantaire doesn’t even grace that with a reply, just gives it the face it deserves.

“It’s really nothing important,” he says testily. “Bahorel thinks I’m being a fucking idiot. That’s how you know I’m hitting new lows.”

“You still have about 20000 leagues to go before you hit me, Feu,” says Grantaire, “I’m down there with Atlantis and those creepy fish with the teeth. Tell me your woes.”

Feuilly scowls at the table and says, moving his mouth as little as anatomically possible while still allowing for the emission of sound, “I can’t do maths.”

Grantaire squints at him, applies a concentrated effort into taking that seriously and says levelly, “And this is a problem.”

“I really, really can’t do it. I keep failing all the tests. And all the other subjects are too difficult as well. I work just as hard as Cos and ‘Ferre, but I just don’t understand anything. I get marked low even on the homework I think I’ve done well in. I stare at maths questions all night, I get Combeferre to explain them and they make sense at the time, but as soon as he’s gone I’m lost again. I don’t understand anything.” Feuilly sounds absolutely miserable and Grantaire flails for comfort.

“You know it doesn’t really matter though, right?” he tries. “They set all these tests and stuff, but they don’t mean anything… Any more than the things they did at the Institute mean anything. They don’t, like, determine your worth.”

“It’s easy to say that when you find it all easy,” says Feuilly, which Grantaire grants with a shrug. “It’s awful feeling stupid, and not knowing what you’re supposed to be doing. Nothing makes sense. I hate it. And…”

Grantaire raises his eyebrows, “And?”

“And the worst is that you all find it so easy,” Feuilly’s mouth is turned down in a little moue and Grantaire resists the urge to hug him because Feuilly doesn’t really like acknowledging feelings. He looks like he’s about to go into anaphylactic shock as it is. “I’m like, jealous, and it’s so weird and horrible. I’ve never been jealous of anyone before. Especially not in the flock. Or Bahorel. He gets an A and I don’t feel happy for him? What’s that about?”

Grantaire rolls his eyes, “Feu, you’re allowed to not be perfect. You’re allowed to not be good at stuff and get annoyed at the flock and fail tests.”

“It means I’m not trying hard enough,” says Feuilly, “But I only have so many hours in a day to try, you know?”

“You are trying hard enough,” says Grantaire, who regards applying effort for more than an hour with a very special kind of horror.

“Don’t say that!” snaps Feuilly right back, “If that’s true then it means I’m just really, really stupid. And I don’t want to be stupid, ‘Taire. I don’t feel stupid!”

“You’re not stupid!” says Grantaire, voice rising, “Don’t you think we’d tell you if we thought you...
were stupid? You think Eponine would have let that go unsaid?"

Feuilly huffs and his patience with the whole sharing-his-feelings experience abruptly runs out. “Lets go see the Turner stuff,” he says. Grantaire nods and talks about Enjolras’s new quest to save the whales because he’s all about letting people ignore things.

“That picture reminds me of you,” says Feuilly, in a truly Eponinesque display of snark. Grantaire eyes the painting warily, “Gloomy and indistinct?”

“Yip,” drawls Feuilly.

Grantaire makes a mental note to never make Feuilly talk about his feelings again.

They all, with the exception of Gavroche, turn fourteen that year. None of them bother with the exact dates but Javert loudly and frequently bemoans the change. Feuilly, Combeferre and Bossuet grow like gangly, clumsy weeds, Cosette’s acne gets so bad that Eponine is on disciplinary record for having punched a boy at their school who was making comments about it, they all eat even more, sleep whenever they’re not doing anything else, and bicker even more than normal. Feuilly’s temper runs short, Eponine physically and verbally eviscerates anyone stupid enough to cross her path and finds everyone in the flock except Combeferre to be irreproachably annoying. In her defence, she says, making the same pun seventeen times during the one day, laughing harder each successive time, and refusing to shut up for even a moment while people are trying to do their homework, means that Bahorel, Courfeyrac and Joly aren’t just singularly fucking annoying, but also terrible people who she hates with an undying passion. This, shouted at an abashed looking Feuilly, who had only gone downstairs for a third helping of toast, does not go over well with Mrs Hauche, who does not approve of swearing in her kitchen, thank you very much. Enjolras and Grantaire’s bickering escalates into an interminable argument, with very little reason, cessation, or motivation. Although for most of the flock, any kind of conversation above speaking volume between Enjolras and Grantaire has stopped even registering to their cerebral cortexes, Jehan has no tolerance for sitting listening to them, it upsets Cosette, and in a worrying - when Grantaire takes the time to consider it - development, Combeferre now regards them with discomfort. Gavroche seems to think they’ve all gone absolutely mental, and takes as little to do with them as possible.

Grantaire does his best to explain this to Myriel in one of their informal “chats” that the doctor springs on Grantaire every so often. The shifting, unfamiliar dynamics, the flock being at each other’s throats, the quiet getting quieter and the loud getting unbearably so, Cosette’s sudden preoccupation with being ugly, Eponine’s viciousness, Feuilly’s regular maths-related emotional breakdowns, Grantaire’s own complete inability to stop annoying Enjolras when he’s bored (which is always) and Enjolras’s terrible reciprocal habit of using Grantaire as an emotional release valve whenever he’s upset (which is nearly always).

“It’s completely normal,” says Myriel with his kind smile.

“It’s completely fucking miserable,” says Grantaire.

“It’s all you are doing well,” points out Myriel.

It’s true, Grantaire supposes, that Musichetta seems happy enough, with friends in her classes and a fashion blog that she’s more or less obsessed with. Courfeyrac, with his freakish bell-curve-breaking intrapersonal intelligence, is made for high school, and according to Joly he just about has the run of St. Anthony’s. Bossuet seems happier, more settled, and more likely to burst into uncontrollable bouts of giggles than any other human Grantaire has ever met. (He is also the sole
generator of about 90% of the puns in circulation around the house, much to Eponine’s abject disgust.) Combeferre - potentially the only one among them with anything close to a well-developed psyche - copes as well as he always does, secure in his own head. Bahorel, who had weird N.B.s in his Institute file about emotional stability and endurance, is the same as he has always been, to a spooky but nevertheless comforting extent. In total, it’s only about half of them that are undergoing some kind of slow-motion emotional meltdown, which Grantaire supposes is better than to be expected.

“You should ask Combeferre what his theories were, when he came in last week,” says Myriel, with a deeply amused grin.

When Grantaire does ask, Combeferre goes an uncharacteristic pink. “I thought it was the Institute,” he says, “I thought they were maybe giving us some kind of mind-altering substance, somehow.”

“But Myriel says…”

“Myriel says puberty, yes,” says Combeferre, wrinkling his nose to keep his glasses sitting in place, “But how was I to know it was going to be so drastic?”

After Grantaire’s finished laughing at him, he asks Combeferre, “What’s with all the concerned glances you’re throwing my way recently? Just worried about the possible presence of narcotics in my blood stream?”

“No,” says Combeferre simply. Because none of them ever really lie to each other out of Eponine-enforced habit, even if in retrospect they’d prefer to.

It’s not the answer Grantaire is expecting, anyway. “Then why?”

Combeferre shrugs and looks down at his book distractedly. “Hey,” says Grantaire, swinging up to sit on Courfeyrac’s desk (which he knows is Courfeyrac’s by virtue of there being a feather boa wrapped around the desk light). “I have it on good authority that you gave Eponine advice just last night. What’s with the lack of égalité, Ferre? I’m appalled.”

“Grantaire, you don’t even take your own advice, why on earth would take mine?”

“You’ll only give advice if there’s a guarantee of it being taken?” asks Grantaire socratically.

Combeferre’s smile turns up at one side and his eye-lids look particularly sleepy beneath his thick glasses and even thicker brows. In a response that Grantaire is sure is Pavlovian, he finds Combeferre’s face far more comforting than it should be.

“I think you should make more friends,” says Combeferre, “Outside of the flock.”

“Why?” says Grantaire, actually taken aback.

“You and Enjolras,” says Combeferre, who doesn’t have a stutter any more but still makes it obvious when he’s thinking carefully before he speaks, “Have the potential, I think, to make each other very unhappy. I think some distance might make it better.”

Cosette has started giving him sad puppy looks whenever his teasing makes Enjolras snap or walk away, and he thinks she’s probably on the same blame train as Combeferre, which isn’t fair. “You know, I’m a loud-mouthed asshole to everyone. Historically, the only person I am ever nice to is Enjolras. Everyone needs to stop pandering to him and his insistence that I’m just about enacting the third reich upon him, emotionally, because I’m not. I listen to him talk about whales and tax
policies and the Tories. At length. Who else would I do that for? No one, Ferre. I can’t help that he doesn’t actually like who I am as a person.”

Combeferre waits patiently till he’s sure Grantaire’s finished. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Grantaire, but your only problem with Enjolras—” he talks over Grantaire’s comment about the problems between Enjolras and himself numbering at last count in the high thousands, “—Is that you need to not be controlled and Enjolras has a tendency to be controlling. You are, in actual fact, the kind of person that will break a rule only because it exists to be broken. But you resent that this upsets Enjolras.”

“And Enjolras does like you,” Combeferre adds with a sigh, before Grantaire can jump in, “You have to stop perceiving any negative feelings towards you as comments on your entire person. Enjolras can like you perfectly fine and still not like the way you act sometimes.”

Grantaire pulls at his hair, “I just… Why does it bother him so much? So I don’t go to class and stuff, whatever, why does it matter?”

Combeferre gives him a resignedly patient look, which pretty much defines his entire person. “You don’t like to care about things, and Enjolras perceives caring about things as the most significant part of his humanity. If you’ll notice, Enjolras doesn’t care at all if you break insignificant rules, he’ll actively participate if he thinks he’s doing the right thing. What upsets him, is you not caring about things he considers very important. Like yourself, your education, and yes, I suppose, the Tory government.”

Grantaire can’t think of an immediate argument for that (which is why he generally avoids debating with Combeferre, as a rule) so he sits and thinks about it instead.

“That’s… Actually, probably… Yeah.”

“Yeah,” says Combeferre gently.

“You’re not going to tell me to, like, care? Or whatever?”

“No, ‘Taire. I’ll never fault you for not caring enough,” says Combeferre gently, and to Grantaire’s absolute horror, he now feels like he’s got something sharp stuck in his throat.

Combeferre’s sympathy is the only sympathy that Eponine is capable of receiving without interpreting it as pity and clawing the speaker’s skin off with her nails. Grantaire has to admit that as sympathetic faces go, Combeferre’s is very nice - If a bit unsettling, because Combeferre has an awful habit of actually understanding exactly what you’re thinking.

Grantaire recovers the track of the original conversation. “So, by distance you mean…”

“Friends outside the flock, friends just for you.”

“I thought we had a flock-wide agreement about how all non-bird-people are not to be trusted?”

“I know,” says Combeferre, “But I think maybe that was a mistake. I think that kind of attitude… It’s bad for us. All of us, not just you two. We can’t be everything to each other. It’s not safe.”

“So, what, you’ll be replacing Courfeyrac with a newer model any day now?” Grantaire says, eyebrow raised. “I get your point but there’s no way any of them will go for it. I show up with a BFF bracelet that Enjolras doesn’t have the pair of, you watch how quickly I loose my internal organs.”
Combeferre actually laughs at that, and shrugs, “At some point or another you’re going to have to do something that isn’t purely for Enjolras’s benefit. Just statistically. Why not make it in your own best interests?”

The problem with Combeferre, thinks Grantaire, is that he’s literally never wrong.

“Seriously, what is with your names?” says one of the guys from Grantaire’s Greek class. They’re in a McDonald’s after school with what feels like the rest of the City’s high school student population. There’s general laughter from everyone that goes to the Corinthe, so Grantaire guesses this is common chatter, which, fair enough. Their first names are all French surnames. It’s unmistakably strange.

Grantaire, leaning back in his plastic stool, McFlurry spoon sticking out his mouth, says seriously, “We’re in a cult.”

“My sister goes to the Musain, she says there’s even more of you there!”

“We are pretty rampant,” admits Grantaire.

“Seriously,” says the guy, who Grantaire’s 79% sure is called Dominic, “How many siblings do you have?”

Grantaire makes a show of counting on his fingers, “Twelve. But, like, none of them are related.”

There are general shouts of, “Twelve???” all around.

But apparently Dominic is a persistent bastard, “That doesn’t explain the names,” he says, “Especially if you’re not related.”

“We’re all originally from a French foster home and we took our birth parents last names really early on because too many of us were called Jean.”

Grantaire’s brain does a rare and genuine self-congratulatory round of applause for the general speed and quality of that lie.

“Huh,” says Dominic(?), seemingly appeased.

“What’s with your name?” Grantaire asks, on a chance.

“Huh? Oh, my mum’s German. They spell Dominic with a K,” says Dominik, to Grantaire’s delight.

“So wait,” says one of the guys whose sister goes to Musain, “Who in their right mind adopted, what, thirteen random French kids and then sent them to the best prep schools in London?”

Grantaire thinks this guy must either be really into asking awkward questions, or he’s super concerned with the Amis family’s lack of aristocratic right to superior education. Either way, Grantaire is not endeared.

“Some trillionaire adopted us and gave us the whole fairytale life thing,” says Grantaire airily, “It happened like a nine years ago, man, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Who’s the trillionaire?” asks the guy suspiciously. Grantaire thinks his name might actually be Guy, which is the kind of name Joly and Bossuet were born to make people regret, it pushes the
pun-opportunity baseline way up.

Grantaire gives the people around him a one-eyebrow-raised, *Is this guy for real?* look that makes everyone laugh except the Guy himself. He just looks kind of sulky.

“I could tell you,” says Grantaire, utilising his hard-earned Pop Culture Knowledge for good, “But then I’d have to kill you.” Everyone laughs again, and Guy stops asking stupid questions, and Grantaire checks his phone.

He has four missed calls from Enjolras. No, wait. Five.

“Yeeees?” drawls Grantaire, fending Dominik away from his McFlurry with his spoon.

“Where are you?” says Enjolras, sharply.

“McDonalds,” says Grantaire, “Don’t tell Jehan.” Jehan is vegan and has Feelings about animal rights, and while Grantaire agrees with him in theory and is happy to eat whatever ethical food Mr Hauche feeds them in practice, he doesn’t give enough of a shit to convince a hoard of thirteen year old boys that Meat is Murder.

“*Which* McDonalds?”

“Ehh, the Earls Court one?”

“Why?”

“I’m eating Enjolras. Literally what else would I be doing in a McDonalds… Fuck off Dominik!” Grantaire removes Dominik’s fry from his ice-cream and makes to shove it up the offending party’s nose.

“Dominik? The guy from our English class?”

“You’re in my English class?” Grantaire asks Dominik, who rolls his eyes hard.

“Yes,” says Dominik, stealing back his fry and eating it.

“Yes,” confirms Grantaire.

“Why are you out with him?” says Enjolras, audibly losing patience with Grantaire, “And why didn’t you *tell* any of us that’s where you were going?”

“I texted Javert, Enjolras,” says Grantaire. He did, too, but only because for all his faux-confusion he had expected exactly this conversation to occur. “I didn’t realise I needed your permission.”

“You don’t need my *permission,*” shouts Enjolras, without a trace of irony.

The others are already starting to give him looks, like, *why is your brother being weird,* so Grantaire cuts Enjolras off, “Okay, so we’re good then,” and hangs up. Enjolras is going to murder him, but it can’t be helped. If necessary he can always blame Combeferre.

“Your brother is so weird,” says a guy called Alex, and Grantaire momentarily checks his internal monologue to find out if mind-reading has been added to his supernatural skills set. But no, it looks like *Enjolras is weird* is just the national consensus.
“Eh, aren’t we all?” says Grantaire.

“Yeah, but he’s…” the guy trails off with a look of distaste.

“Not a fan?” asks Grantaire innocently, but with the slightly mad lilt to his smile that Joly calls his *I dare you* face. Mostly it’s only ever Enjolras who does. Dare, that is.

Dominik rolls his eyes again and diverts the conversation, “My older sister’s a basket-case. She painted her whole room black and her boyfriend says he’s a vampire and that he’s pledged his soul to Satan.”

“Wait,” says Grantaire, “You *haven’t* pledged your immortal soul to our Lord of Darkness?”

Everyone laughs again, and Alex subsides with a sullen look. Dominik meets Grantaire’s eye and makes a face, prompting him to snicker and look away. It’s nice to have someone on your side in a conversation, Grantaire decides. The flock’s loyalties are always split and confused and well to be fair. Sometimes you just want someone to laugh at stupid people with. Someone who’s on your side for no other reason than *they like you better*.

Grantaire makes new friends and sits with them at break and lunch times, when Enjolras, Combeferre and Feuilly are in the library. He wishes that Feuilly would come with him, and give himself a break from the endless obsessing about grades and homework, but Feuilly edges in just behind Musichetta in terms of murderous stubbornness and Grantaire is Not Hopeful.

Instead, Grantaire goes to movies with people who don’t know his every fracture and fault-line. He chats and laughs with people who didn’t see him lose his baby teeth, and his smile, and his wings. He goes to parties and hangs out at friends houses and gets to know mums and nannies. He still sits with Enjolras in English but he leans against Dominik’s desk right up until the bell, snickers over notes that get tossed onto his desk. He relishes childishness, stupid laughter, removes himself as far as possible from the deathly seriousness of the tetrarchy, from Eponine’s anger and Jehan’s graveyard chill.

It’s spooky to him, the first time he sees Dominik upset over some argument with his step-dad. Outside of a vague sympathy, he’s untouched. Cosette’s self-consciousness makes Grantaire feel vulnerable and sickly soft, Feuilly’s frustration itches hot, Enjolras’s wild emotions send him whirling. He isn’t used to seeing people feel things without *feeling* them, somehow, himself, through some spiky awful feedback system. There’s no such thing as sympathy in the flock, only a kind of an all-consuming empathy. Grantaire for the first time appreciates how hellish Combeferre’s particular skill must be.

This strategic retreat is how he fails to notice Joly’s complete psychological breakdown.

Grantaire gets home at 8pm to find the house in complete chaos. He (very) narrowly misses Musichetta’s phone projectile as it whizzes past his ear.

“Where the *fuck* were you?” Musichetta screams at him.

Grantaire, entirely reasonably, stumbles half a foot backwards, drops into a crouch and throws his hands up in supplication.

“Why isn’t your phone on, Grantaire?” Musichetta shouts, “Why the fuck aren’t you answering?”
There’s a moment of silence during which Grantaire’s brain recognises the presence of a non-rhetorical question. “I… ran out of charge?”

Courfeyrac is cross-legged on the floor and hasn’t yet looked up from his phone. Jehan is folded on the couch next to Cosette, who is crying. Enjolras is mid-pace, eyes somehow conveying both fury and weak-kneed relief in Grantaire’s general direction. Combeferre is sitting terrifyingly still, head in hands. Bossuet, who is also in tears, says, “Have you seen Joly?” and Grantaire’s stomach, already somewhere in the region of his knees, drops through the floor, leaving a horrible sickening emptiness.

“No,” Grantaire mouths, because he’s lost his voice somewhere, and shakes his head. He glances at Eponine, who’s curled between Bahorel and Feuilly, biting her nails till they bleed.

“What happened?” he asks, voice wavery.

“He wasn’t at the gates when school got out,” says Bahorel, “We waited for ages, then went back in to find him. Someone Courfeyrac knows in his fourth period class said he wasn’t there for English. We figured he’d gone home sick and forgot to tell any of us, but…”

“He’s not here,” says Cosette, “Levant says no one’s been in all day.”

Grantaire doesn’t bother asking if they’ve told Valjean and Javert. It’s not in the Flock’s instincts to look for outside help, it’s the primary reason they were stuck in the Institute for as long as they were. When crisis hits, they close ranks without question. Enjolras is body-warmth close to him, fist closed in the Merino wool of Grantaire’s school jumper.

“I called the taxi company,” says Courfeyrac, “They said they haven’t picked up anyone from the school all day, let alone anyone needing the cars with ramps.”

“That means he either left in his chair or—” Bahorel says, cutting himself off. Feuilly looks vaguely ill.

“Did anything else happen today?” asks Grantaire. Musichetta gives him a look of such unparalleled fury that Grantaire’s hands shoot back into the air, “I mean, to Joly. Did anything seem strange? Would there be any reason for him wandering off?”

Bahorel looks to Bossuet, who says, “I had a fit?”

“But it wasn’t bad or anything,” says Courfeyrac, “It was a tiny one. And Joly’s seen Bossuet fit a thousand times.”

“His phone’s off,” says Eponine with audible frustration, “He turned it off at the school so we can’t even track it or anything. But there’s only so far he can get, London isn’t exactly Access Friendly.”

As Grantaire listens, he pulls his school-issued iPad out and brings up a map of London on it, he hands it to Enjolras without a word. Enjolras’s eyes light up.

“Cosette, close your eyes,” Enjolras says, striding over and kneeling in front of her.

Cosette closes her eyes immediately, without question. Enjolras sets the iPad down on her lap. “Point somewhere.”

Here, she hesitates, eyes still closed, “I don’t know Enj’. I don’t think it’ll work. I can win coin tosses, but.”
“Cos,” Enjolras says gently, “Just point.”

Cosette’s finger comes down.

“If the Institute has him, he’ll already be out of London,” says Feuilly, whisper-level, like he’d rather the words didn’t exist.

“Ferre doesn’t think the institute has him,” says Grantaire, peering over Enjolras’s shoulder to see the exact point on the Thames smudged with Cosette’s fingerprint, “And if they did have him, Cosette would be in a much worse shape. I think he’s just wandered off.”

Everyone looks to Combeferre for an explanation and he slumps even further, “I don’t know why I think it. I just… I think I’ve missed something, with Joly. I think I’ve been stupid. I just get so distracted. I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

“Joly wouldn’t do that,” says Musichetta, “He knows how much that’d worry us.”

“If you’re going to be worried about something,” says Jehan, “Personally I’m more worried about whatever it is that Combeferre’s missed.”

“We’re not going to be worried,” says Enjolras decisively, “We’re going to find him.”

They find Joly on the riverside walk South of the river, between Tower and London bridge, bundled up in his yellow duffel coat, watching lights flicker on the black Thames. He turns around as they approach, smiles instinctively, genuinely. His face is splotchy white and red, tears are caught up in his eyelashes and frozen on his cheeks.

“Sorry,” is the first thing he says, then, “Oh god, I’m so sorry Chetta.” His smile crumples, like Feuilly’s paper birds, and Grantaire can see, vividly, how Combeferre missed whatever is broken underneath Joly’s effusive joy.

Bossuet drops to his knees, lets his head fall against Joly’s skinny legs; Musichetta grips Joly’s shoulder and stares at the ground, breath stuttering out in white clouds. The lights of the buildings around them are rainbow hued, and make the whole thing seem surreal.

Combeferre stays well back, looking devastated, Courfeyrac is tucked in on himself, silent, Enjolras’s hand is white-tight on Grantaire’s, Bahorel has never looked less sure. Musichetta and Bossuet don’t move, or speak. In the end, only Cosette steps forward. Grantaire remembers Jehan saying to him once that he thought Cosette was the bravest of all of them, which, for the first time, Grantaire sees. He knows now that he’s standing there that he doesn’t have it in him to go any closer. Joly has the awful air of someone on a wire, and Grantaire’s too scared to move.

“Joly,” Cosette says softly.

Joly looks up at her. His face is a shifting mosaic of misery.

“Darling,” she says, “Breathe. We’ve got you. Now you’ve got to breathe.”

The shuddering noise that follows sounds like the air is been ripped from Joly’s chest. Musichetta’s face twists.

“Good,” says Cosette, “Now again. In and out.”
“I feel like I’m going to die,” says Joly.

“I know, darling,” says Cosette, over Bossuet’s low sob. “But you’re not. We won’t let you. Breathe.”

Joly cries all the way home in the taxi, with Cosette in the seat across from him, insistent, “Breathe.”

Grantaire never asks Joly about that night, or any of the nights that come after it. He doesn’t ask about the medication or the counselling or what, exactly, panic attacks feel like. He figures that some things are best kept between you and yourself, in the layer between your skin and your soul. Grantaire would rather tear his own face off than talk about the dark tangled horror that keeps him up at night, the one he sees inside himself most of all. Much to Grantaire’s displeasure, in the year they all turn fifteen, Myriel starts to ask him questions that more and more look like they’re pointed at the awful noise in Grantaire’s head.

“Are you happy, Grantaire?” asks Myriel.

“Sure,” Grantaire drawls, “I’m content, merry, chipper. One time I was even joyful.”

Grantaire has slept seven and a half hours total in the last three nights. He’s gotten into a kind of obsessive habit of counting the hours lying stone-still next to Enjolras’s snuffly warm body. He’s exhausted in a full-on limbs-of-stone kind of way, and he has very little patience for Myriel’s questioning his level of existential delight.

“I can’t help noticing you looking tired, recently. Is something getting you down? Or keeping you up at nights?”

“Christ,” says Grantaire, “I’m never drinking coffee before bed again if this is what’s going to come of it.”

Myriel continues to look at him in that way that makes Grantaire feel guilty for lying, which, fuck that. If he doesn’t want to talk about his feelings, he shouldn’t have to.

“What?” Grantaire says into the expectant silence, “Are you going to give me charts with smiley faces too?”

“No, Grantaire,” says Myriel, “I’d just like to know that you’re alright, is all. Cosette has concerns-”

“Cosette has concerns?” Grantaire says, “Cosette has concerns about, like, ants, she should not be the threshold for taking things seriously.” It’s not fair in the least, as well as factually untrue: Cosette has better instincts than should be statistically possible. But Grantaire isn’t feeling all that generous, re: Cosette right now.

Myriel gives Grantaire a look that suggests just how much bullshit he thinks Grantaire’s spouting, a look Grantaire thoroughly ignores.

Instead of saying as much, Myriel veers off at a different angle, “Grantaire, what do you like to do?”

Grantaire tries to follow the logic in that one and fails, “Huh?”
“What do you like to do? What do you think is fun?”

Grantaire shrugs expansively. “Eh, I don’t know. Sleep?”

Myriel smiles, “Anything else?”

Grantaire passes that one on to his higher functioning capabilities and his brain helpfully responds with blank silence.

He shrugs again and Myriel looks a lot more disappointed than Grantaire thinks he has any right to, really.

&

When Grantaire walks out of school with Combeferre next Monday and sees Javert waiting by his ridiculously rusty three-door VW Polo, he has what he can only describe as a minor heart attack.

Javert gives Grantaire’s wide-eyed look the open suspicion it deserves, and then says, “Get in.”

When Combeferre steps forward, Javert shakes his head at him, “Just me and Grantaire, I’m afraid. You lot can get the train.”

Grantaire, who’s only just started to find his chill again after wading through the expansive relief of Javert not catching him truanting, starts to back away. Javert watches Grantaire visibly running through escape options with an increasingly trapped expression on his face.

“In the car, Grantaire,” Javert repeats. Then, when Grantaire makes it clear he’ll do no such thing, Javert snags him by the loop of his tie and shoves him into the back seat of the Polo, pushing the driver’s seat back on its rails with a clunk that definitely sounds menacing.

“No need to worry,” says Javert (smiling over Grantaire’s shouts of, “Worry! There is a definite need for worry!”) as Enjolras and Feuilly arrive and look distressingly unfazed by Grantaire’s kidnapping.

Enjolras eventually gives in to Grantaire’s entreating face, pressed up against the tiny back-seat window. “Where are you taking him?” he asks, sounding only mildly curious, which, really Enjolras, the one time indignance would have been a useful addition to the proceedings.

“We’re going to spend some quality legal-guardian, legal-ward time together,” says Javert, sounding about as enthused as Grantaire is by that prospect.

Feuilly - unkindly, Grantaire thinks - laughs.

“Have, er, fun?” says Combeferre.

“Oh he will,” says Javert.

The car takes them through Chelsea and across the river past Battersea Park, before turning west away from the city. The entire flock has a pretty solid sense of direction but Grantaire has honestly no idea where they’re going. He thinks asking would probably constitute some kind of surrender though, so he keeps quiet as Javert hums tunelessly to whatever jumpy pop song is on the radio.

Grantaire would never admit it, ever, but of all the adults in his life, his favourite is Javert. The kindness and understanding heaped on him by Valjean and Dr Myriel makes him feel uncomfortable and guilty and he doesn’t really have any way to express that - not even to himself. They’re reactive, is the thing, the same way everyone else Grantaire cares about reacts to him. He
loves his family but he resents the spider-web trembles that rock them all at his slightest move. He resents that Enjolras is upset by him, that Combeferre and Cosette seem sometimes almost unnerved by him, that Myriel and Valjean watch him carefully. He wants, desperately, to do the things that make him more sane - skip school, wander the city, distance himself from his family - without the distant thundering of guilt always overhead. Javert can be theatrical, but really he’s unshakeable. He gives Grantaire someone to push against, without feeling like he’s hurting anything, as if Grantaire could throw his very worst at Javert and he wouldn’t even flinch. He thinks Eponine probably feels the same, as much as he can distinguish any common themes in the lightning storm of Eponine’s thoughts any more. If it were Valjean driving, Grantaire would be constantly itchy-aware of his focus, of Valjean’s eyes on him in the rear-view mirror. With Javert, he may as well not be in the car.

The area becomes more suburban and Javert slows to a halt outside an old red brick building that looks, to Grantaire’s wary eyes, suspiciously like a school.

Javert finds a space to park, unfolds himself from the driver’s seat, and flips the seat down with an expectant look at Grantaire. He has a rucksack on his back. Grantaire tries to convey with his face just how deeply unimpressed he will be if his school-theory pans out. Javert ignores him, just hooks him out by his - now mangled, tight-knotted - tie, and hustles him into the reception. It’s more open than Grantaire expects, more commercial. Probably not a school then.

“Hello,” says the smiling woman at the desk. “Are you here for a class?” she asks Grantaire.

“The half four one,” says Javert, “With Floreal.”

“What’s the name?” she asks, as Grantaire casts himself about frantically for any sign of what’s in store for him.

“Grantaire Amis,” says Javert, gripping Grantaire’s shoulder with faux-casualness. Grantaire has just spotted the gold-embossed crest on the wall of two ballet shoes intertwined and has stiffened in preparation for flight.

“Ballet?” Grantaire hisses through his teeth, as the woman disappears into a back office

Javert raises an eyebrow at Grantaire and passes the rucksack to him. Grantaire unzips it and immediately sees a pair of black ballet shoes in his size, still partially wrapped in tissue paper.

“I do not like you,” he tells Javert factually.

“I do not care,” replies Javert easily, as the woman comes back.

“Here’s your ID card!” she says brightly, “it’ll let you through the doors to the changing room.”

“Great!” says Grantaire insincerely.

“If you just follow me, I’ll show you the studio you’ll be in and the changing rooms. There’s still a bit of time before the class starts.”

Grantaire follows, shooting an poisonous look back at Javert as he goes.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” says Javert, with a smug smile, “See you in a bit!”

For the first four weeks (two classes a week, Wednesday afternoon and, hideously, Saturday
morning) Grantaire hates ballet. It seems like a concentrated form of everything he hates in the world, a room ringed with mirrors, with someone telling him how to do things he’s pretty much already mastered in daily life, thanks, like point his feet and hold his arms out straight. He’s not a fan. Unfortunately there are two things stopping him from making an immediate escape attempt upon entering the building. Javert’s presence by the only point of ingress is one, which is to be expected, most of the tedious things in Grantaire’s life are Javert’s fault. The other is a ballet instructor whose life goal, upon meeting Grantaire, is to make him as miserable as possible. At least, that’s the only reason he can think of for why the woman is so unrelentingly bloody all the time.

“Arm, Grantaire, foot... That is not what forth position looks like!”

Grantaire wonders at moments like this, as he’s pushed into the forwards splits, why it’s only people who want to cause him suffering that are capable of tracking his movements and actually seeing him with any degree of exactitude.

Floreal has her dark hair pulled back so tight the skin around her temples actually looks a bit stretched. She’s gorgeous, hispanic, and utterly incurious about Grantaire’s wings. She’s much more concerned with his arm, which he’s just brought down too fast again.

“Éffacé, Grantaire! Again, on the beat this time.”

Grantaire doesn’t know where Javert found a ballet instructor who could be trusted to keep avian-humanoid science experiments a secret, but he does get the impression that Floreal takes the responsibility seriously. She locks the doors to the studio before they start, every time. Apart from that, she never mentions it.

When he comes in on the fifth week, Floreal tells him not to get changed, and instead leads the way to the nearest tube station with Grantaire trailing her like a leaf. Watching Floreal on the tube at rush hour is strangely hypnotising to Grantaire. Everyone else swings with the rocking of the train, like pendulums in a clock. Floreal stands straight, holding her bag over one shoulder, as if she’s held up by some central, invisible string. They get off at Covent Gardens and Floreal leads him up the steps of a huge white building, towering pillars flanking them on either side. She gets waved inside by a man at a desk who seems to know her, and leads Grantaire up some stairs and along a narrow corridor. It strikes Grantaire, suddenly, that he hasn’t asked her where they’re going and that’s a disappointing lack of suspicion on his part, really. She could be about to turn him over to shadowy government officials, although he doubts it. This is a really nice building. Eventually they come out into the light of the biggest, most opulent, room Grantaire has ever seen.

“This is the Royal Opera House,” Floreal says quietly. She indicates for him to take a seat in one of rows and Grantaire does, fumblingly, without taking his eyes off the swaths of red and gold.

“You’re going to watch the Royal Ballet Company’s dress rehearsal. They’re doing Romeo and Juliet.”

The ballet starts, and Grantaire looks out over the empty theatre and feels something inside him leap like it does when he’s about to fly. He doesn’t really follow the ballet, plot-wise, but his eyes are dry from not-blinking by intermission. He gets it, suddenly, in the swirl of steady arms and legs and the shrill violins. The delicate, steely control of the whole thing soothes him like listening to a clock tick.

Grantaire gets it, and he loves it.

Four weeks after that he sees Floreal smile for the first time, when he pulls off a tricky petit-allegro-adage combination in the first fifteen minutes of class. He takes it as pretty much the
Grantaire is fifteen years old and he hates himself. He hates school and homework and the London public transport system. He hates eating food that doesn’t taste of anything and trying to get to sleep. He hates his numerous guardians for making him feel guilty or just flat-out making him do things he doesn’t want to do. He even hates the flock, the people he loves more than anything else, which is an uncomfortable position to be in, emotionally speaking.

Grantaire loves his family, desperately, but there’s a creeping rot inside of him that warps and distorts feelings like a fun house mirror, and loving people is not an exclusively positive emotion, he discovers. Musichetta, Bahorel, and Combeferre are laws unto themselves, they’re human fortresses and Grantaire never looks at them and hurts. But he hurts when he looks at Jehan, who is quiet and clever and vulnerable (Grantaire knows it’s Jehan’s blindness against the swirl and thunder of London that makes him wince, not any intrinsic Jehan weakness, but it’s there, it’s a chink). Bossuet and Joly are soft somehow, something that’s probably only possible because Musichetta is so fucking hard. Courfeyrac smiles at strangers and trusts them, too, likes nothing more than to be liked, as if other people weren’t inherently dangerous. Cosette and Eponine set off very similar aches in Grantaire’s chest, even though they couldn’t be more different. Eponine sits with her legs splayed on the subway, boots planted on the ground, making uncompromising black-lined eye contact with strangers. Cosette folds herself in and down, tucks her legs in, averts her gaze beneath her curtains of curls. Inside, though, Eponine has always given Grantaire the impression of being hopelessly small and lost, and Cosette, when she forgets herself, shines out as something big and wild and beautiful. But it’s the smallness - superficial in Cosette, deep in Eponine - that makes Grantaire flinch, like their vulnerabilities are cuts in his own skin.

And he doesn’t see smallness in anyone like he sees it in Enjolras. Everything Grantaire loves about him - his hope, his determination, his will - he hates for its naivete, stupidity, stubbornness. Enjolras is - has always been - a gaping hole in Grantaire’s armour. Grantaire knows his family think he’s too harsh with Enjolras, the constant, biting inner-critic, snapping at any show of weakness. Grantaire has Enjolras’s back and always will, for the rest of his life. But it seems like a long time since he’s seen Enjolras’s back without having the urge to prod it, out of sheer irritation that such a point of fragility exists.

In Grantaire’s long and unfortunate experience, hurting never exists by itself. It’s usually followed by things like resentment and anger and hopelessness. And hatred. Grantaire hates that his family have the capacity to make him hurt so much. He hates them.

But most importantly he hates himself.

There’s no one thing, per say, that makes him so unlikeable to himself. Yeah he’s says stupid shit, stuff he doesn’t even believe - Valjean says diplomatically that he likes to play the devil’s advocate; Javert says Grantaire would happily argue with himself in an empty room - but that’s only the surface level of distaste, as far as Grantaire’s concerned. He’s miserable without reason, he’s spiteful and angry and he hurts, always. He imagines himself all rotten and crumbly inside, black dust held together with a semi-convincing facade. He thinks maybe one day Enjolras will hug too tight and he’ll disintegrate all together and blow away. He lies awake at night and can very nearly hear his cells screaming, like his whole body is sounding out a distress call. Everything feels wrong. And he has no idea why. He thinks of Cosette’s word: foreboding and makes a greater effort to avoid her.
Of course as soon as he decides this, Cosette decides to take up ballet.

She doesn’t want to, he can tell: he’s never seen a human being look more awkward in a leotard before (and he saw himself in the mirror, that first time, so it’s not like he hasn’t seen some dark shit). Cosette has little cuts around the ankles and knees of her now hairless legs - its the first time her legs haven’t been covered in fluffy blonde hair that Grantaire’s seen, and they look cold and goosefleshed in the big ballet studio. Cosette folds her arms over her chest and smiles uncertainly, and puts up with it all, because she’s worried about Grantaire. Grantaire is caught between annoyance and amusement and some aching, throat-welling feeling he ignores.

Floreal splits the time between them, and is generally much nicer to Cosette than Grantaire, which he would resent if he wouldn’t be the first one to get in a fist fight if someone ever happened to not be nice to Cosette. Cosette isn’t nearly as good a dancer as he is - she progresses about four times slower than him - but she seems to love it almost as much as he does, by the end of the second lesson.

“It’s almost like flying,” she says, “And it’s lovely to have your wings out, isn’t it? It’s so nice to whirl them around and not worry about who’s watching.”

Floreal gives them half an hour after the lesson to dance free-style, with as lose hand positions and as swirling, elaborate turns as they want. They unfurl their wings and let their jumps go long, their pirouettes fast and breath-stealing. By the end they are covered in sweat and panting and laughing breathlessly and when Grantaire sneaks a glance at Floreal she actually looks a little fond of them.

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Dom’s parents are almost never home, so Grantaire and Dom spend a lot of time lounging about in his living room, eating takeout, drinking from Mr and Dr Taully’s liqueur cabinet, and smoking weed. Grantaire, who has pretty much spent his every waking (and non-waking) moment in the company of his family, evil scientists and/or overbearing parental figures finds the peaceful quiet of Dom’s five-bedroom suburban detached absolutely bloody glorious. That’s not even mentioning the general absence of show tune sing-offs, base-level bickering, politically-charged ranting and visual impairment assistance, the absence of which is a massive step up from his own frankly migraine-inducing life.

Dom, on the other hand, seems weirdly discomfited by his own quiet house, and seems anxious for Grantaire to come round and share in the food, booze and flat screen television whenever possible. Considering that the latter of these items doesn’t function in Dominik’s household as a catalyst for rage and remote-throwing arguments, Grantaire is very happy to do so. He also thinks that if he had all this to himself he would not be inviting random tragic-haired losers to come share in the bounty, but as long as Dom’s offering, Grantaire is happy to capitalise on his mistakes.

Grantaire had his first drink three months ago, and his first spliff a few weeks after that. He honestly doesn’t know how he ever coped without them, now. They pull him out of his head, out of the twisted circuits that go round and round and drive him crazy. The white noise is still going on back there, somewhere, but as long as Grantaire doesn’t have to be excruciatingly aware of it, he doesn’t give a shit.

Dom’s parents have a huge liqueur cabinet filled with never-touched bottles that Dom assures him his parents will never miss. It takes Grantaire about half of an alcopop to get ludicrously, falling-out-of-his-seat drunk, which is lightweight ever for a 14 year-old ballet dancer for sometimes forgets to eat. Dom gives him a hard time (already on his third WKD) and Grantaire distantly wonders about his fucked-up biology and its possible effects on alcohol metabolism. It’s pretty idle speculation - to know for sure he’d have to ask Myriel, Cosette, or maybe Combeferre - and he’d
honestly rather get his wings torn off than deal with that ensuing horrorshow.

The feeling of pleasant, sinking numbness is more than enough to make up for the thick coating of syrup the colourful drinks leave on his tongue, and the chaos he’s probably wreaking on his delicate biology. After a while he discovers whisky, bourbon and rum, and that’s the more pressing of the two problems solved, for him. He feels warm and boneless and the darkness ebbs and something important inside him corrodes.

&

Grantaire isn’t the only one who makes new friends. Eponine has a friend called Marius, who plays the clarinet with her in school. They sit for hours in front of Eponine’s computer monitors, doing who fucking knows what, exiling poor, ever-understanding Cosette from her own bedroom for hours on end. Marius is floppy haired, flailing, and daft as mud. He’s nice enough, even if he does seem moderately terrified of Eponine’s family - particularly Javert, Musichetta and Enjolras, which at least confirms to Grantaire that Marius isn’t completely stupid. Marius also unveils a hitherto unseen facet of Eponine’s personality: one where she’s nice, not at all mean, and only a little insulting. Marius, for his part, seems to be a little in awe of Eponine, which is fairly reasonable response, as far as Grantaire’s concerned.

Musichetta, Courfeyrac and Bahorel have too many friends for Grantaire to even hope to keep track of, so he calls them all Dave in what started as a joke and ended as a bad habit that makes all the Daves eye him weirdly.

“You’re coming right?” asks one of the Daves, a girl with pretty blond hair, freckles and big teeth. She’s talking to Courfeyrac but turns to the rest of them a half-moment later, “You should all come! Courf, you never bring your family to things! Everyone wants to meet them!”

Freckly Dave is at the house for dinner, so they’re all on their best behaviour, wings tucked safely away and a beady-eyed Javert watching Category Five for any indication of, like, C-4. She’s asking about Courfeyrac’s plans for Halloween. Grantaire hopes Courfeyrac doesn’t tell her, because the truth - watching the Rocky Horror Picture Show at a volume which has previously blown speakers, getting real weird on caffeine, and playing an interminable game of how-many-marshmallows-can-you-fit-in-your-mouth-without-vomming - isn’t going to do their reputation as the Strange Family any favours. The marshmallow game in particular can get quite ghastly. Even though it should have had nothing to do with luck and everything to do with mouth volume and capacity for disgusting behaviour (which, surely Bahorel was the strongest contender there), Cosette is the reigning champion. This doesn’t stop at least one person from nearly asphyxiating every year in an effort to beat her.

“We normally have a family halloween thing,” says Courfeyrac easily, “But if we can get out of it, we’ll definitely come.” From this Grantaire gathers that Courfeyrac would like to go to the party but knows better than to speak on behalf of the flock before the full democratic process has been carried out. Courfeyrac’s diplomacy was on top form tonight. So far freckly Dave hasn’t noticed the simmering antagonism at the table, in spite of Musichetta’s pointed scowls and Grantaire sitting almost with his back to Enjolras. This is in contrast to Javert, who has definitely picked up on it and it absolutely going to interrogate them as soon as freckly Dave leaves the premises.

That afternoon, in a sadly unsurprising turn of events, Bossuet had somehow tipped a full jug of juice over Feuilly’s twenty pages of maths homework, turning his notebook into soggy, insubstantial mush. Feuilly had then demonstrated a Vesuvius-like rage implosion that had made even Eponine raise her eyebrows, and demanded to know if Bossuet actually fucking enjoyed destroying everything he touched.
Everyone in the flock has little soft spots, exposed nerves that lie close to the skin, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred, they collectively avoid those spots with a precision and deftness grown out of literally thousands of breakdowns, arguments and crying fits. But there’s always that hundredth time. At Feuilly’s words Bossuet - already wringing his hands and apologising - flinched violently. Combeferre openly winced, and Musichetta - apparently on pure reflex - hurled her pencil case straight into Feuilly’s face. This was not something to be taken lightly, as both Musichetta’s stationary collection and her right swing were both pretty considerable. Bahorel grabbed Musichetta by the arm and was met by an equally ferocious backhand that he responded to by yanking her hair. Jehan, unfazed as always by his riotous siblings, continued to listen to a fast-paced Russian audiobook in the background. Peace was only regained when the twin-powered social calming measure of Combeferre and Courfeyrac arrived on the scene and bodily intervened. Grantaire had to convince a bruised and moderately hysterical Feuilly - who would rather loose digits than get caught cheating - to let him re-do Feuilly’s homework, since Grantaire wasn’t actually planning on doing the homework, there would be no hitches involving obviously identical answers. This, inevitably, started Enjolras off on his crusade for Grantaire’s academic welfare, and the clatter of Jehan giving up on ever successfully hearing a chapter of Anna Karenina and leaving the room was drowned out by Enjolras demanding to know why Grantaire was premeditatedly failing homework assignments he was evidently perfectly capable of doing. Grantaire’s glib answer of, “Aesthetic,” prompted Enjolras to hurl his French folder at Grantaire’s head and Courfeyrac to burst into actual tears.

All things considered, the fact that freckly Dave was having a nice night was frankly astonishing, a true testament to the unrivalled social mastery of Courfeyrac and Combeferre. At last count no fewer than six different silent treatments were being administered around the dinner table, not including Jehan’s disdain for the whole fucking lot of them, which he expressed by making poorly-veiled Shakespearean insults. Only Couer and Ferre could make the conversational equivalent of the Cold War appear to an outsider as only friendly banter.

“Please try and come!” coaxes freckly Dave, “It’ll be so much fun!”

“I’ll come along,” says Musichetta sweetly. Next to Grantaire, Enjolras the resident recluse stiffens.

“Me too,” says Grantaire. He’s probably smirking. In his peripheral vision he’s aware of Courfeyrac give Combeferre the subtlest of SOS communications with nothing but his eyebrows.

Javert and Valjean, who’ve looked for most of the dinner like two men watching open war being declared through semaphore - expressions demonstrating a kind of baffled terror - stand up and start talking loudly about getting desert.

One evening at Dom’s house, half-way through some weird cartoon for adults that’s much funnier when Grantaire’s high, Dom leans in and kisses him on the mouth. In three seconds Grantaire has processed that (a) this is something that apparently could happen (b) it’s actually quite nice and (c) he would like it to continue. He presses back into the kiss, clumsy teeth clicking off Dom’s, riding the gentle swoops in his stomach. It’s his first experience with a kind of nervousness on the right side of pleasant.

After five, ten, whatever minutes of surprisingly gentle, almost sleepy, kissing, Dom pulls away, gazes blearily at Grantaire, then throws up. Grantaire’s reflexes, while fast, have never actually gotten to Cosette’s preternatural levels. He gets pretty thoroughly splattered and laughs raucously at the look on Dom’s face. Dom gets up and runs into the bathroom, locking the door, and
proceeds to freak out. Grantaire cleans up the living room and then sits against the bathroom door. Voice now carefully devoid of humour, because apparently that’s the wrong reaction, Grantaire asks him what’s up.

It turns out it’s the gay thing, that is in fact, up. Which, oops.

There are very few positive consequences of being brought up in an artificial environment in which you are mostly left to find your own developmental milestones and whatnot. One of the very, very few is a lack of awareness of certain social norms and cultural conditions. While this can reap unpleasant side effects, like a willingness to commit homicide (Enjolras), it also means that racism, sexism, homophobia, and pretty much every other widely-held social prejudice was pretty lost on the flock once they eventually reached the Real World. It’s probably why most of them are quite so social justicey, if Grantaire thinks about it. In the institute, the social minority, the others, had been the Razors, and the flock had hated them. It wasn’t that the flock was magically immune to, like, the basic psychology of intolerance, but unless anyone in the general public started evidencing fangs and the like, it was highly unlikely that they’d start being racist or anything. There was also a certain undertone of who cares about sexuality, we have wings, that stopped any of them from getting too judgey.

“Look,” says Grantaire, very reasonably for someone with hollow bones who is one Jack Daniel’s mixer to the wind, “If you want to, like, ignore that and pretend it never happened, that’s totally okay with me, I’m ace at ignoring things. But if you want to, I don’t know, try it again? I’m also down with that. So really there’s no wrong answer here, lets do what you want. You’re like my best mate or whatever, Dom. Don’t be weird.”

Dom opens the bathroom door a crack and eyes Grantaire through it. “We’re best mates?” He looks pale and a bit wobbly.

“Sure,” says Grantaire. Dom is, in fact, the first person since Montparnasse who is just his mate. Just his pal, someone to hang out with and laugh with and not feel tangled up in so tight he feels like suffocating. A friend, instead of family. A human, not an albatross, if Grantaire feels like being poetic.

Dom opens the door a bit more, and Grantaire makes him some tea because that’s what Joly does whenever anyone throws up or looks moderately sad. They end up sitting close together against the hallway wall, knees knocking a bit.

“We good?” Grantaire asks.

Dom squints at him narrowly before nodding, “Yeah, yeah.”

“Wanna kiss again?” asks Grantaire, feeling like an absolute dork, but he’s not plunging back in there without like, verbal consent or whatever.

“Best mates don’t normally pull each other though,” says Dom, looking uncomfortable but not moving away either.

“Eh, who cares?” says Grantaire, “They can if they want.”

Dom giggles at that for a bit, which sets Grantaire off. After a solid five minutes of laughing at nothing they get themselves under control, and Dom looks up and says, “Alright then.”

It only occurs to Grantaire twenty minutes into the subsequent make-out session to be grateful for Dom brushing his teeth.
“Where were you?” asks Jehan idly as Grantaire flops onto his bed. Jehan’s phone is doing that god awful thing that drives Eponine crazy, where a Jeeves-esque voice reads out the contents of Jehan’s twitter feed, which is unilaterally filled with amateur poets, vegetarians and non-sequiteur-spouting weirdos.

“Dom’s,” says Grantaire, over the noise of someone with a Sylvia Plath inspired handle talking worryingly about ovens. “His parents are away and he had some people round.”

“What’s that smell?” says Jehan, “It’s gross.”

“Some guys were smoking.”

“It’s not smoke,” says Jehan, shaking his head, and pausing to relisten to the most recent tweet, something about consumer fetishism.

Jeeves responds to Jehan’s taps with, “Reply… Retweet… Favourite… Selected, favourite,” as Grantaire shifts uncomfortably.

“It was weed,” he says, “But don’t tell the others, okay?”

“I’m going to Febreeze you,” says Jehan, which is not an answer. He rolls the entire top half of his body under his bed, his lower half still sprawled out over the duvet. He emerges with a can of air refresher, which he scooshes at Grantaire’s face like he’s a misbehaving cat. “And you shouldn’t smoke weed.”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s all about expanding your mind,” says Grantaire, “Don’t try and tell me you wouldn’t smoke.”

“My brain chemistry isn’t already holding itself together with string,” Jehan mutters, frowning.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” says Grantaire. He’d headed straight to Jehan’s room after getting home at 3am because Jehan never tried to make him behave, or be mature, and yet here he was getting told to be sensible. This from a boy whose primary aim in life seemed to be to distance himself as far away from reality as physically and existentially possible.

“Enjolras was worried,” says Jehan, ignoring him.

“Since when do you care about Enjolras being worried?” Grantaire asks, completely exasperated. Jehan meets his eyes, “Enjolras is my family too.”

“Okay, but-”

“And if it were him who had snuck out, you’d be more than worried, with less reason.”

“What does that mean? Why does everyone act like I can’t take care of myself?”

“Because you never show any indication of wanting to,” says Jehan.

Grantaire opens his mouth to argue but Jehan’s attention is gone, focused on some meta article about gothic literature as an inherently feminist genre.

“Can I sleep here tonight?” says Grantaire.
“No,” says Jehan simply, looking up, “Enjolras is still awake. Go and tell him you’re home.”

“But-”

“You can use my shower first, if you want,” he says, looking away again.

“Right, thanks.”

Jehan just kind of jerks his head and restarts the article and Grantaire’s left to wonder what the fuck that was about.

They don’t go to any Halloween parties that year, but they do the next, on account of the flock’s extroverts just barely holding the voting majority.

When it comes to costumes, there’s only one obvious choice.

“‘Chetta!’ hollers Jehan, hurtling down the stairs like a literal bat out of hell, “Where did you put the glitter?!”

Feuilly leaps back to avoid collision and says to Grantaire smugly, “This is why low key is the way to go.”

“Uuhh,” says Grantaire, fixing little paper snake heads to the end of his curls in the hall mirror with elastic bands. His fingers are stained green with the spray-on hair dye that’s coating his dark curls. It’s not as vibrant as he might of hoped - his hair now has a vaguely slime-green hue.

Low key isn’t how he’d describe Feuilly and Bahorel’s intricate hand-made paper bird masks, but Feuilly has always had a low opinion of his own talents.

“Grantaire are you sure this is right?” Enjolras asks, looks supremely uncomfortable. He’s draped in red velvet and gold jewellery. His wings are studded with massive costume jewels and swathes of rainbow gauze.

Grantaire holds a thumb up in the mirror as Enjolras adjusts the red sash that’s kind of but not really covering his nipple.

“Woah,” says Feuilly, “You look…”

“Ridiculous?” says Enjolras.

“Err,” says Feuilly, the tips his ears going an interesting red, “Not really what I…”

Bahorel’s shrill wolf whistle earns him a dirty look from Enjolras, “You look hot, ‘Enj. Did Chetta do your makeup? Cause the manliner thing is A+.”

“Grantaire,” Enjolras whines, “You said this was a mythology thing, not a, a gigolo thing.”

(“Gigolo?” snickers Bahorel. “All that time on urban dictionary,” sighs Feuilly sadly, “And he still can’t talk like a normal kid.”)

Grantaire meets his eye in the mirror as he does his own winged eyeliner, “Sunshine have you ever actually read anything Greek? Ever? Because sex is, like, a big part of the whole ordeal.”

That, if anything, makes Enjolras look even more uncomfortable. Grantaire sighs, abandoning the
tiny eyeliner snake on his temple and turning to face him. He chews his cheek and readjusts the red material till its covering most of Enjolras’s skin, wielding safety pins to make sure the whole thing stays PG-friendly.

“Better?” he asks, and Enjolras scowls, but he doesn’t look like he wants to climb out of his own skin any more, so it’s an improvement.

“Jehan said I make a great Cupid,” grumbles Enjolras, “You said I was a Greek god.”

“Jehan is an embarrassment,” Grantaire informs him, “Getting the Greeks and Romans mixed up, what a loser.”

“So I’m the Greek cupid?” Enjolras says, not sounding any happier about it.

“Eh, kind of,” says Grantaire, “Can I go back to my eyeliner now?”

Enjolras storms off semi-dramatically talking about how he doesn’t even like Valentines day.

“There aren’t as many winged Greek things as you’d think,” says Grantaire defensively to Feuilly, who’s giving him a look. Feuilly just rolls his eyes.

They pile into two taxis and head to Courfeyrac’s friend’s house in Kensington. The party is filled with kids from the richest and most exclusive schools in London, dressed up in expensive costumes, with high grade drugs being dealt in the upstairs bedrooms and bodyguards lurking outside in cars.

A Very Hot Vampire Dave answers the door and his eyes go huge at the flock in front of him. “Hey Courf!”

“Hey!” shouts Courfeyrac, because he’s had way too much sugar already this evening. “Hey man! This is my family! I told you I’d bring them!”

“Nice, eh, wings?” he says, eyes darting from wingspan to wingspan.

“They were for the ’06 Spring Versace fashion show,” says Musichetta, dazzling VDV-Dave with her smile, “The line got pulled so our dad bought them for me. How real do they look?”

“Totally,” says VHV-Dave, not taking his eyes off of Musichetta’s face, “They’re amazing.”

He backs up to let them all in to the entranceway. “So,” he says, managing to shake Musichetta’s effect on him briefly for the sake of being a good host. “House rules, you have to wear a name badge-” he gestures with a roll of blank stickers and a sharpie, “-so people know what you are. And no going into the locked rooms, obviously, cause that’s where the expensive stuff is.” Grantaire eyes the crystal chandelier above them and wonders what the cheap, breakable stuff consists of.

“Courf, I love the outfit man, but what are you?”

“I am Crowley, and this is Aziraphale,” says Courfeyrac with a bow, almost losing his sunglasses. His wings stick out through slits in his long-vandalised black leather jacket. Like the rest of them, he’s added some ribbons and extra bits to his wings to help detract from just very not-fake they look. Combeferre is dressed in his favourite woolly jumper (although the wing slits mean that this is the first time it’s ever been out of the house) and looks exactly the same as usual except for the sword in his hand with fake flames dancing down it. Grantaire has no idea what they’re supposed to be but VHV-Dave makes some appreciative noises.
“We’re birds,” says Feuilly bluntly, and Bahorel laughs, “Can we go now?”

Eponine and Cosette are dressed as a devil and an angel, respectively, because Eponine wanted to wield a trident and Cosette is easily persuadable. VHV-Dave grins at them and says, “And what are you two?” in exactly the kind of too-nice tone of voice that sends Eponine postal in about 0.3 seconds.

“Your last wet dream,” she sneers, “Don’t you recognise us?” Then she links her arm with Cosette and disappears off into the party without waiting for her sticker or for the rest of them.

Joly, Bossuet and Musichetta are up next. “Where are your wings?” VHV-Dave asks Joly.

“Difficult to get them on, what with the wheelchair,” says Joly. VHV-Dave stammers around awkwardly the way everyone does when Joly brings direct attention to his chair and Joly kindly distracts him with a question about the decor because Joly’s like that. The real reason his wings are tucked up under his paisley-pattern shirt and blazer is that he’d almost pushed himself into a panic attack at the idea of walking around with what - Grantaire agreed - basically amounted to big feathery targets for faceless government agencies. Instead, Joly is dressed as Professor X, Bossuet as Archangel and Musichetta as Tempest. They’re all big comic book geeks and apparently have no qualms with wearing spandex skin-suits and capes in public.

Once their stickers have been delivered, VHV-Dave turns to Jehan, who’s bobbing vaguely to the music.

“Sorry,” VHV-Dave apologises, “I’m probably being stupid, you’re…”

Jehan cocks his head to the side, long red hair getting caught in his spidery fake eyelashes, “I’m the thing with feathers that perches on the soul,” Jehan says, as if VHV-Dave is, in fact, stupid.

VHV-Dave looks like he’s about to probe further, an act of such sheer folly that Grantaire dives in, “He’s an anthropomorphism of an abstract noun,” he says quickly, “I’m a gorgon. This is cupid.” Behind him, Enjolras splutters.

“A gorgon?”

“You know, winged with snakes for hair?” tries Grantaire, “Hatred of mortal man?” He sighs at the blankness the gets in return, “Medusa?”

“Oh… yeah…” says VHV-Dave, sounding unconvinced but writing GORGON on the name tag anyway.

Enjolras receives his CUPID with as much dignity as possible and Grantaire is so busy laughing at that that Jehan wanders off and leaves him next to Enjolras at a party, which, he’s sure he’s warned them about that.

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The next time he’s with Enjolras at a party, it’s a surprise 16th for Grantaire that Dominik’s hosting. Dom drags him out to see a stupid movie - the kind that Eponine calls Dick Flicks - and they eat popcorn until the movie gets too boring, at which point they start throwing at each other. Grantaire had forgotten that it was his birthday until Dom had asked him to go to the cinema - the flock don’t celebrate birthdays, purely for reasons of practicality in that there are 13 of them and no one has time for that kind of expenditure - but they do have birthdays, officially, even if some of them hesitate for a bit too long when they get asked for the date. They traipse back to Dom’s afterwards and when his family and most of the Corinthian (and a sizeable number from the
Musain and St Anthony’s) jump out from behind sofas, Grantaire puts his training as a child-weapon to good use when he reacts by hurling his jacket straight into Bossuet’s face and falling over a pouffe.

“Really?” asks Grantaire to Feuilly, as an aside, while Dom gets him a drink from the table full of booze, “Surprise birthday party?”

“He asked if we were doing anything already,” mutters Feuilly, amused, “What were we going to say? No, we don’t celebrate Grantaire’s birthday because we don’t love him?”

“Sure, why not?” Grantaire laughs, peeling off as Dom approaches with a jack and coke.

He and Dom mostly stick together because Dom’s been kind of touchy-feely all day, holding onto his elbow and slinging his arm round Grantaire’s shoulders for photos. Grantaire may also be avoiding the less fun-loving members of his family like the plague, but he doesn’t have to admit that.

They end up in the garden, lying back in the cool damp of the spring grass, sending smoke spiralling up into the sky. Dom’s in a talkative mood, waxing lyrical about the future - he wants to go on a road trip round the US when they graduate, Grantaire’s arguing for Europe. Dom sits up to gesticulate more wildly in favour of New York City and San Fransisco, Grantaire laughs and Dom swoops down and kisses him, sweet and deep. It only ever happens when they’re drunk or high - which is, admittedly, most of the time outwith school - and it’s only ever just kisses. For the rest of the time they’re just mates, which is fine by Grantaire.

Dom pulls away in a giggling fit and Grantaire joins him, rolling his head back in the grass and looking up at where the stars would be, if they maybe didn’t live in London. He remembers watching the stars at the institute, remembers the deep unknowable feeling they gave him. They seemed to say there is better out there, there is more, don’t give up hope. Grantaire can admit now, that the stars were right,

After a bit Dom gets hungry, so he pulls Grantaire to his feet and they go indoors where a game of Truth or Dare has begun, obviously by people who are unfamiliar with certain members of Grantaire’s family and the lengths they will go to fulfil any dare that so much as looks at them. There is a lifetime ban on any and all forms of dares, challenges and gambles in their house, enforced by Javert’s zero-tolerance policy and social services’ mounting interest in Bossuet’s hospital attendances.

“Dare,” says Bahorel to the observable fear of literally everyone who knows him. Except for Feuilly - that little psycho grins.

Grantaire does a quick scan of the circle and notes the conspicuous absence of Musichetta, Cosette, Combeferre and Courfeyrac, the most sensible - and least likely to die by tragic accident - of their family. Surprisingly, Enjolras is there, and doesn’t seem to have voiced any objection. He’s sitting with crossed legs sipping quietly from a bottle of fruit cider.

“I dare you to put all the ice in that bucket in your pants until it melts,” says Feuilly to raucous laughter.

“Easy,” says Bahorel. He undoes his fly and tugs his boxers and pours…

The sound he makes is hideous and includes more swear words than Grantaire knew existed.

“Your turn,” says Feuilly cheerfully.
Bahorel spins the bottle with one hand frantically clutched over his crotch. It lands on Bossuet

“Ohhhh _fuck_, eh, guess you’re going with truth, Sweets?” Bahorel says, not seeming particularly
invested in making Bossuet’s life any harder. Grantaire guesses he’s biding his time for the next
time the bottle points Feuilly-wards.

“Probably best,” says Bossuet sadly.

“Errhh, who’s your favourite person, Musichetta or Joly?”

Feuilly, Eponine and Grantaire laugh hard at that, though no one else gets the joke. Bossuet looks
hopelessly torn. “I can’t decide that!”

“You picked truth, Sweets,” gasps Bahorel, eyes watering, not quite making the taunting tone he
was reaching for due to - Grantaire assumes - the beginning of the melting process.

Feuilly can’t stop laughing at him, but he agrees between breaths, “Yep, you gotta answer,
Bossuet. Thems the rules.”

“I’d understand if you picked Chetta,” says Joly, with faux-sniffs, “She’s much prettier than me.”

Grantaire kind of wishes Enjolras would speak up with something sanctimonious like how _that’s
not fair_ because his threshold for Bossuet looking even a little upset is pretty low.

“Ya know, Sweets,” says Grantaire lazily, “If you answer in Spanish you can gender it.”

Bossuet’s face lights up in the midst of loud outcry, and Grantaire is pelted with the ice cubes that
haven’t made it to Bahorel’s crotch.

“Booo!” shouts Eponine, from where she’s eating peanuts in the corner.

“Musichetta es mi amiga favorita y Joly es mi amigo favorito,” says Bossuet smugly.

(”Ha,” says Feuilly, “Holy Joly.”)

“I think that might be the first time I’ve ever seen the gender binary be of use,” ponders Joly.

“Spin the bottle,” says someone else. Bossuet spins it and it points at Grantaire who hoots.

“I’m usually a strictly dare kind of guy, but I think considering it’s you who spun the bottle Sweets
I’ll stick on the safe side,” says Grantaire, laughing, “Truth.”

“Who’s _your_ favourite person?” asks Bossuet, obviously throwing a gratitude-imbibed low ball.
Because the flock all know the answer, 100%, no questions necessary. It’s a fact.

Dom doesn’t, though, “Answer carefully Taire! I’ll be proper moody if it’s not me.”

Grantaire laughs, “Hmmm, let me thiiiiink,”

“Who’s got competition on me, eh?” Dom asks, “Jehan or Eponine, right? Well, Jehan’s not here,
and I’ll fight Eponine.”

Eponine scoffs and catches a peanut in her mouth expertly, “Like you could take me.”

“I didn’t say I’d _win_,” says Dom, “The aim is to make Taire feel sorry for me so I cinch the pity
vote!”
“I think Enjolras might have a bit of competition with you,” says Bossuet, smiling, “Probably better fighting him.”

Dom laughs openly, “Oh yeah, sure, Enjolras and Taire are best pals.”

Eponine smirks, “It’s a love-hate thing.”

“Heavy on the hate, though, right?” laughs Dom. The dread that has been sinking slowly through Grantaire for the last few seconds hits the bottom of him with a thunk.

“Nah,” he says, trying to save a pretty dire situation that he just let unfold in front of him like an origami game from hell. “I don’t hate him, eh?”

“Christ you sure bitch about him a lot for someone you don’t hate,” says Dom, whose mouth will just not stop moving, and now he’s on to a shoddy Grantaire impression, “Enjolras is so annoying, I can’t fucking stand him, he thinks he’s better than me.” He seems to realise, belatedly, drunkenly, that he is actually being offensive. “No offence, man,” he clarifies to Enjolras. Eponine lets slip a bark of horrified laughter at that one. Joly is wide eyed, Feuilly’s closed his eyes like he’s in physical pain, and Bossuet’s hand-wringing has reached a fever pitch.

Enjolras hasn’t looked up from his cider the whole time, but now he does. He gazes at Bossuet, face strangely pale. “Ask me,” he says quietly.

Bossuet makes a noise that could generously be called, “Hnhgh?”

“Ask me who my favourite person is,” he says.

Bossuet opens his mouth then closes it again immediately. He keeps sending an appalled-looking Joly for the love of god help me looks.

Enjolras doesn’t wait, “It’s Grantaire,” he says, looking straight at him.

Then he gets up and leaves the house.

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Grantaire nearly decapitates some poor slow-moving human in his rush to leave the room. He hears over the immediate ringing in his hears Bahorel snap, “Hey,” and Eponine say, “Back the fuck off,” to Dominik, he assumes, he doesn’t really care.

He battles his way out of the foyet - why are people not moving? - shoving and pushing until he can get to the front door and out into the warm evening. Enjolras is walking away from the party, hair lit up by fizzing, straining street lights, hands stuffed deep into his red leather jacket.

Grantaire has to break into a sprint to catch up, throwing his arms around Enjolras desperately when he does, fingers catching and clinging to the sharp zipper teeth. For the first time in Grantaire’s living memory, Enjolras pushes him away, thrashes loose and whirls round. He’s shaky and frenetic and his tears are trickling to the corner of his mouth, dripping off his chin.

Grantaire knows, theoretically, that he’s felt worse in his life, but no examples are springing readily to mind.

“I-” Grantaire says, hands pulling like magnets to Enjolras’s hot face, thumb sweeping at his cheekbone, fingers into his curls.
“I’m sorry,” Grantaire says, feeling like he can’t get his words out fast enough or clear enough. The world is spinning around him unpleasantly. “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have let him say that. He’s drunk, that was awful. I’m sorry, hey, I’m sorry.” He kisses Enjolras’s forehead, temple, cheek, compulsively, tugs him closer into his arms.

Enjolras makes a bizarre thrashing movement wherein he tries to pull away from Grantaire and push closer simultaneously. He shakes his head violently, and he hasn’t said anything yet, which Grantaire hates. Enjolras should not be silent.

“Hey, hey sunshine, say something. Tell me I’m an idiot, hey?”

That doesn’t seem to help at all, and Grantaire panics as Enjolras’s face crumples.

“What do you really hate me?” asks Enjolras, sounding small, tiny, like back when they were still at the Institute and he said to Grantaire, promise.

“No,” says Grantaire “Of course I don’t hate you, don’t be- I could never hate you.”

“Why do you act like it then? Why do you say you do?”

“I don’t know, I’m an idiot, you know I’m an idiot, this is well known. Enjolras you’re the most important person in the world to me, how can you not know that?”

“I thought I did,” says Enjolras quietly. He sits down so suddenly that Grantaire thinks he’s fallen, slumping against someone’s garden wall. “But you act like you can’t stand me. And the weird thing is I can’t remember a time when you haven’t. Like, sometimes I think it was before we got out, but then I remember that you didn’t like me much then.”

“Enjolras,” Grantaire, says, words coming out in a kind of strangled whisper, “I love you. Like, more than anyone else. Way more than myself.” He kneels down on the cold pavement, takes Enjolras’s long trembling fingers in his own.

Enjolras looks at him bleary, “You’re supposed to like the people you love though, right? You’re at least not supposed to hate them.”

“I don’t hate you,” Grantaire repeats.

“I think you maybe do,” mumbles Enjolras, “You know I said that to Combeferre once and he said the same thing back, he said, Grantaire loves you, like hating someone and loving them are somehow mutually exclusive or something. But they’re not. I know they’re not. Because I think you probably hate me, even if you don’t know it, even if you’d never admit it. And that’s not even the worst thing. The worst thing is that I don’t care if you hate me, just as long as you don’t leave me, and that’s just… That’s so awful, isn’t it? Because you’re all that I have, Grantaire. You’re all I’ve got. You were all I had.” Enjolras’s throat seems to close off in the swell of tears that follows.

Grantaire gapes, not sure what part of that to start refuting first but sensitive enough to the situation to know that leading with no you’re wrong would not be helpful. “I’m not all you’ve got,” says Grantaire, “And even if I was, nothing’s changed. I’m still here aren’t I?”

Enjolras stares off into the darkness behind the sleep lamps, swallowing hard. “I saw you with Dominik,” he says, veering wildly off topic, “In the garden. Tonight.” Grantaire rubs at his face. “That’s not new, is it. He’s, like, your boyfriend. And you never told me. You spend all your time with him, you don’t talk to me at school, you ignore me when I text you, you stay out all night without telling me, you’re… You’re supposed to be mine.” Enjolras’s voice cracks neatly in time with some fundamental piece of Grantaire’s heart.
It’s a line that Grantaire has watched enough porn to know is pretty exclusively sexual. But this isn’t. For one thing, he’s pretty sure that Enjolras isn’t sexual, like, that’s not a thing that computes with him. For another, this goes way deeper than that. Onto a level he’s pretty sure would be difficult to explain to people who had normal, functioning childhoods. What Enjolras feels for Grantaire is something huge and terrifying. It’s a feeling Grantaire imagines normal people have towards their parents, their childhood bedrooms, their favourite teddy bears or bed time stories. Enjolras has it for him, this weird, aching comfort and nostalgia and faith that Grantaire would never be gone, never stop existing. Grantaire never had that for anyone. He loved Enjolras with everything he had and it never brought him any peace of mind, any comfort. It terrified him, every moment, and made him into a worse person than he necessarily had to be.

“I’m yours,” Grantaire sighs, tipping his head forwards till it’s resting on Enjolras’s knees. “If it’d make you happy I’d never speak to Dom again, okay? I’m yours, okay? You got me.”

“No you wouldn’t,” scoffs Enjolras.

Grantaire looks up at him in surprise. “I absolutely would,” he says seriously.

Enjolras’s eyebrows arc in shock.

“Sunshine, I would fuck over people I care a lot more about than Dominik Taully to protect you.”

Enjolras shakes his head and looks away.

“No, listen,” presses Grantaire, pulling Enjolras’s eyes back onto him, “I might argue with you, and shout at you, and drive you fucking mental. But I will always, always pick you. You’re not my favourite person, Enjolras, you’re my only person. And that’s really weird, okay, that’s not normal and sometimes I like to act normal, and hang out with people who don’t have wings and don’t having a fucking clue what it feels like to genuinely be ready to kill for someone. But I’ve got wings, sunshine, and I’ve got you. And there is literally nothing in the world that will change that. I couldn’t change it, even if I wanted to. Nobody else has a chance.”

Grantaire walks up to Dominik at break time next Monday, hands in his pockets.

“Woah,” says Dom, “Man, did Saturday night get weird. Did I, like, upset your brother or something?” Dom looks kind of jittery. His smile is nervous. Grantaire wonders what his own face looks like. Dom continues “Like, siblings don’t like each other, get over it already - right?” He laughs and Grantaire smiles.

He’s done way worse than this before, he reminds himself.

“Nah,” he says casually, “We’re done now.”

Dom gives him a strange look, “What?”

“I don’t let anyone speak to my family like that,” says Grantaire, “So we’re done. As in, no longer friends, no longer people who make out sometimes. Finished.”

Dom gapes at him, “Look, I’m sorry, okay? It really wasn’t that big a deal, though.”

Grantaire shrugs, “I wasn’t really looking to start, like, a debate. I’m just telling you. We’re done.”

Dom shakes his head, “Why is your brother so weird honestly, it’s fucking creepy. Is he telling you
to do this or something? You know he was watching us when we were out in the garden on Saturday night, just, like, staring. That’s probably why I was so mean to him. He freaks me out.”

Grantaire closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Look, do I actually have to say the words I’m dumping you for you to understand this? My brother freaks you out, great, you’ll never have to talk to him again. Because, as I said, we’re done.”

At which point Dominik punches him, which, Grantaire supposes, is probably fair.

What’s probably not fair is Enjolras arriving to punch Dom in the face, breaking his own hand, and landing all three of them in detention, which, Grantaire protests, he didn’t even get to hit anyone.

Detention is… Awkward. Not only because the person taking it forgets about Grantaire’s physical presence on three separate occasions but also because Enjolras is dividing his energies between glowering at the back of Dominik’s head so hard the halogens flicker, and trying to engage Grantaire with his studies under the guise of “needing help”, which is very clearly a lie.

Enjolras might not be as naturally brilliant as Cosette or Combeferre but he works hard and his willpower is a force to be reckoned with. He once willed himself out of electric-fenced captivity, the pig headed stubbornness required to memorise maths theorems is absolutely within his reach.

“How do you do this one?” Enjolras asks a half asleep Grantaire.

Grantaire casts a distasteful eye over it, “Find the derivation then make it a graph,” he says, lolling back onto the desk.


“With the 3 and the… Look:” Grantaire snatches Enjolras’s pen and scribbles out the derivation, then sketches some x’s and draws a shaky parabolic curve connecting them.

“Yes, but you didn’t explain how,” says Enjolras, scowling at the two pages of working Grantaire left very thoughtfully in his notepad. He doesn’t usually write out his working. It’s why he fails even when he does apply effort.

“You just do it, sunshine,” sighs Grantaire, “It’s not difficult. There’s nothing else you can do with it.”

Enjolras eyes him narrowly, “It is hard. No one else in the class could do it. The teacher gave it out to see if anyone would be able to manage any of it.”

“Oh no,” says Grantaire robotically, with a heavy eye roll, “You have tricked me. Now I realise maths is my calling. I have found salvation.”

Enjolras nudges him and Grantaire laughs.

“How can you hate something that you’re so good at?” Enjolras asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“I’m good at loads of things I’m not particularly proud of,” says Grantaire, “Not sleeping, dancing the Macarena, finding clothes that Jehan likes.” They both make a face at the last one.

“Being a fucking freak,” mutters Dom, a row and a desk in front of them.

“Do you want to say something?” demands Enjolras, apparently still under the misapprehension
that he’s the injured party here. Considering Dom just got dumped by his a guy who was functionally his boyfriend over said guy’s brother means he’s undoubtedly having the shittier day here. Grantaire sinks deeper into his seat.

Dom’s apparently up for the fight, “Yeah, I do,” he says, spinning in his seat.

The teacher in charge of the detention - a detention in existence solely because of Enjolras and Dominik’s violent feelings for each other - has wandered off on some errand and left them alone in an empty, unsupervised place. Grantaire thunks his head off the desk.

“What the fuck is your problem anyway?” Dominik asks Enjolras, “Are you like a homophobe or something? Because, like, I’ve seen Jehan, and I’ve got some fucking unfortunate news for you.” Dominik’s narrow face is flushed up to his ears and Grantaire is actually pretty proud of him. Dominik makes gay jokes, has homophobic parents, and is basically a simmering pot of internalised homophobia. He’s in the middle of his own bona-fide social justice breakthrough purely because Enjolras is being a weirdo.

Unfortunately there are few ideas in the world worse than suggesting to Enjolras that he doesn’t have a clear understanding of societal injustice and prejudice.

“No you idiot,” Enjolras seethes, “I just don’t like you.”

That seems to take Dom aback but he rallies quickly, “Well I don’t like you either. And you know what? Neither does anyone else. You’re a creep who hasn’t got any friends except from your family, and that’s only because they haven’t got any other choice. You think you’re too good for everyone, so everyone hates you, they think you’re a stuck-up little bitch who’s way too obsessed with his brother to be normal, okay? You’re pathetic and I don’t like you either. So fuck off already, so I can get back to fucking your brother.”

Grantaire is too speechless about that last part to mount any sort of response but Enjolras stands up straight and rounds the desks. Dom shrinks a little as Enjolras leans over his desk till he’s inches from Dominik’s face. “Do you honestly think that I care what you or any of your friends say about me?” say Enjolras, cold as ice. “Do you honestly think that your opinion is even close to the worst thing to happen to me? I don’t care if you don’t like me. I don’t care. You’re worried I think I’m better than you? Well guess what, I do. And so does Grantaire. Right, Taire?”

Grantaire is in no way ready for that one, but manages to choke out a, “Sure do.”

Enjolras goes on shining brighter than the halogens or the afternoon sun outside. Dom is squinting. “You don’t know anything about me,” says Enjolras, “Why would your opinion matter to me in any way?”

Then he stands up straight, goes to his desk to collect his maths supplies, his rucksack, and a moderately stunned Grantaire, and storms out the room without looking back.

“We’re not actually supposed to…” Grantaire starts, not fighting Enjolras’s grip on his wrist.

“I don’t care,” says Enjolras, “Let’s skip out.”

Grantaire laughs wildly and throws an arm around Enjolras’s neck. “When did you get all big and scary?” he asks.

“I’ve always been big and scary,” says Enjolras, sun catching in his curls.
Without Dom’s house to go to after school and at the weekends, Grantaire spends more time in the house than he has since they first arrived. Everyone seems pretty happy about this development. Bahorel pesters Grantaire to box with him in the basement, where Javert’s set up a ring and some mats, so now they spend every Sunday morning hitting each other with boxing gloves on. Cosette climbs out and joins him on the rooftop at night time, and they huddle up under each others wings for warmth. Cosette’s big fluffy white wings are, admittedly, much more weather-resistant that Grantaire’s sleek dark ones. She reads books and they share music through tiny earphones and Grantaire watches the stars and drinks from a bottle of whisky-mixed coke that Cosette tactfully ignores. Jehan drapes himself over him like a cat and then thoroughly ignores him in favour of whatever audiobook is holding his attention at the time. Courfeyrac makes him watch Singing In The Rain on what feels like an endless loop. Joly, Musichetta and Bossuet ensnare him in their terrible sci-fi shows, Combeferre drags him to the science museum on wet Sunday afternoons, and he and Feuilly go on architectural tours of the city. Enjolras seems happier than he has been in years.

Grantaire isn’t happy. He’s pretty sure he’s forgotten how to be happy at this point, and the lack of alcohol and recreational substances doesn’t help. But his family are happy, and that’s basically the same thing.

Eponine seems to have replaced him with a floppier, more upbeat best friend, but when Grantaire finally catches the way Eponine looks at Marius he can’t even bring himself to make jokes about it.

Marius is friends with Courfeyrac too - although really, who isn’t - and he gets on well with Combeferre. Grantaire can’t work out if Cosette doesn’t like him or if it’s just her natural shyness that makes her so quiet around him. Enjolras is polite to him, which given the Pontmercy family history of Tory MPs, is more than could be hoped for. Bahorel, Feuilly, Joly and Bossuet love nothing more than trying to convince Marius that they are actually a cult, and that they still require blood sacrifices every full moon.

But Marius is round a lot, is the point. Grantaire isn’t particularly aware of him - he tends to hideout with Eponine in her room working on complicated computer things - but he washes up at meal times and on movie marathon nights. Cosette mentions something about him not getting on with his granddad and needing to get out of his house, but that’s the sum total of Grantaire’s knowledge on the subject.

As it turns out the rest of the flock isn’t particularly aware of him either, because one lunch time Bahorel wanders downstairs without his shirt on, wings unbound and outstretched, straight into the kitchen containing one very surprised Marius.

“Oh, what is it?” he says mildly. He licks his lips, casts around for inspiration and then summarises with, “Nope. Can’t think of any good ways out of this. Luck Ponine.” Then scarpers out of the kitchen before Eponine can throw anything at him, leaving her and Courfeyrac to bring Marius up to speed re: the flock. A bristling Javert is the one to impress upon him the importance of keeping all this very, very secret.

The teachers at the Corinthian are pretty intense about the whole exam thing, so it’s not like the final year of school and it’s associated exams took Grantaire by surprise, per say. But the fully-fledged exam-fuelled insanity that is unleashed on his house the second year 13 gets underway is a little surprising, not to mention deeply irritating, in that it makes his attempts to utterly ignore the existence of exams a little impossible
By the fourth week in term, Courfeyrac, Joly and Cosette have all cried messily into Grantaire’s shoulder for reasons relating to the volume of homework, the difficulty of homework, or just general feelings of inadequacy, Grantaire finds it difficult to tell. Even more concerning is the number of people who have to be emotionally or physically out-of-order for Grantaire to be the first line of defence in comforting random members of the flock. Combeferre has developed a nervous tick under his left eye and Musichetta now has the hard-jawed long-staring look of a war vet. Grantaire is eternally thankful for Bahorel and Bossuet’s laissez faire attitude to life because otherwise he’s pretty sure he’d have been struck down by some kind of sympathy-induced cardiac event one month into the term.

“My. Can’t. Fucking. Do. This,” hisses Feuilly, hands tugging at his wild ginger hair.

Grantaire gurgles sympathetically and Bahorel tries to fumble through Grantaire’s wings to smack him on the back.

Grantaire hits him back, still choking.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, eyes watering, back protesting from Bahorel’s wallop, gag reflex still objecting to the whole aspiration-of-solid-objects bit.

“Fucking, maths!” Feuilly seethes, “Fucking. Fucking. Fucking. Maths. I need to get an A if I want to do architecture. Even though trig has fuck all to do with building houses. And I can’t do it.”

“Actually,” begins Bossuet, but cuts himself off at Bahorel and Grantaire’s twin looks of horror. Thankfully Feuilly doesn’t notice.

“I’ll do it for you, give me your notebook-” Grantaire raises his hands in pre-emptive surrender, “-Like a human person. No throwing.”

“Sorry,” says Feuilly, perching on the arm of the couch and burying his head in his hands, “I was just trying not to hit Bossuet. I’ve done the work now. It’ll probably be wrong, but it’s done. I’m just so sick of it. It takes me all fucking night to do, like, an hours worth of homework.”

Grantaire makes his, sucks bro, face. He’s all empathied out, and now he can’t even chew some gummy worms and kill Bahorel in peace.

“Just get Grantaire to do it,” says Bahorel, “Or I will, whatever,” he adds when Grantaire gives him a flat look.

“If I get Taire to do it, I’ll never get any better,” sighs Feuilly, “Not that I will anyway. I don’t know what I’m going to do. My brain just isn’t built for this.”

Eponine and Marius traipse in, interrupting the well-tread conversation of Feuilly’s academic woes. Eponine makes a disgusted noise when she sees them occupying the games console. “We want to play on it,” she whines.
“But I’m winning!” says Bossuet, without taking his eyes off the screen.

Bahorel and Grantaire both turn around, baffled. “Sweet, we’re not playing any more.”

“I don’t care!” says Bossuet, “I’m winning! I never win!”

He glances away from the screen in excitement and everyone flinches simultaneously.

“Oooh,” says Bahorel, speaking for the room.

“Did you just… Shoot yourself?” Marius asks incredulously.

“I’m done now Ep,” sighs Bossuet, dropping his controller to the ground.

“No really,” persists Marius, “That shouldn’t be possible.”

“Marius,” says Grantaire, “If Bossuet had won the game it would absolutely be a sign of the end of days and we would all be running right now.”

“Ponine,” says Bahorel, as Eponine moves round to insert her new game in the console, “We’re not moving, so if you’re putting something in there it better not be something you’ll get pissed at Bossuet fucking up.”

“Why?” says Eponine exasperatedly.

“Have you seen the rest of this house?” asks Grantaire, “The dead are fucking walking, Eponine. I’m not leaving this room without, like, a hazmat suit.”

Bossuet nods seriously.

“Look,” adds Bahorel, indicating to Feuilly, who’s still sitting with his head in his hands, “One of them even got in.”

Eponine looks Feuilly up and down, taking in the tracksuit bottoms he hasn’t changed out of in two weeks, “Very scary,” she sneers.

“Hey, you weren’t here for the projectiles,” says Grantaire, wounded.

“What about you, young Marius,” asks Bahorel, now attempting to take one of Grantaire’s rightfully stolen sweets, which is just not on, something Grantaire communicates by shoving all the sweets into his mouth simultaneously. “Shouldn’t you be at home cramming for the evil exams?”

“I, uh,” Marius starts, blushing, “My granddad-”

“You can just ignore Bahorel when he says things,” says Eponine matter-of-factly, “The rest of us do.”

Grantaire nods vigorously.

“Woooo,” Joly trills into the room, followed by a less-enthusiastic (if only by necessity) Musichetta, “Bossuet texted to say movie night, what are we watching?”

Eponine scowls at Bossuet who smiles sunnily at the ceiling. “We’re not watching anything, me and Marius are playing the new Fallout game. The rest of you are fucking off.”

“Mad Max,” chants Bahorel, “Mad Max, Mad Max, Mad Max, Mad Max,”
Musichetta joins in and Grantaire makes unpleasant noises instead of chanting because he’s having difficulty swallowing at the present time.

Eponine sighs heavily. “Fine. But I hate all of you.”

“Noted,” mumbles Grantaire gooely.

Eponine gives him a look of unparalleled disgust and elbows in next to him on the couch. Marius perches delicately on the seat furthest from the door, like he’s somehow afraid of breaking the chair with actual burn marks on it from that incident last spring with the flaming marshmallows. Feuilly slides off the arm-rest into the space between Bahorel and the chair, much to Bahorel’s vocal discomfort. The unholy trinity settle on the single armchair in their usual chaos of limbs - careful, as always, to make sure that they’re not cutting off any important blood supplies to Joly’s limbs.

Cosette pokes her head round the door with a smile and a, “What are we watching?”

A few months ago Cosette convinced Myriel to put her on super-strength anti-acne drugs and now her skin is clear of spots, and at some point after that she and Musichetta bought up half of Boots in their quest to find a product that worked for Cosette’s flyaway curls. Now she’s got the skin and hair of a porcelain doll, and - most noticeably - she’s actually beginning to walk around without looking like she wants to disappear through the floor. Grantaire isn’t sure if that’s to do with the ballet or the self confidence, but it’s the final element in the perfect storm and he noticed about a week ago that his gangly, awkward sister is actually… Kind of beautiful.

She’s barefoot, wearing Bahorel’s skater shorts and some geeky sweater of Combeferre’s with a chemistry joke on it, hair soft and loose over her cotton-covered shoulders. Her legs are pale and dusted with blond hair, her feet delicate and small.

Grantaire feels Eponine stiffen next to him and turns to see her watching Marius.

Marius is staring at Cosette like she’s made the world stop turning.

The awful thing about loving these people so much and for so long is that everyone in the room is - to a greater or lesser extent - aware of the fidgeting distance between Marius and Cosette on their couch, and of the cloud of despair that has just enveloped Eponine. The more socially tone deaf among them - Joly and Bossuet in particular - are just aware that Something Awkward is happening. And, given the frequency with which awkwardness comes up in the day-to-day lives of thirteen maladapted teenagers living on top of one another, it makes sense to ignore it for the sake of enjoying the movie. Combeferre and Courfeyrac, on the other hand, look in from the hallway as the opening sequence plays and Eponine starts to subtly wipe angry tears from her eyes, and bid a retreat so hasty Courfeyrac nearly breaks his foot.

Enjolras wanders in past them, genuinely doesn’t seem to notice the atmosphere, then settles on the floor against Grantaire’s legs. Grantaire ruffles his hair fondly and pulls out his phone to try and guilt Courfeyrac and Combeferre into dealing with the emerging problem.

Enjolras then slips Grantaire’s phone out of his hold and frowns in confusion, before adding himself into the chat.

At which point Enjolras turns fully round to face Grantaire and says, “The what?” and Bahorel says, “No secret text chats unless I’m invited, we’ve discussed this,” without looking away from
the dude with the flame-throwing electric guitar currently taking up the whole screen.

“You want to read Taire and Enj’s secret texts?” asks Feuilly dully. “Personally I could stand to know a little less.”

Eponine shakes her head minutely, then stands up and walks out.

Grantaire, Feuilly and Bahorel exchange glances.

Cosette doesn’t seem to notice - her and Marius are talking shyly about their favourite Tom Hardy movie.

Grantaire stands up, dislodging a disgruntled Enjolras, and follows Eponine out. Bahorel and Feuilly trail reluctantly after him.

“Where are you going?” asks Cosette.

“Er,” says Bahorel.

“Jehan related emergency,” completes Grantaire, which earns him understanding nods from Joly and Bossuet, and a suspicious squint from Musichetta.

They do indeed find Eponine in Jehan’s room, head on his lap, Jehan stroking her hair absently as he quietly recites Russian verbs.

When Grantaire, Feuilly and Bahorel arrive at his doorway he says dryly, without missing a beat, “Oh good, the cavalry.”

Feuilly and Bahorel throw themselves onto the remaining space on Jehan’s bed. Grantaire scowls and slouches into the desk chair, spinning it idly with his toes.

Eponine is not happy with this development. “You left them alone together?” she hisses, red eyed.

“Er,” says Grantaire.

“Nah,” says Feuilly, “We left the unholy trinity. And Enjolras.”

At this point Enjolras wanders past the door, does a double take, then pokes his head in, casting an eye about.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Enjolras says, “But I’ll be with Combeferre and Courfeyrac if anyone needs me.”

“Oh good,” snaps Eponine, “Well at least we’ve got you on standby.”

Enjolras raises his hands and backs away as Grantaire shoots him an apologetic glance. “Well, like I said,” Enjolras says stubbornly.

“So just Musichetta, Joly and Bossuet then,” says Eponine bitterly, then subsides into silence.

"As third wheels go, they're about as good as it gets," points out Bahorel.

“You wanna… Talk about it?” asks Feuilly, looking a bit green. It’s the biggest testament to his familial love that Grantaire’s ever seen.
“No. Yes. Seriously, what the fucking fuck,” spits Eponine.

Bahorel and Feuilly exchange a glance and Grantaire rubs his face. Jehan hums agreeably.

“Like, seriously?” Eponine says again, “It’s not like he’s never seen her before.”

Grantaire can see Jehan repressing the urge to say something romantic like, ‘it only takes a glance’.

“Are you sure that this is as bad as you think?” asks Feuilly reasonably. Grantaire thinks that’s a bad line of comfort to go with because it generally is. “So Marius has a crush on Cos. So what? That doesn’t mean she likes him.”

Eponine looks at him like he’s unfathomably stupid, and says shortly, “She does.”

“Oh, shit,” says Jehan mildly.

“Wait, you both like him?” Bahorel looks frankly boggled, “Him?”

“Shhh,” Jehan chides.

“Why don’t you… Tell her?” Feuilly asks hesitantly. “It’s Cos. She can’t know that you like him, or else…”

He doesn’t say, or else she’d never so much as look at him, she’d never put herself before Eponine. They all think it.

“She doesn’t know,” says Eponine, “I don’t want her to know. I didn’t want him to know, it would ruin it.”

“Not necessarily,” says Jehan gently.

“Well it doesn’t fucking matter now, does it?” Eponine snaps.

“Well on the plus side, I guarantee you that Bossuet will not leave that room,” says Grantaire, “If not because of his horrific sense of timing than at least because the holy trinity’s abiding love of explosions can’t be tampered by, like, social awkwardness.”

“Unless Cosette’s luck is stronger than Bossuet’s bad luck,” muses Bahorel, “Always wanted to put those two to war and see what happens.”

Eponine’s look is vicious.

“Maybe not the time,” suggests Jehan mildly.

Grantaire texts Musichetta in an effort to maybe stop the flames of this social fire from raging out of control.

He gets a text in from Enjolras simultaneously.

Grantaire swears profusely and texts Bossuet.

Grantaire closes his eyes and when he opens them, Eponine’s own red-rimmed ones are looking back, devastated.

&
Next Thursday finds the exams another inch closer, Marius and Cosette officially an item and Eponine more miserable than Grantaire has ever seen her. Javert and Valjean are both still at work, which isn't unusual for either of them. Prior to adopting thirteen kids, Grantaire thinks they were both probably lonely workaholics, and sometimes they still forget to stop working past a certain time of night. Mrs Hauche no longer feels the need to prepare and supervise every meal time for fear of botulism and/or murder, so they’re eating something tasty and quorn-based that Jehan and Musichetta have made.

“Doves were always my favourite animal,” says Marius, sotto voice, fingers trailing over Cosette’s feathers.

“Cos is part albatross,” snaps Eponine, stabbing viciously at a boiled potato and making her fork screech on the plate.

Jehan makes a noise like a stood-on cat and Joly says cheerfully, “You know doves and pigeons are the same species?”

“We know,” Feuilly and Bahorel drone

“But we treat them completely differently,” Joly continues, “Like, doves are celebratory, for weddings and stuff, but people don’t like pigeons? Isn’t that weird?”

Marius makes a baffled kind of noise of agreement.

“I’m part pigeon,” Joly confides in him seriously.

Marius looks around interestedly, “So you know what types of birds you share DNA with?”

“Sure,” says Courfeyrac with a grin, “I’m a nightingale.”

“Crow,” says Grantaire, raising his hand, “Specifically a raven. And yes, I do get the best collective noun.”

Marius looks blank and Jehan fills in with the helpfully vague, “Murder.”

“What about you, Ep?” asks Marius, “You’ve never said.”

“Me and Gav are magpies,” says Eponine dully, not looking up from her plate.

“Go team corvidae,” chants Grantaire.

“When did you learn the genus names for the bird species?” asks Combeferre, amused.

“More importantly, when did your humour get so lame?” asks Feuilly, not.

“Wait, so are you and Gavroche actually brother and sister? Like, biologically?” Marius asks. He’s definitely picking up on the weird vibe in the room, which is good because it at least confirms that he’s got the intelligence of something bigger than a single-celled organism. Maybe like multicellular plankton of some kind.

“Yeah,” says Eponine.

“Speaking of, where is Gav?” asks Bahorel.

“Er,” says Grantaire, “He texted me to say that he was staying out tonight? I told him that was fine.” Everyone turns to look at him.
“And I was wrong,” he adds slowly.

Feuilly rolls his eyes expansively.

“Wait, so where is he?” asks Cosette, concern creeping in round her mouth.

“At a friends?” Grantaire hazards.

“Grantaire, it’s a school night!”

“Someone’s in trouble,” Bahorel singsongs.

“Wait, is it me?” Grantaire asks.


“Did he say anything to you?” Cosette asks Eponine, confusion clear in her voice at Eponine’s lack of perceptible reaction.

“Nope,” says Eponine, making steady eye contact with her potatoes.

“So…” Cosette says, before audibly crushing her frustration, “Okay, well. I’m a bit annoyed with him, anyway.”

“Fine.”

Cosette boggles at Eponine and everyone else makes do something expressions at Combeferre and Courfeyrac.

Marius checks his watch awkwardly then startles, “Crap!” he says, jumping up from the table and knocking over his empty glass. “Oh no, sorry. I didn’t realise that was the time. I need to go! Erm. Okay. So. Thank you so much for dinner!”

Musichetta smiles, ”You’re welcome,” and Jehan makes uncannily accurate finger guns.

Marius looks back down at Cosette and seems to get caught staring at her, a habit which is starting to become embarrassingly commonplace. He bends down and kisses her, finger just brushing her cheek and no more, then starts away, like he’s forgotten the time again. “Okay, ah. I love you! Goodnight!” he says, in one garbled rush, then sprints out the door.

Eponine sets down her glass with a thump that coincides with the front door slamming shut. The rest of the table is uncomfortably silent.

“So,” says Eponine, gaze settling on Cosette for the first time all night, “He loves you?”

Cosette blushes, “He’s never said that before. I think it just kind of… Fell out. He’ll be freaking out right now, I bet.” Her smile goes warm and Eponine’s face goes dark.

“Right,” she says, standing up to dump her plate in the dishwasher. “Don’t you think it’s a bit early for I love yous?”

Cosette doesn’t say anything, just presses her lips together. Cosette doesn’t argue back, as a rule, which is why it’s so very difficult to win an argument with her - it’s deeply unsatisfying to shout at someone who just watches you with endless love and patience.
“Hey,” gentles Courfeyrac, “Who doesn’t love a bit of teenage romance. If you can’t have love at first sight when you’re 17, when can you have it?”

Beside him, Combeferre winces minutely. Opposite him, Eponine flinches outright.

Under the table, Enjolras’s hand feels clumsily for Grantaire’s and holds on tight.

“We just feel like,” starts Cosette hesitantly, “That feelings this strong can’t be… Well. They can’t be unimportant.”

“So it’s we?” Eponine asks, “I thought it was just him. Don’t tell me you love him?”

“I-” begins Cosette.

The front door rattles again and in tumbles Gavroche, to the relief of just about everyone alive on the planet, it feels like.

Cosette turns on him, already shaken from Eponine’s interrogation and asks, “Where were you?” with a bit more tearfulness than Gavroche is obviously expecting.

“I was just at Jo’s,” says Gavroche, defensive and bewildered right off the bat. “I told Grantaire.”

“You told Grantaire because you knew he wouldn’t give you in trouble!” says Cosette, “I’m not trying to be mean here, Gav, but it’s late and we were worried. You have school tomorrow!”

“Grantaire always skips school!” Gavroche protests, “How come it’s one rule for him and another for me.”

“Oh sure, just hurl me right on under that bus,” mutters Grantaire, “No problem Gav. No one was shouting at me for a few minutes I can see how you’d get confused.”

“We’re not talking about Grantaire,” says Cosette loudly over Grantaire’s mutterings, “We’re talking about you. But, incidentally, when you can ace any test that gets put down in front of you without even reading the textbook, you’re welcome to skip as much class as you like.”

“What-” Cosette begins, “Of course it has to do with me, he’s my brother!”

“But he’s not, really, is he,” Eponine says bluntly. “He’s mine. He’s my brother, not yours. My blood, my genes, my brother.”
“Eponine,” Grantaire snaps. Cosette’s eyes overflow with tears and she seems to be having difficulty breathing. “That’s enough. You know that’s not true.”

“It is so,” says Eponine mulishly. Grantaire is out the seat and across the room in a few seconds, and the recessed lights above flicker ominously. Eponine takes a swaying step back.

“Apoloise,” he says quietly, “And take it back. Cosette can’t hear lies, she’ll believe you. I’m not going to let you tell your sister, my sister, a lie you’ll always regret. Something that she will never forget. Not over some stupid floppy haired boy. Gavroche is her brother. I love you, Ep, but I’m not going to let you act like that to Cos. She has never done anything to deserve that.”

“No,” says Eponine, “Oh no, never that. Cosette doesn’t deserve anything bad. She has everything!” Eponine shouts suddenly, grabbing Grantaire by the front of his zipper and shaking it, uselessly. “I love him. I love him. And I spend every day with him and one day he just walks in and looks at her, and he’s fucking in love? Just because that’s what she wants, and God forbid the universe not give Cosette everything she wants. Why does she get everything? Why do I have to be the one to walk around next to someone who’s always smarter and prettier and whiter and more.” Eponine chokes on a sob, “More everything. Always just better. And now she gets Marius, and it’s not fair, I loved him first!”

Grantaire holds her tighter and glances back. Cosette has tears pouring down her face but she hasn’t backed away. “You didn’t tell me,” she says, “You didn’t tell me, Ponine! I can’t… You told me you were fine, that school was getting you down. I didn’t think you lied to me, Ponine.”

“I had to lie!” shouts Eponine, “I had to lie, because otherwise you would have told him no, and that would be awful, you two tiptoeing around me, like, Cosette’s pathetic sister has a crush on me so we can’t date just now. I can’t-”

“What do you want me to do?” Cosette asks softly, “I love you Eponine. So much more than him. More than anyone. What do you want me to do?”

Eponine shakes her head. “Nothing,” she says dully. “I want to stop being myself. Jesus, I hate you sometimes. If our situations were reversed, you’d have fucking. You’d have smiled the whole way to the fucking maid of honour speech. You’d have been so happy for me. What the fuck is wrong with you.” Cosette shakes her head wordlessly, expression utterly compassionate, not a trace of offence or hurt.

“I love you,” she says simply. “I’ll always choose your happiness over mine.”

Eponine gazes wordlessly at Cosette for a few long moments, tears glistening on her cheeks. “If I was Marius, I’d choose you too,” she says. Then she shakes her head and leaves the front door open behind her as she walks out. Cosette shoves her feet into a pair of Bahorel’s Doc Martens lying by the door, which together with her floaty white summer dress and wild-eyed expression give her a bit of a Bronte look.

“Cos,” says Courfeyrac, “Are you sure…”

“Like Grantaire said,” says Cosette, “I’m not losing Eponine over some boy.” The door closes gently behind her with a snick.
Combeferre is still throwing up in the bathroom by the time Jehan has made a large pot of tea and Bahorel has gotten Gavroche to stop crying.

“I swear my tolerance for this stuff used to be higher,” says Combeferre, looking pale and sweaty on the bathroom floor. Courfeyrac is curled up next to him, in contrast to everyone else who is trying to get as far away as possible.

“Guess you’ll have to start hanging out with me more,” says Grantaire with a grin, “Keep up your tolerance for misery.”

Combeferre doesn’t smile back, just stares at Grantaire for a moment then clunks his head back against the bathroom wall. “I saw that whole fight coming. For years I’ve seen it coming,” he says, “But there was nothing I could do.”

“Poor Cos,” mumbles Courfeyrac.

“Poor Eponine,” says Musichetta, “I’ve never seen her look so upset.”

“You saw it all coming?” asks Bahorel, squinting at Combeferre, “Cause frankly that swerve ball into racism was a bit unexpected, just personally.”

Musichetta scoffs, “Shocking.”

“I’m just saying!” says Bahorel, “I didn’t think race was a big deal, with us. Why does it matter that Cos is white and Ep is asian?”

“Oh my god,” says Courfeyrac, raising his eyes to the heavens.

“No melanin, no opinion,” snaps Musichetta, “You don’t get to decide what matters to Eponine.”

“Isn’t it wonderful how race is never a big deal to white people?” says Joly to Bossuet, genuinely amused.

“I mean technically, we all have melanin,” starts Combeferre.

“I’m not saying race doesn’t matter,” says Bahorel defensively, “I just didn’t think it mattered to us! We weren’t even aware of race until we were like, what, thirteen?”

“This whole conversation is just really problematic,” says Grantaire to Enjolras, who steps on his foot.

“Tea!” calls Jehan authoritatively, thumping the massive teapot down in the middle of the table. “Get in here, Gavroche. Someone hug him, my hands are full.”

They all shuffle back out into the kitchen and settle round the dining table.

Gavroche is enveloped in a bear hug from Bahorel. “They’ll make up, right?” Standing up he’s still smaller than a sitting Bahorel. “I don’t get it. Is this my fault? Or.. or Marius’s?”

“It’s not your fault at all, Gav,” says Courfeyrac

“And it’s not Marius’s either,” sighs Combeferre. “It’s not even really about Marius. It’s just… Eponine’s having a tough time right now.”
Gavroche wrinkles his nose, “Why?”

There’s silence as everyone mentally tags themselves not it. Combeferre looks at Grantaire, who gives him a flat look.

“Eponine is unhappy,” he says shortly, “And Cosette is happy. And that hurts her because she thinks she’ll never have that, even though it’s so close, even though she can see it right in front of her.”

“And she can’t look away,” finishes Jehan, staring into his tea, “We’re pulled to what we lack.”

“But-” Gavroche looks confused, and much younger than he normally does, “But why is she unhappy.”

Grantaire opens his mouth then closes it with a click when he realises he doesn’t have an answer.

Feuilly shifts uncomfortably, “I think Eponine would say, how could she possibly not be.”

“Sometimes people don’t need specific reasons to be unhappy,” says Combeferre, “Sadness, anger, it can get into a person’s soul. It colours their whole world dark.”

Grantaire can feel Enjolras’s eyes on him.

“How do you stop it?” asks Gavroche, “How do you make it better?”

Combeferre sighs, “I… I don’t know, Gav. I think, maybe-“

Grantaire leaves the kitchen before he can hear the end of the sentence.

Cosette and Marius split up the next morning. Three days later Eponine shoves Cosette out the door for a date with Marius, scowling, “It’s even worse when you’re both miserable, go away and make up with him.”

“I didn’t actually know I could feel this bad,” says Eponine philosophically, voice dull, knees tucked up under her chin on Jehan’s bed. “Like guilty and humiliated and inadequate and a shit sister, all rolled into one.”

“That’s more emotions than I feel in a whole day,” Bahorel informs her, licking his spoon, piled high ice cream.

Feuilly snorts and steals the tub of ice cream. The only reason this doesn’t escalate to full-out war is that Jehan kicks Bahorel on the shin and gives him a not now kind of look.

“Well, lets, like, problem solve this shit,” Feuilly says, digging into the ice cream with repulsive zeal, “You feel guilty because you upset Cosette, but you apologised and she forgave you, like, instantly. You feel humiliated because why? The only people who know are us, Ep. And we know you. You can’t, like, make us think any worse of you.”

“Not any more than we already do,” adds Bahorel helpfully.

“You could be an axe murderer, we’d just help you hide the bodies-“
“Although, like, please don’t be,” says Grantaire.

“-But we don’t care, Ep. We just want you to be happy.”

“You’re not inadequate,” says Jehan softly, “And honestly? I would never let anyone call my sister inadequate, so don’t say it again.”

“You’re also not a shit sister,” says Grantaire, “Don’t tell anyone but you’re actually kind of my favourite.”

Eponine looks at him in bewilderment when she notices that he’s not lying.

Grantaire shrugs, “Hey, I love y’all equally but I’m just saying, you win the desert island draw.”

“Pretty sure you and Eponine on a desert island is the plot of a Pirates of the Caribbean film,” says Bahorel.

Eponine sniffs, “We would make great pirates.”

“We’d make the best pirates,” Grantaire confirms. He steals the ice cream from Feuilly and gives it to Eponine with a grin.

&

When exam season finally hits, Cosette and Eponine have returned to something like their normal selves. This is good because just about everyone else has lost their fucking minds, as far as Grantaire is concerned.

“Move, move, move,” chants Enjolras from the bottom of the stairs, as Grantaire drags his leather jacket on reluctantly.

“We do not have to leave this early,” Grantaire complains to Feuilly, who’s got the kind of mile-long stare that usually goes along with death by firing squad.

“We have to be there 30 minutes early,” says Enjolras, “It says so in the hand-out. Have you got everything?”

Grantaire digs a single burst pen from his jeans pocket, and displays it like a magician.

Enjolras closes his eyes as if he’s in deep pain. “Where’s your card?” he asks.

“My card?” Grantaire repeats.

Feuilly buries his head in his hands. Next to him, Combeferre is reading An Encyclopaedia of Moths as some form of emotional coping mechanism, thoroughly ignoring them all.

“The card with your student ID on it, to match you to the correct paper?” Enjolras says, with strained patience.

“Ah, this card?” Grantaire digs the little laminated card out of his other pocket. Enjolras looks thoroughly relieved.

“That one.”

Valjean comes in from the kitchen where he’s been trying to make a jittery Joly eat something. “Good luck you lot,” he says with a smile, “Not that you’ll need it. I know how hard you’ve been
working.”

“Just do your best and you’ll be fine,” rumbles Javert, on his way out to work, “No one can ask any more from you than that.”

Feuilly’s lip is bleeding from being bitten and Valjean frowns and passes him his handkerchief, but doesn’t comment.

Grantaire sits jammed between Enjolras and Feuilly in the backseat of the cab as they make their way to the school.

Enjolras’s fingers are cold on Grantaire’s, but he doesn’t say anything, just stares down at his English notes, mouthing silently to himself.

“I need As,” says Feuilly quietly to Grantaire, “That’s what all the provisional acceptances all say. What if I don’t get them?”

“You will,” Grantaire assures him, “This is English, you’re good with English.”

“Yeah, but I need A’s in all of them,” he says.

The exam goes fine, as far as Grantaire’s concerned. He finishes early and gets bored so wanders out and smokes and waits for the others to make an appearance.

“How did it go?” Grantaire asks them, stubbing out the cigarette at a horrified look from Enjolras.

“Fine,” says Feuilly, “Better than I thought it would.” He looks, conversely, worse than he did on actually going into the exam, shaky and sick.

Grantaire doesn’t ask. Maths is next week.

Combeferre and Enjolras discuss every question in detail on the way home, jittery with each confirmed success. Next to Grantaire, Feuilly gets quieter and quieter.

It’s 3am on the morning of the Maths test and Feuilly is a nervous wreck of himself.

“I can’t do this,” he says, foot bouncing, hands rubbing together, breath coming fast and ragged, “I honestly can’t fucking do this. I can’t do this. I can’t sleep, I can’t concentrate, I can’t, I can’t.”

Feuilly darts to his feet and starts pacing again, from the desk straining beneath piles of notes and textbooks, past Grantaire and Bahorel (his eyes are closed but he’s still grunting disagreeably when Feuilly says something self-deprecating so Grantaire’s sure he’s like, mostly conscious) to the window, then back.

Feuilly looks down at the desk, shuffles some papers about, swallows hard and turns away again distractedly. Bahorel yawns so widely that Grantaire is pretty sure jaw dislocation is a serious risk.

“You should go to sleep,” Feuilly says suddenly to Grantaire and Bahorel. You guys shouldn’t be dealing with this. You have to be up in four hours too.”

“Go sleep in my bed,” Grantaire tells Bahorel, “I’ll stay here tonight.”

“Will Enjolras try to cuddle me?” Bahorel asks warily.
“Almost definitely,” Grantaire says, “But you actually want to do something with your life, so your grades tomorrow are important.”

Bahorel rolls his eyes but doesn’t argue, just throws himself to his feet and stands in front of Feuilly, blocking the path he’s wearing through the carpet. He presses his forehead to Feuilly’s, his dark tan presses against Feuilly’s pale, freckled skin. “You will be fine,” Bahorel intones, “You’ve got this.”

Feuilly looks abruptly like he’s going to cry, and pushes Bahorel away and out the room. Then it’s just him and Grantaire.

“You know you might eventually want to do something with your life,” says Feuilly with a deep sigh, “Just because you’re not applying to Uni this year, doesn’t mean you never will.”

Grantaire shrugs his shoulders, “It all sounds a bit too much like hard work to be honest,” he says, lying back on Feuilly’s bed.

Feuilly shakes his head with a humourless laugh, “Why are you so against working hard?” he asks, “Doesn’t it make you feel good, to achieve stuff?”

“No,” says Grantaire shortly. “And stop sounding like Enjolras, you’re creeping me out.”

“I just can’t believe I’ve worked so hard and I’m going to fail,” says Feuilly softly. “I tried, Taire, I really tried.”

“You have tried,” says Grantaire, “I’ve watched you try. Now it’s over, okay? There’s nothing you can do now that will change what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

Feuilly rubs his eyes ferociously. “In some ways I’m glad,” he admits, “Even failing can’t feel as bad as knowing I’m going to fail. At least I can forget about it. All of it.”

“Sure,” says Grantaire, “Me and you can start a bar together, it’ll be great fun.”

Feuilly tries to smile but doesn’t quite manage to communicate the impulse with his face.

Grantaire laughs and grabs the nearest sheet of paper from Feuilly’s desk. The equation goes wrong two lines down, where Feuilly has obviously misread a seven as a one and continued on from there. Grantaire doesn’t comment and instead folds the sheet into a wonky paper airplane and throws it at Feuilly’s head.

“Let’s make an origami solar system,” says Grantaire, “You’ve got the paper for it.”

Feuilly casts a dubious glance at his piles of notes and nods slowly.

&

Feuilly and Grantaire wake up in a pile of white and black origami stars and planets to the sound of Enjolras banging the door open. “Grantaire! I spent most of last night cuddling Bahorel, he took photos, will you tell me before you switch with people?!”

Mostly-asleep Grantaire actually wakes himself up laughing at that.

He stops laughing when he sees Feuilly jump straight back into the panic it took Grantaire three hours to wind him down from last night.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” mutters Feuilly, grabbing armfuls of stars and unravelling them, squinting at
Grantaire gives Enjolras a long-suffering look.

“Fuck, where’s my ID card?” Feuilly says, sweeping stars around in a panic.

“It’s right there, chill,” sighs Grantaire, pointing at the desk. “Come downstairs and stop freaking out. Maybe Valjean will have made pancakes.”

The taxi ride to school is worse than any of the previous. Thankfully Grantaire shotgunned and therefore doesn’t have to sit next to a vibrating Feuilly for twenty minutes.

Enjolras accompanies Grantaire all the way to his seat. “What, are you afraid I’m going to try and escape?” Grantaire laughs.

“Stop leaving after ten minutes,” says Enjolras, “You’ve got nothing else to do, the extra hour of sitting in an exam hall won’t kill you.”

“Hey,” says Grantaire, “I stayed for a whole half hour of my Greek exam.”

“And skipped design technology,” hisses Enjolras.

“I wrote a full essay for philosophy,” argues Grantaire.

Enjolras points a warning finger at him, “If I find out you wrote that essay on… On… Nihilism as a life choice or something, I will kill you.”

Grantaire laughs loudly in the tensely quiet exam hall. He feels Dominik’s scowl on him from the next row over.

“Quiet,” says the invigilator, “Everyone take your seats.”

Grantaire gives Enjolras an amused look and Enjolras storms off to find his own seat, leaving Grantaire to copy out his eight digit ID number and wait in silence for the clock to turn 8.30 so he can turn the page.

When they get out, Feuilly seems to have moved beyond tears, to a point of resigned horror.

Combeferre flinches when he sees him.

“So,” Feuilly says when he sees Grantaire, “I guess we better get working on a plan for that bar.”

Grantaire just slings his arm over Feuilly’s shoulder and presses a bottle of coke into his hand. Feuilly looks like he’s been involved in some kind of traumatic car accident. “Hey man, it’s the summer holidays. Take a breath. It’s over.”

Results come out on the 8th of August, and the postman gets the pile of envelopes to their house so fast, Grantaire is sure that Valjean has bribed them. Grantaire is not happy about this development. The whole point of the summer is that he doesn’t have to wake up before 7am.

Valjean looks almost as ill as Feuilly does this morning, sipping quietly from his cup of coffee. Javert is almost aggressively normal, which is how Grantaire knows he’s worried too.
Cosette, Combeferre, Enjolras, Courfeyrac, Feuilly and Bahorel are the ones with the most to lose this morning. Cosette has applied for medical school, Combeferre for a mixture of sciences at Oxbridge and Imperial, Enjolras for PPE in similar places, Courfeyrac and Bahorel for law and Feuilly for architecture. They’re the ones with the provisional places that depend on the results lying in the middle of the breakfast table.

Grantaire drinks the remaining milk in his cereal bowl and wrinkles his nose. “Are you lot going to open your letters or did I get dragged out of bed for nothing?” he asks.

Enjolras turns his envelope over in his hands then rips it open in one big movement. He scrambles the letter open and lets out a sigh of relief, passing it on to Grantaire a second later, hugging him so tightly that Grantaire can barely read the column of A’s on the sheet of paper.

“He’s in,” Grantaire clarifies, voice muffled, waving the sheet of paper in the air.

“Cos is too,” cheers Eponine, peering over Cosette’s shoulder. “Cos, you’re going to be a doctor!” Cosette’s answering smile is breathtaking.

In the background, Courfeyrac and Bahorel are high fiving and hugging - they’ve both gotten places in the same law school.

Grantaire seeks out Feuilly with his eyes. His envelope is still on the table, untouched, his hands are shaking.

“Open it,” says Jehan.

Feuilly shakes his head. “Rel, do it for me,” he says, voice small. “Please. I can’t.”

Bahorel nods seriously, placing his envelope down and picking up Feuilly’s. He opens it slowly, takes a huge breath, and…

“Feuilly, you’re in,” he says, “You’re in. You got them. All A’s.”

Tears spring to Feuilly’s eyes. “No I’m not, don’t say that,” he says, grabbing for the paper. He stares at it, shaking his head, “That’s not possible,” he says, groping behind himself for a chair to drop into. Musichetta hurriedly nudges a chair in his direction. “I can’t have,” Feuilly repeats, “There’s no way I got an A. There’s been a mistake. I bombing that paper, I…”

“You must have done better than you thought,” says Cosette, smiling even bigger, something which shouldn’t really be anatomically possible.

“Feu, you’ve done it,” says Bahorel, “You’re in!” He explodes with noise, a huge cheer, yanking a disoriented Feuilly to his feet and whirling him around. “I’m so fucking happy for you!” he shouts, “You’re so awesome Feu, you did it! All A’s! You got the same as Cos, Ferre and Enj! You don’t ever get to call yourself stupid again, you hear me?”

The whole kitchen is in an uproar, Joly is doing celebratory wheelies, Feuilly has been buried under hugs from Musichetta, Cosette and Eponine.

Enjolras is not smiling. Enjolras is looking at Grantaire.

Grantaire’s heart sinks.

“Open your envelope,” Enjolras says casually.
“Nah,” says Grantaire, “I’ll do it later.”

The noise in the kitchen falls off sharply. Grantaire can feel Javert’s sharp eyes on him, can see the confusion in some faces, the apprehension in others.

“Do it now,” says Enjolras shortly.

“Mmm, no,” says Grantaire. “I’m sensitive. I want to open them quietly by myself, where I can cry undisturbed.”

Enjolras doesn’t laugh. Instead he advances on Grantaire, who slides away down the counter, envelope behind his back. “Give me it,” he says lowly.

“Nah.”

“Give me it now.”

“Nope.”

Grantaire feels the envelope being yanked out his hands behind him and when he whirls round Feuilly is already ripping it open.

Grantaire manages to catch a glimpse of it upside down.

Language and literature A
Classical Greek A
Philosophy B
Design technology Fail
Mathematics Fail
Visual arts A

Personally, he’s more taken aback by the B in Philosophy. He really had ranted about something only very tangentially related to the question asked - and only that if you were being generous with the term tangential.

Feuilly is still staring at the sheet of paper like he can’t quite make it form meaningful words.

“How,” he begins, “Did you manage to fail maths.”

“I guess it just… Wasn’t my day,” says Grantaire carefully, eyeing first Feuilly, then Enjolras, who looks… Beyond angry.

Across the kitchen, Eponine closes her eyes slowly.

“You took it for me?” demands Feuilly, “You… How did you?”

“The ID cards,” says Enjolras, without a trace of a doubt, “He switched yours around.”

Feuilly opens his mouth, then closes it again, leans against the table.

“Taire,” he says quietly, “Answer me. You took the test for me?”
Grantaire avoids the eyes on him and instead focuses on the shiny arc of Joly's wheelchair rim. "Of course not," he says, trying to keep the tone light, "That would be cheating."

Apparently that's all it takes for Enjolras to lose the very last threads of his sanity.

He shoves Grantaire backwards, till he's bumped against the kitchen counter, gets right up in his face.

"You did it, I know you did, don't lie to me," he says through gritted teeth.

"Christ, sunshine," says Grantaire, honestly surprised, "Why do you care?"

"Why do I care?!" Enjolras shouts, so loudly that half the kitchen jumps. "This is your life, Grantaire, this is your future and you don't give a fuck about it! You'd happily throw it all away for a laugh! Why do you always do this? Why do you cheat and lie your way through everything? Why don't you just, fucking, try for once in your life? You could be so good, Grantaire, you're really smart, you could do anything you want, and you just waste it, and it's like you don't care about yourself at all, don't walk away from me!"

Grantaire turns and runs a hand distractedly through his hair, "Why not?" he asks tiredly, "Does it make any difference whether I'm here or not? Do I have to be witness to your ranting? I'm very imaginative, I'm sure I could fill in the gaps. Waste, blah blah, potential, blah blah, whatever."

Enjolras darts around him and slams the kitchen door shut. "You're not getting out of here until you explain to me why you think this is okay," he brandishes the now-crumpled exam results in Grantaire's face.

The whole kitchen is watching him.

"You want to know?" asks Grantaire, feeling strangely reckless, "You really want to know?"

"Yes," says Enjolras.

"Fine. I'm not really smart Enjolras. I am the smartest person you have ever met. I'm not bragging, I'm not being… Whatever. My IQ is off the charts. I'm a fucking genius. Give me a test. Give me any test: I'll ace it. I spent my whole life in that place jumping through hoops and meeting targets and solving problems and spotting patterns. I justified my existence to them every day. And then I got out, and I. Am. Done. Justifying my existence to people. I. Am. Done. Following rules set by some arbitrary authority. I'm done, I'm done with it all. I will do whatever the fuck I want, and nobody will stop me, do you understand? Not even you. I will fail every single test I get set. I will be the stupidest motherfucker you have ever met. I will break rules and I will not strive to succeed in a system that is valueless to me. Why is it so important for you to succeed, sunshine? Explain that to me? For money? We have money; Valjean won't let us starve. For power? Success? No, wait, I got this. To make a change? Well explain to me how passing a test achieves that. It's not important, none of this is important. You've bought into a bullshit system designed to evaluate your worth and use you as a commodity. And that's fine, as long as you've got some worth, yeah? Never mind that Feuilly almost drove himself fucking insane over that stupid, stupid test. Never mind that he's got himself halfway convinced that he's functionally useless as a human being because he can't do binomial expansion. As long as your self worth is validated, who gives a fuck, right?"

Grantaire doesn't even know where all this is coming from, but he feels like he could go on forever, keep shouting all this stuff at Enjolras, who's backed away from him like he's a stranger. He jams the lid down hard on the hole where all this is flooding up from, and takes a deep breath.

"You deserve that grade," he tells Feuilly, straining for calm. Feuilly focuses on him, dazed. "You
worked for it, you put in the hours. You could put me back in the same situation, I’d do the same thing every time.”

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Feuilly sticks his head out the window and finds Grantaire, staring up into the sky.

“Hey,” he says softly, and Grantaire looks down with heavy eyelids. He’s smoking something long and foul-smelling that he hopes Feuilly doesn’t recognise.

“Thanks,” says Feuilly.

Grantaire laughs to himself, “Pull up a pew, my friend.”

Feuilly clambers out onto the roof and lies back on its slope next to Grantaire.

“You are very welcome,” says Grantaire eventually, when he remembers what Feuilly had originally said.

“Did you mean all that stuff you said?” asks Feuilly neutrally.

“Hmmm, did I? I don’t know,” muses Grantaire. He can’t stop staring at the stars. He’s having lots of feelings about stars. “I supposed I did, if I said it. Don’t remember really thinking any of it before, mind.”

Feuilly laughs. “Good self awareness. Ten out of ten.”

“Oh god, don’t even joke about that. If all goes to plan I’ll remain as unaware of myself as is possible,” says Grantaire, blowing smoke up into the sky.

“That’s a shame,” says Feuilly, “I like you. You’re a good person to be aware of.”

Grantaire laughs, “You have really poor taste, Feu.”

“So are you going to manage running that bar without me?” asks Feuilly, ignoring him.


“What do you mean?”

“Tired, like, inside. Tired in my heart, in my soul, hah, do you believe in souls?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think mine is probably a bit broken.”

“Your heart or your soul?”
Grantaire just laughs, and holds his roll-up into the sky, tracing darker patches of night with the furling smoke.

“I really, really love him,” Grantaire confides.

“I know.”

“No,” Grantaire shakes his head, “Like, really.”

“I know,” confirms Feuilly again.

“I don’t think he knows. He doesn’t get it, I don’t think. He has faith in me. Otherwise he’d understand. It’s like faith-love. Does that make sense? He thinks I’m permanent. He loves me because I’m here, because he doesn’t think I’ll never not be here. He loves me like I’m a star.”

“Aren’t you permanent?” Feuilly asks.

Grantaire snorts, “No one is permanent. Nothing lasts and the stars are dead. I don’t have faith in him. I don’t have faith in anything, not like that. I just love him. Like a... Hmmm. Like a flower. Not something to have faith in. The whole world always feels so unsteady under my feet, like it’s going to break apart. I have nightmares that I’m falling.”

Feuilly rubs his face with his hands. “Taire, I love you man. But I have no idea what you’re telling me. Except that it sounds bad.”

Grantaire laughs, “It does sound bad, doesn’t it, I’m sorry. I just can’t stand how awful everything always is.”

“You need to fix it,” says Feuilly. “You need to fix this. Find a solution. You’re a genius. Solve for x.”

Grantaire hums, “You can’t run away from what’s inside yourself,” he says wisely, “That’s just basic biology. You need your insides.”

“Taire, I...” Feuilly breathes out heavily. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but will you just, just answer me one question?”

Grantaire hums agreeably.

“Are you happy here?”

“No,” Grantaire laughs, and takes a drag. “No of course not.”

Feuilly’s voice is hoarse when he says, “Well maybe there’s somewhere else, where you could be happy.”

Grantaire doesn’t reply, just closes his eyes against the glittering stars.

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After that, things are more peaceful in the house than they have been in years.

No one’s moving away, all the Universities were carefully chosen to be within commuting distance.

If Grantaire is quieter than usual, no one asks him about it. He reads The Odyssey over and over, in
English and the original Greek, lying out on the huge green stretch of gardens behind the house.

He remembers lying out there when they first arrived at the house, twelve years old, held together by nothing but chance, heart beat powered by some tiny flame that flickered in him when he looked at Enjolras.

He finds himself seeing things in his family that he’s missed, or grown so used to that he’s forgotten. Javert and Valjean touch now, casually, to fix a tie or reach for a mug. They’ve slept in the same room for years now, their antagonism softening into something gentle, teasing. Gavroche is tall now, a normal kid with a huge, reckless energy and a smart sense of humour. Mr and Mrs Hauche are greying, old, and they smile at Bahorel when he makes a stupid joke, at Bossuet when he grabs a biscuit before dinner time. Cosette is more beautiful than Grantaire has words for, unfurling confidence, whirling joy in her every step as she buys her new medical textbooks, a pink stethoscope. It’s been years since he’s seen Bossuet unable to speak, or Musichetta scream like her world is ending. Combeferre smiles at Courfeyrac when Courfeyrac’s not looking, something unspeakably gentle in his eyes. Courfeyrac is exuberant and and enthusiastic, with an unshakeable impulse towards kindness. Eponine has tapped into something inside herself, steely and sweet, a fierce determination to love Cosette no matter what. They’re closer than Grantaire has seen in years. Jehan is jehan: quiet and graceful and intrepid and in love with the whole world. Feuilly is happy, high school is over, his excitement at starting a new part of life, at working for something he cares about, it palpable.

Enjolras is taller than Grantaire, now. He’s tall and beautiful and serious and fierce. Grantaire watches him the most. Watches him talk with Courfeyrac and Combeferre about politics, the way his face softens when he looks at Cosette, his debates with a grinning Javert, the way people stare when he walks down the street. Slowly a thought settles over Grantaire, sweet and awful all at once, a thought that quietly, quietly, alters almost two decades of decisions and choices and ultimatums. He stares at Enjolras while he’s sleeping at night and thinks: he doesn’t need me, really. Not any more.

The little crying boy that asked Grantaire, promise, is gone. He slipped away bit by bit, like a dream in the morning. Now in his place was Enjolras, brave and stubborn and oddly sweet, a law unto himself. A nineteen year old with big ideas, who didn’t really need Grantaire at all.

Grantaire cannot articulate, even to himself, how much of a relief the thought is.

&

“What’s this?” demands Enjolras, brandishing a sheaf of paper in his hands.

Grantaire is sitting on the floor playing what might be the least fair game of Monopoly he’s ever witnessed in his life with Cosette, Bossuet, Bahorel and Combeferre. Everyone else is gathered round watching, groaning whenever Bossuet takes a particularly severe loss.

“I have no idea,” says Grantaire, squinting at him, “Paper?”

Enjolras thrusts the paper into Grantaire’s face. When Grantaire reads it he goes very still.

Like they’ve felt some torrential wind ripple through the room, Combeferre looks up sharply and Cosette freezes.

“It’s a ticket,” Grantaire says softly. He rolls his little metal thimble around on his hand.

“I can see that,” says Enjolras acidly, “Why do you have a ticket to Paris?”
“I’m going to Paris.”

“Grantaire,” sighs Enjolras, exasperated. “We start Uni next week, we haven’t time to go to Paris. You couldn’t have mentioned this earlier on in the summer?”

“It’s just me,” says Grantaire, “I’m the only one going, listen, Enjolras can we-”

“For how long?” Enjolras says, “Honestly Grantaire, were you actually going to tell anyone before you got on the flight?”

“I, yes, I was going to speak to you,” starts Grantaire, “Can we please-”

“How long for, Taire?” Enjolras asks, “I mean, most of us can probably do a weekend, if you give us notice!”

Grantaire stays silent and Enjolras makes an impatient gesture.

Grantaire opens and closes his mouth a few times before he manages to get out, “Indefinitely.”

“What?” Enjolras asks flatly.

“I’m going indefinitely. I’m going, to… To stay.”

Enjolras throws his hands up in the air like he’s asking for divine intervention. “Again, Grantaire, you couldn’t have told me that’s what you wanted to do? Do you know how difficult it is to transfer Universities this close to the beginning of term? Across countries?”

Grantaire closes his eyes and begs for more patience. The moment stretches out. Grantaire can’t work out how Enjolras can be so oblivious to the atmosphere around them. He doesn’t think anyone else is actually breathing. “You’re not coming,” Grantaire says, “I’m going alone.”

Enjolras stares at him for a long moment, then says, “What?”

“I’m going to Paris. I’m leaving the city, leaving the house. I’m leaving…” his throat closes on the last sentence and he leaves it hanging like string.

Enjolras shakes his head. He looks hurt and confused. “What’s this about, Taire?” he asks, “Is this about the exam results because-”

“It’s not,” says Grantaire, “It’s not about that, it’s not about anything. I’m just leaving, okay?”

“Em, no?” Enjolras says, “Not okay? Jesus, Grantaire what is wrong with you? I have to physically fucking drag you out of The Institute. Back then we didn’t have a choice, but now we do. Now we can choose how our lives go. We’re safe, we’re together, our whole lives are ahead of us - and now you want to leave? I don’t understand you. Do you honestly hate yourself that much?”

Grantaire goes white hot then cold with anger. He laughs hollowly. “God, you are so incredibly stupid, you know that sunshine?”

Enjolras recoils.

Grantaire stands up, stalks away, then paces back. He wanted to do this gracefully. This will not be graceful. He feels like something very important has eroded, deep down inside him, a dam burst or a pipe punctured. He can’t stop himself now. “Listen closely,” he says. He can barely hear himself over the rushing in his ears. His lips and finger tips feel numb. “I. Am. Invisible. Do you honestly believe that I couldn’t have left the Institute any time I wanted? Or are you just so incredibly dense
that the idea never occurred to you? Because I could, you know. They used to make a game of it, how fast I could get to the main gates. I think they got it down to 21 minutes at one point.”

Enjolras shakes his head, “That’s not true- Then why wouldn’t you-”

“BECAUSE OF YOU!” Grantaire roars.

Cosette begins to cry, quietly. Enjolras has gone paler than the wall, his golden tan drained away.

“Because of you,” Grantaire repeats, voice hoarse, tears starting in his eyes, “Because I wouldn’t leave you. Even though it meant staying there. Even though it meant…” his voice breaks and goes high, keening, “I could have gotten them out. I could have gotten them all out. Everyone except you, because you, you could never go unseen. So I didn’t. Because I promised.” He brings his hand up to his face and finds it slippery with tears. “I told you,” he says, sobbing now, “I told you, I’d fuck over anyone for you. Even them. Even Gav. He was six years old Enjolras. I could barely look at him. They made me watch what they did to Joly and I couldn’t stop them. This is what you make me into, Enjolras. This is the person I am when I’m with you.”

“No wonder you hate me,” Enjolras whispers.

Grantaire tries to laugh but sobs come out instead, “Don’t you get it? I can’t hate you. It literally isn’t possible for me to hate you. I love you, Enjolras. It’s me I hate. But I can’t go on like this. I can’t live like this any more. It will kill me. It will literally kill me. I will kill myself.”

Enjolras shakes his head. “No.”

“I’m sorry,” says Grantaire, “I’m so, incredibly sorry.”

He noise that comes out of Enjolras is almost a whimper. “You promised,” he says, tears running over his lips, “You promised you wouldn’t.”

Grantaire nods slowly. “I know. But please, please. Don’t ask me to stay. Because I will. And I don’t know how much longer I can hold out.”

Enjolras shakes his head again, more violently this time.

“I’m not trying to be cruel,” Grantaire approaches Enjolras, hands out like he’s trying to calm a skittish animal. “And, you know, I wouldn’t even be doing this if it was just for me. I honestly don’t have that in me.”

“What does that even mean,” Enjolras chokes out, reaching blindly for Grantaire’s hands, pulling him in.

“We are toxic to each other,” says Grantaire, running his hands up Enjolras’s neck, cupping his face, “You don’t believe me just now but we are. And if I stay, and drink myself into oblivion, do drugs until I can’t feel any more, and you find me in a bathtub somewhere. It will destroy you. Which is so stupid, because you’re stronger than that Enjolras, you don’t need me, not really. So I’m going to leave, and I’m going to learn how to be happy, and you’re going to learn how to be alone. Because we are capable of that. I have to believe we’re capable of that.”

“What you’re saying,” Enjolras’s sobs interrupt him but he presses on, “What you’re saying is that you’d rather die than stay with me.”
Grantaire shakes his head, pressing his lips to Enjolras’s forehead, his wet cheeks, his eyelids. “I’d rather die than be myself any more. I need to get better, to change some parts of me that go all the way down, and I never will if I don’t leave you. You’re most of what makes me, me.”

Enjolras swallows wetly, “I like you,” he says pitifully.

Grantaire presses his lips to Enjolras’s for one long, lingering moment. “I love you,” he says seriously. “I love you so much I’d set fire to myself, just to keep you warm. And that’s why I have to go. I can’t stand to be on fire any more.”

Chapter End Notes

I live at raennem.tumblr.com.

Give me a shout if you liked this chapter, because what remains of my soul would love the positive feedback!

End Notes

I live at raennem.tumblr.com.

There are definitely mistakes in this but I hate editing even more than I hate writing stuff *jazzhands*.

But for reals tell me what you think because feedback fuels my tiny dead soul.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!